Environmental Science and Policy 78 (2017) 36–39

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Environmental Science and Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/envsci

Review

Policy note: Lessons from environmental policy integration for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

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1. Introduction

The need for an integrated approach to public policy-making has become a central concern as governments gear up to implement the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015. There is widespread recognition that the Agenda will require shifts in how policy is developed and implemented. Issue of integration features strongly in the UN resolution text, and since its adoption, governments (UN ECOSOC, 2016), NGOs (Stakeholder Forum, 2016), UN organizations (UN, 2016) and scientists (ICSU, 2017) have all advocated for integrated policy making as a guiding principle for implementing the SDGs.

But how do you pursue integrated policy making in the context of a comprehensive policy framework such as the SDGs? This paper draws lessons from experiences with environmental policy integration (EPI) and discusses to what extent they apply for an integrated approach for policy implementation around the SDGs. It examines how four key policy-making dimensions identified in the EPI literature are applicable (or not) to the challenge of implementing the SDGs, and what new challenges and opportunities have surfaced, based on the characteristics of the goals.

We draw on three decades of policy experiences captured in EPI academic and policy literatures, as discussed across this Special Issue. We also draw on adjacent experiences with policy coherence (Nilsson et al., 2012) (e.g. in foreign policy areas such a development co-operation policy and security policy) (e.g. OECD, 2017) and mainstreaming (e.g. around gender perspectives) (e.g. Hillion, 2008).

2. The EPI experience

The experience of using EPI as a policy principle for achieving sustainable development is well documented. Introduced by the 1987 "Brundtland Commission", the principle was picked up by the European Union and enshrined in the EU treaties of Maastricht (1992); and Amsterdam (1997). The principle of EPI was motivated by the insight that environmental problems cannot be fully resolved by environmental ministries and agencies but that the sectors that drive and cause these problems need to take ownership of environmental objectives. Several countries including the UK and Sweden pursued EPI, and international organizations such as the European Environment Agency (2005) developed guidance (Persson, 2007 Jordan and Lenschow, 2008).

Over time, however, the political attention to EPI as a principle arguably waned, partly perhaps as a consequence of environmental objectives becoming increasingly institutionalized into normal bureaucratic and policy-making routines (Persson et al., 2015). This would suggest that while the political discourse on EPI disappears in the "Downsian" issue-attention cycle, policy making in practice continues to be environmentally integrated. It is also plausible that there was a crowding out of EPI as a discrete agenda by new agendas and concepts with partly overlapping meaning, such as green economy/green growth (UNEP, 2011; OECD, 2011), low-carbon/climate-smart development (Menon et al., 2014), and, in the wake of Rio + 10 in Johannesburg, the mainstreaming of sustainable development overall (Jordan and Lenschow, 2008). On a more negative note, empirical work into all these different agendas and concepts suggest that they rarely result in having significant impact on policy but tend to get stuck at the level of policy statements and (in the case of the EU) largely inconsequential Council communications (Adelle and Nilsson, 2015). Across OECD countries, Jacob and Volkery (2004) found a preference for formulating high-level objectives and frameworks over actual reform of operational procedures. Clearly, whatever the integration concept, institutional and political barriers need to be overcome to advance EPI beyond rhetoric and through to action "on the ground".

In the research literature, EPI work has expanded although systematic lesson-drawing is still limited (Nilsson and Eckerberg, 2007; Jordan and Lenschow, 2008; Runhaar et al., 2014). The literature commonly identifies four dimensions of policy making that need to be addressed advance EPI: the normative framework guiding it, the political will to implement it, cognitive and analytical capacities, and the institutional (organizational and procedural) arrangements (Persson, 2007; Jordan and Lenschow, 2010; Hogl et al., 2016). Normative frameworks may involve constitutional and legal provisions to consider environmental objectives in policy formation and implementation or even give them 'principled priority' (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.09.003
Received 6 July 2017; Received in revised form 11 September 2017; Accepted 11 September 2017

Political commitment and will is commonly seen as a core, if not the most important, factor for achieving EPI in practice and not only rhetorically (Dupont and Oberthür, 2012; Jordan and Lenschow, 2010). A political perspective also involves analyzing whether and how different interests and stakeholders can be aligned towards EPI (Hertin and Berkhout, 2003). Cognitive and analytical capacities have generally been less studied, but are addressed as key factors in policy learning perspectives on EPI (Nilsson, 2005). Finally, many EPI studies take as their entry point institutional arrangements, whereby organizational structure, procedures and policy process are in focus (Peters, 1998; Russel and Jordan, 2004). Below we discuss the applicability of the EPI experiences to the SDGs following these four key dimensions.

3. How are EPI lessons applicable to the SDGs?

The Sustainable Development Goals represent a considerable widening of the integration challenge. They encompass major environmental areas such as climate change, chemicals pollution, waste, marine and terrestrial ecosystems, etc., but they also extend social, economic and institutional development objectives applicable to both low-income and high-income countries, such as access to food, water, sanitation, energy, health, education, justice, and development of infrastructure, cities, employment and growth. In the international system, the SDG agenda can be seen as a hybrid, derived partly from the follow up to the Millennium Development Goals (focusing on "finishing the job" on poverty) and partly from the UN's "Rio" processes with more focus on global environmental issues.

With a comprehensive SDG agenda (17 goals, 169 targets), the coordination challenge multiplies: the challenge is no longer how to integrate environmental with sectoral or economic policy – but how to create an "indivisible whole" – as the 2030 Agenda rhetoric states it. Admittedly, EPI involves a non-trivial 'internal coherence' challenge, considering that the environment is highly multidimensional (e.g. climate, biodiversity, water quality) and sometimes facing difficult trade-offs. Still, the 2030 Agenda have many more dimensions that clearly touch upon most parts of any government.

There are thus major differences in both the type and the scale of the integration challenge in the SDG context as compared with EPI. Bearing these differences in mind when learning from EPI, we will now discuss how to pursue integrated policy making in the context the SDGs, looking at the four EPI dimensions.

3.1. The normative framework

Considering, first, the *normative framework* for integration, this gains a very different character with the SDGs. Lafferty and Hovden's (2003) much-cited idea that EPI required that policy making gave "principled priority" to environmental objectives over all other policy objectives is a conception with limited value for the SDGs. Environmentalists did of course advocate strongly that the SDGs should prioritize environmental values and safeguards, for example in the form of planetary boundaries, but any such form of prioritization was firmly avoided by the UN negotiators. The SDGs put human, social, economic, institutional and environmental objectives on the same level. Integration in the context of SDGs can thus be understood better as a matter of harmonization i.e., to bring different policy objectives on equal terms across the government (which is what the 2030 Agenda declaration is hinting at with its indivisibility rhetoric) or, in a weaker form, coordination, i.e. avoiding contradictory sectoral policies or mitigating adverse spill-over effects from sectoral policies (OECD, 2017). The 2030 Agenda as a whole *is* a normative framework, but in a different way. It gives priority and weight to for example the global partnership and universality principles rather than specific issues such as environmental protection over others. The normative "steer" of the 2030 Agenda is thus to trigger a sense of joint responsibility to resolve universal development problems and a commitment to international collaboration.

3.2. The political will

The requisite *political will* for integration changes character profoundly with the SDGs. The starting point of EPI was to integrate a traditionally less prioritized policy objective, typically supported by less powerful actors, into "mainstream" sector objectives, typically supported by well-organized interests (Lundqvist, 2004). This sets the stage for resistance from incumbents which arguably requires significant political will to be overcome. The SDGs, on the other hand, cover most of the policy areas already prioritized by governments, such as including economic growth and jobs (although it does not cover top-priority issues of national security or for example the fight against terrorism).

Still, the lack of political will remains a concern with the SDGs, but it has more to do with the lack of will, perhaps in particular in high-income countries, to change existing national policy frameworks by imposing a (voluntary) global agreement. The integration challenge is not about integrating a discrete 'issue' into a bigger whole, but integrating an entire 'agenda' – emerging from a distant UN system that is neither particularly accountable nor necessarily responsive to a country's electorate – into a pre-existing (but constantly evolving) domestic political agenda, often with a strong and intricate root system in parliamentary politics, domestic public opinion and the bureaucracy. Early experiences in the implementation suggests that the SDG agenda does not take center policy stage in many OECD-countries or in the international bodies such as the OECD secretariat and the European Commission. Like the previous national sustainable development strategies (Steurer, 2008), the 2030 Agenda risks marginalization within the public administration with limited impact on the public policy and investment. To mitigate this risk, domestic interpretation and internalization of the SDGs in terms of national political priorities are critical processes (Persson et al., 2016). Integration thus involves interpreting and contextualizing the SDGs within the national political agenda. Countries such as Germany, Sweden and Colombia have set in motion significant processes with clear and visible support from their heads of government. In other countries, such as the UK, where one might expect an interest given past achievements in policy integration (Russel and Jordan, 2008) as well as the role of the UK in the preparatory processes of the 2030 Agenda (where its Prime Minister David Cameron co-chaired the UN Secretary-General's "High-level group of eminent persons on the post-2015 development agenda" (UN, 2013)), we have not seen evidence that would suggest significant political commitment.

3.3. The cognitive and analytical capacities

To overcome a narrow problem framing impeding integration, the EPI literature has pointed to the need for systems thinking and (environmental) knowledge input through advisory mechanisms and through environmental assessment procedures (Turnpenny et al., 2009). In EPI, assessment procedures were typically promoted as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) at policy level (World Bank, 2010). Here, the fate of the European "SEA directive" (2001/42/EC) is a case in point to the issue about political will, as initial ambitions to apply the directive to the policy level did not prove acceptable and the directive was limited to "certain plans and programmes", leaving the national policy level outside the realm of the directive (EC, 2000). A richer international experience in applying SEA for EPI is however available across emerging and developing countries (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005). Indeed, countries such as for example Vietnam and Tanzania have passed legislation requiring all policy proposals to undergo strategic environmental assessment.

As the integration challenge moves from the environment department to the center of government, additional experiences have been highlighted with using systemic knowledge and engaging in strategic foresight studies (i.e. analysis of megatrends, scenario building, and