

# UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY IN A TURBULENT WORLD

A RESEARCH AGENDA AND  
STRATEGY FOR THE SUSTAINABLE  
CONSUMPTION INSTITUTE  
2025-2029



MANCHESTER  
1824

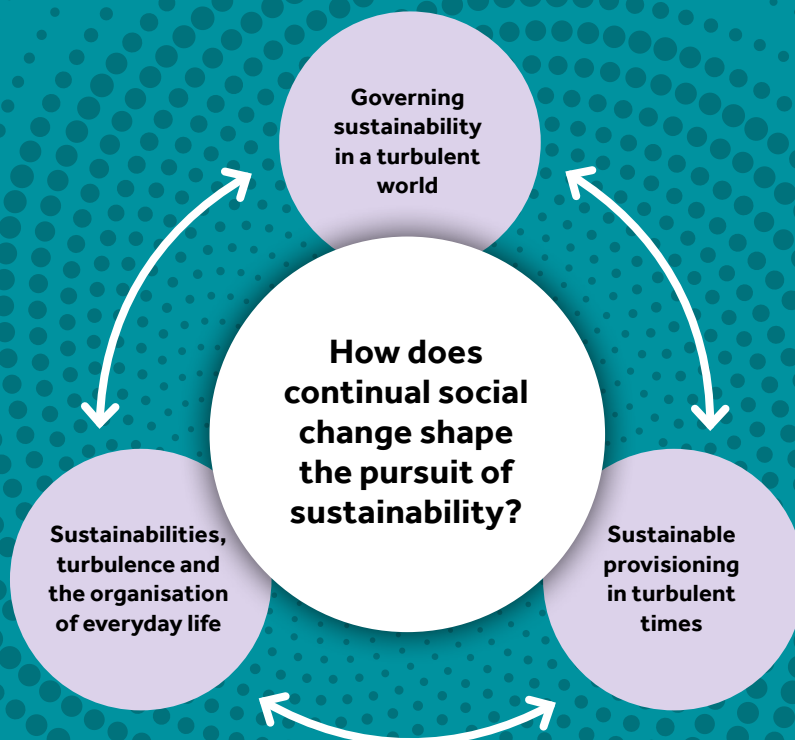
The University of Manchester  
Sustainable Consumption Institute

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research agenda of the Sustainable Consumption Institute for 2025-29 is organised around the core question of **'How does continual social change shape the pursuit of sustainability?'** We focus on the way that ongoing disruptive transformations are the background within which efforts to pursue sustainability need to be understood. Key disruptive transformations encompass changes in business practices, widening inequalities, geopolitical conflicts, pandemics, everyday practices, and social movement innovations. Alongside these dynamics, impacts of multiple ecological crises are accelerating, producing their own social disruptions. Addressing sustainability in this way provides the SCI with a distinct approach to sustainability as a plural, complex, contested, and inevitably problematic process.

We focus this research through three, intertwined, thematic areas: governing sustainability in a turbulent world; sustainable provisioning in turbulent times; and sustainabilities, turbulence, and everyday life. Each deploys and builds on particular aspects of SCI expertise and provides a basis for ongoing innovation in sustainability research and potential for wide-ranging social impacts.

The strategy for realising this agenda will involve a concerted focus on collective research activity to develop the programme of research, ongoing maintenance of a vibrant research culture, securing resources for future projects, and maintaining our record of supporting PhD students and Early Career Researchers.



# INTRODUCTION

The SCI's current research agenda<sup>1</sup> is coming to an end. It provided a way of collectively organising the SCI's research for the period 2020-2024, setting out:

Key trends shaping our work (living within planetary boundaries; unequal access to sustainable goods, services, and liveable environments; and the digitalisation of society)

A distinctly SCI framework for responding to these trends ('re-imagining futures and materialising sustainabilities') and

A research focus that organised the various strands of our work (Sustainability and social inequalities; Circular economy; Cities and sustainability; Collective action, social movements and alternative economies; Responsive research).

## Process for Refreshing the Research Agenda

As the time-period of the agenda is coming to a close, we have engaged in a collective reflection to assess a) our collective successes in carrying out this agenda and b) how we want to refocus our agenda for the next five years (2025-2029). The process for developing this refreshed agenda was sixfold:

- 1 A workshop with SCI members in January 2024 to build discussion of the future research agenda amongst colleagues and to generate input for a draft agenda.
- 2 A workshop with SCI Associates in February 2024 that posed a set of questions to structure discussion of the draft agenda.
- 3 A workshop with the SCI's group of Critical Friends in March 2024, also organised around a structured discussion of the research agenda.
- 4 Re-drafting the research agenda, in April-June 2024, to take account of workshop inputs.
- 5 A second workshop with SCI colleagues to present the re-drafted research agenda for discussion and subsequent revisions in June 2024.
- 6 Production and publication of the SCI research agenda in Autumn 2024.

## A Refreshed SCI Research Agenda

The agenda provides orientation for the SCI's research endeavour for the coming five years. It will strengthen our strategic approach to the key challenge areas of sustainability, digitalisation, inequalities, and net zero that our work speaks to. The first of these is the broad remit of the SCI and all our research speaks to this. For the other three challenge areas, we have strong teams of researchers and ongoing programmes of research focused specifically on digital platforms, digital innovation and sustainability; on intersecting inequalities at multiple scales; and on climate governance and energy transitions. These align particularly well with current UK Research Council strategic priorities, positioning us well to make significant contributions.

The remainder of this document sets out the refreshed SCI Research Agenda. It is organised in three sections. First, we provide a general summary of the SCI's successes over the period of the 2020-2024 research agenda, to provide foundations and continuity on which to develop the refreshed agenda. Second, we set out why the SCI provides a distinctive context and culture for undertaking interdisciplinary sustainability research and we set out the refreshed research agenda. Finally, we detail a strategy for implementing and realising this agenda.

<sup>1</sup> <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=48569>

# BUILDING ON SUCCESS

In refreshing our research agenda, it is important to recognise what the SCI has done well over the period of the 2020-2024 research agenda and to build on these achievements. This is particularly significant given much of this work was carried out during the period of COVID restrictions and while rebuilding a work culture afterwards. There are many areas of success that the SCI can point to over this period. Thematically, we summarise key successes as:

## Refreshing and Reproducing the SCI and its Agenda:

The current research agenda has unfolded during a period marked by a transition away from the initial Tesco funding that established the Institute, necessitating the exploration of new ways of supporting the Institute's activities. Substantively, this has meant that the SCI has been effective in:

- > Securing substantial grant funding from a diverse array of sources, such as the Leverhulme Trust and the Economic and Social Research Council, to support key elements of the SCI agenda. These elements encompass critical areas such as environmental sustainability and justice, urban platforms and mobility, futures and imaginaries, and circular economies.
- > Developing and undertaking research that has contributed to the production and circulation of new thinking in a number of areas and in shaping debates. These debates include but are not limited to, sustainability and net zero transitions and social justice; platformisation and its implications for the organisation of systems of provision; and re-thinking relationships between plastics, metals and processes of production and consumption.
- > Seeding new agendas, with follow-up publications and/or funding proposals from relatively small amounts of funding from the SCI's university funds.
- > Establishing connections around the sustainability agenda within The University of Manchester (UoM), including collaborations with the Sustainable Futures Platform and the Manchester Urban Institute.
- > Strengthening its research capacity through the recruitment of cohorts of new and excellent early career researchers, such as Dr Sandra Barragán, Dr Jeremy Brice, Dr Torik Holmes, Dr James Jackson and Dr Aarti Krishnan.

## Publication of a Large Volume and Broad Range of High-Ranking Journal Articles:

Between 2020 and 2024, SCI members made significant contributions to both inter-disciplinary and disciplinary debates. Our research has been published in a wide variety of journals, including in internationally recognised journal publications across a range of the SCI's agenda. These include leading publications such as the Journal of Cleaner Production; New Political Economy; Environment and Planning A; Local Environment; Urban Studies; Sociological Review; and Economy and Society.

## Building Research Networks:

SCI members have actively engaged in network-building activities across this period, both within and outside of the University. This has involved strong engagement with external partners across disciplinary and interdisciplinary networks. Notable activities include workshops and symposia that brought together academics from across disciplines, seeding conversations and seeking to build new research activities, such as a workshop on the politics of energy transitions. SCI members have also collaborated with our SCI Associates on workshops focused on topics on creative methods, inequalities and sustainability, and human-animal relations. The SCI has increased its presence and visibility in UoM sustainability initiatives, for example, enhancing understanding of 'sustainability-related' research capabilities across the Faculty of Humanities, via a mapping exercise as well as hosting the SCI Annual Lecture, which recently was presented by internationally renowned sustainability thinker, Kate Raworth.

### **An Active Programme of Impact Activity:**

SCI members engage in extensive work to generate impact across society, business, and policy on the basis of their research. Many projects have impact built into the research design, including co-designing research with practice partners. These have included museum exhibitions, collaborations with newspapers as well as regular media interviews, talks and events in Parliament, policy briefings for government departments and NGOs, and collaborative relationships with municipal/regional authorities concerning for example public transport provision and inclusion of ethnic minority communities in urban environmental policy processes. SCI members have received recognition for the quality of this impact work, for example through the 'Making A Difference' award won by the One Bin to Rule them All team.

### **A Supportive and Creative Research Environment:**

The SCI has a supportive environment that has helped to advance the careers of its members. At the level of PhD students and PDRAs, SCI PhD students, Dr Ulrike Ehgartner and Dr Steffen Hirth, have taken up research associate/fellow posts at the University of York and the University of Leeds, while Dr Torik Holmes and Dr James Jackson have both moved from PDRA positions to postdoctoral fellowships based within the SCI. Among our full-time staff, we have seen many promotions: Dr Helen Holmes, Dr Luke Yates, and Dr Dan Welch were promoted to Senior Lecturer in Sociology; Dr Sherilyn MacGregor, Dr Alison Browne and Dr Maria Sharmina were promoted to Professor in Politics, Geography, and Engineering respectively. These outcomes have been aided by the SCI's supportive environment both in general and through specific developmental activities that we have designed and delivered. These activities include our annual writing retreat, regular funding workshops and impact workshops facilitated by the University's dedicated impact officers.

# THE RESEARCH AGENDA: UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY IN A TURBULENT WORLD

## The SCI's Approach to Sustainability Research

The SCI's approach to sustainability is built on a commitment to critical and constructive social science research. The Institute is home to a distinctive collection of researchers who engage in both interdisciplinary and disciplinary-specific sustainability-related debates in sociology, politics, innovation studies, geography and urban studies. The SCI's approach to researching sustainability engages with questions of political economy, social justice, and innovation processes in relation to both existing unsustainable arrangements and desirable, future arrangements.

The work of the Institute recognises that it is more appropriate to talk of sustainabilities in the plural, rather than of a single sustainability. SCI research is diverse in scope and encompasses, for example: the politics of climate change; interdisciplinary work on waste, digital technology, sustainability and transitions, inequalities in sustainability governance, re-thinking production, consumption and circularity; and social movements, sustainability and everyday life. SCI research addresses sustainability in relation to various sectors, including food, transport, plastics, and 'critical minerals'; at multiple scales from local to global; through various analytic lenses such as global value chains, intersectionality, and social movement studies.

The SCI's distinctiveness is in combining this variety of what we study with how we research it. The Institute combines a welcoming and open-minded research culture and space with strategic priorities that involve:

- 1 Seeking to influence a broad range of academic debates on sustainability,
- 2 Pursuing research supported by a portfolio of external research grants from a variety of funders,
- 3 Maintaining and building a programme of high-impact publications,
- 4 Continuing the SCI's capacity as a developmental context for the next generation of sustainability researchers.
- 5 Maintaining and deepening relationships within the UoM to support cross-institute and interdisciplinary activity.





## The Research Agenda

The SCI's Research Agenda - 'Understanding Sustainability in a Turbulent World' (2025-2029) - needs to be understood in the context of this approach and these strategic priorities. Sustainability is now widely seen as a 'transformational' problem. We need far-reaching, multi-dimensional change to effectively respond to the range of sustainability challenges societies face. Our societies are always in a state of ongoing transformations whether in business practices, widening inequalities, geopolitical conflicts, everyday practices or innovations driven by social movements, to name just a few. Such changes are, at least at present, turbulent: disruptive and destabilising in ways with important consequences for the pursuit of sustainability. Furthermore, these social transformations intertwine with the accelerating impacts of multiple ecological crises including climate change, biodiversity decline, water scarcity and the proliferation of toxic substances, which are similarly turbulent in their social consequences. Research needs to take seriously and recognise that in the 21st Century turbulence seems to be less an aberration and more a 'new normal'. Transformations towards sustainability need to be understood in this context of continual social and ecological change. Proposals for sustainability that fail to take this into account are unlikely to succeed. Too often, research on sustainability starts with blueprints or 'solutions' – whether in policy instruments, technological fixes or 'behaviour change' – and neglects the underlying social

conditions which shape the possibilities of pursuing sustainability. The SCI's collection of research expertise positions us strongly to be able to provide a distinctive and effective response to this challenge.

Research at the SCI therefore focuses on the question: **'How does continual social change shape the pursuit of sustainability?'**

The SCI's approach to responding to this question starts with key contemporary social, economic, political, and technological transformations, and asks how they shape the possibilities for pursuing and accomplishing sustainability(-ies) in a way that is coherent, bringing together a wide canvas of (geo) politics, organisations, and households. On this basis, we then research the unsustainabilities produced by contemporary turbulence, also paying attention to underlying global continuities, and focus on whose priorities are being pursued to produce what sorts of (un)sustainability. Through this analysis, we aim to contribute to more hopeful characterisations and imagining of alternative futures.

We organise this work by focusing on three key and intertwined themes of such ongoing transformations. For each, we briefly summarise the theme, how it relates to existing SCI work and how the SCI can contribute to the development of the theme in the period of the Research Agenda.

# 01

## THEME ONE: GOVERNING SUSTAINABILITY IN A TURBULENT WORLD

Effective governing and collective action is critical to addressing sustainability challenges globally. Yet, governing institutions are confronted by rising political polarisation, the rise of right-wing populism, and widening economic and political inequalities. This raises the question: how do we govern for sustainability in a turbulent world of rising political polarisation, wars, pandemics, a cost of living crisis, and what has been characterised as a global 'polycrisis'?

Current and recent SCI research is well placed to make effective contributions to addressing this question. The SCI's research on the politics and governance of climate change, work on global value chains, governance and corporate sustainability, social inequalities and social justice, digital technology and sustainability, and alternative economies provides a wide ranging and novel combination of research contributions that speak to the challenges of governing sustainability in a turbulent world.

In the period of the research agenda, SCI members will continue to build on this existing work, both in particular areas such as energy transitions or the effects of political polarisation, and through developing a critical synthesis focused on theorising the governance of sustainability across a range of domains.

# 02

## THEME TWO: SUSTAINABLE PROVISIONING IN TURBULENT TIMES

In the context of how to govern in turbulent times, there is a pressing issue of how the provisioning of food, energy, water and other systems and resources critical to the reproduction of life can be organised sustainably. Provisioning systems are being changed in numerous ways, including via novel business practices and structures such as digitalisation and the emergence of platform business models, ongoing global restructuring of value chains, attempts to create 'circular economies', but also regular attempts to generate new economic activity based on principles of solidarity, community and care.

SCI research has long engaged with debates in the area of sustainability and provisioning. More recent contributions have focused on re-thinking production and circularity in relation to plastics, metals and wastes, building resilience in food systems, and how urban services are being re-organised through processes of digital platformisation. This has produced a wide-ranging body of work with insights into the sustainable organisation of provisioning.

In the five-year period of the research agenda, the focus for SCI members is both on maintaining contributions to these debates – which are often rapidly developing debates with burgeoning literatures – and also working closely together to develop collective understanding of how provisioning is being re-organised, across a range of sectors and services, and the extent to which it is sustainable and socially just.



# 03

## THEME THREE: SUSTAINABILITIES, TURBULENCE AND THE ORGANISATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Governance and provisioning systems structure and condition the organisation of everyday life. The organisation of everyday life is constantly being shifted by changes in infrastructure (transport, housing, etc), but it is also the site of social movements and community innovation. In each of these areas (often of course intertwined with each other), we can see rapid change that shapes the pursuit of sustainability. This raises the question: how is the organisation of everyday life structured by and how does it respond to the context of wider turbulence?

SCI research has engaged with everyday life and sustainabilities, from various perspectives, including social movements, technologies and everyday life, food consumption practices, inclusive environmental sustainabilities, and migration and sustainabilities. There remains a research need to build effective syntheses of different perspectives on the sustainable organisation of everyday life.

This means that in the period of the research agenda, SCI members will undertake the work of building critical synthesis that is required to address not only the question of how the organisation of everyday life is structured by turbulent times but also how we understand the variety of responses to this.

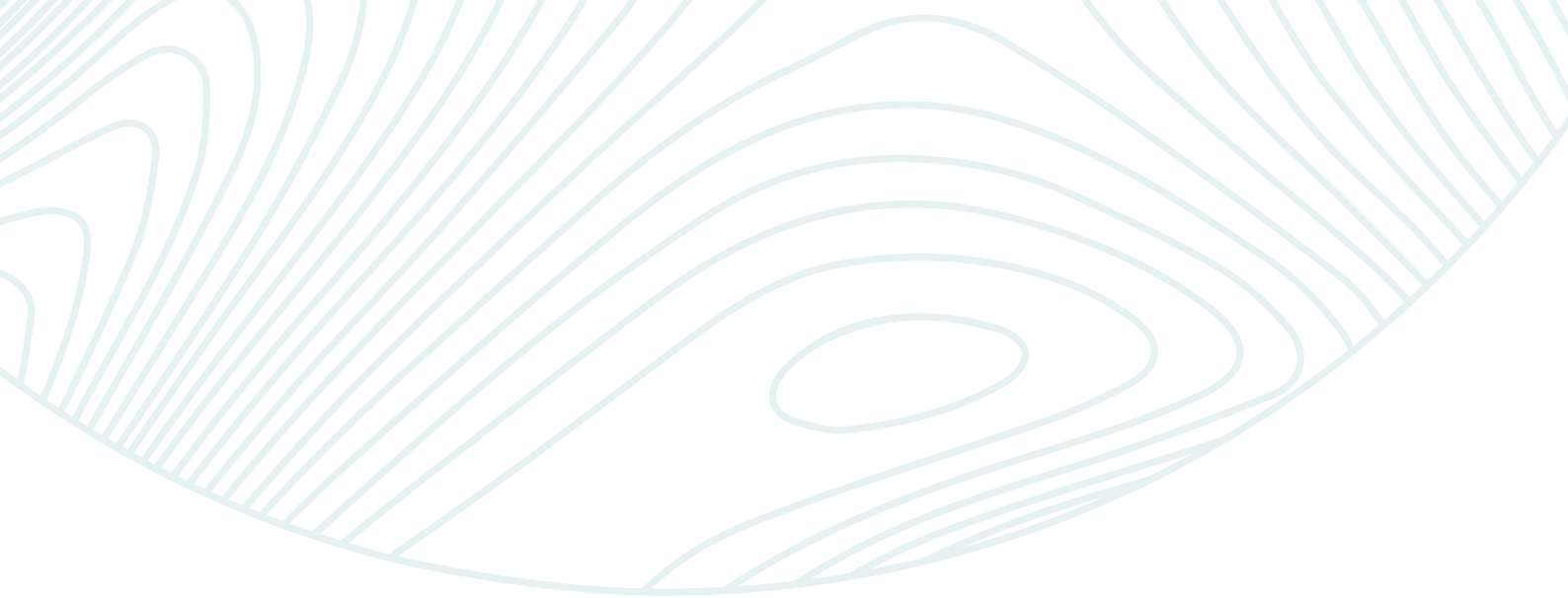
This agenda reflects our current work and shapes our attempt to take research and practice in sustainability forward in the coming years. Combining a tight-knit core community with extensive interdisciplinary networks across The University of Manchester and beyond, and with deep and broad engagement with partners from communities, government and business will enable us to realise this agenda.

Although each of these three themes addresses an intellectually interesting and relevant area, the added value is in the SCI's approach of focusing on the interrelationships between the three themes: addressing governing sustainability in turbulent times, the (re-)organisation of provisioning, and the ways in which this structures everyday life and the responses to this. It is this threefold issue of what we study together with how we study this, via insights that we bring from political studies, sociology, innovation studies and geography, that is the added value that the SCI brings in its distinctive approach to understanding sustainability in a turbulent world.

# A STRATEGY FOR REALISING OUR AGENDA

To plan our work to realise this Agenda, we have identified four specific goals, and actions we will develop, guided by these goals.

GOAL	ACTION	TIMEFRAME
To build a programme of research to advance the research agenda	Organisation of thematic roundtables to build common understanding: in the first instance, we will organise three roundtables, one for each of our subthemes, during 2025-6.	2025-26
	Build internal processes (e.g. reading groups, workshops, specific seminars) around the key three thematic areas (governing, provisioning, everyday life) within the research agenda.	2025-26
	Collective writing project synthesising key SCI insights regarding turbulence and sustainability.	2025-27
	Supporting other research outputs by SCI members pursuing the agenda.	2025-29
	Develop internal processes and activities to strengthen dialogue between the three principal areas of research and build critical syntheses in relation to this thematic question.	2025-29
	Continue building SCI's networks with researchers outside of the UoM through designing and organising dedicated roundtables, external seminars, and hosting visiting academics.	Ongoing
To maintain and build the research culture in the Institute	Continue our wide-ranging programme of seminars: our monthly internal seminar for work-in-progress presentations by SCI members as well as external seminars and larger events such as the Annual Lecture.	Ongoing
	Continue building the SCI Forum as a generative space for new ideas and sense of common enterprise, as well as specific project ideas.	Ongoing
	Continue funding the annual writing retreat and consider adding a second retreat to our calendar.	Ongoing
	Continue working with sustainability researchers across the Faculty of Humanities, notably via our Associate members. Additionally we will engage with colleagues across the University, especially via the Sustainable Futures Platform.	Ongoing



GOAL	ACTION	TIMEFRAME
To resource future research projects	Continue with existing environment scanning practices within the SCI to identify potential sources of future funding.	Ongoing
	Build more strategic discussion of key funding sources within the SCI Management Team.	2025-26
	Maintain existing and build new links with external partners important to future funding bids.	Ongoing
	Submit a minimum of 10 external grant applications per year, including two large applications.	Ongoing
	Continue to use the SCI's internal fund to support small pilot projects that lead to research outputs, impact activity, and future external applications.	Ongoing
To support the next generation of sustainability researchers	Integrate PhD students and ECRs into SCI activities (seminars, research projects, workshops, roundtables).	Ongoing
	Build specific developmental activities for ECRs (career development workshops, writing support).	Ongoing
	Enable ECRs to access SCI internal fund.	Ongoing
	Build existing ECRs into future research funding applications.	Ongoing
	Maintain involvement of ECRs in management of SCI via the management team in particular.	Ongoing
	Maintain focus on EDI within all of these activities.	Ongoing

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