



Research and Dialogue for Sustainable Societies



The Task

Tackling global challenges such as climate change, energy security, and resource efficiency calls for novel approaches that cut across scientific, disciplinary, and geographic boundaries. The Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) in Potsdam is a centre of scientific excellence for the kind of innovative thinking and practice necessary to meet these challenges.

Our Mission

is to generate robust knowledge that will pave the way towards sustainable societies. Our research teams pursue a transdisciplinary approach in cooperation with partners from science, society, and politics. These activities aim to develop solutions and actionable policy recommendations for sustainability challenges and to support regional, national, and international decision-making processes.

Our Approach

is solution-oriented and collaborative. We strive to create new and effective ways to bridge the divide between society and science. RIFS cooperates closely with diverse partners and stakeholders to develop research processes together from the ground up and does not view them as mere targets for its recommendations and findings. This approach stimulates and supports public debate, generates innovative ideas, and advances transformation processes towards a more sustainable society.

The Institute

RIFS is part of the Helmholtz Association and is affiliated with the GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences.

Employees

Approximately 100 researchers work at the institute.

Research Disciplines

Around 30 different disciplines are represented at RIFS.

Fellows

As many as 30 new fellows come to the institute as visiting researchers each year. These include scientists, artists, and practitioners from the business community, politics, and public administration.

Events

The institute organises and hosts various events, ranging from single-day workshops, symposia, and expert discussions to multi-day conferences. Around 40 participants from all over the world attend the annual Potsdam Summer School at the institute.

To find out more, please see:

WWW.RIFS-POTSDAM.DE/EN

Background

In 2007, the Nobel Laureate Symposium “Global Sustainability — A Nobel Cause” adopted its Potsdam Memorandum.

The memorandum called for a joint effort to tap into “all sources of innovation and invention” in an effort to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and establish a new “global contract” to promote sustainability.

In its wake, the German Science Alliance developed a concept for a novel, transformative research institute, from which the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) emerged, the predecessor to today’s Research Institute for Sustainability — Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS).

Inspired by the Potsdam Memorandum, RIFS brings together all relevant forms of knowledge generated both within and outside science in order to understand the problems of sustainable development, identify appropriate solutions, and support their implementation in cooperation with relevant stakeholders and affected communities.

Following two five-year periods of project funding (2010 to 2016 and 2017–2022), RIFS joined the Helmholtz Association in 2023 and operates as part of the GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences.

Sustainability

We live in a rapidly changing world. We must respond to this challenge by pursuing development pathways that enable us to build globally just, environmentally sustainable, and economically viable societies for the present and the future.

In the perspective of RIFS, sustainability is a guiding concept to secure and foster humane living conditions for all people worldwide, in the present and future, and to facilitate restoring and preserving the environmental foundations to enable this.

Securing a sustainable future will require an all-of-society approach that spans the fields of politics, culture, the economy and technology. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies 17 goals that are crucial for this transformation, including the protection of the environment and the climate, the preservation of the natural foundations of economic systems that provide efficient access to goods and services for all, and a peaceful society with an equitable social system based on the principle of the common good. RIFS is committed to these goals.



Science

Our transdisciplinary research and advisory activities unfold across three overarching research themes and a fellowship programme.



Sustainability Transformations and Society

Researchers working on this theme analyse challenges and developments in society that enable or hinder transformations towards sustainability. These research activities aim to gain a better understanding of relevant social structures and dynamics and to develop strategies that will foster sustainable social well-being. The researchers cooperate with diverse stakeholders from across society and study public participation processes and their successful design for democratic and just transformations as well as identifying key stakeholders in decision-making and change processes.



Transforming Human-Earth Interactions

This research theme analyses and develops approaches for dealing with current and potential impacts of various transformation processes and sustainability challenges such as climate change, air pollution, and changes in the marine environment. The aim is to improve and strengthen resilience to environmental changes and risks and to identify suitable measures for prevention, adaptation or transformation towards sustainability. A range of issues is addressed under this research theme, including the populist turn and its impact

on environmental policy and conservation, the development of policies with a distinctly “planetary” scope and outlook, and the rethinking of environmental governance processes and approaches in response to diverse challenges.



Advancing Transdisciplinarity and Co-Creation

Bringing together different perspectives and forms of knowledge is crucial to advancing the transformation towards sustainability. Socially robust knowledge about and for this transformation can be generated in culturally-aware spaces for reflection and dialogue and through trusting, transdisciplinary partnerships. Researchers working on this theme evaluate and develop transdisciplinary and co-creative research methods and support their use in different areas of research practice. This theme also explores how different forms of knowledge can be combined to improve both the quality of research outcomes and innovative practices and support the development of solutions to complex problems.



The Fellow Programme

enhances our research by bringing around 30 visiting researchers and practitioners from around the world to Potsdam each year to contribute their expertise and ideas.

Results

Our research findings feed into transformation processes at the regional, national, and international levels. We analyse developments around energy transitions in Germany and abroad, advise urban planning processes, support innovative citizen assemblies, provide expertise for the negotiation of international agreements and much more besides.

Knowledge transfer

Publications

RIFS publishes several series of publications, including policy paper, policy brief, discussion papers and studies as well as various publications prepared by projects or in cooperation with external partners.

Website

Information about our scientific activities is presented on the RIFS website alongside personal blog posts by our researchers and fellows. We also produce videos, podcasts and a monthly newsletter covering current developments:



Fellow Programme

We invite highly qualified individuals from academia, the business world, and civil society to join the institute on a research stay and support our teams with their expertise, creative input, and inspiration. RIFS Fellows take an understanding of our distinctive research approach with them when they return to their home institutions and networks.



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