

Reflections on the first two decades of SEI Oxford



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Pictured above: The four founders of SEI Oxford, Ruth Butterfield, Kate Lonsdale, Tom Downing, and Sukaina Bharwani © SEI

We began in a small office next to the soup kitchen serving meals for homeless people. There were just three of us. Our finances consisted of a few bob left from the tail end of a project. And, yet, undeterred by limited staff and limited resources, we embarked on an experiment: establishing the Stockholm Environment Institute's outpost in Oxford.

Now, as SEI Oxford celebrates its 20th anniversary, the occasion provides a moment for reflection and a reminder on the changes we and the world have experienced over that time in the climate change mitigation and adaptation causes.

Our initial mission, set out by former SEI Executive Director Roger Kasperson, was to examine rural vulnerability and livelihoods. Right from the start, we were encouraged to take policy focus, one in line with the institute's aim of bridging science and policy. With this in mind, Tom Downing, Kate Lonsdale and I left the Environment Change Institute at the University of Oxford, and we were joined just a few months later by Sukaina Bharwani.

From those early days SEI Oxford established a defined focus: participatory engagement with stakeholders. Kate used to practice this approach in a theatrical fashion – giving us all roles to play as coastal farmers, land owners, water company executives, and environmental agency representatives. Thus, with method acting as part of our training, we began working on the interdisciplinary challenges of managing river basins as social-ecological systems (the stated goal) and also of the interdisciplinary challenges of managing people from different areas of expertise and walks of life.

Working in partnership to emphasize the value of partnerships

We began contributing to the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and it came as a thrilling milestone in 2007 when our own Tom Downing and Anna Taylor were among the collective recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded jointly to all authors of that year's IPCC report and to Al Gore Jr. "for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change."

That same year, we used a shoestring budget to begin a "wiki" entry on climate change adaptation. This was the beginning of weADAPT, our pioneering effort to create and adaptation platform and network – undertaken at a time when adaptation was an issue many people shied away from for fear of detracting from efforts needed for mitigation.

Image (above right): Radcliffe Camera library, Oxford © ADOBE STOCK



In 2018, SEI Oxford conducted "Learning Labs" for climate change adaptation planning in Windhoek, Namibia © SEI



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Stockholm Environment Institute is an international non-profit research and policy organization that tackles environment and development challenges. We connect science and decision-making to develop solutions for a sustainable future for all.

Our approach is highly collaborative: stakeholder involvement is at the heart of our efforts to build capacity, strengthen institutions, and equip partners for the long term.

Our work spans climate, water, air, and land-use issues, and integrates evidence and perspectives on governance, the economy, gender and human health.

Across our eight centres in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, we engage with policy processes, development action and business practice throughout the world.

Since those early days, interest in adaptation has grown – as have the wildfires, floods, droughts and storms that painfully remind us of the action needed on both mitigation and adaptation fronts. weADAPT has grown, too, now reaching 6000 registered users in 220 countries and territories, connecting them with one another and with the latest research in the field. The number of weADAPT users grew by roughly a third from 2020 to 2021 alone – a measure of the striking growth in the interest in and need for information.

Our focus on climate change adaptation emerged from that early work on vulnerability and livelihoods. It went on to take our research and knowledge management all over the world, to partner with and learn from remarkable organizations and people in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. We are indebted to partners – fellow researchers, practitioners, policymakers, private-sector actors, and members of community associations – all of whom expanded our reach and understanding.

It is not lost on us that we have worked in partnership to emphasize the value of partnership. The tools, training and technical methods we have helped create give different people ways to engage with one another effectively to consider their risks and consider their options – and to use the best knowledge available to make a good decision.

Helping people make informed, collaborative decisions

Over the years, colleagues have come and gone, and agendas have changed. Our work has expanded to take on other issues: analysing international climate law; proposing online climate negotiations; using taxonomies to improve climate knowledge management; undertaking social and agent-based modelling to support policy decisions for climate resilience and disaster preparedness; and creating a report on the global fossil fuel production gap to track the (now vast) discrepancy between governments' planned fuel-production levels and those consistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C or 2°C. Our work has taken us into community forests in Central Africa, coffee fields in Indonesia and Latin America, and the sprawling megacities of sub-Saharan Africa. No matter where we go, we try to help decision-makers understand the complex issues involved with climate risk – and the responses that they must consider to address these challenges.

Our aim remains equitable and participatory information gathering and sharing of knowledge and expertise. We continue to advocate for ways to address stresses – from climate change, hazards and disasters of course, but not just from that alone. We carry on in the firm belief that effective solutions have the best prospects of arising through meaningful engagement with many disciplines – through engagement with experts in science, law, social sciences, and the everyday matters of living life in a certain place and given time. We believe that these issues are the foundation of good decision-making. As time has passed, such a focus has only become more resonant. For no matter what comes next in climate mitigation and adaptation causes, what will be required are good decisions.