



Dispatch No. 537 | 3 August 2022

Zimbabweans look to government for action on climate change

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 537 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country with abundant natural resources and a population of 15.3 million. The country's rainy season historically stretches from October to March, while the dry season spans from June to August (World Bank, 2021).

In addition to being affected by extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods, and drought, the country has recorded significant climatic changes, including declining mean annual precipitation, late onset and early cessation of the rainy or growing season across all agro-ecological regions, and an increase in mean annual temperatures (World Bank, 2021). The Meteorological Services Department of Zimbabwe says the country has experienced its six warmest years on record since 1987, putting stress on the agricultural and water sectors. Rain is becoming unpredictable, and droughts are the most frequently occurring natural hazards in Zimbabwe (United Nations Development Programme, 2017; Frischen, Meza, Rupp, Wietler, & Hagenlocher, 2020).

In line with its ratification of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Gumbodete, 2022), the government has crafted a National Climate Change Response Strategy to deal with issues of "adaptation, mitigation, technology, financing, public education and awareness" and to outline climate and disaster risk-management policies (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2015).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Zimbabweans' experiences and perceptions of climate change.

Findings show that while climate change is still an unknown concept to more than half of Zimbabweans, those who are aware of it overwhelmingly say that climate change is making their lives worse. Citizens expect far more action from both the government and their co-citizens to fight it.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March and 10 April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

Key findings

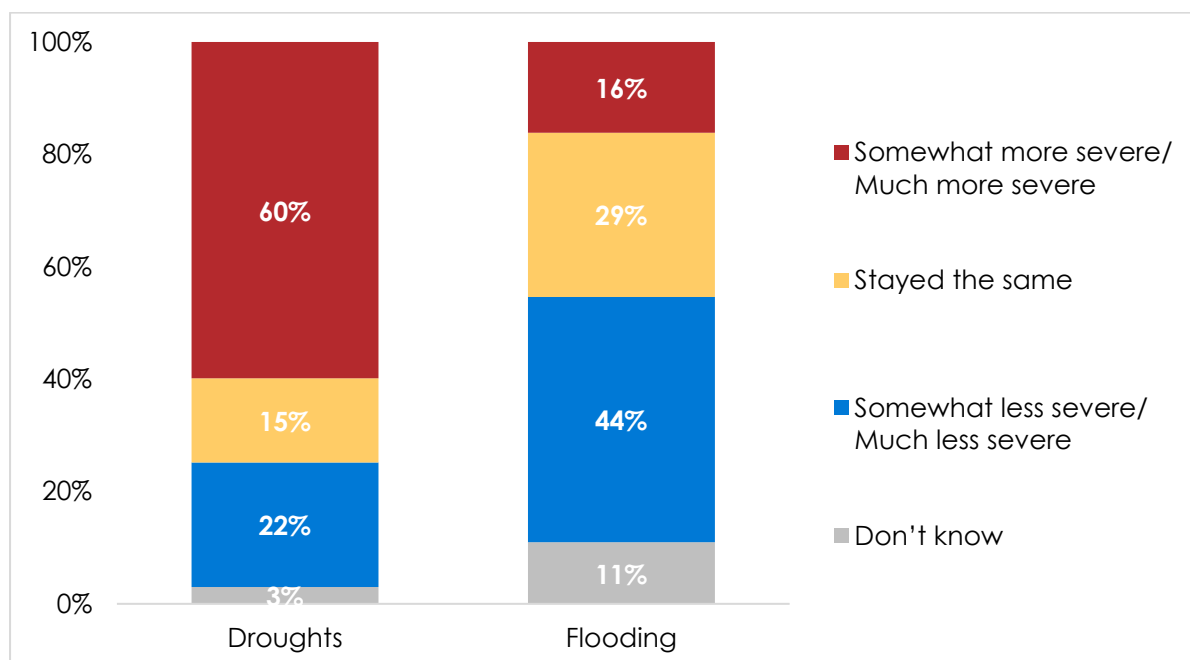
- Six in 10 Zimbabweans (60%) say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” over the past 10 years; only a quarter as many (16%) say the same about floods.
- Fewer than half (45%) of Zimbabweans say they have heard of climate change. Among those who are aware of climate change:
 - Eight in 10 (80%) say it is making life in Zimbabwe worse.
 - Almost two-thirds (64%) believe that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change, and even more (71%) want the government to take immediate action to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy.
 - Only small minorities are satisfied with efforts by the government (2%), business and industry (3%), developed countries (4%), and ordinary citizens (11%) to fight climate change.

Severity of extreme weather conditions

Before mentioning climate change, Afrobarometer asked respondents about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. Six in 10 Zimbabweans (60%) say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” over the past decade, while 22% say they have become less severe and 15% say they have stayed the same (Figure 1).

In contrast, more than four in 10 (44%) say that the severity of floods has *decreased*, while fewer than half as many (16%) say they have gotten worse.

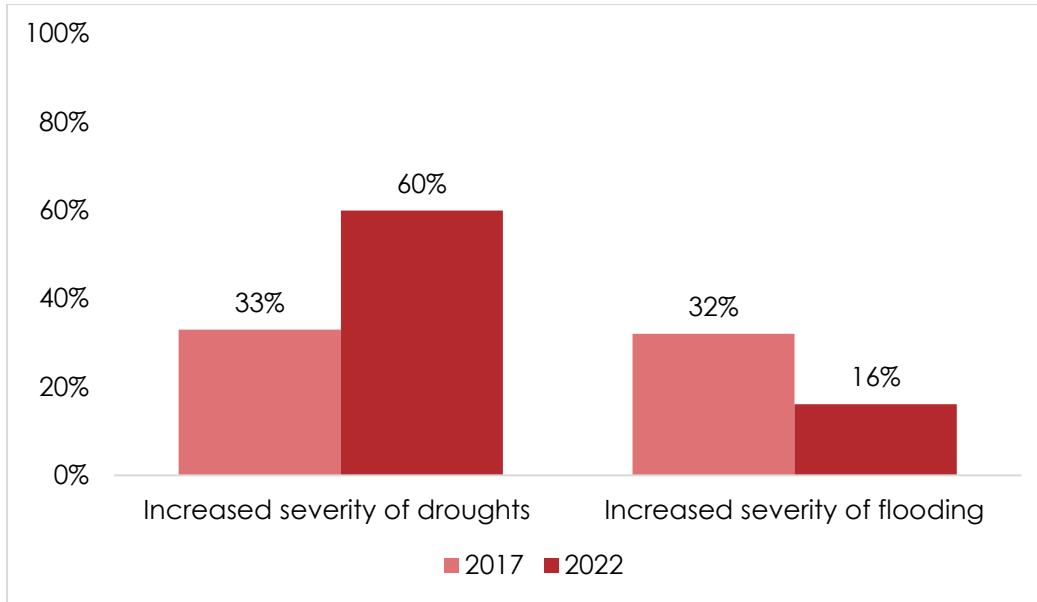
Figure 1: Severity of droughts and floods | Zimbabwe | 2022



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: Droughts? Flooding? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Compared to 2017, the proportion who say droughts have gotten more severe has increased by 27 percentage points, while perceptions of worsening floods have decreased by 16 percentage points (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Increased severity of droughts and flooding | Zimbabwe | 2017-2022



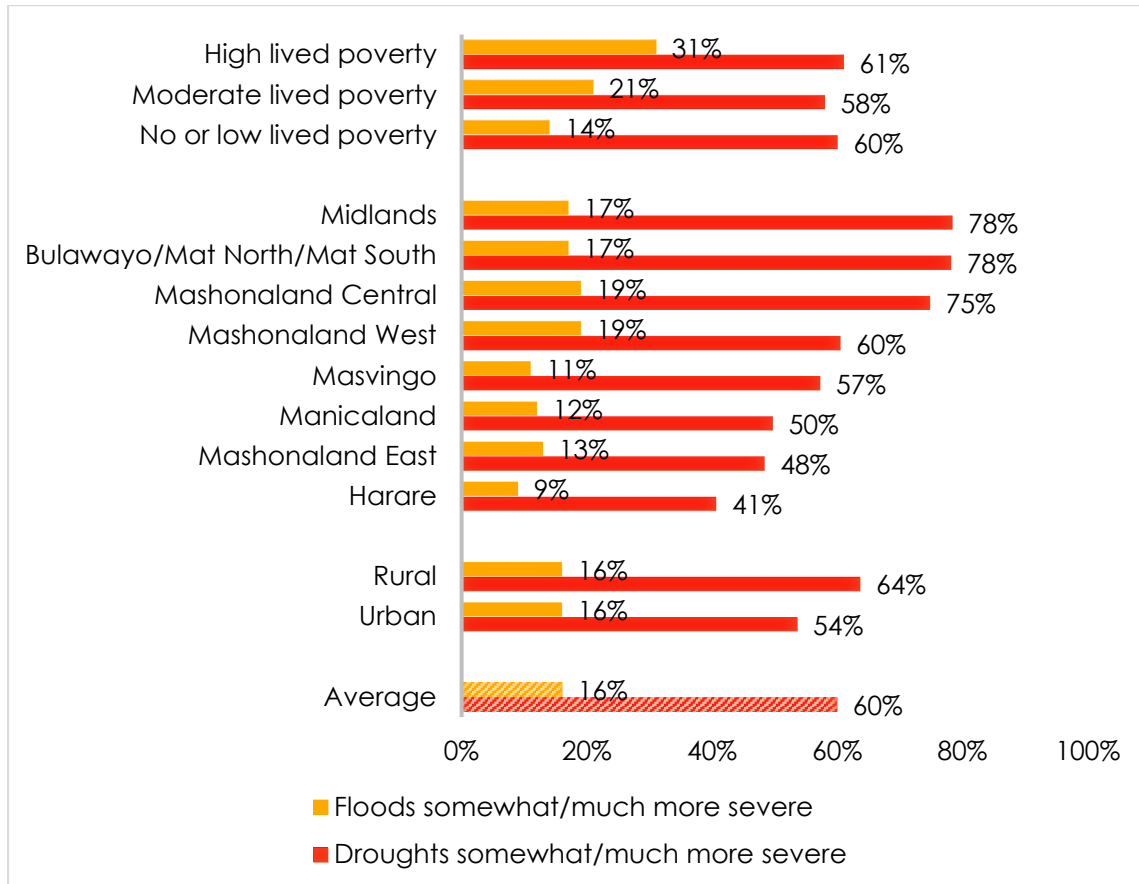
Respondents were asked: *In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live: Droughts? Flooding? (% who say "somewhat more severe" or "much more severe")*

Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to report increasingly severe droughts (64% vs. 54%), perhaps reflecting a greater awareness of the effects of a lack of rainfall in agricultural areas (Figure 3). Geographically, five provinces have majorities reporting that droughts have become more severe, most commonly in the Midlands province (78%), Bulawayo/Mat North/Mat South provinces (78%), and Mashonaland Central (75%).

Citizens with high lived poverty¹ are more likely to report that floods have become more severe (31%) than their better-off counterparts (14%-21%).

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).

Figure 3: More severe droughts and flooding | by demographic group | Zimbabwe
 | 2022



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: Droughts? Flooding? (% who say “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe”)

Climate change

Awareness of climate change

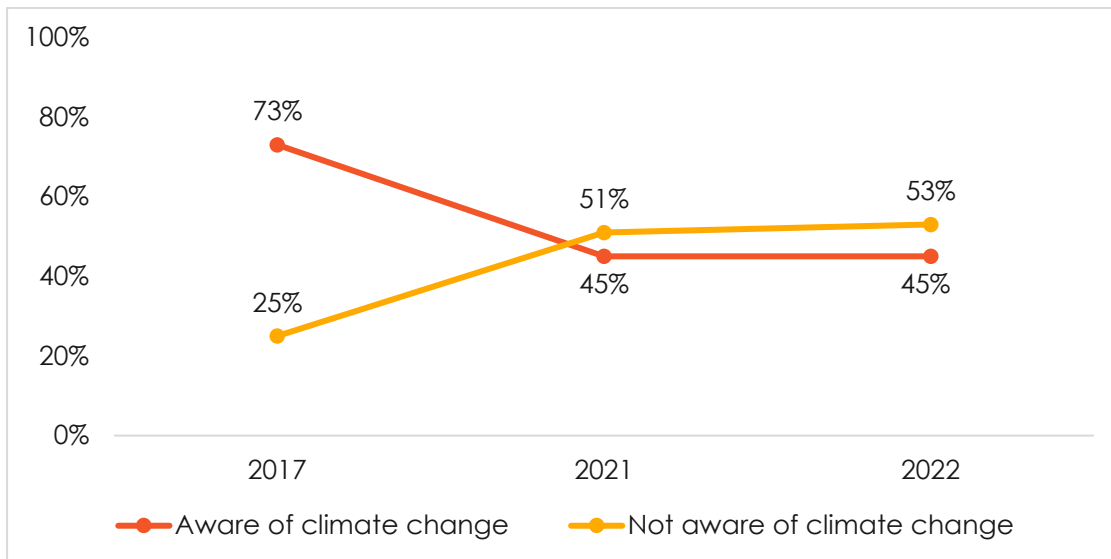
Fewer than half (45%) of Zimbabweans say they have heard of climate change. This proportion was 28 percentage points higher (73%) in 2017, perhaps reflecting high public awareness at the time of floods that hit Zimbabwe in late 2016 and early 2017 (Aljazeera, 2017) (Figure 4).

Although the experience of severe drought is more common in rural areas, awareness of climate change is far lower among rural residents than among urbanites (38% vs. 56%) (Figure 5).

Citizens with post-secondary education are three times as likely as the uneducated to have heard of climate change (75% vs. 25%). But poor citizens are more likely to be familiar with the term “climate change” (51%) than better-off respondents (40%-44%). Middle-aged citizens (50%) are also more likely to be aware of climate change than older or younger respondents.

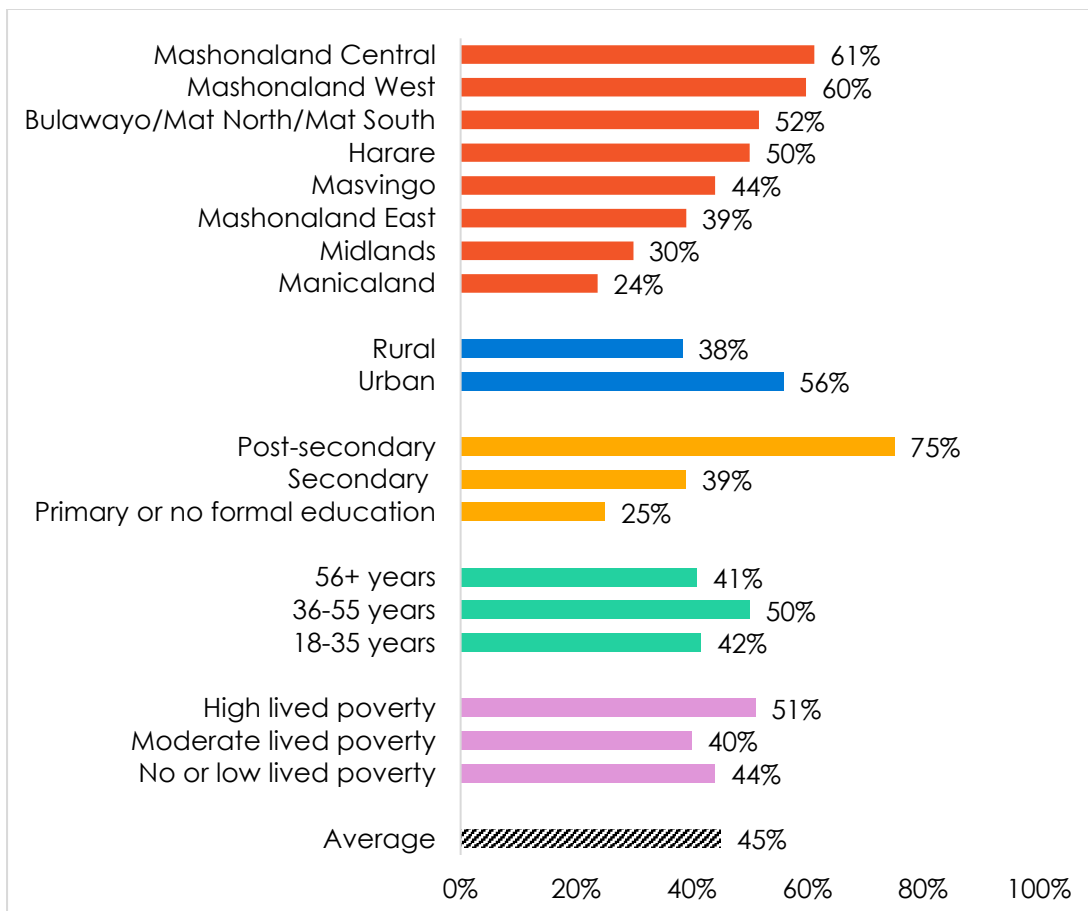
Awareness of climate change varies widely by geographic location, ranging from 24% in Manicaland to 61% in Mashonaland Central.

Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | Zimbabwe | 2017-2022



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

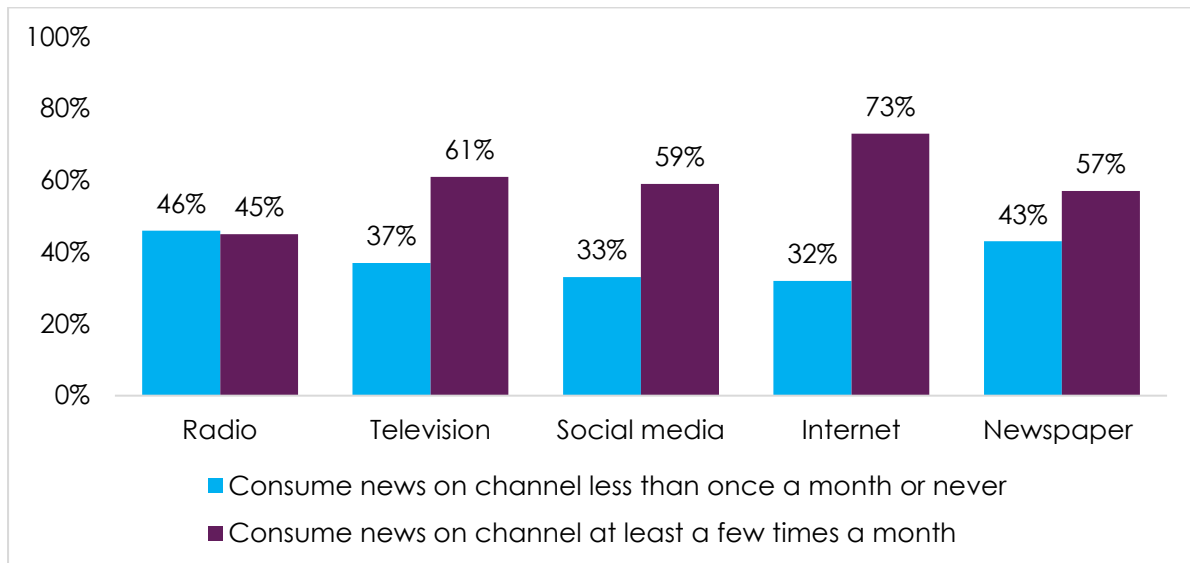
Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Awareness of climate change increases with respondents' consumption of news from television, social media, the Internet, and newspapers: Among those who never or rarely (less than once a month) consume news from these sources, only 32%-43% are aware of climate change, compared to 57%-73% among those who obtain news at least a few times a month. The exception is radio, where we see no difference between the two groups (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Awareness of climate change | by news media consumption | Zimbabwe | 2022

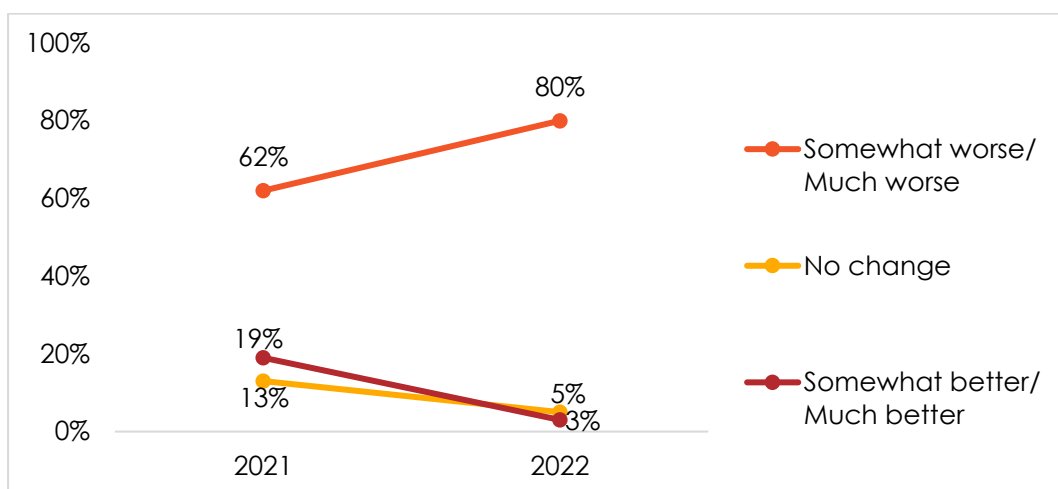


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Effects of climate change

Eight in 10 of citizens (80%) who are aware of climate change say it is making life in Zimbabwe "somewhat worse" (30%) or "much worse" (50%). Perceptions of the adverse effects of climate change have risen sharply from 62% in 2021 (Figure 7).

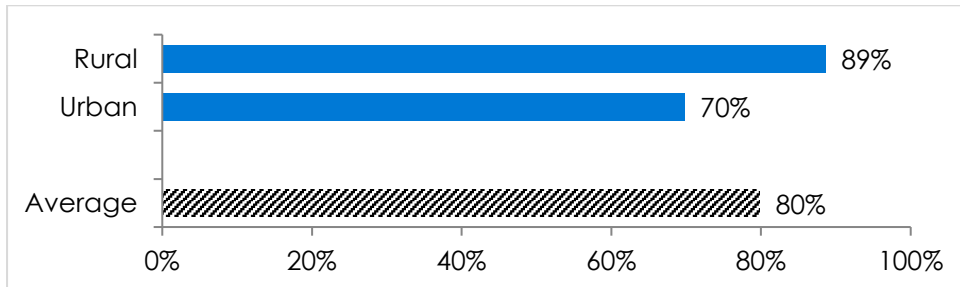
Figure 7: Effect of climate change | Zimbabwe | 2021-2022



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

The negative impact of climate change is more strongly felt among rural residents than urban residents (89% vs. 70%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Climate change is making life worse | by urban-rural location | Zimbabwe | 2022



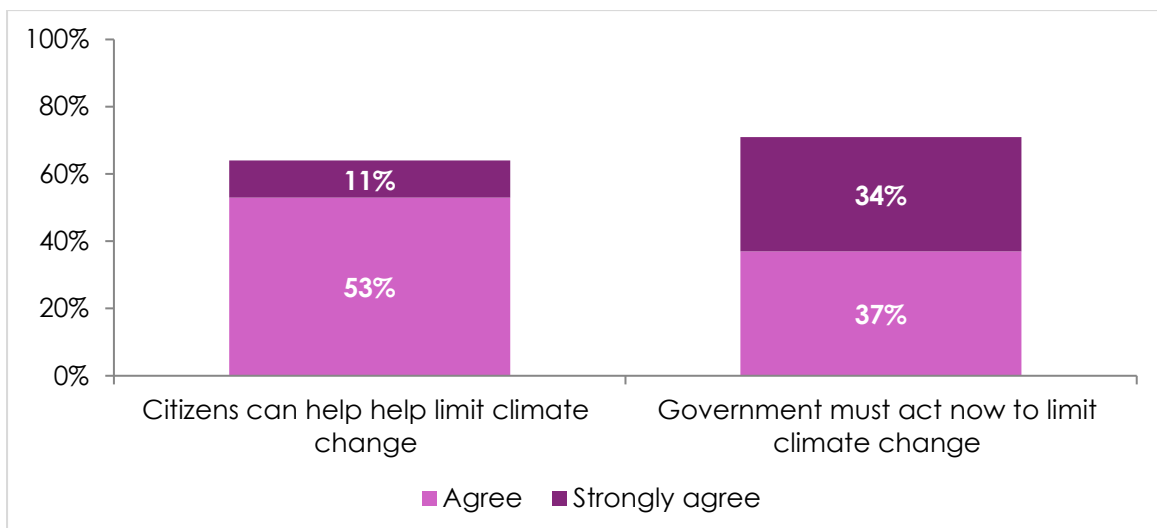
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Zimbabwe better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Fighting climate change

Majorities of Zimbabweans believe that both ordinary citizens and the government have a role to play in limiting climate change. Almost two-thirds of respondents who are aware of climate change (64%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that citizens can help curb climate change (Figure 9). Even more (71%) want their government to take steps now to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy.

In fact, for a majority (57%) of Zimbabweans, the government has the primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact. Fewer respondents assign primary responsibility to ordinary citizens (16%), business and industry (10%), developed countries (3%), and traditional leaders (3%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Limiting climate change | Zimbabwe | 2022



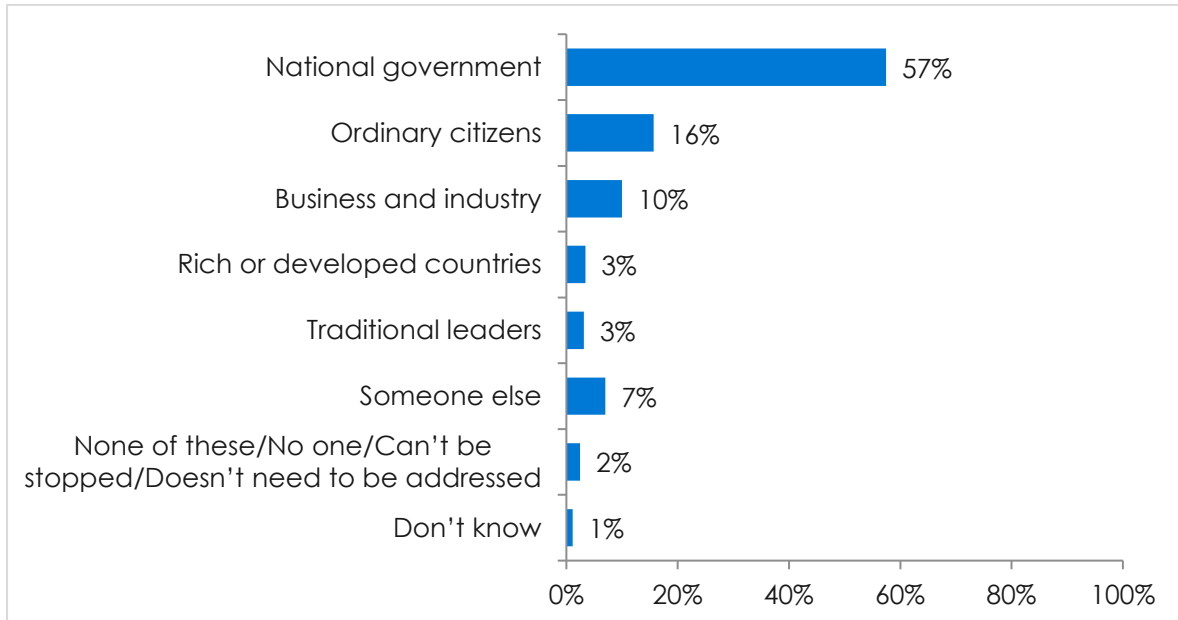
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

Ordinary Zimbabweans can play a role in limiting climate change.

It is important for our government to take steps now to limit climate change in the future, even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy.

(Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

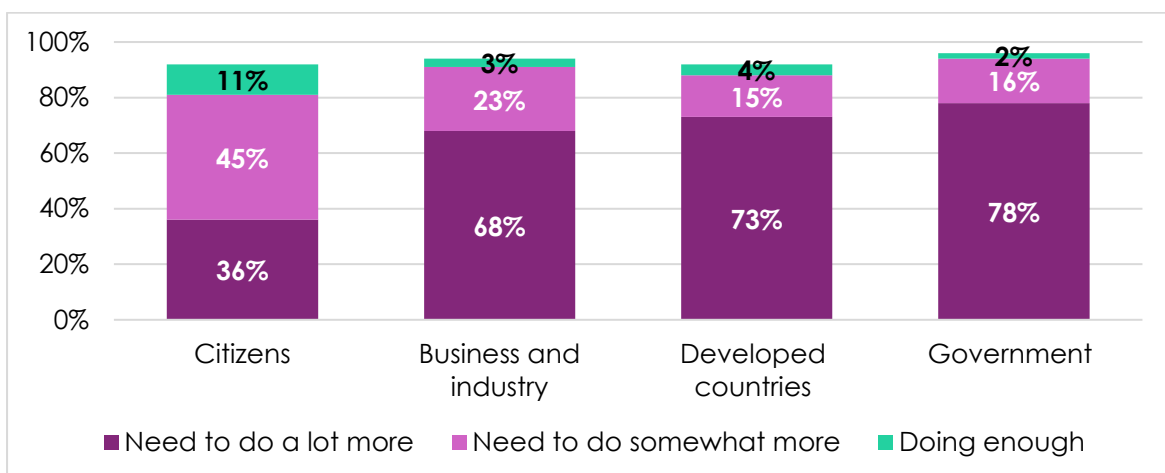
Figure 10: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? Respondents answer with a resounding “No.” Only small minorities say the government (2%), business and industry (3%), developed countries (4%), and citizens (11%) are making enough of an effort to fight climate change (Figure 11). Large majorities believe more needs to be done, including 78% who say the government needs to do “a lot more.”

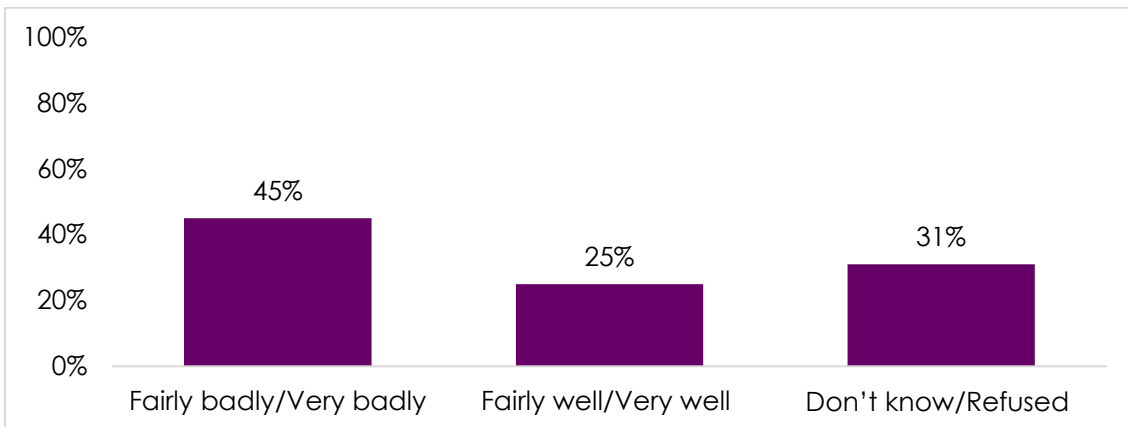
Figure 11: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think each of the following are doing enough to limit climate change, or do they need to do more, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

When asked to assess how well the government is addressing the problem of climate change, only a quarter (25%) of all survey respondents give the government a passing grade, while 45% describe its performance as “fairly bad” or “very bad.” Three in 10 (31%) say they “don’t know” or refused to answer the question (Figure 12).

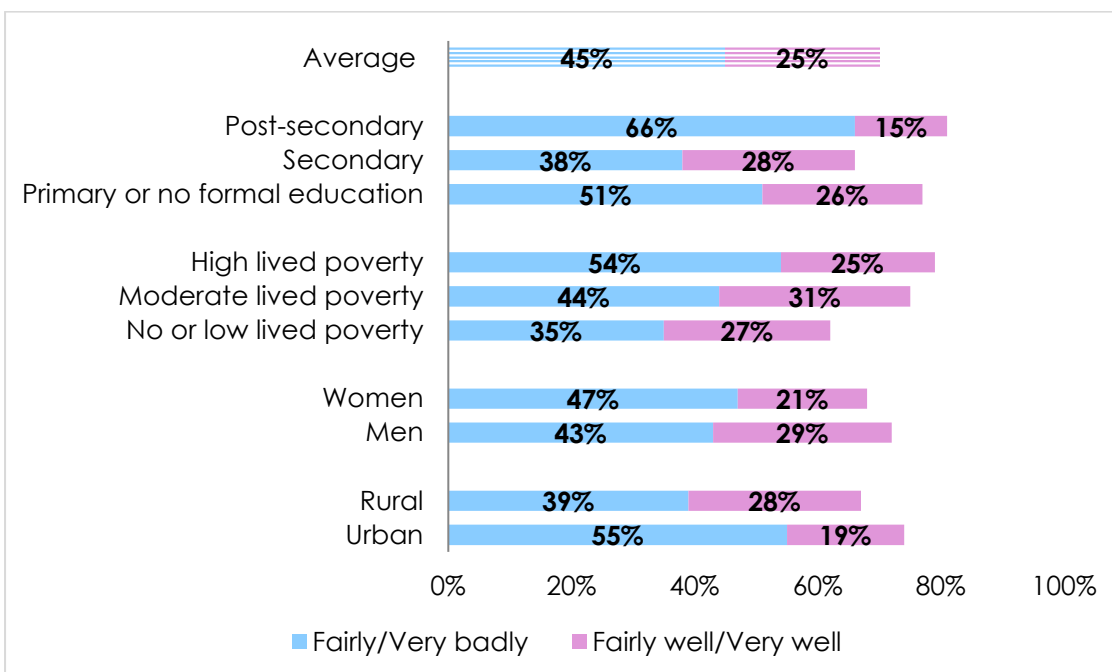
Figure 12: Government performance on addressing climate change | Zimbabwe | 2022



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 the problem of climate change?

The view that the government is doing a poor job on climate change is particularly common among highly educated citizens (66%), urban residents (55%), and poor respondents (54%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Government performance in handling climate change | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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 the problem of climate change?

Conclusion

Climate change is still an unknown phenomenon to more than half of Zimbabweans, but among those who are aware of it, most report that it is making life in the country worse. Dissatisfied with stakeholders' efforts to limit climate change, citizens place the primary responsibility for combating it on the government and want immediate action, even at considerable cost to the economy.

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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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

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