Centre for Food Policy

Educating, researching & influencing for integrated and inclusive food policy

Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice

Brief 5: Policy coherence in food systems

What is policy coherence?

This brief describes what policy coherence is, why it is needed and how to analyse it in order to devise more coherent food policy.

A large number of policies affect the economic, environmental, health, social and political domains of the food system.[1] Policies aiming to achieve different goals tend to be made in isolation from each other,[2] raising the risk of divergent policy objectives, activities and outcomes.

This is policy *in*coherence. It undermines the efficient and effective achievement of different goals and leads to tensions in the food system. Given its diversity of goals, policy incoherence is a particular challenge for food policy.

Yet policies in different parts of the food system can also be designed to reinforce each other, creating policy *coherence*. This can be defined

as the systematic reduction of conflicting policy objectives, activities and outcomes across government ministries, and the promotion of mutually reinforcing policies.[3]

Food policy coherence can be defined as **the alignment of policies that affect the food system with the aim of achieving health, environmental, social and economic goals, to ensure that policies designed to improve one food system outcome do not undermine others.**

Because the concept and practice of policy coherence recognise that the different dimensions of the food system are interconnected,[4] creating policy coherence is an important, and tangible, way of putting a food systems approach into practice.

Why policy coherence matters

Government policies can undermine one another if their respective objectives, activities or outcomes pull in conflicting directions.

Policy objectives and actions which make sense in isolation within a particular sector may frustrate policies in another sector. For example, the economic objective of expanding palm oil production might be incompatible with the objective of environmental sustainability. Other activities undertaken to grow economies – such as signing an investment agreement which gives preference to the rights of international investors – might be incompatible with the objective of promoting healthy diets through taxation or labelling requirements on the products of those investors. The result of this policy incoherence is that government efforts to address food systems challenges are less effective and efficient, representing a form of (often unwitting) self-sabotage and undermining the multiple objectives of government.
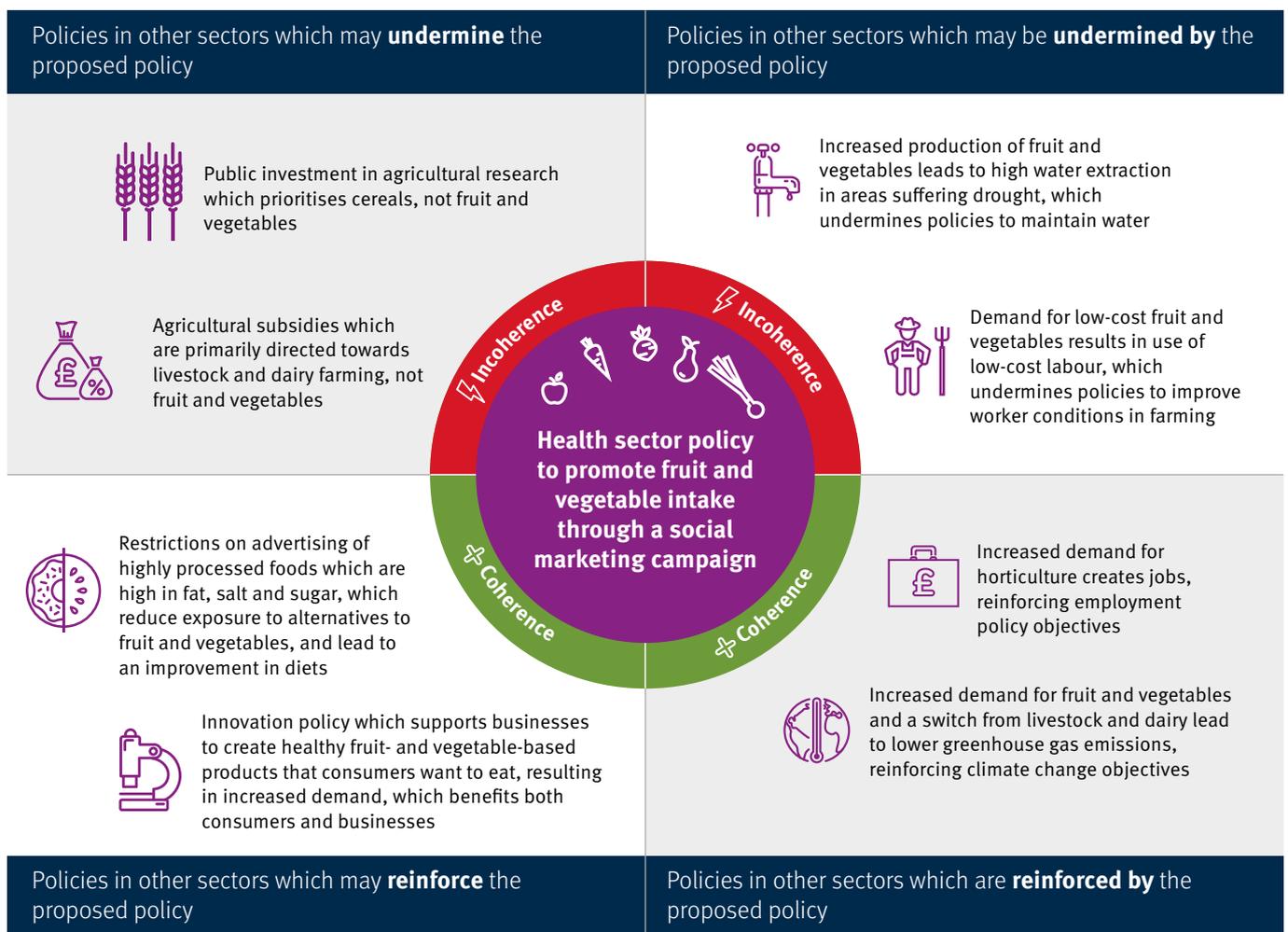
Policy coherence is about identifying and addressing these conflicts. It is also about taking opportunities for policies to reinforce one another. For example, a policy designed to increase plant-based diets for their health benefits could reinforce climate change policies. Policy coherence is thus important because it can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing policies.

The example of a policy to encourage greater fruit and vegetable intake (Figure 1) illustrates how a single policy intervention can be coherent or incoherent with other policies across government ministries in the same jurisdiction.

It highlights that a policy to promote intake may be undermined by policies in other sectors, but also reinforced by them. Likewise, it shows that a policy to promote intake can undermine policies in other sectors, but also reinforce them. Achieving policy coherence requires aligning these different objectives, activities and outcomes.

Figure 1: Example of potential policy (in)coherence: a policy to promote fruit and vegetable consumption

Policies in other sectors which may **undermine** the proposed policy

Public investment in agricultural research which prioritises cereals, not fruit and vegetables

Agricultural subsidies which are primarily directed towards livestock and dairy farming, not fruit and vegetables

Policies in other sectors which may be **undermined by** the proposed policy

Increased production of fruit and vegetables leads to high water extraction in areas suffering drought, which undermines policies to maintain water

Demand for low-cost fruit and vegetables results in use of low-cost labour, which undermines policies to improve worker conditions in farming

Incoherence

Incoherence

Health sector policy to promote fruit and vegetable intake through a social marketing campaign

Coherence

Coherence

Restrictions on advertising of highly processed foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar, which reduce exposure to alternatives to fruit and vegetables, and lead to an improvement in diets

Innovation policy which supports businesses to create healthy fruit- and vegetable-based products that consumers want to eat, resulting in increased demand, which benefits both consumers and businesses

Increased demand for horticulture creates jobs, reinforcing employment policy objectives

Increased demand for fruit and vegetables and a switch from livestock and dairy lead to lower greenhouse gas emissions, reinforcing climate change objectives

Policies in other sectors which may **reinforce** the proposed policy

Policies in other sectors which are **reinforced by** the proposed policy

Dimensions of policy coherence

The concept of policy coherence originated in international development and gained currency in the 1990s.[5]

Policy coherence for development was a response by developed country governments to the negative spill-over effects of their domestic policies on living standards in developing countries: for example, agricultural quotas and subsidies creating an unfair playing field for small farmers through artificially lowering domestic prices.[6]

The concept has since been expanded to encompass *sustainable* development. The stimulus came from the adoption of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, which were designed to address the different pillars of sustainable development in an integrated manner. The specified mechanism for doing so was through Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD), one of the 169 SDG targets (Target 17.14).

PCSD is described by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), its main proponent, as "an approach and policy tool to integrate the economic, social, environmental dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of policy making".[7] PCSD aims to help governments to:

- Foster synergies and minimise trade-offs across economic, social and environmental policy areas in the same geographical domain and between different jurisdictions

- Reconcile domestic policy objectives with internationally agreed objectives

- Address the transboundary (from one jurisdiction to another) and long-term effects of policies[8]

The four dimensions of policy coherence are shown in Table 1.
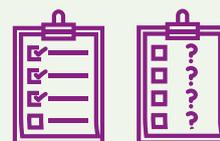
> **Policy coherence is important because it can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing policies**

Table 1: Four dimensions of policy coherence

Dimension	Type	Example
Now, in the same jurisdiction	Coherence between existing policies at the same policy level in one geographical context, such as national or local (*horizontal* coherence)	Coherence of a country's nutrition policy with same country's trade policy
Now, at different policy levels	Coherence between existing policies at different policy levels (*vertical* coherence)	Coherence of a country's national obesity policy with its local obesity policy
Elsewhere	Coherence between existing policies in one geographical context with another	Coherence between developed country agricultural policy and developing country food security policy
Later	Coherence between current and future policies	Coherence between policy to increase agricultural production to support wellbeing now and ability to produce food to support future wellbeing when subject to climate change pressures

Source: Authors, drawing on the OECD's PCSD Framework

Policy coherence analysis

Understanding the impact of different food policies on each other is fundamental to achieving goals more efficiently and effectively in the food system and provides concrete knowledge on how the food system could be redesigned.

While different policies may never fully align, a first step is to conduct a policy coherence *analysis*. This aims to understand the impact of existing policies on others – where they are inconsistent or where they align and why – with the goal of identifying (i) how to reduce inefficiencies and outright conflicts; (ii) where potential synergies could be created; and (iii) the complementary measures that could be used to manage trade-offs. Its potential to identify disconnections and tensions in the food system and suggest ways these can be managed means policy coherence analysis is a practical tool for informing the redesign of food systems.

Policy coherence analysis is a relatively new form of analysis, both in food policy and elsewhere. The advent of the SDGs has raised its profile and provided a framework for understanding different interactions. Several publications have attempted to model how the 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets interact and affect each other.[9]

Methods

There is no single established method or analytical tool to analyse coherence, but a range of promising approaches is emerging. Methods for data collection for policy coherence analysis include modelling, policy document content analysis, literature reviews, interviews and workshops. The starting point is to formulate the guiding question: "Coherence with what?" First, a specific policy must be selected as the starting point. This policy could be in any domain – health, economic, environmental and/or social. Trade policy, for example. The second requirement is to identify what you want to assess its coherence with, e.g. "Is trade policy coherent with nutrition policy?" The third aspect of formulating the guiding question is the degree of specificity of the policy you want to assess coherence with:

- A normative goal (e.g. "free trade in food")

- A policy objective (e.g. liberalise trade)

- A specific action designed to enact a policy objective (e.g. lowering tariffs on cereals)

- An outcome of the policy (e.g. lower-priced cereals)

So the question could be general: "Is free trade policy coherent with the goal to end malnutrition in all its forms?" Or specific: "Is the intended outcome of lower-priced cereals coherent with objectives to reduce stunting?"

The following case studies draw on existing published studies to exemplify a variety of policy coherence analysis approaches and findings.

A documentary analysis of coherence between trade policy and nutrition policy objectives at global level[10]

Why was the analysis conducted?

The analysis was undertaken by the author, Corinna Hawkes, on behalf of the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition in the context of the polarised debate about the impact of trade policies on nutrition. One perspective considers that free trade policy is damaging for nutrition; another that it is an effective and efficient way to advance human development.

What it did:

Based on a literature review, the analysis drew up a set of overarching trade policy objectives and nutrition policy objectives and traced potential pathways of influence between them to assess if the objectives were aligned.

What it found:

- Trade policy objectives are both coherent and incoherent with nutrition objectives. For example, if trade policy lowers the price of nutritious foods, this is coherent. But if trade liberalisation policies lead to increased imports of ingredients used in unhealthy foods by the processing industry, there is incoherence.

- Whether there is coherence or incoherence depends on a host of contextual conditions, such as the type of food being traded, the dominant forms of malnutrition and the domestic policies already in place.

- Trade policy and nutrition policy objectives may be coherent on paper, but they are not necessarily so in practice.

What it recommended:

"Complementary policies" are needed to enhance the potentially positive benefits of trade policy for nutrition and manage the downsides, and there is a need for greater capacity for cross-sectoral coordination and governance structures to enable policy coherence to be created.

A qualitative analysis of the coherence of food supply policies with food security and nutrition policy objectives in South Africa[11]

Why was the analysis conducted?

The authors, Thow and colleagues, observed potential tensions in South Africa, whereby economic policies impacting the food supply – which include objectives for economic liberalisation, attracting trade and investment, and economic growth – appeared incoherent with government nutrition objectives.

What it did:

The authors analysed the content of forty South African national policy documents to identify and compare policy objectives and activities for nutritional health, food security, agriculture (food production and marketing); investment (food processing, marketing and distribution); and trade (food distribution). This analysis was informed by a literature review on the impacts of these economic policy activities on food security and nutrition outcomes. The authors then conducted qualitative interviews with food policymakers and other stakeholders, from agriculture, economic policy and health, to explore how their beliefs and framings used might help explain the nature of the policy (in)coherence evident in the policy documents.

What it found:

- Nutrition and food security policy objectives in health and agriculture policies – in particular those relating to food supply change that promote the availability of affordable nutritious foods – are not coherent with economic policies. Economic policies relating to the food supply do not explicitly consider nutrition or food security, and treat food as an economic commodity.

- These policy priorities and activities reflected the interests of different actor "coalitions" with different beliefs about food and nutrition security. Policy coherence for achieving food security and nutrition objectives was undermined by an emphasis on food system policy activities and incentives to achieve economic objectives. However, there were instances of coherence, and opportunities to enhance policy coherence across economic, health and food security objectives were identified.

What it recommended:

Coherence between food security/nutrition and economic objectives could be improved by creating links between producers and consumers, through markets and fiscal incentives to make healthy/fresh foods more accessible and affordable; increasing avenues for engagement for civil society in nutrition and food security; and including nutritional quality in policy objectives.
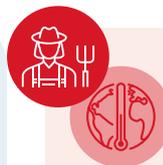
Analysis of the coherence of land resource policies across sectors in Indonesia[12]

Why was the analysis conducted?

The analysis was done because land is a scarce resource, which is crucial to achieving multiple policy objectives, including environmental, energy and economic ones, across policy sectors that include infrastructure, environment, agriculture and forestry. In Indonesia, the expansion of palm oil plantations has led to non-sustainable land use practices in recent years, particularly deforestation, while at the same time ambitious bioenergy targets have been put in place. The authors, Harahap and colleagues, noted that this had increased the potential for overlaps and inconsistencies between policies.

What it did:

The authors compared four sectoral policies, all of which have objectives with implications for land use: biofuels (targets require significant land for oil palm plantations); agriculture (goal of agricultural self-sufficiency and increase in crop production to improve food security); climate (reducing land use change through reduced deforestation); and forestry (increasing sustainable forest management). They then assessed the consistency of these four objectives through cross-policy analysis of relevant documents. The actual land available for biofuel, agriculture, forestry and climate policy actions was calculated.

What it found:

- The study found incoherence in land classification and the concepts applied, which may result in the double counting of land. The authors concluded there may be conflict in terms of land resource availability to satisfy goals in all policies, which could compromise policy outcomes.

What it recommended:

Definitions of land use need to be clarified, to be clear what should be considered degraded land, or abandoned land, and how much is available for food crops. A database should be developed to provide policy information and guidance across sectoral policies, and this should be made publicly available to stakeholders.

Documentary analysis of coherence between EU agricultural policy and climate change mitigation objectives[13]

Why was the analysis conducted?

It was produced for the Agriculture Directorate General of the European Union by an environmental alliance and an environmental consultancy, Alliance Environnement and Ricardo-AEA . The authors set out to test whether the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) delivers a "coherent contribution to climate action".

What it did:

The authors analysed the policy content, extracting all CAP measures, not simply those with specific focus on climate, and analysed the interactions of these with climate objectives drawn from the EU's 2020 Climate and Energy Framework. Along with assessing the objectives on paper, the study also analysed implementation choices in ten member states to provide a more concrete assessment of coherence with respect to policy outcomes.

What it found:

- Both coherence and incoherence were found in CAP measures. Examples of coherence included the positive (or potentially positive) relationships between climate goals and the CAP's crop diversification obligations, and its support for cooperation and farm advisory services on implementing greening obligations. Examples of incoherence included the availability of voluntary coupled support (VCS, sector-specific income support payments) for livestock.

- The analysis of member state implementation of CAP measures identified multiple examples of incoherence, including: most member states subsidise ruminant livestock through VCS, meaning "a large and targeted financial support" is provided to a sector "which contributes to nearly 60 per cent of agricultural emissions in the EU";[14] VCS is provided for the growing of fruit and vegetables, cotton and rice in Andalusia in Spain, whose production drives overexploitation of water resources. Coherence was identified in relation to CAP measures to promote leguminous crops, which can enhance carbon stock in soils, as can implementation of landscape features such as buffer strips or agroforestry.

What it recommended:

That member states screen all implementation choices "through a climate lens" to reduce incoherence.

Development of a framework to support coherence across food system policy in the USA[15]

Why was the analysis conducted?

The USA National Research Council, a group of academics which provides advice to the federal government, set up a committee to develop an analytical framework to assess the health, environmental, social and economic aspects of the US food system, and to take into account its complexity. A new framework was needed because current methods of policy impact assessment were not holistic, and taking a food systems approach and avoiding unintended consequences require understanding impacts across multiple fields.

What it did:

After compiling a detailed literature review on the current US food system, the authors, Nesheim and colleagues, designed a series of steps for assessing the effects of action in one part of the system on another. Tools for analysis proposed in the framework include modelling (but with the caveat that while evidence from multiple disciplines is needed, this may not always be available). The framework was applied to five case studies to illustrate how policy change in one part of the food system has implications for, and can lead to incoherence with, policy elsewhere.

What it found:

- The case study on a policy recommendation to eat more fruit and vegetables identified potential incoherence with other policy areas including: agriculture and trade (in terms of availability); innovation (in terms of the development of pre-packaged, pre-cut and other value-added products); environment (water ecology and possible increased use of fertilisers and pesticides); immigration (availability and costs of labour); advertising (consumer messaging); social welfare (affordability); the economy (if sales of other foods go down); and food safety (raw vegetables, fruit and nuts can be a source of foodborne illness).

What it recommended:

Building human capacity in the field of systems science research – particularly within government institutions – as a fuller understanding of the implications of changes to the food system could be gained through integrated analyses, but most research remains narrowly focused and linear.

Three principles for effective policy coherence analysis

Policy coherence analysis promises to be an important addition to the toolbox of policymakers, researchers and civil society groups working to inform the process of redesigning food systems. The following considerations should be taken into account when planning and conducting an analysis.

1 Address a real-life policy conflict

The purpose of policy coherence analysis is to improve policy effectiveness. It should thus focus on a specific problem where one policy is undermining another. It is important to start by analysing how a specific policy is being undermined by another policy or other policies. This requires analysing not just policy objectives stated in documents – which are likely to be high-level – but also policy activities designed to achieve the objectives. The purpose of the analysis should be to identify if there are ways of creating greater coherence by minimising contradictions with other policies, identifying synergies and – through specific complementary policy interventions – managing trade-offs.[16] The process will require experts from both policy areas to co-design appropriate solutions.

2 Define and create an evidence base

Fully analysing connections in the food system involves drawing on a huge range of disciplinary knowledge and types of data. This can be documentary data, such as the policies themselves, as well as media and other reports, qualitative data, or quantitative data on outcomes. The analysis also needs to be informed by an in-depth understanding of the political issues that shape policy objectives and activities relevant to the food system, which may be gained through a literature review or the knowledge of policy specialists.

3 Develop pathways to guide analysis

A map of likely pathways between the two or more polices being analysed, or a map of tensions and possible trade-offs within the food system (see Brief on Tensions), can be used to guide any context-specific analysis and provide a framework for investigation. A priority for food policy should be the mapping of broad pathways between policy domains, as has been produced for trade and nutrition (see Case Study 1, p. 4),[17] to support the wider and more efficient application of coherence analysis.

Policy coherence analysis will only realise its potential if it is more broadly understood, undertaken and applied, which, in turn, will require increased capacity. This includes government capacity for understanding how different food systems issues are connected and for assessing policy interventions for their effects elsewhere, and increased research capacity. There are to date few examples of coherence analysis focused specifically on food-related policies, and methods for analysis could be further applied, and refined, to maximise the potential for policy coherence analysis to inform the redesign of food systems.

Notes

1   Hawkes C, Parsons K. Brief 1. Tackling Food Systems Challenges: The Role of Food Policy. In: Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice. London: Centre for Food Policy; 2019.

2   Parsons, K. Brief 3. Integrated Food Policy. What is it and how can it help transform food systems? In: Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice. London: Centre for Food Policy; 2019.

3   For example: Nilsson M, Zamparutti T, Petersen JE, Nykvist B, Rudberg P, McGuinn J. Understanding policy coherence: analytical framework and examples of sector–environment policy interactions in the EU. Environmental Policy and Governance. 2012 Nov;22(6):395-423; OECD; 2016. Better policies for sustainable development 2016: A new framework for policy coherence. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Publishing; 2016.

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5   Mackie, J, Ronceray M, Spierings E. Policy coherence and the 2030 Agenda: Building on the PCD experience. (Discussion Paper 210). Maastricht: ECDPM; 2017.

6   Ibid.

7   http://www.oecd.org/gov/pcsd/Coherence%20for%20Development_Issue_9.pdf

8   Ibid.

9   Coopman A, Osborne D, Ullah F, et al. Seeing the Whole: Implementing the SDGs in an Integrated and Coherent Way. London: Stakeholder Forum, 2016. International Council for Science. A guide to SDG interactions: From science to implementation, ed. M Nilsson et al. Paris: International Council for Science; 2017. Le Blanc D. Towards Integration at Last? The Sustainable Development Goals as a Network of Targets. Sustainable Development, 2015. 23(3):176–87.

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11 Thow AM, Greenberg S, Hara M, Friel S, Sanders D. Improving policy coherence for food security and nutrition in South Africa: a qualitative policy analysis. Food Security. 2018 Aug 1;10(4):1105–30.

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15 Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. Nesheim MC, Oria M, Yih PT (eds.). A Framework for Assessing Effects of the Food System. Washington DC: National Academies Press; 2015.

16 Hawkes C. Nutrition in the trade and food security nexus. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; 2015.

17 Hawkes C. Enhancing Coherence between Trade Policy and Nutrition Action. United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition; 2015.