

A tidal wave of adaptation science, practice and policy

An increasing number of Nordic actors are moving from being intimidated by uncertainty about climate change to starting to face the challenge of adaptation to its impacts. This was clear from the international conference ‘Climate Adaptation in the Nordic Countries: Science, Practice, Policy’, which was co-organized by the Stockholm Environment Institute and Mistra-SWECIA in Stockholm on 8–10 November 2010.

While climate and impact modelling can offer a scientific basis for more informed planning, the social science research presented at the conference indicates that climate change as such is only one out of myriad of factors to consider in local adaptation processes. Other important issues include the presence of leaders and role models, access to funding, and competition with more immediate political priorities. The Nordic region is host to a number of local initiatives on climate adaptation, often driven by committed individuals. One key message from the conference is that information about the climate needs to be linked to knowledge created in such local initiatives. Many presentations also highlighted that local adaptation often needs national policy signals – an incentive or regulation at the national level that enables local action. Another challenge is to move from working only in time-limited stand-alone projects to mainstreaming adaptation into existing institutions. Many such steps will be taken in the next few years, both at the national level and Europe-wide.

The conference featured discussions about a number of emerging issues that need to be addressed in research as well as in practice and policy, as adaptation to climate change moves forward. They include equity and power relations, the causal connections between climate change and specific impacts (e.g. in the health sector), the role of financial incentives for adaptation, and the question of how to foster reflection and learning among researchers, practitioners and decision-makers. Another important issue is the need to link adaptation with mitigation and other environmental policies so as to avoid policy conflicts and maladaptation. In short, the challenge and opportunity highlighted at the conference is for climate adaptation to become an integral part of building a robust and sustainable society.

Annika E Nilsson