Dispatch No. 998 | 16 June 2025

Facing lack of economic opportunity, Nigerian youth want government action on jobs and cost of living

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 998 | Raphael Mbaegbu

Summary

Nigeria's population of more than 230 million is skewed toward youth: The median age is 18.1 years, and 58% of the population is under age 30 (Worldometer, 2025; World Bank, 2023a). While a youth bulge is often viewed as a potential driver of economic growth, current Nigerian realities present a more complex and challenging picture, not least because large portions of young adults are unemployed and lack the necessary skills to accelerate economic productivity (Punch, 2024).

Approximately 80 million Nigerians are classified as living in poverty, more than one-third of the population. Even beyond this segment officially considered poor, a significant share of households face difficult living conditions as they struggle to meet basic needs such as health care, education, and adequate housing (World Bank, 2023b).

Young Nigerians are confronted with especially difficult circumstances. The country ranks 172nd out of 183 countries in the 2023 Global Youth Development Index (Commonwealth, 2024), which assesses countries based on a variety of social, political, economic, health, and education measures. Nigeria places second-to-last for youth employment and opportunity and third-to-last for equality and inclusion. Although the National Bureau of Statistics reported an unemployment rate of 6.5% among 15- to 24-year-olds in 2024, this follows a controversial change in the methodology for calculating unemployment. In 2020, according to the official statistics agency, 53.4% of 15- to 24-year-olds were unemployed, as well as 37.2% of 25- to 34-year-olds – figures that experts say are much more in line with the reality on the ground (Mbachu, 2025; National Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

While successive governments have prioritised youth education and skills development, these initiatives have yet to make a significant dent in the high unemployment rates (This Day, 2025). Analysts argue that broader socio-economic and political challenges continue to limit the full potential of Nigeria's youth, without which such interventions can only ever have a limited impact (Idike & Eme).

The Afrobarometer Round 10 survey (2024) offers some insights into the situation of Nigeria's youth. Findings show that compared to older generations, Nigerians aged 18-35 have advanced only slightly in educational attainment and face somewhat higher rates of unemployment. Employment outranks other needs as a priority for additional government investment to help young people, Nigerians of all ages say. If given a choice of job sectors, a majority of youth say they would start their own businesses.

Job creation also ranks high among the most important problems that youth want their government to tackle, surpassed only by the increasing cost of living. But on these and other priority issues, most young citizens see their government as failing.

A majority of youth say they have considered emigrating, primarily in search of better work opportunities and relief from economic hardship.

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 Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians in June-July 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

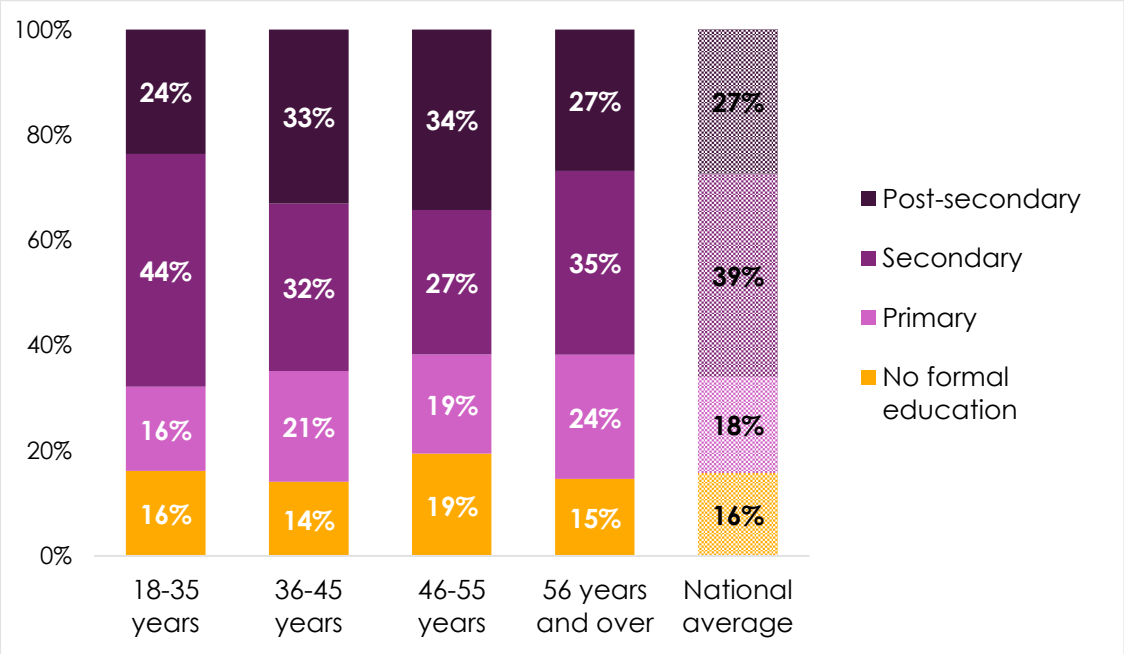
- More than two-thirds (68%) of Nigerian youth (aged 18-35) have secondary or post-secondary education, a modest increase compared to older cohorts (62%-65%).
- Almost a quarter (23%) of youth say they are unemployed and looking for work, compared to 17%-21% of middle-aged respondents.
    - Aside from the country's general economic situation and scarcity of jobs, young people cite a lack of experience required by employers, inadequate training or preparation, and youth unwillingness to work certain jobs as their most important barriers to employment.
    - Given their choice of jobs, a majority (60%) of Nigerian youth would like to start their own businesses. Next in popularity is working for the government or public sector (19%).
    - If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help youth, job creation would be young people's top priority for greater investment, followed by access to business loans, job training, and education.
- The increasing cost of living is the most important problem that young Nigerians say their government must address, followed by unemployment, crime and security, poverty, management of the economy, and electricity.
- On these priority issues, youth offer overwhelmingly negative reviews of their government's performance. On their top two priorities, inflation control and job creation, only 2% and 6% of youth, respectively, say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well."
- An overwhelming majority of young people see their country as moving in "the wrong direction" (91%) and describe both the country's economic condition (86%) and their personal living conditions (72%) as "fairly bad" or "very bad."
    - Not quite half (46%) of youth think things will get better during the coming year.
- Six in 10 Nigerian youth (60%) say they have considered emigrating, most to find jobs or escape economic hardship. The share of youth who say they have given "a lot" of thought to leaving the country has tripled since 2017, from 12% to 37%.

Level of education

More than two-thirds of Nigerian youth (aged 18-35) have secondary (44%) or post-secondary (24%) education (Figure 1). About one in six (16%) report primary school as their highest attainment level, and the same proportion lack formal education altogether (16%).

The share of respondents with at least secondary schooling is marginally larger among youth (68%) than among older cohorts (62%-65%), reflecting only modest generational gains in access to education.

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



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

Employment status

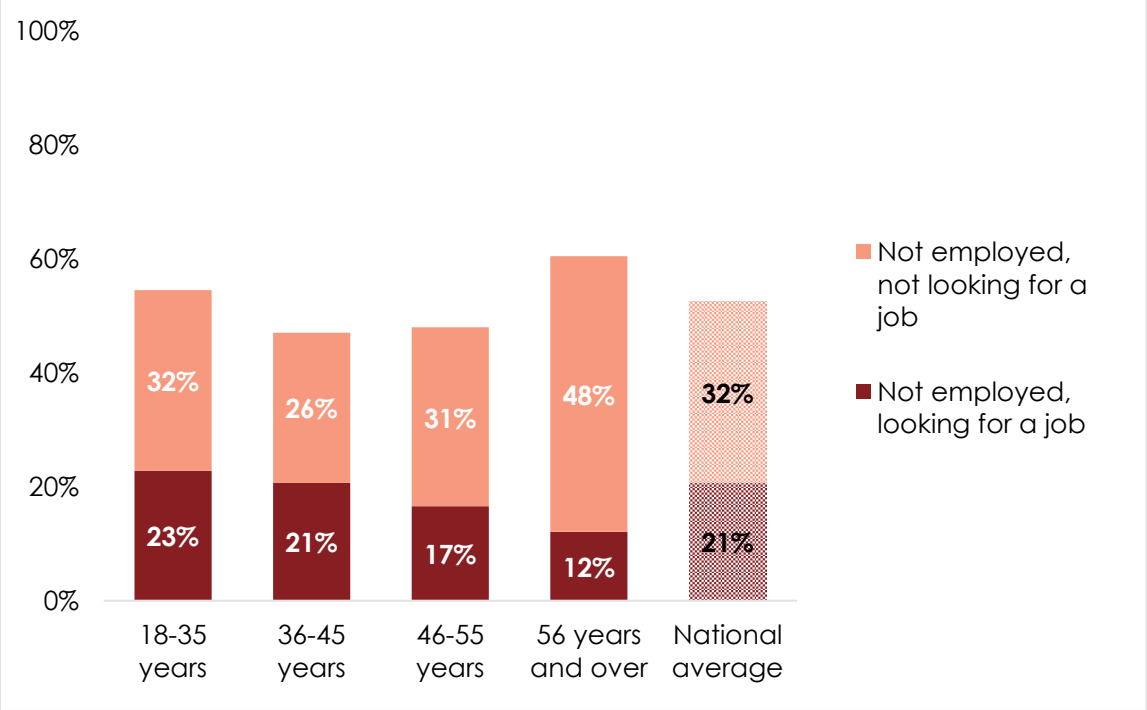
Almost a quarter (23%) of young respondents say they are unemployed and are actively looking for work, compared to 17%-21% of middle-aged respondents (Figure 2). Another third (32%) of youth are not employed and not looking for a job, while almost half report working full time (35%) or part time (10%).

The share of unemployed youth looking for work includes 3% who identify as students, while the group without jobs and not actively looking for work includes 8% who say they are students (Figure 3).

Youth unemployment is a complex problem linked to a multitude of economic factors. But aside from the country's general economic situation, are there other barriers to young people finding jobs?

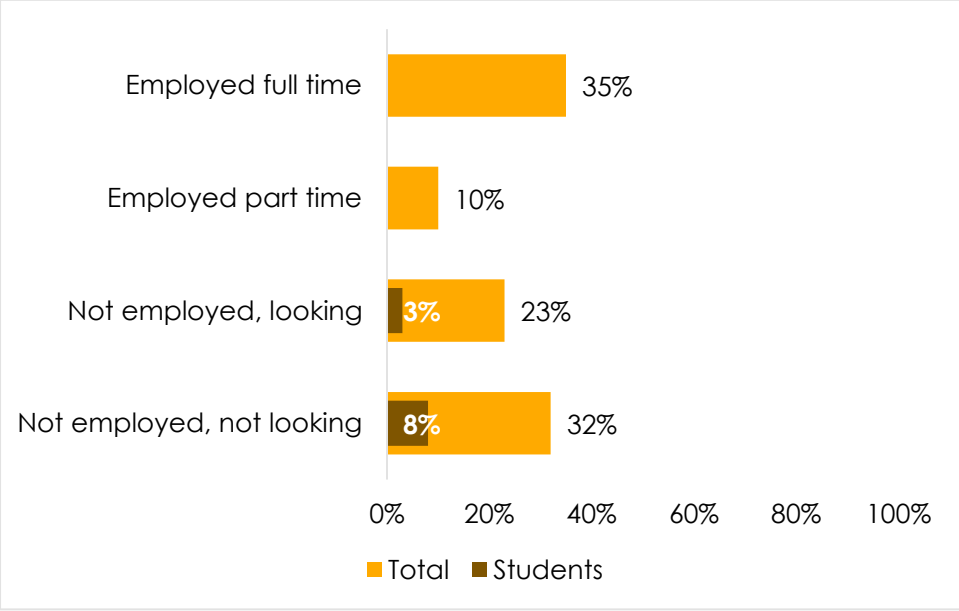
Nigerian youth are most likely to see a lack of experience required by employers as a barrier to youth employment (cited by 27% of young respondents) (Figure 4). Others mention a lack of adequate training or preparation (19%); an unwillingness among youth to work certain kinds of jobs, such as in agriculture (15%); a lack of entrepreneurial skills or motivation (11%); and a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (11%).

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

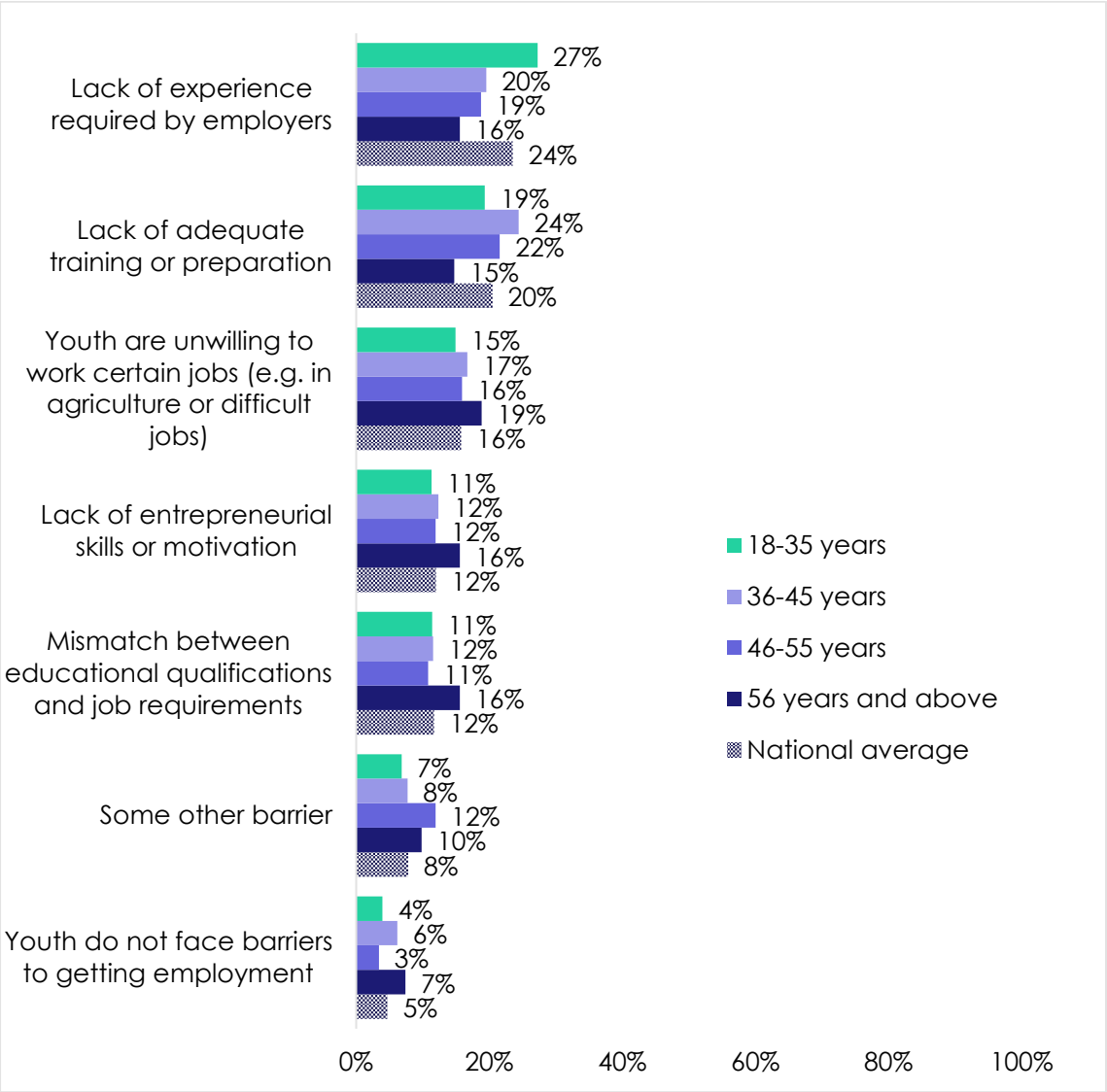


Respondents were asked:

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 | Nigeria | 2024



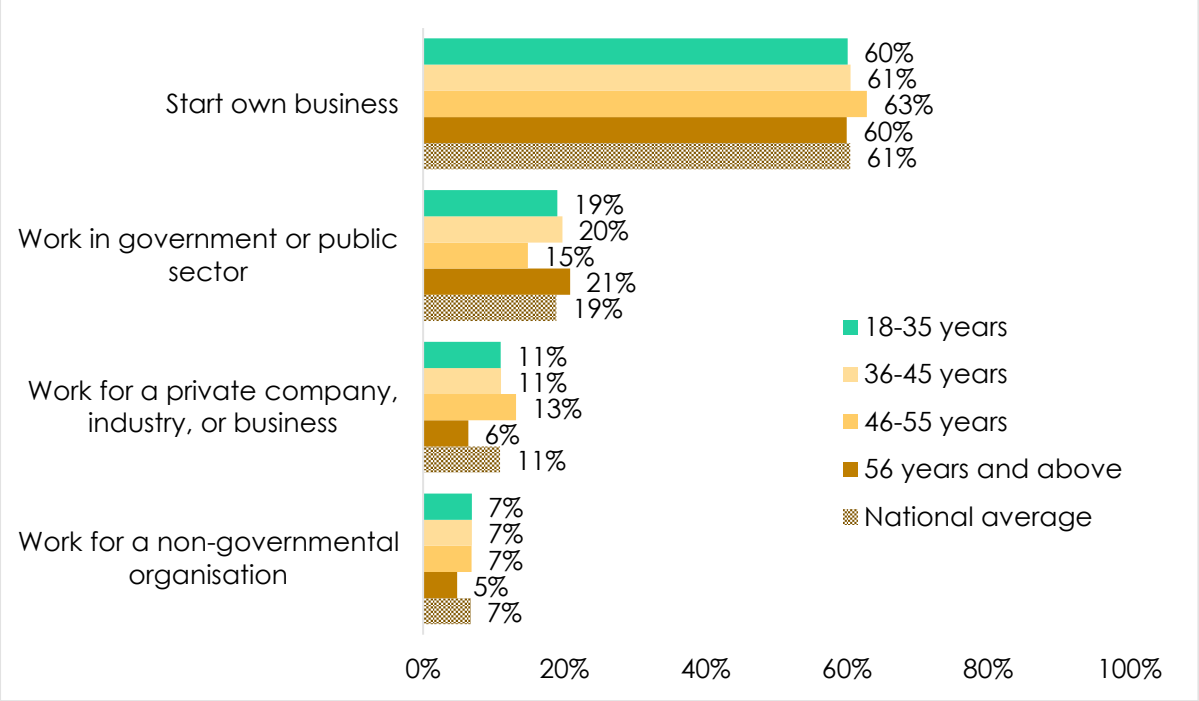
Respondents were asked: *Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, which of the following factors, if any, would you say is the main barrier to young people getting jobs and entering the workforce?*

If young Nigerians could choose their own jobs, the most popular route would be to start their own businesses, cited by 60% of youth (Figure 5). Working in a government or public-sector job ranks second (19%), while fewer young people would opt for jobs in the private sector (11%) or a non-governmental organisation (7%).

Youth differ very little from their elders when it comes to professional aspirations.

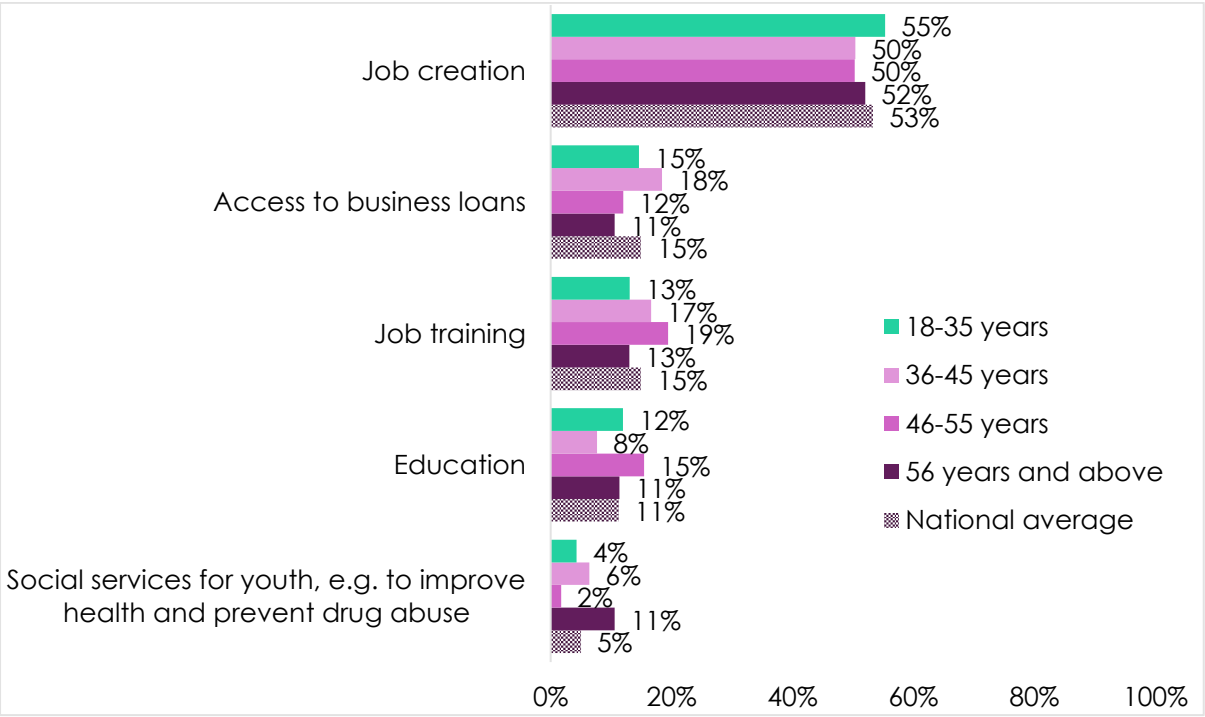
Jobs also outrank other needs on a list of priorities for additional investment if the government were able to increase its spending on programmes to help young people (Figure 6). More than half of respondents in all age groups – including 55% of young respondents – cite job creation as their top priority, followed by access to business loans, job training, and education (cited by 15%, 13%, and 12% of youth, respectively).

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



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

Figure 6: Priority for government spending to help youth | by age group | Nigeria | 2024



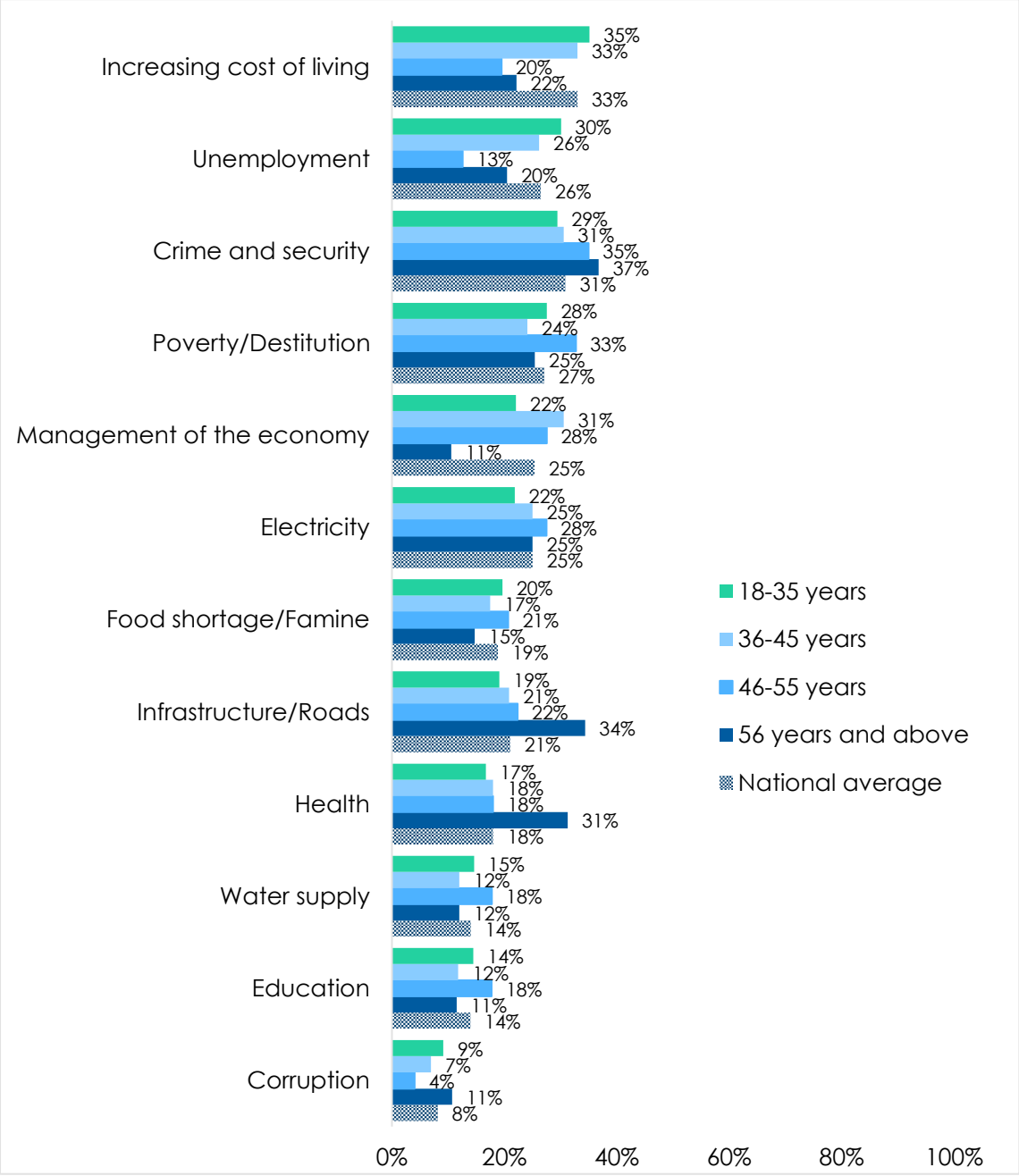
Respondents were asked: *If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?*

Youth priorities

For young Nigerians, the increasing cost of living ranks at the top of important problem that they want the government to address, cited by 35% of youth as one of their three priorities. Other issues follow close behind, including unemployment (30%), crime and security (29%), poverty (28%), management of the economy (22%), and electricity (22%) (Figure 7).

Compared to older cohorts, young Nigerians are more likely to prioritise the cost of living and unemployment and less concerned about crime/security and infrastructure/roads.

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

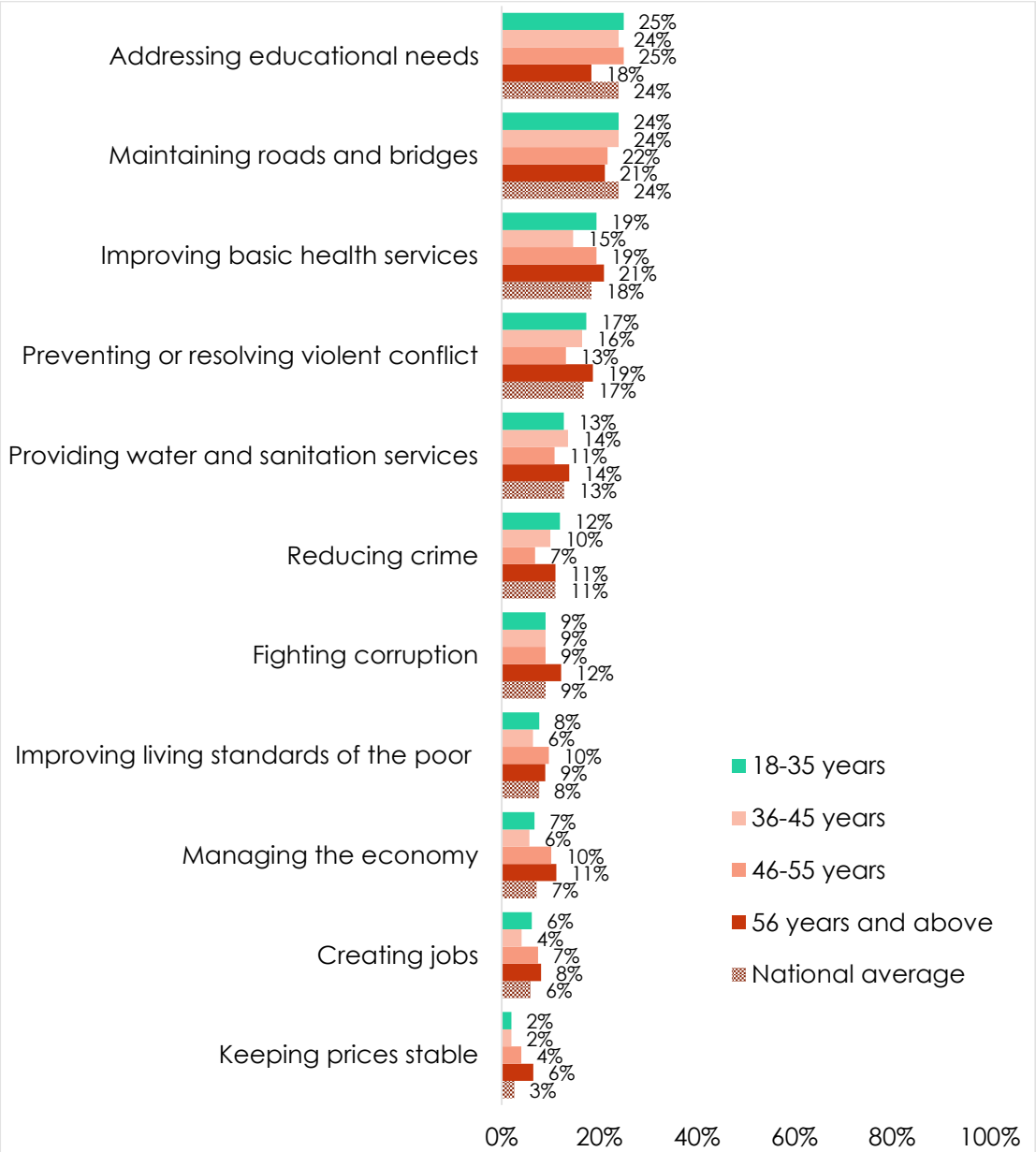
Government performance on priority issues

On issues that concern them most, young Nigerians – like their elders – offer overwhelmingly negative assessments of their government's performance (Figure 8). No more than one-fourth of young respondents say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on any of these issues.

It fares best on education (25% approval) and maintaining roads and bridges (24%). Fewer than one in 10 youth rate the government positively on fighting corruption (9%), improving living standards of the poor (8%), and managing the economy (7%).

On their top two priorities for government action, they give the government their worst ratings: 2% approval on keeping prices stable and 6% approval on creating jobs.

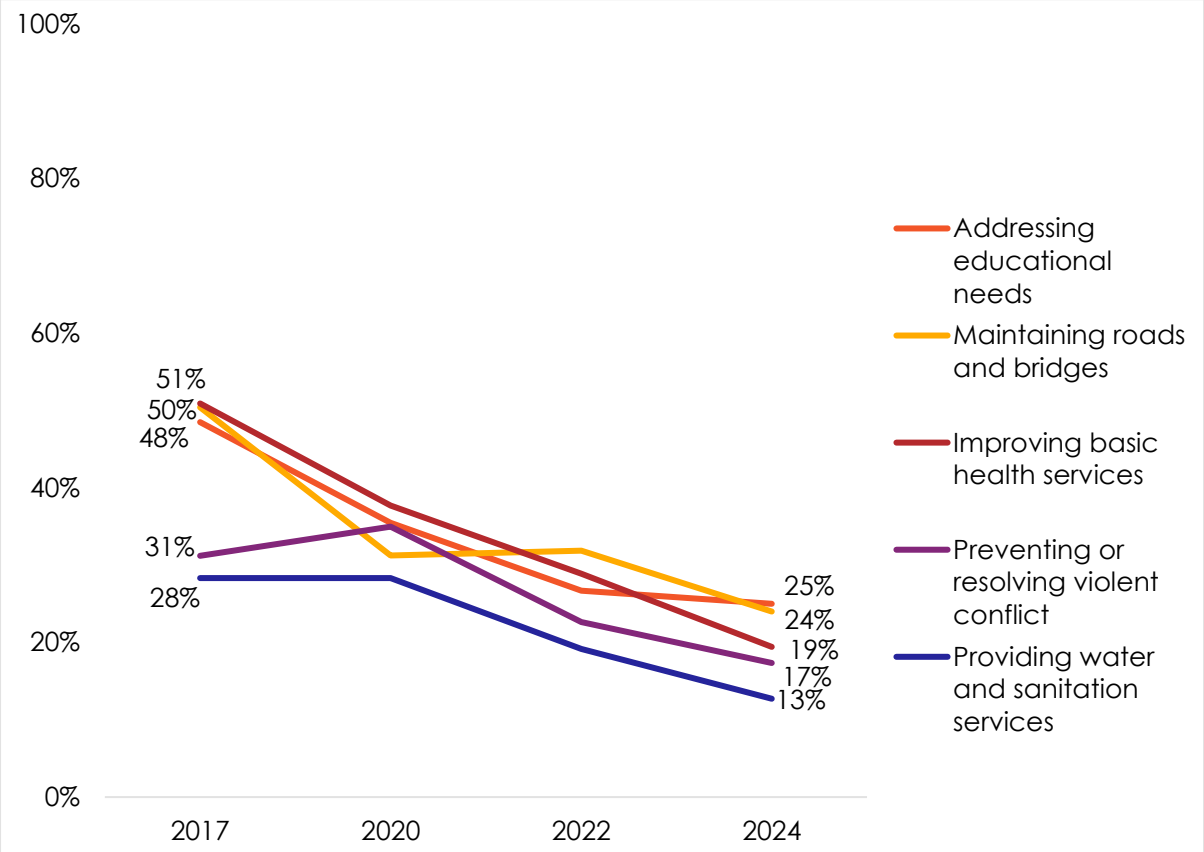
Figure 8: Government performance | by age group | Nigeria | 2024



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 few years, young people's evaluations of the government's performance on these priorities have worsened significantly. For example, approval of its efforts to improve basic health services dropped from 51% in 2017 to 19% in 2024 (Figure 9). Positive assessments have also seen major declines for maintenance of roads and bridges (-26 percentage points) and addressing educational needs (-23 points).

Figure 9: Youth approval of government performance | respondents aged 18-35 | Nigeria | 2017-2024



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")*

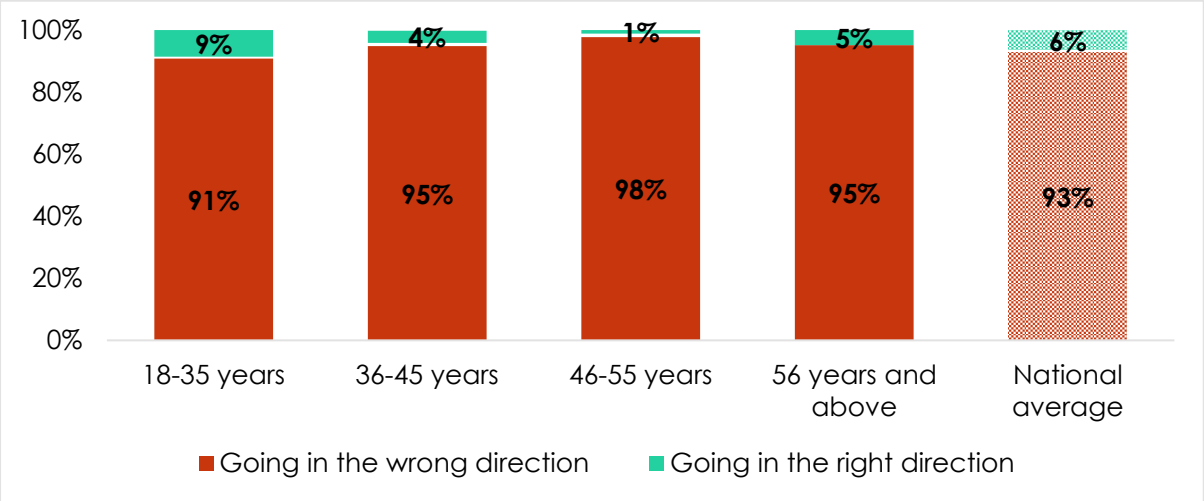
Country's overall direction and economic conditions

In line with their negative assessments of government performance, an overwhelming majority (91%) of young Nigerians see the country as going in "the wrong direction" (Figure 10). Older cohorts are even gloomier (95%-98%) in their assessments of the country's direction.

Young Nigerians are also overwhelmingly negative – though again less negative than their elders – in their assessments of the country's economic condition and their personal living conditions (Figure 11).

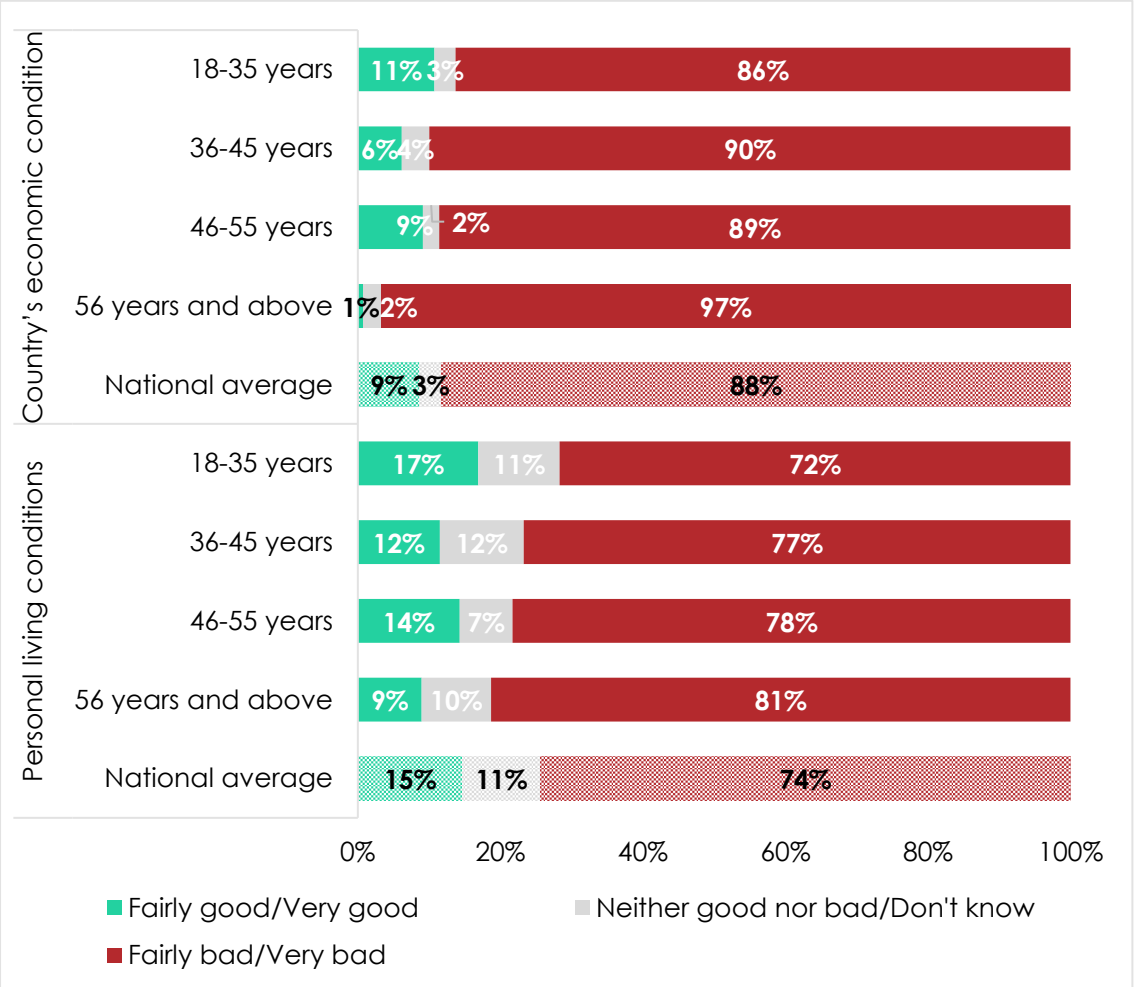
Almost nine out of 10 (86%) describe the economy as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (compared to 89%-97% among older cohorts). And more than seven in 10 youth (72%) say their personal living conditions are bad (compared to 77%-81% of older groups).

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



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

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

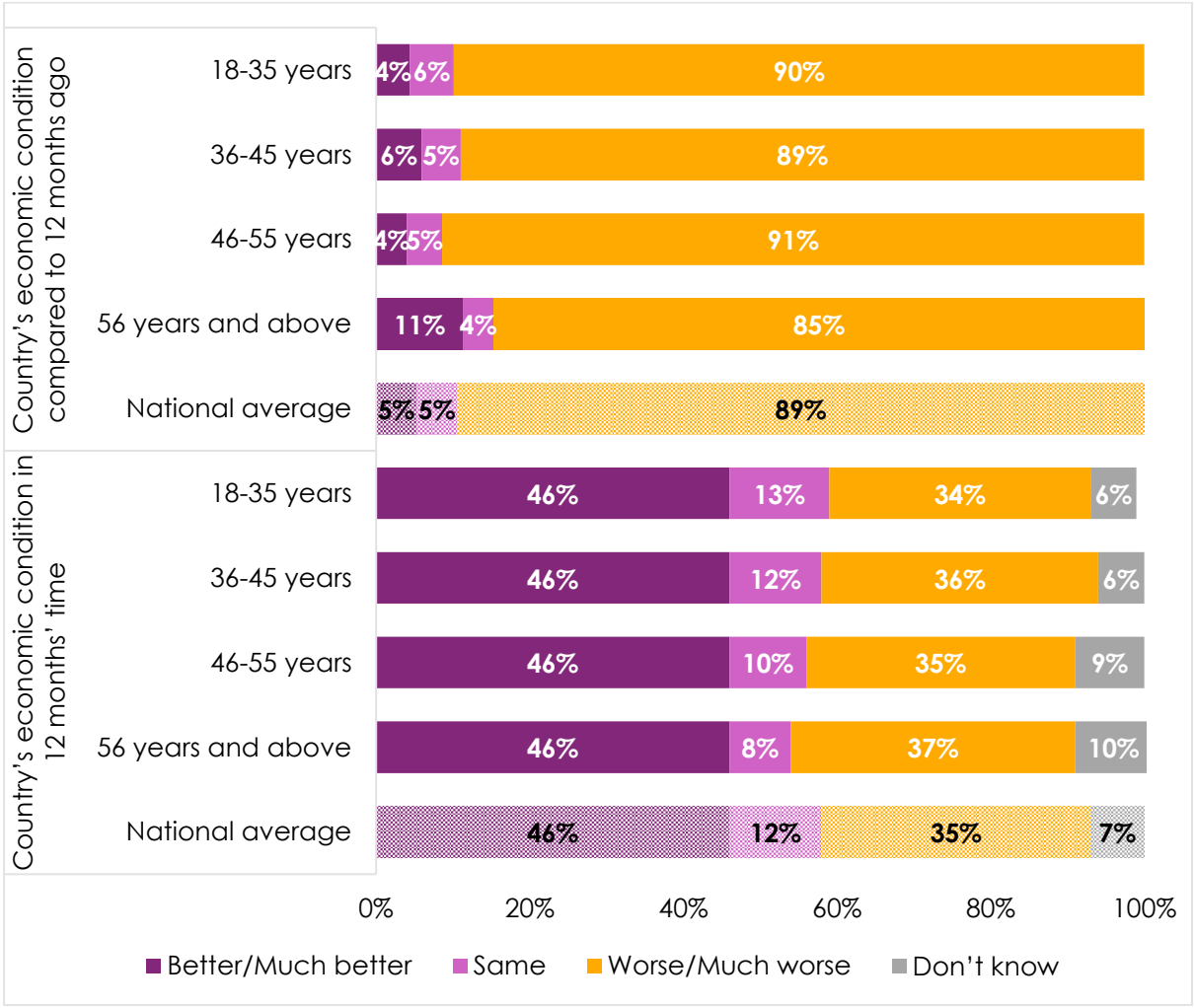


Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?*

Not surprisingly, only 4% of young people believe that the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, while 90% say it has worsened (Figure 12).

And fewer than half (46%) expect things to improve during the coming 12 months, matching other age groups in their level of optimism.

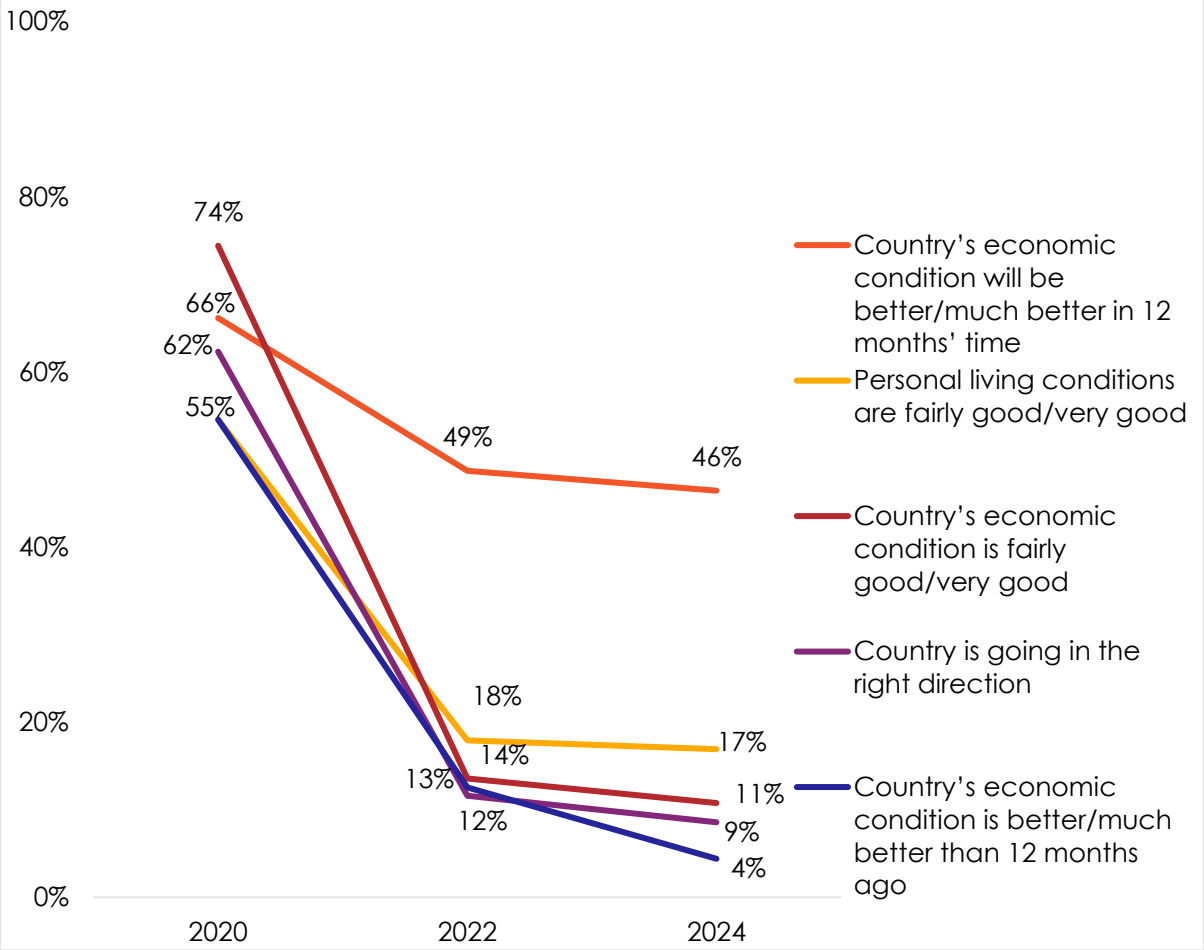
Figure 12: Country's economic condition compared to 12 months ago and in 12 months' time | by age group | Nigeria | 2024



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?*

Since 2020, young Nigerians' evaluations of the country's overall direction and economic well-being have become significantly less positive. Approval has declined by 63 percentage points for the country's economic condition, 54 points for the country's direction, 51 points for perceptions of improvement over the previous year, 38 points for personal living conditions, and 20 points for expectations that things will get better over the next 12 months (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Economic assessments | respondents aged 18-35 | Nigeria | 2020-2024



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?

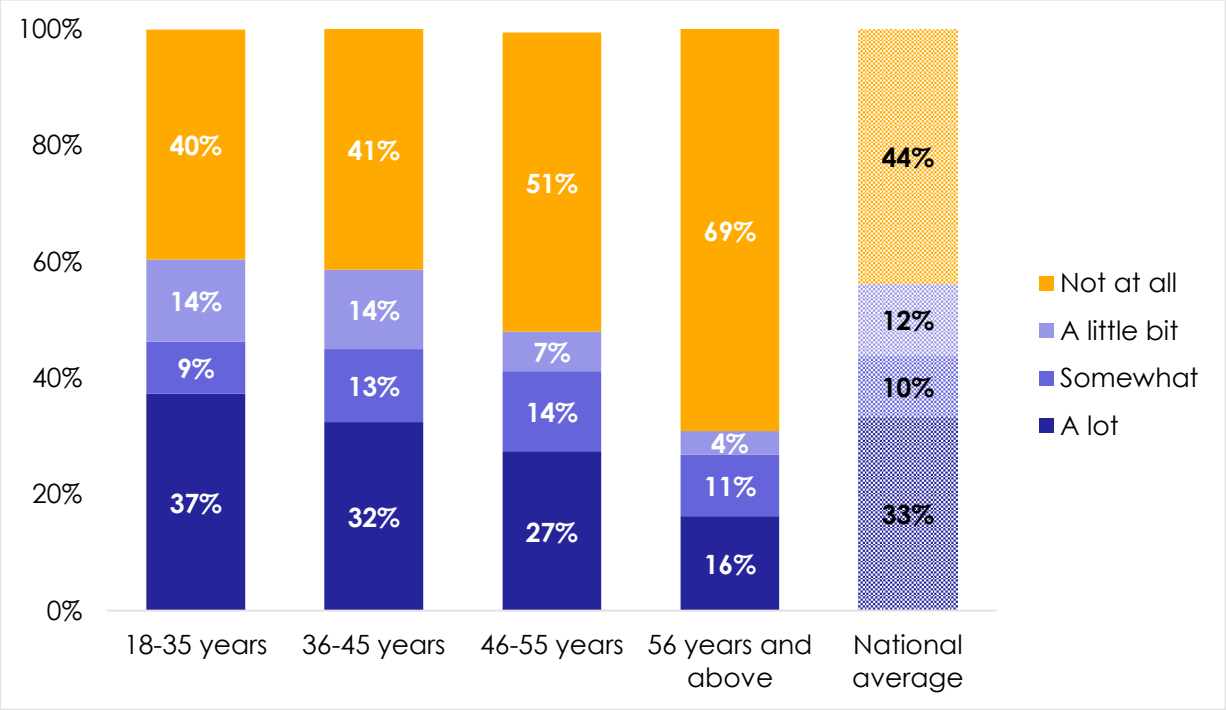
Emigration

Against this background of growing dissatisfaction, six in 10 young Nigerians (60%) say they have considered moving to another country to live, including 37% who say they have given emigration "a lot" of thought (Figure 14).

The proportion of potential emigrants is similar among 36- to 45-year-olds (59%) and somewhat lower among older citizens (31%-48%).

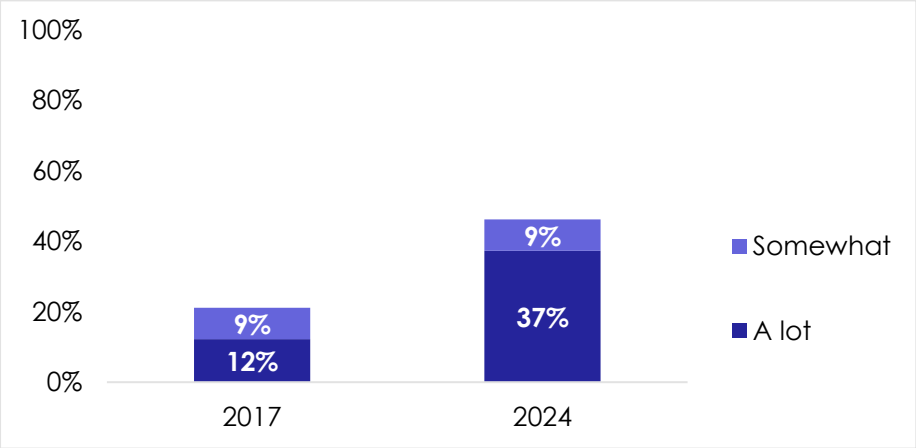
Compared to 2017 survey findings, the share of youth who say they have given "a lot" of thought to emigrating has tripled, from 12% to 37% (Figure 15).

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



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

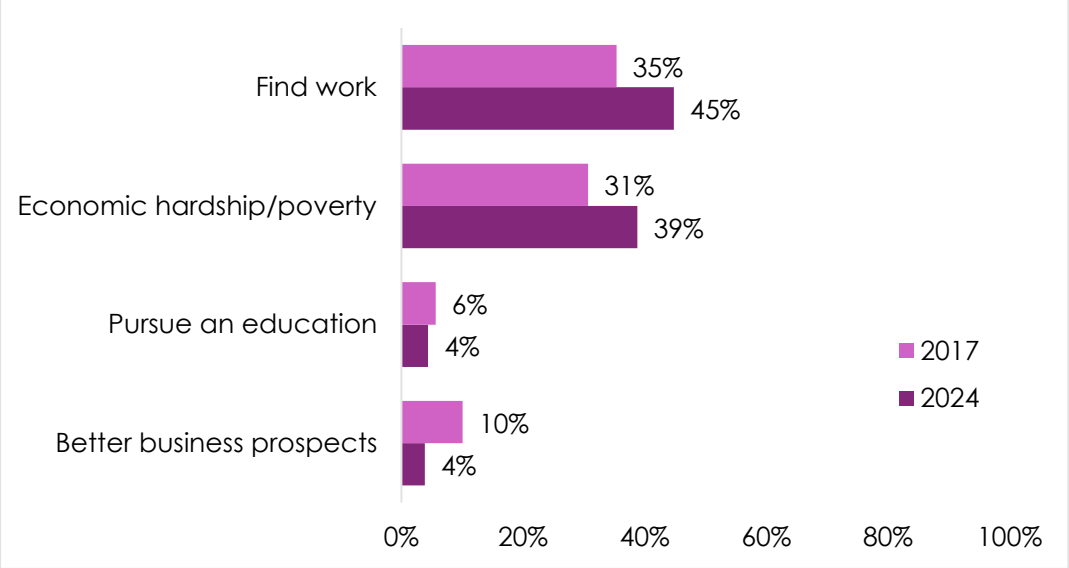
Figure 15: Considered emigrating | respondents aged 18-35 | Nigeria | 2017-2024



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

Among those who have given emigration at least "a little bit" of thought, economic reasons dominate, led by the hope of finding better job opportunities (45%) and escaping economic hardship or poverty (39%) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Reasons for considering emigration | respondents aged 18-35 | Nigeria | 2017-2024



Respondents who have considered emigrating 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 Nigeria? (Respondents who have not considered emigrating are excluded.)*

Conclusion

Survey findings show that many young Nigerians remain unemployed or underemployed, with inadequate preparation for limited opportunities. A majority would like to start their own businesses, and they clearly prioritise job creation, access to business loans, and job training as key areas for government investment.

Youth are increasingly frustrated with economic conditions and the government's performance on their most important problems, particularly the increasing cost of living and unemployment. While some remain hopeful about the future, many are looking beyond Nigeria's borders for better prospects. Addressing the economic challenges facing young people will be critical to unlocking the potential of Nigeria's most populous age group and restoring their confidence in the country's future.

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Raphael Mbaegbu is the head of social research and Afrobarometer project manager for NOIPolls, the Afrobarometer national partner in Nigeria. Email: rmbaegbu@noi-polls.com.

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