

## South Africans see pollution as serious problem requiring greater government attention

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 776 | Stephen Ndoma**

### Summary

South Africa has one of the most developed economies in Africa, fuelled in part by rich deposits of coal, diamonds, gold, and platinum group metals (Statista, 2024; CEIC Data, 2023). The country's natural beauty draws tourists to Table Mountain, the Cape Winelands, the Drakensberg Mountains, Kruger National Park, and the Blyde River Canyon, among many other attractions.

Despite its wealth of natural resources, South Africa faces enormous challenges, including high inequality (Hamilton, 2022), depletion of resources, and pollution. A recent analysis reported that most South Africans breathe air that does not meet World Health Organization standards due to vehicle emissions, mining, waste burning, and the use of wood and coal for cooking and heating (Paul, 2022). Studies have estimated that air pollution in Johannesburg has reduced life expectancy by 3.2 years, with particularly severe effects on children (Africanews, 2022). In Durban, residents and environmental activists have been calling for action on the polluted Umbilo River for more than a decade (Majola, 2020).

Section 24 of the South African Constitution provides for the people's right to an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being, and it obligates the government to take measures to prevent pollution and ecological degradation (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Air Quality Act of 2004 and Waste Act of 2008, among others, operationalise these commitments. In 2022, South African courts upheld the right of residents in the highly polluted Highveld Priority Area to live in an environment that is safe for their health (Garland, 2022; Reuters, 2019).

The supreme law of the land also states that mineral resources are the "common heritage of all the country's people and the state is the custodian of these resources for the benefit of all citizens" (Field, 2020). The Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act seeks to promote equitable access to South Africa's mineral resources and to ensure that those who hold mining rights plough back into the communities in which they operate, though critics say the law does not fully protect communities from the environmental effects of mining (Field, 2020).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of pollution, environmental governance, and natural resource extraction.

In South Africa, findings show that a majority of citizens consider pollution a serious problem in their community, rating trash disposal as their most important environmental issue. Many say the government is not doing enough to protect the environment and call for tighter regulation of natural resource extraction activities. But only a minority of citizens would prioritise environmental protection over jobs and incomes.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan 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's national partners conduct 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, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

## Key findings

### **On pollution and environmental governance:**

- Seven in 10 South Africans (70%) say pollution is a serious problem in their community.
  - Citizens say trash disposal (cited by 41% of respondents) is the most important environmental issue in their community, followed by sanitation (16%), pollution of water sources (12%), and air pollution (10%).
  - Seven in 10 citizens (70%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution in South Africa.
- Nearly half (48%) of South Africans say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with ordinary citizens, while about four in 10 would assign that responsibility to local (20%) or national government (17%).
- Seven in 10 citizens (70%) say the government should do more to reduce pollution and protect the environment, including 57% who say it should do "much more."
- But if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, 49% of citizens want the government to prioritise jobs and incomes, compared to 32% who would prioritise environmental protection.

### **On natural resource extraction:**

- South Africans hold mixed views on the benefits of natural resource extraction to local communities.
  - A majority (61%) want the government to regulate the industry more tightly in order to reduce its negative impact on the environment.

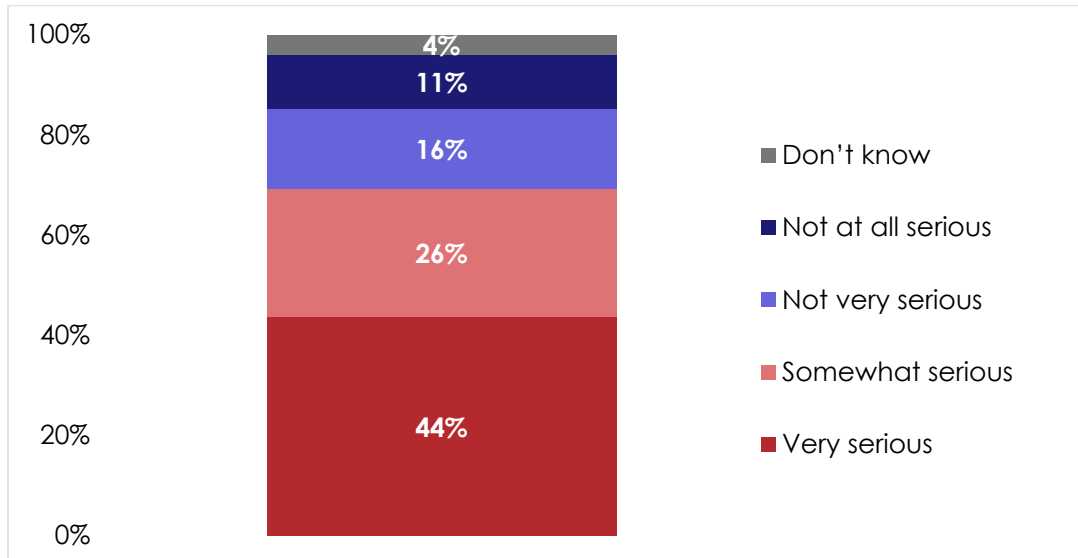
## Pollution: The scope of the problem

Seven in 10 South Africans (70%) consider pollution to be a "somewhat serious" (26%) or "very serious" (44%) problem in their community (Figure 1).

Urban residents are somewhat more concerned about pollution than rural residents (71% vs. 67%), as are women compared to men (73% vs. 66%) (Figure 2). Older respondents (63%) and

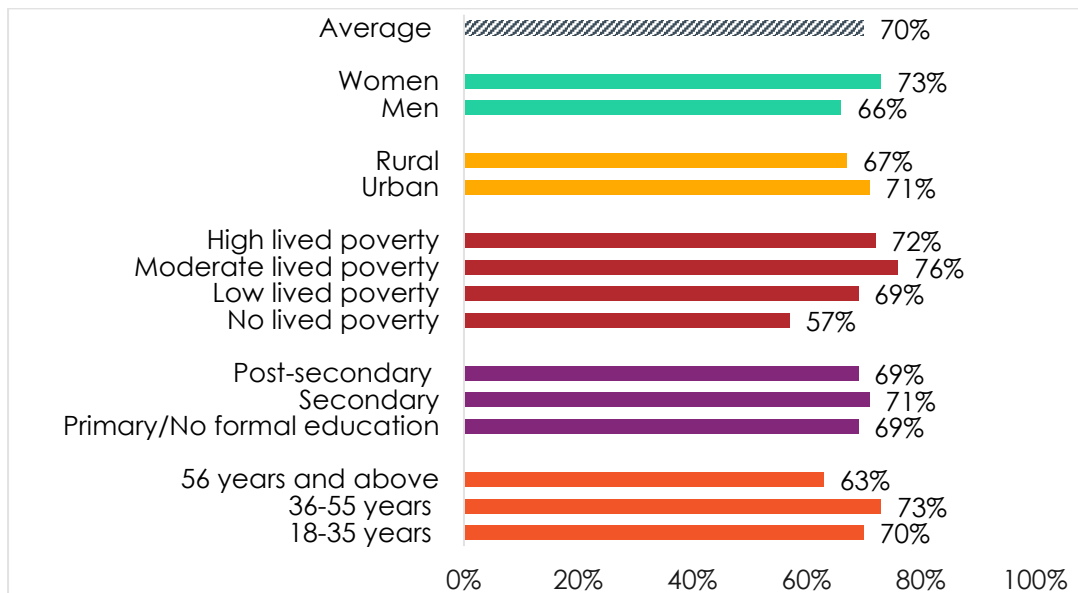
economically well-off citizens (57%) are less likely to see pollution as a serious problem than their younger (70%-73%) and poorer (69%-76%) counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1: Extent of pollution in the community | South Africa | 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 | South Africa | 2022**



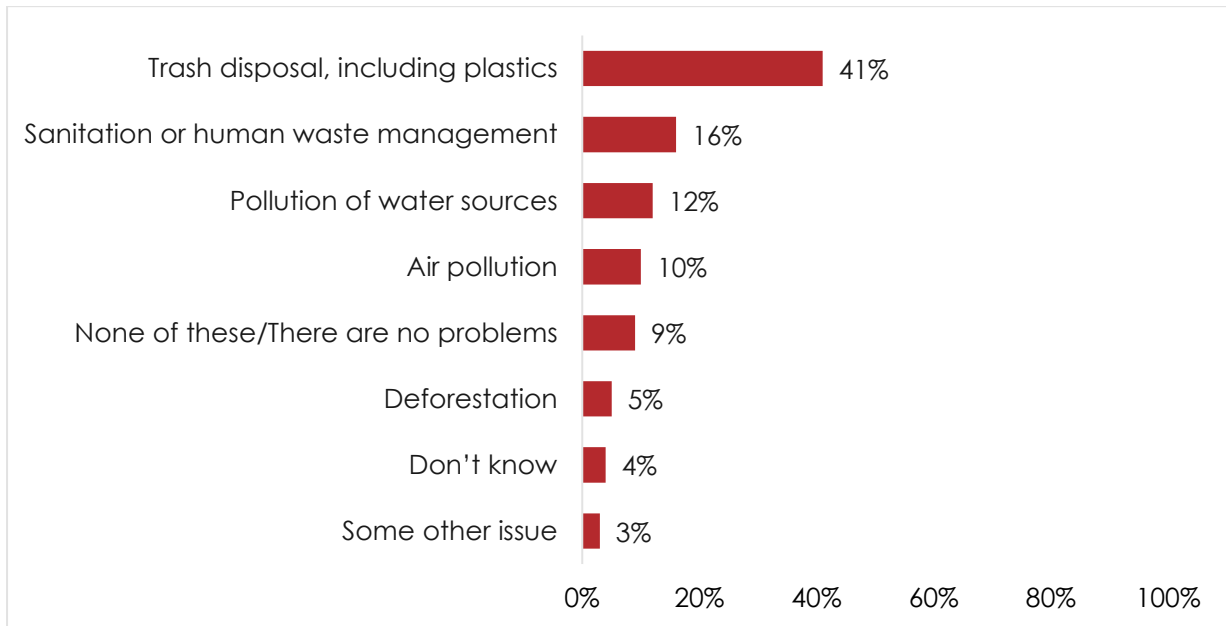
**Respondents were asked:** How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land, in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

<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 and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

South Africans rank trash disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community (41%), followed by sanitation or human waste management (16%), pollution of water sources (12%), and air pollution (10%) (Figure 3). Only one in 20 (5%) cite deforestation as a problem.

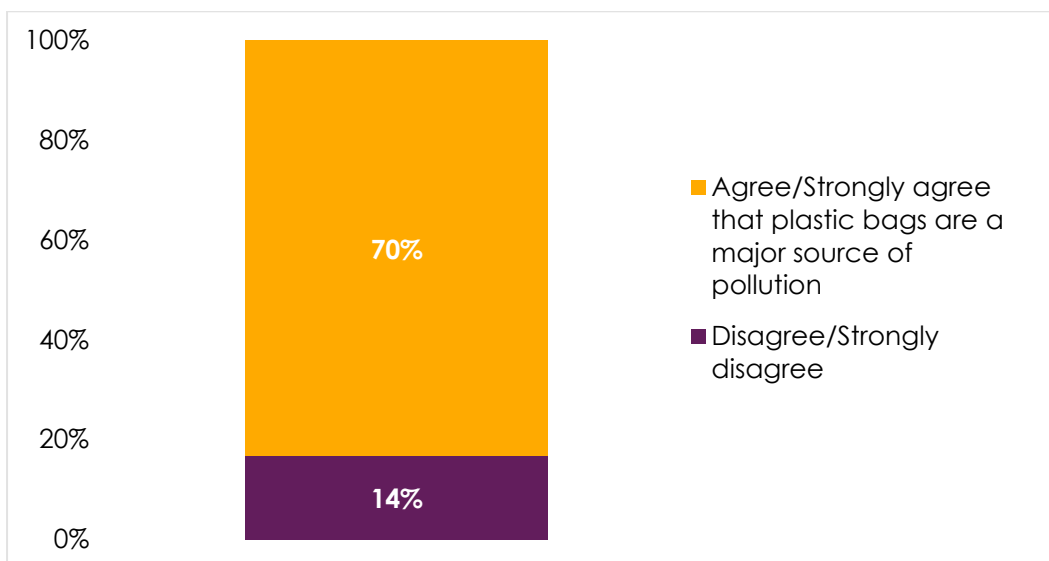
Fully seven in 10 citizens (70%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in South Africa (Figure 4).

**Figure 3: Most important environmental issue in the community | South Africa | 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? | South Africa | 2022**



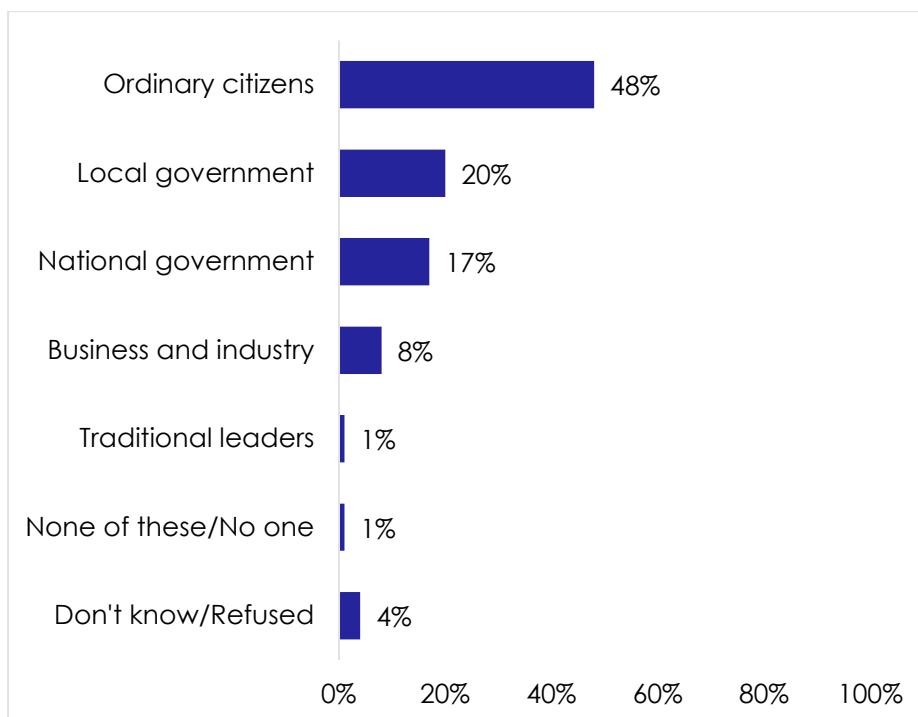
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

## Protecting the environment

Actions to reduce pollution can range from making small everyday adjustments to once-in-a-generation game-changers – from shifting (back) to reusable shopping bags to dismantling a coal-burning industry.

For South Africans, protecting the environment starts at home: Close to half (48%) of respondents say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 5). Only 20% would instead place that responsibility on the local government, and even fewer would look to the national government (17%), to business and industry (8%), and to traditional leaders (1%).

**Figure 5: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution?**  
 | South Africa | 2022



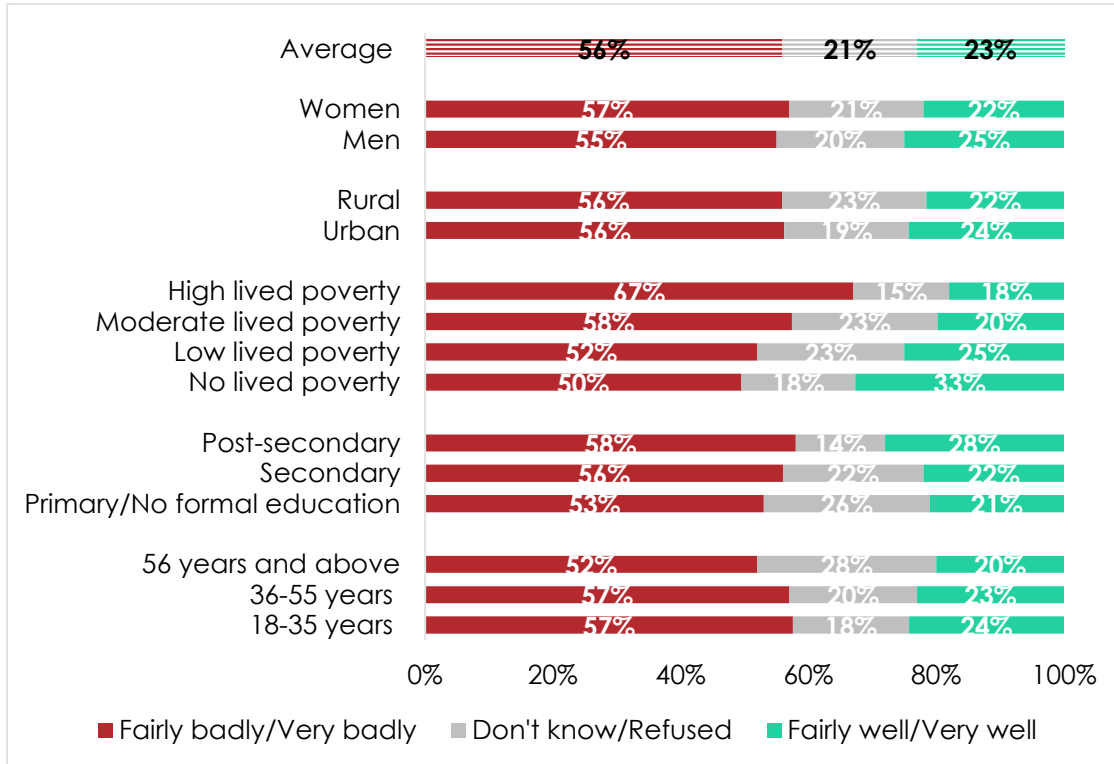
**Respondents were asked:** Who do you think should have primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping your community clean?

Fewer than one-quarter (23%) of citizens think the government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while more than half (56%) rate the government's efforts poorly and 21% say they "don't know" or refused to offer an opinion (Figure 6).

Negative ratings are more common among younger than older citizens (57% vs. 52%) and among the most educated than among those with primary schooling or less (58% vs. 53%). Disapproval increases with respondents' level of lived poverty, ranging from 50% among well-off respondents to 67% among those experiencing high lived poverty.

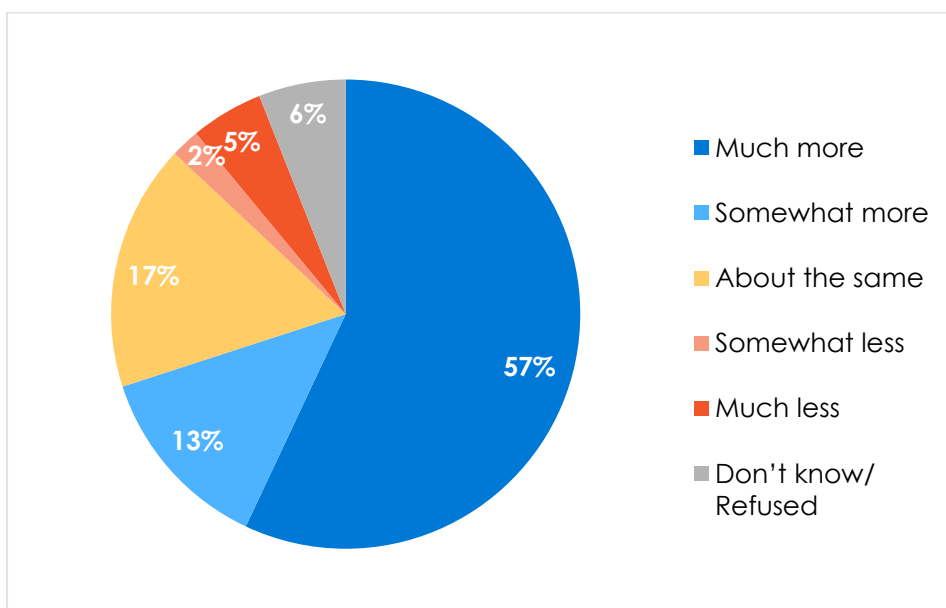
In line with their performance ratings, 70% of South Africans say the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 57% who want "much more" action (Figure 7). Only 7% think the government should do less to protect the environment.

**Figure 6: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment** | by demographic group | South Africa | 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 protect the environment?** | South Africa | 2022

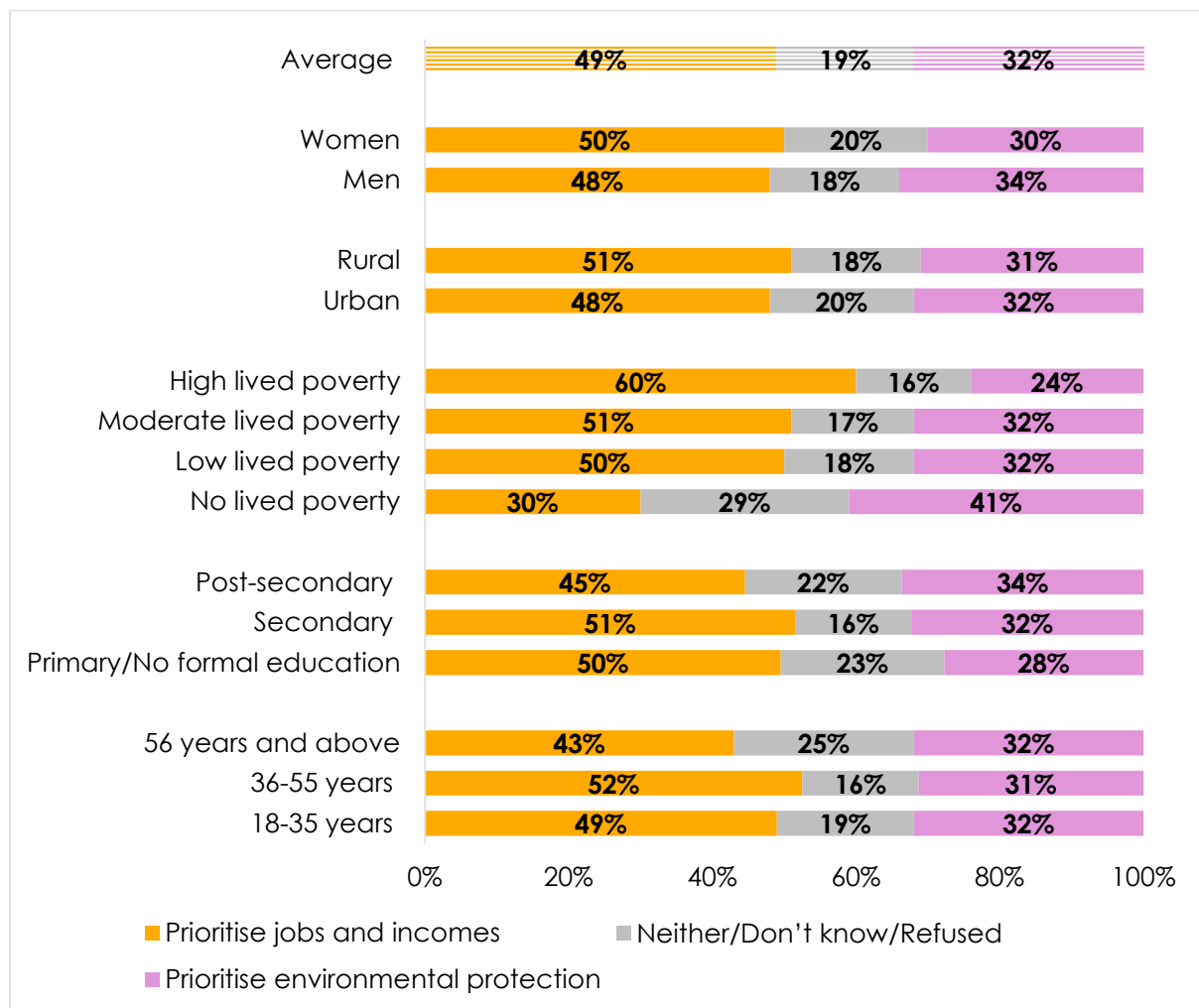


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?

However, if environmental-protection policies threaten livelihoods, about half (49%) of respondents say reducing pollution or other environmental damage must take a back seat to job and income creation. About one-third (32%) would prioritise protecting the environment, “even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives” (Figure 8). About one in five (19%) decline to offer an opinion.

Support for prioritising job creation over environmental protection is particularly strong among the poorest respondents (60%, compared to 30% among well-off respondents). This position is somewhat less popular among the most educated (45%) and the oldest respondents (43%).

**Figure 8: Should government prioritise jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | South Africa | 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 “agree very strongly” with each statement)

## Natural resource extraction

In South Africa, the mining sector contributes about 8% of the country's gross domestic product (Möncks et al., 2023). But resource extraction can also be a major source of local-level environmental damage.

About four in 10 South Africans (39%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that overall, the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. Only about one-quarter (24%) disagree with this assessment, while almost four in 10 (38%) say they neither agree nor disagree, don't know, or refuse to answer the question (Figure 9).

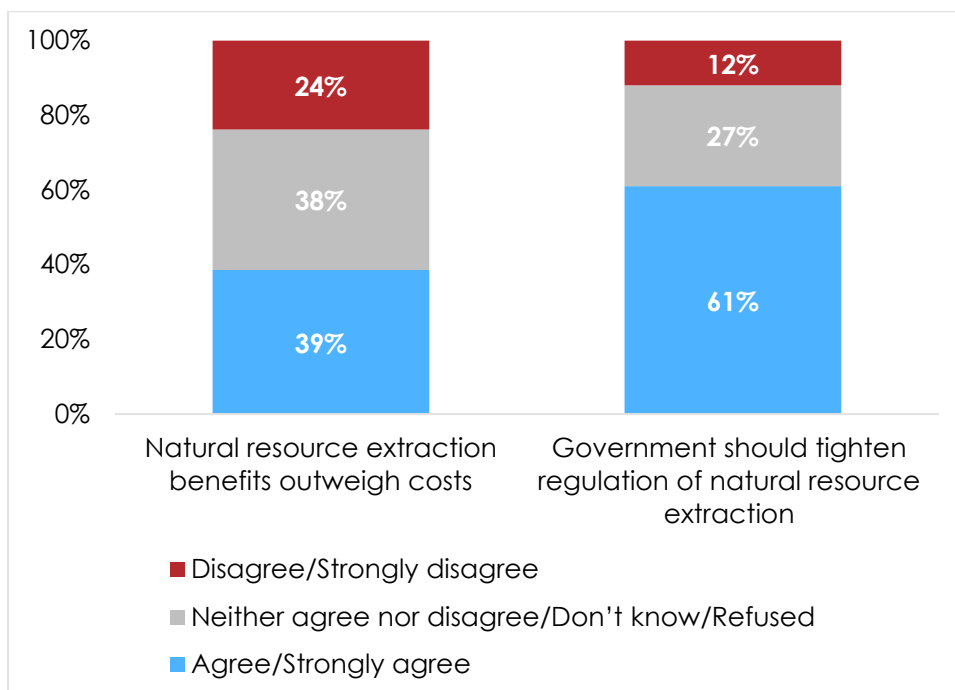
Nevertheless, in order to reduce the negative impact of natural resource extraction on the environment, a majority (61%) of citizens want the government to regulate the industry more tightly.

Positive assessments outweigh negative ones when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 10). A plurality (41%) of respondents say that community members have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while about one-third (32%) disagree.

But while 30% of respondents think local communities receive a fair share of revenues from natural resource extraction, 37% say they don't.

Again, large proportions (27%-33%) decline to take a position on these questions.

**Figure 9: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | South Africa | 2022**



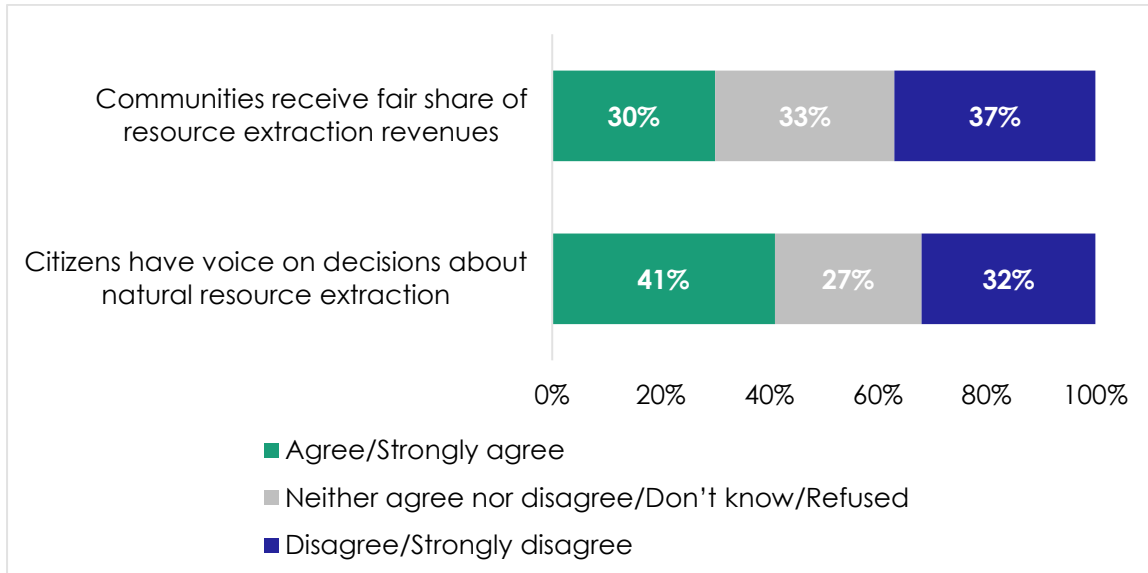
**Respondents were asked:** *Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the 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** | South Africa  
 | 2022



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

*Ordinary South Africans 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

South Africans see pollution and environmental protection as issues requiring urgent attention from citizens themselves and from the government. But in a context of high unemployment and poverty, citizens are not ready to sacrifice jobs and incomes in favour of maintaining the integrity of the environment. Nonetheless, findings show that South Africans want the government to put regulations in place to ensure that natural resource extraction is done in an environmentally responsible manner.

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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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