



Dispatch No. 712 | 5 October 2023

Mauritians call for greater government efforts to protect the environment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 712 | Preesha Ramtohol and Zuhayr Mustun

Summary

Nestled in the southwestern Indian Ocean, Mauritius is a global biodiversity hotspot, ecologically unique and rich in species (Sujeeun & Thomas, 2022). As a small island developing state, it is also highly vulnerable to environmental shocks due to climate change, which imperil food security, livelihoods, and health; accelerate coral bleaching, marine ecosystem degradation, and biodiversity loss; and jeopardise the tourism sector (Kelman et al., 2021; Sultan, 2021; World Health Organization, 2021; Pillay, 2011; Dhoomun, Hytten, & Perry, 2022).

The government of Mauritius has dedicated considerable attention to consolidating legislation to ensure environmental protection, embracing important sectoral reforms and implementing budgetary measures. For instance, in 2021/2022, it elevated green energy to the status of a new economic pillar for the country, targeting an energy mix with 60% renewables by 2030 and commissioning major wind and solar farms (Government of Mauritius, 2021; EDB Mauritius, 2023). The Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2022) last year unveiled a high-level roadmap toward a “waste plastic free Mauritius” by 2030. The government has earmarked significant resources for the National Environment and Climate Change Fund (NECCF) and for beach rehabilitation and coral-reef and lagoon preservation, and has committed to launch a 1 million tree-planting programme (Government of Mauritius, 2023).

Although natural resource extraction is not a major economic activity in Mauritius, the government's 2021 Offshore Petroleum Bill has laid the foundation for seabed exploration, raising serious concerns among environmental activists (Deena, 2021). Commercial fishing more than quadrupled between 2010 and 2020 (Statistics Mauritius, 2021). Mauritius claims an exclusive economic zone of 2.3 million square kilometres of ocean, representing opportunities to venture into marine-based natural products such as nutraceuticals and cosmeceuticals. Planners look to the “blue economy” to emerge as a pillar for a more diversified and resilient economic trajectory – but one requiring careful environmental conservation policies to be sustainable (Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping, 2020; Beejadhur et al., 2017).

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

Findings show that almost half of Mauritians consider pollution a serious problem in their community. Trash disposal tops the list of citizens' most urgent local environmental problems, and most citizens say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in the country.

Mauritians are most likely to look to one another to reduce pollution and keep their communities clean, with the government following in second place. But most citizens agree

that the government should do more to protect the environment, including ensuring tighter regulation of natural resource extraction.

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 Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians 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 conducted in Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Almost half of Mauritians (48%) consider pollution a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
 - Concerns about pollution are more widespread among poor citizens (59%) and rural residents (50%) than among the well-off (38%) and urbanites (44%).
 - Trash disposal is most widely cited as citizens' top local environmental issue (45%), followed by air (19%) and water (10%) pollution.
 - Almost nine in 10 citizens (88%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Mauritius.
- Mauritians assign primary responsibility for limiting pollution and keeping communities clean to ordinary citizens (50%) and the national (27%) and local (17%) governments.
- Citizens are evenly divided in their assessments of the government's efforts to protect the environment but are fairly united (82%) in saying it should do more.

On natural resource extraction:

- A majority (56%) of Mauritians say the government should regulate natural resource extraction more tightly in order to reduce its impacts on the environment.

Pollution and environmental governance

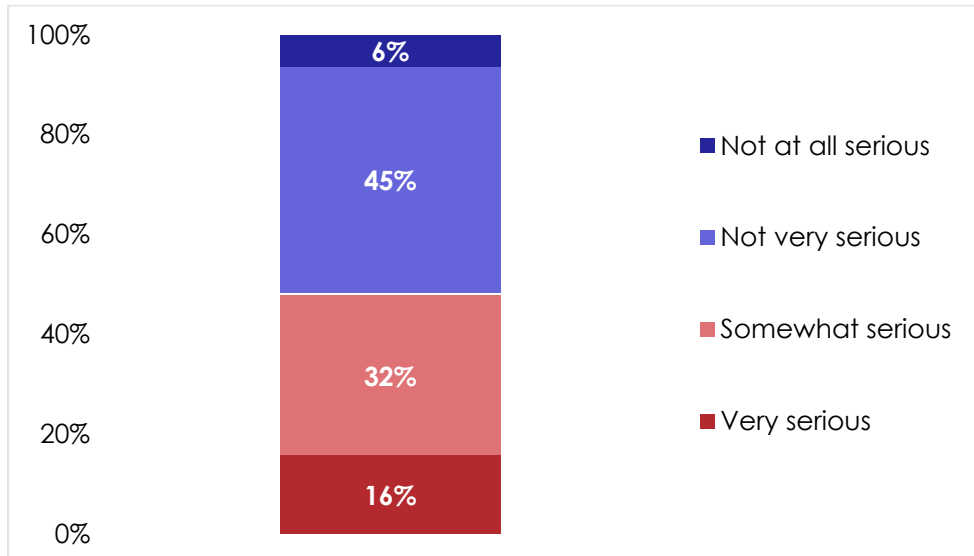
Pollution: How serious is it?

Mauritians are divided in their assessments of pollution: Almost half (48%) of citizens see pollution as a “somewhat serious” (32%) or “very serious” (16%) problem in their community, while 51% consider it “not very serious” (45%) or “not at all serious” (6%) (Figure 1). Concerns about pollution increase sharply with respondents' level of lived poverty,¹ ranging from 38%

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).

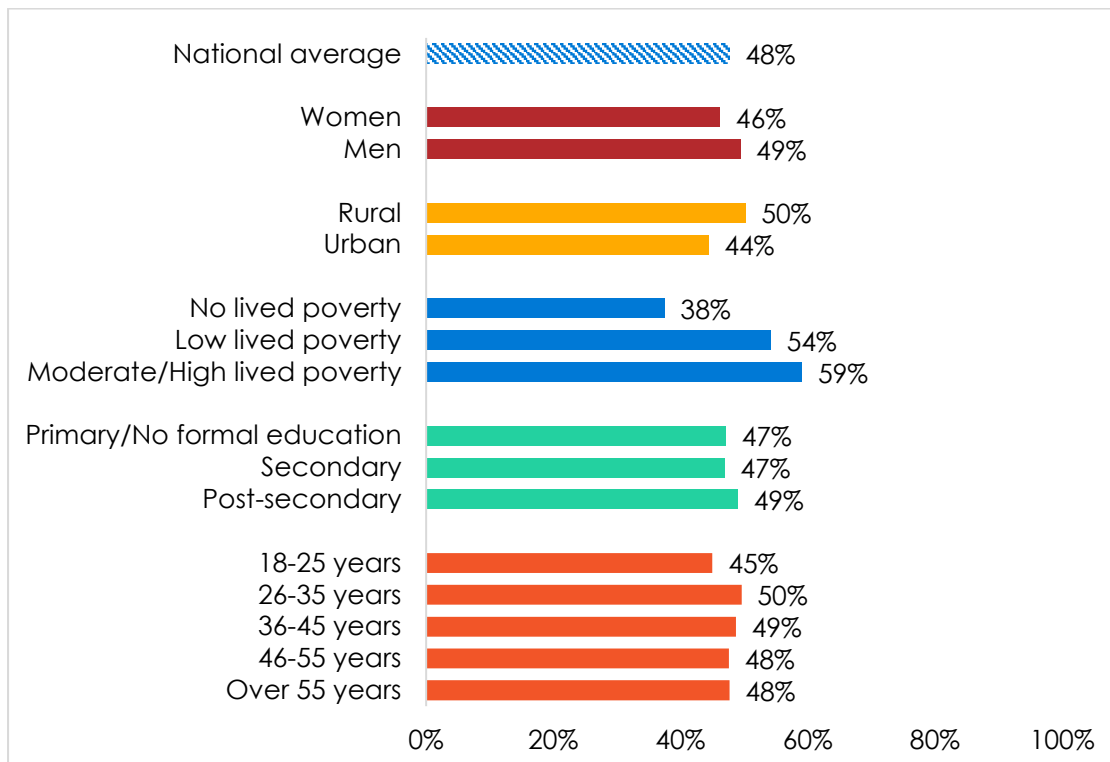
among relatively well-off citizens to 59% among the poor (Figure 2). Rural residents are more likely to report pollution as a serious problem than urbanites (50% vs. 44%).

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

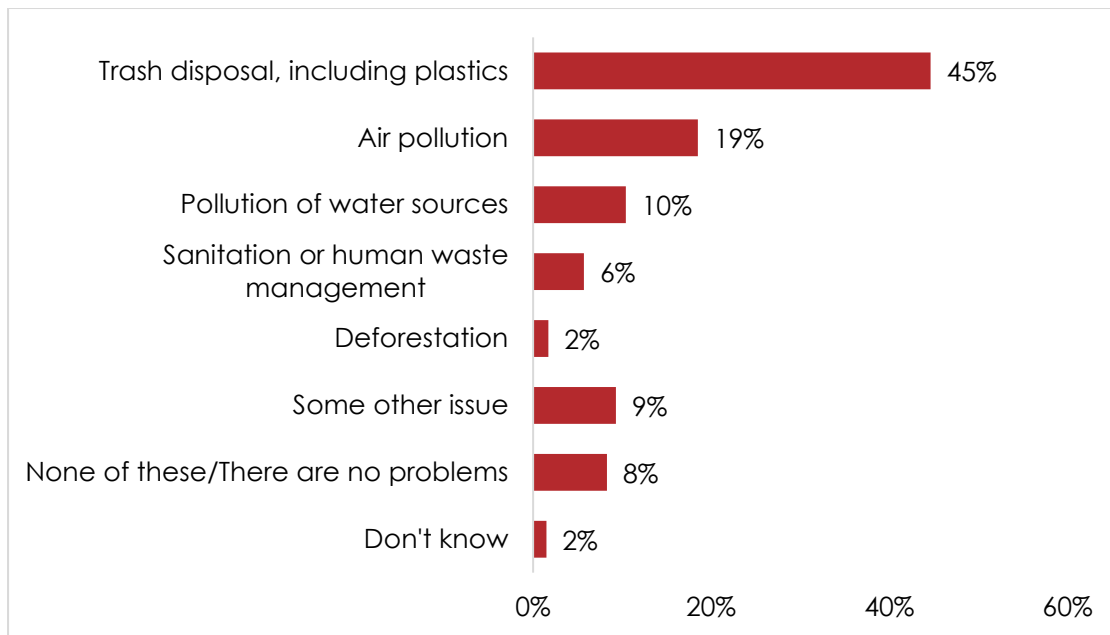


Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

Asked what they consider the most important environmental problem in their community, Mauritians most frequently cite trash disposal (45%), followed by air pollution (19%) and pollution of water sources (10%) (Figure 3).

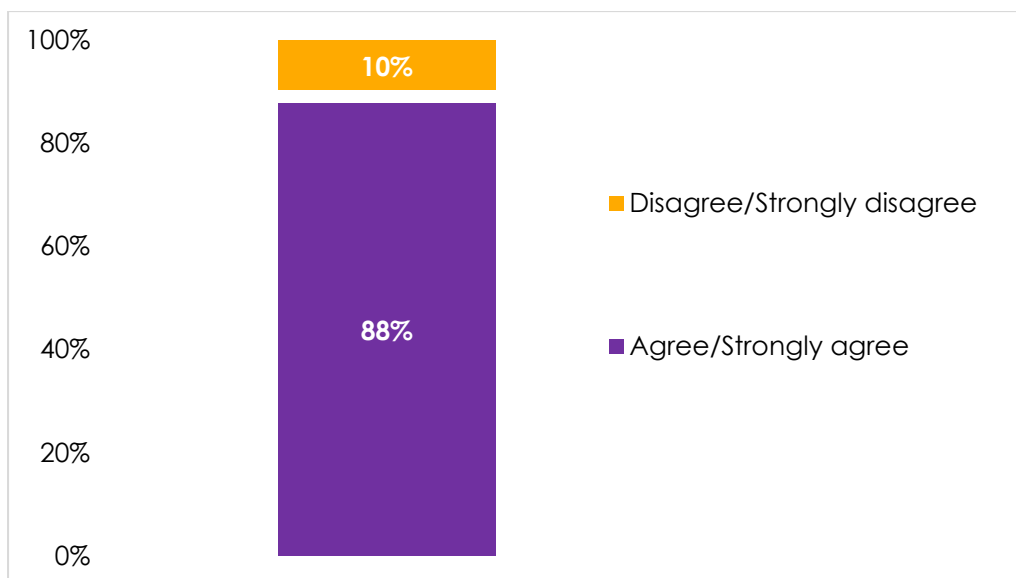
An overwhelming majority (88%) of citizens “agree” or “strongly agree” that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Mauritius (Figure 4). This perception is widely shared across key demographic groups, especially among 18- to 25-year-olds (92%), economically well-off respondents (92%), and those with post-secondary education (90%) (Figure 5).

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



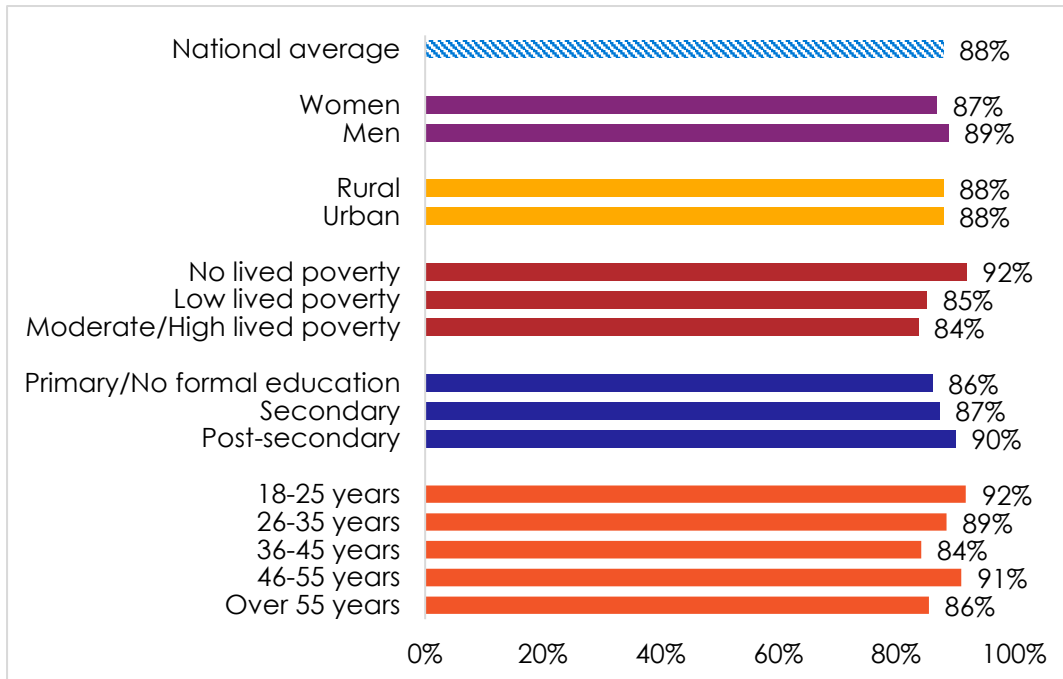
Respondents were asked: Which of the following is the most important environmental issue in your community today?

Figure 4: Are plastic bags a major source of pollution? | Mauritius | 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.

Figure 5: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution | by demographic group
 | Mauritius | 2022



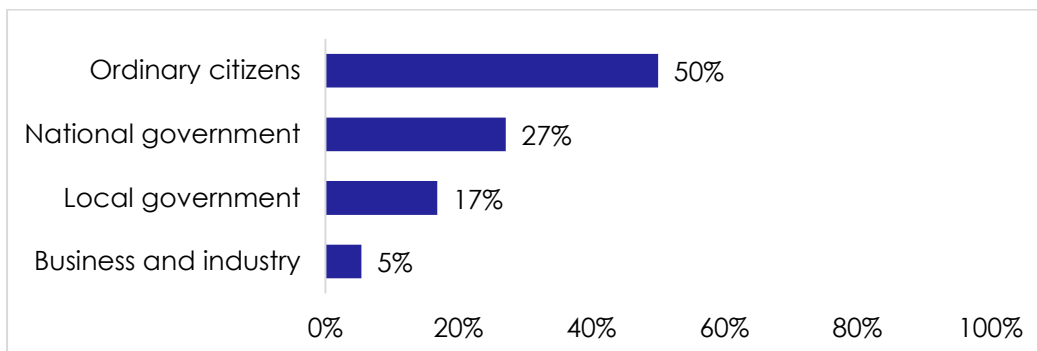
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Protecting the environment

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

For Mauritians, environmental citizenship places ordinary people at the heart of climate and environmental protection. A plurality (50%) of respondents say citizens bear the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean, while more than four in 10 assign this responsibility first and foremost to the national (27%) and local (17%) governments. Only 5% of respondents consider business and industry to be primarily responsible for addressing pollution (Figure 6).

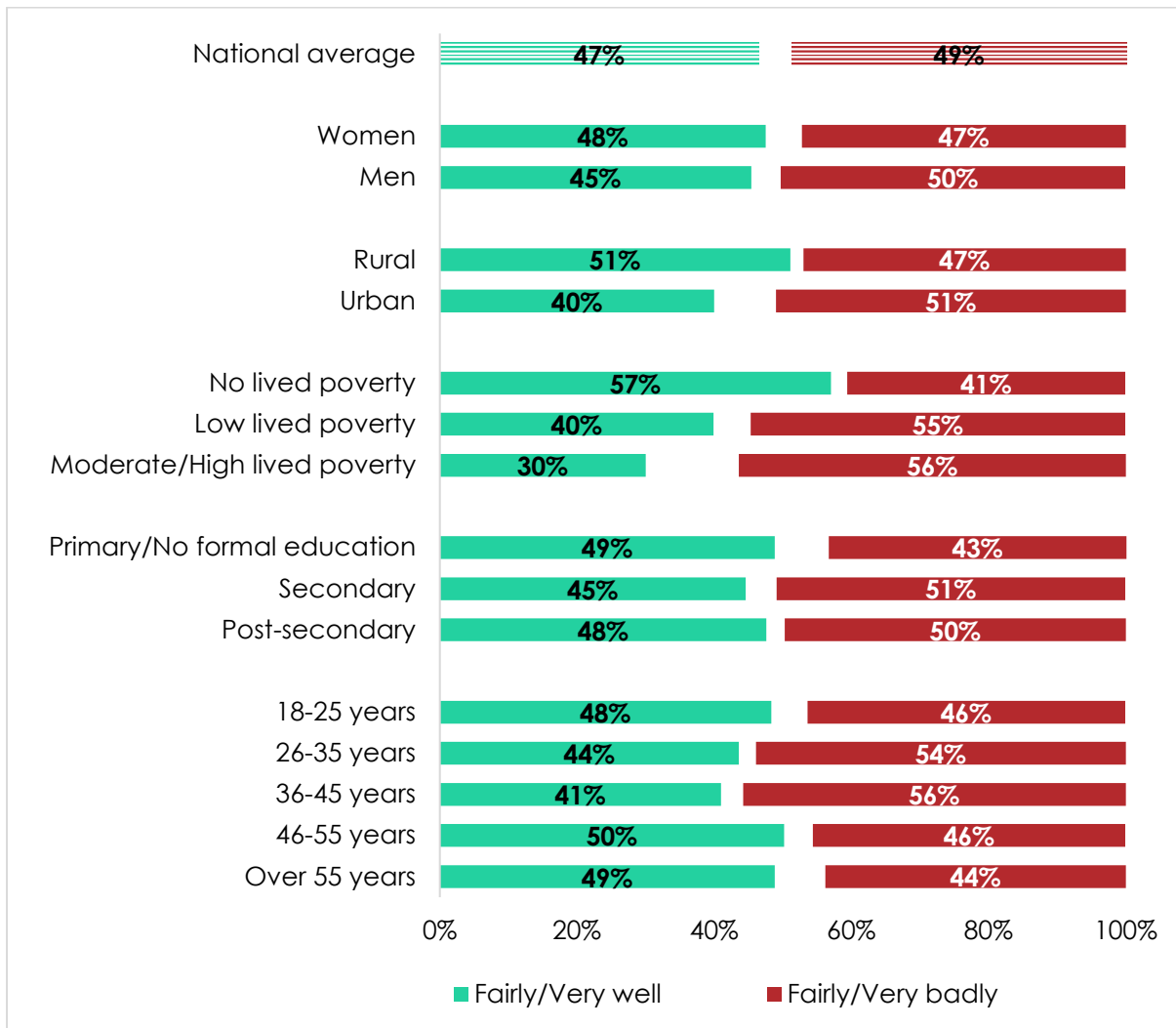
Figure 6: Who should be responsible for reducing pollution? | Mauritius | 2022



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

When asked how well the government is tackling environmental issues, Mauritians are almost evenly divided: 47% say it is doing “fairly well” or “very well,” while 49% think it is doing a poor job (Figure 7). The government's performance wins less applause in cities than in rural areas (40% vs. 51%), and citizens experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (30%) are far less likely to praise the government's efforts than their better-off counterparts (40%-57%).

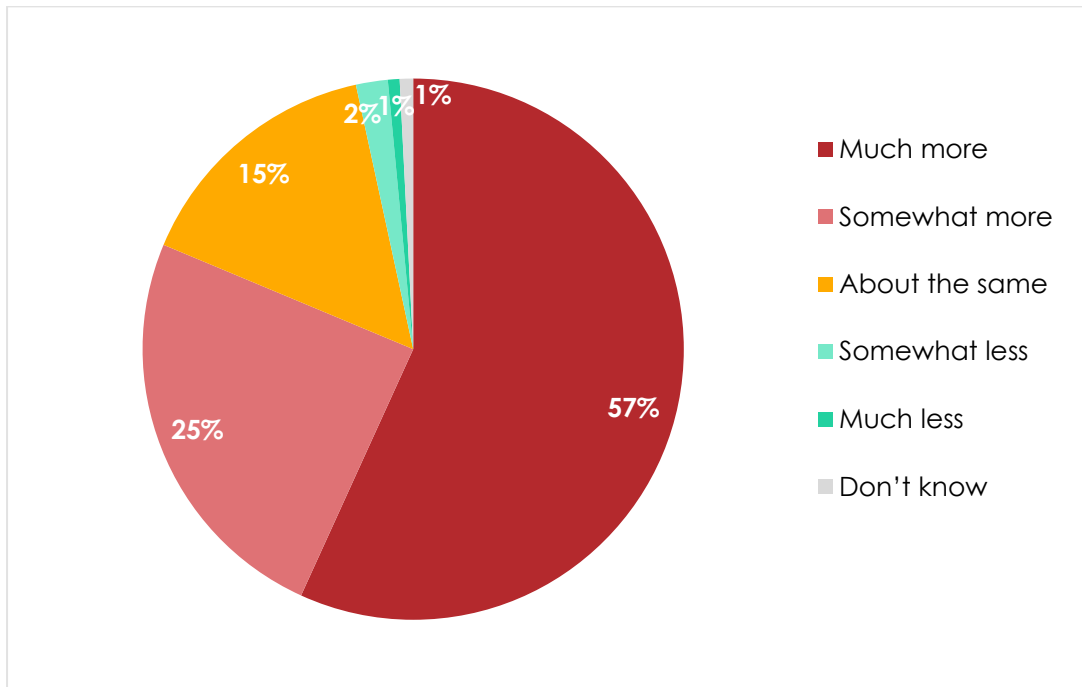
Figure 7: Government performance on reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



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?

Views are less divided on whether the government should increase or decrease its efforts to limit pollution and protect the environment: More than eight in 10 Mauritians (82%) want the government to do more, including 57% who call for “much more” environmental action (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Should government do more to protect the environment? | Mauritius | 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?*

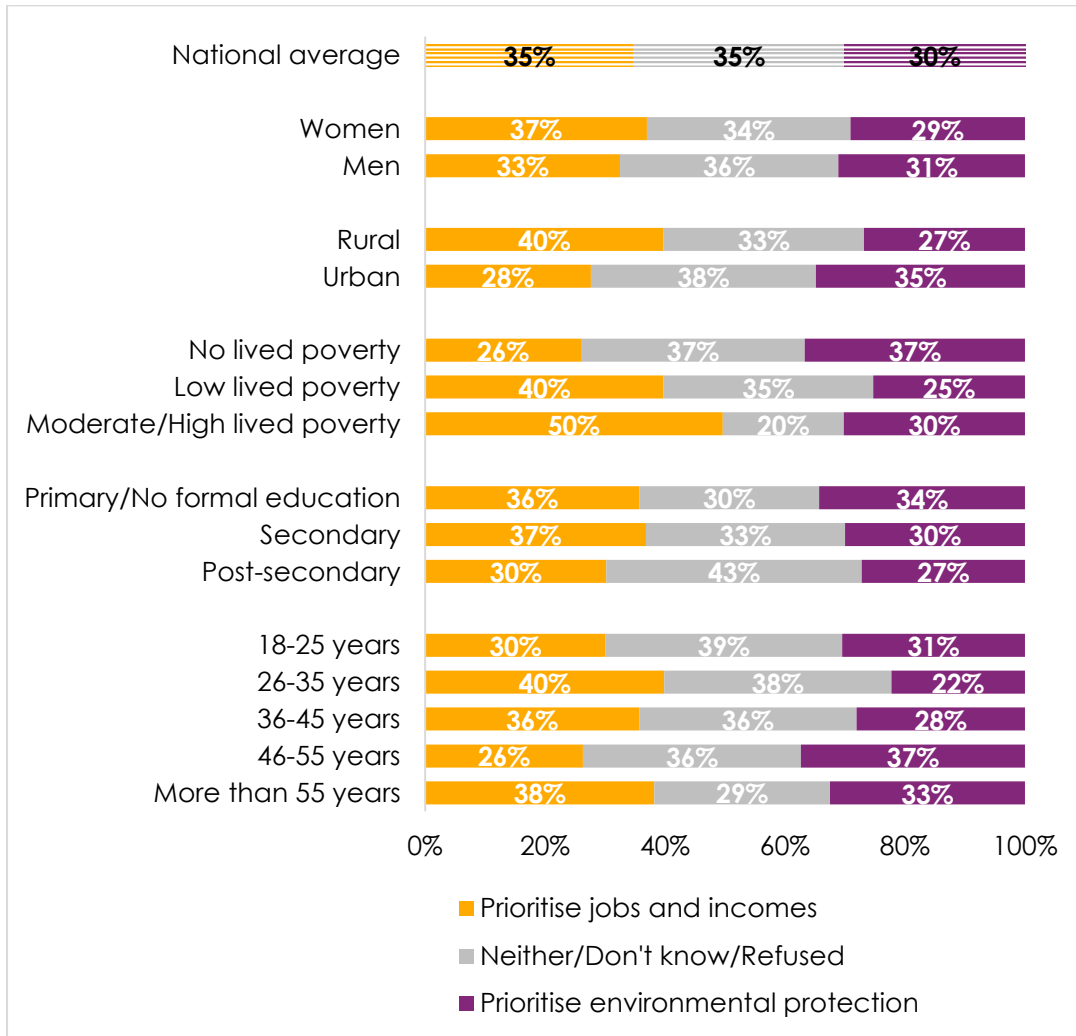
However, if environmental-protection policies pose a threat to jobs or incomes, Mauritians are again divided as to which should be given priority. More than one-third (35%) of respondents say that jobs and income creation should be prioritised over reducing pollution or environmental damage, while 30% favour prioritising protection of the environment, “even if it means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives” (Figure 9).

Importantly, more than one-third (35%) of respondents do not take a position on the issue, saying they agree with neither viewpoint (28%) or else “don’t know” (7%) or don’t want to answer the question (1%).²

Support for prioritising economic considerations over environmental protection is stronger in rural areas than in cities (40% vs. 28%) and increases with respondents’ level of lived poverty, ranging from 26% among well-off citizens to 50% among those experiencing moderate or high lived poverty.

² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 28% “Agree with neither” and 7% “Don’t know” and 1% “Refused to answer” sum to 35%).

Figure 9: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2022



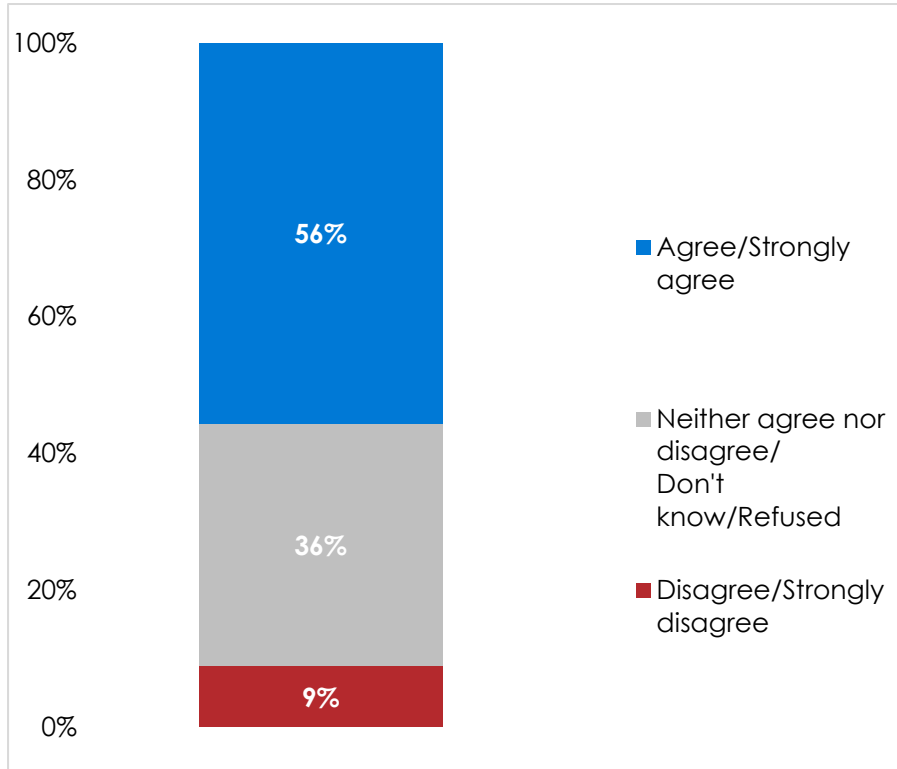
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage.
 Statement 2: The government should focus more on preventing pollution 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

Mauritius' vast exclusive economic zone offers the country an unparalleled opportunity to leverage the ocean economy as a key development strategy in the coming decades, though ensuring that this does not come at the expense of the oceanic kingdom will be a challenge.

A majority (56%) of Mauritians “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government should regulate natural resource extraction more tightly to reduce negative impacts on the environment (Figure 10). In part this may reflect a desire for increased supervision of commercial fishing, as the artisanal fishing community often reports the presence of foreign fishing vessels in Mauritian waters (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

Figure 10: Should government regulate natural resource extraction more tightly?
 | Mauritius | 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 the following statement: In this country, natural resource extraction should be more tightly regulated by government to reduce the negative impacts on the environment.

Conclusion

Survey findings reflect significant popular concerns about pollution in Mauritius, with plastic bags and trash disposal at the top of the list. Citizens hold themselves accountable, but they also look to their government for bolder action to protect one of the world's uniquely rich environments, including in its potential use in a blue economy.

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.

References

- Beejadhur, Y. A., Kelleher, K., Kelly, T., Howells, M. I., Alfstad, T., Farrell, S., & Willwerth, J. (2017). The ocean economy in Mauritius: Making it happen, making it last.
- Deena, M. (2021). L'offshore petroleum bill voté : Le pire est à venir, préviennent les militants écologistes. Lexpress.mu. 9 December.
- Dhoomun, L., Hytten, K. F., & Perry, P. (2022). Perceptions of climate change and climate change policies within the tourism sector in Mauritius. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 18(1), 36-59.
- EDB Mauritius. (2023). Renewable energy - EDB Mauritius.
- Government of Mauritius. (2021). National budget 2021-2022. Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development.
- Government of Mauritius. (2023). National budget 2023-2024. Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development.
- Kelman, I., Ayeb-Karlsson, S., Rose-Clarke, K., Prost, A., Ronneberg, E., Wheeler, N., & Watts, N. (2021). A review of mental health and wellbeing under climate change in small island developing states (SIDS). *Environmental Research Letters*, 16(3), 033007.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.
- Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry. (2022). The MCCI roadmap for a waste plastic free Mauritius.
- Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping. (2020). Blue economy.
- Pillay, K. R. M. (2011). Adapting coral culture to climate change: The Mauritian experience. *Western Indian Ocean Journal of Marine Science*, 10(2), 155-167.
- Statistics Mauritius. (2021). Agriculture statistics.
- Sujeeun, L., & Thomas, S. C. (2022). Biochar rescues native trees in the biodiversity hotspot of Mauritius. *Forests*, 13(2), 277.
- Sultan, R. (2021). Economic impacts of climate change on agriculture: Insights from the small island economy of Mauritius. *Small Island Developing States: Vulnerability and Resilience Under Climate Change*, 137-158.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2021). EEOFISH: New fishing grounds for the artisanal fishers of the republic of Mauritius.
- World Health Organization. (2021). SIDS summit for health: For a healthy and resilient future in small island developing states.

Preesha Ramtohol is a senior research consultant at StraConsult Ltd., the Afrobarometer national partner in Mauritius. Email: src@straconsult.intnet.mu.

Zuhayr Mustun is a junior researcher at StraConsult Ltd. Email: prgresearch@straconsult.intnet.mu.

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, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 712 | 5 October 2023