



Dispatch No. 725 | 2 November 2023

Sierra Leoneans demand urgent climate action from government and other stakeholders

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 725 | Margaret Eduonoo

Summary

Situated along West Africa's low-lying coastline, Sierra Leone boasts dense biodiversity with rich marine life and relies heavily on its agriculture and livestock sectors (Sesay & Kallon, 2022; World Food Programme, 2022; Brima, 2021). Despite being only a marginal producer of greenhouse gases, Sierra Leone ranks 166th out of 185 countries on the ND-GAIN (2021) Index, indicating very high vulnerability to climate change and low readiness to confront the accelerating threat (African Development Bank, 2022; Karim & Bah, 2022; Africa Renewal, 2022). Extreme heat and rising sea levels, recurrent storms, floods, droughts, coastal erosion, mudslides, and other climate disruptions threaten the country's food security, aquatic life, biodiversity, and sustained livelihoods (African Development Bank, 2022; Climate Parliament, 2022; Mukpo, 2022; Pickson & Boateng, 2021; World Vision, 2021; Wadsworth, Jalloh, & Lebbie, 2019).

In partnership with international organisations, the Sierra Leonean government has adopted strategies to increase risk awareness and bolster institutional capacities for climate action outlined in the National Adaptation Plan, including restoration of its forest and tree cover (African Development Bank, 2022; World Food Programme, 2022; UNDP Climate, 2022).

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

Survey findings show that while popular awareness of climate change is increasing, it is still limited to about half of Sierra Leoneans. Most of those who have heard of climate change say it is worsening their quality of life. Overwhelming majorities say that greater efforts are needed from the government, business and industry, developed countries, and ordinary citizens to protect the country from the climate crisis.

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 rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 42 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult Sierra Leoneans between 13 June and 9 July 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 Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

- Most Sierra Leoneans say droughts (65%) and floods (75%) have become less severe, rather than more severe, in their region over the past 10 years.
- About half (49%) of Sierra Leoneans say they have heard of climate change, an 8-percentage-point increase since 2018. Among those who are aware of climate change:
 - Two-thirds (67%) say it is making life in Sierra Leone worse.
 - Overwhelming majorities believe that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change (85%) and that their government needs to take immediate climate action, even at considerable economic cost (81%).
 - Most assign primary responsibility for limiting climate change to the government (59%) or to ordinary citizens (30%).
 - Large majorities say “a lot more” action to fight climate change is needed from the government (84%), business and industry (82%), ordinary citizens (68%), and developed countries (66%).
- About half (48%) of respondents say the government is doing a good job of addressing climate change.

Severity of extreme weather conditions

Before asking about climate change, Afrobarometer asked respondents about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. Only 15% of Sierra Leoneans say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” in their region over the past 10 years, while 65% say they have become less severe and 17% report no change (Figure 1).

Even fewer (9%) say the severity of flooding has worsened, while three-fourths (75%) say floods have become less severe.

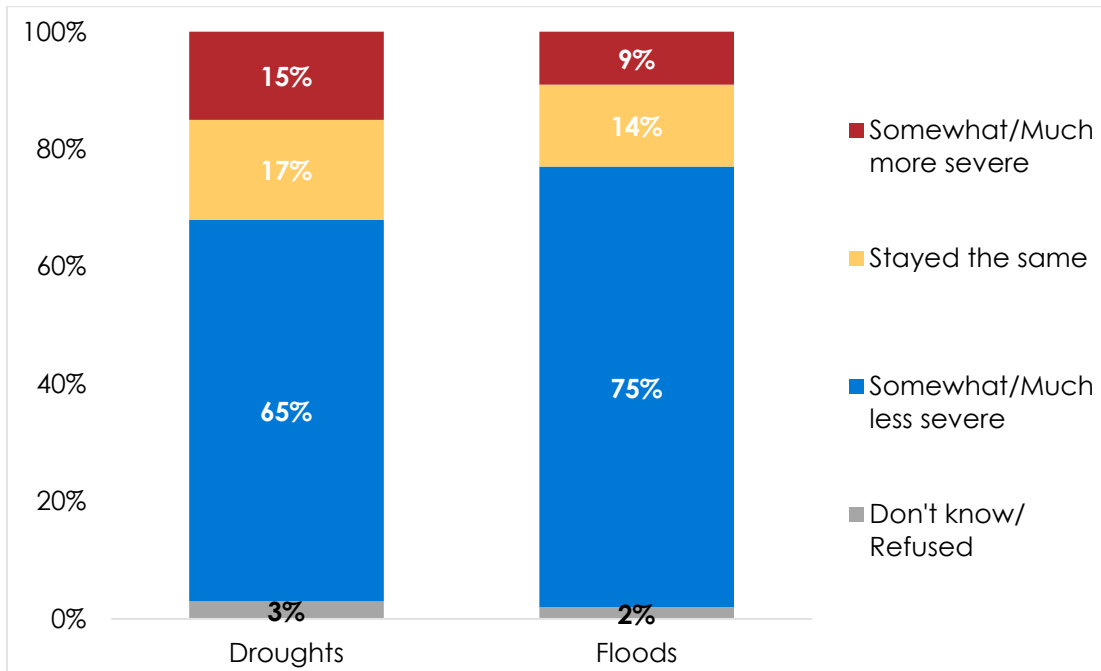
Compared to 2018, the proportion of citizens reporting worsening floods has decreased by two-thirds, while perceptions of worsening droughts have remained stable (Figure 2).

Worsening droughts are less commonly perceived by economically well-off citizens (9%) and the most educated (5%) than by those experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty¹ (19%-20%) and those with secondary schooling or less (14%-17%) (Figure 3).

Increasingly severe flooding is least often reported by rural residents (3%) and respondents with no formal education (5%), while residents in the Western Area (20%) are most likely to report worsening floods.

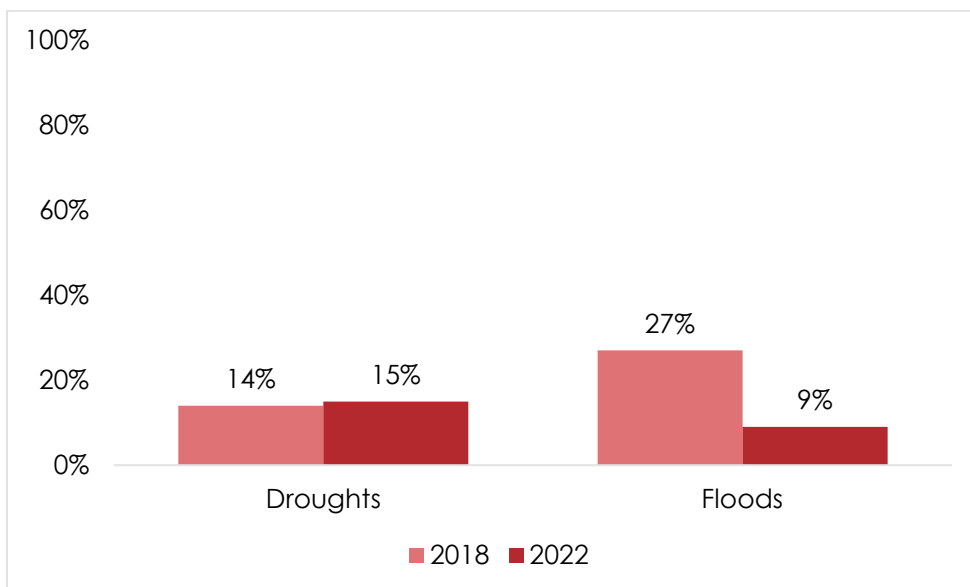
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: Severity of droughts and floods | Sierra Leone | 2022



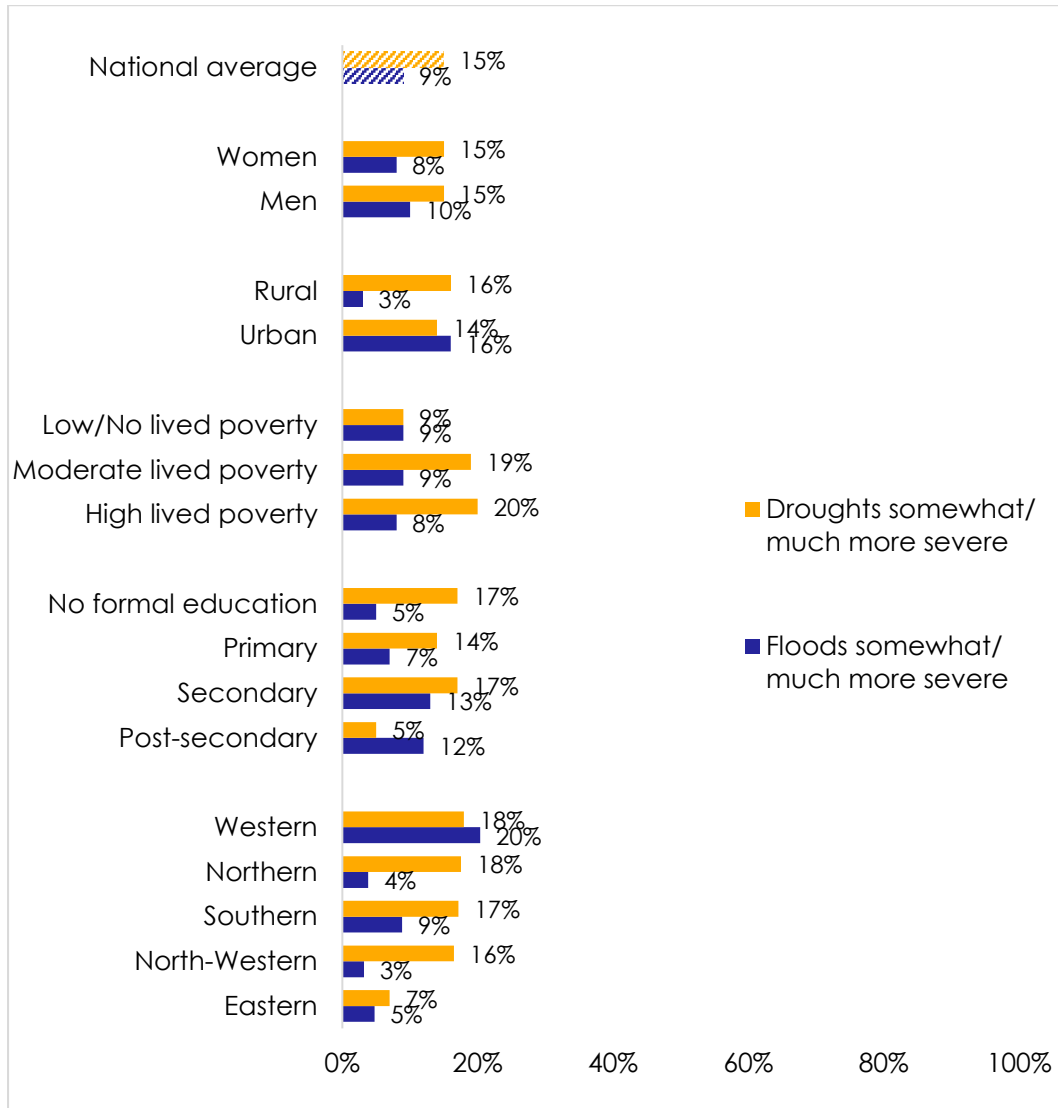
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Figure 2: More severe droughts and floods | Sierra Leone | 2018-2022



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: More severe droughts and floods | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 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")

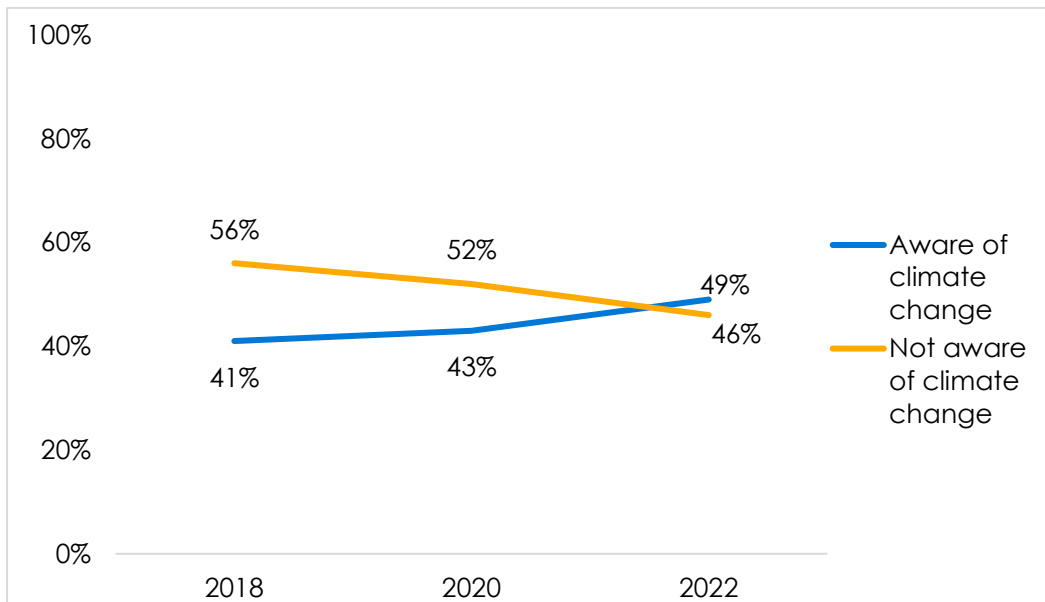
Awareness of climate change

About half (49%) of Sierra Leoneans say they have heard of climate change, an increase of 8 percentage points since 2018 (Figure 4).

Women are less aware of the climate threat than men (36% vs. 61%), as are rural residents compared to urbanites (40% vs. 60%) (Figure 5). Awareness of climate change increases sharply with respondents' education level, ranging from just 32% among citizens with no formal schooling to 86% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

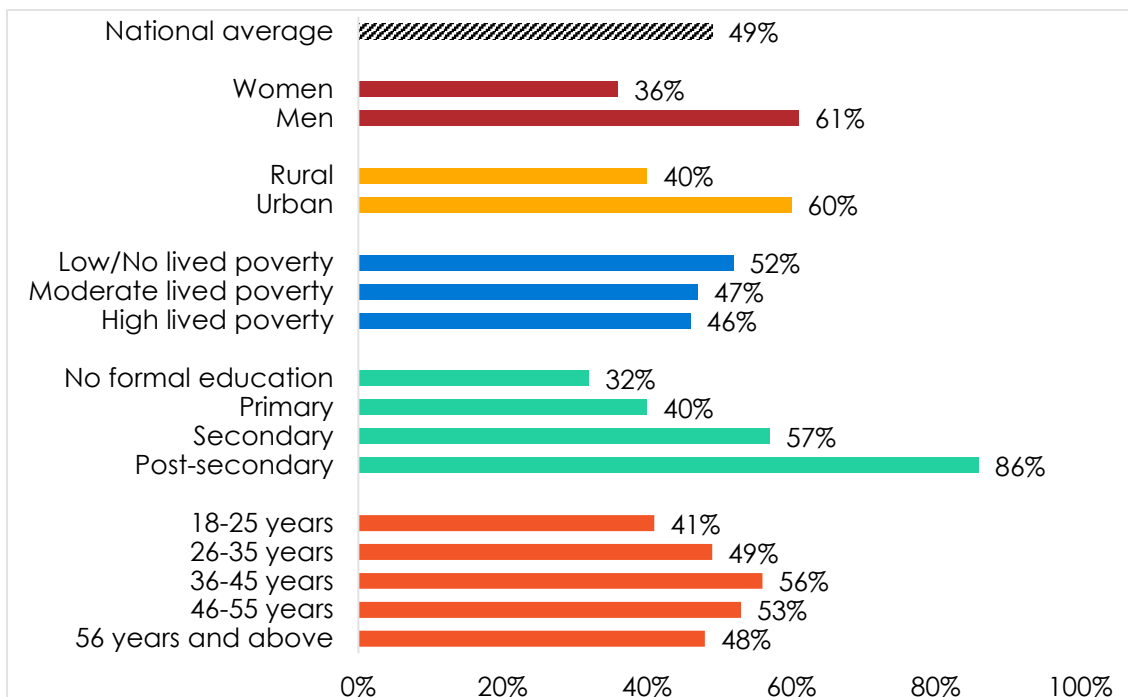
Economically better-off respondents (52%) are somewhat more likely to have heard of climate change than their poorer counterparts (46%-47%), and the youngest respondents (41%) are less aware of the concept than their elders (48%-56%).

Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | Sierra Leone | 2018-2022



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

Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022

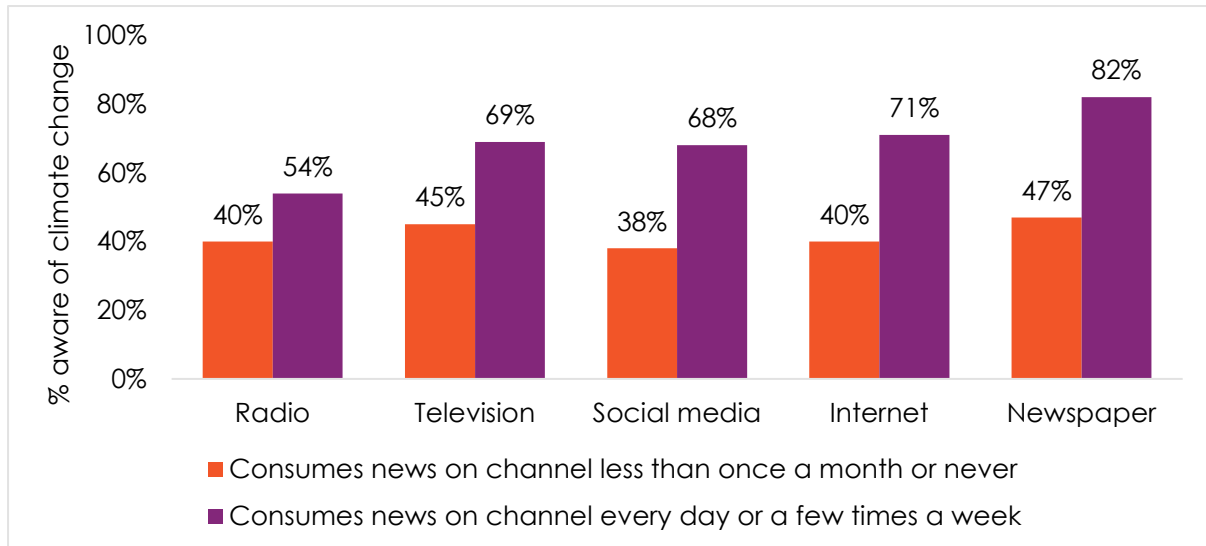


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Awareness of climate change also increases with respondents' news consumption (Figure 6). Those who get news "every day" or "a few times a week" from the radio, television, social

media, the Internet, or newspapers are significantly more likely to be conversant with climate change than those who use these media “less than once a month” or never,” reaching gaps of 30 percentage points or more for social media, the Internet, and newspapers.

Figure 6: Awareness of climate change | by news media consumption | Sierra Leone | 2022

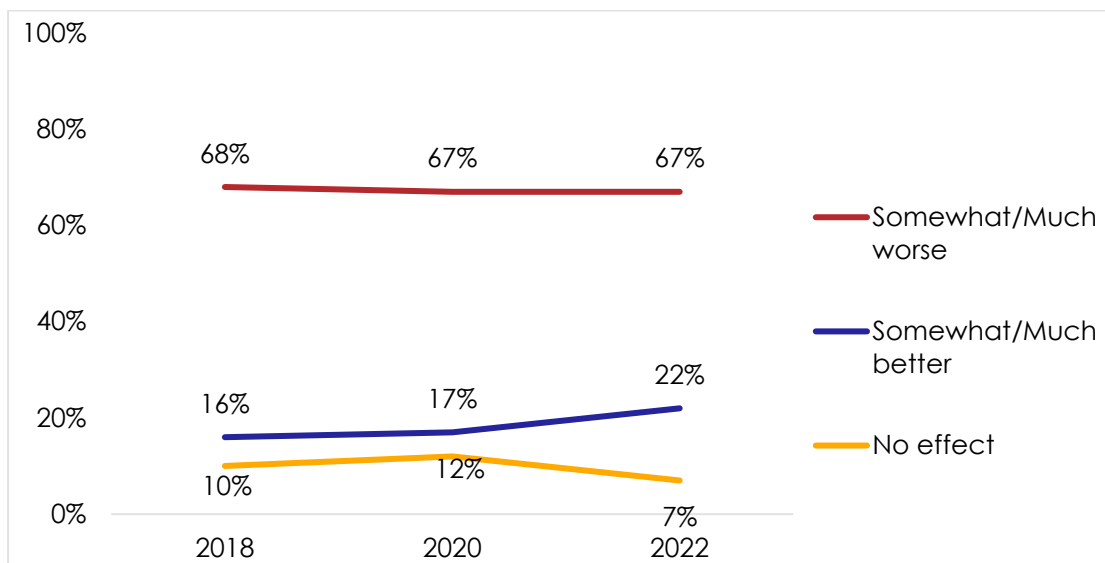


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say “yes”)

Effects of climate change

Among Sierra Leoneans familiar with climate change, two-thirds (67%) say it is making life “somewhat worse” (38%) or “much worse” (29%) (Figure 7). This proportion has remained consistent in the past three Afrobarometer survey rounds.

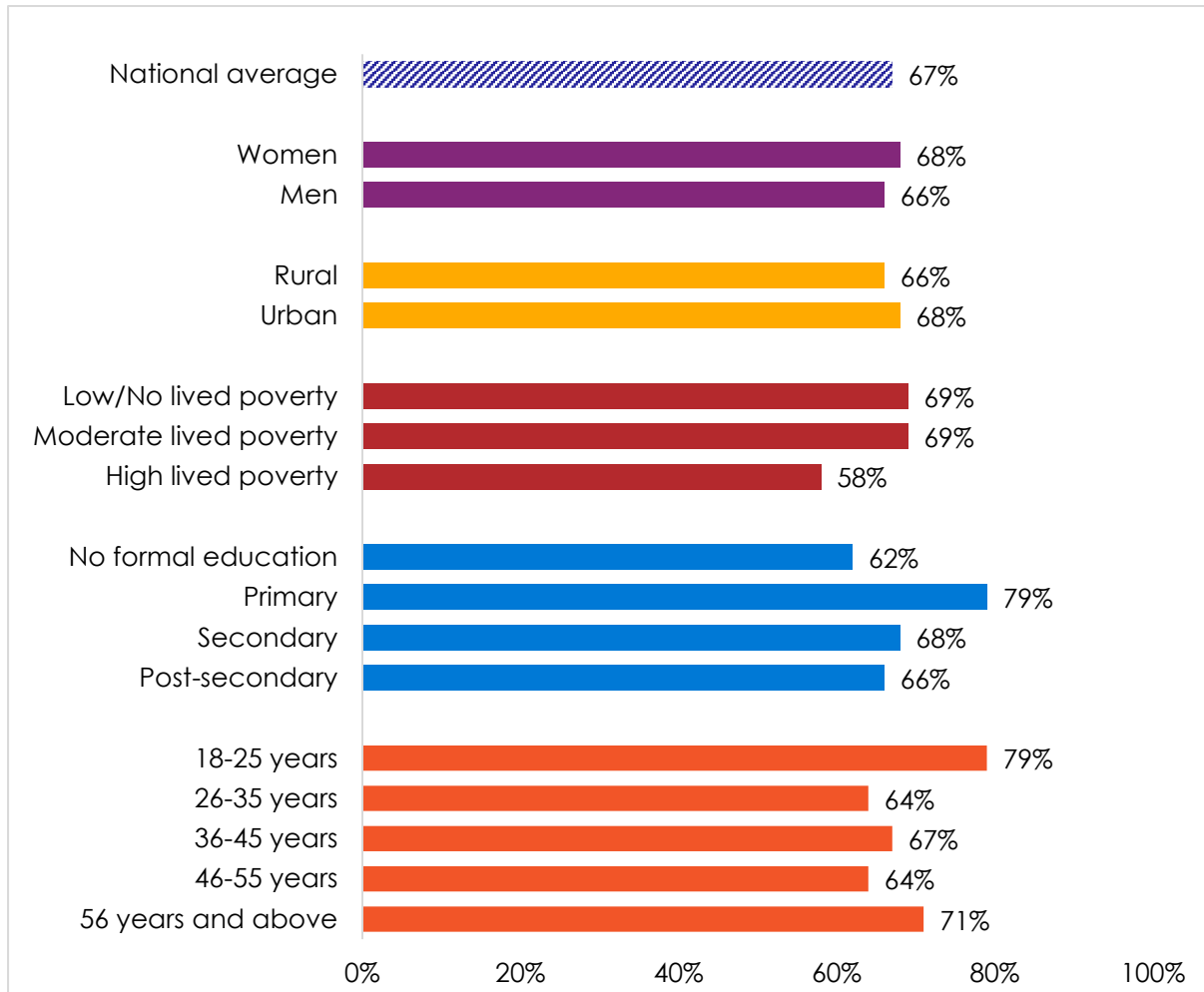
Figure 7: Effect of climate change | Sierra Leone | 2018-2022



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

Perceptions of negative effects of climate change are somewhat less common among the poorest (58%) and least educated (62%) citizens but are particularly frequent among 18- to 25-year-olds (79%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Climate change is making life worse | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022



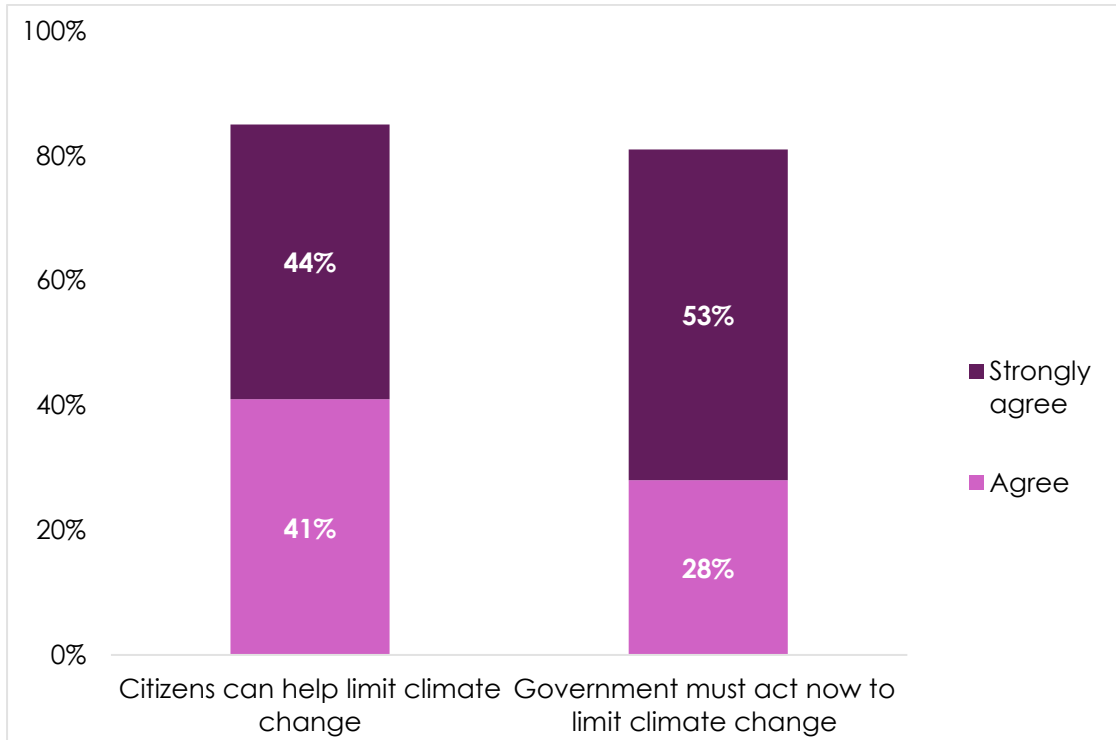
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Sierra Leone better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Fighting climate change

An overwhelming majority (85%) of Sierra Leoneans who are aware of climate change believe that ordinary citizens can help to limit climate change (Figure 9). A similar proportion "agree" (28%) or "strongly agree" (53%) that their government must take immediate action to tackle climate change, "even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or takes a toll on our economy."

Asked who should have primary responsibility for limiting climate change and reducing its impact, respondents most frequently cite the government (59%) and ordinary citizens (30%) (Figure 10). Small minorities assign this responsibility mainly to traditional leaders (6%), business and industry (3%), and rich or developed countries (1%).

Figure 9: Limiting climate change | Sierra Leone | 2022



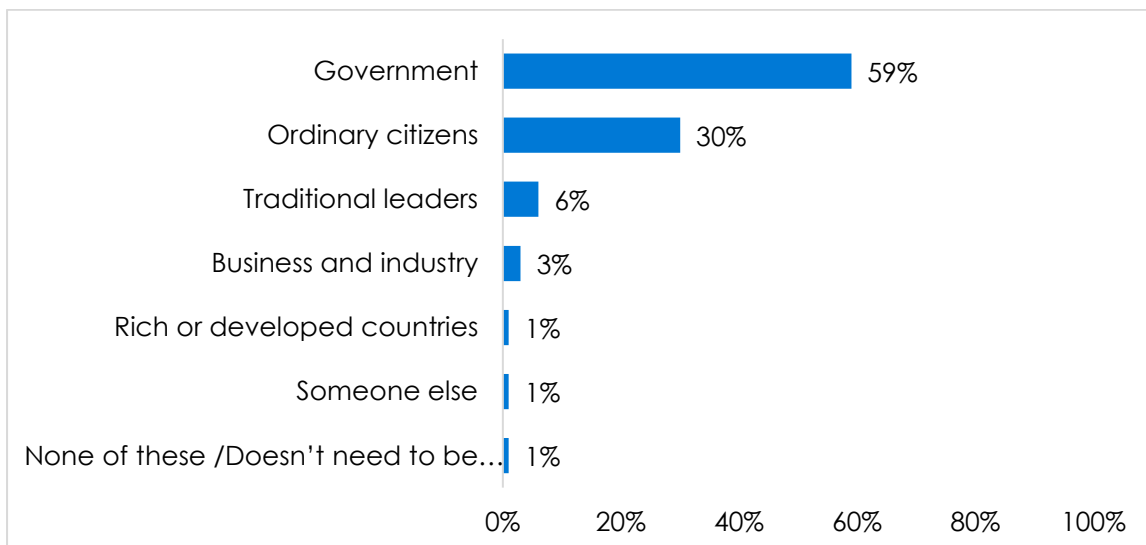
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

Ordinary Sierra Leoneans 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? | Sierra Leone | 2022

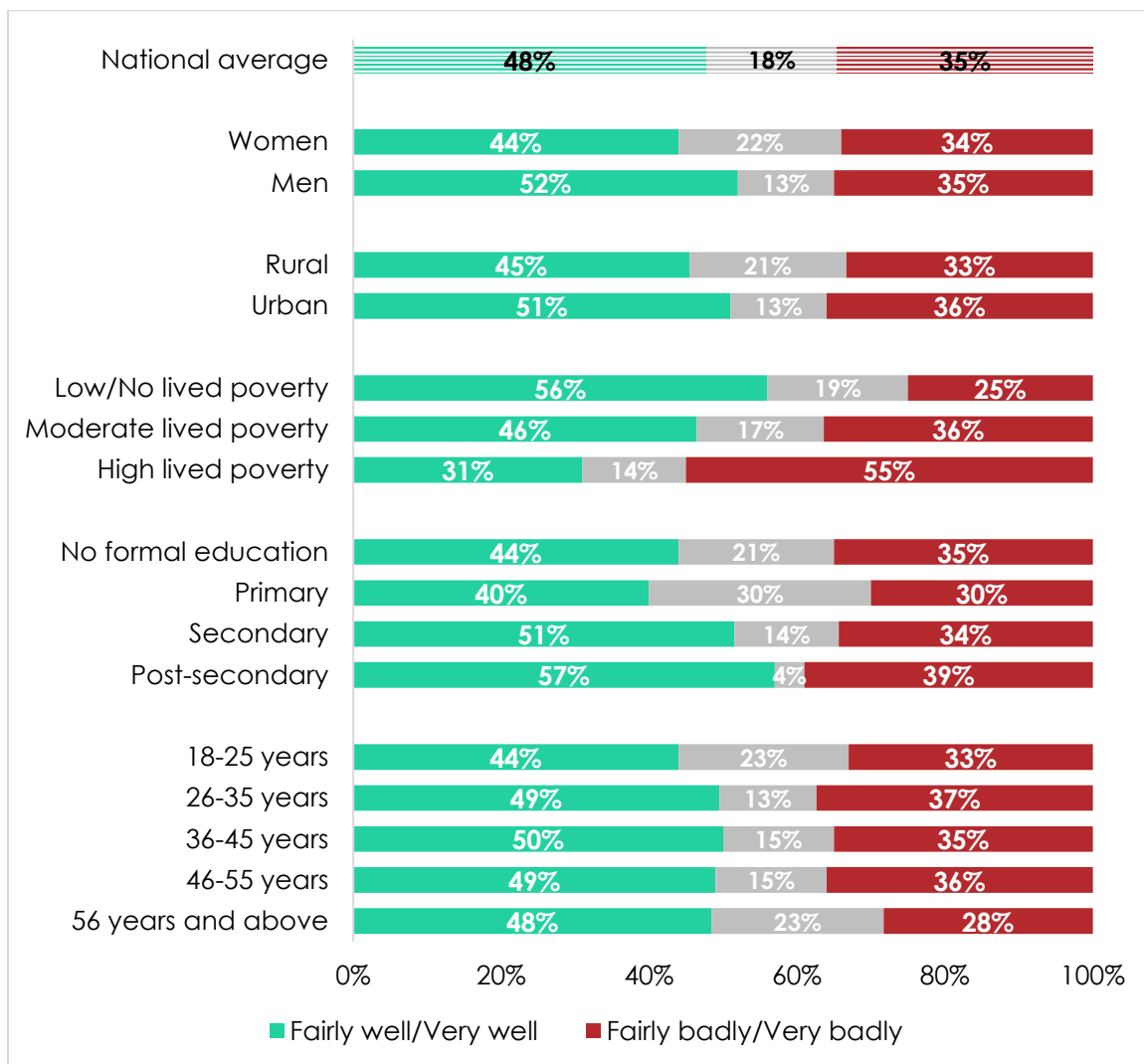


Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Almost half (48%) of all survey respondents say the government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of addressing climate change, while 35% are displeased with the government's handling of the issue. About one in five (18%) say they “don't know” or refused to answer the question (Figure 11).

Women are less likely than men to approve of the government's performance on climate change (44% vs. 52%), as are rural citizens (45%) compared to their urban counterparts (51%). The poorest respondents offer the lowest approval ratings (31%, vs. 56% of well-off respondents), and less educated citizens (40%-57%) are less approving than those with at least secondary schooling (51%-57%).

Figure 11: Government performance in handling climate change | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022

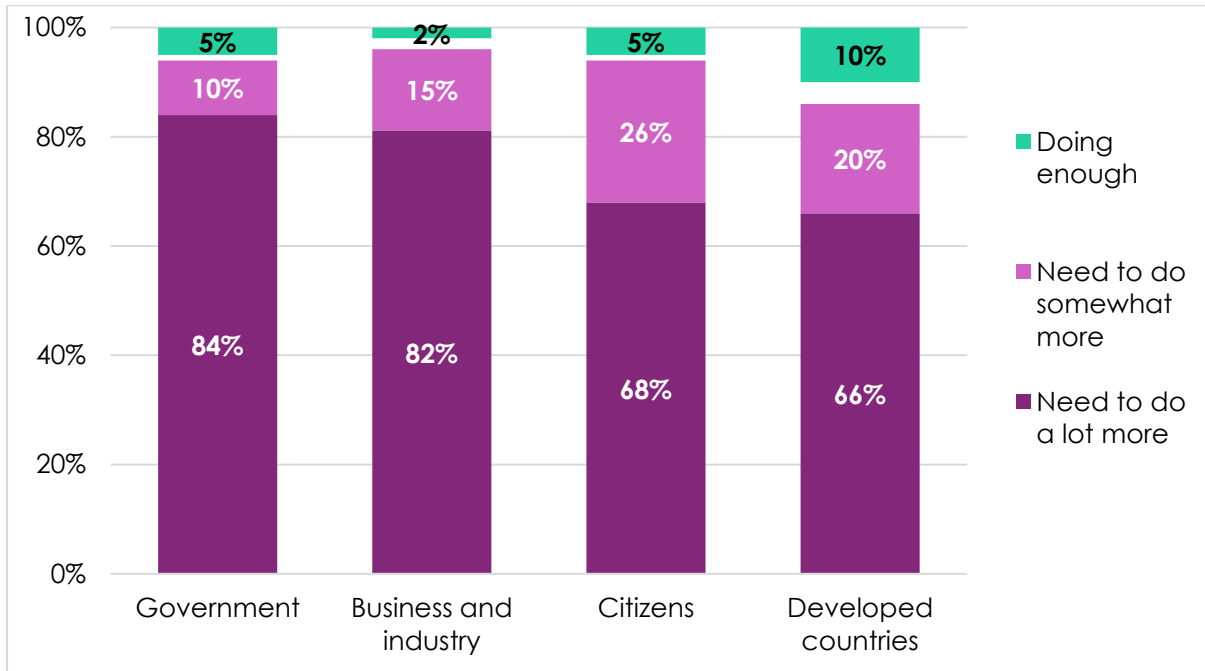


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Addressing the problem of climate change?

But regardless of who has the primary responsibility, citizens say none of the critical actors is doing enough to limit climate change (Figure 12). More than nine out of 10 respondents who are aware of climate change say greater efforts to tackle the climate threat are needed from the government (94%) and business and industry (97%), including more than eight in 10

who want to see “a lot more” action. Similarly, overwhelming majorities demand more significant efforts from citizens (94%) and developed countries (86%).

Figure 12: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | Sierra Leone | 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.)

Conclusion

Despite gains in public awareness of climate change, about half of Sierra Leoneans still have not heard of the climate threat. Awareness of climate change increases dramatically with citizens' levels of education and exposure to news media, suggesting possible pathways to build broader support for climate action.

Among those who have heard of climate change, the call to action is clear. Most say climate change is making life worse and requires “a lot more” effort by the government, business and industry, developed countries, and ordinary citizens, even at considerable economic cost.

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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