



KANTAR

Better Futures Thrive 2025

**Social sustainability,
social actives, and the
business mandate for a
thriving society**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social sustainability continues to grow as a critical dimension of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) strategy. While environmental concerns have long dominated the agenda, a growing group – Social Actives – are emerging and demanding that businesses also step up to shape a more resilient, thriving and equitable society. This paper explores the current state of social sustainability among New Zealand consumers, the characteristics and expectations of Social Actives, and the strategic imperatives for businesses to authentically lead societal progress and build a thriving society.



1. Introduction: the human-centric shift in sustainability

For decades, the word “sustainability” painted a picture of melting ice caps, endangered species, and forests under threat – the narrative was green, and we felt that by doing our part, we could clean things up. Governments and some businesses measured their worth by how much they recycled, how little they polluted, their emissions and how efficiently they used resources.

But quietly, almost imperceptibly at first, the story began to change. The world’s problems grew more complex, more interconnected. What began as a subtle shift has now become a defining reality – globalisation and digital connectivity no longer just influence economies; they bind them together, creating interdependencies and risks that shape every facet of modern life.

People start to notice that the same forces driving environmental decline are also undermining the fabric of society. The cost-of-living soars, mental health crises deepen, and communities are feeling the strain. Suddenly, sustainability is no longer just about saving the planet; it is also about saving ourselves. Yet the relationship between environmental and social sustainability is complex: some drivers are shared, some are distinct, and the impacts often reinforce each other. So while the two are deeply linked, they are not always identical, requiring both integrated and targeted solutions.

This is the dawn of the human-centric era in sustainability. The questions shift from **“How do we protect the environment?”** to **“How do we ensure everyone can thrive?”** Social sustainability is the new broader narrative: which includes a focus on poverty, hunger, health, education, and the stubborn persistence of inequality. It is about building resilient communities, not only resilient ecosystems. The Sustainability Sector Index 2023 and 2025 reports from Kantar highlight that consumer concerns and brand strategies are increasingly focused on human wellbeing, equity, and social justice, not just environmental protection, with a growing expectation that sustainability means improving lives, not just reducing harm to the planet.

2. The state of social sustainability

Social impact issues in 2025 are not a distant challenge – it is the lived reality of communities, families, and individuals navigating a world in flux. The conversation has shifted from abstract principles to urgent, everyday concerns. In New Zealand, as in many places, the story begins at the kitchen table and in the supermarket aisle, where the rising cost of living feels more pressing. It is here, in the choices people make about food, healthcare, and daily necessities, that the true state of social sustainability is revealed.

The numbers tell a story of both hope and hardship. Two-thirds of people (66%) believe their choices and actions can make a difference, and 60% are willing to invest their time or money in companies that “try to do good.” Yet, the top five concerns are deeply human: the cost of living, access to affordable healthcare, protection of children from abuse, mental health, and the impact of social media. These are not theoretical issues, they shape daily life for many.

The cost of living remains the number one concern, with 75% of respondents rating it as a top issue. The price of everyday essentials – fresh fruit and vegetables, food basics, personal care items, household bills, and petrol has become a source of anxiety for many. Half of New Zealanders say they cannot easily afford non-essentials or treats, a stark reflection of financial pressure. For others, a meal out, new clothes, or a coffee in a café are out of reach.



Looking at broader consumer sentiment, PwC’s 2025 Holiday Outlook survey revealed that 84% of respondents plan to cut back on their overall spending over the next six months. The primary reasons cited for this cautious approach are the ongoing rise in prices, the introduction of new tariffs, and the increasing cost of living. These factors together are shaping a more restrained spending environment for the upcoming holiday season and beyond.

Beneath these immediate concerns lie powerful macro forces. Growing economic inequality is threatening social stability and economic growth. An ageing population and lowering birth rate are reshaping the workforce and increasing demand for social services. Skill shortages are emerging as a new challenge, with a mismatch between the skills people have and those the labour market demands. The pace of change is faster than previous cycles with training systems not keeping up with evolving job requirements.

Widespread economic uncertainty and concerns about global conflicts add to the sense of instability. Kantar Corporate Reputation Index 2025 highlights the top concerns for New Zealanders are the economy, global conflicts, and inflation.



3. The new mandate for socially responsible business

In this new landscape, businesses find themselves at a crossroads. No longer can they rely on green credentials alone. People, especially the young, the marginalised, and those who have felt the sharp edge of social injustice – demand more. They want to know: Does this company pay a living wage? Does it treat its employees with respect? Does it give back to the community? Does it make life better for everyone, not just shareholders?

The data from Kantar Better Futures 2025 is clear: 66% of people believe their choices can make a difference, and 60% are willing to invest in companies that “try to do good.” But the issues that matter most like the rising costs, healthcare, mental health, the impact of social media – are deeply human.

This shift is a change in mindset. It is the recognition that sustainability is not a box to be ticked. It is about closing the gap between what we say and what we do, between intention and action. It is about understanding that every purchase, every policy, and every product can either build or erode the foundations of a thriving society.

The human-centric shift in sustainability is, ultimately, a call to action. It asks businesses to measure success not just in profits, but in lives improved. Social sustainability is a lived reality, and from this new consciousness, Social Actives began to emerge. It is a story still being written by Social Actives, by communities, and by every organisation brave enough to put people at the heart of their purpose.



4. The rise of Social Actives

Who are these Social Actives? Social Actives are driven by a desire to build fairer, more resilient communities. They care about living wages, mental health, inclusion, and the everyday struggles that shape lives. Eco Actives, meanwhile, are motivated by the urgent need to protect the environment, reduce waste, and champion sustainability. Yet, the data tells us these groups are not so different after all. Their journeys may begin in different places, but they converge in the same landscape: a world where the choices we make for our communities are also choices we make for our planet.

A large proportion (83%) of Social Actives are also Eco Actives. They are more likely to be women, to have pursued higher education, and to have experienced discrimination or live with a disability. They are open-minded, hungry for information, and wary of misinformation. Their worldview is broad, they care about the big issues: the ageing population, the economy, racism, gender equality, and political extremism. But they also care about the small, everyday choices that shape communities.

What unites them is a belief that individual choices matter. Social Actives are more likely to let social causes influence their purchases – 26% say diversity, equity, and inclusion issues guide their buying decisions “all the time” or “often”, compared to just 4% of those uninterested in social sustainability. And when it comes to environmental action, the same pattern emerges: those who are passionate about social causes are also more likely to act for the environment.

What has fuelled their rise? The rise of Social Actives is a direct response to this interconnected reality. It is a combination of personal experience and societal change. The relentless news cycle, the visibility of injustice, and the growing sense that individual choices matter have all played a part. They are also more likely to seek out different points of view, to avoid untrustworthy information. These individuals recognise that their personal wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of their communities and the planet. The interconnectedness of issues makes it impossible to address one without considering the others.

Yet, there is a paradox at the heart of this movement. While many express deep commitment to social causes, far fewer translate that passion into action. Although 58% of people say they care about social sustainability and 64% about environmental issues, only 19% actually act on social sustainability compared to 36% for environmental sustainability. Put simply: just one in three who care about social issues take action, versus more than half for environmental issues. This gap suggests that those who act on social issues are also more likely to act on environmental ones. Social issues are often seen as intractable and deeply complex, making it hard for individuals to feel their actions will have a meaningful impact. There are few 'easy wins' when it comes to social change. In contrast, some environmental issues tend to feel more actionable – people believe they can make a difference through everyday behaviours, like recycling or reducing waste.

The Kantar Better Futures 2025 findings highlight that the barriers that stop people from doing more for social or environmental are real; many feeling overwhelmed: financial constraints (42%), lack of time, unsure where to start, knowledge gaps, and doubts about whether individual efforts truly make a difference. However, the complexity of social issues adds another layer of difficulty – people are less sure what to do or whether it will matter. The Social Actives are the ones who bridge this gap. They don't just care, they're compelled to act.

Generational change is a powerful undercurrent in this story. Young adults, aged 18-29 years, are at the forefront. For them, social and environmental responsibility are inseparable. When they judge a business, they weigh both equally, and they are especially attuned to how companies treat their employees. For this generation, fair and respectful treatment of workers (31%) is the baseline for trust. The commercial implications are profound: businesses that fail to meet these expectations risk losing the loyalty of the generation with the longest future ahead.

Those in the next age cohort, 30-44 years, are less focused on employee treatment and more on advocacy (23%). They want to see businesses speaking up, taking a stand, and using their voice for social change. Meanwhile, those who are financially struggling – regardless of age – share the younger generation's emphasis on fair treatment, perhaps because they know, more than most, what is at stake.

The rise of Social Actives is, then, both a response to the world as it is and a vision for the world as it could be. It is a movement shaped by hardship, by hope, and by the belief that businesses have a vital role to play in building a society where everyone can thrive. Social Actives are not waiting for change – they are demanding it, and they are expecting brands and organisations to join them on the journey.

5. The business role: from compliance to authentic leadership

In the evolving landscape of social sustainability, businesses are no longer bystanders – they are protagonists, and the audience is watching closely. The expectations placed on organisations have never been higher, nor more personal. In 2025, 89% of New Zealanders believe businesses must be accountable for their social and environmental impacts.

It begins with a shift in what matters most. While environmental credentials once dominated, today it is a company's social behaviour that most powerfully shapes how it is seen. Minimising social harm – whether through fair treatment of employees, supporting communities, or ensuring products do not disadvantage the vulnerable: is now the single biggest driver of positive brand perception, influencing 28% of consumer perceptions of a business. That's nearly double the impact of minimising environmental harm (15%) which dominated in the past.

But what does this look like in practice? It means that when a business chooses to pay a living wage, to be transparent about its supply chain, or to give back to the communities it serves, it is not just doing the right thing, it is building its reputation, its customer base, and its future. For younger New Zealanders (18–29 years), fair and respectful employee treatment is the number one factor in how they judge a brand's social responsibility. For those struggling financially, it is just as important.

The commercial incentive is clear. Brands that act authentically by aligning their actions with their values and their category are rewarded with loyalty and advocacy. The Kantar Corporate Reputation Index 2025 highlights that advocacy rates rise from 9% (low trust) to 45% (high trust) when a brand is trusted. Often because it acts authentically and aligns with its stated values – nearly half of consumers will actively recommend it to others, compared to less than one in ten for brands with low trust. But authenticity is non-negotiable. Superficial gestures, or “social washing,” are quickly spotted. Sustainability without social responsibility is hollow.

A recent report revealed that many leading fashion companies have made ambitious net-zero climate pledges while neglecting the human rights of supply chain workers. By ignoring the social dimension of sustainability, these commitments risk being perceived as little more than inauthentic, bold environmental claims masking systemic labour issues. This disconnect undermines trust and exposes the gap between corporate rhetoric and genuine responsibility.

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Consumers want more than words. They want businesses to make it easy, meaningful, and rewarding for them to act sustainably. That means removing barriers, financial, informational, or practical and providing clear, trustworthy information.

It means showing, not just telling, how a company's actions make a difference. In fact, being transparent and actively speaking up on social and environmental issues are far more impactful than simply communicating the good things a business does.



The data in the Kantar Corporate Reputation Index NZ 2025, shows that social sustainability now accounts for up to one-third of corporate reputation. The impact of “socially responsible,” “treat employees well,” and “environmentally responsible” has more than doubled in the past decade. Responsibility is trending upwards as a reputational driver – traditional notions of measuring leadership and success are declining, with people caring more about who is doing the right thing.

So, what do New Zealanders expect from business? According to Kantar Better Futures 2025, the list is long and clear: be accountable if you overcharge, protect privacy, prioritise safety, uphold ethical practices, pay a living wage, contribute to prosperity, ensure affordable necessities, protect the environment, provide local jobs, make products more sustainable, have a positive impact on health, be transparent, and participate in community initiatives. The best-performing brands only reach 60% agreement on these measures – there is much room to grow.

The message is simple but profound: businesses are being called to lead. The brands that will thrive are those that act with integrity, listen to the needs of their communities, and make social impact a core part of their story. In the end, the most successful businesses will be those that help build a society where everyone can thrive – one real and authentic action at a time.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the state of social sustainability is defined by a tension between aspiration and reality. People care deeply about the wellbeing of their communities but face significant barriers to action. The issues are urgent, complex, and deeply personal. The call to action for businesses is not just to “do less harm,” but to become active partners in building a society where everyone can thrive.

The future of social sustainability will be written not just in boardrooms, but in the everyday choices of individuals, families, and communities and in the willingness of organisations to listen, respond, and lead.

Social sustainability is a movement that is demanding societal transformation. The rise of Social Actives signals a shift in consumer consciousness and societal expectations. Businesses that embrace this shift, authentically and strategically, will not only build trust and loyalty but also help shape a more equitable and thriving society for all.



About Kantar

Kantar is the world's leading marketing data and analytics business and an indispensable brand partner to the world's top companies. We combine the most meaningful attitudinal and behavioural data with deep expertise and advanced analytics to uncover how people think and act. We help clients understand what has happened and why and how to shape the marketing strategies that shape their future.

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