



Dispatch No. 642 | 18 May 2023

Climate change ‘making life worse’ in Malawi; citizens demand action from all stakeholders

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 642 | Happy Kayuni and Joseph J. Chunga

Summary

Malawi ranks among the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 2020). In addition to the destructive effects of deadly disasters like last year's Tropical Storm Ana (BBC, 2022), drought, heat, flooding, and other climate shocks threaten development plans in every sector. Nowhere are potential impacts clearer than in agriculture, which employs more than three-fourths of Malawi's workforce and contributes about one-fourth of gross domestic product (GDP) and 80% of export revenue (Government of Malawi, 2022:9; National Planning Commission, 2020:13; Malawi Investment and Trade Centre, 2023).

The World Bank's (2022) Country Climate and Development Report estimates that climate change could reduce Malawi's GDP by 3%-9% in 2030 and push 2 million more Malawians into poverty over the next decade.

Confronting the threat of climate change, the government of Malawi is a signatory to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement aimed at strengthening the global response to the climate crisis. In addition to its 2016 National Climate Change Management Policy, it has implemented a variety of programmes and projects aimed at limiting and mitigating climate change, including the National Climate Change Resilience Programme, Africa Adaptation Programme (AAP), Climate Adaptation for Rural Livelihoods and Agriculture (CARLA), Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), and Strategy on Climate Change Learning (Government of Malawi, 2021).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Malawians' experiences and perceptions of climate change.

Findings show that among the three-fourths of Malawians who are familiar with climate change, most say it is making life in their country worse. They divide primary responsibility for fighting climate change between the government and ordinary citizens but say “a lot more” action by all stakeholders – including more developed countries and business and industry – is needed.

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 (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in February 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- A majority (55%) of Malawians say droughts have become more severe over the past decade. Half (49%) say the same about floods.
- Almost three in every four Malawians (74%) say they have heard of climate change.
 - Awareness of climate change is higher among urbanites (87%) and men (79%) than among rural residents (72%) and women (69%). More educated citizens are more likely to be aware of climate change than those with less schooling.
- Among Malawians who are aware of climate change:
 - Almost nine in every 10 (86%) say it is making life in Malawi “somewhat worse” (14%) or “much worse” (72%).
 - More than eight in 10 (82%) believe that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change, while close to three in four (73%) want the government to take immediate action to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy.
 - Only very small minorities are satisfied with efforts by the government (12%), developed countries (12%), ordinary citizens (11%), and business and industry (8%) to fight climate change. Most say these stakeholders must do “a lot more.”
 - Most Malawians assign primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact to the government (41%) and ordinary citizens (39%).
- Only four in 10 citizens (39%) think the government is doing a good job of addressing climate change, while 52% say it is handling the issue “fairly badly” or “very badly.”

Severity of adverse weather conditions

Before mentioning “climate change,” the survey asked respondents about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. More than half (55%) of Malawians say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” in their region over the past 10 years, while 27% say they have become less severe (Figure 1).

About half (49%) of respondents say floods have become more severe.

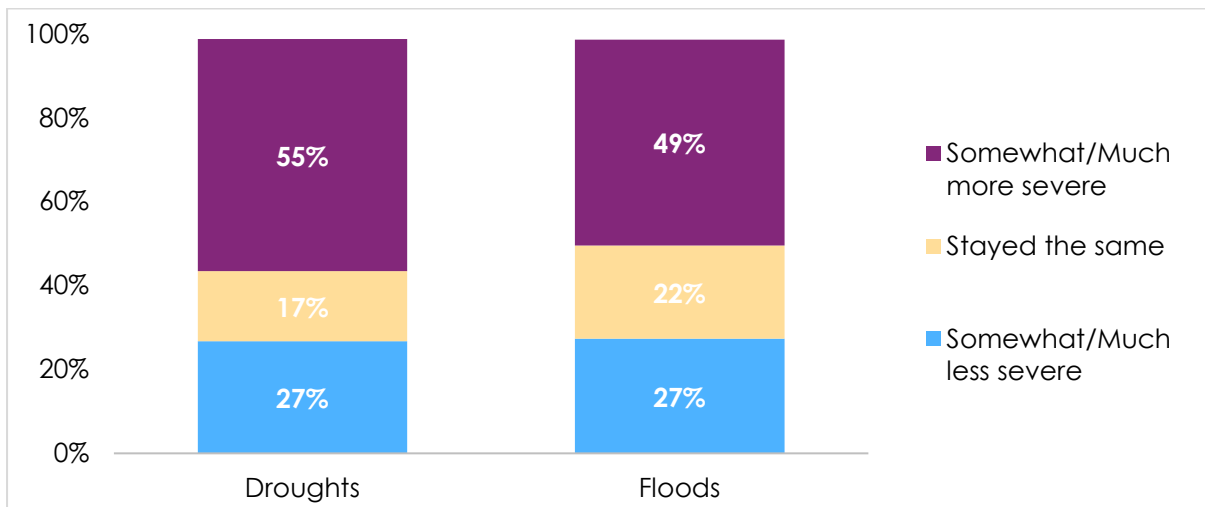
Perceptions of increasingly severe droughts and floods are highest in the Southern region (67% and 59%, respectively) (Figure 2). Worsening droughts are more widely perceived in rural areas than in cities (57% vs. 44%), and among poor citizens (60%) than among their better-off counterparts (50%-55%).¹

Citizens with no formal education are more likely to report worsening droughts and floods than those with secondary or post-secondary qualifications.

Compared to 2017, the proportion of citizens who say droughts have gotten more severe has decreased by 29 percentage points, while perceptions of worsening floods have decreased by 9 points (Figure 3).

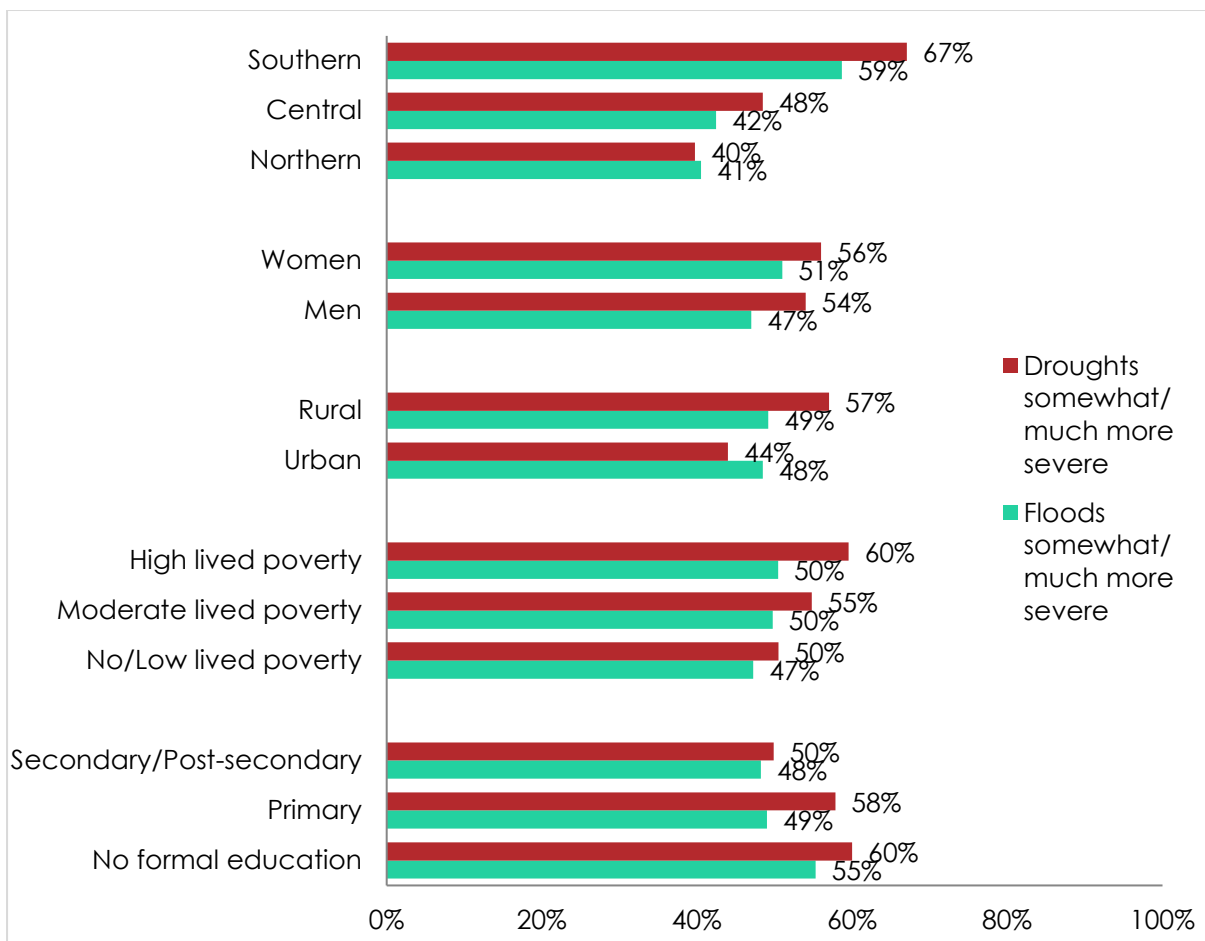
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: Severity of droughts and floods | Malawi | 2022



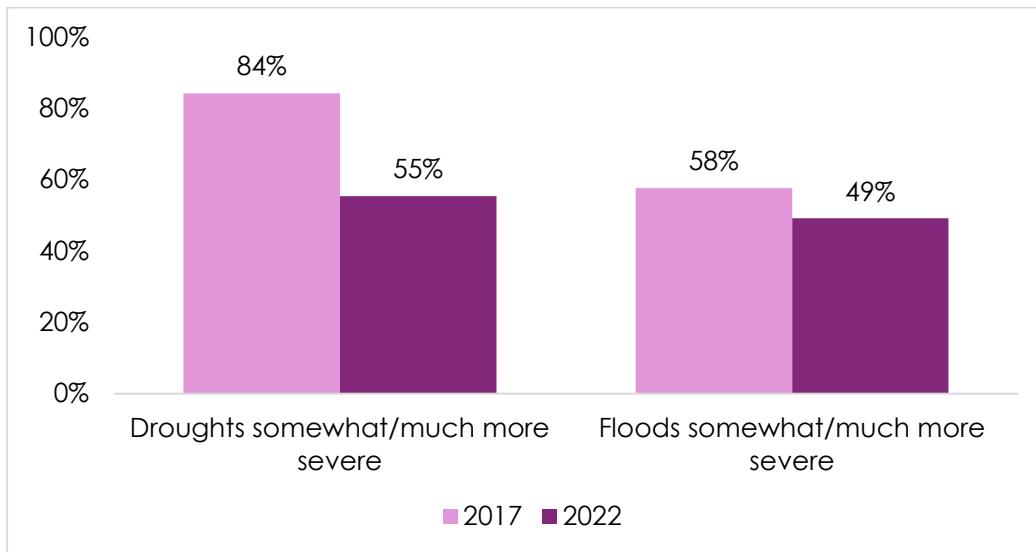
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Figure 2: Droughts and floods more severe | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Figure 3: Increasing severity of droughts and floods | Malawi | 2017-2022



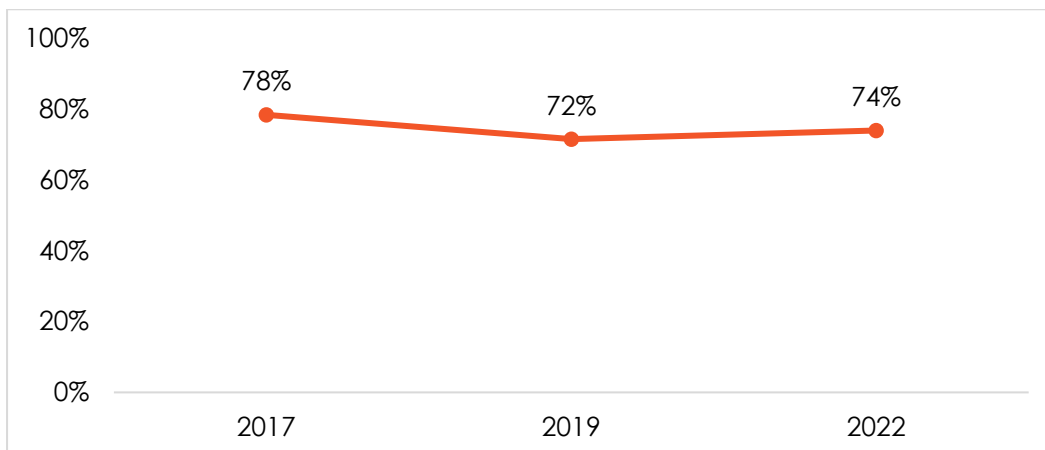
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live?

Climate change

Awareness of climate change

About three-fourths (74%) of Malawians say they have heard of climate change, roughly the same level of awareness as in 2019 (72%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | Malawi | 2017-2022

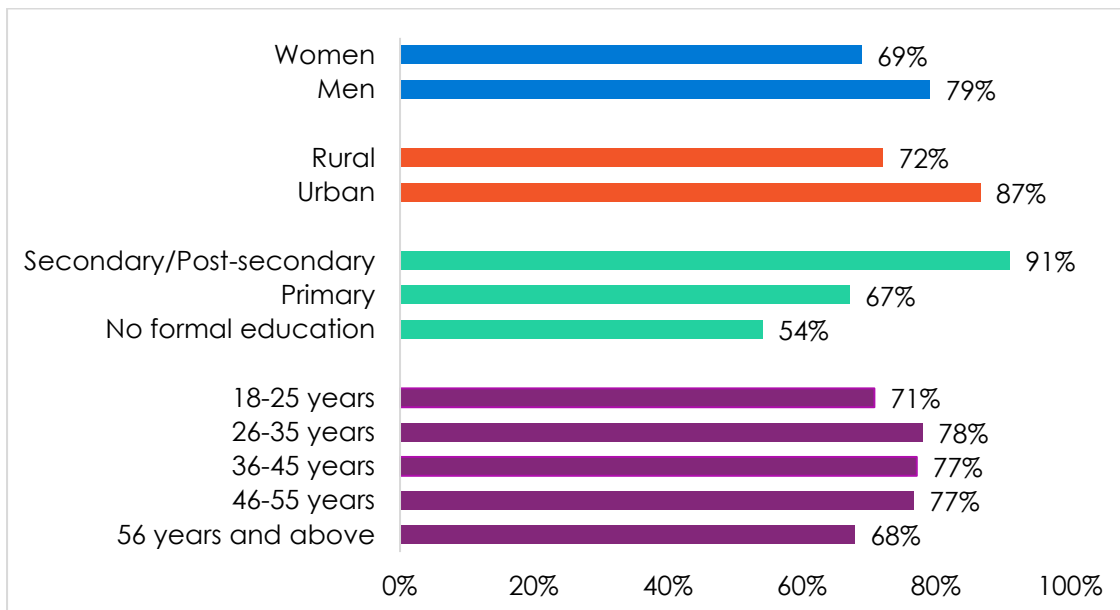


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% "yes")

Even though rural residents are more likely than urbanites to report droughts of increasing severity, they are significantly less aware of the concept of "climate change" (72% vs. 87%) (Figure 5).

Awareness of climate change is also far higher among citizens with a secondary or post-secondary education (91%) than among those with primary (67%) or no formal schooling (54%). Men are more likely than women to have heard of climate change (79% vs. 69%).

Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | by demographics | Malawi | 2022

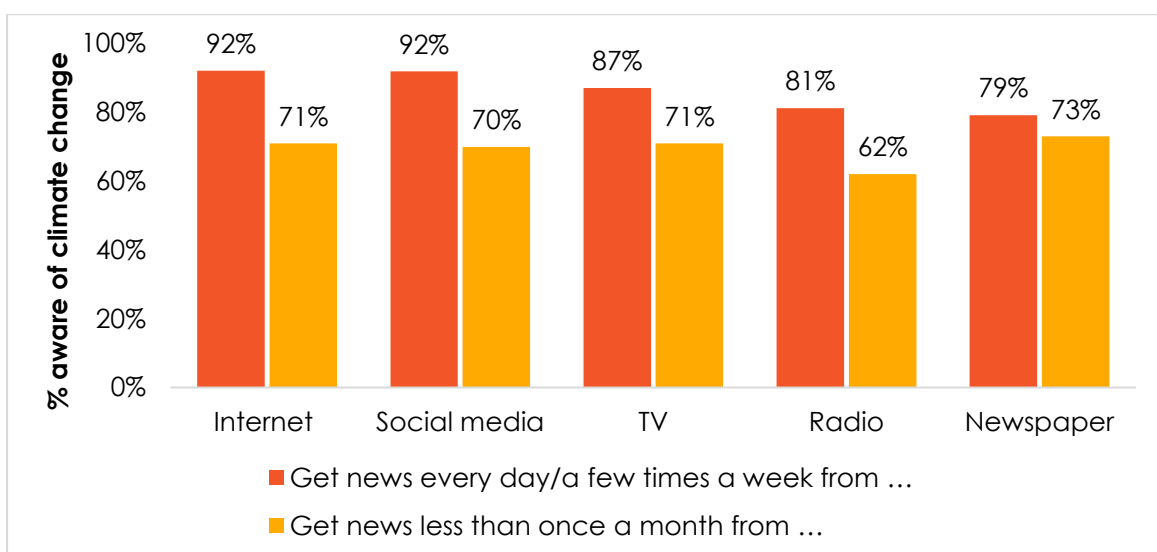


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Awareness of climate change also varies with respondents' news habits (Figure 6). More than nine in 10 citizens have heard of climate change if they get news at least "a few times a week" from the Internet and/or social media (92% for each). Awareness is slightly lower among frequent consumers of news via television (87%), radio (81%), and newspapers (79%).

Across all five platforms, frequent news consumers are significantly more likely than infrequent users to be aware of climate change.

Figure 6: Awareness of climate change | by news media use | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked:

How often do you get news from the following sources?

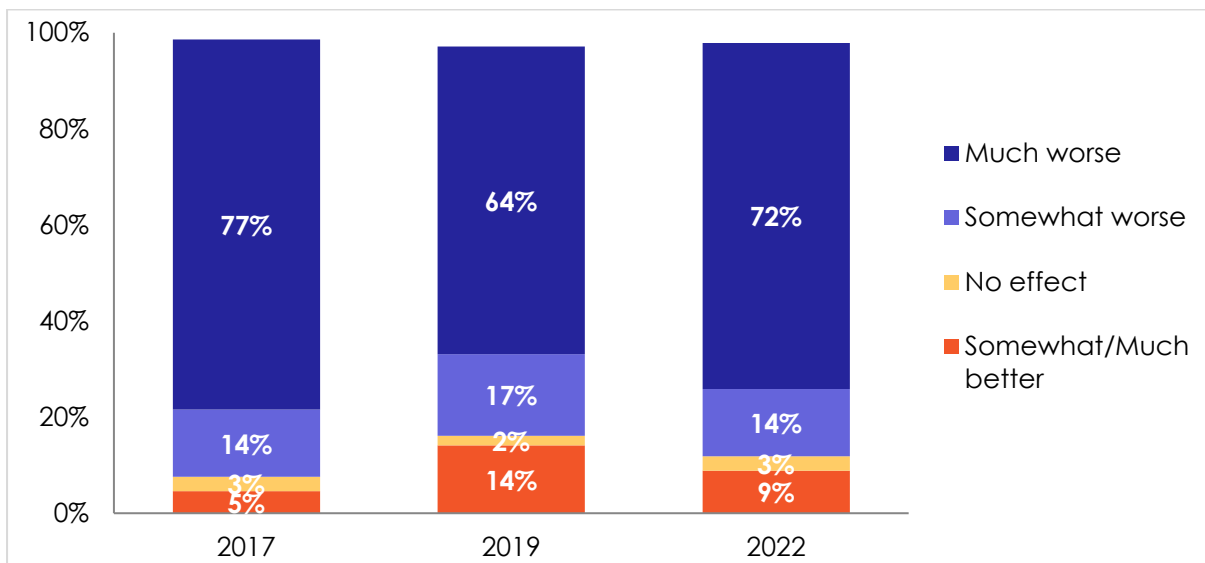
Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Effects of climate change

Among Malawians who are aware of climate change, almost nine in 10 (86%) say it is making life in Malawi worse, including 72% who say “much worse” (Figure 7). Though a modest increase compared to 2019 (81% somewhat/much worse), this proportion is slightly lower than that recorded in 2017 (91%).

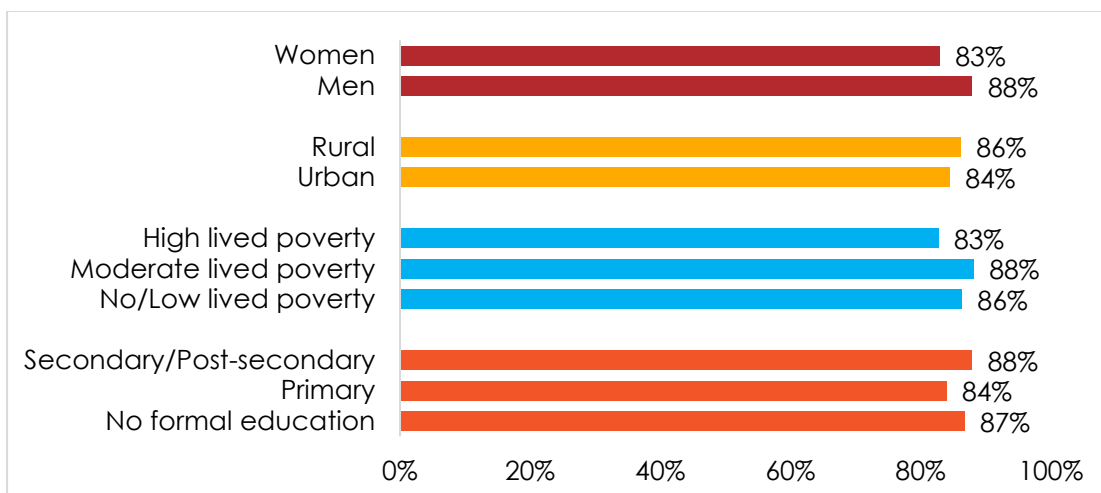
Slightly more men (88%) than women (83%) say climate change is having a negative impact on the quality of life, but this assessment is shared by more than eight in 10 respondents across key demographic groups (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Effect of climate change | Malawi | 2017-2022



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

Figure 8: Climate change making life worse | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



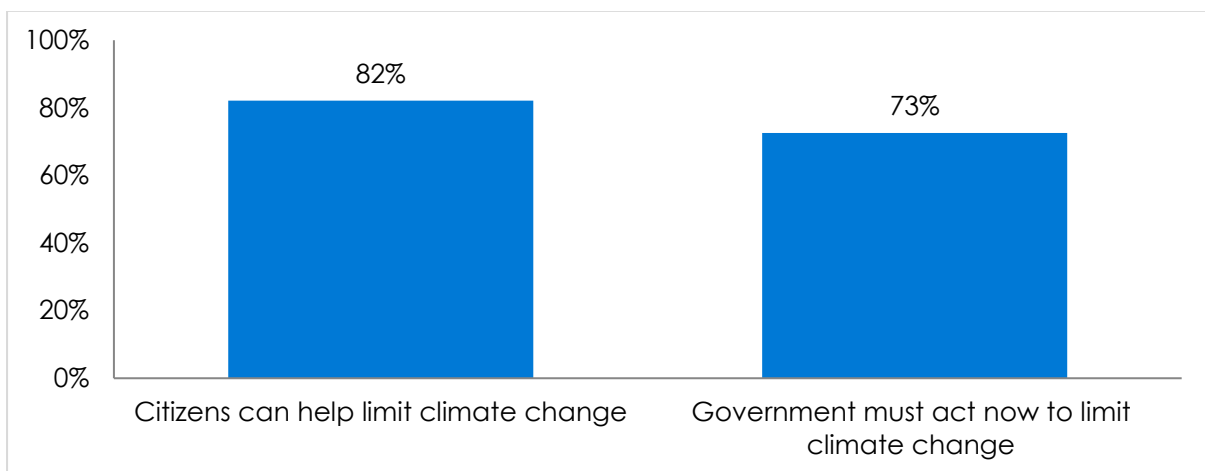
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Malawi better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say “somewhat worse” or “much worse”)

Fighting climate change

Most Malawians believe that both ordinary citizens and governments have a role to play in limiting climate change (Figure 9). More than eight in 10 respondents who are aware of climate change (84%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that citizens can help curb climate change). And almost three-fourths (73%) want their government to take steps now to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy.

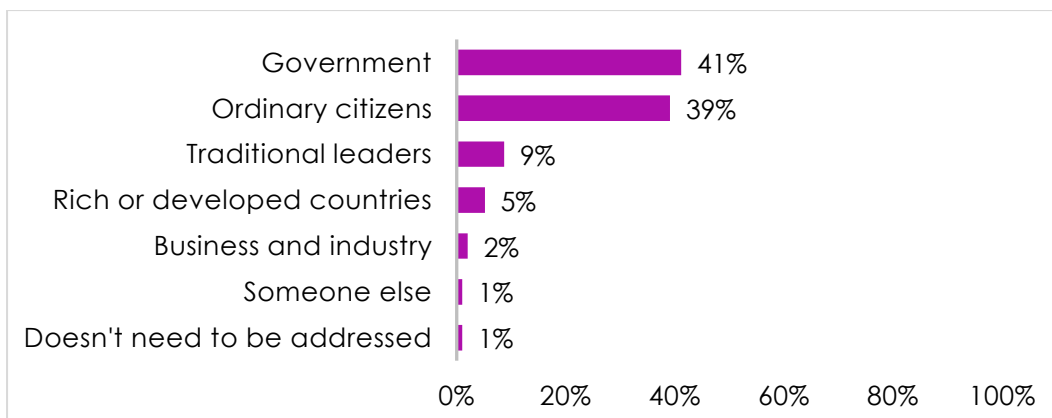
In fact, in Malawians’ eyes, the government (41%) and ordinary people (39%) share primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact. Far fewer survey respondents assign primary responsibility to traditional leaders (9%), more developed countries (5%), and business and industry (2%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Government and citizen roles in limiting climate change | Malawi | 2022



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:
 Ordinary Malawians can play a role in limiting climate change.
 It is important for our government to take steps now to limit climate change in the future, even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy.
 (& who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)
 (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

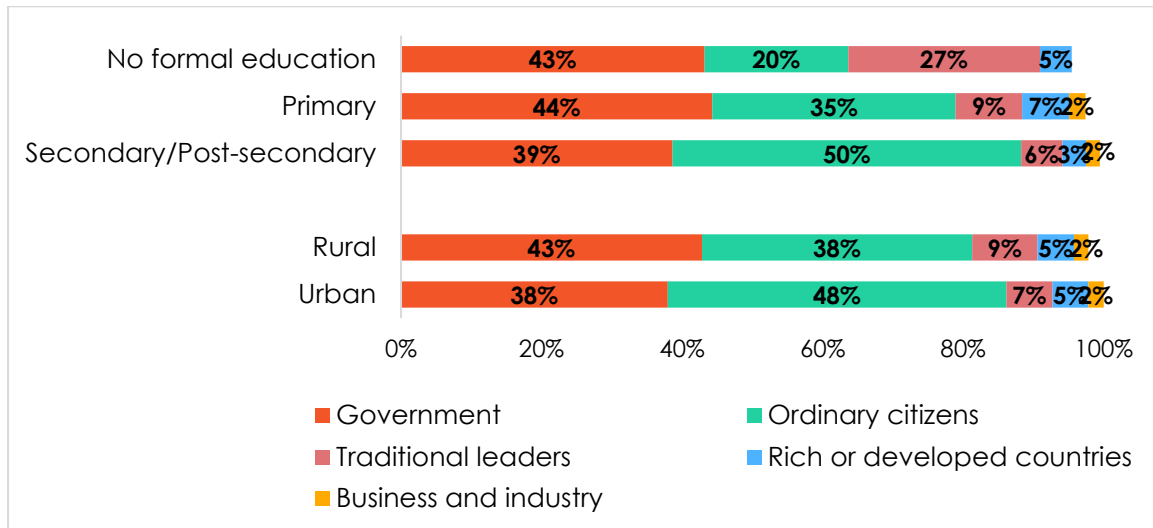
Figure 10: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | Malawi | 2022



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Malawians with secondary or post-secondary education are more likely (50%) to say that citizens have the primary responsibility for fighting climate change than those with primary (35%) or no formal education (20%). Urban residents (48%) are more inclined to this view than their rural counterparts (38%) (Figure 11).

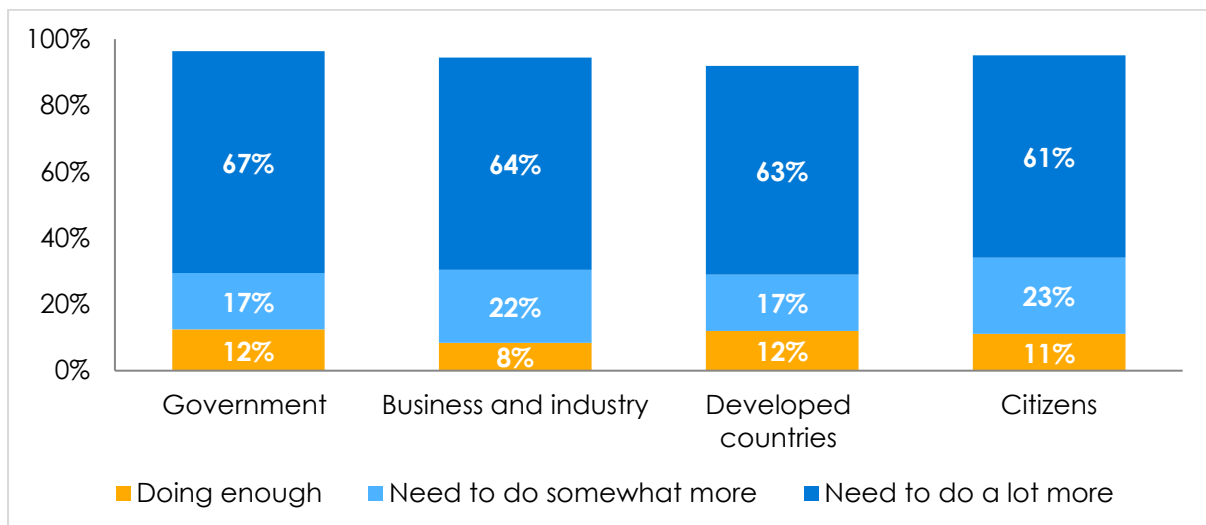
Figure 11: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | by education and location | Malawi | 2022



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? Respondents answer with a resounding “No.” Only small minorities say business and industry (8%), citizens (11%), the government (12%), and more developed countries (12%) are making enough of an effort to fight climate change (Figure 12). More than six in 10 respondents (61%-67%) say all four stakeholder groups need to do “a lot more.”

Figure 12: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | Malawi | 2022

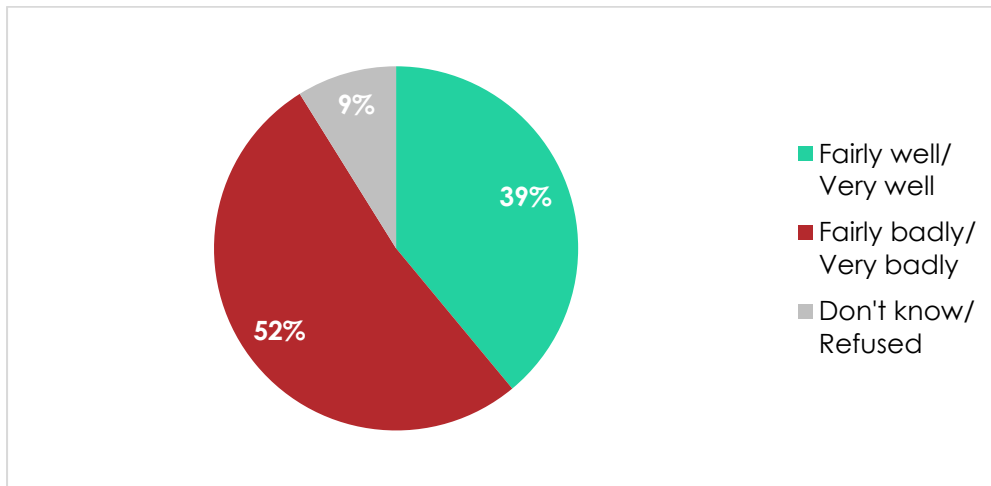


Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think each of the following are doing enough to limit climate change, or do they need to do more, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

When asked to assess how well the government is addressing the problem of climate change, only four in 10 respondents (39%) describe the government's performance as "fairly good" or "very good," while 52% give the government a failing grade on this issue (Figure 13).

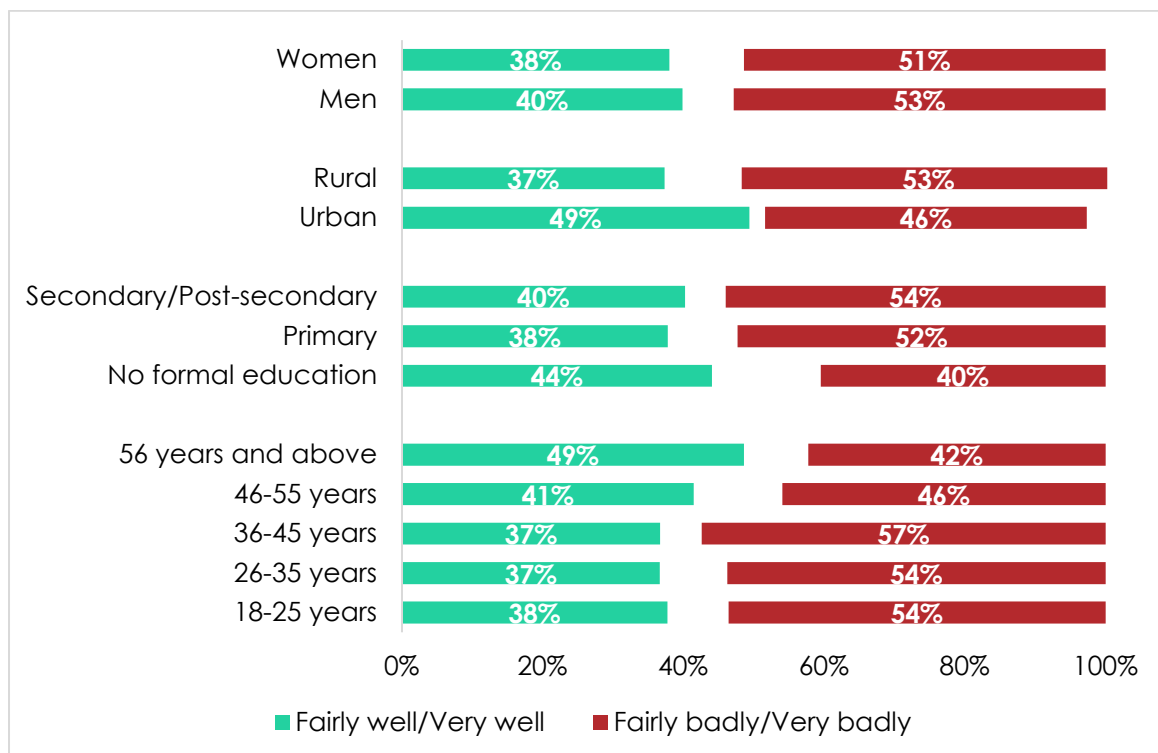
Urban residents (49%) and older respondents (49%) are more likely to approve of the government's efforts than rural residents (37%) and younger citizens (37%-41%) (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Government performance in handling climate change | Malawi | 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 the problem of climate change?

Figure 14: Government performance in handling climate change | by demographic group | Malawi | 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 the problem of climate change?

Conclusion

Most Malawians are aware of climate change and its negative impacts on their country. Considering Malawi's dependence on rain-fed agriculture, the effects of drought, flooding, and other climate shocks will be both immediate and wide-ranging. A majority of survey respondents think that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change, but they are also looking to the government, more developed countries, and business and industry to do "a lot more" to limit its ravages.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Happy Kayuni is a professor in the University of Malawi's School of Law, Economics, and Government. Email: hkayuni@unima.ac.mw.

Joseph J. Chunga is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi, Zomba. Email: jchung@unima.ac.mw.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan 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.

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, 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.

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