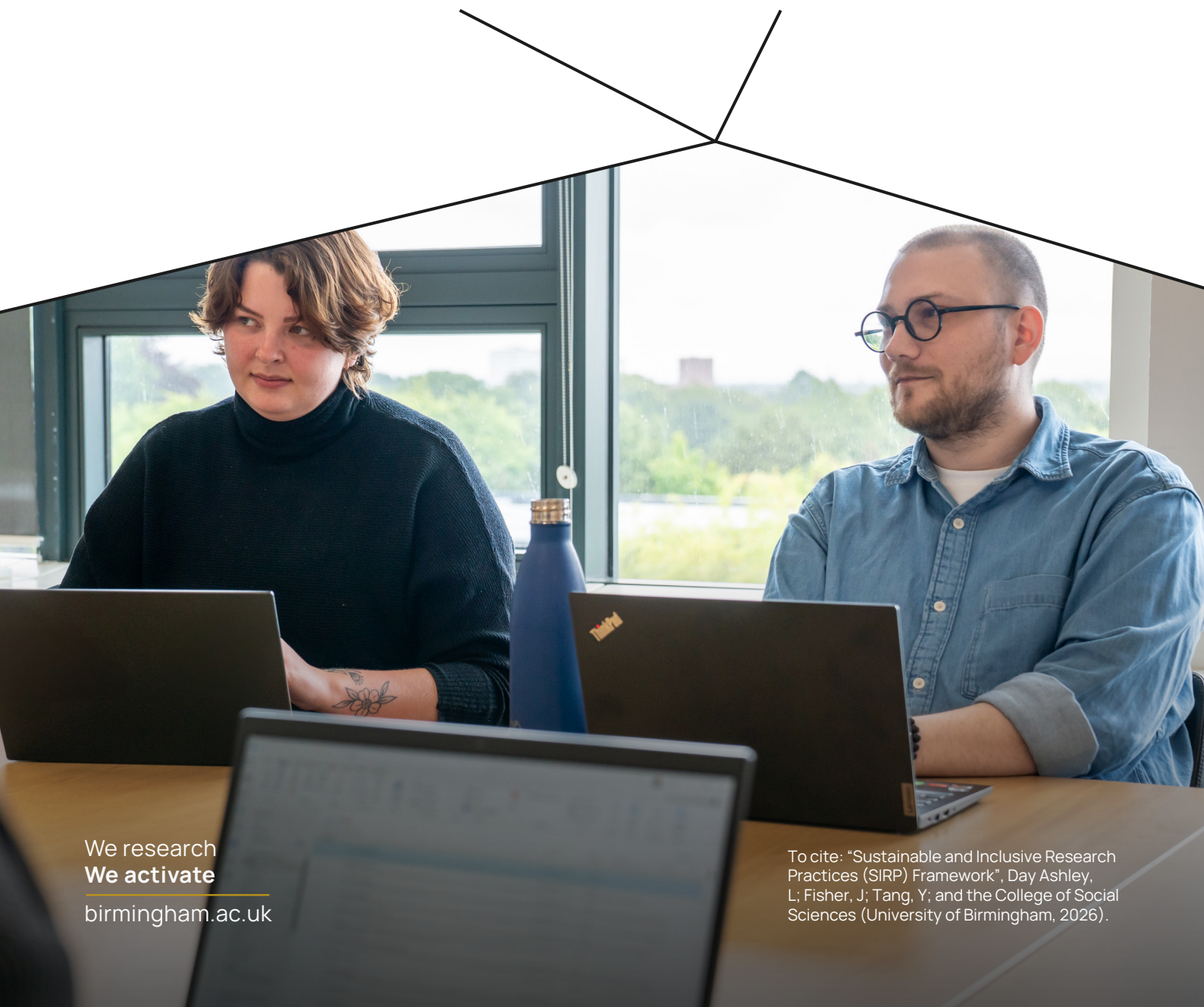




UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Sustainable and Inclusive Research Practices (SIRP) Framework

2026



We research
We activate
[birmingham.ac.uk](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

To cite: "Sustainable and Inclusive Research Practices (SIRP) Framework", Day Ashley, L.; Fisher, J.; Tang, Y.; and the College of Social Sciences (University of Birmingham, 2026).

About this framework

This academic framework has been developed as a conceptual and practical foundation for the SIRP approach and should be read alongside the accompanying toolkit. It comprises a quick-read Executive Summary style account of the SIRP framework, followed by a longer-read Appendix which sets out its academic and scholarly foundations. Rather than presenting a fixed or definitive model, SIRP is intended as a living theoretical approach, one that will continue to evolve through application, reflection, research and dialogue with diverse users and communities.

The framework emerged through a collaborative process that drew on the collective expertise of the College of Social Sciences' sustainability leadership team, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion/ Belonging (EDI/B) colleagues, and postgraduate researchers, alongside critical discussion of the strengths and limitations of existing sustainability concepts and frameworks. These conversations identified several guiding principles that underpin SIRP: a commitment to an intersectional understanding of sustainability and inclusion; an openness to multiple perspectives, knowledges and experiences;

recognition that meaningful change requires continual learning and adaptation; and a commitment to actively seeking and incorporating feedback from those who engage with the framework in practice.

Readers are therefore encouraged to view this framework not as a static set of propositions, but as an evolving resource that gains depth, relevance and explanatory power through ongoing use, critique and refinement. We also welcome feedback on the framework, which will be reviewed periodically. Please email any thoughts you have on it to sustainability@contacts.bham.ac.uk.



Sustainable and inclusive research practice framework

Sustainability and inclusivity are interconnected features of good research practice and are shaped through the relationships that research creates. Sustainability and inclusivity research practice (SIRP) means designing and delivering research that is environmentally responsible, socially just and practically liveable, by considering how benefits, burdens and participation are distributed across people, places and time. The SIRP framework provides a shared structure to guide the design, conduct and review of sustainable and inclusive research across the research lifecycle.

In this framework, sustainability refers to socially, environmentally and economically just change that enable both human and natural systems to flourish. This refers to both the systemic conditions of research, and the decisions made by researchers about research relationships and practices that allow research to be conducted responsibly over time. Inclusivity refers to the practices, relationships and conditions that enable people to participate meaningfully, safely and fairly in research. Inclusion may describe who is involved, while inclusivity describes how research processes are designed and delivered so that participation, recognition and benefit are made possible. Informed by Kumar's Soil,

Soul and Society (2013), SIRP adopts a relational approach. It starts from the view that research is shaped by relationships with the natural world, with researchers and others involved in research, and with wider communities, institutions and social structures. SIRP connects environmental responsibility with the social and relational conditions that make research fair, ethical and sustainable over time. It also asks how shifts towards more sustainable research practice can avoid displacing costs onto less powerful groups and can support fairer, less extractive and

more regenerative research systems, resonating with just transition thinking.

The framework is organised around three connected domains: Planet, People, and Systems. SIRP highlights that sustainability and inclusivity are often mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives. Research practices that reduce environmental impacts while fostering meaningful engagement, accessibility and shared benefit can often advance both sustainability and inclusivity goals. Figure 1 presents the relational model of the SIRP framework.

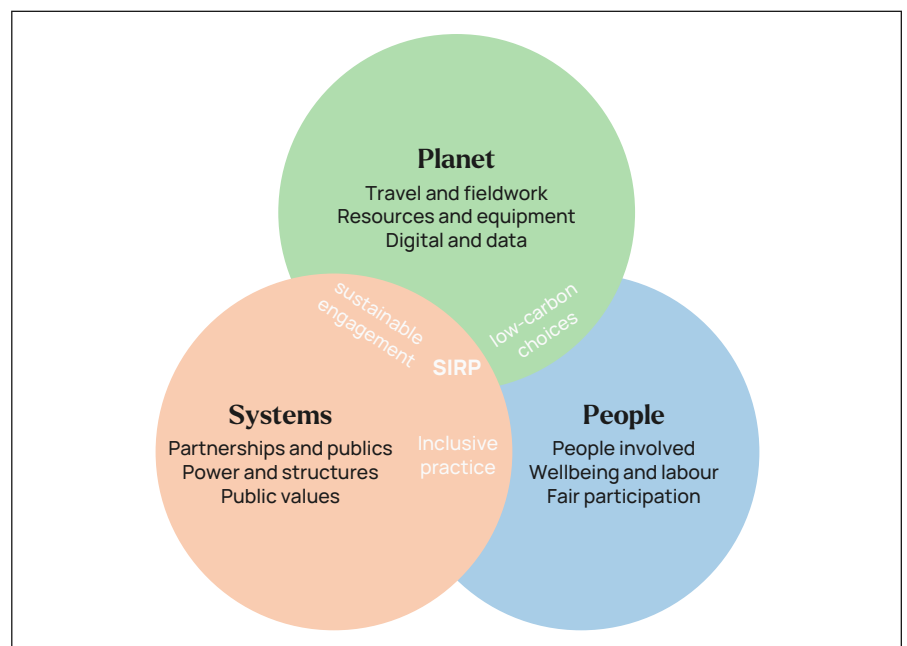


Figure 1: A relational model of the SIRP framework

SIRP is structured around the interaction of Planet, People and Systems. Planet refers to the ecological relationships and environmental impacts of research. People refer to those directly involved in or affected by the research process, including researchers, participants, collaborators, students, professional services staff and partners. Systems refers

to community engagement as well as the wider social and institutional structures, power relations and knowledge hierarchies through which research is shaped. The specific focus and guiding questions for each domain are set out in Table 1.

The overlapping areas show where Planet, People and Systems come into dialogue in practice.

These intersections draw attention to low-carbon choices, sustainable engagement and inclusive practice as connected areas of good research practice. They support decisions about research design, methods, travel, resources, data, partnerships, engagement, dissemination and review across the research lifecycle. These intersections are summarised in Table 2.

Domain	Focus	Key questions
Planet	Ecological impact, resource use and waste reduction	■ How does this research affect the natural world through its use of resources and generation of waste? ■ Where can this research reduce, replace or avoid environmentally intensive activities, resources or methods? ■ How will environmental impacts and reduction measures be monitored, recorded and reviewed across the research lifecycle?
People	Fairness, wellbeing, labour and participation	■ Is this research fair and practically liveable for those involved? ■ How can the research process be ethical, equitable, accessible and inclusive? ■ How will people's time, expertise, labour and needs be recognised, supported and reviewed?
Systems	Relationships with wider public and communities, social and institutional structures and power relationships	■ Who benefits from this research, and how are relationships with communities, partners, institutions and wider publics shaped? ■ How can the research create accessible and lasting value beyond the immediate project? ■ How can engagement be meaningful, reciprocal and non-extractive?

Table 1: SIRP domains and guiding questions

Intersection	Implications
Planet–People	Low carbon choices that also protect inclusion, opportunity and research quality
Planet–Systems	Sustainable engagement that considers environmental effects, institutional structures, community relationships and enduring public value
People–Systems	Inclusive practice that supports fair participation, recognition and shared decision making while addressing institutional structures and power relations

Table 2: Intersections within the SIRP Framework

While SIRP emphasises the connections between sustainability and inclusivity, tensions may arise where environmental, financial, ethical and inclusion responsibilities generate competing demands across different research contexts. These tensions show why research decisions need to be made transparently and proportionately, with attention to who benefits, who carries additional burdens and what harms may be displaced.

Researchers and institutions can use a set of reflective questions to

assess whether a decision supports sustainable and inclusive research practice: What consequences may follow from this decision, and for whom? How could harms, burdens or exclusion be reduced? How will the decision and any trade-offs be justified, recorded and reviewed? These questions help researchers and institutions assess whether sustainability and inclusivity are being considered together, and whether any trade-offs have been made visible, justified and subject to review.

The SIRP framework is intended to support ongoing reflection and should be adapted and refined as research contexts, institutional priorities and sector expectations change. Feedback from piloting, sector engagement and practical use will inform the continuing development of the framework and toolkit. A fuller account of the foundations of SIRP is provided in the Appendix.



Appendix. Conceptual and scholarly foundations of the SIRP framework

In this appendix, we set out the academic foundations of the SIRP framework. We define its key concepts, reflect on existing approaches and the gaps that have informed its development, and outline the relational approach underpinning the framework. We also explain how sustainable and inclusive research practices are understood across Planet, People and Systems, and consider where these practices align and where tensions or trade-offs may arise.



A1. Definitions

We begin by clarifying the key concepts used in the SIRP framework. Sustainability and inclusivity serve as the principal organising concepts, while justice and responsibility provide the normative basis for assessing how research practices and decisions distribute benefits and burdens, enable participation and assign accountability.

Sustainability

We recognise that sustainability has been defined in different ways across academic and policy contexts. The influential Brundtland (1987) definition describes sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Rio+20 subsequently reaffirmed the importance of integrating the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, while the UN 2030 Agenda organised these dimensions through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intended to be integrated and indivisible (United Nations, 2012, 2015). Despite these developments, dominant approaches to sustainable development have been criticised for remaining anthropocentric, treating the natural environment primarily in relation to human needs rather than recognising the flourishing of natural systems in their own right, and providing an imprecise account of intergenerational timescales and responsibilities (Adelman, 2018; Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019; Tikly, 2020).

In this framework, we draw particularly on justice-oriented understandings of sustainability. Sustainability has an inherently

normative dimension concerned with what should be sustained, for whom, across what timescales and through what distribution of benefits, burdens and risks (Stumpf et al., 2015). Following Tikly (2020), we understand sustainability as socially, environmentally and economically just change that enables both human and natural systems to flourish. This refers to both the systemic conditions of research, and the decisions made by researchers about research relationships and practices that allow research to be conducted responsibly over time.

In research practice, the environmental dimension of sustainability concerns the ecological relationships, dependencies and impacts of research activity, including environmental harm, resource use and relationships with land, ecosystems and animals. The social dimension concerns the human, relational and institutional conditions through which research takes place, including participation, wellbeing, recognition, fair working conditions and reciprocal relationships. The economic dimension concerns the responsible use and fair distribution of financial and material resources, including proportionate costs, reduced waste, fair compensation and sufficient investment to support participation and longer-term value.

Inclusivity

In this framework, inclusivity extends beyond demographic representation or the inclusion of particular groups in research samples, teams or events. Drawing on Morrow, Vandrevalla and Ross's account of inclusive research, inclusivity refers to the intentional

engagement of diverse voices, communities, perspectives and experiences across the full research lifecycle, including how research is governed, funded, conducted and connected to policy and practice (Morrow, Vandrevalla and Ross, 2025).

The distinction between inclusion and inclusivity matters here. Although the existing literature does not consistently distinguish between inclusion and inclusivity, Berlach and Chambers (2011) distinguish inclusion as the incorporation of non-dominant groups into an existing setting from inclusivity as their active participation within it. Comparatively, inclusivity serves more to capture the extent to which environments, practices and processes enable their meaningful participation. In SIRP, we use inclusion to refer to an outcome or status concerning whether particular people or groups are present, accepted, recognised and able to participate in relevant research activities and decisions (Dobusch, 2021). We use inclusivity to refer more specifically to how these forms of participation, recognition, influence and access to benefits are enabled and sustained across the research lifecycle.

The Inclusive Research Dimensions model presented by Morrow, Vandrevalla and Ross (2025) maps inclusive research across four interconnected areas: research funding and design, research environments and cultures, public and community engagement, and research practices. The model also includes cross-cutting attention to implementation and intersectional inequalities, with sub-components addressing issues such as workforce



diversity, equity in research careers, diverse participation, inclusive data practices and the inclusion of under-represented groups. We use these dimensions as a source for identifying practical considerations and actions within SIRP. This means considering how research priorities are shaped, whose knowledge is recognised, who participates in decision-making, how research environments are structured, how participation is supported, how labour is recognised, how findings are shared and who benefits from research outcomes. In this sense, inclusivity builds on EDI commitments while focusing on the practices and conditions that enable meaningful, safe and equitable participation in research.

Justice and responsibility

Justice and responsibility provide the normative principles through which sustainability and inclusivity

are interpreted and applied within SIRP. Drawing on environmental justice scholarship, justice directs attention to the distribution of benefits, burdens and risks, participation in decision-making, and the recognition of different forms of knowledge and experience (Schlosberg, 2007). Responsible research and innovation literature frames responsibility as collective and future-oriented, requiring researchers, institutions, funders and other actors to anticipate potential consequences, reflect on research purposes and assumptions, engage relevant publics and stakeholders, and respond through research and governance decisions (Owen, Macnaghten and Stilgoe, 2012).

Together, these principles guide how sustainability and inclusivity are translated into research practice. Justice focuses attention on who

participates, whose knowledge and experience are recognised, and how benefits, burdens and risks are distributed. Responsibility focuses attention on how consequences are anticipated, how decisions and their underlying assumptions are examined and justified, and how practices are reviewed and revised. These principles are particularly relevant where social sustainability and inclusivity intersect around participation, recognition and the equitable distribution of research benefits and burdens (Boström, 2012). They provide the normative basis for the practical questions and actions developed across the framework.

A2. Existing frameworks and gaps

Existing policy and governance frameworks have made important progress in recognising sustainability and inclusive research practice as priorities for universities, research organisations and research systems, although these concerns have largely developed through separate agendas.

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a widely used global reference point, including within universities and research organisations. They operate as both a set of policy goals and a governance infrastructure through which sustainability priorities are defined, measured and coordinated through targets, indicators and reporting systems (Bandola-Gill, Grek and Tichenor, 2022). This makes a broad and complex agenda more governable, while also creating the risk of fragmented approaches and giving greater visibility to issues that can be readily quantified and reported.

Several models have sought to organise this broad agenda of the 17 SDGs into a smaller number of interconnected dimensions. The three-pillar model groups sustainability around environmental, social and economic dimensions, although its meaning and practical use are not always clearly defined (Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019). The SDG “wedding cake” model developed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre maps the 17 goals across three nested layers, with the biosphere forming the foundation for society and the economy embedded within society (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). This organisation connects ecological conditions, social development

and economic activity in ways that relate closely to the environmental, social and economic dimensions of the three-pillar model. Its nested structure makes the dependence of social and economic activity on ecological conditions more explicit and clarifies how the goals are connected across these dimensions. Within organisational and financial governance, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) models also group responsibilities into environmental, social and governance dimensions, although their primary purpose is to assess organisational performance and risk rather than to organise the SDGs as a whole (Gillan, Koch and Starks, 2021).

Within the research sector, UKRI's Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2025 to 2030 and the cross-sector Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice have strengthened expectations around environmental responsibility across research

activities, including travel, procurement, estates, infrastructure, equipment and resource use (UK Research and Innovation, 2025; Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice, 2024). At the same time, UKRI's EDI Strategy, Research England's EDI Action Plan and Advance HE's transformed Athena Swan Charter have encouraged institutions and funders to address representation, participation, accessibility, equality and inclusive working environments across research systems and career pathways (UK Research and Innovation, 2023; Research England, 2025; Advance HE, 2021).

The relationship between sustainability and inclusivity nevertheless remains underdeveloped. Environmental sustainability frameworks tend to focus on carbon reduction and operational efficiency, while EDI frameworks focus more on access,



representation and equality. These agendas are rarely brought into sustained dialogue. This separation creates both a conceptual and practical gap. A project may reduce travel emissions while increasing unpaid digital labour or limiting access for some groups. A funding scheme may promote international collaboration while reproducing unequal partnerships between institutions in the Global North and Global South. A university may meet EDI targets while maintaining workloads, career structures or assessment systems that make participation difficult for marginalised researchers. These examples demonstrate the need to consider sustainability and inclusivity as connected dimensions of research practice.

A related gap concerns the limited attention given to social sustainability within sustainable research agendas. Sustainability is frequently treated as a matter of environmental management, while the human and social conditions that make research possible, ethical and liveable over time receive less attention. These conditions include workload, career security, wellbeing, accessibility, recognition of labour, decision-making power and the relationships between researchers, participants, institutions and communities. A research system may reduce its carbon footprint while continuing to rely on precarious labour, unequal recognition, exclusionary cultures and extractive relationships with participants, communities or partners.

Research culture provides a useful foundation for addressing these gaps within the research sector and connecting sustainability with inclusivity. A good research culture is supportive, collaborative, creative and inclusive (Moran et al., 2020). It enables people to participate meaningfully, work in fair and

respectful conditions, receive recognition for their contributions and conduct research in ways that are ethical, responsible and sustainable over time. This focus directs attention to the everyday conditions, relationships and institutional practices through which research takes place. Recent sector developments, including the REF 2029 People, Culture and Environment Pilot Exercise Guidance and the UKRI-commissioned Research Culture Initiatives in the UK report, also indicate growing attention to the conditions under which research is conducted, supported, recognised and assessed (REF 2029, 2025; Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network and Vitae, 2024). Research culture therefore provides an important sector-based foundation for SIRP, while SIRP extends this agenda by connecting these human and institutional conditions more explicitly with environmental responsibility and the wider relationships through which research is conducted.

These gaps indicate the need for an approach that connects ecological responsibility with the human, institutional and social relationships through which research is produced. Satish Kumar's idea of Soil, Soul and Society provides one useful reference point by linking ecological responsibility, personal and relational wellbeing, and wider social relations (Kumar, 2013). Kumar presents these dimensions as interconnected. Soil represents the natural systems on which life depends and the responsibility to sustain and restore them. Soul connects reflection, wellbeing and care with responsibility towards the natural world, while Society extends these responsibilities to social relationships, justice, reciprocity and collective wellbeing. Although this model was not developed specifically as a research

governance framework, it offers a sensitising lens for understanding the connections between environmental conditions, human wellbeing and wider social relationships. Related forms of relational thinking have also gained recognition in contemporary academic and policy debates. For example, the Dasgupta Review (2021) emphasises humanity's dependence on nature and the interconnections between ecological, social and economic systems. These perspectives provide complementary relational reference points for understanding natural systems, human wellbeing and social activity as interdependent, while arising from different conceptual and policy contexts. The application of this relational perspective to SIRP is developed further in the following section.



A3. A relational approach

Building on these perspectives, we adopt a relational approach to sustainable and inclusive research practice. Drawing inspiration from *Soil, Soul and Society* (Kumar, 2013), we use these three interconnected dimensions to consider the relationships through which research takes place.

Soil draws attention to the relationship between research activity and the natural world, including resource use, travel, infrastructure and care for environmental conditions. Soul foregrounds the human experience of research, including reflection, wellbeing, care, dignity and the personal and institutional conditions through which research decisions are understood, negotiated and carried out. Society emphasises social relationships, justice, participation, reciprocity and responsibility towards wider communities. These dimensions inform the SIRP domains of Planet, People and Systems, whose terminology makes their application to research practice more explicit by connecting ecological relationships, human

experiences and wider social and institutional structures.

We begin from the view that research is shaped by relationships with the natural world, with the people involved in research, and with wider social and institutional contexts. We therefore understand sustainability as extending beyond environmental impacts and inclusivity as extending beyond representation. Both require attention to the quality of research relationships, including care, responsibility, reciprocity, participation, recognition and longer-term value. From this perspective, sustainable and inclusive research is research that attends to the relationships through which knowledge is produced. It seeks to reduce environmental harm, support the wellbeing and dignity of those involved, and contribute to more just and reciprocal social relationships. Good research culture provides the conditions through which these commitments can be supported in practice.

Within this framework, we understand sustainability and inclusivity as interconnected dimensions of research practice.

Environmental decisions shape who can participate in research, under what conditions and with what forms of support. Exclusionary practices can also generate waste, duplication, unrecognised labour and longer-term harm. These connections require sustainability and inclusivity to be considered together throughout the research process.

Attention to environmental relationships, working conditions and wider social relationships can reduce harm, strengthen participation, support wellbeing and create longer-term value. Particular decisions may still produce competing demands or distribute benefits and burdens unevenly. The relational approach therefore supports contextual judgement by directing attention to participation, accessibility, distributional consequences and the involvement of affected groups in decision-making. These alignments and tensions are considered further in A6.



A4. Applying the relational approach in practice

In practice, the relational model presented in Figure 1 organises these considerations through Planet, People and Systems and their intersections. Planet focuses on ecological relationships and environmental impacts, People on human experiences, participation and working conditions, and Systems on community engagement, social and institutional structures, power relations and public value. Their intersections show how environmental responsibility, inclusion and engagement influence one another in practice.

Economic considerations operate across these domains rather than forming a separate area of the framework. Decisions about funding, compensation, procurement, time and resources shape relationships with the natural world, the conditions under which people participate in research, and the distribution of benefits and burdens across communities and institutions.

The following sections develop the practical implications of Planet, People and Systems and their intersections. We consider how the framework can inform contextual judgement across the research lifecycle, particularly where sustainability and inclusivity align, where decisions produce uneven consequences, and where competing responsibilities require transparent justification and review.



A4.1 Planet

Within the Planet domain, SIRP considers how research affects the natural world and how environmental decisions shape the conditions under which research is conducted. We understand the natural world as more than a setting for research or a collection of resources for human use.

Field sites, ecosystems, animals, land, water and local environments may form part of the ethical relationships through which research takes place, particularly in place-based, environmental, community and multispecies research. Research practices involving travel and fieldwork, resources and equipment, and digital technologies and data therefore require attention to carbon emissions and resource use alongside care, coexistence and ecological responsibility. These practices also have inclusivity consequences by shaping who can participate, who undertakes additional work, whose development is supported, how relationships are maintained and whether researchers, participants, partners and communities experience the research as accessible and respectful.

Travel and fieldwork decisions are one of the important considerations within this domain. Reducing conference, meeting or fieldwork travel can lower emissions and costs, but may affect early-career researchers, postgraduate researchers, community partners and less well-resourced collaborators who depend on in-person engagement for visibility, training, relationship-building and professional development. Travel may also support inclusive research by enabling participation,

strengthening relationships and providing access to opportunities that cannot be reproduced fully through online engagement. Decisions should therefore consider whether travel serves a clear purpose and how access to its benefits can be distributed fairly.

Similar considerations apply to resources and equipment. Procurement, equipment, printing, event materials, catering and other physical resources contribute to the environmental impact of research. Sharing, reusing, leasing and refurbishing equipment can reduce waste and costs while improving access to research tools. Durable materials and reusable resources can also reduce duplication and create longer-term value. These choices should be assessed in relation to research purpose, quality, accessibility and the distribution of benefits and burdens. Additional expenditure on translation, accessibility support or in-person engagement should be recognised as part of responsible research where it enables ethical and meaningful participation.

Digital and data practices carry related environmental and inclusive implications. Digital research may reduce travel and printing, while generating material and energy costs through data storage, cloud platforms, high-performance computing and AI use. Online participation may widen access for some people, although its benefits depend on suitable technology, digital skills, private space and accessible platforms. Data collection and management may also create less visible labour through translation, transcription, anonymisation, accessibility work

and long-term stewardship. SIRP therefore asks what data and digital activities are necessary, who can access them, who undertakes the associated labour and who benefits from their future use.

In addition to the aspects discussed above, other environmental, material and infrastructural aspects of research may also have implications for sustainability and inclusivity, depending on the methods, discipline, location, scale and organisation of a project. SIRP asks researchers and institutions to consider the full range of environmental relationships and consequences relevant to their particular research context, including less visible impacts, displaced burdens and longer-term effects.



A4.2 People

Within the People domain, SIRP focuses on the people with whom research is imagined, designed, conducted, supported, experienced and used. This includes researchers, participants, collaborators, professional services staff, students, community partners and others who contribute to or are affected by research.

Sustainable and inclusive research depends on whether these people can participate in ways that support dignity, wellbeing, care, accessibility, ethical judgement, fair recognition and meaningful contribution. Researchers are included within the People domain because research decisions are shaped by their assumptions, institutional positions, workloads, resources and responsibilities.

This requires attention to the working conditions of research as well as to the ethics of participation. Sustainable and inclusive practice should recognise visible and invisible labour across the research project. This includes but is not limited to recruitment, coordination, translation, transcription, accessibility work, emotional labour, community engagement, data management and the labour of maintaining relationships. These forms of work are often unevenly distributed across research

teams and partners. They may fall disproportionately on postgraduate researchers, early-career researchers, women, minoritised staff, professional services colleagues or community partners. Inclusive research therefore requires consideration of how responsibilities are allocated, how contributions are recognised, and whether people have the time, resources and support needed to participate well.

Researcher responsibility also includes reflexivity and positionality. Researchers should consider how their roles, assumptions, institutional positions and forms of power shape the research process. This includes how research questions are framed, how participants are approached, how communities are represented, how findings are interpreted, and how credit is distributed. Reflexivity should be treated as part of responsible research practice rather than as a purely individual reflection exercise. It helps researchers consider whether their methods, language and relationships reproduce exclusion, extraction or unequal recognition.

SIRP requires fair participation across the research lifecycle. At the design stage, fair participation includes building diverse teams, involving relevant communities or people with lived experience where appropriate, and budgeting for fair compensation,

accessibility and engagement. During delivery, it includes supporting responsible co-production, ensuring accessible communication, sharing decision-making where appropriate and making reasonable adjustments for participants, collaborators and team members. During impact and engagement, it includes sharing findings in accessible formats, recognising contributions and supporting benefits that extend beyond the immediate project. These concerns align with the checklist emphasis on diverse teams, involvement of people affected by the research, fair compensation, ethical engagement, capacity building, accessible outputs and community benefit.

SIRP therefore treats researcher responsibility as both ethical and practical. It asks researchers and institutions to consider whether research practices are liveable, fair and sustainable for those who carry them out and those who contribute to them. This includes supporting wellbeing, avoiding unnecessary burdens, recognising labour, enabling development opportunities, and creating conditions in which people can participate safely and meaningfully. SIRP also requires attention to other human, relational and organisational conditions relevant to the specific research context.

A4.3 Systems

Within the Systems domain, SIRP focuses on the social and institutional structures, power relations, and relationships with communities and wider publics through which research takes place. Research is shaped by power relations, knowledge hierarchies, funding structures, institutional priorities, partnership arrangements and the distribution of resources.

Sustainable and inclusive research therefore requires attention to who shapes the research agenda, whose knowledge is recognised, who participates in decision-making, who benefits from research outcomes and who carries the risks or burdens of participation.

These considerations are particularly important where research involves communities, public groups, policy actors, professional organisations or international partners. Research relationships should be reciprocal, fair and attentive to longer-term value. This includes considering whether the research creates useful outcomes for those involved, whether findings are shared in accessible and appropriate formats, and whether engagement continues beyond data collection, dissemination or a single engagement activity. Sustainable engagement should build relationships, capacity and shared benefit rather than short-term visibility alone.

The Systems domain also draws attention to the risks of extractive research practice. Research can reproduce unequal relationships when participants, communities or partners are mainly treated as sources of data, access, legitimacy or institutional value. A relational approach asks whether



research partnerships recognise local knowledge, lived experience and community priorities, and whether benefits are distributed in ways that are meaningful to those involved. Language also matters because the terms used to describe research relationships can shape how people and communities are positioned. More careful language can support respect, reciprocity and shared contribution.

This domain connects sustainable and inclusive research with longer-term public value. Research outputs should be designed so that they can be accessed, understood, reused or adapted by relevant audiences where appropriate. This may include plain-language summaries, community briefings, policy outputs, open-access materials, toolkits, training resources

or digital repositories. The aim is to support research that remains useful beyond the immediate project and contributes to wider social learning, institutional improvement or policy and practice change.

SIRP thus asks researchers and institutions to consider how research can strengthen rather than simply use social and institutional relationships. It links inclusivity with social sustainability by asking whether research practices support fair participation, reciprocal partnerships, accessible knowledge and longer-term benefit, while recognising wider questions of justice, recognition, power and public value that shape research relationships. Attention should also be paid to other community, institutional and structural conditions relevant to the specific research context.

A4.4 Intersections between the domains

The intersections between Planet, People and Systems show how decisions within one domain can shape relationships and consequences in the others. They provide a way of considering sustainability and inclusivity together across research practice.

The intersection between Planet and People is expressed through low-carbon choices. Decisions about travel, methods, procurement, digital tools, data and materials affect environmental impacts as well as research quality, working conditions, participation and access to professional and developmental opportunities. For example, reducing travel may lower emissions but can also influence opportunities for networking, collaboration, career progression and relationship-building, particularly for early-career researchers or those working across international contexts. Similarly, choices about digital methods and infrastructures may reduce environmental impacts while raising questions about accessibility, workload, digital exclusion and resource use. Low-carbon choices therefore require attention not only to environmental outcomes but also to research purpose, fairness and the distribution of benefits and burdens. Considering these issues together can help researchers identify approaches that minimise environmental

impacts while supporting equitable participation and wellbeing.

The intersection between Planet and Systems is expressed through sustainable engagement. Choices concerning online, hybrid and in-person formats, venues, communication, travel expectations and longer-term outputs shape how research reaches, involves and benefits communities, partners, institutions and wider publics. Decisions about engagement methods can influence both the environmental footprint of research activities and the accessibility of participation for different groups. Sustainable engagement therefore involves balancing environmental responsibility with the need to build trust, maintain relationships and support meaningful collaboration. It also encourages consideration of how research activities can contribute to longer-term social and community value through capacity-building and knowledge exchange. In this way, sustainable engagement connects environmental responsibility with accessibility, reciprocity, community benefit and longer-term social value, recognising that environmentally sustainable approaches should also support inclusive and mutually beneficial forms of engagement.

The intersection between People and Communities is expressed through inclusive practice.

It concerns how people are involved in research, how decisions are made, whose knowledge and labour are recognised, and whether participation is meaningful, accessible and fairly supported. Inclusive practice extends beyond individual interactions to encompass the wider structures and relationships through which research is conducted. This includes consideration of representation, accessibility, remuneration, recognition, power-sharing and opportunities for participation throughout the research process. It also involves reflecting on whose perspectives are included or excluded, how expertise is valued, and how benefits arising from research are distributed. Inclusive practice connects immediate research relationships with wider questions of power, institutional conditions, shared decision-making and public value, helping to ensure that research processes and outcomes are responsive to the needs, experiences and priorities of diverse communities and wider publics.

These intersections are not exhaustive or fixed. Their relevance will vary across disciplines, methods and research settings, and further connections may emerge through the practical application and development of the framework.

A5 Across the research lifecycle

SIRP should be embedded across the research lifecycle because decisions made at one stage shape the relationships, conditions and possibilities that arise at later stages. Choices made during research design influence how research is delivered, while experiences during delivery may reveal new needs, consequences and responsibilities that require earlier decisions to be reviewed. Sustainability and inclusivity should therefore be treated as continuing considerations rather than as issues that can be completed or resolved at a single stage.

Researchers and institutions should remain attentive to how relationships with the natural world, with people and with wider communities and institutions evolve as a project develops. The distribution of benefits, burdens, opportunities and responsibilities may shift as methods, partnerships and circumstances change.

Decisions should therefore be revisited where necessary to ensure that existing arrangements continue to support ecological responsibility, meaningful participation, recognition, reciprocity and longer-term public value.

This continuity extends beyond the immediate period of research delivery, as outputs, data, materials, relationships, capacities and responsibilities may remain relevant after formal project activities or funding have ended. Reflection at this stage can help identify what should be maintained, adapted, shared or carried into future research and institutional practice.

The SIRP checklist follows the stages of pre-award planning, research delivery and post-project reflection to support this continuous and connected process. The stages provide opportunities to revisit the same relational considerations as the research develops, rather than treating each stage as a separate set of responsibilities.



A6 Alignments and tensions

Sustainability and inclusivity are often mutually reinforcing within research practice. Approaches that support meaningful participation, fair recognition, reciprocal relationships and longer-term public value can also reduce duplication, resource use and extractive practices.

For example, online or hybrid participation may reduce travel-related impacts while improving access for people with disabilities or caring responsibilities. Travel decisions can also consider how professional and developmental opportunities are distributed across research teams, including whether early-career researchers have fair access to them. Attention to ecological responsibility can similarly encourage more purposeful decisions about methods, engagement and resources. These connections show how the relational approach can create opportunities to advance sustainability and inclusivity together.

We also recognise that tensions may arise where environmental, social, financial and ethical responsibilities

create different practical demands. Lower-carbon or lower-resource options may affect accessibility, trust-building, professional development or research quality, while inclusive practices may require additional time, resources or support. These tensions should be examined through a relational and distributional lens, with attention to who benefits, who carries additional burdens and whether savings or efficiencies depend on hidden labour, exclusion or displaced harms.

Such decisions require contextual judgement. Lower-cost or lower-impact options may support responsible resource use, while more resource-intensive activities may be justified where they enable ethical relationships, meaningful participation, community benefit or research quality. Researchers and institutions should consider the different forms of value created, how benefits and burdens are distributed and how decisions should be justified where responsibilities do not fully align.

Temporal and geographic inequalities also shape these judgements.

Present exclusions, precarious work, unequal recognition and inaccessible research environments can create longer-term consequences by damaging trust, limiting capacity and reducing participation. Benefits, burdens, recognition and opportunities may also be distributed unevenly across geographically and institutionally unequal research contexts.

These alignments and tensions show why sustainable and inclusive research requires contextual judgement rather than mechanical compliance. Through SIRP, we aim to support researchers and institutions in identifying who benefits, who bears the costs, whether harms are displaced onto less visible labour or less powerful groups, and how decisions should be justified, recorded and reviewed. The accompanying SIRP Toolkit translates these principles into transparent, proportionate and reviewable decisions across different research contexts.



References

- Adelman, S. (2018) 'The Sustainable Development Goals, anthropocentrism and neoliberalism', in French, D. and Kotzé, L.J. (eds.) *Sustainable Development Goals: Law, Theory and Implementation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 15–40. doi: 10.4337/9781786438768.00008.
- Advance HE (2021) *The transformed UK Athena Swan Charter*. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/transformed-uk-athena-swan-charter> (Accessed: 22 April 2026).
- Bandola-Gill, J., Grek, S. and Tichenor, M. (2022) *Governing the Sustainable Development Goals: Quantification in Global Public Policy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-03938-6.
- Berlach, R.G. and Chambers, D.J. (2011) 'Interpreting inclusivity: an endeavour of great proportions', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(5), pp. 529–539. doi: 10.1080/13603110903159300.
- Boström, M. (2012) 'A missing pillar? Challenges in theorizing and practicing social sustainability: introduction to the special issue', *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 8(1), pp. 3–14. doi: 10.1080/15487733.2012.11908080.
- Brundtland, G.H. (1987) *Our common future world commission on environment and development*.
- Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice (2024) *Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice*. Available at: <https://wellcome.org/about-us/positions-and-statements/environmental-sustainability-concordat> (Accessed: 22 April 2026).
- Dasgupta, P. (2021) *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review*. London: HM Treasury.
- Dobusch, L. (2021) 'The inclusivity of inclusion approaches: a relational perspective on inclusion and exclusion in organizations', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(1), pp. 379–396. doi: 10.1111/gwao.12574.
- Gillan, S.L., Koch, A. and Starks, L.T. (2021) 'Firms and social responsibility: a review of ESG and CSR research in corporate finance', *Journal of Corporate Finance*, 66, article 101889. doi: 10.1016/j.jcorpfin.2021.101889.
- Kumar, S. (2013) *Soil, Soul, Society: A New Trinity for Our Time*. Brighton: Leaping Hare Press.
- Moran, H., Karlin, L., Lauchlan, E., Rappaport, S.J., Bleasdale, B., Wild, L. and Dorr, J. (2020) 'Understanding research culture: what researchers think about the culture they work in', *Wellcome Open Research*, 5, article 201. doi: 10.12688/wellcomeopenres.15832.1.
- Morrow, E., Vandrevalla, T. and Ross, F. (2025) 'Building inclusive research cultures: how can we rise above EDI cynicism?', *Higher Education Policy Institute*, 5 March. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/03/05/building-inclusive-research-cultures-how-can-we-rise-above-edi-cynicism/> (Accessed: 12 May 2026).
- Owen, R., Macnaghten, P. and Stilgoe, J. (2012) 'Responsible research and innovation: from science in society to science for society, with society', *Science and Public Policy*, 39(6), pp. 751–760. doi: 10.1093/scipol/scs093.
- Purvis, B., Mao, Y. and Robinson, D. (2019) 'Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins', *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), pp. 681–695. doi: 10.1007/s11625-018-0627-5.
- REF 2029 (2025) *People, Culture and Environment Pilot Exercise Guidance*. Available at: <https://2029.ref.ac.uk/publication/pce-pilot-exercise-guidance/> (Accessed: 26 April 2026).

Research England (2025) Research England Action Plan for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/publications/research-england-edi-action-plan/research-england-action-plan-for-equality-diversity-and-inclusion/> (Accessed: 22 April 2026).

Schlosberg, D. (2007) Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network and Vitae (2024) Research Culture Initiatives in the UK. Swindon: UK Research and Innovation. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/publications/research-initiatives-in-the-uk-report/research-culture-initiatives-in-the-uk-report/> (Accessed: 12 May 2026).

Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016) The SDGs wedding cake. Available at: <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2016-06-14-the-sdgs-wedding-cake.html> (Accessed: 22 May 2026).

Stumpf, K.H., Baumgärtner, S., Becker, C.U. and Sievers-Glotzbach, S. (2015) 'The justice dimension of sustainability: a systematic and general conceptual framework', *Sustainability*, 7(6), pp. 7438–7472. doi: 10.3390/su7067438.

Tikly, L. (2020) Education for Sustainable Development in the Postcolonial World: Towards a Transformative Agenda for Africa. Abingdon: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781315211343.

UK Research and Innovation (2023) UKRI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy: Research and Innovation by Everyone, for Everyone. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukris-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy/ukris-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-research-and-innovation-by-everyone-for-everyone/> (Accessed: 26 April 2026).

UK Research and Innovation (2025) UKRI Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2025 to 2030. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-environmental-sustainability-strategy/ukri-environmental-sustainability-strategy-2025-to-2030/> (Accessed: 22 April 2026).

United Nations (2012) The Future We Want. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 July 2012, A/RES/66/288. New York: United Nations.

United Nations (2015) Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, A/RES/70/1. New York: United Nations.





To cite: "Sustainable and Inclusive Research Practices (SIRP) Framework", Day Ashley, L; Fisher, J; Tang, Y; and the College of Social Sciences (University of Birmingham, 2026).

Designed and printed by



**UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM**

Creative
Media

Edgbaston, Birmingham,
B15 2TT, United Kingdom
birmingham.ac.uk