

# Horizontal policy coherence starts with problem definition: Unpacking the EU integrated energy-climate approach

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## Abstract

The existing policy coherence literature usually takes problem definition for granted. Building on the case of the Energy Policy for Europe we argue that a focus on shifting problem definitions adds depth to the analysis of policy coherence as it allows us to problematize the standard on which the judgment of coherence is based. We further argue that problem definition is instrumental in enabling certain horizontal policy options. Empirically, the European Union's (EU's) support of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies illustrates that policy coherence between EU energy and environmental policies is increasingly conceptualized as an integrated approach headed for climate change mitigation and a low-carbon economy. We show that by shifting the focus of policy integration and coherence from environment to climate policy, CCS moved from the margins to the center of available policy options. Arguably, this comes at the expense of coherence if viewed from a broader sustainable development perspective.

## KEYWORDS

carbon capture and storage, climate change, discourse, energy policy, low-carbon economy, policy coherence, problem definition, sustainable development

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Policy coherence is a recurring theme in policy analysis and among policy-makers because it is widely considered crucial for policy effectiveness and a central criterion for legitimate governance. The horizontally and vertically fragmented nature of the European Union (EU) and its increasingly heterogeneous membership pose particular challenges for policy coherence. In light of conflictual policy objectives and different levels of institutionalization across policy fields, policy coherence has been mainly discussed with regard to the EU's external actions (Den Hertog & Stroß, 2011; Gebhard, 2011; Marangoni & Raube, 2014). In particular, the notion of “policy coherence for development” has gained attention among academics and practitioners (Carbone, 2009). Also with regard to the EU's internal policies, we can build on a rich research tradition. The concepts of “mainstreaming” (most notably “gender mainstreaming”; e.g., Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000; Stratigaki, 2005) or “policy integration” (most prominently “environmental policy integration”, EPI; e.g., Nilsson & Eckerberg, 2007;

Lenschow, 2002) and more recently climate policy integration (CPI; e.g., Nilsson & Nilsson, 2005; Adelle & Russel, 2013; Dupont, 2016) have received considerable attention in the literature. Normatively, much of the debate centers on the question of whether mainstreaming or integration merely aim at *policy consistency* in the sense of “the absence of contradictions within and between individual policies” (Den Hertog & Stroß, 2011, p. 4) or whether they follow the notion of horizontal *policy coherence* in looking for “the synergic and systematic support towards the achievement of common objectives within and across individual policies” (*ibid.*).

The institutional challenge associated with horizontal policy coherence (but similarly with the weaker concept of policy consistency) has been particularly relevant to policy-makers at the EU level and academics alike. The set-up of the Juncker Commission—including strong coordinating roles for vice-presidents responsible for overarching projects such as the Energy Union—is one of the latest institutional reforms to enhance horizontal policy coherence (Rhinard, 2014). Other institutional solutions to improve policy coherence are reflected



most notably in the literature on EPI (Jordan & Lenschow, 2008; for a review see Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). Implications of institutional design are addressed elsewhere in this special issue, both directly (see the contribution by Skovgaard) and indirectly in structuring actor relations and access to policy-making (see the contribution by Detters).

In this article we follow critics of a narrow institutional perspective and suggest that the concept—"what it means and how it can be assessed"—needs to be studied more closely (Nilsson et al., 2012, p. 396, emphasis added). To problematize the meaning of policy coherence, we therefore question the assumed "positive" description of coherence and diverge from the strand in policy coherence research that tends to take common objectives as a starting point for either assessing substantive policy outcomes (e.g., problems of incoherence on the ground) or explaining policy (in)coherence, drawing on rationalist and institutionalist insights (Nilsson et al., 2012). We instead follow the ideational turn observable in the EPI literature (most explicitly in Nilsson & Eckerberg, 2007) as well as recent writings on the nexus between energy, climate and environment policy (e.g., Bocquillon in this issue; Kögl & Kurze, 2013; Kurze, 2018; Kurze & Lenschow, 2012; Solorio, Bechberger, & Popartan, 2013) in looking for the discursive dynamics prestructuring the thinking of policy-makers and thus what they define as the prevailing problem to be solved, hence framing the meaning of policy coherence.

The policy coherence literature as such has so far not focused on this aspect of *problem definition*. We argue, however, that a "comprehensive coherence analysis" (Nilsson et al., 2012, p. 397) should start with problem definitions. To address this gap in the existing literature we thus draw on discursive approaches to policy analysis. Although policy coherence has hardly been a major topic in discourse research (for a few exceptions see Bocquillon in this issue; Selianko & Lenschow, 2015; Thede, 2013), various discursive policy studies persuasively reveal the discursive nature of problem definitions and respective implications for the range of coherent policy options (e.g., Feindt & Oels, 2005; Fischer & Forester, 1993; Hajer, 1995; Wagenaar, 2011). Thus, Thede (2013) emphasizes for instance the changing meanings of policy coherence for development and related policy practices as well as power relations. This argument is largely based on the assumption that language is not a neutral medium, but that the terms and concepts (i.e., discourses) give (political) *meaning* to physical and social problems (Hajer, 1995). We therefore follow the "recognition of the discursive construction of policy problems" (Bacchi, 2000, p. 48) and thereby introduce a critical reading of the meanings of policy coherence. Strength of the discursive perspective is indeed its focus on diverging meanings and potential tensions as well as inconsistencies arising in the attempt to construct a "coherent" EU policy.

To develop our argument, we analyze how in energy policy a discursive shift in problem definition contributed to a shift in horizontal policy coherence from a general environmental to a more narrow climate-oriented perspective. Coherence between energy and climate policy has become a core aspiration of policy-makers in the EU, as the adoption of common objectives (the so-called 20–20–20 targets) by the European Council in March 2007 shows (European Council, 2007). In addition, various measures of CPI, that is, measures focusing on the objective to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, have been introduced in recent years (Adelle & Russel, 2013; Dupont,

2016; Nilsson & Nilsson, 2005). Even more importantly for our argument is that synergies between EU energy and climate policies are mostly taken for granted (e.g., Dupont, 2016; Dupont & Oberthür, 2012), while conflicts with a wider environmental agenda are often ignored and/or marginalized. Hence, it is argued that policy coherence between EU energy and climate policies is generally desired, but the integrated energy-climate approach is not without tensions.

Following this introduction, we outline in more detail the basic assumptions defining our discursive perspective on policy coherence as well as our empirical research approach. The ensuing analysis will first focus on changing problem definitions: we show how the EU moved from a comprehensive definition of the problems occurring from energy production and consumption to a narrower definition focusing exclusively on the problem of GHG emissions at the beginning of the 2000s. The main argument of this article is that this changing discursive problem definition significantly affects what counts as coherence of energy and environment (or more narrowly, climate) policy in the EU. Second, we highlight how this discursive shift enables new horizontal policy options. A critical example in this respect is the EU's substantial support of the commercial deployment of carbon capture and storage (CCS), which is one of the few energy technologies that have been developed exclusively to address the common objective of reducing GHG emissions. In the final part, we summarize our main findings and highlight the contribution of our chosen discourse approach to the policy coherence literature.

## 2 | DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE AND RESEARCH APPROACH

Discourse analysis has become a well-established, yet highly fragmented field of social science research (Keller, 2007). We adopt a discursive perspective which builds on social constructivist assumptions as well as Foucault's understanding of discourse (Foucault, 1981, p. 74). Discourses are thus defined as a "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices" (Hajer, 2005, p. 300). This social constructivist strand of discourse research, represented most prominently by Maarten Hajer, is also referred to as *argumentative discourse analysis* (ADA). ADA highlights how actors' articulations and discursive structures are mutually constitutive (Hajer, 1995; Keller, 2008; Kurze, 2018). Discourses are (re)produced strategically by "policy entrepreneurs" (see for instance Bocquillon in this issue), but at the same time, "human activity is shaped and constrained by discourse" (Cotton, Rattle, & Van Alstine, 2014, p. 429). Hence, policy-makers "can only make sense of the world by drawing on the terms of the discourses available to them" (Hajer, 1995, p. 53). Indeed, policy-makers tend to draw on terms, concepts and categories provided by established and accepted discourses to advance their particular policy agenda (Schwab-Trapp, 2006, pp. 58–59). With regard to problem definition, Diez describes discursive power as a power that "makes us understand certain problems in certain ways, and pose questions accordingly. It thereby limits the range of alternative policy options, and enables us to take on others" (Diez, 1999, p. 603). Against this theoretical background, we

do not focus on the strategic use of discourses but on the *structuring capacity of policy discourses*, which enable and constrain how actors define problems and hence policy coherence.

Following Hajer's suggestions regarding the implementation of ADA (Hajer, 2005, pp. 306–307), we first explored general developments in EU energy and climate policy based on media coverage, policy-oriented literature as well as official documents (i.e., desk research). This overall survey provided a “first reading of events” (Hajer, 2005, p. 306) and led us to the impression that the problem of climate change gained a particularly prominent status in EU energy policy debates from 2000 onwards. We further explored the policy fields as well as the interplay of energy and climate policy by conducting semistructured expert interviews ( $n = 14$ ) with policy-makers based in Brussels (see Table 1). These interviews, conducted in 2008 and 2011, were very helpful to gain an overview of the different positions and arguments used in policy debates. Overall, our initial impression regarding the increasing importance of climate change (i.e., a specific environmental problem) was clearly supported by the interviews.

However, to reconstruct potential discursive shifts in problem definitions and the implications for the meaning of policy coherence, a longer period had to be considered than the one presented in the interviews. Hence, the textual analysis and the results presented in this paper are based on official documents dating from the late 1980s until 2014 (see Table 1). The documentary data are thereby not used as an objective source of information, but are approached

from an interpretative standpoint. Documents are thus taken to display and create specific meanings of policy coherence. We were particularly interested in analyzing *programmatic* policy documents that have a policy-guiding function, such as the Brundtland Report, European Commission Green Papers and White Papers, European Council Conclusions as well as Environmental Action Programmes.

In addition, we refer to secondary sources to summarize the basic characteristics of the policy discourse of *sustainable development* and the related *low-carbon economy* discourse. Certainly, in policy-making practice there is rarely one single discourse shaping problem definitions and the meaning of what counts as policy coherence. However, following the well-established approach in qualitative interpretative research, we returned to these two ideal-type discourses and illustrate our arguments with reference to key examples from the selected documents (Kelle & Kluge, 2010; Kuckartz, 2012). Overall, the main aim of the document analysis is to trace discursive shifts regarding problem definitions and respective understandings of policy coherence in the sphere of EU energy and climate policy.

### 3 | DISCURSIVE SHIFTS IN PROBLEM DEFINITIONS AND POLICY COHERENCE

In the ensuing analysis we will show that horizontal policy coherence was initially built on an understanding of climate policy as a *subfield*

**TABLE 1** Data basis

Types of data	
Interviews	European Commission ( $n = 4$ )
	European Parliament ( $n = 5$ )
	General Secretariat of the Council of the EU ( $n = 3$ )
	Environmental NGOs ( $n = 1$ )
	Members of the European Parliament ( $n = 1$ )
Selected key documents	
1980s/1990s	Our Common Future (1987), WCED
	Energy and Environment (1990), European Commission (EC)
	Towards Sustainability (1992), EC
	An Energy Policy for the European Union (1995), EC
	Partnership for Integration (1998), EC
2000s	Integrating Environment and Sustainable Development into Energy and Transport Policies: Review Report 2001 and Implementation Strategies (2001), EC
	A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development (2001), EC
	Winning the Battle against Global Climate Change (2005), EC
	A European Strategy for Sustainable, Competitive and Secure Energy (2006), EC
	European Council Conclusions, March (2006)
	Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy, (2006), Council of the European Union, (2006)
	An Energy Policy for Europe, (2007), EC
	European Council Conclusions, March (2007)
	The Strategic Energy Technology Plan: Towards a Low Carbon Future (2007), EC
	A Roadmap for Moving to a Competitive Low Carbon Economy in 2050 (2011), EC
	Energy Roadmap 2050, (2011), EC
Communication on the Future of Carbon Capture and Storage in Europe, (2013), EC	
A Policy Framework for Climate and Energy in the Period from 2020 to 2030 (2014), EC	
European Council Conclusions, October (2014)	



of environmental policy. While the reduction of GHG emissions was deemed as a prominent linkage calling for coherent policy solutions, this was only one aspect in a wider array of policy problems calling for the development of a common approach between energy and environment policy. With the gradual emancipation of climate policy from its original “mother policy” environment and with the gradual domination of climate over environmental policy, the focus of coherent policy-making narrowed at the beginning of the 2000s. Based on ADA we will focus on the *structuring capacity of the two policy discourses*, particularly on the terms in which problems and policy coherence are defined. We begin with the discourse of sustainable development, which serves as a “metadiscourse” (Ferguson, 2015, p. 17) in environmental as well as related policy debates. Thus, we assume that this discourse also plays a key role in structuring what policy coherence means and how it is advanced in EU energy and climate policy. We then argue that the sustainable development discourse has been modified in current EU policy-making processes, emphasizing climate change and the transition to a low-carbon economy. This discursive shift, we argue, is signified by a narrow problem definition and hence a change in the meaning of policy coherence. Finally, we analyze how the emerging policy discourse of a low-carbon economy enables policy-makers to promote controversial horizontal policy options, such as CCS.

### 3.1 | The overarching sustainable development discourse and environmental policy integration

The concept of sustainable development was placed on the political agenda by the United Nations (UN) in the late 1980s. The so called Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 8). Thus, sustainable development does not imply a fundamental critique of the current capitalist system or more specifically the aspiration of economic growth as such. On the contrary, economic growth is considered necessary in particular to satisfy the “legitimate needs of the world’s poor” (Dryzek, 1997, p. 129). Economic growth is therefore promoted also in the Brundtland Report, but it “should be guided in ways that are both environmental benign and socially just” (Dryzek, 1997, p. 129). Thus, the notion of sustainable development as outlined in the Brundtland Report, which has also been adopted as such in sustainable development strategies of the EU (European Commission, 1992, 2001b; European Council, 2006), emphasizes that economic growth, environmental protection as well as social objectives are compatible and even mutually reinforcing.

Besides this overarching win-win perspective generally associated with the sustainable development discourse, the Brundtland Report also points at a specific governance approach to achieving the long-term goal of sustainable development: “The challenges are both interdependent and integrated, requiring *comprehensive approaches* and popular participation” (WCED, 1987, p. 9, emphasis added). Hence, sustainability “emphasizes the *interconnectedness of different problems* and scales, as well as the long-term and indirect effects of actions that result from it” (Voß, Bauknecht, & Kemp, 2006, p. 4, emphasis added). Reproducing the sustainable development discourse

therefore implies accepting the complexity of policy problems and construct solutions accordingly. In other words, proposing simple solutions to single problems does not fit the sustainable development discourse. Instead, a *comprehensive problem definition* and integrated solutions are taken here as the most relevant building blocks of the sustainable development discourse, because they imply the need for enhanced vertical and horizontal policy coherence.

In the second part the Brundtland Report turns to mostly sectoral challenges, including the energy challenge to ensure “its long-term availability in increasing quantities from sources that are dependable, safe, and environmentally sound” (WCED, 1987, p. 168), warning that “[c]hoices must be made, but in the certain knowledge that choosing an energy strategy inevitably means choosing an environmental strategy” (ibid. emphasis added), in other words, pointing to implications for policy (in)coherence. In early EU energy and climate policy the notion of sustainability is also primarily linked to the integration of environmental concerns in “the formulation and implementation of policies that regulate economic activities” (Liberatore, 1997, p. 107).

While early Environmental Action Programs of the EU had already established the EPI principle and set the stage for a corresponding evolution of the EC/EU Treaties, it was the so-called Cardiff process that developed—but with only partial success—EPI into an operational practice (Lenschow, 2002b). During the British presidency in 1998 the European Council endorsed a Commission strategy “Partnership for Integration” (European Commission, 1998) where all EU institutions and the member states were called to collect and exchange “best practice,” identify priority issues and review organizational arrangements. In December 1998 at the Vienna Summit the Energy Council presented an initial report reflecting on performance in the sector and developing perspectives on future sectoral EPI, followed in 2001 by a DG TREN (transport and energy) review with proposals for sectoral EPI indicators (European Commission, 2001a). These documents show that reflections on the link between energy and environmental policy were well underway in this sector, the energy-environment nexus being something like a trendsetter in the wider EPI strategy of the EU.

### 3.2 | Sustainable development discourse defining the energy-environment nexus in the 1990s

The relevance of the sustainable development discourse is well illustrated by the following four programmatic policy documents published in the 1990s. The Commission communication to the Council entitled “Energy and the Environment” constitutes a first clear manifestation of the integrative approach encouraged by the emerging global sustainable development discourse (European Commission, 1990, p. 3). In this context the “greenhouse effect” is already recognized as a key challenge “that accentuates the importance of the environmental dimension in energy policy” (ibid., p. 6). Climate change is clearly not a new topic on the energy-environment agenda, but in the early 1990s climate change was embedded in a broader discourse of sustainable development, which emphasizes the complexity of problems, avoiding a single issue perspective. Indeed, a broad range of problems are addressed in this first EU policy document on “Energy and the Environment.” “Selected environmental effects of the energy sector” (ibid., p. 7a) are presented in a table, ranging from air and water

pollution, to “pipeline impacts on wild life” and the disturbance of “natural habitat” as well as “change in ecosystems” (ibid.). Furthermore, even potential risks for “human health” are included (ibid.). Overall, the Commission states that impacts of “routine energy sector activities” are “manyfold, complex and often interwoven. There are no simple solutions to the problems” (ibid., p. 7).

Another prominent manifestation of the sustainable development discourse taking hold in the EU’s policy discourse is the Fifth Environmental Action Programme entitled “Towards Sustainability” (European Commission, 1992). It covered the period from 1992 to 2000 and describes “energy policy [as] a key factor in the achievement of sustainable development” (ibid., p. 31). Regarding again our focus on the way in which problems are defined, the *comprehensive problem definition* of the sustainable development discourse becomes clearly apparent here, too:

*The Community’s energy sector continues to be confronted with local and regional environmental problems such as acidification. In addition, concerns about the global aspects of energy policy and their effects on the environment are growing in importance. A long-term strategy must be devised which ensures that solutions for one problem do not exacerbate another. The global challenge of the future will be to ensure that economic growth, efficient and secure energy supplies and a clean environment are compatible objectives. (ibid., emphasis added)*

Third, key features of the sustainable development discourse—the appeal to more policy coherence (i.e., the integration principle) and a comprehensive problem definition—are also reflected in the energy strategy of the EU adopted in 1995. Concerning the former, it states in the White Paper “An Energy Policy for the European Union”:

*The energy sector must be included in any environmental protection policy, since every energy action has some impact on the environment, be it at the local, regional or global level [...] integrating environmental concerns has become one of the key objectives of energy policy. Such an integrated energy/environmental framework contributes to the achievement of sustainable development. (European Commission, 1995, p. 9, emphasis added)*

Again, while “global warming” is considered in the White Paper as one of the pressing global problems, it is not seen as the main environmental problem affecting energy policy making (ibid.). On the contrary, a comprehensive problem definition is adopted:

*It must also be borne in mind that environmental problems are complex and actions have to be avoided that solve one specific environmental problem, aggravate or even create new environmental difficulties and lead to no net environmental benefit. (ibid., emphasis added)*

Finally, the Commission strategy paper “Partnership for Integration” (European Commission, 1998) was crucial for making the EPI principle operational in European policy-making. Climate change does

again receive special attention due to its international salience. However, the Commission asked to:

*recognise the importance of the environmental dimension in the decisions which are soon to be taken in the context of both Agenda 2000 and the Community strategy for implementing the Kyoto Protocol and accordingly to ask the Council to use these as test cases for the application of the proposed guidelines (ibid., p. 4, emphasis added).*

Thus, these four key strategy documents all use core terms and categories characteristic of the sustainable development discourse. They exemplify in particular that energy and environment policy were not primarily driven by a single policy problem (i.e., global climate change), but by a broad set of local, regional and global environmental problems to be dealt with in an integrated manner. In sum, throughout the 1990s synergies were increasingly fostered between energy and environment policy based on a comprehensive problem definition informed by the sustainable development discourse. Combating climate change was at that time still seen as a subfield of the environmental policy agenda. Horizontal policy coherence was thus mainly understood in terms of integrating *environmental* concerns in the economically relevant energy sector. In the following we argue that increasing political attention given exclusively to the problem of climate change gradually changed the meaning of horizontal policy coherence and how it is advanced.

### 3.3 | Climate change and the emergence of a low-carbon economy discourse

In the past decade climate change has clearly become one of the main drivers of EU energy and environmental policy (Buchan, 2009, 2010; Lenschow, 2010). We argue that the increasing attention given to climate policy, especially since the release of the Stern Review in 2006 and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report in 2007, is accompanied by a narrower problem definition and the emergence of a new policy *discourse of a low-carbon economy*. Like the sustainable development discourse, this specific EU policy discourse emphasizes a positive sum perspective on economic growth and climate protection. Thus, as pointed out before, sustainable development and varieties of this discourse “share an acceptance of the capitalist economic model” and a “commitment to perpetual economic growth” (Tienhaara, 2014, p. 194). However, in contrast to the sustainable development discourse, climate change is defined in the low-carbon economy discourse as the *main* (environmental) problem (Kurze, 2018). The key objective is therefore to decouple economic growth/energy supply from GHG emissions instead of decoupling it from resource use/environmental harm more generally (Tienhaara, 2014, p. 194). From this perspective, technological solutions, that is, all low-carbon technologies available, should contribute to this decoupling effort (for a detailed discussion see Kurze, 2018).

Potential conflicts of the decarbonization agenda with other nonclimate, environmental objectives (e.g., biodiversity) are marginalized in this discourse. Thus, despite great overlap with the established discourse of sustainable development the inherent “single-problem

perspective" constitutes a unique feature distinguishing the low-carbon economy discourse. Therefore, to focus on solutions to a single (environmental) problem does fit well into the low-carbon economy discourse. We argue that the discursive shift toward a *narrow problem definition* has significant implications for the meaning of horizontal policy coherence. We will illustrate this argument with reference to documents establishing the Energy Policy for Europe (EPE), which promotes a new "integrated approach to climate and energy policy" (European Council, 2007, p. 14, emphasis added).

The process of developing a new EU energy policy was officially launched by the European Commission's Green Paper in March 2006 (European Commission, 2006). It introduces sustainability as one of the three main objectives and key principles of the EPE, next to security of supply and competitiveness, acknowledging the European Commission and the European Council both strongly arguing for a "balanced" approach (ibid., citing European Council, 2006) to these objectives with the European Council calling in particular for "an Energy Policy for Europe, aiming at effective Community policy, coherence between Member States and consistency between actions in different policy areas" (European Council, 2006, p. 13). In short, EU policy-makers drew on terms provided by the established and authoritative sustainable development discourse to define problems and objectives of the new EPE. This is also well illustrated by the Commission's Green Paper "A European Strategy for Sustainable, Competitive and Secure Energy", which defined a sustainable energy policy to include the following aspects:

... (i) developing competitive renewable sources of energy and other low carbon energy sources and carriers, particularly alternative transport fuels, (ii) curbing energy demand within Europe, and (iii) leading global efforts to halt climate change and improve local air quality. (European Commission, 2006, p. 17)

Thus, the *comprehensive problem definition* typical of the sustainable development discourse is routinely reproduced by the Commission. Therefore, policy measures should reach from the global to the local, including both supply and demand policies. However, we can also identify subtle changes in the meaning attributed to sustainability in the energy policy in the policy process (see also Kögl & Kurze, 2013). In line with and actively contributing to the discourse of a low-carbon economy the Commission's communication "An Energy Policy for Europe" (European Commission, 2007a) defines sustainability as follows:

#### Sustainability

Energy accounts for 80% of all greenhouse gas (GHG) emission in the EU; it is at the root of climate change and most air pollution. The EU is committed to addressing this – by reducing EU and worldwide greenhouse gas emissions at a global level to a level that would limit the global temperature increase to 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. However, current energy and transport policies would mean EU CO<sub>2</sub> emissions would increase by around 5% by 2030 and global emissions would rise by 55%. The present energy policies within the EU are not sustainable. (ibid., p. 3, emphasis added)

Thus, sustainability is mainly understood here as the strand of energy policy concerned with the reduction of GHG emissions. The new special focus on climate change is also reproduced in the Energy Action Plan adopted by the European Council in March 2007. Accordingly, the EPE will pursue the following three objectives:

- increasing security of supply;
- ensuring the competitiveness of European economies and the availability of affordable energy;
- promoting environmental sustainability and combating climate change (European Council, 2007: 11, emphasis added).

Combating climate change is discursively isolated from the objective of environmental sustainability and is thereby defined as an energy policy objective in its own right. The EPE agreed upon in 2007 therefore constitutes the beginning of a new "integrated approach to climate and energy policy" (ibid., p. 14) and is part of a broader European transformation project toward a low-carbon economy (European Commission, 2011a, 2011b). The Commission speaks in this context for instance of a "new industrial revolution, accelerating the change to low-carbon growth" (European Commission, 2007a, p. 5).

These quotes from key official documents establishing the EPE reveal a narrower problem definition—focusing on climate change and the reduction of GHG emissions—as well as the long-term goal of a low-carbon economy. In this discursive context, horizontal policy coherence is no longer focused on the integration of environmental concerns but of *climate concerns*. Furthermore, horizontal policy options privileged in this discourse of a low-carbon economy may then also focus exclusively on mitigating GHG emissions. The following section analyzes how this narrow problem definition informed by a low-carbon economy discourse enables policy-makers such as the Commission to promote controversial policy options, in particular CCS.

### 3.4 | Enabling support for Carbon Capture and Storage

A distinguishing feature of the EPE is the move toward binding targets regarding the use of renewables. Although the energy mix is not decided by the EU, European legislation shapes what constitutes the "right" energy mix. With the discourse of a low-carbon economy bringing the *low-carbon criterion* to the center stage in energy policy debates, the European Commission now envisions that the EU's future energy mix

... could include large shares for renewables, sustainable coal and gas, sustainable hydrogen, and, for those member states that want, Generation IV fission power and fusion energy (European Commission, 2007a, p. 16).

Hence, in the context of the low-carbon economy discourse, energy sources are categorized according to their carbon footprint—the lower the better. From a comprehensive problem perspective informed by the sustainable development discourse the interpretation of coherence would vary, in particular regarding coal. To move toward

a low-carbon economy, gas and coal may contribute to the EU's energy mix, as long as their GHG emissions can be reduced via the use of low-carbon technologies, such as CCS (Kurze, 2018; Praetorius, 2009, p. 106). While CCS has been supported in the framework of various R&D programs of the EU since the early 1990s, for quite a long time it was hardly seen as a serious and appropriate policy option, neither at the European nor at the international level (Chiavari, 2010, p. 157; Claes & Frisvold, 2009, pp. 222–223; Meadowcroft & Langhelle, 2009, p. 5). Generally, the focus has been rather on low-carbon policy options such as renewables and energy efficiency. So, during the 1990s “CCS remained the preserve of a narrow group of technical experts in the energy field, who were relatively isolated from the mainstream climate change community” (Meadowcroft & Langhelle, 2009, p. 5).

However, with the ever closer linkage of energy and climate policy *and* the marginalization of wider environmental concerns (i.e., the discursive shift toward a narrow problem definition informed by the low-carbon economy discourse), CCS also emerged in “mainstream” policy debates at the EU level. More precisely, CCS first appeared as a serious mitigation option in the Commission's communication “Winning the Battle against Global Climate Change” (2005) announcing that in the new phase of the European climate policy program “[a]ttention will be paid in particular to energy efficiency, renewable energy, the transport sector (including aviation and maritime transport), and *carbon capture and storage*” (European Commission, 2005, p. 11, emphasis added) and including CCS as one of its technology priorities (ibid., Annex 3).

Furthermore, in the ensuing policy process establishing the EPE, CCS was defined for the first time as a *necessary* low-carbon energy technology to ensure energy security and economic growth in a carbon-constrained world (Claes & Frisvold, 2009, p. 211; European Commission, 2006, European Commission, 2007a; European Council, 2007). Generally, technological solutions play a pivotal role in the EU's energy and climate strategy, which is signified in particular by the first publication of a strategic new energy technology plan entitled “Towards a Low Carbon Future” (European Commission, 2007b). Again, CCS is listed in this document as one of the “[k]ey EU technology challenges for the next 10 years to meet the 2020 targets” (European Commission, 2007b, p. 5).

Even if there has been substantial criticism and uncertainty voiced by various actors and the European public (Climate Action Network Europe et al., 2006; Eurobarometer, 2011; Meadowcroft & Langhelle, 2009, pp. 13–14; The Greens/European Free Alliance, 2006), the importance attached to CCS in the EU is also strongly demonstrated by the comprehensive legal framework, which has been set-up in support of the technology's deployment in Europe. As part of the

energy and climate package adopted in April 2009, the CCS directive actually constitutes “the world's first example of a dedicated CCS legislation” (Chiavari, 2010, p. 151). In addition, substantial financial resources have been allocated to support early CCS demonstration projects, for instance through ETS allowances and the European Energy Programme for Recovery (European Commission, 2014a; European Council, 2014). CCS also plays a key role in most of the current decarbonization scenarios explored in the “Energy Roadmap 2050.” In particular, the so-called “Low Nuclear” scenario assumes a high penetration of CCS (European Commission, 2011b, p. 8). So far, this substantial support for CCS is prevailing among EU policy-makers and politicians (European Commission, 2013, 2014; European Council, 2014). The EU's current policy framework for climate and energy policy strongly reaffirms the necessity to enable the commercial deployment of CCS to meet the EU's GHG objectives: “As theoretical limits of efficiency are being reached and process-related emissions are unavoidable in some sectors, *CCS may be the only option available* to reduce direct emission from industrial processes at the large scale needed in the longer term” (European Commission, 2014b, p. 15).

In sum, the focus on combating climate change as a key energy policy objective and the new long-term vision of a low-carbon economy have enabled the take-up of CCS at the EU level. However, incoherence and conflicts may also come to the fore: investments in energy efficiency, renewables *and* CCS meaningfully contribute to horizontal policy coherence *only* if one applies a narrow problem definition. The evaluation of coherence changes if one applies a more comprehensive problem definition informed by the discourse of sustainable development. As the case of CCS illustrates, the underpinning problem definition may shape which policy options are deemed necessary and legitimate to achieve common objectives.

## 4 | SUMMARY OF RESEARCH RESULTS

In the policy coherence literature, problem definition is mostly taken for granted and the focus is on specific policy objectives and the choice of policy instruments. Following the argumentative turn in policy analysis (Fischer & Forester, 1993) and drawing specifically on ADA (Hajer, 2005), however, this article addressed the analytical level of problem definition to show that the meaning of what counts as policy coherence is contingent (see Table 2). First, we have shown how the policy nexus between energy, environmental and climate policy went through a gradual narrowing of the problem definition and correspondingly a shift to specific (technological) policy solutions that are deemed to achieve a coherent policy package. The initial interpretation of the link between energy and climate policy emerged

**TABLE 2** Contingent meaning of policy coherence

Prevailing policy discourse during the 1990s: Sustainable Development	Emerging policy discourse since the 2000s: Low-carbon economy
<i>Comprehensive problem definition:</i> Climate change is one among other local and regional environmental problems linked to energy production and consumption patterns in Europe.	<i>Narrow problem definition:</i> Global climate change is the main environmental problem linked to energy production and consumption patterns in Europe.
<i>Meaning of horizontal policy coherence:</i> Fostering synergies between energy and environmental policy. The reduction of GHG emissions is <i>one</i> common objective.	<i>Meaning of horizontal policy coherence:</i> Fostering synergies between energy and climate policy. The reduction of GHG emissions is <i>the main</i> common objective.

within a comprehensive discourse of sustainable development. The integration of environmental policy objectives into sectoral policies such as energy was perceived as an operational principle of sustainable development (Lenschow, 2002a, p. 6) and the reduction of GHG emissions was recognized as *one* important objective in this respect among others. Even in the pursuit of this climate-related objective, wider environmental aims and principles of sustainable development remained on the horizon of policy-makers and shaped the identification of policy options. This changed over the years with the policy discourse zooming in on solely a climate-energy linkage. The challenge of achieving policy coherence narrowed down to reducing GHG emissions from the energy chain, marginalizing former consideration of broader sustainability criteria (see also Kurze & Lenschow, 2012; Solorio et al., 2013).

Our analysis traced this evolution and showed in particular how the EU energy policy drifted from a “sustainable development” to a “low-carbon economy” discourse. With the structure of the discourse the policy implications of the discourse also shifted. The set of policy options available to achieve sustainable energy policy by integrating environmental concerns to decision-making (as called for in the Treaties) shifted to a focus on low-carbon technologies, including CCS, which would be perceived as problematic within a wider sustainability discourse.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

In view of these key findings we conclude that the discursive approach is generally beneficial to further our understanding of policy coherence for three main reasons: First, both actor-centered rationalist analyses and institutionalist approaches, which dominate the study of policy coherence and (environmental) policy integration, seem perfectly appropriate to trace the stages of policy formulation and decision-making in the policy process. They reveal how certain conflicts of interests or institutional barriers stand in the way of achieving “the synergic and systematic support towards the achievement of common objectives within and across individual policies” (Den Hertog & Stroß, 2011, p. 4), that is, policy coherence. In building on a taken-for-granted, preunderstanding of the meaning of policy coherence, they may even advance policy recommendations and institutional reform agendas on that basis. However, these approaches overlook that the substance of policy coherence is not objectively given or stable, but emerges from a process of meaning-making and problem definition drawing on terms, concepts and categories provided by established and accepted policy discourses. Thus, certain actor constellations or institutional reforms may serve to stabilize *particular* interpretations of policy coherence, but they are never neutral instruments in the name of coherence per se.

In recognizing the discursive construction of problems as a key part of policy-making, we, secondly, introduce a dimension of power beyond actor capacities, resources or institutional access. Problem definition is powerful in enabling (or marginalizing) specific policy options to achieve objectives that have been constructed as *shared* objectives: in other words, enabling (or marginalizing) policy options that appear coherent.

Third, the achievement of a shared objective (i.e., combating climate change) as such can therefore not serve as a benchmark for the evaluation of horizontal policy coherence. The wider principles and norms provided by a discourse informing the problem definition at large serve as a more suitable benchmark. In other words, considering problem definition is vital to evaluate what counts as horizontal policy coherence in a political rather than a formalistic manner. With this in mind, we are able to reflect more critically on the positive expectations typically attached to the notion of (formal) policy coherence, which are based on the simplistic presumption that there exists a *true* and objective understanding of policy problems that is to be discovered in the policy process. Instead, so-called coherent policy is bound to reflect the biases embedded in the dominant policy discourse.

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