For the first time in a decade, Kenyans see management of the economy as their most important problem

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 754 | Paul Kamau and Samuel Balongo

Summary

Over the past decade, Kenya's government has made notable progress toward achieving economic development as set out in its Vision 2030 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Statistics from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2022) indicate that the national economy grew at an average rate of 4.3% between 2017 and 2021 (see Table A.1 in the Appendix). In addition, in line with its 2010 Constitution, Kenya has been implementing devolution, whose main intention is to bring services and resources closer to citizens and to improve their livelihoods. However, the impact of this growth and devolution on the well-being of Kenyans has remained a mirage (Kamau, 2017, 2021).

In the most recent Afrobarometer survey – conducted in late 2021, after the COVID-19 pandemic had temporarily thrown the economy into disarray – three-fourths of Kenyans saw the country as heading in the wrong direction, and a majority had experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the preceding year (Afrobarometer, 2022). Economic performance was a top agenda item for politicians and analysts during the campaign leading up to the August 2022 elections. In political spaces, many discussions also revolved around how to address corruption and unemployment, especially unemployment among the youth (estimated at nearly 40%) (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

And for the first time in a decade of Afrobarometer surveys, management of the economy ranked No. 1 – up from No. 6 – among the most important problems that Kenyans want their government to address. This shift clearly indicates the economic pressures that Kenyans have been feeling as prices of food, fuel, and other basic commodities continue to rise.

Afrobarometer survey

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 Kenya, based at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, interviewed 2,400 adult Kenyans in November-December 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2019.
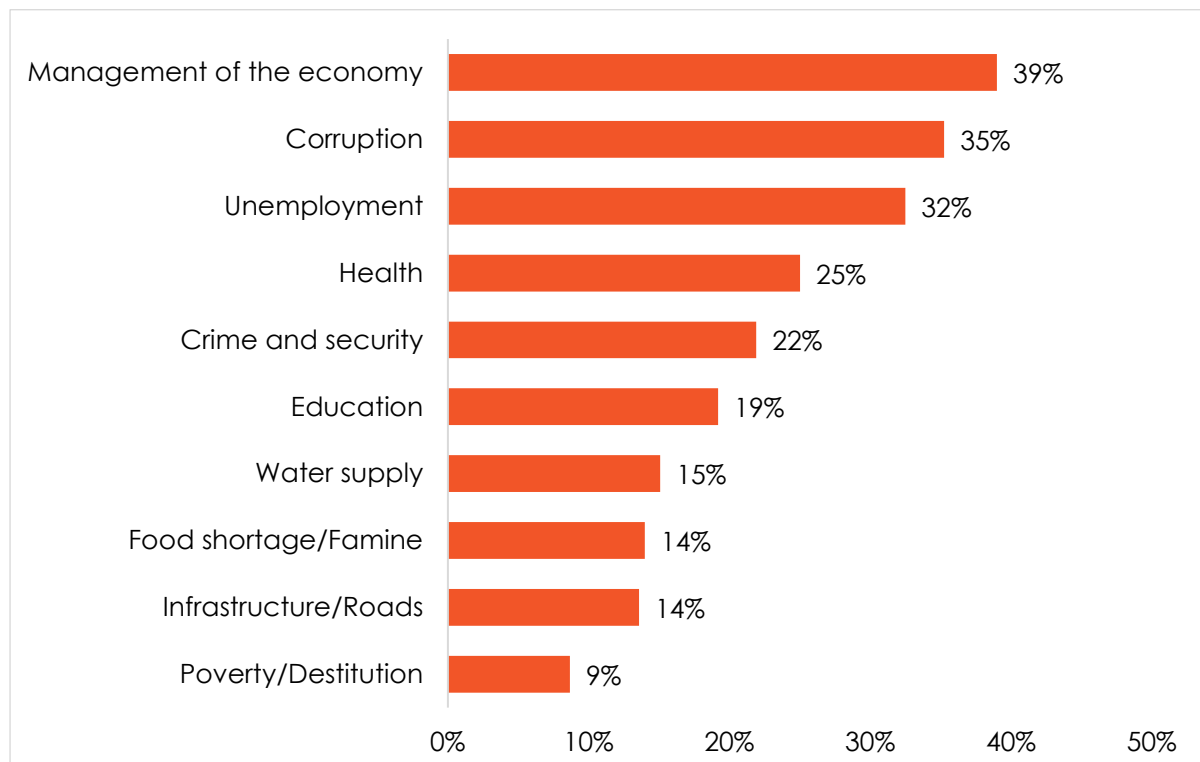
Key findings

■ For the first time in a decade, management of the economy ranked as the top issue that Kenyans want their government to address, climbing from the No. 6 position in three previous survey rounds.

■ Corruption and unemployment followed economic management as top priorities for government action.

■ Rural residents tended to be concerned about the delivery of services (such as education and water) and food shortages, while their urban counterparts were more likely to focus on unemployment, corruption, and crime/security.

■ Kenyans gave their government very poor marks on its efforts to manage the economy: Only 17% said it was doing "fairly well" or "very well." Similarly, few citizens approved of the government's performance on fighting corruption (22%), improving living standards of the poor (16%), and creating jobs (14%).

Economic management: Kenya's most important problem

In the most recent Afrobarometer survey, management of the economy was the most frequently identified problem that Kenyans wanted the government to address, cited by 39% of respondents as one of their top three priorities (Figure 1). Corruption came second, with 35%, followed by unemployment (32%), health (25%), and crime and security (22%).

Figure 1: Most important problems facing the country | Kenya | 2021

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who identified each issue as one of their priorities.)*

Although "management of the economy" is a broad term, as it may include issues such as unemployment, health care, and food supply, the fact that it was mentioned by almost 40% of citizens highlights the need to address the economic challenges that Kenyans are facing. In Afrobarometer's 2014 survey, only 20% of respondents mentioned management of the economy, rising slightly to 23% in 2016 and dropping back to 20% in 20219 (Table 1). For this to increase to 39% in 2021 is a clear indication that things are not right in Kenya. This represents a major shift from the previous three Afrobarometer surveys, in which economic management ranked No. 6.

Table 1: Most important problems over time | Kenya | 2014 -2021

	2014	**2016**	**2019**	**2021**
Management of the economy	20%	23%	20%	39%
Corruption	15%	34%	34%	35%
Unemployment	31%	28%	29%	32%
Health	22%	25%	35%	24%
Crime and security	40%	26%	19%	22%
Education	25%	20%	26%	19%
Water supply	20%	25%	21%	15%
Food shortage/Famine	20%	16%	19%	14%
Infrastructure/Roads	23%	15%	20%	14%
Poverty/Destitution	15%	14%	10%	9%

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Table shows % of respondents who identified each issue as one of Kenya's most important problems.)

While the term "management of the economy" was not defined for respondents, we may suppose that it relates to how the government is using resources and policies for the betterment of the citizenry. Every government has a fundamental responsibility to establish a sound macroeconomic policy framework within which economic agents can function efficiently and effectively. It is important that this framework be flexible enough to permit the economy to adjust to both internal and external disturbances, that it provide adequate incentives for longer-term growth, and that it permit the attainment of the objectives of equity and social development.

Citizens may see evidence of inadequate economic management in Kenya's economic growth struggling to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, rising political tensions, drought, skyrocketing inflation, and ballooning national debts (Van Rij, 2021), exacerbated more recently (after the completion of Afrobarometer data collection) by the Russia-Ukraine war. These events have had a devastating effect on food security and livelihoods in the country and necessitated increased social spending on food assistance (World Bank, 2022).
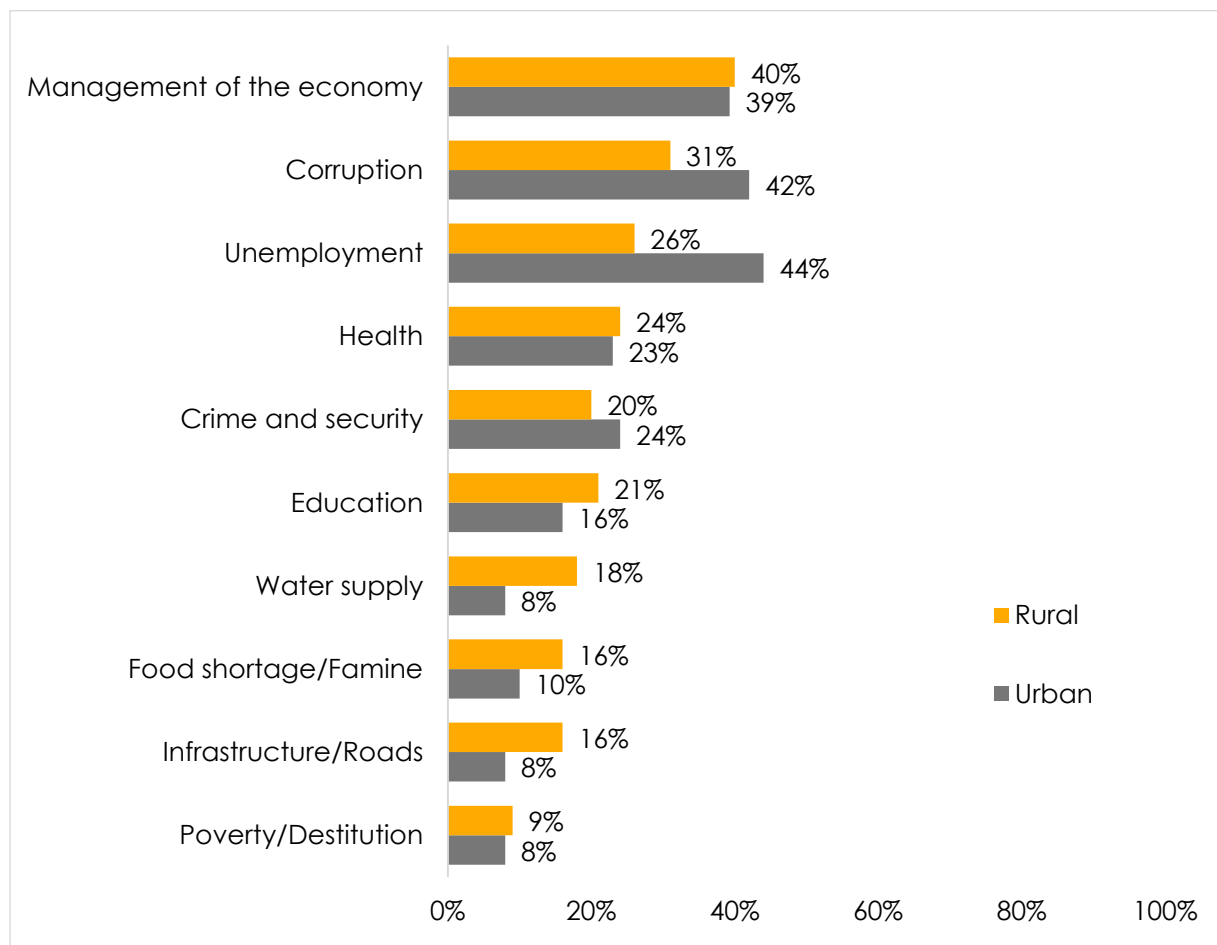
The second-ranked problem in the most recent survey, corruption, is a major challenge that has permeated all sectors of the economy and adversely affected economic gains (Transparency International, 2021; Duri, 2021). The transfer of power and financial resources from the central government to the counties as part of Kenya's devolution process has created ample opportunities for corrupt practices as counties get involved in public contracting, recruitment of county officials, implementation of development projects, and

service delivery to local communities (Onyango, 2022). The Transparency International (2021) Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Kenya 154th out of 182 countries, despite the zero-tolerance campaign by the current government. Corruption scandals involving the Kenya Medical Supplies Authority's handling of pandemic-related materials (Owino, 2021) and the management of the Arror and Kimwarer dams projects (Bii, 2022) may have influenced Kenyans' perceptions of economic management and corruption as top concerns (Munguti & Wasuna, 2023). There has also been a public outcry about the management of public debt, which has risen sharply and in 2022 reached 67.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) (Republic of Kenya, 2022).

Most important problem by demographic

Kenyans' prioritisation of management of the economy and other problems varied significantly based on their demographic characteristics. For example, the rural population was more concerned than urbanites about delivery of services such as education (21% vs. 16%) and water (18% vs. 8%) and about food shortages (16% vs. 10%), while their urban counterparts were more likely to focus on unemployment (44% vs. 26%), corruption (42% vs. 31%), and crime/security (24% vs. 20%) (Figure 2). In both locations, about four in 10 prioritised management of the economy (40% rural, 39% urban).
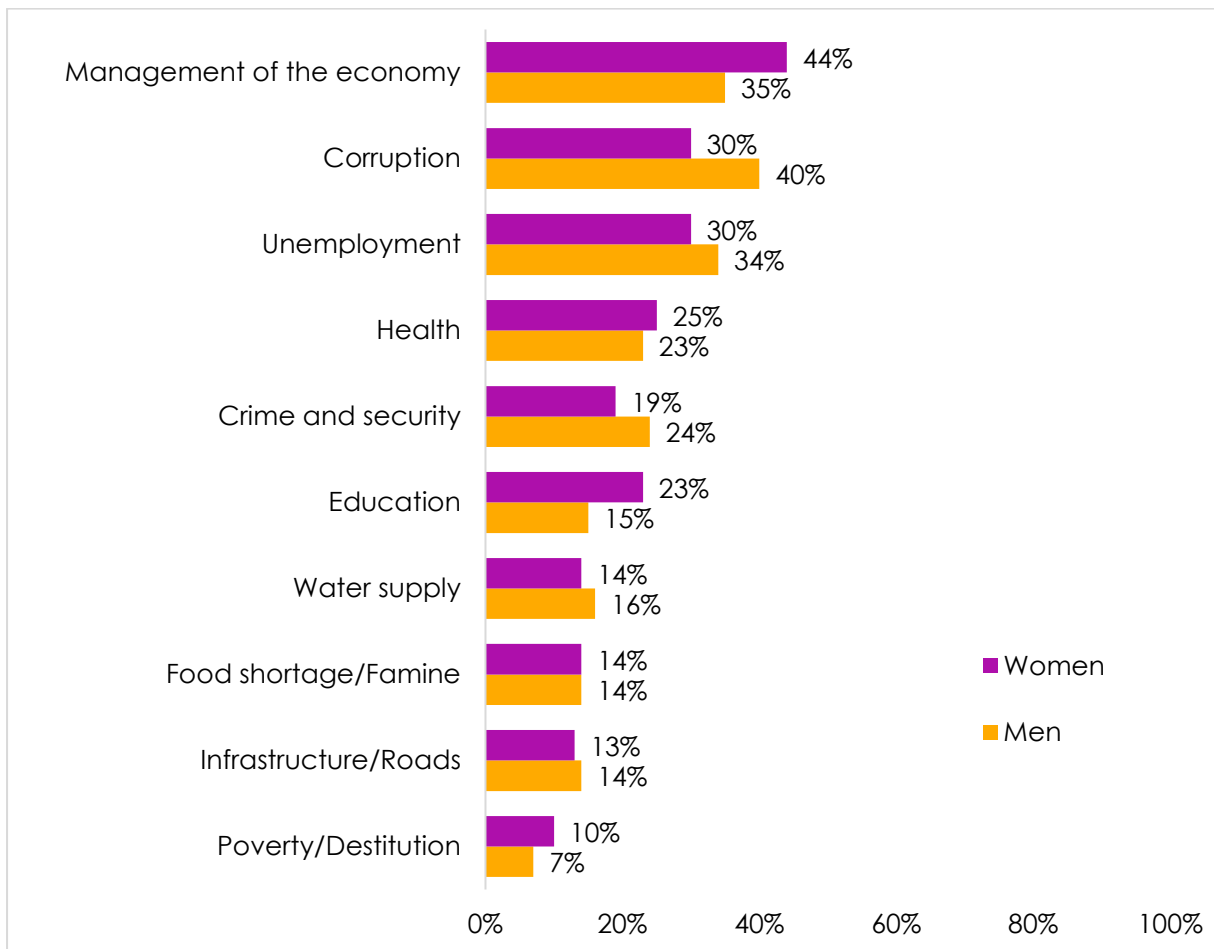
Figure 2: Most important problems | rural vs. urban location | Kenya | 2021

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who identified each issue as one of Kenya's most important problems.)

An analysis of the most important problems by gender shows that while more men than women considered corruption (40% vs. 30%), crime/security (24% vs. 19%), and unemployment (34% vs. 30%) critical problems, women were more likely than men to cite management of the economy (44% vs. 35%) and education (23% vs. 15%) as the most important matters that the government should address (Figure 3).
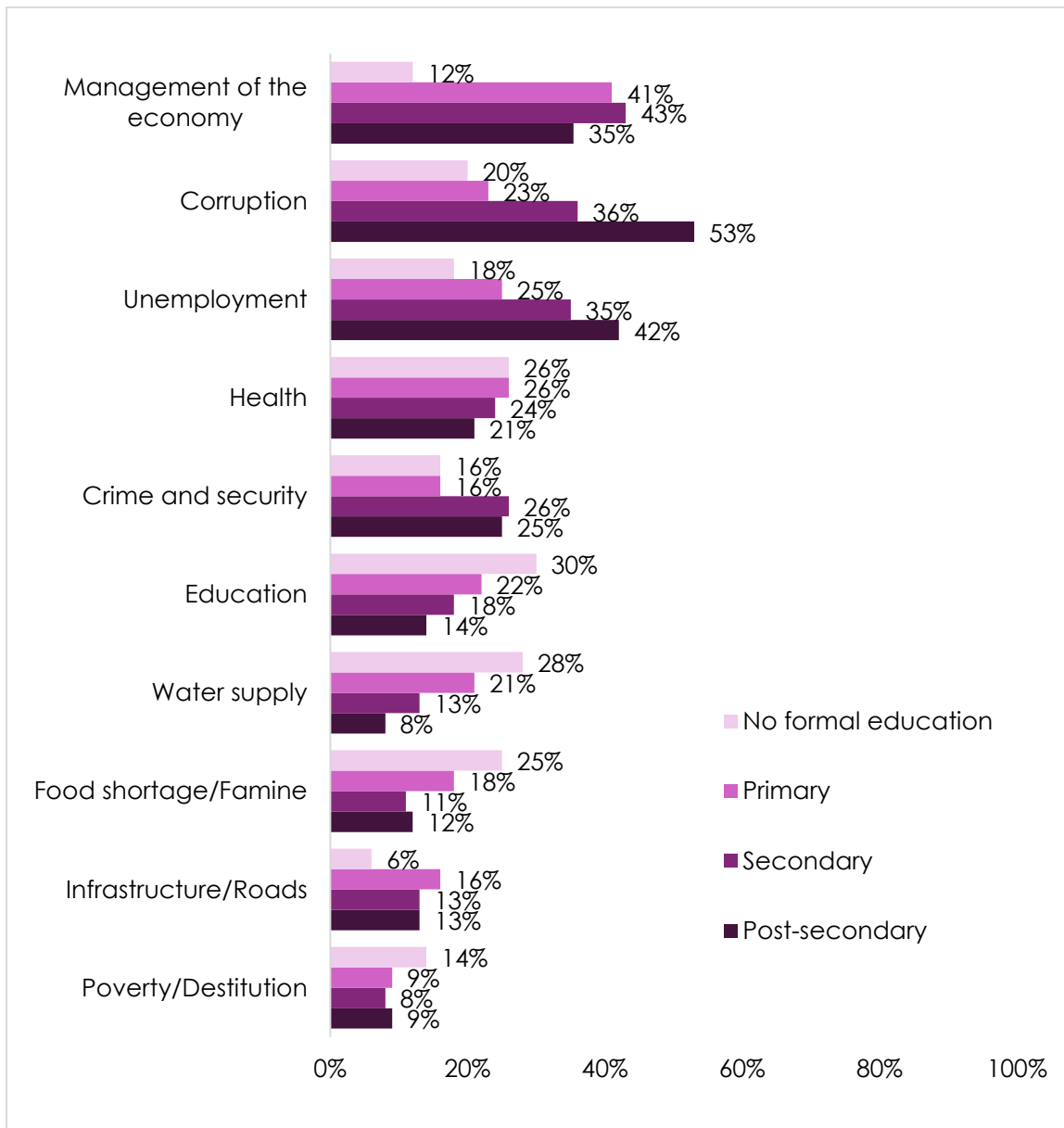
Figure 3: Most important problems | by gender | Kenya | 2021

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who identified each issue as one of Kenya's most important problems.)*

When we disaggregate data by respondents' education level, we see a significant split regarding the most important problems that Kenyans identified. Citizens with secondary or post-secondary education were more likely than their less educated counterparts to cite corruption, unemployment, and crime/security as top problems, while health, education, water, and food shortages were greater concerns among citizens with primary schooling or less (Figure 4).
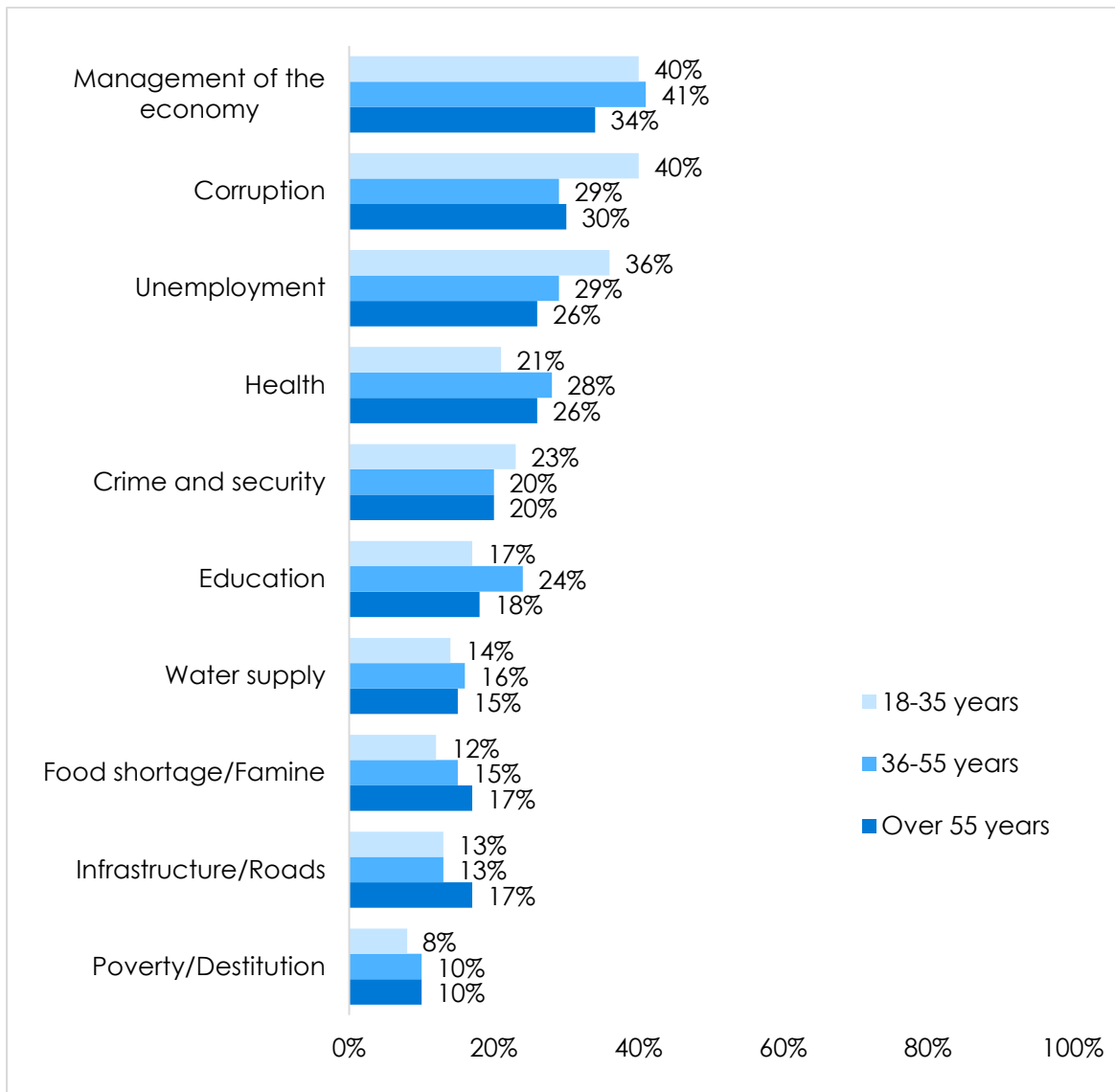
Figure 4: Most important problems | by level of education | Kenya | 2021

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who identified each issue as one of Kenya's most important problems.)

Looking at age groups, the youth (aged 18-35) appeared to be more concerned than their elders about corruption, unemployment, and crime/security (Figure 5). On the other hand, middle-aged and older citizens were more likely than the youth to cite health and food shortages.

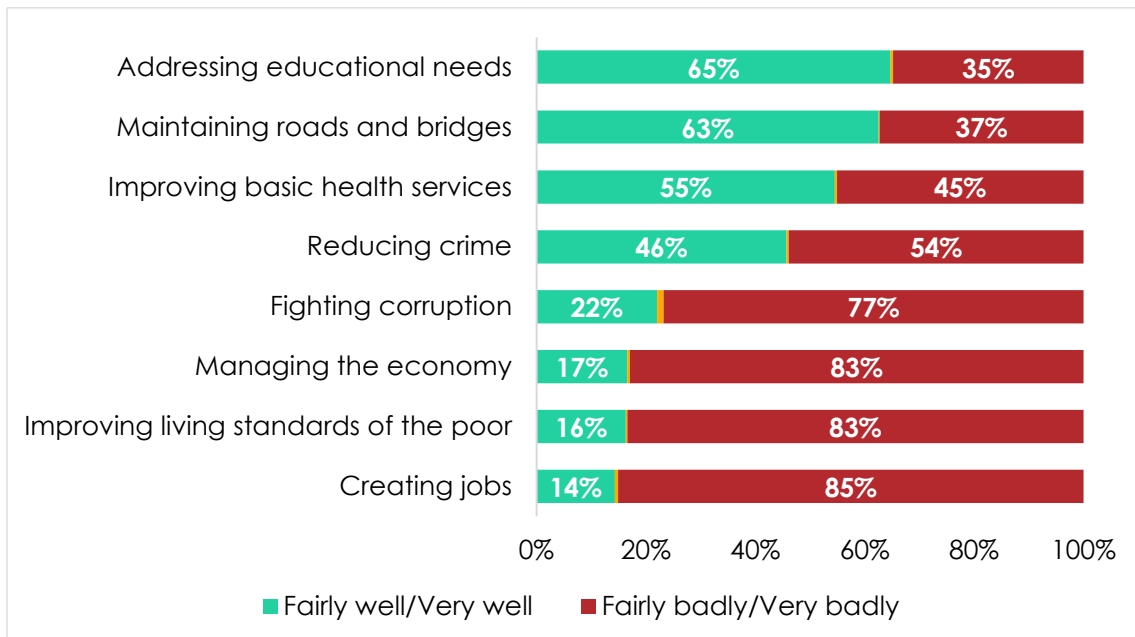**Figure 5: Most important problems** | by age group | Kenya | 2021

Management of the economy
40%
41%
34%

Corruption
40%
29%
30%

Unemployment
36%
29%
26%

Health
21%
28%
26%

Crime and security
23%
20%
20%

Education
17%
24%
18%

Water supply
14%
16%
15%

Food shortage/Famine
12%
15%
17%

Infrastructure/Roads
13%
13%
17%

Poverty/Destitution
8%
10%
10%

■ 18-35 years
■ 36-55 years
■ Over 55 years

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who identified each issue as one of Kenya's most important problems.)

Government performance on most important problems

Kenyans generally held gloomy views of the government's efforts to improve economic conditions and fight corruption. While majorities gave the government good marks on addressing educational needs (65%), maintaining roads and bridges (63%), and improving basic health services (55%), only 46% said it was doing "fairly well" or "very well" on reducing crime. And fewer than one in four approved of the government's performance on key economic issues such as fighting corruption (22%), managing the economy (17%), improving living standards of the poor (16%), and creating jobs (14%) (Figure 6).
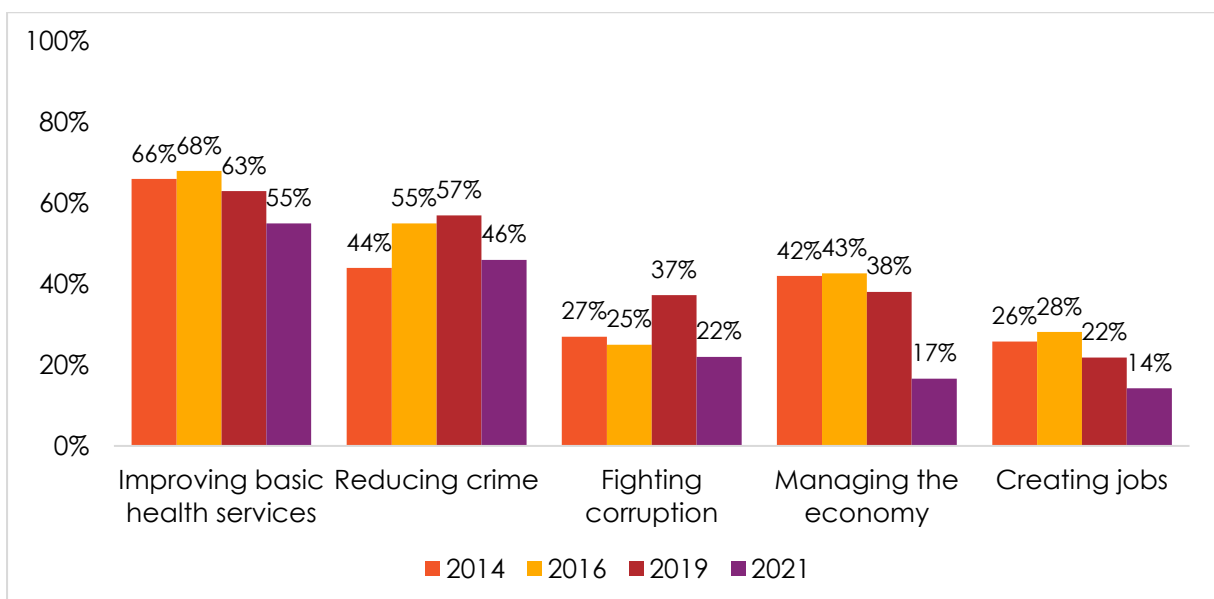
Figure 6: Government performance on key problems | Kenya | 2021

Category	Fairly well/Very well	Fairly badly/Very badly
Addressing educational needs	65%	35%
Maintaining roads and bridges	63%	37%
Improving basic health services	55%	45%
Reducing crime	46%	54%
Fighting corruption	22%	77%
Managing the economy	17%	83%
Improving living standards of the poor	16%	83%
Creating jobs	14%	85%

■ Fairly well/Very well   ■ Fairly badly/Very badly

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?*

Citizens' ratings of the government's performance have worsened over the past few years on a number of economic indicators, especially on management of the economy, where approval ranged around four in 10 between 2014 and 2019 and then dropped to 17% in 2021 (Figure 7). We see similar declines in public approval of the government's efforts to improve basic health services, reduce crime, fight corruption, and create jobs.

Figure 7: Government performance on key problems | Kenya | 2014-2021

	2014	2016	2019	2021
Improving basic health services	66%	68%	63%	55%
Reducing crime	44%	55%	57%	46%
Fighting corruption	27%	25%	37%	22%
Managing the economy	42%	43%	38%	17%
Creating jobs	26%	28%	22%	14%

■ 2014   ■ 2016   ■ 2019   ■ 2021

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")*

Conclusion

Kenyans are pretty consistent in identifying the most important problems they want their government to address, generally citing corruption, unemployment, health, crime/security, education, and water supply among their top priorities. In the most recent Afrobarometer survey, management of the economy shot to the top of the list, probably reflecting not only the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but also continued inflation driving the costs of fuel and other essentials ever higher. Concerns about unsustainably high public debt and corruption across national and county governments may also be undermining citizens' confidence that economic resources are being managed effectively.

On key economic issues, Kenyans' ratings of the government's performance were extremely low in late 2021. The upcoming Afrobarometer Round 10 survey will reveal whether the new Kenya Kwanza government is seen as delivering better results on these priorities.

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Appendix 1

Table A.1: Economic growth indicators | Kenya | 2012-2021

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
GDP growth (%)	4.5	5.9	5.4	5.7	5.8	3.8	6.3	5.4	-0.3	7.5
Population (million)	40.7	41.8	43.0	44.2	45.2	45.	56.5	47.6	48.5	49.4
GDP per capita (Kshs '000)	104.8	113.2	125.6	141.6	157.7	180.2	191.8	204.8	208.6	235.2
Agriculture (% growth)	14.8	20.3	14.5	12.2	17.7	18.4	20.1	14.1	4.6	-0.2
Manufacturing (% growth)	-1.49	10.9	7.1	6.7	5.5	8.1	6.8	5.7	-0.4	6.9
Wholesale and retail (% growth)	11.1	11.0	9.8	7.9	4.9	6.7	8.3	9.4	-0.5	7.9
Transport and communication (% growth)	2.8	4.2	7.3	9.3	12.7	14.7	16.6	17.2	12.7	15.4

Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2014, 2017, 2022)