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Ugandans see health as a key priority for government action, endorse universal access

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 967 | John Ssebunya

Summary

Access to health care is often the difference between life and death. In Uganda, health has long been considered a crucial priority, unsurprising in a country where limited investment, poor infrastructure, and a shortage of health care workers leave large segments of the population without adequate medical care (Afrobarometer, 2023; Turyamureba, Yawe, & Oryema, 2023).

Corruption is one critical challenge for Uganda's health care sector, as it significantly hinders access to essential medical services. A study by Uganda's Inspectorate of Government (2021) conservatively estimated that in 2019, the cost of corruption in Uganda's health care sector amounted to nearly UGX670 billion (about U.S. $175 million).

Corruption increases inequality, as access to medical services often depends on patients' ability to pay informal fees. Health care workers, acting as informal gatekeepers, have been reported to solicit bribes for services that are officially free, a practice that places a financial burden on patients and undermines trust in the public health system (Inspectorate of Government, 2021). In addition, procurement corruption and favouritism in contract allocation often result in inflated prices and substandard goods, compromising the quality of health care delivery (Inspectorate of Government, 2021).

Many developing countries, including Uganda, also face challenges with human resources in the health care system. Inadequate salaries, low job satisfaction and employee morale, and limited training opportunities may go some way toward explaining the prevalence of bribery, absenteeism, and the "brain drain" of emigrating professionals (Ndanyi, 2024).

The government has announced its intention to implement a National Health Insurance Scheme, a universal medical aid programme for which citizens will be required to make a monthly contribution, although the president is yet to sign the relevant legislation (Daily Monitor, 2025).

This dispatch reports on citizens' experiences and evaluations of the Ugandan health system. Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that health remains citizens' top priority for government action. Three-fourths of citizens say a family member went without needed medical care at least once during the past year. And among those who had contact with a public health facility, most say obtaining care was difficult, and four in 10 report having to pay a bribe.

Despite these personal challenges, a slim majority of Ugandans say the government is doing a good job of improving basic health services, and three-fourths express trust in the Ministry of Health. But a clear majority want the government to ensure universal access to adequate health care, even at the cost of higher taxes.

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 Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative 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 in Uganda have been conducted in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Key findings

- Health ranks as the most important problem that Ugandans want their government to address: Six in 10 respondents (61%) cite health as a top priority, well ahead of education (36%), infrastructure/roads (34%), and water supply (26%).

- Three-fourths (74%) of citizens say a family member went without medical treatment or medicines at least once during the 12 months before the survey, including 32% who say this happened "many times" or "always."

- Among the 72% of Ugandans who contacted a public health clinic or hospital during the previous year, about two-thirds (65%) say getting the medical care they needed was "difficult" or "very difficult."

    - Four in 10 respondents (41%) who sought care say they had to pay a bribe to obtain the services they needed.

- A slim majority (52%) of respondents say the government is doing a good job of improving basic health services, but almost as many (48%) disagree.

    - Almost two-thirds (65%) of citizens express confidence in the Ministry of Health.

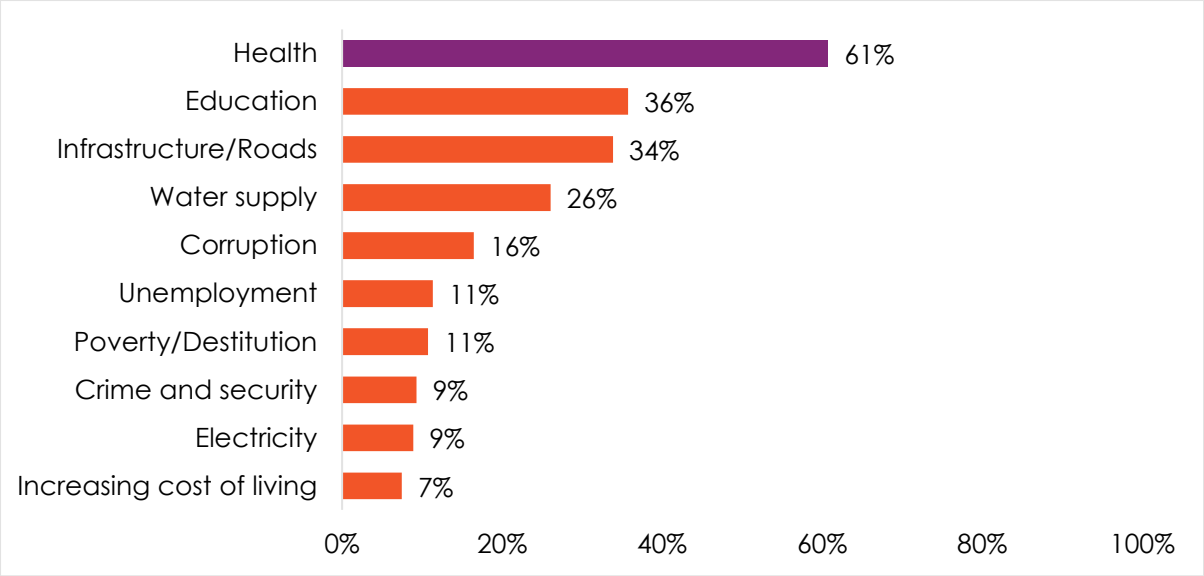
- A strong majority (63%) of Ugandans say the government should ensure universal access to adequate health care, even if that means raising taxes.

Health as Uganda's most important problem

Health is overwhelmingly perceived as the most important problem facing Uganda, with 61% of respondents citing is as a top priority requiring government intervention (Figure 1). This places it well ahead of education (36%), infrastructure/roads (34%), and water supply (26%) on citizens' agenda.

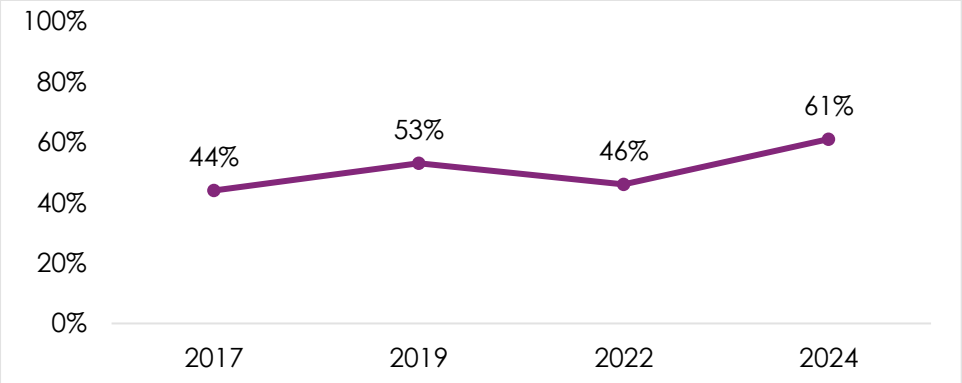
Health has consistently ranked as the most critical issue for citizens over the years, with concern rising significantly from 46% in 2022 (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Most important problems | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who identify each issue as one of their country's three most important problems.)*

Figure 2: Health as most important problem | Uganda | 2017-2024



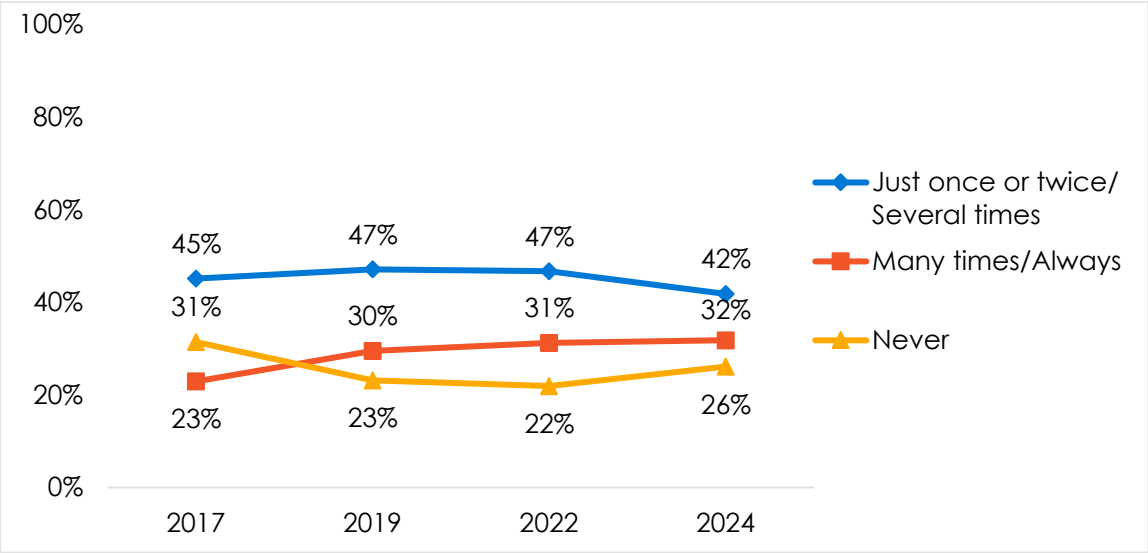
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who identify health as one of their country's three most important problems.)*

Obtaining medical care

When asked about obtaining medical care, three-fourths (74%) of Ugandans say they or a family member went without medical treatment or medicines at least once during the year leading up to the survey (Figure 3). This includes one-third (32%) who say this happened "many times" or "always." The share of Ugandans who report frequently going without medical care has increased by 9 percentage points since 2017.

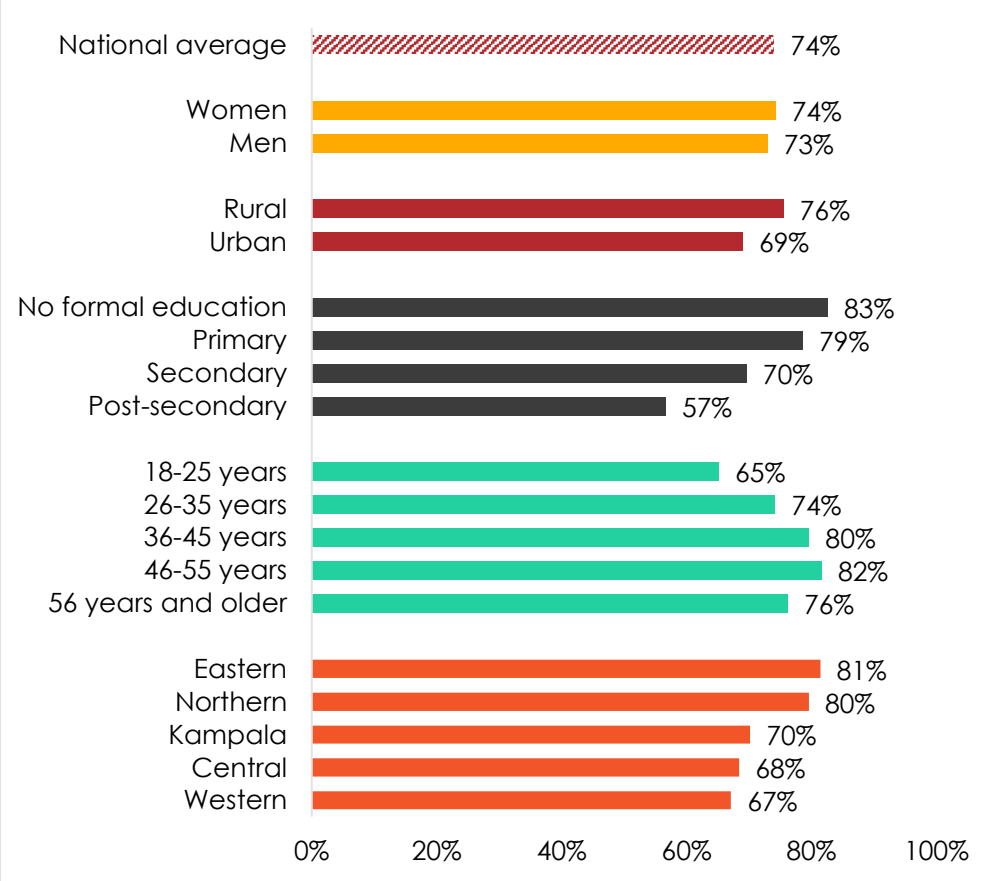
The experience of going without needed care is more common in rural areas than in cities (76% vs. 69%) and is most common in the Eastern (81%) and Northern (80%) regions (Figure 4). The frequency increases with respondents' age but decreases as respondents' education level rises.

Figure 3: Went without medical care | Uganda | 2017-2024



Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Medicines or medical treatment?*

Figure 4: Went without medical care | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Medicines or medical treatment? (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")*

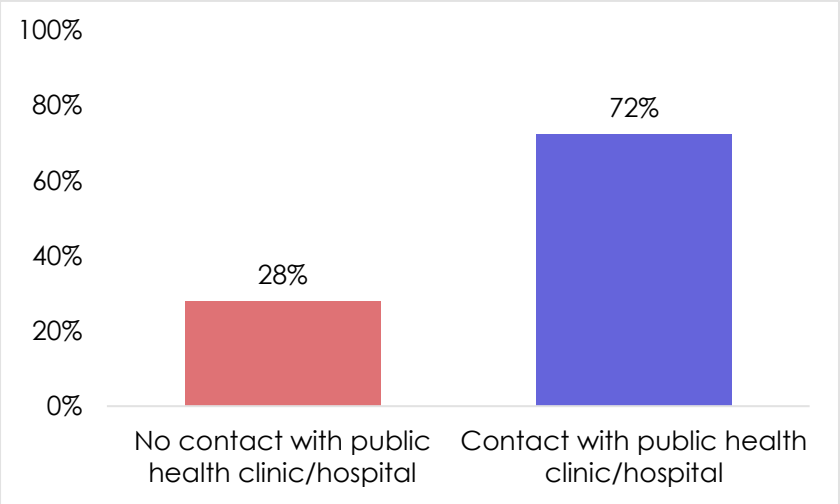
Experience with public health facilities

The Afrobarometer survey also explored respondents' experiences with public health facilities, including challenges they faced in accessing the care they needed.

More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) report having contact with a public clinic or hospital in the past 12 months (Figure 5).

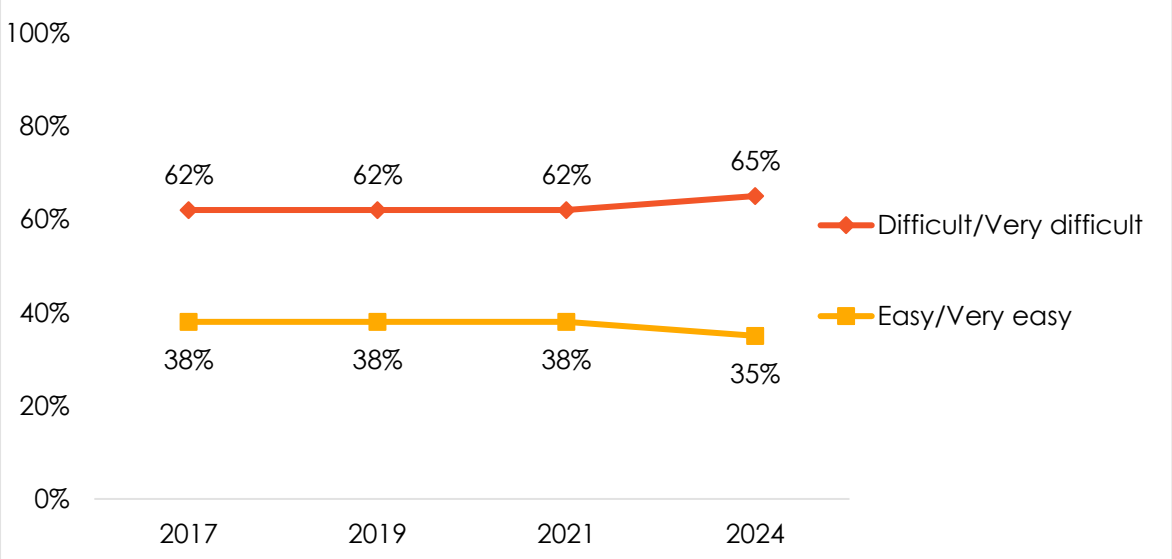
Among those who had contact with a public health facility, about two-thirds (65%) found it "difficult" or "very difficult" to obtain the needed care (Figure 6). This share is up marginally from previous years.

Figure 5: Contact with public clinic or hospital | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public clinic or hospital?*

Figure 6: Ease of obtaining medical care | Uganda | 2017-2024



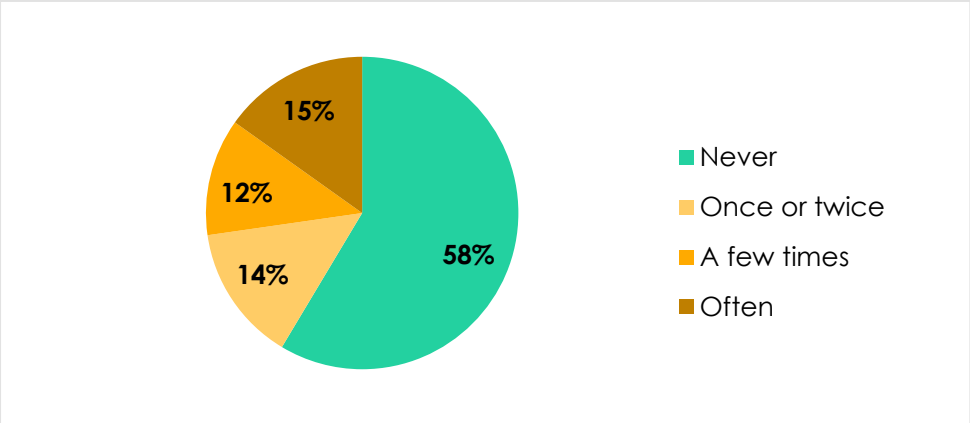
Respondents who had contact with a public clinic or hospital were asked: *How easy or difficult was it to obtain the medical care or services you needed? (Respondents who had no contact with a public clinic or hospital are excluded.)*

Moreover, four in 10 Ugandans (41%) who had contact with a public health facility say they had to pay a bribe in order to obtain medical care at least once, with 12% doing so "a few times" and 15% "often" (Figure 7).

Self-reported bribery in exchange for health care has fluctuated over time, dropping by 11 percentage points between 2011 and 2015 but then climbing to a high of 42% in 2019 (Figure 8). As of 2024, the figure remains near its peak, indicating a persistent and possibly worsening issue of corruption in the health care sector.

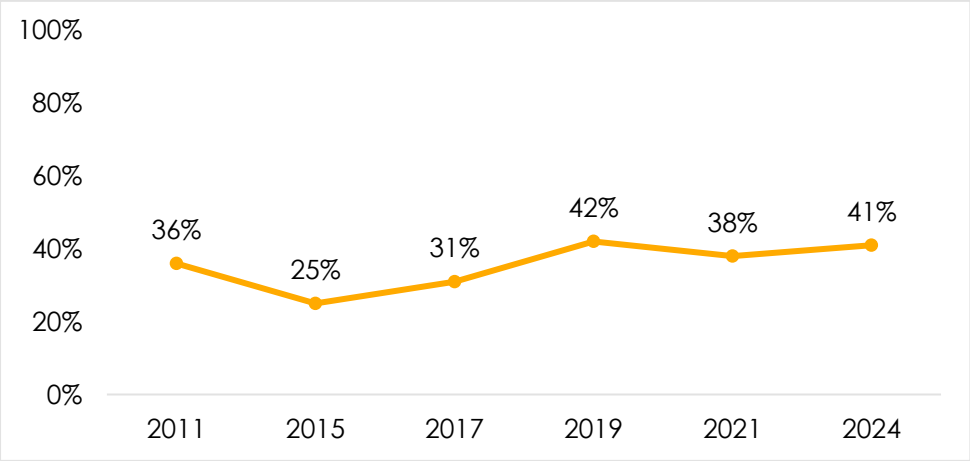
The highest incidence of bribery in Uganda's health care sector are reported in the Eastern (48%) and Central regions (47%) as well as in Kampala (47%) (Figure 9). Among Muslims, a slim majority (52%) report having to pay a bribe, compared to 40% among Christians. Citizens experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (44%-45%) are more likely than those who are better off (35%) to have to pay bribes, suggesting that the economically vulnerable are also more vulnerable to being exploited.

Figure 7: Paid a bribe for medical care? | Uganda | 2024



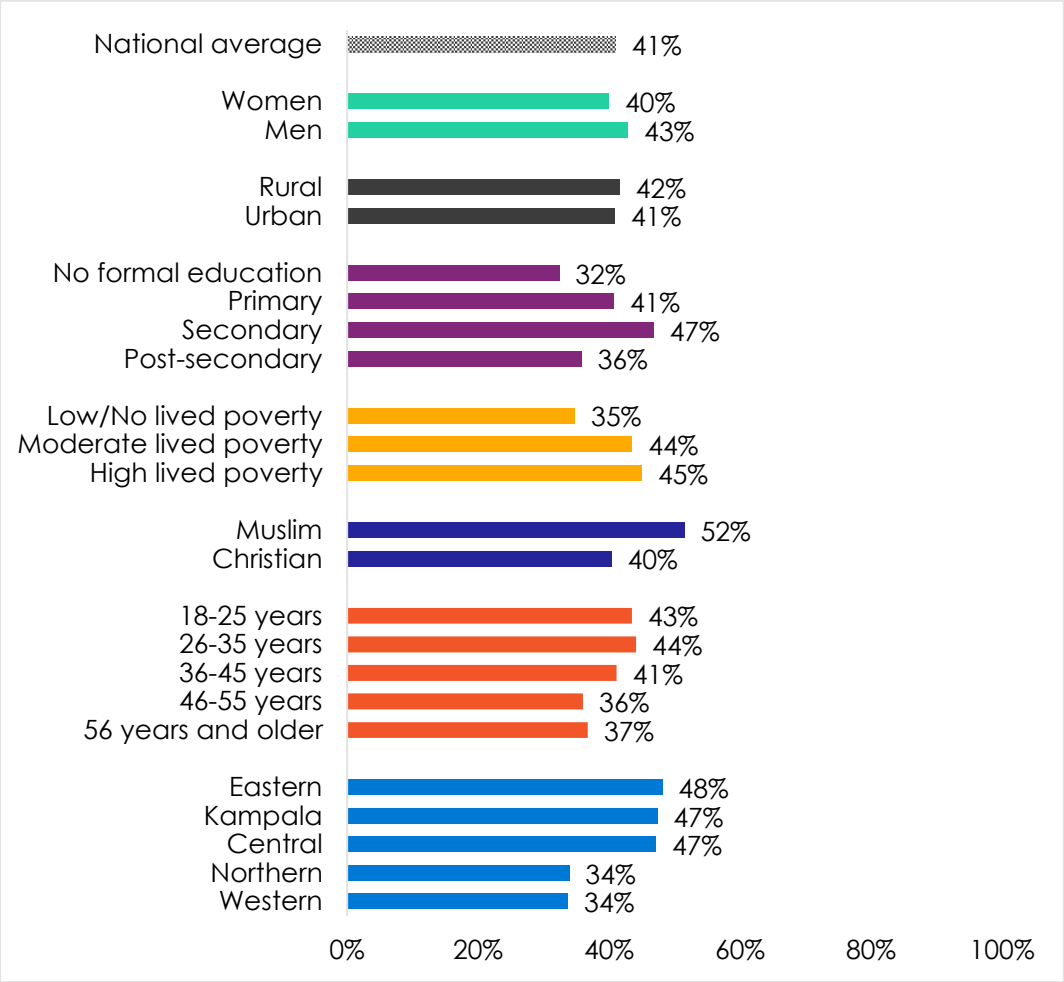
Respondents who had contact with a public clinic or hospital were asked: *How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care or services you needed? (Respondents who had no contact with a public clinic or hospital are excluded.)*

Figure 8: Paid a bribe for medical care | Uganda | 2011-2024



Respondents who had contact with a public clinic or hospital were asked: *How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care or services you needed? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often") (Respondents who had no contact with a public clinic or hospital are excluded.)*

Figure 9: Paid a bribe for medical care | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



Respondents who had contact with a public clinic or hospital were asked: *How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care or services you needed? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often") (Respondents who had no contact with a public clinic or hospital are excluded.)*

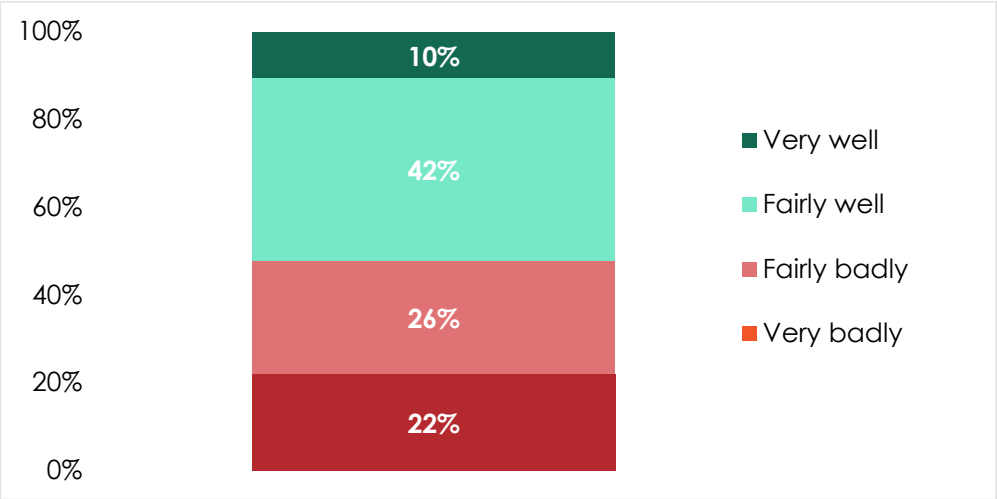
Government performance on health

The public's perception of how well basic health services are being handled is mixed. A narrow majority (52%) think the government is doing a good job, but nearly as many (48%) feel that basic health services are not being handled well (Figure 10).

Dissatisfaction with the government's attempts to improve health care is particularly high among residents of Kampala (60%) and the Central Region (57%), and is higher among urbanites than among rural residents (54% vs. 45%) (Figure 11). Poorer respondents are more likely than those who are better off to say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" (54% vs. 42%-48%).

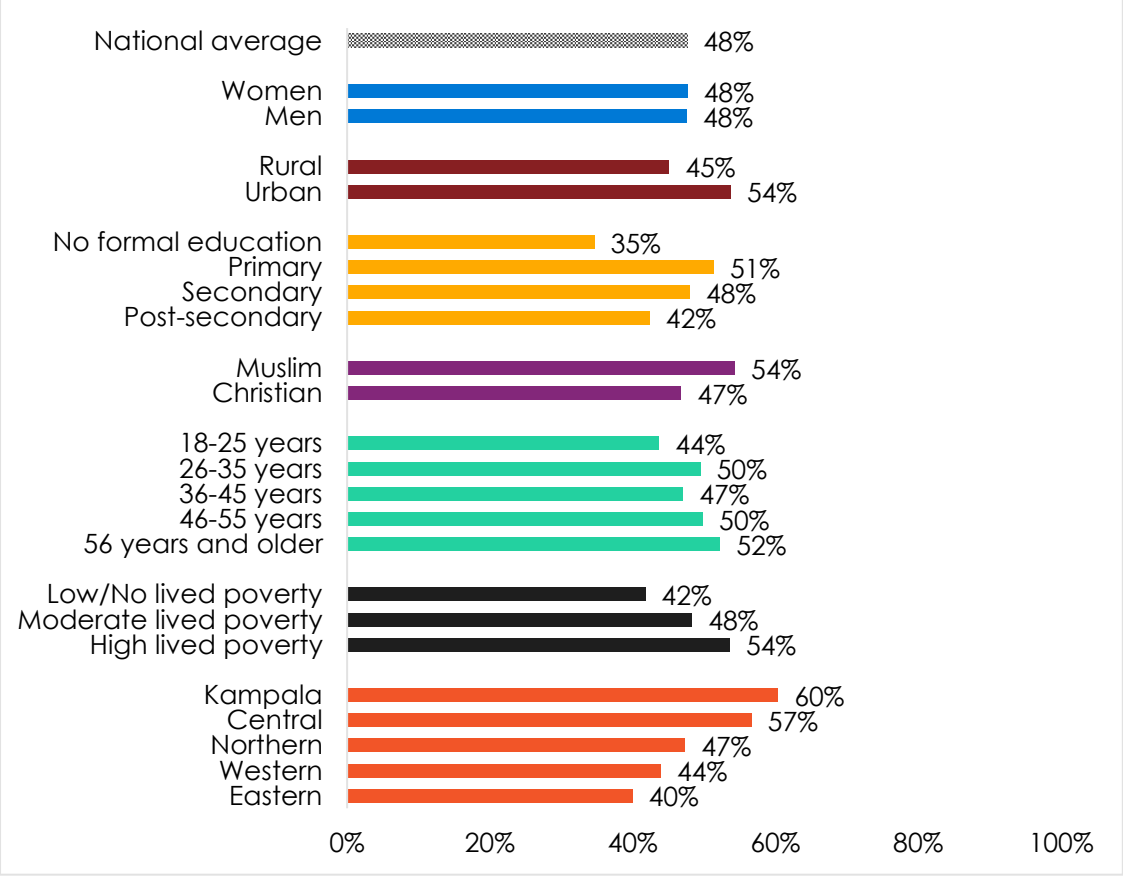
Individuals with no formal education are least likely to disapprove of the government's performance on health care (35%). Disapproval is higher among Muslims than Christians (54% vs. 47%) and increases with respondents' age, ranging from 44% among youth to 52% among seniors.

Figure 10: Government performance on improving basic health services | 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: Improving basic health services?*

Figure 11: Government performing badly on improving basic health services | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024

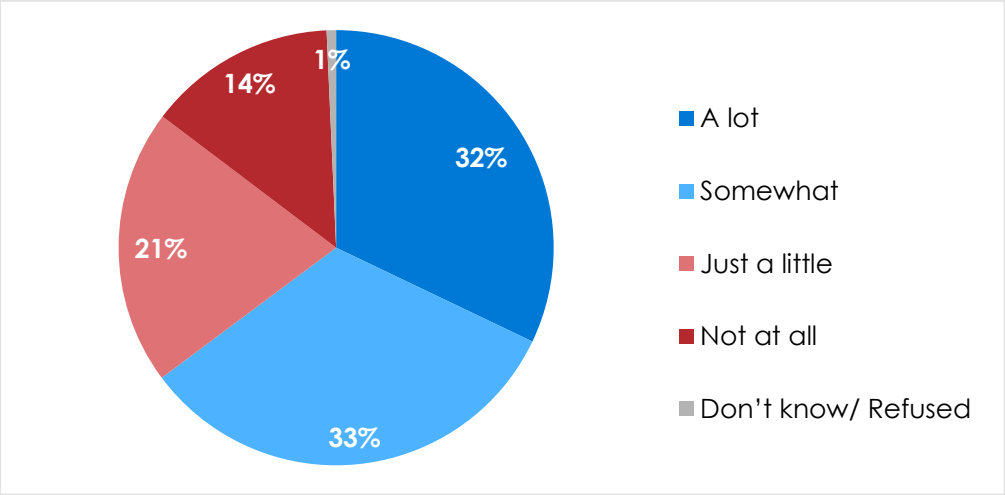


Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Improving basic health services? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")*

Trust in the Ministry of Health

A clear majority (65%) of the public express confidence in the Ministry of Health: About one-third (32%) say they trust it "a lot," while another one-third (33%) trust it "somewhat" (Figure 12). However, a significant share of citizens are sceptical: 21% trust the ministry "just a little," and 14% distrust it completely.

Figure 12: Trust in Ministry of Health | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Ministry of Health?*

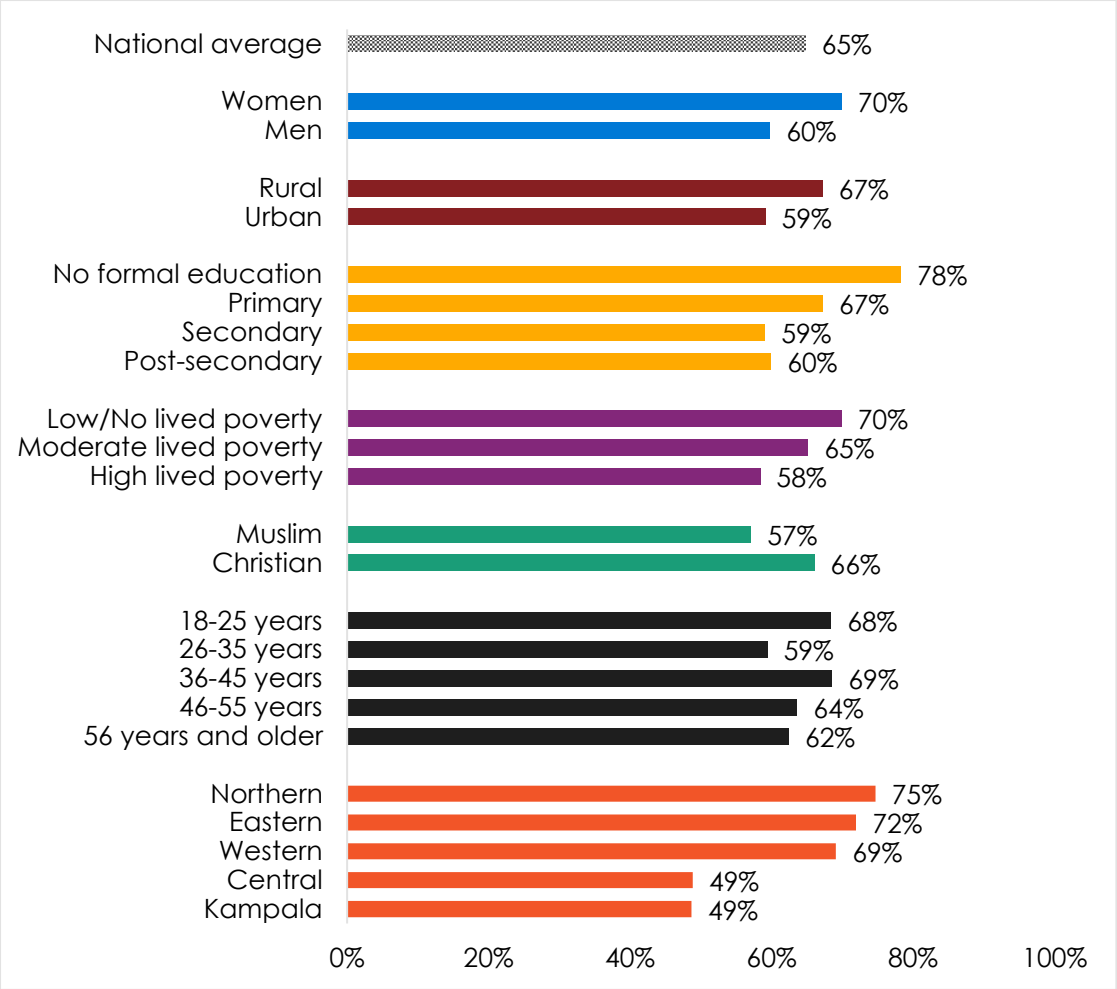
Women are 10 percentage points more likely than men to trust in the government's health department (70% vs. 60%) (Figure 13). Trust is higher among respondents with no formal education (78%) than among those with at least primary schooling (59%-67%).

Economic status also plays a role: Ugandans experiencing high lived poverty[1] are less likely than those experiencing no or low lived poverty to trust the ministry (58% vs. 70%). Trust is also lower among Muslims than among Christians (57% vs. 66%).

While about three-fourths of those living in the Northern (75%) and Eastern (72%) regions express trust in the Ministry of Health, only half (49%) of the population in Kampala and the Central Region share their faith.

[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 Lekalake (2025).

Figure 13: Trust in Ministry of Health | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Ministry of Health? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

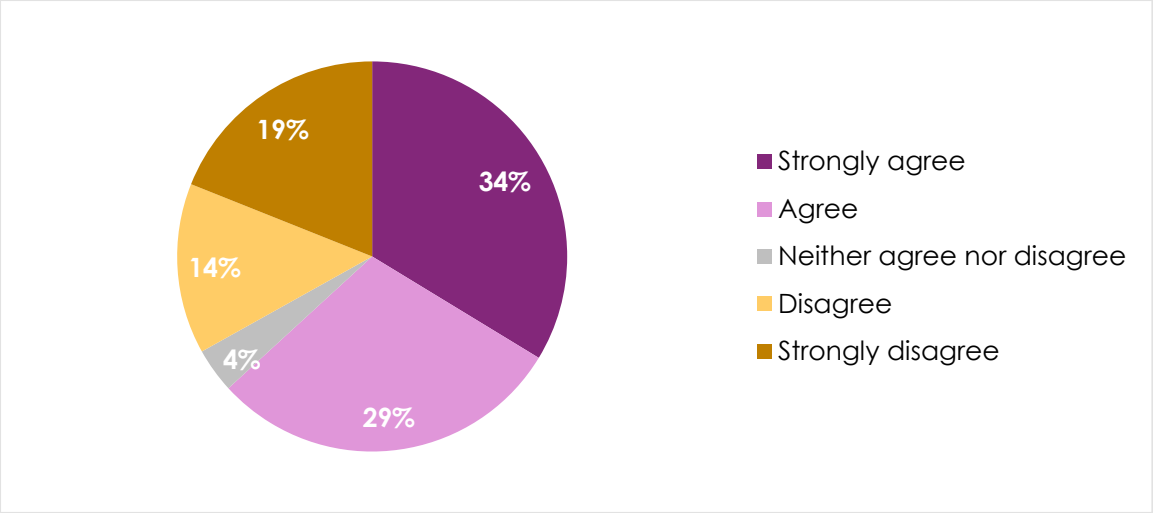
Views on universal health care

When African Union member states met in Abuja in 2001, they committed to allocating 15% of their government budgets to health. But only Cabo Verde and South Africa met this target in 2021 (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Uganda is falling well behind its stated intention: Only 3.9% of public funds are directed toward health (World Bank, 2024).

Asked whether the government should ensure that all citizens have access to adequate health care, even if it means raising taxes, a clear majority of Ugandans (63%) endorse the idea (Figure 14). One-third (33%) of respondents disagree, perhaps due to concerns about increased taxation.

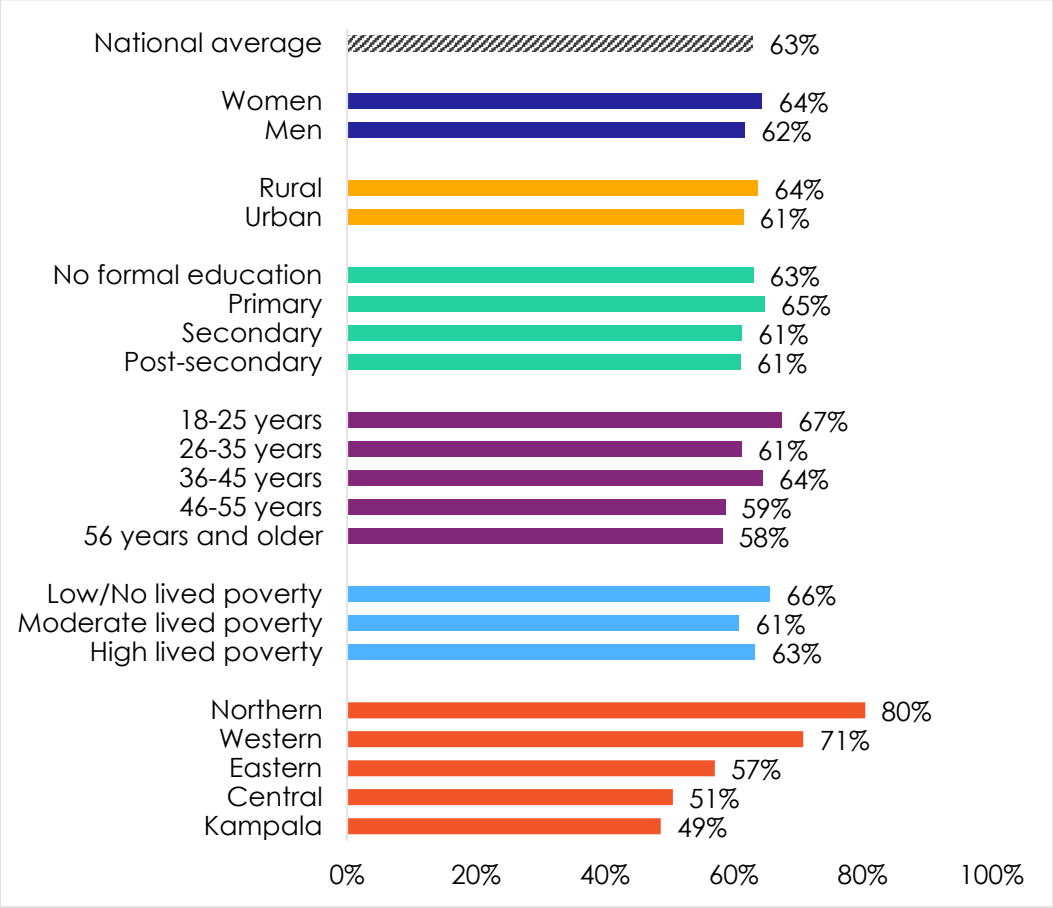
Support for universal access to health care is highest in Northern (80%) and Western (71%) Uganda (Figure 15). Youth are the most likely of all age groups to support universal health care (67%, compared to 58% of those aged 56 years and above). Support varies only slightly by gender, urban-rural location, and levels of education and economic well-being.

Figure 14: Should government ensure universal health care? | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Government should ensure that all citizens have access to adequate health care, even if that means raising taxes.*

Figure 15: Support universal health care | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Government should ensure that all citizens have access to adequate healthcare, even if that means raising taxes. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")*

Conclusion

A majority of Ugandans identify health as the most pressing issue they want the government to address, a position it has retained for several Afrobarometer survey rounds. Three-fourths of citizens say a family member went without needed medical care or medicines at least once during the previous year. These findings may help explain why more than six in 10 Ugandans support a government guarantee of universal access to adequate health care, even at the cost of higher taxes.

While two-thirds of citizens express trust in the Ministry of Health, only a slim majority consider the government to be doing an acceptable job of improving basic health services. Among Ugandans who had contact with a public health facility during the past year, two-thirds say they faced difficulty in obtaining the necessary care, and two-fifths report having to pay a bribe to receive medical attention.

Corruption in Uganda's health care sector remains a significant barrier to equitable access to medical services, disproportionately affecting low-income patients and undermining both health care quality and public trust. Experts argue that implementing robust anti-corruption policies, enhancing transparency in financing and procurement processes, and fostering a culture of accountability among health care workers are essential steps toward ensuring equitable access to quality medical services (Matsiko & Nash, 2022).

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