

**POLICY
BRIEF
2026**

SCIENCE4POLICY
CONCURSO DE ESTUDOS DE CIÊNCIA PARA AS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Empowering public servants for the sustainable development model in Portugal

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Executive Summary

Current crises – climate change, conflicts over energy resources, inequalities, and social justice – call for the sustainable development model, conceived by Brundtland (1987) and embodied in the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While it depends on everyone, it is primarily the responsibility of public policy agents to promote the necessary transformations so the economic development explicitly respects human dignity and the physical boundaries of the Planet, avoiding social tensions and the degradation/exhaustion of the physical resources that sustain life and ensure human well-being. Less than 20% of the SDG targets will be achieved globally by 2030; in Portugal, only SDG 7 is well aligned (Sachs *et al.*, 2025). The National Voluntary Report (2023) points to the lack of expanded capacity building in the Portuguese Public Administration at various levels as a barrier to the implementation of the SDGs. A capacity-building model for the majority of Portugal's 750,000 public employees over the next 5 years is presented, using a blended learning format, to acquire specific transversal skills for the sustainable development model. A prototype, validated by diverse social actors, mostly public servants, was developed. The country's development depends on many aspects related to the 17 SDGs, due to existing regulations, and future ambition. Reduced uncertainty and indecision, better integration, and higher efficiency and effectiveness of the Portuguese Public Administration are the expected impacts if this initiative is implemented.

Recommendations

- RCM to set up a task force to fully develop the proposed capacity-building action.
- Include specific transversal competencies for sustainable development in SIADAP (Integrated system for management and performance evaluation in public administration).
- Enable the capacity-building action for all the Portuguese public servants in the next 5 years.

Destinatário(s) do policy brief

Ministry of the Presidency.
National Institute of Administration. Minister for State Reform, Minister of State and Finance.
Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation.

Introduction and Problem Statement

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) recognizes the SDGs as challenges for public services in all countries, regardless of their level of development. Their broad scope and

interconnectedness, long-term commitment, and contextualization, at both the local, regional, and national levels, require a dedicated focus on government capacities and skills (OECD, 2021). Public services have

transformative power in the transition to a sustainable development model, due to their functional role and intervention in many diverse aspects arising from public policies. However, most continue to operate in silos, without a holistic vision, and with mismatched mental models.

Given the cross-cutting nature of sustainable development, there is a timely need to implement a structured and comprehensive capacity-building model for the Portuguese Public Administration (PPA) employees offering

integrated knowledge, new common competencies regardless of the service's thematic area and its level of decision-making and operationalization, while considering any actions already available.

By providing PPA employees with specific skills related to the sustainable development model, the aim is to reduce uncertainty and indecision in public services, and increase their efficiency and purpose, while fostering their self-esteem and shared purpose of state employees.

Analysis / Key Findings /

The Project answered to the following questions:

- A. How has Public Administration (national and international) addressed its capacity building for sustainable development and the SDGs?
- B. What specific skills should PPA employees have to promote the sustainable development model in their daily professional practice?
- C. What is the suitable pedagogical model for training PPA employees at the central, regional, and local levels, regardless of their area of expertise and decision-making level?
- D. How to scale the capacity building model?

A. BENCHMARKING ANALYSIS

Although there is a global trend of nations committing to the 2030 Agenda, actions aimed at broadly training public servants on this topic are rarely observed. Some initiatives targeting developing countries are carried out sporadically by various actors, namely United Nations agencies, development banks, and cooperation agencies. In Europe, as in other continents, there are multiple examples of capacity building for sustainability, but almost always directed at specific groups. Argentina is the exception with a law requiring mandatory environmental training for all public servants, with multiple actions in place across various ministries.

Portugal has a policy framework for capacity building in sustainability, anchored in the Portugal 2030 Strategy (RCM No. 98/2020), the SDG Implementation Model (RCM No. 5/2023), the National Environmental Education Strategy (ENEA 2020), and the Competency Framework for Public Administration (ReCAP, Decree No. 214/2024/1). However, the National Voluntary Report (PLANAPP, 2023) reveals concerns regarding the multi-level alignment of policies with the SDGs, the systematic use of indicators and empirical evidence, the transparency of funding, horizontal and vertical coordination between actors, and the capacity to transform knowledge into effective administrative practices. This analysis justifies the objective of a transversal capacity building action for all PPA employees, given everyone's role in promoting Portugal's sustainable development.

B. SPECIFIC SKILLS

The basis for constructing the adopted specific competency matrix is the European-based GreenComp (EC, 2022). This matrix for the Portuguesa case was validated in a face-to-face workshop 1 with 29 people (Lisbon, February 26th) from various services across the country and with different areas of expertise. Fig. 1 systematizes the specific skills matrix that guides the proposed pedagogical model (these skills are further detailed in the Final Report).

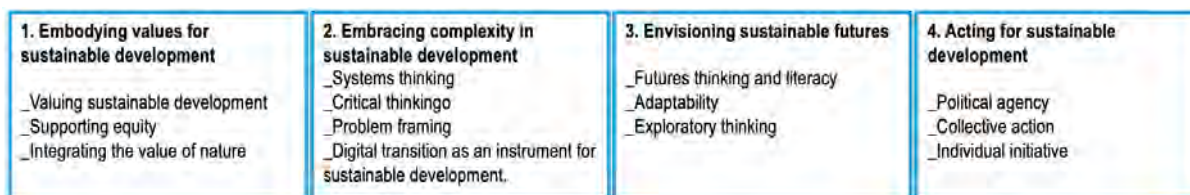


Figure 1 – Specific cross-cutting skills for the sustainable development model.

C. PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

C1. Scientific framework. Although the most common framework adopted by organizations is the 17 SDGs, the model proposed by Sachs *et al* (2019) of the six transformations to achieve them was chosen because it offers an integrated and relatable narrative focusing on six clearly defined areas in which public servants can easily fit, as illustrated in Fig. 2. The concepts associated with sustainable development and its evolution over time are also considered.

C2. Structure of the capacity-building action. The action begins with the 'Setting up' module to the pedagogical model and learning roadmap. It continues with the 'Introduction to Sustainable Development' module, aiming to understand the scope, complexity, and transversality of the sustainable development model in its various social, environmental, and economic domains. These two modules precede the thematic modules, each dedicated to one of the six transformations to be selected according to the trainee's professional interests. The program concludes with an annual one-day in-person conference. Fig. 3 illustrates the organization of the program and its duration.



Figure 2 – Six Transformations for the Sustainable Development Goals (adap. from Sachs *et al*, 2019)

C4. Principles of the learning model. Being the objective to make the training available to the vast majority of PPA employees and aiming

C3. Learning Organization. The proposed learning process is structured in four stages focusing on the specific skills shown in Fig. 1, allowing for a logical learning sequence regardless of the trainee's prior knowledge:

Evidence: Confront and interpret statistics and facts, to understand reality based on evidence, to encourage the search for robust information, and to know how to formulate judgments based on evidence.

Problems: Characterize the underlying problem(s) of each topic, explore its complexity and systemic nature. Relate the evidence to the problem(s).

Solutions: Explore ongoing solutions to the problems analyzed. Understand the role of innovation (technological, economic, social).

Impact: Understand how professional, personal, and service-related practices relate to the problem(s) and solutions. Identify the need to adjust/change specific aspects to increase positive impact.

The content in each of these stages (EPSI) points towards collaboration, a focus on change and innovation, and outcomes, as considered in ReCAP.

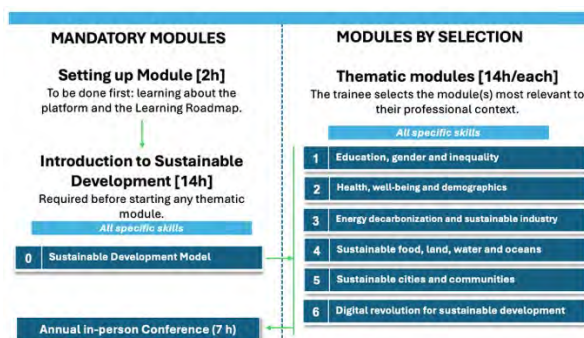


Figure 3 – Structure of the capacity-building action.

to connect trainees from diverse geographical locations and areas of expertise, a blended learning pedagogical model was selected,

using resources available on an e-learning platform. The principles of learner-centeredness and competency-centeredness, and flexibility and collaboration in the learning process were adopted, as follows:

- Guidance for the development of concrete and transferable skills, shown in Fig. 1.
- Each trainee manages their training path, defining their learning pace, without restrictions on time or location, while balancing it with professional responsibilities.
- The learning path is based on the provision of educational resources, centered on activities that trainees must develop, collaborative work in small groups, for the collective construction of knowledge, exchange of experiences and co-creation of responses to sustainability challenges (real problems in the work environment).
- Monitoring of progress throughout the stages, through a human mentor who accompanies the digital community in each edition, and an AI-trained chatbot that accompanies each trainee in formative assessment activities.
- Synchronous sessions, with mentors, to promote discussion among peers and the transfer of learning to the work context.
- Annual in-person event, preferably mandatory, with guest speakers and practical workshops, to consolidate learning and share experiences in fields such as health, education, justice, finance, among others.

Figure 4 illustrates the learning modes in each EPSI stage, and the expected time for each, totaling 14 hours of work (of which 3 hours are contact hours in synchronous sessions).



Figure 4 – Learning methods through the EPSI stages.

C5. Assessment. In addition to formative assessment throughout the four EPSI learning stages, materialized in reflection questions, concrete questions, and challenge solutions,

there is a summative assessment in the final stage, Impact. This assessment always starts from an analysis of the scope and characteristics of each trainee's professional practice and context to identify its connection with the aspects covered in the respective module and to recognize how and where it can be changed to maximize its impact on the sustainable development model. Summative assessment includes individual reflection and collaborative work in small groups, favoring the collective construction of knowledge. The collaborative model culminates in the final synchronous session, where trainees present their work, attend colleagues' presentations, and participate in the discussion.

PROTOTYPE

A prototype of the training activity was developed to illustrate the 'Introduction to Sustainable Development' module on the OpenedX platform (used by the courses offered at NAU), with variations in learning models. These models were tested and experimented in the online workshop 2 (April 14, 2026) with 21 participants, of which 17 were PPA employees. The validated prototype can be accessed [HERE](#).

D. SCALING UP THE CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTION

Using this prototype as a model, it is necessary to develop the various modules (i.e. complete the prototype and develop the remaining ones, including the chatbots training), in collaboration with experts from Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (including the team of this project) and INA technicians, ensuring the adoption of the pedagogical model and the skills completed in this project. According to some participants in workshop 2, this capacity-building action may not be suitable for operational assistants, which requires adaptation.

The action should be made available on the NAU online training platform, in the area dedicated exclusively to the training of public servants and aligned with INA initiatives. The training should be promoted by INA and other training bodies (e.g., FEFAL and IGAP), through partnerships with national Higher Education Institutions to cover all levels of employees and throughout the country, within the next 5 years. It is important to emphasize the need to train human mentors who accompany and promote the digital community

of trainees in each edition of the capacity-building action. These mentors may come from higher education institutions, within the scope of these partnerships, acting as territorial cohesion initiatives. Classes should have 30 trainees from different departments to ensure diversity of profiles. The integration of skills into SIADAP (Integrated System for Performance Management and Evaluation in Public Administration) would be the mechanism to ensure that training reaches all PPA employees, guaranteeing that the desired transformation is transversal.

EXPECTED IMPACTS

The greatest potential lies in the direct impact on the implementation of public policies. When public servants gain skills in sustainable development, the following is expected: (i) Greater coherence between policies (fewer “silos”); (ii) Cross-cutting integration of the SDGs in ministries, regions and municipalities; and (iii) Improved evaluation and forecasting capacity, and (iv) More evidence-based decisions, and a reduction in structural inefficiencies.

With a medium-high impact in the long term, we can expect a change in organizational behaviors, which translates into (i) an

organizational culture geared towards sustainable development, with a change in “administrative mindset”; (ii) day-to-day decisions more aligned with the SDGs, with more internal innovation, as already happens in some services with the so-called champions, individuals committed to promoting sustainable development who voluntarily develop concrete actions with colleagues; (iii) greater accountability and sense of mission.

Public servants and officials are multipliers of impact because they influence businesses (regulation, incentives), citizens (public services, education, communication), and public investment (rules and criteria). Thus, their training can generate (i) better climate policies; (ii) poverty and inequalities reduction; (iii) faster energy transition; (iv) more sustainable cities, among others, with a cascading effect throughout the economy.

However, for this impact to materialize, political alignment and leadership are necessary, and training for sustainable development must be part of institutional objectives, incentives must exist, and it must be reflected in performance evaluation. In short, it is crucial to link the capacity-building to decision-making, budgeting, and accountability.

Policy Options and Recommendations

Considering that most of the Public Administration functions are related to and impact the country's sustainable development model, and taking the core transversal skills of ReCAP, the following policy actions are recommended to promote specific transversal skills in that domain:

1. Establish a task force, through the publication of a Resolution of the Council of Ministers, to coordinated by PLANAPP and INA, in partnership with SDSN Portugal, national Higher Education Institutions and other relevant bodies, with the objective of developing the complete capacity-building action, according to the model proposed here, during a period of 1 year.

2. Adopt the capacity-building action on sustainable development for all public servants in Portugal, through the inclusion of the respective specific transversal skills in SIADAP.

3. Promote and enable the capacity-building action for all PPA employees in the next 5 years, through a **Plan** with specific objectives and mobilization of leadership in the various fields of Public Administration.

4. Monitor and assess the impact of the training activity after one year of editions, identifying any necessary adjustments.

Conclusion

Anticipating the positive impact of specific transversal skills on sustainable development for higher efficiency and wider scope in professional practice of approximately 750,000 APP employees, aware of their central role in the implementation of public policies, a blended learning training model is proposed, to be implemented in Portugal over the next five years.

The model is based on specific GreenComp skills, from European context, which should be transversal to all public servants, thus advocating its inclusion in SIADAP (Integrated System for Performance Assessment in Public Administration). Understanding and applying the values of sustainable development and its complexity, planning for the future and knowing how to act in daily professional practice, is the purpose of the training action, developed from the scientific framework of the six transformations for the SDGs that encompass all levels of APP's performance:

1. Education, gender, and inequality;
2. Health, well-being, and demography;
3. Energy decarbonization and sustainable industry;
4. Sustainable food, land, water, and oceans;

5. Sustainable cities and communities;
6. Digital revolution for sustainable development.

A pedagogical model is proposed, a scientific framework, structure, organization, and principles of the learning model, which is based on the connection to the context and professional practice of the trainee. The model is illustrated in a prototype, validated in dedicated workshops. Public officials trained in sustainable development and the transformations they need to promote have greater awareness of intervention towards a common goal, greater self-esteem (there is always goodwill regarding sustainability), greater efficiency and effectiveness in their functions, and make the country a reference in public policies.

Acknowledgements: The project team wants to thank INA and the participants of both workshops for their availability and constructive spirit, which greatly benefited the final result.

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HOW TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT

Seixas, J., Caeiro, S., Rauch, M., Fernandes, S., Martins, O. (2026). *Empowering public servants for the sustainable development model in Portugal*. S4P-25 Policy Brief 8038/2025. PLANAPP – Centro de Planeamento e de Avaliação de Políticas Públicas.

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This policy brief was developed under the Science4Policy 2025 (S4P-25): Public Policy Science Studies Call, an initiative by the Centre for Planning and Evaluation of Public Policies (PLANAPP) in collaboration with the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), financed by Portugal's Recovery and Resilience Plan. Thematic line S4P-25/09: Professional training of public sector employees.

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