

Gambians say government must do more to help the youth

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 521 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

The Gambia is a youthful country. Almost 60% of its 2.2 million people are under the age of 25 (Index Mundi, 2021), and 18- to 35-year-olds make up 58% of its registered voters (Taylor, 2021).

Does the government prioritise the needs of young people?

Gambian youth face particular challenges in a struggling economy with high unemployment (DW, 2021). The Global Youth Development Index ranks the Gambia 139th out of 181 countries on its efforts in youth education, employment, health, equality and inclusion, peace and security, and political and civic participation (Commonwealth, 2020).

The quest to address these challenges is captured in the vision of the country's National Youth Policy, which seeks to "empower and render the Gambian youth capable and willing to make well-informed, sustainable and meaningful life choices" through education, youth development investment, and initiatives to confront the country's long tradition of emigration (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2019).

Projects by national and international agencies target specific issues pertaining to the youth. For instance, the Gambia Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) was established in January 2017 to address the issue of emigration by improving the skills and employability of potential and returning migrants (National Youth Council, 2017).

Afrobarometer survey findings show that Gambian youth have more education than their elders but are also more likely to be unemployed. Health and management of the economy top the list of the most important problems that young Gambians want their government to address. Among Gambian adults of all ages, a majority are willing to pay higher taxes to fund programs to help young people, with job creation as the top priority for additional government investment. Though dominant in numbers, Gambia's youth are less likely than their elders to participate in change-making activities such as voting and civic engagement.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Gambian adults in January and February 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. A previous Afrobarometer survey was conducted in the Gambia in 2018.

Key findings

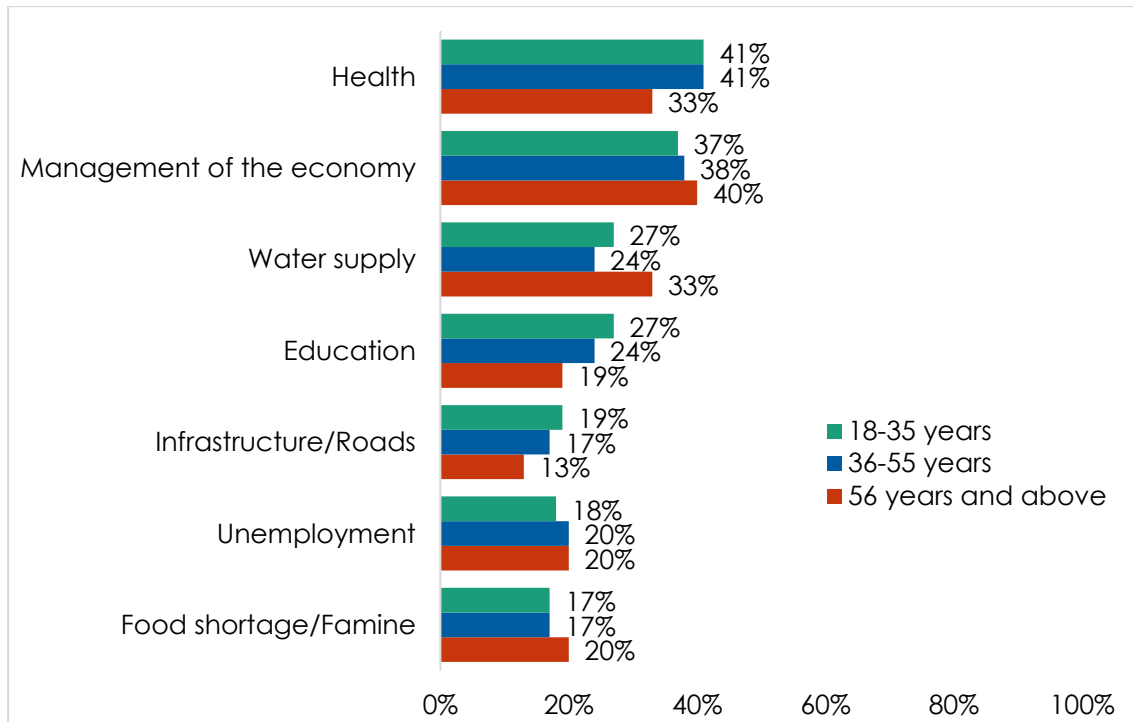
- Health and management of the economy are the most important problems that Gambian youth (aged 18-35 years) want their government to address. They are more likely than their elders to prioritise education and infrastructure/roads, but not unemployment.
- On average, Gambian youth have more education than their elders. Almost six in 10 young Gambians (58%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling, compared to about half as many in the 36-55 (32%) and over-55 (28%) age groups.
- But they are also more likely to be unemployed: A quarter (25%) of young Gambians are looking for a job, compared to 21% of middle-aged and 16% of older citizens.
- Only a minority of young Gambians say the government is doing a good job of meeting the needs of youth (22%) and addressing their priorities for government action.
- Almost six in 10 Gambians (57%) say they would be willing to pay higher taxes to fund programs to help the youth.
- If the government could increase its spending to help young people, job creation (cited by 46% of respondents) would be Gambians' highest priority for additional investment.
- A majority of Gambians say that in order for the country to do well, we should listen to the wisdom of our elders (53%) rather than to fresh ideas from young people (36%). This view is shared widely across all age brackets – even among young adults (51%).
- Young Gambians are less likely than their elders to engage in political and civic activities, including voting, contacting leaders, attending community meetings, and joining others to raise an issue.

Most important problems

When asked what they consider the most important problems that their government should address, Gambian youth (aged 18-35 years) differ only marginally from their elders (Figure 1).

Health tops the list of concerns, cited by 41% of young respondents as one of their top three priorities, followed by management of the economy (37%), water supply (27%), and education (27%). Perhaps surprisingly, unemployment (cited by 18% of youth) ranks only sixth among their most urgent concerns.

Figure 1: Most important problem | by age group | The Gambia | 2021



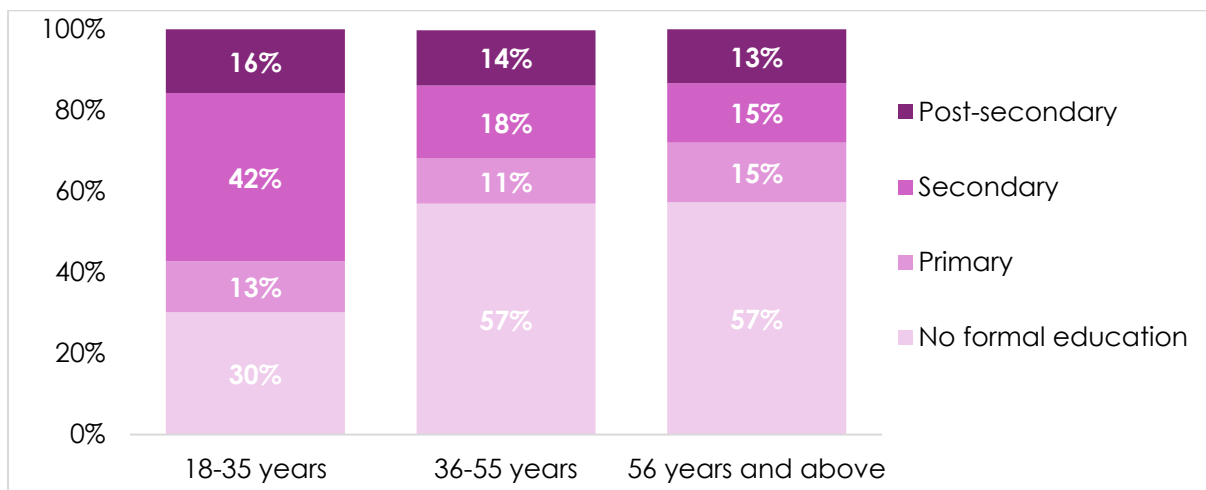
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three answers per respondent were recorded. The figure shows the % of respondents who cited each problem among their three priorities.)

The status of youth: More educated, less employed

Gambian youth are more likely than their elders to have an education, but they are less likely to have a job.

Almost six in 10 young Gambians (58%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling, compared to about half as many in the 36-55 (32%) and over-55 (28%) age groups (Figure 2). Youth are also roughly half as likely as the older groups to lack formal education altogether (30% vs. 57% among middle-aged and senior respondents).

Figure 2: Education level | by age group | The Gambia | 2021



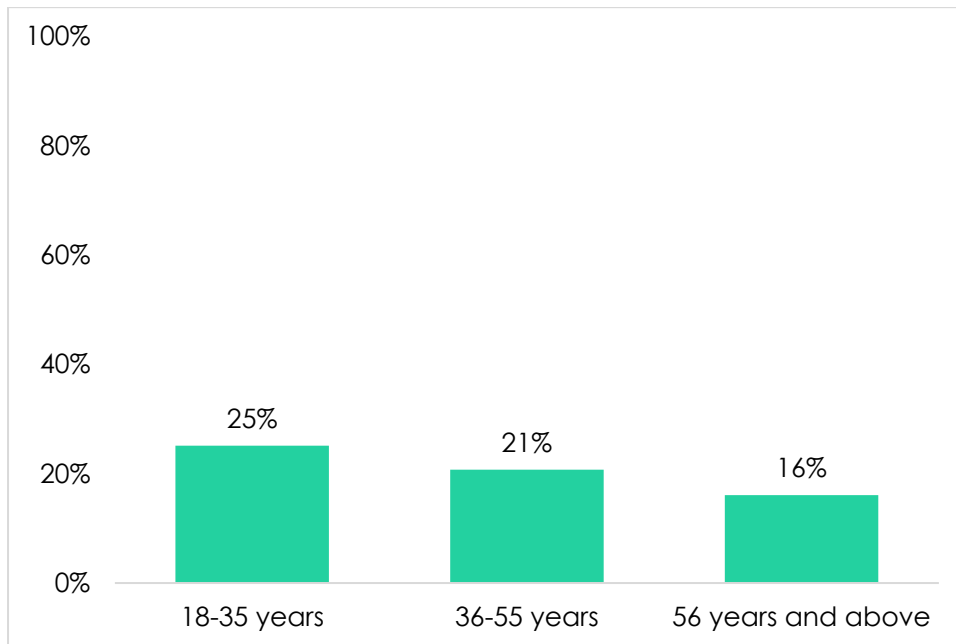
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Even though they are more likely than their elders to be educated, young people are also more likely to be looking for cash-income jobs.

Across the age brackets, one-quarter (25%) of youth are unemployed and looking for work, compared to 21% of middle-aged and 16% of older citizens (Figure 3).

About four in 10 young people report having full-time (23%) or part-time (19%) jobs, while 33% say they don't have work but are not looking for a job.

Figure 3: Not employed and looking for a job | by age group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (% who say “no, but looking”)

Is the government meeting the needs of Gambia's youth?

On their top priorities for government action, young Gambians – like their elders – say the government is doing a poor job (Figure 4). Only about one-third of young respondents say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” on addressing education needs (35%) and providing water and sanitation services (33%)

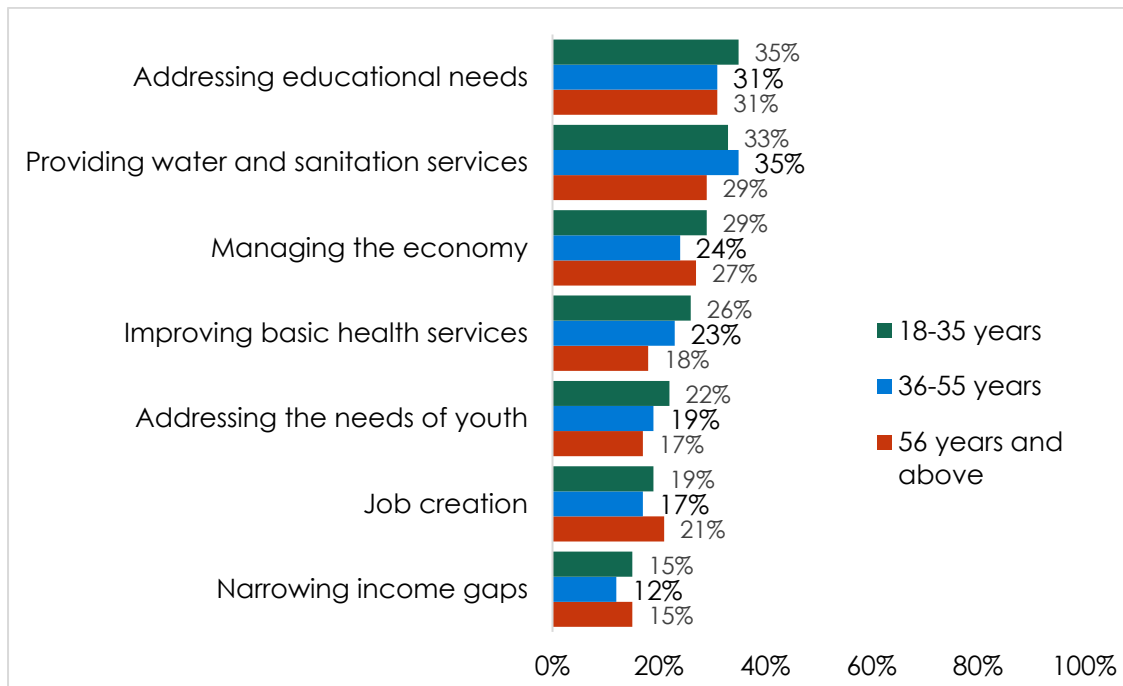
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Even fewer praise the government's efforts on managing the economy (29%), improving basic health services (26%), creating jobs (19%), and narrowing income gaps (15%).

Overall, just 22% of young respondents express satisfaction with the government's performance on addressing the needs of the youth.

In these assessments, young respondents differ only modestly from their elders.

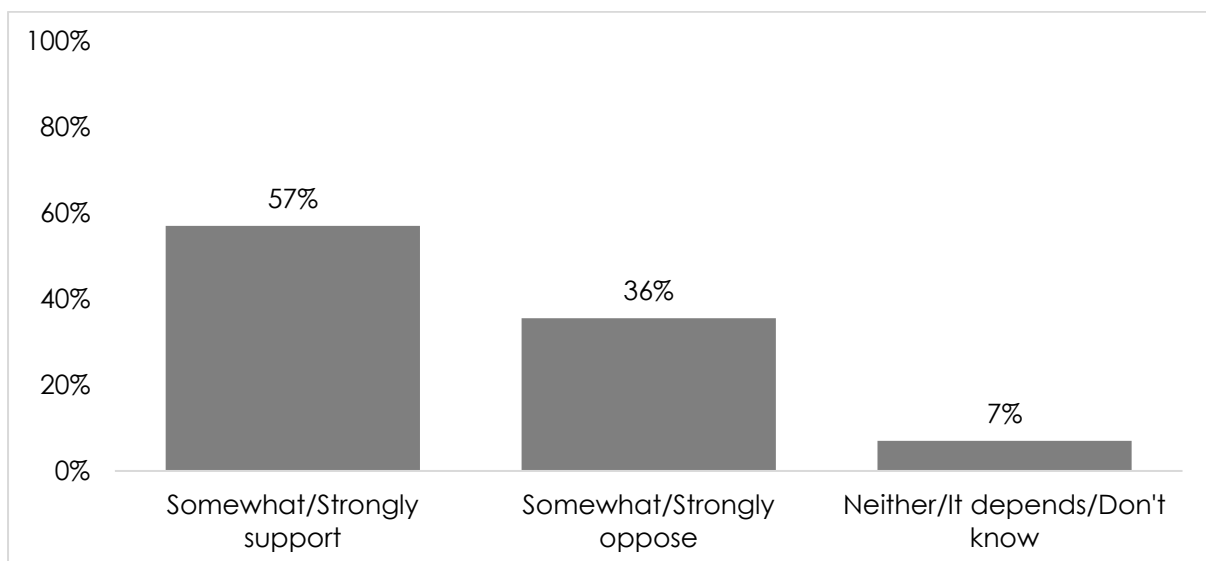
Figure 4: Government performance on youth priorities | by age group
 | The Gambia | 2021



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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Gambians are concerned about the development of their youth, as evidenced by their readiness to pay higher taxes to fund programs to help young people. Almost six in 10 respondents (57%) say they would "somewhat support" or "strongly support" higher taxes to fund youth programs (Figure 5). About one-third (36%) would oppose such a move.

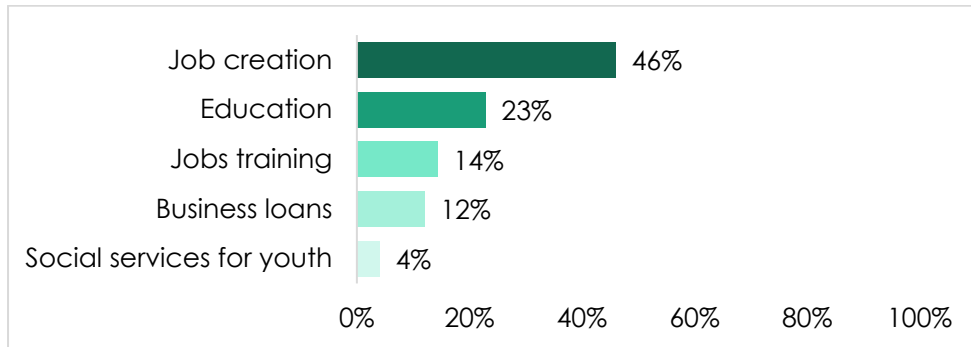
Figure 5: Paying more taxes to support programs to help young people
 | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: If the government decided to make people pay more taxes in order to support programs to help young people, would you support this decision or oppose it?

If the government could increase its spending to help young people, job creation (cited by 46% of respondents) would be Gambians' highest priority for additional investment. This is followed by education (23%) and jobs training (14%). Business loans (12%) and social services for youth (4%) draw less support (Figure 6). These priorities vary little across age brackets.

Figure 6: Priorities for additional government investment in youth | The Gambia | 2021



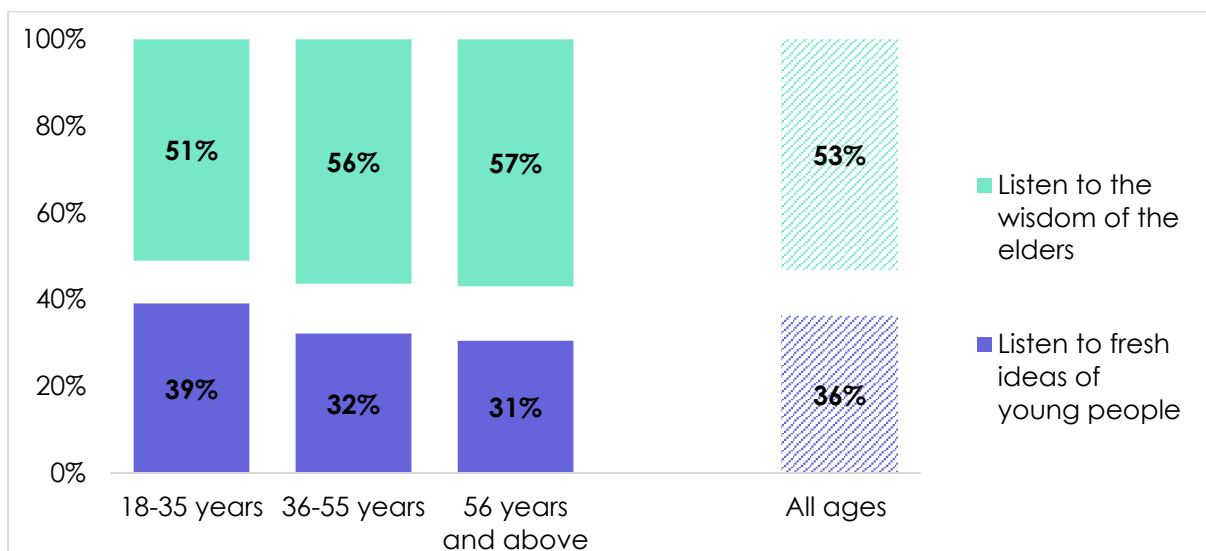
Respondents were asked: If the government could increase its spending on programs to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?

Do the youth have a voice?

Given their sheer numbers, young Gambians might expect their views to carry some weight. But a majority (53%) of Gambians believe that in order for the country to do well, it's more important to listen to "the wisdom of the elders" rather than to "fresh ideas from young people" (Figure 7). Indeed, 42% "agree very strongly" with this view.

Only 36% would prioritise the views of the youth. Young citizens are somewhat more likely than their elders to favour listening to youth, but even they value "wisdom" over "fresh ideas" (51% vs. 39%).

Figure 7: Should we listen more to the youth or elders? | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

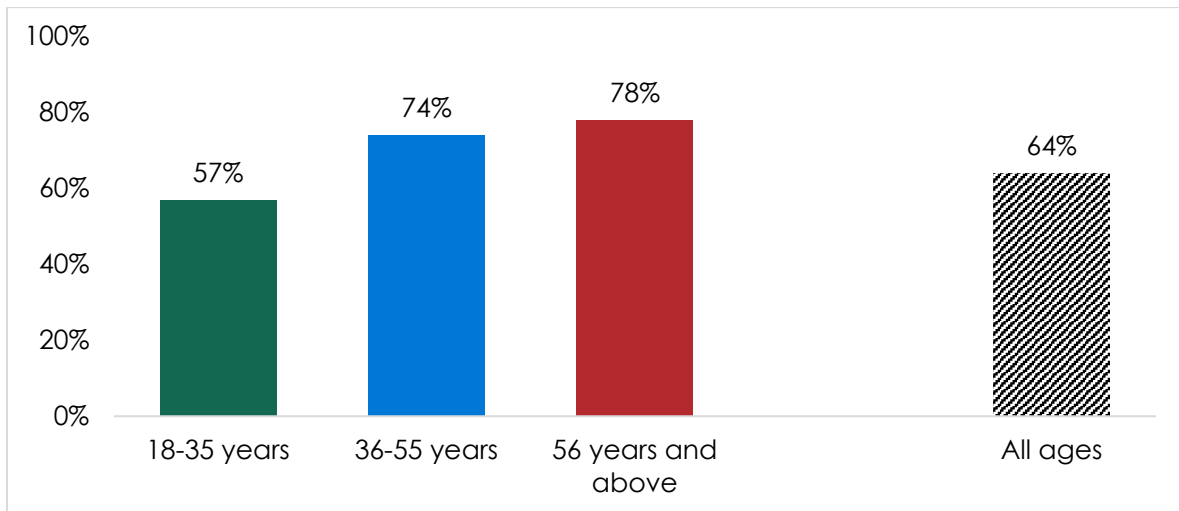
Statement 1: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders.

Statement 2: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to fresh ideas from young people. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Political and civic engagement by the youth

Around the world, young people are generally less likely than their elders to vote in elections (Barrett, 2018). Survey findings show that this is true in the Gambia, too. Excluding respondents who were too young to vote at the time, about two-thirds (64%) of respondents of all ages say they voted in the most recent national election in 2017. But only 57% of 18- to 35-year-olds say they voted, compared to 74% of middle-aged and 78% of older citizens (Figure 8).

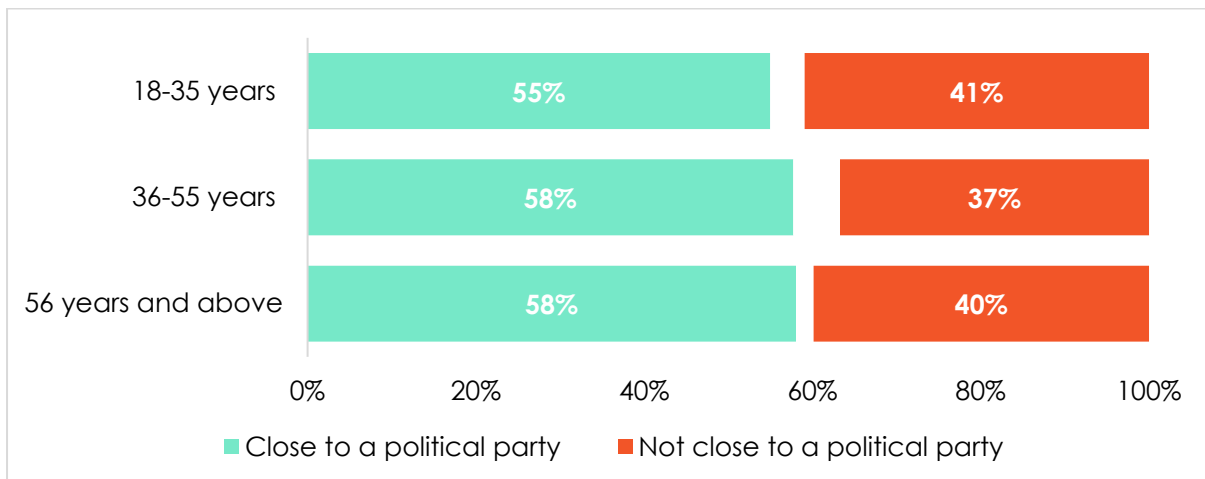
Figure 8: Self-reported voting in the 2017 election | by age group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In the last national election, held in 2017, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2017 are excluded.)*

But young people in the Gambia are only marginally less likely than their elders to identify with a political party. A majority (55%) of young respondents say they “feel close to” a party, compared to 58% of both middle-aged and older respondents (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Political party affiliation | by age group | The Gambia | 2021



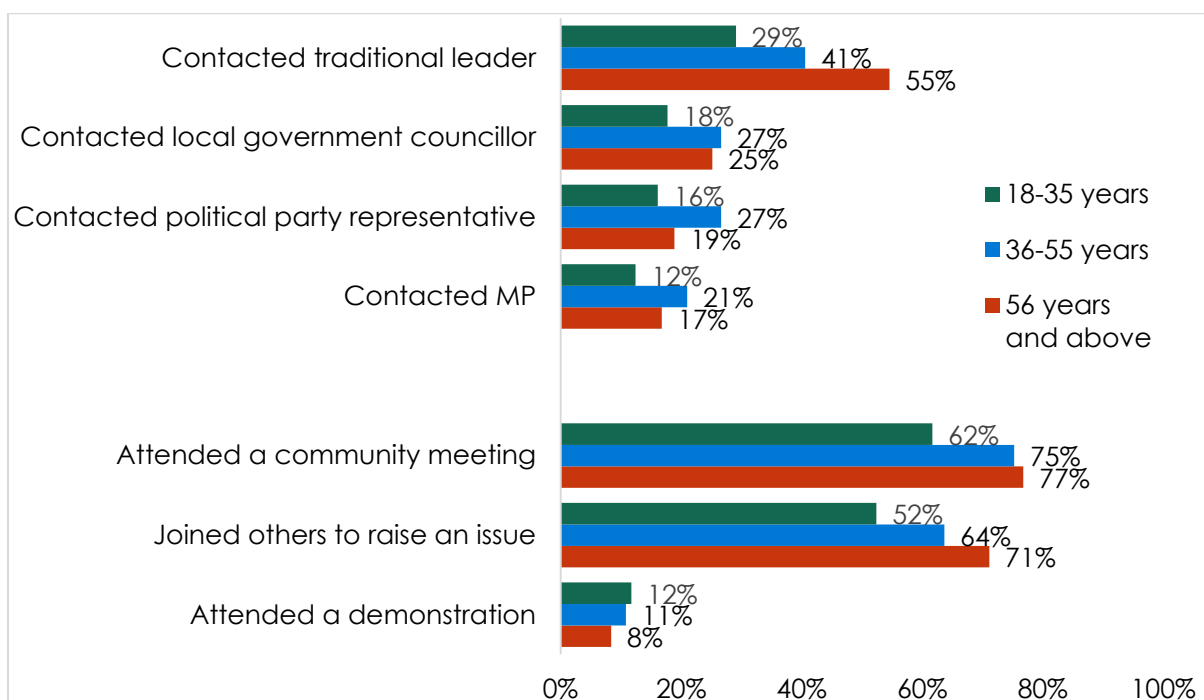
Respondents were asked: *Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

But in other forms of political and civic engagement, young Gambians clearly lag behind (Figure 10). They are less likely than other age groups to report making contact during the previous year with a traditional leader (29%, vs. 41%-55% for the middle-aged and older age brackets), a local government councillor (18%, vs. 25%-27%), a political party representative (16%, vs. 19%-27%), or a member of Parliament (MP) (12%, vs. 17%-21%).

They are also less likely to report having attended a community meeting (62%, vs. 75%-77%) or having joined others to raise an issue (52%, vs. 64%-71%) during the previous 12 months.

They match their middle-aged counterparts when it comes to attending a protest march or demonstration (12% of youth, 11% of 36- to 55-year-olds, vs. 8% of older respondents).

Figure 10: Participation in civic and political activities | by age group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked:

During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")
Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Joined others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Conclusion

Few Gambians believe their government is doing enough to develop one of the country's most important resources – its youth. A majority of citizens favour greater investment in programs targeting young people, even if it means paying higher taxes.

Meanwhile, survey findings suggest that young Gambians are not taking full advantage of political and civic avenues to make their voices and their priorities heard.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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