

# **Addressing the climate and environmental crises through better governance:**

## **The Environmental Democracy approach in development cooperation**

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# Policy brief

## The climate and environmental crises as governance failures

While science is clear on the urgency, impacts and the range of technological and policy solutions, political systems have lagged to produce the decisive action required to address adequately climate change and environmental degradation. Climate change crises and environmental degradation are therefore to a large extent consequence of governance and political failures. Lack of political will and political commitment, short-termism, vulnerability of policies to electoral cycles, weak accountability for implementation are some examples of such failures. Not accounting for governance failures and political economy factors undermines technocratic programmes on climate change and the environment.

This study explores the potential for development cooperation to help address climate change and environmental degradation through greater focus on environmental governance. We review the debate on the relationship between the interventions that strengthen the key pillars of governance and the environmental policy outcomes and complement it with semi-structured interviews with twenty foreign aid experts to understand the current practice, barriers to and opportunities for scaling up such interventions as part of development cooperation<sup>1</sup>. The key messages are presented in this summary, while the full study will be published in May 2022, integrating the discussions at the conference on Environmental democracy taking place on 29-31 March 2022.

## Addressing governance failures

Governance failures require solutions that trigger socio-political and institutional change through enhanced transparency, citizen participation, and justice in addressing climate crisis and environmental degradation. Most such solutions focus on political institutions and processes and lie in strengthening key pillars of democratic governance, an approach that is sometimes labelled as '*environmental democracy*'. They require addressing *information gaps and uncertainty* that often obstruct decision-making. This includes improving quality, transparency, and access to environmental information, such as past and projected emissions, climate risk and vulnerability assessments, scenarios for mitigation and adaptation, and progress made with implementation of policies.

Governance failures also need solutions that *augment credibility and longevity of political commitment* to policies over longer-term across multiple electoral cycles and *strengthen accountability for implementation*. This includes enhancing political oversight through strengthening the ability of legislatures and judiciaries to tackle environmental issues. Political voices and

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews have been conducted with 20 development cooperation professionals, including several UK FCDO experts in the country offices and in the headquarters, staff from other European donors agencies and non-governmental organizations active on climate change and environmental governance

coalitions can help address environmental problems by raising citizen's concerns and holding governments accountable. To do so political voices need to be more inclusive and aware on climate change and environmental degradation and be backed by a strong set of environmental and democratic rights that allows them to be heard through freedom of expression and speech and research. Political parties can also help strengthen environmental democracy through mediating public preferences and political voices, parliamentary oversight and through party competition. A lack of political consensus between the main parties may jeopardize the maintenance of political commitment and lead to policy reversal. Bridging the divide in the positions of the key parties on environmental issues is important for achieving more ambitious policies and outcomes.

Development cooperation can help by enhancing public awareness on environmental issues and policy responses, enabling capacity of the media and civil society to cover these issues, and building multi-stakeholder coalitions to support policy development and implementation. It can also help by building awareness and ability of political parties and parliaments to engage with these issues.

“It's evident that you cannot design an effective climate change support programme without considering all of the other governance measures and sensitivity to conflict, justice, security measures and enforcement”

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UK development professional, Latin America.

“The links between environment and climate-resilient sustainable development, and human rights, democracy and gender equality are clear”

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[Strategy for Sweden's regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific region 2016–2021](#),  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden.

There is growing evidence on how integrating governance priorities into technical environmental cooperation programmes helps increase effectiveness of interventions and sustainability and longevity of change. Emerging examples include projects focused on strengthening the civil society, parliaments and political parties, public opinion and participation on climate change and the environment, capacity of judiciary system to deal with environmental issues (e.g., through trainings of judges) and environmental defendants.

Reinforcing the core pillars of environmental governance can also contribute to overall strengthening of democracies. Environment and climate change often provide a better entry point for supporting drivers of democratic change than trying to push for implementation of democratic priorities as the main objective of a cooperation programme.

“There's a lot to learn from other fields, particularly in the peace and security and conflict resolution. Everyone who worked on nation building or large-scale peace building implementation attempts, have learned critical lessons on how to balance, shape and strengthen political will.”

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NGO democracy support expert, USA.

## Barriers to addressing environmental governance through foreign aid

Expert interviews showed that while there is a growing recognition of the importance of dealing with governance failures especially in the context of climate change, several barriers persist to scaling up integration of governance related interventions into development cooperation on environment and climate change. These barriers largely relate to knowledge and framing; funding strategies and cycles; and measurement and reporting practices.

### Knowledge and framing

Experts noted a lack of understanding on what environmental governance interventions could be and have been effective, and overall shortage of showcased practical examples. There are also knowledge gaps among the environmental experts on how to work politically, and among the governance and democracy experts on technical aspects of environmental and climate change issues. The governance departments in donor agencies often do not have a specialist in environment and aren't thinking in these terms, and the environmental teams do not have specialists in politics. This often leads to reluctance to focus on political economy and politics of environment. Furthermore, the concept of environmental democracy is not widely understood and has not been an explicit strong focus of discussions in the development cooperation community. Some experts have also noted that talking about environmental 'governance' rather than 'democracy' is a more effective way to engage experts and host country governments.

### Funding strategies and cycles

A challenge that all interviewed experts raised is the short-termism of funding programmes, and inconsistency of funding cycles with the longer timeframes required for meaningful governance change. Pressure to deliver short-term results against easily measurable indicators make governance interventions more challenging to integrate into environmental aid programmes.

“The challenge we face is that the way funding systems work and the way the political systems work, they don't lend themselves to investing in the kind of long-term projects required.”

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UK development professional, Latin America.

“Governance issues take longer to address, and our funding tends to be short and very rarely medium term. It's normally three to five years to tackle governance well unless there are easy fixes to the issue. But where they're entrenched, you need at least a political cycle to start moving forward.”

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UK development professional, Africa.

Much of the development funding is still structured in thematic silos, according to the interviewed experts. This makes it challenging to combine technical cooperation and support to interventions that lead to longer-term political change necessary to ensure improvements in the regulatory framework, improved transparency and strengthened accountability for implementation. Experts note an overall strategic deficit, where most of the development finance programmes treat the objectives of strengthening governance and democracy separately from the objectives related to environmental protection. Furthermore, governance objectives are often not explicitly integrated into the overarching development finance strategies on environment and climate change, making integration at the programming stage at the regional and country level challenging.

“Donor bureaucracies are structured so that you end up working in silos... There is a need to more explicitly link in a holistic way the politics of climate change to the technocratic approach”

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Democracy support NGO expert, USA

“We need a more interdisciplinary approach to funding mechanisms and to programming more generally”

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UK development professional, Eastern Europe

## Measurement and reporting

There is a strong perception among the interviewed experts that measurement systems for environmental and climate change programmes are over-focused on indicators related to physical output and emission reductions. There is a gap in the knowledge on how to measure governance change in environmental programs, and the need for integration of relevant indicators in the reporting systems.

“There are fundamental foreign policy barriers in how we structure aid systems and how we measure its effectiveness.”

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Democracy support NGO expert, USA

## Opportunities to address the barriers

The importance of environmental governance has been recognized in several international and regional declarations and agreements, such as Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration; the 1998 Aarhus Convention on access to Information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters; and the 2018 Escazu Agreement on these matters in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Paris Agreement also notes the importance of ‘climate justice’, public awareness, participation, transparency, and access to information. These agreements provide solid basis for incorporation of these issues into development cooperation.

There are emerging good practice examples on explicit integration of environmental and governance, human rights, and democracy objectives at the strategic level into foreign aid; and on the use of the longer-term theories of change. There is also a growing array of interventions that tackle policy change through strengthen environmental coalitions or grass-roots institutions, enhance capacity of parliaments and political parties to develop and adopt environmental legislation and carry out post-legislative scrutiny. Learning from these experiences is an important step in addressing the barriers.

“Activities are to be conducted in a manner that strengthens the ability of regional actors to integrate an environmental and climate perspective into programmes related to human rights, democracy and gender equality, and that strengthens regional actors’ efforts to promote respect for human rights, greater opportunities for democratic participation and gender mainstreaming into programmes related to environment, climate and natural resources.”

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[Strategy for Sweden’s regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific region 2016–2021](#),  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden

“How do we deal with the dynamics of short termism? We think in terms of long-term theories of change. Even for one-year programs, there's still a long-term theory of change we have in place that is linked to governance and development strategies and national development plans.”

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UK development professional, Latin America

Furthermore in the UK the recent merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) offers an opportunity for closer integration of technical and political aspects of environmental and climate change aid.

“You're getting really good synergy benefits where you can amplify the finance that you're spending using the influence in the old [UK] Foreign Office through political channels... There's some good evidence there that those two agendas overlap, and they should overlap.”

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UK development professional, London.

Tangible impact on governance systems necessary to address climate change and environment crisis requires that development cooperation strategies and programmes:

- Ensure longer-term sustained investment and engagement with and support to the key governance actors (inside and outside of the governments), given that change in governance takes longer to take effect.
- Apply an interdisciplinary approach to funding mechanisms and to programming; and ensure closer integration and collaboration among the programmes targeting democracy and climate change and the environment priorities.
- Ensure that measurement of success does not solely focus on immediate short-term gains, but addresses longer-term systemic change in governance systems, processes, and capabilities necessary to address climate crisis.
- Strengthen diplomatic political engagement on environmental governance from the capitals in the regional and national offices.

## Recommendations for development cooperation decision makers:

- To launch dialogues or joint action groups to exchange experiences around the challenges and best practice to design, implement, oversee, and measure impact for the blended programming and gather examples on how integration has worked in different sectors and political contexts. Such dialogues should include donor agencies, implementing institutions, civil society, local partners, and academic experts.
- Improve understanding about the importance of governance as an issue within climate change and environmental agenda among the senior development cooperation leadership.
- Introduce cross-cutting objectives into development cooperation strategies and explicitly articulate the value of working politically and working on governance in a democratic way in the context of the climate and environment development cooperation programmes.

- Tap into experiences of the country offices and embassies in the development of overarching strategic priorities and programming at the regional and the global level.
- Recognise environmental and climate governance explicitly as part of the governance advisors' technical toolbox and include a recommendation for a political economy analysis as part of climate change and environmental programming.
- Develop systems of indicators for measuring governance change in environmental and climate change programmes.

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