

# Despite growing evidence, climate change is still unknown to many South Africans

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 615 | Asafika Mpako and Preston Govindasamy**

## Summary

In recent years, South Africa has experienced several catastrophic climate-related events, most notably the Orange River floods in 2011, the worst drought on record in 2015, the Knysna fires in 2017 (World Bank, 2021; Khoza, 2019), and the recent floods that wreaked havoc in the coastal city of Durban and its surrounds, claiming more than 400 lives and leaving thousands displaced (Ogunmodede, 2022).

Climate change is making its presence felt in the country, impacting South African ecosystems, economies, and livelihoods (USAID, 2021). Despite the country's standing as the most developed economy in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), it is not insulated from the severe harms that the range of climate-change impacts adds to its challenges of constrained financial resources, a sluggish economy, and persistent unemployment (King, 2021).

In response, the national government has approved critical actions that prioritise climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, emissions reductions, and waste management. The South African Cabinet has forged ahead with the creation of a Presidential Climate Change Coordinating Commission, a Low Emissions Development Strategy, a National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, a National Waste Management Strategy 2020, a carbon tax, and a draft Climate Change Bill (South African Government, 2020).

What are South Africans' experiences and perceptions of climate change? Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in South Africa, in 2021, show that popular awareness of climate change, though increasing, remained relatively low. Among those who were aware of it, a growing number said climate change is making life in the country worse.

## 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 with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,600 adult South Africans in May-June 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

## Key findings

- About half (49%) of South Africans said they had heard of climate change, a 7-percentage-point increase since 2018.

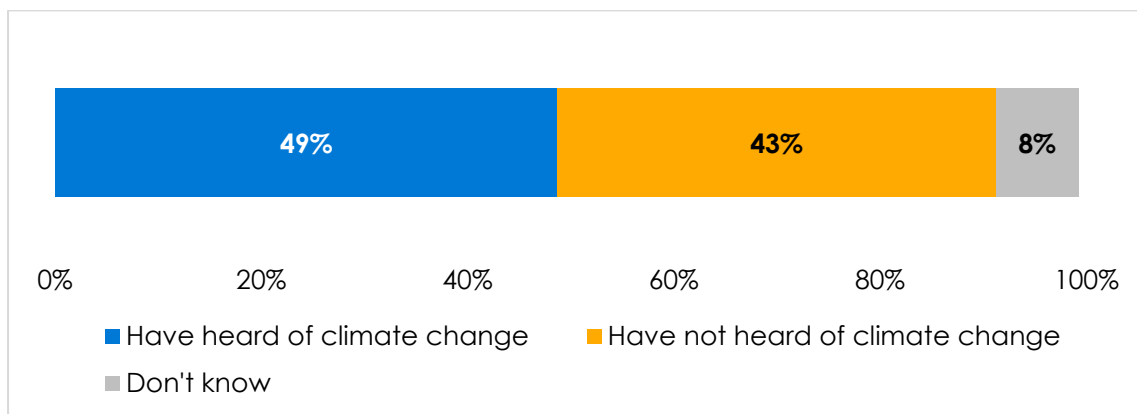
- Awareness of climate change was particularly low among citizens with less than a secondary education (36%), the poor (37%), and rural residents (42%).
- Awareness was slightly above average among citizens who get daily news from the Internet (58%), newspapers (56%), and social media (55%).
- Among those who were aware of climate change, more than six in 10 (62%) said it is making life in South Africa "somewhat worse" (30%) or "much worse" (32%).
- Compared to 2018, the proportion of citizens who said climate change is making life worse increased by 9 percentage points.

### Do South Africans know about climate change?

About half (49%) of South Africans said they had heard of climate change, while the other half said they were unfamiliar with the concept (43%) or didn't know how to answer the question (8%) (Figure 1).

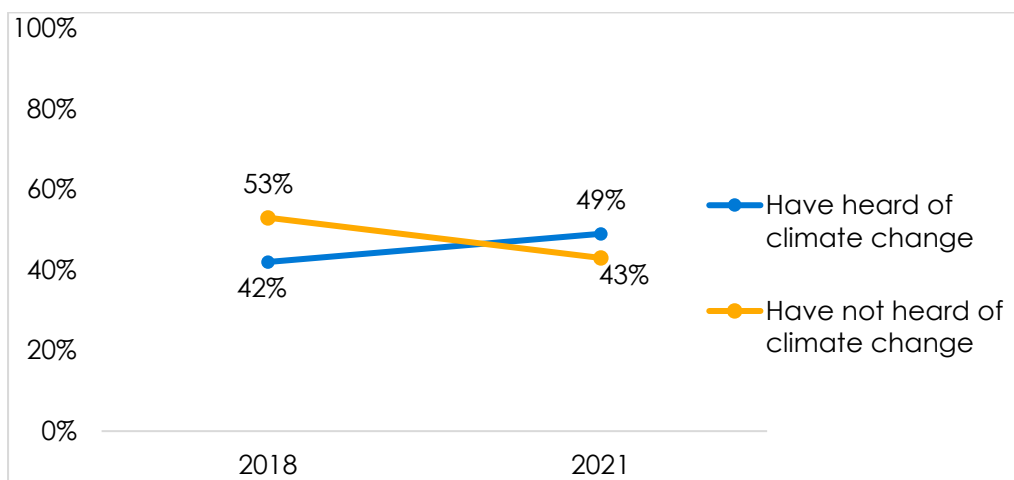
Compared to 2018, the proportion of South Africans who said they had heard about climate change increased by 7 percentage points (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Climate change awareness** | South Africa | 2021



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

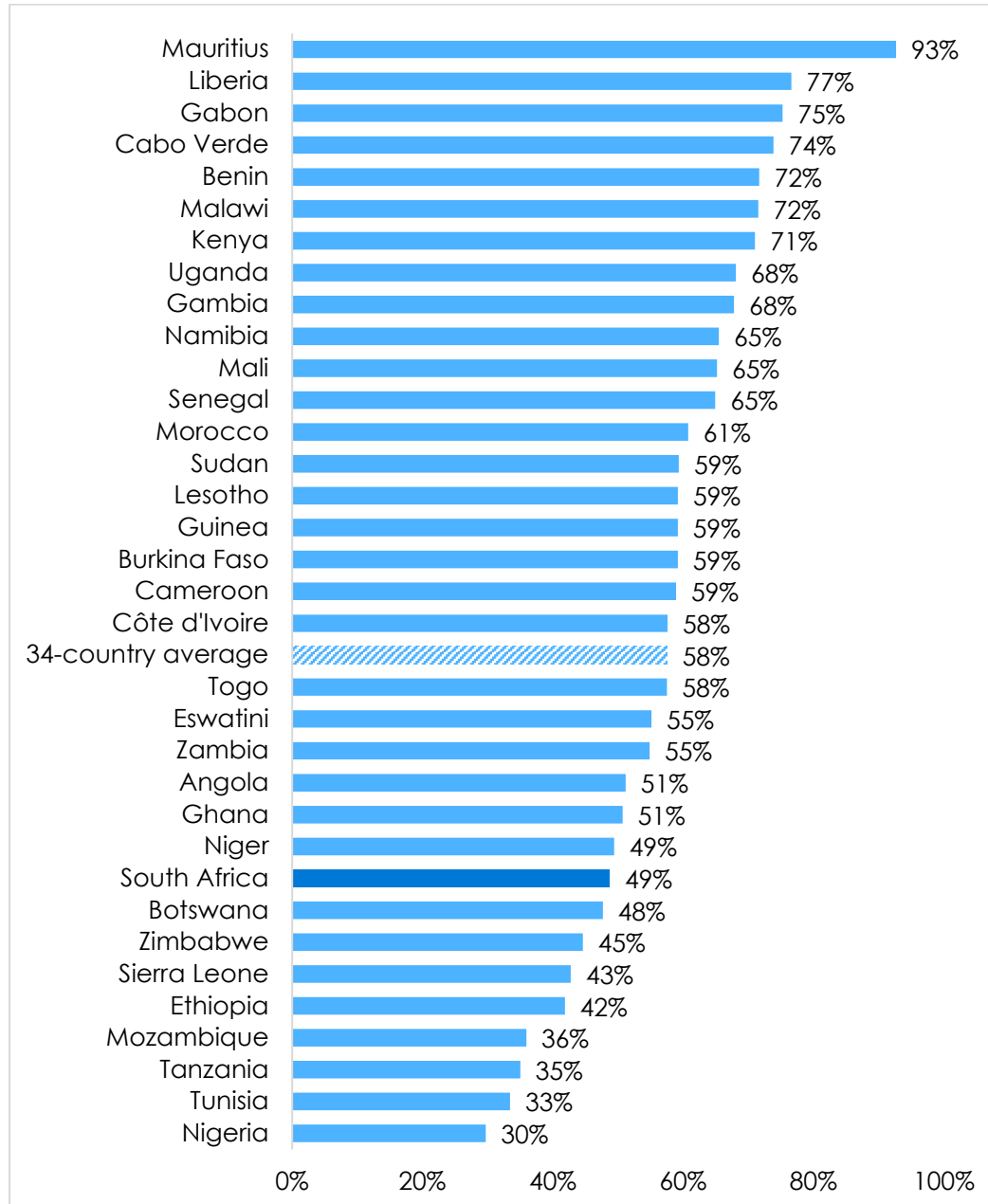
**Figure 2: Climate change awareness** | South Africa | 2018-2021



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

Out of 34 surveyed countries, South Africa ranked among the bottom 10 countries in awareness of climate change, well below the average of 58% (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Climate change awareness | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



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

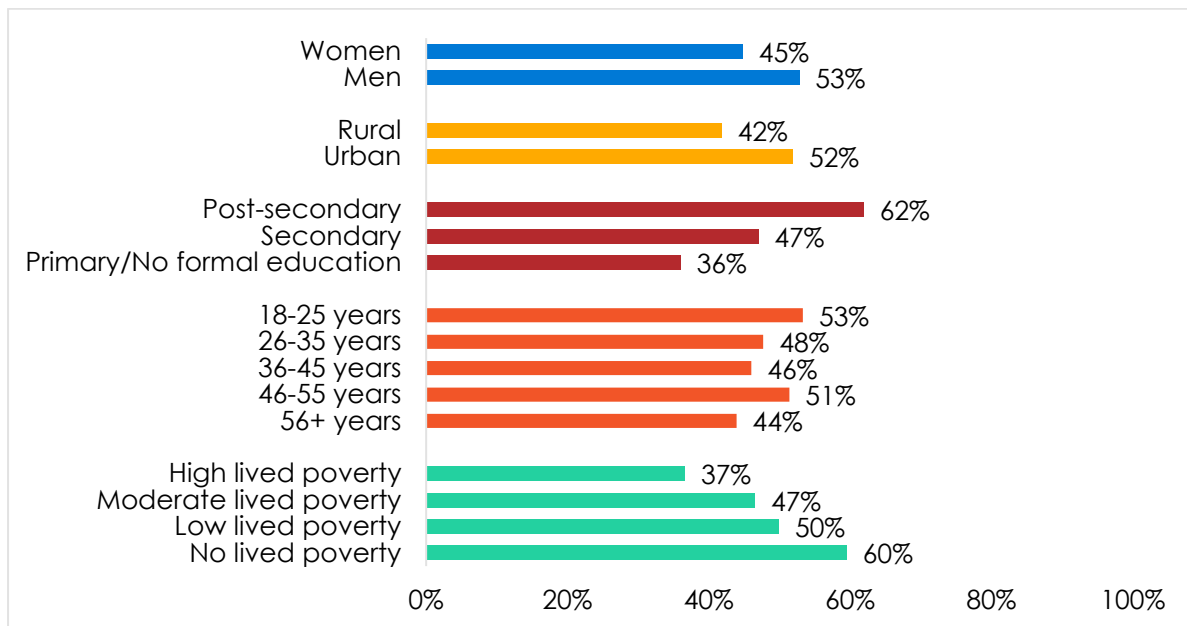
Women were less likely than men to be familiar with climate change (45% vs. 53%), as were rural residents compared to their urban counterparts (42% vs. 52%) (Figure 4). The youngest respondents (53%) were more aware of climate change than their elders.

Awareness of climate change increased with respondents' education level, ranging from 36% of those with primary or no formal schooling to 62% of those with post-secondary qualifications. Similarly, economically better-off citizens (60%) were far more likely to know

about climate change than those experiencing various levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (37%-50%), even though climate change often affects disadvantaged communities the most (GIZ, 2022).

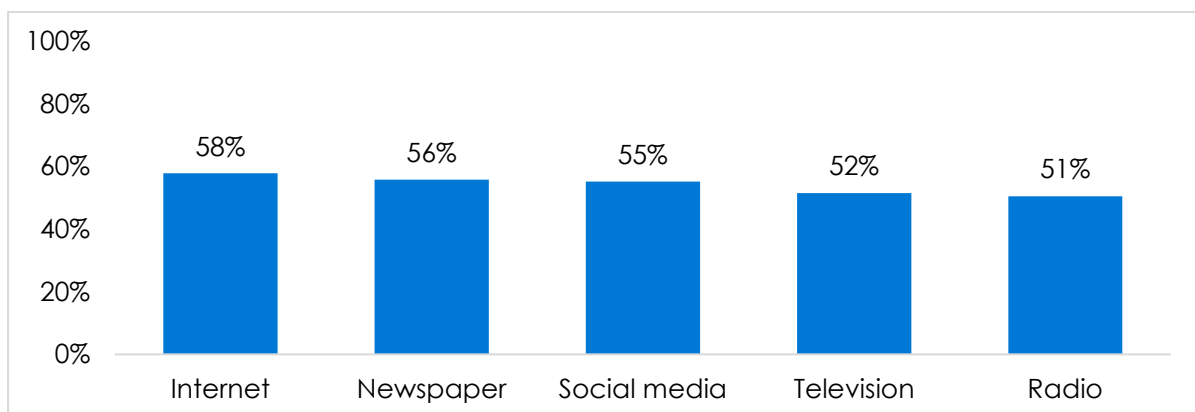
Awareness of climate change was at above-average levels among daily consumers of news via the Internet (58%), newspapers (56%), and social media (55%), though differences were marginal for those receiving daily news from the radio (51%) and television (52%) (Figure 5).

**Figure 4: Climate change awareness | by demographic group | South Africa | 2021**



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

**Figure 5: Climate change awareness and daily news source | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:**  
 How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who said "every day")  
 Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who said "yes")

<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 & Patel (2020).

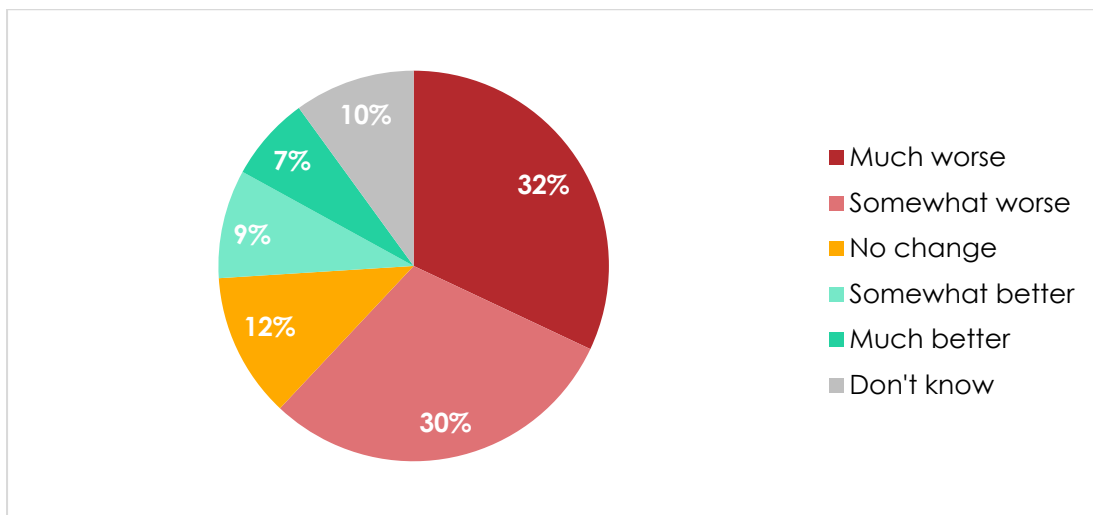
## How is climate change impacting life in South Africa?

Among South Africans who were aware of climate change, 62% said it is making life in the country worse, compared to 16% who said it is making things better (Figure 6).

The share of respondents who saw climate change as making life worse increased by 9 percentage points compared to 2018, suggesting that people are feeling the effects of climate change (Figure 7).

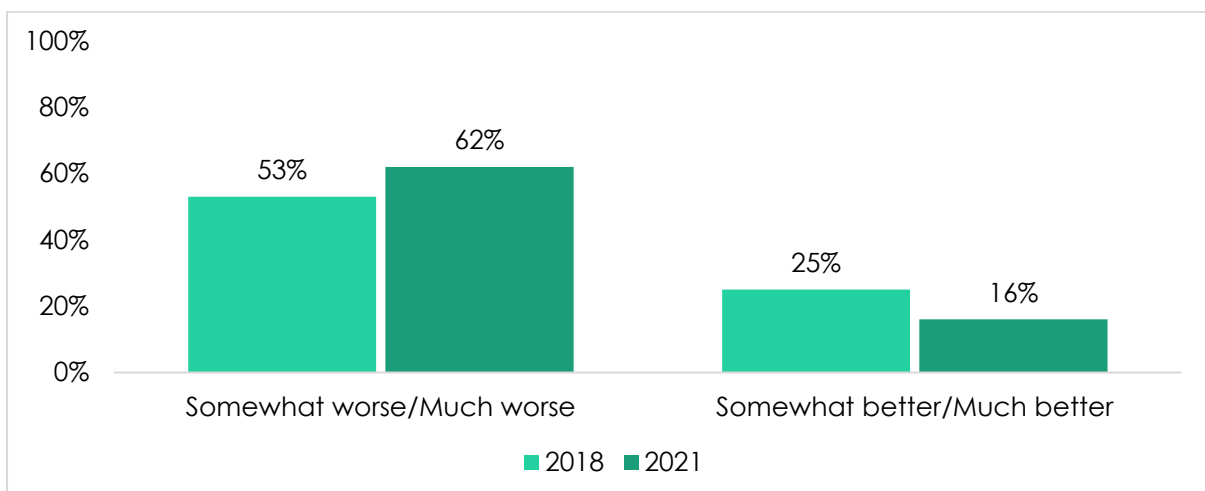
Similar to awareness of climate change, perceptions of its negative impact are more common in cities (64%) than in rural areas (57%), and among the poor (68%) than among the well-off (63%). South Africans with a post-secondary education (69%) are also more likely to perceive the impact of climate change as undesirable, as are the youngest respondents (71% of those aged 18-25 years) (Figure 8).

**Figure 6: Is climate change making life better or worse? | South Africa | 2021**



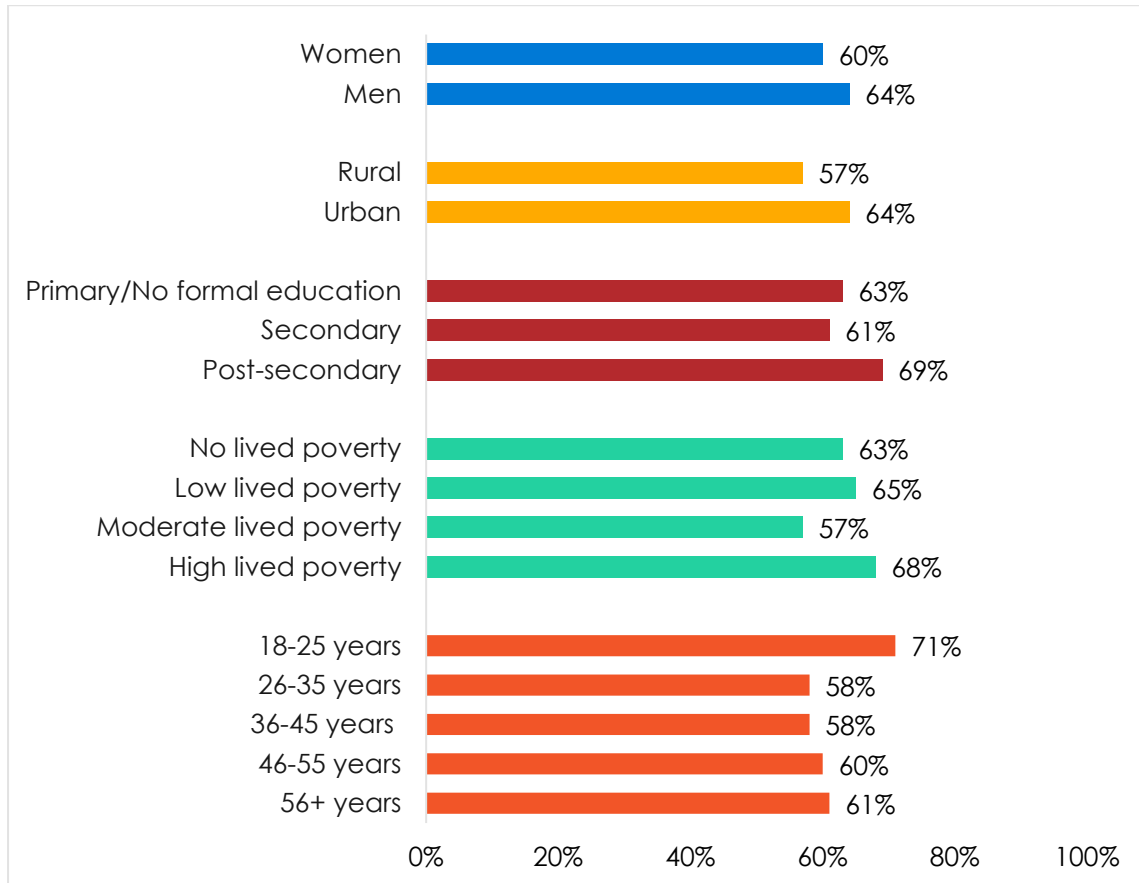
**Respondents who said they had heard of climate change were asked:** Do you think climate change is making life in South Africa better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

**Figure 7: Is climate change making life better or worse? | South Africa | 2018-2021**



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

**Figure 8: Climate change is making life worse** | by demographic group  
 | South Africa | 2021

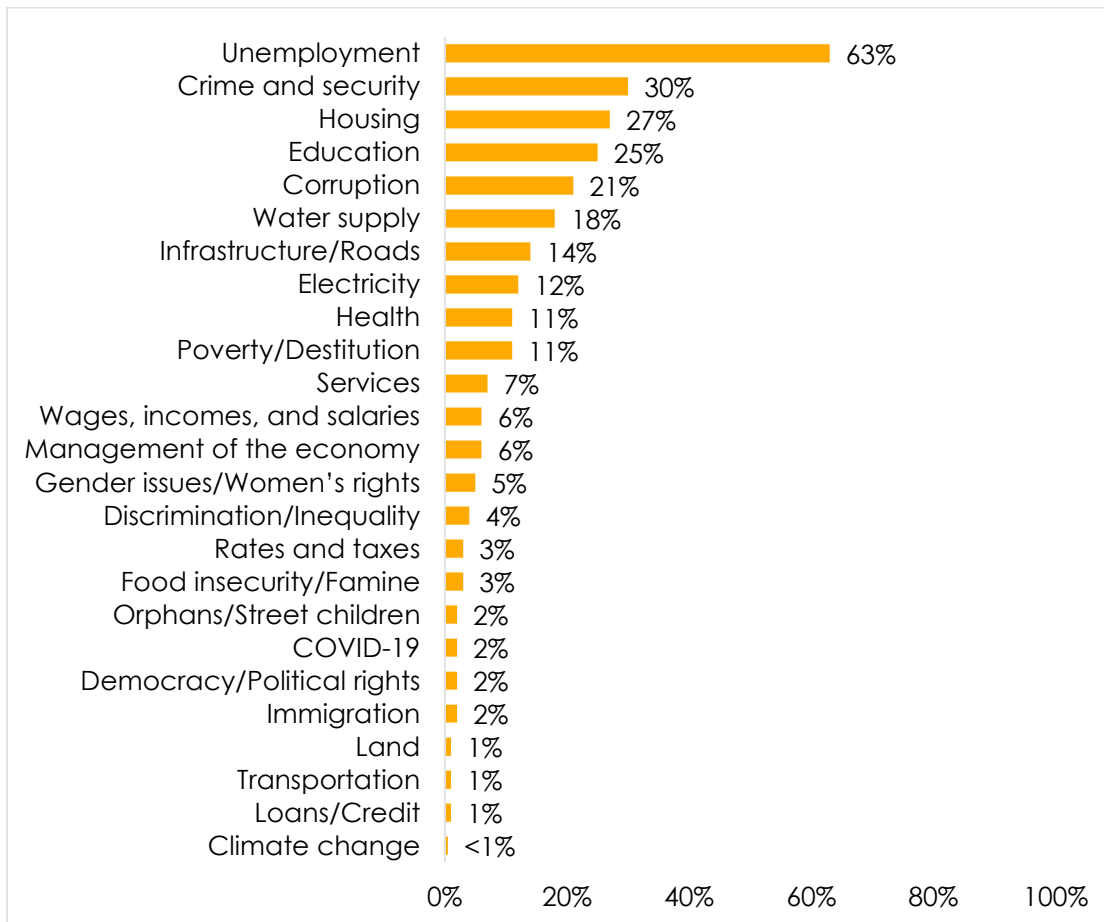


**Respondents who said they had heard about climate change were asked:** Do you think climate change is making life in South Africa better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who had not heard about climate change are excluded.)

### Most important problems

When respondents were asked what they considered to be the most important problems that their government should address, climate change ranked very far down the list – fewer than 1% of respondents cited it among their top three priorities for government action (Figure 9). Unemployment was far and away the top concern, cited by 63% of citizens, and 23 other problems outranked climate change.

**Figure 9: Most important problems | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the 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.)*

## Conclusion

General awareness of climate change in South Africa was relatively low, especially among people with limited education, the poor, and rural residents. This suggests opportunities for increasing citizens' knowledge through education and information campaigns in order to boost support for meaningful, collective climate action.

Most South Africans who were aware of climate change said it is making life in the country worse. But climate change ranked very low among the problems they considered most important – a challenge for activists who consider climate change the existential issue of our times.

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey 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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