



Trade-offs and Goal Conflicts in Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

- What's the Problem Represented to be?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the concepts of trade-offs and goal conflicts in policy-making, specifically in relation to sustainable development, and how they are communicated in policy documents and are understood by civil servants. The study aims to identify the underlying assumptions that shape the construction of policy coherence within the Swedish Government Offices and contributes to the literature on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD), a concept within the 2030 Agenda. The “What’s the Problem Represented To Be” approach used in this thesis offers a critical perspective on policy analysis to interrogate meaning-making within policy processes. This approach gives insight into alternative ways to understand the work with PCSD and the possible effects on the practical work with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The findings show two main underlying assumptions in the empirical material related to trade-offs and goal conflicts: On the one hand, the problem is represented to lie within technical processes, leading to the conclusion that better methods and analytical tools are the solutions; on the other hand, the problem is seen to be a political process with the solution depending on political priorities. However, presenting the solution to conflicting policy objectives as a technical process risks leaving the inherently political nature of sustainability issues, such as political sensitivity and the importance of political interests, unproblematic. The analysis also suggests that when trade-offs and goal conflicts are considered politically sensitive, and sustainability objectives are not the primary focus, government communications tend to rely more on descriptive language rather than on analytical thinking—communicating only the goal conflicts that can be resolved by established political priorities. This results in a lack of clear identification of root causes and potential solutions to the goal conflicts. The PCSD is argued to be valuable because it emphasises the political dedication to achieving transformative development that addresses justice, human rights, and global power imbalances. However, if the 2030 Agenda does not produce results in areas beyond the government's political priorities, its value as a roadmap towards a more sustainable world is questionable.

Keywords: *Agenda 2030*, policy coherence, trade-offs, goal conflicts, sustainable development, discourse analysis, PCSD, What’s the Problem Represented To Be?

Table of contents

List of Tables	5
List of Figures	6
Abbreviations	7
1. Introduction	8
1.1 Aim and Problem Formulation	9
1.2 Research Questions	10
2. Background	11
2.1 Policy Coherence for (Sustainable) Development	11
2.1.1 The Millennium Goals and the 2030 Agenda	12
2.1.2 From PCD to PCSD	13
2.2 The Swedish Context	13
2.2.1 Government Bills and Communications 2003-2022	14
2.2.2 External Assessments of Sweden's Approach	15
2.3 Previous Research	16
3. Research Design	18
3.1 Theoretical Framework	18
3.1.1 Discourse Analysis	18
3.1.2 What's the Problem Represented to be?	19
3.1.3 The Academic Discussion	20
3.2 Analytical Framework	21
3.3 Data Collection and Analysis	23
3.3.1 Methodological Reflections	26
4. Findings	27
4.1 What is the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs represented to be?... 28	
4.1.1 Problem Representations within the Policy Documents	28
4.1.2 Problem Representations within the Interviews	31
4.1.3 The transition from PGD to the 2030 Agenda	34
4.2 What is left unproblematic?	35
4.3 What discursive effects are produced?	37
5. Discussion	39
5.1 What is the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs represented to be?... 39	
5.2 What is left unproblematic within the problem representations?	40
5.3 What discursive effects are produced by the problem representations? ... 41	
5.4 Conclusion	43
6. References	45
Appendix	49
Acknowledgements	51
Popular Science Summary	52

List of Tables

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS.....	24
TABLE 2 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM THE DOCUMENTS AND THE INTERVIEWS.....	27

List of Figures

FIGURE 1 TIMELINE	16
FIGURE 2 PROBLEM REPRESENTATIONS WITHIN THE DOCUMENTS	28
FIGURE 3 PROBLEM REPRESENTATIONS WITHIN THE INTERVIEWS	32

Abbreviations

MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCD	Policy Coherence for Development
PCSD	Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development
PGD	Policy for Global Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
WPR	What's the Problem Represented to Be?
VNR	Voluntary National Review
EU	European Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

1. Introduction

Incoherence is an inherent part of public policymaking. The modern state has many responsibilities within many policy domains, and as they increase, so does the potential for conflicts and contradictions (Lenschow et al., 2018). The argument is that coherent policymaking helps governments deal with goal conflicts and trade-offs between goals and with the cross-sectoral implementation of overarching policy goals. Policy coherence is therefore seen as important for the successful implementation of global policy frameworks like the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement (Shawoo et al., 2022). However, efforts to archive coherent policies can be more or less effective in creating synergies and solving goal conflicts. If perfect coherence is not possible, it's important to consider the normative and political implications of coherence and incoherence and the prioritised political objectives (Ashoff, 2005).

Policy coherence is a contested concept, as the research literature has no common definition. It is, however, often understood as the absence of inconsistencies, the objective of one policy not hindering the objective of another. Incoherence is regarded as undesirable because it can lead to ineffective or inefficient policies (Ashoff, 2005). When discussing policy coherence for development and sustainable development, it's important to consider goal conflicts and trade-offs. A goal conflict arises when there is agreement that several different political goals should be achieved, but there may be disagreement about which goal should be achieved first and how the goal should be achieved (Bartholdsson, 2011). Accordingly, goal conflicts happen when the progress of one goal or objective hinders the progress of another goal. Trade-offs are the choices and priorities that often have to be made when two goals cannot be achieved simultaneously (Pradhan et al., 2017). Synergies occur when progress in one policy goal creates progress in another (Hertog & Stroß, 2013), and the outcome produces an effect greater than if the objectives were pursued independently (Shawoo et al., 2022).

In 2003, Sweden became one of the first countries with a Government Bill and a dedicated government approach for policy coherence for equitable and sustainable development. This meant that all Swedish policy decisions that could affect developing countries should be made with attention to human rights and sustainable development, such as how trade policy can hinder or support development cooperation policy (Proposition 2002/3:122). However, several re-launches and

changes have been made to the policy, and in 2020 a new Government Bill on the 2030 Agenda was implemented.

In the 2030 Agenda, the concept of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development is measured by mechanisms for enhancing policy coherence within states (UNEP, 2022). This thesis takes a critical perspective on this in the Swedish context where, through the years, external assessments have criticised different governments' approaches to policy coherence. The critique often focuses on a lack of effective methods to resolve goal conflicts and the communication to Parliament about the policy's effects lacking transparency regarding trade-offs between national and foreign policy objectives and sustainability (Felleson & Román, 2016). In light of this, I find it important to ask what the mechanisms and methods for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development do and for what purpose, as the mechanisms are central to implementing cross-sectoral political aims (Yunita et al., 2022).

This thesis is located within the field of environmental communication, which understands values, knowledge, and experiences of sustainability issues as socially negotiated and constructed (MISTRA EC, 2021). By switching to problem representations instead of problem solutions, the What's the Problem Represented To Be (WPR) approach offers a critical perspective on policy analysis, moving away from finding facts and problem-solving to interrogating meaning-making within policy processes, where social problems are constructed (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This approach can give insight into alternative ways to understand and work with Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, what is taken for granted in the current approach, and the possible effects on the practical work.

1.1 Aim and Problem Formulation

Policy coherence is seen as important to strengthen cross-sectoral political aims, such as sustainable development, that tend to be seen as challenging to implement as conflicting policies often seem prioritised. Key concepts in the discussion on policy coherence for development and sustainable development are goal conflicts and trade-offs. However, what do they mean? How are they communicated in official documents? And how are they identified and addressed in practice?

The aim is to investigate trade-offs and goal conflicts and how they are addressed in Government Communications and are understood by civil servants. The purpose of this is to analyse the underlying assumptions that shape the construction of policy coherence within the Swedish Government Offices.

1.2 Research Questions

Building on the academic literature on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, this thesis aims to investigate the discursive construction of trade-offs and perspectives on goal conflicts within Sweden's work with policy coherence and how it is understood by actors in practice. This will be done with the help of Carol Bacchi's post-structuralist perspective on policy analysis in the "What's the problem represented to be?" approach. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs represented to be within Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development in Sweden?
2. What is left unproblematic within the problem representations?
3. What discursive effects are produced by the problem representations?

2. Background

In the following sections, I will account for relevant concepts and their definitions used in this thesis and relevant background information, expanding the context and problem formulation presented in the introduction.

2.1 Policy Coherence for (Sustainable) Development

Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) as a concept was first established by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the early 1990s and was later closely connected to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015). The thought was that in an increasingly globalised world, a country's policies have effects beyond its borders, especially the policies of the so-called developed countries on the developing ones. To fight global poverty and create effective development cooperation, a government's policies not related to aid must support their development policies. In an interconnected world, policies on trade, climate change, migration, and security affect global development (OECD, 2009). The OECD defines Policy Coherence for Development as “a principle of International Development policy that aims to take into account the objectives of development cooperation in external and domestic policies in areas which are likely to affect developing countries” (OECD, 2019:5).

The concept of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) was, in turn, introduced in 2015 and is a concept that builds on and expands the aim of PCD, with a focus on coherent policies for sustainable development within and outside both developed and developing countries. The OECD defines Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development as “an approach to integrate the dimensions of sustainable development throughout domestic and international policymaking” (OECD, 2019:5). According to the OECD, this new approach puts more focus on “win-win” solutions by focusing on synergies between environmental, social, and economic policies instead of the “do no harm” focus of the PCD (OECD, 2019).

2.1.1 The Millennium Goals and the 2030 Agenda

Both PCD and PCSD are closely linked to frameworks for global governance of sustainable development. The work for PCD was aligned with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015), and PCSD is aligned with the 2030 Agenda (2015-2030).

In 2000, the UN and its member states committed to eight development goals: eradicating extreme poverty, universal primary education, gender equality, reducing child mortality, maternal health, combatting diseases, environmental sustainability, and a global partnership for development (UN, 2001). The MDGs represented a shift in focus of global development work from the economic performance of developing countries to sustainable human development, which would be achieved by eradicating extreme poverty. Poverty was seen as an effect of countries not participating in the global trade and economic system and could be solved by aid, good governance and economic growth. Some actors highlighted the historical global mobilisation that the goals represented, while others criticised the narrow focus on developing countries and economic perspectives (de Jong & Vijge, 2021).

In 2015, the UN member states agreed on an ambitious framework for sustainable development with a set of goals and targets described as comprehensive, transformative, and universal in the 2030 Agenda. The goals are seen as interlinked, covering environmental, social, and economic sustainability with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets (UN, 2015). The 2030 Agenda is often seen as an agenda for policy coherence, as the goals are indivisible and cannot be reached independently. The interlinkages are context-dependent and complex as they exist within and between environmental, social, and economic interests, short-term and long-term priorities, and international and national policy objectives (Nilsson & Weitz, 2019). The SDGs can be seen as addressing a universal approach to all countries with a broad view on sustainability and an emphasis on stakeholder engagement (Hickmann et al., 2022). In the context of national implementation of the 2030 Agenda, this means that a government needs to identify and handle goal conflicts and trade-offs among policy objectives at the national level, reconcile them with international agreements, and prevent negative spill-over effects in other countries (Nilsson & Weitz, 2019).

PCSD can be found in sustainability goal 17 Partnership For The Goals and is measured by one indicator through target 17.14: “Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development /... / Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development” (UNEP, 2022:2). According to the UN, PCSD, at a minimum level, should aim to identify trade-offs and lessen negative impacts between policies at different levels of government. At an ambitious level, it should strengthen synergies between policies to reinforce positive outcomes (UNEP, 2022).

2.1.2 From PCD to PCSD

There are several ways to see the difference and transition from PCD to PCSD. de Jong & Vijge (2021) argue that although the SDGs build on the MDGs and both frameworks rely on setting and reaching goals in similar institutional mechanisms, the transition between them signified a change in sustainable development discourse, pointing to the different underlying assumptions of the approaches (de Jong & Vijge, 2021). On the other hand, Yunita et al. (2022:93) argue that “this shift is conveyed in the change of nomenclature from Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) to Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)”, and the practical shift in governments is more of a rhetorical one.

The OECD view the transition from policy coherence towards development to coherency within and between all policies related to sustainable development as a process where PCSD builds on the work done on PCD. It involves updating mechanisms and broadening the approach (OECD, 2016). This view on the relationship between the two concepts can also be found in the Swedish context. The new Government Bill that covers PCSD states that the objectives of the previous Government Bill on PCD are consistent as the goals of the two bills largely correspond.

In addition to the concepts building on each other and being frameworks for reaching policy coherence, a defining aspect of both PCD and PCSD is identifying and handling goal conflicts and making legitimate trade-offs between policy objectives (OECD, 2016). Considering the close connection between goal conflicts and trade-offs, I will investigate the discursive construction of trade-offs and perspectives on goal conflicts within Sweden’s work with policy coherence together. The literature and material used in this thesis cover both concepts in the Swedish context of 2002-2023.

2.2 The Swedish Context

Sweden was one of the first countries to have an overarching and long-term goal for policy coherence when the Swedish Policy for Global Development (PGD) was adopted by a united Parliament in 2003 under a social-democratic government. The PGD is a Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) framework and was developed to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals (Proposition 2002/3:122). In 2020, a new Government Bill on the 2030 Agenda was introduced and it is a framework for implementing Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (Proposition 2019/20:188).

2.2.1 Government Bills and Communications 2003-2022

The goal of the Policy for Global Development introduced in 2003 was to contribute to equitable and sustainable development by adopting two perspectives: a rights perspective based on international human rights conventions and the perspectives of the poor. It meant preventing the negative effects of Swedish policy within all policy sectors on developing countries (Proposition 2002/3:122). The goal covered all Swedish policies but brought up examples from economic, migration, security, environment, trade, and agricultural policy areas. Aid was not seen as enough to reach the development goals (Proposition 2002/3:122). The PGD acted as an overarching policy from 2003-2015 and is still used within the development cooperation policy today. However, there have been different relaunches and alterations throughout the years (Fellesson and Román, 2016).

The first Government Communications to the Parliament focused on the eight central areas proposed by the Government Bill and subsequently operationalised them into a number of goals. The central components of equitable and sustainable development identified were respect for human rights, democracy and good governance, gender equality, environmental protection and sustainable use of resources, economic growth, social development and social security, conflict management and human security, and global public goods. The bill identifies the common goal of equitable and sustainable development as a tool for addressing potential goal conflicts and when informed trade-offs need to be made. The work with these goals was presented in three result communications (Communication 2004/05:4; Communication 2004/05:161; Communication 2005/06:204).

In 2008, the at the time new centre-right government re-launched the PGD by introducing six global challenges with 18 prioritised areas. The reason given was the perceived ineffectiveness of the policy up until that point and the continued need to deal with common global challenges (Communication 2007/08:89). Later, another approach was introduced when the communications focused on only one challenge each: economic exclusion in 2012 and migration flows in 2014 (Communication 2011/12:167; Communication 2013/14:154).

In 2016, the policy was re-launched yet again by a new social-democratic government. By this time, the 2030 Agenda had been adopted by the UN. The re-launch was communicated as an even more proactive approach to PGD with better steering regarding ownership and responsibility of the policy. Examples of the work with prioritised PGD areas were reported in relation to the 17 SDGs replacing the previous governments' six challenges. For example, in SDG 2: No Hunger, Sweden focuses on food security and agricultural policies (Communication 2015/16:182; Communication 2017/18:146).

The PGD bill was in effect from 2003 until the adoption of a new Government Bill on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in 2020. The Government Communications to the Parliament evaluating PGD were then integrated into the

result communications on the implementation of the SDGs (Proposition 2019/20:188). The new Government Bill identifies PGD as a central part of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Identifying trade-offs and synergies is argued to provide a basis for better decision-making that lead to sustainable development. Collaboration between policy areas should be prioritised, and conflicts managed as a consequence of the 2030 Agenda's whole-of-government approach (Government Bill 2019/20:188).

As of the writing of this thesis, one Government Communication on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda has been submitted to the Parliament (Communication 2021/22:247). In addition, Sweden has submitted two Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to the UN in 2017 and 2021. VNRs are a voluntary follow-up mechanism part of the UN's review process of the 2030 Agenda (VNR 2017; VNR 2021).

2.2.2 External Assessments of Sweden's Approach

However, even with political unity in the Parliament regarding the PGD, it proved hard to implement in practice (Fellsson & Román, 2016). There is a longstanding critique towards the practical implementation of PCD and, more recently, PCSD within the Swedish Government Offices.

The Swedish Agency for Public Management was tasked with evaluating the working methods and governance of PGD during the policy's first ten years. The report concluded that there was a lack of common understanding of the policy and the coherence concept within the Government Offices. The government's goals were often seen as too idealistic, making the policy difficult to evaluate, the targets hard to achieve, and the roles and responsibilities hard to define. The report further pointed to difficulties in identifying and dealing with goal conflicts and trade-offs in the ordinary processes of the Government Offices (Statskontoret, 2014).

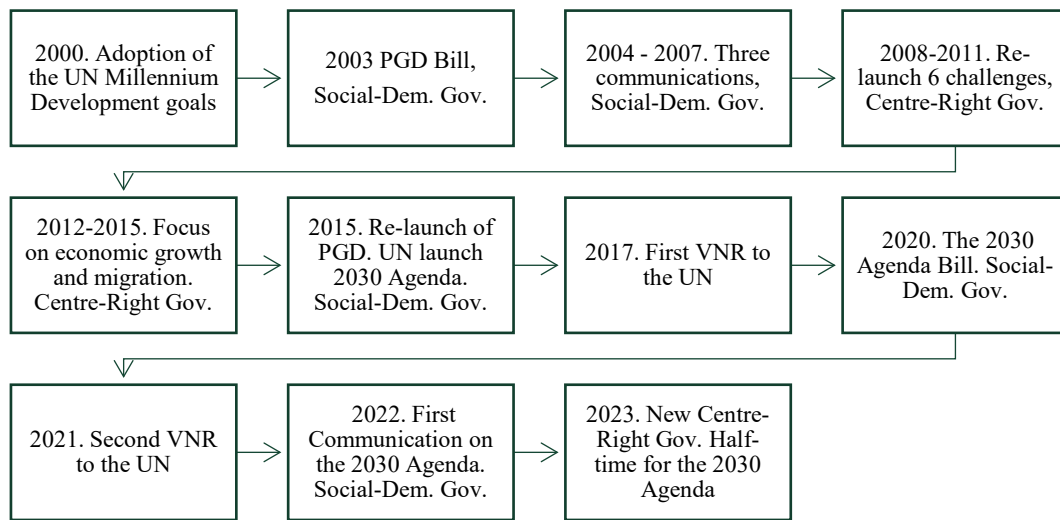
The Expert Group for Aid Studies' report reflected on the various relaunches of the policy between 2003 and 2014 and identified them as a consequence of a decline in political interests. The report concludes that most of the results communicated during this period did not reference the policy domain it was included in, the specific outcomes, or how it was funded. (Fellsson & Román, 2016).

The Swedish Agency for Public Management's second report recommends that the government develop their working methods within the Government Office to achieve a more coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to improve the management of synergies and goal conflicts. The report argues that the government might need to consider larger reforms, investments, and measures to achieve the SDGs (Statskontoret, 2020).

Additionally, Swedish civil society, represented through the umbrella organisation Concord Sverige, evaluates the government's work with PCD / PCSD and regularly publishes reports covering policy decisions that go against ambitions

for sustainable development. The focus is on the international perspective and Sweden’s contribution to global development. The latest report argues that after the Government Communication of PGD was incorporated into the communication of the 2030 agenda, the focus on the international dimension of policy coherence has been limited (Concord Sweden, 2022). This, in turn, makes it harder for the NGO to follow and evaluate the government's work and its effect outside of Sweden (Concord Sweden, 2022).

Figure 1 Timeline



2.3 Previous Research

Policy coherence as a concept is often seen as something technical and instrumental to maximise synergies and minimise conflicts between policies to increase efficiency. Horizontal policy coherence is between policies of one political entity, for example, between aid and non-aid policies. Vertical policy coherence is between policies at different societal levels, such as local, national, and international policy objectives (Hertog & Stroß, 2013). However, while there is literature on challenges to policy coherence within the policy process, such as coordination between ministries and institutional designs, there are fewer studies on the political factors that influence policy coherence (Shawoo et al., 2022).

Shawoo et al. (2022) found that out of 50 articles on PCSD and related concepts, only ten looked at how interests and ideas influence policy coherence, and the rest focused on the role of institutions. The articles were taken from Google Scholar and published during the last 25 years. Bocquillon (2018) argue that this technical and instrumental perspective has caused a depoliticised and static understanding of coherence.

The literature that applies this political perspective on policy coherence often explores the discourses that institutional designs emerge from and operate in, as discourse limits what can be said and what changes can be done. The question becomes what policy coherence does and what purpose incoherence might serve (Yunita et al., 2022). Here, the meaning of policy coherence is dependent on whose interests are served by the coherence and incoherence. Political factors will determine the selection of prioritised goals and how trade-offs are understood and managed. Discourses influence the interpretation of issues and how boundaries between issues are constructed (Shawoo et al., 2022).

Political systems are separated into sectors for practical purposes, where the sectors “have their own logic” as they serve different purposes and the public with different interests (Bocquillon, 2018:340). Thus, policy coherence in pluralistic political systems is hard to achieve as it is an exercise in reconciling conflicts between legitimate policy goals. This can lead to some actors being dissatisfied with the ways these conflicts are handled (Adelle & Jordan, 2014). Some coherence issues and goal conflicts can be solved by information in the case where one actor might not realise the damage done by one policy objective on another. It is, however, generally a case of different worldviews. Thus, some degree of incoherence is unavoidable as actors have different objectives and perspectives on how policies are connected to outcomes (Winters, 2005).

Ashoff (2005) argues that the progress towards policy coherence depends in part on the political commitment and political weight of the minister and ministry responsible for the policy. But the civil servants’ level is important as the base for later political decision-making at a higher level. Civil servants’ perceptions of a policy can shape the practical application of that policy, which in the case of policy coherence, is the communication around trade-offs and synergy effects.

A recurring conclusion in articles where the authors argue for the political perspective on policy coherence finds that governmental actors often highlight potential synergies between goals for sustainable development (Bocquillon, 2018; Kurze & Lenschow, 2018; Carbone & Keijzer, 2016) while less focus is put on how to handle inevitable trade-offs between goals, as the trade-offs are often politically difficult to solve (Adelle & Jordan, 2014). Solving a goal conflict or deciding on a trade-off, regardless of if it needs extensive analysis and information or extensive political negotiations on worldviews, takes time and energy. Winter (2005:333) argues that it might be considered rational “to accept that the world will continue to be beset by incoherence”. However, if perfect coherence is not possible, it is important to reflect on normative and political claims related to coherence and prioritising political goals (Ashoff, 2005).

3. Research Design

The research design utilised in this study draws on a social constructivist worldview with a post-structuralist perspective through Carol Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) approach (Bacchi & Godwin, 2016). Within a social constructivist worldview, actors construct subjective meanings about the world in interaction with other actors, negotiated based on social, historical, and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, post-structuralism can be seen as a subcategory of social constructivism (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). A post-structuralist perspective is not a single theory, but in general, it is about questioning taken-for-granted truth, knowledge and practices and their connection to social inequality. The perspective emphasises the plurality of practices and realities, which are social constructions possible to challenge and change (Bacchi & Godwin, 2016). Furthermore, the use of a qualitative research design offers an in-depth understanding of social issues through an interpretive analysis in which the author cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and historical they are situated (Creswell, 2009). My problem representation as the author will be further addressed in section 3.3.1.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Bacchi's WPR approach to policy through discourse analysis is both the theoretical and the analytical framework of this study. This will be developed in this section. In discourse analysis, theory and method are interconnected as the theoretical assumptions guide the empirical study method. Every approach to discourse analysis is based on philosophical premises related to its worldview, theoretical assumptions, and guidelines for what methods to use (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

3.1.1 Discourse Analysis

Within the WPR approach, a policy is a form of discourse as it is the result of power relations and knowledge practices (Goodwin, 2012) and builds on Foucault's understanding of discourse analysis with a post-structuralist perspective. Here, discourses are ongoing practices that produce "social forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a given social object

or practice”, and knowledge is understood as what is accepted as the truth (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016:35).

A common use of the term power in policy analysis means the concept of “power over” when some people have power and dominate people without it. From a post-structuralist perspective, power is “constitutive of reality”, meaning it is more systemic than actor specific. Based on Foucault, power is not a thing that you have; it is relative and “a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault, 1990:93 in Bacchi & Godwin, 2016:28). The WPR approach is based on the perspective that power is productive and relational, as the approach focuses on how practices and relations produce objects, places, and subjects. A policy contains power relations as it produces subjects within discourses (Bacchi & Godwin, 2016). Understanding policy as discourse assumes that all practices, subjects, and objects have socially constructed meanings that are shaped by “political struggles in specific socio-historical contexts” (Goodwin, 2012:29).

3.1.2 What’s the Problem Represented to be?

The WPR approach to policy analysis provides a framework to investigate public policies critically. The basic premise is that what one proposes as the solution to a problem reveals how one understands the problem (Bacchi, 2012). The approach advocates for an ongoing assessment of assumptions about the social world, its problems, and the policy agenda designed to respond to the problems. (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012). Thus, instead of being a response to objective social problems, policy solutions are made based on assumptions within the problematisation process (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012). Here, a policy is not a decision-makers best solution to a problem. Instead, policies present problems in a certain way that has consequences for how it is understood and what gets done or not done. The focus is, however, not on actors’ strategic framing or intentional manipulation but on what is left unexamined within the solutions and its implicit problems (Bacchi, 2012).

Bacchi’s approach to policy analysis can be described as a methodology based on two positions. First, instead of evaluating how policies solve problems, the approach focuses on how policies construct problems. Secondly, problematisation is central to governing as the practice of government (Bletsas, 2012). The second position questions a problem’s “independent existence as a ‘problem’ to be solved by (state) government and other experts”. This does not question the reality of actors’ experiences with a problem or that the problem is not something problematic. Rather, it questions the relationship between the problem and the government policy and what this relationship means for the practical implementation of the policy (Bletsas, 2012:39).

The WPR approach is a critical approach. This is not the same as criticism in the form of finding faults in a policy process or text. It means identifying key issues, themes, and approaches that are often taken for granted and reflecting on their

significance (Rehnlund, 2019). In the field of policy studies, there is a distinction between rationalist and critical approaches to policy analysis. In the rationalist approach based on a positivist perspective, experts can learn analytical techniques and reach objective solutions to social problems. By switching to problem representations instead of problem solutions, governance can “be conceptualised as more than a technocratic exercise” (Goodwin 2012:28). Goodwin (2012) argues that the WPR approach offers a perspective on policy analysis, moving away from fact-finding and problem-solving to the interrogation of meaning-making within policy processes, where social problems are constructed.

The focus of the WPR on knowledge practices and power relations moves away from a focus on the technical dimension of governing (Goodwin, 2012), making it a relevant theoretical and analytic approach when analysing the Swedish PCSD framework. This is in line with the need to problematise the political aspects of policy coherence identified by the previous research. When the assumption is that policy coherence is good on its own and that we just need to find the barriers within governments, the political nature and use of policy coherence and the construction of trade-offs and synergies are left unexamined (Shawoo et al., 2022).

3.1.3 The Academic Discussion

In this thesis, I have been inspired by other articles that have applied social constructivist perspectives or used discourse analysis to reflect on the political dimensions of policy coherence, articles that are part of a growing literature moving away from the technical perspective on policy coherence and look instead at problem definitions which point to the contingent nature of the purpose and meaning of policy coherence (Lenschow et al., 2018).

Both the WPR approach to policy analysis and the previous research on PCSD and PCD offer counterpoints and critique towards the technocratic perspective on policy, which often focuses on institutional design instead of the political construction of policy problems and solutions. The WPR approach can add to this literature in its structured approach to analysing problem representations. Although the articles do not use the WPR approach, they give insight into how authors have used similar concepts and perspectives and applied them to other contexts that are relevant to this thesis. The following articles will be used to discuss my findings.

Brand et al. (2021) take a problem-driven approach with a focus on policy hierarchies and the 2030 Agenda as a political project within the EU. They argue that the 2030 Agenda is too political and complex for technocratic solutions to the trade-offs and incoherency built into the Agenda. Yunita et al. (2022) interrogate the institutional agreements underlying the Dutch approach to PCSD, how they are understood and pursued, and their implications for sustainable development through the 2030 Agenda. Kurze & Lenschow (2018) investigate problem definitions within the EU, exploring how shifts within sustainable development

discourse have enabled new policy options and created tensions and inconsistencies when policies are constructed as coherent. Koff and Magdala (2016) reflect on how a technical focus can offer material benefits. Still, that does not guarantee that the normative changes that underline the 2030 Agenda are prioritised, such as its focus on equality and inclusion in the principle of leaving no one behind.

This thesis contributes to this literature by focusing on the political aspect of trade-offs and goal conflicts in policy coherence in the context of Sweden. It also puts this literature within the field of environmental communication. Much like Bacchi's post-structural approach to policy analysis, the field focuses on how certain knowledge found in dominant discourses shapes how sustainability issues are communicated explicitly and implicitly and the consequent effects on sustainability practices and governance (MISTRA EC, 2021).

Further, this thesis adds to the literature on the Swedish implementation of the PGD and the current approach to the 2030 Agenda by applying a post-structuralist perspective focusing on how the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs are represented and communicated. Thus, the WPR approach applied to the policy documents and interviews with civil servants offers a different perspective from previous literature within the Swedish context.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The WPR approach contains six questions that facilitate a critical investigation of policies to reflect on how problems are understood, underlying assumptions, and the practical effects of policies. Although all six questions can be systematically applied to a policy, combining the questions I find most relevant to use in the analysis. I have chosen to exclude Question Three, which involves how practices and processes have evolved. As well as, Question Six, which considers how and where problem representations have been produced, challenged, and defended over time (Bacchi, 2009). More concretely, I will address Questions One and Two in my first research question, Question Four in the second research question, and Question Five in the third research question.

WPR Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?

The first question focuses on how the material presents the problem that is to be addressed and how the problem ought to be understood (Bletsas, 2012). Working backwards from the solution enables the researcher to see what kind of problem it is supposed to solve. Furthermore, within one policy, there might be different and sometimes contradicting problem representations (Bacchi, 2009).

WPR Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem" (problem representation)?

The second question focuses on what assumptions and background knowledge are taken for granted within a policy problem (Bacchi, 2009). It is not meant to be an exercise in summarising the decision-makers' beliefs. Instead, you are looking for the logic behind the problem representations by identifying binaries, categories, and key concepts and reflecting on their meanings (Goodwin, 2012), which forms patterns that point to specific conceptual premises (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). A conceptual premise is then what must be accepted as true for a problem representation to make sense (Rehnlund, 2019)

WPR Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the “problem” be conceptualised differently?

The fourth question considers the limits to the problem representations and what is not problematised and draws attention to tensions (Bacchi, 2009). The question opens up the policy to “the critical practice of thinking otherwise” here, comparisons between problem representations can be helpful (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016:22), for example, comparing the problem representations of goal conflicts as communicated by policy documents and by the civil servants implementing the policy in practice.

WPR Question 5: What effects are produced by this representation of the “problem”?

The fifth question presents an assessment of the limits of the problem representations and how it shapes actors’ understandings of the issue and themselves in relation to it (Bacchi, 2012). Discursive effects set limits on what can be done said, or thought (Bacchi, 2009). The focus is on the effect on power relations and political implications, not measurable outcomes (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Post-Structural Interview Analysis

Post-structural interview analysis is founded on Foucauldian thinking and the concepts introduced in the WPR approach. Using a post-structuralist perspective challenges the view that there is privileged knowledge. Experts, policy analysts, and developers are not only “mere technicians” who produce policy but are also produced as subjects within the policy. They govern and are governed by the policies and can be treated as subjects in a process. Therefore, their knowledge should not be taken for granted. As the subjects within an interview are always in the process of politicisation, the interview transcripts can be treated as policy texts (Bacchi & Godwin, 2016:8).

Through this perspective, civil servants within the Swedish Government Offices are subjects located within a discursive practice. They speak and respond in relation to that discursive practice. Here, the focus is on what can be said instead of who said it (Bacchi & Godwin, 2016). The post-structuralist understanding of a located

subject diverges from the structure/agency debate in its view that no individual identity stands outside its context and society. A person is made a subject within discourses, and because several discourses constitute us, our subjectivity can be changing and contradictory depending on the context. Thus we are not “completely rational agents”. Policy workers or civil servants are not separate or outside the bureaucratic processes of policy work, in which they either fight against the bureaucratic processes or “robotically perform” them. They are instead “formed through the environment in which they work” (Gill, 2012:83). It is important to remember that as an interviewer and researcher, I am also a subject within discourses that cannot be removed from my context and whose knowledge should not be taken for granted (Bacchi, 2009).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In this section, I present the data collection, how the analysis was done, and methodological reflections. The empirical material used in this study consists of twelve official policy documents guiding the implementation and communication of the approach and results of the Swedish Policy for Global Development and the 2030 Agenda and seven interviews with civil servants within the Swedish Government Offices.

Policy Documents

The first step was to collect the documents by searching the Swedish government’s website. To delimitate the study, only the Government Bills and Communications with the explicit purpose of presenting the work with the Policy for Global Development or the 2030 Agenda by the Government Offices to the Parliament were chosen. For a complete list of the policy documents used in this thesis, see the Appendix. These documents are relevant because they propose measures to deal with goal conflicts and trade-offs between sustainable development goals. They communicate what has been done as well as what should be done related to PCD and PCSD.

The policy documents are legal documents produced by the government and subsequently approved by the Parliament. The material consists of two Government Bills and ten Government Communications. Although the Government Bills have passed the Parliament and could be called acts, in the official translations, the policy documents are still called bills (Riksdagen, n.d). Government Bills are not laws with corresponding formal sanctions if they are not followed. Instead, they are guidelines used to direct the Swedish government authorities in the implementation of the policy (OECD, 2005). Government Communications are reports submitted to the Parliament that do not contain any proposals for decisions (Riksdagen, n.d).

Interviews

Interviews were done with current and former non-political civil servants at the Swedish Government Offices. All interviewees had experiences working with the Swedish frameworks for policy coherence in different capacities, either with the Policy for Global Development and Agenda 2030 or only the Agenda 2030. They were chosen based on their experience and insight into the practical work of coordinating the implementation of the policy within the Government Offices and producing the policy documents. The interviewed civil servants were initially chosen based on my own connections from an internship within the Government Offices and, after that, a snowball method with the help of recommendations made by the interviewees.

To anonymise the interviewees, they will, throughout the analysis, be named former or current civil servants within the Government Offices, and quotes will be assigned a number based on what interview it was taken from. All interviewees received and signed a consent form regarding research ethics and the management of personal data. The interviews were held over Zoom or, as in one case, written through email. The interviews were done during February and March 2023 and were, on average, 30 minutes long.

Table 1 Number of Interviews

Type	Number of interviews
Current civil servant	4
Former civil servant	3

The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions in the interview guide were open, encouraged the interviewees to speak freely about their experiences and left room for follow-up questions. The interview guide was divided into three parts, starting with an introduction to their professional role and how it relates or relates to PCSD. The interviewees were then asked to reflect on the purpose and the practical work associated with the policy and the challenges and significance of addressing trade-offs and goal conflicts in the documents and the practical work.

Analysis

Bacchi & Goodwin (2016) understand policy texts in a broad sense which includes both documents and interviews. A vital characteristic of the material used in a WPR analysis is that it can be understood as “a form of proposal” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Both materials used in this thesis include proposals for change, indications of challenges and solutions to goal conflicts within Sweden’s work with PCD and PCSD. They are relevant to answering my research questions.

I find it important to look at both policy documents and interviews with former and current civil servants because the interviews can give valuable insight into the background of the documents, such as the context and process in which they are

written in. Further, when investigating what aspects of the policies are left unproblematic in the documents, the interviews can offer insight into the practical everyday work, the opportunities and challenges. The interviews can provide critical perspectives on how sustainability issues are perceived within the Government Offices, who is doing policy and how different concepts are understood. When comparing the problem representations of the documents and the interviews, I can reflect on similarities and differences that give insight into underlying assumptions and explore the possible discursive effects of the problem representation found in the documents on the practical work.

The documents were read, and the interviews were held in Swedish as the documents' original language and the civil servants working language. I made this decision because the language used in policy documents is subjected to long preparation processes involving different government actors going through the texts and negotiating the content and words used. Thus, I considered the original Swedish formulations relevant to the study as opposed to the official English versions that are often sent to translation services. The translation made for the purpose of the analysis and examples of quotes was done by me with this consideration in mind.

My initial introduction to the research topic and the empirical material was during my internship at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The research design and my analysis were developed through an iterative process going back and forth between the material, the previous research and the theory.

The analysis started with an initial explorative reading and coding of the policy documents with a focus on how and when goal conflicts and trade-offs were named in the texts, as well as other unexpected or interesting aspects of the documents. The initial coding resulted in several recurrent themes relating to the research questions. The initial analysis of the documents was used as a basis for the interview guide, and the interview analysis was, in turn, used to deepen and complement the analysis of the documents. The policy documents and the interview transcripts were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

The result section was structured based on the WPR approach, where the analysis of each research question is built and developed on the analysis of the one before. The first research question was applied to all of the material, and two analytical questions derived from WPR questions one and two were used in a second round of coding of the documents and the interviews. The second research question address what is left unproblematic in the problem representations found in the documents by comparing them with the ones found in the interviews. The third research question was used to reflect on the effects of the problem representations found in the previous two.

Analytical questions:

1. What measures are proposed to deal with goal conflicts and trade-offs between policy objectives for sustainable development?
2. When are the words goal conflicts, conflicts of interest, and trade-offs mentioned and in what context in the material?

3.3.1 Methodological Reflections

One limitation found in my study is that the civil servants are the only interviewed subjects within this policy. Other civil servants in other parts of the Government Offices and the political leadership are not interviewed here. Thus, the understanding of actors not interviewed but referenced in the result section is identified in the way the interview subjects perceive them. Further research might look at other actors, which was outside the scope of this study. Other relevant actors when looking into the PCSD are civil society organisations, EU-level actors, politicians, and actors within the private sector.

When reflecting on the study's validity, the researcher's positionality is important. An integral step of Bacchi's WPR approach is applying the questions to your problem representations and reflecting on the underlying assumptions affecting the policy analysis. Even the material selection is part of an interpretative exercise, and the material reflects an author's interests (Bacchi, 2009). Coming from the field of environmental communication, where societal and environmental problems should be seen as socially constructed and shaped by power relations (MISTRA EC, 2021), my underlying assumptions informing my problem representation should be seen as critical towards a technocratic perspective towards sustainability issues and its possibilities for social change.

My experiences from my internship at the Swedish Government Offices have given me insight into the practical work and the existing perspectives. This has shaped my interaction with civil servants and my choices of interviewees.

4. Findings

In the following sections, drawing on Bacchi’s WPR approach, I identify different problem representations within the material (Section 4.1). Based on the analysis of problem representations, I reflect on what is left unproblematic and how the representations interact in the material (Section 4.2) and their potential discursive effects (Section 4.3).

My analysis resulted in nine recurrent problem representations that can be found in my material and that rest on four underlying conceptual premises that can be connected to two different kinds of discourses within the academic debate on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development; 1) the rational discourse of policy coherence as a technical process and 2) the social constructivist discourse of policy coherence as a political process. The following sections will further address the findings and answer my research questions.

Table 2 Overview of findings from the documents and the interviews

Discourse	Conceptual Premise	Problem Representation
Political process outside the ordinary processes	Responsibility of non-governmental actors	Private sector
		Multilateral organizations
	Political priorities	Politically sensitive
Technical process within the ordinary processes	The practical work	Political interest
		Method and analytical tools
	The civil servants	Knowledge / understanding
		Method and analytical tools
		Knowledge / understanding
		Resources

In reference to sections 3.1 and 3.2, a problem representation is how a problem and its solution are understood a certain way which has consequences for what gets done or not done in a policy. A conceptual premise is what must be accepted as true for a problem representation to make sense, an underlying assumption that is taken for granted based on social knowledge (Rehnlund, 2019). Discourses are ongoing practices that create social knowledge and set boundaries on what can be thought, written, or spoken about a particular social object or practice (Bacchi, 2009).

4.1 What is the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs represented to be?

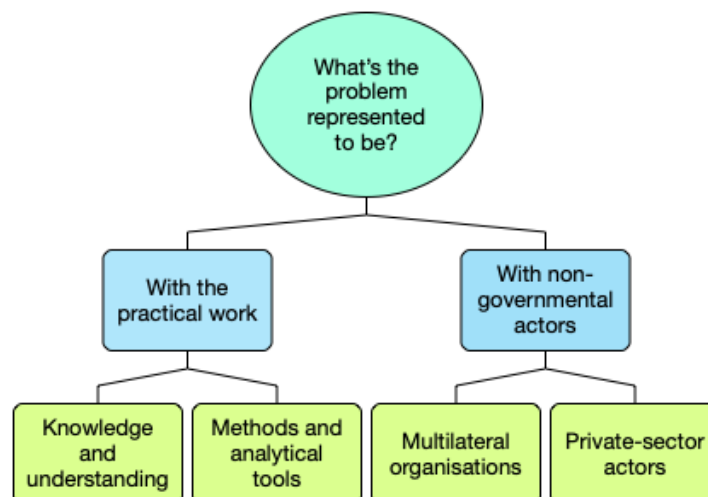
In this section, I present the different problem representations found in the documents and the interviews and develop the underlying assumptions. I outline the conceptual premises that form the basis for the measures and solutions to goal conflicts and trade-offs in the material and, thus, how the problem should be understood.

4.1.1 Problem Representations within the Policy Documents

I found four recurring problem representations in the policy documents that rest on two underlying conceptual premises. The first conceptual premise assumes that the problem is with the practical work within the ordinary processes done by civil servants. The two problem representations based on this conceptual premise complement each other proposing that the solution is to develop the practical work with the use of methods and tools as well as the education of actors involved in the practical work. Thus, if an understanding of the PCSD and PCD exists among government actors, tools and methods within the ordinary processes of the Government Offices will be used to address and identify goal conflicts and trade-offs.

The second conceptual premise assumes that the responsibility of solving the conflicts is not with the government but with non-governmental actors and thus *outside* the ordinary processes of the government. The two problem representations based on this conceptual premise both share the idea that government policies are aligned with sustainable development objectives and can influence multilateral organisations as well as private-sector actors to align themselves to these objectives, too.

Figure 2 Problem Representations within the documents



The problem representations identified in the policy documents form a pattern in their placement within the texts. When the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs is represented to be with the knowledge, understanding and methods and analytical tools within the practical work, the context in the texts is most often the beginning of the documents. When the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs is represented to be within multilateral organisations and with private-sector actors, the context in the texts is most often later in the documents where specific policy sectors and sustainability or development issues are addressed. Thus, the problem representations can be found in the same documents. Each of the problem representations will be further examined below.

The problem is represented to be with the practical work within the ordinary processes.

The problem is a lack of knowledge and understanding. The assumption is that if government actors have the knowledge of how policy sectors affect other sectors, goal conflicts can be addressed. The understanding of what possible goal conflicts there are and why it is essential to address them can be found by actors within the ordinary processes.

This work requires thorough knowledge of development issues and the human rights perspective, and the perspective of the poor on development, which means that the work of implementing the policy is very much about promoting this knowledge (Government Communication 2005/06:204).

In Government Communication 2015/16:182, the challenge of a changing political landscape and changing relations between objectives is mentioned. Thus, the knowledge highlighted in the quote above becomes even more important as the Communication points to the possibility of different perceptions, even the existence, of incoherencies in work towards sustainability objectives.

The problem is the lack of methods and analytical tools. The assumption is that government actors can use tools and methods within the ordinary processes of the Government Offices to address and solve goal conflicts and trade-offs between sustainability goals.

It has become clear that all policy areas and policy instruments at the Government's disposal must be used in a unified and coherent manner for Sweden's contribution to global development to be as effective as possible (Government Communication 2009/10:129).

In the PGD proposition, no methods are specified. Still, the need for these is highlighted, and this need continues to be identified in the documents throughout the relaunches of the policy. Additionally, a main point of value of the 2030 Agenda is argued to be the way it can be used as an analytical framework that, in a structured

way, can “make visible both synergy effects and goal conflicts” (Government Communication 2021/22:247). Solutions can be created with the help of new methods or the use of methods in a more structured way. Analytical tools can bring new insight into how goals interact and how one can work with them.

The problem is represented as the responsibility of non-governmental actors outside the ordinary processes.

The problem is represented to be within multilateral organisations. One sector that is brought up in all documents and is often named as containing conflicts of goals, objectives, and interests is food security. Several goal conflicts are linked to trade and agricultural policies that hinder developing countries from participating in global markets. Instances of when goal conflicts within global multilateral organisations and EU policies are named in this context can, for example, be found in the Government Communication from 2015/16:182 and 2017/18:146, where the same text is used in both documents:

Sweden will continue to play an active part in various trade negotiations and endeavour to ensure that the interests of developing countries are taken into account in various international trade negotiations, not least within the World Trade Organisation (WTO) /.../ Sweden would like to see a continued reform of the EU common agricultural policy, with further increased market orientation and taking into account the interests of developing countries (Government Communication 2017/18:146).

The assumption is that Sweden’s positions within multilateral organisations, such as the UN and the EU, are deemed coherent with sustainable development and consider developing countries’ interests. The problem of the goal conflict is not within Sweden but can be found in negotiated positions of the multilateral organisations in which Sweden participates as an actor.

The problem is represented to be with private sector actors. A recurrent example of when potential goal conflicts are named is in connection to Swedish companies operating in emerging and difficult markets through their business relations. A difficult market is described as when there are environmental, social and political challenges like corruption, human rights violations and negative environmental impacts, for example, within Swedish companies’ supply chains.

Swedish companies shall serve as a model for how social and environmental responsibility issues are to be integrated into business operations. They must take into account the environment and respect for human rights in all of their operations /... / The Government also expects Swedish companies to apply a clear anticorruption policy and encourages companies to develop a tax policy and an internal control system (Government Communication 2017/18:146).

The solution to this is communicated as the companies taking responsibility for and acting in accordance with global sustainable development. The government urges and expects the private sector actors to operate in a certain way in these difficult markets. It is assumed that they will do that as Swedish companies adhere to Swedish values and norms that are shaped by the government's political priorities. The problem of Swedish consumption is in a similar way left to export-import companies and the expected values of the public. For example, in the Communications from 2015/2016:182 and 2017/2018:146, Swedish consumption is described as having negative impacts on sustainable and equitable development. Actions need to be taken to lessen the "ecological footprint" of textile, electronic, and meat imports and consumption.

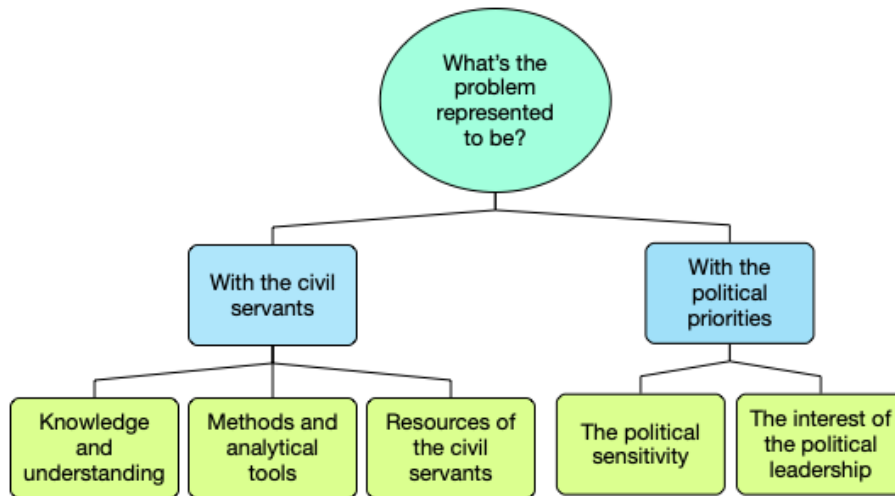
4.1.2 Problem Representations within the Interviews

In the interviews, I found five recurring problem representations that are based on two conceptual premises. The first conceptual premise assumes that the solution is with the civil servants and within the ordinary processes. This premise is aligned with the underlying assumption found in the documents where the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs is represented to be with the practical work. The three problem representations based on this conceptual premise relate and interact in the way that if the civil servants had the knowledge, the methods, and the resources, there would not be a problem in addressing goal conflicts and implementing PCSD in ordinary processes.

The second contrasting conceptual premise assumes that the solution is with political priorities. The problem is represented to be with politically sensitive issues, the interest of the decision-makers. Thus, the two problem representations based on this conceptual premise both regard the problem to lie with the political processes outside the ordinary processes.

There is tension between the two conceptual premises, which can be found in almost all interviews. Several interviewees reflected on how understanding PCSD among civil servants in the different ministries is important and that analytical tools can give valuable insight into how sustainability goals interact and what goal conflicts there are. However, for tools to be used and understanding to become widespread, PCSD needs to be a political priority in the form of political ownership and clear instructions to civil servants. This tension between what can and cannot be done within the ordinary processes points to the political realities of the civil servants and will be discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

Figure 3 Problem Representations within the interviews



The problem is represented to be with the civil servants within the ordinary processes.

The problem is the knowledge and understanding of the civil servants. In the interviews, the knowledge level of the civil servants was seen as very important. A large part of the work was to create an understanding of the 2030 Agenda and PCSD within all departments and levels of the Government Offices. If the civil servant has the knowledge and the certain thinking needed for PCSD, they will “have this perspective in the back of their head” (interview 4) and use it to identify and address goal conflicts.

In a way, the weaker the intuitions are the more important civil servants and their understanding and willingness to pursue certain issues in the administration. I would say that today perhaps the formal follow-up of the coherency policy is relatively weak (Interview 5).

The assumption is that if civil servants understand why policy coherence and the 2030 Agenda are important and what kind of goal conflicts there are, they will have the drive and motivation to do the work needed for conflicts between sustainability objectives to be solved.

The problem is a lack of methods and analytical tools within the ordinary process. To improve the analytical work, more systematic methods should be incorporated into the ordinary processes. Currently, while there are analytical tools available, it requires time and effort to develop and utilise them effectively.

There is no forum or organisational model for resolving goal conflicts specifically. It’s about actually doing this work and understanding what these hooks actually look like and the logic behind them. This takes some work (2).

The assumption is that there are or can be better ways to deal with conflicts and with PCSD if they had the tools. A complex question within the work with PCSD identified in the interviews is how to identify the long-term and external effects of national policies being used today. To be able to do this, one view is that civil servants need to work more systematically with these questions with additional methods for implementation and evaluation. One interviewee reflected on how having high ambitions is only good until you cannot make them a reality because you do not have the right institutional arrangements where the methods and tools can be efficiently used for it.

The problem is the resources of the civil servants. A problem identified by the interviewees was that there is a lack of resources allocated to the coordination functions that, with the current staffing, have a hard time following all processes connected to the sustainability goals. Moreover, civil servants responsible for the SDGs in various departments have insufficient time dedicated to the 2030 Agenda.

We want to work on these issues and find synergies with other colleagues and collaborate more closely, but there are no resources for that (6).

The assumption is that with more resources and time allocated for it, the work could be easier to do, and they could easier address goal conflicts within the policy coherence work. When political silos are an inherent part of a political organisation, there needs to be an “engine driving the work with the 2030 Agenda forward” (3). Without this strong drive, the work becomes challenging.

The problem is represented to be with political priorities outside the ordinary processes.

The problem is the political sensitivity of goal conflicts and trade-offs. The assumption is that named goal conflicts open up criticism of the government’s policies. An example brought up in an interview was that everything addressed in Government Communications is seen as the government’s position, which creates concern about how goal conflicts are communicated, even among civil servants. Because if a trade-off has to be made between two policy objectives, strong incentives can form on either side and in practice, the decision has to be made on the political level. This can make it difficult for a civil servant to formulate the problem in a text if it is, for example, a political priority that can be seen as not in line with an SDG. Another civil servant remarked:

If you think of naming something as a goal conflict, it is quite powerful because then you admit that there is a problem, and if you admit it, you have to take measures to do something (6).

As a decision-maker, discussing positive aspects is easier than justifying trade-offs between conflicting goals. If stating a conflict of goals is viewed as taking a political stance on what is seen as the right solution, this requires strong motivation. This problem representation is closely tied to the issue of interests.

The problem is the interest of the political leadership. The work on PCSD can be done effectively if the political leadership finds it of interest and prioritises it. In a government made up of different political parties with different interests, every political priority has to be negotiated. A major challenge of policy coherence identified in the interviews was getting political ownership of the policy and clear instructions on how to work with it.

Let's say that everyone has an understanding of this policy and can contribute to it in their work, but if it is not prioritised politically then it will not matter. There may not be a strong enough interest. If the political level does not have that understanding, the civil servants can do a lot but not go all the way (4).

An assumption is that even if civil servants identify a goal conflict and all relevant actors have a good understanding of PCSD and why it is important to be able to change the relationship between two policy domains, this prioritisation requires political support. Another assumption is that long-term sustainable goals are not the focus. This is often because short-term goals are easier to prioritise as the 2030 Agenda can seem abstract and further away from the crisis we are currently experiencing.

4.1.3 The transition from PGD to the 2030 Agenda

This section reflects on whether the problem representations of trade-offs and goal conflicts changed over time and between Government Bills. The Bills build on each other, and most of the institutional arrangements, such as interdepartmental working groups and writing the Government Communications with the help of the common preparation process, remain largely the same. However, the two Government Bills presented different ways of thinking in the interviews. During interviews, it was repeatedly discussed that there is a noticeable difference between the Policy for Global Development and The 2030 Agenda. The shift from simply having coherence between national and foreign policies to ensuring that all policies align with the SDGs has made the analytical work of civil servants more complex. As a result, it has become more difficult to identify conflicts between goals. This is connected to the 2030 Agenda's vision of covering all societal levels and policy sectors, while the Policy for Global Development focused on the effects on developing countries and poverty reduction.

When looking at the documents from 2003 to 2020, the policy sectors in focus are largely the same. Specific goal conflicts are named in some documents, and in

others, they are not. An example that illustrates this is trade-offs within agricultural policies in the EU and their effects on developing countries. Achieving food security or sustainable food systems in connection to agriculture policy and its relation to trade, investments and access to international markets are included in all Government Communications. In a majority of the documents, Sweden wants to see reforms in the EU's common agricultural policy to ensure that they do not hinder trade with countries outside of the EU. Sweden is also taking part in international trade negotiations and supporting developing countries in achieving food security from inside multilateral organisations such as the UN Food and Agricultural Organization. The problem of goal conflicts is then represented to be within the EU and multilateral organisations in which the Swedish positions align with the interests of developing countries and the SDGs.

However, the words goal conflicts, conflicts of interest, and trade-offs are only mentioned in some Government Communications concerning external actors. An exception to this can be found in the communication from 2006, where a specific trade-off between Swedish policy objectives and the interest of developing countries is mentioned. During the implementation of the EU's agricultural reform in 2004, although the overarching goal was still not to affect the economies of developing countries, Sweden made a trade-off in the interests of national policy objectives. A decision was made to "temporarily retain a production-driven type of support for keeping cattle" because of the effect on national employment and environmental goals (Communication 2005/06:204). This example further illustrates that although trade-offs can be made explicit and motivated, they seldom are.

4.2 What is left unproblematic?

In this section, I will compare the conceptual premise and problem representations found in the interviews with the policy documents and use this comparison to reflect on what is taken for granted in the documents that are perceived differently in the interview material.

The conceptual premise expressed in the documents, "the problem is represented to be with the practical work within the ordinary processes", and the conceptual premise in the interviews "the problem is represented to be with the civil servants and within the ordinary processes" align with each other. The assumption is that the solutions can be found in the development of methods, analytical tools, and the knowledge of actors.

However, there is a tension between the above-mentioned conceptual premises and the observation that "the problem is represented to be with political priorities and outside the ordinary processes" that I made based on the interviews. This tension gives insight into what is left unproblematic in the documents: the political

sensitivity of goal conflicts. A common assumption in the interviews was that PCSD could be successfully implemented within ordinary processes if it is a political priority. The role of the political leadership's interests and priorities in the documents is then left unproblematic as it is an official product of the government. In the documents, the political interests in the issues are taken as given as opposed to the political reality of the civil servants, where long-term sustainable development is not always the prioritised goal.

One interviewee concluded that with this kind of policy, where you cannot work in silos, you often have to do extra work. The understanding of civil servants is important, but as it is not done automatically, there need to be clear instructions from the political level that policy coherence is important. Another interviewee similarly reflected on how there are analytical tools and methods that can be used to develop the work with policy coherence. Still, there will be no resources without it being a clear political priority. Therefore, even if civil servants have the tools and resources to analyse potential synergies and the consequences of trade-offs, the results of that work depend on the interests of the decision-makers at the political level.

An example brought up in several interviews was the case of Stockholm Environment Institute's analytical tool "SDG synergies", which illustrates that tools can be used systematically to identify goal conflicts. However, it depends on the political priorities if the tools will be used in practice: in 2021, ahead of Sweden's second Voluntary National Review to the UN on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Stockholm Environment Institute developed a tool for identifying goal conflicts and synergies between SDGs. This was in part based on estimates from civil servants in the Government Offices on how their political domain affected or supported the SDGs. The second Voluntary National Review is a document that is not part of my analysed material but referred to in the interviews,

Nonetheless, from the interviews, it is clear that the tool was not integrated into the ordinary processes. This was despite some of the civil servants seeing it as a good opportunity to begin looking at synergies and goal conflicts within the SDGs more systematically. The tool was used in the Voluntary National Review 2021 and has since not gained much traction within the government. Although the political leadership at the time, according to one former civil servant, thought the report generated from the analytical tool was interesting, they were not interested in taking it further. Even if civil servants were to use the tool, it is no guarantee that it would change how sustainable development goals are understood, worked with, or prioritised, as is assumed in the documents analysed in this study.

When comparing "the problem is represented to be the responsibility of non-governmental actors outside the ordinary processes" (see documents) with "the problem is represented to be with political priorities and outside the ordinary processes" (see interviews), the perceived responsibility and role of the government

in relation to goal conflicts between sustainability objectives are different. The documents I analysed present the private sector, Swedish consumers, and multilateral organisations as a central problem underpinning unsustainable global development. The solution is assumed to be with the Swedish government's political priorities, as they can shape the norms and values of the non-governmental actors to be more in line with sustainable development objectives and considerate of developing countries. For example, a central aim of the Policy for Global Development was to reframe global development as more than a question of aid by including trade based on Swedish positions on good economic governance and sustainable conduct.

Additionally, in the documents, the conceptual premises are linked in the way the technical process of policy coherence within the Government Offices will lead to coherent Swedish policies that can lead to more sustainable policies in multilateral organisations and influence non-governmental actors. However, when the political priorities of the government in relation to sustainable development are perceived as the problem, the transformative effects of multilateral organisations or non-governmental actors acting according to Swedish political positions can no longer be taken for granted.

4.3 What discursive effects are produced?

In this section, I explore potential discursive effects that are produced as a consequence of the identified problem representations and their conceptual premises and what is left unproblematic. Discursive effects can be seen when the conceptual premises limit what is meaningful to say about a specific problem representation and what questions and problems are seen as valid in relation to a problem representation (Rehnlund, 2019).

When the problem of trade-offs and goal conflicts is represented to be within the practical work and at the civil servants' level of the Swedish Government Offices, the solution is constructed to be a technical process within the ordinary processes. The discursive effects of this conceptual premise within the technical discourse is a larger focus on the role of civil servants in contributing to sustainable development and the construction of the 2030 Agenda as an apolitical project.

The Role of the Civil Servants

An assumption is that the solutions can be found in the development of methods, analytical tools, and the knowledge of actors who will work towards sustainability within ordinary processes. This further assumes that sustainability is the overarching priority or that all goal conflicts hindering sustainable development are a matter of disagreement about facts that can be solved in a rational and technical process. Based on the comparison between the documents and the interviews, what

is left unproblematic is the political reality of civil servants working in a political organisation where sustainable development aligned with the 2030 Agenda is not always the priority. Goal conflicts are seen as politically sensitive, and possible solutions to goal conflicts are seen as political statements.

One respondent reflected that when goal conflicts are seen as politically sensitive, the Communications become more descriptive texts of what the government is working on in different policy sectors rather than an analysis of the causes and solutions to goal conflicts among sustainability goals. Further, a former civil servant commented on how they perceived widespread knowledge of the major goal conflicts when they worked in the Government Offices but not enough political will to address and change them. Some civil servants thus perceive the absence of communicating goal conflicts as a de-prioritisation of PCSD and the 2030 Agenda.

The 2030 Agenda as Apolitical

The effect of the 2030 Agenda being perceived as deprioritised is that it becomes an apolitical project of framing established sustainable policies, as opposed to the 2030 Agenda contributing to new ways of thinking about goal conflicts and trade-offs. A possible effect of this is that only goal conflicts whose solution can be constructed to be found within the government's political priorities are brought up and communicated in the documents.

One purpose of the Government Communications on the 2030 Agenda and PGD is to legitimise the government's political priorities in relation to sustainability and development issues. This is done by highlighting the goal conflicts that can be solved in line with established political priorities. The assumption is that communicating the goal conflicts legitimises the government's approach to PCSD among non-governmental actors and what issues are prioritised.

A former civil servant commented on how Sweden's challenges in working towards achieving the SDGs were deliberately communicated to show that Sweden is good at sustainability but can do better. This comment was made in connection to the 2021 VNR to the UN, giving communicating goal conflicts among Swedish policy objectives a political purpose as opposed to systematically reporting on identified goal conflicts and trade-offs and their consequences for sustainable development. Several interviewees observed that Sweden is often seen as a frontrunner in work with the 2030 Agenda because we have had policies that fit into the aim of the SDGs for a long time. However, one interviewee concluded that if Sweden wants to keep that image and address the sustainability challenges that are left or will develop, PCSD needs to be a higher priority than it is today.

5. Discussion

My thesis examines how trade-offs and goal conflicts are constructed in the Government Communications to the parliament and how civil servants understand and address them in their practical work. I do so intending to explore underlying assumptions that shape policy coherence within the Swedish Government Offices. The following sections discuss my findings and situate the results within the academic discussion on PCD and PCSD (Section 3.1.3).

5.1 What is the problem of goal conflicts and trade-offs represented to be?

In response to my first research question, I identified nine problem representations that were based on four conceptual premises (see Table 3) within the material. I argue that the conceptual premises give expression to two discourses that can be found and are debated in the academic discussion on PCSD.

The rational discourse of policy coherence as a technical process is reflected in the conceptual premise that “the problem is represented to be with the practical work within the ordinary processes” (see documents) and “the problem is represented to be with the civil servants within the ordinary processes” (see interviews). This discourse on policy coherence is based on the underlying assumption that unsustainable and inequitable development is the effect of incoherent policy and institutional design. This assumption implies that the solution to incoherent policies hindering effective, sustainable development initiatives is changing or adding institutional procedures to coherently implement the SDGs (Yunita et al., 2022).

By contrast, the social constructivist discourse of policy coherence as an inherently political process is expressed in the conceptual premise that “the problem lies with the responsibility of non-governmental actors outside the ordinary processes” (see documents) and “the problem lies with the political priorities outside the ordinary processes” (see interviews). This finding is in line with the social constructivist side of the debate that criticises the technical understanding of policy coherence for neglecting the way coherence is practically

about political choices on what should be prioritised (or excluded) from the problematisation of goal conflicts between sustainability goals (Yunita et al., 2022).

For example, Yunita et al. (2022)'s article investigate institutional arrangements designed to incorporate the SDGs and PCSD into the policy-making process in the Netherlands. However, they found little evidence suggesting that the SDGs have had any real impact on Dutch policies or political priorities, and the SDGs instead reflected how things were already being done. As such, even if changing institutional structures could be understood as a fundamental change going far beyond the ordinary processes, an interdepartmental working group can only be effective in facilitating the work with PCSD and the SDGs if the political leadership prioritises working with these issues in a civil servant's everyday work. Without such prioritisation, the group's impact will be limited. This challenge is identified in my interviews and Yunita et al. (2022)'s interviews with civil servants in the Netherlands.

5.2 What is left unproblematic within the problem representations?

Building on the analysis of the first question, findings related to my second research question showed how the underlying conceptual premise of the interviews; “the problem is represented to be with political priorities and outside the ordinary processes” was left unproblematic in the documents. The problem representations in the interviews that highlighted the political sensitivity of goal conflicts and the importance of an interested political leadership in the Government Offices were not efficiently problematised in the documents. This is due to the fact that they are formal government products with the aim of legitimising the approach to sustainability issues.

However, this gave insight into how the political aspect of sustainable development affects the practical work with goal conflicts and trade-offs. For example, as reflected by Brand et al. (2021), having better knowledge and methods may not necessarily prevent unsustainable policies in situations where pressures from various actors and time constraints due to external crises can impact the overarching priority of sustainable development in the practical work.

My findings complement Brand et al. (2021)'s assertion that the political aspects of goal conflicts and trade-offs between policy objectives that hinder sustainable development and its proposed solutions need to be acknowledged. This is because political interests have implications for what goal conflicts and trade-offs are prioritised in the practical work and communicated in policy documents, as seen in my interviews.

The documents construct PCSD as a technical process within the ordinary processes where the existence of goal conflicts and trade-offs and their effects are assumed to be logical. Their effects are obvious in a way that actors will agree on them and are apolitical, which means that they can be solved “without using power to overcome opposition” (Brand et al., 2021:111).

However, this is contrasted by the perspective in the interviews where the challenges identified within the practical work are inherently political and long-term sustainable development is not always the prioritised goal. This was seen in the recurrent reflection that PCSD could be successfully implemented within ordinary processes if it was a political priority. This was exemplified by the challenge of analytical tools observed by the civil servants, such as when potential solutions to goal conflicts are identified but whether they are acted upon is based on political interests. My observation is supported by Brand et al.’s (2021) conclusion that technical solutions to goal conflicts cannot be implemented before the political decision has been made to prioritise that solution.

5.3 What discursive effects are produced by the problem representations?

My third research question reflected on the potential effects of the problem representations within the material. I argue that a discursive effect of rational discourse where PCSD is a technical process is the construction of the 2030 Agenda as an apolitical project, shifting the focus to the role of the civil servants and the practical work and limiting the systemic reforms and changes that narratives of the 2030 Agenda aim to achieve.

Brand et al. (2021) and Yunita et al. (2022) emphasise the value of developing a conceptual understanding of the 2030 Agenda and empirical data on the SDGs. But as my findings show, representing the problem of trade-offs and the lack of synergies as technical solutions within institutional arrangements constructs a perspective on policymaking detached from civil servants' political realities (Brand et al., 2021). This can also be seen in the external assessment of Sweden’s work with policy coherence. For example, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (2014)’s report wrote how the civil servants did not feel like it was requested by the political leadership to highlight possible goal conflicts from a PCD perspective. An assessment based on this was that the ordinary processes could not guarantee that the development perspective was brought into the ordinary process, such as the common preparation process of policy documents (Statskontoret, 2014). These challenges were again identified in my interviews.

From a social constructivist perspective, policy coherence and sustainable development are contested, broad concepts defined differently by actors. The meaning of the terms is contingent on the political context in which they are used (Kurze & Lenschow 2018). Kurze & Lenschow (2018) argue that policy coherence frameworks reproduce the assumptions present in the dominant policy discourse on what goal conflicts are important and what we should sustain. Given this, developing tools, methods or resources and setting up working groups between departments will not create change that transcends the dominant understanding of sustainability within the Swedish government. Thus, if the 2030 Agenda is, in effect, apolitical, the kind of sustainable development to be promoted is taken for granted. Although it might not necessarily be seen as apolitical, it is treated as such.

An effect of this can be found in the finding that only goal conflicts whose solution can be found within political priorities are brought up and communicated in the documents. When goal conflicts and trade-offs are made explicit, they are often constructed as the responsibility of multilateral organisations or Swedish companies operating in difficult markets. Here the government's position is perceived as being in line with sustainable development. It is not a discussion on how government policies can be more sustainable.

Yunita et al. (2022) argue that when PCSD and the 2030 Agenda are presented as apolitical projects that only focus on changing rhetoric and institutional arrangements, it has the potential to make sustainability just a symbolic goal. This is because improving institutional arrangements for policy coherence would have little impact on sustainable development if the definition of sustainable development is unclear or avoids addressing the root causes of incoherence (Yunita et al., 2022). This perspective is supported by my interviews where two respondents reflected on how it is one thing to know about goal conflicts and another to do something to change policies that cause the conflicts. It is one thing to support PCSD and the 2030 Agenda as good political ideas and another to change the work in practice and the established political priorities.

Additionally, when goal conflicts and trade-offs are inadequately addressed in the reporting related to the SDGs, “there are no meaningful debates or policy actions emerging from this reporting process”, according to Yunita et al. (2022:97). The reporting is then more performative than a function for accountability. This aligns with the finding that Government Communications become less analytical and more descriptive when the goal conflicts are considered politically sensitive. The focus is not examining the causes and solutions to conflicts between sustainability goals.

A consequence of this can be seen in the Swedish Agency for Public Management's report from 2020, which offered up a critique towards the ambition to implement the 2030 Agenda within the ordinary processes. The report argued that the government might need to consider larger reforms, investments, and

measures to achieve the SDGs, even if they are costly. This is in reference to the ambitious and visionary wording of the UN resolution on the 2030 Agenda (Statskontoret, 2020). This perspective could also be found in my interviews. Aligned with this is Koff & Maganda's (2016) argument that the PCSD's value is its normative aspect which highlights the political commitment to transformative development that addresses justice and human rights issues and global power imbalances. Still, suppose the 2030 Agenda fails to achieve results in areas outside of the government's established political priorities. In that case, its relevance as a normatively good road map for a more sustainable world will be questioned (Brand et al., 2021).

5.4 Conclusion

The problem being investigated in this thesis is the argument that the construction of policy coherence as a technical problem makes it an apolitical one. This leads to political aspects being taken for granted, and alternative ways to understand and work with Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development are silenced. The Government Communications to the Parliament and the interviews with the civil servants offer measures and solutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda and the direction of the work with policy coherence in the Government Offices. The measures and solutions determine explicit and implicit problem representations related to the practical work with sustainable development goals and how to address and deal with goal conflicts and trade-offs.

Building on previous literature on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, this thesis identifies tensions and highlights perspectives relevant to the academic debate on the 2030 Agenda and PCSD. Further research might choose to investigate a specific policy area in relation to PCSD and how problems and solutions to sustainability issues are constructed. Another suggestion might be to situate the Swedish approach to PCSD within global sustainability discourses to reflect on the relationship between the three dimensions of sustainability; economic, social, and environmental and how they are constructed in Swedish national or foreign policies.

This year (2023) marks the half-time for the 2030 Agenda in a world with multiple crises and where many SDGs are moving in the wrong direction (UN, 2022). However, in most interviews, the value of the 2030 Agenda and the need for long-term goals is highlighted as necessary. Many interviewees saw the PCSD as essential in addressing current and future global and regional crises. While methods and tools can enhance civil servants' comprehension and expertise, meaningful progress towards addressing conflicting goals can only occur with a political commitment to these issues.

At the point of writing, the government that took office in the fall of 2022 have yet to publish any Communication related to the 2030 Agenda and PCSD, and the next one is planned for 2024. When the interviews were conducted, the current civil servants could only make limited reflections on how the change in government would affect the work with PCSD and the 2030 Agenda in the coming years. Changes in policies and narratives made by the new centre-right government are beyond the scope of this paper.

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Appendix

List of Policy Documents

Name of document	Month/Year	Document Type
Shared Responsibility: Sweden's Policy for Global Development 2002/03:122	May 2003	Government Bill
Sweden's Global Development Policy 2004/05:4	September 2004	Government Communication
Sweden's Global Development Policy 2004/05:161	May 2005	Government Communication
Sweden's Global Development Policy 2005/06:204	May 2006	Government Communication
Global challenges - our responsibility, Communication on Sweden's policy for global development 2007/08:89	March 2008	Government Communication
To meet global challenges – Communication on coherence for development 2009/10:129	March 2010	Government Communication
Implementation of Policy Coherence for Development – Focus: The Global Challenge of	June 2012	Government Communication

Economic Exclusion 2011/12:167		
The implementation of policy coherence for development – Focus: the global challenge of migration flows 2013/14:154	March 2014	Government Communication
Policy for global development in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda 2015/16:182	May 2016	Government Communication
Policy for global development in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda 2017/18:146	March 2018	Government Communication
Sweden’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda 2019/20:188	June 2020	Government Bill
Sweden’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda 2021/22:247	May 2022	Government Communication

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Popular Science Summary

Public policymaking can be confusing and inconsistent because the government has many responsibilities in different policy areas. This can lead to conflicts and contradictions. Having coherent policies help governments manage conflicts and trade-offs between goals. This is when one policy goal hinders the positive effects of another policy goal. Policy coherence is important for successfully implementing the United Nations' global sustainability framework, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, policies can be more or less effective in solving goal conflicts. If perfect coherence is not possible, it's important to consider what political objectives are prioritised over others. Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development is important because it highlights justice, human rights and environmental protection as important in policymaking. But, if the 2030 Agenda does not produce results in areas beyond the government's political priorities, its value as a roadmap towards a more sustainable world is uncertain.

This paper looks at how conflicts between policy goals are dealt with in policymaking, especially for sustainable development. It examines how civil servants understand these ideas and how policy documents communicate the solution to the goal conflicts. The aim is to understand the perspectives that shape the work with policy coherence within the Swedish Government Offices. How a problem is represented and ought to be understood in a text or an interview affects the practical work of achieving sustainable development policies.

The findings show two main perspectives on the concept of trade-offs and goal conflicts in the material: the problem is represented to be technical processes, leading to the conclusion that better methods and analytical tools are the solutions, or the problem is seen to be a political process with the solution depending on political priorities. But treating the solution to conflicting policy goals as only a technical process ignores the political aspects of sustainability problems, such as the importance of political interest and that some solutions can be politically sensitive. The analysis finds that when trade-offs and goal conflicts are considered politically sensitive, and sustainability objectives are not always the focus, policy documents use descriptive language rather than analytical thinking. The documents communicate only the goal conflicts that can be resolved by established political priorities. This makes it difficult to pinpoint the reasons for conflicting goals and find effective ways to resolve them.

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