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Drifting Past Policy Coherence? Rhetoric and Realities of the Mexican Sembrando Vida Program's Sustainability Goals

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Abstract: Global and interconnected sustainability challenges require systems thinking and policy coherence to support bold and coordinated action. To chart a course for action, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a suite of targets across international and national levels. Here, we explore intentions and contributions over time of the Mexican multifaceted rural-development program *Sembrando Vida* (SV) to the SDGs, to assess its policy coherence for sustainable development, especially in relation to climate change. We reviewed online documents and newspaper articles, interviewed key SV staff and analyzed the Mexican President's morning conference speeches. We show that multiplicity and adaptation of stated intentions suggest opportunistic forms of policy drift with limited policy coherence. The potential of the SV program remains promising, but it requires clearer objectives, coherent strategy, expert knowledge, community support and evaluation. These results demonstrate how political context can cause policy drift and negatively impact intended policy coherence for sustainable development.

Keywords: UN Sustainable Development Goals; rural development; conditional cash transfer; climate change policy; environmental policy

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1. Introduction

Interconnected global challenges necessitate bold and coordinated actions. The Transformative Agenda 2030 and the accompanying UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched in 2015, were designed to address these challenges. The SDGs provide a broad framework for action in the current policy context [1,2] and represent a politically negotiated consensus [3]. This integrated approach requires policy coherence, underpinned by systems thinking, to enable a holistic rollout of strategies [4]. Research on policy coherence largely focuses on how multiple policies can achieve SDGs. However, there are limited empirical data exploring how individual programs evolve and integrate into the SDG framework, and whether rhetoric aligns with reality.

Global challenges are the syndrome of systemic environmental and social changes, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, broken food systems, poverty, and health impacts [5,6]. These changes, which have been intensifying since the 1970s, reflect the escalating demands that the global population and overconsumption places on the planet's biocapacity [5,7]. A significant demand is for food, with agriculture, forestry, and

land use directly accounting for 18.4% of greenhouse gas emissions, while the entire food system contributes to about a quarter of these emissions [8]. The food and agriculture sector is, paradoxically, both a major contributor to climate change and particularly vulnerable to its impacts [9]. Additionally, inequality interacts with climate change, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups [10,11].

Recognizing the practical challenges of increasing agricultural production, promoting rural development, and conserving natural resources while addressing climate change [12], many governments have developed policies to combat rural poverty and promote sustainable agriculture. The Mexican federal government expressed an intention to achieve several SDGs by promoting rural development while addressing climate change through the *Sembrando Vida* (SV) program. Launched in 2019 in Mexico, SV promotes agri-environmental strategies, offering monthly payments to smallholders as part of its support program. It has since been extended to countries neighboring Mexico, and Mexico promotes the program as a comprehensive solution to many of the issues outlined in the United Nations' SDGs.

This paper analyzes the potential contributions of the SV program to the SDGs and its effectiveness in promoting a policy of coherent sustainable development. We focus on its contributions to Mexico's climate and environmental policies, given the frequent trade-offs between environmental and socio-economic SDGs [13]. We address the following questions: how and why did the government initiate the SV program, and did its goals change over time? Does SV's stated intentions and implementation demonstrate effective climate change and environmental policy? Does SV contribute to the SDGs, providing evidence for a program achieving a policy of coherent sustainable development? Finally, what do our results suggest for policy coherence within the SV program, in the reality of national and local contexts?

Various studies have examined diverse impacts of the SV program since its recent launch, including effects on Mexico and Central America migration to the US [14], community social cohesion [15], forestry dynamics [16], and tradeoffs between poverty reduction and environmental sustainability [17]. Our research contributes to this growing body of literature by offering a critical analysis of the stated intentions and consequences of the SV program. We found some efforts towards policy coherence, but policy drift occurred over time and problems with program design, unclear objectives, and a lack of strategic coherence hindered the program's contribution to sustainable development. This study highlights the importance of expert input, community support, clearly defined objectives, and robust evaluation mechanisms to enhance program contributions, and develops new insights on policy coherence and policy drift in relation to sustainability.

This paper is organized as follows: first, we introduce the global context of, and theoretical framework for, the study. Second, we describe the case study context and methods, which included a novel combination of content analysis of media articles, government releases and presidential speeches (*mañaneras*), along with interview thematic analysis. Third, we present our results, and fourth, we discuss the implications of our findings and offer recommendations for the local context and wider global SDG implementation. The paper concludes with an analysis of policy coherence and policy drift deriving from our study.

Context and Framework

The SDGs represent a significant step forward in conceptualizing strategies to tackle poverty, reduce inequality, and address climate change and other environmental issues [18]. However, the SDGs also present challenges for sustainable development: (1) they demand a focus on the relationships and trade-offs between goals [19], such as tensions between environmental protection and economic growth [13,20–22]; (2) there are inherent contradic-

tions within Agenda 2030, regarding economic growth models [18]; (3) there is the diverse nature of individual SDGs, with some underpinning others and being essential to facilitate outcomes [13]; (4) there are difficulties in linking and selecting action plans and indicators, as some are chosen for ease of measurement rather than appropriateness [23–25]; and (5) the SDGs do not always reflect Indigenous or local community ontologies, identities, and rights [18,22,26]. Despite these tensions, the SDGs remain the best available collaborative aspiration and action plan for sustainable development, and addressing them critically can help support sustainability.

Sustainability research has a normative impetus, seeking to not only understand, but to support, change towards sustainable futures, using holistic, transdisciplinary approaches [2]. It enables a critical, yet constructive, analysis of sustainability governance to explore contested theories of sustainable development, and also offers practical recommendations for action (e.g., [18]). Enhanced sustainability governance is necessary to tackle global challenges and implement the SDGs. Policy coherent sustainable development aims to maximize synergies across goals and policies while minimizing negative trade-offs [4]. Despite the technical skills required for such policy coherence, the choices made are often political, not neutral [27,28]. Ideational and institutional processes significantly influence policy making and implementation, and can cause policy drift [29]. Policy drift occurs when there are gradual changes in policy design or implementation over time, in a different direction [30]. There is thus a need to further understand the factors influencing initial intentions for policy coherence, and how these may be influenced by context over time.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Positionality

In addition to the research methods described below, our research is underpinned by between 10 and 25 years of research experience and residency in southern Mexico by each author except RMW (1 year), working with local communities on climate change, conservation, livelihoods, and sustainable development in SV-program regions. Whilst drawing on our understanding of community context and priorities in the region, we sought neutrality in our analysis of media and policy documents through rigorous protocols, double or triple coding, and repeated writing, until all authors agreed on the textual representation. Views from media and policy sources do not necessarily reflect the authors' positions.

2.2. Study Area

Located between the USA and Central America, Mexico occupies an important geostrategic position. With a population of almost 130 million, a rich cultural history and diversity, and abundant natural resources, Mexico is the fifteenth biggest economy worldwide and the second largest in Latin America [31]. The country plays an important role in meeting global and regional challenges (e.g., climate change and natural disasters, biodiversity loss, conflict and violence). However, Mexico faces structural barriers to inclusive rural growth and significant social inequalities, with over 36% of the population living in poverty [32]. The country is also highly vulnerable to climate variability and change [33,34]. Mexico's rural populations are especially vulnerable, due to their reliance on rainfed agriculture, low crop yields, limited adaptive capacity, and small landholdings [35]. Smallholder farmers face significant challenges in adapting to climate change, primarily due to limited access to financial resources, technology, and information, as well as their dependence on rain-fed agriculture and fragile ecosystems [36,37]. These constraints leave Mexican smallholders trapped in poverty and highly vulnerable to shocks such as price fluctuations and extreme weather events. These challenges pose serious threats to their livelihoods [38]. Mexico had no explicit national rural policy [39], but

the *Programa Especial Concurrente para el Desarrollo Rural Sustentable* (Special Program for Sustainable Rural Development) was considered the main policy tool to prevent rural areas from being marginalized and to contribute to rural well-being. This program was also intended to contribute to the progress towards the SDGs [40]. Overall, since the 1990s, rural development policy in Mexico has been based on compensatory programs through conditional cash transfers (CCTs) aimed at alleviating poverty. These programs were designed to provide poor rural households with a minimum income to sustain priorities such as their agricultural activities, children's education, and health [41]. However, there is evidence that these programs in Latin America have not fully achieved their primary objectives. Several studies showed that rural poverty has continued to increase and that smallholders still have crop yields below the national average [35,42,43]. Such programs can also have negative effects on sustainability and community resilience. For example, Robles (2019) [44] also linked such programs to the loss of millions of hectares of forest and to changes in land use towards monocultures and agro–industrial cattle ranching, while eroding indigenous agrobiodiversity. Poverty alleviation programs often aim to enhance livelihoods by providing financial support to smallholders, enabling (or encouraging) them to expand agricultural activities. This expansion frequently involves clearing forested land to increase crop production or establish pastures, leading to deforestation [45–47].

To address the above-mentioned challenges of the traditional CCTs, the Mexican Government introduced the SV program. This program has had diverse stated intentions, including promoting rootedness to the land, generational change in the countryside, combating environmental degradation, and recovering practices based on traditional knowledge [40]. Gonzalez-Moctezuma and Rhemtulla [48] considered that its primary objectives were to reduce poverty, slow deforestation, and protect biodiversity. Whilst they recognised the multiple objectives of this program, these authors labelled SV an 'agroforestry' program under the wider umbrella of Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR). SV can thus be considered both an FLR and a CCT program. Gonzalez-Moctezuma and Rhemtulla [48] analyzed empirical data to explore the beneficiaries and likely impacts of SV. In this paper, we seek to examine the political and media rhetoric around the intentions and goals of SV.

To explore the political intentions of the SV program and its contributions to the SDGs, especially in relation to climate change, and to address our research questions, we (1) analyzed official government documents, newspaper articles, media reports and the Mexican President's morning conference speeches, and (2) interviewed key SV staff. These methods were selected because at the time we initiated this research, and to this day, precise data regarding the program's impacts and outcomes, and rigorous independent evaluations, were not available. Additionally, there was scarce scientific literature addressing the results and impacts of the program. Consequently, we drew on government documents and the president's speeches to explore how and why the government initiated the SV program, and we used these sources, plus reports, to examine stated changes in its intentions over time. We were particularly interested in how the stated intentions and implementation of SV demonstrated effective climate change and environmental policy, because it has been shown that environmental goals are often in tension with goals for economic development [20,21] and can be deprioritized when such tensions arise [22]. Focusing on the SV program provided an excellent empirical context to explore how a policy of coherent sustainable development could be pursued at this scale.

2.3. Establishing the Program's Emergence and Evolution [Timeline]

We conducted online searches using "Sembrando Vida", "Cambio Climatico", and "Desarrollo Sostenible" (Sembrando Vida, climate change, and sustainable development) via Google and the Mexican government's official website (https://www.gob.mx/) to

gather information on the program's origins. However, most information pertained to operating rules, goals, and implementation, rather than design and origins. To deepen our understanding, we conducted two semi-structured interviews with an SV Advisory Board member and a former community facilitator. We then constructed a timeline of the SV program's evolution from conception through its first five years of implementation.

2.4. The Official Intentions of the Sembrando Vida Program: Content Analysis of the "Mañaneras"

The *mañaneras*, or morning conferences, began as a communication format when the President Andrés Manuel Lopéz Obrador was head of government of the then Federal District, now Mexico City [49]. Every morning at 07:00 (Central Mexican Time), the President appeared for at least one hour before an audience of accredited press and selected participants to explain his policy agenda, discuss current issues, and answer questions [50]. These conferences were delivered in popular language and broadcast live (with replays available) on the President's official social media channels on Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube. In the first two years alone (2019 and 2020), the *mañaneras* accumulated 235 million views on the President's YouTube channel, and the official channels of the Mexican government, Cepropie[1] and Canal 14[2], together had 50 million views. Although these conferences could be a great tool for informing citizens of ongoing government activity, they were said to be similar to the controlled information model used by various populist governments worldwide [51].

We analyzed the stenographic versions (transcripts) of the *mañaneras* found on the official website of the President[3] from 2019 to 2022, to identify the President's communication of his environmental and climate change agenda, including the SV program. We used the following search terms: "cambio climático", "Sembrando Vida", "medio ambiente", "ecología", and "reforestación" (climate change, Sembrando Vida, environment, ecology, and reforestation). This search identified 75 transcripts, which we then reviewed to select those with specific content related to our interest, resulting in 20 transcripts for analysis (until data saturation), which were independently coded by three authors.

To obtain specific information on how the government addresses climate change mitigation and adaptation in the SV program, we searched the program's official website. We also reviewed the program's original operating guidelines and objectives (2019), and the subsequent modifications in objectives, guidelines, and operating rules (2020, 2021, and 2022). We then created a database of textual references and definitions in Excel.

2.5. Media Content Analysis

We conducted a content analysis of articles from both Mexican (six newspapers) and international (nine newspapers) sources, published between January 2019 and December 2022. The selection of these newspapers was based on their extensive coverage of the SV program. Furthermore, to minimize bias, we chose Mexican newspapers representing a range of political orientations, all of which are recognized for their relatively high levels of public trust. Although trust in the Mexican media sector is generally low, at approximately 37%, the newspapers included in our study are notably more trusted. Among them, *Grupo Milenio* stands out with the highest trust level at 65%, followed closely by *El Universal* (64%), *El Financiero* (63%), and *Animal Político* (56%), according to the *2022 Digital News Report* [52]. Additionally, *El Universal* holds the distinction of being the most widely read newspaper in Mexico [53]. We used Google to find articles with "*Sembrando Vida*" in the title and any of the following terms in the title or summary sentence: "*cambio climático*", "*adaptación*", "*mitigación*", "*deforestación*", or "*reforestación*" (climate change, adaptation, mitigation, deforestation, and reforestation), yielding a total of 70 articles (Table 1). We focused on these terms to highlight coverage of environmental sustainability. The SV

program was labelled as a CCT poverty reduction program; hence, all mentions of the program noted poverty alleviation goals, and to explore policy coherence we needed to seek the presence and content of environmental sustainability goals.

Table 1. List of newspapers searched and number (#) of articles consulted [selected and analyzed] in each newspaper.

Newspapers	# of Articles
National	
El Universal	8
El Financiero	5
Proceso	10
Animal Politico	4
Milenio	13
La Jornada	15
International	
El País [Spain]	2
Washington Post [USA]	1
Reuters [USA]	3
Bloomberg [USA]	1
El Heraldo [Honduras]	1
El Mundo [El Salvador]	1
Forbes [USA]	2
New York Times [USA]	2
Prensa Libre [Guatemala]	2

The 70 newspaper articles were randomly distributed among four authors, for content analysis. We entered the information into a database adapted from Teso-Alonso and Águila-Coghlan [54]. Our protocol was as follows: 1. Identification (including publication date, newspaper, place of origin, and type of note, i.e., report, opinion column, news item, etc.). 2. Relevance of the story within the newspaper (section of the newspaper where the note is located) and placement of key words within the story. 3. Content (including the summary sentence of the article, main topic, thematic headings or subtopics, summary of the main and secondary contents). 4. Elements of discourse production (e.g., tone or stance of the news item as positive, negative, or neutral). 5. Reference elements of discourse, including textual quotations of the ideas of the main and secondary content.

A quarter of the articles were double-checked and analyzed by another co-author, to minimize coding bias. The database was then exported to the qualitative analysis software Dedoose 9.0 (dedoose.com) for final analysis, where we introduced three main categories: "SV and Climate Change", "SV and the environment", and "AMLO's climate agenda"[4], to address our research questions. Dedoose facilitated systematic coding of these categories and allowed for the efficient exportation of specific categories into Word documents. This feature enhanced the reliability and replicability of the data.

3. Results

3.1. Origin, Evolution and Characteristics of the Program

We could not locate any official documentation on the origin, theoretical foundations, or design of the SV program. However, a key informant stated that participatory planning for community development was inspired by INCA Rural (Instituto Nacional para el Desarrollo de Capacidades del Sector Rural, A.C.), an NGO specialized in technical assistance and training in rural areas. INCA Rural advocates extension alternatives that include actions to strengthen rural human capacities [40].

We created a timeline from the initial proposal to the program's fifth year of implementation, outlining its evolving goals and scope based on key informant interviews, media analysis, and document analysis (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Timeline from the first proposal of the SV program until 2023, its fifth year of implementation, derived from data from key informant interviews, media analysis and document analysis.

After assuming the presidency on 1 December 2018, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador outlined a new era of social programs central to his political project. His administration prioritized multiplying direct cash-transfer programs to combat poverty and inequality. In this context, SV was developed for rural communities in high-biodiversity areas with medium-to-very high poverty levels, prioritizing Indigenous and Afro-Mexican populations in regions with forestry and food production potential [55]. The program aimed at that time to diversify and promote local consumption for food sovereignty and to support marketing agricultural products produced by smallholders. According to the then director of the Secretaría del Bienestar in charge of the program, María Luisa Albores González, SV would contribute to SDGs 1, 2, and 12—ending poverty and hunger through responsible consumption and production [55]. Since 2022, the President has emphasized SV's focus on food production and security amid rising staple food prices [56].

To alleviate rural poverty, beneficiaries currently receive a monthly payment of approximately USD 350 (or MXN 6250 in January 2024) for establishing 2.5 hectares of agroforestry production systems. Unlike other Mexican large agricultural or conservation programs (e.g., PROCAMPO or Payment for Environmental Services), the SV program targeted community members with and without land rights, enrolling both male and female smallholders. According to the Mexican government, this thus contributed to gender equality in rural areas (SDG5). Most previous rural support programs had required land titles, limiting access to payments to landowners, who were predominantly men. SV program beneficiaries also receive in-kind support (plants, seeds, inputs, and tools) and technical assistance. The production systems combine traditional crops with timber and fruit trees (MIAF[5]) and agroforestry systems (SAF[6]) [57], intended to further contribute to SDGs 8 and 11 [55]. The operational guidelines (Section 2.4) originally stipulated that "production units" included in the program should be (a) idle or abandoned, (b) in early secondary succession, or (c) cultivated under the milpa[7] system. However, because the program indirectly en-

couraged people to return to their communities and included landless peasants, these requirements were not always met. Reports indicated people cleared forested areas and that SV increased deforestation rates at the start of the program in 2019 (e.g., [58–60]).

The Mexican President also stated, at the 2021 Central American Summit on Climate Change, that SV would help curb migration to the USA. According to the Mexican government, many Central American smallholders have enrolled in a version of SV. The Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation (AMEXCID) registered smallholders from Guatemala (14,000 beneficiaries), Belize (2000), El Salvador (10,000), Honduras (10,000), and Nicaragua (no number available) in mid-2019. At the end of 2021, the US and Mexico announced *Sembrando Oportunidades*, a bilateral cooperation framework with the US International Development Agency (USAID), presented as a strategy to stop migration from Central America [61], aiming to provide decent work and economic growth (SDG8) for rural populations.

3.2. *Sembrando Vida and the Sustainable Development Goals*

As described above, the official discourse on SV's main objectives thus initially focused on alleviating rural poverty and hunger and improving food security, with some impact on gender equality. However, a broader ambition was later stated. On 19 May 2019, the Welfare Secretariat announced on Facebook that the "*Sembrando Vida* program complies with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda". However, only ten SDGs were officially addressed during the presentation of the National Strategy for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Mexico (26 February 2020) by the head of the Welfare Secretariat. Our research also identified stated intentions towards 10 SDGs (Figure 2), confirming that the SV program aimed to achieve multiple goals simultaneously, but not to explicitly address all of the SDGs as a system.

Figure 2. *Sembrando Vida* contributions to the SDGs, based on the official discourse of the Government of Mexico, as found at www.gob.mx, in the article "Secretaría de Bienestar refrenda su compromiso con la Agenda 2030" (Accessed on 17 March 2022), on the official Facebook pages https://www.facebook.com/bienestar.mx (Accessed on 17 February 2022) and https://www.facebook.com/Agenda2030MX (Accessed on 30 January 2024) [Figure drawn from the official representation of the SDGs on UN documents and webpages].

Significant progress was subsequently reported on SDG1, with official data [62] indicating that SV, along with other government social programs, contributed to lifting over four million Mexicans out of poverty between 2018 and 2022. However, during the first two years of AMLO's administration (2018–2020), there was a notable increase in poverty rates. While SV exact contribution was not clarified, the media broadly agreed with these achievements [63,64]. However, Hugo Paulin Hernández, deputy secretary of the Ministry of Wellbeing, acknowledged in the virtual forum "Impact of the *Sembrando Vida* program on poverty reduction in Mexico and Central America 2024", that precise data on SV's contribution are not yet available, and that further analysis of the program contributions to the SDGs is needed.

More contradictory impacts of SV were noted on progress towards SDGs 13, 14, and 15. Climate change emphasis grew as the program expanded. Initially, climate change mitigation and adaptation were absent from the program launch in 2019 and related documents. However, during the second half of the federal administration, SV became Mexico's flagship climate-change mitigation program. In 2020, the President began associating SV with climate change in his speeches, citing it as the largest reforestation program globally (potentially absorbing 17.8 million tons of carbon dioxide per year). The SV program was presented by the Mexican President at the 2021 Central American Summit on Climate Change as a climate-change mitigation effort, through reforesting over one million hectares, thus contributing to SDG13, Climate Action. At this Summit, he also promoted its potential to combat migration.

On 18 October 2021, the President presented Mexico's climate agenda, mainly based on SV, to John Kerry (First U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate). Throughout 2021, the media and official discourse highlighted SV as a key policy for climate change and migration.

> "*SV was a program that did not have a focus towards climate change, fortunately, we began to take into consideration the type of soils and divided the country into different eco-regions and, according to that we decided the species to be planted, we calculate that between 2019 and 2020, an accumulated total of 3.89 million tons of carbon dioxide were absorbed. The calculation we are making, the accumulated total by 2030 with both the agricultural and forestry components, would be 21.09 million tons of carbon dioxide*", stated Amparo Martínez Arroyo, director of the National Institute of Ecology and Climate Change [65].

Mexico reiterated this position at COP26, in Glasgow. The President stated there that the reforestation agreement included in the Glasgow COP26 Declaration on Forests and Land Use was inspired by SV:

> "*And they are not going to admit it, but what was the most significant agreement about that meeting in Great Britain? It was yes, to plant trees. Where do you think that idea came from? From Sembrando Vida. And an additional piece of information, for those of you who are still wondering why Mexico had not signed that reforestation program, we proposed the program ourselves*" [66].

Whilst aiming for multiple goals is in line with the holistic framing of the SDGs, there has been criticism of this approach in relation to SV. First, the media has been critical about the lack of clarity of the multiple goals of SV and its implementation:

> "*This program has a narrative that generates confusion in society: sometimes it is presented as one of welfare, of combating poverty, and sometimes as one that combats environmental degradation*" said Gustavo Sánchez, director of the Mocaf Network [59].

Second, it has not been clear how progress against these multiple goals can be assessed. The government acknowledged a lack of environmental indicators for SV within its Special

Climate Change Program 2021–2024. For the first time, objectives such as "Incorporate climate change criteria in the implementation of the *Sembrando Vida* program" were included, as reported [60].

Third, the intended contribution of SV to climate action was contradicted by (anti-) environmental actions. The President's morning conferences mainly responded to environmental criticism by emphasizing tree planting through SV, limiting oil extraction, reducing methane use, not granting new mining concessions, and modernizing hydroelectric plants. However, Mexico's actual environmental and climate policies and their implementation faced widespread criticism from opposition legislators, environmentalists, and civil society groups [67]. Media reports indicated that the government dismantled federal environmental institutions and significantly reduced the National Forestry Commission's budget, and that illegal logging increased, while confiscations of illegally harvested timber and forest protection measures decreased in the last six years [68,69]. Moreover, despite positive statements about the SV role in climate change mitigation, Mexico continued to support fossil fuels, as evident in modernization of its refineries and increased oil production [70].

Whilst rail travel can reduce carbon emissions, the construction of the Tren Maya has reportedly caused significant environmental damage [71–73]. This massive project involves 1500 km of railroad in southeastern Mexico, passing through sensitive ecosystems and protected areas, leading to forest loss and ecosystem destruction [72,74]. These findings suggest that achieving policy coherence for sustainable development within a single program is challenging, and that even if it is achieved, multiple programs can negate positive sustainability impacts of others.

3.3. Challenges in the Implementation of Sembrando Vida

By 2021, SV had evolved into a program focused on both environmental services and social benefits, with an emphasis on agroforestry. It was deemed successful enough to inspire similar initiatives in other Central American countries. However, implementation challenges comprise a fourth problem that hindered SV from fully achieving its evolving and multiple goals.

First, there was initial deforestation linked to SV launch. A World Resources Institute report, cited by *The Washington Post* [60] and *El País* [58], estimated that nearly 73,000 hectares of forest were lost in 2019 due to the program, nearly half of Mexico's annual forest loss from land-use change and illegal logging. Beginning in 2020, SV became increasingly associated in the media with deforestation, as some beneficiaries, lacking land access under program rules, cleared new areas. Critics pointed out that SV lacked sustainable forest management, suggesting that although reforestation was an objective, SV was primarily a social, rather than environmental, program.

> "*The program's successes are its territorial focus and its search for the wellbeing of the poor population; but unfortunately, the incentives it has provided lead beneficiaries to devastate thousands of hectares of forests in an effort to increase the area under cultivation. SV has become synonymous with devastation*", stated José Medina Mora, President of COPARMEX [75].

The second challenge was scale. Despite ambitious rhetoric, the *2021 Climate Transparency Report* on G20 countries found that SV was insufficient to achieve the zero-deforestation goal by 2030 proposed at COP26. The report suggested that SV would only mitigate 8% of the 20% of gas emissions from Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry [LULUCF] that Mexico committed to reducing in its Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement.

Third, there was the challenge of capacity. The Secretary of Social Welfare, María Luisa Albores, admitted that out of an initial target of 575 million trees, only 80 million were

planted in the first year, and barely half survived, according to the *Reforma* newspaper [76]. Experts claimed from the beginning that Mexico lacked sufficient seedlings to meet the target and that there were not enough experienced technicians to train farmers in the Milpa Intercropped with Fruit Trees (MIAF) system [77]. In its first year, the program required 8800 technicians to train and supervise farmers, more than existed in the country at the time. Consequently, some inexperienced or unqualified people were hired.

Finally, challenges related to communication, verification, and reporting were identified. Confusion about objectives and slow ground cooperation were reported in the media, and persisted over time.

> "*What is needed is to make the territorial distribution of the program impact transparent, to verify that land is actually being used and that it does not replace forest with crops. In this regard, the silence of organizations that look after the interests of the communities is striking. It is also urgent to build bridges of collaboration and coordination between sub-national and local governments to select eligible areas in accordance with the program objectives*" [44].

4. Discussion

We explored how a program with ambitious goals in Mexico emerged, mapped changes in its emphasis and stated intentions, noted its alignment with other policies and highlighted challenges in its attempts at policy coherence for sustainable development. We showed that while the program aimed to address multiple SDGs, shifting goals led to policy drift for the program. Some positive policy adaptations resulted, but the ambitious attempt to meet several agendas simultaneously also led to implementation challenges. Additionally, SV seemed to contradict some of the government's other sustainable development policies. We first discuss the rhetoric and reality of the SV program and then analyze our findings in response to our research questions.

4.1. Rhetoric and Reality: Who Benefits from the Sembrando Vida Program

SV draws on a large and increasing budget of billions of pesos. From February 2019 to December 2022 alone, the program transferred MXN 79.3 billion (USD 3.9 billion) [48]. The discourse in Presidential speeches, Mexico's international engagement, and press releases claim significant action towards the SDGs. However, only a small percentage of Mexico's smallholders benefit from the program (450,000, representing around 14% of the country's smallholders) [62]. Many of these were classified as living in poverty, although large quantities of funds went to more wealthy regions and there were challenges in identifying poorer beneficiaries at community and household levels [48]. These authors found an emphasis on poverty and then deforestation, with less allocation of payments for biodiversity conservation. They suggested that, rather than reaching areas of restoration priority, SV tended to reach areas that were already forested.

Public policy can be misused as an instrument to increase votes for the ruling party [78]. The *mañaneras* were said to monopolize public discussion and serve as a political tool that allowed the President to influence public debates, attack opponents, and consolidate his narrative [79,80]. For many political analysts, SV has a clear political orientation and is used to secure votes for the President's party and ensure the support of its beneficiaries [81]. This is a tradition in Mexican politics, where programs such as PROCAMPO and *Oportunidades* were said to have served this purpose [82]. A survey by MCCI (2020–2023) revealed that 52% of federal social program beneficiaries believed their benefits came directly from the President, up from 38% in 2020. This clientelism has led to negative consequences, including failure to reduce poverty and inequality and shaping citizens' political preferences to

support the President's party in exchange for public resources [83]. The survey suggests that SV has been exploited for electoral gain, rather than to develop more effective policies [83].

The alignment between the proposed Tren Maya route and SV communities, and the instruction to include Transisthmian Corridor communities in the program, further support SV political and policy goals [84]. The states with the largest number of SV beneficiaries coincide with those most affected by megaprojects such as the Tren Maya, refineries, and the Transisthmian Corridor [85]. Beneficiaries fear losing program benefits, which discourages social resistance against these megaprojects [84]. It has been reported that SV benefits may have been used by the government to acquire the political allegiance of communities influenced by initiatives such as Tren Maya [48,85]. It appears that SV design and implementation decisions may thus have been made strategically, for political gain as well as program policy success.

4.2. How and Why Did the Sembrando Vida Program Emerge

The SV program design was initially aligned with other Mexican initiatives aimed at supporting poor smallholders. However, its objectives shifted over time to address new political agendas, including emigration, climate change and environmental issues. Whilst adaptation can occur along with policy coherence, in this case the lack of clarity led to inconsistencies in program implementation [86].

Discrete policy changes can be triggered by external shocks or veto actors, such as those in certain political roles [87], but policy drift—gradual changes in policy design or implementation over time—has been less emphasized [30]. Ideational and institutional processes can drive policy drift, which can be adaptive but also susceptible to political opportunism [29]. In the case of SV, it was suggested that the program evolved into a political tool to secure electoral support and improve smallholders' livelihoods [79]. It also served to demonstrate the President's authority, particularly through the *mañaneras*, and to suggest Mexico's leadership on the world stage, especially at COP26. In the case of SV, we thus identified policy changes due to external shocks and veto actors, alongside policy drift towards climate change mitigation. Adaptive governance can be positive for sustainable development, but ensuring policy coherence in relation to the SDGs requires ongoing critical assessment of program goals and implementation. The SV program experienced policy drift that could have been seen to lead towards greater policy coherence through wider coverage of environmental issues (such as SDGs 13, 15). However, first, policy drift appeared as political opportunism for domestic and international audiences, rather than policy adaptation in response to outcomes. Second, within the program, rhetoric did not meet reality, in the way that early implementation caused deforestation and failure of planted-tree maintenance in some areas. Third, policy drift in the SV program contradicted other policies and programs, such as *Tren Maya* and the ongoing Mexican fossil fuel expansion. Finally, the policy drift was inconsistent. Media reports highlighted different statements and framings for SV over time. Hence, in this case, we see a paradoxical situation, where potential optimism from stated policy drift towards environmental goals actually leads to negative outcomes and fails to improve policy coherence. We discuss the impacts on climate change and environment further, in the next section.

4.3. Do Stated Intentions and Implementation of Sembrando Vida Demonstrate Effective Climate Change and Environmental Action?

SV was initially presented as a program for smallholders and sustainable agriculture, then as a welfare program, then a climate-change mitigation initiative, and then a strategy to curb emigration. Thus, the stated intentions shifted from rural development to a flagship climate-change initiative for Mexico, before also addressing emigration. Despite being proclaimed a pillar of Mexico's environmental policies, technical difficulties emerged in

the first year, with less than 14% of planned trees planted and only half surviving [88]. The program did not account for the need for frequent watering, especially in arid areas, complicating implementation for producers [89]. Additionally, the program induced forest loss in highly climate-vulnerable regions during its first year [90]. The lack of local stakeholder involvement in SV design and implementation contributed to practical problems in establishing agroforestry systems [91], and technical limitations hindered its capacity to respond to climate change [92]. SV implementation challenges—initial deforestation, hasty rollout, technical capacity shortfalls, and poor communication— thus hampered its early application and potential contribution to environmental goals. It should technically be possible for SV to address multiple goals together, including poverty reduction, reforestation and biodiversity conservation, although, to date, data demonstrate an emphasis on poverty reduction and less success in reaching unforested areas needing restoration [48]. However, with adequate support, planning, and monitoring, its potential seems promising for both rural development and climate change mitigation.

4.4. Contributions of Sembrando Vida to SDGs and Evidence for Policy Coherence

SV addressed many, but not all, SDGs. Reduced monitoring limited understanding of its impact on specific targets and indicators, making it difficult to measure its actual contribution to reforestation and climate change mitigation. SV quickly became the primary national mechanism for reducing rural poverty and addressing SDGs 1 and 2. However, while it provided subsidies to the poorest in rural areas and promoted sustainable agriculture, there are concerns that when the program ends, smallholders may revert to poverty [48,93]. Previous social policies in Mexico, such as the *Oportunidades/Prospera* program, had limited success, due to the dilution of original objectives and failure to address social inequality in the long term [94]. Evidence suggests that SV aligns with a neoliberal vision of sustainable development [18], rather than empowering small farmers or promoting food sovereignty in a rights-based, liberal version of sustainable development. As described above, the contributions to environmental and climate change goals were limited at first, but show potential for the future; yet the contributions to social goals were effective at first, but bear doubts for future impact. We thus see time-specific impacts on SDGs that vary across clusters of SDGs.

Policy coherence seeks to maximize synergies across different goals, such as various SDGs, while minimizing trade-offs. Given the stated broad scope of SV, does it illustrate a coherent approach? Our findings suggest that much of this possible policy coherence is actually policy drift [72], and may not lead to the synergistic outcomes aimed for by policy coherent approaches. While some policy shifts could be seen as adaptive governance, SV appears to have been influenced by political opportunism. Unplanned multiplicity of goals can generate a more holistic, systems approach to governance, but risks contradictions within and across initiatives if not monitored and evaluated.

Grand claims were made about the SV contribution to climate change at COP27, but Mexico was criticized there for not specifying emissions baselines, sectoral policies, or decarbonization pathways [95]. The Climate Action Tracker rated Mexico's climate policies as "Critically insufficient", indicating that Mexico's climate commitments at a national level were inconsistent with fair-share contributions and would lead to rising carbon emissions [96]. Hence, whilst SV had the potential to make a positive contribution to climate change mitigation (after initial implementation challenges), this contribution was dwarfed by the negative impacts of decisions supporting the fossil fuel sector and other infrastructure projects in Mexico. This demonstrates the importance of scale in considering policy coherence. Policy coherence may be sought within a program, or policy drift may lead to multiple objectives being pursued, but to have a positive impact on sustainable

development, this orientation must be consistent with other programs and manifest at the national level.

Does the intention of policy coherence matter? Does it matter if more holistic policy is pursued for reasons other than through democratic, planned governance processes? Policy drift can lead to positive, but also possibly negative, impacts, because planning and monitoring are limited. Political opportunism can be damaging when stated goals misrepresent actual achievements. By consistently citing SV in national and international arenas, the Mexican government appears active, while minimizing changes in fossil fuel extraction and use. Several academics and the civic association "Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity" (MCCI) suggested that one goal of SV could be to mitigate the environmental damage caused by the national energy policy and the construction of the Tren Maya. Hence, while SV has the potential for politically coherent sustainable development at a program level, this potential is not being fully realized. Policy drift to meet changing political agendas, inconsistent implementation, a lack of planning and evaluation and flawed development principles limit positive synergies for the outcomes of this program. In addition, because it is not aligned with larger-scale national intentions, policy coherence in this program may be countered by other initiatives.

4.5. Study Limitations

In this study, we used novel methods to assess program-level contributions to the SDGs, partly out of necessity. For example, we were faced with the limited availability of official government information, which may become available in the future, providing primary rather than secondary sources of information on the impacts and outcomes of the SV program. There are also limitations to our findings. Data explicitly on the extent to which each SDG target was achieved would allow for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of policy coherence. In addition, in the future, more policymakers and SV staff may be willing to provide interviews about both the SV program and the influence and political trajectory of the Mexican president.

5. Conclusions

The SV program in Mexico held promise for policy coherence for sustainable development, because, as the program started, there were stated intentions for positive synergies through integrated environmental and rural development gains. However, we documented policy drift as the stated goals of the SV program shifted over time. We also showed how media and NGO reports indicated inconsistent and sometimes ineffective implementation. Whilst some policy drift appeared to respond to external demands and thus to be adaptive, there was also political opportunism and some stated outcomes that were not verified or that clashed with other national actions. Selected implementation decisions (e.g., location of beneficiaries) and communication with the public seemed to emphasize political opportunism. Thus, rather than a positive, steady policy drift toward policy coherence for the SV program and broader government policies, there has been a series of inconsistent changes that have limited the program's impact. Over time, attention to implementation, consistent support for broader goals, and alignment of other government policies with this program has the potential to lead to policy coherence for sustainability within and beyond the SV program in Mexico, but this will require improved sustainability governance.

Addressing integrated systems and the interrelationship among SDGs requires, first, participatory and democratic decision-making [24,97]. Second, it means prioritizing environmental goals to acknowledge environmental limitations and constraints at local and global levels [17]. Third, policy-coherent sustainable development is needed [24,27,28]. Much of the literature on policy coherence addresses relationships between policies, but we

suggest that more research is needed to explore the potential for policy coherence within and across programs, as well as policies. In addition, we suggest that policy coherence be assessed over time to capture policy or program drift. Such changes may reflect adaptive governance in response to external shocks such as climate change, but there is a risk that policies will be co-opted for the benefit of a minority of people.

The aspirations of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs include achieving dignity for all, eradicating poverty, and restoring the environment, while mitigating climate change. To achieve this, good sustainability governance requires coherent, honest and informed policies. Without policy coherence, we risk perpetuating social inequalities and related power asymmetries between rich and poor [27]. Policy-coherent sustainable development should be planned, supported, and monitored [24]. There are opportunities for learned reflective practice and adaptive governance, based on emerging evidence. However, unregulated policy drift is unlikely to achieve positive outcomes, and we should be careful not to confuse policy coherence with policy drift.

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Notes

1 [https://www.youtube.com/@centrodeproduccionconcepropie5039 (accessed on 17 July 2023).]
2 [https://www.canalcatorce.tv/?c=EnLinea (accessed on 21 September 2022).]
3 [https://www.lopezobrador.org.mx (accessed on 14 January 2022).]
4 AMLO are the initials of President Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador.
5 Sustainable, regenerative, resilient shifting cultivation, intercropped with fruit trees.
6 Agroforestry Systems.
7 The *milpa* system is an intercropping of maize, beans, squash and other crops, which include cash crops and forest management, in long-term slash-and-burn cycles, developed in Mesoamerica.

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