

# ACTING TOGETHER TO PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT

ADM CAPITAL FOUNDATION

RS GROUP

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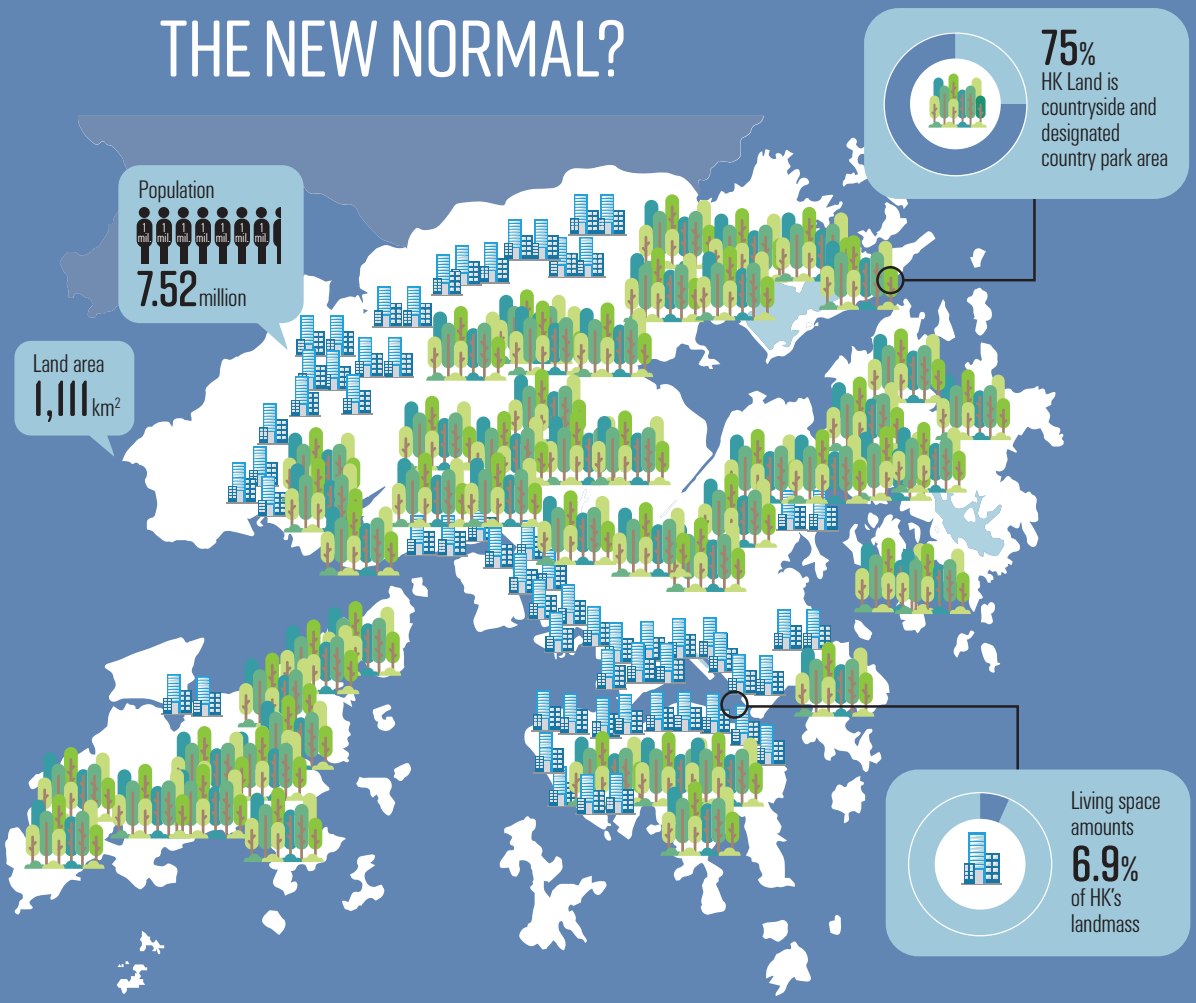
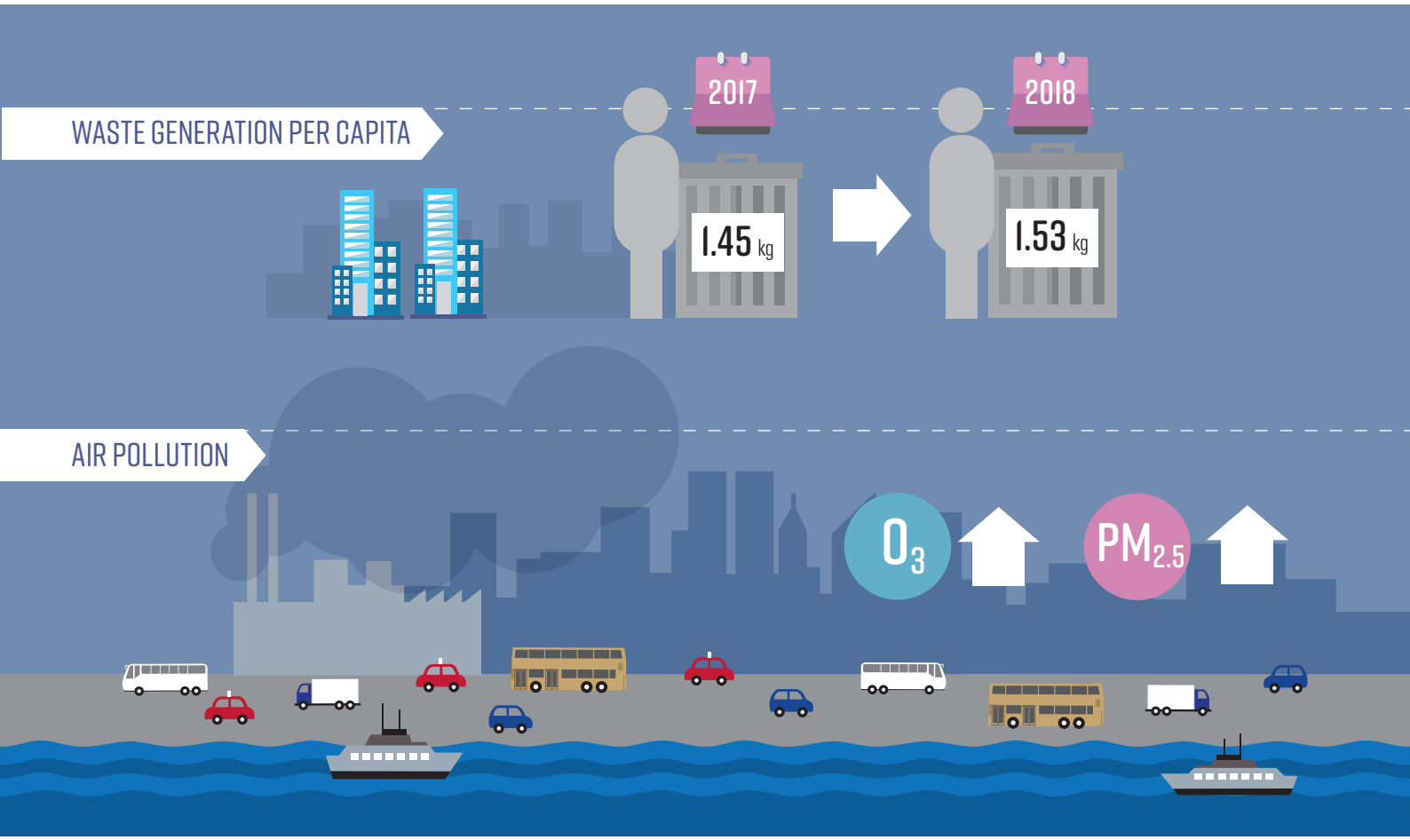
# 1 HONG KONG'S PRESSURED ENVIRONMENT: THE NEW NORMAL?




At approximately 6,800 km², Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. The Territory comprises only 1,111km² of land[1], around 75 percent of which is countryside and designated country parks[2]. This means that the population (7.52 million) is compressed into a living space amounting to about 6.9 percent[3] of Hong Kong's already limited landmass. The problems associated with this are apparent not only regarding the quality of life of its residents, but also in relation to the pressure placed on the Territory's natural resources.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hong Kong faces a severe housing crisis due to the shortage of available land supply for housing development, exacerbated by the increasingly unaffordable and smaller residences available. The problems associated with overcrowded living spaces, inadequate community facilities and waste management issues are expected to worsen with continued population growth, and attention is inevitably turning to the country parks for new developments along with large-scale reclamation from the sea.

Waste management and pollution remain key challenges with landfill sites under tremendous pressure due to increased volumes of daily municipal waste[4] and a lack of infrastructure to deal with the volume of recyclables[5]. Recent figures indicate that waste generation continues to rise with residents disposing of 1.53kg of waste daily in 2018, compared to the 1.45kg in 2017.[6] The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) is looking to develop incineration plants and recycling-business parks to reduce the bulk of waste heading to landfill, but these solutions are not at the scale needed.




Air pollution is another challenge, mainly from motor vehicles, marine vessels and power plants.[7] Hong Kong is often shrouded in a layer of smog and street-level pollution that is damaging to health. Notably, concentrations of particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$[8]) and Ozone have increased in recent years. Despite the Government's newly proposed Air Quality Objectives expected to come into force in 2020, the concentration limits proposed for each air pollutant still lag behind the safety standards set by the WHO.[9]

Climate change is also affecting Hong Kong. According to the Hong Kong Observatory, there has been an average rise of 0.13°C per decade from 1885 to 2018.[10] The rate of increase in average temperature became faster in the latter half of the 20th century, reaching 0.17°C per decade during 1989-2018.

The recurrence of heavy rain events (100mm or more) has doubled in the past 100 years, from every 37 to every 18 years.[11]

Typhoon intensities are also on the rise. In the past six years, three T10[12] typhoons (Box 2) have hit the Territory compared to 12 in the previous 65 years, and predictions are that intensities will increase if climate change is not mitigated.[13] Looking forward, China Water Risk estimate that storm tides in Victoria harbour are estimated to reach 5.87m by 2030, if sea levels rise by the expected 22cm due to thermal expansion and glacial melt.[14]

## CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTING HONG KONG




BOX 1

### THE CLIMATE CRISIS

On a global scale the effects of past and current anthropogenic activities, have led to global warming of 1°C above the pre-industrial level. The ocean is becoming warmer, more acidic and less productive, and we are reportedly facing the sixth mass species extinction.[15] Sea-levels are rising due to melting glaciers and ice sheets, and extreme coastal events are becoming more severe and increasingly common.[16] There is overwhelming evidence of the profound consequences for ecosystems and global populations if an urgent coordinated effort to limit global warming to its lowest possible level isn't prioritized among governments within the foreseeable future.

BOX 2

## TYPHOON MANGKUT (SEPT 2018)

Source: Mirando and Tan (2019)

When category T10, Super Typhoon Mangkhut, hit Hong Kong in 2018, Victoria harbour experienced storm surges of 3.88m. Not only was Mangkhut not a direct hit, but it was not high tide. Had the typhoon hit Hong Kong during high tide and followed a slightly different path, storm tides of up to 5.65m could have submerged parts of Central, reaching as far as the headquarters of HSBC and Standard Chartered. In Kowloon, much of Tsim Sha Tsui, would have been submerged.[17]



The aftermath of Super Typhoon Mangkhut in HK
Photo: Alex Hofford

Considering the need to address these issues and the associated challenges, in March 2019 ADMCF commissioned a survey (Box 3), to gauge people's interest in environmental issues, as well as their experience and appraisals of online petitions especially those on the local website "SupportHK.ORG".

BOX 3

## THE SURVEY

The target population of the survey was Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong citizens aged 18 to 55. The fieldwork was conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI) in June 2019 and comprised a total of 1,005 respondents who answered 15 questions. For more information on the survey please contact info@admcf.org.

# 2 A CITY IN DENIAL?

## 2.1 Pollution and Waste Management, Issues of Most Concern

The survey began by asking what kinds of environmental issues or news, respondents would pay attention to.

Pollution and waste management were the most cited environmental concerns (Figure 1), with 26% and 23% of all respondents indicating them, respectively.

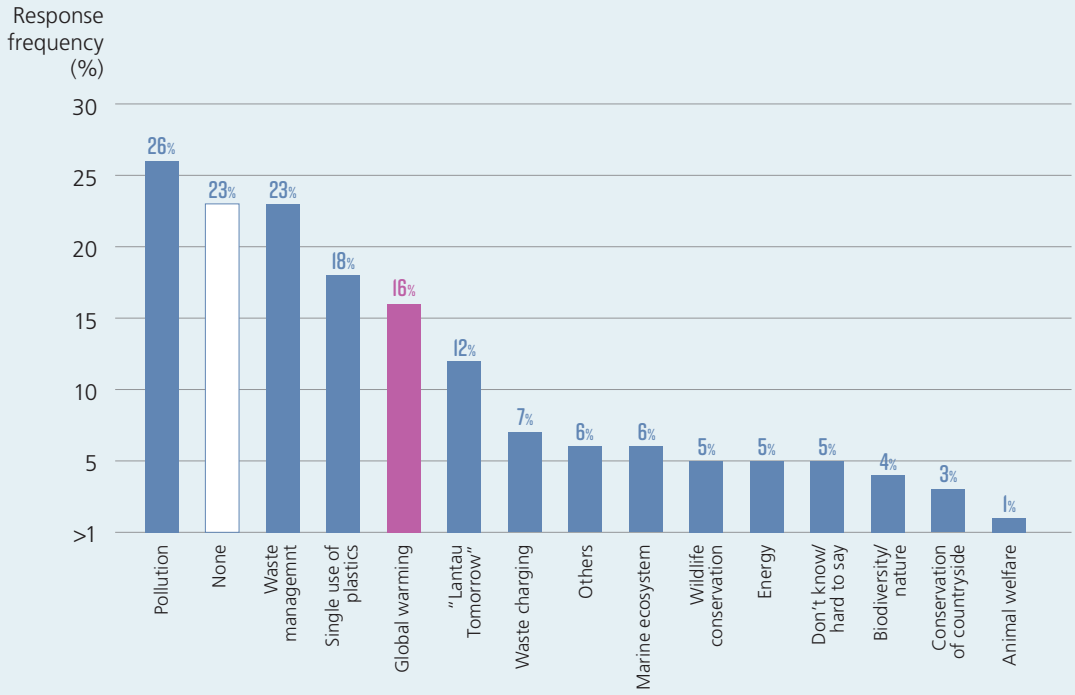
Single use plastics, global warming / climate change and "Lantau Tomorrow" scheme formed the next tier, with 18%, 16% and 12% of respondents respectively showing an interest in these topics.

FIGURE 1

**MOST FREQUENTLY CITED RESPONSES IN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION:**

In general, what environmental issues or news would you pay attention to?

Source: PORI (2019)[1]



Despite 30 years of increasing dialogue on the unfolding and increasingly urgent climate crisis, climate change consistently failed to capture the interest of Hong Kongers across all age groups. Only 16% indicated that global warming was of interest.

Issues cited by less than 10% of respondents included waste charging (7%), marine ecosystems or marine life (6%), wildlife conservation (5%) and energy (5%).

Alarmingly, the second most cited answer from over 1 in 5 respondents was that environmental issues were simply not of interest (Figure 1).

## 2.2 Interest in Environmental Issues Declines with Age

For ages 30 and above, there appeared to be some consistency in the apparent lack of interest in environmental issues (Table 1), with a third of 50-55-year-olds having no interest. This was closely followed by 30-39-year-olds, with 28% of respondents expressing the same sentiment.

TABLE 1

### THE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES OR NEWS RESPONDENTS WOULD PAY ATTENTION TO, BY AGE GROUP

Source: PORI (2019)

| Overall ranking | 18 - 29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-55 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Waste management | Pollution | Pollution | None |
| 2 | "Lantau Tomorrow" | None | Waste management | Waste management |
| 3 | Single-use plastic | Waste management | None | Pollution |
| 4 | Pollution | Single-use plastic | Single-use plastic | Single-use plastic |
| 5 | Climate change/ Global warming | Climate change/ Global warming | Climate change/ Global warming | Climate change/ Global warming |
| 6 | None | "Lantau Tomorrow" | "Lantau Tomorrow" | Others |
| 7 | Waste charging | Conservation of wildlife | Waste charging | Waste charging |
| 8 | Conservation of wildlife, e.g. elephant, rhino, pangolin | Marine ecosystem/ Marine life | Others | Marine ecosystem/ Marine life |
| 9 | Biodiversity/ Nature | Others | Energy | "Lantau Tomorrow" |
| 10 | Marine ecosystem/ Marine life | Waste charging | Marine ecosystem/ Marine life | Energy |

Among the 18-29 age group the three most cited issues of interest were, waste management (22%), "Lantau Tomorrow" scheme (21%) and climate change (18%). Nevertheless 'no interest' was also frequently cited (17%).

## 2.3 Traditional News Media Remains Relevant

With respect to the information channels respondents would use to search for environmental issues, "traditional news media such as TV, radio, newspaper" topped the list, by two-thirds (66%) of the sample. Following at a distance were "internet" and "social media such as Facebook and Instagram", as indicated by 50% and 34% respectively.

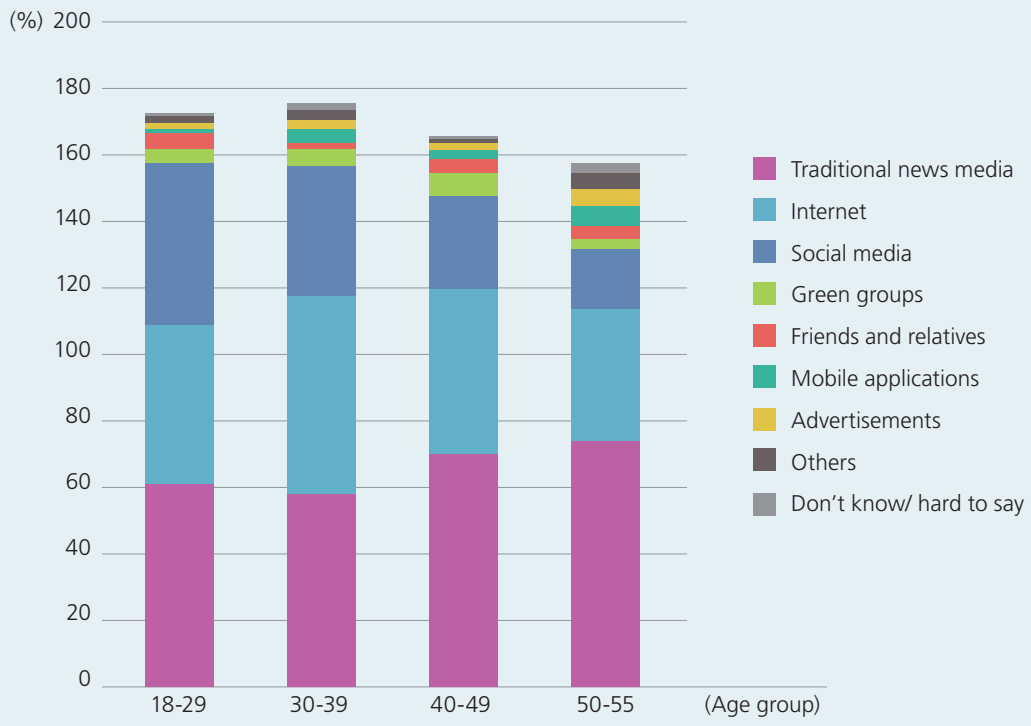
Analysis shows that among those aged 50-55, as many as 74% would rely on traditional news media (Figure 2) with only 18% on social media. Of the age group 18-29, nearly 1 in 2 used social media to obtain environmental news, but still nearly 1 in 3 used traditional news media.

FIGURE 2

RESPONSES, BY AGE GROUP, IN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION:

What channels would you search for/obtain information about these environmental issues? (multiple answers allowed)

Source: PORI (2019)



# 3 MAKING CHANGE: USING ONLINE PETITIONS AS A SOURCE OF ACTIVISM

Online petitions have grown as a medium for collective action, likely facilitated by social media and internet accessibility. With the rise of platforms such as Avaaz and Change.org, the last decade has seen an increase in the use of online petitions as a means of seeking redress directly from governments and businesses. These petitions cover political, environmental and social concerns, and there has been a number of success stories globally.[18]

Since its launch in 2013 to the end of 2018, Hong Kong's first environment focused petition platform 'SupportHK' hosted 137 petitions – on average 27 petitions per year. According to the site, urban planning is the most popular concern representing 60% of total petitions, with 'opposition to the East Lantau Metropolis' obtaining the largest number of signatures (7,947). Since 2013, there have been 15 claimed victories with 16,987 signatures. These have included amongst others: granting the State Theatre (built in 1952) 'listed' building status; saving Cardogan Garden in Kennedy Town from being demolished; and the Macau government changing policy and granting permission for volunteers to care for the 532 homeless and injured greyhounds from the closed Macau Canidrome.



The survey respondents were however in large part unaware of online petitions as a means of expressing concerns and making change. Just over one quarter had participated in an online petition, with nearly half of these focusing on "political or democracy issues". Of these, only 29% and 10% respectively had taken part in petitions related to environment/conservation issues and animal welfare.  Of these, respondents on average had participated in over three such petitions in the last three years.

Of those who had no experience of online petitions (72%), one quarter cited lack of awareness and one fifth cited lack of time, as the reason for not participating. Only 23% of respondents claimed they were aware of the SupportHK platform. For the younger generation, lack of awareness (39%) was the predominant reason.

Nearly two-thirds of all respondents thought the impact of ultimately "solving" environmental problems through online petitions was small. Moreover, just one in seven believed the impact would be significant.

# 4 DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM COMES LATE TO HONG KONG

Hong Kongers' apparent apathy towards our growing environmental crises is likely rooted in many issues – not least an education system that does little to garner interest over more traditional academic subjects.

It is unsurprising that pollution and waste management were the survey respondents' most cited concerns, as both issues are apparent in day-to-day life. Air pollution is visible and polluted days are common, with citizens frequently warned of poor air quality by the government. Hong Kong's waste problems have also long been publicized, while the city's highly visible army of informal recyclers remind us daily of the government's limited response to the issue[19].

An apparent lack of interest in one of the most significant environmental threats globally – climate change – is the most alarming response. Until recently Hong Kongers have been relatively unaffected directly by climate impacts, which may explain perceptions. Hong Kong citizens may also feel a sense of helplessness in the face of such a seemingly insurmountable environmental challenge.

The declining interest in environmental issues with age further highlights the challenge of engaging citizens across all age groups to change behaviours that drive environmental problems.

Online petition platforms such as SupportHK have a role to play in raising awareness by creating a "goal specific" platform for people to connect over local environmental challenges and solutions.  Between 2013 and 2018, SupportHK obtained over 114,000 signatures, the majority of which were from people living in Hong Kong, despite only 23% of survey respondents hearing of the platform.

Petition platforms serve multiple purposes and can be effective in raising awareness of environmental issues, and in connecting communities and mobilizing supporters, whether the petition itself changes the minds of law and policy makers or not. Such online technology makes decision-makers and policy-makers increasingly accessible to everyone. By coupling online petitions with other lobbying tactics such as media campaigns, movements can gain momentum and the ability to reach more supporters than ever.

"Digital activism" has transformed the way we act, protest, donate and share information among many platforms worldwide. Smartphones and the internet can now mobilize and connect more supporters and potential supporters than ever before and for a wide range of causes.

Urgently, we must build momentum in the community around addressing environmental challenges. We must use the tools available to us to foster inclusivity and action, bringing together the corporate sector, civil society, government and communities.  As an individual this challenge may seem daunting, but a petition in hand can be a first and simple step to change.

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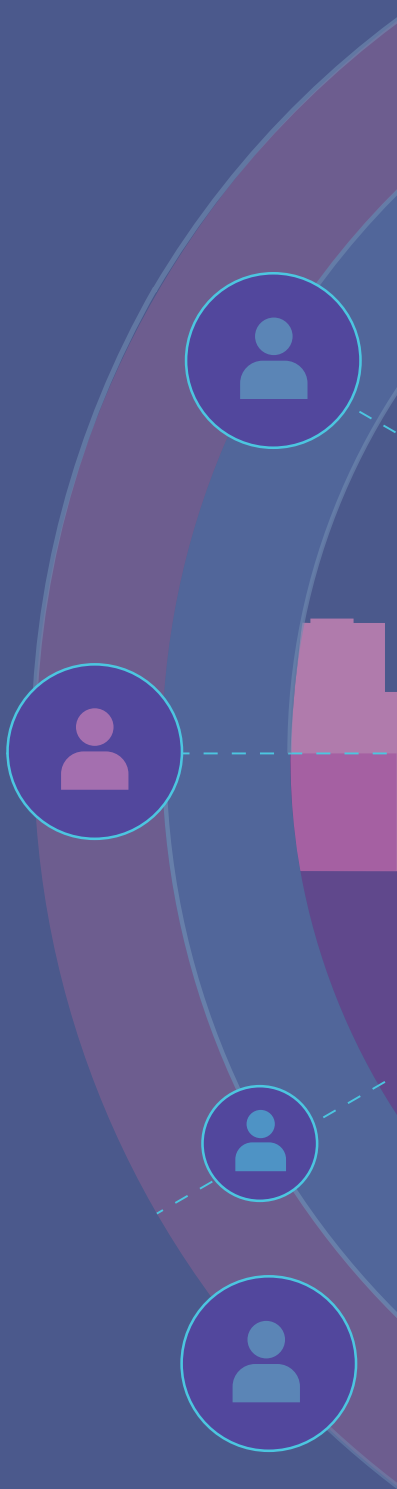

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