



Kenyans want government to prioritise environmental protection, even at the expense of job creation

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 678 | Richard Kweitsu

Summary

Kenya's rich diversity of wildlife and landscape makes it a top tourism destination. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector generated \$7.9 billion in 2018, contributing 8.8% of gross domestic product (GDP) while providing jobs for about 1.6 people (Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife & Heritage, 2020; Muli, 2021). Recovering from pandemic shutdowns, tourism grew by 83% in 2022 compared to the previous year (Miriri, 2023).

As such, tourism is emblematic both of Kenya's wealth and of its stake in environmental protection, as pollution of the air, water, and soil due to urbanisation, poor waste management, agriculture, and industry – including the tourism industry itself – threatens the health of the economy as well as of the population (UNEP, 2023; ASAP East Africa, 2019; Health Effects Institute, 2020).

At the same time, Kenya has emerged as a leader in the fight against environmental degradation and climate change. Home to the Green Belt Movement founded by the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Muta Maathai, Kenya has been a pioneer in banning single-use plastic bags, joining the Clean Sea Initiative, and, as of 2020, banning single-use plastics from its beaches and parks (UNEP, 2021; Ighobor, 2011; Kimeu, 2023).

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

Findings show that about half of Kenyans consider pollution a serious problem in their community, ranking deforestation and trash disposal as their most important environmental issues. A majority expect action from fellow citizens to address the menace.

But they also expect "much more" from the government, including tighter regulation of the natural resource extraction industry, and think environmental protection should be prioritised even if that should be at the expense of job creation.

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 Kenya, based at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, interviewed 2,400 adult Kenyans in November-December 2021. A sample of this

size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2019.

Key findings

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Half (49%) of Kenyans say pollution is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
 - Citizens say deforestation (31%), trash disposal (25%), pollution of water sources (14%), and sanitation (14%) are the most important environmental issues in their community.
 - Eight out of 10 citizens (79%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Kenya.
- More than half (55%) of respondents say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping the community clean rests with ordinary citizens. About one-third would assign this responsibility to their local (25%) or national governments (10%).
- An overwhelmingly majority (91%) of Kenyans say the government should do more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 74% who want the government to do “much more.”
- Three-fourths (75%) of citizens say the government should prioritise environmental protection over job creation and income generation.

On natural resource extraction:

- Public opinion is evenly divided as to whether the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh associated environmental costs.
 - Respondents are also divided on whether ordinary people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that occurs near their communities.
 - Only 35% think that local communities receive a fair share of revenue from natural resource extraction.
- A large majority (85%) of Kenyans 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

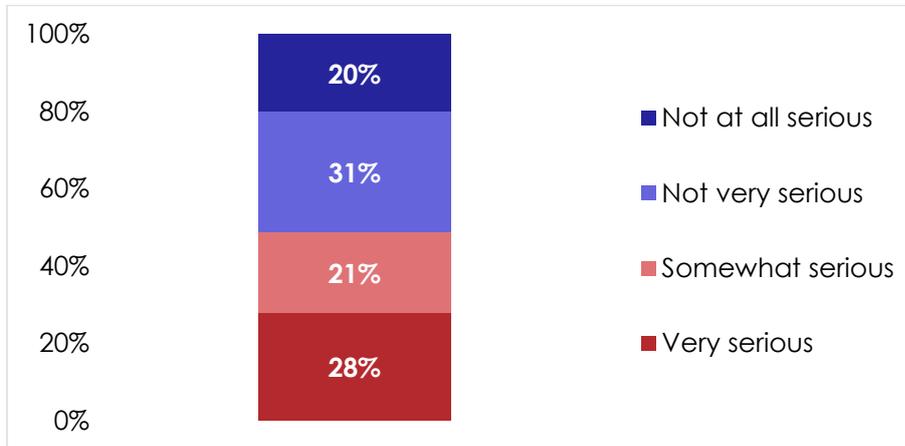
Half (49%) of Kenyans consider pollution in their communities to be a “very serious” (28%) or “somewhat serious” (21%) problem, while the other half (50%) think it is “not very serious” (31%) or “not at all serious” (20%)¹ (Figure 1).

Urban residents are significantly more concerned about pollution than rural residents (63% vs. 43%) (Figure 2). Concerns about pollution also increase sharply with one’s experience of

¹ 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. 31% “not very serious” and 20% “not at all serious” sum to 50%).

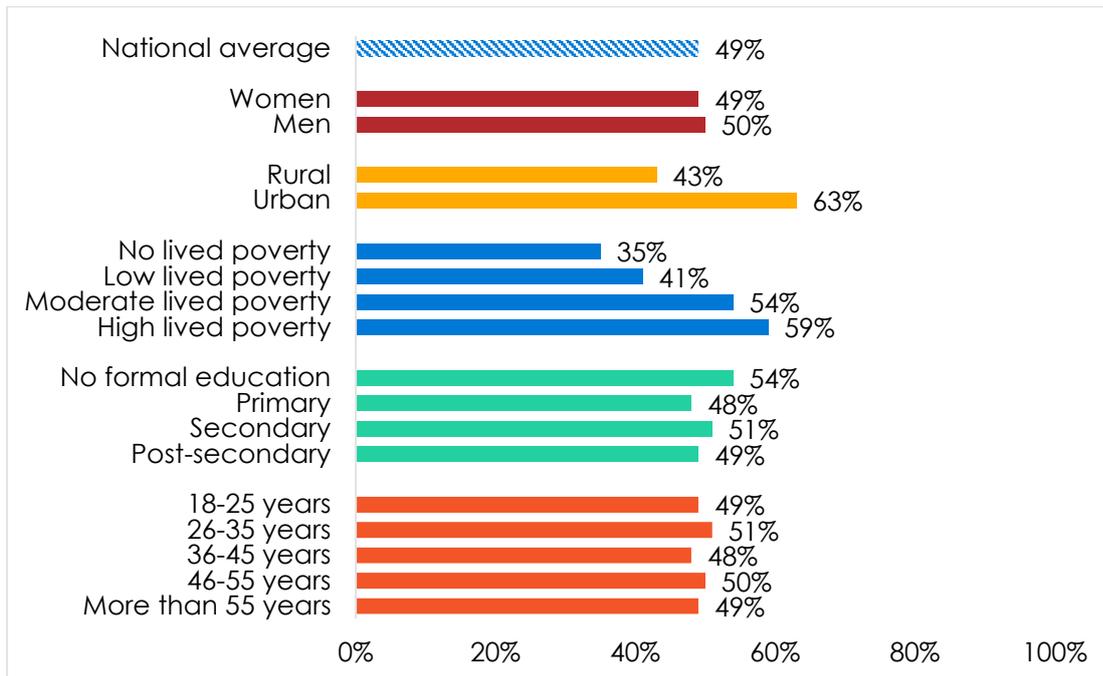
poverty, ranging from 35% among well-off respondents to 59% among those with high lived poverty.²

Figure 1: Extent of pollution in the community | Kenya | 2021



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 | Kenya | 2021



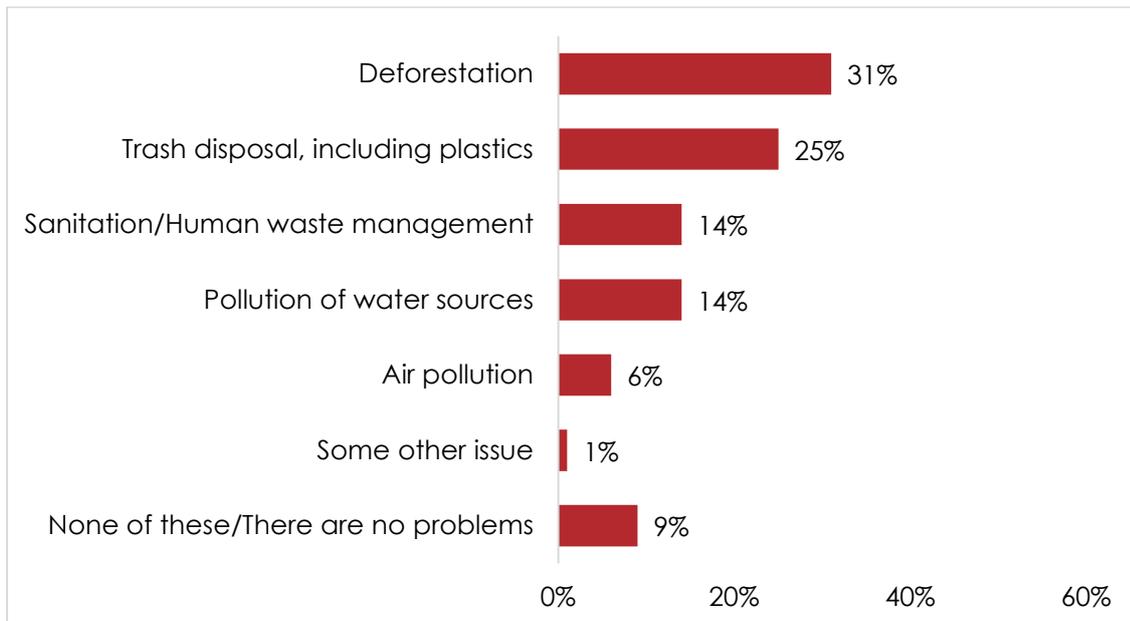
Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land, in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

² 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).

Three out of every 10 Kenyans (31%) rank deforestation as the most important environmental issue in their community, followed by trash disposal (25%), human waste management (14%), pollution of water sources (14%), and air pollution (6%) (Figure 3).

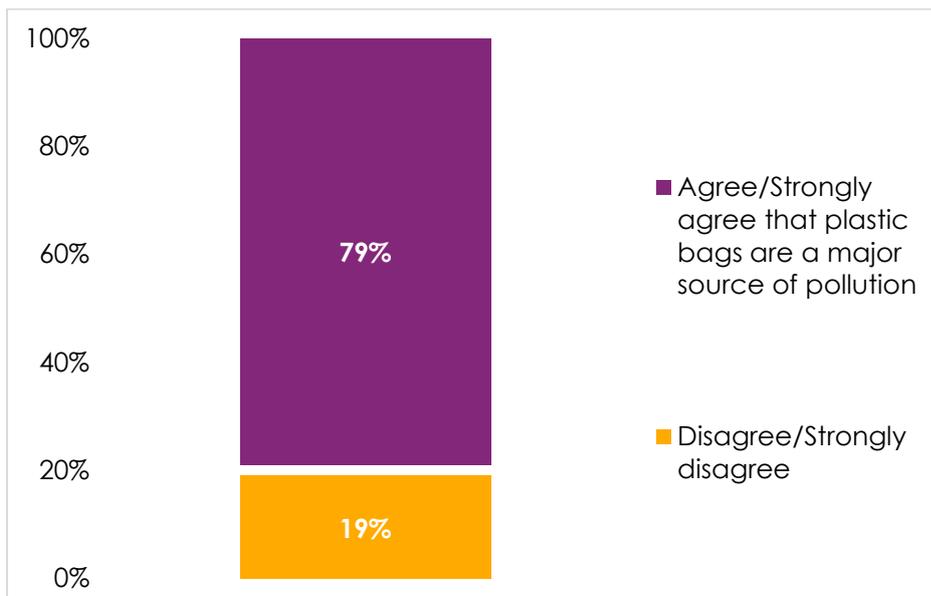
And despite a ban on single-use plastic bags in place since 2017 (Kimeu, 2023), eight out of 10 citizens (79%) say that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Kenya (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | Kenya | 2021



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? | Kenya | 2021



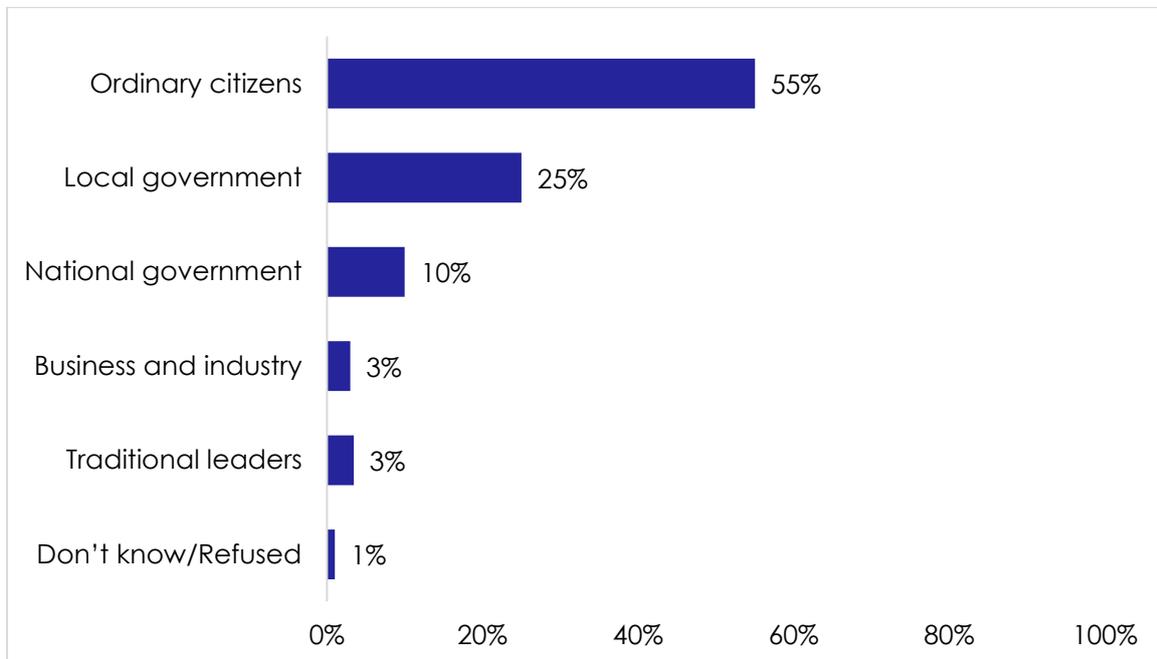
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

Protecting the environment

Efforts to combat pollution encompass a wide spectrum of actions, ranging from increasing the use of renewable energy and reusable shopping bags to the dismantling of the coal-burning industry.

For Kenyans, protecting the environment starts with an individual responsibility: More than half (55%) of respondents say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). Aside from individual initiative, a quarter (25%) of Kenyans would instead place that responsibility on the local government, while 10% would look to the national government, 3% to business and industry, and 3% to traditional leaders.

Figure 5: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution? | Kenya | 2021



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

Overall, Kenyans are almost evenly divided in their assessments of the government's performance on reducing pollution and protecting the environment: Half (50%) think it is doing "fairly well" or "very well," while an almost equal proportion (47%) rate its efforts poorly (Figure 6).

Urban residents offer less favourable ratings of government efforts to reduce pollution and protect the environment than rural residents (46% vs. 52%). And approval is notably lower among poor respondents (38%) and those with no formal education (41%) than among their better-off and more educated counterparts.

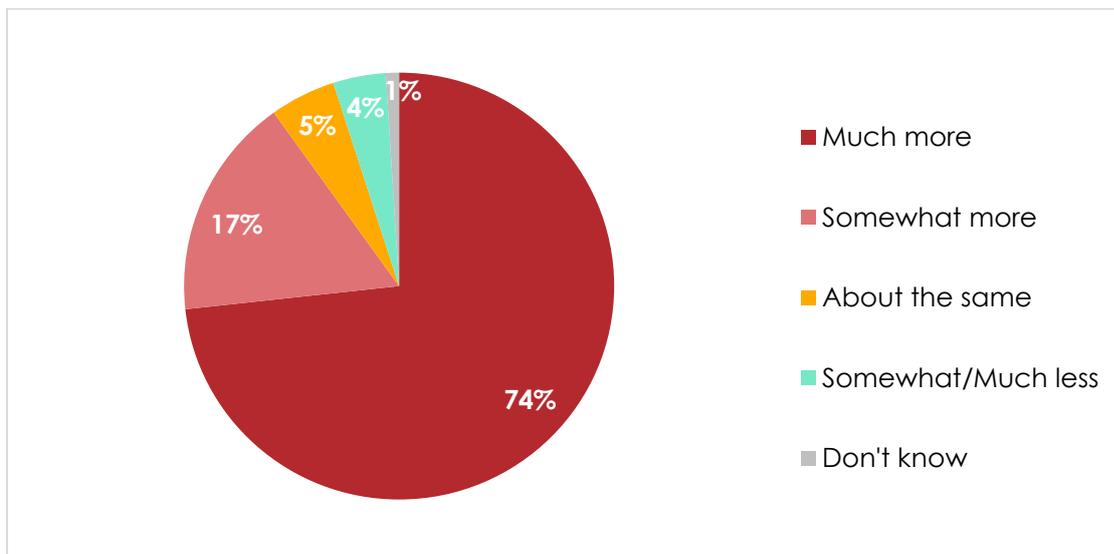
While ratings of the government's performance are mixed, Kenyans overwhelmingly (91%) say the government should do more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 74% who want the government to do "much more" (Figure 7). Only about one in 10 think the government should keep doing what it is currently doing (5%) or should do less (4%) to protect the environment.

Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021



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?

Figure 7: Should government do more to limit pollution? | Kenya | 2021

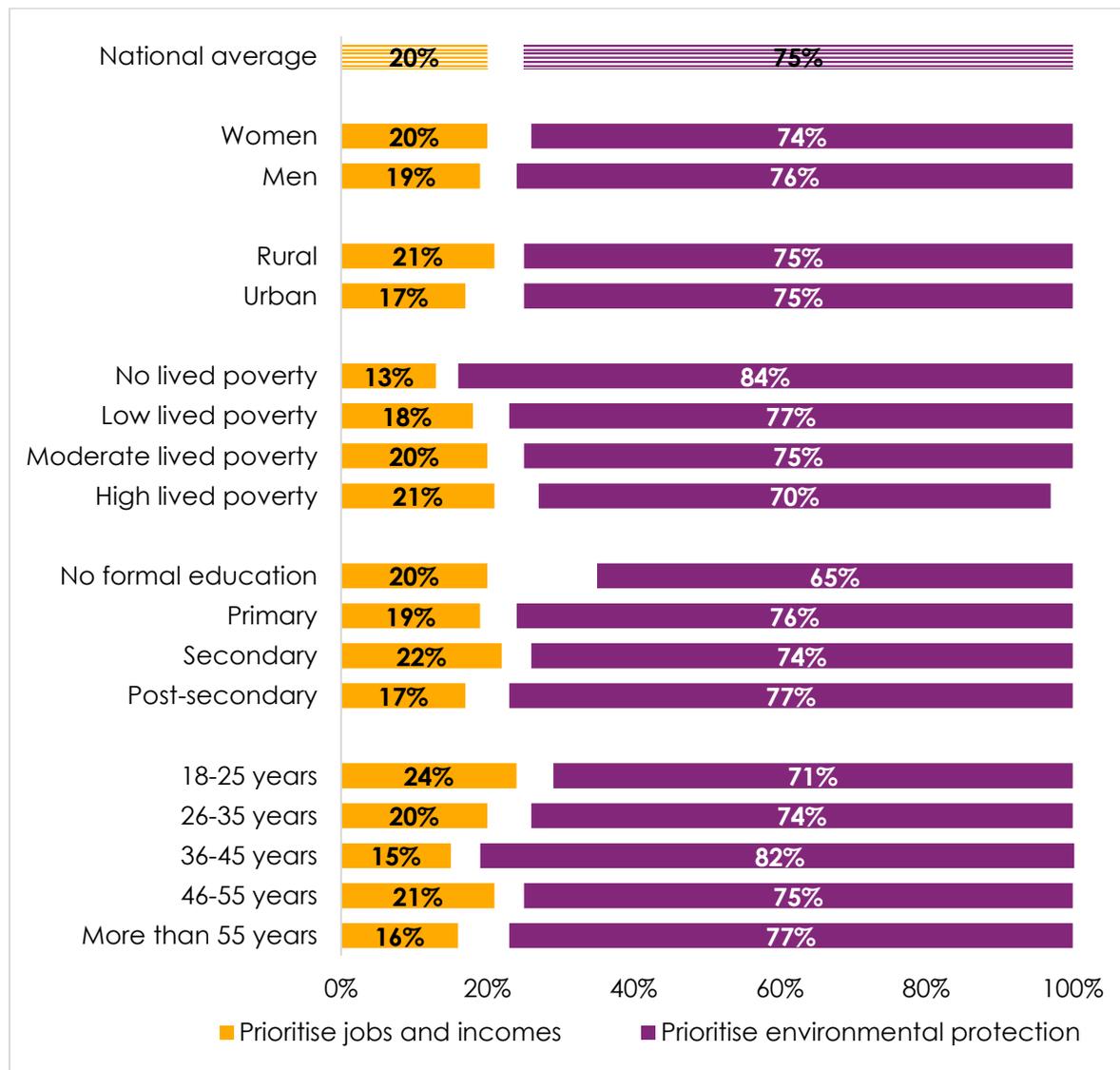


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?

Even if policies to protect the environment come into conflict with job creation or income generation, three-fourths (75%) of Kenyans say the government should prioritise environmental protection, including 52% who “strongly agree” with this approach (Figure 8). Only 20% of respondents say the government should focus more on creating jobs and increasing incomes even if doing so leads to greater environmental damage.

Support for prioritising environmental protection over jobs and incomes is somewhat weaker among citizens experiencing high lived poverty (70%) and those with no formal education (65%).

Figure 8: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021



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)

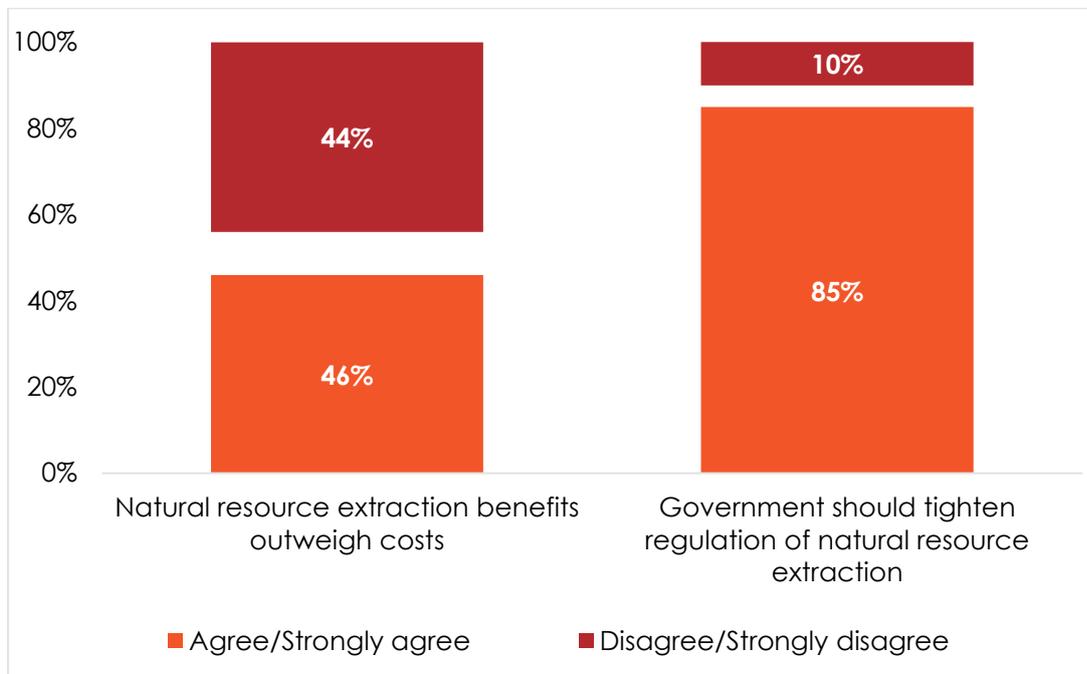
Natural resource extraction

Mining of soda ash, limestone, gold, and other minerals currently contributes only about 1% of Kenya's GDP, but its potential is estimated at 10% of GDP (Republic of Kenya, 2016; Onditi, 2022), which would make it a major source of revenue but possibly also a significant contributor to environmental pollution.

Almost half (46%) of Kenyans say the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to the economy in terms of revenue and job creation outweigh the industry's environmental costs, but about the same proportion (44%) disagree (Figure 9).

Opinions are less divided when it comes to regulating natural resource extraction: 85% of Kenyans want the government to tighten regulation to reduce the industry's negative impacts on the environment.

Figure 9: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Kenya | 2021



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:

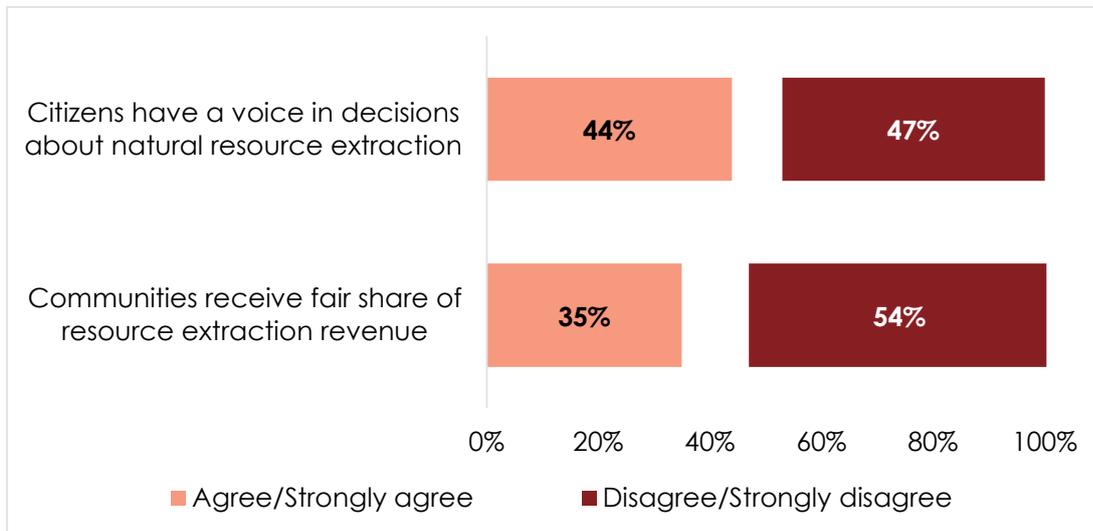
In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

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

But respondents are divided again in their assessments when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 10). While 44% of respondents say that people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, 47% think they don't.

And only three out of 10 citizens think local communities receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction, while a majority 54% disagree.

Figure 10: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Kenya | 2021



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

Ordinary Kenyans 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

Survey results show that many Kenyans are concerned about pollution and feel a personal responsibility to protect the environment. But they also expect “much more” from the government on this issue – even to the point of prioritising environmental protection over job creation should the two goals be in conflict. As one step to safeguard the environment, tighter regulation of natural resource extraction has overwhelming public support.

Poor citizens are particularly likely to see pollution as a serious problem and to give the government poor marks on protecting the environment, suggesting that mitigation of environmental degradation may be especially urgent in less affluent communities.

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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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