



Dispatch No. 677 | 26 July 2023

# Zambians look to one another and government for action to safeguard the environment

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 677 | Edward Chibwili**

## Summary

Zambia's economic development is tied closely to the environment: Mining, tourism, agriculture, and forestry contribute the biggest share of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and export value (Aongola et al., 2009; World Bank, 2020).

Copper alone generates more than 80% of export earnings and is the backbone of Zambia's economy, complemented by mining of cobalt, gold, nickel, lead, silver, uranium, zinc, and numerous precious and semi-precious stones. Natural assets such as waterfalls, lakes, rivers, and a variety of wildlife species contribute to the country's economic development via job creation and foreign exchange revenues (Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

The balance of economic development and environmental protection is critical in Zambia, as industry, urbanisation, and climate change take a heavy toll, including pollution of soil, air, and water, with attendant effects on human health and wildlife; rapid deforestation and loss of wetlands; severe drought; inadequate sanitation; and trash-disposal challenges in cities (UNEP, 2021, 2023; Slunge & Ölund Wingqvist, 2010; Chibwili, 2023).

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

Survey findings indicate that more than half of Zambians consider pollution a serious problem in their community, citing trash disposal, deforestation, and pollution of water sources as their top local environmental issues.

Citizens see themselves as primarily responsible for limiting pollution and keeping communities clean, but they also want "much more" action from the government to protect the environment, even at considerable economic cost.

Zambians hold mixed views on the benefits and environmental costs of natural resource extraction, and most want the government to regulate this industry more tightly to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 42 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia, interviewed a nationally

representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Zambian adults between 3 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 have been conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

## Key findings

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

- More than half (52%) of Zambians say pollution is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
  - Citizens cite trash disposal, deforestation, and pollution of water sources as the most important environmental issues in their community.
  - More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Zambia.
- About six in 10 Zambians (58%) say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with local citizens. Far fewer would defer that responsibility to their local governments (19%) or the national government (13%).
- Even so, most Zambians (72%) say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 61% who say it needs to do “much more.”
- A majority (55%) of citizens would prioritise environmental protection over jobs and income creation, while 40% say the government should focus on creating jobs and growing incomes, even if it means increasing pollution or other environmental damage.

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

- Only 39% of Zambians say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution.
- Only 31% think local communities receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction.
- And a large majority (74%) 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*

More than half (52%) of Zambians consider pollution in their communities a “somewhat serious” (20%) or “very serious” (31%) problem (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Urban residents are more concerned about pollution than rural residents (64% vs. 41%) (Figure 2). Concerns about pollution increase with one’s experience of poverty, ranging from 49%

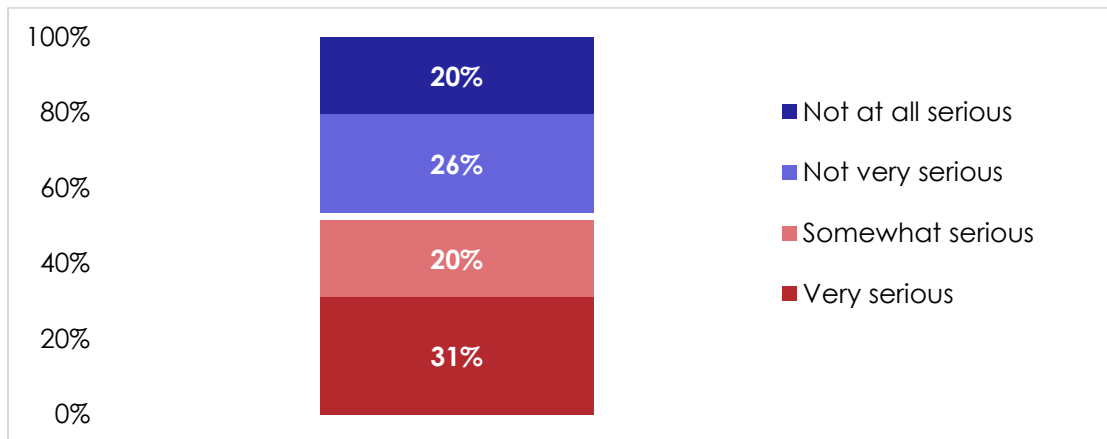
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<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 30% “very serious” and 21% “somewhat serious” sum to 52%).

among those with no lived poverty to 61% among those with high lived poverty.<sup>2</sup> They also rise with respondents' education level: While only 45% of those with primary schooling or less consider pollution a serious problem, 60% of those with post-secondary qualifications do.

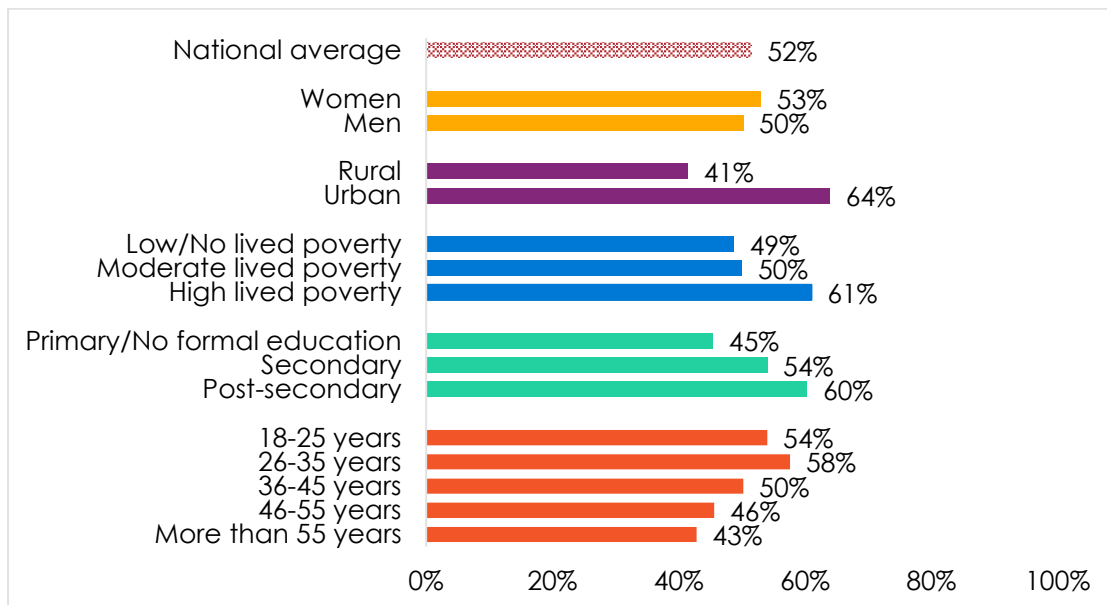
Young citizens (54%-58%) are more likely than their elders to express concern about pollution.

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



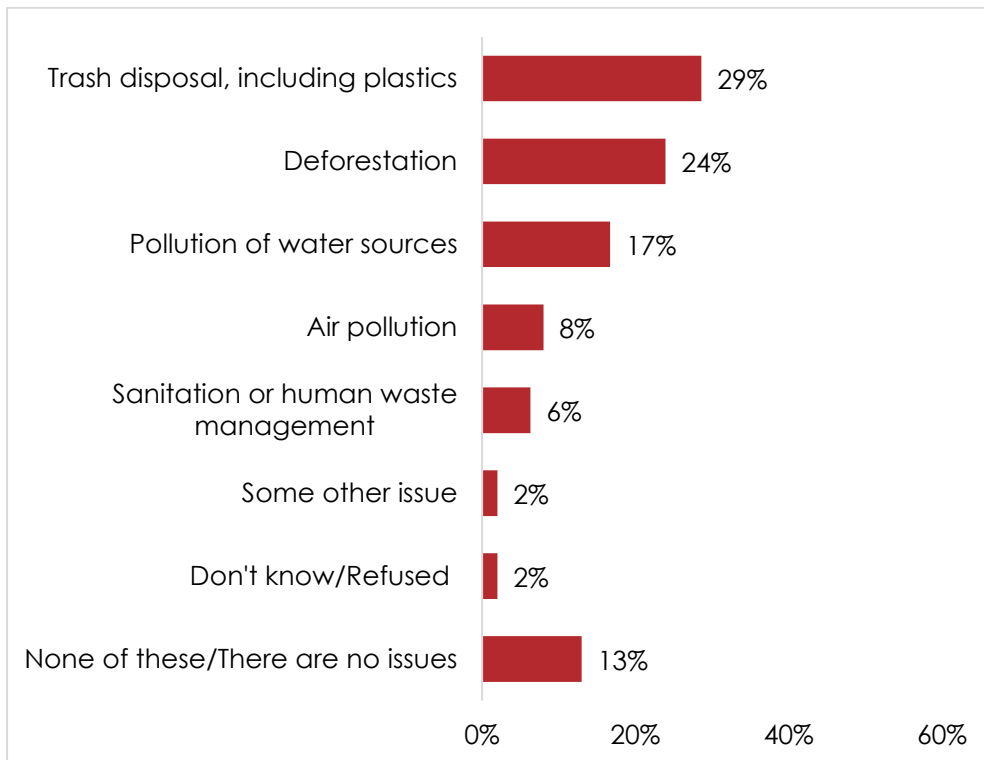
**Respondents were asked:** How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

<sup>2</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 and Patel (2022).

Zambians rank trash disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community (29%), followed by deforestation (24%) and pollution of water sources (17%) (Figure 3).

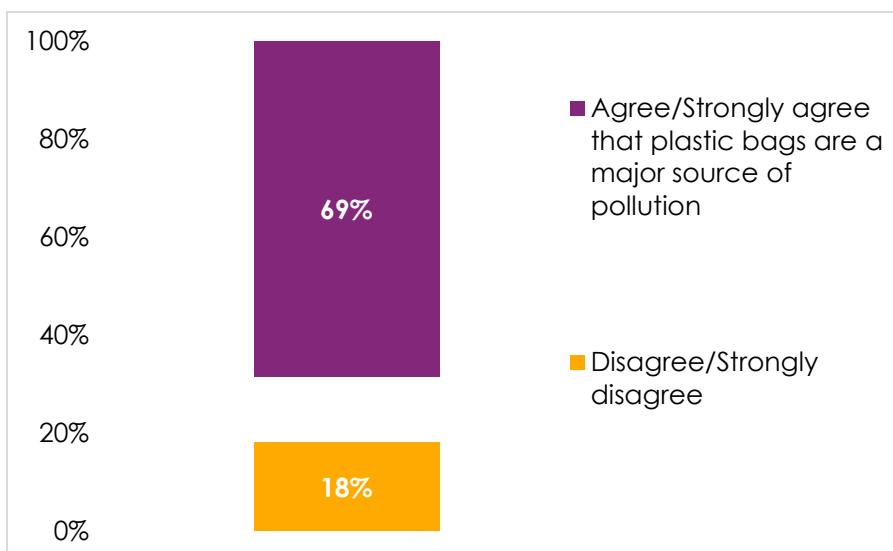
More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens "agree" or "strongly agree" that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Zambia (Figure 4).

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



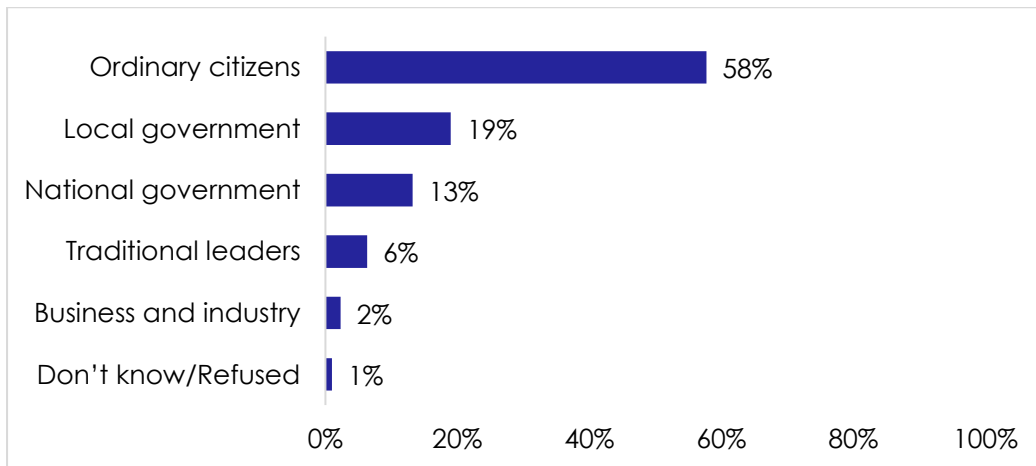
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

*Protecting the environment*

For Zambians, protecting the environment starts at home: Almost six in 10 respondents (58%) say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). About one-third place that responsibility on the local (19%) or national (13%) government. Even fewer look to traditional leaders (6%) and business and industry (2%).

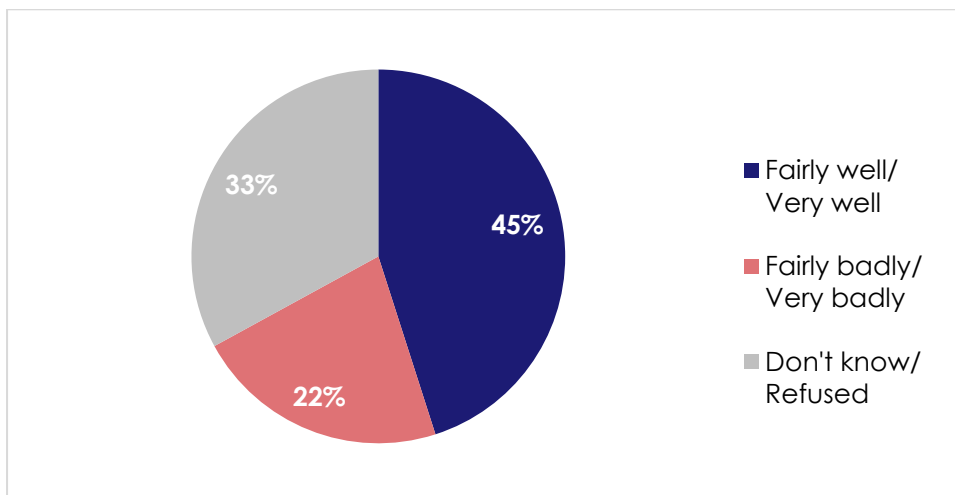
Almost half (45%) of citizens think the government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while half as many (22%) rate the government's efforts poorly (Figure 6). Fully one-third (33%) of citizens say they "don't know" or declined to answer the question.

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



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

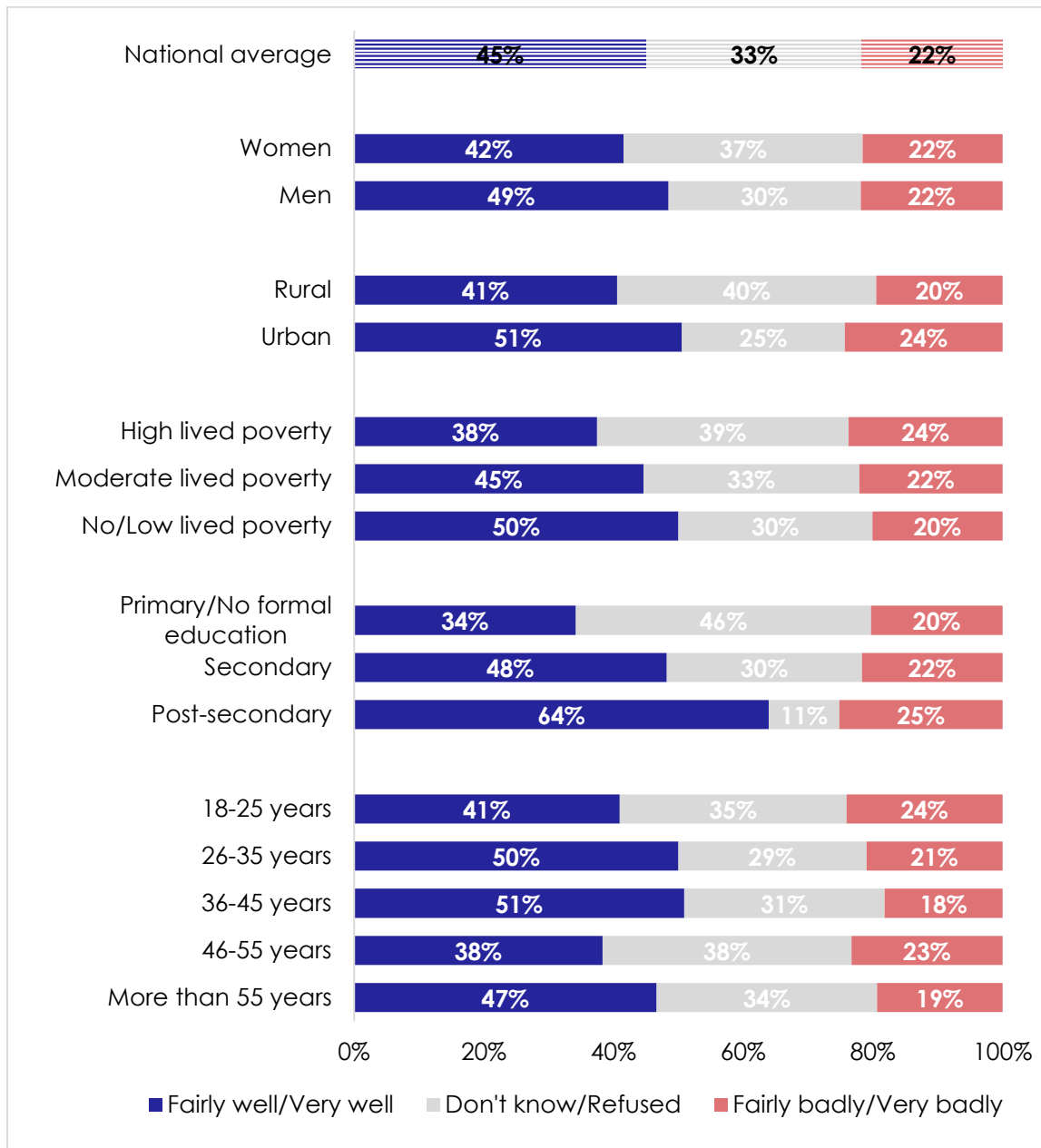
**Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | Zambia | 2022**



**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?

Approval of the government's performance on protecting the environment is higher among men (49%), urban residents (51%), economically better-off citizens (50%), and the most educated respondents (64%) than among their counterparts, who tend to record larger proportions of "don't know" responses (Figure 7).

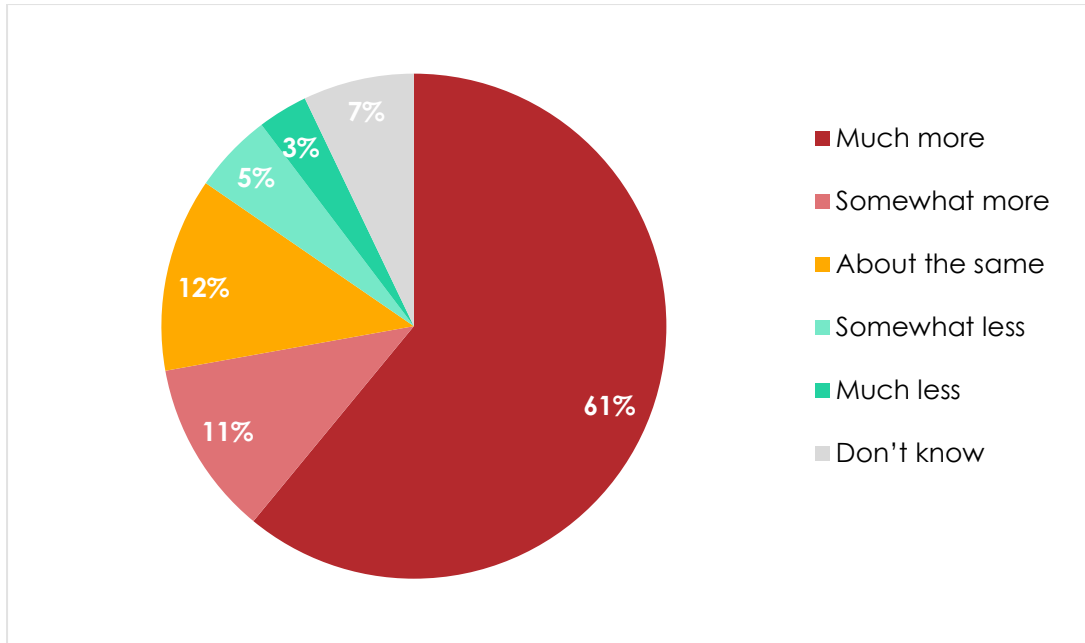
**Figure 7: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Zambia | 2022**



**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?

But while the government's performance ratings are more positive than negative, a large majority (72%) of Zambians say it should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 61% who want "much more" government action (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Should government do more to limit pollution? | Zambia | 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?*

In fact, if Zambians have to choose between environmental protection and jobs or incomes, a majority of them would pick the former: 55% of respondents say preventing pollution and protecting the environment must be prioritised, even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to their daily lives. Four in 10 (40%) would instead prioritise job and income creation (Figure 9).

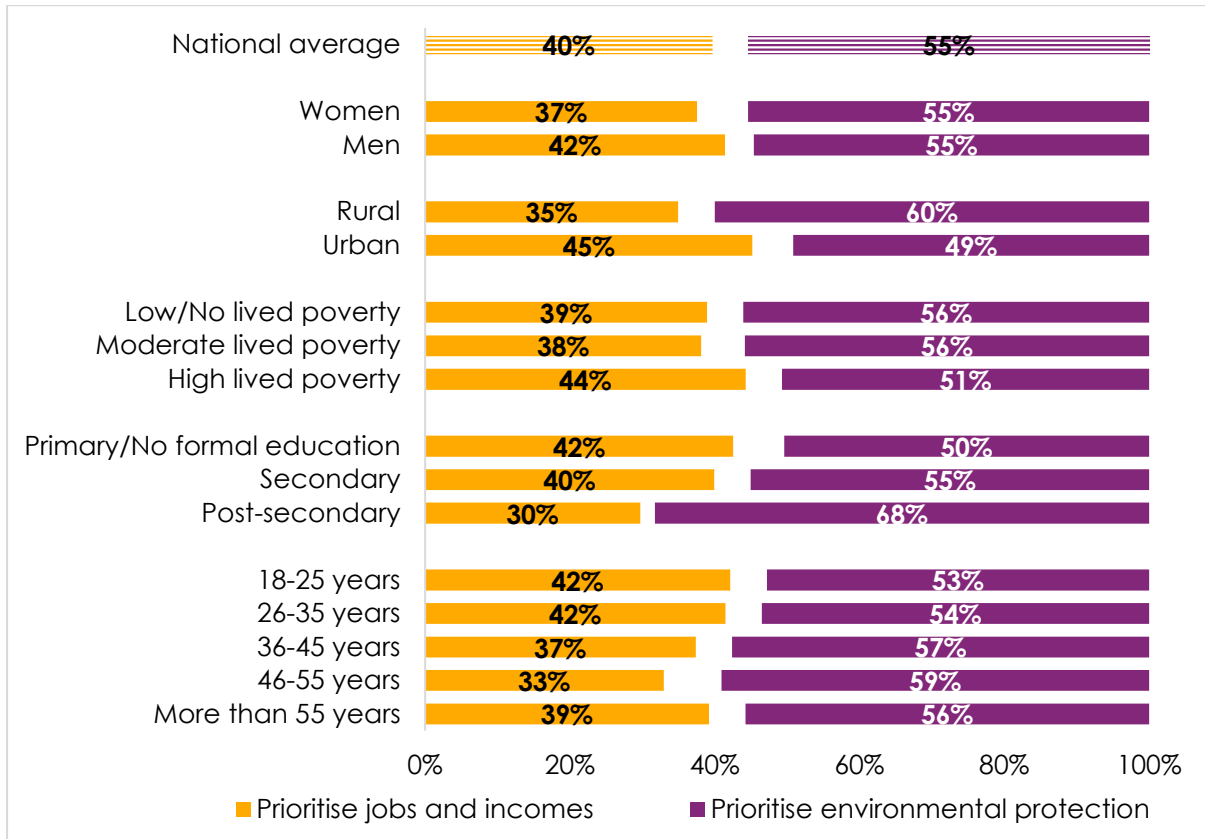
The emphasis on environmental protection over jobs is particularly strong among rural citizens (60%, vs. 49% of urbanites) and those with post-secondary education (68%, vs. 50% of those with primary schooling or less). Prioritisation of jobs and income is somewhat more common among poor respondents (44%) than among their better-off counterparts (38%-39%).

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**Figure 9: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment?** | by demographic group | Zambia | 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

Only about four in 10 Zambians (39%) think that overall, the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. About the same proportion (41%) disagree with this assessment (Figure 10).

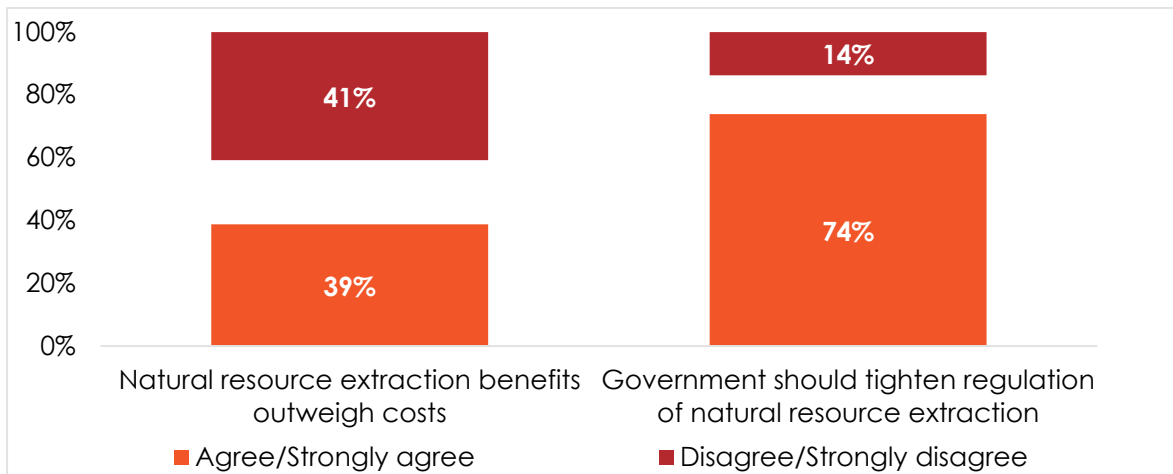
Further, three-fourths (74%) of citizens want the government to regulate the resource-extraction industry more tightly to reduce its negative impacts on the environment,

The view that the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its costs is more commonly held by men (43%) than women (34%), and by those aged 36-55 (44%-45%) than older and younger respondents (36%-37%) (Figure 11).

Support for tighter government regulation increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 68% among those with primary schooling or less to 85% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 12). Better-off citizens (79%) are more likely to demand tighter regulation than those experiencing moderate (73%) or high (70%) lived poverty. Older citizens (83% of those over age 55) also favour regulation more than younger respondents (72%-75%).



**Figure 10: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Zambia | 2022**



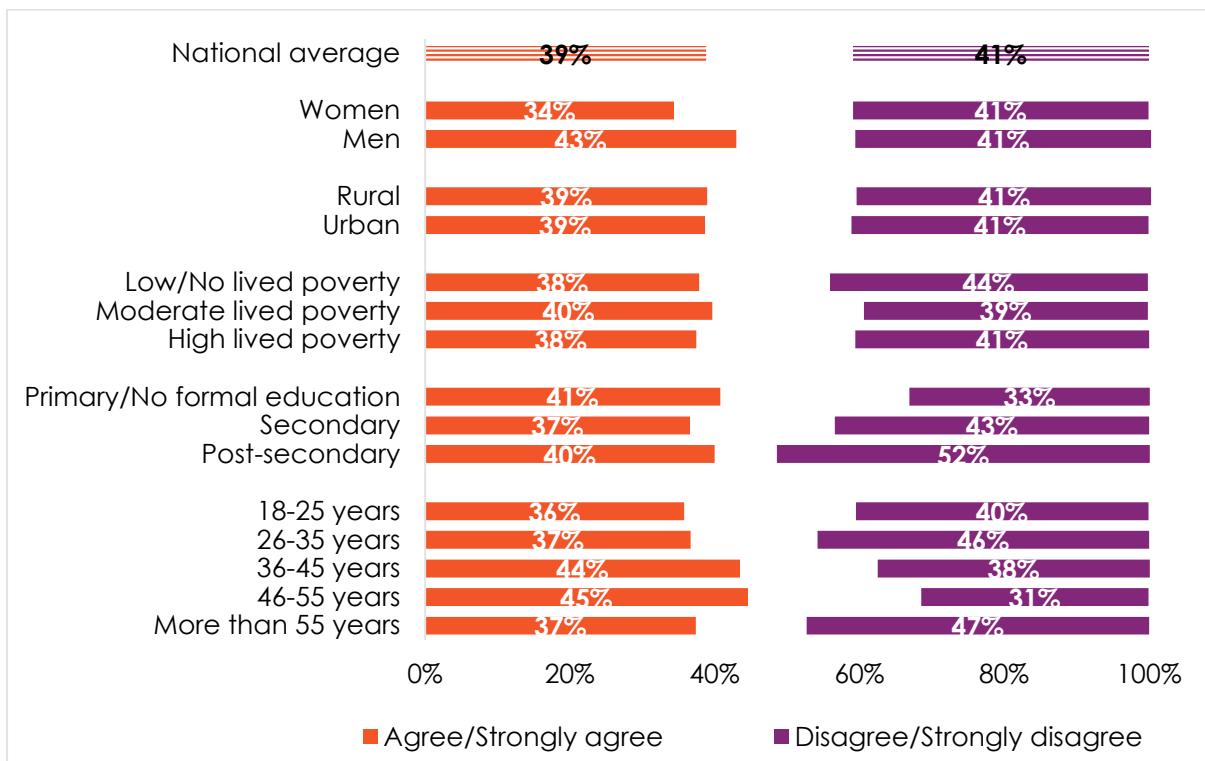
**Respondents were asked:** Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the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

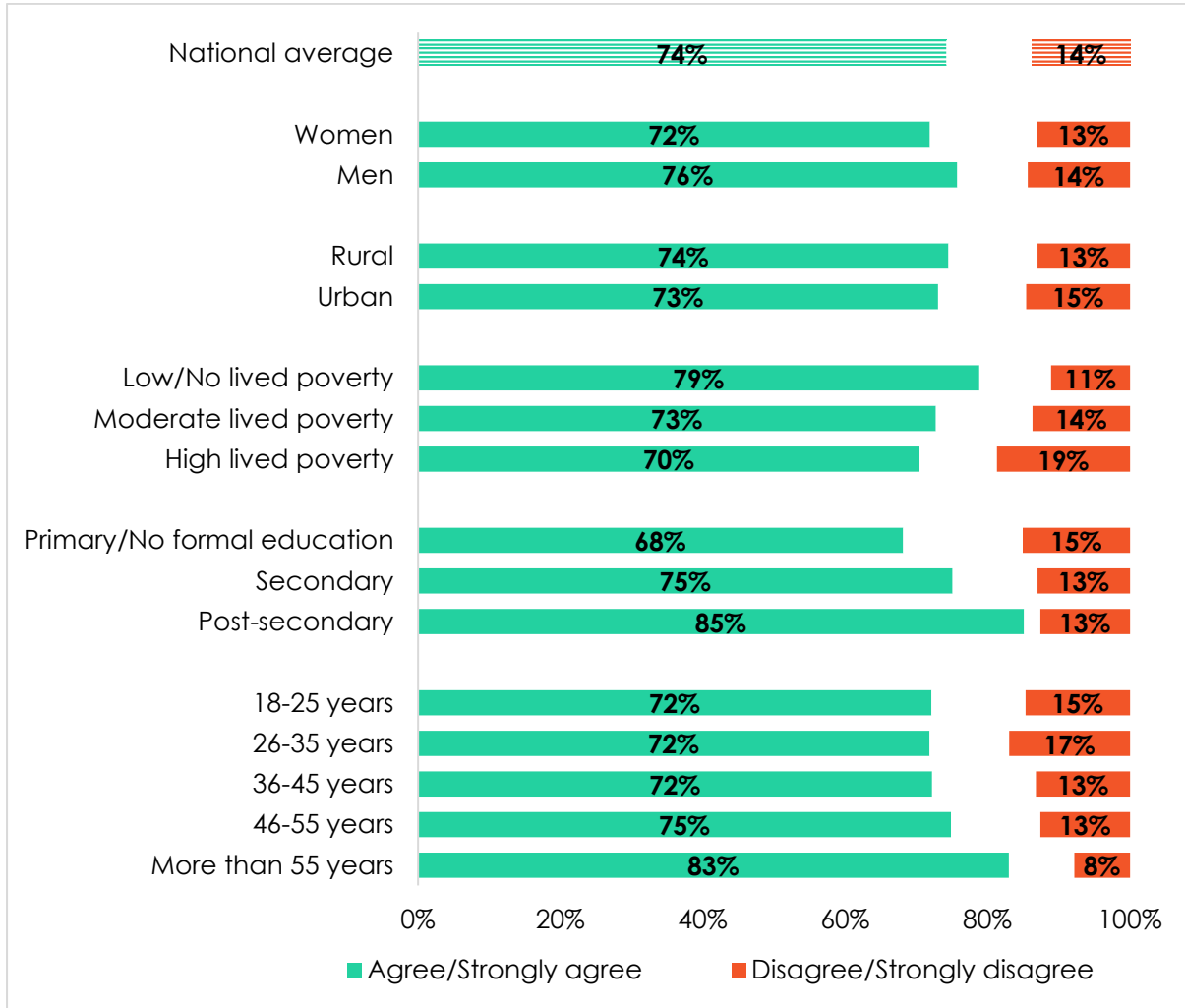
**Figure 11: Do benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its costs?**

| by demographic group | Zambia | 2022



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

**Figure 12: Should government tighten regulation of natural resource extraction?**  
 | by demographic group | Zambia | 2022

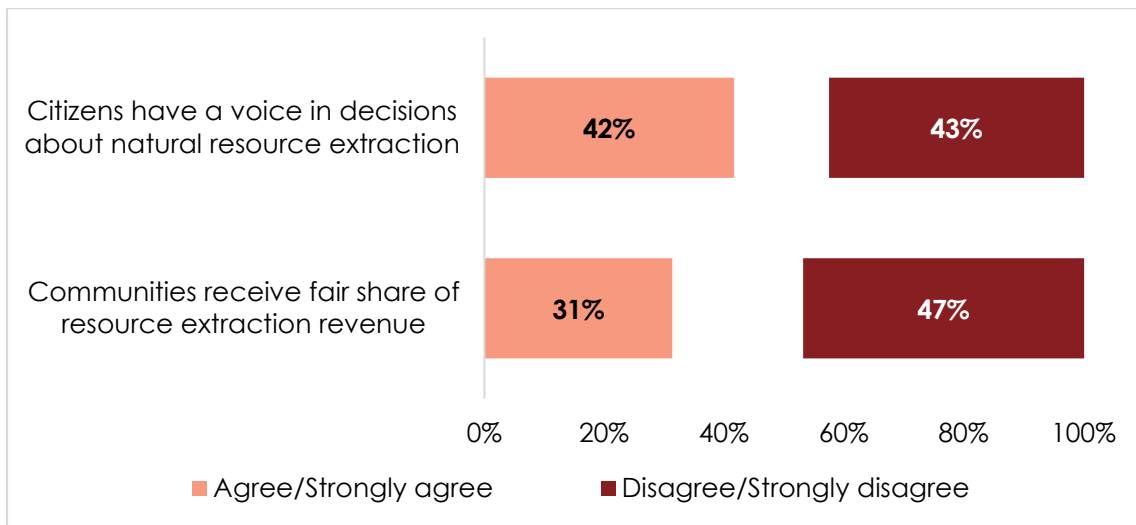


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with statement: In this country, natural resource extraction should be more tightly regulated by government to reduce the negative impacts on the environment.

Zambians are divided on whether local residents have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities: 42% say they do, while 43% disagree (Figure 13).

And only three in 10 respondents (31%) think local communities receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction, while 47% say they don't.

**Figure 13: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Zambia | 2022**



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

*Ordinary Zambians 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

Zambia is gifted with a wealth of natural resources. Ensuring that they are managed sustainably requires safeguarding an environment in which ordinary Zambians can benefit from this wealth.

Afrobarometer survey findings show that more than half of Zambians see pollution as a major problem affecting their communities and assign themselves the primary responsibility of fighting it. But they also expect “much more” action from the government to protect the environment.

Their perceptions of the natural resource extraction industry are mixed, with only minorities affirming that ordinary people have a voice or benefit fairly. And most want the government to regulate the industry more tightly to limit its negative consequences for the environment.

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