

# Ghanaians look to one another and government for action to protect the environment

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 616 | Francisca Sarpong Owusu and Maame Akua Amoah Twum**

## Summary

Formerly known as the Gold Coast, Ghana has a diverse climate and geography that support a wide range of natural resources, including minerals (such as gold, diamonds, bauxite, manganese, and lithium), oil and gas, timber, and fertile land for agriculture, making the environment and natural resources crucial to its people (Aboka, Jerry, & Dzigbodi, 2018; Citi Newsroom, 2022).

While the exploitation of these resources has been a key driver of economic growth and development, Ghana's over-reliance on natural resources affects the environment and the well-being of local communities. The World Bank (2020a) estimated the cost of environmental degradation at U.S. \$6.3 billion for 2017, equivalent to 10.7% of gross domestic product. Specifically, the country is threatened by air and water pollution, unregulated gold mining, unmanaged solid waste, deforestation, and contaminated sites that release hazardous chemicals and affect health and hygiene (Srivastava & Pawlowska, 2020).

One pressing environmental issue in Ghana is *galamsey* (illegal mining), whose use of dangerous chemicals and poor waste-management practices have caused water pollution and soil contamination that pose health risks to nearby communities and water production (Africa Report, 2023).

Growing concern among policy actors and donors has led to environmental-protection measures such as the Forest and Wildlife Policy, Minerals and Mining Act D, and Environmental Protection Agency Act (World Bank, 2020a). Steps to address the issue of *galamsey* include the launch and relaunch of Operation Halt to remove all persons and mining equipment from water bodies and forest reserves in the country (World Bank, 2020a; Graphic Online, 2022), but the dangers persist as minimal results have been achieved.

Additionally, these efforts have been politicised, with accusations linking major violations to the political elite and people within the government (Minerals Commission, 2022; Tawiah, 2022; Tossou, 2022).

Will Ghana win the fight against environmental degradation and protect its resplendent natural resources?

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

Survey findings show that a majority of Ghanaians consider pollution a serious problem in their community. Trash disposal and sanitation rank as the most important environmental issues at the local level, and most citizens say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in the country.

Ghanaians want greater government action to protect the environment but are divided as to whether this should take precedence over job and income creation.

Fully half of citizens say that the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs, do not outweigh its negative impacts, such as pollution, and most want the government to regulate the industry more tightly to protect the environment.

## **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 conducted since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

## **Key findings**

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

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Ghanaians say pollution is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
  - Citizens say trash and plastic disposal (cited by 31%), sanitation or human waste management (26%), and pollution of water sources (16%) are the most important environmental issues in their community.
  - Fully four out of five respondents (81%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Ghana.
- Ghanaians overwhelmingly (82%) say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 72% who say it needs to do “much more.”
- But only 41% would prioritise environmental protection over jobs, while 48% say the government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage .
- Almost six in 10 Ghanaians (57%) say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with local citizens. Far fewer would assign that responsibility to their local (21%) or national (14%) government.

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

- Only 39% of Ghanaians say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution.
- And most (85%) want the government to regulate natural resource extraction more tightly in order to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

## Pollution and environmental governance

### *Pollution: The scope of the problem*

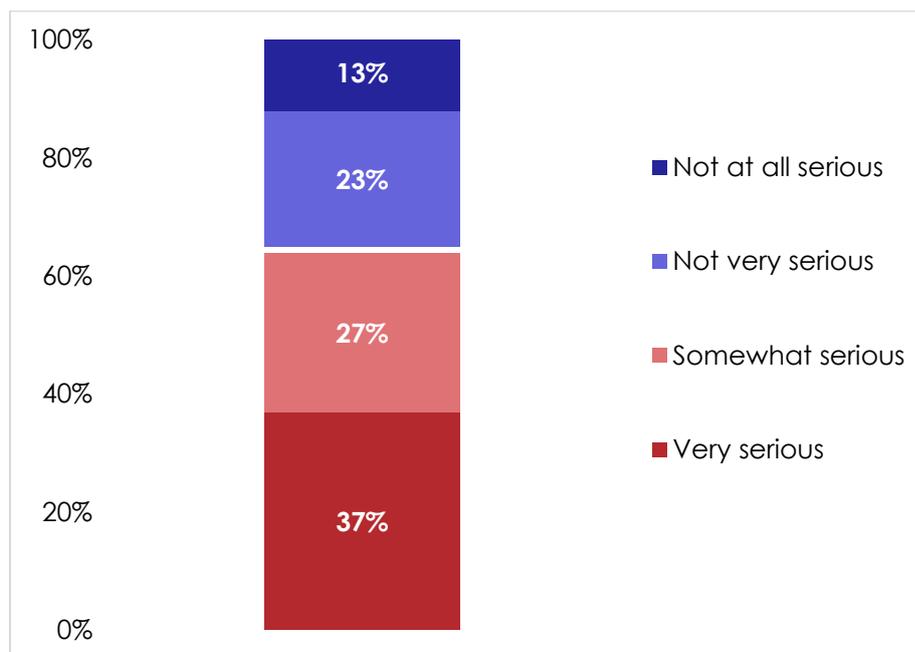
Almost two-thirds (64%) of Ghanaians consider pollution in their communities to be a “somewhat serious” (27%) or “very serious” (37%) problem (Figure 1).

Urban residents are more concerned about pollution than rural residents (68% vs. 58%) (Figure 2). Concerns about pollution are also more widespread among poor citizens (73%) than among their better-off counterparts (63%-66%).<sup>1</sup>

Trash and plastic disposal ranks at the top of Ghanaians' environmental concerns (cited by 31% of respondents), followed by sanitation or human waste management (26%) and pollution of water sources (16%) (Figure 3). About one in 10 cite deforestation (11%), while far fewer cite air pollution (6%).

Fully four out of five citizens (81%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Ghana, including almost half (46%) who “strongly agree” with this view (Figure 4).

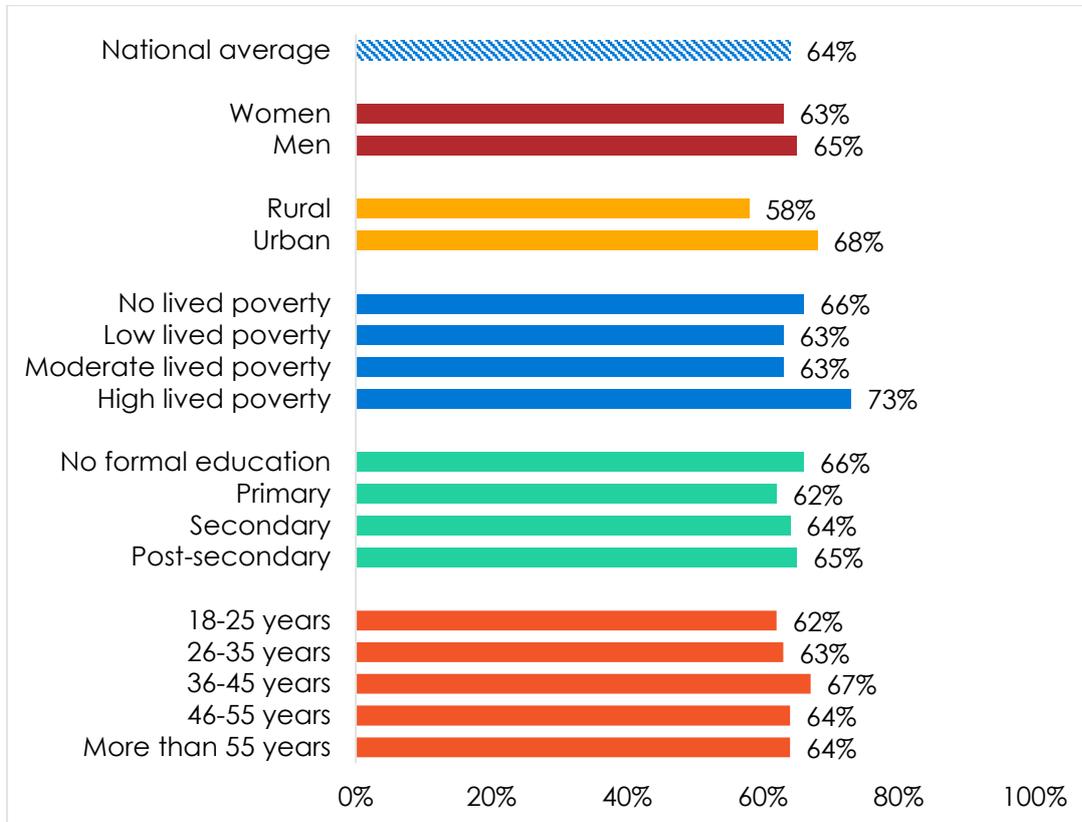
**Figure 1: Extent of pollution in the community | Ghana | 2022**



**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?

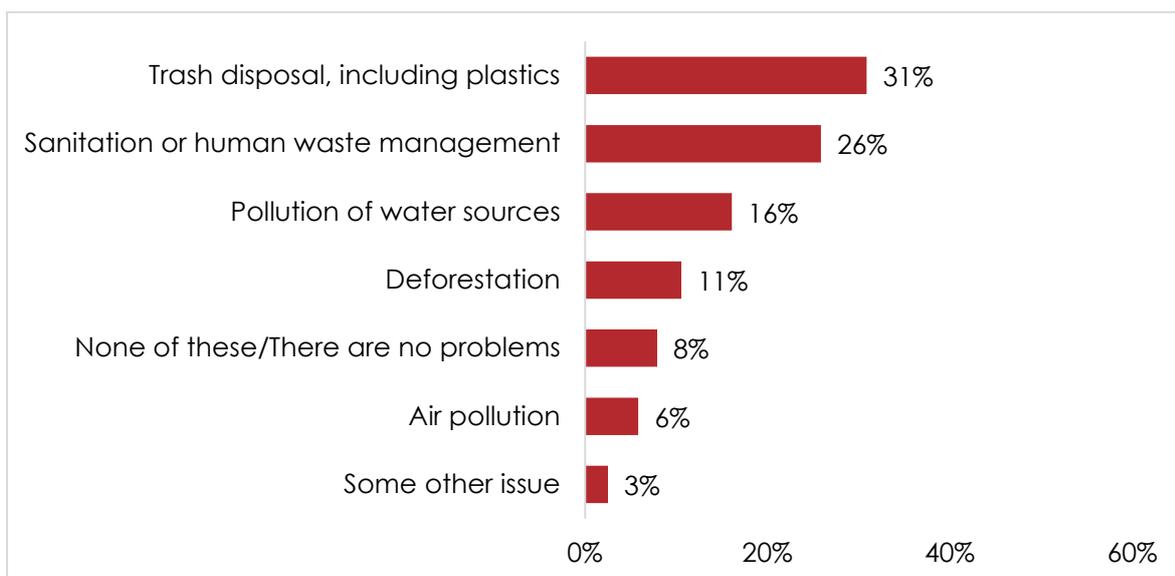
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

**Figure 2: Pollution is a serious problem in the community | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022**



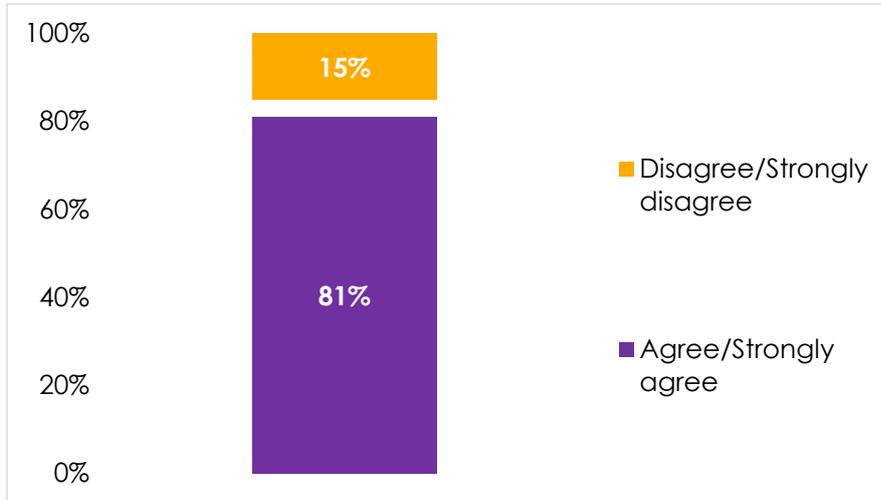
**Respondents were asked:** How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

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



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

**Figure 4: Are plastic bags a major source of pollution? | Ghana | 2022**

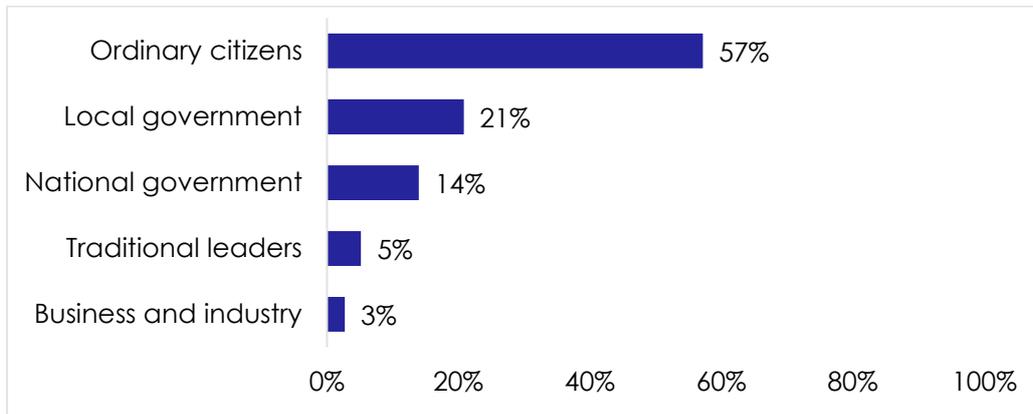


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

### Protecting the environment

For Ghanaians, environmental protection starts from home: A majority (57%) of respondents say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). One in five (21%) place that responsibility on the local government, and only 14% say it is the responsibility of the national government. Even fewer look to traditional leaders (5%) and business and industry (3%).

**Figure 5: Who should be responsible for reducing pollution? | Ghana | 2022**

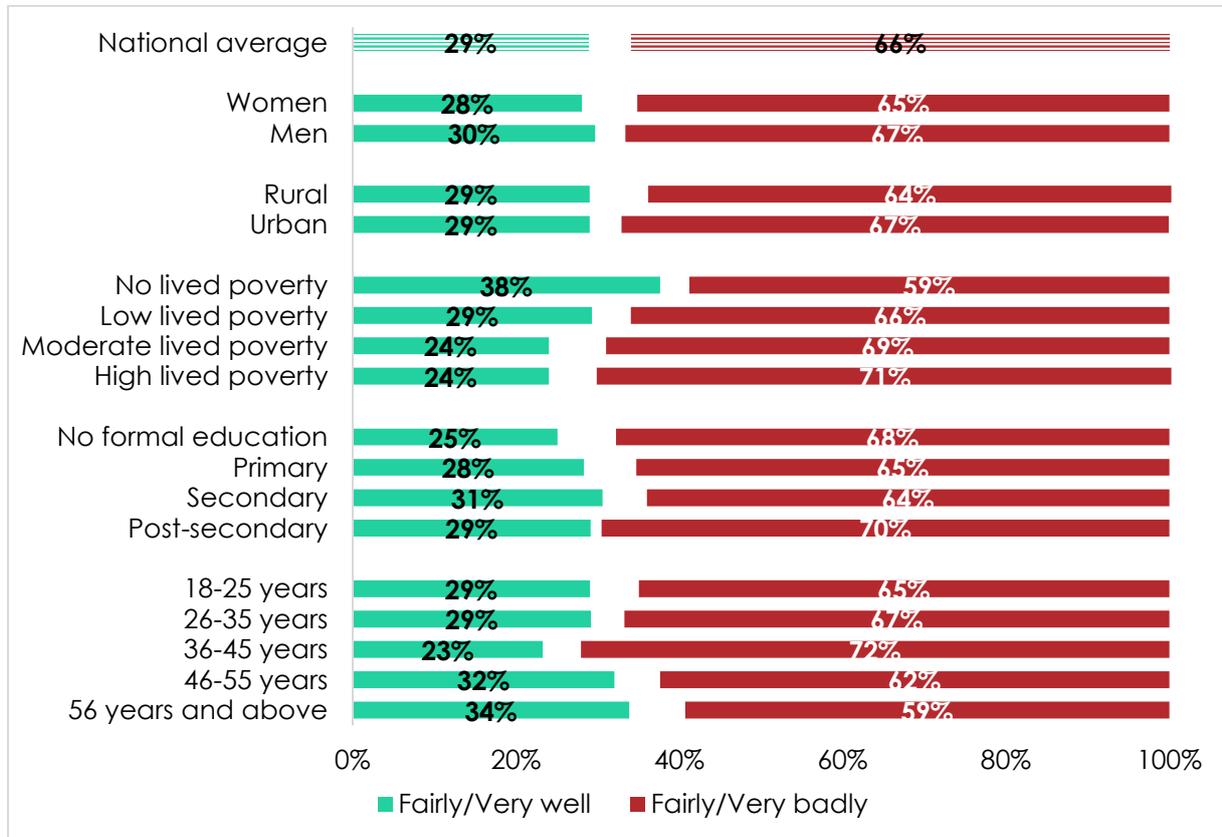


**Respondents were asked:** Who do you think should have primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping your community clean?

Only about three in 10 citizens (29%) think the government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while a majority (66%) rate the government's efforts poorly (Figure 6). Favourable ratings are more common among the best-off citizens than those with high or moderate lived poverty (38% vs. 24%), and older respondents (34%) are more likely to approve of the government's efforts than their younger counterparts.

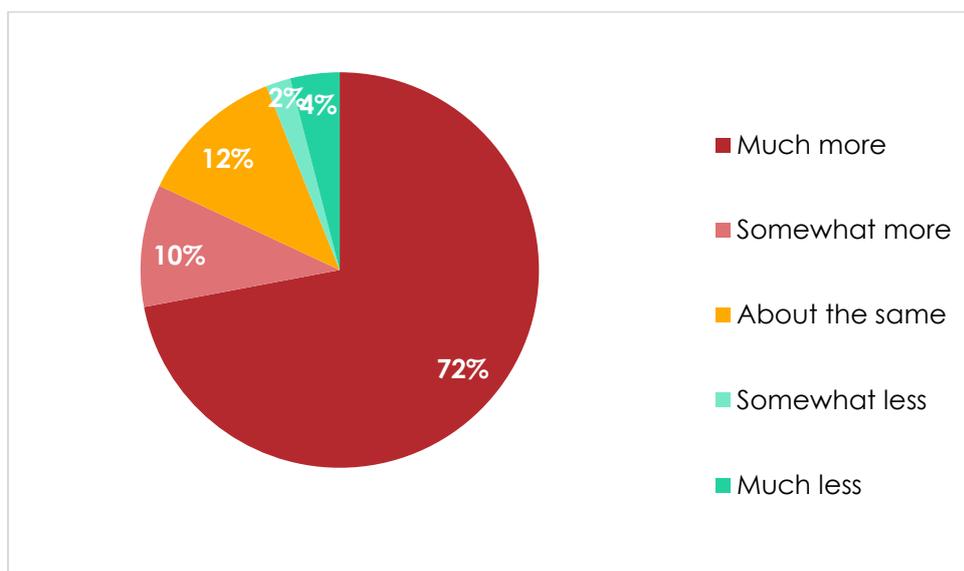
A large majority (82%) of Ghanaians believe that the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 72% who want the government to do "much more" (Figure 7).

**Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Ghana | 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 7: Should government do more to limit pollution? | Ghana | 2022**

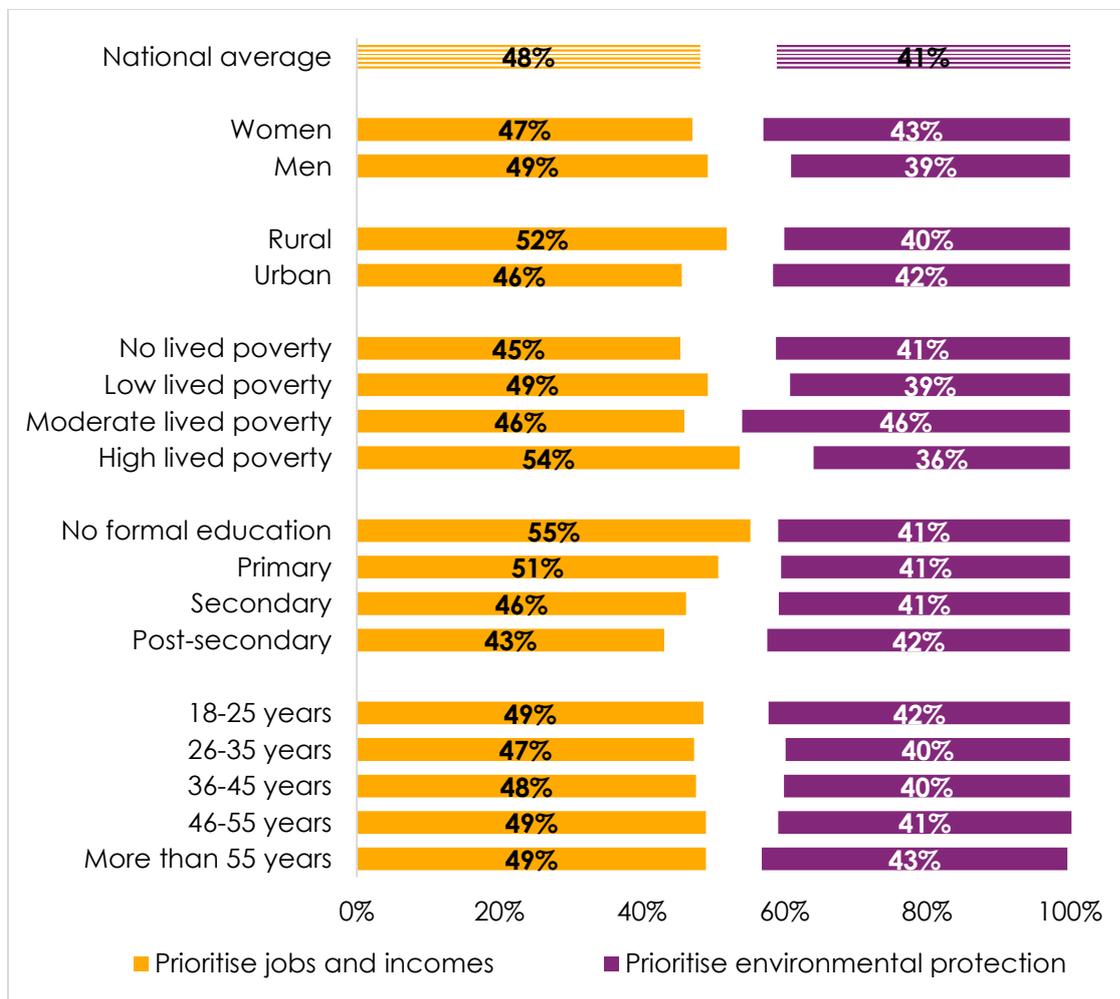


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?

However, if they have to choose between environmental protection and jobs, more Ghanaians pick the latter: 48% of respondents say reducing pollution or other environmental damage must take a back seat to job and income creation, while 41% would prioritise protecting the environment, “even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives” (Figure 8).

Poor respondents (54%) and rural citizens (52%) are more likely than citizens experiencing no lived poverty (45%) and urbanites (46%) to prioritise job creation over environmental protection. But support for emphasising jobs over environmental protection decreases as respondents’ educational level increases, dropping from 55% of those with no formal schooling to 43% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

**Figure 8: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment?** | by demographic group | Ghana | 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 “strongly agree” with each statement)

## Natural resource extraction

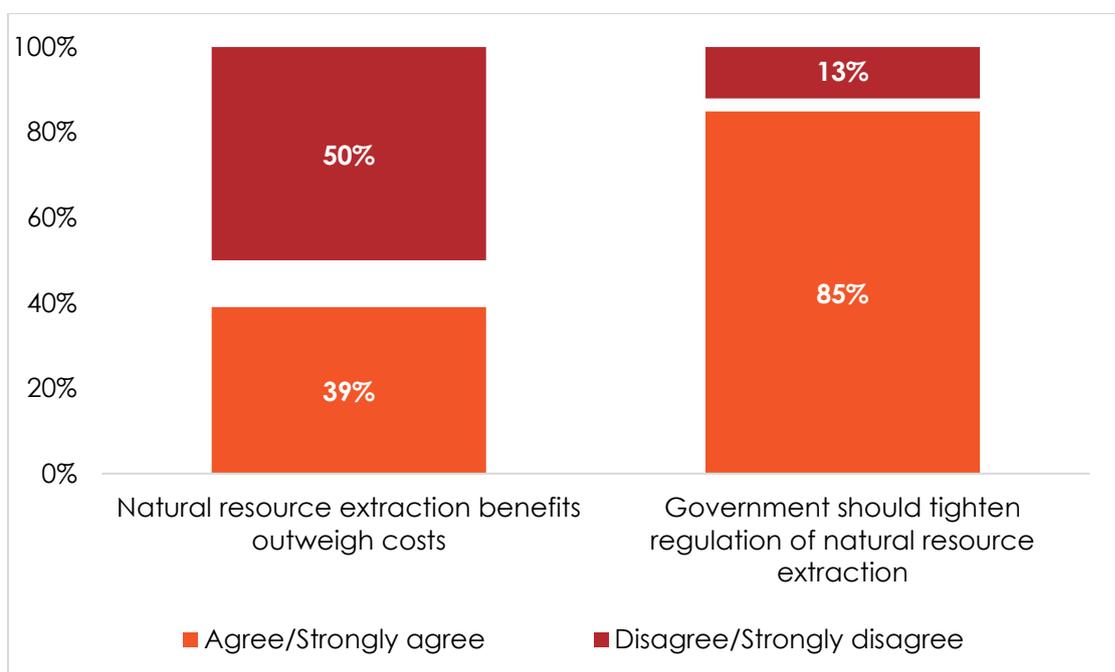
In Ghana, natural resources rents contribute an important share of the country's gross domestic product, estimated at 9.5% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020b; UNDP Ghana, 2022).

But resource extraction can also be a major source of local-level environmental damage.

Only about four in 10 Ghanaians (39%) think that overall, the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. Fully half (50%) disagree with this assessment (Figure 9).

In order to reduce the negative impact of natural resource extraction on the environment, a large majority (85%) of citizens want the government to regulate the industry more tightly.

**Figure 9: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Ghana | 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:*

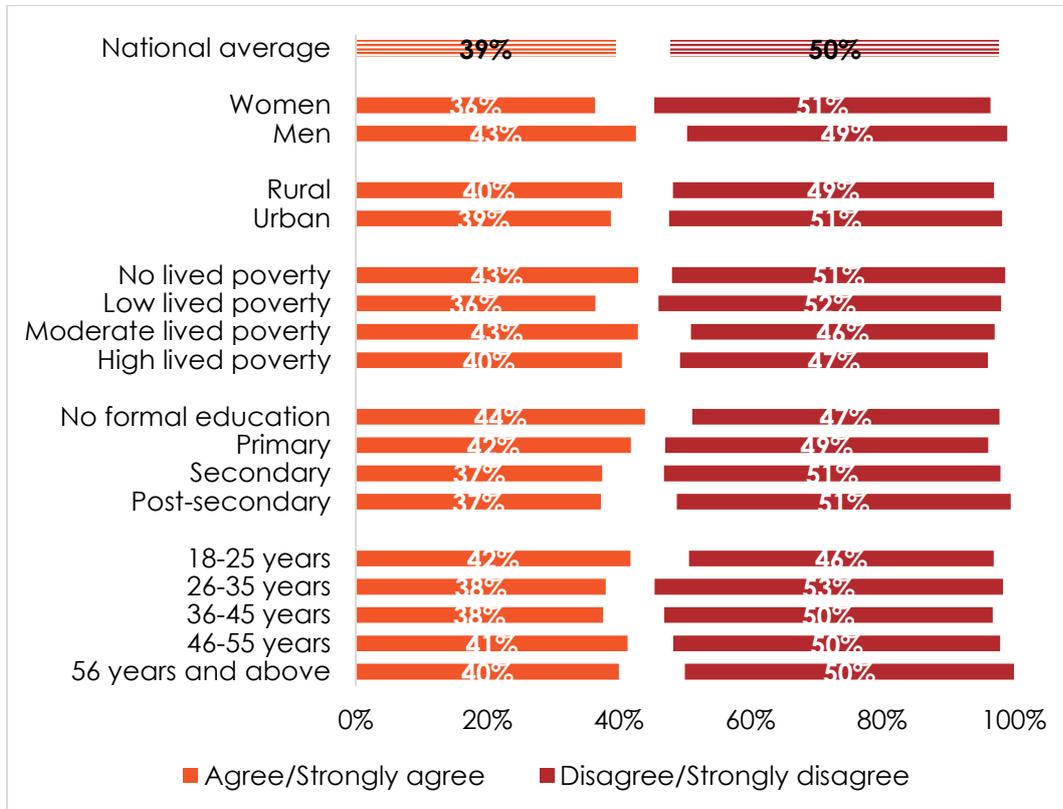
*In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.*

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

The view that the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its costs is more commonly held by less educated citizens (42%-44%) than their better-educated counterparts (37%), and by men (43%) compared to women (36%) (Figure 10).

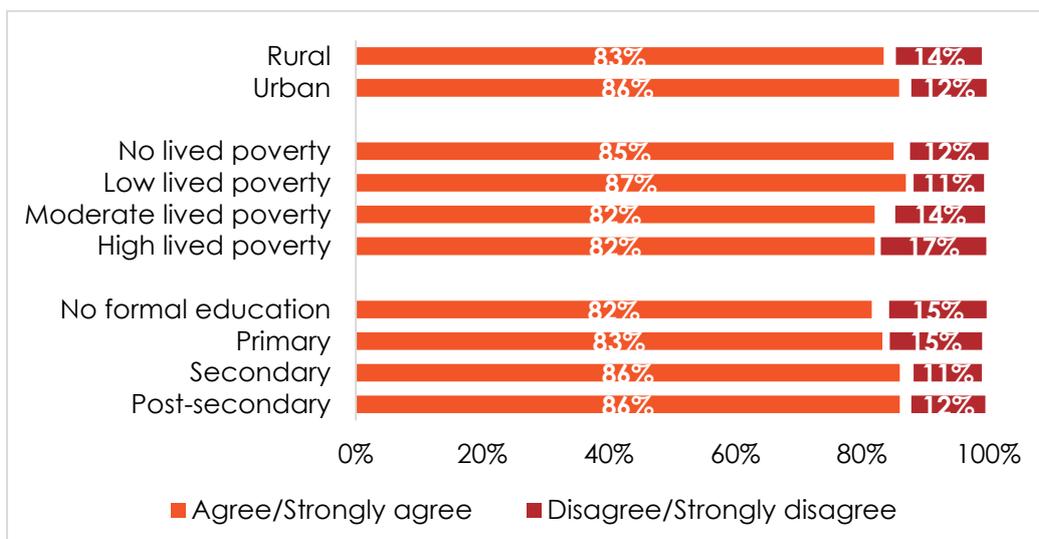
Support for tighter government regulation is strongest in urban areas (86%), among educated respondents (86% of those with secondary or post-secondary education), and better-off citizens (85%-87% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty) (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Costs of natural resource extraction outweigh benefits** | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with this statement: In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

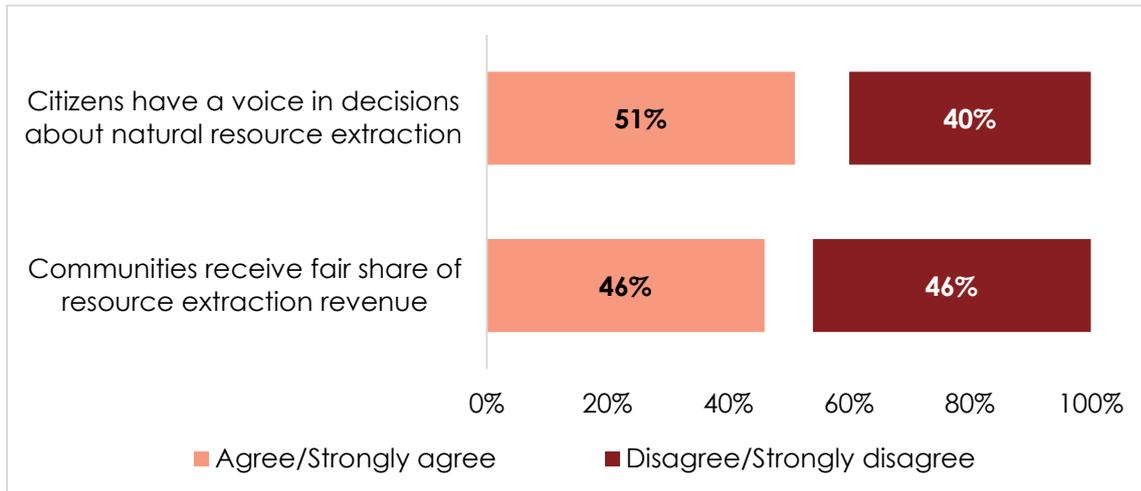
**Figure 11: Government should tighten regulation of natural resource extraction** | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with this statement: In this country, natural resource extraction should be more tightly regulated by government to reduce the negative impacts on the environment.

A slim majority (51%) of respondents say that people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while four in 10 (40%) disagree (Figure 12). And fewer than half (46%) of citizens think local communities receive a fair share of revenues from natural resource extraction; just as many (46%) think they don't.

**Figure 12: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Ghana | 2022**



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

*Ordinary Ghanaians 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

Ghana's natural resources and diverse ecosystems support mining and tourism, but their exploitation is also leading to significant environmental degradation. Afrobarometer survey findings indicate that Ghanaians see pollution as a major problem affecting their communities and assign themselves the lead role in fighting it, at least at the local level.

But they also want greater environmental-protection efforts by the government, including tighter regulation of the natural resource extraction industry.

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