

# Young Ethiopians prioritise management of the economy for government action

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 741 | Anne Okello and Mulu Teka**

## Summary

More than two-thirds of Ethiopians are under age 30 (Ethiopian Statistical Service, 2013), a powerful asset and resource for growth that has gone largely untapped. Historically, the relationship between successive Ethiopian governments and the youth has been “a combination of repression and co-optation” linking state resources and employment opportunities to youth associations affiliated with the ruling party (Kefale, Dejen, & Aalen, 2021).

In 2004, Ethiopia introduced its first National Youth Policy, which defines youth as 15- to 29-year-olds and seeks to ensure that they have professional competencies, skills, and ethics to contribute to and benefit from the country's development. Components of the policy emphasise youth participation in education and training, economic progress, and democracy and governance (Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, 2004). Measures designed to empower the youth include the Youth Revolving Fund, a multibillion-birr fund intended to help unemployed youth in urban and rural areas get jobs (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2017).

Despite such initiatives, the official rate of youth unemployment as of February 2021 stood at 12% in rural areas and 23% in cities, and migrants leaving the country in search of opportunities are predominantly the young aged 15-29 (Ethiopian Statistical Service, 2021). Ethiopia remains a country where youth development is low, ranking 158<sup>th</sup> out of 181 countries on the Global Youth Development Index (Commonwealth, 2020).

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2023) offers some insights into the situation Ethiopian youth (defined here as ages 18-35). Findings show that young people are more educated than their elders but are also more likely to be unemployed. The economy is topmost on the minds of young Ethiopians, who think their government is doing a poor job on economic management and job creation. A majority of youth think their country is headed in “the wrong direction,” though they 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.

## 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 Ethiopia, led by ABCON – Research and Consulting, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ethiopians in May-June 2023. 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 Ethiopia in 2013 and 2020.

## Key findings

- Almost four in 10 young Ethiopians (38%) have secondary or post-secondary education, significantly surpassing older generations.
- But youth (aged 18-35) are also more likely than their elders to be unemployed: 21% say they are not employed and are looking for jobs, compared to 8%-15% among older cohorts.
- Management of the economy tops the list of the most important problems that Ethiopian youth want their government to address, followed by water supply, infrastructure/roads, electricity, and unemployment.
- Fewer than half of young Ethiopians say the government is doing a good job of providing water (47%), maintaining roads and bridges (45%), providing electricity (39%), managing the economy (30%), and creating jobs (28%).
- A majority (53%) of youth say the country is going in “the wrong direction,” while almost two-thirds (64%) describe the nation’s economic condition as bad and fewer than half (45%) expect things to improve over the coming year. But these assessments are somewhat more optimistic than those offered by older generations.
- 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, and joining others to raise an issue.

## Education and employment status

Ethiopia’s youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders. Almost four in 10 young respondents (38%) report having secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 22%, 15%, and 16% of older cohorts (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Youth are far less likely than older citizens to have no formal education (22%, vs. 63% of those aged 56 and above).

While they have more education than their elders, young Ethiopians are also more likely to be unemployed. One in five youth (21%) say they are not employed and are looking for a job, compared to 15% of 36- to 45-year-olds and 8% of those over age 45 (Figure 2). The youth who are unemployed (i.e. not employed and looking for work) include 3% who identify as students (Figure 3).

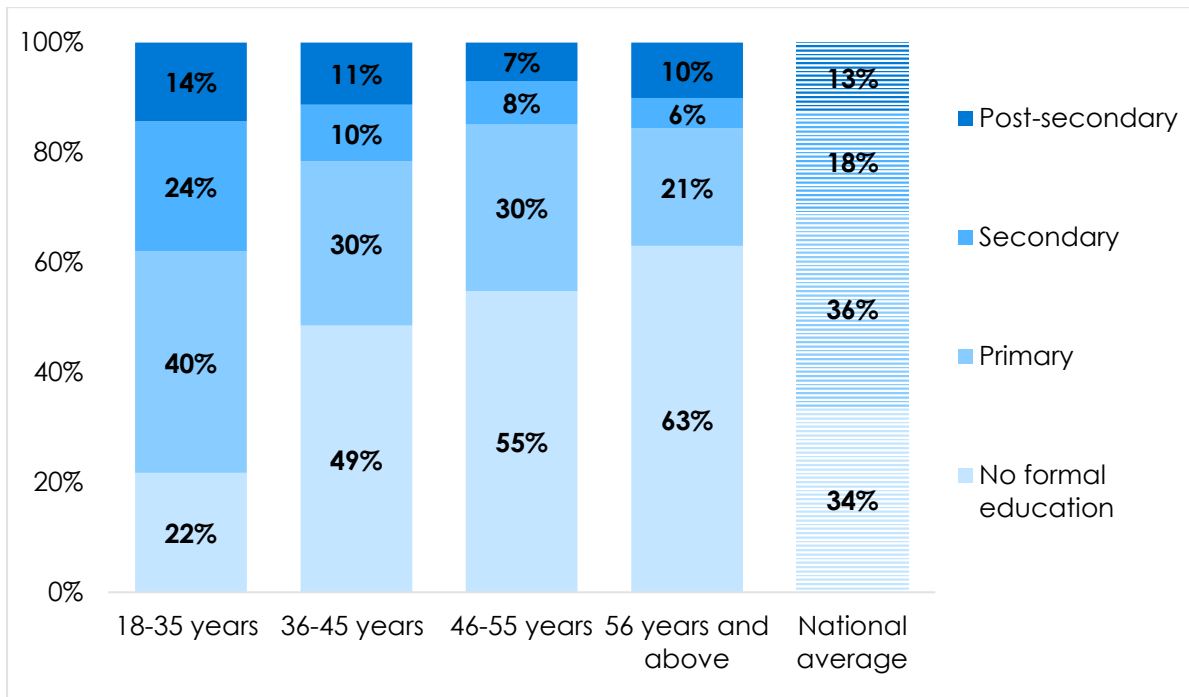
In addition, 36% of young respondents say they are not employed and are not looking for work, including 7% who identify as students.

More than one-third (35%) of youth say they are employed full time, and 9% report having part-time work.

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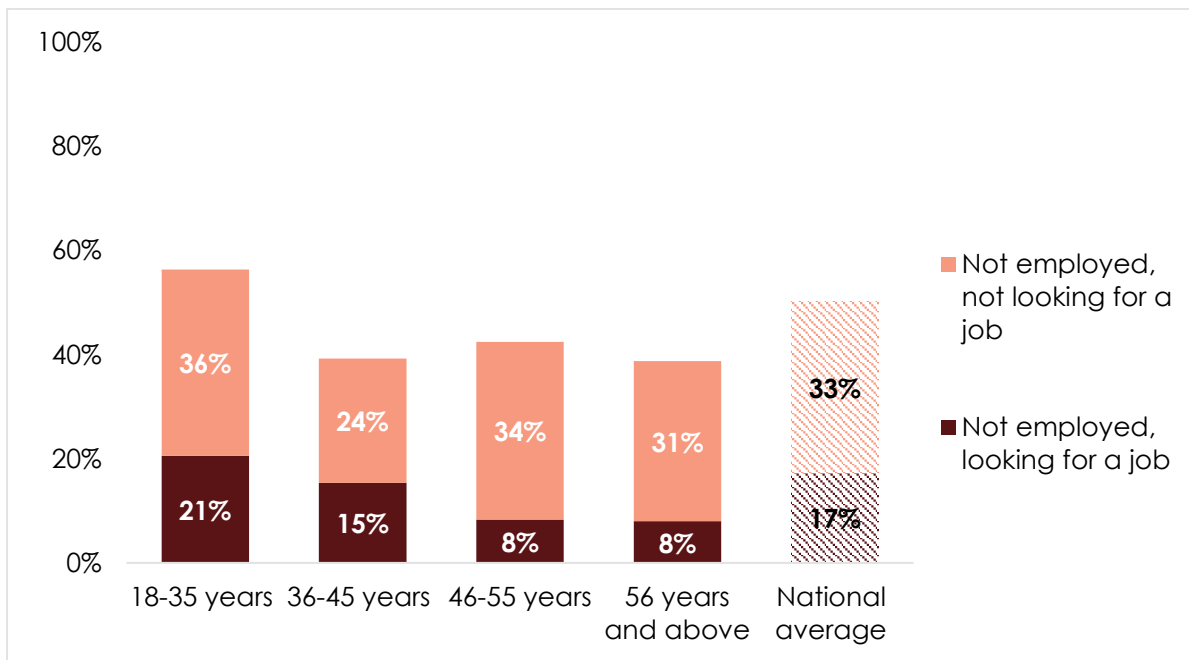
<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. for 36- to 45-year-olds, 11% post-secondary and 10% secondary sum to 22%).

**Figure 1: Level of education** | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023



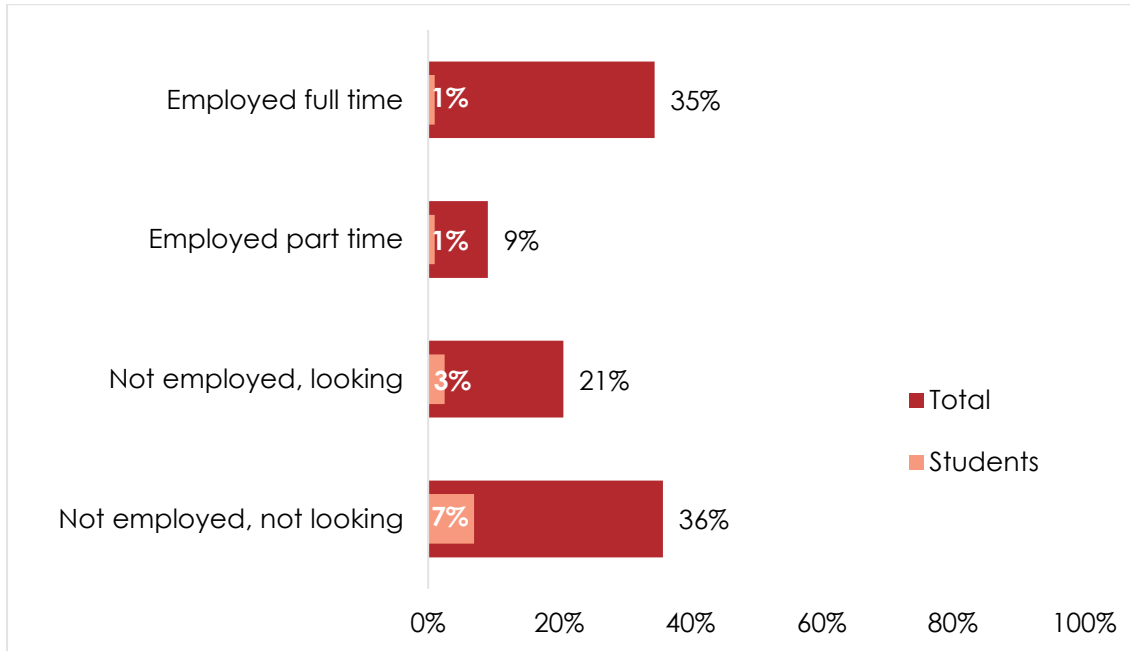
**Respondents were asked:** What is your highest level of education?

**Figure 2: Unemployment rate** | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023



**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 | Ethiopia  
 | 2023



**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 Ethiopians, management of the economy is the most important problem the government must address, cited by 49% of 18- to 35-year-olds as one of their top three priorities for government action (Figure 4). This is followed by water supply (27%), infrastructure/roads (25%), electricity (23%), and unemployment (19%). One in six (17%) cite civil war as a top concern, while only 8% list education.

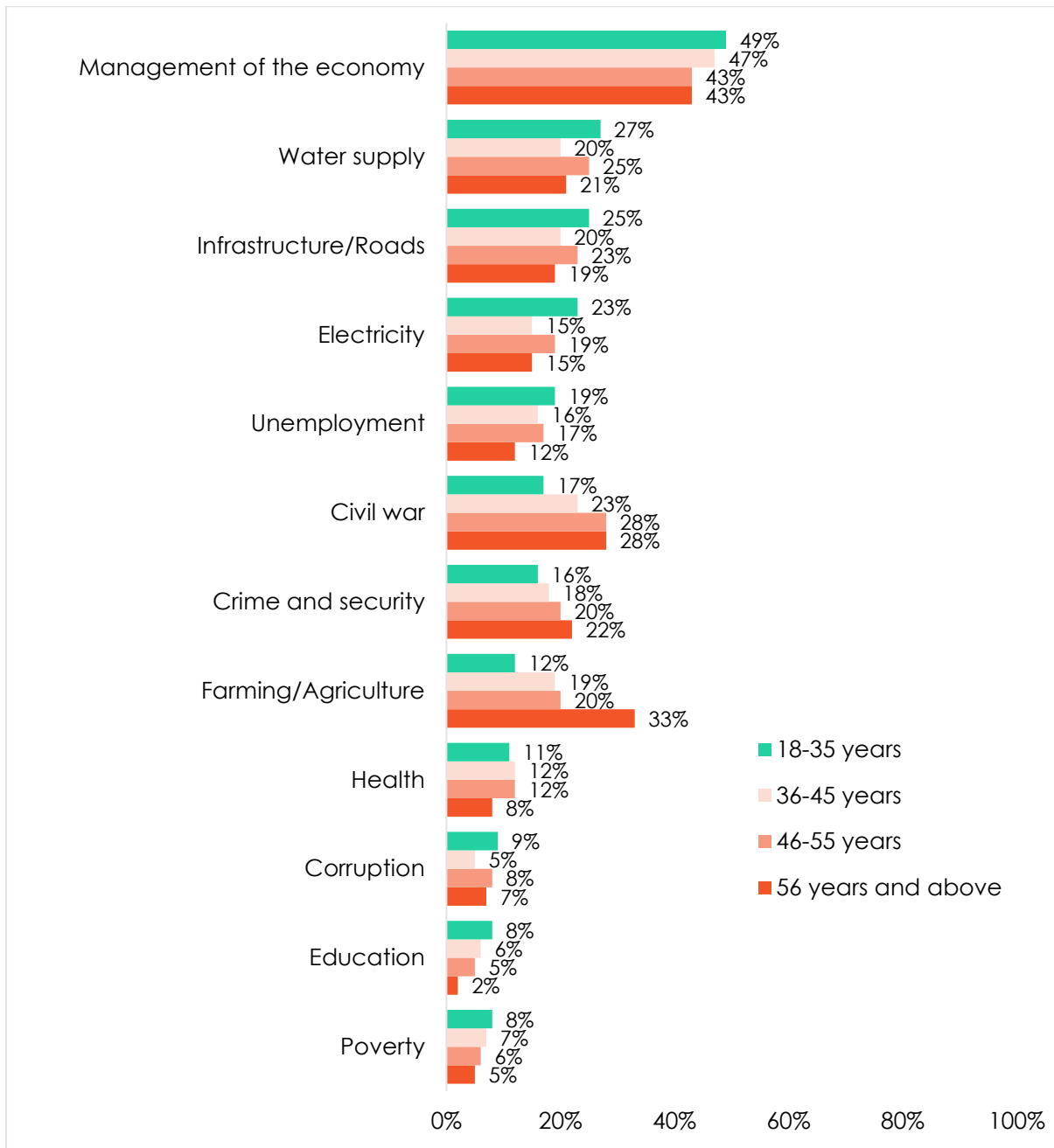
Young respondents are significantly more likely than their elders to focus on electricity (by 8 percentage points compared to respondents over age 55), unemployment (by 7 points), as well as economic management and infrastructure/roads (each by 6 points). Young Ethiopians are less likely than older cohorts to cite farming/agriculture, civil war, and crime/security as top problems.

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**Figure 4: Most important problems | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023**



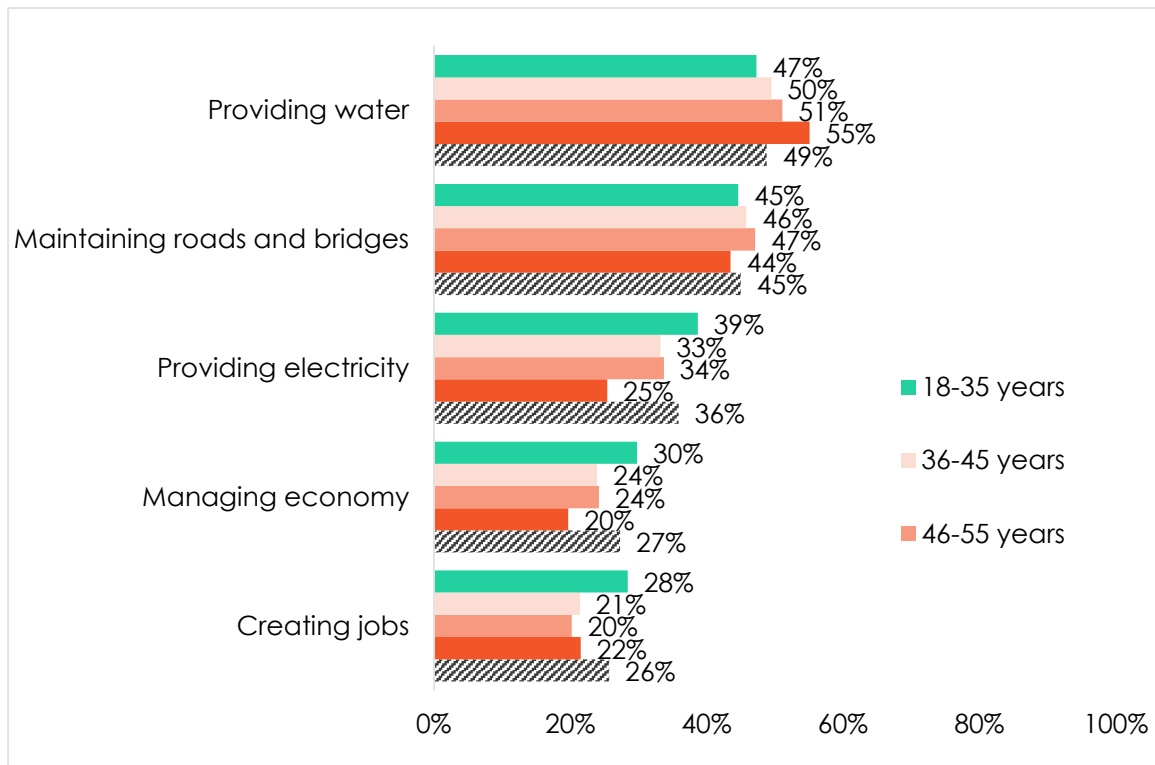
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

### Evaluation of government performance

On their core priorities for government action, most young Ethiopians – like their elders – are dissatisfied with their government's performance (Figure 5). Fewer than half say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on providing water and sanitation services (47%), maintaining roads and bridges (45%), and ensuring a reliable supply of electricity (39%). Only 30% approve of the government's performance in managing the economy, while even fewer give positive appraisals on job creation (28%).

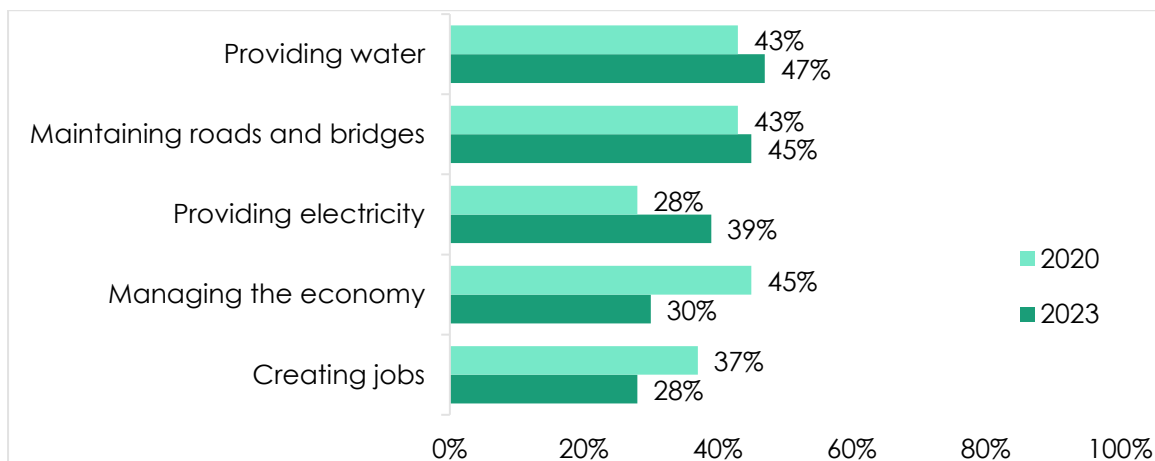
Compared to survey findings in 2020, young Ethiopians' evaluations of the government's performance have worsened significantly when it comes to managing the economy (by 15 percentage points) and creating jobs (by 9 points) (Figure 6). Assessments improved with regard to providing electricity (by 11 points) and water/sanitation (by 4 points) and remained stable concerning road and bridge maintenance.

**Figure 5: Approval of government performance on top youth concerns | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023**



**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 their top concerns | respondents aged 18-35 years | Ethiopia | 2020-2023**

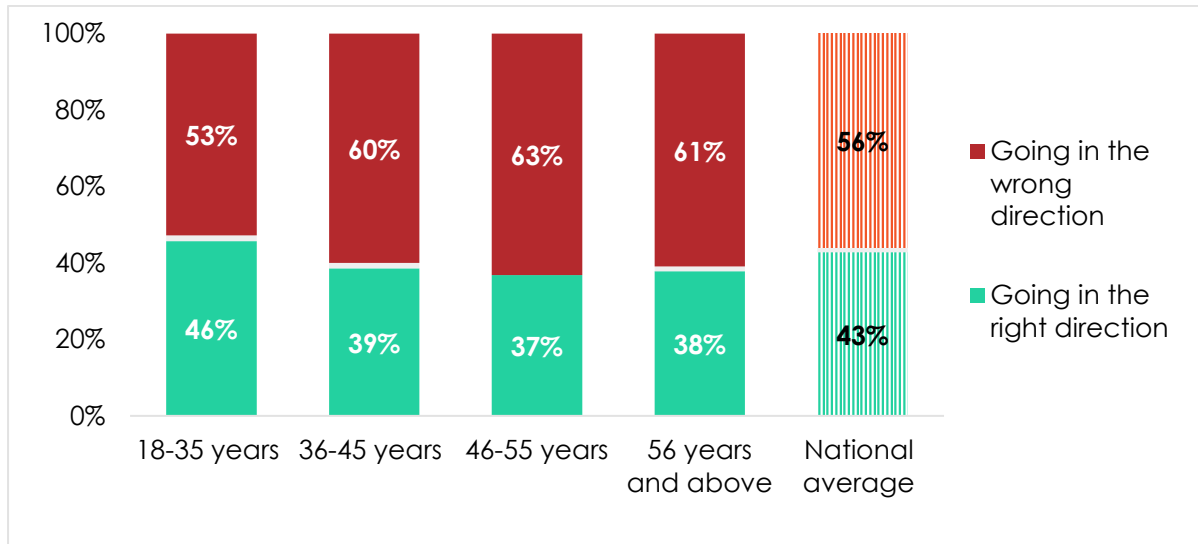


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

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

Overall, more than half (53%) of young Ethiopians see their country as moving in “the wrong direction.” But that is a less pessimistic assessment than those offered by older cohorts (60%-63%) (Figure 7).

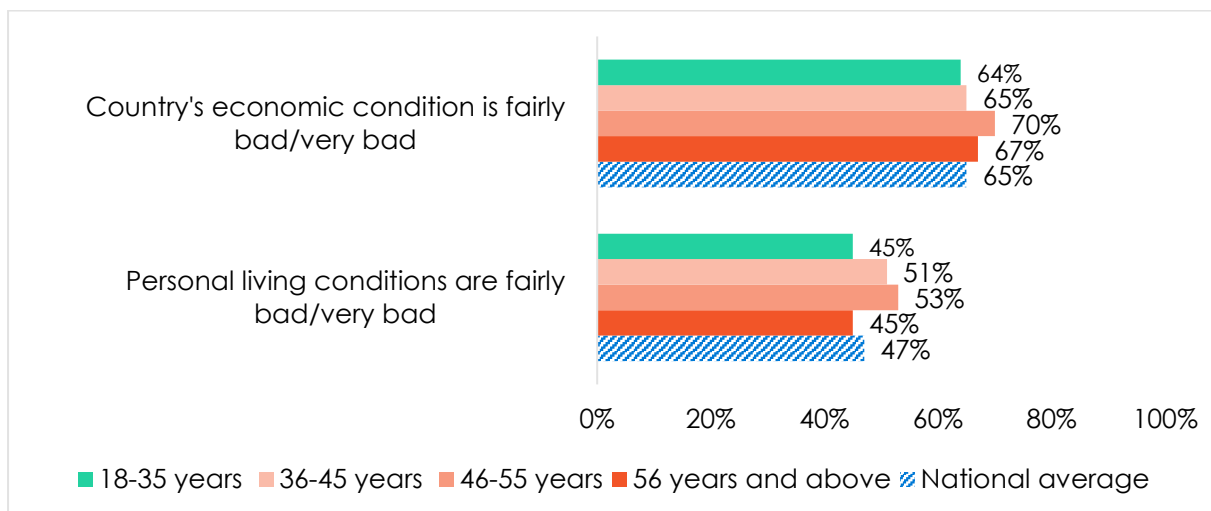
**Figure 7: Country's direction** | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023



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

Almost two-thirds (64%) of young Ethiopians describe the country's economic condition as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” again slightly less gloomy than assessments by respondents over age 45 (67%-70%) (Figure 8). More than four in 10 youth (45%) say their personal living conditions are bad, a significantly smaller share than among middle-aged citizens (51%-53%).

**Figure 8: Negative assessments of country's economy and personal living conditions** | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023

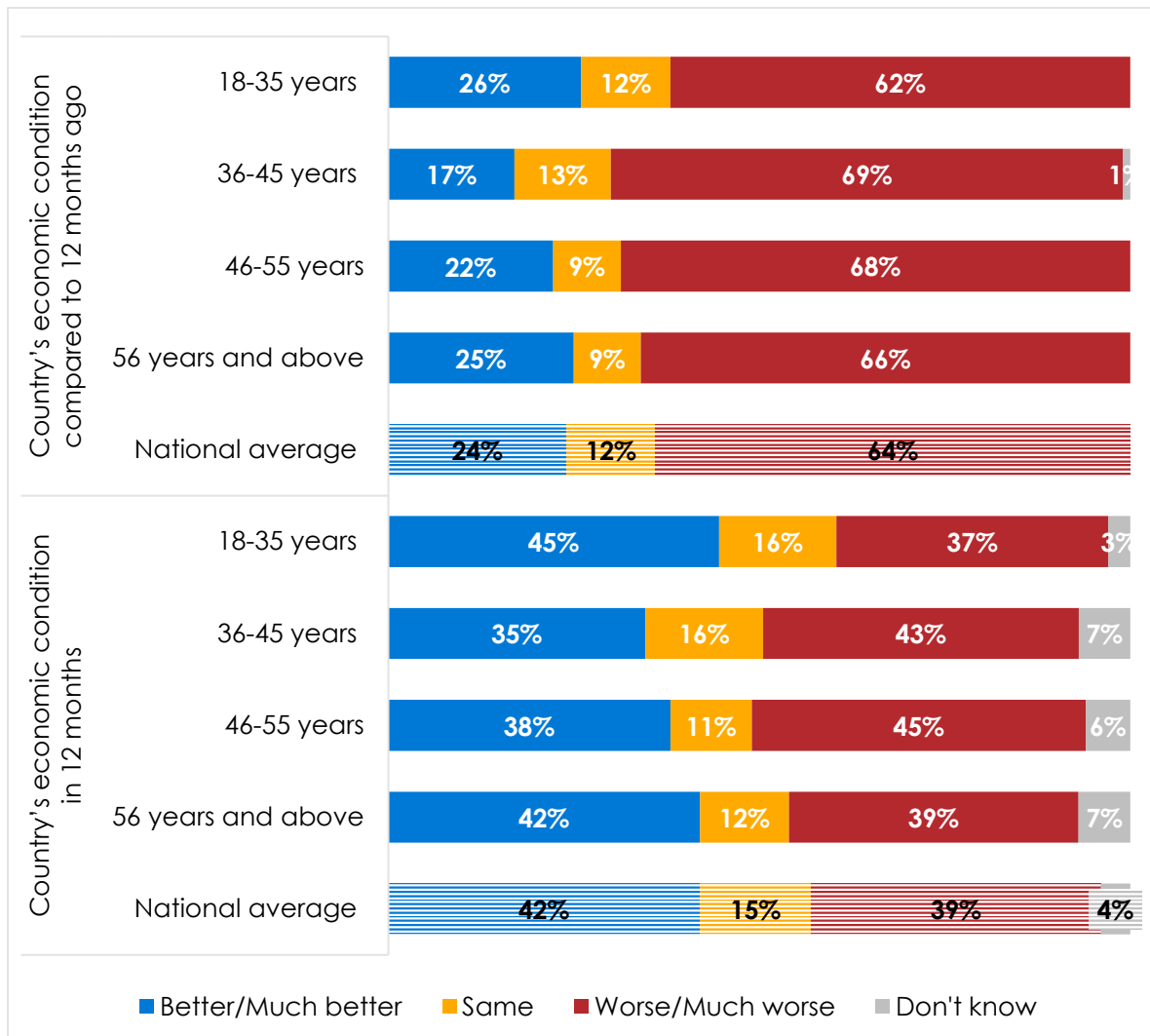


**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions? (% who say “fairly bad” or “very bad”)

Only 26% of young respondents think the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, while 62% say it has worsened (Figure 9).

But young citizens are somewhat more optimistic than their elders about the near future: 45% think things will get better over the next 12 months, compared to 35%-42% of those over age 35.

**Figure 9: Retrospective and prospective assessment of country's economic conditions | Ethiopia | 2023**



**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 Ethiopians' dissatisfaction with economic conditions, the country's 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.

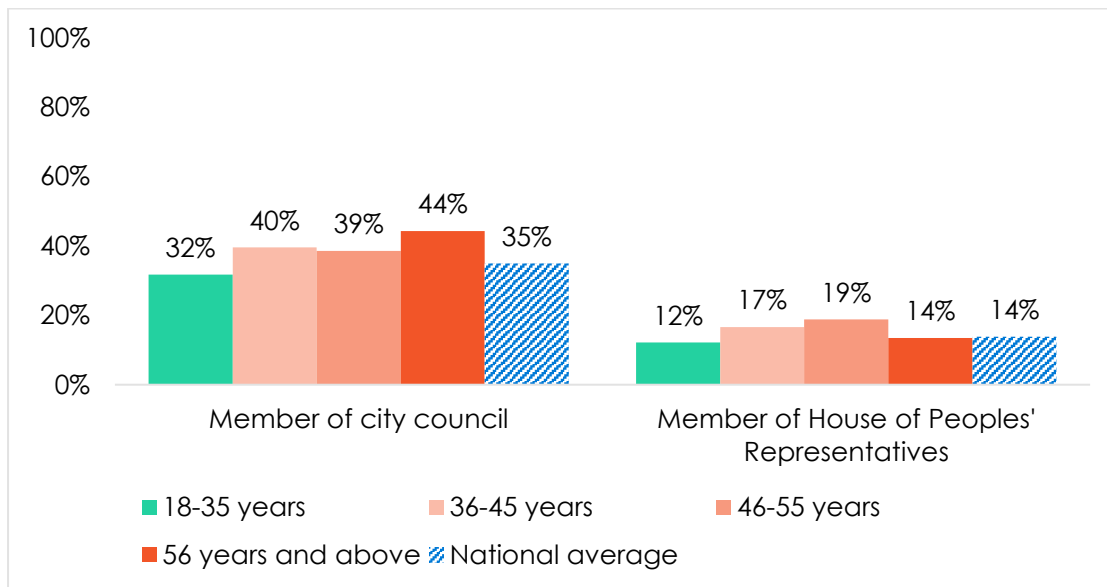


About one in three young respondents (32%) say they contacted a member of their city council about an important issue at least once during the year preceding the survey, a significantly lower contact rate than was recorded for their elders (39%-44%) (Figure 10).

Similarly, only 12% report having contacted a member of the House of Peoples' Representatives, compared to 14%-19% among the older groups.

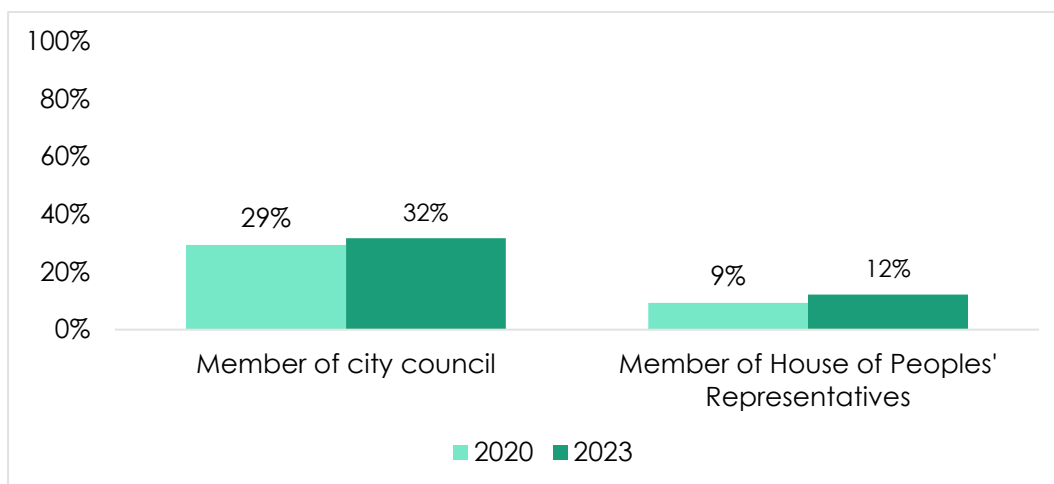
Young people's self-reported contact with these elected officials has increased marginally (by 3 percentage points) over the past three years (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Contacted political representatives during previous year** | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023



**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 | Ethiopia | 2020-2023



**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")

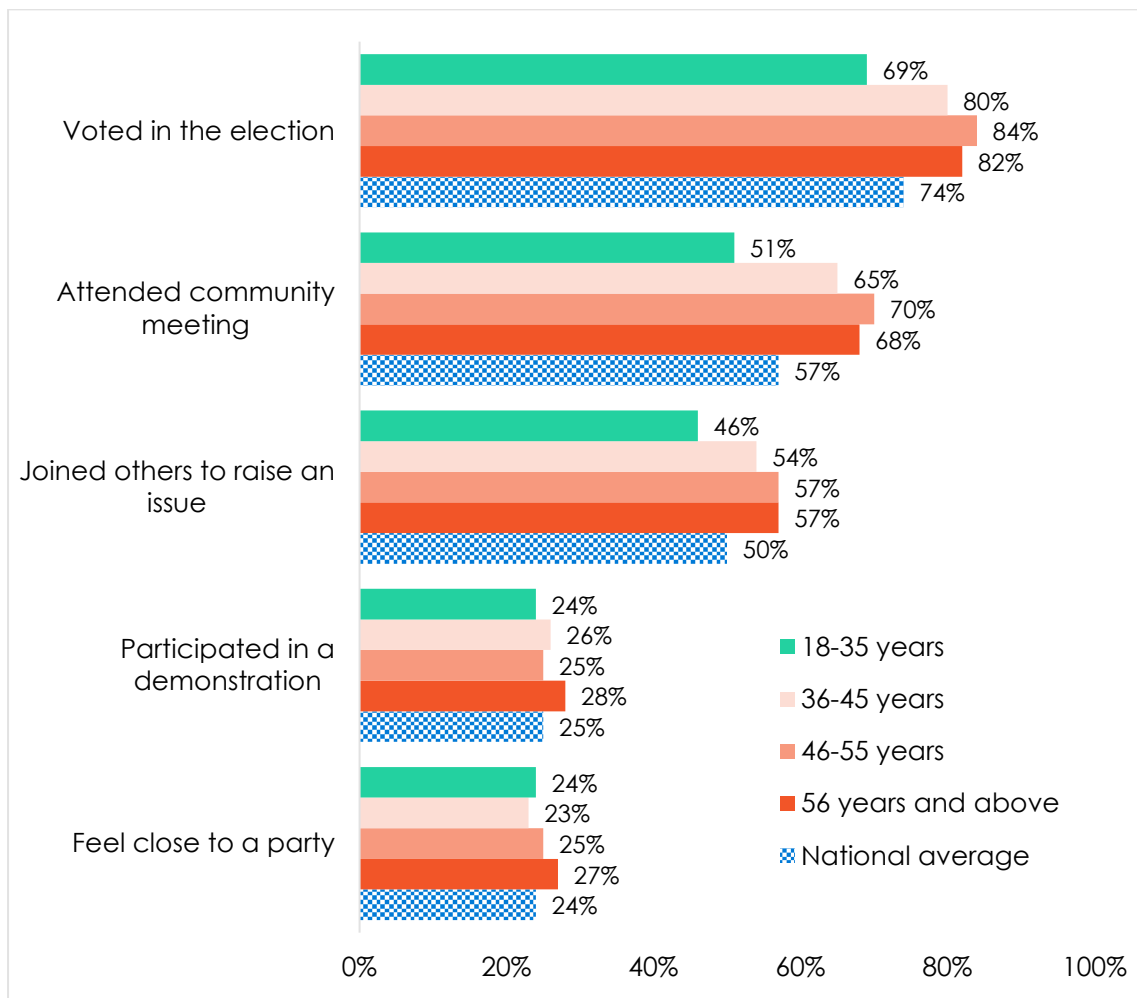
Youth also trail their elders when it comes to voting in elections, attending community meetings, and joining others to raise an issue (Figure 12).

Excluding those who were too young to vote, 69% of 18- to 35-year-olds say they voted in the most recent national election in 2021, a considerably lower rate than reported by older cohorts (80%-84%).

Half (51%) of young respondents say they attended a community meeting at least once during the previous year, while 46% say they joined others to raise an issue – both significantly lower rates than reported by older citizens.

About one in four report having participated in a demonstration or protest march during the past 12 months (24%) and feeling close to a political party (24%), both about average for the adult population.

**Figure 12: Political participation** | by age group | Ethiopia | 2023



**Respondents were asked:**

*In the last national election, held in 2021, 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 2021 are excluded.)*

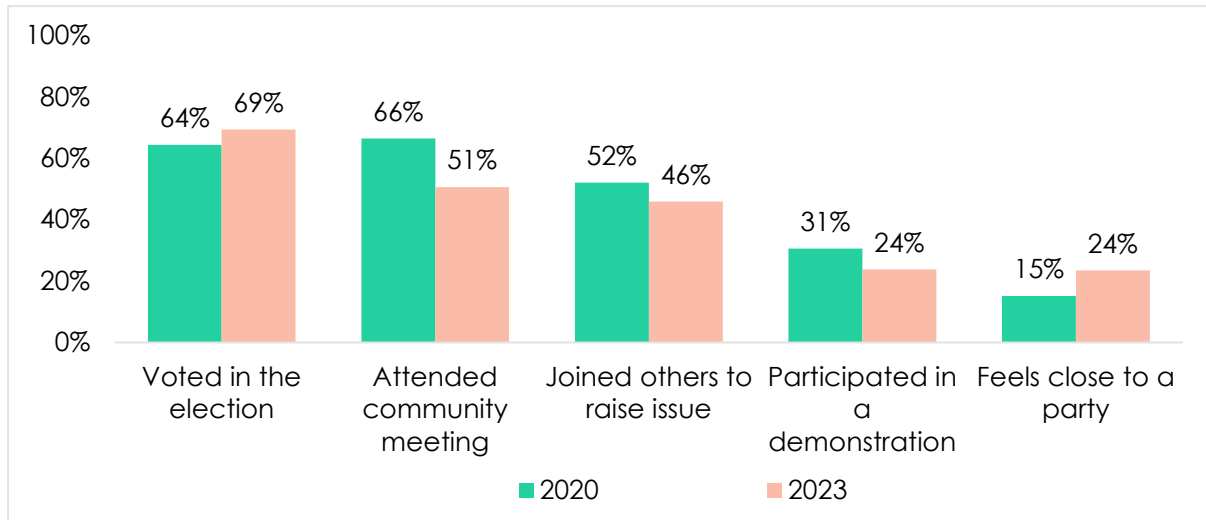
*Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

*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")*

Youth participation in several of these political activities declined between 2020 and 2023 (Figure 13): attending community meetings by 15 percentage points, demonstrating by 7 points, and joining others to raise an issue by 6 points.

Self-reported identification with a political party increased by 9 percentage points since 2020, while voting in elections rose by 5 points over the same period.

**Figure 13: Youth political participation** | respondents aged 18-35 years | Ethiopia | 2020-2023



**Respondents were asked:**

*In the last national election, held in [year], 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**

Ethiopian youth are more educated but less employed than their elders. A majority of young people offer gloomy assessments of the country's direction and economic condition, citing management of the economy as their top priority for government action. But they are a bit more optimistic than older citizens that things will improve in the near future.

Survey findings also show that young Ethiopians are less likely than older generations to engage in political activities, suggesting that they have not fully exploited their potential to ensure that their voices are heard.

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