

Mauritians embrace COVID-19 vaccination despite low levels of trust in vaccine safety

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 550 | Louis Amédée Darga and Nazrana Hurroo

Summary

Mauritius reported its first case of COVID-19 on 18 March 2020. The next day, the government closed the country's borders and announced a nationwide lockdown. Schools were closed, public transport services were limited, private vehicles were subjected to police checks, and only people with work access permits were allowed to move around the island (Vox EU, 2020).

Since then, the country has experienced two waves of rapid increases in new infections, hospitalisations, and deaths. As of 6 September 2022, Mauritius (with a population of 1.3 million) had officially recorded 258,301 cases of COVID-19 with 1,023 deaths (World Health Organization, 2022a).

The government's swift and massive response included the creation of a High-Level Committee (National Communication Committee) on COVID-19 chaired by the prime minister, which released official information on the virus. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology created the "beSafeMoris" smartphone app, which provided official updates and practical advice daily (Vox EU, 2020). The Quarantine Act 2020 mandated the wearing of masks in public and prevented gatherings of more than 100 people (Government of Mauritius, 2020).

As COVID-19 vaccine became available in December 2020, health authorities created a national vaccine deployment plan that included vaccination sites in neighbourhoods and private clinics as well as vaccination at home for people with disabilities (World Health Organization, 2022b). As of September 2022, 2,636,650 vaccine doses (based on a two-dose regimen plus booster) had been administered; 80.1% of the population had received at least one dose (Africa CDC, 2022).

The government lifted COVID-19 restrictions as of July 2022; wearing of masks is no longer compulsory except on public transport and in health centers, and public gatherings are allowed (AfricaNews, 2022).

In addition to immense health and human costs, the pandemic brought a downturn in several sectors of the country's economy. The unemployment rate reached 9.1% in 2021, compared to 6.7% in 2019 (Statistics Mauritius, 2021). The country's gross domestic product growth rate, however, which declined from 3% in 2019 to -14.9% at the end of 2020, managed to grow to 4% in 2021 (World Bank, 2021).

A new Afrobarometer survey shows the pandemic's widespread negative effects on Mauritians' health and livelihoods. Overall, however, most Mauritians are satisfied with the government's response to the pandemic and its relief efforts, though many believe that COVID-19 resources have been lost due to corruption.

An overwhelming majority of citizens report having been vaccinated against COVID-19 despite low levels of trust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety.

Mauritians are divided when it comes to whether the government is prepared to deal with future public health emergencies and whether it should invest in preparations for such crises even at the cost of other health services.

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 Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in March 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 surveys were conducted in Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

■ Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- More than half (53%) of Mauritians say they or a member of their household became ill with COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus. About one-fourth (27%) say someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic.

■ Attitudes toward vaccines:

- More than nine in 10 Mauritians (95%) say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Among those who have not been vaccinated, almost two-thirds say they are "very unlikely" (41%) or "somewhat unlikely" (23%) to try to get vaccinated.
- A majority of vaccine-hesitant citizens cite concerns about negative side effects and vaccine safety as their main reasons.
- Only 36% of citizens say they trust the government "somewhat" or "a lot" to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

■ Government response to COVID-19:

- More than half (52%) of Mauritians say the government has done "fairly well" or "very well" in managing the response to the pandemic.
- About the same proportion (51%) say they are satisfied with the government's efforts in providing relief to vulnerable households.
- Fewer than half think the government has done a good job of minimising disruptions to children's education (46%) and of ensuring that health facilities are adequately resourced (47%).
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Mauritians believe that "some" or "a lot" of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response have been lost to corruption.
- More than six in 10 Mauritians (62%) approve of using security forces to enforce public health mandates during an emergency like the pandemic, and almost half (45%) would accept postponing elections. But most (79%) disapprove of censoring media reporting during a public health emergency.

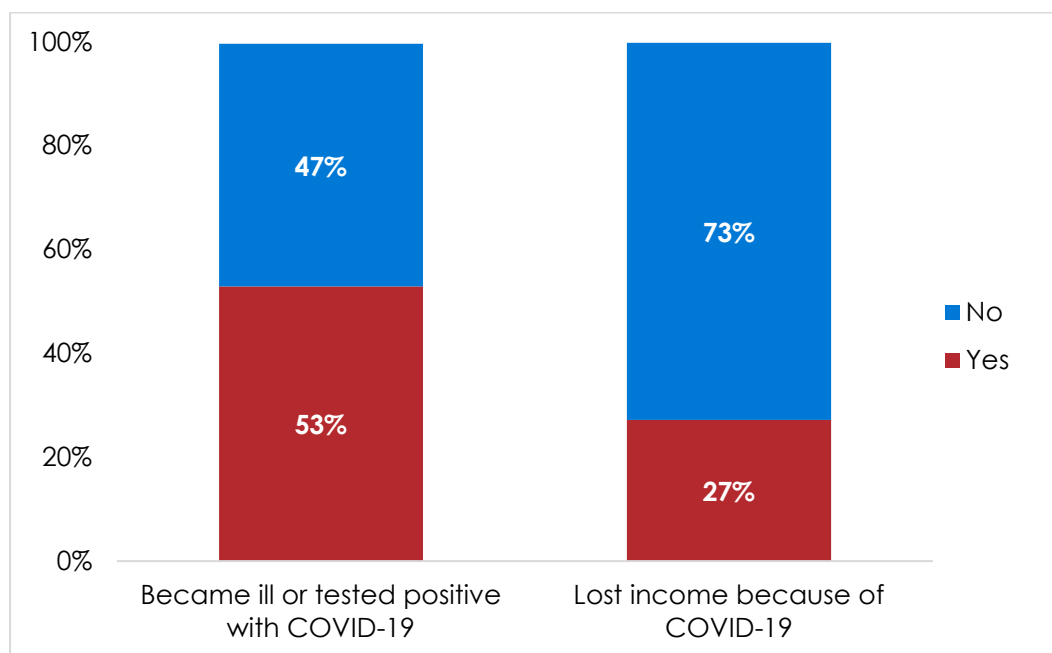
■ **Looking ahead:**

- Mauritians are divided in their views on whether the government is prepared to deal with future public health emergencies (52% yes, 43% no) and whether it needs to invest more in such preparations (43% yes, 40% no).

Effects of COVID-19

More than half of Mauritians (53%) say they or a member of their household became ill with or tested positive for COVID-19, while about one-fourth (27%) of citizens say someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Effects of COVID-19 | Mauritius | 2022



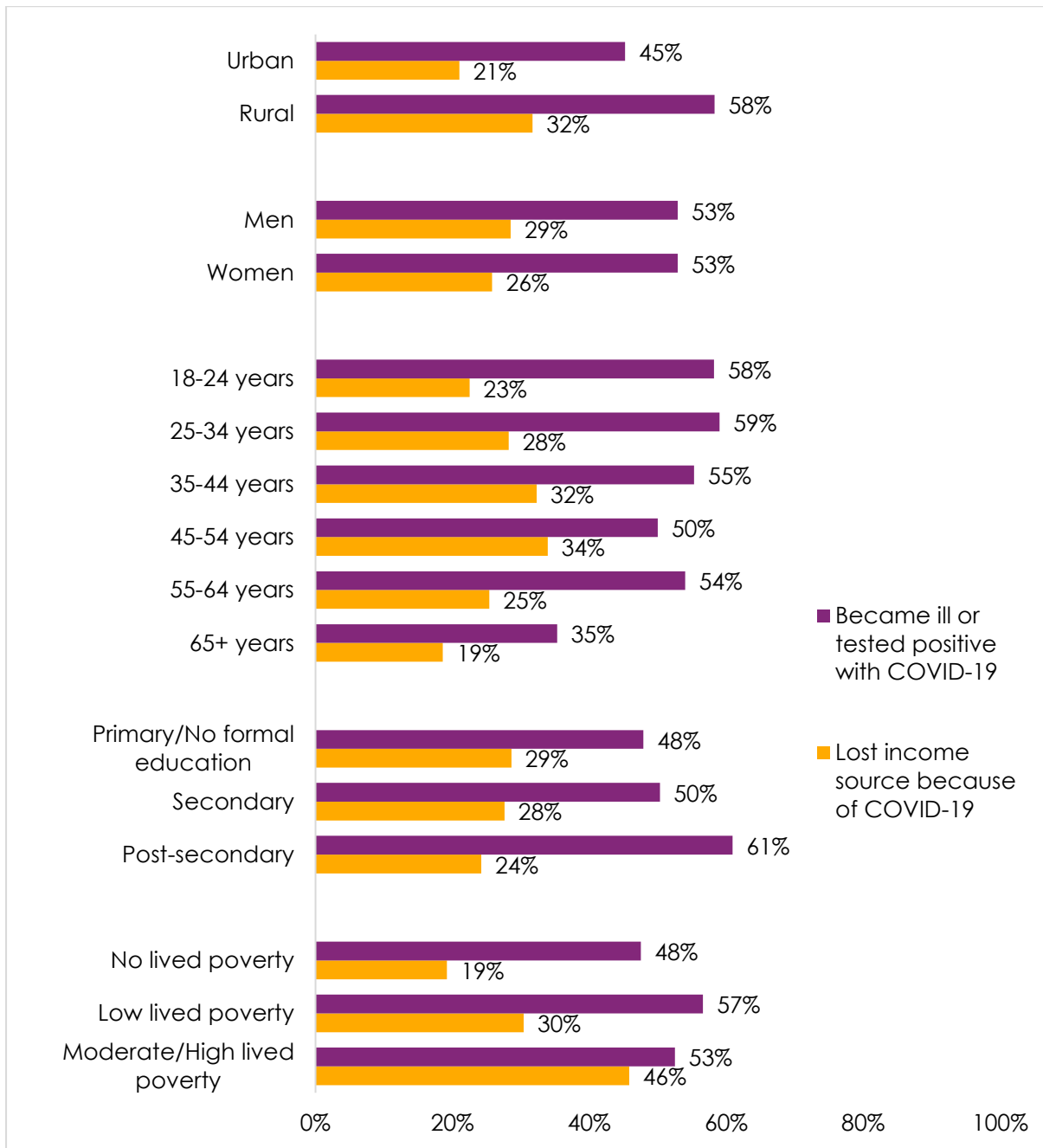
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with, or tested positive for, COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

The effects of COVID-19 appear to have been more widely experienced in rural areas than in cities. Rural residents are significantly more likely than urbanites to report losing an income source (32% vs. 21%) and becoming ill with or testing positive for COVID-19 (58% vs. 45%) (Figure 2).

Illness and/or positive COVID-19 tests are somewhat more common among younger respondents than among their elders and increase in frequency with respondents' education level, ranging from 48% of those with no formal/primary education to 61% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

Loss of an income source is more common among poorer citizens (46% of those experiencing moderate/high lived poverty, compared to 19% of the wealthy).

Figure 2: Effects of COVID-19 | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



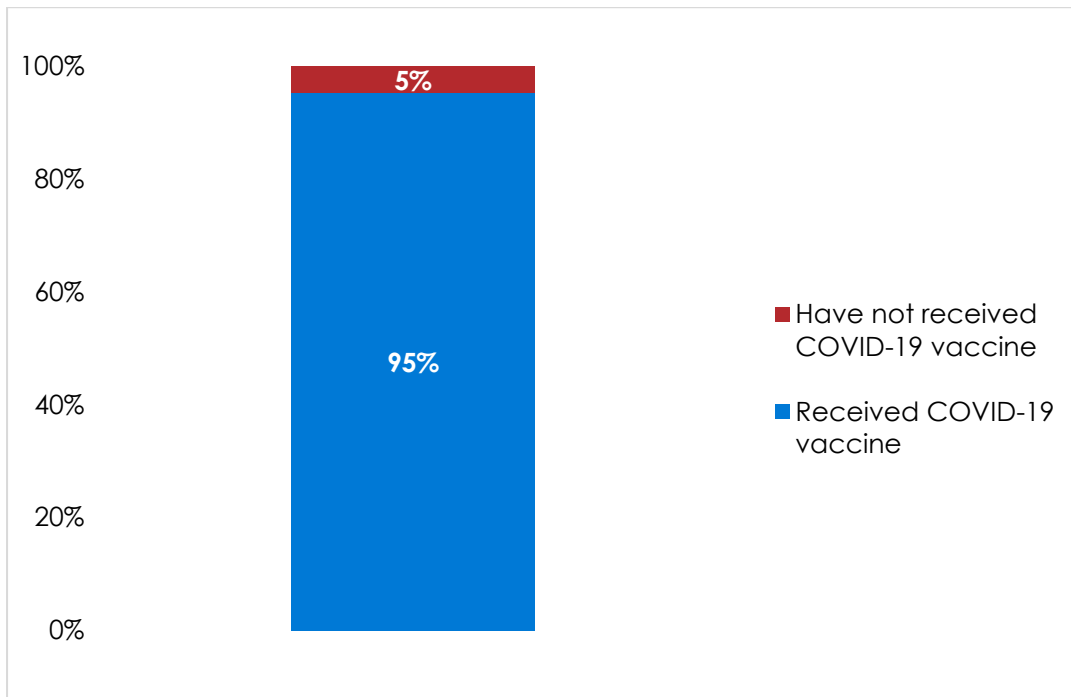
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income? (% who say "yes")

Attitudes toward vaccination

More than nine in 10 citizens (95%) say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19. Only 5% say they have not received the shot (Figure 3).

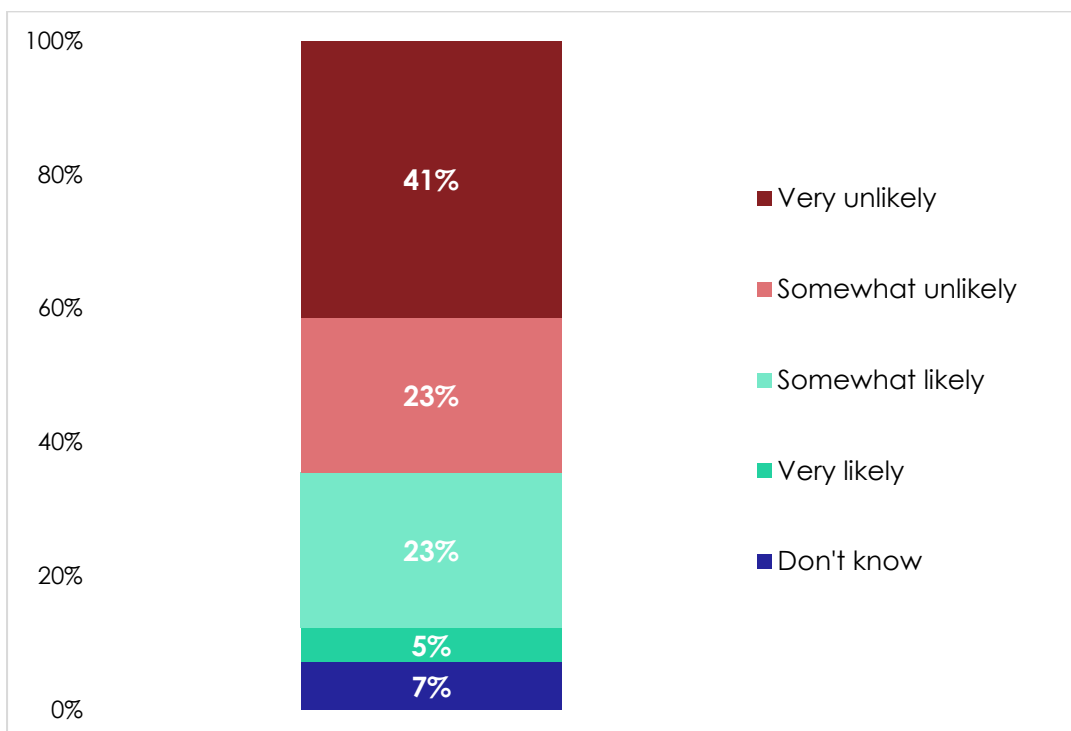
Among those who have not been vaccinated, almost two-thirds say they are "very unlikely" (41%) or "somewhat unlikely" (23%) to try to get vaccinated (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Received COVID-19 vaccination | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: Have you received a vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses?

Figure 4: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | Mauritius | 2022

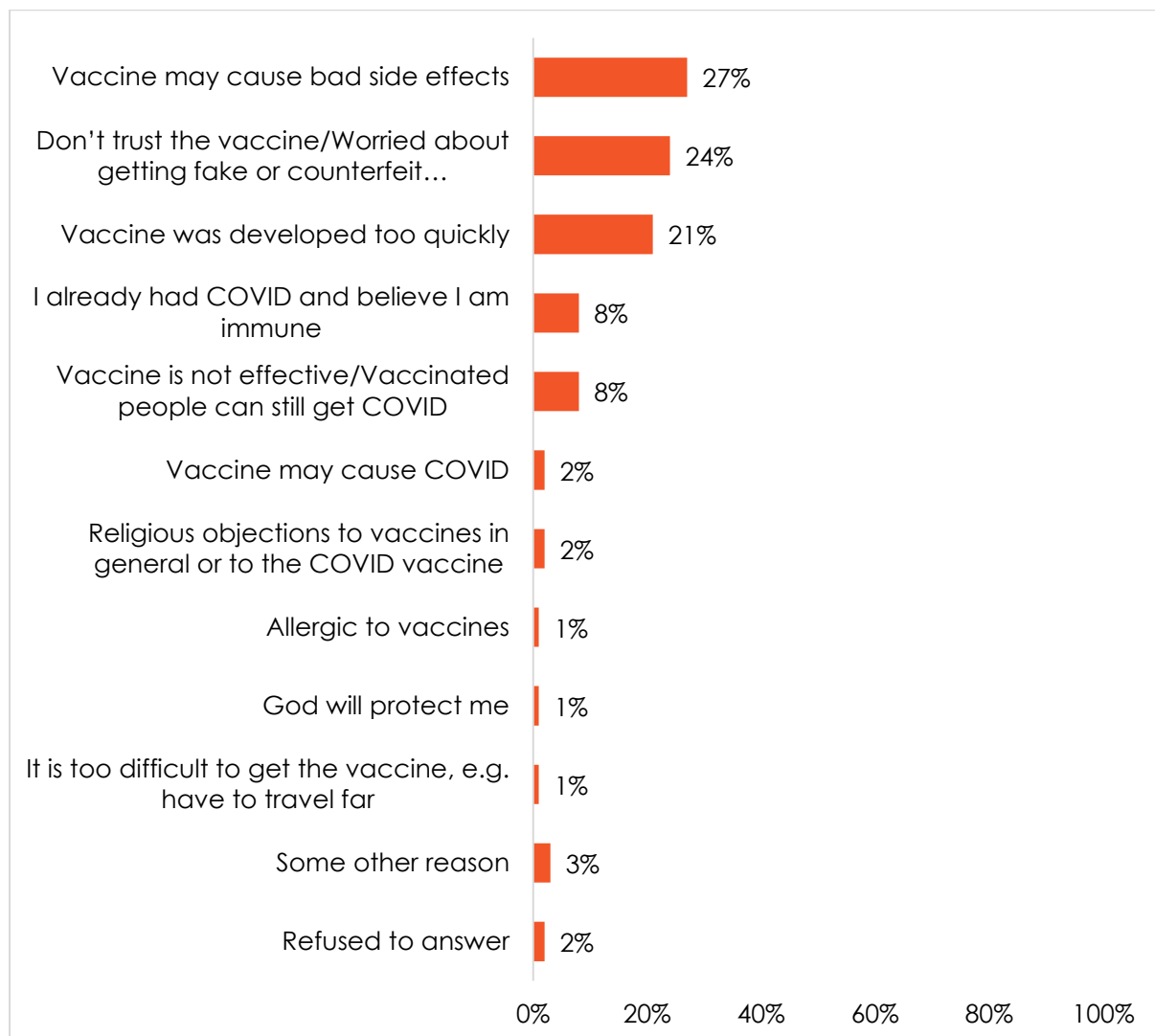


Respondents who had not been vaccinated against COVID-19 were asked: If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (Respondents who had received a COVID-19 vaccination are excluded.)

Among citizens who say they are unlikely to get vaccinated, the most frequently cited reasons have to do with vaccine safety, including the belief that the vaccine may cause bad side effects (27%), mistrust of the vaccine or worries about getting a fake or counterfeit vaccine (24%), or concerns that the vaccine was developed too quickly (21%). Others say they already had COVID-19 and believe they are immune (8%) or that the vaccine is not effective (8%) (Figure 5).

It is important to note that because of the small samples of respondents who say they have not been vaccinated (N=56) and those who say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated (N=38), these results have large margins of error and should be interpreted with caution.

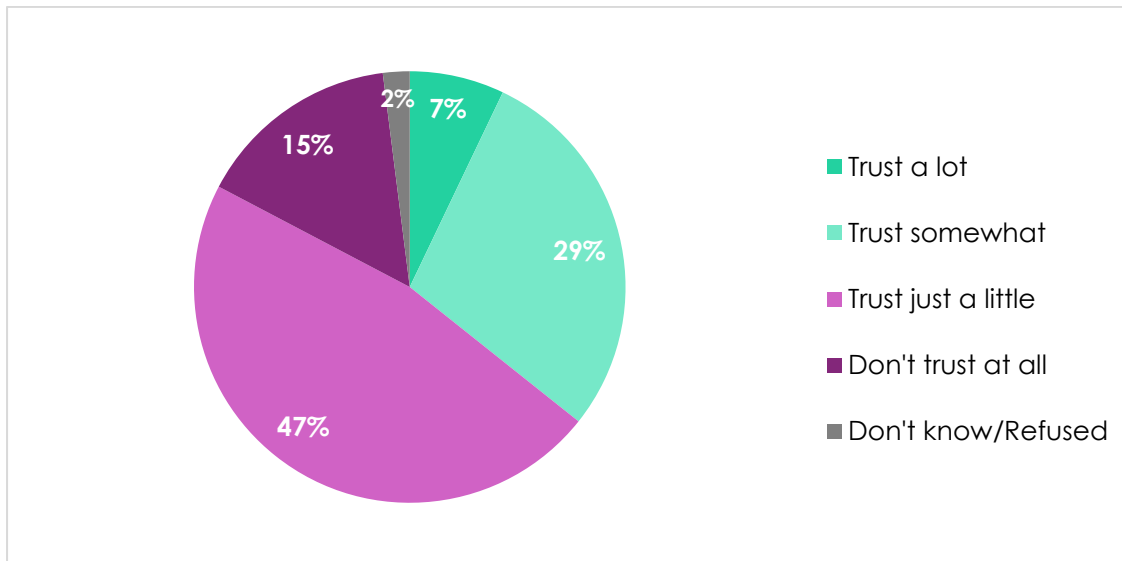
Figure 5: Main reason for vaccine hesitancy | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents who say they are not likely to get vaccinated were asked: What is the main reason that you would be unlikely to get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Even though most Mauritians say they have received a vaccination against COVID-19, fewer than four in 10 citizens say they trust the government “somewhat” (29%) or “a lot” (7%) to ensure the safety of the vaccines, while a majority express “just a little” trust (47%) or no trust at all (15%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Trust government to ensure vaccine safety | Mauritius | 2022



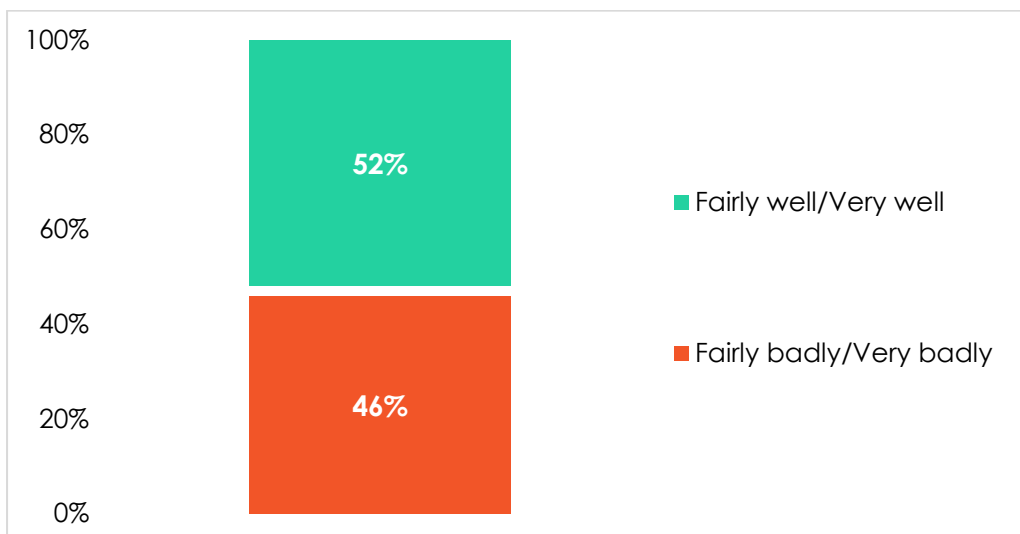
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Mauritian citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

Government response to COVID-19

While trust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety is relatively weak, more than half of Mauritians (52%) describe the government's overall performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as "fairly" or "very" good, while 46% say it has done a poor job (Figure 7).

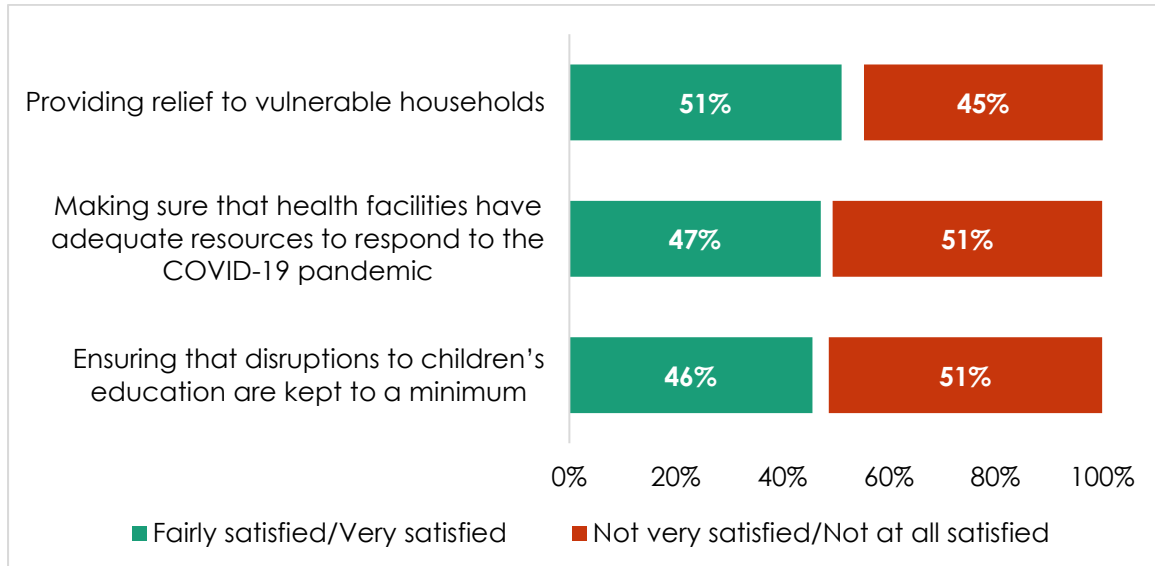
On specific aspects of the COVID-19 response, a slim majority (51%) say they are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the government's efforts to provide assistance to vulnerable households. Close to half of citizens express satisfaction with the government's efforts to ensure that health facilities are adequately resourced to deal with the pandemic (47%) and to ensure that disruptions of children's education are held to a minimum (46%) (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Government response to COVID-19 | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government has managed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Figure 8: Satisfaction with government's response to aspects of the pandemic
 | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government's response to COVID-19 in the following areas?

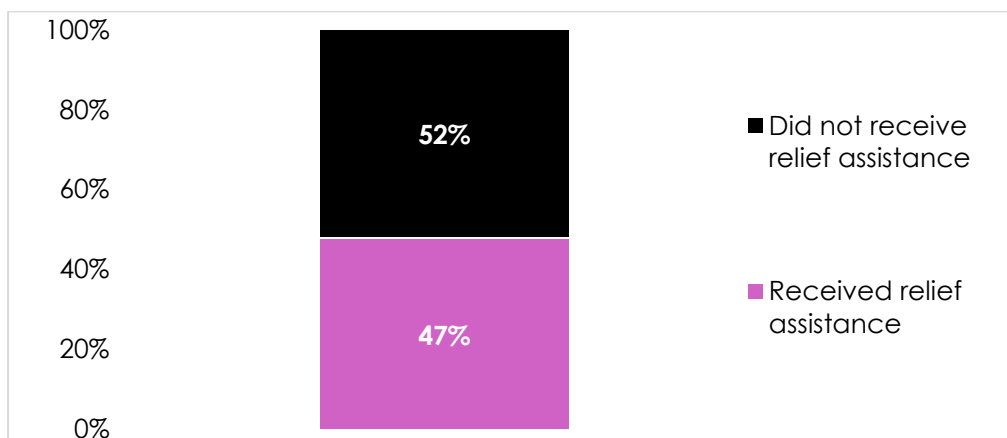
COVID-19 relief assistance

Almost half (47%) of Mauritians report that their household received COVID-19 relief assistance from the government, while 52% say they did not (Figure 9).

Rural households were considerably more likely to benefit from government assistance than those in urban areas (56% vs. 36%) (Figure 10). Government assistance more frequently benefited households experiencing moderate/high lived poverty (61%) than those in other economic categories (41%-50%). Senior citizens are particularly unlikely to report having received pandemic-related assistance (35% of those aged 65 or older).

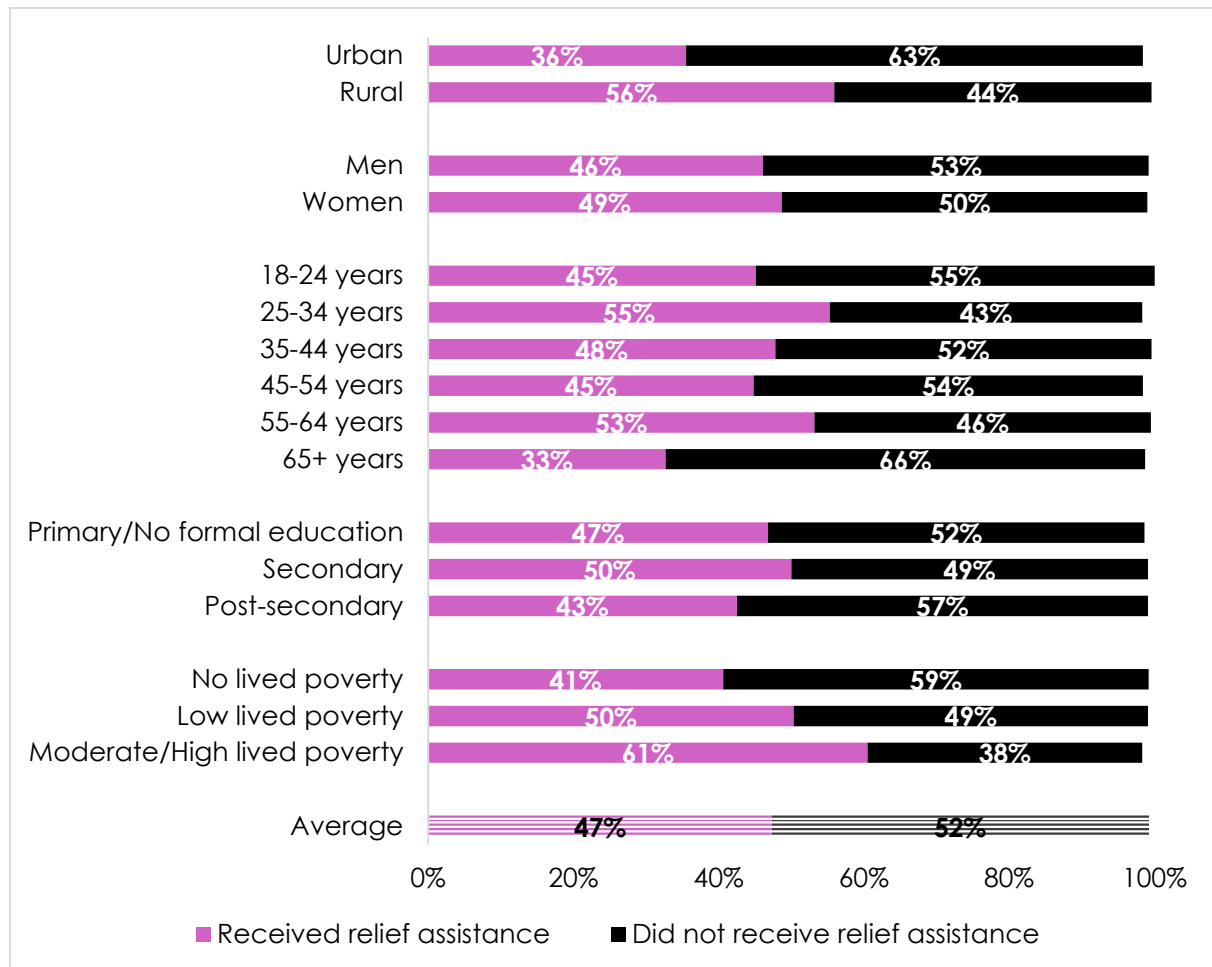
More than half (55%) of citizens say that COVID-19 relief was distributed "somewhat fairly" or "very fairly" while 37% say the distribution was unfair (Figure 11).

Figure 9: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance | Mauritius | 2022



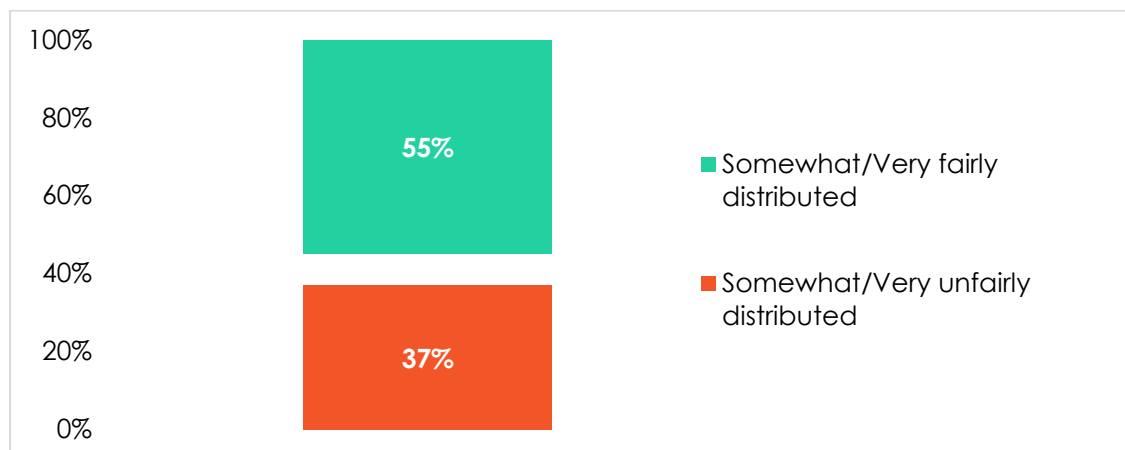
Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

Figure 10: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance | by demographic group
 | Mauritius | 2022



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?

Figure 11: Was COVID-19 relief assistance distributed fairly? | Mauritius | 2022

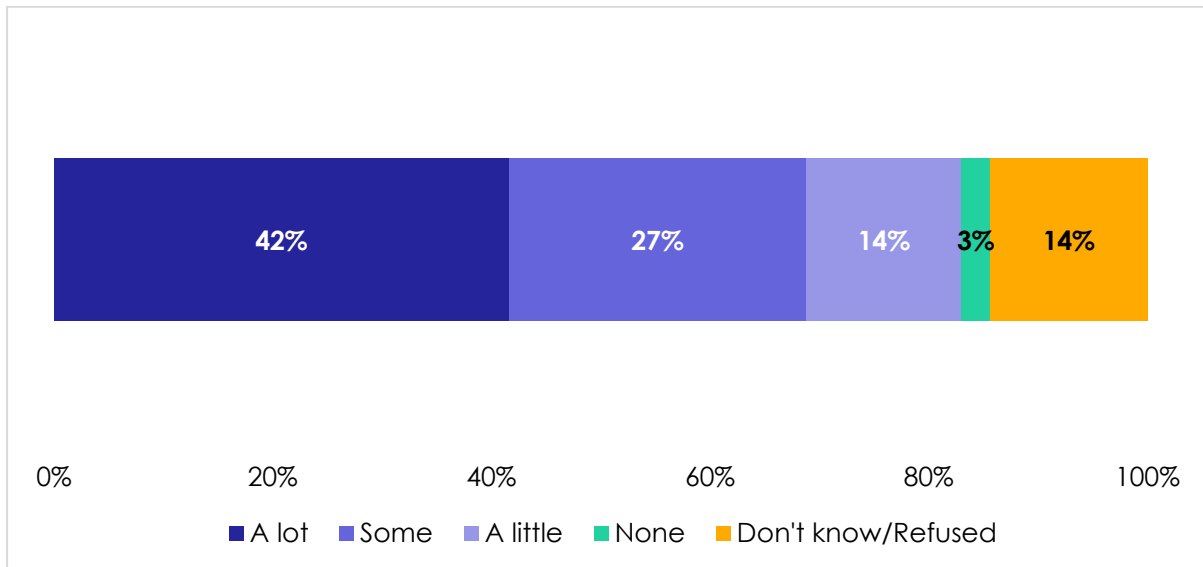


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the distribution of government support to people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, has been fair or unfair?

Corruption related to COVID-19

Despite expressing significant satisfaction with the fairness of government relief assistance, more than two-thirds (69%) of Mauritians say they believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response have been lost to corruption (Figure 12). Only 3% think that none of these resources have been embezzled.

Figure 12: Perceived pandemic-related corruption | Mauritius | 2022



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

Limit democratic freedoms during a pandemic?

Lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions in some countries have raised questions about the extent to which citizens are willing to forego certain freedoms, even temporarily, to protect public health.

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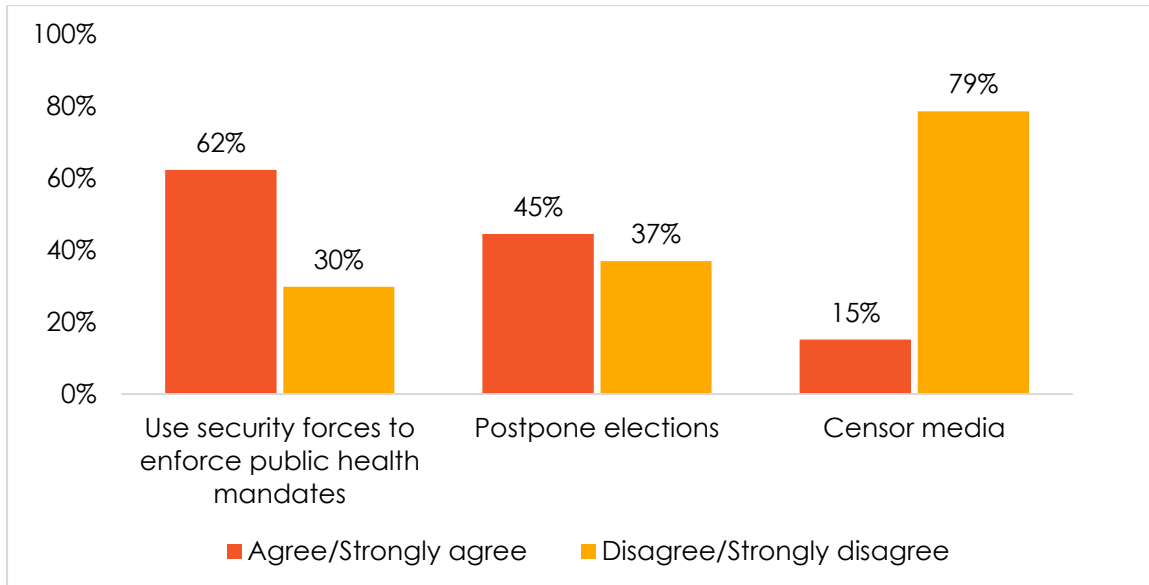
In Mauritius, a solid majority (62%) of citizens “agree” or “strongly agree” that it is justified for the government to use the armed forces or the police to enforce public health mandates during an emergency like the pandemic (Figure 13).

When it comes to postponing elections during a public health crisis, 45% consider this acceptable, while 37% “disagree” or “strongly disagree.”

But Mauritians overwhelmingly (79%) disapprove of censoring media reporting during a public health emergency.

Figure 13: Limit democratic freedoms during a public health emergency?

| Mauritius | 2022



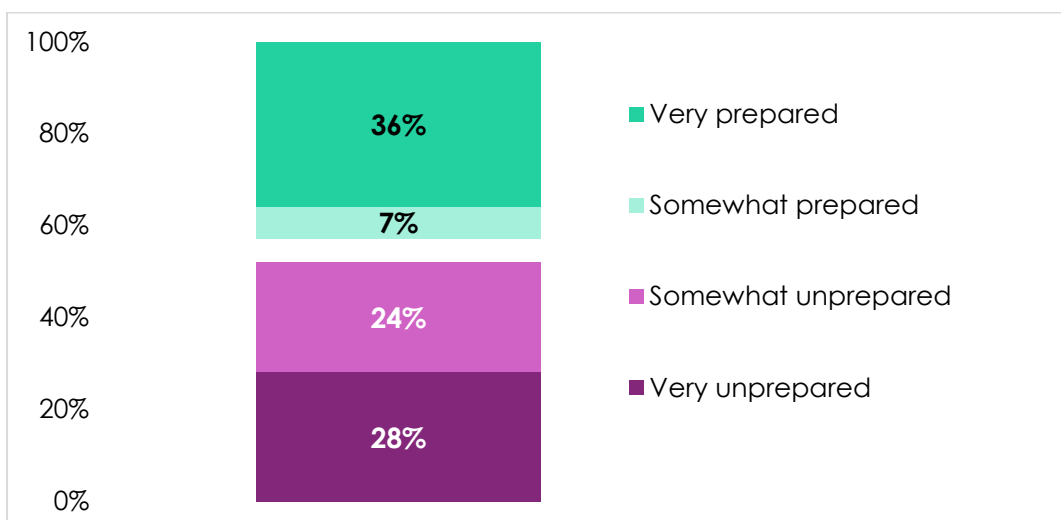
Respondents were asked: When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures: Censoring media reporting? Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings or wearing face masks? Postponing elections?

Looking ahead

After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, how prepared will Mauritius' government be to deal with future public health emergencies?

More than half (52%) of citizens think their government will not be prepared, including 28% who think it will be "very unprepared" (Figure 14). Only 43% believe that the government will be "somewhat" or "very" ready for the next public health crisis.

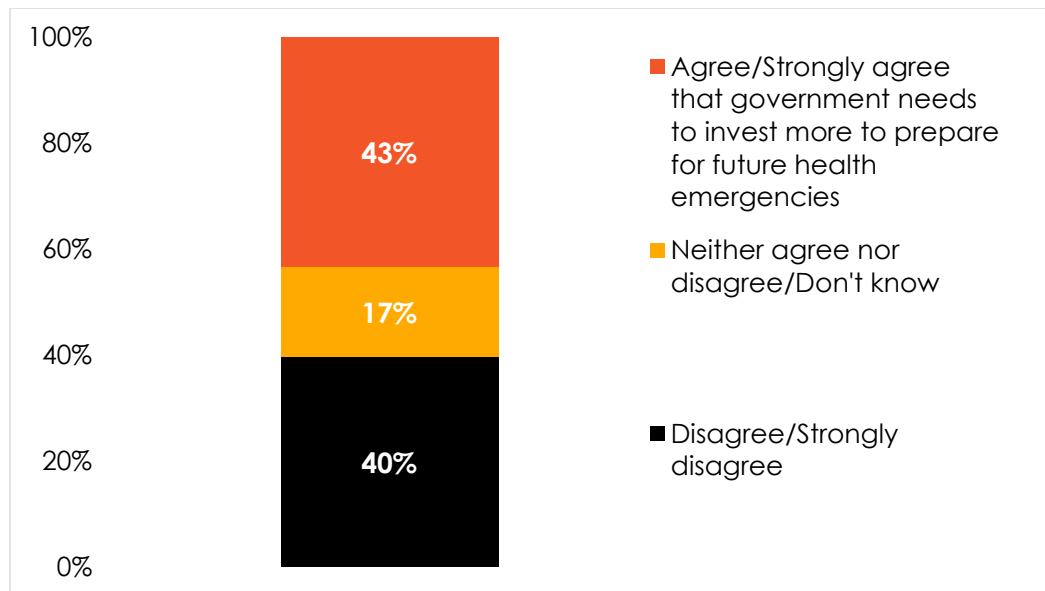
Figure 14: Preparedness for future health emergencies | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic in Mauritius, how prepared or unprepared do you think the government will be to deal with future public health emergencies?

Mauritians are similarly divided on whether the government needs to invest more in preparing for future public health emergencies, even if it means that fewer resources are available for other health services: 43% say yes, 40% say no (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Invest more to prepare for future health emergencies? | Mauritius | 2022



Respondents were asked: 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

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. Few citizens trust the government to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, and more than two-thirds believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources intended to help with the pandemic were lost to corruption.

These concerns do not appear to have undermined vaccine uptake or citizens' satisfaction with government relief efforts. But they are challenges to be addressed now, rather than in the heat of the next public health emergency.

Similarly, questions about the government's preparedness for future health emergencies and the need to invest more health resources in preparing for such crises require attention now. On both questions, Mauritians are far from a consensus.

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Louis Amédée Darga is the managing partner at StraConsult Ltd. in Port-Louis, Mauritius.
Email: straconsult@intnet.mu.

Nazrana Hurroo is a junior researcher at StraConsult in Mauritius.
Email: prgresearch@straconsult.intnet.mu.

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