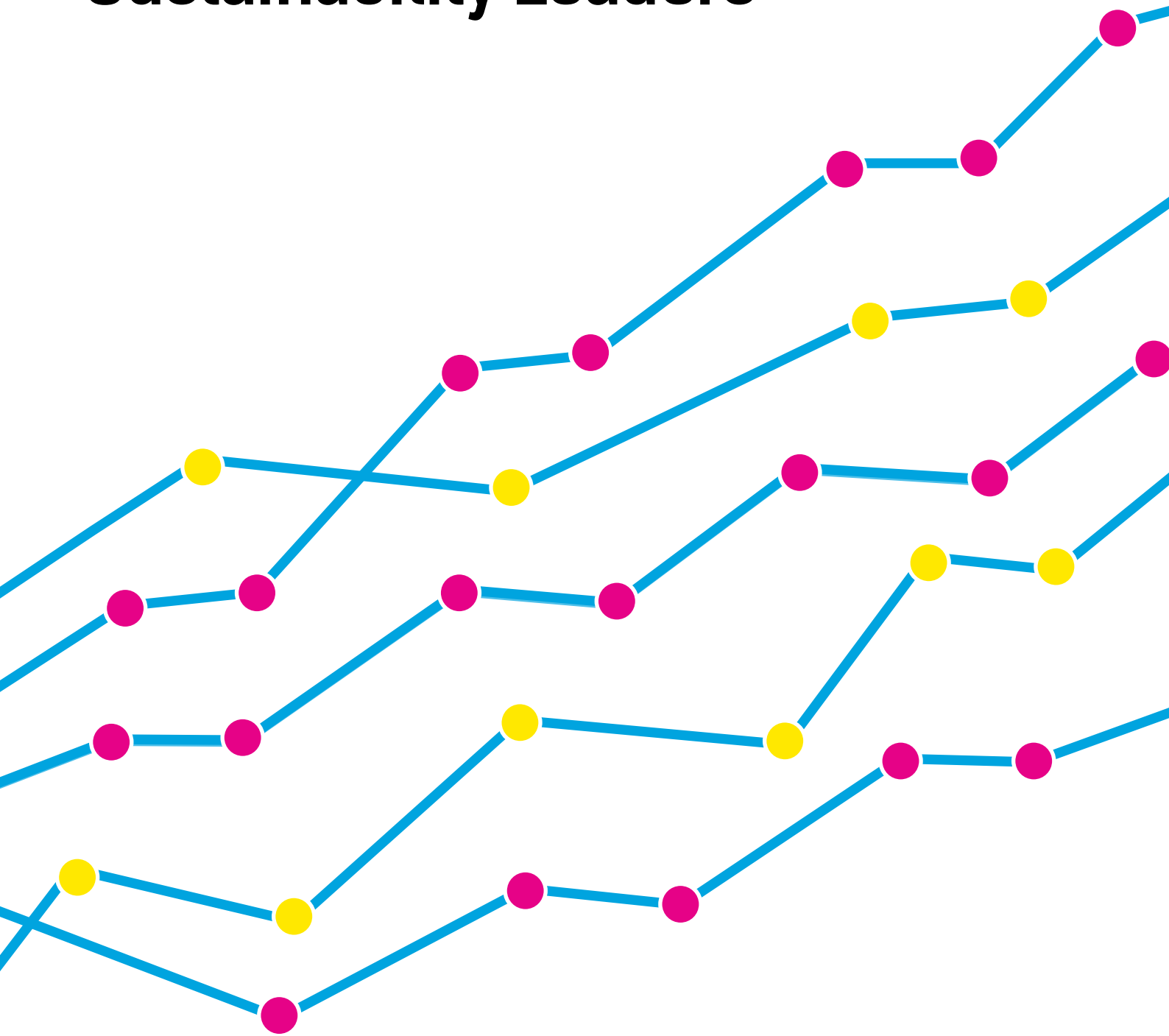




The 2020

# Sustainability Leaders



# About the GlobeScan / SustainAbility Survey

A unique, collaborative platform that uses research-driven insights from the most influential global thought leaders to explore the biggest sustainability challenges.



## Cross-sector

We survey thousands of sustainable development experts and practitioners from the following sectors:

- Corporate
- Government (including multi-lateral institutions)
- NGOs
- Academic & Research organizations
- Service & Media



## Up-to-date

We publish two reports each year, providing a regularly updated expert perspective on a range of timely topics.

Each publication is supported by a global interactive webinar where we invite leading thinkers and practitioners to contribute.



## Leadership Focus

Every year we study leadership in sustainability, quantifying the extent to which experts identify companies as leaders for integrating sustainability into their business strategy.



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# Introduction

The GlobeScan / SustainAbility Leaders Survey has tracked global expert opinion on the evolution of the sustainability agenda alongside the companies and organizations experts perceive to be leaders since 1997.

In 2020, we collected responses between May and July as the global community was battling one of the worst public health crises in decades, the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to asking the regular tracking questions we include each year, we also took the opportunity to ask questions about COVID-19 that would let us gauge expert opinion on how this unprecedented crisis may impact the sustainability agenda and leadership action.

More than 700 experts in 71 countries responded to the 2020 Leaders Survey this year. Unilever, Patagonia and IKEA once again have emerged as the most frequently recognized corporate leaders. For the tenth consecutive year, Unilever tops the ranking, recognized by 42 percent of respondents. Patagonia is in second place with 26 percent, while IKEA ranks third at 14 percent. Interface sits in the fourth position at 8 percent, continuing its run as the only company recognized in the top cohort of leaders in the 23 years this survey has taken place.

An exciting development this year is the entrance of four new companies: Microsoft, Ørsted, L’Oreal and Tata. US-based tech giant Microsoft and Denmark’s leading energy company Ørsted have been gaining particular recognition for their climate efforts. Meanwhile, India-based conglomerate Tata is establishing itself as a sustainability frontrunner in South Asia and joins Brazil-based Natura &Co as the second company not based in Europe or North America to be recognized in this select group.

**An exciting development this year is the entrance of four new companies: Microsoft, Ørsted, L’Oreal and Tata.**

Despite the exciting addition of these four new companies to the Leaders list, the overall reputation of the private sector remains bleak. Only 17 percent of respondents believe that companies are doing their part to advance the sustainable development agenda, with the private sector's reputation steadily declining after peaking in 2018. Recognition of the United Nations' efforts has declined slightly since last year also. This is in contrast with NGOs and academic institutions, which continue to be recognized for their outstanding efforts.

National governments, institutional investors and companies need to do much more to tackle the expanding list of global sustainability challenges, according to survey respondents. The experts also perceive that the urgency of sustainable development challenges is rising with all the issues tracked in this survey increasing in importance since last year. Climate change, biodiversity loss and water remain at the top of the list, while social issues such as poverty, inequality and lack of access to education are also increasingly recognized as requiring urgent solutions.

Given the immediate and likely long-term impacts of COVID-19, maintaining needed focus on long-term social and environmental priorities while battling the pandemic and undertaking recovery efforts will be difficult. Half of polled experts flag concern that the crisis is likely to lead to reduced attention for sustainability priorities, given the focus on economic issues and governmental budget constraints. At the same time, around one-third of experts are optimistic that the crisis will help renew focus on environmental issues because awareness of the interconnectedness of global challenges related to the environment and human health has heightened.

The pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of social issues such as unemployment, inequality and poverty. Companies are reevaluating the critical role that employees and other stakeholders play in their long-term success as well.

**The pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of social issues such as unemployment, inequality and poverty.**

As public and private actors continue to deal with the impacts of the pandemic, experts advise companies to maintain focus on their sustainability strategies and goals, to accelerate their transitions to new business models that deliver long-term value, and to find new ways to anticipate and tackle complex risks. Successfully meeting such challenges will help businesses learn to overcome future disruptions while also making all our systems more resilient, healthy and lasting.

# Survey Methodology

701 qualified sustainability experts completed the online questionnaire from May 11th to July 2nd, 2020.

## Sectors

Respondents were drawn from the following sectors:



**4%**  
Government  
(including multi-lateral institutions)



**15%**  
Academic  
& Research



**19%**  
NGO



**27%**  
Corporate



**29%**  
Service  
& Media



**6%**  
Other

## Geography

Experts surveyed span 71 countries in the following regions:



**4%**  
Africa /  
Middle East



**9%**  
Latin America



**20%**  
North America



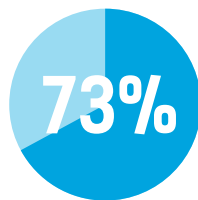
**27%**  
Europe



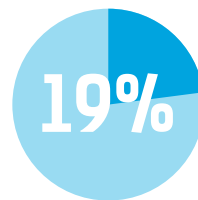
**39%**  
Asia-  
Pacific\*

## Experience

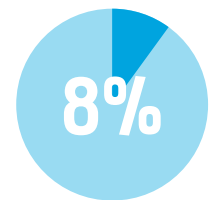
Respondents have the following experience working on sustainability issues:



More Than 10  
Years



5 to 10  
Years



3 to 4  
Years

\*The proportion of respondents from Asia-Pacific has increased substantially from 21 percent in 2019 to 39 percent in 2020. To ensure comparability, results were weighted to previous proportions and compared to unweighted data. Results presented in this report are based on unweighted data, as variation was minimal.

# Summary of Findings

- **Climate change, biodiversity loss and water scarcity remain the most urgent sustainability challenges according to experts, with climate change generating strong concern almost universally.** In the wake of the global pandemic and economic recession, concern about poverty, economic inequality, access to healthcare and food security – along with the spread of infectious disease – are increasingly seen as very urgent. The challenge of diversity and inclusion also receives increasing attention among sustainability professionals in 2020.
- **Experts' perceptions of the private sector's contribution to sustainable development continue to decline, although less sharply than last year.** For the first time in years, the United Nations is also seen as contributing less to sustainable development. Research/academia and citizen-led movements have seen their perceived performance steadily increase, while national governments and institutional investors continue to be perceived as contributing the least.
- **For the tenth consecutive year, Unilever is most frequently named by experts globally as a corporate sustainability leader, but the list has seen some interesting shifts this year with four new companies recognized for their efforts.** After dipping in 2019, mentions of Unilever have rebounded, while Patagonia and IKEA have kept their second and third positions. Thirteen companies are mentioned by at least three percent of experts, with four new companies reaching this threshold this year – Microsoft, Ørsted, L'Oréal and Tata.
- **While having sustainability as part of the core business model continues to be key to sustainability leadership, setting ambitious targets and committing to the SDGs is also increasingly recognized by experts and is now seen as an equally significant attribute of leadership.** As we confront a global pandemic with resulting economic hardship, efforts around communications and advocacy as well as health, social engagement and human rights have also become increasingly important criteria.

- **When asked to rate corporate sustainability leaders on a range of pre-defined leadership attributes, experts rate companies particularly highly on having a clear sustainability strategy or plan.** However, respondents award relatively low marks to the corporate leaders on their ability to advocate for systemic change.
  
- **Sustainability professionals point to WWF as the leading NGO advancing global sustainable development, with a spike in recognition since last year.** While perceptions of Greenpeace remain steady, the World Resources Institute strongly reinforces its third position compared to 2019.
  
- **The COVID-19 pandemic crisis is expected by experts to diminish sustainability priorities, with economic and health concerns likely to dominate the global agenda over the coming decade.** However, some experts also believe that there will be a renewed focus on environmental issues in order to build long-term resilience and to address increasingly interconnected global challenges. Social impacts of the pandemic are also expected to have an impact on the sustainability agenda, with a growing focus on unemployment, inequalities and poverty.
  
- **To enhance private sector resilience to future systemic shocks, experts call on companies to strengthen their ESG commitments, and rethink their business models and supply chains with sustainability and long-term priorities in mind.** Improving risk and business continuity planning will also be an important element.



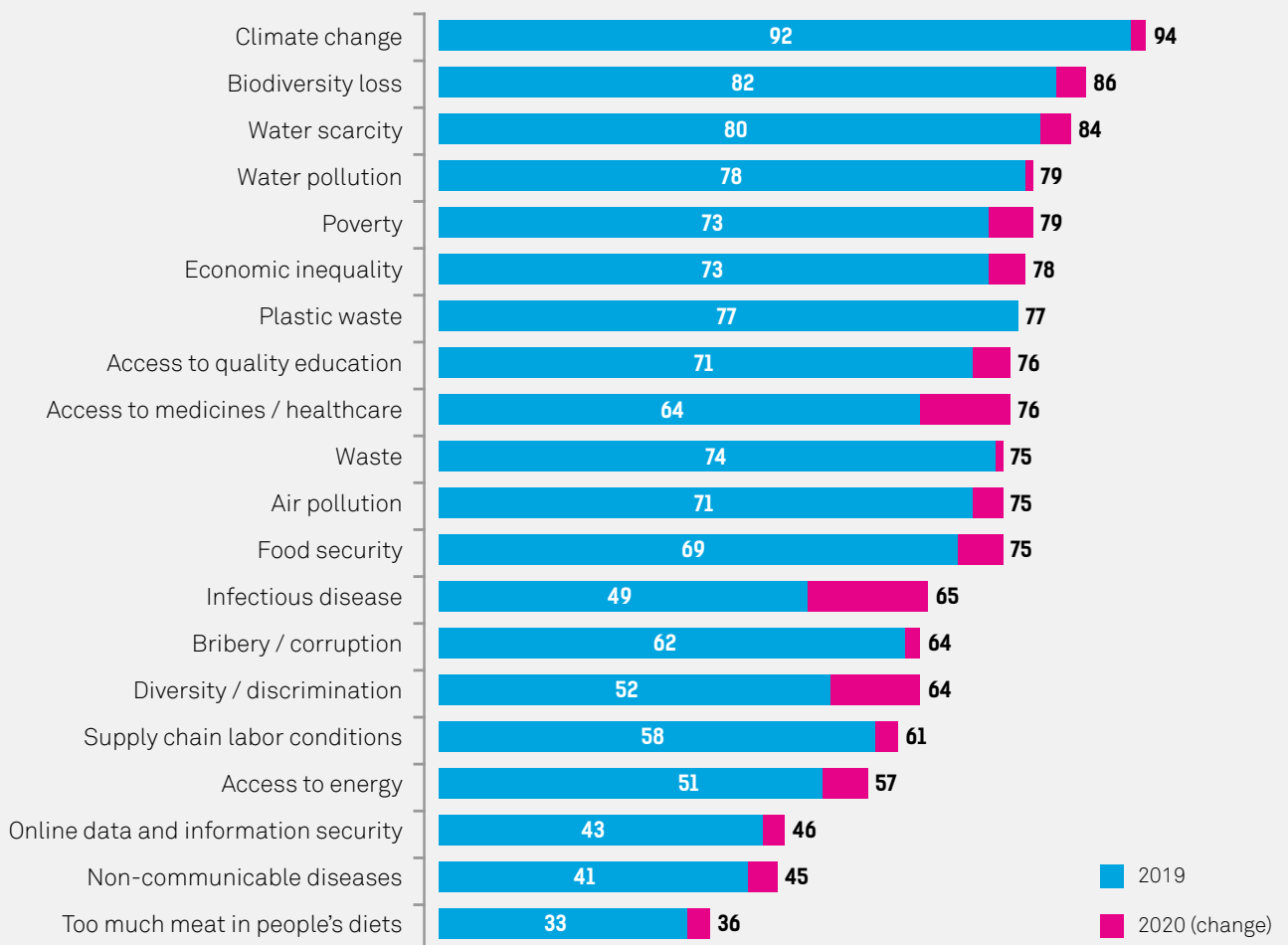
# Urgency of Sustainable Development Challenges



# Urgency of All Sustainable Development Challenges Is Rising

The perceived urgency of all sustainable development challenges tracked in this survey has increased since last year. Environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity and water pollution dominate the list. The perceived urgency of social issues is also on the rise, with significant increases in concern about poverty, economic inequality and discrimination. Growing attention is also given to accessibility of basic needs such as education, food and energy. As the world confronts the global pandemic, the perceived urgency of health challenges, including infectious disease and access to healthcare, is soaring.

% of Experts, "Urgent" (4+5), 2019–2020



## Question

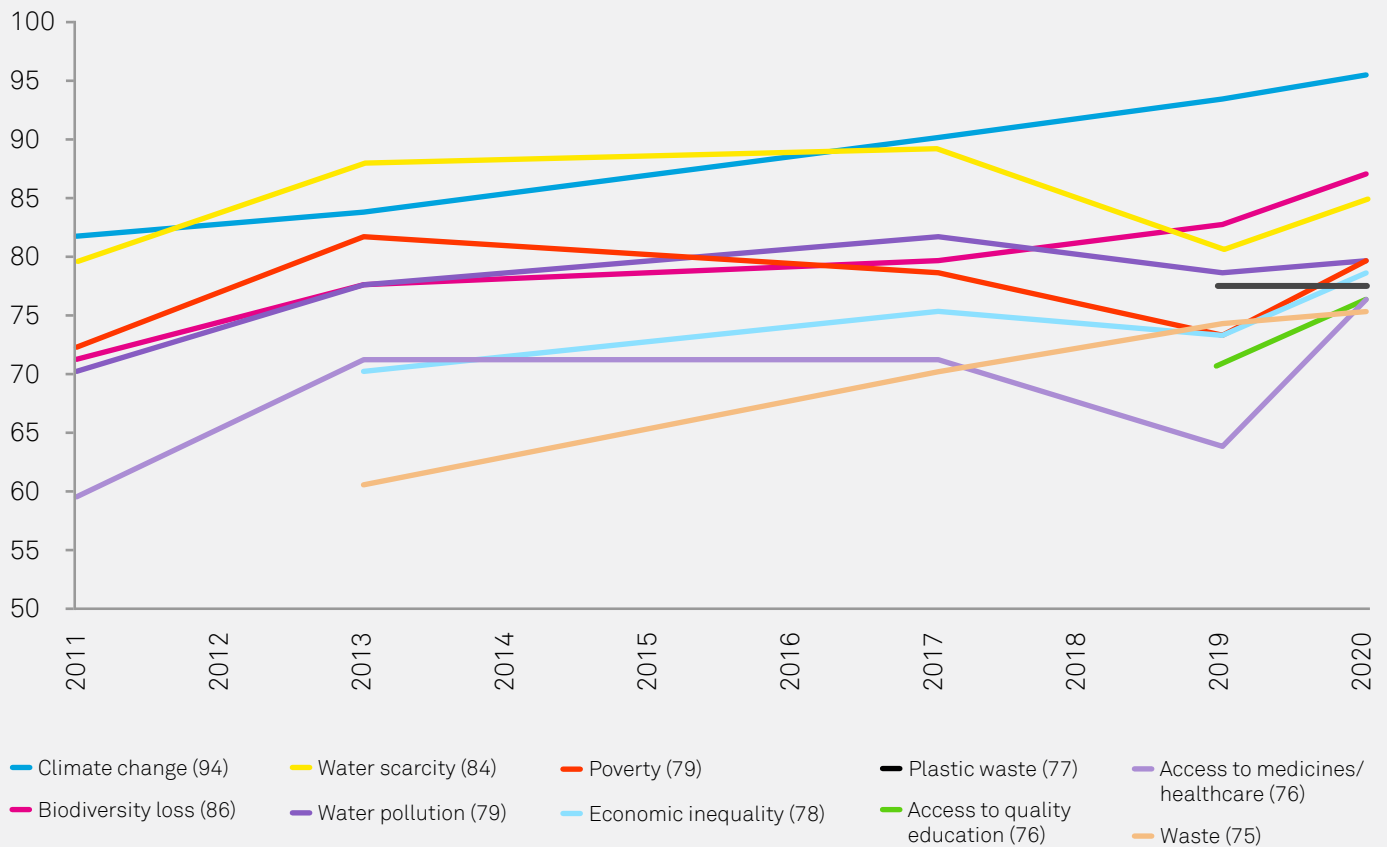
Considering society's numerous sustainable development challenges, please rate the urgency of each of the following:

*Please use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 means "not urgent at all" and 5 means "very urgent."*

# Climate, Biodiversity, Water and Poverty Seen As the Biggest Challenges of the Decade

Perceived importance of acting on climate change has been steadily increasing over the last decade, with 94 percent of respondents now saying that it is a “very urgent” challenge. After experiencing a slight decline in 2017-2019, the perceived urgency of other key global issues has been rising as well. Climate, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, water pollution and poverty have been consistently seen as the greatest social and environmental challenges facing the global community.

% of Experts, “Urgent” (4+5), 2011–2020



## Question

Considering society’s numerous sustainable development challenges, please rate the urgency of each of the following:

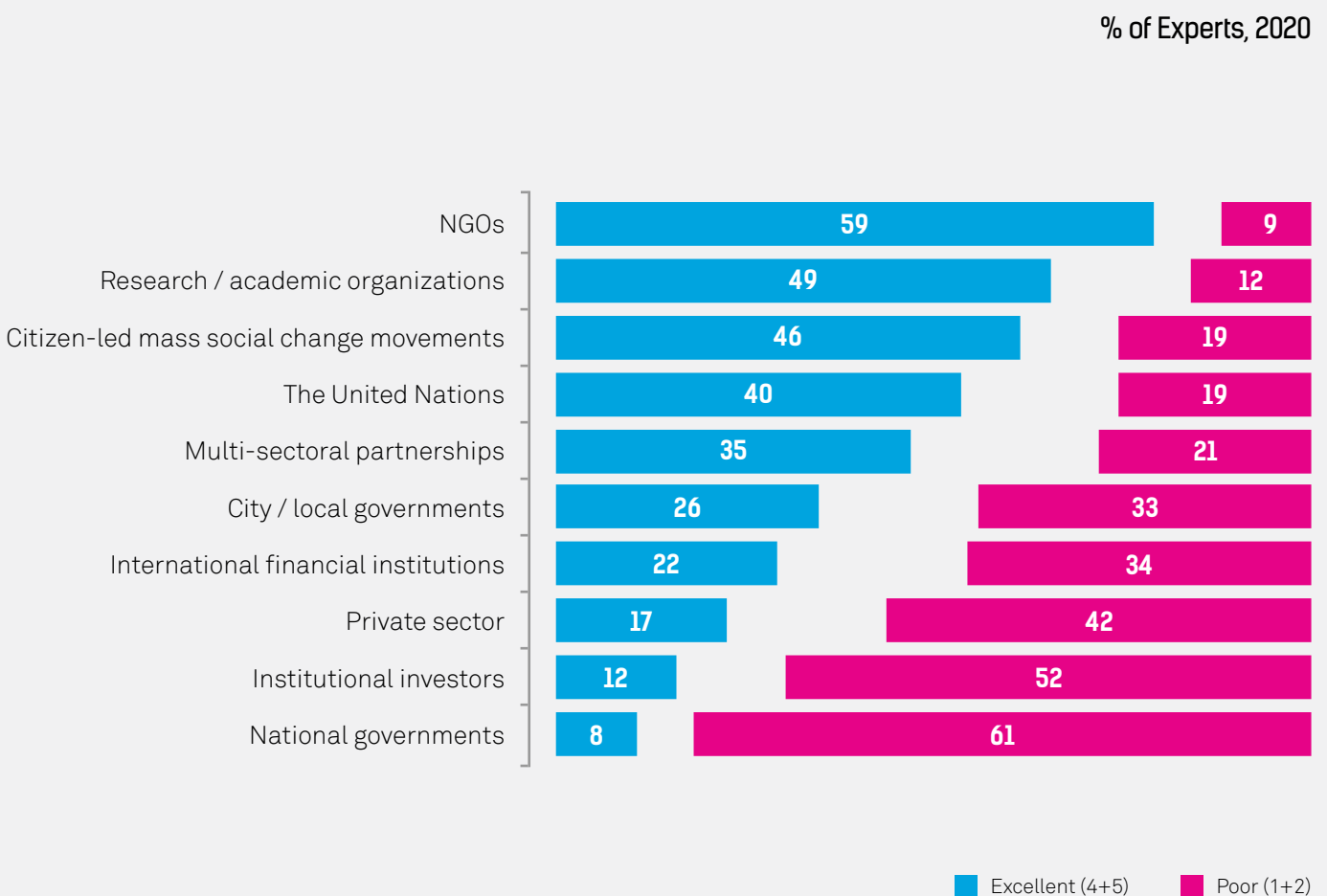
*Please use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 means “not urgent at all” and 5 means “very urgent.”*

# Institutional Leaders



# NGOs, Academia and Citizen Movements Demonstrate Leadership

National governments are overwhelmingly seen by experts as lacking in leadership on sustainable development, with a majority saying they are doing a poor job. Institutional investors are also seen as making a poor contribution, followed by the private sector. In contrast, NGO leadership is rated positively by a majority of respondents, while the performance of research/academic organizations and citizen-led mass movements is seen as positive by almost half of experts.



## Question

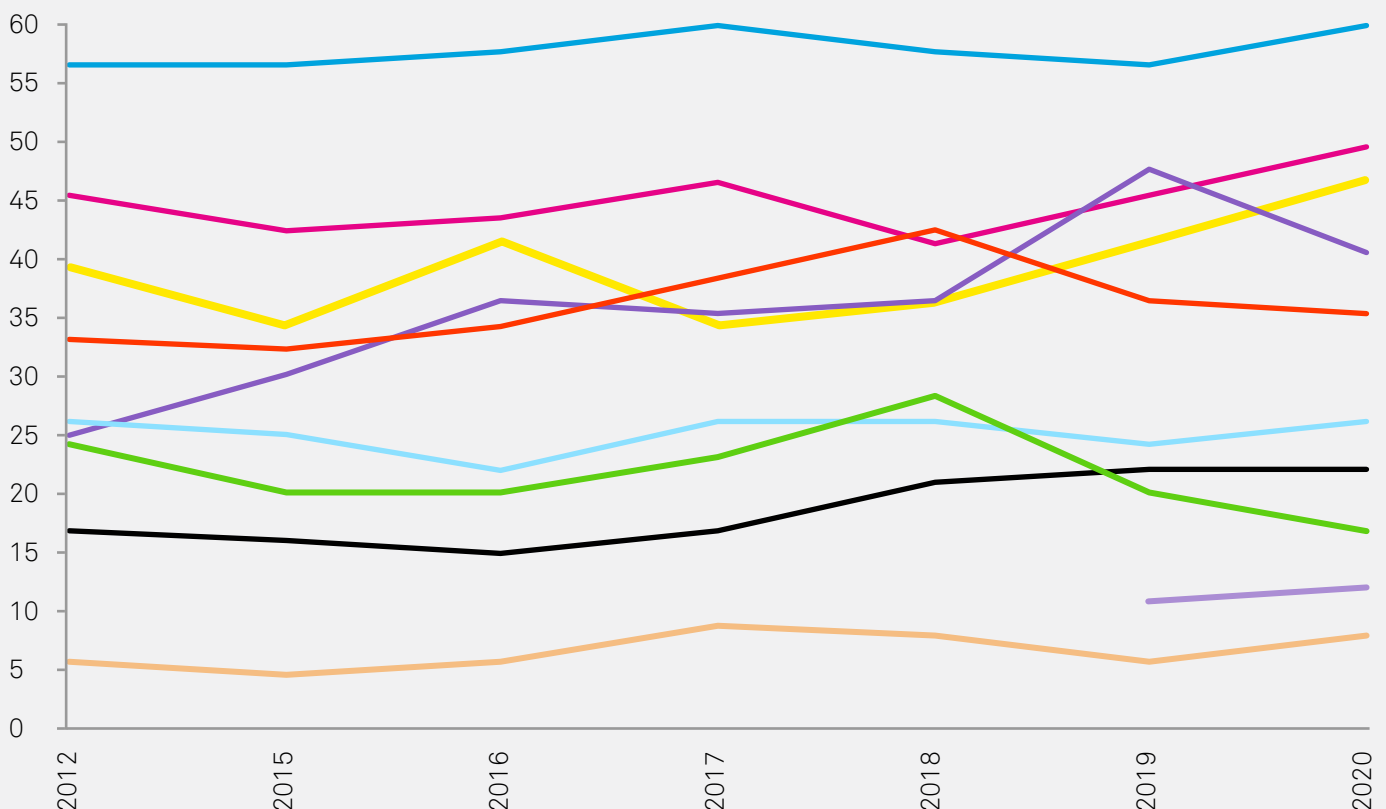
How would you rate the performance of each of the following types of organizations in terms of its contribution to progress on sustainable development since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio?

*Please use a scale where 1 is "poor" and 5 is "excellent."*

# Expert Perceptions of Business and UN Performance Are Trending Down

Expert perceptions of the United Nations' contribution to sustainable development have dropped compared to 2019, and the private sector also continues to see a relative decline in its perceived performance. Meanwhile, positive assessment of research/academia and citizen-led movements has strengthened over the past two years.

% of Experts, "Excellent" (4+5), 2012–2020



- NGOs (59)
- Independent research and academic organizations (49)
- Citizen-led mass social change movements (46)
- The United Nations (40)
- Multi-sectoral partnerships / collaborations (35)
- City/local governments (26)
- International financial institutions (22)
- Private sector (17)
- Institutional investors (12)
- National governments (8)

## Question

How would you rate the performance of each of the following types of organizations in terms of its contribution to progress on sustainable development since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio?

Please use a scale where 1 is "poor" and 5 is "excellent".

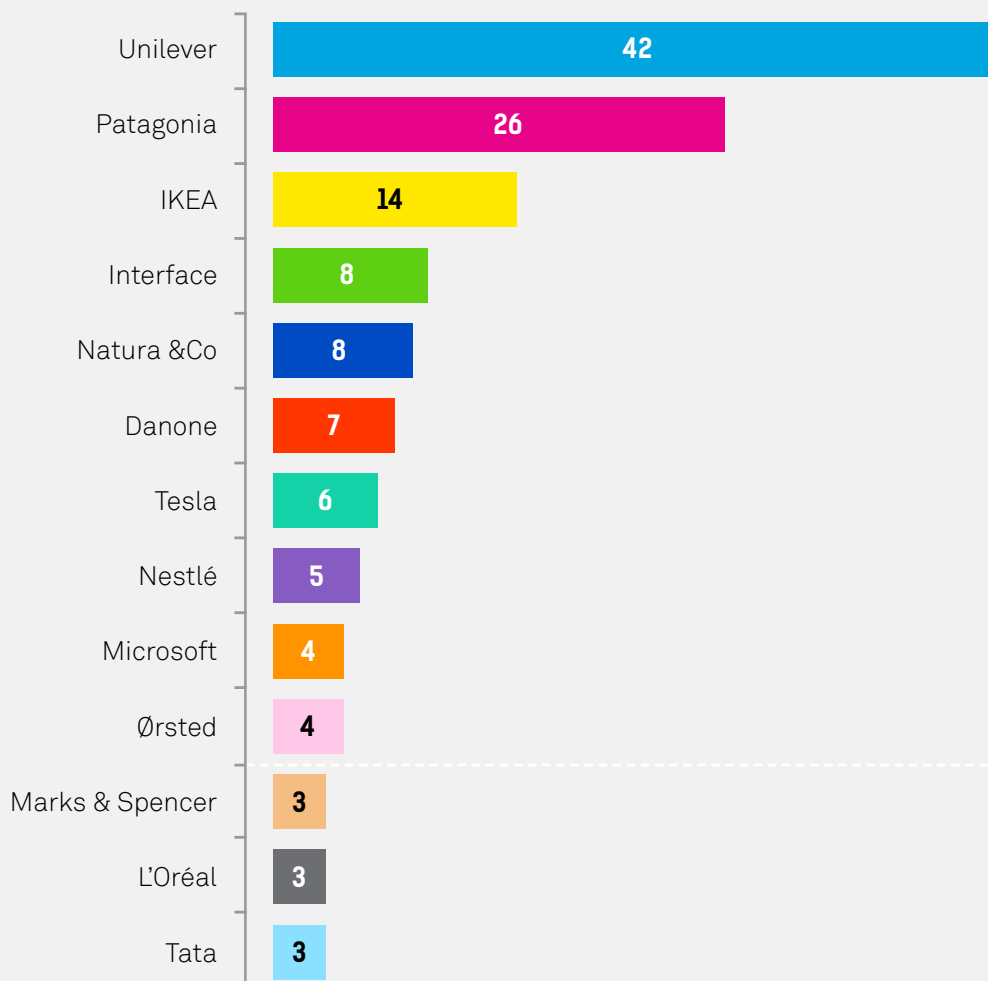
# Corporate Leaders



# Unilever, Patagonia and IKEA Continue to Lead

Unilever, Patagonia and IKEA once again hold the top three positions among recognized corporate sustainability leaders. Four new companies reached the three percent threshold and enter the list this year – Microsoft, Ørsted, L'Oréal and Tata. European and North American companies dominate the list of most recognized leaders with the exception of Natura &Co (Brazil) and Tata (India).

% of Experts, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2020



## Question

What specific companies do you think are leaders in integrating sustainability into their business strategy?

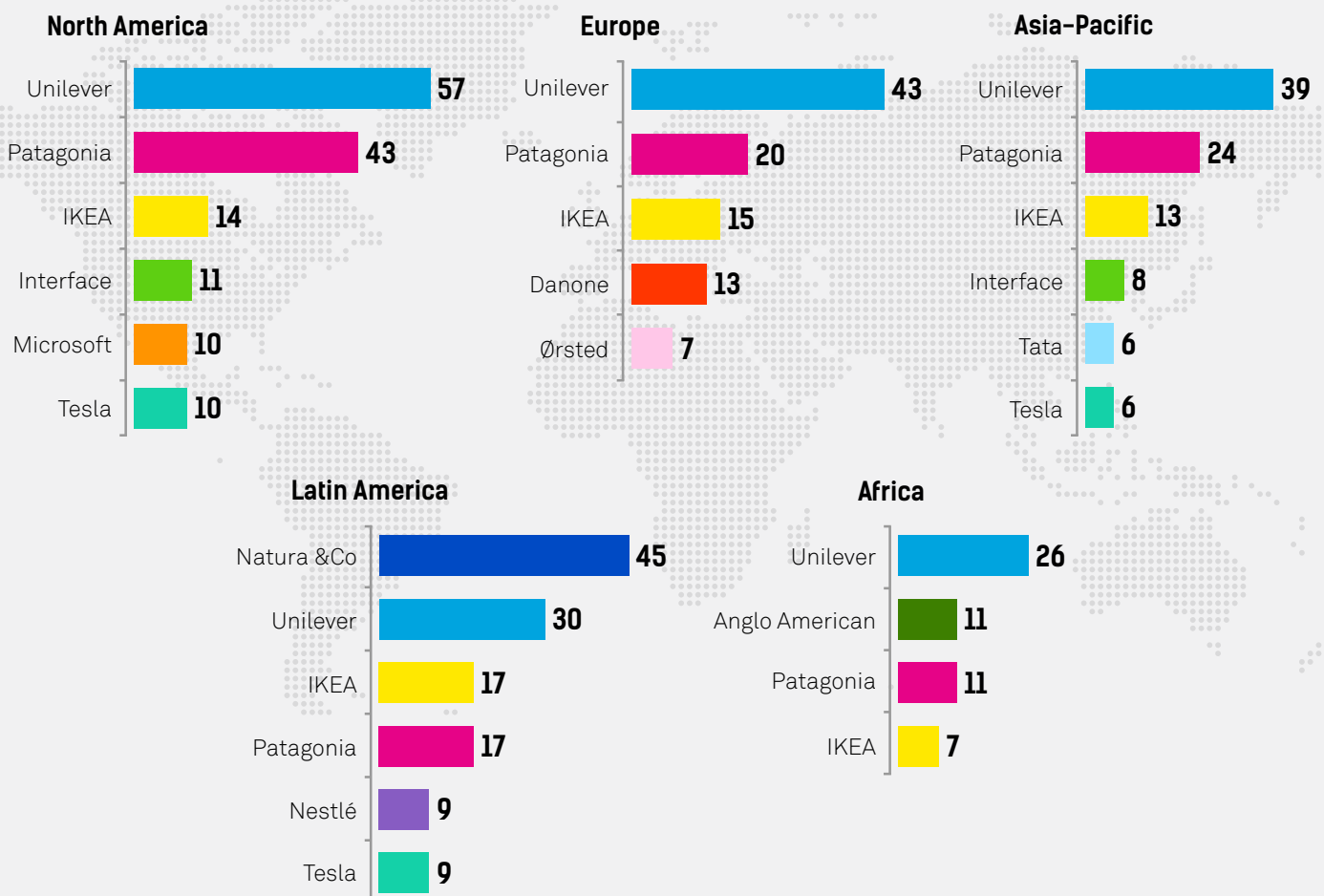
*Please enter a maximum of 3 companies in the spaces provided.*



# Corporate Leaders By Region

Unilever, Patagonia and IKEA remain among the top five most frequently mentioned sustainability leaders on all continents, but experts also recognize local companies headquartered in their regions. Natura &Co tops the ranking in Latin America, and Interface, Microsoft and Tesla are among the most mentioned in North America. Similarly, Danone and Ørsted are well ranked in Europe, while Tata is gaining traction in the Asia-Pacific region.

% of Experts, by Region, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2020



## Question

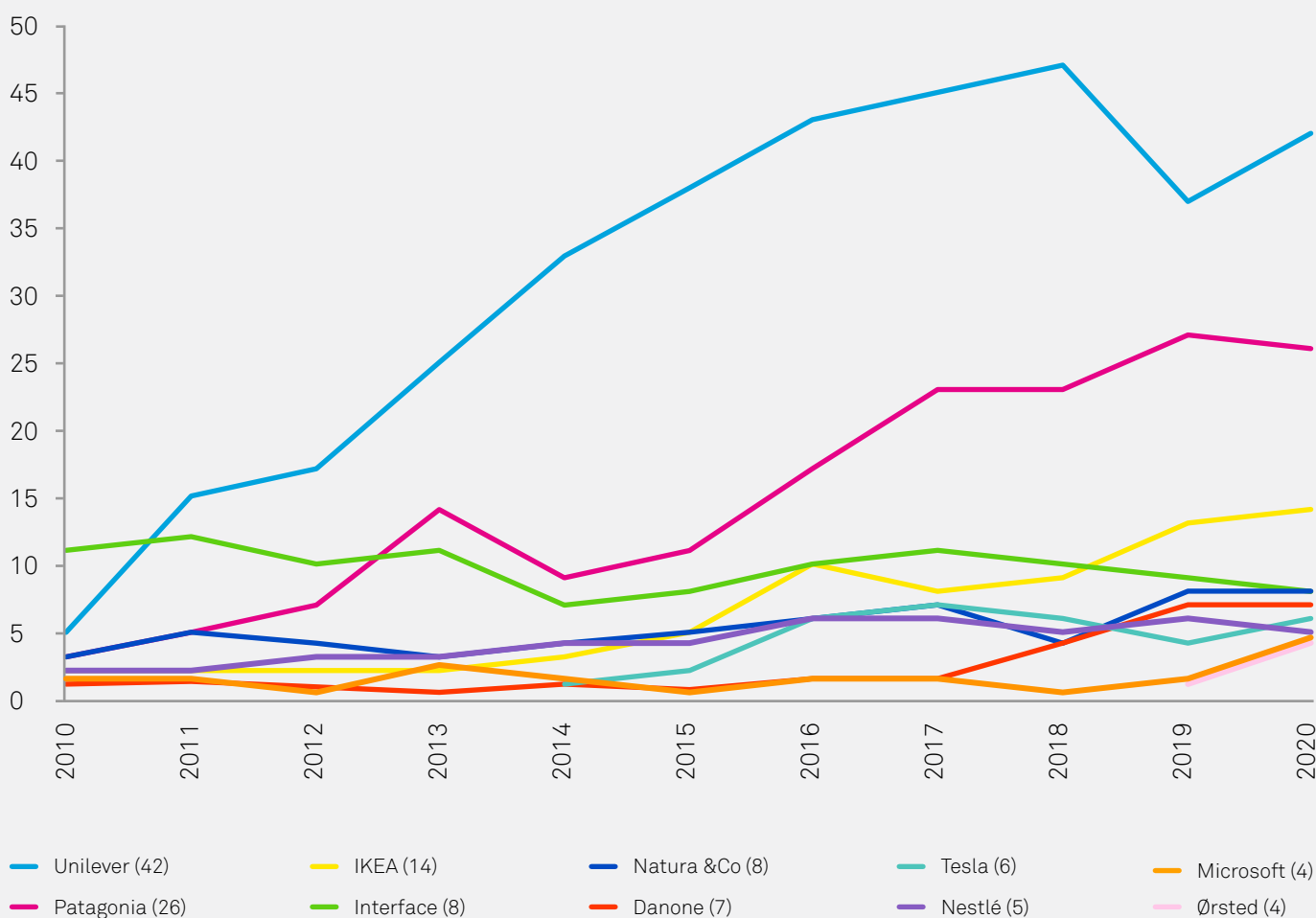
What specific companies do you think are leaders in integrating sustainability into their business strategy?

*Please enter a maximum of 3 companies in the spaces provided.*

# Unilever, Patagonia Dominate Rankings of the Last Decade

Unilever and Patagonia have established themselves as the dominant sustainability leaders of the last decade. The degree to which experts perceive Unilever to be a leader on sustainability is growing again after a drop in 2019. Meanwhile, recognition of efforts by Patagonia, IKEA, Interface, Natura &Co and Danone has stabilized. To a smaller extent, Tesla, Microsoft and Ørsted are increasingly pointed to as global leaders in integrating sustainability into their business strategy.

% of Experts, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2010–2020



## Question

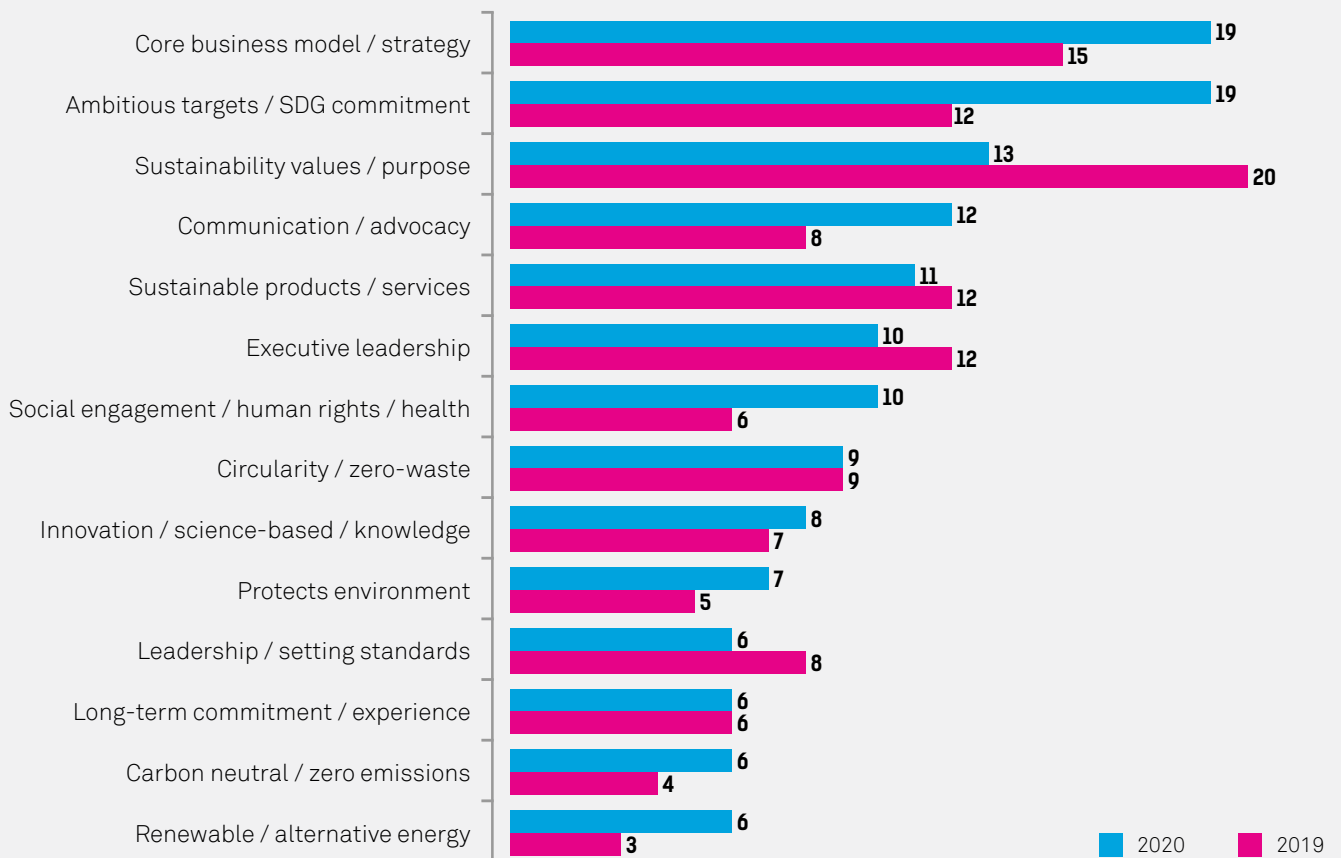
What specific companies do you think are leaders in integrating sustainability into their business strategy?

Please enter a maximum of 3 companies in the spaces provided.

# Ambitious Targets, Business Models Drive Leadership Recognition

While having sustainability as part of the core business model continues to be key to sustainability leadership, setting ambitious targets and committing to the SDGs is increasingly recognized by experts and is now seen as an equally significant attribute of leadership. As we confront a global pandemic and the economic hardship it is producing, efforts around communications and advocacy alongside health, social engagement and human rights have become increasingly important criteria as well.

% of Experts, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2019–2020



## Question

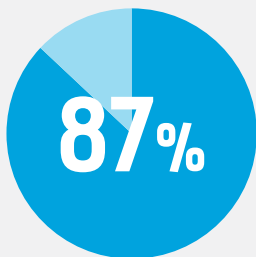
Why do you think [insert company #1] is a leader in sustainable development?

Please enter up to two responses.

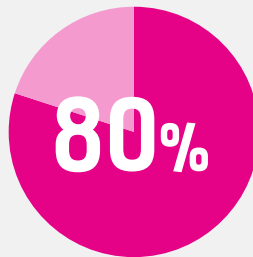
# Corporate Leaders Show Best Performance on Plan / Strategy

When asked to rate companies chosen as sustainability leaders on a range of pre-defined leadership attributes, experts rate companies particularly highly on having a plan or strategy that defines how the organization will achieve its sustainability performance ambitions. Leaders are considered to be relatively weaker on their ability to collaborate or to advocate for new policies that enable systemic change.

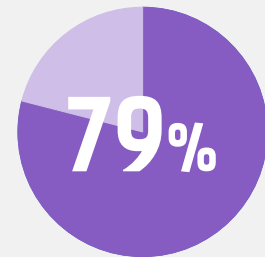
% of Experts, Excellent (4+5), 2020



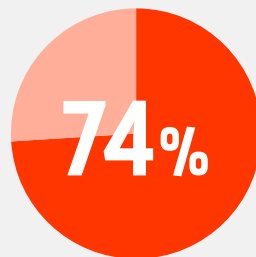
Plan / Strategy



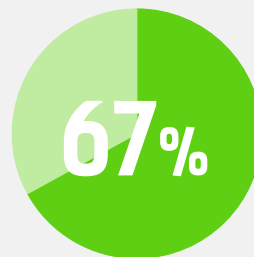
Culture



Purpose



Collaboration



Advocacy

## Question

Please rate how well [insert company from Q2] performs in each of the following specific areas. Please use a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is "poor" and 5 is "excellent."

a) Being **purpose-driven** such that all of its actions support sustainability performance that serves the company and society. b) Having a **corporate culture** that fosters the innovation and commitment required to build and maintain high sustainability performance. c) Having a **strategy or plan** that defines how the organization will achieve its sustainability performance ambitions. d) Working with others in **partnership and collaboration** to scale sustainability performance. e) **Advocating** for new policies and behaviors that enable systemic change that supports sustainability performance.

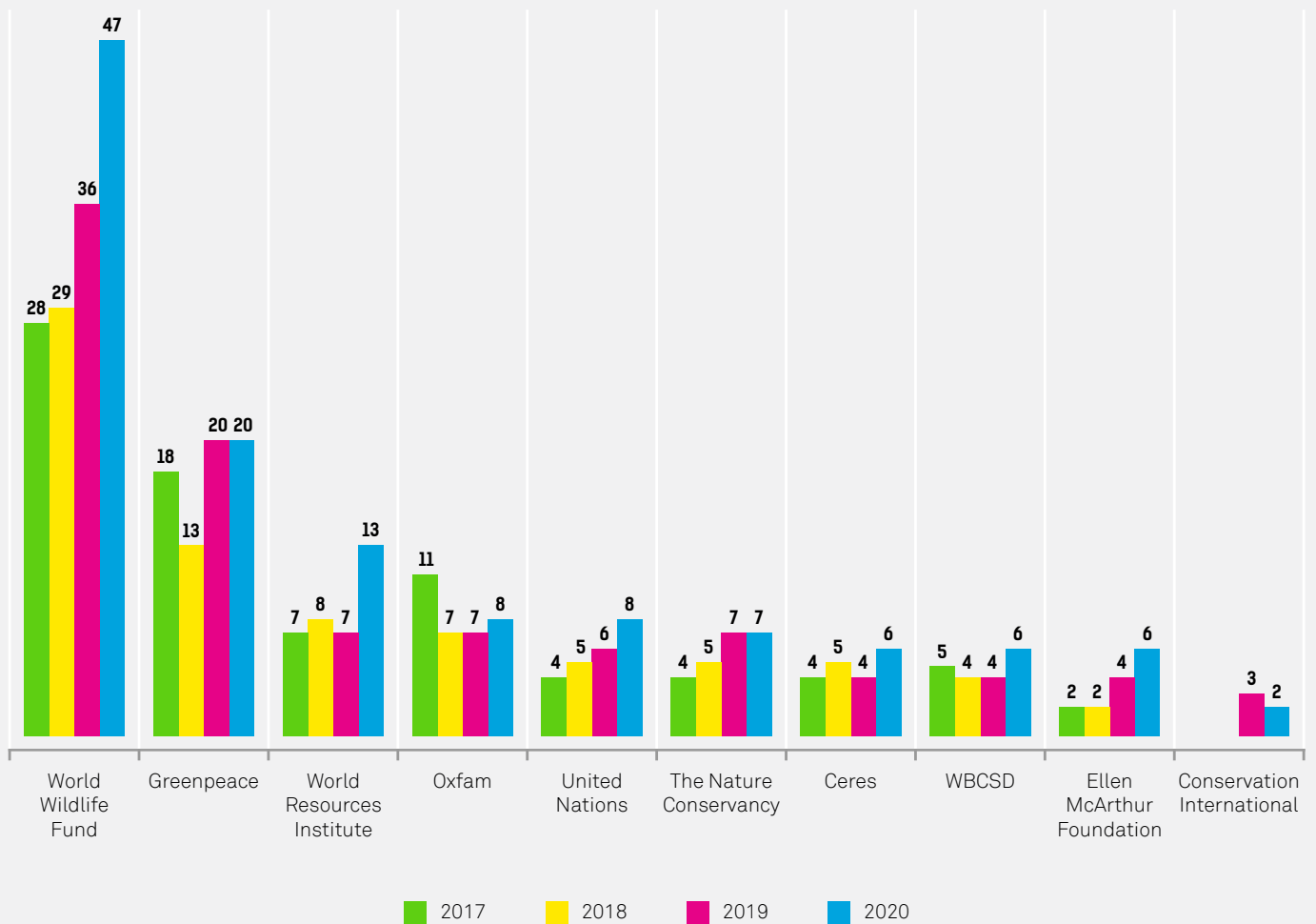
# NGO Leaders



# WWF and Greenpeace Continue to Lead NGO Rankings

The World Wildlife Fund continues to increase its lead as the most recognized NGO advancing global sustainable development among sustainability professionals, with a sharp increase in positive perceptions since 2019. Greenpeace keeps a stable second position, and the World Resources Institute is also increasingly pointed to as a leader.

% of Experts, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2017–2020



## Question

What specific NGOs do you think are leaders in advancing sustainable development?

Please enter a maximum of 3 NGOs in the spaces provided.

# NGO Leaders by Sector and Region

The World Wildlife Fund is recognized as the leading NGO working on sustainable development by respondents from all sectors and by experts in all parts of the world, with its reputation being particularly strong among corporate respondents and sustainability experts in Latin America, North America and Europe. Greenpeace and World Resources Institute occupy the second and third positions, with the former having a stronger reputation among academic/research and government respondents, and the latter enjoying greater recognition among corporate experts.

% of Experts, by Sector and Region, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2020

	World Wildlife Fund	Greenpeace	World Resources Institute	Oxfam	United Nations	The Nature Conservancy	Ceres	WBCSD	Ellen McArthur Foundation	Conservation International
<b>Government</b>	38%	29%	5%	19%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>NGO</b>	45%	23%	8%	8%	10%	6%	5%	8%	5%	3%
<b>Academic/ Research</b>	41%	31%	10%	9%	5%	6%	2%	1%	2%	4%
<b>Corporate</b>	52%	13%	18%	6%	8%	11%	9%	12%	8%	7%
<b>Service/ Media</b>	50%	21%	16%	8%	8%	6%	6%	5%	6%	5%
<b>Africa / Middle East</b>	33%	11%	4%	7%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Asia-Pacific</b>	46%	19%	8%	4%	12%	6%	6%	4%	6%	6%
<b>Europe</b>	48%	26%	11%	13%	5%	4%	1%	10%	6%	2%
<b>Latin America / Caribbean</b>	51%	34%	20%	15%	8%	10%	7%	10%	5%	7%
<b>North America</b>	49%	10%	25%	3%	6%	12%	14%	5%	6%	4%

## Question

What specific NGOs do you think are leaders in advancing sustainable development?  
Please enter a maximum of 3 NGOs in the spaces provided.

# COVID-19 Impact on the Sustainable Development Agenda

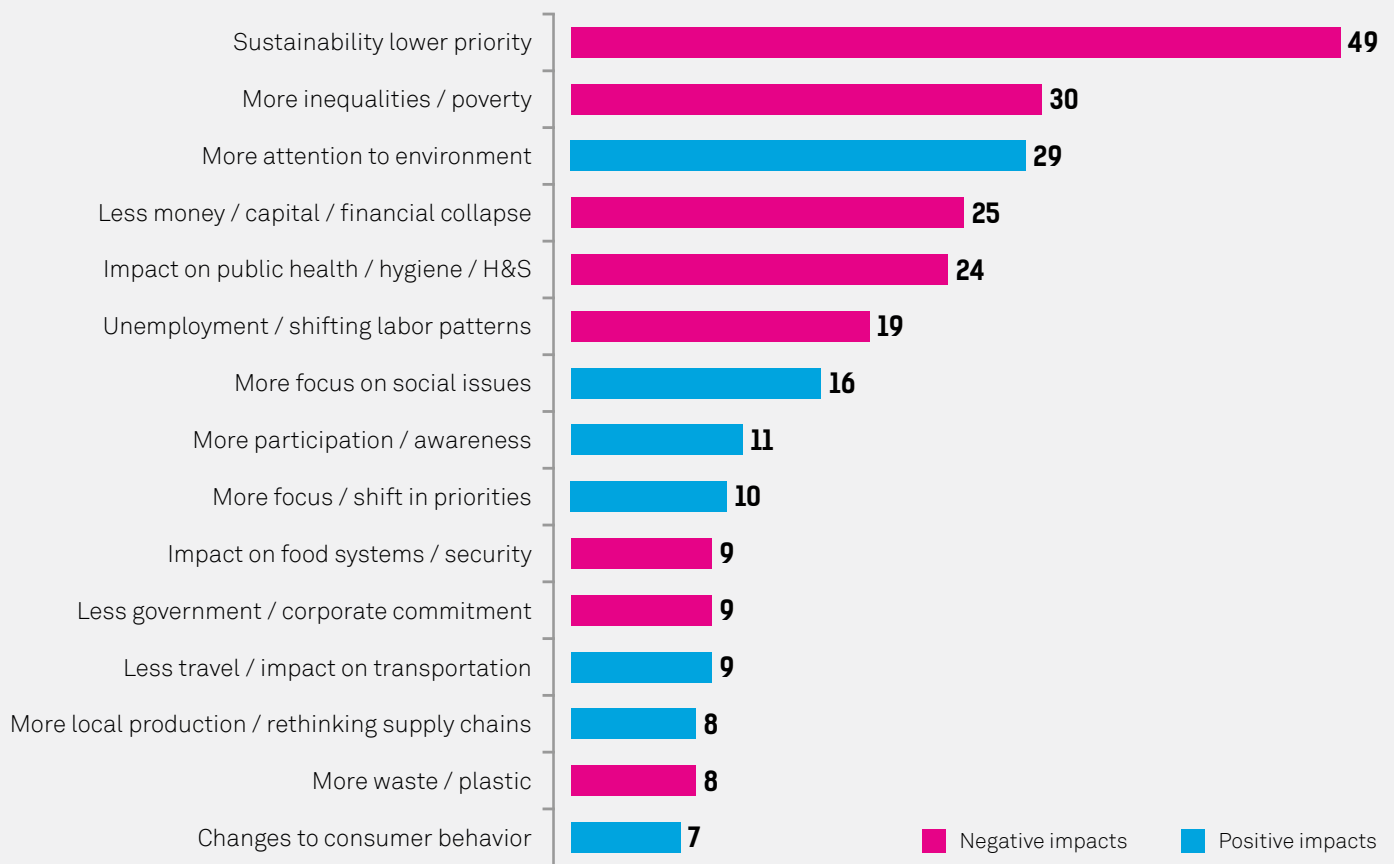




# COVID-19 Expected to Shift Global Priorities

Most experts believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a negative impact on the sustainable development agenda, with almost half of experts expecting that sustainability will become a less urgent priority. They also point out that COVID-19 will likely further exacerbate inequalities and poverty. Almost a third of experts also believe that the pandemic will lead to a renewed focus on environmental issues.

% of Experts, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2020



## Question

How will the COVID-19 pandemic crisis affect sustainable development priorities between now and 2030? *Please enter up to three impacts in the spaces provided.*



# COVID-19 Impacts: Quotes from Experts

Below we share some verbatim quotes from respondents around the world on how COVID-19 is likely to impact the sustainable development agenda.

## Survival mode

“Companies may postpone some of their sustainability initiatives that don’t also reduce cost or increase revenue, as companies activate ‘survival mode’ to ensure they still exist after the COVID-caused economic recession.” - USA

## People first

“There will be a focus on people first. Now is the time for decent and meaningful jobs, leaving no one behind.” - Sweden

## Reduction in financial resources

“There will be a reduction in financial resources available for the SDG agenda and poor institutional capacity at government level to address sustainable development priorities.” - Mexico

## Marginalization

“It will increase the vulnerability of marginalized groups and their exposure to poverty.” - Palestine

## Wake-up call

“This could be a wake-up call to the urgency related to natural resources, health and inequality.” - South Africa

## Question

How will the COVID-19 pandemic crisis affect sustainable development priorities between now and 2030? *Please enter up to three impacts in the spaces provided.*

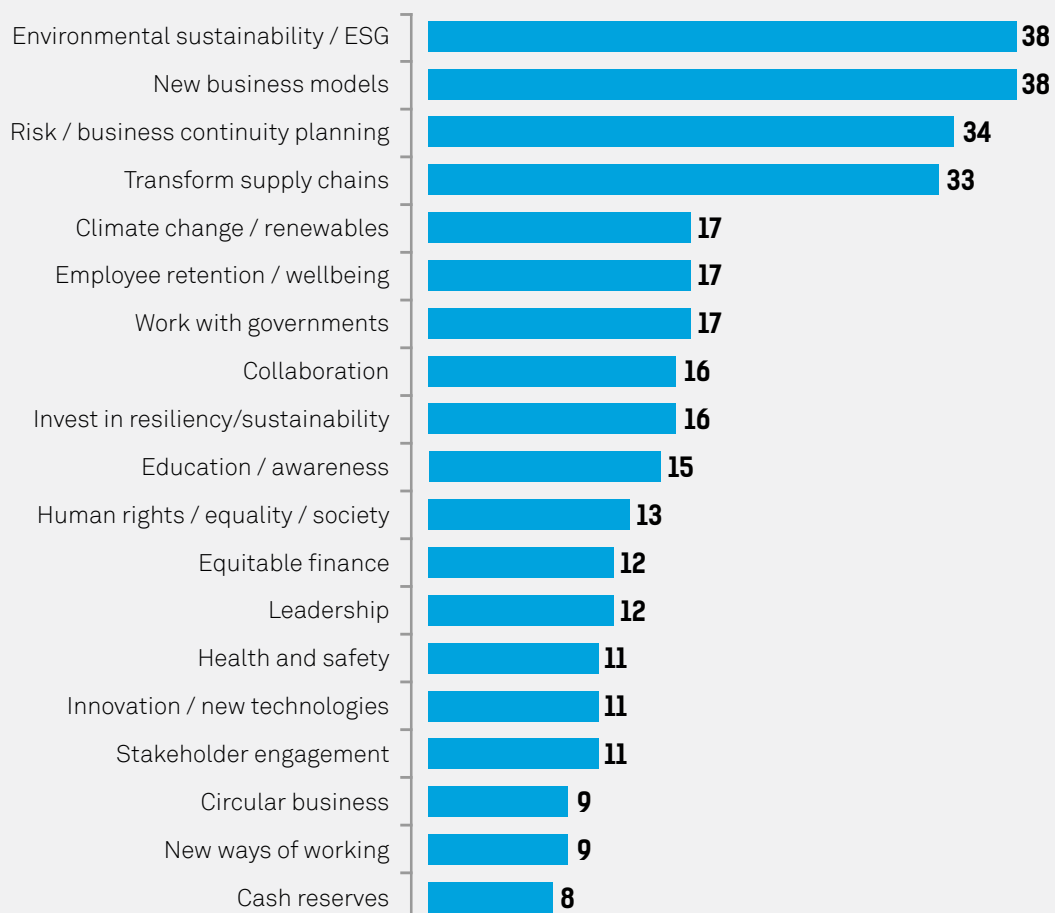
# Building Private Sector Resilience



# Companies Should Focus on ESG and New Business Models as Ways to Strengthen Resilience

In order to increase resilience and their ability to withstand future systemic shocks, businesses are first and foremost expected to double down on their ESG commitments. Beyond ensuring business continuity and risk preparedness, the private sector is encouraged to take far-reaching action by rethinking business models, transforming supply chains and focusing on lowering GHG emissions. Collaboration and partnerships with governments are also pointed to as urgent actions that companies should take to build resilience.

% of Experts, Unprompted, Total Mentions, 2020



## Question

What are the most urgent actions the private sector should take to increase resilience and ability to withstand future systemic shocks? *Please enter up to three actions in the spaces provided.*

# Increasing Resilience: Quotes from Experts

Below we share some quotes from respondents around the world with their reflections on how business can build resilience to future systemic shocks.

## **Align targets**

“Align business targets with social and environmental targets.” - **Brazil**

## **Co-create solutions**

“Build sustainability into business strategy and co-create sustainable solutions through multi-stakeholder partnerships.” - **India**

## **Develop circular economy**

“Develop local/regional circular economy supply chains.” - **Germany**

## **Embrace systems**

“Embrace systems thinking in every facet of business operations.” - **Australia**

## **Reform supply chains**

“Review and reform or strengthen global supply chains to address human welfare issues and encourage legal and sustainable traceable supply of natural resources.” - **USA**

## **Stop waiting**

“Stop waiting for governments to create a conducive environment. Forge ahead and let governments catch up. The cost of doing business as usual is too high to carry on.” - **Pakistan**

## **Have a plan**

“Set up a plan that can be implemented effectively in case of systemic shocks in the future, but the plan must focus on green and sustainable features.” - **Vietnam**

## **Step up innovation**

“Step up technology and innovation across the board to adapt to the new reality (virtual workplaces, education, healthcare-making telemedicine the norm).” - **USA**

## **Focus on staff**

“Focus on staff retention, training and cross skilling a workforce who can keep a business running through a crisis” - **Australia**

## **Question**

What are the most urgent actions the private sector should take to increase resilience and ability to withstand future systemic shocks? *Please enter up to three actions in the spaces provided.*

# Contact

For more information, please contact...

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