



Dispatch No. 672 | 17 July 2023

Liberians prioritise environmental protection over job creation

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 672 | Margaret Eduonoo

Summary

Though one of the world's least-developed countries (UNCTAD, 2022), Liberia is rich in natural resources. In addition to iron ore, diamonds, and gold, a major share of the country's wealth lies in its forests, fourth-largest contributor to the national economy (Nthara & Srivastava, 2020).

But deforestation due to logging, palm-oil plantations, small farms, and other pressures is claiming this wealth at an alarming rate, threatening rural livelihoods and food security and contributing to the global environmental crisis while destroying habitat for some of the world's rarest wildlife (Insight, 2023; UNDP, 2023).

Initiatives by the government and development partners have sought to protect the forests (UNDP, 2022; FAO, 2023; Christensen, Hartman, & Samii, 2021), but the government has also been implicated in "major failures" to control illegal logging (Davey, 2023).

Other environmental challenges in Liberia include waste management and air and water pollution, representing significant threats to public health and the fisheries and agriculture sectors (UNEP, 2023; Kuukpen, 2023).

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

Findings show that most Liberians consider pollution a serious problem in their communities, rating trash disposal and sanitation as their most important environmental issues and describing plastic bags as a major source of pollution.

A majority of citizens say the government should do "much more" to protect the environment, even at significant economic cost.

And while a majority say the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh negative impacts such as pollution, 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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between 15 August and 7 September 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 Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Eight in 10 Liberians (80%) say pollution is a serious problem in their community, including 63% who describe it as “very serious.”
 - Citizens say cite trash disposal (31%) and sanitation (27%) as the most important environmental issues in their community.
 - Most respondents (82%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Liberia.
- Overwhelming majorities say the government is doing a poor job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment (79%) and needs to do more (82%).
- If environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, a majority (61%) of Liberians would prioritise environmental protection.

On natural resource extraction:

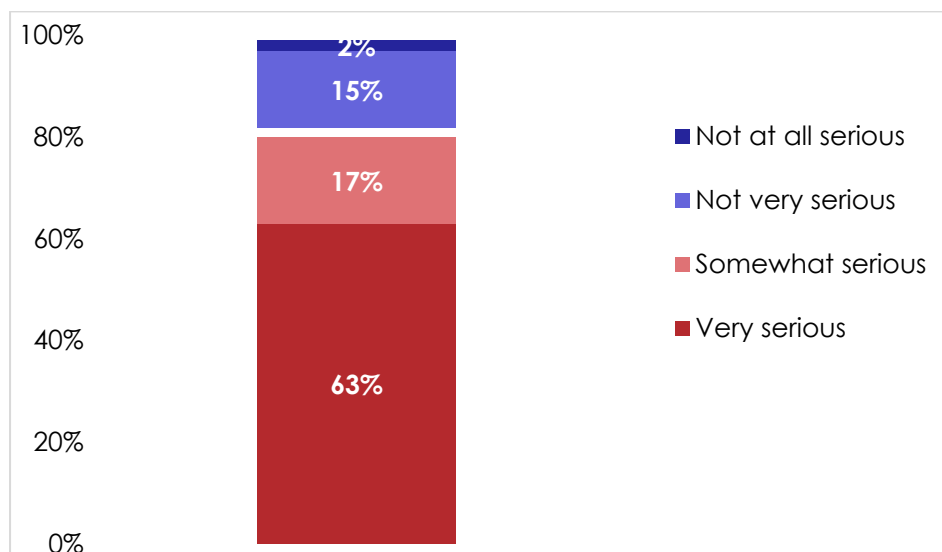
- About two-thirds (65%) of Liberians say the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh negative impacts such as pollution.
 - However, most (86%) want the government to tighten regulation of the natural resource extraction industry to reduce its negative environmental impacts.

Pollution and environmental governance

Pollution: The scope of the problem

Eight in 10 Liberians (80%) consider pollution in their communities a “very serious” (63%) or “somewhat serious” (17%) problem (Figure 1).

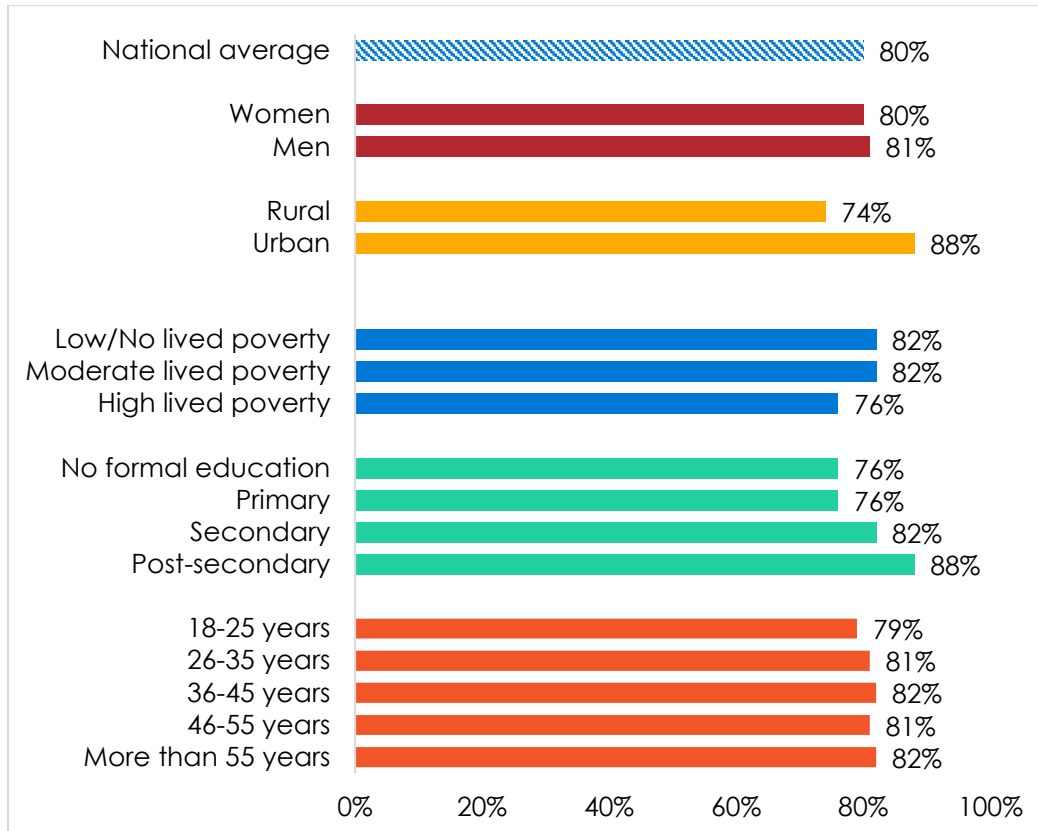
Figure 1 : Extent of pollution in the community | Liberia | 2022



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?

Urban residents are more concerned about pollution than rural residents (88% vs. 74%) (Figure 2). Perceptions that pollution is a serious problem increase with respondents' education level, ranging from 76% among those with primary schooling or less to 88% among those with post-secondary qualifications. The poorest respondents (76%) are less likely to share this view than their better-off counterparts (82%).¹

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



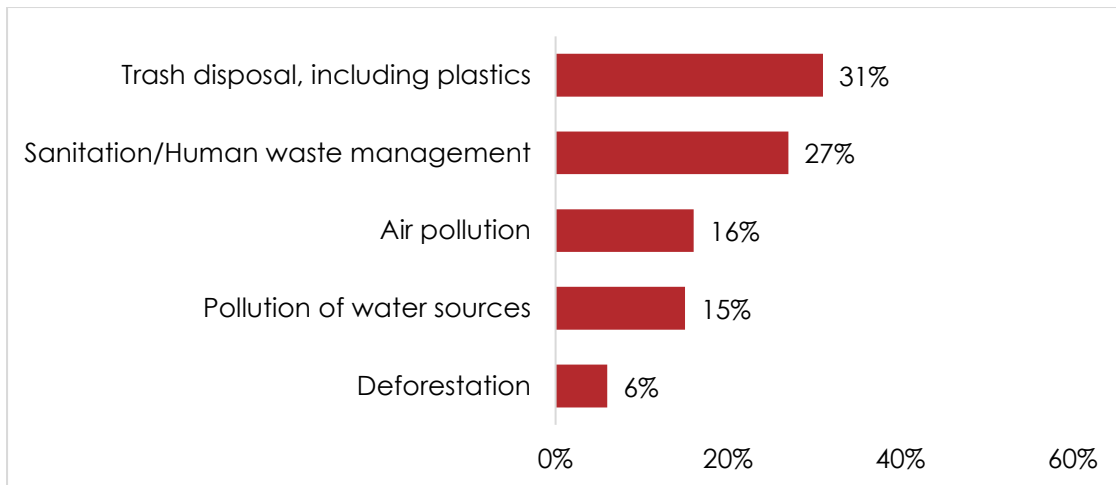
Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

Liberians rank trash disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community (31%), followed by human waste management (27%), air pollution (16%), and pollution of water sources (15%) (Figure 3). Fewer are concerned about deforestation (6%).

More than eight in 10 citizens (82%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Liberia (Figure 4).

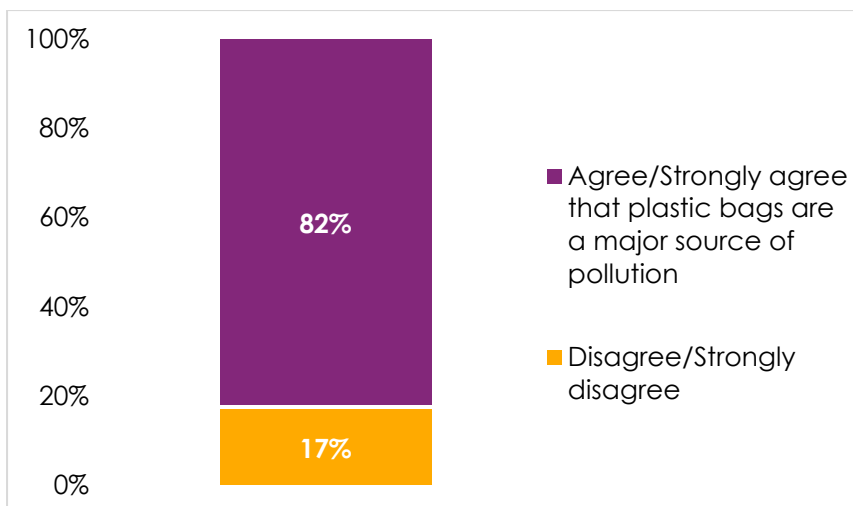
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | Liberia | 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? | Liberia | 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.

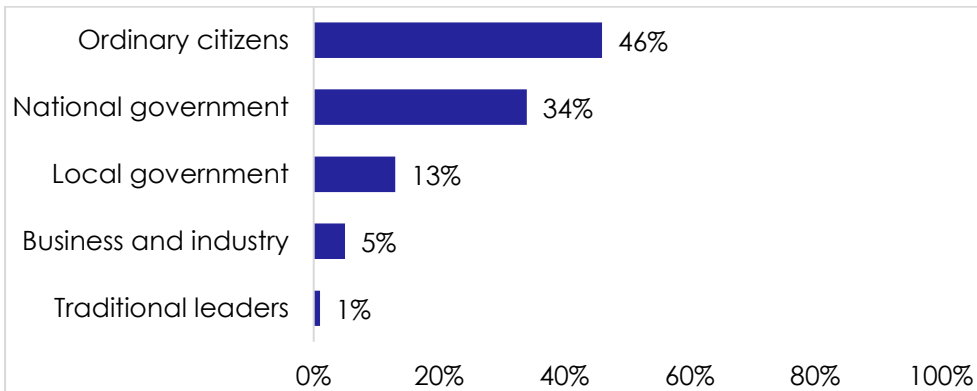
Protecting the environment

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 many Liberians, protecting the environment starts at home: Almost half (46%) say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean (Figure 5). About one-third (34%) instead place that responsibility on their national government, while fewer (13%) look to their local governments (13%), to business and industry (5%), and to traditional leaders (1%).

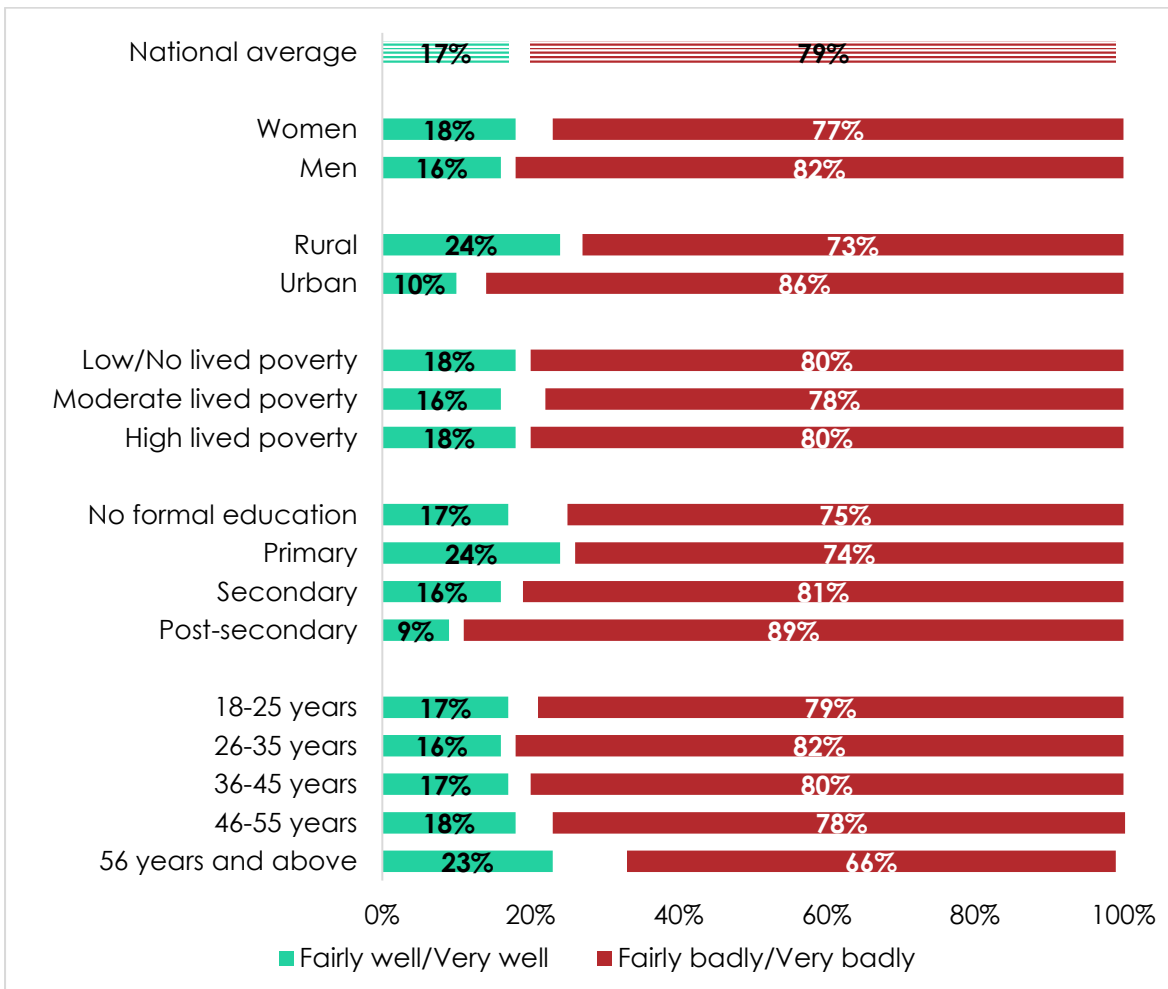
Fewer than one-fifth (17%) of citizens think the government is making satisfactory strides in reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while 79% rate the government's performance as "fairly" or "very" bad (Figure 6). Favourable positive ratings are more common among rural than urban residents (24% vs. 10%).

Figure 5: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution? | Liberia | 2022



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

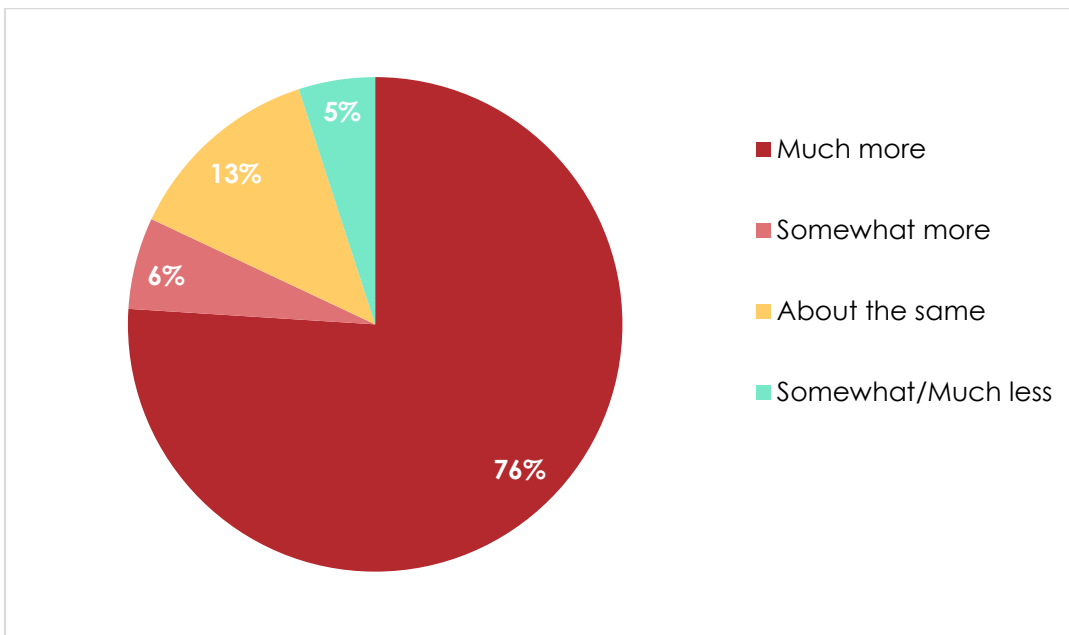
Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022



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?

In line with these negative performance ratings, most Liberians (82%) say the government should expand efforts to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 76% who want the government to do “much more” (Figure 7). Only 13% want the government to keep doing what it is currently doing, while only 5% think it should do less to protect the environment.

Figure 7: Should the government do more to limit pollution? | Liberia | 2022



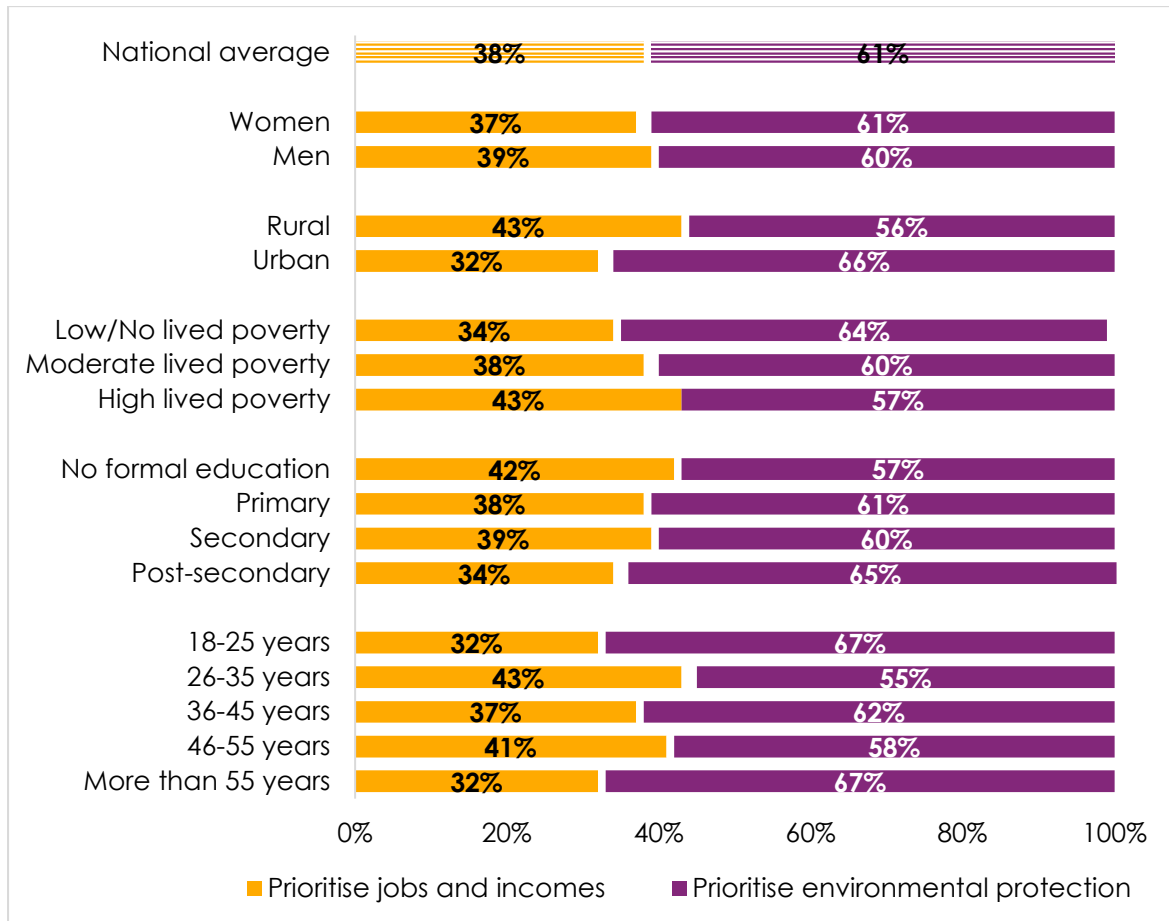
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?*

Even if environmental-protection policies carry significant economic costs, a solid majority (61%) of Liberians say the government should prioritise protecting the environment, while 38% think it should instead focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes (Figure 8).

Urban residents are more likely than rural residents to prioritise environmental protection over job creation (66% vs. 56%). Emphasis on the environment increases with respondents' educational attainment, ranging from 57% among those with no formal schooling to 65% among those with post-secondary qualifications. Similarly, better-off citizens (64%) are more likely than poor respondents (57%) to prioritise environmental protection.

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Figure 8: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | Liberia | 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

Mining of iron ore, gold, diamonds, and other minerals accounted for 5.4% of Liberia's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021, while total natural resources rents were estimated at 21.92% of GDP (Trading Economics, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Kalokoh & Kochtcheeva, 2022; OECD, 2017). But resource extraction can also be a major source of local-level environmental damage.

About two-thirds (65%) of Liberians say that overall, the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. About one-third (32%) disagree with this assessment (Figure 9).

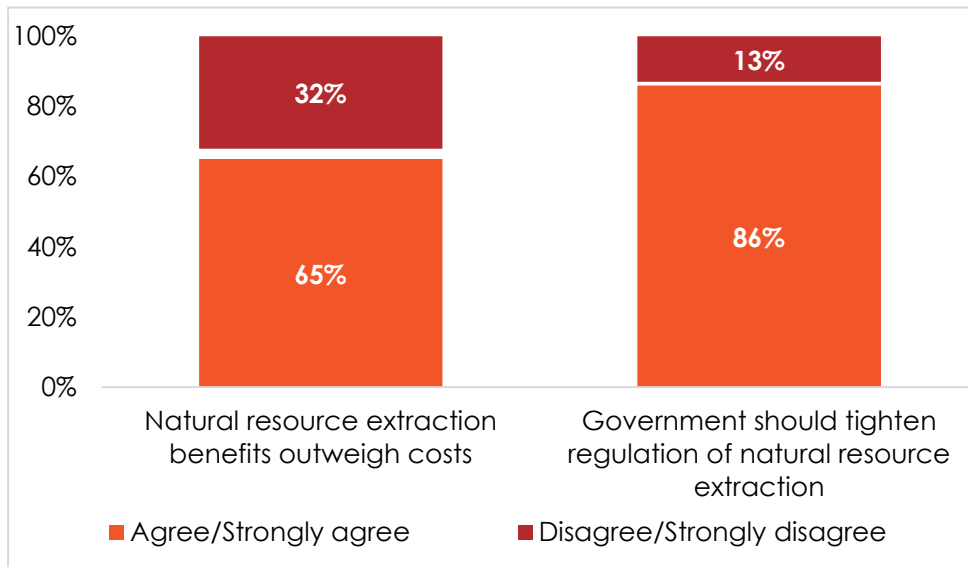
Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority (86%) of citizens want the government to regulate the industry more tightly to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

Positive assessments outweigh negative ones when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 10). Two-thirds (66%) of respondents say that ordinary

people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while three in 10 (31%) disagree.

And by a 62%-to-35% margin, respondents say that local communities receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction.

Figure 9: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Liberia | 2022

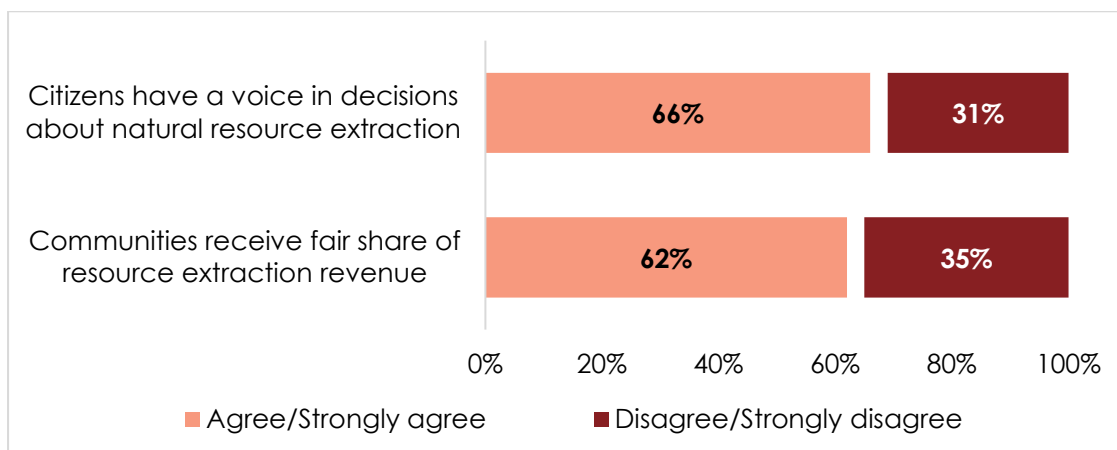


Respondents were asked: Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following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

Figure 10: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Liberia | 2022



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

Ordinary Liberians 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

Liberians overwhelmingly see pollution as a major problem in their communities and expect their government to do “much more” to protect the environment, even at considerable economic cost.

And while a majority of citizens see the benefits of natural resource extraction as outweighing its environmental costs, they also want tighter government regulations to reduce the industry’s negative impacts on the environment.

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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.

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