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Transformational Change:
The Challenge of a Brave New World



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LEARNING PAPER SUMMARY:

Transformational Change: The Challenge of a Brave New World

The IEU's Learning Paper Series fosters learning and discussion of climate evaluation, low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways. This 2-page summary provides an overview of the IEU's learning paper, *Transformational Change: The Challenge of a Brave New World*.¹

Background

The learning paper summarized in this brief asks: What is transformational change? Can we define it? And can we measure it? Most multilateral development agencies aim for change that is 'transformational' or shifts the 'paradigm'. Arguably, transformational change has become the holy grail in development assistance. Most development and environmental aid agencies aspire to provide transformational change, often referring to something that will change how they undertake and think about their work and its impact.

What is transformational change?

Despite aid agencies' emphasis on effecting transformational change, definitions of transformational change remain elusive, meaning the near absence of evidence on whether a transformational change has been achieved. The learning paper looks at several instances where attempts have been made to define and measure transformational change.

What are organizations doing?

Table 1 presents a summary of where and how a selection of international agencies refer to transformational change. The mission statements of all these organizations implicitly assume they will be implementing transformational or paradigm-shifting interventions. However, the learning paper's analysis finds just a few instances of agencies evaluating transformational change or paradigm shift.

How do organizations define transformational change?

In the learning paper's analysis of transformational change at CIF, WB and GEF, several common features emerge, as shown in Table 2. Agencies acknowledge the importance of seeing change that is large and has scale and depth. On this basis, a large change in a small pilot programme should not count. But neither should a small change among many people. What counts is a large change that covers large areas.

Agency	Document source	Mentions of transformational change
Green Climate Fund (GCF)	Initial Strategic Plan: Green Climate Fund	"...the GCF will promote the paradigm shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways by providing support to developing countries to limit or reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the impacts of climate change..."
Global Environment Facility (GEF)	GEF 2020 Strategy	"GEF 2020 emphasizes the need for us to support transformational change and achieve impacts on a broader scale."
Climate Investment Fund (CIF)	Annual report 2016	"The CIF is financing policy and regulatory work that is critical to achieving transformational change."
World Bank (WB)	Lessons from World Bank Group Experience - Independent Evaluation Group	"Transformational engagements are a critical pillar of the World Bank Group's strategy for achieving its twin goals of extreme poverty elimination and shared prosperity."

Table 1: Mentions of 'transformational change' by selected multilateral organizations in their strategy and vision documents.

NOTE: For the sake of brevity, the table in this summary paper does not include the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization and International Fund for Agricultural Development, as found in the learning paper.

¹ The citation for the learning paper discussed in this brief is: Jyotsna Puri, J. (2018). Transformational Change – The Challenge of a Brave New World. Independent Evaluation Unit. Green Climate Fund. Songdo, South Korea.

Several of the six agencies reviewed employed the idea of agencies using projects to demonstrate and catalyse change. Some of them also considered lowering costs and removing barriers as an important attribute of what would potentially be transformational.

The WB and GEF referred to 'systems change across sectors', and others consider the time dimension in their conceptualization of transformational change.

In many cases, it seems agencies intentionally use an ambiguous definition of transformational change. For example, the GCF has not yet defined the phrases 'transformational change' and 'paradigm shift', as it recognizes the concept will apply in different ways to different sectors and differently at different times.

ATTRIBUTE OF T-CHANGE	CIF	WB	GEF
Measured T-change?	No	Maybe	No
Specific/consistent indicators	Yes	No	No
Demonstration project logic (Theory of Change)/Catalytic	Yes	No	Yes
Removing barriers/lower costs	Yes	No	Yes
Scale effects (spatial)	?	Yes	Yes
Research and learning	Yes	No	Yes
Systems and across sectors	No	Yes	Yes
Long-term change	No	Yes	Yes
Behaviour change	No	Yes	No

Table 2: A review of definitions for 'transformational change' across evaluations of the CIF, WB and GEF. NOTE: The table in the learning paper also includes the UK Climate Impacts Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

How do organizations measure transformational change?

The learning paper's analysis found that agencies employ surrogate indicators to mark transformational change. Multilateral and bilateral agencies around the world use and report indicators related to change and effectiveness. Typically, indicators related to value for money and sustainability are used as surrogates for transformational change that illustrate and prove transformation.

Recommendations

The challenge of transformation is not just in implementation. It is also in conceptualizing what a transformational change could look like, and importantly for evaluators, identifying if a transformational change occurred, and measuring its magnitude. The learning paper suggests several actions that organizations can take to increase their learning and help them identify and measure transformational change in credible and robust ways.

Examine existing evidence: Attributes associated with transformational change, including changes in scale, depth, sustained change and systemic change, can be enhanced using existing evidence. Creating evidence databases and synthesizing evidence is a key first step.

Set up ex ante theory-based impact evaluations and impact measurement systems: To measure the effects of impact, it is important to ensure that interventions are ready for impact measurement at the inception stage. Methods that use counterfactuals, among others, are one way of doing this. Combining these with qualitative approaches and ensuring they are guided by theory is an important second step.

Implementation research: Monitoring programmes and projects closely is another important requirement. Most programmes build datasets that are not very useful due to their poor quality data. It is necessary to ensure good monitoring data is produced, along with good protocols.

Build buy-in: Studies have shown the benefits of effective planning in resolving the nuanced constraints that engagements face. Further, for engagements to successfully effect transformational change, they must anticipate the transformation of the environment they operate in. An important first step is designing an engagement that fits the context in which it is deployed.

Replicate: It is important to ensure (i) evaluations are not showing one-off results and (ii) that the results are replicable. The learning paper recommends organizations conduct further research into replication. A key starting point for agencies seeking to evaluate transformational change is to systematically review evidence in areas where good evidence is available so that causal inferences can be made.

Conclusion

The aspiration to be transformational is widespread among organizations working in climate change. However, for claims to be credible, organizations must invest more in deliberation, design, and measuring and informing transformational change. This requires critical thinking and investments by the agencies involved.