

Vast majority of Tunisians say pollution is a major problem, want government to do more to fight it

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 673 | Baba Adou

Summary

Tunisia's modest resource-extraction industry – mainly phosphates, oil, and natural gas – contributed about 2.2% to the country's gross national product (GDP) in 2021, less than half as much as tourism (Trading Economics, 2023; OECD, 2023).

It has also been a magnet for protests demanding jobs and an end to pollution blamed for damaging public health, pristine beaches, and industries such as fishing and agriculture (Cordall, 2019; Foroudi, 2021).

Tunisia was once the world's fifth-largest exporter of phosphate, which is used to make fertiliser, but the industry contracted dramatically after the 2011 revolution amid protests and strikes (Waszkewitz, 2018; Göbel, 2013; Amara, 2022). In 2017, for example, thousands of people took part in protests against pollution by phosphate-processing plants in the southern region of Gabès, including the dumping of phosphogypsum into the sea (Africanews, 2017). In November 2022, protesters demanding employment opportunities brought phosphate production in Tunisia to a temporary halt with a nationwide strike (Reuters, 2020). But output has been increasing again as Tunisia aspires to regain its position as a major phosphate producer (Amara, 2022).

This dispatch, which is based on special survey modules included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire, explores Tunisians' experiences and perceptions of pollution, environmental governance, and natural resource extraction.

Findings show that a vast majority of citizens are deeply concerned about pollution in their community. They rank trash disposal, pollution of water sources, and sanitation as their most important pollution problems. Most say the government must do "much more" to protect the environment, although they are divided as to whether environmental protection should take priority over jobs and incomes.

Tunisians offer mixed views of the benefits of natural resource extraction activities and say tighter regulation of the industry is needed to reduce its negative impacts on 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 completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Tunisia, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 21 February and 17 March 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 Tunisia in 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Almost nine out of 10 Tunisians (88%) say pollution is a serious problem in their community, including 76% who see it as “very serious.”
 - Citizens say trash disposal (cited by 38%), pollution of water sources (25%), human waste management (15%), and air pollution (11%) are the most important environmental issues in their community.
 - Eight in 10 respondents (80%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Tunisia.
- Tunisians say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with local citizens (39%), local government (30%), and the national government (17%).
- Only 15% of citizens think the government is doing an adequate job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, and 90% say it needs to do “much more.”
- But if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, citizens are evenly divided as to which should be prioritised.

On natural resource extraction:

- About half (48%) of Tunisians say that the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its negative impacts, such as pollution, while 35% disagree.
- More than eight in 10 (83%) want the government to tighten regulation of the resource-extraction industry to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.
- Fewer than four in 10 citizens think that ordinary people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction (38%) and that local communities receive a fair share of the sector's revenues (32%).

Pollution and environmental governance

Pollution: The scope of the problem

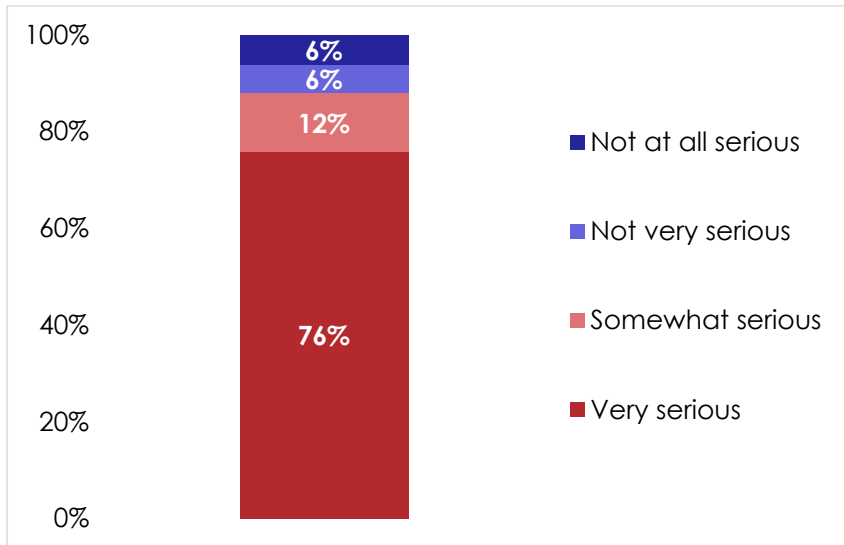
An overwhelming majority of Tunisians (88%) say pollution is a serious problem in their community, including fully three-fourths (76%) who describe it as a “very serious” problem (Figure 1).

Urban residents are somewhat more concerned about pollution than rural residents (91% vs. 83%) (Figure 2). Concern about pollution is higher among individuals with secondary (90%) or post-secondary (92%) education than among those with no primary or no formal schooling (85%).

Tunisians rank trash and plastic disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community (38%), followed by pollution of water sources (25%), sanitation (15%), and air pollution (11%) (Figure 3).

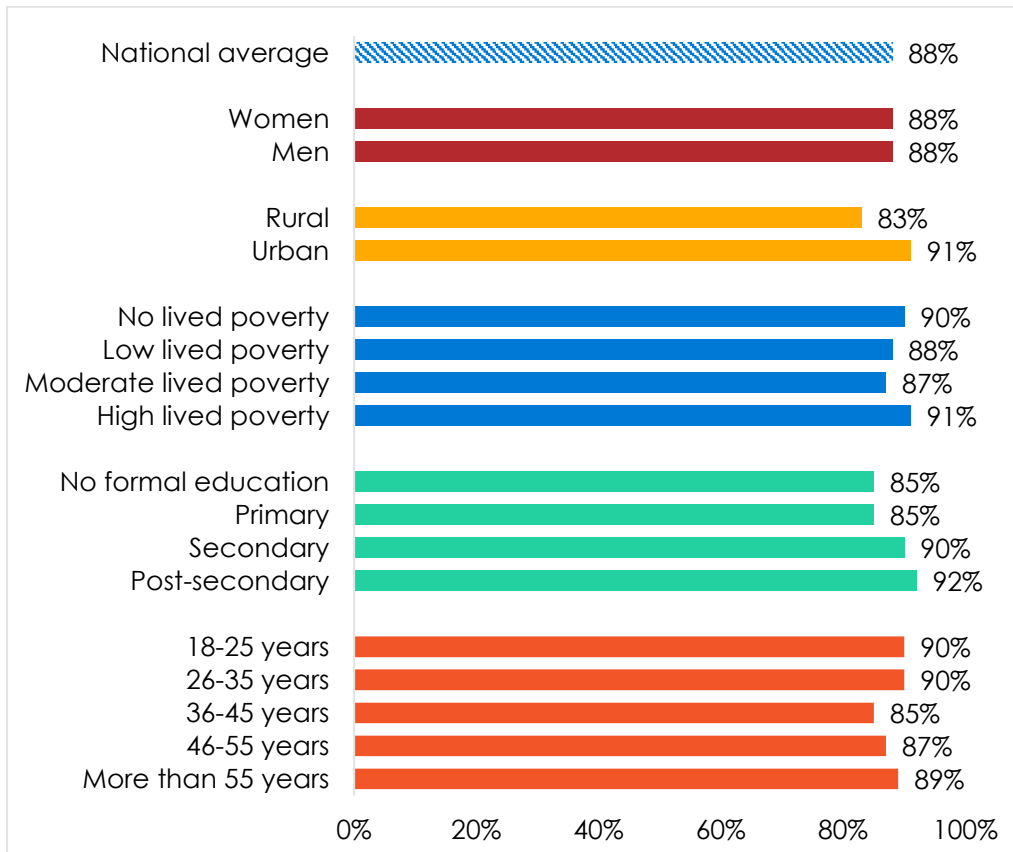
Eight out of 10 respondents (80%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Tunisia (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Is pollution a serious problem in the community? | Tunisia | 2022



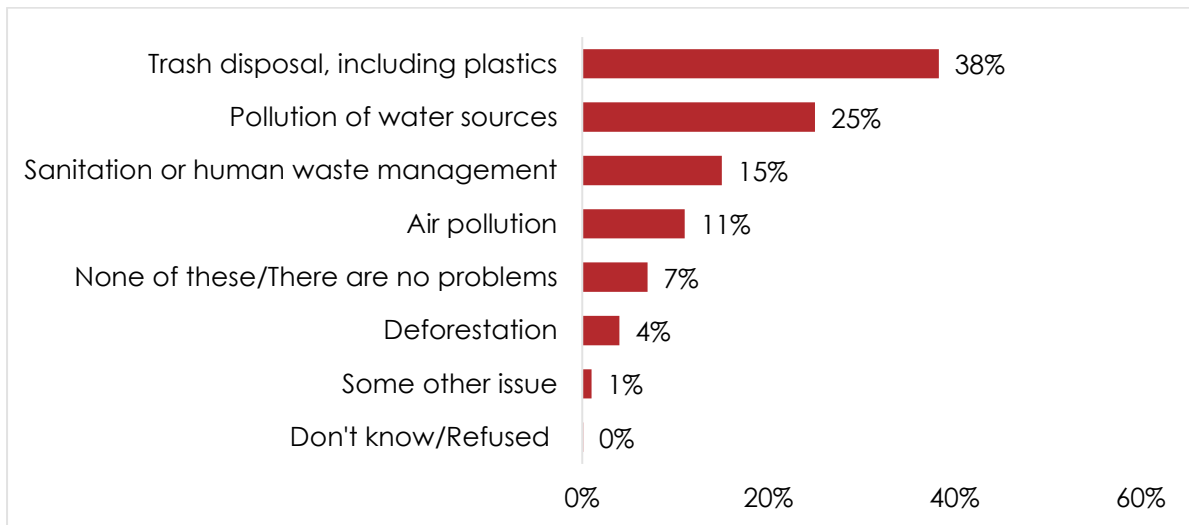
Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community?

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



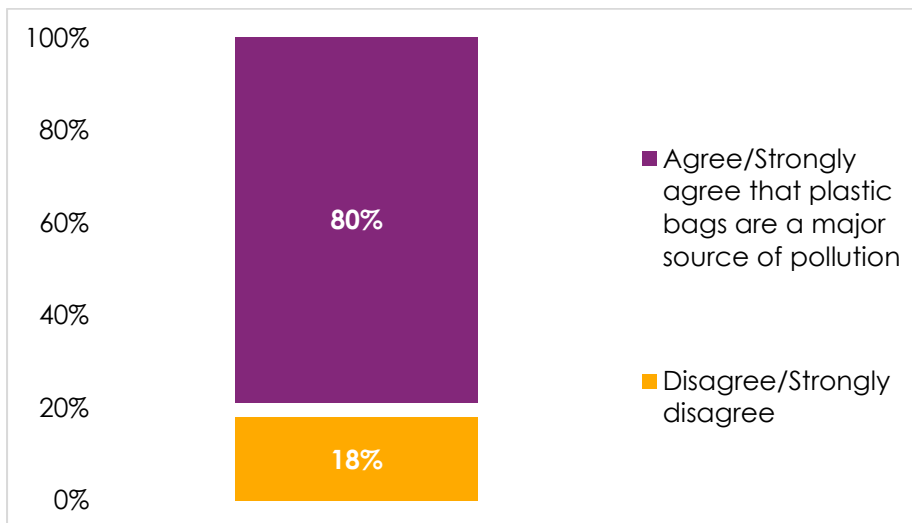
Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | Tunisia | 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? | Tunisia | 2022



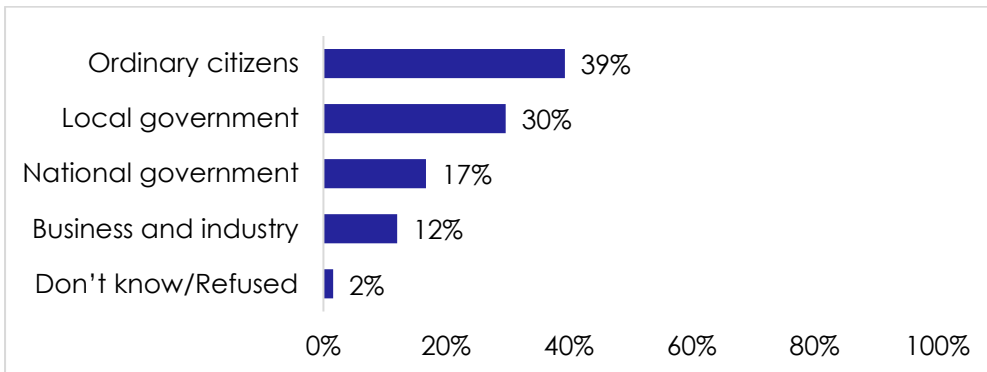
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

Protecting the environment

For Tunisians, protecting the environment is a responsibility shared by citizens and government. About four in 10 respondents (39%) assign primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean to ordinary citizens, while a similar proportion see it as the job of the local (30%) or national (17%) government (Figure 5). Far fewer (12%) think environmental protection is first and foremost the responsibility of business and industry.

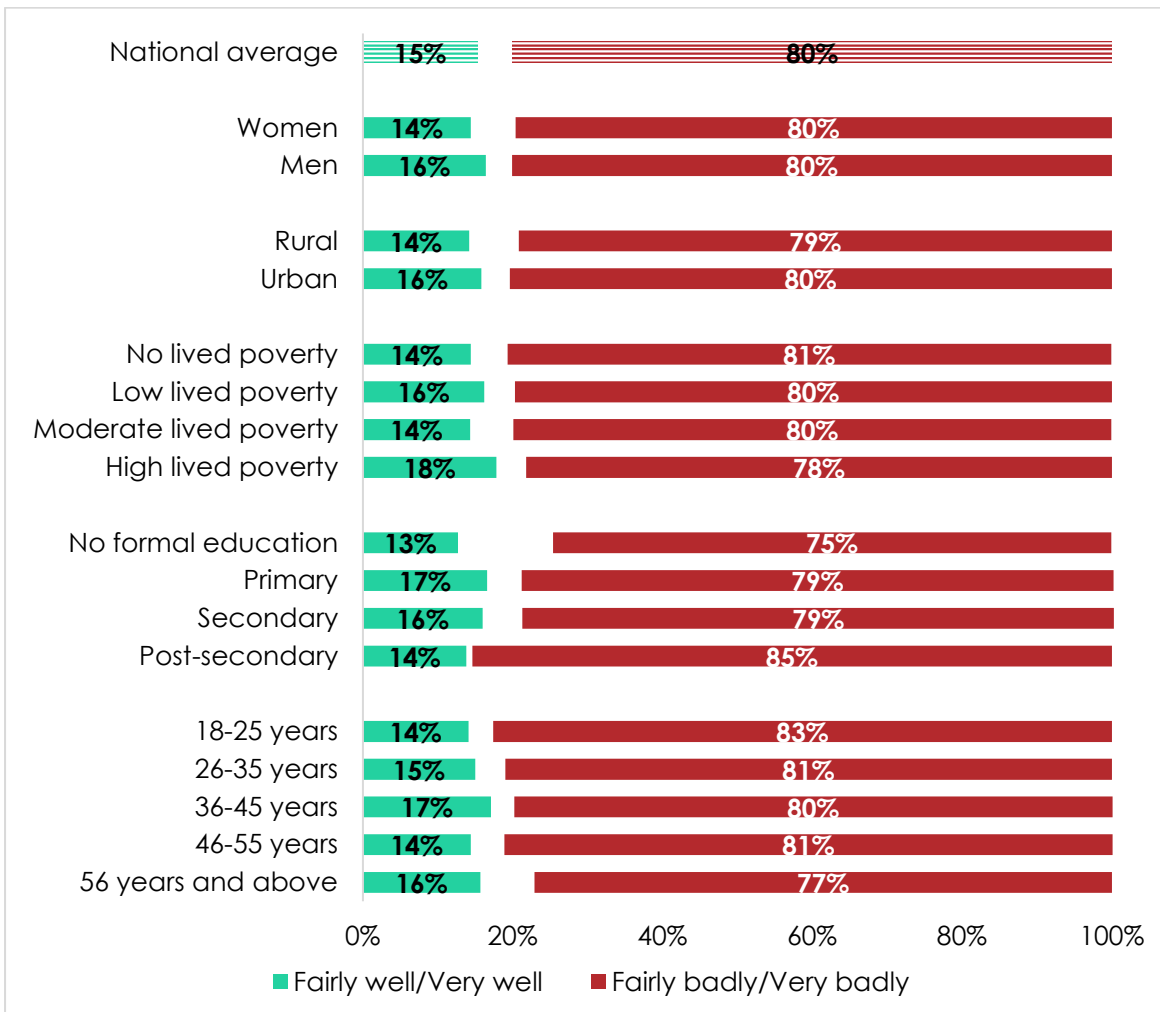
However, only 15% of Tunisians think their government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while an overwhelming majority (80%) say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on this issue (Figure 6). This rating is consistent across key demographic groups. The highest negative rating comes from people with post-secondary education (85%, compared to 75% of those with no formal education).

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



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

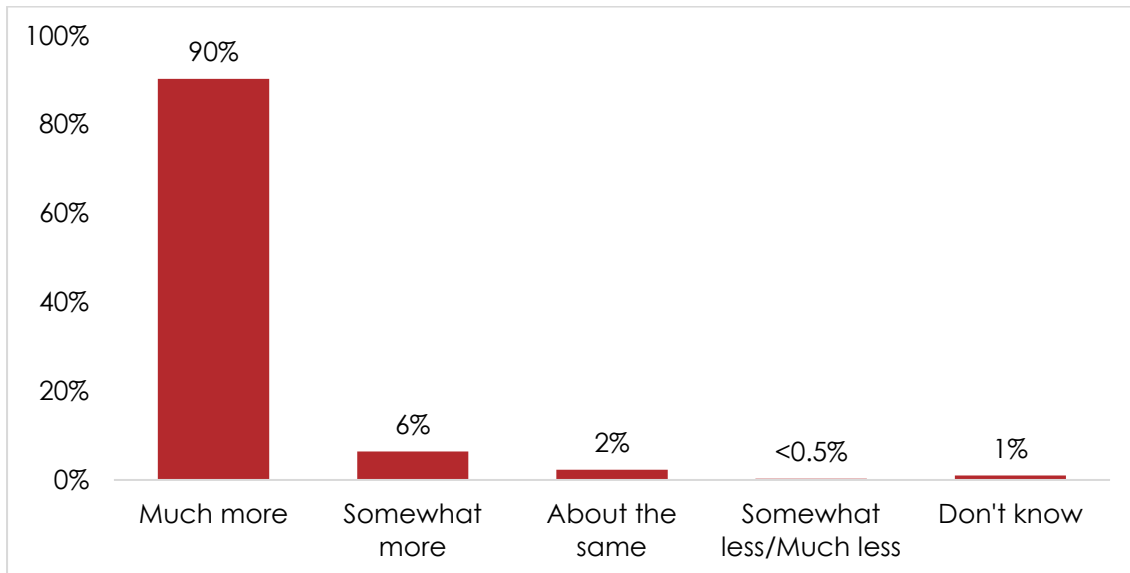
Figure 6: Government performance on reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Tunisia | 2022



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?

Fully nine out of 10 Tunisians (90%) say the government should be doing “much more” to limit pollution and protect the environment, and an additional 6% think it should do “somewhat more”. Only about one in 40 citizens would be satisfied with continuing or reducing the current level of effort (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Should government do more to limit pollution? | Tunisia | 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?*

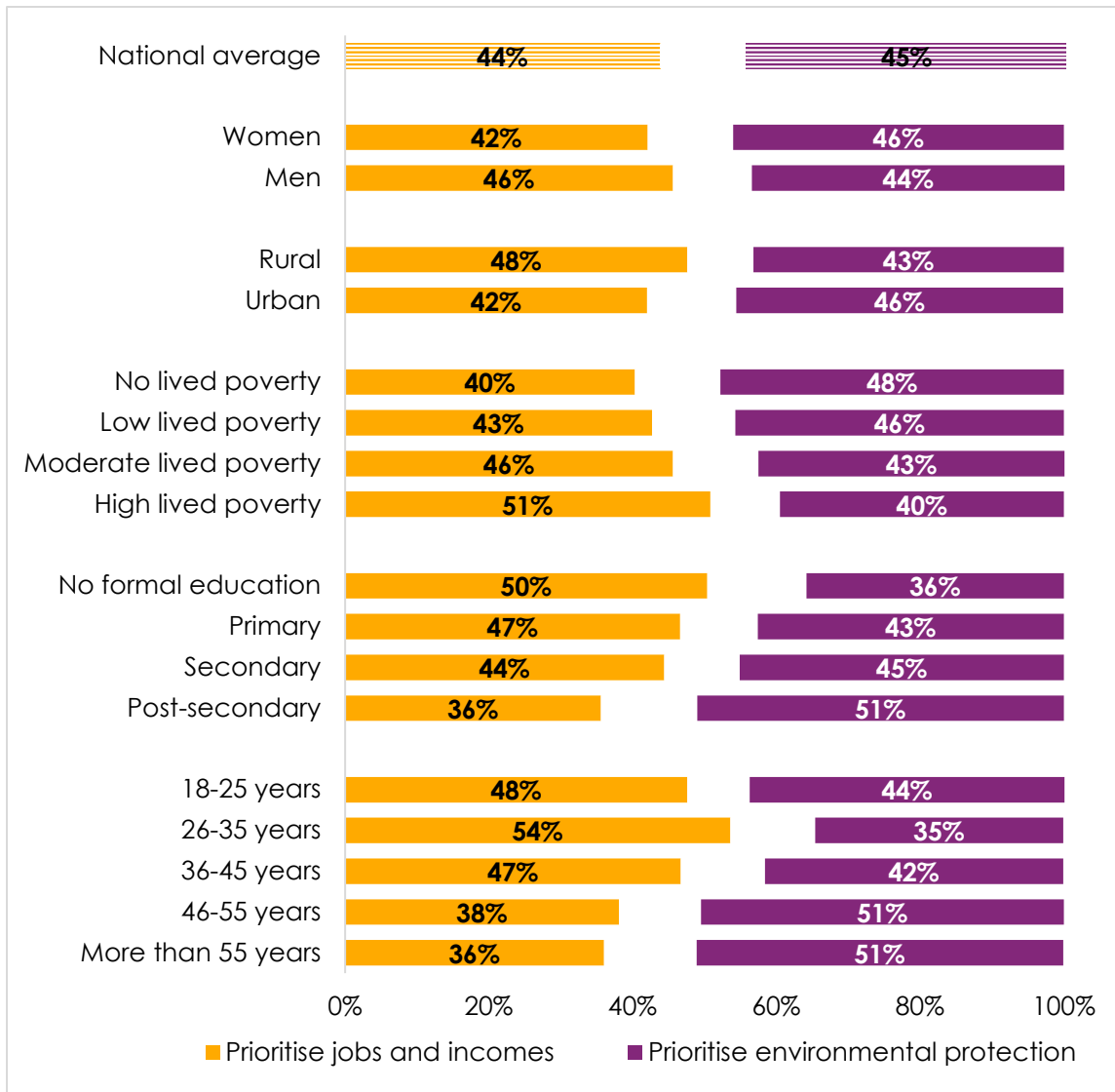
However, if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs or incomes, Tunisians are sharply divided as to which should take priority: 45% say the government should focus on protecting the environment and reducing pollution, while 44% say job creation and incomes should be prioritised, even if it leads to greater environmental damage (Figure 8).

Men (46%) and rural residents (48%) are slightly more likely than women (42%) and urban residents (42%) to prioritise job creation over environmental protection. Individuals between 26 and 35 years old – often entering the job market – are more likely than other age cohorts to value job creation (54%) over environmental protection.

On the other hand, support for prioritising environmental protection increases with respondents' education and economic levels, reaching 51% and 48%, respectively, among those with post-secondary education and those experiencing no lived poverty.¹

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 8: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | Tunisia | 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)

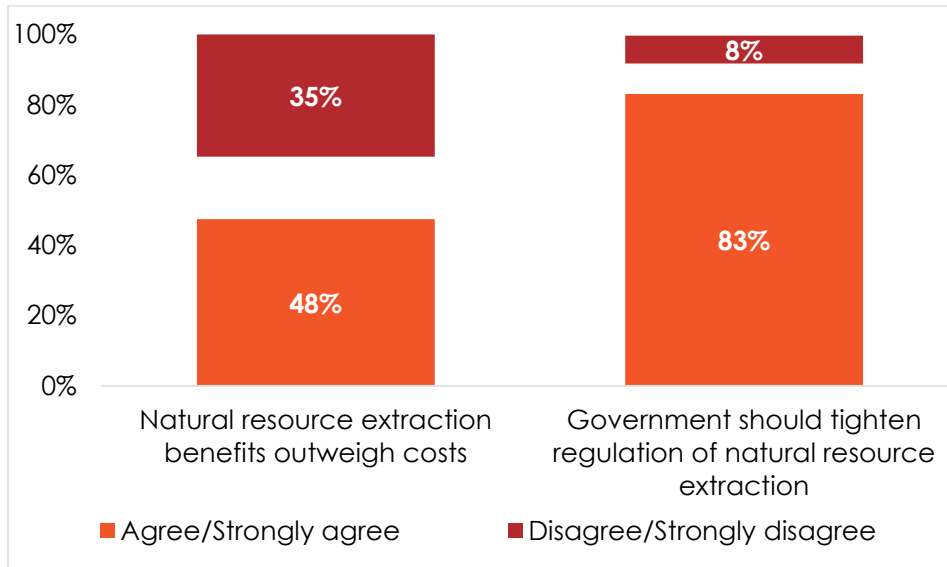
Natural resource extraction

While resource extraction makes a significant contribution to Tunisia's GDP, it can also be a major source of local-level environmental damage.

About half (48%) of Tunisians “agree” or “strongly agree” that the costs of natural resource extraction, such as pollution, are outweighed by its benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But more than one-third (35%) of citizens disagree with this assessment (Figure 9).

And a vast majority (83%) of citizens want the government to tighten regulation of the resource-extraction industry in order to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

Figure 9: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Tunisia | 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:

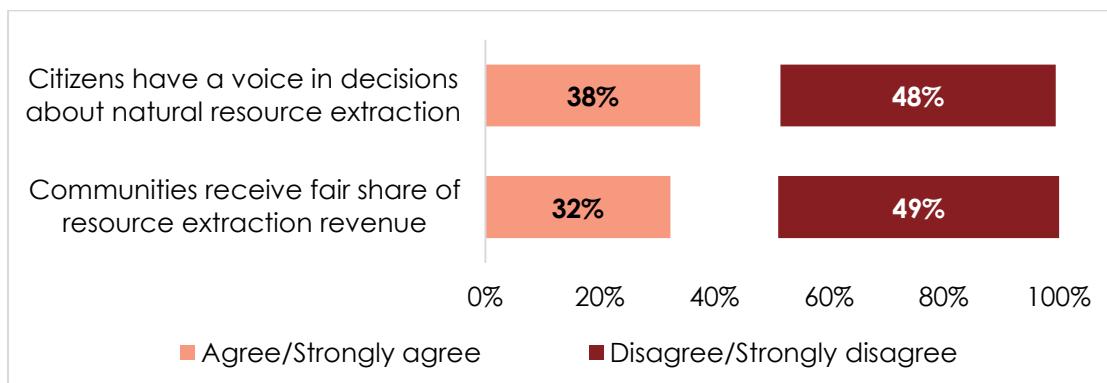
In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

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

Negative assessments outweigh positive ones when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 10). Fewer than four in 10 Tunisians (38%) say that ordinary people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while 48% think they don't.

Similarly, only one-third (32%) say local communities receive a fair share of revenues from natural resource extraction," while 49% say they don't.

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



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

Ordinary Tunisians 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

A vast majority of Tunisians view pollution as a serious problem in their community and want their government to do “much more” to protect the environment, including regulating the natural resource extraction industry more tightly to reduce its negative environmental impacts.

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Baba Adou is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida and a graduate research assistant in the UF Sahel Research Group. Email: adou.baba@ufl.edu.

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.

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