

São Toméans want ‘a lot more’ climate action from government and other stakeholders

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 700 | Richard Kweitsu

Summary

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of our time, affecting ecosystems, economies, and communities around the world (World Health Organization, 2021). As a small island developing state, São Tomé and Príncipe is one of the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change, mainly due to its geography and the fragility of its ecosystems (Green Climate Fund, 2020). The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (2021) Index ranks São Tomé and Príncipe high in vulnerability (146th-worst out of 185 countries) and somewhat better (112th) in readiness.

Rising temperatures and sea levels, changes in wave action, and erratic weather patterns leave the country vulnerable to increasing coastal erosion, drought, and storms. Catastrophic flooding and landslides in December 2021 affected virtually the entire country, followed by more flooding in March and May 2022 (ReliefWeb, 2023; WorldsAid, 2022).

Confronted with an urgent need for adaptive measures, the government launched development of a national adaptation plan in 2022 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022). Even though the country is a “carbon sink,” meaning it removes more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than it releases, the government has also committed to reducing the country’s greenhouse gas emissions, doubling its renewable energy generation, and enhancing energy efficiency (São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021).

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

Findings show that among citizens who are aware of climate change, a majority think it is making life worse, and most say “a lot more” action is needed from the government, developed countries, business and industry, and ordinary citizens to fight it.

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.

In São Tomé and Príncipe, Ovilongwa – Estudos de Opinião Pública of Angola in partnership with a local consultant and the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) interviewed 1,200 adult São Toméans in December 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 São Tomé and Príncipe in 2015 and 2018.

Key findings

- About one-third (35%) of São Toméans say droughts have become more severe over the past decade, but the same proportion say they have become less severe. Assessments of floods are similarly mixed (37% more severe, 31% less).
- More than half (57%) of São Toméans say they have heard of climate change. Among those who are aware of climate change:
 - A majority (57%) say climate change is making life worse.
 - Most say that ordinary citizens can help limit climate change (78%) and that the government must act now to fight climate change (72%), even at considerable economic cost.
 - Only small minorities are satisfied with efforts by the government (6%), business and industry (7%), developed countries (9%), and ordinary citizens (13%) to fight climate change.
 - Most São Toméans assign primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact to either ordinary people (36%) or the government (34%), though 24% look primarily to developed countries.
 - Large majorities say the fight against climate change requires “a lot more” effort by the government (80%), rich or developed countries (73%), business and industry (66%), and ordinary citizens (65%).
- Assessments of the government's performance in the fight against climate change are mixed: 39% positive, 33% negative.

Severity of extreme weather conditions

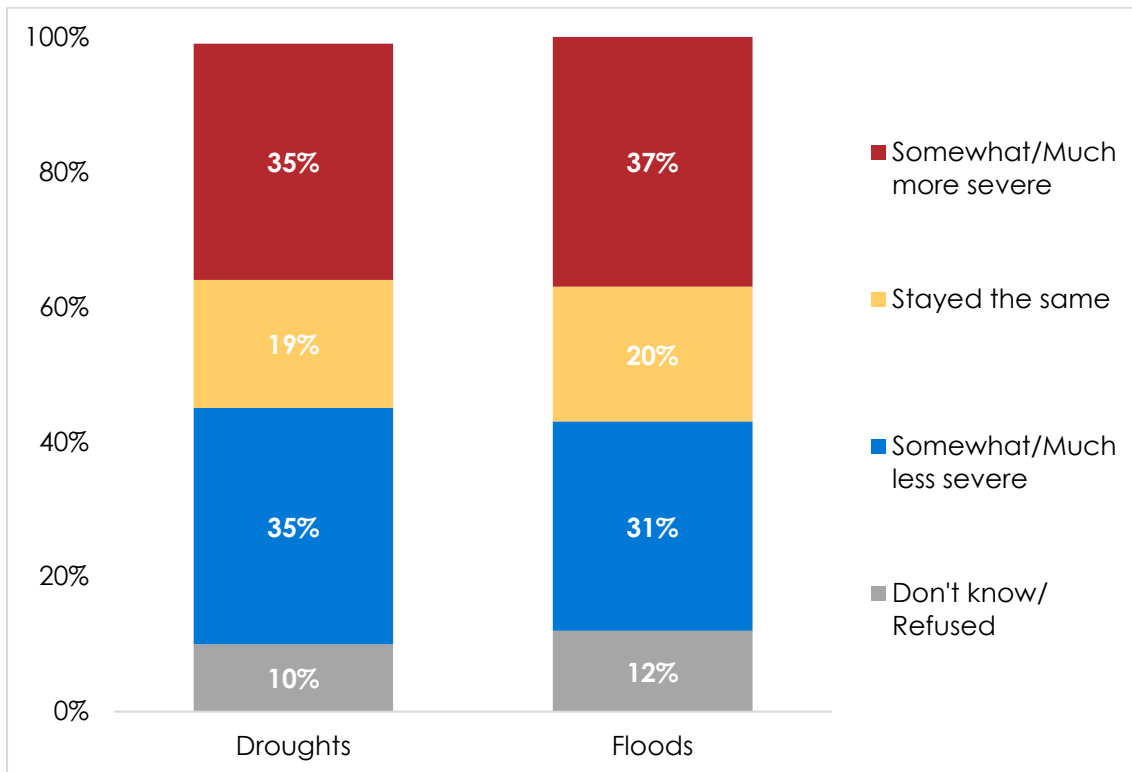
Before asking about climate change, Afrobarometer asked respondents about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. Slightly more than one-third of São Toméans say droughts (35%) and floods (37%) have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” over the past 10 years. But similar proportions say they have become less severe (35% for droughts, 31% for floods), while about one-fifth say they have stayed the same (Figure 1).

Compared to 2017, the share of respondents who see floods as growing more severe has increased by 17 percentage points, while perceptions of increasing droughts has risen by 4 points (Figure 2).

Rural and urban residents differ little in their assessments, but citizens experiencing high lived poverty¹ are significantly more likely than better-off respondents to report worsening droughts and floods, perhaps reflecting greater exposure to such weather events (Figure 3).

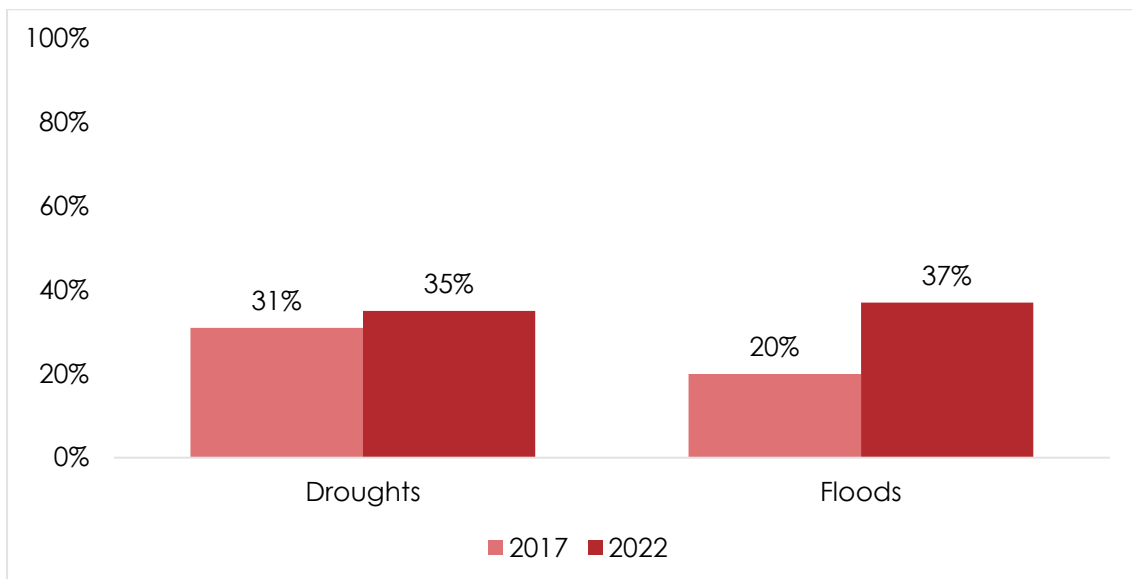
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 1: Severity of droughts and floods | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



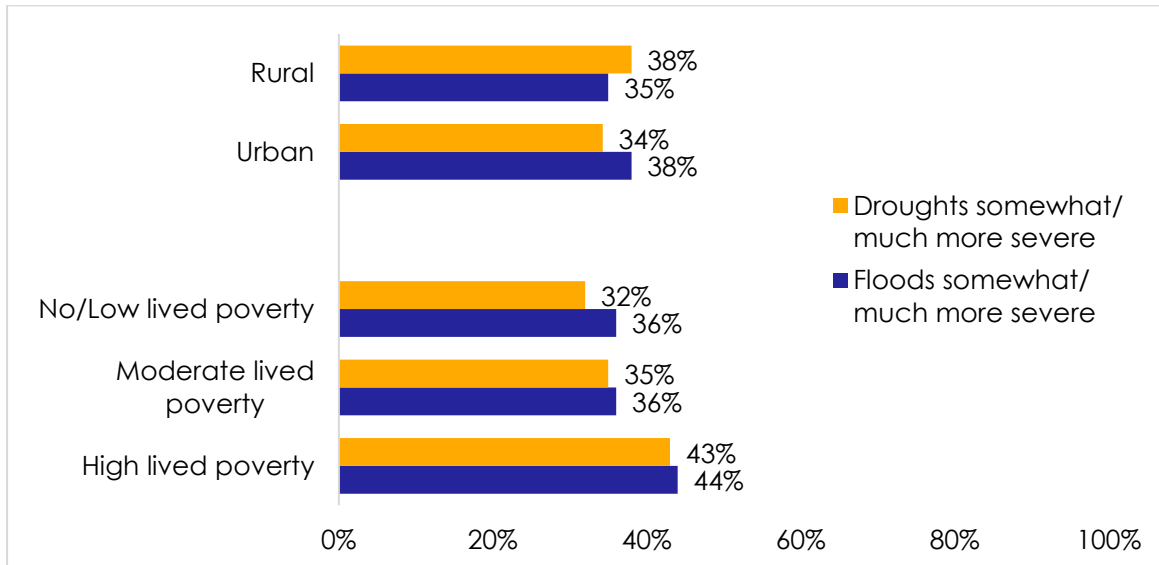
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Figure 2: Increasing severity of droughts and floods | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2017-2022



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")

Figure 3: Increasing severity of droughts and floods | by urban-rural residence and lived poverty | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



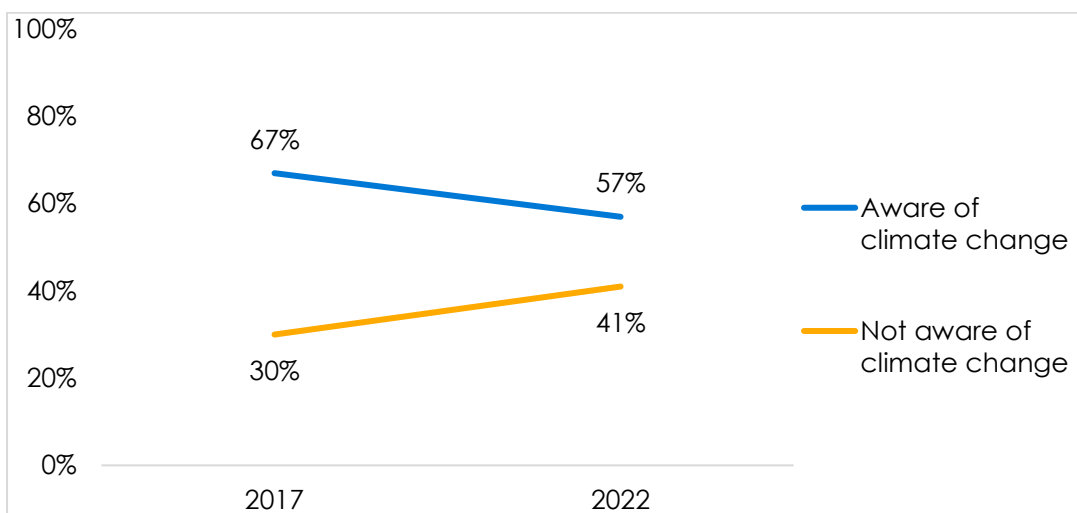
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? (% who say “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe”)

Climate change

Awareness of climate change

More than half (57%) of São Toméans say they have heard of climate change, while 41% say they have not (Figure 4). This represents a 10-percentage-point decline in climate-change awareness compared to 2017 (67%), perhaps reflecting fluctuating levels of acute awareness of weather events (e.g. in response to media reports) combined with a tenuous understanding of climate change.

Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2017-2022

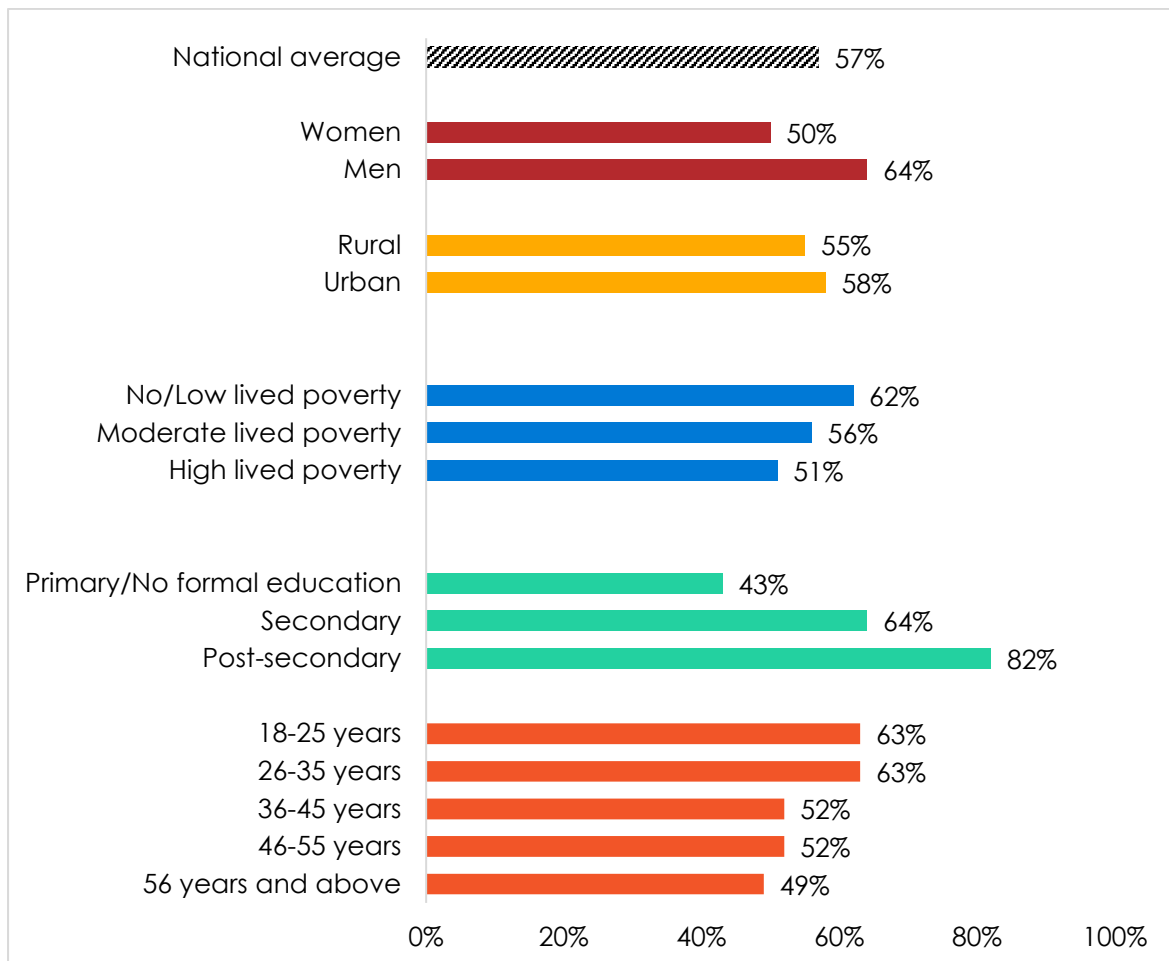


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet?

Awareness of climate change increases with citizens' education and economic levels. Respondents with post-secondary education are almost twice as likely to be familiar with climate change than those with primary schooling or less (82% vs. 43%) (Figure 5).

Awareness is also higher among young respondents (63% among 18- to 35-year-olds) than among their elders (49%-52%), and among men compared to women (64% vs. 50%).

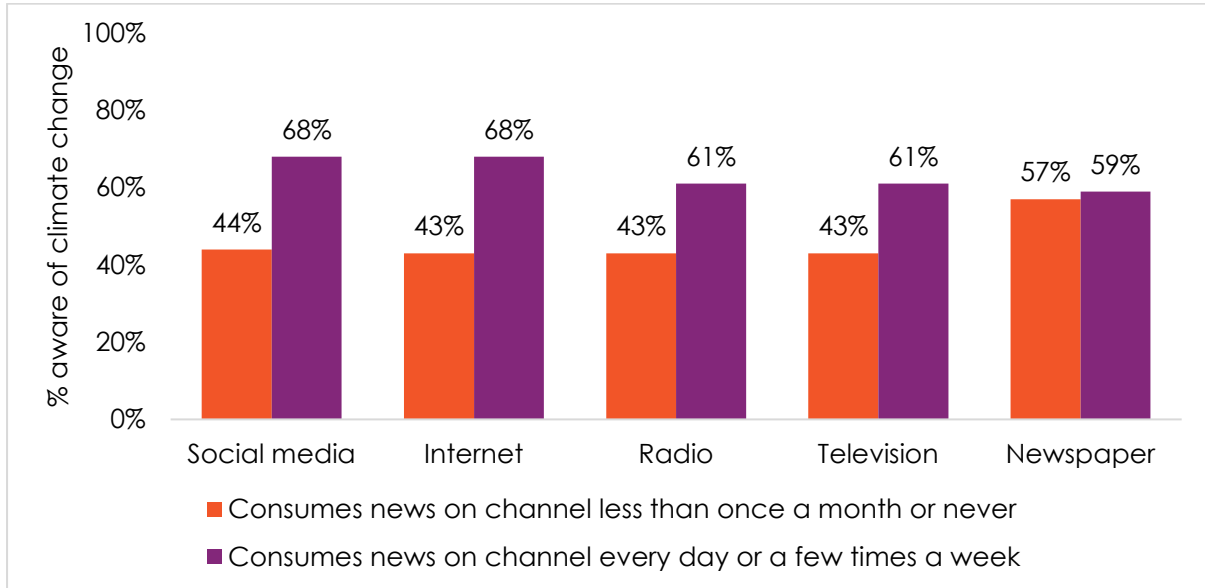
Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



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

Awareness of climate change increases with citizens' news consumption (Figure 6). Among those who get news regularly ("every day" or "a few times a week") from social media or the Internet, 68% say they have heard of climate change – about 25 percentage points more than among those who rarely or never get news that way. Among regular radio and television news consumers, 61% are familiar with climate change, compared to 43% among those who rarely or never tune in for the news. Regular newspaper readers show no substantial advantage in climate-change awareness over those who rarely read the paper.

Figure 6: Awareness of climate change | by news media consumption | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked:

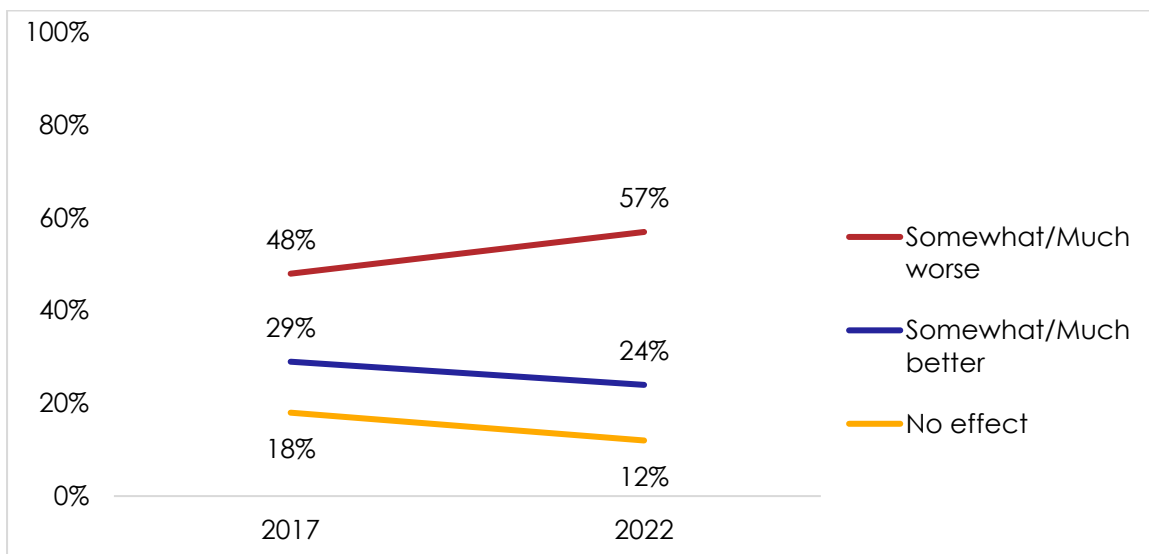
How often do you get news from the following sources?

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 São Toméans who are aware of climate change, a majority (57%) say it is making life in the country "somewhat worse" or "much worse." Compared to 2017, this represents a 9-percentage-point increase. One in four respondents (24%) think it is making life better, and 12% see no effect (Figure 7).

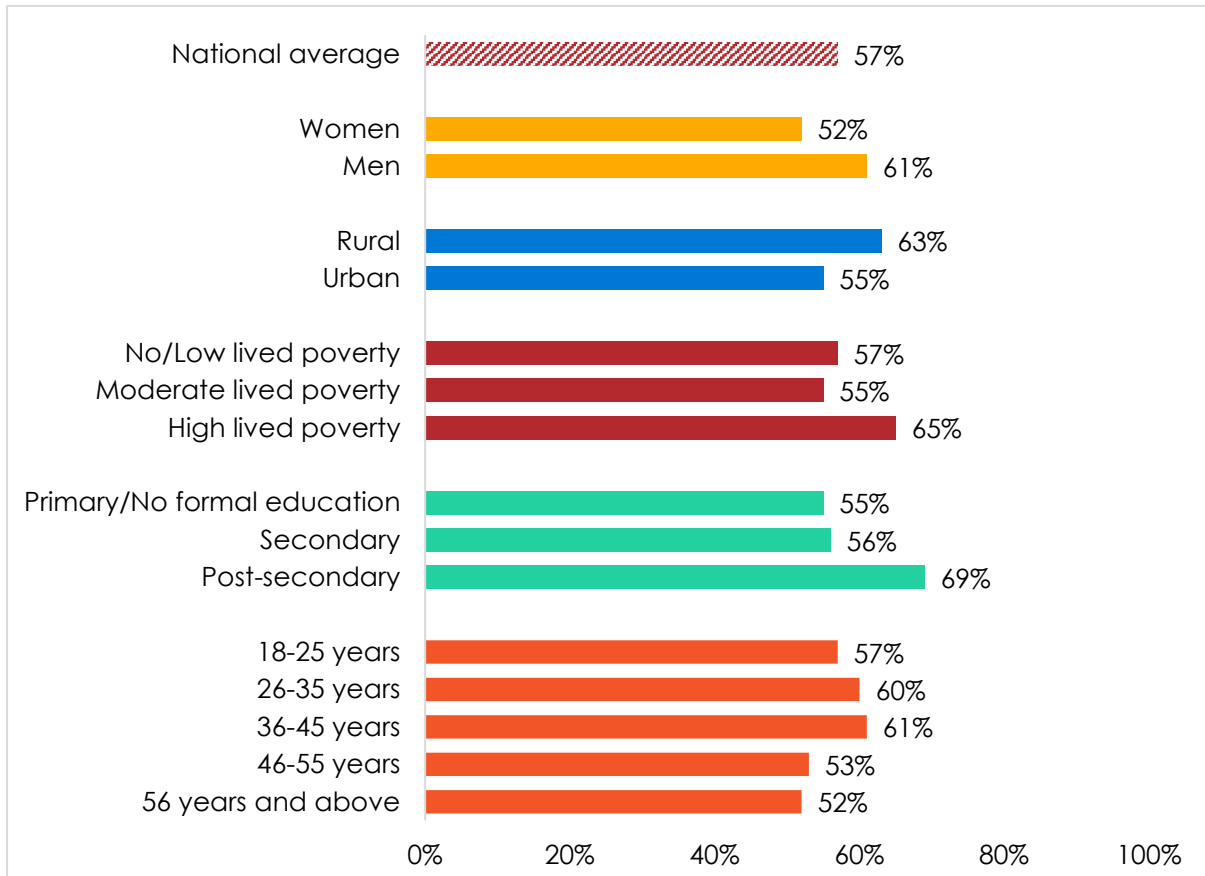
Figure 7: Effect of climate change | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2017-2022



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

The adverse impact of climate change is more widely felt among men than women (61% vs. 52%) and among rural than urban residents (63% vs. 55%) (Figure 8). Citizens with post-secondary education (69%) are more likely than less educated respondents (55%-56%) to say climate change is making life worse, as are the poorest respondents (65%) compared to their better-off counterparts (55%-57%).

Figure 8: Climate change is making life worse | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in São Tomé and Príncipe 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.)

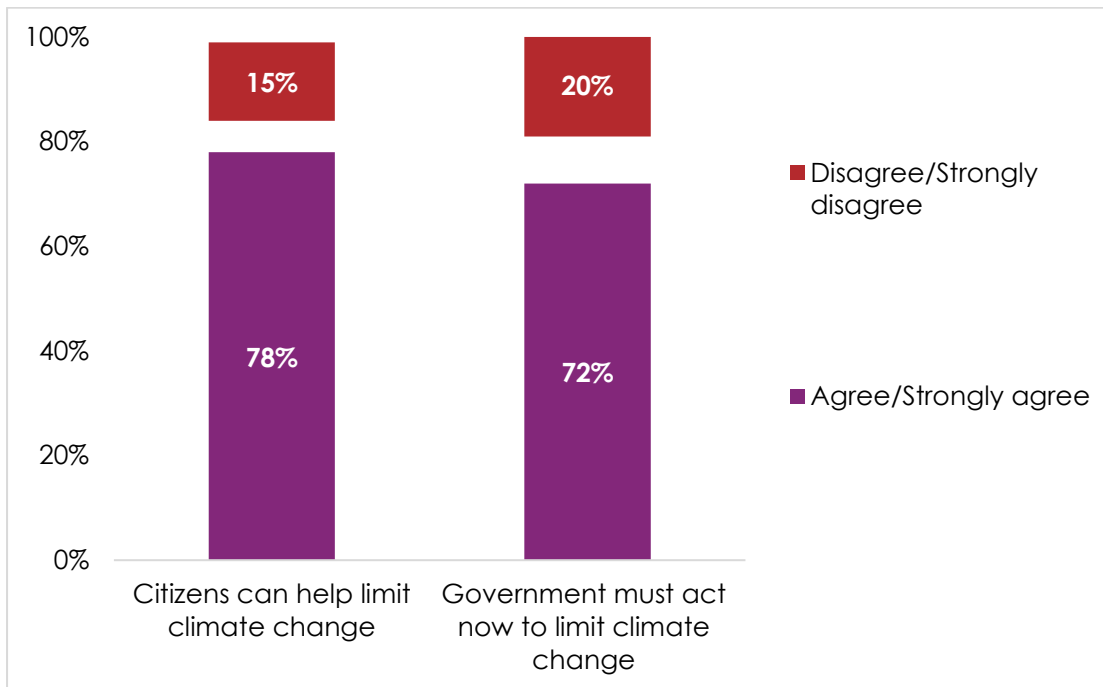
Fighting climate change

More than three-fourths (78%) of São Toméans who are aware of climate change believe that ordinary citizens have a role to play in limiting climate change (Figure 9).

Similarly, 72% say the government must act now to fight climate change, "even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy."

In fact, in the view of São Toméans, ordinary people (36%) and government (34%) share the primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact. One in four (24%) assign this responsibility to rich or developed countries, while only 2% cite business and industry (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Limiting climate change | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



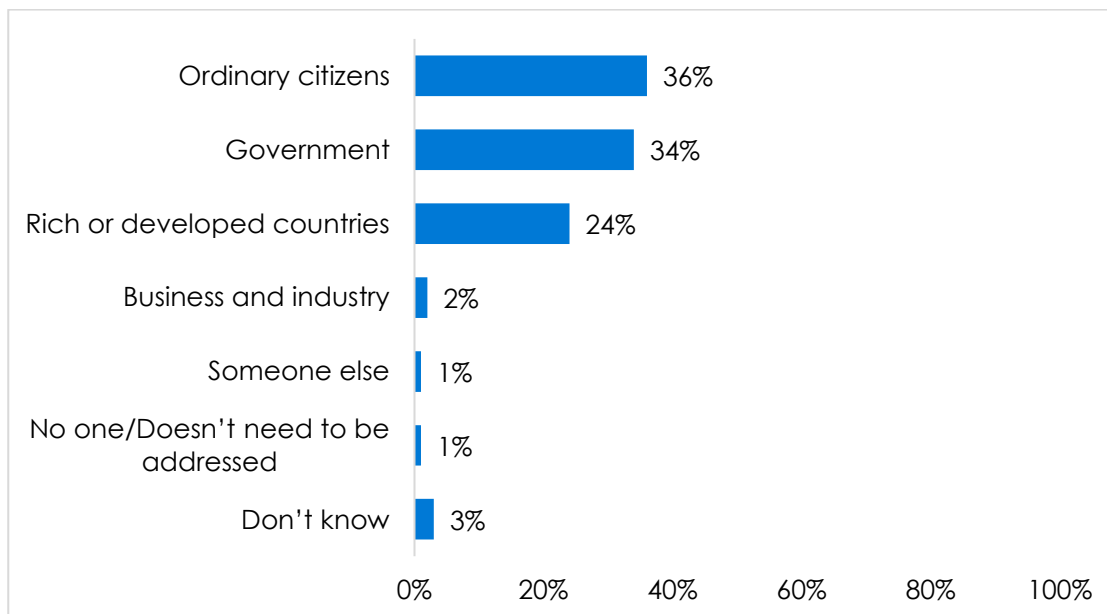
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

Ordinary São Toméans 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.)

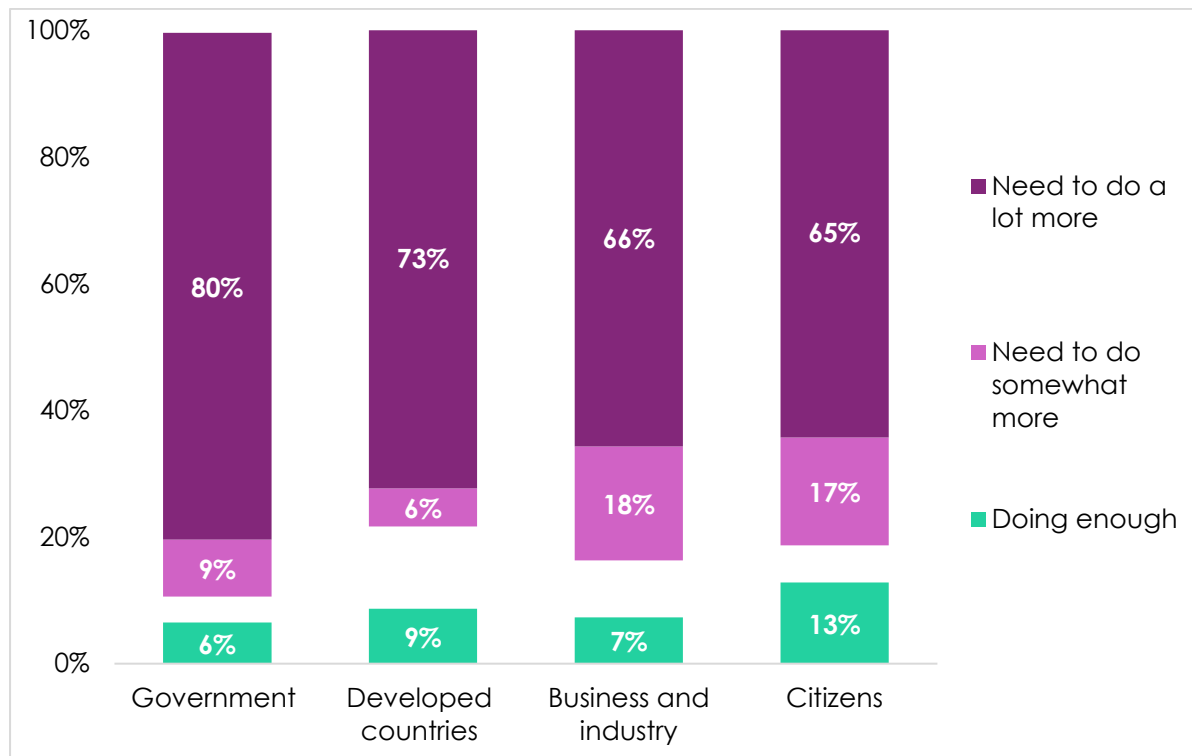
Figure 10: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



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.)*

Most São Toméans say stakeholders are not doing enough to limit climate change (Figure 11), including large majorities who say “a lot more” needs to be done by the government (80%), rich or developed countries (73%), business and industry (66%), and ordinary citizens (65%). Only small minorities say the government (6%), business and industry (7%), developed countries (9%), and citizens (13%) are making enough of an effort to fight climate change.

Figure 11: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022

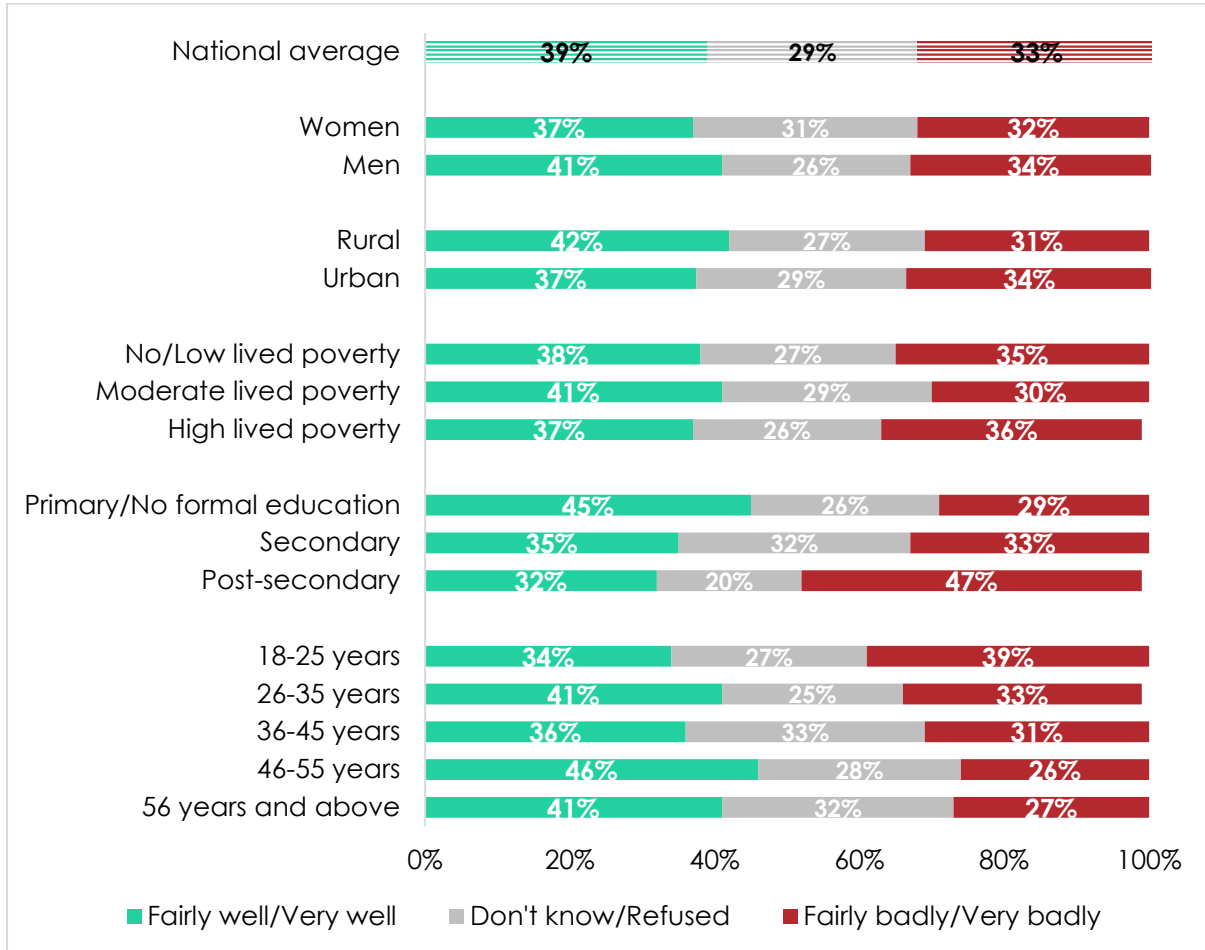


Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think each of the following are doing enough to limit climate change, or do they need to do more, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

São Toméans are divided in their assessments of how well the government is addressing the problem of climate change: 39% describe the government's performance as “fairly good” or “very good,” while 33% say it is doing a poor job. About three in 10 (29%) say they “don't know” or refused to answer the question (Figure 12).

Approval of the government's performance is slightly higher among men (41%) and in rural areas (42%) than among women (37%) and in cities (37%). The most educated respondents are most critical of the government's efforts (47% fairly/very badly).

Figure 12: Government performance in handling climate change | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 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: Addressing the problem of climate change?

Conclusion

Even though São Tomé and Príncipe is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, four in 10 citizens say they have not heard of the phenomenon, suggesting that public education may be one pathway for building support for climate action.

Among citizens who are aware of climate change, a majority say it is making life worse, and most call for "a lot more" action from the government, developed countries, business and industry, and ordinary citizens to limit it.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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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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