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Dispatch No. 988 | 23 May 2025

Most Kenyan youth see government as failing on their top priorities

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 988 | Paul Kamau, Eunice Karimi, and Erick Murithi

Summary

About 80% of Kenya's population is aged 35 years or below. Those between 18 and 35 years make up 36% of the population (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Kenya's economy can gain immensely from this demographic if the youth are gainfully engaged and possess the right skills (Kenya Vision 2030, 2021).

However, this youth bulge has also been described as "a ticking time bomb" as young people face unemployment, a mismatch of skills and jobs, and a lack of entrepreneurial skills that prevent them from being catalysts for sustainable and transformative development (Okello & Iberi, 2023; National Council for Population and Development, 2017; Onsomu, Munga, Ngugi, & Nyaboro, 2023). With up to 800,000 youth entering the job market each year, youth unemployment is a critical policy issue in Kenya (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, 2024), as it is throughout much of the continent (Ghambi & Torsu, 2025; Sanny, van Wyk-Khosa, & Asunka, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

Kenya has developed national policies and programmes aimed at upskilling youth, increasing access to credit, and creating jobs, including the National Youth Policy of 2007, the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (2009), the Youth Employment Opportunities Project, the Ajira Digital Programme, the Uwezo Fund, the Kazi Mtaani Initiative, government internships, and the Talanta Hela initiative.

Yet many youth feel left out of Kenya's economic transformation, as became strikingly clear in the 2024 "Gen-Z protests" triggered by proposed taxes but responding more broadly to a lack of economic opportunity and poor governance (Monyae & Shilaho, 2024; Okello & Iberi, 2023).

The 2023 Global Youth Development Index ranks Kenya 143rd out of 185 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, conducted in April-May 2024, offers some insights into the situation of Kenya's youth. Findings show that young people are more educated than their elders, but also more likely to be unemployed. Health is the most important priority for government action, according to young Kenyans, followed by the cost of living, unemployment, education, and corruption.

While youth offer mixed assessments of the government's performance on these priority issues, most see the country as headed in "the wrong direction," and evaluations of economic conditions are largely negative. A majority of young people, however, are optimistic that things will get better in the near future.

Even so, a growing share of youth say they have seriously contemplated emigration, most often in search of better work and economic opportunity.

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 Kenya, led by the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Kenyans between 10 April and 2 May 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 surveys were conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019, and 2021.

Key findings

- Kenyan youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders. Eight in 10 (80%) have secondary or post-secondary qualifications, compared to 43%-58% among older cohorts.

- However, youth are also more likely to be unemployed: 43% say they are looking for work, compared to 23%-32% of the middle-aged.
    - Aside from the country's general economic situation and scarcity of jobs, young respondents cite a lack of training, a mismatch between education and job requirements, an unwillingness by some young people to perform certain types of work, and a lack of experience required by employers as the most important barriers to their employment.
    - Given their choice of jobs, six in 10 Kenyan youth (60%) would like to start their own businesses. Next in popularity is working for the government or public sector (23%).
    - If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help the youth, job creation would be the top priority for young people.

- Health is the most important problem that young Kenyans say their government must address, followed by the increasing cost of living, unemployment, education, and corruption.

- On these priority issues, youth offer mixed reviews of their government's performance, ranging from strikingly low levels of approval on creating jobs (22%) and improving living standards of the poor (26%) to majority approval on education (59%).

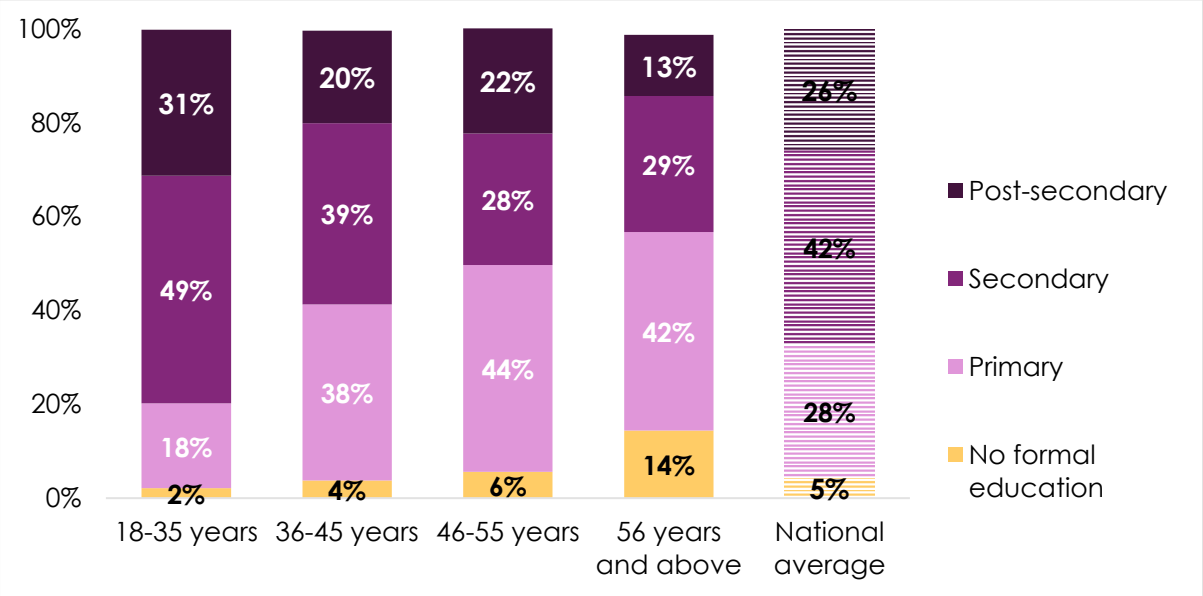
- A majority of young people see their country as moving in "the wrong direction" (55%) and describe economic conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (56%).
    - But six in 10 (61%) think things will get better during the coming year.

- More than four in 10 young Kenyans (43%) say they have considered emigrating, including 25% who have given it "a lot" of thought. Those who have considered emigrating cite finding jobs and escaping economic hardship as the key reasons.

Level of education

Kenyan youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders (Figure 1). Eight in 10 (80%) have secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 43%-58% among older cohorts.[1] Post-secondary qualifications are considerably more common among youth (31%) than among older cohorts (13%-22%). Only 2% of young Kenyans lack formal schooling, about half as many as the national average (5%).

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



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

Employment status

While Kenyan youth have more education than their elders, they are less likely to have jobs (Figure 2). More than four in 10 young respondents (43%) say they are unemployed and are actively looking for work, compared to 32% of those aged 36-45 and 23% of those aged 46-55.

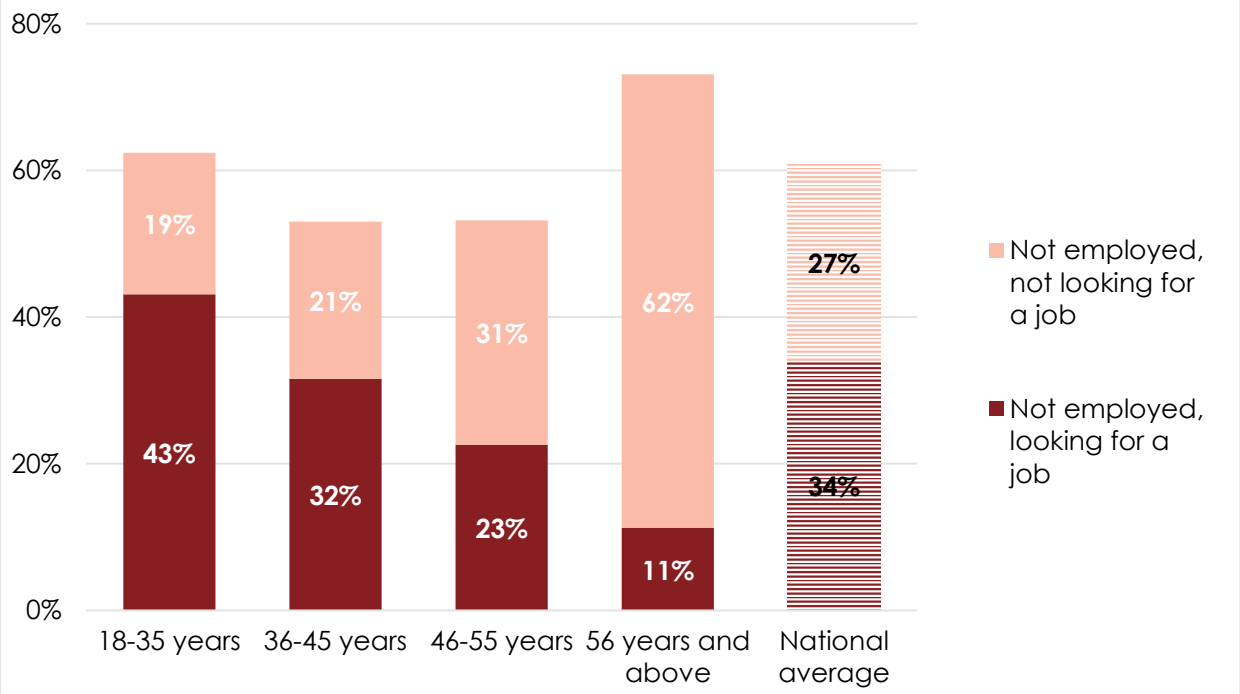
The share of unemployed youth looking for work includes 7% who identify as students, while the 19% of respondents without jobs and not actively looking for work includes 9% who say they are students (Figure 3).

Youth unemployment is a complex problem linked to a multitude of economic factors (Barasa & Kamau, 2025). However, besides the country's general economic situation, young people face other job barriers (Kamau & Wamuthenya, 2021).

Like their elders, Kenyan youth identify inadequate training or preparation as a barrier to youth employment (cited by 22% of young respondents) (Figure 4). A related factor is a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (20%). There is also the element of some youth being too choosy about the type of jobs they will accept (19%). Respondents also cite a lack of experience required by employers (19%) and a lack of entrepreneurial skills or motivation among youth (16%).

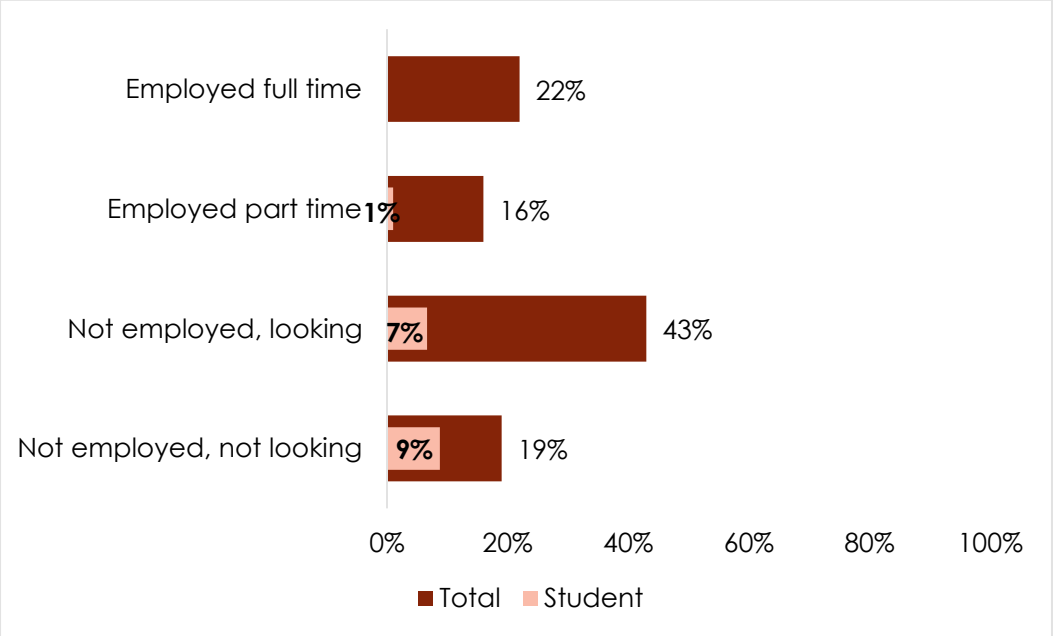
[1] Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. for 36- to 45-year-olds, 39% "secondary" and 20% "post-secondary" sum to 58%).

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

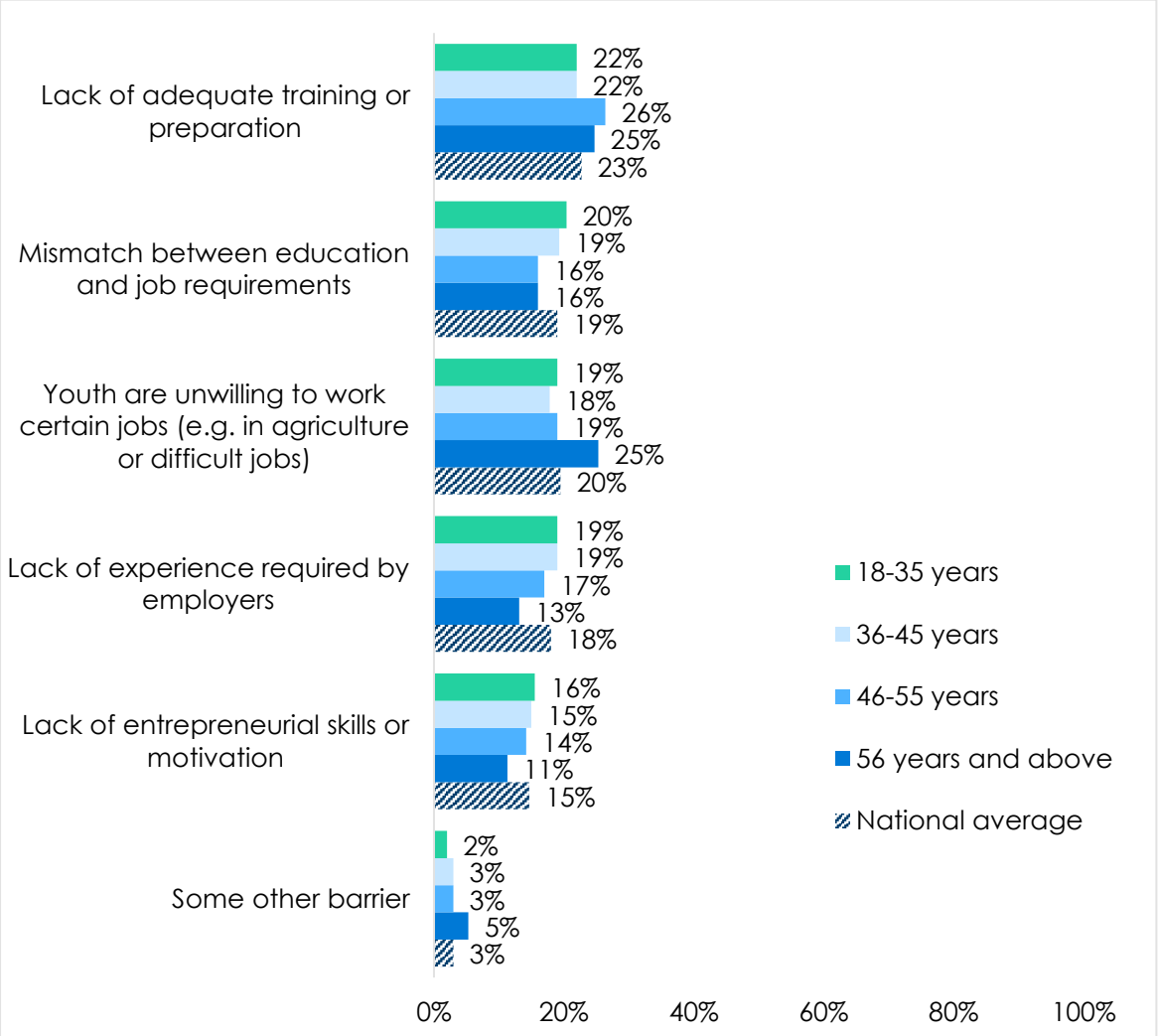


Respondents were asked:

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 | Kenya | 2024

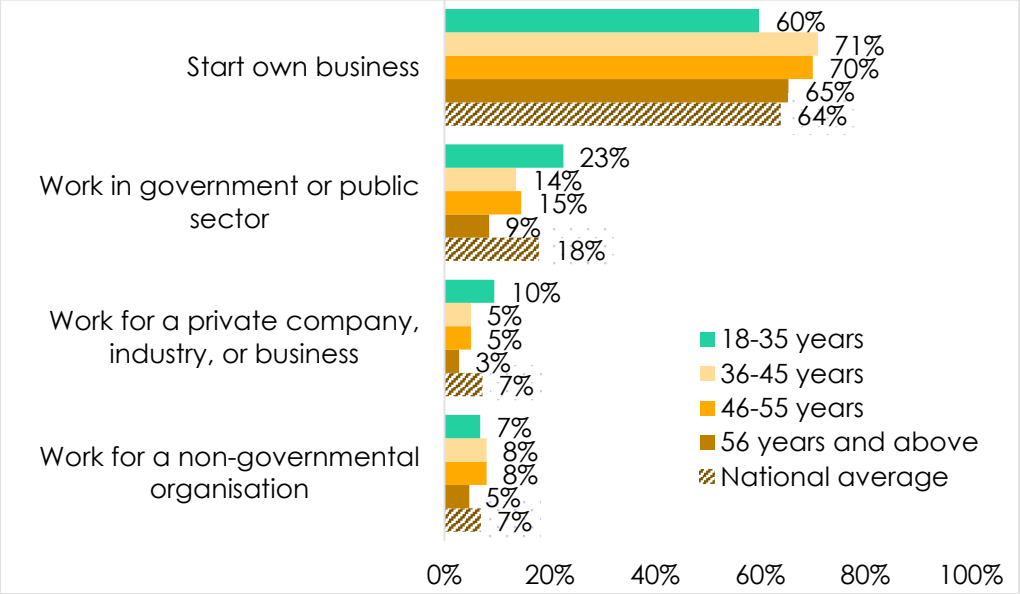


Respondents were asked: *Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, which of the following factors, if any, would you say is the main barrier to young people getting jobs and entering the workforce?*

If young Kenyans were given a choice of jobs, the most popular route would be to start their own businesses, cited by 60% of youth (Figure 5). This is followed by working in a government or public-sector post (23%), while only about one in 10 young people would opt for jobs in the private sector (10%) or a non-governmental organisation (7%).

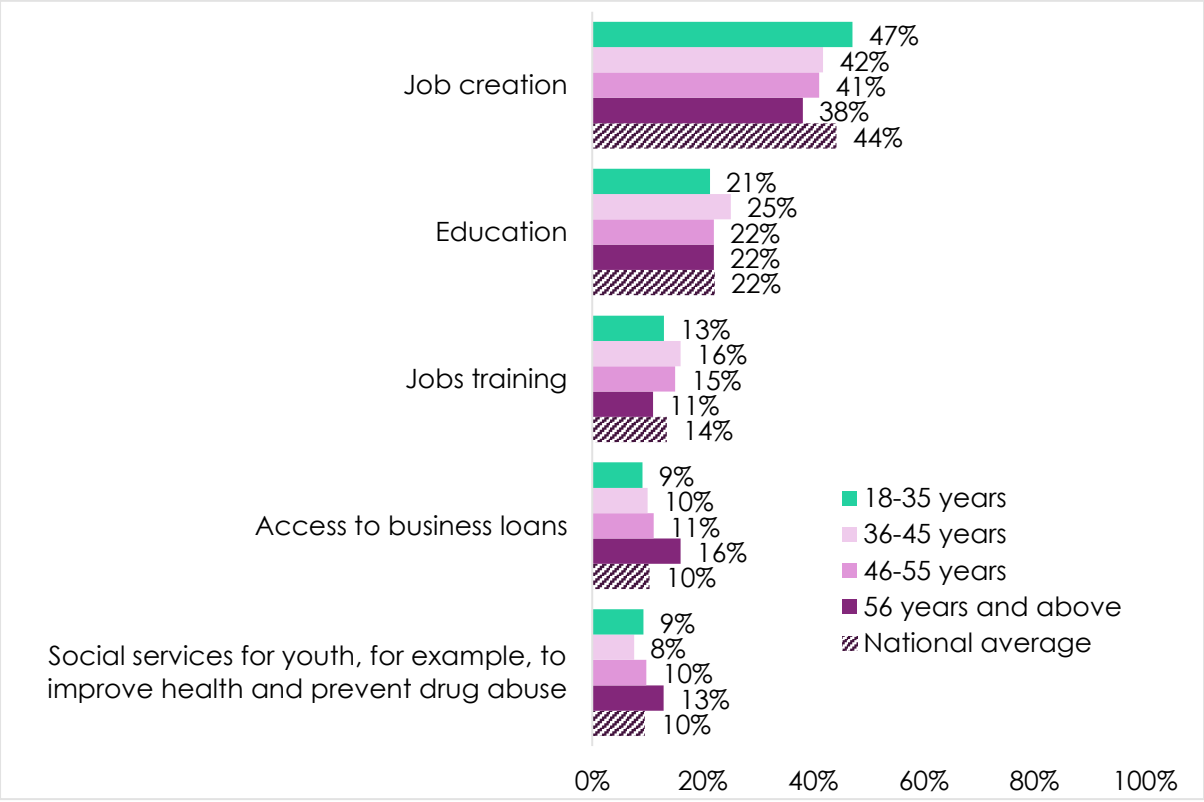
If the government were able to increase its spending on programmes to help young people, job creation would be the top priority for youth (47%) as well as older cohorts (38%-42%) (Figure 6). Education (21%) would rank second, followed by jobs training (13%) and access to business loans (9%).

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



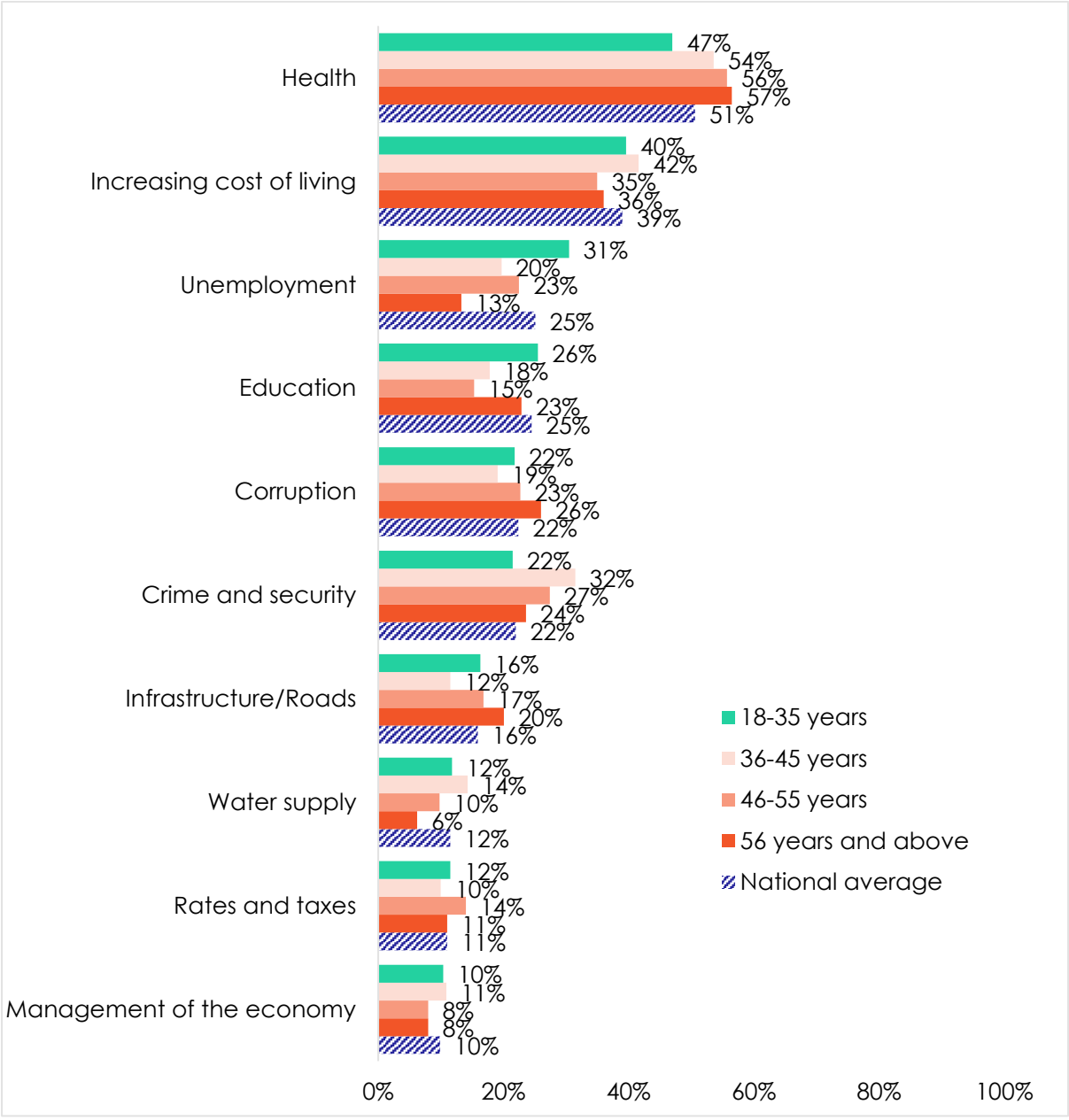
Respondents were asked: *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?*

Youth priorities

For young Kenyans, health is the most important problem that the government must address, cited by 47% of youth as one of their top three priorities. The increasing cost of living is close behind at 40%. Unemployment ranks third (31%), perhaps suggesting that in the eyes of young Kenyans, job creation is as much a private-sector challenge as a direct government responsibility. Education (26%) and corruption (22%) round out the top five priorities (Figure 7).

Compared to older cohorts, young Kenyans are somewhat less likely to prioritise health and more likely to express concern about unemployment and education.

Figure 7: Most important problems | by age group | Kenya | 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)*

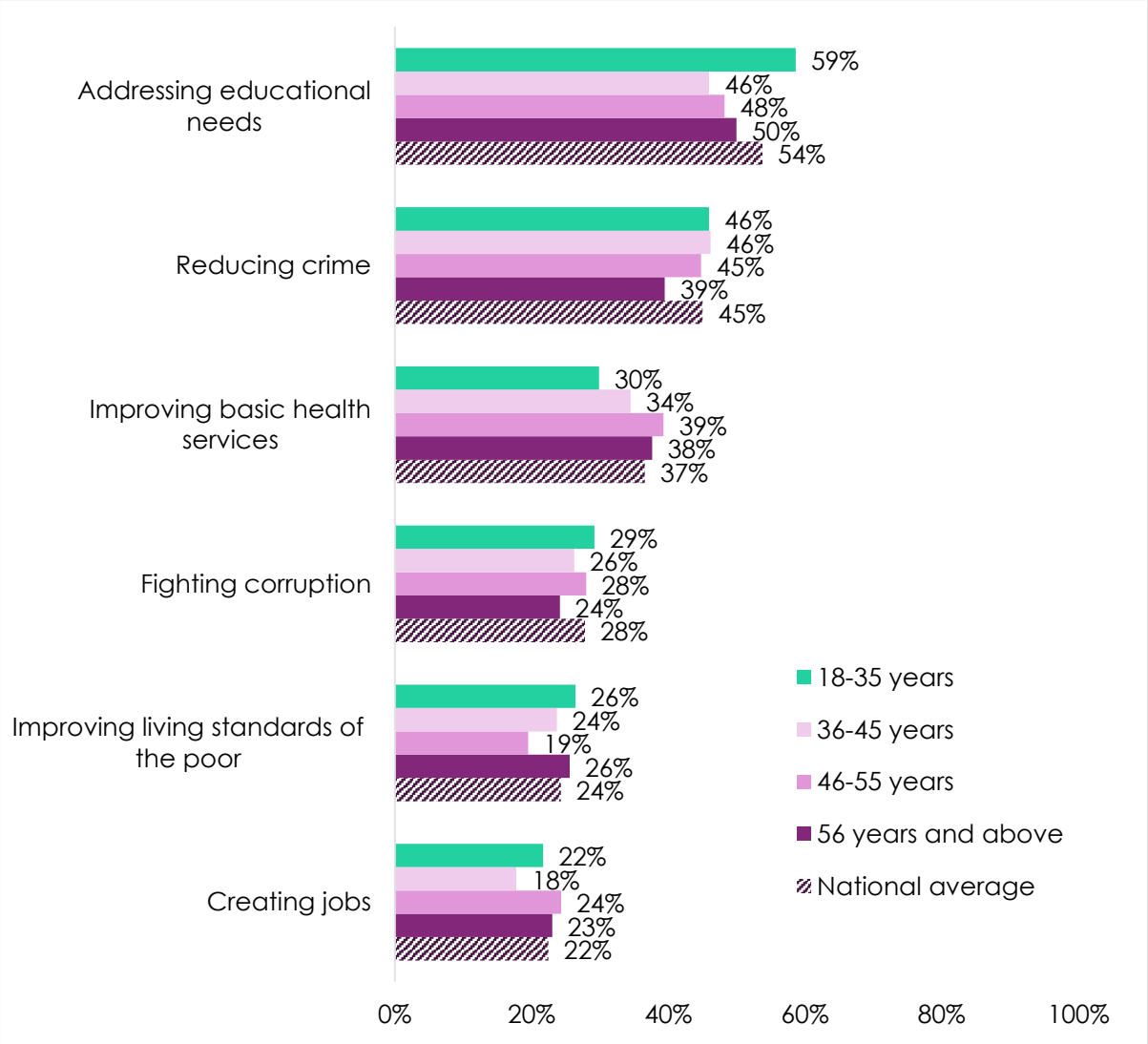
Government performance on priority issues

Young Kenyans offer mixed reviews of the government's performance on their top concerns (Figure 8). More than half (59%) give the government passing marks on addressing educational needs, but fewer approve of its efforts to reduce crime (46%) and improve basic health services (30%).

Government efforts on fighting corruption, improving living standards of the poor, and creating jobs receive gloomy approval ratings of only 29%, 26%, and 22%, respectively.

Youth do not differ dramatically from older age groups in their assessments of government performance, though they are somewhat more likely to approve of its efforts on education and less likely to offer praise for improving basic health services.

Figure 8: Government performance on youth priorities | by age group | Kenya | 2024

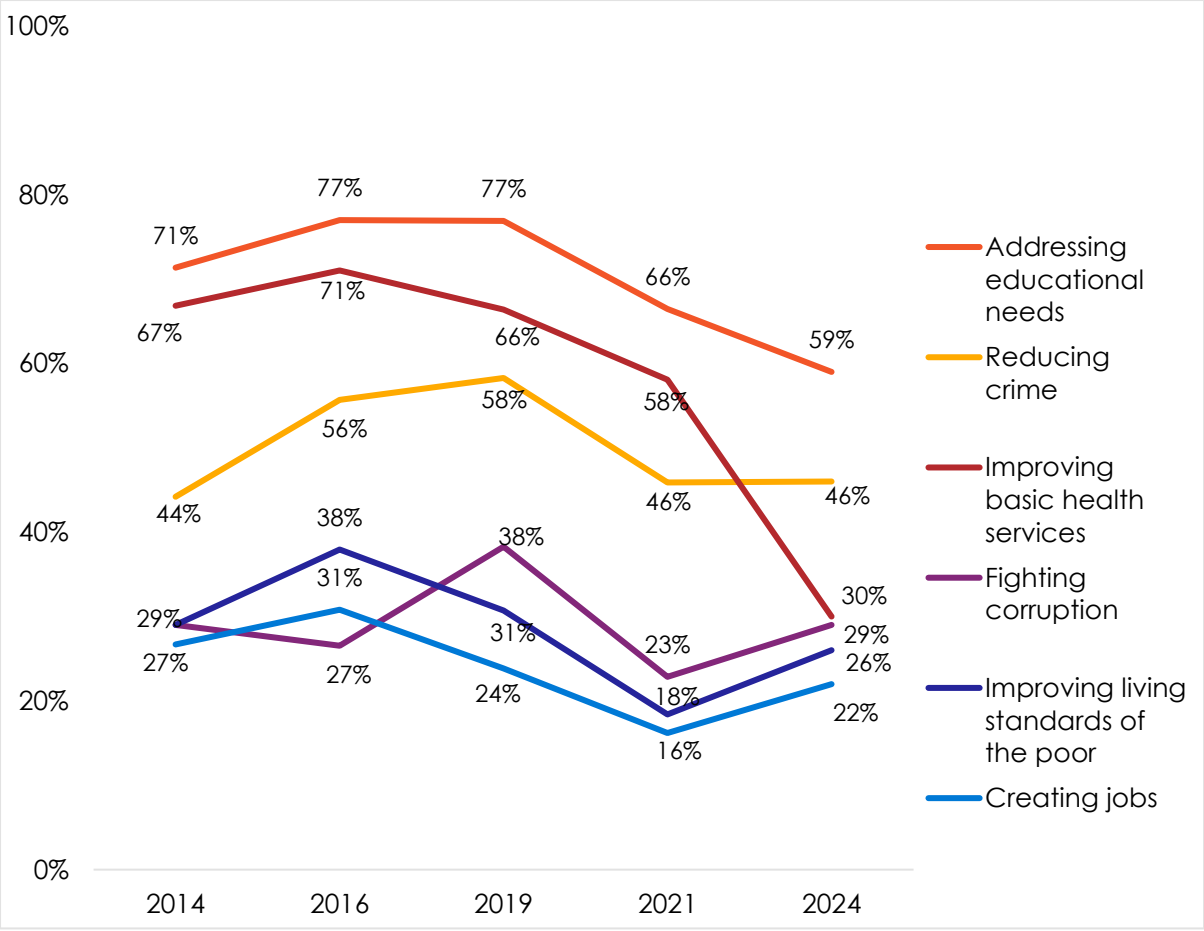


Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

Over the past decade, young people's evaluations of the government's performance on these priorities have fluctuated considerably, generally reaching their highest approval levels around 2016-2019 and then falling again (Figure 9). For example, approval of the government's handling of education declined sharply from a peak of 77% in 2016 and 2019 to 59% in 2024. Similarly, positive assessments on improving basic health services dropped from 71% in 2016 to 30% in 2024. Approval of crime-reduction efforts rose from 44% in 2014 to 58% in 2019 before declining again to 46% in 2024.

Approval of job-creation efforts has been consistently low (between 16% and 31%) throughout the decade.

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

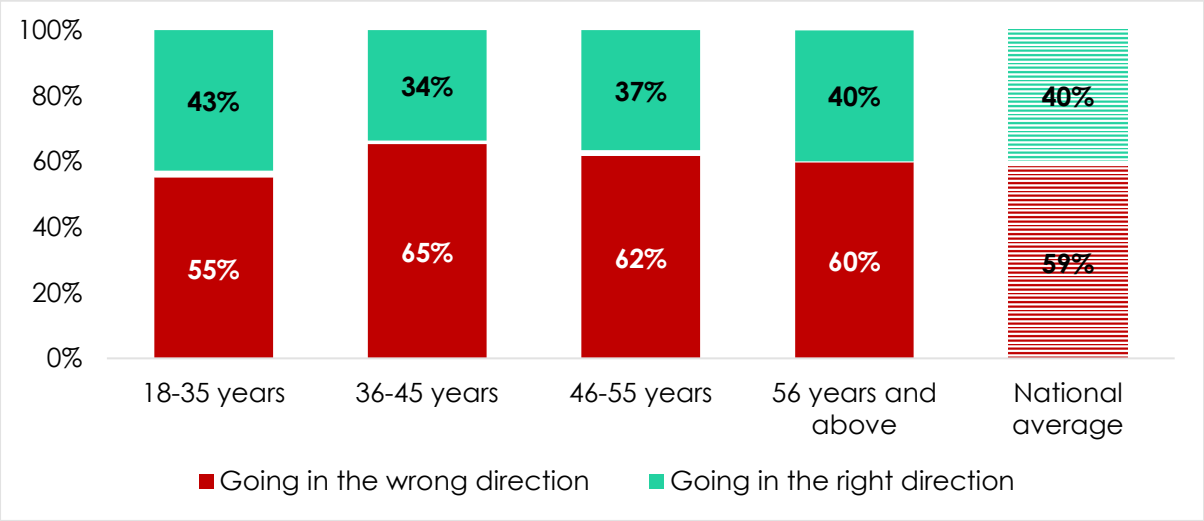


Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

Country's overall direction and economic conditions

In line with their mixed assessments of the government's performance, more than half (55%) of young Kenyans see the country as going in "the wrong direction," while only 43% think it is on the right track (Figure 10). In this perception, young Kenyans are more optimistic than their older counterparts: Among those over age 35, 60%-65% say Kenya is heading in the wrong direction.

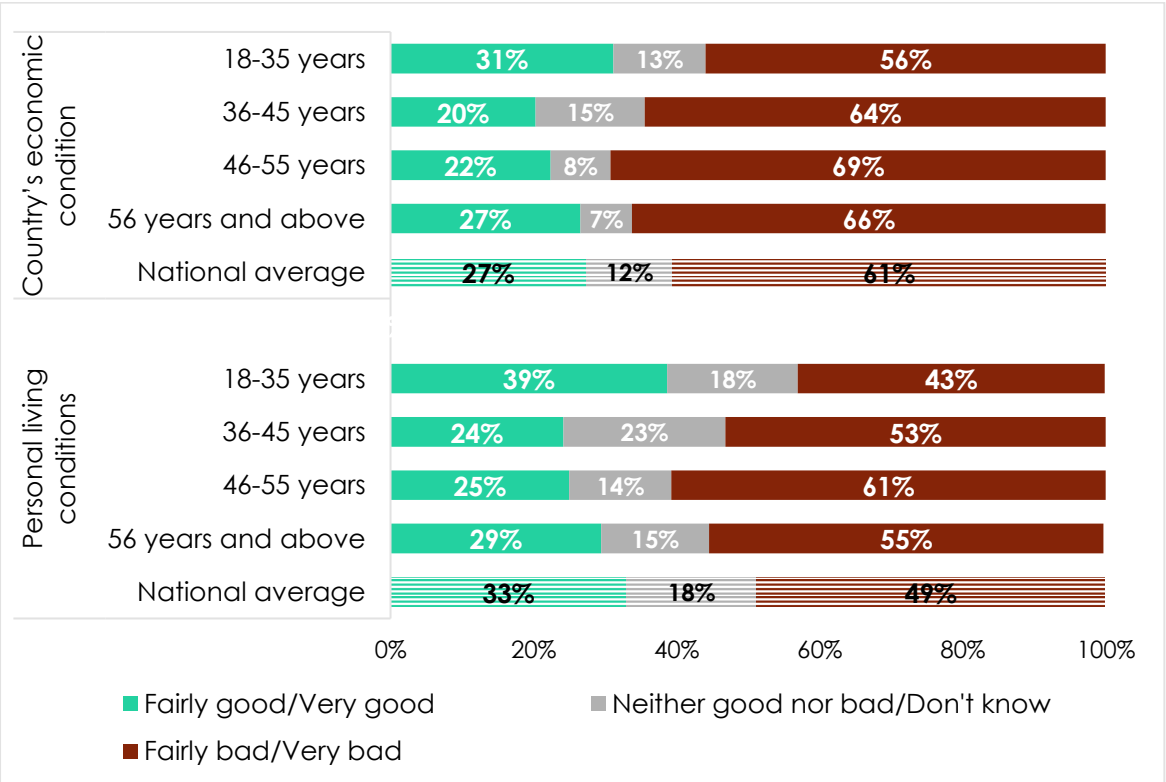
Figure 10: Country's overall direction | by age group | Kenya | 2024



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

Similarly, youth are more positive than older cohorts in their assessments of the country's economic condition and their personal living conditions. Even so, only 31% of youth describe the economy as "fairly good" or "very good," and only 39% say the same about their own living conditions (Figure 11).

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

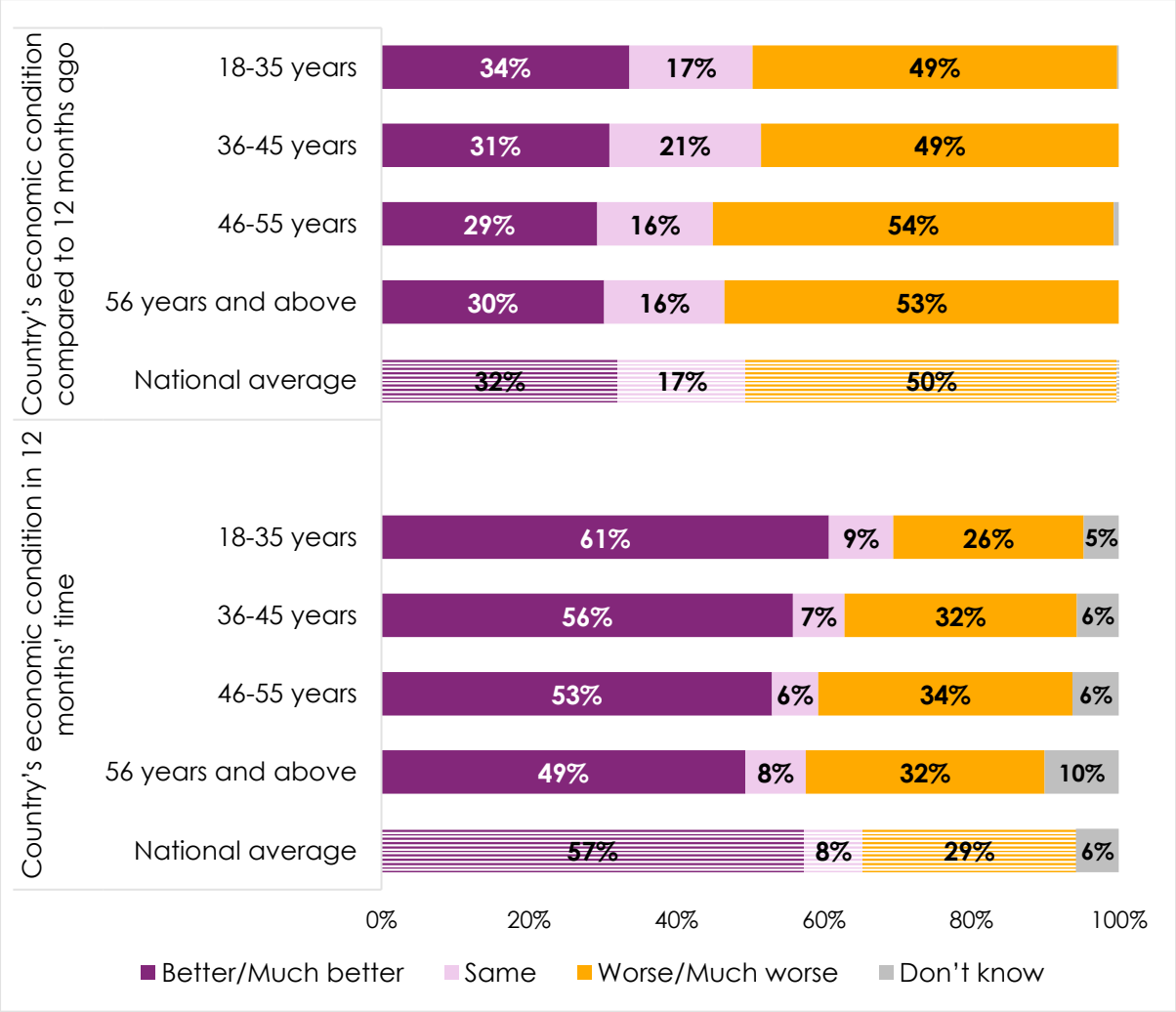


Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?*

Only about one-third (34%) of young people think the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, while 49% say it has deteriorated (Figure 12).

But a solid majority (61%) of youth expect economic conditions to improve during the coming 12 months. Optimism declines as respondents' age increases, dropping to 49% among those over age 55.

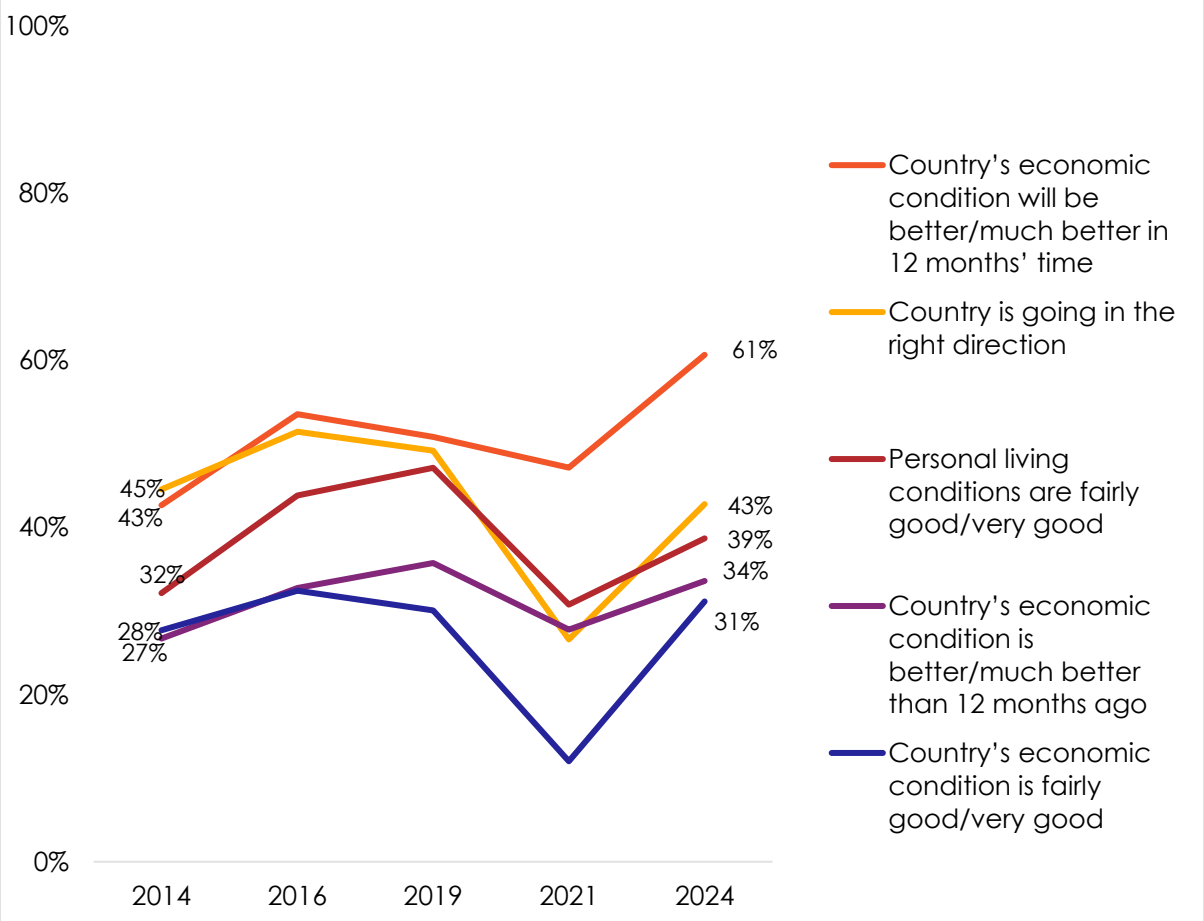
Figure 12: Country's economic condition 12 months ago and in 12 months' time | by age group | Kenya | 2024



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 Kenyans regarding the country's overall direction and economic well-being have fluctuated, with a notable drop in 2021 – a year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic – and recovery in 2024 (Figure 13). Compared to 2014, positive assessments have increased with regard to personal living conditions (by 7 percentage points), for the country's economic condition (+3 points), and for perceived improvement in economic conditions over the previous year (+7 points). Optimism about improvement during the coming year is up by 18 points, though it is possible that the Gen-Z protests in June-July 2024 (i.e. after Round 10 data collection) may have changed this.

Figure 13: Economic assessments | respondents aged 18-35 | Kenya | 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?

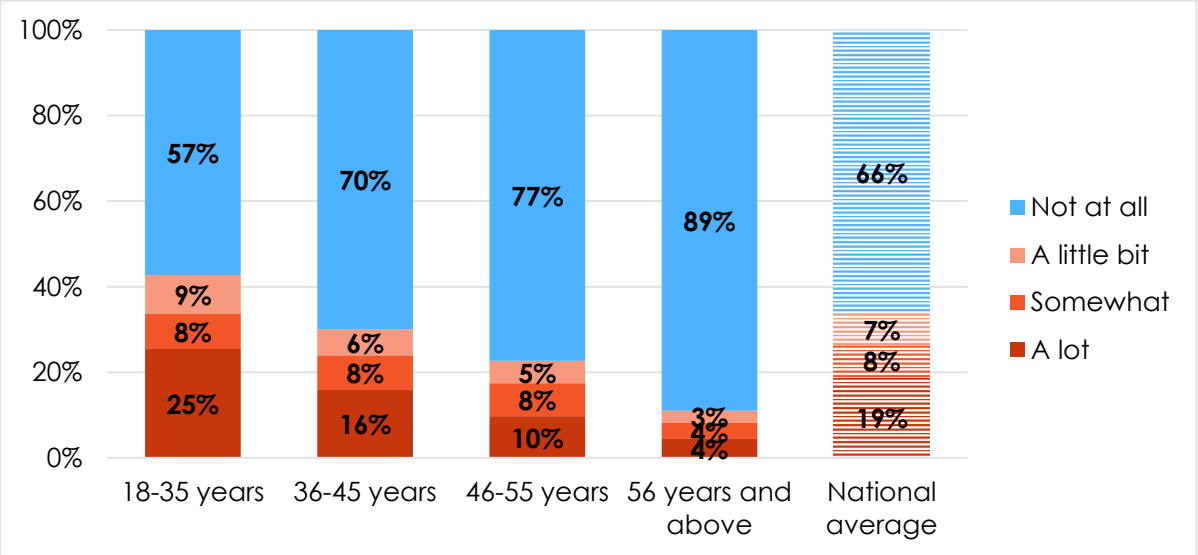
Kenyan youth and emigration

Against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with economic conditions, more than four in 10 young Kenyans (43%) say they have given emigration at least "a little bit" of thought (Figure 14). One in four (25%) say they have considered it "a lot" – a significantly larger proportion than among older cohorts (4%-16%).

Compared to 2016 survey findings, the proportion of youth who have considered emigrating has increased marginally (from 40% to 43%), but that includes a 9-point jump in the "a lot" category (Figure 15).

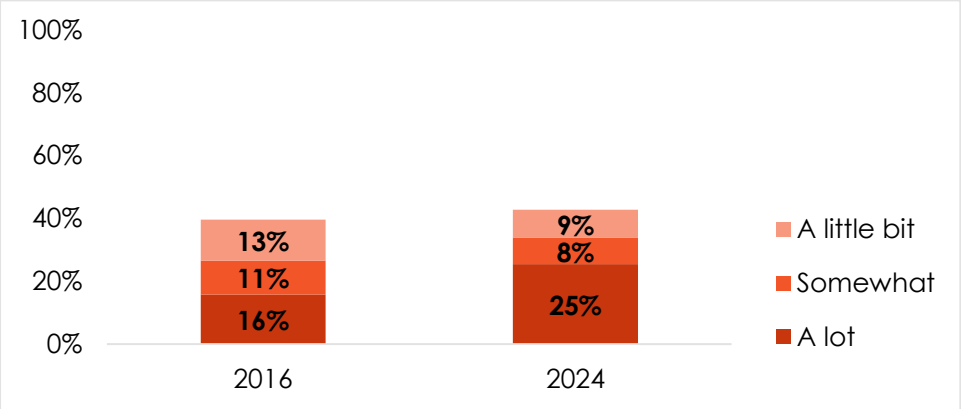
Among those who have considered emigrating, economic reasons dominate, led by the hope of finding a (better) job (61%) and escaping economic hardship or poverty (25%) (Figure 16).

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



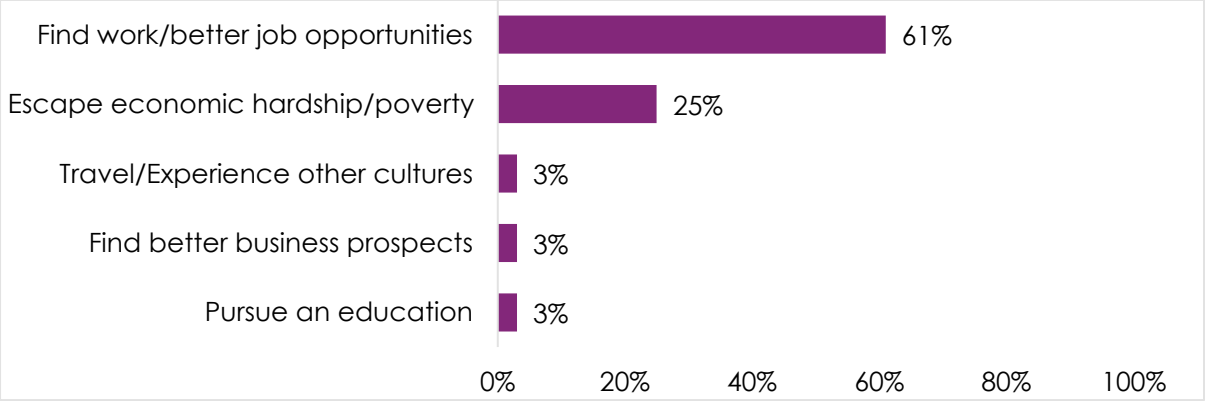
Respondents were asked: *How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?*

Figure 15: Considered emigrating | respondents aged 18-35 | Kenya | 2016-2024



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 | Kenya | 2016-2024



Respondents who have considered emigrating were asked: *What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from Kenya? (Respondents who have not considered moving are excluded.)*

Conclusion

A majority of Kenyan youth see their country as headed in "the wrong direction" and their government as failing on the issues that concern them most, including health, the rising cost of living, and unemployment.

Amid broadly negative assessments of economic conditions, a growing number of youth in Kenya are giving serious thought to emigration as a path to better opportunities.

One bright spot is youthful optimism that economic conditions will improve over the next year, though we may have to await the next round of Afrobarometer data to see whether it survived the 2024 crisis sparked by the government's attempt to raise taxes.

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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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminate, the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, and GIZ.

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