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Ugandans give government mixed marks on education, see it as a priority to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 929 | Ssevume Stevenson Male and Stella Amalo

Summary

Like many countries around the world, Uganda strives to match increases in access to education with improvements in learning outcomes (Kasirye, Nakato, Kahunde, Atwine, & Mugume, 2023). In line with the United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goal No. 4, the government has a stated commitment to provide inclusive, equitable, and quality education as the basis for improving people's lives and achieving sustainable development (UNICEF, 2024).

Uganda introduced a policy aimed at universal access to primary education in 1997, which saw primary school enrolment rates reach 84% for the poorest quintile of households by 2004 (Uganda Media Centre, 2022) and raised overall primary school enrolment to 95% by 2013 (World Bank, 2020).

However, the basic education sector still suffers inadequacies in learning infrastructure, low teacher-to-pupil ratios, and a lack of learning materials (Economic Policy Research Centre, 2023). Despite the progress in enrolment, primary school completion rates remain low: just 52% for boys and 54% for girls as of 2017 (UNESCO, 2024). Moreover, COVID-19 reversed some of the progress the country had made, resulting in enormous inequalities in schooling access, as initially only 10% of children could return to the classroom when schools reopened (UNICEF, 2021).

Even when Ugandan learners complete primary school, they may not be acquiring basic competencies. For example, a national learning assessment in 2021 found that one-fourth of Primary 3 learners could read nothing at Primary 2 level, while another one-fourth could only sound out letters and read no words. In addition, one-tenth of Primary 3 learners were unable to solve numeracy tasks at Primary 2 level (Kasirye et al., 2023). These findings highlight fundamental barriers to learning, including poverty and inadequate government investment in the education sector (UNESCO, 2024; Office of the Prime Minister, 2021).

Afrobarometer survey findings show that while a majority of Ugandans approve of the national government's performance on addressing educational needs, more than half are dissatisfied with their local district or city council charged with implementing education programmes at the local level. In citizens' eyes, education still ranks as the second-biggest concern requiring government intervention.

Access to education varies widely by region: Citizens in the North are far less likely than those in the Central Region or the capital to live within walking distance of a school and to have progressed beyond primary school.

Afrobarometer surveys

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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 in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans in January 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Key findings

- Schools are unevenly distributed across the country: The share of Ugandans who live within walking distance of a school ranges from more than nine in 10 in Kampala (100%) and the Western (96%) and Central (92%) regions to only about half (52%) in the North.

- Among adults who had contact with a public school during the preceding year, 36% said they found it difficult to obtain the services they needed, and 29% said they had to pay a bribe. Both proportions increased between 2015 and 2022.

- While more than four in 10 Ugandans have secondary (33%) or post-secondary (11%) education, one in 10 citizens (10%) have no formal schooling. Women, rural residents, older citizens, and inhabitants of the Northern Region are more likely to lack formal education than their various counterparts.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans say school-age children in their community are "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently" not in school.

- In some cases, girls face additional hurdles to attending school: One-sixth (16%) of Ugandans say families in their community "often" or "always" prioritise boys' education and prevent girls from going to school, and 36% say teachers commonly discriminate against girls, harass them, or ask them for sexual favours.

- Education ranks second among the most important problems that Ugandans want their government to address.

- A majority (58%) of citizens say the national government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on meeting educational needs.

- But more than half (52%) say they are dissatisfied with their district or city council's efforts to provide education services at the local level.

- More than six in 10 respondents (64%) are disappointed with the government's efforts to minimise disruptions to children's education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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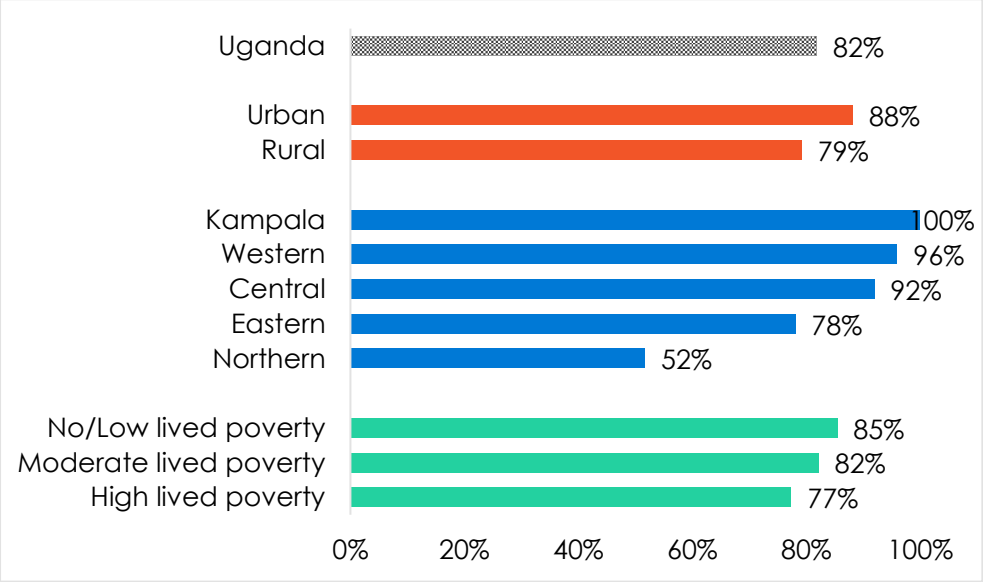
Citizens' experience with public schools

School infrastructure is a prerequisite for access to education. On average across the country, Afrobarometer enumerators found that 82% of enumeration areas had at least one public or private school within easy walking distance[1] (Figure 1).

Rural areas (79%) and poorer communities[2] (77% of those experiencing high lived poverty) are somewhat less likely than average to have schools in the vicinity. Northern Uganda is particularly underserved: Only 52% of enumeration areas in this region have a school situated nearby – half as many as in Kampala (100%).

Figure 1: Presence of school | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



Survey enumerators were asked: *Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or in easy walking distance: A school (private or public or both)?*

In its 2022 survey, Afrobarometer asked respondents about their experiences with public schools. Among the 27% of respondents who said they had contact with a public school during the previous year, more than one-third said they found it "difficult" (20%) or "very difficult" (16%) to obtain the services they needed from teachers or other school officials (Figure 2).

And three in 10 (29%) said they had to pay a bribe to secure the needed services (Figure 3). The proportions reporting difficulty in accessing services and bribe paying increased between 2015 and 2022 by 6 and 9 percentages points, respectively.

[1] Afrobarometer samples are based on a selection of enumeration areas (EAs) drawn randomly from the national census frame. In most countries, eight interviews are conducted in each selected EA, so interview teams usually visit between 150 (for surveys with n=1,200) and 300 (for surveys with n=2,400) EAs. In each EA, the team records the presence or absence of basic services, such as electricity supply, and infrastructure, such as schools. Because of the smaller sample sizes, the margin of error on the figures reported here for presence of a school is higher than for findings captured in individual interviews.

[2] 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).

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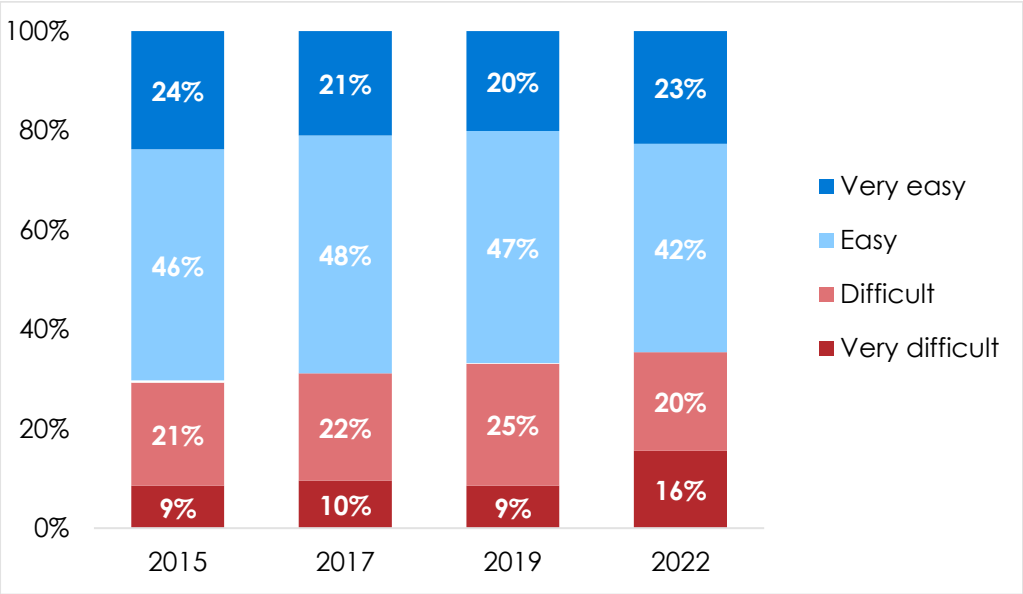
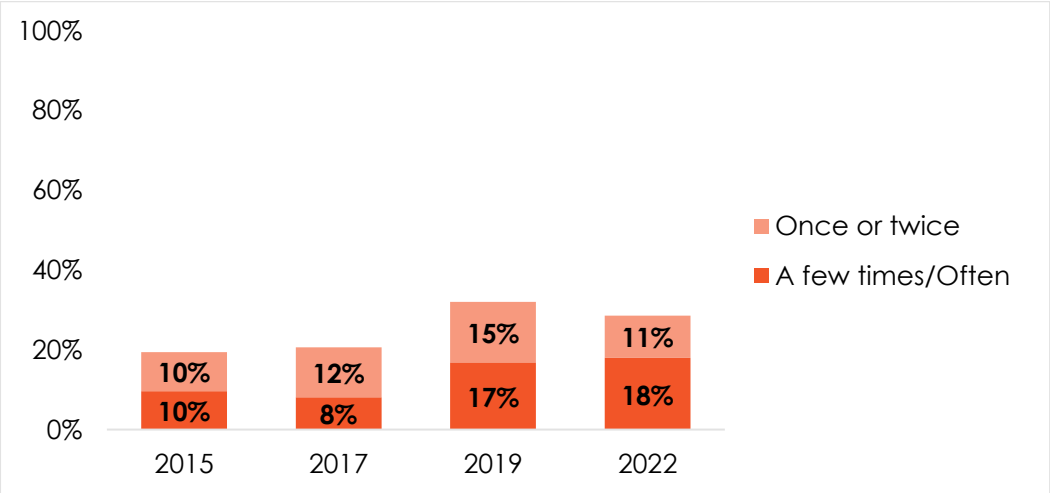
Figure 2: Ease of obtaining public school services | Uganda | 2015-2022



Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed from teachers or school officials? (Respondents who had no contact with a public school are excluded.)*

Figure 3: Paid a bribe to obtain public school services | Uganda | 2015-2022



Respondents who had contact with a public school during the previous 12 months were asked: *How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools? (Respondents who had no contact with a public school are excluded.)*

Education status

How well educated are Ugandans? One in nine respondents (11%) report some form of post-secondary education, while one-third (33%) received secondary schooling (Figure 4). Almost half (46%) only attended primary school, and 10% report never obtaining formal education.

Citizens' education levels vary significantly across demographic groups. Women are more likely than men to miss out on school completely (13% vs. 6%) and less likely to extend their education after secondary school (8% vs. 14%) (Figure 5).

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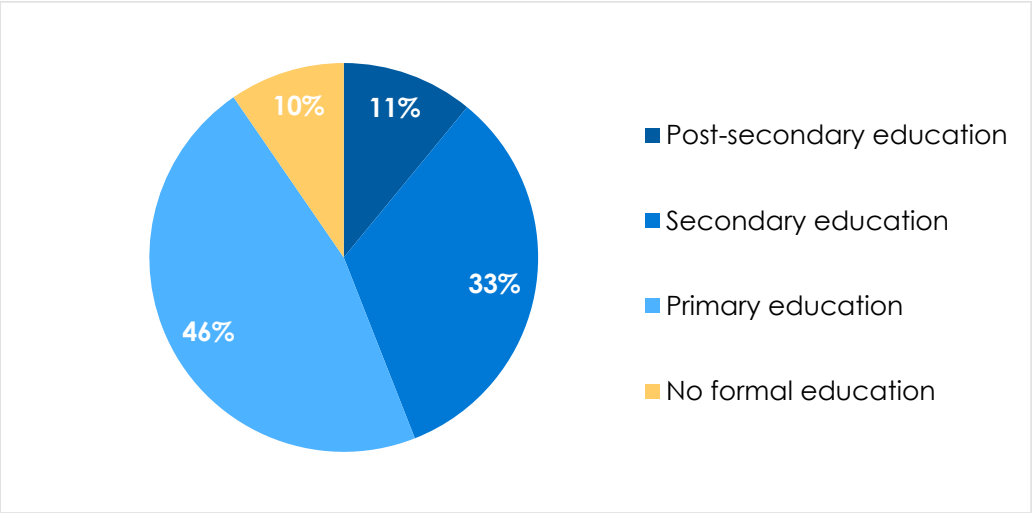
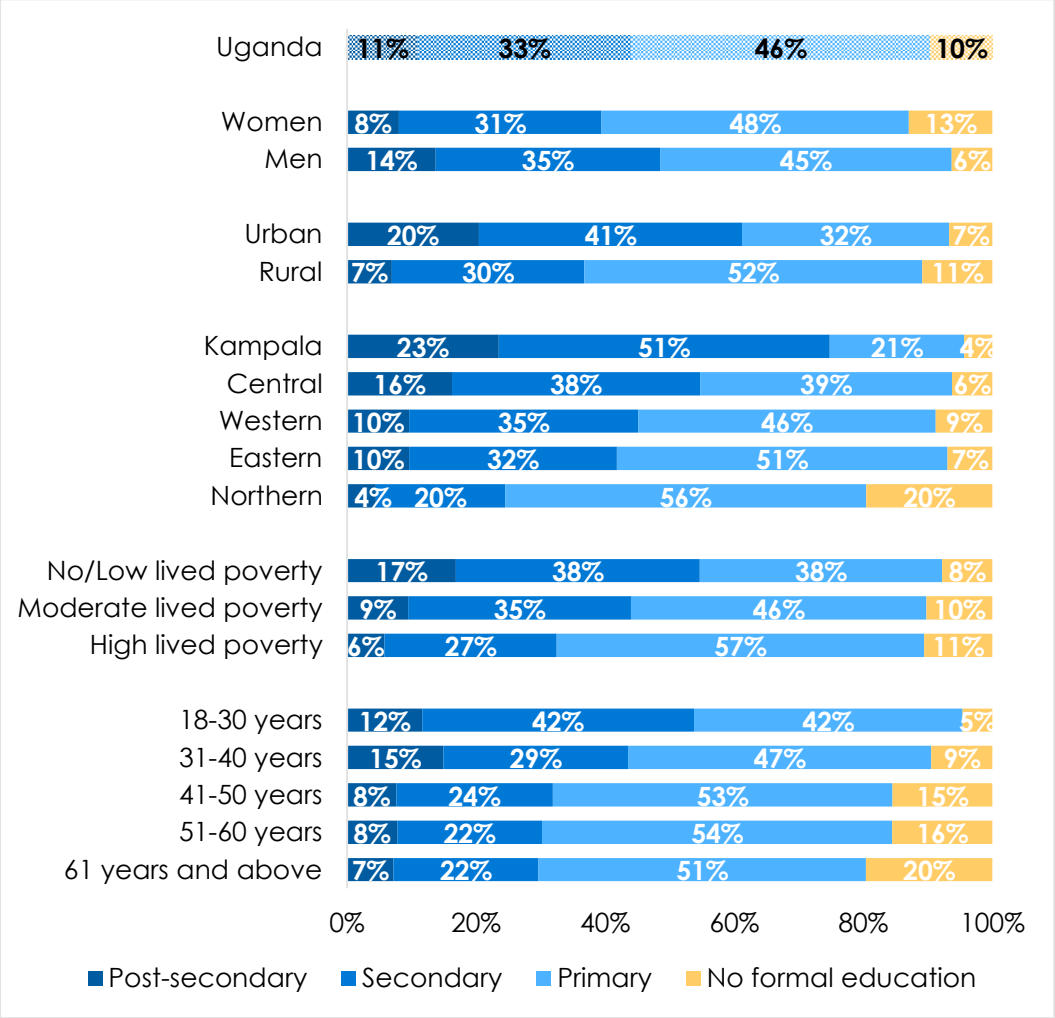
Figure 4: Educational attainment | Uganda | 2024



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

Figure 5: Educational attainment | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



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

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Urban citizens (20%) and Kampala residents (23%) are especially likely to be highly educated. In contrast, three-quarters of northern Ugandans report a primary education only (56%) or no formal schooling at all (20%). Two-thirds of those in very poor communities have either attained education up to primary level (57%) or have no schooling whatsoever (11%).

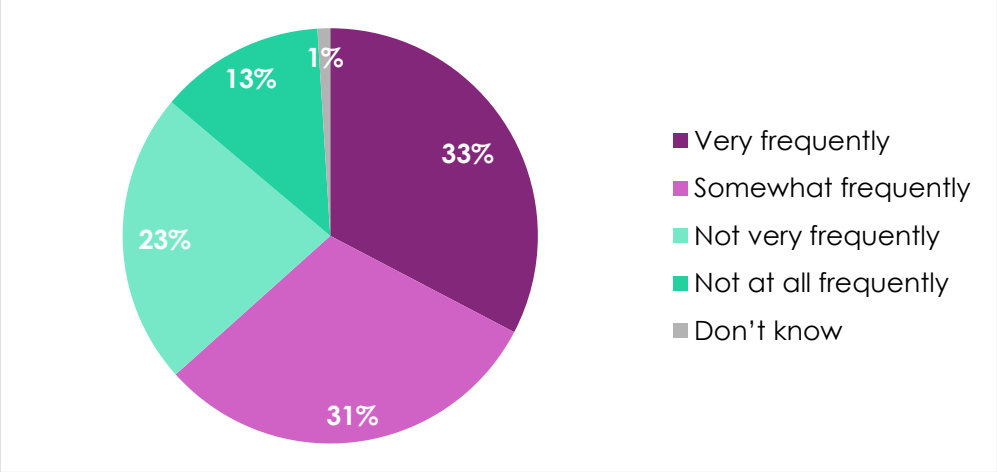
Educational attainment is positively correlated with age. More than half of the youth have at least secondary education (54% of those aged 18-30), compared with one-third or fewer among those over 40 years of age (30%-32%).[3]

Barriers to children's education

The Ministry of Education and Sports is tasked with ensuring that all children receive equitable, relevant, and high-quality education. This objective cannot be achieved unless all children are attending school. How often are Ugandan children missing school?

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of adults say school-aged children in their neighbourhood are "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently" not in school (Figure 6). Such high levels of perceived absence bode badly for the government's attempt to ensure universal access to education.

Figure 6: How often are children not in school? | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children who should be in school are not in school?*

Gender discrimination can also be a significant barrier to children's education. About one in six citizens (16%) say families in their community "often" or "always" prevent girls from attending school because they prioritise the education of boys (Figure 7). Respondents in the North are especially likely to report that families prioritise boys' education (24%) (not shown).

And more than one in three respondents (36%) say that teachers in their communities frequently discriminate against girls, harass them, or request sexual favours.

[3] 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 respondents over age 60, 22% "secondary" and 7% "post-secondary" sum to 30%).

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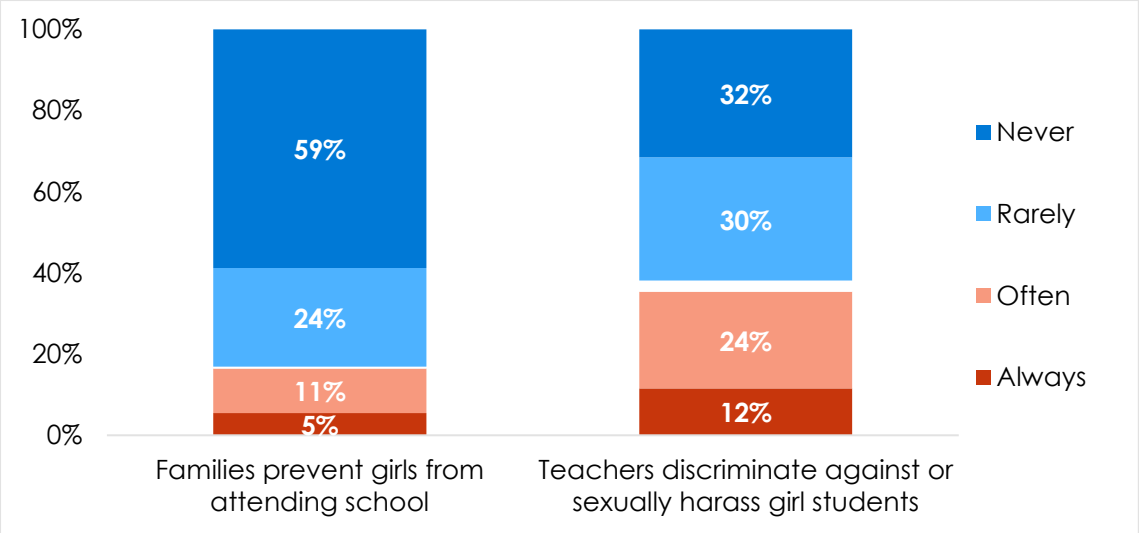
Figure 7: Barriers to girls' education | Uganda | 2024

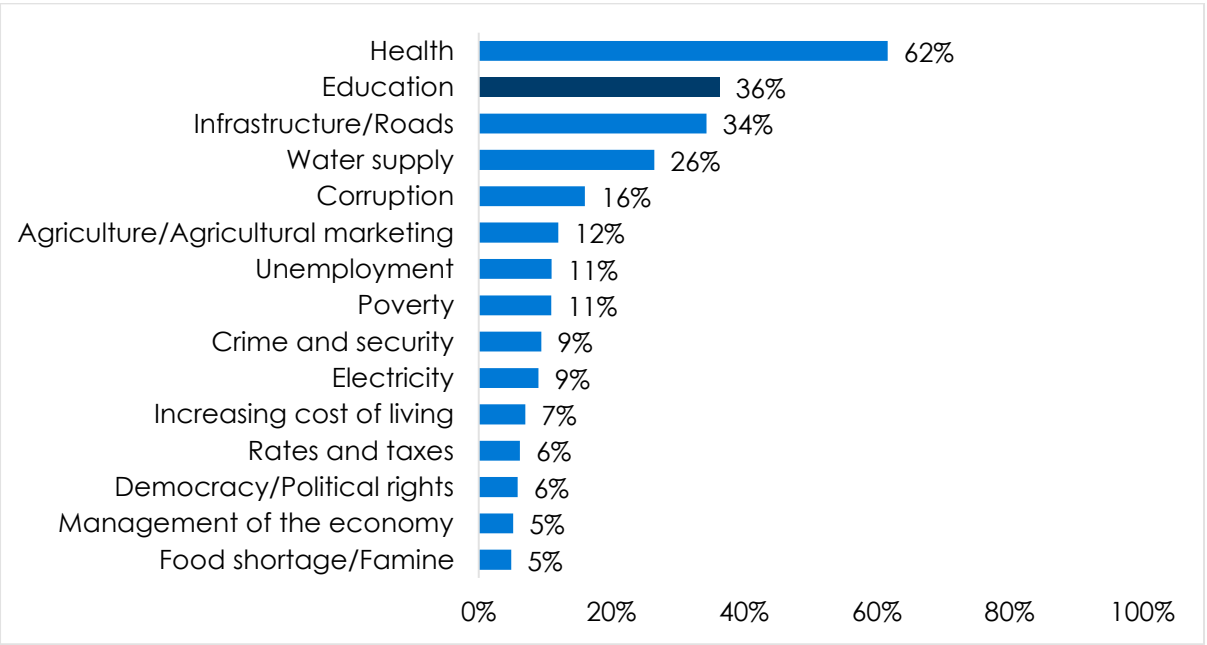


Respondents were asked: *How frequently do the following things occur in your community: Girls are prevented from attending school because their families prioritise the education of boys? Girl students face discrimination, harassment, or requests for sexual favours from their teachers?*

Education as a public priority in Uganda

Across survey participants, education ranks second only to health among priority issues that Ugandans want the government to address (Figure 8). More than one-third (36%) of citizens cite education as one of their top three priority interventions. Except for a dip from 2008 to 2012, education has consistently ranked as a priority for three-tenths or more of the population for the past two decades (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Most important problems | Uganda | 2024



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 percentage of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)*

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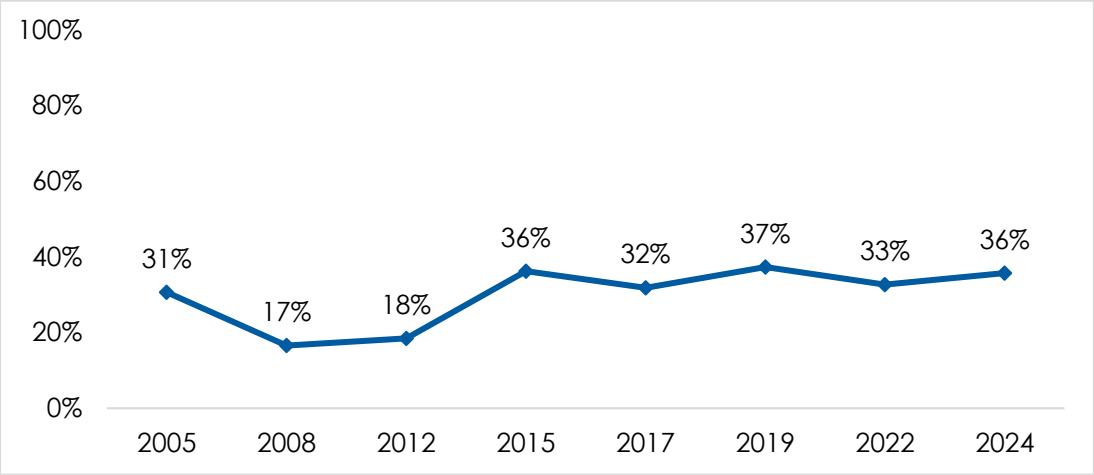
Figure 9: Education as an important problem | Uganda | 2005-2024

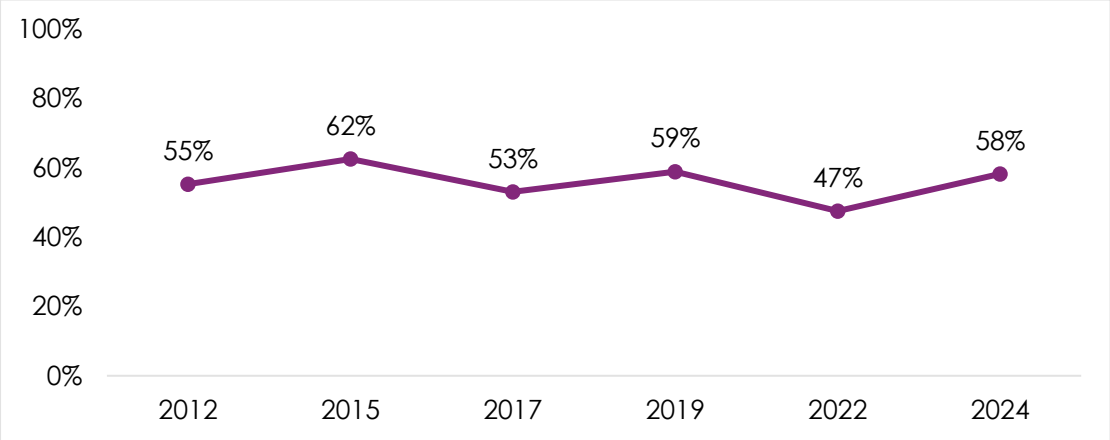


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (% who cited education as one of their top three responses)*

Government's performance on education

How satisfied are Ugandans with their government's performance in providing education for its people? A clear majority (58%) of citizens rate the government as performing "fairly well" or "very well" when it comes to addressing educational needs (Figure 10). This reflects a significant rebound in opinion since the previous survey in 2022 (+11 percentage points) following a dip to below half (47%) after 2019.

Figure 10: Government performance on education | Uganda | 2012-2024



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: Addressing educational needs? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

Approval of the government's performance is especially high among respondents lacking formal education (68%), residents from the Eastern and Western regions (both 65%), and better-off citizens (64% of those experiencing low or no lived poverty) (Figure 11). Rural residents are slightly more likely than their urban counterparts to approve of the government's efforts on education (61% vs. 52%).

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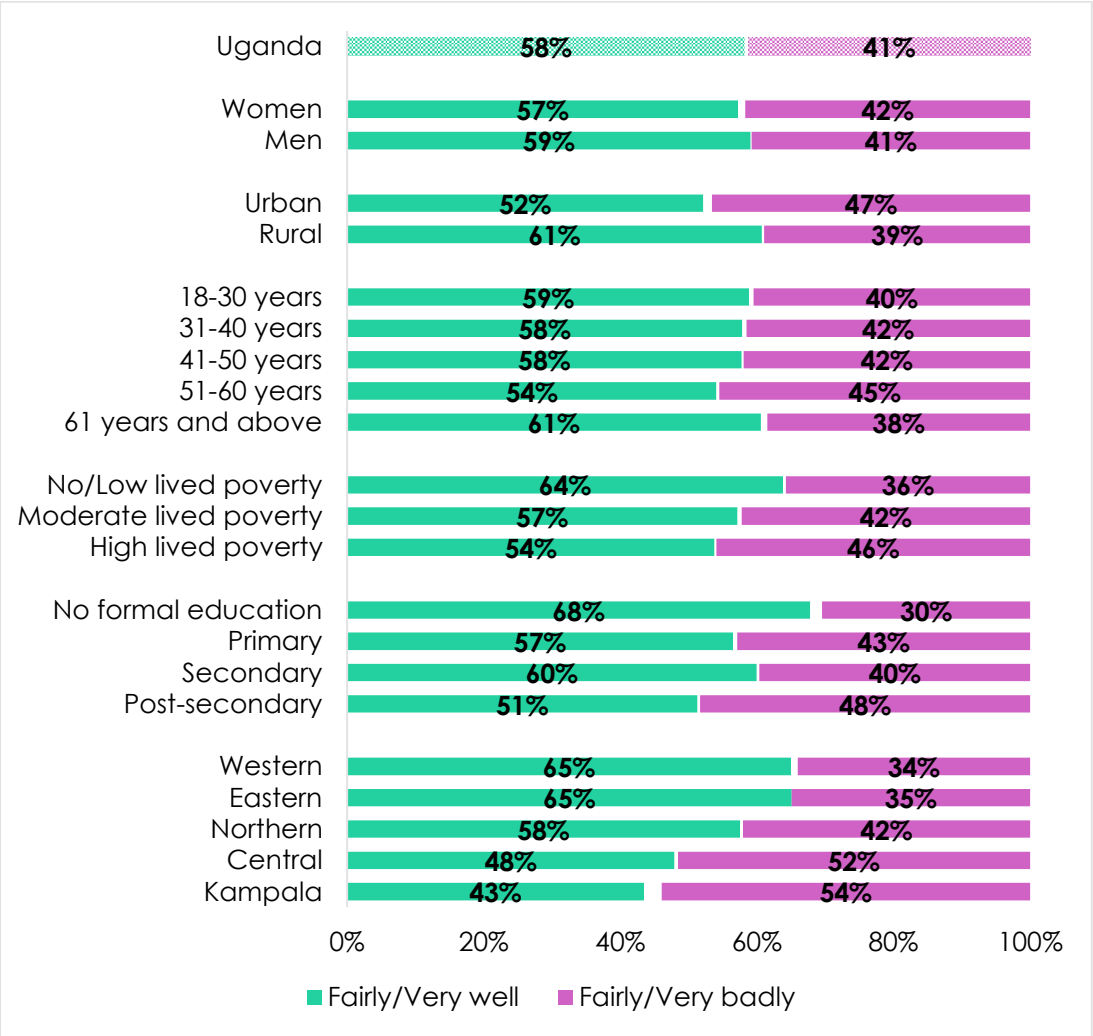
Figure 11: Government performance on education | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



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: Addressing educational needs?*

Under Uganda's decentralised system, education programmes are implemented by city or district councils. These local councils are mandated to align their education plans with the National Development Plan. Local government sector development plans must explain how education funding from the line ministry will be spent (National Planning Authority, 2014).

Asked how happy they are with the way their district or city councils are delivering education services, a majority of Ugandans say they are "not very satisfied" (31%) or "not at all satisfied" (21%) (Figure 12).

But satisfaction levels vary widely across the country. The North is the only region where a majority are satisfied (62%). In contrast, about two-thirds of central Ugandans (67%) and residents in the capital (64%) are dissatisfied with their councils. Meanwhile, eastern and western Ugandans are fairly evenly divided on the question.

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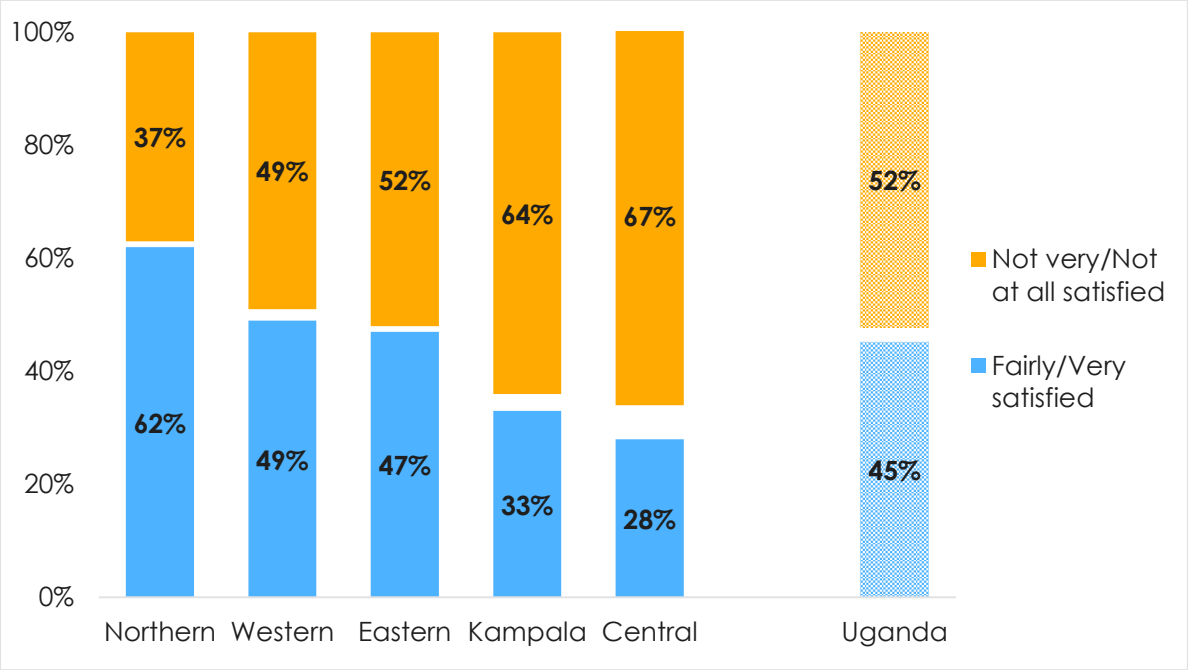
Figure 12: Satisfaction with district or city council performance on education | by region | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked: *How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way that your district or city council is delivering the following services, or haven't you heard enough to say: Providing education services at all levels in the district or city?*

Disruptions due to COVID-19

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of citizens hold the government responsible for failing to minimise disruptions to their children's education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 13). Among respondents with secondary or post-secondary education, about seven in 10 (69%-70%) report dissatisfaction, compared with 59% of those without formal education.

Again, there is significant regional variation: While a slim majority (54%) of those in northern Uganda are satisfied with the way the government handled disruptions to education, fewer than one-fifth in Kampala (18%) and the Central Region (17%) agree.

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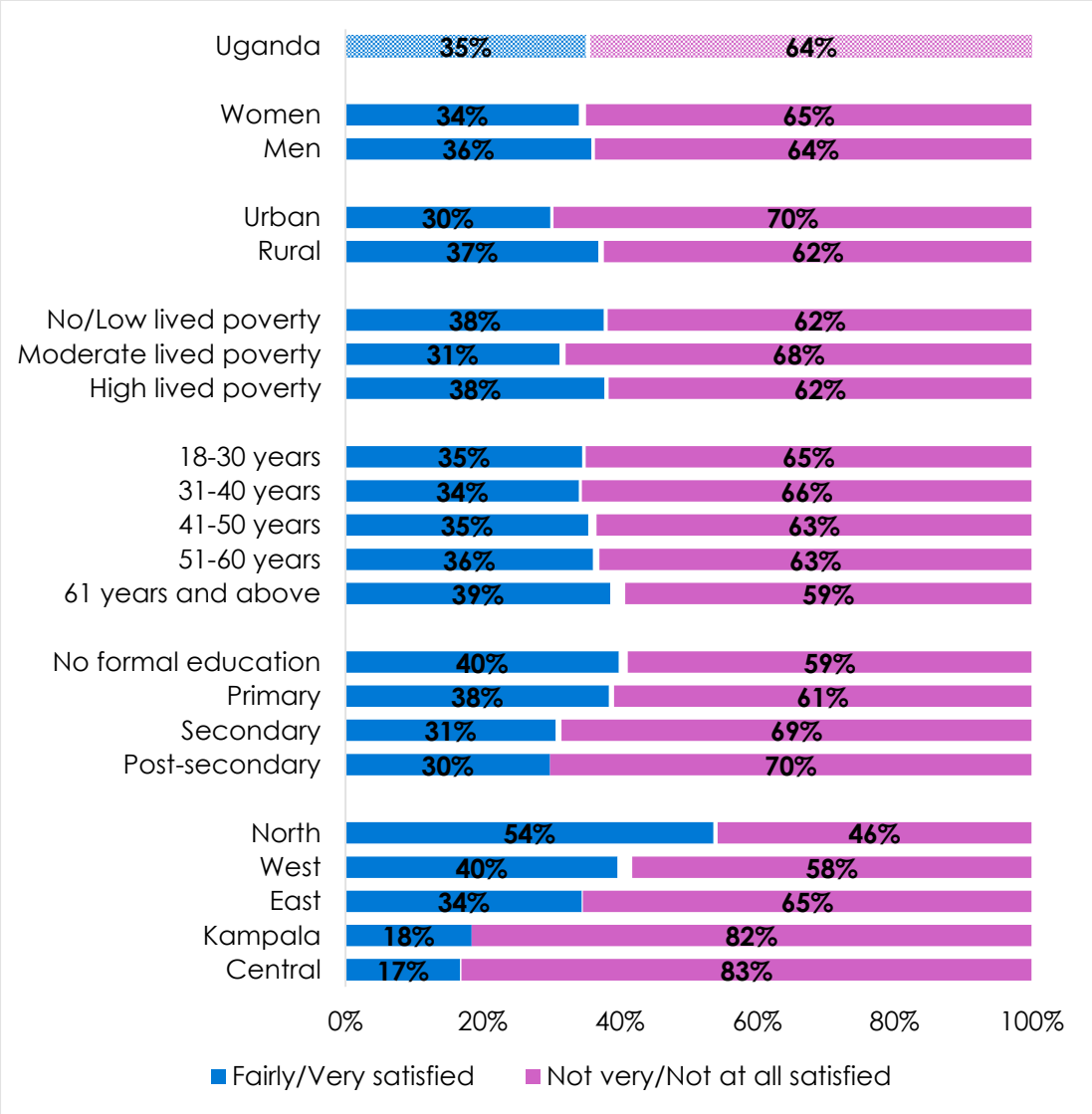
Figure 13: Views on government efforts to minimise disruptions to education during COVID-19 | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked: *How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government's response to COVID-19 in the following areas: Ensuring that disruptions to children's education are kept to a minimum?*

Conclusion

While educational attainment is rising among Uganda's younger generation, important inequalities in access to education remain. Citizens in the North, for example, are far less likely than residents in other regions to live near a school or to progress beyond primary school.

Girls also continue to face barriers, according to survey findings, including some families' prioritisation of boys' education over girls' and the experience of discrimination, harassment, and requests for sexual favours by teachers.

More generally, almost two-thirds of Ugandans say out-of-school children are a common problem in their community – a major impediment to the government's aim to provide both universal access and high quality when it comes to education.

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Ugandans consistently identify education as a top-tier challenge that the government must address and offer mixed reviews of the government's performance on the issue: The national government gets majority approval on meeting educational needs – though not on minimising disruptions to education during the pandemic – while fewer than half of citizens are dissatisfied with their district or city councils charged with implementing education programmes at the local level.

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