Normative coherence for development – What relevance for responsive regionalism?

Introduction to special issue collection

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Summary

Motivation: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for transformative development rooted in international norms, such as human rights, rule of law and gender equality. Often, however, nation-states do not implement these norms to the extent to which they are envisaged. Against this backdrop, regions have the potential to fill this implementation vacuum.

Purpose: Without a normative dimension, transformative development risks reproducing traditional economic development. In this special issue we focus on norm implementation in different world regions through the lens of normative coherence for development.

Methods and approach: The articles in this special issue all use qualitative methods, such as text analysis and in-depth interviews. Given the different regional contexts, each article has its own approach to normative coherence for development depending on the regional normative framework.

Findings: This special issue indicates that regions are an important interlocutor between the global, national, and sub-national level and, as such, are crucial for implementing the sustainable development agenda. The articles show, however, that to date normative coherence for development has not been achieved due

to overriding priorities and technical approaches to policy coherence for development.

Policy implications: With this special issue we aim to draw more attention to the topic of normative coherence for development and show that policies need to be adjusted in order to reflect the normative dimension of sustainable development.

Keywords: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, comparative regional integration, normative coherence for development, policy coherence for development, regionalisms, Sustainable Development Goals

1 INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were presented as a new phase of development, including appropriate action towards achieving sustainable development for all (Martens, 2015). As such, sustainable development implies a normative dimension of development, which is supposed to promote a human- and environment-centred perspective. The SDGs state: "We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind" (United Nations, 2015). This approach to development is presumably guided by universal values, such as human rights, gender equality, social inclusion, ecosystem integrity, etc. Moreover, the SDGs' focus on co-operation and partnerships to foster sustainability along with the recognition that development in one sector or geographic region affects development in others. This approach highlights the complexities of interlinkages and interactions in development co-operation. For this reason, policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) has been included in SDG 17 focusing on "Partnerships for the Goals."

Introduced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 1991 and adopted by the European Union (EU) in 1993 through the Maastricht Treaty, Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) has emerged as a central pillar of supranational discussions on sustainable development. The concept was first proposed to ensure that a country or organization's non-development policies do not undermine its own development objectives (OECD, 2005). Now, the concept has been expanded into policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) which promotes a "whole of government" approach to the pursuit of sustainable development objectives (OECD, 2019). According to the most recent OECD definition, PCSD is "an approach to integrate the dimensions of sustainable development throughout domestic and international policy-making. Its objectives in the context of the 2030 Agenda are to advance the integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda by: 1) Fostering synergies and maximizing benefits across economic, social, and environmental policy areas; 2) Balancing domestic policy objectives with internationally recognised sustainable development goals; and 3) Addressing the transboundary and long-term impacts of policies, including those likely to affect developing countries" (OECD, 2019).

PCD and PCSD represent important approaches to policy-making because they prioritize development among competing policy arenas. Early studies of PCD examined the implementation of this approach in policy sectors such as security (Picciotto, 2004), trade (Grabel, 2007), agriculture (Matthews, 2008), and so on, identifying PCD as a way to understand and articulate how

policy-making in non-development sectors undermines development co-operation objectives. This position became the basis for a group of studies on the SDGs which analysed how synergies and trade-offs between the individual goals either mutually reinforce the 2030 Agenda or undermine it (see Collste et al., 2017; Le Blanc, 2015; Nilsson et al. 2018).

Many observers, however, have asked whether PC(S)D has been characterized by unfulfilled potential as a policy tool. Carbone (2008) correctly contended that PCD can be viewed as both a decision-making process and a policy outcome. More recently, Carbone and Keijzer (2016) argued that the EU has in fact pursued the development of institutional reform over policy effectiveness. Siitonen (2016) has noted that PCD implementation has largely been limited to the development co-operation strategies of supranational organizations or their own member states. In doing so, the tool has not been widely employed to detect incoherences that exist in different parts of the world where development occurs. This "Northern bias" has been highlighted in recent research by Mbanda and Fourie (2019), Koff and Maganda (2019) and Larsson (2018). Koff, Challenger, and Portillo (2020) have also indicated that PCD's heavily institutionalized nature has hindered its policy effectiveness by limiting channels for public understanding and participation.

These critiques are especially relevant today as the Covid-19 pandemic only magnified how far the world is from implementing transformative development as defined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda: vaccine nationalism and political debates about artificial zero-sum choices between health concerns and economic interest are prominent examples. Even though PCD has advanced development co-operation significantly, a new iteration of this paradigm would be timely. Prioritizing development co-operation, even sustainable development, is simply not enough to promote transformative development defined as providing for the needs of local populations while addressing power imbalances at the supranational level (see Hernández-Huerta et al., 2018). Instead, it is evident that development must be defined around normative values which provide policy guidance, especially in times of crisis. For this reason, this special issue and the articles presented here explore normative coherence for development as an important new stage in the policy innovation of PCD.

## 2 FROM POLICY COHERENCE FOR (SUSTAINABLE) DEVELOPMENT TO NORMATIVE COHERENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT: TIME TO INNOVATE?

"Sustainable development" has emerged as a popular concept in global affairs. However, many scholars have questioned the validity of this popularity. Hajer (1995) contended that the global coalition in support of sustainability in international debates would absolutely break down if the term were defined with more precision, given the inclusion of both radicals and conservatives in this movement. Redclift (2006) more forcefully discusses sustainable development as an oxymoron "coming of age." He argues that this concept has emerged as a product of competing discourses that hold different meanings depending on whether we prioritize "sustainable" or "development."

PCD and PCSD are also popular concepts because they emphasize the importance of sustainable development. However, they never clearly answer the questions "what kind of development?" and "development for whom?" Obviously, "sustainable development" indicates that development is and should be more than economic growth, and includes social, economic and environmental considerations. Nonetheless, the concept is still rooted in global economic and political contexts characterized by historical power imbalances between the so-called Global South and Global North (Pilke & Stocchetti, 2016). Normative considerations, such as human rights, gender equality, political participation, etc. are present in global development discussions, but they remain in the

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background (a more elaborate discussion can be found in the next sub-section). In order to prioritize the need for norms in development, especially within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this special issue explores normative coherence for development (NCD) as a new stage of PCD-PCSD. NCD is defined as the implementation of sustainability norms in both development and non-development policies (see Koff, 2017). Norms are codified systems of ethics or values that emerge within policy communities in order to help define acceptable behaviours and promote a collective vision for the community. Some norms, such as human rights, have emerged from the bottom-up through partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors (see Korey, 1998). Other norms, such as responsibility to protect (see Spies & Dzimiri, 2011), have been forwarded by specialists who identify a governance need requiring problem-based solutions. Unlike laws, norms do not formally punish violators but they can be even more powerful than laws when they are characterized by widespread legitimacy (Nye, 2005). They permeate throughout society. As such, sustainable development norms are transversal in nature and they should ensure that all policy sectors follow the same normative points of reference, thus facilitating mutual reinforcement of sustainable transformative development as an operationalized policy objective (Graham & Graham, 2019).

Thus far, PCD has not been able to achieve this objective. Häbel's (2020) ground-breaking work on normative coherence for development in EU–Vietnam relations is important because it shows how different policy communities (development, political, and trade) interpret and appropriate norms according to their own agendas and priorities, thus undermining the overall normative commitments in inter-regional relationships. This occurs because norms are vaguely defined and not forcefully integrated into policy frameworks, which permits actors to re-shape norms according to their incentive structures (see Vivekanandan, 2021). Koff, Maganda, and Kauffer (2020) show how regional norms in Central America are undermined by member states which formally support them but use "non-decisions" as a way to avoid implementation and maintain status quo. These studies highlight the interaction between the relevance of norms and the agents of norms in PCD discussions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Two-dimensional agent-relevance grid for norms
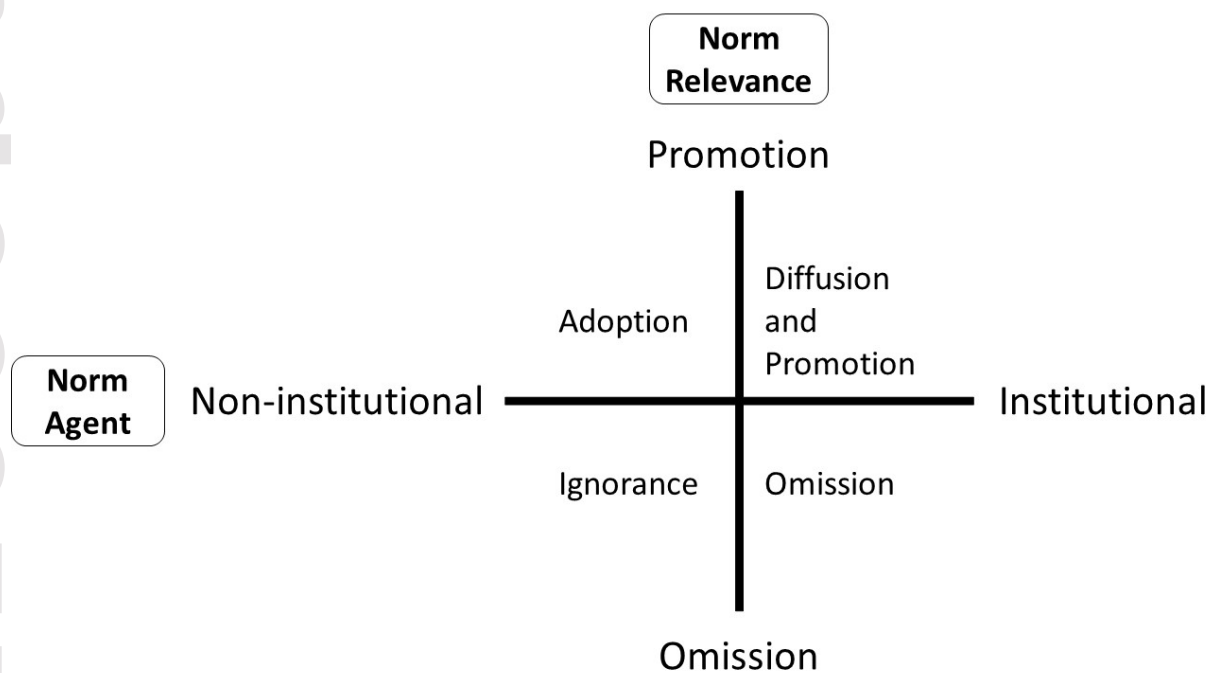
Source: Figure created by authors.

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Normative coherence is especially relevant as our sustainable development agendas expand. For example, Table 1 illustrates the emergence of new types of goals among the SDGs. Whereas seven of the SDGs represent traditional development objectives that are material in nature and investment-based, seven other goals are relational in nature and require qualitative changes in how we conceive development in order to be attained. Three goals specifically aim to protect the Commons and require co-operation by their very nature. Consequently, strong norms are necessary to provide common threads that transverse these different types of goals and unite them in a common vision.

Table 1. The categorization of the SDGs according to their normative character

Material SDGs	**Relational SDGs**	**Communal SDGs**
No Poverty	Gender Equality	Climate Action
Zero Hunger	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Life Below Water
Good Health and Well-being	Reduced Inequalities	Life on Land
Quality Education	Sustainable Cities and Communities	
Clean Water and Sanitation	Responsible Consumption and Production	
Affordable and Clean Energy	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	
Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Partnerships for the Goals	

Source: Table compiled by authors.

2.1 Normative coherence for development as a driver for transformative development

Foreign policies, including development policies, tend to be overshadowed by economic interests even though they are guided by international norms, such as human rights (Häbel, 2020). One question which is prominent in global development discussions asks: Why should sustainable development strategies aim to establish trade relationships between aid donors and recipients? (Stocchetti, 2016). More pointedly, this approach asks: Why invest in sustainable development if these strategies will be abandoned in favour of increased trade? (Häbel, 2020). These questions highlight a major challenge in global affairs. Norms are often considered to be rhetorical commitments rather than policy tools for transformative change (see Espinosa, 2018), leading to ineffective or insufficient implementation of norms as an integral part of development and non-development policies (Nhengu, 2020). In this context, this special issue emphasises the importance of norms in global development as a way to improve people's livelihoods, to provide them with freedoms (Sen, 2000), and to ensure a safe and sustainable environment in which they can flourish. All of the articles presented here engage with this vision. Normative coherence *for development* argues for promoting and implementing norms within and across all policies, including non-development policies, in order to support and accelerate transformative development.

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Policy coherence for sustainable development has certainly taken steps in this direction. The 17 SDGs surpass the indicator-based Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which specifically addressed the global fight against poverty. In support of the SDGs, PCSD argues for coherence among development policies to achieve sustainable development, "as an approach and policy tool to integrate the economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policy making. PCSD [according to the OECD] aims to increase governments' capacities to foster synergies across economic, social and environmental policy areas; identify trade-offs; reconcile domestic policy objectives with internationally agreed objectives; and address the spill-overs of domestic policies" (Dohlmann, 2016, p. 38).

The main difference between PCSD and NCD is that the former aims to integrate dimensions of sustainability in order to promote an agenda whereas the latter defines the agenda first and aims to integrate each individual dimension into a common vision. For example, the SDGs include relational and communal goals which PCSD supports. NCD would mainstream these relational and communal ideals so that they better infuse various policy sectors. For example, gender equality is highlighted as SDG 5. Observers such as Amilhat Szary (2020), Gbowee (2016) and Sacchetti (2016), however, have illustrated how gender perspectives are largely excluded from regional, economic, security, and migration policies. Transformative development implies promoting equitable systems in which enfranchisement is prioritized. According to Bidegain Ponte and Rodríguez Enríquez (2016, p. 83), "[f]rom a feminist point of view, the issue of sustainable development implies thinking about new forms of sustainable production, consumption, and distribution patterns. It requires redistribution of wealth, power, work, and time". This perspective would also promote the establishment of norm-based methodologies for definition and evaluation of policies at different levels of governance. This is especially relevant for regional organizations which often are tasked with linking global norms to multilevel governance systems.

3   NCD AND RESPONSIVE REGIONALISM

Regional integration began (re)ascending in global affairs in the 1990s. It was flourishing in different parts of the world, so much so that some observers were questioning whether regions could eventually replace states as the most effective form of organization for the international community (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). The advantages of regional integration were multiple: regions heightened the influence of member states in global affairs, they permitted states to collectively address transnational issues, such as environmental security, they successfully promoted economic wealth in many parts of the world, etc. In terms of global governance, some observers, such as Conca (2012) and Kirchner and Dominguez (2011) posited that regional norms could act as building blocks for the promotion of global norm implementation.

All of these perceived benefits, however, derived from the interests of states or supranational organizations. A decade ago, scholars already asked: "Regions, regions everywhere…but what about the people?" (Koff & Maganda, 2011) and in doing so questioned whether regional integration promotes development that responds to citizens' needs. This question remains valid today. Leading scholars on regional integration in Europe (Agnew, 2020), Asia (Tan, 2020), Latin America (Dubé, 2020) and Africa (Shaw & Kabandula, 2020) emphasize the need to re-think regions from citizens' perspectives. This is especially pertinent within the framework of the SDGs. Since their establishment in 2015, all world regions are supposed to pursue the transformative development described above. Regions are specifically mentioned throughout the SDGs as facilitators for the achievement of sustainability along with member states. For example, Article 21 of the 2030 Agenda states: "We acknowledge also the importance of the regional and sub-regional

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dimensions, regional economic integration and interconnectivity in sustainable development. Regional and sub-regional frameworks can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at national level" (United Nations, 2015).

Since its inception following World War II, modern regional integration has mixed normative objectives with the pursuit of economic wealth (Nadalutti, 2020). The European Coal and Steel Community aimed to prevent further militarized conflict in Europe through the establishment of economic interdependence. The constitutional treaties of most regional organizations include language focusing on the needs of citizens. Unfortunately, for numerous reasons, regions have not been able to promote responsive development in their pursuit of wealth which has undermined their legitimacy. Today, regionalism seems to be in crisis throughout the world. Dubé (2020) has argued that the fourth wave of regionalism in Latin America has receded and there is little public appetite for a fifth wave. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has become so unpopular in all three member states (Canada, Mexico, United States) that it was re-negotiated as a state-based trilateral treaty with strong public support. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has been so damaged by member state criticisms over proposed common health guidelines, vaccine distribution and economic recovery aid that many citizens have questioned the need for its very existence.

Normative coherence for development is not just a paradigm aimed at promoting fulfilment of the SDGs. It is also a relevant perspective for regional integration. If regions are to thrive, they must become more responsive to their citizens. At the moment, the state of regional integration is problematic because citizens generally do not identify with the regions in which they live, especially during times of crisis when regions have failed to meet the needs of their citizens. Siitonen's (2017) research has compared regions to sub-regions in Europe. He has shown how sub-regions of like-minded states (Benelux and Nordic states) with similar normative visions are easily overshadowed by the larger and more formal regional organizations, even when they may be more effective in norm diffusion and promotion.

This crisis of regionalism which currently afflicts the world significantly affects sustainable development. At the moment, international norms, like those included in the SDGs, promote sustainability but implementation is left to nation-states. Regions are skipped as an important level of governance, which is highly problematic because they are well-positioned to address transnational challenges to sustainability and they are often more effective norm implementers and diffusers than nation-states (Turton, 2020). Indeed, most regional organizations are rooted in strong normative frameworks in the form of regional charters or treaties. Those high-level commitments to norms are the foundation for regional integration and set out the agenda for the regions' international engagement. Norms, such as human rights, gender equality, peace, democracy, good governance, and the rule of law, are core values enshrined in the EU Lisbon Treaty and the ASEAN Charter, for example. Through those legal and political commitments to norms, regions have established strong normative frameworks to act upon, even though implementation of these regional normative frameworks is often undermined by other interests (Häbel, 2020). The 2030 Agenda could thus serve as impetus for stronger regional involvement in norm implementation, particularly in those areas that are highlighted in the agenda, such as inclusiveness, equity, gender equality, and sustainability (United Nations, 2015).

Because regions are not fully integrated in SDG implementation plans, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is undermined by the presence of a missing link in the chain of governance. Koff (2020), for instance, has shown how Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in

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Africa are more responsive to the policy agendas of external donors than they are to the SDGs, despite formal commitments to the goals. This special issue addresses this problem. It contends that normative coherence for development is necessary to make regions more responsive to citizens and integrate them more prominently in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. All of the articles included in the special issue address these questions in one way or another.

4   CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue derives from a panel on normative coherence for development that was part of the 2019 RISC-RISE Consortium conference organized by the University of Johannesburg. The RISC-RISE Consortium includes 23 research institutes based in five continents which are committed to the comparative examination of human and environmental impacts of regional integration. The consortium is committed to understanding how regions can promote sustainable development in local communities. This special issue, and all the individual articles, engage with regional norms and their relationships to sustainable development.

Not only do these articles address the need to explore the normative bases of development more fully, they also engage with regionalism and inter-regionalism, exploring how regions implement or undermine normative coherence for development. Collectively, these contributions provide normative analyses of regional integration and its relationship to development, with particular reference to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The articles address both the relevance of norms to regional development as well as the sources for the emergence of these norms.

This special issue includes seven contributions. One original feature of the special issue is its engagement with PCD in different world regions, inquiring how relevant this policy approach is beyond Europe, where it first emerged. Two of the articles engage with Asian regional integration, one focuses on Africa, two examine Europe and two more study the Americas. This comparative approach highlights the importance of norms for development in different geographic and political contexts as region-building varies in form and content in these diverse parts of the world (see Koff et al., 2020).

More importantly, these contributions engage with normative coherence for development and region-building through complementary perspectives which discuss the above-mentioned themes. Following this introduction, the first two articles engage with the nature, potential and relevance of norms for region-building and development. Lauri Siitonen's contribution provides a methodological framework for analysing norms in terms of content and function. He shows how norms affect European regionalism and applies his analyses to EU migration policies. Similarly, the second contribution by Edith Kauffer and Carmen Maganda studies the importance of global water norms in Central America. They discuss the hegemonic nature of global norms within supposedly weak regions, thus introducing an important reflection concerning the relationship between normative coherence for development and political power.

The second grouping of articles focuses on regional implementation of normative coherence for development. Alexandra Berger's contribution examines EU migration policies and shows that they are normatively incoherent with sustainable migration management and sustainable development, because these migration policies promote non-mobility as a policy response to third-country immigration. Similarly, the article by Sandra Häbel, Harlan Koff and Marie Adam focuses on migration within ASEAN countries. This contribution documents ASEAN's recent legal

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commitments to gender equality and examines female intra-regional migration within this framework. The article shows how ASEAN undermines gender coherence for development by concentrating women's rights and protection for female migrants in its cultural community. Economic community measures undermine gender equality by promoting growth-based strategies that exploit female migrant labour. The third article in this grouping, by Suzanne Graham and Victoria Graham analyses the African Union's Banjul Charter which establishes a system of human and civil rights within the continent. This article shows that African Small Island States formally commit to the charter, but implementation varies significantly, indicating significant normative incoherence for development in practice among these states.

The final two articles in this special issue are important because they engage with regional integration as a system of actors. The article by Vlada Perekrestova studies women's empowerment in Myanmar through the establishment of social entrepreneurship organizations. It contends that networks of non-governmental actors in Asia can more effectively promote NCD than formal political bodies because they are not constrained by non-interference norms and they understand better the needs of local communities. Finally, the article by Santiago Mejía Idarraga examines urban sustainable development in Latin America. He shows how the local sustainability initiative in the Colombian city of Medellín initially found success through social participation and infrastructure investment. When the Inter-American Development Bank uploaded this programme and reproduced it in different cities without the participative character, the programme did not obtain the same results. This contribution once again views NCD within the framework of interactive regional systems, highlighting how the reproduction of development initiatives without NCD tangibly undermines policy results.

Collectively, these articles highlight the differentiation between PCD/PCSD and NCD. They show how policies are often coherent without necessarily being normatively coherent with key principles on which the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is founded. For this reason, these articles answer key questions in development co-operation: Why should we pursue sustainable development? What is sustainable development? And for whom is sustainable development? (Redclift, 1991). The SDGs focus heavily on the latter two queries presented here. However, the 2030 Agenda does not necessarily engage adequately with the first question which addresses the purpose of the 2030 vision. Similarly, policy coherence for development has been implemented with little attention to normative coherence. For this reason, this special issue explores whether NCD can emerge as the next stage of PCD/PCSD. It would add a new perspective to this paradigm. Normative coherence for development can be viewed as PCD with a purpose.

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