

# How South Africa can align its development plan with the SDGs

By [Willem Fourie](#)

28 Mar 2018

Creating coherent national policies is a challenge for most countries. And now the adoption of the [UN's 2030 Agenda](#) and its [sustainable development goals](#) (SDGs) has presented governments with an additional challenge: aligning national policies with expansive global development goals.



Both developed and developing countries are faced with this challenge. This is exacerbated by the SDGs' integrated nature and the related challenges of [measuring, monitoring and communicating progress](#). In Africa, a plethora of home-grown development goals, encapsulated in national development plans and visions, have emerged during the last decade.

Kenya, for example, adopted its [Vision 2030](#). And at a continental level the African Union adopted [Agenda 2063](#). In most cases these national or continental development plans are accompanied by detailed implementation plans.

In South Africa, policymakers need to align the country's [National Development Plan](#) (NDP) with the SDGs. The NDP is South Africa's long-term development plan. It expresses consensus on societal challenges, focuses the national planning system and has the potential to implement development priorities in a more effective way.

The plan is primarily implemented through five-year [Medium-Term Strategic Frameworks](#). The current one prioritises 14 outcomes, ranging from quality education and health care to an effective public service and rural development.

But aligning South Africa's national development plan and the sustainable development goals will have its fair share of complications.

South African policymakers must consider how best it can be done. One possible route is to turn to the [Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development](#) movement which is regarded as the industry standard for creating policy coherence. It initially focused on creating policy coherence for countries receiving foreign aid. But this weakness, namely using policies of developed countries as point of reference, has been corrected in the post-2015 development era.

The approach provides a few useful guidelines.

## Obstacles

A number of challenges face South Africa in aligning its domestic development plan and the SDGs.

Firstly, the plan was adopted before the 2030 Agenda. Superimposing the global agenda onto the local plan is politically problematic because it can't be changed without seriously damaging its legitimacy.

Secondly, the 2030 Agenda does not - and cannot - respond to national development challenges. The 2030 Agenda expresses global commitments reached by the United Nation's 193 members states. There's of course very little space in the core text of such an agenda for national development challenges.

This is certainly the case in South Africa. The country's development plan explicitly and understandably seeks to address injustices resulting from its apartheid past. This includes improving the poor quality of education for black people, strengthening national infrastructure, uniting the country and creating employment.

The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs do not mention the peculiarities of the South African - or any other national - context.

The good news is that the [Policy Coherence for Development](#) movement can help as countries try and bring the two together.

## Five guidelines

Developing countries have been wary of this approach given its genesis as [a product](#) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Co-operation Directorate. In its early days it had a strong donor bias and impact was defined mostly in terms of the interests of donor countries.

But after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the donor-bias was addressed by emphasising [sustainable development](#). This signified a sea-change in the movement itself.

At least five of the guidelines it uses could be helpful to South Africa.

The *first* is the movement's emphasis on political buy-in without which policy coherence isn't possible. It might be helpful for South Africa to rekindle the political momentum that was achieved when it was involved in negotiations for the global adoption of the 2030 Agenda. As joint chair of the G77 and China it [played an important role](#) in finalising the agenda.

The *second* guideline emphasises the importance of national development priorities and challenges. National ownership is key for development effectiveness. The fact that the national development plan was adopted before the SDGs should make it easier to safeguard the integrity of national priorities.

The *third* useful guideline is the emphasis on using existing institutional structures and processes. There's no need to

reinvent the wheel. Rather existing structures should be organised in the most efficient way. This should result in a coordinated effort to improve policy coherence that includes various government actors and stakeholders.

A number of institutions that could play a critical role. The [Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation](#), for example, is well positioned to champion policy coherence between the national development plan and the 2030 Agenda. This is because it's already the custodian of the national development plan.

Another is the [country's statistical body](#) as well as the [Department of International Relations and Cooperation](#) which coordinates South Africa's international obligations.

The *fourth* guideline takes an issue-based approach to policy coherence by suggesting cooperation across government departments and across sectors. This is difficult but important. The notion that [development priorities are interconnected](#) is a defining characteristic of the sustainable development goals, and also characterises South Africa's national development plan. But using an issue-based approach will be of no avail if it's not coupled with making the best use of existing structures and processes.

The *fifth* guideline has to do with encouraging governments to look beyond the short-term. The effect of policies should be viewed [beyond the present generation and beyond national borders](#). Many governments find it difficult to include long-term and transnational impacts into their policy making processes. But they should because issues such as climate change aren't constrained by national borders and affect the flow of people and of goods.

## No panacea

There isn't a panacea to aligning national and global development goals. It will remain a difficult thing to do. Yet, its difficulty doesn't mean that it's not important or that it's impossible. On the contrary: the policy coherence for development movement is based on the assumption that inclusive and sustainable development depends on coherent policies.

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