

# Are South Africans prepared to confront climate change?

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 295 | Gugu Nonjinge**

## Summary

As South Africa's KwaZulu Natal and Eastern Cape provinces began digging out mud and floodwaters, President Cyril Ramaphosa was surely not alone in blaming climate change for last week's deadly disaster (Times Live, 2019; France24, 2019).

The South African government has long acknowledged the realities of climate change, identifying the phenomenon in its 2011 National Climate Change Response White Paper as "one of the greatest threats to sustainable development" with "the potential to undo or undermine many of the positive advances made in meeting South Africa's own development goals" (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2011).

A water-stressed country, South Africa is considered highly vulnerable to the extreme weather patterns of intensified drought, flooding, and storms that characterize climate change (Institute for Security Studies, 2018). Since 2013, nearly every province in the country has experienced some form of drought and water shortages resulting in water restrictions in urban areas and in the agriculture sector (Climate Analysis Group, 2018).

Yet despite the pronouncements of government and academic analysts, a majority of South Africans had not heard of climate change as of September 2018, according to Afrobarometer survey findings. Among those who were familiar with climate change, a majority said it is making life in South Africa worse. But very few thought there was anything they can do about it.

## 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 findings from Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently being disseminated. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

## Key findings

- South Africans held mixed views on whether climate conditions for agricultural production, floods, and droughts have worsened over the past decade.
- As of September 2018, more than half (54%) of South Africans said they had never heard of climate change. Rural residents (63%), women (58%), and citizens without

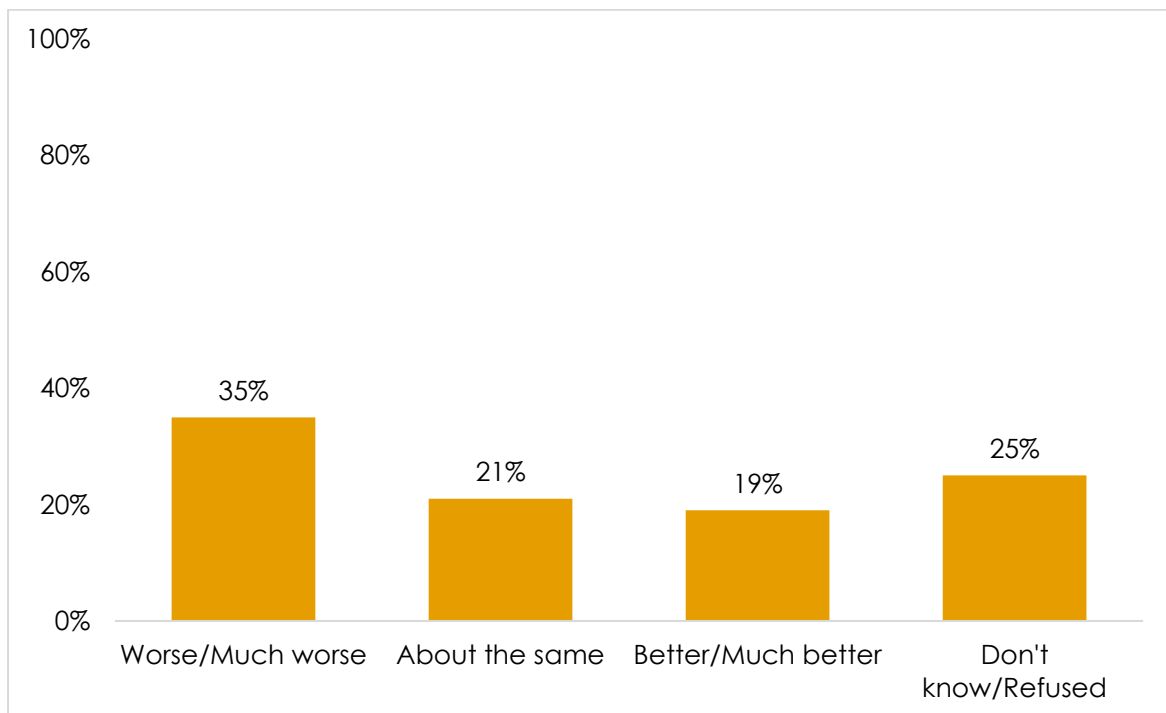
formal education (65%) were particularly likely to be unaware of the phenomenon. But even among those with post-secondary education, almost four in 10 (37%) said they had not heard of it.

- A majority (53%) of South Africans who had heard of climate change said it is making life worse.
- But only about half (52%) of those who were familiar with climate change believed it needs to be stopped, and far fewer thought they could do “a lot” (20%) or even “a little bit” (15%) to help fight it.

### Climate conditions compared to 10 years ago

Before mentioning climate change, Afrobarometer asked survey respondents in South Africa about changes in climate conditions in their regions over the past decade. About one-third (35%) said that climate conditions for agricultural production have gotten “worse” or “much worse.” Only about half as many (19%) said they have improved, while 21% said they have not changed. One in four respondents said they don't know (Figure 1).

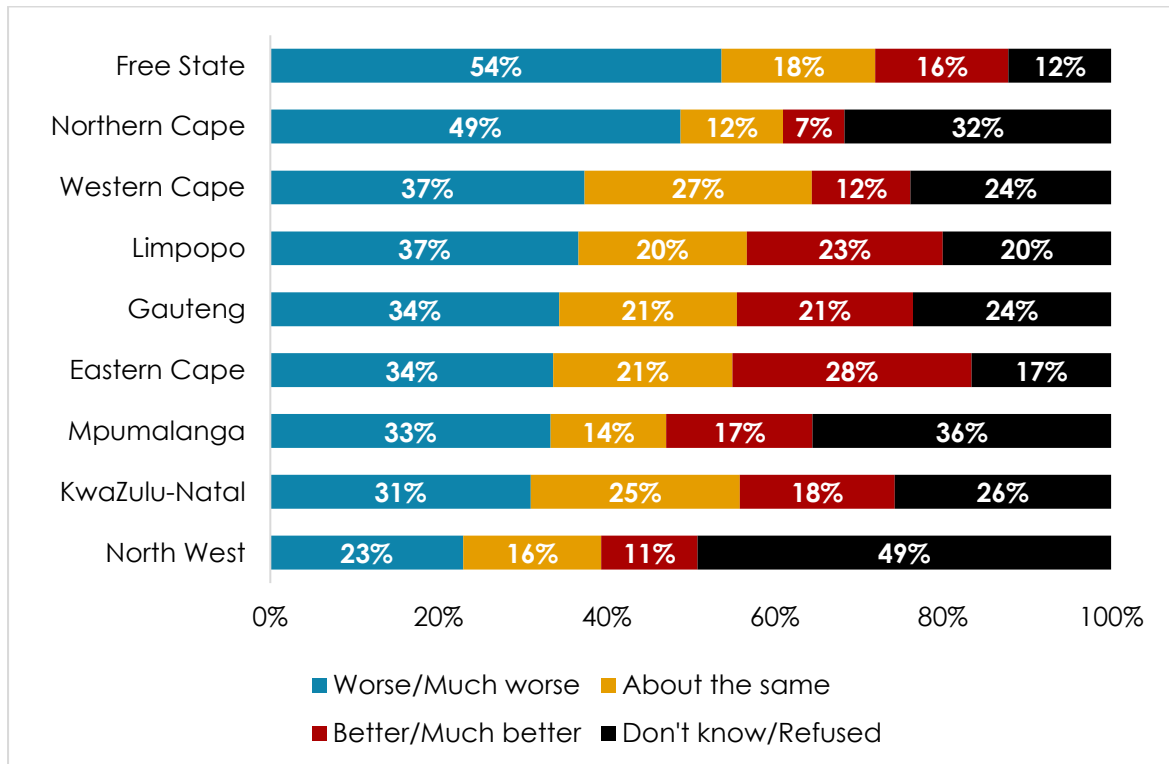
**Figure 1: Climate conditions over the past decade | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your experience, would you say climate conditions for agricultural production in your area have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same over the last 10 years, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Views on climate conditions varied by province. While about half of respondents in the Free State (54%) and Northern Cape (49%) said climate conditions for agricultural production have gotten worse, this view was shared by fewer than one-third of respondents in North West (23%) and KwaZulu-Natal (31%) (Figure 2).

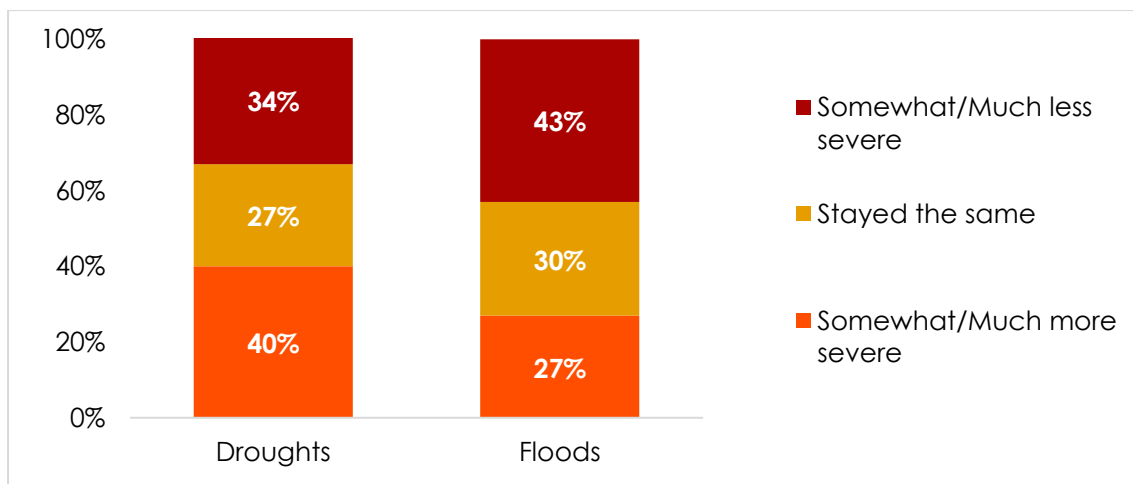
**Figure 2: Change in climate conditions for agricultural production | by province**  
 | South Africa | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** In your experience, would you say climate conditions for agricultural production in your area have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same over the last 10 years, or haven't you heard enough to say?

When asked about the severity of floods and droughts in their provinces, four in 10 South Africans (40%) said droughts have gotten "somewhat more severe" or "much more severe" over the past decade, while somewhat fewer (34%) said they have become less severe. The proportions are reversed when it comes to floods: 27% said they have become more severe, while 43% said they have lessened in severity (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Severity of flooding and droughts | South Africa | 2018**



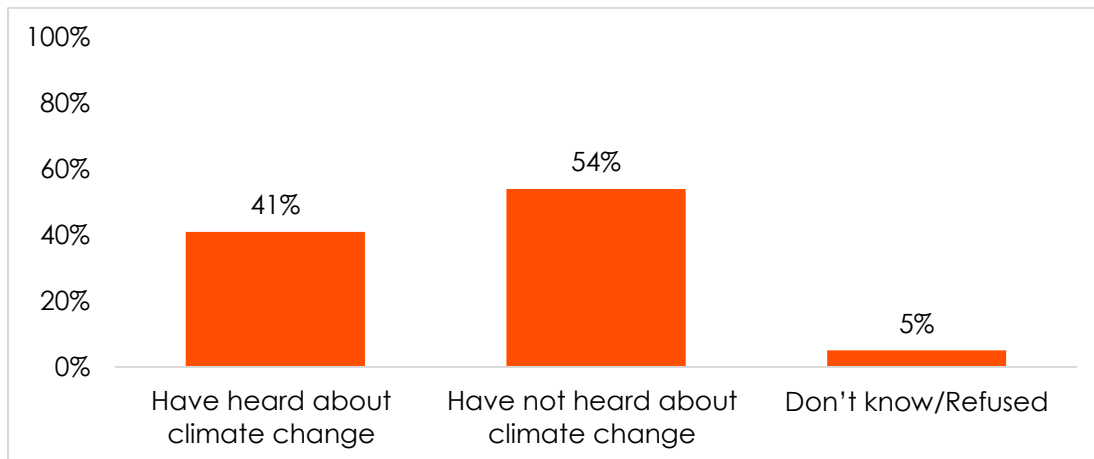
**Respondents were asked:** In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live: Severity of droughts? Severity of flooding?

## Awareness of climate change

### Lack of knowledge about climate change

Despite headlines and government plans, a majority (54%) of South Africans said they had not heard of "climate change." Only about four in 10 (41%) said they were familiar with the concept (Figure 4).

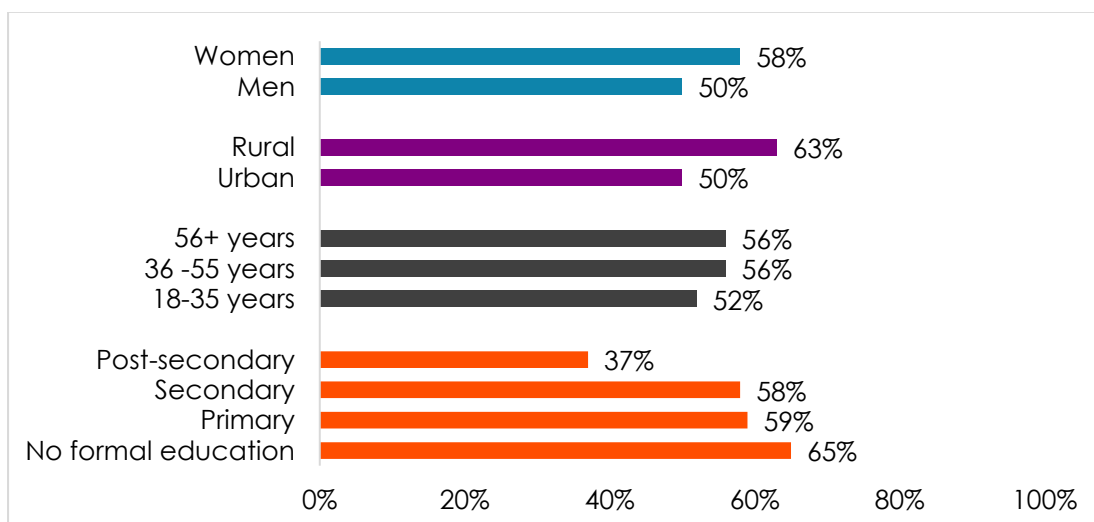
**Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet?

Lack of awareness of climate change was higher in rural areas (63%) than in cities (50%). Women were more likely than men to be unaware of climate change (58% vs. 50%). And respondents with no formal education (65%) were less familiar with climate change than those with primary (59%) or secondary (58%) schooling, but even among citizens with post-secondary qualifications, more than one-third (37%) said they had not heard of climate change (Figure 5).

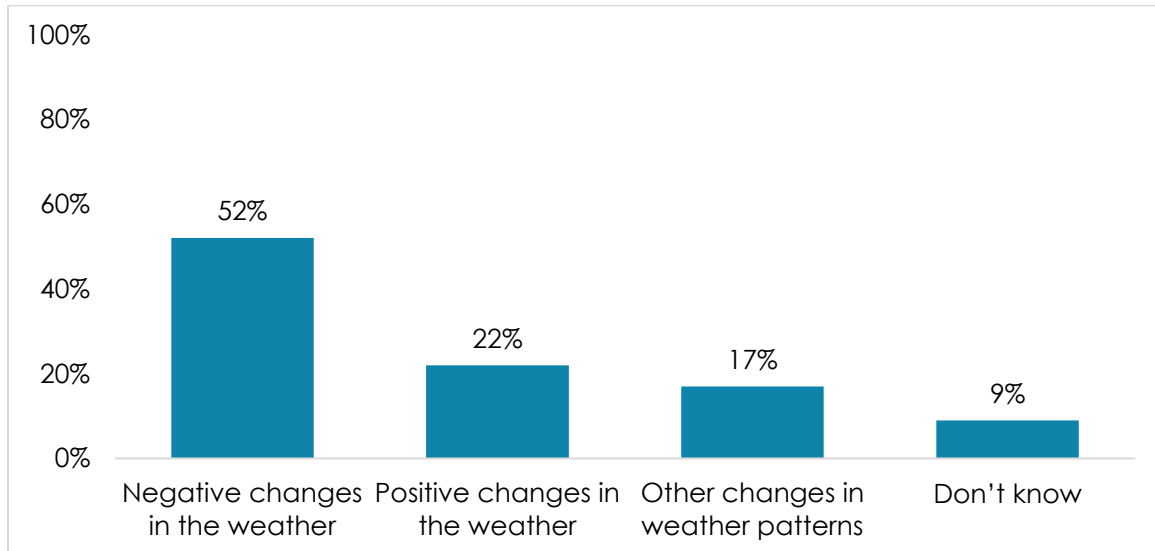
**Figure 5: Not aware of climate change | by socio-economic group | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who said they had not heard about climate change)

Among respondents who had heard of climate change, more than half (52%) understood it as negative changes in the weather, such as more droughts, floods, or extreme heat. The rest believed that it refers to positive changes, such as better rainfall patterns or longer growing seasons (22%), or to other changes in weather patterns (17%) (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Meaning of 'climate change' | South Africa | 2018**

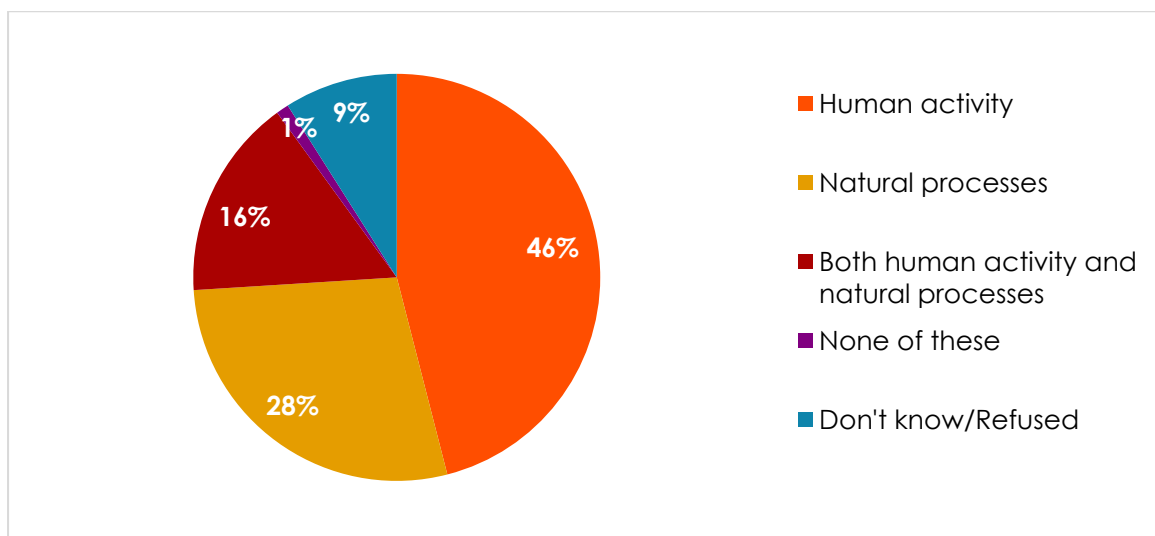


**Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked:** What does the phrase “climate change” mean to you? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

### Causes of climate change

Among those familiar with climate change, close to half (46%) say its main cause is human activity, such as burning fuel and other activities that pollute the atmosphere, while about three in 10 (28%) attribute climate change to natural causes. 16% say that both human activity and natural processes cause climate change (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Main cause of climate change | South Africa | 2018**

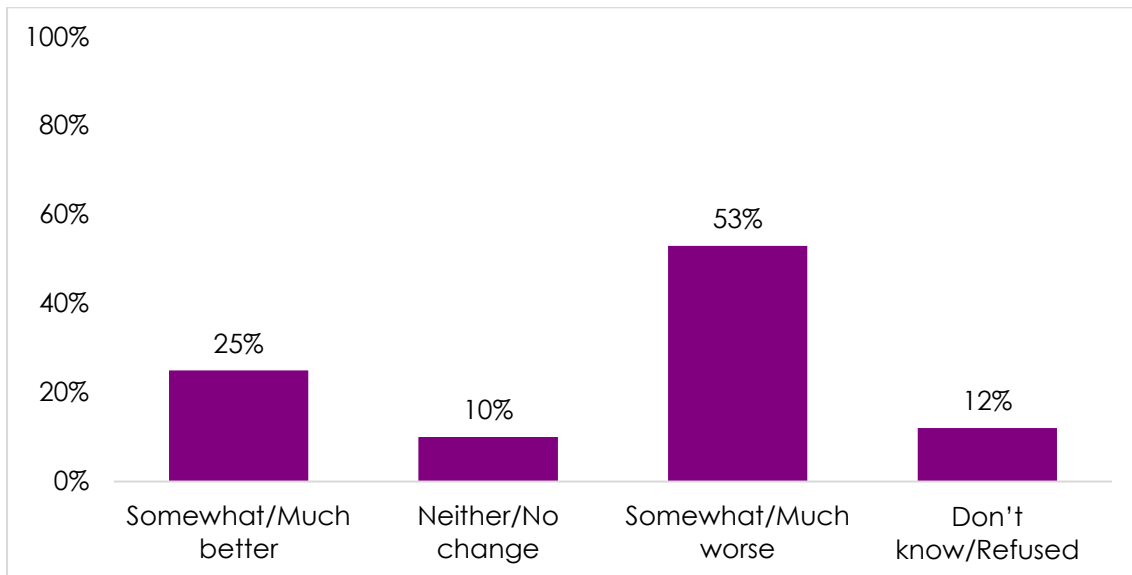


**Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked:** People have different ideas about what causes climate change. What about you, which of the following do you think is the main cause of climate change, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

*Effects and mitigation of climate change*

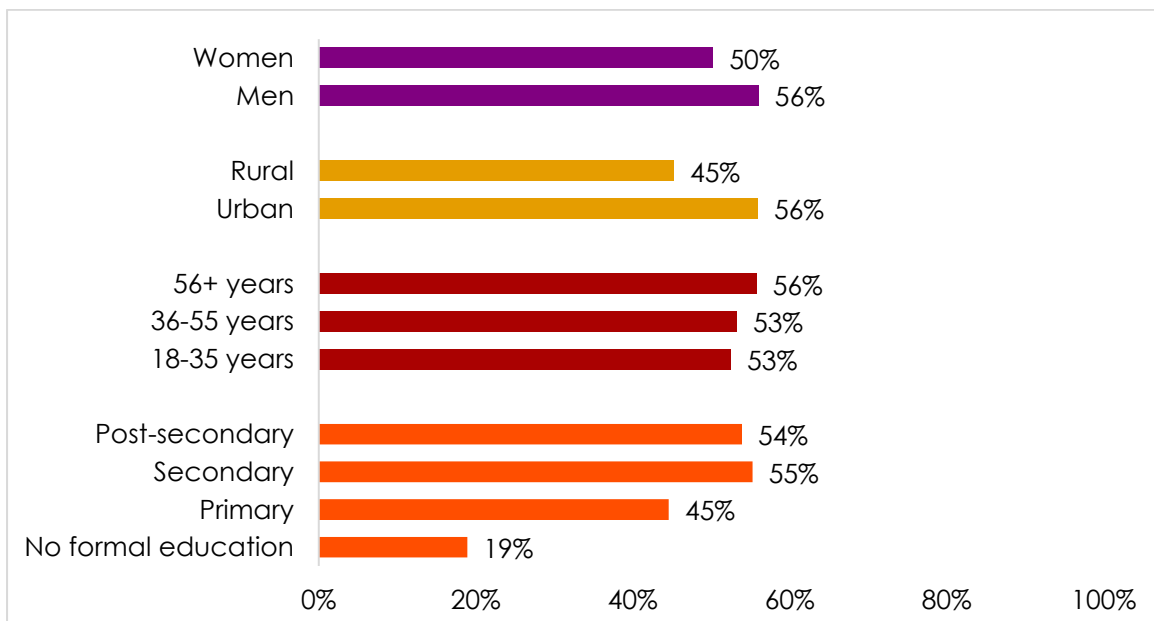
Among South Africans who had heard of climate change, a majority (53%) said it is making life in South Africa “somewhat worse” or “much worse” (Figure 8). This view was particularly common among respondents with higher education (54%-55%), those who are more than 55 years old (56%), urban residents (56%), and men (56%) (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Climate change affecting life | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked:** Do you think climate change is making life in South Africa better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

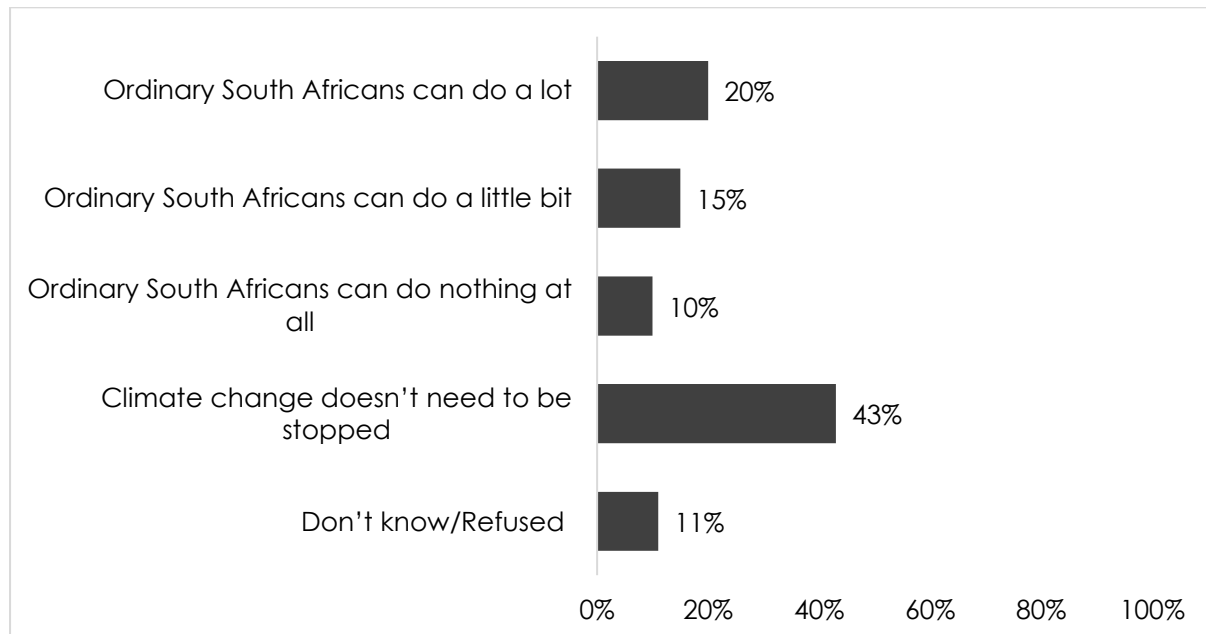
**Figure 9: Climate change making life worse | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked** Do you think climate change is making life in South Africa better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say “somewhat worse” or “much worse”) (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

Among citizens who were aware of climate change, fewer than half (45%) said that climate change has to be stopped, while about the same proportion (43%) believed there's no need to stop it. And only four in 10 said ordinary people can do "a lot" (20%) or "a little bit" (15%) to help stop it (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Stopping climate change** | South Africa | 2018



**Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked:** Do you think that climate change needs to be stopped? [If yes:] How much do you think that ordinary South Africans can do to stop climate change? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

## Conclusion

Even if recent cyclones and flooding are making headlines – and perhaps raising awareness – across the region, survey findings from South Africa suggest plentiful opportunities for strengthening public understanding of climate change, its causes and effects, and steps needed to fight or adapt to it. Almost half of the population had never heard of climate change as of last September. This lack of awareness was particularly strong among rural residents, women, and less-educated citizens – some of the people who are most likely to suffer the negative effects of extreme weather. But even among South Africa's most highly educated, knowledge about climate change was strikingly weak. And few citizens were prepared to play a role in combating it. The country will need a better popular understanding of climate change if citizens are expected to help mitigate, to adapt, and to support difficult policy choices that the future is likely to demand.

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Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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