



Dispatch No. 843 | 30 August 2024

Zambian youth want the government to prioritise management of the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 843 | Anne Okello and Edward Chibwili

Summary

Zambia has a young population, with about half under the age of 18 and 72% younger than 30. This demographic profile presents both amazing possibilities and major challenges for making youth a critical resource for the country's development in the years ahead (Population Council and UNFPA, 2018; UNESCO, 2022; FHI 360, 2022; Zambia Statistics Agency, 2024).

Efforts to empower young Zambians include the government's revised National Youth Policy, Adolescent Health Strategy, and programmes that provide financial resources to youth for starting businesses and other entrepreneurship activities (Population Council and UNFPA, 2018; Government of Zambia, 2016; UNESCO, 2022; Ministry of Youth and Sport, 2015).

Despite these initiatives, young people continue to face an uncertain future marked by growing unemployment and rising costs of living. Many youth who are employed work in the informal sector, which is characterised by low wages and a lack of career progression (Chooma, 2022; Population Council and UNFPA, 2018). The Global Youth Development Index ranks Zambia as a "low youth development" country, placing it 154th out of 181 countries (Commonwealth, 2021).

But in their country's 2021 election, Zambian youth served notice of their potential power: Voter turnout among young people increased to its highest level in the past decade in a protest vote that was widely credited with voting out a ruling party whose tenure was characterised by unemployment, a rising cost of living, and the erosion of democracy and human rights (Chooma, 2022; Mail & Guardian, 2021; FHI 360, 2022).

This dispatch reports on insights into the situation of youth in Zambia based on Afrobarometer's Round 9 survey in 2022.

Findings show that while young people are more educated than their elders, they are also more likely to be unemployed. Management of the economy, health, infrastructure, water supply, and unemployment are the top issues that young people want the government to address.

Zambian youth are divided in their views on the country's overall direction and economic condition, but a solid majority expect things to get better in the near future.

Notwithstanding their role in the 2021 election, young Zambians are significantly less likely than their elders to engage in political and civic activities, including voting.

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 10 surveys

were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 Zambian adults between 3 August and 7 September 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 have been conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Seven in 10 young Zambians (71%) have secondary or post-secondary education, significantly surpassing older generations.
- But they are also more likely to be unemployed: 36% say they are looking for a job, higher than the national average of 30%.
- Management of the economy ranks as the most important problem that Zambian youth (aged 18-35 years) want their government to address, followed by health, infrastructure/roads, water supply, and unemployment.
- Half (51%) of young Zambians say the government is doing a good job of managing the economy, and 71% offer favourable assessments on job creation. Fewer approve of the government's performance on improving basic health care (44%), providing water and sanitation services (43%), and maintaining roads and bridges (31%).
- A slim majority (53%) of youth say the country is going in "the right direction." While 52% describe the nation's economic condition as bad, 65% expect things to improve over the coming year.
- Young citizens are less likely than their elders to engage in political and civic activities such as voting, attending community meetings, joining others to raise an issue, and contacting their elected representatives.

Education and employment status

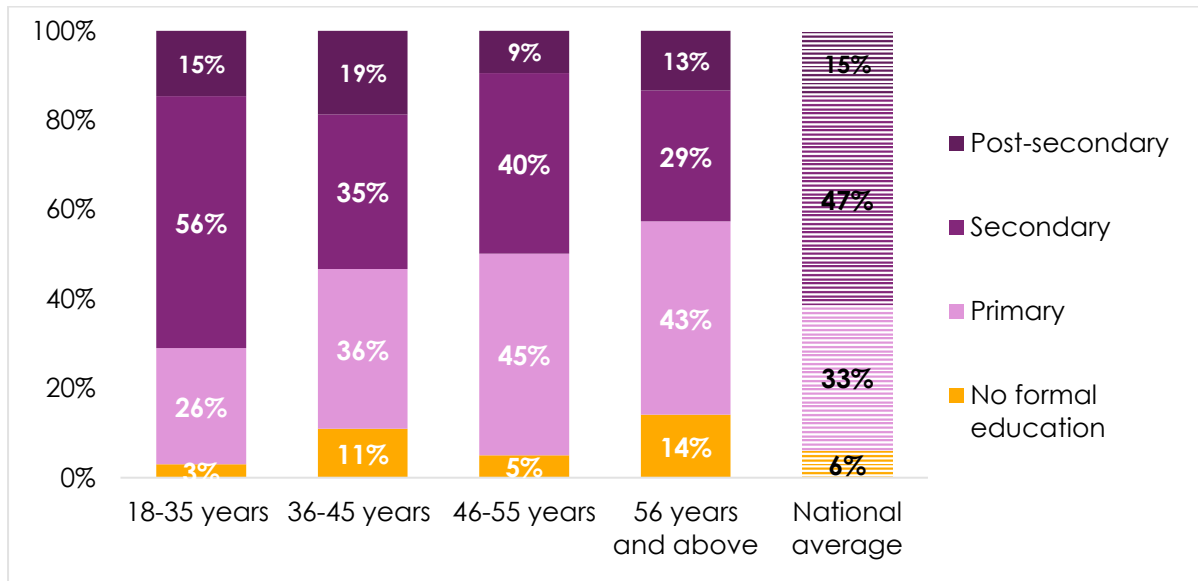
Zambia's youth (aged 18-35) are more educated than older generations. Seven in 10 young respondents (71%) report having secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 42%-54% among older cohorts (Figure 1).¹

While they have more education than their elders, young Zambians are more likely to be unemployed. More than one in three (36%) youth say that they are not employed and are looking for a job, compared to 32% of 36- to 45-year-olds and 23% of those in the 45-55 age bracket (Figure 2).

Data from the Afrobarometer survey suggest that there are significant levels of underemployment, too. Among youth who say they are employed, only slightly more than half (54%) say they have full-time jobs; the remainder (46%) are in part-time work (Figure 3).

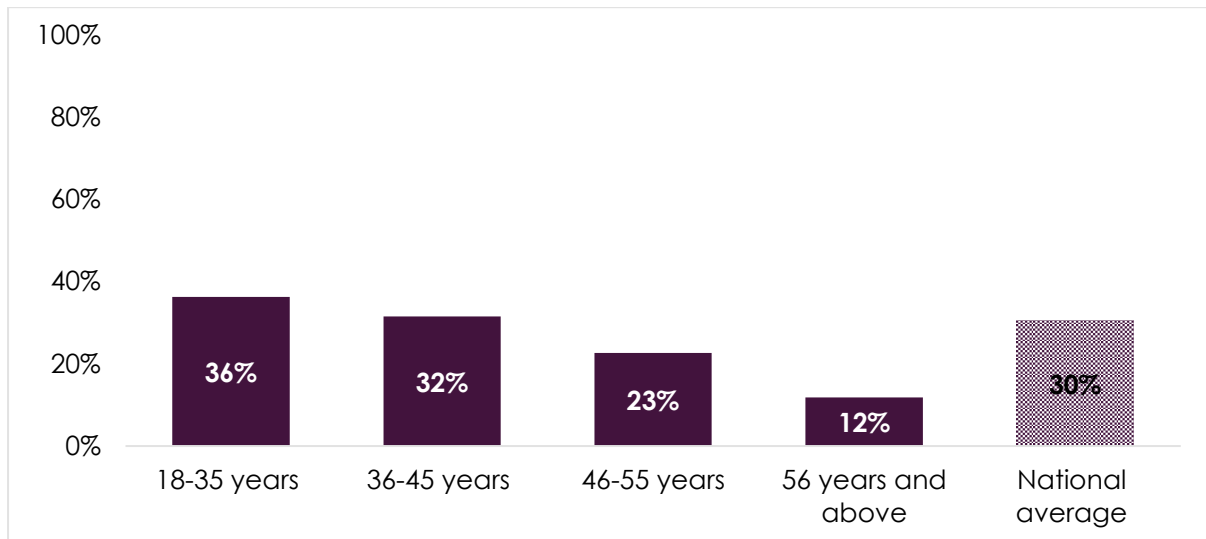
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. for 46- to 55-year-olds, 9% post-secondary and 40% secondary sum to 50%).

Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | Zambia | 2022



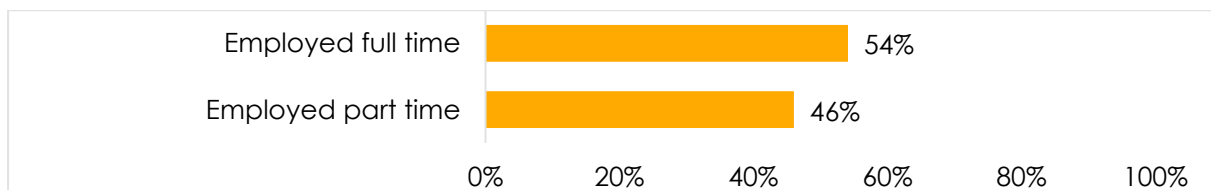
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Figure 2: Unemployment rate | by age group | Zambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (% who say they are unemployed and looking for a job)

Figure 3: Employment status | respondents aged 18-35 years who have jobs | Zambia | 2022



Respondents who say they have jobs were asked: Is it full time or part time? (Respondents who do not have jobs are excluded.)

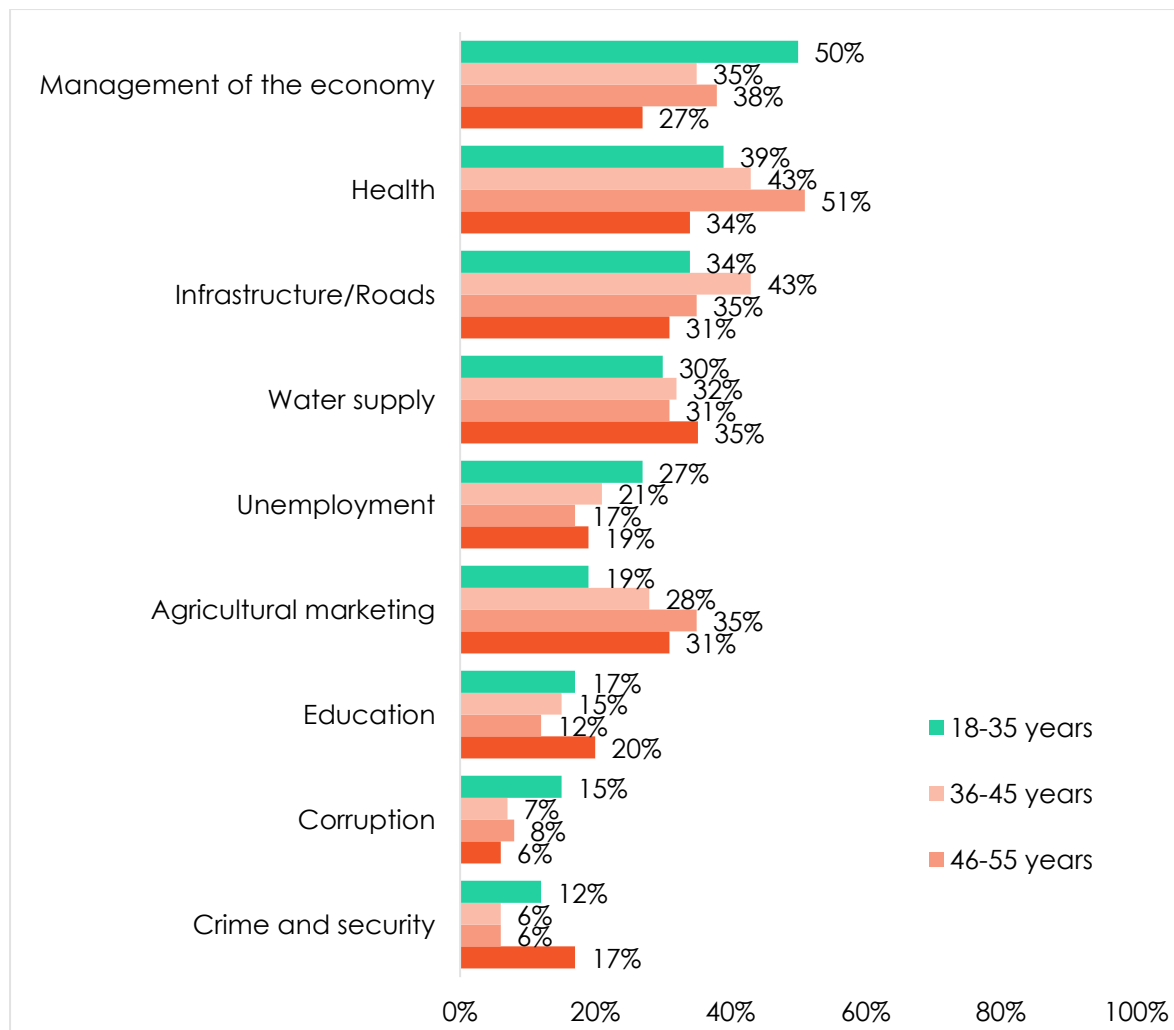
Priorities for government action and perception of performance

Young Zambians identify management of the economy as the most important problem the government must address: Fully half (50%) of 18- to 35-year-olds cite this as one of their top three priorities (Figure 4). Interestingly, given the jobs crisis, significantly fewer cite unemployment (27%, in fifth place) as a priority that the government specifically should address, perhaps suggesting that young Zambians see other potential actors, such as the private sector, as possible providers of jobs, if the government were to manage the economy better.

Health (39%) ranks in second place, followed by infrastructure/roads (34%) and water supply (30%), agricultural marketing (19%), education (17%), and corruption (15%).

Young respondents are significantly more likely than their elders to focus on economic management (by 12-23 percentage points), unemployment (by 6-10 points), and corruption (by 7-9 points). In contrast, young Zambians are less likely than older cohorts to cite health, agricultural marketing, water supply, and crime/security as top problems.

Figure 4: Most important problems | by age group | Zambia | 2022



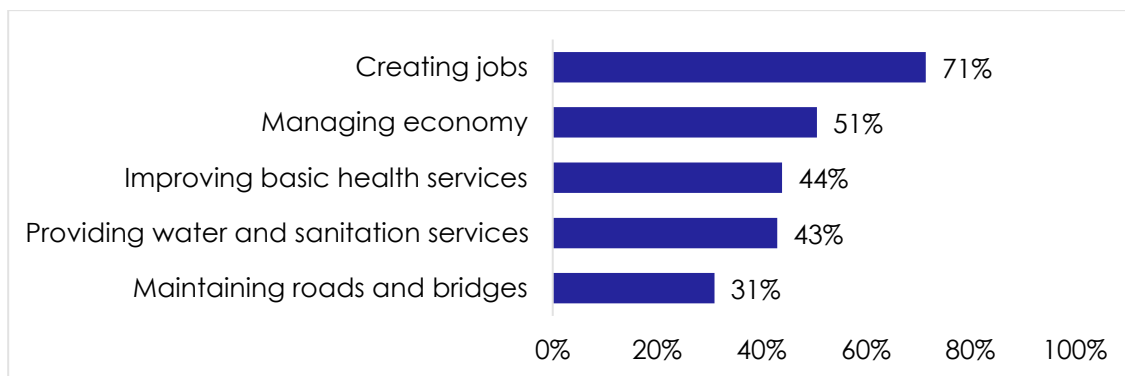
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)*

What are young Zambians' perceptions of government action on their core priorities? Half (51%) of youth say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on managing the economy (Figure 5). And despite high levels of unemployment and underemployment, seven in 10 young respondents (71%) are happy with the government's performance on job creation, again perhaps suggesting that many young Zambians don't see it as primarily the government's responsibility to provide employment.

In contrast, fewer youth approve of the government's efforts to improve basic health services (44%), provide water and sanitation services (43%), and maintain roads and bridges (31%).

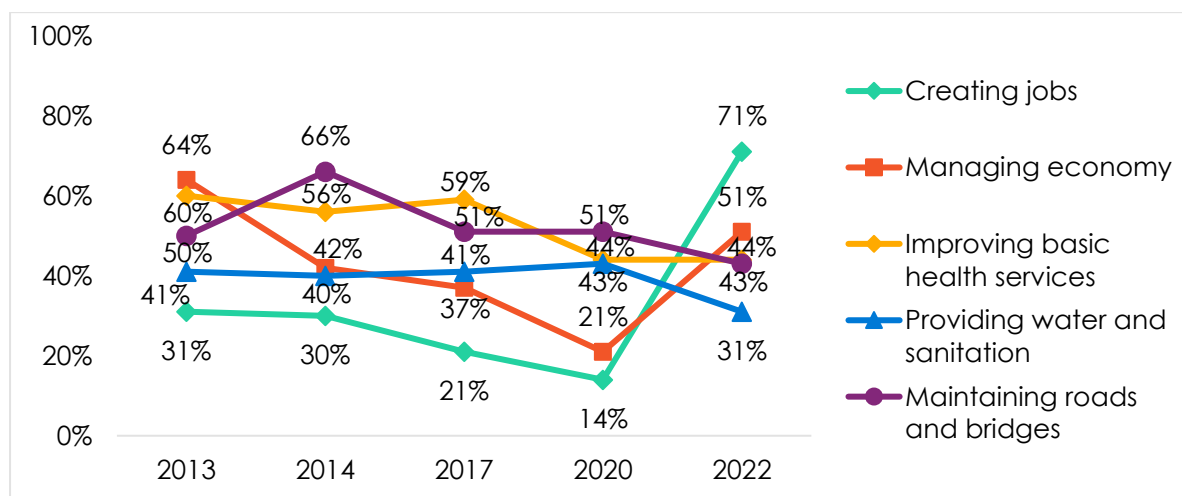
Young Zambians' assessments of the government's performance on these top five priorities have varied considerably since 2013 (Figure 6). Evaluations of economic management and job creation declined dramatically between 2013 and 2020 (from 64% to 21% and 31% to 14%, respectively), before rising sharply again in 2022 (by 30 and 57 percentage points). However, ratings have worsened over the past decade when it comes to water and sanitation services (from 41% to 31%), infrastructure maintenance (from 50% to 43%, but down 22 percentage points from a peak of 66% in 2014), and health care (from 60% to 44%).

Figure 5: Youth approval of government performance on top five youth concerns
| respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 6: Youth approval of government performance on top five youth concerns
| respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 2013-2022

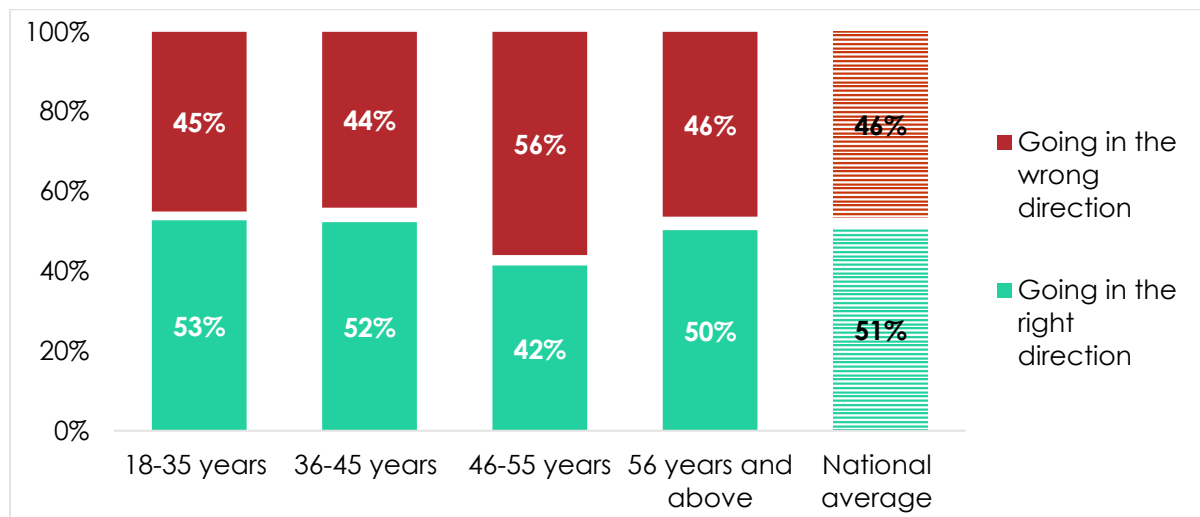


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

The country's direction, economic condition, and future

Like their elders, young Zambians are divided in their views on the country's overall direction: A slim majority (53%) think it is headed in "the right direction," while 45% disagree (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Country's direction | by age group | Zambia | 2022

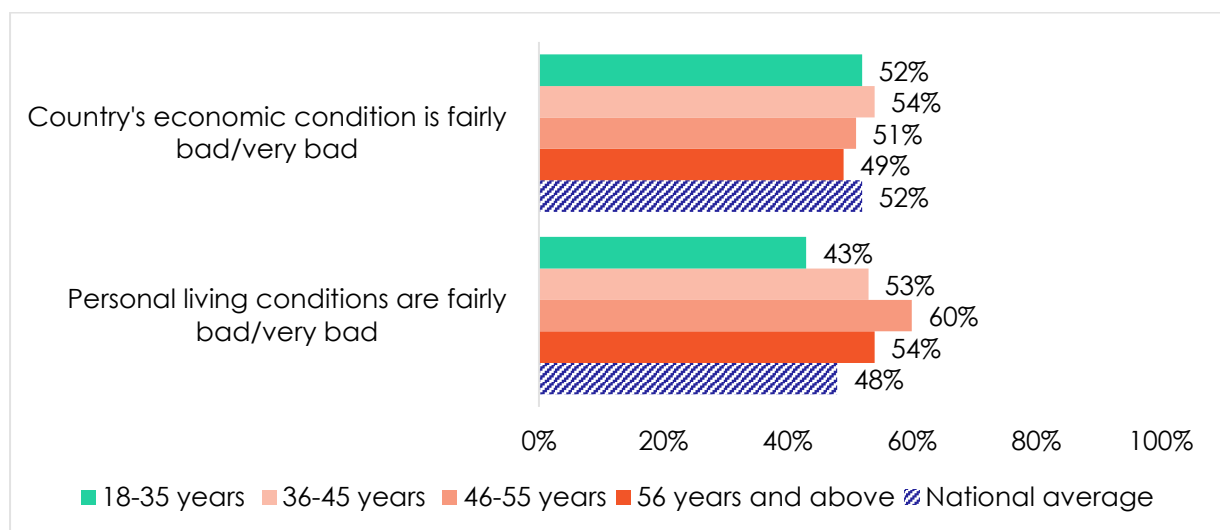


Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Similarly, views on the economy are mixed: Slightly more than half of young Zambians (52%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," matching the national average (Figure 8).

While more than four in 10 youth (43%) report that their personal living conditions are bad, this is a significantly smaller share than among middle-aged and elderly citizens (53%-60%).

Figure 8: Negative assessments of country's economy and personal living conditions | by age group | Zambia | 2022

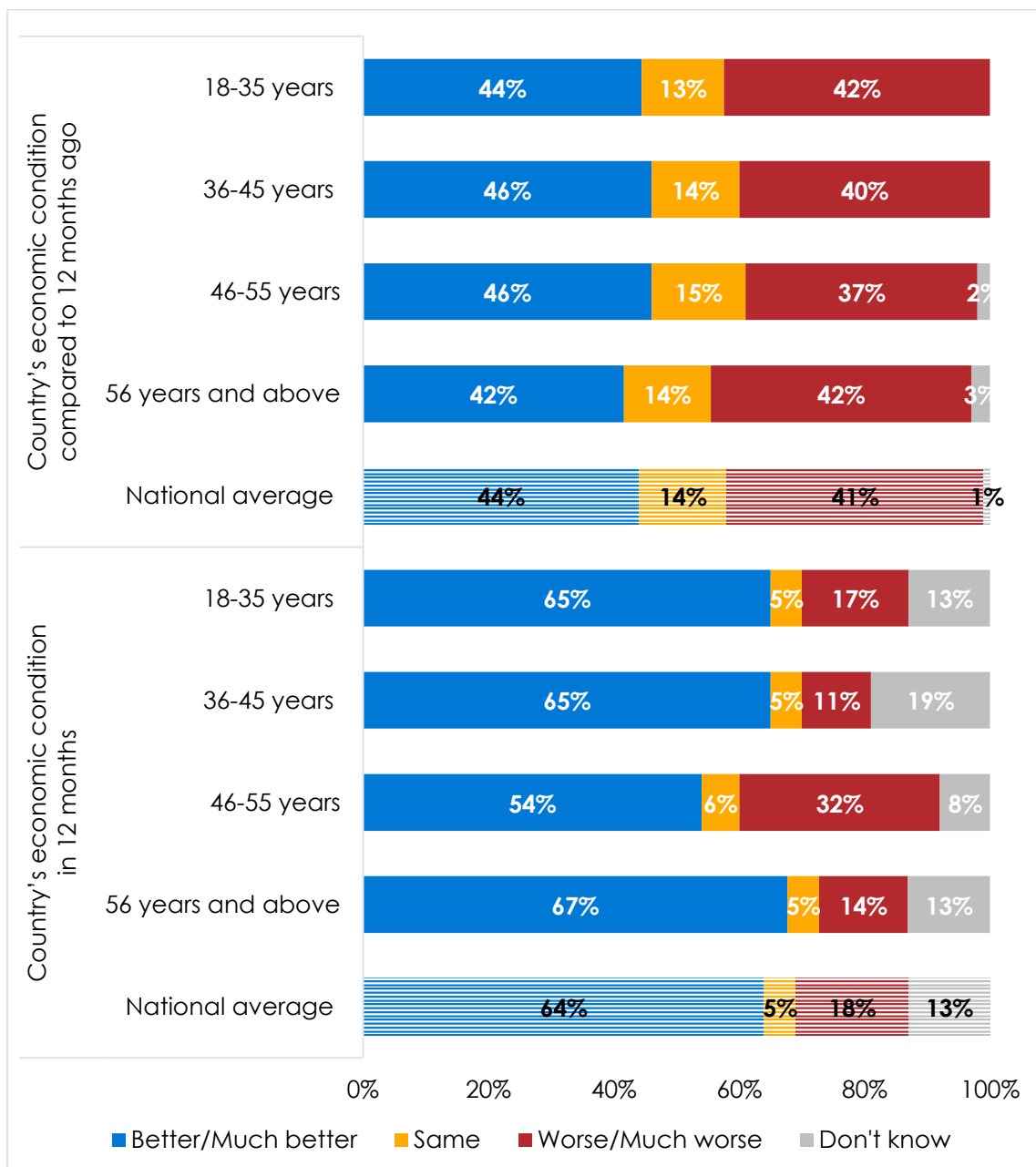


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

While 44% of young respondents think the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, an almost equal proportion – 42% say it has worsened (Figure 9). About two in three young Zambians (65%) believe that things will get better in the 12 months to come, a sign of hopefulness.

This is consistent with the age brackets of 36-45 years and those aged 56 or more; the age group of 46- to 55-year-olds buck the trend, with a significantly higher proportion (32%) indicating that the economic situation would deteriorate over the year to come.

Figure 9: Retrospective and prospective assessments of country's economic condition | by age group | Zambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago? Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Political engagement

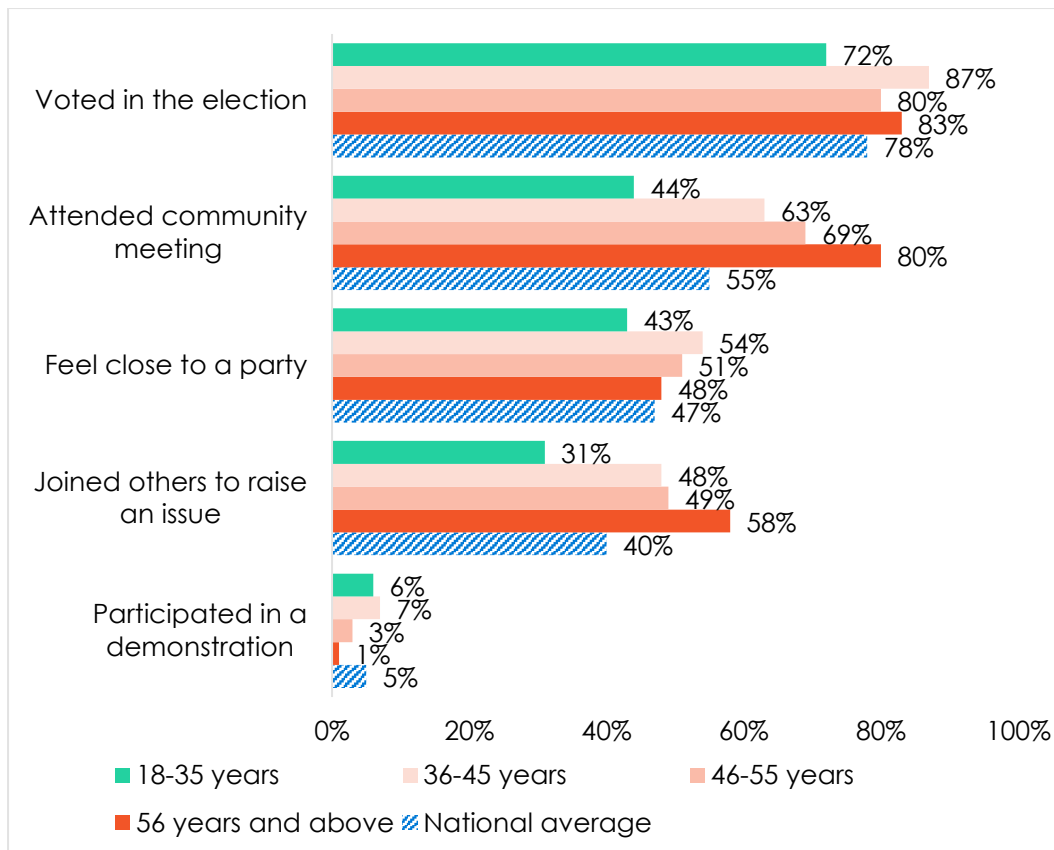
To what extent do young citizens in Zambia engage in political and civic processes in pursuit of change?

The youth lag behind their elders when it comes to voting in elections, attending community meetings, identifying with political parties, and joining others to raise an issue. Not quite three-quarters (72%) of 18- to 35-year-olds say they voted in the most recent national elections in 2021, a lower rate than reported by older cohorts (80%-87%) (Figure 10).

While 44% of young respondents say that they attended a community meeting at least once during the previous year, that is between 19 and 36 percentage points lower than older age groups. Youth are similarly less likely to say that they joined others to raise an issue (31% vs. 48%-58%).

About one in 20 young people (6%) say they participated in a demonstration or protest march last year, about the same rate as among 36- to 45-year-olds (7%), but higher than among older respondents (1%-3%).

Figure 10: Political participation | by age group | Zambia | 2022



Respondents were asked:

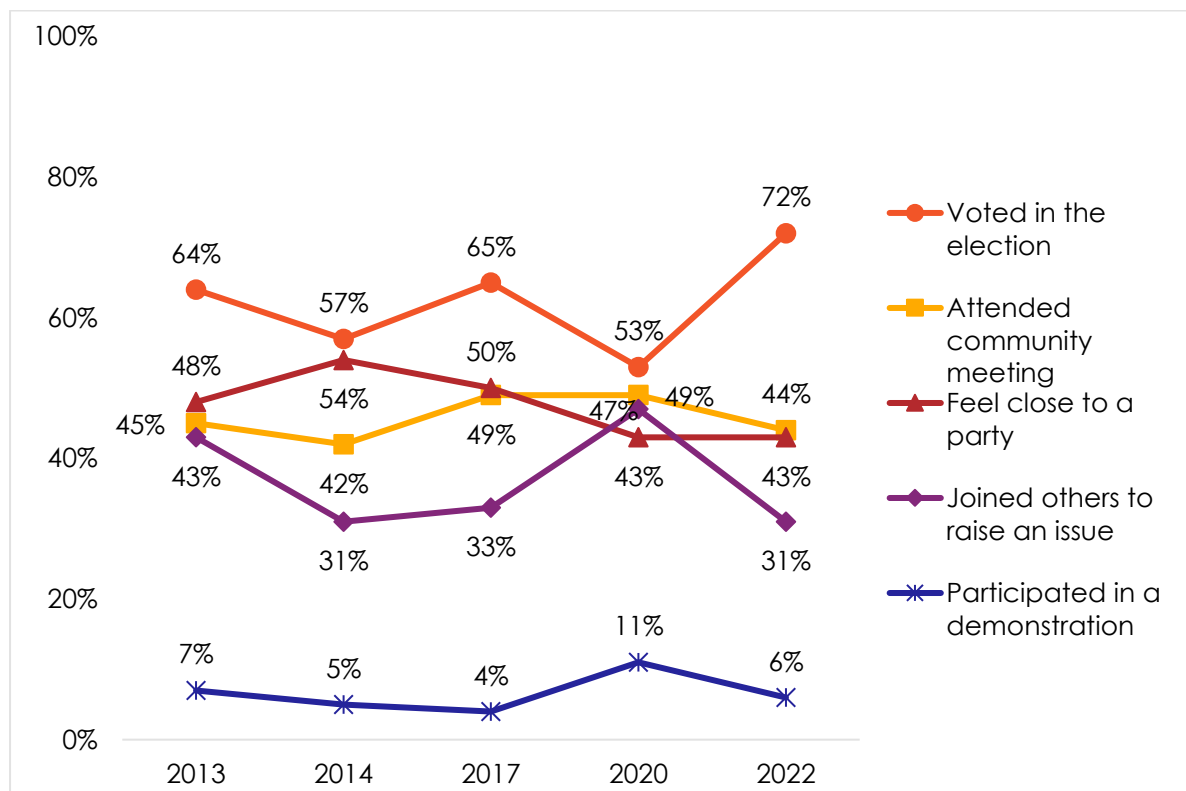
In the last national election, held in 2021, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2021 are excluded.)

Do you feel close to any particular political party?

Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Young Zambians' self-reported engagement has varied over time on each of these indicators (Figure 11). Compared to 2020 survey findings, voting in the most recent election rose by 19 percentage points (from 53% with regard to the 2016 general election to 72%). In contrast, joining others to raise an issue declined by 16 points (from 47% to 31%), while attending community meetings and demonstrating dropped by 5 points each, back to figures seen in the 2013 survey. Identification with a political party remains unchanged since 2020 but has seen some decline over the years.

Figure 11: Youth political participation | respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked:

In the last national election, held in [year], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Respondents who were too young to vote are excluded.)

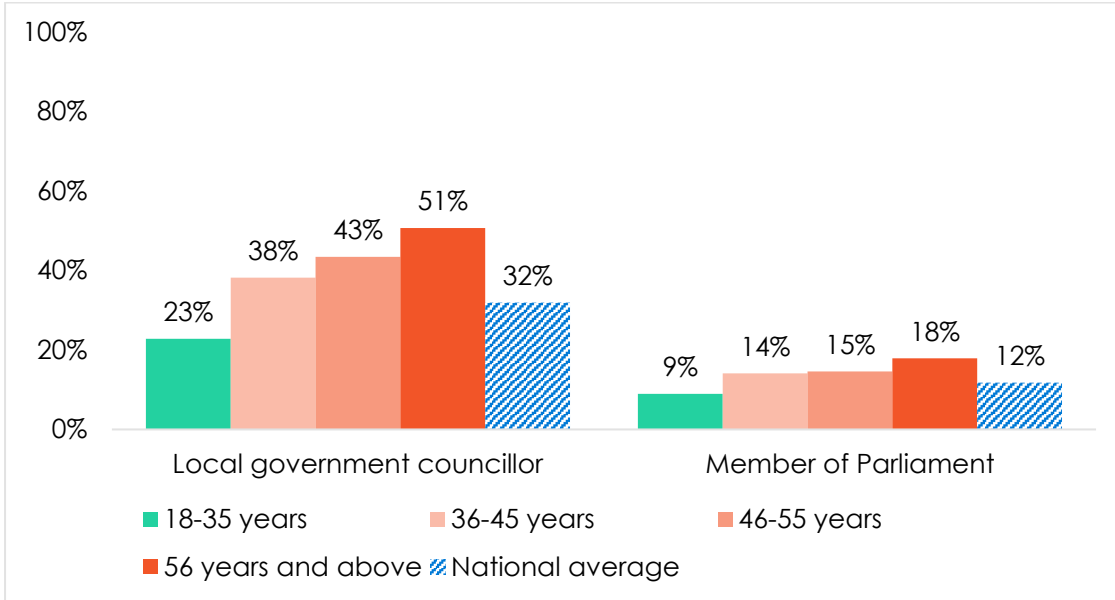
Do you feel close to any particular political party? (% who say "yes")

Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

About a quarter (23%) of young respondents say they contacted a local government councillor about an important issue at least once during the year preceding the survey, a significantly lower contact rate than was recorded for their elders (38%-51%) (Figure 12). Only 9% report having contacted a member of Parliament (MP) – again, a significantly smaller proportion than among older groups (14%-18%).

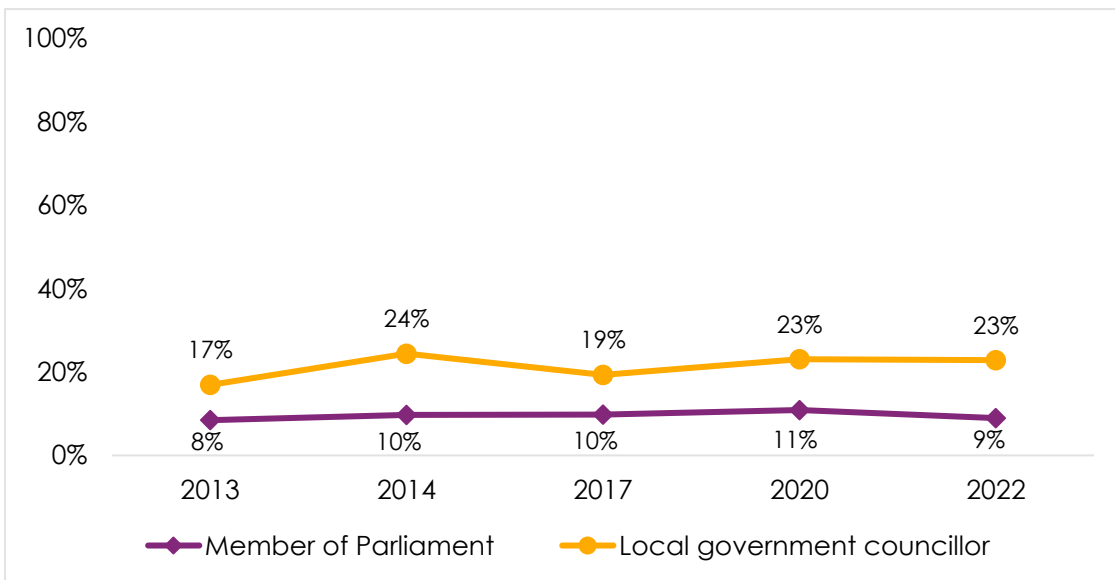
Young people's self-reported contact with local government councillors has increased by 6 percentage points (Figure 13). Contact with MPs has remained very low – it does not show a similar gain.

Figure 12: Contacted political representatives during previous year | by age group | Zambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

Figure 13: Youth contact with political representatives | respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

Conclusion

Zambia's future lies with its youth. Afrobarometer's 2022 survey findings show that young citizens are intensely concerned about the country's economic performance. This is to be expected, given high levels of unemployment and underemployment among the youth. But

while young people highlight economic management as a top priority for government action, fewer seem to see job creation as a governmental responsibility – or a governmental failure. This suggests that young Zambians may see the state as needing to facilitate the economic conditions that will let the private sector flourish and create jobs for them.

The significant increase in voting by young people in the last national election taught us that the youth retain massive power in Zambian politics (Chooma, 2022; Mail & Guardian, 2021; FHI 360, 2022). Yet by their own accounts, young Zambians are still significantly less politically engaged than older citizens, suggesting that there is room for young citizens to make their voices heard more powerfully.

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Anne Okello is Afrobarometer assistant project manager for Eastern Africa, based at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi. Email: aokello@afrobarometer.org.

Edward Chibwili is a research fellow at the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia. Email: edward.chibwili@unza.zm.

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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 Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, 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.

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