



# Dissatisfaction, disengagement mark outlook of young Kenyans

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 710 | Anne Okello and Daniel Iberi**

## Summary

Africa boasts the world's most youthful population; 70% of people in the sub-Saharan region have yet to reach their 30<sup>th</sup> birthdays (United Nations, 2022). Kenya, one of the region's leading economies, has a median age of 19 years, and about 80% of the country's population is below age 35 (World Bank, 2021; Government of Kenya, 2020).

Kenya's youth represent enormous potential as well as the enormous challenges of preparing millions of young citizens and integrating them into the country's economic, social, and political life. The Global Youth Development Index ranks Kenya as a "low youth development" country, 139<sup>th</sup> out of 181 countries (Commonwealth, 2021). Youth unemployment is almost four times the national rate, despite strategies in Kenya Vision 2030 and successive five-year plans with goals for youth employment and annual targets for job creation (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Government of Kenya, 2023). Earlier this year, President William Ruto announced that the government's "comprehensive intentional plan on how to sort out unemployment" will prioritise digital jobs (e.g. e-commerce and online services) as well as agricultural consolidation, industrial growth, and a housing programme to generate jobs for the youth (Wanza, 2023).

On the political front, advocates say Kenyan youth have had little representation in public policy and decision-making spaces because of a lack of political awareness and education, financial barriers, and disillusionment with the political system (Motsamai & Noor, 2022; Carter Center, 2018).

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2021) offers some insights into the situation of Kenya's youth. Findings show that young people are more educated than their elders but are also more likely to be unemployed. The economy, corruption, and unemployment are topmost on the minds of young Kenyans, who think their government is doing a poor job on all three issues. Most think the country is headed in "the wrong direction," though youth are somewhat more optimistic than older citizens that things will improve in the near future.

Despite their dissatisfaction, young citizens are less likely than their elders to engage in political processes. In fact, youth engagement has declined significantly over the past decade.

## 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 a nationally representative sample of 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.

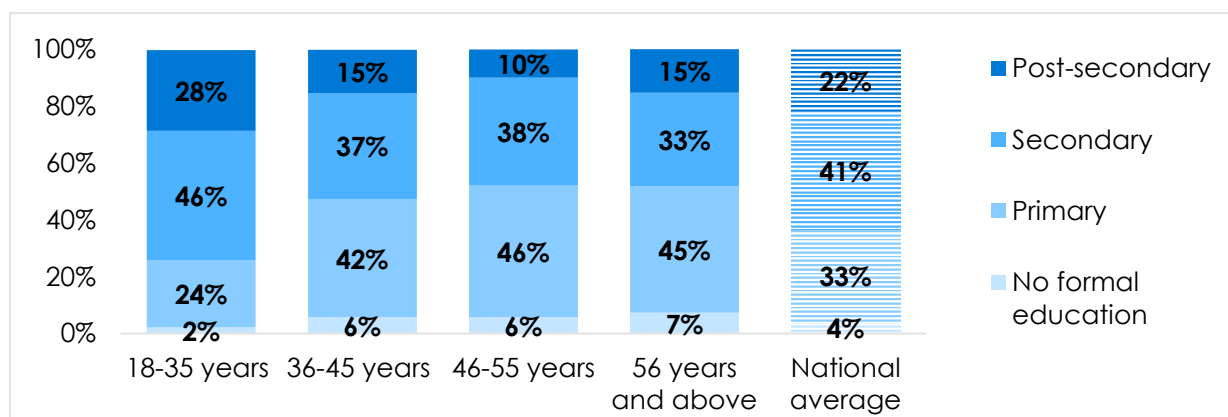
## Key findings

- More than seven in 10 young Kenyans (74%) have secondary or post-secondary education, far outshining previous generations.
- But youth (aged 18-35) are also more likely than their elders to be unemployed: 41% say they are not employed and are looking for jobs, compared to 14%-31% among older cohorts.
- Management of the economy, corruption, and unemployment top the list of the most important problems that Kenyan youth want their government to address, followed by crime/security, health, and education.
- While two-thirds (66%) of young Kenyans say the government is doing a good job of addressing educational needs, fewer than one in four offer positive assessments of its performance on managing the economy (19%), fighting corruption (23%), and creating jobs (16%).
- Like their elders, most youth say the country is going in “the wrong direction” (71%) and offer negative assessments of the nation’s economy (83%). They are somewhat less gloomy than older respondents regarding their personal living conditions (though 51% say they are bad) and more optimistic that things will improve over the coming year (47%).
- Despite their dissatisfaction with the country’s direction and the government’s performance, young citizens are less likely than their elders to engage in political and civic activities such as voting, attending community meetings, joining with others to raise an issue, and contacting elected officials. On all of these indicators, youth engagement has declined significantly over the past decade.

## Education and employment status

Kenya’s youth have more education than their elders. About three-fourths (74%) of young respondents (aged 18-35) report having secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 48%-53% of the older cohorts (Figure 1). Only 2% of youth lack formal education, about one-third the percentage found in other age groups (6%-7%).

**Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | Kenya | 2021**

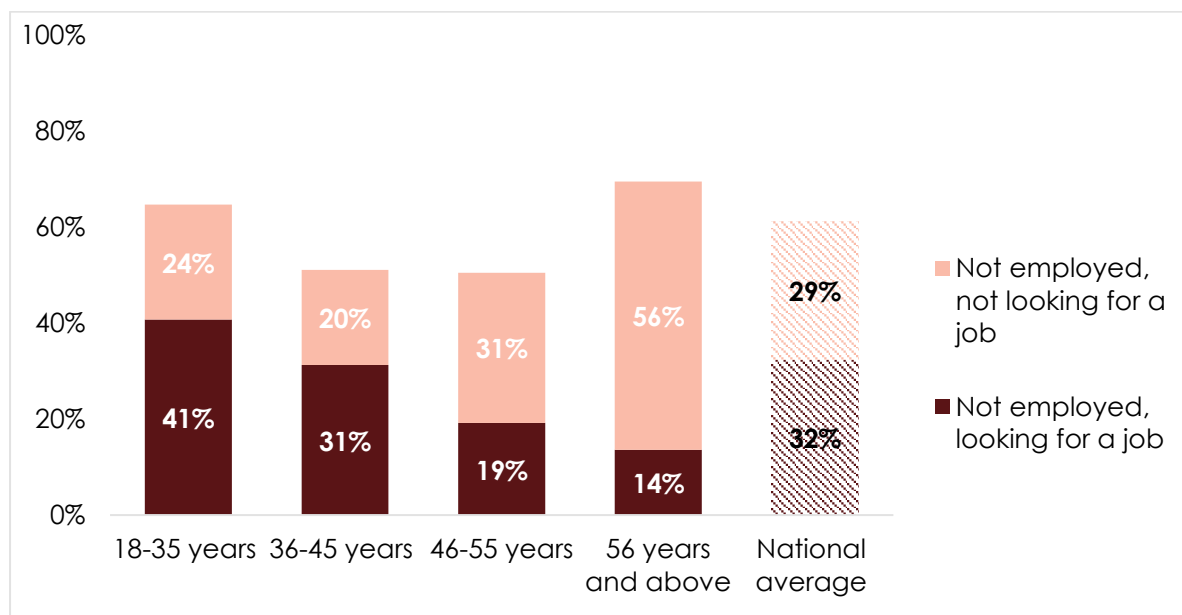


**Respondents were asked:** What is your highest level of education?

While they have more education than their elders, young Kenyans are also more likely to be unemployed. Four in 10 youth (41%) say they are not employed and are looking for a job, compared to 31% of 36- to 45-year-olds, 19% of 46- to 55-year-olds, and 14% of those over age 55 (Figure 2). These youth who are unemployed (i.e. not employed and looking for work) include 6% who identify as students (Figure 3).

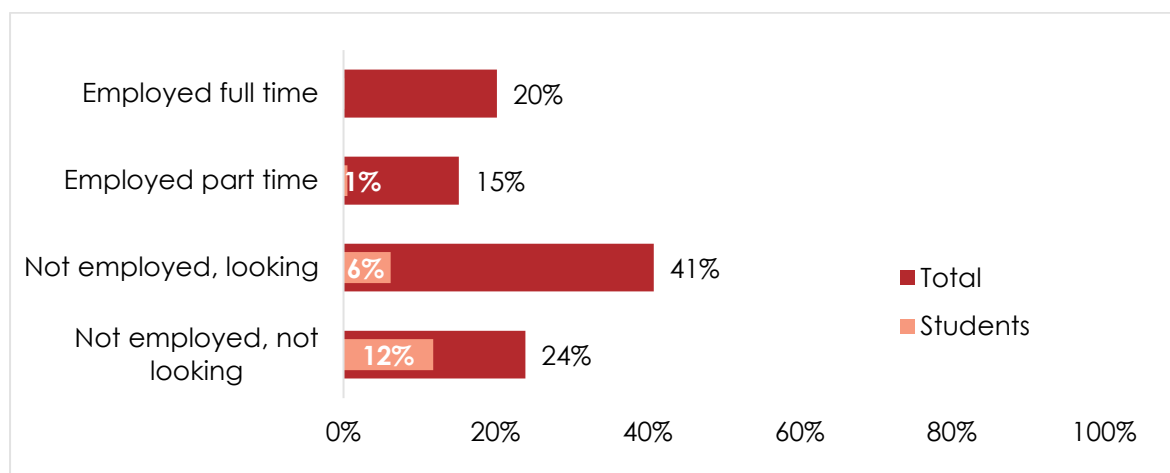
In addition, 24% of young respondents say they are not employed and are not looking for work, including 12% who identify as students.

**Figure 2: Unemployment rate | by age group | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

**Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 years | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:**

Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

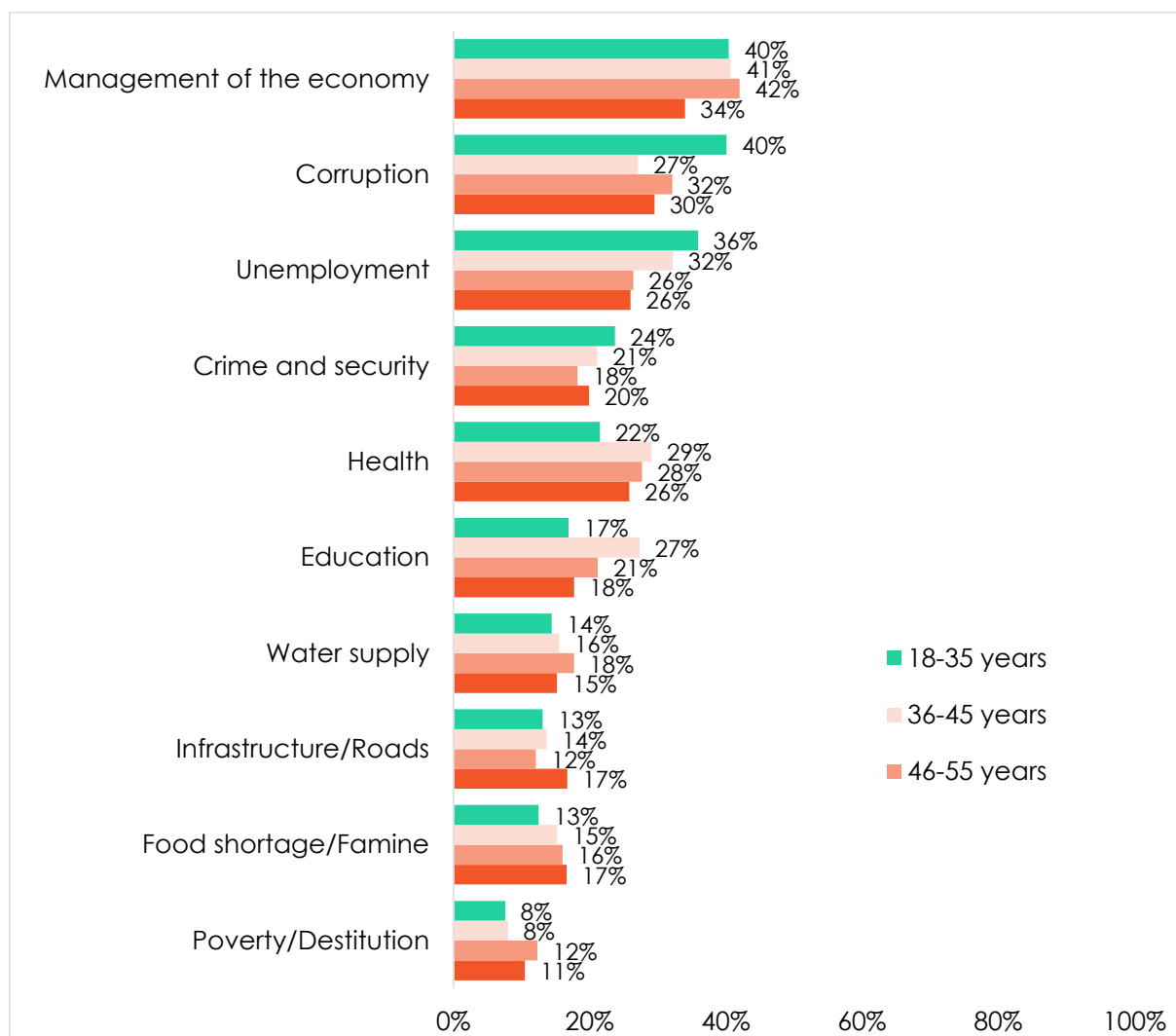
What is your main occupation? [If not currently working:] What was your last main occupation? (% who say "student")

### Priorities for action

For young Kenyans, management of the economy and corruption (each cited by 40% of 18- to 35-year-olds) are the two most important problems the government must address (Figure 4). These are followed by unemployment (36%), crime and security (24%), health (22%), and education (17%).

Young respondents are significantly more likely than their elders to focus on corruption and unemployment (each by a 10-percentage-point margin compared to respondents over age 55), somewhat more likely to emphasise crime, and less likely to cite health and food shortage as top problems.

**Figure 4: Most important problems | by age group | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

### Evaluation of government performance

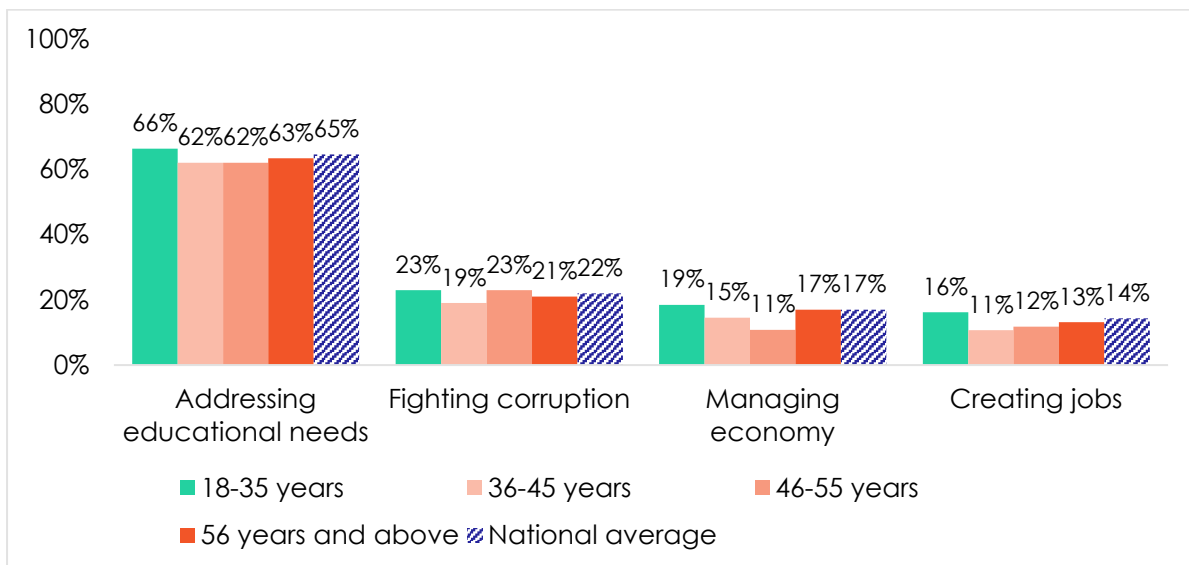
On their top three priorities for government action, most young Kenyans – like their elders – are dissatisfied with their government's performance (Figure 5). Only 23% say the government

is doing “fairly well” or “very well” on fighting corruption, while even fewer approve of its efforts on managing the economy (19%) and creating jobs (16%).

On the critical youth issue of education, on the other hand, two in three youth (66%) say the government is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job.

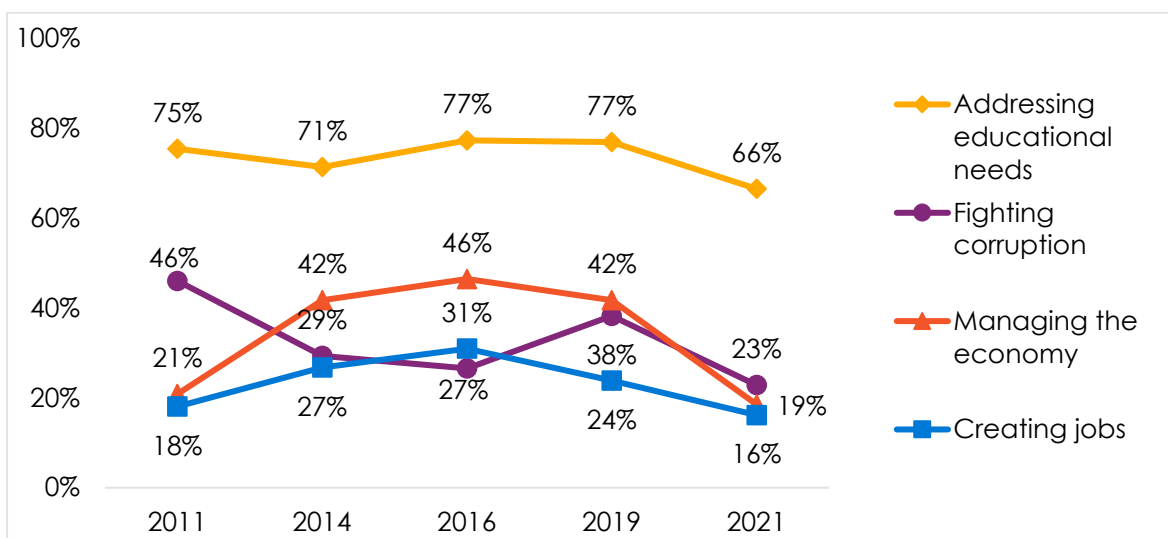
Young Kenyans’ assessments of the government’s performance on these four issues have varied over the past decade, but all have worsened significantly since hitting relatively high points in the 2016 and/or 2019 surveys (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Approval of government performance on education, corruption, the economy, and jobs | by age 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? (% who say “fairly well” or “very well”)

**Figure 6: Youth approval of government performance on education, corruption, the economy, and jobs | respondents aged 18-35 years | Kenya | 2011-2021**

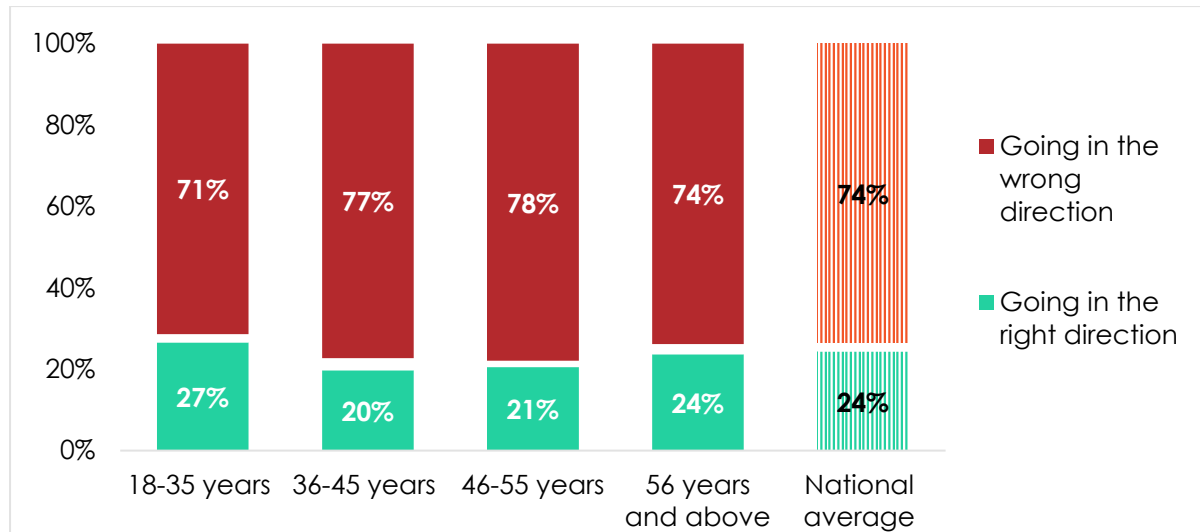


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? Creating jobs? (% who say “fairly well” or “very well”)

### Views on country's direction and economic situation

Overall, young Kenyans are almost as pessimistic as their elders about their country's direction: 71% say Kenya is headed in "the wrong direction," compared to 74%-77% among citizens over age 35 (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Country's direction** | by age group | Kenya | 2021

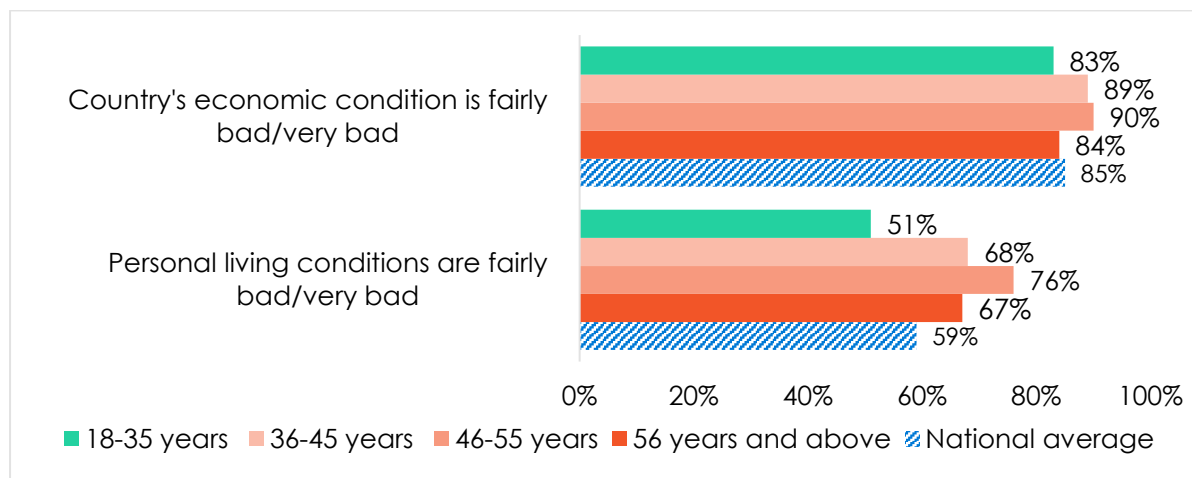


**Respondents were asked:** Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

More than eight out of 10 young Kenyans (83%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," a slightly less gloomy assessment than those offered by middle-aged respondents (89%-90%) (Figure 8).

About half (51%) say their personal living conditions are bad, a significantly smaller share than in older cohorts (67%-76%).

**Figure 8: Negative assessments of country's economy and personal living conditions** | by age group | Kenya | 2021

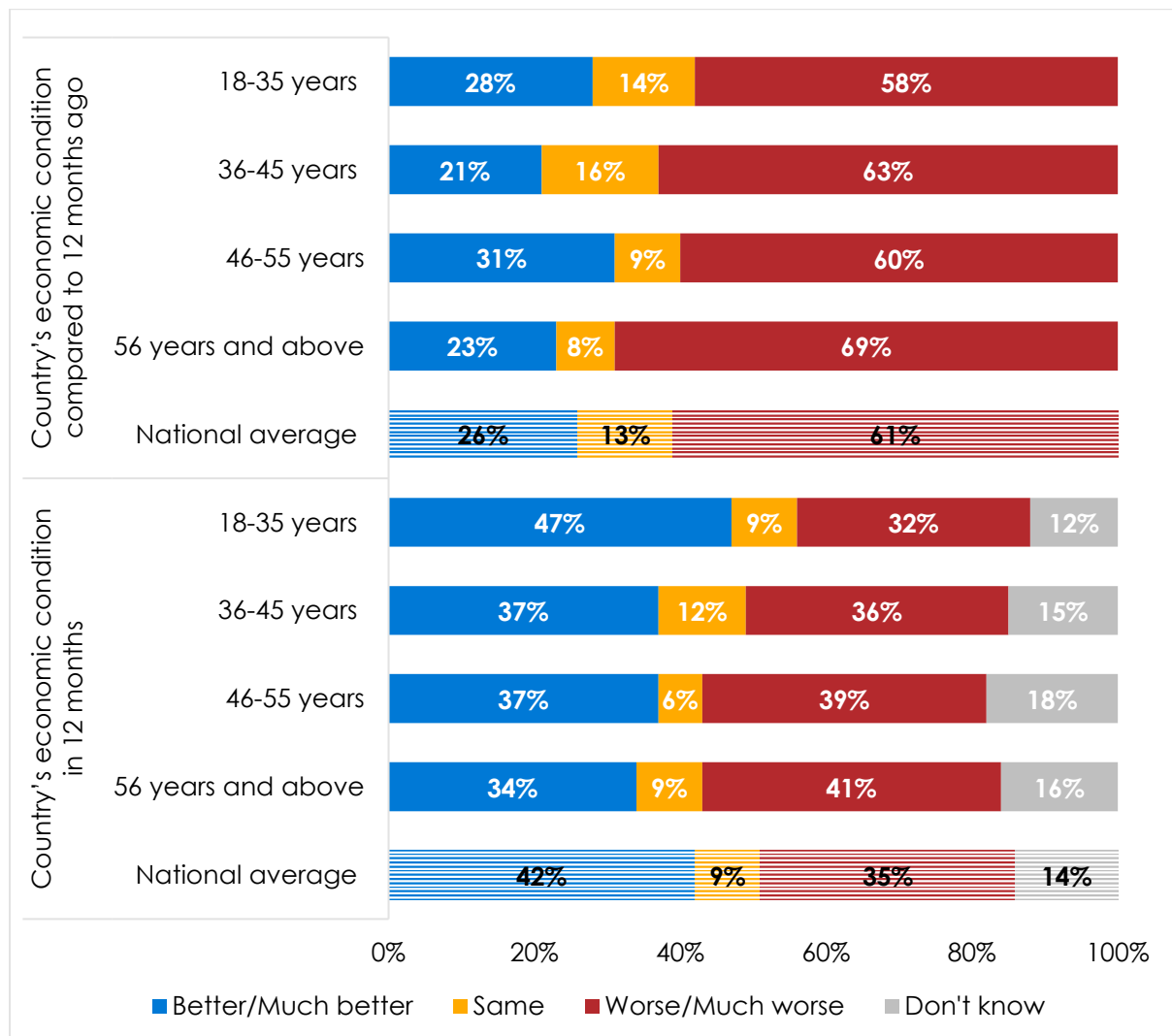


**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Only 28% of young respondents think the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, while 58% say it has worsened (Figure 9).

But young citizens are somewhat more optimistic than their elders about the near future: 47% think things will get better over the next 12 months, compared to 34%-37% of those over age 35.

**Figure 9: Retrospective and prospective assessment of country's economic conditions | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago? Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

### Political engagement

Considering young Kenyans' dissatisfaction with economic conditions, the country's overall direction, and their government's performance, to what extent do they engage in political and civic processes in pursuit of change?

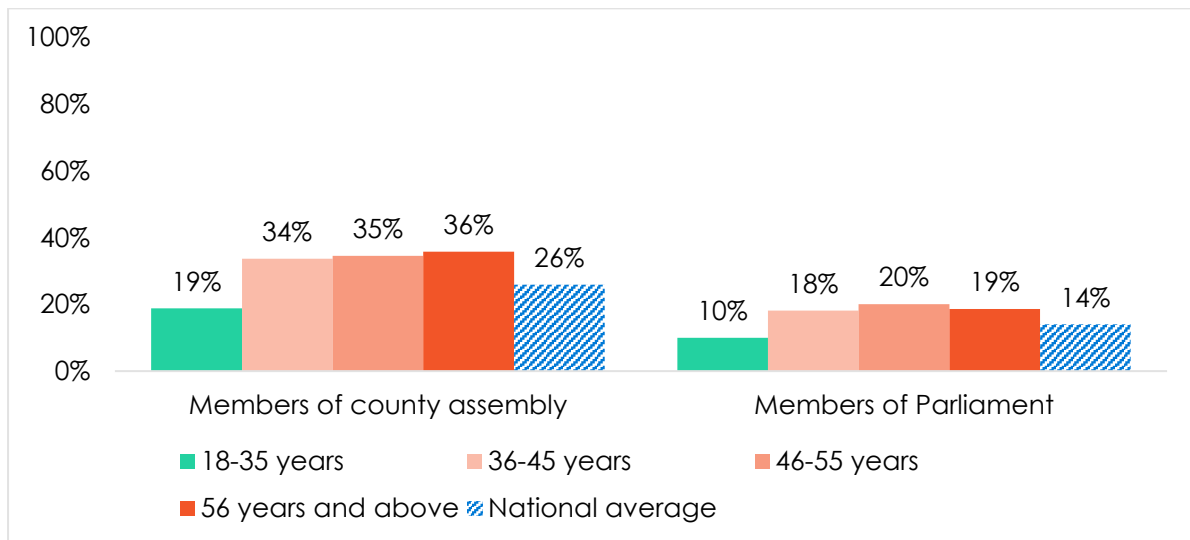
Survey findings suggest that youth have room to extend their potential influence through pathways such as contacting their elected officials, joining with others to express their concerns, and voting in elections.

About one in five young respondents (19%) say they contacted a member of their county assembly about an important issue at least once during the year preceding the survey, a significantly lower contact rate than was recorded for their elders (34%-36%) (Figure 10).

Similarly, only 10% report having contacted a member of Parliament (MP) – about half as many as in the older age groups (18%-20%).

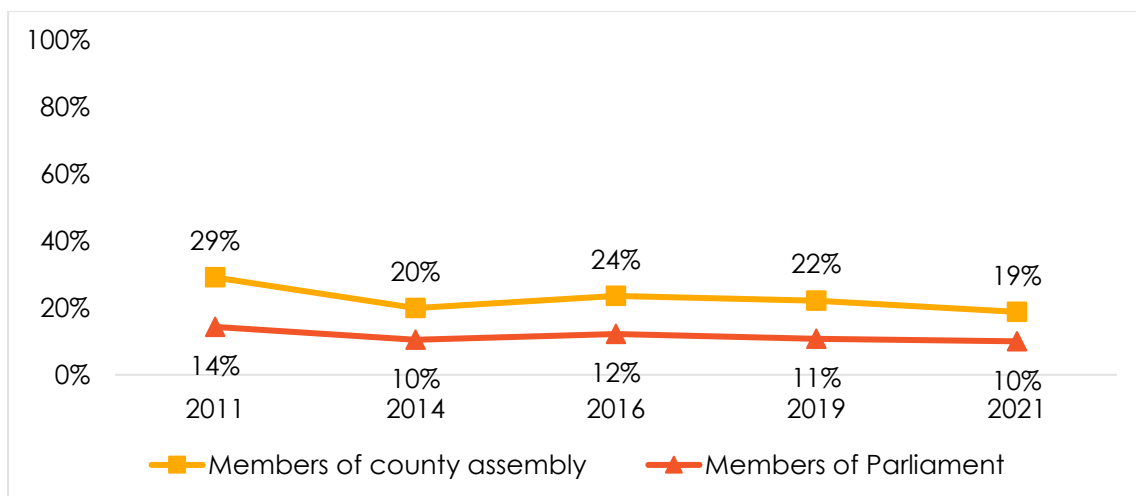
Moreover, young people's self-reported contact with these elected officials has declined over the past decade, dropping by 10 percentage points since 2011 in the case of county assembly members and 4 points for MPs (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Contacted political representatives during previous year | by age group | Kenya | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

**Figure 11: Youth contact with political representatives | respondents aged 18-35 years | Kenya | 2011-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")



Youth also lag behind their elders when it comes to voting in elections, identifying with political parties, attending community meetings, and joining others to raise an issue (Figure 12).

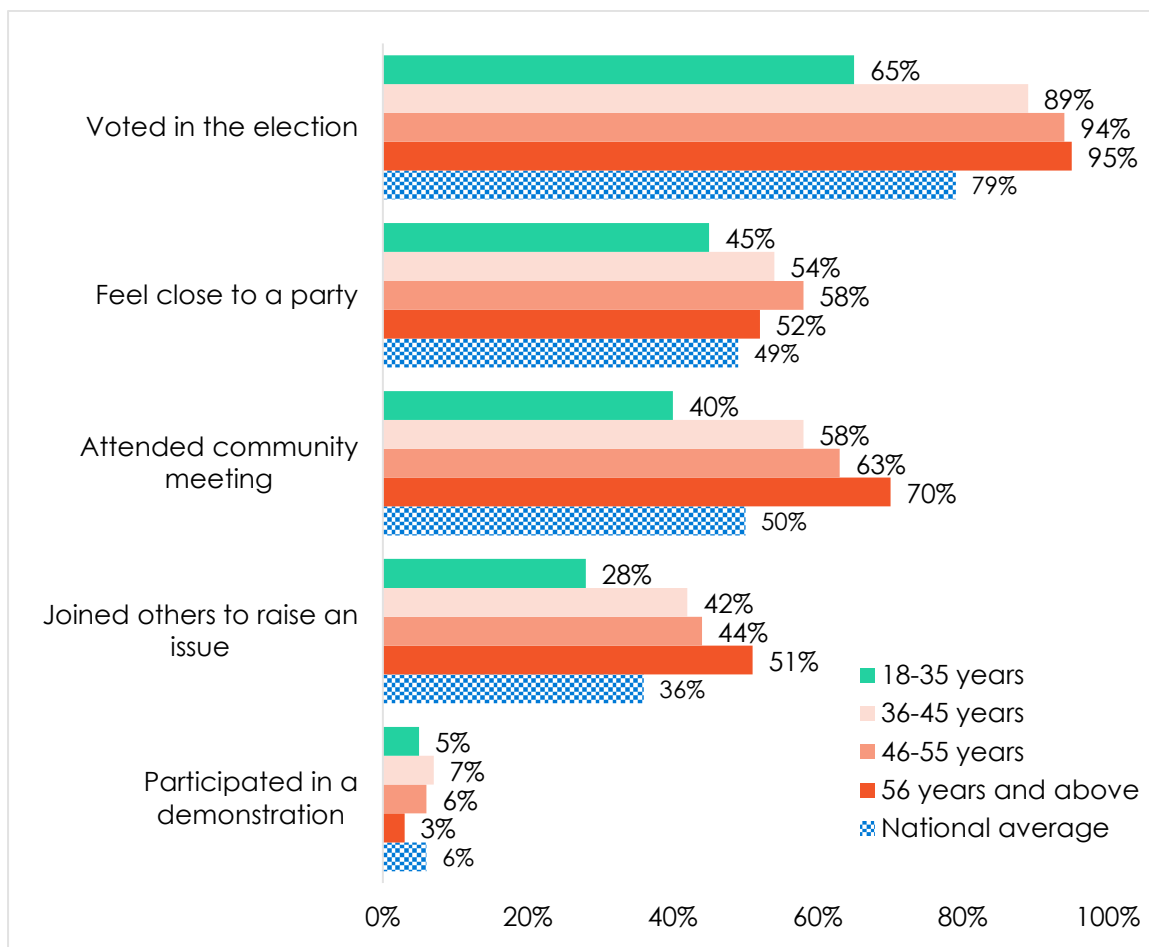
Excluding those who were too young to vote, about two-thirds (65%) of 18- to 35-year-olds say they voted in the most recent national election in 2017, a considerably lower rate than reported by older cohorts (89%-95%).

Youth are also less likely to say they “feel close to” a political party (45%, vs. 52%-58% of older citizens).

Four in 10 young respondents (40%) say they attended a community meeting at least once during the previous year, while 28% say they joined others to raise an issue – both significantly lower rates than reported by higher age cohorts.

One in 20 (5%) report having participated in a demonstration or protest march during the past 12 months, which is about average for the adult population (6%).

**Figure 12: Political participation** | by age group | Kenya | 2021



**Respondents were asked:**

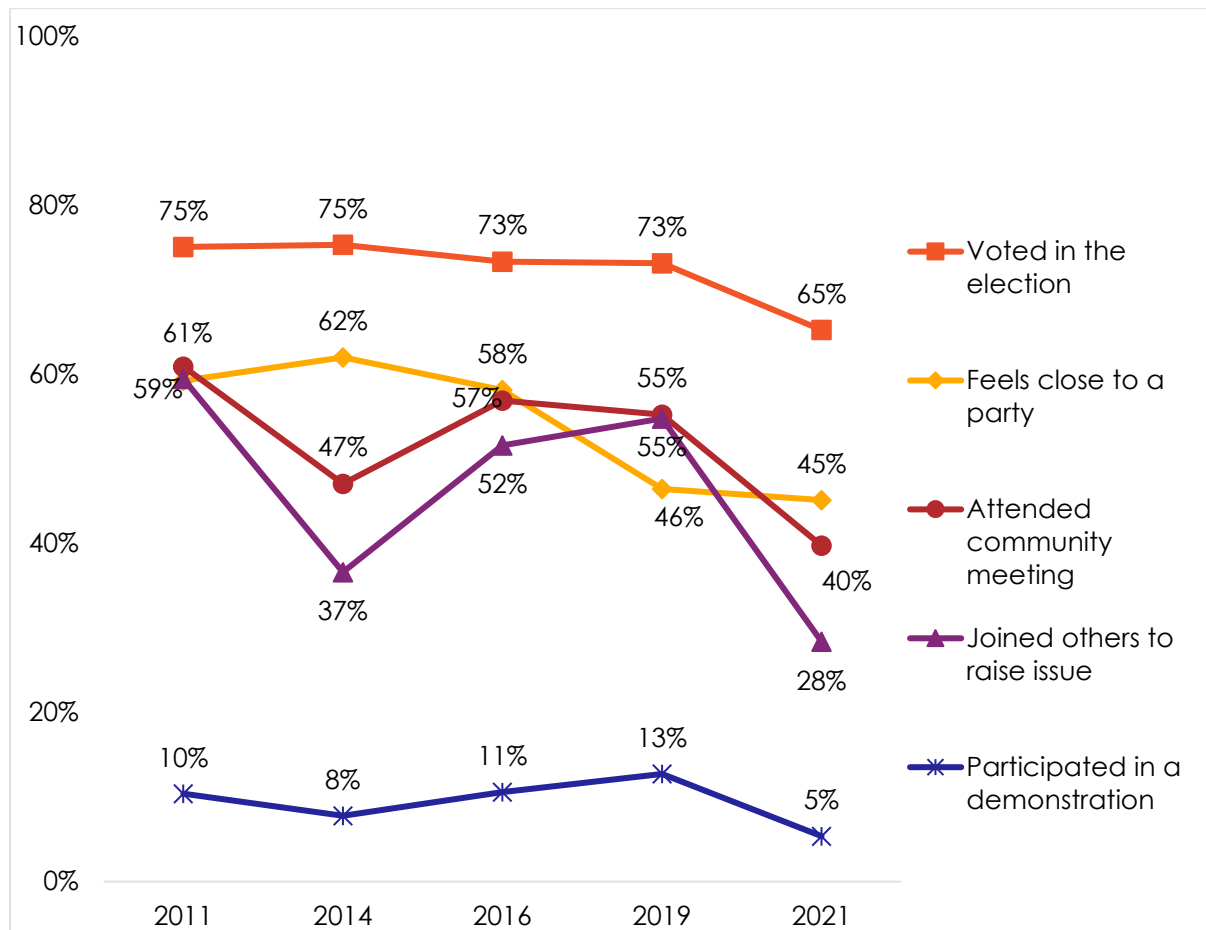
*In the last national election, held in 2017, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2020 are excluded.)*

*Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

*Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say “once or twice,” “several times,” or “often”)*

On each of these five measures, youth participation has declined significantly over the past decade, including drops of 31 and 21 percentage points, respectively, in joining others to raise an issue and in attending community meetings (Figure 13). Self-reported voting by young Kenyans decreased by 10 points compared to 2011, while identification with a political party declined by 14 points.

**Figure 13: Youth political participation** | respondents aged 18-35 years | Kenya | 2011-2021



**Respondents were asked:**

*In the last national election, held in 2017, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Respondents who were too young to vote are excluded.)*

*Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

*Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")*

**Conclusion**

Survey findings provide a sobering assessment of the situation of Kenya's youth. Despite being more educated than their elders, young Kenyans are more likely to be unemployed, and they are increasingly critical of what they see as their government's failure to address their key concerns: the economy, corruption, and unemployment. They are actually

somewhat less pessimistic about the near future than their elders, but even so, fewer than half think things will improve during the coming year.

The significant decline in youth participation in political and civic activities over the past decade suggests a disconnect that may alarm advocates for youth priorities and for Kenya's democracy.

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