Addressing Inequality and Exclusion in the Pandemic's Aftermath

Insights From Cross-Country Opinion Research

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PATHFINDERS

FOR PEACEFUL, JUST AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

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About the Grand Challenge

Inequality and exclusion are among the most pressing political issues of our age. They are on the rise and the anger felt by citizens towards elites perceived to be out-of-touch constitutes a potent political force. Policymakers and the public are clamouring for a set of policy options that can arrest and reverse this trend. The Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion seeks to identify practical and politically viable solutions to meet the targets on equitable and inclusive societies in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Our goal is for national governments, intergovernmental bodies, multilateral organizations, and civil society groups to increase commitments and adopt solutions for equality and inclusion.

The Grand Challenge is an initiative of the Pathfinders, a multi-stakeholder partnership that brings together 42 member states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to accelerate delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion. Pathfinders is hosted at New York University's Center on International Cooperation.

About this Publication

Frontline Heroes mural, Ontario, Canada. Photo credit Flickr User: designwallah, accessed via https://flic. kr/p/2kZKAjN.

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Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the wealth of the top ten billionaires doubled, while 120 million people were pushed into poverty and discriminated groups found themselves far more likely to die from the virus. Now COVID-19 related supply-chain disruptions and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in ballooning food and energy costs with a disproportional impact on the poorest. The ripple effects of the overlapping crises are not just economic—political unrest is already igniting in different parts of the world. The social contact between the state and the public is under severe pressure. Public fears about inequality and exclusion signal how urgent action is and provide the basis for government action.

Pathfinders' polling of eight countries—Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Sweden, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, and South Korea—measured public concern about inequality, and the popularity of different possible policies to address the challenge before the cost-of-living crisis hit. The findings demonstrate an acute awareness of inequality, and deep-seated sense of unfairness whether looking at opportunities or who pays taxes. **The headline result of the poll was the strength of peoples' feelings on divisions within their societies, with eight in ten believing there are divisions causing fault lines in their society.** In all the countries polled except Uruguay (narrowly, 49 percent), an absolute majority of respondents felt that too little is being done to address divisions.

There were strong ideas of class, urban, and ethnic or racial privilege. 67 percent of people across countries surveyed thought that **being born into a low-income family was equivalent to being born with a disability**. The second biggest perceived factors for life chances was being born in a rural area, to a particular ethnic group, or to a family that came to the country (with roughly equal proportions across all surveyed countries). There was also an overwhelming belief that policymaking and power had been captured by the wealthy, with the majority in every country **believing those on higher incomes and big corporations had far more political influence than others**.

Affordable housing was highlighted as the biggest weakness in policy before the pandemic. In terms of where people felt government should be focusing, three policies scored especially well:

— job opportunities for young people

— a fairer justice system

— actions to tackle corruption

Whether in a low-, middle-, or high-income country—there was a striking similarity across question responses. One hypothesis for this similarity is that global economic integration has led to convergence of economic trends across countries, contributing to on overlapping set of grievances across diverse societies. The existing concern and anger over inequality and exclusion even before the current cost-of-living crisis indicates that populations will not be able to withstand another prolonged crisis.

For policymakers and those wishing to bring about policy change it is not just a question of what to argue for, but how to argue for action on inequality. Too often, political narratives work to divide and distract from the real causes of today's problems—what does the opposite look like? The survey considered how we can make stronger arguments about the need for action on inequality and exclusion, testing different "frames"—i.e. using different narratives during the survey to see if answers differed. This included:

1   An ***Injustice*** **framing** that emphasized the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had in terms of increasing injustice in society. It was geared toward raising a sense of urgency about resolving the injustice. The prompt read: *Researchers at New York University have found that although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, it has not affected everyone equally. People from poorer backgrounds and more vulnerable groups have had a higher death rate than others. They have been at much greater risk of infection because they are less able to stay at home, especially if they are essential workers. The poorest have often had to choose between hunger and danger. On the other hand, some of the very richest corporations have seen their profits go up and they are making more money than before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how unfair our society is and how important it will be to tackle these injustices.*

2   An ***Interconnectedness*** **framing** that emphasized the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had in terms of bringing societies closer together. It was geared toward strengthening a sense of solidarity in face of the pandemic. The prompt read: *Researchers at New York University have found that countries with more unequal societies have had higher infection rates during the*

COVID-19 pandemic. The research showed that in this pandemic no one can be safe unless everyone is safe. If one person is sick, we can all get sick. When the economy collapses, everyone is hurt. The biggest lesson from the pandemic is that we are all connected and need each other. The researchers argue we must take more action to tackle discrimination and division in our societies, because more equal societies are in everyone's interest. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that we need get over the divides between people and build a society where everyone is respected and supported.

3   The **Control** group received no narrative treatment, proceeding directly to the questionnaire.

What difference did these prompts make? For the most part there was no statistically significant difference, but there were three key areas where it did shift opinions:

1   **Perceptions of inequality worsening**: Those in the *Injustice* group were more skeptical about the future. Mentioning the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of increasing injustice in society caused the share of respondents seeing inequalities getting worse to increase by some four percentage points, from 47 to 51 percent. Those in the *Interconnectedness* group, on the other hand, revealed a somewhat more optimistic streak—45 percent see inequalities getting worse (which was still a strong plurality of respondents).

2   **Perception of wealthy people in terms of tax system fairness**: Those who received the *Injustice* treatment were more bothered by the perceived fact that some wealthy individuals don't pay their fair share of taxes, with only 12 percent saying that it did not bother them compared to 14 percent of the control group.

3   **Willingness to provide more support for poorer countries**: For those in high- and middle-income countries, 35 percent of the control group felt that their countries should be more generous towards more disadvantaged countries, but the *Interconnectedness* narrative group had more of an altruistic response with 40 percent answering positively.

These small differences can be significant in trying to shape narratives. However, the overall survey results show us that there is a clear demand for governments to develop policy to address inequality, not just rhetorically, but through concrete action to deliver visible material change, tackle division, and build solidarity across groups, as well as to secure trust and credibility in institutions.

Introduction

During the first quarter of 2022, signs continued to emerge that suggest the most acute stage of the pandemic is slowly drawing towards its end. COVID-19, a black-swan event that disrupted the world, brought into sharp focus systemic issues surrounding inequality and exclusion that well predated 2020. Societies that experienced deeper societal inequities before the crisis ended up being more vulnerable to both the infection spread and the related economic recession.[1] The past two years also demonstrated that inequities are neither a high- nor low-income country issue, and that tackling them is a shared global necessity. As governments now engage in laying out policies geared toward the post-pandemic recovery, there is a rare window of opportunity to recalibrate priorities in a way that responds to updated social sensitivities.

In order to achieve this goal, we need to better understand current views of the general population, including their main concerns and preferences regarding public policies going forward. To that end, Pathfinders has commissioned a global opinion survey. Over 17,000 adult respondents across eight countries representing diverse world regions and income levels—Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, and Uruguay— were polled by Pathfinders and Kantar between June 4 and July 23, 2021. We then followed the poll with in-depth interviews and focus groups in August 2021, involving over sixty participants across four of these countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Sierra Leone, and Tunisia. The exercise offered a potent combination of quantitative insights and individual testimonials on social sentiment eighteen months after the COVID-19 pandemic's global spread and ideas on how this sentiment can be best mapped onto policy action.

1 Deepening Social Divisions

The Pathfinders global survey revealed the extent to which people are acutely aware of deepening inequalities and expect decisive action from policymakers. Similarities in poll answers across the diverse sample of countries are striking, pointing to convergence in perceptions on the global scale. Around half of those polled (48 percent) believe there will be more inequality following the pandemic, while only 18 percent think the situation will improve. Those representing a higher level of education across surveyed countries are even more likely to say inequality will worsen (54 percent), as are younger respondents (51 percent in the age group 25-34). Disturbingly, the exact same share of respondents, 67 percent, believe that being born in a low-income family or being born in poor health puts a child at a significant disadvantage in life, putting those two predicaments at a similar footing. Around half of the polled people believe that a child born in a rural area, in a particular ethnic group, or in a family of migrants is also at a significant disadvantage in their country. Around a third of respondents think gender and religion play a significant role as well.

In general, some 80 percent of respondents expressed their concern over existing social divisions and 65 percent stated that too little is done to overcome them. The situation points to the urgency with which politicians should engage in renewing the social contract over the coming years. Renewing a social contract is a complex undertaking that requires building a political coalition which can carry out necessary reforms and make them sustainable. The global survey sheds light on nuanced differences between genders, income, and age groups across countries, which can make or break such reforms. For instance, young people displayed consistently a more altruistic stance across countries, both in terms of helping low-income families domestically as well as supporting global redistribution efforts

Figure 1 — Country perceptions on levels of inequality post-COVID
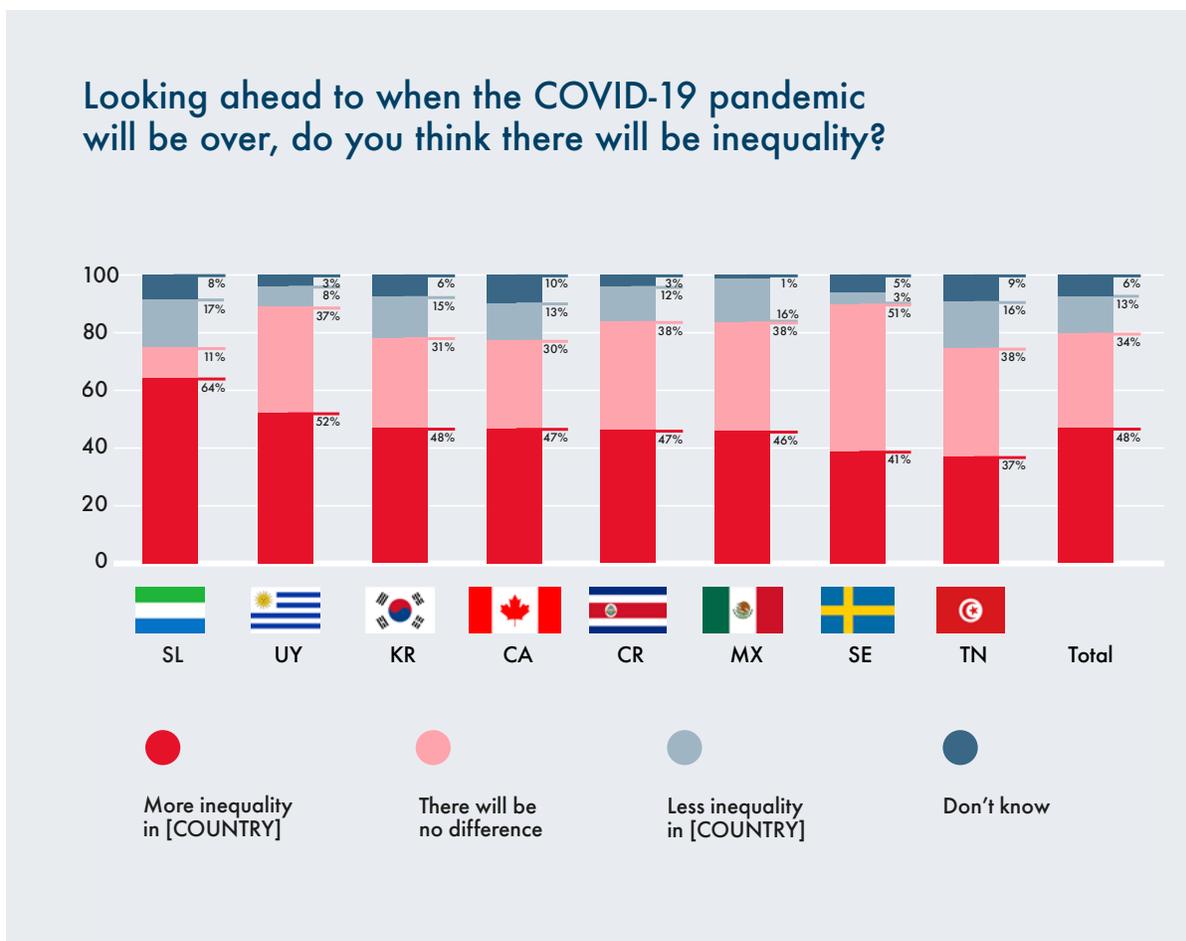
Looking ahead to when the COVID-19 pandemic
will be over, do you think there will be inequality?

	SL	UY	KR	CA	CR	MX	SE	TN	Total
Don't know	8%	3%	6%	10%	3%	1%	5%	9%	6%
Less inequality	17%	8%	15%	13%	12%	16%	3%	16%	13%
There will be no difference	11%	37%	31%	30%	38%	38%	51%	38%	34%
More inequality	64%	52%	48%	47%	47%	46%	41%	37%	48%

- More inequality in [COUNTRY]
- There will be no difference
- Less inequality in [COUNTRY]
- Don't know

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay

The overarching impression emerging from the global survey results as to why people are so pessimistic is their concern over deepening social divisions. Initially, the main purpose of this part of the survey was to delineate differences between societies that have had a recent history of conflict and fragility and those that have not. However, the sense of deepening social divisions turned out to easily cut across geographic and income differences; all of the polled societies showed a pronounced sense of social divisions. Sweden had the highest share of respondents sensing social divisions in general (a share of people seeing either some divisions or large ones) and Tunisia had the highest share of respondents seeing large social divisions. On average, 80 percent of respondent agreed that there are divisions in their society that have an

influence on their life, to either a large or some extent. These divisions then directly link with tensions in a society, especially in countries where the perception that division is widespread (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 —Perceptions of social divisions among polled countries

In your country today, to what extent do you feel that there are divisions in society that have an influence on the way we live together?

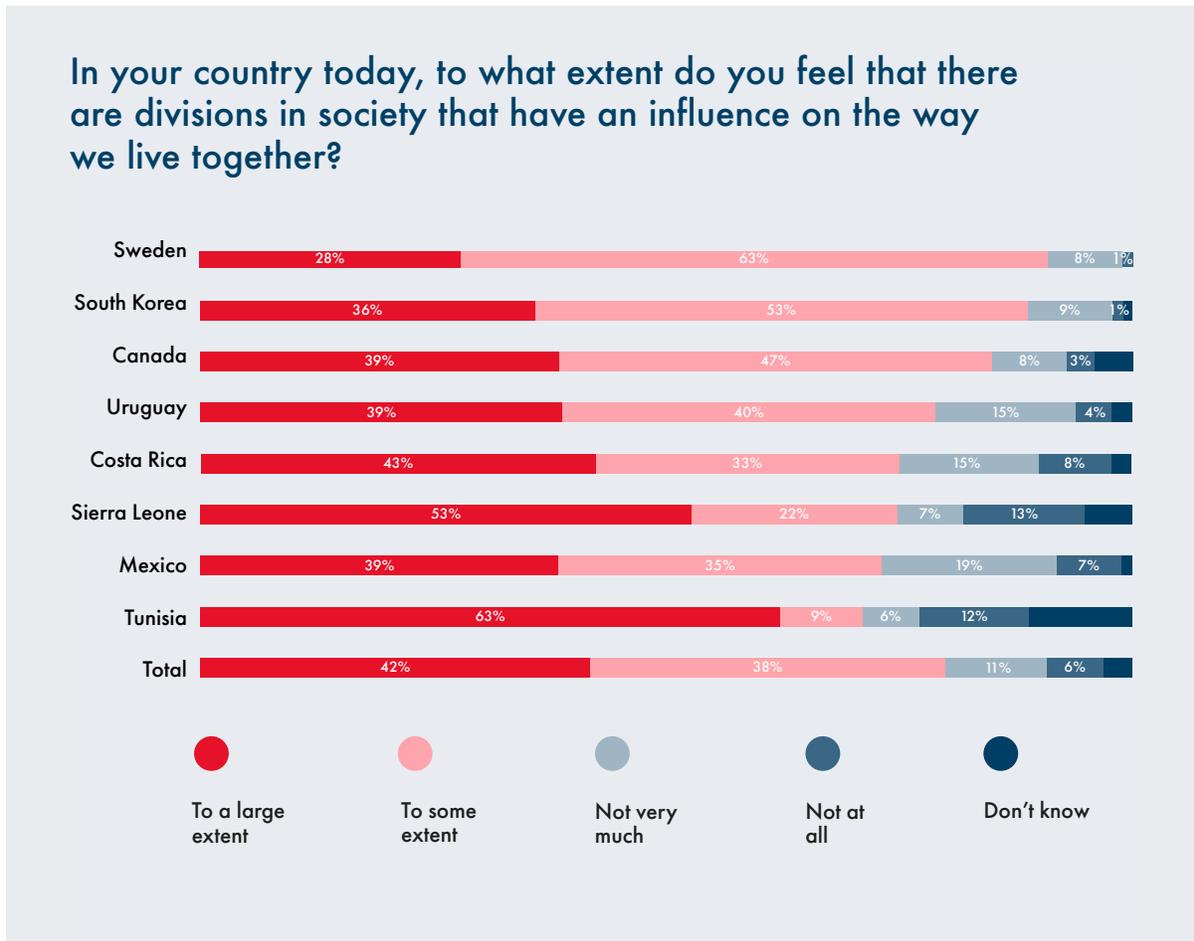| Country	To a large extent	To some extent	Not very much	Not at all	Don't know
Sweden	28%	63%	8%		1%
South Korea	36%	53%	9%		1%
Canada	39%	47%	8%	3%	
Uruguay	39%	40%	15%	4%	
Costa Rica	43%	33%	15%	8%	
Sierra Leone	53%	22%	7%	13%	
Mexico	39%	35%	19%	7%	
Tunisia	63%	9%	6%	12%	
Total	42%	38%	11%	6%	

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

Figure 3 — Country attitudes on impact of social divisions
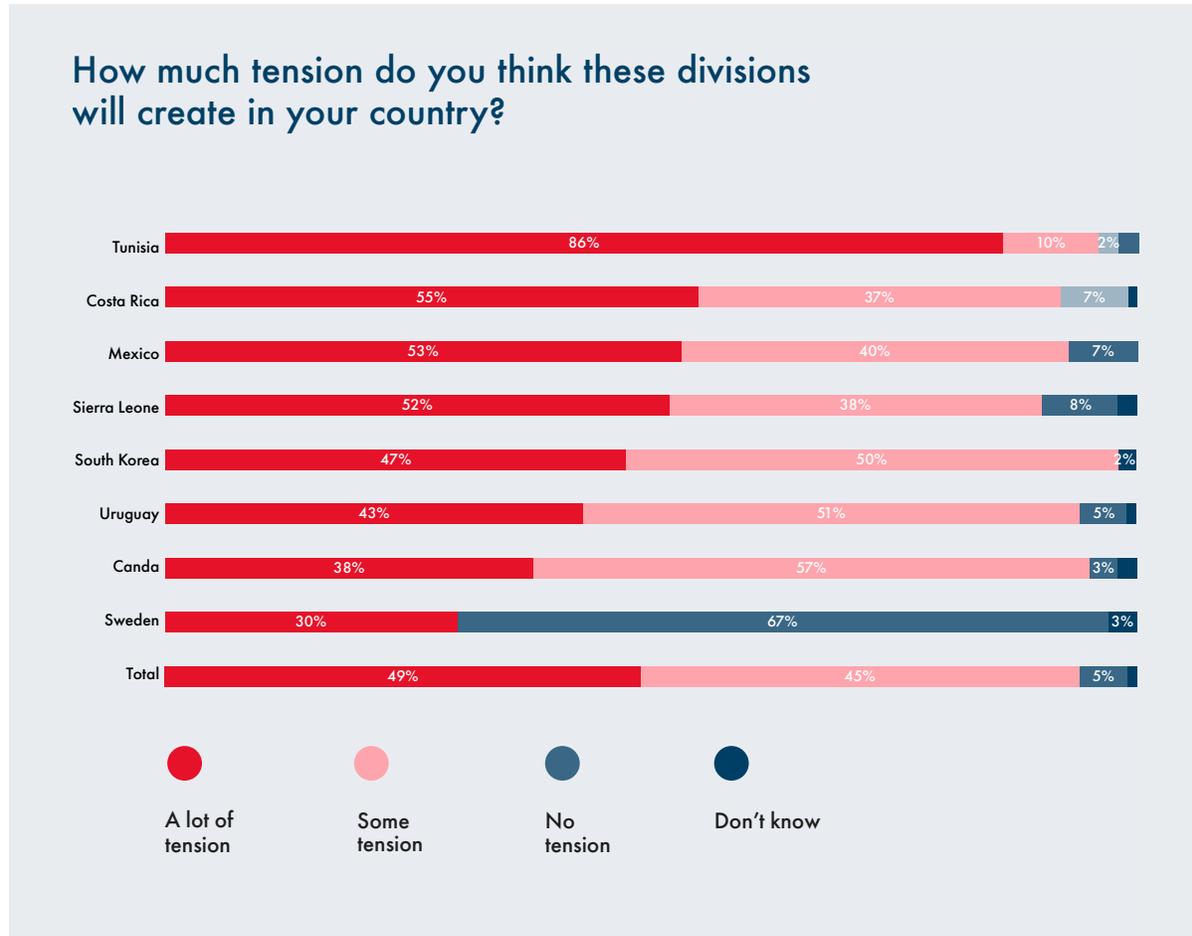
How much tension do you think these divisions will create in your country?

Country	A lot of tension	Some tension	No tension	Don't know
Tunisia	86%	10%	2%	
Costa Rica	55%	37%	7%	
Mexico	53%	40%	7%	
Sierra Leone	52%	38%	8%	
South Korea	47%	50%	2%	
Uruguay	43%	51%	5%	
Canda	38%	57%	3%	
Sweden	30%	67%		3%
Total	49%	45%	5%	

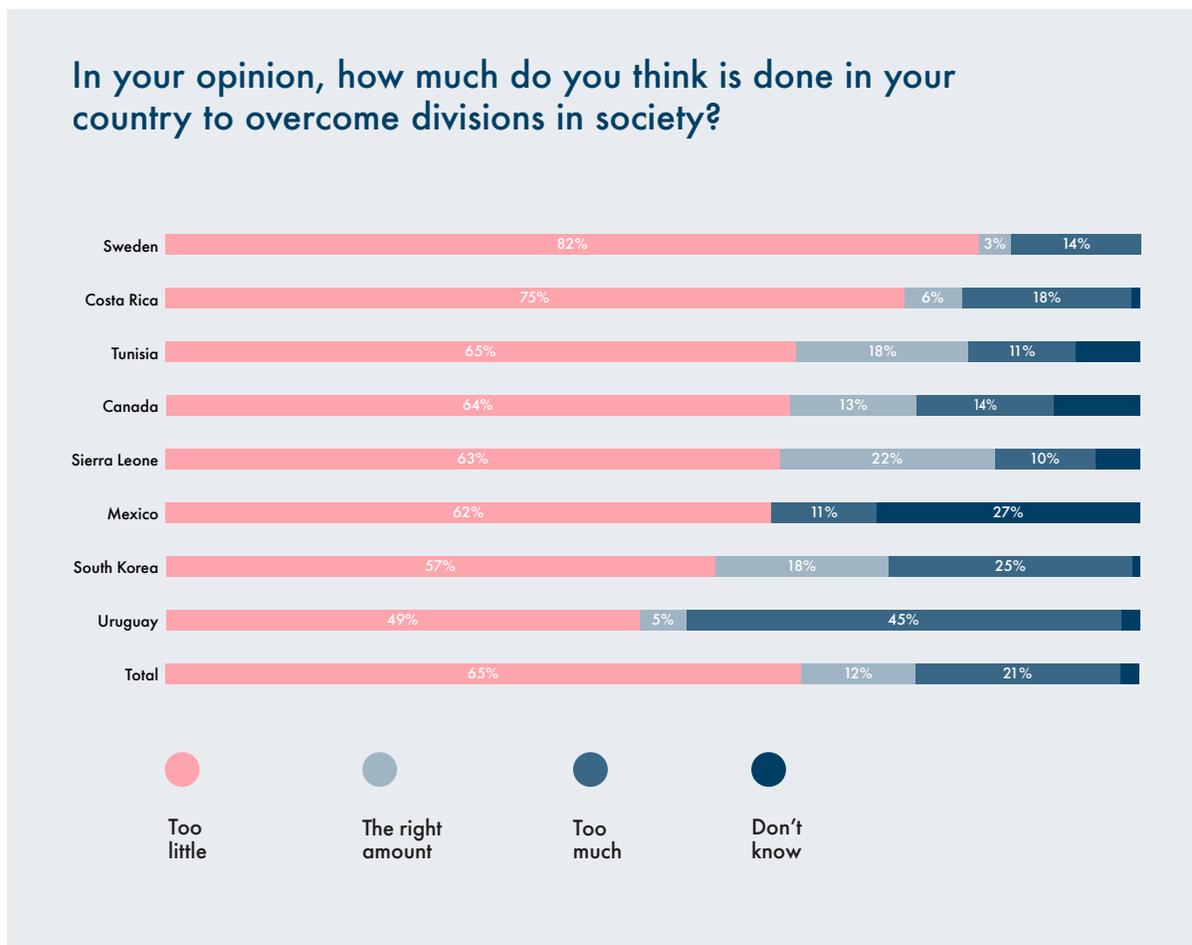● A lot of tension ● Some tension ● No tension ● Don't know

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

While these questions have not been asked in this format in previous surveys, preventing a longitudinal comparison, there is still a way to substantiate the hypothesis that the currently experienced levels of social divisions and tensions are unusually high. Overall, around two thirds of respondents across countries agreed that not enough is being done to overcome divisions in their country (Figure 4) and only 36 percent of respondents across polled countries, with little regional variation, thought that their governments were doing well on overcoming social divisions before the pandemic.

What kind of divisions were upsetting people the most? Quantitative data as well as focus groups and in-depth interviews revealed a wide array of factors driving the public sentiment, most notably centered on uneven access to

opportunities and disparities in political agency stemming from differences in wealth and the place of residence. Moreover, the issues surrounding racial and ethnic identity were raised frequently as important. For instance, in Canada, the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous persons at school sites was referenced a number of times as an example of systemic bias

Figure 4 — Country attitudes on overcoming societal divisions

In your opinion, how much do you think is done in your country to overcome divisions in society?

Country	Too little	The right amount	Too much	Don't know
Sweden	82%		3%	14%
Costa Rica	75%		6%	18%
Tunisia	65%	18%	11%	
Canada	64%	13%	14%	
Sierra Leone	63%	22%	10%	
Mexico	62%		11%	27%
South Korea	57%	18%	25%	
Uruguay	49%	5%	45%	
Total	65%	12%	21%	

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

Unfair distribution of political agency appears to be a big driver of perceived social divisions. Less than half of people (48 percent) think that their government takes views of people like them into account across all surveyed countries (47 percent think it doesn't). Over two-thirds think that people with

a higher level of education (71 percent) and people who live in towns and cities (66 percent) wield more political influence than others. More than half think the same of people born in the country (61 percent) and of men compared to women (58 percent).

Across all surveyed countries, perceived excess of power and lack of accountability enjoyed by richer members of a society is a source of public ire. Seventy-nine percent of respondents agree that big business owners have more political influence than others in their country. Seventy-eight percent think the same of people with higher income. Eighty-three percent believe that some wealthy people find ways to avoid paying their fair share of taxes and 80 percent think the same about large corporations. Eighty-two percent see it as bothersome that some people avoid paying fair taxes in general. A large majority (63 percent) of people think that the government in their country is largely influenced by a few wealthy individuals, interest groups, or businesses, and a large majority (71 percent) of people want to limit the influence of money in politics. More than three fourths (76 percent) are bothered by the lack of transparency in the tax system and 65 percent are aggravated by the amount they must pay in taxes.

Finally, many respondents perceived the political system not only to be skewed toward the rich, but also corrupt and broken. Corruption was a potent driver of frustration that surfaced during the interviews. Numerous interviewees talked about concrete cases of government graft that led to them lose belief in the fairness of the system. Among the poll respondents, 72 percent strongly agreed or tended to agree that tax avoidance is equivalent with corruption, which combined with people's conviction that the rich don't pay their fair share in taxes, implies that the latter are seen to have rigged the system. Undelivered election promises featured closely as a reason for loss of trust in system too. On a positive note, good government performance on combatting the COVID-19 pandemic and arranging access to vaccines appears to reverse some of that perceived loss of trust in the system, according to the interviews. When asked which actions would increase their trust in the political system, two-thirds (65 percent) of respondents expressed a general desire to give more voice to underrepresented groups. In addition, a qualified majority (64 percent) mentioned increasing the number of women participating in politics. Just over half (52 percent) of all respondents were in favor of giving more power to the local governments

Figure 5 — Key drivers of perception of social divisions

Uneven access to **opportunities**

Unfair distribution of **political agency**

Identity-based **divisions**

Corruption and lack of accountability

Source: NYU CIC 2021

Our findings are consistent with other recent research, which engages with the issues of inequality, exclusion, and social divisions in the aftermath of the outbreak of the pandemic. The 2021 Trust Barometer Report by Edelman found a record number of countries with a double-digit trust inequality measure, a metric that Edelman devised and has been tracking since 2012 to gauge the gap between *informed public* and *mass public* in terms of trust in government, media, business, and NGOs.[2] Researchers at the London School of Economics found that pandemics make societies more averse to inequality, escalating negative perception of existing social divides and inequities.[3] Finally, Pew polling research done in seventeen high-income economies showed unequivocally that people in those countries see their societies more divided now than before the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] All these reports, including ours, point to the urgency with which newly deepened divisions should be addressed

2 Framing of the Narrative

How questions and polices are framed matters. This delicate aspect of policymaking can make or break reforms and therefore, we wanted to capture it in our global survey. To that end, we randomly assigned poll participants to one of three groups: *control, injustice, and interconnectedness*. The groups were statistically comparable in key dimensions such as age, gender, and income. Before answering the questionnaire, the respondents in the latter two groups received a framing treatment. This approach allows us to compare baseline results with those in groups affected by the treatment. This treatment can be summarized as follows:

- The ***Injustice* framing** emphasized the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had in terms of increasing injustice in society. It was geared toward raising a sense of urgency about resolving the injustice. The prompt read:

  Researchers at New York University have found that although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, it has not affected everyone equally. People from poorer backgrounds and more vulnerable groups have had a higher death rate than others. They have been at much greater risk of infection because they are less able to stay at home, especially if they are essential workers. The poorest have often had to choose between hunger and danger. On the other hand, some of the very richest corporations have seen their profits go up and they are making more money than before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how unfair our society is and how important it will be to tackle these injustices.

- The ***Interconnectedness* framing** emphasized the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had in terms of bringing societies closer together. It was geared toward strengthening a sense of solidarity in face of the pandemic. The prompt read:

  Researchers at New York University have found that countries with more unequal societies have had higher infection rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research showed that in this pandemic no one can be safe unless everyone is safe. If one person is sick, we can all get sick. When the economy collapses, everyone is hurt. The biggest lesson from the pandemic

is that we are all connected and need each other. The researchers argue we must take more action to tackle discrimination and division in our societies, because more equal societies are in everyone's interest. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that we need get over the divides between people and build a society where everyone is respected and supported.

• The **Control** group received no narrative treatment, proceeding directly to the questionnaire

The aim of this experimental component was to test whether a particular framing would have an effect on respondents' answers to the perception and policy-related questions in the survey.
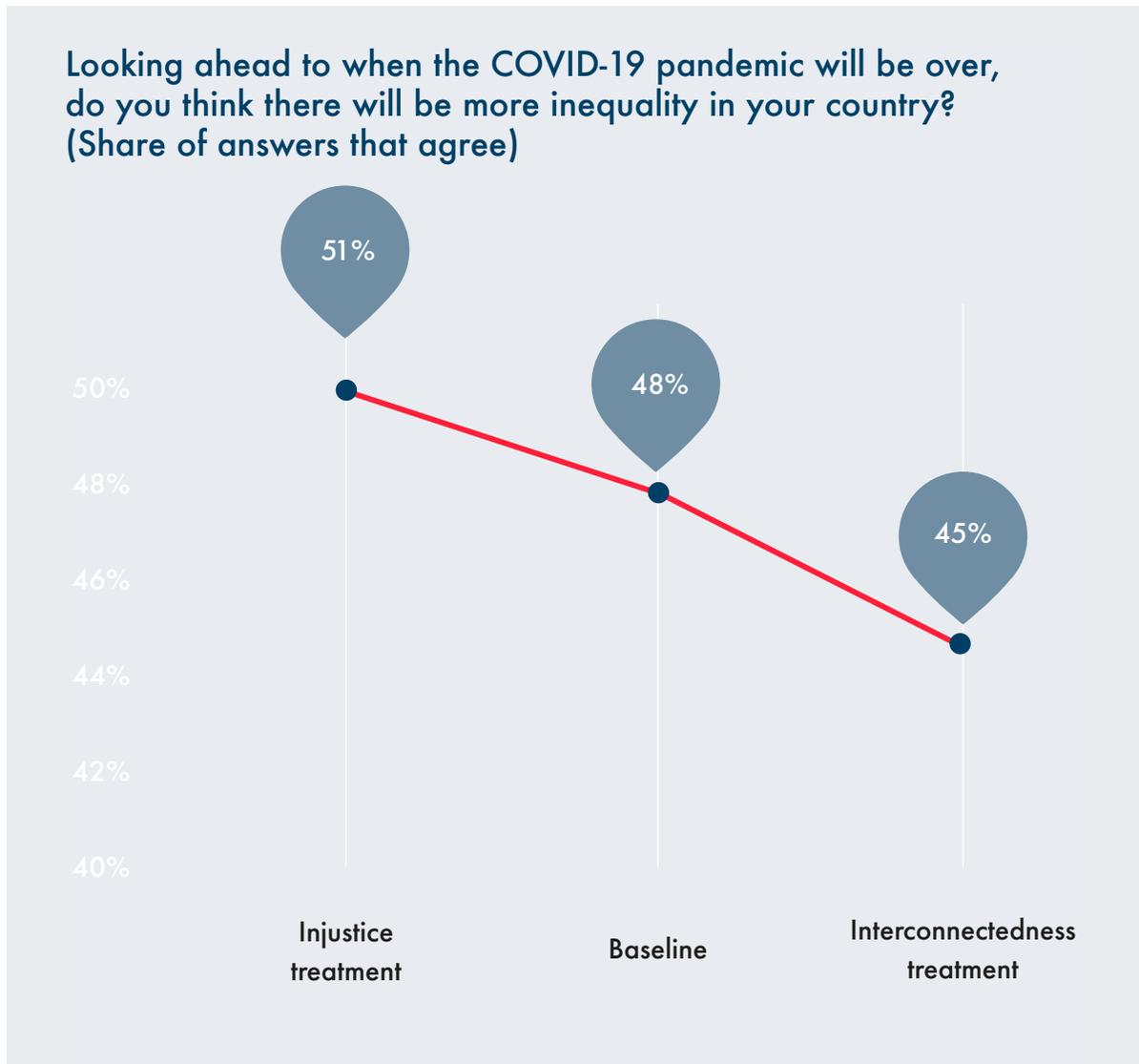
This framing stimulus was repeated two times during the interview. As it turned out, both narratives had a statistically significant impact on participants' responses for some questions, albeit usually a small one. Below we would like to highlight some of the key areas where socio-political framing mattered.

The narrative treatments had a significant effect on respondents' expectations regarding inequality in their country in the future. As we stated in the Introduction, some 48 percent of respondents overall expect inequality to worsen in years to come. This overlaps well with the control group in our study, in which 47 percent of people agreed. However, those subject to the narrative treatment returned somewhat different results:

• Those in the *Injustice* group were skeptical about the future. Mentioning the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of increasing injustice in society caused the share of respondents seeing inequalities getting worse to increase by some four percentage points, up to 51 percent. The injustice treatment had a highly significant effect in Uruguay.

• Those in the *Interconnectedness* group, on the other hand, revealed a somewhat more optimistic streak—45 percent see inequalities getting worse (which was still a strong plurality of respondents). The *interconnectedness* treatment has an especially significant effect in Sweden, Canada, and Mexico.

Between the narrative treatment that made respondents more pessimistic (the *injustice*-centered framing) and the one that makes them more optimistic than the baseline (the *interconnectedness*-centered framing), there is a gap of some six percentage points in people's responses, which is big enough to make a difference in the policymaking context. An econometric analysis proved that both of the framings had a statistically significant impact (at α = five percent) in terms of shifting respondents' answers away from the baseline
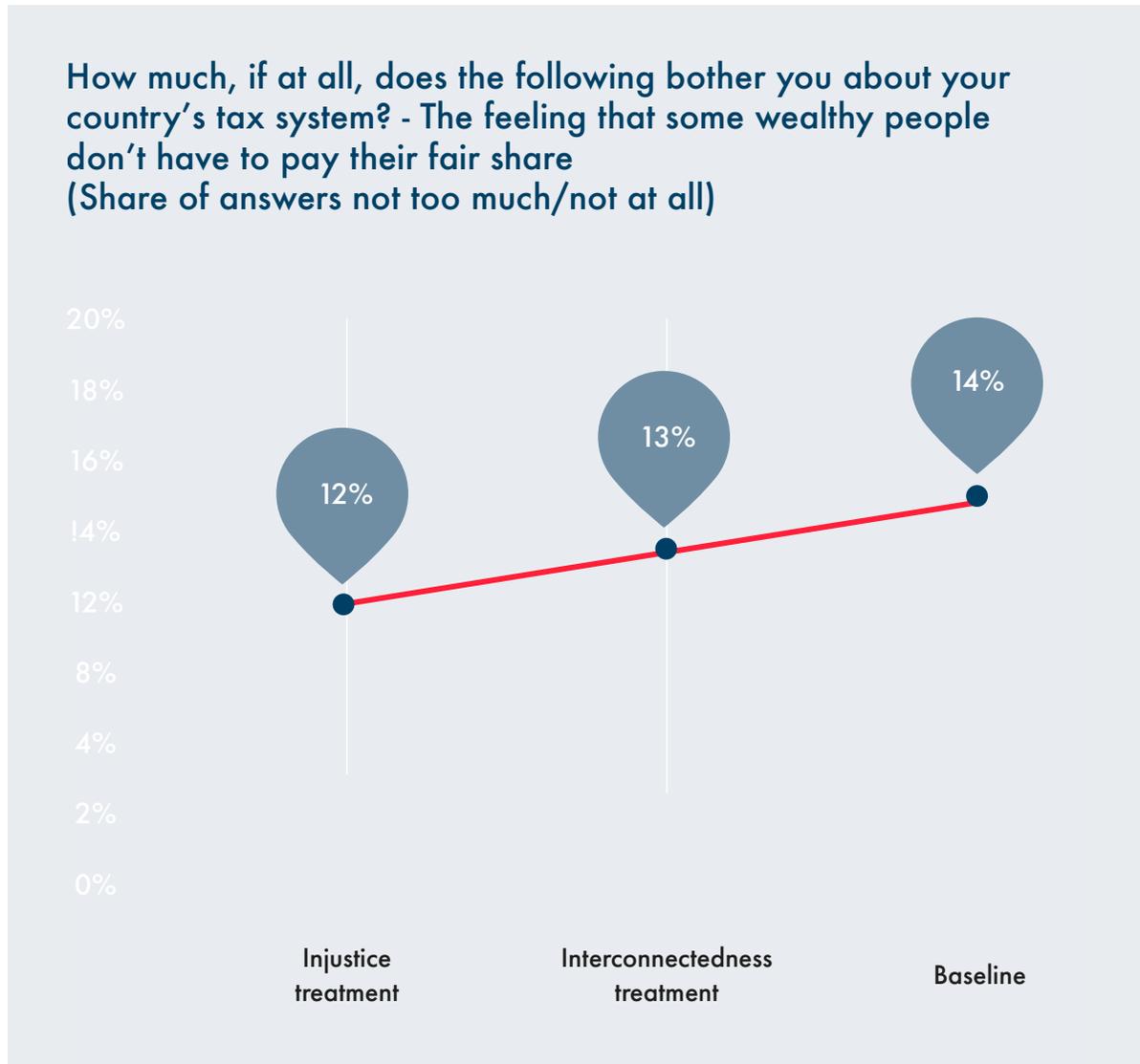
Figure 6 — Post-COVID expectations of in-country inequality

Looking ahead to when the COVID-19 pandemic will be over, do you think there will be more inequality in your country? (Share of answers that agree)

51%

48%

45%

50%

48%

46%

44%

42%

40%

Injustice treatment

Baseline

Interconnectedness treatment

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

Another area where a narrative mattered for poll participants' responses was perception of wealthy people in terms of tax system fairness. Those who received the *injustice* treatment again turned out to be more pessimistic. Specifically, they were more bothered by the perceived fact that some wealthy individuals don't pay their fair share of taxes. The *interconnectedness* narrative also resulted in a small difference, albeit one that was not statistically significant difference from the baseline
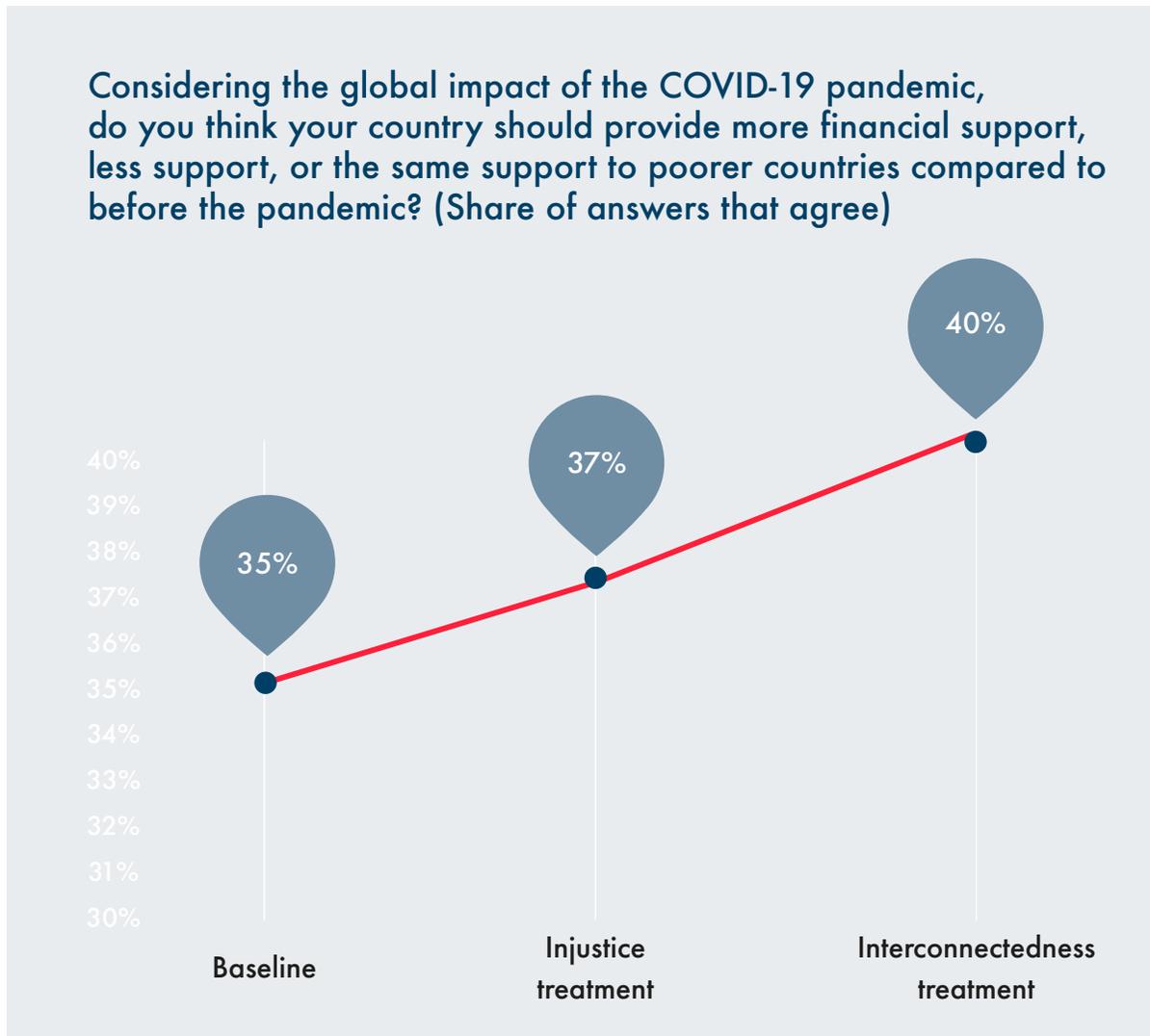
Figure 7 — Perception of wealthy people and tax system fairness

How much, if at all, does the following bother you about your country's tax system? - The feeling that some wealthy people don't have to pay their fair share
(Share of answers not too much/not at all)

20%			
18%			14%
16%	12%	13%	
!4%			
12%			
8%			
4%			
2%			
0%			
	Injustice treatment	Interconnectedness treatment	Baseline

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

Finally, in one instance interconnectedness elicited a statically significant difference in responses while the injustice narrative did not. That was the case for the question regarding international financial solidarity which was only asked of respondents in high and middle-income countries in the sample—namely, Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sweden, and Uruguay. Among poll participants in those countries, respondents in the interconnectedness narrative group had an altruistic response rate that was five percentage points higher.5

Figure 8 — Attitudes towards international financial solidarity

Considering the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, do you think your country should provide more financial support, less support, or the same support to poorer countries compared to before the pandemic? (Share of answers that agree)

40%

37%

35%

40%
39%
38%
37%
36%
35%
34%
33%
32%
31%
30%

Baseline

Injustice
treatment

Interconnectedness
treatment

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

The power of narratives in shaping public perceptions and rallying support for reforms has been extensively researched. Kate French et al. wrote that "narrative frames form the central organizing idea and turn facts into a story by selecting and emphasizing some attributes over others."[6] Experiments showed that people can react altruistically or egoistically depending on the narrative framing in all kinds of contexts: some studies tested people's individual readiness to offer carpooling to members of their communities,[7] while others explored their readiness to support fiscal redistribution toward racial and ethnic minorities at the national scale. It has been also theorized that choice of a moral framing for political arguments can lead to a candidate losing an election.[8] In all those instances, narratives play a tangible role in shaping human opinions and behavior. It comes then as no surprise that the same is the case with people's preferences regarding the post-pandemic policies.

Municipal Election Costa Rica 2010, Photo Credit: Flickr User Ingmar Zahorsky, https://www.flickr.com/photos/ingmar/5243818933.
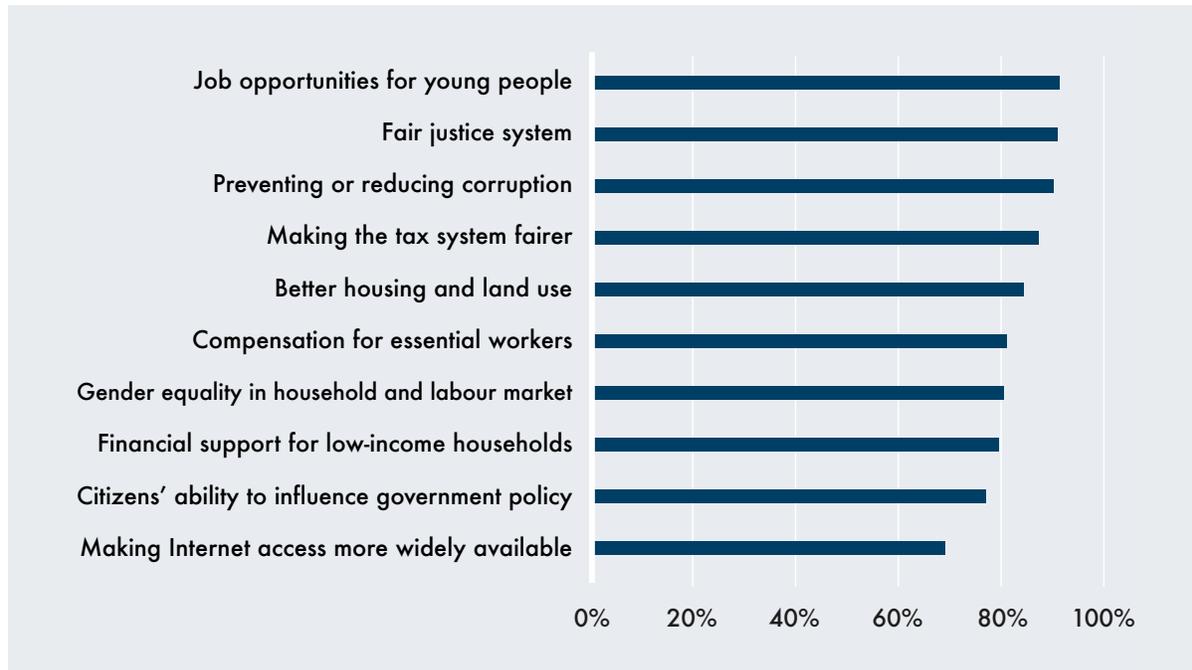
3 Policy Priorities and Coalition Building Post-COVID-19

When people were asked about policy priorities they would like their governments to pursue in the post-pandemic context, a clear picture emerged. These are summarized below in Figure 6. Three policies scored especially well:

- More job opportunities for young people

- A fairer justice system

- Less corruption

A common thread that connects them is a demand for a fairer, more just society that enables everyone to thrive in their own capacity. This is different from demands for compensatory redistribution, such as financial support for low-income families, which while still supported by some 80 percent of respondents, scored lower than proposals that would even the playing field. It is important to note that we did not ask if people wanted education and health to be a policy priority. This decision was made because of the extent to which these two subjects had been covered in past surveys and in because we wanted to make room for other issues that haven't been typically the focus of development

Figure 9 – What are your policy priorities for the future?

Job opportunities for young people
Fair justice system
Preventing or reducing corruption
Making the tax system fairer
Better housing and land use
Compensation for essential workers
Gender equality in household and labour market
Financial support for low-income households
Citizens' ability to influence government policy
Making Internet access more widely available

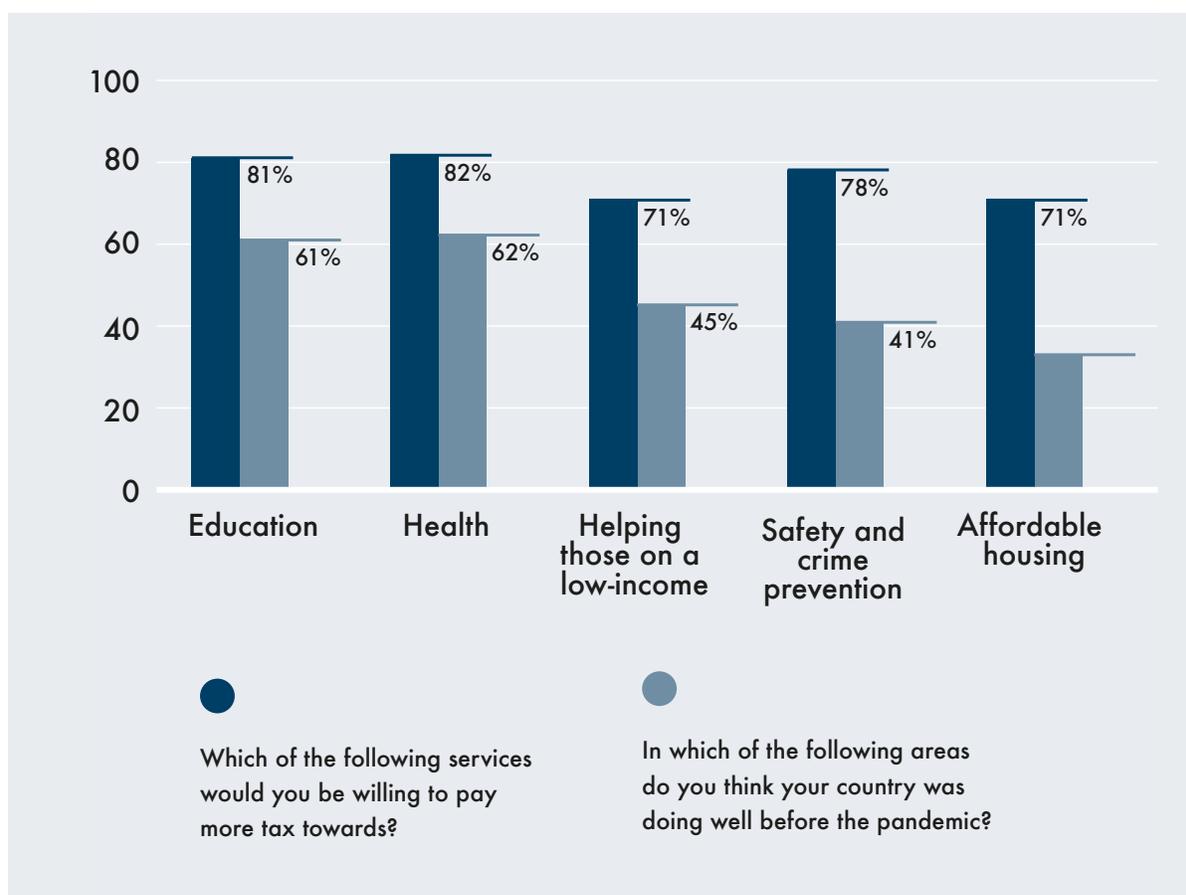0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

To further explore people's support for policies, we asked which areas they would actually be willing to spend more money in taxes on. Figure 9 brings together perceptions of where people feel governments had been doing well or poorly alongside the willingness to pay more taxes. The two areas where governments were doing best before the pandemic (healthcare and education) were also the ones toward which the highest shares of respondents were willing to pay more taxes, suggesting potentially a positive demonstration effect. On the other end of the spectrum, affordable housing received the least support in terms of people willing to pay additional taxes.

Despite challenges caused by the pandemic, there is prevailing sentiment across the polled countries to help those most in need within their societies. Seventy-nine percent of respondents expressed their preference for governments to financially support low-income families and then 71 percentage stated they would be ready to spend more in taxes toward that purpose. Such support is even stronger among young people (83 percent versus 76 percent), those with a lower level of education (87 percent versus 72 percent), and those with a lower economic status (86 percent versus 74 percent), and stays consistently above 70 percent across various categories included in the survey. This sense of solidarity with society's poorest is also apparent at the
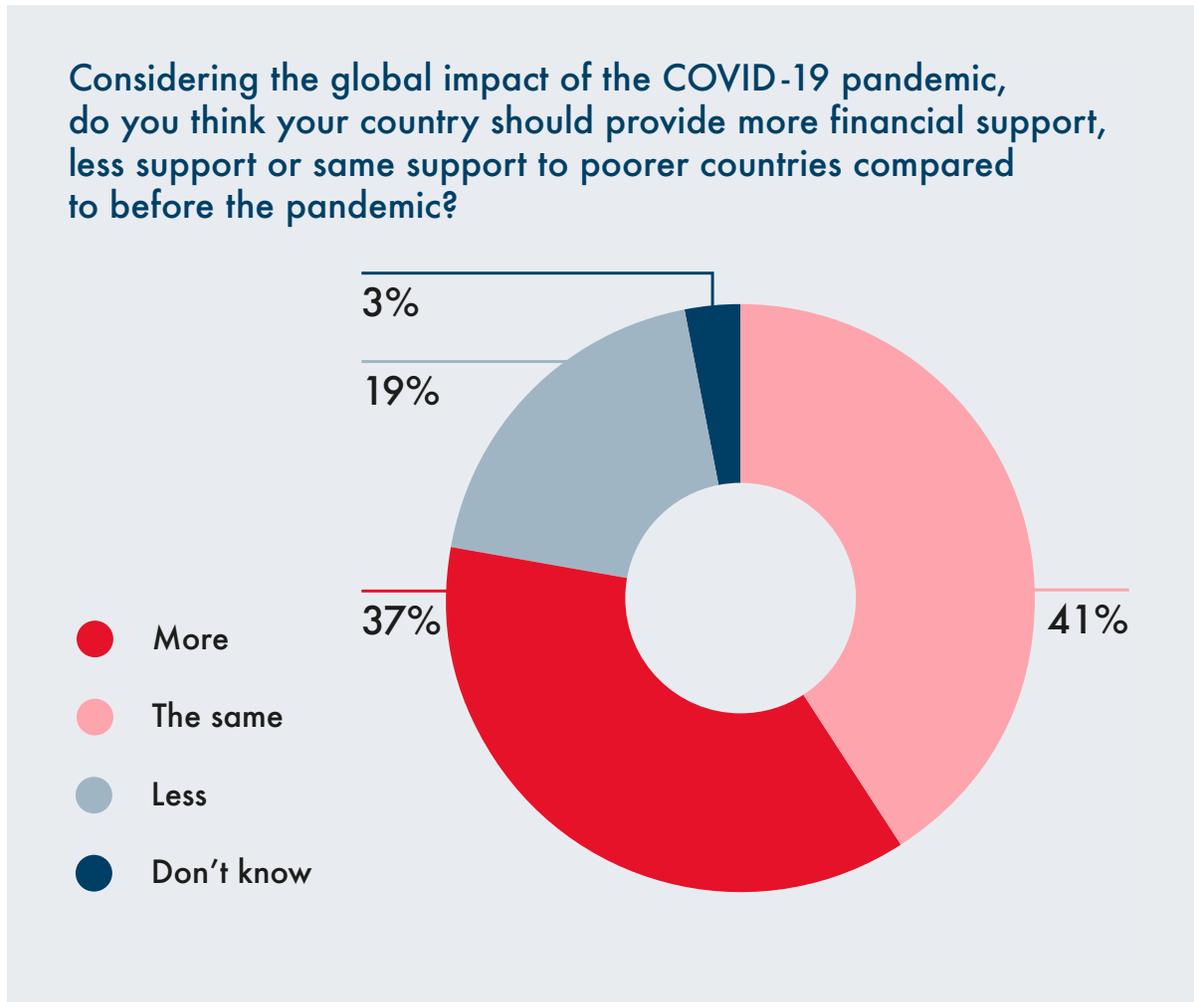
international level. The majority of respondents in all countries, but especially in middle-income countries, want to either maintain or expand existing levels of financial support for poorer countries (see Figure 10 below). Similar to the question on financial solidarity the most vulnerable within the society, the youngest age group (18–24) was the most likely to express their support for global financial solidarity (55 percent). Those with the lowest education (primary and below) were also more likely to share a more altruistic attitude. Affluent members of society, on the other hand, were the most reluctant to endorse international financial support (with only 29 percent of respondents in the highest-earner category supporting more financial solidarity)

Figure 10 – The gaps between where people think government was doing well before the pandemic and where they are willing to pay more taxes

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.
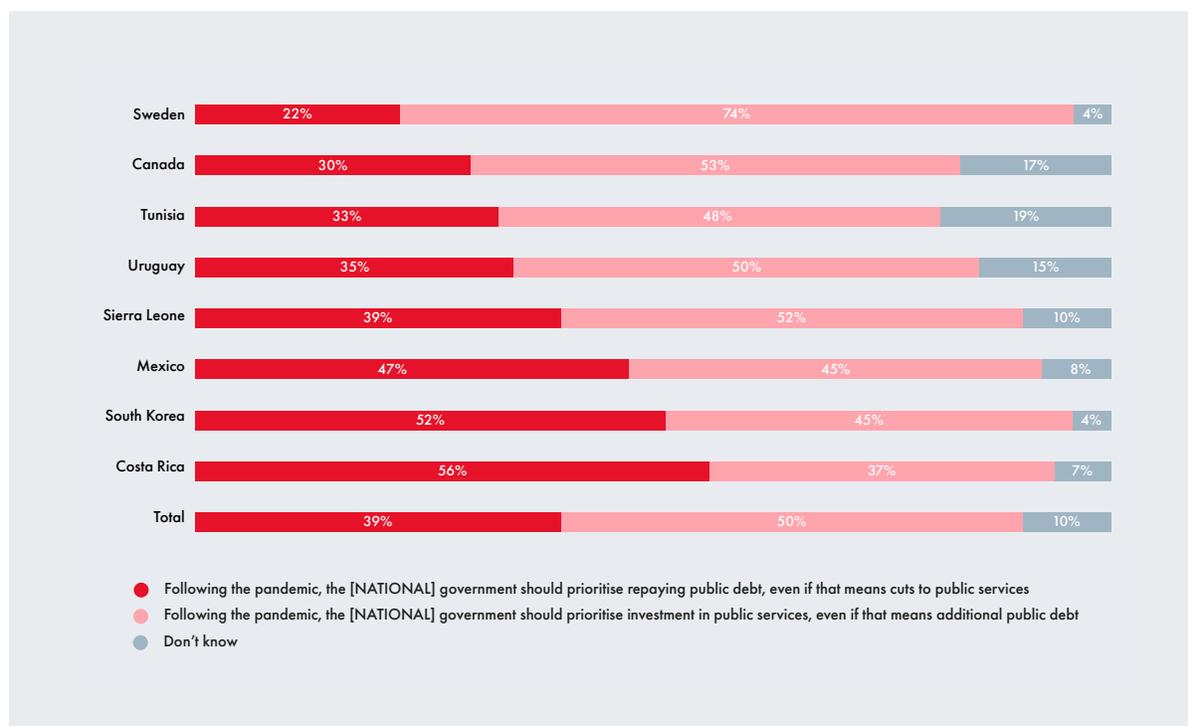
Figure 11 – Attitudes toward global financial solidarity across analyzed countries

Considering the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, do you think your country should provide more financial support, less support or same support to poorer countries compared to before the pandemic?

- 🔴 More
- 🌸 The same
- ⬤ Less
- 🔵 Don't know

3%
19%
37%
41%

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.
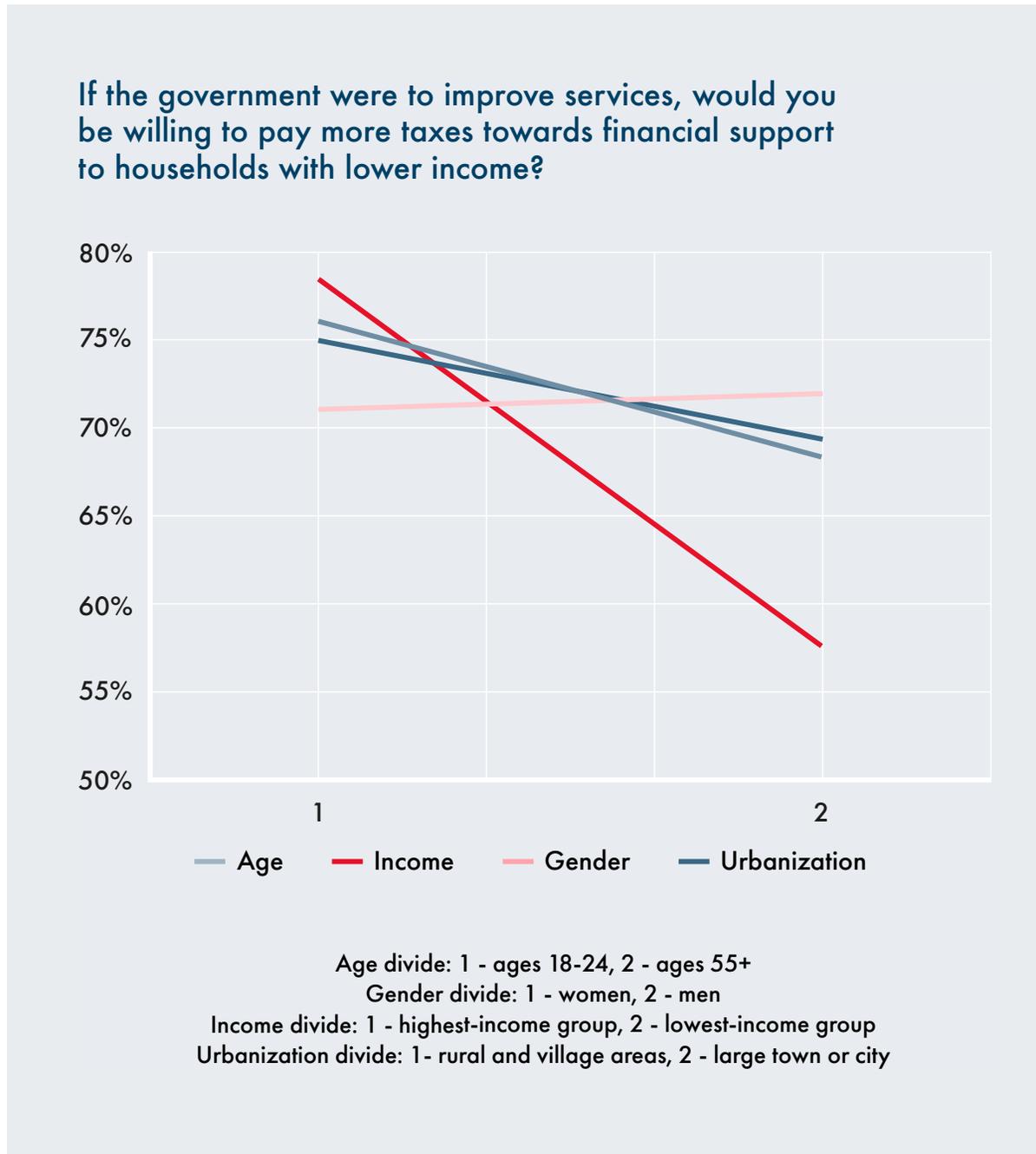
Most of the polled countries also displayed a preference for sustained public spending following the pandemic, even if that would mean incurring more national debt. In general, 50 percent of respondents across countries supported this stance while only 39 percent held an opposite view, implying that delivering on policy priorities might be politically and fiscally feasible. However, a variety of stances on the subject among countries reveals that that scope differs across societies (see Figure 12. below) The two high-income countries in our sample, Sweden and Canada, are the ones most ready to prioritize investment in public services. This is consistent with external research that shows that richer societies, enjoying preferential access to lending terms, are now in a mood to spend. This follows a period of very activist public sector behavior during the most acute stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which appears to have compelled many societies to embrace the notion of *bigger government.*[9]

Figure 12 – Preference on public services delivery vs. repaying public debt

Country	Prioritise repaying public debt	Prioritise investment in public services	Don't know
Sweden	22%	74%	4%
Canada	30%	53%	17%
Tunisia	33%	48%	19%
Uruguay	35%	50%	15%
Sierra Leone	39%	52%	10%
Mexico	47%	45%	8%
South Korea	52%	45%	4%
Costa Rica	56%	37%	7%
Total	39%	50%	10%

● Following the pandemic, the [NATIONAL] government should prioritise repaying public debt, even if that means cuts to public services
● Following the pandemic, the [NATIONAL] government should prioritise investment in public services, even if that means additional public debt
● Don't know

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

Figure 13 – Willingness to pay higher taxes to support lower income households

If the government were to improve services, would you be willing to pay more taxes towards financial support to households with lower income?

Age divide: 1 - ages 18-24, 2 - ages 55+
Gender divide: 1 - women, 2 - men
Income divide: 1 - highest-income group, 2 - lowest-income group
Urbanization divide: 1- rural and village areas, 2 - large town or city

Source: NYU CIC and Kantar 2021; countries: Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay.

For most the questions in the global survey, the ones gauging social perceptions as well as those about policy preferences, there was a surprising level of consistency in answers various across socio-demographic categories, such as gender, age, or income level. At the same time, there are some nuanced differences among respondents representing diverse profiles. These can inform the process of designing and communicating reforms in a way that makes them politically feasible. The question regarding financial support for low-income households, which was the most straightforward redistributive policy, represents broader patterns found in the data. Seventy-nine percent of respondents in the lowest income quintile supported the measure, while only 57 percent of those in the highest one did. Looking at age groups, 76 percent of those in the youngest age group (18-24) supported the measure while 68 percent of those in the oldest one (55+) did. In terms of the rural/urban divide, 75 percent of those representing rural areas and 69 percent of those living in cities were in favor. Finally, when it came to gender, there was no difference whatsoever, with 71 percent of both men and women supporting the redistributive measure.

This is especially relevant in the context of the pandemic-time policies, which for the most part have recently expired or are set to expire over the next few months. During the United Nations (UN) High-Level Political Forum in July 2021, panel experts called on UN member states to replace temporary COVID-19 pandemic responses with lasting social protection measures.[10] Meanwhile, more than four billion people worldwide still lack access to any social protection, according to the UN International Labor Organization.[11] Oxfam recently found that radical improvements in poverty eradication could be achievedif the momentum in social protections from 2020 were sustained.

Installation at the protest for former Republic of Korea President Park Geun Hye's impeachment. Each jacket is a child that was lost on the Sewol Ferry sinking, Seoul, Korea. Photo Credit: Mathew Schwartz on Unsplash.

Discussion: Why Do People Across Countries Feel the Same Way?

This paper presents the state of public opinion in selected countries in key policy areas relevant for the post-COVID-19 recovery. Among other key discoveries, a sense of frustration and urgency around the issues of inequality and exclusion was palpable among poll participants. This, in conjunction with a profound impression of deepening social divisions, paints a challenging picture. A question emerged from these results as to why there is so much consistency in people's perception across a sample of countries spanning various geographies, cultures, and income levels. Various hypotheses can be proposed to explain this phenomenon. One of them is that global economic integration led to convergence of economic trends across countries, contributing to on overlapping set of grievances across diverse societies. Another explanation is that country elites around the planet now more resemble one another rather than their fellow citizens in terms of their lifestyle and mindset, sending their children to the same globally acclaimed schools, and frequenting the same vacation spots. The resulting perception of social divisions and exclusion from the privilege stokes social grievances across societies. Thirdly, the use of narratives that divide populations by gender, race, ethnicity, and geography, are finding purchase in many countries around the world. For example, in South Korea, anti-feminist narratives framed as unfairness for young men played a key part in 2022 elections in the country.[12]

Creation of global supply chains, and ever increasing cross-border flows of goods and money, and ideas have completely remodeled the global economy over the past 50 years. These processes have reshaped the relationship between businesses and the state—weakening the latter—and made the labor force more vulnerable than ever to international pressures. It is then logical that the unprecedented convergence generated by globalization's impact not

only impacts trade volumes, but also other dimensions, such as socio-economic dynamics across countries. In particular, the income and wealth gap between those with graduate degrees and those without has widened in many regions of the world, revealing stark differences in security and lifestyles. It is inevitable that groups left behind will feel angry, especially when governments have failed to redistribute the proceeds of globalization. France's *gilets jaunes* movement, where the government's move to increase taxes on diesel and patrol ended up triggering a backlash, presents a good example of anger among working class groups.

A somewhat related explanation could be predicated on the impact of globalization on the behavior of country elites across the world. They were the first ones to draw benefits from the world shrinking. At this point, the wealthiest 1-percenters across countries oftentimes have more in common with other rich individuals abroad than their fellow citizens. This phenomenon was laid out well by Carniege scholar David Rothkopf, who on the eve of the Global Recession of 2008 described in detail the degree to which lifestyles and perceptions of very rich individuals around the world have aligned.[13] F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said in the 1920s to Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald: "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me,"[14] alluding to the difference in mindset that comes with being part of the privileged few. In that vein, the global elites slowly becoming a nation onto itself could draw ire across societies, leading to the consistent perceptions of deepening social divisions and plutocratic elites defying accountability that we found through the survey.

There appears to exist potential to translate social frustration into a positive momentum. People in our poll expressed their eagerness to see more policy action in areas such as facilitating job creation for young people, improving the justice system, and anti-corruption. This combination of urgency and hope for reforms can empower governments to address some long-standing issues. Framing of messages around the planned reforms can help form a political coalition needed for those changes to be sustainable. Our global survey showed that differences in selected narratives have the power to channel and move social perceptions, even if marginally. These insights can help craft policies that will best respond to social sensitivities.

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