

Research and Dialogue
for Sustainable Societies



How to become a RIFS Fellow

Webinar 1 June 2026

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Structure of Webinar

1. A (very) short introduction to the RIFS Fellow Programme
 2. What's a fellow (and how is this different to a regular scientist)?
 3. This years' topic: *Sustainability in Tough Times – How to Move Forwards in Times of Backlash?*
 4. The application documents
 - a) Proposal
 - b) CV
 - c) Optional: Annex
 5. Selection criteria
 6. Timeline
 7. Open Q&A
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A (very) short introduction to the RIFS Fellow Programme

- **The programme has been a central pillar of the Institute since its inception in 2009, following the Potsdam Memorandum of 2007. The programme brings together diverse perspectives and competencies to address the sustainability questions of our time.**
- **About ten fellows (depending on available budget and costs) join the institute every year through our general call. We aim to have a diverse group, from science, politics, civil society, business, arts, and other areas from around the world.**
- **Since 2010, over 300 fellows from over 50 countries from have been part of the Fellow Programme, forming an ever larger network.**

What is a fellow?

Fellow

- Can be a scientist, but not necessarily
- Open call with a wide spectrum of ideas, even experimental
- Connected to one or more research groups and enjoy more freedom in their work
- Independent in time planning, including working hours or vacation
- Own budget
- Stay for a limited duration, usually 6-12 months, and then return home

Regular Scientist

- Scientist (or specialist) in a specific field.
- Recruited for a specific project/task, with specific skill set and expected results
- Works in one research group, tasks defined by research group leader
- Must keep time sheets, defined office hours, vacations need to be approved, etc.
- Budget decisions made by group leader
- Contract duration dependent on funding and need

Overarching Topic for 2027

Sustainability in Tough Times – How to Move Forwards in Times of Backlash?

- Sustainability goals are challenged across the world, actively, but also as a result of political and economic developments
- Follow-up to the RIFS conference “Tough Conversations in Tough Times” (December 3-5, 2025) with over 300 participants (check our website on the proceedings)
- We defined six sub-topics focusing on questions such as scales, interactions, justice, polarization, alliances, transdisciplinary research and knowledge
- Your project idea does not have to fit perfectly to any of these
- But you should be able to relate at least to some in your project proposal

Application Documents

1. All application documents must be in English
 2. All application documents must be submitted as single PDF files, each individually no larger than 25MB
 3. Minimum of 2 files: Project Proposal and CV
 4. Optional annex (e.g. full list of publications, artistic portfolio, reference letters, etc.)
 5. Application documents must be submitted via our online portal (go to www.gfz.de -> jobs -> Fellow Programme, where you will find the CfA)
 6. Application documents must be submitted by 21 June, 23:59:59 German / Central European Standard Time (CEST). The application portal automatically closes after this!
 7. Once uploaded, applications CANNOT be changed!
 8. Applications by e-mail are NOT accepted!
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Application Documents: the Optional Annex

- **The Optional Annex can be as long as you want, but must not exceed 25MB (PDF only)**
- **Could be a collection of reference letters, list of publications, artistic portfolio, list of patents, etc.**
- **Whatever additional information you consider relevant to your application**
- **Feel free to design it however you want. But keep your reader in mind ...**

The Application Documents: CV

- **No longer than 3 pages (when printed). Ideally use the standard format setting of your office programme (whether MS Word, Open Office, Pages, etc.). Must be a PDF file!**
 - **Your CV should highlight key career steps, including:**
 - Educational background, additional training (if applicable), etc.
 - Major job positions
 - Achievements, e.g. personal achievements, most cited papers, prizes, exhibitions curated, etc.
 - **Should be easily understandable, e.g. personal background and education on page 1, job positions on page 2, achievements on page 3.**
 - **The design of your CV is up to you because it is about you!**
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The Application Documents: Project Proposal Template

- **The project proposal is the heart of your application. It is your idea, your aspiration how to contribute to sustainability, and the most important part of your application.**
- **We use a proposal template. The link for the template (PDF) is in the Call for Applications.**
- **Only applications using the proposal template will be considered.**
- **If you do not use the template, your application will be automatically rejected.**
- **The template has the following sections:**
 - Why RIFS? (Page 1)
 - Project Overview (Page 2)
 - Description of Work (Page 3-5)
 - Logistical Aspects (Page 6)
 - Bibliography (Page 7-8)
 - Exclusion Criteria (Page 9)

The Project Proposal Template – Why RIFS?

- **Page 1 of the template.**
- **Replaces the letter of motivation required in many other calls**
- **It has the following sections:**
 - What is your motivation to become a fellow?
 - What are your expectations regarding our research and how you hope to work with us?
 - What will you bring to the institute and how do you intend to support our work?
- **Your response in each section should not exceed 1,200 characters**

The Project Proposal Template – Project Overview

- **Page 2 of the template.**
- **Following sections:**
 - Project title: What is the name of your project? – 200 characters max.
 - Abstract: Describe your project in a nutshell! – 2000 characters max.
 - How will your project address the theme of “Sustainability in Tough Times”? – 2000 characters max.
- **Selection of research groups:**
 - Primary group: Where you think your work would fit best
 - Secondary group: One additional group that would also be a good fit for your idea

The Project Proposal Template – Description of Work

- Page 3-5 of the template
- **Just plain text: Describe your intended work**
- **Please note that no graphs or pictures can be included here**
- **As a tip: Explain your work in a way that a friend would understand if you read the text out aloud**

The Project Proposal Template – Logistical Aspects

- **Page 6 of the template.**
- **It has the following sections:**
 - **Timeline:** Outline the key steps and milestones (Conferences? Field research? Productions? Publications?) of your project, as well as when you would like to start (April 2027? May? August?) and finish your fellowship.
 - **Resource needs:** What is necessary to implement your project beyond a desk and a computer? Specialized software? Laboratory equipment? Measurement instruments? Conference space to host a hundred people? Power tools to create sculptures? Service providers for graphic design, workshop facilitation, legal advice, etc.?
 - **Budget:** Please make a (rough) estimate what your project will cost beyond the stipend. We are aware that prices may change.
 - **Declaration of AI use:** Please tick yes or no if you partially (e.g. language) or fully used AI/LLM or other software tools to develop the proposal.

The Project Proposal Template – Bibliography

- Page 7-8 of the template.
- List all of the sources used to prepare your proposal (e.g. publications cited, websites, etc.)
- Citation style is your choice, but should be easily understandable and researchable

The Project Proposal Template – Exclusion Criteria

- **Page 9 of the template**
- **Nothing to fill in here**
- **The following exclusion criteria apply:**
 1. If the proposal form is not used
 2. If the proposal is not completed in full
 3. If the page limit for the CV is exceeded
 4. If your application specifies a duration of less than 6 months or more than 24 months
 5. If you are not of legal age under German law (18 years)
 6. If the additional budget (beyond the stipend) exceeds 20,000 Euro
 7. If the application is not in English
 8. If your project requires equipment that the institute does not currently have, like specialized laboratory equipment
- **Only if your application passes these criteria will it be submitted to internal review by the research groups!**

Selection Criteria

- **Originality:** Is it a new and interesting idea?
- **Quality:** Is the proposal idea state of the art and well structured?
- **Interface:** Does it connect to different sectors, e.g. bridging between science, private sector, politics, etc.?
- **Complementarity:** Does it connect to the work of the institute?
- **Feasibility:** Is it implementable with the resources of the institute?
- **Topical fit:** Does it align with the call's overarching topic?

- **None of these are "Knock-Out" criteria**, but **feasibility** (can we do it?) and **complementarity** (does it relate to our work?) are key criteria.

Timeline

- **19 June, 15:00 CEST: Deadline for questions to me / my team**
 - Please note that the volume of inquiries escalates significantly ahead of the deadline.
 - **21 June, 23:59:59 CEST: Application deadline. No applications thereafter will be accepted.**
 - Please note that the application portal cannot process hundreds of applications at the same time. It is best to submit your application earlier (June 20 or earlier!) and try again an hour later if you have problems.
 - Avoid uploading excessively large files and make sure you have a good internet connection.
 - **Internal review will be completed by the end of July. Applicants who do not progress to the external review will be notified.**
 - **Fall 2026: Jury session of the external reviewers on the top candidates**
 - **Following Jury Session: Interviews with top candidates, if necessary**
 - **Subsequently: Decision by the institute**
 - **April 2027: Earliest starting date for new fellows**
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Open Q&A

- Please use Zoom's "Raise hand" feature
 - You can write questions in the chat, but "raised hands" will take precedence
 - If a question is not answered, just send it to achim.maas@rifs-potsdam.de
 - Feel free to contact us about any questions that are not answered today or that occur to you later
 - Please check our FAQ section at <https://www.rifs-potsdam.de/de/institut/fellow-programm/faq>. The link is also in the Call for Applications.
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