



PhD SDC
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
AND CLIMATE CHANGE



The Crucial Role of Higher Education for a Sustainable Future

KICK OFF meeting

Cycle 41

Accademia dei Lincei

Auditorium, Accademia dei Lincei, Palazzo

Corsini, Via della Lungara, 10 - Rome

January 23rd 2026

This event explores the transformative role of advanced education and doctoral research in shaping sustainable futures.

As the world faces complex and interconnected challenges— climate change, social inequality, technological disruption—higher education emerges as a powerful driver of innovation, inclusion, and long-term resilience.

Through keynote speeches the program will reflect on how universities and research training can generate positive social impact, empower new generations, and support the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Path for the Future (UN, 2024).

The event also aims to foster dialogue between youths, academia, industry, policymakers, and civil society, highlighting the strategic relevance of doctoral education for the public good and its potential to inform more just and sustainable development pathways.



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8:30 – 9:00 – Registration

09:00 – Welcome and Opening remark

09:15 – Sustainability in Advanced Education

09:15 – 09:30: The Italian National Phd on Sustainability and climate change – **ROBERTO BUIZZA**, PhD SDC Coordinator, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna Pisa

09:30 – 09:45: Researchers as Changemakers: Sustainable Development and Leadership for a Sustainable Future – **DANIELLA TILBURY**, honorary fellow of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge

09:45 – 10:00: Education for sustainability, education for the future – **ENRICO GIOVANNINI**, Scientific director ASViS, Università di Tor Vergata

10:00 – 10:15: Agents of change and the academy: How universities and university actors shape sustainability action – **KRISTY FACCER** – Co-convenor, Higher Education Climate Network of Networks, Director, University of Toronto

10:15 – 10:30: Environmental crisis and public health: the role of education – **PAOLO VINEIS**, Scientific Director Regenerative Society Foundation, Imperial College, London

11:00 – Collaborative effort for Sustainable Future

Panel Discussion Chair: Sonia Filippazzi, RAI

PATRIZIA LOMBARDI, co-chair SDSN Italia, Politecnico di Torino

GIANPAOLO BALSAMO, European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, UK

FILIPPO BETTINI, President, Global Compact Italia

ROXANI ROUSHAS, Global Lead, Youth4climate, United Nations

MARCO GERVASI, Energy System and Industrial Decarbonization JPO, UNIDO

12:30 – Q&A

13:00 – Summary and final remarks



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Abstracts



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Roberto Buizza (PhD-SDC Coordinator) - Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna Pisa (Italy)
The Italian national PhD on sustainability and climate

Higher education can and must play a more decisive role in leading the world towards a more just, sustainable and decarbonized society. The Italian national doctoral training course on sustainable development and climate change (PhD-SDC) has been designed with this main objective in mind. In its programme, education in sustainability and climate is embedded in the educational activities of all students pursuing very different degrees (mathematics, physics, law, economics, philosophy, agriculture, engineering, medicine). Students work in multi-disciplinary teams to investigate, understand and identify possible solutions to issues linked to sustainability and climate. In this talk, I will briefly describe the key characteristics of the PhD-SDC.

Daniella Tilbury, honorary fellow of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge
Researchers as Changemakers: Sustainable Development and Leadership for a Sustainable Future

This keynote argues that much sustainability research, despite its conceptual sophistication and methodological rigour, has functioned primarily as informational rather than transformational. While it has contributed significantly to understanding complex socio-ecological challenges, it has too rarely disrupted dominant problem framings, altered institutional practices, or shifted the conditions under which decisions are made. In a context of accelerating planetary and social crisis, this raises fundamental questions about the role of doctoral research: who shapes research agendas, how inquiry is designed, and to what ends research ultimately contributes. Addressing these questions requires moving beyond research that merely explains the world towards research that actively engages with how the world might be changed. The keynote seeks to reposition doctoral researcher so that it does not perpetuate the status quo but contributes to challenging it. Through this lens, the keynote will invite PhD researchers to interrogate their own research choices and assumptions, and will identify a small set of critical questions that can guide doctoral work beyond contribution to the literature towards meaningful change-making.

Enrico Giovannini, Scientific director ASViS, Università di Tor Vergata
Education for sustainability, education for the future

The keynote speech discusses how futures literacy and education for sustainable development are interrelated, and therefore how they should be integrated into training programmes for tertiary and adult education.

Kristy Facer, Director, University of Toronto
Agents of change and the academy: How universities and university actors shape sustainability action

Most people enrol in sustainability programs because they want to make a meaningful difference with their work, but what does that look like in practice? What pathways exist to facilitate influence and impact? This talk will offer an overview of change agency in higher education and – drawing on the example of higher education in the global climate agenda – argue that universities are uniquely positioned to respond to the grand societal challenges of our time.



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Paolo Vineis, Chair in Environmental Epidemiology, MRC Centre for Environment and Health, School of Public Health, Imperial College London

Environmental crisis and public health: the role of education

The current planetary crisis requires a shift in the way we conceive technology, including the relationships between natural sciences and human sciences. The separation between nature and culture is no longer tenable and a much stronger interactions between the two are required also in higher education. I will provide examples.

Sonia Filippazzi, RAI

Collaborative effort for Sustainable Future

Patrizia Lombardi Politecnico di Torino, Turin, Italy

Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Italy

Higher education is widely acknowledged as a critical catalyst for innovation, social inclusion, and long-term resilience, with a pivotal transformative role in shaping sustainable futures in alignment with the UN Pact for the Future, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, the impact of universities, including and research centers and national laboratories on public policy and society at large remains insufficient and requires further strengthening. In this context, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)—established in 2012 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General—operates at the interface of science, policy, and development practice. Specifically, the mission of the Italian chapter of SDSN is to advance the territorialization of the SDGs, foster sustainable development solutions, facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue, engage youth, and promote sustainable campus operations through education, research, policy analysis, and international cooperation.

Gianpaolo Balsamo, European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, UK

Why our sustainable future requires monitoring the Earth system? What does it mean in practice?

Filippo Bettini, Chairman, UN Global Compact Network Italy

UN Global Compact contribution in shaping the future sustainable business leaders

The global challenges we demand business leaders who can navigate complexity with ethical judgment, sustainable vision and inclusive business practices. With 1.2 billion young people worldwide, this demographic is uniquely positioned to uphold societal, environmental and economic integrity. Developing responsible private sector leaders is imperative for a sustainable future. Business and management schools play a key role in shaping the skills and mindsets of future business leaders. In order to have a real impact on equipping them with the skills needed, UN Global Compact launched in 2007 the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), the largest organised relationship between the United Nations and business schools. In working with forward-thinking higher education institutions, and embedding the Seven Principles of PRME into curricula, research and practice, we ensure that emerging business leaders are prepared to navigate these complexities ethically and sustainably.

Roxani Roushas, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Rome Centre for Climate and Energy

Youth as Architects of Sustainable Futures

Today's youth are the most climate-aware generation in history, yet awareness alone does not deliver systemic change. This intervention explores how young people convert knowledge, values, and concern into tangible climate solutions when enabling environments are in place. Building on UNDP and Youth4Climate experience, it examines the role of inclusive governance, targeted finance, and mentorship in turning youth-led innovation into real-world impact. Investing in youth capacity and agency is central to achieving sustainable development pathways that leave no one behind.



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Marco Gervasi - Energy System and Industrial Decarbonization JPO, United Nations Industrial Development Organization

The importance of higher education in the international cooperation

Higher education plays a critical role in shaping the skills, knowledge and leadership needed to address today's global challenges, including climate change, sustainable development and industrial decarbonization. In the context of international cooperation, universities and advanced training programmes are key enablers of long-term institutional capacity, policy coherence, and technology uptake. Drawing on the experience of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), this intervention will highlight how higher education and advanced professional training can support partner countries in designing and implementing inclusive and sustainable industrial development strategies. Particular attention will be given to the role of interdisciplinary education in bridging energy systems analysis, industrial policy and climate action, and to the importance of linking academic training with real-world policy processes, international partnerships and multilateral cooperation frameworks.



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Short Bio



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Gianpaolo BALSAMO

Gianpaolo Balsamo is Climate scientist at ECMWF and formerly director at WMO, Gianpaolo has worked to advance weather and climate prediction since 2006 and he contributed to setup the Global Greenhouse Gas Watch. His research situates at the crossroads of water energy and carbon cycle for enhancing the Earth system monitoring and predictive capabilities.

Filippo BETTINI

Filippo is the Sustainability Senior Advisor to the Executive Vice Chairman & CEO at Pirelli. Filippo entered Pirelli in 2008 to manage some of the non-core activities of the Group before being appointed Chief Sustainability, Risks Governance and Future Mobility Officer, role which he has covered for the last fifteen years. From 2001 to 2008 he worked in Telecom Italia Group with responsibilities in innovation management until being nominated Chief Strategy Officer. From 1985 to 2001 he worked in biomedical and biotechnology field both in multinational companies and academic research centers. Filippo holds a degree in biomechanical engineering from Politecnico di Milano and a Master in Business Administration from SDA Bocconi University of Milan. He is Chair of the Board of Fondazione Global Compact Network Italia since April 2025, Chair of the Board of CSR Europe and represents Pirelli in World Business Council for Sustainable Development and in the United Nations Road Safety Fund.

Roberto BUIZZA

Roberto Buizza is full Professor in Physics at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna (Pisa) and honorary research Fellow at The Grantham Institute on Climate Change and the Environment of Imperial College (London). In 2022-2023, he served as Scientific Attaché at the Embassy of Italy in the United Kingdom. He is an expert in numerical weather prediction, Earth-system modelling, climate science, ensemble methods and predictability, and since 2020 has been included in the Stanford University list of the top 2% scientists in atmospheric physics and meteorology.

Kristy FACCER

Kristy Facer is the inaugural Director of University of Toronto's President's Advisory Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Sustainability (CECCS) and co-founder of the international Network of Networks (NoN) for climate action in higher education. Dr. Facer is a strategic advisor, trained facilitator, engaged scholar and practitioner with over two decades of experience working on climate and sustainability solutions in Canada and internationally. She holds a PhD from the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business and is interested in how sensemaking, collaboration and organizational processes facilitate positive and societal outcomes.

Sonia FILIPPAZZI

I am a professional journalist at Giornale Radio Rai, where I cover environmental and social issues. I edit and host the programme "L'aria che respiri" (The air you breathe) on Radio 1, dedicated to sustainability, the local area and good practices. I have taught "Communication and Participatory Processes" at Sapienza University of Rome. Previously, I worked for five years at the UN and published "Desertification: A Global Challenge for Sustainable Development".

Marco GERVASI

Marco Gervasi serves as JPO at the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), where he works on energy systems and industrial decarbonization. His journey in international development began nearly a decade ago, contributing to initiatives that expanded access to energy, water and sanitation in Sub-Saharan Africa, and has since supported industrial decarbonization efforts across multiple regions worldwide from both the private and public sector. Alongside his professional work, he served as board member of the European Youth Energy Network (EYEN) and the founder of Green Jobs Tree, through which he has mentored hundreds of young professionals towards careers in renewable energy. He has also served as an IRENA and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs I-ACT Educator, as a Young Energy Ambassador at the European Commission, and as a Youth4Climate Ambassador with the Italian Ministry of Environment and Energy Security.



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Enrico GIOVANNINI

Enrico Giovannini is a full professor of Economic Statistics and Sustainable Development at the University of Rome Tor Vergata and a lecturer at the National School of Administration (SNA). He was Minister of Sustainable Infrastructure and Mobility in the Draghi government (February 2021-October 2022) and Minister of Labour and Social Policies in the Letta government (April 2013-February 2014). He is co-founder and Scientific Director of the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS), a network of over 300 civil society organisations created to implement the UN's 2030 Agenda in Italy. He was Head of Statistics and Chief Statistician at the OECD (2001-2009) and President of ISTAT (2009-2013). In October 2014, he was appointed "Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic" and in January 2023, he received an honorary PhD in "Sustainable Development and Climate Change". He is the author of over 130 articles published in national and international journals and eight books on statistical and economic topics, including *L'Utopia Sostenibile* (Laterza, 2018), *Quel mondo diverso* with F. Barca (Laterza, 2020) and *I ministri tecnici non esistono* (Laterza, 2023).

Patrizia LOMBARDI

Patrizia Lombardi (PhD, MSc, BA/MA) is Full Professor of Project Evaluation and Vice-Rector for Sustainable Campus and Living lab at the Polytechnic University of Turin, where she has also served as Head of the Interuniversity Department of Urban and Regional Studies and Planning since 2018 and Deputy Rector of PoliTo since 2021. President and co-founder of the Italian network of universities for sustainable development (RUS) since 2024 is currently co-chair of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Italy. She is an established figure in the field of evaluating sustainable development in planning and the built environment for over 30 years, publishing widely in the subject area and coordinating, or serving as lead partner, in a number of Pan-European Projects.

Roxani ROUSHAS

Roxani Roushas is the Global Lead of the Youth4Climate initiative, co-led by UNDP and the Government of Italy. The initiative works to identify, amplify, support and scale youth-led climate breakthroughs and provides financial and technical resources to youth-led innovations. Prior to taking on this role, Roxani was based in Jordan with UNDP's Regional Innovation Team for Arab States, supporting initiatives on youth-led innovation, women's digital entrepreneurship, and enhancing country-level development programming through the use of foresight, behavioural science and systems thinking. Roxani has also worked with UNDP Somalia, the Delegation of the European Union to the African Union, and the International Labour Organization. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and Politics from the University of Essex and a Master of Science in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford.

Daniella TILBURY

Professor Daniella Tilbury is an academic leader, policy expert, and educator in sustainable development, widely credited with having defined initial sustainable development frameworks (Cambridge 1993). A passionate advocate for sustainability, Daniella played a pivotal role on the Board of WWF Australia, helping to establish the globally recognised Earth Hour in 2007. Before becoming HM Government of Gibraltar's first Commissioner for Sustainable Development in 2018, Professor Tilbury held senior academic leadership roles including Rector, Vice-Chancellor, Dean, Director of Research, and Chair across universities in the Europe, Australia and Asia. She was the Chair of the UN Global Expert Evaluation Group for the UN Decade in ESD. Her work has been recognised through numerous prizes, awards, and honorary degrees spanning more than 35 years. She is a Fellow (Hon) of St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge, an adviser to the European Commission on learning for sustainability, and the UK government's focal point to the UN Economic Commission for Europe on education and the environment.

Paolo VINEIS

Paolo Vineis is Chair of Environmental Epidemiology at Imperial College, London. His research activities focus on investigating biomarkers from omic platforms (including metabolomics and epigenetics) in large epidemiological studies. He is Scientific Director, Regenerative Society Foundation, Italy.