Maximizing Research Impact, Minimizing Waste: The Case for Explicit Priority Setting in Advancing Sustainable Development

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Abstract: This paper does not argue against the value of serendipitous discovery or blue-sky research—indeed, many life-changing technological advances have emerged from curiosity-driven exploration and such approaches will always have a critical place in research. However, in today's context of escalating social, economic, and ecological crises, this must be balanced with research that is deliberately designed to inform real-world decisions and contribute to sustainable development broadly defined as the capacity to pursue economic growth and social progress in ways that safeguard ecological systems and ensure intergenerational equity. Despite growing expectations for research to demonstrate real-world impact, explicit impact reporting remains rare in peer-reviewed literature. Well-documented barriers—including the time lag between research and impacts, attribution challenges, and limited capacity to monitor long-term effects—contribute to this gap. Yet an equally critical, and less acknowledged, obstacle is the persistent lack of transparent research priority setting. Most studies do not begin by identifying the concrete decision choices faced by policymakers, service providers, or communities for which research is needed, nor do they assess whether existing evidence is sufficient to guide those decisions or whether new research is necessary and strategically justified. As a result, research often proceeds without a clear understanding of its intended use—diminishing relevance, undermining potential impact, and missing opportunities to support sustainability goals. This study systematically reviewed 60 publications from the OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development to assess the extent to which they incorporated explicit research priority setting or reported research impact. Using Boolean search methods, articles were analysed by year, country of origin, theme, outcome types, and attention to impact and priority-setting practices. While countries such as South Africa and Indonesia were well represented, West Africa—despite being a stated priority for OIDA—was entirely absent, highlighting potential disparities in research capacity, access, or institutional support. More strikingly, none of the reviewed studies clearly articulated the decision dilemmas they aimed to inform, nor did they distinguish between generating knowledge for its own sake and producing evidence to guide action. This disconnect reinforces a troubling pattern in which valuable research investments risk being wasted—through duplication, irrelevance, or failure to influence policy and practice in ways that advance sustainability. To address this, research design must be flipped: rather than starting with filling evidence or knowledge gaps, it must begin with the real-world decision choices or dilemmas that users face in striving for sustainable economic, social, and ecological outcomes. OIDA is uniquely positioned to lead this shift by embedding structured priority-setting into its journal publication and conference presentation criteria. Frameworks such as the Lowitja Institute's Research for Impact Tool offer practical models for aligning research with user decision choices and implementation contexts. Transforming research from a knowledge-generating exercise into a decision-informing strategy will require systemic change—but it is both possible and urgent. Through strategic leadership, OIDA and other journal editors and conference organisers can help reduce research waste, enhance the return on investment, and reshape the international research landscape toward greater equity, sustainability, and real-world impact.

Introduction

The evidence is overwhelming that much of the research conducted globally fails to generate meaningful societal value. Nowhere is this failure more evident than in health and medical research, where the stakes are literally life and death. Alarmingly, up to 85% of health research is estimated to be avoidably wasted—equivalent to approximately $170 billion annually, or the GDP of a mid-sized nation (Chalmers & Glasziou, 2016). This waste stems from preventable issues such as unpublished findings, poorly designed studies, and research outputs that lack clarity, relevance, or practical applicability. At every stage of the research process—from inception to dissemination—opportunities for waste abound. The consequences are particularly severe in resource-constrained settings, where every wasted dollar is a dollar diverted from urgent social, economic, or ecological needs. Beyond the financial cost, research waste represents a missed opportunity to generate evidence that could help societies pursue development pathways that balance economic growth, social progress, and environmental stewardship.

The health and medical research community has begun addressing these inefficiencies, as illustrated by *The Lancet*'s landmark series on research waste, which outlines key challenges and proposes actionable solutions across the research cycle—from funding decisions to the dissemination of unbiased, accessible findings (Chalmers et al., 2014; Ioannidis et al., 2014; Salman et al., 2014; Chan et al., 2014; Glasziou et al., 2014). This movement aligns with the principles of evidence-based practice, which has transformed medical decision-making by grounding it in reliable evidence. However, the issue extends beyond health research. Fields such as international development face similar inefficiencies (Georgeou & Hawksley, 2020). Tasked with addressing global challenges—ranging from poverty reduction to climate resilience—these disciplines increasingly require research that translates into tangible, real-world impact in support of sustainable development. This shift resonates with strengths-based approaches to research engagement, which emphasize co-design, stakeholder involvement, and translational research to maximize societal and ecological benefits (Tsey, 2019).

The push for societal impact is driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Many researchers are motivated by a moral obligation to ensure their work serves the greater good. However, this intrinsic motivation is now reinforced by external pressures from governments, funding bodies, and the public, who demand evidence of tangible benefits. For instance, the Australian Research Council (ARC) requires grant applicants to demonstrate not only the quality of their work but also its societal impact (ARC, 2020). Through the ARC's case study approach, researchers must articulate clear narratives about their impact, specifying who benefits, how, and to what extent. While assessing impact retrospectively is challenging, these evolving requirements signal a shift in research norms: scholarship must increasingly justify its value in terms of real-world outcomes that advance equity, sustainability, and resilience (Tsey et al., 2019; Jefferson et al., 2024).

This emphasis on impact is reshaping global research norms. Ethical imperatives and altruistic motivations now intersect with pragmatic realities: in a world of finite resources and escalating crises, research must demonstrate tangible societal and ecological value to secure funding and maintain public trust. While the expectation that research should be relevant is not new, the scale and urgency of this demand are unprecedented. The global sustainability agenda—anchored in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—requires that research not only expand knowledge but also actively contribute to safeguarding ecological systems and ensuring intergenerational equity.

For First Nations Australians, this urgency is particularly poignant. The historical legacy of being "researched to death without benefit" has fostered deep mistrust of researchers and institutions (Tsey, 2001; Thomas et al., 2014). This distrust became seared into my consciousness in the 1990s when First Nations colleagues challenged me with stark clarity: "What are you doing with those research mob? We've been researched to death without any benefits—except for the researchers, who get their PhDs and become professors." Their words echoed my own father's probing questions decades earlier in our village in Ghana: "If we send you to school, and you cannot make what you learn relevant to our needs, then what is the point of sending you?" These challenges—one personal, the other professional—shaped my lifelong commitment to ensuring research serves the communities it seeks to study and contributes to their sustainable futures.

In response, I collaborated with First Nations leaders to create frameworks and institutions that prioritize Indigenous control over research agendas. This partnership led to the establishment of the Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs) for Aboriginal health (Tsey, 2001), which evolved into the Lowitja Institute—the only national Indigenous-controlled

research organization in Australia (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & The Lowitja Institute, 2017). At its core, this initiative represents a radical shift: research agendas driven by community priorities. To support this transformation, we developed a research-for-impact tool (Tsey et al., 2017), along with practical resources such as funding templates and training courses (The Lowitja Institute, 2020; Whiteside et al., 2021; Watkin Lui et al., 2022), to enable researchers to systematically plan for and demonstrate the impact of their work. The Lowitja Institute also pioneered an innovative funding model by directly awarding research funds to First Nations communities, allowing them to select researchers to co-produce studies aligned with their priorities—ensuring greater relevance and impact (Holland et al., 2024). This shift represents a critical step toward improving research value and reducing waste. Crucially, it also highlights how explicit priority setting can help research contribute to sustainability by aligning knowledge generation with long-term community wellbeing and environmental stewardship.

Drawing on these and related experiences, this paper addresses three critical issues relating to the broader challenge of improving research value while reducing waste. First, a systematic scoping of *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* papers reveal that, like other disciplines, sustainable development researchers rarely report the societal or ecological impact of their work, despite rising expectations. Second, I propose a priority-setting framework to align research with the immediate needs of decision-makers, ensuring that outputs translate more seamlessly into actionable decisions rather than remaining unused evidence. Third, I outline concrete steps that funding agencies, journal editors and conference organizers can take to inspire the cultural transformation necessary to reduce waste and enhance impact in sustainable development research—and in research more broadly.

Methods & Materials

The aim of the study is to assess the extent to which publications in the *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* explicitly incorporate research priority setting and/or report research impact. To do so, this study involved first identifying all publications in the journal relating to research impact and/or priority setting, examining their key characteristics, and assessing the extent to which they explicitly incorporate priority setting or reported impact. It is important to distinguish research impact from impact evaluation (Tsey et al., 2019; Kinchin et al., 2017).

- Research impact refers to the tangible contributions that research makes beyond academia, influencing society, policy, health, the environment, or the economy. It encompasses how research informs decision-making, shapes practice, and generates real-world benefits over time.
- Impact evaluation, in contrast, is a structured program evaluation methodology used to assess the effectiveness of a specific intervention, program, or policy. It systematically examines causal attribution within a defined timeframe, employing rigorous assessment frameworks to determine whether observed changes can be directly linked to the intervention. While research impact can be diffuse and indirect, impact evaluation focuses on establishing causality (Tsey et al., 2019).

Similarly, explicit research priority setting refers to a structured process used to identify and prioritize research areas based on criteria such as relevance, feasibility, and potential impact. This process often involves deliberate decision-making guided by stakeholder consultations, evidence reviews, and formal ranking systems (Tsey et al., 2017). The objective is to align research efforts with pressing societal needs to maximize benefits.

A systematic search of *International Journal of Sustainable Development* publications was conducted using Boolean search techniques (Bramer et al., 2018) to identify relevant papers. The following search terms were applied, using parentheses and quotation marks as necessary:

- research impact
- research engagement
- research priority setting
- research translation
- knowledge translation
- research communication
- research benefit versus cost
- cost-benefit
- cost versus benefit

An initial search, conducted without time restrictions, identified 133 publications, accessed directly via the simple search function on the Ontario International Development Agency (OIDA) website.

During the screening process, one duplicate publication (Albintani, 2016) was identified, reducing the dataset to 132 unique publications. Screening began with the most recent publications, revealing consistent trends across the dataset. Given this uniformity, the review was narrowed to papers published between 2015 and 2025, focusing on the most recent decade. This refinement produced a final dataset of 60 publications, which were analysed based on:

1. Year of publication
2. Country of origin
3. Research themes
4. Types of reported outcomes
5. Extent to which research incorporated explicit priority setting and/or reported impact

The decision to limit the review to the past decade is justified by the increasing global expectation that researchers demonstrate the impact of their work. This expectation has gained significant traction, particularly following the United Kingdom's formal adoption of research impact assessments in 2014, which has influenced research evaluation frameworks worldwide (Jefferson et al., 2024).

Results

Publication Trends

The number of publications varied across the years, ranging from a low of one (n=1) in 2021—likely due to COVID-19 restrictions and reduced opportunities for in-person interactions, including academic conferences—to a peak of eleven (n=11) in 2024. The median number of publications per year was six (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Number of publications per year
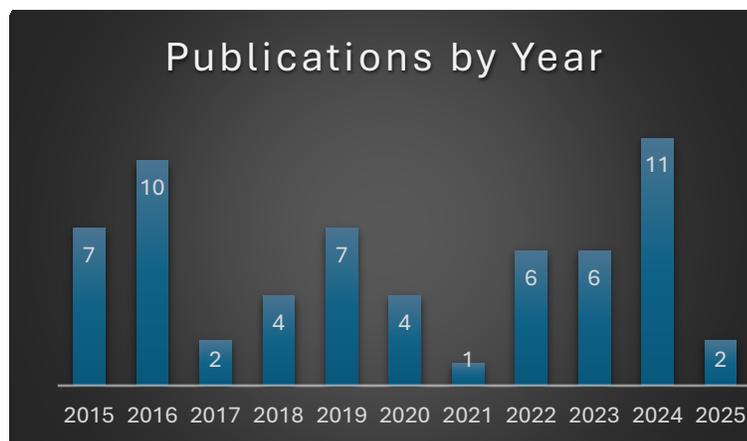
Geographic Distribution

The country of origin, determined by the main researcher's affiliation, revealed a notable geographic concentration of research output. South Africa (n=21) and Indonesia (n=14) were the most prolific contributors, collectively accounting for nearly half of all publications. Other notable contributors included India (n=8), Iran (n=5), and Malaysia (n=2). The remaining 10 countries—Ethiopia, Germany, Greece, Kenya, Namibia, the Philippines, Qatar, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe—each contributed one publication (n=1) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of publications by country of origin
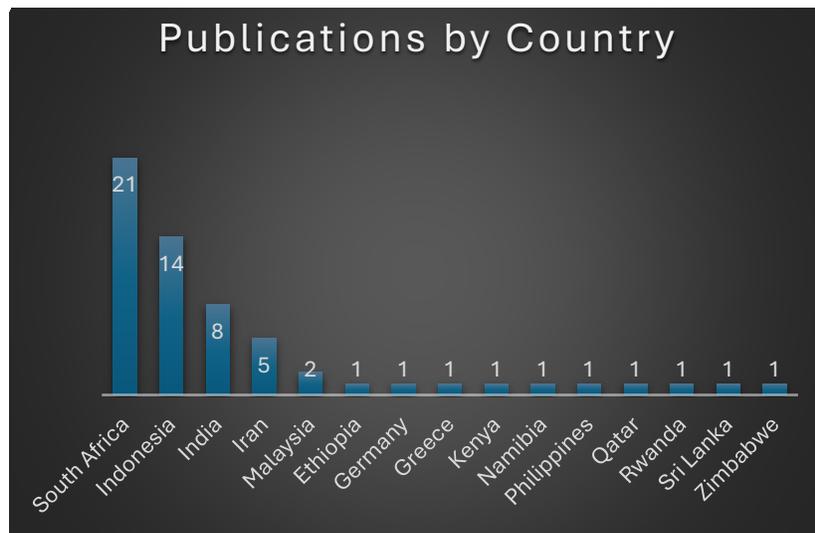
Thematic Focus

A diverse range of research themes emerged, with economic issues (n=12) being the most dominant, covering topics such as economic development and financial policies. Education (n=6) was another major focus, followed by crime, environment, health, and urban design/urban development (each n=4). Other topics included:

- Civil safety, finance, human rights, and law (each n=3)

- Agriculture, business, and sustainable development (each n=2)

- Unique specialized themes (n=8), including accounting, child car safety, commerce, local governance, mining, relationships, research & development, and society (Figure 3).

This distribution reflects a broad spectrum of research interests while indicating limited engagement with certain critical areas such as agriculture and sustainability.

Figure 3: Publications by themes
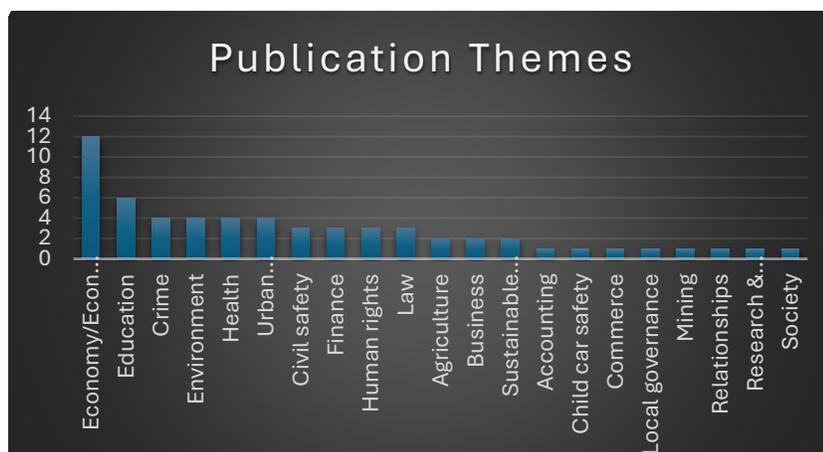
Reported Research Outcomes

The analysis of reported outcomes revealed ten broad categories, including:

- Economic & Financial Impact
- Governance & Policy Influence
- Education & Knowledge Development
- Environmental & Sustainability Impact
- Urban Planning & Infrastructure
- Health & Well-being
- Social & Cultural Effects
- Crime & Safety Measures
- Human Rights & Gender Equality
- Technological & Digital Advancements

Among these, Economic & Financial Impact, Governance & Policy Influence, and Education & Knowledge Development were the most frequently reported outcomes, highlighting a strong focus on economic growth, regulatory frameworks, and knowledge dissemination. Environmental & Sustainability Impact and Urban Planning & Infrastructure also featured prominently, reflecting concerns about climate resilience and efficient urban development. Other outcomes, such as Crime & Safety Measures and Human Rights & Gender Equality, emphasize the importance of justice, security, and inclusivity, while Technological & Digital Advancements highlight the growing role of innovation and digital transformation in various sectors (Figure 4).

Figure 4: **Reported outcome types**
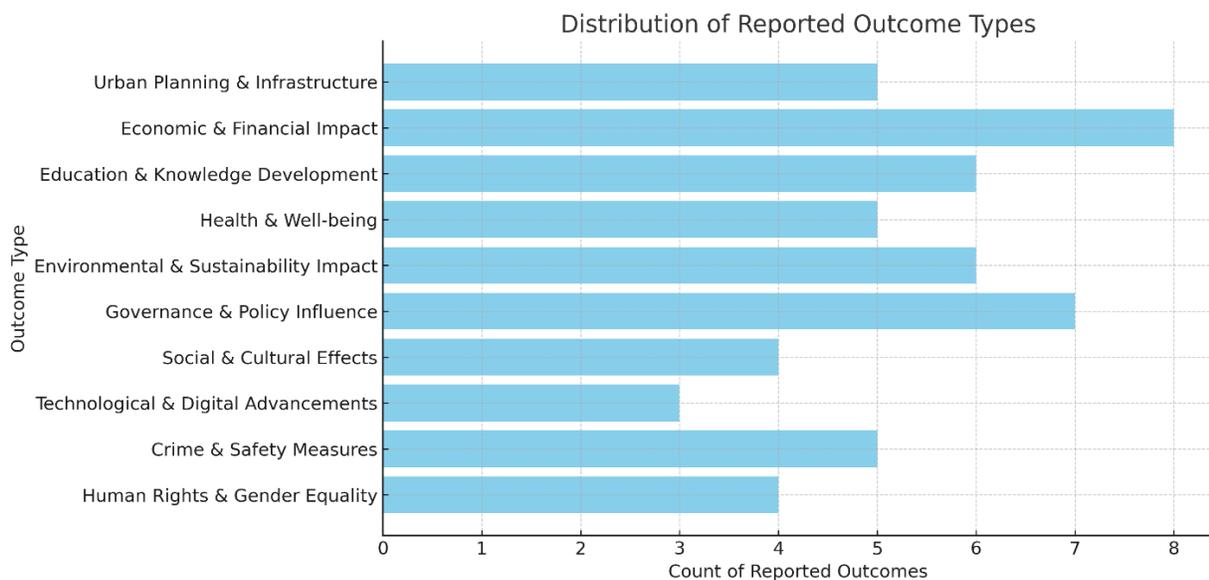
This diverse range of outcomes underscores the interdisciplinary nature of research and its broad societal applications. However, despite this emphasis on various sectors, none of the studies explicitly incorporated priority setting or reported research impact as defined in this paper (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Explicit priority setting and impact reporting
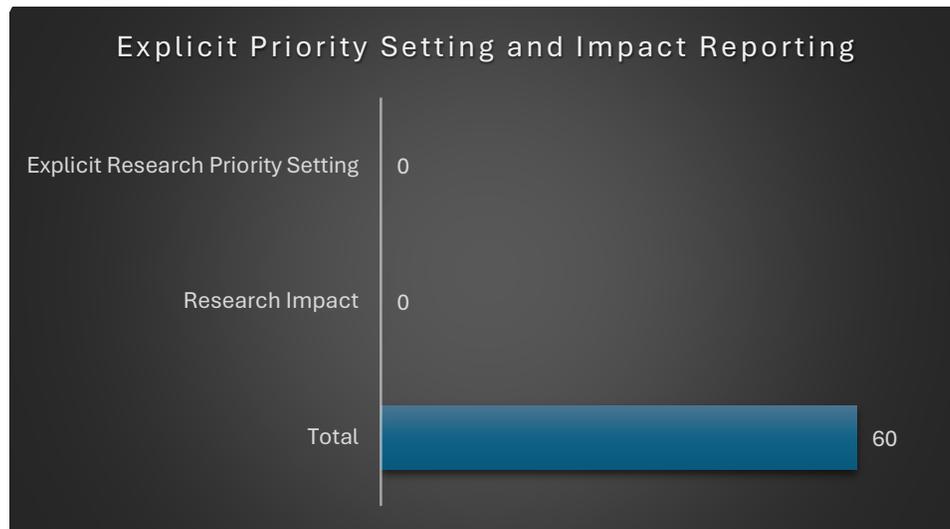
This finding highlights a critical gap in systematically assessing how research translates into tangible societal benefits and informs decision-making processes. Addressing this gap requires a more deliberate approach to impact reporting and priority setting within sustainable development research.

Discussion and Conclusion

This review reveals notable geographic patterns in sustainable development research. South Africa and Indonesia feature prominently, while regions with comparable socio-economic challenges—particularly West Africa—remain underrepresented. Such imbalances reflect entrenched academic networks, uneven research capacity, and misaligned funding priorities. For development organisations like OIDA, this raises a critical question: are current mechanisms truly enabling global participation, or are they inadvertently reinforcing disparities in the very regions they aim to support?

Beyond geographic distribution, a more pressing concern is the absence of explicit research impact reporting and structured priority-setting. Analysis of 60 papers from the *International Journal of Sustainable Development* highlights a systemic issue: while many studies target pressing societal challenges, none explicitly employ priority-setting frameworks or clearly distinguish between research impact (real-world change informed by research) and impact evaluation (assessment of interventions). This is more than a technical oversight. For funders and decision-makers increasingly accountable for outcomes, the lack of clarity compromises strategic investment and undermines the potential of research to inform better policies and practices in support of sustainability goals.

This pattern is not unique. Similar shortcomings are well documented across fields, including First Nations research (Bainbridge et al., 2015; Kinchin et al., 2017; Tsey et al., 2017), global health, and development studies (Heyeres et al., 2019; Yinghong et al., 2018). Researchers often aim to contribute to improved decisions and services, yet few provide concrete evidence of such impact. Time lags, attribution challenges, and limited systems for tracking long-term change are part of the explanation. More fundamentally, the dominant model of research still treats impact as an eventual by-product of a well-executed study rather than as the central organising principle (Tsey et al., 2019; Jefferson et al., 2024).

A crucial but under-recognised issue is the lack of transparent, up-front priority-setting. Rarely do research proposals begin with the concrete decision dilemmas or competing choices that funders, policymakers, or communities need answered. Nor do they systematically ask whether existing evidence is already sufficient to address those questions. Without this, research investments risk being misaligned, duplicative, or ultimately irrelevant (Tsey et al., 2017). The assumption that participatory, translational, or well-implemented research will automatically generate impact has proved misguided. Without structured processes for identifying user needs, studies too often default to filling conceptual gaps rather than producing actionable knowledge.

If repeating the same process and expecting different results is the definition of insanity, continuing to fund research that does not start with decision-makers' needs is a missed opportunity. The research design process must instead be

flipped (Shibasaki et al., 2019): beginning not with academic questions but with the real decision choices that users face (Tsey et al., 2017). The Lowitja Institute's Research for Impact Tool provides one proven, practical framework for this shift (Tsey et al., 2017). By identifying decision dilemmas, assessing whether existing evidence is adequate, and commissioning new research only where genuine gaps exist, this approach ensures that investment leads directly to better decisions—whether by individuals, services, communities, or governments.

For funders and development organisations, the implications are far-reaching. Embedding structured priority-setting into funding calls, project assessments, and accountability mechanisms can enhance the strategic relevance of research, reduce duplication, improve outcomes, and maximise returns on investment. More importantly, it creates the conditions for research to serve as a genuine driver of sustainable development—aligning with the urgent need to balance economic growth, social progress, and ecological stewardship while ensuring intergenerational equity.

While this review focuses on a single journal, the consistency of its findings with broader literature strengthens their generalisability. Serendipitous discovery will always remain essential, but it must be balanced with targeted, decision-driven research capable of meeting today's urgent social and environmental challenges. To reliably deliver the insights, actions, and outcomes that funders, policymakers, and communities increasingly expect, research must begin with the decisions that matter most, assess the adequacy of existing knowledge, and commit from the outset to producing evidence that informs action.

Transforming research into a decision-informing strategy is both possible and urgent. Only by reducing waste, enhancing relevance, and embedding sustainability at the core of research design can we ensure that knowledge generation translates into equitable, real-world impact—advancing economic and social progress while safeguarding ecological systems for generations to come.

Acknowledgements

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