Capturing Real Impacts
Environmental Peacebuilding Evaluation in the Middle East: Lessons Applicable Worldwide

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to close the knowledge gap relating to suitable evaluation methodologies for interdisciplinary approaches of Environmental Peacebuilding, covering not only intended but also unintended, unanticipated, positive and negative, short and long-term outcomes. Information was gathered on Middle Eastern case studies and from a global perspective, triangulating facts from literature reviews, expert-, NGO-, and beneficiary interviews, and a global expert survey. Findings clarify the complexity of internal and external, donor-based aspects, all indicating the need to fundamentally revise current evaluation structures to ensure effectiveness of projects. Moreover, a framework was developed to support practitioners in their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities.

Keywords

Environmental peacebuilding; monitoring and evaluation; conflict; natural resources; water governance; indicators and criteria; real impact; multidisciplinary; big picture; sector-crossing

INTRODUCTION

Developmental, humanitarian or environmental-oriented organisations have the best intentions; however, it is extremely complicated to really know their projects' true impacts. Examples are plentiful, for instance regarding food distribution in Gaza which is meant to avoid starvation while it may indeed prolong hunger if provided incorrectly, hindering locally produced food to be competitive as no market price can outcompete free food. While this is only one example, the risk of causing harm instead of helping is nonetheless real since the world is extremely complex. However, this is not a new insight, even on the contrary, but how can impacts be measured, taking this appropriately into account, covering, besides project goals, unintended and unanticipated impacts from all their negative and positive perspectives? Based on these considerations, this thesis research paper, commissioned by the Environmental Peacebuilding Association (EnPAx) and connected to the Bachelor course International Development Management and Major of Disaster Risk Management at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Science, assesses this topic in depth.

Environmental Peacebuilding is a great example for interdisciplinary evaluation approaches since it aims in its very essence, to reconnect views between sectors to address issues through their real dynamics of interactions amongst conflict, environment, peace and natural resources. Regarding these elements in isolation is not feasible since natural resource competition can cause conflict and their returns can finance it, however, human's dependence on natural resources can also make them incentives for peace when using them to re-establish dialogues amongst conflicting parties[1].

Thus, this research focused on identifying characteristics suitable to conduct evaluations in such Environmental Peacebuilding projects that capture real impacts, finally creating a guiding framework for such processes that can support practitioners to improve evaluations and subsequently learn what works, what doesn't and why. The research took two in-depth case studies into account, selected based on their current leading status in the Environmental Peacebuilding sector: the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES) and EcoPeace Middle East.

In the following, first the problem statement and research questions will be introduced, then the methodology outlined, some key findings will be stated and discussed and finally the conclusion will be stated. Due to the high depth and subsequent length of the original thesis research and respective report, only key aspects will be highlighted without presenting the full extent of data collected and analysed.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

EnPAx is a knowledge platform led by the Environmental Law Institute and the United Nations Environmental Programme. EnPax and its platform members lack in-depth knowledge on how to effectively and exhaustively assess long- and short-term impacts of different Environmental Peacebuilding projects in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world in order to create a scientific evidence base (dis)proving the effectiveness of every facet of Environmental Peacebuilding approaches and best practices.

This problem statement led to the research objective to: develop a practical framework and criteria set on how to evaluate impacts of Environmental Peacebuilding comprehensively, integrating all relevant lenses of this multidisciplinary intervention form as well as addressing key challenges of M&E methodologies and inclusion of stakeholders - providing a tool to build a reliable, scientific evidence base for the emerging Environmental Peacebuilding field.

Finally, the research questions, informed by the first literature reviews, were formulated as follows and were further used to guide and structure the research:

What are appropriate components and characteristics of impact evaluation methodologies for Environmental Peacebuilding considering the field's multidisciplinary nature?

a) How do current evaluation methodologies as used by EcoPeace and AIES balance the attention towards primary and secondary monitoring indicators in order to cover unintended and unanticipated changes in addition to project goals and what does the international community think would be an appropriate distribution?
   i. Which methods are used in this process and which steps are being followed?

b) To what extent is sustainability integrated into the M&E process to assure monitoring of not only short but also long-term impacts outside of their framed goals from social, economic and environmental perspectives, and how can the integration be optimised?

c) Which key challenges in Environmental Peacebuilding evaluation methodologies can be identified, how do they relate to the quality of the evaluation and how can they be

addressed?

d) What are best practices and challenges of evaluating impacts from peacebuilding, development, humanitarian or environmental projects worldwide, and how can they be used to evaluate Environmental Peacebuilding?

e) How do perceptions of local beneficiaries, NGO staff, (trans)national institutions and the global community differ in the case studies when regarding priorities in impact assessments methodologies or ownership questions?

METHODOLOGY

To gain a detailed understanding, multiple data collection methods and angles were consulted as figure 1 highlights, whereby the case studies, EcoPeace and AIES focussed on the Middle East (field research) while other sources presented global viewpoints, providing opportunities to compare perspectives.
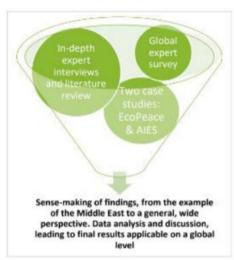

Figure 1: Methodology of the research: multiple perspectives

The initial literature review defined clear indicators and categories to consider, embedded in a high variety of existing knowledge of the wider sector. Those categories were then translated into methods to gather further information. An online-based global expert survey with a total of 83 responses (75 were sent out directly and the survey was openly shared within the networks with an untracked reach, 100 was the original target) was shared via, amongst others, the commissioner's network, several Environmental Peacebuilding specific forums such as Earth-Eval, LinkedIn etc. and served as a general baseline. The experts were selected based on their length of experience and activity within the stated networks, with a required minimum of at least two years of experience in M&E with either an environmental, developmental, humanitarian or peacebuilding-oriented NGO, institute or governmental department and/or people who currently work or have worked on Environmental Peacebuilding in general.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted with beneficiaries (10) as well as with the staff of the case studies (6), donor representatives (2) and leading experts from all around the world (4). The interviews averaged approximately 90 minutes each. The experts were selected based on their publications in the sector and commissioner's recommendations while the beneficiaries and NGO staff were selected based on their role and participation in the project. This variety of in-depth insights helped contrasting perceptions of effectiveness from differing viewpoints. Due to security

implications, most names of interviewees were requested to remain anonymous.

These giant data sets were further processed into indicator-based tables for qualitative information as well as quantitative SPSS-based data sets. To improve comprehensiveness and conciseness in this paper, it was decided to limit its scope solely on the most relevant key aspects rather than going into full depth for each method of data collection.

FINDINGS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To improve readability, the following is structured according to thematic sub-headings. Findings were compiled from all data sources and directly connected with each other.

Focus on secondary indicators

Primarily, it needs to be emphasised that global experts perceive it as extremely important to increase the focus on secondary, meaning context-related, indicators rather than maintaining the current focus on project-related ones. When asked about the usual experienced distribution of primary and secondary indicators, 75.9% said that the balance between those indicators was approximately 90-100% primary and 0-10% secondary. In contrast, only 3.6% of the respondents mentioned this distribution as appropriate. This is because impacts are often seen in the changes of context rather than in formal indicators, such as counting peace dialogue sessions conducted. As an NGO staff interviewee explained: "Since the real goal is to change the context, its changes should be more permanently tracked". This is also in line with concepts outlined by Nanthikesan and Uitto in their work on evaluations in post-conflict settings[2].

Usage of categories instead of indicator

However, besides re-considering this balance, further findings led to challenging even more fundamental concepts such as using indicators in the first place. While indicators certainly can be useful, it is important to be aware that they may also lead to incorrect conclusions and limit the evaluation's scope since pre-defined indicators, by definition, do not consider unanticipated impacts or complex interconnections of activities. All differing data sources confirmed this statement, e.g. by experts rating "the need to find alternative ways to measure impacts besides indicators" - as "very important". Thus, loose categories, such as 'changes in management and access of natural resources', or 'changes in stakeholders' relationships' or local perceptions, appear to be more effective than counting the number of seedlings planted or training sessions. This is not only true for Environmental Peacebuilding alone, but for almost all evaluations. To put it in perspective, let's take an ordinary example such as basketball statistics, using indicators such as points scored or attempted throws, to measure how successful players are instead of also considering their teamwork ability. Therefore, statistics may be positive, presenting many attempted shots, while in reality, a player would have been more useful for the team when passing the ball first, thus, selfish acts of wanting to score themselves are not captured in the evaluation, falsifying players' real values[3].

Donor dependency and pre-defined M&E steps

As you can see, the logic of looking at complex realities rather than pre-defined indicators is widely applicable, and it appears obvious that a change is needed – so why does the world still over-focus on these indicators? Simply put,

staff as well as donors like measurable results - consequently requiring the use of measurable indicators. And Itzchak Kornfeld indicted in the in-depth expert interview: "while some attempts of Environmental Peacebuilding may be feasible without funds, it must be conceded that it is much easier to generate large scale changes with available resources". Indeed, donors' requirements to view project impacts in isolation to attribute changes appears to be one of the most fundamental problems. This research's results indicate, that evaluations are most accurate when conducted on sector, theme or region-wide levels to integrate interactions and reduce biases. However, some basic steps such as baselines, endlines, stakeholder involvement, amongst others, were identified as useful tools regardless of complexities and context.

Internal Aspects

Which biases? Well, that leads to another facet of findings: while largely unconscious, it is common for staff to tend to report 'moderate gains' instead of 'failures', potentially leading to a culture of subconscious institutional lying. Global experts rated the correlation between the quality of an evaluation and its target audience (donor or internal use) as 4.04 out of 5, showing the factor's importance. This is caused by donor, but also management-related pressures of needing to perform well; thus, the research suggests that management and evaluation teams shall always be kept apart to minimise bias development. These findings were also confirmed by literature, for example in writings of Wahlén[4] and Sunstein[5] from the environmental and legal perspectives.

Adaptive management

However, besides functioning separately from one another, regular information sessions should be held in order to inform a responsive, adaptive management system, allowing evaluation results to feed into project improvements continuously during its lifespan. These findings were also coherent from all data perspectives, for example regarding lenses of the case study NGOs, experts and also literature, such as Rasmussen's triple loop learning theory[6] but also Herweg et al.'s integration of M&E in the project management cycle[7].

Context specific and downwards accountability

However, in addition to increasing the evaluation's scope beyond project-based views, it is also important to consider who is involved in the project's M&E process. The global expert survey indicated with an importance rating of 4.49 out of 5 that high stakeholder involvement is key towards successfully formulating and reviewing steps such as problem statements, impact hypotheses and selection of data collection and analysis methods. This ensures the project's relevance from all perspectives and increases local people's felt ownership over the process, a fundamental condition for successful interventions, as a beneficiary indicated "we know our problems best, so ask us what changes". Moreover, including stakeholders, such as beneficiaries or local institutes for example, also increases the coverage since more data can be collected in a short time as well as focusing more on unintended changes than donor-oriented evaluations. Why? Consider AIES' project which established grey-water-systems for irrigation across the Palestinian-Israeli border (figure 2)

Figure 2: AIES grey-water system established in a Palestinian community

aiming to increase harvests. While the donor is interested in increasing harvests, local people noticed a multitude of changes, intended or unintended, simply because their daily life is affected. This perspective is also supported by Gruener and Hald's work on local perspectives of peacebuilding[8] as well as by the expert survey conducted which confirmed that currently unintended changes are insufficiently covered (figure 3).
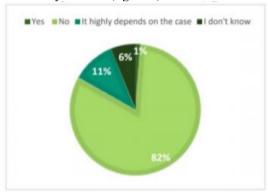

Figure 3: Global expert perception if typical Environmental Peacebuilding projects cover unintended and unanticipated changes sufficiently

Consequently, when determining projects' actual impacts, locals also noticed other changes such as reduced tensions amongst villages sharing the same aquifer, different water qualities or impacts on gender roles. Thus, it is highly important to balance donor-related upwards accountability with downwards accountability to maximise real impacts captured.

Therefore, the research suggests a case-by-case approach to developing and reviewing M&E processes, including all relevant perspectives. This ensures not only better coverage but also guarantees that the approach matches the local context and its corresponding sensitivities.

And last but not least - sharing data. The global expert survey results rated this importance with 3.16 out of 5, however, the second round of questions clarified data privacy concerns as main reasons for low ratings, thus emphasising to abstract data first. An evaluation's real value is to enable lesson-learning and if this is done on a sector-wide, rather than on an organisational level, collaborative results of improving future projects will increase.

CONCLUSION

As a final conclusion of this paper, the research objective will be fulfilled by presenting the final framework which is based on the variety of findings. While all sub-research questions were addressed in their full extent and fed into this conclusion, their answers will not be outlined here for brevity.

Since the research concluded that a universal list of indicators or criteria for Environmental Peacebuilding projects is not feasible and may rather hinder learning
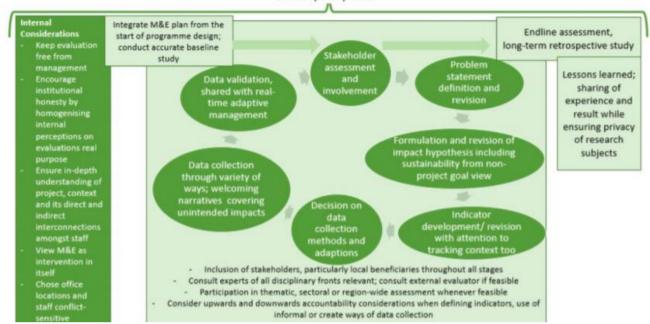
Figure 4: Final framework for practitioners

lessons instead of encouraging them, this framework (figure 4) instead provides a guideline to follow when planning the evaluations that specifically matches the given circumstances of the local context. This guideline indicates, from left to right: internal points of attention, steps to consider before implementing the project, a circle of steps to follow during project implementation that can and shall be repeated as often as appropriate and some advice on how to proceed after the project ends. However, each project and its local participants are different and so the evaluation has to be different as well, tailored to its specific purpose, as well as conditions and resources available. Results of this research pointed towards rethinking not only existing approaches but also the fundamental thinking of indicators and upwards-accountability.

It is highly important to recognise the value an evaluation has and to take it accordingly seriously, focusing on facing accurate, real impacts, positive or negative, unintended or intended, anticipated or unanticipated - and to learn from them as much as possible. Re-emphasising the need to treat downwards accountability with the same commitment as upwards accountability helps to identify them through community involvement, and maintaining an open ear for all perspectives further contributes towards starting to understand the role Environmental Peacebuilding projects play in the bigger picture. If in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world, the findings are applicable due to their localising perspectives and critical views on the global funding and process structures, not limiting insights to the research area.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

The student of this research conducted the entire research project independently with limited supervision from Carl Bruch, president of the Environmental Peacebuilding Association. The supervision was limited to three Skype calls which provided feedback and advice on the research formulation, execution and analysis.

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A full list of this research's references as well as the full-length research report and data sets can be viewed under: **https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K6KVJZQKn0QsFwPaKMAgmW-TxpqYwHtH/view?usp=sharing**