

Symposium on Corporate Responsibility & Responsible Investment: Past, Present, and Future

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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Hosted by

High Meadows Institute and Columbia University's Sustainable Investing Research Initiative (SIRI), in partnership with the Corporate Responsibility Initiative (CRI) at the Harvard Kennedy School



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Introduction

Over five decades, Corporate Responsibility (CR) and Responsible Investment (RI)* have evolved from peripheral initiatives to institutionalized fields with a global influence on corporate governance, strategy, capital allocation, disclosure, and stewardship.

Yet, at a time of political polarization, climate acceleration, geopolitical fragmentation, rising inequality, and technological disruption, the question is no longer whether the fields have matured, but whether they can drive the system-level thinking and large-scale systemic change required to transition to a more inclusive, sustainable low-carbon economy.

This symposium proceeds from this system-change hypothesis: it assumes that the next stage of progress will require a commitment to a systemic change strategy that can engage the core of the capital market system and key industry value chains and policy ecosystems.

Day 1 focuses on diagnosis and stress-testing the current CR and RI fields and strategies for change. Day 2 focuses on identifying key pathways for leverage, redesign, and a five-year strategic direction.

* **Terminology:** In this document, *Corporate Responsibility (CR)* and *Responsible Investment (RI)* are used as inclusive terms encompassing CSR, Corporate Citizenship, Corporate Sustainability, Sustainable Finance, SRI, ESG integration, and related approaches.

Agenda Overview

DAY 1 — Understanding the Fields, their Evolution and Current Dynamics 4

9:00 – 9:30 AM	Registration & Coffee	4
9:30 – 9:45 AM	Opening Welcome & Framing	4
9:45 – 11:00 AM	Session 1: Defining the Fields — Origins, Evolution, and Convergence	4
11:00 – 11:15 AM	Break	4
11:15 AM – 12:30 PM	Session 2: Norm-Setting, Rule-Making & Accountability	4
12:30 – 12:40 PM	Book launch for <i>The Handbook of System-level Investing</i>	5
12:40 – 1:30 PM	Networking lunch	5
1:30 – 2:45 PM	Session 3: Stress Testing the Fields in a Fragmenting and Disruptive Global Economy	5
2:45 – 3:00 PM	Break	6
3:00 – 4:15 PM	Session 4: Incremental Reform and System Change	6
4:15 – 4:30 PM	Break	6
4:30 – 5:15 PM	Plenary Synthesis: What Has Actually Changed?	6
5:15 – 6:00 PM	Reception	6
6:00 – 9:00 PM	Dinner & Informal Dialogue.....	6

DAY 2 — Designing the Future 7

8:30 – 9:00 AM	Coffee	7
9:00 – 10:30 AM	Session 5: Strategic Leverage Points for the Next Phase	7
10:30 – 10:45 AM	Break	7
10:45 – 11:45 AM	Session 6: Planning for the Next Five Years — What Should the Fields Do Now?	7
11:45 AM – 12:00 PM	Break.....	8
12:00 – 12:30 PM	Session 7: Archive & Field-Building Legacy Session	8
12:30 – 1:15 PM	Closing Plenary: Synthesis, Commitments & Next Steps	8
1:15 PM	Lunch & Adjournment.....	8

Thursday, May 7

DAY 1 — Understanding the Fields, their Evolution and Current Dynamics

9:00 – 9:30 AM Registration & Coffee

9:30 – 9:45 AM Opening Welcome & Framing

Purpose: Establish shared intellectual discipline and objectives

- Welcome from High Meadows Institute, Columbia University’s Sustainable Investing Research Initiative (SIRI), and the Corporate Responsibility Initiative (CRI) at the Harvard Kennedy School
- Why this moment represents a potential paradigm inflection point
- Introduction to three guiding lenses:
 1. Historical evolution
 2. Systems context
 3. Strategic redesign

9:45 – 11:00 AM Session 1: Defining the Fields — Origins, Evolution, and Convergence (75 minutes)

Purpose: Establish a shared understanding of what CR and RI set out to achieve and how they have evolved

Core Questions:

- What have the fields attempted to change?
- What has worked — and why?
- Where have CR and RI converged and diverged?

Illustrative Milestones: Sullivan Principles/South Africa divestment, UN Global Compact, UN PRI, GRI, stewardship evolution

Format: Scene-setting (20 min) + moderated dialogue (45 min) + plenary reflection

11:00 – 11:15 AM Break

11:15 AM – 12:30 PM Session 2: Norm-Setting, Rule-Making & Accountability — Tools, Practices, and Limits (75 minutes)

Purpose: Assess which accountability mechanisms have genuinely shifted behavior

Discussion Focus:

- Coalition building & voluntary standards
- Disclosure frameworks (GRI, TCFD, ISSB, CDP)

- Stewardship & engagement (ICCR, Climate Action 100+, Engine No. 1)
- Voluntary vs. mandatory regimes

Key Tensions:

- Enforcement vs. signaling
- Voice vs. exit
- Greenwashing and credibility

12:30 – 12:40 PM Book launch for *The Handbook of System-level Investing*, with editors Jon Lukomnik and William Burckart

12:40 – 1:30 PM Networking lunch

1:30 – 2:45 PM Session 3: Stress Testing the Fields in a Fragmenting and Disruptive Global Economy (75 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate whether historical strategies remain viable under current conditions – rather than a general environmental scan, this session will function as a structured stress test

Three Analytical Axes:

1. Political Legitimacy

- Anti-ESG backlash
- Polarization & populism
- Sovereignty vs. global standard-setting

2. Market Structure

- Capital concentration & dominance of passive funds
- Growth of private markets
- State capitalism & geopolitics

3. Technological Disruption

- AI-driven disruption, transparency, and modeling
- Data concentration
- Transition risk analytics

Core Questions:

- Where has legitimacy eroded?
- Are voluntary alliances still scalable?
- Does AI enhance accountability or amplify opacity?

Outcome: Clear identification of structural constraints shaping the next phase

2:45 – 3:00 PM Break

3:00 – 4:15 PM Session 4: Incremental Reform and System Change (75 minutes)

Purpose: Examine how a systems lens reshapes strategy and scale

Core Questions:

- What is the interaction between systems, companies, investments?
- Can enterprise and portfolio-level intervention affect system health?
- What techniques and tools really affect systems?

Outcome: Shared understanding of enterprise/portfolio/system interactions and leverage points

4:15 – 4:30 PM Break

4:30 – 5:15 PM Plenary Synthesis: What Has Actually Changed? (45 minutes)

Purpose: Integrate insights from Sessions 1–4

Core Questions:

- Where have CR and RI achieved durable impact?
- Where have they institutionalized but not transformed?
- Where are the major gaps and what tensions must carry into Day 2?

Celebrating our work together

5:15 – 6:00 PM Reception

6:00 – 9:00 PM Dinner & Informal Dialogue

Friday, May 8

DAY 2 — Designing the Future

8:30 – 9:00 AM Coffee

9:00 – 10:30 AM Session 5: Strategic Leverage Points for the Next Phase (90 minutes)

Purpose: Pivot from diagnosis to redesign

Identify 3–5 high-leverage strategic shifts capable of materially accelerating and scaling systemic impact over the next five years

Opening Frame (20 minutes): From Sustainability / Responsibility 2.0 to 3.0 — What Actually Changes?

Core Questions:

- What must fundamentally shift to move from incremental to systemic impact?
- Where is institutional redesign required (fiduciary duty, accounting, capital allocation)?
- How can AI function as a force multiplier for measurement and coordination?
- How can CR and RI achieve deeper structural alignment?

Outcome: Shortlist of priority leverage areas for field-level advancement

10:30 – 10:45 AM Break

10:45 – 11:45 AM Session 6: Planning for the Next Five Years — What Should the Fields Do Now? (60 minutes)

Purpose: Translate insights into actionable, forward-looking strategies

Core questions:

- What would a credible five-year strategy for CR and RI look like?
- What must change in tools, incentives, governance, collaboration, and policy?
- What research and resources are needed to support this strategy?

Working groups focus on: Strategic leverage points identified in session 5

Outcome: Short, concrete strategy prototypes grounded in institutional and political reality

11:45 AM – 12:00 PM Break

12:00 – 12:30 PM Session 7: Archive & Field-Building Legacy Session (30 minutes)

Purpose: Introduction to the Corporate Responsibility & Responsible Investment Archive at Columbia SIRI and Archive Initiative in the UK

- Preserving the intellectual evolution of the fields
- Invitation to contribute materials and oral histories
- Positioning the Archive as infrastructure for the next paradigm phase

12:30 – 1:15 PM Closing Plenary: Synthesis, Commitments & Next Steps (45 minutes)

- Consolidation of priority strategies
- Identification of shared commitments
- Clarification of post-symposium opportunities and actions:
 - Collaborative research
 - Field coordination
 - Institutional pilots
 - Archive support

1:15 PM Lunch & Adjournment