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“Evaluation shouldn’t just be tagging along behind new projects.”



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“There has been a great deal of improvement in evaluation models.”

David Michael Todd and Claudio Volonte, both evaluation officers with the Global Environment Facility (GEF), were key players at the International Conference on Evaluating Climate Change and Development. According to Todd, climate change evaluation has so far been carried out on a piecemeal, project-by-project basis, with little overall synthesis to indicate the actual impact of climate change reduction efforts on a broader scale.

Volonte also sees the need for improvement but acknowledges how far climate change

evaluation has come, saying, “Ten years ago evaluation models were very coarse. We’ve now produced much finer models and uncertainties are decreasing as a result. There’s also a growing recognition of the helpfulness of evaluating achievements.” Both agree that to achieve success in the future, evaluations need to be gathered together and synthesized to give a clearer picture of where things are and where they should be headed.

According to Todd, mitigation projects (reducing greenhouse gas emissions) have been a staple feature of the GEF climate change portfolio, but adaptation projects are now gaining prominence. Both Todd and Volonte were quick to point out that adaptation projects have been around for years, although not necessarily recognized as such.

“Climate change adaptation projects have been happening in Europe and elsewhere for over 60 years, but not labelled as adaptation, such as drought-resistant crop planting projects and the like,” says Todd. He adds, “Climate change adaptation used to be seen in a different light, more along the lines of poverty alleviation, but now that’s changing; we’re looking at it in terms of changing climatic conditions.”

The increased prominence and funding of adaptation efforts are accompanied by a greater demand for accountability. This creates an urgent need for meaningful ways to evaluate the climate change component. Todd maintains that evaluation methods are largely supply driven. When the issue is emissions reduction, evaluators look at quantities, projections, and estimates. When it comes to adaptation, however, more of a socioeconomic treatment is required, but there is no standard in the evaluation community specific to climate change projects. Todd is aware that aggregating and synthesizing climate change evaluation findings poses a large challenge and will require substantial time and effort, given the wealth of information that has already been compiled and the cross-sectoral nature of the issue.

Adding to the complexity and difficulty of this process, Volonte points out the need for quick feedback on new initiatives. “Climate change impacts are taking place right now (even within adaptive management) and must be addressed in the present.” He believes that additional information sharing will help to achieve this aim. Using existing institutions that are already working on evaluating climate change will improve ownership and demand within the evaluation community.

According to Volonte, practitioners in many fields have a lot to contribute. For example, having worked in the natural disaster sector himself for many years, Volonte is aware of “the amazing amount of information available from the natural disaster community and the benefits available to adaptation practitioners and evaluators alike, who could tap into this knowledge and include it in the development of an integrated evaluation methodology.” There is also an opportunity for specialists in the evaluation of agriculture to contribute, even though the threats are changing. However, these “communities of practice” are not sufficiently involved in the discussions about evaluating climate change impacts.

Overall, adaptation projects should be evaluated based on the sector or subject they fall under, but reported together in a comprehensive manner. After all, agree both Todd and Volonte, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and this broader perspective is important for evaluators and practitioners to take stock of how much difference is being made and in what direction efforts need to be focused to make more of a difference in the future. This exchange of information on methods as well as experiences within climate change and evaluation is vital, especially considering that it is still new for many evaluators. According to Volonte, the knowledge gap between evaluators and practitioners creates an even greater need for enhanced communication and knowledge sharing.

Broadly speaking, climate change evaluation is not always smooth sailing, whether one is talking about mitigation or adaptation. Besides the fact that projections and estimates that evaluators work with are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, difficulties at the project level increase the challenge. Common pitfalls, as Todd puts it, include late implementation of vital portions of projects, as well as late evaluation — when it's too late to make a difference instead of before major impacts occur, the importance of which Volonte highlights. In addition, a lack of correspondence between the skills needed in projects and skills available at the institutional or individual level does not make things any easier. Finally, baseline information is often missing because it is expensive to acquire and there is less willingness to pay for this type of groundwork, even though it is necessary for meaningful evaluation.

When asked about the way forward, Todd suggests that it would be useful to look back at past adaptation projects that, at the time, were not categorized as such, and to evaluate their contribution toward the overall reduction of negative effects of climate change. He also finds that evaluation needs to contribute more to identifying the most cost effective interventions, given the limited resources many projects have to work with, for there to be lasting impact on the ground. In line with this, Volonte mentions the need to pay due attention to context when developing adaptation interventions as well as developing cost-benefit tools for adaptation.

For both Todd and Volonte, the primary value of the workshop lay in networking and knowledge exchange, because it allowed for interaction with practitioners and researchers and discussion around the issue of evaluation. The workshop brought various communities together to discuss climate change evaluation, including implementers, researchers, and evaluators, reinforcing synergies between agencies and individuals working in this area, which has never before happened on such a scale. Perhaps what this conference illustrates is that there is a need for the aggregation and synthesis not only of evaluation outcomes and methods, but also of ideas, knowledge, and experience.