

Zambians see progress on education despite persistent inequalities

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 272 | Thomas Isbell and Dominique Drying

Summary

While Zambia has achieved steady growth in primary-school enrollment and completion, critics say poorly trained teachers, inadequate learning materials, and poor school governance undermine the quality of education (Global Partnership for Education, 2018). To address these challenges, the Zambian government has committed to educational reforms designed to make teaching and learning more responsive to the needs and demands of the population. Minister of General Education David Mabumba recently announced five pillars of reform: teacher recruitment and career progression, school furniture, textbook development, school infrastructure, and examinations (Lusaka Times, 2018a).

According to World Bank (2019) education data from 2013, 87% of Zambian girls and 85% of boys were enrolled in primary school, and 78% of girls and 80% of boys completed primary education. Zambian women face an additional barrier to accessing and completing their education: 28% of young women between the ages of 15 and 19 are mothers or have been pregnant (Human Rights Watch, 2018) – nearly six times the global average of 4.7% (World Health Organization, 2018) – and despite a government re-entry policy, only 50% of girls who become pregnant go back to school (Lusaka Times, 2018b).

Since the government announced its commitment to reforming the educational sector, an additional challenge arose when it was reported that about U.S. \$1.6 million was embezzled at the Department of General Education. This has affected the international funding available to developing the education sector as the U.K. Department for International Development suspended funding pending further investigation (Lusaka Times, 2018c).

In this paper, we use Afrobarometer survey data to explore popular perceptions and evaluations of educational policy in Zambia. Despite the challenges facing the education system, the data suggest that Zambians approve of the government's handling of the educational needs of the population, find it fairly easy to obtain public school services, and think the government is responsive to complaints about teacher misconduct. Men and women differ little in their perceptions of government performance on education, and overwhelmingly say boys and girls have equal opportunities to get an education.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys were completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by RuralNet Associates Limited, interviewed 1,200 adult Zambians in April 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2014.

Key findings

- Six in 10 Zambians (60%) say the government is addressing the country's educational needs "fairly well" or "very well," up from 54% in 2014. But among the poorest Zambians, the same majority (60%) say the government is performing poorly on education.
- By a 2-to-1 margin, Zambians also say the government is more effective than it was "a few years ago" in addressing educational needs. But among the poorest respondents, only three in 10 (29%) agree, and the country's regions differ considerably in their assessments of the government's efforts on education.
- Educational attainment is considerably lower among poor and rural Zambians than among their wealthier and urban counterparts.
- Among Zambians who had contact with public schools during the previous 12 months, more than two-thirds (69%) say that obtaining the services they needed was "easy" or "very easy." But about one in 10 (11%) say they had to pay a bribe to obtain needed services.
- Almost nine out of 10 Zambians (86%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that girls and boys have equal opportunities to get an education.
- A majority (58%) of Zambians say it's "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that official action will be taken if people report teacher misconduct such as absenteeism or mistreatment of students.

Government performance in addressing educational needs

Education was a given high-priority status in post-independence Zambia. Successive national development plans and education policies highlighted instituting compulsory schooling to the ninth grade, abolishing secondary-school fees, decreasing the number of dropouts, increasing the number of schools, improving technical and agricultural aspects of education, decentralizing the education system, and introducing instruction in local languages (Lumpa, 2018; Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016).

In response to an Afrobarometer survey question asked in 2014, Zambians identified education as their top priority for additional government investment, well ahead of agricultural development, health care, infrastructure, energy, and security (Bentley, Olapade, Wambua, & Charron, 2015).

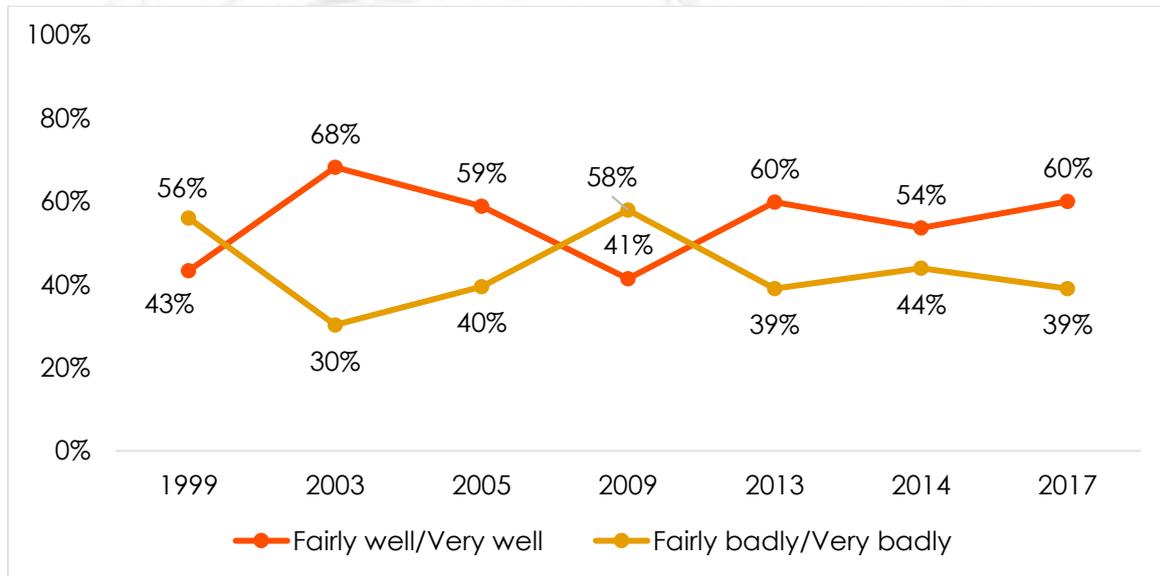
Citizens' assessments of the government's performance on education have fluctuated since Afrobarometer began its surveys (Figure 1). In 1999, after more than a decade of resource shortages and efforts to decentralize education, only 43% of respondents said the government was doing "fairly well" or "very well" in meeting education needs. Approval dipped again in 2009, to 41%, before recovering and stabilizing. In 2017, six out of 10 Zambians (60%) say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" in addressing education needs, a slight improvement from 54% in 2014.

Zambians who are poor are significantly more critical of the government's performance on education than their wealthier counterparts: Among respondents with high lived poverty,¹ only 38% say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well," compared to twice as many wealthy respondents (78%) (Figure 2). Young citizens are more likely to approve of the

¹ Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?"

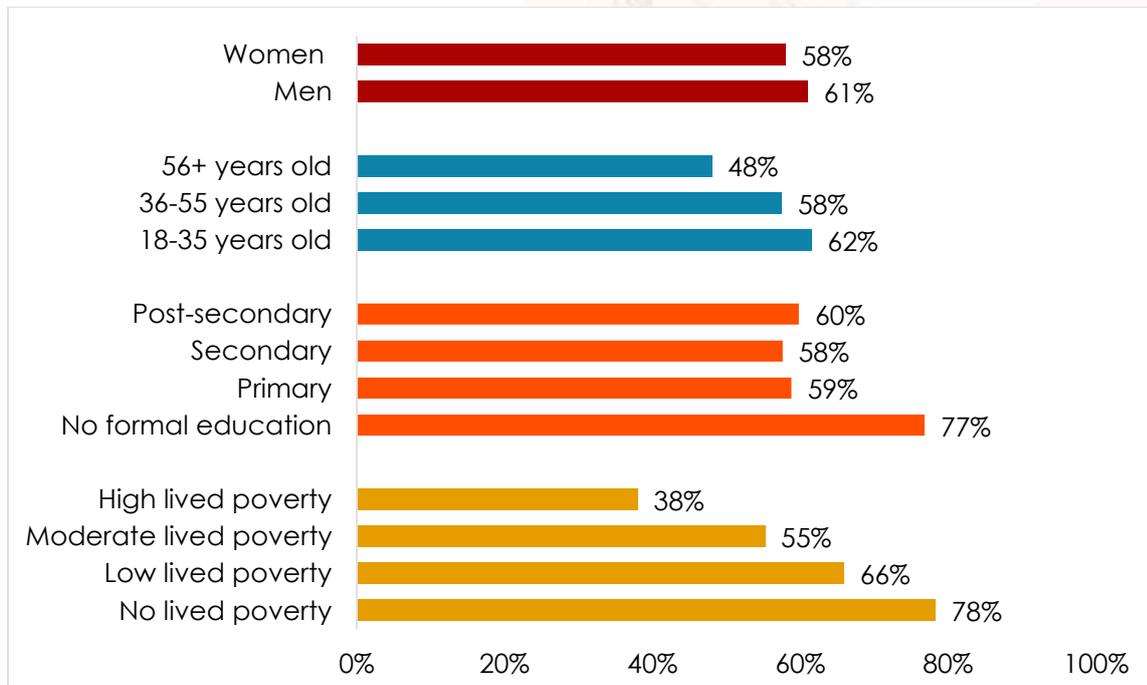
government's performance than their elders (62% of 18- to 35-year-olds vs. 48% of those aged 56 and above), and approval is far more common among respondents with no formal education (77%) than among their more-educated peers (58%-60%). Men and women differ little in their assessments of the government's performance on education.

Figure 1: Government performance on education | Zambia | 1999-2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Addressing educational needs?

Figure 2: Government performing well on education | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2017



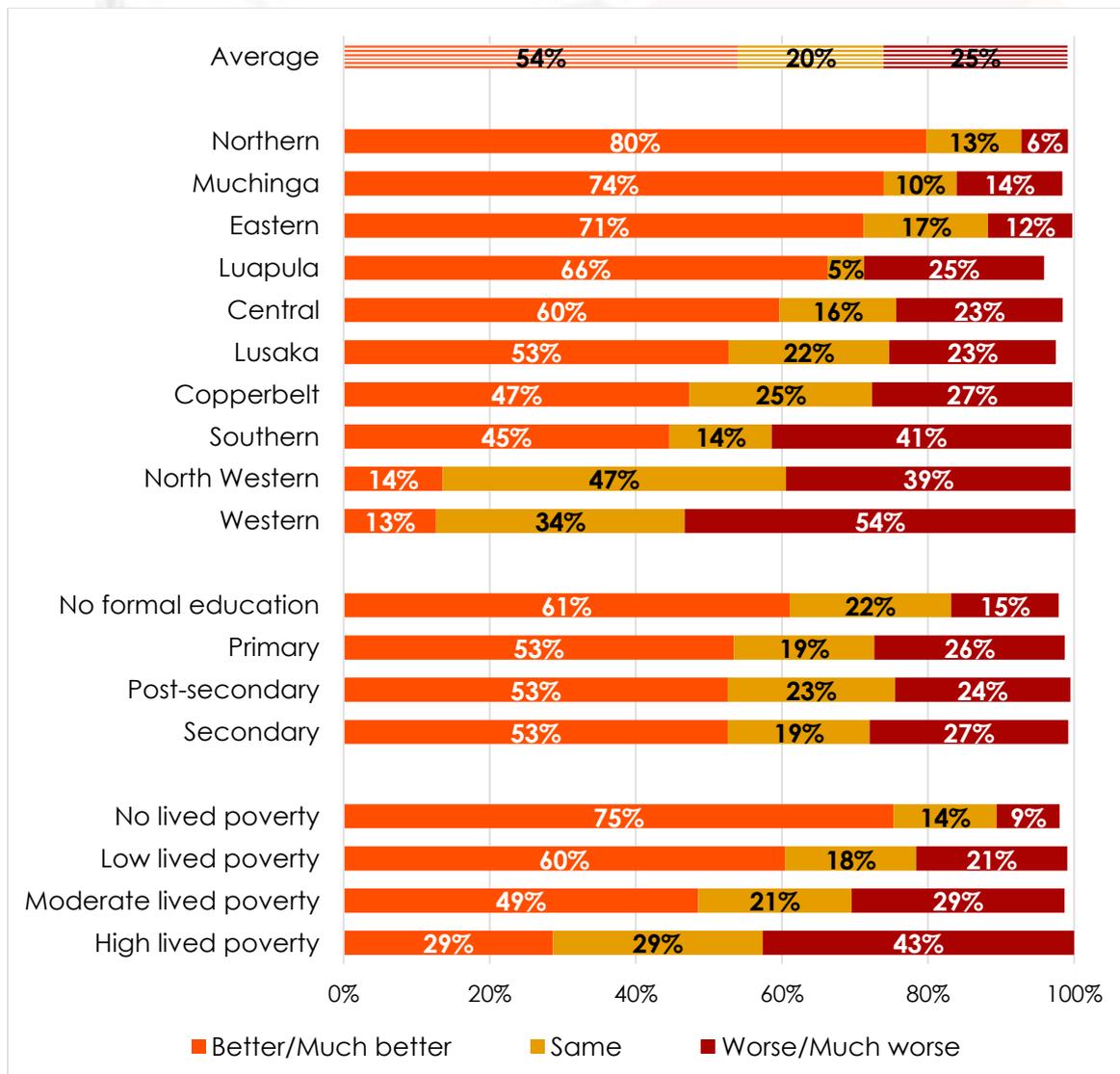
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Addressing educational needs? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

A slim majority (54%) of Zambians also affirm that the government has become more effective in addressing educational needs than it was “a few years ago.” About half as many (25%) say government effectiveness on education has become “worse” or “much worse” (Figure 3).

The proportion of respondents who believe that government effectiveness has improved varies significantly across key demographic groups. The most significant variance can be seen amongst the provinces. While more than seven in 10 respondents see improvement in Northern (80%), Muchinga (74%), and Eastern (71%) provinces, only about one in seven in Western (13%) and North Western (14%) provinces agree.

Perceptions of improved effectiveness in education are also more common among citizens with no formal education (61%) and wealthy Zambians (75% of those with no lived poverty).

Figure 3: Better or worse: Government effectiveness on education | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2017

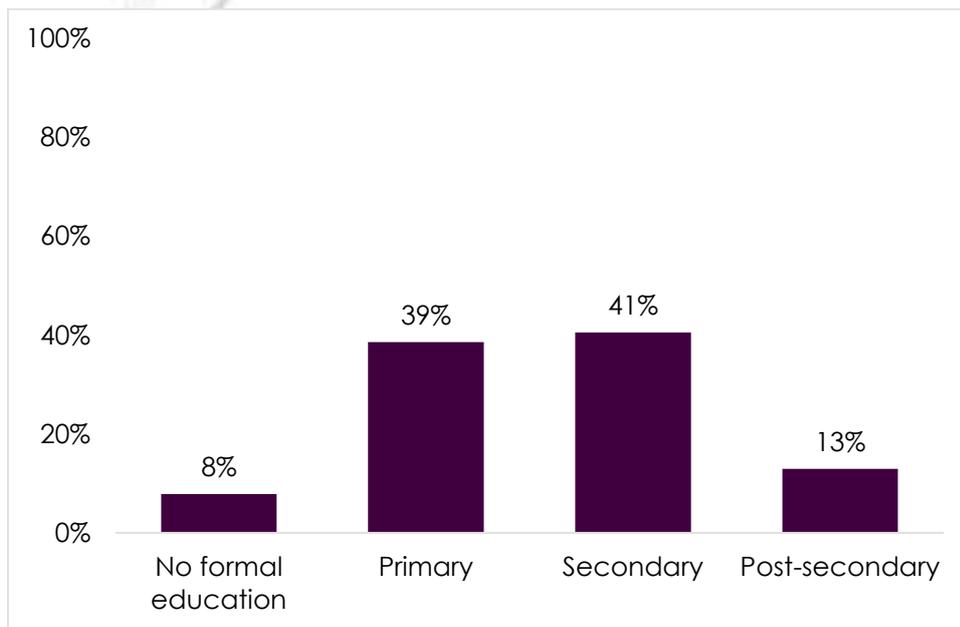


Respondents were asked: Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: The government’s effectiveness in addressing educational needs?

Educational attainment

One factor that might contribute to a positive assessment of government efforts on education is the relatively high levels of education in the country. Fewer than one in 10 respondents (8%) have had no formal schooling, well below the 20% average across 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018. The overwhelming majority have a primary education (39%) or secondary education (41%), while 13% have post-secondary qualifications (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Level of education | Zambia | 2017



Respondents were asked: *What is your highest level of education?*

Educational attainment varies tremendously depending on socio-economic circumstances. For example, the wealthiest are about eight times as likely as the poorest to enjoy post-secondary education (41% vs. 5%), while the poorest are three times as likely as the wealthiest to have no formal education (10% vs. 3%) (Figure 5).

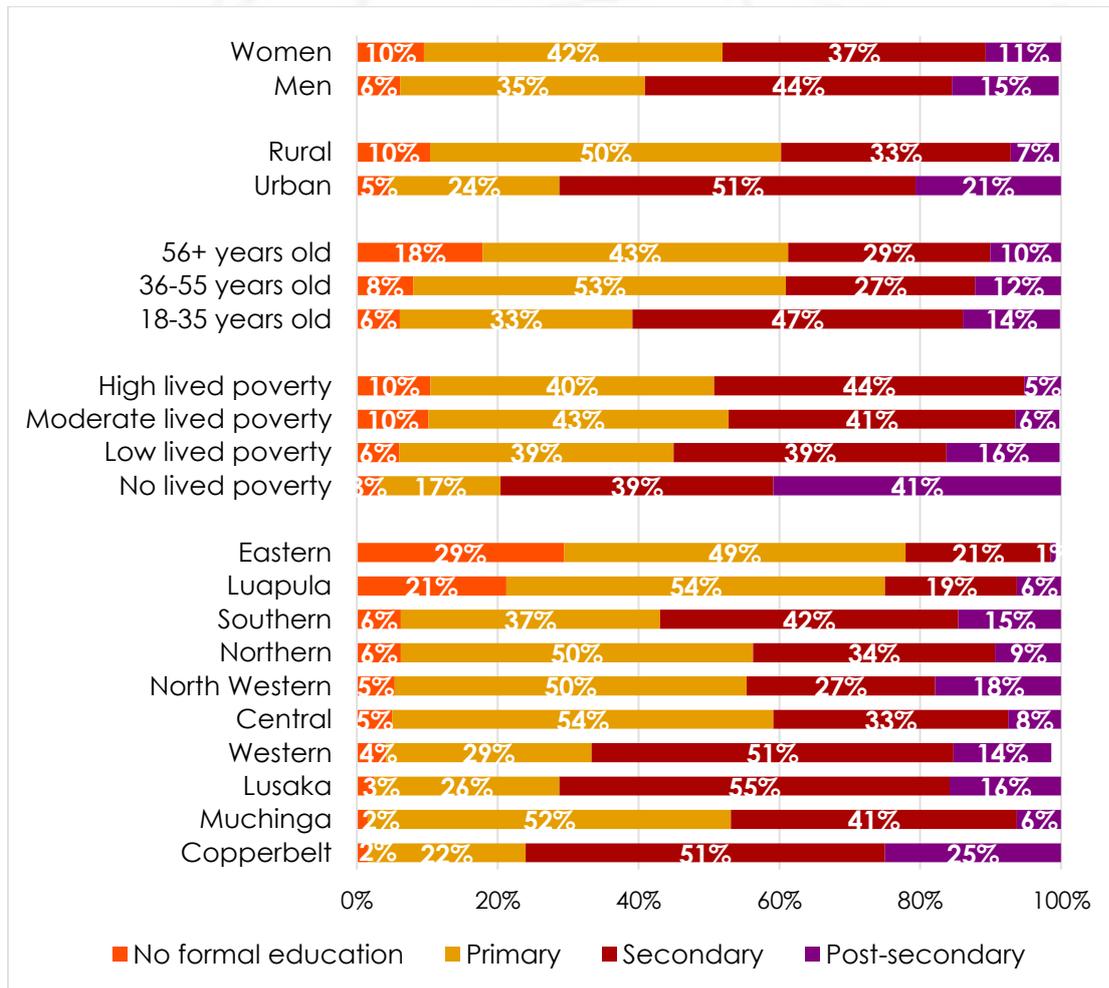
Similarly, respondents from rural areas are significantly less educated than their urban counterparts: 7% vs. 21% have post-secondary education, and 33% vs. 51% have secondary schooling.

Provinces also show remarkable variation in educational attainment. Around one-quarter of the population in Eastern (29%) and Luapula (21%) provinces have no formal education, compared to fewer than one in 20 residents in Western (4%), Lusaka (3%), Muchinga (2%), and Copperbelt (2%). Only one in 100 Eastern residents have post-secondary studies, compared to one-fourth (25%) of their Copperbelt compatriots.

While Zambian men are somewhat more educated than women, the differences are small: 4 percentage points when it comes to the proportion with no formal education (6% vs. 10%) and with post-secondary education (15% vs. 11%). And each generation in Zambia is more educated than its elders.

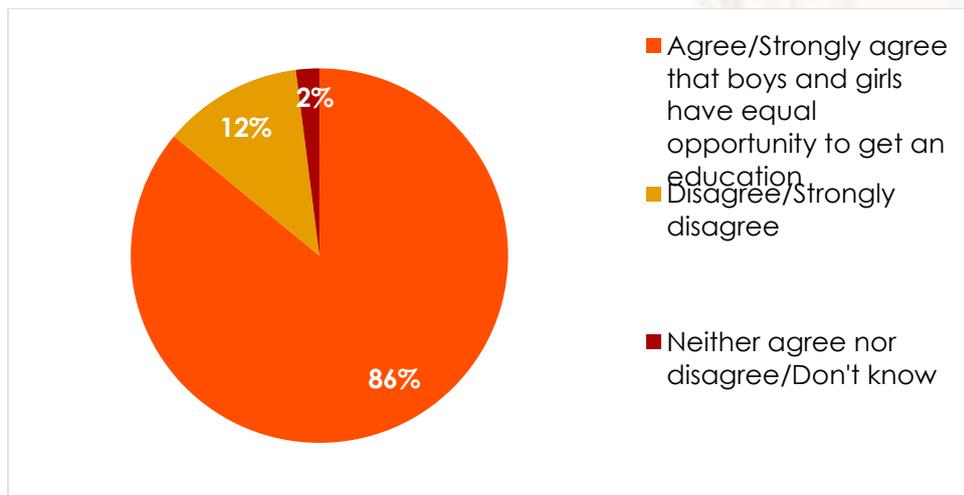
Despite women's slight disadvantage in educational attainment and additional challenges in accessing education as a result of teenage pregnancy, almost nine out of 10 Zambians (86%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that girls and boys have equal opportunities to get an education (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Level of education | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2017



Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Figure 6: Do girls and boys have equal chance at education? | Zambia | 2017



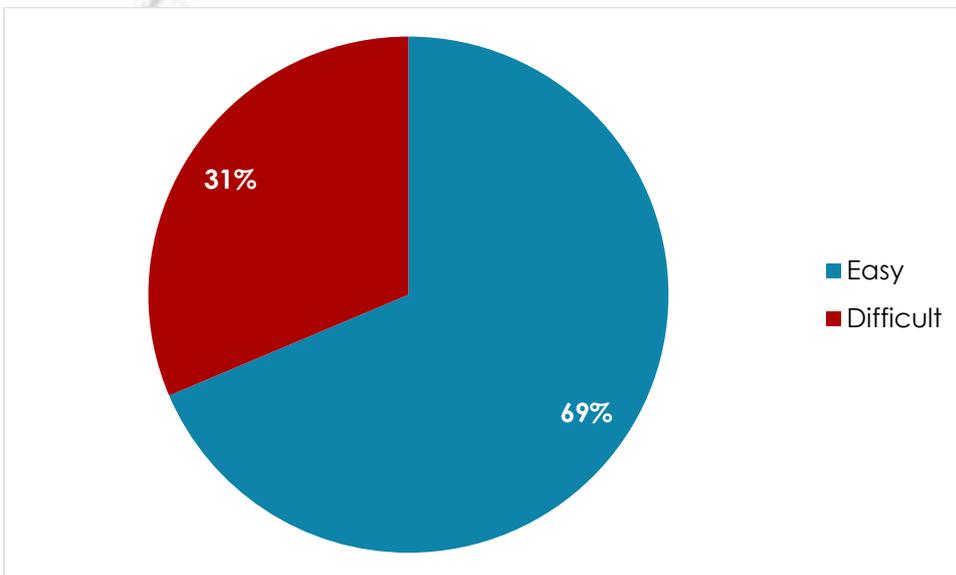
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In our country today, girls and boys have equal opportunities to get education?

Access to public school services

Most Zambians have nearby schools and find it easy to obtain services, but for a sizeable minority, these are not givens. Eight out of 10 survey respondents (79%) live within easy walking distance of a school, leaving two out of 10 (21%) who do not. Rural residents are at a slight disadvantage (76% have schools nearby, vs. 82% in cities).

Among the 45% of Zambians who say they had contact with teachers or school officials during the 12 months preceding the 2017 survey, more than two-thirds (69%) say that obtaining the needed services was "easy" or "very easy," while 31% describe it as "difficult" or "very difficult" (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Ease/Difficulty of obtaining public school services | Zambia | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed from teachers or school officials? (Note: Respondents who had no contact with a public school are excluded.)*

Zambians in rural areas are more likely than city residents to describe obtaining public school services as easy (72% vs. 64%) (Figure 8). As in citizens' perceptions of the government's

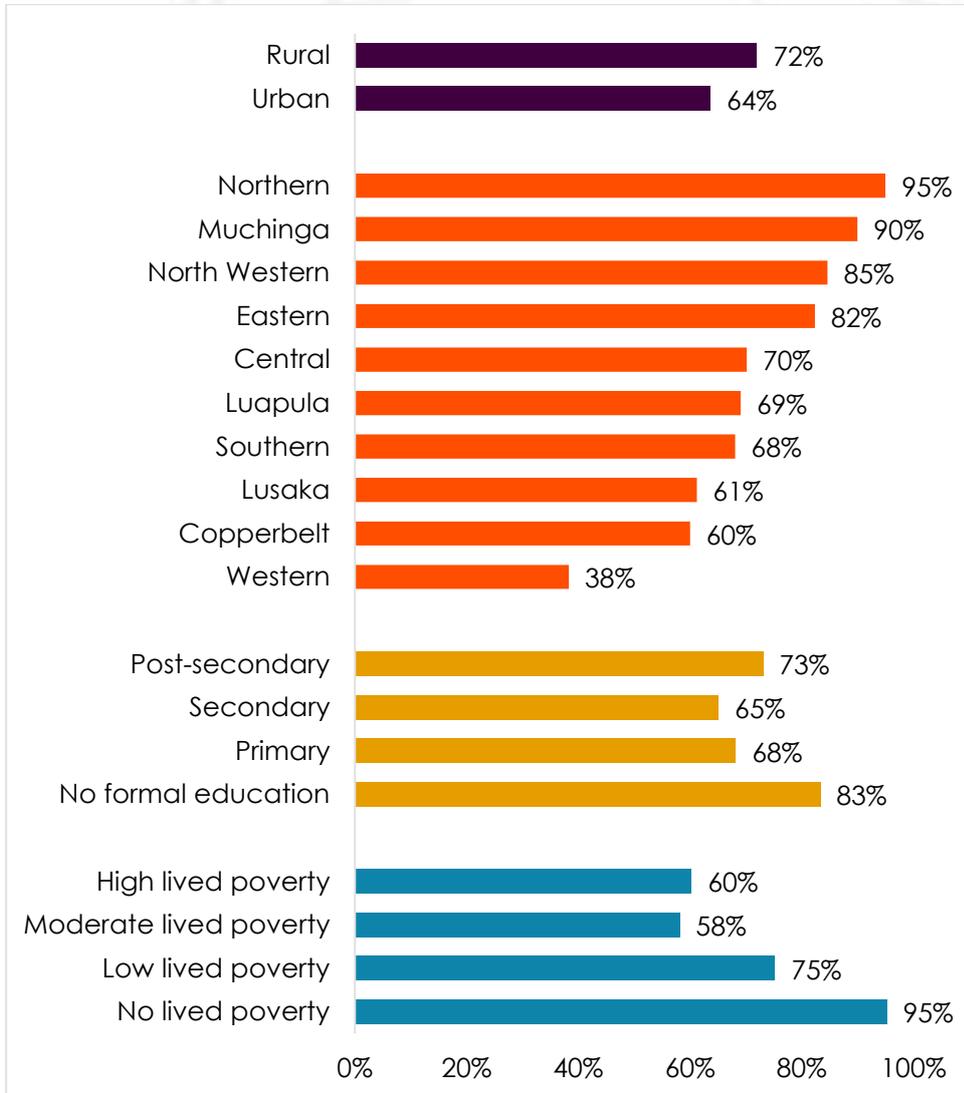
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effectiveness on education, the provinces show significant variation in how easy it is to obtain public school services. While 95% of residents in the Northern Province say it's easy, only 38% of those in the Western Province feel the same.

Both the least-educated (83%) and most-educated (73%) respondents are more likely to see obtaining school services as easy than those with primary (68%) or secondary (65%) schooling. And almost all wealthy Zambians (95%) say it's easy to obtain needed school services, compared to about six in 10 poor respondents.

Both the least-educated (83%) and most-educated (73%) respondents are more likely

Figure 8: Ease of obtaining public school services | by socio-demographic group
 | Zambia | 2017

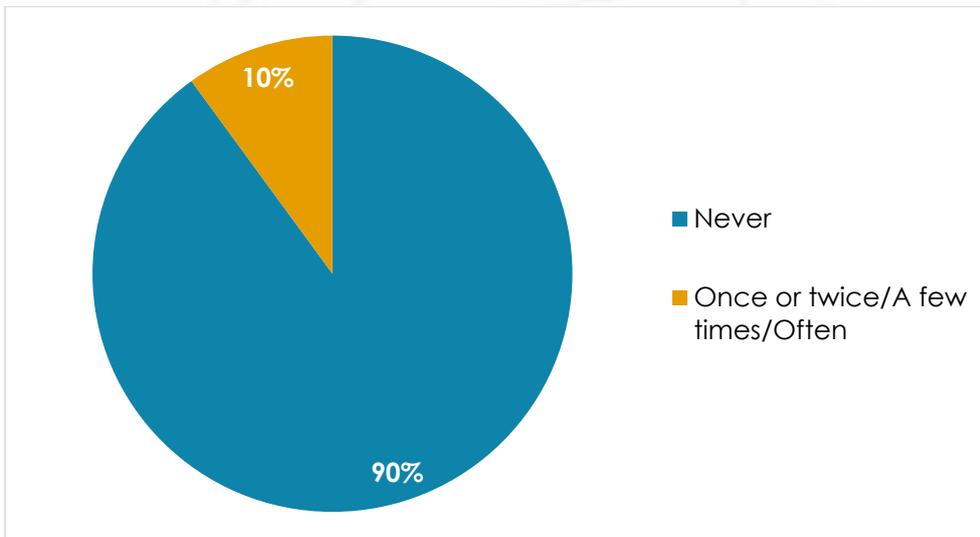


Respondents who say they had contact with public schools were asked: *In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed from teachers or school officials? (% who say “easy” or “very easy”)* (Note: Respondents who had no contact with a public school are excluded.)

Even though most Zambians found it easy to obtain school services, some say they had to pay bribes or do favours to get the help they needed. Among those who had contact with the schools, 10% say they paid a bribe “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often” (Figure 9).

Key socio-demographic groups differ little in their experience of paying bribes for school services. Across provinces, Zambians in Lusaka (25%) are most likely to say that they paid a bribe at least once (not shown).

Figure 9: Paid bribe to obtain school services | Zambia | 2017

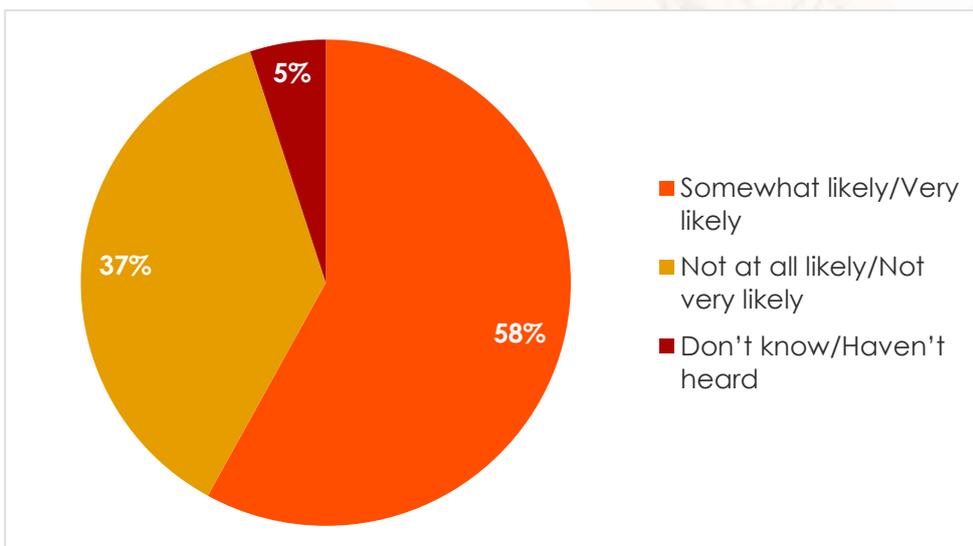


Respondents who say they had contact with public schools were asked: And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools? [Note: Respondents who had no contact with schools are excluded.]

Responsiveness to citizen complaints

In addition to easily accessible schools and school services, a high-quality education system should be responsive to public complaints about misconduct by school officials. A majority (58%) of Zambians say it's "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that official action will be taken if people report teacher misconduct such as absenteeism or mistreatment of students. But a substantial minority (37%) see official action as "not very likely" or "not at all likely" (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Likelihood of official action if teacher misconduct is reported | Zambia | 2017

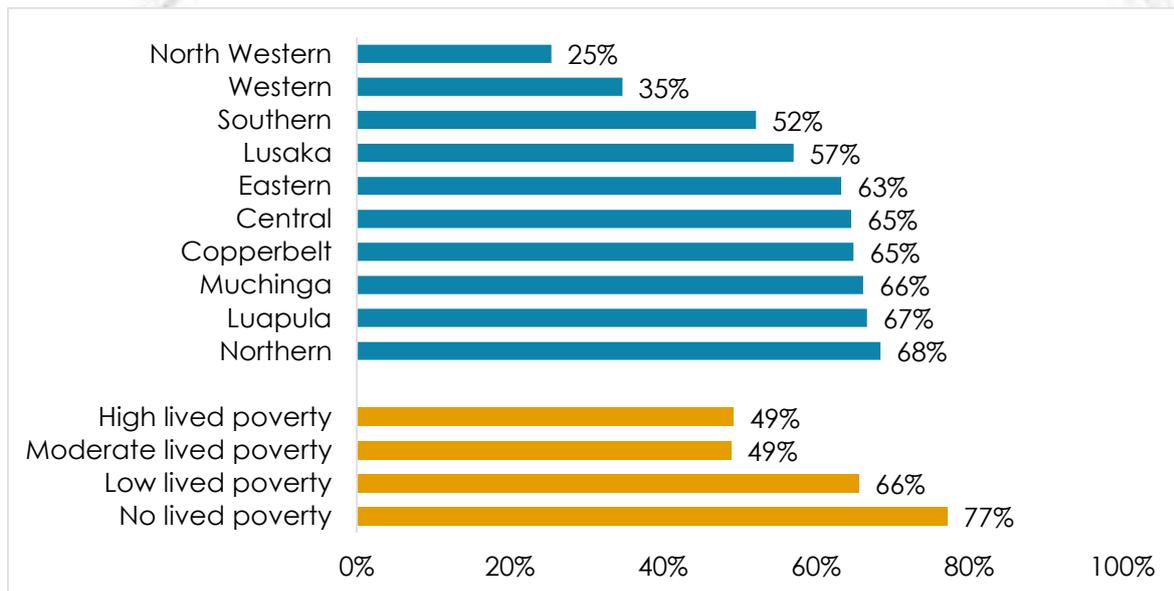


Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to a government office or other public institution to report the following problems, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to the local school to report teacher misbehaviour such as absenteeism or mistreatment of students?

Government responsiveness to complaints lodged about teachers does not extend equally to all regions of the country, according to survey respondents. While 68% of residents in the Northern Province believe government action to be “somewhat” or “very” likely, only one in four (25%) of those in the North Western Province feel the same way (Figure 11).

An even bigger gap separates wealthy and poor Zambians. While large majorities of those with no lived poverty (77%) and low lived poverty (66%) see official action as likely, only half (49%) of those with high and moderate levels of lived poverty are confident that officials would respond if they reported teacher misconduct.

Figure 11: Official action likely if teacher misconduct is reported | by socio-demographic group | Zambia | 2017



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action if you went to a government office or other public institution to report the following problems, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to the local school to report teacher misbehaviour such as absenteeism or mistreatment of students? (% who say “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)

Conclusion

A majority of Zambians see progress on education, find it easy to obtain public school services, and see the system as responsive to complaints about teacher misconduct. But these positive perceptions are not shared equally by all. Zambians who are poor, in particular, are considerably more likely than their wealthier counterparts to criticize the government's performance on education, to experience difficulties in obtaining services, and to doubt the responsiveness of school officials to complaints.

Regional differences are also striking, with residents of the Western and North Western regions considerably less enamored of government performance and responsiveness than their compatriots.

And while most Zambians say girls have a fair chance at getting an education, fundamental challenges remain in ensuring educational opportunities for poor and rural Zambians.

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