

# Addressing fragmented government action: coordination, coherence, and integration

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**Abstract** Solving complex problems is a challenge faced by many governments. Academic and practical discussions on how to solve said problems look at policy integration as a solution to the negative implications that fragmented government actions have on addressing public problems or providing public services. Notwithstanding important recent contributions, we still lack a precise understanding of what policy integration is, an explanation of how it differs from other “solutions” to complex problems, such as coordination or policy coherence, and a practical operationalization. In this paper, we argue that coordination, coherence, and integration are related but substantively different concepts. We offer a new way of understanding and observing policy integration in a manner that is theoretically distinguishable from policy coordination and coherence and empirically observable. We argue that policy integration is the process of making strategic and administrative decisions aimed at solving a complex problem. Solving this complex problem is a goal that encompasses—but exceeds—the programs’ and agencies’ individual goals. In practical terms, it means that, at every moment of the policy process, there is a decision-making body making decisions based on a new logic—that of addressing a complex problem.

**Keywords** Policy design · Coordination · Policy coherence · Policy integration · Complex problems · Fragmented government action

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## Introduction

Policy integration has emerged as a key concept in the policy literature and as a top goal for many policy makers. It is presented as a solution to deal with the negative implications that fragmented government action has on addressing public problems or providing public services. However, beyond vague definitions, we still lack a precise understanding of what policy integration is, an explanation of how it differs from other “solutions” to complex problems, such as coordination or policy coherence, and a practical operationalization. Any progress in addressing complex problems requires clarifying these concepts and showing their implications for policy design and implementation.

This is not a mere conceptual problem. Under the label of policy integration, several governments have tried to address complex problems. Working from the premise that security cannot be achieved by a single agency, the United States (US) government has attempted to enforce coordination by creating a new federal department (Homeland Security) that oversees the different functions and responsibilities of a wide range of agencies (May et al. 2011). Facing environmental problems that cannot be solved by the effort of a single government intervention, Sweden has set the National Environmental Quality Objectives (NEQOs), which depend on 24 governmental agencies, each with their own objectives (Nilsson and Persson 2003). In order to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> gas emissions in the United Kingdom (UK), at least five agencies share responsibility for the implementation of transport policy (Hull 2008). In these and many other instances (see Karre et al. 2012; Lafferty and Hovden 2003; Meijers and Stead 2004b), policy integration is presented as the tool for solving complex problems. Many of these decisions look a lot like coordination or policy coherence. Is policy integration a new concept, or just a new label for an old concept?

We make two contributions to this literature. One is conceptual: We refine notions that are often used interchangeably. We argue that coordination, coherence, and integration are related, but substantively different concepts. To do so, we use the available literature to present definitions of coordination and coherence that clearly distinguish each from the other, and we offer a new way of understanding policy integration.

The second contribution is analytic: We show the implications of these different notions for policy design and implementation, by operationalizing these concepts and developing a scale to distinguish among different levels of coordination, coherence, and integration. We show how each of these concepts can be used when analyzing a government intervention to solve a complex problem. For that purpose, we study Mexico’s National Crusade against Hunger (Crusade), a comprehensive strategy launched in 2013 by the federal government to address extreme poverty in the country.

Despite a dramatic increase in social expenditure and in the number of social programs in Mexico, the percentage of people in poverty (almost fifty percent) has remained the same in the last two decades (Coneval 2015). Notwithstanding important reforms aimed at improving the effectiveness of social policy, programs are redundant and agencies work separately (ASF 2011, 2013; Coneval 2011; ITESM 2007). The Mexican government has tried several strategies to cope with this fragmentation. The Crusade, the latest attempt at providing a comprehensive solution to extreme poverty, has promoted coordination, coherence, and integration (Coneval 2015). As a strategy to overcome fragmentation when dealing with a complex problem, it is a good case for demonstrating the substantive differences among these concepts.

## Fragmented government action as a problem

For the last three decades, following the principles of the New Public Management (NPM), governments all over the world have favored devolution, disaggregation, and specialization in dealing with public problems (Hood and Dixon 2015; Moynihan 2006; Verhoest et al. 2012). Decentralized governance, single-purpose organizations, and specialized units were seen as the way to make government more efficient, responsive, and accountable. The limits of this trend soon became evident: By operating under the principle of “single-purpose organizations,” with many specialized and non-overlapping roles and functions, the NPM reforms ignored the problems of horizontal coordination. Political and administrative leadership was deprived of the levers of control and of influence, dwindling their capacity for being accountable for results that exceeded their specific administrative unit and hampering governments’ effectiveness and efficiency (Christensen and Lægreid 2007; OECD 2005; Peters and Savoie 1997). These actions came into conflict with the quest to address public problems that were, by definition, more complex and inherently interconnected with other issues (Peters and Savoie 1997).

As Peters (2015: 5) explains, specialization tends to artificially segment problems “rather than presenting a more integrated conception of causes and possible remedies for the difficulties.” In other words, the responsibility to address complex problems is dispersed among different policies, agencies, ministries, and levels of government (Briassoulis 2004; Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Koschinsky and Swanstrom 2001; OECD 2005; Peters and Savoie 1997). In consequence, the provision of public goods and services is incomplete. “Both citizens and public servants tend to be distressed when programs are not adequately coordinated. Citizens feel the effects of inadequate coordination [...] when, as clients of programs [...] they find themselves confronted with difficulties in obtaining the full range of services they need from government” (Peters 1998: 16–17).

Disaggregation and specialization resulted in a new problem: fragmented government action. Even if some simple, one-dimensional problems could be solved by specialized government interventions, problems that are more complex may not. As Jennings (1994: 53) explains: “Programs develop in a piecemeal fashion [...] They are assigned to diverse agencies depending on their programmatic content and legislative origins. The result, typically, is an array of policies and programs that are related along a variety of crucial dimensions, but lack central control or direction.” Complex issues demand collective action (Van Bueren et al. 2003) because they are multifactorial; that is, their causes are multiple and rooted in different policy arenas (Agranoff 2003; Agranoff and McGuire 1998; O’Toole 1997) and may cut across multiple levels of government (Weber and Khademian 2008: 36). As Howlett and Del Rio (2015) point out, in contexts of multilevel governance, more actors are affected by the decisions concerning the design and selection of policy tools for addressing a problem, which make them more willing to take part on such decisions. Moreover, different levels of government often have different goals, “and reconciling them typically involves the use of overt political calculus of intra- or intergovernmental bargaining and decision making” (2015: 1237).

Complex problems requiring interventions from different programs, ministries, and levels of government appear in several settings. For instance, in the UK, the pollution produced by public transportation—shown in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> gas emissions—was identified

as a problem whose solution demands for the simultaneous interplay of five different sectors and levels of government (Hull 2008). Sweden has recognized the need to achieve ecological sustainability in every action or policy conducted by the government. To do so, 15 objectives were defined to frame the Swedish environmental policy. Twenty-four governmental agencies are responsible for achieving them (Nilsson and Persson 2003: 337). In the USA, homeland security issues have been historically understood as a variety of public risks that pose potential harms to segments of society. Such definition allows for areas such as food, public health, information, domestic security, border protection, and transportation to intervene in addressing the problems related to homeland security (May et al. 2011).

Fragmented government action has previously been analyzed under many labels: disjointed government (Pollitt 2003), policy fragmentation (Koschinsky and Swanstrom 2001), departmentalism (Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Hood 2005; Kavanagh and Richards 2001; Pollitt 2003), agencification (Bouckaert et al. 2010), sectorization, and more. Regardless of the great variety of concepts that constitute the efforts to address complex problems, as long as governmental action is fragmented, these problems will only be partially solved.

## Coordination, coherence, and integration as solutions

How can the problem of fragmented government action be solved? Just as different expressions have been used to describe the problem, possible solutions are often presented under diverse, not clearly defined, terms. Ideas have also been put forward under several labels: policy coordination (Christensen and Lægreid 2008; Meijers and Stead 2004a; Peters 1998, 2004, 2015; Peters and Savoie 1997), policy integration (6 2005; Adelle and Jordan 2014; Adelle and Russel 2013; Bornemann 2016; Candel and Biesbroek 2016; Christensen and Lægreid 2008; Jordan and Halpin 2006; Jordan and Lenchow 2010; Nordbeck and Steurer 2015; Russel and Jordan 2009), joined-up government (Bogdanor 2005; Hood 2005; Peters 2015; Peters and Savoie 1997; Streeter et al. 1986), policy coherence (Cejudo and Michel 2016; Christensen and Lægreid 2008; May et al. 2006; Peters 2015; Peters and Savoie 1997; Russel and Jordan 2009), holistic government (6 2004), or whole of government (Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Mulgan 2005). Sometimes, these concepts are used as mere synonyms and, at other times, as different degrees of coordination; alternatively, coherence and integration are defined as the outcome of coordination.

Indeed, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Policy coherence and policy integration are often seen as loosely *equivalent terms* and understood as types of coordination that seek to achieve compatibility among the objectives of different policy areas (Adelle and Jordan 2014; Adelle and Russel 2013). An integrated policy is also seen as a set of policies within different domains, whose design is coherent with each other (Candel and Biesbroek 2016; Rayner and Howlett 2009). Likewise, policy integration and joined-up government (JUG) are both understood as public organizations and programs working together effectively toward consistent goals (Peters 2015: 6, 2005). As Hood suggests, those are “new term[s] [...] for an old administrative doctrine. In ‘oldspeak’, [...] that doctrine was conventionally called coordination” (2005: 19).

Alternatively, these concepts are used as different *degrees* of coordination. For instance, Peters (2015) distinguishes policy coordination from policy integration in terms of the

complexity and number of actors needed to achieve each one. Perri 6 considers integration to be a type of coordination. For him, coordination entails a “strategy development [that] considers the impact of/on others, exchange of information [and] temporary joint planning or joint working,” while integration entails “temporary collaboration, long-term joint planning and joint working on major project core to the mission of at least one participating entity [and a] separate entity, jointly owned, created to serve as integrative mechanism” (2004: 108). For Nordbeck and Steurer (2015) coordination and integration only differ from each other because the former refers to the process while the latter refers to the outcome of governance. Sometimes the attainment of horizontal and vertical coordination is called JUG (Christensen and Lægread 2008; Pollitt 2003). Bogdanor also argues that JUG is a coordination strategy with the aim of addressing complex social problems (2005: 1–2).

Finally, coherence and integration are sometimes explained as the default *outcome* of coordination. For instance, when policy coherence is defined as the process by which policies are sufficiently well designed by top government officials so they can produce the desired outcome in the field (Peters 2015), or when policy integration is understood as the “execution or implementation of the products of coordination” (Perri 6 2004: 106), it is assumed that the substantive analysis necessary for producing coherent policies will take place as an automatic consequence of coordination.

As is usual when there is a lack of conceptual order;

words with similar meanings crowd around each other, vying for attention and stealing each other’s attributes [...] This sort of semantic confusion throws a wrench into the work of social science. Arguments employing such terms have a tendency to fly past each other; work on these subjects does not cumulate. Concepts seem to “get in the way” of a clear understanding of things. (Gerring 1999: 361)

Some conceptual clarity is needed here. If the policy coordination, coherence, and integration literatures are going to make a contribution to our understanding of the way governments cope with complex problems and to governments’ capacity for effectively dealing with fragmentation, we need to make sure that concepts are distinguishable and observable. In other words, they should help differentiate and operationalize what they want to define. They should allow “to say that one policy area is coordinated and another is not” (Bouckaert et al. 2010: 24), and similarly, when there is coherence or integration, and when there is not.

In the following pages, we argue that coordination, coherence, and integration are related, but substantively different concepts. Based on the available literature, we present definitions for coordination and coherence that clearly distinguish each from the other and identify their observable implications. We also offer a new way of understanding policy integration, and show how these concepts can be operationalized. Table 1 previews the key distinctions we draw and the issues to consider for policy design and implementation. We advance definitions, identify specific attributes, develop scales, and pose questions of practical and analytical relevance. These notions are elaborated upon and applied to the analysis of Mexico’s National Crusade against Hunger. We base our analysis on a comprehensive assessment of the strategy conducted in 2014–2015 (Coneval 2016), where we studied official data for two years of the Crusade’s operation in 19 federal agencies and in 31 states, and carried out semi-structured interviews in 12 states and 23 municipalities with officials of the federal, state, and municipal levels of government, as well as focus groups with state officials and beneficiaries of social programs.

**Table 1** Conceptualizing coordination, coherence, and integration *Source:* own elaboration

	Coordination	Policy coherence	Policy integration
Object	Organizations	Design of each policy within a policy area	Decision-making processes regarding a set of agencies and policies
Definition	A process in which members of different organizations define tasks, allocate responsibilities, and share information in order to be more efficient when implementing the policies and programs they select to solve public problems	The process where policy makers design a set of policies in a way that, if properly implemented, they can potentially achieve a larger goal	The process of making strategic and administrative decisions aimed at solving a complex problem. Solving this complex problem is a goal that encompasses—but exceeds—the programs' and agencies' individual goals
Attributes	Information sharing Clearly defined rules and responsibilities	Policies' goals Policies' instruments Policies' target populations	A decision-making body in charge of addressing a complex problem. Capacity (authority and information) for deciding over instruments needed for addressing a complex problem
Scale	Level 1: regular exchange of information between members' organizations for achieving their own goals more efficiently Level 2: formal information exchange with which members' organizations make decisions regarding their own resources, and work individually, to contribute to a shared goal Level 3: formal information exchange with which members' organizations make joint decisions regarding the existent resources for archiving a shared goal	Level 1: policies could simultaneously operate without getting in each others' way, but without contributing in a clear and differentiated manner to solve the same complex problem Level 2: policies complement each other, and could contribute to address the complex problem Level 3: policies complement each other in order to address the complex problem, and they would be enough to do it comprehensively	Level 1: the decision-making body's capacity is limited to modify operational and design aspects of the instruments (programs and agencies) of the overall strategy Level 2: the decision-making body has the capacity to redefine the design, modify the operation, and reallocate the responsibilities and resources that the agencies and programs already have Level 3: the decision-making body has the capacity to use and modify the existent instruments (programs and agencies), and also to create new ones or eliminate them
Questions	Is there a shared goal among organizations? Do organizations establish rules and define responsibilities for coordination? Do organizations share information?	Do these policies overlap? Do these policies reinforce each other? Do these policies serve the same overarching goal? Are these policies enough to achieve the larger goal (that of the policy domain)?	Is there a mandate to address a complex problem and a causal theory for doing so that involves several organizations and policies? Is there a decision-making body responsible for addressing a complex problem? Does the decision-making body have the authority for modifying the programs, agencies, financial and human resources in order to contribute to solve the complex problem? Does the decision-making body have the necessary information to guide its decisions about the programs, agencies, financial, and human resources for contributing to solve the complex problem?

## A strategy for overcoming fragmented government action in social policy in Mexico: the National Crusade against Hunger

In Mexico's Social Development Law, poverty is specifically understood as a multidimensional problem. It is defined as the inability of people to fulfill seven social needs: income, access to social security, education, quality housing, access to basic housing services, access to food, and access to health care (Social Development Law 2004, Art.36). Addressing it requires the involvement of agencies from several policy sectors, different levels of government, and many social programs.

This has been a persistent problem. According to the latest official report on the subject, in 2014 46.2% of Mexico's population lived in poverty (Coneval 2015). From 1992 to 2012, public expenditure on social development increased by approximately 75% (Cortés 2014), and the creation of social programs expanded accordingly. While in 2004 there were 89 federal social programs, in 2012 there were 278 (Coneval 2013). In spite of several governmental efforts, including conditional cash transfers that have been emulated around the world (Yaschine 2015; De La O 2015), the percentage of people in poverty has remained the same in the last two decades.

Even if social policy has evolved in the last decade toward better designed programs subject to strict evaluations (Pérez et al. 2015), it is fragmented. Many social programs are redundant: They execute the same actions, have the same or similar objectives, and target the same population (Coneval 2013). Hundreds of federal, state, and municipal programs coexist without sharing information, coordinating their actions, or making their design consistent. More programs with more resources have not been enough to solve the complex problem of poverty.

The Mexican government has tried several strategies to overcome social policy fragmentation since 2000 (specifically, *Estrategia Microrregiones* and *Estrategia 100 × 100*). The National Crusade against Hunger is the latest and most ambitious one. The Crusade was a strategy undertaken by the Mexican federal government aimed at tackling this multidimensional problem. It was officially launched in February 2013 by President Enrique Peña Nieto in a high profile event, in which he presented it as the cornerstone of social policy for his administration. More than 19 agencies at the federal level took part in it, involving 90 social programs, as well as the governments of 31 states (excluding Mexico City) and 400 municipalities (later extended to over one thousand) (Decree for the establishment of a National System for the Crusade against Hunger 2013; Ministry of Social Development 2014).

The Crusade was a strategy for *coordination* among federal agencies and levels of government. It also promoted *coherence* among social programs. And it aimed at *policy integration* by fostering decision making toward addressing extreme poverty instead of agencies' and programs' individual goals. Indeed, when announcing the Crusade, the Mexican president stated that "it [was] necessary to undertake an integral approach that [allowed] for the three levels of government to join their efforts in terms of social development [through] transversal, concrete and coordinated actions among other sectors that also affects food safety issues, such as education, health, social security, housing and income [...]" (Decree 2013, *own translation*). The government created an inter-ministerial commission with authority for selecting the programs that would be part of the strategy, modifying their design and budget and even "reassign[ing] budgets within agencies and/or increas[ing] programs' scope" (Ministry of Social Development 2014: 172, *own translation*).

## Coordination

Coordination is the traditional response, from the public administration perspective, for tackling complex problems. There are abundant definitions of coordination that distinguish among mechanisms of coordination (Bouckaert et al. 2010), levels of coordination (Metcalf 1994), or moments of policy process in which coordination takes place (Peters 2015).

In most definitions, coordination entails clearly defined rules and responsibilities for all actors involved, and information and knowledge exchange among them. The existence of rules and responsibilities is an essential attribute of inter-organizational coordination (Christensen and Lægveid 2008; Kumar 2007; Lie 2011; Streeter et al. 1986). By having clearly defined responsibilities, members of each organization are aware of the functions and activities (i.e., sharing information, attending a committee, deciding over some specific theme or instrument) that must be carried out in order to achieve certain objective. In other words, the definition of responsibilities indicates what should be coordinated. But for coordination to happen, it is also necessary to set rules or procedures that specify how actors should collaborate (Streeter et al. 1986).

Coordination also requires information sharing. As Wheatley (2006) argues, whenever limited sharing of information and knowledge exists in an organization, its members are unable to develop coordinated solutions to problems. Governments require leveraging information across agencies for jointly address complex problems (Kraemer and King 1986; Landsbergen and Wolken 2001). Indeed, the more information agencies have regarding each others' actions, policies, and resources, the faster and more effectively they can identify problems and make the necessary decisions to respond to them (Reschenthaler and Thompson 1996). As Dawes (1996) puts it, information sharing allows agencies to complement its own information with other sources, making it more reliable and accurate. “[T]he result is a more comprehensive picture of a problem or population. The agency is then in a better position to act” (Dawes 1996: 379).

Considering these elements, we argue that coordination is a process in which members of different organizations define tasks, allocate responsibilities, and share information in order to be more efficient when implementing the policies and programs they select to solve public problems.

There are different levels of coordination (see Metcalfe 1994; Briassoulis 2004), depending on the extent to which rules and responsibilities are defined within or among organizations, or the amount of information exchange. Based on Metcalfe (1994) and Candel and Biesbroek (2016), we present a coordination scale with three levels.<sup>1</sup> At a minimum level, coordination exists where there is regular exchange of information between members' organizations, in order to be more efficient in achieving their own goals. At this level, organizations formally or informally share information, but it is used by each organization for decisions concerning its own objectives and priorities. The next level of coordination implies a formal process of information exchange with which actors of different organizations are responsible for making decisions regarding their own resources (human, financial, and programmatic), and work individually, expecting to

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<sup>1</sup> Since there are at least two variables at play when speaking of coordination, it is more accurate to expect different *types* of coordination rather than a *scale* of coordination. Indeed, there can be as much types of coordination as possible configurations of these variables. As Candel and Biesbroek (2016) point out, this sort of processes (i.e., coordination, integration) does not advance or diminish in a linear manner; instead, their dimensions “move at different paces” (p. 214). However, for the sake of analytical clarity, we present three levels of coordination. The same consideration was made for the scales presented in the “[policy coherence](#)” and “[policy integration](#)” Sections.



contribute to a shared goal. Finally, the highest level of coordination occurs when organizations are involved in a process where the specific actors are formally bound to exchange information, so they can make joint decisions regarding the existent resources (human, financial, and programmatic) for achieving a shared goal. Unlike the previous level of coordination, this level entails the members of the organizations involved in using their resources (human, financial, and programmatic) at the service of a common goal.

In the National Crusade against Hunger, the president issued a decree mandating the creation of three inter-ministerial committees at the federal, state, and municipal levels where the relevant actors in each level of government were responsible for exchanging information about their programs, and agreeing upon the goals each would pursue, and the way they would do it (Ministry of Social Development 2014). At the federal level, for example, different ministers had the responsibility of discussing the modifications that should be made to the programs associated with the Crusade in order to avoid duplications and gaps in their implementation. The same was supposed to happen at the state level, where the federal representatives of each ministry in the states, along with the local ministries, had the responsibility of gathering at the inter-ministerial state committee with the purpose of sharing information regarding the programs that each planned to implement (i.e., the population they were targeting and the resources they were spending in order to do so) and decide in which cases they could operate together to be more efficient in achieving the Crusade's goals (Ministry of Social Development 2014; Coneval 2016). The expectation was that, by defining the actors and agencies that should be sharing information and making joint decisions, they would be coordinated and, hence, fragmented government action would be overcome.

The level of coordination achieved by the Crusade was unequal because each of the structures (committees) that conformed it behaves differently. The lowest degree of coordination achieved was evident in some of the state inter-ministerial committees. The operation of these committees consisted in the members informing the budget they planned to spend, the communities they seek to address, and in regularly reporting their progress toward such objectives. However, this information was not used to make any joint decisions regarding the design or operation of the programs they were in charge of (Coneval 2016).

Other state inter-ministerial committees showed a higher degree of coordination (level two of the scale presented above) when, for example, federal representatives of the ministries of social development and urban development—both in charge of implementing housing programs—after exchanging their beneficiary registers, decided to direct their programs each to a different village, so they would not duplicate. So, even if they kept working individually, each providing the type of good or service they regularly did, the information they exchanged allowed them to be more efficient in doing so and, hence, to better contribute to the Crusade's goals.

The highest degree of coordination was observed at the federal level, particularly in a working group comprised by the representatives of different ministries and agencies in charge of the design and implementations of programs that seek to promote self-employment activities to reduce poverty. After regular information exchange, they identified that most of their programs were focused on providing productive assets, technical training, and microcredits, but no support was being provided for the rest of the stages that encompasses a supply chain. They all agreed in changing the way the programs were implemented (the use of their budget and the allocation of benefits), but they did not modify the design of the programs, which constrained the type of instruments at their disposal (Coneval 2016).

In general, when coordination works at its best, decision makers come together in the face of a complex problem, set goals in order to solve it, and decide which programs and decisions will be implemented to achieve them. Policy administrators would have clear responsibilities and specific rules to ensure that the implementation of each program contributes to the overall goal. Then, as a result of the information they formally—or informally—share, policy administrators are able to identify potential synergies or redundancies in the implementation of their programs. This information activates new processes through which they seek to solve these operational obstacles, either by working it out with other programs' administrators or by sharing this information with top decision makers.

However, this sort of operational problems can only be overcome as long as the modifications required to do so do not contradict each program's design. Changing the design of such programs entails taking decisions that are not a product of coordination, but a result of substantive analysis of policy design that does not necessarily represent a coordination activity.

Even in a scenario where coordination worked perfectly, fragmented government action may remain. Coordination may solve challenges regarding a set of given policies being implemented. But tackling complex problems requires more than actors working together for a greater objective, creating structures for sharing information, setting goals and allocating tasks. It also requires that their instruments (policies) are sufficient to solve the complex problem. That is, policies whose designs are consistent with each other, so they do not overlap and their interactions enhance the possibilities of achieving the broader goal of solving the complex problem.

Of course, this is not breaking news. From the public administration perspective, it has always been recognized that coordination is required for achieving coherent policies or programs. However, this coherence is not an automatic product of coordination; it can only be achieved through an analysis of the features of each program involved in addressing the complex issue at hand, and through an understanding of how these should be modified. Undertaking this analysis is not a coordination activity. It is a substantive discussion that cannot be held just by sharing information and allocating responsibilities for coordination or even by setting common goals. Coordination focuses on the decision-making process, and the implementation required for achieving an integrated government action, but says nothing about the substantive content of those decisions. This is when policy coherence comes in.

## Policy coherence

Complex problems require responses from several policies. Those policies, in order to address the complex problem effectively, need to be coherent. This means that while addressing a specific and concrete problem, every policy of the same domain contributes toward addressing a broader problem. Hence, when analyzing policy coherence, policies are seen as the components with which governments seek to address complex problems (Careja 2011: 346; Dery 1998: 169–171).

However, by definition, public policies are oriented to address concrete, specific problems (in opposition to comprehensive problems). This attribute often leads public officials to focus on each public policy without considering the whole, or to believe that the set of public policies within a policy domain is, by default, attuned and complementary. So

it may erroneously be assumed that a series of well-designed and properly implemented public policies is equivalent to a set of complementary and self-reinforcing policies that are able to jointly address complex problems (Cejudo and Michel 2016).

This is not a minor problem. It is not uncommon to find policies that are effective, achieve their objectives, and reach their target population, but that, when analyzed from a broader perspective, show redundancies (i.e., they all provide the same goods or services, they all have the same purpose, or they duplicate beneficiaries), obstruct each other, or leave gaps.

May et al. (2005) argue that policy coherence “implies that various components of policies correspond because they share a set of ideas or objectives” (2005: 37). Thus, policy coherence refers to the process where policy makers design a set of policies in a way that, if properly implemented, they can potentially achieve a larger goal (Cejudo and Michel 2016). In other words, policy coherence means that the policies that coexist in the same policy domain can contribute to, reinforce, or improve the chances of attaining their goals. Since the quest for policy coherence mostly occurs during the design stage, policies’ *potential* to be coherent can only be fulfilled if they are correctly implemented (which may depend on an adequate coordination, but also, on institutional capacities and other contextual factors).

There are three ways in which a policy maker could make a set of policies coherent: coherence among different policies’ objectives, instruments, and target populations. Coherence among different policies’ *objectives* refers to the consistency between the individual objectives of the policies that coexist within the same policy domain.<sup>2</sup> This way of achieving coherence requires an analysis of all policies’ objectives. The policy maker would try to make those objectives harmoniously related to each other, so that the actions that each policy undertakes serve a common purpose (Forster and Stokke 1999; Fukasaku and Hirata 1995; May et al. 2006). A policy domain will thus be comprised of policies designed in such a way that, in achieving their own objective, they complement or reinforce each other so that they solve, together, a greater and more complex problem. In other words, there is coherence when the overall objective may be achieved (without leaving lacunae or generating redundancies) by having a policy domain conformed by a set of policies that achieved their own objective (Cejudo and Michel 2016).

Coherence among *instruments* means that two policies can potentially contribute, by the way they are designed, to solve the same public problem with different tools. That is, assuming that public issues are complex and multidimensional, policy makers would try to make sure that different policies, each by a different route, address a dimension of the same problem with a specific instrument (i.e., regulation, goods, and services). For doing so, policy makers would focus not only on how each instrument serves each policy objective, but on the complementarity among the instruments of all policies within the same domain, and their potential to achieve the overall objective (Cejudo and Michel 2016).

Coherence among *target populations* exists when the sum of all the people targeted includes the entire policy domain’s target population. This kind of coherence implies that the targeting made by each of the policies of the same domain potentially avoids duplications or gaps in attending certain population. Coherence between target populations is not equal to the correct targeting of policies. Policy makers would try to design a set of policies in such a way that not only a person does not benefit from two policies that

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<sup>2</sup> We use “policy domain” not to refer to a policy sector, but to a set of policies oriented toward addressing the same complex problem. In this sense, our understanding of this concept is closer to May and Jochim’s policy regimes (2013) or to Bornemann’s integrative political strategies (2016).

contribute to the same objective, but also that the same person is not targeted by two policies that have the same objective. The difference is subtle but important: Policy coherence in this sense is based on a correct targeting of policies, but goes beyond that because, ultimately, it seeks to avoid a situation in which anyone suffering from a given public problem is left unattended (Cejudo and Michel 2016).

Policy coherence can be observed at three different levels. Low policy coherence exists when policies are designed in such a way that, when implemented, they could simultaneously operate without getting in each others' way, but without contributing in a clear and differentiated manner to solve the same complex problem. That is, they run in parallel. Medium policy coherence is observed when policies, by their design, complement each other. This means that every policy, by pursuing the objective, providing the good and services or assisting the target population they do, could contribute to address the complex problem. However, even when these policies do contribute to address it, they are not enough to do it: They leave gaps. A high level of policy coherence means complete policy coherence. That is, when these policies are implemented, their design could led them to complement each other in order to address the complex problem, and they are enough to do it comprehensively.

In order to achieve policy coherence, the Crusade defined a set of programs that, given their design, would be considered as instruments of the strategy for attaining its goal: address the problem of extreme food poverty (which, as mentioned before, is measured in terms of social needs). Ninety programs were linked to each of the seven social needs with the expectation that they would contribute to it, without neglecting the achievement of their own goals (Decree 2013). An example of the lowest degree of policy coherence achieved by the Crusade involves two programs that were obstructing each others' potential to contribute to the broader goal: It was explicitly established in the operation rules of *Prospera* (a conditional transfer program aimed at increasing their income) that their beneficiaries could not benefit from *Pal Sin Hambre* (a food support program). In search for coherence, the design of these two programs was modified, so that the same people could benefit from both and then be able to contribute to address the broader problem (Coneval 2016).

The Crusade also achieved a medium degree of policy coherence, for example, in the programs linked to the social need of social security. Having access to social security entails access to a medical service, to paid medical leaves, and to a system for retirement savings or a pension. Three programs were linked to that social need, however, since the type of support that these programs provide do not include paid leaves or access to a medical service, even if they complement each other, they are not enough to address the problem of lacking access to social security. Therefore, we have programs that are complementary, but that, even if properly implemented, do not solve their shared problem.

The highest degree of policy coherence achieved in the Crusade can be exemplified with the programs selected to grant access to basic housing services. Since the people who are considered in need of access to basic housing services must have (1) electricity, (2) a gas stove, (3) potable water, and (4) a drainage system, some of these programs install distribution lines to deliver electricity, others potable water treatment plants and drainage, and yet others provide gas stoves. With the Crusade, the representatives of two programs modified their targeting so they would each provide a different good or service so that if a household benefits from all these programs it could overcome this social need (Coneval 2016).

Thus, under perfect coherence (an unlikely prospect), we would witness different policy domains conformed by the necessary and sufficient instruments the government has at hand

(programs) to effectively address every dimension of a complex problem. But identifying and implementing a set of coherent programs is not enough to address a social need. Instead, the actors in charge of the design and implementation of each program have to agree upon the objective to which each program is supposed to contribute, as well as upon the way in which it is meant to do it. To put it simply, the administrators of the programs within each ministry need to coordinate in order to determine which modifications have to be made so that the programs do not overlap, and agree to carry them out. The Crusade intends to achieve this through the creation of an inter-ministerial committee at the national level in which the people in charge of implementing these programs in each ministry agree to make the necessary changes so they can actually contribute to each social need without duplicating actions or leaving unattended populations (Decree 2013).

In other words, in the Crusade and in general, not even the most capable official, with an unrealistic ability to control all the possible effects that each program within a policy domain might have, can tackle a complex issue. The problem is that even if a given official could solve the puzzle for a perfectly coherent set of programs (each run by different organizations) within a policy domain, representatives of each program would still need to agree upon the design modifications and have that capacity to implement them. Secondly, assuming the representatives of each program agreed to undertake the design modifications suggested by our extremely capable official, the implementation of perfectly coherent programs (each from a different organization) could be transformed into programs that in practice are incoherent. The independent implementation of programs that are designed to be coherent does not guarantee coherent results. Indeed, the decisions related to policies are not only made at the design stage; the probability of policies to perform as planned in their design depends upon the decisions that will (and should) be made down the implementation stream.

## Policy integration

When different organizations and programs want to jointly address multidimensional public problems, they may use both coordination and policy coherence, but they are not always sufficient. If perfect coordination and policy coherence existed, top officials and/or administrators would work together with the purpose of jointly addressing problems that cut across different organizations and policy domains, and coherent policies would coexist within different policy domains. Yet, organizations and programs would continue to decide over their own structure, budgets, and planning processes even if they had a shared goal—as happened in the USA when trying to address problems related to homeland security, where most of the relevant actors, by not having a shared vision of the problem, continued executing their own programs and actions, failing to actually contribute to the overall goal (See May et al. 2011). Decisions would continue being taken by organizations and programs: for instance, when allocating budgets or defining target populations, the needs, and objectives (as well as indicators and controls) of each program or organization would be prioritized over the broader needs and objectives of the set of organizations and programs in the policy domain. In other words, there would not be a new mandate that encompasses individual components, but an aggregation of coherent programs and coordinated organizations that would keep taking decisions based on goals and priorities defined by them.

So, it could be the case that even if perfect coordination and policy coherence were possible, they still would not be enough to properly address complex issues. In any policy

intervention, there are decisions that need to be taken for the whole of the intervention, not for its components (how to allocate budget, which population to target, when a component is no longer necessary, etc.). Thus, such decisions cannot be based on the individual logic of each organization and program.

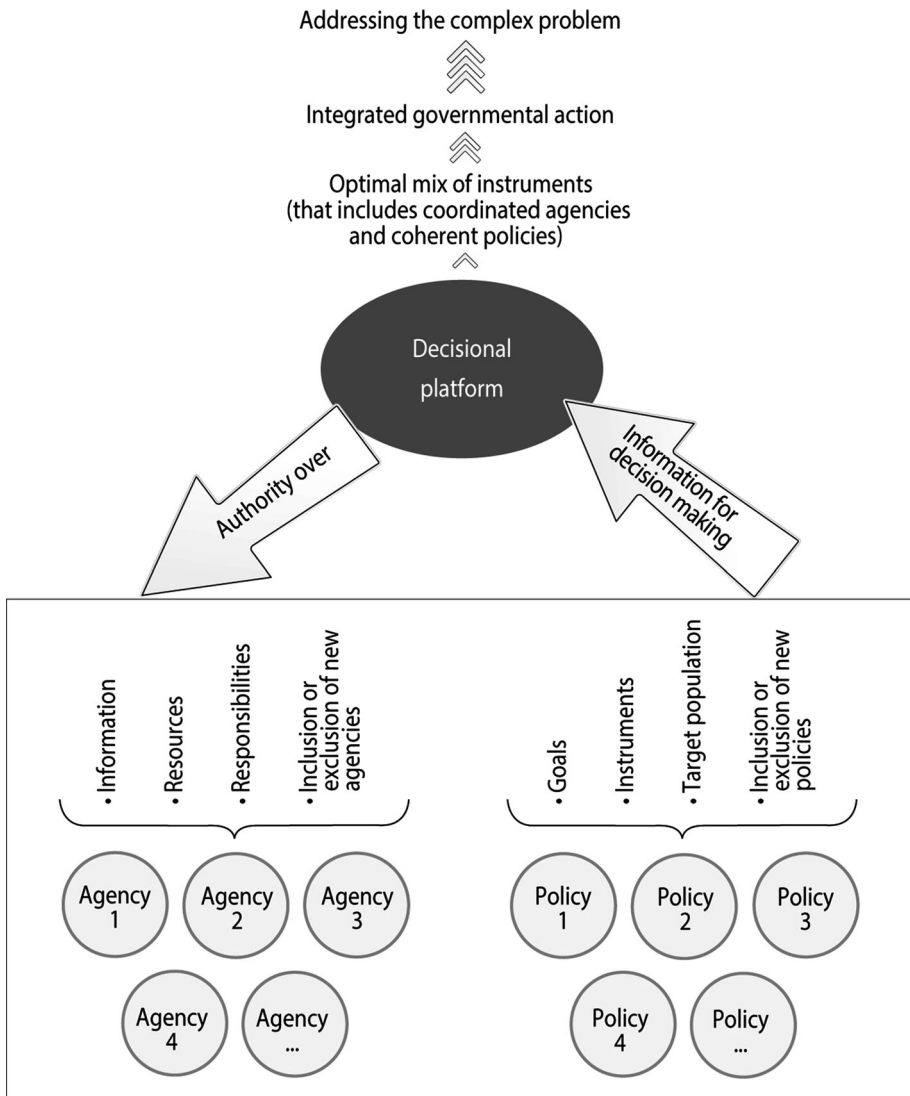
We argue that policy integration is more than the sum of coherence and coordination. Policy integration is not only integrating agencies (à la Peters 2015), or integrating policies (as Rayner and Howlett 2009 would suggest). Integrating policies and organizations is more than just making them compatible and articulated. It entails a new mandate by which policies and organization work under a new logic, subordinating their objectives to a *new* overall goal, and making their decisions based on the needs and priorities derived from the complex problem (see Fig. 1).

We define policy integration as the process of making strategic and administrative decisions aimed at solving a complex problem. Solving this complex problem is a goal that encompasses—but exceeds—the programs’ and agencies’ individual goals. Thus, programs and agencies are now part of an overall strategy where decisions are made for the whole, by a new decision maker.

It is a *process of making strategic and administrative decisions* along the whole policy process. Policy integration is a process that starts by understanding a public problem as a complex one (with multiple dimensions). After the definition of a complex problem, once each of its dimensions is specified, the process of policy integration means choosing the components (agencies and programs) needed to solve it. There is, consequently, a new causal theory that specifies how the combination of these components would achieve the broader goal of solving the complex problem. As any other government intervention aimed at addressing a public problem, these decisions could be a triggered by a legislative change or an executive order, and they can be established in norms or just in a political mandate. Thus, it can be labeled as a new strategy or as a new overarching policy. As with any other process of policy making, the sequence may vary and the actors involved change depending on the specific circumstances.

Policy integration is not just a moment in which an overall goal or central priority is set, with the expectation that, after doing so, all the instruments interact and automatically achieve it. Unlike coordination and policy coherence (that tend to be more evident during the implementation and design stages, respectively), policy integration is a process guided by a decisional principle that may have an effect on every level of management and every stage of the policy process, and seeks to modify the behavior of both top officials and policy administrators. In practical terms, it means that, at every moment of the policy process, there is a decision-making body making decisions based on a new logic—that of addressing a complex problem (Lenschow 2002; Nollkaemper 2002). The focus of the decisions taken by the decision-making body “should not be on the functioning of specific instruments with respect to one specific criterion, but rather upon the functioning of the whole policy mix [...]” (Howlett and del Rio 2015: 1239).

Policy integration requires a *decision-making body* with authority over the components of the whole new strategy or policy. Setting a new goal and articulating policies and programs as components to achieve, it is a decision that can be made only by an actor with authority over all of them (it cannot be a result of coordination). Whether it is a committee integrated by ministers, a cabinet, a “tsar,” or a specific officer, this figure has authority for making decisions over the all the components oriented to address the complex problem. The same logic would apply whether it is a case of horizontal (inter-ministerial) or vertical (intergovernmental) integration (Bouckaert et al. 2010).



**Fig. 1** The process of policy integration. *Source:* own elaboration

The authority embedded in this decision maker is enough for it to decide whether new programs or organizations should be created, eliminated, modified, or subordinated to another; to redefine the allocation of resources (financial and human) among programs or agencies; to prioritize target populations; and to generate new tools or mechanisms for making strategic decisions (including how to define success and how to evaluate). To make these decisions, there should be information about the contribution of each component (i.e., the performance of each program or agency) not in terms of their own goals, but of those of the new strategy.

Policy integration thus requires defining a decision-making body that addresses a broader problem, rather than just addressing separately (even if done in a coherent and

coordinated manner) specific dimensions of that problem. If this decision-making body were to be conformed by the ministers of a country, for example, they would modify programs, organizations, and resources depending on their performance and success toward addressing the complex problem. Unlike a group of ministers working coordinately, each of the parts would give up their autonomy and resources on behalf of the success of the new strategy, because they would be acting not as ministers but as members of a new structure, by which they are embedded with a new power. The same would happen if this decision-making body was embodied in a “tsar,” for example. He would have control over every instrument (programs and organizations) and would move (or remove them) strategically to address a complex problem.

Policy integration is different from just making policies align with another, already existing, specific policy. In other words, policy integration is not just making every policy consistent with another one perceived to be more important, for example, environmental policy (cf. Adelle and Russel 2013; Jordan and Lenchow 2010). This conceptualization allows for a further important distinction: *Policy integration is not a result*. For some authors, policy integration is a complex problem being solved (Jordan and Lenchow 2010; Mickwitz and Kivimaa 2007). Such definition entails a circular argument: If integration is the solution to complex problems, then whenever problems were not solved it was because there was no integration. It is necessary to differentiate the process (integration) from its outcome (integrated government actions) and from its consequences (solved complex problems).

Policy integration may lead to integrated policies, but not necessarily to the resolution of a complex problem. That would depend not only on a good design of the strategy (i.e., the causality of its theory of change) but also on its implementation (which may depend on coordination, institutional capacities, financial resources, timing, and context, among other features). If the process of policy integration is successful, government action would be less fragmented. And only if this action is effective, the complex problem would be solved. The process may end up in only partial integration, with some components being integrated while others remain fragmented (see Vince 2015). Yet, even a fully integrated policy could fail in solving the complex problem.

As it happens with coherence or with coordination, there can be different types of policy integration, depending on the *capacity* of the decision-making body for taking decisions regarding the instruments needed for addressing a complex problem. At the same time, this capacity depends on the *authority* of the decision-making body, and the *information* available for making decisions. To put it simply, its capacity has to do with the actual ability to decide over the programs, agencies, financial, and human resources regarded as instruments for addressing the complex problem. It also depends on having the necessary information for knowing what to decide about the programs, agencies, financial, and human resources. The higher the level of policy integration, the more its achievement would depend on positive integration (as opposed to negative integration), that is, on the setting of rules that bound the parts to a common goal; see Scharpf (1999), because the parts involved would need to give up control over more aspects of their programs, organizations, and the resources they have to operate them.

The first level of policy integration would be achieved when the decision-making body’s capacity is limited to making decisions over the operational and design aspects of the instruments (programs and agencies) of the overall strategy. The decisions that could actually be taken would be to make some programs modify their design to widen the population they are addressing, to change their operation prioritizing one geographical demarcation over another, or to modify any other attribute of their design. In the National



Crusade's against Hunger, this level of integration was achieved when the inter-ministerial committee decided that every program linked to the Crusade should modify their operation and, instead of targeting according to their own information, they would first apply a socioeconomic questionnaire to every person that could potentially benefit from them. This questionnaire would allow each program/organization to get information about the social needs each household has and therefore to inform their decisions not only with their own data, but with data associated with the overall strategy of the Crusade (Coneval 2016).

A second level of policy integration would be reached when the decision-making body has the capacity to redefine the design, modify the operation, and even reallocate the responsibilities and resources that the organizations and programs already have. The decisions would be oriented to increase the budget of one program at the expense of another one or to modify the type of a support that provide a set of programs. This means that, at this level of policy integration, the parts would give up control over the way they allocate their resources within their agencies and programs, or over the design's attributes of the existent programs, in order to better contribute to addressing the complex problem. This level of integration was achieved in the Crusade when the inter-ministerial commission decided to merge two programs into one. Two of the programs that were supposed to contribute to the social need of access of quality housing provided the same kind of supports (they both built floors, roofs, ceilings, and/or additional rooms to avoid overcrowding), although they did target different people. By the end of 2015, as part of a reorganization of the federal budget, it was decided that both programs would become a single one in order to be more efficient in addressing the social need of access of quality housing (Coneval 2016).

The highest level of policy integration is when the decision-making body has the capacity to use and modify the existent instruments (programs and agencies) and also to create new ones or eliminate them. The decisions would imply, for instance, reallocating budgets among programs, eliminating a program or changing the hierarchical relationship between two organizations. At this level, there is authority not only over the design and operation of already existing programs or organizations, but over their very existence. The Crusade has not actually achieved this level of policy integration. However, by mid-2016, the inter-ministerial commission was planning to make some changes in order to increase the instruments the Crusade has to achieve its goal. Specifically, the inter-ministerial commission was seeking to modify the rules that guide how states and municipalities should invest the resources that they annually receive from the federal government to develop infrastructure that directly benefit the poorest population. The modifications, intended to be in place by 2017, would reorient the planning of those resources by local governments toward the social needs that the Crusade seeks to address. This would mean that local governments would be bound to indicate which of their social programs can contribute to address each social need, and to make them complementary to those of the federal government (Technical Secretariat for the National Crusade Against Hunger 2016).

## Observing coordination, coherence, and policy integration

In the previous sections, we have shown that coordination, policy coherence, and policy integration are related but substantially different concepts. These three concepts can be observed by looking at specific attributes of policies and organizations. As the example of the National Crusade against Hunger in Mexico has shown, the same strategy may involve

**Table 2** Coordination, coherence, and integration in practice Source: own elaboration

	Coordination	Policy coherence	Policy integration
Objects	Ministries and agencies from three levels of government	Social programs	Inter-ministerial commission's decisions regarding how to address social needs
Expected performance	Officials from different ministries and levels of government gather at the Crusade's inter-Ministerial Committees to share the necessary information and make joint decisions to be more efficient in addressing extreme food poverty	Ninety programs are oriented toward one or more social needs in order to eliminate redundancies among them	Planning, budgeting, and targeting decisions are taken in order to fulfill the Crusade's goal of addressing extreme food poverty, not each program/organizations' goals
Results (examples)	<p>Level 1: federal, state, and municipal officials <i>share information</i> about their programs' goals and resources</p> <p>Level 2: after exchanging information, federal officials <i>modified the targeting of their programs</i></p> <p>Level 3: a working group with officials from different ministries <i>jointly agree</i> to modify the implementation of their programs</p>	<p>Level 1: modification in programs' design, <i>to prevent them from obstructing</i> each other</p> <p>Level 2: modification in programs' design, <i>to make them complementary</i></p> <p>Level 3: modification in programs' design, <i>to make sure that, together, they reach the goal</i> of overcoming a social need</p>	<p>Level 1: the inter-ministerial commission <i>decided to modify the programs' operation</i> by establishing a shared source of information for decision making in each program/organization oriented toward the broader goal</p> <p>Level 2: the inter-ministerial commission <i>merged two programs to increase their effectiveness</i> for achieving the broader goal</p> <p>Level 3: the inter-ministerial commission wants to <i>create new instruments</i> by changing the rules guiding how states and municipal governments use their social budget to direct it toward the broader goal (planned for 2017)</p>
Reasons for different performances	The responsibilities and tasks of the actors involved were not clearly defined	Changes in programs operating rules were mainly focused on adjusting their procedures, not their goals, targeting or instruments	<p>Inter-ministerial commission did not enjoy enough authority to modify all programs/organizations</p> <p>Information was not enough to show how each component contributed to the overall goal</p>

coordination, coherence, and integration at different moments. With the Crusade, the Mexican government tried to address a complex problem (extreme food poverty) by overcoming fragmented government actions. To do so, it created processes and allocate responsibilities

among organization's representatives so they would share information and align their performance (coordination), it tried to modify programs designed to reduce duplications in social programs and to create complementarities among them (policy coherence), and, more ambitiously, it aimed at developing a new logic of decision making, based on aggregated social needs, rather than on the specific objectives of each program or organization.

As stated before, policy integration, coordination, and policy coherence are not results but processes, which is why it cannot be said that a policy or strategy absolutely succeeded or failed in achieving any of them. The case of the Crusade clearly demonstrates this point. Its progress toward achieving coordination, policy coherence, or policy integration was not only different in each case, but also within each of the components (ministries, agencies and programs) that conformed this strategy. Some ministries attained higher levels of coordination than others, just as one set of programs oriented toward a given social need became more coherent than those oriented toward another social need (Coneval 2016). Moreover, not every decision taken by the inter-ministerial commission was intended to modify the programs and organizations (including their financial and human resources) involved in the Crusade in order to contribute to solve the problem of extreme food poverty.

In Table 2, we use the experience of the Crusade to show how these distinctions operate in practice.

## Conclusions

Conceptual clarity is an essential attribute of any discussion in the social sciences. Beyond attractive labels and academic fashions, it is important to make sure that concepts reflect their intended meaning. If we have the right conceptual tools, we will be in a better position to understand how governments try to address complex problems. To contribute to our understanding of policy integration and its application, we have offered new definitions and operationalizations for concepts that are often used interchangeably. We do not aim at a general theory of policy integration (cf. Candel and Biesbroek 2016), but to a more essential goal: conceptual clarity. Distinguishing among coordination, policy coherence, and policy integration allows for a better understanding of how governments address complex, cross-cutting problems. We have shown that these concepts are analytically differentiable and empirically observable, as they are ways of addressing fragmented government action, but they are not synonyms. Rather, they refer to different processes and different units of analysis.

Policy integration is substantively different from policy coherence and policy coordination. Coordination is a process through which organizations share knowledge and information and their members have clearly defined responsibilities so they can make joint decisions. Coherence implies making programs' design complementary in their objectives, instruments, or target populations, so not only do they not overlap or leave gaps, but also they reinforce each other to address a complex problem. Policy integration is a process where decisions are taken in order to achieve a common greater goal of solving a complex problem. It entails a new decisional principle for the design and operation of policies aimed at solving, in tandem, a complex problem. Integration is not a magic recipe for solving complex problems<sup>3</sup>; it is a strategy for making strategic and administrative decisions to overcome the fragmentation of government action.

<sup>3</sup> Some governments (see Vince 2015; Vince and Nursey-Bray 2013; Jay et al. 2013) "are steering away from large-scale integrated approaches that were once advocated as solutions to [complex problems]" (Vince 2015).

We have analyzed one strategy pursued by one government, but the research agenda should look much further. There are new questions regarding policy integration that would arise if we looked at the challenge of fragmentation when there are two or more governments involved, whether in a federal system or in a supranational space (i.e., the European Union). We could also learn more from a systematic analysis of what fosters and prevents integration in a policy area and what are the determinants of effectiveness of each of these approaches when dealing with complex problems. Much work is needed on practical methodologies for assessing degrees of coordination, coherence, and integration.

If we want to effectively address complex problems, we need to understand much more about what can be done to overcome fragmented government action and about the degrees of integration that may be attainable and desirable in different policy domains.

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