



A Research Agenda – on innovation research and sustainability

LUND UNIVERSITY





A RESEARCH AGENDA ON INNOVATION RESEARCH AND SUSTAINABILITY

In April 2025, CIRCLE (Centre for Innovation Research) together with IIIIE (International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics), LUCSUS (Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies), the Sten K. Johnson Centre for Entrepreneurship, Sustainability Forum, and the Urban Arena organised the Innovation Research Day at Lund University. The event has become a recurrent arena for sharing and discussing new projects and initiatives, identifying interfaces and complementarities, and jointly shaping ideas about the future of innovation research. The theme of the 2025 gathering was the intersection between innovation and sustainability, with particular attention to the follow-up of the Lund Declaration of 2009. That declaration called for a shift in research and innovation policies, urging that societal challenges be placed at their core and that traditional supply-oriented approaches should be complemented with demand-side policies such as lead market initiatives, public procurement, and problem-driven priority setting.

Background: From the Lund Declaration to Today

Since the adoption of the Lund Declaration, innovation research has gradually moved beyond its earlier concentration on technological advancement and commercial success. Increasingly, scholars and policymakers have explored the role of innovation in addressing grand societal challenges such as climate change, public health, and social inequality. This shift has highlighted systemic and governance dimensions, underscoring the need for institutional reform, public policy engagement, and cross-sectoral collaboration to steer innovation in the public interest.

The urgency of developing a new research agenda has become even clearer in today's political and societal context. Innovation is both celebrated and contested, with critics pointing towards its "dark side" in the form of widening inequalities, surveillance technologies, greenwashing, and rebound effects, while policy voices, such as the Draghi Report of 2024, stress its importance for securing growth, wellbeing, and competitiveness in a world marked by geopolitical rivalry. At the same time, broader trends of poly-crises, weakened climate targets, threats to democracy, and declining trust in research-based knowledge place additional pressure on how innovation is understood and mobilised. Against this backdrop, the need to articulate a transformative research agenda that combines scientific quality with societal relevance is more pressing than ever.

The 2025 Workshop: Co-Creating a Future Research Agenda

Against this backdrop, the 2025 Innovation Research Day was organised as a co-creation workshop with the explicit aim of discussing a future research agenda at the intersection of innovation studies and sustainability research. Researchers from across the organising centres were divided into interdisciplinary groups and asked to reflect on three issues: 1) the identification of new themes where further knowledge is urgently needed; 2) the reframing of ongoing areas of research; and, finally, 3) whether there are topics that may no longer be relevant and could be phased out.

The discussions that unfolded during the day reflected the urgent need to reorient the field of innovation research in ways that both use its transformative potential and confront its systemic risks. A green and inclusive society will not be achieved through new technologies alone, but will also require changes in social norms, institutional capacities, policy efforts, and financial systems. The transition to a low-carbon and more inclusive society is urgent, yet the current level and pace of action remain insufficient to reach the targets that have been set. This calls for actionable knowledge about how to mobilise innovation for sustainability, while at the same time maintaining a reflective and critical perspective on the promises and limitations of innovation.

What follows is the co-created research agenda that emerged from the workshop discussions.

Emerging directions

In light of today's shifting context, especially around themes like resilience and geopolitical uncertainty, new themes are surfacing research in the field of innovation and sustainability transitions, these include:

Innovation (systems) under crisis and instability

This theme examines how innovation systems respond to external shocks and prolonged instability, and how resilience can be strengthened in times of crisis.

- A stronger focus on poly-crises (climate change, pandemics, war, financial turbulence) and the need to break silos in research and policymaking.
- Understanding how sustainability transitions unfold in contexts of instability or deliberate destabilisation, including disrupted supply chains or failing governance systems.
- Exploring the role of sustainability-oriented innovation in reconstruction after war, and the interactions between civilian innovation and the military-industrial complex.

Reframing the purpose and direction of innovation

Here the focus is on questioning dominant assumptions about innovation as inherently positive and growth-driven, and instead reflecting on its underlying intentions and values.

- Strengthening the role of *responsible innovation* and making intentionality explicit in innovation practices.
- Exploring the fragility and vulnerability of innovation, including the risks of new technologies such as AI, sometimes referred to as the “dark side of innovation.”
- Balancing critical perspectives with normative perspectives, recognising both the promises and limitations of innovation.
- Examining the tension between setting directionality in innovation policy versus relying on market-driven development.
- Investigating alternative economic models such as *degrowth* in high-income countries, with a stronger focus on wellbeing.
- Considering the idea of *de-innovation*: intentionally withdrawing or phasing out certain technologies or products (an “anti-Schumpeterian” approach).

Power, influence and governance

This theme explores who drives innovation, who benefits from it, and who is exposed to its risks, while also addressing inclusiveness in governance.

- Understanding the *winners and losers* in sustainability transitions and how benefits and burdens are distributed.

- Analysing multilevel governance tensions, for example, between EU, national, and local levels, and how they shape innovation.
- Examining the role of societal elites as powerful “niches” influencing innovation trajectories for sustainability.
- Investigating the growing role of *philanthropy* in shaping research and innovation agendas.
- Highlighting the perspectives of younger generations and children, who will inherit both the risks and opportunities of current innovation trajectories.

Reframing approaches

Some areas of innovation and sustainability research have been ongoing for decades. To remain relevant, there is a need to strengthen, reframe, or update existing paradigms.

Shifting the purpose and values of innovation

This sub-theme explores the ethical, philosophical, and value-based foundations of innovation.

- Rethinking the notion of “value” in innovation, value for whom, and under what conditions?
- Looking beyond growth and reconsidering innovation in terms of sustainable and regenerative business models.
- Placing ethics, democracy, and justice at the heart of innovation for sustainability.

Contextualizing innovation across scales and geography

This sub-theme highlights the importance of context in shaping innovation processes.

- Paying greater attention to local and urban contexts, where many innovations are implemented.
- Understanding knowledge transfer across regions and major blocs (e.g. USA, China, EU).
- Expanding research on the Global South, recognising its different needs and innovation dynamics.
- Examining the role of international trade in shaping innovation pathways.
- Paying closer attention to the political aspects of change, including language, power, marginalisation, and polarisation.

Broadening the scope of innovation actors and processes

This sub-theme expands the questions of who innovates, how innovation is governed, and the role of co-creation.

- Bringing in a stronger user and citizen perspective on innovation.
- Paying more attention to social innovation, not just technological solutions.
- Advancing co-production and network governance approaches to innovation.
- Investigating public sector innovation and the state as a central actor in driving change.

Rethinking innovation dynamics and outcomes

This sub-theme questions assumptions about the pace, nature, and impact of innovation.

- Analysing the speed of innovation and its implications, whether change is too fast, too slow, or uneven.
- Comparing narratives of innovation with actual impacts, focusing on measurable performance.
- Exploring adaptive approaches to change rather than fixating on “solutions.”
- Examining the implications of AI for sustainability transitions.
- Strengthening research on energy security as a key innovation driver.

- Moving beyond linear “S-curve” models of innovation and embracing more dynamic, messy processes of change.

Closing chapters

Finally, in light of the changing context of sustainability and innovation, including intensifying geopolitical competition, some themes were identified as less relevant or potentially counterproductive.

- Challenging the “innovation hype,” moving away from treating innovation as a universal panacea.
- Moving beyond linear models of innovation that oversimplify complex processes.
- Questioning the assumption that crises automatically drive societies towards sustainability.
- Shifting attention from narrow efficiency and optimisation studies toward more fundamental questions of whether we are “doing the right thing.”

Conclusion: Towards a Transformative Research Agenda

The Innovation Research Day 2025 demonstrated that research at the intersection of innovation and sustainability is not only under pressure to change, but also already generating new directions for how such change can be achieved. Through co-creation across disciplines and perspectives, participants outlined an emerging agenda that addresses the most pressing challenges of our time.

The agenda highlights the importance of understanding innovation under conditions of crisis and instability, of questioning and reframing the very purpose and values of innovation, and of paying closer attention to issues of power, governance, and inclusiveness. It calls for strengthening and re-contextualising existing approaches, broadening the scope of actors and processes, and rethinking the dynamics and outcomes of innovation in ways that better reflect the uneven and urgent nature of sustainability transitions. At the same time, it identified areas of research that may no longer be productive, encouraging the field to move beyond uncritical reliance on linear models, efficiency-driven studies, or the notion of innovation as a universal solution.

Taken together, these discussions resulted in an agenda that is both critical and constructive: it acknowledges the limitations and risks of innovation, while outlining pathways for research that can generate actionable knowledge and support profound and just societal transformations. Rather than simply calling for change, the Innovation Research Day 2025 has outlined what that change could look like, offering a foundation for future collaboration, debate, and research at Lund University and beyond.

This research agenda presented in this document is developed, based on, and as part of the Innovation Research Day at Lund University on the 23 April 2025. The research day and the writing of this document was coordinated by Markus Grillitsch, Lena Neij, Andrew Karvonen, Pauline Mattsson, Barry Ness, Diamanto Politis and Ylva van Meeningen at Lund University. We would like to thank the many researchers participating at the Innovation Research Day who have contributed to the discussions and providing input and inspiration to the agenda.



PHOTOS BY JENNY LEYMAN

The Innovation Research Day at Lund University is held annually by CIRCLE (Centre for Innovation Research)

In 2025 it was organised in collaboration with IIIIE (International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics), LUCSUS (Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies), the Sten K. Johnson Centre for Entrepreneurship, Sustainability Forum, and the Urban Arena.

The 2025 theme was the intersection between innovation and sustainability, with particular attention to the follow-up of the Lund Declaration of 2009, which called for a shift in research and innovation policies. This research agenda sheds light on new emerging directions, reframing approaches and, in some cases, closing chapters for research.



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