

Local, National, Global: Evaluative Evidence of Scaling up the SDGs

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intended to provide guidance to all countries in reaching development that is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. While the SDGs are global, the actions must take place at various scales, including local, national and beyond. Many national and international development agencies face the issue of scaling up successful local level initiatives to a larger geographic scale. Climate change, loss of biodiversity and other global environmental problems manifest themselves at the local level, with disproportionate impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable groups, many of whom are women. At the same time, locally-evolved solutions to tackle these problems are often scalable. The role of evaluation is critical in analyzing performance of policies, strategies, and programs, and to generate lessons about what works, for whom and under what circumstances to facilitate broader adoption. In this paper we draw upon an evaluation of the Global Environment Facility/UNDP Small Grants Program (SGP) that works at the local scale to help communities address global environmental issues while improving their livelihoods and reducing vulnerability. The evaluation found that broader adoption occurs, particularly in the form of replication and scaling-up, and at a local scale, despite a lack of explicit strategy thereto. The evaluation assessed various models of broader adoption in the program and the specific consequences, both intended and unintended, pertaining to the official SGP upgrading policy.

Background and Introduction

Using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ as a framing reference for development, which all countries subscribe to, has the potential to significantly shape the development discourse, and development itself. As a set of guiding principles and objectives they set the basis for a common discourse amongst policy makers, politicians and citizens on what should be achieved through 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with no one being left behind. Assessing progress presupposes that there is a common understanding on what each goal means in practice, how it can be measured and what are the units of analysis, and evidence, that transacts across local, regional and national levels to produce evidence of progress. This is both an evaluation and spatial challenge, given that there is limited consensus as to how measurement is to take place, and little understanding in the evaluation community of scale, and what this means when it comes to scaling up for SDGs. Evaluation practice in the international development community, while making efforts at an enhanced comprehensiveness and holistic perspectives (Garcia and Feinstein, 2019), must be better prepared to respond to the complex challenges posed by the SDGs, including scale (Naidoo and Soares, 2017; Steiner, 2017; Uitto, Puri and Berg, 2017).

A key question to geographers is that of scale, and whether the SDG thrust will in fact transect the global, national and local, and be able to address progress at the local level (SDG localization) and report credibly progress of the national level, internationally. There remains an inevitable tension between reporting on progress from a government perspective, over that of beneficiaries, notably at the local level. This brings in the question of how successful SDG localization is, and whether aggregated data of SDG progress that may be presented as country progress, does in fact reflect and represent the experiences of citizens, and if so, whether this is the experience of a proportionally significant part of the population. The persistent and even exacerbation of inter and intra-regional inequality has marked development in the last century, and the changing environmental, economic and social landscape, at rates unprecedented, makes measurement of SDG progress difficult. It is evident that in most instances the environment has been adversely impacted through development policies, and negative effects spill over into vulnerable national states, with dire consequences on overall sustainability of resources, and a disproportional adverse impact on the poor and marginalized. The sustainability of new ways of doing business in reducing poverty – through job creation efforts that may be resource consumptive or infrastructure development that may destroy habitats – means many intended and unintended consequences which impact on any ecological sustainability.

This paper explores what it means to scale up, and examines why this intent can often be challenging, given that theories of change around the SDGs are not clear, and the connectedness between the SDGs implies a complexity that is difficult to address in providing coherent progress reports on SDGs.

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

The Sustainable Development Agenda

When the SGS were launched in 2015 the evaluation community used the opportunity to emphasize that within the political construct of the UN language on SDGs, there was mention of monitoring and review, albeit voluntary and country led. There was great sensitivity that any assessment of progress towards Agenda 2030 was not seen as an accountability function, or an imposition, and that the right to advance SDGs and report thereupon be voluntary and country led – the SDG Voluntary National Review, emphasizing peer-ship over expert imposition, and exercising soft pressure upon countries to exchange as a part of mutual learning and support, over accountability. The UN has provided a range of advice, and the evaluation community offered technical support as needed. The results of the VNRs show an increase in the momentum of countries offering to share experiences, but there remains high variability in the quality of presentations, which are more descriptive of architecture from a government perspective, and less indicating the engagement with civil society or showing what and when evaluation will be done.

Whilst the SDG calls for country led participation, and emphasizes civil society and people, the process to date has been alive at the level of capitals with the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) reflecting the progress of monitoring apparatus, by central governments, without much reference to the engagement at the local level, or active participation by civil society, the media or academia. The process, also reflected in the deliberations of the National Evaluation Conference of the UNDP in 2017 (Turkey, Istanbul) under the theme People, Planet and Progress in the SDG era, which was a first in bringing together all countries, illustrated that there was no region with significant progress in SDG attainment, and there was a marked discrepancy between political intent and practice at the level of countries themselves.

Drawing from Evaluations

Scaling up in the GEF

The goal of the GEF assistance to countries is support transformational change that would lead to improved protection of the global environment in areas such as biodiversity conservation, land degradation, sustainable forest management and carbon sequestration, climate change mitigation, and sustainable management of international waters and chemicals. The projects and programs in these areas increasingly assume an integrated landscape-based approach demonstrating successful and feasible approaches. They also address constraints pertaining to the enabling environment in the countries, including legal and policy frameworks and market conditions for environmentally sound products, services

and practices with the aim of broader adoption of such policies and approaches at the country and/or regional level. Broader adoption is here defined as, when governments and other stakeholders adopt, expand, and build on the initiatives that the GEF funds, during program or project implementation or afterwards, as a result of initial successes (GEF-IEO, 2017). Broader adoption is seen as a necessary step towards transformational change.

One of the pathways for broader adoption is scaling up whereby the initiatives supported by the GEF are implemented at a larger geographical scale. This may involve extending the initiative's implementation to include more political, administrative, economic or ecological components. Such expansion to a larger scale would then help expand the impact of the intervention. Another related pathway is replication,

meaning that the intervention is reproduced at a similar administrative or ecological scale, often in another geographical area or region.

The Sixth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF (GEF-IEO, 2017) took a broad look at the portfolio of completed projects that had been evaluated independently. Out of the 415 projects reviewed, 24% had achieved broader adoption at a large scale, while 37% achieved broader adoption at a local scale. Broader adoption was taking place more in countries with higher internal capacity, often middle-income countries, where institutions and finance existed to absorb and carry on successful initiatives. Similarly, shifts in political priorities in the countries have posed threats to broader adoption of successful environmental management models. This demonstrates the importance of context in which interventions take place.

With regard to SDG 15 – Life on Land – an impact evaluation of GEF support to protected areas and protected area systems (GEF-IEO and UNDP-IEO, 2016) identified broader adoption taking place in Namibia in relation to three protected area projects: Bwabwata, Etosha and Mudumu. In all three locations, a landscape approach to conservation has been mainstreamed as the policy for the park management agency. Efforts are underway to replicate these landscape and co-management with local communities and conservancies approaches in the Zambezi region with the aim of connecting the Mudumu park with four other landscape conservation areas. Factors contributing to the expansion included shifts in government policy regarding co-management of protected areas with local people, as well as contributions from civil society. In Namibia, the establishment of conservancies adjacent to protected areas and the zoning of protected areas to accommodate multiple-use zones.

Scaling up can take place in connection with projects of varying size. Here below we focus on the UNDP-implemented and GEF-funded Small Grants Program (SGP).

The joint evaluation of the Small Grants Program

A joint evaluation of the SGP) by the Independent Evaluation Offices of the GEF and UNDP, provided critical findings which relate to the environment question, that is represented within the overall SDGs (GEF-IEO and UNDP-IEO, 2015). These findings related to how the interventions, local, and hence termed small grants, and needs driven, show the play off between local, regional and national.

Established in 1992, the SGP provides technical and financial support to projects that conserve and restore the environment while enhancing people’s wellbeing and livelihoods. In its more than a quarter century of existence, SGP has provided funding to 14,500 projects in over 125 countries. The projects provide funding of up to \$50,000 to community-based organizations, NGOs and other local groups to protect the global environment while providing sustainable livelihood benefits at the local level.

The evaluation found evidence of broader adoption through the SGP. This most often took place through the replication of innovations at the local scale: from neighbor to neighbor or from one village to the next. For example in Senegal, SGP’s work in the Delta duSaloum that focused on mangrove restoration was replicated by other villages outside of the initial project area. The evaluation also found cases where the SGP approaches were scaled up even to national levels. For example, in Panama an SGP project, which demonstrated the sustainable extraction of oil from coconuts in the Darien region had been taken up with large funding by the Inter-American Development Bank with the intention to carry out a larger project based on the same approach, while continuing to work with the communities involved in implementing the SGP grant.

A general challenge that SGP faces in reporting on its results is that of aggregation (Chen and Uitto, 2014). The projects are designed on a community-based approach emphasizing demand-drivenness and innovation. Whereas to be eligible for GEF funding, all SGP projects must fit into the overall GEF results framework, aggregation of the outcomes of a very large number of disparate projects in over 120 countries is difficult. Given the overall scale of the program, there is a clear interest and need from the part of the donors to know how the SGP has contributed to GEF's core mission of protecting the global environment. There is ample evaluative evidence that SGP has been beneficial to the grantees at the local level, both in terms of sustaining the environmental resource base and providing enhanced livelihood options, and that there are cases of scaling up. However, the global benefits of the program are harder to quantify. This tension between the local and the global has existed in GEF programming for a long time (Uitto, 2014).

Some of the conclusions that are of importance in a discussion on why scale matters are that:

- The intervention at the local level did not factor the long-term vision, and in this case the 2015 evaluation looking backwards had not digested the SDGs;
- There were real contextual factors – an issue of how at the local level matters are thought through, negotiated and implemented – that due to complexity makes governance difficult, as well as any measures to improve performance (monitoring and evaluation).

Despite these challenges, there were tangible benefits from the grassroots driven program, in that communities were supported in their livelihoods, and poverty and gender addressed. There were also instances of replicating and mainstreaming, and achievements had fed into national development processes. The successes brought in more resources, and the coherent nature of the program (global, but grassroots driven) has balanced both levels, albeit with tensions.

The key issue has been how different stakeholders' different views are balanced, the global and the local.

The lessons from the GEF-UNDP evaluation is instructive to other international agencies which attempt to advance normative or public goods agendas, and which assume that there will be an uptake by countries that may subscribe to certain agreed upon conventions. The reality is often different, and whilst the GEF has a strong implementing partner in the form of the UNDP and dedicates enough resources to assessing its projects to provide the feedback for course correction, this is not as simple when it comes to other conventions. All of these assume that there would be the infrastructure to connect the policy to grassroots through an implementation architecture. In the case of the GEF-UNDP it was found that moving to the broader adoption across the program was not easy, and tensions between the objectives of each level persisted.

Evaluation and Geography

There are a number of reasons why geographical perspectives are useful to program evaluation. We have above discussed the importance of scale when determining the success and impact of a program. Geography is also an integrated spatial science that allows for the identification, description, analysis and synthesis of data to demonstrate cause and effect. Any program takes place in a complex context that is essential in determining the outcomes. A program cannot thus be evaluated in isolation from that context

only referring to the program's internal logic. An evaluation should always start with an analysis and understanding of the context, the system limits and how the intervention interacts with other parts in the complex system (Garcia and Zazueta, 2015). Furthermore, the system incorporates various actors whose motivations and goals may not always be compatible. Similarly, especially when it comes to environmental programs, there is always a need to deal with both natural and human systems, with their differing timelines and geographical manifestations (Birnbaum and Mickwitz, 2009; Rowe, 2012). Geographical perspectives provide a very useful lens for evaluators in this setting.

Many dimensions of environmental evaluation also lend themselves well to geospatial analysis (Lech et al., 2012), including but not limited to land use / cover change, vegetation productivity, deforestation and land degradation. Similarly, factors such as infrastructure and nightlights (a good proxy for level of economic development) can be tracked utilizing remote sensing and geospatial tools.

Conclusions

This paper examines the importance of the scale of implementation of SDGs in assessing progress at local, regional and national levels and the challenges related to the implementation architecture that could connect global and national policy to results achieved at local level. The paper relies on evidence from the evaluation exercise, particularly from the evaluation of the environmental "Small Grants Program" funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and managed by UNDP. The joint evaluation conducted by the Independent Evaluation Offices of UNDP and GEF found significant evidence of broader adoption of local level interventions, especially in the form of replication and scaling-up. It showed that the grassroots-driven program had provided tangible benefits to the local population, particularly in the areas of livelihoods, poverty, and gender where achievements have fed into national development planning. Moreover, the success of the local-level interventions appeared as leverage for resource mobilization towards SDGs. However, there was limited evidence that the intervention at local level did factor the long-term vision of the SDGs. Local level interventions are subject to issues of real contextual factors, how local level matters are included in the planning and implementation processes, complexity at the governance level, and the challenge related to the capacity to balance stakeholders' views in the processes. The evaluation of the Small Grants Program revealed that the scale of implementation matters and tensions persist between the objectives of each level.

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