

# From Millennium to Sustainable Development Goals: evolving discourses and their reflection in Policy Coherence for Development

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## Abstract

The discourse of sustainable development is highly influential in global and national governance frameworks, though its meaning and operationalisation are context-dependent and have evolved over time. The transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects the most recent evolution in this discourse. We analyse key differences in storylines between the MDGs and SDGs and develop a methodological approach to study these, focusing on the objectives of sustainable development, the means to reach those objectives, and the relations between developing and developed countries. We use this framework in quantitative and qualitative discourse analyses of the Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) approach of the Netherlands. This shows that global discourses are closely reflected in national-level policy frameworks. During the MDG era, the key objective of sustainable development was poverty reduction to be reached through economic growth and participation in the global trade system. The SDGs aim for a broader set of objectives across the full spectrum of the economic, social and environmental dimensions. This is reflected in the Dutch PCD approach, first through a conceptualisation of environmental and social safeguards for trade and economic growth, and later with social and environmental sustainability as equally important objectives alongside poverty reduction. While the MDGs mainly focus on national averages and the poorest, the SDGs target the most marginalised and vulnerable groups with a focus on disaggregate data. In this respect, the Netherlands was ahead of its time; already in the early 2000s it acknowledged that “*there is no question of “the” developing countries*”. Related to this, the Dutch PCD approach also reflects the changed conceptualisation of the relations between developing and developed countries. This changed from aid to developing countries as reflected in the MDGs, toward partnerships with them, initially for the purpose of stimulating economic growth and trade, later also aimed at environmental sustainability. The article ends with a reflection on how our research findings relate to broader discourses, the literature of sustainable development and PCD, and the generalizability of this paper.

**Key words:** Sustainable Development; Discourse; Sustainable Development Goals; Millennium Development Goals; The Netherlands; Policy Coherence for Development

## 1 Introduction

Ever since the 1987 Brundtland report, the discourse of sustainable development has been and still is highly influential in global and national governance frameworks (UN, 1987). Its meaning and operationalisation, however, are context-dependent and have evolved over time (e.g. Lélé, 1991; Redclift, 2005; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Sneddon et al., 2015; Holden et al., 2014; Ziai, 2015). The most comprehensive global governance framework for sustainable development is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs contain goals, targets and indicators in the areas of poverty reduction, environmental protection, human prosperity and peace (UN, 2015a). The 2030 Agenda was a follow-up to the 2000 Millennium Declaration with its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the first comprehensive global governance framework for the achievement of sustainable development (UN, 2000).

The transition from the MDGs (2000-2015) to the SDGs (2015-2030) reflects the most recent evolution of the discourse of sustainable development. While the evolution of the discourse of sustainable development has been the focus of much academic literature (e.g. Lélé, 1991; Redclift, 2005; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Sneddon et al., 2015; Holden et al., 2014; Ziai, 2015), a comprehensive discursive analysis of the transition from MDGs to SDGs has not yet been done (for partial analyses, see Fukuda-Parr 2016; Battersby 2017; Briant Carant, 2017; Arts, 2017).

This article aims to fill this gap. We analyse how the discourse of sustainable development has evolved in two of the most prominent global sustainability governance frameworks: the MDGs and the SDGs. Since the MDGs and SDGs are both intended for national implementation, it is imperative to study not only their formulation at the global level, but also their application at the national level. We therefore develop and apply a methodological approach to study the way in which the evolving discourse of sustainable development, as reflected in the MDGs and SDGs, is reflected in national-level policy frameworks.

In so doing, we employ a case study analysis of the Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) approach in the Netherlands. PCD refers to the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and is aimed at enhancing coherence between domestic policies and foreign, international cooperation or development policies (OECD, 2009). We view PCD as a key site in which the national reflection of global discourses can be studied, since it contains framing of synergies as well as unavoidable trade-offs and priorities with regard to which goals to achieve and for whom. Throughout the years, the PCD approach has been reflective of the development agenda and macro-socioeconomic changes such as globalisation (Thede, 2013). Analysing the PCD approach therefore provides important information on how countries frame some of the key elements of sustainable development, such as global and domestic economic growth and trade. It also provides information on (perceived) relations between developed and developing countries, thereby shedding light on North-South relations that have been and continue to be a crucial element of the discourse of sustainable development. Through a number of treaties, the European Union affirms its commitment to PCD, which it views as a key tool in achieving the SDGs (European Commission, 2019; European Union, 2017). At the European level, the Netherlands has been highly influential in the development of the PCD approach, and is one of the frontrunners in applying the approach at the national level (OECD, 2009; 2017). Because of the Netherlands' advancement in implementing the PCD approach, it constitutes a good case to study the reflection of sustainable development discourses at the national level. The Dutch political commitment to PCD started in the 1980s and has since not diminished (OECD, 2009). The PCD approach is currently part of a whole-of-government approach, which means that different ministries and departments jointly implement PCD activities in order to reach a common goal;

policy coherence. Thus, the Netherlands presents a good case as we expect to have sufficient data to confidently say something about how the Netherlands have framed PCD over the years. In their effort on and political commitment to PCD, the Netherlands is a unique case (OECD, 2009; 2017).

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 explains the methodology for the qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis that formed the basis of this article. In Section 3 we shortly touch upon the existing literature surrounding the PCD approach. Section 4 contains a literature review on the most recent evolution of the discourse of sustainable development, as reflected in the transition from MDGs to SDGs. It also presents the methodological approach with which this evolution can be studied at the national level. In Section 5, we apply this framework to study the framing of (sustainable) development in the PCD approach of the Netherlands in the period 2000 to 2019. In the discussion (Section 6), we reflect on our research findings in relation to the broader academic literature on the evolving discourses of (sustainable) development and development cooperation. We conclude with recommendations for further research.

## 2 Methodology

This article uses a discursive approach to study evolutions in the framing and governance of sustainable development at both global and national levels. A discourse can be defined as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations” that are (re)produced in specific policies and practices and that give meaning to reality (Hajer, 1995, 4; Dryzek, 2013). In further operationalising discourses, we use the concept of storylines, i.e. specific elements of a discourse or “narrative[s] (...) to give meaning to (...) phenomena” (Hajer, 1995, 56).

Using a discursive approach, we view the ways in which people speak and write—for example in politics and policies—as non-neutral instruments (Boréus & Bergström, 2017). As such, the way in which policies are framed is influenced by (as well as influences) wider social patterns such as the international agenda on sustainable development (Hajer 1995; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2011). Studying the framing of national policy documents—in our case documents outlining the PCD approach in the Netherlands—can thus inform us about wider discourses surrounding sustainable development. Such discourses matter because they shape global and national policy debates and policy designs that contain storylines about how to achieve sustainable development. In this article we use a “thin” discursive approach by viewing discourses as one of many factors that help to explain policies and politics (Arts et al., 2010). While we draw on discourse analysis as a method, our aim is not to contribute to discourse-theoretical approaches, but rather to academic and policy debates around discourses of (sustainable) development (Section 6).

In employing discourse analysis, we draw on Mayring (2000) who proposes a structured deductive approach to define categories and codes with which to analyse discourses. Our research methodology consisted of three steps: 1) a systematic review of primary and secondary literature to develop a methodological approach to study the evolution of discourses and storylines around sustainable development (Section 4); 2) a quantitative discourse analysis to analyse the prevalence of storylines in the Dutch PCD approach, using the methodological approach as a basis for the categories and codes (Section 5.1); and 3) a qualitative discourse analysis of the Dutch PCD approach to study the evolution of storylines in more depth (Section 5.2).

The methodological approach developed in step 1 is used to systematically describe the meaning of policy documents through linking parts of text to categories of a coding frame (Boréus & Bergström, 2017). The framework is based on secondary (academic) literature—using search terms such as discourse analysis, sustainable development, evolution, MDGs and SDGs—as well as official UN documents related to the MDGs and SDGs. For feasibility

reasons, we only focused on the outcome reports of the MDGs and SDGs and excluded reports on negotiations that led to or followed these outcomes. Drawing on the literature review, categories and codes were identified based on the most important differences between the way in which (elements of) sustainable development are framed in the MDGs and SDGs. Categories include framing of the main objective(s) of sustainable development; the means to reach sustainable development; and the relations between developed and developing countries. Within these categories, detailed codes were created which were categorised either to the MDGs or the SDGs (see Table 1 in Section 4 ).

The qualitative and quantitative discourse analyses on the PCD approach in the Netherlands (step 2 and 3) draw on data from Dutch policy documents starting from 2000—the year that the MDGs were launched—to the time of writing (2019). These policy documents were acquired through an official website of the government of the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, using key search terms such as policy coherence, development cooperation, and PCD<sup>2</sup>. This yielded 27 policy documents that were coded and analysed, consisting of official (final or progress) reports, letters of/to the government, memoranda, and evaluation reports carried out by the Dutch Operations Evaluation Department. These documents are listed in Annex A.

For the quantitative analysis, the frequencies of the codes in every category were counted and the percentages in which codes within a category occurred in every 5 years was calculated. While this shows general trends in discourses, it does not show which changes in specific storylines were most prominent. We therefore also analysed changes in the prevalence of the most common storylines—by counting the number of codes from each storyline—to gain insights into changes within and between categories. The changes in storylines are illustrated in the quantitative discourse analysis (Section 5 .1), and further analysed in more depth in the qualitative discourse analysis (Section 5 .2).

### 3 Literature debate surrounding PCD

PCD has been introduced in the 1990s by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) and has since received significant attention on political levels. On academic level this has been no less (Carbone & Keijzer, 2016). Policy coherence has been researched from different perspectives including a technical-analytical and an empirical perspective (Häbel, 2020). Much research has been done on how the PCD approach is theoretically significant and/or how it can have influence on developing countries (Ashoff, 2005; Picciotto, 2005; Carbone, 2008; Barry et al, 2010). Some articles have focused on the evolution of PCD (Thede, 2013; Carbone & Keijzer, 2016), but such studies have not been abundant (Carbone & Keijzer, 2016). More recently, PCD has been researched from a normative perspective. PCD has transformed from being a policy tool to improve efficiency and effectiveness of development policies, to being a political objective; a norm that aims not to let development strategies undermine non-development strategies (Koff & Maganda, 2016; Koff, 2017). PCD aims to prioritize human development over competing policy arenas, and it is therefore not only a technical tool (Carbone, 2008; Siitonen, 2016). Koff & Maganda (2016) argue that the greatest significance of PCD in the post-2015 agenda is its normative value as the SDGs are believed to pursue an inclusive (e.g. Sexsmith and McMichael, 2015; Arts, 2017), universal (e.g. Martens, 2015; Battersby, 2017) and a transformative development paradigm (e.g. Koff & Maganda, 2016), in which concepts as equity, justice, human rights and quality of life have become more apparent (Koff & Maganda, 2016; Häbel, 2020; Kumar et al., 2016; Freistein & Mahler 2016). In connection to the new

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.officielebekendmakingen.nl>

<sup>2</sup> The following search terms were used in Dutch: beleidscoherentie, ontwikkelingssamenwerking and beleidscoherentie voor ontwikkeling.

universal sustainable development agenda, the OECD recognized the need to update PCD into a framework which can promote synergies between the SDGs, policies and between national, regional and international levels (OECD, 2016). The OECD follows SDG 17:14 which asks for enhancing ‘policy coherence for sustainable development’ (PCSD). PCSD should build upon PCD efforts, but should better promote the focus on the well-being of future generations (OECD, 2016). PCD can be considered a multilateral framework that connects national, regional and international levels, respectively member states, EU/OECD, and the United Nations (MDGs/SDGs), as well as a multi-sectoral framework that connects different policies, subjects and departments (Fukasaku et al., 2005; Verschaeve et al., 2016).

#### **4 From MDGs to SDGs: conceptualising evolving discourses**

At the time of their inception in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals were seen as an important new chapter in the global pursuit of sustainable development (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014). They formed the start of what some call “governance through goals”, in which global sustainability governance increasingly relies on goal-setting as a key strategy, and which continued with the later formulation and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Biermann et al., 2017, 26; Vijge et al., 2020; Kanie & Biermann, 2017; Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014). The ways in which the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals are formulated are therefore important indicators for the evolution in discourses around sustainable development that find concrete application in global and national governance strategies. This section presents an overview of the changes in the formulation of these two sets of global goals, drawing on key literature in this field.

##### *The MDGs (2000-2015)*

In the decades preceding the introduction of the MDGs, the international development agenda primarily focused on the economic performance of (mainly developing) countries. The MDGs embodied an increased focus on sustainable human, rather than only economic development (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014; Vandermoortele, 2011). Such development was, however, believed to be reached mainly through the global eradication of extreme poverty (UN, 2000; Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Nayyar, 2011; 2012; UN, 2015b). Indeed, the MDGs and their founding document, the Millennium Declaration, mainly focused on (economic) poverty reduction without a clear focus on other development dimensions such as human rights, empowerment and equality (UN, 2000; Liverman, 2018; Fukuda-Parr, 2011; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Freistein & Mahlert 2016).

The MDGs framed poverty, and thus also human development, as a consequence of a lack of goods and services (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011). The MDGs focused on the basic needs of the poor, rather than taking a (human) rights-based approach to development that had emerged during the 1990s (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014; Nelson, 2007; Kabeer, 2015; Hulme, 2010). This meant that the long-held focus on economic growth—and indeed the wider discourse of neoliberalism—were still prevalent in the MDGs (Briant Carant, 2017; Vandermoortele, 2011; Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011). The MDGs reflected the belief that poverty is caused by—and could be eradicated through addressing—a lack of economic growth, aid and/or governance (Nayyar, 2012; Vandermoortele, 2011), which were in turn seen as a consequence of not participating in the global economy or trade system (Weber, 2015). Poverty reduction was thus mainly framed as something that could be addressed through economic rather than (also) social or political reforms (Briant Carant, 2017; Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014).

The MDGs focused mainly on aggregates (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Vandemoortele, 2001), with their exclusive targets and indicators that are tangible and measurable. They presented a results-based approach with “robust and reliable” data (UN,

2015b, 12; UN, 2000; Davis, 2011; Hulme, 2010; Nelson & Dorsey, 2018). They focused mainly on the poor, with limited to no references to equity, equality or distribution (Nayyar, 2012; Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Fukuda-Parr, 2019). The MDGs presented a “one-size-fits-all” approach with no concrete strategies on how they were to be implemented at national or local scales (Andresen & Iguchi, 2017, 181). This coincided with the “all or nothing classification” of developed versus developing countries, relying on national averages (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016, 2146).

Indeed, although the MDGs aimed to stimulate universal aspirations, they were not universal in focus (Battersby, 2017). The MDGs focused on addressing development problems in developing countries (Kumar et al., 2016; Battersby, 2017; Nayyar, 2011; Liverman, 2018; Picciotto, 2005; Arts, 2017), supported by the help of developed countries (Janus et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2016). The MDGs thus reinforced a donor-centric view of development (Nayyar, 2012). They were framed as a North-South aid agenda, aiming to encourage pro-poor development through donor support (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Liverman, 2018; Manning, 2010). Most of the MDG goals and targets required changes in or by developing countries, with only MDG 8 (Global Partnership for Development) pointing to responsibilities of developed countries (UN, 2000; Picciotto, 2005; Hulme, 2010).

### *The SDGs (2015-2030)*

The SDGs differ on a number of key elements and thus present different storylines compared to the MDGs. The SDGs expanded the predominantly singular objective of the MDGs—i.e. the reduction of extreme poverty—to include four goal dimensions: inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability, and peace and security (UN, 2012; UN, 2015a). The SDGs take a much more comprehensive approach to sustainable development than the MDGs did (Battersby, 2017). They offer a more people-centred development agenda; while the MDGs only included limited notions of human rights, equity, equality and empowerment, these concepts are deeply rooted in the SDGs (Kamur et al., 2016; Freistein & Mahlert 2016). Out of the 17 SDGs, for example, 11 goals contain targets related to equity, equality or inclusion, and SDG 10 is solely devoted to addressing inequality within and among countries (UN, 2015a; Fukuda-Parr, 2019; Freistein & Mahlert 2016). Also inclusiveness is much more prevalent in the SDGs than it was in the MDGs, with forty references to “inclusive” in Agenda 2030 (Arts, 2017). The SDGs call for participation of all parts of society, including the private sector which the MDGs did not mention (UN, 2015a; Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011).

Notwithstanding the existence of SDG 8 that specifically aims at economic growth, the discourse of neoliberalism is less pervasive in the SDGs than it was in the MDGs (Briant Carant, 2017). This can be seen in the alteration of one of the targets of MDG 8 (Global Partnership for Development): “*To further develop an open, predictable, rule-based, non-discriminatory trading and economic system*” (UN, 2000), into SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): “*Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system*” (UN, 2015a, 27). By adding the words “universal” and “equitable”, the neoliberal target embodied in MDG 8 changed into a more conditional target in SDG 17. Despite this shift, the SDGs still aim at promoting multilateral trade by increasing “market access” that is “consistent with World Trade Organization decisions” (UN, 2015a, 27). It has therefore been argued that the SDGs do not, on this element, represent a major discursive revolution vis-à-vis the MDGs (Vijge et al., 2020; Briant Carant, 2017). Other literature have argued that the SDGs show continuations with the MDGs in terms of development issues (Ziai, 2015; Sexsmith & McMichael, 2015), economic growth (Hickel, 2019), and the persistence of neoliberalism (Birn, Nervi & Siqueira, 2016).

Overall, the SDGs present a much more integrated approach to sustainable development than the MDGs, embodied in a focus on the interplay between the 5 Ps of people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace (UN, 2015a). The SDGs are framed as “indivisible and interlinked” (UN, 2015a, 31), with a large focus on “policy and institutional coherence” and coordination between all sectors and policies in order to achieve the three economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (UN, 2015a, 27). Rather than being subordinate to the economic dimension, the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development are at the core of the SDGs (Arts, 2017).

In contrast to the “one-size-fits-all” approach of the MDGs, the SDGs provide much leeway for national (or local) preferences (Biermann et al., 2017; Kanie and Biermann, 2017; Vijge et al., 2020). This coincides with a prime focus on individuals and/or specific localities rather than national averages (Battersby, 2017). Similar to the MDGs, the SDGs rely on “high-quality, timely and reliable data”, but in contrast to the MDGs aim for data to be “disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics” (UN, 2015a, 27). This focus on particular groups and individuals is particularly apparent in the Agenda 2030’s core principle of “leaving no one behind”. For example, where the MDGs aimed to “halve the proportion of people” suffering from hunger or “extreme poverty”, the SDGs aim to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (UN, 2000; UN, 2015a, 14).

In contrast to the MDGs which focused on developing countries, the SDGs apply to all development challenges irrespective of the country. They are framed as “universally applicable” (UN, 2015a, 13). Developing and developed countries are all responsible for sustainable development through the implementation of the SDGs, thereby seeking to overcome the North-South dichotomy that was prevalent in the MDGs (Kumar et al., 2016; Battersby, 2017; Liverman, 2018; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Freistein & Mahler, 2016; Arts, 2017).

The above literature review shows that discourses surrounding sustainable development have evolved with the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs. For pragmatic purposes of being able to study discourse evolutions, we overly focus on the changes rather than the continuations. Some of these changes may merely constitute changes in words rather than real policy/discursive changes. However, we argue that these changes in words also represent slight changes in framing, even if there are no real policy changes or discursive shifts behind them. The differences in the framing of sustainable development as reflected in the MDGs and SDGs are summarised and compiled in Table 1. The table presents the methodological approach for this article, outlining the categories and codes used for the analyses in the next section.

**Table 1:** Methodological approach on the evolving discourse and storylines of sustainable development as reflected in the MDGs and SDGs. Source: compiled by the authors based on references used in section 4

<b>Category I: Objective(s) of sustainable development</b>	
<b>MDGs aim at poverty reduction</b>	<b>SDGs aim at integral development</b>
Sustainable development aims at: <b>Code a.</b> Poverty reduction as main objective  <b>Code b.</b> Pro-poor growth to reduce poverty <b>Code c.</b> Enhance economic growth, aid and improve governance to reduce poverty	Sustainable development aims at: <b>Code a.</b> 5 Ps: people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace as equally important objectives <b>Code b.</b> Inclusive growth and integral development <b>Code c.</b> Pursuing policy coherence/integration, enhancing synergies
<b>Category II: Means to reach sustainable development</b>	
<b>MDGs for (macro-)economic policies</b>	<b>SDGs for people-centred policies</b>
Sustainable development policies focus on: <b>Code a.</b> Meeting people’s basic needs through economic policies <b>Code b.</b> Participation in global economy and open economic trade system <b>Code c.</b> Aggregates and national averages, focus on poorest people	Sustainable development policies focus on: <b>Code a.</b> Improving people’s lives through integration of economic, social and environmental concerns in policies <b>Code b.</b> Equality and equity is promoted in the trade system (UN, 2015a, Goal 17.10, 27) <b>Code c.</b> Disaggregates, individuals and/or localities, focus on the most vulnerable and marginalised so that “no one is left behind” (UN, 2015a, 31)
<b>Category III: Relations developed-developing countries</b>	
<b>MDGs frame divided relations</b>	<b>SDGs frame universal relations</b>
Developed-developing country relations framed as: <b>Code a.</b> Divided responsibilities <b>Code b.</b> Aid to developing countries <b>Code c.</b> Passive role for developed countries	Developed-developing country relations framed as: <b>Code a.</b> Universal responsibilities <b>Code b.</b> Partnerships with developing countries <b>Code c.</b> Active role for developed countries

## 5 Discourse analyses of the Dutch PCD approach

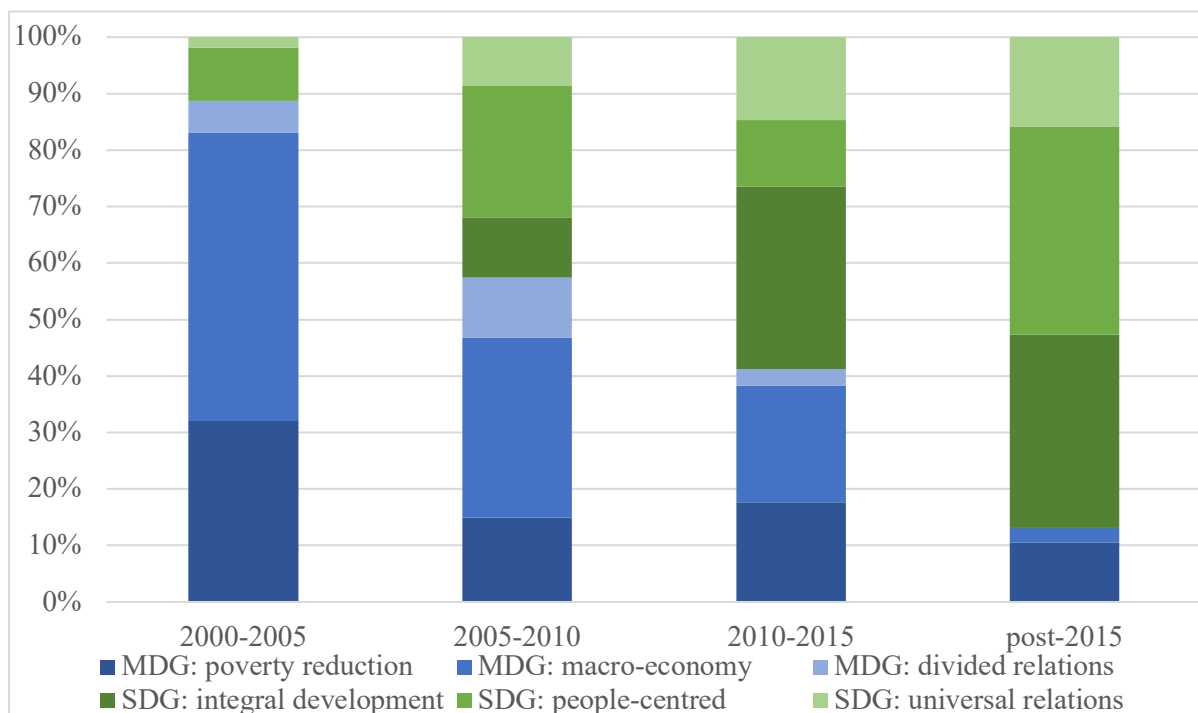
In this section we apply the methodological approach developed in Section 4 to analyse—both in quantitative and qualitative ways—how storylines around sustainable development evolved from 2000 to the time of writing (2019) in the Dutch approach for Policy Coherence for Development. We present the evolving storylines in the Dutch PCD approach in time periods of five years.

### 5.1 Quantitative analysis

Our quantitative analysis revealed that overall, storylines that were particular to the MDGs have become less prominent, while SDG-specific storylines have become more pervasive in the Dutch PCD approach (Figure 1). The most striking change occurred in the category ‘means to reach sustainable development’, with the MDG-related focus on the macro-economy (meeting people’s basic needs, participation in the global economy, and focus on the poorest). This was the most prominent storyline in the period 2000-2005, but disappeared almost entirely after 2015. This storyline is replaced by a focus on integral development and policies that include a focus on not only economic, but also social and environmental concerns. Particularly the code of ‘5Ps: people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace’ evolved from being non-existent in the period 2000-2005 to the second largest category after 2015. Interesting to note is that while the prominence of the MDG-related storyline on poverty reduction has reduced, it has not disappeared entirely. This means that poverty reduction is still an objective of sustainable development, but has now become one among many. Another observation that we made from our quantitative analysis is that since 2015, the MDG-related storyline on divided relations between developed and developing countries has entirely disappeared from Dutch

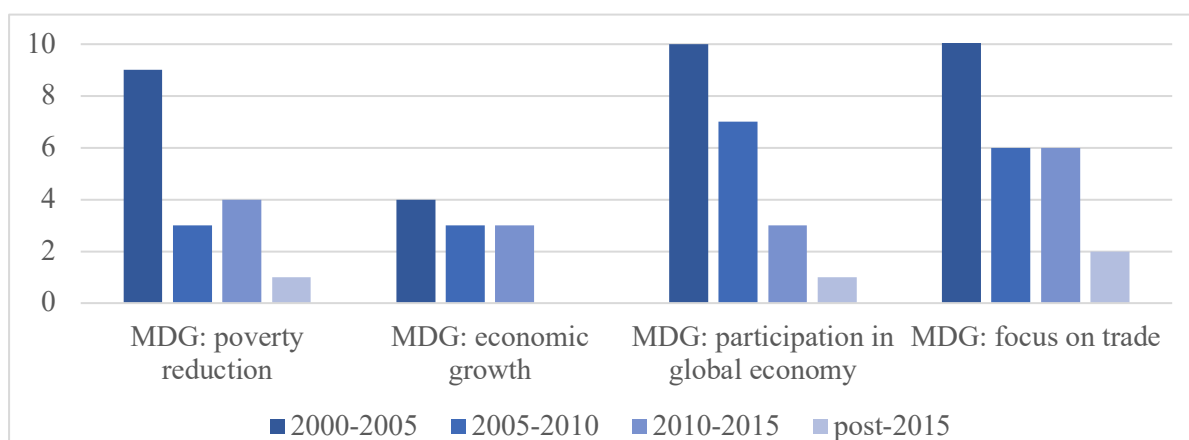


PCD policy documents. It has been replaced by a focus on universal relations, with universal responsibilities for developed and developing countries and a focus on partnerships.



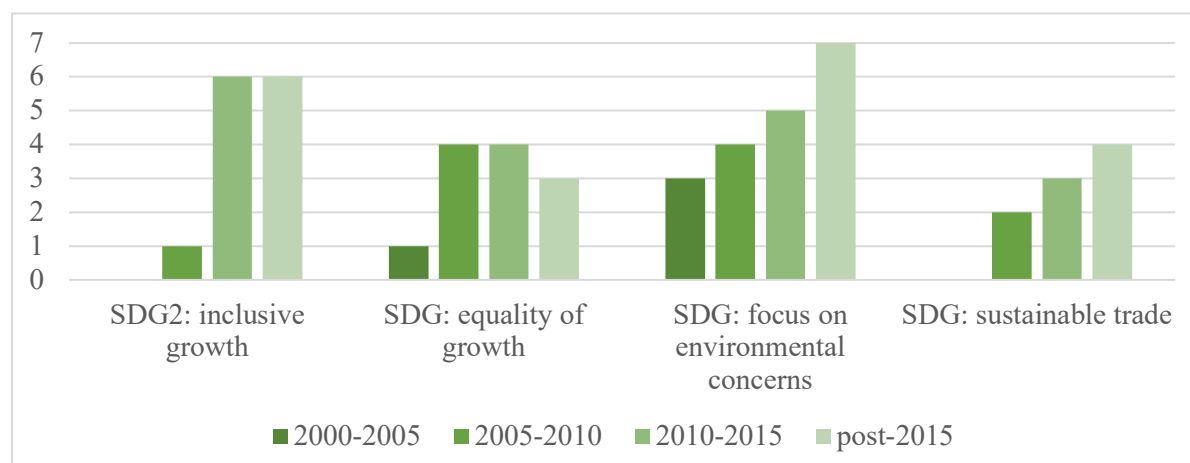
**Figure 1:** The appearance of MDG- and SDG-related storylines in policy documents outlining the Dutch PCD approach, in percentages of the total amount of codes found in these periods.

To study which specific storylines evolved, we further disaggregated our data into specific MDG- or SDG-related codes (Table 1). We only focus on those that showed the most prominent changes over time (Figure 2 and 3). This shows again that the main objective of poverty reduction has decreased over the years, though not in a constant decreasing line (Figure 2). The MDG-related code ‘participation in the global economy’ shows the most significant change from being very prominent in 2000-2005 to being almost non-existent after 2015. The same holds for the similar code ‘focus on trade’. Interestingly, the code ‘economic growth’ had a medium prominence throughout the years 2000-2015, before entirely disappearing in the period post-2015 (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** The number of times MDG-related codes appeared in policy documents outlining the Dutch PCD approach in periods of 5 years.

Looking at SDG-related codes, we observe that ‘inclusive growth’ has emerged from being non-existent in 2000-2005 to being very prominent from 2010 onwards (Figure 3). The code ‘sustainable trade’ shows a similar development, which was non-existent in 2000-2005 and has since seen a steady increase in prominence. Also the code ‘equality of growth’ has gained prominence since 2005, though its increase ceased after 2010. Interestingly, the ‘focus on environmental concerns’ has seen a very steady increase since the inception of the MDGs in 2000, and is the most prominent code in the period post-2015 (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** The number of times SDG-related codes appeared in policy documents outlining the Dutch PCD approach in periods of 5 years.

## 5.2 Qualitative analysis

In this sub-section, we analyse the policy documents outlining the Dutch PCD approach in more depth, using the methodological approach presented in Section 4. We structure our analysis according to the three categories presented in Section 4, representing the framing of: the objective(s) of sustainable development; the means to reach sustainable development; and the relations between developed and developing countries.

### *Objective(s) of sustainable development: poverty reduction vs. integral development*

As discussed in Section 4, the main objective of sustainable development has shifted from poverty reduction in the MDGs to integral development (including poverty reduction) in the SDGs. The shift is also apparent in Dutch PCD policy documents.

From 2000 to 2005, “*sustainable poverty reduction is the central objective of Dutch development policy*” (IBO, 2003, 18). In line with the MDG storyline on this, poverty was conceptualised as a needs-based concern: “*Poverty is the main aspect of underdevelopment and can be described as a lack of opportunities to improve one’s own situation*” (IBO, 2003, 6). Aspects other than poverty reduction were framed not as objectives, but as means to reach poverty reduction: “*aspects such as a better environment and gender equality are essential elements of poverty reduction, which at the same time enhance the ability to earn an income*” (IBO, 2003, 6).

From 2005, the Dutch PCD approach started acknowledging objectives other than poverty reduction, and from 2010 these objectives co-existed alongside poverty reduction as the main objective. In this period, poverty reduction was still framed as the most important objective: “*Sustainable poverty reduction is the main objective of Dutch development policy*” (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2007, 113). However, sustainable development came to be framed as something in which “*a balance is being sought between trade, environment and poverty reduction*” (DGIS/CE, 2008, 28; similar views

expressed in Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2010). Notwithstanding this shift, the focus on social and environmental dimensions still remained subordinate to the economic (or trade) dimension. Issues such as injustice and (gender) inequality were deemed important because they could inhibit economic growth, and thus poverty reduction: *“structural inequality of opportunity, or “injustice”, leads to economic inefficiency and thus has a negative effect on growth. Gender inequality also inhibits economic growth”* (Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2010, 50).

In 2013, when presenting its vision on the emerging post-2015 development agenda, the Netherlands acknowledged the importance of (economic) growth being *“sustainable and inclusive”*, which *“could include combating illicit arms trafficking, illicit money flows, water wastage, climate change, as well as promoting food security and sustainable production and consumption, [and] development-friendly structures for international trade”* (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2013a, 15). In framing sustainable and inclusive growth, issues such as water, food and climate (sustainability), as well as the interests of different stakeholders and social groups (inclusiveness) came to be taken into account in Dutch development cooperation.

From 2015 onwards, poverty reduction was not anymore framed as the main objective of sustainable development. The framing of sustainability and inclusiveness evolved from a safeguards approach (see below) to becoming key objectives of sustainable development: *“policy coherence for development contributes to inclusive and sustainable growth”* (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2016, 8). *“In order to promote sustainability and inclusiveness, the global production process must move on to a sustainable path much faster: in a social and ecological sense”* (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 5). Sustainability and inclusiveness were deemed important not only to *“improve working conditions”*, stimulate *“fair work”* and achieve a *“liveable loan”* in developing countries, but also to *“improve social and environmental conditions”* and *“sustainable production”* as key objectives (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 5).

In later policy documents, the Netherlands presents its PCD approach with an *“increased commitment to sustainability”* (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 2). In line with the SDG-storyline on policy coherence and integration, the Dutch PCD approach aims to integrate sustainability with the other objectives of sustainable development: *“Climate action is integrated into development activities, in particular in the areas of energy, water and food security. In this way it is achieved that climate action and development action do not undermine each other but reinforce each other”* (Rijksoverheid, 2017, 35).

#### *Means to reach sustainable development: macro-economic vs. people-centred policies*

When looking at what were believed to be the main means to achieve the objective(s) of sustainable development, we observe that between 2000 and 2005, the Dutch PCD approach framed economic growth as the most important means to reduce poverty: *“It is certain that aid can contribute to achieving economic growth, which reduces poverty”* (IBO, 2003, 6). Along the lines of the MDG-related storyline, trade, aid and investment were seen as the most important means to increase economic growth, reduce poverty and thereby reach sustainable development: *“In this battle, development and the reduction of poverty are the goals, and trade, aid and investment the means”* (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2004, 49). *“Trade is and remains the most important thematic priority in Dutch efforts (...) aimed at poverty reduction. (...) Trade can contribute to growth and poverty reduction and can be an important catalyst for sustainable development”* (Minister

van Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij & Staatssecretaris van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2002, 12/23).

During the same time period, facilitating developing countries' participation in the global trade system was a key policy priority in the Dutch PCD approach: "*In particular, promoting trade opportunities and market access for developing countries have been identified in government declarations and play a key role in implementation*" (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2004, 50). As the previous sub-section showed, the code 'participation in the global economy' saw a steady but drastic decline in Dutch PCD documents in the past decades (Figure 2). Between 2005 and 2010, participation in the global economy and economic growth were still framed as important means to reach sustainable development: "*This government is strongly committed to the full participation of developing countries in the world trade system.*" (DGIS/CE, 2008, 8). "*First of all, high and sustained economic growth in developing countries is a condition for poverty reduction.*" (Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2010, 50). However, during this time, economic growth and trade began to be framed as something that should not be pursued unconditionally. Concepts such as climate, energy and food security were introduced as important safeguards. This was closely related to a wider global shift that took place: "*there is a shift in attention within the trading system from traditional trade barriers (tariffs and subsidies) to product standards and the requirements for production processes in relation to "non-trade concerns", such as sustainability, human rights, fundamental labour standards (...) animal welfare, (...) labour migration, climate and energy.*" (DGIS/CE, 2008, 28).

Despite the larger focus on social and environmental safeguards in the promotion of economic growth and trade, participation in the global trade system was framed as something that could *contribute to* rather than (also) *impoverish* social and environmental conditions: "*International standards in areas such as food safety, the environment, social issues, etc. are being implemented earlier and better in countries or sectors that are closely linked to foreign trade than in countries or sectors that are not or hardly exposed to international traffic*" (Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2010, 44).

Also after 2015, the focus on social and environmental concerns in trade efforts continued to be an important policy focus for the Netherlands: "*And thanks to Dutch efforts, social and environmental conditions in various value chains have improved*" (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 2). Despite the increased focus on the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, the economic dimension did not disappear after 2015; it was still framed as an important means to reach sustainable development, with a large emphasis in the 2018 PCD action plan on "*development-friendly trade*" (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 3).

In studying whether the Dutch PCD approach focused on aggregates/national averages and the poor (i.e. MDG-related storylines), or on disaggregates and marginalised groups of people (i.e. SDG-related storylines), we observe that already back in 2002, the Netherlands framed a focus on national averages as undesirable. This was contrary to storylines presented in the MDGs that were implemented at that time, which focused on averages and aggregate data. The Netherlands stated that "*targeted policy is essential because there is no question of "the" developing countries*" (Minister van Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij & Staatssecretaris van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2002, 9). In other words, the Dutch PCD approach acknowledged that developing countries are all different, and that policies should be adapted to specific localities, individuals or cultural groups. The Netherlands seemed ahead of its time with this line of reasoning, which is closely aligned with the SDG-related storyline on people-centred policies (focus on disaggregates, individuals and/or localities).

This line of reasoning became even more prominent in later PCD policy documents (e.g. DGIS/CE, 2008). From 2010, for example, the concepts of “equality” and “distribution” were added in discussions about economic growth. Where previously economic growth was framed as directly contributing to poverty reduction (and thus to sustainable development), this was now questioned: “*Growth and a fair distribution do not automatically go together.*” (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2013a, 8). After 2010, other concepts such as “fair” and “balanced” were often added in discussions about economic growth and trade: “*Revise Dutch investment protection policy that provides for a fairer and balanced system for investment disputes*” (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 11).

Related to this shift was the increased importance of tailor-made and context-specific approaches: “*A one-size-fits-all approach to promoting PCD is inappropriate since outcomes in developing countries are often highly context-specific.*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014, 19). This is closely linked to the post-2015 focus on the principle of “leaving no one behind”: “*Everything must be done to ensure that no one is left behind.*” (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2017a, 3). The focus of sustainable development policies had shifted from the poorest alone, to also the most vulnerable and marginalised: “*Inclusive development is the guideline, in which the poorest and most marginalised groups are involved in social, economic and political development and benefit from it.*” (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2016, 3). “*The Dutch commitment helps marginalised and vulnerable groups to improve their living standards and to get their voices heard*” (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2015, 13). On the issue of climate change, and again in line with the SDG-related storyline, the Netherlands argued that it is “*committed to (...) an architecture for climate finance that benefits the poorest and most vulnerable, including women*” (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 6).

#### *Relations between developed-developing countries: divided vs. universal*

Until 2005, policy documents outlining the Dutch PCD approach framed the role of the Netherlands in (sustainable) development as a donor, though this did not receive much attention. In line with the MDG-related framing of developed countries’ role as passive donors, documents spoke of “*Dutch aid*”, “*programme/project aid*”, “*aid relation*” or simply “*aid*” (e.g. “aid” was mentioned 504 times in total in the 97-page IBO (2003)). Such aid was mainly targeted to the objective of “*sustainable poverty reduction*”, as outlined above (IBO, 2003, 5). More attention than the Netherlands’ role as donor was paid to its role in trade efforts, particularly in negotiations about international trade standards. In these efforts, “*the Netherlands (...) promotes that (...) the interests of developing countries are explicitly taken into account in decision-making*” (Minister van Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij & Staatssecretaris van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2002, 4).

Approaching the year 2010, the Netherlands adhered an increased importance to the role of developing countries in negotiating trade standards: “*The Netherlands is committed to developing international standards in which developing countries are fully involved*” (DGIS/CE, 2008, 10). Also in decision-making about the development agenda, the Netherlands advocated for a prominent role for developing countries: “*Poor countries and poor groups within countries must decide for themselves how this [development] agenda is implemented and what contribution international donors can make to it*” (Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2007, 2). Much in line with the SDG-related storyline of universal responsibilities, the Netherlands argued in 2014 in the context of an agreement on international public goods: “*agreements must be universal, which means that the traditional classification into developed countries and developing countries will be abolished*” (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2014, 8). This not only meant that

developing countries' role in achieving (sustainable) development had grown, but also that developed countries were not anymore passive donors. The Netherlands also acknowledged its own (sometimes negative) role in sustainable development challenges: *“The international challenge lies mainly in the relatively large burden the Netherlands places on the prosperity of other countries”* (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018a, 1).

Between 2005 and 2010, the Dutch PCD approach also began to stress the importance of partnerships between the Netherlands and developing countries. The focus on partnerships meant that the Netherlands began to view its role in (sustainable) development as one that goes beyond providing aid and being donor alone. Until 2010, the partnerships mainly served economic objectives: *“The purpose of the partnerships is to provide solutions (...) in order to promote the development of new opportunities for market access (WTO agreements) in developing countries and to prevent existing markets from being lost”* (Minister voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2006, 4).

After 2015, partnerships between the Netherlands and developing countries were not anymore framed only in terms of trade relations. Other dimensions than the economic one, such as the environmental dimension, were added to the objectives of partnerships: *“Making production and trade more sustainable (...) offers opportunities to further expand and deepen the cooperation on sustainability in partnerships with industry and civil society organisations”* (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking 2018a). Partnerships were now meant not only to promote trade, but also to improve social and environmental conditions: *“Through partner organisations (...), work has been done to improve social and environmental conditions in cocoa, coffee and tea.”* (Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018b, 4; similar views expressed in Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2017b). Thus, partnerships between developed and developing countries not only grew more prominent, also their objectives altered, in line with the changed objectives of sustainable development in the MDGs and the SDGs.

## 6 Discussion

In this article, we analysed the evolving discourses around sustainable development as reflected in the MDGs and SDGs. We focused on three main areas: the framing of the objectives of sustainable development, the means to reach these objectives, and the relations between developed and developing countries. We observed a shift in focus from poverty reduction as the main objective in the MDGs to integral development for people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace, including poverty reduction, in the SDGs. The SDGs frame the integration between these objectives as key in reaching sustainable development. The framing of the means to reach sustainable development also changed. The MDGs framed economic growth—particularly through participation in the global economy and trade system—as the main means to reach sustainable development. The SDGs, on the other hand, frame the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development as equally important. The economic dimension did not disappear; rather, social and environmental dimensions were added to it, first as safeguards, and later also as key objectives, with concepts such as “development-friendly trade” and “sustainable and inclusive growth”. Related to this is the shift in focus from aggregates, national averages and the poorest in the MDGs, to a focus on disaggregates and the most vulnerable and marginalised with the introduction of the principle of “leaving no one behind” in the 2030 Agenda. Finally, with the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs, the relations between developed and developing countries changed from divided to universal responsibilities. Developed countries' role changed from being passive donors to active participants in the pursuit of sustainable development, including within their own territory and through partnerships with developing countries.

Drawing on the above-identified changes in discourse, we developed a methodological approach with which we studied the reflection of specific MDG- and SDG-related storylines in the Dutch approach to Policy Coherence for Development. Our analyses showed that the above-identified changes in storylines around sustainable development are closely reflected in the Dutch PCD approach. In many ways, the Dutch PCD approach is an operationalisation of the MDG- and SDG-related storylines. While most of the evolution took place in the same time period as the transition from MDGs to SDGs at the global level, the Netherlands seemed ahead of its time in stressing targeted, context-specific policies and a focus on disaggregate data rather than national averages.

The above-identified changes in MDG- and SDG-related storylines at the global and national levels do not stand on their own. Such storylines are influenced by (and influence) broader discourses of and transformations in (agendas of) sustainable, international and economic development around the world. For example, although hybrid and new discourses were formed following widespread critique on neoliberalism, as well as rising concerns about global inequality and the inability of economic growth to address this, neoliberal discourses still dominate many existing governance frameworks for sustainable development (Baldwin et al., 2019; Kabeer, 2015; Fukuda-Parr, 2019). One can pose the question of whether the changes in our methodological approach provides proof of the (non-)existence of neoliberalism in the SDGs or any other broader discourse. Whilst an analysis on whether changes in framing, as displayed in our methodological approach, are part of a real discursive change can be important and meaningful it is beyond the scope of this article. The purpose of this article is therefore not to make any conclusions about the meaning behind the changes, and their connection to discursive change and broader discourses. This article aims to 1) create a methodological approach to analyse PCD and/or the influence of the MDGs/SDGs, and 2) to measure the (discursive) influence of global mechanisms, such as the MDGs/SDGs, in one country. In order to do this and to show discourse evolution, we chose to overly focus on changes rather than continuations. Although the methodological approach was used to analyse the PCD approach in one country, we are confident that the approach can also be used to analyse the PCD approach in other countries and also in other national, regional and international policies to analyse the influence of the MDGs/SDGs. The generalizability of this paper therefore lies in the replication of the methodological approach.

By offering a comprehensive discursive analysis of the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs, we fill up a gap in literature as only partial analyses have been done (see Fukuda-Parr 2016; Battersby 2017; Briant Carant, 2017; Arts, 2017). The transition from the MDGs to SDGs has also not been researched much at a country level. This paper offers such an analysis. Similarly, literature on the evolution of PCD has not been abundant. By analysing the PCD approach in the Netherlands from 2000-now, we add to the body of literature. We argue that discourse analyses on PCD can present an important tool to identify which norms PCD tries to follow. PCD from a normative perspective aims to prioritize human development in which Koff & Maganda (2016) argued that the normative value of PCD is of great importance for the post-2015 agenda. As was argued in section 3 and section 4 the post-2015 agenda offered an inclusive, universal and transformative development paradigm where concepts such as justice, human rights and quality of life have become more apparent. The SDGs thus asks for a more normative approach. The discourse analysis (section 5) has shown that the PCD approach in the Netherlands did include people-centred concepts more post-2015, which would indicate that the normative value of PCD became more significant. In addition, the PCD approach in the Netherlands has become more encompassing by adding both social and sustainable development concepts next to economic development concepts. This shows that PCD is not

only a policy tool but also a political norm which includes non-development strategies in development policies.

## **7 Conclusion**

To conclude, this article showed strong overlap between the evolution of discourses at the global level and the evolution of discourses at the national level. It was beyond the scope of the article to study the complex institutionalisation of global-level discourses and governance frameworks in national policies and practices, and to what extent this process of institutionalisation is influenced by global discourses and governance frameworks or vice versa. Looking at the time period in which global- and national-level discourses have been formed does not necessarily help in shedding light on these questions, since governance frameworks can take years to come to fruition. Interviews and/or surveys with policymakers and government officials would therefore be needed to analyse where discourses come from, how and by whom they are shaped, and to what effect.

Only a small body of literature has studied the connections between global and national discourses on issues related to sustainable development governance (e.g. Davis, 2011; Lafferty, 1996; Vijge, 2015). More explanatory research on the evolution of discourses in global and national policies and practices would be welcome to further explore these connections. Such research will play an important role in understanding the effects of global goal setting processes—such as the MDGs, SDGs and other (future) global goals—on national-level policy frameworks. As we showed, Policy Coherence for Development is a relevant site where connections between global- and national-level discourses around sustainable development governance can be studied, in particular because it contains framing of synergies as well as unavoidable trade-offs and priorities with regard to which goals to achieve and for whom. We hope that our methodological approach on evolving MDG- and SDG-related storylines will invite future analyses of how global goal setting processes find concrete application in national governance strategies.



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## **Annex A: Full list of literature used for discourse analysis of the Dutch PCD approach**

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