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National environmental evaluation systems – guiding towards sustainability?

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Abstract

Background. Dealing with environmental threats is one of the largest, if not the largest, challenge contemporary societies face. One way to better deal with this challenge would be to produce knowledge that can be used to improve environmental work and environmental policy and thus ultimately contribute to sustainable development. National environmental evaluations, which this thesis explores, could potentially fill this function because they are supposed to generate applicable and useful knowledge for improving environmental policy and practice for a sustainable transition. However, what different environmental actors view as useful knowledge varies, and needs to be empirically investigated. Against this background, the aim of this thesis is to investigate whether, and how, national environmental evaluation systems contribute to key actors' environmental work and sustainable development. The thesis explores two national environmental evaluation systems in Sweden.

Method. A mixed methods approach is applied that combines three methods. Firstly, a narrative synthesis is developed and applied to compile a list of sustainable development effects from national environmental evaluations. Secondly, a critical program theory is used to investigate the evaluation system's underlying logic and to assess the likelihood of it achieving its intended effects. Thirdly, a directed content analysis is used to explore the usability and use of environmental evaluations and evaluation systems. The methods are applied to various documents, interviews with key actors, and observations at two environmental seminars.

Results. The results show that, to contribute to sustainable development in the context of evaluation systems and network governance, environmental evaluations need to be of sufficient quality and meet different stakeholders' knowledge needs. However, only some evaluations meet this demand. The main value of national environmental evaluations and evaluation systems is that they reinforce the national objectives, provide a recurrent report on achievement of objectives, and push actors to take responsibility to improve their environmental work.

Keywords

Environmental evaluation, evaluation systems, evaluation use, sustainable development, program theory, stakeholders, environmental policy

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