

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustainability at a Crossroads

July 2025



ERM
SUSTAINABILITY
INSTITUTE



THE GLOBESCAN / ERM SUSTAINABILITY INSTITUTE RESEARCH PROGRAM

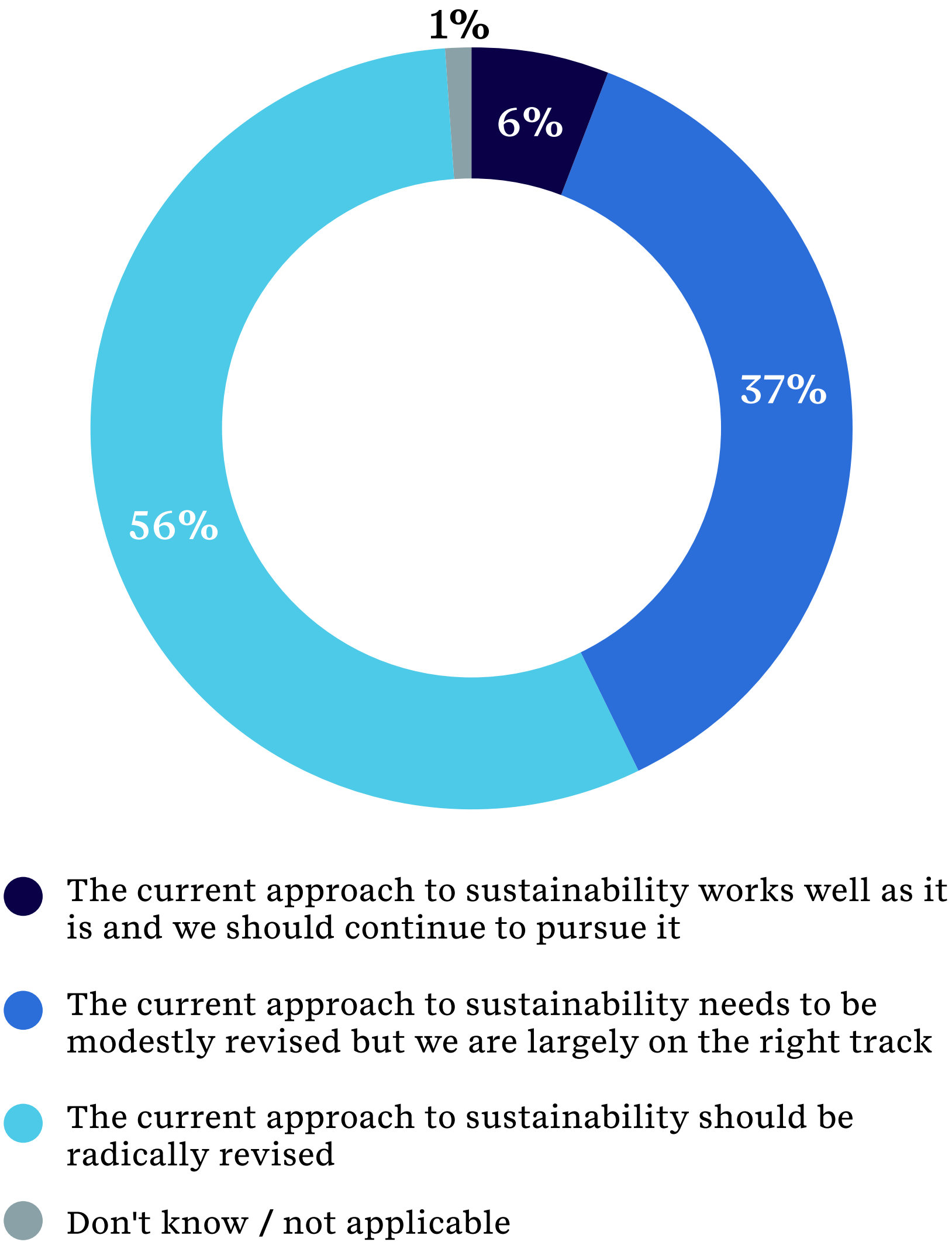
Sustainability at a Crossroads was jointly developed and fielded by GlobeScan, ERM, and Volans. This survey of 844 qualified, highly experienced sustainability experts across 72 countries reveals a pivotal inflection point in the evolution of the global sustainability agenda.¹

While the sustainability field has matured, expanded, and mainstreamed over the nearly four decades since the 1987 publication of the Brundtland Report ***Our Common Future*** established the foundation on which much of today’s sustainable development agenda and approaches stand, experts say that that current practices simply are not working. Over nine in ten respondents say the agenda requires revision, while more than half of experts call for a radical overhaul. We are truly at a crossroads in terms of the way forward.

GlobeScan, ERM, and Volans do not interpret the survey’s findings to mean the field is in an existential crisis. We see a glass-half-full moment of opportunity. At this time, leaders in the private, public, and civil society sectors can pivot and make the bold strategic adjustments needed to deliver the just, low-carbon, and nature-positive transition needed. This will mean creating new markets that strengthen societies and economies at the same time as increasing business resilience. This requires developing opportunities that build commercial value while simultaneously addressing sustainability imperatives.

This journey will be difficult and there will be frequent disruptions, but it is necessary – especially given the system is already in flux. At a time of significant geopolitical, economic, and societal volatility, the best sustainability solutions will be the ones that help stabilize international relations and trade, strengthen economies, protect natural ecosystems, and prepare citizens for a different future.

Personal Feeling about the Current State of the Sustainability Agenda



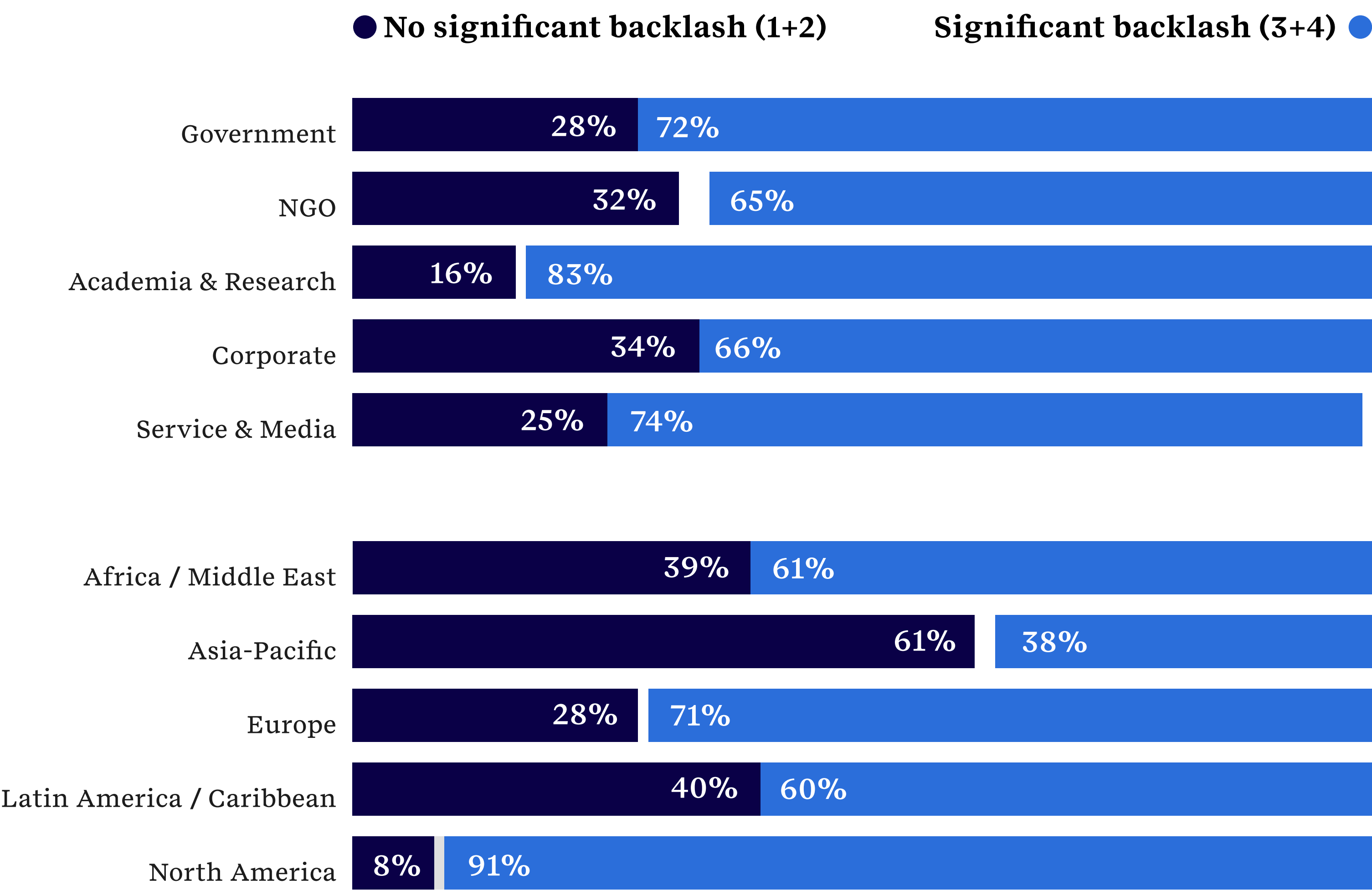
% of Experts, 2025

1. Please see page 10 for full research methodology.

In addition to calling for change, survey respondents provided insight on how to do this successfully. Research findings emphasize the following:

- **Stalled progress and rising backlash:** Experts express frustration with the slow pace of change and note the growth of organized resistance to the sustainability agenda, particularly in North America. However, this backlash is not universal – stakeholders in Asia-Pacific report far less friction.
- **Eroding confidence in global frameworks:** Belief in the effectiveness of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, and other multilateral frameworks is low, with many experts questioning the ability of these frameworks to deliver on the ambitions they enshrine.
- **Underperformance by key actors:** National governments and institutional investors receive the lowest performance ratings, with only five percent of experts rating government efforts as excellent in terms of their contribution to progress on sustainable development. The private sector also fares poorly, with just 14 percent of respondents rating it positively, its lowest performance score since tracking began in 2012 and a seven-point decline since 2021.

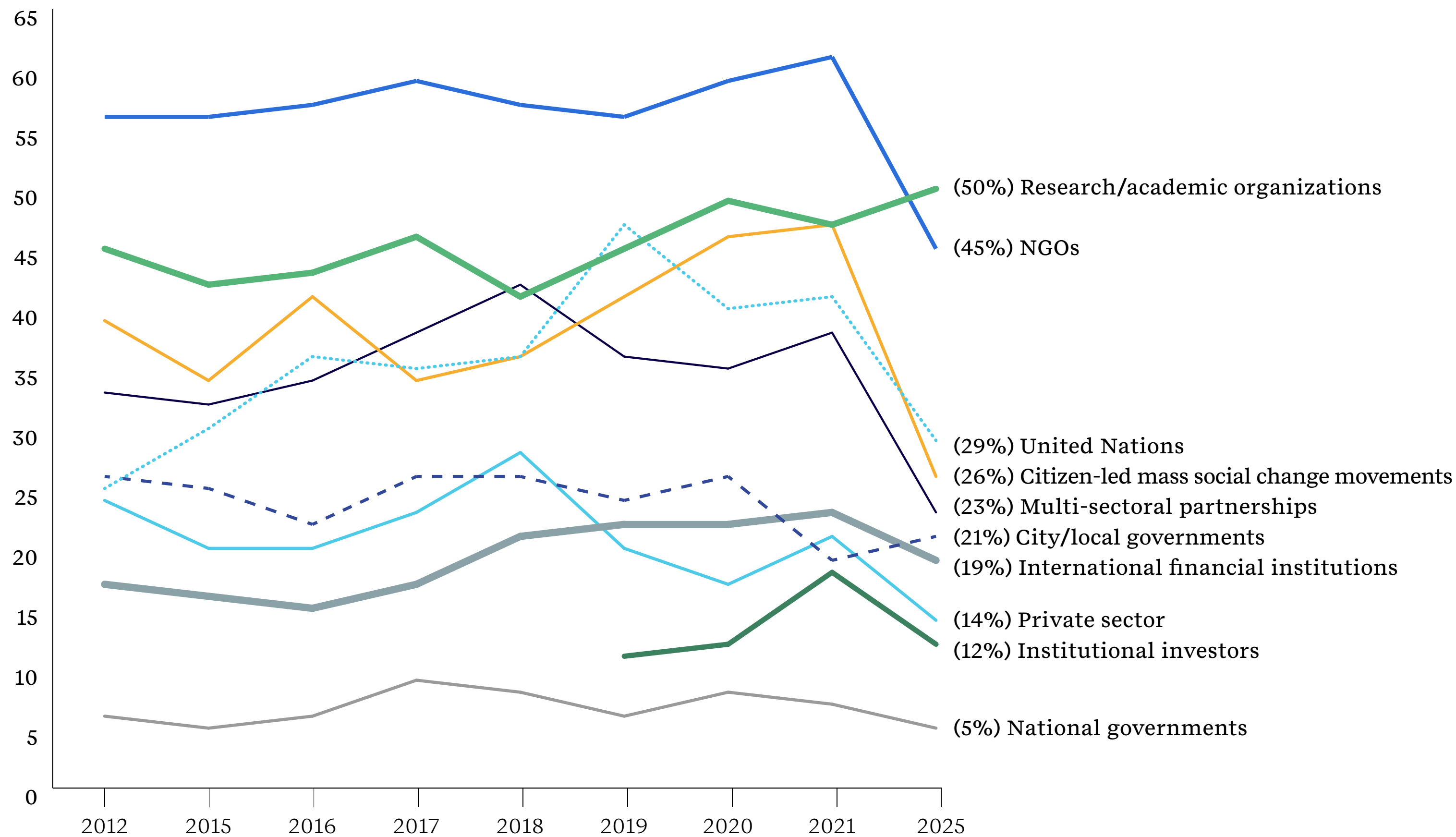
Significance of the Backlash against the Sustainability Agenda in Your Country



% of Experts, by Sector and Region, 2025
White space indicates "Neutral" and "Don't know / No answer" (DK/NA).
Small sample size for Government (n=32) and Africa / Middle East (n=33).

- Declining faith in civil society:** Since 2012, positive ratings have declined precipitously for social movements (down 21 points from 2021), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (down 16 points), multi-sectoral partnerships (down 15 points), and the United Nations (UN) (down 12 points). In contrast, research and academic institutions have gained credibility over the last few years (up three points).
- Diverging regional perspectives:** Experts in Africa and the Middle East, Europe, and North America are the most critical of progress, while those in Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia-Pacific are more optimistic and more likely to view current political and economic shocks as opportunities rather than threats.

Sustainability Performance of Key Institutions



% of Experts, “Excellent” (4+5), 2012–2025

Pick Your Horse

Experts were asked to rate a set of 64 actions or initiatives on potential impact in terms of delivering significant positive sustainability outcomes over the next five years.² Respondents were also asked to estimate the likelihood that each action could be implemented at scale over the same five-year period while considering political will, economic costs, social acceptance, and technical readiness.

Each possible action was assessed considering which of four types of actors might be accountable for its delivery – governments, corporations, investors / capital markets, and civil society – which we explore further in the next section. Overall, the results of the action assessment hint at how to potentially reverse-engineer a next-wave sustainability agenda capable of significant progress by 2030 and the delivery of a just, low-carbon transition by 2050.

2. These 64 actions or initiatives were crowd sourced among a number of sustainability experts in advance of the survey.

Fast rising

HIGH IMPACT / LOW FEASIBILITY ACTIONS

Several ambitious sustainability actions may be gaining traction because of their transformative potential but still need to overcome significant implementation hurdles. These include fiscal and regulatory measures like subsidies or taxes to incentivize sustainable choices, extended producer responsibility legislation, and internal carbon pricing; legal and governance reforms such as mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence, judicial interventions, and international trade policies with embedded sustainability standards; and systemic shifts, like integrating natural, social, and human capital into accounting systems, linking executive compensation to sustainability, and wealth redistribution. Cultural and organizational changes, such as building sustainability-first workplace cultures and advancing nature-based solutions, are perceived as having high potential but are unlikely to scale in the near term.

Fading

LOW IMPACT / LOW FEASIBILITY ACTIONS

A considerable number of legacy sustainability initiatives are increasingly viewed as ineffective and unlikely to scale. These include multilateral frameworks like the Paris Agreement, the SDGs, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Similarly, voluntary or principle-led efforts such as B Corp certification, the UN Global Compact, PRI, and various just transition frameworks are perceived as lacking enforcement power and traction. Some market-based tools like divestment, shareholder resolutions, and the EU Taxonomy are also seen as limited in driving systemic change. Finally, technological fixes, like carbon capture and geoengineering, as well as personal development programs and non-violent direct action do not win support from survey respondents, perhaps because they view them as too speculative or marginal to meaningfully influence the sustainability agenda in the near term.

Greatest momentum

HIGH IMPACT / HIGH FEASIBILITY ACTIONS

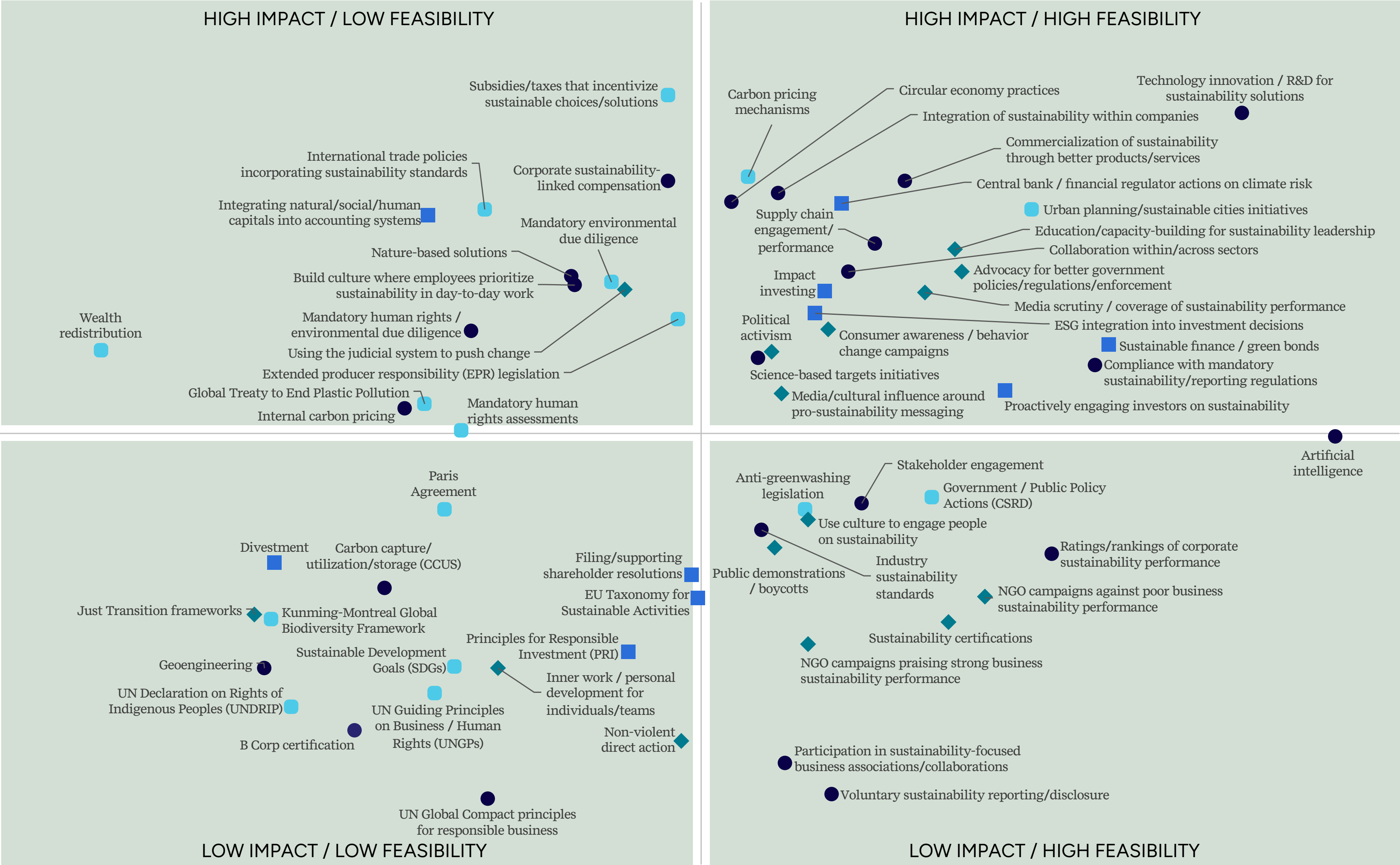
A wide range of sustainability actions may be gaining momentum due to their high potential impact and strong likelihood of near-term implementation. These include regulatory and policy levers like carbon pricing, mandatory sustainability reporting, and central bank actions on climate risk; financial strategies such as ESG integration, green bonds, and impact investing; corporate practices, like embedding sustainability into core operations, innovating and commercializing sustainable products, investing in technology and innovation, improving supply chains, and adopting circular economy models; and civil society efforts including advocacy, education, media scrutiny, and behavior change campaigns.

Stagnating

LOW IMPACT / HIGH FEASIBILITY ACTIONS

While seen as possible, some actions are considered less transformative in their impact. These include compliance-oriented or reputational measures such as voluntary sustainability reporting, sustainability certifications, anti-greenwashing legislation, ratings and rankings, and participation in industry associations. Similarly, initiatives like stakeholder engagement, public demonstrations, NGO campaigns, and cultural engagement strategies are seen as familiar and accessible but insufficient to drive systemic change. Even emerging technologies like artificial intelligence are perceived as underdelivering on their sustainability promise compared to other available approaches.

Assessing Levers of Change to 2030: Potential Impact vs. Feasibility



And Place Your Bets

The preceding ‘Pick Your Horse’ section mapped the actions and initiatives experts believe have the highest potential to deliver significant positive sustainability outcomes over the next five years. But who does what? Here in ‘And Place Your Bets,’ we present survey respondents’ suggestions about which actions governments, corporations, investors/capital markets, and civil society can take to accelerate sustainability over the next five years.

Governments

Experts see sustainable urban planning as the most promising government and public policy action over the next five years. Carbon pricing mechanisms, such as carbon taxes or cap-and-trade systems, also fall into the category of relatively high potential impact with just above average likelihood to be implemented in the short term. Incentivizing sustainable choices through subsidies or taxes is seen as having the largest potential impact, but with just below average likelihood of being quickly implemented.

In contrast, multilateral frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Paris Agreement, and the SDGs are thought to have relatively low potential impact and to be relatively unlikely to be implemented at scale over the next five years.

Investors / Capital Markets

Experts identify central bank or financial regulator actions on climate risk, impact investing, sustainable finance (including green bonds), integration of ESG into investment decisions, and proactively engaging investors on sustainability as the most promising capital market levers for advancing sustainability in the short term. Integrating natural, social, and human capital into accounting systems is seen as having the potential to have meaningful impact, but it is thought to be less likely to be implemented quickly at scale.

Several other investor or capital market actions are considered both relatively ineffective and unlikely to be activated at scale. These include divestment and shareholder activism as well as guidelines like the Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) and EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities.

Corporations

Experts point to investing in new technologies and R&D aimed at solving sustainability challenges as the most powerful action that business can take as a lever of change. Creating better products and services that make sustainability commercially attractive, drive improvements across supply chains, and improve collaboration within or across sectors are also seen as promising private sector pathways. Other actions perceived as relatively high impact and feasible include circular economy practices, further integration of sustainability into business operations, and complying with mandatory regulations.

Voluntary initiatives like B Corp and the UN Global Compact as well as unproven technological fixes like geoengineering and carbon capture are considered much less promising in terms of their potential to deliver near-term change at scale.

Civil Society

Experts think that education and capacity building for sustainability leadership, advocacy for better government policies, regulations, and enforcement, plus media scrutiny and coverage of sustainability performance are the best civil society actions to focus on to achieve progress over the next five years. Consumer awareness and behavior change campaigns, political activism, and media or cultural influence to promote more sustainable behaviors also fall into the category of relatively high potential impact and high feasibility.

In contrast, initiatives such as just transition frameworks, personal development programs, and non-violent direct action are considered less impactful and less likely to see widespread adoption in the near term.

Understanding Mindsets

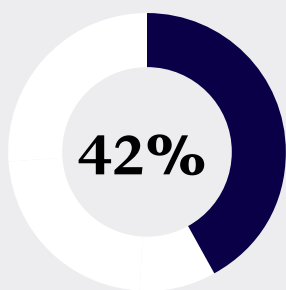
It is one thing for experts to call for radical revision of the sustainability agenda. It is another to organize and deliver. To better understand the diversity of perspectives of different sustainability practitioners and how they might be harmonized to enable action, we conducted a segmentation of our survey respondents.

Segmentation revealed four cohorts with different mindsets. The four segments break down into two camps, each made up of two groups. We call them Incumbents and Insurgents. We will need all their energy and wisdom to redesign sustainability, so building understanding among them will be key.

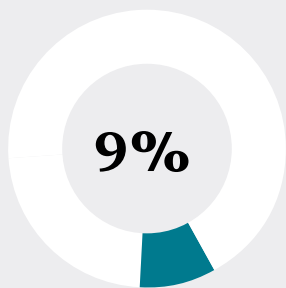
Despite differences, 93 percent of all respondents think the sustainability agenda needs to be revised, with 56 percent calling for radical revision. So, all these groups want change – the question is how and whether the best of their approaches and instincts can be harmonized. Alignment is critical to this being a truly global agenda, as the four groups are demographically and geographically different in composition, as well as in their approaches.

Incumbents are comprised of Traditionalists and Institutionalists.

These sustainability practitioners are more disposed to maintain and incrementally evolve the sustainability agenda than to remake it.



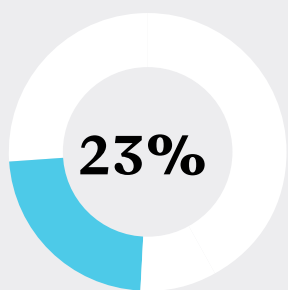
Traditionalists (42 percent of respondents) are the most aligned with the current agenda, favoring continuity and incremental improvements. More prevalent in Asia, Latin America, and the public and corporate sectors, they rate legacy frameworks like the SDGs and UNGPs more positively and are less inclined toward disruptive change.



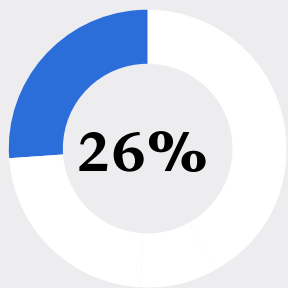
Institutionalists (nine percent) believe in strengthening institutional accountability. With a technocratic mindset and a strong presence in government and corporate roles, they favor regulatory tools like mandatory reporting and central bank oversight. This small segment is less supportive of symbolic or activist approaches, and its members are most concentrated in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Insurgents are made up of Pathfinders and Radicals.

They are less satisfied with progress to date and more impatient about finding fixes. They want more change, faster, and they are less concerned about preserving the current system than identifying and implementing the changes they believe necessary for the sustainability agenda to deliver on its ambitions.



Pathfinders (23 percent of respondents) are reform minded and optimistic. They hail largely from the corporate and government sectors. They are optimistic about progress and focused on scalable, high-impact solutions like ESG integration, sustainable finance, and cross-sector collaboration. Regionally diverse, they are especially active in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and North America.

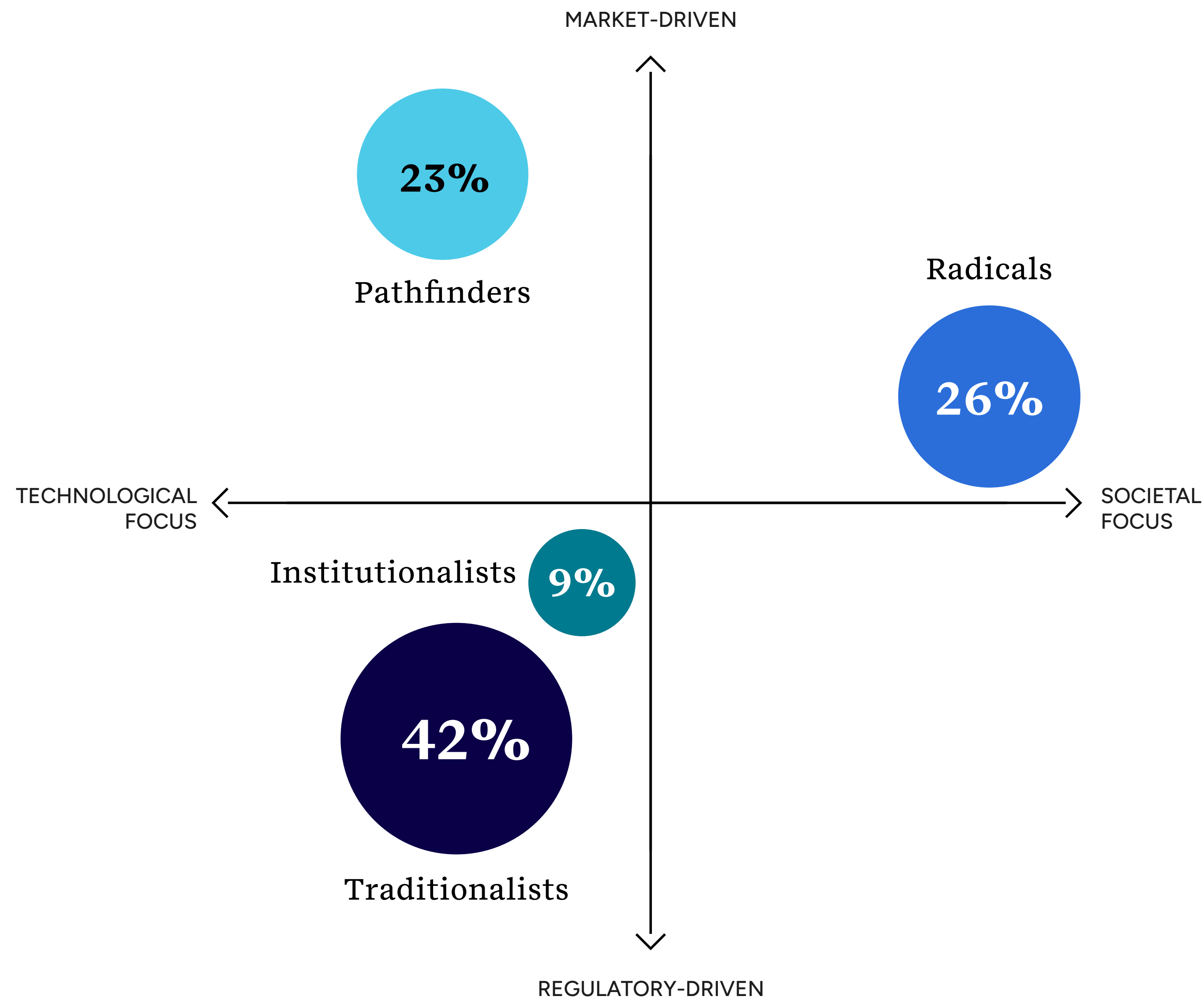


Radicals (26 percent) are the least satisfied with the status quo. Overrepresented among academia and NGOs, and concentrated in Europe, North America, and Oceania, they call for the most significant overhaul of the sustainability agenda. More than any other group, they champion bold, systemic interventions – such as wealth redistribution, carbon pricing, and judicial action – while rejecting legacy frameworks and incrementalism.

The four segments can be represented on a matrix structured along two intersecting axes that reflect differing theories of change for advancing sustainability and which map the diverse mindsets and strategies shaping the global sustainability agenda.

The vertical axis contrasts market-driven approaches – which include not only commercial and financial markets but also societal preferences, cultural norms, and consumer demand for sustainability – with regulatory-driven approaches where progress is primarily driven by enforced rules, policies, and compliance mechanisms. The horizontal axis spans from technology-led solutions, where innovation, digital tools, and scientific advancement are prioritized, to society-led approaches, which emphasize collective engagement, collaboration, and participatory governance.

The Global Sustainability Community: A Segmentation



Fast Forward

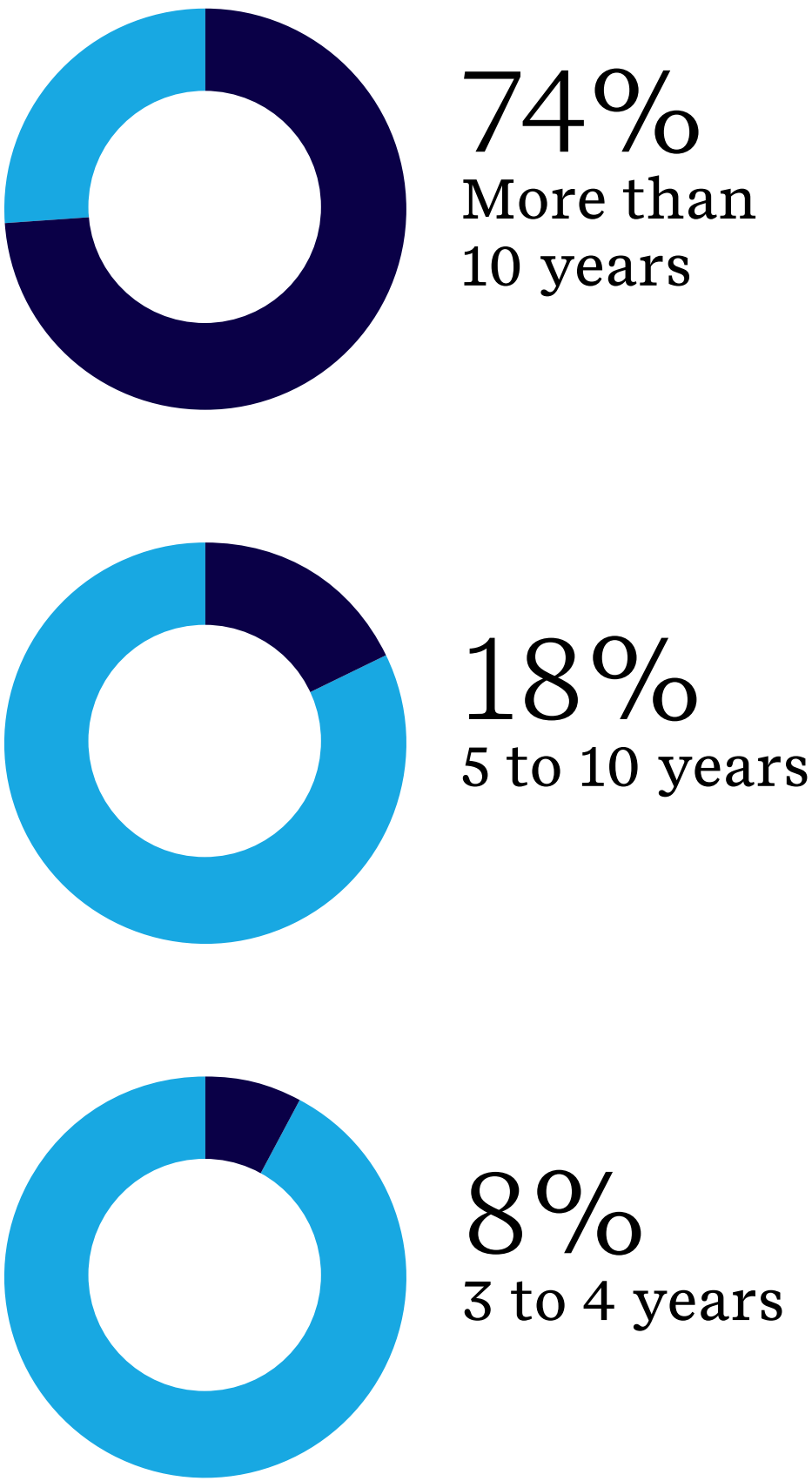
This research presents a mandate for change, declaring that the sustainability agenda developed over the last several decades is not meeting the moment. Acting on this mandate includes risk, but, again, we see a glass-half-full moment of opportunity to co-create a new, bold, future-fit sustainability agenda.

We have an opportunity to vault from today’s crossroads to a decisive and catalytic route forward. Building strong consensus for strategic choices and resource allocation will allow us to make the most progress fastest. We hope the collective wisdom of the global sustainability community captured in this expert survey helps us identify and embrace the most effective actions and solutions to progress this journey.

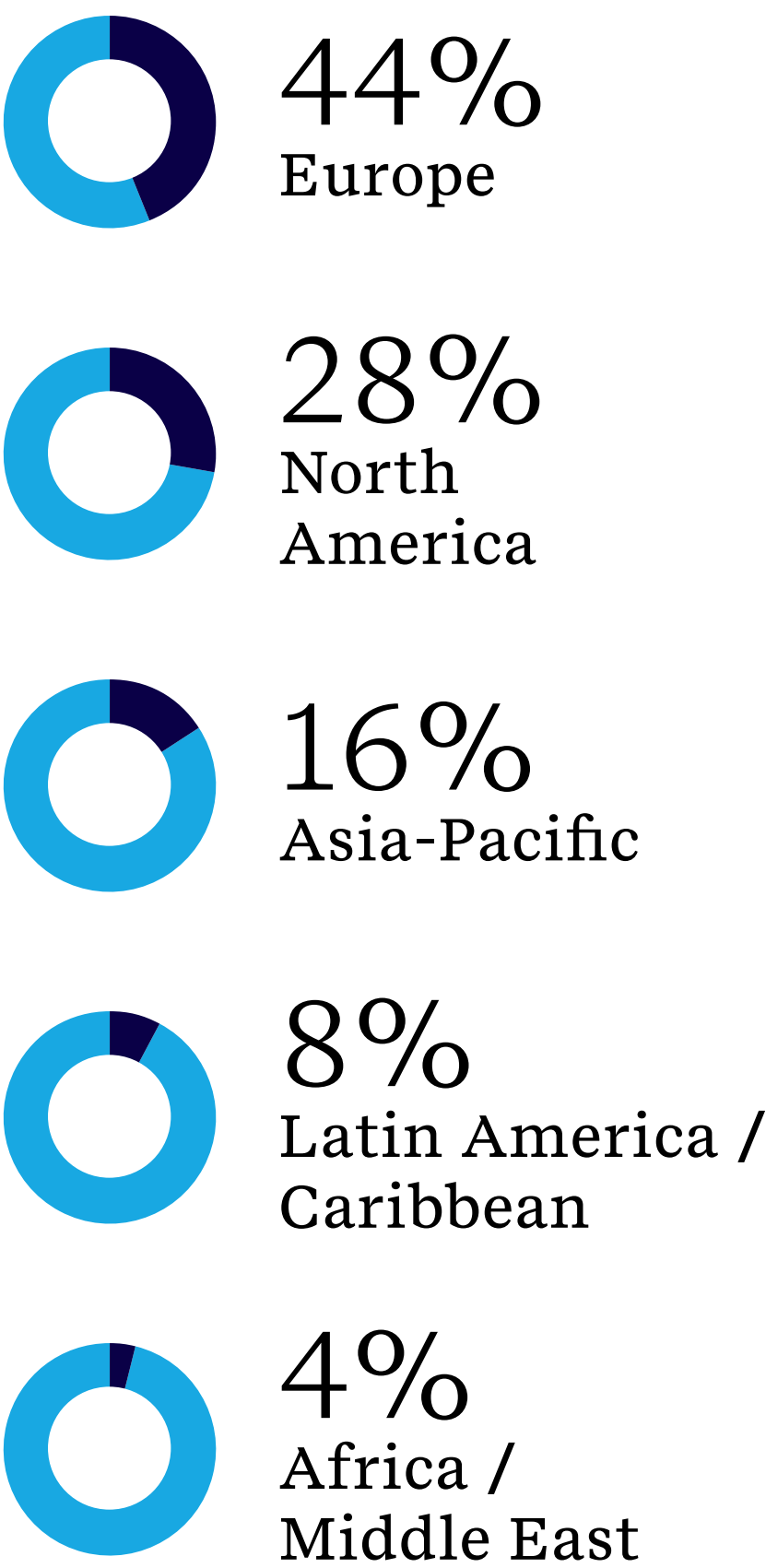
In addition to this report, this research will be used to turn insight into action through a global series of in-person and online convenings that will result in a roadmap designed to inform and guide policy, business, and civil society as we navigate the critical years to 2030 and put in place the measures needed to achieve the success required for 2050.

Survey Methodology

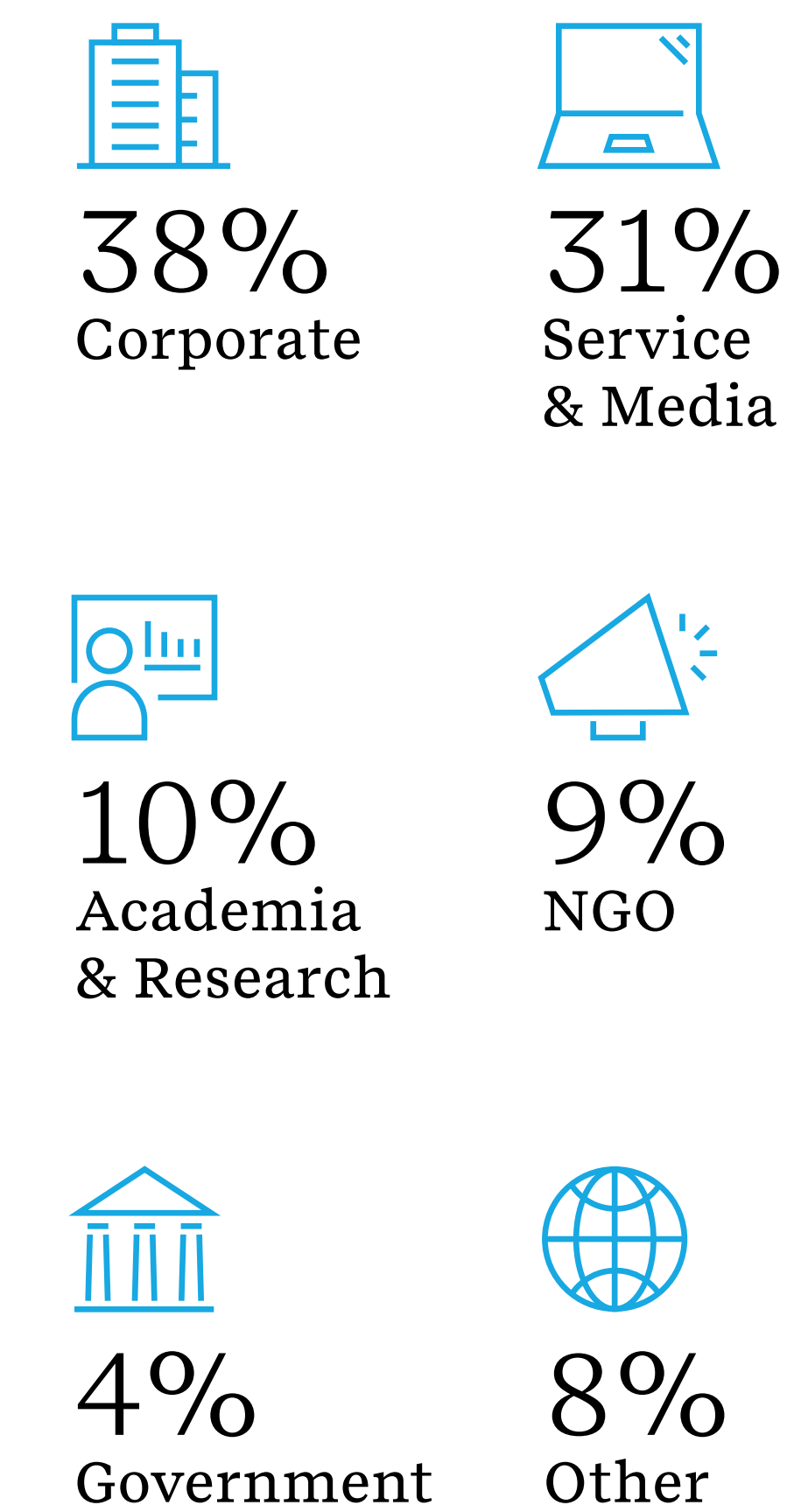
Experience



Geography



Sectors



All Experts (n=844), 2025

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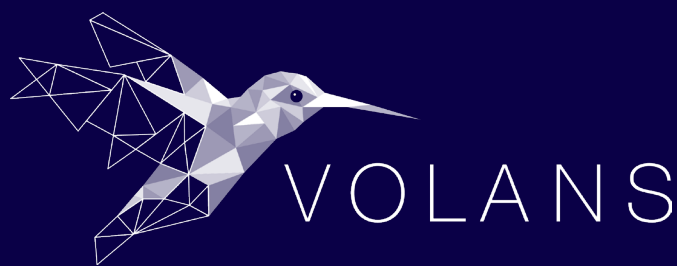


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