

# South Africans praise government's COVID-19 response but express concern over corruption, find pandemic assistance lacking

---

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 752 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma**

## Summary

South Africa confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 5 March 2020. By 26 March, as the number of cases surged, the country was thrust into an unprecedented nationwide lockdown that placed severe restrictions on movement, trade, and schooling (South African Government News Agency, 2020a, b).

By July, as caseloads surged and ebbed in waves, President Cyril Ramaphosa had called for a probe into the alleged misappropriation of COVID-19 funds by state institutions (Africa News, 2020). In an 18-month inquiry, the Special Investigating Unit found evidence of procurement irregularities, price inflation, political manipulation in the awarding of contracts, and other instances of fraud (Reuters, 2021; Vuk'uzenzele, 2022).

By the end of 2020, the South African economy had been dealt a hard blow, reflected in a 7% drop in gross domestic product and soaring unemployment figures (Smit, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2021). To assist low-income individuals, the government introduced the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant, which was recently extended until 2025 (South African Government News Agency, 2023).

As of 30 November 2023, the country had recorded 4,072,575 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 102,595 deaths and had administered more than 41 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine (World Health Organization, 2023).

A 2022 Afrobarometer survey in South Africa shows that three in 10 citizens say their household lost a primary source of income because of the pandemic. While most approve of the government's COVID-19 response, majorities say that pandemic-related relief assistance was inadequate and distributed unfairly and that "a lot" of the resources intended for the pandemic response were lost to corruption.

A majority of respondents report having been vaccinated against COVID-19, but among those who have not, most say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated, citing vaccine safety as the main reason for their reluctance.

More than half of South Africans endorse postponing elections and using security forces to enforce public health mandates during a pandemic, but not censoring media reporting. Many doubt whether their government is adequately prepared for future health emergencies, and a majority support investing more in preparations for such crises, even at the cost of other health services.

## 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 South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,582 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

## Key findings

### ■ Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- About one-quarter (26%) of South Africans say a member of their household became ill with COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus, while 29% say someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic.

### ■ Attitudes toward vaccines:

- Almost six in 10 citizens (57%) say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Among those who have not been vaccinated, most say they are "very unlikely" (63%) or "somewhat unlikely" (14%) to do so.
- The most commonly cited reasons for vaccine hesitancy are related to concerns about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.
- Only about four in 10 respondents (42%) say they trust the government to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

### ■ Government response to COVID-19:

- A majority (54%) of South Africans say the government has performed "fairly well" or "very well" in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Nearly six in 10 are also satisfied with the government's efforts to minimise disruptions to children's education (57%) and to ensure that health facilities are adequately resourced (56%).
- But only 41% think the government has done a good job of providing relief assistance for vulnerable households. More than six in 10 (62%) say assistance was distributed unfairly, and 83% believe that "some" or "a lot" of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption.
- In response to a public health emergency, majorities approve of postponing elections (52%) and using the police or military to enforce public health mandates (61%), but only 33% consider censorship of media reporting an acceptable measure.

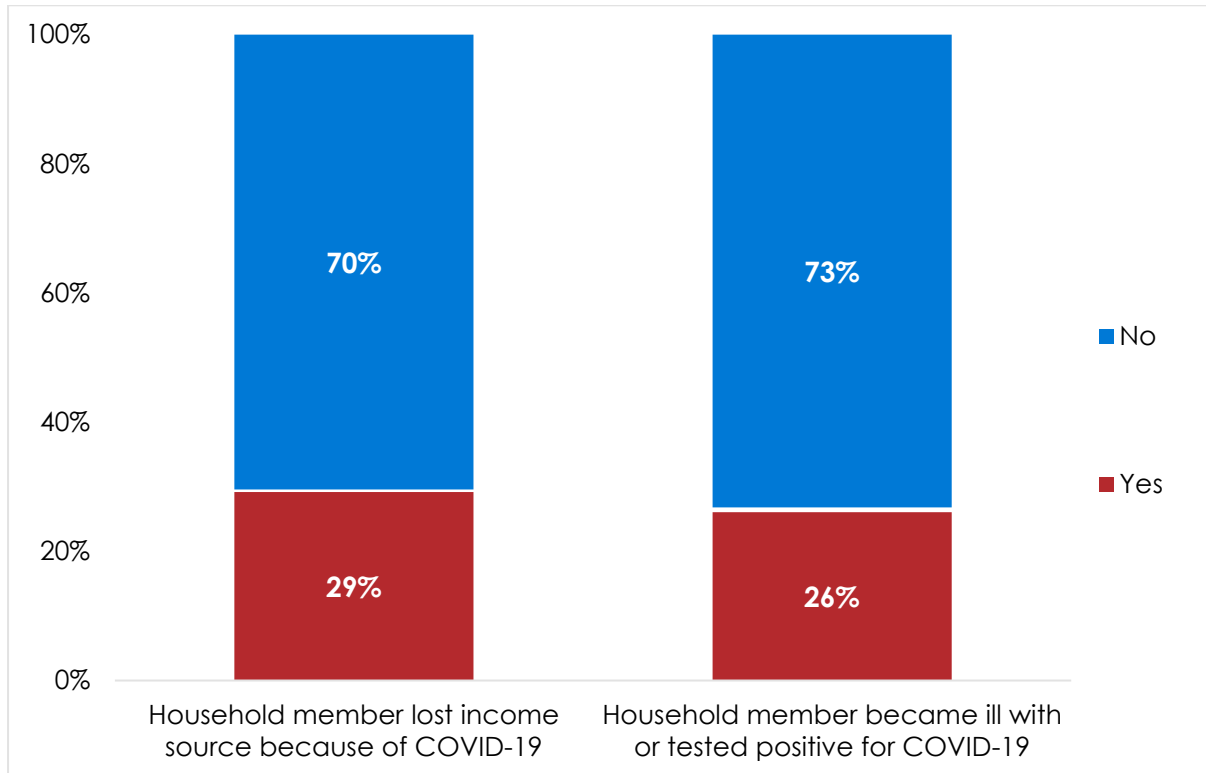
### ■ Looking ahead:

- More than four in 10 South Africans (43%) think the government is prepared to deal with future public health emergencies, but just as many (45%) disagree.
- More than half (53%) think the government needs to invest more in such preparations, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

## Effects of COVID-19

About one-quarter (26%) of South Africans say a member of their household became ill with or tested positive for COVID-19, while about three in 10 (29%) say someone in their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Effects of COVID-19 | South Africa | 2022**



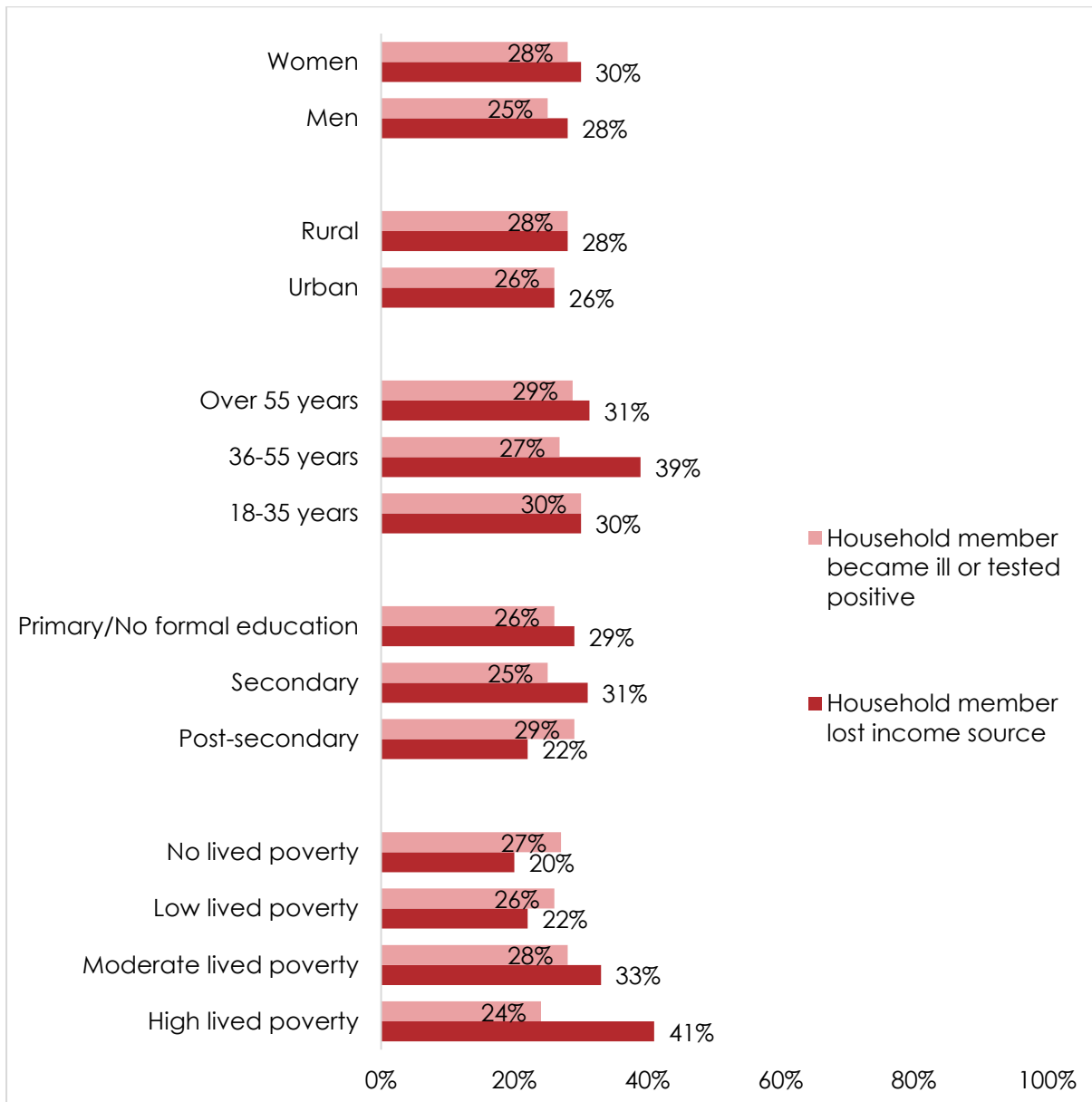
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with, or tested positive for, COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

The effects of COVID-19 appear to be experienced to similar degrees in cities and in rural areas, as well as among women and men, according to citizen reports of illness and losing an income source (Figure 2).

Loss of an income source was particularly common among respondents in the middle age range (39% of 36- to 55-year-olds) and least common among those with post-secondary education (22%) and the economically well off (20%-22% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty, vs. 41% of the poorest citizens).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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).

**Figure 2: Effects of COVID-19** | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



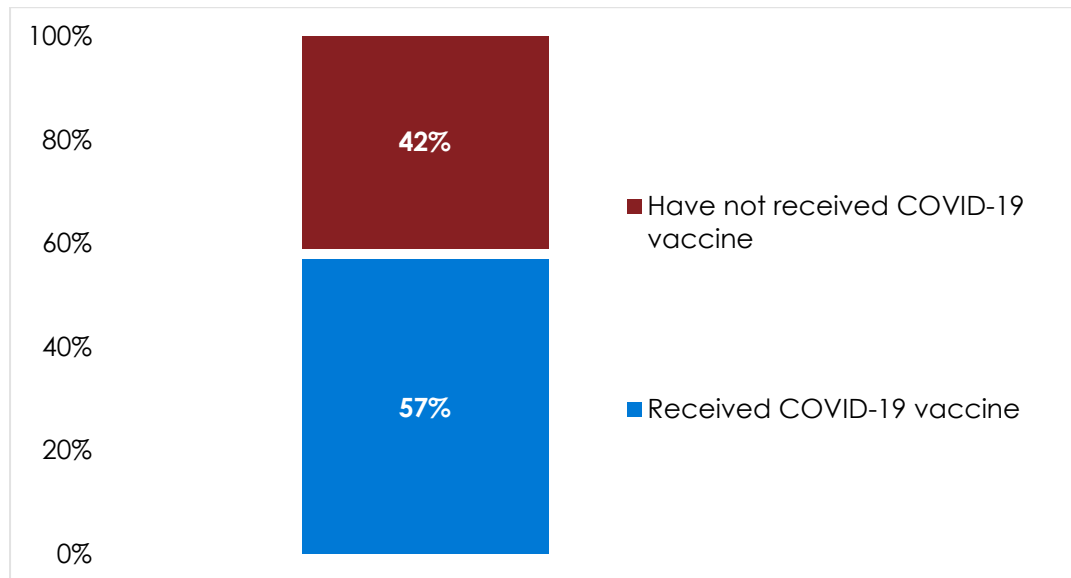
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income? (% who say "yes")

### Attitudes toward vaccination

Close to six in 10 South Africans (57%) say they have been vaccinated against COVID-19. More than four in 10 (42%) have not received the shot (Figure 3).

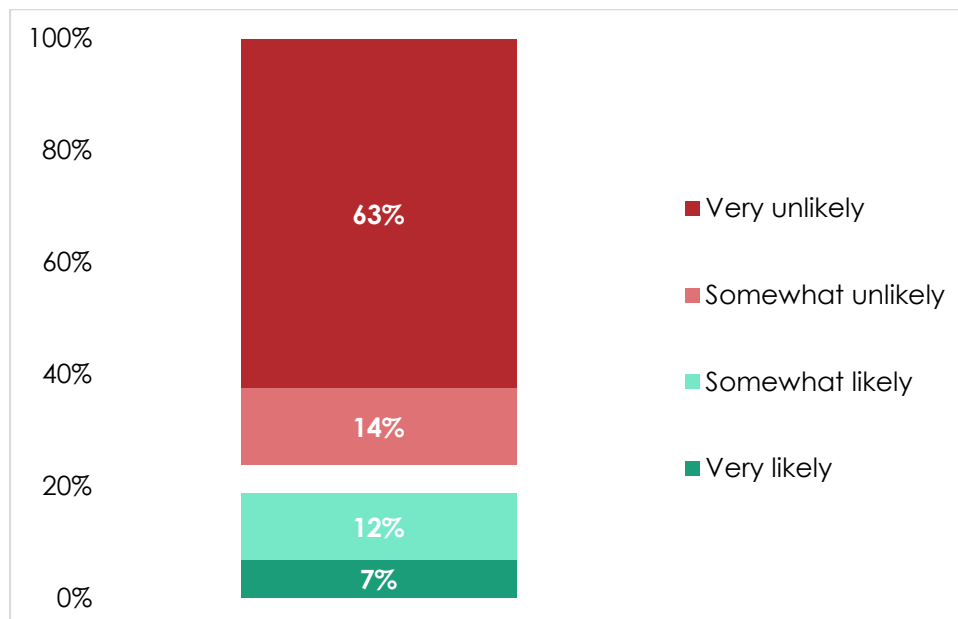
Among those who have not been vaccinated, most say they are "very unlikely" (63%) or "somewhat unlikely" (14%) to try to get vaccinated. Only one in five describe themselves as "somewhat likely" (12%) or "very likely" (7%) to try to get vaccinated (Figure 4).

**Figure 3: Received COVID-19 vaccination | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you received a vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses?

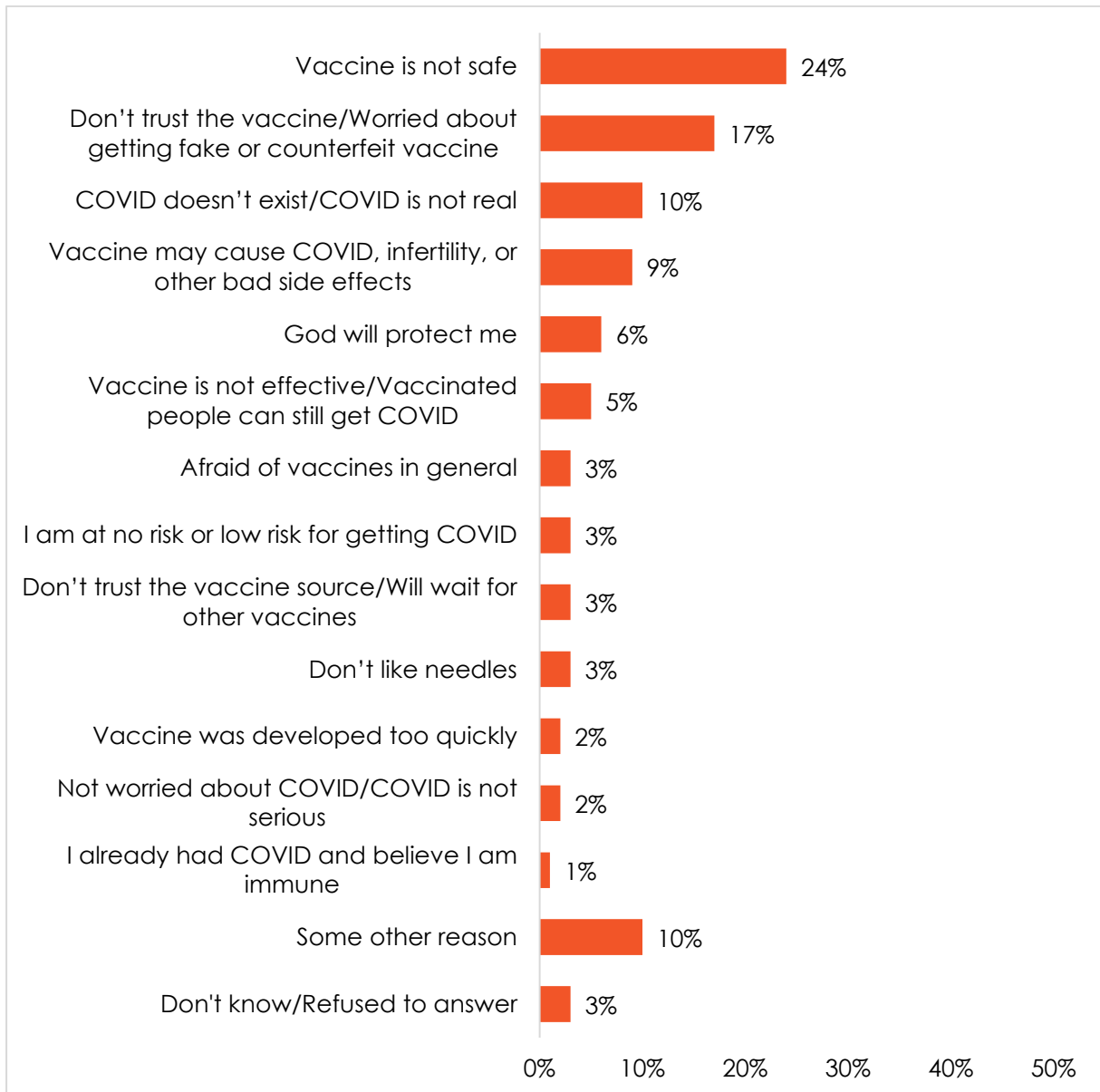
**Figure 4: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19 were asked:** If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (Respondents who say they were vaccinated are excluded.)

Among citizens who say they are unlikely to get vaccinated, the most commonly cited reasons for their vaccine hesitancy are related to safety, including 24% who say the vaccine is not safe, 17% who don't trust the vaccine or are worried about getting a counterfeit vaccine, and 9% who worry that the vaccine might cause COVID-19, infertility, or other negative side effects (Figure 5). Others believe that COVID-19 doesn't exist (10%), that God will protect them against COVID-19 (6%), or that the vaccine is not effective (5%).

**Figure 5: Main reason for vaccine hesitancy | South Africa | 2022**

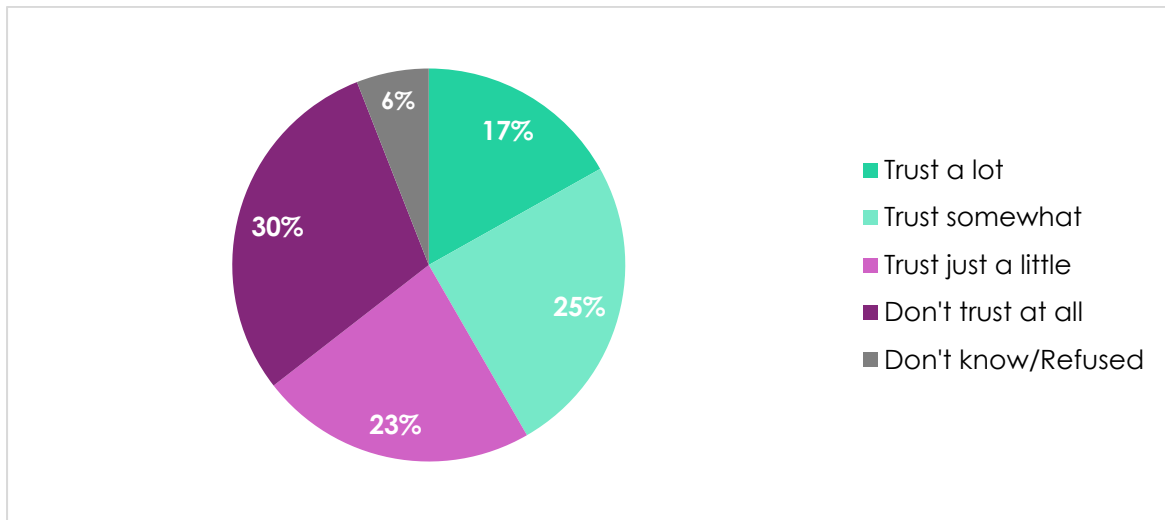


**Respondents who say they are not likely to get vaccinated were asked:** What is the main reason that you would be unlikely to get a COVID-19 vaccine? (Respondents who say they were vaccinated are excluded.)

Widespread concerns about vaccine safety present a major hurdle for government efforts to vaccinate the population. Only about four in 10 South Africans (42%) say they trust the government “somewhat” (25%) or “a lot” (17%) to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, while a majority (53%) express “just a little” trust (23%) or no trust at all (30%) (Figure 6).

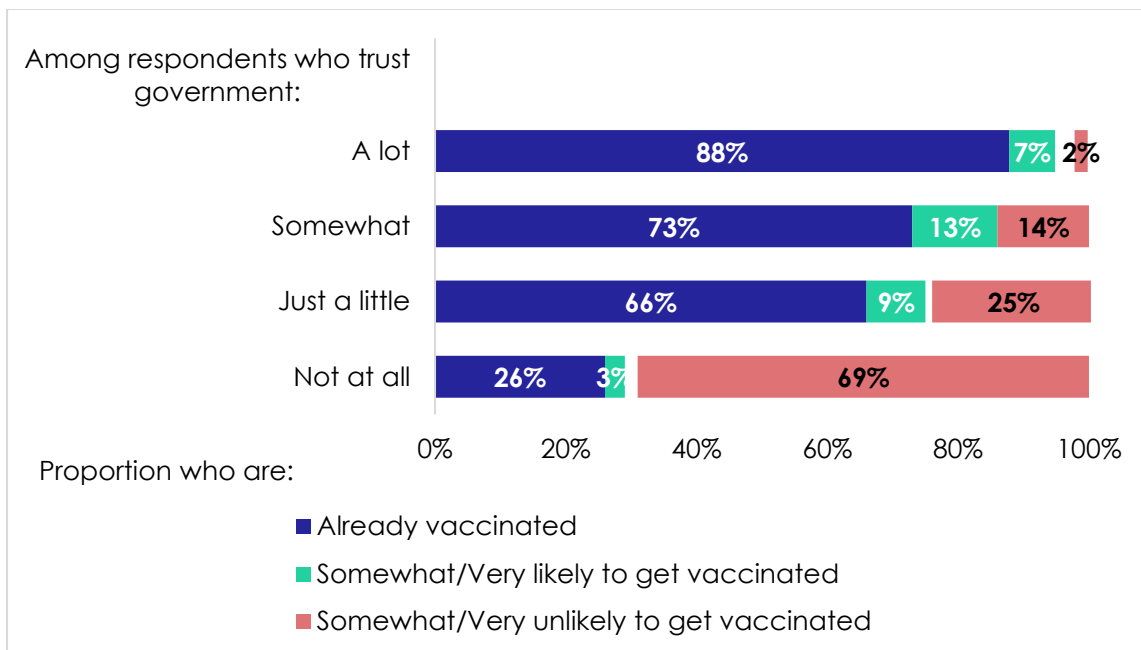
Citizens' willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19 is strongly correlated with their trust in the government's ability to ensure the safety of the vaccine (Figure 7). Citizens who trust the government “a lot” to ensure vaccine safety are more than three times as likely to be vaccinated as those who express no trust at all (88% vs. 26%). Only 2% of those who trust the government “a lot” on vaccine safety express hesitancy to get vaccinated, compared to 69% of those who don't trust the government “at all.”

**Figure 6: Trust government to ensure vaccine safety | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to South African citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

**Figure 7: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | by trust in government to ensure vaccine safety | South Africa | 2022**



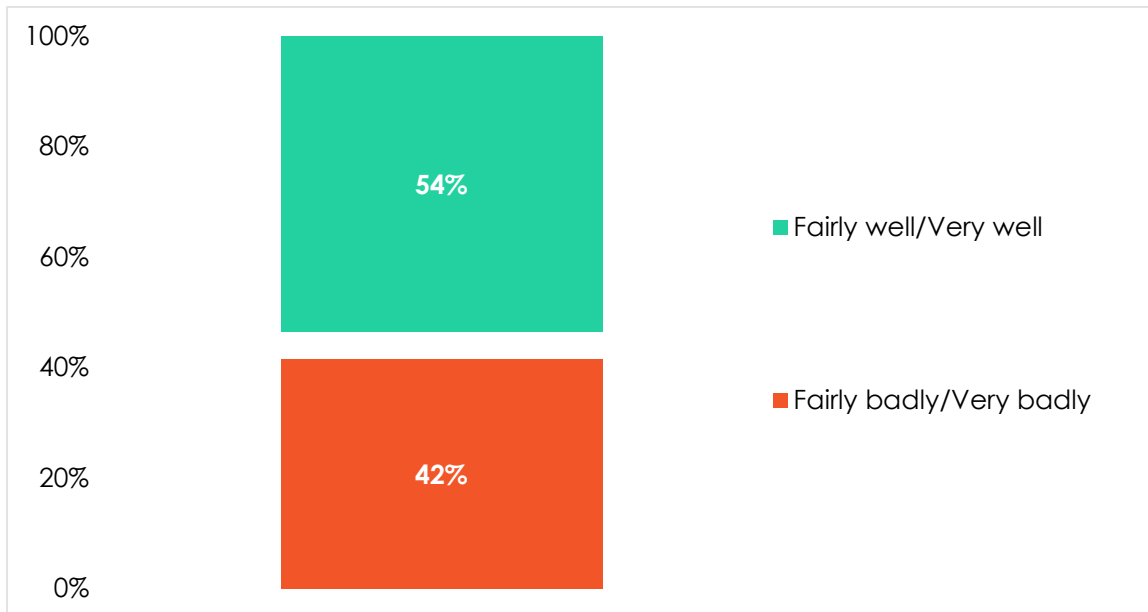
**Respondents were asked:**

If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?  
 How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to South African citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

### Government response to COVID-19

While trust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety is relatively weak, more than half (54%) of South Africans describe the government's overall performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as "fairly" or "very" good, while 42% say it has done a poor job (Figure 8).

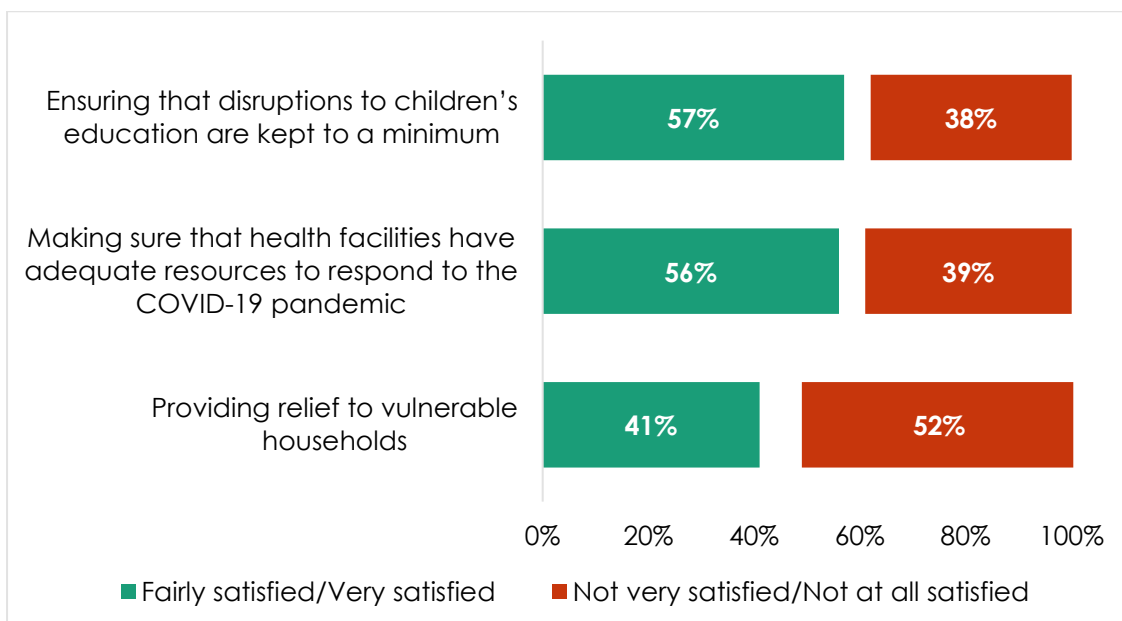
**Figure 8: Government response to COVID-19 | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government has managed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

On specific aspects of the COVID-19 response, majorities say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the government’s efforts to ensure that disruptions to children’s education were held to a minimum (57%) and that health facilities were adequately resourced to deal with the pandemic (56%). However, only 41% express satisfaction with the government’s efforts in providing relief assistance to vulnerable households (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Satisfaction with aspects of the government’s response to COVID-19 | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government’s response to COVID-19 in the following areas?

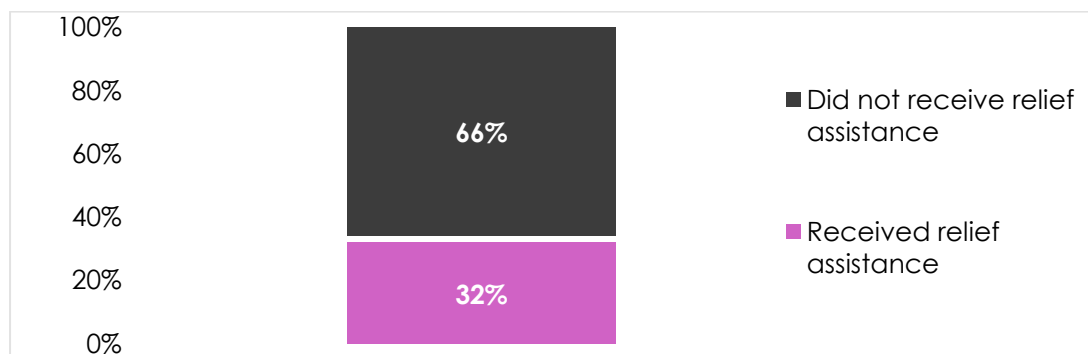


### COVID-19 relief assistance

About one-third (32%) of South Africans report that their household received COVID-19 relief assistance from the government, while 66% say they did not (Figure 10).

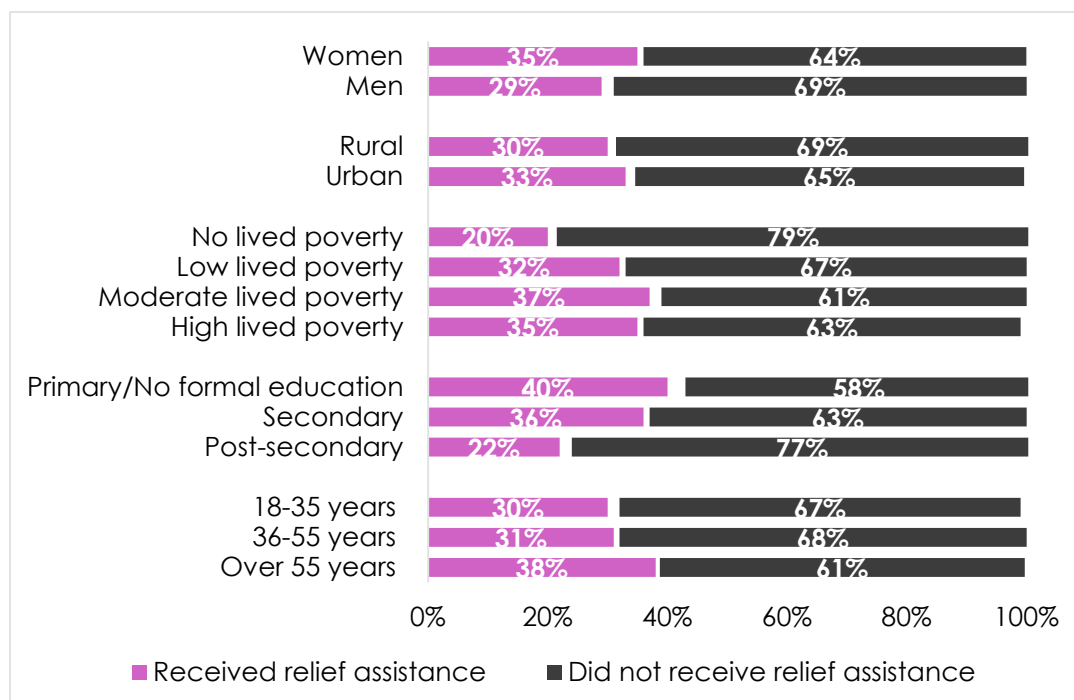
If assistance was aimed at the most vulnerable households, findings suggest at least some success (Figure 11). Respondents experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (35%-37%) were more likely to benefit from aid than well-off respondents (20%), as were the least educated (40%) compared to the most educated (22%) and older respondents (38%) compared to younger cohorts (30%-31%). More women than men report receiving pandemic-related assistance (35% vs. 29%).

**Figure 10: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

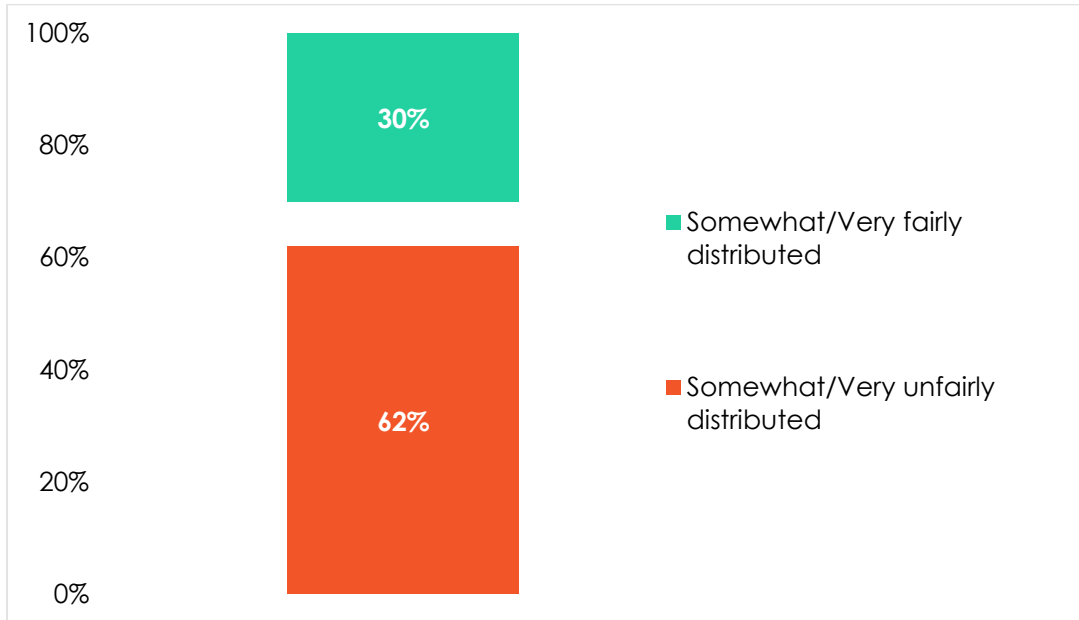
**Figure 11: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

But only three in 10 citizens (30%) say that COVID-19 relief was distributed “somewhat fairly” or “very fairly,” while 62% say the distribution was unfair (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Was COVID-19 relief assistance distributed fairly?** | South Africa | 2022

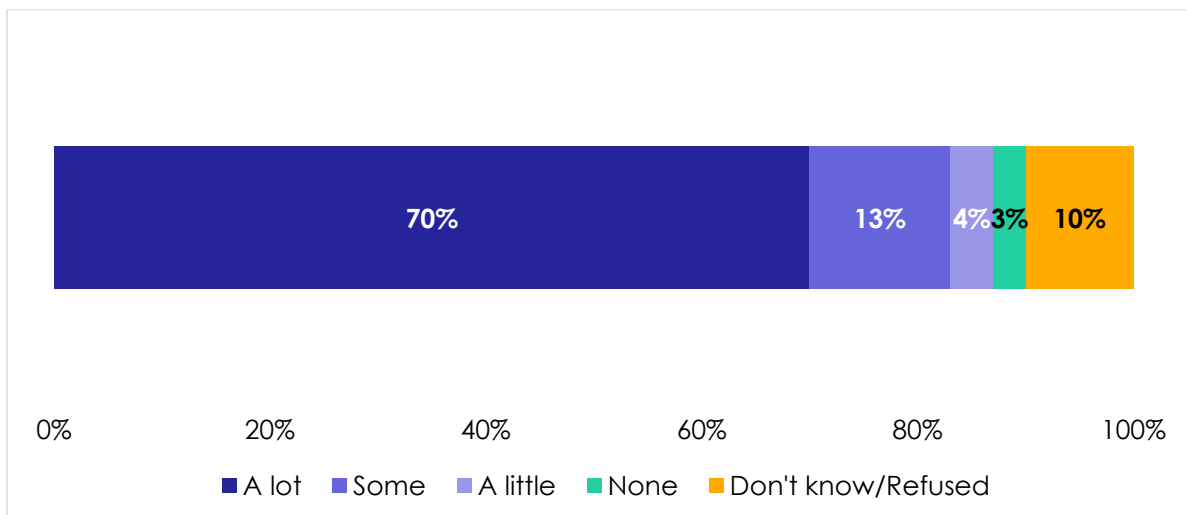


**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the distribution of government support to people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, has been fair or unfair?

### Corruption related to COVID-19

In addition to expressing significant dissatisfaction with the fairness of government relief assistance, more than eight in 10 South Africans (83%) say they believe that “a lot” (70%) or “some” (13%) of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption. Only 3% think that none of these resources were embezzled (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Perceived pandemic-related corruption** | South Africa | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption?

## Limit democratic freedoms during a pandemic?

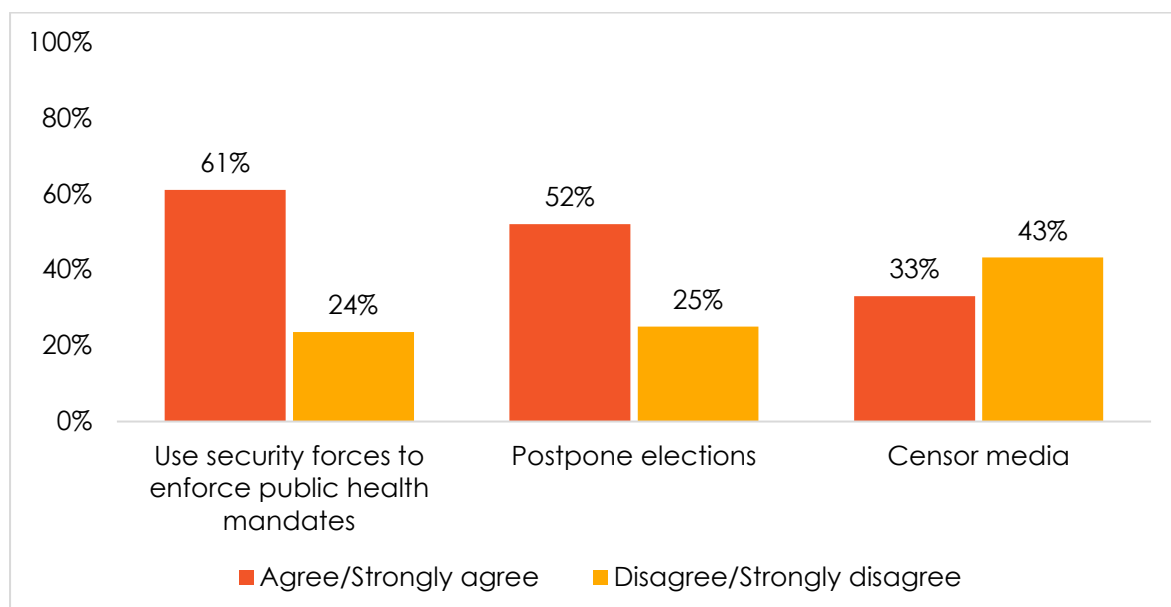
Lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions in some countries have raised questions about the extent to which citizens are willing to forego certain freedoms, even temporarily, to protect public health.

In South Africa, six in 10 citizens (61%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that it is justified for the government to use the armed forces or the police to enforce public health mandates during an emergency like the pandemic (Figure 14).

More than half (52%) would also accept postponing elections during a pandemic, while 25% “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” But only 33% consider it acceptable to censor media reporting during a public health emergency, while 43% do not.

**Figure 14: Limit democratic freedoms during a public health emergency?**

| South Africa | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

*Censoring media reporting?*

*Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings or wearing face masks?*

*Postponing elections?*

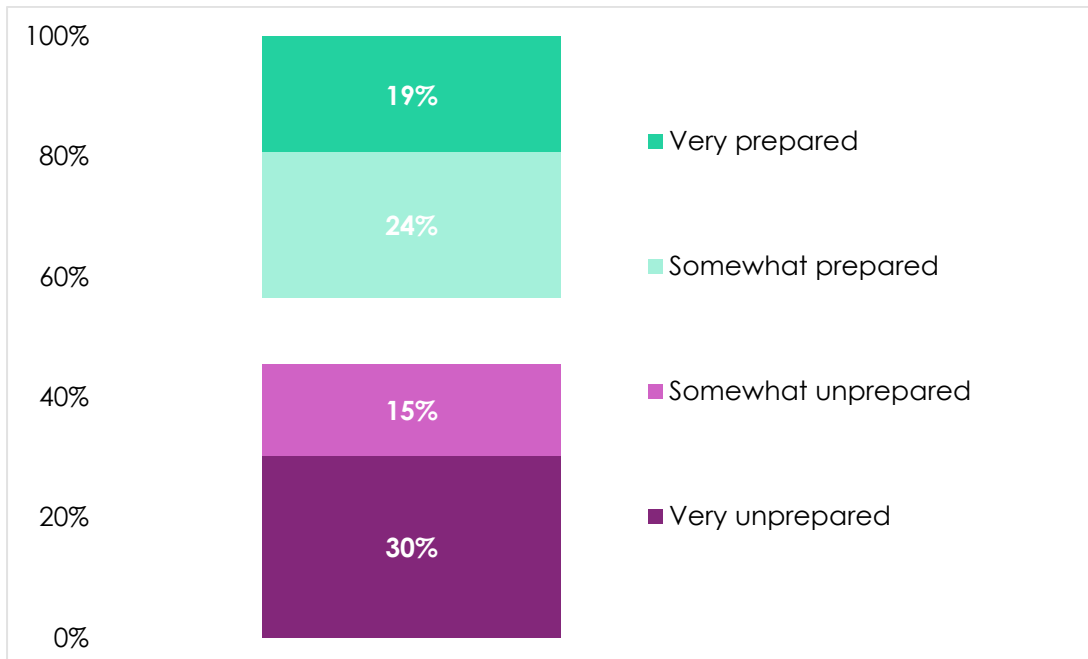
## Looking ahead

After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, how prepared will South Africa’s government be to deal with future public health emergencies?

Views are split: Almost half (45%) of citizens think their government will not be prepared, including 30% who think it will be “very unprepared” (Figure 15). About an equal proportion (43%) believe the government will be ready for the next public health crisis.

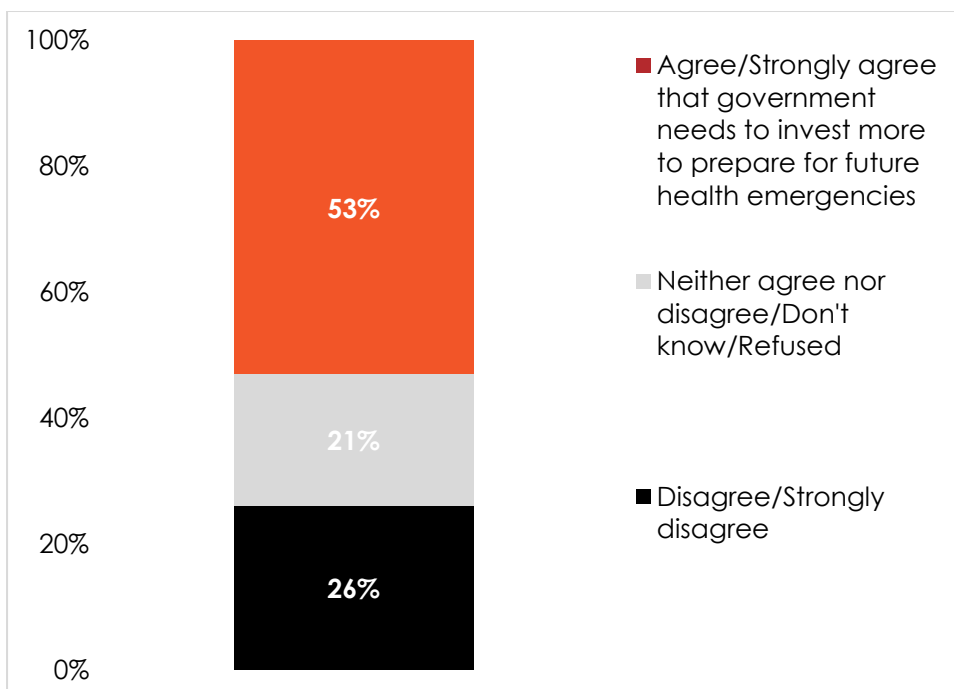
But more than half (53%) of South Africans “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government needs to invest more in preparing for future public health emergencies, even if it means that fewer resources are available for other health services (Figure 16). Only one-quarter (26%) oppose such preparations.

**Figure 15: Preparedness for future health emergencies | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, how prepared or unprepared do you think the government will be to deal with future public health emergencies?

**Figure 16: Invest more to prepare for future health emergencies? | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services?

## Conclusion

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South African families has been severe. Even so, many citizens remain reluctant to get vaccinated. Trust-related issues drive vaccine hesitancy as many South Africans do not trust the government to ensure that the vaccine is safe and many voice concerns about the safety and possible side effects of the vaccine.

Overall, South Africans are fairly satisfied with the government's handling of the pandemic, including its efforts to limit disruptions to children's education and to keep health facilities stocked. But they are less satisfied with the government's distribution of relief assistance, and a majority believe that a lot of resources meant for fighting the pandemic were lost due to corruption.

As emergency measures during a pandemic, a majority of citizens are willing to allow postponing elections and using the police or military to enforce public health mandates, but not censoring the media.

South Africans point to a need for the government to be better prepared for these kinds of emergencies in the future, even if the necessary funds have to come from other health services.

---

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,  
for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at  
[www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

---

## References

- Africa News. (2020). South Africa to probe corruption in COVID-19 funds. 28 August.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.
- Reuters. (2021). South African probe finds evidence of political pressure, fraud in COVID-19 contracts.
- Smit, S. (2020). South African economy contracts 7% in 2020 amid COVID-19 slump. Mail & Guardian. 9 March.
- South African Government News Agency. (2020a). First case of coronavirus reported in SA. 5 March.
- South African Government News Agency. (2020b). President Ramaphosa announces a nationwide lockdown. 23 March.
- South African Government News Agency. (2023). COVID-19 social grant extended until 2025. 1 November.
- Statistics South Africa. (2021). Quarterly labour force survey – quarter 1: 2021.
- Vuk'uzenzele. (2022). COVID-19 corruption perpetrators brought to book.
- World Health Organization. (2023). WHO coronavirus (covid-19) dashboard.

**Asafika Mpako** is Afrobarometer's communications coordinator for Southern Africa. Email: [ampako@afrobarometer.org](mailto:ampako@afrobarometer.org).

**Stephen Ndoma** is Afrobarometer's assistant project manager for Southern Africa. Email: [ndomashe@gmail.com](mailto:ndomashe@gmail.com).

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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)) or contact Felix Biga ([felixbiga@afrobarometer.org](mailto:felixbiga@afrobarometer.org)) or Runyararo Munetsi ([runyararo@afrobarometer.org](mailto:runyararo@afrobarometer.org)) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 752 | 22 December 2023**