

# Ugandans applaud government's COVID-19 response but suspect pervasive corruption

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 868 | George William Kayanja**

## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the health and economic well-being of people around the globe, though to varying degrees (OECD, 2022). Uganda's geographical location, rate of population growth, influx of refugees, and weak health care infrastructure make the country particularly vulnerable to public health emergencies. In the past, outbreaks of cholera and the Ebola virus have led to high mortality rates, due in part to late detection and inadequate coordination by the Ministry of Health. And even though those outbreaks were contained, poor record-keeping has delayed the development of future response strategies (Kayiwa et al., 2022).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government rapidly instituted response measures that included a national lockdown and a supplementary budget of UGX310 billion (roughly \$80 million) to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

The strict lockdown, which lasted from March 2020 to August 2021, included bans on transportation, the closure of schools and places of worship, and quarantines for incoming travellers. Analysts specialising in health care have lauded the Ugandan government for being prepared to respond to this public health emergency before the first case was registered, going so far as to call its response "a role model for pandemic containment in Africa" (Sarki, Ezeh, & Stranges, 2021).

However, some critics argue that the government's overall response was insufficient. For example, a report by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022) says that "relief programs have primarily been directed toward the urban population in Kampala and surroundings, while economic response measures were mostly focused on the formal sector, therefore not effectively reaching the poorest and most vulnerable citizens."

This dispatch explores Ugandan citizens' evaluations of the government's COVID-19 response based on Afrobarometer surveys completed in early 2021 and in early 2022.

Overall, most Ugandans praised the government's management of the pandemic and endorsed the use of the police and military to enforce public health mandates during a crisis. But most were dissatisfied with government efforts to provide assistance to vulnerable households and suspected pervasive corruption related to COVID-19 resources.

Self-reported vaccine uptake rates were relatively high, and trust in the government's ability to ensure vaccine safety grew by 10 percentage points between 2021 and 2022.

More than half of citizens said the government should invest more resources to prepare for future public health crises, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health 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 10 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed nationally representative samples of 2,400 adult citizens in December 2020-January 2021 and in January 2022, the 10th and 11th Afrobarometer surveys conducted in Uganda. Samples of this size yield country-level results with margins of error of +/- 2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

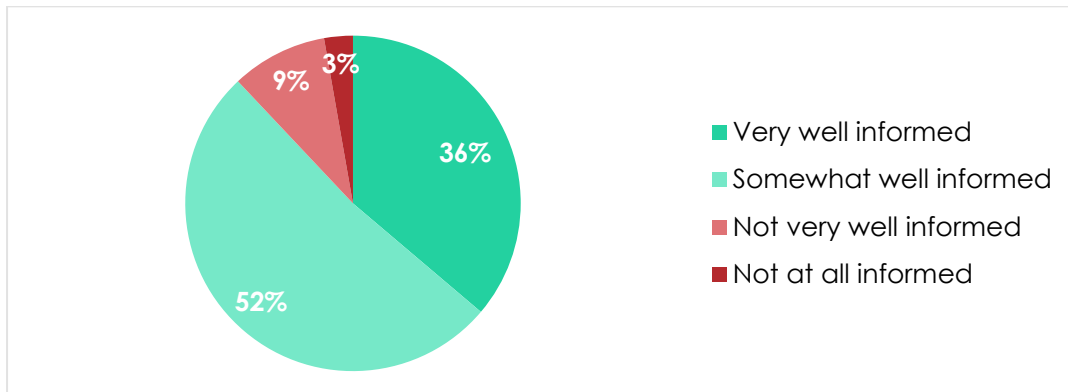
## Key findings

- As of early 2021, an overwhelming majority (88%) of Ugandans said they were at least "somewhat well informed" about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it.
- In both 2021 and 2022, more than eight in 10 Ugandans applauded the government's performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Nearly three-fourths of respondents endorsed the use of police and security forces to enforce health mandates during a pandemic.
- As of January 2022, 71% of adults said they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.
  - More than eight in 10 residents in the North (86%) and West (83%) reported getting the vaccine, rates that are about 30 percentage points higher than in the East (55%).
- Trust in the government's capacity to ensure vaccine safety grew between 2021 and 2022, from 49% to 59%.
- In 2022, the vast majority (87%) of Ugandans said they had not received any government assistance to limit the negative effects of COVID-19.
- Fewer than one in five citizens considered the distribution of pandemic-related assistance to have been fair, and just one-third (33%) were satisfied with the government's efforts in this area.
- Eight in 10 Ugandans (81%) said "some" or "a lot" of funds intended for the COVID-19 response were lost due to corruption.
- A majority of respondents said the government should invest more resources in preparing for future public health emergencies, even if it comes at the expense of other health services.

## Citizens' awareness of COVID-19

As of early 2021, nearly nine in 10 Ugandans (88%) reported feeling "somewhat well informed" (52%) or "very well informed" (36%) about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Uganda | 2021**

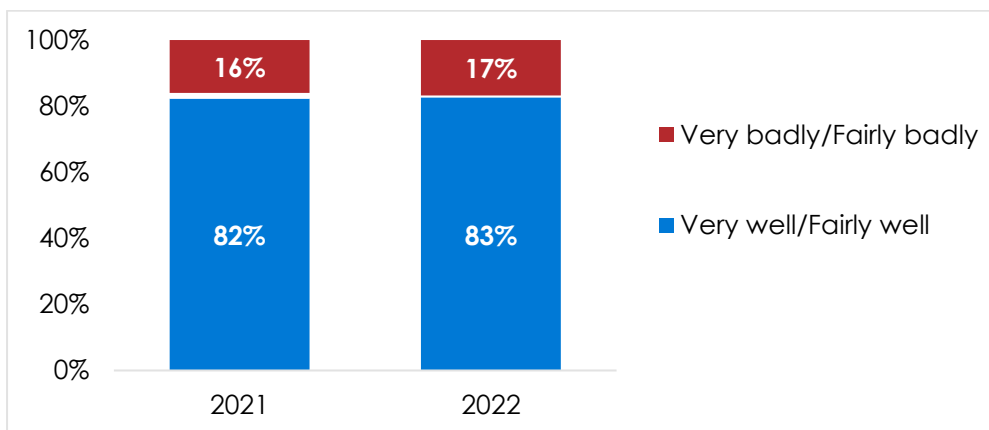


**Respondents were asked:** How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

### Government response to COVID-19

In both surveys that quizzed interviewees on COVID-19, overwhelming majorities of Ugandans praised the government’s response to the pandemic: More than four-fifths (82%-83%) of respondents said the government performed “very well” or “fairly well” (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: How well is the government managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? | Uganda | 2021-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling/managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

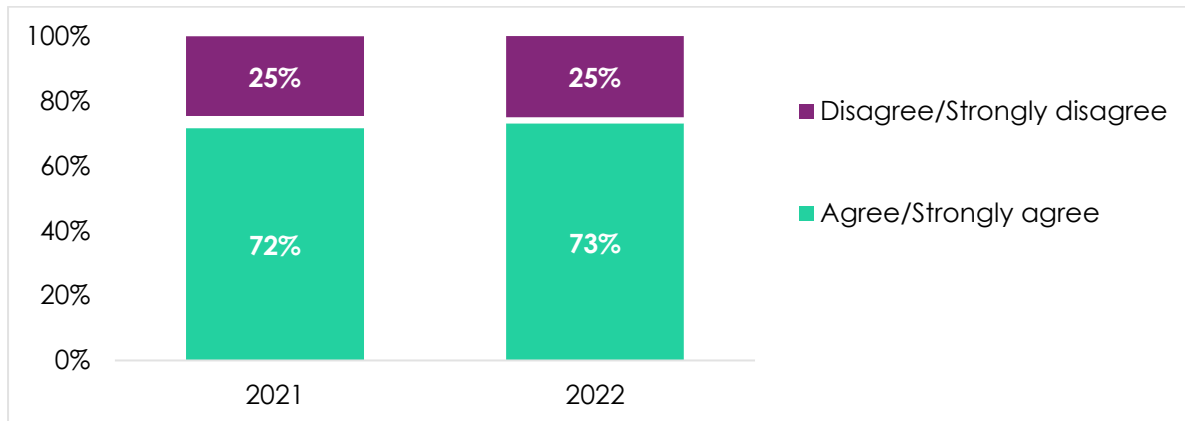
We see similar consistency in support for the government's right to use the police or military to enforce public health measures during a pandemic: In both 2021 and 2022, nearly three-fourths of respondents (72%-73%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that such steps are justified (Figure 3).

Women were 8 percentage points more likely than men to endorse the involvement of security forces in public health management (77% vs. 69%), while rural residents were 7 points more likely than their urban counterparts to hold this view (75% vs. 68%) (Figure 4).

Support was higher among citizens in the East (79%), Kampala (77%), and the West (76%) than in the North (67%) or Central Uganda (68%). Respondents with post-secondary

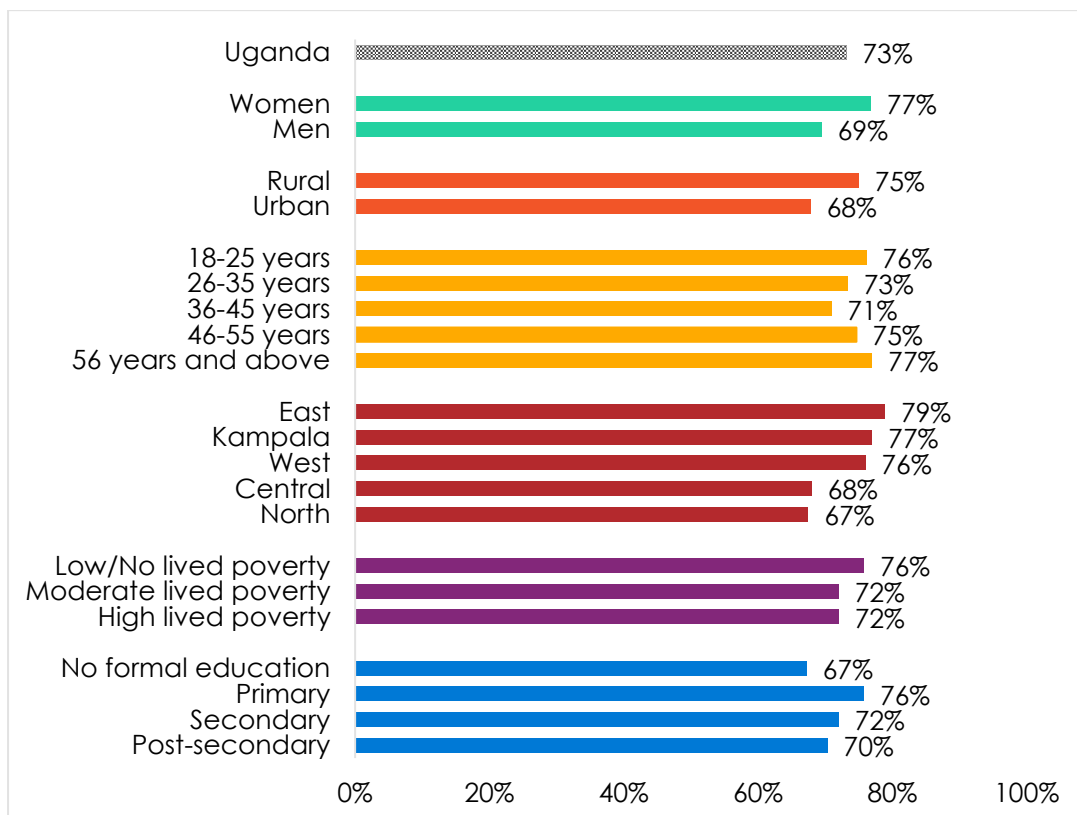
education (76%) were somewhat more likely to accept such measures than those with less schooling (72%).

**Figure 3: Should security forces enforce public health mandates?** | Uganda | 2021-2022



**Respondents were asked:** When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to use police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings or wearing face masks?

**Figure 4: Government is justified in using security forces to enforce public health mandates** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



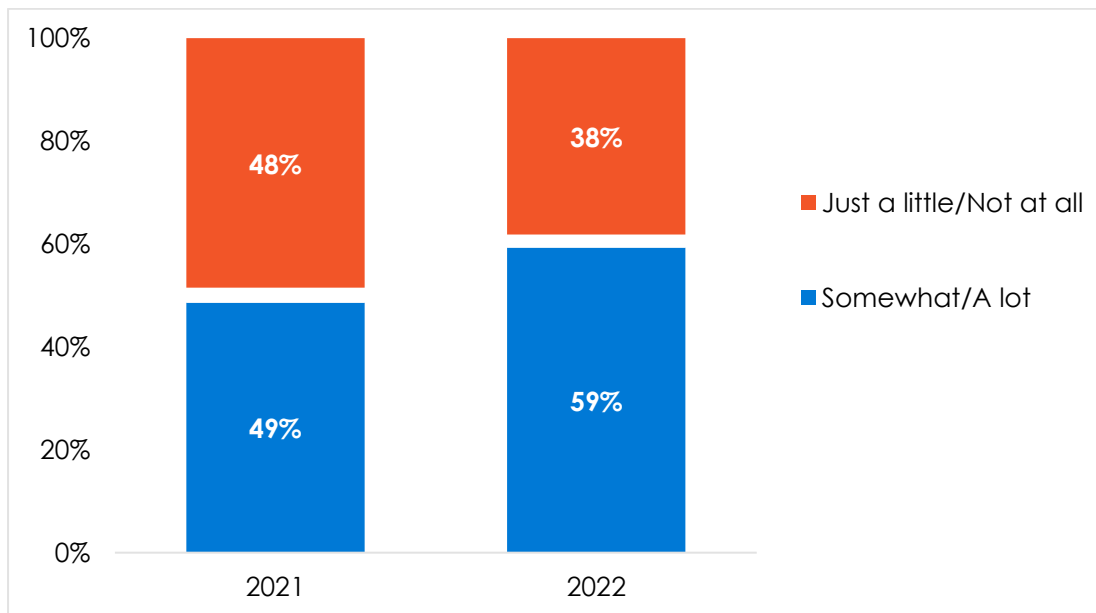
**Respondents were asked:** When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to use police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings or wearing face masks? (% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed")

## COVID-19 vaccines

How much do Ugandans trust their government to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines?

On this question, there is a considerable difference between surveys (Figure 5). In 2021, citizens were split down in the middle (49% vs. 48%) on whether they trusted the government to ensure that vaccines were safe. A year later, the share of trusting respondents had increased by 10 percentage points, to 59% who said they trusted the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure safe vaccines.

**Figure 5: Do you trust the government to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines?**  
 | Uganda | 2021-2022



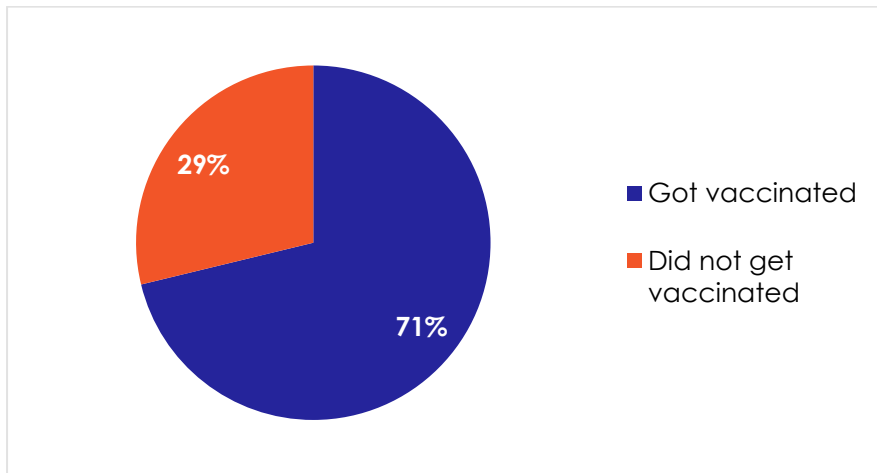
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Ugandan citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

As of January 2022, 71% of adults said they had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine (Figure 6).

Differences in vaccine uptake rates were modest across gender, the urban-rural divide, and lived poverty status<sup>1</sup> (Figure 7). But there was significant regional variation: More than eight in 10 respondents in the North (86%) and the West (83%) reported that they had received a vaccine, while only a narrow majority (55%) in the East said the same. Ugandans with post-secondary education were 14 percentage points more likely than those without formal education to be vaccinated (79% vs. 65%).

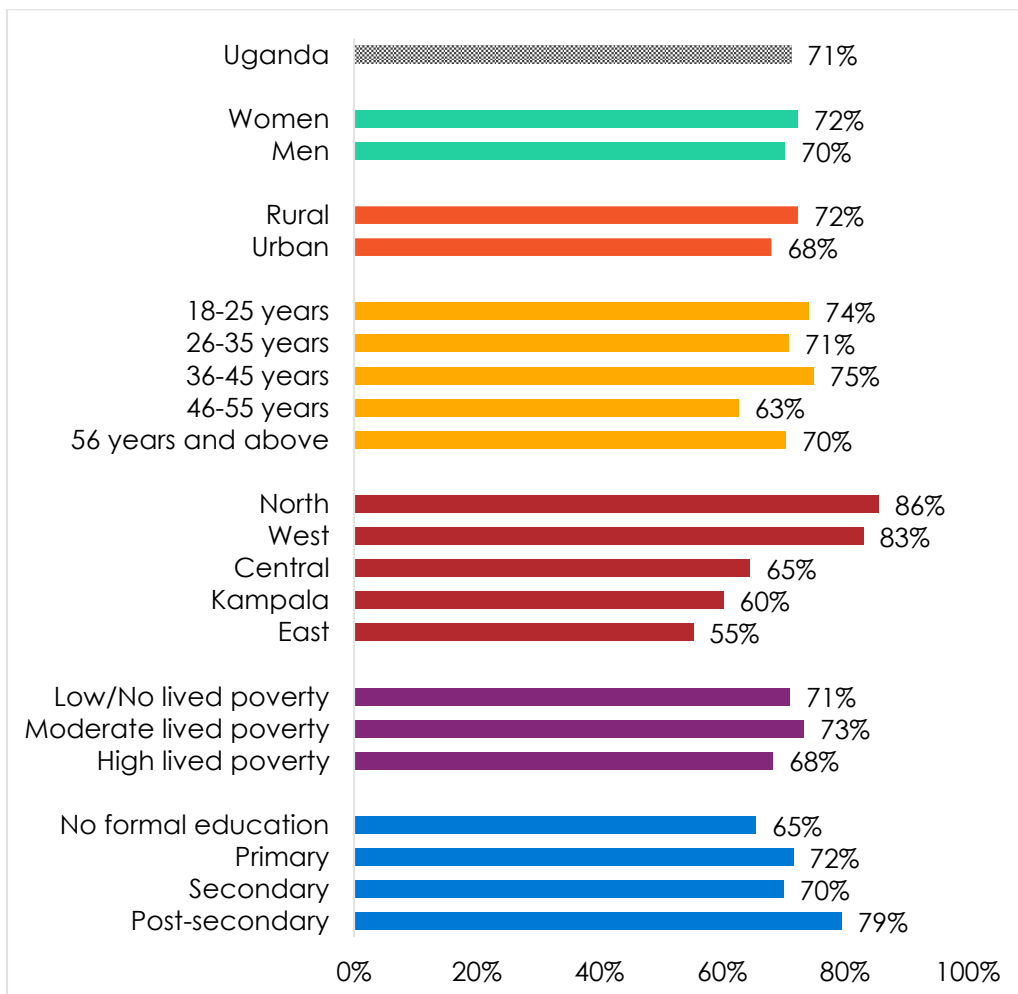
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived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

**Figure 6: COVID-19 vaccine uptake | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you received vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses?

**Figure 7: Citizens' uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you received vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses? (% who said "yes")

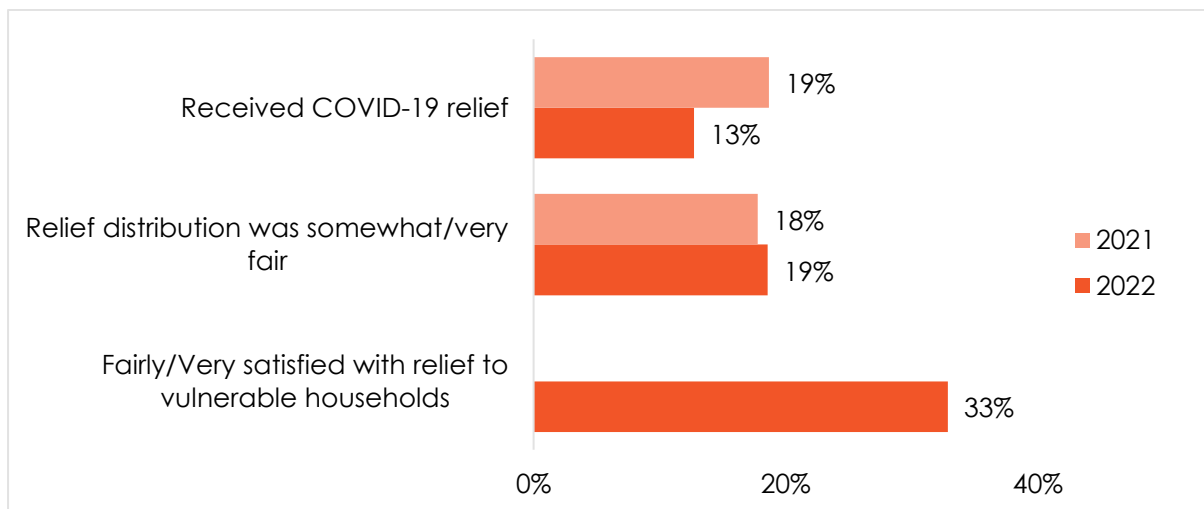
## Relief distribution

Despite positive ratings of the government's overall response to the coronavirus outbreak, Ugandans were less than pleased with its efforts to assist them in dealing with the negative impacts of the pandemic.

In 2021, one in five respondents (19%) said they had received COVID-19 relief assistance from the government, a proportion that shrank to 13% a year later (Figure 8).

Given how few citizens reported receiving relief, it is unsurprising that fewer than one in five considered the provision of such relief to have been fair (18% in 2021, 19% in 2022). In 2022, only one-third (33%) of respondents said they were "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the government's provision of pandemic-related assistance.

**Figure 8: COVID-19 relief distribution: Reception, fairness, and satisfaction | Uganda | 2021-2022**



### Respondents were asked:

*Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from the government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?*

*Do you think that the distribution of government support to people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, has been fair or unfair?*

*How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government's response to COVID-19 in the following areas: Providing relief to vulnerable households?*

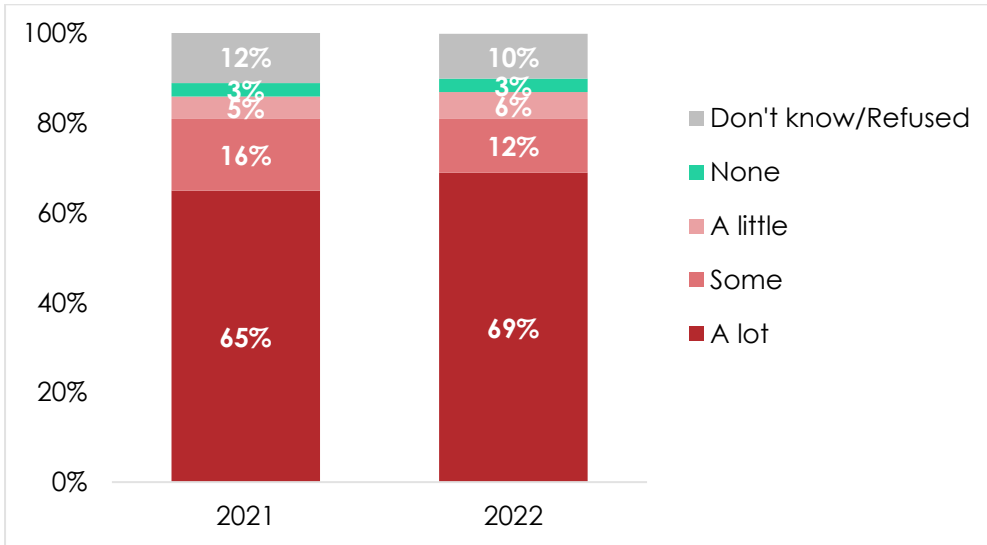
## Resource management

Even though Ugandans applauded the government's response to the pandemic, survey data show that eight in 10 citizens (81%) thought that "a lot" or "some" of the funds or resources meant to combat COVID-19 were lost due to corruption by government officials (Figure 9). Responses changed very little between 2021 and 2022.

Suspicious of corruption were widespread across key demographic groups (Figure 10). Urban residents were slightly more likely than their rural counterparts to say that "some" or "a lot" of COVID-19 resources were stolen (85% vs. 79%). At least nine out of 10 residents suspected widespread corruption in Kampala (90%) and Central Uganda (93%), about 20 percentage points more than in the West (71%) and the North (73%).

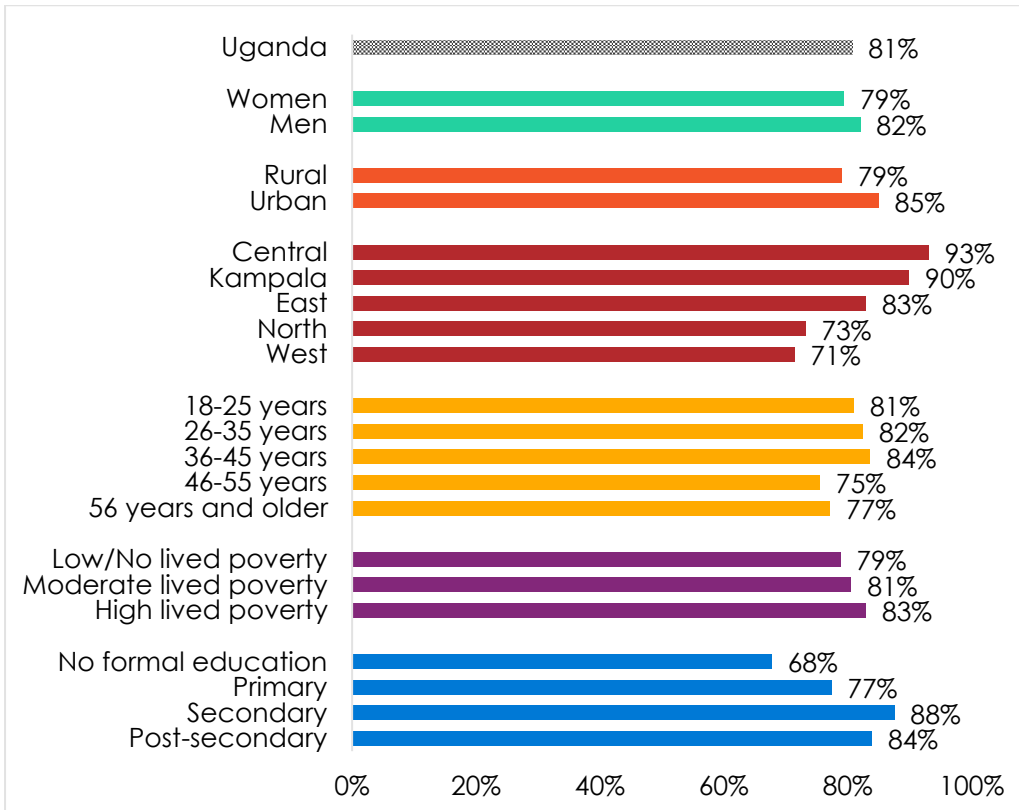
Young respondents were more likely to see pervasive corruption than their elders, as were more educated citizens compared to those with less schooling.

**Figure 9: How much COVID-19 corruption was there? | Uganda | 2021-2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption? (Note: In the 2021 survey, the question asked specifically about “due to corruption among government officials.”)

**Figure 10: Some/A lot of COVID-19 resources were lost to corruption | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022**

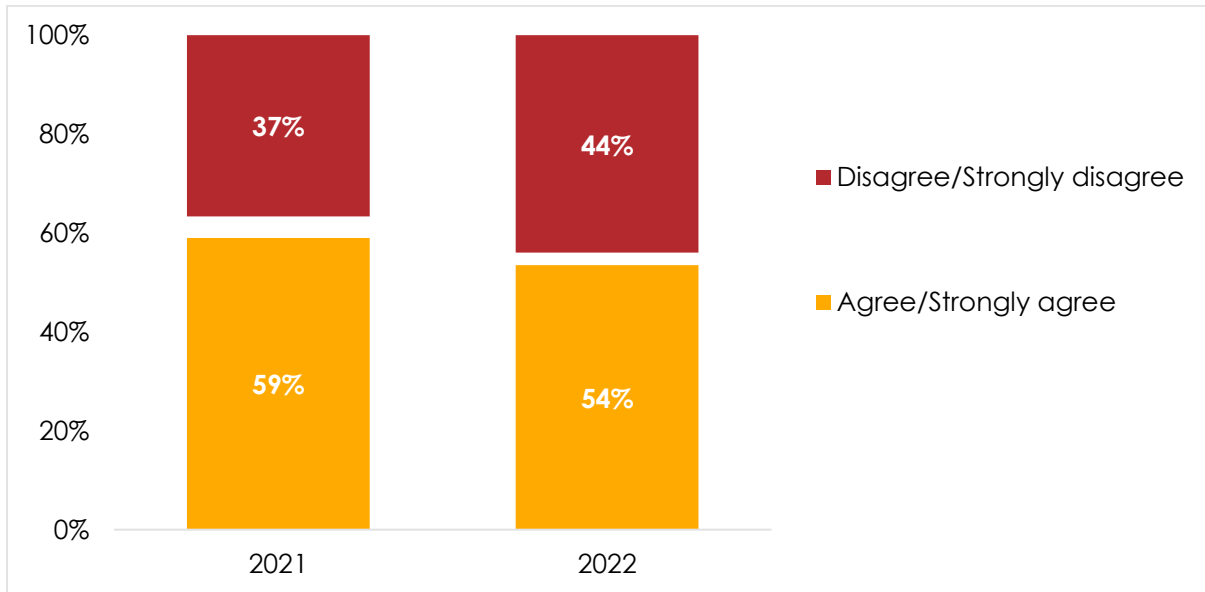


**Respondents were asked:** Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials? (% who say “some” or “a lot”)



Asked whether the government needs to invest more health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies, a slim majority (54%) of Ugandans “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the idea in 2022 even if it would mean fewer resources are available for other health services, reflecting a 5-percentage-point decrease from 2021 (59%) (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Should the government invest more resources to prepare for public health emergencies? | Uganda | 2021-2022**

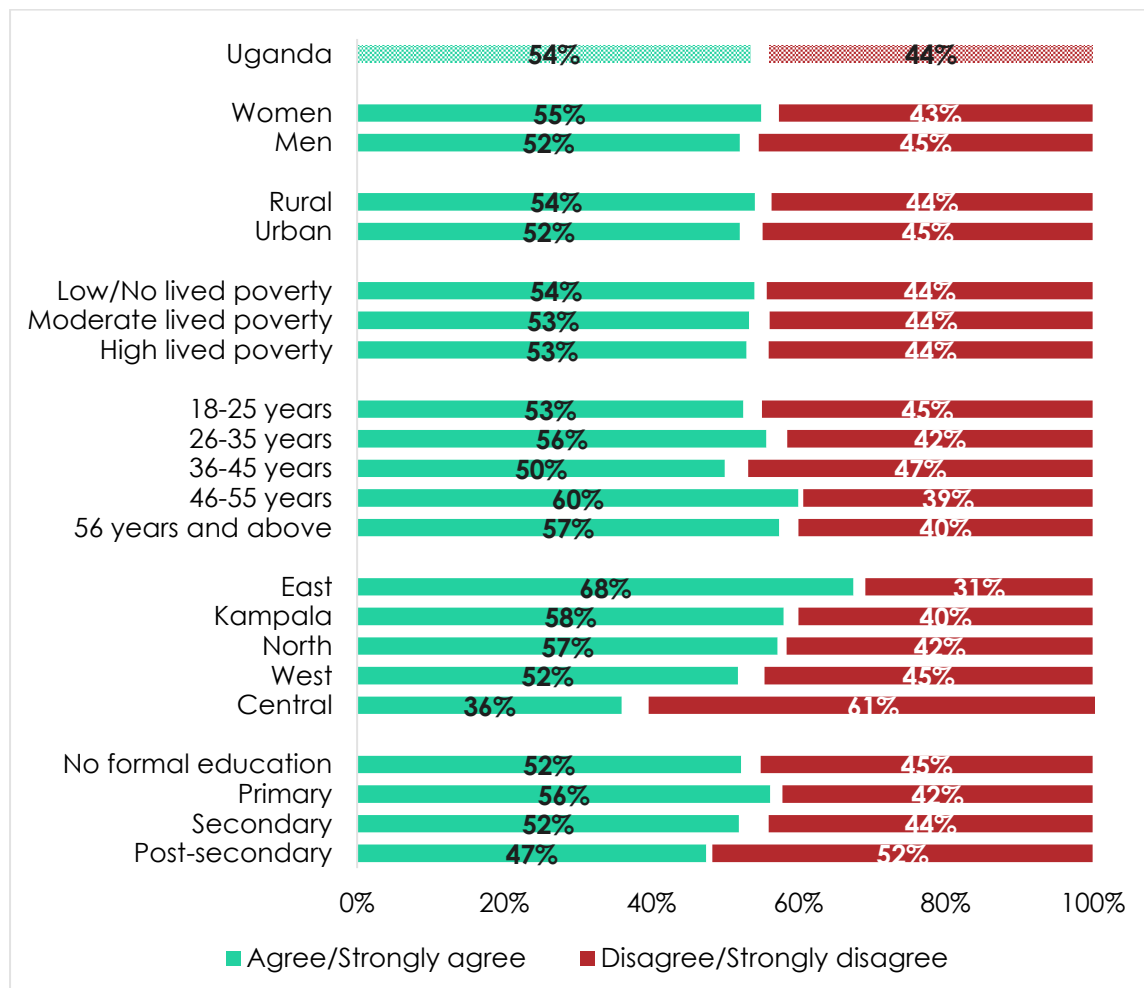


**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

Older citizens were slightly more likely than their younger counterparts to support greater investment in preparations for future health emergencies (57%-60% vs. 50%-56%) (Figure 12). Residents in the East were especially likely to support government investing more resources: Two-thirds (68%) approved of this idea, compared to only 36% of Central Ugandans. A 9-percentage-point gap in support for greater investment separated respondents with primary schooling (56%) and those with post-secondary education (47%).

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**Figure 12: Government needs to invest more in preparations for public health emergencies** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

## Conclusion

Afrobarometer surveys in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic provide insights into citizens' views on how the Ugandan government responded to the unique set of challenges it posed.

Findings reveal that most citizens considered themselves well informed about the pandemic and reported that they had received at least one dose of a vaccine.

The government might take heart from citizens' applause for its overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as their increasing confidence in its ability to ensure safe vaccines. At the same time, Ugandans were very clear in their dissatisfaction with government relief efforts and their perceptions of widespread corruption in the management of pandemic-related resources.

As the current mpox outbreak extends its reach, the majority opinion that the government should invest more resources in preparing for future health emergencies may also be of timely relevance.

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