

iiED

*our thinking...*

## **Towards excellence**

**Policy and action research for  
sustainable development**





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This booklet presents a vision of how excellent policy and action research that contributes to sustainable development can be carried out, measured and enabled by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and its partners. It explains the context for IIED's research, sets out the principles of excellence that we value and identifies the practical approaches needed to ensure high-quality research.

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# The challenge

Defining and achieving excellent research  
for sustainable development



*“Research is ... gathering the information you need to answer a question and thereby help you solve a problem.”*

Booth, W., Colomb, G., Williams, J. 1995. *The Craft of Research*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

What does 'excellent research' mean? And how can it be achieved? For organisations like IIED, which undertake policy and action research for sustainable development, excellent research not only lives up to traditional academic measures such as rigour and reliability, but also solves real-world problems. It improves equity in decision making; it contributes to the sustainability of livelihoods and ecosystems; and it delivers justice in the allocation of benefits, for both people and environments.



## Our context

IIED is an independent policy and action research organisation working at the interface between development and environment. Based in London and working on five continents, our mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

The research that we do must help us further this ambition and, combined with communications and other activities, make a positive impact on livelihoods and environments. Assessing its excellence is not just about reviewing how we gather information, but also evaluating the extent to which this information is useful in solving real problems. We must consider traditional measures of research quality. But we must also take account of the complex nature of sustainable development and the multitude of institutions, systems and processes that affect it.



## Our concern

We believe that it is only through engaged, iterative research — developed through long-term partnerships — that we can hope to tackle the complex, real-world challenges of achieving sustainable development. And the lack of priority given to such research by many aid agencies and research councils is a growing concern. Together with our partners and other policy research organisations, we are exploring new ways of thinking about research excellence.

We must be rigorous in this thinking. We must learn from both academic measures of excellence — including the UK Research Assessment Exercise and Research Excellence Framework — and development assistance measures of impact, such as results-based evaluation. But we must also go beyond these two factors to incorporate a range of other issues.



## Our purpose

A better shared understanding of research excellence will help IIED on three fronts. First, it will provide a quality benchmark to help us plan and manage research so that it offers a sound basis for making policy and development decisions that lead to more fair and sustainable development. Second, it will enable our staff and partners to think deeply about the quality of their research, and ensure continuous improvement. Third, it will allow us to work with partners and other groups — including communities, research partners, funders, and the media — to work towards common standards for research excellence.

# The foundation

Principles of research excellence





In the context of sustainable development, frameworks for analysing research excellence must look beyond traditional academic principles such as rigour and reliability.

They must acknowledge that sustainable development research takes place within diverse political and social conditions, which also influence how policies are developed, decisions taken and projects implemented. And they must recognise, and challenge, the power dynamics that shape how different types of knowledge are valued.

## **Rigour**

That research must be both rigorous and reliable is widely accepted by researchers and policymakers alike. And there are plenty of academic principles available to measure how effective different methods are in accurately representing natural and social phenomena. But many of these define rigour and reliability in very narrow terms, and often favour empirical data that are gathered using scientific approaches.

Knowledge produced by local communities or organisations — which is often acquired over years of experience and practice in specific contexts — can also be rigorous and reliable. Excellent sustainable development research should draw on this.

## **Ethics**

People lie at the heart of much sustainable development policy and action research, which often involves human subjects and applies innovative and experimental methods. Against this backdrop, careful ethical reflection is essential. For IIED, excellent research must incorporate ethical considerations at every stage of the research process, to emphasise the rights, independence, dignity and safety of participants in research, and their equality within research relationships.



## Results

For policy and action research that contributes to sustainable development, results are key: the impacts of the research are its *raison d'être*. Theoretical thinking can certainly help improve research and its analysis. But the ultimate purpose for IIED's research is to achieve fairer and more sustainable policies, decisions and institutions. Assessing research excellence therefore involves asking whether the results are useful, and whether their use contributes to these broader aims. This is not just a question of how much research is cited in academic journals, even though citation indices can be important.

The definition of excellence must also recognise the need for sustainable development research to change the policies and practices of NGOs, governments, businesses and international agencies. One indicator lies in communication: examining how effectively results are communicated both to those people who are affected by them and those who can act upon them.



## Process

If the quality of sustainable development research is shaped by its results, it is also defined by its process — how the research is planned and carried out. To be excellent, the research process should be based on principles of partnership, empowerment and sound management. This means encouraging marginalised groups to share control of the research process.

Such groups should be able to define the issues that require research, set research questions, develop research methods, analyse research materials and shape the criteria for assessing its quality. Excellent research involves engaging with individuals and institutions in ways that build relationships, capacity and influence.

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# The practice

Routes to research excellence



High quality research does not happen by accident. Rather, it is the result of a careful process that includes a solid knowledge base, competent use of relevant tools and methodologies, access to appropriate resources, deep reflection and analysis, and the insights of other researchers.

Applying the principles of research excellence to achieve it in practice requires a five-pronged approach that brings together meaningful engagement, review, process management, evaluation and communication. Each is important in its own right but it is only when they are combined that excellent research can really be achieved.

## **Effective engagement**

Excellent research is facilitated and supported by working with others and learning from their experience in a community of knowledge and practice. Traditional academic research has long-valued materials published in peer-reviewed journals as a means of engaging with a knowledge community, and these remain an important source of reliable information. But at IIED, we also value other forms of collaborative relationships. Sometimes, these are pragmatic, focused on partnering with those researchers, at home and abroad, with knowledge, skills or expertise that are not available within the institute.

At other times, our collaborations are informed by a broader ethos of privileging under-valued forms of knowledge: for example, working with individuals and local organisations to draw on their context-specific knowledge of livelihoods in forest ecosystems or environmental health threats in urban areas.

## **Diverse peer review**

Peer review is often held up as the gold standard for ensuring quality in academic publications. And, at IIED, we similarly acknowledge the importance of having our work reviewed by peers. But 'peers' in sustainable development research extend far beyond the traditional definition of other researchers. We have long-recognised the need for peer review to put more emphasis on local knowledge, and on providing the holders of such knowledge with opportunities to judge the validity of our research.

Achieving this in practice requires careful nurturing of trusted relationships in which partners feel able to engage with and critique our work. Ensuring that our work is reviewed by both internal colleagues and a wide range of external peers and partners — including communities, local partners, global policy partners and academic researchers — can help us achieve research excellence.

## Inclusive research management

At IIED we aim to achieve excellence throughout the research process — from posing research problems and questions to collecting and analysing data to building a compelling argument for change. In part, this is about ensuring equitable involvement of partners and participants in shaping the research — setting priorities, choosing methods and disseminating results. But it also includes incorporating ethical considerations by, for example, ensuring prior informed consent of all research participants, being transparent about where funds come from, maintaining research independence and integrity, and respecting the rights of informants and participants.

## Agreed standards

There is no question that the quality of sustainable development research must be both measurable and regularly evaluated. The principles of excellence that we value imply a range of criteria for doing this. Some mirror those used to evaluate academic research. Others still need to be firmly established: for example, measures of stakeholder validation, good process management and usefulness of results. This area of practice remains underexplored by both IIED and our partners. And the lack of agreed criteria, or standards, for quality assurance and evaluation may be limiting the ability of our research to contribute to sustainable development more generally.

## Meaningful communication

Research is useless unless it is used, and its true value will depend in large part on whether the findings are communicated effectively to the different stakeholder groups who are affected by them, or who are in a position to act upon them. To achieve this we need both a theoretical and practical understanding of what different audiences need, and how to meet those needs. Such an understanding is also essential to develop theories of change for individual research projects. This requires thinking about effective communication from the very beginning of a research project.

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# **The future**

Next steps towards excellence



IIED remains committed to developing our understanding of the principles and practice of policy and action research that contributes to sustainable development. We will keep striving to improve the quality of our research processes, outputs and impacts. And we will continue working with other research and policy organisations to identify more appropriate ways of measuring and enhancing research quality.



## Looking in

Within IIED, we will work with staff to strengthen research skills and enhance access to research resources. We will encourage and support our researchers to engage with other communities of research and practice. We will develop supportive, yet rigorous, peer review processes. And we will improve mechanisms for overseeing the research that we do.



## Looking out

Beyond IIED, we will continue to work with communities and researchers in low and middle-income countries to achieve excellent policy and action research that contributes to sustainable development. We are already collaborating with other research organisations to develop a common framework for assessing research excellence based on appropriate criteria, indicators and peer review facilities for work in sustainable development. Together, we want to build capacity for excellent policy and action research that contributes to sustainable development.



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## About this booklet

This booklet summarises our thinking about excellence in sustainable development research, which has been shaped by a range of papers, presentations and discussions with IIED staff, partners and others.

IIED's work on research quality is guided by a cross-institute team that strives to enhance the research skills of our staff, develop agreed frameworks and standards for conducting research, and document the institute's research methods and strength.

For more information about research quality at IIED please contact [info@iied.org](mailto:info@iied.org).



The International Institute for Environment and Development is one of the world's top policy research organisations working in the field of sustainable development. With its broad based network of partners, IIED is helping to tackle the biggest issues of our times — from climate change and cities to the pressures on natural resources and the forces shaping global markets.

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