








## REVIEW ARTICLE

# How does policy coherence shape effectiveness and inequality? Implications for sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda

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## Abstract

During the formulation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, many promoted policy coherence as a key tool to ensure achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a way that “leaves no one behind.” Their argument assumed that coherent policymaking contributes to more effective policies and supports over-arching efforts to reduce inequality. As the 2030 Agenda reaches the halfway point, however, countries are falling short on many SDGs, particularly SDG 10 (reduce inequality). This study revisits the basic assumptions about policy coherence underpinning the SDGs. We systematically screened the peer-reviewed literature to identify 40 studies that provide evidence about whether coherent policymaking contributes to more effective outcomes and helps to reduce inequality. We find that coherent policymaking did *not* help reduce inequality in a majority of cases and made it worse in several. Our findings challenge the narrative that coherence is a necessary pre-condition for progress on the SDGs for all people.

## KEYWORDS

effectiveness, global goals, inequality, policy coherence, policy outcomes, Sustainable Development Goals

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

As the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development approaches the halfway mark, no country is on track to achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Biermann et al., 2022; UN, 2022). Countries are falling particularly short in efforts to reduce inequality (SDG 10), with inequality widening according to many measures (Chancel et al., 2022; Haas & Ivanovskis, 2022). Though the Agenda has faced unforeseen roadblocks, the COVID-19 pandemic foremost among them, the lack of collective progress raises questions not only

about political will and ambition, but also of how to enable fair and effective implementation going forward.

During negotiations over the SDGs, policymakers, practitioners, and international agencies promoted policy coherence—policymaking that systematically considers multiple policy goals in a coordinated way—as a key tool to achieve the “integrated and indivisible” Agenda (McGowan et al., 2019; Nilsson et al., 2018; OECD, 2018; UN, 2015). Coherent policymaking, they argued, would help governments to mitigate trade-offs and maximize synergies, thus ensuring that the fulfillment of some goals would not come at the cost of others

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(Collste et al., 2017; de Jong & Vijke, 2021; Haas & Ivanovskis, 2022). The resulting Target 17.14 reflected the belief that enhanced coherence is a necessary pre-condition for policy effectiveness, that is, policy that meets its stated goals. It also reflects the broader assumption that coherence is necessary for balancing economic, social, and environmental goals to ensure sustainable development overall.

Proponents of policy coherence also saw it as a key tool to help countries reduce inequality (UNCDP, 2018). SDG 10 calls for reducing inequality along multiple dimensions (UN, 2015). Agenda 2030 further includes the overarching goals of poverty eradication and progress that “leaves no one behind.” Proponents broadly expected improved policy effectiveness overall to translate into more effective policies for reducing inequality under SDG 10 (UNCDP, 2018). In theory, improved understanding of the interactions between goals (generated, for example, by dialogue across government agencies and stakeholders) would help governments to better manage the “trade-offs, distributional effects, and long-term consequences” of pursuing multiple goals simultaneously (UNCDP, 2018). An improved understanding of trade-offs would limit their negative consequences and, where these consequences proved unavoidable, ensure they would not fall on those previously “left behind,” such as traditionally vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. Maximizing synergies (e.g., by coordinating between government agencies) would also help governments achieve multiple goals with limited resources, thereby improving outcomes across society.

With progress on the 2030 Agenda stalled, we seek to re-examine these assumptions that coherent policymaking leads to better and more equal outcomes. In this review, we systematically investigate the relationship between policy coherence, policy effectiveness, and efforts to reduce inequality. We ask two related questions:

1. Does coherent policymaking contribute to more effective policies?
2. Does coherent policymaking contribute to reducing inequality?

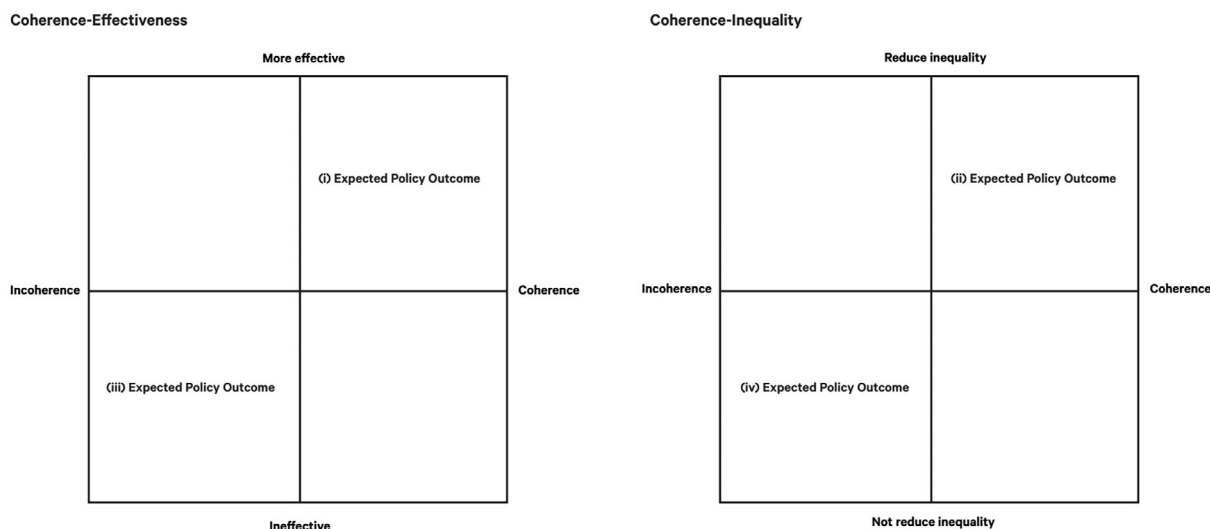
We conceptualize the relationship between policy coherence and effectiveness as one quadrant and policy coherence and inequality as a second quadrant (Figure 1). As per the assumptions reflected in the 2030 Agenda, we expect coherent policymaking to contribute to (i) more effective policy and (ii) reduced inequality. Likewise, we expect incoherent policymaking to contribute to (iii) ineffective policies and (iv) policies that fail to reduce inequality. We also expect to find a similar pattern of outcomes across the two quadrants, that is, when coherent policymaking produced more effective policies, it also reduced inequality.

Following a systematic review procedure, we screened the peer-reviewed literature for articles that provide empirical evidence of the influence of policy (in)coherence on policy effectiveness and policymaking efforts to reduce inequality. We identified an evidence base of 40 peer-reviewed articles. We mapped the evidence from these 40 studies on to the quadrants to determine whether and how the evidence aligns with the expected outcomes. We additionally evaluated and mapped the strength of influence of policy (in)coherence on the outcomes (high, medium, low, and none). Finally, we assessed whether reducing inequality was the primary policymaking goal, one of multiple goals, or not a stated goal.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Conceptual framework

To evaluate the relationship between coherence and outcomes, we focus on three key concepts: policy coherence, policy outcomes, and inequality. Following Nilsson (2021), we define policy coherence as “a process of policymaking that systematically considers the pursuit of multiple policy goals in a coordinated way, minimizing trade-offs and maximizing synergies” (p. 2). We define policy incoherence as the absence of such systematic policymaking. Policy coherence is



**FIGURE 1** Policy coherence is expected to produce more effective policies and to help reduce inequality in society.

conceptualized in many ways in the literature (Righettini & Lizzi, 2022), including as policy integration (Azizi et al., 2019; Trein et al., 2023), policy coordination (Rasul & Neupane, 2021), policy mixes (Kosow et al., 2022), mainstreaming (Owusu-Manu et al., 2020), and “whole of government” and “joined up government” approaches (Zeigermann, 2018). Coherence can include both horizontal dimensions (i.e., across sectors or government agencies and departments) and vertical dimensions (i.e., across levels of government). In the context of sustainability, it is often framed as Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD), which is defined 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).

Policy outcomes are generally understood as the impacts that are produced by the implementation of policy outputs (the texts resulting from a decision-making process). Following Candel (2017), we distinguish between *intermediate* and *eventual* outcomes. Intermediate outcomes are impacts on the functioning of the political system itself, referring to “changes of institutions, policies, and political process of or within a polity itself” (2017, p. 521). Eventual outcomes are impacts on society more broadly, referring to “effects outside of the immediate political system” (2017, p. 521). Because we are interested in how policy coherence influences the SDGs’ impact on society, we focus exclusively on identifying evidence of eventual outcomes.

We examine the outcomes of policy coherence in two ways. First, in terms of policy effectiveness, which we define as whether a policy or set of policies achieved their stated goals (Collste et al., 2017; Haas et al., 1993). In answering our first research question, we determine that a policy is more effective if it meets at least one of its stated policy goals. We determine that a policy is ineffective if it does not meet any of its stated policy goals. Within the policy evaluation literature, there is significant debate about the best methods to measure policy effectiveness, with studies employing a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Peters et al., 2018). We rely on the authors of each study’s methods and overall assessments to determine whether policies are effective. This review includes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies.

Second, we examine the outcomes in terms of reduced inequality. Because we intend our findings to shed light on the role of policy coherence in contributing to achievement of the SDGs, we define inequality following the language of the 2030 Agenda, particularly SDG 10, which calls for “reducing inequality within and between countries.” The goal recognizes inequality as multidimensional, aiming not only to reduce income inequality, but also inequalities based on age, sex, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status. In evaluating whether policymaking reduced inequality, we draw in particular on targets 10.1–10.4, which focus on within country inequality, and encompass social, political, and economic inclusion, equal opportunity, and the adoption of progressive policies. In answering our second research question, we determine that a policy reduces inequality if it increases income, enhances opportunities, and/or minimizes discrimination for at least one traditionally vulnerable and/or marginalized group in society. We determine that a policy

does not reduce inequality if it fails to do so for at least one group in society.

It is worth noting that our method of determining whether policies are effective and reduce inequality is a conservative one. We base our determination on a minimum requirement for success: policies need to achieve only one of their stated goals to be considered effective, and need to improve outcomes for only one group in society to be considered to have reduced inequality. Our analytical approach thus errs on the side of confirming the expected outcomes, contributing to the robustness of our findings.

We recognize that each of these three key concepts is more accurately represented as a spectrum. Policymaking can be more coherent or less coherent. Policy outcomes are complex. In terms of effectiveness, policies can fall anywhere on a scale from fully effective (meeting all goals) to partially effective (meeting some goals but not others, or making progress toward but not fully achieving goals) to fully ineffective (not making any progress on any goals). Policies can also reduce inequality for all groups in society along all dimensions, for some groups along some dimensions, or one group on one dimension. Policies can also fail to reduce inequality, have mixed outcomes in terms of inequality, or exacerbate inequality.

For the sake of this review, however, we have simplified these spectrums into binaries. Policymaking is either coherent or incoherent; the outcomes from this policymaking are either more effective or ineffective; policies either do or do not reduce inequality. Given the breadth of literature considered, we must compare outcomes across sectors, scales, and methodologies of measurement, as well as across different dimensions of equality. Though the approach risks losing nuance in the analysis, we believe it is the most accurate way to represent the findings.

## 2.2 | Systematic review

Following a systematic review protocol (Supporting Information 1), we searched the Web of Science and Scopus databases to identify peer-reviewed studies that include evidence of the outcomes of (in)coherent policymaking. To ensure we captured relevant documents, we first conducted an initial scoping of the literature to identify appropriate search terms. A list of 11 *a priori* publications, identified during the initial scoping as relevant to the primary research questions, were used to construct search terms. Unique search strings were developed for each bibliographic database (Table 1). The searches focused on documents containing the three key concepts: policy (in)coherence, policy outcomes, and (in) equality.

The searches produced 14,818 total results: 7,156 from Web of Science and 7,662 from Scopus. We imported these results into Eppi-Reviewer, a web-based software program for managing and analyzing data in literature reviews. The software automatically removed 823 duplicates, leaving 13,995 articles for manual screening. We screened the articles for empirical evidence of the outcomes of policy (in)coherence in a multi-phase process (Figure 2).

**TABLE 1** Search strings used to search Web of Science and Scopus databases.

Database	Concept 1	Concept 2	Concept 3	Focus area restrictions	Results
Key concepts and scope	(in)coherence	outcomes	(in)equality	English	
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((coheren* OR incoheren* OR coordinat* OR integrat* OR mainstream* OR "policy mix*" OR "joined up government*" OR "whole of government*" OR synerg* OR interlink* OR interconnec* OR tradeof* OR "trade-of**")	W/20 goal* OR target* OR outcome* OR objective* AND achieve* OR implement* OR realiz* OR realis* OR progress OR success OR effect* OR impact*	AND equal* OR inequal* OR unequal* OR equit* OR inequit* OR justice OR injustice OR inclus* OR exclus* OR multidimensional OR empower* OR disempower* OR fair* OR unfair* OR discrimin* OR displace* OR poverty OR poor*)	AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "ENVI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "AGRI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "EART") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "DECI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "MULT"))	7662
Web of Science	TS = (coheren* OR incoheren* OR coordinat* OR integrat* OR mainstream* OR "policy mix*" OR "joined up government*" OR "whole of government*" OR synerg* OR interlink* OR interconnec* OR tradeof* OR "trade-of**")	AND TS = (goal* OR target* OR outcome* OR objective*) AND TS = (achieve* OR implement* OR realiz* OR realis* OR progress OR success OR effect* OR impact*)	AND TS = (equal* OR inequal* OR unequal* OR equit* OR inequit* OR justice OR injustice OR inclus* OR exclus* OR multidimensional OR empower* OR disempower* OR fair* OR unfair* OR discrimin* OR displace* OR poverty OR poor*)	Environmental Sciences, Environmental Studies, Multidisciplinary Sciences, Social Sciences Interdisciplinary, Development Studies, Political Science, Social Work, International Relations, Public Administration	7156

### 2.2.1 | Phase 1 (screening by article title)

Five authors manually screened article titles according to predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). To ensure consistent interpretation of the inclusion criteria, members of the screening team each screened the same initial set of 100 articles and then compared their application of the criteria. At this point, the authors identified and manually removed a number of additional duplicates the software had not automatically identified. Because the screening team did not expect to encounter many duplicates at this stage, they did not record the number. Retroactively, they estimate that they manually removed thousands of additional duplicates. In the first phase, we narrowed the articles down from 13,995 to 2,183 (excluding 11,212).

### 2.2.2 | Phase 2 (screening by article abstract)

In the second phase, the same five authors manually screened the article abstracts following a narrower set of pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). The goal was to identify articles with high potential to include empirical evidence of the policy outcomes of (in)coherence. To ensure consistent interpretation of the inclusion criteria, each member of the screening team screened the same 10 abstracts and compared application of the criteria. Screeners were also given the option of responding "include for second opinion," where there was uncertainty or where they deemed the inclusion borderline. In these cases, the lead author double-screened the article. In

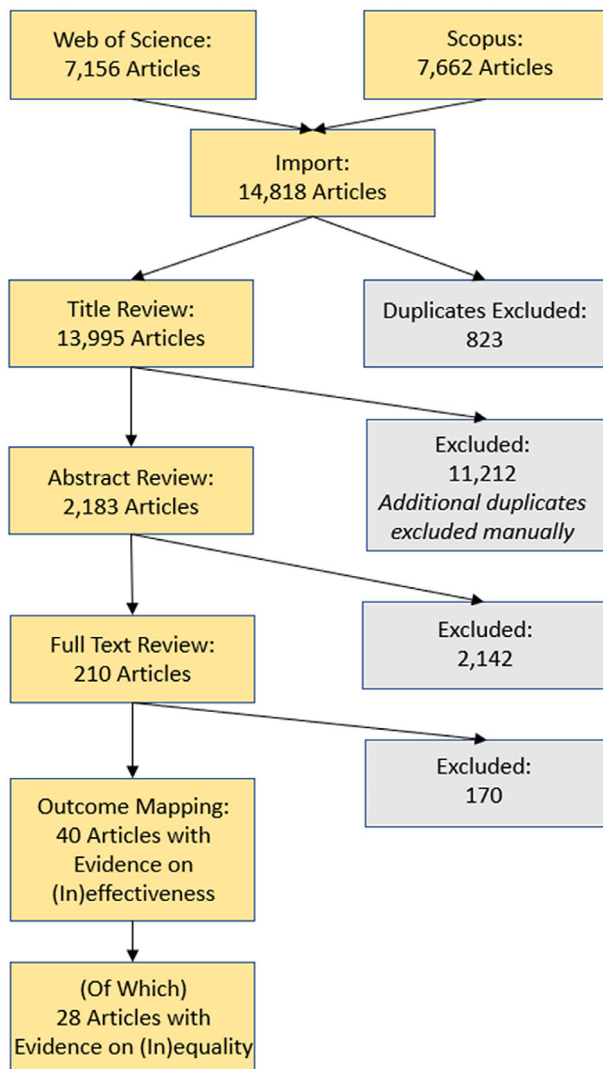
the second phase, we narrowed the articles down from 2,183 to 210 (excluding 1,973).

### 2.2.3 | Phase 3 (screening by full article text)

In the final phase of screening, eight authors reviewed the full text of each of these 210 articles to determine whether it included empirical evidence of the relationship(s) between (in)coherence, effectiveness, and equality. The authors completed a template capturing information about how the article characterized the three key concepts, the relationships between them, and the strength of those relationships (Supporting Information 2). In the final phase, we narrowed the articles down from 210 to 40 that included empirical evidence of the relationship between (in)coherence and policy effectiveness. Of these 40, 28 provided additional empirical evidence of the relationship between (in)coherence and efforts to reduce inequality.

## 2.3 | Mapping outcomes

Three members of the author team reviewed the templates from these 40 articles during a two-day, in-person workshop. For each template, the authors followed a set of guiding questions (Table 3). The decision criteria for each question determined if and how the article was placed on each quadrant. In addition to evaluating policy outcomes for each article, the authors also evaluated the strength of influence of (in)coherence on the outcome, as well as whether



**FIGURE 2** Systematic review workflow.

reducing inequality was the primary policy goal, one of multiple policy goals, or not a stated goal. The authors discussed each template until they reached consensus on all questions and returned to the article text where needed to clarify. All articles mapped on the equality quadrant are also mapped on the effectiveness quadrant, because if a policy's stated goals focused solely on equality, then reducing or failing to reduce equality reflected the effectiveness of that policy (Supporting Information 3).

## 2.4 | Methodological limitations

We identify three primary limitations to our findings. First, this systematic review cast the net widely in seeking to identify empirical evidence of the outcomes of policy coherence. We only identified, however, 40 studies providing evidence of the influence of policy (in) coherence on effectiveness, of which 28 provide evidence of (in)

**TABLE 2** Inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the title and abstract screening phases.

Title screening	Include	Exclude
	IF title contains one of three key concepts: Coherence OR policy outcomes OR equality	IF title does not contain one of three key concepts
	IF title topic relates to SDGs or MDGs	IF title does not relate to policymaking
		IF title is a duplicate
Abstract screening	Include	Exclude
	IF abstract contains two of three key concepts: Coherence AND policy outcomes OR Coherence AND equality	IF abstract does not contain two of the three key concepts
		IF abstract does not relate to policymaking

coherence's influence on efforts to reduce inequality. Though we are confident that the systematic approach captured the current body of evidence, these 40 articles provide a relatively narrow base on which to draw conclusions.

The narrow evidence base may be partially explained by the tendency for studies of policy coherence to focus on policy content rather than outcomes (Righettini & Lizzi, 2022). Many studies of coherence are theoretical, modeling synergies and trade-offs between goals in an effort to identify optimal policy mixes (Coscieme et al., 2021; Fuldauer et al., 2022; Miola et al., 2019; Nilsson et al., 2018; Tremblay et al., 2020). Studies that do evaluate outcomes tend to focus on intermediate rather than eventual outcomes, likely due to the methodological challenges involved in isolating the effects of (in)coherent policies from other factors (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Knill et al., 2012). Many studies removed in the screening process focused on policy content and intermediate outcomes.

The review may have also missed studies that describe outcomes using context-specific terminology. We used broadly defined search terms in order to capture information from a wide range of academic fields and policy sectors. This was particularly the case for terms focused on outcomes (e.g., “effectiveness,” “achievement,” and “progress”).

The second limitation is the potential information lost in reducing three broad, difficult-to-measure concepts into binaries. In our framework, policies are either coherent or incoherent, more effective or ineffective, and do or do not reduce inequality. In reality—and in the

**TABLE 3** The authors used guiding questions to determine if and how to place each article on the quadrants.

Guiding question	Decision criteria	Mapping in quadrant
1. Does this paper describe coherent or incoherent policymaking?	Coherent OR Incoherent Policymaking	IF coherent = left IF incoherent = right
2. Did (in)coherent policymaking contribute to more effective policies (i.e., policies meet at least one of their stated goals)?	More effective (met at least one stated goal) OR Ineffective (did not meet any stated goals)	IF more effective = top IF ineffective = bottom
3. Did (in)coherent policymaking contribute to reduced inequality (i.e., policies increase income, enhance opportunities, and/or minimize discrimination for at least one traditionally vulnerable/marginalized group in society)?	Reduced inequality (increased income, enhanced opportunities, and/or minimized discrimination for at least one group in society) OR Did not reduce inequality (did not increase income, enhance opportunities, and/or minimize discrimination for at least one group in society)	IF reduce inequality = top IF not reduce inequality = bottom
4. How strongly did the (in)coherent policymaking influence the outcome?	None = no effect Low = a weak factor among several or many factors Medium = a strong factor among several factors High = the primary or only factor	Placement within quadrant
5. Was reducing inequality a policymaking goal?	Primary goal One of multiple goals Not a stated goal	Dot color

studies reviewed—these concepts are much fuzzier. Some, for example, have challenged the binary framing of policy coherence, arguing there are benefits to incoherence and costs to building coherence within a political system (Moure et al., 2021). Though our approach is useful in isolating the key relationships of interest, it runs the risk of losing nuance in understanding causality and outcomes. We seek to mitigate this risk by exploring in depth the unexpected outcomes we identified, as well as highlighting the complexity of the relationships between (in)coherence, (in)effectiveness, and (in)equality.

Finally, there are significant challenges in comparing across the breadth of studies identified. These studies differ widely across both geographic and temporal scales, as well as across the types of policy goals addressed. Skjærseth (2021), for example, broadly evaluates the coherence of EU climate and energy policies and their effect on emissions over three decades. In contrast, Lee et al. (2021) focus on the social outcomes of integrated land use and transport planning in a single city, Seoul. The studies also employ different methods in evaluating outcomes, including quantitative (e.g., regression), qualitative (e.g., stakeholder perception), and mixed (e.g., land fragmentation analysis combined with interviews) approaches. It is also worth noting that each study has its own limitations. For instance, in finding that coherence had little effect on achievement of the SDGs, Glass and Newig (2019) examine only a small set of advanced democracies based on data collected in 2015, the year the SDGs were adopted.

### 3 | RESULTS

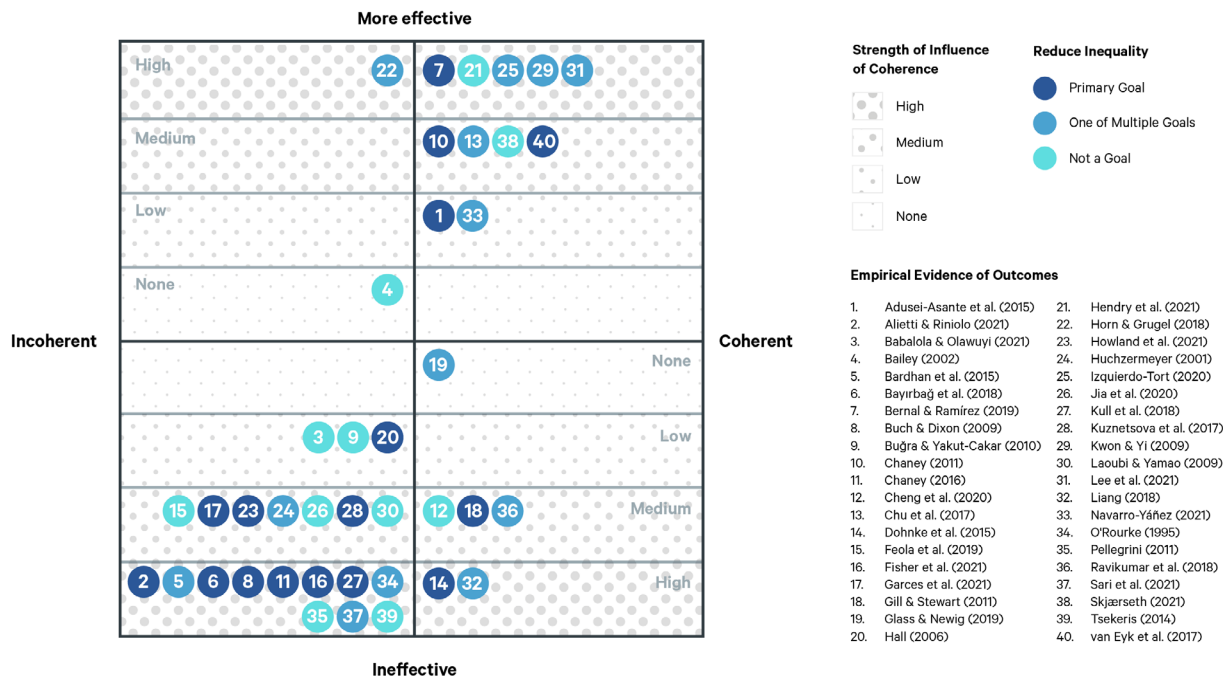
We identified 40 studies that provide empirical evidence of the influence of coherence on policy effectiveness, of which 28 studies provide evidence of its influence on efforts to reduce inequality. These studies analyze (in)coherence across a wide range of social, environmental, and

economic sectors: social care (poverty reduction, education, health, and employment); environment (climate mitigation and adaptation, water resources, waste management, forestry, mining, and ecosystem services); land use planning (agriculture, urbanization, housing, transportation, and infrastructure); and energy (electricity access). Only two of the studies focus explicitly on the SDGs. Overall, the body of evidence is recent—with nearly three-quarters ( $n = 28$ ) of the studies published in 2015 or later—reflecting the rising interest in policy coherence since the adoption of the SDGs (Righettini & Lizzi, 2022). Most studies used qualitative approaches ( $n = 27$ ), with a smaller number using quantitative ( $n = 8$ ) and mixed ( $n = 5$ ) approaches.

Reducing inequality was the primary policymaking goal in 16 studies and one of multiple goals in an additional 13 studies. Efforts to reduce inequality focused on multiple dimensions, including poverty alleviation, empowerment and inclusion of marginalized groups, desegregation, gender mainstreaming, environmental justice, access to resources, and addressing inequalities in health, education, and employment. The influence of (in)coherence varied across the cases. (In)coherence was the primary or only influence on the effectiveness of outcomes in nearly half the cases ( $n = 19$ ). (In)coherence appeared to be less influential on efforts to reduce inequality, acting as the primary or only influence in about a third of cases ( $n = 11$ ).

#### 3.1 | Coherence-effectiveness

In answering our first question, we found that the outcomes of most studies conform to expectations (Figure 3). Over half of the studies ( $n = 21$ ) provided empirical evidence of a link between incoherent policymaking and policy ineffectiveness. Incoherence highly influenced many of these outcomes. Sari et al. (2021), for example,



**FIGURE 3** Empirical evidence of the relationship between policy coherence and policy effectiveness largely conforms to expectations.

illustrated how multilevel and multisectoral incoherence of land use policy in Indonesia led to fragmentation of peatlands.

A smaller but still significant number of studies ( $n = 11$ ) linked coherent policymaking to more effective policies. Again, coherence was often strongly influential. Izquierdo-Tort (2020), for example, found that coherence between Payment for Ecosystem Services and Conditional Cash Transfer programs in Chiapas, Mexico, increased household income while contributing to conservation objectives. None of the studies found that incoherent policymaking led to more effective outcomes.

Despite this broad conformance with expectations, six cases found that coherent policymaking contributed to ineffective policies. Gill and Stewart (2011), for instance, demonstrated that gender-sensitive policies did not improve gender equity in health outcomes, such as maternal mortality, across five Asian countries. In one of these cases, coherence had no influence on the outcome. Investigating the relationships between a set of democratic indicators and achievement of the SDGs, Glass and Newig (2019) found that policy coherence had a positive effect on only two of the 17 goals (SDG 15, Life on Land, and SDG 17, Partnerships for the Goals). They concluded that their findings “do not yield strong empirical support for the view that policy coherence contributes to goal achievement” (2019, p. 17).

Additionally, two cases linked effective policy outcomes to incoherent policymaking processes. Bailey (2002), for example, examined an EU directive intended to harmonize member-state laws regulating recycling. He found that national legislative context, rather than coherence between national and EU regulations, influenced recycling rates. (The other case, Horn and Grugel (2018), is discussed in detail below.)

### 3.2 | Coherence-inequality reduction

In answering our second question, we found that the outcomes of many studies do not conform to expectations (Figure 4). Further, in many cases reductions in inequality occurred along a single dimension, and often this progress came at the cost or neglect of other dimensions. Other cases showed that coherence made inequality worse. In-depth examination of these studies reveals a complex relationship between coherent policymaking and efforts to reduce inequality, which we summarize in four key findings.

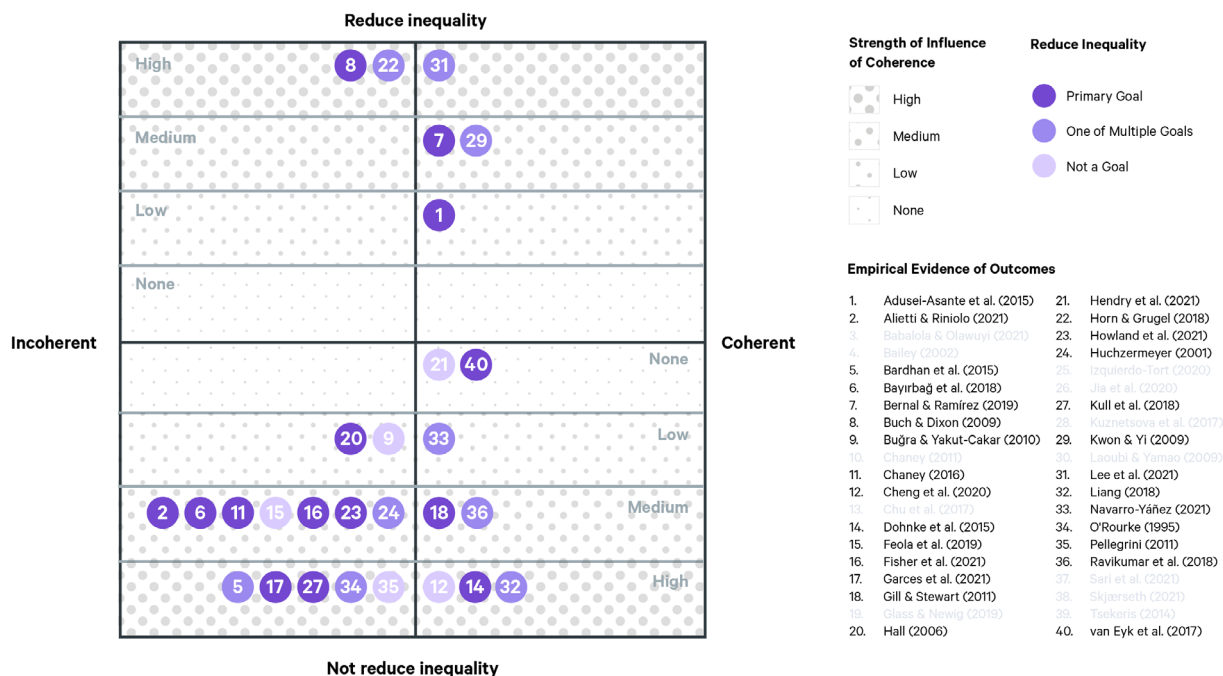
1. Moderate evidence ( $n = 14$ ) supports the assumption that incoherent policymaking contributes to inequality.

To give an example, Feola et al. (2019) demonstrated how incoherence between conservation and agricultural policymaking in the city of Sogamosa, Colombia, leads to uncertainty over land ownership and enables state appropriation of farmers' land.

2. Limited evidence ( $n = 4$ ) supports the assumption that coherent policymaking reduces inequality along at least one dimension.

The clearest evidence is from Kwon and Yi (2009), who illustrated how strong institutional coordination within the South Korean government enabled the country to simultaneously achieve goals of economic growth and poverty reduction. This coherent policymaking particularly reduced health inequalities by improving rural access to healthcare.

Though the other three cases demonstrated a link between coherence and reduced inequality, they also showed progress on



**FIGURE 4** Empirical evidence of the relationship between policy coherence and efforts to reduce inequality shows many outcomes that do not conform with expectations.

inequality to be limited to a single dimension. Investigating gender mainstreaming policies in Ghana, Adusei-Asante et al. (2015) concluded that though the policies enabled more women to attain positions of political power, broader gender inequalities persisted in education attainment and access to resources. Bernal and Ramírez (2019) evaluated Colombia's national strategy to improve early childhood outcomes by combining nutrition, health, and education interventions. They found that though the program reduced inequalities in education between rich and poor students, it delivered greater nutritional benefits to young boys than girls. In both cases, other factors (i.e., patriarchy in Ghana and gender preferences among parents in Colombia) likely played a more significant role in shaping outcomes.

Finally, Lee et al. (2021) found that integrated land use and transport policies in Seoul triggered a spatial transformation with uneven social effects: one group gained as another lost. Though the policies met the goal of increasing access to downtown for residents of the mega-city's periphery, they also decreased mobility and access for residents living near congested transport hubs.

3. A larger number of studies ( $n = 8$ ) found that coherent policymaking failed to reduce inequality across all dimensions and even exacerbated it in some cases.

van Eyk et al. (2017), for example, assessed Australia's "joined-up" policies to address social determinants of health inequities, especially among Aboriginal and low-income Australians. They found that though policymaking was coherent, competing interests of political actors led the government to deprioritize equity, severely limiting the policy's social impact. Investigating the integration of environmental

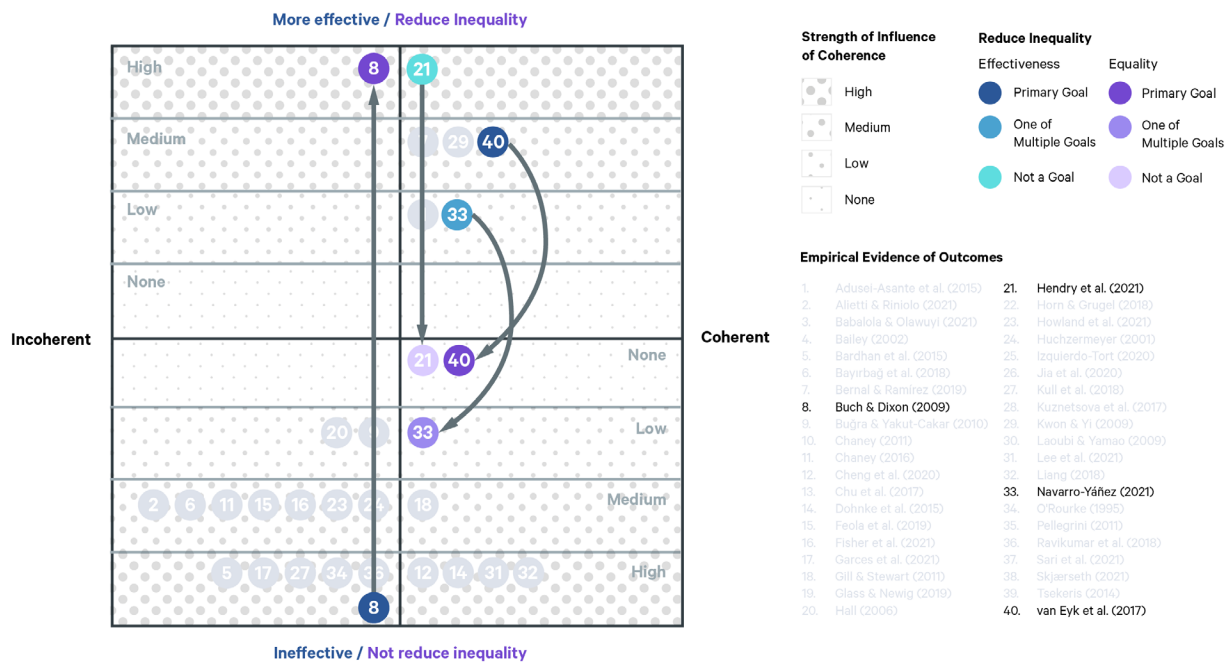
justice policies into the Clean Air Act in New York State, Liang (2018) found that integration did not produce a meaningful shift in resources or enable increased air quality monitoring in areas with vulnerable groups.

A surprising number of studies ( $n = 3$ ) found that coherent policymaking made pre-existing inequalities worse. This link is clearest in Ravikumar et al.'s (2018) study of land use policy in three countries with high rates of deforestation: Mexico, Peru, and Indonesia. They found that coordination between government, private sector interests, and local elites not only drove deforestation, but also contributed to social harms. In Indonesia, such coordination opened forest land to palm oil plantations, benefiting a narrow few at the cost of forest-dependent communities. They concluded that though "there could hardly be a clearer example of highly effective multi-level and multi-sector coordination ... [it] did not lead to environmentally sustainable or socially just outcomes" (p. 1444).

Others echo this finding. Dohnke et al. (2015) examined Chile's "New Housing Policy," which integrated social objectives into housing regulations in Santiago. Though it aimed to promote socioeconomically mixed development, in practice the policy "connect [ed] and expand[ed] traditional urban patterns," resulting in continued "partition and fragmentation along socioeconomic lines" (2015, p. 854). Another study by Cheng et al. (2020) investigated the Chinese government's "Link Policy," which aimed to preserve farmland while simultaneously enabling urban expansionism through land exchange. They illustrated how the policy not only failed to preserve farmland but also allowed the state to dispossess many poor farmers of their land and displace them without consent.

4. Incoherent policymaking can contribute to reducing inequality ( $n = 2$ ).





**FIGURE 5** Outcomes of four cases shifted between quadrants, indicating that they were either effective but failed to reduce inequality ( $n = 3$ ) or ineffective but nevertheless reduced inequality ( $n = 1$ ).

Unexpectedly, we also found two cases where policymaking was incoherent but nevertheless contributed to reductions in inequality. To give one example, Horn and Grugel (2018) described the implementation of SDG 10 (reduce inequality) in Ecuador. They illustrated how national and sub-national policymakers each focused on differing dimensions of inequality, according to their political priorities and agendas. As a result of this incoherence, Ecuador saw significant progress on a narrow, politically palatable dimension of inequality: disability rights, which was a national priority. At the same time, the focus on disability contributed to a lack of progress on broader, more politically sensitive inequalities like ethnicity, an issue prioritized sub-nationally. As in other cases, progress on one dimension of inequality came at the cost of another dimension. In this case, progress on disability rights may have been *because* of policy incoherence rather than *in spite of* incoherence.

### 3.3 | Linking effectiveness and inequality reduction

We also observe cases ( $n = 4$ ) that did not align with our expectation that we would see a similar pattern of outcomes across the two quadrants (Figure 5). In three studies, policies were effective overall but failed to reduce inequality. Conversely, one study found that ineffective policies nevertheless helped to reduce inequality.

#### 1. Effective policies did not reduce inequality.

The clearest example here is Hendry et al.'s (2021) evaluation of the outcomes of integrated health and social care in Scotland. Though they found significant, positive outcomes for health overall, they also

found that relative inequalities between affluent and deprived areas continued to widen. They concluded that the integrated approach had “little impact” on such systematic inequalities. van Eyk et al. (2017) similarly found that coherent policymaking with overall positive effects could not close long-standing gaps in health outcomes among marginalized groups in Australia. Finally, Navarro-Yáñez (2021) examined an integrated urban development initiative in Spain that sought to improve employment opportunities in disadvantaged neighborhoods. He found that though the initiative had positive overall effects on employment rates and business activity, it did not yield clear benefits for disadvantaged groups in targeted areas.

#### 2. Ineffective policies that reduced inequality.

Buch and Dixon (2009) evaluated a South African job creation program that sought both to reduce poverty and achieve environmental objectives. Targeting the “poorest and most marginalized,” the program was ineffective in its primary goal of securing regular income for its graduates. Despite its failure, the program reduced inequality by providing participants with intangible benefits, including greater confidence, leadership abilities, and “knock-on skills” that enabled them to seek employment in other fields.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Following a systematic review procedure, we identified 40 peer-reviewed articles that provide empirical evidence of the societal outcomes of (in)coherent policymaking. We mapped the findings from these studies on to quadrants representing the broad expectations

that improved coherence will lead to more effective policies and help to reduce inequality. Our findings largely confirmed the expectation that policy coherence would improve policy effectiveness. In most cases, but not all, coherent policymaking contributed to the achievement of at least some policy goals.

In contrast, our findings largely do not support the expectation that policy coherence helps to reduce inequality. Coherence did not help to reduce inequality in a majority of cases, even when doing so was an explicit policy goal. In several cases, more coherent policies actually exacerbated inequality. The following discussion focuses primarily on the relationship between policy coherence and efforts to reduce inequality, especially on the review's unexpected findings.

In seeking explanations for why policy coherence largely failed to reduce inequality, we must first consider two common explanations for policy failure in general and failure of efforts to promote policy coherence specifically. The first common explanation is lack of ambition in policy goals and/or implementation. If a policy is coherent, but unambitious, it will have only limited effect. Many of the studies included in this review, however, considered clearly ambitious policies, such as the Bolsa Familia program in Brazil, which sought to lift 30 million people from poverty (Hall, 2006). Many of the policies we examined were particularly ambitious in their aims to reduce inequality, such as the "Closing the Gap" policies which sought to improve educational, health, and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and low-income Australians (Fisher et al., 2021).

A second commonly cited explanation is institutional failures. Some pointed to the high costs of coherence, such as demands on the time and resources of policymakers, as inhibiting successful implementation (Moure et al., 2021) and effective monitoring and evaluation (Schoenefeld et al., 2019). Others argued that slow feedback loops between implementation and outcomes in society can obscure progress on goals (Collste et al., 2017). These types of failures can help explain some of our unexpected findings. Gill and Stewart (2011), for example, clearly identified implementation gaps as hindering gender mainstreaming in South Asia. van Eyk et al. (2017) illustrated how the perceived cost of coherence, especially the time and energy needed to build cross-sectoral relationships, in part led government actors to abandon efforts to integrate equity into health policy in Australia. Glass and Newig's (2019) analysis of the SDGs occurred not long after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, making it difficult to measure progress. Most studies, however, did not identify implementation as the primary issue, leading us to seek other explanations.

#### 4.1 | Policy coherence and inequality: Challenging expectations

To examine how and why policy coherence failed in many cases to reduce inequality, it is helpful to revisit some of the assumptions underpinning its inclusion in the 2030 Agenda. Proponents' first expectation was that improved effectiveness overall would translate into more effective efforts to reduce inequality specifically. Though many cases show how policy incoherence leads to ineffectiveness and

failures to reduce inequality, few show the opposite pattern whereby coherence leads to effectiveness and successful efforts to reduce inequality. Instead, we see cases where coherent policymaking led to more effective policies but fell short in meeting goals to reduce inequality. This shows that while incoherence may hinder policy effectiveness, coherence is not a sufficient pre-condition to ensuring effectiveness, and in particular to reducing inequality (Dombrowsky et al., 2022). We also see a case where incoherent and ineffective policies nevertheless succeeded in reducing inequality (Buch & Dixon, 2009). Overall, the relationship appears inconsistent: one desired outcome simply does not follow upon the other.

Proponents' second expectation was that improved understanding of trade-offs between goals would limit the negative consequences of those trade-offs and prevent those consequences from falling on vulnerable and marginalized groups. A close look at the cases in which coherence did not reduce inequality challenges this expectation. Some cases illustrated that governments' improved understanding of trade-offs did not necessarily limit their negative consequences in the first place (i.e., Ravikumar et al., 2018; van Eyk et al., 2017). Others showed how, even when improved understanding did enable policymakers to limit negative consequences, unavoidable consequences continue to fall on vulnerable and marginalized groups (Cheng et al., 2020; Hendry et al., 2021).

Another theme also emerged when considering trade-offs. In cases where improved coherence did help to reduce inequality, we find that these reductions were often along a single dimension and often came at the cost or neglect of other dimensions. In some cases, we see progress on only a narrow dimension of inequality (e.g., Adusei-Asante et al., 2015). We also see progress for one group in society coming at the cost of another (Lee et al., 2021). Finally, we see clear trade-offs, where focus on one dimension of inequality draws attention away from other dimensions (Horn & Grugel, 2018).

Across the cases where coherence failed to lead to more effective and equal policies, or where we see trade-offs between different dimensions of inequality, we observe two primary factors inhibiting the expected outcomes: the interests of policymakers, government authorities, and private actors; and the influence of broader political and economic structures.

In terms of interests, those of policymakers shaped how inequality was interpreted and which dimensions were emphasized, as well as if and how it was meaningfully addressed. We see, for example, the preferences and agendas of policymakers leading governments to deprioritize equality (Horn & Grugel, 2018; van Eyk et al., 2017). We see groups of elites in government, civil society, and private industry coordinating to benefit a narrow few rather than broader, public interests (Dohnke et al., 2015; Ravikumar et al., 2018). Ravikumar et al. (2018), in particular, illustrated how traditional "institutional fixes" for incoherence (such as coordination and dialog among stakeholders) can be hijacked by powerful actors to steer the outcomes they find desirable. We also see coherence reinforcing established political dynamics, with mixed results for inequality reduction. On the one hand, coherence enabled government agents to disempower and dispossess their own citizens (Cheng et al., 2020). On the other hand, highly

cohesive policies developed without civil society input helped reduce inequality in the context of a strong welfare state (Kwon & Yi, 2009).

We also observe many cases in which broader political and economic structures are more influential in shaping outcomes than coherence. Coherent policymaking could not overcome historical colonization and marginalization to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal peoples in Australia (Fisher et al., 2021). Deep-rooted patriarchy in Ghana limited the effects of gender mainstreaming policies (Adusei-Asante et al., 2015). In Chile, coherent social housing policies intended to promote integration of poor families were hampered by a broader neoliberal economy that supported profit-oriented development (Dohnke et al., 2015).

The final expectation among proponents of policy coherence was that maximizing synergies would help governments achieve multiple policy goals with limited resources, improving outcomes for traditionally vulnerable groups and across society at large. Several cases support this expectation. Kwon and Yi (2009) for example, found that improved coordination of “multifunctional institutions” contributed to the success of the South Korean welfare state. In contrast, however, Liang (2018) found that integration of equity goals into air quality regulation policies gave rise to new trade-offs. Shifting resources to vulnerable communities meant reduced compliance inspections and punitive actions, reducing regulatory effectiveness overall, while doing little to alleviate the actual environmental burdens born by these communities.

## 4.2 | Recommendations: Policy coherence and effectiveness for whom?

Taken together, these findings raise important questions about the role policy coherence can play in ensuring fair and balanced achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The cases in this review indicate that policy coherence can benefit some and not others. Who benefits can depend on the interests of those in power. Even in cases where coherence helps policymakers minimize trade-offs between multiple goals, sectors, or objectives, it is not necessarily an effective policy tool for reducing inequality along its many dimensions and for all groups in society. We should not assume that policy coherence will lead to more effective and more equal outcomes for all. Instead, we should ask: policy coherence and effectiveness *for whom?*

Based on these findings, we make three recommendations for researchers and proponents of policy coherence as the 2030 Agenda passes the halfway mark:

1. *Recognize policy coherence as a political process in which actors seek to advance their own interests.* Our findings underscore the need to consider the role of power dynamics, vested interests, and political and economic structures in promoting coherence and shaping its outcomes (Bocquillon, 2018; Brand et al., 2021; Dombrowsky et al., 2022; Nilsson, 2021; Purdon, 2014; Shawoo et al., 2022; Trein et al., 2023). Traditional institutional fixes, such as improved dialogue and coordination, are unlikely to contribute to reducing

inequality if policymakers and practitioners fail to account for actors' interests (Ravikumar et al., 2018). Because the 2030 Agenda is implemented at the national level, local contexts and political drivers also need to be more directly and specifically addressed.

2. *Investigate the relationship between policy coherence and multidimensional inequality.* Our findings show that where coherence helped reduce inequality, progress was narrow, confined to a single group or dimension. This result is not encouraging in light of the broad gains needed among vulnerable and marginalized groups to meet the SDGs and ensure no one is left behind. More research is needed on the complex trade-offs between groups and dimensions of inequality, particularly the circumstances in which coherence can exacerbate existing inequalities and the potential for new trade-offs to arise as equity objectives are integrated into broader sustainable development targets. Likewise, we need to better understand how deep-rooted inequalities can limit the effectiveness of coherence as a policy tool for reducing inequality.
3. *Focus on the consequences of (in)coherence.* Our systematic approach revealed a narrow evidence base for empirical evidence of the outcomes of (in)coherence, reinforcing similar findings of others (Righettini & Lizzi, 2022). The evidence is particularly limited for outcomes relating to inequality. Given the lack of progress on SDG 10 to date (Sachs et al., 2022, p. 20), as well its strong interconnection with other SDGs (Le Blanc, 2015), more research is needed on outcomes in terms of inequality. With SDG 10 receiving less political attention than other goals (UN-ECOSOC, 2019), independent research is necessary to drive and inform politically-sensitive but crucial conversations around which groups bear the burdens of societal progress (Wong & van der Heijden, 2019).

## 4.3 | Conclusion: What role for policy coherence in “leave no one behind?”

With the 2030 Agenda appearing to lose steam—and countries falling particularly behind on efforts to reduce inequality—many see incoherence as at least partially to blame (Antwi-Agyei et al., 2018; Coscieme et al., 2021; Dzebo et al., 2017; Nilsson & Weitz, 2019). This has led to calls for a renewed focus on implementation, with some going so far as to assert that “the need for better policy coherence in global sustainability governance is undisputed” (Bogers et al., 2022). We do not dispute that coherent policymaking can help governments achieve some of the SDGs. Our findings lead us to question, however, the extent to which coherence will ensure that the Agenda's overarching goals of reducing inequality and “leaving no one behind” are achieved.

As others have argued, policy coherence is not a panacea (Brand et al., 2021). Coherence may help policymakers to minimize trade-offs and the negative consequences thereof, but it cannot help them “manage away” or eliminate all trade-offs (Haas & Ivanovskis, 2022; Ravikumar et al., 2018; Yunita et al., 2022). Technical approaches to coherence which aim to align policy content or improve coordination

and integration will not necessarily address political challenges at the root of existing inequalities.

Ultimately, reducing inequality is a political act, requiring political will and political risk-taking rather than technocratic solutions. Ensuring that the negative consequences of efforts to address global issues like climate change and sustainable development do not fall disproportionately on socially, economically, and politically vulnerable groups may require prioritizing efforts to reduce inequality over efforts to promote policy coherence. Policymaking and dialogue in the latter half of the 2030 Agenda should be squarely on whom unavoidable consequences of progress will fall. The goals of the 2030 Agenda will not be achieved unless they are achieved for all.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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