

# **The Sustainable and Just Association: Canadian Benchmark of Association ESG Practices**



**By**  
**Coro Strandberg**  
**President, Strandberg Consulting**  
**in collaboration with Dana Coble**

**September 2021**

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## **Introduction**

Canadian Associations are becoming increasingly interested in developing or enhancing their strategies and programs to help members improve their social and environmental performance and address societal challenges faced by their members and society. To address this interest, the Government of Canada commissioned the author to analyze best practices in Association sustainability and corporate social responsibility programs and prepare a report on the findings. This resulted in two reports:

The Sustainable and Just Association: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/the-sustainable-and-just-Association/>

Sustainable Association Case Studies: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/sustainable-Association-case-studies/>

From this research, two frameworks were developed for Associations to design and implement policies, practices, and programs to help their members improve their social and environmental performance, enhance their resilience, and become future-fit. These frameworks are included in the Appendix C of the report, along with other resources for Associations seeking to advance their practices in this area (Appendix D).

Several Associations expressed interest in learning from others regarding the practices profiled in these reports. To address this interest, the author conducted a national benchmarking study to identify the current state of Association social and environmental practices and programs. This report is a summary of the results of The Sustainable and Just Association National Benchmark. It uses the term “ESG” to refer to social and environmental performance and practices of associations and their members. ESG stands for Environment, Social, Governance.

***“This is an excellent, detailed report. It is interesting to compare to others and to learn where we are in the process. This will be extremely beneficial for us to gauge and measure against other similar type Associations.”***

**- Bruce Rodgers, Executive Director, Canadian International Freight Forwarders Association**

## Findings at a Glance

**Staffing:** A number of Associations have staff with designated ESG responsibility.

**Terminology:** Most Associations use the term “Sustainability” when referring to the environmental and social performance of their members.

**Priorities:** Many Associations focus on one social theme and one environmental theme, four topics altogether:

- Social justice
  - Equity, diversity, and inclusion
  - Indigenous relations
- Climate change
  - Adaptation to climate change
  - Transition to the low carbon economy

**ESG Practices:** Most are bringing their members together to address ESG issues through collaboration, and many have in-house operational ESG practices. One-quarter have an ESG standard, benchmark, or certification for members and some have targets to improve the overall ESG performance of members. In addition to convening their members on ESG, most Associations are involved in ESG partnerships or collaborations with other Associations or stakeholders. These partnerships and collaborations are designed to pursue ESG priorities through collective strategies. One-third, however, are not involved in ESG partnerships or collaborations.

**Barriers:** While ten percent say they don’t face any barriers, most point to varying levels of ESG knowledge and organizational size among members as their top constraint, followed by member and Association capacity. Lack of member interest is not a primary obstacle.

**Business Case:** A key driver of ESG programs is to demonstrate sector or professional leadership. Many also believe that it advances the Association’s strategy and mission while also helping build positive stakeholder relations, including government, and helping members build resilience.

**Social Purpose:** Many Associations have a social or societal purpose as the reason their Association exists, in which the Association serves society in addition to serving members. Those who don’t have a social purpose plan to give this further thought and raise it with their leadership. A small percentage think this topic is irrelevant.

**Stage:** In terms of their ESG maturity, most Associations are either at the basic, strategic, or visionary level. Very few perceive themselves at the social purpose and transformational level of impact.

**Plans:** It appears that most of the Associations are planning to pursue the following actions next year:

- Educating their members on ESG
- Incorporating ESG into their strategic plans
- Helping their members address climate change
- Helping their members address equity, diversity, and inclusion

## Methodology

Approximately 150 professional, trade and business Associations were emailed an opportunity to participate in the survey during the summer of 2021. The survey was based on the Sustainable and Just Association report findings. 59 Associations completed the survey, representing a 40 percent response rate. Some of the Associations are provincial and others are international, but the majority are national Associations.

The paper uses the term ESG which stands for environment, social and governance. For the purposes of this report, it can be used interchangeably with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability.

## Results

### 1. Respondents

The most common respondent, at 22, was the President, CEO, Executive Director or General Manager. followed by ten directors and ten managers. Six VPs completed the survey, as did 3 board members.

Directors and managers had the following functions:

- Member services
- Marketing and communications
- Regulatory and public affairs
- Education
- Administration
- Partnerships
- Research
- Programs and special projects

Notably, there were 11 respondents in sustainability and social impact roles:

- VP Sustainability (2)
- Senior Director, Natural Resources and Sustainable Growth
- Director, Material Stewardship and Global Sustainable Development Lead
- Director, Generation and Stewardship
- Manager, Climate Change and Sustainability Initiatives
- Manager, Programs and Sustainability
- Senior Manager, Community Impact
- Senior Manager, Sustainable Programs
- Social Impact Lead
- Research and Sustainability Policy Advisor

See Appendix B for a list of the organizations who completed the survey.

#### About Coro Strandberg

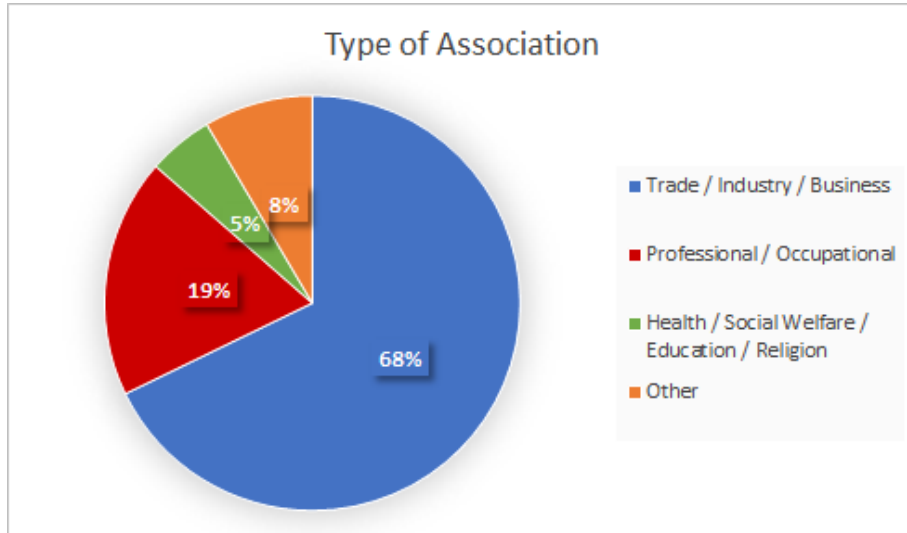
Coro Strandberg, President of Strandberg Consulting, is a nationally recognized thought leader and advisor on corporate sustainability and social purpose to business, Associations, and governments on strategies to accelerate sustainability in the marketplace. She publishes her research on her website at [www.corostrandberg.com](http://www.corostrandberg.com).

#### About Dana Coble

Dana Coble specializes in the development and implementation of organizational ESG strategies. She is partnering with Coro to assist Associations in their efforts to support their membership's sustainability initiatives.

## 2. Type of Association

Respondents were mostly trade, industry, and business Associations at over two-thirds, followed by professional and occupational Associations at 20 percent.

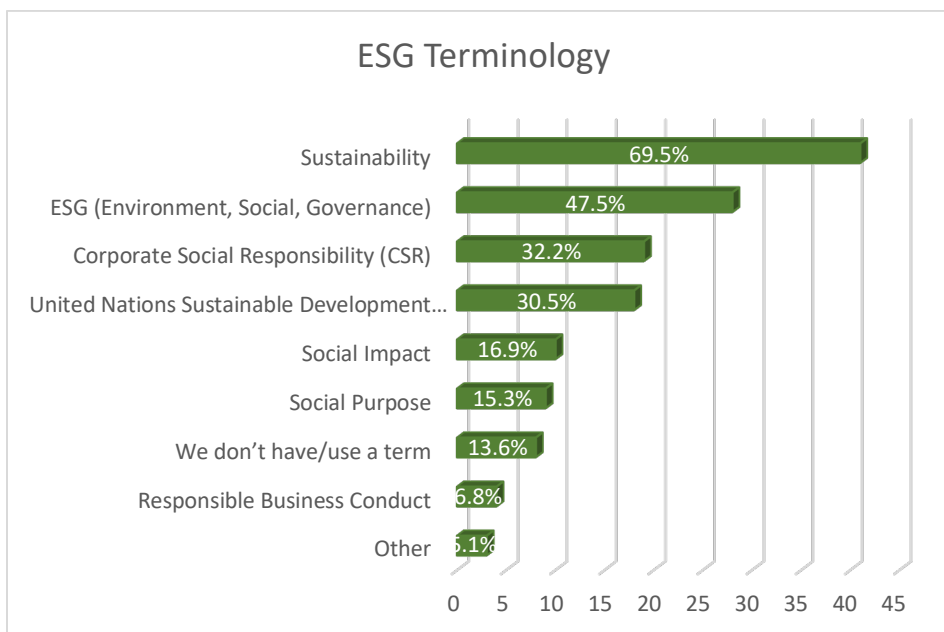


## 3. Terminology

Associations were asked to indicate the terms they use for this general field of practice and to check all that apply.

Most Associations use the language of sustainability to refer to the social and environmental performance of their members (69.5 percent)

The next most common term is ESG at nearly 50 percent (47.5 percent).

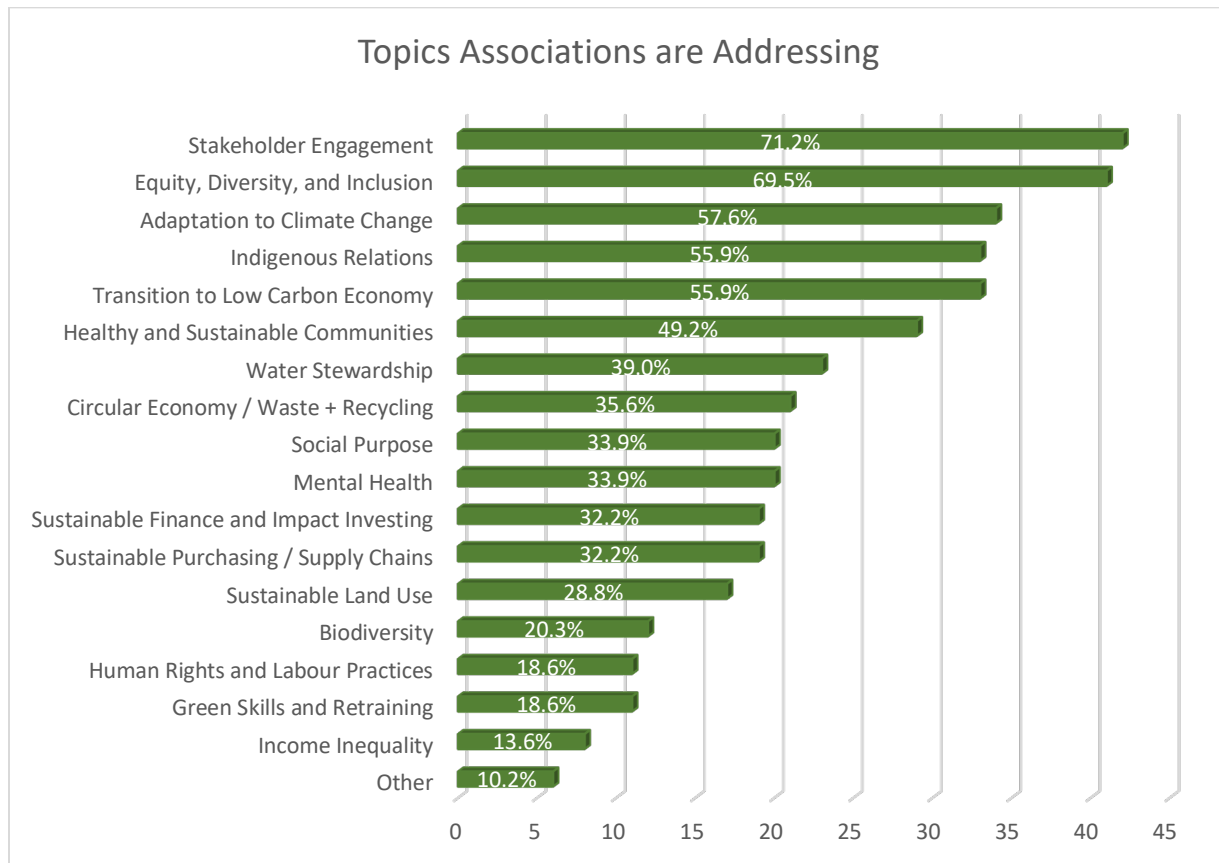


#### 4. ESG Topics

Respondents were given 17 topics and asked to indicate which they were currently addressing. As can be seen from the chart below, over 70 percent are addressing stakeholder engagement. Other top topics are:

- Equity, diversity, and inclusion (69.5 percent)
- Adaptation to climate change (57.6 percent)
- Indigenous relations (55.9 percent)
- Transition to the low carbon economy (55.9 percent)

Notably these environmental and social issues are generic to most organizations and their memberships.



#### 5. ESG Practices

Associations were asked to indicate the ESG practices they currently have in place. The top ESG practice is to bring members together to address ESG issues through collaboration at nearly two-thirds (62.7 percent).

Other top practices include:

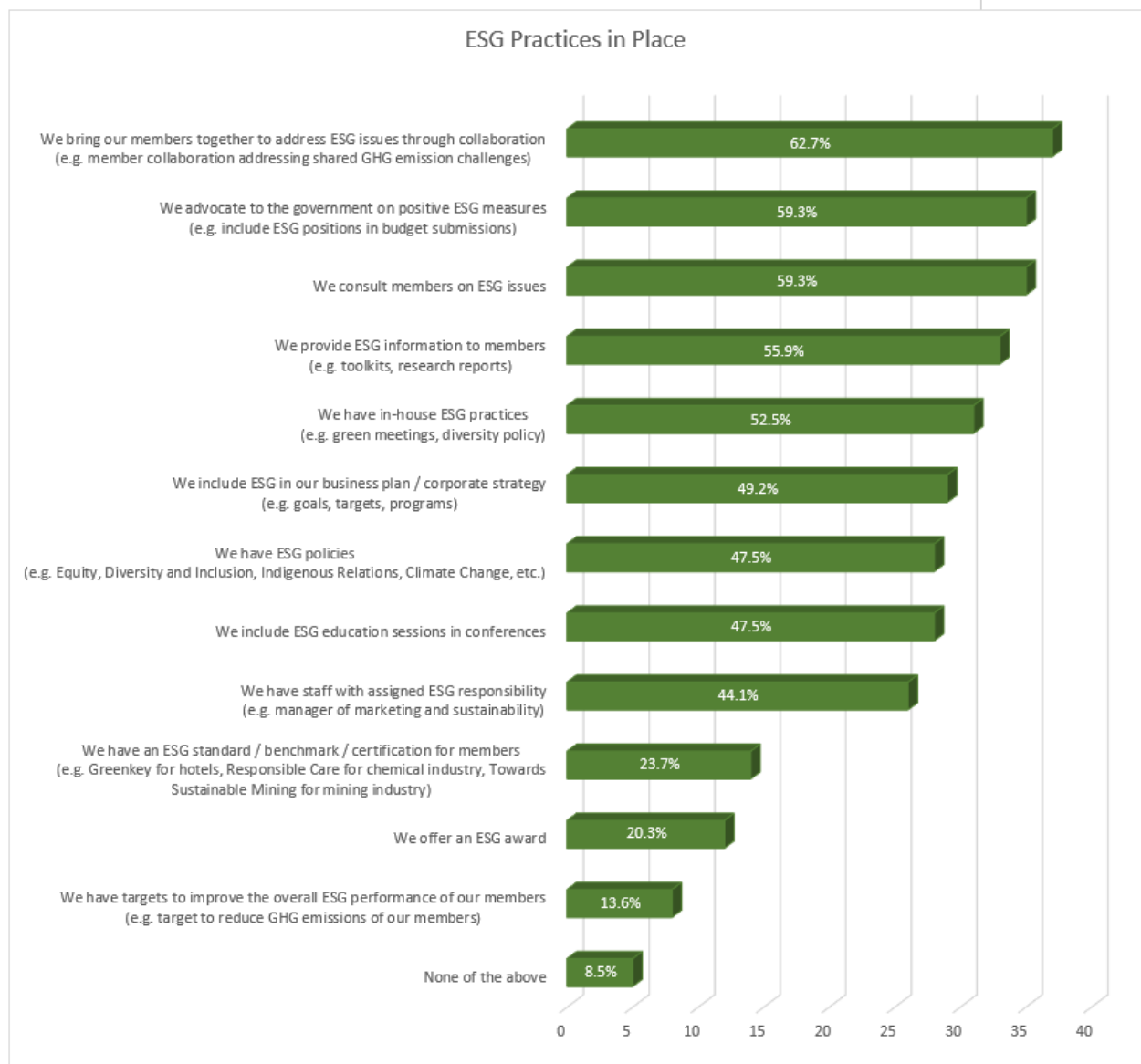
- Government advocacy on positive ESG measures (59.3 percent)
- Consult members on ESG issues (59.3 percent)

- Provide ESG information to members (55.9 percent)
- Have in-house ESG practices (52.5 percent)

These five common practices represent some of the early stages and easiest to accomplish steps on the list. As well convening members and engaging in government advocacy are common roles of industry Associations. It is notable that these common roles are being harnessed to address ESG issues.

Adopting policies, including ESG deliverables in a business plan or corporate strategy and assigning ESG responsibility to one or more staff represent more advanced practices, and a second stage of development.

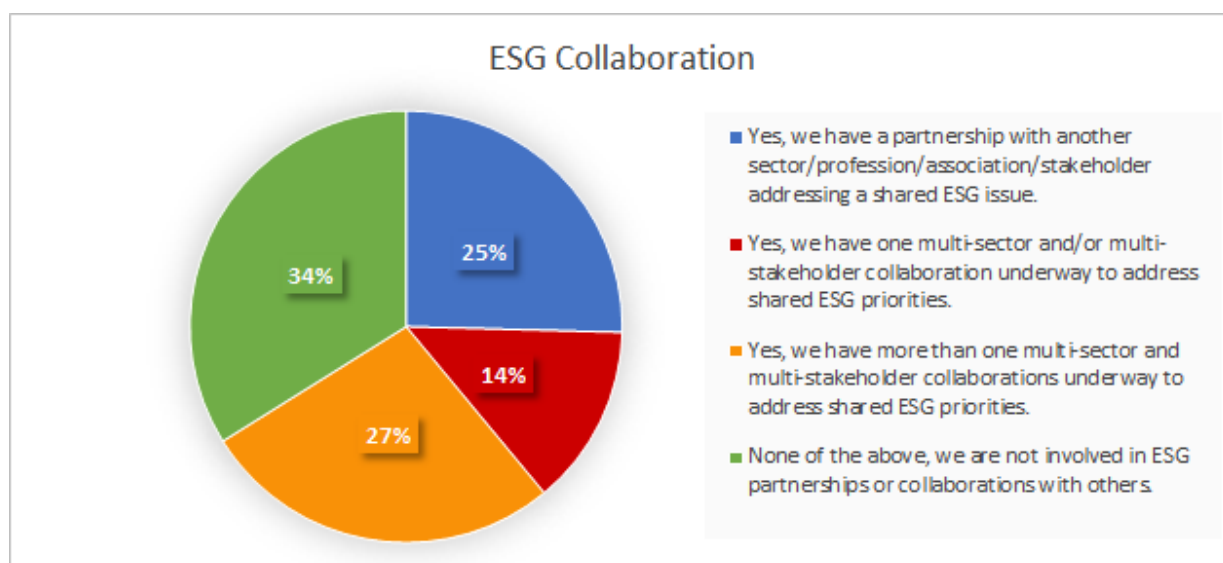
Note that nearly one quarter have an ESG standard, benchmark, or certification for members and nearly 14 percent have targets to improve the overall ESG performance of members. These are among the most advanced practices of all; it would take longer to evolve to this stage.



## 6. ESG Collaboration

As can be seen from the following, respondents were asked if they bring their sector/profession and other sectors/professions/stakeholders together to collaborate on ESG topics.

Nearly two-thirds are involved in ESG partnerships or collaborations with other Associations or stakeholders. Over 40 percent have one or more multi-sector and / or multi-stakeholder collaborations underway to address shared ESG priorities, while one-quarter have one partnership with another sector/profession/ Association/stakeholder addressing a shared ESG issue. One-third are not involved in EGS partnerships or collaborations (33.9 percent). As no sector, profession, or Association that represents them can address ESG issues fully on their own, collaborating and partnering is the route to tackling ESG issues together, while harnessing external expertise, resources, reach, and relationships.

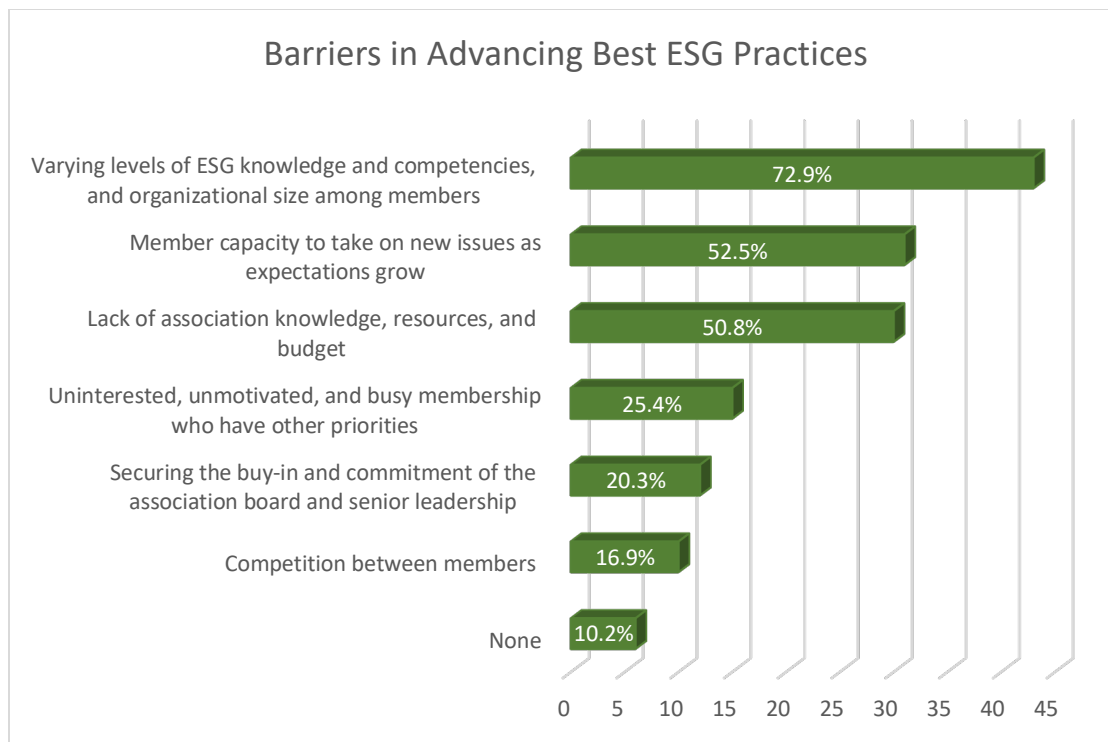


## 7. Barriers

Respondents were asked: “What barriers, if any, does your Association face in advancing best ESG practices among your members? Check all that apply.”

The most frequently mentioned barrier (72.9 percent) is membership diversity: there are varying levels of ESG knowledge and competencies, and organizational size among members. The second barrier is member capacity: about half of the respondents (52.5 percent) believe their members lack capacity to take on new issues as expectations grow. Associations face capacity barriers too: roughly the same (50.8 percent) said the Association lacked knowledge, resources, and budget to advance ESG among their members. Lack of member interest was perceived as a barrier by a few: one quarter (25.4 percent) thought members were uninterested, unmotivated, or too busy. Ten percent don’t face any barriers.

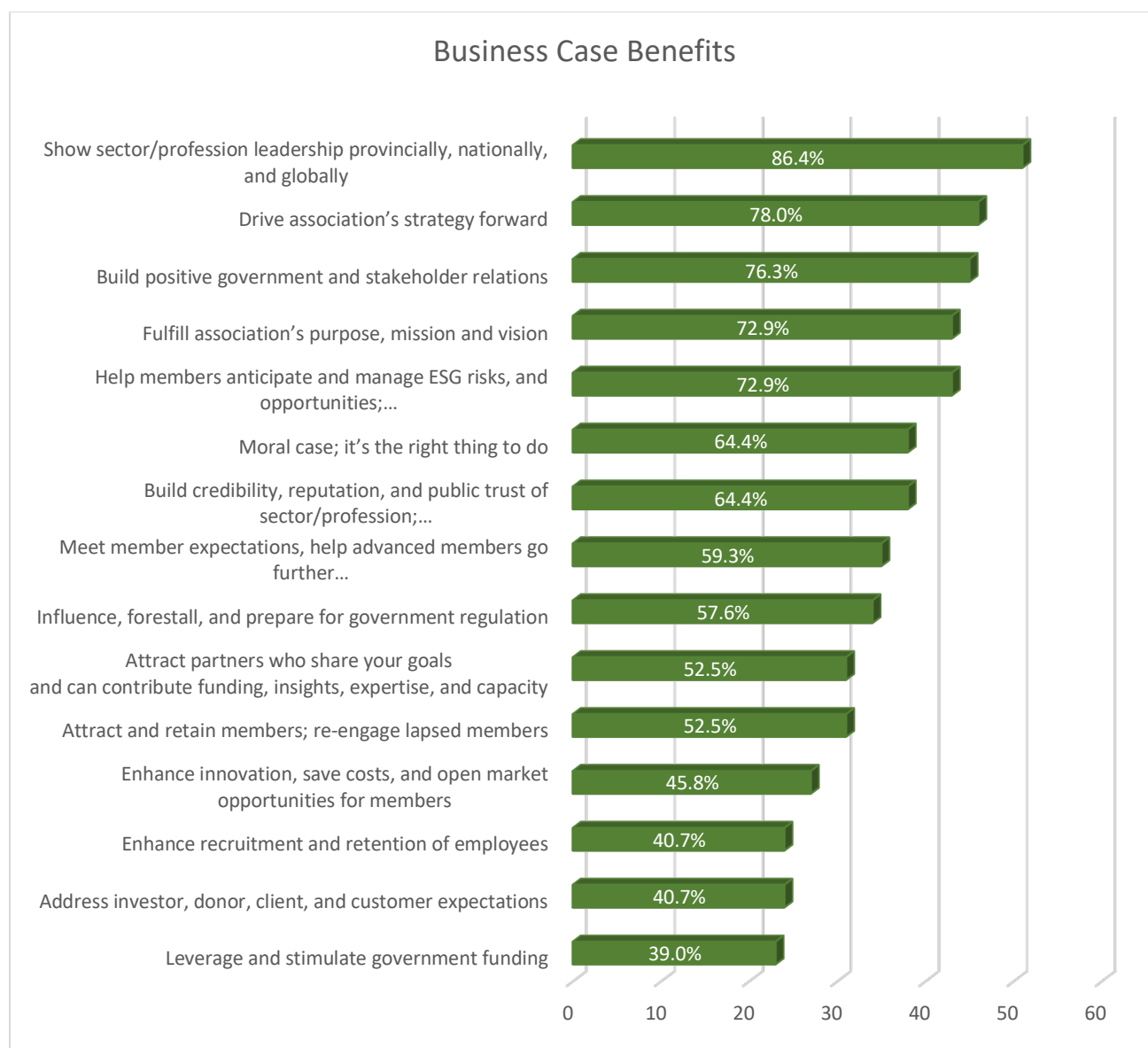




## 8. Business Case Benefits

Associations were asked about the business case benefits of advancing best ESG practices among members. They were provided a list of options and requested to check all that apply.

As the chart reveals, the top benefit by a significant majority (86.4 percent) is to demonstrate sector or professional leadership. Many also believe that ESG advances the Association's strategy (78.0 percent), builds positive government and stakeholder relations (76.3 percent), fulfills the Association's mission (72.9 percent) and helps members anticipate and manage risks and opportunities and build resilience (72.9 percent). Most of the business benefits were ranked high by respondents, except for leveraging government funding, addressing expectations of investors, donors, clients, or customers, or enhancing recruitment and retention of employees. This suggests that customers and employees are not yet demonstrating a keen interest in these topics and are not yet perceived as the drivers of progress.

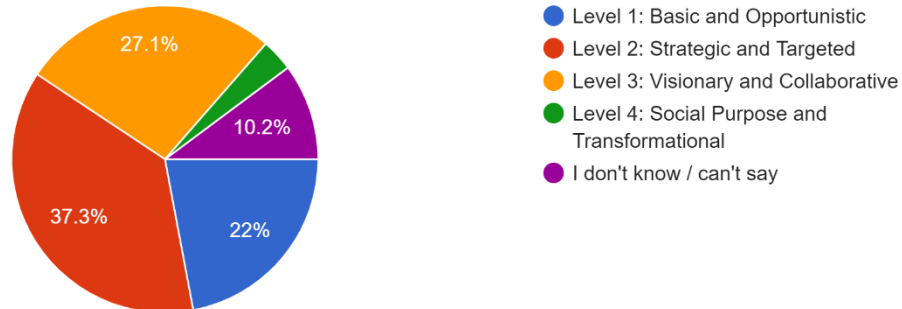


## 9. ESG Continuum

As can be seen in the chart below, survey respondents were asked to rank their Association's stage on the ESG maturity continuum across four levels: 1) basic and opportunistic; 2) strategic and targeted; 3) visionary and collaborative; and 4) social purpose and transformational. While most ranked themselves at "Level 2: Strategic and Targeted" (37.3 percent), the answers mostly fell evenly into one of three categories from Level 1 to Level 3. Only 3 Associations ranked themselves as social purpose and transformational and 10 percent were unsure.

Where is your association on this continuum? Choose one that most represents your current approach.

59 responses

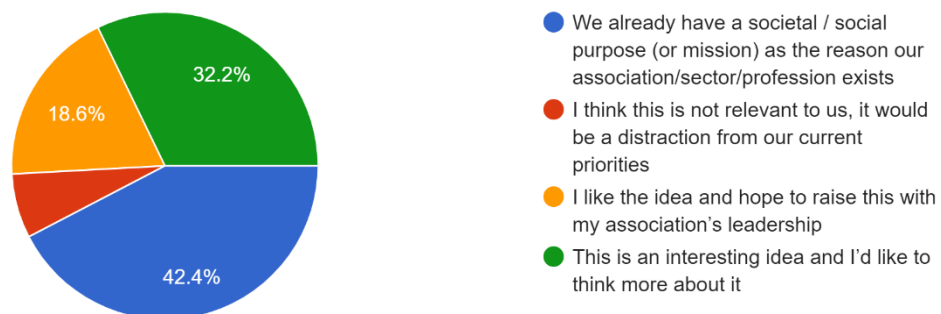


## 10. Social Purpose

Asked for their reaction to the concept of their Association having a societal or social purpose (or mission as the reason it exists, over 40 percent already have a social purpose, and about half think the idea is interesting and they would like to think more about it or raise it with their Association's leadership. Only four respondents thought the concept was not relevant. This shows a high degree of receptivity to, and action on, the Social Purpose Association model in which the Association serves society in addition to serving members.

What is your reaction to the concept of your association/sector/profession having a societal/social purpose (or mission) as the reason it exists? Choose one that best applies.

59 responses



## 11. Sample Social Purpose Statements

Respondents who reported their Association had a social purpose were asked to share it. These are some of the responses:

“To transform our communities and our visitors through the power of travel”

“To advance the mission of our member institutions to transform lives, strengthen communities and find solutions to the most pressing challenges facing our world”

“To achieve a low carbon sustainable economy”

“To make a better, safer more sustainable world”

“To empower Associations to transform the world”

“Together, we mobilize British Columbia to shape a brighter future for all”

“Better Futures for People and Communities”

## 12. Future ESG Actions

Respondents were asked to name one or two ESG actions their Association might pursue over the next year internally and externally. Their responses can be clustered into the following ESG priorities:

1. Member ESG Education and Support
2. Specific Topics (Climate Change and Circular Economy, Indigenous Reconciliation and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion)
3. Purpose and Plans
4. Committees, Collaboration and Advocacy
5. Internal Practices (Green Meetings, Hiring and Internal Education)

### Notable Action

“We are going to implement a Massive-Impact project”

It appears that Associations are focusing on the following priorities for 2022:

- Educating their members on ESG
- Incorporating ESG into their strategic plans
- Helping their members address climate change
- Helping their members address equity, diversity, and inclusion

A few Associations have plans to define a social purpose as the reason they exist as a component of strategic planning in the coming year.

See Appendix A for a detailed list of planned actions.

## Appendix A

### Detailed List of Future ESG Actions

Respondents were asked to name one or two ESG actions their Association might pursue over the next year internally and externally. These are the actions they listed.

#### **Member ESG Education and Support**

- **Education**
  - ESG Day with Members and their senior management to learn and share perspectives/ best practices
  - Share industry best practices/benchmark/initiatives on wider sustainability/climate change issues impacting our industry
  - Educate members on sustainability and bring sustainability to the forefront
  - Provide ESG education
  - Provide resources, webinars, committees, etc. for members of all sizes recognizing that they are at different stages in their ESG journey
  - Hold an ESG workshop or webinar
  - Invite ESG speakers to our events
  - Include ESG topics at upcoming conferences
  - Focus on ESG issues at our periodic member congresses
  - Increase member ESG engagement
- **Tools and Guidance**
  - Explore the development of tools for our members as part of an Association ESG Strategy Roadmap
  - Provide guidance on navigating the various and emerging ESG frameworks and reporting standards
  - Deepen support to members as they work on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- **Baseline**
  - Document the ESG practices of members

#### **Specific Topics**

- **Climate Change and Circular Economy<sup>1</sup>**
  - Industry decarbonization roadmap
  - Determine feasible net zero/significant GHG reduction pathway for sector
  - Set carbon emissions management 2030 & 2050 targets in line with the IPCC, Federal Government, Province, and municipal targets to keep the planet within 1.5 degrees of warming
  - Set 2025 and 2030 targets for GHG reductions

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<sup>1</sup> Here is a Climate Change Guide for Industry and Professional Associations: Climate Change Guide for Industry and Professional Associations: <https://www.bccic.ca/climateguide/>

- Produce a report for our members that will provide educational materials on the requirements of the Paris agreement, a roadmap to net zero emissions and a standard model for the measurement of scope 3 emissions
- Embark on a national pledge campaign for net-zero
- Engage members in a conversation on how they can contribute to solving global issues around climate change and encourage them to pursue collaborations to that effect
- Advance climate action practices and leadership
- Offer webinars or create a working group to help members with Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD)
- Explore fleet certification
- Help members focus on procurement and GHG reduction initiatives
- Launch a major circular economy initiative and tool
- Develop circular economy standards
- Indigenous Reconciliation
  - Deepen our commitment to Indigenous reconciliation
  - Update our Principles on Indigenous education (originally adopted in 2015)
  - Partner with Indigenous business organizations to integrate 'I' within ESG frameworks
  - Co-ordinate an Indigenous network
  - Implement accreditation standards in response to the calls to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)
  - Develop a diversity and inclusion protocol for our sustainability standard
  - Conduct an equity, diversity, and inclusion survey
  - Develop national and provincial equity action plans
  - Adopt a diversity and inclusion policy and strategy
  - Support member anti-black racism work
  - Push for a Black Entrepreneurship Program to be implemented in the industry to increase Black Economic participation in the sector
  - Develop a diversity policy
  - Pursue best practices and leadership on diversity and inclusion amongst our membership
  - Advance operationalization of EDI education, practices, etc.
  - Push for initiatives within the Association to boost equity, diversity and inclusion, specifically on representation among board directors and senior leadership for BIPOC communities
  - Deepen our commitment to inclusion of marginalized groups

## **Purpose and Plans**

- Social Purpose
  - Build social purpose into our mission/mandate and execute
  - Establish a social purpose as part of our vision and mission when it is updated next year
  - Build our next 3-year strategic plan around a clear social purpose
- Strategic Plan, Targets, Policies and Standards
  - Incorporate explicit consideration of ESG issues in development of next strategic plan

- Update our organizational identity statements and strategic plan to reflect ESG
- Incorporate some provisions into mission statement
- Implement the Board-approved commitment in our forthcoming 2022-2024 Strategic Plan to explore the development of an Association ESG Strategy Roadmap
- Further embed ESG into our strategy, risk, and performance management of the organization, including a plan to achieve net zero and actively address escalating issues of social importance (EDI, Mental health, etc.)
- Update existing policies to align with our Association's ESG commitments
- Review investment policies through ESG lens
- Review of core Association values is overdue
- Embed our commitment to working towards a sustainable and inclusive future at home and abroad into our guiding documents and strategic plans
- Formalize our commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and develop programming around them
- Incorporate SDG metrics into our plan
- Get board buy-in to develop an ESG strategy
- Set quantifiable targets by certain years
- Expand our existing sustainability program
- Continue to increase our sustainability standards for members

### **Committees, Collaboration and Advocacy**

- Networks and Committees
  - Introduce a sustainability-focussed sub-committee
  - Start an ESG Network for members
- Collaboration and Advocacy
  - Engage members on collaboration
  - Build out our partnerships with other organizations to access expertise and leadership
  - Partner with a water Association to begin working on water stewardship initiatives
  - Incorporate ESG efforts into the Association's advocacy efforts

### **Internal Practices**

- Green Office Practices
  - Update green office strategy
  - Determine carbon offset contributions based on travel and meeting activity
  - Travels offsets for conferences
  - Implement GHG reductions measures across the organization
  - Develop a greener meetings and travel policy
  - Adopt a zero-waste policy
  - Analysis of paper usage and needs - transitioning to digital
- Hiring Practices
  - Implement training and equitable hiring practices
  - Adopt best practices in our hiring
- In-house ESG Education
  - Hold ESG information sessions with the team

- Learn more about key strategies and methods to improve and enhance our ESG initiatives
- Develop a shared understanding
- Continue to engage with members and external partners to see where we can best support them and take feedback back to senior leadership
- Gain more knowledge of the longer-term benefits and identify how we can proceed



## Appendix B

### List of Respondents

#### NATIONAL

Building Owners and Managers Association of Canada  
Can Manufacturers Institute  
Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance  
Canadian Association of Research Libraries  
Canadian Association of University Business Officers  
Canadian Black Chamber of Commerce  
Canadian Chamber of Commerce  
Canadian Credit Union Association  
Canadian Electricity Association  
Canadian Federation of Library Associations  
Canadian Institute of Planners  
Canadian International Freight Forwarders Association  
Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters  
Canadian Printing Industries Association  
Canadian Professional Sales Association  
Canadian Society of Association Executives  
Canadian Society of Landscape Architects  
Canadian Sphagnum Peat Moss Association  
Canadian Standards Association  
Canadian Wood Pallet and Container Association  
Cannabis Council of Canada  
Cement Association of Canada  
Chartered Professional Accountants Canada  
Chemistry Industry Association of Canada  
Colleges and Institutes Canada  
Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada  
Copper Development Association  
Federation of Canadian Municipalities  
Fertilizer Canada  
Fisheries Council of Canada  
Forest Products Association of Canada  
Global Automakers of Canada  
Governance Professionals of Canada  
Hotel Association of Canada  
Industrial Gas Users Association  
International Ship-owners Alliance Canada  
Mining Association of Canada  
National Farm Animal Care Council  
Paper and Paperboard Packaging Environmental Council  
Real Property Association of Canada  
Retail Council of Canada

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada  
Universities Canada

### **PROVINCIAL**

Alberta Community Co-operative Association  
Association of Consulting Engineering Companies — Ontario  
BC Chamber of Commerce  
BC Real Estate Association  
BC Tech Association  
British Columbia Automobile Association  
Burnaby Board of Trade  
Engineers and Geoscientists British Columbia  
Nova Scotia Association of Realtors  
Ontario Sustainable Energy Association

### **LOCAL/REGIONAL**

Chilliwack and District Real Estate Board  
Tourism Vancouver  
Vancouver Island Real Estate Board

### **INTERNATIONAL**

International Actuarial Association  
International Copper Association  
International Society of Limnology

## Appendix C

### Frameworks

#### Best Practice ESG / SDG Hub for Associations

This is a tool for Associations to develop robust approaches to helping their members improve their social and environmental performance. SDG refers to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which is a set of 17 global goals universally adopted by the United Nations in 2015. For more information on the tool see: The Sustainable and Just Association: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/the-sustainable-and-just-Association/>

#### BEST PRACTICE ESG/SDG HUB FOR ASSOCIATIONS



[www.corostrandberg.com](http://www.corostrandberg.com)



## Association ESG Strategy Roadmap

This is a tool for Associations to assess where they are on a continuum of maturity and impact with regards to ESG practices and programs for their members. It can be used as a gap and opportunity assessment, to identify next steps on the ESG journey. For more information on the tool see: The Sustainable and Just Association: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/the-sustainable-and-just-Association/>

### ASSOCIATION ESG STRATEGY ROADMAP

CONTINUUM OF MATURITY AND IMPACT



PRACTICE AREA	LEVEL 1 Basic & Opportunistic	LEVEL 2 Strategic & Targeted	LEVEL 3 Visionary & Collaborative	LEVEL 4 Social Purpose & Transformational
<b>Operations &amp; Strategy</b>	Includes ESG practices in its operations	Adopts ESG policies and definitions, includes ESG in values and workplan	Adopts ESG vision, goals, targets for members to pursue together	Adopts societal purpose as reason association/sector profession exists. Strategy includes societal goals, targets, and metrics
<b>Knowledge &amp; Capacity</b>	Provides ESG information and education	Provides information on ESG trends and risks	Develops ESG standards, benchmarks, designations, curriculum	Requires members to participate in ESG program/training; develops social purpose resources for members
<b>Member Engagement</b>	Establishes ESG task force and consults members on priorities	Creates ESG working groups for members to research and learn together	Creates ESG working groups to collaborate on ESG issues	Supports members to provide solutions to ESG / society's challenges
<b>Government &amp; Stakeholders</b>	Engages in ESG advocacy with governments	Engages in ESG partnerships with government and other stakeholders	Engages in multi-stakeholder collaborations to tackle ESG issues	Engages other associations to address ESG / society issues together
<b>Staffing</b>	No designated ESG staff	Designated lead ESG staff	ESG designation on leadership team; ESG training provided to staff	CEO is ESG and social purpose leader; all staff have ESG and social purpose responsibilities

## Appendix D

### **Resources**

The Sustainable and Just Association: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/the-sustainable-and-just-Association/>

Sustainable Association Case Studies: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/sustainable-Association-case-studies/>

Sustainable and Just Association Benchmark Tool: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/sustainable-and-just-Association-benchmark/>

An Association's Social Purpose: A Benchmarking Tool: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/an-associations-social-purpose-a-benchmarking-tool/>

Time for Associations to Help Their Members Become Forces for Good (Boardroom article): <https://boardroom.global/time-for-Associations-to-help-members-become-forces-for-good/>

Future of Business in Society Thought Leader Report on Sustainable Business Trends and Best Practices: <https://corostrandberg.com/publication/future-of-business-in-society-global-thought-leader-study/>

Climate Change Guide for Industry and Professional Associations, BC Centre for International Co-operation: <https://www.bccic.ca/climateguide/>

A View Beyond the Horizon: Ten Societal Megatrends Impacting Canadian Organizations, Sectors and Communities to 2030, KPMG: <https://corostrandberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/view-beyond-horizon-ten-megatrends.pdf>