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## Analysis of the Organizational Management Model and Research Development Mechanism of the Stockholm Environment Institute (Postprint)

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### Abstract

**Purpose/Significance:** This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the management and research mechanisms of the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), a world-class environmental think tank, to provide references and lessons for the development of think tanks in China. **[Methodology/Process]** Through web-based investigation of SEI, this paper examines its organizational management model and structure, personnel composition, research topic setting, product system, quality control system, and research development strategy, and summarizes the characteristics of its management and research mechanisms. **[Results/Conclusion]** SEI possesses specialized and internationalized human resources, an efficient research organization model, forward-looking topic selection and whole-process quality control mechanisms, and a rich and diversified product system, which hold important reference value for the construction and development of think tanks in China. Chinese think tanks, especially environmental think tanks, should learn from these characteristics to improve their organizational management mechanisms, emphasize international cooperation and collaborative research, enhance think tank product quality, enrich their product systems, and thereby elevate their influence across multiple dimensions.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

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Analysis of the Organizational Management Model and Research Development Mechanism of the Stockholm Environment Institute

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## Abstract

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**Keywords:** think tank; environmental think tank; management mechanism; research mechanism; decision-making; influence

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## 1 Introduction

As energy resources become increasingly strained and climate change pressures continue to mount, global environmental and development issues have become more prominent. Frequent natural disasters and extreme weather events have caused tremendous economic losses and threats to human life, while the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 has once again sounded the alarm for human social development. In this context of unprecedented global changes in a century, the role of environmental think tanks cannot be ignored in addressing complex and critical questions such as how to slow the deteriorating trend of ecological environments, how to coordinate environmental, economic, and social development, and how to advance international negotiations and collaborative governance on global issues. In fact, renowned environmental think tanks such as the Stockholm Environment Institute, the World Resources Institute, and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research have continuously exerted decision-making influence by actively conducting policy research and deeply participating in global environmental governance, becoming important emerging forces shaping international agendas on climate negotiations and action, biodiversity, and sustainable development [1]. How to deepen the construction of environmental think tanks is a new issue for China to better participate in global climate governance under new circumstances.

The Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) is an international non-profit policy research organization established by the Swedish government in 1989. With a history of over 30 years, SEI is committed to providing knowledge to address environmental problems affecting human development and well-being. By building bridges between science and policy and practice in the environment and development fields, SEI supports decision-making and promotes sustainable development worldwide [2]. Its research spans natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences, emphasizing interdisciplinary approaches and highlighting the need to propose strong strategic policy recommendations from new perspectives.

SEI maintains a stable ranking among global think tanks, consistently placing among the top two environmental think tanks worldwide in the “Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” published by the University of Pennsylvania’s Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, and ranking first globally in the environmental field in 2019 [3]. As a premier global environmental think tank, SEI has for many years adhered to values of internationalization, independence, objectivity, and interdisciplinary collaboration, combining science with decision-making to deeply participate in international agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, playing a global role in climate change negotiations, sustainable development, and international cooperation. This paper takes SEI as a case study, conducting web-based and literature investigations to analyze the characteristics of its management and research mechanisms, with the aim of providing possible references for the construction of environmental think tanks in China.

## 2.1 Organizational Management Model and Structure

SEI’s global management architecture consists of a Board of Directors, an Executive Team, regional centers, a Global Management Committee, a Global Research Committee, and a Science Advisory Council [4]. Global management adopts a vertical-centralized and horizontal-decentralized model. Vertically, it employs an executive director responsibility system under the leadership of the Board. The executive director manages the Global Management Committee and the Executive Team. Since its founding in 1989, SEI has emphasized global expansion, establishing headquarters and institutes in Europe and North America from the outset, and subsequently setting up centers in Tallinn (1992), Oxford (2002), Asia (2004), Africa (2008), and Latin America (2018). This has created a horizontal network of seven regional centers across major global regions, each led by a center director [Figure 1: see original paper] [5].

The Board of Directors, appointed by the Swedish government, determines SEI’s overall objectives, plans, and programs, as well as important issues related to organizational, financial, administrative, and information activities. The Executive Team is the decision-making body, providing overall guidance for SEI’s governance, strategy, and operations, and monitoring and evaluating progress

toward strategic objectives and key performance requirements defined in long-term strategies and annual work plans. Center directors are responsible for the daily management of SEI's various centers and offices. The Global Management Committee is the primary management advisory body, supporting the executive director in planning, implementing, controlling, and supervising the development, management, and activities of each institute, while also supporting center directors in strategic and long-term development of each center. The Global Research Committee determines priority areas for SEI's core-funded research, creates space and opportunities for research innovation, and is responsible for internal quality processes including peer review and ethical standards. The Science Advisory Council, established in 2012, comprises leading international researchers who provide strategic guidance on research priorities and quality, reporting to the Board of Directors [6].

As shown in SEI's organizational structure, the institute adopts a corporate-style, relatively flat operational structure similar to renowned global think tanks such as the RAND Corporation and the Brookings Institution. The Board selects the executive director and management team, who manage administrative staff and academic research teams with clear rights and responsibilities. The establishment of regional centers for separate management, with center directors exercising comprehensive management, creates a relatively flat organizational structure. Most non-profit, non-partisan independent think tanks adopt flat corporate structures because their internal researchers often participate out of interest or voluntarily, and the flat architecture grants members greater autonomy, fully mobilizing their enthusiasm and creativity while facilitating cross-disciplinary collaboration to address complex environmental issues. However, this also requires think tank managers to possess high-quality expertise and rich management experience. Some managers not only have strong professional knowledge but also senior management experience and have served in other international organizations, government agencies, foundations, and non-profit organizations. This experience facilitates the development of long-term partnerships with other organizations and a better understanding of decision-makers' needs. Advanced management expertise also promotes information communication between organizations, fully mobilizes the enthusiasm of non-profit organization members, and coordinates cross-sectoral collaboration to solve complex environmental problems.

## 2.2 Personnel Composition

High-quality human resources are fundamental to think tank output. SEI has a diversified, international, and professional global team, currently employing 333 staff members [7] located worldwide. Professional backgrounds are evident from the management level to the execution level. Board Chair Kerstin Niblaeus previously served as Director-General for Environment and Health at the Council of the European Union. Executive Director Måns Nilsson joined SEI in 1995 and is also an adjunct professor of Environmental Strategic Analysis and Policy

at the Royal Institute of Technology. Members of the Executive Team and directors of various centers are experts in environmental or environmental policy fields, some with senior management experience or previous positions in foundations. Members of the Global Management Committee are selected from the Executive Team and center directors, while the Global Research Committee currently has nine members also elected from other management teams. This cross-appointment approach facilitates internal information dissemination and exchange to some extent. The Science Advisory Council currently has 11 members, all professors from renowned universities in environmental-related fields, with professional backgrounds primarily in environmental science, geography, environmental health, energy, and sustainable development. This reasonably structured network of external experts ensures the scientific validity and forward-looking nature of think tank perspectives and research topics.

Think tanks are typical knowledge-intensive organizations, and talent resources are the foundation for producing high-quality intellectual products and constitute core competitiveness. Current global environmental issues are increasingly characterized by complexity, competitiveness, and professionalism. SEI's high degree of staff internationalization, with employees spread across the globe, provides important support for its global influence. All staff are experts and scholars in environmental-related fields, ensuring the professionalism and scientific validity of research. This international, professional human resource team is a key factor enabling SEI to become a top-tier international environmental think tank.

### 3.1 Research Themes

SEI's research themes are relatively broad, centered on environment and sustainable development, with research questions radiating to economic and social development aspects. There are nine main research themes: climate, water, air, land, energy, governance, economics, gender, and health, basically covering all target areas of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each of these nine themes includes sub-themes focusing on current hot and difficult issues in environment and sustainable development. Around these themes, SEI currently focuses on seven research initiatives: Urban Health and Well-being, Pathways to a Bioeconomy, Carbon Barriers, Water Beyond Boundaries, Integrated Climate and Development Planning, Gridless Solutions, and Gender Equality, Social Equity and Poverty [8]. Currently, there are 154 ongoing projects covering key global regions including Asia, the Americas, Africa, and the Arctic. In addition to these regular research themes, SEI continuously enriches and expands its research themes through rapid and active responses to environmental and social emergencies. Taking the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic as an example, after the outbreak, SEI quickly organized global forces to conduct countermeasure research, providing insights and analysis for decision-makers and frontline personnel [9]. The research focused on climate and economic risks brought by the pandemic and equitable economic recovery post-pandemic, covering topics such

as COVID-19 and economic recovery, wild meat consumption, air pollution, urban green space, nature conservation, and climate finance. Since the outbreak, SEI has continuously reported on and researched COVID-19, producing over 40 research reports, demonstrating strong emergency research organization capabilities on hot issues and emergencies.

Identifying, analyzing, and solving problems is the mission of think tanks. As a top environmental think tank, SEI consistently adheres to problem-oriented research topic selection, taking the resolution and progress of human environmental problems as its criterion. Most research projects propose solutions to specific problems. For example, SEI's "Gridless Solutions Initiative" [10] aims to solve the problem of providing basic services such as electricity, sanitation, and freshwater to geographically isolated areas, conflict zones, and countries with fragile social institutions. The COVID-19 research module [9] is dedicated to providing solutions for post-pandemic economic recovery and equitable climate transition.

### 3.2 Research Organization Model

SEI's research organization model can be summarized as a linear-plus-grid research organization. The linear model reduces management levels, with unified leadership from the Board and advice from the Science Advisory Council to determine research projects, topics, and future strategic directions. This promotes information exchange between organizations, improves research operation efficiency, and reduces the number of managers, thereby lowering research funding and costs. Additionally, SEI's research organization exhibits grid characteristics of the blockchain economy era. Most regional centers are co-established with local universities or companies, responsible for formulating regional research development strategies, building partnerships, participating in global project research, and influencing local sustainable development policies. Taking SEI Asia as an example, the SEI Asia Center in Bangkok has a diverse team of multinational experts and is co-established with a subsidiary of Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. Its main research areas focus on gender and social equity, climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, water security and integrated water resources management, agricultural transition, renewable energy, and urbanization, working consistently within Asian realities and contexts.

This global research network provides great convenience for the accuracy and timeliness of SEI's information and intelligence, supporting internal and external team collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas between teams, which facilitates the formation and refinement of innovative perspectives and enhances the scientific validity and innovation of in-depth research at different global and regional scales and contexts. SEI's innovative research organization model is a key factor in its ability to become a world-class environmental think tank. Its linear-plus-grid research organization model improves research operation efficiency while strengthening team collaboration and intellectual exchange and innovation. The grid organization characteristics provide SEI with a global re-

search network and partnership system, ensuring timely and accurate resources and information. Top environmental think tanks all emphasize the construction of global research networks. For example, the World Resources Institute (WRI) has offices in 10 countries and related research projects in 60 countries [11]. This distributed grid structure not only provides timely and accurate intelligence information but also creates opportunities to participate in local decision-making [4], facilitating the establishment of long-term partnerships with local institutions and conducting comparative research across different regions, thereby enhancing the think tank' s comprehensive global influence.

### 3.3 Research Development Strategy

To ensure continuous enhancement of influence and sustainable development, SEI formulates a comprehensive development strategy every four years, closely focusing on the organization' s goals and mission to guide research areas and development plans for the next four years. In its 2015-2019 strategic plan, SEI stated its commitment to sustainable development research starting in 2015 and formulated eight research initiatives to achieve its goals of promoting sustainable development and becoming a global leader in environmental knowledge through scientific research, policy engagement, and effective communication [Figure 2: see original paper]. shows SEI' s basic data from 2015-2019.

In the strategic plan for 2020-2024, SEI focuses on seven key initiatives, considering gender, poverty, and human rights issues as critical, mainstreaming research on gender equality, social equity, and poverty projects for the next four years. SEI emphasizes its participation in global policies and practices at all levels, focusing on the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, global climate governance, sustainable development finance, biodiversity and ecosystem agendas, and ocean agendas to influence decision-making at all levels by changing agendas, enhancing capacity, and improving policies to reduce climate risks, promote sustainable resource use, enhance ecosystem resilience, improve health and well-being, and advance the 17 Sustainable Development Goals [Figure 3: see original paper].

From SEI' s development, it increasingly emphasizes building global partnerships and pays greater attention to the scientific nature of research results, targeting major global environmental and social issues and hot topics. From the evolution of SEI' s strategy, its overall strategic planning goals have become increasingly clear, evolving from generally using organizational mission as the overall development goal to specifying the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Research areas have transitioned from focusing on environmental governance to social development, recognizing gender, poverty, and human rights issues as key to sustainable development and paying greater attention to social issues in sustainable development. There is also greater emphasis on participation in international policies and deep involvement in global governance, focusing on global agendas such as sustainable development finance and global climate governance. The think tank attribute of combining scientific research with im-

proved decision-making runs throughout, with strategic planning keeping SEI's focus firmly on its organizational mission.

## 4.1 Product System

Think tank products are the explicit manifestation of think tank strength and the display of research results [12]. Over 30 years of development, SEI has continuously improved its product system with diverse outcome formats, including books, journal articles, conference papers, discussion briefs, fact sheets, other publications, proceedings, project reports, external report chapters, and annual reports. As of September 28, 2020, SEI had published 2,562 research outcomes, with journal articles (989), research reports (923), book chapters (204), and briefs (195) accounting for the largest proportions [13]. In addition to these formal publications, SEI also provides expert perspectives and maintains a press room to report important events and news in relevant fields [14]. Simultaneously, SEI provides consulting services to the Swedish government, the United Nations, the European Commission, the Green Climate Fund, and others, with products primarily being high-quality strategic research outcomes [15] in the form of consultation responses, strategic plans, and research reports. SEI emphasizes using new media formats to release latest developments, express viewpoints, and influence public opinion, operating multiple social media accounts including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn to expand its influence across multiple dimensions.

SEI's rich and diverse product system can be divided into self-selected topics and commissioned topics based on different research themes. This diverse product range enables SEI to establish partnerships at different levels, from international and national decision-makers to civil society organizations, businesses, and households, exerting decision-making influence at various levels and securing the broadest possible support. At the international influence level, SEI's self-selected topic products improve formal and informal policy agendas and international agreements or treaties, raising environmental awareness and influencing the attitudes, perspectives, and norms of leaders at different levels. In terms of policy consultation, commissioned topic products support changes in decision-making, influence decision-making processes, practices, strategies, and plans, and affect actors in public policy, finance, business, and resource management fields through policy advisory reports and consultation responses.

### 4.2.1 Research Process Quality Control

The quality of think tank products determines whether they can be applied to decision-making and exert influence. SEI attaches great importance to product quality, ensuring high quality through a full-process quality control system that makes specific requirements and regulations for each stage of think tank research [Figure 4: see original paper]. SEI stipulates that topics should be innovative and applicable and should respond to new challenges. SEI's research

questions focus on thorny and critical issues in current environmental and social development, responding promptly to new situations and challenges in the economy and society. For example, after the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, SEI quickly activated an emergency research mechanism, matching special funds and establishing dedicated research teams to conduct countermeasure research. In terms of information collection, research must collect the most original data to ensure accuracy, integrating and evaluating data. Research methods must be systematic, focus on the big picture, and investigate, interpret, and deepen understanding of complex issues. Research must be scientifically evidence-based, objective, and independent, without preconceived positions. The research process must involve stakeholders through participatory scenario development, collaborative production processes, workshops, different types of dialogues, and network training to fully understand user needs. Research products should use visualization tools to make results more vivid, accessible, and easily understood by decision-makers. Additionally, SEI publishes high-quality peer-reviewed articles to ensure scientific validity of outcomes.

#### 4.2.2 Supervision and Guidance

To ensure product quality, in addition to specific quality control regulations for each stage of the think tank research process, the Science Advisory Council, Global Research Committee, Ethics Review Committee, and research guidelines provide supervision and guidance from different levels and perspectives. The Science Advisory Council provides strategic guidance for SEI, helping to determine priority topics and conduct quality supervision and control. The Ethics Review Committee ensures that SEI's ethical guidance is put into action, responsible for developing ethical review plans and ethical guidelines, setting codes of ethical conduct for all staff to follow, and determining how to incorporate ethical considerations into the design and conduct of SEI research [22]. Research guidelines provide practical guidance and clear processes to enable individuals, teams, and centers to work effectively, covering best practices for dissemination activities such as social media, written publications, and digital content, as well as proposal writing [23]. Additionally, SEI cultivates an organizational culture and ethical standards that adhere to integrity, collaboration, and respect [24].

### 5 Implications for Think Tank Construction in China

The world today is undergoing unprecedented changes in a century, and the complex research issues of our time pose strategic missions and tasks for think tanks, as well as strategic space for China's new think tanks to play their role [25]. China faces increasingly complex environmental issues that urgently require intellectual support from think tanks, and China's environmental think tank development faces unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Environmental think tanks are also important platforms for demonstrating China's commitment to sustainable development, green and low-carbon transformation, and climate governance, as well as for showcasing China's image as a major

country, fulfilling major country responsibilities, increasing China's discourse power in international resource and environmental issues and affairs, and enhancing national soft power [1]. Currently, Western environmental think tanks occupy the high ground of international discourse and public opinion, while Chinese environmental think tanks rarely have significant international influence. Most Chinese environmental think tanks are internal reference-type think tanks affiliated with the government and universities, with only a few weak civil society think tanks and low internationalization levels, resulting in a significant gap compared with Western think tanks. As China's international status rises and the global initiative of building a community with a shared future for mankind is proposed, China urgently needs first-class environmental think tanks to provide suggestions for government decision-making and global environmental development, enhancing China's global influence. Due to the global nature of environmental issues, environmental think tanks also have global and complex characteristics. Taking current world-class think tanks as references and serving China's and the world's sustainable resource utilization and environmental sustainable development requires fully understanding and learning from the successful experiences of developed countries' environmental think tanks in organizational structure, personnel composition, funding acquisition, operation models, and product system construction [26]. Compared with the century-long development of Western think tanks, SEI has only a 30-year history, but its think tank construction offers many lessons with important reference significance and value for China's think tank construction, especially independent external environmental think tanks.

### 5.1 Improve Organizational Management Mechanisms

As a large-scale international think tank, SEI's organizational structure is similar to a corporate model and relatively flat, facilitating efficient management and independent operation. China's environmental think tanks mainly include technical support units directly serving government environmental decision-making, units in the natural and social science research systems, and university research units [27], most of which operate according to academic institution models with complex hierarchical structures and low efficiency. Independent, non-partisan, non-profit think tank research institutions should flatten their organizational mechanisms as much as possible to stimulate maximum member enthusiasm, reduce unnecessary interest demands, and prevent corruption. Simultaneously, they should cultivate high-quality think tank managers, experts, and outstanding researchers in relevant fields to lay the foundation for effective management and high-quality output. They should also emphasize think tank organizational culture construction, which helps members follow scientific evidence-based standards and ethical norms toward common values and goals.

## 5.2 Emphasize International Cooperation and Collaborative Research

SEI has branches on five continents and extensively seeks partnerships globally, forming a distributed think tank research network. This distributed yet collaborative research organization model facilitates timely and accurate intelligence gathering and establishes lasting and stable partnerships. Diversified team organization facilitates intellectual collision and integration innovation between internal, external, and different regional research teams, enhancing the scientific validity and comprehensiveness of think tank decision-making and improving research operation efficiency. Environmental issues are global problems; no country can stand alone. Global climate change, biodiversity loss, ozone depletion, air pollution, and COVID-19 are common challenges facing humanity. Environmental think tanks should establish research intelligence networks at global and broad regional scales to comprehensively enhance regional influence, international visibility, and discourse power.

## 5.3 Emphasize Comprehensive Quality Improvement of Products

Think tank product quality control and management are key links in think tank construction [28] and critical for think tank outcomes to exert influence. Only high-quality, applicable, and understandable research results will be adopted by decision-makers and thus play their practical role. Product quality is related to every process of think tank research, and quality control must run through the entire think tank research process. Guidelines and specialized committees should be established to guide and review each process stage, from topic selection, analysis, delivery, to dissemination, ensuring quality control throughout. SEI's quality control system provides valuable lessons for China's think tank construction.

## 5.4 Enrich Think Tank Product System and Establish Multi-level Communication Channels

A diversified product system helps think tanks disseminate ideas more comprehensively. As a world-renowned environmental think tank, SEI has developed a mature, rich, and diversified product system over its long development, using advanced new media for dissemination, which facilitates multi-level influence enhancement. Chinese think tanks should learn from the product systems of world-class foreign think tanks, creating diversified products for different audiences: books, papers, research reports, consultation reports, briefs, expert commentaries, field news, etc., and widely disseminating them through traditional and emerging communication channels. Diversified communication channels can exert influence at different levels from international to public and guide public opinion, occupying the high ground of public discourse.

## 5.5 Deeply Participate in Global Environmental Governance System and Build International Influence

Currently, issues such as global climate governance, sustainable development agendas, and ecosystem and biodiversity protection are becoming increasingly complex. The trend of integrating environmental governance policies with environmental science and international cooperation is strengthening, and competition among countries for discourse power and rule-making power in global climate governance and other environmental and development issues is intensifying. The subjects of global environmental governance are diffusing from national governments to non-state actors such as cities, enterprises, and think tanks, with obvious trends toward collaborative governance. Environmental think tanks are important participants and collaborative forces in global environmental governance, exerting increasingly profound decision-making influence on the international stage. China is an important contributor and leader in global environmental and ecological governance. Chinese environmental think tanks should play supportive roles in knowledge, information, and intelligence, strengthening research on forward-looking, holistic, and complex issues, playing active roles in global environmental governance, and building international influence, thereby promoting the formation of a more scientific, reasonable, and just global environmental governance system.

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## Author Contributions

Zhang Chunhua: Drafting and revising the manuscript;

Sun Yuling: Topic selection and framework development, guidance and revision of the manuscript.

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