



The (anti-)politics of policy coherence for sustainable development in the Netherlands: Logic, method, effects

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed in 2015, chart an integrated and universal policy agenda to be realised by 2030. To this end, policy coherence for sustainable development is embedded in the SDGs as both an end in itself and a means through which to ensure that the fulfilment of some goals does not come at the expense of others. Yet, as a transformative process and outcome, policy coherence, as articulated in the SDGs, is narrowly predicated on technical means to address incoherencies that are inherently political. Using the case study of the Netherlands, where the concept of policy coherence has animated the development policy discourse for decades, we question whether such means necessarily improve policies for sustainability, asking what institutional arrangements established for the SDGs *do* through their (re)configuration and operation, and to what ends. Drawing on an extensive document analysis and a series of semi-structured interviews, we show that the means established to resolve policy incoherence in the Dutch context cast an apolitical façade that limits, if not prevents, possibilities for transformation. In particular, the focus on ‘neutral’ institutional arrangements and ‘win-win’ constructions in coherence building privileges the appearance of coherence over the more fundamental issue of its sustainability, decentering the key political question of what is, or is supposed to be, sustained.

1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets at its core, to re-orient policy agendas for the next 15 years. Distinct from the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that guided development policy from 2000 to 2015, the SDGs renewed and expanded development both conceptually and spatially (the ‘what’ and ‘where’ of development). The SDGs have been described as the most comprehensive iteration of global goals to date, integrating global development and environmental sustainability agendas into one encompassing framework (Biermann et al., 2017). Equally important, the SDGs apply to all countries, unsettling the notion of development as a project confined to the so-called Global South (Langford, 2016; Horner, 2020).

Given the casting of the SDGs as integrated, indivisible and universal, “policy coherence for sustainable development” has emerged as a key means through which these global goals can be realised (United Nations General Assembly, 2015: Target 17.14). The premise is straightforward: mutually-reinforcing policies are needed to ensure that the attainment

of some goals does not undermine others. However, we question whether the current practice around policy coherence necessarily improves policies for sustainability or the sustainability of policies. This is especially because, as a long-standing fixture in Northern donors’ development discourse, the pursuit of policy coherence evinces a distinctly apolitical quality: where policy incoherence is understood as a problem of institutional and policy design, that, once correctly adjusted, can lead to a coherent state of development (Theede, 2013; Schmitz and Eimer, 2020; Brand et al., 2021). This apolitical approach has been identified by critics as a key reason why progress towards cohering policy interventions in the Global South has been slow despite recurrent institutional reforms by Northern donors (Carbone and Keijzer, 2016; Brand et al., 2021). This is not least because the proclaimed objective of these reforms – be it development or sustainable development – is so fraught with incoherencies and yet so widely accepted in ways that often limit, if not foreclose, reflections and debates on its endemic tensions and contradictions (Swyngedouw, 2010b; 2010a; Hope, 2020). These reforms do, nevertheless, stabilise a particular way of knowing and doing ‘development’. Following James Ferguson, insofar as these reforms take for granted that coherence for development can be attained

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technically, they also mask important political and economic dimensions to shape the ‘development’ *problematique* (Ferguson, 1994).

What this suggests is that the central contention around building policy coherence for sustainable development lies in the ways in which sustainable development itself, and what it should bring about, is (re)imagined. Yet, policy coherence for sustainable development, as articulated in the SDGs, reproduces the technical design logic and method around building policy coherence that have been argued as ineffective, or worse, conducive to the reproduction of incoherent policies (Brand et al., 2021). The sole indicator the United Nations has identified to measure “policy coherence for sustainable development” is the “number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development” (United Nations Statistical Commission, 2020: Target 17.14, Indicator 17.14.1). While we do not deny that institutional mechanisms can play a constructive role in bridging institutional siloes, centring such mechanisms as *the* criterion by which policy coherence is judged or measured risks neglecting how and whether sustainable development – the polysemous concept around which coherence is sought – is (trans)formed.

The focus of this paper is not on how meaning is ascribed to sustainable development, but we draw from the literature on the (fluid and contested) definition and (anti-)politics of sustainable development. We think with this literature to engage critically with what the SDGs do to shape the logic and method of coherence building for sustainable development, assessing what institutional arrangements referred to as key ‘building blocks’ for policy coherence *do* through their (re)configuration and operation, and to what ends. These questions are instructive to discern how the SDGs, through their means of implementation, transpire in a given context and what effects are (re)produced through them.

We explore these questions in the Netherlands, a country that has (re)configured institutional arrangements for coherent SDG implementation. It has long been considered, by its Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) peers, a frontrunner in policy coherence for development, noted especially for its effort in cohering aid, trade and investment objectives (OECD, 2011; 2013; 2017). As a small but leading trading nation, these policy areas lie “at the interface of global issues and national interests” (Knapen et al., 2011: 9). Given this interconnectedness, which joins its own (sustainable) development trajectory to others, the Netherlands is a fitting site to study the means through which policy coherence is now sought in response to an integrated and universal sustainable development agenda that pledges “no one will be left behind” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015: Preamble).

In what follows, we begin by sketching the concept of policy coherence in dialogue with critiques on the anti-politics of (sustainable) development. This analytical perspective bears much relevance to understanding policy coherence for sustainable development, where coordination or integration appears to be the leitmotif despite the contentious politics around sustainable development and the practices it engenders. Section 3 then provides a brief background to our case study and methodological approach. Section 4 explores the ways in which policy coherence is parsed into parts that include coordination, monitoring and evaluation, focusing on the institutional arrangements designed to improve these components. In Section 5, we discuss the anti-political effects of the Dutch practice of building policy coherence, arguing that by and large, it reproduces an apolitical understanding of policy (in)coherence that lends itself to technical design interventions. Through this, the key political question on what is, or ought, to be sustained or transformed goes unasked. We conclude with a reflection on the need to question the political and economic assumptions built into the SDGs to open up possibilities for alternative sustainable development trajectories to take shape.

2. Policy Coherence for (Sustainable) Development: Coherence by Design?

The term policy coherence has been regularly employed since the end of the Cold War to reform development for the better.¹ Its origin and development can be traced along a shift in aid allocation from geopolitical motives to consensus-based development around structural adjustment in the 1980s, and subsequent phases of neoliberal stabilisation (Thede, 2013). Coherent development, tethered to liberal democracy and market economy, required ‘joined-up’ approaches, undergirded by the assumption that development interventions would be more effective if pursued coherently in relation to other goals, so as to “not take with one hand what it gives with the other” (European Commission, 2005: 13; see also Stokke and Forster, 1999; Hoebink, 2004; Ashoff, 2005).

Over the decades, the commitment to policy coherence has received wide-ranging and sustained political endorsements.² In global goal-setting more specifically, the policy coherence goalpost has broadened from a predominant focus on North-South development cooperation framed around poverty alleviation to, as befits the SDGs, universal sustainable development “in ways that balance economic, social and environmental goals; consider domestic and international effects of policies; and support long-term sustainability” (OECD, 2015: 3). Amongst most OECD donors, this shift is conveyed in the change of nomenclature from Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) to Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PSCD) (e.g., O’Connor et al., 2016; Gregersen et al., 2016; Zeigermann, 2018).

All these have given impetus to the elaboration of various institutional arrangements to rationalise policy procedures and rearrange institutions to improve coherence (OECD, 2018). This is complemented by the growth of research around inter- and multi-sectoral policy and institutional designs, linked to questions of how to acquire and incorporate the right kinds of knowledge and processes to maximise synergies among disparate policy goals. Among other things, this scholarship has explored operational, conceptual and analytical frameworks to better understand interactions between different policy goals (Nilsson et al., 2012; Collste et al., 2017; Nilsson et al., 2018; Borchardt et al., 2019; Nilsson and Weitz, 2019); goal interactions in the SDGs (Bennich et al., 2020); and institutional set-ups and procedures for governing policy interlinkages (Tosun and Leininger, 2017; Breuer et al., 2019).

A key assumption underlying much of this work is that ineffective, inequitable and unsustainable development interventions are, in part, the consequence of fragmented, siloed, and therefore incoherent institutional and policy design (e.g., OECD, 2016; Nilsson and Weitz, 2019). By and large, coherence here is understood as “a function of how rules, policies, and arrangements across dimensions of global [national and sub-national] governance are coordinated” (Bernstein, 2017: 218). This begets another assumption that implies tinkering with institutional rules, procedures and structures can ultimately produce ‘win-win’ opportunities in service of a common purpose, a rhetoric that dominates the discourse on coherence (e.g., OECD, 2016).

On the margins of the policy coherence debate, a small group of scholars questions this managerialist bent, shifting the attention from how coherence for (sustainable) development can be attained, to how coherence is constituted in the first place. From historical and political vantage points, they argue that the design logic informing the pursuit of

¹ Coherence has earlier iterations in “‘comprehensive planning’ in the 1960s, ‘integrated development’ in the 1970s” and since the end of the Cold War, in “‘structural adjustment programmes’ in the 1980s and ‘poverty reduction strategy papers’ in the 1990s” (Carbone and Keijzer 2016: 40).

² Among many, the political endorsement for policy coherence is expressed in *The Treaty of the European Union 1992*; *The European Consensus on Development 2005*; *The Millennium Declaration 2000*; *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 2015*; *European Consensus on Development 2017*.

policy coherence neglects that substantively, policy coherence is shaped by choices and preferences over what gets prioritised, made to cohere or excluded entirely from the (sustainable) development *problematique* (Carbone and Keijzer, 2016; Lane, 2019). As Ilene Grabel points out, “policy coherence is, practically speaking, devoid of independent content” (Grabel, 2007: 339). Sustainable development – the SDGs’ foundational concept around which policies are meant to cohere – is similarly open-ended, much critiqued as ambiguous, incoherent, and therefore easily appropriated (e.g., Redclift, 2005; Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017; Adelman, 2018; Hickel, 2019). The SDGs have been described as a “patchwork of universal values” (Thérien and Pouliot, 2020: 13) with a “bewildering array of subtexts” (Nightingale, 2018: 197) and “a myriad of objectives that represent multiple constituencies” (Moseley, 2018: 203). That the SDGs represent a “politically negotiated consensus” (Fukuda-Parr, 2016: 51) means that a wide range of responses, even those considered ‘business as usual’, can claim legitimacy through their articulation to the SDGs. Jessica Hope (2020), for example, shows the ways in which the SDGs act as a form of anti-politics in Bolivia, enabling an articulation of the philosophy *Vivir Bien* (Living Well) to extractivism, productivity and growth that mute the contentious politics of extractivist development. She and others also note that as a “looser script” for global development than the MDGs, the SDGs have been found to serve pre-existing development agendas, shaped by predispositions that make certain priorities and ways of doing development more prevalent than others (Horn and Grugel, 2018: 75; see also Hope, 2020; Siegel and Bastos Lima, 2020; Forestier and Kim, 2020).

The contention, to borrow from Thomas Yarrow (2011: 6), is that “development is not a coherent set of practices but a set of practices that produces coherence”. Policy linkages are, more often than is acknowledged, forged rather than *essential* (e.g., Chandler, 2007; Duffield, 2009). This is alluded to in the ways in which policy coherence for (sustainable) development has been articulated to different projects, even when there is insufficient empirical grounding to support the association between development and, among others, trade and investment (Schmitz and Eimer, 2020); migration control (Nyberg Sørensen, 2016); and security and defence (Chandler, 2007; Duffield, 2009). The empirical and conceptual foundations the SDGs rest upon, some suggest, are similarly fragile (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017; Hickel, 2019; Weber and Weber, 2020). This does not imply that there are no complex linkages between these goals or issue areas per se. Rather, as David Chandler (2007) cogently argues in his critique of policy coherence in the security-development nexus, such a nexus is not necessarily driven by evidence but by concerns over donors’ self-image, or, as has been argued elsewhere, self-interests (Theede, 2013). This, he concludes, signifies the collapse rather than an invigoration of politically-coherent policy making – where grandiose policy claims can neither be substantiated nor accounted for – engendering instead institutional fixes that “can be better grasped in terms of performative or simulated techniques... rather than practices concerned directly with the object of policy concern” (Chandler, 2007: 365). Clarity of goals, which he considers to be lacking in this nexus, is posited as a prerequisite for politically-coherent policy making (Chandler, 2007).

Several scholars, however, find that the framing and operationalisation of policy coherence *do*, both surreptitiously and openly, orientate around the goal of economic liberalisation (Grabel, 2007; Theede, 2013; Schmitz and Eimer, 2020). This continues to be evident, for example, in the OECD’s framework for policy coherence, in which open markets and investors’ confidence are framed as enabling conditions for the SDGs (OECD, 2016). As astutely analysed by Nancy Theede (2013: 789), policy coherence functions “as a vehicle for enclosure of policy space” that positions the market as the site through which disparate goals can be made to cohere. While the discourse of policy coherence reflects changes in global norms (de Jong and Vijge, 2021), Theede (2013) argues that it is precisely this kind of realignment with normative ideals that help to legitimise the equation between economic liberalisation and development. Affording (limited) critique is instrumental in shoring up

legitimacy of this pursuit. As Schmitz and Eimer (2020) demonstrate in their case study of the European Commission’s external policies, the Commission agrees with critics who challenge the neoliberal premise of ‘rising tides lift all boats’, conceding that economic liberalisation does not produce win-wins for people, planet and profit by default. Similarly, in the Dutch context, there is acknowledgement that “[g]rowth and a fair distribution do not automatically go together” (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2013: 8). What can emerge from this, though, is a discursive terrain in which such ‘win-wins’ can be delivered *by design*, all the while retaining the underlying neoliberal logic in sense- and meaning-making of coherent development (Schmitz and Eimer, 2020). Indeed, in official rhetoric or guidance on building policy coherence, there is a propensity to suggest that, given the right institutional and market conditions, contradictory goals can be made synergistic (e.g., Hallaert, 2010; OECD, 2016). Policy incoherence is often understood as emerging from ‘siloe thinking’ or ‘imperfect information’, removed from the political economy to which it is connected, a line of thinking some argue to be emblematic of the neoliberalisation of sustainability governance (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017).

Policy coherence, then, has historically functioned to stabilise the status quo, serving to enclose the development policy space around economic liberalisation as a preeminent goal. Yet, as exemplified in the SDGs, policy coherence and the technical approach it engenders remain largely uncontested as a means through which to remake development for the better. Ferguson’s critique of development as an ‘anti-politics machine’ is prescient here (Ferguson, 1994). Thinking with Foucault, he argues that the reconstitution of development as a technical problem forestalls an understanding that the means established to address them are a “political fact” that works, among other things, to control its own definition of the development problem (Ferguson, 1994: 225, emphasis in original). This produces an apolitical front that manifests in, and perpetuates, a logic where development failures are repeatedly understood as “the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies” or “superficial rather than fundamental” (Li, 2019: 33). The focus of debate, in turn, is limited to the detail of technical interventions and institutional adjustments (Swyngedouw, 2010b; 2010a), accompanying a “conceptually vague anti-political policy discourse” to enrol vastly different stakeholders that are either (unwittingly) constrained or biased by the context in which they operate (Büscher, 2010: 29). This materialises in forms of consensual politics wherein, intended or not, critical insights of the incoherence of (neoliberal) capitalist development are exempt from debates (Swyngedouw, 2010b; 2010a).

From this analytical optic, the prevailing tendency to frame policy coherence as an impartial technical exercise distracts from the political contention on the sustainable development *problematique* itself. It also draws attention to the ways in which institutional arrangements designed to improve coherence emerge from, and operate in, contexts that can limit what is said and done (e.g., Ferguson, 1994; Nadasdy, 2005; Büscher, 2010; Hope, 2020). As the SDGs call for “mechanisms to enhance policy coherence”, there is a need to (re)consider what the mechanisms purportedly designed to improve policy coherence *do*, and what purposes they end up serving, even in failing to achieve their stated objectives.

3. Case study and methods

This paper probes the (re)configuration, operation and effects of institutional arrangements designed to improve coherence for the SDGs. As key means of SDG implementation, these institutional arrangements sit in-between global goals and their possible effects. The Netherlands, the case study chosen here, is well-situated to explore the means through which policy coherence is sought within a universal development project. This is not least because policy coherence has framed and reframed Dutch development discourse and strategies since the 1980s, in which coherence between aid and trade is a constant, and increasingly

prominent, component (Hoebink, 1999; Spitz et al., 2013). This may be attributed to the fact that the Dutch economy depends on maintaining reliable (cheap) imports and growing its export markets, driving its commitment (at least on paper) to ‘enlightened self-interest’, noting that global sustainable and inclusive growth is beneficial for Dutch national interests (Kok et al., 2011; Knape et al., 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013; Spitz et al., 2013; van Ewijk et al., 2017).

This quest for coherence has manifested, among other things, in ‘decompartmentalisation’ in the 1990s to integrate aid policy into overall foreign policy (Hoebink, 1999); the establishment of a policy coherence unit (PCU) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to improve inter-departmental and ministerial coherence in 2002 (Engel et al., 2009); and recently, the establishment of a ministerial post covering both trade and development in 2012 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013).³ These coordination mechanisms are complemented by various policy instruments, including *ex-ante* and *ex-post* evaluation procedures, as well as up-to-date statistics on environmental, social and economic indicators (e.g., CBS, 2015; 2019; 2020; 2021b; Ministry of Justice and Security, 2019). In short, there is, as has been for decades, no shortage of technical means to address the distributive effects of Dutch policies for improved coherence. Still, Dutch wealth and wellbeing remain unambiguously linked to environmental and social impacts across time and space (e.g., Xiao et al., 2017; Lucas and Wilting, 2018; CBS, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021b).

In what follows, we focus on four newly configured institutional arrangements that are frequently referred to as key ‘building blocks’ for coherent SDG implementation in the Netherlands: the SDG National Coordinator based at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; ministerial SDG Focal Points; an *ex ante* impact assessment framework *Integraal Afwegingskader* or IAK in Dutch (known as the ‘SDG Check’ in SDG circles); and an *ex post* monitor *The Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs* (OECD, 2018). We interrogate, rather than depart from, the premise that gives rise to these institutional arrangements, acknowledging that they are never ‘neutral’, and, to borrow from Ferguson’s wording, can serve “as a point of entry for an intervention of a very different character” (Ferguson, 1994: 255). Through these institutional arrangements, we explore how the project of building policy coherence for the SDGs in the Dutch institutional and political milieu is now understood and pursued, and with what implications.

Our analysis is based on qualitative research undertaken between March 2019 and July 2020. We draw from an extensive document analysis, supplemented with 20 semi-structured interviews with ministerial staff, as well as representatives from civil society organisations, the OECD, the Dutch Parliament, Statistics Netherlands (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* or CBS), the Policy and Operations Evaluations Department (*directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie* or IOB) and the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (*Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving* or PBL). We contextualise interview material with selected official documents, including parliamentary letters and transcripts, and policy studies and reports, which are publicly accessible through various government websites. All parliamentary correspondences are retrieved from an online archive: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/uitgebreidzoeken>. Search terms used include ‘SDGs’, ‘Sustainable Development Goals’, ‘*duurzaamheid*’ (sustainability), and ‘policy coherence’. Building on the analytical considerations laid out above, we pay specific attention to how policy coherence and/or sustainable development is discussed and understood, and how this corresponds to specific logic and methods designed to improve policy coherence.

³ This is *not* an exhaustive list of institutional means to better coherence in the Netherlands. Efforts to address incoherencies between development policy and other policy areas including the environment and human rights, date back to at least the 1970s, under different concepts such as ‘integral policies’ (Hoebink 1999).

4. Coordination, Evaluation and Monitoring: ‘Building Blocks’ for Policy Coherence in the Netherlands

From the outset, Dutch efforts to enhance policy coherence for the SDGs can be characterised as a pursuit of mutual gains (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016). There is, as many suggest, already an array of ambitious policy programmes that contribute to the SDGs even when they are not defined in SDG terms (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016; Lucas et al., 2016; Netherlands Court of Audit, 2017), in addition to “a lot of strategies, a lot of institution building, a lot of multistakeholder partnerships, but they are scattered everywhere, there is no clear picture” (Interview04 21.01.2020). Exploiting synergies between these policies and partnerships for mutual gains is not only considered pragmatic, it also reflects the non-hierarchical conception of development promoted by the SDGs, in which all goals are considered equally important (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016; Government of the Netherlands et al., 2021).

The Dutch plan of action regarding the implementation of the SDGs thus revolves largely around creating inventories of partnerships and existing policies (at both central and local levels), to create platforms for collaboration and baselines for evaluation and adjustments (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016). Presented to parliament by the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation in 2016, the plan makes explicit that progressive, sustainable and inclusive policy programmes are already so numerous that devising a separate national SDG strategy would be of little added value (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016). What is seen as more important, particularly given the timeframe of the SDGs, is to enhance the means through which existing policies and initiatives can be better coordinated (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016; Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2017). In particular, this requires “clear coordination and assessment of policy proposals in order to avoid conflicts and overlaps” (OECD, 2018: 1). The point is to promote the SDGs as a tool to frame and formulate policies that are already in the pipeline, detailed in the coalition agreement *Confidence in the Future*, the government’s work programme for the period 2017–2021 (Interview15 20.04.2020). This agreement serves as a document of policy ambition and intent, negotiated by parties of the Cabinet prior to the commencement of its governing term. It is cast as the political commitment to policy coherence for sustainable development, which, practically speaking, serves as the Dutch SDG translation to date (OECD, 2018).

Each ministry, therefore, is responsible for the SDGs relevant to its portfolio. Those undertaking the task of coordination are a group of Focal Points, made up of ministerial staff who carry out SDG coordination in addition to their formal functions. This inter-ministerial working group works alongside the National SDG Coordinator and a small SDG team based at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose work is overseen by the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016). Together they form the Dutch ‘light-touch’ coordination arrangement (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016; Netherlands Court of Audit, 2017).

With a view to “making the effects of new policy, law and regulation proposals on reaching the SDGs visible,” the government developed an SDG assessment tool for policy and legislative drafting, by bringing “the ‘Integraal Afwegingskader’ (IAK), where necessary, in line with SDG ambitions” (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2018a). A long existing impact assessment framework for new policy, laws and regulations, the IAK was revised in response to a parliamentary motion, linked to civil society advocacy in collaboration with the SDG National Coordinator, to “give parliamentarians the tool to question new policies and legislations” in relation to the SDGs (Interview03 01.08.2019), in the hope that it would “enhance the implementation of coherent policies in the Netherlands” (Interview14 03.04.2020). The

newly revised IAK or ‘SDG-Check’, launched in 2019, produced two additional criteria for policy formulation that were considered missing from the previous iteration: effects on gender equality (SDG 5) and effects on developing countries (Interview03 01.08.2019).⁴ In theory, all legislations and policies must prospectively consider their effects on gender equality and developing countries, in addition to preestablished criteria.

Reporting, another key component in building coherence, complements this *ex-ante* process by monitoring progress towards the SDGs retrospectively, in addition to raising awareness of policy linkages and generating baselines for monitoring and evaluation. At least two reports are of relevance here, both of which are ceremoniously presented on Accountability Day, a day where the government presents its annual progress and financial report to parliament.⁵ The first is the annual Dutch SDG Report put together by the National Coordinator and Focal Points, which gathers contributions from five stakeholder groups in addition to the national government: local governments, the private sector, civil society, knowledge institutions, and youth. There is an emphasis, both in the reports and in our interviews, that this is not a top-down process, constituting a joint-but-differentiated approach that encourages critical contributions from participating stakeholder groups (Government of the Netherlands et al., 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021). There is, in short, no scripts or edits on what is reported (Interview03 01.08.2019).⁶

The second report is the Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs, set apart as the scientific politically-neutral SDG report (Interview06 22.01.2020), inasmuch as it neither relates to, nor comments on, government policies (CBS, 2019; 2020; 2021b). It shows, as a matter of fact, where the Netherlands stands in relation to a range of indicators, to be interpreted and used as policymakers see fit (CBS, 2019; 2020). The Monitor was first launched in 2019, integrating a previously separate statistical report on SDG indicators into the more expansive Monitor of Wellbeing (*Brede Welvaart*). The integration of these reports is intended to address a bias in SDG indicators towards the ‘here and now’, as *Brede Welvaart* situates wellbeing in the ‘here and now’ in relation to wellbeing ‘elsewhere’ and ‘later’ (CBS, 2019; 2020). *Brede Welvaart* also contains indicators developed specifically for the Dutch context, and has a longer history in the political system than the SDGs. *Brede Welvaart* was developed in direct response to a parliamentary request for measures of wellbeing beyond GDP (Hurlings and Smits, 2019), and is preceded by the Sustainability Monitor, which also measured the impacts of wellbeing in the Netherlands on future generations and other countries (CBS, 2015). As noted by an interviewee, “it’s really valuable to monitor the SDGs because it’s an international framework. But I do think that *Brede Welvaart* is better in showing how we’re doing as a country” (Interview19 19.06.2020). The integration of the SDGs and the *Brede Welvaart*, therefore, provides a platform through which the SDGs can partake in broader parliamentary debates on wellbeing. This is considered to be especially strategic given the ongoing discussion to integrate wellbeing metrics into the entire policy cycle, including budgeting (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, 2020).

Alongside these institutional arrangements, a multistakeholder platform – *SDG Nederland* (previously the SDG Charter) – was established and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide a

⁴ For a full list of the quality requirements of the IAK (‘SDG Check’), please see <https://www.kcwj.nl/kennisbank/integraal-afwegingskader-voor-beleid-en-regelgeving>.

⁵ This day completes the policy cycle set on ‘budget day’.

⁶ A separate annual report on policy coherence for development abroad is also presented for ‘Accountability Day’, although the National SDG Coordinator and Focal Points do not engage in its production and there are little substantive overlaps between this report and the SDG annual report they coordinate (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation 2018b; 2019).

springboard for collaboration and coordination between societal responses and governmental responses (Interview15 20.04.2020). Expressed as “a movement of everyone who contributes to the SDGs”, it has a membership of more than a thousand organisations, spanning diverse social and political fields (SDG Nederland, 2021). In this broad coalition, the SDGs are understood as *the* guiding compass for a sustainable 2030, a destination in which many stakeholders participate in shaping its roadmap, from strategy design to monitoring and evaluation (SDG Nederland, 2021; Government of the Netherlands et al., 2021). The role of the National Coordinator transverses these stakeholder groups (Interview04 21.01.2020).

Each of the institutional arrangements outlined above was ostensibly (re)configured to embed the SDGs more fully in the policy process, integrating new criteria to ground and inform parliamentary debates, monitoring and evaluating SDG progress in relation to wellbeing across space and time, and cultivating a growing multistakeholder process in implementation and evaluation. Yet, few would confidently say that the SDGs, through the institutional arrangements set up for them, have made a difference to Dutch policies or political priorities. Instead, as pointed out by an interviewee, “the SDGs are driven by the way we were already working” (Interview11 24.01.2020).

The challenge, as indicated in many of our interviews, is to do with where the SDGs have landed institutionally and the absence of an explicit SDG strategy, both of which limit the ability of institutional arrangements to influence policy, both procedurally and substantively (Interview07 22.01.2020; Interview08 24.01.2020). The coalition agreement, while presented as the Dutch political commitment to whole-of-government policy coherence (OECD, 2018), confines the SDGs only to the domain of ‘development cooperation’ (Government of the Netherlands, 2017). Some interviewees attribute this to institutional legacy, a “heritage of the MDGs” (Interview14 03.04.2020) or the fact that there is no “history of big projects coordinated by the Prime Minister’s office” (Interview03 01.08.2019) so “it is not necessarily a conscious decision to not place SDG coordination there” (Interview17 05.05.2020).

Reasons aside, not everyone views the place of the SDGs in the coalition agreement as problematic. Many agree that the Netherlands was (and is) already ‘doing’ the SDGs and it should not matter that policies are not defined in SDG terms so long as they contribute to the SDGs (Interview15 20.04.2020). Moreover, framing the SDGs as a development cooperation agenda in the Dutch context need not be contradictory to the SDGs’ universal aspirations. On the contrary, as some suggest, it could “challenge the way the Netherlands develops in relation to other countries” (Interview16 24.04.2020), where “Dutch national implementation of the SDGs is to ensure that our negative footprint abroad is as limited as possible” (Interview15 20.04.2020).

Yet, it is precisely the framing of the SDGs as a development cooperation agenda that limits deliberations on policy linkages and their distributive consequences (Interview17 05.05.2020). In the Dutch context, parliament is organised to mirror the Dutch bureaucratic system, which means that, given the institutional locus of the SDGs, policy discussions pertaining to the SDGs occur almost exclusively in the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (Interview17 05.05.2020). Within the bureaucracy, this reflects and reproduces the perception of development as something that is needed ‘elsewhere’, unrelated to Dutch domestic policies. Throughout our interviews, it was not uncommon to hear of the SDGs as “more for developing countries” (Interview04 21.01.2020), “not a domestic or national agenda” (Interview07 22.01.2020); and that the SDGs are “mainly present in debates about development policy” (Interview17 05.05.2020). This is telling as it suggests that the universal shift from the MDGs to the SDGs, and the repositioning of the Netherlands as a subject of development has not yet transpired.

Confining the SDGs to the domain of Development Cooperation in the government’s work programme also creates an unclear division of labour in the implementation of the SDGs (Transition International,

2021). While ministers are supposedly responsible for implementing the SDGs in their respective policy areas, there is ambiguity as to which SDGs each ministry is responsible for, or with whom each ministry should be collaborating. This extends down to the role of SDG Focal Points, who hold no specific terms of reference in relation to their SDG coordination (Interview09 24.01.2020), and those who do take the initiative to raise awareness of the SDGs find that it is “an uphill struggle,” particularly with colleagues who work on domestic issues (Interview08 24.01.2020; Interview10 24.01.2020). Without a detailed official mandate, Focal Points face limitations in their coordination work, as the immense task of getting “a whole ministry to use the SDG framework in their work” requires more than the resources, time and clout that they have, many of whom are at the early stages of their career and stationed in the international departments of their ministries (Interview14 03.04.2020).

In addition, the particular place of the SDGs in the coalition agreement affects the political response (or a lack thereof) to the annual SDG report. As there are no clear policy concerns to report on, the report is not subjected to critical scrutiny (Interview14 03.04.2020). Put differently, despite it being an accountability report to parliament, there is little to be, or that can be, accounted for (Interview14 03.04.2020; Interview18 19.06.2020). Consequently, what is reported is quite ad-hoc and arbitrary insofar as “[t]here’s no plan on what to report on or where this should be going. In any case, it’s the same group of people who gets together every year and writes another report” (Interview19 19.06.2020). The government contribution mainly regurgitates what is already reported by each ministry “put in another box” (Interview11 24.01.2020), noting their relevance to the SDGs but without the necessary articulations among them; and showcases the Dutch SDG performance according to various SDG metrics, including the Sustainable Development Solutions Network’s ‘SDG Index’ and OECD’s ‘Measuring the Distance to SDG targets’ (Government of the Netherlands et al., 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021). While the Dutch perform well on these indices, which shows how the Dutch fares relative to other countries, its SDG performance cannot be attributed to specific (changes to) Dutch policies. Nor do they demonstrate trade-offs between social, economic and environmental goals.⁷ As politically contentious issues, contradictions and trade-offs are inadequately addressed, there are no meaningful debates or policy actions emerging from this reporting process. As has been shown elsewhere (Bexell and Jönsson, 2019), national SDG reporting in the Dutch case can be seen as serving a performative, and *not* an accountability, function.

While some of these shortcomings could be addressed through establishing an SDG strategy, for which coordination is relocated to a ministry with domestic jurisdiction; it does not mean that what is coordinated or made to cohere would necessarily change. Even in the domain of development cooperation, where the SDGs serve as “the international guiding principles”, the policy agenda reaffirms pre-established priorities of the previous cabinet (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018; see also Breman, 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013; Savelli et al. 2019). The rhetoric of policy coherence within this agenda is premised on creating greater trading and investment opportunities to “both achieve and profit from the SDGs”, framing the private sector as a crucial agent in cohering economic ambitions with that of poverty reduction, inclusive and sustainable growth, and conflict prevention (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018: 85; see also Savelli et al., 2019). This resonates with a broader shift in development cooperation – from a focus

on poverty alleviation to economic growth – which some argue reinforces a neoliberal agenda under the rubric of ‘shared prosperity’ (Mawdsley et al., 2018; Savelli et al., 2019). The connotation that comes with ‘shared prosperity’, like other well-worn phrases in coherence building – be it ‘enlightened self-interest’ or ‘mutual benefits’ – normalises the overt pursuit of self-interests in development cooperation. It also obfuscates inherent tensions in pursuing said interests in the context of uneven development, enabling the Dutch development cooperation and foreign trade agenda to acknowledge “the relatively high claims [it] makes on other countries’ resources”, without confronting head on how this must change to make provisions for other countries (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2018a,b).

On this note, one might argue that the revision of the ‘SDG Check’ and the integration of the SDG Indicator Report into *Brede Welvaart* were precisely to direct the political conversation towards identifying and navigating these contradictions. Yet, with regard to the ‘SDG-Check’, despite being an obligatory assessment, there is no centralised coordinating body to oversee how – if at all – the ‘SDG Check’ is applied, leaving the uptake and quality of its application to the discretion of policymakers (Interview03 01.08.2019; Mijs and Schout, 2015). A review of this instrument indicates that there is little incentive for its application, as ministerial staff are more concerned about policy outputs for which they are directly responsible, and therefore devote little time to intersectoral considerations to improve their drafts (Mijs and Schout, 2015). Even if applied, the application guideline of the ‘SDG Check’ stipulates that it needs not actually “lead to an adjustment of your policy”, so long as these effects are considered (Ministry of Justice and Security, 2019: 1). Various sources indicate that both the design and the uptake of the ‘SDG Check’ have been inadequate (Interview14 03.04.2020; OECD, 2020; Transition International, 2021). As a framework, it does not include a systematic assessment of environmental, social or distributional impacts, nor is it linked to any *ex-post* monitoring and evaluation process, making it the Netherlands’ “weakest area of regulatory policy” (OECD, 2020: 6). By design, then, it is unclear what exactly this *ex-ante* impact assessment ought to do in substantive terms, especially given it does not stipulate that policies be adjusted in light of their distributive effects.

In response to the use and effectiveness of the ‘SDG Check’, a few of our interviewees caution that it is too early to assess. However, while newly retrofitted, this instrument has existed for some time. This particular impact assessment began to develop in 2007, was formed in 2011, then reformed in 2019, and still, the effects to date remain limited (Mijs and Schout, 2015; OECD, 2020).

Similarly, it is uncertain how, if at all, the Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs would inform policymaking. It is worth noting that the Netherlands has systematically collected environmental statistics since the 1960s, with a view to making “precise calculations of the damaging side-effects of environmental activities” (Oosterhuis et al., 2016: 14). Knowledge of uneven distributional effects of the Dutch political economy has therefore been known in policy circles for decades, effects that in many respects remain present, as the Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs and earlier iterations resolutely show (CBS, 2015; 2019; 2020; 2021a,b). Still, much of the political debate on the Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs remains on “how we can take this instrument further – more about the process rather than what’s in it” (Interview13 30.01.2020). In their parliamentary response to the 2020 Monitor, the Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation both stress the value of continuing to develop the Monitor, noting however, that while it is a “useful tool for looking back... evaluating or predicting policy effects on wellbeing and the SDGs requires additional information about the relationship between different aspects of wellbeing” (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, 2020).

⁷ Notably, the best ranked countries in relation to the SDGs, as measured in the Sustainable Development Solutions Network ‘SDG Index’ and OECD ‘Measuring the Distance to SDG targets’, are industrialised countries that have transgressed most planetary boundaries, including the Netherlands. For comparison, see <https://goodlife.leeds.ac.uk/countries/> to explore how differently industrialised countries perform relative to the ‘just and safe space’ framework.

5. Institutional Arrangements for the SDGs and Dutch Policy Coherence: Soft Solutions to Hard Problems

Although institutional arrangements for the SDGs have had limited influence on policy coherence in both procedural and substantive terms, it would be misleading to conclude that they are without effects. At the time of writing, the post-election negotiation around the incoming cabinet and coalition agreement are underway. This coincides with the fifth-year anniversary of the SDGs, marked in the Dutch plan of action for the SDGs as an opportunity of reflection, evaluation and adjustment (Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, 2016). At this opportune moment, two reports were commissioned as input for the next cabinet and the coalition agreement. One is *Five years of implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands (2016–2020) (Vijf jaar implementatie van de SDGs in Nederland (2016–2020): Monitoring en reflectie)*, a statistical report of progress for all 169 SDG targets, this time linking each target to relevant policy measures, differentiating it from previous statistical reports on the SDGs (CBS, 2021a,b). It further provides provisional material on which combinations of different SDGs harbour most for synergies and trade-offs (CBS, 2021a,b). The other is an evaluation of how SDG implementation has been managed in the Netherlands, which focuses on the coordination arrangement we detail here (Transition International, 2021). Their main recommendation, as summed up in the 2021 SDG Report, is as follows:

to draft a national SDG strategy linking the 2030 Agenda to Dutch policy objectives. This would also enable closer monitoring by CBS. Other recommendations focus on strengthening interministerial engagement and more intensive use of the SDGs as an assessment framework [IAK] in drawing up new policy (Government of the Netherlands et al., 2021: 3–4).

This recommendation echoes a growing momentum for a national SDG strategy, coalescing around a campaign for a sustainable coalition agreement or *Duurzaam Regeerakkoord*, attached to a manifesto signed by 2100 organisations and more than 4300 citizens thus far (Duurzaam Regeerakkoord, 2021). It appears as though change is afoot, or at least there is growing awareness of the inadequacy of the government's approach to the implementation of the SDGs and the need for a clear political commitment for any accountability to ensue.

In all these, two underlying assumptions can be discerned. One is the unquestioned assumption that the SDGs and their non-hierarchical mode of development will, if implemented coherently, lead to a state of sustainable development. The coordination arrangement around the SDGs and the broad coalition it facilitates sustain, and is sustained by, a narrative of the SDGs as a 'common framework' for coherent sustainable development that can yield mutual gains for people, prosperity, planet, partnerships and peace (e.g., Government of the Netherlands et al., 2021; Duurzaam Regeerakkoord, 2021). Here, the incoherent quality of the SDGs themselves go unremarked, abstracted in what some call a "fantasy" that obfuscates fundamental tensions between poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability and profitable enterprise" (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017: 450).

This is perhaps why the SDGs have such a mobilising power, in that "they bring people to the table naively assuming that they want the same thing", but few engage with the SDGs in political terms, in ways that foreground the relations of power that are constitutive of incoherence (Interview16 24.04.2020). Stakeholders who "think in terms of politics or political economy" do not typically occupy this multistakeholder SDG space (Interview16 24.04.2020), much like how those who view policy coherence as fundamentally about political economy (and not "a design opportunity") often find themselves outside of the actor landscape around policy coherence (Schmitz and Eimer, 2020: 13). The SDGs do, in this case, act as a form of anti-politics. Although it is unlikely that the thousands rallying behind the SDGs operate within a singular coherent epistemic framework that shapes a common understanding of

sustainable development, contradictions and differences go unnoticed, undebated and unresolved through an ambiguous consensus (e.g., Swyngedouw, 2010b; 2010a; Hope, 2020).

The second assumption is more tacit, and is indebted to the consensual notion of sustainable development promoted by the SDGs. Taking for granted that the SDGs constitute a "ready-made agenda for the things that really matter" (Duurzaam Regeerakkoord, 2021) puts the spotlight around the design of institutional arrangements required to implement the SDG agenda. The agenda itself is taken for granted – 'ready-made' – as the quote implies. Intended or not, this foregrounds the 'mechanisms' and 'coordination' purportedly required in coherence building, and relegates to the background the ways in which 'sustainable development' itself (and the practice of building coherence around it) may be implicated in the reproduction of incoherence. The recommendation cited above indicates as much: that despite their inability to effect policy change, the institutional arrangements we explore here successfully reproduce the premise (and promise) of policy coherence secured by design. It assumes that with improved procedures, broader multi-stakeholder engagement, and better data and knowledge, the conditions would be right for change, where newfound alertness to complex policy interlinkages and diverse perspectives would improve policy diagnoses and prescriptions.

This approach to policy coherence, reflected in the criterion of policy coherence in the SDGs, has profound effects. It naturalises a particular interpretation of, and approach to, policy coherence for sustainable development that is both depoliticised and depoliticising. The effects of these institutional arrangements are evident in their recursive quality, in which their failings to affect policy end up reifying the same political rationality that locates the cause of incoherence to improper institutional design (e.g., Ferguson, 1994). This further sustains the exclusion of political, economic and relational causes of policy incoherence from the technical field of interventions (e.g., Lane, 2019). Through all the efforts that go into building coherence, the capitalist neoliberal context in which the SDGs are being implemented is left largely undisputed. Uneven distributive effects of development are seen as an instrumental failure in policymaking, unrelated to questions of political economy. This limits, if not prevents, possibilities for transformation, where policy coherence is reinvented through habit and bricolage fixed on getting institutions right (e.g., Ferguson, 1994; Büscher, 2010; Hope, 2020). Through this, the questions of what kind of sustainable development should be promoted or opposed, and what is to be transformed or sustained, go unasked.

This oversight legitimises conspicuous engagement with sustainable development that is decoupled from its actual contribution to sustainability, staged through the (re)configuration of institutional arrangements working toward a sustainability that is, to borrow from Erik Swyngedouw, "always vague, ambiguous, unnamed and uncounted, and ultimately empty" (Swyngedouw, 2010a: 201). Here, the leeway afforded by the vast normative ambiguity of the SDGs follows a (neoliberal) drift in global sustainability governance that "critically could be called shared *unaccountability*" (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017: emphasis added). The Netherlands, for example, remains a frontrunner in policy coherence, praised for its robust coordination structure and partnerships to implement the SDGs (OECD, 2017). Other EU countries seeking to introduce an SDG assessment tool look to the 'SDG Check', which was launched with much clamour and hailed as a means to bring the Netherlands a step closer to the SDGs (Rutten et al., 2019), despite its history of inefficacy.

It is useful to recall here that three decades ago, Chandra Kirana, writing on Dutch engagement with environment and development notes that "For the Dutch... [w]hat is seen is very important" (Kirana, 1992: 99). In some respects, this observation still holds. Then, as now, the official rhetoric acknowledges the Netherlands' disproportional claim and impact on the global environment, and the need for both policy and behavioural changes that, if heeded, might lead to an evening out of development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1991; Gomes et al., 1992).

Yet, while the policy analysis was concerned with “hard problems and realities,” the resolve then, as now, is skewed towards technical solutions that circumvent the need to confront affluence (and its distributive effects) and the market system that produce uneven development (Kirana, 1992: 108). Such solutions are “soft to the North,” and by their very nature, are unequipped to do what they are set up to do (Kirana, 1992: 103).

To be sure, this does not mean that institutional arrangements are not needed to improve coordination between institutions, facilitate better understanding of policy linkages, or improve accountability. Contradictory objectives within and between policy domains, pursued in siloes, do have real consequences for development (e.g., Barry et al., 2010). In the Dutch case, the marginal place the SDGs occupy in the coalition agreement, and the ensuing disconnect between domestic and international implementation of the SDGs, hampers accountability and reproduces North-South hierarchy. It also obstructs critical reflection on the ways in which the Netherlands develops in relation to other countries, all the while legitimising a development cooperation agenda that advances a markedly neoliberal trajectory. Fixating on institutional arrangements alone, however, leaves the question of coherence for what and for whom unscrutinised. Here, the SDGs serve to obscure, not clarify. They help reproduce and legitimise the same logic and method to building coherence for sustainable development centred on institutional mechanisms and ‘win-win’ constructions. The same logic and method that isolate the problem of incoherence from its systemic, relational causes. Efforts to improve institutional arrangements for policy coherence would do little for sustainable development if the meaning of sustainable development itself remains undefined or evasive of systemic causes of incoherence.

6. Conclusion

The SDGs articulate that policy coherence for sustainable development is necessary to realise sustainable development in which no one is left behind, for which the presence of institutional mechanisms is an essential criterion. Using the case study of the Netherlands, this paper questions this assumption through probing the ways in which institutional arrangements were (re)configured for the SDGs, what they do in the policy process and what effects are (re)produced through them. In the Dutch context, while institutional arrangements are ostensibly designed to help prevent and address distributive effects of policies across space and time, they paradoxically obscure the trade-offs and political-economic changes required to deal with such effects. But if they lack influence in policy, they have successfully maintained the same definition of the problem that give rise to them, one, no less, that offers no significant challenge to the status quo.

While we agree that institutional arrangements can play a constructive role in enhancing policy coherence (understood as a function of how policies and institutions are coordinated), reimagining the ends about what form of development is considered sustainable should precede, and not follow, the means established to enhance policy coherence. At the very least, institutional arrangements should open up a space where manifold understandings of sustainable development, and the incoherencies of the dominant market-based socio-economic-political organisation can be exposed, confronted and debated. Here, the framing of the SDGs as a universal sustainable development project, implemented in a world characterised by uneven development, can help to table this debate. Attempts towards *universal* sustainable development, in this context, should account for the extremely varied challenges, circumstances, and choices that shape prospects and prosperity for all, everywhere (e.g., Horner, 2020). Here, given the Netherlands’ interconnectedness to globalised capitalism, and the consequences that Dutch wellbeing bears on wellbeing in other places and across time, attaining sustainable development *universally* should therefore pay heed to how economic, social and ecological relations must change to ‘even-out’ development in a sustainable way.

Our findings highlight that there is a need to attend to the diverse contexts in which the SDGs are implemented, and equally important, to broaden our analytical gaze from the modalities of institutional arrangements for the SDGs, to the political and economic assumptions upon which the SDGs (and sustainable development more generally) rest, and those they help to perpetuate. While there is a growing scholarly debate that pays attention to the assumptions built into the SDGs and the ensuing logics, epistemes and methods of sustainable development they reproduce and legitimise, it is noticeably lacking from the literature on policy coherence. Without a clear understanding of the effects of the SDGs beyond conspicuous changes in rhetoric and institutional arrangements around policy coherence, *we risk legitimising a symbolic, conspicuous form of sustainability through the SDGs* that distracts from the need for more fundamental changes to take shape and take hold.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Abbie Yunita: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Frank Biermann:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Rakhyun E. Kim:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Marjanneke J. Vijge:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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