



Canadian attitudes about the environment during COVID-19

Report on Phase 1 focus groups

July 3, 2020

A large, abstract graphic on the right side of the slide, composed of white lines forming various geometric shapes like triangles and polygons, some filled with patterns of horizontal lines or a grid. It resembles a stylized, multi-faceted object or a cluster of data points.

ENVIRONICS
RESEARCH

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Introduction

Objectives. Public attention to the environment and climate change has recently been accelerating in Canada but threatens to be disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet COVID-19 also represents an unparalleled opportunity to do things differently: as we begin to re-open, Canada could choose approaches and policies that lead to a healthy sustainable and equitable society. Qualitative research was conducted to better understand where Canadians stand on these issues and why, with the goal of generating insights that help EcoAnalytics and its partners develop strategies and communications efforts that resonate with key audiences, whether it be the public or government stakeholders.

In this report, we present the findings from a first round of focus groups held in June 2020. A second round of focus groups with the same participants will take place in September/October 2020 to determine if, and how, their perspectives have changed.

Methodology. Environics conducted six 90-minute online focus groups using the Zoom platform. The group composition, number of participants and date of the session is as follows:

1. Women 18-34 from Canada East (Ontario + Atlantic) (n=6) (June 9)
2. Men 18-34 from Canada West (BC, AB, SK + MB) (n=5) (June 10)
3. Men 35+ from Canada East (Ontario + Atlantic) (n=6) (June 11)
4. Women 35+ from Canada West (BC, AB, SK + MB) (n=6) (June 11)
5. Montreal (French; no age or gender requirements) (n=5) (June 15)
6. Ex-Montreal (French; no age or gender requirements) (n=5) (June 15)

To ensure a diverse mix of experiences and opinions, each group was also recruited to include 1-2 participants from small towns or rural areas (except for Group 5 – Montreal) and 1-2 participants of non-European descent or who are visible minorities, as well as a mix of education and income levels. Climate change deniers or those unconcerned about climate change and the environment were excluded.



Key insights

- **The environment and climate change remain issues of concern.** While acknowledging that public attention to the environment has been supplanted by the more immediate threat posed by the pandemic, participants welcomed the discussion and expressed an ongoing desire for action and solutions.
- **Participants did not draw parallels between the environment/climate change and the pandemic.** They considered the pandemic to be an emergency requiring immediate attention, while climate change continues to be a long-term or distant threat. Moreover, the idea that our lack of preparation for the pandemic is a lesson to be applied to the environment did not resonate. There was no uptake on the idea that climate change might have exacerbated the pandemic.
- **Participants' frame of reference for environmental change was personal and incremental rather than structural or system-wide.** That is, they focused on their own individual efforts (e.g., driving or consuming less) and had difficulty envisioning large-scale “transformative” change. Ultimately, they do not see themselves as the main cause of our environmental problems (low impact) and thus, do not believe they are, or can be, the solution (low personal efficacy).
- **The pandemic has clearly demonstrated to people that our environmental efforts matter.** First, they matter because of the value of nature and the outdoors, which was particularly noted by participants in the absence of other activities and entertainment. Second, almost universally, participants had personally experienced, observed or heard about the environmental benefits of the lockdown (e.g., encounters with wildlife, reduced smog in major cities) – providing direct evidence that human activity can and does have a tangible impact on the environment.



Key insights (continued)

- Participants generally held that environmental change needs to be driven by governments and institutions “with power”, by giving individuals access to better choices. Yet they were skeptical about the potential for progress, for a few reasons: based on government’s track record to date; because of the complexity of the problem for which there are no simple solutions (unlike “wear a mask” and “stay six feet away from others”); and because they don’t believe Canadians are ready for the level of sacrifice required (despite evidence of sacrifice during the pandemic). They also acknowledged that, in the wake of pandemic, there will be other urgent priorities competing for attention.



Thoughts for consideration

- The environment/climate change remain relevant topics for public engagement during the pandemic and should not be avoided.
- The pandemic has not (so far) sensitized the public to the idea that:
 - Climate change is also an emergency requiring immediate action. “Emergency” is now defined as an immediate threat.
 - We need to prepare now to avoid a pandemic-like environmental crisis in the future – this is a complex argument that may resonate better with government stakeholders.
 - The solution lies in transformative or large-scale structural change – instead, need to connect with people through their personal lived experience
- There is opportunity to leverage changing perspectives in light of the pandemic:
 - Increased importance of community, social responsibility and “solidarité” – champion a collective sense of efficacy
 - Proof that what we do matters/has an environmental impact – provides a sense of hopefulness/optimism
 - Increased value placed on nature/outdoors and “back to basics”

For example: “Together, we can protect and care for what matters”

- Be clear on what you are asking of the public. What is it you want people to do? Pandemic communications benefitted from relatively simple instructions (e.g., wear a mask, stay six feet away). Climate action, in particular, is viewed as complex and sometimes contradictory, contributing to a low sense of efficacy.



Target audience differences

Overall, there were more similarities or consistencies than differences between the various groups. The following summarizes the key differences observed:

Gender – There was clearly a gender dimension to the results, with women tending to express greater optimism about the potential for environmental actions, a greater sense of personal efficacy, and less zero-sum thinking. Men were more cynical and more likely to raise economic tradeoffs.

Age – The younger groups tended to place greater emphasis on social justice and not leaving anyone behind, possibly due to feeling less in control or established themselves (e.g., gig economy). Otherwise, there were more consistencies between the younger and older groups than had been hypothesized.

Region/English vs. French – The sentiments in the French groups were similar to the English groups. The only notable differences were somewhat more of an emphasis on social solidarity and more unprompted mentions of the provincial government in Quebec. Within the province, there were also limited differences between the Montreal and ex-Montreal groups.



**PERSPECTIVES ON THE
ENVIRONMENT AND THE
PANDEMIC**



Changes in perspective

The pandemic has encouraged introspection about how people spend their time, consumption, community and personal responsibility. The environment is comparatively less prominent, except for mentions of more time spent outdoors.

Following introductions, participants were asked how their worldviews had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants focused on positive aspects of their time during the lockdown, finding that the sudden change to their lives gave them opportunity to think about what is important.

Time to appreciate life. The downtime of the lockdown gave many participants the opportunity to take life more slowly. Although plans like travelling had to be cancelled, the slower lifestyle was acknowledged to come with many benefits:

- Happiness
- Opportunity to disconnect from technology
- Time spent with family
- Going out for walks/appreciating nature
- Better work-life balance



Changes in perspective (cont'd)

Critical reflection on personal consumption. With limited access to stores, respondents noted how they needed to rethink their consumption habits. Some thought that their purchasing behaviour had become more environmentally friendly during the pandemic. Purchases were now more often considered by needs versus wants. Often this was not due to financial restrictions, but from a realization of already having enough. Participants also mentioned limiting the number of times they grocery shop, buying local, doing more “homemade” activities (i.e., baking) rather than buying, less driving/more walking, and recycling more.

Changes in behaviour were not all made from an environmental conscience – with stores closed and lingering health risks, one participant described that “the joy has been taken out of shopping”. Some also recognized that consumption has also changed for the worse, including more online shopping (resulting in extra waste from packaging and more shipping activity), ordering in food more often, and seeing examples of hoarding (both in stores and in media coverage).

Community. Participants have been encouraged by meaningful demonstrations of community. In one sense, this is related to the general support for healthcare workers. In another sense, general camaraderie was observed among Canadians (i.e. people being nicer, kinder, and helping each other more), but there were mixed opinions about how long this solidarity will last.



Changes in perspective (cont'd)

Personal responsibility. Participants described being proactive in taking measures (e.g., wearing a mask or not going to work if feeling sick) to protect others even more than themselves. On the flip side, some participants also recounted a sense of powerlessness over the actions of others (i.e., not wearing masks, littering), revealing limited trust in the capacity of others to also take responsibility.

The environment and climate change. Without prompting, environmental concerns were not prominent in this initial discussion. The few unprompted mentions of environmental values noted how the previous “big issue” in society had been climate change, and that concern for climate change had been entirely eclipsed by the pandemic.

Less common themes raised during the discussions include:

- **Flawed system** in which the pandemic has exposed pre-existing problems (e.g. situation in long-term care homes, struggles of underprivileged communities, struggling small business vs larger corporations)
- **Interconnectedness of world** (e.g. virus started in China and spread globally, environment rebounds as tourism economy suffers)
- COVID-19 is a **temporary situation** and we will return to the previous normal



Lasting impact on Canada

Participants generally feel behaviours adopted over the past few months (with respect to health, work and social dynamics) will continue post-pandemic; the environment did not factor into the discussion.

Participants were asked to envision what Canada would look like a couple of years down the road after the pandemic. Responses were shared via the video conference chat box and then discussed as a group. Although many ideas were shared, discussion lacked any meaningful consideration of how the environment will fare. Their vision for Canada post-pandemic can be summarized in three themes:

1) Society will become more health conscious.

- Physical distancing and mask-wearing will continue when out in public and in crowds
- Demand for travelling and tourism will remain suppressed as more screening in airports will increase
- Eating habits will change as more people will adopt vegetarian/vegan lifestyles
- This experience will have prepared us for the next pandemic

“I think people are going to continue being distant from people physically, anxiety towards groups of people, more mask wearing when in crowds.”



Lasting impact on Canada (cont'd)

2) A shift in work structures

- Working from home will continue
- The local economy will see an increase in manufacturing activity / less globalization
- More people will shop online, and bricks and mortar retail will decline

“There will be more homebodies, which should cut down pollution and consumption.”

3) Impact of shared experience on communities

- Optimism
 - Greater community cohesion from shared experience
 - Greater efficacy to address important matters quickly
- Neutral/Pessimism
 - Things will go back to normal / “busy-ness of regular routines”
 - Sense of community is temporary (i.e. like after the ice storm in Quebec)
 - Lingering stress and trauma from pandemic effects may make recovery difficult
 - Historical evidence that people don't do what is best (i.e. backlash against restrictions in USA, Canadians coming out of lockdown too quickly, etc.)

“I also believe that the differences will lie in how we treat each other.”



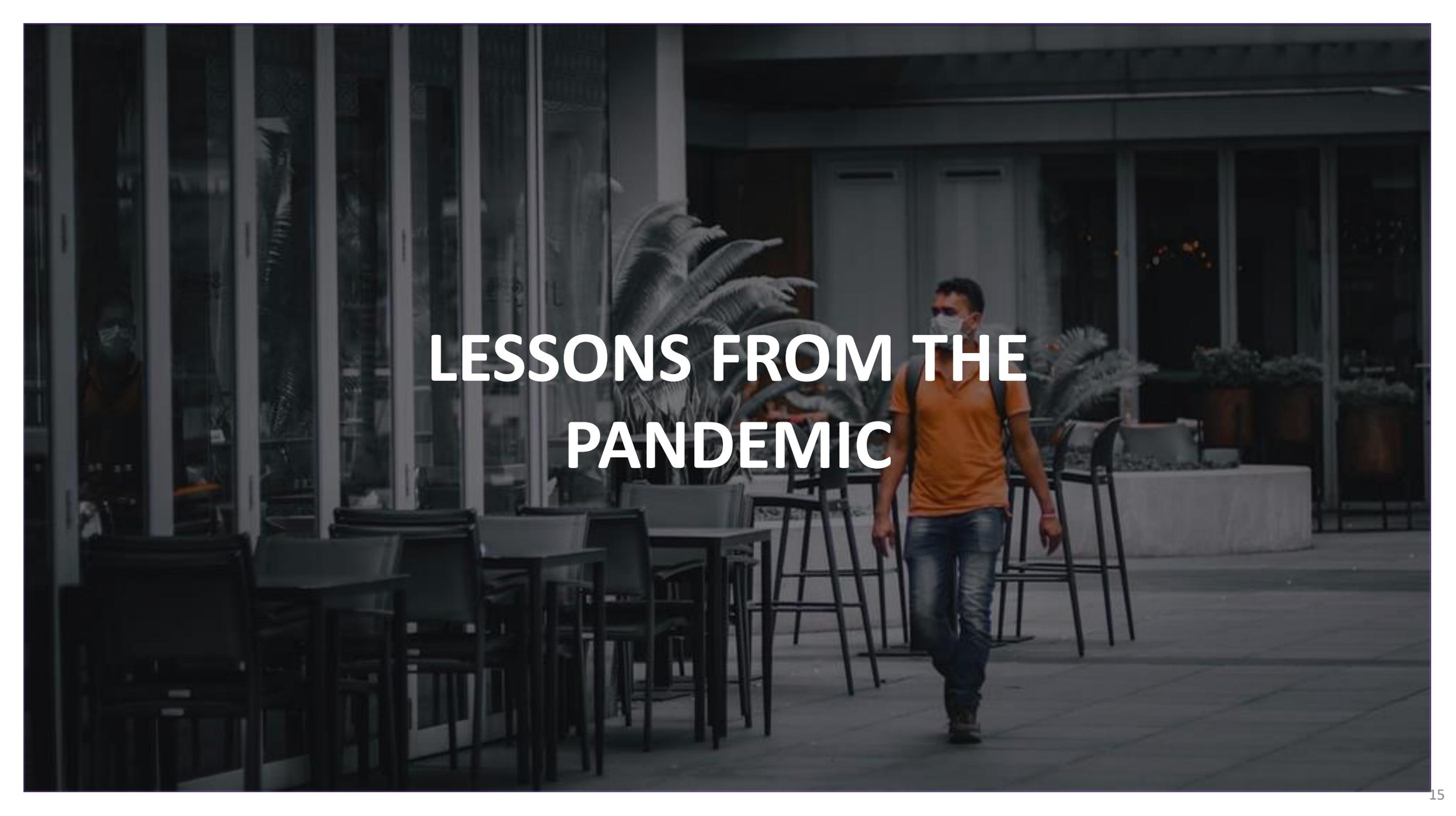
Changes to environmental values

The value of the environment was primarily considered through a personal frame of reference. Initial conversations lacked consideration of the environment as a complex system.

Next, participants were asked how their perception of the environment had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Two key themes emerged: the value of the outdoors to the individual, and optimism for nature's regeneration. Participants tended to apply a personal frame of reference, focusing on an immediate and visible concept of the environment, with limited consideration of the implications on broader systems.

Value of the outdoors. During the lockdown, outdoors activities have provided one of the only safe diversions outside people's homes. Participants enjoyed going outside for exercise; as one participant described, "Going out for a walk has never been more chic". In the absence of options to go anywhere else, nature has been a place of escape, regeneration and enjoyment. Participants enjoyed going out for walks, bike rides, visiting green spaces, and camping, and noticed how others in their neighbourhood were also being more active outside.

Nature is regenerating. Several participants noted that the economic shutdown has had a positive regenerative effect on the environment. Animals have been seen returning to spaces now empty of human activity – as observed in media (i.e. dolphins in Venice) but also in local neighbourhoods (i.e. deer on a residential street). Air quality conditions were noted to have improved in India, China and Toronto: one participant with a view of the Toronto shoreline could see a stark change in air quality. He reflected, "If I am seeing this (positive change), what else am I not seeing?". In this way, participants believed the lockdown had given the environment "breathing space", and as importantly, generated optimism that the environment can heal (i.e., efforts to undo environmental harm can and will be effective).

A man wearing a face mask and a backpack is walking through an empty outdoor cafe area at night. The cafe has several tables and chairs, and a large potted plant is visible in the background. The scene is dimly lit, with some lights visible through the windows of the building.

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC



Comparing the pandemic and climate change

Participants had difficulty identifying similarities between COVID-19 and climate change and tended instead to highlight differences in the immediacy of the threat posed.

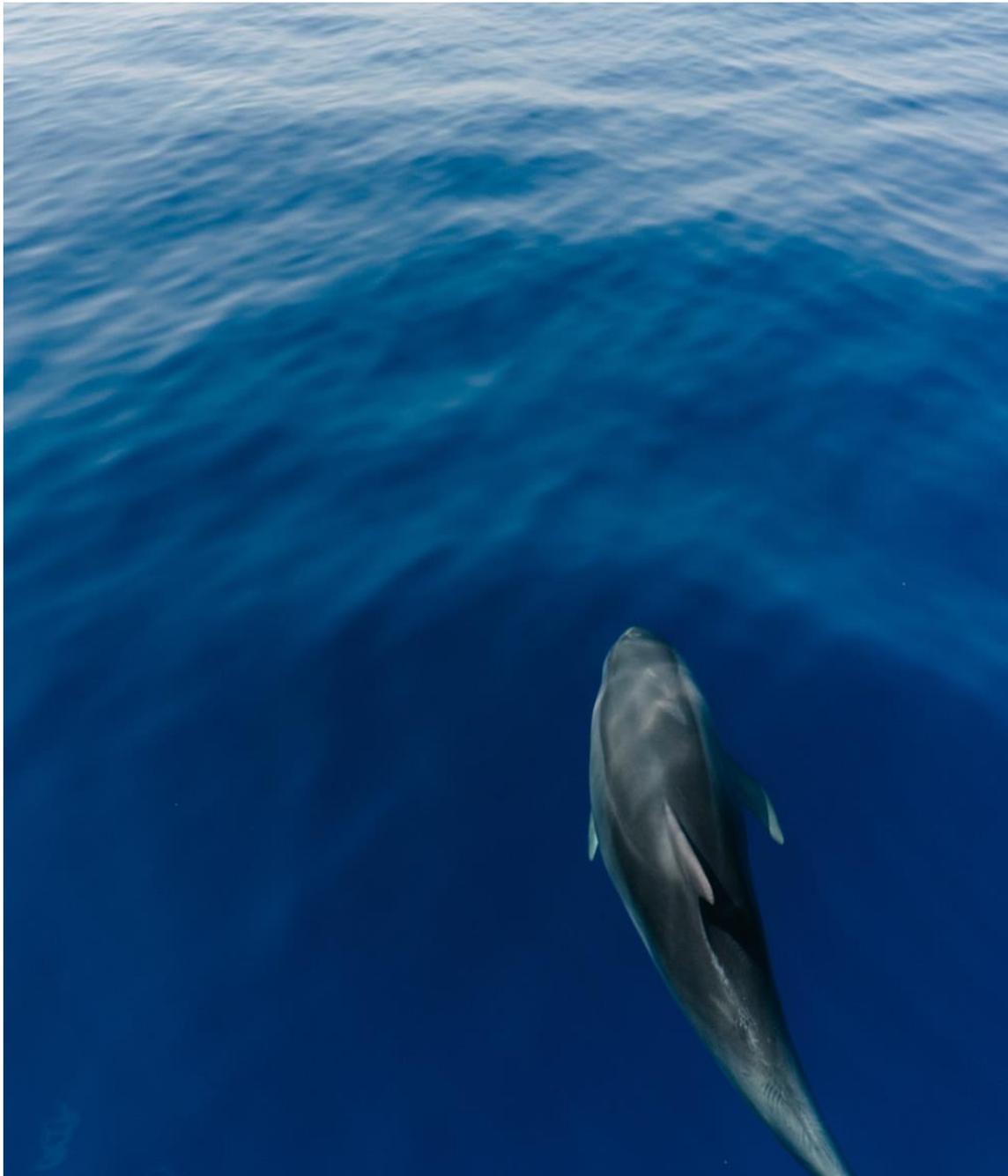
The similarities between the coronavirus pandemic and climate change were not immediately obvious to participants. Some were unable to draw any comparisons; those who did saw more differences than similarities.

Immediacy. A key theme when comparing the two issues was the different timeframe involved. Participants noted that the pandemic is an immediate threat, effectively forcing change or facing immediate consequences (i.e. an overload of the healthcare system). Climate change, in contrast, continues to be viewed as a distant threat that has been discussed for decades without significant individual or societal change – attributed to the fact that consequences may not be fully felt or properly attributed during our lifetime.

“Immediate effects cause immediate action. Yes, the world is going to end but that will be in generations.”

A common sentiment throughout the discussions was that climate change has been “pushed to the backburner” during the pandemic. Participants expressed that this was unfortunate, but ultimately practical and necessary to deal with the pandemic.

Interconnectedness. A few participants saw similarities in the global nature of the two issues, where policies and behaviours in one part of the world have implications for the rest of the world.

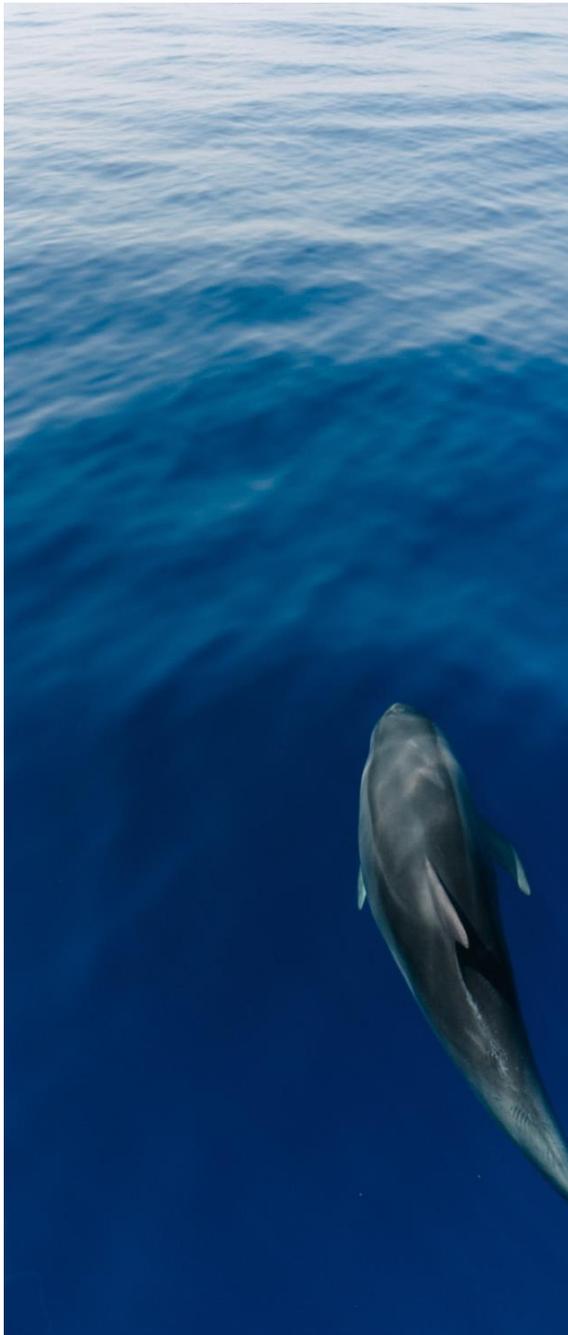


Impact of the pandemic on environment

Animal visibility and improved air quality are heartening signs of environmental improvement during the pandemic.

Positive impact. Increased reported sightings of animals, better air quality and a change in neighbourhood activity were three themes of positive change. These visible changes gave hope that negative human activity can be reversed. It provided an encouraging note that dramatic change is possible when society adjusts its behaviours collectively.

Negative impact. Negative observations noted how during the pandemic, reduced tourism also negatively affected humans and animals, more trash (i.e. PPE, packaging) was being generated and littered, and some of the biggest environmental offenders (i.e. oil and gas mining) were deemed essential services and continued on like business-as-usual during the pandemic. This pessimism prevailed more among men and in the West. Those with hardened negative positions viewed many of the positive impacts as superficial: any uptick in recycling and walking would not offset the more egregious degradations.



Impact of the pandemic on environment (con't)

Positive impacts	Negative impacts
 <p>Greater visibility of animals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dolphins in Venice, along beachside • Turtles able to lay eggs on beaches • Seeing more wildlife wandering local neighbourhoods • Hearing more birds 	 <p>Reduced economic activity/tourism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zoos can no longer afford to care for animals • Economic loss of tourism impacts some communities particularly hard
 <p>Air quality improving around world</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First time seeing Himalayas from cities in years • Difference in Chinese cities • Skyline in Toronto noticeably clearer • Comparison of satellite imagery 	 <p>More consumption & litter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observed latex gloves, masks on ground • Waste from online shopping, ordering in food • Greater consumption in plastic
 <p>Change in neighbourhood activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More people working from home = Less traffic & pollution • More walking, visiting parks • Less tourism = less environmental strain 	 <p>Ongoing ignored activity of environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mining oil & gas industries deemed essential during pandemic; environmental impacts ongoing

“This pandemic has allowed nature to flourish, **allowed the environment to take a breath.**”

“For bigger businesses with larger carbon footprints... it [is] easier to cut corners [during the pandemic]. **Potential for this to be WORSE for climate change.**”



Personal impact on environment during pandemic

Participants generally believe their environmental impact has been reduced during the pandemic.

Participants were also asked how their personal behaviour had changed in terms of its environmental impact.

Positive impacts

- Travelling less (no flying, less driving), due to cancelled vacation trips or simply from working from home
- Being more efficient in travels outside of house (i.e. reducing number of trips to grocery store)
- Eating at home more
- Recycling and composting more

Negative impacts

- Not taking public transit out of health concerns
- Increased carbon cost of shipping online orders
- Not able to use re-usable grocery bags
- Overconsumption / hoarding

A couple of participants felt their carbon footprint was unchanged mainly because it was insignificant to begin with - they were already taking public transit or Uber, recycling, using LED screens and lightbulbs. They believed that they were already doing enough, did not think there was any opportunity for their lifestyles to become more environmentally friendly, and did not strongly consider the environmental impacts from societal trends and behaviours.

Priorities post-pandemic

A discussion of Canada's priorities after the pandemic tended to pit economic versus environmental recovery, with the former generally believed to be of greater priority given the pandemic's massive economic impact.

Participants were asked what needs to be the top focus for Canada and its governments as we recover from the pandemic. The economy was generally prioritized over the environment, mainly because it was envisioned that a green transition could not be affordable otherwise. The few who preferred prioritizing the environment often admitted they didn't think it would be likely.

A few participants also noted the need to prioritize addressing social inequities laid bare by the pandemic. However, there tended to be "zero sum" thinking that this need would also draw resources away from the environment, rather than complement or align with it.

Prioritize environment

1. Ideally prioritized in recovery (but likely not)
2. Technology hasn't solved the pandemic, therefore we cannot rely on finding a technological solution to address the effects of climate change; must prevent it
3. Not personally impacted by pandemic, so open to environment focus
4. Moral imperative to focus on environment
5. Green economy could best be implemented at the municipal level (e.g. Vancouver as model)

Prioritize economy/social concerns

1. Canadians will not have the choice between environment & economy (default option)
2. Green recovery will not be affordable when trying to recover from deficit
3. Communities need economic activity to survive
4. Pandemic has shown areas where we lack equity in society; needs to be addressed
5. Canada needs to pay back debt; taxes will already be increasing



Priorities post-pandemic (cont'd)

"I would hope the environment is near the top, but fear it won't be."



PRO-ENVIRONMENT

BALANCED

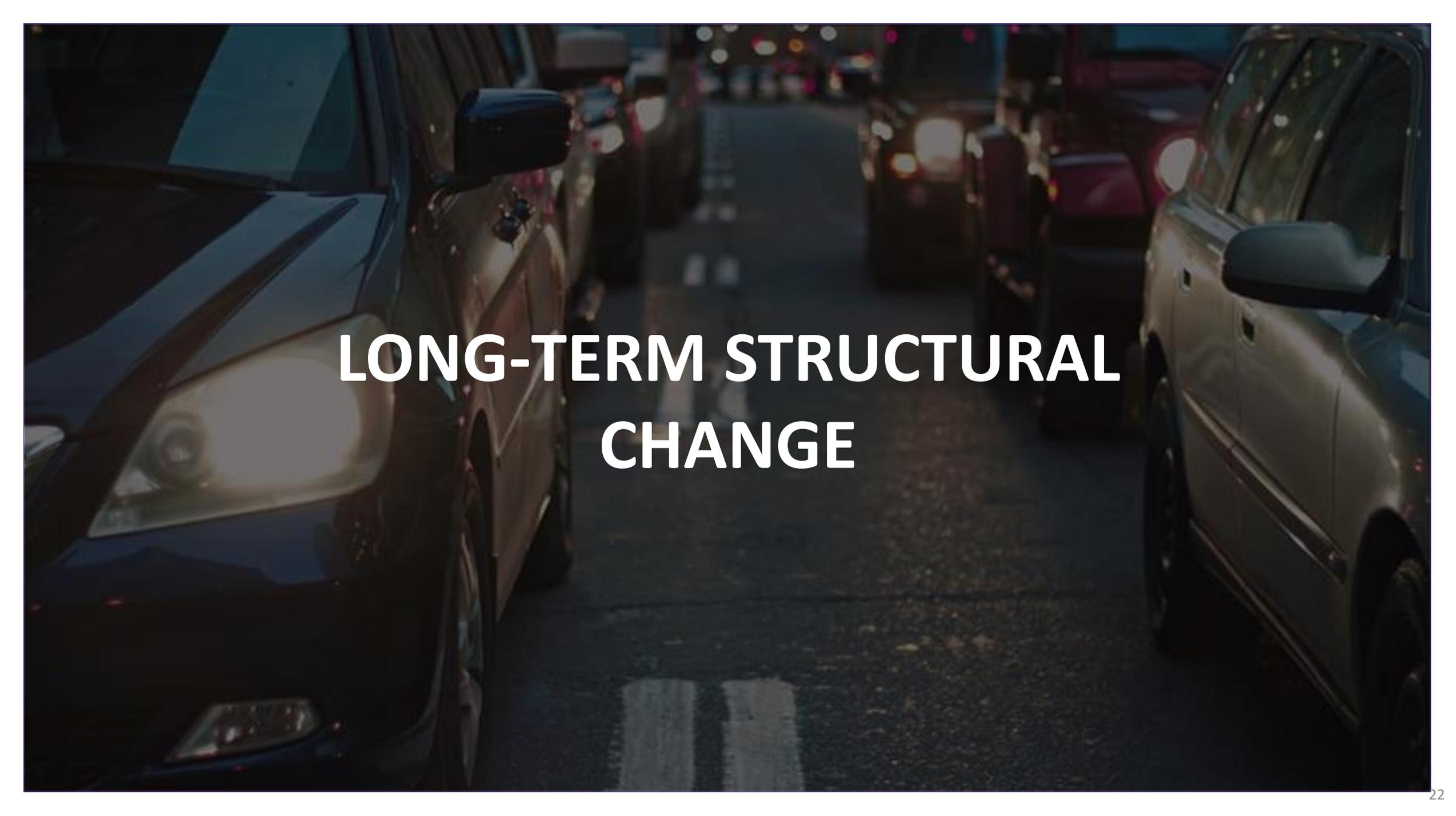


"It's a tug-of-war - more economy means more transport, pollution. But without that, how do you get the economy going again? People need to start thinking more local - eating, buying local - doing away with the big chains - support the local economy."

"The government is looking at how to spend tons of money to bail the economy out from COVID, so the environment will have to take the backburner because we will not be able to afford it. We have a huge deficit to recover from, and we're not going to recover by focusing on environment. "



PRO-ECONOMY

A dark, blurred photograph of a busy city street at night. The image shows a perspective view down a road with cars on both sides. The lights from the cars and streetlights are out of focus, creating a bokeh effect. The overall tone is dark and moody.

LONG-TERM STRUCTURAL CHANGE



Long-term structural change

Participants' frame of reference for environmental change is primarily personal rather than societal or system-wide. There is acknowledgement that the pandemic situation presents a unique window of opportunity, but limited optimism that we will follow through.

Participants' understanding of the long-term structural changes needed to address climate change/other environmental issues mainly encompass changes to transportation and consumption.

- **Transportation:** drive less, more use of public transit, adopt electric vehicles. A few also mentioned the broader implications of moving people around, such as less travel/tourism and reduced commuting due to work-at-home arrangements.
- **Consumption:** reducing consumption and waste (including recycling), shopping local, sharing resources (instead of purchasing), increasing self-sufficiency (e.g., gardening).



Long-term structural change (cont'd)

While effort was made to shift the conversation away from individual environmental efforts to broader “structural changes”, notably, participants still mainly envisioned changes related to consumer choice.

- For example, relatively few voluntarily raised the topic of **energy sources** (i.e., renewable energy) despite being asked about system-wide changes. By comparison to transportation mentions, there were also very few mentions of **structural changes related to the home**, aside from a few comments about solar panels (despite the fact that homes are a major source of ghge).

When asked, participants **acknowledged there is an opportunity to do things differently** for climate change/environment as we emerge from the pandemic. At the same time, there is not a lot of confidence that we will make the most of the opportunity instead of returning to our old ways (“Should we? Yes. Can we? I guess we’ll see.”)



Role of government

Lacking belief in their own efficacy from lack of choice and/or power, participants look to governments to drive change but with some skepticism.

A key theme of the conversations is that **these types of structural changes have to be driven by those “in power”** – governments in particular, as well as industry.

- Some of the pessimism about change is because participants don't feel individuals cannot effectively drive change on their own, due to a lack of choice and/or a lack of power.

“Our carbon footprint as individuals is small”

“It's hard for people to believe that as individuals we have ability to change this. The average person doesn't know how to go about that.”



Role of government (cont'd)

Because belief in personal efficacy is low, there is recognition that governments will need to change their priorities and lead societal change. However, there is skepticism that this will happen given their past track record.

“Yes, [strong government action] is something I would like to see. But it’s probably not something that’s going to happen, because we’ve seen time and time again that environment is not at the forefront. First we need to see that everybody gets out of this [pandemic] with food to eat, a job, a place to live...”



Barriers to change

Skepticism about the potential for change is also due to the perceived complexity of any solutions, and uncertainty about whether Canadians are prepared for sacrifice (despite their pandemic experience).

One perceived barrier to structural change is the **complexity of the issue** and that there is no straightforward path to a climate change solution. Which decisions and changes are the right ones? For example, building and charging an EV has an environmental impact on its own. One participant noted that protecting against COVID is much simpler and easier to communicate (i.e., physical distancing, wear masks, wash hands).



Barriers to change (cont'd)

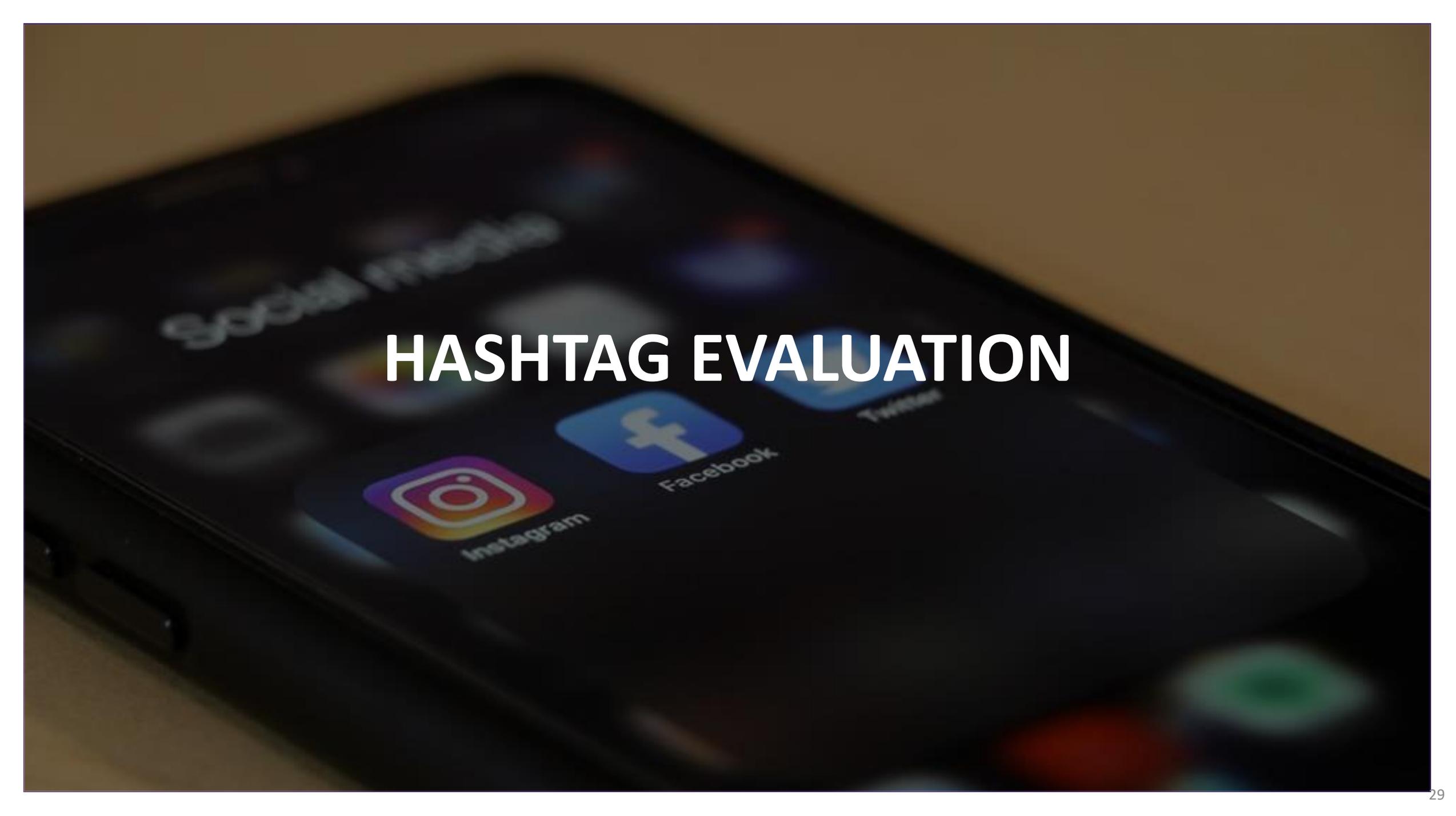
Some participants also questioned whether Canadians are prepared for personal sacrifice, both financial and otherwise (e.g. comfort or convenience). A few acknowledged that it is difficult to pitch the idea of “spending now to save later”. That is, the current evidence that people can make substantial sacrifices when necessary (in the case of the pandemic, to protect their health and that of others) has not alleviated skepticism about similar future efforts for the environment.

“I worry that the knee-jerk reaction would be: ‘a green recovery sounds expensive’. A similar mindset to ‘eating healthy is more expensive than junk food’. Not necessarily true, but I do think people hold that as belief.”

“How do you achieve progress without sacrifice? We need to look at producing things that are more environmentally friendly, that breakdown in ten years instead of thousands of years. It will cost a little bit more up front. Would people be okay with a compromise like that?...Are you willing to pay a little more up front for long-term benefit?”

There was not a self-evident connection for participants between the need for governments to prepare for (rather than react to) future environmental threats because of the “lesson” of the pandemic. At least one participant raised the concern that the pandemic may do the opposite, with success at containing the threat breeding belief that our massive efforts were unnecessary, and making people less inclined to support such efforts around future threats.

HASHTAG EVALUATION

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a smartphone home screen. The screen displays several social media application icons. The most prominent ones are Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The text 'HASHTAG EVALUATION' is overlaid in the center of the screen in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The background is a warm, brownish-gold color.

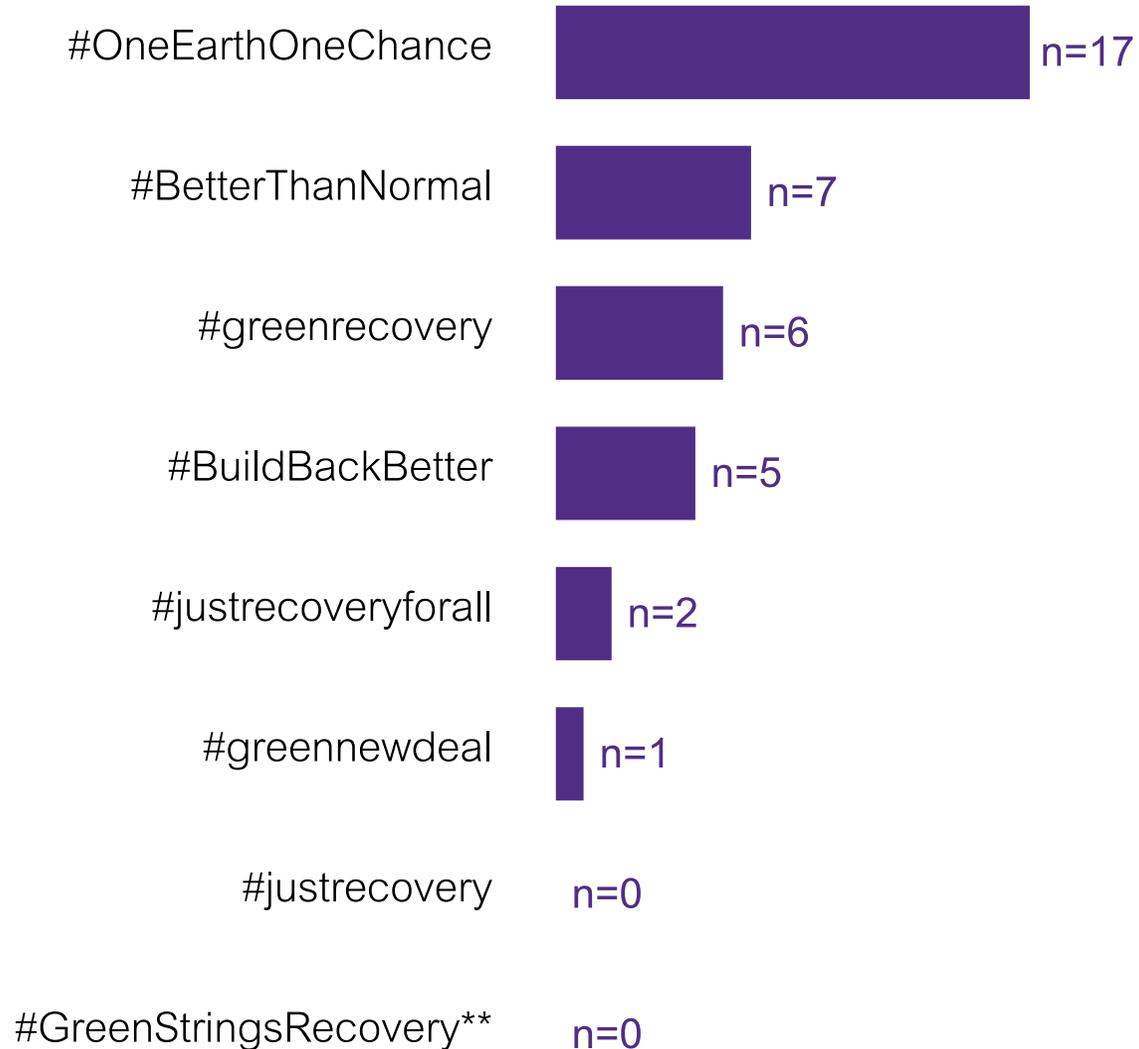


Hashtag preferences

Participants were shown a list of hashtags and asked to identify which they preferred most. Responses were initially relayed via the chat function, with participants allowed to list as many as they liked, followed by a brief discussion about the reasons for their preferences.

- The most preferred hashtag across all English focus groups, as indicated by 16 of 23 participants, was [#OneEarthOneChance](#).
- Across the two French focus groups, six of ten participants preferred [#relanceverteetsolidaire](#), closely followed by [#relanceverte](#).

Number of participants preferring each hashtag (English)



Hashtag preferences

Summary of feedback on English hashtags

The overall favourite hashtag was distinctly **#OneEarthOneChance**. It was thought to be a factual, easy to understand and urgent call to action. The only critique was that it seemed generic and couldn't be related to a life lesson from the pandemic/direction for the movement to go.

#BetterThanNormal was liked because of how it spun a negative into a positive. Participants who chose it described how it resonated with society's obligation to do better.

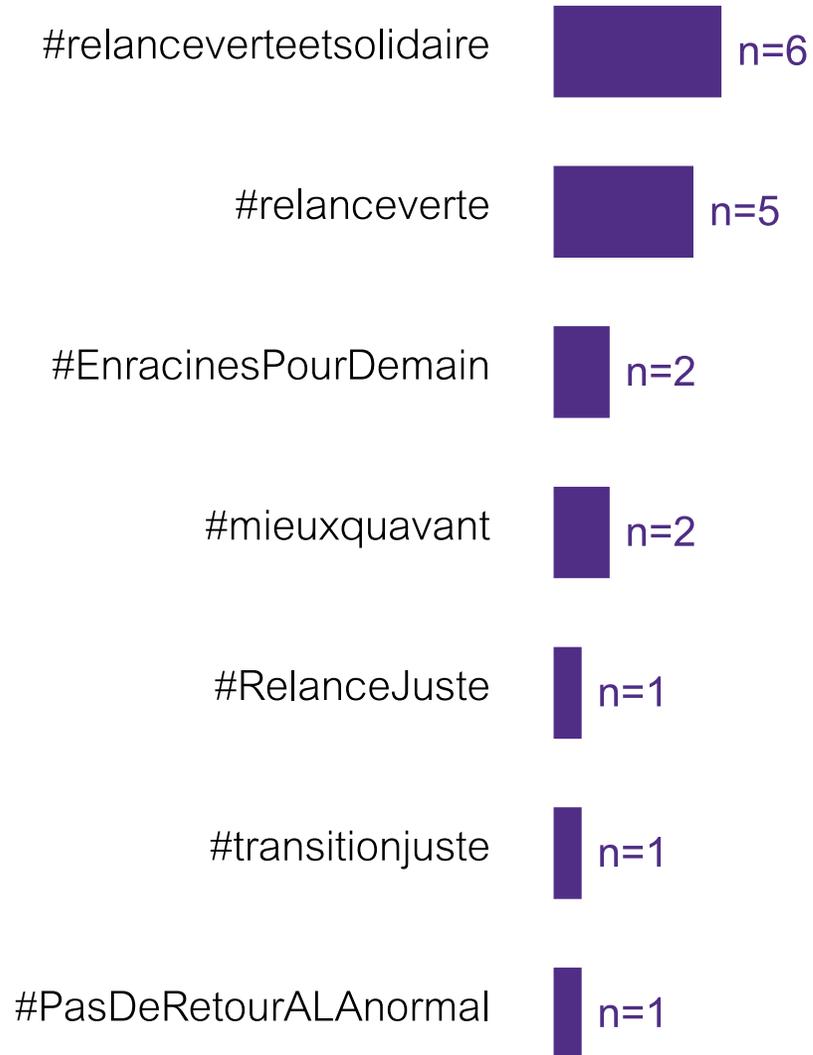
#greenrecovery was liked as a compromise between other hashtags. However, one respondent was put off by the reference to "green", saying it could alienate people who have a pre-existing negative connotation of the environmental movement.

#BuildBackBetter was viewed as positive and prompts constructive thought about how we continue forward after the pandemic.

The remaining hashtags were not as well liked.

Note: **#GreenStringsRecovery** was added to the list partway through the focus groups; participants noted that it seemed out of place and confusing.

Number of participants preferring each hashtag (French)



Hashtag preferences

Summary of feedback on French hashtags

#relancevertesolidaire was the preferred hashtag in the French focus groups. Many insisted that the term “solidaire” was key (it was the only hashtag with this term). They said it made sense because we can’t do this alone, useless if we are not in this together. Another said they liked solidarity because it is a continuum with the pandemic. However, one participant said “solidaire” reminded them of Québec Solidaire, introducing political implications.

Generally, people liked **#relanceverte** and (to a lesser extent) **#relancejuste** because of equity concerns; these were not considered confusing.

Those who liked **#mieuxquavant** found it positive.

At least one participant said **#PasdeRetourdeLaNormal** made them fearful.

**For further information
or questions**

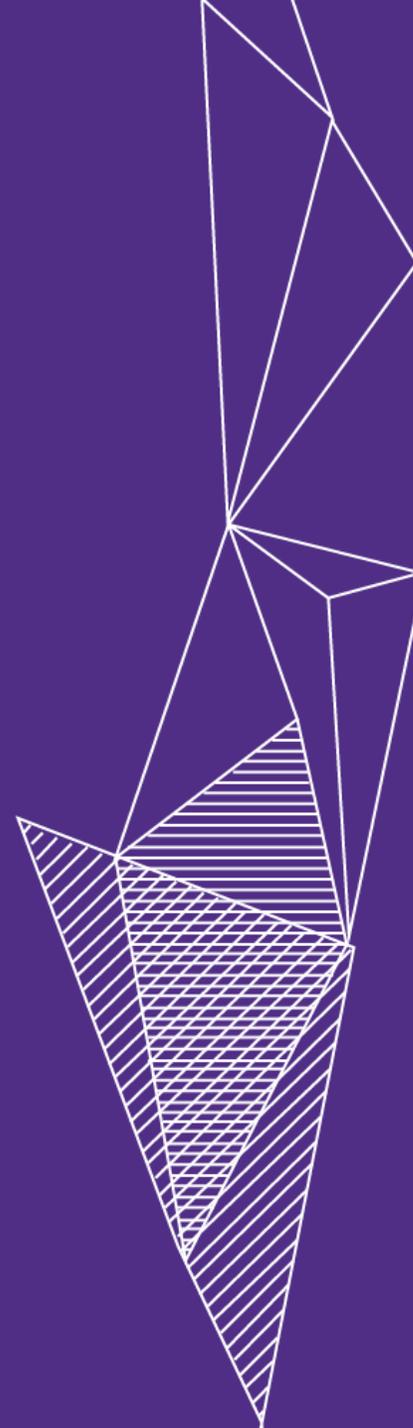


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