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Sierra Leoneans urge government to tighten mining regulations to protect the environment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 728 | Marcelline Amouzou

Summary

Sierra Leone is endowed with abundant reserves of diamonds, bauxite, gold, and other minerals as well as productive agricultural resources and fisheries (International Trade Administration, 2021). Agriculture is an important driver of the economy, making up 55% of the nation's gross domestic product (United Nations, 2020), while the mining sector contributes a majority of the country's foreign exchange earnings (60% in 2022) (Coface for Trade, 2022). Both sectors are major sources of employment for Sierra Leoneans (Fayiah, Dong, Singh, & Fayiah, 2020).

Both agriculture – including large-scale palm oil and sugar cane plantations – and mining are also major sources of the country's environmental problems, including deforestation, land degradation, and water and air pollution (Mabey, Li, Sundufu, & Lashari, 2020). The Forestry Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry estimated in 2017 that less than 5% of the country's cover in 1990 remained intact (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022). In 2017, deforestation turned deadly when a mudslide claimed the lives of more than 1,100 Sierra Leoneans (Glynn, 2018).

The government's response, overseen by the Environment Protection Agency and laid out in documents such as its National Adaptation Plan, has sought to strengthen natural resource management and to promote environmentally safe mining practices (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022). Last year, Sierra Leone assumed a leadership role in environmental protection by passing laws that give local communities the right to veto mining, farming, and industrial projects (Peltier, 2022).

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

In Sierra Leone, almost half of respondents consider pollution a serious problem in their community. Most assign primary responsibility for reducing pollution to ordinary citizens and the government, which they overwhelmingly expect to do "much more" to protect the environment.

Perceptions of natural resource extraction are mixed, and most Sierra Leoneans favour tighter government regulation of the industry to reduce its damaging 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 Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone 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

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Almost half (45%) of Sierra Leoneans consider pollution a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
 - Sanitation ranks as the most important local environmental issue (cited by 30%), followed by trash disposal (22%), water pollution (18%), and deforestation (14%).
 - Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Sierra Leone.
- Almost half (48%) of Sierra Leoneans believe that the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with ordinary citizens, while about four in 10 assign this task mainly to the local (19%) or national (18%) government.
- A slim majority (53%) say the government is doing a good job of protecting the environment. A far larger majority (78%) say it should be doing more on this issue.
- If environmental protection conflicts with economic development, 45% of Sierra Leoneans say the government should prioritise protecting the environment, while 40% say creating jobs and increasing incomes should be its foremost concern.

On natural resource extraction:

- Only about one-third (32%) of Sierra Leoneans think the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its costs, such as pollution.
- More than three-fourths (77%) of citizens say the government should regulate the industry more tightly to curtail its detrimental effects on the environment.

Pollution and environmental governance

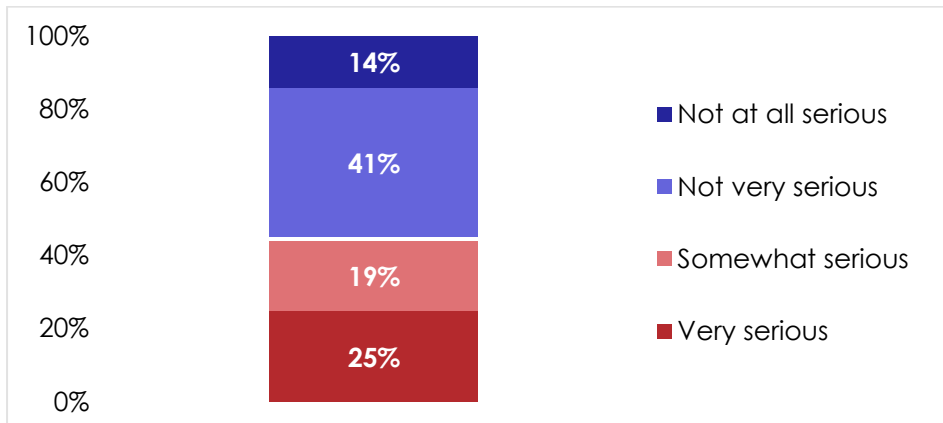
Pollution: The scope of the problem

Almost half (45%)¹ of Sierra Leoneans consider pollution in their communities a “somewhat serious” (19%) or “very serious” (25%) problem (Figure 1). Almost six in 10 believe pollution is “not very serious (41%)” or “not at all serious” (14%).

Urban residents (48%) and men (47%) are more troubled by pollution than rural residents (42%) and women (42%) (Figure 2). Concern about pollution increases with respondents' level of education, ranging from 36%-41% among those with primary schooling or less to 53% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

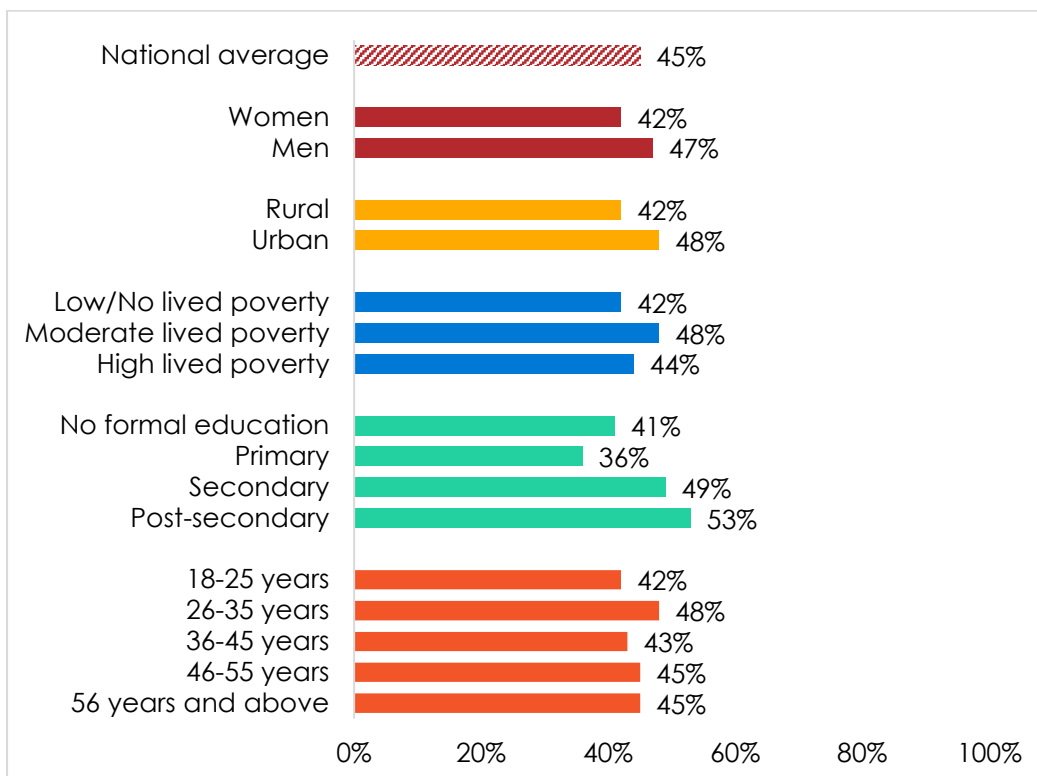
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 25% “very serious” and 19% “somewhat serious” sum to 45%).

Figure 1: Extent of pollution in the community | Sierra Leone | 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 | Sierra Leone | 2022

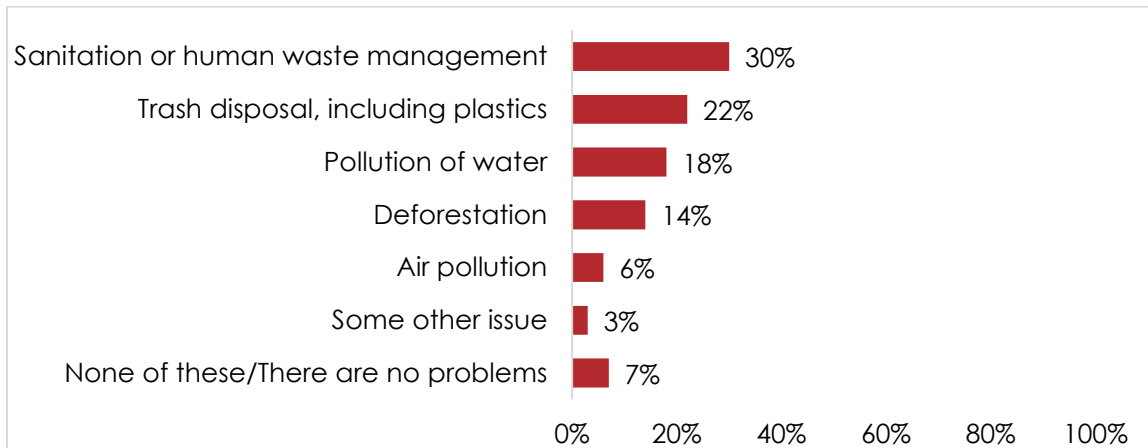


Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land, in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

Sierra Leoneans rank sanitation or human waste management as the most important environmental issue in their community (cited by 30%), followed by trash disposal (22%), water pollution (18%), and deforestation (14%) (Figure 3).

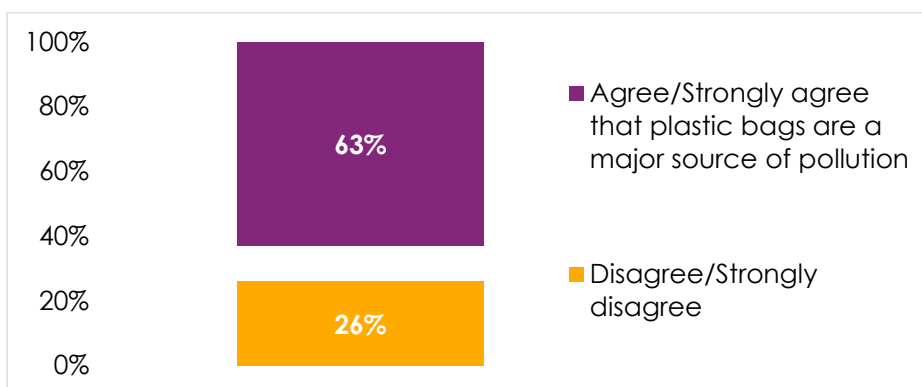
More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Sierra Leone (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | Sierra Leone | 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? | Sierra Leone | 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 almost half (48%) of Sierra Leoneans, protecting the environment starts at home, with ordinary citizens bearing primary responsibility for limiting pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). About four in 10 assign this responsibility to local (19%) or national (18%) government, while 14% look first to traditional leaders.

Overall, more than half (53%) of citizens say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” on reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while 41% express dissatisfaction with the government's achievements in this realm (Figure 6).

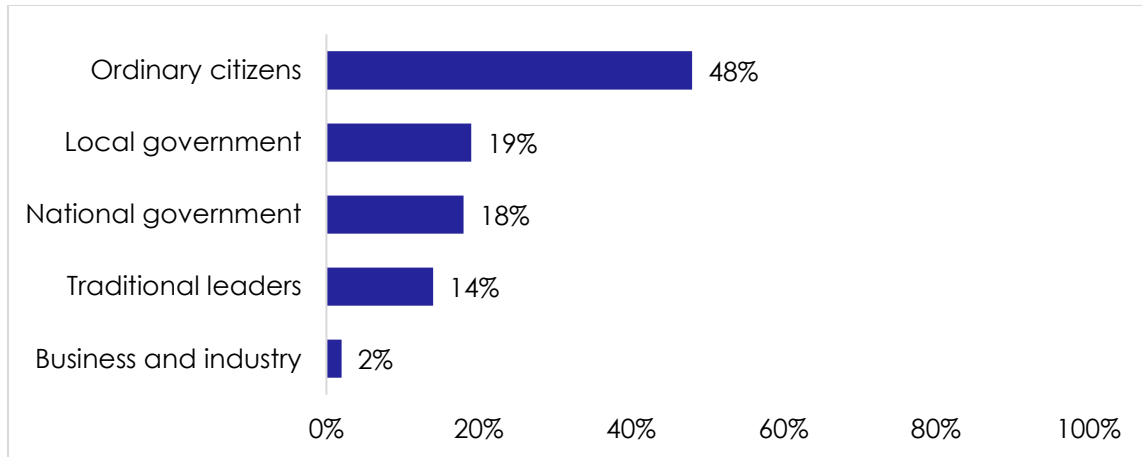
Approval of the government's efforts is significantly less widespread among poor respondents (38% among those experiencing high lived poverty²) than among their better-

² Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without 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).

off counterparts (48%-62%), and urban residents are less satisfied than citizens living in rural areas (48% vs. 56%).

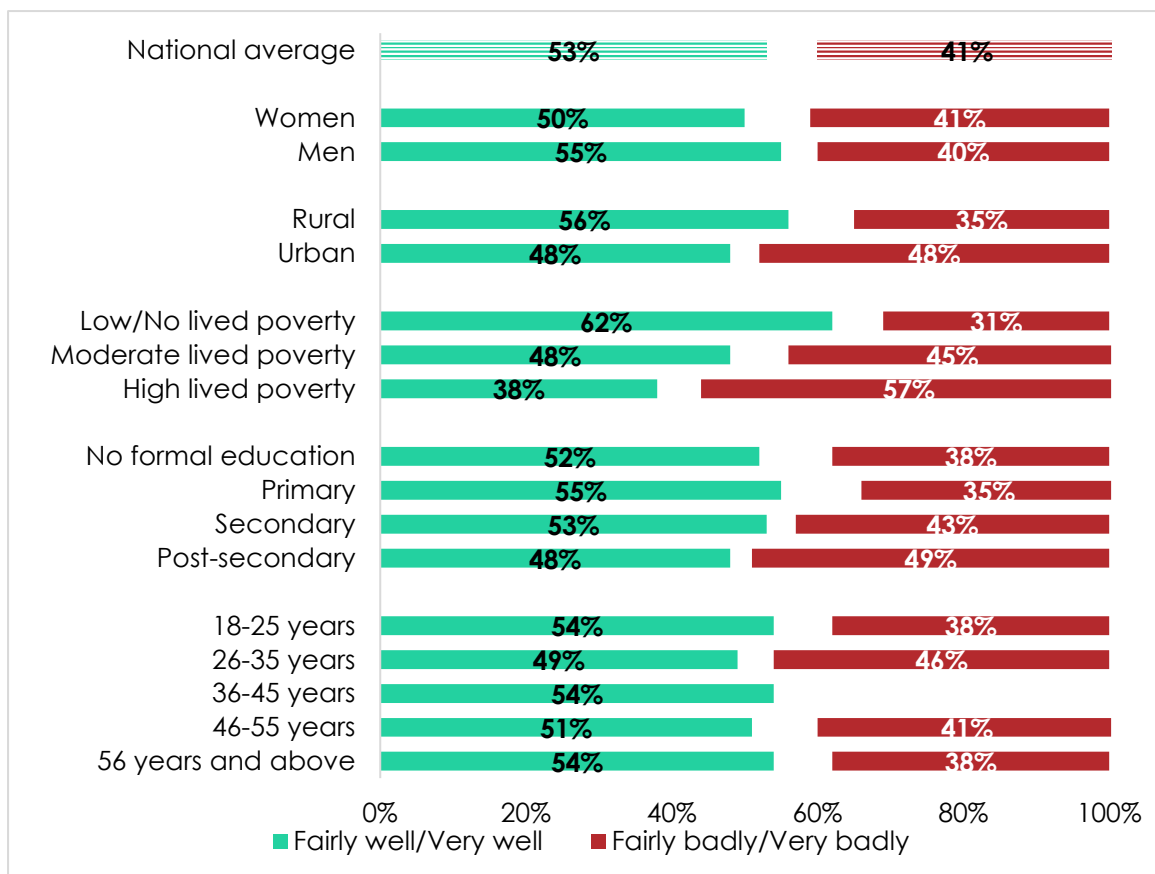
Figure 5: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution?

| Sierra Leone | 2022



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

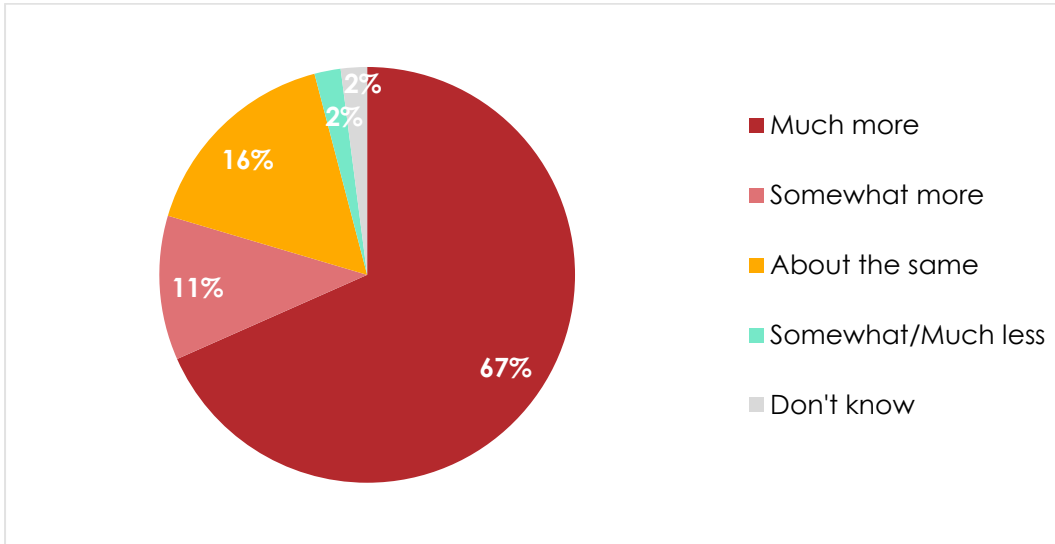
Figure 6: Government performance on reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2022



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: Reducing pollution and protecting the environment?

Despite majority approval of the government's performance, more than three-fourths (78%) of citizens see a need for the government to intensify its efforts to curb pollution and preserve the environment, including 67% who want it to do "much more" (Figure 7).

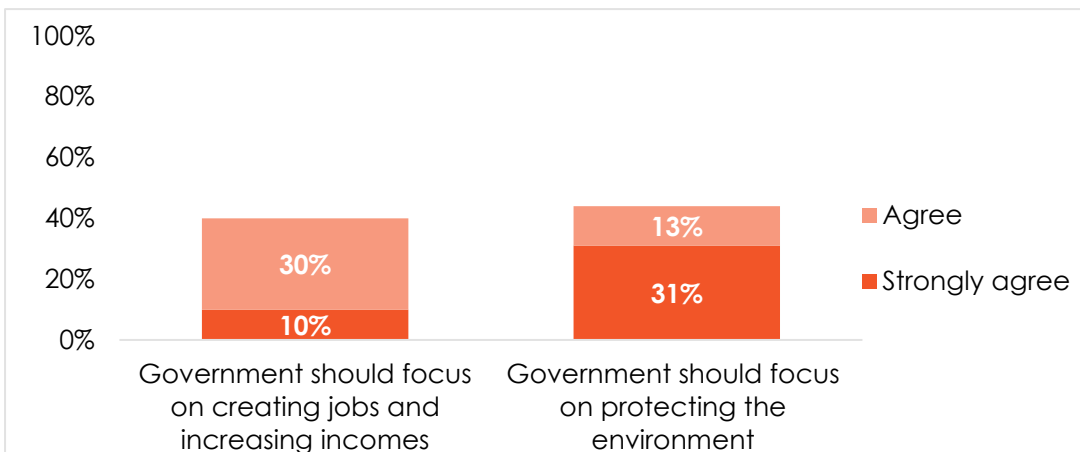
Figure 7: Should the government do more to limit pollution? | Sierra Leone | 2022



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 come into conflict with economic development, Sierra Leoneans are divided as to which should be prioritised (Figure 8). While 45% support a government emphasis on safeguarding the environment even at significant economic cost, 40% say the government should prioritise creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if it causes greater environmental damage. About one in six (16%) don't take a stand on the issue.

Figure 8: Should the government prioritise jobs or the environment? | Sierra Leone | 2022



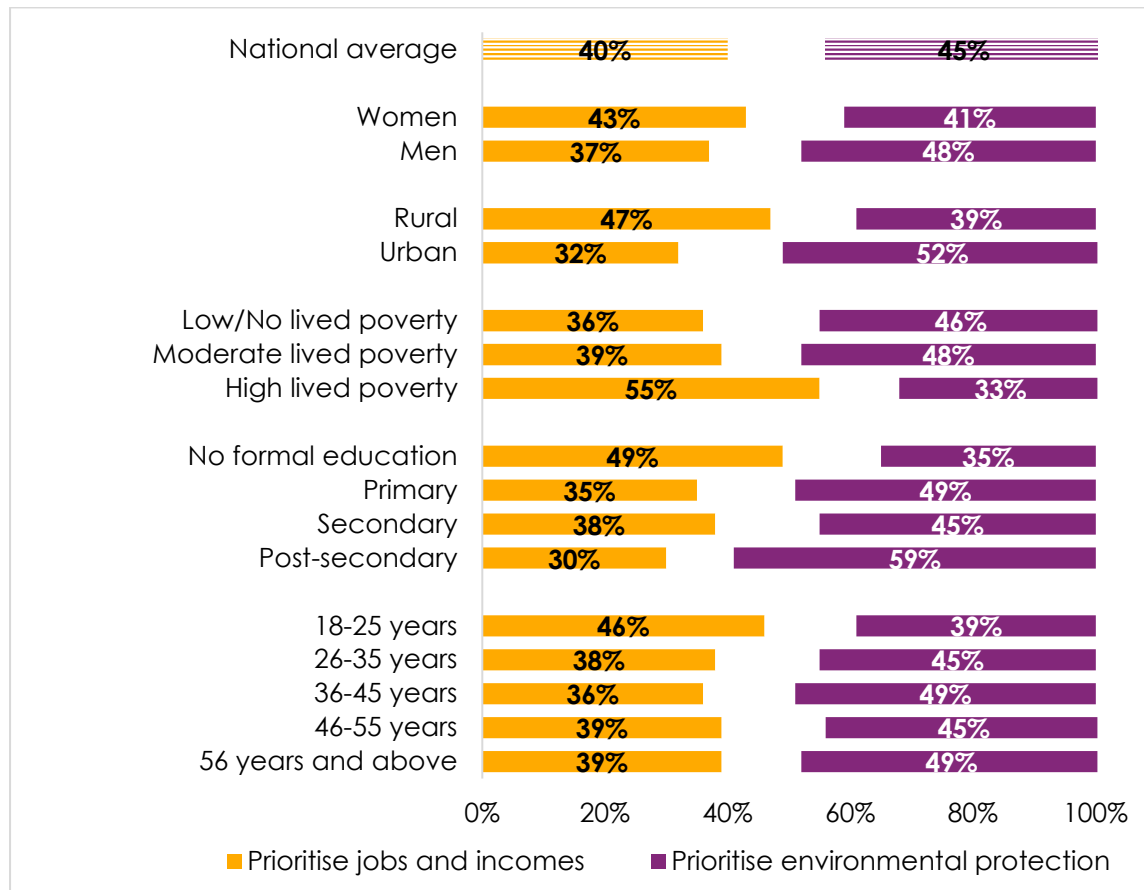
Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*

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.

Emphasis on jobs and incomes rather than the environment is particularly prevalent among rural residents (47%), respondents with no formal education (49%), those experiencing high lived poverty (55%), and youth (46%) (Figure 9). Urbanites (52%) and citizens with post-secondary education (59%) are most likely to prioritise environmental protection.

Figure 9: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 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)

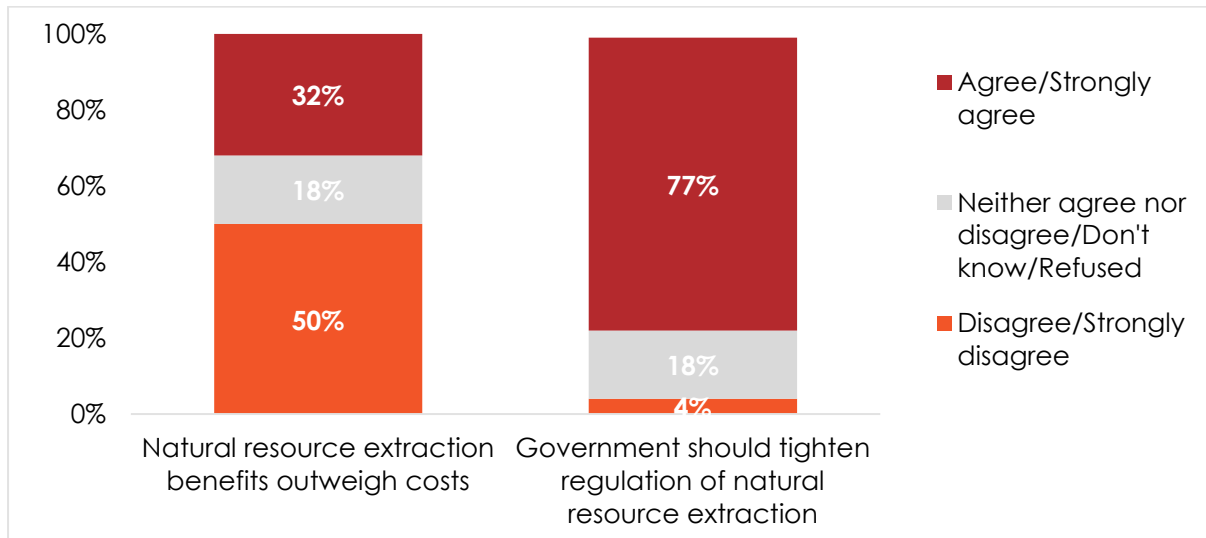
Natural resource extraction

While the mining sector is essential to Sierra Leone's economy, it also contributes to many of its environmental challenges.

By a margin of 50% to 32%, citizens say that the detriments of natural resource extraction, such as pollution, surpass its benefits, such as jobs and revenue, rather than the other way around (Figure 10). About one in five respondents (18%) maintain a neutral perspective or say they “don't know” how the benefits and costs associated with natural resource extraction balance out.

Moreover, a large majority (77%) say the government should tighten regulation of the industry to mitigate its adverse environmental impacts.

Figure 10: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Sierra Leone | 2022



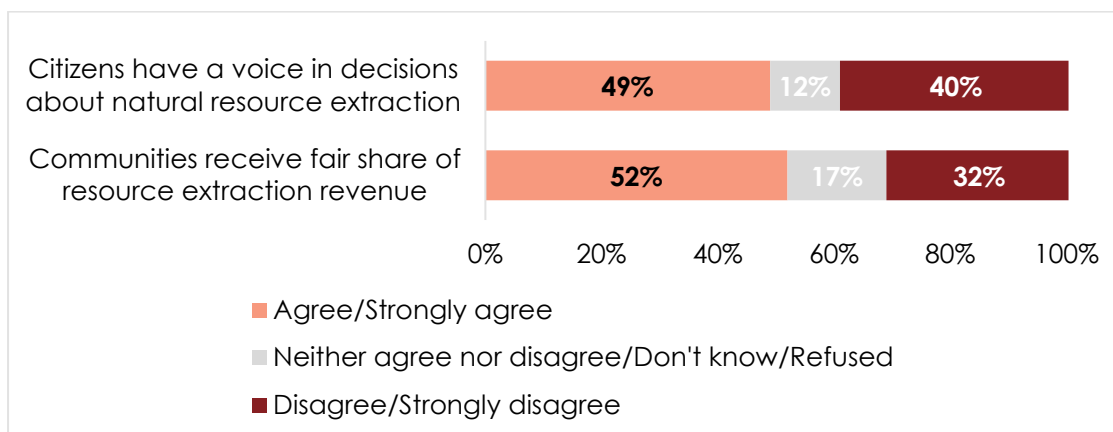
Respondents were asked: Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following 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.

Views are divided regarding the stake of local communities in resource extraction that takes place in the vicinity (Figure 11). Half (49%) of Sierra Leoneans say that ordinary citizens have a voice in decisions concerning such activities, while 40% disagree. And slightly more than half (52%) think communities receive their fair portion of revenues derived from resource extraction, while 32% say they don't.

Figure 11: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Sierra Leone | 2022



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

Ordinary Sierra Leoneans 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

Many Sierra Leoneans see pollution as a serious problem in their localities and consider themselves responsible for doing something about it. But fully two-thirds also expect “much more” action from the government to protect the environment.

Despite its important contributions to the national economy, the mining industry gets mixed reviews from Sierra Leoneans: Only one-third think that the benefits of natural resource extraction outweigh its costs, and most say the government should regulate the industry more tightly to reduce its damaging effects on the environment.

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