

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINANCIAL SECURITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR



Renars Felcis¹, Assistant Professor / PhD; **Elgars Felcis**², Scientific Assistant/MA

^{1, 2}University of Latvia

Abstract. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on adaptation is demonstrating that the most vulnerable people are already disproportionately affected by the climate breakdown (IPCC, 2022: 8-9). The ongoing climate and environmental breakdown, the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian war in Ukraine in early 2022 are creating a convergence of crises with grave concerns about its future unfolding and impacts on vulnerable groups. Inability to afford environmentally friendly actions might leave certain groups of society in a vicious circle. Based on quantitative social survey data from 2020 and 2021 within the Latvian Council of Science funded project 'Ready for change? Sustainable management of common natural resources', this paper demonstrates correlations between the financial security of people and environmental behaviour in Latvia. Financial security is measured by status of debt obligations and the length of time people can provide for themselves in case of the loss of their current income sources. We conclude that the overall financial security has significantly reduced from 2020 to 2021, while at the same time environmentally oriented behaviours have remained stagnant or less widespread. As a result of cluster analysis, three groups of financial security are distinguished and further analysis demonstrates that high income alone is an insufficient motivator for diverse environmental behaviour. Affluent people tend to do the simplest steps more often, like trying to sort their waste for recycling, while many with lower incomes and in rural areas are capable of more actions, with the overall lower consumption levels. Only thinking and acting beyond the 'business-as-usual' narrative can enable transformative actions to change the structural processes that keep causing the side-effects of our development.

Keywords: financial security, environmental behaviour, regional development, degrowth, resilience.

JEL code: Q5

Introduction

'When long-established systems break down, they often do so in many different ways at the same time. Our economy and society depend on a lot of things working right, all the time: cheap and reliable flows of energy, a stable climate, fertile soils, abundant fresh water, productive oceans, an intact, diverse ecology, high levels of employment and a cohesive culture. These are all in trouble.' (Fleming, 2016: 3)

Spring 2022 was expected by many to bring financial and health stability contrary to the previous turbulent years. The war in Ukraine has made the matters worse, especially in Central and Eastern Europe with direct historical links and borders with Russia. Probably, systems thinkers paying attention to the multiple unsustainable patterns of socio-economic development were less surprised by such a turn of events. Military conflicts predominantly appear as symptoms; in situations with heightened socio-economic tensions in a country or region. When too much is 'in trouble', as David Fleming has analysed and warned (2016). Both the COVID-19 pandemic (Spash, 2020) and the Russia-Ukraine war are catalysts for the breakdown of our long-established systems. 'The research team had posed the questions about the awareness of change and readiness for change already in 2019 application for the currently implemented research project 'Ready for change? Sustainable management of common natural resources' (further, RfC). The change we meant was primarily about the societal response to the ongoing environmental breakdown' (Felcis & Felcis, 2021). However, every consecutive year since 2019 has only brought more approval to the initial thesis of the vulnerability of the current times and our life in an era of environmental breakdown that is a direct outcome of the modern scientific and technological process – side-effects of our development (Beck, 2009).

The ever-rising grave concerns are confirmed in the previous IPCC reports (IPCC 2018, 2019, 2021) and the report in February 2022, stating that the 'rise in weather and climate extremes has led to some

1 renars.felcis@lu.lv

2 elgars.felcis@lu.lv

irreversible impacts as natural and human systems are pushed beyond their ability to adapt [...], the extent and magnitude of climate change impacts are larger than estimated in previous assessments' (IPCC, 2022: 8-9) and 'climate change impacts and risks are becoming increasingly complex and more difficult to manage. Multiple climate hazards will occur simultaneously, and multiple climatic and non-climatic risks will interact, resulting in compounding overall risk and risks cascading across sectors and regions' (IPCC, 2022: 19). Compounding or converging risks include further transgression of planetary boundaries (Steffen *et al.*, 2015a), biodiversity loss, resource and overall environmental degradation (Steffen *et al.*, 2015b; Ripple *et al.*, 2017; Ceballos *et al.*, 2017; Hickel, 2020; IPBES, 2019; Dasgupta, 2021).

Within this wider disturbing context, the focus of this article is on personal financial security and its importance on environmental behaviour. Currently many are expecting environmentally friendly transformations to happen, but often with limited understanding of what enables or hinders those. The financial prosperity on a national level is indeed related to more environmental awareness and action (for example, the leadership of the EU), but raises the question of whether humans are capable of some responsible action only when the footprint is grossly in excess of the planetary carrying capacity on a national level (O'Neill, 2019) or private level. In our research regarding personal actions, we are calling it the risk of 'sustainability for wealthy'. For example, a lump-sum subsidy for electric vehicles is a support mechanism for only those able to afford the highly-priced electric cars; in Latvia, there are much fewer such households than, for example, in Norway.

It is very important to further explore these interlinkages to understand the capacity for environmental behaviour in the likely future circumstances of convergence of crises. A concerning example is the comparison of mass media coverage that received previous IPCC reports (2018, 2019, 2021) and the recent one (IPCC, 2022) that was published on the third day of the Russia-Ukraine war and was nowhere in the headlines. Immediate crisis always trumps a more distant crisis and environmental breakdown is both current and at the same time more distant than war or an economic recession.

Regarding the broader economic framework within which we carry out our analysis, as in previous publications, we must emphasize that 'human progress side-effects cannot be solved while remaining in the same hegemonic paradigm of progress, modernity and development based on neo-classical economics, neoliberal capitalism, free market, the panacea of technological solutions, and infinite growth. There are almost no countries in the world, where GDP growth would not be among the primary country development target indicators' (Felcis & Felcis, 2021). Popular alternatives like 'Green economy', 'Green growth', or 'Green new deal' offer some changes, but are not challenging the essential aspects of such hegemony (Spash, 2012) and are not decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation (Fletcher & Rammelt, 2016; Parrique *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, overall economic growth without redistributed income and capital inequalities (Pikkety, 2014; Pikkety, 2020; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009) is socially and environmentally undesirable. '[Degrowth] calls for the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective. Beyond that, degrowth signifies also a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. 'Sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care' and the 'commons' are primary significations of what this society might look like' (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2014: 3). The problems present at all scales of human societies are interlinked and long-term environmentally friendly behaviour can be achieved only if development actors will contribute to mindset shifts away from the paradigm hegemony (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2014; Gopel, 2016).

All these trends reveal systemic issues of economic systems, which might constrain certain economic and ecological behaviour. In recent studies, Welch, Swaffield and Evans (2021) contribute with empirical

evidence on the concept of 'responsibilisation of the consumer' developed in critical accounts of sustainable consumption. In other words, it is the reduction of systemic issues (Jaeger, 2018) to the individualised behavioural choices.

We are proposing the idea that material conditions conceptualized as financial security might interrelate with individualized practices of sustainable consumption conceptualized as certain examples of environmental behaviours. Therefore, the article aims to understand the role of financial security in environmental behaviour to provide structural guidelines to enable further environmental actions.

Materials and methods

This paper is based primarily on the quantitative data gathered during the RfC project in late 2020 and 2021 in two surveys (further, RfC survey and RfC survey data in research results section). Some trends in attitudes are compared with previous primary data from Human Development Report (Felcis & Felcis, 2017) and ISSP research topics on the environment in 2000 and 2010 (ISSP Research Group, 2003; ISSP Research Group, 2012), namely, adapted scale of environmentally oriented activities.

Two waves of RfC surveys were conducted in November 2020 and November 2021 by social and market research agency Latvijas Fakti. Telephone interviews with random digit dialling sample were used in both waves. 1020 and 1015 completed valid interviews with overall response rates 28% and 25% were gathered respectively in 2020 and 2021.

Financial security can be operationalized directly or by indirect conditions or burdens that enable or disable financial security. Variables that can be operationalized as direct financial security are monthly **income** per person in a household (further – **income**) and assessment of how long a person could **provide** for himself/herself if they would suddenly lose income (further – **provision assessment**). Provision assessment was measured on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 is 'could not provide for myself at all', 2 – 'could provide for myself a few months', 3 – 'could provide for myself up to a year', 4 – 'could provide for myself for more than a year'. Indirect conditions that enable or disable financial security are **employment status** and **education** level. **Debt obligations** can be included in the model as a burden. In the end, the model is tested for correlations with the type of settlement or region of place of residence. In addition to tests for statistical significance (chi-square tests), cluster analysis is applied in this paper (Hair et al., 2014).

Quantitative data is supplemented with ongoing participatory action research to explore diverse ways how awareness and readiness for environmental breakdown related changes manifest themselves in Latvian circumstances. That allows for broader interpretation and contextualisation of the quantitative data. Essentials for action-oriented, transformations, and climate change research by the collective effort of almost 50 scientists (Fazey *et al.*, 2018) are manifested throughout our research. They are based on the need for 'massive upscaling of research that can rapidly enhance learning about transformations', and the scientists conclude that 'the most critical question for climate research is no longer about the problem, but about how to facilitate the transformative changes necessary to avoid catastrophic climate-induced change' (Fazey *et al.*, 2018: 55).

Research results and discussion

Results of quantitative studies conducted in the years 2020 and 2021 demonstrate statistically significant differences in **provision assessment** – 28% could not provide for themselves at all in the case of a sudden loss of income in late 2021 in comparison to 16% only a year before. The number of people who could provide for themselves for longer periods – up to a year and more than a year – has reduced from one third (32% in 2020) to a quarter (24% in 2021). The socioeconomic hardships of the second year

of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be among the key causes for the reduction in people's provision assessment.

Year 2020	16	52	21	11
Year 2021	28	47	16	8

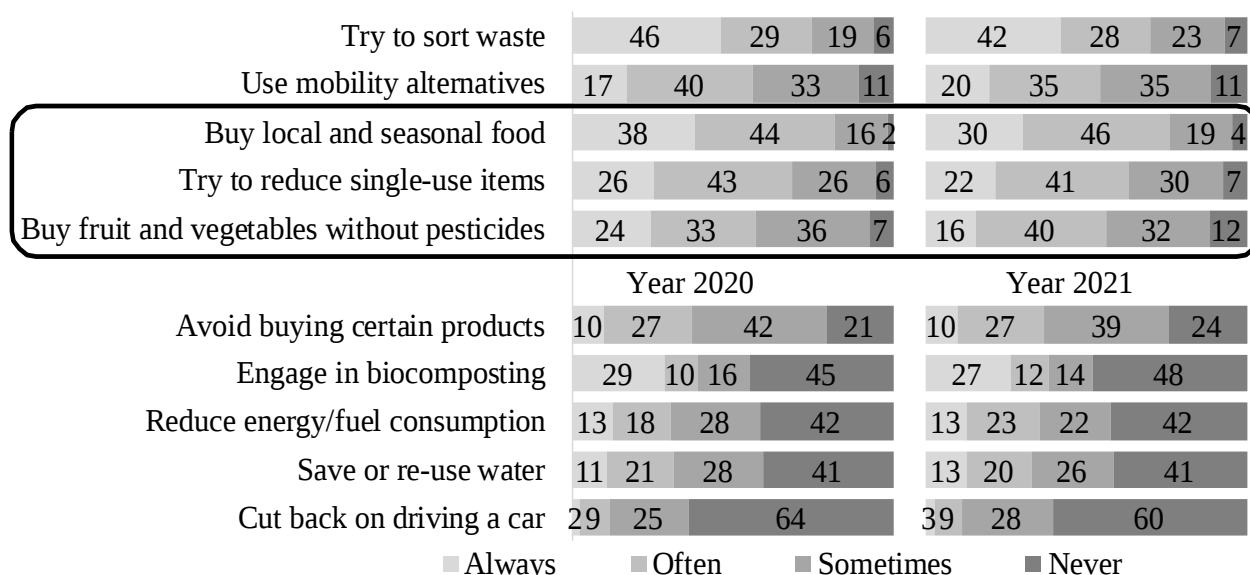
- Could not provide for myself at all
- Could provide for myself up to a year
- Could provide for myself a few months
- Could provide for myself for more than a year

Source: RfC survey data. Weighted data. Base: n=1020 (exact answers depicted, year 2020), n=1015 (exact answers depicted, year 2021)

Fig. 1. **Provision assessment among Latvia population, % of respondents**

At the same time, we can observe some reduction in the debt obligations. 38% of respondents have any debt obligations in the survey sample in 2020, but only 29% in 2021. According to the official data on debt from the Latvian Credit Information Bureau (KIB), at the beginning of 2022, there are 683 000 Latvian inhabitants with active borrowing contracts (KIB, 2022). That is 36% of the Latvian official population in January 2022, which means that they are either underrepresented in our sample and/or underreporting their obligations. KIB confirms our survey results that fewer people are borrowing than in 2020, but note that the borrowing volumes have risen.

Previous research on environmental behaviour trends has described a decrease in all actions except waste sorting/recycling from 2010 to 2017 (Felcis & Felcis, 2017: 99-101). However, 2020 data have shown improvements in all actions. The trends are rather stagnant in 2021, but three out of ten behaviour patterns have become less widespread and these changes are statistically significant from the year 2020 to 2021 – buying local and seasonal food, fruit and vegetables without pesticides and trying to reduce single-use items (see Figure 2.).



Source: RfC survey data. Weighted data. Base: n=1020 (exact answers depicted, year 2020), n=1015 (exact answers depicted, year 2021)

Fig. 2. **Frequency of environmentally oriented activities in 2020 and 2021, % of respondents**

Trends in environmentally oriented activities allows to conduct further analysis for last RfC survey wave in 2021. Further analysis of correlations shows that there is a moderately strong statistically significant

correlation between income and provision assessment (Spearman correlation coefficient .380, $p < .01$). At the same time, there is not a direct correlation between income, provision assessment, and debt obligations status. On one hand, there is a higher proportion of people with higher incomes among those with debt, but on the other hand, there is no correlation between debt with provision assessment.

It is therefore legitimate to group respondents according to their answers to income and provision assessment questions to form more typical groups and to validate whether combinations of income and provision assessment relationships further on are related to the regularity of environmental behaviour.

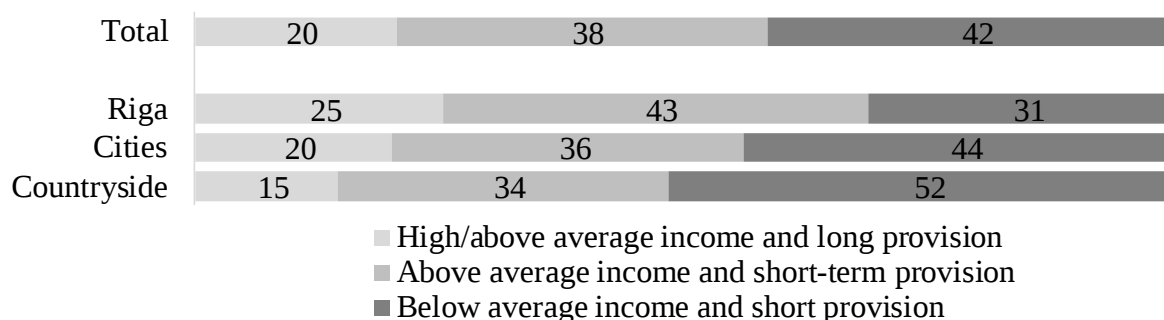
Two-step cluster analysis combining hierarchical and non-hierarchical cluster analysis overestimates the impact of provision assessment in the model, therefore hierarchical cluster analysis for a range of 2 to 4 solutions (as suggested by two-step cluster analysis) was performed using Ward's method as cluster method and by Squared Euclidean distance as measure interval (standardizing income and provision assessment scales in the range from 0 to 1).

Three distinct groups of people by **financial security** can be distinguished.

- 1) Income 451eur or above, but cannot provide at all or only for a few months (n=283 or 38% of population, base n=696 valid answers, weighted percentage, unweighted counts).
- 2) Income 451eur or above (with few exceptions below and with particularly high proportions in income group 701 or above) and can provide for themselves till a year or more (n=139 or 20% of population, base n=696 valid answers, weighted percentage, unweighted counts).
- 3) Income 450eur or less and mostly cannot provide at all or only for a few months (n=274 or 42% of population, base n=696 valid answers, weighted percentage, unweighted counts).

For the sake of analysis, we can label these three groups further as:

- 1) above average income and short-term provision;
- 2) high/above average income and long-term provision;
- 3) below average income and short-term provision.



Source: RfC survey data. Weighted data. Base: n=1015 (exact answers depicted, year 2021)

Fig. 3. Financial security groups by place of residence, % of respondents

The regional dimension is important in the composition of financial security groups. There are higher proportions of people with income below average and short-term provision living in the countryside (52%) in comparison with only 31% in Riga. However, as indicated below, that does not lead to lower levels of environmental behaviour.

Table 1

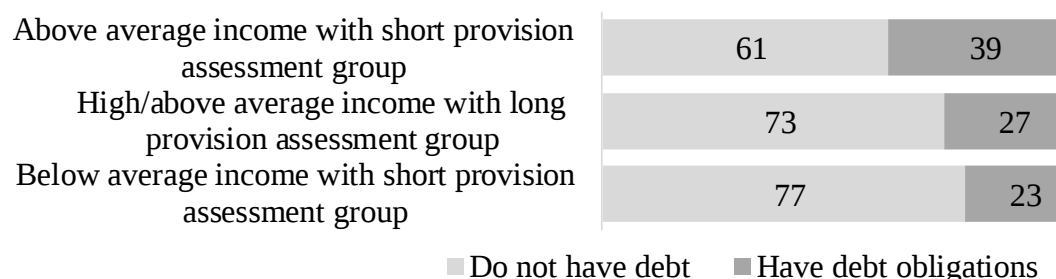
Composition of income and provision assessment in financial security groups, weighted data (RfC survey data, 2021), n=696

	Above average income and short-term provision	High/above average income and long provision	Below average income and short provision
Below EUR 200	0%	0%	16%
EUR 201 - 300	0%	0%	32%
EUR 301 - 400	0%	1%	41%
EUR 401 - 450	0%	2%	10%
EUR 451 - 500	30%	18%	0%
EUR 501 - 600	19%	18%	0%
EUR 601 - 700	18%	9%	0%
EUR 701 and more	32%	51%	0%
Could not provide for myself at all	24%	0%	43%
Could provide for myself a few months	76%	0%	47%
Could provide for myself up to a year	0%	62%	9%
Could provide for myself for more than a year	0%	38%	1%

Consecutively in the analysis of financial security and environmental behaviour indirect conditions or burdens are included that enable or disable financial security, namely: **employment status, education level, and debt obligations**. Without clustering respondents this time, it is worth analysing the impact of employment status and education level on financial security. Employment status is grouped in groups by type of job duties and financial insecurity inclination – "manager; self-employed, entrepreneur, farmer; specialist" (1st group), "physical worker" (2nd group), and "non-employed (student, senior, currently unemployed)" (3rd group).

There are statistically significant differences between higher education levels and higher income as well as employment status as such and high income. Furthermore, simple job workers have a proportionally high risk of short provision assessment (statistical significance $p < .05$ by chi-square test).

As described earlier, 29% of the population have debt obligations. They might be an explanatory factor that distinguishes 'above average income with short-term provision group' from 'above average or high income with long-term provision group'. The Chi-square test suggests that there is a statistically significant difference between the fact of debt obligations and financial security measurement groups.



Source: RfC survey data. Weighted data. Base: n=1015 (exact answers depicted, year 2021)

Fig. 4. Correlation between debt obligations and financial security groups, % of respondents

Independent Samples Test with t-test for equality of means among 10 items of environmental behaviour regularity four-point scale from 'never' to 'always' was performed to compare three groups from financial security measurement. Additionally, a chi-square test for full distribution of answers on a four-point scale of environmental behaviour regularity was performed.

Results suggest that in five out of ten environmental behaviour questions there are predominantly statistically significant differences among financial security measurement groups. At the same time only in three out of ten, there are no statistically significant differences.

People with high/above average income and long provision assessment are more frequently engaging in the following environmental behaviours in comparison with people with income above average, but short-term provision assessment:

- trying to sort waste (54% of them practice it always);
- buying local or seasonal food (38% always);
- more frequently trying to reduce single-use items (25% always);
- more frequently practicing bio-composting (29% always, see Figure 5).

However, people with income below average and a rather short provision assessment are relatively more engaged in three environmental behaviours:

- more frequently using environmentally friendly mobility alternatives (26% of them practice it always);
- more frequently practicing bio-composting (33% always);
- more frequently choosing to save or re-use the water (19% always, see Figure 4).

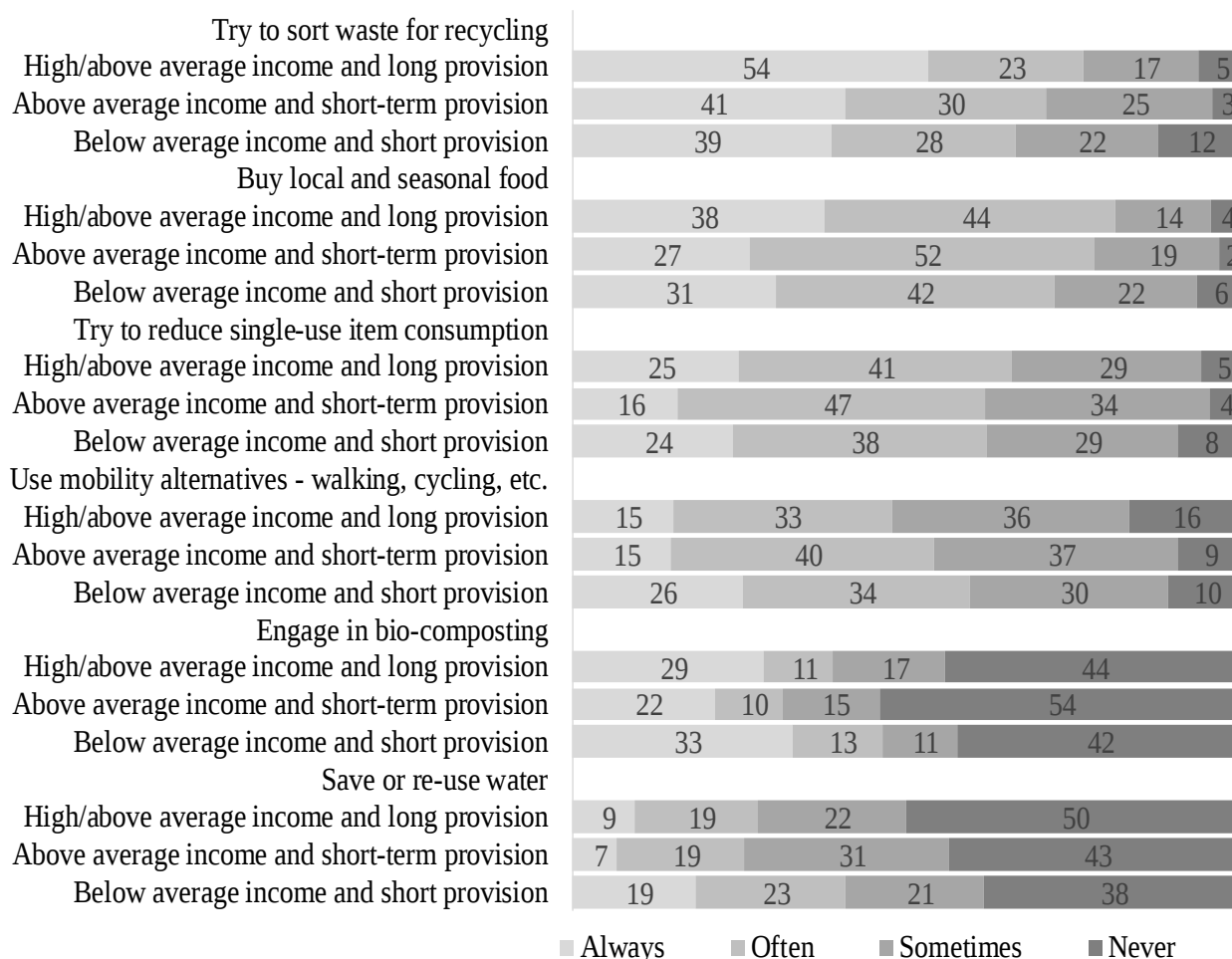
Additionally, the fact of having debt obligations for a rather high percentage of people with income above average, but short-term provision assessment (39%, see Figure 4), might affect involvement regularity in several environmental behaviours (see Figure 5).

Furthermore, there are differences in environmental behaviour depending on the place of residence. There are statistically significant differences for environmental behaviour regularity only in those dimensions, where people living in the countryside are practicing more frequently, but people living in cities or Riga – more rarely:

- try to sort waste for recycling (always 49% in comparison to 37% in Riga);
- buy local and seasonal food (always 36% in comparison to 28% in Riga);
- engage in bio-composting (always 39% in comparison to 17% in Riga).

At the same time, a higher proportion of people living in Riga are using mobility alternatives - walking, cycling, and public transport, while the car dependency is higher in the countryside.

We can conclude that differences in groups of financial security measurement provide evidence that high financial security, namely, people with high income or income above average and the ability to provide for themselves in the longer-term more frequently are doing the first easy steps in environmental actions, like trying to sort waste. However, comparatively financially less secure people are more frequently engaged in other more challenging environmentally friendly behaviours.



Source: RfC survey data. Weighted data. Base: n=1015 (exact answers depicted, year 2021)

Fig. 5. Environmentally oriented activities and financial security groups, % of respondents

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

The results of empirical quantitative data suggest that higher financial security does not correspond to a more sustainable lifestyle in many aspects, but rather includes only the simplest steps. This is concerning, taking into account the higher resource use intensity of more affluent people. Additionally, the fact of having debt obligations has a negative impact on short-term provision assessment and environmental behaviour. People with income above average, but short-term provision assessment have lower overall rates of environmental behaviour regularity – it means that monetary affluence alone is insufficient for motivated, sustained environmental actions if there is less longer-term confidence in personal livelihoods. This confidence has considerably reduced within the short period from 2020 to 2021.

Empirical evidence of this paper supports the argument of 'greening the poor' if we adapt this concept to environmental behaviour, where 'the social group with the least impactful lifestyle on the environment is the one which is moralized in the most intrusive and resolute manner' (Malier, 2019).

The idea of socially responsible consumers is the result of the enactment of particular contexts within neoliberalism (Thompson & Kumar, 2021). In other words, the very idea of a socially responsible consumer is still within the framework of responsabilisation of the consumer or sustainable consumption. Therefore, it is reasonable to encourage moving beyond the usual paradigms of 'sustainability', 'sustainable development', and diverse versions of 'green growth'. As the data confirm, monetary affluence alone is not contributing to more environmental actions, while people with less privileged backgrounds and rural areas

are capable of more environmental actions with lower consumption levels and overall resource throughput in their lives. Economic growth and personal income growth in itself is not an answer on the path to environmentally responsible behaviour; all groups of society need to be educated about the environmental and climate breakdown evidence to make political and personal choices towards more resilient futures.

Thinking and acting beyond the 'business-as-usual' narrative allows us to suggest recommendations for structural processes that enable complex improvements in environmental behaviour:

- to promote alternative options to widespread indebtedness that creates financial insecurity even at relatively high incomes;
- to achieve transformations in energy consumption (from consumers to prosumers), waste management, and people-oriented public transport mobility, including electric micro-mobility with its infrastructure development as interrelated policy making and implementation areas;
- encourage environmentally friendly behaviours through voluntary simplicity as a universal solution in resilience-building in the current time of convergence of crises; thus, avoid the consequences of 'coercive' or 'compulsive' processes in the future when environmental and climatic deterioration will become more evident in everyday lives also in Latvia.

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