

SCIENCE
EUROPE

Shaping the future of research



WEBINAR REPORT

Driving Environmental Sustainability in Research Organisations: Building Institutional Strategies for Change

23 January 2026

Colophon

May 2026

Event date: 23 January 2026

Event Report: 'Driving Environmental Sustainability in Research Organisations: Building Institutional Strategies for Change'

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20521685

Author: **Diana Potjomkina** (Science Europe)

Acknowledgements: We are very grateful to all speakers for their valuable insights, and to Pablo del Río González (CSIC) and Margarida Prado (FCT) for their valuable assistance in organising the event.

Lead editor: **Lidia Borrell-Damián** (Science Europe)

Editing and design: **Rosemary Hindle, Klaudia Sroka** (Science Europe)

For further information please contact the Science Europe Office:
office@scienceeurope.org

© Copyright Science Europe.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited, with the exception of logos and any other content marked with a separate copyright notice. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Table of Contents

Introduction	4
A Theoretical View on Environmental Sustainability in Research Organisations	5
Organisational sustainability in context	5
Sustainability in research organisations: a conceptual map	5
Promoting environmental sustainability in research organisations	5
Environmental Sustainability in the CSIC Operational Strategy	6
CSIC's Sustainability Plan	6
Sustainability management in CSIC: a whole-of-organisation approach	6
Whole-of-Organisation Approach to Environmental Sustainability at the NOVA University	6
Environmental sustainability in both missions and operations	6
NOVA University's sustainability governance model	7
Sustainability across the entire research lifecycle	7
Sustainability-related Best Practices at SNSF	7
Context-driven approach to environmental sustainability	7
Effective approaches to environmental sustainability in public sector organisations	8
Rannís Strategy to Reduce Operational Emissions	8
The origins of Rannís environmental sustainability strategy	8
Sustainable travel at Rannís	8
Open Discussion	9
Conclusion and Next Steps	9
Annex: Programme	10

Introduction

On 23 January 2026, Science Europe organised a webinar on ‘[Driving Environmental Sustainability in Research Organisations: Building Institutional Strategies for Change](#),’ gathering experts to discuss the lessons learned from the development and implementation of environmental sustainability strategies in research funding and performing organisations. The webinar built on the earlier work of the Science Europe Working Group on Greening Research, notably the 2024 Greening Research Webinars Series,¹ the Framework for the Environmental Sustainability of Research Organisations,² and the survey report on Appraising Greenhouse Gas Emissions of Research Organisations.³ The discussions also informed the work of the Task Force on Environmental Sustainability of Research Organisations.

Environmental sustainability of research and research-related processes is an important concern for Science Europe and its Member Organisations, contributing to the organisation’s strategic priority to “strengthen the role and contribution of science in tackling societal challenges.” This commitment is further reflected in the Framework for the Environmental Sustainability of Research Organisations. The transition to sustainability is necessary not only to address the environmental impacts associated with research and research-related processes, but also, in view of the important co-benefits that can be unlocked (for example, improved inclusion, risk management, and greater cost efficiency).⁴ Many Science Europe (SE) Member Organisations (MOs) are already working on improving the environmental sustainability of their operations. According to a survey of MOs completed in 2024, 11 of 23 had a strategy/action plan in place to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions; additionally, seven organisations were working towards one. The survey report also lists SE MOs’ best practices across several domains.⁵ In parallel, other important efforts are taking place across the sector, for example the Heidelberg Agreement on Environmental Sustainability in Research Funding,⁶ the Durham Declaration on the collaboration of Coimbra Group Universities on Climate Change and Sustainability,⁷ or the recent revision of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Green Charter and accompanying guidance material.⁸

The webinar on 23 January event aimed to contribute to the ongoing discussions on environmental sustainability in research and research-related activities. Following an earlier webinar in 2024, which highlighted the key components of environmental sustainability strategies of several SE

-
- 1 Nicola Francesco Dotti, Greening Research Webinars Series: Final Report (Science Europe, 2024).
 - 2 Nicola Francesco Dotti and Diana Potjomkina, Framework for the Environmental Sustainability of Research Organisations (Science Europe, 2024), <https://scienceeurope.org/our-resources/framework-for-the-environmental-sustainability-of-research-organisations/>.
 - 3 Diana Potjomkina et al., Survey Report: Appraising Greenhouse Gas Emissions of Research Organisations (2024), <https://www.scienceeurope.org/our-resources/survey-report-greenhouse-gas-emissions/>.
 - 4 Diana Potjomkina, “Briefing on the Environmental Impact of Science,” Science Europe, 2026.
 - 5 Potjomkina et al., Survey Report: Appraising Greenhouse Gas Emissions of Research Organisations.
 - 6 Philipp M. Weber et al., The Heidelberg Agreement on Environmental Sustainability in Research Funding, October 22, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13938809>.
 - 7 Coimbra Group, “Durham Declaration on the Collaboration of Coimbra Group Universities on Climate Change and Sustainability,” accessed February 12, 2026, <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/durham-declaration/>.
 - 8 DG EAC, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Green Charter (Publications Office of the European Union, 2025), <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d8e5b75a-ae2d-11fo-89c6-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>; DG EAC, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Green Charter: Guidance Material for Researchers and Research Managers (Publications Office, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.2766/3901124>; DG EAC, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Green Charter: Guidance Material for Research Groups, Organisations and Consortia (Publications Office, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.2766/9234484>.

MOs, this session focused on the lessons learned from strategy development and implementation, particularly the conduct of research and administration with regard to sustainability. The webinar was introduced by Lidia Borrell-Damián, Secretary General of Science Europe, and Pablo del Río González, Senior Researcher at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) and Co-Chair of the SE Task Force on Environmental Footprint of Research Organisations. A theoretical perspective was provided by Rodrigo Lozano, Researcher at CSIC. Subsequently, Dolores del Castillo, Senior Scientist and Head of Food Bioscience Group in the Food Science Research Institute (CIAL-CSIC-UAM), CSIC; Lea Quilitz, Head of Sustainability at the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF); Júlia Seixas, Pro-Rector at the NOVA University Lisbon, Portugal; and Rúna Vigdís Guðmarsdóttir, Director at the Erasmus+ National Agency within Rannis, Iceland, presented and discussed practical examples. Pablo del Río González and Diana Potjomkina, Science Europe Senior Policy Officer for Greening Research, provided concluding remarks. Diana Potjomkina also presented the [Science Europe briefing on the Environmental Impact of Science](#).

A Theoretical View on Environmental Sustainability in Research Organisations

Rodrigo Lozano, Researcher at the [Spanish National Research Council \(CSIC\)](#), shared his extensive theoretical knowledge on environmental sustainability in organisational environments, adapting it to the context of research organisations more specifically.

Organisational sustainability in context

Rodrigo Lozano described sustainability as having four interlinked dimensions: economic, environmental, social, and the time dimension. Moreover, it must be seen in context. Individual organisations are part of a larger societal system, so they need to reflect on how to become more sustainable internally, as well as on how they can contribute to the broader sustainability transition. In this context, research organisations and higher education institutions (HEIs) play several key roles, such as breaking, creating, and changing societal paradigms, educating future leaders, and supporting economic development.

Sustainability in research organisations: a conceptual map

Research organisations (ROs) share some similarities and differences with the private and public sectors. Like other organisations, they rely on inputs of resources, such as materials, energy, and human resources; and as a result of their internal operational and production processes, they have products, services and human resources as their outputs. ROs also deal with many internal and external stakeholders, such as employees, management, civil society, companies, or governments. Organisations' operations change over time, although in the case of ROs, the rate of change tends to be slower than for some companies. Ultimately, ROs, like other organisations, are driven by a specific purpose, and their work has implications for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Promoting environmental sustainability in research organisations

A first step for ROs is to assess their environmental performance in a targeted way, notably considering developments over time, the functioning of the organisation in the broader context, including interaction with different stakeholders, and the pathways to improvement. These assessments can be supported by international standards such as ISO 14001 or the Global Reporting Initiative guidelines. The analysis should consider factors that support or hinder sustainability and put in place an appropriate governance and institutional framework to support the sustainability

transition. The transition stage tends to last up to one year, while institutionalisation of environmental sustainability in an organisation may take from as little as one year to five to ten years. Ultimately, organisations need to balance the economic, environmental, and social issues in a holistic, systemic, and transdisciplinary way, with attention to both their present situation and the future.

Environmental Sustainability in the CSIC Operational Strategy

Dolores del Castillo, Senior Scientist and Head of Food Bioscience Group in the Food Science Research Institute (CIAL-CSIC-UAM), Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), gave a presentation on how environmental sustainability is being embedded in CSIC's operational strategy.

CSIC's Sustainability Plan

CSIC has developed a Sustainability Plan, aligning with the broader European drive towards more environmentally friendly research. The Plan covers sustainability management on the scientific, technical and administrative levels, and comprises 32 actions structured along ten action areas, with each action being measured through dedicated indicators. CSIC has integrated environmental, social, and governance dimensions of sustainability in a single operational framework; an approach that has proven very successful in practice.

Sustainability management in CSIC: a whole-of-organisation approach

Being a large and geographically distributed organisation with 120 research centres, CSIC needed to ensure that its institutional approach to sustainability reflects its diversity. Accordingly, CSIC has a central Sustainability Committee with 22 members, which functions as an advisory body to the Governing Board and has representatives from scientific, technical, managerial, and administrative domains, respecting gender and disciplinary balance. Moreover, not only the Sustainability Committee, but the entire staff was involved in developing the Sustainability Plan. The implementation of the Plan is being centrally co-ordinated by the Sustainability Committee, but also relies on distributed governance, enabling and supporting local action. As a result, the Plan has enjoyed successful cultural adoption and is bringing real-world change to the daily operations of CSIC. CSIC's approach is evidence-driven, making sure that the implementation of the Sustainability Plan is measurable and can be monitored.

Whole-of-Organisation Approach to Environmental Sustainability at the NOVA University

Júlia Seixas, Pro-Rector at the [NOVA University Lisbon, Portugal](#), shared her experience in advancing environmental sustainability. Similar to CSIC, NOVA University has opted for a whole-of-organisation approach, mainstreaming environmental sustainability across the university's nine schools.

Environmental sustainability in both missions and operations

NOVA University has prioritised environmental sustainability in its three missions: training and teaching, research and development, and innovation and value creation, with the aim of making a

positive impact on society. One of the important strands of work here is contributing to public policies based on scientific evidence. In addition, sustainability is also embedded in the infrastructures and services, so that the university acts as an example within its own community and achieves high standards of sustainability. Environmental and social sustainability are addressed together. When it comes to environmental sustainability, the end goal is to achieve carbon neutrality in scopes 1, 2, and 3 by 2040.

NOVA University's sustainability governance model

NOVA University approved a new sustainability governance model in January 2026, ensuring that all institutional units (the nine schools) are involved in delivering on the common vision and strategy. For smaller schools that do not have the capacity to run their own sustainability services, shared services are made available. The management structure is inclusive: the Sustainability Executive Council, comprised of representatives from each dean's team, the central university, and students' representatives, maintains a coherent, transversal agenda in the strategy and action plans with specific goals, targets, and KPIs. Sustainability in education and research is addressed separately, working with the Vice Rectors for Education and Research, respectively.

Sustainability across the entire research lifecycle

NOVA University considers sustainability across the entire research lifecycle, beginning with the research strategy. Inspired by the Heidelberg Agreement on Environmental Sustainability in Research Funding,⁹ the university works with researchers in the proposal preparation stage, aiming to include sustainability from the start. Regarding the conduct of research, the university has launched initiatives such as the NOVA Green Labs Working Group, with four labs already having achieved the highest-level sustainability certification by My Green Lab ("Green" Status), and a dedicated short course for PhD students. Finally, the university also encourages the researchers to maximise the impact of their research.

Sustainability-related Best Practices at SNSF

Lea Quilitz, Head of Sustainability at the [Swiss National Science Foundation \(SNSF\)](#), discussed best practices related to the promotion of environmental sustainability. Like the previous organisations, SNSF pursues a comprehensive approach to sustainability (environmental, social, and economic dimensions) and adopted a comprehensive strategy for sustainable development in 2022. The strategy encompasses research for sustainable development, sustainable research, and sustainable operations.

Context-driven approach to environmental sustainability

In the SNSF, the environmental sustainability strategy was initiated by employees in a bottom-up process, supported by the highest body of the Research Council, and successfully developed within a relatively short timeframe. This was possible thanks to the positive momentum for sustainability existing at the time; without this momentum, it is possible that the process would have taken a slightly different form. The strategy sets several operational targets; in relation to environmental sustainability, these address facility management, procurement, finances, travel, and IT, but also aspects of communication, collaboration, and knowledge management. SNSF bases its work on a carbon footprint assessment; for the moment, addressing travel, which accounts for 70% of the total emissions, is a major priority.

⁹ Weber et al., The Heidelberg Agreement on Environmental Sustainability in Research Funding.

Effective approaches to environmental sustainability in public sector organisations

Lea Quilitz shared several takeaways when it comes to effectively addressing sustainability on the ground, both in SNSF and in other public sector organisations. Firstly, it is important to understand organisational dynamics and provide exceptionally solid arguments for sustainability (for example, related to efficiency or cost gains), especially in moments when attention is diverted by other crises. Secondly, it is important to identify barriers to action and potential synergies, and to consider which pathways are currently likely to be most fruitful. Windows for action can be found, for example, in scheduled revisions of regulations or processes, or in collaboration with other organisations. At the same time, some barriers may evolve or disappear. Thirdly, it is important to be transparent, not only about achievements, but also about challenges; avoiding complacency will help to maintain the momentum. Fourthly, it is important to look for sustainability allies and build strong relationships with operational units (e.g. HR, finances, facility management), especially in decentralised organisations. If a solution for the entire organisation is not yet possible, a bottom-up pilot project can be a good place to start. Finally, communication and engagement are key to sustainability efforts, but are also resource-intensive, so they need to be planned for accordingly.

Rannís Strategy to Reduce Operational Emissions

Rúna Vigdís Guðmarsdóttir, Director at the Erasmus+ National Agency within the [Icelandic Centre for Research](#) (Rannís Iceland), discussed how environmental sustainability is being implemented within her organisation, focusing specifically on measures to reduce travel emissions.

The origins of Rannís environmental sustainability strategy

Similar to SNSF, for Rannís, the environmental sustainability strategy was largely a bottom-up initiative, thanks to the strong interest of the staff. The policy and action plan were discussed with staff before its approval in 2022. At the same time, as a public organisation, Rannís was required by the Icelandic Government to develop such a strategy; the Environment Agency of Iceland provided co-ordinated guidance in the form of checklists with sustainability actions. Overall, sustainability is well-anchored within Icelandic society, and it is also important for Rannís to lead by example. Finally, EU funding rules also played a role, as sustainability is one of the four horizontal policy priorities in the Erasmus+ programme, which Rannís co-ordinates together with several other EU programmes.

Sustainable travel at Rannís

In another similarity with SNSF, travel outside and within Iceland – especially flights – constituted the majority of Rannís emissions (over 90% in total) by the time the work on the environmental sustainability strategy started. Rannís sustainability strategy foresees a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. The organisation is working on more sustainable travel policies: aiming to decrease employees' car commute (offering an extra allowance for eco-friendly commuting to work at least three times a week); limiting the number of business trips per staff member; improving the transparency about travel decisions; and raising employees' awareness. However, travel remains essential for Rannís mission, and in view of its geographical location, there are no viable alternatives to air travel. Therefore, Rannís plans to implement carbon offsets in partnership with the agency Land and Forest Iceland.

Open Discussion

Questions addressed during the Q&A session included:

- **Tools that can be used for calculating travel emissions:** approaches mentioned included using information provided by the travel agency, as well as a calculator¹⁰ developed by Atmosfair (a German NGO).
- **The key factors for successful implementation of environmental sustainability measures:** speakers mentioned working with senior leadership as they can provide the vision to the community and anchor sustainability in the organisational governance; gathering a “critical mass” within the organisation, especially in cases where the senior leadership is not yet on board; upskilling, empowering and rewarding the staff to ensure they are well-positioned to implement sustainability measures; explicitly making sustainability a part of employees’ responsibilities; staying resilient in contexts where sustainability is being deprioritised; ensuring the sustainability vision is realistic and includes achievable indicators.
- **Collaboration between research funding and performing organisations:** environmental sustainability measures in research must be supported by both types of organisations, and it is important for them to be mutually aware.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The speakers’ interventions highlighted several common themes, notably: a systemic approach and a comprehensive environmental sustainability strategy, providing a clear and broadly appealing vision as well as realistic and actionable targets and KPIs; a combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches, together with measures to strengthen staff empowerment in research organisations; inclusive governance, enabling decentralisation where necessary; evidence-driven strategies addressing key sources of carbon emissions; and the importance of collaboration within the R&I sector.

Science Europe will continue to support exchanges between research funding and performing organisations – its Member Organisations as well as partners – to implement environmental sustainability measures, in line with the Science Europe Framework for the Environmental Sustainability of Research Organisations, and taking account of hallmark reports from the European Commission, United Nations and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Future plans include guidelines on environmental sustainability, which are currently being jointly developed under the umbrella of the SE Working Group on Greening Research.

It will further explore opportunities to strengthen environmental sustainability also on the regulatory level, notably in the forthcoming Horizon Europe Framework Programme 2028–2034 (FP10), the ERA Act, and in dialogue with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has set up an Expert Group on Environmental Impact of Research.

¹⁰ https://www.atmosfair.de/en/standards/emissions_calculation/emissions_calculator/

Annex

Programme

23 January, 14.00-15.30 CET, Online

14.00-14.05 **Welcome**

Lidia Borrell-Damián, Secretary General, Science Europe

Pablo del Río González, Co-Chair of the SE Task Force on Environmental Footprint of Research Organisations; Senior Researcher, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

14.05-14.20 **Setting the scene**

Rodrigo Lozano, Researcher, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

14.20-15.00 **Environmental sustainability strategies of research organisations: Best practices and lessons learned**

Dolores del Castillo, Senior Scientist and Head of Food Bioscience Group in the Food Science Research Institute (CIAL-CSIC-UAM), Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

Lea Quilitz, Head of Sustainability, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)

Júlia Seixas, Pro-Rector, NOVA University Lisbon

Rúna Vigdís Guðmarsdóttir, Director, Erasmus+ National Agency within Rannís, Iceland

Moderator: **Pablo del Río González**, Co-Chair of the SE Task Force on Environmental Footprint of Research Organisations; Senior Researcher, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

15.00-15.30 **Q&A and Concluding remarks**

Pablo del Río González, Co-Chair of the SE Task Force on Environmental Footprint of Research Organisations; Senior Researcher, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

Diana Potjomkina, Senior Policy Officer for Greening Research, Science Europe