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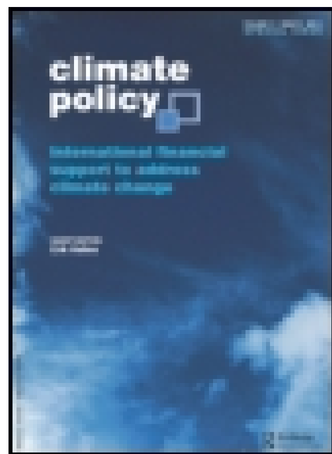

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# Who determines transformational change in development and climate finance?

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climate policy

policy analysis

# Who determines transformational change in development and climate finance?

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The language of transformational change is increasingly applied to climate policy, and particularly in climate finance. Transformational change in this context is used with respect to low-carbon development futures, with the emphasis on mitigation and GHG metrics. But, for many developing countries, climate policy is embedded in a larger context of sustainable development objectives, defined through a national process. Viewed thus, there is a potential tension between mitigation-focused transformation and nationally driven sustainable development. We explore this tension in the context of operationalizing the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which has to deal with the fundamental tension between country ownership and transformational change. In relation to climate finance, acceptance of diverse interpretations of transformation are essential conditions for avoiding risk of transformational change becoming a conditionality on development. We further draw lessons from climate governance and the development aid literature. The article examines how in the case of both the Clean Development Mechanism and Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions, there has been limited success in achieving both development objectives and 'nationally appropriate' mitigation. The development aid literature points to process-based approaches as a possible alternative, but there are limitations to this approach.

**Policy relevance**

The concept of transformational change has gained prominence in climate finance. The conundrum facing the GCF is that it seeks to support transformational change in the climate realm, in a context where countries may have competing priorities. Balancing or even transcending this tension is a fundamental design challenge for the GCF. A primary focus on mitigation, particularly if metrics of performance are tied exclusively to GHG reduction, raise concerns about diluting ownership by recipient countries and evokes concerns of conditionality or worse. The literature on development assistance has explored options notably conditions on process and adequate capacity, and suggests that there are no short cuts to building domestic ownership. Actors on climate change need to avoid the risk that transformational change is perceived as, and becomes, an imposed condition. The risk that transformation change, operationalized in the context of unequal power relations, becomes an imposition on development, needs to be avoided.

*Keywords*: climate change; development aid/assistance; governance; Green Climate Fund; mitigation; transformational change

## 1. Introduction

The concept of 'transformational change' has entered climate policy relatively recently, and has taken on particular relevance in the context of climate finance. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) has emerged as a key new financial mechanism to channel funds under the Convention, and some early operational

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documents (cited below) refer to transformational change. The term may be given very different meanings and carry diametrically opposed implications for economies and societies. Transformational change may be sought through climate finance, but its implications depend on who defines and drives transformational change and whether there is country ownership. This article explores who determines transformational change, drawing lessons from climate finance, governance, and the aid literature.

Transformational change signifies a step change beyond short-term, incremental adjustments, and in that sense is undoubtedly needed to address climate change. If poorly and unilaterally defined, transformational change risks imposing a vague set of undefined pressures on developing countries. The pursuit of low-carbon objectives is still seen by many developing countries as carrying the risk of downsides for other objectives such as economic growth, energy access, improved local environmental issues, and more equal distribution. There is a significant risk, particularly in the context of unequal power relations, that climate finance seeking 'transformation change' might become a top-down process without country ownership.

This article seeks to raise and sharpen questions about the operationalization of the concept of transformational change in climate finance. Is transformational change to be determined and driven from outside or managed from within? How will differences in understanding of what constitutes transformation be resolved? For operational effectiveness and institutional cogency, will a single conception prevail in climate finance and, if so, will that conception be driven by power dynamics between countries? Or will multiple conceptions, based on a locally specific case-by case determination, perhaps leading to high transactions costs, be the operational norm?

We explore these questions by examining fundamental tensions in determining transformational change in the GCF, and then by assessing past lessons from climate governance as well as the voluminous development aid literature. We conclude by considering some institutional mechanisms through which transformation may usefully be operationalized in the domain of climate finance, while keeping in mind political sensitivities around this term and the substantive concerns behind them.

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## 2. Fundamental tensions in determining transformational change in the GCF

Transformational change has emerged in discussions around climate finance and the GCF. The Transitional Committee, which designed the GCF, held a meeting in September 2011 to consider the role of public and private capital in funding transformational change towards a low-carbon, climate-resilient world. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres said:

> Nothing short of transformational change is required in order to enable the world to shift towards a low-carbon, climate-resilient future.[1]

Fuller discussions occurred in the setting up of the GCF. Transformational change is not explicitly mentioned in the decisions establishing or launching the GCF (UNFCCC, 2010, 2011a), nor in that instrument itself. However, the governing instrument of the GCF provides salient guidance using the

language of paradigm shift, co-benefits, and results measurement, which informs discussions of transformational change (UNFCCC, 2011b):

> the Fund will promote the paradigm shift towards low emission and climate-resilient development pathways … (Paragraph 2)
>
> The Fund will strive to maximize the impact of its funding for adaptation and mitigation … while promoting environmental, social, economic and development co-benefits … (Paragraph 3)
>
> A results measurement framework with guidelines and appropriate performance indicators will be approved by the Board. (Paragraph 58)

The conundrum facing operationalization of the GCF is implicit in this guidance. The GCF has to fund paradigm-shifting actions in climate mitigation and adaptation, while simultaneously promoting a range of co-benefits. The problem arises where there are significant trade-offs, particularly between development and mitigation objectives (e.g. if promoting low-carbon energy sources increases the short-term costs of providing energy access). Designing a results-based framework (GCF, 2013) for such multiple objectives becomes a challenge, one that is apparent in subsequent efforts to operationalize the GCF. The point is that transformation in itself is not problematic; it is the substantive content given to low carbon policies, the potential implications of these for the development path of countries, and issues around who determines these changes that are at issue.

The funding of adaptation is perhaps less contentious, because the benefits of any adaptation actions accrue entirely to the country taking those actions. Although there may be some trade-offs, there are perhaps even more synergies between development and adaptation. *Ceteris paribus*, more development means higher levels of adaptive capacity (Yohe & Tol, 2002). The GCF Board has decided 'to aim for a 50:50 balance between mitigation and adaptation over time' (GCF B.06/06).[2] In this article, we focus on the larger trade-offs in funding development or mitigation: those involved in transforming 'business-as-usual' to low-carbon development paths.

To understand how the GCF approached the difficult questions of being transformative without dictating the balance between mitigation and development requires delving deeper into GCF documents. In its initial framing paper for objectives, results, and performance indicators, the GCF presented two options: a strategic focus on mitigation with reporting on co-benefits, or a strategic focus on areas with maximum co-benefits, indirectly achieving mitigation but allowing for greater emphasis on national development priorities (GCF/B.04/03).[3] A subsequent results management framework document (GCF/B07/04) provided a clear proposal for the first option: judge mitigation based on GHG metrics (tonnes of GHGs produced, cost per tonne, and so on) and only report on co-benefits generated rather than treat them as part of the results framework. The GCF Board's decision, somewhat confusingly, leans toward this option but does not adopt it conclusively. Specifically, it opts for clear GHG metrics for mitigation at the paradigm shift and fund-wide level, but allows for case-by-case metrics at the project or programme level, while calling for more work on the measurement framework (GCF/B.07/11). The tussle between a mitigation-first and a development-first approach to GCF financing, and the failure to fully resolve the tension, is apparent from this sequence of documents.

As the final decision indicates, GHG-related metrics are likely to become the most tangible indicator of success in the GCF's work. Is such a framework, then, consistent with country ownership of climate

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finance? Is there a risk that GCF financing will slip into a donor financing mode, where maximizing GHG mitigation, in particular, becomes an explicit or implicit condition of financing?

One possible resolution to managing the deep tension between country ownership and mitigation-focused transformational change is through national capacity development. The argument is that the better the domestic institutional structures that coordinate climate finance, the stronger the argument for national control and discretion over finance – and the higher the chance that 'transformational change' is seen as appropriately transformational by local actors.

As part of their preparations to address climate change nationally, developing countries are considering national institutions and strategies for climate finance (DBSA, 2011; Naidoo, Amin, Dimsdale, & Marcela, 2014). The potential of enhanced institutional capacity for climate finance has two aspects. First, national institutions define what counts as transformational change – and this helps reduce the perception and reality of foreign imposition, which has long bedevilled development assistance. Second, institutions with a track record in development finance might be more sensitive to national development priorities than international agencies, being in a better position to harness and prepare good ideas. This is not to argue that national climate finance institutions or coordinating bodies will be without problems – tensions may well arise between national and local or regional actors, and will need careful design and ongoing management.

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## 3. Lessons from funding mitigation in developing countries

To what extent, and how, has external financing of mitigation in developing countries sought transformational change? In the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), success in meeting the developmental objective has been limited in general (Ellis, Winkler, Morlot, & Gagnon-Lebrun, 2007; Olsen & Fenhann, 2008), and also in relation to particular aspects such as technology transfer (Haites, Duan, & Seres, 2006; Seres, Haites, & Murphy, 2009). One lesson to be drawn is that when the key metric is defined by GHG reduction, market-based mechanisms are likely to closely follow low-cost mitigation opportunities, and loose governance provisions for developmental objectives do not make much difference. If this is the case, then CDM funding can hardly be said to have stimulated the consideration of different development models.

How are these ideas of transformative change and nationally driven development reflected in the current policy discourse, particularly around Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs)? NAMAs originated as mitigation actions that were to be 'nationally appropriate', an emphasis on country ownership that, if anything, should be strengthened in the post-Warsaw context of defining 'intended nationally determined contributions' (UNFCCC, 2013). However, in operationalizing NAMAs there is some indication that donor conceptualizations of NAMAs place the emphasis on transformation understood in carbon-centric ways, while acknowledging broader sustainable benefits. For example, the information document of the International NAMA facility established by the German and UK governments in 2012 states:

> Although a final definition of NAMAs has not been concluded under the UNFCCC, NAMAs are increasingly understood to strive for strategic, long-term sustainable development benefits beyond mere GHG emissions reductions and to aim at catalysing transformational change towards a low carbon society.[4]

In another example, a paper involving several agencies[5] explicitly sought to define transformational change in NAMAs, going from theory to practice (UNEP-DTU & WI, 2014). The paper argues that transformational change is a descriptive concept, whereas sustainable development is seen as normative. The authors also trace the objective of transformational change to 'current and potential funding options' (UNEP-DTU & WI, 2014). In other words, requirements for funding emerged after the NAMA concept was negotiated, in the context of funding. 'Thus, fostering transformational change has become an explicit ambition of NAMA *financing*' (UNEP-DTU & WI, 2014, emphasis added). The paper provides various frameworks to 'identify NAMAs which foster the institutional, cultural, technological, economic and ecological transformation of systems' (UNEP-DTU & WI, 2014). However, the paper does not address which actors determine transformation, side-stepping the key issue of alternative perspectives on what constitutes transformation.

As this discussion suggests, actions originally defined as 'nationally appropriate' have been redefined by donors as requiring transformational change, measured first in GHG emission terms. Without clear agreement on what, substantively, constitutes transformational change, as well as who decides how this concept is operationalized, leaves the door open to concerns of externally imposed agendas, which have a long and troubled history in development assistance, and that also have been echoed in the climate debate.[6]

With this context we turn to exploring whether there are lessons from the development literature on whether and how there can be domestic ownership of low-carbon development?

## 4. Lessons from development assistance

The challenge of ensuring domestic 'ownership' of policy agendas financed by overseas funds is a long-standing theme of the aid effectiveness literature.[7] The simple idea is that ownership would make transformational changes acceptable. However, approaches – whether to development or climate – have to deal with the fundamental tension between country ownership and transformational change. What lessons can be drawn from discussions over aid effectiveness for the determination of transformational change in climate finance?

The use of policy conditions to induce ownership over a reform agenda is a failed strategy (Dollar & Pritchett, 1998; Easterly, 2001). This is particularly true of politically challenging reforms that may affect existing interests. Development aid has also been associated with patterns of colonialism, in economic and also environmental history (Grove, 1997). The risk is that where transformational change is imposed in the context of unequal power relations, it takes on overtones of structural adjustment programmes, which stimulated widespread protest and had negative impacts not only on developing economies, but also on the natural environment (Riddell, 1992). Structural adjustment has also been bedevilled by a deep contradiction that may also affect transformation in the name of climate change: If a reform had serious opponents, conditions and the inducement of aid funds that were attached were unlikely to be sufficient to shift local political economies. If there were sufficient domestic champions, aid had little role to play other than, perhaps, buying down transactions costs. This literature shifts attention from how to induce reform to an understanding of how and when the domestic conditions for far-reaching domestic reforms, such as shifts to low-carbon economic trajectories, might occur. To avert any risk of climate change conditions being perceived as 'carbon colonialism',

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this history is worth bearing in mind. A framing more akin to 'triple transformation' (Khan & Shinn, 2013), which includes low-carbon futures, national considerations, and access modalities, might avoid the worst – or feared – scenarios of carbon colonialism.

Attempts have been made to build ownership over time, one approach being to focus on the creation of long-term plans, with the content of those plans providing the substantive focus for specific financial support. The most far-reaching such example is the effort to develop country-specific 'Policy Reduction Strategy Papers' (PRSPs). The idea is that the process of plan formation provides a mechanism to engage public opinion, identify political economy constraints, and generate sufficient agreement if not consensus around a plan of action. According to an independent assessment, while there were incremental improvements with this approach, in practice the results are heavily shaped by the histories and traditions of particular countries (Piron & Evans, 2004).

Translating this to a climate context, the concept of low-carbon plans received a boost from the South African experiment with their Long Term Mitigation Scenarios, based on an exemplar of an open and consultative process, and leading to considerable national ownership (Raubenheimer, 2011). However, this example is very probably strongly shaped by South Africa's broader tradition of deliberative decision making arising out of the anti-apartheid movement, and is hence hard to replicate.

The requirement for the preparation of such plans can be thought of as a form of 'process conditionality', which specifies the process but not the outcome required to access funds. Although the results are likely to be shaped by domestic traditions and histories, as discussed above, such conditions can bring heightened engagement with salient questions about energy futures, for example, which can provide an opening for domestic actors to engage their own governments. However, for these openings to be successfully used requires sufficient domestic capacity for analysis, convening, and synthesis, as well as all the associated skills involved with both formulating plans and structuring engagement implied in the idea of ownership. A plan that is process-driven and informed by external consultants unfamiliar with local political economies and contexts is unlikely to serve this purpose. The lessons of development assistance suggest there are no short cuts to building domestic ownership for policy or transformational change.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has addressed the question of who determines transformational change, in the context of development and financing climate change mitigation. Transformational change, especially when narrowly defined in climate terms, risks being perceived as, and becoming, a pressure imposed on developing countries. Definitions of transformational change matter, but they also have broader implications for economies and societies. If there were any sense of one country imposing its agenda on another, it would risk evoking colonial overtones of distorted development.

We have examined fundamental tensions as they have emerged in the design of climate finance. Operationalizing the Green Climate Fund (GCF) requires addressing a tension that has long proved an obstacle to effective climate finance. To result in deep and sustained change, an agenda for transformational change needs to be owned by the country undertaking the change. However, ownership may require accepting and even embracing a diverse set of ideas on what constitutes desirable

transformation, even though the diversity of pathways and end points make for more measurement challenges for a multilateral fund. In this article we have suggested that ownership and acceptance of diverse interpretations of transformation are essential conditions for avoiding the risk of transformational change becoming conditional on development.

There are no easy ways past this tension. This is illustrated in the GCF, which, while moving from explicit mention of transformational change to paradigm shifts, has been clearest on GHG-related metrics, which seem likely to become the most tangible indicator of success.

The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) had had limited success in promoting sustainable development, with finance flowing to low-carbon mitigation opportunities. In defining 'nationally appropriate' mitigation, efforts to operationalize the idea have included the language of transformational change defined in mitigation terms, even though in its original negotiation context the emphasis was on national appropriateness.

We have examined the aid literature for experiences in dealing with the fundamental tension between country ownership and transformational change. One approach to building ownership over time is to focus on the creation of long-term plans. Requiring the preparation of such plans can be thought of as a form of 'process conditionality', which specifies the process but not the outcome required to access funds. This might be transferrable to climate change to a degree, but in our assessment will be shaped by existing political and institutional culture. We argue that, the better the domestic institutional structures that coordinate climate finance, the stronger the argument for national control and discretion over finance. Yet, lessons from the aid literature should be borne in mind, suggesting that the use of policy conditions to induce ownership over a reform agenda is a failed strategy.

Lessons from climate finance and development assistance suggest that exploring alternative approaches to low-carbon planning, when married to adequate capacity and nudged along by process conditions, may be an avenue to explore. The risk that requirements for transformational change, operationalized in the context of unequal power relations, become an imposition on development, needs to be avoided.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

1. Press release, 9 September 2011; https://unfccc.int/files/press/press_releases_advisories/application/pdf/20110909_genevatc_gcf.pdf
2. GCF documents are available at http://www.gcfund.org/documents/in-session-documents.html. Decisions are numbered by Board meeting, so B06 is a decision taken at the sixth meeting.
3. One of the authors of this article was also involved in drafting the background paper for the GCF cited here.
4. 'International NAMA Facility, General Information Document', see http://tinyurl.com/c8o45vb.
5. The UNEP DTU Partnership (formerly the UNEP Risoe Centre), in collaboration with the WuppertalInstitute (WI), implemented the project resulting in this article, supported by the UNFCCC Secretariat and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

6. For literature on the role of suspicions in UNFCCC-related scientific and technical deliberations, see Lahsen (2007).
7. Significantly, for many engaged in the debate, climate finance is not considered aid, as exemplified by the governance structure of the GCF, which is more balanced between recipient and provider countries than is, for example the World Bank, which is dominated by donor countries. However, given the dynamics discussed here, and the dominance of GHG-related metrics of success, some of the same questions of ownership apply.

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