



A better evidence philosophy for sustainable development

Introduction

This paper presents the results of an exploration of what is better evidence by an IIED team in collaboration with colleagues from IIED and other organisations.

Evidence can be conceived as the available body of facts, data and/or information that indicate whether a belief or proposition is true or valid. Recognised synonyms of evidence include: proof, confirmation, verification, substantiation, corroboration, affirmation, authentication, attestation and documentation.

By 'better' we mean more desirable, more satisfactory and/or more effective. So, although evidence needs to generate, analyse and gather facts, information and data, it must also be accompanied by a social process in which we — the generators and users of evidence — agree that the body of information and data constitutes proof of something.

We consider that better evidence is itself a dynamic process that improves the main products of our work through enquiry, investigation and research. But this does not deny the internal and external dialectical nature of the better evidence process. We are involved in negotiating what constitutes evidence and how we can improve the way we generate, communicate and use it.

We live in a post-factual — or as Robert Proctor, Stanford historian of science has coined, an 'agnotological'ⁱ — age, where special interest groups who work hard to create confusion and suppress the truth purposefully create culturally constructed ignorance. But we believe that evidence has value, and that better evidence is even more important to achieving positive change. We agree with American author and journalist Farhad Manjoo, who stated recently that "we need to fashion ways of working and information tools that combat agnotological rot".ⁱⁱ

In this paper, we want to answer two questions. How can we generate better evidence for sustainable development? And how can we use this evidence for a series of local to global purposes? The most important of these are endogenous and rooted in bottom-up and accountable initiatives that are supported by collective action and create public goods. At IIED, we take the Sustainable Development Goals' universality principle seriously: we inform our better evidence work from experiences in the global South and North for application across all locations.

How do we go about finding evidence and carrying out our research? Our strategy for generating better evidence spans a range of approaches, including normal scientific methods (largely quantitative), ethnographic methods (both quantitative and qualitative) and case studies. The philosophical frameworks we use allow us to interpret evidence from different viewpoints, including critical realist, Marxist and feminist ones. Inherent to this strategy is a dialectic approach to comparing and contrasting different points of view or constructs, including our own. We believe this strategy brings with it strengths in having a diversity of methodologies for a diversity of contexts and purposes.

What is our perceived relationship with the evidence we are uncovering and discovering? We are part of — and party to — the knowledge we hope to contribute to by generating better evidence. We do not stand apart from — or external to — evidence. Our values and frames interact with the process of building better evidence. Our approach, recognising that knowledge is governed in part by the laws of nature, is objective. But we are also subjective, seeing evidence as something interpreted differently by different individuals.

So in our multiple journeys to better evidence, where do we start? Many others — typically the ‘normal’ scientistsⁱⁱⁱ — start from theory. This risks prejudice and departing from the conceptual perspectives and realities of the people studied. Others start from practice; this risks that the putative raw data is dependent on the context and concept in which it is collected. The best we can do, then, is improve our interpretations of reality, rather than seek a definitive, finished truth.

1. Politics

Politics “shapes and orders society, and, importantly, is always subject to contestation and resistance”.^{iv} In a similar way, better evidence serves to develop sustainable development policy and to contest and resist what people see as not constituting sustainable development. To achieve sustainable development, there needs to be interaction and dialogue among diverse groups of actors across socio-political hierarchies to support locally-driven solutions and evidence generation. But when the international development sector “seeks to support transformational development, it encounters fundamental contradictions concerning its legitimacy of action, its practice of power, and ... recurrent themes in the politics of evidence”.^v So, we are interested in how better evidence can help support endogenous and locally-led transformational development. We also want to know how we can avoid the failings of transactional development, which tends to be blind to values and frames (or the ‘how’), concentrating on the technical (or the ‘what’).

The better evidence issues we develop in this briefing are related to, but somewhat distinct from, the concerns of international non-governmental organisations and donor agencies raised in the Big Push Forward discussions.^{vi} They were preoccupied with how the results agenda, as it arose in the international development sector, affected the generation of evidence on the performance of interventions. The ensuing discussion was characterised as a ‘wonk-war’, with one observer concluding that it “should (have been) ... much less around whether we want to see results ... and much more around how we can obtain these results without the adverse effects.”^{vii}

Our argument is also related to — but somewhat distinct from — the issues raised in the debate around appropriate impact evaluation methodologies. Some have strongly pushed back on the notion that only a few methods are suitable to assess causality,^{viii} helping to broaden not only the range of methods and approaches that are suitable for impact evaluation, but the evaluation questions themselves. As a result, the impact evaluation agenda has shifted from looking for simplistic responses to general questions on what works to more fine-grained lines of enquiry to find out what works for whom; under what circumstances; how; and why.

This work has been a cornerstone in challenging the political economy of a fictitious hierarchy of evidence. In doing so, it has given back dignity to different sources of evidence. But the debate has remained largely technical. It has touched the minds of evaluators and commissioners, but has yet to reach the hearts of politicians and beneficiaries (or victims) of policies and development interventions. If evaluation is to be of any use for our societies, it should challenge “monopolies of various kinds — of problem definition, of issue formulation, of data control, of information utilisation.”^{ix} This debate has successfully challenged the monopoly of methods: the debate must now move to the other domains of evidence generation and use.

Empiric evidence generation can show us what factors increase the likelihood of cooperation and collective action to create public goods in the face of social dilemmas.^x So, for a positive politic of sustainable development, we need:

- Available and reliable evidence about the immediate and longer-term costs and benefits of action
- Those involved to share resources for their own achievements and to have a longer time horizon for rights of access and use

- To recognise and reward being trustworthy reciprocators
- Monitoring and sanctioning that is both feasible and considered appropriate
- Social capital and leadership for solving joint problems, and
- Everyone to view rules and sanctions imposed by external authorities as legitimate and for these to be enforced equitably on all.^{xi}

These requirements and attributes guide our search for — and generation of — better evidence as a feedstock of sustainable development.

We place great emphasis on the ‘with, for and by whom’ issues related to generating better evidence. This is partly because we want to meet our own expectations; but we also want to rise to the expectations and challenges of others. In this sense, we can find ourselves working either with or against the political grain. Understanding power and politics can help us find ways to gather better evidence that will support social change. We see power as a dynamic and productive mechanism, where we and our partners play a leading role to transform exploitative dynamics.

“... Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.”^{xii} Behind our understanding of the politics and power related to sustainable development and the need for better evidence is a set of values. We make these explicit in the next section.

2. Proposed values for better evidence

Values drive the ways we work and interact with the world. We can classify values as intrinsic and extrinsic. The latter are predicated on external approval or rewards; the former are based on more inherently rewarding pursuits.^{xiii} We can identify groups of values under the following categories: universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation and self-direction.

The intrinsic values of equality, creativity and self-direction, alongside political engagement and concern about social and environmental justice need to be upheld.

As well as influencing our behaviours and attitudes, these values are connected to the ways we understand the world. One way this connection manifests itself is through frames. These are both mental structures that order our ideas and communicative tools that evoke these structures and shape our perceptions and interpretations over time. Some frames and values are central to better evidence for sustainable development.

Values and frames shape the way in which we seek to achieve better evidence. By making them explicit, we are more likely to realise what better evidence means and implies. No aspect of our work is ever free from values and frames. But rather than embodying and reinforcing certain values and frames, we can promote intrinsic values by achieving better evidence. The interpretative window we get from understanding values and frames helps us generate better evidence in new ways to explore issues — such as economic structures or what underpins a behaviour or an institution — by assessing how we trade off extrinsic and intrinsic values.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the values we express through the type of evidence generation we choose to use.

Table 1. Typology and characteristics of evidence generation^{xiv}

Typology	Characteristics used by IIED
Manipulative	Biased towards certain aims and interests; participation as pretence
Passive	The objects has no say in the process
Consultative	People are consulted, but outsiders decide what is evidence
Incentivised	People participate in evidence generation because they will receive a return
Functional	Externally initiated action
Interactive	Jointly initiated action

Self-mobilised Insiders take the initiative independently of outsiders

3. Philosophy

Through an internal dialogue, established IIED staff and younger, more recently recruited staff discussed what better evidence means to us, developing the following set of characteristics. This conversation led to the conclusion that better evidence should be (see the list below) and a framework for a philosophy of better evidence – see Table 2 below:

- Be well triangulated, using different sources of information and embracing multiple perspectives
- Be transparently based upon data and information processed through knowledge and experience, including local and collective experience
- Address local issues and seek to influence discourse, policy and/or practice at national and global levels
- Be communicable, well communicated and listened to
- Be action-oriented towards creating positive change
- Challenge perceived wisdom and/or reinforce alternative narratives where relevant
- Be cognisant of its own limitations in being the best evidence under the (financial, contextual, cultural, political, etc) circumstances, and
- Have a high level of validity and reliability and be transparent about its own methodological limitations.

Table 2. A philosophy for better evidence

Aim: Evidence should...	Be empirical and inductive Understand the participant in a particular context Enlighten and empower
Assumptions about reality	Reality is changing and is contingent on context
Assumptions about knowledge	Knowledge is constructed out of dialogue between participants The researcher is a participant Knowledge is not something that belongs to the researcher The researcher is dialogic
Assumptions about method	All methods are to some extent flawed, so use multiple approaches
Validity	The use of evidence generates change and can work as a catalyst

Normal scientific explanations of what is evidence (or what is uncertainty) are problematic, because it is often the scientists who determine what is necessary to know (and to be certain about). Scientists alone define what is evidence, what is knowledge or information and how these reduce uncertainty.

We want to explore if and how existing social, political and economic relations create inequality to develop a normative critique against those relations. Research that aims to generate evidence of how structures influence agency may show that existing structures are exploitative. So, is the researcher's task to make a difference by engaging in political argument and therefore challenge these structures? We think that better evidence for sustainable development demands this.

By generating better evidence, we seek to gain knowledge of a reality that exists independently of different stakeholders' representations of reality. We hold that we can only develop better evidence through a critical dialogue with alternative understandings.

4. Ways forward

It is often said that decision makers' demand for evidence does not match the increasing quality of evidence available. At the same time, we want to ensure that sustainable development decision makers use evidence consistently and appropriately to drive their decisions.

Decision makers need better evidence to support their decisions and need to get to grips with wide evidence sets when they have a shortage of time and often narrow technical expertise.

Development decisions across all sectors should be informed by all the evidence that is relevant to achieving the goals set. If evidence informs policy choices on interventions and funding decisions, it can replace a "reliance on good intentions, rhetoric, fads, ideology or allegiance to the 'what we've always done' philosophy."^{xv}

But there has also been a move toward generating and using evidence to inform the 'do what works' approach to development. There are now web-based directories that collate and weigh evidence of what works across different domains, listing and describing good development approaches. But these directories are a shortcut, designed to help time-constrained decision makers assess an expanding evidence base.^{xvi}

But for decisions to be truly informed by evidence, we must also understand contextual and implementation factors. Decision makers need to know how important context is to impact and whether contextual factors are generalisable. So we must recognise not only the beneficiaries of interventions, but also those who benefit less or are even negatively affected. We must understand contributory factors to impact and any correlated changes in communities, systems and policies.

Processes for better evidence for sustainable development can convene organisations across different sectors. Once we identify common objectives, we can use aligned implementation and adaptive management to maximise impacts. We could agree common measures of success and learning and, where there are shared goals but alignment for implementation is not possible, we could use common or core effectiveness factors across multiple interventions to show and understand impact.

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Notes

- ⁱ See www.sup.org/books/title/?id=11232
- ⁱⁱ See an explanation by Farhad Manjoo at www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X8H4CpR5HQ
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kuhn, Thomas S. (2012). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 50th anniversary. (4th ed.). University of Chicago Press. p. 264.
- ^{iv} Explanation by Mouffe, as flagged in Eyben, R *et al.* (2015) — see note 4.
- ^v Eyben, R *et al.* (2015) *The politics of evidence and results in international development: playing the game to change the rules?* Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/9781780448855>
- ^{vi} Guijt, I (2013) *The politics of evidence conference report*. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, 23–24 April. See <http://tinyurl.com/zcm94qx>
- ^{vii} Green, D (7 February 2013) *So what do I take away from the great evidence debate? Final thoughts (for now)*. See: <http://tinyurl.com/j2k5ggp>
- ^{viii} Stern E *et al.* (2012) *Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations*. London: Department for International Development.
- ^{ix} MacDonald, B (1978) *Democracy and evaluation*. Public address at the University of Alberta Faculty of Education, 17 October 1978.
- ^x Ostrom, E (2010) *Beyond markets and states: polycentric governance of complex economic systems*. *American Economic Review* 100(3): 641–72.
- ^{xi} Poteete, Amy R, Marco A Janssen, Elinor Ostrom (2010) *Working Together: Collective Action, the Commons and Multiple Methods in Practice*. Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press.
- ^{xii} Foucault, M (1979) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage.
- ^{xiii} PIRC (2011) *The common cause handbook*. Available at: <http://valuesandframes.org/downloads>
- ^{xiv} Pretty, J N (1995) *Participatory Learning for Sustainable Agriculture*. *World Development* (August 1995) Vol. 23, No. 8.
- ^{xv} CSSP (2016) *Better evidence for decision-makers*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- ^{xvi} See, for example, Neuhoff, A *et al.* (2015) *The what works marketplace: helping leaders use evidence to make smarter choices*. The Bridgespan Group. See www.bridgespan.org