

São Toméans look to government, one another for action on the environment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 760 | Nina Silvia Iskandarsjach and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah

Summary

São Tomé and Príncipe is known for its rich forest ecosystems, but agriculture and fuelwood consumption have led to a decline in forested areas, endangering rare and endemic species (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2023; Seibert & Clarence-Smith, 2023). Agriculture, particularly cacao, coffee, and coconut palm, is vital to the economy, contributing 20% of gross domestic product (GDP) and employing 60% of the population (Agence Française de Développement, 2021).

The country has also experienced climate-change impacts such as rising temperatures, prolonged dry seasons, and sea-level rise, leading to natural disasters such as floods, storms, coastal erosion, and droughts. The government declared a state of disaster in December 2021 after severe flooding from a major storm and initiated a National Adaptation Plan in 2022 to mitigate climate-change vulnerabilities (UN Environment Programme, 2022).

While São Tomé and Príncipe has no known mineral resources, the country has considerable deep-water hydrocarbon reserves within its maritime boundaries (Seibert & Clarence-Smith, 2023). In 2001, São Tomé and Príncipe established a Joint Developing Zone with Nigeria for the exploration of petroleum and other resources within their shared boundaries (International Trade Administration, 2022). Foreign companies have also shown interest in the country's oil reserves, with some acquiring the rights to oil blocks off São Tomé and Príncipe's coasts.

This dispatch captures the results of a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire that explores São Toméans' experiences and perceptions of pollution, environmental governance, and natural resource extraction.

Survey findings show that a majority of São Toméans believe pollution is a serious problem in their community, ranking waste disposal and water pollution as the most important local environmental issues. Most want their government to do more to limit pollution and protect the environment.

Citizens are divided as to whether environmental protection policies should be prioritised over jobs and incomes, but most say the government should tighten regulations on natural resource extraction to reduce their negative impact on the environment.

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.

In São Tomé and Príncipe, Ovilongwa - Estudos de Opinião Pública of Angola in partnership with a local consultant and the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) interviewed 1,200 adult São Toméans in December 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 surveys were conducted in São Tomé and Príncipe in 2015 and 2018.

Key findings

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Three-fourths (76%) of São Toméans say that pollution is a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem in their community.
 - As the most important environmental issues in their community, citizens cite trash and plastic disposal (45%), pollution of water sources (20%), and sanitation (14%).
 - Most respondents (87%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in São Tomé and Príncipe.
- Almost half (48%) of São Toméans say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with local citizens. A similar proportion assign that responsibility to their local government (43%) while far fewer say it is the responsibility of the national government (7%).
- Even so, an overwhelming majority (89%) of São Toméans say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 75% who say it needs to do “much more.”
- But only 44% would prioritise environmental protection over jobs, while 38% say the government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage.

On natural resource extraction:

- Only 28% of São Toméans say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution.
- Almost seven in 10 citizens (69%) want the government to regulate natural resource extraction more tightly in order to reduce its negative impacts on the environment.

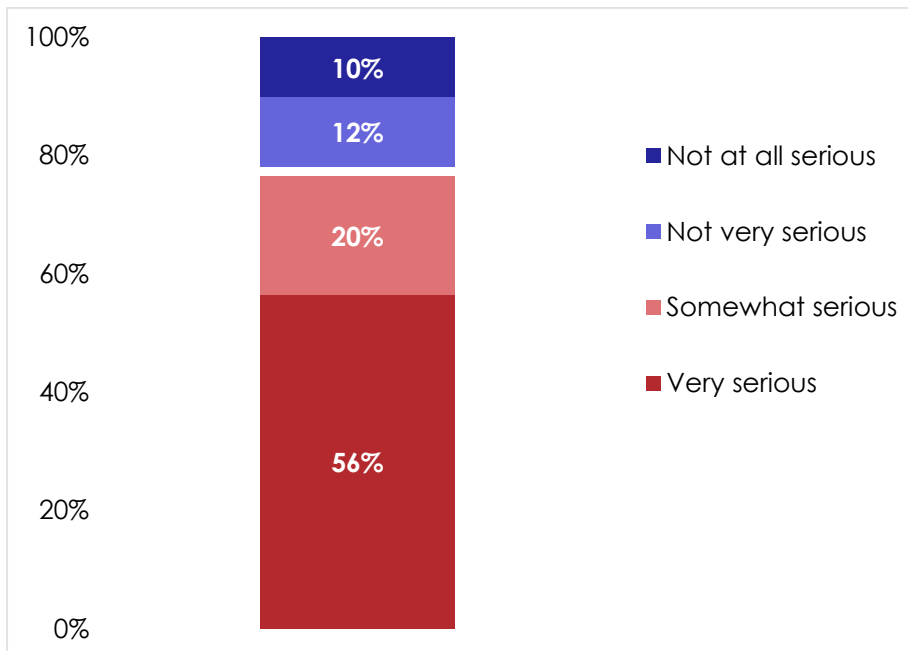
Pollution: The scope of the problem

About three-quarters (76%) of São Toméans consider pollution in their communities to be “somewhat serious” (20%) or “very serious” (56%) (Figure 1).

Urban residents are more likely than rural residents to believe that pollution is a serious issue (82% vs. 64%) (Figure 2). Concerns about pollution also increase with one’s experience of poverty, ranging from 70% among those with low or no lived poverty¹ to 83% of those with high lived poverty. Respondents with a post-secondary education (84%) are more likely to consider pollution a serious problem than their counterparts with less schooling (73%-78%).

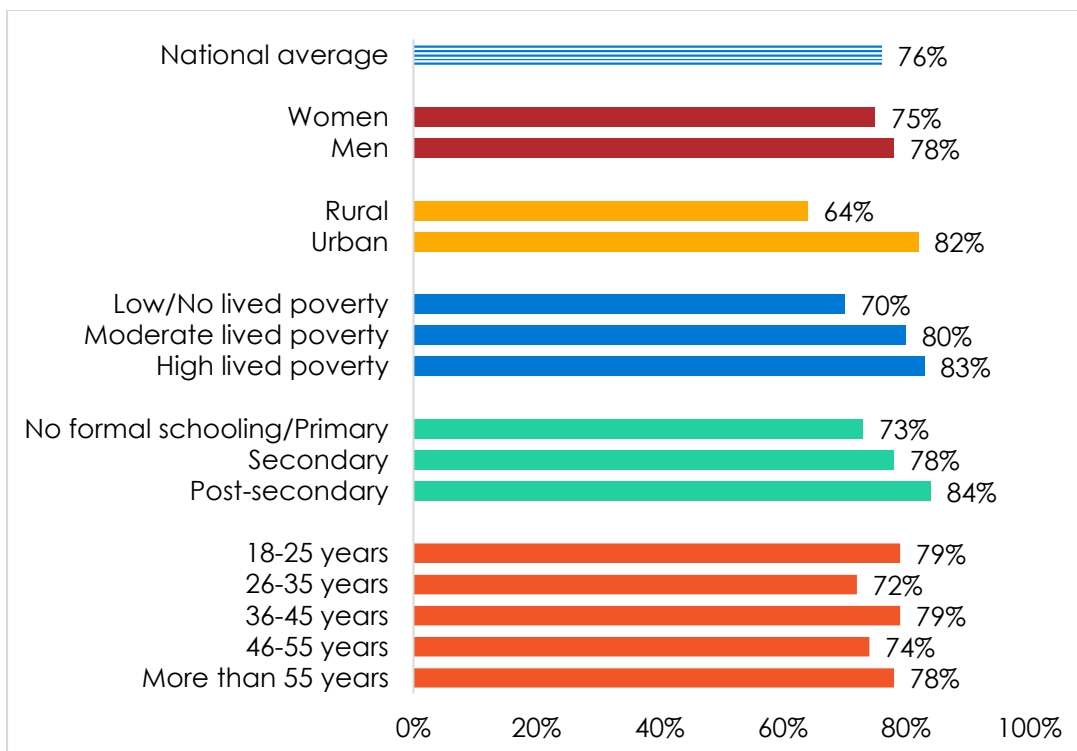
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 1: Extent of pollution in the community | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land, in your community?

Figure 2: Pollution is a serious problem in the community | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022

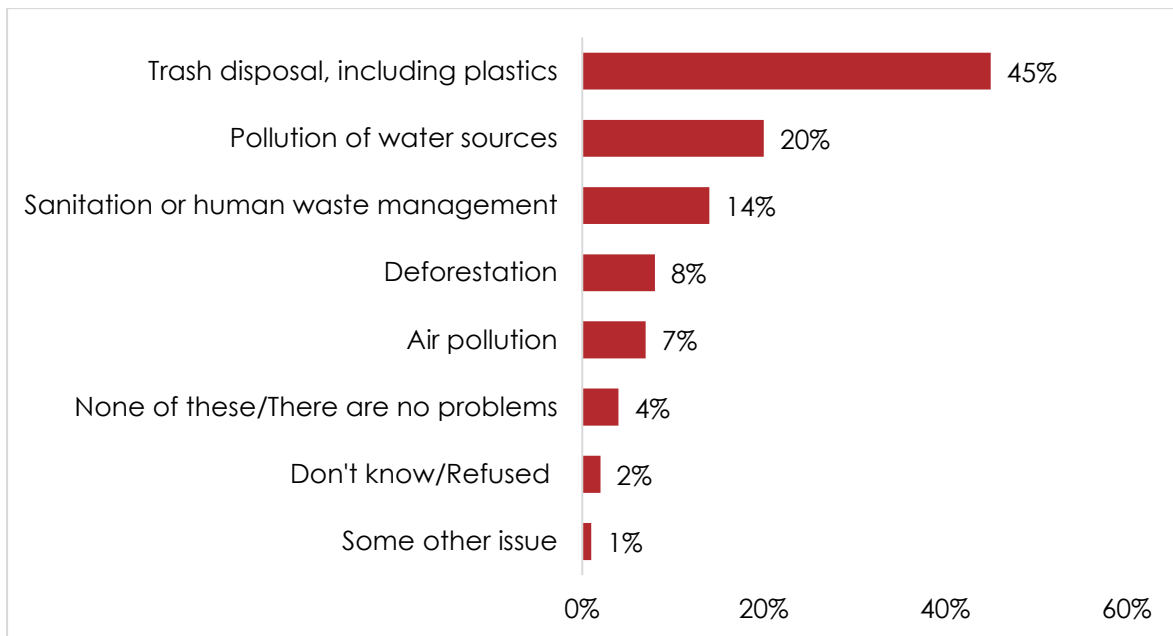


Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land, in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

São Toméans rank trash and plastic disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community (cited by 45% of respondents), followed by pollution of water sources (20%) and human waste management (14%) (Figure 3). Fewer than one in 10 cite deforestation (8%) and air pollution (7%) as the most important environmental issue.

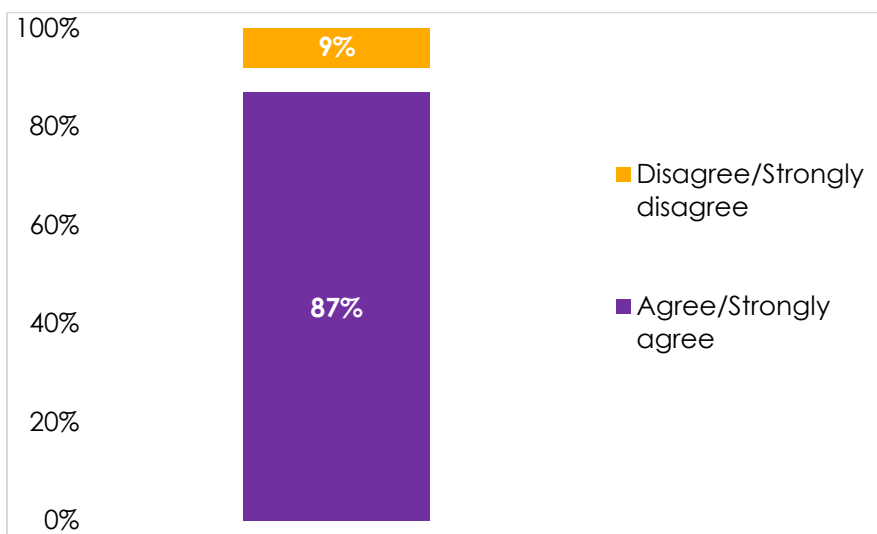
Nearly nine in 10 citizens (87%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in São Tomé and Príncipe (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following is the most important environmental issue in your community today?

Figure 4: Are plastic bags a major source of pollution? | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022

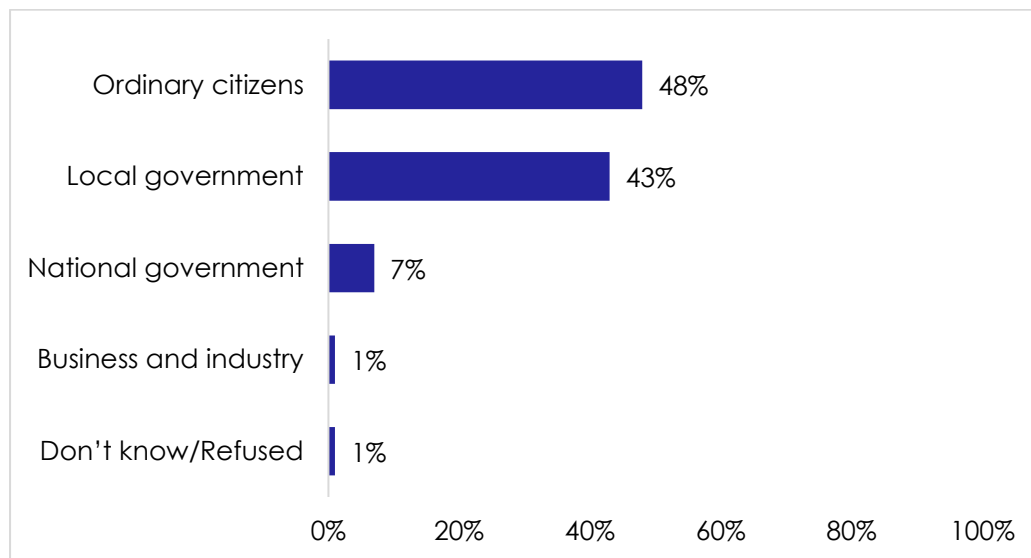


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

Protecting the environment

For São Toméans, protecting the environment starts at home. Almost half (48%) of respondents say ordinary citizens are primarily responsible for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). More than four in 10 (43%) believe that local government is primarily responsible for reducing pollution, while only 7% assign this responsibility to the national government.

Figure 5: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution?
 | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping your community clean?

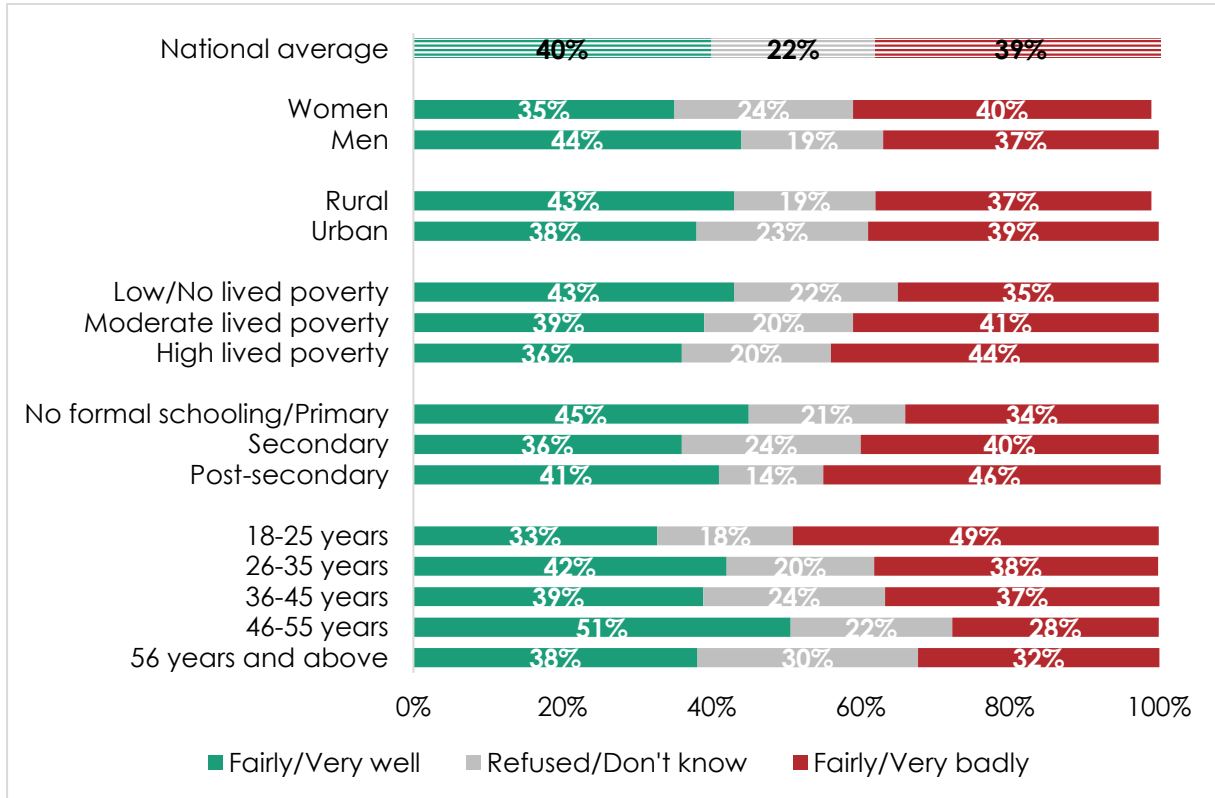
When it comes to government performance on reducing pollution, São Toméans are divided: Four in 10 citizens (40%) think the government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while 39% say it is performing poorly (Figure 6). Positive ratings for the government are more common among respondents with primary education or less (45%), men (44%), rural residents (43%), and those who experiencing low or no lived poverty (43%).

About nine in 10 São Toméans (89%) believe that the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 75% who want the government to do “much more” (Figure 7). Only about one in 10 want the government to keep doing what it is currently doing (6%) or to do less to protect the environment (4%).

However, if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs or incomes, São Toméans are divided: 44% prioritise protecting the environment, even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to daily life, while 38% say the government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage (Figure 8).

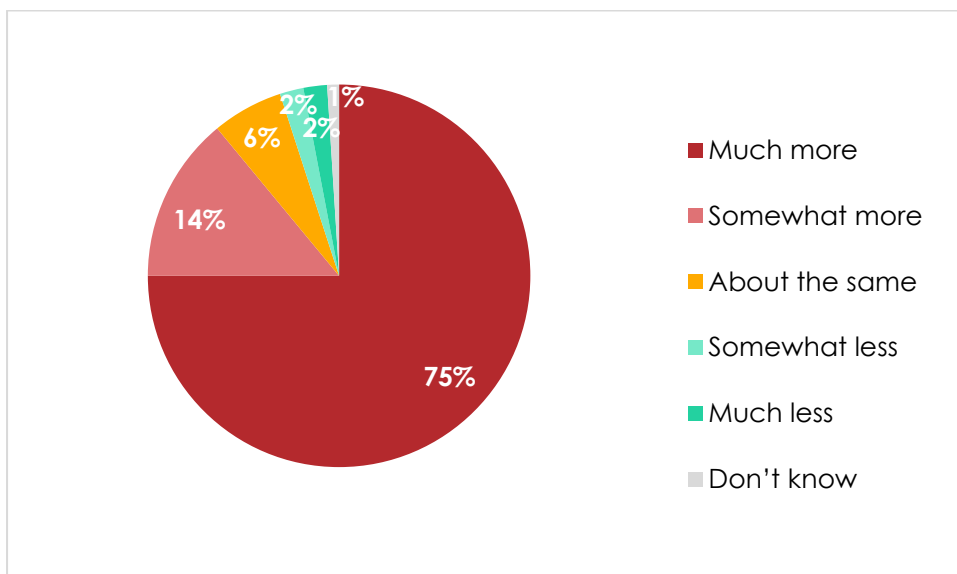
The view that jobs and incomes should take priority over environmental protection is more common among rural residents (44%), economically vulnerable citizens (44%), and those with primary schooling or less (43%) than among urbanites (35%), better-off citizens (35%-38%), and those with post-secondary education (23%).

Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



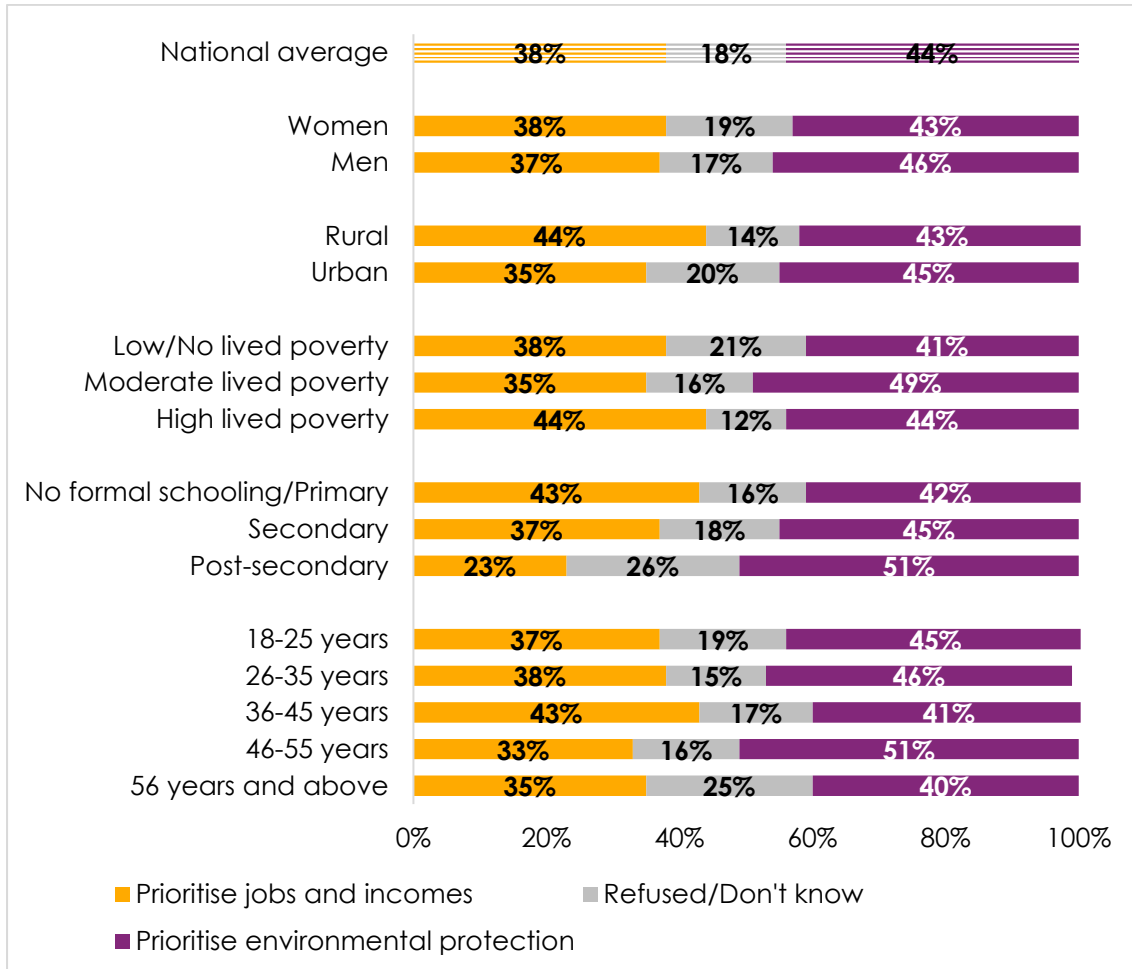
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Reducing pollution and protecting the environment?

Figure 7: Should government do more to limit pollution? | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?

Figure 8: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage.
 Statement 2: The government should focus more on preventing pollution and protecting the environment, even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

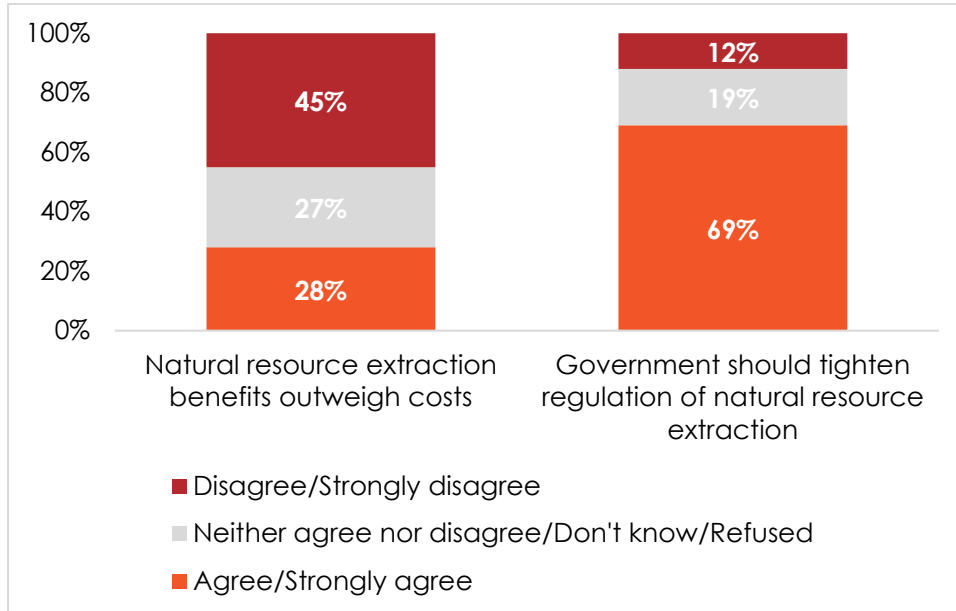
Natural resource extraction

Only about three in 10 São Toméans (28%) think that the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. Almost half (45%) disagree with this view, while 27% offer no opinion (Figure 9).

And a large majority (69%) of citizens want the government to regulate the industry more tightly in order to reduce the negative impact of natural resource extraction on the environment.

Fewer than half (47%) of respondents say that people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while three in 10 (31%) disagree (Figure 10). And only a quarter (26%) of citizens think local communities receive a fair share of revenues from natural resource extraction, while fully half (51%) think they don't.

Figure 9: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022

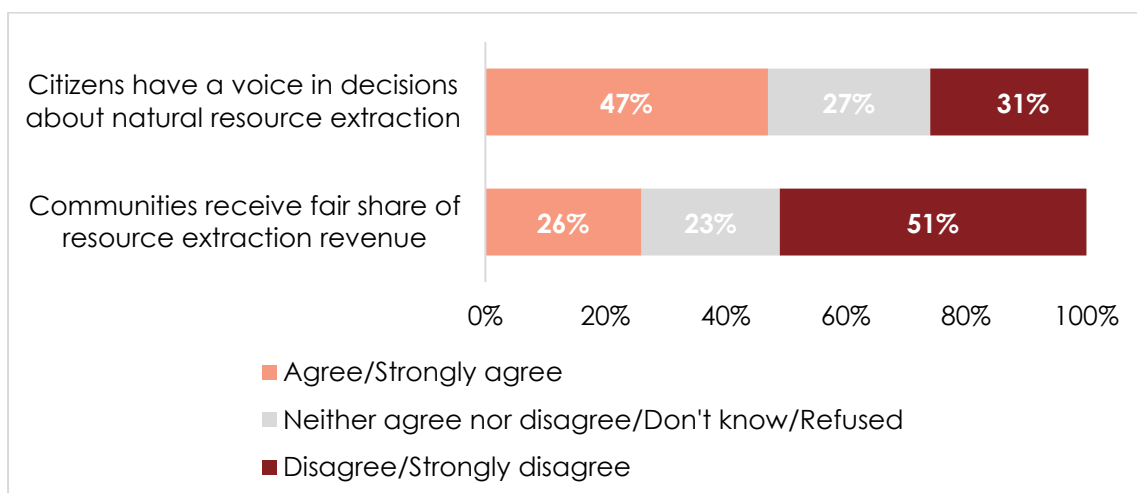


Respondents were asked: Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

In this country, natural resource extraction should be more tightly regulated by government to reduce the negative impacts on the environment.

Figure 10: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Ordinary São Toméans currently have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.

Local communities currently receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.

Conclusion

Survey findings show that a majority of São Toméans view environmental pollution as a significant problem in their communities. And while they assign themselves primary responsibility for reducing pollution, they also want greater government action to protect the environment.

Citizens are divided as to whether environmental protection should take priority over jobs and incomes, but most call for stricter government regulations on natural resource extraction to limit its environmental impact.

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.

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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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