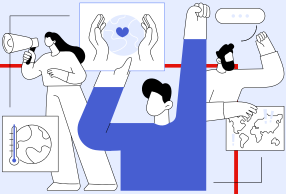
ECONOMIST IMPACT



Resilience from the ground up: assessing city-level approaches to climate risk and adaptation

Supported by ZURICH

Climate change is no longer a distant threat. Cities, as hubs of people, infrastructure, economic activity and culture, are at the heart of the climate crisis.

They can amplify the risks, but they can also offer solutions and build resilience.

So, how prepared are our cities for what lies ahead? To find out, Economist Impact, supported by Zurich Insurance Group, surveyed 5,000 individuals across ten global cities and interviewed 15 experts.[1]

Cities are not ready to handle the impacts of climate change

4 in 5

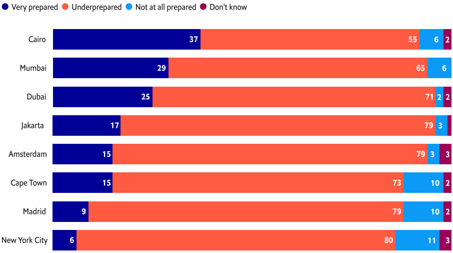
82% of respondents believe their city is underprepared to manage climate-related risks.

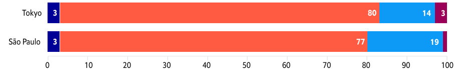
Concerns are especially high about managing heatwaves, air pollution, water shortages and flooding.

But perceptions of readiness vary globally. São Paulo, Tokyo and New York City are seen as the least prepared: only 3–6% of residents consider these cities to be "very prepared". In contrast, Cairo stands out as the most equipped to handle climate risks, with 37% of its residents feeling this way.

Leading the charge or falling behind?

How prepared do you consider your city to be to handle climate-related risks? (% of respondents, by city)





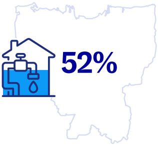
Source: Economist Impact survey

Public infrastructure is already struggling to cope with climate impacts.

Our survey reveals a high level of public anxiety surrounding water management infrastructure.

2 in 5

41% of respondents think their city's water management infrastructure is at risk.

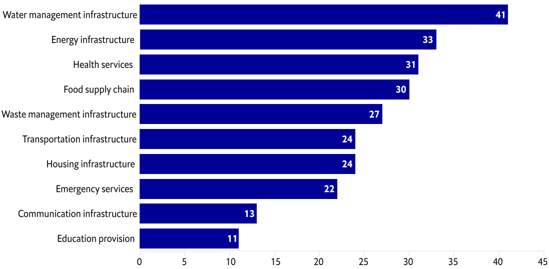


52%

More than half of individuals in Jakarta are worried about the vulnerability of the city's water management infrastructure.

Urban water systems are on the brink

Which of the following types of infrastructure are most vulnerable to climate-related risks in your city? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

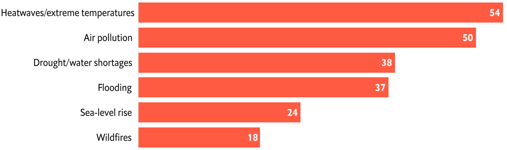
> These worries tie into the major concerns people have about the risks and impacts of climate change.

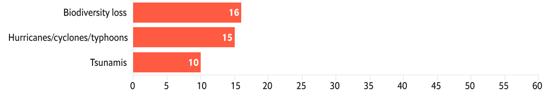
38% worry about water shortages or drought

37% are concerned about flooding

Risky business

Which physical risks of climate change are you most concerned about in your city? (% of respondents)





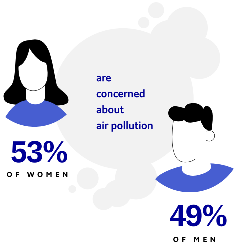
Source: Economist Impact survey

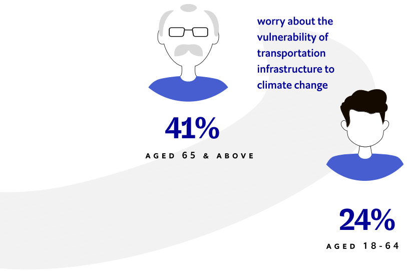
The dual threat of water-related risks means that water issues must be further prioritised in national and city-level policymaking to ensure a resilient and sustainable supply. Yet, water issues rarely receive the attention they deserve.

> **Despite the fact that 90% of natural disasters are water-related, water has often been treated as a niche issue or subset of more prominent climate change concerns.**
>
> Eric White, head of climate adaptation at the World Economic Forum

Climate change worsens existing inequalities. Vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly and those with health conditions, face the greatest risks.

Air pollution, for example, affects women more than men as particulate matter is more likely to settle in women's lungs,[2] increasing health risks like breathing problems and heart disease.


are concerned about air pollution
53%
OF WOMEN
49%
OF MEN


worry about the vulnerability of transportation infrastructure to climate change
41%
AGED 65 & ABOVE
24%
AGED 18-64

The effects of climate change also vary across age groups. As people age, mobility issues often limit their ability to walk or drive independently, making them more dependent on alternative modes of transport.

Cities must develop inclusive resilience plans that address the needs of different groups, while ensuring that communication and support reach everyone.

> **Climate change is an inequality maximiser.**
>
> Ilan Cuperstein, regional director for Latin America at C40 Cities

The public expects all levels of government to work together to build resilience.

50%

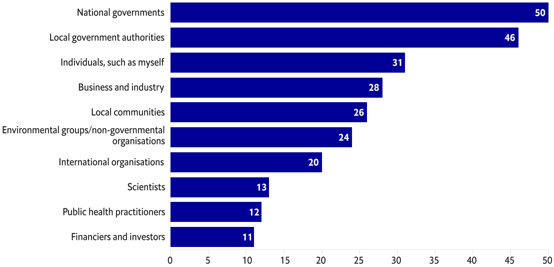
46%

50% of survey respondents believe that **national governments** should lead adaptation efforts in their city, and 46% think that **local governments** should play the primary role.

National governments have the financial resources and regulatory power to implement large-scale infrastructure and policy reforms, while local governments know their city’s unique climate challenges. Balancing top-down and localised approaches is essential for effective mitigation and adaptation.

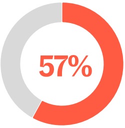
In the hot seat

Who should be primarily responsible for improving adaptation to climate change in your city? (% of respondents)



Source: Economist Impact survey

However, policy misalignment can stifle progress.



of respondents see **“conflicting priorities around climate change across different levels of government”** as a primary barrier to adaptation.

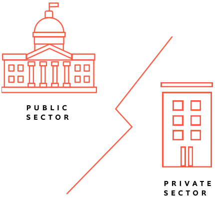
In Jakarta and São Paulo, **political disconnects are particularly pronounced**, cited by 71% and 62% of respondents, respectively.

71%
JAKARTA

62%
SÃO PAULO

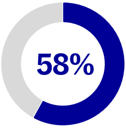
On the road to urban resilience, businesses are critical but underutilised players.

Governments cannot do it alone. Companies have the resources and technical expertise to help develop affordable, localised solutions, bridging the gap between national policy and local implementation.



But collaboration between public and private sectors is often lacking. 57% of respondents cite **"lack of collaboration between public authorities and the private sector"** as a major barrier to effective adaptation.

> The public also believes that companies are not doing enough to address climate change.



of respondents believe that **businesses take minimal action** to facilitate adaptation in cities

Businesses must increase their investment in climate mitigation and adaptation, and view it as a strategic choice that will protect their interests and contribute to broader societal resilience.

> **With the increasing frequency and severity of climate impacts, businesses are beginning to recognise the interconnectedness of their operations and urban infrastructure.**
>
> Cassie Sutherland, managing director for Climate Solutions and Networks at C40 Cities

People are making changes to become more resilient to climate impacts.

Nearly a third of respondents feel personally responsible for climate adaptation in their city. This is driving action.

95%

of respondents are either taking steps to increase their resilience or plan to do so within the next year.

Popular actions undertaken by individuals:

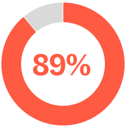
Self-education on climate change and how to adapt

Conserving water resources

Modifying diet and food purchasing habits

Improving energy efficiency and security

Enhancing preparedness for emergencies



Many want to do more, but 89% of respondents **face barriers that prevent them from taking action.**

Main barriers to individual climate action:

Lack of trust in the government and its policies on adaptation

High Cost

Lack of trust in the effectiveness of existing strategies

Cultural reasons

Lack of knowledge

Governments and businesses must build public trust, offer financial support and invest in education and awareness campaigns to empower individuals to take action.

Cities face unprecedented climate risks. Building urban resilience is no longer optional. The path forward requires proactive, coordinated action from all stakeholders: governments, business and communities.

> **Given that financial and human resources are limited, deliberation is needed to ensure that local community priorities are addressed, which requires collaboration among governments and other key stakeholders.**
>
> Gina Ziervogel, director of the African Climate & Development Initiative at the University of Cape Town

To help cities manage climate risks, stakeholders need to:

Invest in climate-resilient infrastructure to reduce disaster recovery costs, maintain essential services and protect public health

Integrate mitigation and adaptation efforts to reduce emissions and prepare for unavoidable climate impacts

Collaborate across government levels and departments to weave resilience into every aspect of urban planning

Harness public–private partnerships to foster innovation and investment that can scale climate solutions at the city level

Rebuild public trust by engaging with local communities and providing transparent communication regarding climate actions

Promote inclusive urban planning to ensure that climate resilience plans prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups like women, children and low-income communities

> **Every investment must be considered with climate in mind.**
>
> Janice Barnes, founder of Climate Adaptation Partners

For more detailed analysis and city-specific insights, read our full report.

Footnotes:

1. The survey solicited opinions from 500 respondents each in Amsterdam, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Jakarta, Madrid, Mumbai, New York City, São Paulo and Tokyo. The gender divide was 45% female and 55% male, all aged 18 or older.
2. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35837410/