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Malawians expect 'much more' government action to protect the environment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 682 | Walleign S. Hassen

Summary

Malawi is known for its spectacular highlands and lakes, including Lake Malawi, which covers more than one-fifth of the country and boasts a unique diversity of fish. Lake Malawi National Park is a Natural World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 2023). Forest covers about one-fourth of Malawi's land.

Yet against this backdrop, environmental degradation is a mounting threat as high population density and growth interact with high levels of poverty, weak infrastructure and economic development, and climate change to increase vulnerability (World Bank, 2019, 2022).

Deforestation, which reduced Malawi's forest cover from 37% of its land area in 1990 to 24% in 2020 (World Bank, 2023), continues at an alarming rate to clear land for agriculture, feed the timber industry, and fuel the country's households – almost 90% of which don't have access to electricity (Vaughan, 2019; Global Forest Watch, 2023; Bhammar, 2019).

Solid waste management is also an environmental challenge in Malawi, particularly in cities. About 280,000 tons of solid waste remain uncollected in urban areas each year (Turpie, Letley, Ng'oma, & Moore, 2019). Meanwhile, 75,000 tons of plastic are produced in Malawi each year, of which 80% is single-use plastic that cannot be recycled (Griffin & Karasik, 2022; Lebreton & Andrady, 2019).

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

Findings show that deforestation is most widely seen as the top environmental issue facing rural communities in Malawi, while waste disposal is the top concern in cities. Most citizens consider pollution a serious problem in their communities. They divide primary responsibility for fighting pollution between ordinary citizens and the government, which they say needs to do "much more" than it is currently doing to protect the environment.

When it comes to natural resource extraction, Malawians offer mixed assessments of its benefits and costs, but most want the government to regulate the industry more tightly 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. 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 Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed 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

On pollution and environmental governance:

- More than two-thirds (69%) of Malawians say pollution is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
 - Rural residents cite deforestation as the most important environmental issue in their community, while urbanites prioritise trash disposal.
 - About seven in 10 citizens (69%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Malawi.
- Four in 10 Malawians (40%) say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean. Others assign this task primarily to the national government (26%) or to traditional leaders (21%).
- Most citizens (88%) say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 80% who say it should do “much more.”
- More than half (52%) of Malawians think the government should prioritise protecting the environment over creating jobs and increasing incomes.

On natural resource extraction:

- Malawians are closely divided as to whether the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution.
 - But a large majority (78%) say the government should regulate natural resource extraction more tightly to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

Pollution and environmental governance

Pollution: The scope of the problem

More than two-thirds (69%) of Malawians consider pollution in their communities a “somewhat serious” (28%) or “very serious” (40%) problem (Figure 1).¹

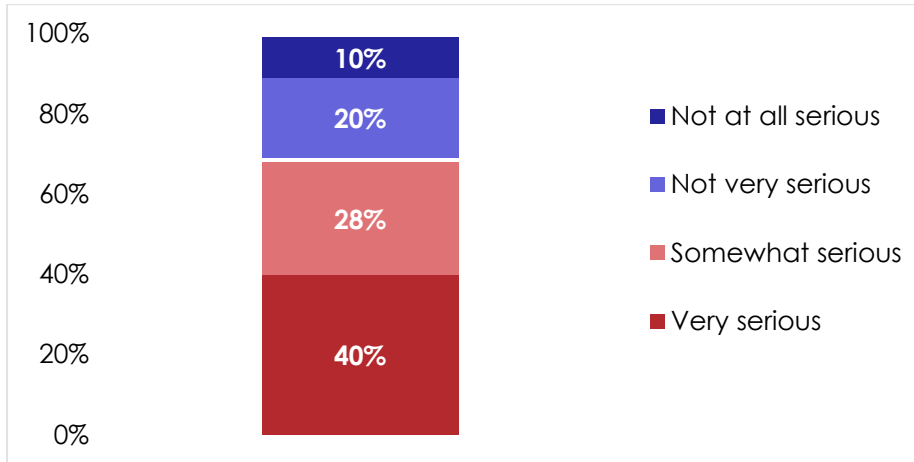
The perception of pollution as a serious problem increases with one’s experience of poverty, ranging from 63% among economically better-off citizens (those with low or no lived poverty) to 74% among those with high lived poverty.² Urbanites are more concerned about pollution

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. 40% “very serious” and 28% “somewhat serious” sum to 69%).

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).

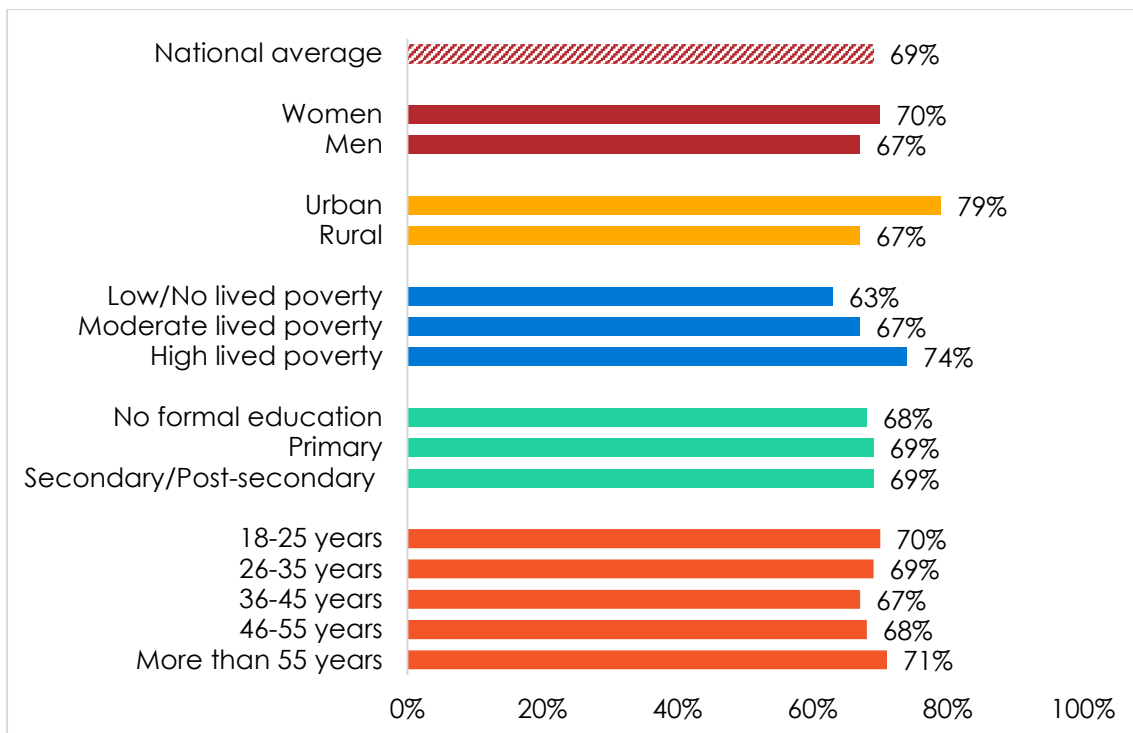
than rural residents (79% vs. 67%). Different age groups and education levels are fairly similar in their assessments of the extent of pollution in their community (Figure 2).

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



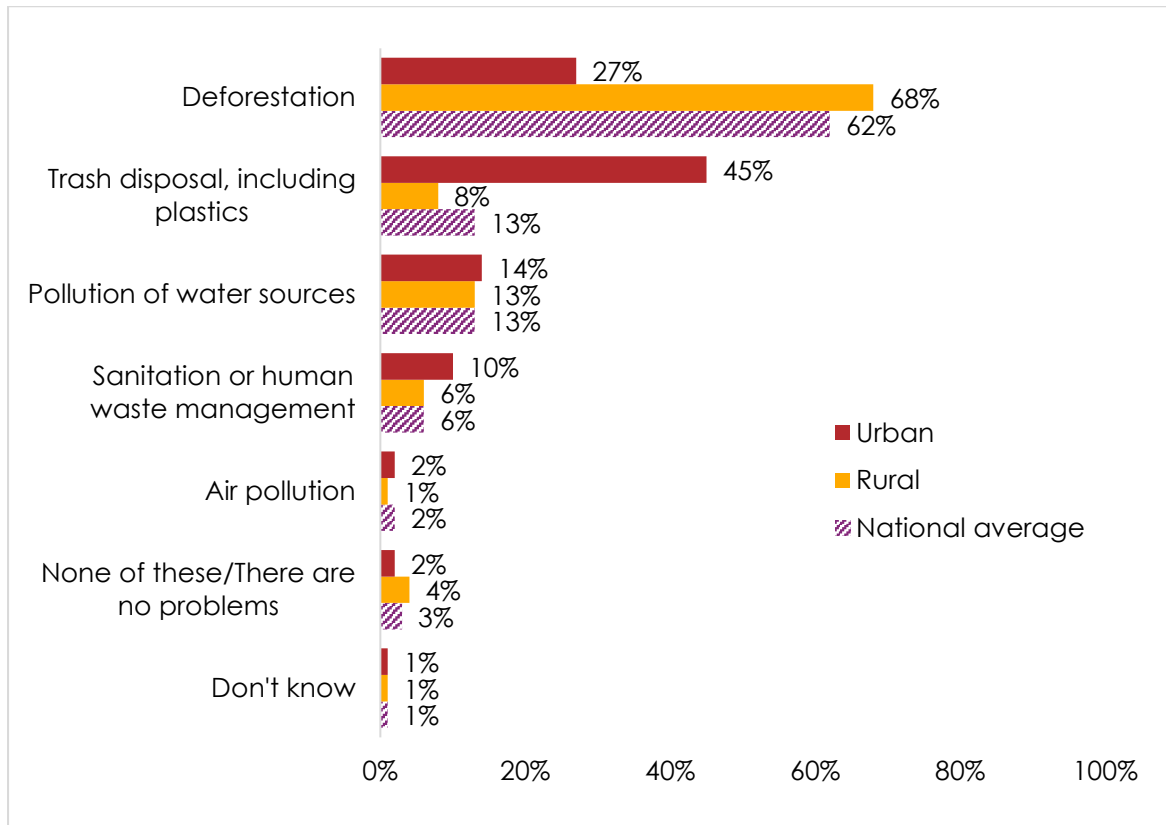
Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

Overall, Malawians count deforestation as the most important environmental issue in their community (cited by 62% of respondents), followed by trash disposal (13%) and pollution of water sources (13%) (Figure 3). But priorities differ sharply in cities and rural areas: Rural

residents cite deforestation more than twice as often as urbanites (68% vs. 27%), whereas trash disposal ranks No. 1 in urban areas (45%, vs. 8% in rural areas). Human waste management also concerns more urban than rural residents (10% vs. 6%).

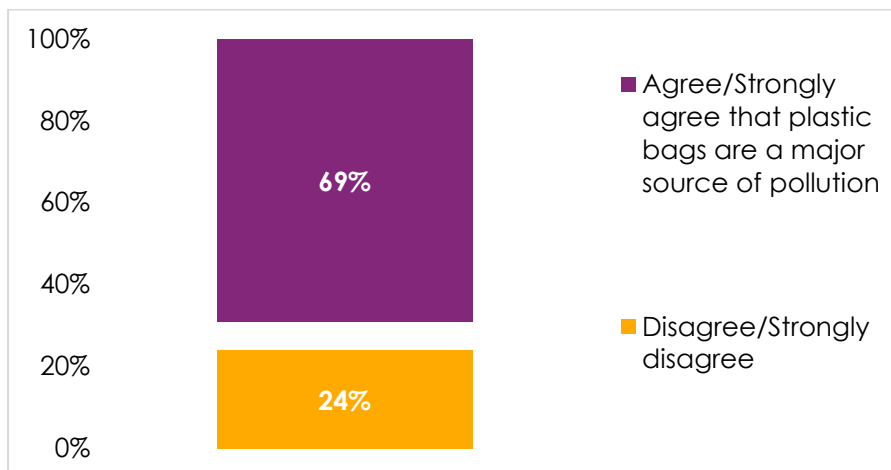
More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens “agree” or “strongly agree” that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Malawi (Figure 4).

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



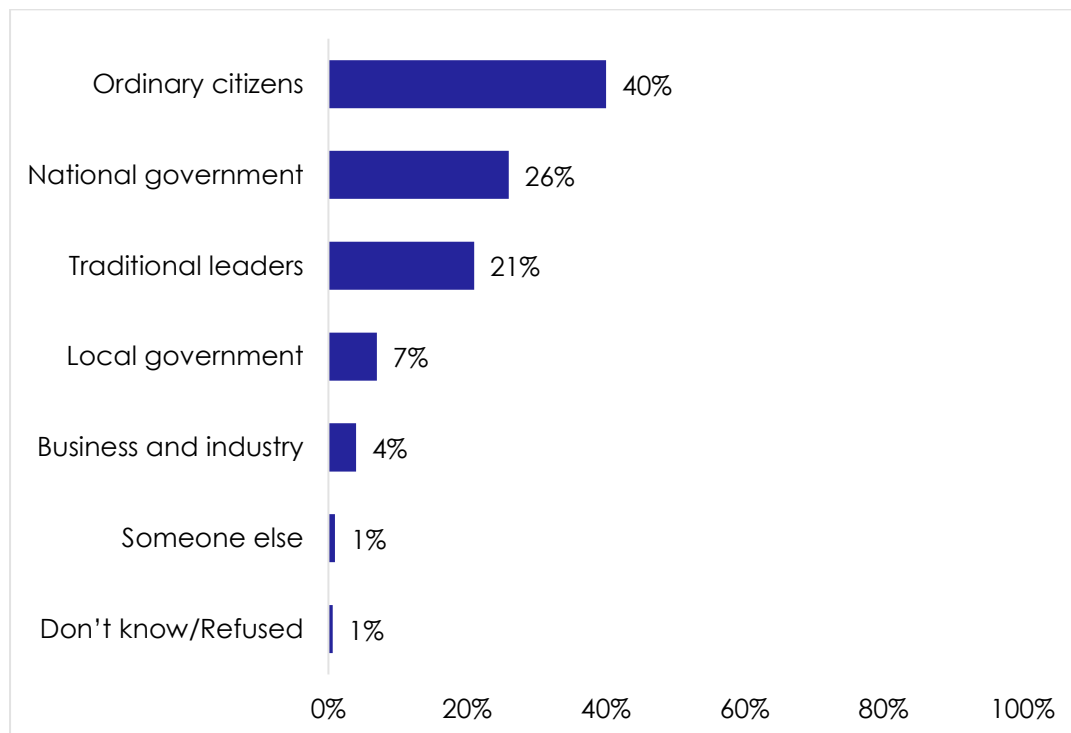
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country?

Protecting the environment

Actions to reduce environmental pollution can range from making small adjustments in day-to-day lifestyles to once-in-a-generation game-changers – from shifting to reusable shopping bags to dismantling a coal-burning industry.

For a significant number of Malawians, protecting the environment starts at home: Four in 10 respondents (40%) say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). One-fourth (26%) consider this the role of the national government, and 21% would assign this responsibility to traditional leaders. Far fewer see it as primarily the responsibility of local government (7%) or business and industry (4%).

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



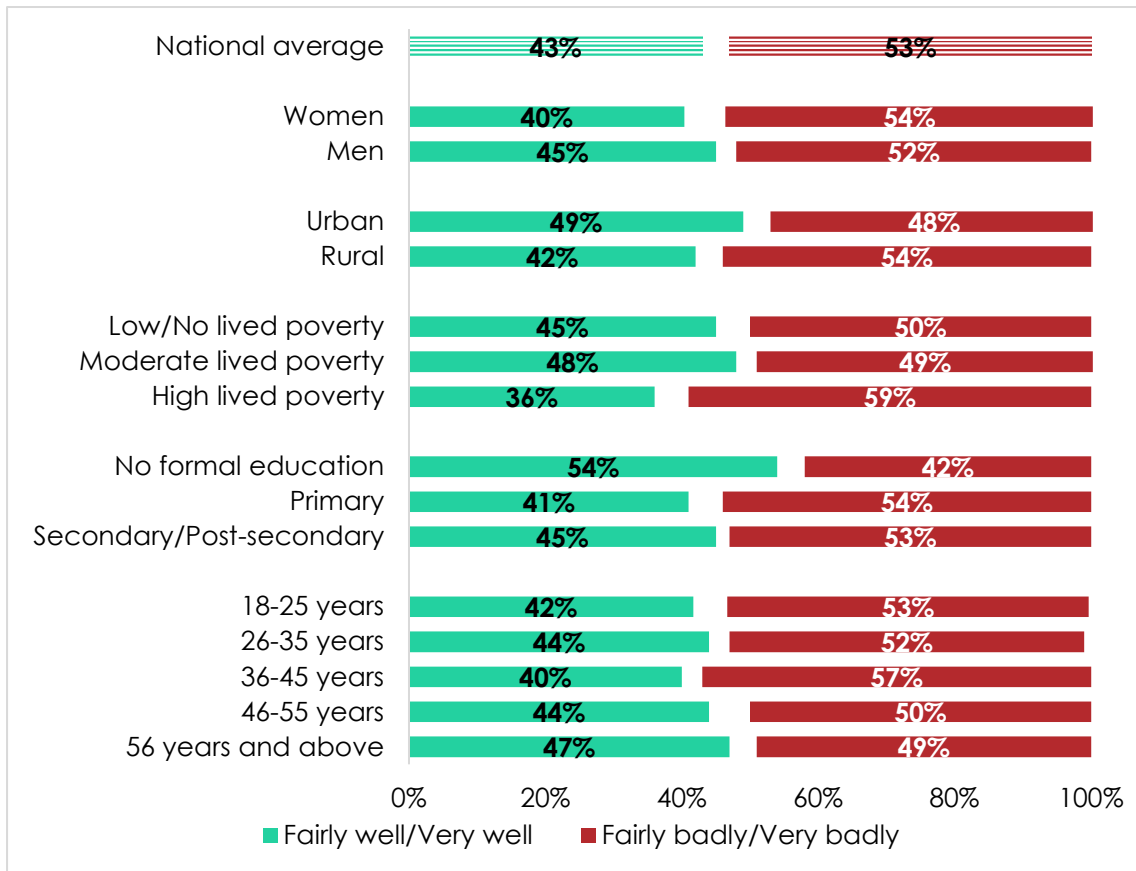
Respondents were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping your community clean?

Only about four in 10 citizens (43%) think the government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while more than half (53%) rate its efforts poorly (Figure 6).

Favourable ratings are more common in cities (49%) than in rural (42%) areas, and among men compared to women (45% vs. 40%). Citizens with no formal education (54%) are more likely to approve of the government's performance on environmental protection than those with at least primary schooling (41%-45%).

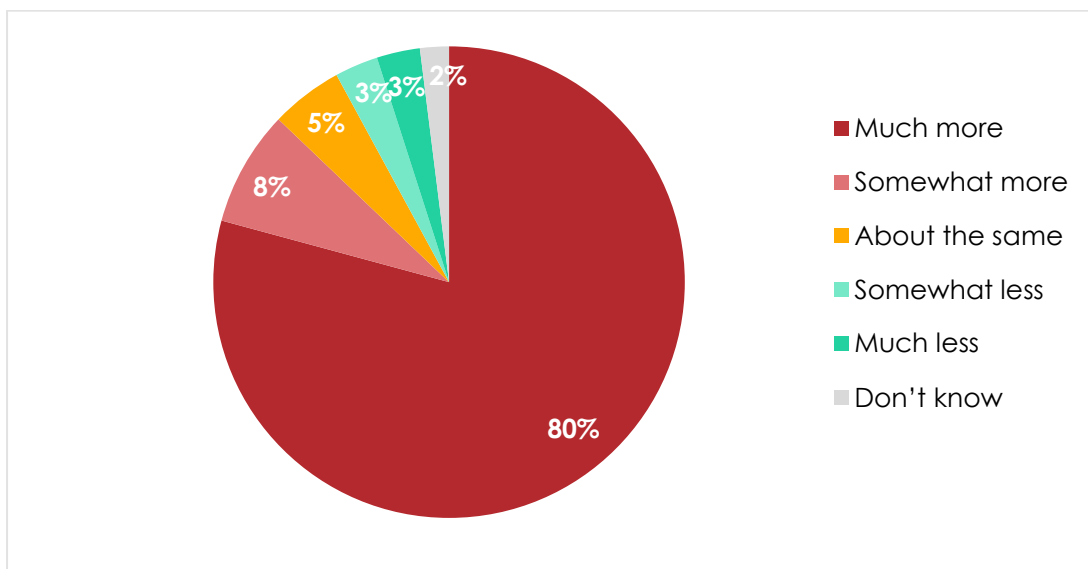
While government performance ratings are mixed, an overwhelming majority (88%) of Malawians say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including fully 80% who think it should be doing "much more" (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | 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: Reducing pollution and protecting the environment?

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

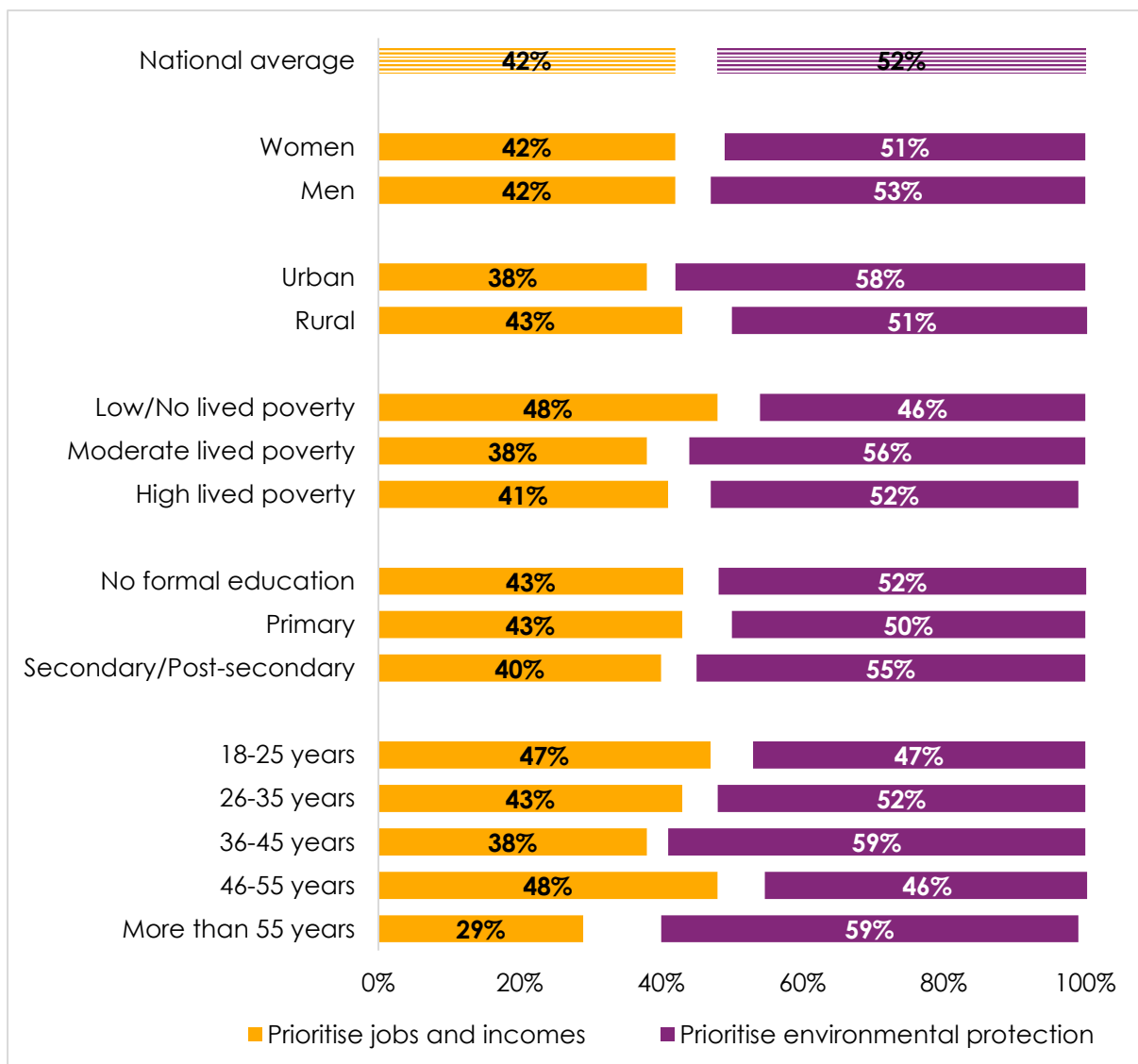


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?

More than half (52%) of Malawians would prioritise protecting the environment “even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives,” while 42% say reducing pollution or other environmental damage must take a back seat to job and income creation (Figure 8).

Economically better-off citizens (48%) are more likely to prioritise job creation over environmental protection than citizens experiencing moderate (38%) or high (41%) lived poverty. But protecting the environment rates more highly among more educated respondents (55%, vs. 50%-52% among those with primary schooling or less) and among urban residents (58%, vs. 51% among rural residents).

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

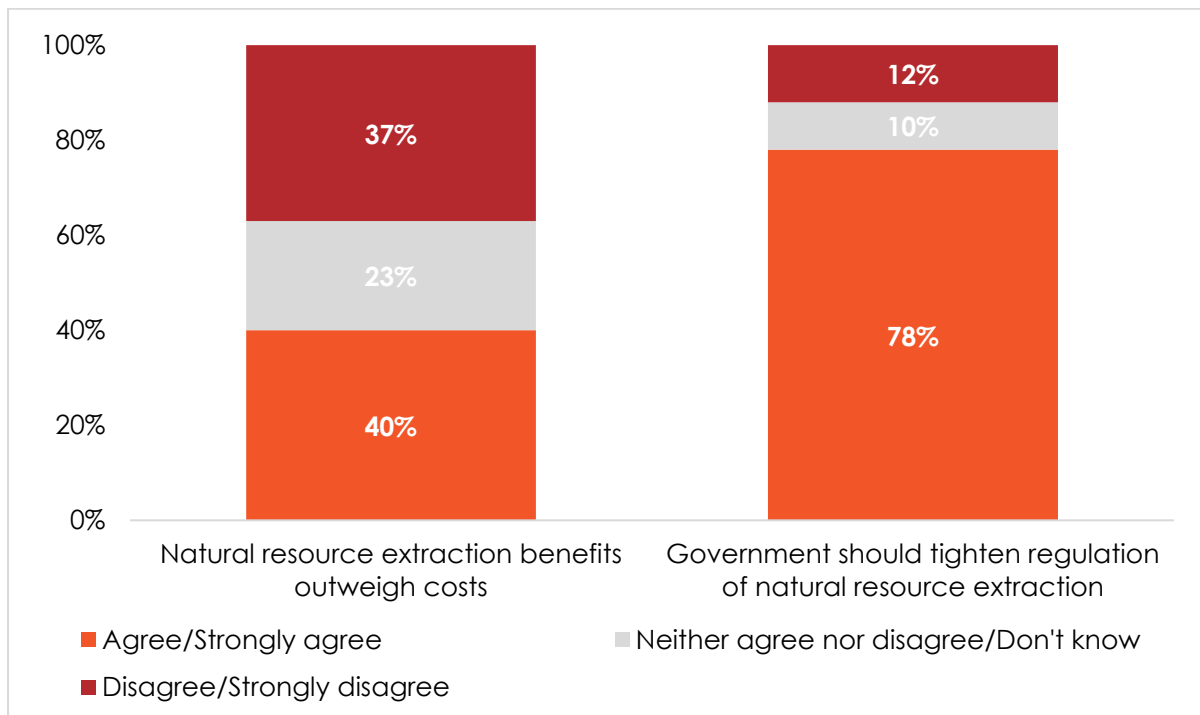
Natural resource extraction

Although the mining industry contributes less than 1% of Malawi's gross domestic product, the country has several minerals with economic potential (including uranium, phosphates, and titanium), and oil and gas exploration is underway in Lake Malawi (International Trade Administration, 2022).

Malawians are divided as to whether the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. While 40% of Malawians "agree" or "strongly agree" that the benefits exceed the negative impact, almost as many (37%) disagree with this assessment, and 23% say they "don't know" or don't take a position (Figure 9).

However, a large majority (78%) of citizens want the government to regulate the natural resource extraction industry more tightly to reduce its negative impact on the environment.

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

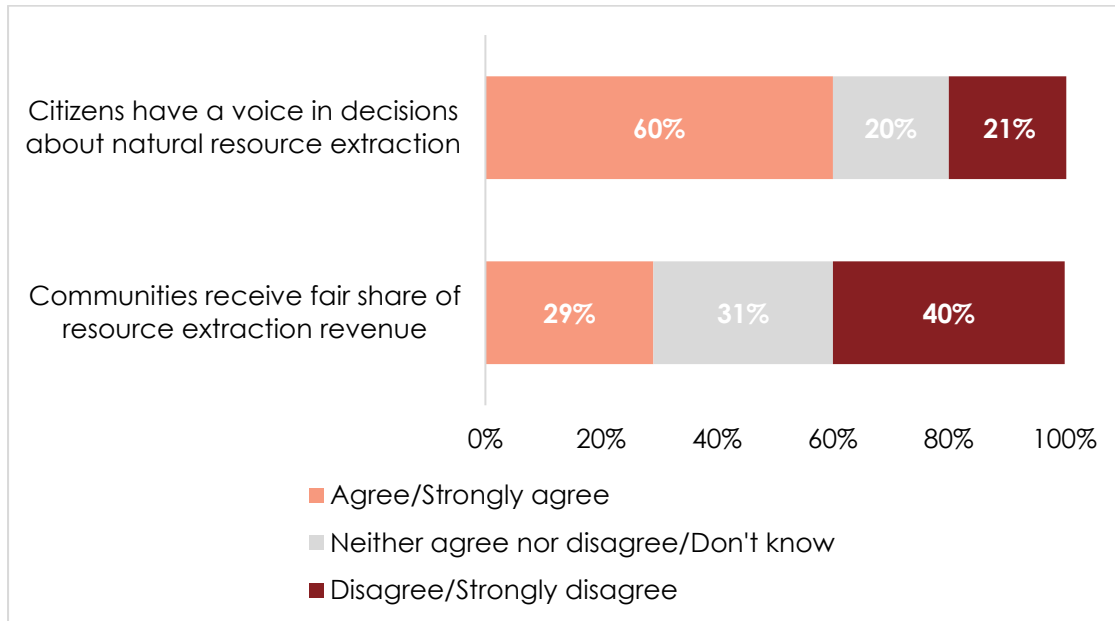
In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

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

A majority (60%) of respondents say ordinary people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while 21% disagree (Figure 10).

But only 29% of respondents think local communities receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction. Four in 10 (40%) say communities don't share fairly in revenues, while 31% say they "don't know" or don't take a position.

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



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

Ordinary Malawians 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

Malawians express high levels of concern about environmental degradation, rating deforestation and waste disposal as the most urgent issues and pollution as a serious problem in their communities.

While many are willing to take personal responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean, an overwhelming majority expect “much more” action from the government to protect the environment. More than half prioritise the environment over jobs and incomes – a striking statement in a country where economic opportunities are severely limited.

A large majority also favour tighter regulation of the natural resource extraction industry to reduce damage to the environment.

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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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