The implications of how climate funds conceptualize transformational change in developing countries

The search for globally coordinated mitigation strategies that could contribute effectively towards bridging the gap between current emissions reduction efforts and a rapidly closing 2°C climate target remains contentious. The participation of developing countries through Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs) is emerging as a crucial feature to attain this goal. Against this background, two of the major NAMA funding agencies have embraced ‘transformational change (TC)’ and ‘paradigm shifts’ as policy concepts. Yet, their operationalization within aid management approaches has not been fully justified. Concurrently, academic interest in theories of sustainability transitions has been growing, out of which the Transition Management (TM) approach provides the theoretical inspiration to study, and eventually promote, systemic TCs. However, there is still limited knowledge with which to contextualize the steering of such transitions to different settings. This article engages in these debates by reviewing the theoretical grounding behind the Green Climate Fund and the NAMA Facility’s conceptualizations of TC through NAMA interventions against the corresponding theoretical assumptions of TM. Based on a critical review of relevant literature, it is argued that the logical framework based approach adopted by the funds contains implicit assumptions of causality, which do not adequately cater for the uncertainties, non-linearity and feedback loops inherent in transition processes. The incorporation of more adaptive and reflexive elements is proposed as an alternative. This paper contributes to existing knowledge by critically reflecting on the applicability of TM towards governing sociotechnical transitions in the developing world and by exposing the limitations behind the current thinking underpinning NAMA funding. In conclusion, the systems perspective adopted in sustainability transition theories is thus recommended as a more rewarding approach towards understanding how attempts at transforming paradigms through support to climate policies and actions in developing countries are played out.

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