

Confusion reigns over climate aid as rich nations overstate projects

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An activity entitled "savannah elephant vocalisation" is just one of the projects questionably defined as climate-related aid in an international database, a new study shows. REUTERS/Noor Khamis

Analysis of international data by academics shows donors are overstating aid for poor countries to tackle climate change, highlighting the need for new guidelines to measure whether rich countries are keeping their promises.

A love movie festival in Belgium, uniforms for park guards in Central America, tobacco control, earthquake safety and an activity entitled "savannah elephant vocalisation" are just a few of the projects questionably defined as climate-related aid in an international database.

New [research by Katharina and Axel Michaelowa of the University of Zurich](#) found that around one-third of all projects given the "Rio Marker" for climate change mitigation - signalling they are activities that help developing countries reduce their greenhouse emissions - in the [PLAID \(Project-Level Aid\) database](#) between 1995 and 2007 had no relevance to climate.

Similarly, nearly three quarters of projects given the "Rio Marker" did not qualify as mitigation efforts, the research showed.

"There appear to be too many errors for (the over-coding) to be purely random," Katharina Michaelowa told a [conference on aid transparency and development finance](#) in Oxford this week. "Some is related to misunderstandings, but some may also be related politico-economic factors."

Michaelowa said over-coding is more likely to happen in countries where people value environmental objectives, where they are less well-informed about climate issues, and where bureaucratic quality is low. But it is less likely where a government favours ecological policies, the study suggests.

In a separate [analysis carried out by researchers at Brown University and the College of William and Mary](#), both based in the United States, as many as 70 percent of projects given the climate Rio Marker by major donors between 2000 and 2006 were judged to have no beneficial impact for climate change.

J. Timmons Roberts, director of the Center for Environmental Studies at Brown University, said new promises of climate change funding for poor countries, outlined in December's [Copenhagen Accord](#), make accuracy more important than ever.

INDEPENDENT CHECKS NEEDED

"Now it is a case of donors deciding what counts ... Someone should be independently checking to see if it's legitimate the way projects are being categorised," he told AlertNet on the sidelines of the AidData conference. "If this doesn't happen, we will have a lot of projects that have nothing to do with climate change included in the list."

The new research could be key in putting pressure on rich countries to stop inflating the volume of their climate aid in the future. It may also help in defining a baseline for the new and additional financing promised by wealthy polluting nations.

The Copenhagen Accord - now backed by around 110 countries - says developed nations will provide "new and additional resources, including forestry and investments through international institutions, approaching \$30 billion for the period 2010-2012 with balanced allocation between adaptation and mitigation".

And by 2020, it commits developed countries to a goal of mobilising jointly \$100 billion dollars a year from a range of public and private sources, including "alternative sources of finance".

"There is all kinds of wiggle language in this thing," Roberts told data experts at the conference.

A [February briefing](#) he co-authored sets out key unanswered questions about this new financing, including the lack of a baseline year from which it will be additional, how the baseline will be set, and how to assess whether funds are additional - a task complicated by the overlap between climate change projects and development aid.

According to calculations by Roberts and his team, rich nations have been providing \$11 billion to \$14 billion annually in climate aid in recent years, so they will need to raise that amount to between \$21 billion and \$24 billion each year from 2010 to 2012 to fulfill their Copenhagen pledge on short-term financing.

Roberts told AlertNet there is still much to be worked out - including what should count as fresh climate funding, who receives it, how it should be allocated and how it should be delivered - and little time in which to do it.

"In terms of the 'quick-start' promise (2010-2012), we will be halfway through spending it before we get to know what it is and whether things count, so the sooner the better," he said.

STEPS TOWARD BETTER TRACKING

Tentative steps are being made towards tracking aid flows more accurately. In December, members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) - the major donor countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) - approved a new "Rio Marker" to identify aid in support of climate change adaptation, which they started to use from the beginning of this year.

"The marker will complement the existing DAC marker on climate change mitigation, and thus allow presentation of a full picture of all aid in support of developing countries' efforts to address climate change," the [OECD said in an information note](#).

Roberts said the new marker could be a useful tool but there must be international agreement under the United Nations on what constitutes additional funding for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Failure to reach consensus will further damage trust between rich and poor countries, already battered by slow progress towards a new and binding global climate treaty, he warned.

"People in the wealthy countries won't trust the system to deliver aid in an effective way and will stop wanting to give that money, and yet developing countries have made it very clear that, without meaningful promises that are kept, they can't be expected to reduce emissions of climate change-causing gases and that they need compensation and help with adaptation," said Roberts. "We will be right back at square one."

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