Happy 10th birthday, weADAPT!

Celebrating the history and future of the climate adaptation network

By Anna Taylor and Ben Smith

October 2017

weADAPT in Retrospect

The walking fish has come a long way!

Over the years, many have been perplexed by the weADAPT logo. But at this 10 year milestone the walking fish logo does a good job of conveying a sense of evolution and a direction of travel that emerges step by step, both of which are central to the weADAPT journey. Over the past 10 years weADAPT has evolved from a few articles on a wiki to a multi-functional web platform that integrates with other platforms, such as the Climate Information Portal, and powers customised websites targeting particular audiences, such as the "Energy Adaptation Map". The weADAPT network has grown from a handful of UK-based climate adaptation researchers curating content for the web platform, to a global community of researchers, practitioners, advocates and policy-makers sharing the work they are doing, questions and challenges they are facing, and the lessons they are learning on numerous issues relating to climate adaptation in all corners of the world.

Underpinning the growth of the web platform and the network has been an approach to climate adaptation that involves:
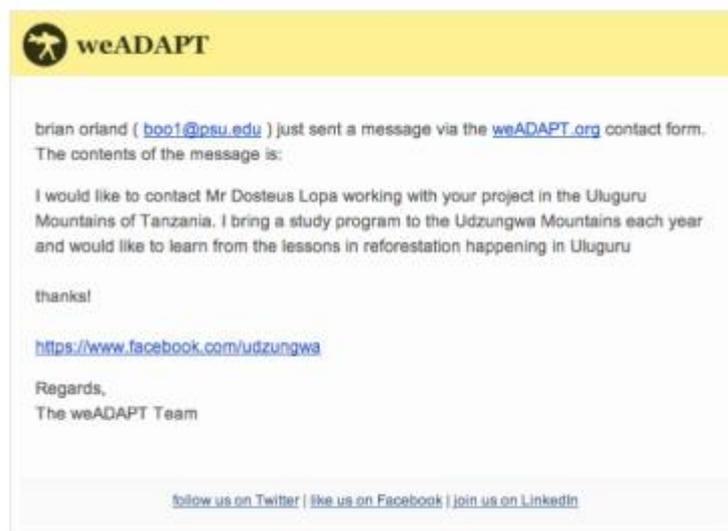
- Collecting and integrating spatial quantitative and qualitative data on current vulnerability;
- Analysing climate conditions and trends;
- Calculating thresholds of exposure to climatic risks in a variety of sectors or groups;
- Charting envelopes of climate scenarios for critical thresholds;
- Estimating sensitivity of adaptation options to future conditions; and
- Screening options using simple, clearly defined methods whenever possible, while providing more complex models where required.

This list is copied from an email sent in June of 2007, when weADAPT was just getting started (and evolved into our "adaptation principles"). What is striking when reading them again now in 2017 is how relevant they remain in light of how the science and practice of climate adaptation have developed over the last decade. weADAPT has been at the leading edge of fostering, capturing and sharing new developments in the field of climate adaptation, linking theory, policy and practice across scales and places. This has not been easy and has involved many hard lessons borne out of various unsuccessful attempts at doing things differently. But ultimately weADAPT's success - appropriately enough - is adaptability!

The sense of a broad and diverse adaptation network or community that the weADAPT platform seeks to foster and grow was central to the choice of the name. The early development of weADAPT began in the days when Apple was rapidly becoming the international icon of innovation and high-tech simplicity with the iPod dominating the market and the iPhone just being released. This was a source of inspiration for the first proposed name for the platform, iADAPT. But we quickly argued that for climate adaptation to work it couldn't be an individual pursuit but rather relied on collaboration, coordination and collective effort. We put several names to a vote in the core group (if things had been different we could be celebrating 10 years of coADAPT, AdaptAble or The Adaptarium amongst others), but weADAPT was the clear winner!

weADAPT has always been about growing and sustaining a community of people working on climate adaptation in some shape or form, to learn together and promote action that addresses current needs while accounting for a range of possible climate futures. Examples of our successful efforts to support collaboration have emerged from practitioners exchanging lessons learned through project implementation to university lecturers using weADAPT resources for their teaching (see figure 1 below).

That stems from an understanding of climate adaptation as an emergent process of experiencing and anticipating various climate impacts, recognizing the burden of these is unevenly distributed, working through competing priorities for the allocation of resources, acting to try and reduce the negative impacts and leverage any positive impacts, and assessing the implications of those actions as a basis for moving forward. This process has to accommodate a diversity of values and perspectives, well as a many gaps in knowledge and irresolvable uncertainties. As such ongoing learning and modification or transformation is key. Because the scale of action required to address climate change is well beyond any individual or organization the nature of such action and learning has to be shared; hence weADAPT rather than iADAPT.

Figure 1: A user making contact with the contributor of a similar project on weADAPT to share lessons learned, which resulted in a peer-to-peer site visit.

Back in 2007, we started off using a wiki as a web platform, hoping to encourage collaboratively written articles on key issues in adaptation. We struggled to get much purchase with this model of collaborative writing (which we'd somewhat naively imagined could work as well as Wikipedia had). Despite general agreement that this type of collaboration would be beneficial, issues around ownership and recognition of content, the time required, and quality control of content were frequently raised as barriers (Smith et al., 2013).

In an effort to test approaches to collaboration, in 2009 we ran an experiment in collaborative online writing which we called the *Frontline Knowledge Explorer (FKx)*. This was designed and run in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, to explore specific questions on the linkages between climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. We produced a lot of guidance on how to edit the wiki, incentivised contributions by linking the output to a collaboratively-authored publication, publicised the FKx heavily through many different adaptation networks, and approached individuals for their contributions. Despite our best efforts, and although we received some useful contributions, engagement fell well short of what we had hoped.

We learnt many lessons from the FKx experiment. It was instrumental in designing the platform around themes and networks, each with an editor, and the move to new web technologies that still enabled articles to be co-authored, but provided more structure, a greater variety of formats for content, and more dynamic linking of content than a wiki. One of the many key weADAPT developments over the last 10 years was the inclusion of the Adaptation Layer based on a collaboration with Google Foundation, which spatially locates on Google Maps and Google Earth where adaptation actions, research and innovations are taking place, as well as showing locations where climate data is publicly available through the Climate Information Portal, developed by the Climate Systems Analysis Group at the University of Cape Town.

Figure 2: A timeline showing some of weADAPT's partners - want to collaborate with us? Get in touch at info@weadapt.org

Reflecting on 10 years of weADAPT, it becomes clear that key to its longevity is the funding model used; in particular the fact that its development has never been tied to a single project. Instead, resources for technical developments and staff time have been leveraged from a variety of projects and partnerships, including plenty of in-kind contributions. While this has constrained the rate and scale of development, it has ensured a sharp focus on priorities and where most value can be added to meet the emerging and changing needs from research, policy and practise in the adaptation community, especially in light of many other platforms coming onto the scene. Also, by staying away from one core source of funding, weADAPT has not been constrained by any small group of interests, short project timeframes and narrow project deliverables, but has remained diverse, inclusive and continuous over time.

So 10 years after we started building weADAPT what can we say? It's been quite the journey; one of experimentation and collaboration guided by a bold vision! In many ways we've seen our framing of adaptation validated, with an increasing focus on decision-making, actor-oriented approaches, and the integration of climate information into adaptation processes becoming widespread. We've seen big strides in the field of knowledge brokering and its application to climate adaptation, and we've followed the COP negotiations from the nadir of Copenhagen to the milestone of Paris. We've been part of moving climate adaptation from theory to practice (and back again to enrich the theory based on practices).

We now stand on the cusp of the mobilization of significant international finance to help countries, sectors and cities adapt and build resilience.

To achieve this will require an extensive and ever-growing knowledge base and network of capable individuals and organizations, to which weADAPT has made and will continue to make a contribution, alongside and in partnership with many others. On a personal note, our involvement in building weADAPT, under the leadership of Tom Downing, Ruth Butterfield and Sukaina Bharwani, and together with an innovative and diverse set of collaborators, has inspired and motivated us both to complete doctoral degrees in the field of climate adaptation, so as to remain part of the cohort of people moving this work forward for another 10 years and beyond!

See how weADAPT has evolved:

a.) wikiAdapt in 2007

b.) In 2008 a collaboration with the Google Foundation led to integration of case studies and lessons learned with Google Earth.

c.) In 2010, the introduction of Google maps enabled a more flexible user interface.

d.) Integration of climate data alongside adaptation projects was introduced in 2011.

e.) The redesigned homepage in 2012.

f.) The redesigned homepage today!

References

Smith, B., Bharwani, S., Taylor, A., Rastall, M., Coll Besa, M. and Devisscher, T. (2013) Learning across locales, organisations and networks - The weADAPT experience. weADAPT Briefing Note. https://www.weadapt.org/knowledge-base/innovative-icts-for-communicating-climate-risk/the-weadapt-experience