



Dispatch No. 1034 | 25 August 2025

Amid worsening droughts and crop failure, Zambians call for collective climate action

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1034 | Edward Chibwili

Summary

Zambia is highly vulnerable to climate change, manifesting through increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and rising temperatures, which pose significant threats to food security, electricity supply, wildlife, human health, livelihoods, and the economy (African Climate Foundation, 2023; Chibwili, 2023a, 2023b; Ministry of Green Economy and Climate Change, 2023). According to the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative's (2023) country index, out of 187 countries, Zambia ranks 59th in vulnerability and 137th in readiness to act against climate change.

On 29 February 2024, President Hakainde Hichilema declared a national disaster after prolonged drought devastated the agriculture sector, affecting more than 1 million families. The disaster exacerbated the effects of an earlier dry spell and deadly flooding – described as Zambia's worst in half a century – in 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2024; Chibwili, 2023a).

The country's heavy reliance on hydroelectric power and rainfed agriculture makes it particularly vulnerable to climate shocks, threatening food security and livelihoods, water availability, electricity supply, and economic development (Al Jazeera, 2024; Teschemacher, Ng'ombe, Fajardo-Steinhäuser, & Wani, 2023).

To address these challenges, the government has committed itself to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol and has integrated climate-change interventions in its Vision 2030 and successive five-year national development plans and programmes. The Ministry of Green Economy and Climate Change's (2023) National Adaptation Plan, supported by the Green Climate Fund, seeks to strengthen the country's climate resilience by promoting climate-resilient agriculture, improving water management, and undertaking other disaster risk-reduction measures.

A special question module in Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey (2024) explores Zambians' experiences of changing weather patterns and their awareness of and attitudes toward climate change.

Findings show that overwhelming majorities of citizens report worsening drought and crop failure in their region. One-third of respondents report having changed their water source or water-consumption patterns in response to these developments.

Three-fifths of Zambians have heard of climate change. Among those familiar with the concept, large majorities blame it on human activity, say it is making life worse, and call for urgent action by their government and developed countries.

Among all citizens, at least seven in 10 express support for putting pressure on developed countries to provide climate aid to Zambia, for government investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, and for funding for wind and solar energy.

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. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens in July 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 standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- More than eight in 10 Zambians say that crop failure (85%) and droughts (82%) have grown more severe in their area over the past 10 years.
- One-fourth or more report having to adjust their lives in response to changing weather patterns by using less water or changing water sources (34%), changing the types of crops they plant or the food they eat (30%), reducing or rescheduling outdoor work (29%), and reducing their livestock holdings or changing grazing patterns (25%), while 14% say they have moved to a different place.
 - Respondents who experience high lived poverty are more likely than their better-off counterparts to report having relocated, changed their patterns of water usage, and altered their outdoor working hours.
- Six in 10 citizens (59%) have heard of climate change. Among those who are familiar with the concept:
 - An overwhelming majority (92%) say it is making life in Zambia worse, up by 35 percentage points since 2017 (57%).
 - Three-fourths blame climate change on human activity (56%) or a combination of human activity and natural processes (18%).
 - Almost seven in 10 (68%) say the government must take immediate action to limit climate change, "even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy." Similar proportions call for developed countries to take climate action (72%) and to provide climate aid to Zambia (71%).
 - Zambians are most likely to see themselves (38%) and their government (34%) as bearing primary responsibility for limiting climate change.
- Across all respondents, strong majorities express support for policies to respond to changes in weather patterns, including putting pressure on developed countries for aid (77%), investing in climate-resilient infrastructure (72%), and investing in wind and solar technologies (70%).

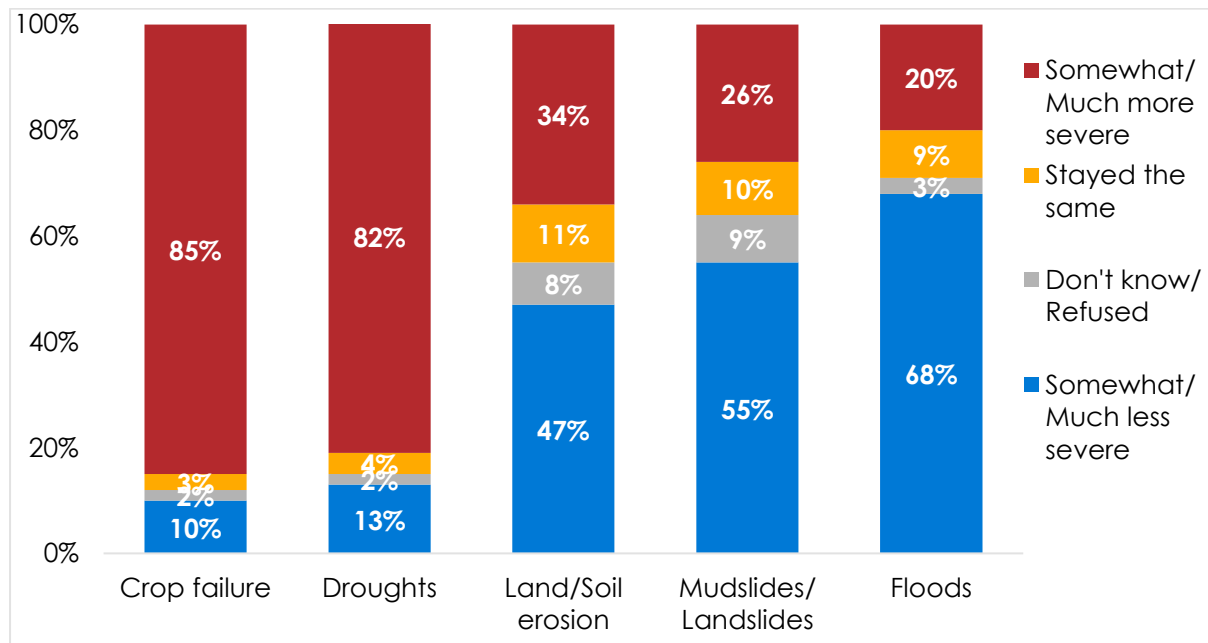
Changes in weather conditions and their consequences

Afrobarometer asked survey respondents about their experiences, if any, with changing weather conditions, the effects of such changes, and whether they have taken steps in response to changes in weather patterns.

More than eight in 10 Zambians say that crop failure (85%) and droughts (82%) have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” in their area over the past 10 years (Figure 1). Minorities say mudslides or landslides (34%), soil erosion (26%), and floods (20%) have intensified.

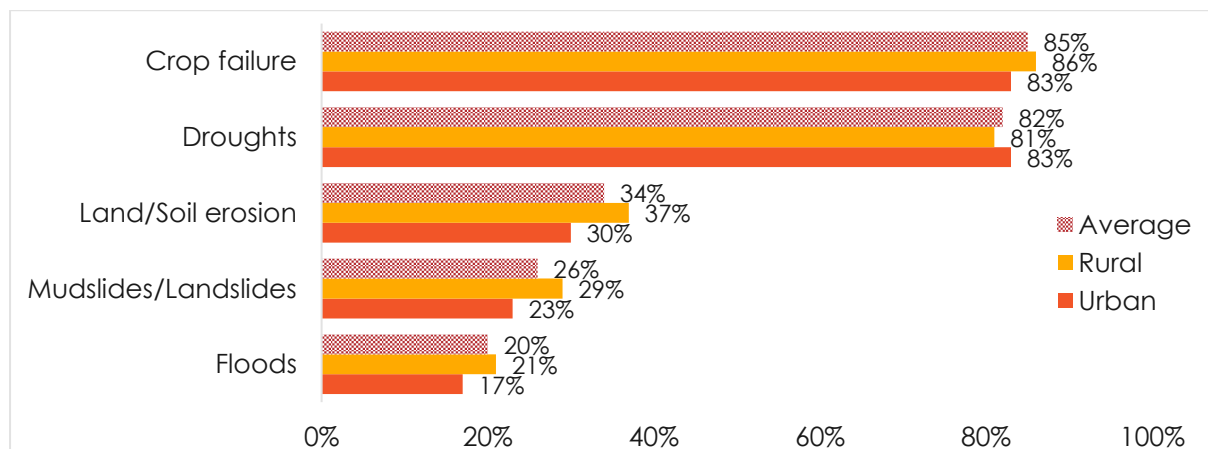
Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to report worsening soil erosion (37% vs. 30%), landslides (29% vs. 23%), and floods (21% vs. 17%) (Figure 2). There are few differences in reports of increasing drought and crop failure across the urban-rural divide.

Figure 1: Severity of natural disasters | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live: Drought? Flooding? Crop failure? Mudslides or landslides? Land or soil erosion? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?

Figure 2: Increased severity of natural disasters | by urban-rural location | Zambia | 2024



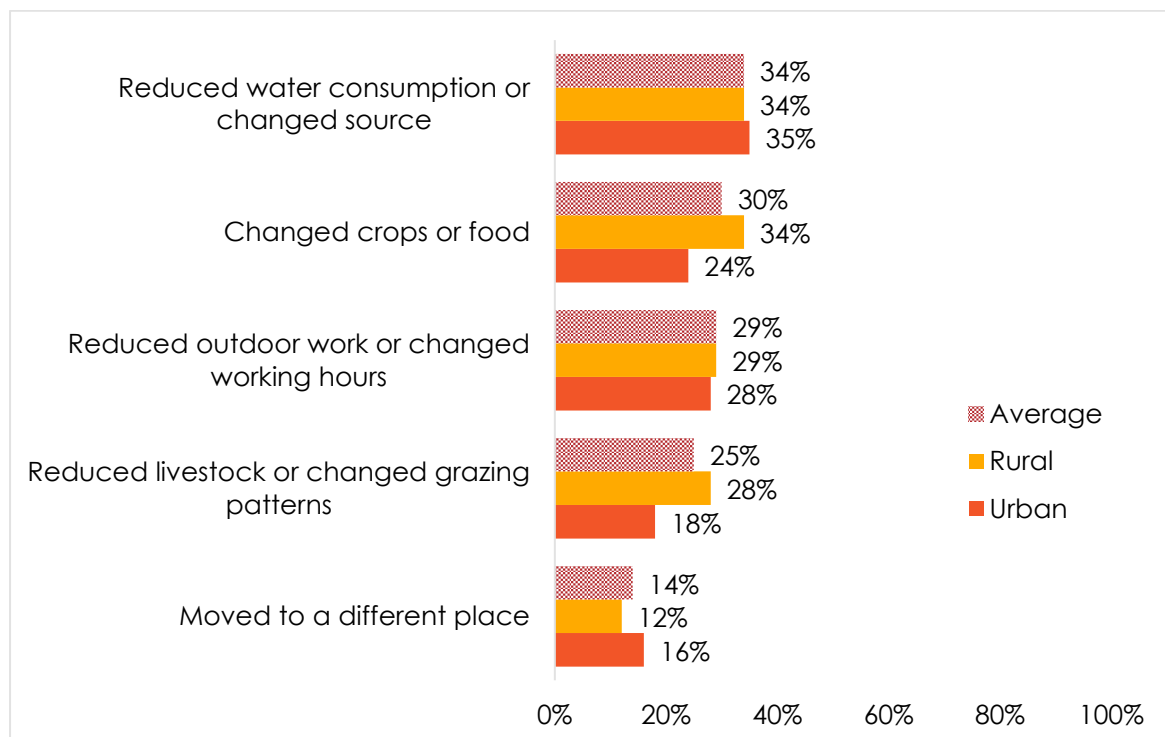
Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live: Drought? Flooding? Crop failure? Mudslides or landslides? Land or soil erosion? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same? (% who say “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe”)

In significant numbers, Zambians say they have taken various steps in response to changing weather patterns: One-third (34%) report using less water or changing water sources, while three in 10 report changing the types of crops they plant or the foods they eat (30%) and reducing or changing the hours they work outdoors (29%) (Figure 3). More than one in 10 (14%) say they relocated.

Among respondents with livestock, 25% say they reduced their livestock holdings or changed grazing patterns to cope with climatic changes.

Rural residents are 10 percentage points more likely than their urban counterparts to have altered crop production (34% vs. 24%) or livestock farming (28% vs. 18%), while urbanites are somewhat more likely to have moved elsewhere (16% vs. 12%).

Figure 3: Actions taken in response to changing weather patterns
 | by urban-rural location | Zambia | 2024

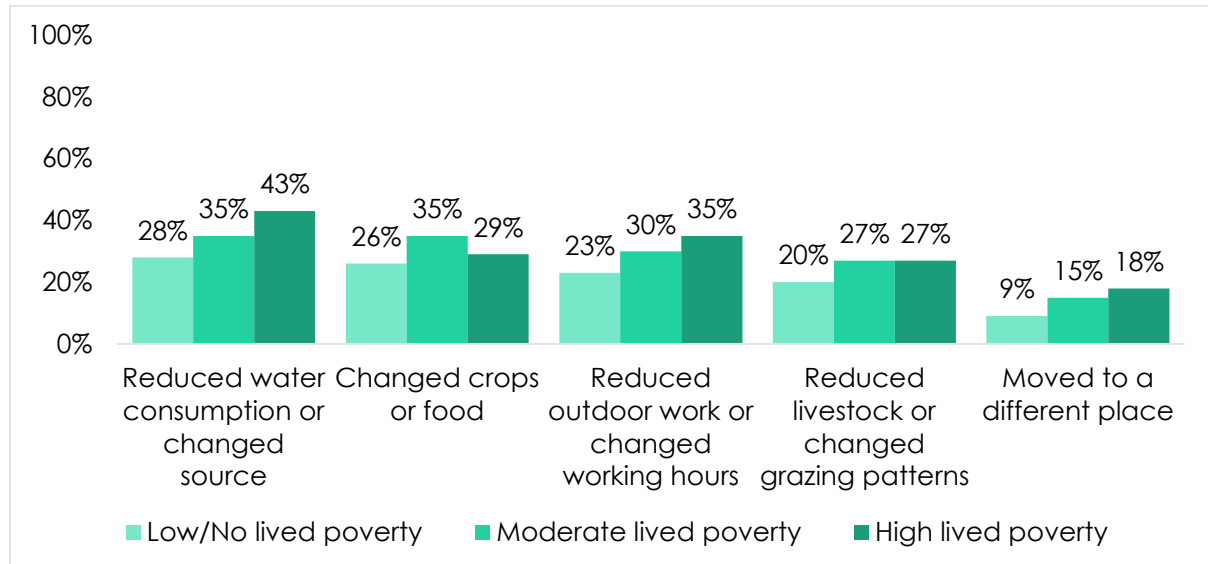


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you or your family have had to do any of the following in the past five years. (% who say "yes")

Adjustments in water use, outdoor work habits, and physical residence are more common among the very poor¹ than their economically more advantaged compatriots (Figure 4).

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

Figure 4: Actions taken in response to changing weather patterns | by lived poverty | Zambia | 2024

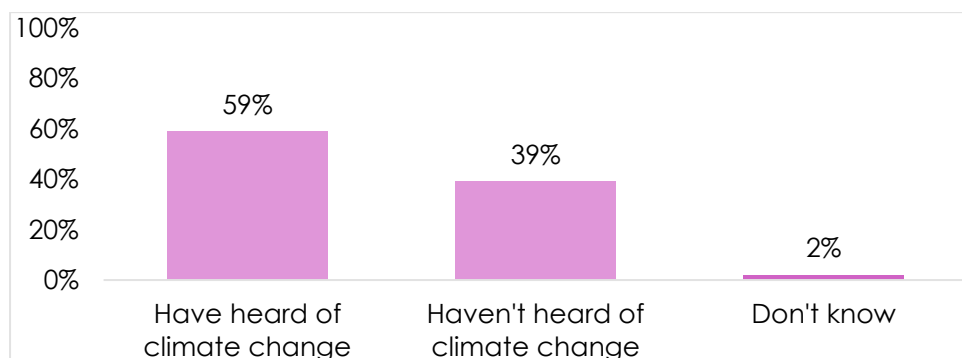


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you or your family have had to do any of the following in the past five years. (% who say “yes”)

Awareness of climate change

While most respondents provide an opinion on changes in the weather, not all Zambians know about climate change: Three-fifths (59%) say they have heard of the concept, while 39% say they have not (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | Zambia | 2024

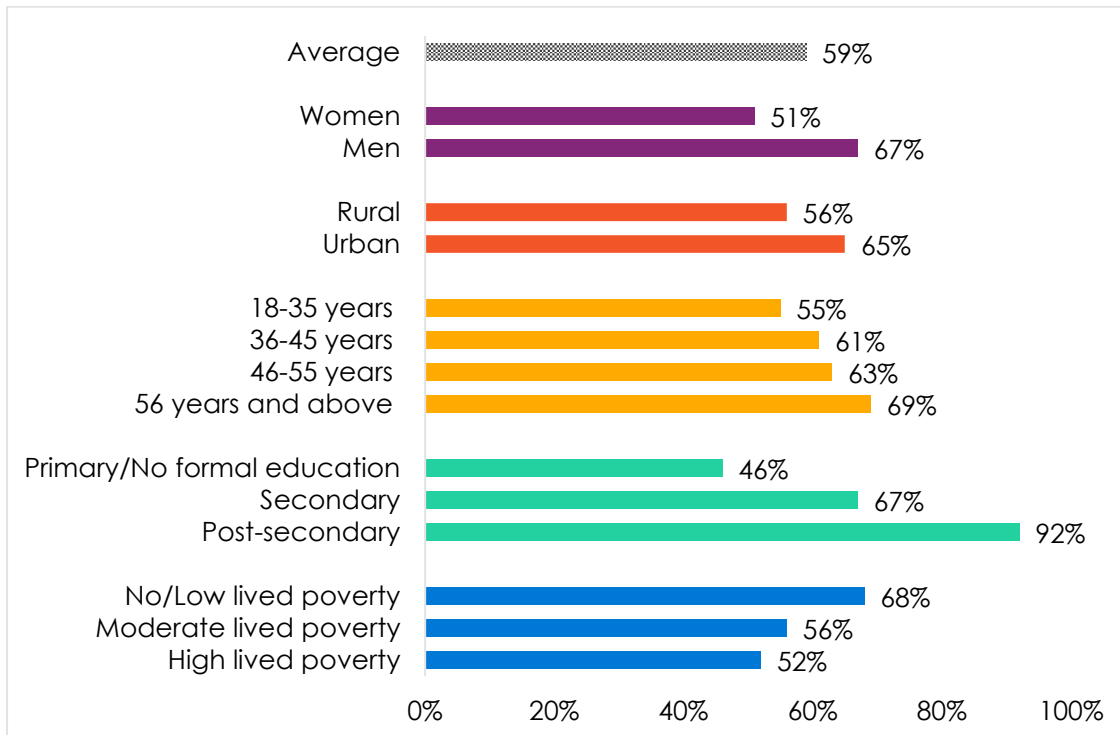


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet?

As might be expected, awareness of climate change increases sharply with respondents' education level, ranging from fewer than half among those with no formal schooling or primary schooling only (46%) to twice that among those with post-secondary qualifications (92%) (Figure 6). Interestingly, awareness also rises with age, from 55% among the youth to 69% of the elderly.

Economically better-off citizens are more familiar with the concept than those experiencing high lived poverty (68% vs. 52%), while awareness is higher among men than women (67% vs. 51%) and in cities than in rural areas (65% vs. 56%).

Figure 6: Awareness of climate change | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024

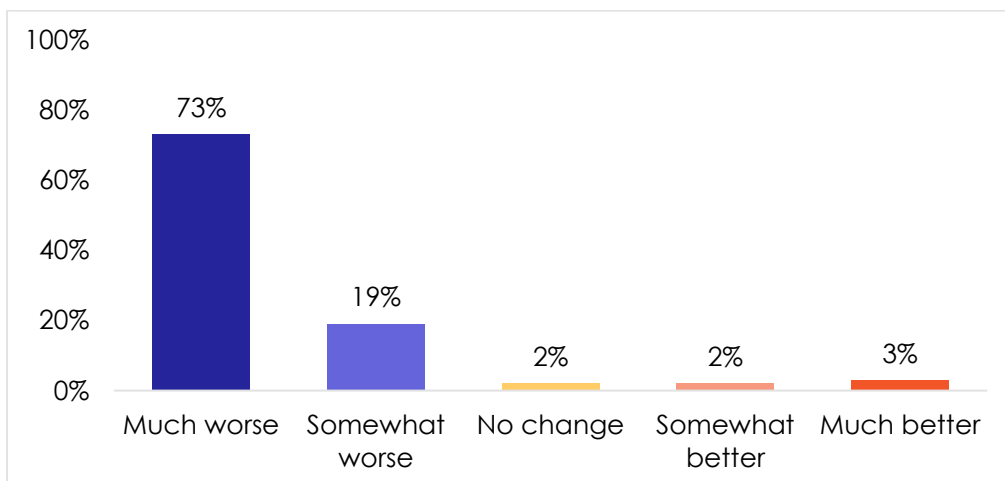


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Effects of climate change

Among respondents who have heard of climate change, more than nine in 10 (92%) think it is making life in Zambia worse, including 73% who say it is making life "much worse" (Figure 7).

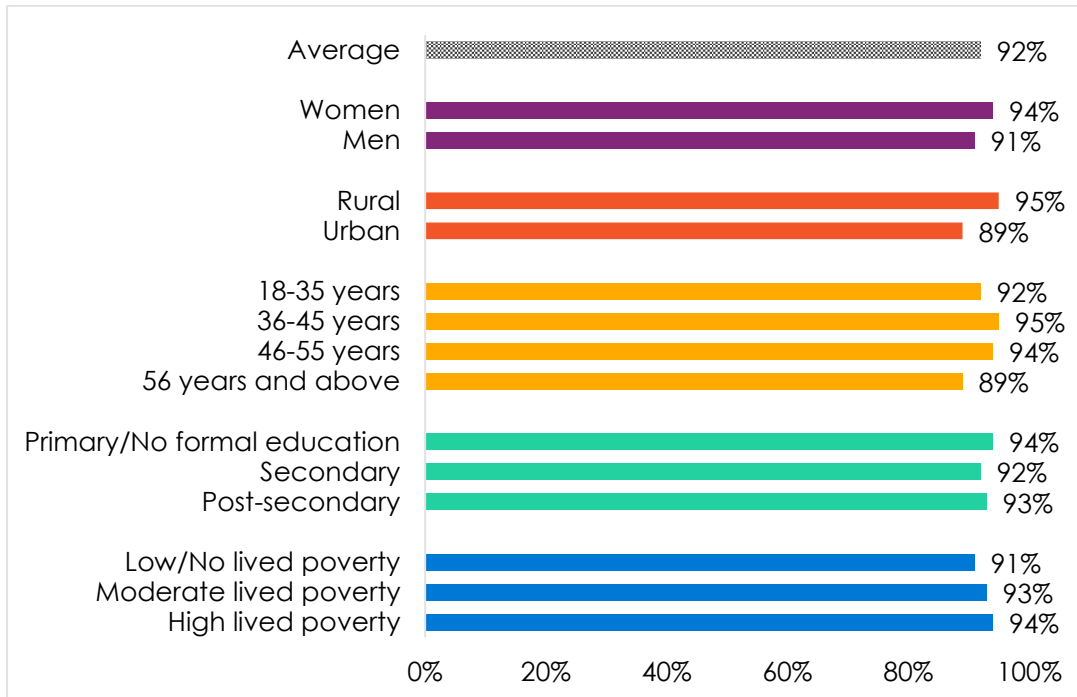
Figure 7: Is climate change making life worse or better? | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Zambia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

Perceptions of the negative impact of climate change are fairly consistent across key demographic groups, though somewhat more common in rural areas than in cities (95% vs. 89%) (Figure 8).

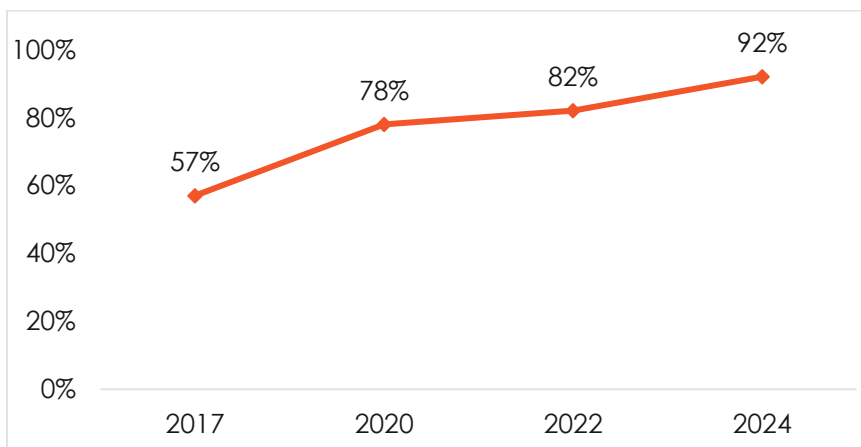
Figure 8: Climate change is making life worse | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Zambia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

The share of climate-aware citizens who see climate change as worsening the quality of life has increased by 35 percentage points since 2017 (57%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Climate change is making life worse | Zambia | 2017-2024

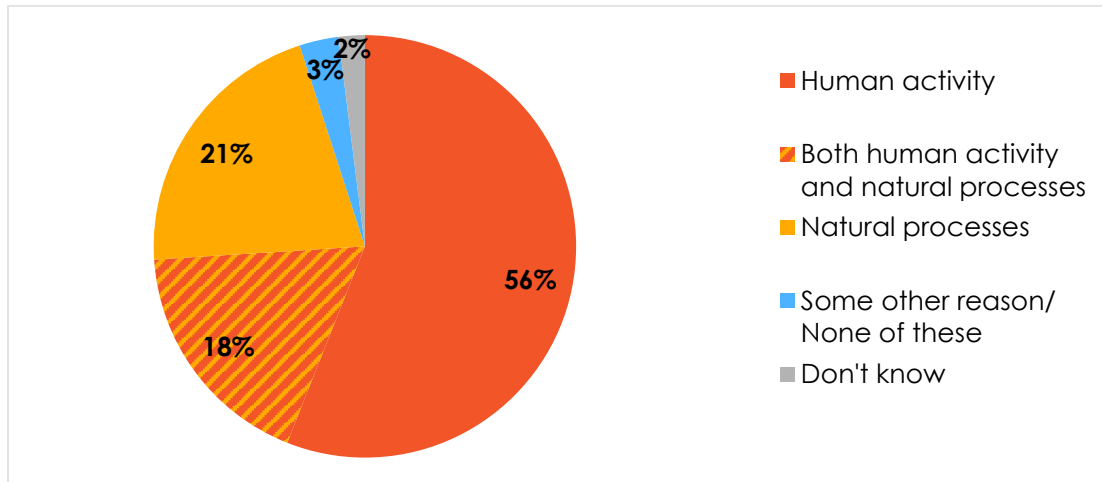


Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Zambia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

Causes of climate change

Among Zambians who are aware of climate change, more than half (56%) see human activity as primarily responsible for causing climate change (Figure 10). About two in 10 (21%) blame natural processes, while roughly the same share (18%) think climate change is caused by a combination of human activity and natural processes.

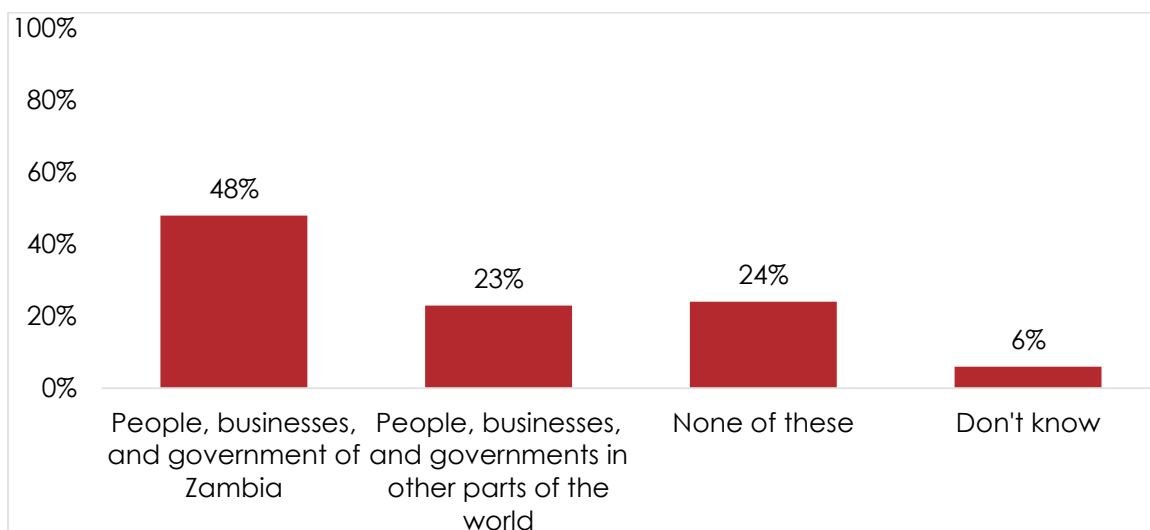
Figure 10: Main causes of climate change | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: Which of the following do you think is the main cause of climate, or haven't you heard enough to say: Human activity, like cutting down forests, or burning fuel and other activities that pollute the atmosphere? Natural weather patterns or natural processes? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

Asked which actors are most responsible for causing climate change, almost half (48%) of respondents blame the people, businesses, and government of Zambia (Figure 11). Only 23% say other parts of the world are most responsible, while 24% say it is neither of these.

Figure 11: Who is responsible for causing climate change? | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: Who do you think is most responsible for causing climate change? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

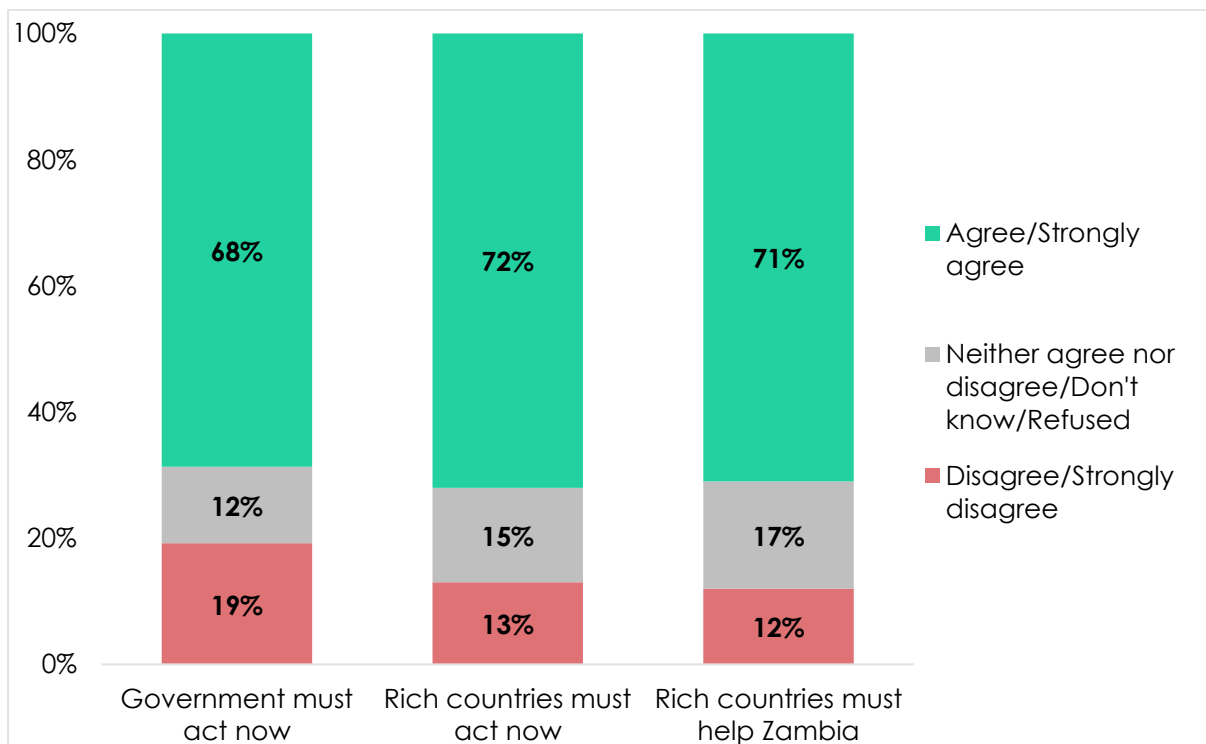
Addressing climate change

Survey findings indicate that Zambians view addressing climate change as a collective responsibility. Almost seven in 10 respondents (68%) say the government must act now to limit climate change “even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy” (Figure 12).

Similar proportions agree that rich or developed nations should take action to fight climate change “even if it is costly for those countries” (72%) and that they have an obligation to assist Zambia in responding to the crisis (71%).

Ultimately, Zambians see ordinary citizens (38%) and their own government (34%) as bearing primary responsibility for limiting climate change (Figure 13). Only small proportions of citizens identify the private sector (7%), rich countries (5%), or traditional leaders (5%) as having to shoulder the bulk of the load.

Figure 12: Who must act to limit climate change? | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

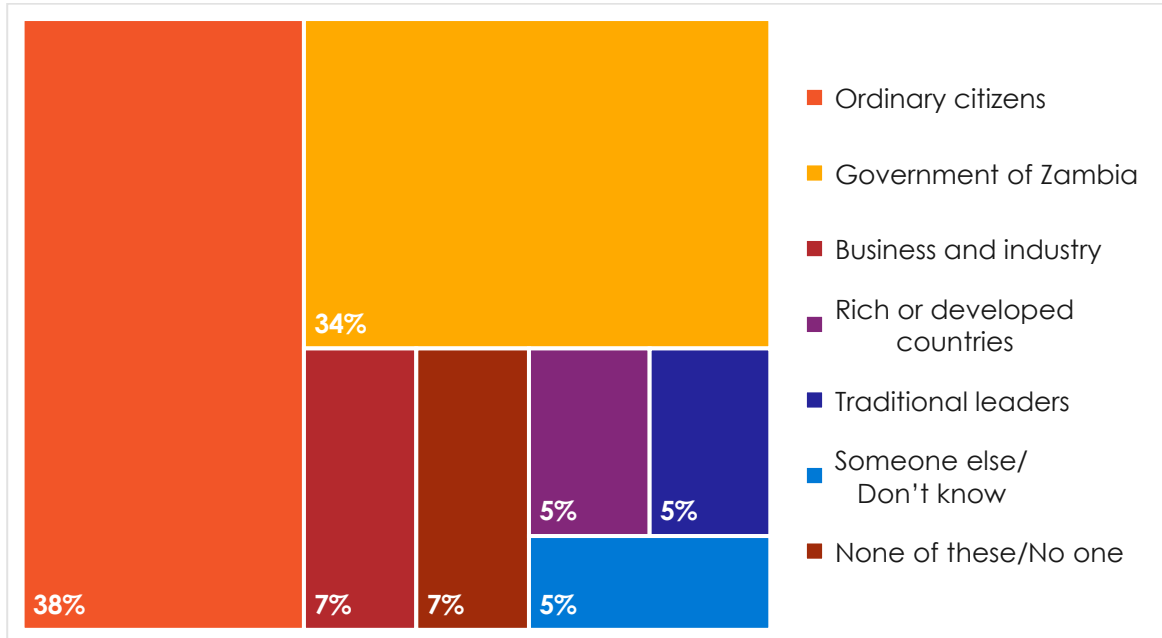
It is important for our government to take steps now to limit climate change in the future, even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy.

It is important for rich or developed countries that have done the most to cause climate change to take steps now to limit climate change in the future, even if it is costly for those countries.

Rich or developed countries that have done the most to cause climate change have an obligation to help Zambia cover the costs of adapting and responding to the negative impacts of climate change.

(Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

Figure 13: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | Zambia
 | 2024



Respondents who had heard of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who had not heard of climate change are excluded.)

Views on policies in response to changing weather patterns

Afrobarometer asked all respondents, regardless of whether they had heard of climate change, about their views on measures their government might take in response to changing weather patterns and environmental degradation.

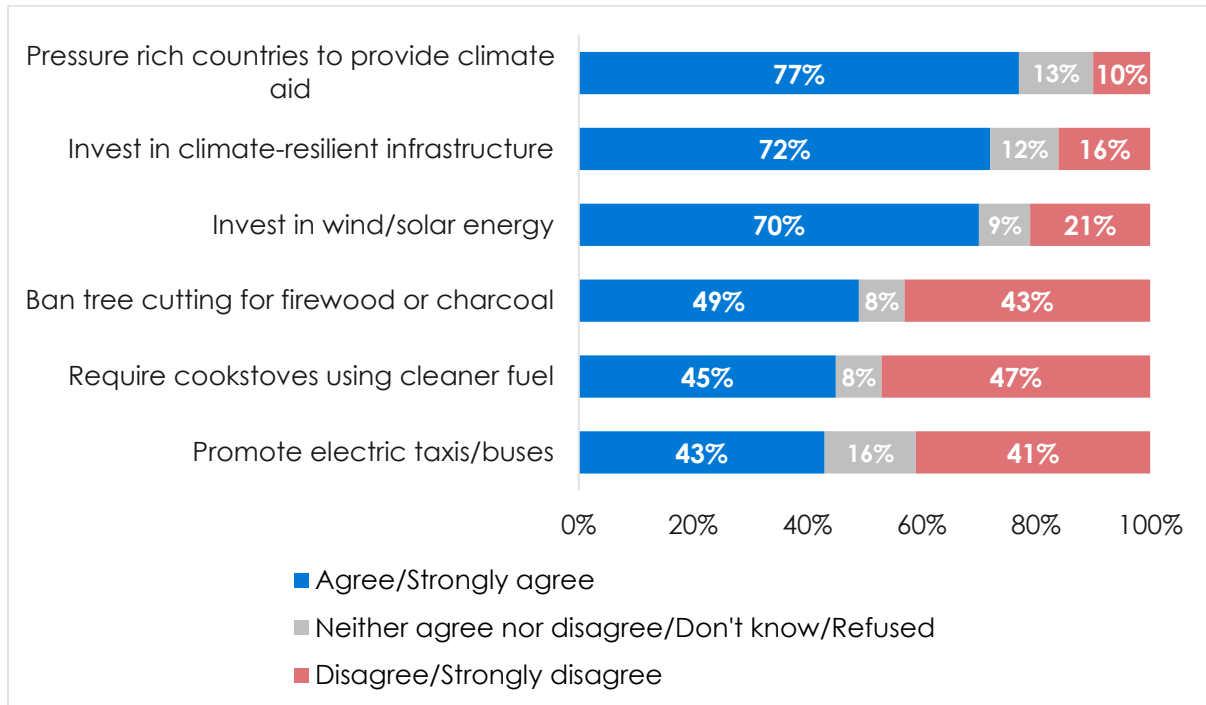
Strong majorities endorse putting pressure on rich or developed countries to fund or assist Zambians affected by changes in weather conditions (77%), investing in infrastructure to increase resilience to floods and droughts (72%), and investing in wind and solar technologies, even if it increases the price of electricity (70%) (Figure 14).

About half (49%) support making it illegal for people to cut down trees for firewood or charcoal.

Views are divided on whether the government should promote the use of taxis and buses that run on electricity if that would mean higher fares (45% for, 47% against) and whether everyone ought to switch to cookstoves that use cleaner fuels if that increases the costs of food preparation (43% for, 41% against).

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Figure 14: Views on policies in response to changing weather patterns | Zambia
 | 2024



Respondents were asked: *There are many policies that our government could adopt in order to respond to changing weather patterns and environmental degradation. Please tell me whether you disagree or agree with each of the following options:*

Make it illegal for people to cut down trees for firewood or charcoal, even if it means we have to pay more for other sources of energy.

Require everyone to switch to cookstoves that use cleaner fuels like electricity, gas, or propane, even if it means we have to pay more to cook our food.

Invest in improving infrastructure so our country can withstand more extreme floods and droughts.

Put more pressure on rich and developed countries to provide resources to help Ugandans who are affected by climate change or changes in weather conditions.

Promote the use of taxis and buses that run on electricity, even if that means we have to pay higher fares.

Invest in wind and solar technologies to generate electricity, even if it increases the price.

Conclusion

The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows that Zambians are experiencing the negative effects of climate change in the form of increasingly severe droughts and crop failure. Substantial minorities have already taken steps to adapt to changing weather patterns, such as changing water consumption, altering their crop-production methods, and reducing or adjusting the hours they work outside.

Although four in 10 citizens have not heard of climate change, those familiar with the threat are largely united in seeing it as making life worse, blaming it on human activity, and calling for urgent climate action by the Zambian government and developed nations.

Some segments of the population are less likely to have heard of climate change, including those who have primary education or lack formal schooling, women, and the very poor. Targeted interventions aimed at these groups could produce significant increases in awareness of the issue.

The government also clearly has public backing for climate action. Large majorities support investment in infrastructure and technologies that can mitigate the worst effects of climate change, while more than three-fourths want the government to pressure rich countries to provide climate assistance.

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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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