



## **Kenyans want more government action to fight climate change, and stand ready to help**

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 696 | Simon Templer Kodiaga**

### **Summary**

Kenya has been a leader in the fight against climate change, putting in place a Climate Change Act (2016) and policies to promote climate-resilient development, clean and efficient energy, reforestation, and other adaptive strategies (USAID, 2022). President William Ruto has spoken passionately about the need for action, including greater investment to help African nations confront a threat for which developed nations are largely responsible (Din-Kariuki, 2023).

In September, Kenya is hosting the Africa Climate Summit and Africa Climate Week 2023, one of four regional "climate weeks" in preparation for the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP 28 in November-December (United Nations Climate Change, 2023).

Kenya itself is highly vulnerable to climate change, with a national economy that is dependent on rainfed agriculture and tourism – both very sensitive to increasing temperatures, climate variability, and extreme weather events. The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (2021) Index ranks Kenya 150<sup>th</sup> out of 185 countries, meaning only 35 countries are less prepared for the climate risks they face.

Over the past decade, the country has experienced extensive climate variability, with distressing socioeconomic effects on the population (Whitaker, 2023). After five consecutive seasons of poor rainfall, the number of Kenyans affected by drought and hunger has risen from 4.2 million to 6 million, according to the latest report by the Kenya Food Security Steering Group (Chelangat & Ngotho, 2023). The report states that more than 970,000 children below the age of 5 require urgent treatment for malnutrition, up from 884,000 reported in July 2022. The number of Kenyans requiring humanitarian assistance has increased from 3.5 million to 4.4 million, a clear indication of the impact that drought has had on food security in arid and semi-arid parts of the country.

Similarly, a report by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network warned that households in 15 counties in Kenya with a total population of more than 10 million are at risk of acute hunger this year, extending the ravages witnessed through 2022 due to a lack of rain (Mburu, 2023).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Kenyans' experiences and perceptions of climate change.

Findings show that despite the government's prominent positions on climate change, only about half of Kenyans are aware of the problem. Among those who have heard of climate change, most say it is making life worse and needs immediate government action, even if it's expensive. Citizens also stand ready to do their part. In fact, most Kenyans say "a lot more" action is needed from citizens as well as from the government, developed countries, and business and industry to limit the ravages of climate change.

## 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

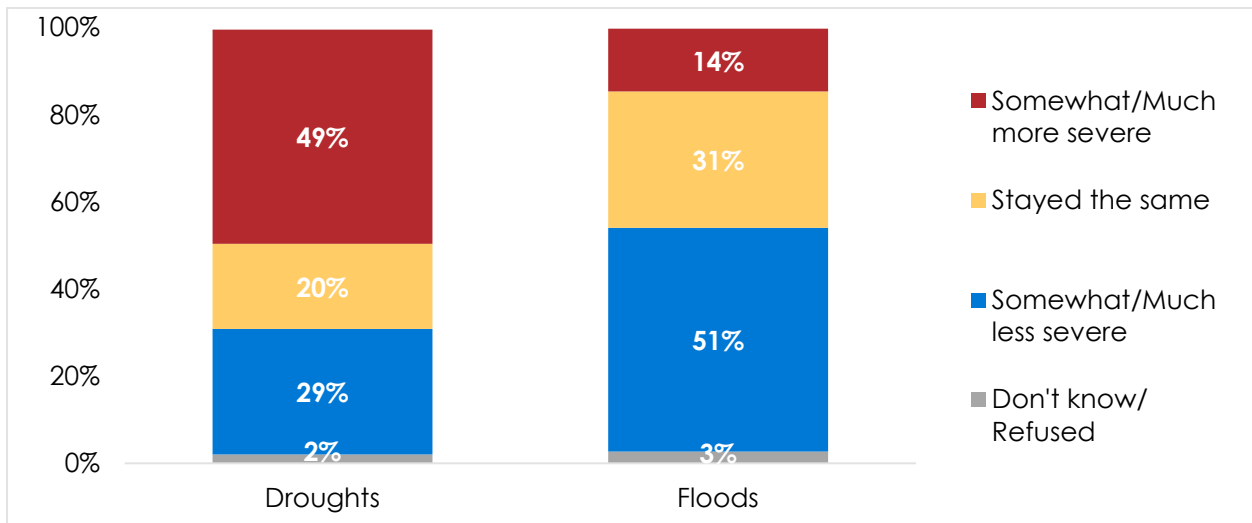
- About half (49%) of Kenyans say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” in their region over the past decade. Only 14% say the same about floods.
- Slightly more than a half (53%) of Kenyans say they have heard of climate change, a 17-percentage-point drop from 70% in 2019.
  - Climate-change awareness is higher among men (59%), urban residents (57%), economically well-off citizens (62%), and highly educated respondents (71%) than among their demographic counterparts.
- Among those who are aware of climate change:
  - More than eight in 10 (83%) say it is making life in Kenya worse.
  - Three-fourths (76%) believe that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change, and 81% want the government to take immediate action to limit climate change, even at considerable economic cost.
  - Respondents assign the primary responsibility for fighting climate change to citizens (44%) and the government (43%).
  - Large majorities say “a lot more” effort to fight climate change is needed from the government (74%), business and industry (68%), developed countries (65%), and citizens (59%).
- Only 41% of Kenyans say their government is doing a good job of fighting climate change.

## Severity of extreme weather conditions

Before being asked about climate change, survey respondents were asked about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. About half (49%) of Kenyans say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” in their region over the past 10 years. Three in 10 (29%) think they have become less severe, while 20% see no change (Figure 1).

When it comes to floods, half (51%) report that they have become “somewhat” or “much” less severe, while only 14% say they have worsened.

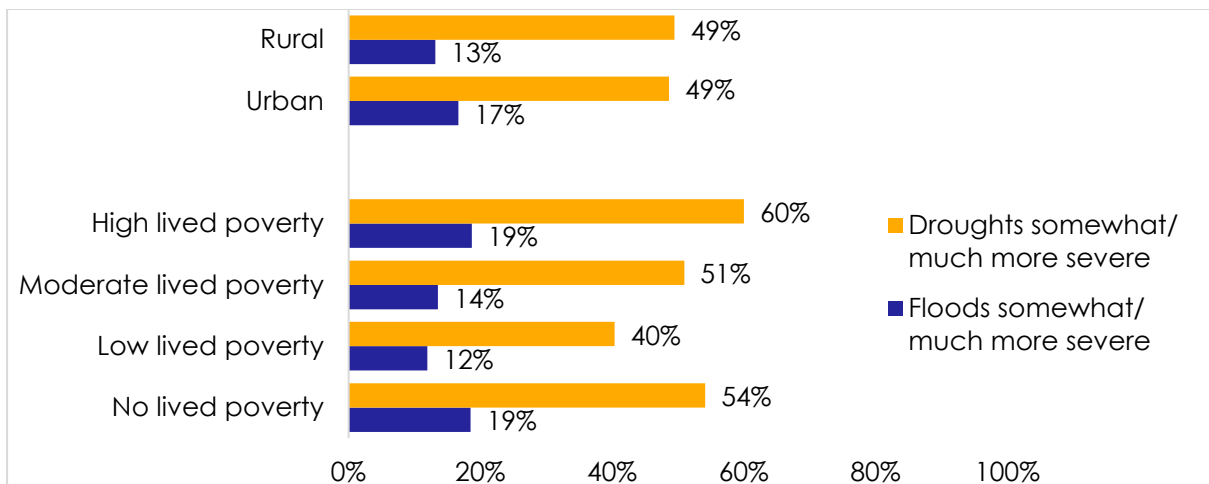
**Figure 1: Severity of droughts and floods | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Urban and rural residents concur in their experience of these climatic events. Respondents who are relatively poor (those experiencing high lived poverty<sup>1</sup>) are somewhat more likely to see increasingly severe drought (60%) than their better-off counterparts (40%-54%) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: More severe droughts and floods | by urban-rural residence and lived poverty | Kenya | 2021**



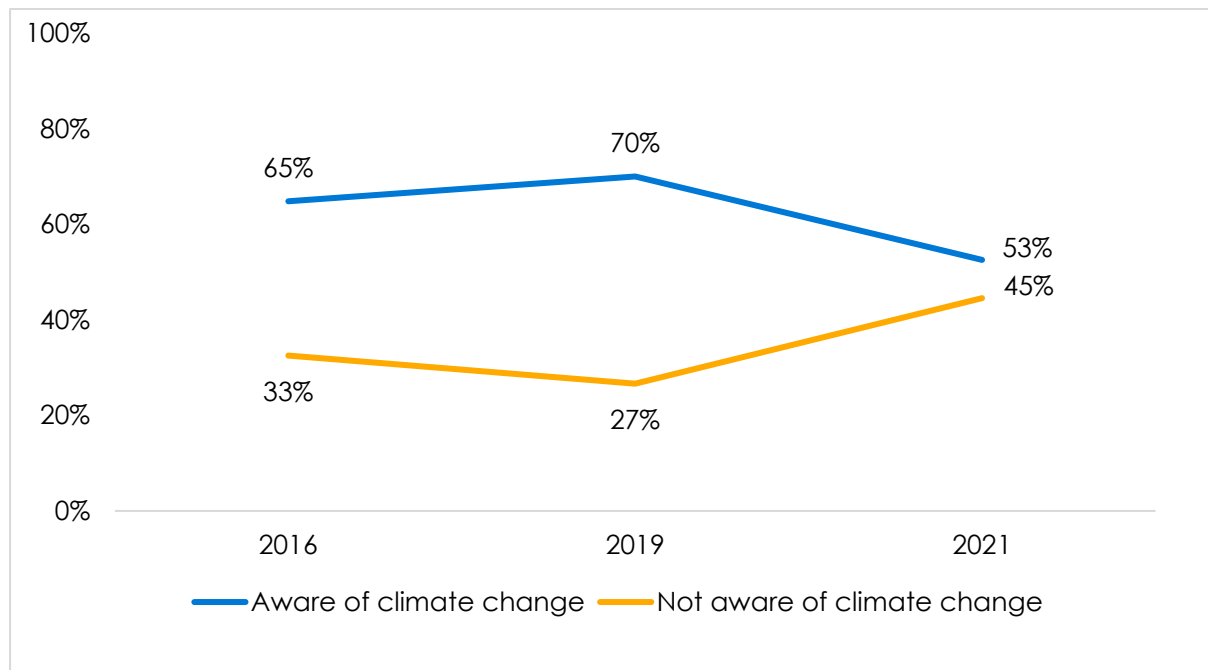
**Respondents were asked:** In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? (% who say "somewhat more severe" or "much more severe")

<sup>1</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).

### Awareness of climate change

Slightly more than half of Kenyans (53%) say they have heard of climate change. This is a 17-percentage-point decline compared to 2019 (70%) (Figure 3). This decline may reflect fluctuating levels of acute awareness of weather events (e.g. in response to media reports) combined with a tenuous understanding of climate change.

**Figure 3: Awareness of climate change | Kenya | 2017-2021**

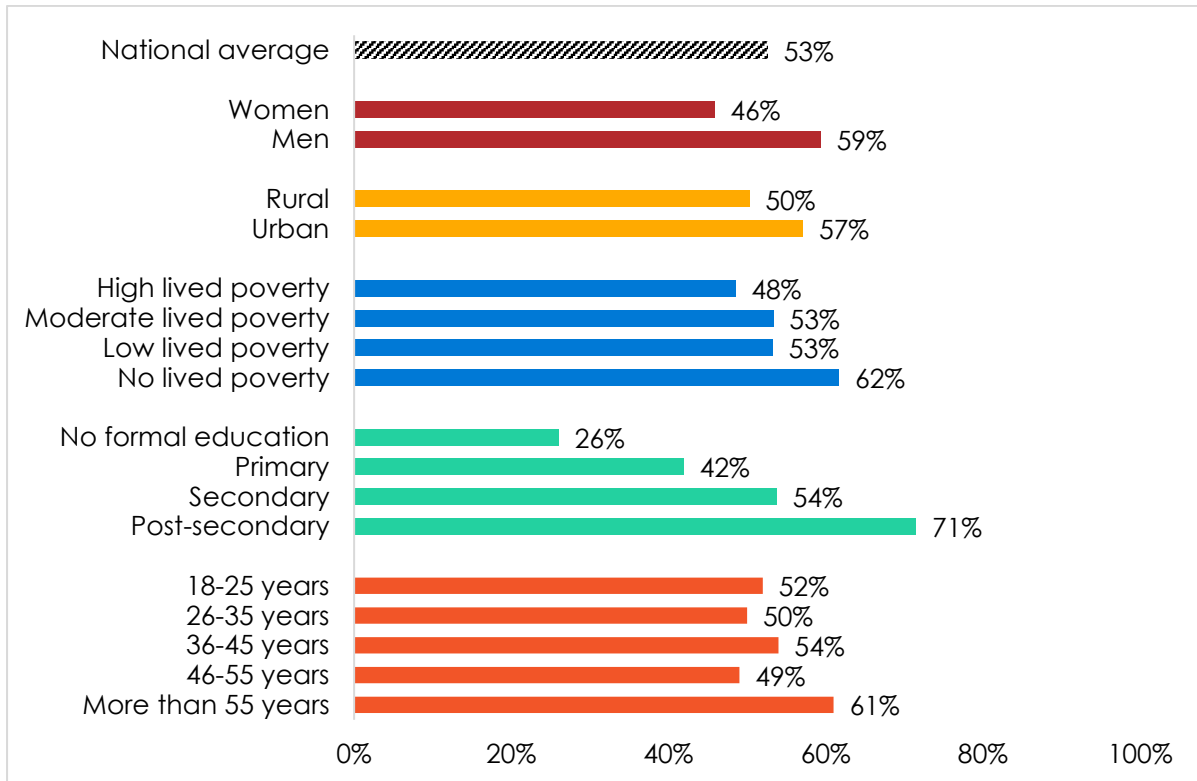


**Respondents were asked:** *Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet?*

Although drought and flooding have immediate consequences for agriculture in rural areas, awareness of climate change is lower among rural residents than urban residents (50% vs. 57%) (Figure 4). Economically well-off citizens (62%) are more likely to be familiar with the term “climate change” than those experiencing high lived poverty (48%). As expected, awareness increases with an individual's level of education, with the most educated respondents (71%) almost three times as likely to have heard of climate change as those with no formal schooling (26%). More men (59%) than women (46%) are aware of the concept.

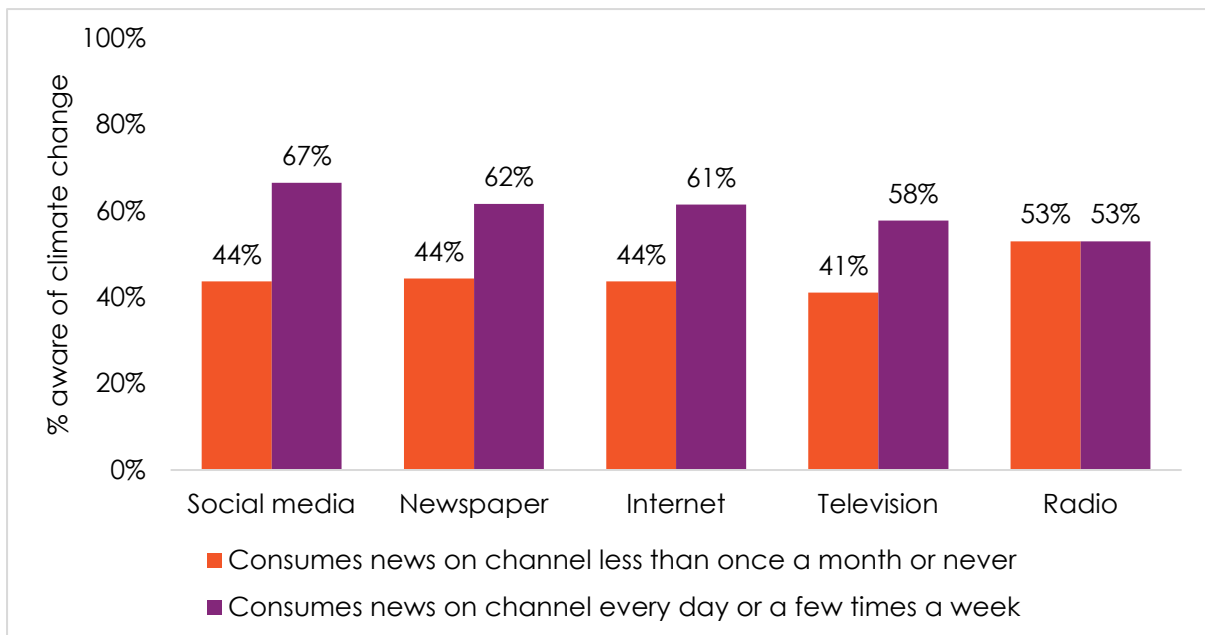
Awareness of climate change increases with respondents' news consumption. Those who get news “every day” or “a few times a week” from social media, newspapers, the Internet, or television are significantly more likely to be familiar with climate change than those who use these news channels “less than once a month” or “never,” reaching gaps of 23 percentage points for social media (Figure 5). Radio shows no such difference between regular consumers and those who rarely or never tune in.

**Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

**Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | by news media consumption | Kenya | 2021**

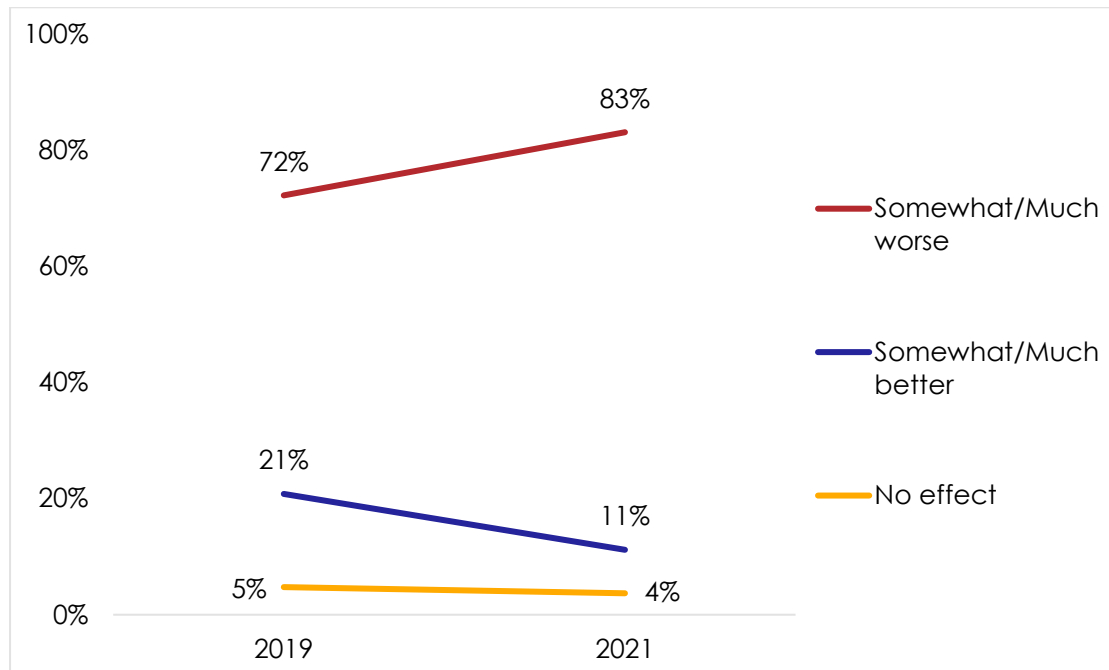


**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

## Effects of climate change

Among citizens who are aware of climate change, more than eight in 10 (83%) say it is making life in Kenya “somewhat worse” or “much worse,” a significant increase compared to 2019 (72%). One in 10 (11%) say it is making life better (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Effects of climate change | Kenya | 2019-2022**

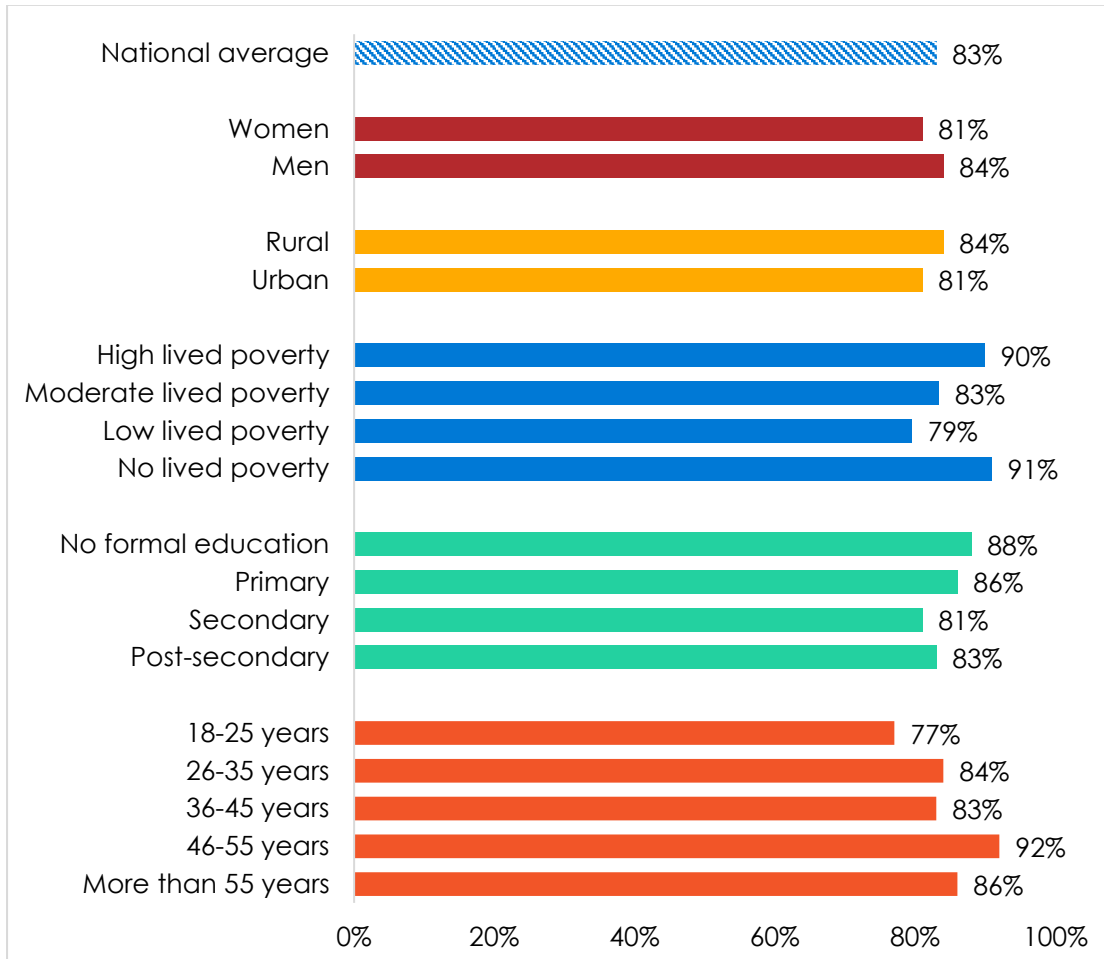


**Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked:** Do you think climate change is making life in Kenya better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Men and women differ little in their assessments of the impact of climate change, and the same is true of rural and urban residents (Figure 7). Both the poorest (90%) and the wealthiest (91%) respondents are highly likely to say that climate change is making life worse, as are older respondents (86%-92%).

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**Figure 7: Climate change is making life worse** | by demographic group | Kenya  
 | 2021



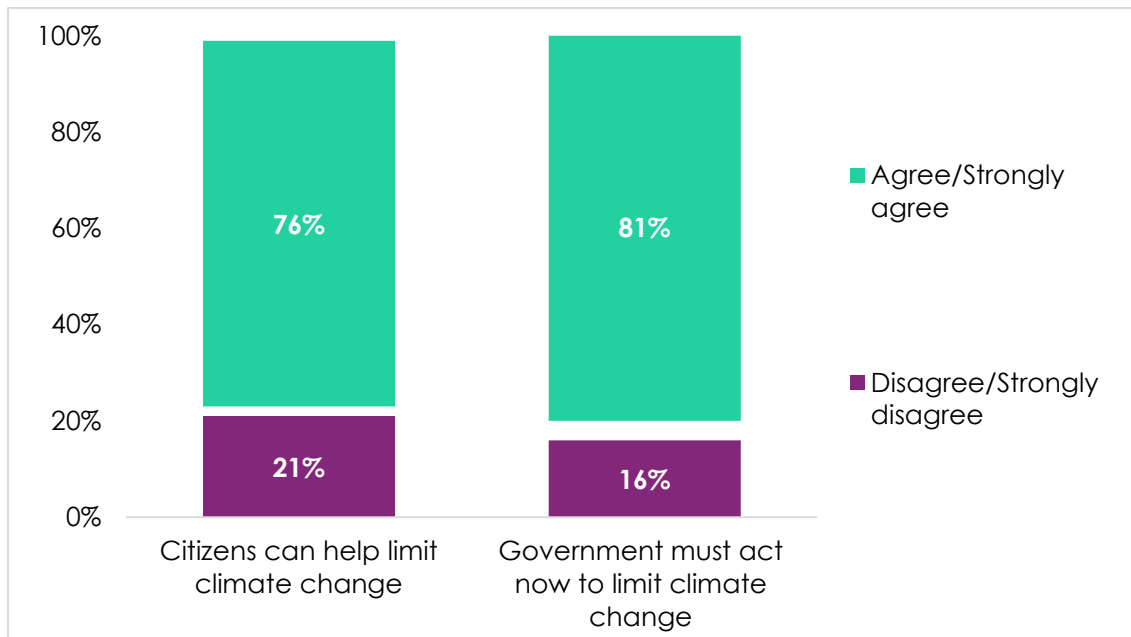
**Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked:** Do you think climate change is making life in Kenya better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

### Fighting climate change

For Kenyans, addressing climate change is a collective responsibility. Three-fourths (76%) of respondents who are aware of climate change believe that citizens can help curb climate change (Figure 8). And an even larger majority (81%) want their government to take steps now to limit climate change, "even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy."

In fact, in Kenyans' eyes, citizens (44%) and the government (43%) share primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact. Very few survey respondents assign this responsibility primarily to business and industry (5%), developed countries (4%), and traditional leaders (3%) (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Limiting climate change | Kenya | 2021**



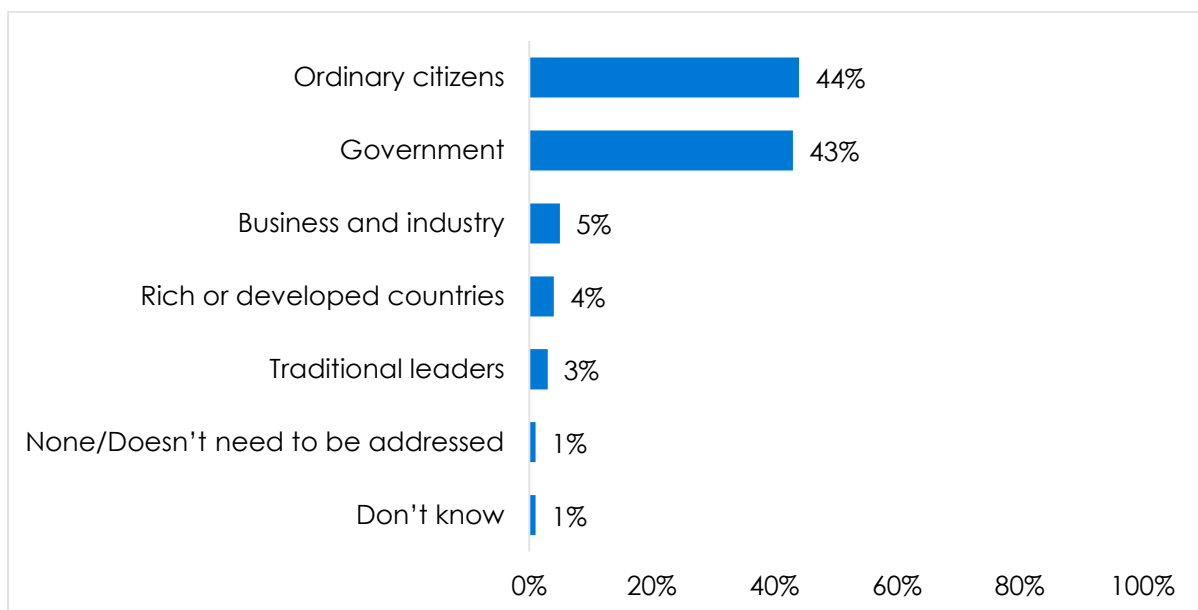
**Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

Ordinary Kenyan can play a role in limiting climate change.

It is important for our government to take steps now to limit climate change in the future, even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy.

(Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

**Figure 9: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | Kenya | 2021**

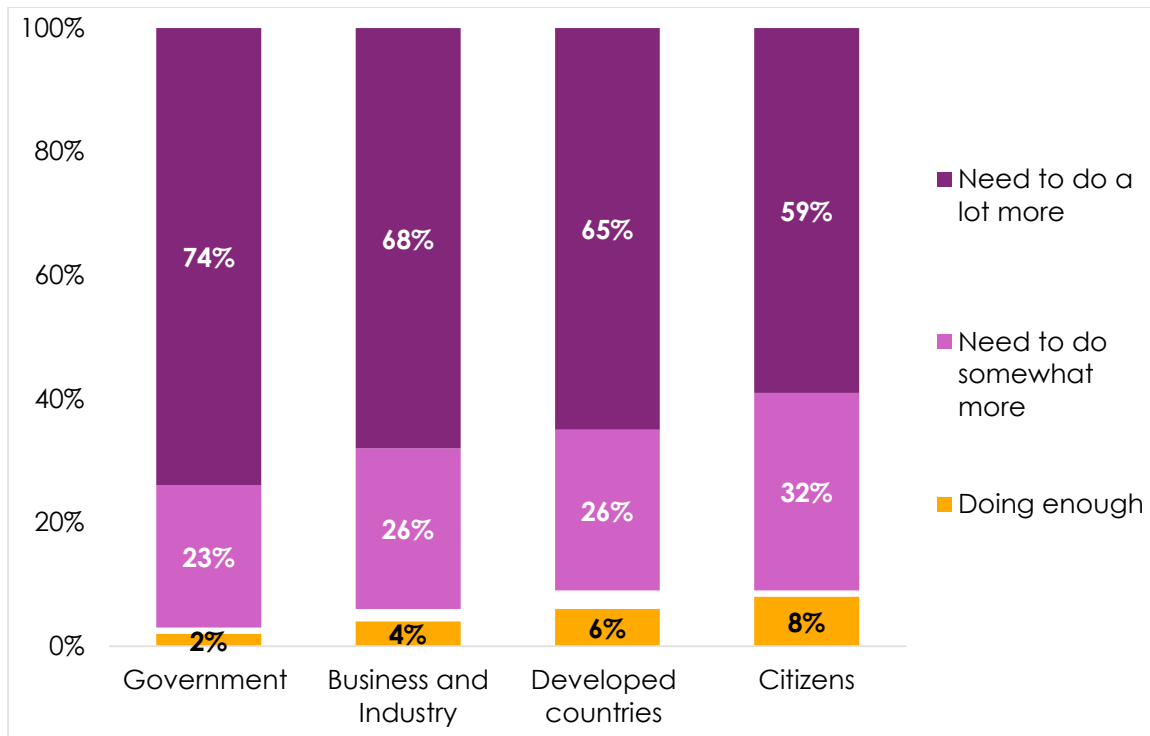


**Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked:** Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)



Overwhelmingly, Kenyans believe more needs to be done, including large majorities who say the government (74%), business and industry (68%), developed countries (65%), and citizens (58%) need to do “a lot more” to limit climate change (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | Kenya | 2021**

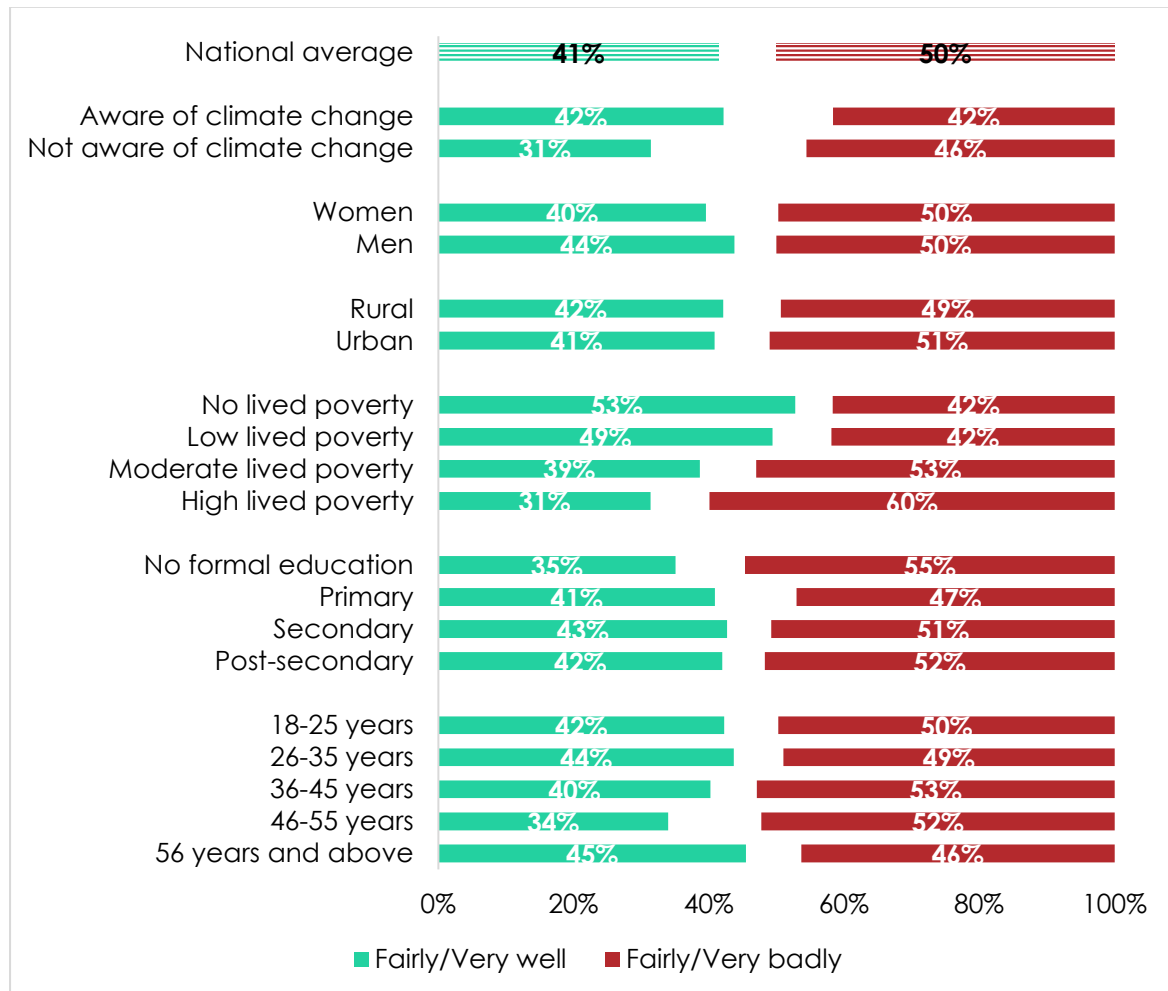


**Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked:** Do you think each of the following are doing enough to limit climate change, or do they need to do more, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

When asked to assess how well the government is addressing the problem of climate change, only 41% of all survey respondents describe the government's performance as “fairly” or “very” good, while half (50%) give the government a failing grade on this issue (Figure 11).

Negative assessments of the government's performance on climate change are particularly common among those experiencing high lived poverty (60%), and citizens with no formal education (55%). Approval is somewhat higher among those who say they have heard of climate change (42%) than those who say they haven't (31%).

**Figure 11: Government performance in handling climate change | 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: Addressing the problem of climate change?

## Conclusion

Among Kenyans familiar with climate change, large majorities say it is making life worse and requires immediate government action, even if such policies and programmes are expensive, cause job losses, or take a toll on the economy.

A large majority of Kenyans also believe that citizens and the government have major roles to play in mitigating the adverse impacts of climate change. But overwhelming majorities also say they expect greater efforts by other stakeholders, including more developed countries and the private sector.

Since almost half of Kenyans say they have not yet heard of climate change, one step toward building momentum for climate action may be targeted interventions to educate more citizens about the threats it poses.

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This dispatch was produced as part of an Afrobarometer writing workshop.

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.

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 Commission, the Mastercard Foundation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the World Bank Group, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Luminare.

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 696 | 31 August 2023**