Dispatch No. 1082 | 21 November 2025

Zambians support cross-border mobility, but want fewer immigrants

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1082 | Edward Chibwili

Summary

Migration has played an important role in shaping Zambia's history and economy. The country's strategic location in Southern Africa has made it a hub for regional migration (International Organization for Migration, 2019), presenting both opportunities and challenges. Immigrants have contributed to Zambia's economy through new business ventures, skills transfer, and tax contributions, though illegal immigration can pose challenges such as competition for resources (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023; Nyamazana, Koyi, Funjika, & Chibwili, 2017).

Zambia hosts about 170,200 international migrants, including 71,000 people of working age (15 years or older) and more than 44,200 refugees and asylum seekers (Integral Human Development, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2023). Recognising the importance of migration in the country's development, the Zambian government has taken steps to manage migration effectively, with a National Migration Policy that aims to promote economic development, social cohesion, and national security. The policy highlights the need to balance and protect the rights of all stakeholders, including those fleeing persecution and conflict (Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security, 2022; United Nations Network of Migration, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019; Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2024).

Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey sought the perspectives of Zambians on migration. Findings reveal that a majority of citizens favour the free cross-border movement of people in the region to work and trade and profess no reservations about having foreign workers or refugees as neighbours. At the same time, fewer than half see immigrants as beneficial to Zambia's economy, and most want fewer foreign workers and refugees, or even none at all, to come into their country.

Meanwhile, about one in four Zambians – including a majority of those with post-secondary education and more than a third of those with full-time jobs – say they have considered emigration themselves, mostly for economic reasons.

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 between 8 and 28 July 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3

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percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- More than six in 10 Zambians (62%) say people in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders to trade or work in other countries. About one-third (35%) think the government should limit cross-border movement of people and goods.
    - A majority (57%) of respondents say that in practice, crossing international borders is "difficult" or "very difficult."
- Fewer than half (45%) of citizens view the economic impact of migrants on Zambia as beneficial.
- Majorities say they would like or wouldn't mind living next door to foreign workers or immigrants (71%) and refugees (56%).
- Even so, more than three-fourths of Zambians say the government should reduce the number of foreign job seekers it allows to enter the country (57%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (23%).
    - A similar majority favour reducing (52%) or eliminating (26%) entry by refugees.
- About one in four respondents (27%) say they have considered leaving Zambia.
    - This figure is highest among the most educated citizens (57% of those with post-secondary education), urban residents (41%), people with full-time jobs (37%), and youth (34%).
    - The most common reasons cited for potential emigration are economic – finding better job opportunities (50%) and escaping economic hardship (25%).
    - The most popular destination among potential emigrants is North America (24%), but four in 10 (39%) would prefer South Africa or another country on the African continent.

Freedom of movement and the AfCFTA

Freedom of movement is a basic human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 13 allows for all human beings to travel across borders, while Article 14 provides for anyone to seek refuge from persecution (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). What do Zambians think about the free movement of people in the region?

Almost two-thirds (62%) of Zambians agree that "people living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders to trade or work in other countries" (Figure 1). One-third (35%) of citizens would prefer that the government limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

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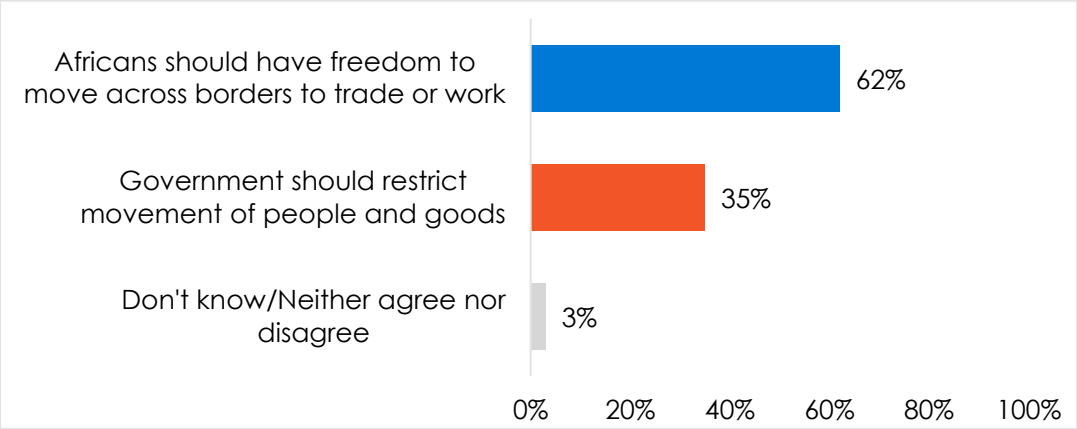
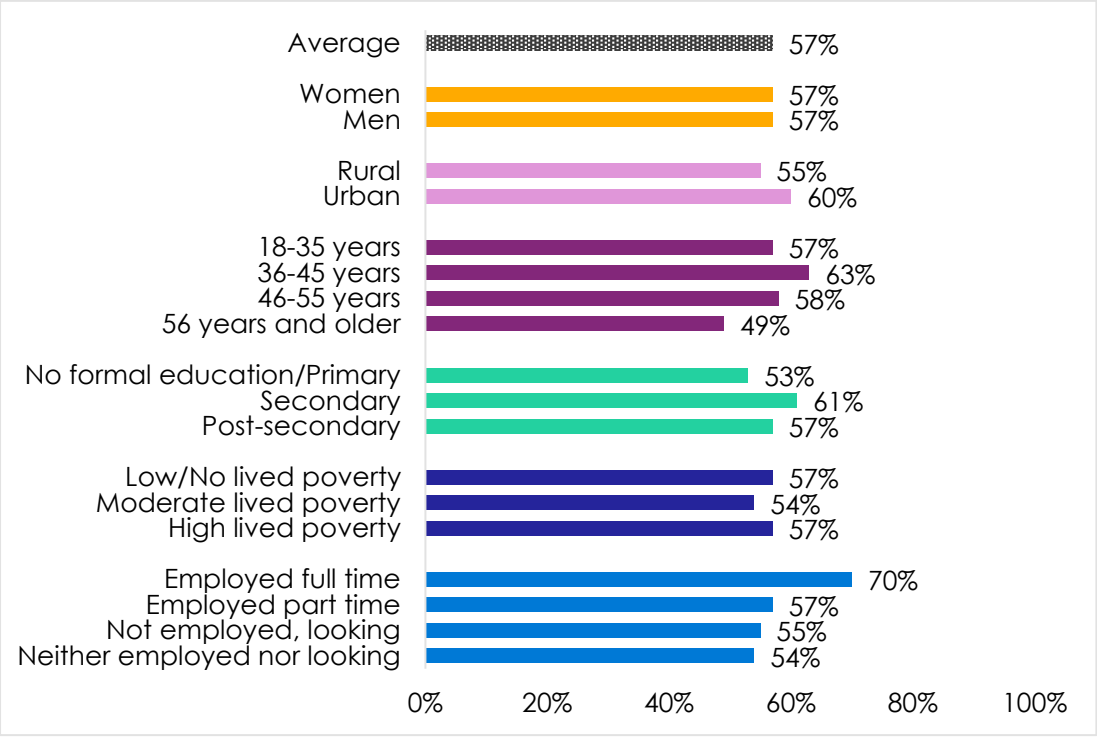
Figure 1: Free movement of East Africans | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
Statement 1: People living in East Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.
Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, the Zambian government should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

But how easy is cross-border travel in reality? Almost six in 10 respondents (57%) say it is "difficult" or "very difficult" for people in Southern Africa to enter other countries in order to work or trade (Figure 2). Only one in five describe it as easy, while another 22% say they "don't know."

Figure 2: Difficulty in cross-border movement | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in Southern Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "difficult" or "very difficult")*

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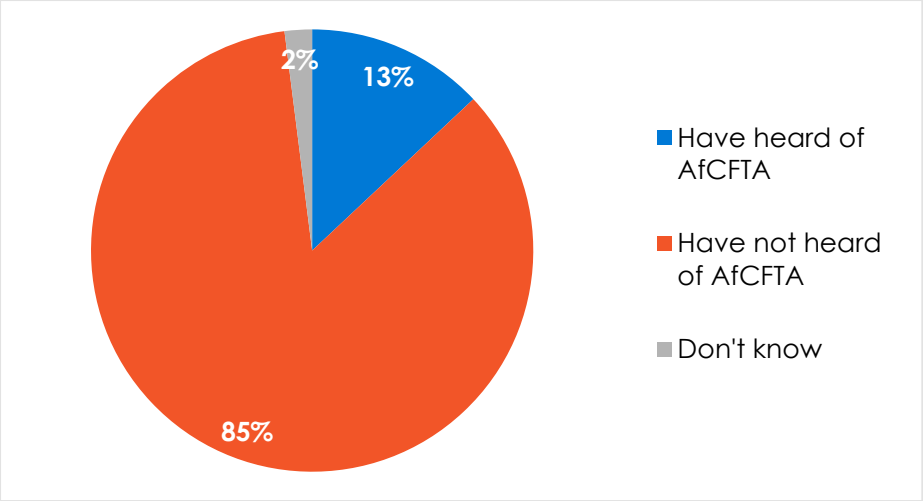
Respondents in full employment (70%) are particularly likely to say that cross-border travel is hard, while senior citizens (aged 56 or older) less frequently report difficulty in crossing borders (49%).

Cross-border movement is a central aspect of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its complement, the Free Movement of Persons Protocol. The AfCFTA, signed by 54 African Union (AU) members, seeks to create a single continental market and boost trade between African countries by eliminating trade barriers, thereby fostering industrialisation, spurring investment, and creating jobs for millions of Africans.

While the AfCFTA focuses on freer movement of goods and services, the free movement protocol, adopted by AU heads of state in 2018, promotes labour mobility across the continent by, for example, eliminating visa requirements for intra-African travelers (ISS Africa, 2022). However, the number of countries that have ratified the protocol has remained stalled at four (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

The AfCFTA entered into force in 2019, and trade commenced under the banner of the agreement on 1 January 2021. However, the effects of this agreement don't seem to be felt very widely as yet: Only 13% of Zambians say they have heard of the AfCFTA (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Heard of the AfCFTA? | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?*

Attitudes toward migrants

A majority of Zambians support freedom of movement, at least for people within the region. Are their views consistent with their attitudes toward immigrants?

Zambians are divided over the economic impact of immigration. Fewer than half (45%) of citizens say that migrant workers are good for the nation's economy, while 47% see it as "fairly bad" or "very bad" for the economy "if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years" (Figure 4).

Perceptions that foreign workers are good for the economy increase with respondents' education level, ranging from just 40% of those with no formal schooling to 58% of those with post-secondary qualifications. Positive assessments of migrants' economic contributions are also higher among men than women (48% vs. 41%).

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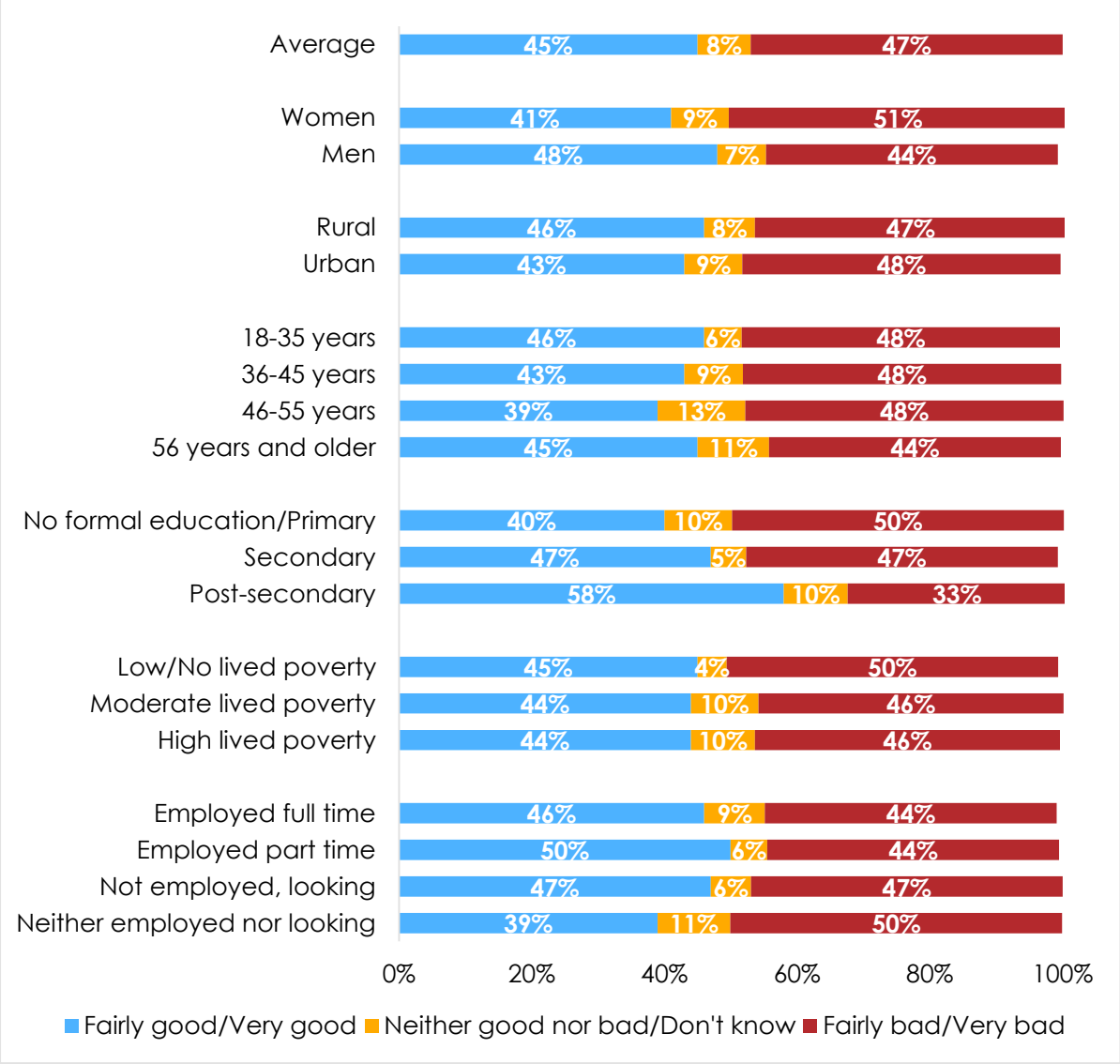
Figure 4: Economic impact of immigration | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



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

Despite their mixed assessments of the economic impact of immigrations, a majority of Zambians express tolerant attitudes toward migrants on a personal level. Seven in 10 (71%) say they have no objection to having foreign workers or immigrants as neighbours, including 44% who would "somewhat" or "strongly" like the idea (Figure 5).

The majority expressing tolerant attitudes toward refugees is weaker (56%), suggesting that some citizens may accept foreigners conditionally, perhaps based on preconceptions about the likely contributions of foreign workers and refugees.

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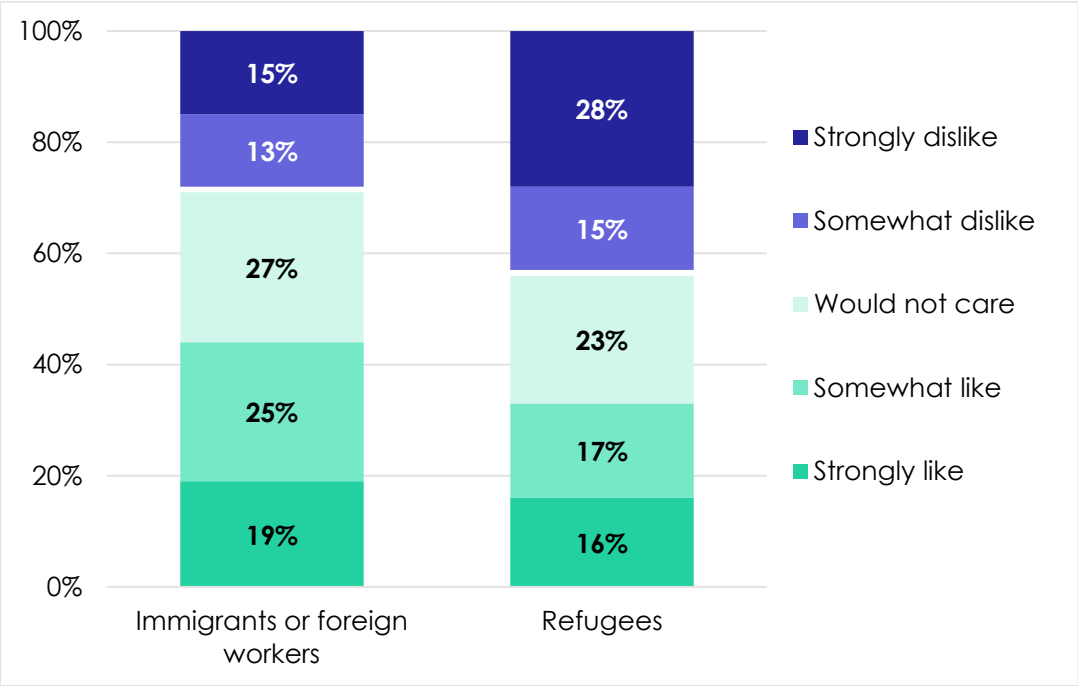
Figure 5: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution?*

Men are somewhat more likely than women to express tolerant attitudes toward both foreign workers (74% vs. 69%) and refugees (59% vs. 53%) (Figure 6). Likewise, urbanites are more welcoming to both groups than rural residents (77% vs. 68% for foreign workers, 63% vs. 51% for refugees). And tolerance for both groups increases significantly as respondents' education level rises.

Both foreign workers and refugees also find more tolerant attitudes among citizens with full-time do part-time jobs than among those without employment.

Citizens' economic status seems to make no difference in their tolerance toward foreign workers, though tolerance for refugees is somewhat lower among poorer citizens (54%-55%) than among those experiencing low or no lived poverty[1] (59%).

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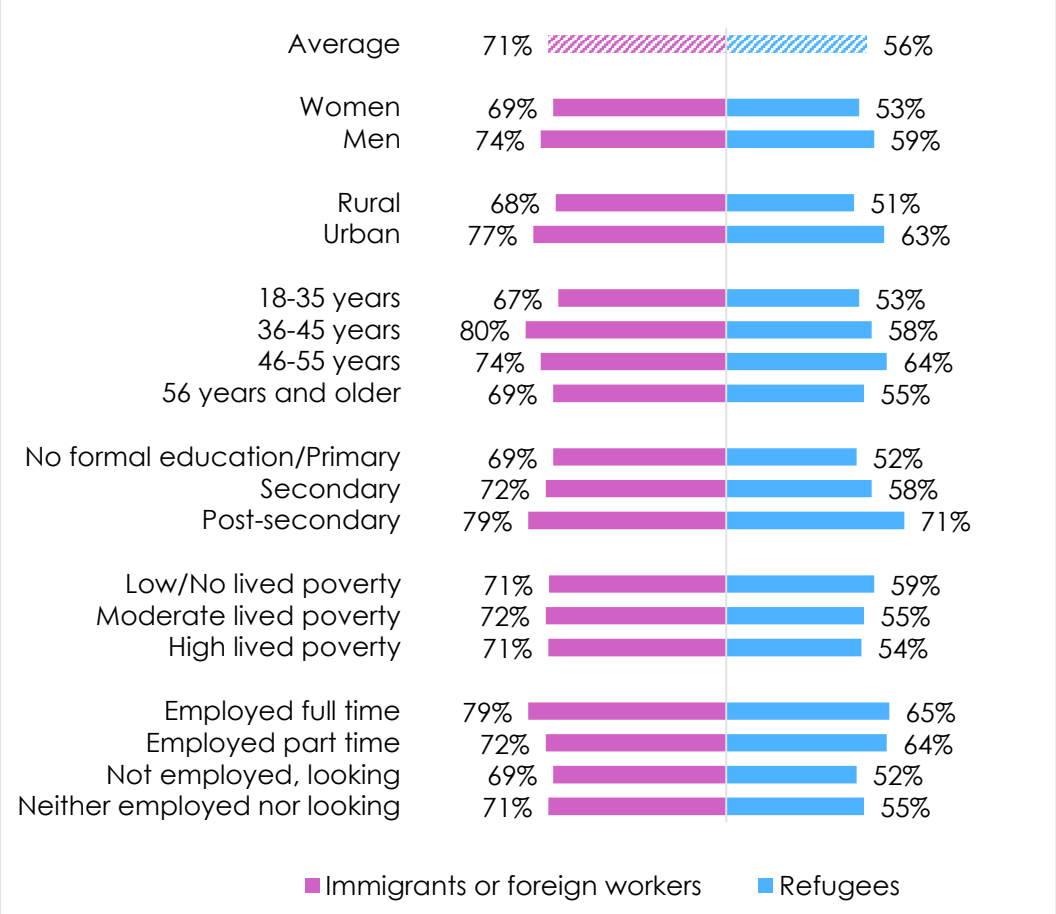
[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2022).

Figure 6: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")*

Despite these generally tolerant attitudes toward immigrants, survey findings show that Zambians are apprehensive about letting migrants into their country: More than three-fourths (80%) say the government should reduce the number of job seekers it allows to enter (57%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (23%) (Figure 7). Similarly, 77% favour reducing (52%) or eliminating (26%) entry by refugees.

Only one in 10 respondents would welcome more prospective workers (9%) and asylum seekers (11%).

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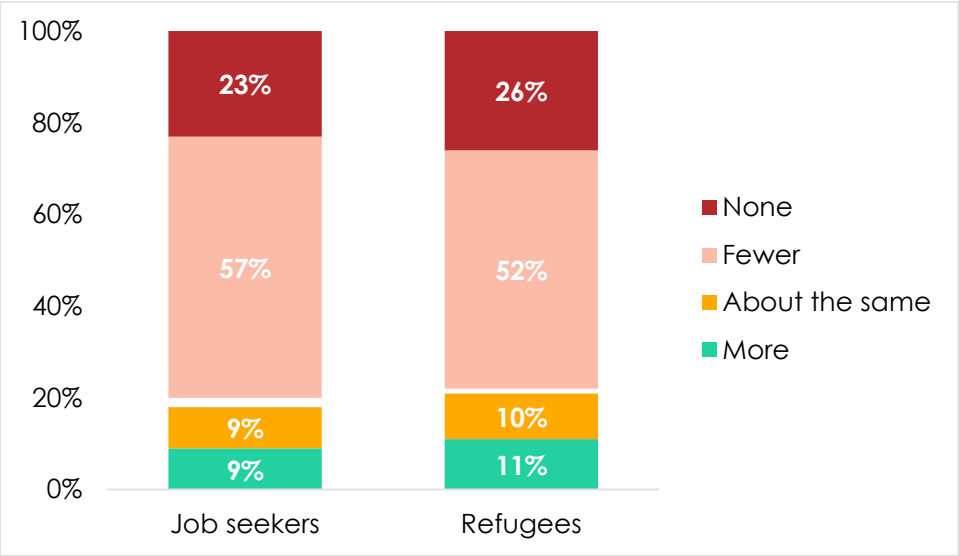
Figure 7: How many foreign workers and refugees should be allowed into the country? | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked:

Do you think Zambia should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country?

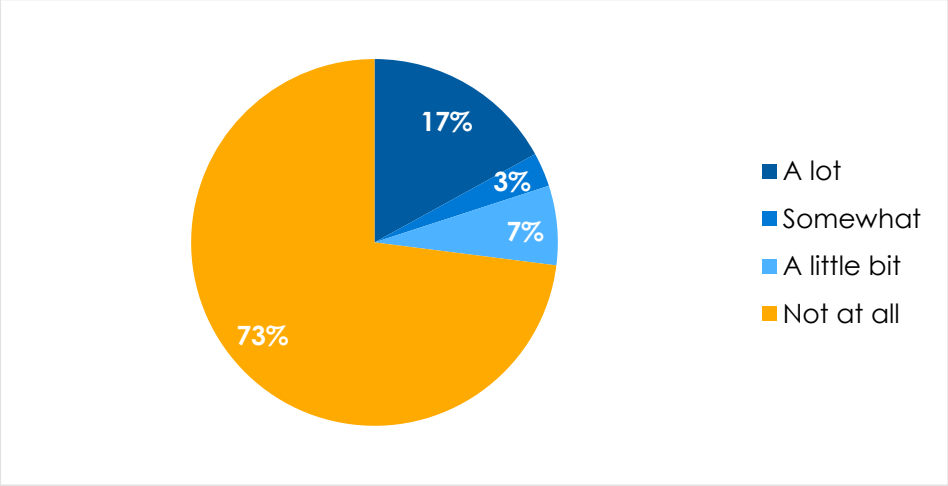
Do you think Zambia should allow more or fewer refugees from other countries to come and live in this country?

Looking abroad: Zambians' attitudes toward emigration

People leave home for a variety of reasons: to escape conflict or resource scarcity, to avoid discrimination and oppression, to pursue better economic opportunities, or for any one or more of a myriad other reasons. Do Zambians think about emigrating? If so, what propels them to do so?

When it comes to leaving their country, about one in four Zambians (27%) say they have contemplated the possibility at least "a little bit," including 17% who have considered it "a lot" (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Considered emigrating | Zambia | 2024



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

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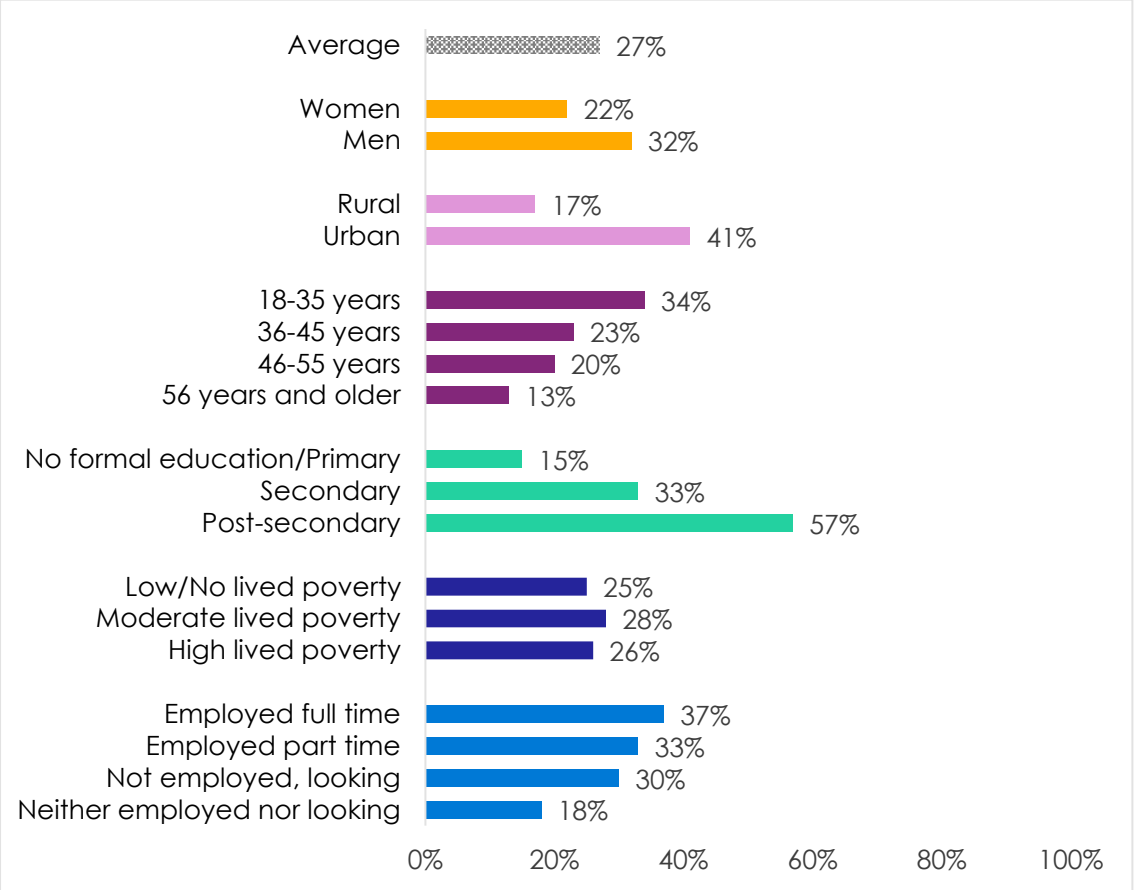
Interest in leaving the country increases with education, ranging from just 15% of those lacking formal schooling to 57% of the most educated, and decreases with age, from 34% of the youth to 13% of the elderly (Figure 9).

Men (32%) and urbanites (41%) are more likely than women (22%) and rural residents (17%) to say they have thought about leaving the country. Citizens with full-time (37%) or part-time (33%) jobs are somewhat more likely than those without jobs (18%-30%) to have considered emigrating.

Figure 9: Considered emigrating | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



***Respondents were asked**: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live? (% who say "a little bit," "somewhat," or "a lot")*

The most frequently cited reasons among those who have considered emigration are economic: 50% would leave in search of work opportunities and 25% to escape economic hardship or poverty (Figure 10). Others would emigrate for travel/adventure (13%) or to look for better business prospects (6%).

The most popular destination for potential Zambian emigrants is North America (24%) (Figure 11). But 39% would stay in Africa, whether in South Africa (16%), another country in the region (12%), or elsewhere on the continent (11%). About one in eight (13%) would opt for Europe.

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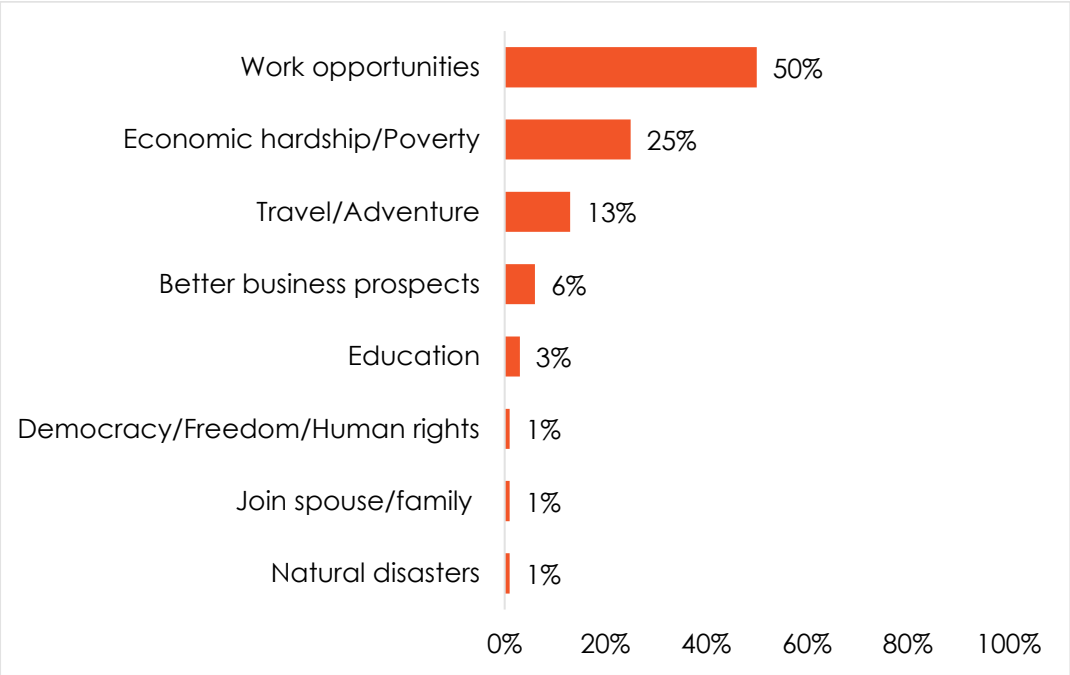
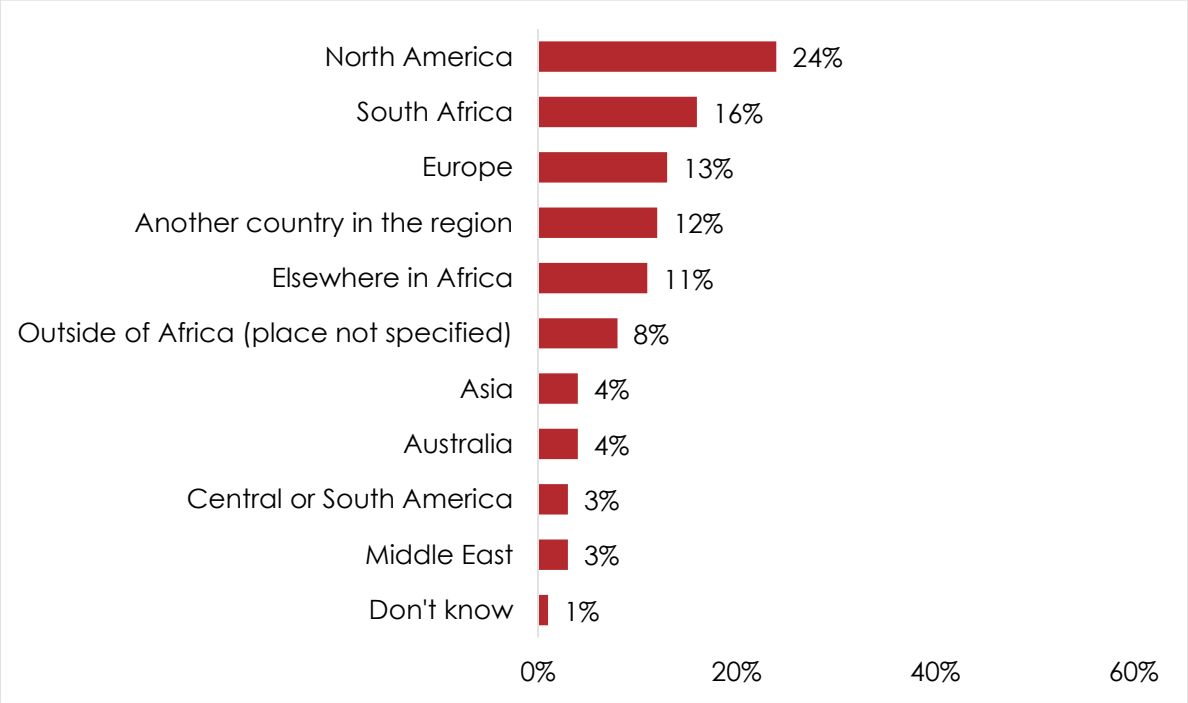
Figure 10: Reasons for emigration | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who say they 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 Zambia? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)*

Figure 11: Preferred destination of potential emigrants | Zambia | 2024



Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked: *If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)*

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Conclusion

Migration is a significant and complex challenge in Zambia as the government works to accommodate and integrate substantial numbers of immigrants and refugees. Citizens are divided as to whether immigrants help or hurt Zambia's economy, but most express tolerant attitudes toward foreign workers and refugees, and a majority endorse the free movement of people to work and trade in other countries in Southern Africa. Yet most Zambians want fewer immigrants and refugees, or even none whatsoever, to come into their own country.

As for emigration, about one in four Zambians say they have thought about looking for greener pastures abroad. Highly educated citizens and those with full-time jobs are especially likely to consider emigration, generally in pursuit of better work and economic opportunity. Despite the challenges of working in other African countries, four in 10 potential emigrants would look to move to another African country – just as many as would opt for North America or Europe.

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Edward Chibwili is a research fellow at the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), a research wing of the University of Zambia. Email: edward.chibwili@unza.zm.

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