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International and donor agency portfolio evaluations: Trends in monitoring and evaluation of climate change adaptation programmes



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADB IED	Asian Development Bank Independent Evaluation Department
AMAT	Adaptation Monitoring and Assessment Tool (of the GEF)
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung
CCA	Climate change adaptation
CO2	Carbon dioxide
DME	Design, monitoring and evaluation
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
LDCF	Least Developed Countries Fund (of the GEF)
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
SCCF	Special Climate Change Fund (of the GEF)
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
SPA	Strategic Priority for Adaptation (of the GEF)
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
WRI	World Resources Institute

Evaluation Reviews are short papers highlighting and/or distilling 'lessons learned' from a selection of evaluation reports that are relevant to M&E of climate change adaptation.



Introduction

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) declared that “climate change is the defining development challenge of the 21st century” (GEF 2012: v). There has been a growing recognition that climate change will increasingly compromise the lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world, and is one of the factors challenging the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals and the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Initially, climate change responses tended to focus on mitigation activities or on understanding direct impacts. Today, a complex landscape of climate adaptation programmes exists, often overlapping with broader environmental, disaster risk reduction (DRR), or other development objectives. Climate change adaptation (CCA) is now identified as a key issue with relevance across the spectrum of development programming, including sectors that it was not initially associated with (e.g. health or urban development). Although consensus has emerged over time about what constitutes ‘adaptation’, there are still divergent ideas on how the results of adaptation interventions should be monitored and measured, especially when seeking to ‘read across’ large programmes and organisational portfolios.

Climate change adaptation (CCA) poses a distinct bundle of methodological monitoring and evaluation (M&E) challenges for international agencies (see, for example, Olivier, Leiter, and Linke 2013). It often requires the consideration of long time horizons and is characterised by uncertainty both in terms of future climatic conditions and the socio-economic circumstances in which adaptation measures will operate. In contrast, climate change mitigation is relatively straightforward to measure: it has the easily-quantified objective of minimising the speed and extent of climate change through reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, or preserving and enhancing ‘carbon sinks’ which absorb CO₂. Although these interventions may be very complex in other respects, the presence of universally-relevant measures, such as reductions on emissions levels, provides a sound foundation for tracking impact and performance. In contrast, CCA poses a complex web of M&E dilemmas and requires M&E approaches which examine how people, systems, and institutions adjust to both climate change and its cascading social, economic, and political repercussions. Given that these are challenging to measure, it is often hard to attribute change to a specific programme or organisation. While there is considerable overlap between CCA and good development practice, there is also growing recognition that “not all development is adaptation and not all adaptation leads to development” (Spearman and McGray 2011: 11), thus we cannot simply rely on development indicators as proxies for adaptation.

CCA M&E is a rapidly-evolving field, and there has been a proliferation of guidelines and toolkits in recent years (those interested in a detailed review of them should consult our 2014b reference report). As investments in CCA increase, donors and development agencies are seeking to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the CCA activities they fund. This includes a desire to gain a broader picture of progress across an organisation or portfolio, often spanning multiple programmes, countries and sectors. This Evaluation Review, based on published portfolio evaluations of several international and donor agencies, reflects on these higher level evaluations in order to an outline of trends in CCA Design, monitoring and evaluation (DME).

The paper is organised into five parts: this short introduction is followed by a summary of the paper’s methodology and intended audience, and then a very brief walk-through of the agencies that were reviewed for this paper. We subsequently present a narrative, conceptual overview of trends in CCA DME, based on UN and donor agencies’ published portfolio evaluations. We conclude with our own remarks and recommendations.

Purpose, methodology, & audience

This paper identifies trends in how selected major international agencies have approached CCA programmes, and particularly their M&E components. It is important to emphasise that this is not a meta-evaluation or systematic review of evidence or financial trends. Instead, this paper is an interpretive literature review based on the published portfolio evaluations of selected international agencies which finance or extend key technical assistance to CCA in Asia and the Pacific. We present past, present, and emerging trends in the evolving thinking and practice behind donors' approaches to CCA DME. We believe that this reflective approach fills an important gap, and will help development practitioners and policy-makers better understand how to approach CCA DME in a way that reflects current trends, knowledge, and evidence. This in turn will enable them to not only satisfy current donor requirements, but reflect best practice in CCA DME.

The sample of documents reviewed comprises portfolio evaluations published by UN and donor agencies within the past five years. However, there are limitations insofar as several important funders are not represented, either because their evaluations are kept internal, and / or their portfolios have not been evaluated as a whole. The information that we present should thus be regarded as illustrative rather than definitive. This also explains why we refrain from presenting pooled financial, performance, or technical data, and instead focus on broader messages.

It should also be noted that these portfolio evaluations were all prepared by independent teams, and thus the authors' viewpoints – which may vary from official agency positions – also influence this analysis. The reader should be aware that there may be differences between evaluators' assessments and formal agency positions. This paper is a conceptual overview of key M&E themes that emerged from a close reading of portfolio evaluations, and should be recognised as an interpretive narrative study, rather than a summary of official policy.

Selected agencies

In this section, we briefly note the portfolio evaluations reviewed for this paper. Agencies were identified based on whether they extend funding or key technical assistance for climate change adaptation in Asia and the Pacific, and whether their portfolio evaluations are publicly available.

The **Asian Development Bank** (ADB)'s Independent Evaluation Department (IED) published a "special evaluation study" in 2012 concerning the ADB's response to natural disasters and disaster risks, including climate change adaptation.

The **Swedish International Development Agency** (Sida) has published three evaluations pertaining to different aspects of its support for CCA. All three papers directly address CCA, albeit with varying degrees of emphasis. These papers are:

- A 2013 overview of Sida's entire development portfolio;
- A 2012 evaluation of one of Sida's major global partners (The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation) which in turn extends sub-grants to local partners worldwide;
- A 2012 evaluation of Sida's work regarding vulnerability, risk, and resilience.

The **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change** (UNFCCC) established several mechanisms to finance climate change mitigation and adaptation. The following agencies' portfolio evaluations are included in this review: the **Least Developed Countries Fund** (LDCF) for Adaptation to Climate Change, the **Special Climate Change Fund** (SCCF) – both under the Global Environment Facility (GEF) – and the **Strategic Priority for Adaptation** (SPA), a GEF-established fund that was operational between 2003 and 2010. These three evaluations were published between 2009 and 2012.

The **United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction** (UNISDR) published an evaluation of its Asia/Pacific Secretariat in 2009, which assessed the work of this office from 2006 to 2009. It should be noted that ISDR is not a donor agency but does extend key technical assistance.



The emergence of CCA: The evolution in approaches to design, monitoring, and evaluation (DME)

The focus of earlier climate change policy and programming was on mitigation and assessing the impacts of climate change on developing countries. While adaptation was increasingly prioritised and identified as a critical aspect of broader climate change negotiations, it has taken a considerable amount of time for this to result in the implementation of adaptation actions on the ground. As investment in implementing adaptation increases, so interest in M&E has grown. Yet, quite correctly, adaptation programming in developing countries is often delivered by agencies which already actively deliver environmental, DRR, or other development portfolios. This meant that, until recently, M&E of adaptation sat within broader, pre-existing M&E frameworks. These often failed to effectively determine the impact of an intervention on the resilience of a given community. While agencies submitting proposals to donors usually had to demonstrate “relevance” to climate change adaptation, there were no widely-recognised criteria for what that meant.

From an M&E perspective, the result was quite chaotic. The desire for greater specificity when assessing adaptation impacts and progress is apparent in the comments and recommendations made in the portfolio evaluations. Evaluators were generally favorable when talking about the many interesting and often innovative programmes that had been funded. However, evaluation teams consistently were unable to formulate any robust conclusions, simply because data was too fragmented, scattered, and inconsistent. The GEF evaluators (2012), for example, argued that:

“Indicators are the glue that connects objective with outcome / impact and shows change over time. However, there were very few such strong and to-the-point indicators. Moreover, none of these indicators related to each other across projects, making it nearly impossible to aggregate data at the fund level” (p. 50–51).

Christoplos, Novaky, and Ayson (2012) took a more qualitative approach to their Sida evaluation, but similarly asserted that “it has not been possible to obtain a sufficiently broad or structured overview of this somewhat elusive topic¹ to present definitive conclusions and recommendations” (p. 7). Fragmented data has contributed to a series of problems and challenges, including that it has been difficult for donor agencies to fully justify or engage global policy-makers on key climate change issues. It has also thoroughly stymied efforts to build an evidence base to support CCA strategy and programming at the local level.

All of the portfolio evaluations that we reviewed made strong and urgent calls to ‘tame’ CCA M&E. The evaluations are strikingly uniform in this regard. The specificities of their recommendations, however, show a rapid evolution in thinking and approach on how to do so. Among the evaluations included here, the earliest two are Cunliffe’s (2009) review of UNISDR’s Asia/Pacific Secretariat, and COWI and IIED’s (2009) evaluation of the LCDF. COWI and IIED’s evaluation primarily focused on internal management issues outside the scope of our inquiry², but they also noted a wide range of M&E issues including an outdated project database, lack of a common tracking procedure, poor reporting compliance, lack of data availability, and weak M&E capacity among funded partners.

1 The authors were referring to resilience, risk, and vulnerability in general – not just climate change adaptation.

2 The COWI and IIED (2009) evaluation of the LCDF focused on internal processes. The main thrust was that the Fund’s effectiveness and efficiency had been seriously compromised due to erratic and inadequate financing from the Fund’s donor countries. Complex, slow, and opaque disbursement procedures had further contributed to ‘bottlenecks’ within the Fund.



Cunliffe (2009) addressed M&E more directly. He observed that “at the moment the [regional UNISDR secretariat] office M&E could be summarised as having virtually no system” (p. 50), and he made a series of very specific and concrete recommendations that he characterised as “a priority and... a matter of urgency” (p. 12). UNISDR’s mandate is DRR rather than CCA *per se*, but in the evaluation review Cunliffe demonstrates that UNISDR’s stakeholders had intense interest in CCA and were looking to UNISDR for leadership in addressing it. However, the report does not specify what CCA entails and how it is distinguished from DRR. Moreover, some of the recommendations about how to improve M&E are, in hindsight, somewhat blithe regarding the specific methodological challenges that characterise CCA M&E. This should in no way be interpreted as a shortcoming of the paper or its author: rather, it reflects the state of knowledge in 2009. Indeed, this paper is, if anything, quite prescient on several key points. Evaluators for the later papers made recommendations that were more specific and targeted, reflecting the evolution of thinking and practice on CCA M&E.



Current approaches to CCA DME

The strong recommendations to devise coherent M&E systems for CCA are clearly being taken seriously by global agencies, and the later portfolio recommendations welcomed that concrete steps had already been taken in this regard. Agencies with dedicated funding streams for CCA recognise that it is extremely difficult to derive robust conclusions about their mandates in the absence of a unified analytic / reporting framework. Those agencies with broader missions, meanwhile, struggle to identify whether and how CCA is being, or should be, addressed. Many of the agencies have been rolling out M&E frameworks and tools which are aimed at organising CCA M&E efforts (for a recent overview see Bours *et al.* 2014b) This recent surge in CCA M&E-related resources highlights just how rapidly this field is evolving.

One major priority has been to identify and track CCA indicators that can be monitored and, ideally, aggregated at the global level. GEF's Adaptation Monitoring and Assessment Tool (AMAT) is a prominent example. The 2012 independent evaluation of SCCF's portfolio emphasised the need for "strong and to-the-point indicators" (p. 51) which demonstrate specific achievements that can be attributed to funded interventions, compared across programmes, and aggregated for global policy analysis. AMAT was designed precisely to support these efforts, and the evaluators declare that it "is redefining the logframe by outlining suggested objectives, outcomes, and outputs" (p. 51). While this language is a bit overstated, the AMAT is a useful tool for linking disparate programmes into a coherent framework. Funded projects are required to align their objectives under one or more of the SCCF's overall objectives, select the appropriate sector(s), and then choose at least one output and one outcome indicator per objective from a pre-defined menu of options. For example, an implementing partner's rural development programme might align itself under the overall AMAT objective "diversified and strengthened livelihoods and sources of income for vulnerable people in targeted areas," and then select the pre-defined output and outcome indicators that are most suitable. (Programmes are not restricted to only pre-defined indicators; they can also devise ones that are tailored to the specificities of their programme. Use of the pre-defined indicators is, however, required in order to support facilitate global-level monitoring and analysis.)

Approaches like AMAT primarily facilitate upwards accountability, international-level analysis, and global policy-making. However, CCA presents a thorny bundle of DME challenges, and methodologically speaking, CCA is a poor fit for standardised or global indicators (Bours, McGinn, and Pringle 2014a). Tools like AMAT are indispensable for a number of purposes, including climate finance and climate investment decision-making, but are of limited utility for other key M&E functions, particularly at the local level. The danger, of course, is that new tracking / monitoring tools will facilitate consistent collection and tracking of data, but be only superficially attuned to assessment of adaptation and resilience.

A related key question that emerges is whether, and to what extent, CCA is best served by dedicated funding versus 'mainstreaming' within other programming. While not an M&E issue *per se*, this is a critical strategic question that has clear implications for how to approach programme design. Some of the evaluation teams clearly regard this issue as a key dilemma, although others sidestepped it entirely. For example, the ADB's 2012 evaluation of its work pertaining to natural disasters found that agency strategies related to DRR and CCA were "less than responsive" (p. 64) and "patchy" (p. 63), and exhibited "significant weaknesses in terms of the sustainability" (p. 47). The evaluation stressed that the ADB "needs to integrate climate change" (p. 67), although there was little discussion of what the implications would be for the ADB's portfolio as a whole. Meanwhile, the authors of the 2011 SPA evaluation observed that there was little that seemed to distinguish climate change from other programming, but then welcomed the fact that this indicated "strong convergence among practices that represent good sustainable development activities, good environmental activities, and good adaptation activities" (p. 44).



They embraced the prospect of integrating climate change into other programmes “with marginal additional investment” (p. 44). However, the team carefully avoided questioning what constitutes ‘win-win’ versus ‘window dressing,’ i.e. whether programmes have simply been re-packaged as climate change adaptation, but do not meaningfully address it.

The three Sida evaluations indirectly identified some of the risks of mainstreaming, including that key aspects of CCA may be only superficially incorporated into existing programmes. Holmberg *et al.* (2012) cautiously raised questions around whether partners had simply conflated climate change with longstanding aims that did not necessarily fulfill a CCA mandate. (They also argued that many of these partners would greatly appreciate technical assistance and capacity building so that they would be better equipped to do so.) The authors of another of the Sida portfolio evaluations (Christoplos, Novaky, and Aysan 2012) were even more assertive. They observed that while CCA concepts had been included within programmes, “in many cases these components have not been accompanied by a fundamental rethinking” (p. 8) of strategy and practice. They observed that key constructs were often not labelled or reported on in an accessible way, while other partners seem to have adopted the ‘right’ CCA language but showed little evidence of substantive application:

“This review has encountered many examples of where the ‘right words’ are included in introductory chapters of programme documents, but where, in the actual activities, outcomes and assumptions in the results frameworks, there is insufficient indication of if and how there will be follow-up to unpack these rhetorical commitments and hold development actors to account for actually reducing risk” (p. 63).

There is no ‘right or wrong’ answer to the question of whether CCA is best served by mainstreaming versus dedicated funding mechanisms. What is an appropriate strategy for one agency may not be for another. Whether, how, and to what extent CCA agencies will mainstream CCA in the coming years is clearly a major issue facing development donors. This will have implications for CCA evaluation which may be tasked with disentangling CCA progress where the relationship with broader development objectives is poorly defined.



Emerging trends in CCA DME

All of the portfolio evaluations were authored by independent teams, and their recommendations do not necessarily reflect donor policy directions. Indeed, all of the authors very carefully refrained from making any statements regarding the agencies' expected trajectories, and it should be remembered that portfolio evaluations do not necessarily reflect or anticipate official policy. This section should thus be read as an interpretative assessment of directions and trends in M&E, based on a close reading of portfolio evaluations together with our own professional expertise and judgment.

We are confident that the donor trend towards more unified CCA DME reporting frameworks will only gain momentum. There are a plethora of new tools and approaches (see 2014b) that are being rolled out. Collectively, we see global agencies taking concrete steps towards more coherent and systemised approaches to CCA DME. The earlier 'data chaos' problems identified in the portfolio evaluations are widely recognised, and thankfully should not continue.

While any single DME tool has its pros and cons, there is a critique emanating from many CCA M&E specialists, which is reflected in some of the portfolio evaluations as well. This school of thought holds that while metrics and accountability are important, too narrow a focus on indicators can distract attention from other pertinent issues. Chief among these is growing recognition that the most urgent issue is not how to measure CCA programmes, but how to most effectively learn from them and improve practice. Such improvement relies heavily upon M&E influencing programme design. As the authors of one of the Sida portfolio evaluations asserted:

"A central lesson learnt in the review is that resilience has no fixed standard characteristics and cannot be effectively promoted by checklists. The prevalence of rhetorical reference to resilience, vulnerable groups, etc. in current programming, and the dearth of clear evidence of results, suggests that it is more important to assess whether programmes reflect genuine common concerns about how natural hazards are impacting on factors that hinder resilience. This is especially important in relation to commitments to address the landscape of risk associated with (a) resource scarcities, (b) food insecurity, (c) the complex vulnerabilities of the poor, and (d) the challenges faced in developing capacities to adapt to climate change... the key question is whether there is a clear theory of change" (Christoplos, Novaky, and Aysan 2012: 9)

It is no accident that this critique dovetails with concerns that too many programmes reference climate change but only address it superficially. The focus of some of the key current technical literature on CCA (see, for example, Sterrett 2011; Webb and Dazé 2011) is on analysis of emerging and uncertain climate change scenarios together with contextual dimensions of a given population's vulnerability and resilience – and ideally differentiated by socio-economic and demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, class and wealth. This discourse is reflected in some of the portfolio evaluations. The authors of the 2011 SPA review argued that "climate-specific enabling interventions... [should] include vulnerability assessments and mapping, climate modelling, and down-scaling" (p. 43), and they regret that "very few SPA projects explicitly demonstrate that this thinking was the basis for the selection of adaptation measures... the evaluation found limited evidence to indicate that adaptation options were selected on the basis of dedicated vulnerability assessments" (p. 7). It may be that in the near future some CCA funders will require – or at least favour – programmes which are built on a more coherent and explicit climate change vulnerability and resilience analysis. This may or may not be accompanied by a return to M&E frameworks that are more tailored to project or programme specificities, and less emphasis on standardised or aggregated indicators.



A separate M&E issue that is emerging is how to guarantee that lessons learned are disseminated, and especially how those from specialised CCA initiatives inform more general ones. To this end, it is important that dedicated CCA policies and programmes should be coordinated with wider development agendas, and moreover that what is learned about CCA would inform 'climate-smart' development. There was considerable criticism in the portfolio evaluations that this was not being achieved. New learning about CCA was not informing wider work, because CCA was too isolated into 'silos.' The COWI and IIED (2009) evaluation of the LCDF singled out this as a weakness in the LCDF's approach. They observed that the National Plan of Action (NAPA) "priority activities identified are largely project type interventions targeting specific interventions in single sectors... integration of adaptation into development, and policy reform are largely absent" (p. 49). They further argued that "this process missed the opportunity to develop a strategic set of activities that by combining and sequencing could have resulted in more comprehensive programmes for climate change adaptation" (p. 70). In other words, the CCA processes that it was funding were marginalised rather than integrated into national policy.

The evaluators who assessed the LCDF and Sida raised similar concerns, albeit from the standpoint of an agency with a broad development mandate. Christoplos, Heqvist, and Rothman (2013) directly questioned whether Sida's support to multilateral CCA funders was inadvertently marginalising the topic within Sida's overall portfolio. They expressed concern that CCA "was primarily seen as a topic to be funded through the Special Climate Change Initiative and lessons learned from this programming had limited broader influence on Sida thinking" (p. 46). They argued that:

"Environmental sustainability should also be a thematic priority, but the evaluations suggest that this is almost always seen as a purely sectoral issue. Ownership of climate change objectives is even weaker, as support in this area tends to be associated with the Special Climate Change Initiative. The evaluations provide insufficient evidence to conclude that this special initiative modality is detrimental to broader mainstreaming and ownership of this objective within Sida programming, but it does indicate cause for concern" (p. 49).

There is a strong sense from a number of portfolio evaluations that CCA endeavours are strongest when the following characteristics are met:

- The programme design stems from a coherent underlying analysis of how a dynamic climate change context interacts with socio-economic vulnerability;
- Initiatives are coordinated within broader policy and programming (rather than fragmented amongst individual projects);
- M&E is harnessed to build an evidence base and disseminate learning.

Summary and Conclusion

In this Evaluation Review, we have discussed key trends in CCA M&E that were identified from a close reading of a small selection of relevant portfolio evaluations published by agencies that finance or extend technical assistance for CCA in Asia and the Pacific. This paper sketches out the evolution of CCA M&E experiences, problems, and trends, as they were discussed in the selected portfolio evaluations.

What the evaluators had in common was a struggle to formulate robust conclusions regarding CCA praxis and performance in the absence of coherent reporting frameworks. Early CCA programmes simply had to demonstrate 'relevance' to climate change, but there were no criteria for what that meant. Evaluators were thus positive about interesting, innovative, and relevant initiatives but could not pool data or derive sound findings across programmes. There was strong consensus that a more systematic approach to CCA programming and M&E was urgently needed. The agencies are now rolling out more structured reporting frameworks. However, there are subtle signs of a 'backlash' insofar as there is growing criticism that this focus has been too narrow, i.e. that the emphasis on indicators, metrics, and reporting convenience has been 'crowding out' important, more nuanced, issues.

There are hints that an emerging trend, at least among some agencies, will be renewed attention to CCA programme design; this would include, an explicit analysis of climate change hazards and risks, together with an assessment of how that will influence a population's vulnerability and resilience. Such an assessment would explicitly consider socio-economic contexts, i.e. how risk and resilience are embedded in such factors as gender, ethnicity, poverty, land ownership, and other axes of inequality. A second strategic question is whether and how to mainstream CCA. While not an M&E issue *per se*, this question does have implications for programme design and reporting mechanisms. The different portfolio evaluations approach this topic very differently. Some directly confront key challenges; others gloss over them altogether. There does appear to be support for embedding CCA within broader policy and programming, though this must be balanced with ensuring that programmes do not simply pay lip service to the considerable challenges that CCA presents to development practitioners. M&E systems will need to be able to draw out key messages to inform CCA programme design even when such messages are located in a complex web of broader development objectives and impacts.

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