

# Our Human Moment

# When it comes to sustainability, organizations and people aren't aligned.

The disconnect is so severe that most people – 3 in 5 – don't strongly relate to the idea of living sustainably.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the climate crisis intensifies, revealing the need for a fundamental reinvention of consumption.

In this report, we draw on anthropological research with people living in eight different countries to offer a framework for how we can reinvent consumption by making sustainability more human.

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# Consumption isn't working.

At COP26 in November 2021, we said people were already at maximum capacity and struggling to live more sustainably.<sup>2</sup> Given the increased global economic and socio-political uncertainty in the world today, the load isn't likely to lighten any time soon. While a slim majority (53%) of people across ten countries are trying (but not necessarily succeeding) to uphold their sustainability values despite current challenges, almost the same percentage (47%) is thinking less about sustainability because they're grappling with inflation and rising prices.<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, sustainability is not a top priority for most purchases, and price and quality are more influential purchase decision variables for over 71% of people.<sup>4</sup>

Relatedly, only a minority are taking steps toward a more sustainable lifestyle by shifting their consumption patterns in archetypal ways, such as purchasing essential products only (49%), reducing electricity consumption at home (43%), purchasing products that are better quality/ longer lasting (31%), refillable (25%), or second-hand (21%), or using repair services more regularly instead of buying new products (22%).<sup>5</sup>

As a result of such dynamics, people's average personal carbon emissions are rising globally.<sup>6</sup> The tragic irony of this data is that many modes of sustainable consumption (e.g., second-hand, or repaired products, and fewer purchases) promise to save people money just when they're grappling with tighter household budgets.<sup>7</sup>

So, what's going on? Why are these more sustainable options not being adopted more widely?

On one level, modes of consumption are not governed by economic factors alone.

Instead, consumption is a cultural phenomenon governed by people's varying values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, identities and aspirations. To bring everyone into sustainable consumption more significantly, we must address these cultural dynamics, incorporating the idea of making sustainability cheaper and easier for people but moving beyond it too.

On another level, personal emissions (i.e. carbon footprints) vary greatly due to variations in "the consumption and investment patterns of different income groups".<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the "top 1% of global emitters are found to be responsible for almost one-fourth of the growth in greenhouse gas emissions since 1990" most especially because demand for energy intensive luxury goods and services, such as package holidays and vehicle fuel, has risen with higher incomes.<sup>9</sup> If the top 1% of emitters are going to reduce the environmental impacts of their personal consumption significantly, we clearly can't rely on economic arguments and mechanisms such as cost-saving to drive change.<sup>10</sup>

# We need to reinvent it.

Searching for another remedy, we can look at organizations instead of focusing all our attention on people, the ‘consumers’. To this end, at COP26, we said organizations should do more to enable sustainable consumption by ‘reducing the burden’ on people by leading with sustainable operations, products and services. For organizations, this response wouldn’t be entirely selfless. Accenture predicts that if companies are to thrive over the next decade, they need to harness sustainability as a key force of change, reinventing for their survival while solving for our collective human challenges. Nearly all CEOs (98%) see this responsibility, and agree sustainability is core to their role – a move taking them beyond purely financial to planetary stewardship.<sup>11</sup>

This traction is not guaranteed to yield the results we might hope for, however. As with households, most organizations are under increasing pressure from global volatility.<sup>12</sup> Most (87%) CEOs believe global disruption will constrain the delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as their ability to deliver value and impact for all stakeholders.<sup>13</sup>

Lighting a path out of this quagmire are the organizations Accenture calls ‘Reinventors’. This select group is committing to sustainability and delivering multi-dimensional stakeholder value as part of a Total Enterprise Reinvention strategy that embraces total and continual reinvention centered around a digital core.

As global greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase significantly, demonstrating how economic output and carbon emissions retain their problematic interdependency, the imperative to reinvent is stronger than ever.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of this imperative has both ecological and humanitarian dimensions as the climate crisis threatens both human and planetary welfare. The modes of reinvention we employ in response must account for this interplay at their core. Circular and regenerative models of consumption, for example, point us in the right direction.

These models promise to reinvent consumption by transforming how organizations and people consume interdependently, reinventing today’s dominant dynamics of (ir)responsibility and (un)accountability.

We believe organizations should drive this transformation with human and planetary ambitions in sight.

To realize this ambition fully, we need to look beyond organizational boundaries. Systemic reinvention is required too, calling for shifts in policy, technology, financing and infrastructure.

Ultimately, we believe people will determine the success of these systemic efforts.

Why? Because sustainability is a human challenge – non-sustainable activity is a human-made thing, so in turn, only we can move away from it.

This change cannot be achieved without people. People will need to create and adopt new technologies, adjust policies, design and overhaul infrastructure, and reconfigure global finance systems, for example, acting more responsibly than before. People also have an opportunity to transform how organizations operate, reinventing businesses and their engagements with people internally and externally. For all of this to happen, significant cultural shifts are needed inside and outside organizations.

A sustainable reinvention of consumption begins and ends with people.



# Introducing a life-centric approach.

To determine how we can reinvent consumption more significantly, we went to the heart of the issue: people's lives.

Over eight months in 2022, we engaged with people in eight countries (India, China, Japan, South Africa, Brazil, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States), taking a life-centric, anthropological approach to exploring the richness of people's everyday lives, unpacking what sustainability means to people and the reasons some lives are more sustainable than others.

In addition to expert engagements with academics, musicians, and entrepreneurs, we built our strongest relationships with thirty-three people living across the eight countries, understanding their lives as fully as possible

with ethnographic research methods (including photographic and videographic), collaborating with most of them in-person and online. We also conducted a semiotic analysis of various sustainability related communications and media.

This approach is an example of Accenture's broader commitment to Life Centricity, which highlights the need to unpack and respond to the complexity of people's lives, all the way from their thoughts and ideas through to the social, political, cultural, and economic conditions within which they live.<sup>15</sup> By incorporating non-human beings (e.g., animals and plants) into this ecosystem, a life-centric framework can guide the creation of new relationships between people, environments and other species.





# We can generate change.

At the beginning of the research, we put predefined notions of sustainability aside, exploring people's lives most broadly – their relationships, cares and concerns and compulsions to act – while opening ourselves up to diverse ideas about, and manifestations of sustainability. Later, we encouraged people to explore sustainability further on their terms, while we learned more about how sustainability is both similar and different around the world.

Amid the urgency of the climate crisis, we're pleased to say we found a story of optimism.

The research process triggered a positive change in some people's lives. Many adopted new or strengthened existing sustainable habits and identities, with many seeing themselves as 'sustainable' for the first time following our reflective discussions and some research methods that encouraged them to adopt a 'sustainable behavior' of their choice.

## WHAT DROVE THESE TRANSFORMATIONS?

- ▶ Rather than 'pushing' sustainability onto people, we enabled them to connect their values, identities and histories with sustainable action.
- ▶ We created time and non-judgmental spaces to experiment.
- ▶ We gave people the autonomy to choose their actions, giving them a greater sense of ownership and accountability.

During our first conversations, Rose didn't talk about sustainability. Instead, her family dominated, and she was far keener to talk about her grandchildren than climate change. However, during the research process, she experienced a personal transformation and significant lifestyle changes. She began to collect litter regularly, often walking for miles and even encouraging others to join her. She also made changes to her diet. Initially, these shifts were motivated by a desire to create a better life for her grandchildren, but she then broadened her view, integrating ideas about the environment alongside her more human concerns.

I want to make it that I'm around for my grandchildren, so I've even changed my lifestyle [because of this research]. I'm going to carry on doing what I'm doing.



# Spot the bigger problem.

## Relevancy Gap

### Organizational Assumptions

Alongside notable personal transformations, we also discovered something more troubling, something which we think helps to explain the lack of mainstream sustainability.

The people we met don't think about sustainability the way organizations do. Moreover, they think so differently that they rarely think about organizations at all.

We call this disconnect the **Relevancy Gap**.

### Human Reality

There is a radical difference between how organizations assume they should **define** sustainability, try to **connect** with people and **stimulate** sustainable action, and how people define and connect with sustainability and the factors that stimulate them to act sustainably.

The gap between these two worlds is so wide that **three in five people don't strongly relate to the idea of living sustainably.**<sup>16</sup>



ORGANIZATIONAL ASSUMPTION #1

Decide what sustainability is for people, based on how organizations define it

ARCHETYPAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES



Educate people with packaging explanations, educational campaigns, and stereotypical images of sustainable solutions.



Target sustainable consumers by appealing to early adopters' notions of solidarity, civic duty, or an exaggerated personal responsibility.

HUMAN REALITY #1

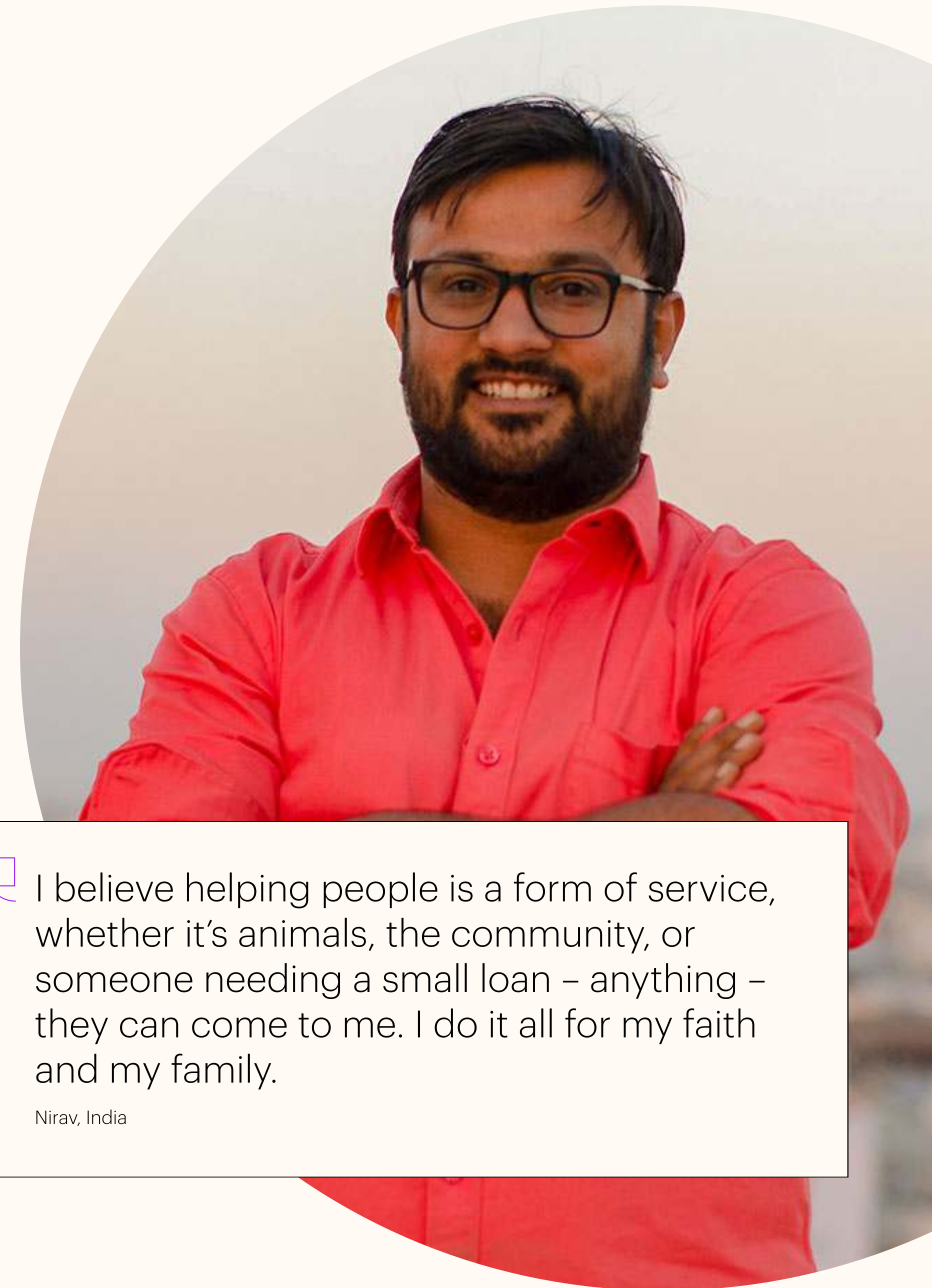
Expressions of sustainability are diverse and not always related to 'sustainability'

INSIGHTS

- ▶ People don't have to care or know about sustainability to act sustainably.
- ▶ Sustainability is often conveyed in a way that is alienating.

EXAMPLE

Nirav makes many sustainable choices each day, from cycling to work to sharing books with others to letting "forests and animals thrive", but he didn't connect with any typical, organizational terminology around 'sustainability' in any language. Instead, he explained these behaviors by referencing his cultural, philosophical connection to faith and duty.



I believe helping people is a form of service, whether it's animals, the community, or someone needing a small loan – anything – they can come to me. I do it all for my faith and my family.

Nirav, India



ORGANIZATIONAL ASSUMPTION #2

Make people care about sustainability

ARCHETYPAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES



Get people to care about the planet with romanticized planet imagery, corporate biophilia and vulnerable wildernesses.



Sell the benefits of sustainability by perpetuating corporate, quantified ideals of success and progress.



Lead with new ideas and technology solutions by championing utopian futures and extreme stunts.

HUMAN REALITY #2

The true drivers of action are human values

INSIGHTS

- ▶ Immediate, human concerns override concern for the planet frequently.
- ▶ How and what people buy is a small part of living sustainably.
- ▶ Continuity and tradition are as important as change and progress.

EXAMPLE

Abeb was previously a pastor and now runs a diversity, equity and inclusion training business. He has dedicated his life to serving others, especially the Black community. Was Abeb also concerned about the planet? Yes, but when explaining why these issues matter, he spoke about human values, needs and priorities.



Sustainability doesn't hit home to people because it's macro and not micro. I haven't had any intimate experience with sustainability like I did with George Floyd.

Abeb, USA

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSUMPTION #3

# Sway people toward sustainable choices

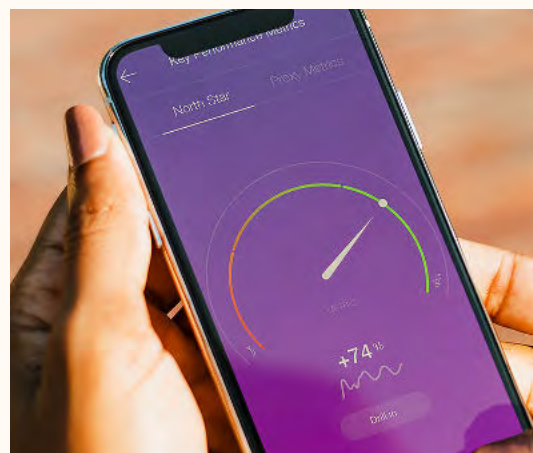
ARCHETYPAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES



Get people to choose the better option by appealing to social norms and persuasion tactics.



Act as the voice of guidance by using qualifications, pledges, and signposting.



Focus on externally imposed interventions by making sustainability trackable and 'nudgeable'.

HUMAN REALITY #3

# People aren't looking to organizations for direction

INSIGHTS

- ▶ Sustainability doesn't always have to be a preference.
- ▶ Sustainable values and habits are cultivated socially between many entities.
- ▶ Internalization leads to personal transformation and behavior change.

EXAMPLE

Despite being in a constant battle between aspiration and the limitations of her present situation, for Sinethemba, taking care of others and the places around us is an innate aspect of humanity, not a choice.



 Sustainability should not be a privilege.  
Sinethemba, South Africa



## Solve the challenge.

The Relevancy Gap is placing a low ceiling on sustainability. Too often people are being invited to build a relationship with something that doesn't feel relevant or actionable. Is it any wonder that most people don't strongly relate to sustainability?

Here lies the challenge: to reinvent consumption, how do we make sustainability relevant and actionable for everyone?

Closing the gap between organizations and people with a life-centric approach holds the key.

To create greater relatability and inspire more widespread sustainable behaviors, organizations will need to shed these assumptions and do things differently.

# Make sustainability more human.

Stop asking: How can we make humans more sustainable?

And start asking: How can we make sustainability more human?

To close the Relevancy Gap, we can't sprinkle sustainability over existing business models.

Closing the Relevancy Gap presents an opportunity to reinvent what businesses are and how they affect the planet and people's lives.

This shift will require a complete transformation of our approach to sustainability so that we can change the relationship between people, sustainability and organizations.

## Define

### NEW DIRECTION #1

Redefine what sustainability means and looks like

We can do this by:

- ▶ Broadening definitions of the 'sustainable consumer'
- ▶ Matching representations of sustainability to people's realities

## Connect

### NEW DIRECTION #2

Relate to what matters most to people

We can do this by:

- ▶ Reconnecting with people's values
- ▶ Engaging beyond the point of purchase
- ▶ Folding tradition into innovation

## Stimulate

### NEW DIRECTION #3

Build partnerships and platforms

We can do this by:

- ▶ Connecting through trusted networks and communities
- ▶ Becoming a facilitator, not a director



# Create Life-centric Entryways.

Our research uncovered six universal human values that connect people with sustainable action most strongly.

We believe organizations can use these same values as Life-centric Entryways to sustainability and stronger relationships with people – they provide a compass for organizations wanting to define sustainability, connect with people and stimulate action differently.

The framework can help organizations make their sustainability efforts and offerings more reflective of people's everyday lives, enabling them to:

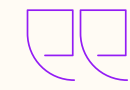
- ▶ Identify innovative and creative sustainability strategies that are relevant and differentiated
- ▶ Widen the reach of sustainability efforts by connecting better with more people
- ▶ Inspire people within organizations to create internal changes and desires to 'walk the walk'
- ▶ Improve the efficacy of services, products, technology, innovation, partnerships and marketing campaigns by aligning them with what matters most to people

How can we use them? We can review all existing programs and ask: "Am I triggering one or more of the entryways?" If you're not, you're most probably missing opportunities to activate strong connections with people and drive cultural change. When thinking about product strategies, we can use the entryways as a starting point for framing entire change programs, revisiting them at every checkpoint. During workshops, they provide jumping-off points for creating new sustainability initiatives, and they can direct brand strategy and communication activations too.

## Caring

Looking after ourselves, our loved ones and the places or things that hold meaning for us.

- ▶ Appeal to people's desire to care for the things that matter, without relating it to the planet necessarily.
- ▶ Activate salvaging, donating and future-proofing behaviors.



That's the reason I do [litter picking]. The result is for my children and their children.

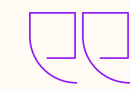
Rose, United Kingdom



## Resourcefulness

Maximizing the value or use of what is available to us.

- ▶ Appeal to people's drive to get the most of things without focusing on the angle of using less to save the planet.
- ▶ Activate reduced purchasing, repurposing and sharing behaviors.



I've been brought up to persevere and use what we have. I was taught by my mother to recycle soap using cooking oil.

Valeria, Brazil

## Self-fulfillment

Seeking to survive and thrive by taking steps to protect our well-being, security and status.

- ▶ Appeal to desires for physiological and psychological health and social status without needing to relate it to sustainability more explicitly.
- ▶ Activate product swaps and lifestyle habit changes that improve people's lives.



Letting skin breathe can reduce the occurrence of many skin diseases. The materials [for underwear] shouldn't be polyesters, but pure cotton."

Yuan's friend, writing to an underwear brand.<sup>17</sup>



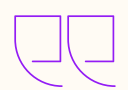
Start by using our Life-Centric Entryways to find new avenues to sustainable innovation and impact



## Empowerment

Protecting and standing up for the causes and communities that matter most to people.

- ▶ Capitalize on those who already have the drive to create positive change without needing to incite activism to save the planet explicitly.
- ▶ Activate sustainable purchasing power, community initiatives and the mobilization of others.



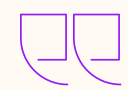
We are used to buying from local artisanal brands or even making our own products, and we don't see it like it's a sustainable thing, that's just the way things are around here.

Sinethemba, South Africa

## Belonging

Pursuing a sense of acceptance, support and connection in the communities in which we live.

- ▶ Play to social dynamics (using tools like social comparison, for example) and sustainability as a social performance without talking about sustainability explicitly.
- ▶ Activate adherence and collective behavior change.



Community helps us find our people and can shape how we grow as an individual. I personally would not have developed interests or the way I view and react to the world without being part of different communities.

Willard, USA



## Openness

Striving to discover, experiment, and learn how things could be different.

- ▶ Appeal to people who are naturally open to new experiences and lifestyles to trigger broader behavioral shifts.
- ▶ Activate experimentation, reflection and learning.



Now I'm at university, I'm trying new types of clothing brands that my friends are using.

Miya, Japan

# Benefiting organizations, people and the planet.

If **organizations** could make sustainability more relevant and actionable, we could mobilize over 4.5 billion people more strongly<sup>18</sup> and deliver the 3Rs to organizations.

From Accenture's report on Total Enterprise Reinvention, we know organizations reinventing first and most fully, the Reinventors, not only outperform peers financially<sup>19</sup> but also outperform on sustainability metrics too (by 32%).<sup>20</sup>

And it's not just about organizations – **people** can also find the 3Rs.



## Relevancy

Connecting with more people and driving long-term brand relationships

Consumption opportunities that align with their priorities



## Revenue

Expanding and diversifying avenues to sustainable value generation

Consumption choices that don't break the bank



## Resiliency

Guaranteeing the efficacy of sustainability efforts and ensuring the long-term viability of organizations

Protection and support for loved ones and communities

This is an invitation to reinvent consumption by reinventing how organizations relate to people.

It's time to stop making people sustainable, and start making sustainability human.

This is Our Human Moment.



# References

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- 6 Chancel, L., Bothe, P., Voituriez, T. (2023) Climate Inequality Report 2023, World Inequality Lab Study 2023/1, accessed via <https://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CBV2023-ClimateInequalityReport-2.pdf>
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- 17 The relative sustainability credentials of cotton versus polyester are contentious and dependent on many variables, including processes of production and manufacturing such as the reuse of raw materials, water use, and fertilizer/pesticide use. The inclusion of the statement from Yuan's friend is not included to promote the environmental benefits of one material over the other but to demonstrate how decisions regarding consumption relate to notions of well-being that have environmental implications.  
  
4.5 billion is indicative based on the global survey response from reference 16. The percentage of people who responded using a 7PT scale that they don't strongly relate to the idea of living sustainably (59%) has been applied to the current global population of 8 billion.
- 18
- 19 "Reinventors report generating 10% higher incremental revenue growth, 13% higher cost reduction improvements and 17% higher balance-sheet improvements compared with Transformers. Those numbers are significantly higher when compared with Optimizers at 22%, 21% and 20% respectively." Source: Accenture, Total Enterprise Reinvention Accenture, 2023, page 11 <https://www.accenture.com/content/dam/accenture/final/accenture-com/document/Accenture-Total-Enterprise-Reinvention.pdf>
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# Ethnography Participants

Here are the people who generously shared their lives and stories. All participants have been pseudonymized.



**Bruna**  
Brazil



**Yuan**  
China



**Govind**  
India



**Francois**  
South Africa



**Rose**  
UK



**Matheus**  
Brazil



**Jasmine**  
Hong Kong



**Nirav**  
India



**Gcina**  
South Africa



**Abeeb**  
USA



**Patricia**  
Brazil



**Amanda**  
Germany



**Shwetha**  
India



**Lwazi**  
South Africa



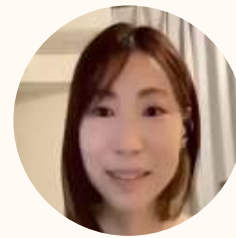
**Emily**  
USA



**Valeria**  
Brazil



**Luis**  
Germany



**Ayumi**  
Japan



**Sinethemba**  
South Africa



**Marion**  
USA



**Chao**  
China



**Karl**  
Germany



**Kenshiro**  
Japan



**George**  
UK



**Willard**  
USA



**Tao**  
China



**Rebecca**  
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**Miya**  
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**Wei**  
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# About Accenture

## Accenture

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## About Accenture Song

Accenture Song accelerates growth and value for our clients through sustained customer relevance. Our capabilities span ideation to execution: growth, product and experience design; technology and experience platforms; creative, media and marketing strategy; and campaign, commerce transformation, content and channel orchestration. With strong client relationships and deep industry expertise, we help our clients operate at the speed of life through the unlimited potential of imagination, technology and intelligence.

Read our new perspective on Life-Centricity.

## About Accenture Song's Sustainability Studio

Accenture Song's Sustainability Studio reinvents and scales sustainable models of consumption through human insight and creativity, combined with Accenture's ability to scale sustainable solutions.

The Studio is a global practice of over 30 sustainability, business, and human-centered experts, bringing together creativity, design, anthropology, and business strategy to interrogate and experiment how the relationship between organizations, consumers, sustainability, and consumption can evolve for the benefit of people, business, and planet.

The practice delivers insights generation and client services including product and experience design; creative; media and marketing strategy; and business model transformation and strategy.

## About Accenture Research

Accenture Research creates thought leadership about the most pressing business issues organizations face. Combining innovative research techniques, such as data science led analysis, with a deep understanding of industry and technology, our team of 300 researchers in 20 countries publish hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research developed with world leading organizations helps our clients embrace change, create value, and deliver on the power of technology and human ingenuity.



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