

Call for Expressions of Interest for establishing an International Research Program on Walking as a mode of transport (IRP-WALKING)



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The Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) invites researchers to submit Expressions of Interest (Eoi) to establish and lead a VREF International Research Program on "Walking as a mode of transport" (IRP-WALKING). VREF will fund one IRP-WALKING, which will be carried out for four years 2026-2029.

In this Call, IRP-WALKING refers to an international research consortium in which multiple researchers and relevant practitioners work together in a thematic program. This program focuses on joint knowledge production, learning, and the sharing of insights on walking as a mode of transport in urban environments.

The Call is a two-step process. In this first step (December 2024 – May 2025), VREF invites researchers at universities (and research institutes of academic standing) to submit an Eoi to establish and lead an IRP-WALKING.

- *Each Eoi will serve as an application for a VREF planning grant to prepare a full proposal for an IRP-WALKING. VREF plans to approve 3-5 planning grants.*
- *An Eoi should be submitted to VREF no later than 1 April 2025.*

In the second step (June-September 2025), only applicants who have received a planning grant will be invited to submit a full proposal for an IRP-WALKING.

The envisaged outcome of the second step is a VREF decision in December 2025 to fund one IRP-WALKING for 4 years 2026 – 2029 with up to 25 MSEK (approx. 2,2 M€).

The background and context of the Call are described below, followed by guidelines and instructions for submitting an Eoi.

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A. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE CALL

A1. About the Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF)

The Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) is an independent foundation that inspires, initiates and supports research and educational activities that can contribute to new knowledge on broad issues related to urban mobility and access. VREF's mission is to support the development of research on ideas, approaches and solutions that can contribute to equitable access and sustainable urban mobility in ways that can radically reduce transportation's negative local and global environmental impacts. An important goal is also to support educational programs in these areas, as well as to facilitate dissemination and implementation of research findings among university researchers, practitioners, decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders.

A2. The VREF program "Walking as a mode of transport" (Walking program)

With the Walking as a Mode of Transport program, VREF seeks to strengthen international research, research capacity, and education on walking in ways that can contribute to more equitable access and sustainable mobility in urban transport. The aim is to build a broad, international and interdisciplinary community of learning which encompasses both researchers and other stakeholders in this area.

An important point of departure for VREF's initiative is the indication that despite its ubiquitous presence in everyday life (particularly in the Global South), walking as a mode of transport has not received extensive research or policy attention to date. In addition, while walking has been a research topic in certain academic contexts for many years, work on walking as a mode of transport has not yet developed into a cogent research direction or area in itself.

The scientific profile of the Walking program is centered around four themes:

- Conceptualizing and critically appraising walking as a mode of transport
- Walking as a mode of transport in everyday urban life, including equity issues
- Governance, policy and planning for walking as a mode of transport
- Services, tools and business models to facilitate walking as a mode of transport

For more information on the program, please visit www.vref.se

The overall mode of operation of the Walking program to date has been to support cross-disciplinary research in the form of exploratory projects which focus on comparative case studies in specific urban areas of relevance for the respective project's orientation, content and goals.

Since its inception in 2022, the Walking program has initiated 30+ such exploratory research projects and special studies, involving 100+ researchers and numerous Ph.D. candidates at multiple universities in both the Global South and the Global North. Many projects have been carried out by teams with partners from both the Global South and Global North, while other projects have been South-South collaborations or collaborations within Europe. Most of these teams have been strongly multidisciplinary, representing a breadth of disciplines such as anthropology, geography, urban and/or transport planning, sociology, gender studies, politics and policy, architecture, and engineering sciences.

Within and across these disciplines, examples of theoretical frameworks in completed and ongoing projects in the Walking program include equity, intersectionality, temporality, spatial analysis, urban safety studies, and children's studies. Methodologically, projects to date have made use of both qualitative approaches (e.g. various forms of interviews/focus group

interviews, design workshops/labs, peer research methodology, participatory methods) and quantitative methods using specific tools (e.g. surveys, biosensors, quantitative measures of physical factors/proximity, audiovisual analysis). Thus, projects in the Walking program so far represent a rich and diverse mix of research interests, theoretical and methodological approaches, empirical foci and geographies which provide a promising base for future work in the program.

Please see additional information via the links below:

- [Publications from finalized projects and other studies \(so far\) plus scientific studies and other reports from the program's planning phase \(pdf\)](#)
- [Abstracts of exploratory projects 2022-2024](#)

To learn more about the background and vision of the Walking program, [VREF strongly recommends all applicants to carefully read the document "Walking as a Mode of Transport – A Road Map for Program Implementation 2023-2029" \(pdf\)](#)

A3. What is a VREF International Research Program on Walking as a mode of transport (IRP-WALKING)?

The IRP-WALKING is intended to be an international research collaboration, where a number of researchers work together in a thematic program for joint knowledge building, learning, and sharing of knowledge on walking as a mode of transport. The IRP will be led and coordinated by scholars from a research environment at a university or research institute of academic standing. Together with other partners, these scholars will form a consortium to carry out the IRP during four years. In addition to the research partners, the consortium should also encompass relevant practitioners and other actors who commit to working actively with the research partners to achieve consortium goals.

A proposed IRP-WALKING should reflect high standards of scientific quality and be based on both broad and in-depth knowledge about relevant issues and knowledge gaps within the area of walking as a mode of transport. The program should "break new ground" through state-of-the-art approaches regarding both thematic content and methodologies applied. While the IRP's orientation must be thematically focused, it should nevertheless reflect relevant breadth in terms of e.g. methodologies, scientific disciplines (where multidisciplinary is encouraged), and geographic focus (e.g. in choice of participating research environments, and urban areas for empirical focus)

Thus, an IRP-WALKING is intended to represent a "cohesive diversity" characterized by multiplicity, complementarity, and variety in many different areas, e.g. with regard to research directions, methodologies, researchers' disciplinary backgrounds and demographics, public practitioners' backgrounds and roles, and types of case study/fieldwork sites. The IRP's research program must be thematically coherent, where various sub-projects are carefully designed to contribute to an interconnected, unifying whole. Although the sub-projects may deal with multiple dimensions – e.g. health aspects, personal safety, accessibility, configurations of urban environments, intersectionality – all sub-projects must clearly relate to, and be motivated by, how they contribute to the program's overall research goals.

A core dimension of an IRP-WALKING is research and co-production of new scientific knowledge that is developed in continuous collaboration between researchers and relevant urban practitioners. The IRP is also expected to actively involve doctoral students and early career scholars in the research, while also contributing to education and training in the form of e.g. academic courses, supervision and mentoring.

Finally, an IRP should also be committed to giving visibility to research on walking, serving as a “go-to” place for both researchers and practitioners seeking knowledge in the area of walking as a mode of transport.

The timeframe for the planned IRP-WALKING is 2026–2029 (4 years), with the possibility of extension if VREF considers the work to have been successful (and also contingent upon that VREF has access to additional resources). The IRP-WALKING will account for the major part of research that is carried out within VREF’s Walking program, replacing the program’s earlier focus on smaller exploratory projects.

A4. Thematic profile and methodological approach of an IRP-WALKING

In recent years international walking research has produced significant research results in many relevant areas. However, there is a need for innovative work that develops new perspectives, new knowledge and new planning approaches or tools which can be evaluated, implemented or tested in specific urban planning contexts, which in turn can then provide a fruitful basis for more generalized understandings.

Thematic profile

The IRP-Walking aims to take the work of the Walking program forward by calling for both new knowledge and new forms of knowledge production and implementation. We foresee that the IRP-Walking will have a clear integrative and transformative approach with regard to theory, thematic profile, and methodologies. More specifically, the IRP-Walking should produce research that advances current understanding and knowledge of walking as an integrative part of both urban planning and policy processes and operations (including being integrated into the overall transport system), while also being a prerequisite for the functioning of cities and a vital part of people’s everyday lives.¹

This integrative and transformative ambition involves heightening the understanding of behavioral and policy changes and how they could be achieved, the politics and processes that lead to the inclusion/exclusion of walking in/from different policy discourses, goals and arenas, and the potential for concrete measures for increasing walking and its importance in urban transport systems. The integrative approach also calls for focusing on relationships between walking and other transport modes, e.g. in the form of complementarity, competition and modal shifts. Related to this, new theoretical and empirical research on e.g. underexplored user groups could act as a basis for understanding rationales, prerequisites and incentives in the context of changes in mobility patterns and policies. Finally, an integrative approach should also increase our knowledge of the role of walking in shaping and increasing economic and social activity and capital in urban areas.

The transformative approach means the development of insights that can lead to a substantial change in terms of improved conditions for walking as a mode of transport. This could include the development of new planning frameworks and tools, alongside the integration of walking into existing transport planning methods, frameworks, and operations. It could also include e.g. identifying and including dimensions or issues that currently are largely invisible or ignored within existing frameworks or analyzing existing power dynamics within various levels of planning and their importance for potential policy changes.

¹ See the program’s Road Map for further elaboration on these matters (including the Themes 1-4). (pdf)

Method

One central purpose of the current Call is to stimulate and support co-production of new knowledge in close collaboration and ongoing exchanges between researchers, urban planners, and other relevant stakeholders at concrete sites. This form of knowledge generation is often referred to as transdisciplinary research. Transdisciplinary research also implies collaboration among researchers from different scientific disciplines. The methodological approach of Eol should include developing knowledge, planning approaches, tools and methods that are relevant for planning processes at specific sites. This should be based on close cooperation between researchers and stakeholders at these sites. The approach also includes studying, evaluating, and following planning projects over time.

VREF foresees that successful Eol will propose interlinked, complementary research projects and processes for knowledge co-production which include the following dimensions:

- a clear statement of the research problem and a strong motivation for the relevance and usefulness of the proposed content and approach,
- a clear theoretical and thematic framing that introduces or develops new concepts and perspectives for understanding and conceptualizing walking as a mode of transport in urban transport planning,
- plans for proposed comparative studies, living-labs etc. at specific urban sites (e.g. 3-5 urban areas in Global South and/or Global North). While types of urban contexts and sites should be identified and discussed in the Eol, they can be further developed in a full proposal for an IRP,
- clear methodological approaches to participatory/transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge that is directly relevant to urban planning for walking. Innovative methodological approaches are encouraged.

A5. What are consortium partners expected to bring to an IRP-WALKING?

An IRP-WALKING is expected to provide relevant resources in the following areas:

- Clear research focus based on innovative thematic content and methodologies: The proposed research must be characterized by innovative thinking and creativity in its problem formulation and orientation, theoretical approach, and methodologies. Researchers in the IRP are expected to contribute to new state-of-the-art knowledge and perspectives in their respective fields.
- Researchers with strong scientific backgrounds; strong leadership: The program leader and other senior researchers in the IRP consortium should have strong, multidisciplinary scientific competence (as indicated by e.g. scientific publications or other outputs), motivational drive, and commitment to the area of walking as a mode of transport. The IRP leader should also have broad international leadership experience from a variety of relevant contexts. In addition the IRP should actively engage doctoral students and early career researchers in the work, as well as contribute to educational programs at master and doctoral levels.
- Strong plan for co-production of knowledge; outreach capacity: The IRP should include a clear process and plan for active collaboration and/or co-production of knowledge (also known as “transdisciplinary” research) with actors who are situated in (or have strong connections to) concrete contexts/sites of urban planning and policy processes in the area of walking. These actors may include e.g. urban planners, elected decision makers on various levels, representatives for community groups, or other relevant stakeholders. IRP researchers should also demonstrate high ambitions for their work in widely disseminating and sharing their results with other relevant users of research findings.

- Demand for knowledge and testing in transdisciplinary processes: The program leader and partners should be able to demonstrate that the research focus of the proposed IRP has high relevance and is “in demand” both within research and by their partners within planning and policy contexts for walking as a mode of transport. This applies to the demand for new knowledge, tools and/or approaches in the sites where case studies/fieldwork are to be conducted, that e.g. specific municipalities, urban regions, or other relevant sites. The program leader and other core researchers must have good contacts with actors who can offer “labs” or other methods for co-production, i.e. sites and contexts where case studies/fieldwork can be carried out.
- Access to research infrastructure, data and other existing information: The consortium should have access to good research infrastructure in the form of tools and other resources (e.g. databases, labs or research facilities, libraries) which are prerequisites for creative research. Imaginary infrastructure in the form of well-developed networks within the research community on a global level and within relevant stakeholder groups should also be present within the IRP team.
- Institutional framework: While VREF will provide the financial and contractual framework for the IRP, the program leader's host institution should have reliable and flexible systems for efficient management and administration of the program; the IRP should also demonstrate strong support from the university/research institute to host the IRP.

A6. How does VREF contribute to IRP-WALKING?

The financial contribution from VREF to IRP-WALKING is envisaged to be up to 25 million SEK (approx. 2,2 M€) over the four years. VREF will fund research and other related activities, while also contributing financially to the coordination of IRP-WALKING. VREF's funding can be matched through in-kind resources from the participants or additional funding through other resources. For example, contributions to postgraduate education are preferably financed by other means than VREF funding.

VREF will be responsible for the overall administrative and contractual framework for the funding of the IRP. Further, VREF will act as an advisory “sounding board” during both the start-up of the program and in ongoing follow-up during implementation, e.g. through review of annual progress reports, mid-term review and the like. VREF may also be part of an advisory group or reference group for IRP-WALKING.

VREF will actively serve as a “bridge” between the IRP and other researchers in VREF's global community who have an interest in walking as a mode of transport. VREF will also be a bridge between IRP and VREF's international partners with whom IRP participants do not have established relationships.

A7. The process for establishing and implementing the VREF IRP-WALKING

The Call is a two-step process carried out from December 2024 to December 2025.

In the first step (December 2024 – June 2025), VREF invites researchers to submit Expressions of Interest (EoI) to establish and lead the IRP-WALKING. Each EoI will serve as an application for a VREF planning grant for preparing a full proposal for an IRP-WALKING.

Expressions of Interest should be submitted to VREF **no later than 1 April 2025**.

All qualifying EoIs will be reviewed by the VREF Scientific Council in April – May 2025. The VREF Board will make a formal decision on planning grants in June 2025, where VREF anticipates approving 3-5 planning grants. The amount of the grant will be a maximum of SEK 200,000 (approximately 17,500 EUR). The planning grant can be either used solely by the lead applicant or

distributed among the consortium partners. VREF will inform all applicants of the outcome of the process before 15 June 2025.

Consortia that have been awarded planning grants will be invited to submit a full proposal for an IRP-WALKING around 1 October 2025 (the exact date will be specified with the invitation to submit a full proposal).

Full proposals will be reviewed both by international external reviewers and the VREF Scientific Council. The envisaged outcome of the completed process is a VREF Board decision in December 2025 to fund one IRP-WALKING with up to 25 MSEK (approx. 2,2 M€) for the 4-year period 2026 - 2029.

B. GUIDELINES FOR SUBMITTING AN EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (EoI)

B1. Who can submit an Expression of Interest?

An IRP-WALKING will typically be established as a consortium of reputable, well-established research groups/researchers acting in concert. VREF particularly encourages universities/research institutes with an established track record in the relevant thematic area, but also welcomes emergent research groups in this area to take part in the consortium. It is foreseen that each IRP-WALKING consortium will primarily be a partnership between researchers from 3-5 universities/research institutes, as well as associated partners such as cities, regions, not-for-profit organizations and others which support the uptake of research findings. It is also foreseen that each IRP-WALKING consortium may engage, as needed, individual researchers from universities that are not formally institutionally affiliated with the consortium.

The EoI should be submitted by an individual researcher (here called main applicant, see guidelines below) who is representing the entire consortium behind the proposed IRP-WALKING. While individual researchers may be included in more than one Expression of Interest for an IRP-WALKING, researchers are only eligible to serve as consortium leaders for one Expression of Interest.

For legal reasons, VREF grantees must be universities or research institutes of academic standing². Thus, the main applicant must be affiliated with and supported by a university or research institute of academic standing.

B2. Submission of an Expression of Interest

An EoI must be submitted by e-mail to secretariat@vref.se and received **no later than 1 April 2025 12:00 noon GMT**.

The EoI must:

- be structured and delineated in accordance with the guidelines stated below;
- be written in English;
- be laid out in European A4 paper format, with a minimum font size of 12 pt, minimum 1,1 row spacing and margins of at least 25 mm; applications are also encouraged to enhance readability through e.g. clearly separating text sections and paragraphs;
- consist of a maximum of eight (8) single pages, not including CVs (maximum 3 pages/person) and references;
- be saved in PDF file format (of ready-to-print quality).

² By "research institute of academic standing", VREF means that the institute is conducting research of high scientific quality (e.g. resulting in peer-reviewed publications).

Eols exceeding the specified maximum number of pages will be rejected.

Please e-mail to secretariat@vref.se for further information on the call for Eols or for clarification regarding the requirements for application.

NB: To ensure maximum transparency in the recruitment process, all questions, and VREF's answers to them, will be published in a [Q&A section](#) on the VREF web site.

B3. Content and format of the Expressions of Interest

Detailed guidelines on content and format of each section in the Eol follow below. The page numbers shown in the guidelines indicate the numbering to be used in the final document. In guidelines, the person submitting the Eol is referred to as the main applicant. The main applicant's university affiliation is envisaged to act as host institution for the planning grant, if awarded. Other participants in the consortium behind the Eol are referred to as consortium partners. Please note that the main applicant is an individual, while consortium partners should be universities or research institutes of academic standing who are represented in the Eol by a contact person. Similarly, associated partners such as cities, regions, not-for-profit organizations and other stakeholders, should also be represented in the Eol by a contact person.

FRONT PAGE: Administrative information

The front page should be structured as follows:

- *Title of the proposed IRP-WALKING*: The title should be concise and informative
- *Main applicant*: The main applicant must be a person, not an organization. Please note that only one person can be the main applicant. To ensure prompt communication, it is important to state the name of the main applicant.
- The main *applicant's* affiliation (university or research institute of academic standing)
- The main applicant's *e-mail address, mailing address and telephone number*
- *Host institution*: The host institution should be a university or a research institute of academic standing. Please provide the full name of the university, as well as the department (if applicable) and the name and contact details (e-mail address, mailing address and telephone number) of an administrative contact person for the university.
- *Consortium partners*: Please list the names of all consortium partners (universities etc), including the names and e-mail addresses of each partner's contact person (whose scientific and other professional background, as well as current activities, will be presented later in the proposal).

PAGE 2: Overview of the proposed IRP: purpose, motivation, and unique added value

Present a summary of the purpose, content and direction of the proposed IRP, including the factors that give the proposal a unique, innovative profile or "competitive edge." What makes this consortium unique in terms of its thematic focus and methodologies, as well as the resources it will bring to the proposed IRP-WALKING? How will the proposed Eol add new knowledge and value to existing research in the area? How will the proposed IRP-WALKING work to ensure that its findings have a significant impact on practice and policy making? In other words, why should VREF support the proposed IRP-WALKING?

PAGE 3: Background, rationale and potential of the proposed IRP-WALKING

Provide a summary of the consortium's view of why research on walking within its proposed area is needed and how the proposed IRP-WALKING could contribute to developing and improving the current state of knowledge. Formulate a vision for the IRP-WALKING in a few sentences and list the main objective(s) and goal(s) that can be achieved over the duration (4 years) of the IRP-WALKING.

Guiding questions for this section:

- What are the most important issues, problems, challenges and/or opportunities that can be served by knowledge building and learning within the proposed IRP's area within walking as a mode of transport?
- What is your view of current knowledge (or the absence thereof) relating to walking as a mode of transport?
- What would be the potential contributions of the proposed IRP-WALKING to academic research, knowledge building, education and academic capacity building?
- Who (i.e. what specific actors) are going to need the results and outcomes of the proposed research and how (i.e. through what specific work methods or channels) can these actors be expected to use the findings in their everyday practices?
- What could the consortium accomplish if it were awarded the 4-year grant, and what would be the expected scientific, policy, and social impact of the work?
- What are possible expectations and goals as to where the proposed IRP-Walking should be in 3-4 years?

PAGE 4-5: The consortium's research direction and approach

- Thematic Profile: Describe the thematic profile and priorities that are envisaged for the proposed IRP-WALKING within the overall thematic framework of the call, as described in section A4.
- Scientific and methodological approach: Describe the scientific and methodological profile and approach of the proposed IRP-WALKING, including
 - theoretical framework
 - possible comparative case studies at preliminary urban sites (e.g. 3-5 urban areas in Global South and/ or Global North). NB the methodological approaches can be further developed in a full proposal for an IRP
 - possible methodological approaches to participatory/transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge as a means to achieve consortium goals
- Educational dimensions; capacity building among next generation scholars: It is envisaged that the IRP-WALKING will have ongoing direct connections to university education as a means of renewing curriculum offerings, enhancing capacity among next generation scholars and disseminating new scientific findings. Describe the current connections between research and education at the host institution and among consortium researchers, as well as how key researchers in the proposed IRP-WALKING are engaged in university education and curriculum development. Further, describe the consortium's ideas for significantly involving Ph.D. students and early career researchers affiliated with the IRP-WALKING partners in consortium research.
- Dissemination and communication of findings within and beyond the broader academic community: VREF expects that research findings from the consortium will primarily be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and/or scientific books (e.g. as book chapters). VREF also has an ambition to communicate research findings among broader circles of stakeholders, practitioners and other relevant actors. The applicant should express ideas and plans in both these areas.

PAGE 6-7: Composition and resources of the Consortium

- Composition of the consortium: Present the full proposed consortium and the approach behind how it has been composed, i.e. how the partners will contribute to the IRP-WALKING, how they complement each other in terms of scientific profiles, geographic scope, and other dimensions that are important for the consortium's capacity to address the thematic area. NB. Minor changes to the composition of the consortium will be allowed between the EoI and a full proposal, e.g. the cities can be stated as "preliminary

partners” in the EoI. However, the core research partners are expected to be the same and any changes between the EoI and the full proposal must be well justified.

- Main applicant: Provide a summary of the main applicant’s scientific background and other achievements/experiences relevant to the work and success of the proposed research. Current activities will be of particular interest (a summary CV of max 3 pages should also be provided in an annex).
- Core team: Provide a brief summary of the scientific backgrounds and other achievements/experiences of key researchers and other key partners in the consortium, as considered relevant to the success of the proposed research.
- Cooperation beyond the consortium: Describe the consortium’s most important collaborations and interactions beyond the consortium, particularly in relation to relevant non-academic actors who are engaged in urban planning and policy processes.
- Other resources: Describe other resources available to the consortium which are considered relevant to the success of the proposed research. These resources may include research infrastructure and capacity (e.g. databases, labs, libraries, tools, methods), institutional support at host institution (e.g. management and administrative capacity for hosting the IRP), and scientific engagements of relevance for the thematic area. This could include local as well as international, national and local/community levels/contexts.

PAGE 8: Plan for how the planning grant will be used

Present a work plan and a provisional budget to prepare a full proposal for an IRP-WALKING. Describe planned activities and what is envisaged as the outcome of each activity, who will be engaged in the work, and an estimation of the overall cost of each activity. Please indicate in the budget if the work to prepare a full proposal will be partly funded (co-funded) by sources other than VREF.

NB. All overheads, VAT and similar costs must be included in the provisional budget.

- Annex 1: Summary CVs (maximum 3 pages per CV) of main applicant, key researchers and other core participants in the proposed IRP-WALKING. Each CV should also include a selection of maximum 10 references (publications or other references).
- Annex 2: Relevant literature and key references (maximum 3 pages). List the most important publications of relevance to the proposed program, as originating both from the consortium and from other sources. In the case of scientific publications by participants in the consortium, externally reviewed publications from the last 3 years will be of primary interest.