

With hindsight and foresight, what needs to be done differently for climate action? Directors reflect on halfway through our critical decade for climate action

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During the Critical Decade for Climate Action Conference, hosted by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia (UEA), climate experts gathered to showcase evidence-based ideas and critically evaluate opportunities for climate action. This briefing note serves as a summary of Session 12 on Wednesday 10 September 2025.

The Tyndall Centre, founded in 2000, is the first interdisciplinary, multi-University, multi-Research Council Institution, as far as we know. These characteristics are now commonplace and everyday in UK and European research. At that time, the UK's emission reduction ambition was a 60 per cent reduction in CO₂. Much of our public, policy and media engagement was 'climate change its happening, we all need to be thinking about it'. In this session, some senior members discuss what they would have done differently in the context of climate research for policy and our critical decade for climate action, and they highlight some of their top tips for early and mid-career researchers – the people who are the research directors of the future. What did the Tyndall Centre get right, where has it fallen short, and what lessons guide the future?

Professor Mike Hulme, Tyndall's founding director, emphasised the formative role PhD students played in building the Centre's success — and continue to play today. He also highlighted the 'three things we didn't get right.' (1) 'Great science, great interdisciplinary science, means little if you can't win the political argument.' He argued the Centre had overvalued evidence as a lever for social and political change. (2) 'We didn't have or didn't seek a sufficient understanding of how and why change happens in societies: especially the dynamics of change in the non-western world and in non-democratic countries'. (3) 'We overweighted the significance of a changing climate in determining the future well-being of the world at large.' He highlighted how context matters that climate change is a relative risk, not an absolute one. He compared the year 2000, when Tyndall was founded, with 2025, where wars, democratic fragility, social media, and the uncontrolled rise of AI complicate the climate challenge. But Hulme also encouraged a 'glass half full' perspective: emissions are now flattening and declining, catastrophic warming scenarios have receded, and awareness of adaptation has grown dramatically.

Professor Kevin Anderson reflected on whose voices shaped the Centre, expressing regret that he didn't push for the Global South to be more meaningfully included from the outset. For many communities, climate change is not abstract but 'a lived, suffered, and dying experience.' He argued inclusion must go far beyond tokenism, calling for greater empathy and recognition that vulnerable communities are intertwined with ours. He also highlighted structural inequalities: the difference between driving a large car, flying business class, or living in a larger house results in vastly unequal carbon footprints, even among people with otherwise similar lives. 'Our efforts shouldn't be a swap from one business as usual to another,' Anderson warned. We should rather drive systemic change than putting our energy into technical fixes that primarily benefit the wealthy.

Professor Corinne Le Quéré chose to start off with achievements. Tyndall was among the first to focus on solutions, interdisciplinarity, and co-design with stakeholders. It also contributed to the science behind

climate change, and with that, bringing it and Net Zero into the public eye. The research by Tyndall, and the wider community, also laid the foundation for us to shift trajectories away from a worst-case, 4–5°C warming scenario. However, she also highlighted we wrongfully focused on delivering the perfect transition: ‘The world is messy, it’s chaotic, it’s ugly, it’s opportunistic.’ Looking ahead, she was clear in her message: ‘I think that in the next 25 years, we need to focus on implementation, implementation, implementation!’ For Le Quéré, the task is to create conditions that make the right choices accessible and attractive, and to nurture the next generation of researchers. ‘You are the Tyndall Centre, and you are the research community and the thought leaders of tomorrow.’

Professor Lorraine Whitmarsh MBE underscored the centrality of the social sciences. She argued the research community has too often treated people as barriers rather than as agents of change. ‘There has been a failure to leverage people power ... people are absolutely critical to fast-tracking and accelerating change on climate change.’ Whitmarsh called for a sharper focus on demand, on designing upstream measures that remove barriers to behaviour change, and on doing so in ways that reduce inequality. Scientists, she noted, remain among the most trusted voices, carrying both privilege and responsibility. She ended with a quote by Nigel Topping: ‘Instead of focusing on being right, let’s focus on doing something.’

Across the discussion, speakers also shared advice for early-career researchers. They stressed the value of building strong support networks, of being honest and bold in communicating results, and of remembering that working on solutions is not only good for society but also for researchers’ own mental health. Early-career researchers were encouraged to lead with integrity, find good collaborators, and to have the courage to push debates forward.

With the Tyndall Centre entering its next 25 years, and a new, equally decisive decade, it is ready to be guided by lessons from the past and clear-eyed about the challenges ahead.