

Ghanaians split on free senior high school policy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 623 | Mavis Zupork Dome and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah

Summary

Ghana's Akufo-Addo administration began implementing a free senior high school (SHS) policy in September 2017, fulfilling a campaign promise in the 2016 general election. The policy, one of the country's biggest welfare programmes, has been a significant push toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals target of free, publicly funded, inclusive, equitable, quality primary and secondary education (sdg4education2030, n.d.).

Senior high school enrolment levels increased by 17.2% in 2017 and by 30.7% in 2018 (Opoku Prempeh, 2018) as almost all students (97.1%) who qualified their basic education certificate examinations were placed into free secondary schools to continue their education. Government spending on education increased almost five-fold between 2017 and 2021 (Government of Ghana, 2021). To accommodate the increased enrolment and address the stress on school infrastructure, the government adopted a double-track system that allows two separate cohorts of students in school at different times of the academic year.

While supporters describe the policy as bold and far-reaching (Modern Ghana, 2022), debate about its merits, implementation, impact on education quality, and financial sustainability continues.

The programme's cost has left little fiscal space to fund educational infrastructure and materials, and heavy reliance on proceeds from Ghana's oil sector leaves its funding subject to the uncertainties of the petroleum sector (UNICEF, n.d.; B&FT Online, 2022). Some experts have warned that the programme is not sustainable and should instead target only the poor, excluding students whose families can afford to pay their fees (Ghanaweb, 2017; Ghanaweb, 2022; MyJoyOnline.com, 2019).

While the government initially rejected calls for review (Graphic Online, 2020), financial strains exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled it to call for a broad stakeholder dialogue on a possible review of the policy (Citinewsroom, 2022; MyJoyOnline.com, 2022). In light of this ongoing discourse, Afrobarometer survey findings from 2019, 2021, and 2022 offer insights into public opinion on the free SHS policy.

Two years into implementation of the new policy, most Ghanaians saw it as creating an opportunity for many students who otherwise would not have been able to afford a secondary education. But citizens were sharply divided as to whether the policy should have targeted only the poor, whether free senior high school was good even if it increased the ranks of the educated unemployed, and whether implementation of the policy should have been delayed until all necessary structures were in place.

Overall, citizens ratings of the government's performance on education have taken a nosedive since 2017.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan 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 are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

This dispatch draws mainly on results from three surveys in Ghana conducted by Afrobarometer's national partner, the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana): Afrobarometer's Round 8 survey (September-October 2019), a post-election survey (May-June 2021), and Afrobarometer's Round 9 survey (April 2022). Each survey used a sample size of 2,400, yielding 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, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

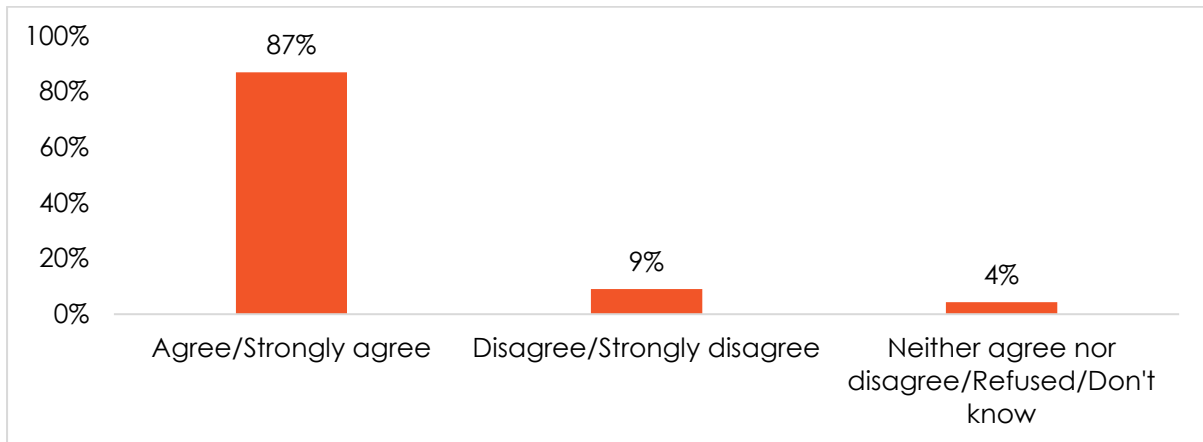
- In 2019, an overwhelming majority (87%) of Ghanaians said the free SHS policy created an opportunity for many students who otherwise would not have been able to pay for secondary education.
 - Poorer citizens (76%) were less likely than their better-off counterparts (89%) to agree that the policy created an opportunity for many who otherwise would not have been able to afford a secondary education.
- Ghanaians were about evenly split on whether the policy should have targeted only the poor.
- Half (50%) of Ghanaians said it was better to have free senior high school even if it led to an increase in the number of educated citizens who cannot find a job.
- While half (50%) of respondents said the government should have put all the necessary structures in place before implementing the free school policy, 45% believed it was right to start implementation and address challenges as they arose.
- Positive ratings of the government's performance in addressing educational needs have declined by 44 percentage points since 2017, from 82% to 38%.

Support for the free senior high school policy

In 2019, close to nine in 10 Ghanaians (87%) said the free SHS policy had created an opportunity for many students who otherwise could not have afforded secondary education (Figure 1). Almost two-thirds (63%) "strongly agreed" with this view.

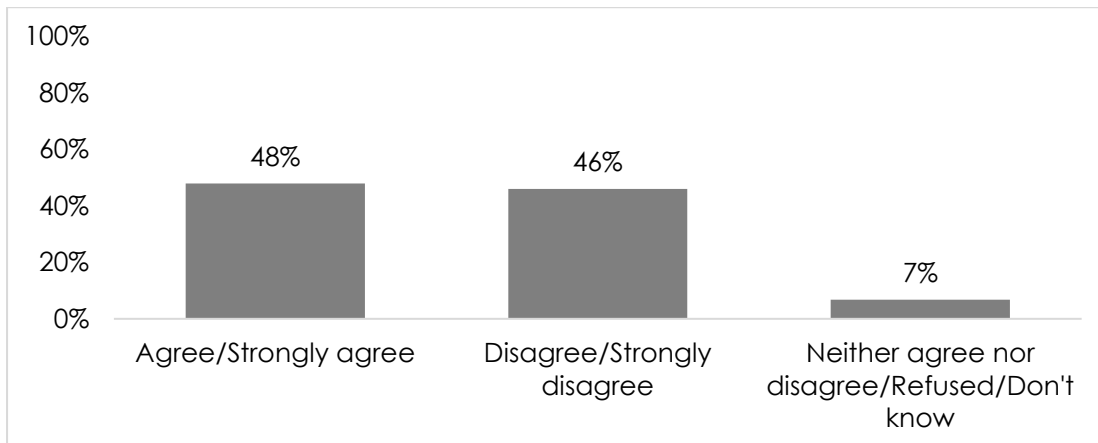
But Ghanaians were split on the question of whether the programme should have targeted only poor students and excluded those who are better off. While almost half (48%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the policy should have been limited to the poor, a similar proportion (46%) disagreed (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Free SHS policy has created opportunity for poor to obtain education
 | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement below: The free SHS policy has created opportunity for many who otherwise would not have been able to pay for secondary education.

Figure 2: Free SHS policy should have targeted only the poor | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: In implementing the free SHS policy, the government should have targeted only the poor who otherwise will not be able to pay for secondary education.

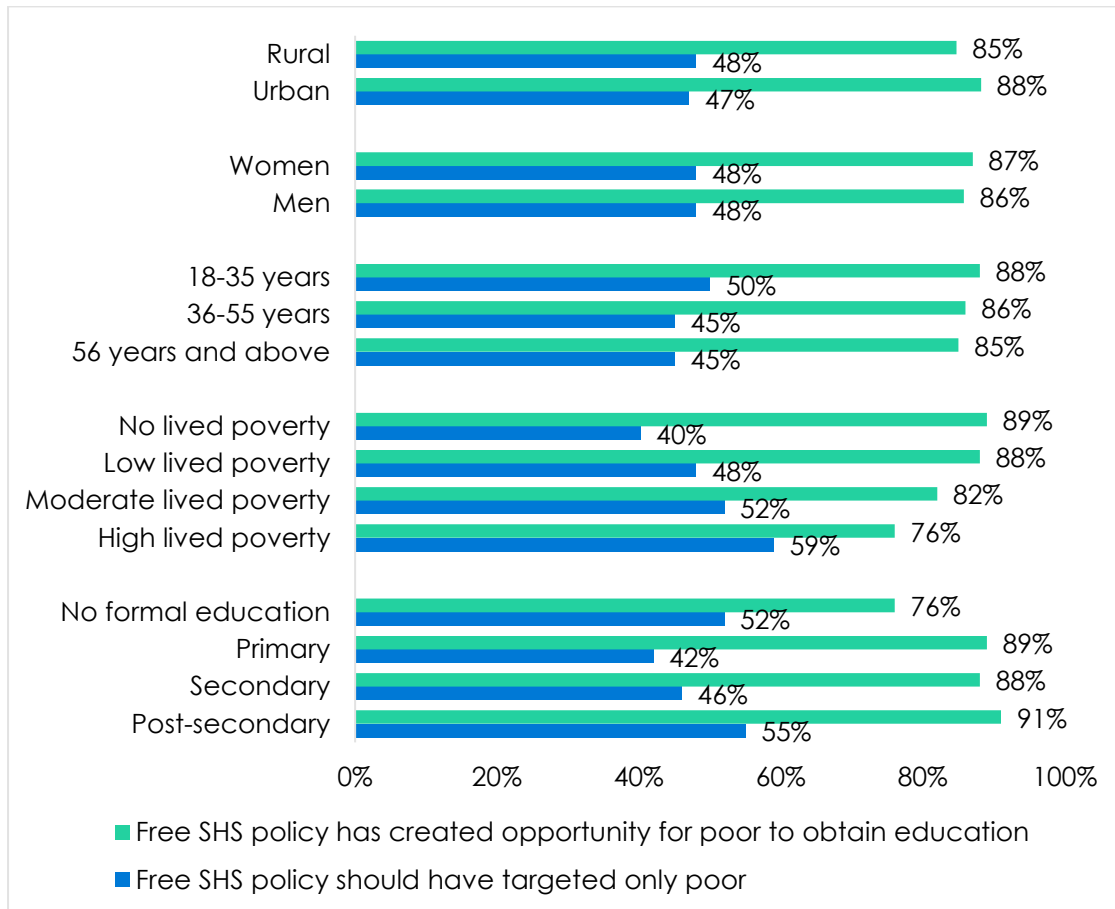
Interestingly, the perception that the policy created an opportunity for economically disadvantaged students to obtain an education was less widespread among poor Ghanaians than among their better-off counterparts (76% vs. 89%) (Figure 3).¹ This may reflect the fact that economically disadvantaged students who get posted into day senior high schools in distant communities find it difficult to cover the daily costs of getting to school (Africa Education Watch, 2021).

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 & Patel (2022).

Citizens with post-secondary education were 15 percentage points more likely than those with no formal schooling to appreciate the policy as an opportunity for children from poor families (91% vs. 76%). The perception that the policy had created an opportunity for the poor was about equally common across age cohorts, genders, and rural-urban areas.

Support for the free SHS policy to target only the poor was about average among young adults (50%) but was notably low among the wealthiest respondents, ranging from 40% of those with no lived poverty to 59% of the poorest respondents.

Figure 3: Views on free SHS policy | by demographic group | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

The free SHS policy has created opportunity for many who otherwise would not have been able to pay for secondary education.

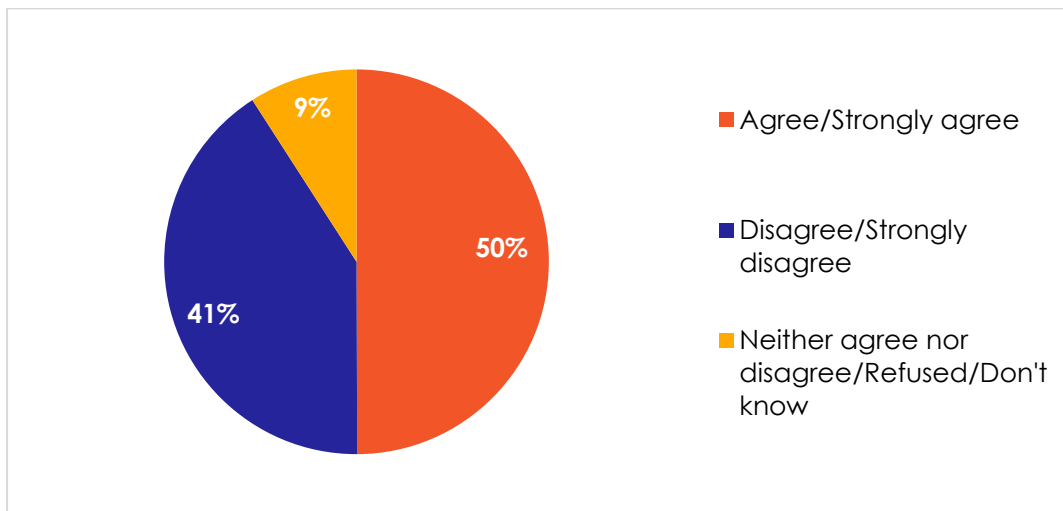
In implementing the free SHS policy, the government should have targeted only the poor who otherwise will not be able to pay for secondary education.

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

In spite of the recognition of the opportunities created by the policy, only half (50%) of Ghanaians "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that it was better to have free senior high school even if it led to an increase in the number of educated citizens who couldn't find a job (Figure 4). A significant minority (41%) disagreed.

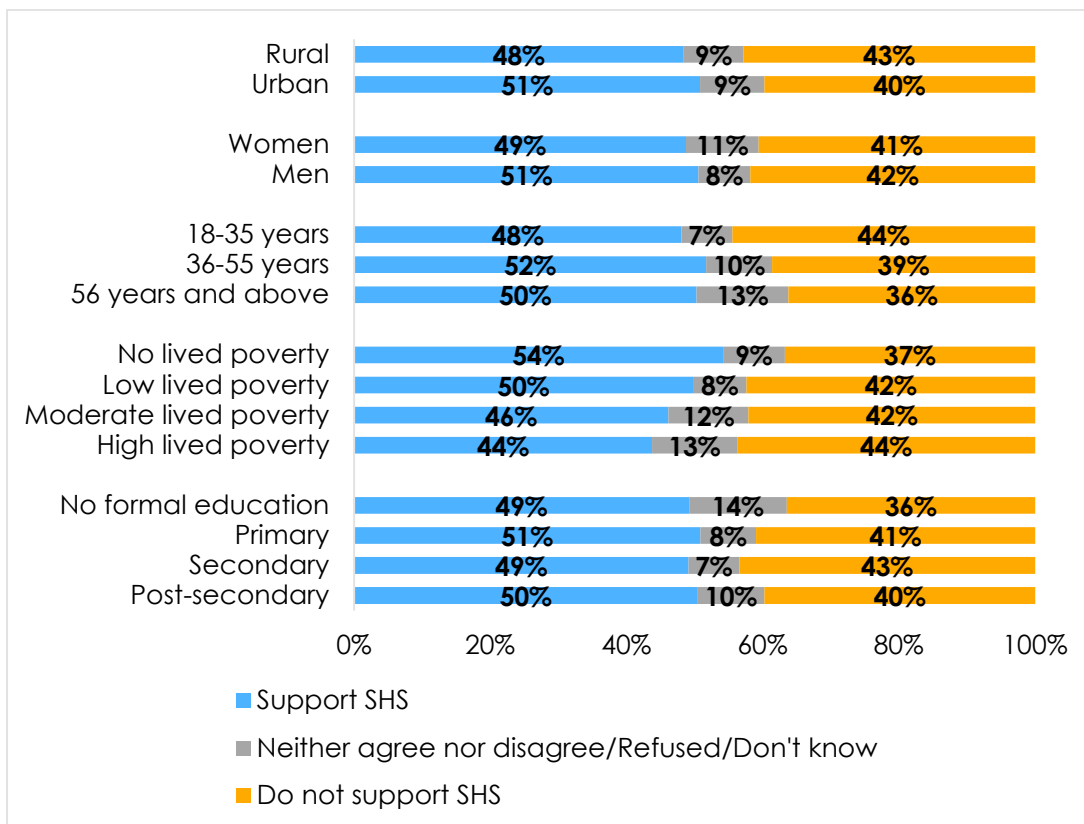
Support for the policy was weaker among citizens with high lived poverty (44%) than among better-off respondents (54%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Is free SHS good if it creates more educated unemployed? | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement below: It is better to have free SHS even if it leads to an increase in the number of educated citizens who cannot find a job.

Figure 5: Is free SHS good if it creates more educated unemployed? | by demographic group | Ghana | 2019

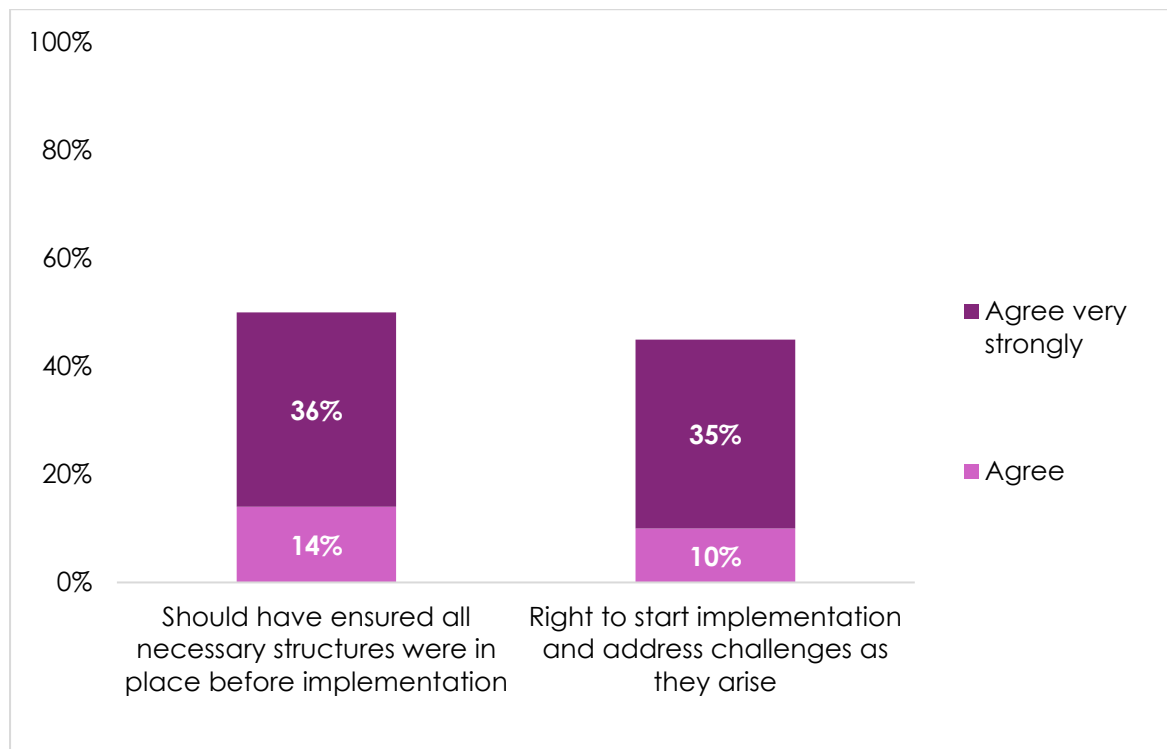


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement below: It is better to have free SHS even if it leads to an increase in the number of educated citizens who cannot find a job.

Views on implementation of the free SHS policy

Part of the debate has focused on the timing of policy implementation. Views among survey respondents were sharply divided: Half (50%) said the government should have ensured that all necessary structures for free senior high school were in place before launching the policy, while 45% said the government was right in going ahead with the policy and addressing challenges as they arose (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Should the government have put necessary structures in place before implementing the free SHS policy? | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

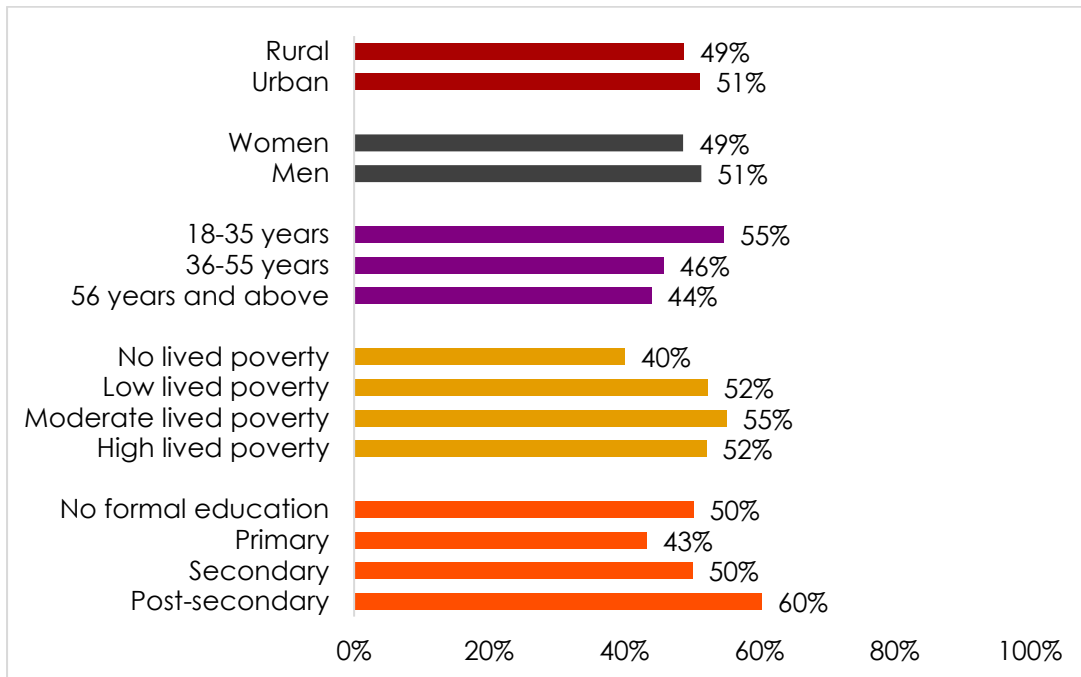
Statement 1: Government should have ensured that all the necessary structures for free SHS are in place before its implementation.

Statement 2: Government took the right decision to start the implementation of the free SHS policy and address the challenges as they arise.

Young adults (55%) were more likely than their elders (44%-46%) to think the government should have put in place the necessary infrastructure before implementing the free SHS policy. The best-off respondents were least likely to agree with this position (40%) (Figure 7).

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Figure 7: Government should have put necessary structures in place before implementing free school policy | by demographic group | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

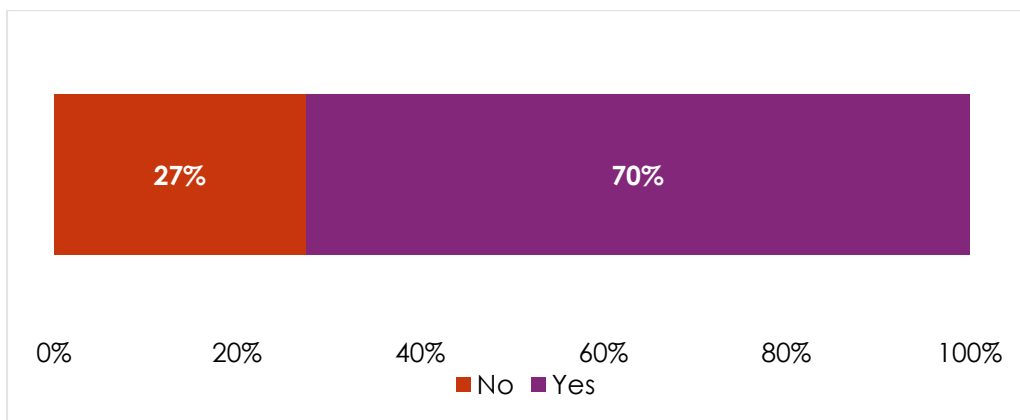
Statement 1: Government should have ensured that all the necessary structures for free SHS are in place before its implementation.

Statement 2: Government took the right decision to start the implementation of the free SHS policy and address the challenges as they arise.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)

In terms of expectations, findings from CDD-Ghana's 2021 post-election survey show that seven in 10 Ghanaians (70%) expected the government to adapt its provision of educational infrastructure to meet the growing needs arising from the free policy (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Expect changes in infrastructure development? | Ghana | 2021

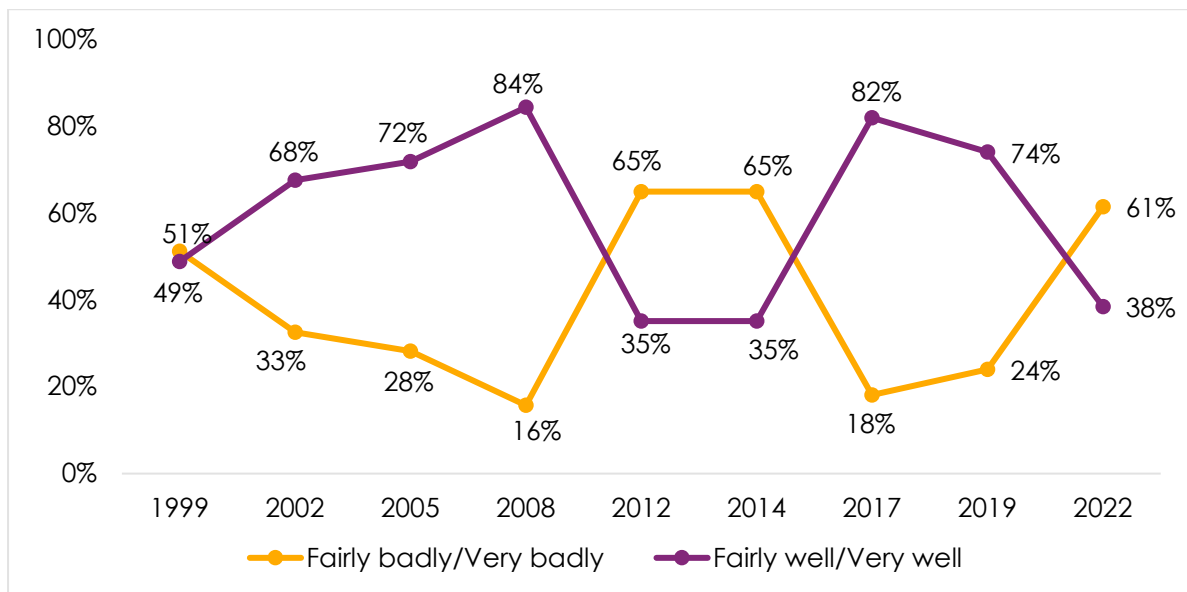


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you expect changes in the way the Akufo-Addo-led NPP government will handle the following in the next four years: Providing educational infrastructure to meet the growing needs arising from the free SHS programme?

Government performance in addressing educational needs

Over the years, citizens' assessments of the government's performance in handling educational needs have varied dramatically, ranging from 35% approval in 2012 and 2014 to 84% approval in 2008. Compared to the period when the free SHS policy was introduced in 2017, positive ratings have declined from 82% to 38% in the 2022 survey, a 44-percentage-point drop (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Government performance in addressing educational needs | Ghana
 | 1999-2022



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: Addressing educational needs?

Conclusion

Based on its first few years of implementation, most Ghanaians saw the free senior high school policy as opening opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. But while the policy aims at promoting inclusive education, critical voices have raised concerns about its sustainability as well as its ability to ensure that the poor benefit as intended. And survey respondents show themselves sharply divided on certain aspects of the policy, including whether it should target only the poor rather than all students.

A government review, if it happens, will have to address these questions in order to strengthen the policy and unite the citizenry behind this attempt to guarantee a chance at secondary education for all Ghanaians.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United. Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 623 | 28 March 2023