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Evaluating Climate Change Action for Sustainable Development: An Introduction

Introduction

Published in 2017, *Evaluating Climate Change Action for Sustainable Development* brings together the key papers from the Second International Conference on Evaluating Climate Change and Development, held in Washington, D.C., in 2014. The book's 18-chapters review the current state of climate change evaluation and bring together experiences in evaluating climate change policy, mitigation and adaptation. The book's editors contribute several papers to the publication, including the introductory chapter, as summarized in this 2-page brief.¹

In the introductory chapter, the editors argue thorough and credible evaluation is essential to identifying what works and for whom, where and when in:

- Mitigating climate change and securing win-wins for society, the economy and the environment.
- Reducing risk and increasing resilience in the face of changing climate conditions.

Viewed through the lens of current global climate change knowledge, the chapter introduces the emerging practice of evaluating climate change activities and their part in sustainable development.

Background

2015 marked a historic turning point for global climate action. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change established the Paris Agreement, obligating signatory countries to steer the world towards a net zero-carbon, resilient and fair future. Member UN States also adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Like the Paris Agreement's aspirations, the 17 SDGs aim for a just and sustainable world. SDG 13 specifically relates to climate change, recognizing its impact on development and demanding an urgent response.

Also in 2015, the 3rd UN Conference on Disaster Reduction identified climate change as a driver of increased disaster risk. These global political commitments signify governments' growing concerns about climate change's potential to harm sustainable development significantly.

Climate change, food security and biodiversity

Sustainable development particularly includes sustainable food production. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates climate change will undermine future food production through altered weather patterns and ecosystem impacts. Notably, the three globally important staples of wheat, rice and maize may be harshly affected. Fisheries productivity may also be challenged, compounding existing problems caused by over-fishing. The extinction of many animal and plant species will exacerbate the loss of biological diversity. A warmer climate may also affect human health, aiding the spread of vector-borne diseases such as malaria to higher latitudes. The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather and climate events – such as forest fires, drought, floods and hurricanes – will damage infrastructure, ravage the natural environment, and take people's lives.

Adapting to and mitigating climate change

Addressing climate change requires (i) adapting to and reducing its impact on human and natural systems and (ii) mitigating, preventing or removing the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming and lead to climate change. Successful adaptation and mitigation share a common foundation: effective governance, innovation, investments in environmentally sound technologies and infrastructure, sustainable livelihoods and behavioural and lifestyle choices. Climate change is complex. It encompasses physical, technological,

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institutional, economic, social and political elements. Identifying suitable measures and making the right choices for mitigation and adaptation to climate change is essential to ensuring a sustainable future. This is where evaluation comes in.

Evaluating climate change responses

Evaluation is essential to understanding if climate science is to advocate the right actions for current and future generations. Evaluation of climate change policies, mitigation, and adaptation actions helps assess progress on the complex challenges the world is facing. Evaluation also helps identify what works, under what circumstances and for whom. Evidence-based analysis of past experiences and innovations can shed light on enhancing the effectiveness of actions at various levels and achieving win-win situations and multiple benefits, such as reducing risk and increasing resilience.

Climate-related evaluations assess the value or worth of climate policy, strategy, programmes, projects and other interventions. **Formative evaluations** examine how an intervention is implemented to identify areas for improving the intervention and its performance. **Summative evaluations** determine how well an intervention fulfils its ambition. **Prospective evaluations** assess the likely outcomes of proposed interventions a priori. **Impact evaluations** examine how measurably an intervention contributes to a larger, longer-term goal, such as transforming national policy, rather than just the intervention's outputs and outcomes.

Evaluation challenges

Evaluating climate actions can be challenging primarily because climate change is a global good with many players involved in climate-related decisions. Evaluation is also challenged by the multi-sector, multi-objective and complex nature of climate intervention programmes – interventions that aim to affect the environment, livelihoods, health, income and food security. Additionally, climate intervention programmes aim to affect immediate outcomes and outcomes over

generations. Another major challenge evaluations incur is the absence of data and capacity to assess climate interventions: most evaluators are trained in more traditional sectors and think about evaluations in conventional ways. Also, some evaluators find it challenging to distinguish between the 'direct' and 'final or ultimate' impact of interventions.

Evaluating climate change action is a relatively new frontier, having emerged only in the first decade of the 2000s. But it is already apparent that evaluation in the area of environment and sustainable development has the potential to progress rapidly and generate high-quality, relevant evidence for informing national and international efforts directed at the environment and sustainable development.

In the context of evaluation challenges, it is important to mention the evaluation challenges posed by climate-related initiatives implemented by the private and civil sectors, such as impact investing, corporate responsibility, sustainable operations, civic initiatives and social enterprise. The role of evaluation in these relatively new climate-related initiatives is not yet established. They are often identified as new frontiers for development evaluation and present teething challenges for evaluation. People and institutions working in these nascent initiatives need to take stock of the evaluation provided evidence on operationalizing and managing climate-smart enterprises.

In conclusion, institutions and individuals across the globe involved in efforts to reduce climate change and its impacts must set themselves the goal of making sure their interventions are (i) effective and significantly increase mitigation, adaptation or both while ensuring sustainable development and (ii) able to identify and measure trade-offs. Proper and methodically sound evaluation can help achieve that goal.

