

POLICY

POINTS

Issue 2021/05
March 2021

SOUND POLICY-MAKING IN THE ECOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EIGHT GUIDANCE NOTES IN SEARCH OF PRACTICE

Governance has a major role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but how to improve on the governmental capacity to listen, to analyse, to deliver and to leave ‘no-one behind’ in the SDGs vision? The United Nations (UN) - [Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) (UN-DESA) consulted its [Committee of Experts on Public Administration](#) (CEPA). The experts elaborated a set of [11 principles](#) of effective governance for sustainable development. For these principles to become operational, they have to be supported by strategies and tools that can be adopted and customised by a large number of countries in different contexts.

One of the principles is sound policy-making – the term is often evoked, but what does it mean exactly? How can this principle deliver on sustainable development? To address these two daunting questions, the UN and CEPA made a step ahead by pinning down eight common strategies. In a sense, the UN spelled out the equation of sound policy-making by identifying the following eight factors: (i) [strategic planning and foresight](#); (ii) regulatory impact analysis (iii) promotion of [coherent policymaking](#) (iv) strengthening [national statistical systems](#) (v) [monitoring and evaluation systems](#) (vi) the science-policy interface (vii) [risk management frameworks](#) and (viii) [data sharing](#).

Policy Points author:

Claudio M Radaelli (Professor of Comparative Public Policy, EUI School of Transnational Governance)

The opinions of the authors represent personal opinions and do not represent the position or opinion of the European University Institute

Acknowledgements: I wish to acknowledge the ERC project [Procedural Tools for Effective Governance](#), PROTEGO no 694632

For each strategy the UN-DESA is publishing a guidance note (science-policy interface is not yet available). Last year I was asked to prepare the note on [regulatory impact analysis](#). This was presented with the others at two workshops in February, one addressing [Latin America](#) and the other for an [African](#) audience.

What's the overall contribution of the guidance notes? Do they provide usable knowledge? The vision of connecting different strategies and their tools is an important achievement. Only a coherent, ecological vision can deliver on sound policy-making for sustainable development. The strategies are whole-of-government (from building capacity via national statistical systems to the usage of tools across departments and regulators), whole-of-policy cycle (meaning that they address the different stages of process, for example impact assessment at policy formulation and evaluation after a policy has been implemented), and whole-of-society (the SDGs as compass gears the tools towards social benefits). In the [ERC project Protego](#), we take a similar ecological approach by analysing the interaction among tools such as freedom of information, impact assessment, consultation, the Ombudsman and judicial review.

The ecological approach is not just about coherence. It is about hinging individual tools to a broader reform effort – a [World Bank study](#) noted that individual tools fail to take off if not 'hinged' to major collective problem-solving and reform exercises in government. In particular, this study found that regulatory impact analysis should not be implemented "in vacuum". Instead, it should be rolled out with adequate linkages to other governance reforms and tools. This corroborates the [claim](#) that the implementation of impact assessment is more robust when this tool is delivered as part of the solution to broader problems such as simplification, competitiveness, economic integration, and legitimacy. Today, the tools ought to be joined to the vision of the SDGs. It is the SDGs vision that can create the commitment to create and mobilise the capacity necessary to the successful implementation of the tools of sound policy-making. At the same time, the tools must incorporate the SDGs in their templates – for example [widening](#) regulatory impact analysis and evaluation to include gender impact assessment, social inclusion and environmental sustainability appraisal.

Another important quality of the guidance notes is that they are rich in examples, case studies and sources for peer-to-peer learning. They empower the reader to find a path to sound policy-making that is flexible enough to be adapted to the characteristics of the political and administrative context. As such, the notes have potential for policy learning.

Two problematic issues remain on the table. To be honest, this is not a specific problem of the UN approach, but of all policy strategies recommended by international organisations. First, if we were to implement the guidance in full, we would end up with the rise of new central government institutions. The notes recommend a strong central unit for foresight, observe that impact analysis requires proper institutions of regulatory oversight, suggest to support evaluation, foresight and risk management with proper institutions at the centre of government. This is a classic way of (institutional) reasoning: there is a problem; we enter a new tool to address the problem; we therefore create an institution to become the custodian of the tool (or approach). However, previous [research](#) has shown that 'strong' central units are not made strong by fiat. Rather, their strength depends on how trustworthy they are, how central they become in the web of core governmental communication channels, and if and how they matter for stakeholders who care about sound policy-making. Strength must be conquered so to speak on the terrain of daily policy decisions and policy processes in government. The proliferation of units and oversight centre may create new coordination problems.

This leads us to the second issue. Strategies and tools are one side of the coin. The other side is the world of practices. We certainly need to design and offer tools for risk analysis, regulatory impact assessment, evaluation and foresight. But more importantly still, we need an [evaluative attitude](#), a public management culture of asking the right evidence-based questions about risk, foresight and impacts. International organisations cannot teach or impose practice from the top of course. It follows that the next step in the implementation of the guidance notes in the hands of domestic policy-makers, national schools of government, schools of public policy, consultants and trainers. More broadly, we need the emergence of communities of learning to turn guidance into capacity.

The School of Transnational Governance (STG) delivers teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State. Based within the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, the School brings the worlds of academia and policy-making together in an effort to navigate a context, both inside and outside Europe, where policy-making increasingly transcends national borders.

The School offers Executive Training Seminars for experienced professionals and a Policy Leaders Fellowship for early- and mid-career innovators. The School also hosts expert Policy Dialogues and distinguished lectures from transnational leaders (to include the STG's Leaders Beyond the State series which recorded the experiences of former European Institution presidents, and the Giorgio La Pira Lecture series which focuses on building bridges between Africa and Europe). In September 2020, the School launched its Master-of-Arts in Transnational Governance (MTnG), which will educate and train a new breed of policy leader able to navigate the unprecedented issues our world will face during the next decade and beyond.

The STG Policy Papers Collection aims to further the EUI School of Transnational Governance's goal in creating a bridge between academia and policy and provide actionable knowledge for policy-making. The collection includes Policy Points (providing information at-a-glance), Policy Briefs (concise summaries of issues and recommended policy options), and Policy Analyses (in-depth analysis of particular issues). The contributions provide topical and policy-oriented perspectives on a diverse range of issues relevant to transnational governance. They are authored by STG staff and guest authors invited to contribute on particular topics.

School of Transnational Governance
European University Institute
Via dei Roccettini, 9
I-50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Tel. +39 055 4685 545
Email: stg@eui.eu

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



stg.eui.eu — www.eui.eu



doi: 10.2870/467835
ISBN:978-92-9084-980-3
ISSN:2600-271X
QM-BA-21-005-EN-N

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

© European University Institute, 2021