Report

Pathways towards transformational climate action: connecting the worlds of research, evaluation and policy for action

Wednesday 8 September 2021 | WP1965V

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In association with The International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), Climate Investment Funds, Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund, University of Sussex, Institute of Development Studies, United Nations Development Programme Independent Evaluation Office, International Fund for Agricultural Development.

Background

Climate change is a defining issue of our time. It continues to threaten societies globally and its economic, social, and environmental impacts are a challenge for us all. Without drastic action today, adapting to these impacts in the future will be more difficult and costly, and the world will struggle to get back on track with the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This meeting explored how the world of research, evaluation, policy and action can collaborate to promote transformational change. It follows an exploratory event during the gLOCAL week in June 2021, which confirmed the need to consider evidence of transformational change and how it can be defined, designed, strengthened and supported (see report WP1783V1). This report of the 8 September 2021 event is a record of the first dialogue involving around 50 participants.

Defining transformational change

1. The Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP) guidance note, Transformational change concepts, summarises and promotes dimensions and signals of transformational change. This note has emerged from consultations with a wide range of stakeholders across the globe.

2. There is no standard definition of transformation, so the TCLP guidance is a helpful contribution and solid starting point for further joint work.

3. Comments from participants touched upon the contexts in which the guidance can be used and the systems perspective that is recommended. Many contextual factors are challenging but need to be included to achieve transformation: power, politics, culture, and values, amongst others.

4. While the guidance note mentions inclusion, it does not contain the word 'equity'; however this concept is crucial and is different to inclusion.

5. Transformational climate action needs to be accompanied by a global communications campaign. A profound effort is needed to ensure that policy makers, civil society and the private sector genuinely understand the climate crisis, and what is necessary to achieve deep transformational change.

Evidence of transformation in climate action

6. Research evidence shows that transformational change needs to be intentional and disruptive to succeed. A power shift needs to occur, with political systems taking a more central role in discussions to ensure transformation happens.

7. Evaluative evidence demonstrates that transformational interventions need to conceptually investigate the systems to be transformed and to explore the pathways towards transformation.

8. Ownership and control through citizen and stakeholder engagement are crucial so that the co-benefits of transformational change will be realised, enhancing social acceptance and strengthening social capital.

9. The state, civil society and the market will have varying roles in transformational change, depending on the contexts. This should be explored in theories of change, in which systems, barriers, pathways and contexts are represented in what could be called an 'eco-system' of transformation.

10. The Just Transition Initiative presents a framework for two key dimensions of justice: procedural justice, who decides and how inclusive decision-making processes are; and distributional justice, how benefits are distributed to reach safe and just outcomes.

11. The language around justice and just transitions may be appropriated by those in power, who may use this to state that they cannot move too fast or be overly ambitious until all the views of stakeholders are heard and resolved. This needs to be distinguished from more legitimate uses of 'justice' for transformational change.

12. While the principles of Just Transition are clear, a profound discussion is needed between the private sector, civil society and policy makers to identify how transitions will take place in countries and regions.

13. Within countries it is hard to get momentum for transformational change, if a government is risk averse, especially around losing votes. Risks can also provide a turning point: when groups or individuals realize the threat of climate change to their livelihoods, they can become active against climate change.

14. If an individual or organisation wishes to contribute to transformation, they may need to recognize that they do not have the skills or the institutional requirements to support transformation – they will need to 'transform themselves' first!

Towards transformational climate action

Pathways

15. It is essential to understand and emphasize that much of the fundamental change needs to happen in the global North.

16. How is it possible to identify whether an early change in a project or programme will lead to transformation? Sometimes transformation happens as a result of a project even though it has not been planned. How can this be translated into guidance for investments and interventions?

17. Stronger M&E, research, evidence and knowledge systems are needed to better understand and communicate lessons learnt from transformations that happen as a result of investments and projects. How can these lessons be captured and made relevant and accessible for others?

18. Issues of power need to be more explicitly dealt with both in the definitions and dimensions of transformational change. While it can certainly be picked up in the dimensions it is not immediately apparent to somebody who may not be looking for it. A more explicit and proactive engagement with power, vested interests and thus the political economy should be promoted and supported.

19. The distributional effects associated with transformational change are important and need to be captured. Such effects can be analysed across all five dimensions as identified in the TCLP guidance note.

Overcoming barriers

20. There is a need for further work on a systems perspective, leading to understanding of how systems function together as an 'eco-system'. While the work done so far on the TCLP framework is brilliant, it centres around an anthropocentric concept. The biggest player at the table is nature, which is threatened by irreversible changes, loss, degradation and damage. We need to ensure agency and voice for natural systems, because they will frame which transformations can and cannot take shape.

21. Information asymmetry is a barrier as access to information is different among stakeholders. Evidence and knowledge produced through research and evaluation needs to be communicated and focused on supporting a profound interaction in countries on a more balanced and inclusive way forward.

22. There is a tension between traditional ways of living and knowing (e.g. forest communities and indigenous peoples) on the one hand and new discourses (e.g. on carbon sequestration, countries' efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and the clean development mechanism) that impact on traditional communities on the other. This requires the development of 'languages of inclusion' that recognize and engage with other ways of knowing and seek to create spaces of 'dialogue' across 'languages'.

23. Significant knowledge barriers are currently holding back transformation. This constraint is not value free, as it is often the result of current power structures that continue to propagate existing knowledge and belief systems.

Final reflections and next steps

24. The transformational agenda is not about 'building back better', it is about real transformational action, addressing political economy and generating political space. The challenge is to engage all actors and stakeholders in society on the climate challenges and risks and to engage them in transformational action.

25. Importantly, how are those who are not at the table included? Agency and voice can be a huge push factor to change or to influence the political economy of the disruption that is needed.

26. Conversations at the interfaces of science, evaluation and policy need to promote knowledge systems that are needed for transformation, as the knowledge systems we have in place reinforce the build back better mentality, not transformation.

27. Many transformational approaches are too anthropocentric. They need to include the ecosystems on which humanity depends. Nature has to be more explicit in transformational change concepts and approaches.

28. Participants were invited to think through how the future Wilton Park dialogues on pathways to transformational climate action can take up these issues in a practical, pragmatic way, through discussing more concrete guidance on transformational change on the basis of evidence and knowledge. They are invited to bring interesting cases and conceptual and knowledge work to the attention of the organizers of this series of events, to ensure the next event will identify concrete ways in which policy, civil society, the private sector, research and evaluation can support greater transformational intent.

Reactions to transformationalchange@wiltonpark.org.uk

Resources

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