



# Can democracy accelerate sustainability transformations? Policy coherence for participatory co-existence

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## Abstract

The 2030 Agenda envisages a world “in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law [...] are essential for sustainable development” (Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, 2015, paragraph 9). However, the extent to which democratic practices can help or hinder sustainable development remains contested. I show how the relationship between democracy and environmental sustainability can be illuminated by recent advances in research on policy coherence for sustainable development. I apply a framework developed by Shawoo et al., (2022), to illustrate how (in)coherence between these two objectives is driven by a mix of ideas, institutions and interests. This framework can, in turn, help to identify policy options for strengthening coherence between democratic and environmental aims, spanning pluralisation of integrative frames and discourses, inclusive institutional design and reforms that broaden the range of public interests included in decision-making while restraining undue influence of vested interests.

**Keywords** Sustainable Development Goals · 2030 Agenda · Environmental democracy · Policy coherence for sustainable development · Sustainability transformations

## Abbreviations

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

## 1 Introduction

Commitment to democracy—or antipathy to it—varies greatly among the UN member states, so it is not surprising that the 2030 Agenda’s treatment of the role of democracy in sustainable development is uneven (Dryzek and Tanasoca, 2021, pp. 18–19). The Agenda’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not contain an overarching goal or even a specific target on democracy, although Goal 16 (“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”) and its associated targets address key building blocks of democratic systems. The broader 2030 Agenda links democracy and

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sustainability far more explicitly, envisaging a world “in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law [...] are *essential* for sustainable development” (UN, 2015, paragraph 9; emphasis added).

These features of the Agenda could be read as encapsulating the normative view that democracy—or at least key components thereof—is an intrinsic part of sustainable development. We may also discern an empirical assumption that democracy is conducive to (or even causally necessary for) the achievement of other sustainable development objectives. On either view, efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda encounter challenging questions about whether practices of democracy, inclusion and participation tend to promote or obstruct goals such as human development, equality and environmental performance (Bornemann et al., 2022; Goetz et al., 2020; Pickering et al., 2022).

In this perspective, I show how the concept of “policy coherence for sustainable development” embedded in the Agenda can shed new light on the relationship between democracy and environmental sustainability. I employ a recently developed analytical framework (Shawoo et al., 2022) to argue that (1) (in)coherence between these two objectives is driven by a combination of ideas, institutions and interests, and (2) better understanding of these drivers can help to identify policy options for promoting the simultaneous achievement of both objectives and thereby advancing the 2030 Agenda.

## 2 Democracy, sustainability and the policy coherence challenge

Given the large variety of policy objectives encompassed by the SDGs, some could come into tension with one another, while others could be complementary or synergistic (Nilsson et al., 2022). Accordingly, Target 17.14 includes a commitment to “enhance policy coherence for sustainable development”, which is commonly understood as an “approach and policy tool to systematically integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policy-making” (OECD, 2018, p. 83).

In the present context, a minimal level of coherence would mean that efforts to promote democracy are compatible with (rather than undermining) efforts to promote sustainability, while stronger levels of coherence would entail that promoting democracy is beneficial or even necessary for advancing sustainability.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of large-n cross-country evidence finds either a positive or indifferent relationship between democracy and environmental performance across a range of indicators (Dasgupta and De Cian, 2018; Gerring et al., 2022; Pickering et al., 2022). However, the causal relationship is complex and context-dependent. Achieving synergies between the two objectives is especially challenging given that most states classed as democracies are falling short in their performance on sustainability (Wurster, 2022), and democracy has been on the retreat in many countries (Papada et al., 2023).

Much of the earlier literature on policy coherence assumed that coherent policy-making could be achieved mainly through institutional coordination or technocratic strategies such as interdepartmental committees or cross-sectoral/whole-of-government planning. However, institutional coordination alone is insufficient to generate coherent

<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive analysis of coherence would also include the inverse relationship (i.e. the effects of advancing sustainability on democracy), but a detailed discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of this perspective.

policy-making if, for example, dominant discourses or vested interests favour one objective (e.g. economic growth) at the expense of others (e.g. environmental protection). To address this concern, a recent article by Shawoo et al. (2022) develops a framework for identifying and categorising political drivers of policy (in)coherence. Adapting a three-part typology commonly employed for causal analysis in political science, the framework distinguishes between *ideas*, *institutions* and *interests* as potential drivers of (in) coherence. Analysis of these drivers can, in turn, help to identify sources of conflict between policy objectives as well as opportunities for greater alignment between them. The remainder of this perspective briefly addresses each of these three dimensions as they apply to the pursuit of democratic and environmental objectives under the 2030 Agenda.

### 3 Integrative ideas of democracy and sustainability

Ideas—including norms, discourses, frames and values (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 3)—can have an important role in articulating visions of the compatibility between democracy and environmental progress and motivating action towards these ends (Benford and Snow, 2000; Dryzek, 2022). This raises the question of whether core ideas in the 2030 Agenda can serve as a basis for a coherent reconciliation between democratic and environmental objectives.

The Agenda's framing of "leaving no one behind" has been widely embraced rhetorically by government and civil society actors, and it requires little conceptual stretching to posit that the phrase implies adoption of inclusive decision-making practices (Sénit et al., 2022, p. 118). However, Sénit et al. (2022, p. 132) find little evidence that this framing has led to greater inclusion of vulnerable groups in decision-making at national or global levels. This may be due in part to the framing itself—see, for example, concerns that the SDGs inadequately reflect Indigenous worldviews (Yap and Watene, 2019)—or due to other factors such as institutional inertia or vested interests (Sénit et al., 2022, p. 133). Gupta and Vegelin (2016) posit a related idea of "inclusive development" and find that the content of the SDGs fares better on social inclusiveness than on relational and ecological inclusiveness.

In a highly diverse world—and in any democratic society—it is unrealistic to expect that a single framing will speak to all values held by everyone. But that does not mean the quest for integrative framings is futile. Rather, it is vital that public debate allows space for creating plural integrative framings<sup>2</sup> and, crucially, for contestation over those framings. This is consistent with the idea that implementation of the 2030 Agenda is meant to be adapted to national and local circumstances (UN, 2015, paragraphs 56–59). This approach also underscores the importance of embracing integrative discourses that resonate across a wider range of regions and communities, particularly in the Global South, such as *buen vivir*, which encompasses notions of collective well-being and living in harmony with nature (Chassagne, 2018). Even so, integrative framings and discourses are insufficient conditions for achieving policy coherence unless they are translated into meaningful policies and practices.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of "participatory co-existence" mentioned in the title of this perspective was originally chosen for its alliteration with "policy coherence", but it also encapsulates aspects of both democratic and environmental values, especially if "co-existence" is understood as including a harmonious relationship between humans and the non-human (or more-than-human) world.

## 4 Designing democratic institutions for sustainability

Institutional design—including political systems, legislation and policies, coordination and participation mechanisms (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 6)—can help to advance synergies between democratic practices and environmental sustainability. Glass and Newig (2019, p. 11), assessing correlations between governance indicators and progress on selected SDGs, find that “democratic institutions create a conducive environment for SDG achievement by ensuring accountability and transparency in policy-making as well as political responsiveness”. While they find little evidence that policy coherence itself promotes SDG achievement, their indicators of policy coherence focus mainly on measures of inter-ministerial coordination, whereas institutional design could also promote or inhibit coherence in other ways. Indeed, the authors find that both electoral institutions and stakeholder participation in decision-making are important for SDG achievement.

Other evidence indicates that participatory and deliberative forums such as citizens’ assemblies and citizens’ juries can enhance participants’ environmental values and willingness to act on environmental problems (MacKenzie and Caluwaerts, 2021; Rask et al., 2012). Citizens’ assemblies held in Ireland, France, the UK and elsewhere show how these bodies can inform legislative change, while also underscoring the limits they face in challenging dominant power structures (Willis et al., 2022). Legal mechanisms enshrining environmental rights in legislation or constitutions can help both to empower citizens and protect the environment (Baber and Bartlett, 2020; Gellers and Jeffords, 2018). Likewise, environmental litigation initiated by affected citizens can advance public interests in environmental protection (Eskander et al., 2021).

While these innovations could advance democracy and sustainability simultaneously, debate remains as to whether the transformative vision envisaged by the Agenda (UN, 2015, paragraph 7) can be achieved merely through incremental reforms to liberal democracies (or what is often termed “environmental democracy”) or whether sustainability transformations require a wholesale transformation of democratic institutions towards more decentralised, non-anthropocentric models (or “ecological democracy”: Eckersley, 2020; Pickering et al., 2020).

## 5 Aligning interests with democratic and environmental values

Different configurations of interests—and related distributions of power and resources—may advance or undermine coherence between democratic and environmental aims (Shawoo et al., 2022, p. 7). In any society, people’s interests will inevitably be diverse, with some according much lower priority to environmental protection than others. Democratic systems should reflect this diversity, and in a non-ideal world, the pursuit of a completely coherent reconciliation of all interests is chimerical. Nevertheless, there is great potential to address major democratic deficits while simultaneously improving prospects for sustainability, including by (1) broadening the range of interests represented in public debate and (2) reconfiguring the interests of the private sector and its influence on decision-making. I address each aspect in turn.

Fulfilment of Target 16.7 (“Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”) requires better inclusion of affected interests, particularly those that are often marginalised in decision-making. Greater inclusion could, in turn,

yield environmental benefits. Social movements led by young people such as Fridays for Future—as well as court cases involving young people as litigants—have introduced new norms and discourses and raised the profile of young people’s concerns about climate change and calling governments to account for their inaction (Donger, 2022). Empowerment of Indigenous peoples is not only important as a matter of self-determination and recognition, but can also enhance environmental protection, not least because land managed by Indigenous peoples generally has better outcomes for nature conservation (Watson et al., 2019). Institutions to represent future generations and nature can also encourage decision-makers to consider the intergenerational and cross-species implications of their decisions (Kauffman and Martin, 2021; Lawrence, 2022).

Given the 2030 Agenda’s intention to engage business as a key partner (UN, 2015, paragraph 76), a major challenge for coherence is to ensure that the private sector’s interests are aligned with—or at least not opposed to—the simultaneous pursuit of democracy and sustainability. The ability of powerful business interests and other elites to obtain special treatment is not only corrosive to democracy but also typically bad for the environment, especially when polluting industries can obstruct environmental regulation (Downie, 2017; Nasiritousi, 2017). However, in some areas, it may be possible to achieve at least a partial alignment between commercial interests, democracy and environmental protection. For example emerging structural change in the energy sector means that renewable energy industries are gaining an increasingly influential stake in the energy transition. Decentralised, community-owned renewable energy also offers an opportunity to advance “energy democracy”, but large-scale energy transitions—unless well-designed—could replicate ongoing power imbalances between citizens and large electricity companies (Thombs, 2019). This highlights the need for further measures to level the playing field when it comes to the ability of public and private actors to influence decision-making. Some measures could be industry-specific (e.g. restricting the participation of polluting industries where a conflict of interest arises: Dambacher et al., 2020) or more general, such as restrictions on corporate political donations and “revolving doors” between government and industry (Lucas, 2021) and regulating “greenwashing” or “SDG washing” (Llanos et al., 2022, p. 76).

## 6 Conclusion

This perspective has shown how a structured analysis of the political drivers of (in)coherence can help to identify policy options for strengthening coherence between democratic and environmental aims. Three key areas for policy action emerge from the analysis, corresponding with each of the three categories of drivers:

- **Ideas:** embrace plural integrative framings that reconcile democratic and environmental values in ways that are appropriate to national and local contexts;
- **Institutions:** advance a broad suite of mechanisms for democratic participation, including deliberative forums, environmental rights and public interest environmental litigation; and
- **Interests:** develop targeted measures to enhance representation of marginalised interests while fostering a realignment of business interests consistent with democratic and environmental aims.

A thoroughgoing reconciliation of democratic and environmental aims will require a wider range of measures beyond the scope of this perspective. However, in showing how ideas, interests and institutions interact in this context, the analysis suggests that action on one area alone is insufficient for achieving coherence; action on all three areas is necessary.

Just as this perspective has focused on how democracy influences environmental sustainability, a policy coherence lens could also be used to explore the capacity of democracy to accelerate other elements of the 2030 Agenda, including poverty reduction and gender equality (and vice versa), and to identify drivers of (in)coherence in these areas. More broadly, and especially given ongoing threats to democracy worldwide, the analysis underscores that democracy needs to be a vital part of debates on how to advance transformations towards sustainability.

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