

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONNECTIONS THAT MATTER:

How the quality of governance
boosts climate action



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Inclusive, accountable and effective governance is key to achieving sustainable development, which is why the SDGs include SDG 16 with a dedicated focus on peace, justice and strong institutions that comprises several governance components. Despite their systemic importance, recent studies on SDG interlinkages have either excluded or provided limited coverage of SDG 16 targets in their analyses. At the same time, there is a substantial body of research indicating that institutional quality, state capacity and inclusive governance matter for climate change mitigation as well as for strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity to climate change (SDG 13).

In preparation for the 2024 UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), where both SDG 16 and SDG 13 are under thematic review, UNDP's Global Policy Centre for Governance (GPCG) and the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) commissioned this study on the effects of SDG 16 on SDG 13.¹ Designed as a systematic scoping review of literature, it seeks to answer the research question, "How does progress on SDG 16 affect progress on SDG 13?"

The study reviewed a subset of the academic literature² relating to the enabling or constraining effects of core governance aspects of SDG 16. It analyses whether the three sets of governance issues (entry clusters) (i) accountability, transparency and rule of law; (ii) effective institutions; and (iii) inclusion and participation, impact the achievement of SDG 13, namely adaptation and mitigation (impact clusters).

The review finds that each entry cluster has enabling effects for climate change policy and planning and highlights **three important pathways** that link beneficial impacts between governance and climate action.

Pathway 1: Adoption of ambitious policies. Increased participation and inclusion play an important role for building public awareness, creating concern and consensus, addressing conflicts and opposition, establishing political support and ownership, raising policy ambition and legitimacy, and promoting behavioural change and adoption of adaptive climate strategies. Increased participation and involvement may be enhanced through inclusive institutions, well-designed participation processes and skilled, motivated civil servants. Effective institutions also play an important role here, particularly the capacity to mobilize stakeholder engagement.

¹ The study is part of a long-standing collaboration between IDOS and the GPCG focussed on joint research on SDG 16 interlinkages. The research included a literature review group comprising UNDP and IDOS staff and selected experts, and the draft report is in the process of being peer reviewed by selected experts from the following organisations: ETH Zurich, IASA, IFAR Senegal, ISET Nepal, NORAD, EIT, Carleton University and GIZ.

² From a database of 24,000 academic articles, 803 were selected based on key words and time period (written after 2015) and then further screened for relevance down to a final set of 62 articles.

Pathway 2: Effective design and implementation of climate policies. Key enablers of this outcome include an effective legal framework, which includes particular features: statutory short-term and long-term targets (for mitigation), an independent advisory body, clear accountability structures, an iterative approach to adaptation planning, and mandatory regular reporting. Such a framework promotes political consensus, predictability, use of evidence and clear roles and responsibilities. Similarly, access to information provides critical knowledge on mitigation and adaptation options, preferences and trade-offs which can improve climate planning, while accountability and transparency increases the credibility of policies (e.g., emissions trading schemes) as well as the propensity of government to adopt adaptation or disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies. Effective institutions also play a critical role, through policy making capacities (e.g., foresight, integration, mainstreaming), coordination (of financial and technical support, investment, actors and competing priorities), and competence (capacity to deliver institutional functions, self-organize, and conceive, develop, revise and execute policies and allocate resources). Furthermore, political continuity throughout the planning process is important for the adoption and implementation of policies. Creating a national climate change authority and national climate change legislation are seen as ways to improve institutional coordination and oversight. A strong mandate, support and funding from higher levels of government are pointed out as key for effective local climate action.

Pathway 3: Effective oversight and enforcement of policies and regulations. Here, inclusive and competent institutions along with rule of law and control of corruption are considered vital. Control of corruption improves the effectiveness of climate policies by addressing policy capture and influence of vested interests and enabling better allocation of resources, oversight of regulations, and enforcement. An effective legal framework for climate action and a national institution dedicated to climate change also enhances oversight and enforcement of policy commitments. Competent institutions as well as public concern are further important for effective enforcement of policies and regulations.

By mapping the existing evidence and shedding light on specific causal linkages and pathways, the study offers an approach for accessing the complexity of interlinkages between SDGs 16 and 13 and deriving comprehensive and evidence-based impact logics for climate action programming. The report shows the complex interrelationships between governance attributes and climate actions, which cannot be captured through focusing on individual factors in interventions and programmes fostering climate action only. Instead, it is important to take a systems approach to identify reinforcing positive feedback loops. When developing theories of change for addressing climate change, governmental actors need to consider full pathways that also incorporate governance institutions and measures that may not necessarily be prioritised or of foremost concern.

Policy recommendations The findings of this study have policy implications. Our study offers an approach to understand the complexity of interlinkages. By mapping existing evidence, it sheds light on relevant causal pathways within complex systems. The following recommendations highlight leverage points and priority areas for effective climate action by governments, bilateral donors and international organizations as well as civil society. While our recommendations give an orientation on how governance pathways matter in policymaking for climate mitigation and adaptation, there is no one size fits all approach for practitioner. Effective design and implementation of governance pathways needs to be decided in the respective country context.

Governments and societies can make use of leverage points in policy designs more effectively. The Global Sustainable Development Report (IGS, 2019) identified governance as a key leverage point for achieving the SDGs. To tackle climate change, specific leverage points of governance stand out. (a) Raising public awareness and understanding of climate change and responses is an important starting point, which requires not only information campaigns by governments but also a free media and active civil society. (b) Collaborative leadership and institutional coordination are important. At the same time, inclusive and competent institutions, as well as effective legal frameworks, are needed as they contribute to increased oversight and enforcement of policies. (c) As in other areas, control of corruption is key. This is particularly important since investments in climate adaptation should increase further if the results of the most recent IPCC report (IPCC, 2022a) are considered.

Governments need to develop more integrated governance approaches in their systems to accelerate achievement of Agenda 2030. Individual governance reforms in line with the pathways identified here are important. To make them lasting and effective, the relationships and interactions between governance bodies such as implementation agencies in different sectors is key. Reforms of individual governance instruments need thus to be fit for and integrated in the system. It is important to invest in overall systems (whole-of-government approaches), to strengthen reinforcing feedback loops and to prevent constraining ones. Policies' theories of change need to consider full causal pathways that also incorporate governance programmes and measures that were not necessarily previously associated with climate action. The three pathways identified here may be valuable in guiding policymakers and practitioners in deriving comprehensive and evidence-based theories of change for climate action programming bridging established sectoral silos. The latter is particularly relevant for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs by leveraging synergies between them. Thus, as scholars (Breuer et al., 2023a; Breuer et al., 2023b) have previously argued, reforms must cut across sectors and integrate them.

Democratic governance systems are foundational. Many of the recommendations will only be tangible and implementable if the overall system of a country is open to them. An independent media and a social and political context that guards individual freedoms are important pre-conditions. As the Human Development Report 2023/24 (UNDP, 2024) emphasized, the role of agency – the ability of people to act as agents of change and determine their own future – is central to achieve collective action. Closing agency gaps requires strategies based on institutions that are people-centred (with emphasis in achieving human development and human security), co-owned (reflecting a fair distribution of power) and future oriented (putting in place mechanisms to navigate an uncertain and volatile world).

UN member states strengthen reporting on governance pathways and institutions in Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) and Global Assessment reports of goals. Current reporting to track progress on SDG achievement and further accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should focus more on SDG 16 as an enabler. This reporting should address governance components and mechanisms more specifically, instead of being too general or outcome focused. This would help identify beneficial leverage points of governance and pathways, which connects to the stated aim of VNRs to strengthen policies and institutions of governments for the implementation of the SDGs.

Inclusive knowledge creation to foster SDGs. Research on climate action has a clear bias towards European and North American countries. This is problematic, particularly in view of the high level of affectedness and vulnerability to climate change in many countries where most of the world lives. Hence, strengthening monitoring and research capacities across countries and regions is highly important to create knowledge that informs local reforms on governing climate adaptation and mitigation.

Scaling up interlinkage studies of SDGs to increase synergies and tackle trade-offs between the goals and their targets. Moreover, the further development of the system-based approach used in this study once more regarding the high relevance for policy makers and research of potential results. For example, a more comprehensive future interlinkages study that considers multiple SDGs might be able to identify new causal pathways and reinforcing feedback loops spanning several SDGs, which could provide further guidance for practitioners.

Suggested citation of the study: UNDP and IDOS. 2024. Connections that matter: How the quality of governance boosts climate action. A systematic scoping review of the literature.



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Suggested citation: UNDP and IDOS. 2024. Connections that matter: How the quality of governance boosts climate action. A systematic scoping review of the literature.

Edited by Jeanne Finestone and layout and design by Oliver Forte