

Health, water, and education top problems Ugandan youth want government to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 745 | Madrine Namubiru, Dorah Babirye, Angella Nakasujja, and Caroline Nakayiza

Summary

With a median age of about 16 years, Uganda has the second-youngest population in the world, after Niger (Worldometer, 2023). While supporting this youth demographic to reach its full potential puts pressure on social services and the job market, it is critical to the country's development (World Bank, 2020a, b).

Uganda ranks as a “low youth development” country, 157th out of 181 countries, in the Global Youth Development Index, with a particularly low score (167th) on employment and opportunity (Commonwealth, 2021). The government has prioritised youth employment in its National Youth Policy, National Employment Policy, National Youth Action Plan, and other strategic documents, and promoted job creation for young people through initiatives such as its Youth Livelihood Programme (International Labour Organization, 2023; Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2022). But the youth labour underutilisation rate remains high (67.9% in 2015), reflecting large proportions of 15- to 29-year-olds in irregular employment, unemployed, or inactive (International Labour Office, 2017).

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2022) offers some insights into the situation of Uganda's youth (defined as 18- to 35-year-olds). Young Ugandans are more educated than their elders, but also more likely to be unemployed. They rank health, water supply, and education as the most important problems that their government should address – issues on which only minorities see their government as doing a good job.

A majority think the country is headed in “the wrong direction” and describe its economic condition as bad, though youth are slightly more optimistic than older citizens that things will improve in the near future. Despite their dissatisfaction, young Ugandans are less likely than their elders to engage in political processes.

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 national partner in Uganda, Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans between 7 and 25 January 2022. 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 in Uganda have been conducted in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021.

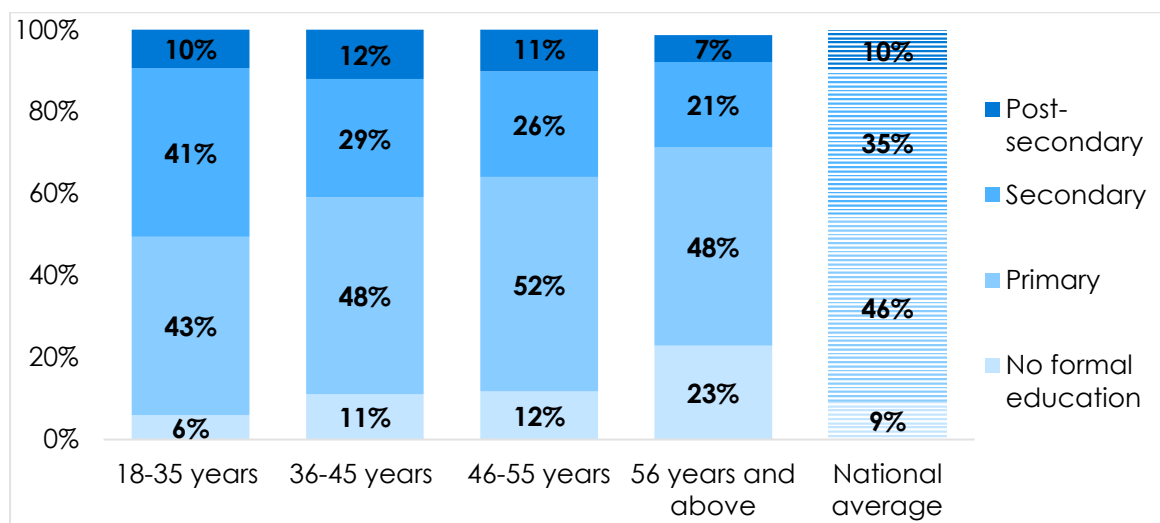
Key findings

- More than half (51%) of Ugandan youths have secondary or post-secondary education, significantly surpassing previous generations.
- But young Ugandans are also more likely than their elders to be unemployed and looking for work (33% of youth vs. 15%-23% of older cohorts).
- Health, water supply, and education are the most important problems that youth say their government should address, followed by infrastructure/roads, unemployment, and corruption.
- Fewer than half of youth say their government is doing a good job on improving basic health care (48%), meeting educational needs (45%), and providing water and sanitation services (40%).
 - Youth approval of the government's performance on these priorities has declined significantly since 2019.
- A majority of young respondents say their country is going in "the wrong direction" (53%) and give negative assessments of the nation's economy (65%) and their personal living conditions (54%). But they are slightly more optimistic than their elders that things will get better in the 12 months to come.
- Young citizens are less likely than older cohorts to be engaged in political and civic activities, including voting in elections, contacting elected representatives, attending community meetings, and joining others to raise an issue. Youth participation in these activities has declined significantly in recent years.

Education and employment status

Ugandan youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders. More than half (51%) of young citizens report having secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 41%, 36%, and 28% of the older cohorts (Figure 1). One in 20 youth (6%) have no formal education – about one-fourth as many as in the over-55 age group (23%).

Figure 1: Educational attainment | by age group | Uganda | 2022

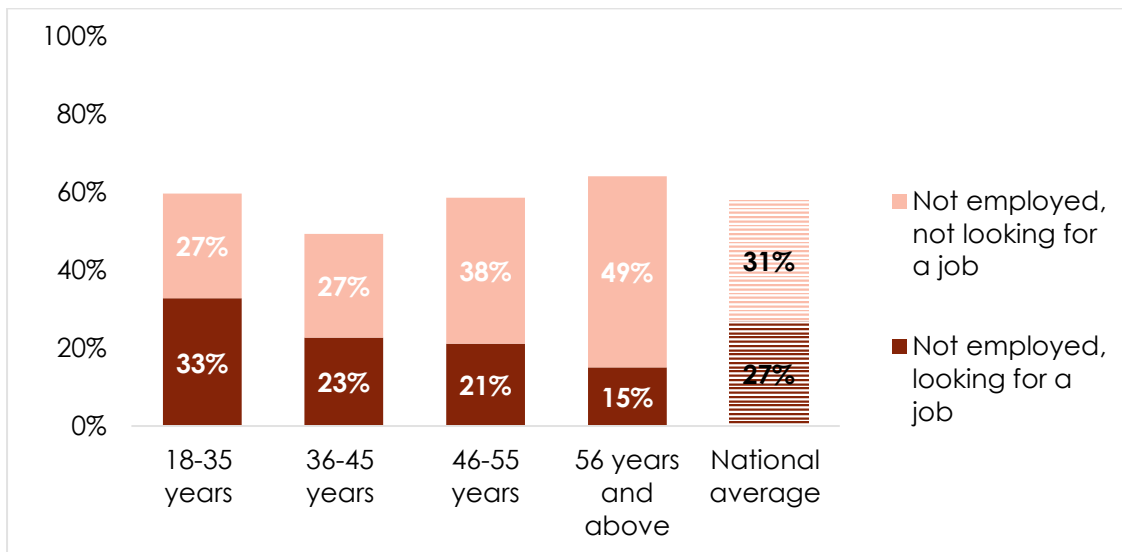


Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

While they are more educated than their elders, young Ugandans are also more likely to be unemployed. One-third (33%) of young respondents say they don't have a job and are looking for one, compared to 21%-23% of middle-aged and 15% of senior citizens (Figure 2). These youth who are unemployed (i.e. not employed and looking for work) include 2% who identify as students (Figure 3).

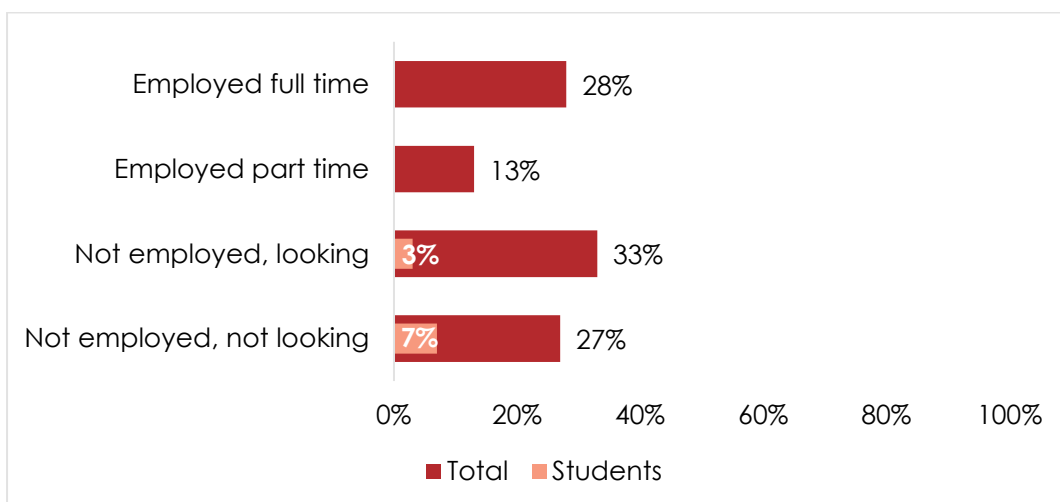
In addition, 27% of young respondents say they are not employed and are not looking for work, including 7% who identify as students. About four in 10 youth say they are employed either full time (28%) or part time (13%).

Figure 2: Unemployment rate | by age group | Uganda | 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?

Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 years | Uganda | 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?

What is your main occupation? [If not currently working:] What was your last main occupation? (% who say "student")

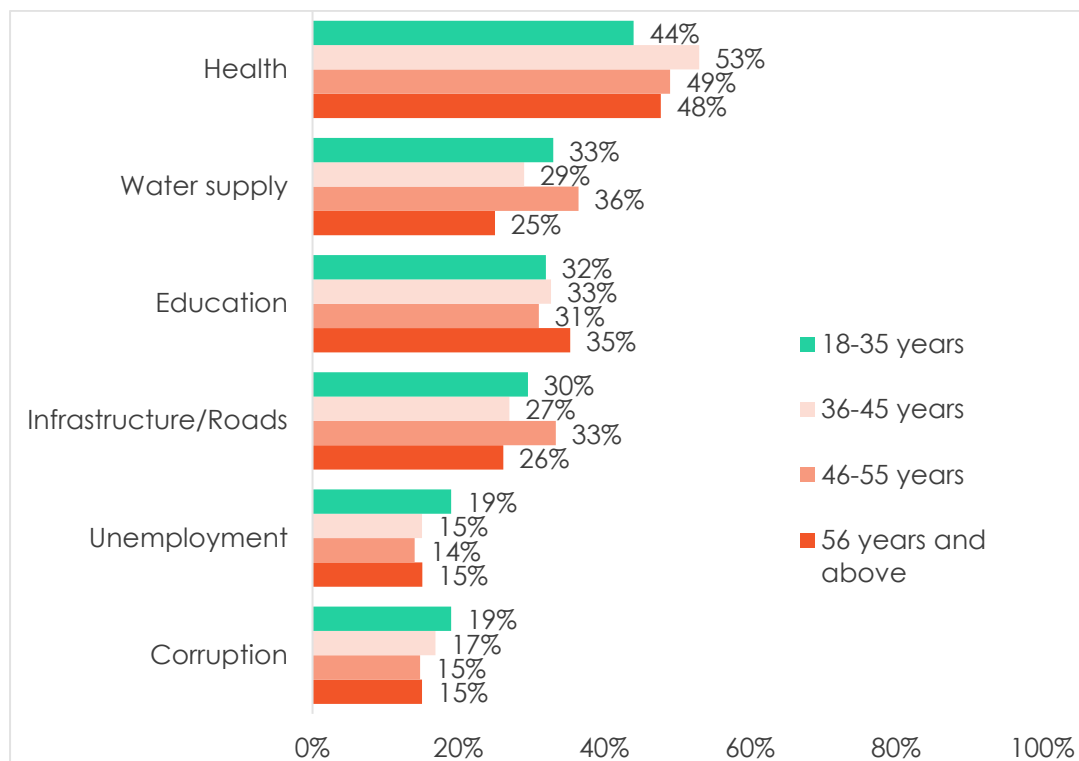
Priorities for action

The most important problems that young Ugandans want their government to address are health (cited by 44% of respondents as one of their top three priorities), water supply (33%), and education (32%), followed by infrastructure/roads (30%), unemployment (19%), and corruption (19%) (Figure 4).

In their priorities for government action, Ugandans differ from their counterparts in many other African countries. On average across 39 countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2021/2023, unemployment and management of the economy outrank health, water supply, infrastructure/roads, and education as youth priorities (Sanny, van Wyk-Khosa, & Asunka, 2023). Crime/security and unemployment top the list in Nigeria (Duntoye & Mbaegbu, 2023), management of the economy and corruption in Kenya (Okello & Iberi, 2023), and economic management and unemployment in Ghana (Kwadzo & Boateng, 2023).

Young Ugandans don't differ dramatically from their elders in their views on which problems are most urgently in need of government attention, though older citizens are even more likely to cite health as a top concern and somewhat less likely to mention unemployment.

Figure 4: Most important problems | by age group | Uganda | 2022

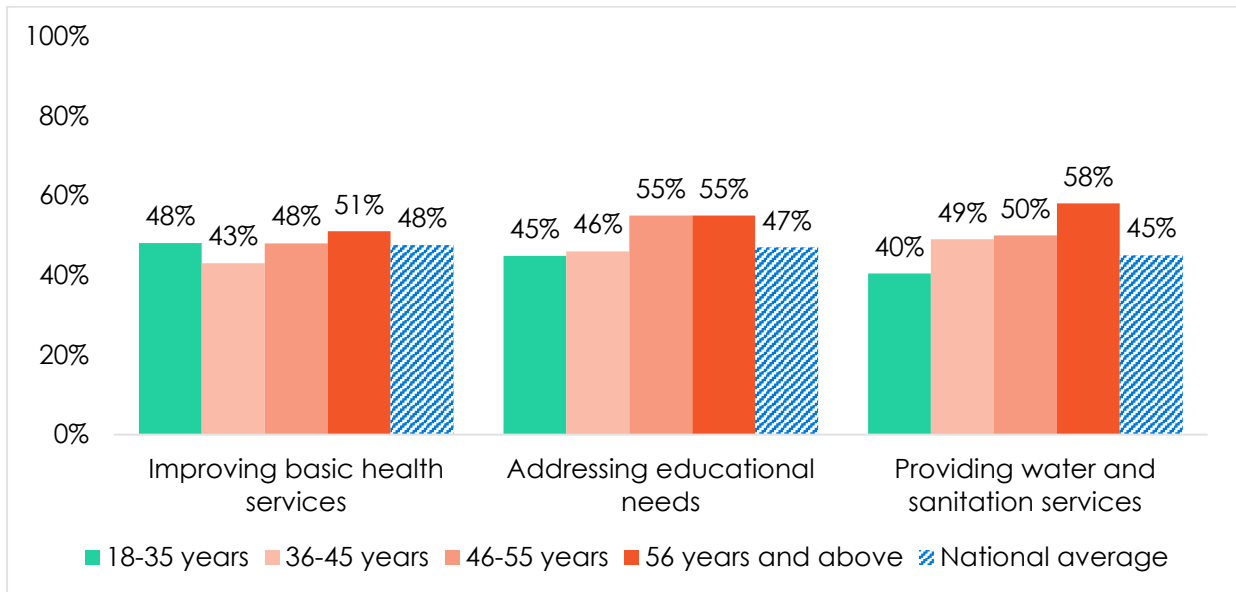


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities)

Evaluation of government performance

On their three top-priority concerns, fewer than half of Ugandans think their government is doing a good job: 48% say it is performing “fairly well” or “very well” on improving basic health services, 45% on meeting educational needs, and 40% on providing water and sanitation services (Figure 5). Their evaluations are close to the national average on health and education, but on water/sanitation, young respondents offer significantly less favourable assessments than their elders (49%-58%).

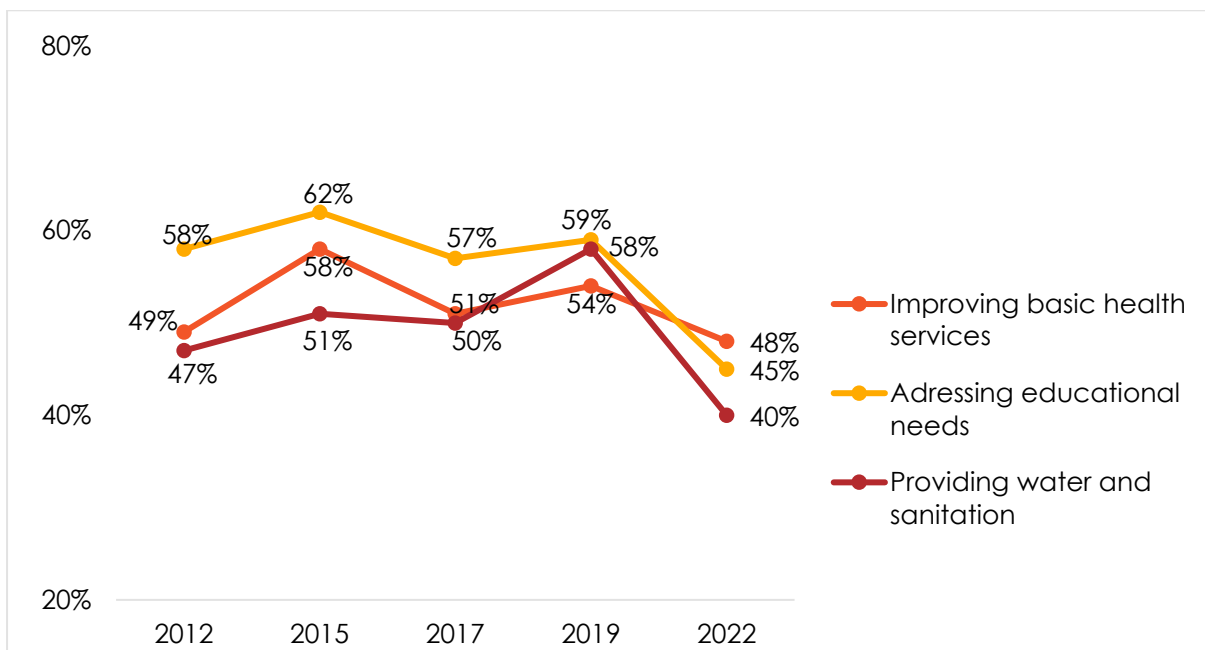
Figure 5: Approval of government performance on health, water/sanitation, and education | by age group | Uganda | 2022



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")

Young people's assessments of the government's performance on these three priority issues have declined significantly since 2019, perhaps coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval ratings dropped by 18 percentage points for water/sanitation, by 14 points on education, and by 6 points on health care (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Youth approval of government performance on health, water/sanitation, and education | respondents aged 18-35 years | Uganda | 2012-2022

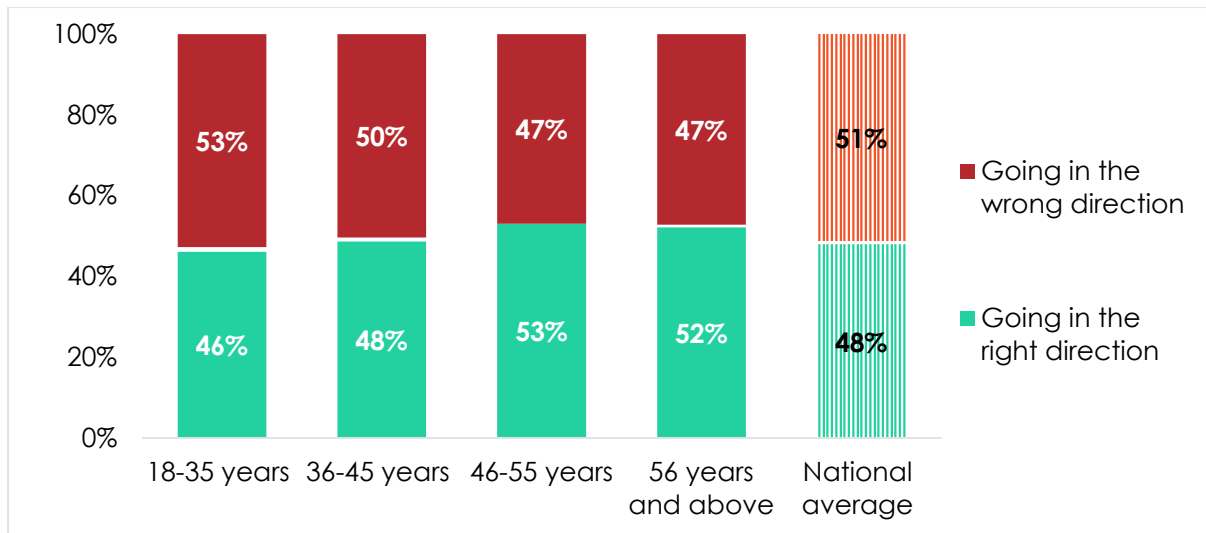


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Views on country's direction and economic situation

Young Ugandans are slightly more pessimistic than older citizens about their country's overall direction: 53% say the country is going in "the wrong direction," compared to 47%-50% of the older cohorts (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Country's direction | by age group | Uganda | 2022

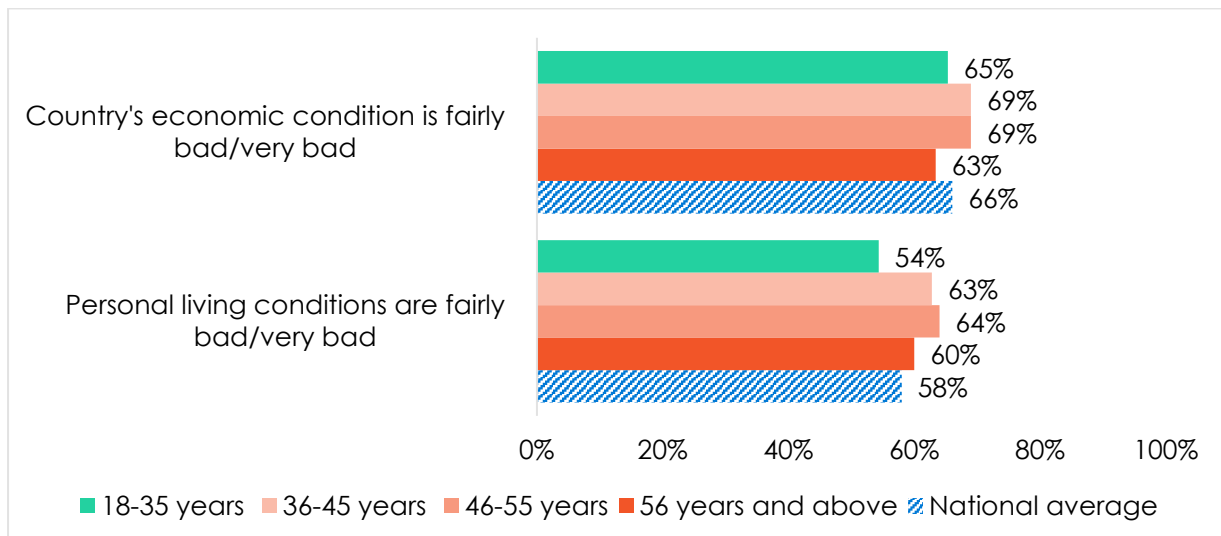


Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

About two-thirds (65%) of young Ugandans say the country's economic condition is "fairly bad" or "very bad," roughly matching the national average (66%) (Figure 8).

More than half (54%) of the youth also describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad," a somewhat less negative appraisal than offered by their elders (60%-64%).

Figure 8: Negative assessments of country's economy and personal living conditions | by age group | Uganda | 2022

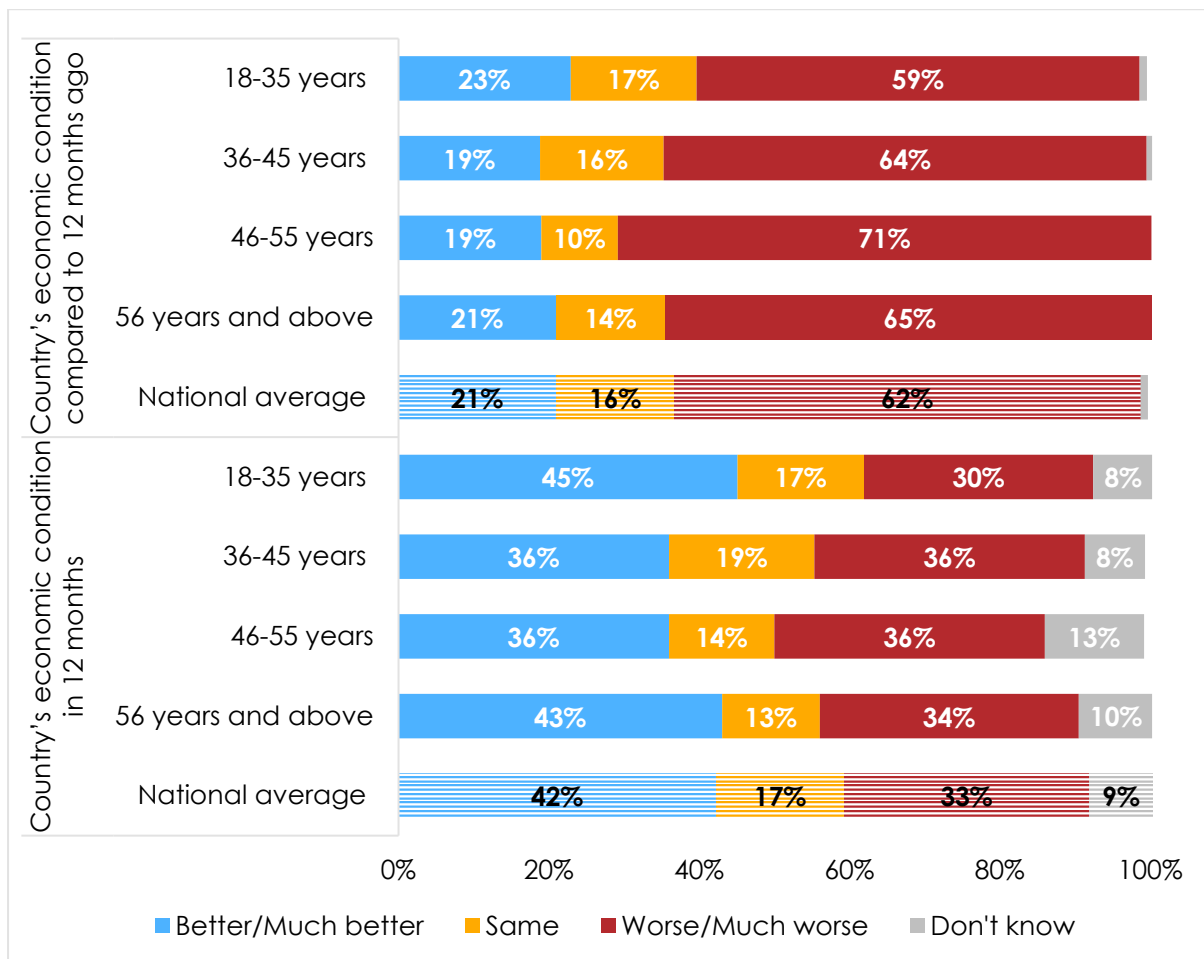


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Only 23% of youth think the country's economic condition improved over the previous year, while 59% say it worsened – again somewhat less negative than assessments by older cohorts (Figure 9).

Twice as many young citizens (45%) believe that things will get better in the 12 months to come, offering a more optimistic outlook than the middle-aged (36%).

Figure 9: Retrospective and prospective assessment of country's economic condition
 | by age group | Uganda | 2022



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 Ugandans' dissatisfaction with economic conditions, the country's overall direction, and their government's performance, to what extent do they engage in political and civic processes in pursuit of change?

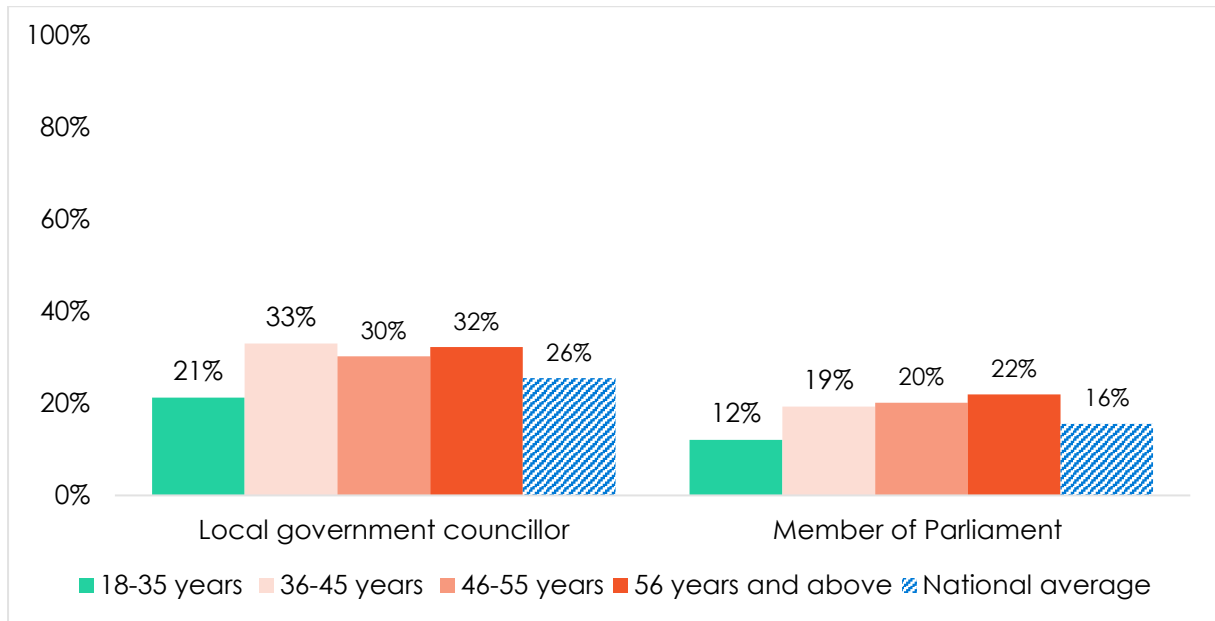
Survey findings suggest that youth have room to extend their potential influence through pathways such as contacting their elected officials, joining with others to express their concerns, and voting in elections.

About two in 10 young respondents (21%) say they contacted a local government councillor about an important issue at least once during the year preceding the survey, a lower contact rate than recorded for their elders (30%-33%) (Figure 10).

One in eight (12%) report having contacted a member of Parliament (MP) – again a smaller share than among older cohorts (19%-22%).

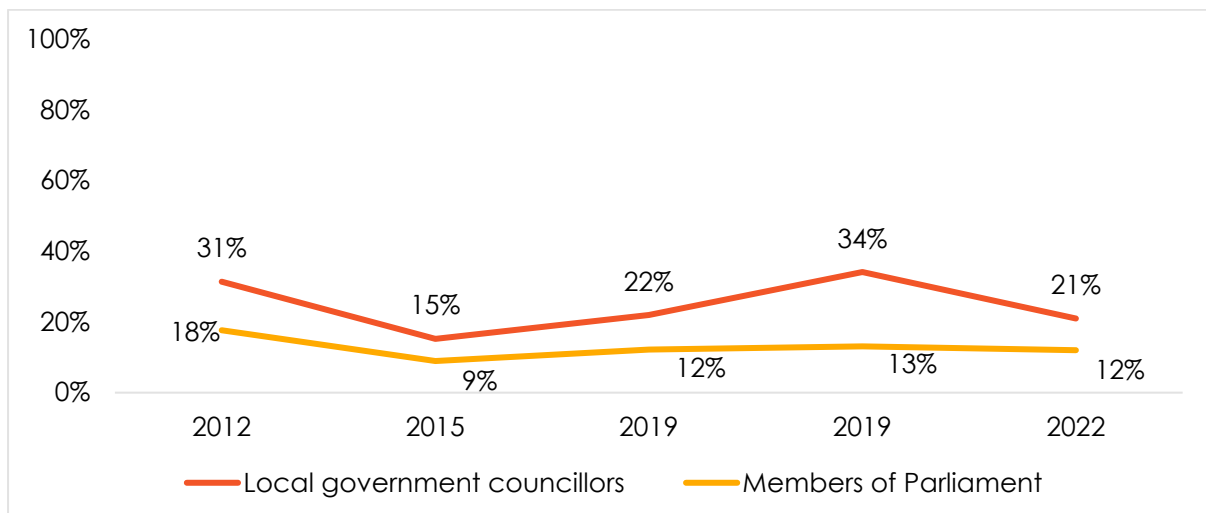
Young people's self-reported contact with these elected representatives is significantly lower than it was a decade ago – by 10 percentage points for local government councillors and by 6 points for MPs (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Contacted political representatives during previous year | by age group | Uganda | 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")

Figure 11: Youth contact with political representatives | respondents aged 18-35 years | Uganda | 2012-2022



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")

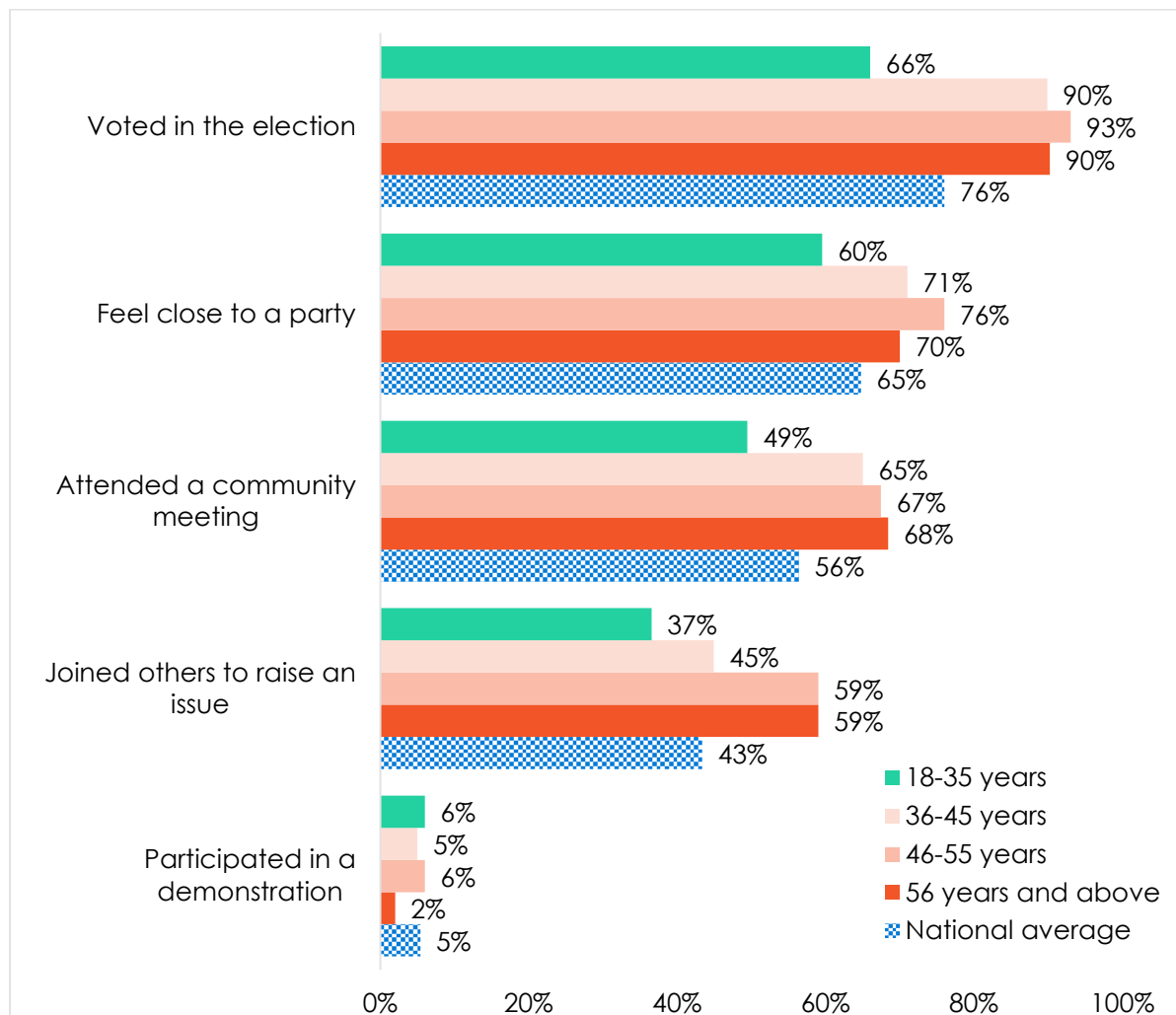
Youth also trail their elders when it comes to voting in elections, identifying with a political party, attending community meetings, and joining others to raise an issue (Figure 12).

Excluding those who were too young to vote in 2021, two-thirds (66%) of youth say they voted in the most recent national election, a far lower rate than reported by older Ugandans (90%-93%). And while 60% of young citizens say they “feel close to” a political party, that is at least 10 percentage points less than among other age groups (70%-76%).

Half (49%) of young respondents report having attended a community meeting at least once during the preceding year, compared to about two-thirds (65%-68%) among their elders. And 37% say they joined others to raise an issue at least once, vs. 45%-59% of those over age 35.

About one in 20 young people (6%) say they participated in a demonstration or protest march last year, which is about average for all adults (5%).

Figure 12: Political engagement | by age group | Uganda | 2022



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.)

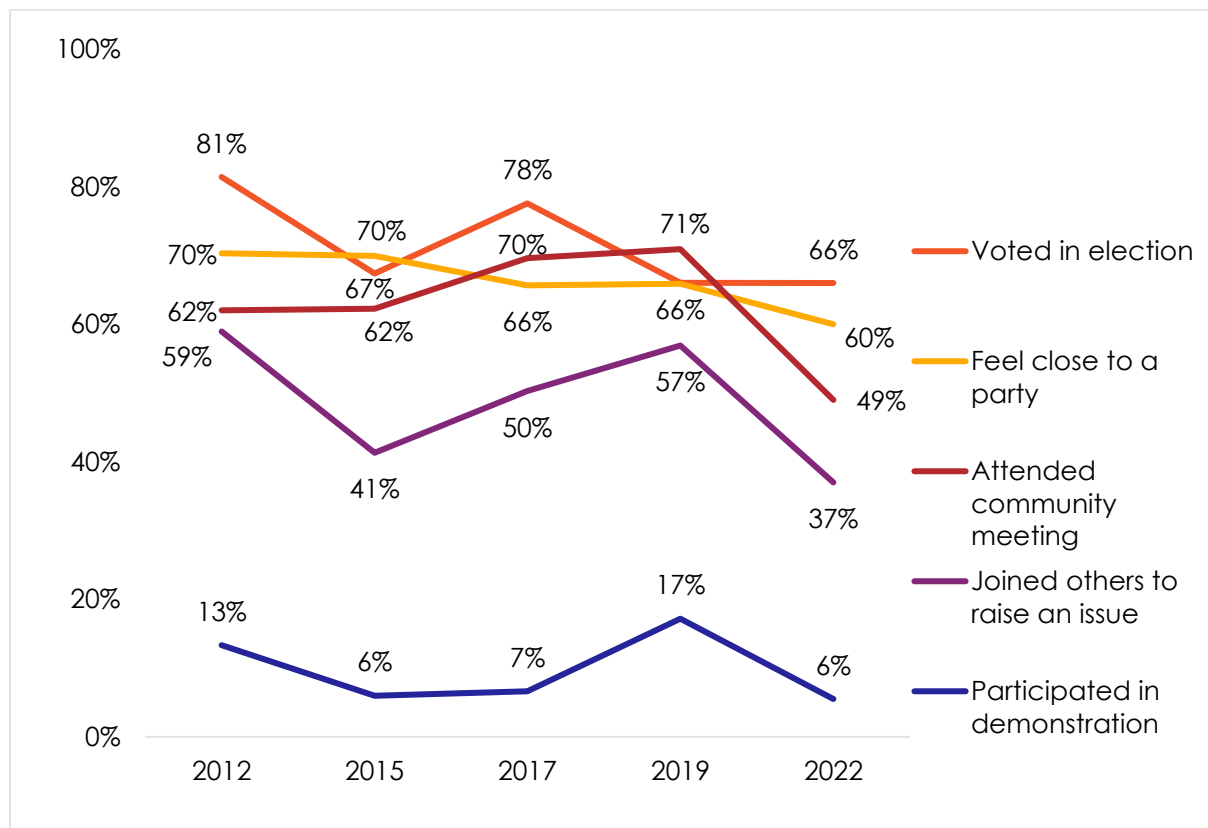
Do you feel close to any particular political party?

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”)

Young Ugandans' self-reported engagement has declined on each of these indicators in recent years (Figure 13). Compared to 2019, attending a community meeting is down by 22 percentage points, and joining others to raise an issue has declined by 20 points. Participation in a demonstration has dropped by 11 points, and identification with a political party by 6 points.

Voting in the previous national election remains unchanged from 2019 but is down by 12 points compared to 2017 and by 15 points compared to 2012.

Figure 13: Youth political engagement | respondents aged 18-35 years | Uganda | 2012-2022



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")

Conclusion

Like their elders, young Ugandans rank health, water supply, and education at the top of the list of problems requiring urgent government action. Their concerns align with the World Bank's argument that greater investment in health and education will be needed for Uganda to unlock the enormous potential of a fast-growing population and reap its "demographic dividend" (World Bank, 2020a).

While Uganda's youth have more education than older cohorts, they are also more likely to be unemployed, as matching education and training skills to available jobs and creating new jobs remain significant challenges.

A majority of youth see their country as headed in the wrong direction and economic conditions as bad, though they are somewhat more optimistic than their elders that things will improve.

Survey findings also suggest that young people have not fully exploited their potential in political and civic processes to ensure that their voices are heard.

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