

Cameroonians say government must do 'much more' to protect the environment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 699 | Baba Adou

Summary

Cameroon possesses abundant natural resources, including oil and gas, mineral deposits, high-quality timber, and an enormous range of flora and fauna. But if its natural and cultural diversity has earned it the title of "Africa in miniature," the country also shares many of the environmental challenges present elsewhere on the continent (World Bank, 2023a; UNEP, 2023).

Deforestation claimed more than 1.5 million hectares between 2001 and 2020, threatening the country's rich biodiversity (World Bank, 2022; Manigha, 2023). Population growth, urbanisation, and industrialisation drive land degradation and water and air pollution, exacerbated in the anglophone region by the country's ongoing socio-political crisis (Bang, 2022).

Cameroon is also struggling with waste management, in particular plastic pollution. According to some estimates, the country generates about 600,000 tonnes of plastic waste every year (Landfill Solutions, 2022).

In 2012, Cameroon implemented a ban on the production, sale, and use of non-biodegradable plastic bags. However, despite this ban, significant quantities of plastic bags are smuggled into the country across its 1,690 km border with Nigeria (Kindzeka, 2023).

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

Findings show that most Cameroonians are concerned about pollution in their community. They rank deforestation, human waste management, and trash disposal as their most important local pollution problems. They consider environmental protection a responsibility they share with their national and local governments but say the government must do "much more" on this issue.

A majority of citizens say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh its costs, such as pollution, but most also call for tighter regulation of the industry to limit 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 Cameroon, led by Cible Etudes & Conseil, interviewed 1,200 Cameroonian adults in 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 carried out in Cameroon in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

On pollution and environmental governance:

- More than seven in 10 Cameroonians (72%) say pollution is a serious problem in their community.
 - Citizens cite deforestation (23%), human waste management (23%), trash disposal (22%), and pollution of water sources (19%) as the most important environmental issues in their community.
 - Three-fourths (76%) of respondents say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Cameroon.
- Cameroonians believe the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean falls on ordinary citizens (36%), the national government (26%), and the local government (21%).
- A majority (57%) of citizens think the government is doing an inadequate job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment. Fully two-thirds (67%) say it needs to do “much more.”
- If environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, 52% of citizens say the government should prioritise the environment, while 42% disagree.

On natural resource extraction:

- A majority (57%) of Cameroonians say the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its negative impacts, such as pollution.
- But more than eight in 10 (81%) want the government to tighten regulation of the resource-extraction industry to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.
- Majorities think that ordinary people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction (61%) and that local communities receive a fair share of the sector's revenues (55%).

Pollution and environmental governance

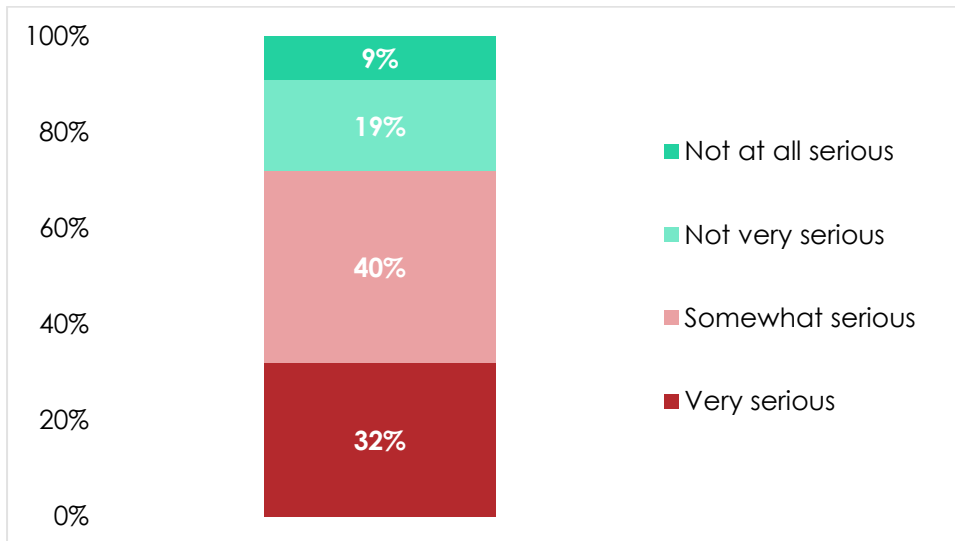
Pollution: The scope of the problem

Almost three-fourths (72%) of Cameroonians say pollution is a serious problem in their community, including 32% who describe it as a “very serious” problem (Figure 1).

Urban residents are more concerned about pollution than rural residents (77% vs. 67%) (Figure 2). Concern about pollution is higher among individuals with advanced education (73%-76%) than among those with primary schooling or less (65%). The poor are also more likely to report that pollution is a serious problem in their community: 76% of respondents experiencing high lived poverty¹ voice this concern, compared to 67% of those with low or no lived poverty.

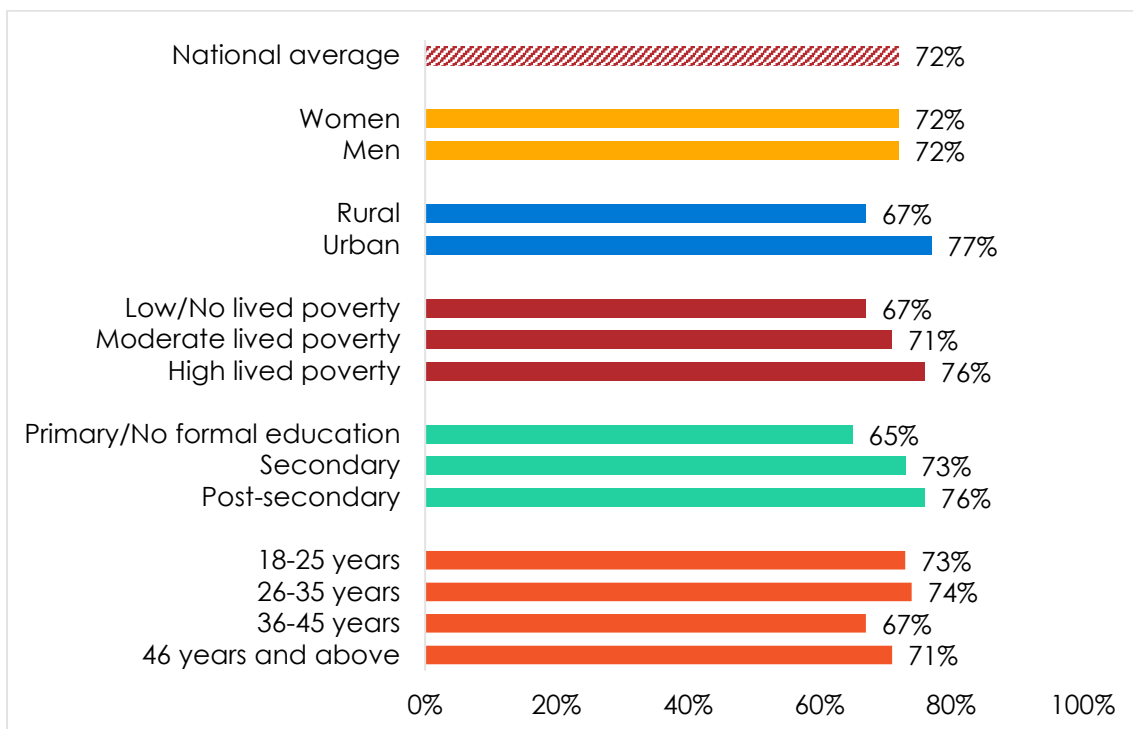
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough

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



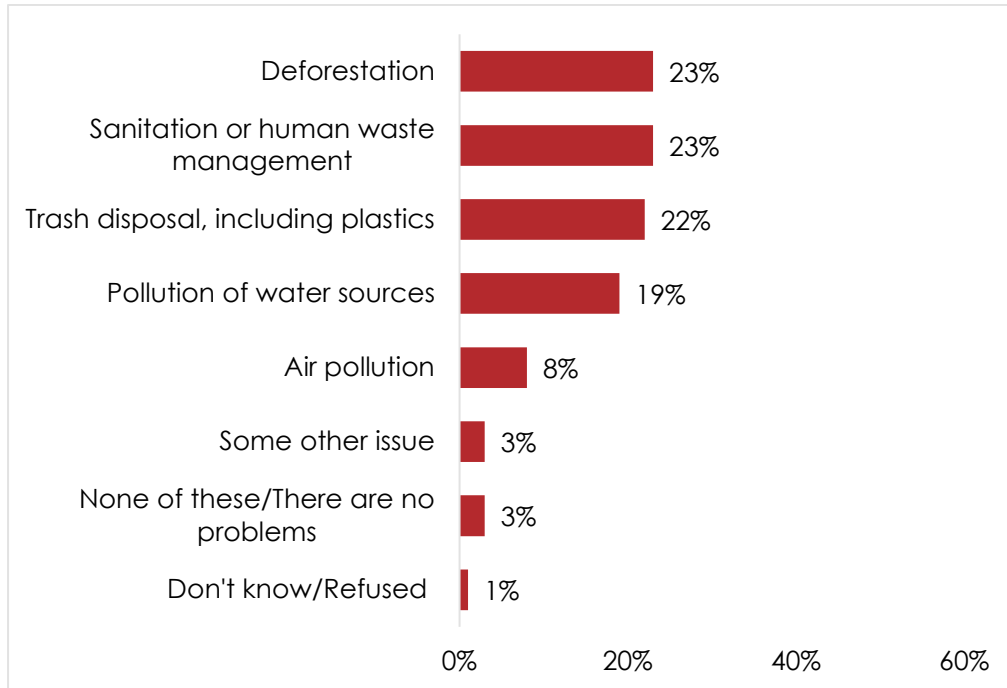
Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Asked what they consider the most important environmental issue in their communities, Cameroonians offer a range of opinions, including deforestation (cited by 23%), sanitation or human waste management (23%), trash disposal (22%), and pollution of water sources (19%) (Figure 3).

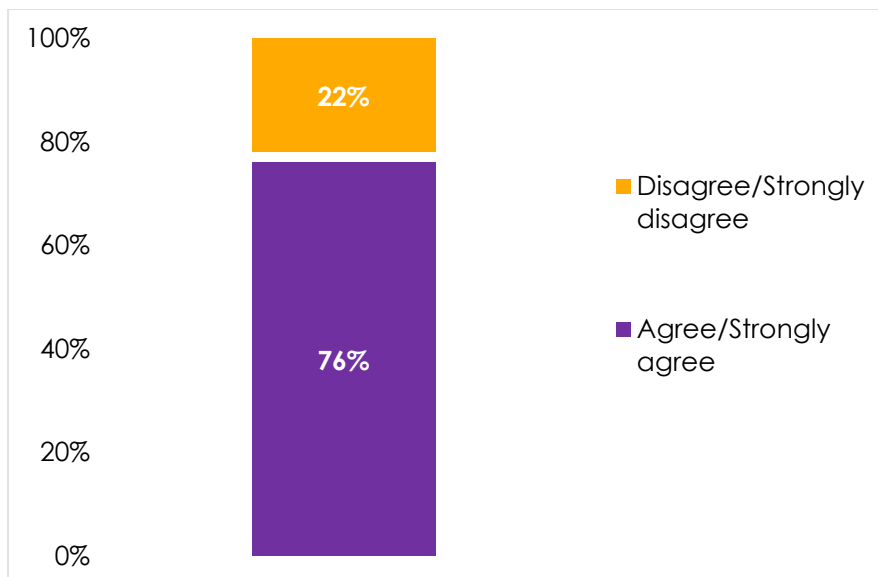
Three-fourths (76%) of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Cameroon (Figure 4).

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

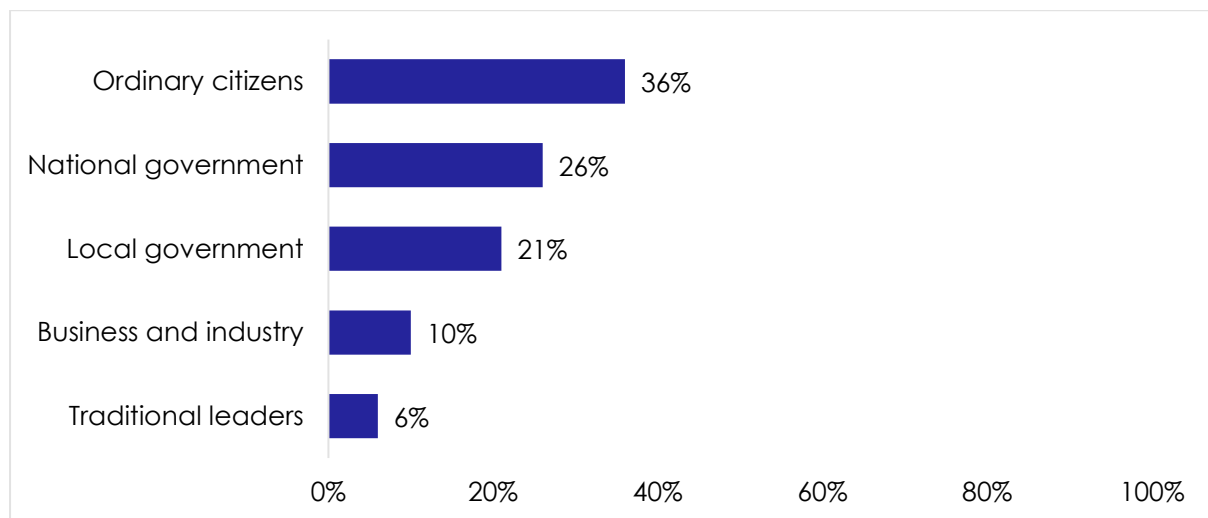


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

Protecting the environment

For more than one-third (36%) of respondents, protecting the environment is first and foremost the responsibility of ordinary citizens (Figure 5). About half assign the responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean primarily to national (26%) and local (21%) governments, while far fewer (10%) think environmental protection is mainly the responsibility of business and industry.

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



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

Overall, only four in 10 Cameroonians (39%) think their government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment. Nearly six in 10 (57%) say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on this issue (Figure 6). Negative ratings are particularly high among urban residents (63%) and individuals with post-secondary education (63%).

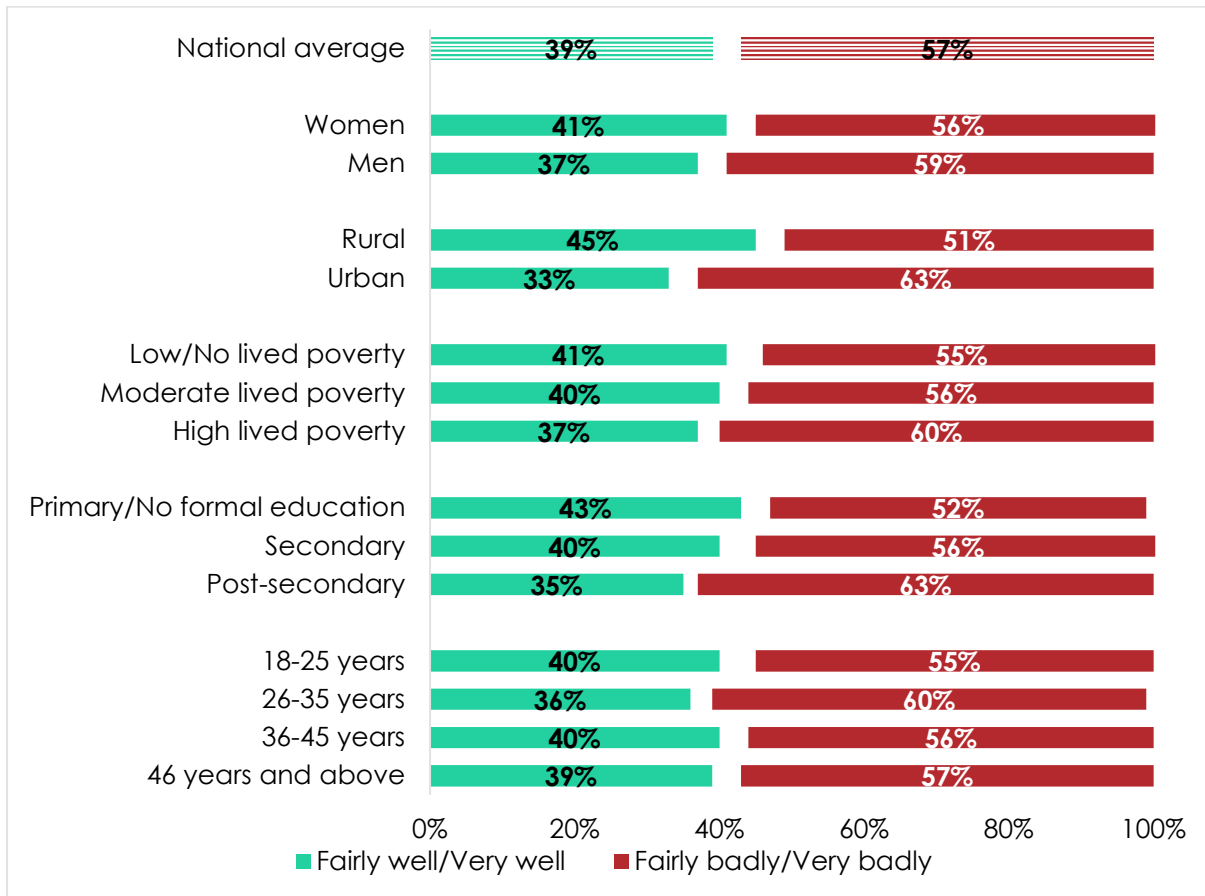
Cameroonians overwhelmingly (80%) believe that the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including fully two-thirds (67%) who want it to do “much more.” Only one in five citizens (19%) would be satisfied with continuing or reducing the current level of effort (Figure 7).²

However, if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs or incomes, citizens in Cameroon are divided as to which should take priority. A slim majority (52%) say the government should focus on protecting the environment and reducing pollution, while 42% say job creation and incomes should be prioritised, even if it means more environmental damage (Figure 8).

Women (54%) and rural residents (55%) are somewhat more likely to prioritise environmental protection over job creation than men (49%) and urbanites (49%). Individuals with primary or no formal education are also more likely to prioritise environmental protection than those with post-secondary education (55% vs. 48%).

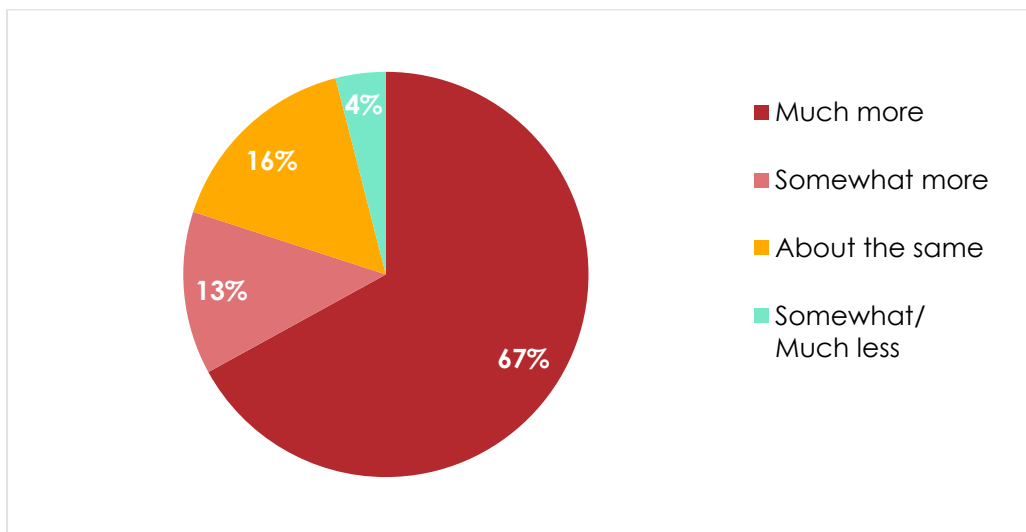
² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 16% “about the same” and 4% “somewhat/much less” sum to 19%).

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



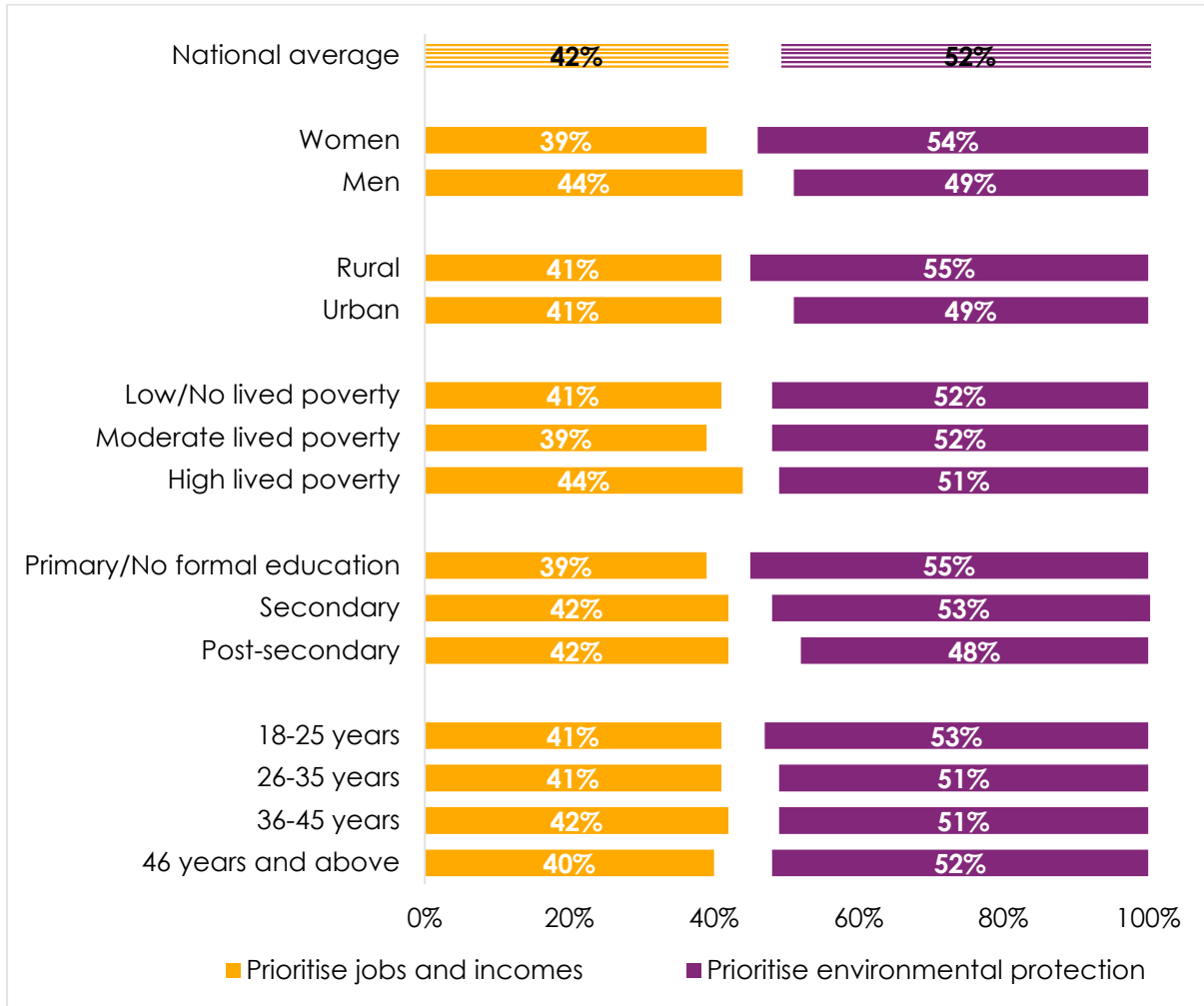
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing pollution and protecting the environment?

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

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

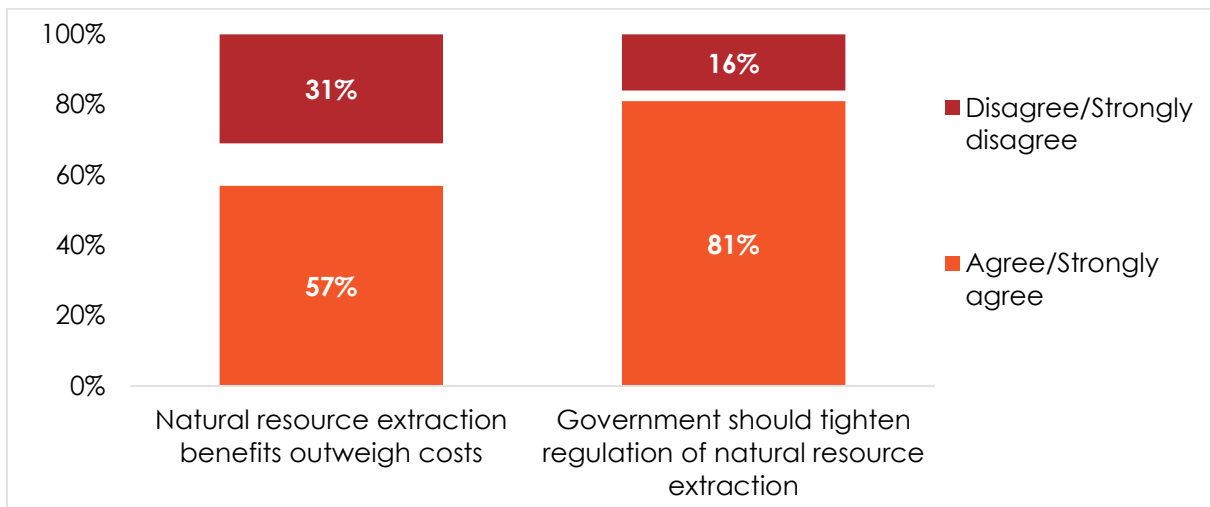
Natural resource extraction

While resource extraction is an important source of revenue in Cameroon, contributing 5.5% of gross domestic product in 2021 (World Bank, 2023b), it can also be a source of local-level environmental damage.

Almost six in 10 Cameroonians (57%) say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh its costs, such as pollution. Nearly one-third (31%) of citizens disagree with this assessment (Figure 9).

But even if a majority think its benefits are greater than its costs, a vast majority (81%) 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 | Cameroon | 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:

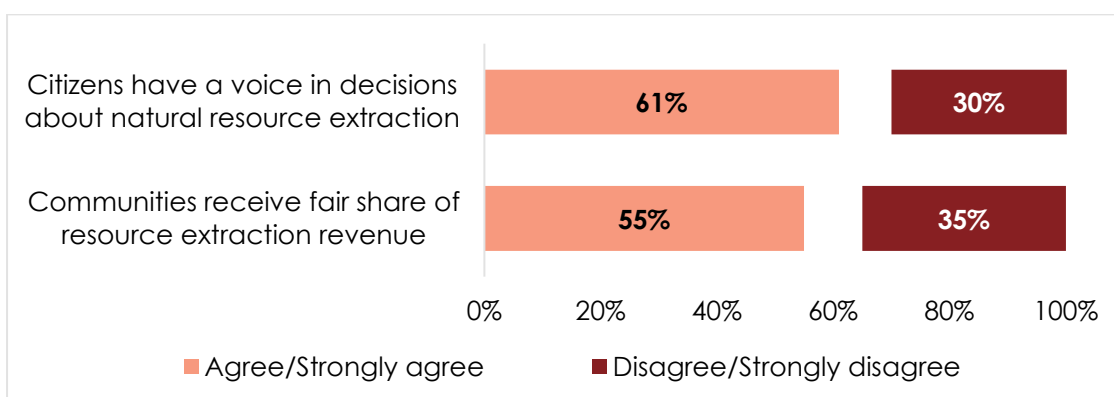
In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

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

Positive assessments outweigh negative ones when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 10). More than six in 10 Cameroonians (61%) say that ordinary people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while only 30% think they don't.

Similarly, more than half (55%) of citizens say local communities receive a fair share of revenues from natural resource extraction, while 35% disagree.

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



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

Ordinary Cameroonians 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

Most Cameroonians view pollution as a serious problem in their community and expect “much more” government action to protect the environment. For a slim majority, environmental protection even outranks job creation as a national priority.

While views of natural resource extraction activities in their country are largely favourable, most citizens say the government should regulate the industry more tightly to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

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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 university's Sahel Research Group. Email: adou.baba@ufl.edu.

Afrobarometer, a non-profit 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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