

Integrating states or integrating people? Kenyans have not heard much about the proposed East African Federation

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 544 | Mercy Kaburu and Carolyn Logan

Summary

The East African Community (EAC) is a regional organisation comprising seven sovereign states – Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Formally established by a 1999 treaty, the EAC adopted regional integration as one of its primary goals at its inception. Article 5(2) of the EAC Treaty recommends using an incremental approach to achieving political, economic, and social integration by establishing a customs union, a common market, a monetary union, and ultimately political federation (East African Court of Justice, 1999).

Adar et al. (2020) conceptualise the EAC quest for regional integration as a process of *eastafrikanization* aimed at creating *eastafrikanness* as a new identity for the citizenry of the federation. Nye (1968) underscores the political, economic, and social dimensions of integration, noting that it should aim to establish a transnational economy, a transnational society, and a transnational political interdependence.

EAC integration has come a long way since 1999, passing two critical milestones: the establishment of a customs union in 2005 and of a common market that became operational in 2010. Progress toward a monetary union has also been significant; the EAC Secretariat says it will be in operation by 2024 (East African Community, 2022a). Realisation of the fourth pillar, political federation, took a major step forward when a 2018 EAC Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government adopted a confederation, projected to be operational in 2023, as a precursor to the EAC political federation (East African, 2020).

The peoples of East Africa – citizens of the seven member nations – are intended to be the primary beneficiaries of integration under EAC auspices. Indeed, the EAC Treaty identifies a “people-centered” approach as one of the principal objectives of the community. Yet findings from an Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021) survey in Kenya indicate that the public’s awareness of, and support for, various aspects of federation appear to lag well behind the plans of the implementing governments.

A majority of Kenyans have still heard little or nothing about plans to establish a confederation. Few people are familiar with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), which is supposed to represent the interests of ordinary citizens at the EAC.

Moreover, levels of support for specific aspects of integration are not high, with political federation winning the least support. Considering that major steps toward monetary union and federation are scheduled to take place over the next two years, Kenya’s government may do well to invest more in educating the public and winning support for the momentous changes that are afoot.

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, and Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Kenya, based at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Kenyans in November 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous AB surveys were conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2019.

Key findings

- Two-thirds (66%) of Kenyans have either heard “nothing” (36%) or just “a small amount” (22%) about the proposed East African Federation (EAF) or else say they “don't know” (8%).
- Only a narrow majority (52%) approve of allowing the free movement of goods, services, and labour across national borders, and even fewer (49%) support monetary union or a common currency.
- Half (50%) of Kenyans disapprove of the formation of a unitary government for East Africa, while only 44% favour this plan.
- Only three in 10 Kenyans (29%) say they have heard “some” or “a great deal” about the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA).
- A plurality (47%) of Kenyans say ordinary people should choose their representatives to EALA through direct popular vote, while 44% prefer to have them chosen by Kenya's Parliament.

Plans and progress toward the proposed East African Federation

Shaped by similar historical experiences and guided by a vision of pan-East Africanism, the founding presidents of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda first considered a regional political federation as a springboard to regional integration in the 1960s. But the idea languished for more than three decades until the three states ratified the EAC Treaty in 1999, more than two decades after the collapse of its predecessor in 1977 (Adar, 2005).

According to Nyong'o (1990), regional integration in Africa has often been characterised by an absence of clear consensus on the benefits and a lack of political will. But the establishment of regional economic communities (RECs) under the African Union Agenda 2063 informed the EAC's quest to position itself as a strategic economic community in Africa and beyond. In a move to broaden its geopolitical influence and to tap new markets, the EAC has expanded well beyond the original three countries, admitting the Democratic Republic of Congo as its seventh member in March 2022 (East African Community, 2022b).

Kaburu and Adar (2020) argue that meaningful integration depends on the involvement of the people who will be the subjects and beneficiaries of such a process. According to Article 7(1) of the EAC Treaty, principles governing the achievement of the community's objectives include a “people-centered and market-driven co-operation” and “the establishment of an export-oriented economy for the Partner States in which there shall be free movement of goods, persons, labour, services, capital, information, and technology” (East African Court of Justice, 1999). The customs union and the common market were seen as major steps in that direction.

In fact, the 2019 Africa Regional Integration Index Report (African Union, 2019) rated the EAC as “relatively well integrated,” performing most strongly on the free movement of people

and on macroeconomic integration. The report ranked Kenya as performing best among the partner states, followed by Uganda, while the worst performers are South Sudan and Burundi.

However, while this report presents a positive outlook on the EAC as a regional body, it does not address the fundamental concern of whether the citizenries of the partner states are aware of and involved in the integration process, much less supportive of it. And the role that the EALA should play in developing legislation and representing citizens at the regional level is still largely hidden from public view.

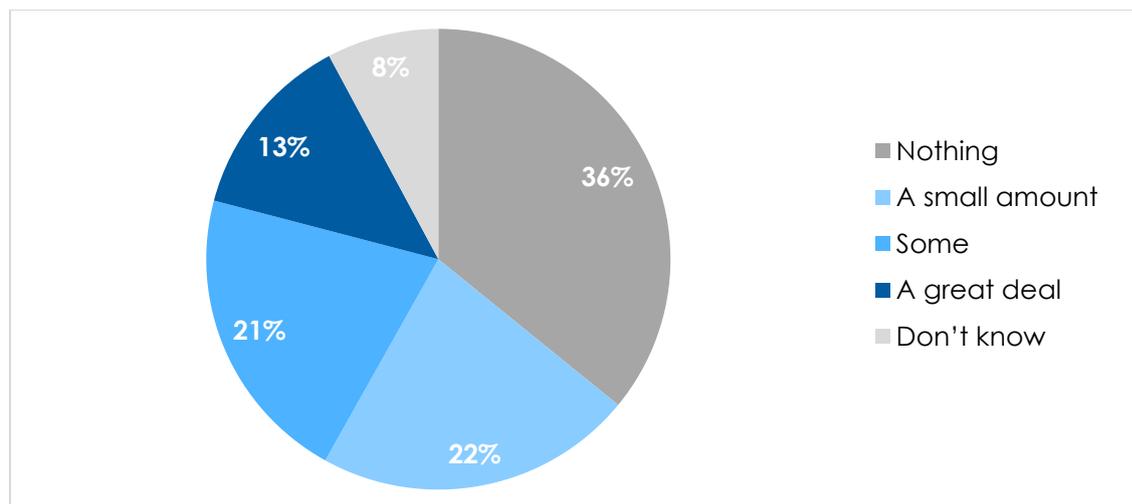
Popular awareness and support

The most recent Afrobarometer survey in Kenya (2021) found that two-thirds (66%) of Kenyans have either heard “nothing” (36%) or just “a small amount” (22%) about the proposed East African Federation (EAF) or else say they “don’t know” (8%) (Figure 1). Only 34% confirm having heard “some” or “a great deal” about the EAF, whose precursor, an East African confederation, is projected to be launched next year.

Awareness of the EAF has increased by 9 percentage points since Afrobarometer asked a similar question in 2008, when 25% said they had heard “some” or “a great deal” about it (Figure 2).

Individuals’ awareness of the proposed federation appears to be strongly linked to education level: While 43% of respondents with post-secondary education have heard some or a great deal about the federation, only 14% of those with no formal schooling have (Figure 3). Similarly, 45% of economically well-off respondents have heard of the federation, compared to 33% of those with high lived poverty.¹ Men (41%) are more informed about the EAF than women (27%), as are older respondents (42% of those aged 56 and over) compared to youth (28% of those aged 25 and under). There was no significant difference between people in rural (35%) and urban (33%) areas.

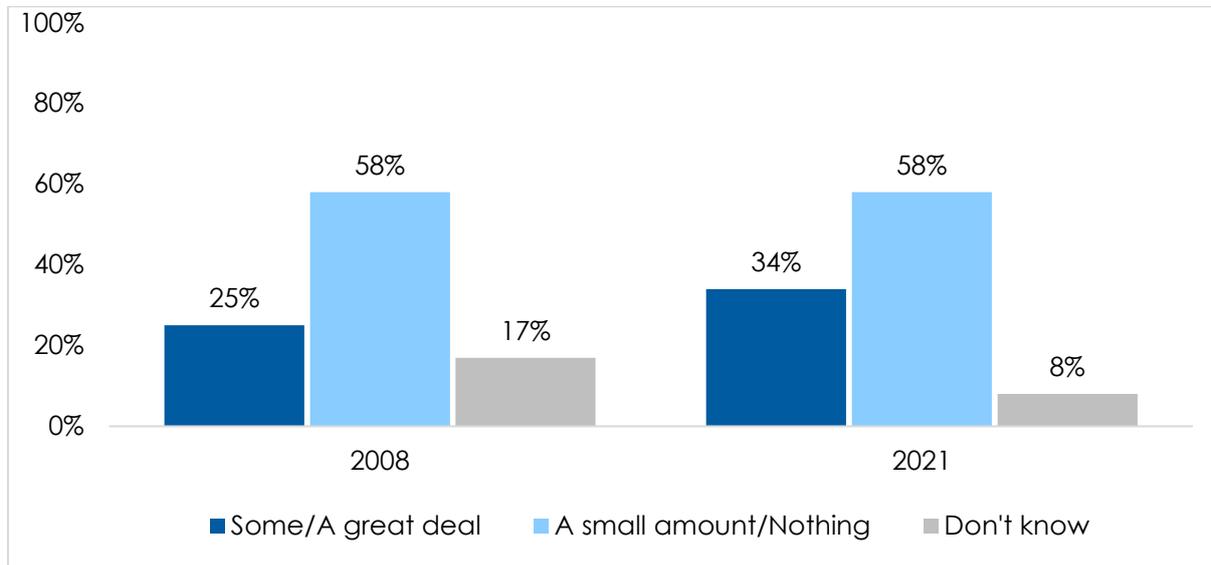
Figure 1: How much have Kenyans heard about the proposed East African Federation? | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much have you heard about the proposed federation of the East African Community, that is, the formation of a unitary government for Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, with a joint army, parliament, presidency, and economy?

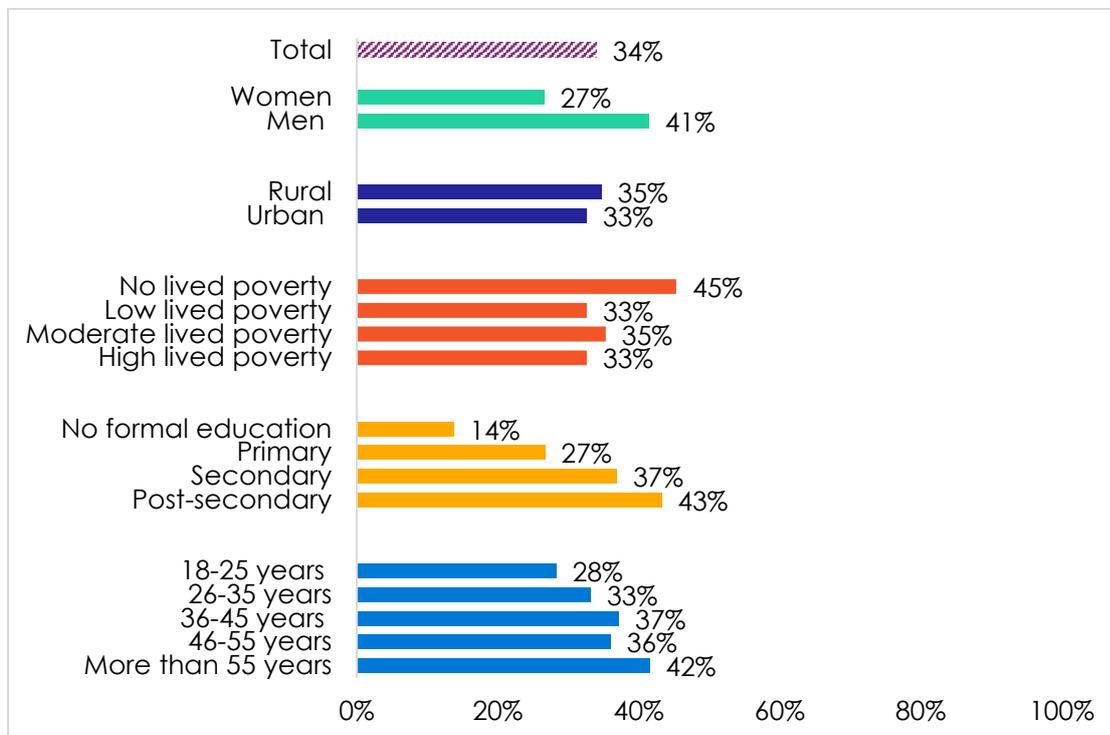
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 2: How much Kenyans have heard about East African Federation | Kenya
 | 2008-2021



Respondents were asked: How much have you heard about the proposed federation of the East African Community, that is, the formation of a unitary government for Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, with a joint army, parliament, presidency, and economy?

Figure 3: Aware of the proposed East African Federation | by demographic group
 | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much have you heard about the proposed federation of the East African Community, that is, the formation of a unitary government for Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, with a joint army, parliament, presidency, and economy? (% say "some" or "a great deal")

Support for the elements of federation

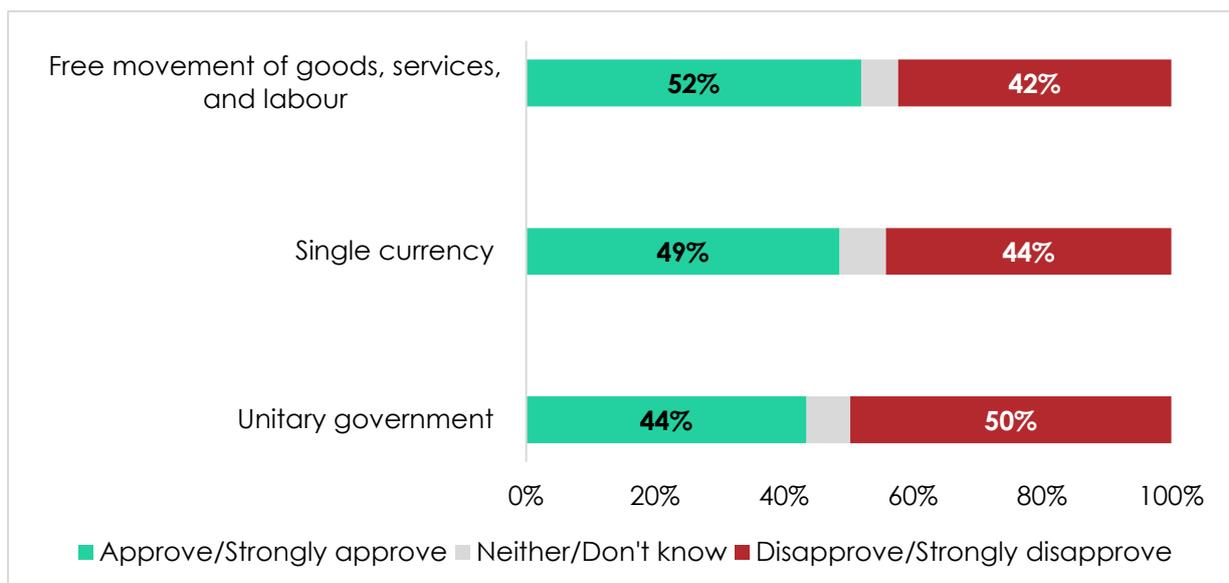
Sustainable regional integration is defined by the extent to which member states are willing to embrace common policies, such as free movement of goods, services, and labour. The customs union, a foundation for the EAC, entailed free trade (or zero duty) on goods and services among the partner states, which also agreed to a common external tariff regime for imports from countries outside the EAC zone. The customs union opened the way for a full common market, also allowing for free movement of labour, which came into force in 2010.

While the goal of free movement of goods, services, and labour is to enhance trade among the East African partners, only a slim majority (52%) of Kenyans approve of free trade and movement, while 42% oppose it. Concerns related to the opening of regional markets within the EAC are not unique to Kenyans: A majority of Tanzanians appreciate the benefits of integration but are skeptical of its possible effects considering flooded labour markets from Kenya (Katera, 2008; Knowles, 2014; Balongo, 2015).

Moreover, although the EAC Secretariat has earmarked 2024 for adoption of a single currency, only half (49%) of Kenyans support this measure, against 44% who oppose it.

And skepticism about more extensive integration runs deeper still: Support for the formation of a unitary government stands at only 44%, while 50% disapprove (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Views on various aspects of integration | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: People have different ideas about how much integration of economies and political systems of the East African states is the right amount. Some don't want any integration. Others support complete unification of the governments. Please tell me if you approve or disapprove of each of the following proposed aspects of integration, or haven't you heard enough to say:

Free movement of goods, services, and labour?

Monetary union, that is, formation of a single East African currency?

Formation of a unitary government, including having one East African president?

Changes in support for, and resistance to, integration show some surprising patterns over time. Afrobarometer asked a similar set of questions about integration and federation in its Round 4 survey in 2008. At that time, support for free movement of goods and services and for free movement of labour (asked as two separate questions in 2008) was substantially higher, at 64% and 63%, respectively. But support for monetary union was much lower than it is now, at just 30%, and support for unitary government was lower still, at just 19%.

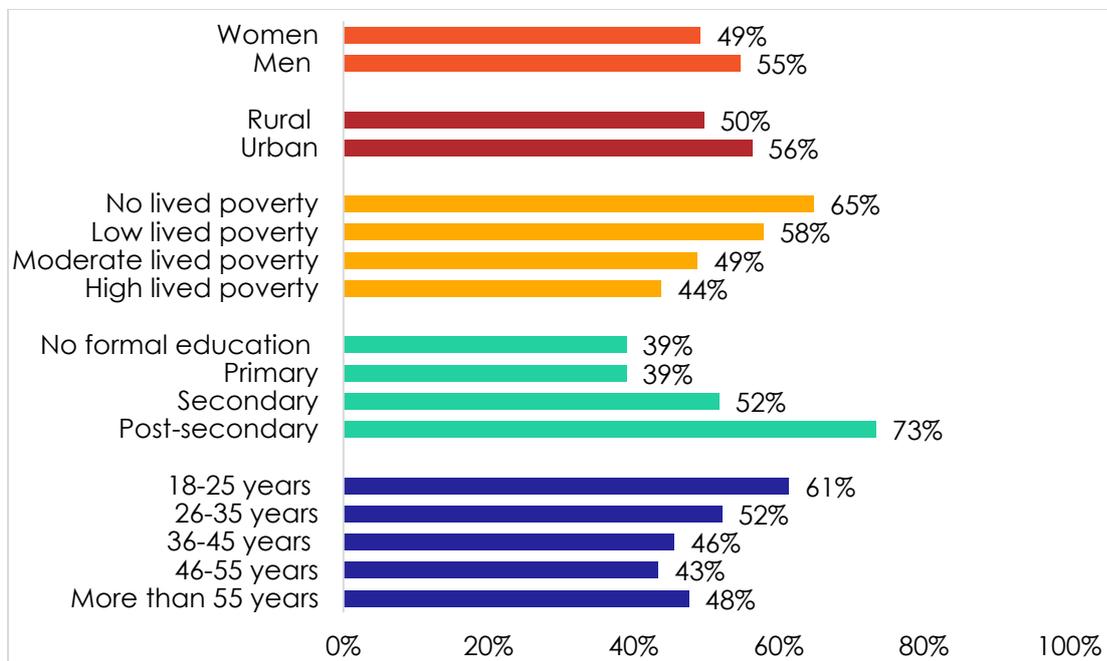
Kenyans' uncertain commitment to free trade comes out in other data as well. In the Round 8 Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2019, respondents were asked whether “in order to develop, our country must rely on trade with the rest of the world, including by opening our borders to foreign imports,” or whether the country should instead rely on local production and protect domestic producers. Kenyans were evenly divided on this question, with 49% preferring open borders and 48% opting for protection of domestic producers.

However, support for free movement of people across borders within the region was much stronger: 61% agreed that people in the region should be “able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries,” vs. 38% who instead wanted the government to limit cross-border movement. But an equal 61% reported that in practice it is “difficult” or “very difficult” for people in the region to cross borders for trade or work (Sanny & Patel, 2021).

Overall, it appears that opening borders to freer movement of people is the most popular element of regional integration from the perspective of ordinary Kenyans, and an objective that is still far from being achieved in reality.

Further analysis points to levels of education and income as sources of disparity in opinions regarding free movement. For example, while a large majority (73%) of respondents with post-secondary education approve of the free movement of goods, services, and labour, only 39% of respondents with primary or no formal education feel the same (Figure 5). Similarly, 65% of the wealthiest respondents approve of free movement compared to just 44% of the poorest. Younger people also show much stronger support for free movement than their elders.

Figure 5: Support for free movement of goods, services, and labour | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021



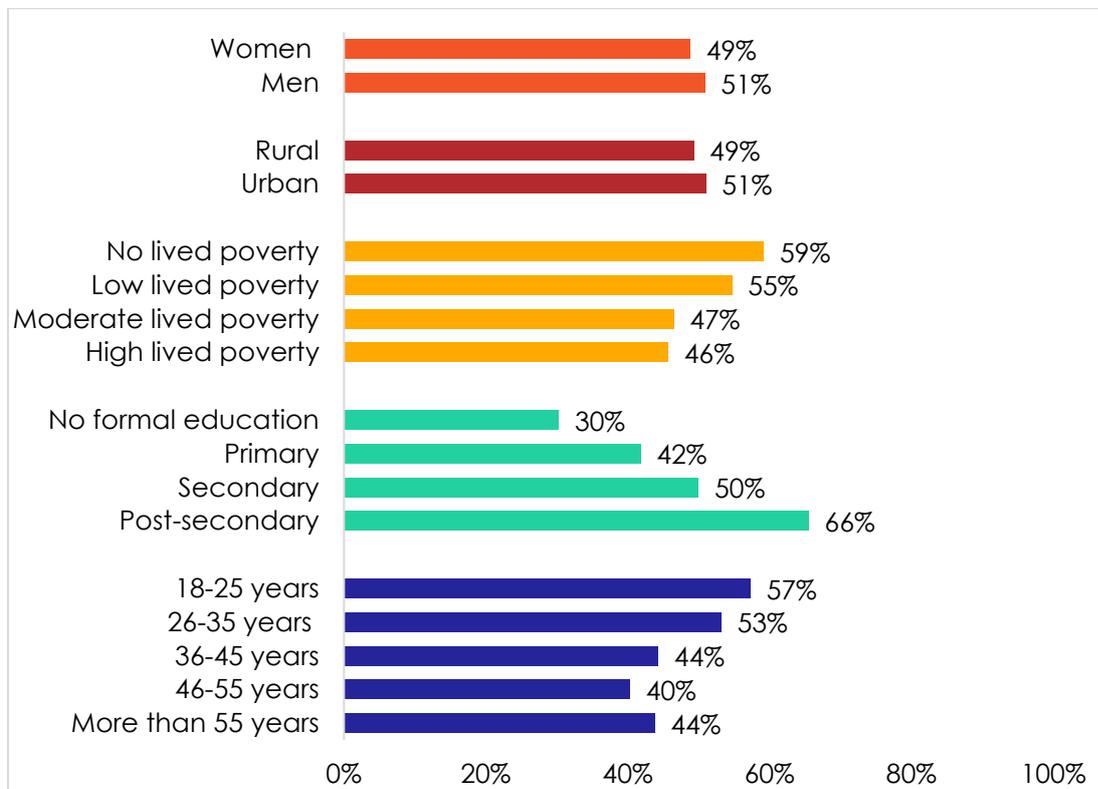
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the following proposed aspect of integration, or haven't you heard enough to say: Free movement of goods, services, and labour? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

Patterns are similar when it comes to support for a shared currency, although the differences across education and income levels are much smaller (not shown). Support for a common

currency is stronger among the more educated: 50% among those with secondary education, and 47% among those with post-secondary education, compared to 37% among those with no formal schooling. But notably, among the most educated, a plurality of 49% disapprove of a common currency. The economically best-off citizens also show the strongest support, at 52%, compared to 44% among the poorest, but again, even among the wealthiest, support for a common currency is far more muted than support for free movement (65%).

The tables are turned when it comes to attitudes toward formation of a unitary government. In this case, more educated and wealthier respondents are far more likely to *disapprove* (66% and 59%, respectively) compared to the least educated and poorest respondents (30% and 46%, respectively) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Rejection of a unitary government | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the following proposed aspect of integration, or haven't you heard enough to say: Formation of a unitary government, including having one East African president? (% who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove")

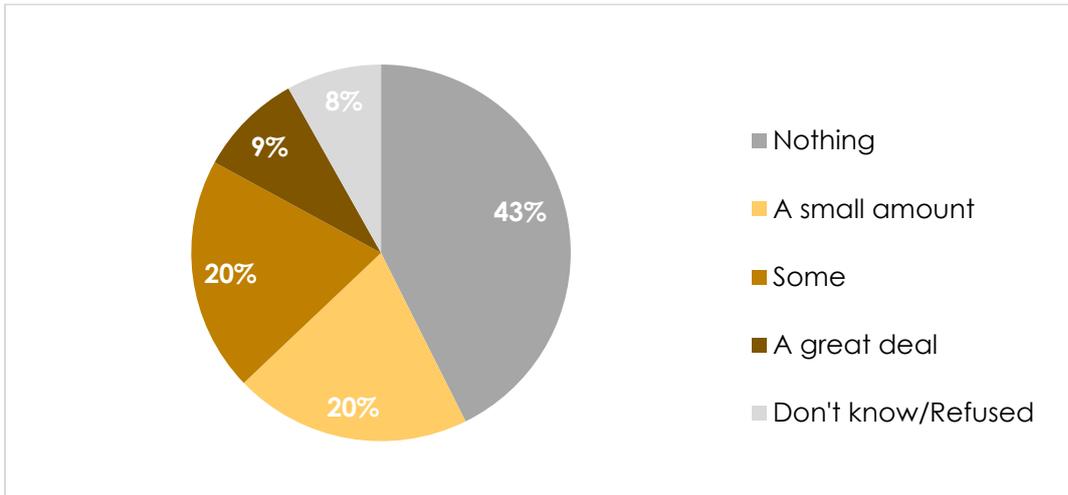
The East African Legislative Assembly

Article 49 of the EAC Treaty established the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), also known as the East African Parliament, as the legislative organ of the EAC. Apart from producing regional legislation, the EALA also plays roles in representation and oversight at the regional level, serving as the representative of the sovereign will and interests of the East African citizenry at the EAC. The EALA is the link between the EAC and the national parliaments of the member states.

Despite its importance, Afrobarometer findings indicate that seven in 10 Kenyans (71%) have either heard nothing (43%) or only a small amount (20%) about it or say they "don't know" (8%). Only 29% of respondents have heard some or a great deal about the EALA (Figure 7).

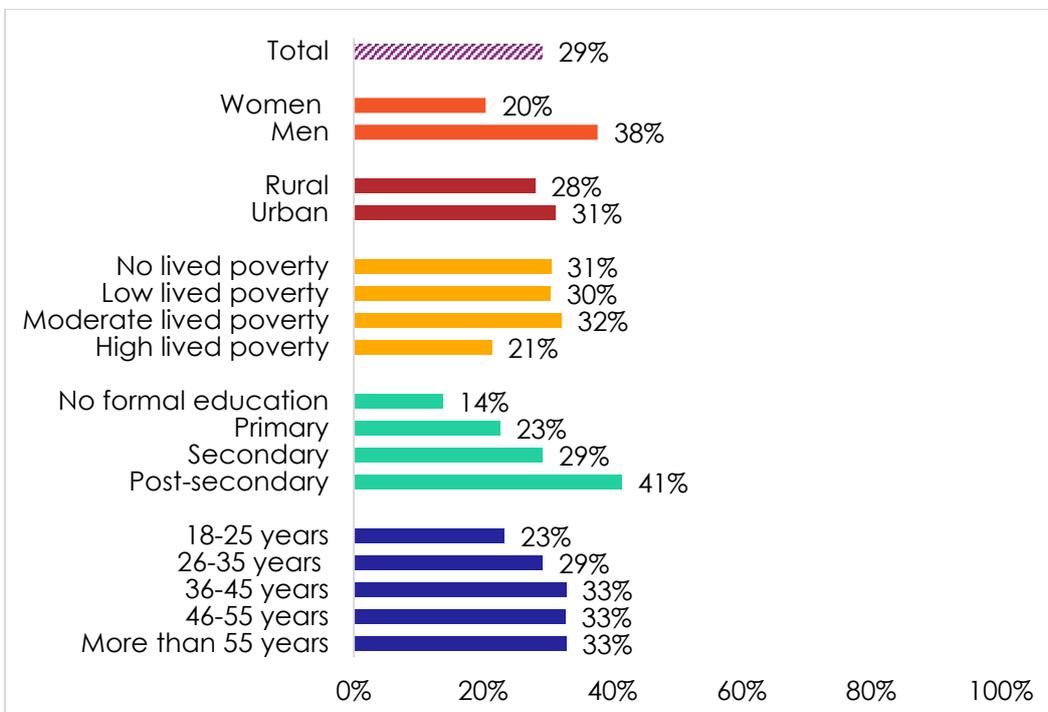
We again see that education appears to have the strongest links to awareness: 41% among those with post-secondary education are at least somewhat familiar with the EALA, compared to just 14% among those with no formal education (Figure 8).

Figure 7: How much have Kenyans heard about the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA)? | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: One of the key administrative organs of the East African Community is the East African Parliament, which is responsible for making common laws that will apply to all member states. How much have you heard about the East African Parliament?

Figure 8: Aware of the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: One of the key administrative organs of the East African Community is the East African Parliament, which is responsible for making common laws that will apply to all member states. How much have you heard about the East African Parliament? (% who say "some" or "a great deal")

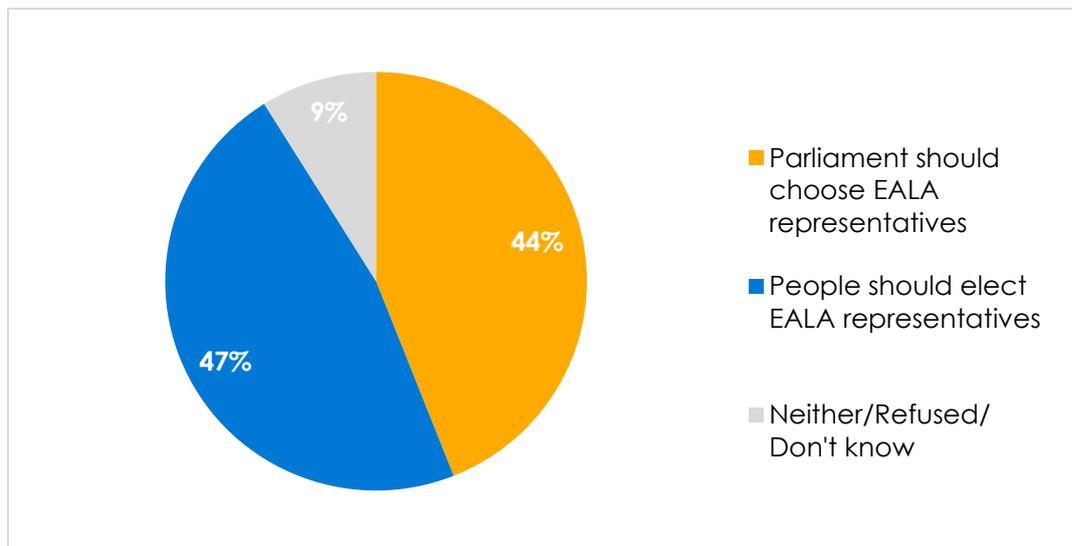
Representation in the EALA is based on sovereign equality among the member states. Thus, each member state is represented by nine EALA members. According to the EAC Treaty, the representatives are elected by the national parliaments based on nominations reflecting the parties' share of parliamentary seats.

The main concern with this approach is that parties' nominations are not open and transparent, but instead embed some of the worst features of Kenya's political parties – especially that they are personalised and ethnically driven and lack internal democracy – in the EALA (Kaburu & Adar, 2020).

Survey findings indicate that Kenyans are divided on how EALA representatives should be selected: 47% prefer direct election by ordinary citizens, but nearly as many (44%) opt to maintain the current system of selection by parliament (Figure 9).

The fact that a majority of Kenyans are largely unaware of the EALA's existence means that they may also be unaware of the impact of laws passed by this important institution. Their choice regarding the method of selecting EALA representatives may therefore be based on a lack of essential information.

Figure 9: Preferred method of electing EALA representatives | Kenya | 2021



Respondents were asked: The East African Parliament has nine representatives from every member state. Currently the nine representatives from Kenya are elected by the Kenyan Parliament. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The Kenyan Parliament should continue to choose Kenya's representatives to the East African Parliament because they know the needs of the East African Community better than ordinary people.

Statement 2: The Kenya representatives to the East African Parliament should be elected directly by the Kenyan people.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Conclusion

The concept of regional integration in East Africa has been around for more than 60 years, but it is only in the past two decades that the region has taken significant steps toward making full integration a reality. Changes are scheduled to accelerate in the next couple of years, with monetary union and initial steps toward federation looming on the horizon.

While the states are central to negotiating treaties and providing the necessary physical and institutional infrastructure, it is the sustained engagement of the people that will make

regional integration feasible, since they are not only the subjects but also the agents and beneficiaries of the process.

But in Kenya, the EAF may be looking at something of a crisis of popular legitimacy, given the widespread lack of awareness about integration and uncertain support for its key pillars. Per the 1999 treaty, the establishment of a federation will eventually require a referendum in each partner state. The findings presented here suggest that the Kenyan government and the EAC Secretariat may need a deliberate, strategic approach to building public awareness and support. Making sure that citizens are effectively represented in the East African Legislative Assembly, perhaps even by transitioning to direct election of Kenya's EALA representatives, might be one way to spur badly needed interest and engagement.

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