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# CLIMATE JUSTICE AND POLICY COHERENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Lessons from the  
Asia-Pacific Region



CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF  
TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION IN ASIA



# PRINCIPAL AUTHORS

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## FOREWORD

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As we move towards the latter half of the timeframe within which the Agenda 2030 and its SDGs must be achieved, Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) seems to be a forward looking tool for ensuring real and meaningful interconnections between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development.

The conceptual frame it provides yields a good analyses of positive feedback and adverse trade-offs among different SDGs as well as between the SDGs and other development objectives including climate action. It can also contribute to addressing the immense and immeasurable loss and damage that humanity is witnessing around the world, and particularly in the global south. We are confident that lower and middle income countries will expedite their efforts towards the achievement of the SDGs if they pursue both the spirit and practice of policy coherence and sustainable development. However, no one country or one region can be truly sustainable or reverse the climate crisis unless all the countries are working towards achieving these outcomes. Considerations of justice, equity, historical role and the need to create development space for less developed countries requires stronger integration of these values within the policy coherence for sustainable development frame of reference, and making therefore a truly transformational tool.

The present study is mainly based on the reflections of a variety of actors from Asia and the Pacific and gives us good insights into their perspectives, their roles and contributions, and the challenges and responses of governments in the region in ensuring policy coherence for sustainable development better in both the global north and the global south. The study underlines the need for more evidence- based research to facilitate the work, analysis and advocacy of civil society, particularly in Asia and the Pacific. It unambiguously calls for a stronger partnership between organized civil society across the world to create a more nuanced, shared, and critical understanding of policy coherence for sustainable development.

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## ANNOTATION

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The “Climate Justice & Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD Report - Lessons from the Asia Pacific region” represents an initial study on this important topic. It contains case studies from 17 countries from 4 different sub-regions in Asia, and includes the Pacific region as well. This is a document aimed at all development actors; and they are invited to comment on, and to enhance it.

The study defines the need for greater policy coherence between climate actions and the sustainable development goals at all levels, and across all areas of work. But the study is also honest enough to accept the difficulty and challenges of achieving policy coherence for sustainable development. While advocating for greater coherence, it is conscious of the obstacles to its achievement. It proposes that clear advocacy on PCSD should lead to much greater coherence. PCSD, as a principle, is conceptually very strong. But there is a risk that it exists purely at a theoretical level under the present circumstances where the neoliberal paradigm dominates the global political economy. Most stakeholders can commit to PCSD. But the people and planet need more than a commitment; achieving PCSD requires action.

I agree with the general findings of the study that policy coherence for sustainable development can only be discerned in a rudimentary form across the Asia Pacific region, as evidenced by the country studies. But it can be properly achieved under the common or overarching principle of partnership, cooperation, and solidarity for people's rights and development.

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# LESSONS FROM FINLAND



Finland is one of the most successful countries in the world when it comes to citizens' wellbeing. This development has been the result of conscious decisions seeking to foster gender equality, education, equity and equal opportunities for participation and to ensure good operating conditions for businesses. Finland's success is built on competence and innovation. It's natural resources have also played an integral role in increasing economic wellbeing.

In 2021, the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development drew up a national 2030 Agenda roadmap, which is a medium-term plan detailing the actions Finland needs to take to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the UN in 2015. The roadmap is guided by the six areas of change defined in the work to draw up the 2030 Agenda roadmap. For each area of change, the roadmap includes a vision extending to 2030, a set of objectives that translate the visions into concrete terms, and a description of the key measures that will affect different sectors of society and play a key role in bringing about change. In addition to the six areas of change, the strategy discusses how Finland is supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda globally. These six areas are: 1. Economy and work promoting wellbeing and sustainable consumption, 2. Education, competence and sustainable lifestyles, 3. Wellbeing, health and social inclusion, 4. Food system promoting wellbeing, 5. Forest, water and land use promoting biodiversity and carbon neutrality and 6. Sustainable energy system.

The roadmap also includes five cross-cutting principles to comply with in its implementation. The principles are the following: ensuring fairness, equity and gender equality; facilitating the inclusion and participation of society at large; paying special attention to the most vulnerable (leaving no one behind); ensuring long-term commitment and policy coherence; and taking global responsibility.

The goal of Finnish development policy and development cooperation is to strengthen developing countries' own capacity and resilience. The countries' ownership, needs and national plans play a key role in this. Finland allocates resources to achieving systemic changes that strengthen the partner countries, as well as their societies and communities' opportunities and abilities to secure the wellbeing and income of people in a better and more sustainable way. Finland's Taxation for Development Action Programme (2020–2023) supports developing countries' efforts to strengthen their tax systems and have a say in global tax policy negotiations. Another goal is to ensure that companies supported with development cooperation funding comply with the criteria for tax responsibility and transparency. For more info: <https://kestavakehitys.fi/en/frontpage>

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report analyses the extent to which Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) informs the development that is taking place in Asia-Pacific, with a particular focus on climate action & climate justice.
- The report finds that, overall, development in many Asian-Pacific countries is informed by a very basic level of policy coherence where climate action and SDGs are concerned. It offers recommendations on how this situation across the region could be improved.
- The study is based on the premise that a credible approach to PCSD includes both vertical coherence (i.e. between local, national, regional and international levels) and horizontal coherence (i.e. between environmental, economic, and social policy areas and sectors as well as governance mechanisms).
- The study notes that SDG target 17.14, and the newly developed SDG global indicator 17.14.1, on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development provide a useful monitoring tool for measuring PCSD.
- The study also notes that the multi-part indicator for 17.14.1 makes it clear that the implementation of a PCSD approach requires the emergence of truly democratic participatory processes and “whole-of-society” approaches with a vibrant civic infrastructure across all levels of governance. Examples of participatory governance mechanisms relevant to a PCSD approach include citizens’ assemblies and multi-stakeholder sustainable development councils.
- This initial study undertook a rapid assessment of climate action, mainly through commitments in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) in specific countries across the Asia-Pacific region, and policy coherence for sustainable development in the context of SDG implementation.
- Primary data was collected through case studies and secondary data through a desk review. The contributors provided data through a mix of tools including policy papers (e.g. India, RoK and Sri Lanka), opinion pieces (Nepal, Mongolia & Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam) and case studies of issues, social groups (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Uzbekistan & Thailand) as well as through PRA (Kiribati).
- The study does not claim to be exhaustive: the data, comprised of diverse and inclusive peoples’ perspectives, is not uniform in its approach. Though the report cannot unpack in an in-depth way NDC-SDG interlinkages, it is still a good starting point for future insights into barriers to policy coherence for sustainable development and viable modalities for reforms in the climate and SDG governance architecture.





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## KEY FINDINGS

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This report analyzed climate action and progress on PCSD in specific countries in the region from the perspective of four key dimensions of the SDG indicator 17.14.1. (i) political commitment and leadership, (ii) institutional structure, (iii) policy integration and conflict, and (iv) people's participation. Overall, some policy coherence can be detected at theoretical level in the NDCs. However, this has yet to percolate into policies, programmes or institutions.

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### Political Commitment and Leadership

While an increasing number of countries are theoretically in agreement on policy coherence for sustainable development, political commitment and leadership are yet to emerge at a practical level. Political instability can also adversely affect political commitment (e.g. in Nepal). Only a few countries have passed legislation on climate action or sustainable development enhancing the long-term level of accountability of the government around the Paris Agreement, Agenda 2030 and SDGs. There are examples of positive practice, such as The Republic of Korea's Framework Act on Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth which brings both climate action and sustainable development together, and Sri Lanka's Sustainable Development Act, 2017. Sri Lanka's revised NDC, adopted in 2021, also shows deeper analysis and interlinkages with many SDGs including SDG5.

### Institutional structures

PCSD relies on the creation of appropriate institutional structures that coordinate actors, promote coherence and evaluate trade-offs and synergies. However, the creation of institutional structures for planning and implementation remains uneven and sporadic across Asia-Pacific. For example, Bangladesh's NDC does not even mention the SDGs. India has set up a Prime Minister's Council on climate change under the leadership of the Prime Minister that lacks focus on sustainable development. However, National and State Action Plans which cover various sectors (and the SDGs) can compensate for this, as they prescribe actions across the SDGs and climate action. As indicator 17.14.1 makes clear, budgeting is vital to support action on PCSD. Where budgets attached to SDG actions cannot be tracked, or inadequate budget allocations are made, this shows a lack of seriousness in enacting commitments to address PCSD.

## Policy integration and conflicts

Asia-Pacific countries are still struggling to remove barriers in planning, governance and implementation of climate goals that lead to conflict with sectoral policies. This study identifies **five key areas of policy incoherence**:

- **Mitigation and adaptation:** the NDCs in the region are mitigation- focused and fail to capitalize on the opportunity of availing of the co-benefits of adaptation policies.
- **Renewables and fossil fuels:** While many countries have put forward ambitious renewable energy plans, they are still quite tentative about reducing their fossil fuel dependence evident of the massive subsidies compared to peanuts in renewable sources. Energy transitions are taking place within fossil fuels as most attempt a fuel switch from coal to gas, rather than to renewable energy.
- **Commitments and actions on forestry:** where forests are concerned, policy conflicts are commonplace. While countries talk about increasing forest cover, halting and reversing deforestation, in practice, many countries are taking actions to the contrary. For example, India and Sri Lanka have revised the definition of forests to include plantations, giving an appearance that forest cover is increasing while in fact natural forests - the rarest and most important ecological systems - are being lost, mainly due to increasing demand of animal/livestock agriculture and industrial farming.
- **Economic growth and sustainable development:** Many countries are in the process of aligning their NDC commitments (more ambitious) with their national and sectoral policies which are more traditional and focus largely on “economic growth dominant development”. Sustainable development cannot be sacrificed in this conflict.
- **Integrating “leave no one behind” in PCSD:** The SDGs commit countries to prioritizing marginalized, vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, but this can be forgotten in policies on climate action. For example, in Bangladesh, 8,000 farmers and fisher families are threatened with dislocation due to Rampal Thermal Power Project closing the biggest wetland and Ramsar protected site of Sundarbans. In Indonesia too, despite the promise to return ancestral land to indigenous population, more small farmers and plantation workers are facing dispossession. In Thailand, a large number of women (farmers) are being left behind in social protection benefits including universal health coverage, contesting government claims that all Thais are covered.



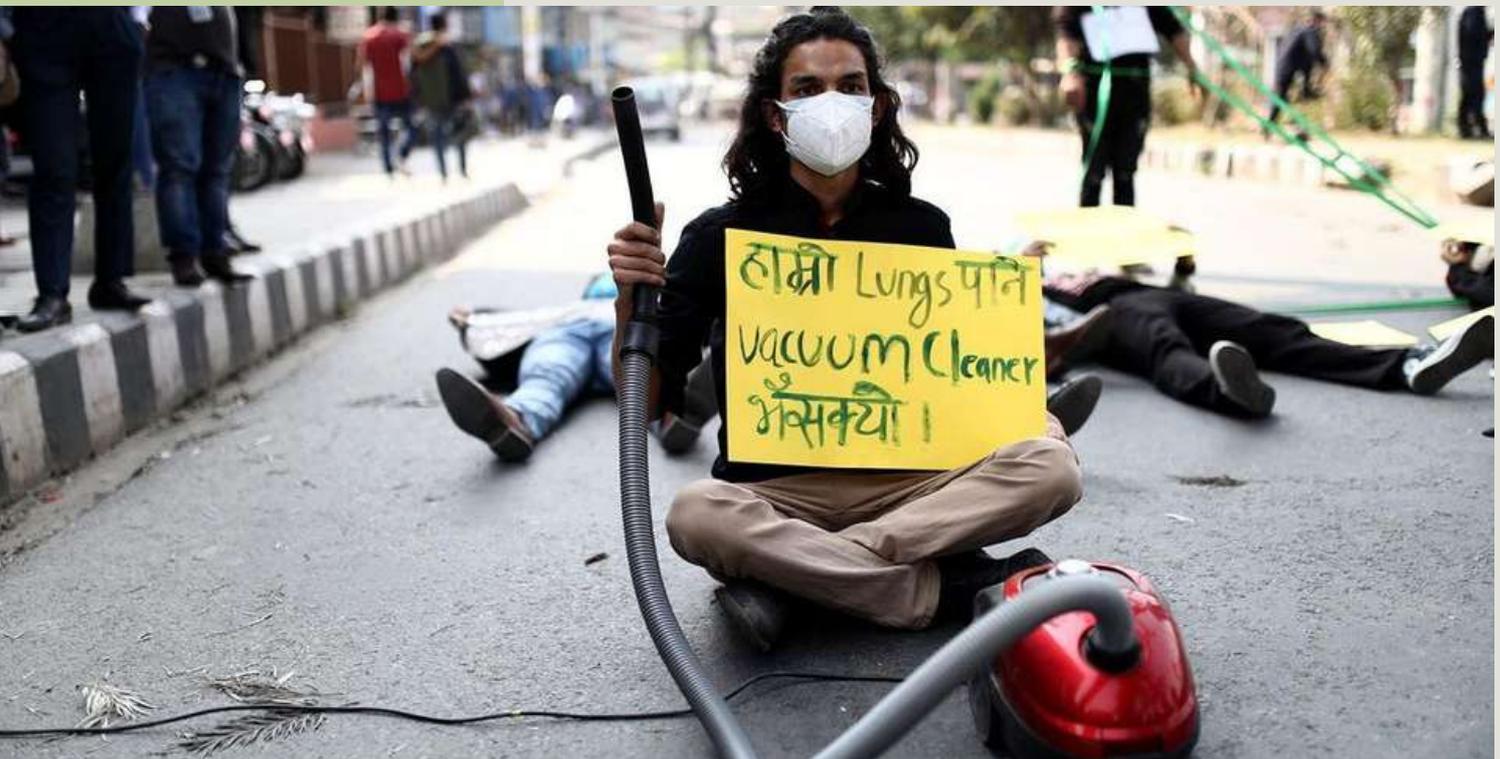


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## People's participation

The Asia Pacific region has a poor record historically of people's participation in policy making and participation is worsening in the context of climate action and the SDGs. PCSD requires a concerted effort to involve all key stakeholders, ensuring equal participation in the process. But while many countries mention the participation of stakeholders in their NDCs, they fail to provide more explicit information on how their inputs were incorporated into NDC development. Case studies in this report affirm that in a large number of countries there has been no public consultation in the NDC development or climate action and responses (e.g. Kiribati, Mongolia). Similarly, the general public is also unaware of public consultations being held while planning or implementing the SDGs or while preparing the VNRs.

In addition to the many examples of failures to consult with stakeholders across the region, there are other instances of governments actively closing down civic space. India and the Philippines have seen a large number of activists, forest and environmental defenders being terrorized and facing charges of being perceived as "anti-national." In the Philippines, environmental or forest defenders are hounded by the anti-Terrorism Act while the ancestral land of the indigenous populations is being parcelled away at a concerning rate.



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# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

## NATIONAL LEVEL

- **Develop a clear PCSD roadmap:** Governments should develop a PCSD roadmap with time-bound targets. Governments implementing the 2030 Agenda should commit to achieving policy coherence for sustainable development by creating functioning PCSD governance mechanisms.
- **Create Awareness:** A positive narrative should be created by governments and other key stakeholders around PCSD by emphasising the great leverage PCSD can have for sustainable development and NDCs by showcasing transferable, up-scalable and promising practices.
- **Create avenues for CSO and people's participation:** Reflecting a “whole of society” approach to sustainable development and climate justice, effective spaces and mechanisms should be created for civil society organisations and other stakeholders to participate in PCSD discussions, in particular ensuring relevant connections with local communities (and developed countries need to ensure dialogue with local communities in the Global South where their policymaking has clear policy impacts on these communities).



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## REGIONAL LEVEL

- **Create spaces for learning and discussion:** PCSD is not discussed enough, and not understood well enough. Discussion and peer learning around PCSD between national contexts is vital. Sub-regions and regions provide the best space for peer learning and deep exchange of knowledge, experience, insights, challenges and cutting-edge success factors.
- **Assign a lead role for APFSD:** APFSD can take a lead in initiating such discussions at sub-regional and regional forums, incentivizing smaller countries with capacity building support and developing tools to support progress towards PCSD.
- **Build national capacity:** Identify and respond to the capacity building needs of developing countries. Capacity building is most often cited critical need in the NDCs of the developing countries.

## GLOBAL LEVEL

- **Ensure more discussion of governance for PCSD at the HLPF:** At the HLPF a thematic session could be devoted to discussing and highlighting best practices in overcoming barriers and challenges in policy coherence. SDG 16, parallel with SDG 17, should be annually reviewed due to its cross-cutting implications with a decisive bearing on the agenda 2030's success.
- **Ensure more recognition for regional perspectives:** The outcomes from regional mechanisms that reflect local aspirations (such as the APFSD) need adequate formal recognition across global deliberative processes to ensure policy coherence.

- **Use other UN Forums as springboards:** As the SDGs and the Agenda 2030 form the core of discussion in addition to climate crisis and its manifestations and management at all UN fora, (viz. UNFCCC, UNCBD, UNCCD, UNEA) a PCSD-centered discussion can be a springboard to elevate discussions, understanding and insights on the policy coherence.
- **Take PCSD seriously across the globe:** Policy coherence does not just require horizontal coherence within countries, but between them. Developed countries need to monitor and evaluate the probable impacts of their policies beyond their borders, substantively reduce such impacts, and address the sustainable development deficits that these policies might create. They also need to acknowledge the loss & damage already created as a consequence of their policies, and support climate action (mitigation, adaptation, as well as loss and damages) and growth towards a sustainable and just future.
- **Establish a global PCSD institution:** A global steering body/committee should develop a standard and recommended process/structures for PCSD, which should be flexible and adaptable to different government models of the countries, and monitor progress over time towards that standard.



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