



Dispatch No. 937 | 20 January 2025

Majority of Zambian youth see their country as moving in ‘the wrong direction’

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 937 | Aubrey Ghambi and Alfred Kwadzo Torsu

Summary

About two-thirds of Zambia's population is under the age of 25. With 15- to 35-year-olds making up 56% of the country's labour force, youth hold the nation's economic future in their hands (Malabo Montpellier Panel, 2024). The African Development Bank (2024) notes that despite the country's substantial economic growth, job growth has not kept pace with the increasing number of young people entering the labour market.

Zambia's National Action Plan for Improving and Strengthening the Skills Anticipation System (2023-2027) reports that, as of 2022, more than 3.3 million Zambian youth – or about half of the youth population – were categorised as “not in education, employment, or training” (NEET) (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2022). The high NEET rate, contributing to increasing poverty among the youth, points to an urgent need for targeted government investment in job creation, education, and vocational training.

In response, the Zambian government's National Youth Policy Implementation Plan emphasises the importance of providing resources for youth participation in sectors such as agriculture and tourism, alongside efforts to promote financial literacy and digital skills training. The plan also aims to strengthen youth leadership and environmental responsibility to foster an inclusive, skilled, and engaged youth workforce that is crucial for Zambia's national development (Ministry of Youth, Sport and Arts, 2024).

The 2023 Global Youth Development Index ranks Zambia 152nd out of 183 countries on indicators of employment and opportunity, education, equality and inclusion, health and well-being, peace and security, and political and civic participation (Commonwealth, 2024).

The Afrobarometer Round 10 survey (2024) offers some insights into the situation of Zambia's youth. Findings show that young people are more educated than their elders, but also more likely to be unemployed. The increasing cost of living is the most important priority for government action, according to young Zambians, followed by public services such as health, water supply, infrastructure/roads, and electricity.

While youth offer mixed assessments of the government's performance on these priority issues, most see the country as headed in “the wrong direction.” Evaluations of economic and personal living conditions are largely negative. Only a minority of young people are optimistic that things will get better in the near future, and a growing share of youth say that they have contemplated emigration in search of better opportunities.

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 in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens of Zambia between 8 July and 28 July 2024. 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 Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

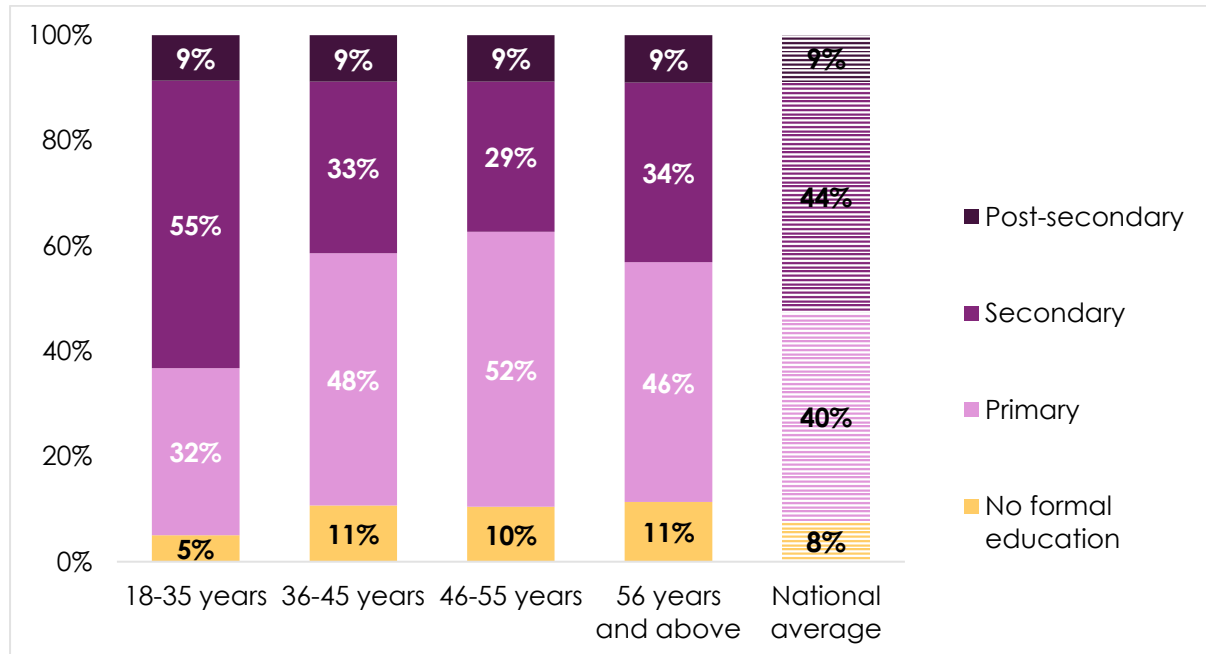
- **Zambian youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders.** Almost two-thirds (63%) have secondary or post-secondary qualifications, compared to 37%-43% among older cohorts.¹
- **But youth are also more likely to be unemployed:** More than half (54%) say they are looking for work, compared to 32%-40% of the middle-aged.
 - Aside from the country's general economic situation and scarcity of jobs, young people cite a lack of adequate training, a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements, and a lack of experience required by employers as their most important barriers to employment.
 - Given their choice of jobs, about half (49%) of Zambian youth would like to start their own businesses. Next in popularity is working for the government or public sector (37%).
 - If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help youth, job creation would be young people's top priority for greater investment, followed by access to business loans, education, and job training.
- **The increasing cost of living is the most important problem that young Zambians say their government must address,** followed by health, water supply, infrastructure/roads, and electricity.
- **On these priority issues, youth offer mixed reviews of their government's performance,** ranging from strikingly low levels of approval on keeping prices stable (9%) and providing reliable electricity (12%) to majority approval on improving basic health services (62%) and creating jobs (57%).
- **Majorities of young people see their country as moving in "the wrong direction"** (70%) and describe as "fairly bad" or "very bad" both the country's economic condition (75%) and their personal living conditions (62%).
 - Fewer than four in 10 youth (38%) think things will get better during the coming year.
- **About one in three young Zambians (34%) say they have considered emigrating,** most to find jobs or escape economic hardship.

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. 55% secondary education and 9% post-secondary education sum to 63%).

Level of education

Zambian youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders (Figure 1). While rates of post-secondary education have remained identical across all age groups (9%), secondary schooling is significantly more common among youth (55%) than among the older cohorts (29%-34%). One in 20 young Zambians (5%) lack formal education altogether, half as many as among their older compatriots (10%-11%).

Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | Zambia | 2024



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

Employment status

While Zambian youth have more education than their elders, they are less likely to have jobs (Figure 2). More than half (54%) of young respondents say they are unemployed and are actively looking for work, compared to 32%-40% of the middle-aged.

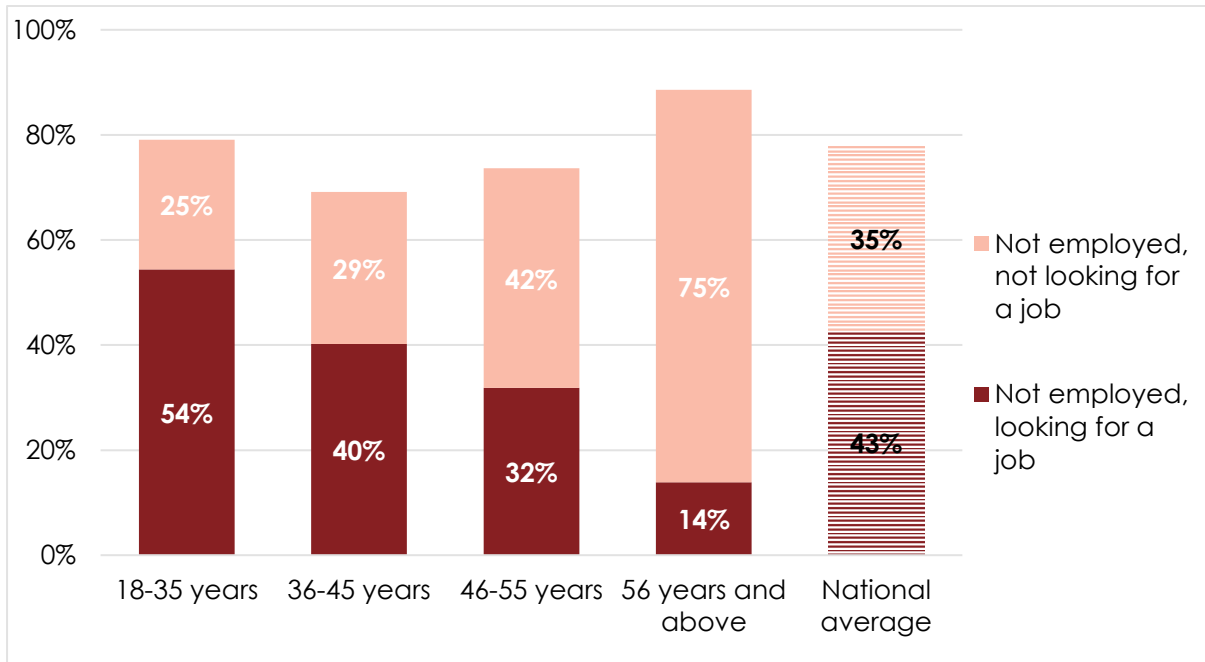
The share of unemployed youth looking for work includes 5% who identify as students, while the group without jobs and not actively looking for work includes 9% who say they are students (Figure 3).

Youth unemployment is a complex problem linked to a multitude of economic factors. But aside from the country's general economic situation, are there other barriers to young people finding jobs?

Like their elders, Zambian youth are most likely to see a lack of adequate training or preparation as a barrier to youth employment (cited by 28% of young respondents) (Figure 4).

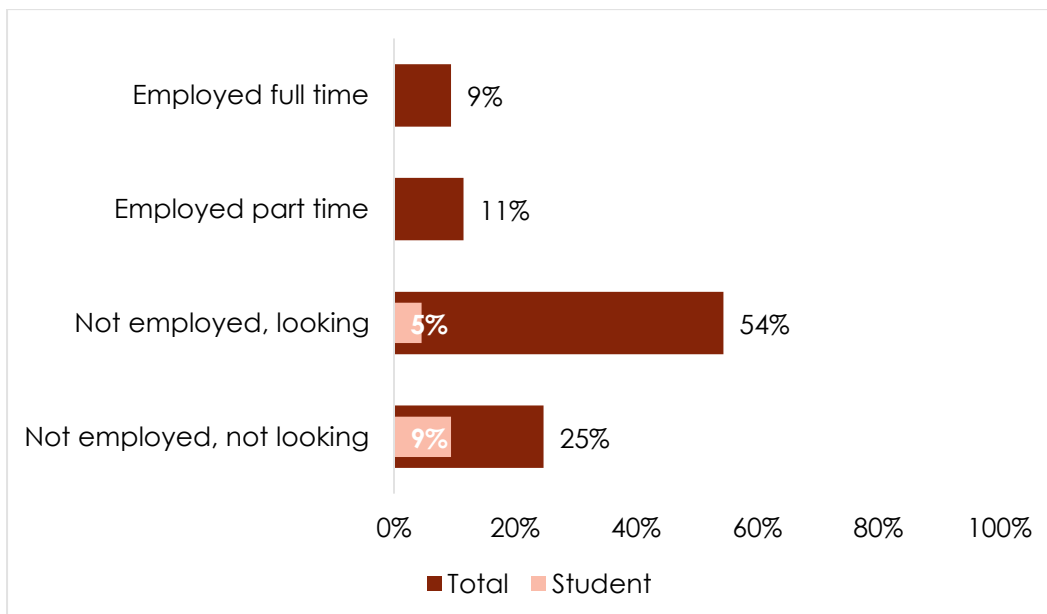
Others mention a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (18%), a lack of experience required by employers (16%), and a lack of entrepreneurial skills or motivation (14%). One in 10 young respondents (10%) say Zambian youth are unwilling to accept certain kinds of jobs, such as in agriculture.

Figure 2: Not employed, looking vs. not looking for a job | by age group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 2024

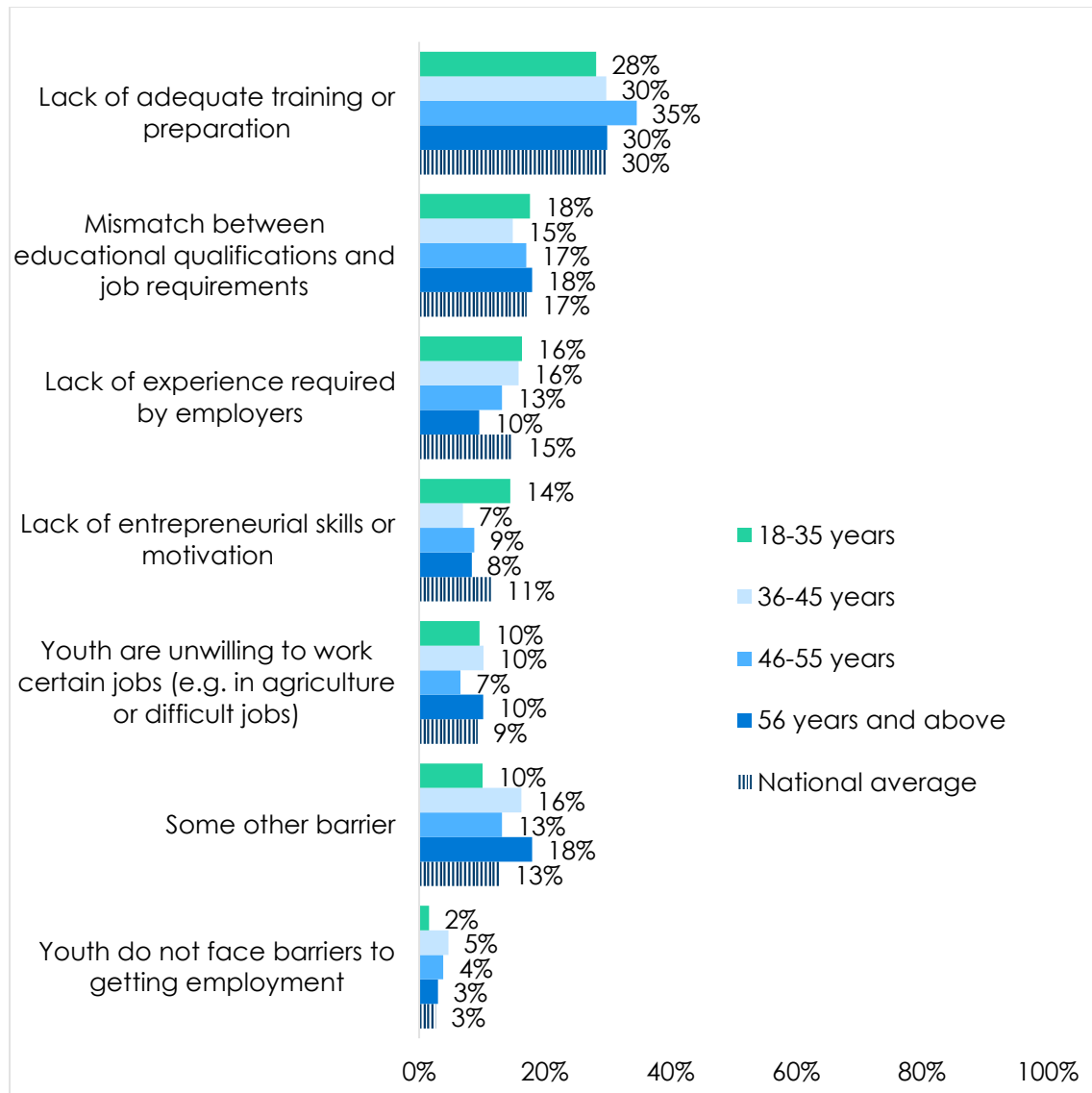


Respondents were asked:

Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

What is your main occupation? [If not currently working:] What was your last main occupation? (% who say "student")

Figure 4: Barriers to youth employment | by age group | Zambia | 2024



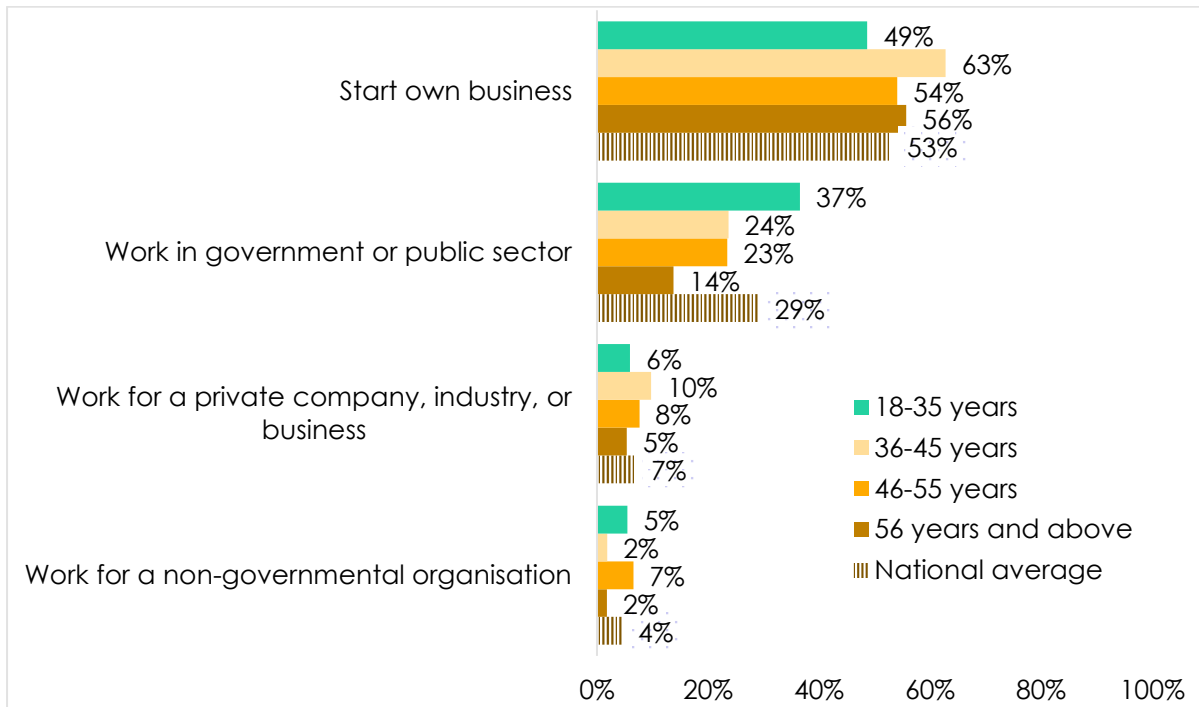
Respondents were asked: *Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, which of the following factors, if any, would you say is the main barrier to young people getting jobs and entering the workforce?*

If young Zambians could choose their own jobs, the most popular route would be to start their own businesses, cited by 49% of youth (Figure 5). Working in a government or public-sector job ranks second (37%), while only about one in 10 young people would opt for jobs in the private sector (6%) or a non-governmental organisation (5%).

Compared to older cohorts, young respondents are significantly more likely to look to the government or public sector for employment and somewhat less likely to want to start their own businesses.

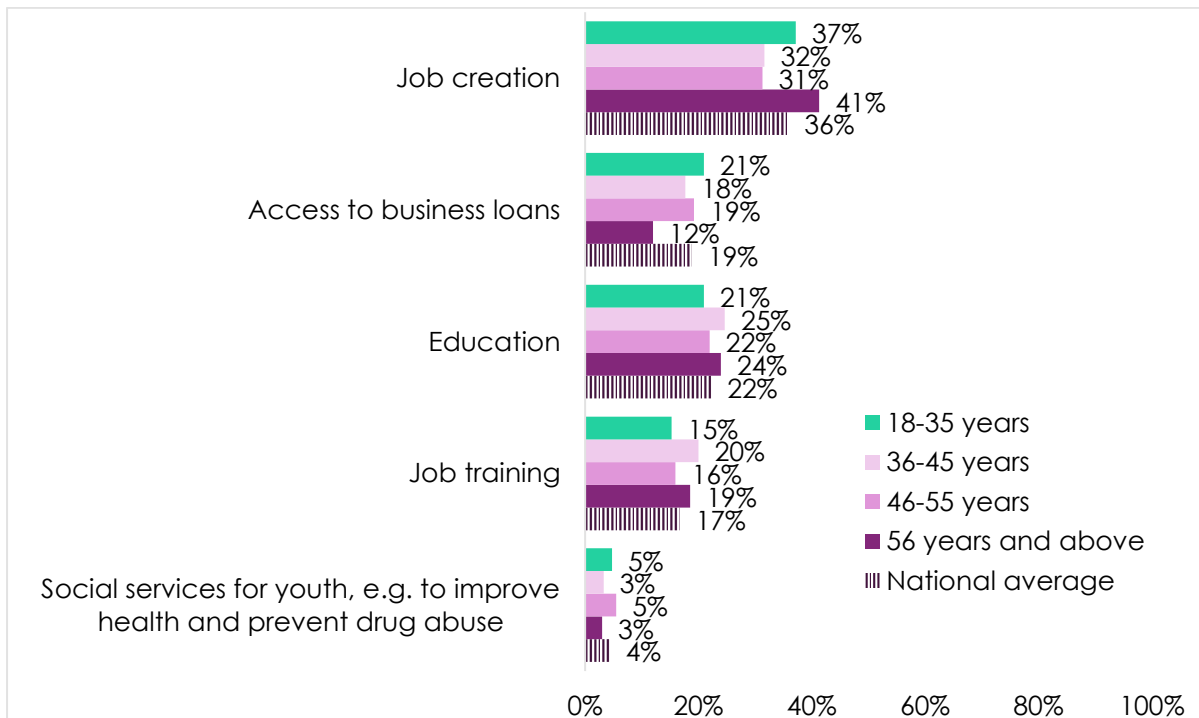
Jobs also outrank other needs on a list of priorities for additional investment if the government were able to increase its spending on programmes to help young people (Figure 6). Almost four in 10 young respondents (37%) cite job creation as their top priority, followed by access to business loans (21%), education (21%), and job training (15%).

Figure 5: Preferred job sector | by age group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *If you could work in any sector you wanted, which of the following would be your first choice?*

Figure 6: Government spending priority to help youth | by age group | Zambia | 2024



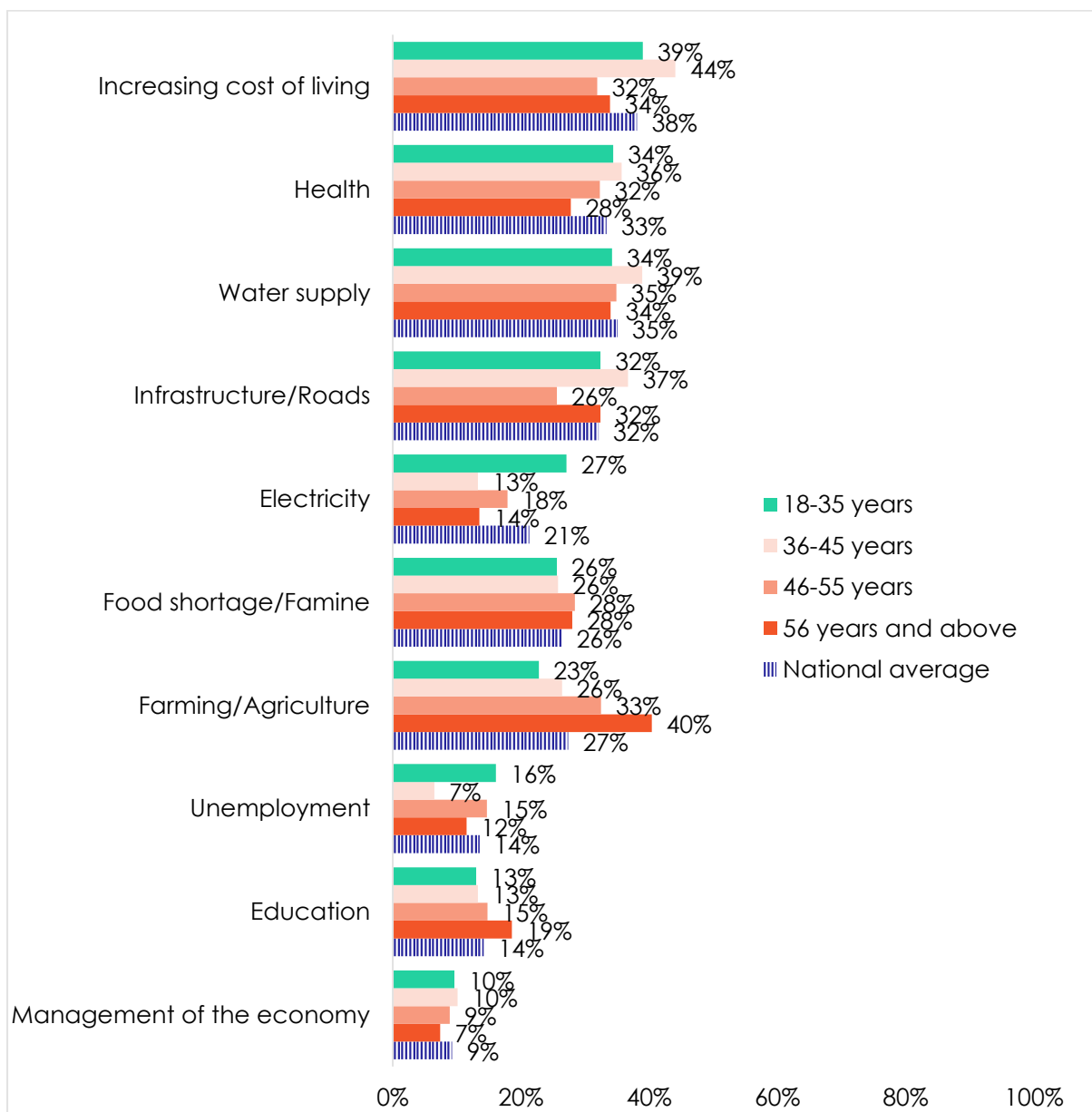
Respondents were asked: *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?*

Youth priorities

For young Zambians, the increasing cost of living is the most important problem that the government must address, cited by 39% of youth as one of their top three priorities. Service-delivery issues follow close behind: health (34%), water supply (34%), infrastructure/roads (32%), and electricity (27%) (Figure 7). Unemployment ranks only eighth, perhaps suggesting that in the eyes of young Zambians, job creation is as much a private-sector challenge as a direct government responsibility.

Compared to older cohorts, young Zambians are more likely to prioritise electricity and less concerned about agriculture (23%).

Figure 7: Most important problems | by age group | Zambia | 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 % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities)

Government performance on priority issues

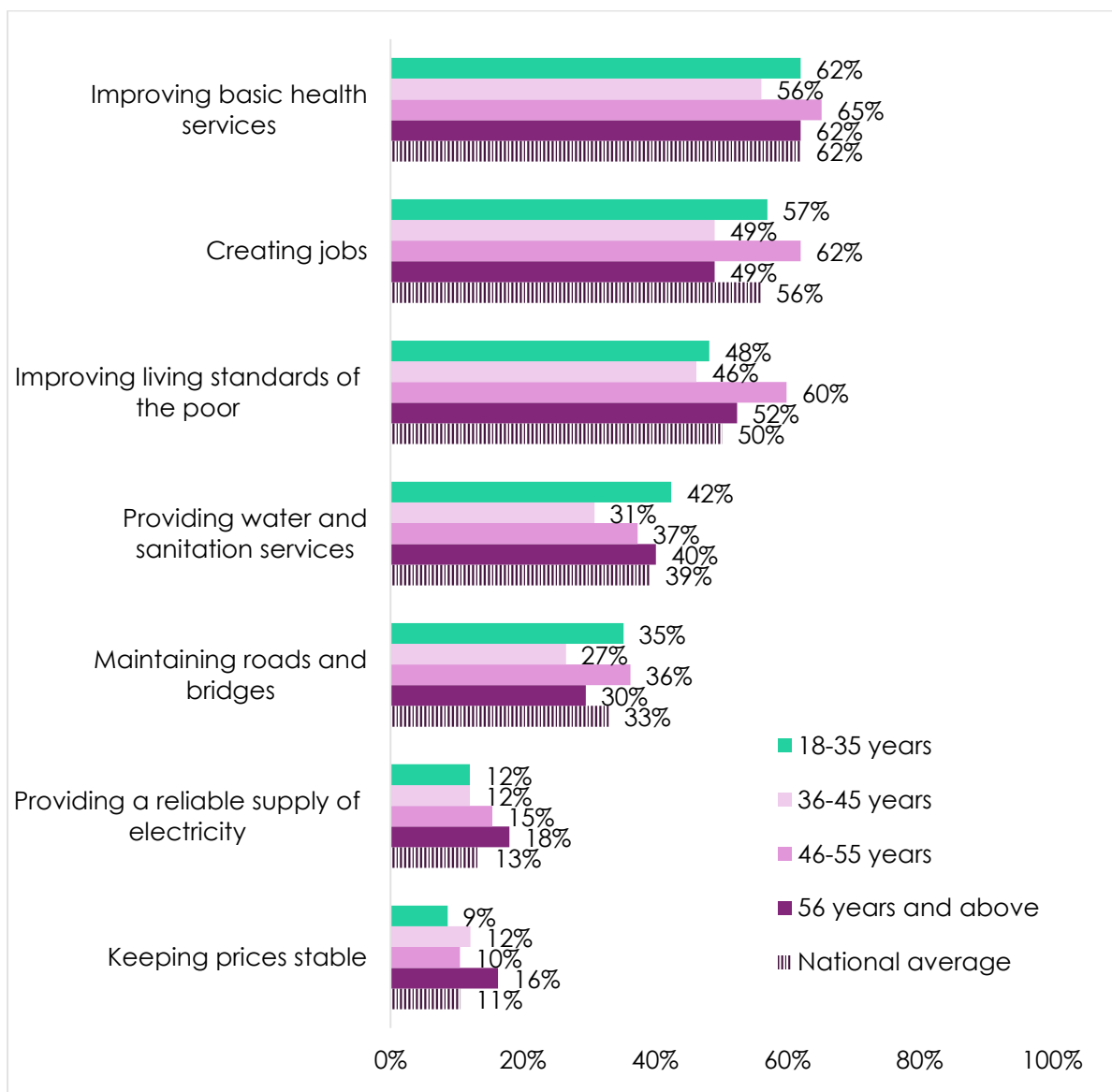
On issues that concern them most, young Zambians offer mixed reviews of their government's performance (Figure 8).

Majorities approve of the government's efforts when it comes to improving basic health services (62%) and creating jobs (57%). But fewer than half praise its performance on providing water and sanitation services (42%) and maintaining roads and bridges (35%).

And only about one in 10 youth say the government is doing a good job of providing electricity (12%) and keeping prices stable (9%).

Despite some variation in assessments by different age groups, youth are close to the national average in their evaluations of the government's performance on these priorities.

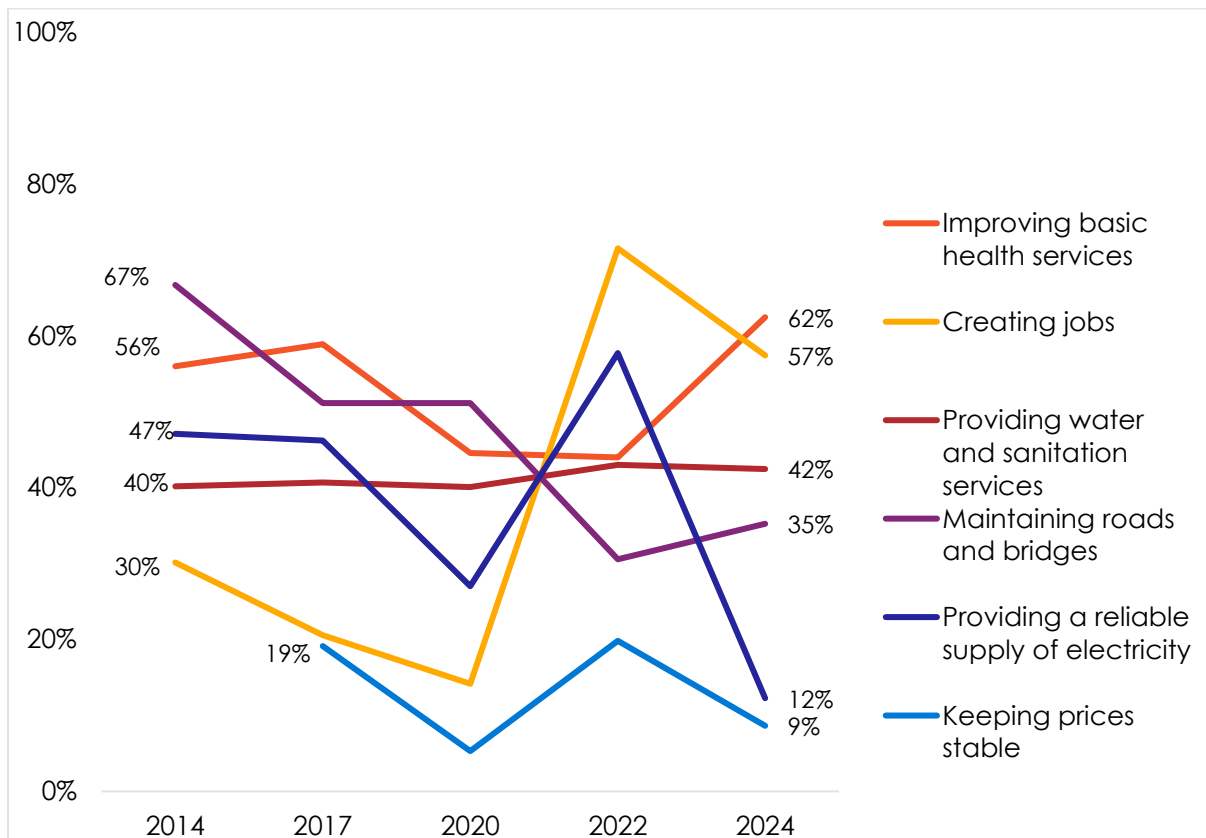
Figure 8: Government performance | by age group | Zambia | 2024



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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Over the past decade, young people's evaluations of the government's performance on these priorities have fluctuated considerably, including a huge surge in approval on job creation between 2020 (14%) and 2022 (71%) before it dropped back to 57% (Figure 9). But compared to survey findings in 2014, positive assessments have declined dramatically for electricity provision (-35 percentage points) and maintenance of roads and bridges (-31 points), while approval of efforts to keep prices stable has dropped by 11 points compared to 2017. Positive ratings of the government's performance on improving basic health services have increased by 6 points after an 18-point surge between 2022 (44%) and 2024 (62%).

Figure 9: Youth approval of government performance | respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 2014-2024



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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

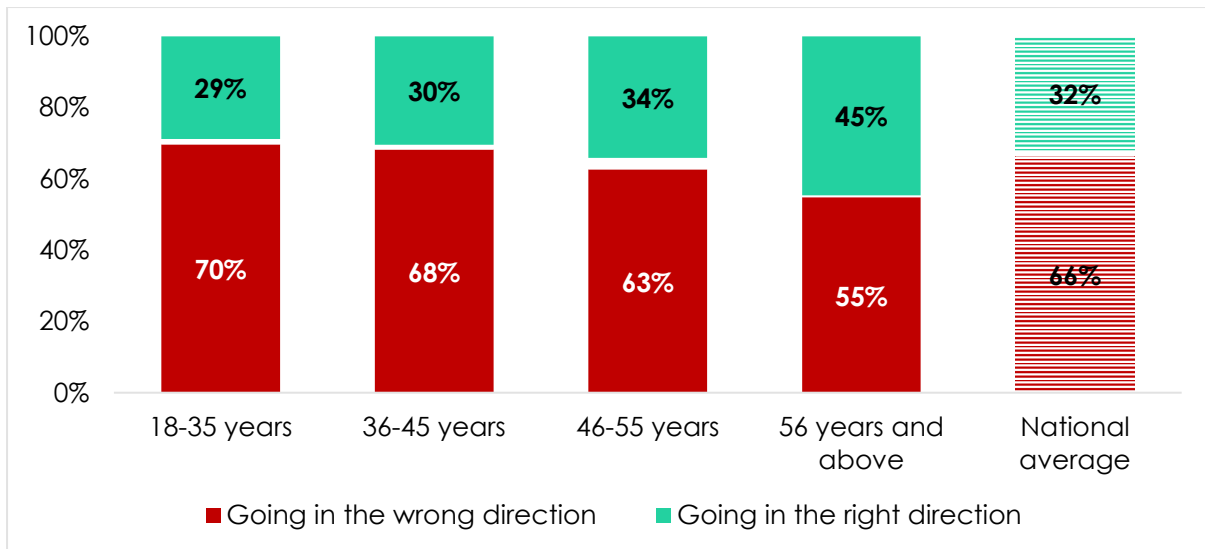
Country's overall direction and economic conditions

Despite their mixed assessments of the government's performance, a strong majority (70%) of young Zambians see the country as going in "the wrong direction" (Figure 10). In this perception, they are more negative than respondents over age 45 (55%-63% "wrong direction").

Similarly, they are more negative than the over-45 cohorts in their assessment of the country's economic condition, with 75% of youth describing it as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 11).

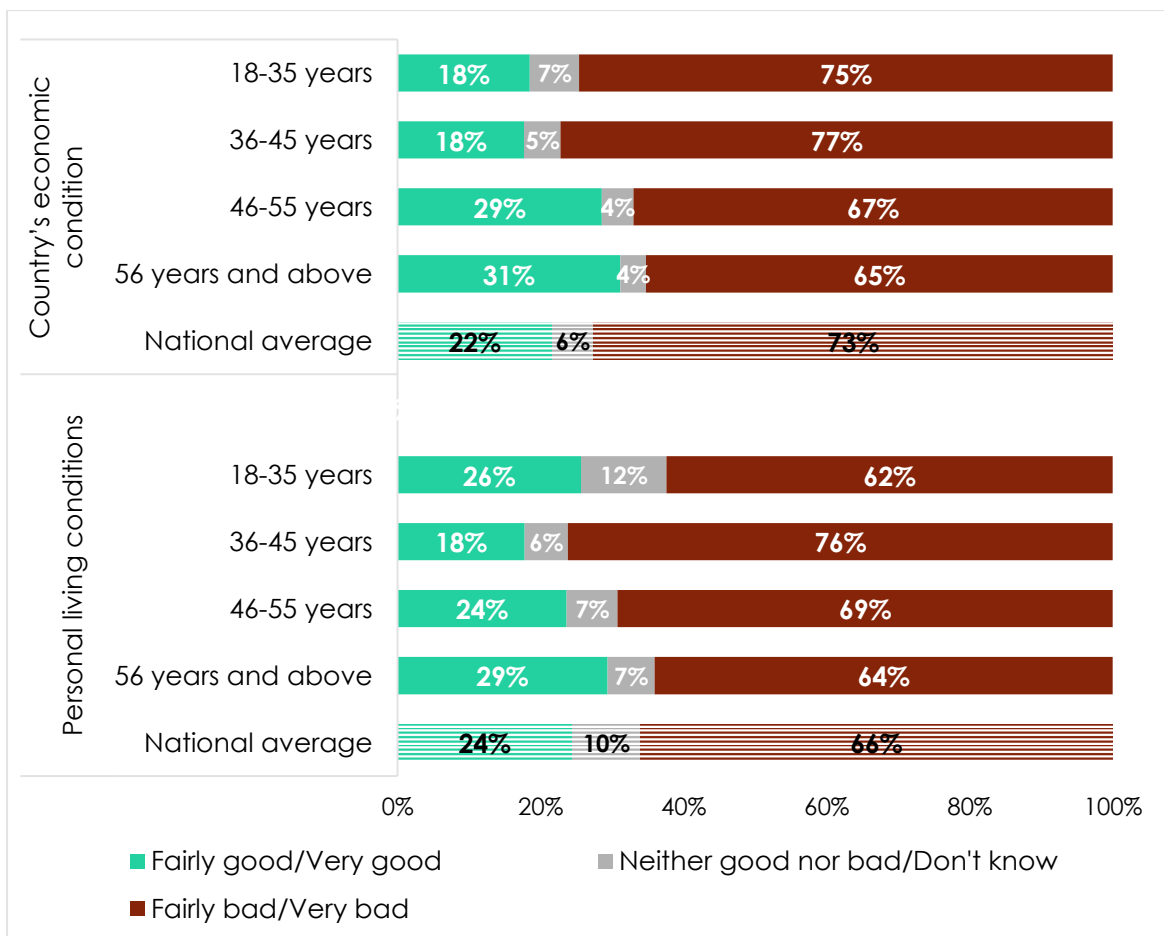
More than six in 10 youth (62%) also say their personal living conditions are bad.

Figure 10: Country's overall direction | by age group | Zambia | 2024



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

Figure 11: Economic and living conditions | by age group | Zambia | 2024

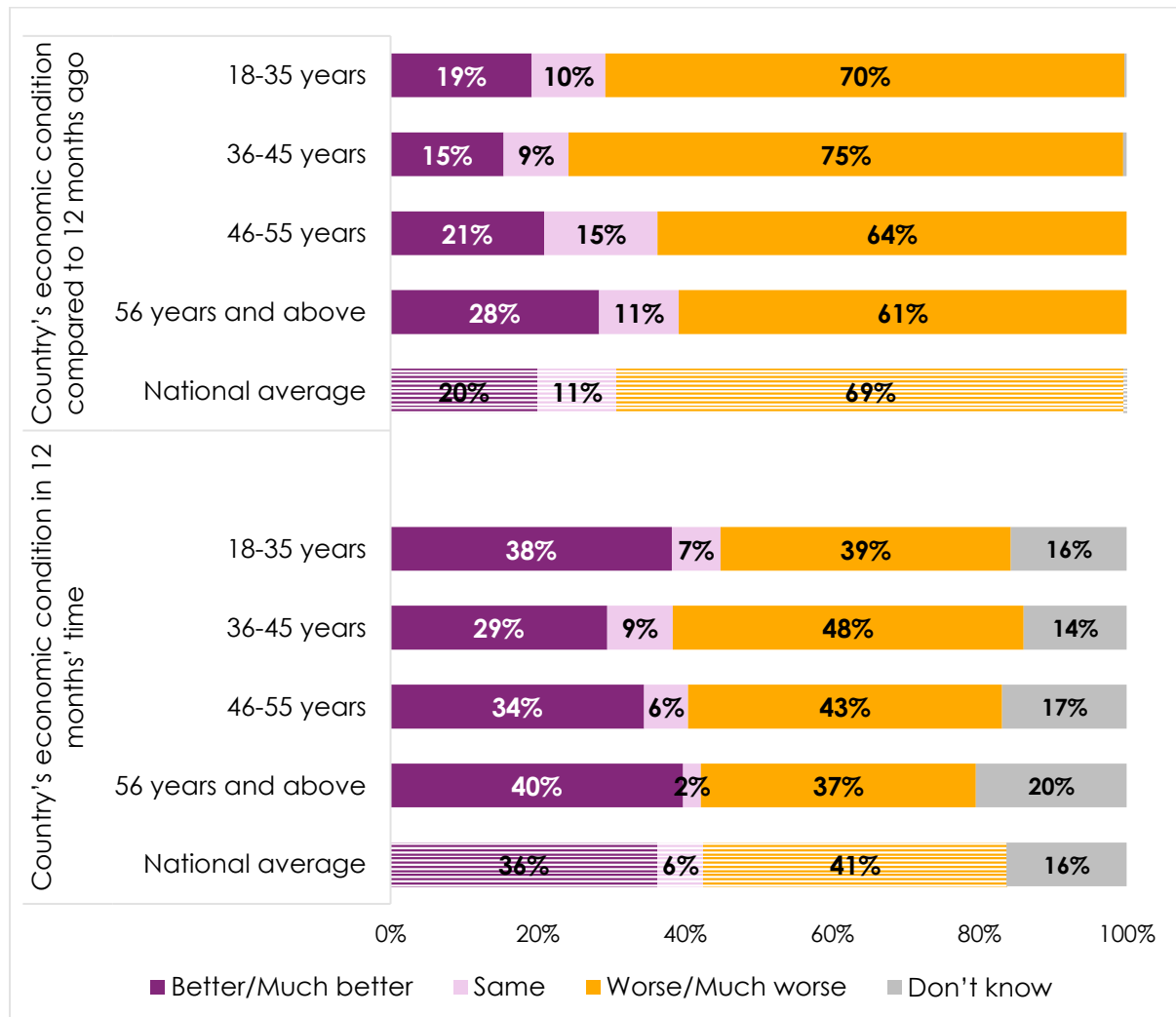


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?

Only one in five young people (19%) think the condition's economic condition has improved over the past year, while 70% say it has deteriorated (Figure 12).

Twice as many (38%) expect things to improve during the coming 12 months, although the same proportion (39%) think they will get worse.

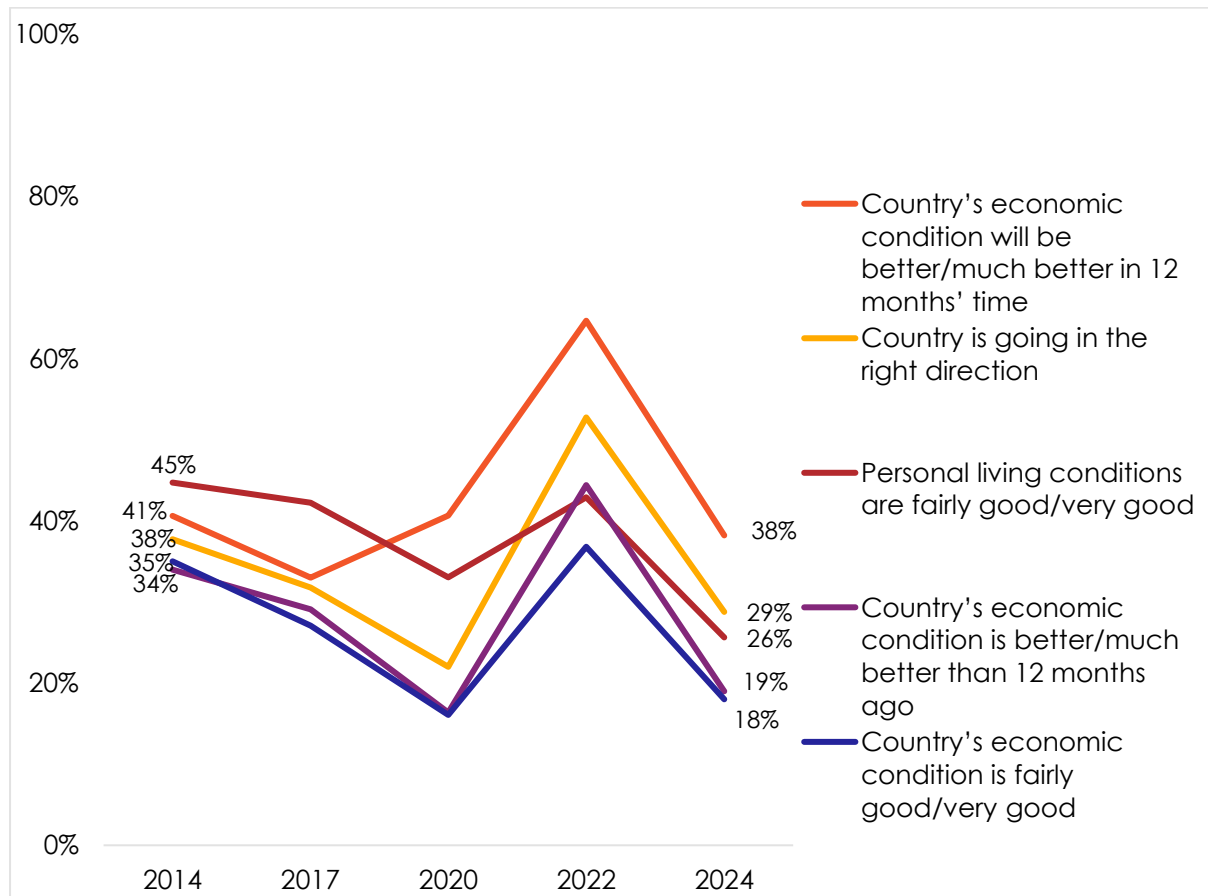
Figure 12: Country's economic condition 12 months ago and in 12 months' time
 | by age group | Zambia | 2024



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?

Over the past decade, the assessments of young Zambians regarding the country's overall direction and economic well-being have declined significantly despite a temporary positive spike in 2022 (Figure 13). Compared to 2014 survey findings, positive ratings have declined by 19 percentage points for personal living conditions, 17 points for the country's economic condition, and 15 points for perceptions of improvement over the previous year. Only optimism about improvement during the coming year (38%) comes close to maintaining its 2014 rating (41%), itself not an overwhelming expression of confidence.

Figure 13: Economic assessments | respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia
 | 2014-2024



Respondents were asked:

*Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
 In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?
 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?*

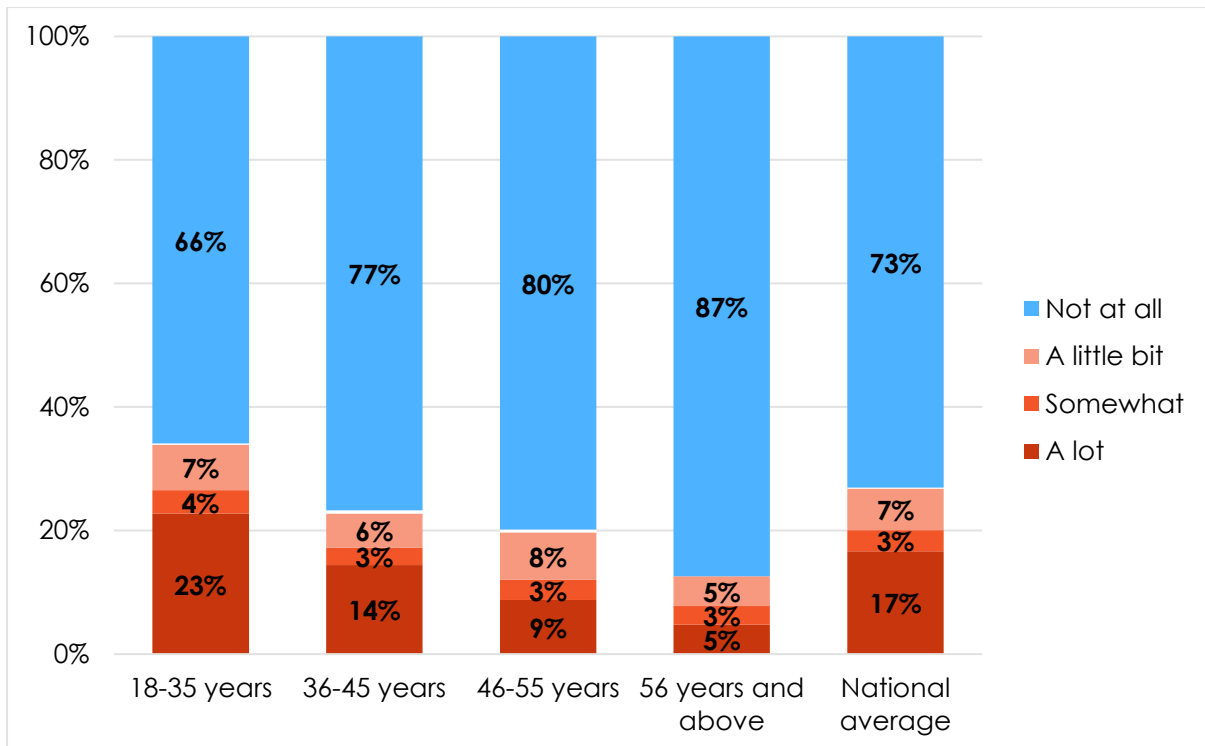
Emigration

About one in three young Zambians (34%) say they have given emigration at least “a little bit” of thought, compared to 20%-23% of respondents in the 36-55 age brackets (Figure 14).

Compared to 2017 survey findings, the share of youth who have considered emigrating “somewhat” or “a lot” has increased from 20% to 27%, including a 10-percentage-point jump in the “a lot” category (Figure 15).

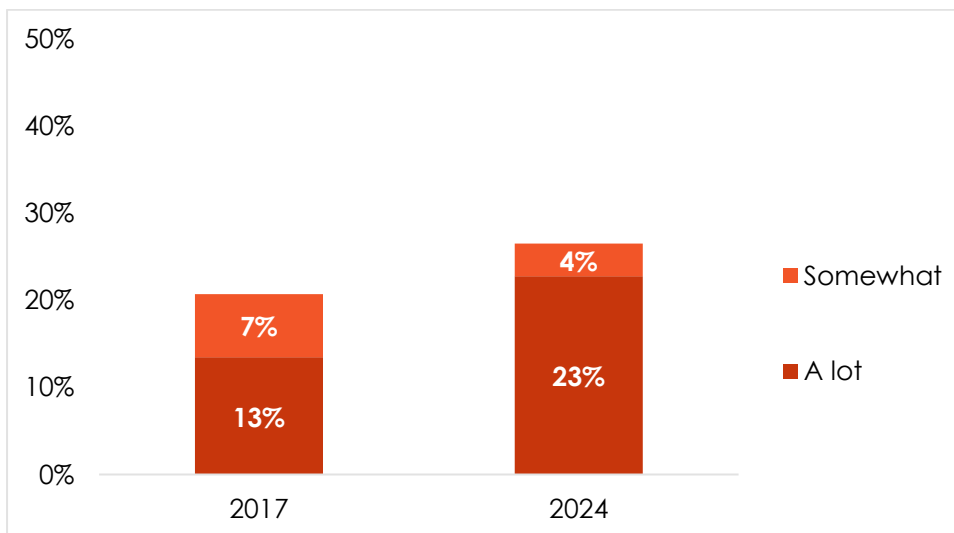
Among those who have considered emigrating at least “a little bit,” economic reasons dominate, led by the hope of finding a (better) job (55%) and escaping economic hardship or poverty (25%) (Figure 16).

Figure 14: Considered emigrating | by age group | Zambia | 2024



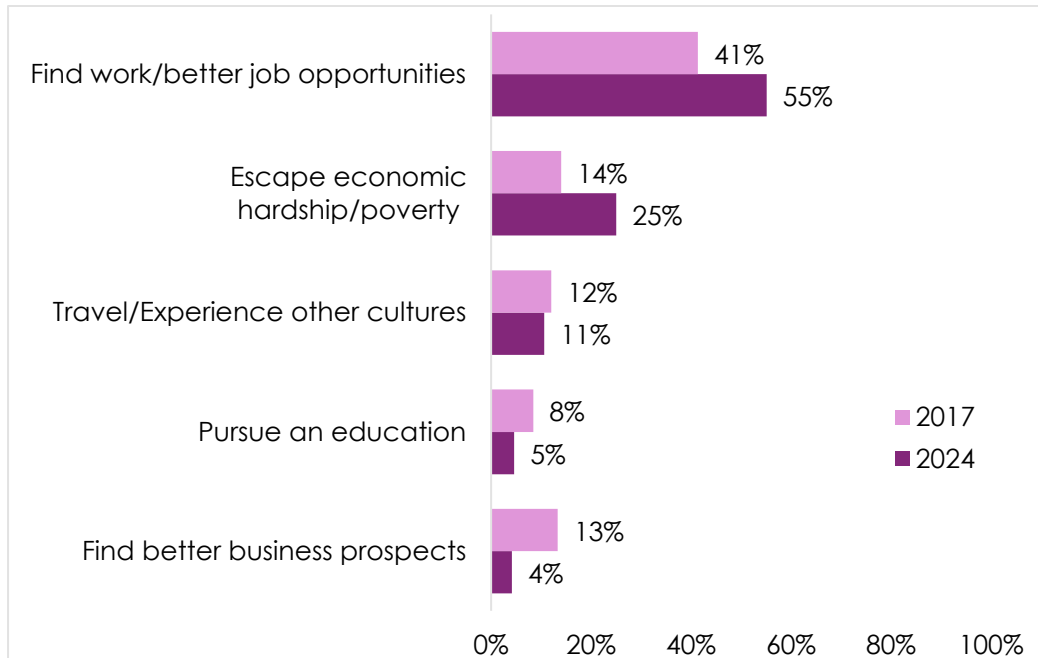
Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

Figure 15: Considered emigrating | respondents aged 18-35 years | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

Figure 16: Reasons for considering emigration | respondents aged 18-35 years
 | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who have considered leaving the country were asked: *There are several reasons why people leave their home to live in another country for an extended period of time. What about you? What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from Zambia?*

Conclusion

A large majority of Zambian youth see their country as headed in “the wrong direction.” The increasing cost of living is the most important priority for government action, according to young Zambians, who overwhelmingly see the government as failing in its efforts to keep prices stable.

More broadly, young people's assessments of economic and living conditions are strongly negative and getting worse, and a growing number of youth are thinking about emigration as a path to better opportunities.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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