

Water and sanitation still major challenges in Africa, especially for rural and poor citizens

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 784 | Mohammed Najib Ben Saad, George William Kayanja, and Stevenson Male Ssevume

Summary

Safe water and sanitation are essential to the health of all Africans as well as to the social and economic development of their countries, yet millions lack access to both (African Union, 2023; World Health Organization, 2023).

Despite governments' commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063, most countries are not on track to meet their objective of ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (United Nations, 2015, 2023; African Union, 2015, 2023). According to the 2023 Africa Sustainable Development Report, 411 million Africans still lack access to safe water, and almost three-fourths don't benefit from safely managed sanitation services (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).



The urgency of ensuring water security is heightened by the effects of climate change, including prolonged droughts that threaten agriculture as well as household water supplies (Mumssen, 2022; Malpass & Sall, 2022).

The latest Afrobarometer surveys in 39 African countries find little progress toward the goal of universal access to safe water and sanitation. Water supply ranks fourth among the most important problems that Africans want their government to address. About one in four citizens report that their household frequently went without enough clean water during the past year. Only minorities enjoy access to piped water and a sanitation system, with stark disadvantages among rural and poor populations. A growing majority give their government poor marks on their provision of water and sanitation services.

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. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 39-country analysis is based on 53,444 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

- On average across 39 countries, water supply ranks fourth among the most important problems that Africans want their government to address, trailing unemployment, management of the economy, and health.
 - Water outranks all other problems in Benin and Mozambique, and ranks second in Guinea, Niger, Congo-Brazzaville, Tanzania, Togo, Ethiopia, and Namibia.
 - Water supply is of particular concern among rural residents and the poor, who suffer major disadvantages on all indicators of access to clean water and sanitation.
- Nearly six in 10 Africans (56%) say their household experienced a shortage of clean water during the previous year, including 24% who say this happened “many times” or “always.”
- Among enumeration areas (EAs) visited by Afrobarometer field teams, 56% had a piped water system. Fewer than one-third of EAs had water systems in Zimbabwe (27%), Malawi (28%), Mozambique (28%), Liberia (28%), and Guinea (29%).
 - On average, four in 10 respondents say they have water piped into their dwelling (27%) or their compound (13%), while about one-third rely primarily on a public tap or standpipe (17%) or a tubewell or borehole (16%). About one in five rely on well water (14%) or surface water (5%).
- Fewer than one-third (31%) of surveyed EAs have sewage systems, ranging from 5% in Malawi to 79% in Tunisia.
- One-third (34%) of respondents have a toilet in the home, while another 39% have facilities outside their dwelling but within their compound. One in five (19%) rely on toilets outside their compound, and 8% say they have no access to toilets or latrines.
- Only 38% of citizens give their government passing marks on its provision of water and sanitation services.

Water supply as a priority for African countries

On average across the 39 surveyed countries, water supply ranks fourth among the most important problems that citizens say their governments must address (Figure 1). Cited by 22% of respondents as one of up to three priorities, water supply follows unemployment (33%), management of the economy (29%), and health (29%) and ties with infrastructure/roads (22%) on citizens' policy agenda.

Countries vary significantly in their level of concern about water supply (Figure 2). About half (49%) of Guineans rank water among their country's most important problems, while virtually no Seychellois share this perception.

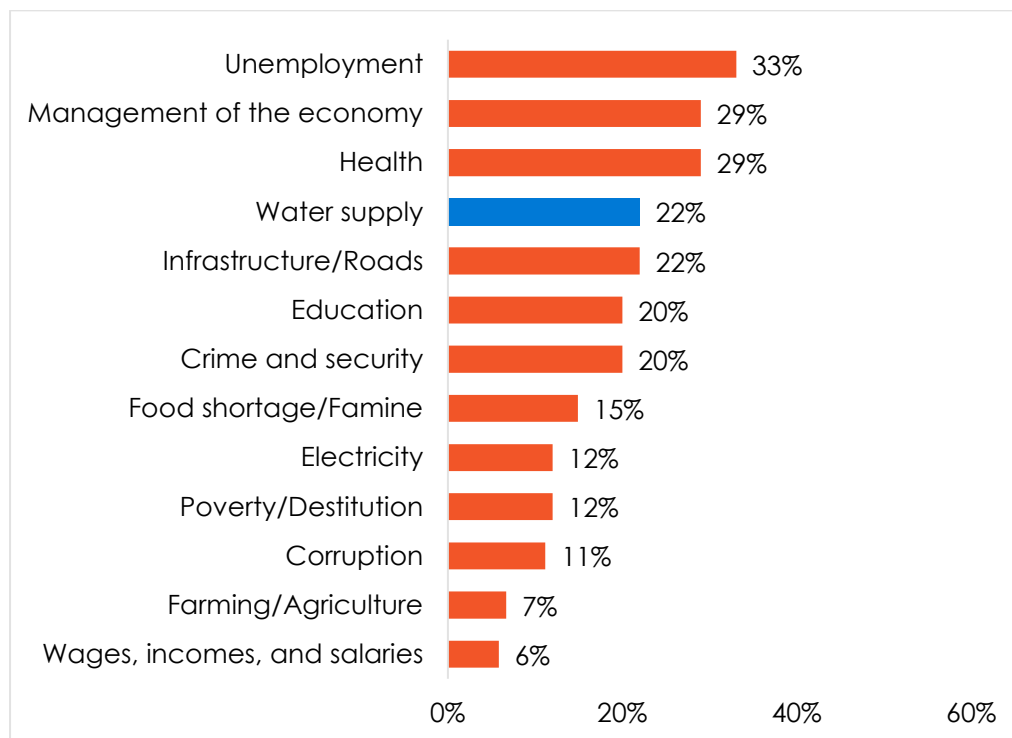
At the country level, water outranks all other problems in Benin (43%) and Mozambique (37%); ranks second in Guinea, Niger, Congo-Brazzaville, Tanzania, Togo, Ethiopia, and Namibia; and takes third place in Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda.

Water supply is a far greater concern in rural areas than in cities (29% vs. 14%) and among the poorest citizens (32%) compared to well-off respondents (8%)¹ (Figure 3). Respondents with no formal schooling are almost three times as likely as those with post-secondary education to consider water supply an urgent problem requiring government action (32% vs. 12%).

Between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023, 12 countries record no significant change (of more than 3 percentage points) in the proportion of citizens who rank water supply as a top priority. But 10 countries show significant increases in public concern, led by Côte d'Ivoire (+12 percentage points), Madagascar (+11), Nigeria (+10), Zimbabwe (+9%), and Uganda (+7) (Figure 4).²

Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents who prioritise water supply as one of their country's most important problems has declined in nine countries (Figure 5), including a 36-percentage-point drop in Burkina Faso, where water supply is now outranked by crime/insecurity (53%) and civil war (16%) as well as health, food shortages, management of the economy, and unemployment.

Figure 1: Most important problems | 39 countries | 2021/2023

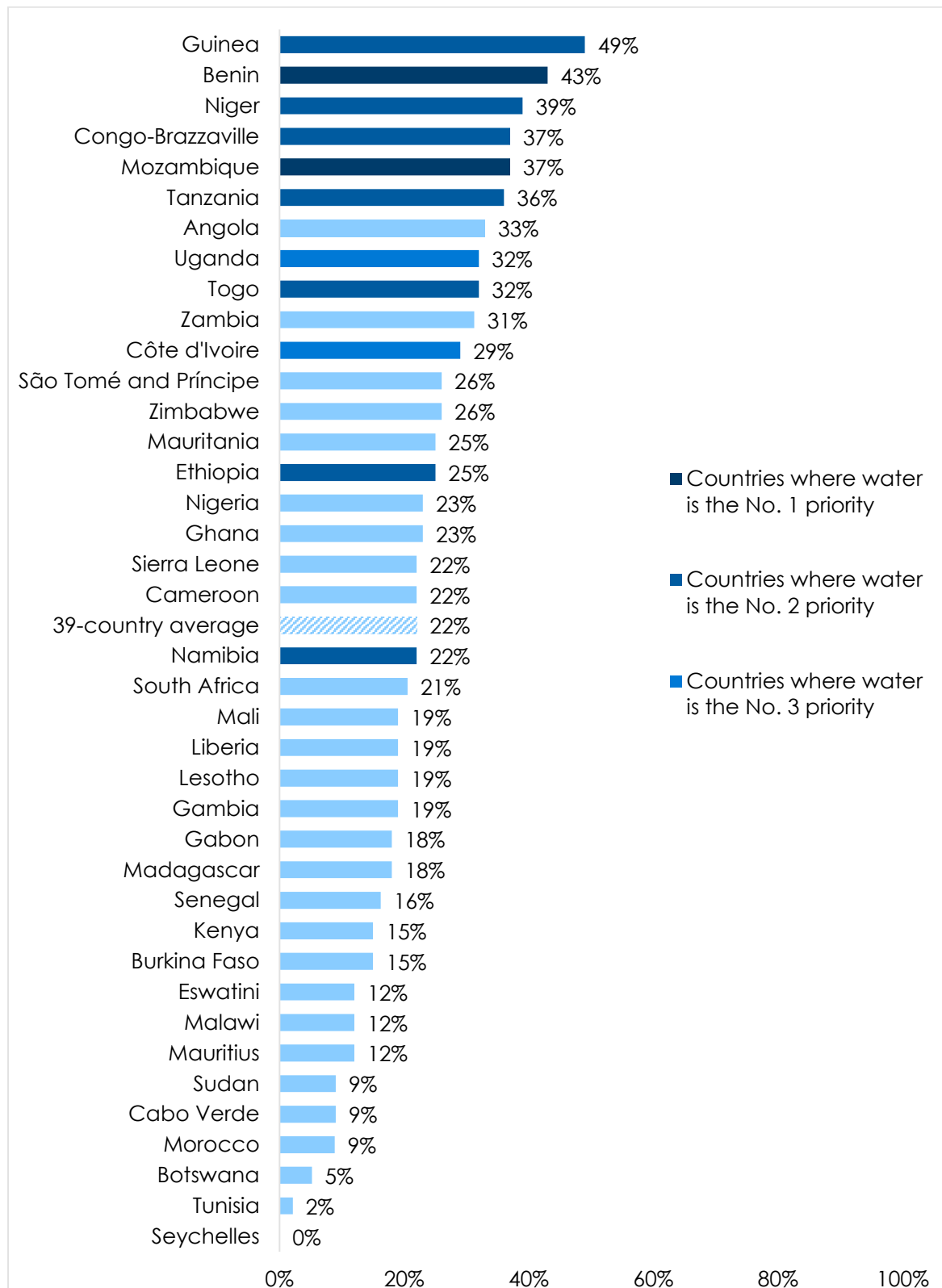


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of their priorities.)*

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 preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

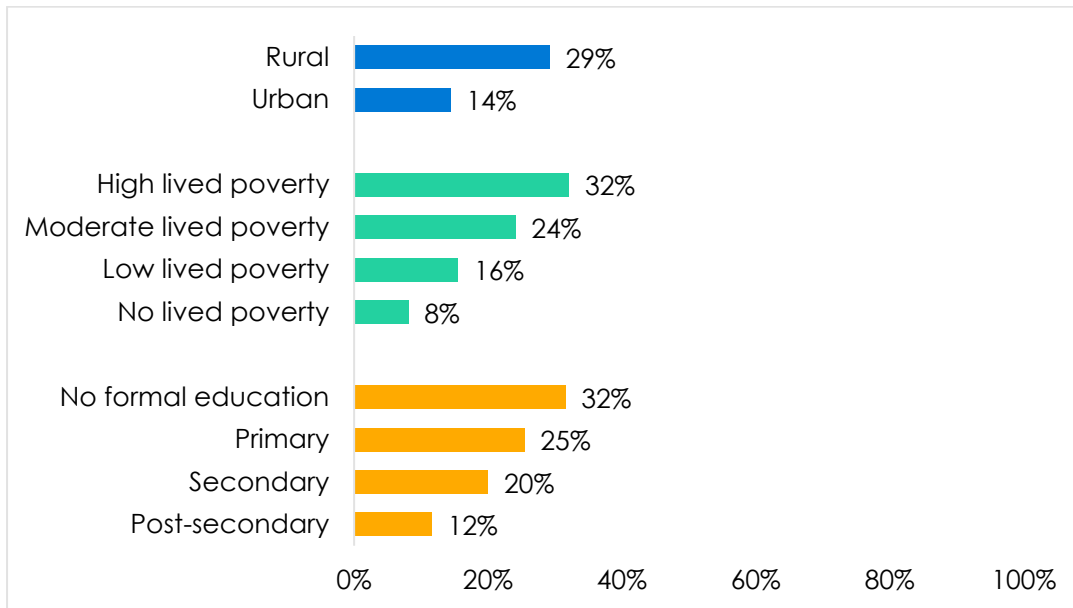
² Due to rounding, the percentage-point change may appear to be 1 point smaller or larger than reflected in the rounded percentages, e.g. for Madagascar, the difference between 6% and 18% (both rounded) is 11 percentage points.

Figure 2: Water supply as a top priority | 39 countries | 2021/2023



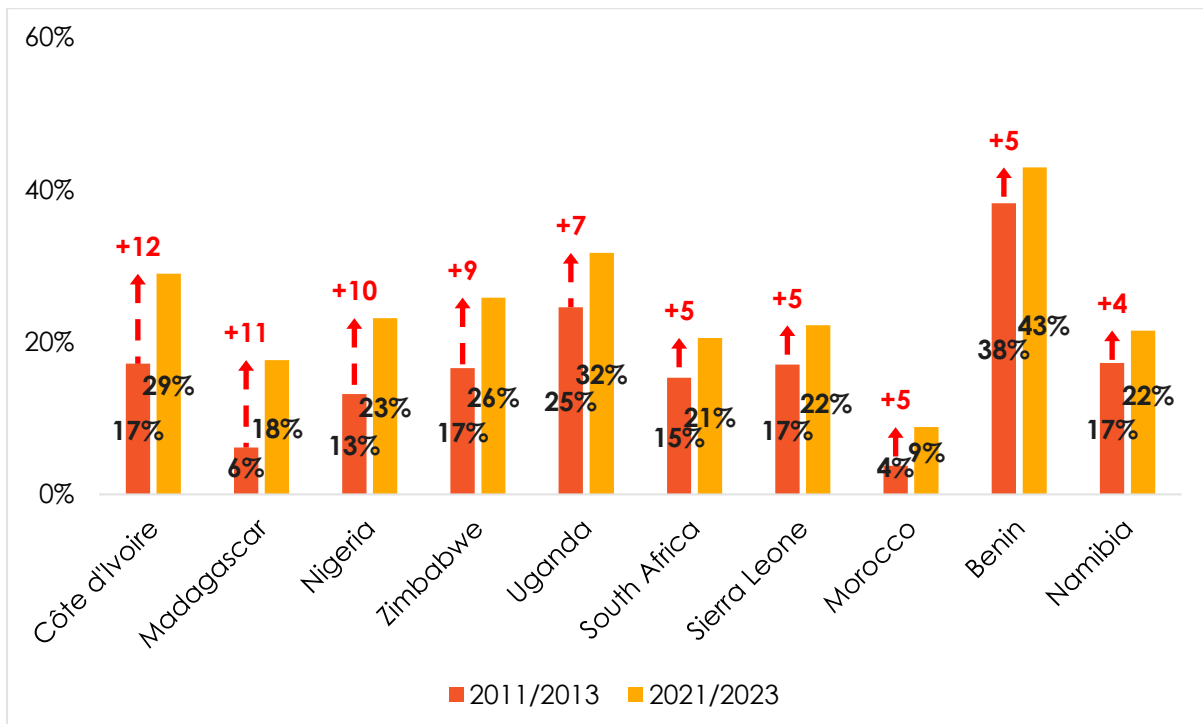
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent. Figure shows % of respondents who cite water supply as one of their priorities.)*

Figure 3: Water supply as a top priority | by demographic group | 39 countries
 | 2021/2023



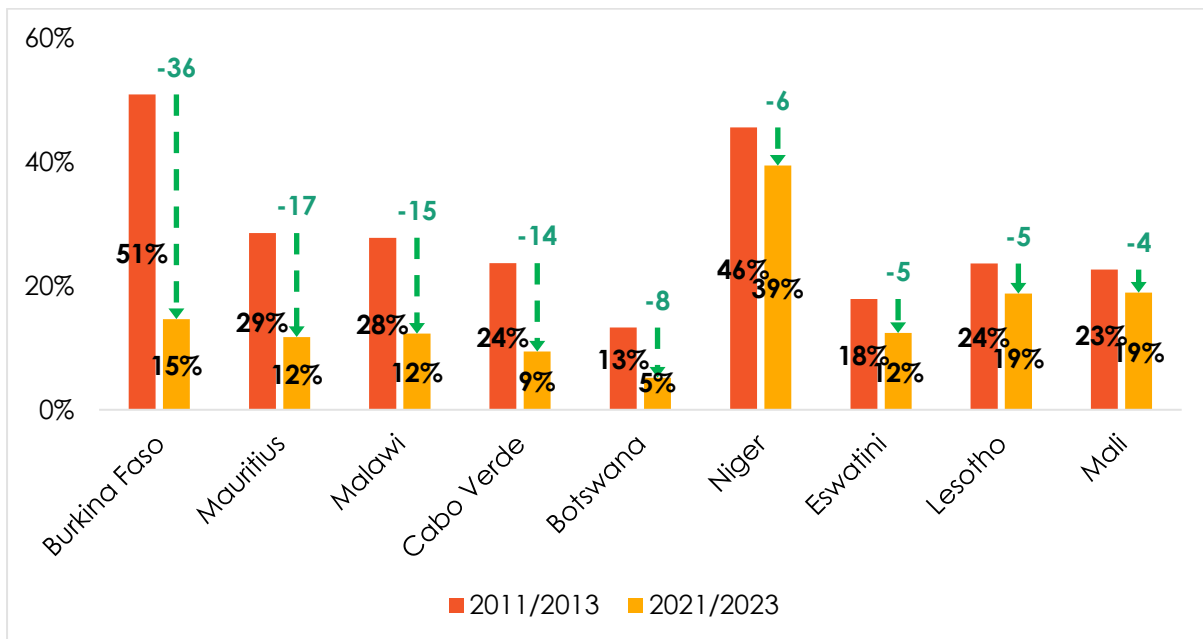
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent. Figure shows % of respondents who cite water supply as one of their priorities.)

Figure 4: Increase in prioritisation of water supply | 10 countries | 2011-2023



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent were recorded. Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who cite water supply as one of their priorities.)

Figure 5: Decrease in prioritisation of water supply | 9 countries | 2011-2023

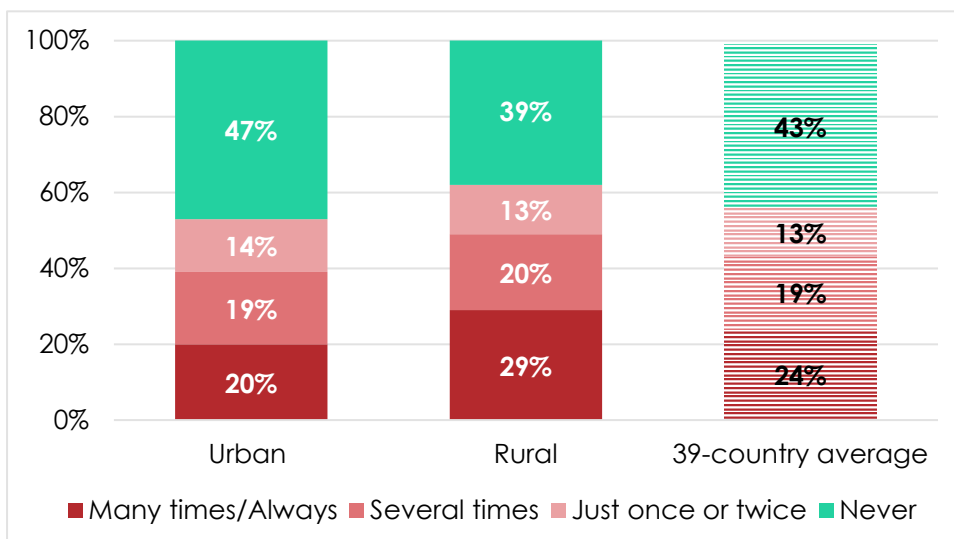


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent were recorded. Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who cite water supply as one of their priorities.)

Access to clean water

Confirming the urgency of government action to ensure a steady supply of safe water for all citizens, an average of more than half (56%) of respondents across 39 countries report that their household went without enough clean water for home use at least once during the year preceding the survey, including 24% who say this happened “many times” or “always” (Figure 6). Frequent water shortages (many times/always) were more common in rural areas (29%) than in cities (20%).

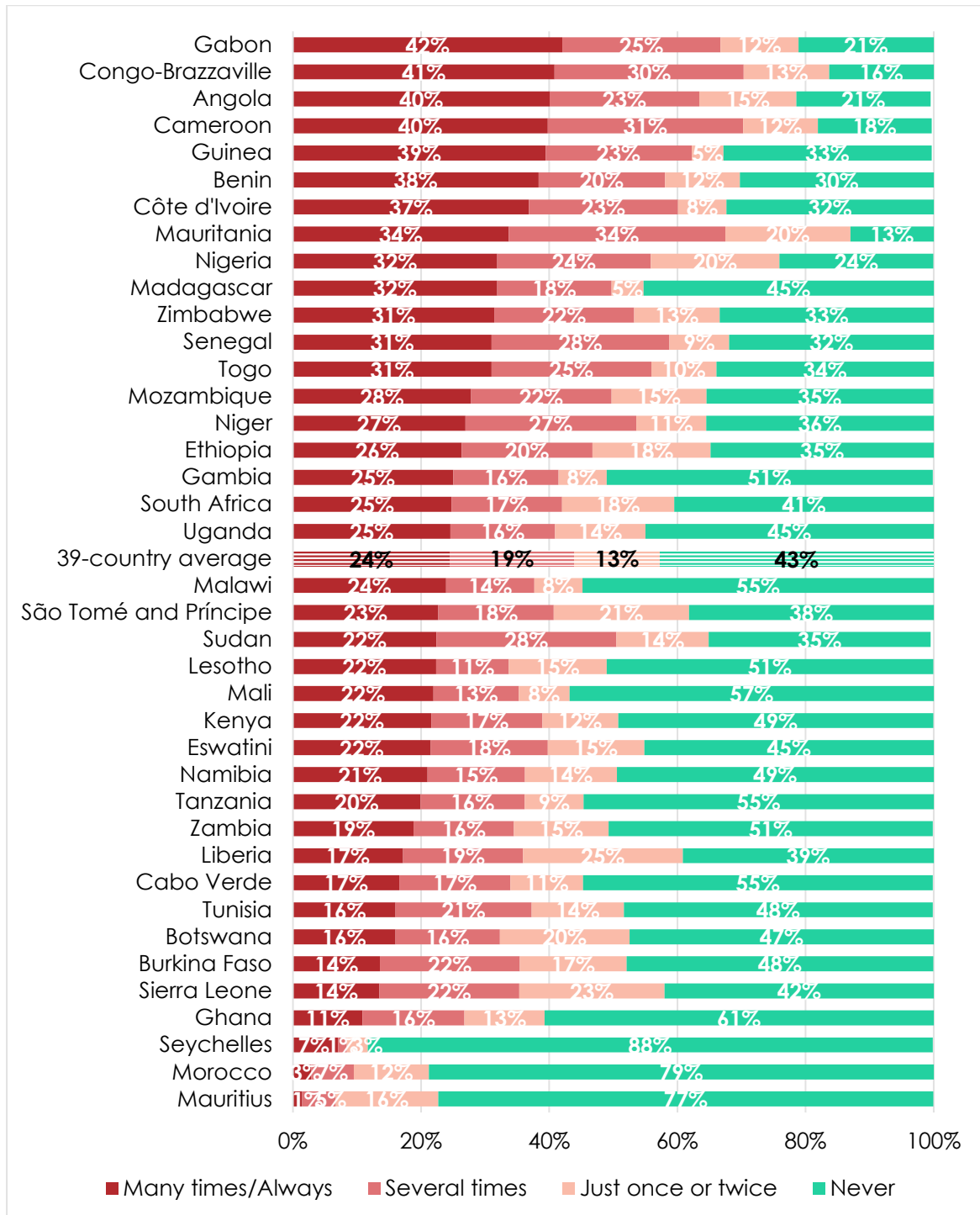
Figure 6: Went without enough clean water | by urban-rural location | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use?

While very few citizens report going without enough water in Mauritius (1%) and Morocco (3%), at least four in 10 suffered frequent water shortages in Gabon (42%), Congo-Brazzaville (41%), Angola (40%), and Cameroon (40%) (Figure 7). Fewer than one in five respondents “never” experienced water shortages in Mauritania (13%), Congo-Brazzaville (16%), and Cameroon (18%).

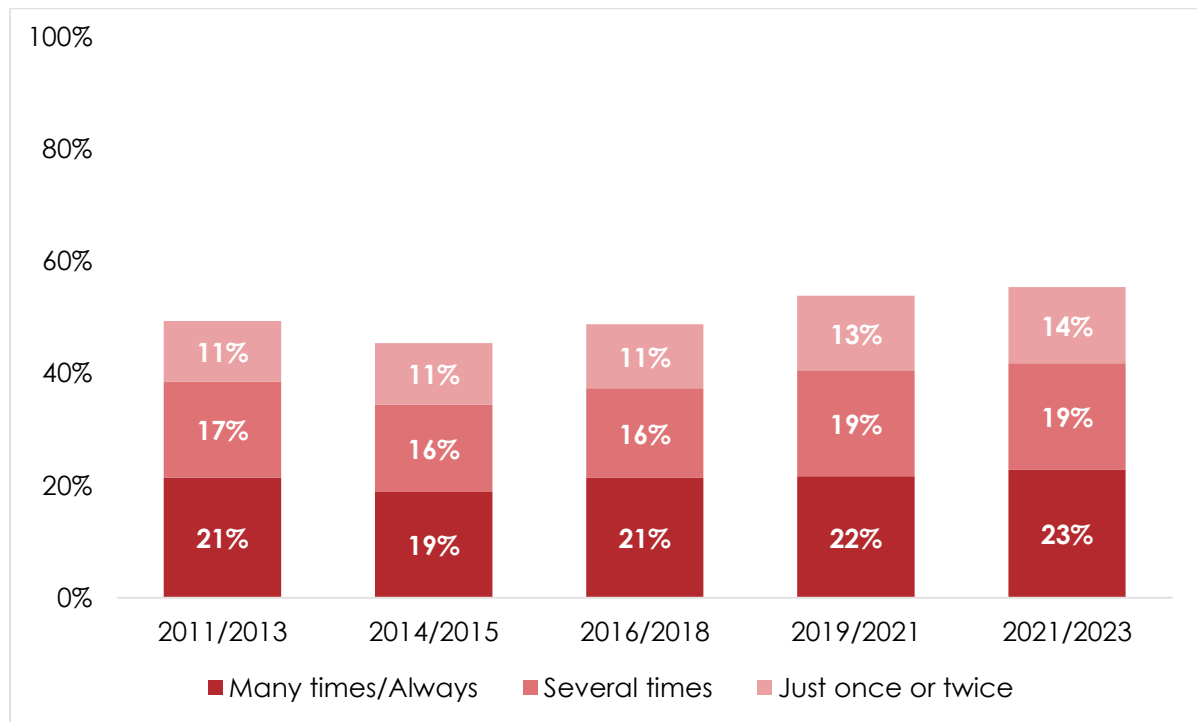
Figure 7: Went without enough clean water | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use?

Over the past decade, the situation has grown worse. On average across 30 countries surveyed consistently since 2011/2013, the proportion of respondents experiencing water shortages dipped slightly in 2014/2015 but has slowly increased since then – from 45% to 55% who went without enough water at least once, and from 19% to 23% who did so frequently (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Went without enough clean water | 30 countries | 2011-2023



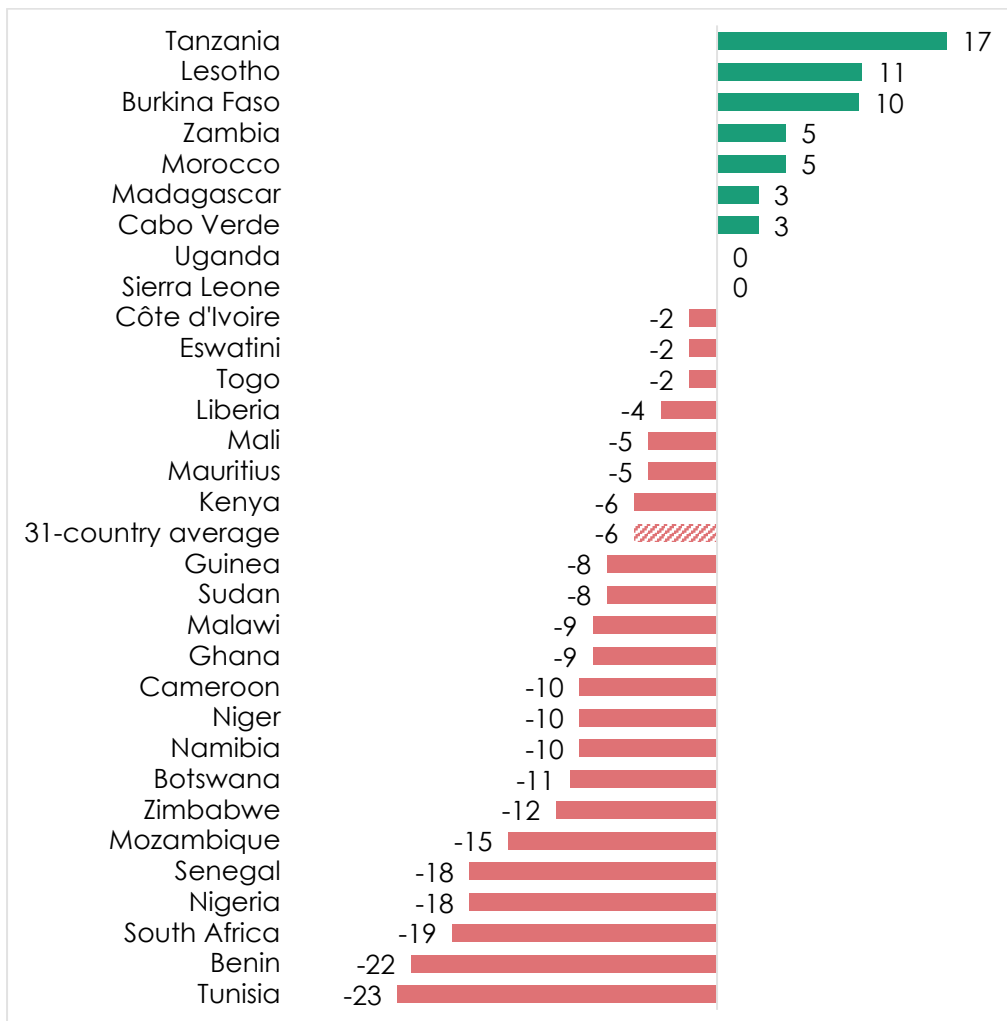
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use?

The share of households that “never” experienced water shortages declined significantly (by more than 3 percentage points) in 19 countries, led by Tunisia (-23 percentage points) and Benin (-22) (Figure 9).

Only five countries report gains of more than 3 percentage points in households that always had enough clean water: Tanzania (+17 points), Lesotho (+11), Burkina Faso (+10), Zambia (+5), and Morocco (+5).

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 for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

Figure 9: Change in ‘never’ going without enough water | 31 countries* | 2011-2023



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough clean water for home use? (Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who say they “never” went without enough clean water during the preceding year.)

* Madagascar, included in this 31-country comparison between Afrobarometer Round 5 and Round 9, is not included in the 30-country over-time comparison in Figure 8 because Afrobarometer was not able to survey Madagascar in Round 8 (2019/2021).

Water infrastructure in the enumeration area

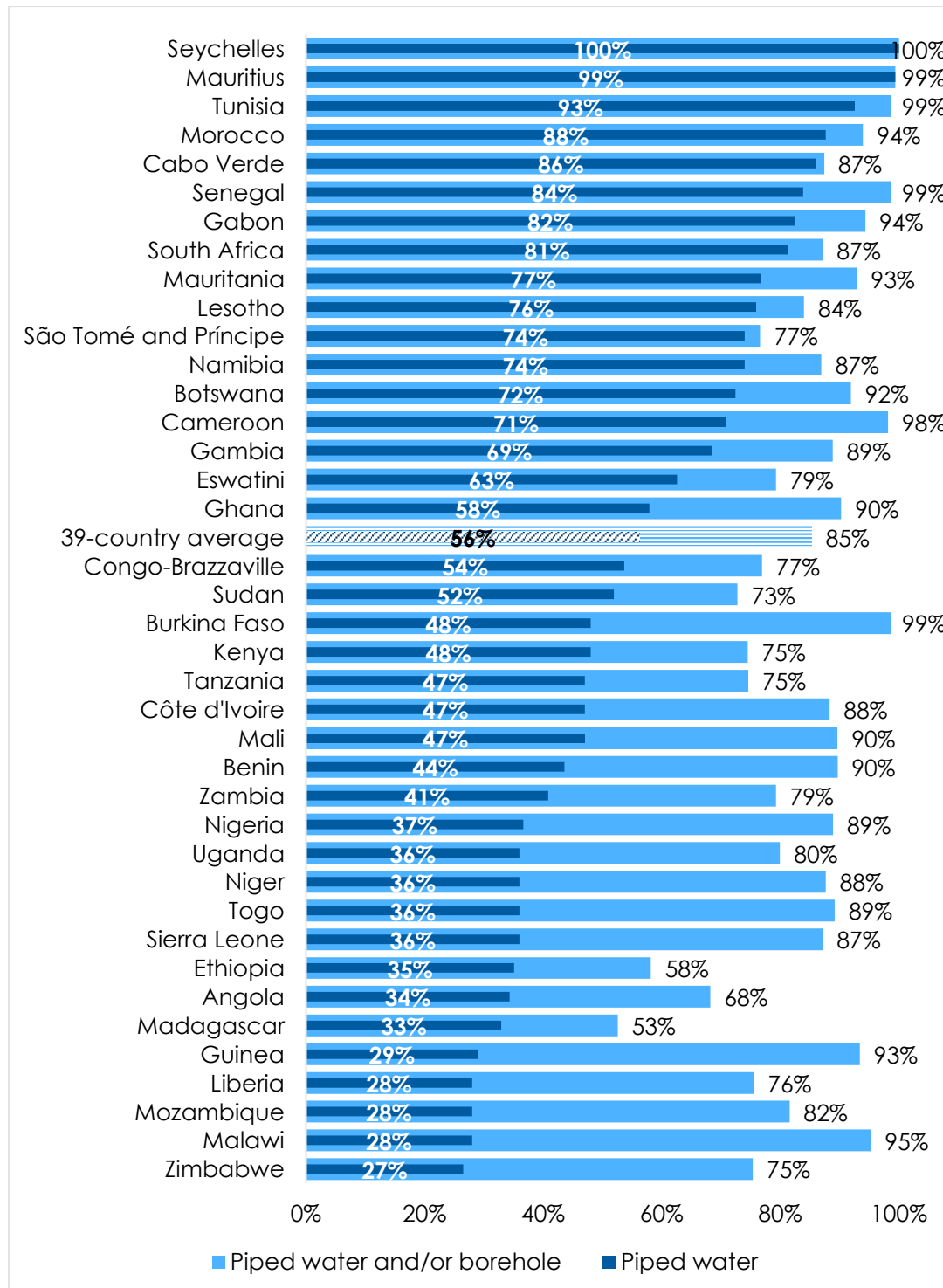
A steady supply of clean water is easier to obtain in areas served by water infrastructure. Afrobarometer field teams record the presence or absence of water, sanitation, and other infrastructure in every enumeration area (EA) they visit.³

On average across 39 countries, field teams found that 56% of communities they visited had a piped water system “that most houses can access.” This was the case in virtually all EAs in

³ Afrobarometer samples are based on a selection of enumeration areas (EAs) drawn randomly from the national census frame. Interview teams usually visit between 150 (for surveys with N=1,200) and 300 (for surveys with N=2,400) EAs. Because of the smaller sample sizes, the margin of error on the results reported here is higher than for findings captured in individual interviews.

Seychelles and Mauritius, but in fewer than one-third of EAs in Zimbabwe (27%), Malawi (28%), Mozambique (28%), Liberia (28%), and Guinea (29%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Piped water and borehole/tubewell in the enumeration area
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023



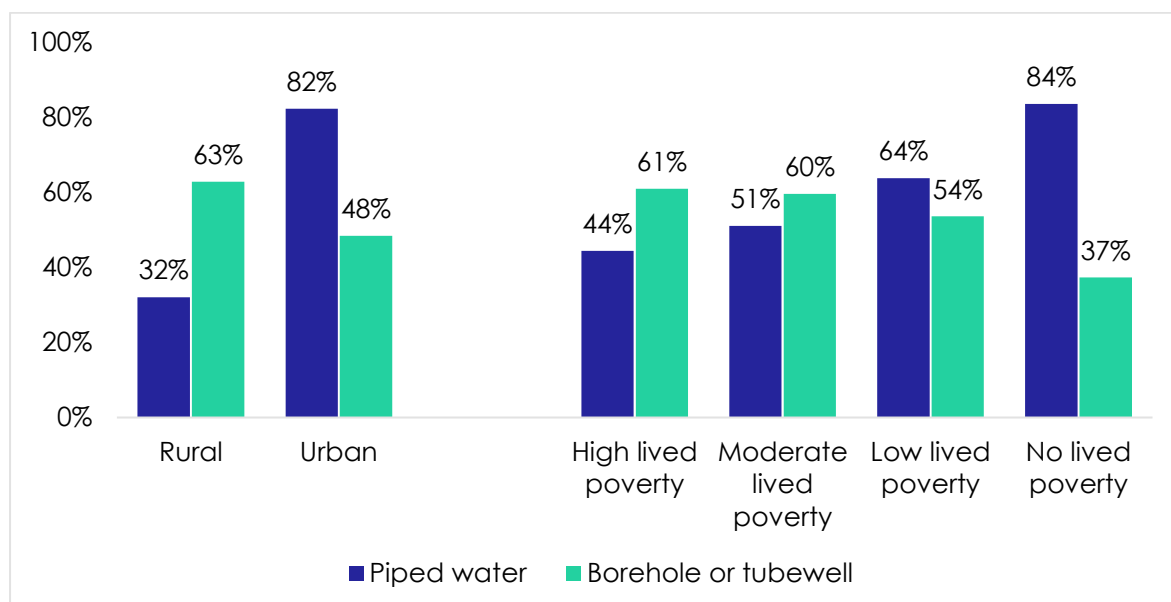
Afrobarometer field researchers were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Piped water system that most houses can access? Borehole or tubewell? (% "yes")

The teams also found boreholes or tubewells in 56% of EAs, on average, ranging from 3% in Seychelles to 98% in Burkina Faso (not shown).

Combining these data, we find that 85% of visited EAs had piped water or boreholes/tubewells or both. This proportion reaches 90% or more in 15 countries, though it drops as low as 53% in Madagascar and 58% in Ethiopia.

As might be expected, piped water is far less common in rural areas than in cities (32% vs. 82%), while boreholes/tubewells are more often present in rural areas (63% vs. 48%) (Figure 11). The poorest respondents are least likely to live in areas served by a piped water system (44%, vs. 84% of the best-off respondents) and most likely to have a nearby borehole or tubewell (61%, vs. 37% of respondents experiencing no lived poverty).

Figure 11: Piped water system and borehole/tubewell in enumeration area
 | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023



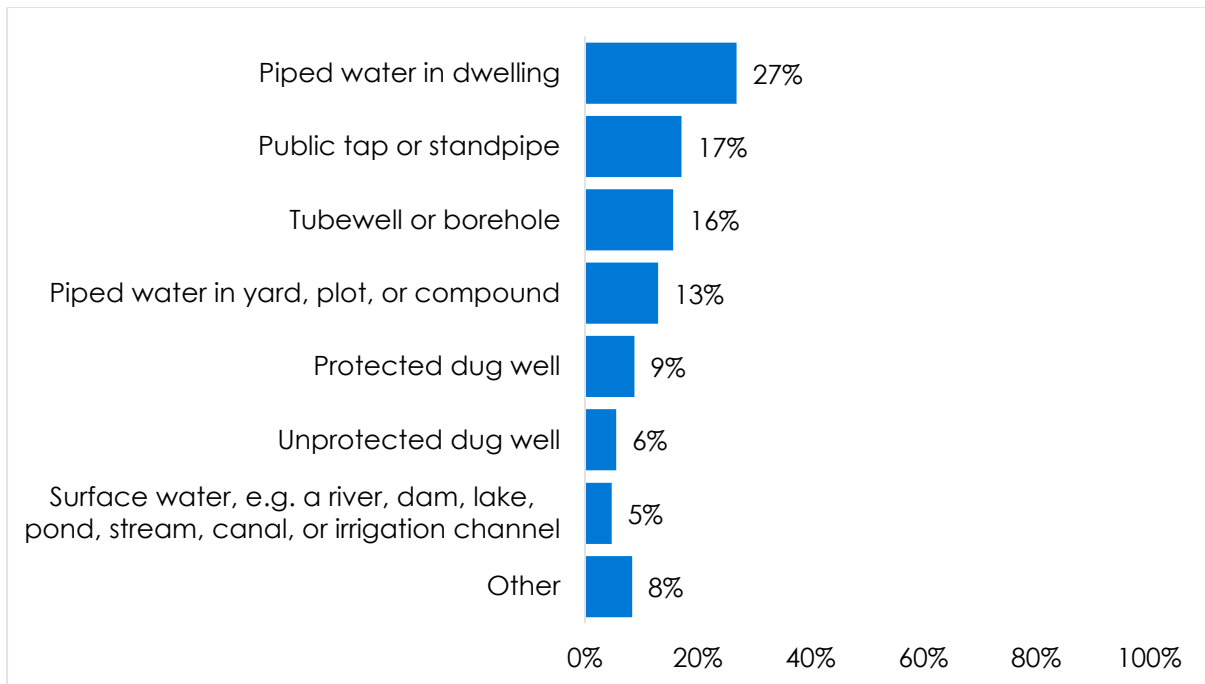
Afrobarometer field researchers were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Piped water system that most houses can access? Borehole or tubewell? (% "yes")

Asked what is their main source of water for household use, about one-fourth (27%) of respondents, on average, say it is water piped into their dwelling, while another 13% report water piped into their yard, plot, or compound (Figure 12). About one-third rely primarily on a public tap or standpipe (17%) or a tubewell or borehole (16%), while about one in five mainly use water from dug wells or use surface water (e.g. from a river, dam, lake, etc.).

Confirming the infrastructure observations of Afrobarometer field teams, piped water is a far more common main source in cities than in rural areas (43% vs. 12%) and among well-off respondents compared to the poorest (65% vs. 14%) (Figure 13). Water piped into the yard or compound is also more common in cities than in rural areas, but is less common in better-off than in poorer households.

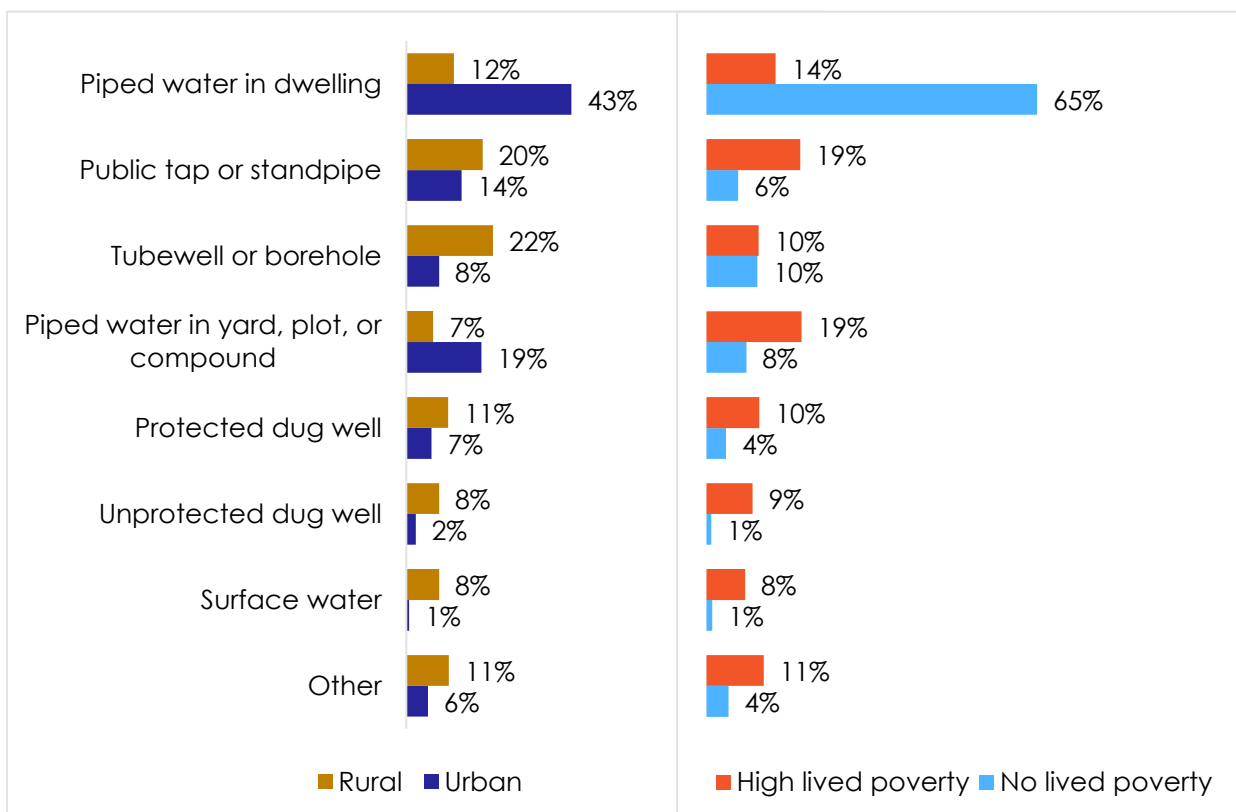
Most of the other sources are more widely used by rural and poorer households than by urban and better-off households.

Figure 12: Main source of water for household use | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: What is your main source of water for household use?

Figure 13: Main source of water for household use | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023



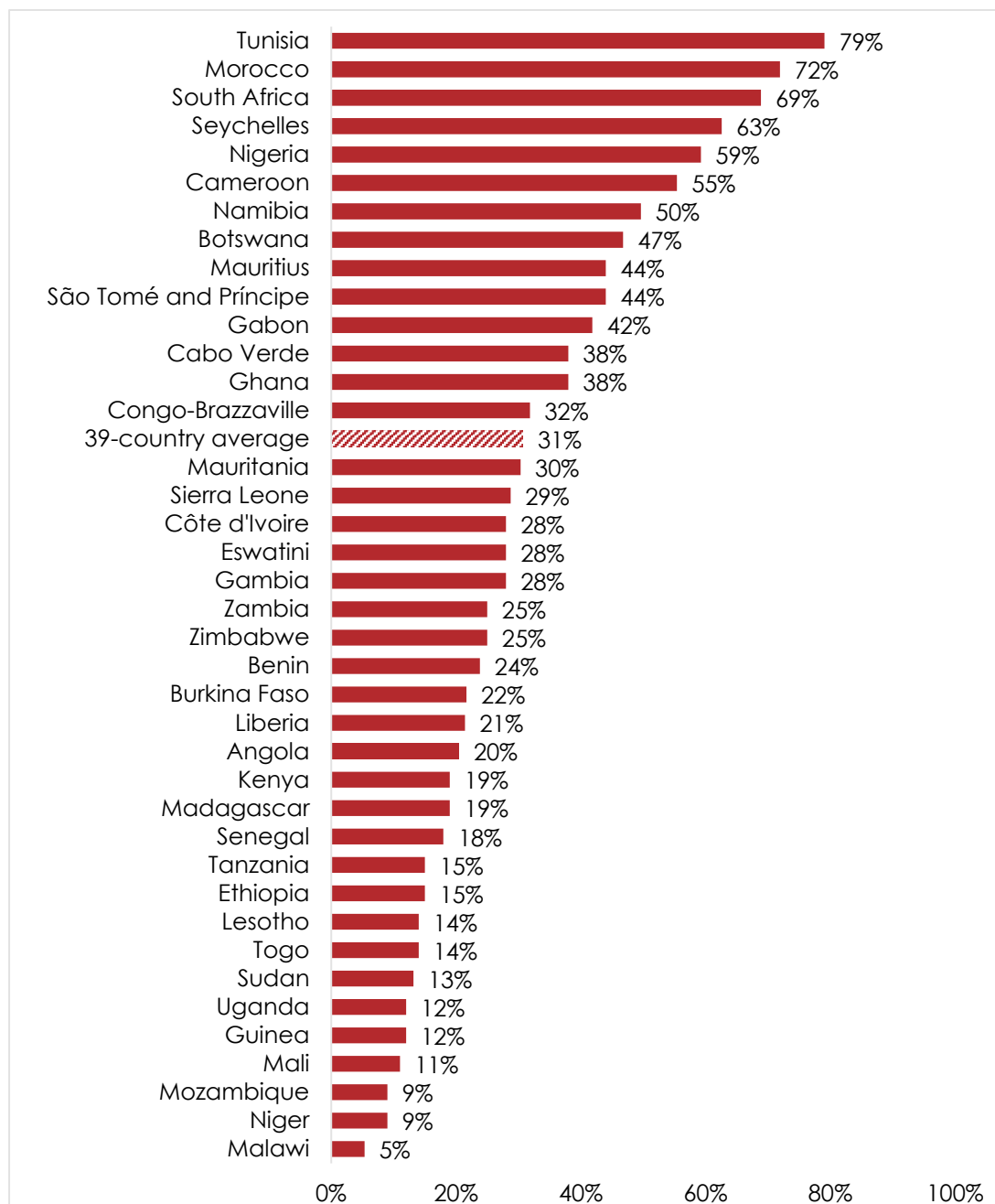
Respondents were asked: What is your main source of water for household use?

Sewerage and access to a toilet

In addition to clean water, protecting the health of Africans requires the effective management of human waste, as highlighted in Agenda 2063 and the SDGs (African Union, 2015; United Nations, 2015). On average across 39 countries, fewer than one-third (31%) of citizens reside in communities with sewage systems that most households can access.

Sanitation infrastructure varies dramatically by country, ranging from fewer than one in 10 EAs in Malawi (5%), Niger (9%), and Mozambique (9%) to more than two-thirds in South Africa (69%), Morocco (72%), and Tunisia (79%) (Figure 14).

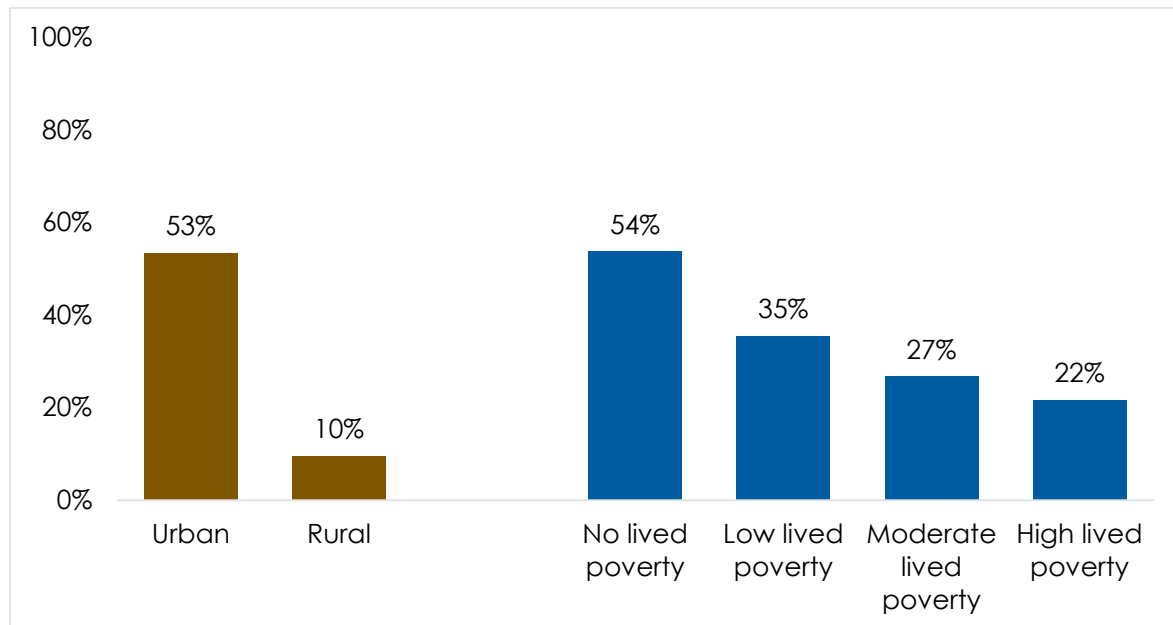
Figure 14: Sewage system in the enumeration area | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Afrobarometer field researchers were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Sewage system that most houses can access? (% "yes")

Urban EAs are five times as likely to have sanitation systems as rural communities (53% vs. 10%), and well-off respondents are more than twice as likely to live in zones with sanitation infrastructure than the poorest (54% vs. 22%) (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Sewage system in the enumeration area | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Afrobarometer field researchers were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Sewage system that most houses can access? (% “yes”)

When it comes to toilet facilities, one-third (34%) of Africans say they have toilets or latrines inside their homes, while another 39% have them outside the dwelling but inside the compound. One in five (19%) say they must resort to toilets outside their compound, and 8% say they have no access to toilets or latrines.

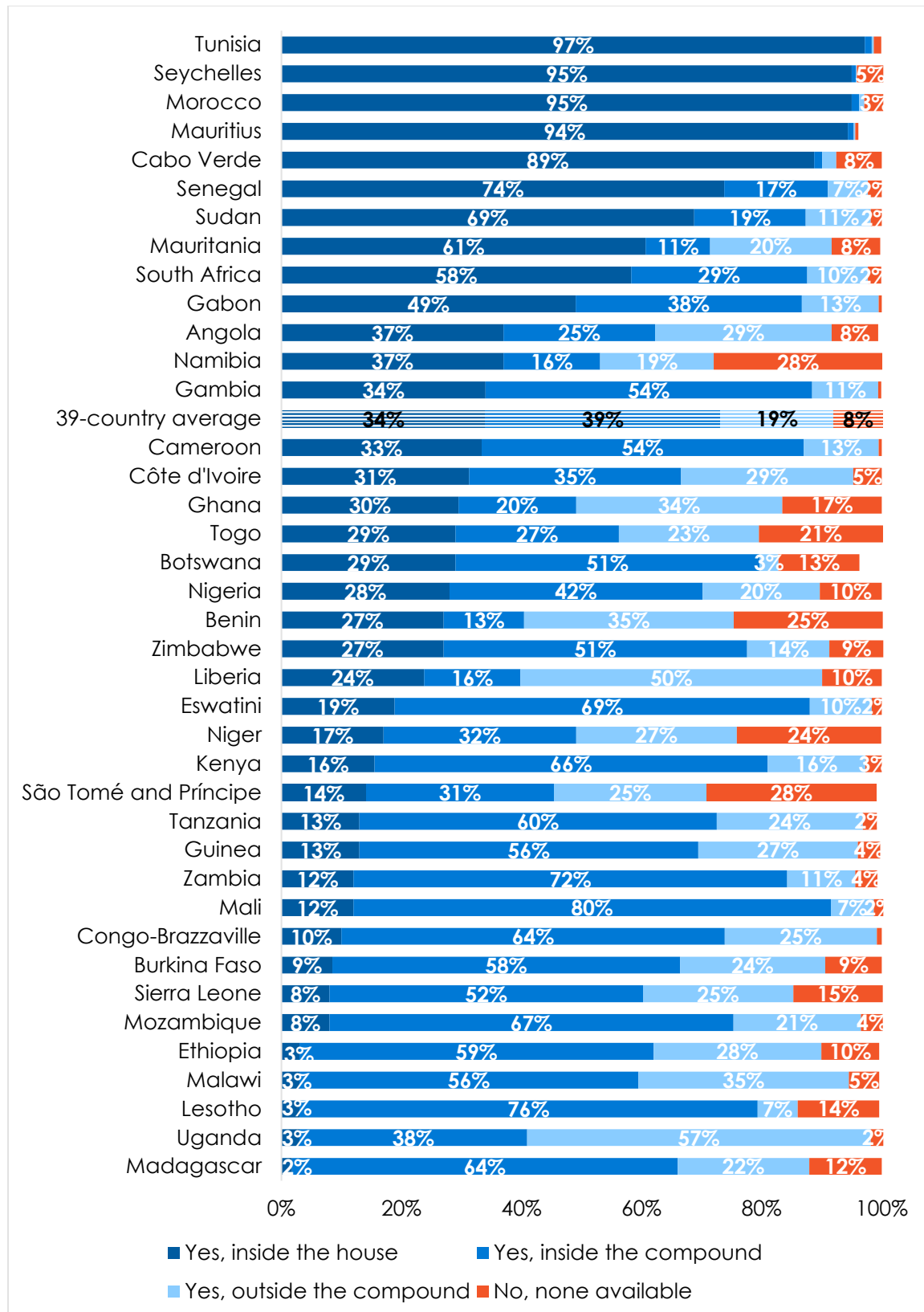
More than nine out of 10 households have toilets inside the home in Tunisia (97%), Seychelles (95%), Morocco (95%), and Mauritius (94%), while such facilities are rare in Madagascar (2%), Uganda (3%), Lesotho (3%), Malawi (3%), and Ethiopia (3%) (Figure 16).

Households with no access to toilets/latrines, even outside the compound, are most common in Namibia (28%), São Tomé and Príncipe (28%), Benin (25%), Niger (24%), and Togo (21%).

A scarcity of in-the-home toilets does not necessarily go hand in hand with a widespread lack of access to toilet facilities altogether: In some countries, very large shares of the population rely on toilets or latrines in the compound rather than the dwelling, including Mali (80%), Lesotho (76%), Zambia (72%), Eswatini (69%), and Mozambique (67%).

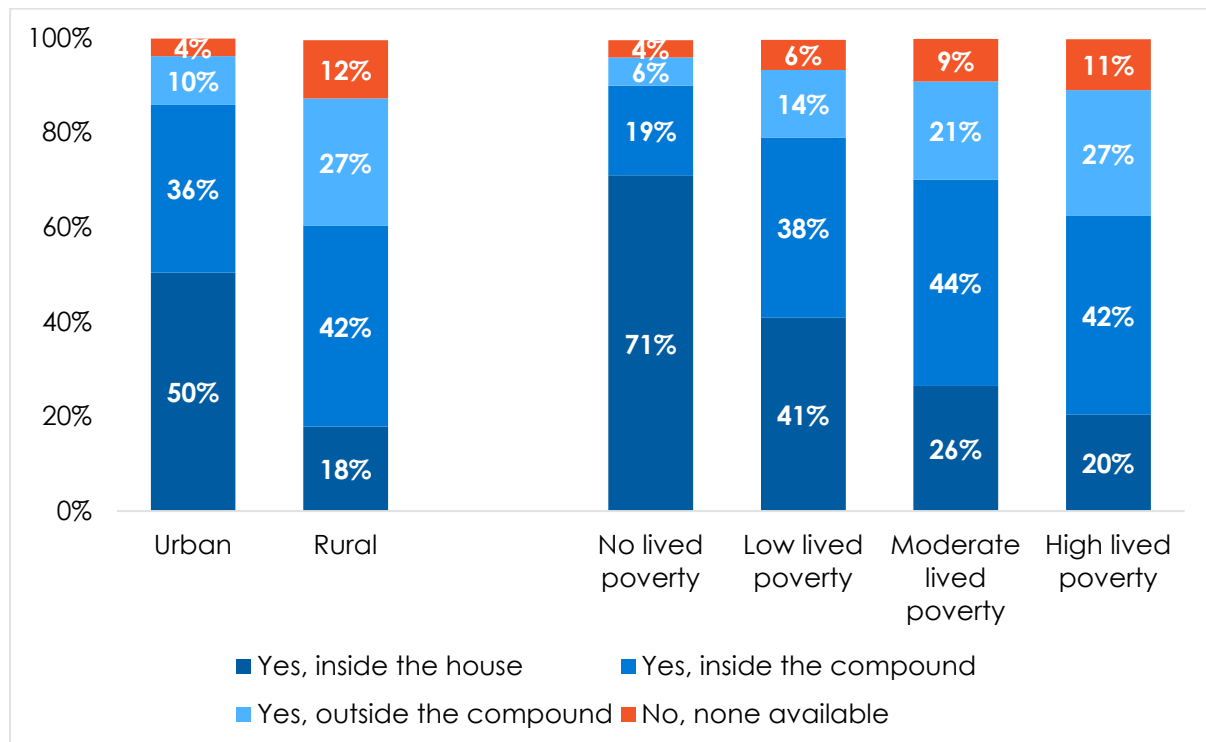
Not surprisingly, urban households are far more likely than rural households to have toilets in the home (50% vs. 18%), as are well-off compared to poor households (71% vs. 20%) (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Location of toilet or latrine | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether each of the following is available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: A toilet or latrine?

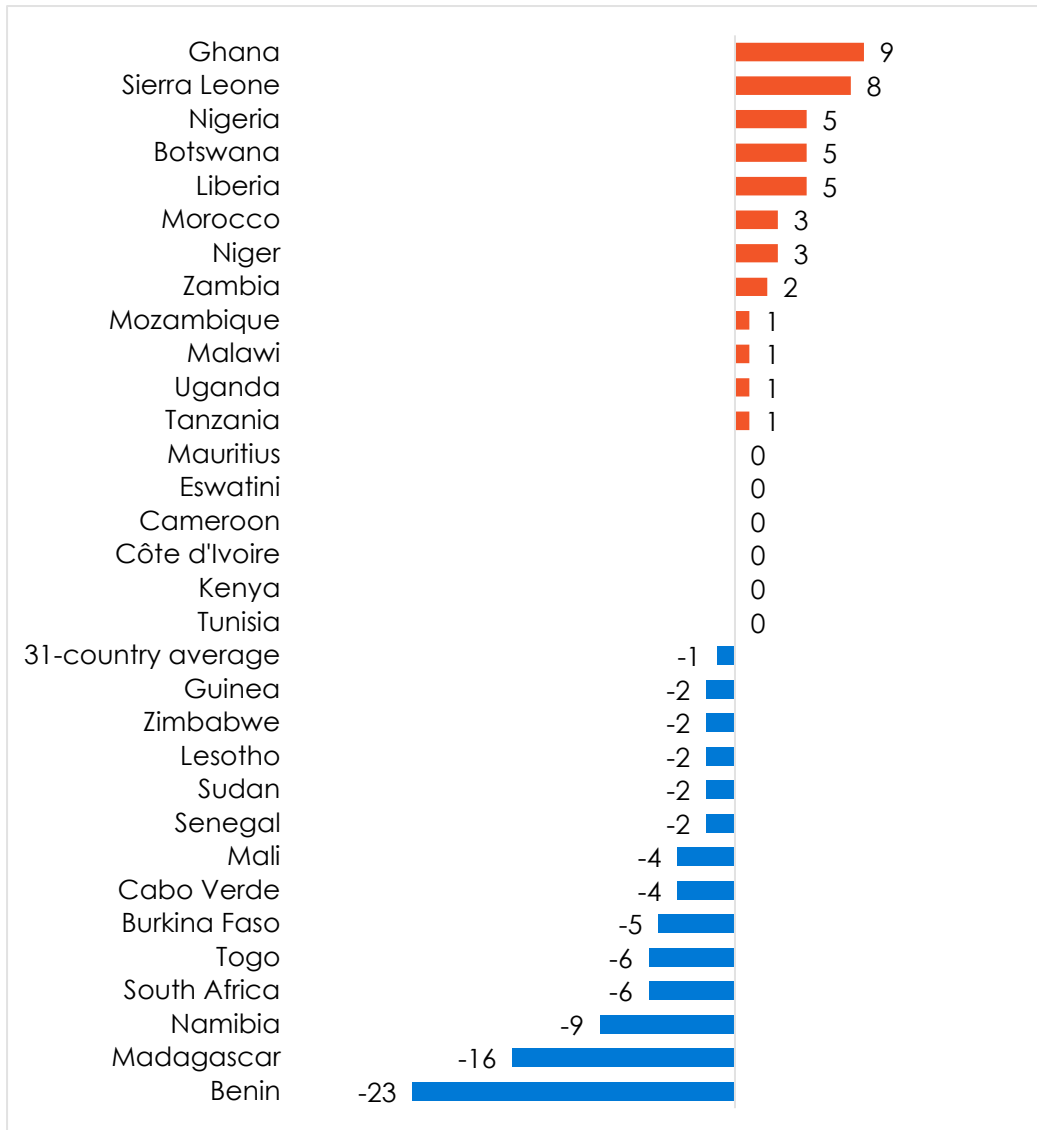
Figure 17: Location of toilet or latrine | by urban-rural location and lived poverty
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether each of the following is available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: A toilet or latrine?

On average over 31 countries, the past decade shows no progress in reducing the share of the population without access to a toilet or latrine, even outside their home or compound (Figure 18). Eight countries record significant reductions, led by Benin (-23 percentage points) and Madagascar (-16), while five countries show increases, including Ghana (+9 percentage points) and Sierra Leone (+8).

Figure 18: Change in proportion of households without access to a toilet/latrine
 | 31 countries | 2011-2023



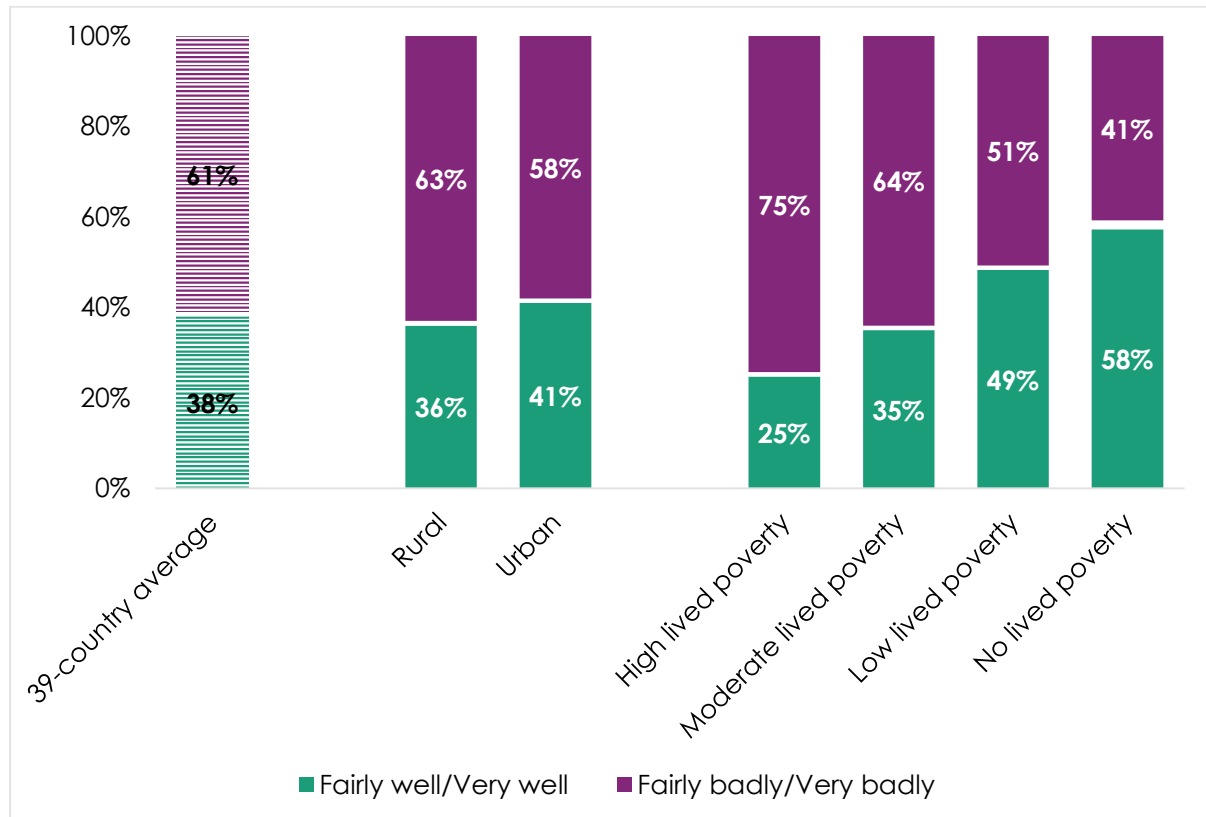
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether each of the following is available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: A toilet or latrine? (Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who say they do not have access to a toilet or latrine inside their house, inside their compound, or outside their compound.)

Government performance in providing water and sanitation services

Against this background of progress and challenges, how do Africans rate their government's performance on providing water and sanitation services?

Afrobarometer findings show that on average across 39 countries, a majority of citizens (61%) say their government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly," while only 38% offer positive assessments (Figure 19). Approval of the government's efforts on water and sanitation is somewhat higher in cities than in rural areas (41% vs. 36%) and increases with respondents' economic status, ranging from just 25% among the poorest to 58% among those experiencing no lived poverty.

Figure 19: Government performance on providing water and sanitation services
 | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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: Providing water and sanitation services?

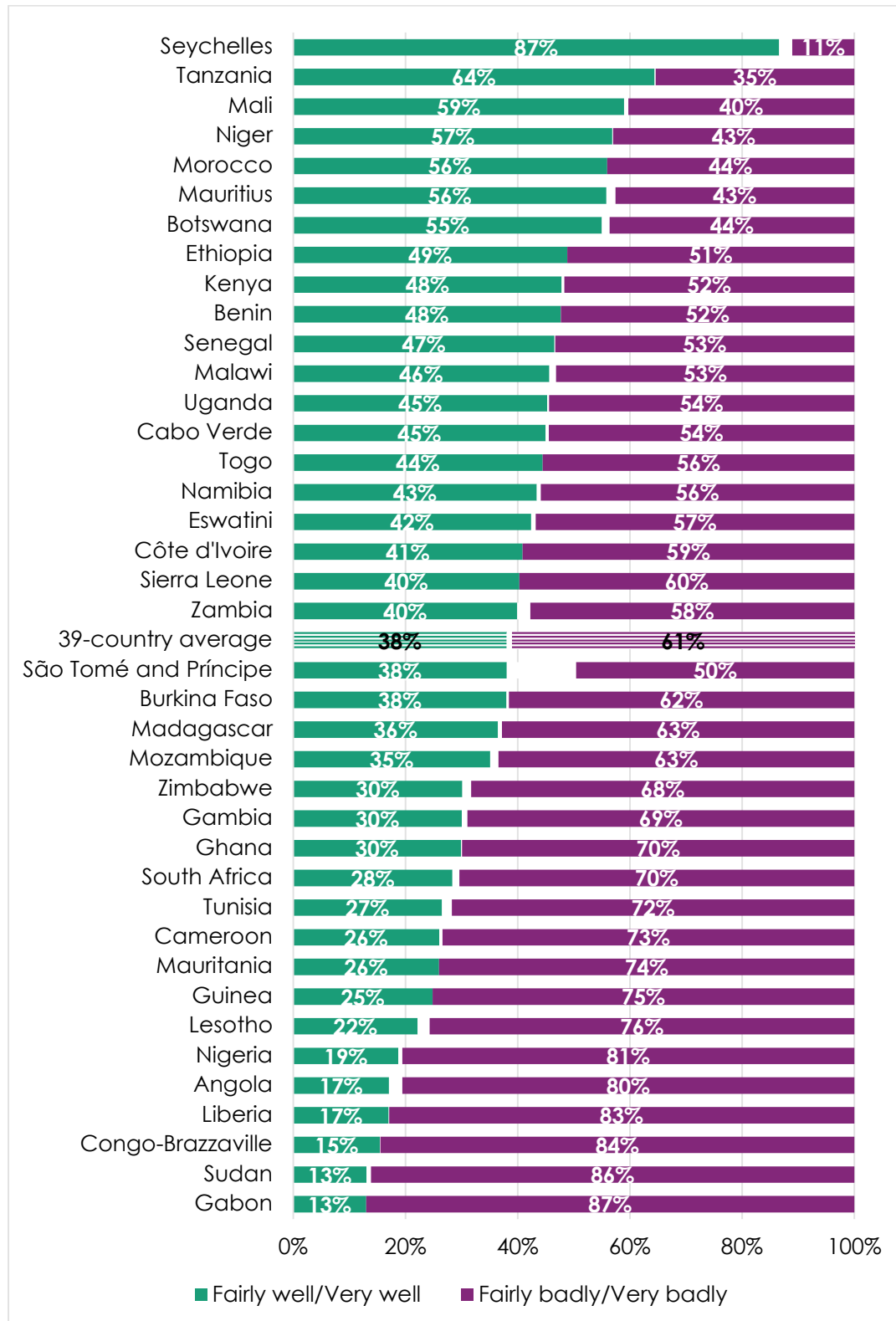
Seychelles – which recorded the largest proportion of households that “never” went without enough water (88%) (Figure 7) – is an outlier here, with 87% approval of the government's performance on water and sanitation, followed by Tanzania (64%). But fewer than one in five citizens praise their government's efforts on water/sanitation in Gabon (13%), Sudan (13%), Congo-Brazaville (15%), Liberia (17%), Angola (17%), and Nigeria (19%) (Figure 20).

Across the 30 countries that have tracked this indicator consistently since 2011/2013, positive assessments of government performance on water/sanitation have always been in the minority, increasing modestly until 2016/2018 (44%) but then dropping back to 2011/2013 levels (Figure 21).

Since 2011/2013, public assessments of the government's performance have improved significantly (by more than 3 percentage points) in 11 of the 31 countries for which we have comparable data, including huge gains in Tanzania (+31 points) and Niger (+25 points) (Figure 22).

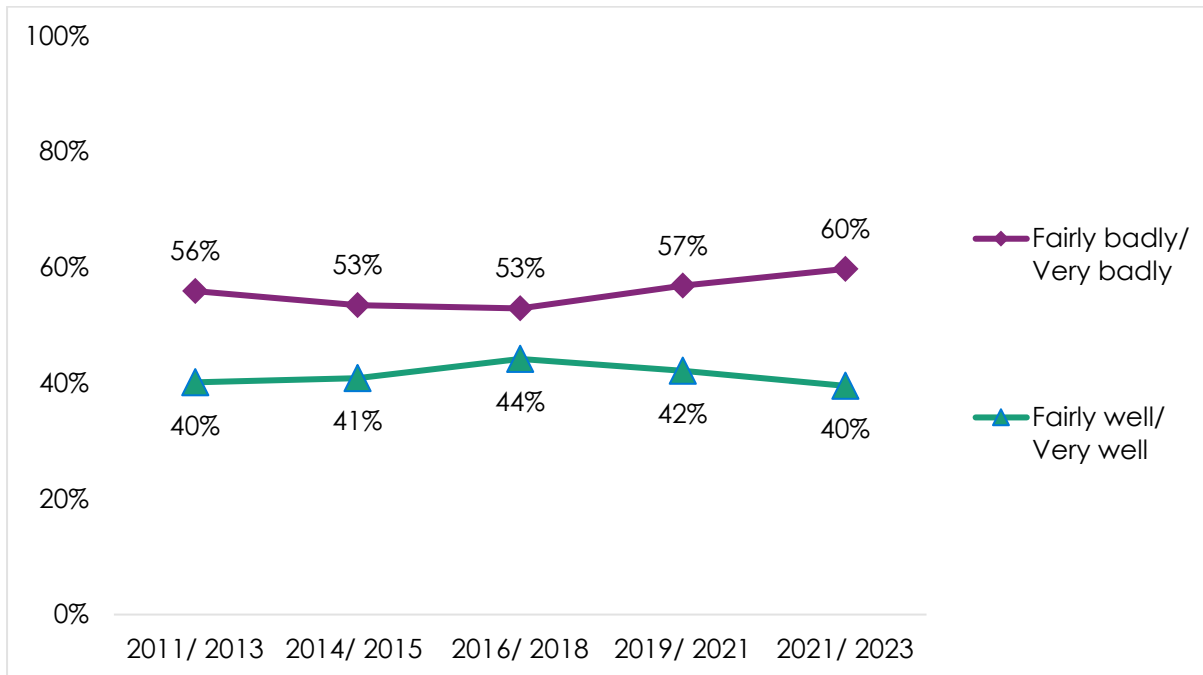
While holding fairly steady in eight countries, approval declined significantly in 12 countries, most dramatically in South Africa (-28 points) and Sudan (-25 points) (Figure 23).

Figure 20: Government performance on providing water and sanitation services
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023



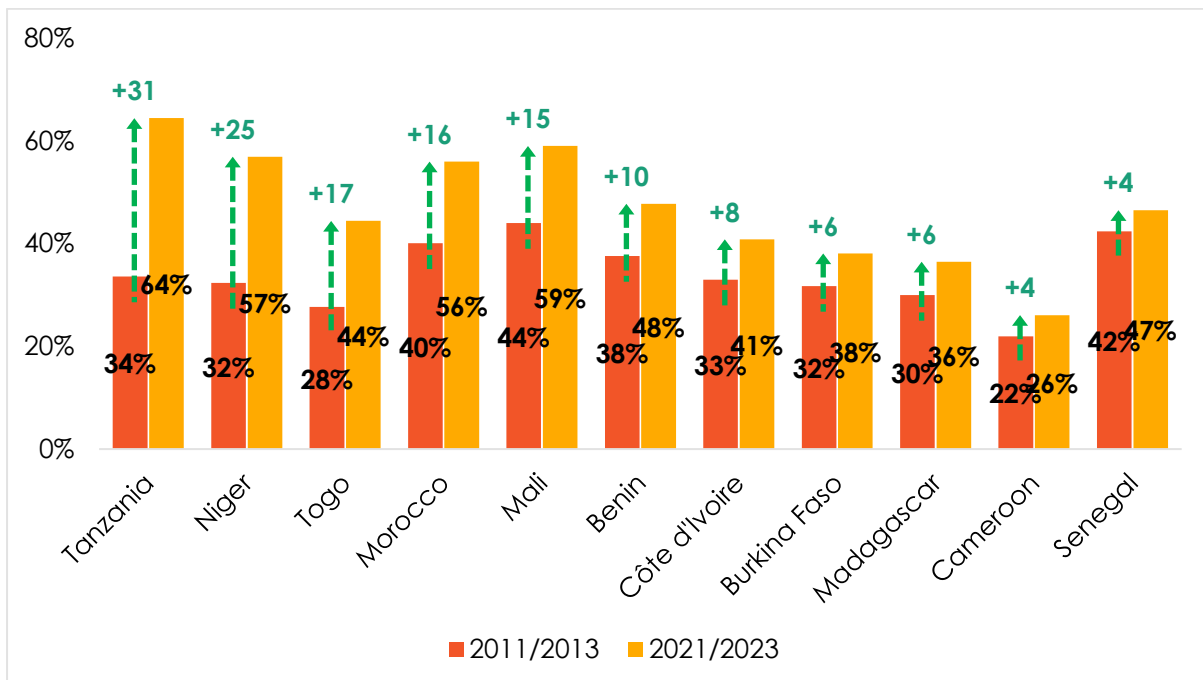
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Providing water and sanitation services?

Figure 21: Government performance in providing water and sanitation services
 | 30 countries | 2011-2023



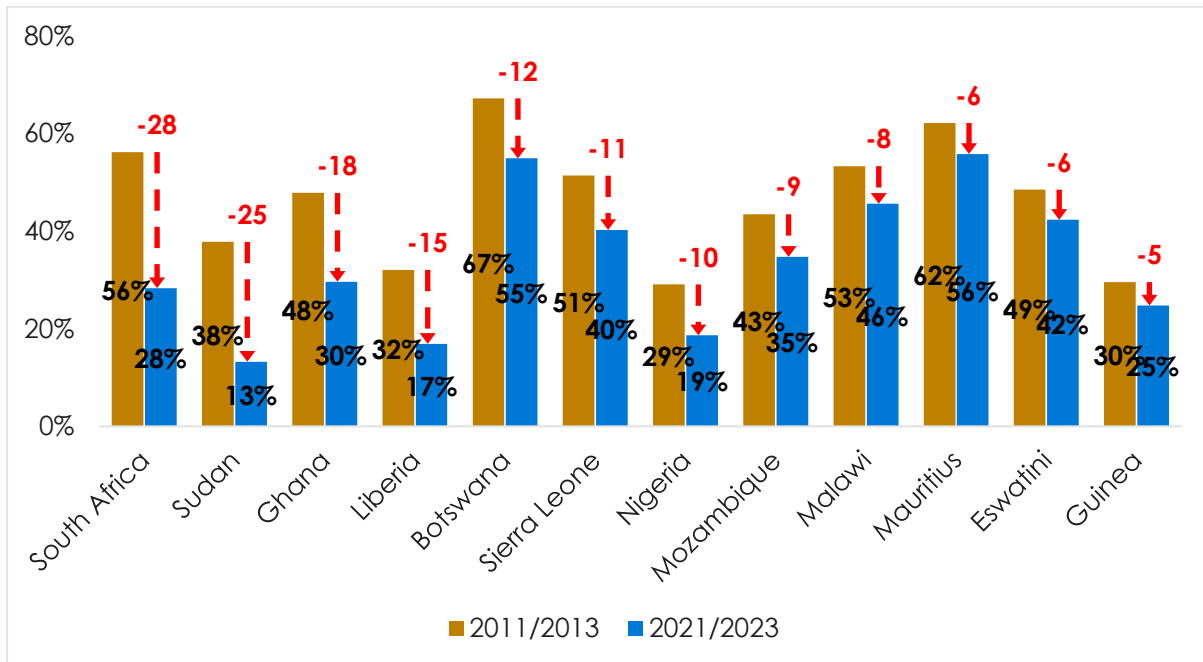
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Providing water and sanitation services?

Figure 22: Increase in positive evaluations of government performance on providing water and sanitation services
 | 11 countries | 2011-2023



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: Providing water and sanitation services? (Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 23: Decrease in positive evaluations of government performance on providing water and sanitation services | 12 countries | 2011-2023



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: Providing water and sanitation services? (Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Conclusion

Survey findings show that water supply and sanitation remain major challenges in most African countries, especially for rural populations and poor households. Ensuring an adequate supply of clean water ranks high on citizens' policy agenda as the share experiencing water shortages inches upward. Climate change is likely to continue to heighten pressure for decisive action by African governments, which are widely seen as failing to provide their citizens the basic necessities of safe water and sanitation.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 9 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 9 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Feb.-March 2022	2019
Benin	Jan. 2022	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020
Botswana	June-July 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Burkina Faso	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Cabo Verde	July-Aug. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019
Cameroon	March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Congo-Brazzaville	June-July 2023	NA
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019
Eswatini	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Ethiopia	May-June 2023	2013, 2020
Gabon	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2015, 2017, 2020
Gambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2018, 2021
Ghana	April 2022	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Guinea	Aug. 2022	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019
Kenya	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Liberia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
Madagascar	April-May 2022	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Feb. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Mali	July 2022	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Mauritania	Nov. 2022	NA
Mauritius	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Morocco	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Mozambique	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021
Namibia	Oct.-Nov. 2021	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Niger	June 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Nigeria	March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020
São Tomé and Príncipe	Dec. 2022	2015, 2018
Senegal	May-June 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021
Seychelles	Dec. 2022	NA
Sierra Leone	June-July 2022	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
South Africa	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021
Sudan	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Tanzania	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Togo	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Uganda	Jan. 2022	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Zambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Zimbabwe	March-April 2022	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021

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