

# Is East Africa doing enough? Citizens' views point to shortcomings in child protection in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 968 | Rosemary Nakijoba**

## Summary

Investing in children's health, education, safety, and well-being is vital for social stability, economic prosperity, and national development. By prioritising the needs of children, communities and governments build a brighter and more sustainable future.

In East Africa, the governments of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania provide extensive legal frameworks and initiatives to safeguard children's right to grow into healthy, productive citizens, but despite these efforts, many of their children face enormous challenges and threats to their well-being (Male, 2023; Kodiaga & Torsu, 2022; Msafiri, 2023). Often exacerbated or perpetuated by socioeconomic factors and cultural practices, these range from poverty, child labour, inadequate education, and early marriage to abuse, neglect, and sexual exploitation (Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2017, 2020; Uganda Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2023; Republic of Kenya, 2019; Tairo, 2022; Winters, Langer, & Geniets, 2017; Sakwa, 2020; Kaawa & Walakira, 2017).

Is East Africa doing enough to protect and promote the well-being of children? Findings from Afrobarometer Round 9 surveys in 2021 and 2022 provide insights into public attitudes and perceptions related to child welfare in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania.

Overall, across the three countries, Ugandans are most likely, and Tanzanians least likely, to point to challenges related to child well-being in their community, including the frequency of child abuse and neglect, the availability of support for vulnerable children, and the government's performance on child welfare.

On the question of corporal punishment of children, most Tanzanians reject it as "never justified," while Kenyans and Ugandans are divided.

## 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.

In Round 9, Afrobarometer national partners interviewed nationally representative, random, stratified probability samples of 2,400 adult citizens in Kenya (Institute for Development Studies, November-December 2021), Tanzania (REPOA, September-October 2022), and Uganda (Hatchile Consult Ltd., January 2022). Samples of this size yield country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

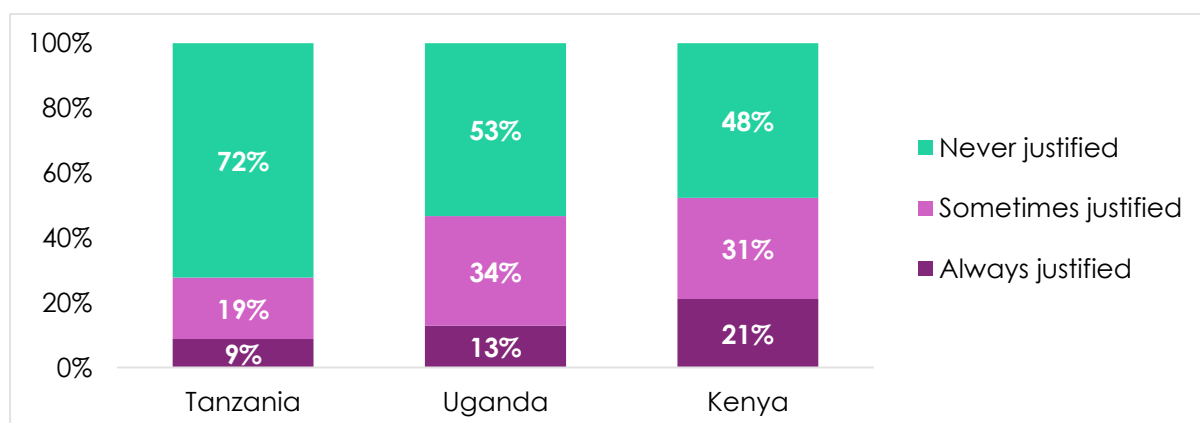
## Key findings

- While more than seven in 10 Tanzanians (72%) say parents are “never” justified in using physical force to discipline their children, Uganda (53% “never”) and Kenya (48% “never”) are much more divided on the issue of corporal punishment.
  - Almost half (45%) of Ugandans say adults in their community “somewhat frequently” or “very frequently” use physical force to discipline children, compared to 30% in Kenya and 18% in Tanzania.
- Ugandans are significantly more likely than Kenyans and Tanzanians to highlight several problems related to child well-being:
  - More than four in 10 Ugandans (43%) say child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect are “somewhat frequent” or “very frequent” in their community, compared to 22% of Kenyans and 16% of Tanzanians.
  - Almost two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans say out-of-school children are a frequent problem in their community, vs. 32% of Kenyans and 26% of Tanzanians.
  - In Uganda, fewer than half of respondents say that help is generally available in their community for abused or neglected children (47%), children with physical disabilities (45%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (36%). In Kenya and Tanzania, majorities assert that support for these vulnerable children and adults is generally available.
- Fewer than half (43%) of Ugandans approve of their government's performance on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, compared to 49% of Kenyans and 70% of Tanzanians.

## Use of physical force to discipline children

Across the three East African countries, Tanzanians are most likely to reject the use of physical force to discipline children: More than seven in 10 respondents (72%) say corporal punishment is “never justified” (Figure 1). A slim majority (53%) of Ugandans agree, while Kenya is the only country where a majority (52%) of adults say it is “sometimes” or “always” acceptable for parents to use physical force to discipline their children.

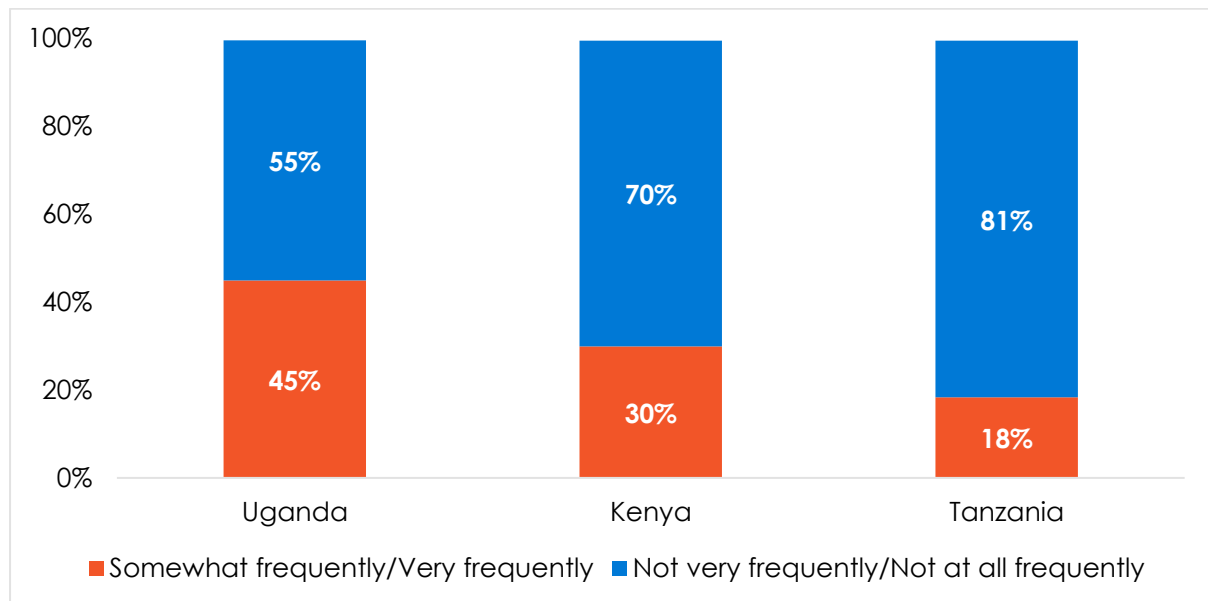
**Figure 1: Views on use of physical force to discipline children | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified for parents to use physical force to discipline their children.

In assessments of how often adults use physical force to discipline children in their community, Uganda ranks comparatively high, at 45% who say “somewhat frequently” or “very frequently,” compared to 30% in Kenya and 18% in Tanzania (Figure 2). Majorities in all three countries report that the use of physical force is “not very” or “not at all” common.

**Figure 2: Frequency of the use of physical force to discipline children | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**

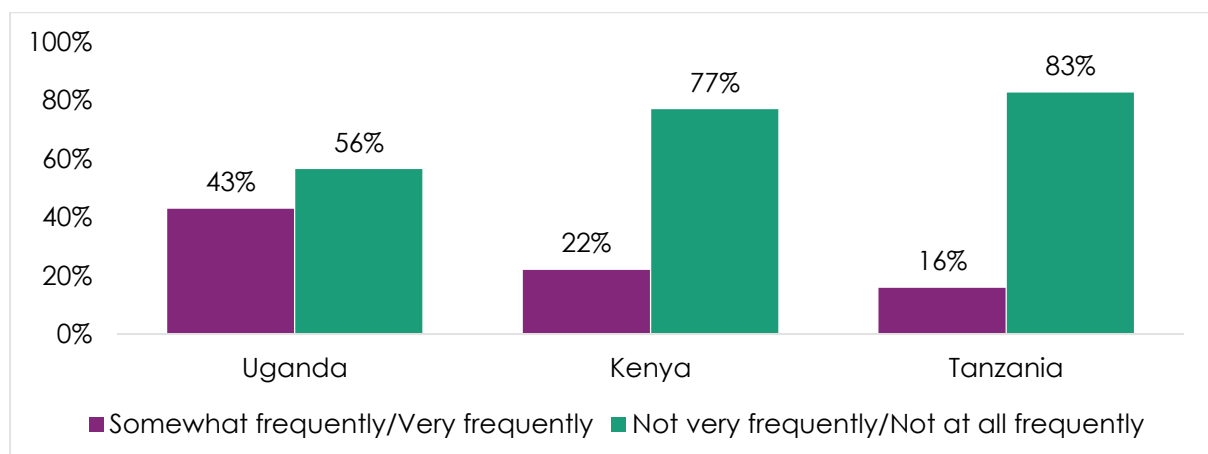


**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children?

### Child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect

In Uganda, more than four in 10 citizens (43%) say that child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect are “somewhat frequent” or “very frequent” in their community (Figure 3). About half as many Kenyans (22%) say the same thing, along with 16% of Tanzanians.

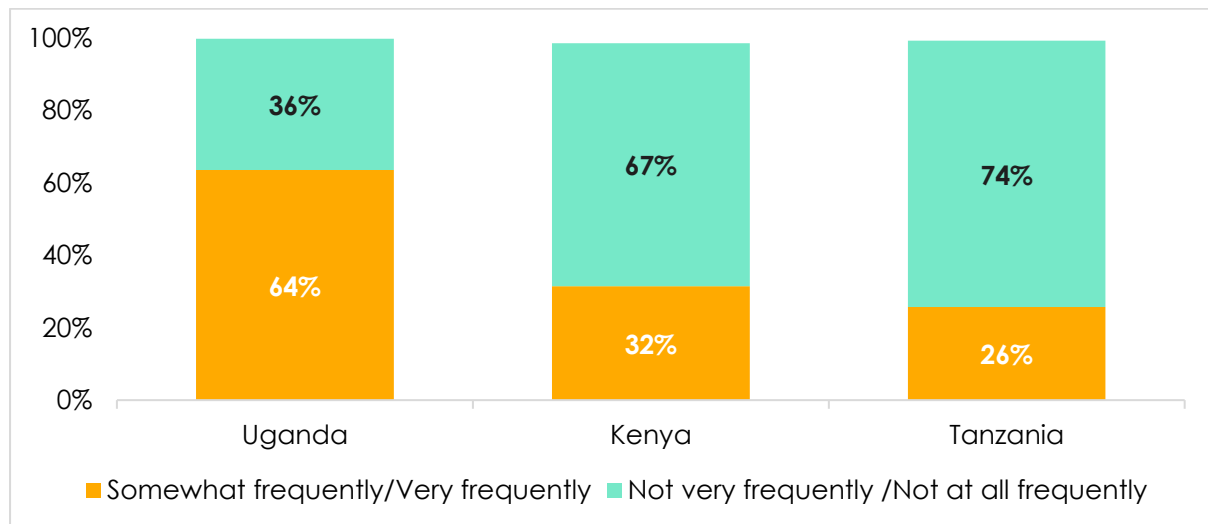
**Figure 3: Frequency of child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected?

Across the region, school-age children who are not in school is a more frequent problem. Almost two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans report that out-of-school children are a common sight in their community (Figure 4). Smaller but still significant proportions of Kenyans (32%) and Tanzanians (26%) report the same concern.

**Figure 4: Frequency of out-of-school children** | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022



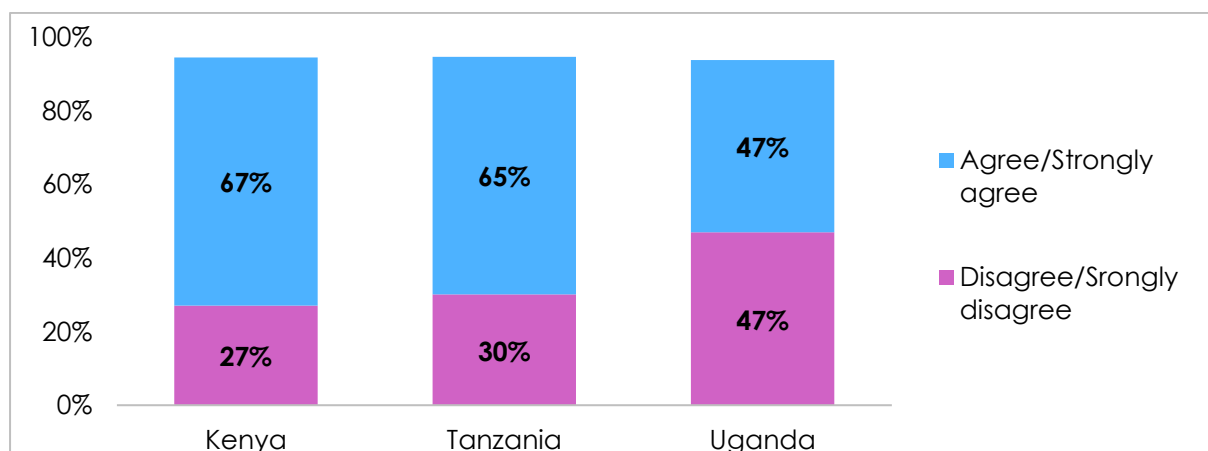
**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do you think children who should be in school are not in school in your community or neighbourhood?

### Support for vulnerable children

About two-thirds of Kenyans (67%) and Tanzanians (65%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that people in their community are generally able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected (Figure 5).

But fewer than half (47%) of Ugandans are confident that help for these children is available.

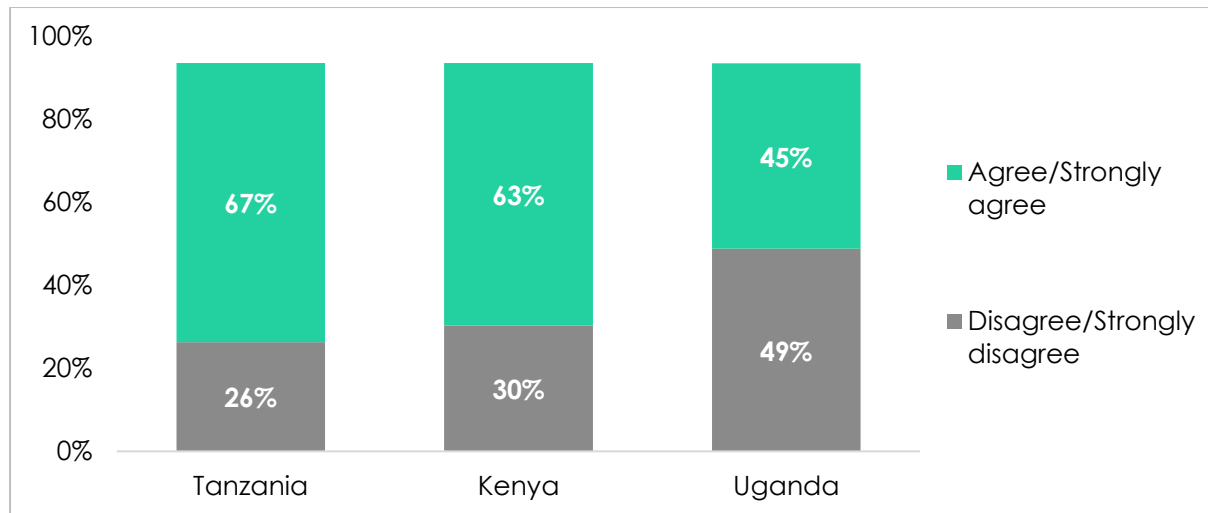
**Figure 5: Availability of support for abused, mistreated, and neglected children** | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

Similarly, solid majorities of Tanzanians (67%) and Kenyans (63%) say support for children with physical disabilities is available in their community, while fewer than half (45%) of Ugandans agree (Figure 6).

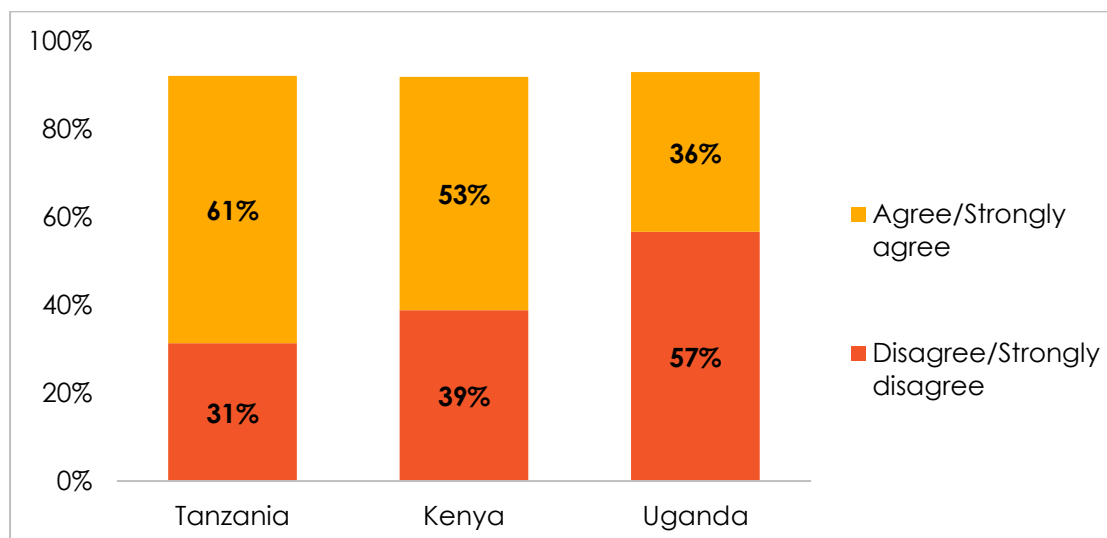
**Figure 6: Support for children with physical disability | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

Somewhat weaker majorities in Tanzania (61%) and Kenya (53%), and only 36% of Ugandans, say that help is available in their community for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Support for children and adults with mental or emotional problems | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**

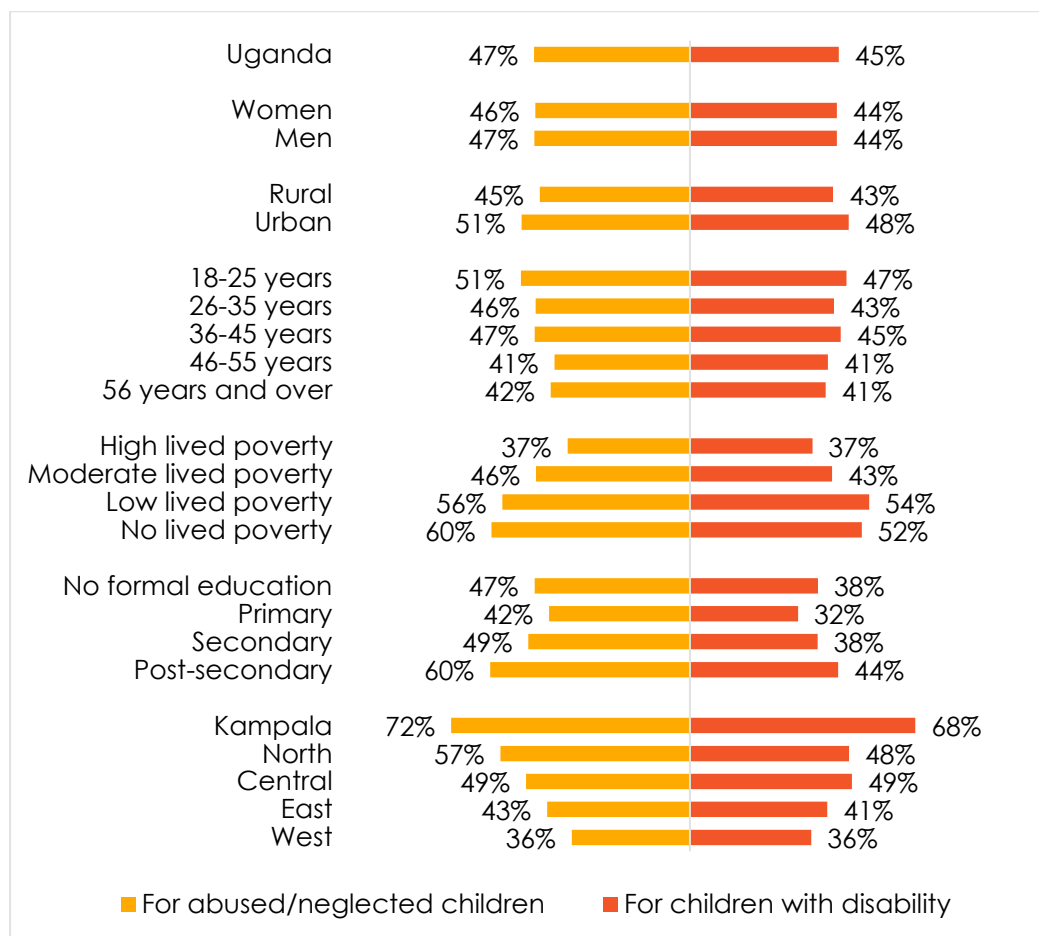


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

Across all three countries and all three categories of child vulnerability, economically better-off and more educated citizens are generally more likely to report that help is available in their community than their counterparts who have less education and/or are experiencing higher levels of lived poverty.<sup>1</sup>

For example, in Uganda, while 60% of well-off respondents say that help for abused/neglected children is available, only 37% of those with high lived poverty say the same (Figure 8). Similarly, 60% of respondents with post-secondary education report that support for such children can be found in their community, only 47% of those lacking formal schooling agree.

**Figure 8: Support for abused/neglected children and children with disability**  
| by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

*In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.*

*In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.*

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

<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 necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

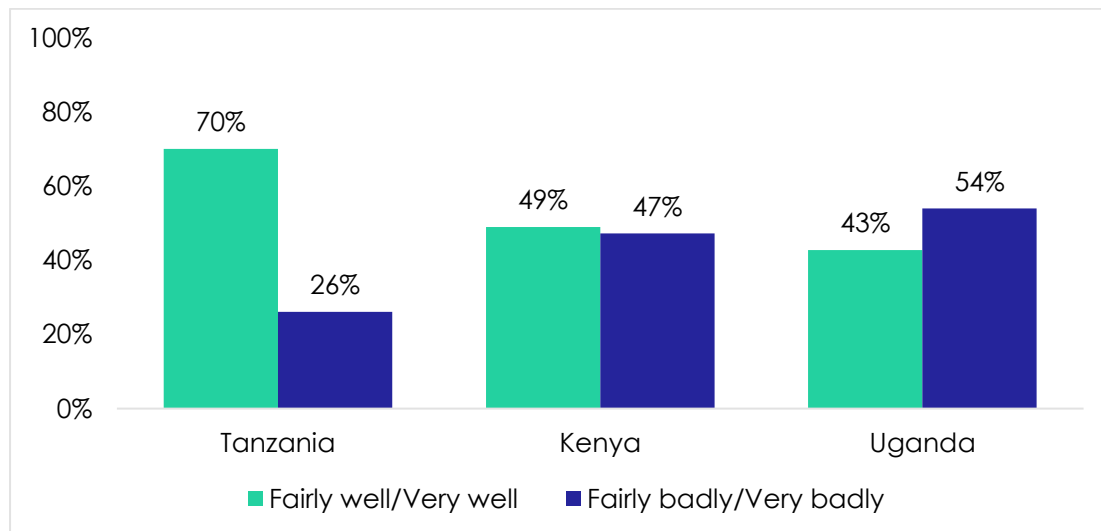
In the case of Uganda, we also see major differences by geographic location: Kampala residents are twice as likely as inhabitants of the Western Region to report that help for abused/neglected children is available (72% vs. 36%).

### Government performance on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children

Overall, seven in 10 Tanzanians (70%) think their government is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children (Figure 9). Kenyans are almost evenly divided in their assessments, with 49% approving and 47% disapproving of their government’s performance on child well-being.

Uganda again trails, with fewer than half (43%) of citizens giving their government satisfactory marks, while 54% say it is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly.”

**Figure 9: Government performance on protecting vulnerable children | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**

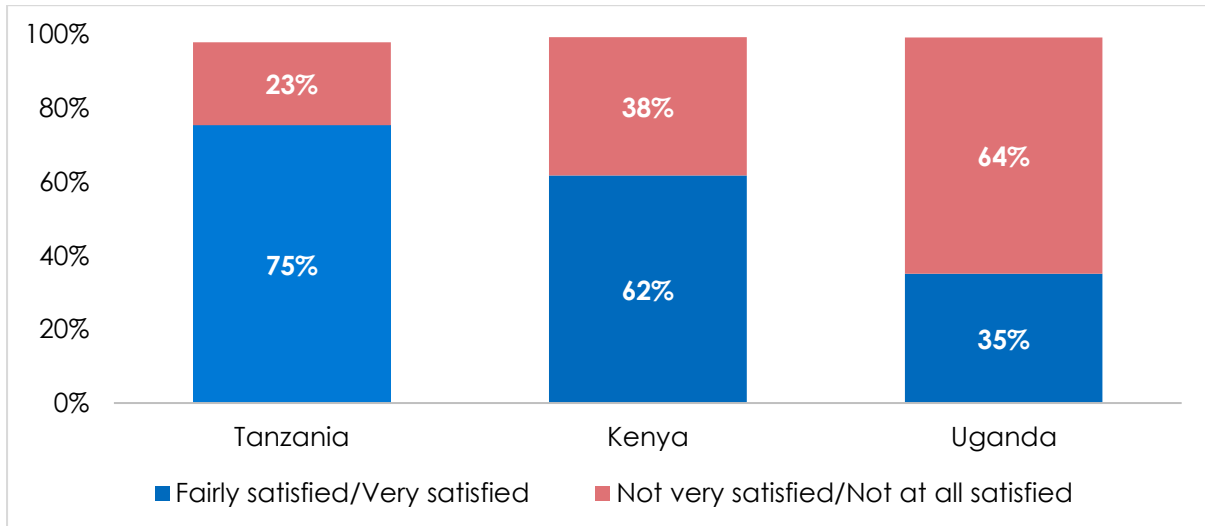


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?

These overall assessments echo citizens' ratings of their government's efforts to minimise disruptions to children's schooling at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 10). Three-fourths (75%) of Tanzanians pronounce themselves “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their government’s efforts, as do 62% of Kenyans. But only about one-third (35%) of Ugandans agree.

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**Figure 10: Government performance on minimising disruptions in education | Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda | 2021/2022**



**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

Uganda consistently trails its two East African counterparts on Afrobarometer indicators of child well-being, including the frequency of punishment using physical force, child abuse and neglect, and out-of-school children; the availability of support for vulnerable children; and the government's performance on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children.

But substantial shares of the population point to shortcomings on these issues in Tanzania and Kenya as well.

The question "Is East Africa doing enough?" thus underscores the challenges that children in the region continue to face, suggesting a need for increased advocacy, greater investment, and stronger collaboration between communities and governments to develop comprehensive strategies focused on the well-being of vulnerable children.

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**Rosemary Nakijoba** is an associate professor of development studies at Ndejje University in Uganda. Email: [rnakijoba@ndejjeuniversity.ac.ug](mailto:rnakijoba@ndejjeuniversity.ac.ug).

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