



Kingdom of the Netherlands



Dispatch No. 577 | 25 November 2022

# Damage control: Ugandans want government action on environmental problems affecting their communities

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 577 | Makanga Ronald Kakumba**

## Summary

As Uganda gears up to start oil production in 2025, controversy over the proposed East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) has pitted economic development against environmental protection and human rights.

A recent European Parliament resolution seeks to delay the 1,443-kilometer pipeline, which is supposed to transport crude oil from western Uganda to the Tanzanian coast. The non-binding resolution cites risks to both countries' protected natural reserves, water sources, and wetlands and notes that use of the oil will result in up to 34 million tons of carbon emissions annually (European Parliament, 2022; Independent, 2022). Bobi Wine, leader of Uganda's largest opposition party, has joined other critics in voicing concerns about environmental impacts as well as the rights of affected landowners, a lack of transparency and accountability, and poor management of the oil project (Okiror, 2021; Wandera, 2022).

In contrast, President Yoweri Museveni, the deputy speaker of Parliament, and other government officials have loudly condemned the resolution and accused the European Union of seeking to undermine Uganda's sovereignty, racism, and economic sabotage (Organization for World Peace, 2022).

The pipeline is the latest chapter in a long-running debate about environmental concerns in Uganda. Evidence shows that the country's forests, swamps, and water bodies face serious threats from pollution, rapid human encroachment, and overexploitation. For example, the country's forest cover declined from 24% of Uganda's total land area in 1990 to 9% in 2015, a loss of about 3 million hectares, while wetland cover decreased from 15.5% in 1994 to 8.9% in 2020 (Ministry of Water and Environment, 2016, 2020).

Despite laws and agencies to protect the environment and natural resources, violations are rampant, and major violators are often either protected or left untouched. Museveni's directives to evict people encroaching on wetlands have hardly made a dent (Etukuri, 2022; Draku, 2022; Muhindo, 2022).

Can the damage be undone, or at least limited?

This dispatch reports on special survey modules included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Ugandans' experiences and perceptions of pollution, environmental governance, and natural resource extraction.

A majority of Ugandans say pollution is a serious problem in their community. They rate deforestation as the most important environmental issue, followed by trash disposal, and describe plastic bags as a major source of pollution.

Most citizens want more government action to limit pollution and protect the environment, even at the cost of jobs and incomes.

And when it comes to natural resource extraction, a majority of Ugandans say that its costs outweigh its benefits, and that tighter regulation of the industry is needed to protect the environment.

### **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 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 Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 7 and 25 January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12<sup>th</sup> Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

### **Key findings**

#### **On pollution and environmental governance:**

- Almost six in 10 Ugandans (58%) say pollution is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
- Citizens cite deforestation (48%), trash and plastic disposal (22%), pollution of water sources (11%), and human waste management (10%) as the most important environmental issues in their community.
- More than eight in 10 respondents (83%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Uganda.
- If environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, two-thirds (67%) of Ugandans would still want the government to prioritise the environment rather than jobs.
- Almost six in 10 Ugandans (57%) say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with local citizens. Far fewer would assign that responsibility to the national (23%) or local (13%) government.
- More than six in 10 citizens (64%) say the government should do more to limit pollution and protect the environment.

#### **On natural resource extraction:**

- Only four in 10 Ugandans (41%) say the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh negative impacts such as pollution, while half (51%) see the costs as being higher than the gains.
- More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) want the government to regulate natural resource extraction more tightly in order to reduce its negative impact on the environment.

- More than half (56%) of respondents say communities do not receive a fair share of revenues from resource extraction activities in their area, while half (50%) believe that ordinary citizens do not have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction.

## Pollution and environmental governance

### Pollution: The scope of the problem

The World Health Organization (2018) estimates that environmental pollution kills more than 8 million people worldwide annually.

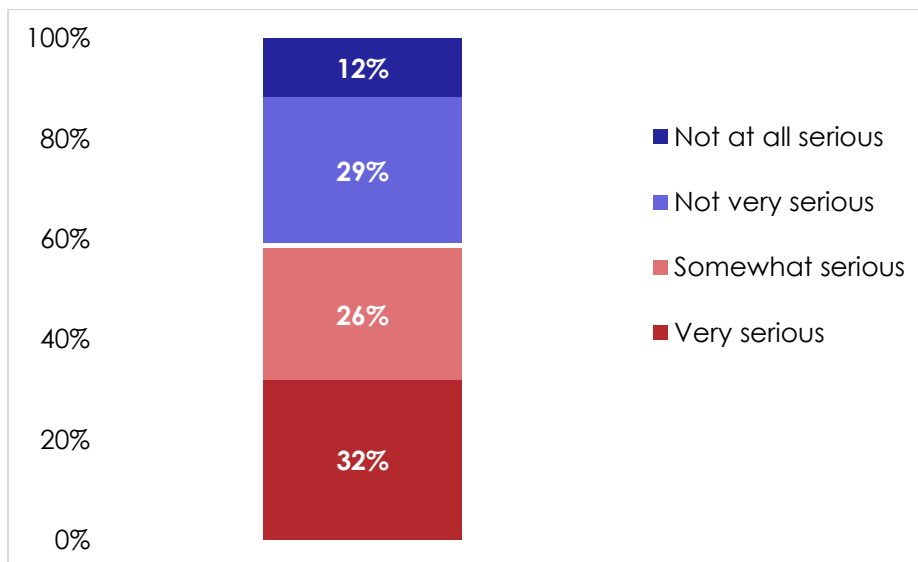
In Uganda, almost six in 10 citizens (58%) consider pollution, such as accumulation of trash or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land, to be a “somewhat serious” (26%) or “very serious” (32%) problem in their community (Figure 1).

Urban residents are more concerned about pollution than rural residents (64% vs. 56%) (Figure 2). Concerns about pollution also increase with one's experience of poverty, ranging from 36% among those with no lived poverty to 67% among those with high-lived poverty.<sup>1</sup> Younger adults, men, and citizens with post-secondary education are also somewhat more likely than their counterparts to consider pollution a serious problem.

Geographically, pollution is of greatest concern among residents of Kampala (75%) and the Northern Region (68%), and far less so among those living in the Western Region (46%).

Our findings are consistent with the 2021 World Air Quality Report, which ranks Kampala as one of the most polluted cities in the world, with pollution levels up to seven times higher than the World Health Organization's standard for safety (World Economic Forum, 2022).

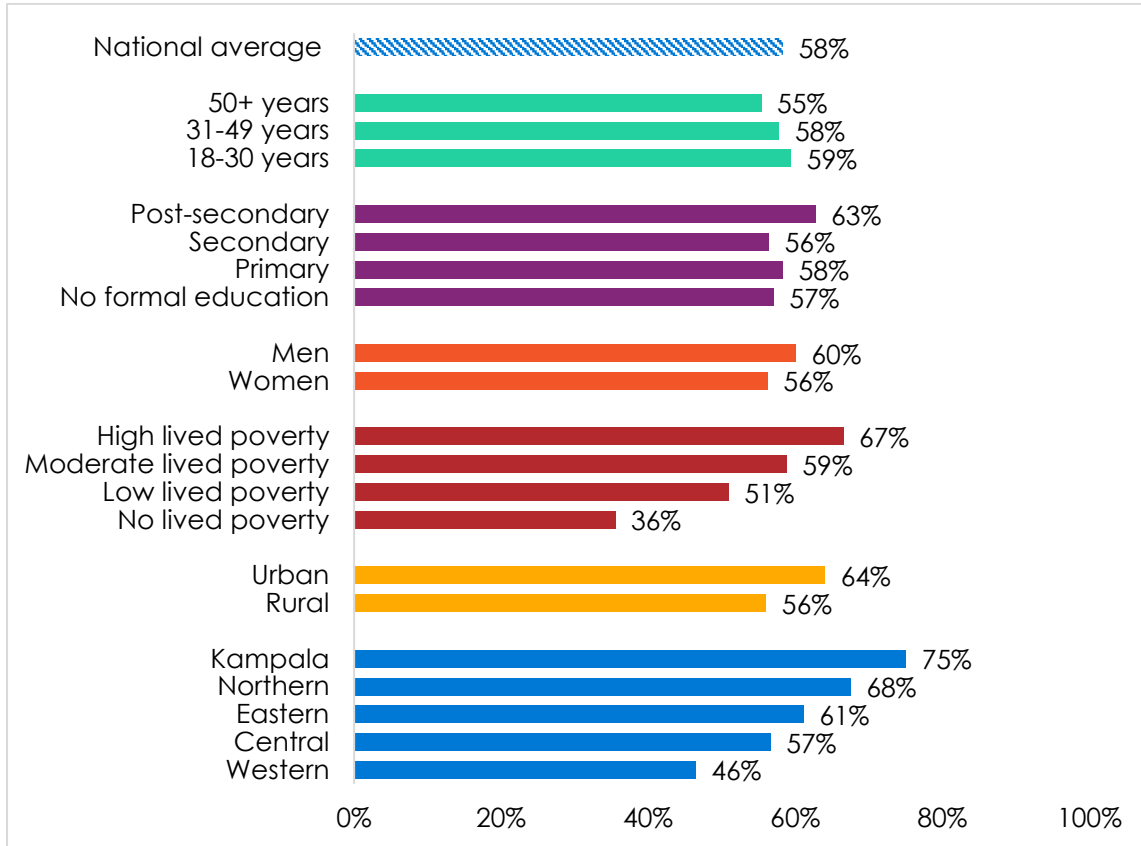
**Figure 1 : Is pollution a serious problem in the community ? | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community?

<sup>1</sup> 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: Pollution is a serious problem in the community** | by demographic group  
 | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

### Most important environmental issue

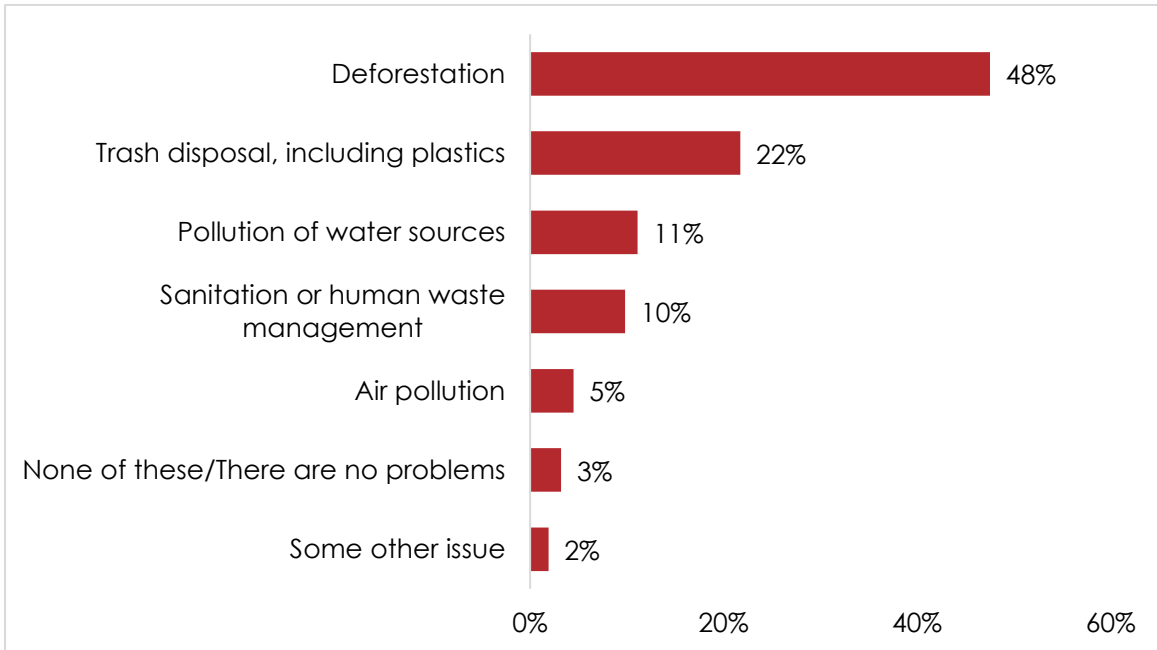
Ugandans rank deforestation as the most important environmental issue in their community (cited by 48%), followed by trash and plastic disposal (22%) (Figure 3). About one in 10 cite pollution of water sources (11%) and human waste management (10%).

Citizens' prioritisation of deforestation and trash disposal as environmental problems varies widely across demographic groups. Rural dwellers are far more likely than urban residents to cite deforestation as most important (54% vs. 30%), while trash and plastic disposal is of greater concern in the cities (36%) than in rural areas (16%) (Figure 4).

Similarly, residents of Kampala (69%) are more than twice as likely to prioritise trash and plastic disposal as their counterparts in other regions (10%-29%), while deforestation ranks low among their environmental concerns (8%). On the other hand, deforestation is cited most often in the East (65%) and North (55%), Uganda's poorest regions.

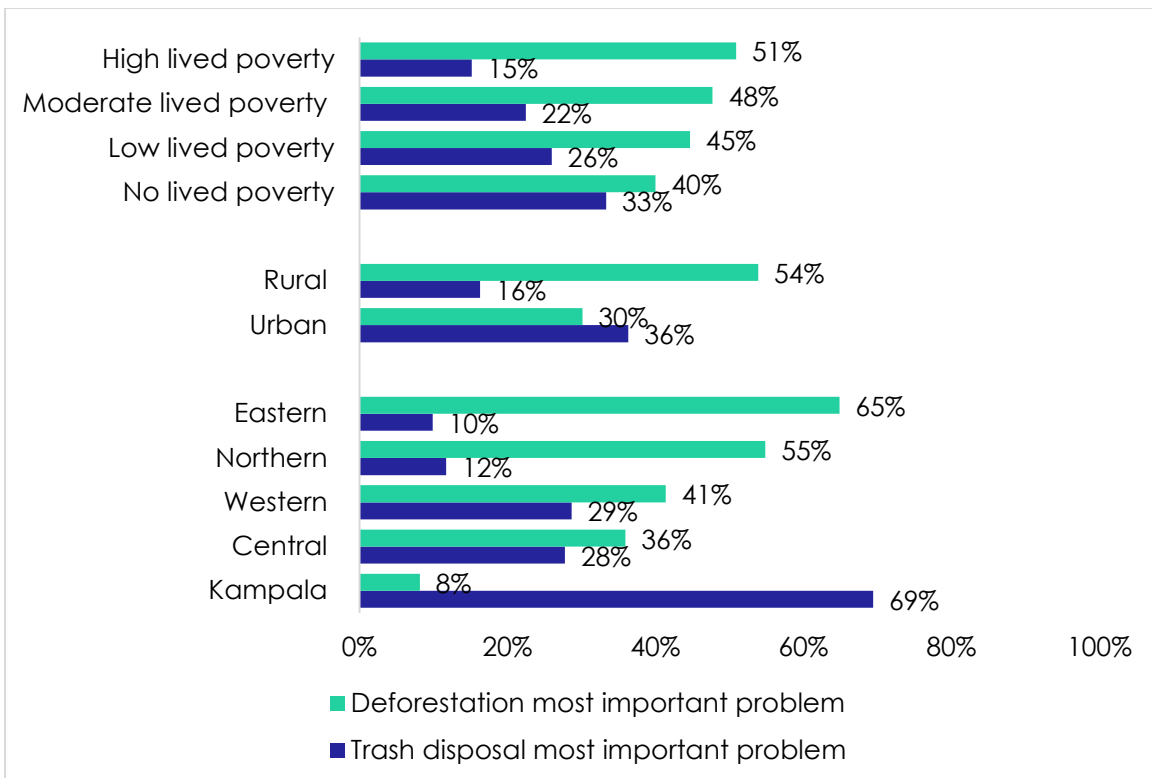
A possible connection between deforestation and poverty is also supported by our finding that concerns about deforestation increase with one's experience of poverty, ranging from 40% among those with no lived poverty to 51% among those with high lived poverty. In contrast, concerns about trash and plastic disposal decrease alongside economic status: The well-off are more than twice as likely as the poorest to cite trash disposal as the top environmental issue affecting them (33% vs. 15%).

**Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following is the most important environmental issue in your community today?

**Figure 4: Deforestation and trash disposal as most important environmental issue in communities | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following is the most important environmental issue in your community today? (% who cite deforestation and trash disposal)

These results are consistent with other reports indicating that Uganda's deforestation is escalating rapidly, due mostly to rapid population growth (with increasing demand for agricultural land, particularly in rural areas) and poverty (with a high reliance on forests for sustenance and livelihoods) (Twongyirwe, Bithell, & Richards, 2018).

Moreover, almost three-fourths (73%) of households in Uganda use firewood for cooking while two in 10 (21%) use charcoal, putting further strain on the country's forests (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

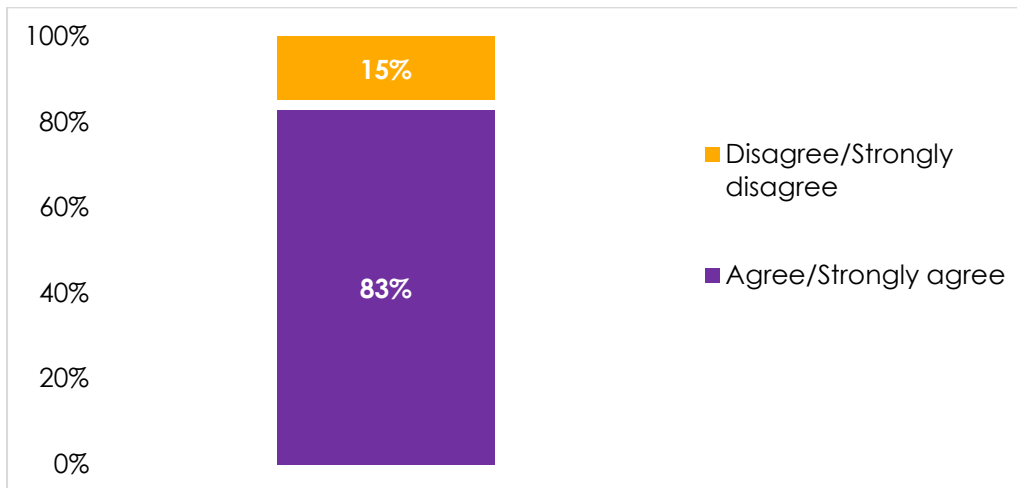
*Are plastic bags a major source of pollution?*

Unlike in Rwanda, bans on the production and use of plastic bags have met with controversy in Uganda, and proposed bans are either overturned or never implemented. Uganda made its first attempt to ban plastic bags in 2007, but it proved unsuccessful. In 2009, 2015, and 2018, further bans were announced, but plastic bags are still widely used in the country (Behuria, 2021).

The president has shifted the goalposts: In June 2018, he issued an order prohibiting the production, distribution, sale, and use of polythene bags (Star, 2018). Later that year, he stated that he opposed the ban on plastic bags and favoured a stronger focus on recycling (Observer, 2018). Behuria (2021) contends that resistance from the business community has greatly contributed to the failed implementation of bans on plastic bags in Uganda.

More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Uganda (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Are plastic bags a major source of pollution? | Uganda | 2022**



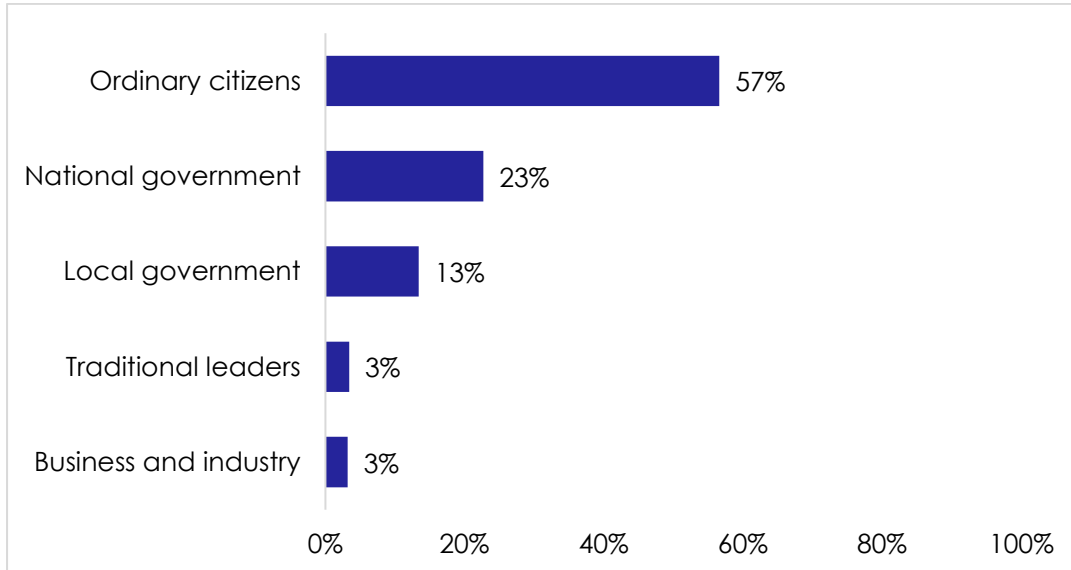
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

*Protecting the environment*

Actions to reduce pollution can range from making small everyday adjustments to once-in-a-generation game-changers – from shifting (back) to reusable shopping bags to dismantling a coal-burning industry.

For Ugandans, protecting the environment starts at home: Almost six in 10 respondents (57%) say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 6). Only about a quarter (23%) would instead place that responsibility on the national government, and even fewer would look to the local government (13%), to traditional leaders (3%), and to business and industry (3%).

**Figure 6: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution?**  
 | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Who do you think should have primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping your community clean?

More than six in 10 citizens (62%) say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while only one-third (33%) think it is doing a good job (Figure 7).

Negative ratings are more common among urban than rural residents (66% vs. 61%) and increase with respondents' level of education, ranging from 58% among those with no formal education to 68% among those with post-secondary qualifications. They also increase with respondents' experience of poverty, ranging from 45% among those with no lived poverty to 67% among those with high lived poverty.

Citizens who live in the Central Region (80%) and Kampala (74%) are far more likely to give the government poor marks on reducing pollution and protecting the environment than their counterparts in other regions (52%-64%).

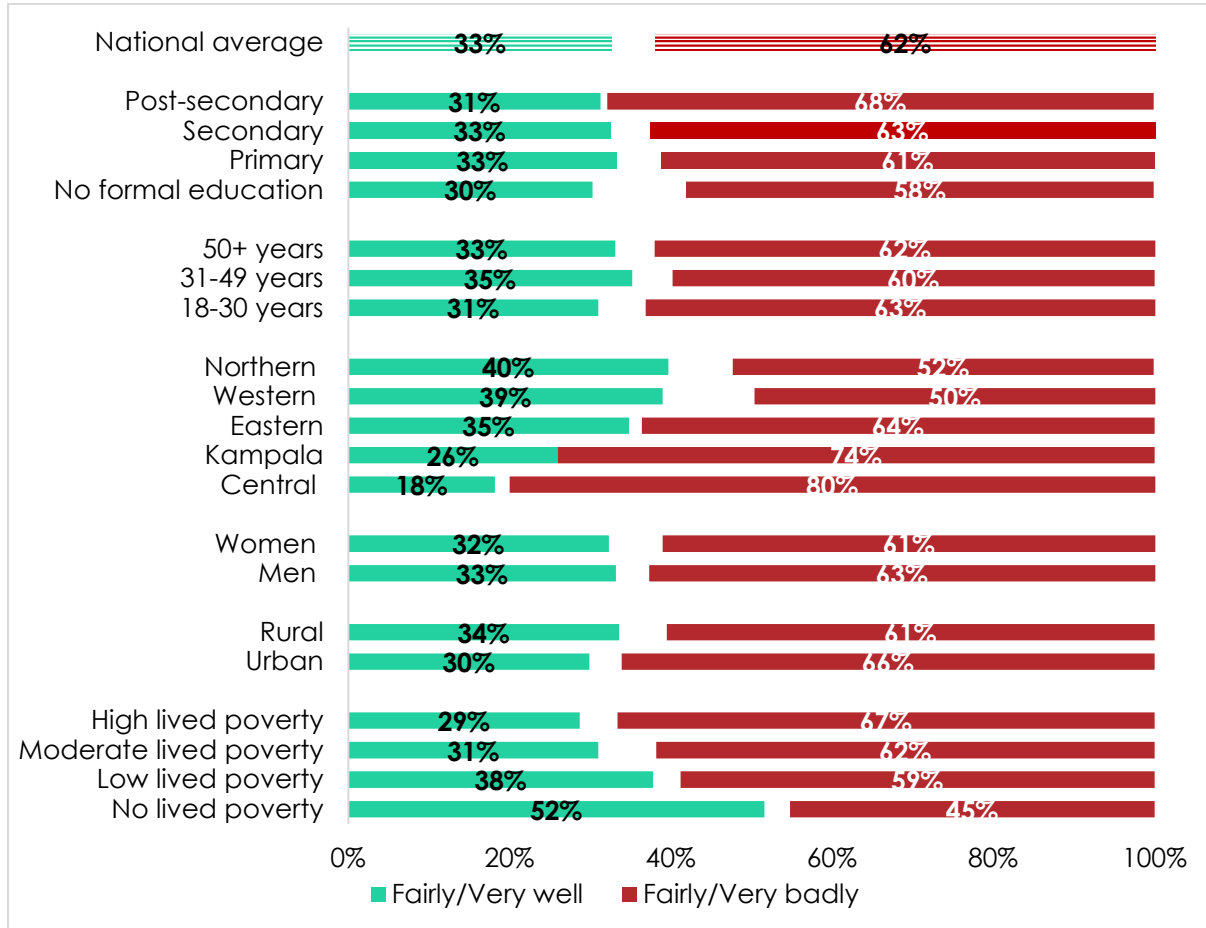
In line with their negative assessments of the government's performance, almost two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including more than half (52%) who want “much more” government action (Figure 8). One in 10 (11%) want the government to keep doing what it is currently doing, while a quarter (25%) think it should do less to protect the environment.

In fact, fully two-thirds (67%) of Ugandans want the government to focus more on preventing pollution and protecting the environment even if it means a loss of jobs or other disruptions to daily life. Only 30% say the government should instead pay more attention to creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if it leads to environmental damage (Figure 9).

Men (69%) and urban residents (71%) are somewhat more likely than women (65%) and rural dwellers (65%) to prioritise environmental protection over job creation. So are middle-aged citizens (71%) compared to younger adults and the elderly.

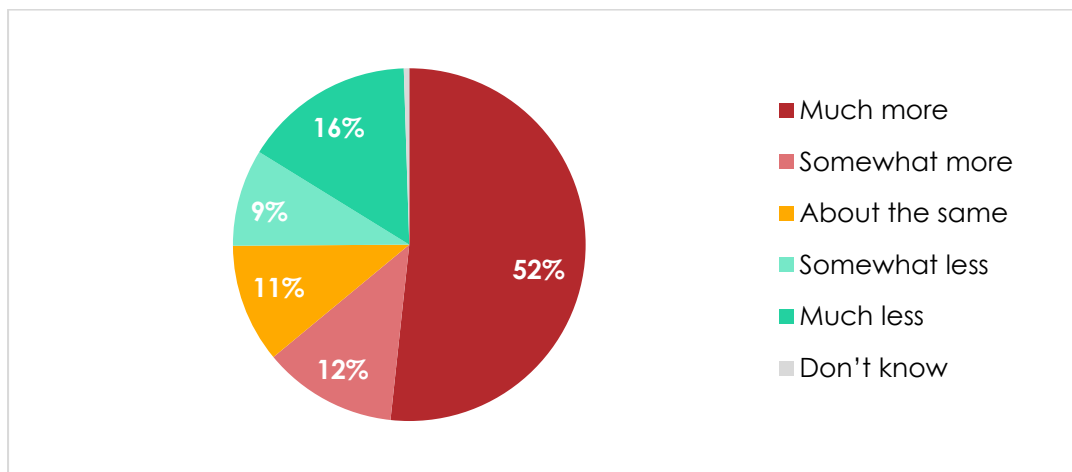
As with the call for greater government efforts to limit pollution and protect the environment, the emphasis on environmental protection is most pronounced in Kampala (84%) and the Central Region (76%).

**Figure 7: Government performance on reducing pollution and protecting the environment** | by demographic group | Uganda | 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: Reducing pollution and protecting the environment?

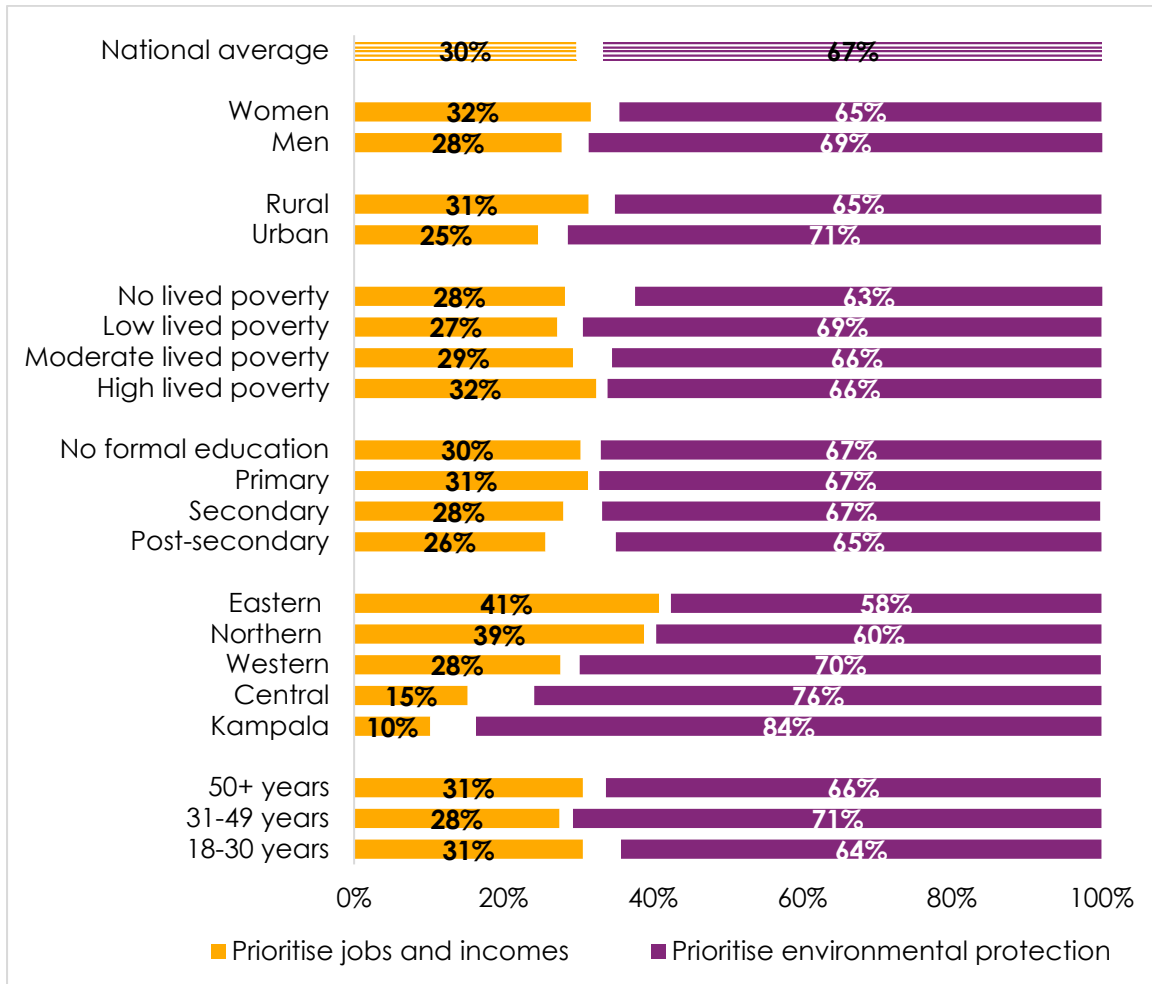
**Figure 8: Should government do more to limit pollution?** | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?



**Figure 9: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment?** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage.  
 Statement 2: The government should focus more on preventing pollution and protecting the environment, even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives.  
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

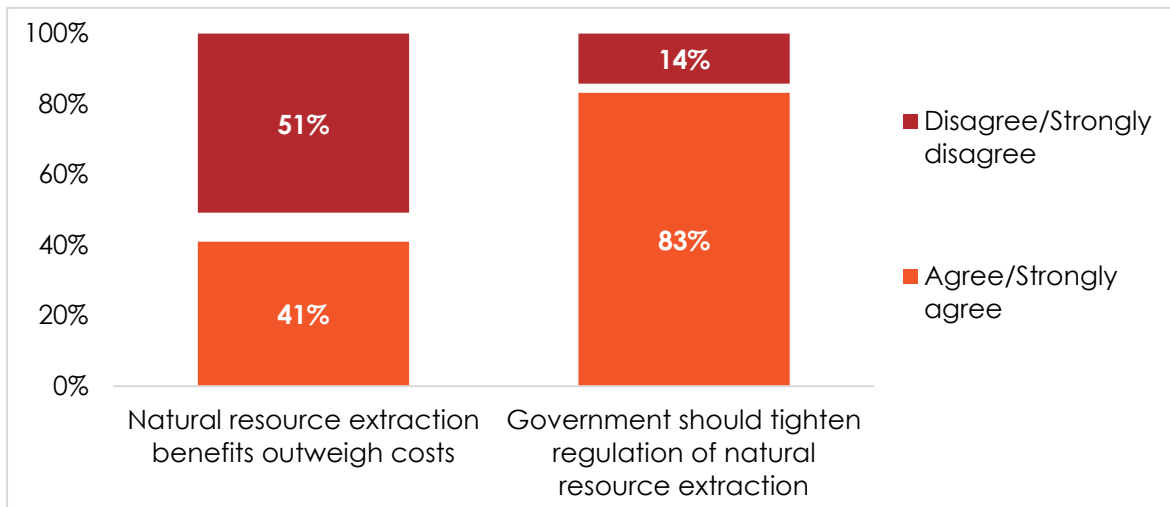
### Natural resource extraction

Although Uganda's mining industry is small, accounting for 2.3% of the country's gross domestic product, it is expected to grow dramatically as a result of recent oil discoveries (Oketch, 2021). But while this may bring economic benefits, resource extraction can also be a major source of local-level environmental damage.

In Uganda, half (51%) of citizens see the costs of natural resource extraction, such as pollution, as outweighing benefits such as jobs and revenue. Only four in 10 (41%) think the benefits outweigh the costs (Figure 10).

To reduce the negative impact of natural resource extraction on the environment, a large majority (83%) of citizens say the government should regulate the industry more tightly. Only 14% oppose stricter regulation.

**Figure 10: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

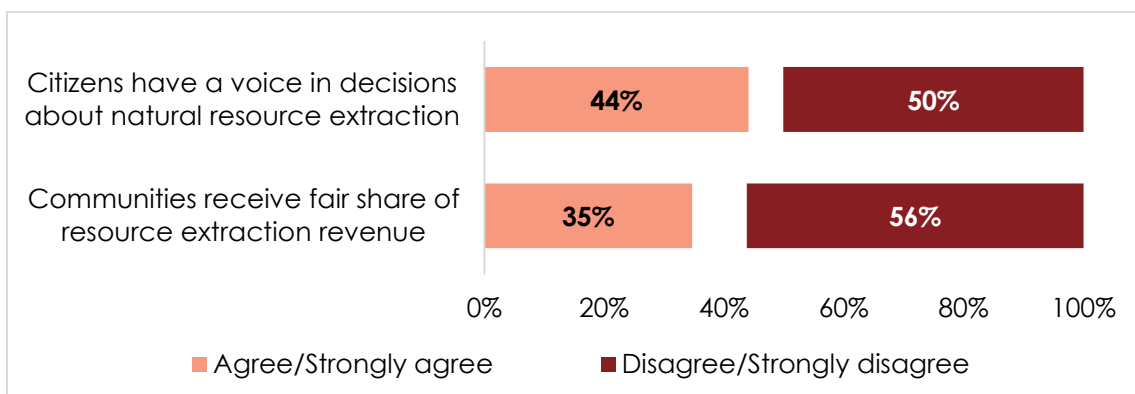
*In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.*

*In this country, natural resource extraction should be more tightly regulated by government to reduce the negative impacts on the environment.*

### Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit

Negative assessments exceed positive ones when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 11). A majority (56%) of respondents say that communities do not receive a fair share of revenues from natural resource extraction that takes place in their area, while only one-third (35%) think they do. Similarly, half (50%) of respondents say local communities do not have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction, while only 44% think they do.

**Figure 11: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

*Ordinary Ugandans currently have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.*

*Local communities currently receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.*

## Conclusion

As Uganda's forests and wetlands continue to disappear at alarming rates, citizens are taking up the call for environmental protection. They see pollution, deforestation, and trash and plastic disposal as important issues that affect their communities and require urgent attention from both ordinary citizens and the government – even at considerable economic cost.

Limiting the damage may require collective action by all stakeholders, such as the adoption of affordable alternative fuel sources and the equitable application of environmental laws. Balancing the benefits and costs of economic development will not be easy, but public opinion suggests that environmental protection must be part of the equation.

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