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Liberians see unfair relief distribution and corruption as marring government's competent response to COVID-19

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 870 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum and Francisca Sarpong Owusu

Summary

Leveraging lessons learned from its fight against the deadly Ebola virus, the government of Liberia established a Special Presidential Advisory Committee on COVID-19 a month before recording its first coronavirus case on 16 March 2020 (UNFPA, 2020; Marsh et al., 2021). The country's early emergency response earned international praise and may well have helped limit the pandemic's toll to 7,930 cases and 294 deaths as of September 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021, 2024; Sanny & Bloh, 2021; United Nations, 2020).

Even so, the country's COVID-19 response faced significant challenges, including misinformation, distrust of public health measures, and inadequate community engagement (World Health Organization, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2020). As the World Bank (2020) projected a 2.6% gross domestic product contraction in 2020, strategies to alleviate economic hardship, including the distribution of food, were hindered by poor infrastructure and corruption (World Health Organization, 2022; Karmo, 2020; Seydou, 2021).

Findings from Afrobarometer's most recent survey show that most Liberians were satisfied with the government's overall response to the pandemic. But a majority said that COVID-19 relief assistance was distributed unfairly and that significant resources intended for the pandemic response were lost to corruption.

And while more than half of citizens believed that their government is at least "somewhat prepared" to deal with future public health emergencies, an overwhelming majority said it should invest more in such preparations, 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 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 Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between 15 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 were conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

■ **Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:**

- As of August-September 2022, about one-third (33%) of Liberians said a member of their household had lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic, while 3% reported that someone in their household became ill with COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus.

■ **Attitudes toward vaccines:**

- Six in 10 Liberians (60%) said they had received at least one dose of a vaccine against COVID-19.
- About one in six citizens (16%) said they were not likely to try to get vaccinated, including 10% who considered it “very unlikely.”
- Citizens who said they were unlikely to get vaccinated cited a variety of reasons for their hesitancy, including faith that God will protect them against COVID-19 (25%), mistrust/worries about getting a counterfeit vaccine (23%), and doubts about vaccine safety (15%).
- Almost six in 10 Liberians (58%) said they trust the government “somewhat” (20%) or “a lot” (38%) to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

■ **Government response to COVID-19:**

- More than seven in 10 Liberians (72%) said the government had performed “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Specifically, majorities were satisfied with the government’s efforts to ensure that health facilities were adequately resourced (64%), to keep disruptions to children’s education to a minimum (61%), and to assist vulnerable households (53%).
- Even so, 72% of respondents said that COVID-19 relief assistance was distributed unfairly, and 83% thought that “some” or “a lot” of the resources intended for the pandemic response were lost to corruption.
- A large majority of citizens said that during a public health emergency like COVID-19, the government is justified in using the police or military to enforce public health mandates (85%), postponing elections (83%), and censoring media reporting (71%).

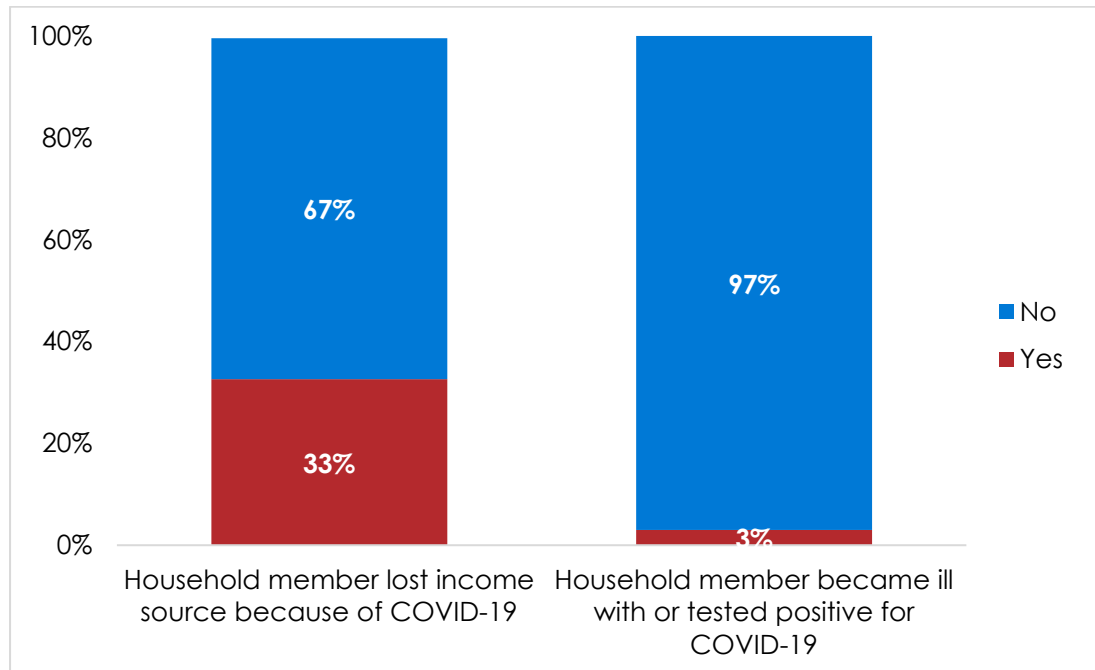
■ **Looking ahead:**

- More than half (56%) of Liberians said they think the government is prepared to deal with future public health emergencies.
- Nonetheless, a large majority (82%) think the government needs to invest more in such preparations, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

Effects of COVID-19

As of August-September 2022, almost one-third (33%) of Liberians said a member of their household lost a job, business, or primary source of income due to the pandemic, and 3% reported that someone in their household had been ill with COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Effects of COVID-19 | Liberia | 2022



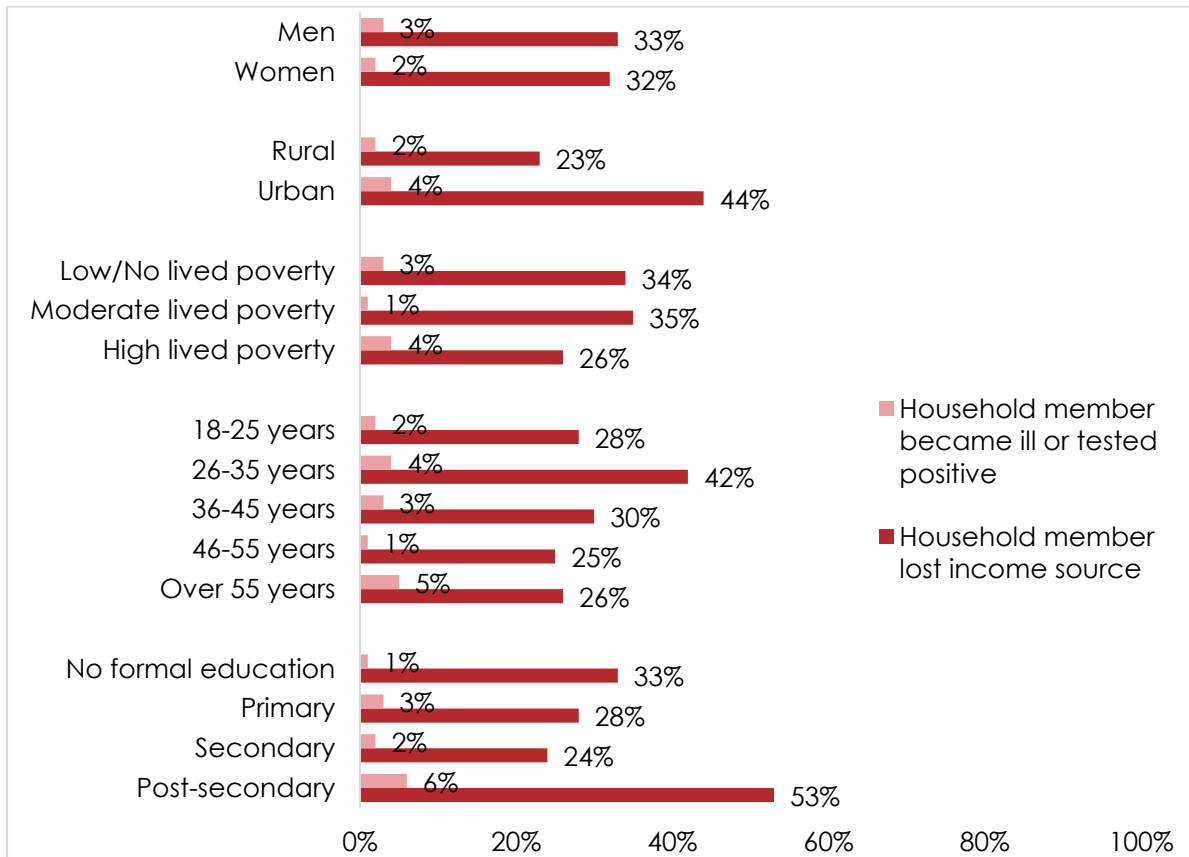
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you personally or any other member of your household has been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with, or tested positive for, COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

The economic effects of COVID-19 appear to have been more widely experienced in cities than in rural areas. Urban residents were about twice as likely as their rural counterparts to report having lost a primary income source (44% vs. 23%) (Figure 2).

The loss of an income source was less common among the poorest respondents (26%) than among their better-off counterparts (34%-35%).¹ It was far more common among citizens with post-secondary education (53%) than among those with less schooling (24%-33%).

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).

Figure 2: Effects of COVID-19 | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022

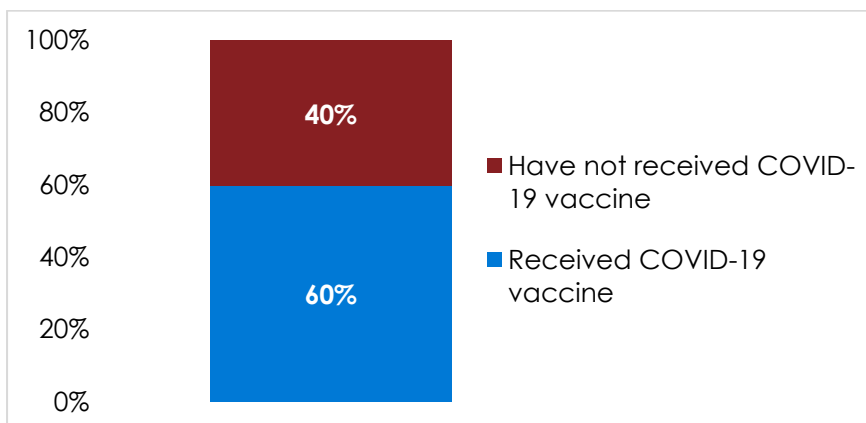


Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income? (% who said “yes”)

Attitudes toward vaccination

Six in 10 Liberians (60%) said they had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine (Figure 3). Four in 10 (40%) had not received the shot, including 16% who said they were “very unlikely” (10%) or “somewhat unlikely” (6%) to try to get vaccinated.

Figure 3: Received COVID-19 vaccine | Liberia | 2022



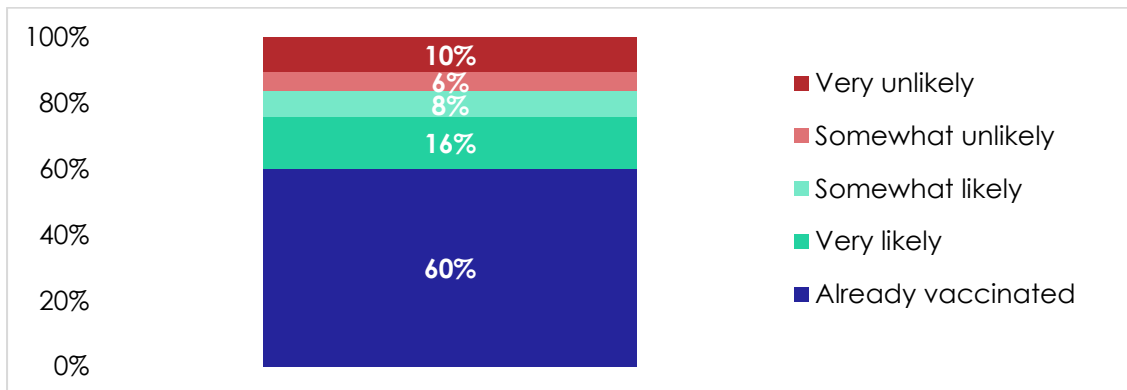
Respondents were asked: Have you received a vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses?

About a quarter described themselves as “somewhat likely” (8%) or “very likely” (16%) to try to get vaccinated (Figure 4).

Vaccination rates were higher among men (63%) and rural residents (62%) than among women (56%) and urban residents (57%) (Figure 5). The youngest respondents were least likely to be vaccinated (53% of 18- to 25-year-olds, vs. 61%-64% of their elders).

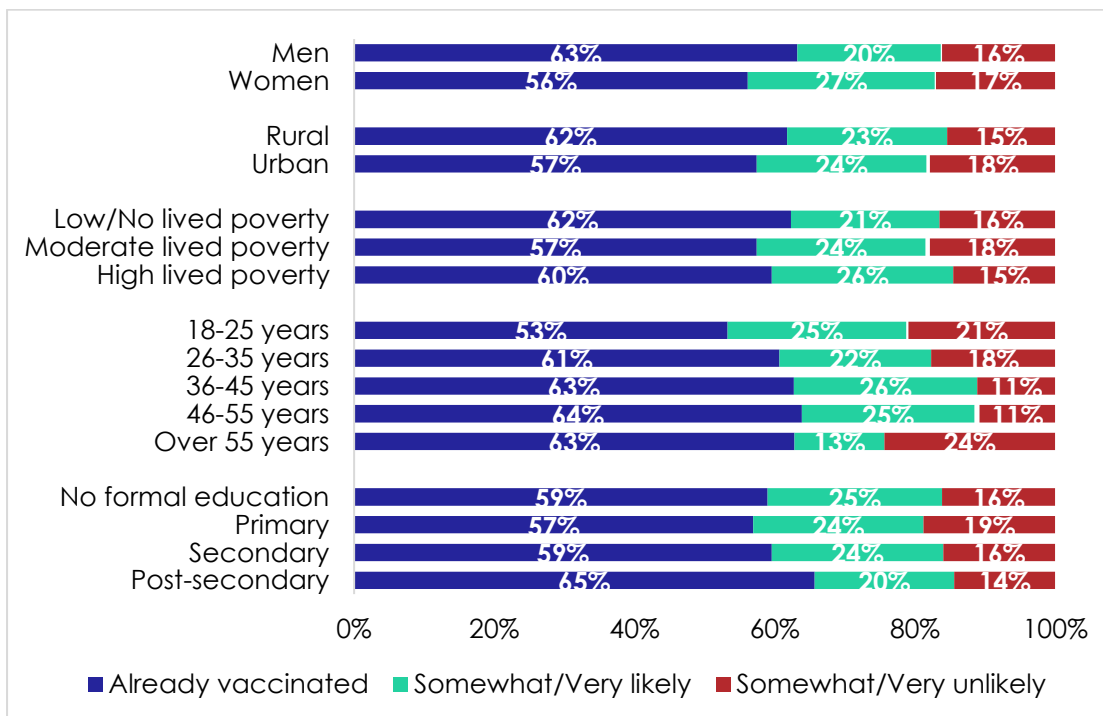
Citizens with post-secondary education (65%) were more likely than those with less schooling (57%- 59%) to have received the vaccine. Vaccine hesitancy was relatively high among urbanites (18% not likely to get vaccinated), those aged over 55 (24%), and those with primary education (19%).

Figure 4: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: Have you received a vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses? [If no:] If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Figure 5: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022

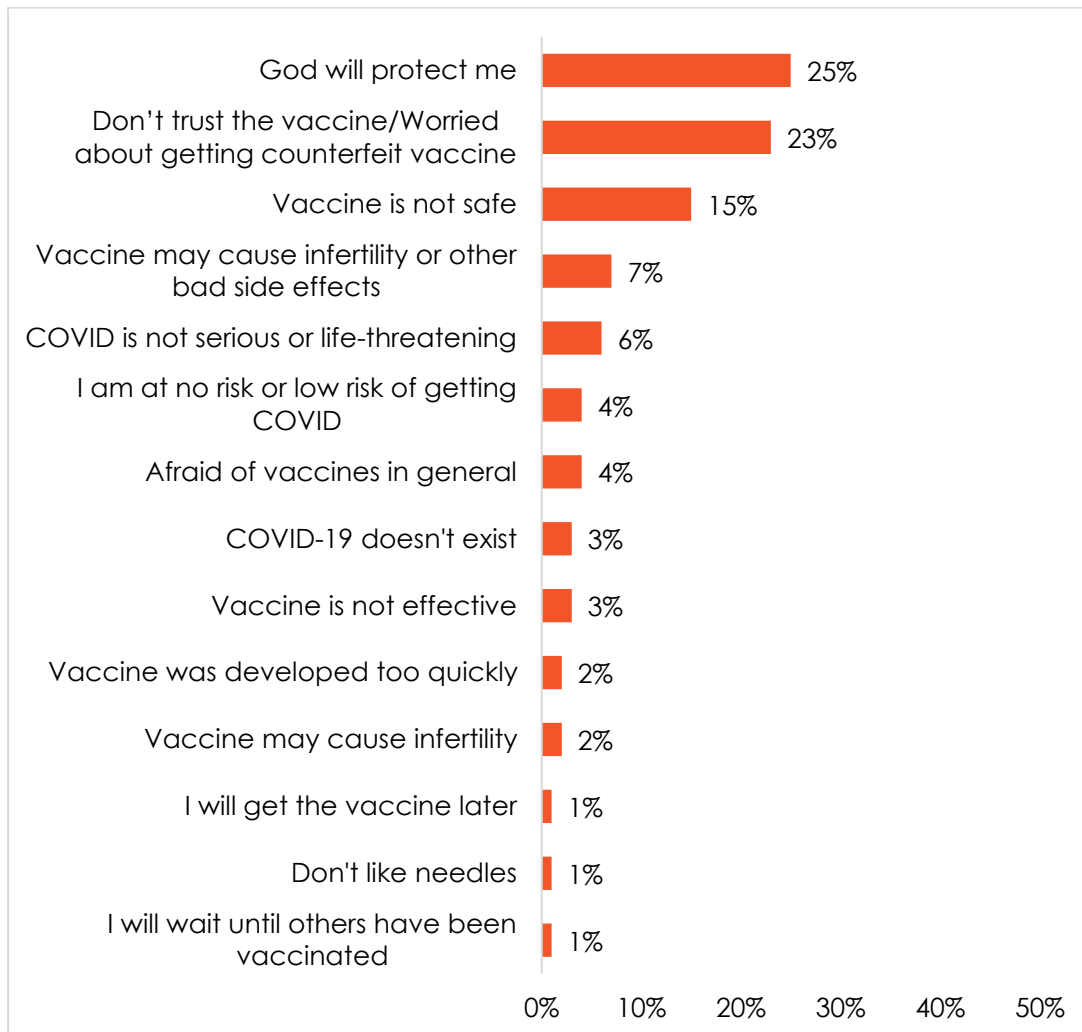


Respondents were asked: Have you received a vaccination against COVID-19, either one or two doses? [If no:] If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Among respondents who said they were unlikely to get vaccinated, the most frequently cited reasons for vaccine hesitancy were the belief that God would protect them against COVID-19 (25%), mistrust or worries about getting a fake or counterfeit vaccine (23%), and doubts about vaccine safety (15%) (Figure 6).

Others believed that the vaccine might cause infertility or other bad side effects (7%) or that COVID-19 isn't serious or life-threatening (6%).

Figure 6: Main reason for vaccine hesitancy | Liberia | 2022



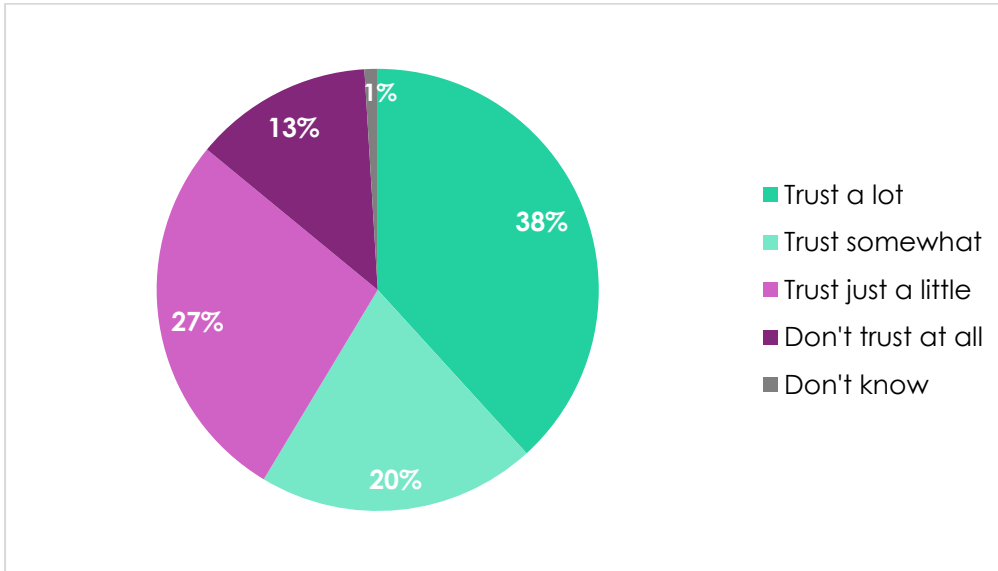
Respondents who said they were not likely to get vaccinated were asked: What is the main reason that you would be unlikely to get a COVID-19 vaccine?

Doubts about vaccine safety can be a major impediment to government efforts to vaccinate the population. While a majority (58%) of Liberians said they trust the government “somewhat” (20%) or “a lot” (38%) to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, about four in 10 (40%) expressed “just a little” trust (27%) or no trust at all (13%) (Figure 7).

Citizens' willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19 is strongly correlated with their trust in the government's ability to ensure the safety of the vaccine (Figure 8). Citizens who said they trust the government “a lot” to ensure vaccine safety were more than twice as likely to be vaccinated as those who expressed no trust at all (79% vs. 32%). Vaccine hesitancy was

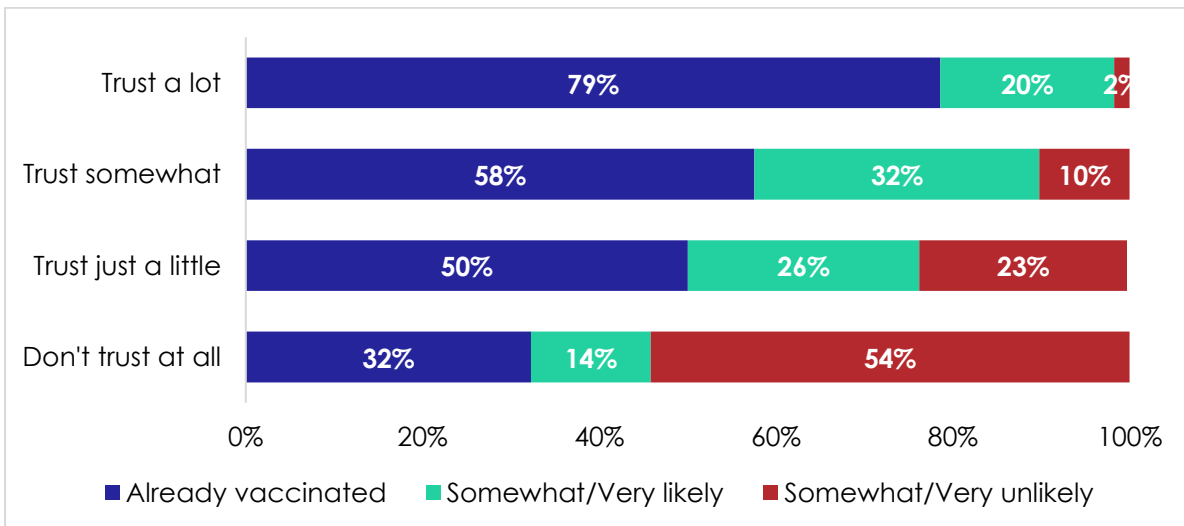
27 times more common among the “no trust” group (54%) than among the “trust a lot” group (2%).

Figure 7: Trust government to ensure vaccine safety | Liberia | 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 Liberian citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

Figure 8: Likelihood of trying to get vaccinated | by trust in government to ensure vaccine safety | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked:

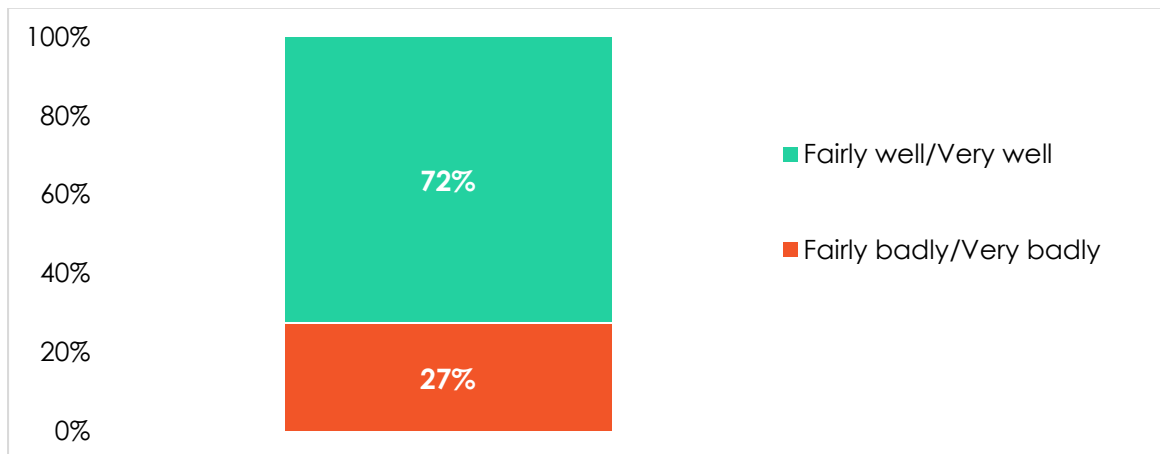
If a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?
 How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Liberian citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

Government response to COVID-19

About seven in 10 Liberians (72%) described the government's overall performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as “fairly” or “very” good, while more than a quarter (27%) said it had done a poor job (Figure 9).

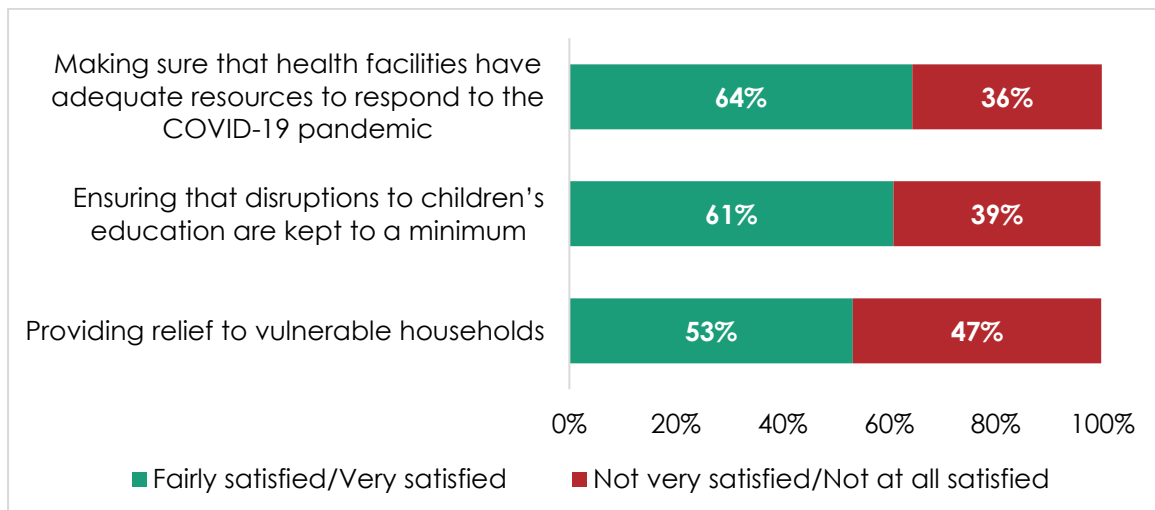
On specific aspects of the COVID-19 response, majorities said they were “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the government’s efforts to ensure that health facilities were adequately resourced to deal with the pandemic (64%), to ensure that disruptions of children’s education were held to a minimum (61%), and to provide relief assistance to vulnerable households (53%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Government response to COVID-19 | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government has managed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Figure 10: Satisfaction with government’s response to specific aspects of the pandemic | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government’s response to COVID-19 in the following areas?

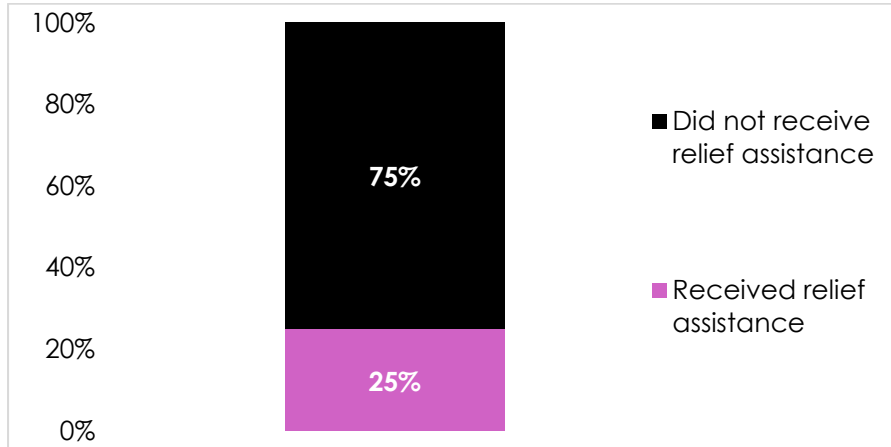
COVID-19 relief assistance

A quarter (25%) of Liberians reported that their household received COVID-19 relief assistance from the government, while 75% said they did not (Figure 11).

Men (28%), rural residents (27%), and the aged (29%) were somewhat more likely to benefit from government assistance than women (22%), urbanites (22%), and younger cohorts (23%-26%) (Figure 12). Respondents with post-secondary education were least likely to receive help (14%).

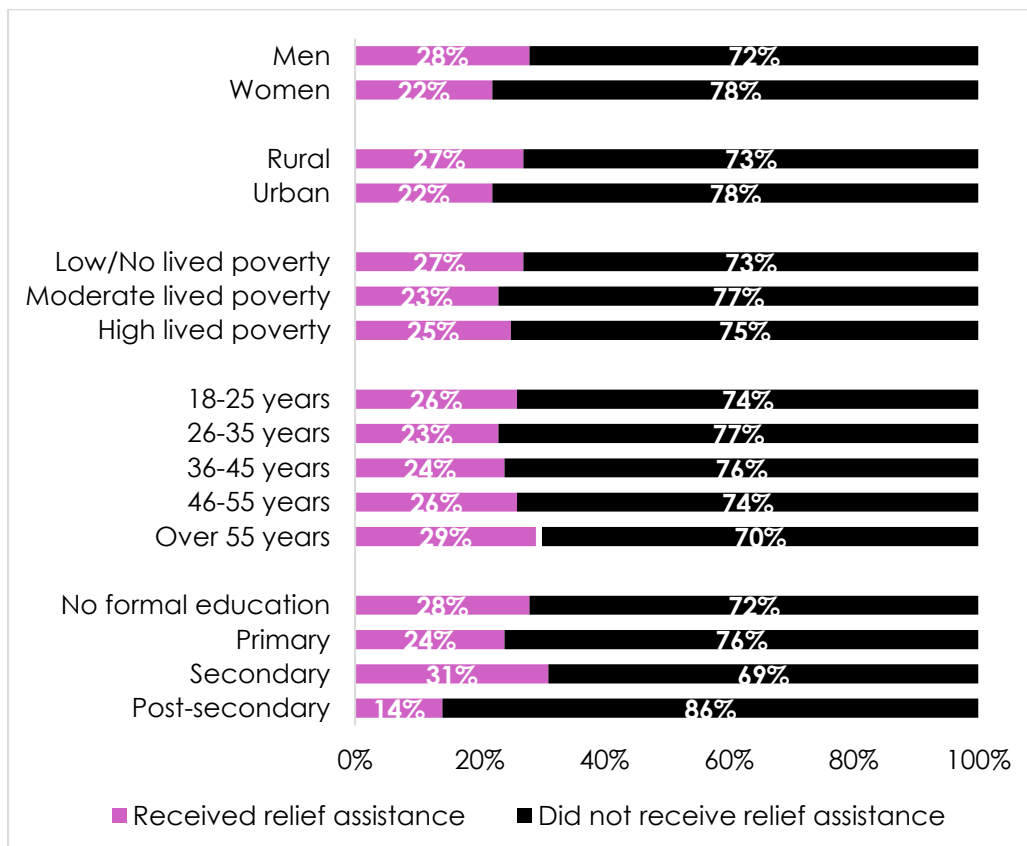
Only 27% of respondents said that COVID-19 relief was distributed “somewhat fairly” or “very fairly,” while 72% saw the distribution as unfair (Figure 13).

Figure 11: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance | Liberia | 2022



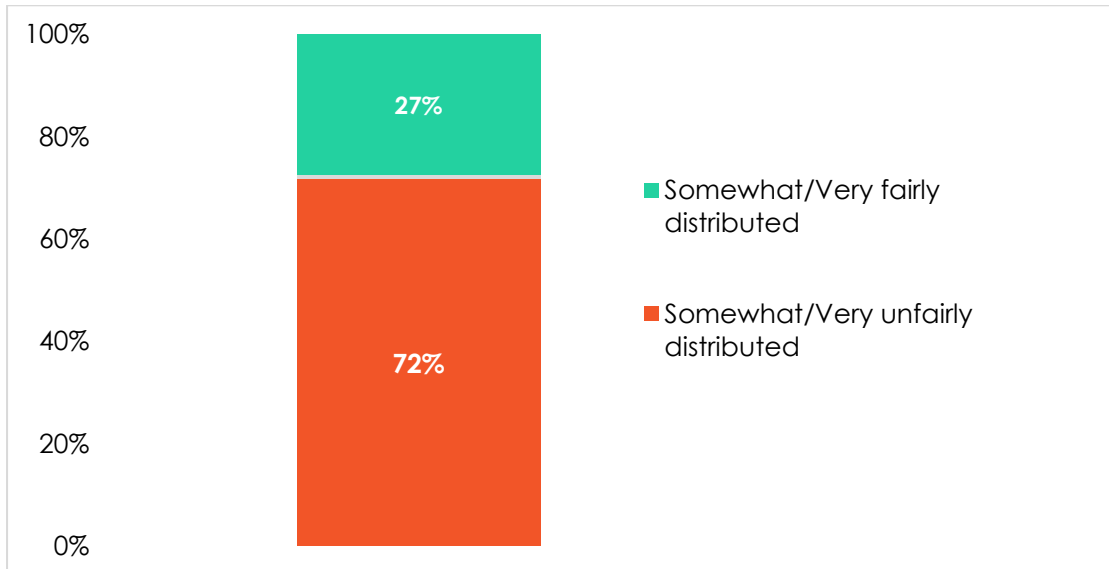
Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from the government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

Figure 12: Access to COVID-19 relief assistance | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022



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

Figure 13: Was COVID-19 relief assistance distributed fairly? | Liberia | 2022

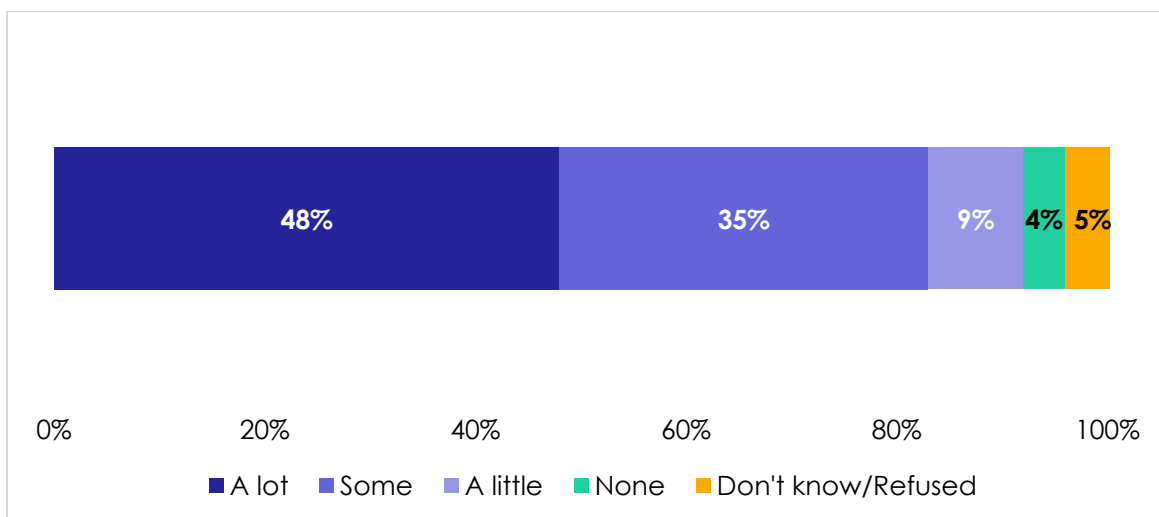


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the distribution of government support to people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, has been fair or unfair?

Corruption related to COVID-19

In addition to expressing significant dissatisfaction with the fairness of government relief assistance, a large majority (83%) said they believe that “some” (35%) or “a lot” (48%) of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption (Figure 14). Only 5% thought that none of these resources were misappropriated.

Figure 14: Perceived pandemic-related corruption | Liberia | 2022



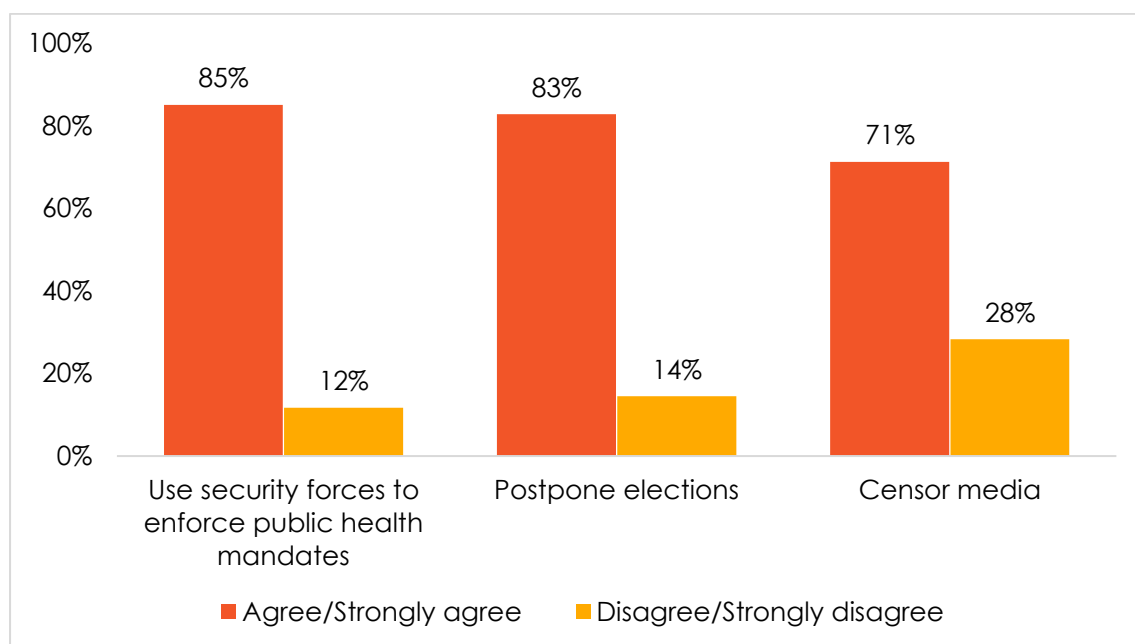
Respondents were asked: Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption?

Limit democratic freedoms during a pandemic?

Lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions in some countries raised questions about the extent to which citizens are willing to forego certain freedoms, even temporarily, to protect public health.

In Liberia, strong majorities “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that it is justified for the government to use the armed forces or the police to enforce public health mandates (85%), postpone elections (83%), and censor media reporting (71%) during an emergency like the pandemic (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Limit democratic freedoms during a public health emergency? | Liberia | 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 temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

Censoring media reporting?

Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like restrictions on public gatherings or wearing face masks?

Postponing elections?

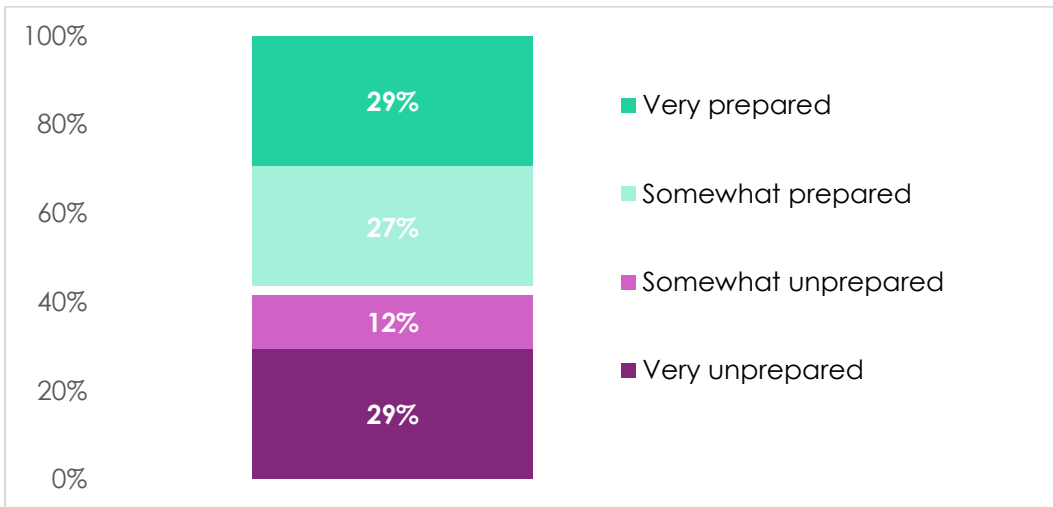
Looking ahead

After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, how prepared will Liberia's government be to deal with future public health emergencies?

Almost six in 10 Liberians (56%) thought their government will be “somewhat prepared” or “very prepared” for the next public health crisis, while four in 10 (41%) said the government will not be ready (Figure 16).

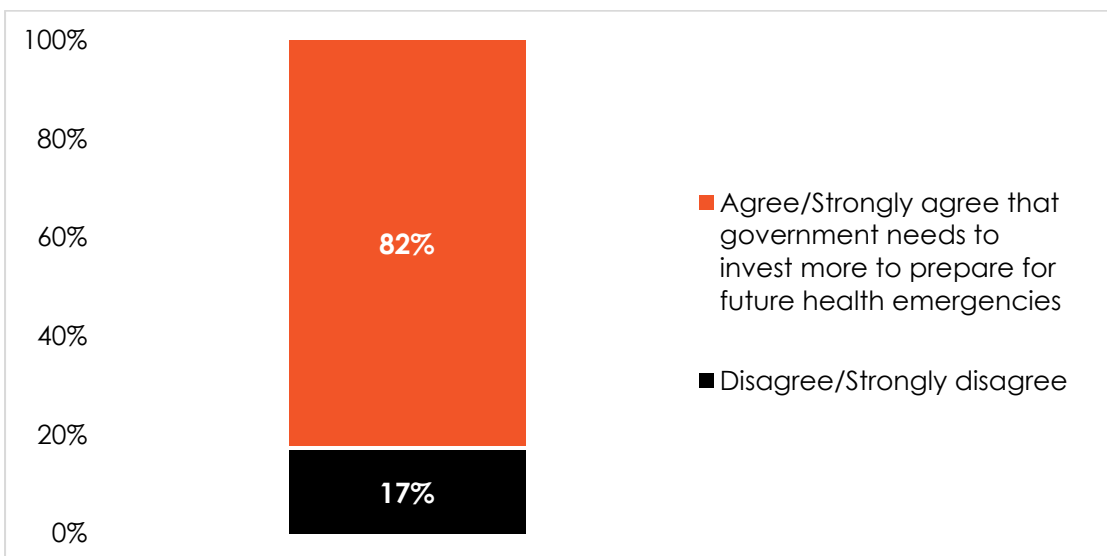
Despite some confidence in the government's readiness, more than eight in 10 Liberians (82%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the government needs to invest more in preparing for future public health emergencies, even if it means that fewer resources are available for other health services (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Preparedness for future health emergencies | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic in Liberia, how prepared or unprepared do you think the government will be to deal with future public health emergencies?

Figure 17: Invest more to prepare for future health emergencies? | Liberia | 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

Survey findings show that most Liberians were satisfied with their government's performance in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most were also willing to give the government broad discretion to use the armed forces or the police to enforce public health mandates, to postpone elections, and to censor media reporting during an emergency like the pandemic. And more than half considered the government at least "somewhat prepared" to face a future health emergency.

Even so, a majority of citizens said that pandemic-related relief was distributed unfairly and that corruption claimed resources intended for the COVID-19 response – important factors

considering that fully one in three households lost a major source of income due to the pandemic.

Looking ahead, Liberians overwhelmingly urged their government to invest more in special preparations for future public health emergencies, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

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