



# The voice of youth.

Vision 2050 issue brief

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# ① Introduction



# 1 Introduction

**In 2010, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) released Vision 2050, a landmark piece of work that laid out a pathway to a world in which more than nine billion people are able to live well, within planetary boundaries, by mid-century.**

Ten years on, as we approach a number of key ecological tipping points and unprecedented global risks continue to build, 40 WBCSD member companies have come together to revisit and revitalize Vision 2050, bringing the original work up to date with a view to resetting the baseline for business leadership in the face of the unique, but rapidly closing, window of opportunity for action that the next decade presents.

As WBCSD sets out pathways and strategies to drive the transformations that will be needed to make our Vision a reality, one stakeholder group with whom it is vital that we engage closely is the youth of today. Globally, those born after 1985 now outnumber those born earlier, with under-35s representing 56% of the global population<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, in recent years it has increasingly been younger generations that have been at the forefront of activism around critical environmental and social issues. This has been epitomized most visibly by the school strike for climate campaign led by Greta Thunberg, whose calls for urgent climate action have resonated with millions of other young people all over the world.

Our efforts to deliver Vision 2050 must be in line with the expectations of young people as agenda-setters, and essential participants in transformation. A generational handover of political, cultural and economic power is already underway and will continue throughout the 2020s; ultimately it will be the youth of today that will lead in the delivery of our Vision for tomorrow.



<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1.

## ② Methodology



## ② Methodology

**WBCSD issued two surveys asking young people about the world they see now and the world they would like to live in in 2050. One survey went to young people working for WBCSD member companies engaged in the refresh of Vision 2050. The survey was circulated around companies' youth and future leader networks in January and February 2020.**

We also issued a second survey via the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network's Youth initiative (SDSN Youth). This second survey was distributed in April and May 2020 to SDSN Youth's partners around the world including students and young professionals working in the United Nations, in international development, and in sustainability and environmental consulting.

In response to the survey distributed through WBCSD member companies, we received 338 responses from employees

of fourteen companies. Of these responses, we analyzed the data of 290 people aged 35 and under, reflecting those that will likely still be in the workforce in 2050. We received 241 responses to the SDSN Youth survey, analyzing the data of 208 people aged 35 and under, from 62 countries.

**Figure 1:** breakdown of survey responses

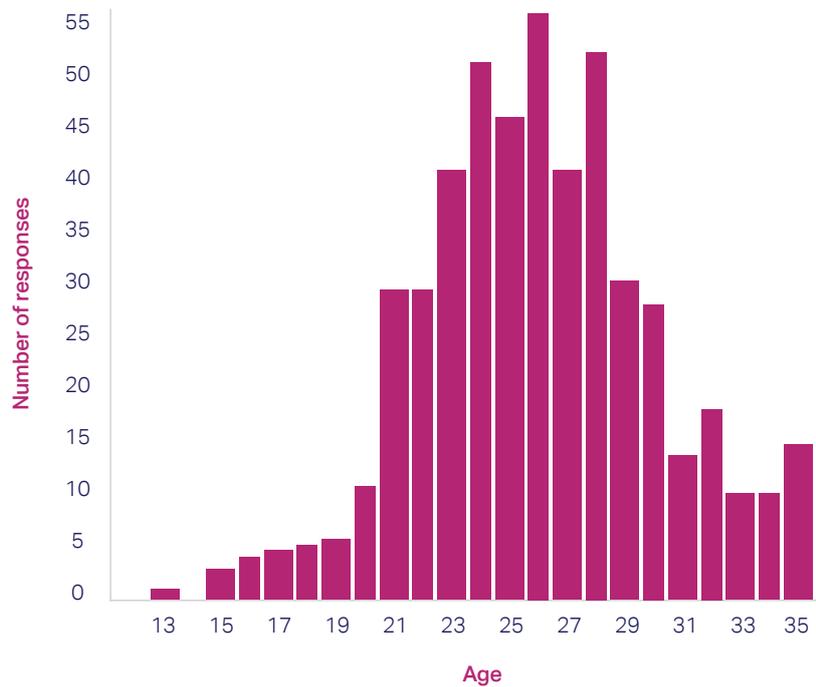
WBCSD MEMBER YOUTH SURVEY	SURVEY OF SDSN YOUTH NETWORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distributed to youth representatives from WBCSD member companies working to refresh Vision 2050</li> <li>• 338 responses received from individuals working for 14 different companies</li> <li>• Respondents based in 33 countries, with 64% based in Europe, 16% in Asia, 14% in North America, 3% in Oceania, 2% in South America and 1% in Africa</li> <li>• Average respondent age was 28</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distributed via SDSN Youth to various youth partners globally</li> <li>• 241 responses were received</li> <li>• Respondents based in 62 countries, with 25% based in Europe, 22% in Asia, 22% in North America, 18% in Africa, 9% in Oceania and 3% in South America.</li> <li>• Average age of respondent was 28</li> </ul>

We are conscious of how the different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic might have affected the responses, with WBCSD member youth responses collected before many impacts were seen outside of China, and SDSN Youth responses collected while many countries were in lockdown. We did not identify obvious impacts on our survey responses, but this context should be kept in mind while reading the results.

The insights that follow in this issue brief explore how these future leaders anticipate the world of 2050 as well as the expectations they have for business, and indeed for capitalism itself, in tackling the key societal and environmental challenges that lie ahead.



**Figure 2:** Age distribution of all analyzed survey responses



## ③ Findings



# 3 Findings

## HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY FEELING ABOUT THE WORLD IN 2050?

The first question we wanted to ask was how young people are feeling about the world in 2050. Are they optimistic about the future? What do they think of our capacity as a society to tackle the environmental and social challenges that the world currently faces? Do young people think that these challenges will be adequately addressed or simply be allowed to get increasingly worse over the next thirty years?

In general, they were quite pessimistic about the state of the world in 2050, with very few voicing optimism about the state of the world 30 years from now. On a scale of zero to ten, with zero being very pessimistic, ten very optimistic and five being neutral, half of respondents scored themselves four or below (figure 3). Overall, the mean score was 4.6, and the most common score was three. The respondents working for member companies were generally slightly more pessimistic

than those from the SDSN Youth network. Our respondents ranged in age from 13-35, but optimism was not significantly different between these age groups. It is worth noting however that the respondents based in Africa, South America and Asia were on average more optimistic (mean = 6.1, 5.3, 5.2 respectively) than those based in Australasia (3.5), Europe (4.3) or North America (4.5).

We can see that, despite the improvements that have been made over the last thirty years across many global development indicators such as poverty, education and life expectancy, very few young people are optimistic about our capacity for long term societal progress in the decades to come. As WBCSD embarks upon efforts to galvanize support for a renewed Vision 2050, it will be important to recognize the apprehension and pessimism that seems to exist among younger

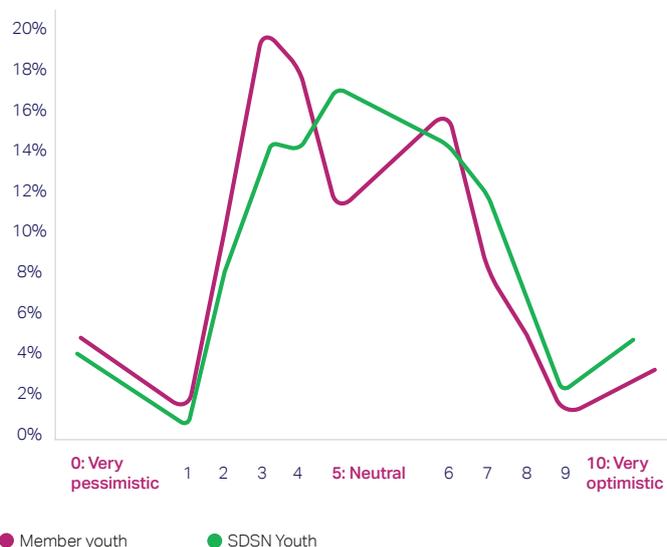
demographics when they think about the world they will be living in in 2050. We must not only do our best to paint a picture of an achievable and desirable vision for the future that can reassure and inspire younger generations, but also support the mobilization of their critical contributions to realizing it.

### How optimistic are you about the state of the world in 2050?

“We only seem to respond well to disaster. A lot of suffering is needed before the world will realize the way forward.”

“The world is getting better every day. Our innovative spirit will help us to cope with every challenge.”

Figure 3: Levels of optimism regarding the state of the world in 2050



## WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE THINK IS BLOCKING PROGRESS ON SOCIETAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?

To further investigate what is causing this general sense of pessimism about the future, we asked the young people in our survey what three factors they saw as blocking progress to a more sustainable world. Results show that our young corporate representatives see individuals as the primary blockers, either due to their mindsets (e.g. greed or apathy), or due to a lack of knowledge or awareness.

The SDSN Youth population also thought mindsets and awareness were important, but that inequalities (e.g. in wealth, power, gender, etc.) were equally important blockers of progress - something not picked up as strongly by the representatives from WBCSD's members. Young people from different backgrounds and geographies will

see the challenges we face very differently, and solutions will need to tackle a variety of barriers if they are to gain traction with different stakeholder groups. The full list of top responses is outlined in figure 4 below.

Across both surveys business was identified as a significant barrier to progress. Interestingly, the young professionals we surveyed who work for WBCSD member companies were twice as likely to call out big business as a barrier to progress than SDSN Youth respondents, pointing to a clear feeling among young business people that the private sector needs to be doing more than it currently is to facilitate progress. Barriers relating to capitalism, the pursuit of economic growth and prioritizing profit were also popular answers.

### What is blocking progress towards a more sustainable world?

"Large corporates unwilling to be the first to take a cut in profits vs their competitors to make long-term commitments."

"Corporations and big businesses are not held responsible for their actions."

Figure 4: Perceived factors blocking progress on realizing sustainable development



## HOW WELL IS BUSINESS RESPONDING TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES?

To explore further how young people see the role of business in relation to critical environmental and social challenges, we asked our respondents how they feel about the response of business to these challenges to date. Young people working for WBCSD members were asked how they feel about their own employer's efforts to address these issues, while SDSN Youth representatives were asked how they think business as a whole is responding.

Those questioned about business as a whole were quite pessimistic, although this varied according to occupation, with those working full time having the most positive view and students the most negative.

While a significant number of the young professionals from WBCSD members had identified business as one of the key factors impeding progress on many environmental and social issues, the majority of those surveyed indicated that they are fairly positive about the contributions that the companies they work for are making. Less than 12% of those surveyed were pessimistic about their

company's response to societal and environmental challenges (figure 5), with a mean score of 6.5 (where five is 'neutral' and ten is 'very optimistic'). However, it is also important to note that these results also fall far short of being a glowing review of current business performance, and that the majority of young corporate respondents also clearly saw room for improvement in their companies' efforts to tackle key challenges.

Generally, these results point to a pervading sentiment among younger stakeholders that the current business response to challenges such as climate change, nature loss and mounting inequality is not sufficient. Young people who do not work in the private sector have a particularly pessimistic view of the sustainability efforts of business, while those who are already part of the business world and generally feel more positively about the efforts of their employers, still have clear reservations regarding the rate and scale of progress being made. It would appear that business still has some way to go

to convince younger generations that it is fulfilling its potential and responsibility to respond to global sustainability challenges.

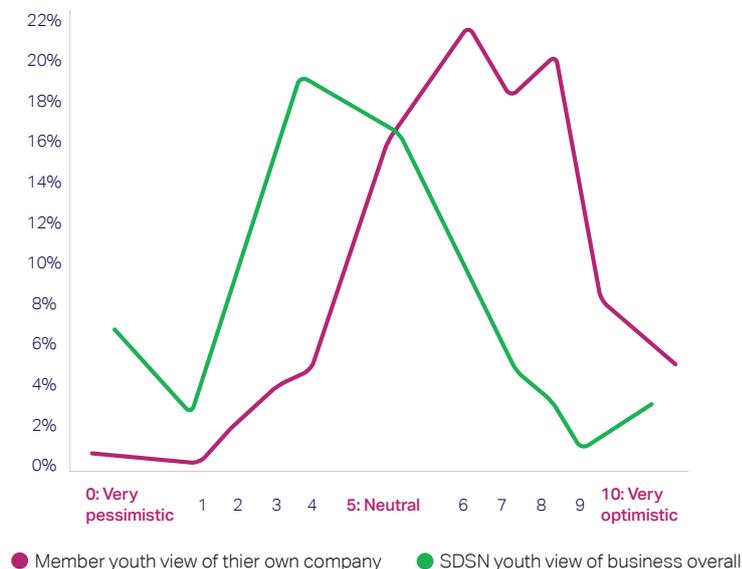
### How do you feel about the overall response by businesses?

"There's still a lot that needs to be done, but the increased social pressure is forcing business to take notice and consider its impact on society and the environment"

### How do you feel about your company's overall response?

"I do genuinely believe our senior leadership's commitment to environmental sustainability, but there is still room for improvement."

**Figure 5: Perceptions of business performance in contributing to sustainable development**



## WHAT DO TODAY'S YOUTH FEEL ABOUT OUR CURRENT MODEL OF CAPITALISM?

When asked to give their views on current barriers to sustainable development, many respondents pointed to concepts relating to capitalism and the pursuit of economic growth at all costs. Exploring this notion further we asked participants for their views on our current model of capitalism. Our survey returned almost unanimous feedback that capitalism cannot continue in its current format. Of the 311 respondents that expressed an opinion, over 99% said that capitalism needs to change. When justifying their responses, many of those surveyed pointed to the negative outcomes that our current model of capitalism is delivering as well as to inherent disconnects between the pursuit of financial growth and providing solutions to social and environmental challenges.

The majority of young people in our SDSN Youth sample called for a fundamental change (54%) or even an end (14%) to the current model of capitalism, compared

to a much smaller proportion that thought minor changes would suffice (6%). The majority of respondents to our survey think that capitalism will evolve over the next 30 years, although a significant minority think the change will be for the worse.

These findings mirror the results of Edelman's 2020 Trust Barometer, which found that 56% of its 34,000 respondents believe that capitalism as it exists today does more harm than good.<sup>2</sup> This seems to be a viewpoint that is significantly more concentrated among the younger stakeholders with whom we engaged, with young people from both outside and within the private sector voicing clear skepticism in relation to the current model of capitalism.

The topic of how capitalism can be reinvented to ensure that its core features of private enterprise and competitive markets can be effectively leveraged to unleash the transformations required to meet the Sustainable Development Goals has been

a recurring and central theme in WBCSD's refresh of Vision 2050. It is explored extensively in our Vision 2050 issue brief '[Reinventing Capitalism: a transformation agenda](#)'.

**Do you think the current model of capitalism will evolve over the next 30 years, and if so, what will change?**

"If capitalism does not change, it will end our civilization."

"Through significant and evidence-based regulations capitalism can be used for so much more good."

"It has started to change, but at a slow pace; we need to gear up."



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2020-01/2020%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report.pdf> p.12

## WHAT ISSUES DO YOUNG PEOPLE THINK THE WORLD SHOULD BE PRIORITIZING AND WHAT GIVES THEM HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

The results of our surveys have pointed to a significant degree of apprehension about the state of the world in 2050 among younger people, but what would give them more cause for hope? What sustainability-related issues do they see as being the most important challenges to tackle moving forward and what sort of initiatives led by business and other stakeholders would reassure them?

We asked respondents to underline the main societal or environmental challenges that they feel are not being addressed at present and need to be tackled urgently in the days, months and years to come (figure 7). Climate change was the clear leader among the issues identified. More broadly, private sector respondents were more likely to identify challenges associated with waste and

circularity, while SDSN Youth respondents cited social issues such as inequality and poverty more strongly. Other issues such as biodiversity, pollution, health and over-consumption also featured prominently among responses.

We also asked respondents what gives them hope that these issues will be adequately addressed in the future (figure 8). The growing awareness and action being taken on environmental and social issues by a range of societal actors and institutions, especially young people, registered as the greatest source of hope. Around 10% of respondents from WBCSD member companies cited the actions by business as cause for hope, although this figure was much lower (3%) among SDSN Youth respondents.

### What makes you optimistic about the future?

"The millions of young people who are striving to protect what they deserve - a livable planet."

"Many businesses and government departments are full of intelligent, enlightened people capable of taking forward a truly sustainable vision for the world of tomorrow."

"The fact that more companies are willing to change how they do business to positively affect the world."

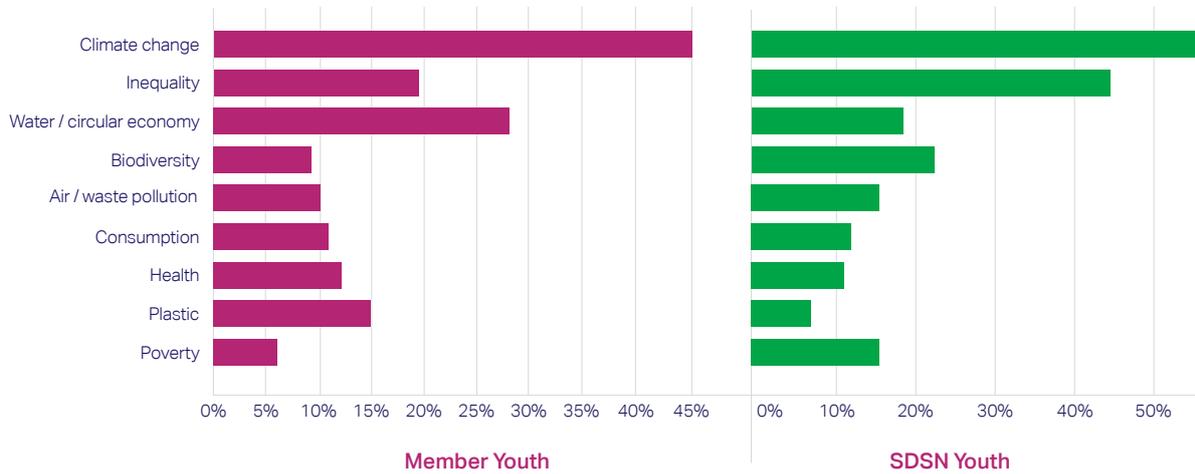


These results provide companies with an indication of the issues that their younger members of staff, and indeed the broader youth community at large, see as critical areas for action moving forward. It is encouraging that a

decent proportion of respondents feel that the actions being taken by companies already to some degree represent a source of hope that these issues can be tackled effectively in the years to come; the challenge ahead of business now

is to build on this and to ensure that the efforts of the private sector represent cause for continued optimism rather than pessimism moving forward.

**Figure 7: Sustainability challenges that need urgently addressing**



**Figure 8: What makes young people optimistic about the future**



## ④ Conclusion: Mobilizing the power of youth on the road to Vision 2050



## 4 Conclusion: Mobilizing the power of youth on the road to Vision 2050

**Engaging with younger stakeholders, from both within and outside of the business world, has unveiled significant apprehension among younger generations about the future of our planet and societies. The young people we spoke to are worried about the world that awaits them in 2050, regarding it more with caution and pessimism than with hope and aspiration.**

We have also encountered cynicism regarding the role that business, and indeed capitalism itself, is currently playing, and the extent to which the private sector is really supporting the

transformations that are needed to realize a more sustainable and equitable world.

In the face of the critical decade ahead it is important that businesses, governments and other stakeholders come together to address pressing environmental and social challenges in such a manner that is in keeping with the expectations of global youth populations and that provides them with reassurance and inspiration. Beyond this it is also vital for us to effectively mobilize and leverage the energy, innovation and leadership of young people as we seek to develop and scale solutions globally. They are the generation that is perhaps best informed and most motivated to work towards the realization of the systemic transformations needed to realize sustainable development.

Our work on Vision 2050 provides an important platform for continued dialogues with key stakeholders including younger generations. As WBCSD and its member companies set a course for realizing a world in which more than 9 billion people can live well, within planetary boundaries, it will be essential for us to maintain constant engagement with younger stakeholders in order to ensure that we are able to fully understand and adequately meet their expectations. The most successful business models of the coming decades will be those that are developed in support of the needs and aspirations of today's younger generations and are aligned with efforts to create a world in 2050 that these generations can look forward to with hope and excitement at the possibilities that lie ahead.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This issue brief was developed in support of the efforts of 40 WBCSD member companies that are leading efforts to revamp WBCSD's Vision 2050.

We would like to extend special thanks to SDSN Youth for their collaboration in engaging their networks of future leaders to support this work.

For more information on the update of WBCSD's Vision 2050 visit [www.wbcسد.org/vision-2050-refresh](http://www.wbcسد.org/vision-2050-refresh)

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## DISCLAIMER

This publication has been developed in the name of WBCSD. Like other WBCSD publications, it is the result of a collaborative effort by members of the secretariat and senior executives from member companies. A wide range of members reviewed drafts, thereby ensuring that the document broadly represents the perspective of the WBCSD membership. Input and feedback from stakeholders listed above was incorporated in a balanced way. This does not mean, however, that every member company or stakeholder agrees with every word.

## ABOUT WBCSD

WBCSD is a global, CEO-led organization of over 200 leading businesses working together to accelerate the transition to a sustainable world. We help make our member companies more successful and sustainable by focusing on the maximum positive impact for shareholders, the environment and societies.

Our member companies come from all business sectors and all major economies, representing a combined revenue of more than USD \$8.5 trillion and 19 million employees. Our global network of almost 70 national business councils gives our members unparalleled reach across the globe. Since 1995, WBCSD has been uniquely positioned to work with member companies along and across value chains to deliver impactful business solutions to the most challenging sustainability issues.

Together, we are the leading voice of business for sustainability: united by our vision of a world where more than 9 billion people are all living well and within the boundaries of our planet, by 2050.

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December 2020

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