



The State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sustainability: A Summary

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Acknowledgements

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First, we want to thank all the respondents who filled out the survey and those who agreed to anonymously participate in interviews with us.

Presenting Partner



Contributors

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A note from Diversity in Sustainability

Many of us get into this field to create a better world. But a better world for whom and defined by whom?

We founded Diversity in Sustainability in June 2020, after the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. We are four practitioners of colour, and these deaths, combined with the devastating health and economic impacts of COVID-19, disproportionately affected racialized communities around the world. These events sparked a deeper discussion among us, and soul searching within us, on racism, inequality and the failures in how society has been built.

We reflected on our own experiences working in different organizations in sustainability, where we were often the only people of colour, and where the leadership team was rarely reflective of the diversity of the communities we inhabited and the experiences we embodied – nor of the world our organizations aimed to serve.

We wanted to draw on our experience in the profession and contribute to removing the barriers for our peers and future generations of sustainability professionals.

Our mission is to equip current and future Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) sustainability leaders with the skills, networks and resources to accelerate the transition to a sustainable and just future. We also aim to shift the industry to become more inclusive and to become better allies to BIPOC communities.

This leads us to our State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sustainability Survey. While race is one of the key factors correlating with social and environmental injustice, we recognize that it is not the only dimension of diversity – the notion of intersectionality is also vital. We want to understand the experiences of those who are also neurodiverse, have different levels of social mobility or education, different politics, disabilities and other social categorizations.

It is our hope that this report sheds some light on the experiences and challenges that lie ahead for building equitable and inclusive organizations in our profession. The industry, and the solutions it creates, cannot be sustainable until it is equitable. Let's keep up the momentum.



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This is a summary report - a longer version of this report, including many of the statistics, is available at www.diversityinsustainability.com.

Introduction

When the phrase “VUCA” – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous – was first coined, few could imagine a world faced with a convergence of crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapidly advancing effects of climate change and social unrest. A crisis often offers a moment to pause and reflect on how our actions are shaping the future. In a profession that is focused on protecting the social and environmental commons and our collective future, we wondered – what is this collective future we’re trying to create, and who is it defined by?

With climate change advancing, the United Nations predicts that women and those living in poverty in the Global South will be disproportionately affected.¹ Refugees, the elderly and the disabled are also more vulnerable to natural disasters, as evidenced by the floods in Germany² and recent extreme heat events across the world.³

Additionally, environmental and social injustices are disproportionately borne by people of colour. According to studies by Christopher W. Tessum et al. and Dr. Daniela Fecht, non-White populations in the United States⁴ and United Kingdom⁵ are exposed to fine particulate matter pollution at a much higher rate than the White population.

Meanwhile, a report published by the National Resources Defense Council found a strong correlation between the racial makeup of

communities and their access to safe drinking water.⁶ According to a UN report, Indigenous peoples in Canada are disproportionately exposed to toxic waste.⁷

In addition, a scathing report from Canada’s auditor general criticized the federal government for the lack of access to clean drinking water in many Indigenous communities, even though Canada is one of the most water-rich countries in the world.⁸

In a profession where we seek to enhance environmental and social outcomes in society, it stands to reason that we need to represent groups that are feeling more than their fair share of the effects of unsustainable development. Many studies have shown the benefits of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), in terms of enhanced decision making, innovation, employee retention, team collaboration and commitment.⁹



Executive summary

The State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sustainability Survey was created by Diversity in Sustainability to understand the demographics of our profession, the barriers to entry faced in entering the profession, the level of inclusion practitioners have experienced within their organizations, and the EDI programs that exist within organizations.

1,500 responses
30+ interviews

We received 1,500 responses, with the majority of responses from Canada, UK and the US. In-depth interviews were conducted with over 30 sustainability practitioners, to provide additional perspectives to the survey responses.

Some of the key findings are as follows:



Sustainability is an elite and privileged profession, which attracts those who have the means to be in it.

People look to work in sustainability not just to earn a living, but also to make a positive impact in the world.

75% of sustainability practitioners came from middle class backgrounds

Others see it as an industry that exists only in economically developed countries, where people have the extra time and resources to think beyond their basic needs. Entering the profession can be challenging, as it requires a

pre-existing level of financial security, which is most likely to be possible for people from middle-class backgrounds (75% of respondents). Sustainability offers no linear career path that can be relied on to lead to a defined level of success in a given amount of years, and it is common for people starting out in the profession to take unpaid internships and lower entry-level salaries before they can become fully established materially.

62% of sustainability practitioners have at least a master's degree

Additionally, the level of educational attainment in the profession is particularly high – 62% of respondents have at least a master's degree, 28% have at least a bachelor's degree, and 13% have a professional designation in addition to an advanced degree. Practitioners of similar backgrounds and means can have homogeneous world views, limiting their approach to solutions that should fit society at large and separating them from those that suffer from environmental and social injustices.



Many do not see our profession as being diverse.

Only 27% of respondents felt that their leadership teams were diverse

Only 27% of all respondents felt that their leadership teams were diverse, and Black (24%), South Asian (29%) and East Asian (37%) practitioners were less likely to agree that they saw someone like them in the profession, as compared to White women (70%).



Of all groups, White or Caucasian practitioners have the longest tenure in sustainability as a profession.

Worldviews of dominant groups tend to persist over time.

White or Caucasian people are more likely to have 16-plus years of experience in the profession compared to other groups (20% of the White or Caucasian respondents, compared to 7% of Black, 8% Hispanic or Latinx, and 9% Asian – East Asian). Early entry in developing the sector suggests a higher level of influence in shaping the initial worldviews in the profession.



White men are the leaders of many sustainability organizations, and generally feel included within the organizations they work in.

Of the respondents in senior leadership roles, White men make up a larger demographic percentage than other groups.

76% of White men felt free to voice an opposing opinion without fear of negative consequences, and 93% felt confident in putting forward ideas in their organization.

On measures of psychological safety, belonging and confidence, they also exhibit the highest percentages by comparison with all other groups. Ninety-three percent of White men reported they feel confident in putting forward ideas in their organizations (compared to an average of 86%), 76% of White men felt free to voice an opposing opinion without fear of negative consequences (compared to a 67% average), 89% of White men are comfortable talking about their backgrounds and cultural experiences with their colleagues (compared to a 76% average) and 85% of White men are confident putting themselves forward for leadership roles (compared to a 73% average).



Yet, a demographic shift is ahead, and we need to take considered approaches to succession planning and inclusion now, to avoid a drop-off in retention.

The diversity of racial/ethnic makeup of more junior practitioners, however, shows a different picture, and the younger the talent pool, the more diverse it is.

Forty-two percent of sustainability professionals aged 25-34 are people of colour, and 54% of sustainability professionals aged 18-24 are people of colour.

Those who hold junior and middle management staff roles are often women (both White and people of colour) and in the LGBTQ+ community.

While this suggests that leadership may naturally become more diverse over time, it also suggests a need for considered approaches to succession planning and inclusion now, to avoid a drop-off in retention.



Key barriers to entering the profession include a lack of networks, experience and financial means.

The barriers repeatedly mentioned include a lack of networks, experience and financial means – the last of which is made more difficult by high educational requirements and the challenge of living on an unpaid internship in a major metropolitan area. Other barriers include a lack of exposure to sustainability careers at a young age, a lack of mentorship and role models, legacy hiring and a lack of family support. However, most respondents feel that their transferable skills are sufficient for finding work in this profession. Increasing access to networks early on, and paying at least a living wage for internships and entry-level job opportunities could help to level the playing field and open the way for a wider pool of society to enter the profession.



Once in the profession, entrants face barriers to advancement.

Practitioners noted that they can face several barriers to advancement in the sustainability profession. These include having the right networks in the workplace, the lack of access to growth opportunities, a lack of feedback/transparency in recruitment, a lack of sponsorship, a lack of turnover at more senior levels, caregiving commitments, and discrimination.



People of colour also face particular barriers within the profession, to varying degrees.

In the interviews we conducted, people of colour reported on other barriers that they have faced in the working environment, including shouldering the burden of equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives within their organizations, bearing the weight of representation, feeling that their “otherism” distracts from their work, being required to code-switch, sensing that they are held to a higher standard, having their viewpoints ignored or co-opted, facing intra- and intercultural conflict, and being subject to a surplus of life distractions that affect their well-being.



Black and South Asian practitioners, and those from materially poor and working-class backgrounds, feel left behind in the profession, while neurodiverse and disabled sustainability practitioners do not feel psychologically safe within our organizations.

While all practitioners are confident about the contributions that they can make to their organizations, Black, South Asian and those coming from materially poor and working-class backgrounds are the least likely to feel included within their organizations, and of all groups, report the least opportunity for career progression. Practitioners who have disabilities or are neurodiverse feel the least psychologically safe within organizations. Meanwhile, White or Caucasian sustainability practitioners feel least confident in how to be allies to diverse colleagues. This offers an opportunity for all of us to build our competencies on other cultures, classes, neurodiversity and disabilities.



As an industry, we have a lot of work to do to make our organizations more inclusive.

Only half (52%) of respondents agreed that their organization has put their words into action on EDI. While larger organizations have more resources and programs for EDI initiatives, smaller organizations have the flexibility to take a personalized approach to inclusion.



Where do we go next?

Given the fractured state of the world with climate change, inequality and environmental degradation, the number of people focusing on sustainability will only increase. While organizations are making strides and trying to close the gap in equity, diversity and inclusion, it is clear that significant improvements are needed to ensure that the views of society – particularly the most vulnerable voices – are truly reflected. We must remember that there are adverse consequences of not being inclusive.

The heart of equity, diversity and inclusion is listening and learning with humility, and seeing our shared humanity, drawing on the wealth of our collective experiences. In subsequent research, we plan to lay out a blueprint for the role of different participants in our ecosystem to enable inclusion within our sector. Our recommendations for the profession are as follows:

- **Inclusion takes dedicated effort and resources.** Training, development and ongoing engagement activities cannot happen without dedicated resources. Make sure you include your diverse colleagues, but do not put the program on their shoulders unless they choose to engage.



- **Reflect on yourself and your organization.**

Reflect on the headwinds and tailwinds that got you to where you are as a sustainability professional. Take the time with your colleagues to do an audit of whether or not you are living up to your organization's values and how inclusive your organization is, through surveys and further discussions. Do this regularly.

- **Start with a level playing field in your organization.** Understand what skills are actually needed in the roles you are hiring for. Pay at least a living wage for interns and entry-level employees, so that everyone can participate in your organization, no matter what their background. Be flexible about the timing and location of work, to accommodate those with caregiving commitments, disabilities or neurodiversity.

- **Build psychological safety within your organization.** If you manage teams, remember that conflict is not always a threat. If someone brings something up that is counter to what you believe to be true, be curious and humble instead of defensive. Make a safe and brave space for tough conversations and ongoing learning.

- **Take the time to build cultural competency and to see your colleagues as individuals.** Spend time with people different from yourself and learn about their lived realities and strengths. Take a break with your colleagues and have open conversations, with a view to learn. Meanwhile, recognize not only that different groups have different experiences, but that even in the same social group, people can experience things in very different ways.

- **Amplify the voice of your colleagues who are not being heard.** Listen deeply to your employees and colleagues. Take the time to understand where they are coming from and give them opportunities that empower them.

- **Go beyond the typical crowd.** Collectively, we need to ensure that we are not going to the same networks for employees, board members, suppliers and speakers. We need to expand beyond our immediate networks and the people we are comfortable with and to give others a chance.

This is just the start of a longer-term journey. Given the scope of the challenges that we face, we will need to fundamentally re-envision our relationships with each other, our organizations, and how our larger systems work. Our lives depend on it.

Please join us at Diversity in Sustainability in our ongoing journey, as we continue to explore, navigate and learn from these deep challenges together.

Visit www.diversityinsustainability.com to download the full version of *The State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sustainability*, to learn more about us, to join our mailing list and Google Group or to donate to our organization as we build ourselves into a fully-resourced organization.

You can also contact us at info@diversityinsustainability.com for further details.

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About the cover: Artist Suhmer Hyatt created the cover, with inspiration from a quote from Sherri Mitchell Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset, of the Penawahpskek Nation. "Human diversity is just as critical to society as biodiversity is to an ecosystem; without it there can be no healthy functioning. The loss of diversity within mainstream systems and structures has left a fracture in our societies that must now be healed, through the purposeful and systematic inclusion of diverse voices, including the voices of the natural world, within the social dialogue."

About the author: Heather Mak is one of the co-founders of Diversity in Sustainability and the Principal Advisor at Heather Mak Consulting.



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