

MEET THE CLIMATE SLEUTHS KEEPING CARBON REPORTING HONEST



In a world of unlimited funds, addressing climate change would be fairly easy.

Governments could splash the cash on fancy clean energy projects, and pay fossil fuel companies to find alternative avenues for their energy.

Back on Planet Earth, money is tight and donors need evidence their money is being used wisely and effectively.

This demand has spawned a modern day army of Sherlock Holmes-style climate investigators, armed with spreadsheets, complex algorithms and a new lexicon of acronyms.

They call themselves “climate project evaluators”, but are “sleuths and superheroes” according to Andrew Steer, a former UK government and World Bank official, now running the influential World Resources Institute.

“It is exceedingly important we use money well, and the only way you can do that is by discovering what’s working and what’s not. Evaluation is exactly what it says; we are evaluating programmes that exist.”

Steer is speaking on the sidelines of a three-day conference in Washington DC in the dimly-lit bowels of the International Finance Corporation, the private sector arm of the World Bank, and based a short jog from the White House.

Here experts in monitoring carbon cutting projects around the world are meeting to exchange best practice and discuss how their 20-year-old profession can improve.

The stakes could not be higher. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world’s leading authority on global warming, the Earth is on course to heat an extra 4C by 2100, which will cause a spike in extreme weather events.

Next year, governments are set to agree a new UN deal to curb greenhouse gas emissions, the main cause of climate change.

But these same governments require evidence there are effective and economic alternatives to existing forms of energy, and they also need to know how they can best prepare for the droughts, storms and rising sea levels that are already locked into the climate system.

Economists like Lord Stern say around US\$100 trillion is needed by 2030 to start decarbonising the world's energy system.

But given the clean energy sector is relatively young, governments and businesses face a dilemma knowing what to plump for. Do you bank on solar, a new Bus Rapid Transit system or go for energy efficiency measures?

"Here's the problem," says Ken Chomitz, a senior official in the World bank's Independent Evaluation Group. "It's not very well established how much energy and money energy efficiency saves.

"It's a complicated problem because it's not engineering – it's a human problem. People are reluctant to invest. We don't have the evidence to back up our theoretical calculations that energy efficiency is a wonderful investment so people prefer to invest in the safe, solid windmills."

Last month the International Energy Agency said the energy efficiency market is worth US\$310 billion a year, calling it the "world's first fuel".

But strip away the hyperbole and there is still work to be done to prove that, as Chomitz points out, when something gets more efficient it's just not used more often.

The same could be said for LED lighting, a major focus in one of the sessions at the conference. According to supporters, widespread deployment of LEDs could cut emissions from lighting 50-70%.

But in reality, said one presenter, far more work needs to be done in evaluating where they would be cost-effective investments.

Evaluating

For other projects, in particular those helping communities in vulnerable areas to cope with erratic or dangerous weather events linked to climate change, there are now ways of measuring success.

"The donors are spending a lot, and for adaptation projects they are looking for evidence that they deliver results," says Timo Leiter from GIZ, the development arm of the German government.

"You can answer the question whether people have become less vulnerable, and I think that's an important part of our work trying to develop methods you can use to measure adaptation outcomes."

Many initiatives defy simple metrics, like the number of people saved, which are often the most useful to politicians and development banks keen to showcase clear-cut success stories.

Dennis Bours, a consultant working with the Global Environment Facility, warns evaluating and planning adaptation projects can be difficult as they are often regionally unique.

“The solutions and results you are looking for are very much contextualised on the local level, and as such you won’t have one evaluation approach for adaptation interventions,” he says.

Fiddling the books

Measuring and verifying data is likely to become far more common after a UN agreement in 2015, when all countries will start to deliver comprehensive reports on their greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors.

In part this was driven by the desire of many developed countries to shine a light on soaring emissions in the developing world, hoping that by doing so it might offer more leverage in future negotiations.

It seems straightforward on paper. The reality is more complex, according to David Rich, a GHG expert at the WRI.

Many countries don’t have the data or understand how to collect it. Then there’s the baseline challenge: from when do you start measuring emissions? Currently the EU has chosen 1990; the US, China and India 2005.

“We would like a common year, but it’s a very sensitive issue because depending on where emissions are in various countries that has a bearing on what it looks like you can achieve by a certain year,” he says.

Rich urges caution on reading too much into press releases hailing projects that boast of huge climate benefits, citing a variety of constraints that can affect these estimates.

“Data quality can vary quite a bit, and when you get a number that says this reduced emissions by one million tonnes – it can be a very accurate or very rough number.”

The concern extends to national emissions data, often compiled by poorly resourced officials or ones who are under political pressure.

Accuracy here is critical. How can any country be sure others are not fiddling the books ahead of next year’s UN climate deal?

“The hope is that the data continuously improves over time,” says Rich, pointing to increased use of the Greenhouse Gas Protocol, a WRI-backed accounting tool for governments and businesses wanting to report their emissions.

India

But as many evaluation specialists in Washington are keen to point out, judging projects merely on the amount of CO₂ saved is at best short-sighted.

“What about the livelihoods of the people who are impacted by the carbon emissions?” asks Irene Karani, a consultant at Kenyan development organisation ITS international.

“What happens to them? Do their lives become better? Do they have cleaner air? It’s not that simple.

“Climate change is a complicated subject. To get an evaluation right you need a lot of integrated tools and methodologies that we are all grappling with at this point in time.”

As developing countries come under increased pressure to ditch fossil fuels this is likely to become a greater concern – perhaps nowhere more than India.

The Delhi government has promised to connect the 400 million people in the country without electricity to the grid, claiming that it has a right to use coal to fulfil this pledge if it wants.

But as the recent IPCC report makes clear, India is increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events linked to climate change, and has a stake in ensuring warming does not break 2C, a barrier deemed dangerous by politicians and scientists in 2010.

“One of the ignored parts of policy is that there are very few tools that have been used to understand whether they lead to trade offs between the environment and development,” says Jyotsna Puri, deputy executive director at the NGO 3ie.

“I can imagine, and again this needs to be examined much more closely, that as you build micro-grids [in India], they lead to increased generation of electricity without really diminishing the development effects.”

No silver bullets

These problems and opportunities are likely to push this anonymous community of technical experts into an increasingly influential position, determining climate investment strategies and rating the progress of companies and countries.

So far the measuring and evaluation community has managed to avoid the worst politics can offer, building up a variety of ways of measuring success and colouring in those tiny spreadsheet boxes so favoured by consultants.

That will change over the coming years, especially if and when the UN manages to secure a global climate agreement in 2015.

This will require intensive reporting and verification procedures from signatory countries, and accelerate demand for climate mitigation and adaptation projects around the world.

But any hopes for a quick fix are likely to meet with short shrift from the evaluators gathered this week, keen to stress the complexity of the climate challenge.

“I don’t believe there are any silver bullets or general answers to any of these questions,” says Juha Uitto, a Finnish official who runs the Global Environment Facility’s evaluation office.

'We have to learn what has worked best so far and how to work with specific situations... and I think that evaluation is a powerful tool to understand what works.'

For the WRI's Steer, what works is already clear.

He wants evaluators to be bold in starting backing projects that have proven track records in delivering carbon cuts and boosting growth, such as the Bus Rapid Transit concept, a budget metro system now used in 180 cities.

'The stakes are so high that we have to aim for systemic change,' he says.

'The world is too big, time is too short and the money is too little if we are to adopt a project by project approach and reward ourselves for each individual pilot project.'

'The time for piloting has now ended. We need to think of scale.'

Source : <http://chimalaya.org/2014/11/06/meet-the-climate-sleuths-keeping-carbon-reporting-honest/>