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# Toward Malawi 2063: Youth confront high unemployment and economic anxiety

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1006 | Joseph J. Chunga and Seth Evance**

## Summary

Malawi's strategic development blueprint, titled "Malawi 2063," envisions the country as an inclusively prosperous and self-reliant nation (National Planning Commission, 2020). Central to this vision is the role of the youth. The document states, "Our greatest resource and source of wealth is our young people." It declares that the nation "aspires to foster youth-centric inclusive wealth creation and self-reliance" and that "MW2063 will not be a success unless it is owned by the youth and based on the ideals of youth inclusiveness and shared prosperity" (National Planning Commission, 2020, pages 1, 11, and 5). Malawi 2063 mentions "youth" or "young people" 69 times – more than three times as often as children, four times as often as women, seven times as often as the elderly, and 17 times as often as men.

As might be expected, Malawi 2063 aims high and faces significant challenges on its ambitious path. According to the Global Youth Development Index 2023, which tracks progress on Sustainable Development Goals associated with youth development, Malawi ranks 168<sup>th</sup> out of 183 countries (Commonwealth, 2024). On its "youth-focused multi-dimensional deprivation indicators," the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that more than one in five Malawian youth suffer multiple deprivations in education, employment, and health (OECD Development Centre, 2018; UNICEF, 2021), while Malawi's Fifth Integrated Household Survey 2019-2020 reported that 38% of young women and 23% of young men are not in employment, education, or training (World Bank, 2020; UN Women, 2022).

More than eight in 10 employed 15- to 24-year-olds work in low-quality jobs and in the informal sector, and more than one in four are underemployed (National Youth Council of Malawi, 2024).

Malawian youth also encounter challenges in securing roles in public affairs and politics. The prevailing cultural context favours the wisdom of older individuals over fresh ideas from younger people (Alfonso & Chunga, 2022). As the National Youth Council of Malawi (2024, Page 8) reports, "Traditionally, youth have been expected to passively receive services from adults, lacking active and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes and interventions addressing their issues as a distinct demographic and the broader national community."

This dispatch on Afrobarometer Round 10 survey findings presents a picture of the state of the youth in Malawi.<sup>1</sup> Survey results show that youth have more education than their elders, though a majority do not reach secondary school. Like their elders, most youth see their

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<sup>1</sup> While the National Youth Policy defines youth as those aged 10-35 years (Government of Malawi, 2023) and the African Youth Charter defines youth as ages 15-35 years (African Union, 2006), the Afrobarometer survey did not include respondents under age 18.

personal living conditions and the country's economic situation as bad. Fewer than one in 10 have jobs. Among youth-oriented programmes, young citizens would prefer that the government prioritise spending on job creation, education, and improved access to business loans.

But youth see food shortages and the increasing cost of living as the most important problems their government must address,

About half of younger citizens say they have considered emigrating, mainly in pursuit of employment and economic opportunity.

Youth see their community leaders and organisations as making efforts to promote young leaders. Solid majorities support elections as the best way of selecting leaders and say they intend to vote in the September elections, although youth trail older cohorts on both counts.

### **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 Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in August 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 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

### **Key findings**

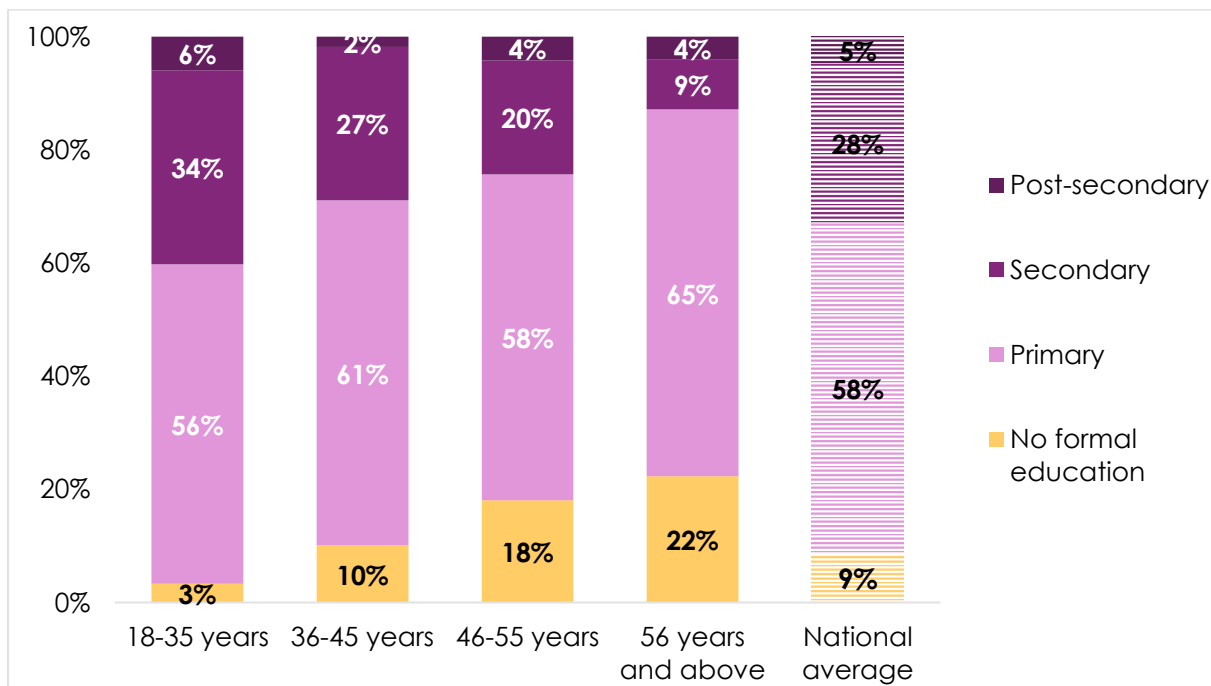
- Malawian youth (aged 18-35) are more educated than their elders. Four in 10 (40%) have secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 13%-29% among older cohorts.
- Only one in three youth (33%) see their personal living conditions as "fairly good" or "very good," and even fewer (23%) describe the country's economic condition as good.
- More than half (53%) of young Malawians say they are not employed and are looking for work, compared to 46%-48% among middle-aged respondents. Fewer than one in 10 youth say they full-time (3%) or part-time (5%) jobs.
  - Aside from the country's general economic situation and scarcity of jobs, young people cite a lack of adequate training, a mismatch between education and job requirements, and a lack of experience as the main barriers to youth employment.
  - Starting their own business is the most preferred job option among youth (61%), followed by employment in the public sector (18%).
  - For youth-focused initiatives, young citizens would like the government to prioritise investment in job creation (26%), education (25%), and access to business loans (23%).
- Food shortage is the most important problem that young Malawians say their government must address, followed by the increasing cost of living.

- A majority of youth say the government has performed well on education (64%) and health services (63%), but far fewer say the same about job creation (33%) and economic management (22%).
- About half (51%) of youth say they have considered emigrating, mostly to find better job opportunities and escape economic hardship.
- When it comes to citizen engagement, more than six in 10 youth (62%) say community leaders and organisations are doing a good job of nurturing young leaders. About two-thirds (65%) of youth see elections as the best method for choosing the country's leaders, and a slim majority (52%) favour reducing the voting age from 18 to 16 years. Eight in 10 youth (81%) say they will "definitely" vote in Malawi's national elections in September 2025.

### Level of education

Malawian youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders (Figure 1). Four in 10 (40%) have attained secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 13%-29% among older age groups. Only 3% of young Malawians have no formal education, far fewer than among their older counterparts (10%-22%).

**Figure 1: Level of education** | by age group | Malawi | 2024



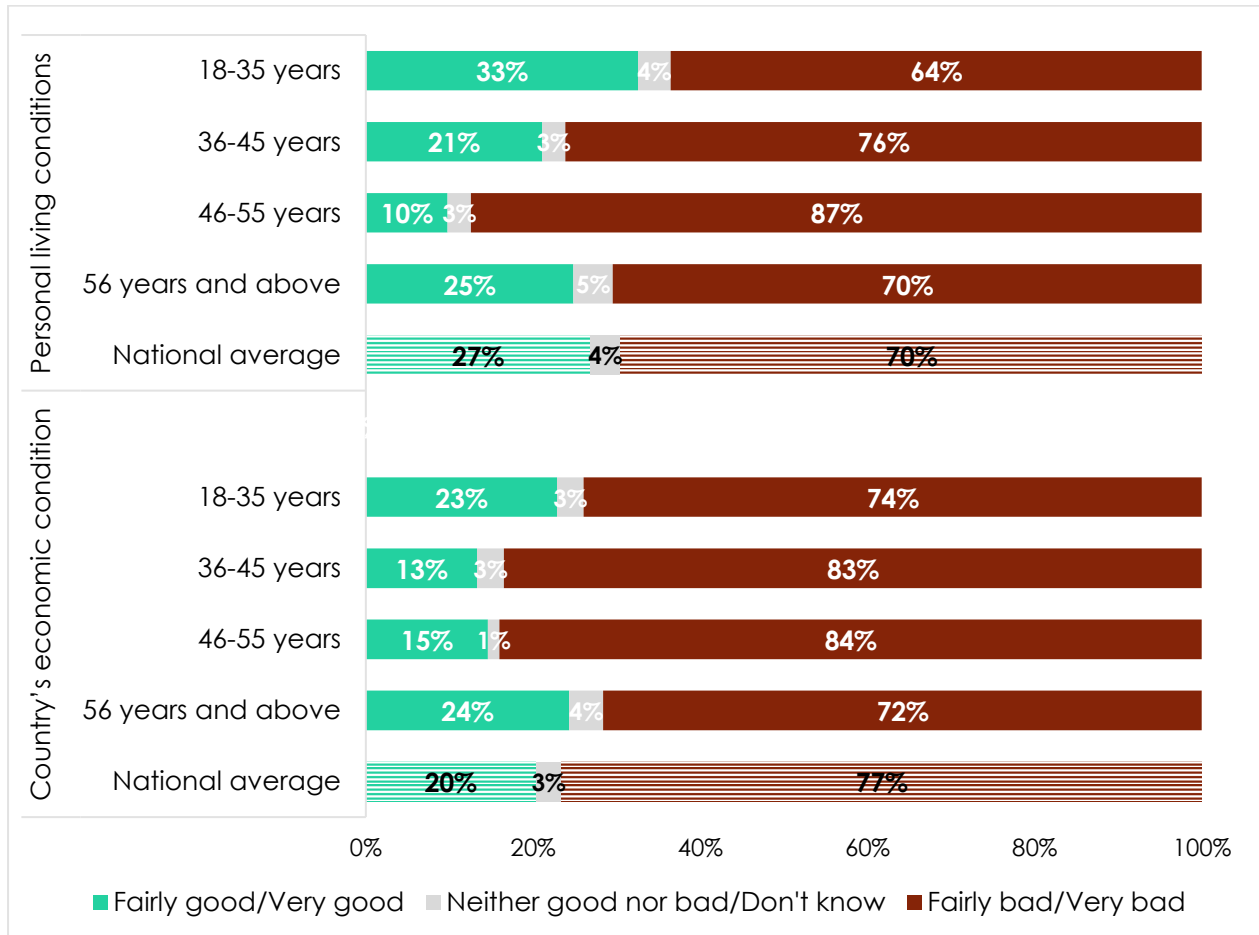
**Respondents were asked:** What is your highest level of education?

### Personal and country economic conditions

Only one-third (33%) of youth describe their living conditions as "fairly good" or "very good," while 64% say they are bad. This is still more positive than assessments by their elders (10%-25% fairly/very good) (Figure 2).

Similarly, only 23% of young respondents offer positive assessments of their country's economic condition – a more favourable average than among middle-aged respondents (13%-15%).

**Figure 2: Personal living and country economic conditions | by age group | Malawi | 2024**



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

### Employment status

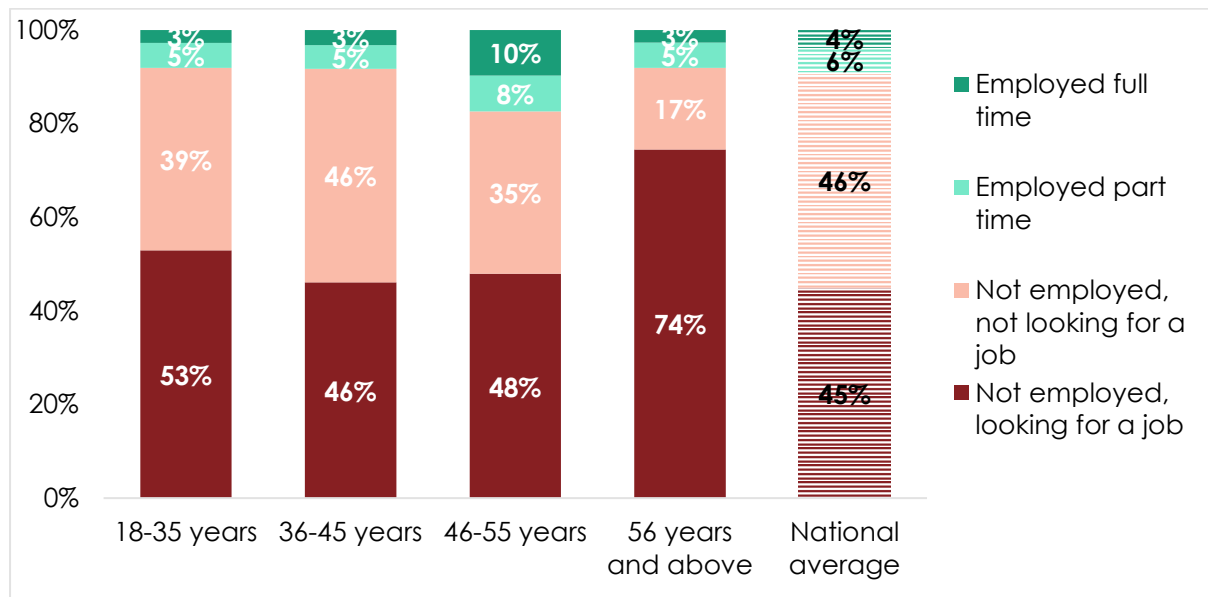
While Malawian youth are more educated than their elders, they are less likely to be employed (Figure 3). More than half (53%) of the young people say they are not employed and are looking for jobs, a somewhat higher rate than among middle-aged respondents (46%-48%). Another 39% of youth don't have a job and aren't looking for one. Fewer than one in 10 youth report having a full-time (3%) or part-time (5%) job.

Youth unemployment patterns vary across different demographic groups (Figure 4). Among youth without jobs, men are more likely than women to be looking for work (56% vs. 50%) and less likely not to be job hunting (34% vs. 44%). The share of unemployed youth looking for work decreases as respondents' education level rises, from 61% among those with no formal schooling to 47% among those with secondary or post-secondary education.

Regionally, the Northern region has the smallest share of youth not employed and looking for a job (47%) and the largest share of those not looking for jobs (49%). More young women (44%) are unemployed and not looking for jobs compared to young men (34%)

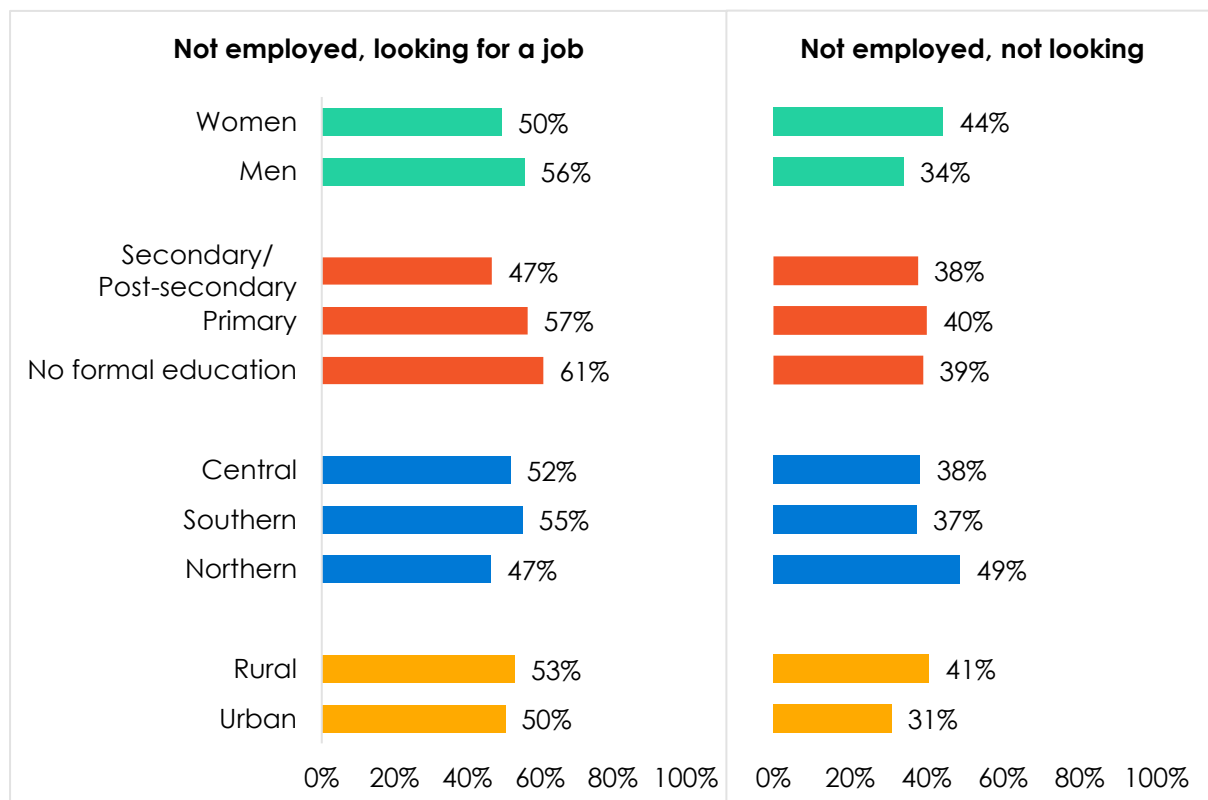
Young unemployed people in rural areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to be looking for a job (53% vs. 50%) as well as not looking for a job (41% vs. 31%), since urban youth are three times as likely as rural youth to have full- or part-time employment (19% vs. 6%).

**Figure 3: Employment status** | by age group | Malawi | 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 4: Youth unemployment** | respondents aged 18-35 | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024



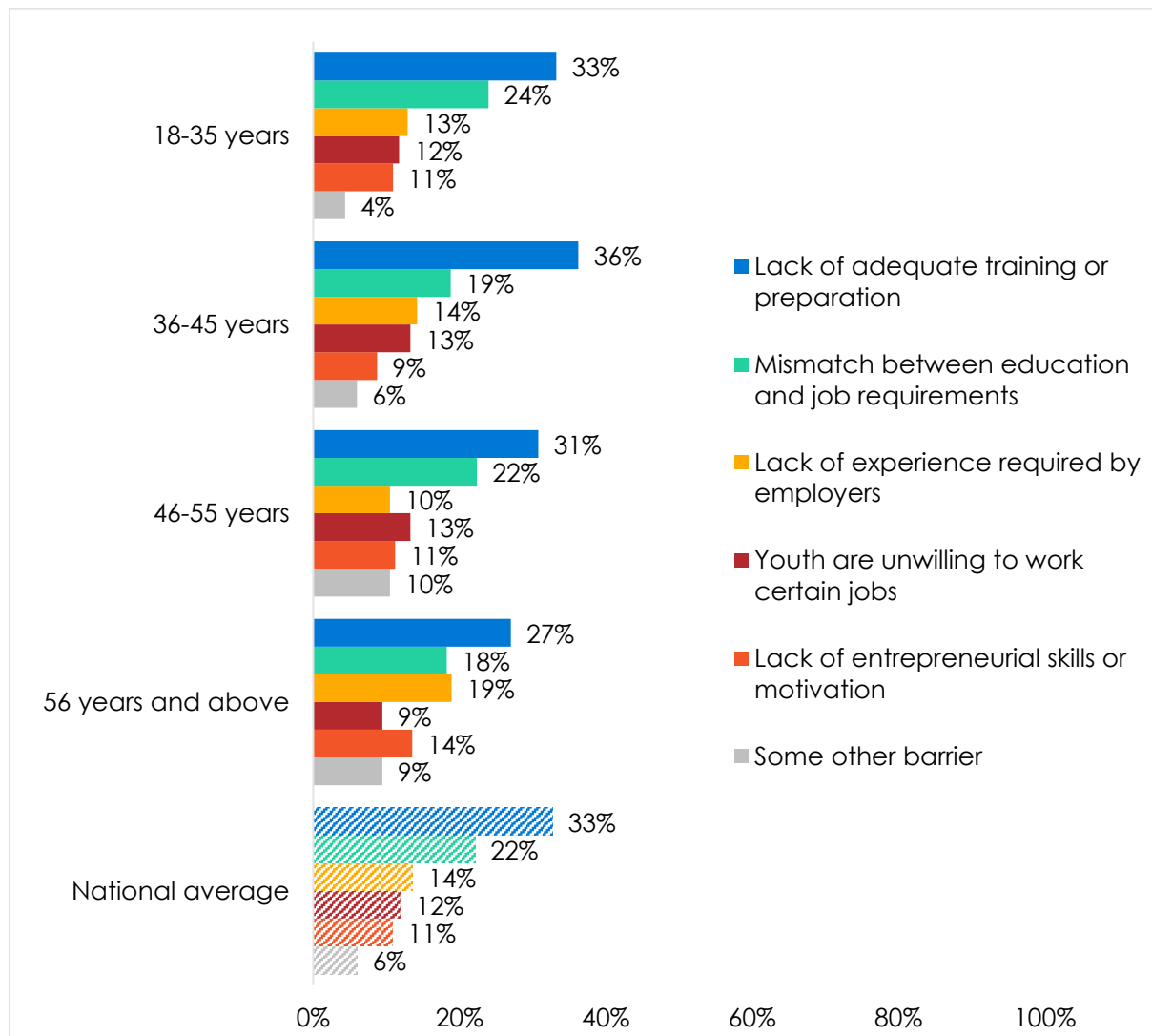
**Respondents were asked:** Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (Youth who have part-time or full-time jobs are excluded.)

The Malawi 2063 blueprint acknowledges that “young people are often faced with age-related challenges and barriers, such as relevant education and skill-sets, among other things. These affect their participation in economic, political and social life, greatly hindering their development and, consequently, their contribution to sustainable economic development” (National Planning Commission, 2020, Page 4).

In addition to general economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, what are the main barriers to young Malawians finding jobs? Youth most commonly report a lack of adequate training or preparation (33%) as the top barrier to employment (Figure 5). This concern is shared across all age groups, highlighting a widespread perception that young people are not sufficiently equipped for the job market.

Other frequently mentioned barriers include a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (24% among youth) and a lack of experience required by employers (13%). About one in eight young respondents (12%) say youth are unwilling to accept certain kinds of jobs, such as those perceived as low-status, difficult, or physically demanding.

**Figure 5: Barriers to youth employment | by age group | Malawi | 2024**

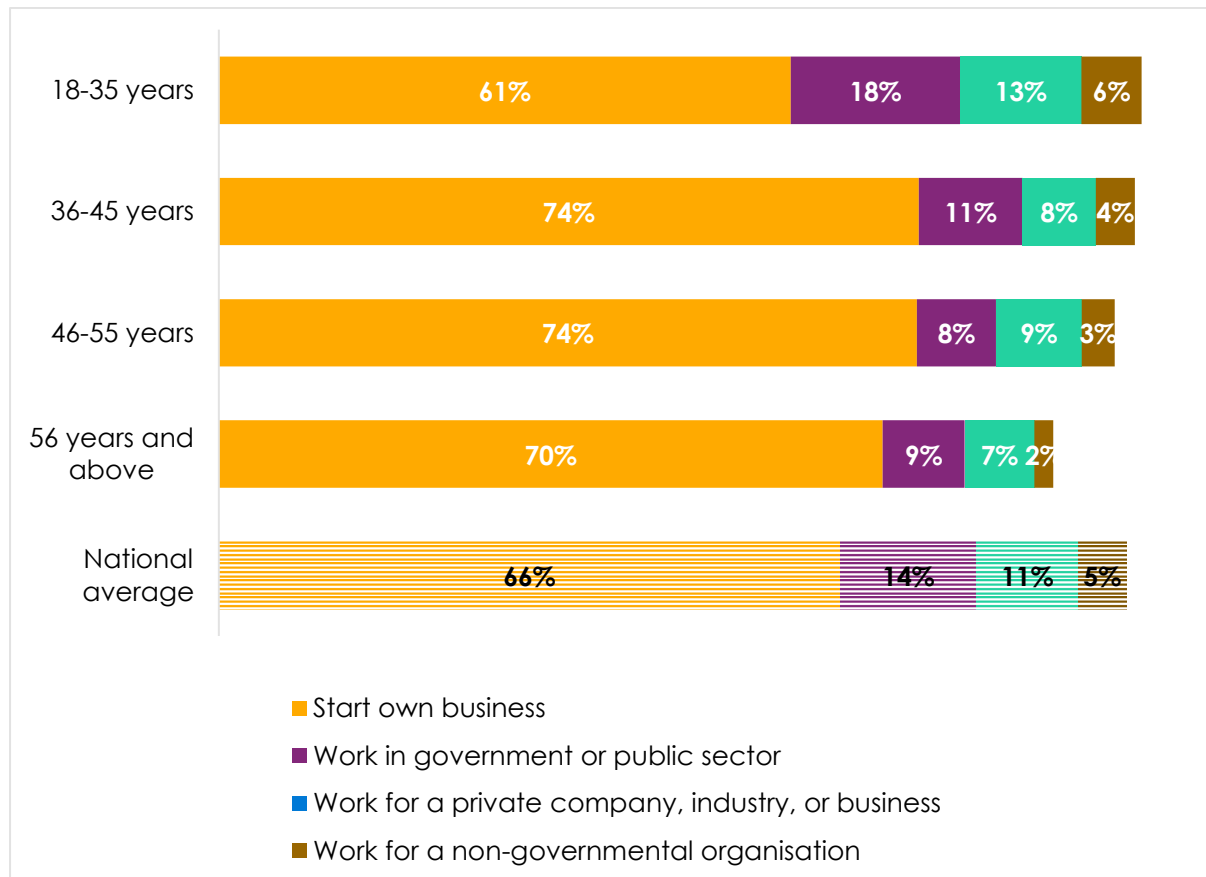


**Respondents were asked:** Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, which of the following factors, if any, would you say is the main barrier to young people getting jobs and entering the workforce?

When asked about their preferred type of employment, starting a business is the top career aspiration for most Malawian youth (61%), though the entrepreneurial spirit is even stronger among older groups (70%-74%) (Figure 6).

Government or public-sector employment is the second-most-popular option among youth (18%), followed by working for a private company or business (13%). Only 6% of young people express interest in working for non-governmental organisations.

**Figure 6: Preferred job sector | by age group | Malawi | 2024**



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

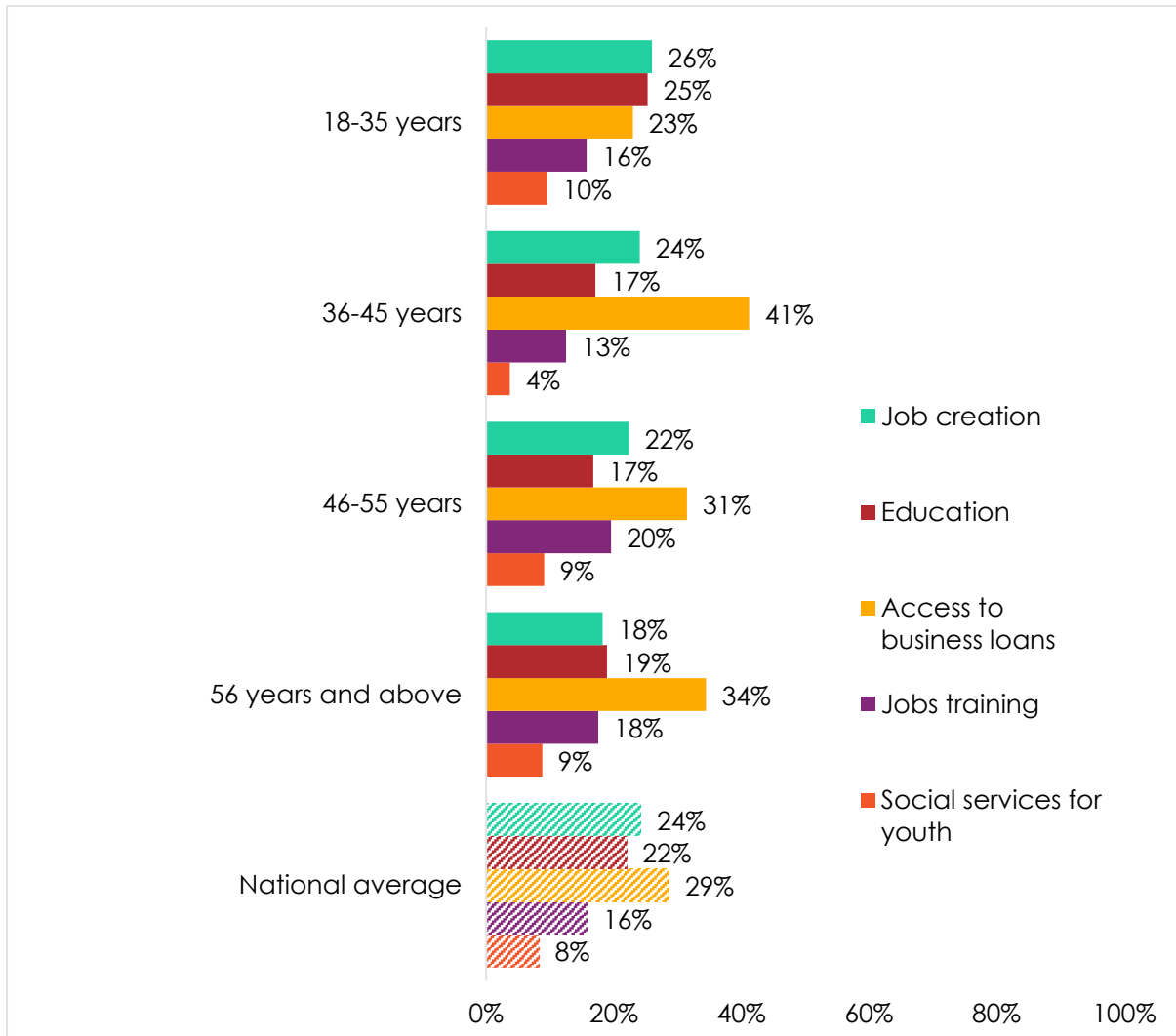
### Youth priorities

Malawi's National Youth Policy identifies 10 priority areas to promote youth development, ranging from employment and technology to health and governance (Government of Malawi, 2023).

If the government were able to increase its expenditures to help young people, job creation tops the list of investment priorities for Malawian youth (26%), followed by education (25%), access to business loans (23%), jobs training (16%), and social services such as health and drug-abuse prevention (10%) (Figure 7).

While the youth place greater emphasis on job opportunities and education, the older cohorts are more likely to prioritise access to business loans (31%-41%).

**Figure 7: Government spending priority to help youth | by age group | Malawi | 2024**

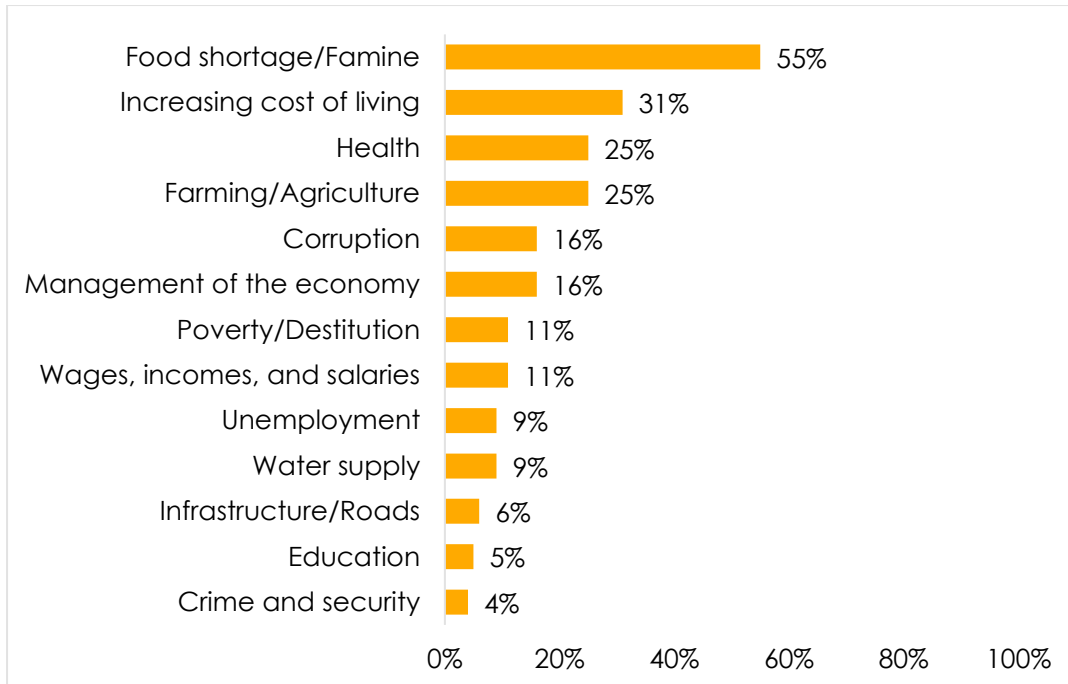


**Respondents were asked:** *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?*

But unemployment drops to ninth place when young Malawians are asked more broadly what they consider the most important problems that their government must address. Two issues critical for survival rank at the top: food shortage, cited by 55% of youth as one of their top three priorities for government action, and the rising cost of living (31%) (Figure 8).

Health (25%), farming/agriculture (25%), corruption (16%), management of the economy (16%), poverty (11%), and wages (11%) also outrank unemployment (9%).

**Figure 8: Most important problems** | respondents aged 18-35 | Malawi | 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 aged 18-35 who cite each problem among their three priorities.)*

### Government performance on youth priorities

In Malawi 2063, Malawians declared that “as a nation, we commit to address the key challenges and barriers to youth development and to protect their health and well-being. We guarantee the provision and accessibility of quality education, skills development and decent work opportunities” (National Planning Commission, 2020, Page 5).

Considering young people's top priorities for government action (Figure 8) and best investments to help the youth (Figure 7), survey results show mixed assessments of government performance in handling the relevant policy areas (Figure 9).

Only one-third (33%) of youth say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” on job creation, and even fewer approve of its handling of the economy (22%) and its efforts to keep prices stable (14%). On the other hand, more than six in 10 youth say the government is doing a good job on education (64%) and on improving basic health services (63%). On most of these indicators, young people offer more positive assessments than their elders.

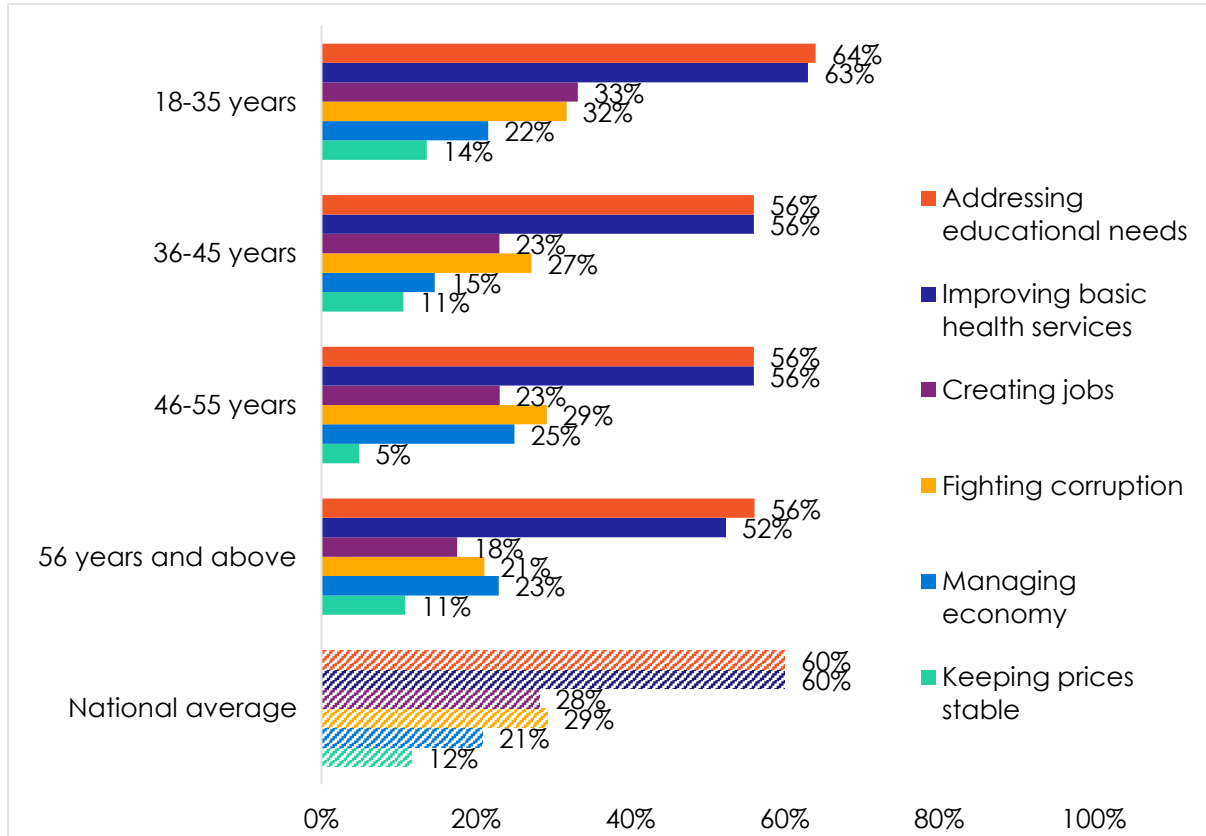
Youth assessments of government performance on all six of these key priorities show improvement compared to 2022, but only evaluations on education and health services reflect major gains – of 16 and 12 percentage points, respectively – compared to a decade ago (Figure 10).

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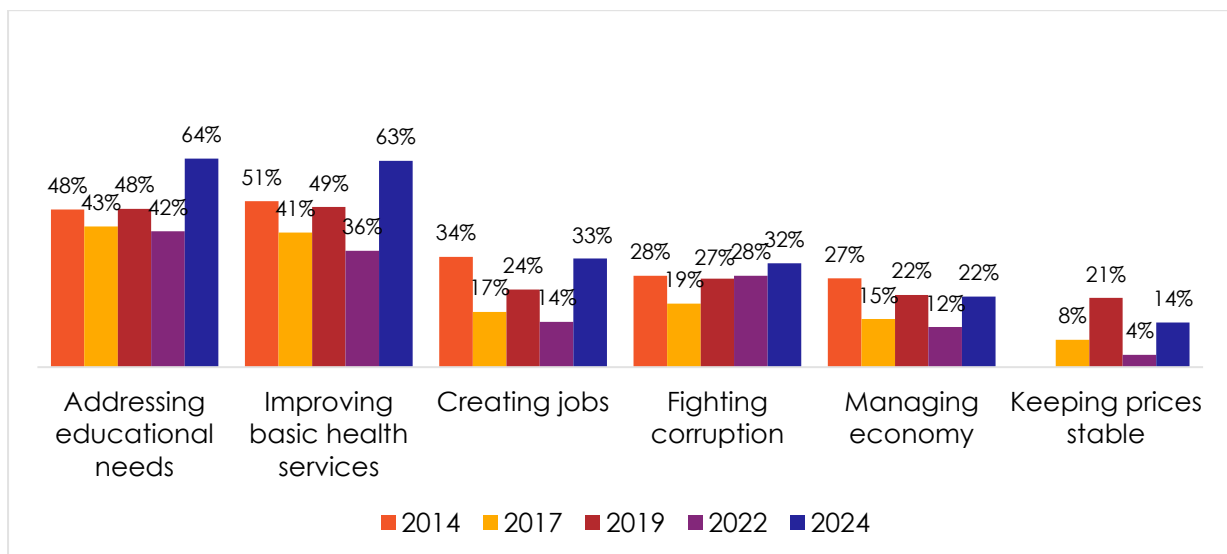
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**Figure 9: Government performance on youth priorities | by age group | Malawi | 2024**



**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")

**Figure 10: Youth approval of government performance on youth priorities | respondents aged 18-35 | Malawi | 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? (% of respondents aged 18-35 who say "fairly well" or "very well")

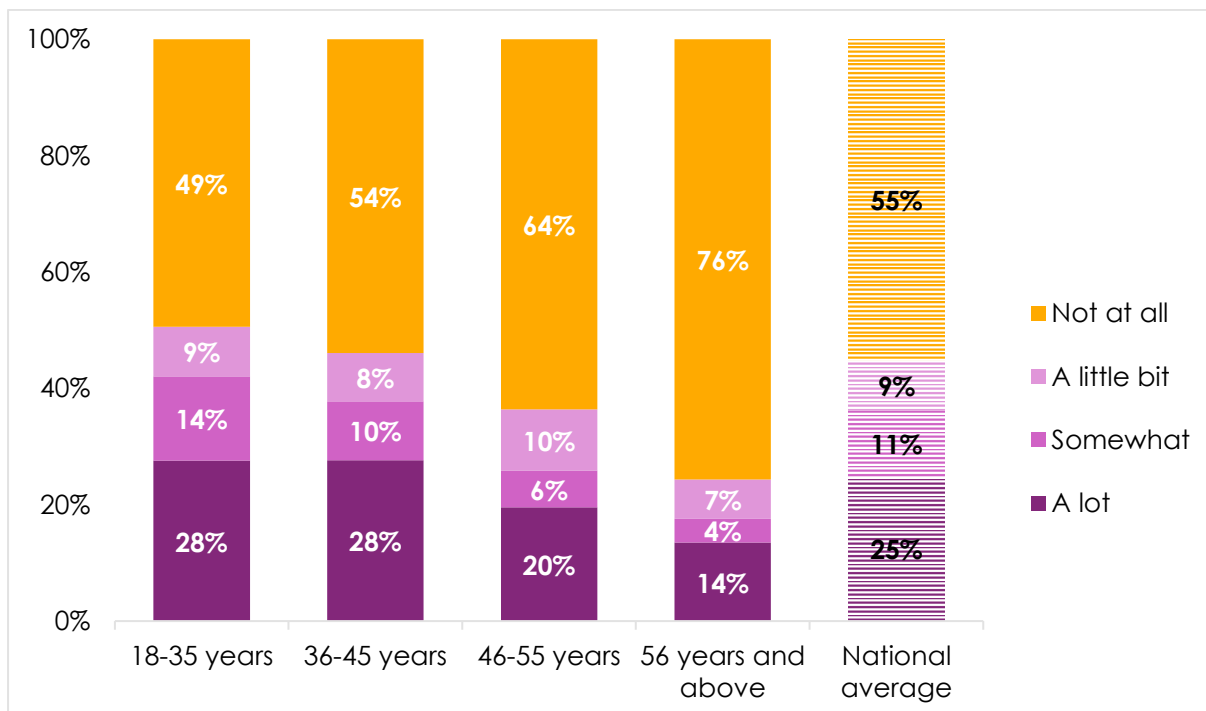
## Emigration

Against this backdrop of economic dissatisfaction and mixed assessments of government performance, about half (51%) of young Malawian say they have considered moving to another country, including 28% who say they have given “a lot” of thought to the possibility of emigrating (Figure 11). Thoughts of leaving Malawi decline by 5-15 percentage points among middle-aged citizens.

Serious interest in in emigration is more common in the Southern region (37% “a lot”) compared to the Northern (13%) and Central (23%) regions. It is also particularly widespread among men (35%), urban residents (39%), and those with higher levels of education (32%) (Figure 12).

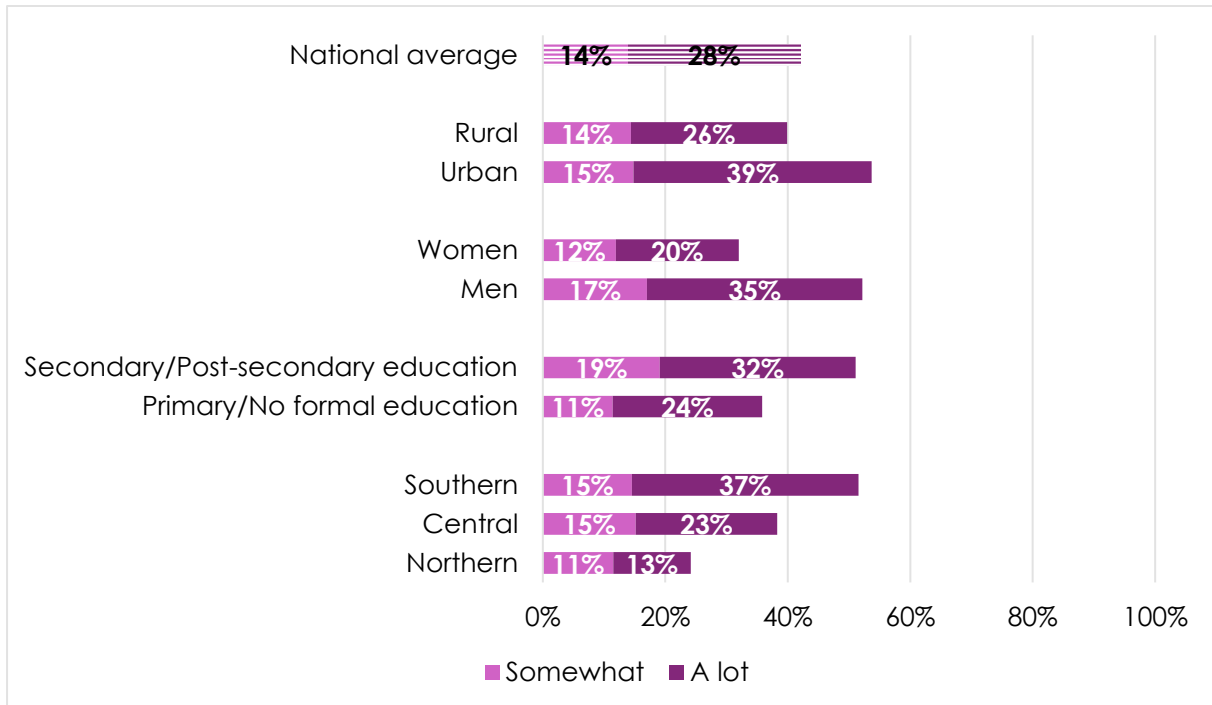
The main drivers of interest in emigration, according to young respondents, are economic pressures. A majority (56%) cite the search for better job opportunities as their main reason for considering leaving the country, while 33% say they want to economic hardship or poverty (Figure 13). Very few youths consider emigration for reasons such as tourism (3%), better business prospects (3%), or education (1%).

**Figure 11: Considered emigrating** | by age group | Malawi | 2024



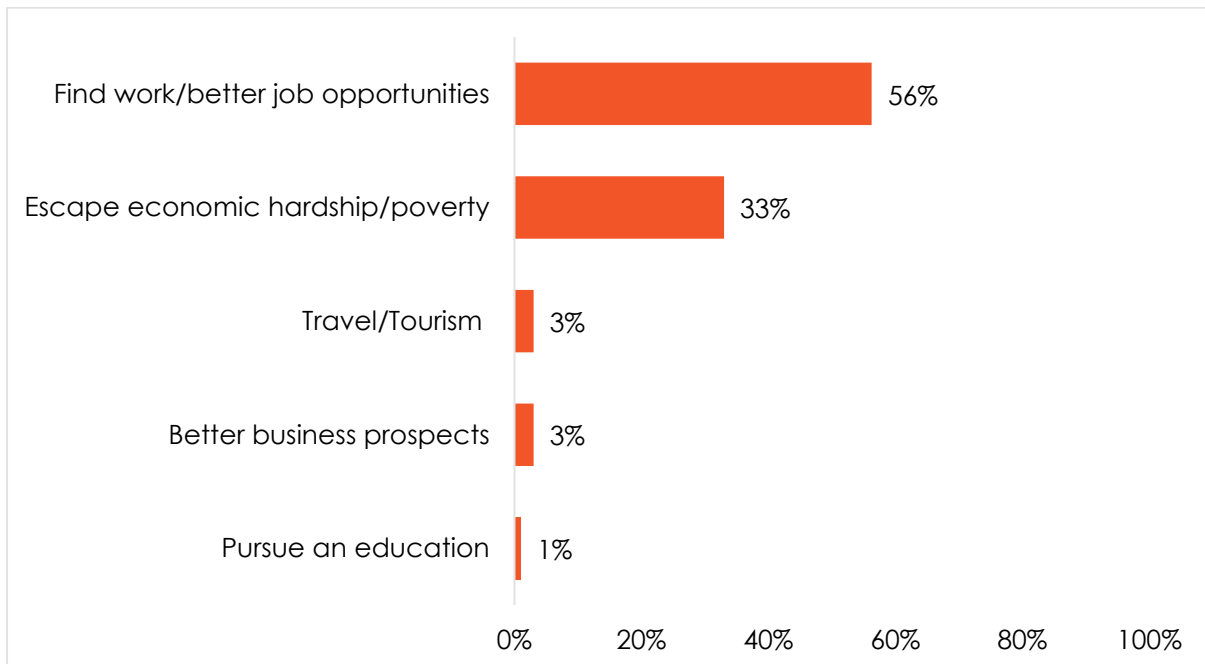
**Respondents were asked:** How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

**Figure 12: Considered emigrating** | respondents aged 18-35 | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024



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

**Figure 13: Reasons for considering emigration** | respondents aged 18-35 who have considered emigration | Malawi | 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 Malawi? (Respondents who have not considered emigration are excluded.)

## Political participation and 2025 elections

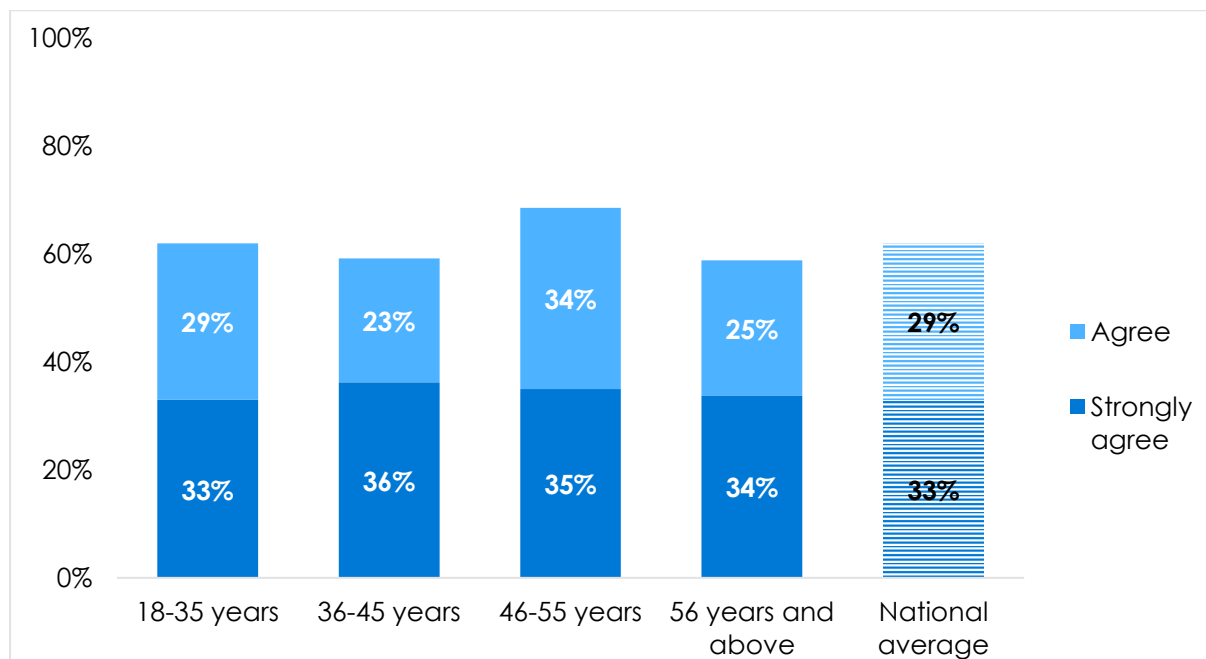
One of the key declarations in Malawi 2063 is that “as a nation, we commit to address the key challenges and barriers to youth development and to protect their health and well-being. ... The youth will be active participants in decision making and governance systems” (National Planning Commission, 2020, Page 5).

In this vein, several initiatives are being implemented to make room for participation by young Malawians, including the Malawi Youth Manifesto – a 14-point document on youth priorities compiled by civil society organisations for lobbying of presidential candidates and political parties (Mvona, 2025). The Malawi Electoral Commission has cut by 50% the nomination fees that candidates have to pay to contest for seats in Parliament and on local government councils (Mhone, 2025).

Youth aspiring to participation in political decision making may also find a starting point in support from community leaders and organisations. Are these role models and facilitators preparing tomorrow's leaders?

Close to two-thirds (62%) of young Malawians say their community leaders and organisations are doing a good job of building and promoting young leaders. These views are generally shared across age groups (Figure 14).

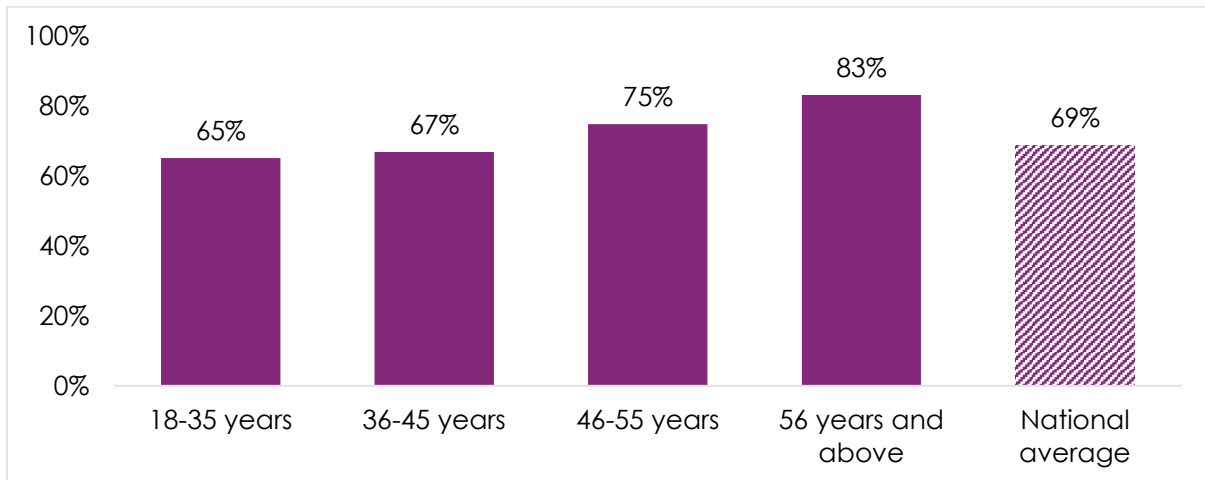
**Figure 14: Do community leaders promote young leaders?** | by age group | Malawi | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Our community leaders and organisations are doing a good job of building and promoting young leaders.

Considering their large numbers, one of the most important ways the youth can shape the direction of their nation is by participating in elections. About two-thirds (65%) of youth support elections as the best way to choose the country's leaders, though this support is weaker than among their elders, especially those over age 45 (75%-83%) (Figure 15).

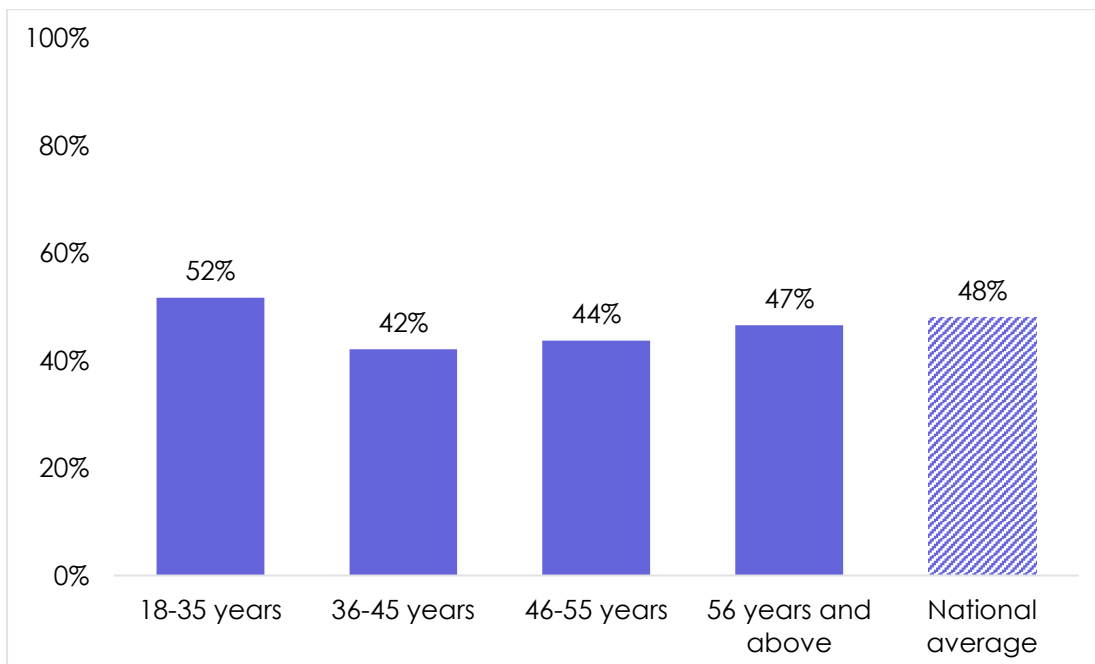
**Figure 15: Support for elections** | by age group | Malawi | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.  
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders. (% who agree with Statement 1)

Only a slim majority (52%) of interviewed youth endorse a proposal to lower the voting age from 18 years to 16 years (Figure 16). This is somewhat stronger support than among older groups (42%-47%). Youth involved in this survey were at least 18 years old and thus had already reached the current voting age themselves.

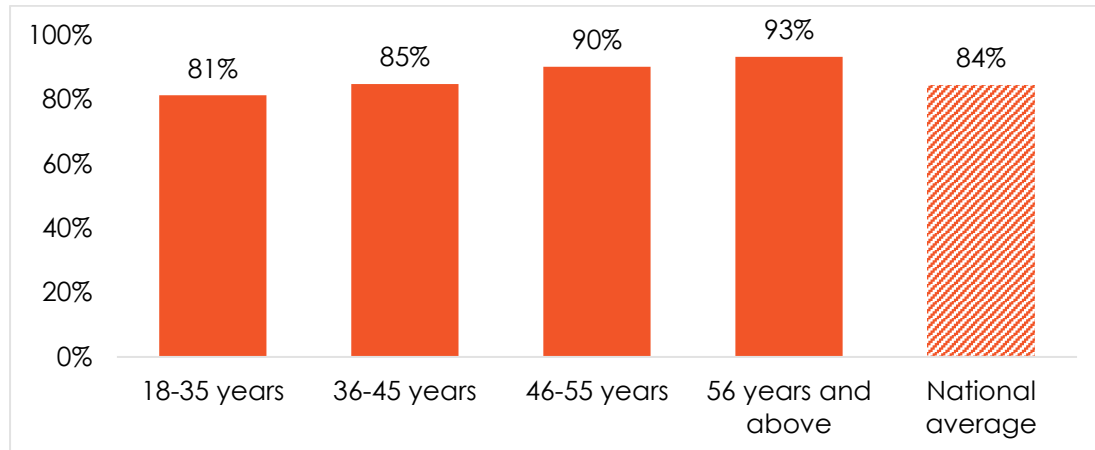
**Figure 16: Support for reducing voting age to 16 years** | by age group | Malawi | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement:  
 The minimum age for voting in national elections in this country should be reduced from 18 to 16 years.

Eight in 10 young respondents (81%) say they will “definitely” vote in presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections scheduled for 16 September 2025. This proportion is somewhat smaller than among older Malawians (85%-93%) (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Readiness to vote in 2025 elections** | by age group | Malawi | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** How likely are you to vote in the 2025 elections? (% who say they “will definitely vote”)

## Conclusion

As Malawi 2063 approaches the midpoint of its first 10-year implementation plan, Afrobarometer survey findings highlight several issues relevant to the development of the country's youth. Despite educational gains compared to previous generations, young Malawians face high unemployment rates and cite inadequate preparation for the labour market as a primary barrier to finding jobs.

Their assessments of their own living conditions are fairly gloomy, and concerns about food shortages and the rising cost of living top their priorities for government action. Half of Malawian youth say they have considered emigrating, mostly in search of economic opportunity.

They acknowledge efforts by community leaders and organisations to nurture young leaders, and their commitment to democratic elections in general and to voting in the September election appears solid, if somewhat less enthusiastic than that of their elders.

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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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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