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Young Zimbabweans see their government as falling short on employment and the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 744 | Asafika Mpako and Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

In addition to hobbling economic development, youth unemployment is a global security threat that, if left unaddressed, can result in social unrest, higher levels of crime, and susceptibility to extremist groups (Obonyo, 2021).

In Zimbabwe, an ailing economy has made the situation particularly critical for young people. The official youth unemployment rate (defined as the percentage of the labour force aged 15-24 actively seeking employment) is 12.37% (Statista, 2023), though activists say this grossly underrepresents the number of young Zimbabweans who need jobs (Moyo, 2023).

While more than 60% of the country's population is under age 25, youth continue to face significant obstacles to realising their economic and political potential (Oyewale, 2023; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2021; Pswarayi, 2023).

The quest to address the needs of the youth is captured in the vision of Zimbabwe's revised National Youth Policy (2020-2025), which aims to achieve holistic youth development through a focus on education and skills development, employment and entrepreneurship, youth governance and participation, and health and well-being (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021).

The latest Afrobarometer survey provides an on-the-ground look at the situation of youth in the country. Findings show that Zimbabwean youth (defined here as aged 18-35) have more education than their elders but are also more likely to be unemployed. Unemployment and management of the economy top the list of the most important problems that young Zimbabweans want their government to address.

Fewer than half of the youth demographic approve of the way the president, members of Parliament, and local government councillors have performed their jobs. Though dominant in numbers, Zimbabwe's youth are less likely than their elders to participate in change-making activities such as voting and civic activities.

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 survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed 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 Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March and 10 April 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 standard surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

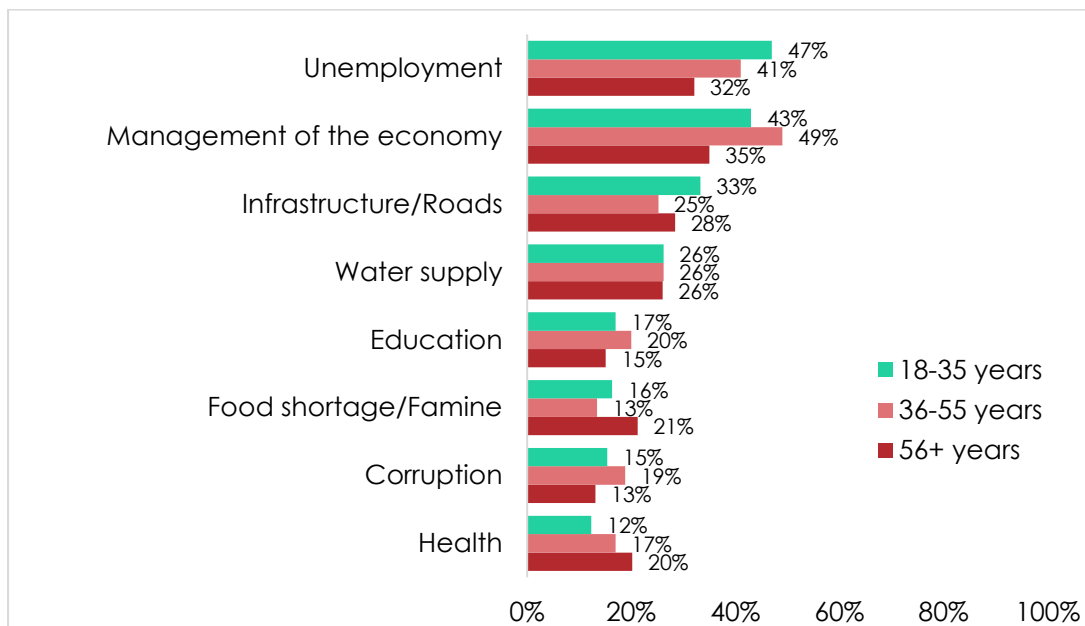
Key findings

- Unemployment and management of the economy are the most important problems that Zimbabwean youth (aged 18-35 years) want their government to address.
- On average, Zimbabwean youth have more education than their elders. Nine in 10 young citizens (90%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling.
- But youth are also more likely to be unemployed: About four in 10 young Zimbabweans (41%) say they are looking for a job, compared to 26% of middle-aged and 10% of older citizens.
- Six in 10 young people (60%) describe their personal living conditions as “fairly bad” or “very bad.”
- Only about one in 10 young people give the government a passing grade on its efforts to create jobs (11%), while 22% approve of the government's management of the economy (22%).
- Fewer than four in 10 young respondents approve of the job performance of President Emmerson Mnangagwa (37%) and their member of Parliament (30%).
- Young Zimbabweans are less likely than their elders to vote in elections, contact local leaders, attend community meetings, and join others to raise an issue.

Most important problems

When asked what they consider the most important problems that their government should address, unemployment tops the list of concerns for Zimbabwean youth (aged 18-35), cited by nearly half (48%) as one of their top three priorities (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Most important problems | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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

Management of the economy (43%) ranks second, followed by infrastructure/roads (33%) and water supply (26%). Education (cited by 18% of youth) places fifth among their most urgent concerns. Youth are significantly more likely than their elders to cite unemployment and infrastructure/roads as top concerns and less likely to prioritise health.

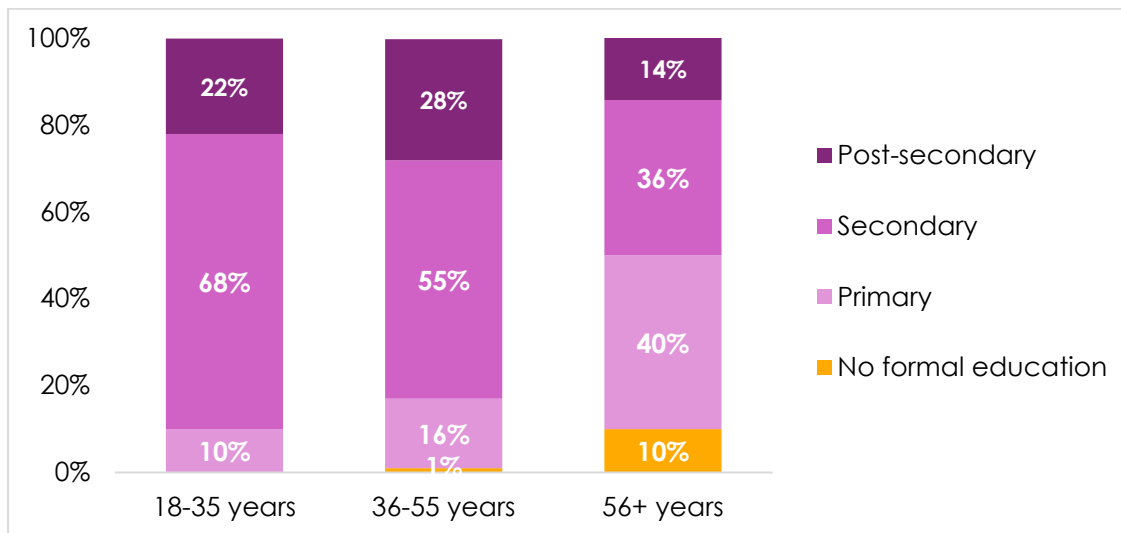
The status of youth: More educated, less employed

Zimbabwean youth have more education than their elders, but they are less likely to have a job.

Nine in 10 young Zimbabweans (90%) have secondary (68%) or post-secondary (22%) schooling, compared to 83% in the 36-55 and 50% in the over-55 age groups (Figure 2). No young respondents report lacking formal education altogether, compared to 1% and 10%, respectively, of middle-aged and senior respondents.

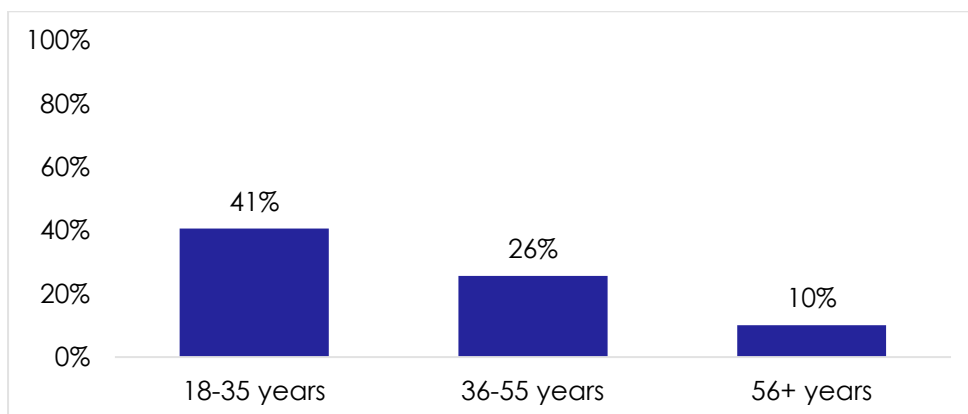
Despite fairly high levels of education, about four in 10 youth (41%) say they are unemployed and looking for work, compared to 26% of middle-aged adults and 10% of older citizens (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Education level | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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

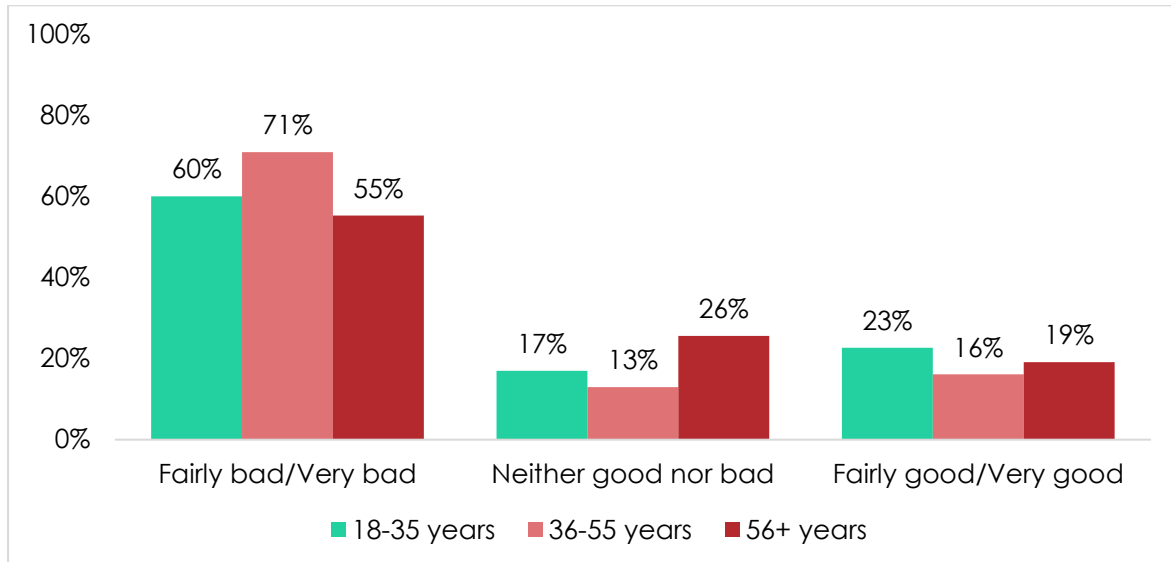
Figure 3: Not employed and looking for a job | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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? (% who say "no, but looking")

Like their elders, young Zimbabweans are less than enthusiastic about their personal living conditions. Three-fifths (60%) describe their living conditions as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” while only 23% say they are “fairly good” or “very good” (Figure 4).

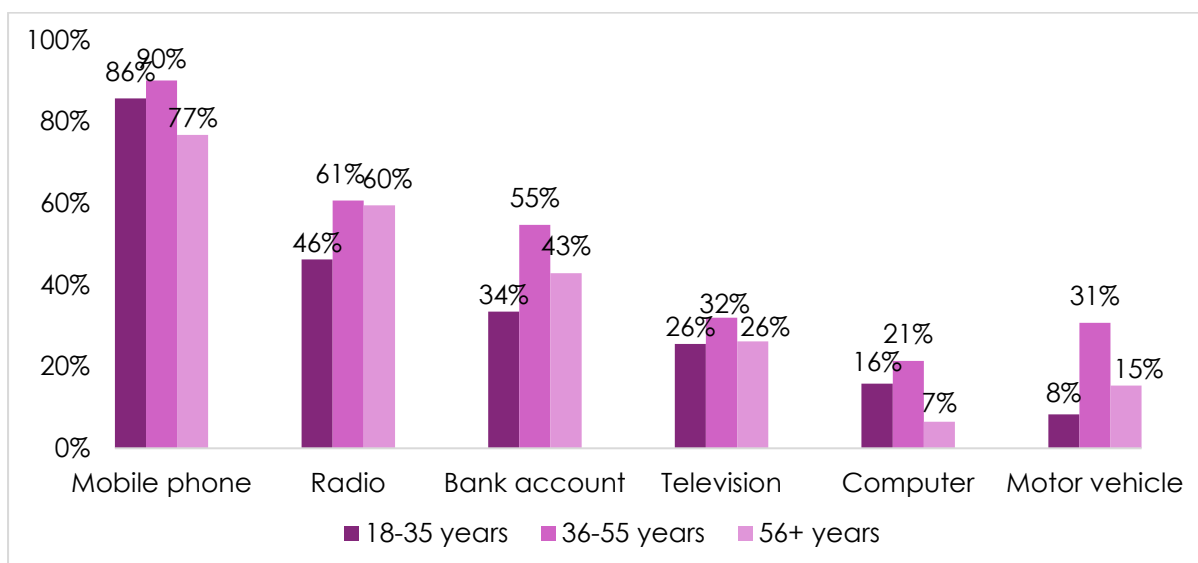
Figure 4: Personal living conditions | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

When it comes to asset ownership, nearly nine in 10 young Zimbabweans (86%) own a mobile phone – not very different from the middle age range (90%) (Figure 5). Youth are less likely than their elders to own a radio (46% vs. 60%-61%), a bank account (34% vs. 43%-55%), and a motor vehicle (8% vs. 15%-31%). Compared to the middle age range, young citizens are also somewhat less likely to personally own a television (26% vs. 32%) and a computer (16% vs. 21%).

Figure 5: Asset ownership | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

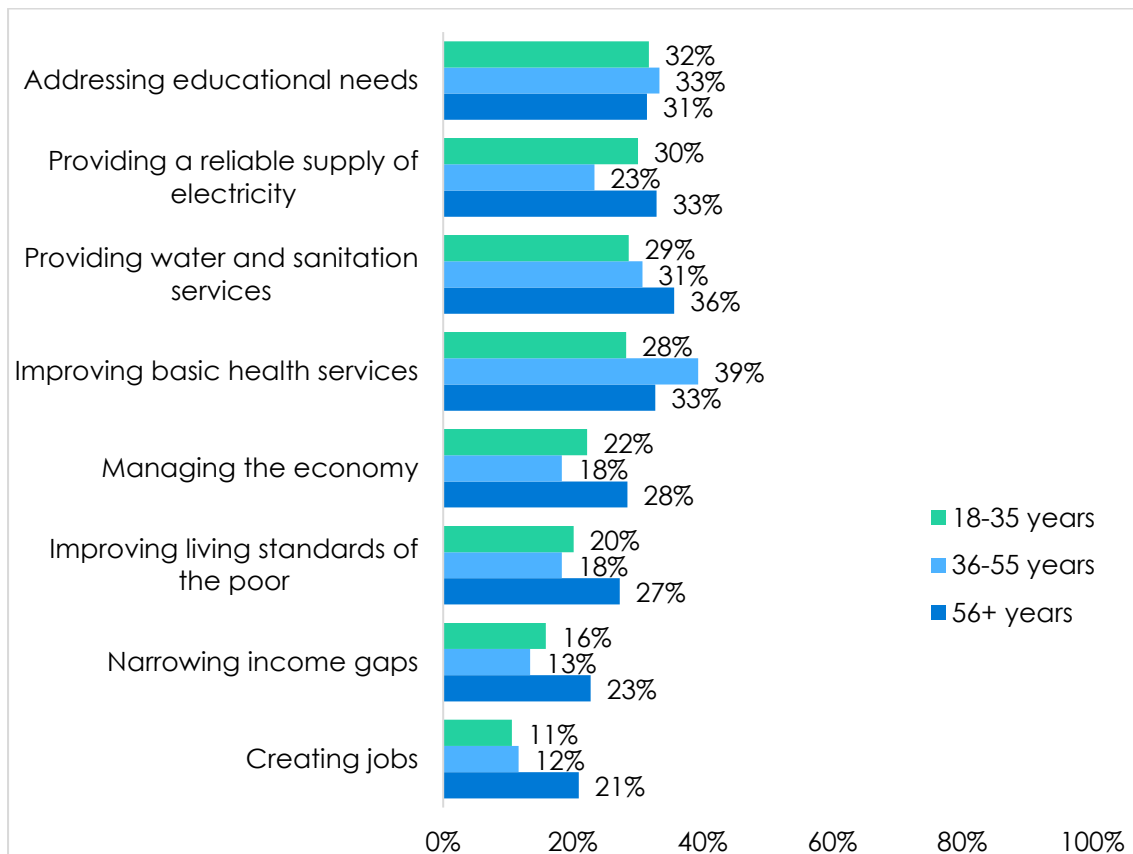
Is the government meeting the needs of Zimbabwe's youth?

Few young Zimbabweans say the government is doing a good job on key economic and service-delivery issues, including their top-priority problems of unemployment and management of the economy (Figure 6).

They are particularly critical of the government's performance on job creation: Only 11% consider it "fairly" or "very" good. About two in 10 youth think the government's efforts on the economy (22%) are adequate, while about three in 10 give a thumbs-up on education (32%), provision of electricity (30%) and water/sanitation services (29%), and improvement of basic health services (28%).

On most issues, youth are considerably less favourable in their assessments than the over-55 generation.

Figure 6: Government performance on key issues | by age group
 | Zimbabwe | 2022

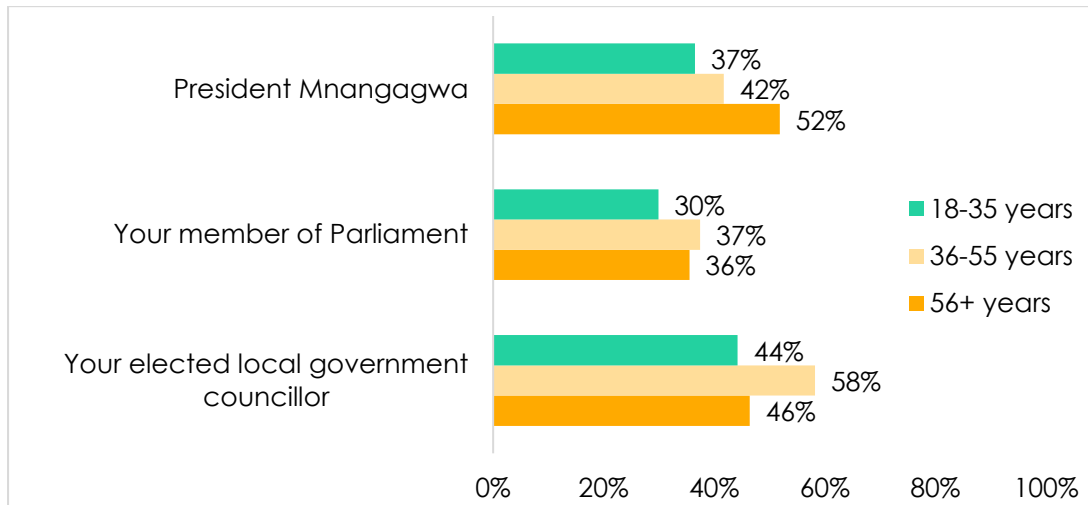


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

In line with their negative assessments of the government's performance, fewer than four in 10 young citizens (37%) "approve" or "strongly" approve of the performance of President Emmerson Mnangagwa (Figure 7).

Their views are even more unfavourable on the performance of members of Parliament (30% approve), but they are somewhat more approving of their local government councillor (44%).

Figure 7: Performance of elected leaders | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



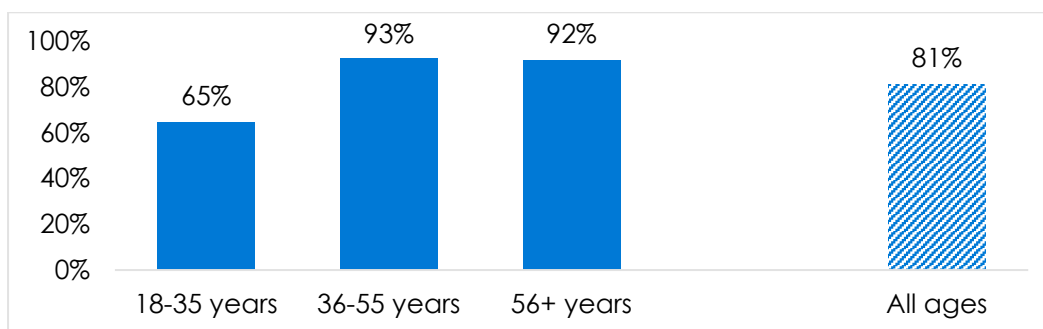
Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Political and civic engagement by the youth

In a democracy, dissatisfied citizens have a variety of outlets to express their views, ranging from community meetings and interaction with elected officials to national elections. Survey findings suggest that young Zimbabweans have room to expand their influence through political and civic engagement.

Around the world, young people are generally less likely than their elders to vote in elections (Barrett, 2018), and Afrobarometer findings confirm this pattern in Zimbabwe. Excluding respondents who were too young to vote at the time, only 65% of young respondents say they voted in the national election in 2018, compared to 93% of middle-aged and 92% of older citizens (Figure 8).

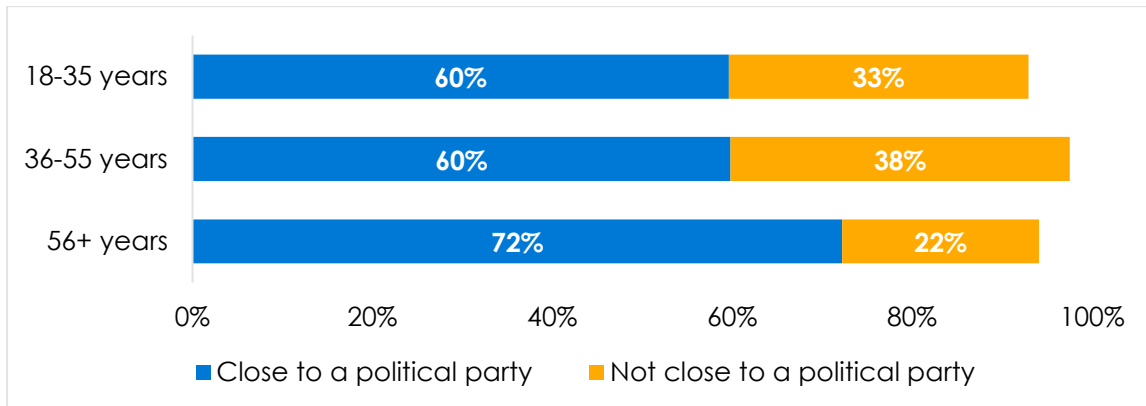
Figure 8: Self-reported voting in the 2018 election | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in 2018, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2018 are excluded.)

Young people in Zimbabwe are also less likely than the over-55 generation to identify with a political party (Figure 9). Three-fifths (60%) of young respondents say they "feel close" to a party, matching 36- to 55-year-olds but trailing the senior age group (72%).

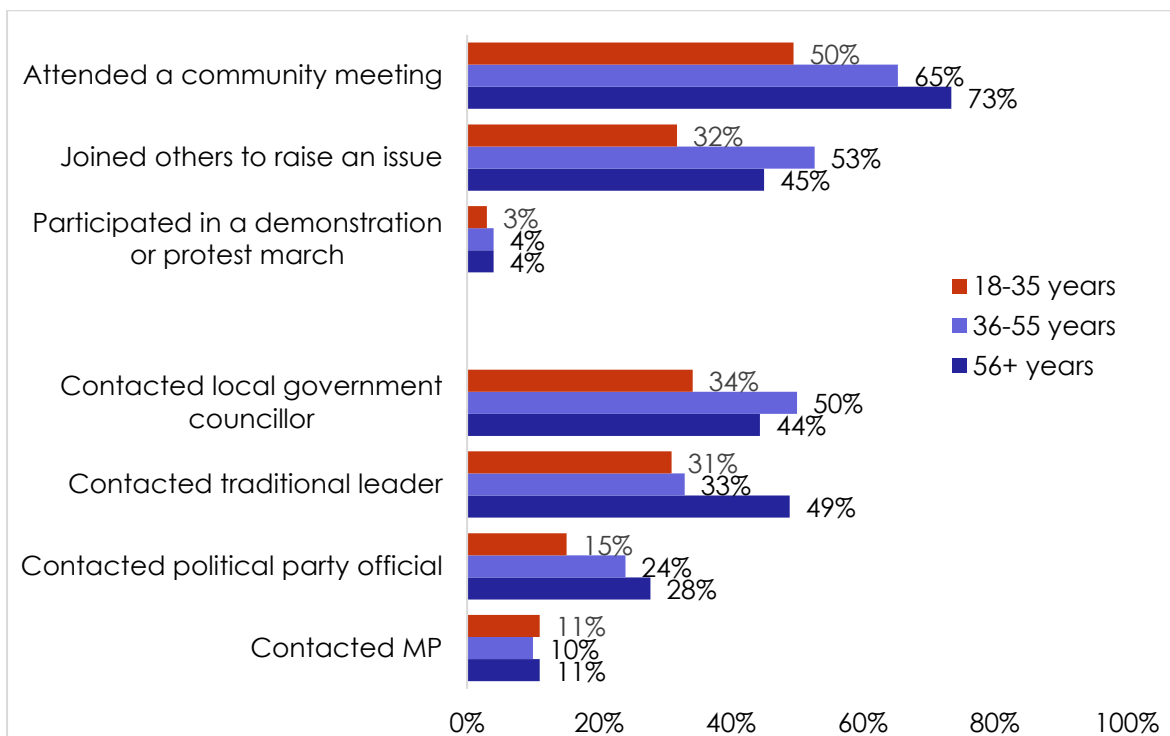
Figure 9: Political party affiliation | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party?

Similarly, young Zimbabweans participate less than their elders in several other forms of political and civic activity (Figure 10). They are less likely to say they attended a community meeting during the previous year (50%, vs. 65%-73% of the other age groups) or joined others to raise an issue (32%, vs. 45%-53% of older citizens).

Figure 10: Participation in civic and political activities | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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")
 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")

They are also less likely to report having contacted a local government councillor (34%, vs. 44%-50% of their elders), a traditional leader (31%, vs. 33%-49%), or a political party official (15%, vs. 24%-28%) during the previous year. In contrast, they were no less likely than their elders to participate in a demonstration or protest (3%) or to contact a member of Parliament (11%).

Conclusion

Young Zimbabweans rank unemployment and management of the economy as the top priorities needing urgent government action, and they are dissatisfied with their government's performance on both fronts. Given their perceived failure to address key challenges confronting the youth demographic, elected leaders receive less-than-stellar approval ratings from their young constituents.

Survey findings suggest that young people are not taking full advantage of political and civic opportunities to inject their voices into the public discourse. The flipside is that leaders who are serious about the importance of the youth's contributions to the country's development will need better strategies for engaging them.

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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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