INEQUALITY, RESOURCE GAPS, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

Insights from the first-ever Global Survey of City Leaders

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Inequality, resource gaps, and opportunities for collaboration:
Insights from the first-ever Global Survey of City Leaders

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Executive Summary

Cities are home to more than half the world's population, and by 2050, that share is expected to rise to 68%. In Asia and Africa, the urban population is expected to grow by some 2 billion people by 2050. Cities are hubs of innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic opportunity—but, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, they also concentrate human vulnerability. It is crucial to the world's collective future that we build cities that foster sustainable and inclusive development.

Urban leaders have gained prominence in recent years with innovative approaches to problems from housing shortages to traffic congestion, flood risks, and joining forces to learn together and advocate for shared priorities—most notably on climate change. Yet until now, no survey had ever gathered the perspectives of urban leaders worldwide: across regions, city sizes, and income levels.

That is the focus of *Your City Counts,* the first-ever Global Survey of City Leaders. Through a massive outreach effort involving numerous partners, from January through August 2022, the survey gathered insights from 241 leaders of cities in every major geographic region.

The results reveal many shared concerns and priorities, but also some stark differences:

- **Cities in developing countries face fundamental challenges to economic growth, along with some of the same ones faced by wealthier cities.** Asked to identify the top challenges to economic growth, leaders in developing countries cited lack of capital/funding (51%) and access to urban infrastructure (45%), while those in developed countries cited access to a skilled workforce (53%) and the availability of land (47%). Lack of external investment ranked third for both, but was cited more by poorer cities (41% vs. 28%).

- **Affordable housing is the top infrastructure priority in developed-country cities (60%), while half of respondents in developing countries cited wastewater and stormwater systems as their top need.** The developed-country data highlight how widespread housing affordability concerns have become. The other two top priorities were about urban accessibility: public transport (59%) and cycling and pedestrian infrastructure (38%). Cities in poorer countries, meanwhile, are again struggling with more basic needs; 44% cited road-building as a top priority, followed by public transport (40%).

- **Majorities of city leaders in developed and developing countries alike believe their cities have prioritized the needs of private vehicle users too much.** Notably, although motorization rates are generally higher in wealthier countries, an even larger share of leaders in developing countries (69% vs. 60%) somewhat or strongly agreed that cars are prioritized too much. Leaders in wealthier countries more often reported their public transportation systems met local needs (59% vs 47%). However, across income levels and geographies, over 87% of leaders agreed that streets should be made more accessible to pedestrians and cyclists.

- **For many city leaders in developing countries, supplying clean drinking water to all residents remains a challenge.** In developed-country cities, 87% of leaders thought their drinking water infrastructure was good or excellent, but only 46.5% in developing countries said the same. The top challenge identified in providing drinking water—cited by a quarter of city leaders in developing countries, and 54% in Sub-Saharan Africa—was the need to still extend piped water to all households. The two other most-cited challenges were insufficient water supply and inadequate maintenance of the piped water system.

- **Sanitation and human waste treatment also pose challenges in many developing-country cities.** While 91% of city leaders in developed countries rated their management of human waste as

good or excellent, only 48% in developing-country cities did the same. Among the latter, almost 30% said they still needed to extend piped sewer service to all households, and 11% said their city had no wastewater treatment facility.

- **City leaders worldwide report growing climate change impacts, particularly extreme heat and flooding.** Overall, 62% of respondents—including 73% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 78% in Central and Southern Asia—said climate change has increased exposure to extreme heat; 49% said flood risks are intensifying, including 64% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 73% in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 75% in Southeast Asia and developing Oceania. Only 16% of city leaders in developed countries cited noted an increase in water scarcity, but 43% in developing countries did so. Conversely, while 16% of leaders in developed countries said climate change was having no effect, only 6% in developing countries said this.

- **City leaders worldwide recognize inequality as a problem—particularly in large and mega cities, where 75% said income inequality is high or very high.** The same is true for 51% of leaders of medium cities and 52% of small cities. Globally, city leaders identified insufficient well-paid jobs as the top challenge to social mobility—but in developed countries, housing costs were an even greater concern (39% vs. 33%). In developing countries, 22% of city leaders cited poor living conditions and inadequate infrastructure and services.

- **In developed countries, mental health and substance abuse are by far the top public health concerns aside from COVID-19,** cited by 61% and 47% of city leaders, respectively. Leaders in developing countries, meanwhile, identified a broad range of issues when asked for their top concerns, topped by lack of access to quality health care (34%) and air pollution (30%). Asked about COVID-19 recovery, meanwhile, 83% of cities in developed countries and 93% in developing countries reported they were back to normal or almost back to normal.

- **Cities in developed countries have more financial resources and plans in place to meet their infrastructure, climate change, and social challenges.** On average, city leaders in developed countries said they have 85% of their budgetary needs for the next year met, whereas leaders in developing countries can only fund 59% of their expenses during the same period. Overall, large majorities of city leaders have plans in place for economic development, infrastructure, climate change, and social needs, but developing countries lag behind.

A key takeaway from the survey is that although cities at different levels of development clearly face different challenges, urban leaders share many concerns—from the need for affordable housing, to the over-prioritization of private vehicles, to growing threats from climate change. They also share similar visions for more livable, accessible, inclusive, and resilient cities. These commonalities offer opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning across cities in different geographies. At the same time, cities in developing countries clearly need significantly stronger support to close critical fiscal resource gaps.

Introduction

One of the most consequential transformations in the last century is the shift from mainly rural to predominantly urban societies. Already, 56% of people worldwide live in urban areas, and by 2050, that share is expected to rise to 68%—the vast majority of them, some 5.6 billion, living in developing-country cities.[1] Between 2018 and 2050, cities in Africa and Asia are expected to welcome nearly 2 billion new residents, accounting for 88% of the world's urban population growth.

Cities are economic, social, and cultural hubs, magnets for people seeking a better life and new opportunities. But, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, they can also concentrate vulnerability. Many urban residents around the world, particularly in developing countries, lack decent housing and basic services such as clean water and sanitation. Often the poorest people are physically isolated in marginal areas, unable to safely access well-paid jobs or educational programs.[2]

This is the daunting responsibility of local governments: to meet city residents' daily needs and try to make their lives better. But urban leaders are increasingly recognized as occupying a unique position to drive positive change.[3] They set agendas, allocate fiscal resources, and direct urban development. If we want to take stock of urban conditions around the world—from infrastructure needs, to climate change impacts, to rising inequality—a good place to start is to ask the mayors, city managers, municipal commissioners, and other officials who lead city governments.

This working paper presents the preliminary findings from the first-ever globally representative survey of urban executive leaders, *Your City Counts*. Working with international development institutions, civil society partners, academics, and researchers from around the world,[4] we gathered insights from a stratified, random sample of 241 leaders of cities with populations above 300,000 in every major geographic region.[5]

Recognizing the value of seeking out and comparing urban perspectives, several similar research projects have surveyed mayors across the United States, in Canada, and other geographic regions, such as Latin America,[6] but never before worldwide. In order to achieve global reach, the project team for *Your City Counts* translated the survey instrument and supporting materials into 23 languages. Data were collected between January and August 2022.

The responses provide an important window into the challenges faced by cities of different sizes, in different regions, and at different levels of urban and economic development. They highlight both commonalities and crucial differences. This working paper provides a first level of analysis, focusing mainly on comparisons between city leaders in developed versus developing countries.

These two groups of city leaders have different needs and priorities when it comes to economic development, infrastructure, public health, inequality and social mobility, and their capacity to respond to challenges—such as the financial resources at their disposal. Regardless of the many areas where city leaders diverged, we found notable areas of convergence, such as shared concerns about climate change risks and eagerness to attract more external investment; provide more affordable housing; reduce private automobile dependency; and make city streets more accessible to walkers and cyclers. As discussed further below, these commonalities offer valuable opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning.

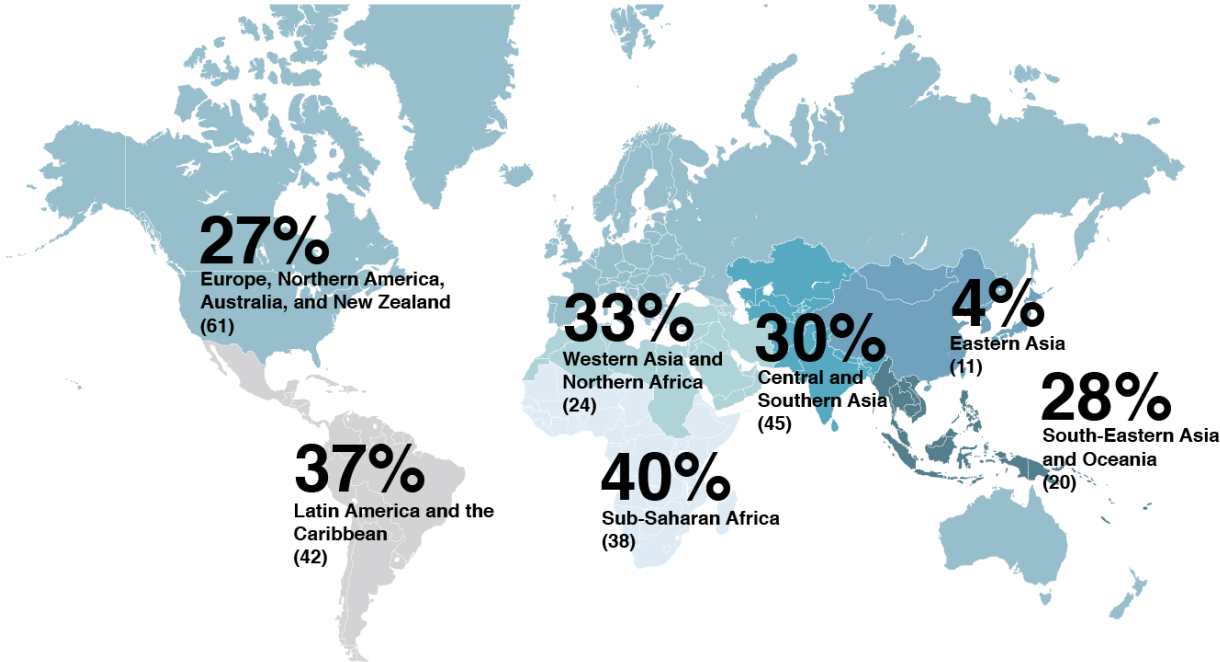## Survey Design, Sample, and Respondents

To create our sample of cities, we began with a list of 1,860 urban agglomerations with more than 300,000 residents that is maintained by the United Nations.[7] From that list, we drew a random sample of 1,012, which was stratified on city size, number of urban agglomerations in each country, and seven major geographic regions: Central and Southern Asia; Eastern Asia; Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand; South-Eastern Asia and Oceania; Sub-Saharan Africa; and Western Asia and North Africa.

The United Nations defines an urban agglomeration as a continuous built-up urban area.[8] That can be a single city, or a cluster of municipalities. To build our sample and identify the appropriate respondent to the survey, we selected the most populated municipality in each urban agglomeration. For example, the United Nations classifies New York-Newark as a single urban agglomeration; we chose New York City because of its larger population to represent this urban agglomeration.

To develop the survey, we worked closely with a coalition of institutional partners, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Slum Dwellers International, Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the World Bank, the World Resources Institute, and the Mayors Migration Council, who advised on the survey content as well as the approach and later helped us increase our response rate. We pilot-tested the survey with local leaders in urban areas in every major geographic region in the world, and revised it based on the results of the pilot before distributing it globally.

The governance structure of urban areas varies considerably around the world. We directed the survey to the top local-level executive leader. Our sample included people with titles ranging from mayor to municipal commissioner, governor, town clerk, and king. With the support of international development agencies, city federations, civil society partners, and dedicated researchers based in different regions of the world, we gathered 241 responses, for a response rate of 23.8%. Figure 1 shows the regional distribution of respondents and the response rate for each region.[9]

Figure 1: Number of survey participants and responses rates by geographic region

27%
Europe, Northern America, Australia, and New Zealand
(61)

33%
Western Asia and Northern Africa
(24)

30%
Central and Southern Asia
(45)

4%
Eastern Asia
(11)

28%
South-Eastern Asia and Oceania
(20)

37%
Latin America and the Caribbean
(42)

40%
Sub-Saharan Africa
(38)

The respondents were roughly evenly distributed across small (300,000 to 500,000 residents), medium (500,001 to 1,000,000), and large and mega cities (1,000,001 and above). More than half were mayors (56%); other common titles were city manager (20%), and municipal commissioner (10%). Most respondents were elected (58%) instead of appointed (38%).[10]

We categorized cities as being in developed or developing countries following the standard classification used by the United Nations as of December 2021.[11] Altogether, 27% of the cities in the sample are in developed countries and 73% are in developing countries, closely matching the universe of cities. It is important to note that there is significant heterogeneity in these two broad groups. In particular, cities in developing countries range from fast-growing urban areas with very limited infrastructure, to well-established economic centers where urban development is formalized, and most households have access to basic infrastructure. For this first round of analysis, we focus mainly on those two groupings; future analysis should examine responses by city size and regional differences more closely.

Economic Development

For much of human history, urbanization and economic growth have moved in tandem. Policy makers closely associate local economic development with the well-being of urban residents, so city leaders usually strive to foster conditions that attract businesses to create jobs and contribute to municipal revenue. They court investors through tax breaks and other incentives; promote tourism; build urban amenities; and work to attract members of the "creative class."[12]

Economists have found that well-managed urban development can foster innovation and more robust growth—for instance, through agglomeration effects.[13] Researchers have also identified numerous factors that can support or hinder urban economic growth, such as the effectiveness and transparency of the regulatory environment, infrastructure systems, real estate markets, crime rates, land use choices, and racial and socio-economic disparities. As cities in developing countries have grown rapidly, a growing body of research has highlighted the complex relationship between urbanization and economic prosperity, and how poverty and various development challenges can prevent economies from reaping the full benefits of urbanization.[14]

We started by asking city leaders to rate the economic condition of their city. Overall, 8% of respondents rated their city's condition as poor, 34% as fair, 47% as good, and 11% as excellent. However, respondents in developed countries far more often rated their city's economic condition as good or excellent (82%) than their counterparts in developing countries (49%).

Next, we asked city leaders to identify the top three challenges to economic development in their city today and if they had more fiscal resources what would they prioritize. Their responses offer a broad range of options including the cost and availability of land, deficient infrastructure, tax rates, governance issues, crime, and corruption. Figure 2 shows the top three responses for city leaders in developed and developing countries.

Figure 2: What are the three most significant challenges to economic development in your city today?

Q. B2
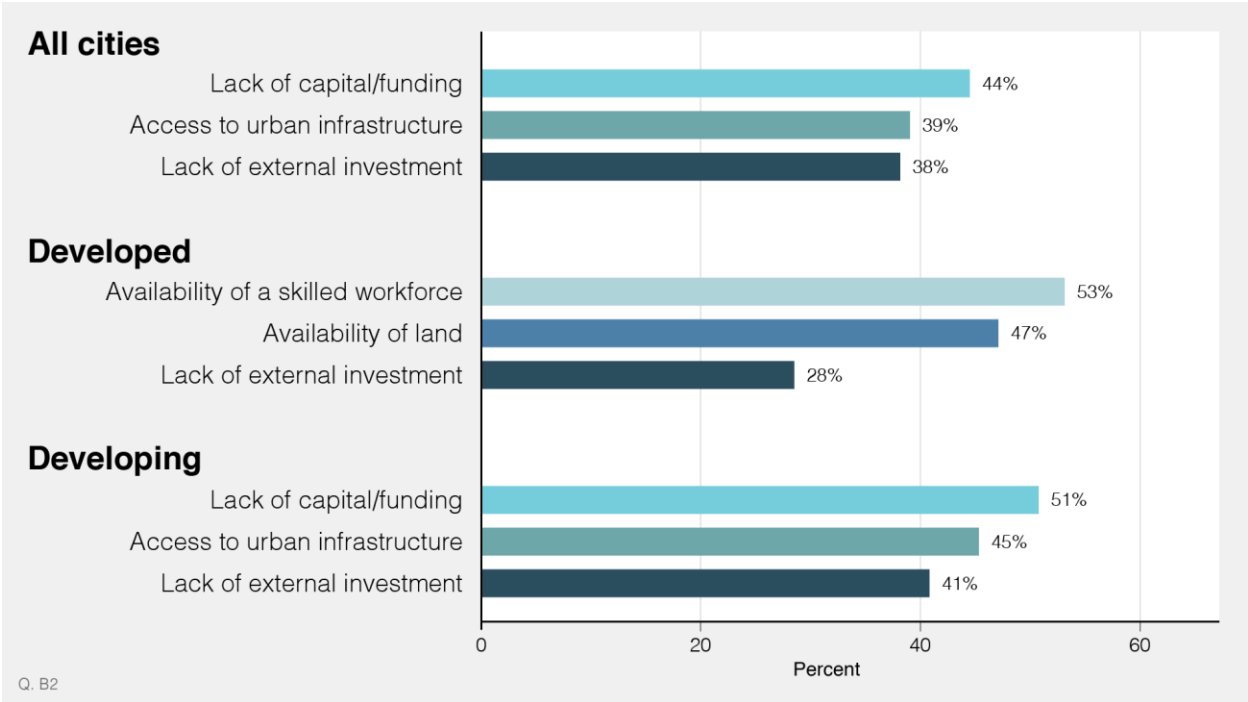
One common concern stands out: lack of external investment, cited by 28% of city leaders in developed countries and 41% in developing countries. However, the top two issues cited by each group show a stark contrast. In developed countries, the biggest concerns are a lack of skilled workers and the limited availability of land. Many of these cities may be "built out" and lack physical space for new development; they are also likely to be focused on the so-called "knowledge economy," which requires a highly educated labor force with specialized skills.

In developing countries, meanwhile, the top two concerns were lack of capital and funding, and access to urban infrastructure. These two challenges are closely linked; quite simply, many cities in low- and middle-income countries lack the resources and investment they need to build core urban infrastructure—which, in turn, is crucial to enabling them to reap the benefits of urbanization. This is discussed in more detail below.

Infrastructure

Urban infrastructure allows cities to reap the benefits of economic concentration—*division of labor* and *economies of scale*.[15] If infrastructure systems are inadequate or nonexistent, do not function reliably and efficiently, and/or are "splintered," the economic benefits of urbanization can be lost.[16] In these contexts, which are often found in cities in developing countries, population growth (and the resulting increase in urban density) can exacerbate poverty and gaps in basic services, create congestion, and lead to inefficiency and reduced productivity and inhibit economic growth.[17]

For example, in the absence of decent housing, the poorest people in a city may find themselves living in informal settlements, where more than 70% of residents typically lack one or more core urban service, such as electricity, piped water, safe sanitation, or public transit.[18] When urban residents have to provide for themselves (for instance, by purchasing a generator, digging a

borehole, or using informal transit services), the results can be economically inefficient, contribute to environmental degradation, and often cost households more for lower-quality services.[19]

These are all common phenomena in developing-country cities. Moreover, often the poor are relegated to the urban periphery, where the cost of providing services is higher than in the urban core, where their ability to access jobs locally is limited, and where they are forced into lengthy and expensive commutes. In these cities, half or more of workers may be informally employed—including home-based workers contributing to global supply chains, waste pickers, transportation workers, and construction workers—with no social safety net.[20]

Asked how they would rate the infrastructure conditions in their city, 9% of survey respondents overall said poor, 37% fair, 44% good, and 10% excellent—but with stark differences between city leaders in developing and developed countries. While 81% of respondents in developed countries rated their city's infrastructure as good or excellent, only 44% of those in developing countries said the same. Almost 82% of respondents in Sub-Saharan Africa, 65% in Western Asia and Northern Africa, and 60% in South-Eastern Asia and Oceania said it was fair or poor.

So, if urban leaders had the resources to make large new infrastructure investments, what would they prioritize? We asked respondents to rank their top three priorities from a list that included different kinds of transportation, water and sewage, energy, digital, and green infrastructure, as well as housing. Figure 3 shows the categories selected by the largest shares of respondents.

Figure 3: What are the top three infrastructure areas you would prioritize if you could allocate a significant amount of new money?
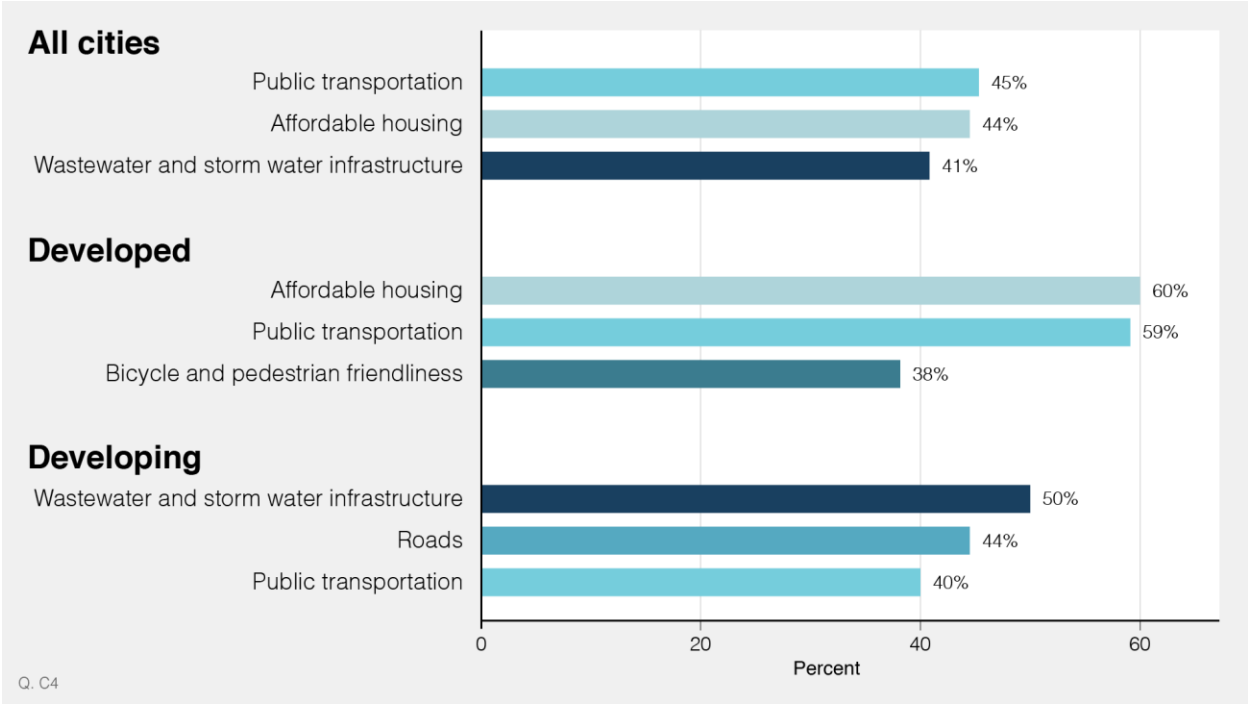
The top infrastructure priorities cited by urban leaders were public transportation and affordable housing—overwhelmingly in developed-country cities, but also by 40% and 38% in developing countries, respectively. They also rank among the top concerns across city size categories, most significantly in the largest cities (57% and 49%, respectively).

The severity of urban housing shortfalls cannot be stressed enough. Asked to rate the match between their current housing stock and their population's current needs, 57% of city leaders in developed countries and 64% in developing countries said it was "fair" or "poor." Evidence from around the world supports that view. For example, the City of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is building hundreds of thousands of units to close a massive housing gap, but the vast majority of the population cannot afford them.[21] More than a fifth of Indonesia's urban population lives in slum conditions,[22] and in Jakarta's core, 35% of households are overcrowded.[23]

The COVID-19 crisis heightened awareness of overcrowding, poverty, racialized economic segregation, and homelessness in U.S. cities.[24] A 2021 survey found 8% of New York City households, and 26% of households with one or more children, live in overcrowded conditions.[25] The lack of affordable housing also drives homelessness. There are more than 500,000 homeless Americans, with high concentrations in the wealthy cities with scant affordable housing, such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC.[26] Solving the affordable housing crisis in cities will require a radical rethinking of our policy and planning approaches, and significant commitments and investments by both the public and private sectors.

For urban leaders in developing countries, however, housing is often just one of several major deficits to contend with. Many still need to build core infrastructure systems. The top infrastructure priority for urban leaders in developing countries (50%) was wastewater and stormwater infrastructure; in Central and South Asia, 76% of respondents cited it as a priority. In addition, 44% of developing-country urban leaders said they need to build roads; 32% prioritized drinking water infrastructure, and 25%, energy infrastructure.

Among developed-country urban leaders, meanwhile, the focus was on affordability and accessibility. Along with housing and public transport, they prioritized cycling and pedestrian infrastructure (38%) and parks and public space (29%); several also mentioned energy infrastructure (32%) and roads (27%). Notably, the general patterns of prioritization were very similar across city sizes, except for large and mega city leaders' much-stronger desire for more public transportation infrastructure.

City leaders agreed worldwide that their cities have prioritized the needs of private vehicles too much. In developed countries, 60% of city leaders somewhat or strongly agreed with that statement, and in developing countries, 69% did. There was less convergence on whether their city's public transportation services meet the needs of the population, with 59% of city leaders in developed countries somewhat or strongly agreeing, compared with 47% in developing countries. One factor that may affect perspectives is that car ownership is far higher in wealthier countries, enabling people to get around even if public transport is inadequate.[27]

Overwhelming majorities of urban leaders in both developed and developing countries (87% for both) agreed strongly or somewhat that their city should make its roads more accessible to active transportation (walking and biking). In Western Asia and Northern Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, it was 100%. This convergence highlights an opportunity for collaboration and mutual learning across cities about how to create more "complete streets," with space for diverse modes of mobility—including cars, public transportation, bicycles, and pedestrians. This is an area ripe for urban innovation, identifying effective urban design models and then sharing and scaling them up.

The survey also asked city leaders to rate their drinking water infrastructure. As shown in Figure 4, there were large differences here: 87% of leaders in developed countries rated their drinking water infrastructure as good or excellent, compared with 47% in developing countries.

Figure 4: How would you rate the management of drinking water in your jurisdiction?


Q. C8
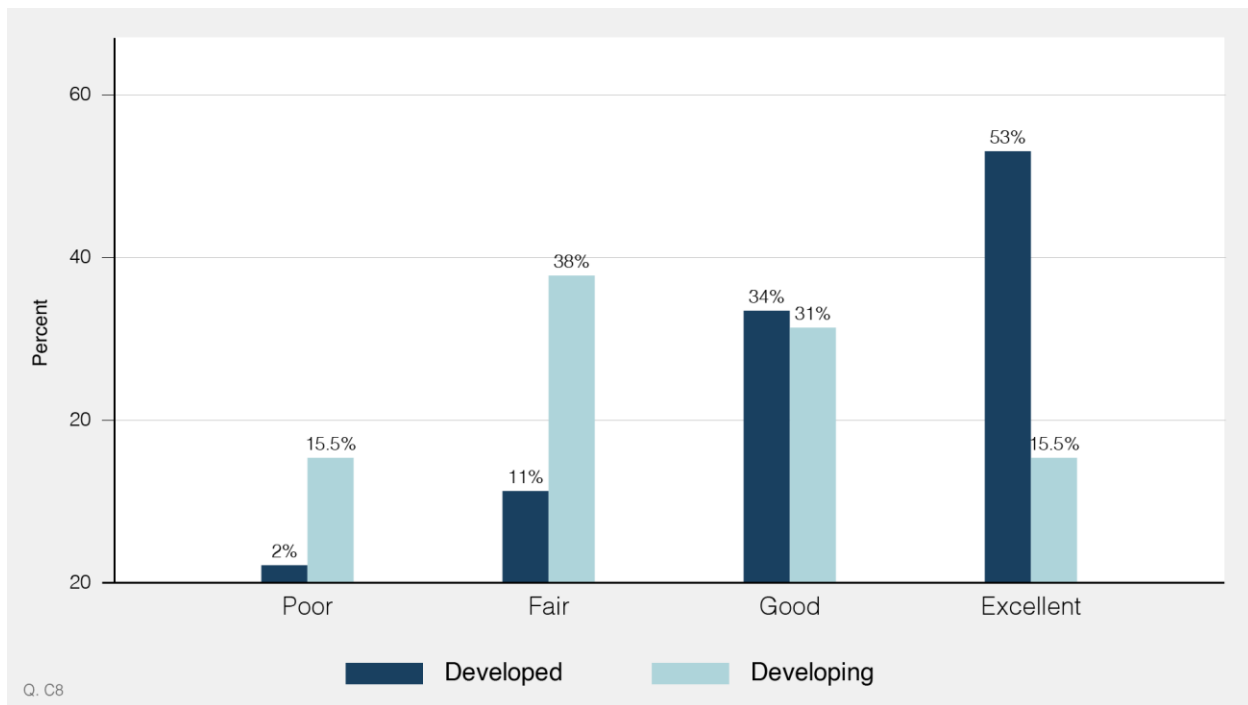
Asked what their greatest challenges are in providing drinking water, 25% of respondents in developing countries said the failure to extend piped water service to all households, and 17% said insufficient water supply. From Mexico City, to Jakarta, to Cape Town, many major developing-country cities face severe water supply crises.[28] In many cities, piped water service is unreliable: A study of 15 cities in the Global South found that in 12, where an average of 58% of households were connected to the municipal piped water system, service was only intermittent—in some cases, two hours a day, three days per week, or less.[29] Where households are not connected, they must either pay exorbitant prices for water or leave their homes, wait in line, and use facilities outside the home. In a situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, such deficiencies makes "social distancing" and frequent 20-second handwashing impossible. These problems existed before the global pandemic and will persist after it, affecting public health in myriad ways.

In developed countries, meanwhile, 64% of city leaders said they had no challenges to their drinking water system, and the biggest challenge was inadequate maintenance of the piped water system (9%). These results may indicate low awareness of the precarious nature of water infrastructure in many developed cities, underscored in the United States by the drinking water crises in Jackson, Mississippi, and Flint, Michigan.[30] Perceptions of water security may also have changed after the severe droughts in Europe and North America in the summer of 2022.

The strongest divergence between city leaders in developed and developing countries, however, was on the issue of infrastructure to manage human waste. In developed countries, 91% rated the management of human waste as good or excellent, compared with 48% in developing countries. Consistent with this pattern, 58% of city leaders in developed countries reported that they had "no challenges" to managing human waste, while almost 30% of their counterparts in developing countries reported the biggest challenges were failure to extend piped sewer service to all households and that their city had no waste treatment plan.

Figure 5: How would you rate the management of human waste in your jurisdiction?

Q. C10
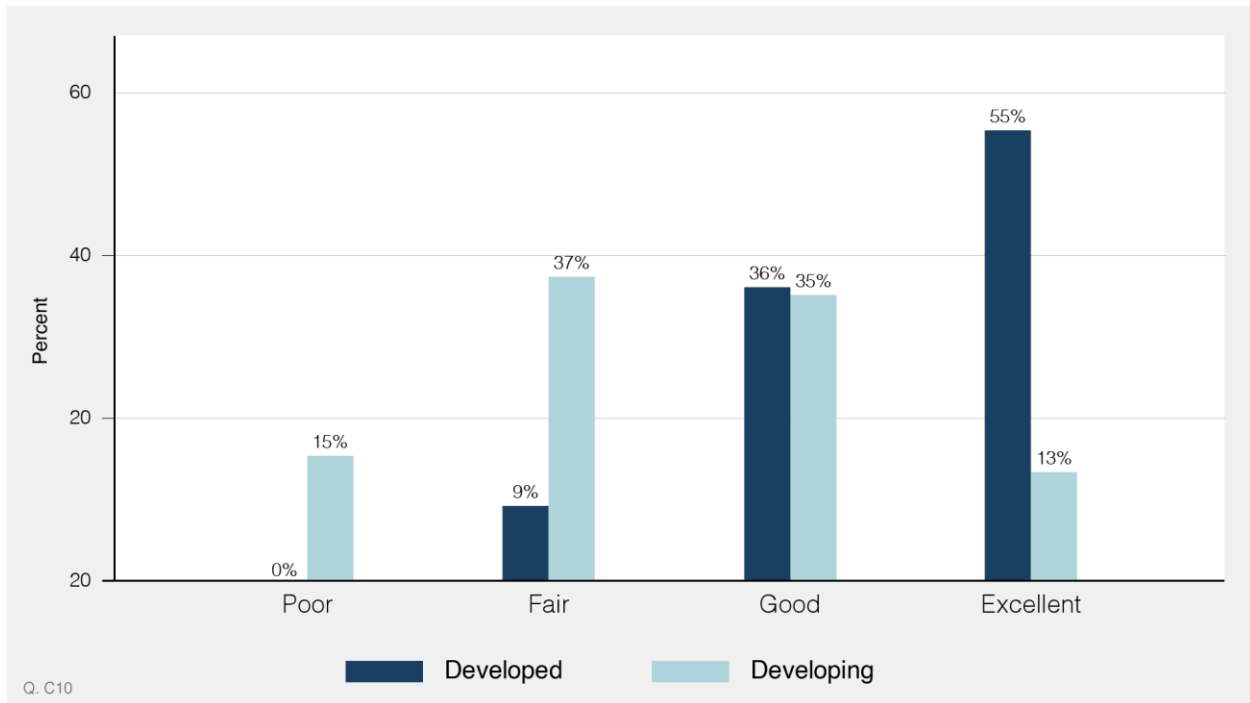
Addressing the absence of sewage infrastructure in cities in developing countries is daunting because the systems of trunk infrastructure needed to tackle this problem require enormous upfront capital investment, and the diverse hyperlocal solutions that often arise instead, such as household septic tanks and pit latrines, can pose huge public health risks in densely populated urban areas.[31]
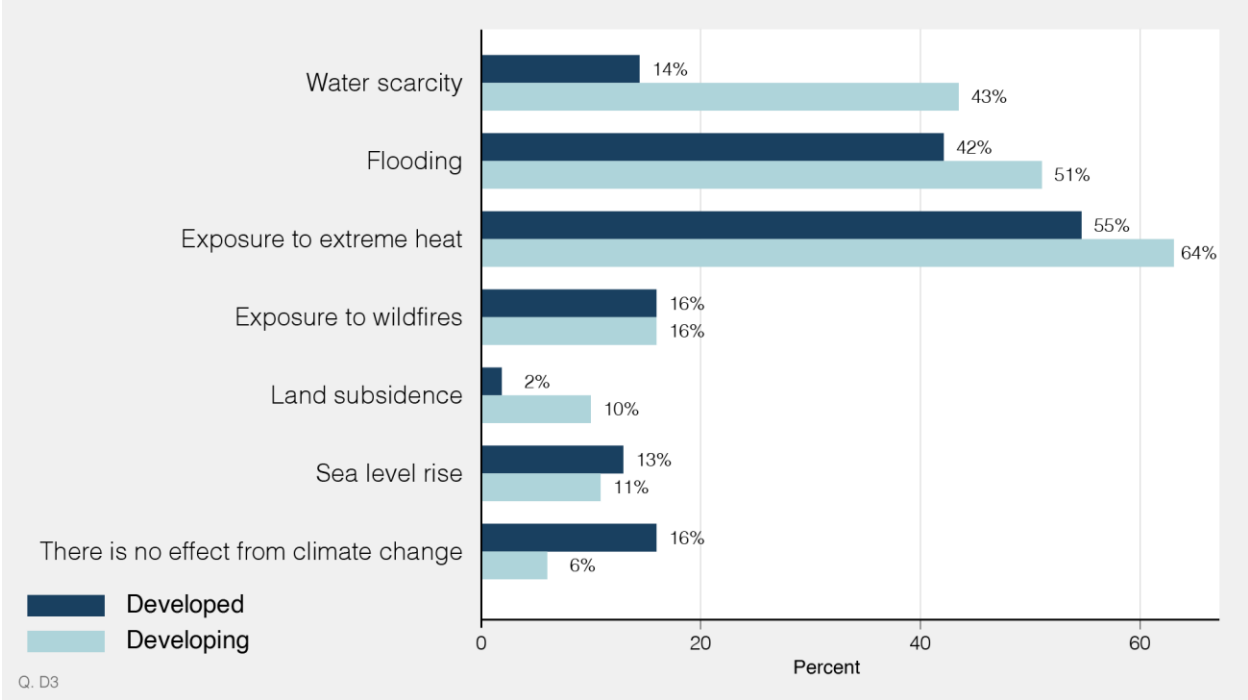
Climate Change

Cities are increasingly recognized as a strategic scale and arena for climate action.[32] Climate change poses serious threats to urban residents living in cities at all levels of development—and particularly to cities with high poverty rates, inadequate infrastructure, and scant resources.[33] Fundamental characteristics of the urban built environment exacerbate climate risks: large areas of impervious surfaces contribute to flooding during storms or heavy extreme precipitation events, and built-up areas radiate heat, creating "urban heat islands" that can be several degrees hotter than surrounding areas, and are dangerous during heatwaves.[34]

Urban populations and economic activities are also concentrated in coastal areas—nearly 11% of people worldwide live on low-lying coasts, facing some of the highest climate-compounded risks.[35] As noted earlier, in many developing-country cities, it is also common for poor and marginalized populations to be relegated to the urban periphery, such as hillsides and floodplains, where they are extremely vulnerable to climate hazards.[36] Moreover, cities face a growing influx of migrants from rural areas, driven in part by climate change impacts on agrarian livelihoods, that will further strain their ability to manage disaster risks and to provide at core urban services to all who need them.[37]

Understanding the spatial distribution of climate hazards, vulnerabilities, and adaptive capacities in cities, and how they relate to political, economic, and social structures, is thus critical to the development of effective and equitable solutions. At the same time, urban leaders are testing different strategies to increase climate resilience, including many nature-based solutions.[38]

With all this in mind, the survey asked city leaders how climate change is affecting their city. The two most salient impacts, floods and extreme heat, were widely reported in cities in developed and developing countries alike, but there were also notable differences, as shown in Figure 6. Only 6% of developing-country city leaders (and just 2–3% in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean) reported no climate change impacts, compared with 16% in developed countries.

Figure 6: Has climate change created or intensified any of these conditions in your city?

Urban leaders in developing countries were three times as likely to say climate change intensified water scarcity; in Central and Southern Asia, Western Asia and Northern Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, about half did. In general, although city leaders worldwide were clearly aware of climate change impacts, those in developing countries may be experiencing them more acutely, for multiple reasons, including poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure. Again, it is important to note that our data collection was mostly complete before the summer of extreme heat and droughts in North America and Europe.

The fact that so many cities, across geographies and development levels, are facing similar threats offers a wealth of opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning. City leaders have already come together to advocate for climate change mitigation, through groups such as C40 and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability.[39] Many urban climate strategies, such as tree-planting and improved insulation in buildings, have both mitigation and adaptation benefits. Climate action can also help make cities more economically competitive, more inclusive, and more livable.[40] City leaders have long recognized these synergies, but there is still enormous untapped potential.
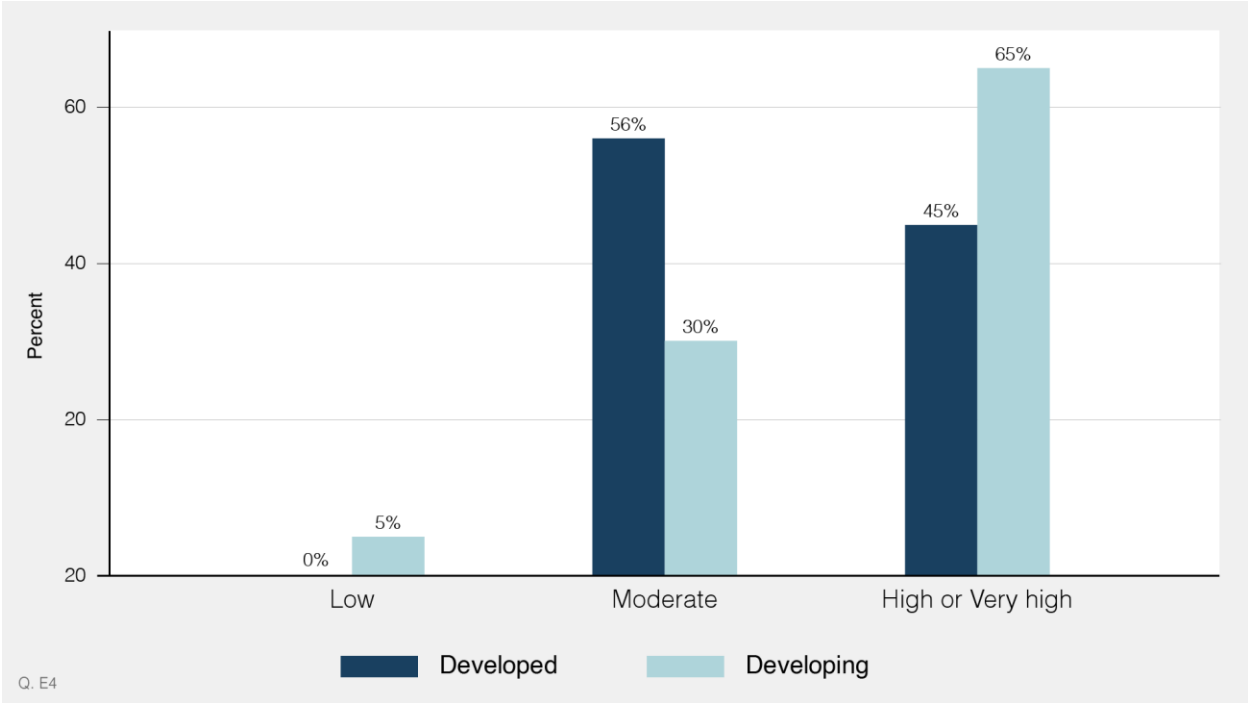
Inequality

Cities may be hubs of economic opportunity—but, as highlighted by the disparate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, they are also profoundly unequal, even in many developed countries.[41] Even before the pandemic, urban scholars and policy makers were deeply concerned about inequality.[42] In 2017, the urbanist Richard Florida described "growing inequality, segregation, and sorting that is taking place within every city and metro area.... the New Urban Crisis is marked by the *disappearing middle*—the fading of the once large middle class and of its once stable neighborhoods, which were the physical embodiment of the American Dream."[43]

In cities in the Global South, meanwhile, as real estate development has flourished, many urban leaders have sought to rid their cities of poor residents and informal settlements that they perceive as standing in the way of development. A typical result is the forcible relocation of residents out to the urban periphery. At best, they may get access to safe and legal housing, but it is often disconnected from systems of core urban infrastructure and far from economic opportunities, locking them in to lengthy and expensive commutes.[44]

The survey asked city leaders how they would rate income inequality—the gap between rich and poor—in their community. As shown in Figure 7, very few reported low inequality, and 65% of respondents in developing countries said it was high or very high.

Figure 7: How would you rate income inequality *(the gap between rich and poor)* in your city today?

Q. E4

While city leaders in developed countries clearly see inequality as a problem, too, only 45% said it was high or very high in their city. The much-larger share in developing countries is not surprising, as the contrasts between rich and poor in developing-country cities is often drastic, with glistening high-rise buildings and luxury hotels and housing complexes on one side, and families living in self-built dwellings, with no electricity, running water, or sanitation, on the other.

Across income levels, such contrasts are more common in the biggest cities, and the survey data reflect that, with 75% large and mega city leaders reporting high and very high income inequality, compared with 51% in mid-size cities, and 52% in smaller cities.

Figure 8: Share of city leaders who rate income inequality in their community as high or very high

52%	51%	75%
Small	Medium	Large and Mega
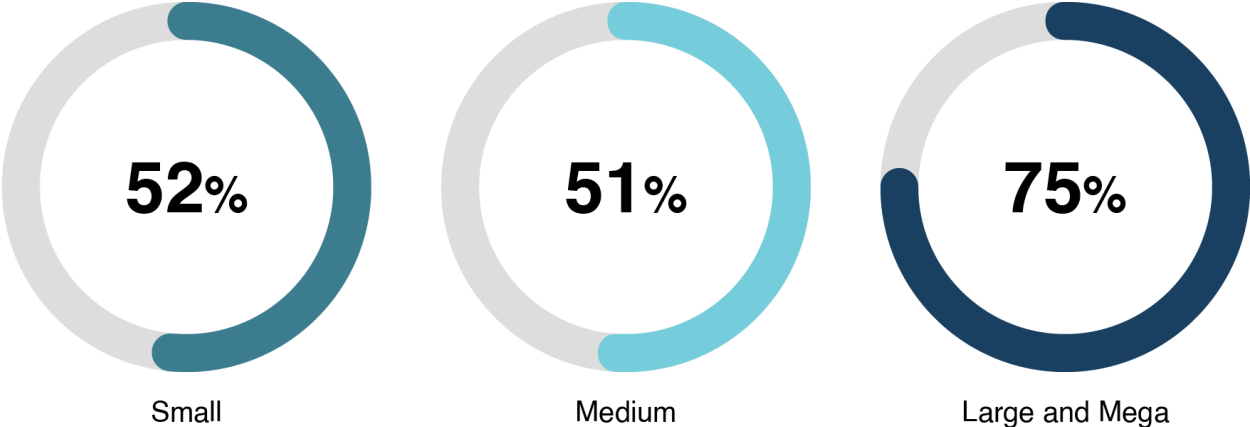
A key responsibility for urban leaders is to narrow the gaps between rich and poor by creating opportunities for people to rise out of poverty and thrive. Asked to identify the greatest challenges to social mobility, city leaders in developed countries mainly cited two: housing costs (39%) and insufficient well-paid jobs (33%). This is consistent with the evidence from scholars such as Richard Florida and Charlotta Mellander showing that high housing costs contribute to economic segregation in cities, affecting access to good jobs and key services, such as education.[45] In developing countries, leaders ranked the greatest challenges as insufficient well-paid jobs (43%); poor housing conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and services (22%); and housing costs (17%).

The central role of good jobs in promoting social mobility points to one of the trickiest challenges for city leaders: how to foster economic growth that will be inclusive. Cities around the world, especially the largest ones, have built enormous wealth in recent years, but the benefits continue to accrue to those cities that are already wealthy, creating what Florida refers to "winner take all urbanism."[46] The same dynamic exists within urban communities and at the household level, resulting in many cities becoming increasingly unequal as their economies and population grow.[47]

Public Health and COVID Recovery

The multiple and combined health, environmental, and political crises in our cities draws into sharp relief the fragility of urban living. Only recently have cities been able to reverse the health and life expectancy "urban penalty."[48] Pre-COVID-19, New York City had life expectancies 2.5 years longer than the U.S. national average.[49] At the same time, before the COVID pandemic our cities were not healthy places for everyone. Many would argue that our cities have been "sick" for a long time—particularly for poor and marginalized populations. For example, in Chicago's Streeterville, a mostly White, affluent neighborhood along Lake Michigan, the life expectancy is 90 years.[50] Just eight miles away in the same city, in Englewood, a very poor and predominantly Black neighborhood where many people live in low-rise apartments adjacent to Interstate 94, life expectancy is below 60 years.

Our survey results show similarly stark contrasts between cities in developed and developing countries. Asked to rate the quality of public health in their city, 49% of respondents in developing countries said it was "fair" or "poor," compared with 24% in developed countries. Asked to identify

the top three public health challenges in their city—excluding COVID-19—leaders shared concerns about air quality, but the overall patterns of their responses were very different (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Excluding COVID, which are the three biggest public health challenges in your city?


Q. E2
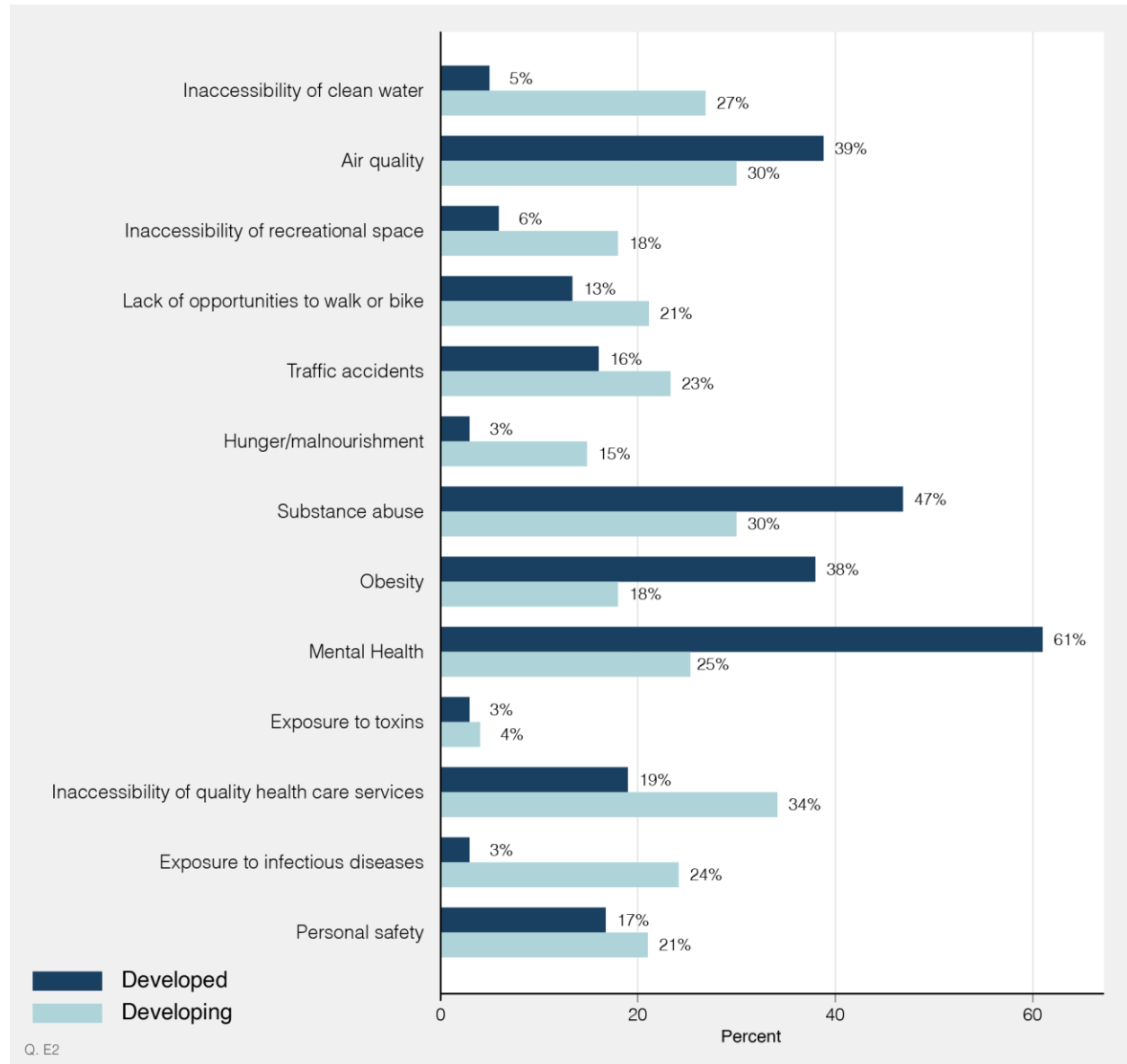
In developed countries, a few issues stood out prominently—mental health was by far the most cited (61%), followed by substance abuse (47%), air pollution (39%) and obesity (38%). Previous studies of just U.S. mayors have also found obesity and substance abuse consistently recognized as top public health challenges.[51] In developing countries, meanwhile, leaders were concerned about so many different issues that only one was picked as a priority by more than a third of them: inaccessibility of quality health services (34%).

The pandemic exposed patterns of inequality and public health challenges that existed prior to the pandemic. Notably, a larger share of developed-country leaders (59%) said COVID-19 has had a "significant" impact on public health in their city than among their developing-country counterparts

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(47%). Given that COVID-19 infection and mortality rates in many developing countries were very high,[52] the difference may mostly reflect the fact that large disease outbreaks and other public health crises are more common in poorer countries.

Asked how far along they are in their pandemic recovery, 73% of developed-country city leaders said they were back to normal or almost so, compared with 93% in developing countries (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Where is your city in terms of COVID recovery?
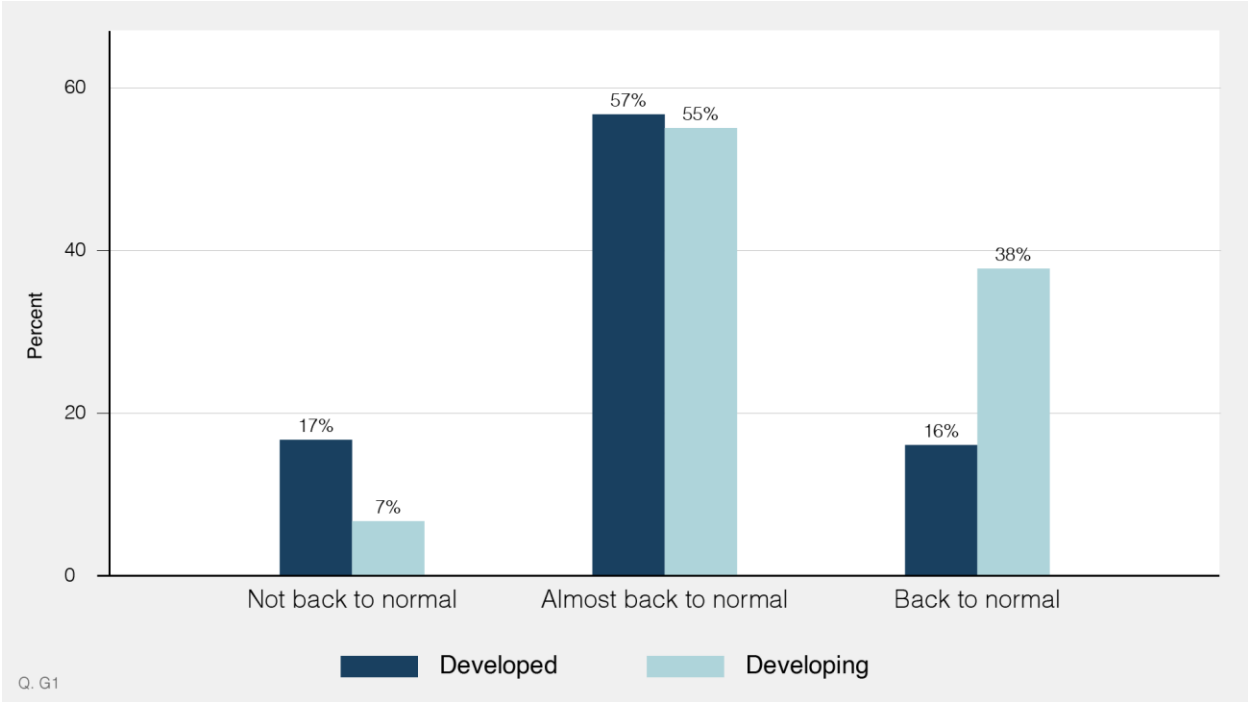
The difference between responses from developed and developing countries may not be due to the pandemic's effects having been less severe, but rather, the broader context. In wealthier countries, cities had the resources and systems in place to allow them to "shut down," and many people were able to work remotely and have goods delivered to their homes. In developing countries, meanwhile, much of the labor force is in the informal economy (for example, construction workers and street vendors), without social safety net benefits or the ability to work remotely.[53] Another factor that may be at play is that the pandemic has exacerbated public health challenges that were already of great concern in developed countries, such as mental health, substance abuse, and obesity.[54]

Fiscal and Planning Capacities

Tackling major urban challenges and delivering the services that residents and businesses need requires both money—to cover the costs—and human capacities to plan and implement policies, programs, and investments. One way to get a sense of a city's capacities is to determine the extent to which it has plans in place to address key issues, such as accessibility, affordability, infrastructure, climate change, and poverty.

Across cities in countries with different levels of development, the survey showed that cities have made significant efforts to systematically plan their responses to key challenges. That said, there were large gaps between cities in developed and developing countries, reflecting underlying resource gaps. Leaders in developed countries overwhelmingly reported having plans in place to address everything from local economic development, infrastructure, housing, environmental sustainability, climate change to poverty. The only area where developing-country city leaders had more plans was citywide slum upgrading, and this is presumably because of the high levels of informal urban development in those cities.

Figure 11: Does your city have a plan that addresses the following areas?

Q. F1
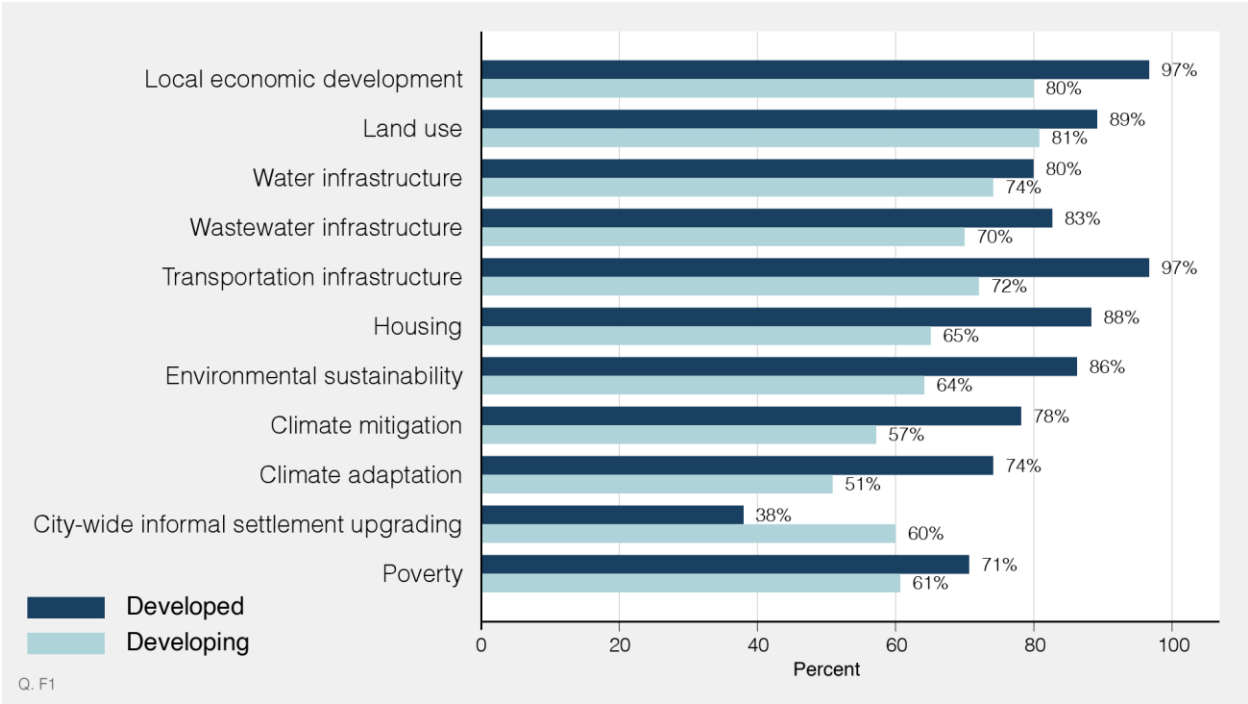
Plans can only take a city so far, however. Urban leaders can have great ideas for how to close their infrastructure gaps, make their cities more accessible, improve the quality of life, tackle climate risks, and much more—but if they lack the resources for capital investments, or even for the provision of basic services, their city may continue to struggle. The survey therefore asked city leaders to estimate the share of their city's budgetary needs that they are confident that they can fund in the coming year. The results are troubling.

Figure 12: Share of budgetary needs city leaders are confident they can fund in the coming year

85%
Developed

59%
Developing
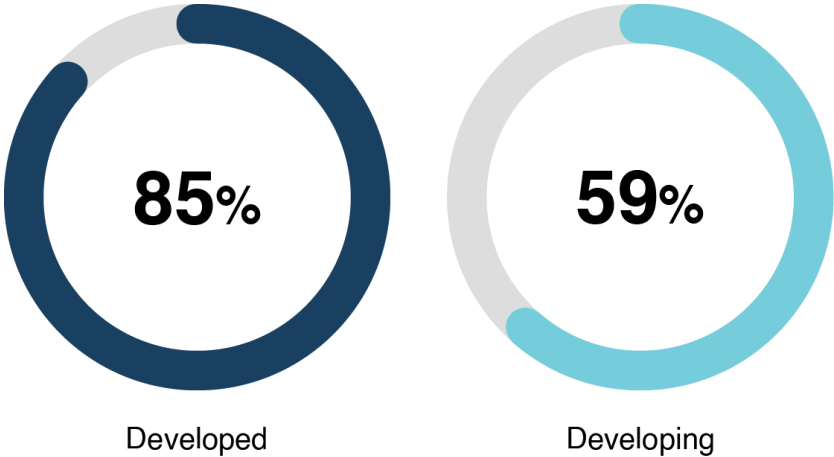
As shown in Figure 12, leaders in developed countries said they could fund, on average, 85% of their budgetary needs, while in developing countries, the average was just 59%. The contrasts are even sharper by region: The average in Sub-Saharan Africa was 46%, and in Central and Southern Asia, 55%, while in South-Eastern Asia and Oceania, it was 73%. Asked how well they could achieve their priorities without support from higher levels of government, 83% of developed-country city leaders said they were either somewhat or very equipped, compared with only 65% of their counterparts in developing countries.

Where do We Go from Here?

Conducting a global survey of city leaders is an enormous task—but, as the results presented in this working paper show, it is well worth the effort. To have such a wealth of comparative data on the concerns and priorities of a representative sample of city leaders around the world, at such a pivotal time for urban areas, is an asset that will benefit urban policy researchers, advocates, national policy makers, and city leaders themselves. The survey responses highlight particularly urgent areas for action, hotspots of vulnerability in different parts of the world, and commonalities that can serve as the basis for partnerships and mutual learning. They also raise important questions for further study.

The data underscore the growing pains that many cities are experiencing, both in terms of the size of their urban populations as well as the expansion of their physical urban footprint. Cities in developing countries in Asia and Africa will expand to accommodate many more residents in the next decades, and they need to build the infrastructure systems to provide services for these residents to flourish and thrive in the urban built environment. There is simply no way to ensure people's well-being, or to foster robust economic development, without significant planning and investment in systems of core urban infrastructure—wastewater, drinking water, public transportation, and streets that are safe not only for cars, but also for pedestrians and cyclists. Closing these cities' large resource gaps to enable them to make these investments is an urgent priority.

Cities in developed countries face their own challenges, and although these may appear less dire than lacking water or sanitation, they are serious and difficult to address. There are no simple roadmaps for reversing the impacts of many decades of racist and anti-poor urban policies and financial practices. In many U.S. cities, for instance, they are literally constructed in cement and steel—embodied, for instance, in the wide (and still growing) highways that carved through neighborhoods and have condemned entire generations to socio-economic isolation and poor

health.[55] The mental health and substance abuse crises that many cities face, which are closely linked with homelessness as well, also defy easy answers.

The areas of convergence between cities in different regions, of different sizes, and at different stages of development represent huge opportunities for innovation and collaboration: on everything from climate change, to affordable housing, to sustainable and active mobility. These issues are interrelated in complex ways, and urban innovations to address them have the potential to improve city residents' quality of life, health, and economic prospects on multiple levels.

This paper provides a first look at the rich data collected through the Global Survey of City Leaders, *Your City Counts*. As we begin our work at the new Mui Ho Center for Cities at Cornell University's College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, we intend to delve deeper into many of these issues, and facilitate critical conversations between urban leaders, planners and policy makers, architects, designers, activists, and artists who are working to envision, plan, build, and govern a different urban future. Through cutting-edge research and creative practice, collaborations with diverse city stakeholders where we co-produce new knowledge and understandings, we can support urban transformation that creates vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable cities where everyone can thrive.

Endnotes

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[5] As described in the next section, we obtained a representative sample from every region in the world. There was one notable exception, however: despite significant extensive outreach efforts, it was not possible to include city leaders in China.

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[10] The rest fell into various sets of circumstances we labeled as "other."

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