

Mauritians voice reservations about immigration and free cross-border movement

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 982 | Preesha Ramtohul and Zuhayr Mustun

Summary

By virtue of its size and remoteness as a dot in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius has always recognised the need to be an open country in terms of its international relations and trade. Mauritius was quick to join regional integration organisations and sign preferential trade agreements, including for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Free Trade Area in 1996, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Free Trade Area in 2000, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2019 (Mauritius Trade Easy, n.d.).

Over the past 20 years, Mauritius has experienced a triple whammy of declining fertility in an aging population, very low unemployment with significant youth emigration, and a rapidly increasing rate of tertiary education achievement. These factors have caused a growing problem of human-resource deficits in sectors such as manufacturing and construction but also increasingly in higher-skilled jobs. The country has had to import labour, mostly from China, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Madagascar. Generally, these migrant workers are on three-year contracts.

A scheme called Occupation Permit also allows for the recruitment of foreign professional cadres by private-sector companies.

At the same time, Mauritius is aiming to be a higher-education hub for Africa by offering diverse opportunities for students at reasonable cost. A majority of international students in Mauritius' tertiary institutions are from mainland Africa, and the Mauritius-Africa Scholarship Scheme further strengthens relations with the mainland (Economic Development Board, 2023, 2024a). Both to incentivise foreign students and to reinforce the local labour market, the government allows foreign students to work for 20 hours a week (Wings, 2025).

Against this background, the present dispatch delves into Mauritians' views on international trade, the influence of African regional organisations on Mauritius, and citizens' perspectives on immigrants and foreign workers. Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey results reveal that a majority of Mauritians think African countries should have a greater say in international organisations such as the United Nations (UN). More than half say their country's needs and interests are adequately recognised by the African Union and SADC, whose influence – like that of the Indian Ocean Commission and COMESA – is generally viewed favourably.

But while a majority of Mauritians are open to international trade, citizens are divided on whether people should be able to move freely across borders. Almost half express intolerant attitudes toward immigrants, and most would prefer to cap, reduce, or eliminate entry by foreign workers.

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 Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in April-May 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 Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- More than two-thirds (68%) of Mauritians say African countries should be given greater influence in the decision-making processes of international bodies such as the UN. Majorities say the African Union (58%) and SADC (55%) recognise Mauritius' needs and interests in their decision making.
- Three-quarters (76%) of respondents say they are unaware of the AfCFTA.
- More than half of Mauritians welcome the economic and political influence of the African Union (61%), SADC (54%), and the Indian Ocean Commission (53%). Most others don't offer an opinion, while negative perceptions are rare.
- A majority (56%) of respondents say international trade is good for their country's economy, but a significant share (35%) say the government should limit trade to protect Mauritian industries.
- Mauritians are divided on the question of free cross-border movement: 41% say people in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders to trade or work, but 39% disagree.
- Half (50%) of respondents consider the economic impact of immigrant workers "fairly bad" or "very bad" for Mauritius, while only 28% see it as positive.
- Nearly half (48%) of citizens say they would "somewhat dislike" or "strongly dislike" having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours.
 - Most Mauritians say the government should limit the number of migrant workers to current levels (48%), reduce the number (33%), or bar entry by foreign workers altogether (10%).

Views on international trade and regionalisation

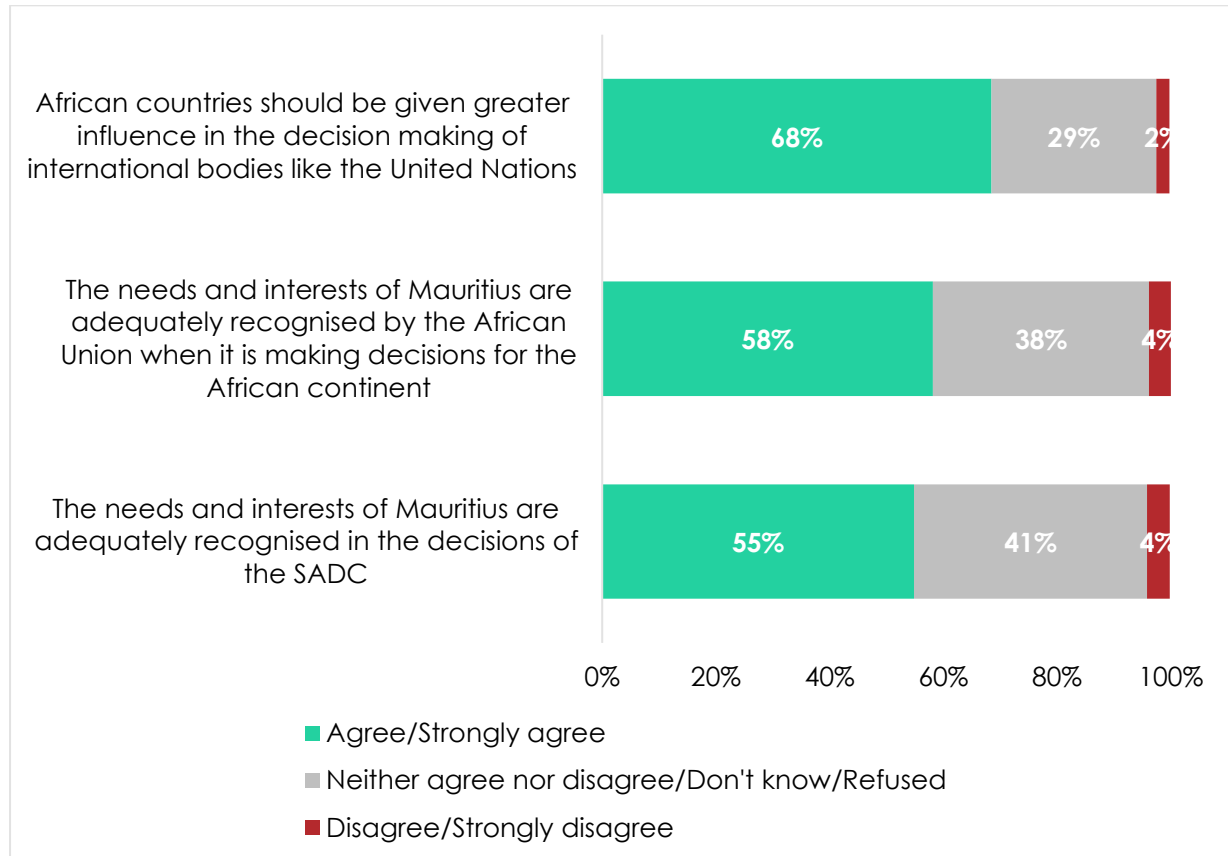
African leaders have become increasingly vocal about the need for Africa to be given fairer representation in international bodies such as the United Nations, calling for permanent seats with veto power on the UN Security Council (Umar, 2024; VOA, 2023).

This demand for greater recognition for Africa on the international scene resonates with a majority (68%) of Africans, who say that African countries should be given more influence in the decision making of international organisations such as the UN (Figure 1).

At the continental and regional levels, a majority of Mauritians think that the needs and interests of their country are adequately taken into consideration by the African Union (58%) and SADC (55%). About four in 10 respondents don't take a position on the matter, while very

few (4% each) see the African Union or SADC as failing to take Mauritius' needs and interests into account.

Figure 1: International recognition of Mauritius' interests | Mauritius | 2024

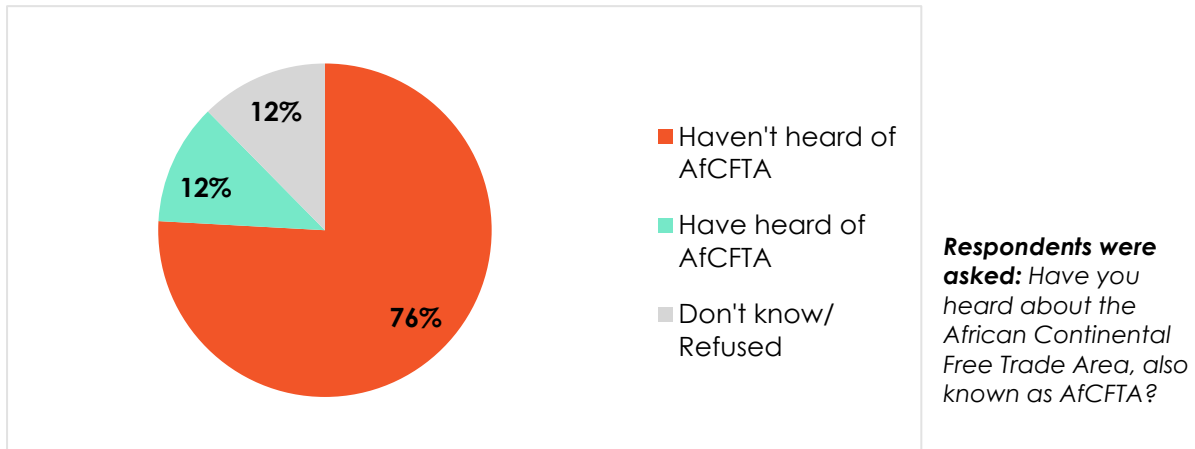


Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Amplifying Africa's common voice and fortifying the continent's presence in international trade negotiations are key aims of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which Mauritius ratified in 2019 and began to trade under in 2021. To inform businesses about market opportunities offered by the AfCFTA, numerous training programmes and information workshops have been organised. For instance, in 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade conducted a two-day national awareness workshop on "Opportunities and Challenges for Mauritius under the AfCFTA," targeting youth, women, and small and medium-sized enterprises (Government Information Service, 2022). Likewise, last May, the Economic Development Board (2024b) hosted an information workshop in partnership with the SADC Secretariat and GIZ to enhance the private sector's awareness of the agreement.

Despite these efforts, survey results show that three-quarters (76%) of Mauritians have not heard about the AfCFTA (Figure 2).

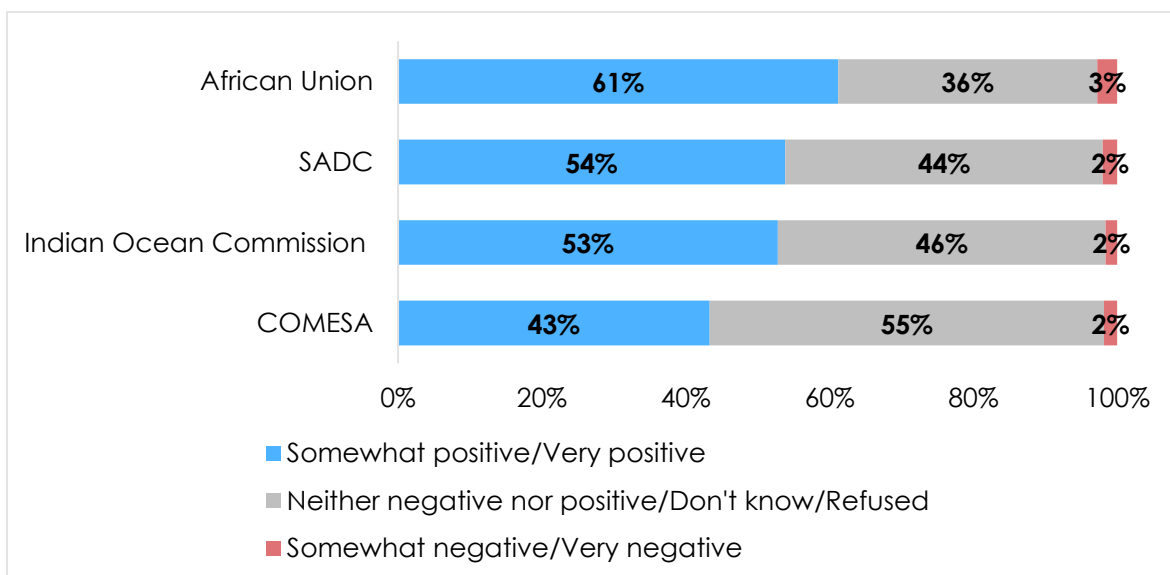
Figure 2: Awareness of the AfCFTA | Mauritius | 2024



Schoolchildren learn about Mauritius' historic connection with the African continent and its membership in regional organisations as part of the social and modern studies syllabus of the National Curriculum Framework. At the same time, Mauritius is the seat of the head offices of several regional organisations, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). What do Mauritians think of the influence of such regional organisations on their country?

In general, a majority of Mauritians see African regional organisations as exerting a positive influence on their country (Figure 3). The African Union is most widely perceived favourably (61%), followed by SADC (54%) and the Indian Ocean Commission (53%). Only 43% of respondents welcome the influence of COMESA. But again, the level of awareness of these organisations and how they influence Mauritius is relatively low, with up to 55% saying they "don't know" or declining to take a position, and perceptions of their influence as negative is rare (2%-3%).

Figure 3: Influence of African and regional organisations | Mauritius | 2024



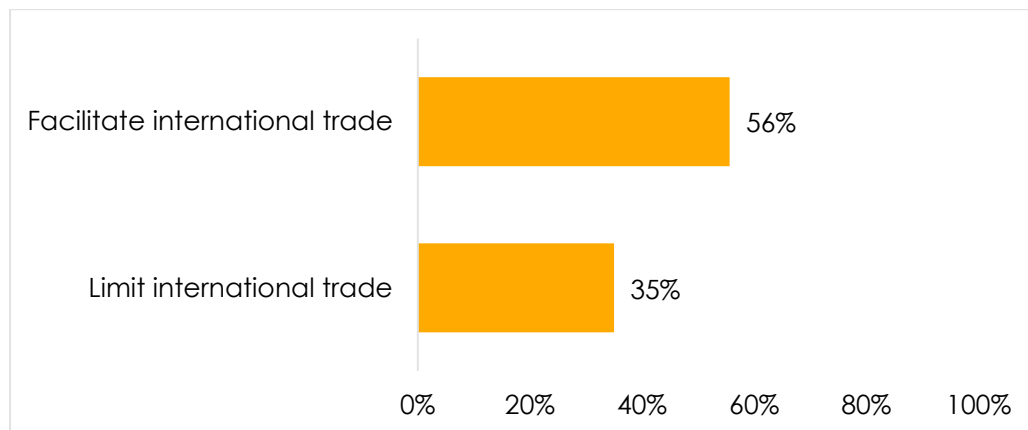
Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Mauritius is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

As an investment hub, Mauritius boasts a battery of 10 trade agreements with Turkey, Pakistan, China, India, and other countries and has signed 46 investment promotion and protection agreements, 54 double taxation avoidance agreements, and 50 memorandums of understanding bridging market gaps and enhancing connectivity for both Mauritian and foreign investors (Economic Development Board, n.d.).

This resonates with a majority (56%) of Mauritians, who say it is better for the economy if the government makes it easier to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities (Figure 4). But more than one-third (35%) of citizens think the government should instead limit trade with other countries in order to protect Mauritian producers from unfavourable competition.

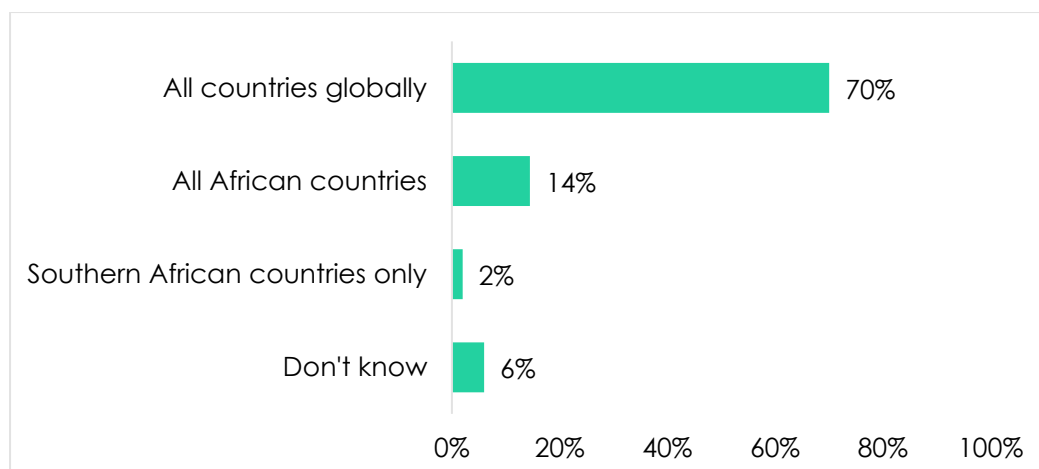
If the government is going to facilitate greater international trade, most Mauritians (70%) say it should make it easier to trade with all countries globally, while only a few would limit this approach to countries in Africa (14%) or in Southern Africa (2%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: International trade vs. protectionism | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is better for our economy if the government makes it easier for Mauritius to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities.
 Statement 2: Our country should limit trade with other countries in order to protect Mauritian producers.

Figure 5: Facilitate trade with which countries? | Mauritius | 2024



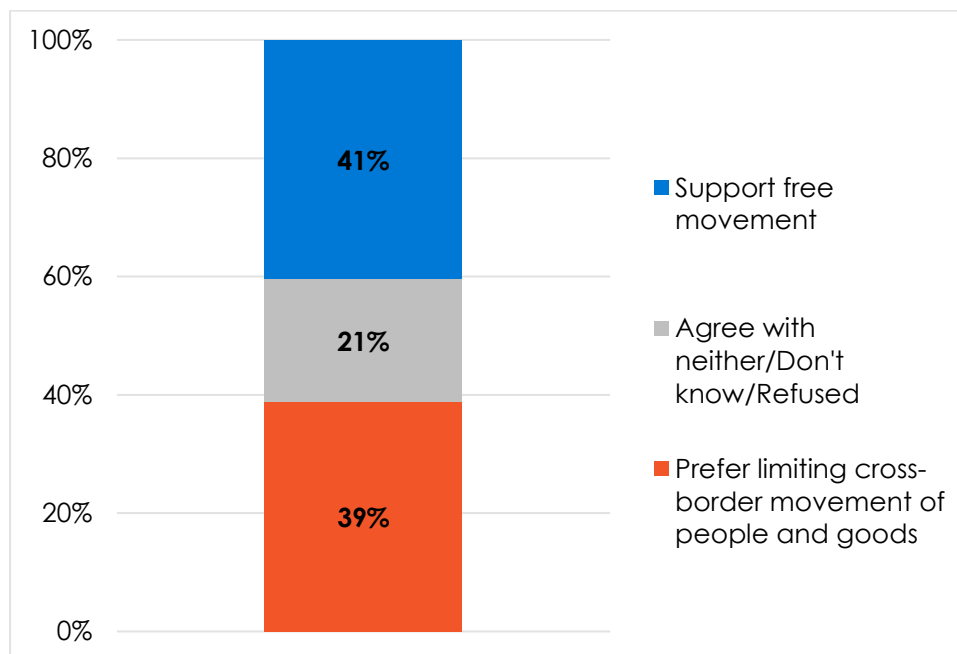
Respondents were asked: If Mauritius' leaders are going to make it easier to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities, which countries should they make it easier to trade with?

Attitudes toward free movement of persons, goods, and migrant workers

Since Mauritius is part of SADC, COMESA, and the AfCFTA, it has engaged in the facilitation of the free movement of persons and goods with fellow member states. For instance, in line with the COMESA Free Movement Protocol, Mauritius has waived visa requirements for all COMESA citizens (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, n.d.). So what do Mauritians think about free movement of persons and goods in Southern Africa?

Mauritians are sharply divided on this question. Four in 10 respondents (41%) say that people living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders for trading or professional reasons, while 39% think the government should restrict cross-border movement of people and goods to protect its citizens (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Free movement of people and goods | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: People living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.

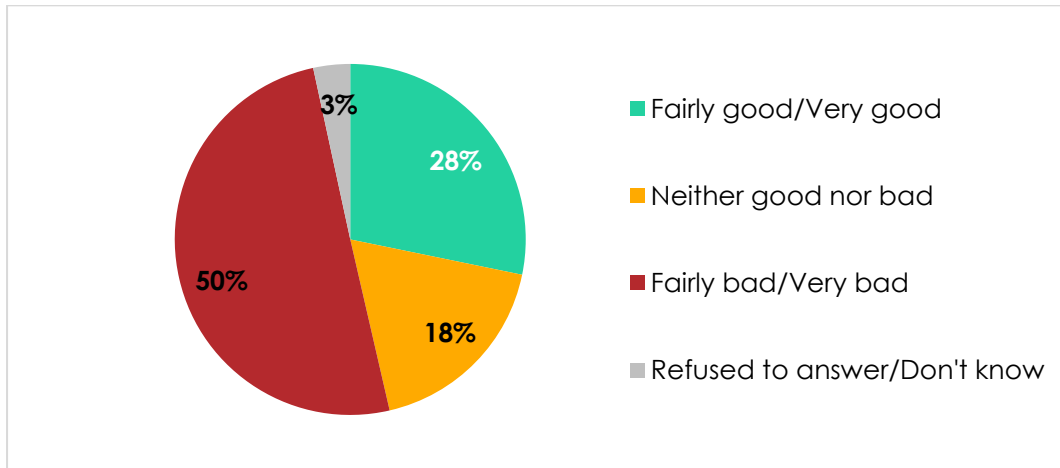
Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, the Mauritian government should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

Mauritius has been recognised as a “migrant hub” for foreign workers (Transparentem, 2023), primarily those working in export-oriented enterprises such as the textile and apparel industries, who as of June 2024 totalled 14,380 (Statistics Mauritius, 2024). One conspiracy theory that has made the rounds, though it’s widely dismissed as based on xenophobia rather than fact, is that migrant workers, especially Bangladeshi, voted illegally in the 2019 election in numbers large enough to swing the election in favour of the Mouvement Socialiste Militant party (Khan, 2023; Lallah, 2023). In reality, what is the perception of Mauritians vis-à-vis migrant workers?

Survey results show that half (50%) of respondents consider the economic impact of migrant workers “fairly bad” or “very bad” for Mauritius, compared to 28% who think it is good for the country and 18% say it is neither positive nor negative (Figure 7). The perception that foreign

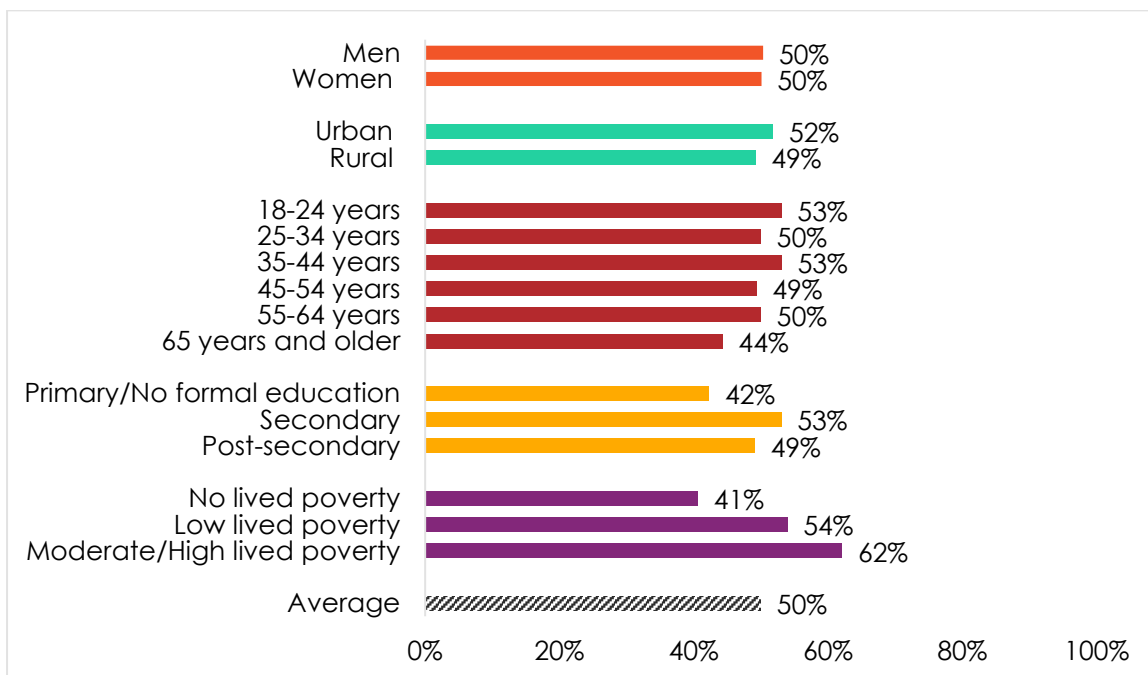
workers are bad for the economy increases with respondents' level of lived poverty,¹ ranging from 41% among well-off citizens to 62% among the poor (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Economic impact of migrant workers | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Would you say it is generally bad or good for Mauritius' economy if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years?*

Figure 8: Immigrant workers have negative impact | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2024



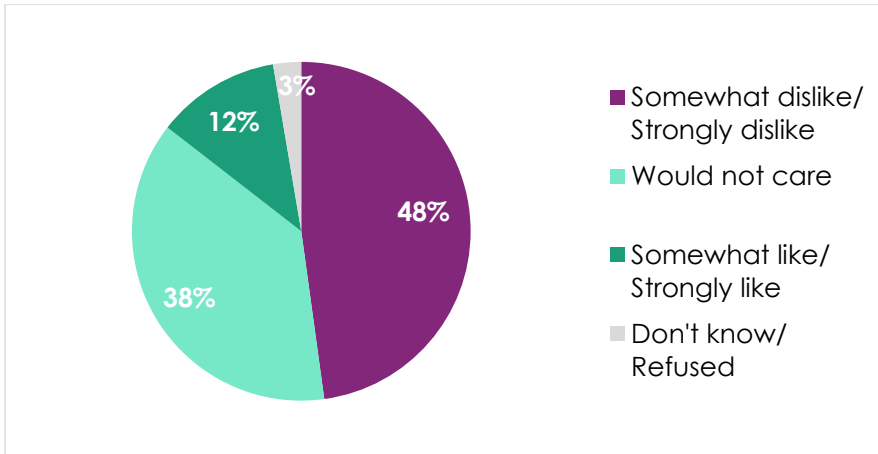
Respondents were asked: *Would you say it is generally bad or good for Mauritius' economy if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years? (%who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")*

¹ 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, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

Nearly half of Mauritians (48%) say that they would “somewhat dislike” (34%) or “strongly dislike” (14%) living next door to immigrants or foreign workers (Figure 9). About four in 10 (38%) say they would not care, while 12% say they would like it.

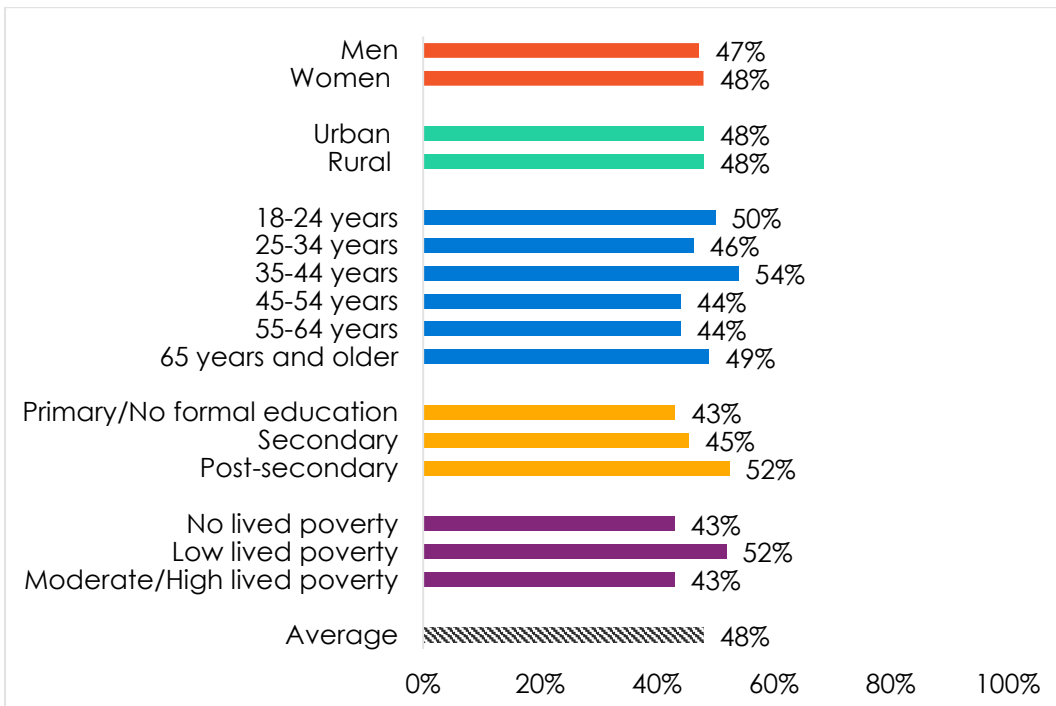
Intolerant attitudes toward immigrants increase with respondents' educational attainment, reaching 52% among respondents with a post-secondary education compared to 43% among those with primary schooling or less (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Tolerance toward immigrants | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers?

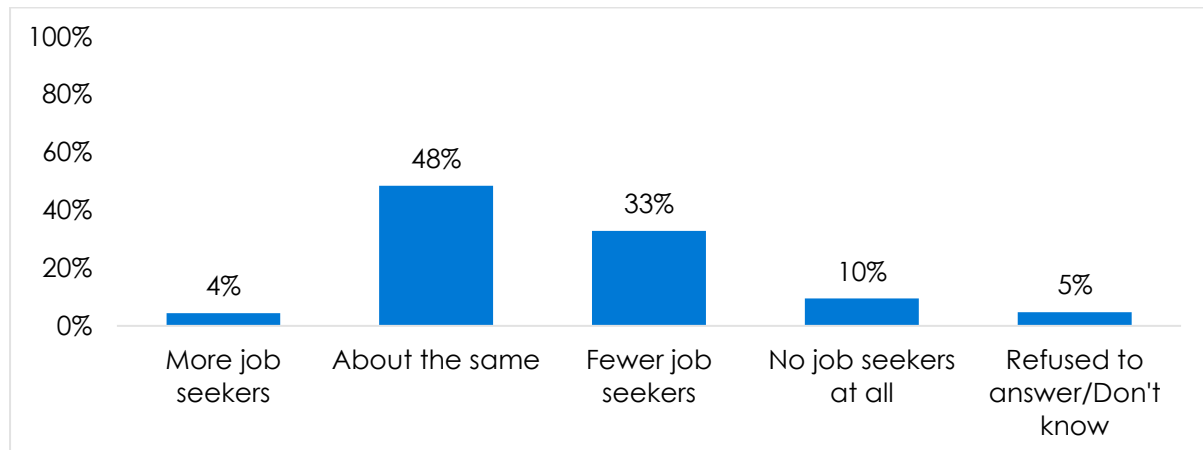
Figure 10: Would dislike having immigrants as neighbours | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? (% of respondents who say “strongly dislike” or “dislike”)

This anti-immigration attitude is mirrored in the desire of many Mauritians to limit the influx of foreign job seekers: Almost half (48%) of respondents say the country should limit the number of migrant workers to current levels, while almost as many say the government should reduce the number of migrant workers (33%) or completely disallow them from entering the country (10%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Allowing foreign job seekers into Mauritius | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you think Mauritius should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country?

Conclusion

Mauritius' economic success is largely based on its trade openness and multilateral trade agreements, especially with the African continent. However, survey findings show that most Mauritians lack awareness of the AfCFTA, and many voice reservations about cross-border movement and immigration.

The country's persistent shortage of domestic labour has led to a strong dependence on foreign labour, which has become the backbone of many export-led industries. Large numbers of Mauritians express apprehension about migrant workers and see their impact as mostly negative. As brain drain continues to be a growing problem, the country's reliance on migrant workers is likely to heighten. As such, the government will have to devise labour migration policies and frameworks to manage the influx of foreign workers and minimise the rise of xenophobic sentiments.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Preesha Ramtohol is a senior research consultant at StraConsult Ltd., the Afrobarometer national partner in Mauritius. Email: src@straconsult.intnet.mu.

Zuhayr Mustun is a junior research analyst at StraConsult Ltd. Email: prresearch@straconsult.intnet.mu.

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