



## Towards a Comprehensive Overview of Alignment Mechanisms for Effective Governance of the Sustainable Development Goals

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### Development at Stake

What kind of world would we live in today if all the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted, leaving behind no child, woman, country or region? This is what all 193 UN Member States dared to aim for in 2015 when they unanimously adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goals. With only five years left to 2030, the reality today is that globally “only 17 per cent of the SDG targets are on track, nearly half are showing minimal or moderate progress, and progress on over one third has stalled or even regressed” (UN DESA 2024 pg. 2).

This is detrimental for millions in the world today, especially in Africa where some of the poorest and most vulnerable communities continue to live with no access to food, education, clean water and healthcare amongst several other vital necessities. The “*Aspirations of the African People*” that closely link the 17 SDG goals with 20 Agenda 2063 goals (African Union website), remain a pipe dream. How do we steer this stark reality towards sustainable social, environmental and economic development in an increasingly complex and polycrisis world?.

### Beyond Cherry-Picking

The recently ended UN Summit of the Future (2024) emphasised the importance of global cooperation and better integration of interventions. This is in line with the indivisible and holistic design of the SDG framework, yet within governments, public-private and donor-recipient relationships, we continue to see policy fragmentation,

duplication of interventions and competing priorities. The 17 goals, 169 targets and 247 indicators interact by enhancing or countering each other. Development efforts (e.g. donor-driven vertical programmes) that operate in silos and cherry-pick some SDGs over others, could be attaining some goals at the expense of others. A wider array of

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alignment mechanisms are required to achieve policy coherence that leverage synergies and mitigate trade-offs (OECD, 2019). This involves integrating SDGs within policies (OECD, 2024), a process complicated by the diversity of development actors in different sectors, jurisdictions and governance levels. Development actors require more clarity on concrete governance mechanisms that transcend policy domains, political obstacles and societal specificities. This policy brief distils the more comprehensive research findings of Wiegant et al. (2024) that provides an overview of

alignment mechanisms available for effective SDG governance.

## Research Approach

From an analytical framework built on literature from public governance and international development literature, Wiegant et al. (2024) answer the question, “What governance mechanisms enable development actors, located in different sectors, in different jurisdictions and at different governance levels, to align their efforts?”

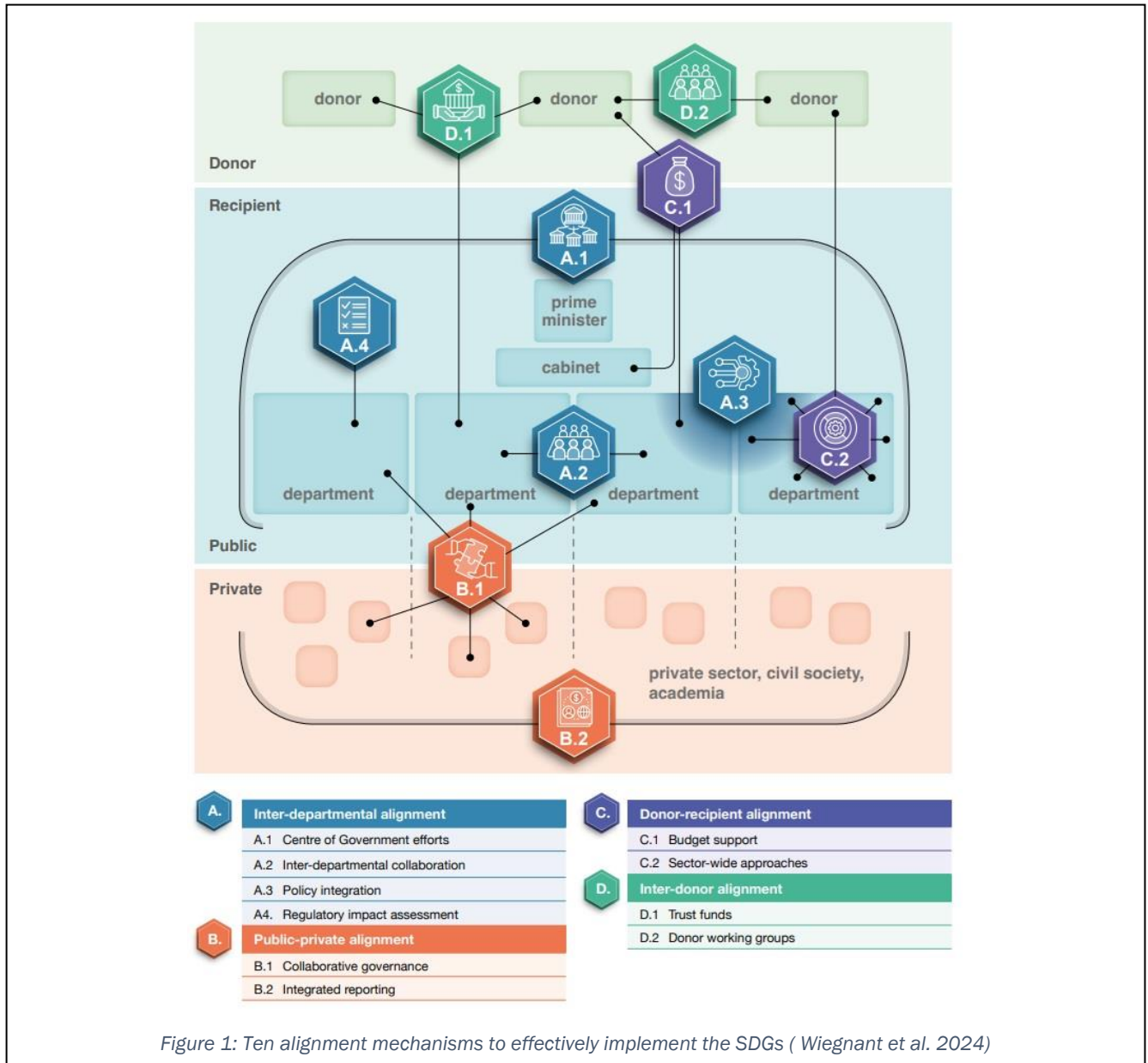


Figure 1: Ten alignment mechanisms to effectively implement the SDGs ( Wiegant et al. 2024)

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They find ten mechanisms that align inter-departmental, public-private, donor-recipient and inter-donor governance arrangements (see figure 1). These findings are contextualised by an empirical study in Ethiopia (and further augmented by ongoing research in Kenya and Uganda).

The rest of this policy brief is divided into two parts. Part A covers the ten alignment mechanisms as categorised under inter-departmental, public-private, donor-recipient and inter-donor multi-actor alignment. Part B further highlights key cross-cutting issues that should be taken into consideration.

## Part A: Governing SDG Interactions through Multi-actor Alignment Mechanisms

Multi-actor alignment relevant to Global North and Global South contexts include inter-departmental and public-private alignment mechanisms, while those specific to the Global South also include donor-recipient and inter-donor alignment mechanisms (Wiegant et al., 2024).

### Inter-departmental Alignment Mechanisms

**The Centre of Government (A1)** is formally the pivotal point of key alignment efforts in a country. Here the President, Prime Minister, and/or other powerful ministry of government like the Ministry of Finance or Planning, holds the mandate, influence and oversight over national policies, budgets, debates and efforts. In more decentralised governance, alignment occurs through **inter-departmental cooperation (A2)** within working groups of high level civil servants and inter-departmental committees. These are crucial centres for identifying and addressing SDG cross-cutting issues and interdependencies.

Alignment through **policy integration (A3)** occurs by mainstreaming cross-cutting issues into a part or whole-of-government approach. It is important for synergistic effects where policies can be harmonised, efforts consolidated and budgets streamlined so

that more is gained than by the simple sum of the individual parts. **Regulatory impact assessments (A4)** are particularly instrumental in mitigating trade-offs by constraining the negative effects of an action on other aspects. For example, an environmental impact assessment would constrain the impact of action towards SDG 9 (innovation and infrastructure) from causing regression of SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) or SDG 15 (life on land). Regulatory impact assessments are therefore useful for designing, regulating and assessing the effectiveness of strategies and efforts.

### Public-private Alignment Mechanisms

Beyond government, alignment mechanisms also include public-private collaboration. The private here is inclusive of all non-government actors such as civil societies organisations, traditional societies, the private sector and other organised forms of local communities. At this level, governance continues in more siloed forms that are more focussed on specific topics or issues. There is great untapped potential for alignment, considering that needs and problems at the household or community levels are by nature tightly interlinked. This can be addressed through collaborative governance and integrated reporting. **Collaborative governance (B1)** engages a diversity of actors incorporating divergent views that can expose blind spots in problem definition. It is also a productive point for building collective capacity, identifying common ground and coming up with an array of innovative solutions. Alignment through **integrated reporting (B2)** enhances accountability and transparency, nuances policy recommendations and demands from development actors the social licence to operate.

### Donor-recipient Alignment Mechanisms

SDG alignment mechanisms also operate through donor-recipient alignment and inter-donor alignment. The most obvious

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mechanism for donor-recipient alignment is through **budget support (C1)**. This could take the form of financial resources, technical assistance or capacity development. Ideally, the Centre of Government is the key point of formal interaction with donors, and the most effective channel for achieving aid effectiveness in terms of recipient ownership and donor-recipient. However, in practice it is not uncommon for donors to directly interact with departments, civil society organisation or local communities – much to the chagrin of government officials. Donor and recipients sometimes hold a form of pull-push relationship in which ambivalence and fragile trust complicate the feasibility of alignment mechanisms. For example, this could take the form of results-based approaches that require complex administrative and reporting skills that may not be readily available. Budget support also opens up space for policy dialogue that could expand a donor’s influence beyond their own resource contributions. Alignment can also be achieved through **sector-wide approaches (SWAp) (C2)**. SWAp requires the trust and goodwill of donors to relinquish influence over their specific contributions for the sake of pooling national and international resources into a common management system. On the one hand this could lead to greater alignment of domestic and foreign resources and harmonise donor procedures. On the other hand it is an expensive mechanism, threatens national sovereignty and faces mismatch with low level national procurement and financial management capacities.

### Inter-donor Alignment Mechanisms

Inter-donor alignment happens when donors pool funding mechanisms, like **trust funds (D1)**, or organise **donor working groups (D2)**. Both help donors to avoid waste, duplication or countering each other’s efforts. Trust funds can be coupled to Project Implementation Units of the recipient government to integrate dedicated economic, development and social objectives and implementation frameworks. The trade-

off for the recipient government is that it is largely bypassed and other sectors excluded.

## Part B: Cross-cutting Considerations

Aligning multi-actor SDG efforts is important for steering progress towards healthy, prosperous and sustainable societies. Building from the findings of Wiegant et al. (2024), with inspiration from ongoing empirical research in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, we further call attention to three cross-cutting considerations.

**Combination of alignment mechanisms:** No single mechanism can act as a panacea that addresses all forms of policy fragmentation and misalignment. Wiegant et al. (2024) found ten alignment mechanisms. They contribute to the lack of comprehensive overview of SDG alignment mechanisms and by inference point to a longer list in practice. It is important for any government, donor or others involved in SDG governance to have a toolbox of alignment mechanisms, but their efficiency and effectiveness lies in the combination of mechanisms. For example, sector-wide approaches (SWAps) go hand in hand with support for interdepartmental objectives and resource allocation.

**Financial constraints:** A significant barrier to alignment, especially for developing countries, is the lack of fiscal space. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres, that “*finance is the fuel that will drive SDG progress*” (UN Secretary-General, 2023). A stranglehold to multi-actor alignment mechanisms is the lack of fiscal space for developing countries. If African countries spend 2.5 times more on servicing national debt than on education, or 4 times more than on health ” (UN Secretary-General, 2023), where then is the room for aligning national priorities with donor demands?

**Policy Coherence versus Effectiveness:** While policy coherence is important, it does not automatically translate into the achievement of SDG goals. SDG alignment is not a goal in

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and of itself but is useful for attaining efficiency (not to be confused with effectiveness) in terms of resource allocation and utilisation. Development actions should be aligned with recipient country needs and interests and be locally-owned and led in line with high level agreements on aid efficiency including Accra (2008) and Busan (2011).

## Final Remarks

With the SDG framework, the world has attained the unprecedented achievement of articulating its ambitions together. Realising the posed aspiration, however, requires

intentional alignment of a diverse set of actors and strategies, including the 10 alignment strategies outlined by Wiegant et al. (2024). More attention should be given to addressing the cross-cutting issues mentioned in this policy brief, in addition to closing the SDG funding gap, localising SDGs and building trust between cooperation partners. We cannot afford to overlook opportunities for strengthening synergies and regulating trade-offs. The quality of millions of lives in developing countries hang on how well we take up these lessons today and continue to commit to them in the Post-2030 agenda.

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