

Bridging the gaps to accelerate the SDGs: Policy Coherence across Water, Energy, Industry and Cities



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Ford Foundation, 320 East 43rd Street, New York, NY 10017



SUMMARY REPORT

Framing the discussion

With less than four years left to 2030, the 2026 HLPF took place at a decisive moment for the Sustainable Development Goals. Progress remains too slow and uneven, while governments face tighter fiscal space, rising debt, climate risks, geopolitical uncertainty and growing demands on public institutions. The SDGs reviewed this year (water, energy, industry and infrastructure, sustainable cities, and partnerships) show clearly why fragmented action is costly. Decisions in one area shape outcomes in many others. Water security depends on energy choices. Energy transitions depend on land, technology, finance and minerals. Cities depend on transport, housing, water, energy and digital systems working together. Industrial transformation depends on skills, innovation, clean energy and investment.

The side event, co-organised by the OECD and the Governments of Spain, Italy and Romania, marked the launch of the OECD report *Bridging the Gaps for Sustainable Development: Coherent Policies for Water, Energy, Industry and Cities*. The discussion underlined one core message: the main challenge is no longer a lack of commitment. It is the gap between ambition and delivery. Closing this gap calls for a shift from fragmented policies to more coherent implementation, from isolated projects to integrated solutions, and from short-term responses to long-term public value.

The event was structured in four parts:

1. It opened with the **launch** of the OECD report *Bridging the Gaps for Sustainable Development. Coherent Policies for Water, Energy, Industry and Cities*, with remarks by OECD Deputy Secretary General **František Růžička**, and Ms. **Björg Sandkjær**, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
2. A **political dialogue** followed with perspectives from the co organising countries. Speakers included **Mr. László Borbély**, State Counsellor and Coordinator of the Department of Sustainable Development, Government of Romania, **Mr. Claudio Barbaro**, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security, Government of Italy, and Mr. **David Perejil Bricio**, Director General for the 2030 Agenda,

Government of Spain. Mr **Alexei Buzu**, Secretary General of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, brought an implementation perspective from a recent VNR country.

3. A second exchange focused on **practical experience from national, regional and partner institutions**, with contributions from Amb. **Cherdchai Chaivaivid**, Permanent Representative of Thailand to the United Nations, Mr. **Pedro Saraiva**, Director of Portugal's Centre for Planning and Evaluation of Public Policies, Ms. **Taru Savolainen**, Secretary General of the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, Mr. **Enrique Delgado Ríos**, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations, Mr. **Tiziano Consoli**, Regional Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development, Marche Region, Italy, Ms. **Conchi Aranguren**, Delegate of the Basque Country to the United States and Canada, Mr. **Rafael Peralta**, UNEP's Director for the New York office and North America, Mr. **Amer Kapetanović**, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Ms. **Özge Aydoğan**, Director of Beyond Lab, UN Office at Geneva, Ms. **Dikshya Devkota**, Analyst, Global Environment Facility, and Mr. **Martin Ganda**, Chairman of New Africa Capital. The discussion was moderated by the OECD.

Policy coherence as a delivery capability

The discussion underlined that policy coherence is a practical government capability. It helps governments anticipate how policies interact, manage trade-offs early, reduce unintended effects, and make public investment work harder across several objectives at once. This is especially relevant when resources are limited and short-term decisions can create higher future costs.

The OECD Deputy Secretary General stressed that governments need to organise themselves around real world connections rather than administrative boundaries. Energy plans need to take account of water availability. Urban development needs to connect with transport, housing, water and energy systems. Industrial strategies need to link with clean energy, innovation, skills and finance. Domestic policies also have effects beyond borders through trade, emissions, finance, technology and supply chains.

The UN perspective reinforced this message. The challenge is not a shortage of commitments, but the need to connect policies, institutions and investments so that they reinforce one another. Innovation and technology can support acceleration, including artificial intelligence, but only when combined with effective governance, strong institutions and international cooperation. SDG 17 was presented as the enabling architecture for all other goals, because no country can manage today's interconnected challenges alone.

Leadership and institutions for coherent action

Country experiences showed that coherence benefits from political leadership, clear mandates and institutions that can bring ministries together. **Romania** highlighted the importance of coordination from the centre of government. Its Department of Sustainable Development under the Prime Minister's Office connects institutions, policies and evidence, supported by an inter ministerial committee, a consultative council, and sustainable development hubs across

ministries. Romania also underlined that implementation depends on people, noting its network of more than 2 300 certified sustainable development experts, many working at local level.

Italy presented policy coherence as the way to translate the 2030 Agenda into public policies that are connected across sectors, levels of government and time horizons. Its National Sustainable Development Strategy uses coherence matrices to identify synergies and trade-offs at the design stage. Italy also highlighted multilevel governance through regional and local sustainable development strategies, voluntary local reviews, and a stronger focus on intergenerational impacts, including structured involvement of young people.

Spain stressed that SDG implementation needs to be embedded in the public policy cycle. Its approach combines multilevel governance, policy coherence, territorial cohesion and localisation. Spain's new action plan brings together national, regional, local and societal actors, supported by tools such as budget alignment, public procurement, training for public officials among others, and measures to move beyond purely quantitative growth towards wellbeing and quality growth.

Moldova added a strong implementation message. Coherence also requires discipline. In a context of crises, limited fiscal space and political pressure, governments need the capacity to stay focused, follow up and finish what they start. Prioritisation means not only choosing what to do, but also deciding what to set aside in order to deliver. Consistency, Moldova stressed, is often more important than intensity.

Embedding coherence in the policy cycle

The discussion moved beyond institutional design to practical tools. **Thailand** showed how integrated planning, reliable data and localisation can help a large bureaucracy work more effectively across sectors and levels of government. Its SDG dashboard provides a common evidence base for monitoring and decision making, while SDG localisation initiatives help adapt national priorities to local realities.

Portugal highlighted the role of planning, monitoring, evaluation and foresight at the centre of government. Its National Roadmap for Sustainable Development includes a full chapter on policy coherence and was approved by the Council of Ministers after two years of stakeholder engagement. Portugal also showed that coherent action can be accelerated in response to crisis. After severe storms caused major damage, the government developed a resilience plan in three months, bringing together ministries, citizens' inputs and analysis supported by artificial intelligence.

Finland stressed the value of long-term dialogue across government and society. Its National Commission on Sustainable Development brings together ministries, political parties, civil society, Indigenous representatives, youth, academia, media and other actors. This broad platform helps test emerging policy initiatives, sustain long term commitment and keep coherence alive beyond individual political cycles.

Mexico underlined three lessons. Coherence starts at the policy design stage. It requires permanent execution and adjustment. Integrated implementation depends on strong

partnerships with state and local governments. Inclusive consultation, cross sector institutions and multilevel governance help translate national priorities into local action.

Localising coherence

Speakers from regional governments showed that policy coherence becomes tangible in territorial decisions. **Marche Region** in Italy presented coherence as a way to embed sustainable development in planning, implementation and monitoring. With OECD and European Commission support, the region tested tools to identify synergies and trade-offs, applying them to soft mobility and the regeneration of historic villages. Its urban planning reform puts urban regeneration and net zero land consumption at the centre of territorial governance.

The **Basque Country** highlighted collaborative governance as the basis for coherent action. Coherence means aligning what institutions say with how they act. The Basque model brings together government, provincial councils, cities, municipalities, civil society, the private sector and international partners. It also uses voluntary reporting, budgets aligned with the SDGs, and data partnerships to support accountability and engagement with businesses.

These examples showed that national strategies become meaningful when regions, cities and communities can adapt them to local conditions. Localisation is where many trade-offs are managed, services are delivered and citizens see whether the SDGs improve their lives.

Scaling coherent solutions

International and partner organisations highlighted the need to connect policy coherence with environmental agreements, financing and long-term systems thinking. **UNEP** stressed that multilateral environmental agreements can help organise coherent action across climate, biodiversity, pollution, water, energy, industry and cities. They can also support new financing mechanisms and help countries move beyond isolated environmental commitments.

The Regional Cooperation Council showed how regional cooperation can support coherence where challenges cross borders. Its Southeast Europe 2030 Strategy is built around regionally owned priorities and metrics, including inclusive growth, depopulation and disaster risk sharing. The message was clear. Governments do not lack strategies. Citizens need tangible results.

UNOG's Beyond Lab added that coherence needs to work across sectors, borders and generations. Spillovers are not only international. They can return as spillbacks and affect domestic resilience. They are also temporal, shaping the prospects of future generations. Systems thinking becomes useful when translated into practical capabilities that help governments reduce negative impacts and create positive ones.

The Global Environment Facility stressed that environmental outcomes are shaped by decisions in finance, planning, energy, agriculture and other sectors. Integrated programmes can help countries address several environmental objectives at once, while stronger data systems, coordination mechanisms and incentive reforms can support long term transformation.

From an investment perspective, **New Africa Capital** underlined that the USD 4 trillion annual SDG financing gap is not due to a lack of available global capital. Highlighting that Africa holds nearly USD 30 trillion in critical minerals, the intervention noted that capital is less likely to flow

at scale into unpredictable environments. Moving beyond traditional donor models, coherent regulations, standardised procurement, and stable policy frameworks act as the ultimate de-risking mechanisms to turn private capital into a reliable commercial partner for sustainable infrastructure and transformation.

Key messages for continued action

The discussion highlighted several areas where further attention could support SDG acceleration towards 2030 and beyond.

- **Policy coherence as a core government capability:** Centres of government can play a key role in connecting priorities, identifying trade-offs and supporting delivery across ministries.
- **Coherence across the policy cycle:** Planning, budgeting, regulation, procurement, monitoring and evaluation offer practical entry points for more integrated SDG action.
- **Follow up and implementation discipline:** Sustained attention, learning and adjustment can help governments maintain focus amid competing pressures.
- **Data as a shared evidence base:** Dashboards, indicators and monitoring systems can make interlinkages and trade-offs more visible.
- **Localisation of coherent action:** Regions, cities and communities are central to translating national SDG strategies into practical solutions.
- **Finance aligned with policy frameworks:** Stable rules, predictable procurement and whole of government approaches can help mobilise public and private investment.
- **Attention to spillovers and future impacts:** Policies can be assessed not only for domestic effects, but also for impacts on other countries and future generations.
- **Skills and public sector capabilities:** Policy coherence depends on people who can work across sectors, use evidence, manage complexity and sustain cooperation.

From ambition to delivery

The side event showed that accelerating the SDGs remains possible, but it depends on how governments organise for delivery. The SDGs under review in 2026 are not separate agendas. They are connected systems that call for connected policies. Policy coherence can help governments make better choices, reduce duplication, manage trade-offs and deliver results that matter to citizens.

A central message emerged from the discussion. The next phase of SDG implementation is less about producing new commitments and more about improving delivery. This means leadership, institutions, data, partnerships, territorial action, coherent finance and sustained follow up working together. In a context of tighter resources and rising risks, policy coherence was presented as a practical condition for transformative, equitable and coordinated action.