

As climate change worsens life in Gambia, citizens want collective action to fight it

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 742 | Baboucarr Fatty and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

Agriculture and tourism combine for almost half of the Gambia's gross domestic product (GDP) (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2022), and both are highly vulnerable to increasingly frequent and severe climate-related disasters that have plagued the country, including droughts, floods, windstorms, bushfires, soil intrusion, and coastal erosion. Climate change poses substantial risks to property, productive assets, livelihoods, and health, impeding the country's progress toward its development objectives (Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Natural Resources, 2022; Republic of the Gambia, 2022).

The Gambia ranks 148th out of 182 countries on the Notre-Dame Global Adaptation Initiative's (2021) Country Index, which rates both vulnerability to climate change and resilience.

In response to the climate crisis, the government ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and in 2021 formulated The Gambia's Long-Term Climate-Neutral Development Strategy 2050. The strategy aims for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 with strengthened adaptive capacities in agriculture, energy, infrastructure, health, coastal management, and other sectors.

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

Findings show that a majority of Gambians say flooding has become more severe in their region over the past decade – perceptions that are especially common among rural and poor citizens.

Among the slim majority of Gambians who have heard of climate change, most say it is making life in the country more difficult. And almost unanimously, they demand greater efforts by the government and other stakeholders to address the threat.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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 the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 30 August and 19 September 2022. This sample size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous AB surveys were conducted in the Gambia in 2018 and 2021.

Key findings

- More than six in 10 Gambians (62%) say floods have become more severe in their region over the past decade. Half as many (31%) say the same about droughts.
 - Rural residents and poor citizens are significantly more likely to report worsening floods and droughts than their urban and better-off counterparts.
- A slim majority (56%) of Gambians say they have heard of climate change, a 12-percentage-point decrease compared to 2021.
- Among those who are aware of climate change:
 - Eight in 10 (80%) say it is making life in the Gambia worse.
 - Most believe that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change (86%) and want the government to take immediate action to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy (83%).
 - Overwhelming majorities call for “a lot more” action to limit climate change by the government (89%), business and industry (84%), traditional leaders (81%), developed countries (79%), and ordinary citizens (77%).
- Only a quarter (24%) of citizens think the government is doing a good job of addressing climate change, while 53% say it is handling the issue “fairly badly” or “very badly.”

Severity of extreme weather conditions

Before asking about climate change, Afrobarometer asked respondents about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. More than six in 10 Gambians (62%) say floods have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” over the past 10 years, while 30% say they have become less severe and 7% say they have stayed the same (Figure 1).

Meanwhile, 31% of citizens say that the severity of droughts has increased, while 48% say droughts have become less severe.

Compared to 2018, the proportion who say floods have gotten more severe has more than doubled, from 25% to 62%, while perceptions of worsening droughts have decreased by 20 percentage points (Figure 2).

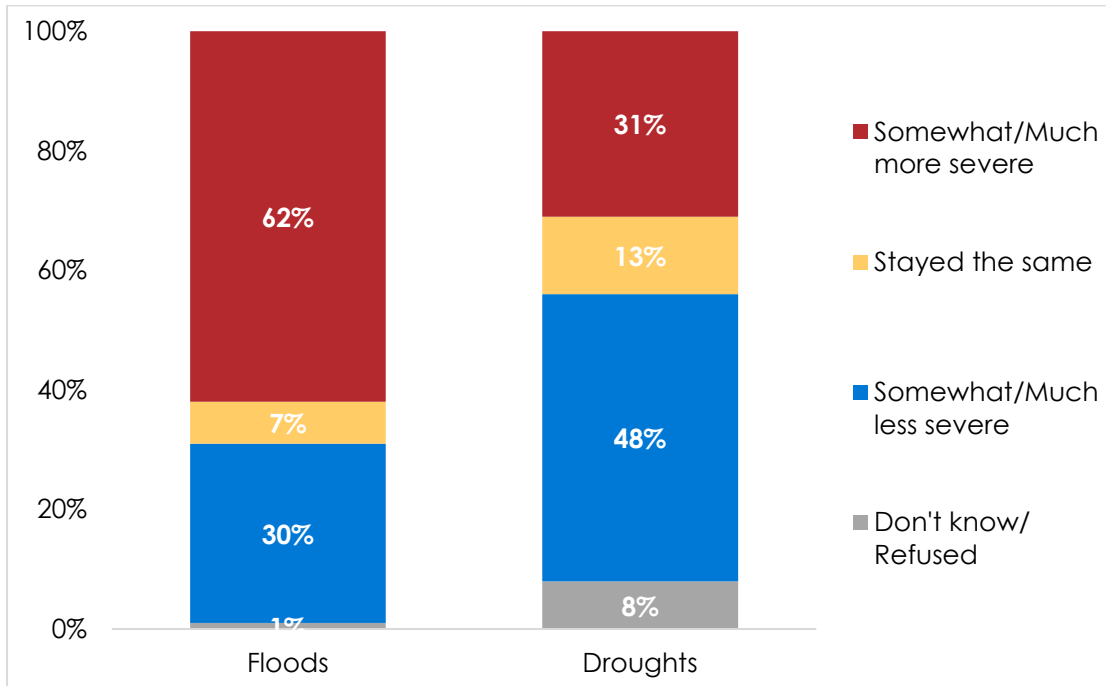
Perceptions of worsening floods and droughts are more common in rural areas than in cities, perhaps reflecting a greater awareness of the effects of climate in more agricultural areas (Figure 3). For example, rural residents are three times as likely as urbanites to say that droughts have increased in severity (50% vs. 16%).

These perceptions also increase with respondents’ experience of “lived poverty,”¹ conceivably because the poor are less sheltered than their better-off counterparts. Reports of worsening floods range from 45% among economically well-off citizens to 69% among the

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).

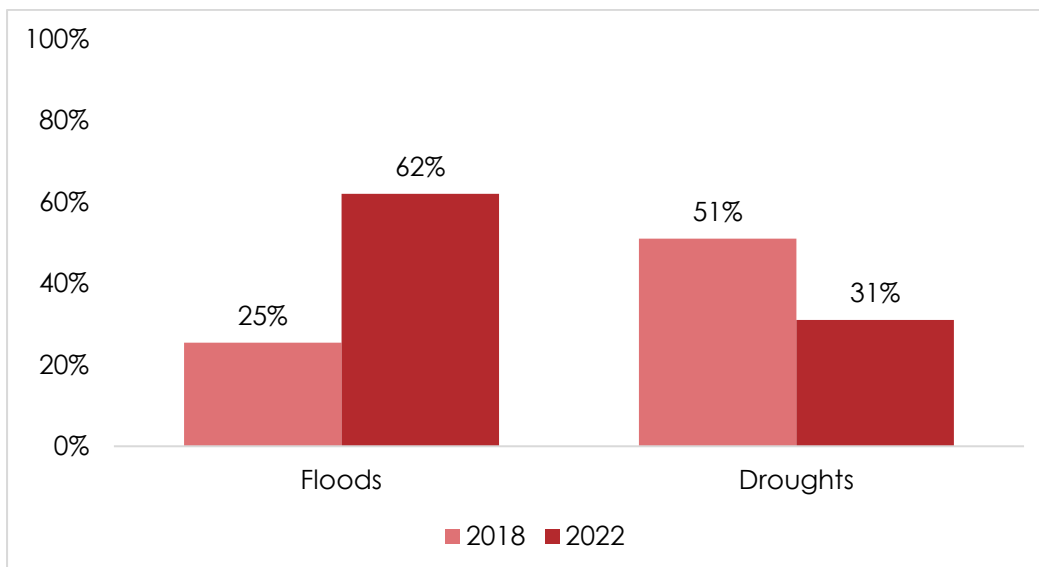
poorest, while the poorest respondents are seven times as likely as the well-off to report worsening drought (51% vs. 7%).

Figure 1: Severity of floods and droughts | Gambia | 2022



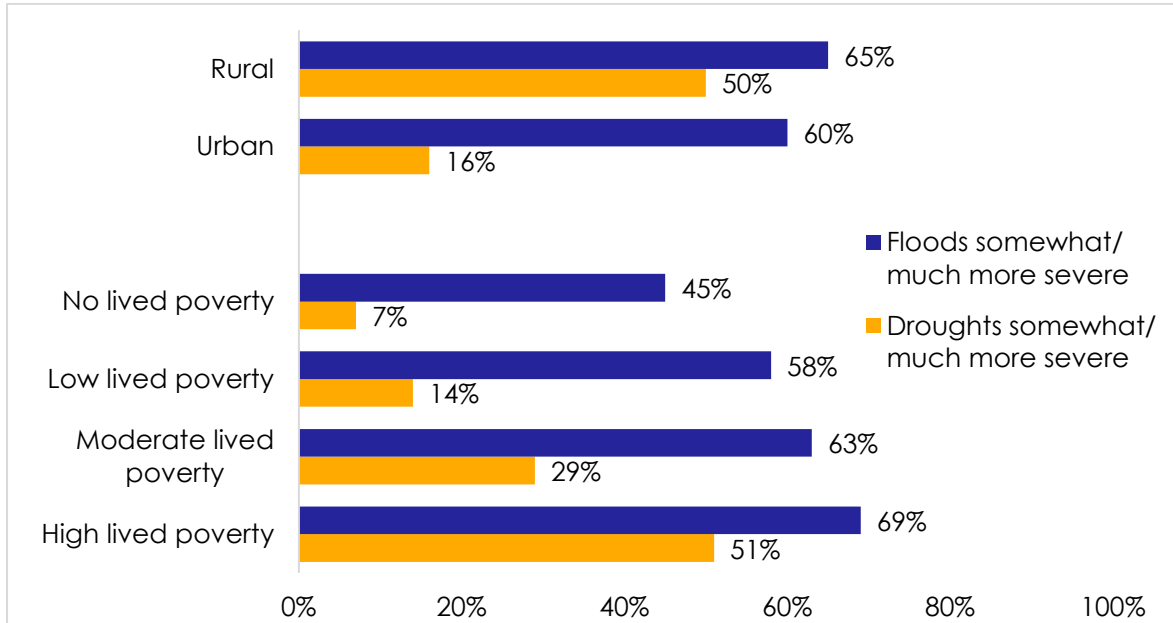
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Figure 2: More severe floods and droughts | Gambia | 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 floods and droughts | by urban-rural residence and lived poverty | Gambia | 2022

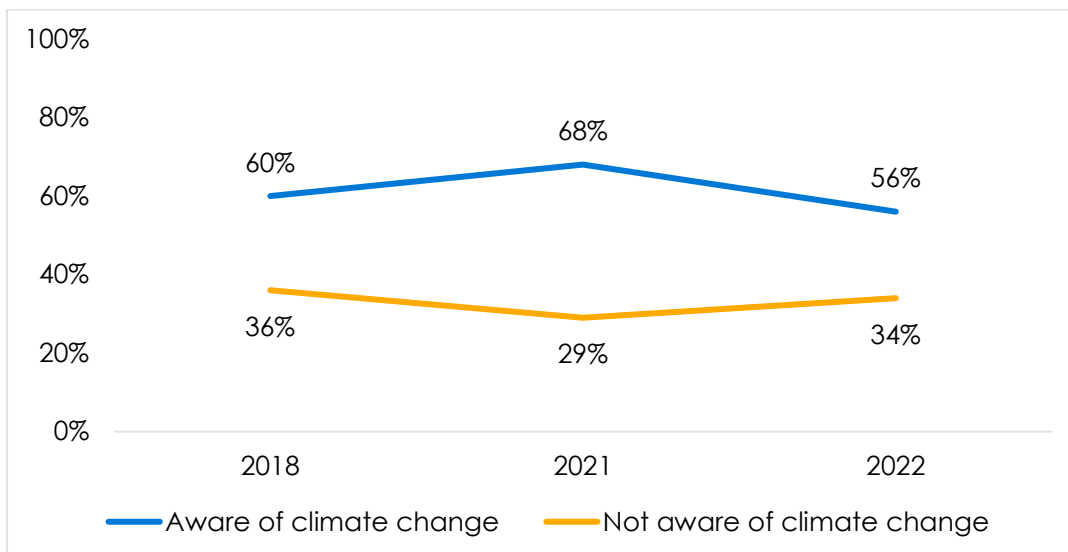


Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? (% who say "somewhat more severe" or "much more severe")

Awareness of climate change

A majority of citizens (56%) say they have heard of climate change (Figure 4). This is a 12-percentage-point decline from 2021 (68%), perhaps reflecting both high public awareness of climate disasters preceding the 2021 survey as well as a decline in community-level communication and advocacy on climate change.

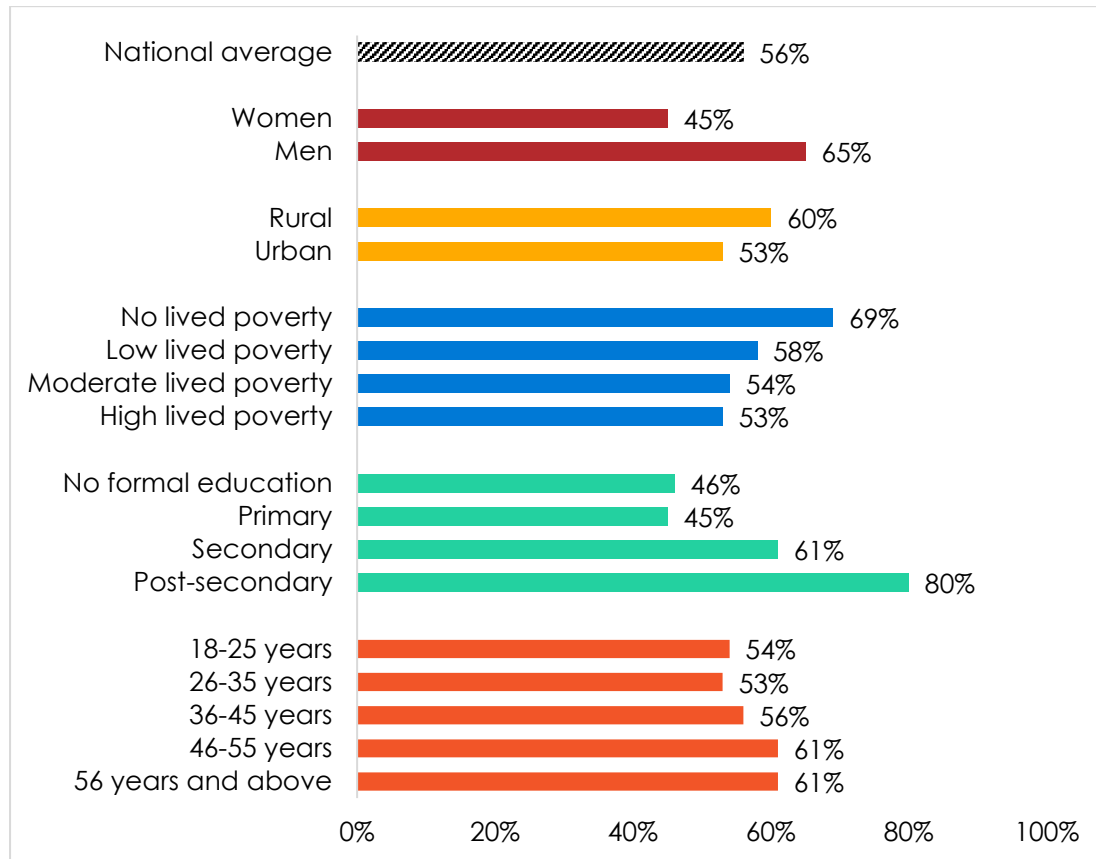
Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | Gambia | 2018-2022



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

Awareness of climate change is lower among women than men (45% vs. 65%) and among urban residents compared to rural residents (53% vs. 60%) (Figure 5). Poorer citizens are less familiar with the term "climate change" (53% among those with high lived poverty vs. 69% among those with no lived poverty), as are citizens with primary schooling or less (45%-46%, vs. 80% of those with post-secondary education). Younger respondents (53%-56% among 18- to 45-year-olds) are less aware of climate change than their elders (61%).

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

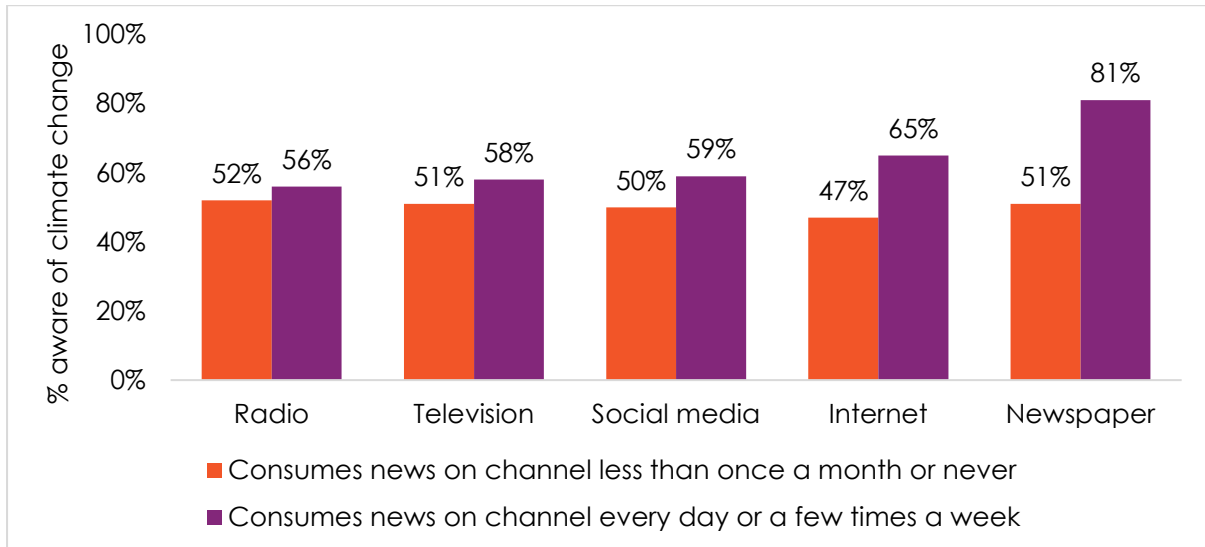


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Awareness of climate change also increases with respondents' news consumption. Among those who never or seldom (less than once a month) get news from the radio, television, social media, the Internet, or newspapers, only 47%-52% have heard of climate change (Figure 6). But climate-change awareness is consistently higher among frequent news consumers, reaching 81% among regular newspaper readers.

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

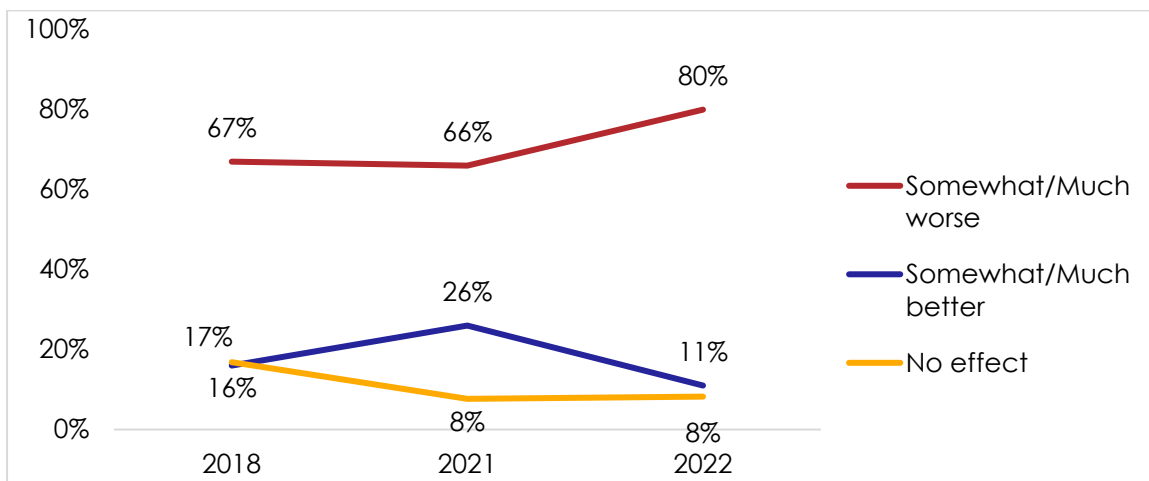


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Effects of climate change

Eight in 10 citizens (80%) who are aware of climate change say it is making life in the Gambia "somewhat worse" (26%) or "much worse" (55%²), a 14-percentage-point increase compared to 2021. About one in five say it is making life better (11%) or has had no effect on their lives (8%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Effect of climate change | Gambia | 2018-2022

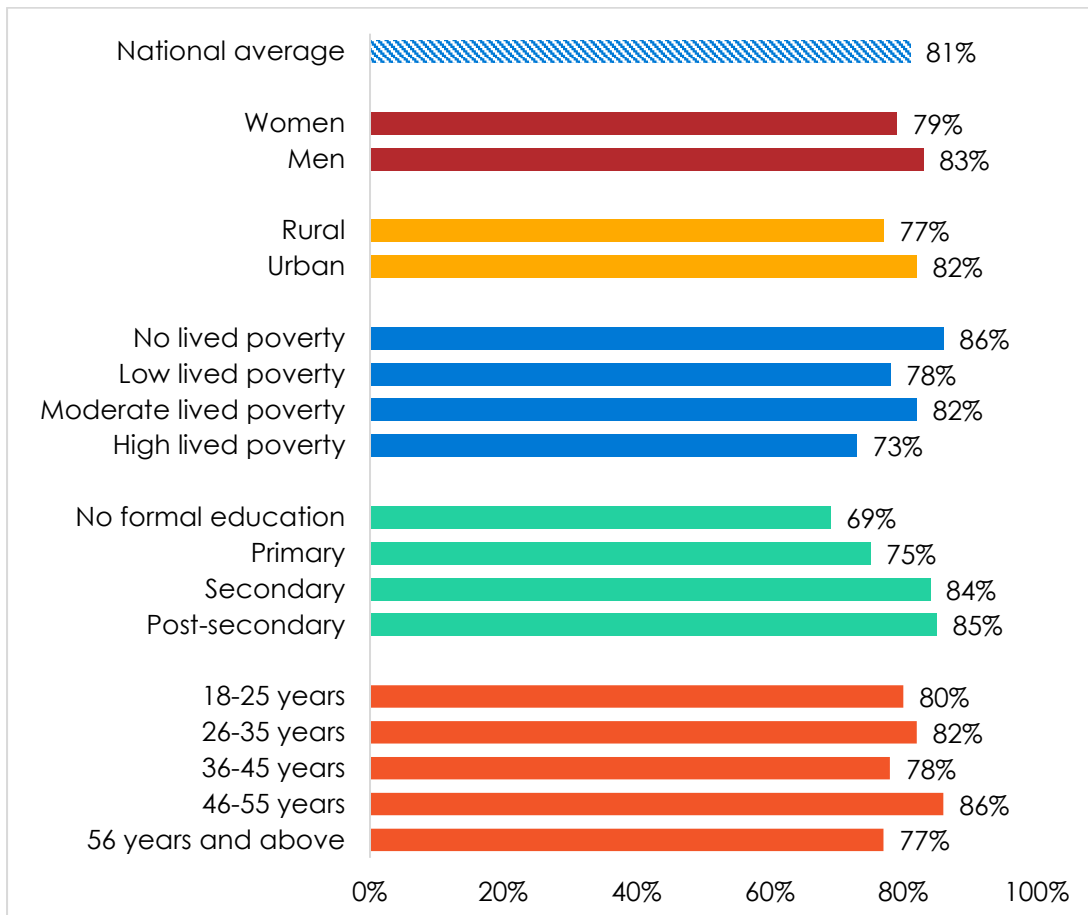


Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Gambia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

² 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. 26% "somewhat worse" and 55% "much worse" sum to 80%).

The negative impact of climate change is more widely recognised among urban than rural residents (82% vs. 77%), among the highly educated than among the unschooled (85% vs. 69%), among men than women (83% vs. 79%), and among economically well-off than economically vulnerable citizens (86% vs. 73%) (Figure 8).

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



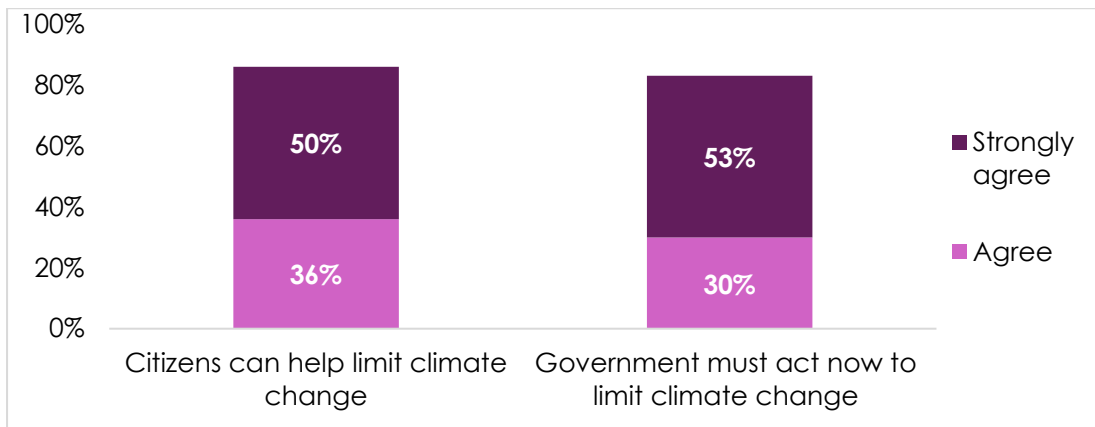
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Gambia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Fighting climate change

Large majorities of Gambians believe that both ordinary citizens and the government have a role to play in limiting climate change. More than eight in 10 respondents who are aware of climate change (86%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that citizens can help curb climate change (Figure 9). And a similar proportion (83%) want their government to take steps now to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy.

In fact, most Gambians (69%) say the government has the primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact. Far fewer respondents assign primary responsibility to ordinary people (21%), business and industry (3%), and developed countries (3%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Limiting climate change | Gambia | 2022



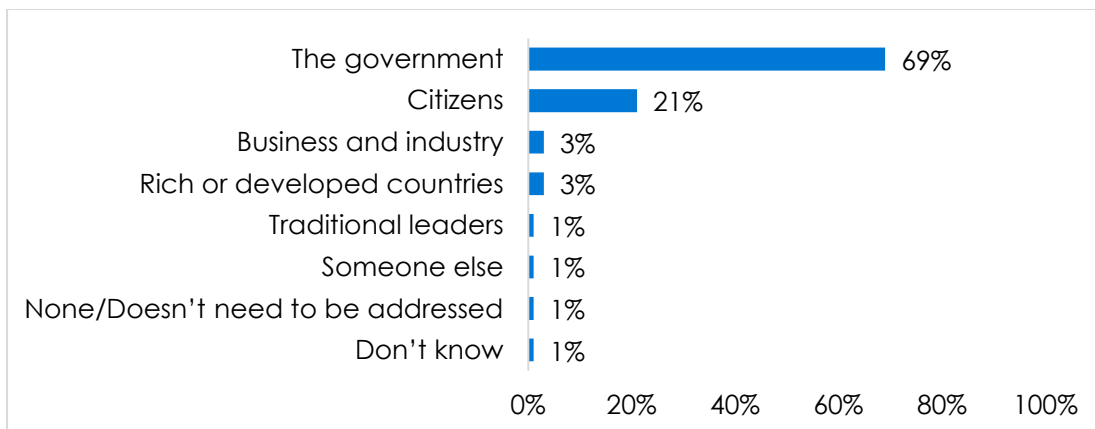
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

Ordinary Gambians 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? | Gambia | 2022



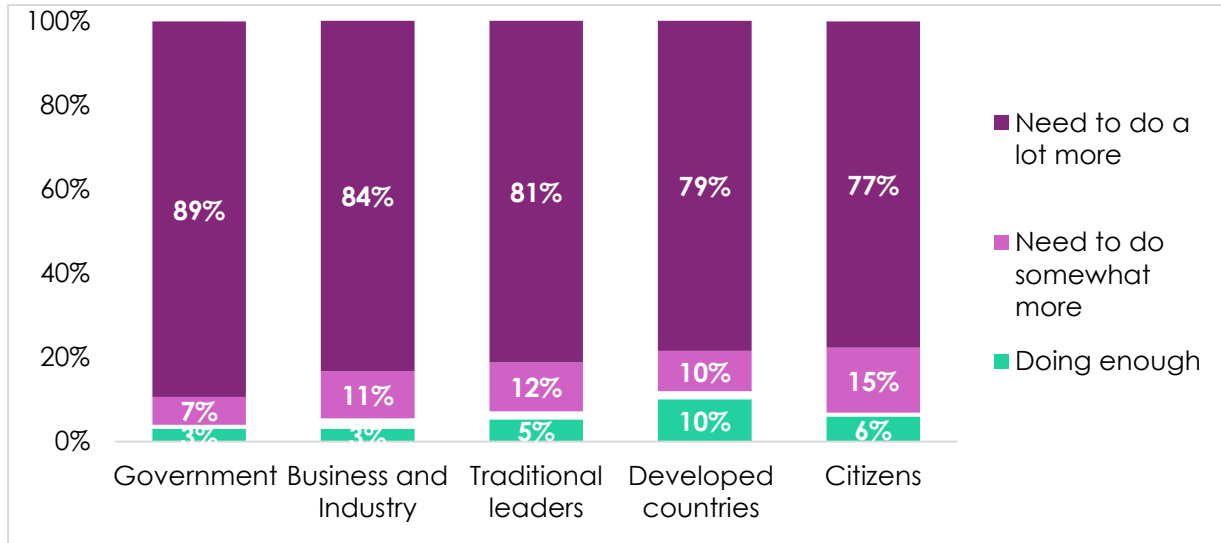
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? Citizens answer with a resounding “No” (Figure 11). Overwhelming majorities say “a lot more” action is needed from the government (89%), business and industry (84%), traditional leaders (81%), developed countries (79%), and ordinary citizens (77%). Only small minorities (3%-10%) think they are doing enough to fight climate change.

When asked to assess how well the government is addressing the problem of climate change, only a quarter (24%) of all respondents describe the government’s performance as “fairly” or “very” good, while 53% give the government a failing grade on this issue. Almost one in four (23%) don’t offer an opinion (Figure 12).

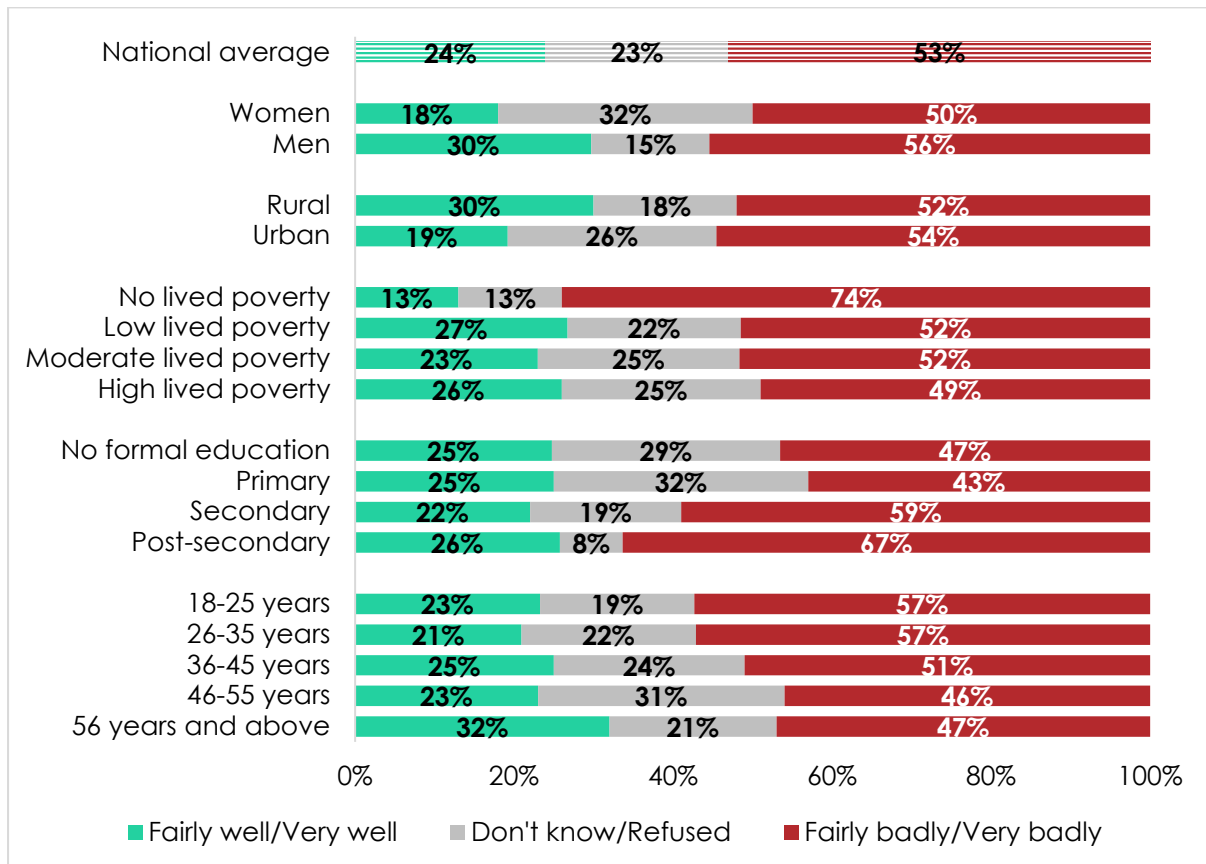
The most negative appraisals of the government’s efforts come from economically well-off (74%), highly educated (67%), and young (57%) respondents.

Figure 11: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | Gambia | 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.)

Figure 12: Government performance in handling climate change | by demographic group | Gambia | 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?

Conclusion

Survey findings show that while many Gambians report increasingly severe floods (and to a lesser extent droughts) in their region, many remain unfamiliar with the concept of climate change.

Among those who are aware of it, there is widespread agreement that climate change is making life in the Gambia worse.

Economically disadvantaged citizens may be most at risk: Compared to their better-off counterparts, they are more likely to report worsening floods and droughts but less aware of climate change and less likely to blame climate change for making life worse – and thus less likely to look to climate action as a necessary response.

Gambians say the primary responsibility for tackling climate change belongs to the government, which they say must act now to limit its negative impact even if doing so is expensive. But they also call on business and industry, developed countries, traditional leaders, and ordinary citizens to do “a lot more” to contain the climate threat. One step may be to support community-based organisations to continue raising awareness of climate change and building momentum for needed climate action.

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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.

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