

Mauritians praise government's COVID-19 response but suspect corruption, distrust politicians

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 427 | Louis Amédée Darga

Summary

The day after Mauritius recorded its first three cases of coronavirus in March 2020, the government closed the country's borders and announced a nationwide lockdown (World Health Organization, 2020). Schools were closed, public transport services were limited, private vehicles were subject to police checks, and only those with work access permits were allowed to move around the island.

Within the week, regulations were tightened with a sanitary curfew closing down supermarkets, bakeries, and shops. These restrictions were lifted on 30 May 2020 following several days without locally transmitted cases. All schools remained closed 20 March-1 July, with educational programs provided online and through the Mauritius Broadcasting Corp. (Vox EU, 2020).

As of early February 2021, Mauritius has registered 583 cases of the coronavirus with 10 deaths in a population of roughly 1.2 million people (World Health Organization, 2021).

Coronavirus vaccinations began on 26 January 2021 at Victoria Hospital, where 100 doctors and medical staff received their first doses (Africa News, 2021). Since then, Mauritius has received 100,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine as a donation from the Indian government (BBC News, 2021), which will be used to inoculate frontline workers as part of a plan the government says will contribute to the revival of crucial industries. The country is also expected to receive doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine through the COVAX distribution facility for low- to middle-income countries (Defimedia.info, 2021).

A new Afrobarometer survey in Mauritius shows that most citizens commend the government's response to the pandemic. While they found it difficult to comply with lockdown and curfew restrictions, they believe the measures – including school closures – were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.

A quarter of all Mauritians say a household member lost a source of income during the pandemic, and slightly more report that they received government assistance.

Despite generally favourable assessments, a majority of Mauritians think resources intended for the pandemic response were lost to government corruption and are worried that politicians will use the pandemic for political gain.

Almost three out of four Mauritians say they are likely to try to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions and related issues across Africa.

Eight rounds of surveys were completed in up to 35 countries between 1999 and 2020. Afrobarometer conducts face to face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by Straconsult Ltd, interviewed 1200 Mauritian adults in November 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points of a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Mauritius in 2012, 2014 and 2017.

Key findings

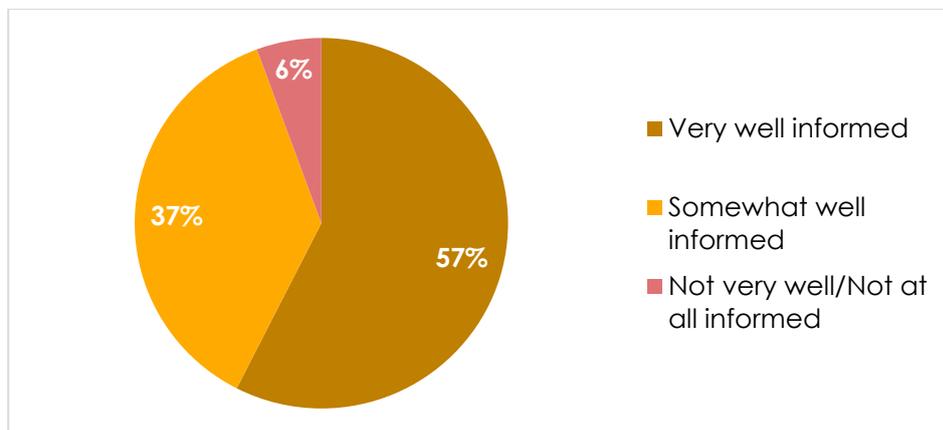
- More than nine out of 10 Mauritians (94%) consider themselves “somewhat” or “very” well informed about the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A quarter (25%) of all Mauritians report that a household member lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic.
- While almost two-thirds (63%) of Mauritians say that complying with lockdown and curfew restrictions was difficult, most citizens (83%) believe these measures were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.
- School closures enjoy even greater public support: 93% of Mauritians endorse the government's decision to close the schools, though almost half (43%) believe they should have reopened sooner.
- Almost one-third (31%) of Mauritians say their household received pandemic-related assistance from the government. A slight majority (53%) think government assistance was distributed fairly.
- An overwhelming majority (85%) of citizens view the government's handling of the pandemic in a positive light. But more than half (54%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of resources intended for responding to the pandemic were lost or stolen due to government corruption. In addition, more than two-thirds (69%) say they are worried that politicians might use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority.
- While only half (51%) of respondents say they trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, almost three-fourths (72%) say they are likely to get vaccinated when a vaccine becomes available.
 - Poor citizens, who are less likely to be informed about COVID-19 and more likely to report having lost income during the pandemic, are also less likely to be willing to get vaccinated.
- Six in 10 Mauritians (60%) say that a pandemic does not justify government measures that infringe democratic freedoms by censoring media reporting. In contrast, most Mauritians (78%) consider the use of police and security forces to enforce public health mandates justified.
- Looking ahead, more than half (55%) of Mauritians say the government should invest more in preparations for health emergencies like COVID-19, even if that would mean fewer resources for other health services.

Awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic

The vast majority (94%) Mauritians consider themselves to be “somewhat” or “very” well informed about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it (Figure 1). Awareness levels of the virus and how to combat it are high across demographic groups except among poor citizens

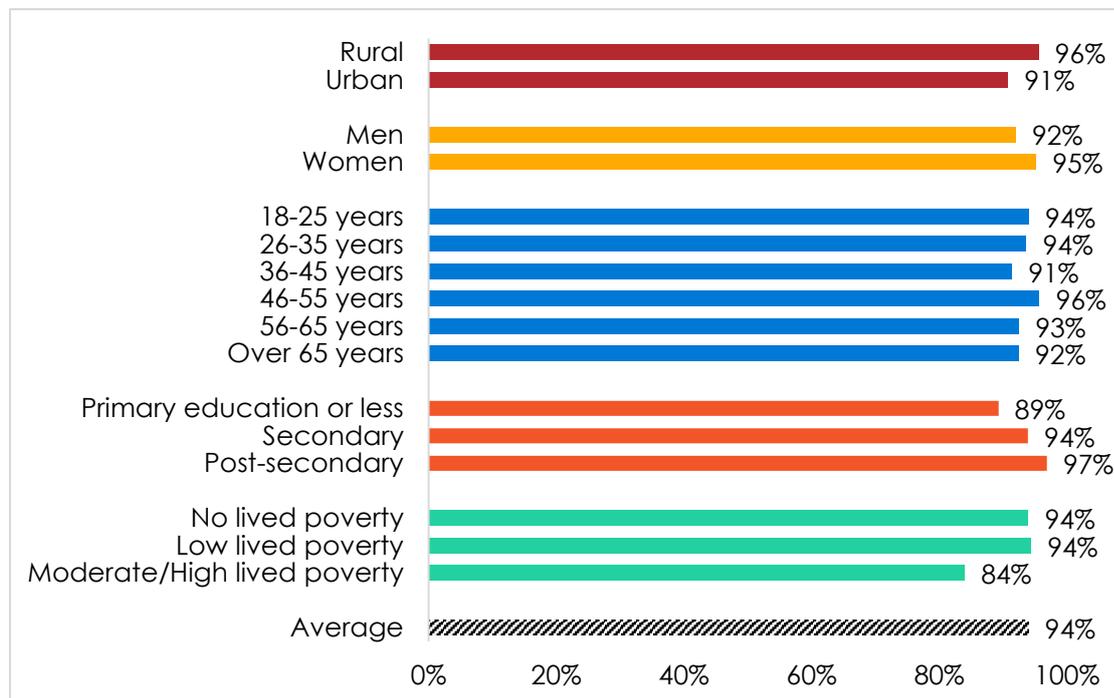
(84% of those who experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty¹). Awareness is somewhat higher in rural areas (96%) than in cities (91%) and among respondents with secondary (94%) or post-secondary (97%) education compared to those with primary or less schooling (89%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

Figure 2: Awareness of COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say "very well informed" or "somewhat well informed")

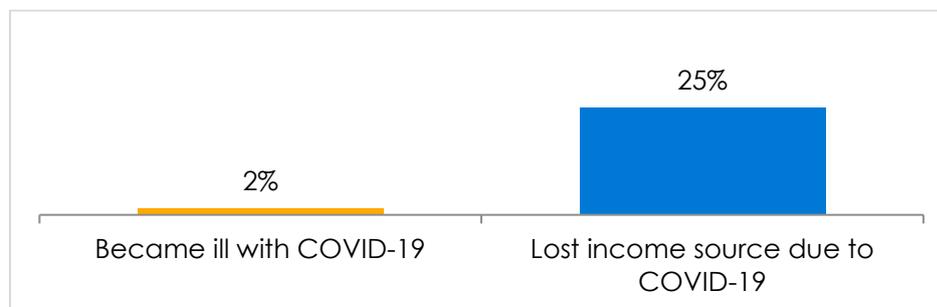
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Impact

In addition to immense health and human costs, COVID-19 has brought a downturn in several sectors of the country's economy. Employment figures from the World Bank reveal that about 37,000 jobs were lost, mostly in the informal sector, between March and May (Ranzani & Kai Suet, 2020). In the formal sector, 4,265 cases of termination of employment were registered at the Ministry of Labour during the period April-June 2020, along with 1,862 complaints of non-payment or reduced payment of wages (Statistics Mauritius, 2020).

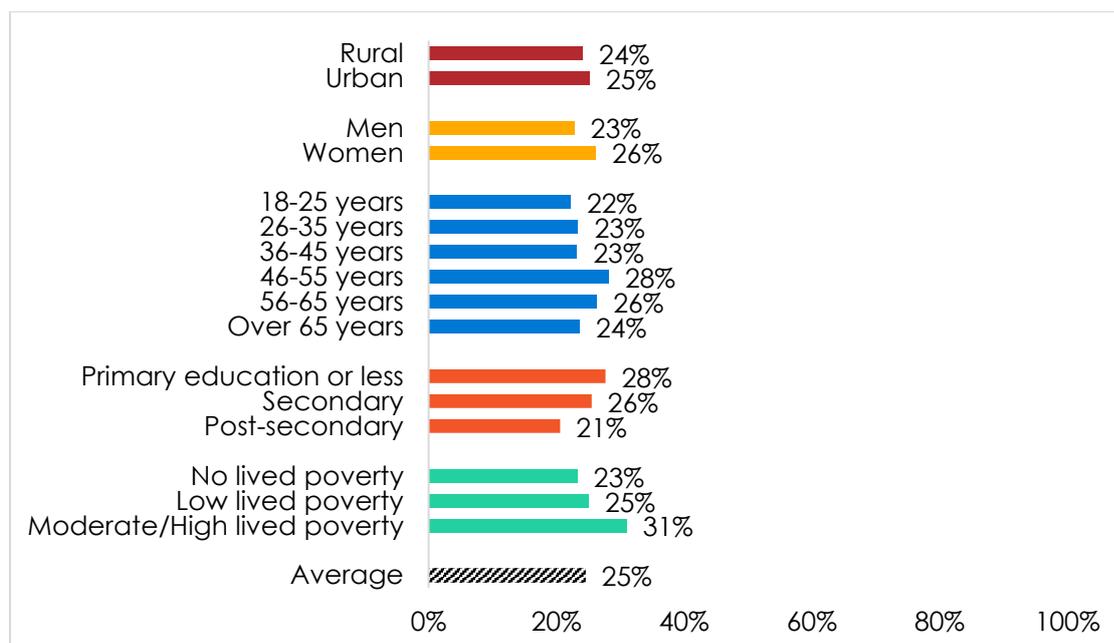
In the Afrobarometer survey, while 2% of Mauritians say a household member became ill with COVID-19, one in four (25%) report that someone in the household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 3). These economic losses are more frequent among citizens experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty (31%) than among their better-off counterparts (23%-25%). They are also more common among less educated respondents (28% of those with primary or less schooling, vs. 21% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Impacts of the pandemic | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19; Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income?

Figure 4: Loss of income due to the pandemic | by socio-demographic group | Mauritius | 2020



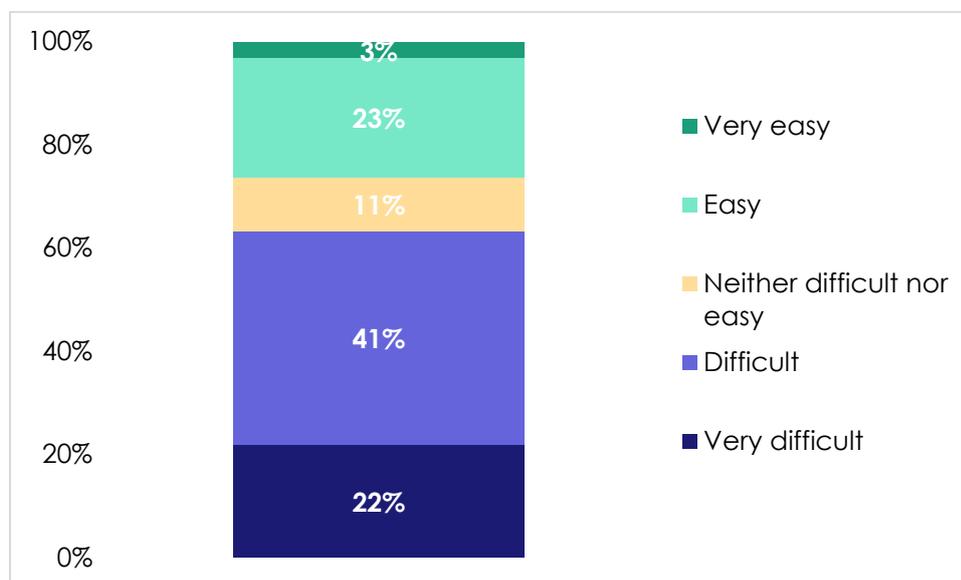
(% who say they temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income)

Lockdowns and school closures

A majority (63%) of Mauritians say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with the lockdown and curfew restrictions imposed by the government (Figure 5). Still, an overwhelming majority (83%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that despite their impact on the economy and people’s livelihoods, the lockdowns and curfews were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 6).

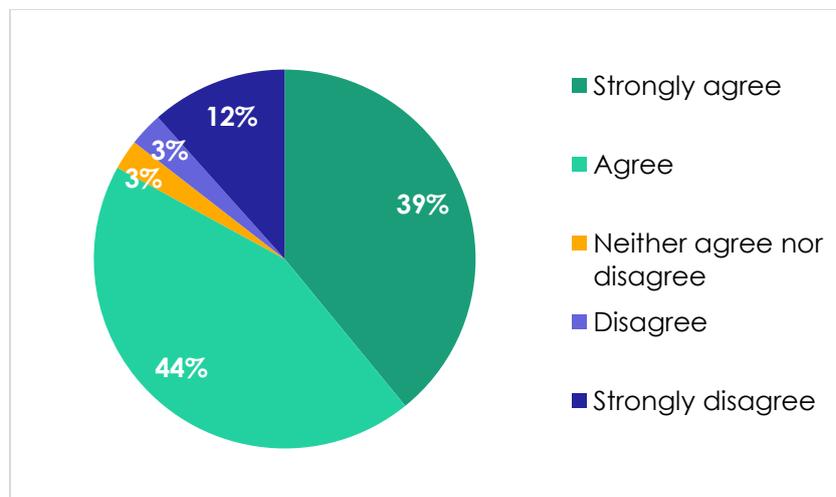
Similarly, most Mauritians (93%) support the government’s decision to close the schools to combat the spread of COVID-19, including 71% who “strongly support” this step (Figure 7). But almost half (43%) say the schools remained closed for too long, while the same proportion consider the duration “about right” (Figure 8).

Figure 5: Difficulty of complying with lockdown restrictions | Mauritius | 2020



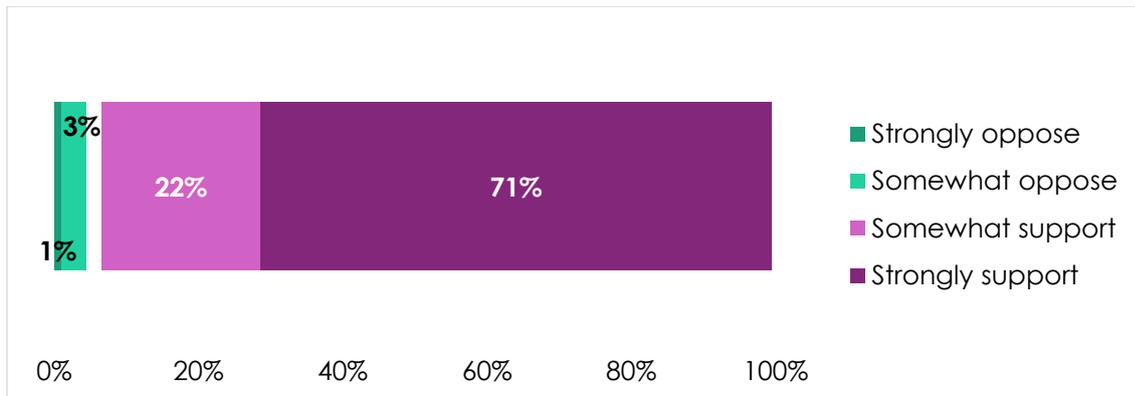
Respondents were asked: How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

Figure 6: Support for lockdown | Mauritius | 2020



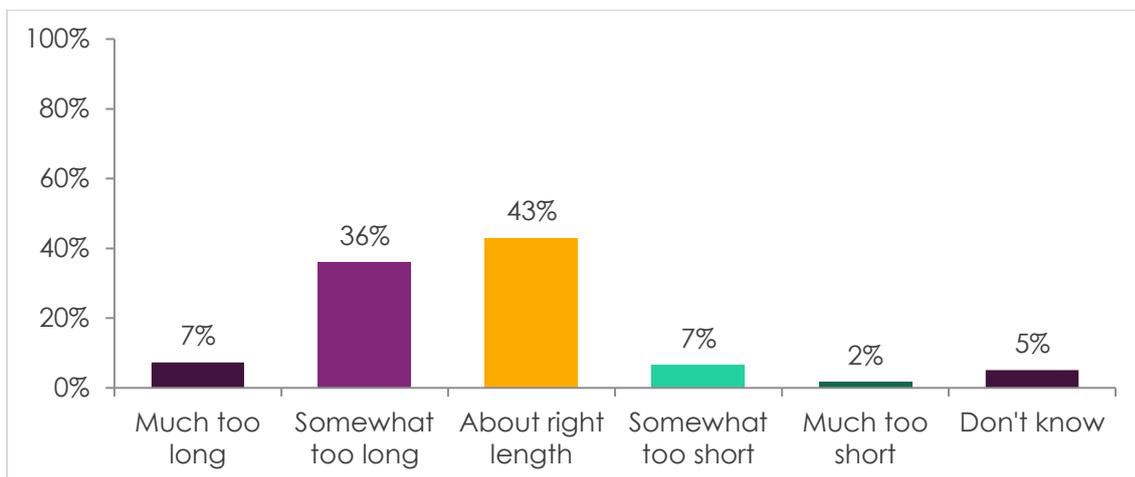
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Figure 7: Support for school closures | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19?

Figure 8: Length of school closures | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

Government assistance and performance

Responding to the pandemic-related economic downturn, the Mauritian government implemented wage assistance and self-employment assistance schemes, instituted a six-month moratorium on capital repayments on existing household loans from commercial

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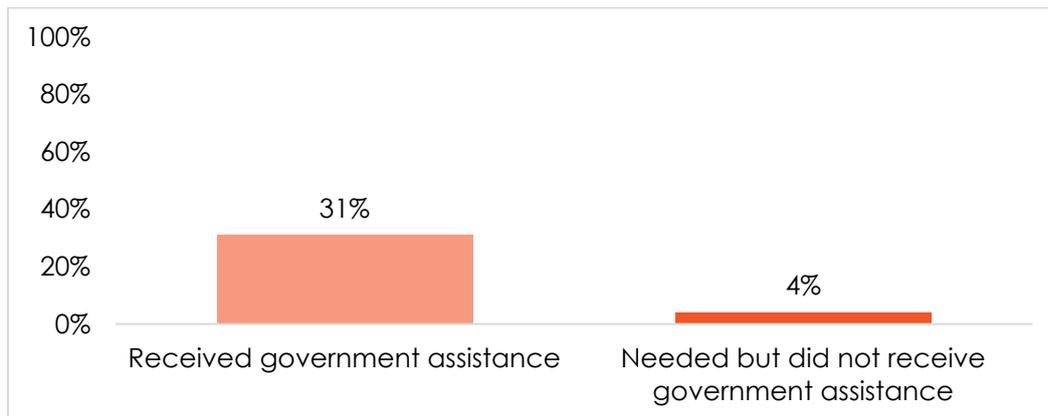
banks, and distributed 35,000 basic food packs to vulnerable households. Around 65,000 vulnerable households benefited from a 20% reduction in their electricity bills, and small enterprises received a reduction of 10% on their bills under certain conditions (Republic of Mauritius, 2020a, b).

In the Afrobarometer survey, almost one-third (31%) of Mauritians say their household received government assistance during the pandemic. Among those who did not, 7% say they needed such assistance, meaning that 4% of all respondents say they needed but did not receive pandemic-related assistance (Figure 9).

A greater share of rural (35%) than urban (26%) residents report having received such assistance (Figure 10). Less educated citizens are more likely to have benefited than their more educated counterparts, although the poorest and best-off respondents are about equally likely to report receiving help. Interestingly, citizens aged 26-35 (38%) and 36-45 (36%) are more likely than other age groups to indicate that they received government assistance, perhaps reflecting assistance schemes for wage workers and the self-employed.

While a majority of Mauritians did not access government assistance, more than half (53%) say that such assistance was distributed fairly. One in four respondents (26%) believe certain groups or regions were given preferential treatment (Figure 11).

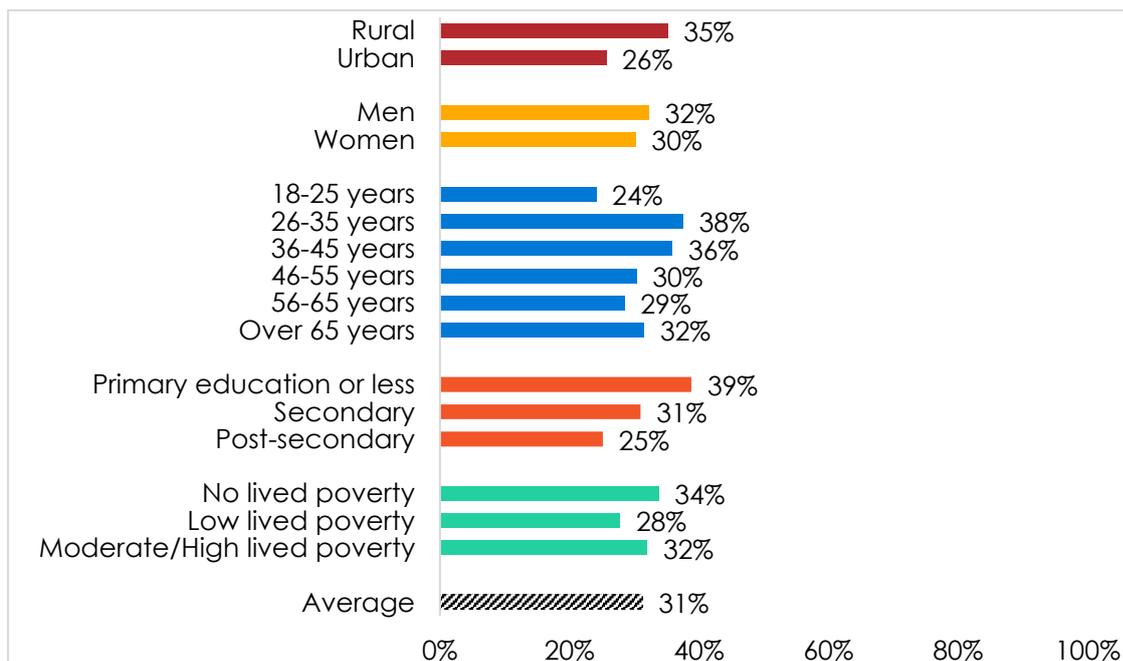
Figure 9: Required and received government assistance | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

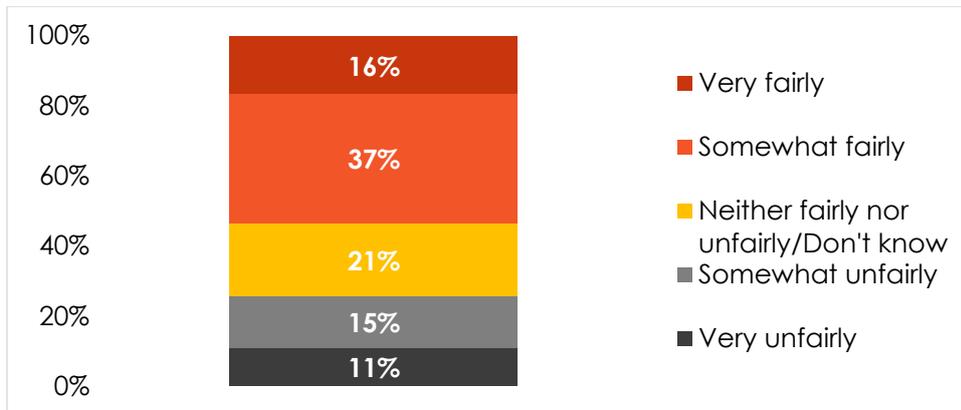
Respondents who say they did not receive government assistance were asked: Did you or your household require any assistance from the government during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Figure 10: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | Mauritius | 2020



(% who say they or their households received assistance from the government)

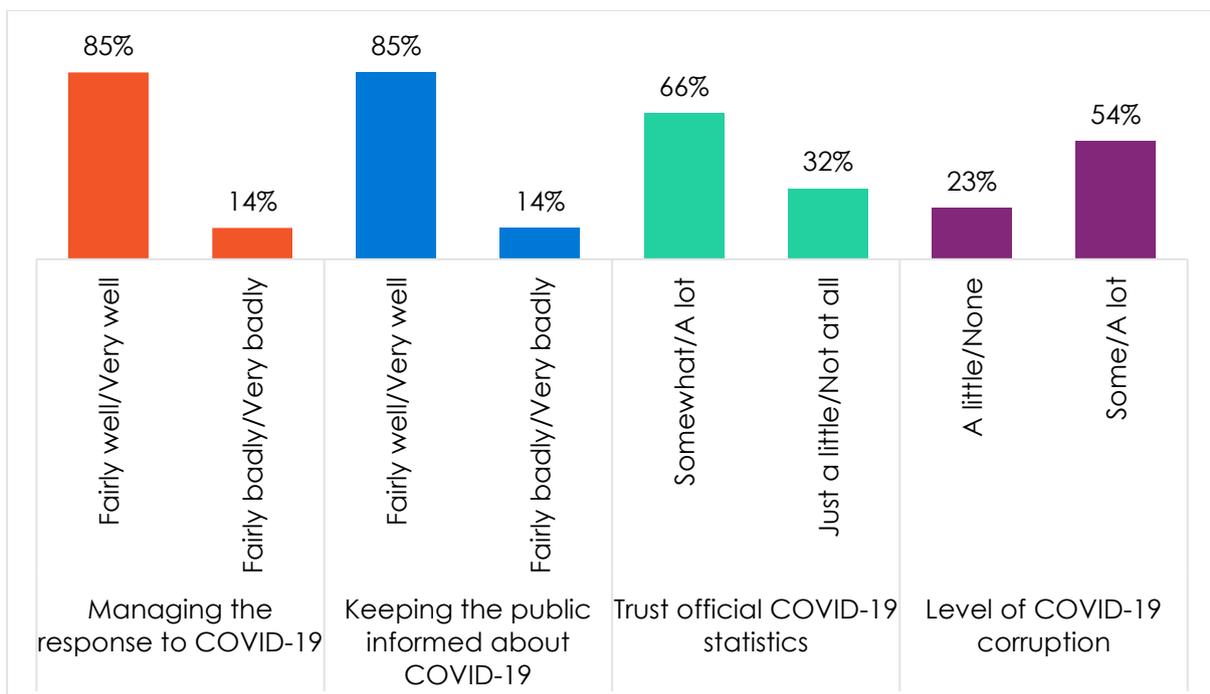
Figure 11: Fairness of government assistance | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favoring certain groups or regions?

Overall, the vast majority (85%) of Mauritians believe that their government has done “very well” or fairly well” at managing the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and at keeping the public informed (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Assessment of government efforts during the pandemic | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked:

How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say? Managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Keeping the public informed about COVID-19?

How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combatting and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials?

And a smaller majority (66%) say they trust official government figures on infections and deaths due to COVID-19 “somewhat” or “a lot.”

But more than half (54%) of citizens believe that “some” or “a lot” of the funds and resources available for the pandemic response were lost or stolen due to the corruption of government officials.

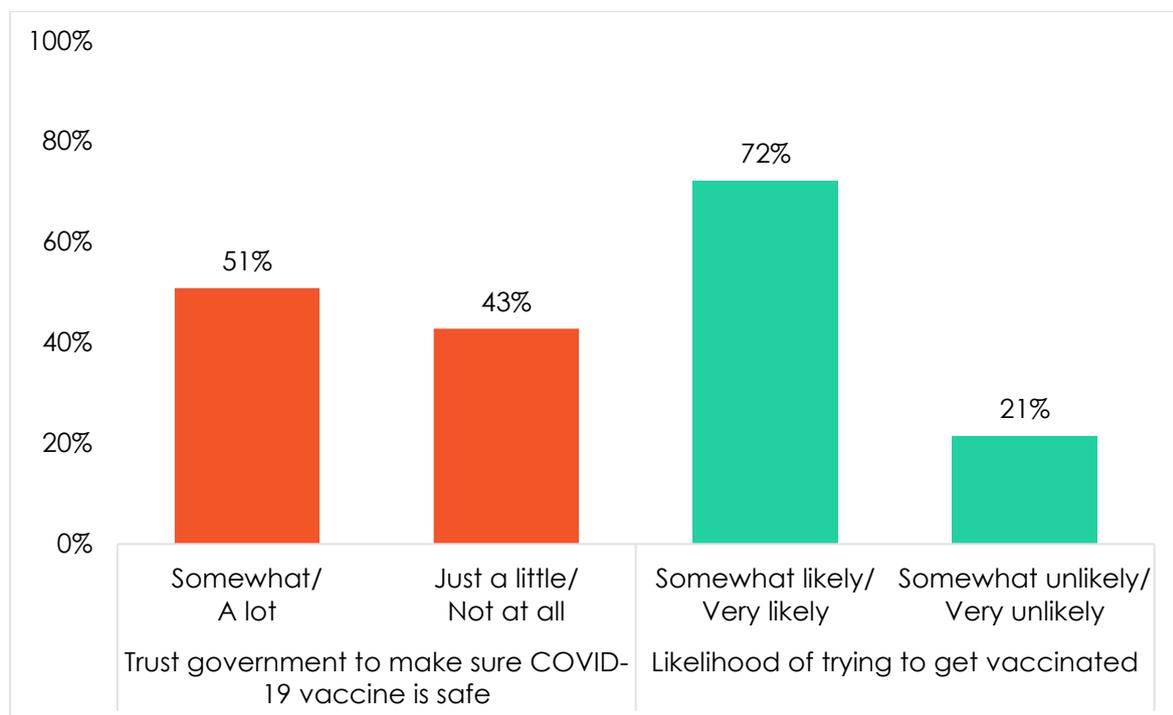
Vaccines

Only about half (51%) of Mauritians say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any COVID-19 vaccine is safe before it is used in the country. But almost three-fourths (72%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated (Figure 13).

Poor respondents (58%) are considerably less likely to say they will try to get vaccinated than their better-off counterparts (79% of those experiencing no lived poverty). Citizens with post-secondary education (75%) are more likely to indicate a willingness to be vaccinated than their less educated counterparts (71%), but so are rural residents compared to urbanites (75% vs. 69%) (Figure 14).

Even though most Mauritians appear willing to be vaccinated, only one in four (25%) believe that a vaccine is more effective than prayer at preventing coronavirus infections. Four in 10 (39%) say prayer is “somewhat more” or “much more” effective than a vaccine, while 27% believe that the two are about equally effective (Figure 15).

Figure 13: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | Mauritius | 2020

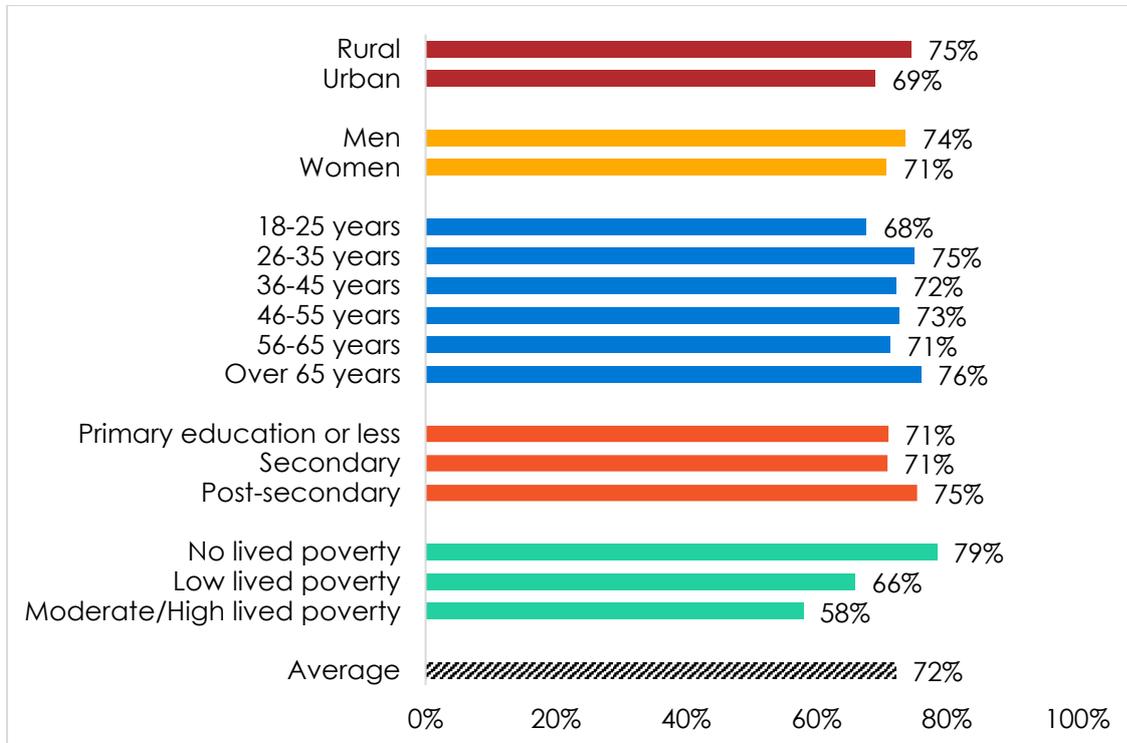


Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Mauritian citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

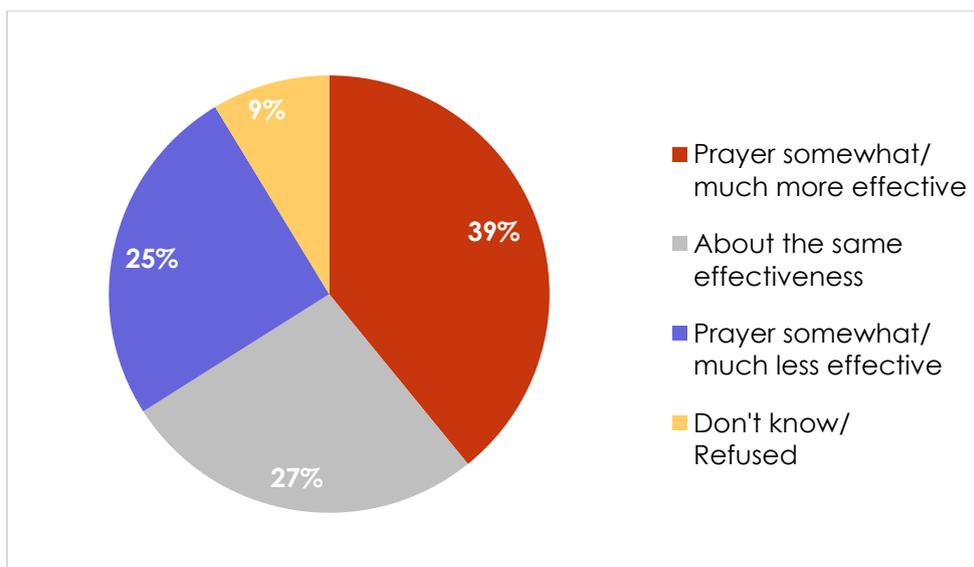
If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Figure 14: Likely to try to get vaccinated | by socio-demographic group | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

Figure 15: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19? | Mauritius | 2020



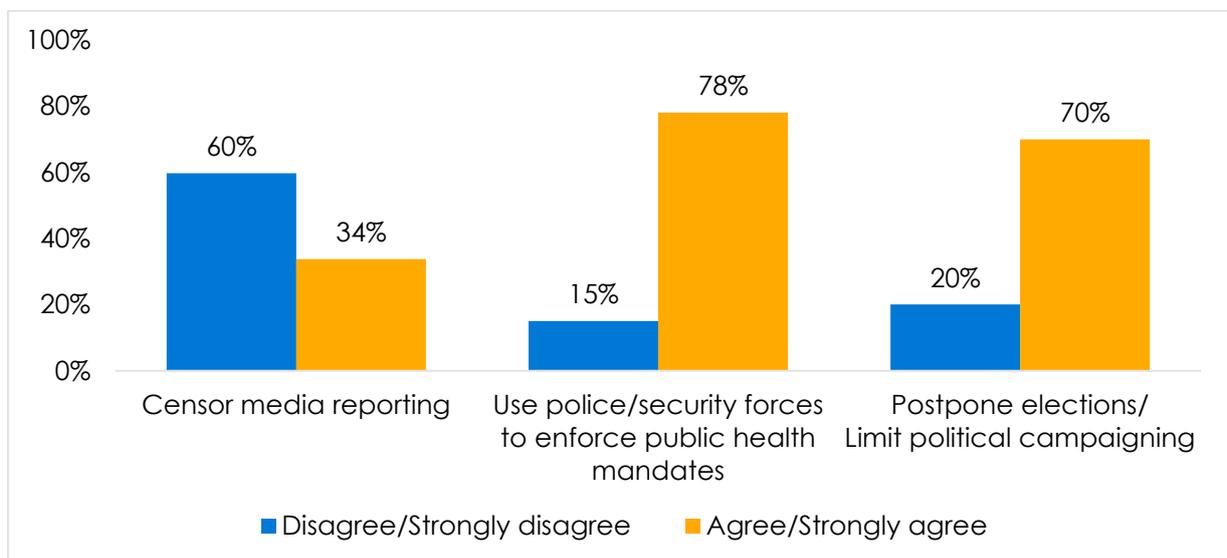
Respondents were asked: Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

Restricting freedoms and democracy

Mauritians place a high value on the free flow of news and information, and as such 60% say that a pandemic does not justify government measures that infringe democratic freedoms by censoring media reporting (Figure 16). However, a large majority (78%) say the government is justified in using police and security forces to enforce public health mandates. And seven in 10 (70%) believe that postponing elections or limiting political campaigning is justified during a health emergency.

Despite their approval of limiting political activities, more than two-thirds (69%) of Mauritians say they are “somewhat worried” or “very worried” that politicians are using, or might use, the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | Mauritius | 2020



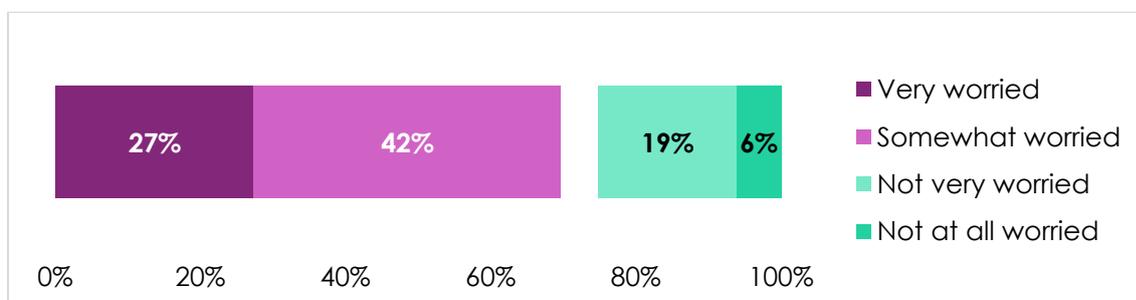
Respondents were asked: When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures?

Censoring media reporting?

Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings?

Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?

Figure 17: Worried about politicians' intentions | Mauritius | 2020



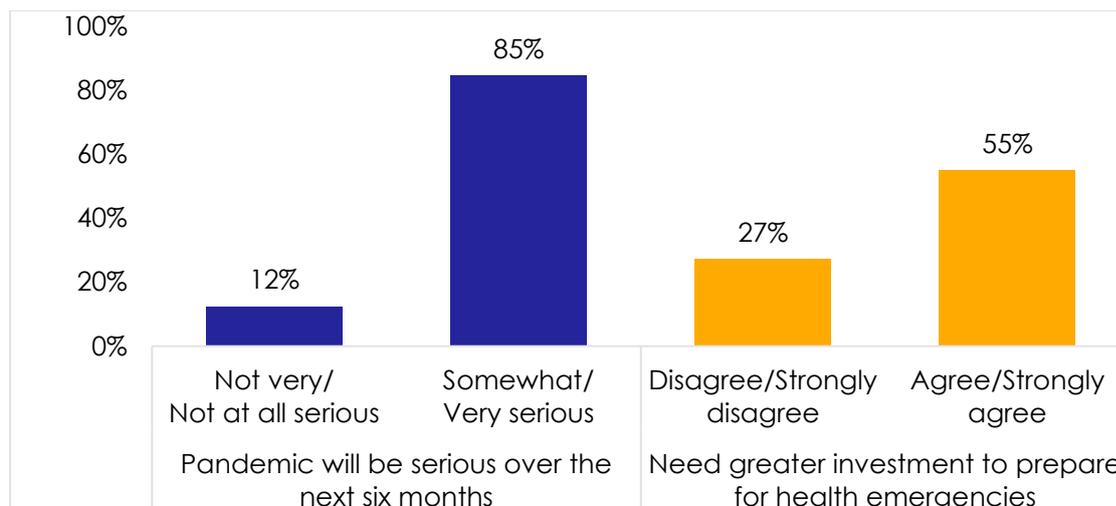
Respondents were asked: In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that the following things are taking place or might take place in Mauritius: Politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority?

Looking ahead

Most Mauritians (85%) citizens believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will be a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem for their country over the next six months (Figure 18).

A majority (55%) also say their government needs to invest more resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even at the cost of limiting resources for other health services.

Figure 18: Future impacts of COVID-19 | Mauritius | 2020



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for Mauritius over the next six months?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

Conclusion

Governments worldwide are playing a more active role in the economy to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and support their populations. Although this expanded role is crucial, it also represents opportunities for corruption. Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that while the Mauritian government enjoys majority approval of its overall COVID-19 response, it faces the challenge of public distrust. More than half of all citizens believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources intended to help with the pandemic were lost to government corruption, and almost seven in 10 citizens worry that politicians might use the pandemic for political gain.

Even during a public health emergency, most citizens oppose government measures that would limit the freedom of the media. However, they endorse the use of the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates.

Survey findings suggest that Mauritians living in poverty – who are more likely to report losing income and less likely to be informed about COVID-19 and willing to get vaccinated – may be an important target for information and assistance.

Finally, Mauritians are highly concerned about the future – the vast majority of citizens expect that the pandemic will be a serious problem for the country over the next six months.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, the European Union Delegation to the African Union, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 427 | 19 February 2021