ALIGNING INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES WITH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS AND FRAMEWORK PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT
Institutional policies have evolved beyond being merely administrative documents regulating internal operations and have become key instruments that support governance quality and shape institutional strategic orientations. In this transformation process, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a globally recognized reference framework for institutions, emphasizing the need to address sustainability objectives in a holistic manner at the policy level. However, practical approaches for the systematic and structured integration of the SDGs into institutional policy documents remain limited.
This study aims to examine the alignment of institutional policy documents with the Sustainable Development Goals through a descriptive analytical approach and to propose an applicable framework for evaluating this alignment. The research was conducted using a descriptive, document-based methodology. A total of 28 institutional policy documents representing different functional areas of the organization were analyzed using an SDG–Policy Mapping Matrix developed specifically for this study. The results of the mapping process were evaluated through descriptive frequency analysis to reveal the distribution of SDGs across policy documents. The findings indicate that institutional policy documents can be associated with multiple SDGs simultaneously, reflecting a multidimensional relationship with sustainability objectives. In particular, SDGs related to governance, education, and health are more prominently represented in the policy documents, while some SDGs appear to be addressed to a limited extent. The proposed SDG–Policy Mapping Framework offers institutions a systematic tool to review policy documents from an SDG perspective, to make sustainability-oriented interconnections between policy sets more visible, and to structure policy development processes in a more integrated manner. In this respect, the study provides a practical contribution, especially for organizations with complex governance structures, such as higher education and healthcare institutions.
Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, institutional policy, policy alignment, sustainability, governance

1. Introduction

Institutional policies have evolved beyond being merely administrative documents that regulate internal operations and have become fundamental instruments that support governance quality and shape strategic orientations. In particular, the increasing prominence of concepts such as accountability, transparency, and sustainability within institutional agendas has necessitated a reconsideration of the content and scope of policy documents.
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), defined by the United Nations within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, provide a globally recognized reference framework for institutions in this context (United Nations, 2015). Recent studies indicate that the SDGs are increasingly addressed not only as reporting tools but also as guiding

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frameworks for policy development and evaluation processes (van Zanten & Putintseva, 2025). This shift highlights the growing need for structured approaches that link the SDGs with institutional policy architectures.
Higher education institutions and healthcare organizations are among the key implementers of SDG-related policies and strategies due to the breadth of their societal impact. In higher education institutions, sustainability-oriented policies are emphasized as being closely associated with leadership vision, institutional culture, and internal policy coherence (Bui et al., 2024). Similarly, in healthcare organizations, the alignment of governance structures and policy frameworks with sustainability objectives is considered critical for the long-term resilience of health systems (World Health Organization, 2014).

Despite this growing emphasis, the integration of the SDGs into institutional policies often remains fragmented, project-based, or driven by intuitive practices. The lack of a structured approach for systematically linking policy documents to the SDGs poses a significant challenge to transforming sustainability objectives into a coherent institutional strategy.

In response to this gap, this study aims to examine the alignment of institutional policy documents with the Sustainable Development Goals through a descriptive analytical approach and to propose an applicable framework for assessing this alignment. Within this scope, the degree to which institutional policies are associated with the SDGs is identified through frequency analysis, and based on the findings, a repeatable and structured alignment framework is proposed for institutional use.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Sustainable Development Goals and Institutional Policies

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a holistic understanding of development that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions. While the SDGs provide a roadmap for policy documents at the national level, they also serve as an important reference point for strategic planning and policy development processes at the institutional level (United Nations, 2015). In this respect, the SDGs enable institutions to address principles of social responsibility, sustainability, and governance in an integrated manner.

Studies focusing on higher education institutions indicate that the integration of the SDGs into institutional policies is not limited to education and research activities but is also directly linked to governance structures, management processes, and institutional culture (Bui et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of structuring the SDGs in a concrete and traceable manner through internal policy documents.

Similarly, in healthcare organizations, reflecting sustainability objectives in policy documents plays a critical role in aligning service delivery, quality management, and governance processes with long-term goals (World Health Organization, 2014). In this context, linking institutional policies with the SDGs can be considered a strategic instrument that supports sustainability objectives in both educational and service delivery dimensions.

2.2. Overview of Policy Alignment Approaches

Policy alignment refers to ensuring coherence across different policy areas and developing a holistic approach toward shared objectives. In studies addressing SDG-related policies, this concept is frequently discussed within the framework of policy coherence (OECD, 2018). Approaches based on policy coherence emphasize the decisive role of governance mechanisms in effectively addressing sustainability goals at the institutional level.

Recent literature highlights that the effectiveness of sustainability policies depends not only on the definition of goals but also on institutional capacity, governance structures, and stakeholder engagement (Shabbir & Salman, 2025). These studies underline the necessity of structured and repeatable analytical approaches for integrating the SDGs into institutional policies.

In addition, integrated policy design and horizontal and vertical alignment mechanisms are identified as playing a significant role in embedding the SDGs within institutional structures (Breuer et al., 2023). Within this framework, analytical and traceable tools that link institutional policy documents to the SDGs contribute to making sustainability objectives more visible and actionable.

Building on this body of literature, the SDG–Policy Mapping Framework proposed in this study aims to provide a practical tool that enables the systematic and descriptive evaluation of institutional policy documents from an SDG perspective.

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3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study is based on a descriptive, document-based research design aimed at examining the alignment of institutional policy documents with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The primary objective of the study is to reveal the relationship between institutional policies and the SDGs through a systematic, traceable, and repeatable framework. Accordingly, the study focuses on the analysis of policy documents through a structured mapping process from an SDG perspective.

No causal, comparative, or impact evaluation was conducted in this research. Instead, a descriptive analytical approach was adopted, allowing the framework to be applied across different institutional contexts.

3.2. Data Source and Scope

The data source of the study consists of a total of 28 institutional policy documents identified through an internal policy inventory process. The selected policy documents were chosen to represent the institution's core functional areas. Accordingly, the policies cover major institutional domains, including academic processes, quality management, human resources, research and innovation, social responsibility, and administrative and support services.

The policy documents included in the analysis are official documents currently in force and intended to guide institutional practices. The study focuses exclusively on policy texts; implementation outcomes, performance indicators, and policy outputs were excluded from the scope of analysis.

3.3. SDG–Policy Mapping Process

To link institutional policy documents with the SDGs, an SDG–Policy Mapping Matrix developed specifically for this study was used. This matrix was designed as a structured analytical tool to enable a systematic and consistent evaluation of the relationship between policy texts and SDG targets.

The following criteria guided the mapping process:

- The thematic alignment between the content of the policy text and the relevant SDGs and their targets
- The potential areas of impact of the policy at the institutional level
- The consistency of policy objectives with global sustainability and governance principles

Each policy document was associated with one or more SDGs based on its primary objectives and the scope of activities it addresses. The mapping process was conducted through content analysis of the policy texts, and assessments were carried out according to predefined criteria. Detailed results of the policy–SDG mapping are presented in Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials.

3.4. Data Analysis

Following the SDG–policy mapping process, descriptive frequency analysis was applied to the resulting data. This analysis identified how many policy documents were associated with each SDG and calculated the proportion of each SDG relative to the total number of policies analyzed.
The frequency analysis aims to reveal the visibility of the SDGs within institutional policy documents. The results reflect the frequency of SDG representation at the policy level and do not include an assessment of policy effectiveness or implementation outcomes.

3.5. Synthesis of Findings

The results of the mapping and frequency analyses were synthesized using a descriptive approach. At this stage, the overall distribution of SDGs, areas of overlap, and prominent themes within the institutional policy structure were examined.

Based on this synthesis, a structured framework was developed to support the alignment of institutional policies with the SDGs, which can be utilized in policy development and review processes.

4. Findings

Using the SDG–Policy Mapping Matrix developed in this study, a total of 28 institutional policy documents representing different functional areas of the institution were linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on the mapping results, the distribution of SDGs across institutional policy documents was examined through descriptive frequency analysis.

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The distribution summarized in Table 1 is presented in detail through the policy–SDG mappings provided in Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials. The findings indicate that the most frequently represented SDGs in institutional policies are Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3). These goals are associated with a substantial proportion of the policy documents analyzed. In contrast, certain goals, such as Zero Hunger (SDG 2) and Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), are represented to a limited extent within the institutional policy framework. The remaining SDGs display moderate to low levels of association with policy documents.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Sustainable Development Goals Across Institutional Policies

SDG No.	Sustainable Development Goal	Number of Policies (n)	%
1	No Poverty	1	3.6
2	Zero Hunger	0	0.0
3	Good Health and Well-Being	19	67.9
4	Quality Education	20	71.4
5	Gender Equality	7	25.0
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	0	0.0
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	1	3.6
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	9	32.1
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	11	39.3
10	Reduced Inequalities	8	28.6
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	6	21.4
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	5	17.9
13	Climate Action	4	14.3
14	Life Below Water	3	10.7
15	Life on Land	2	7.1
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	21	75.0
17	Partnerships for the Goals	15	53.6

Note: $n = 28$ institutional policy documents. A single policy document may be associated with more than one SDG. The findings indicate that institutional policy documents can be simultaneously linked to multiple SDGs. This demonstrates that institutional policies are capable of establishing multidimensional relationships with sustainability objectives and provide an integrated structure that connects different SDGs.

Detailed results of the policy–SDG mapping are presented in Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials. Table S1 specifies which SDG or SDGs each policy document is associated with, thereby enhancing the visibility and traceability of the policy–SDG relationships.

5. Discussion

This study presents a structured and descriptive approach to linking institutional policy documents with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrating how sustainability objectives can be made visible and traceable at the level of institutional policies. The proposed SDG–Policy Mapping Framework shows that the SDGs can be assessed not only as concepts addressed in strategic documents or reporting processes, but also at the content level of policy texts.

The findings reveal that institutional policy documents can be simultaneously associated with multiple SDGs and are capable of establishing multidimensional relationships with sustainability objectives. This suggests that the SDGs are not confined to isolated thematic areas within institutional policy structures; rather, they provide an integrated framework that connects domains such as governance, education, health, institutional capacity, and service delivery. The greater visibility of governance-, education-, and health-related SDGs within policy documents indicates that institutions tend to prioritize sustainability goals that align closely with their core responsibilities.

These findings are consistent with the existing literature on higher education institutions and healthcare organizations. Studies focusing on higher education emphasize that sustainability-oriented policies are closely

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linked to leadership vision, institutional culture, and internal policy coherence (Bui et al., 2024). Similarly, in healthcare systems, the alignment of governance structures and policy frameworks with sustainability objectives is regarded as a critical factor for long-term system resilience (World Health Organization, 2014). By operationalizing these conceptual discussions through the analysis of institutional policy documents, this study contributes to the literature from a practice-oriented perspective.
Conversely, the limited representation of certain SDGs within institutional policy documents points to thematic imbalances in the integration of sustainability objectives into institutional policies. This pattern suggests that institutions often prioritize SDGs that are directly related to their primary fields of activity, while goals associated with more indirect areas of impact tend to be less visible in policy texts. This observation is supported by studies indicating that the effectiveness of sustainability policies is closely related to institutional capacity, governance mechanisms, and policy coherence (OECD, 2018; Shabbir & Salman, 2025).

In this context, the proposed SDG–Policy Mapping Framework can be regarded as a practical tool that translates policy coherence and integrated policy design approaches highlighted in the literature (Breuer et al., 2023) into an institutional-level application. The framework enables institutions to systematically review existing policy documents from an SDG perspective, to make sustainability-oriented interconnections between policy sets more visible, and to approach policy development processes in a more integrated manner.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the integration of the SDGs into institutional policies should not be limited to reporting or strategic declarations. Rather, systematically assessing policy documents at the content level can strengthen sustainability governance. By offering a flexible and repeatable evaluation approach that institutions can adapt to their own contexts, the proposed framework provides a practical contribution to institutional sustainability efforts.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines the alignment of institutional policy documents with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through a descriptive analytical approach and proposes an applicable framework for structuring sustainability objectives at the policy level. The developed SDG–Policy Mapping Framework demonstrates that the SDGs can be systematically assessed at the content level of policy texts, rather than being treated solely as concepts addressed in strategic documents or reporting processes.

The findings indicate that institutional policy documents can be associated with multiple SDGs and can establish multidimensional relationships with sustainability objectives. This highlights the importance of integrating sustainability policies into institutional structures not through isolated goals, but through coherent and aligned policy sets. The greater visibility of SDGs related to governance, education, and health suggests that institutions tend to prioritize sustainability objectives that closely align with their core areas of responsibility.

In this context, the proposed mapping framework offers institutions a practical tool to review existing policy documents from an SDG perspective, to make sustainability-oriented relationships between policy sets more visible, and to structure policy development processes in a more integrated manner. The framework can be considered a flexible and repeatable evaluation tool that can be utilized in policy development, policy revision, and internal review processes.

From an implementation perspective, institutions are encouraged not only to focus on SDGs directly related to their primary fields of activity, but also to make SDGs with indirect areas of impact more visible within policy documents. Such an approach may contribute to a more balanced and coherent integration of sustainability objectives within institutional policy structures.

Finally, given the descriptive and document-based nature of this study, the findings do not allow for inferences regarding the effectiveness or outcomes of policy implementation. Future research may extend this work by applying the proposed framework in different institutional contexts, examining the evolution of policy documents over time, and exploring the relationship between SDG alignment and institutional performance indicators, thereby deepening the evidence base in this field.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted within a single institutional context, and the results are limited to the policy documents analyzed. This restricts the direct generalizability of the findings to other institutions or sectors.

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Second, the study is based on a document-based and descriptive analytical approach. The analysis focused exclusively on the textual content of policy documents and did not include an assessment of policy implementation, performance indicators, or the institutional impact of policy outcomes. Therefore, the findings reflect the degree of alignment between policy documents and sustainability objectives, rather than their practical realization.

Third, although the SDG–Policy mapping process was structured according to predefined criteria, it relies on qualitative assessment. As a result, the mapping outcomes may involve a degree of interpretive judgment. However, this limitation is balanced by the study's objective of providing a structured and repeatable evaluation framework.

Finally, the study adopts a cross-sectional design and does not examine changes in policy documents or SDG alignment over time. Future research may address this limitation through longitudinal or comparative designs, enabling a more comprehensive examination of the long-term effects of SDG alignment on institutional policy structures.

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Supplementary

Table S1. Mapping of Institutional Policy Documents to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

No.	Policy Document	Policy Area	Associated SDGs (No – Title)	Rationale for Mapping
1	Quality Policy	Quality Management	SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 4 – Quality Education; SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Supports institutional quality assurance, service and education standards, and governance principles
2	Management Systems Policy	Governance	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16; SDG 17	Covers institutional process integration, governance structures, and stakeholder collaboration
3	Education and Training Policy (Distance Learning)	Academic Processes	SDG 4; SDG 5; SDG 9; SDG 10	Supports digital education, accessibility, and inclusive learning environments
4	Distance Education Policy	Academic Processes	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 10	Addresses digital learning infrastructure and principles of equal access to education

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No.	Policy Document	Policy Area	Associated SDGs (No – Title)	Rationale for Mapping
5	Research and Development Policy	Research and Innovation	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 17	Promotes scientific production, innovation, and institutional/international collaboration
6	Community Engagement Policy	Social Responsibility	SDG 4; SDG 10; SDG 11; SDG 17	Strengthens social benefit, inclusiveness, and stakeholder interaction
7	Internationalization Policy	Strategic Development	SDG 4; SDG 10; SDG 17	Supports international cooperation and academic mobility
8	Information Security and Digital Resources Management Policy	Information Management	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16	Regulates digital information security and institutional responsibility principles
9	Information Security Policy	Information Security	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16	Aims to ensure institutional data security and transparency
10	Email Usage Policy	Digital Management	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16	Regulates institutional communication and digital responsibility principles
11	User Password Policy	Information Security	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16	Supports secure access and information security awareness
12	Computer Network and IT Resources Usage Policy	Information Technology	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16	Aims for effective and secure use of digital infrastructure
13	Digitalization Policy	Digital Transformation	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 10; SDG 16	Supports digital learning, accessibility, and governance processes
14	Change Management Policy	Institutional Development	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16; SDG 17	Strengthens institutional transformation and stakeholder alignment
15	Corporate Communication Policy	Communication	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16; SDG 17	Supports transparency, information sharing, and stakeholder engagement
16	Human Resources Policy	Human Resources	SDG 4; SDG 5; SDG 8; SDG 10; SDG 16	Targets equality, decent work, and institutional capacity
17	Risk Management Policy	Risk and Quality	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 11; SDG 13; SDG 16	Ensures management of institutional risks from a sustainability perspective
18	Sustainability Policy	Sustainability	SDG 4; SDG 7; SDG 11; SDG 12; SDG 13; SDG 17	Addresses environmental, social, and governance-based sustainability holistically
19	Procurement Management Policy	Supply Chain	SDG 4; SDG 11; SDG 12; SDG 13; SDG 16; SDG 17	Supports responsible procurement and institutional accountability
20	Leadership Policy	Governance	SDG 4; SDG 5; SDG 9; SDG 16	Promotes ethical leadership and strong governance principles
21	Access and Participation Plan	Inclusiveness	SDG 4; SDG 10; SDG 16; SDG 17	Aims to strengthen equal access and stakeholder participation
22	Non-Discrimination Against Women Policy	Gender Equality	SDG 5; SDG 10; SDG 16	Supports gender equality and fair governance
23	Policy on Disadvantaged Groups	Social Equity	SDG 1; SDG 4; SDG 10; SDG 16	Targets social inclusion and reduction of inequalities
24	Non-Discrimination Policy	Ethics and Human Rights	SDG 5; SDG 10; SDG 16	Addresses equality, human rights, and institutional justice principles
25	Anti-Harassment Policy	Ethics	SDG 5; SDG 8; SDG 16	Supports a safe working environment and ethical governance
26	Stakeholder Policy	Stakeholder Management	SDG 12; SDG 16; SDG 17	Strengthens stakeholder engagement and institutional responsibility

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No.	Policy Document	Policy Area	Associated SDGs (No – Title)	Rationale for Mapping
27	Policy on Freedom to Choose Research Areas	Academic Freedom	SDG 4; SDG 9; SDG 16	Supports academic freedom and the institutional ethical framework
28	Public Information and Accountability Policy	Transparency	SDG 12; SDG 16; SDG 17	Strengthens transparency, accountability, and public trust

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