Introduction

In September 2019, Ben Macpherson MSP, Scottish Government Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development (at the time) announced that he would be launching a new Inter-Ministerial Group that will take forward the Scottish Government's commitment to policy coherence for sustainable development. This announcement was welcomed by the Alliance and its members.

On 18th March 2020, Mr Macpherson's successor – Jenny Gilruth MSP – re-affirmed the government's commitment to forming this group during Portfolio Questions on External Affairs in the Chamber at the Scottish Parliament.

She said that the first meeting of the PCSD working group is scheduled for May 2020, but no details of how this group will function, who the group will comprise of and what the group will focus on have yet been published.

In light of the short, medium and long-term socio-economic implications of the coronavirus outbreak domestically and globally, nested within the ever-present climate and environmental crisis, the time has never been more apt to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development and ensure our societal priorities have long term global prosperity at their heart.

This paper outlines our recommendations on what the group might aim to achieve, sets out a number of important principles the group should adhere to, and importantly, offers up a number of thematic areas the group could focus on in order to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development.

Please note, throughout this document hyperlinks are provided to the new Wiki on PCSD which provide more detailed insight into many of the points mentioned. It should also be noted that the decision to create a wiki, is based on a belief that any genuine progress on PCSD in Scotland must involve Government and non-government stakeholders working together. The concept of an open source, peer reviewed wiki is intended to be a novel way to facilitate working together and the co-creation of new ideas.

Why is this important?

The Alliance (formerly as NIDOS) and many of its members have consistently called for 'mechanisms for cross-government planning and policy review' and 'the involvement of all ministries and leadership from the highest level' to enhance policy coherence, since as far back as 2013.

In 2013, the focus was specifically on PCD rather than PCSD, but with the advent of the SDGs in 2015, the concept has shifted to something much broader and presents an opportunity to mainstream a policy coherence approach across government.

A timeline of work in Scotland on this issue is available here.

In more recent work, through its membership of the OECD PCSD Partnership, the Alliance has endorsed and fed into the new OECD Recommendations of the Council on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development. This new 2019 Recommendation amends the Council's 2010 Recommendation on Policy Coherence for Development.

The Recommendation presents a set of eight principles for promoting PCSD, four of which could be directly and positively influenced by this new Ministerial Group. These are:

1. Build a strong, inclusive political commitment and leadership at the highest political level to foster whole-of-government action for PCSD.

2. Ensure whole-of-government coordination and leadership to identify, assess and address divergences and incoherence between sectoral priorities and policies, including external and domestic policies, and promote mutually supporting actions across sectors and institutions.

3. Engage public sector, civil society and private sector stakeholders effectively to sustain broader support for PCSD and its implementation.

4. Analyse and assess policy and financing impacts of policy incoherence to inform decision-making, increase positive impacts and avoid potential negative impacts on the sustainable development prospects of other countries, in particular on developing countries.

Crucially, PCSD principles are not just about ensuring better development outcomes in the poorest countries, but are about achieving better sustainable development outcomes everywhere, including here in Scotland.

Therefore, this group has the potential to help achieve better coherence and joined up action on domestic issues as well, such as embedding gender equality, moving towards a well-being economy or decarbonising the economy.

But to do so, it must help foster cross-party recognition and commitment to the importance of action on PCSD as well act as an internal government mechanism for enhancing coherence.

What could this group aim to achieve?

This new group could aim to impact positively on the four principles outlined above (or revised Scottish interpretations of these principles).

A Scottish-specific interpretation of these four principles might look like this:

1. Encourage reference and attention to PCSD by all Government Ministers in all policy documents going forward, and indicate how policy focus areas can interact with others using the SDGs as the framework for comparison.

2. Identify and work on specific thematic areas that overlap ministerial portfolios to minimise unintended consequences and enhance impact on SDGs/NPF outcomes, e.g. the business pledge (international development and trade portfolios), climate proofing (climate and international development), etc. (More on this below).

3. Ensure regular and systematic communication with and involvement of stakeholders from a different interest groups including local government, the private sector, public sector and local and international NGOs. Promote and facilitate regular parliamentary scrutiny of the work undertaken by the Group and ensure that there is a lead Committee in the Scottish Parliament to do this.

4. Promote a common approach to Sustainable Development Impact Assessment for policy teams across government that goes beyond standard impact assessments (tick box exercises) like this one developed by the Scottish Parliament.

Other priority aims for the group should include:

5. Raising awareness and generating support for action on SDGs both domestically and internationally.

6. Considering how the group can outlive electoral cycles and changes in government/cabinet compositions. Long-term and sustained promotion of PCSD requires this.

7. Laying the groundwork for formalised institutional mechanisms for cross government and cross-party parliamentary planning and policy review through a PCSD lens.

Important Principles

- The group should meet regularly (minimum quarterly) and publish reports on its activities.

- The group should endeavour to be open and transparent in acknowledging unavoidable trade-offs between different policy areas.

- The group should engage and invite views from a variety of stakeholders on every policy area it works on

- The group should be open to parliamentary scrutiny

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Membership

We believe the membership of the Group should ideally include all 14 Ministers, and depending on the focus of particular meetings, relevant Cabinet Secretaries should also be present.

As mentioned above, the potential to help achieve better coherence and joined up action on domestic issues as well as development outcomes elsewhere should increase support for this group.

Thematic focus areas for the group

The Scottish Government has committed to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As such, the SDGs provide a suitable frame for assessment, review and stakeholder engagement. Importantly, any specific policy area that the group works on should be considered by:

- systematically applying a climate, poverty, gender and human rights perspective in line with the 2030 Agenda

- Using existing tools such as strategic foresight, scenario development and systems thinking to identify, prevent and mitigate actual and potential adverse impacts on the wellbeing and sustainable development prospects of future generations here in Scotland and elsewhere.

1. The Coronavirus

The current coronavirus crisis provides an urgent cross-portfolio issue for Ministers to consider as this groups establishes. The effects of this crisis will be felt across society in Scotland and the social, economic and environmental ramifications of the Scottish Government's response will have both domestic and overseas consequences.

Therefore, our medium and long-term policy response to this crisis demands a PCSD approach – short-termism and tunnel vision are not an option.

2. Climate

Going forward, and linking clearly to the just and green recovery that will be necessary following the Coronavirus, is our long-term approach to the climate emergency. At a minimum, future policies to achieve climate targets, as part of a green recovery package or delayed Climate Change Plan, should be aligned with the SDGs – domestically and internationally – to comply with the 2019 Climate Change Act. The group could also go further and seek to address gaps, such as ensuring Scotland's carbon and environmental footprints are reduced without inadvertently 'transferring' emissions elsewhere or making it harder for other nations to make their own fair contribution to the global effort.

3. Other policy areas

Other specific policy areas that the group could look at from an International development perspective are outlined on the public Wiki resource here.

These areas include:

- Nature Crisis
- Education
- Health
- Migration
- International Trade
- Business and Human Rights
- Public Procurement
- Scottish National Investment Bank
- Gender

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