



RECAP OF

THE ICRS EXCHANGE

2025

#ICRSExchange25

Executive Summary

- The ICRS Exchange 2025 brought together members and sustainability leaders under the theme **Sustainability on Trial: Time to Prove the Payoff**. With a strong attendance of over 150 attendees, the Exchange offered an excellent networking & learning space for practitioners. With diverse speakers and a first-time exhibition, the event offered practical insights and inspiration for demonstrating sustainability's real world impact.
- **Feedback from attendees** highlighted the excellent mix of topics discussed, with particularly positive comments on the standout keynote speakers at the beginning and close of this year's event. The workshops held were well received, with a notably high demand for more of these in the future.
- **Adam Elman (Google)** opened with a powerful keynote on sustainability as a growth driver and AI as a key accelerator.
- The following **breakout sessions** offered to attendees explored topics including AI in sustainability, collaboration across value chains, leadership for resilience, community investment trends, and social value storytelling.
- The day closed with **Louisa Harris (Curiously Liminal)**, who inspired attendees to embrace courageous, adaptive leadership and nurture imagination in shaping sustainable futures.



Sustainability On Trial: Time to Prove the Payoff



Adam Elman, FICRS

Director of Sustainability - EMEA

Google



Overview: Adam Elman discussed how businesses can leverage sustainability to drive resilience, growth and measurable value. He highlighted the urgency of climate action amid economic turbulence, geopolitical risks and severe climate impacts, emphasising that sustainability is both a risk mitigator and a growth driver.

Topics explored:

- **Climate urgency:** Climate change threatens a 50% projected loss in GDP by 2070-2090 without action. Turbulence has arisen from crises, regulation and competition, which makes sustainability critical. Major economies are already taking action and businesses are increasingly integrating climate strategy with measurable returns on investment.
- **Acceleration strategies:**
 - Strategic mandate: Embedding sustainability in governance and core operations for auditable ROI.
 - Risk-to-value pivot: Adaptation and mitigation support operational efficiency and stability.
 - AI as a growth engine: Innovation and market expansion can be expedited through AI, data and engineering rigor.
- **Technology in action - Google initiatives:** With progress towards 24/7 carbon-free energy, Google is making major strides in technological innovation for a sustainable future. Google maps routing alone has saved 2.7M tonnes CO₂ from road traffic journeys made by individuals as well as supply chain drivers. Spatial data has also contributed to a significant contrail reduction in aviation, whilst solar API is accelerating solar deployment (6M tonnes GHG avoided). A partnership between Unilever & Google Cloud for holistic eco-impact and flood forecasting has supported community and business resilience and continuity, demonstrating the power of collaboration in innovation.

Key takeaways:

1. **Sustainability drives measurable business value.** Embedding climate strategy into operations, innovation and AI delivers ROI, operational efficiency and market growth.
2. **Technology and data are critical accelerators.** AI and digital tools provide quantifiable impact, from carbon reduction to supply chain resilience and disaster preparedness.

Sustainability On Trial: Time to Prove the Payoff



Jennie Galbraith FICRS

ICRS Chair



Adam Elman FICRS

Director of
Sustainability EMEA,
Google



Cressida Curtis

Group Sustainability
Director, Wates



Marcus Ward

Investment Director,
Inflexion



Maria-Yassin Jah

Transition Finance Lead,
SLR Consulting



Overview: The panel explored how businesses can leverage sustainability to create meaningful social, environmental and financial impact. Jennie described it as one of the greatest opportunities for organisations today.

Key takeaways:

1. Cressida highlighted the value of embedding sustainability across business functions, from finance to commercial teams, and using it to drive new business streams, social impact and first-mover advantage, while also emphasising the power of peer networks and culture-building.
2. Maria focused on scaling new energy technologies, such as hydrogen, solar and wind, stressing the need for collaboration between companies and governments, strengthening supply chain resilience and human rights protections.
3. Adam underscored the importance of prioritising key areas, setting long-term goals, reporting progress transparently and forming partnerships across sectors.
4. Marcus highlighted that companies with strong sustainability strategies are often well-run, and that measurable tracking and executive ownership are essential for long-term success.

Overall:

The discussion highlighted the role of AI, data and technology in scaling impact and demonstrating tangible ROI, showing that collaboration and intentional integration of sustainability are critical for both business and social value.

AI for Sustainability: Innovation with Integrity



Robbie Epsom FICRS

ICRS Board Director

Facilitator



Souvik Ghosh

Director of

Global Sustainability



Lena Chauhan

Founder

RiseIQ

Overview: Lena Chauhan and Souvik Ghosh discussed the intersection of AI and sustainability, emphasising that AI is a powerful but complex tool that must be guided by human judgement. They highlighted the responsibility of sustainability professionals to engage with AI from the start, ensuring ethical use, transparency and positive social and environmental outcomes. While AI can improve efficiency and scale impact, it is not a silver bullet - systems can produce biased or flawed results if not properly overseen, and human oversight remains essential.

Topics explored:

- **AI value creation:** AI can support credible and timely sustainability disclosures, provide predictive insights on climate, supply chain and compliance risks. Ultimately, these benefits lead to greater efficiency across reporting cycles and better scenario planning for strategic decision-making.
- **Governing AI:** Organisations should ensure board-level oversight of AI in sustainability, transparency in disclosures, ensuring audit-readiness and alignment with standards such as ISSB and CSDR. To secure external validation, stakeholders, auditors and raters should be engaged with innovation strategy proactively and ahead of time.
- **Recognising AI within ESG practice:** Whilst traditional ESG activities and reporting are the visible parts of ESG practice, massive AI infrastructures driving these decisions, and creating new opportunities and challenges mostly go unnoticed by practitioners.

Key takeaways:

1. **Embed AI governance and ethics into existing ESG processes**, instead of creating parallel frameworks. This includes Risk Assessment Integration, Impact Measurement Evolution, Stakeholder Voice Amplification, and Ethical Design Principles. Sustainability professionals must be involved from the start to guide AI ethically, ensure transparency, and shape it as a force for good.
2. **AI is a tool, not a solution.** While it can enhance efficiency and impact, human judgement and critical thinking are essential to mitigate risks and biases.

Partnering for Progress: Amplifying Impact and Co-Benefits Across the Value Chain



Stephanie Taviner FICRS

ICRS Board Director

Facilitator



Julie Rousseau

Corporate Partnerships Manager

CARE International



Amanda Smith

Global Head of Social Impact

Diageo

Overview: This session explored the decade-long partnership between CARE International and Diageo, demonstrating how collaboration can advance gender equality, inclusivity and climate resilience across global value chains. The discussion highlighted practical strategies, measurable impacts and lessons learned in creating sustainable, inclusive programs for communities and businesses.

Topics explored:

- **Partnership and purpose:** Multi-year NGO-corporate collaboration with embedded inclusion strategies, combining thought leadership, impact programs and advocacy.
- **Programme outcomes:** The programme has resulted in support for women smallholder farmers, people with disabilities and communities affected by climate change through support to increase skills, leadership and livelihoods. Quantitative and qualitative indicators show improved gender norms, higher women's participation in decision-making and increased household income across Africa.
- **Scaling and systems change:** The speakers discussed strategies for long-term impact, cross-sector collaboration and funding models to scale-up and expand reach.
- **Case Studies:** Success stories including women-led transformations and community engagement through male champions and dialogue sessions.

Key takeaways:

1. **Collaborative, purpose-driven partnerships** can create measurable social and economic benefits to transform communities while simultaneously enhancing business resilience.
2. **Intentional, data-informed programs addressing gender norms and climate resilience** require time, trust and community engagement to deliver sustainable, systemic change.

Leadership Skills for 2030 and Beyond: Ways of Thinking, Being and Doing in a Rapidly Changing World



Sima Varsani FICRS

ICRS Board Director

Facilitator



Caty Batten

Co-founder and Director

Intaconnected

Overview: This workshop examined the business case for setting ambition ‘beyond sustainability’ and embracing a ‘Net Positive’ paradigm. To support the transition of organisations from risk to resilience, the session explored frameworks and principles designed to equip participants with the skills needed to navigate increasing complexity, while maintaining a focus on business-critical outcomes for climate, nature and people. Attendees were encouraged to draw on their own capabilities to lead progress, adopting new ways of thinking, being, and doing.

Tactics and Trends in Corporate Community Investment



Vic Taylor

ICRS Board Director

Facilitator



Jeremy Gould

Senior Corporate Growth Manager

Charities Aid Foundation

Overview: Jeremy Gould shared insights from [CAF's Corporate Giving 2025 report](#), covering trends, challenges and strategies in corporate community investment. The session explored employee expectations, giving practices, trends in donations and examples of effective corporate philanthropy.

Topics explored:

- **Employee expectations vs employer perceptions:** 16% of business leaders feel pressure to deliver social impact, while 70% of employees expect their employer to address social challenges.
- **Corporate giving trends:** UK businesses donated £4.26bn in 2024, which was largely flat compared to 2023. Cash giving declined, whilst in-kind contributions rose, and only 24 FTSE 100 companies donated $\geq 1\%$ of their pre-tax profits to charity.
- **Strategic giving:** 93% of FTSE 100 companies have giving strategies. To maximise their own impact, Landsec partnered with CAF to design a strategy supporting young people from underrepresented backgrounds.

Key takeaways:

1. **Businesses often underestimate the importance of social impact to employees.** However, aligning giving with workforce expectations enhances engagement and improves workplace culture.
2. **Strategic, data-driven approaches to corporate giving** can significantly amplify impact and help address societal challenges whilst maximising resources.

Social Value Fireside: Evolving Expectations and Emerging Strategies



Andrew Wilson FICRS

ICRS Board Director

Facilitator



Caron Dunlop FICRS

Regional Head of Social Value

Mott MacDonald



Charlotte Turner

Founder

Bean Research

Overview: Caron Dunlop FICRS and Charlotte Turner explored how social value is evolving as a key focus for organisations, emphasising its ultimate purpose to positively impact people's lives. While the topic is complex, the panel highlighted the importance of keeping messaging simple, clear and human-centric. A straw poll showed that social value is gaining traction across organisations, and the discussion underscored the need to combine human stories with data to secure stakeholder buy-in. Caron also highlighted the rapid growth of social value as a career path and emphasised the importance of education and training to prepare the next generation of professionals.

Topics explored:

- **Social value gaining momentum:** Across organisational strategy, outreach and types of professions emerging, the importance of social value as an expectation of various stakeholders is becoming increasingly evident.
- **Storytelling for impact:** The most impactful stories around social value come from human voices, the effects of which are further compounded by use of clear data. Storytelling in this format is key to ensuring stakeholders understand and invest in social value.
- **Work for good:** Ultimately, the human benefit of social value strategy and investment is what makes it so critical to operating in today's complex political landscape. The human element of this work is also what attracts talent to these roles and what engages stakeholders and investment.

Key takeaways:

1. **Keep social value human-centric:** Use clear messaging and combine stories with data to engage stakeholders and drive meaningful impact.
2. **Invest in the future workforce:** Support education and career pathways to cultivate the next generation of social value professionals

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Aim, Align, Amplify: How to Sharpen Your Professional Brand for Greater Impact

Overview: In today's crowded workplace, impact comes from more than hard work. A clear and consistent professional brand makes the difference between being heard and being overlooked. In this interactive workshop attendees were taught a simple framework and provided with practical steps to help sharpen their brand and increase their impact. A key takeaway from Karin is that your professional brand is what people say about the value you deliver and what it is like to work with you based on what they see and hear from you.



Karin Mueller

Founder and CEO

Liebfrog



Courageous Leadership in Challenging Times



Louisa Harris

Founder

Curiously Liminal

Overview: Louisa explored what it means to lead courageously in the face of complex sustainability and societal challenges. Drawing on insights from Gus Speth and other thought leaders, the session highlighted the tension between greed, apathy and the urgent need for collaborative, resilient action. The discussion emphasised the importance of courage, adaptive leadership and futures literacy - the ability to imagine and plan for positive futures while navigating uncertainty. Topics included bridging perspectives, maintaining influence and advocacy, and reframing sustainability narratives to engage both hearts and minds. Participants also reflected on the difference between passive and active hope, underlining that meaningful change requires both vision and actionable commitment.

Topics explored:

- **Maintaining influence and advocacy:** Using 4-tiered systems thinking model, outlining top to bottom: 1) react 2) anticipate, 3) design and 4) transform, practitioners can consider how best to influence and actively advocate for a sustainable future.
- **Active hope:** In thinking about the ways to face the mess we are in without going crazy, Joanna Macy's 'active hope' can provide some assurance and a useful exercise for recentering amid a complex and fast-moving landscape. This could look like thinking about one small step you can take in the next week, something you would like to do to make a difference or simply practicing gratitude for what you already have. These exercises are important to one's personal mindset as well as supporting professional goals.

Key takeaways:

1. **Courageous, adaptive leadership is essential:** Leading with heart, resilience and collaboration allows individuals and organisations to act effectively despite uncertainty and limited resources.
2. **Futures literacy and reframing are critical:** Imagining positive futures and connecting them to practical structures helps bridge perspectives, maintain influence and inspire actionable change in sustainability and society.

