

EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

SEMINAR REPORT 1/2018



International Sustainable
Forest Initiatives:
**Seminar on evaluation
and learning**

Oslo, October 12-13, 2017



This report summarises main lessons from a workshop on evaluation and learning for international sustainable forest initiatives, held in Oslo 12.-13. October 2017.

The event was organised by the evaluation department of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), together with the evaluation units of the Global Environment Facility, the United Nation Environment Programme and the Green Climate Fund.

The Government of Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) was a collaborating partner. The main purpose was to identify lessons from evaluating international sustainable forest initiatives, and to discuss how evaluations could contribute to shaping and strengthening future forest-related investments.

Streaming and more information from the seminar is available at Norad.no.

Introduction

More effective management of forested landscapes is increasingly understood as key to any credible set of actions to mitigate climate change. In response, a variety of international programs and projects have attempted to support sustainable forest management in the tropics, including REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation). These efforts have been supported by national governments, development agencies, civil society organizations and, in some cases, the private sector, all based on the recognition of new and enhanced opportunities to realize the multiple benefits associated with tropical forests. Additional forest sector investments appear likely in the near future within the frameworks of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.

What do we know about the impacts and effectiveness of internationally-supported efforts to better manage forests? What is working and what isn't? One starting point to addressing these questions is to draw on the variety of evaluations that have already

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been undertaken to assess the results and development impacts of forest-related programs, even while recognizing that many of these programs and projects are still at early stages of implementation.

To explore these topics further, an international learning event in Oslo was organized by the evaluation department of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), together with the evaluation units of the Global Environment Facility, the United Nations Environment Programme and the Green Climate Fund. The Government of Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative

(NICFI) was a collaborating partner. The main purpose was to identify the lessons from evaluating international sustainable forest initiatives, and to discuss how evaluations could contribute to shaping and strengthening the significant forest-related investments likely to be made in the coming decades.

The event, which was open to all interested parties, attracted around 100 participants with about half coming from outside Norway. They included evaluation practitioners, decision makers – including leaders of projects and programs that have been evaluated, researchers and forest sector experts. Government officials from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States also participated in their individual capacities.

Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI)

There was considerable interest in NICFI, which has disbursed 20 bn NOK (\$US 2.5 bn) since 2008 and has been extended to 2030 by the Norwegian Parliament. The Government of Norway has recognized NICFI's role in integrating REDD+ into the Paris Agreement while understanding that achieving measurable results on the ground is a long-term effort. Notable NICFI gains so far have included: 400+ companies committing to eliminate deforestation from their supply chains under the New York Declaration on Forests; increasing recognition of the role of civil society and indigenous peoples as guardians of forests; innovations in measurement, reporting and verification (MRV); and expanding collaboration with a diverse range of partners.

From its launch, NICFI has been the focus on an independent “real time” evaluation managed by Norad. The published evaluation findings have highlighted the significant role played by NICFI globally in expanding REDD+ as well as giving credit for a (so far unmeasurable) contribution to reducing deforestation and strengthening conservation.



PHOTO: KNUT NYFLØT


The evaluation program has also pointed out that coordination with other funders has proven challenging, that most partner countries have not managed to integrate REDD+ into their wider development plans and actions, and there is still a lack of a coordinated approach at national levels. While civil society groups, including indigenous peoples and minorities, have been supported by NICFI, these groups are not consistently engaged by or represented in national REDD+ coordination mechanisms. Finally, REDD+ itself remains high risk for Norway as long as it remains the largest



PHOTO: ESPEN RØST

single donor, although recent collaborations with Germany and with the United Kingdom are encouraging.




 One of the interactive sessions included a "fish bowl" panel discussion about lessons from evaluations in forestry and land use. With this concept, participants switch seats and volunteer for the panel during the session.



 The seminar included plenary presentations from different perspectives on how evaluations can contribute to international forest sector interventions, for example by Lars Løvold, Director of Rainforest Foundation Norway.



 Concluding day one, participants were invited to vote on some options for future evaluation priorities. Purely indicative, this showed a strong preference for more focus on incentives and behavioral change. Jyotsna Puri, Head of the Independent Evaluation Unit, Green Climate Fund, was one of the seminar facilitators.

Multilateral Organizations

Just as independent evaluations seem to have encouraged the Norwegian parliament to extend NICFI, it also appears that a strong independent evaluation program was important to the Global Environment Facility donors in their recent discussions on replenishment (previously \$US4.4 bn in 2014). These evaluations have helped identify some of the key factors to achieving transformational change – including a combination of clear ambition at the design phase, addressing market reforms through policies, specific mechanisms for financial sustainability, and high quality of implementation and execution; although, perhaps surprisingly, the size of projects has not proven a good predictor of transformative potential. In terms of methodology, the evaluations commissioned by multilateral organizations have shown that that a combination of mixed methods, triangulation of findings from different sources and approaches, and unconventional collaborations (e.g., with NASA for satellite images) has proven valuable.

The challenge in deriving generalizable lessons applicable beyond specific project contexts was also highlighted. Some of the speakers leading independent evaluation units described evaluations that had identified key elements of project effectiveness – notably the critical importance of engaging the right partners as well as problems with overambitious objectives and lack of evidence supporting claimed results. Some evaluations had identified promising efforts to engage with local people and civil society, although many showed room for improvements. Achieving a holistic understanding of project contexts as part of evaluation work – including market, trade and policy issues – was described as a perennial challenge.

Assessing value for money has become a well-established evaluation goal in all sectors, although challenging to analyse convincingly. While direct costs are usually clear, indirect costs as well as benefits that are either indirect or long term are often harder to assess. There was a strong consensus that this is a critical topic to address in the forest sector. Some

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organizations reported greater value for money from smaller initiatives, which runs counter to the concept of economies of scale. Examples were described of experimental/quasi experimental methods to assess value for money (and other attributes), with the key proviso that such evaluation approaches usually need to be planned well ahead and built into programs and projects at the design phase.

Increasing the Utility of Evaluations

Representatives of organizations that have been evaluated described their experiences in ways that could be summarized as “painful but useful”. In particular, programs and projects appreciated the opportunity provided by an evaluation to “step back, ask if you are doing the right thing, if you have the right strategy and implementation approach”.

These ‘evaluatees’ called for evaluations to acknowledge and appreciate the frequent scale mismatch between relatively small forest program resources and the opposing forces driving deforestation and forest destruction which are usually orders of magnitude more powerful and sometimes acting illegally. This helps to explain how individual program successes can be reported in an era of overall losses in forest quality and quantity, but does not simplify the evaluation challenge.

Evaluees pointed out that inherently risky undertakings will inevitably result in some failures; and the risks that need to be taken to achieve transformational change in forestry and land use seem likely to be



PHOTO: KEN OPPRANN

higher than most. This was expressed by one speaker as “We know some of this won’t work but we support brave people who give it a try”. This suggests the need for a portfolio approach, anticipating that some efforts will not achieve success, then building such assumptions explicitly into the evaluation approach.

One speaker advocated a top-down, bigger picture approach, arguing as follows: the Sustainable Development Goals (Target 15.2) include halting deforestation by 2020. This leads to the questions: (i) What does it take



PHOTO: BJØRNULF REMME

to achieve this goal? (ii) How can we evaluate progress towards achieving this goal; and (iii) Can we come to evaluators for the answers? For the evaluation field this appears to be a challenging line of thinking as it would require going well beyond the separate evaluations of individual projects and programs as part of individual organization strategies that most practitioners are engaged in. However, the logic of this call does appear compelling.



ARTIST: TOR AERLIG

On day two, fourteen participants gave short presentations of their work, divided into three groups. Simultaneously, artists illustrated main points from the presentations.



ARTIST: TOR AERLIG

Do Evaluations Make a Difference?

A common theme running through the presentations by practicing evaluators as well as the interactive discussion sessions was the perceived lack of utilization of evaluation findings, lessons and recommendations in subsequent decision-making. This was attributed to a variety of factors, including how evaluation results are communicated and to what extent specific lessons are applicable more generally. Some organizations suffer from evaluation fatigue and struggle to respond to the latest set of recommendations, while for others the lack of evaluation follow-up reduces the incentive to make changes. In cases where implementing partners, i.e., separate organizations, are responsible for work on the ground, these actors have always been fully engaged in the evaluation process commissioned by a donor, and may therefore not be fully motivated or able to make changes.

In the case of NICFI, several responses to independent evaluation findings were described: adopting a results framework; improved reporting from Norwegian Embassies; assign-



PHOTO: MARTE LID

ment of NICFI staff to specific partner countries; applying MRV more strategically; and more directly targeting support to civil society. Rainforest Foundation Norway, an NGO, reported responding to evaluations by adopting more of a “ground-level” focus while also supporting more advocacy for legal and institutional reforms.

Both NICFI as a government department and Rainforest Foundation Norway as an NGO described their own internal strategy development and change processes over time



PHOTO: ESPEN RØST

which respond to their own experiences and learning as well as developments in the external –often political – contexts in which they work. If external evaluators are to provide meaningful recommendations they do need to fully appreciate these bigger picture issues that define the worlds in which such organizations are operating.

Future Priorities

Following a day of plenary presentations and highly interactive discussions, the participants were invited to vote on some options for future evaluation priorities. The results, which all agreed were purely indicative, showed a strong preference for more focus on incentives and behavioral change (partly inspired, it was suggested, by the parallel announcement of the 2017 Nobel Prize for Economics to Richard Thaler, the “grandfather of nudging”). Other topics highlighted were more effective engagement with the private sector and with indigenous peoples, doing a better job to clarify evaluation plans early in project and program cycles, and continuing to work on the definition and assessment of the increasingly popular concept of transformational change.

On the second day, 14 practitioners briefly described the findings and lessons from forest and land use evaluations they had conducted, or were in the process of conducting, and then joined group discussions of their significance. While these very diverse efforts will not be summarized here, they demonstrated that an exciting range of evaluation work is going on

with considerable potential to provide highly usable information for decision makers, to an extent that surprised the organizers of the event. Drawing on studies in many different geographic areas, the key emerging thematic challenges included:

- › How to evaluate efforts to eliminate deforestation from private sector supply chains, leading to the broader question of how to work with the private sector in general?
- › How to assess and describe sensitive political realities faced by projects and programs when these constrain options and performance?
- › How to assess the effectiveness of REDD+ programs at sub-national (i.e., province and state) levels?
- › How relevant and useful is the internationally-accepted idea of the “readiness” phase of REDD+?
- › How to ensure that the results of evaluations are appropriately communicated to outside audiences by implementers and their donor partners, especially when findings are unfavourable?
- › How to help organizations become more effective in addressing project and program design and implementation problems that have long been widely known and reported on?
- › How best to apply new and emerging technologies in evaluation, usually as part of mixed methods approaches?
- › How to assess overall approaches to risk and how to report on individual successes and failures in this context?
- › When are rapid assessment or rapid evaluation approaches most useful and appropriate?
- › What is the value of pilot projects in the all-to-common case where there is no mechanism available to scale up successful prototypes?
- › How to assess efforts to induce behavioural change, reflecting a considerable interest in ‘nudging’?
- › How to evaluate forest-related interventions within broader landscape contexts, especially at the forest-farm border where the disconnect between forestry and agriculture appears acute?

Conclusion

The event was recognized by the participants as a useful step in encouraging interactions among evaluation practitioners as well as discussions between evaluators and leaders of organizations being evaluated. The meeting concluded with a discussion of the [Earth-Eval](#) (formerly Climate-Eval) network currently hosted by the Global Environment Facility's Independent Evaluation Unit. There was support among the evaluation practitioners present to both contribute to and use this online community as a knowledge management forum to exchange lessons on evaluation challenges, solutions and learning in the emerging field of forest and land use evaluation linked closely to climate change. All agreed that this could be a useful way of keeping informed of the diversity of evaluation activities going on.

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Commissioned by
The Evaluation Department

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MAY 2018

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May 2018

Cover photo: Marte Lid

ISBN: 978-82-8369-058-3