Dispatch No. 1247 | 30 October 2026

Three-fourths of Gambian youth see country as moving in the wrong direction, consider leaving

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1247 | Richard Kweitsu

Summary

More than 60% of Gambians are under the age of 25 – an immense resource and an equally enormous development challenge (World Bank, 2023). According to The Gambia Labour Force Survey 2025, 41.3% of youth are not in education, employment, or training, and among those who have jobs, 84.5% are employed in the informal sector (The Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2025).

The Gambia ranks 125th out of 183 countries on the 2023 Global Youth Development Index, up from 139th two years earlier (Commonwealth, 2024), but lags near the bottom (170th out of 193) on the United Nations Development Programme's (2025) Human Development Index, underscoring the scale of the development challenges facing the country's youthful population. Challenges in education were brought into public view in October when University of The Gambia students protested against conditions at the Faraba campus, including inadequate transportation, limited access to food and water, and unreliable Internet connectivity (Jawo, 2026).

The government has introduced policies and programmes intended to expand opportunities for young people. The National Youth Policy 2019-2028 sets out a framework for youth development, including investments in education, skills, employment, and participation in decision making (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2020). The National Employment Policy 2022-2026 also proposes measures to improve young people's access to internships, vocational training, and productive resources, including credit and business support (Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment, 2022).

More recently, the government and the World Bank have supported investments in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) through the Resilience, Inclusion, Skills and Equity project, including U.S. $13 million to establish two TVET centres of excellence in agribusiness and fisheries (Ecofin Agency, 2026).

The Afrobarometer Round 10 survey (2024) offers some insights into the situation of Gambian youth. Findings show that young people are more educated than their elders, but also more likely to be unemployed. Job creation would be their top priority for additional investment to help young people, though given a choice, most youth would become entrepreneurs.

Unemployment ranks among the country's most important problems, according to young respondents, though more voice concerns about health, the increasing cost of living, and crime and security. On all of these priority issues, only small minorities see their government as performing adequately.

Evaluations of economic and personal living conditions are overwhelmingly negative, and most youth see their country as moving in "the wrong direction." A growing majority of youth say they have contemplated emigration in search of better opportunities.

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Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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 The Gambia, led by the Center for Research and Policy Development (CRPD), interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 Gambian adults in April-May 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Margins of error are larger for subgroup analyses (e.g. demographic groups) due to smaller sample sizes. For more on our sampling methodology, click here. Previous surveys were conducted in The Gambia in 2018, 2021, and 2022.

Key findings

- Gambian youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders: 52% have at least secondary education, compared to 28%-38% among older cohorts.
- But youth are also more likely to be unemployed: 22% say they are looking for work, compared to 13% of older cohorts.
    - Aside from the country's general economic situation and scarcity of jobs, young people cite a lack of adequate training and an unwillingness to take certain types of jobs as the most important barriers to youth employment.
    - Given their choice of jobs, seven in 10 youth (69%) would like to start their own businesses.
    - 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 education, business loans, and job training.
- Health ranks as the most important problem that youth want their government to address, followed by the increasing cost of living, crime and security, and unemployment.
- On these priority issues, youth offer overwhelmingly negative reviews of their government's performance. Only 20% say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on improving basic health services, and even fewer approve of its performance on reducing crime (14%), creating jobs (8%), and keeping prices stable (3%).
- Majorities of young people see their country as moving in "the wrong direction" (79%) and describe both economic conditions (77%) and their personal living conditions (55%) as "fairly bad" or "very bad."
    - More than half (55%) of youth think things will get "worse" or "much worse" in the coming year.
- Three out of four young Gambians (75%) say they have considered emigrating, most to find jobs or escape economic hardship.

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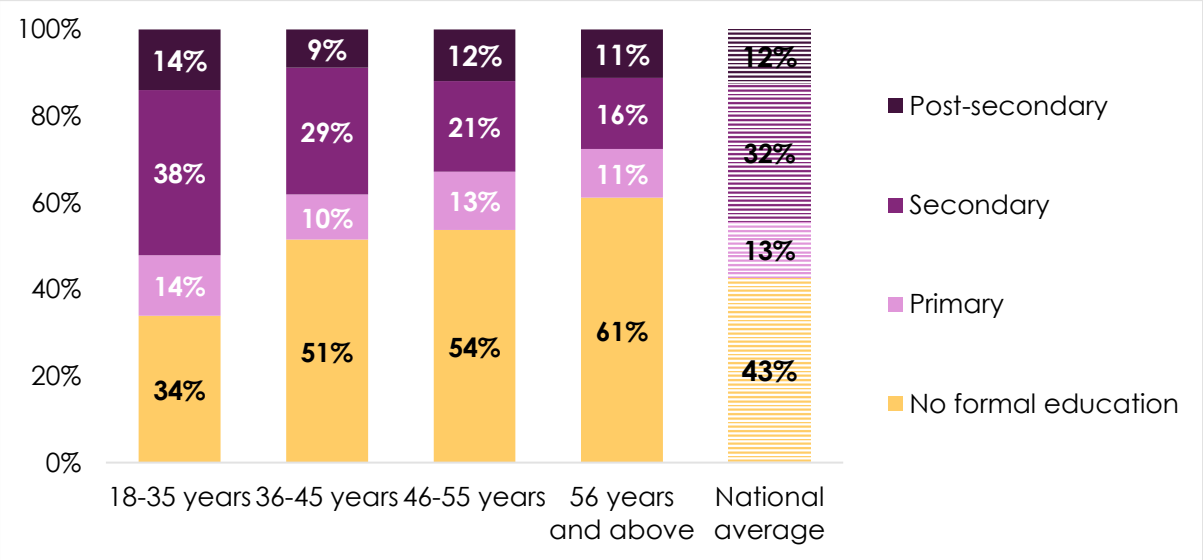
Level of education

Gambian youth (aged 18-35) have more education than their elders (Figure 1). A slim majority (52%) have secondary (38%) or post-secondary (14%) education, compared to 28%-38% among older cohorts. The share reporting no formal schooling is still substantial at one-third (34%) of youth, but is down from more than half among their elders.

Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | The Gambia | 2024

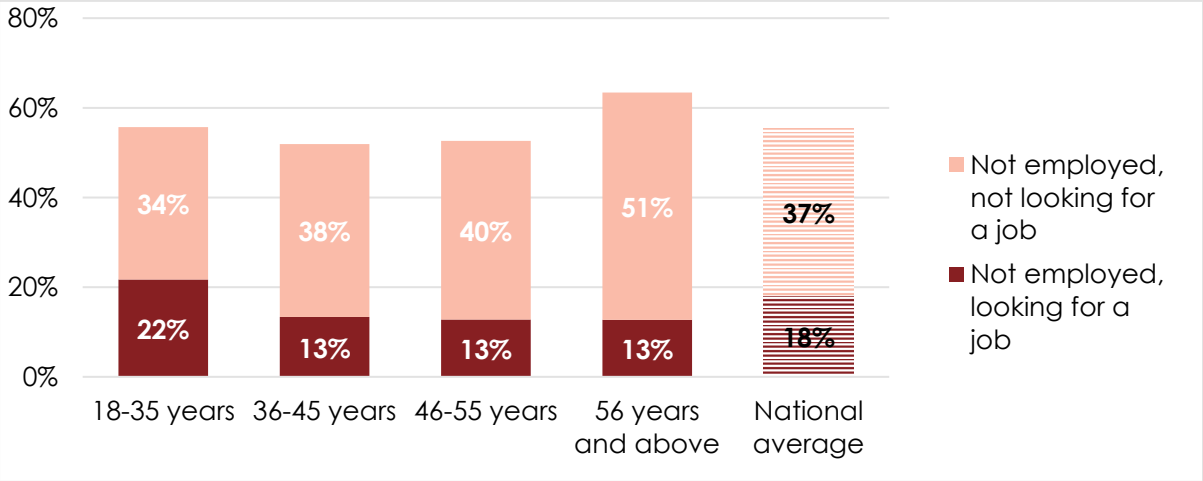


Respondents were asked: *What is your highest level of education?*

Employment status

While more educated than their elders, young Gambians are also more likely to be unemployed. One in five (22%) say they are not employed and are looking for jobs, compared to 13% among older groups (Figure 2). Another 34% say they don't have jobs and aren't looking for work.

Figure 2: Not employed, looking vs. not looking for a job | by age group | The Gambia | 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?*

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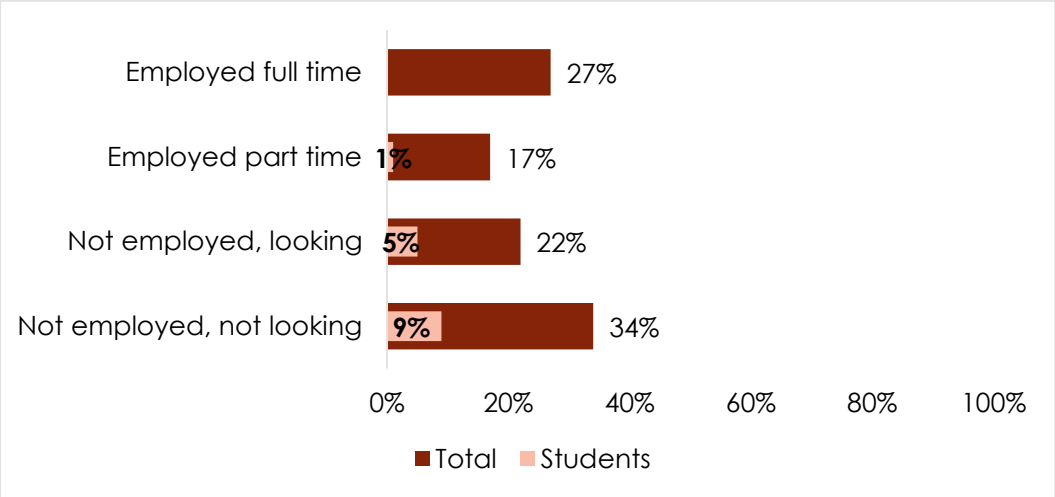
More than four in 10 have full-time (27%) or part-time (17%) employment (Figure 3). The share of unemployed youth looking for work includes 5% who identify as students, while the group without jobs and not actively looking for work includes 9% who say they are students.

Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 | The Gambia | 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")

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?

Gambian youth are most likely to see a lack of adequate training or preparation as the main obstacle to youth employment, cited by 25% of young respondents (Figure 4). But almost as many (22%) blame a perceived unwillingness of youth themselves to work certain jobs, such as in agriculture or other difficult sectors. Others mention a lack of entrepreneurial skills or motivation (13%), a lack of experience required by employers (12%), and a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (10%). Older cohorts rank these barriers in a similar order, though among seniors, the most frequently cited obstacle is youth unwillingness to take certain types of jobs (30%).

If young Gambians could choose their own jobs, the most popular route would be to start their own businesses, cited by 69% of youth (Figure 5). Working in government or the public sector ranks a distant second (11%), tied with working for a private company, industry, or business (11%), while few young people would opt for a job with a nongovernmental organisation (4%). Young Gambians don't differ very much from older cohorts in their professional preferences.

Despite the popularity of the idea of entrepreneurship, young Gambians see job creation as an urgent need. Asked what they would prioritise if the government could increase its spending to help young people, 51% cite job creation, followed by education (19%), job training (10%), access to business loans (9%), and social services, such as health and drug-abuse prevention (9%) (Figure 6).

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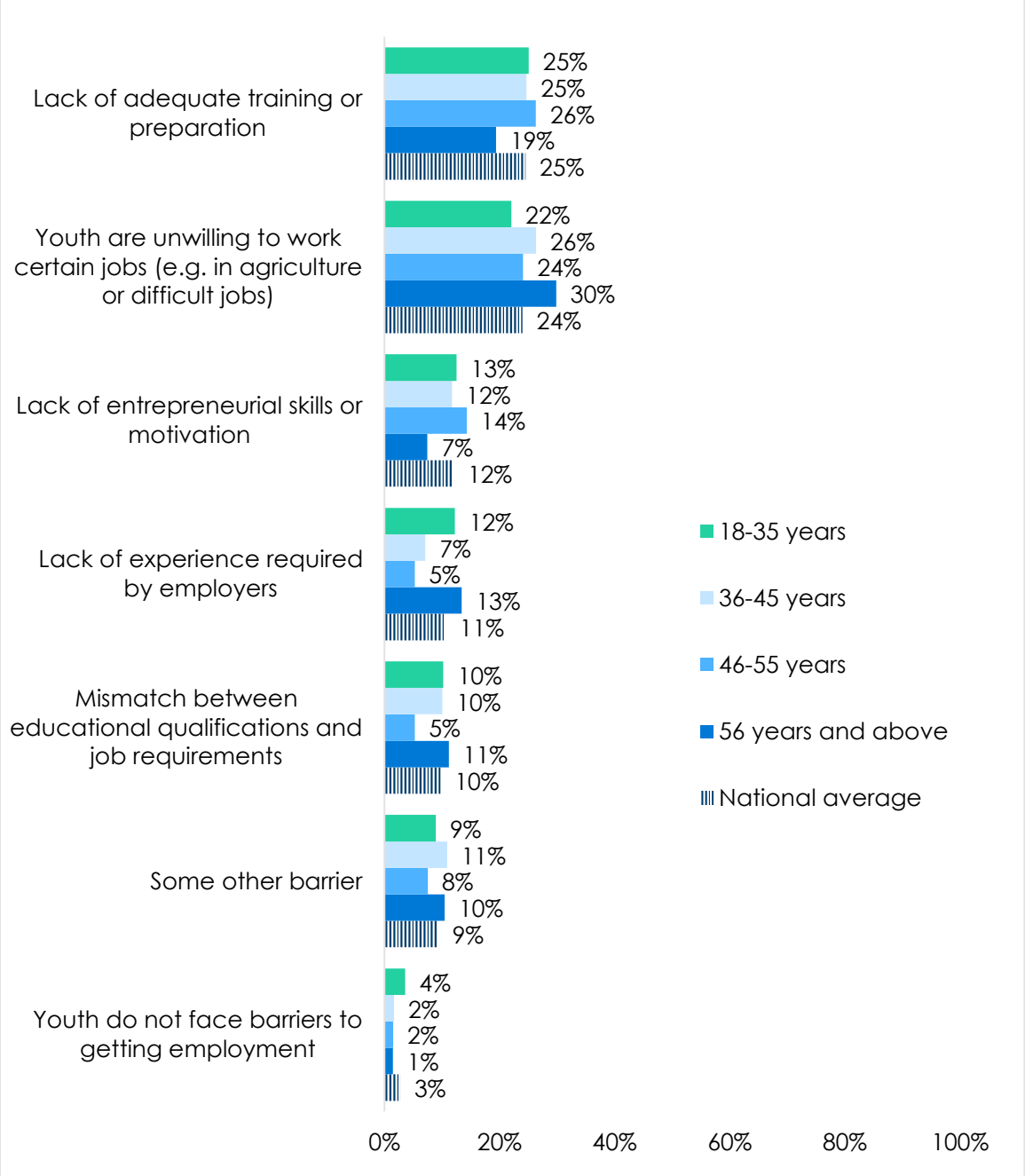
Figure 4: Barriers to youth employment | by age group | The Gambia | 2024



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?*

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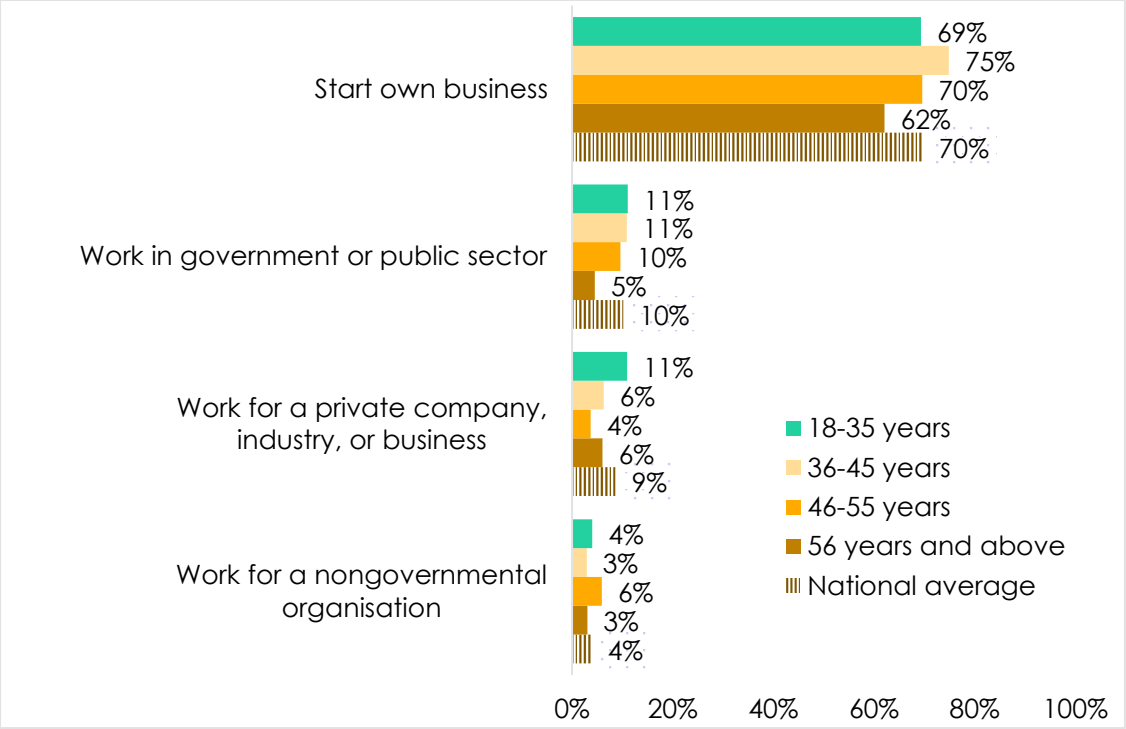
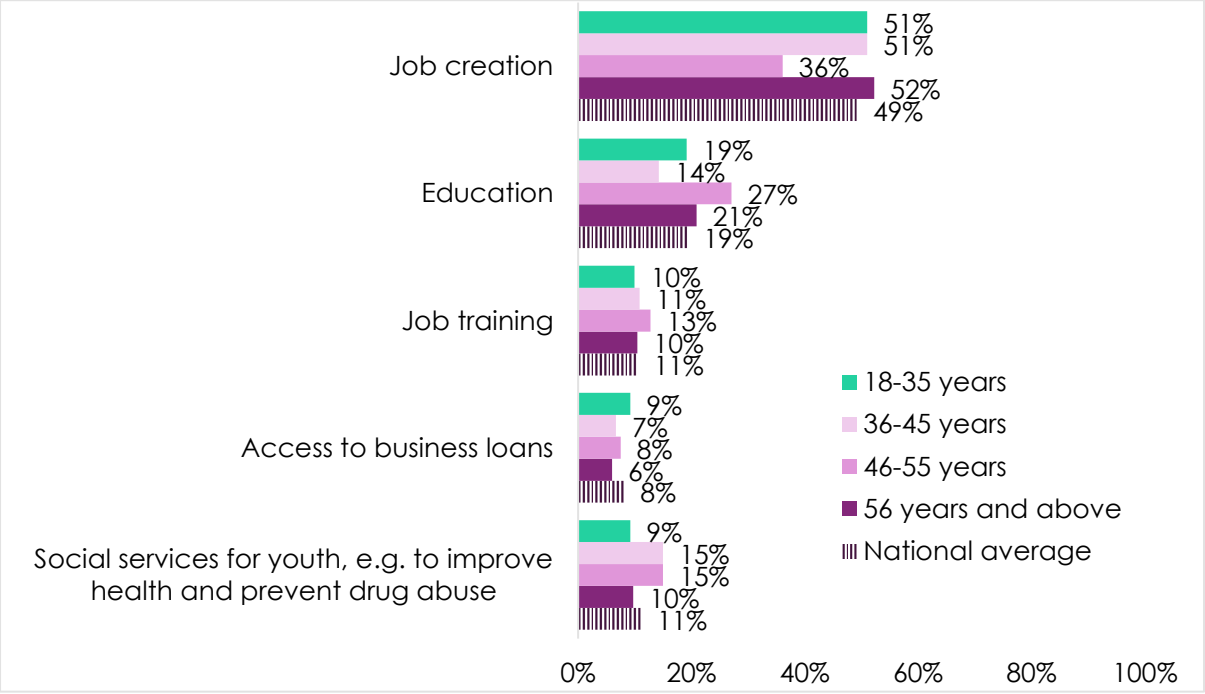
Figure 5: Preferred job sector | by age group | The Gambia | 2024



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 | The Gambia | 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?*

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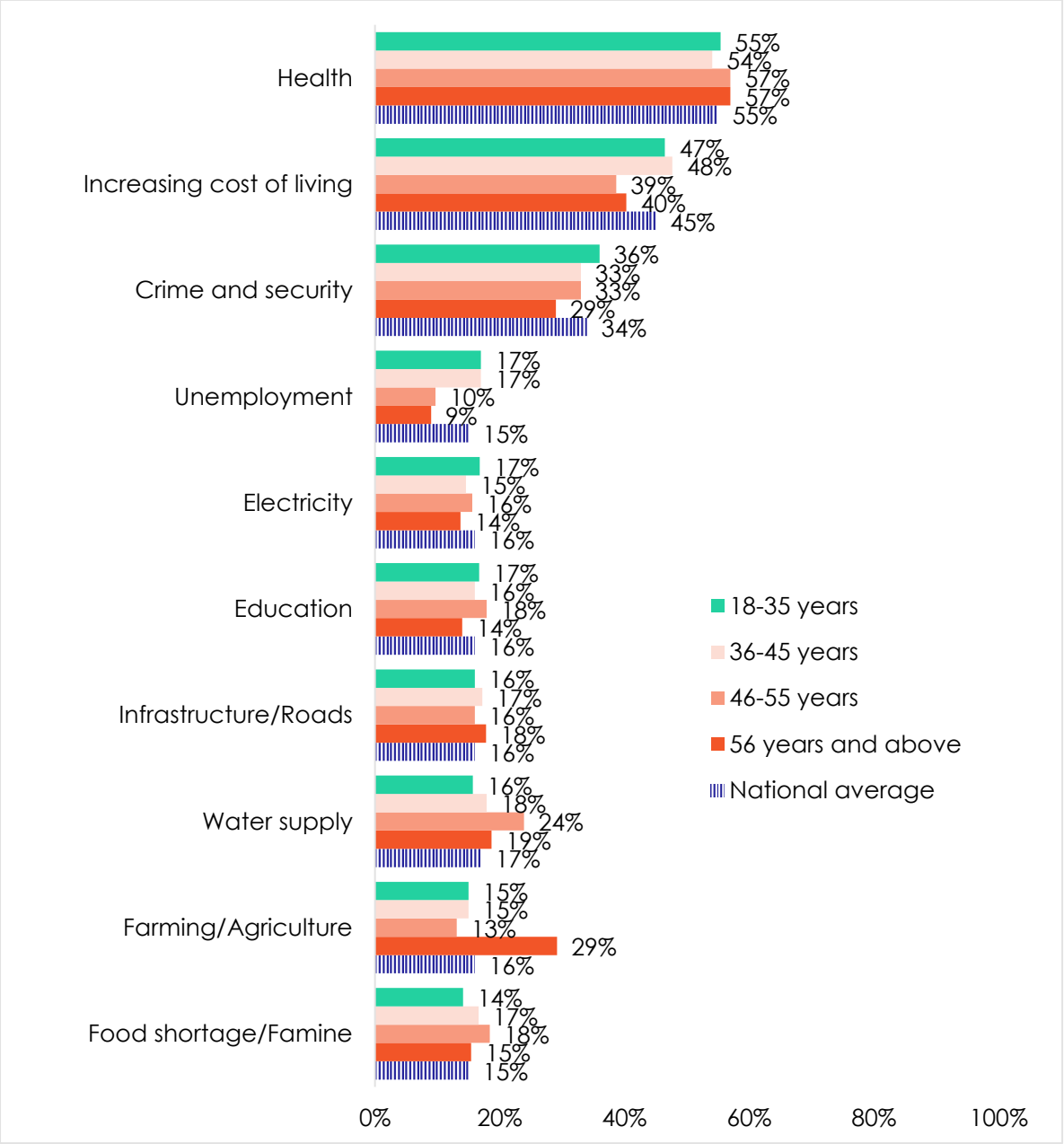
Youth priorities

For young Gambians, as for their elders, health is the most important problem that the government must address, cited by 55% of youth as one of their top three priorities (Figure 7). The increasing cost of living ranks second (47%), followed by crime and security (36%). Unemployment (17%) joins a variety of service-delivery issues – electricity, education, infrastructure/roads, and water supply – in the middle of the youth priority list, perhaps suggesting that in the eyes of young Gambians, job creation is as much a private-sector challenge as a direct government responsibility.

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

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Compared to older cohorts, young Gambians are more likely to prioritise the cost of living and unemployment. Senior citizens are about twice as likely as youth to express concern about agriculture (29% vs. 15%).

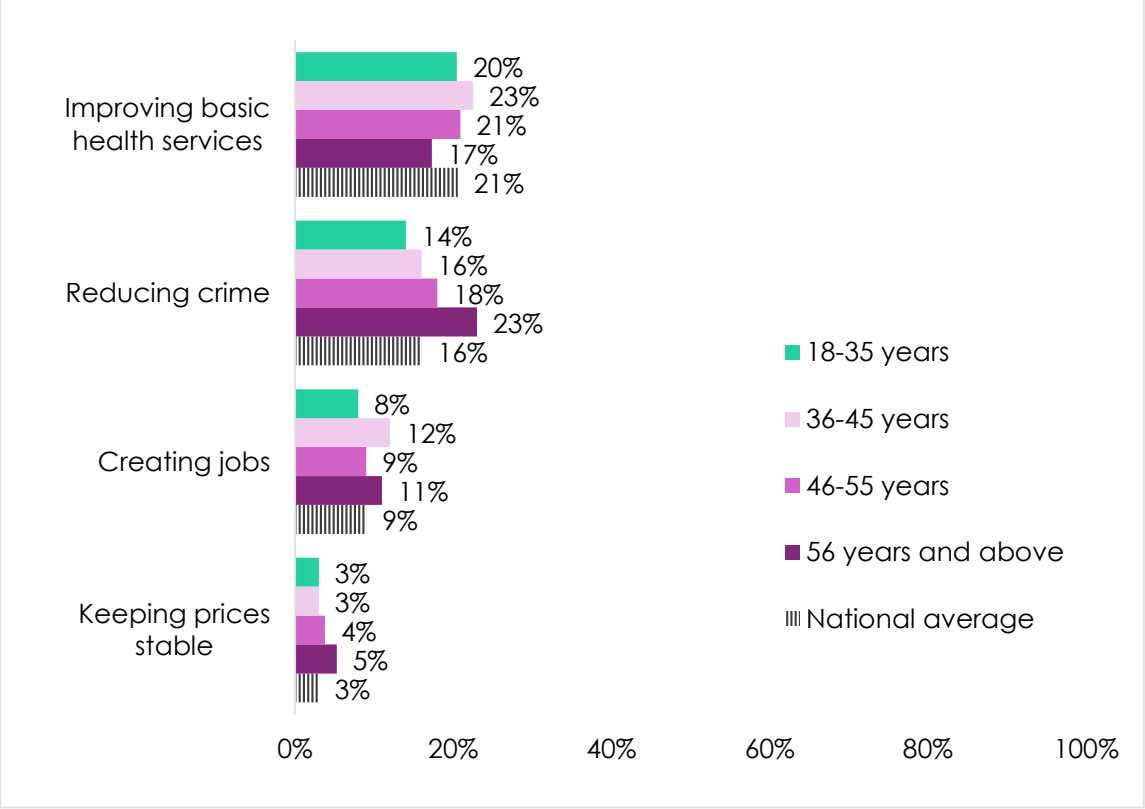
Government performance on priority issues

On issues that concern them most, few young Gambians see their government as doing a good job (Figure 8).

Only one in five youth (20%) say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on improving basic health services, and even fewer approve of its performance on reducing crime (14%), creating jobs (8%), and keeping prices stable (3%).

Older respondents are just as critical of the government's performance except on crime reduction, where 23% of seniors praise the government's efforts.

Figure 8: Government performance on youth priorities | by age group | The Gambia | 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")*

Since 2018, young Gambians' assessments of the government's performance have dropped by 30 percentage points or more on each of these priority issues (Figure 9).

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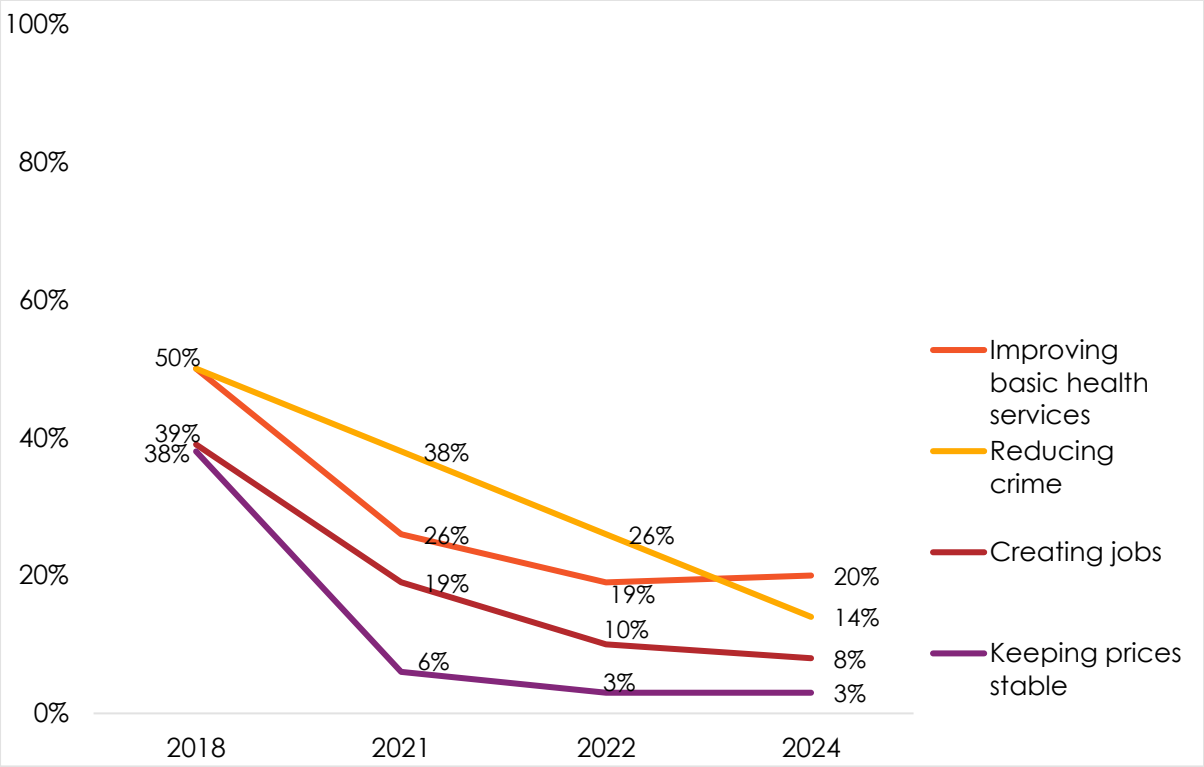
Figure 9: Youth approval of government performance | respondents aged 18-35 | The Gambia | 2018-2024

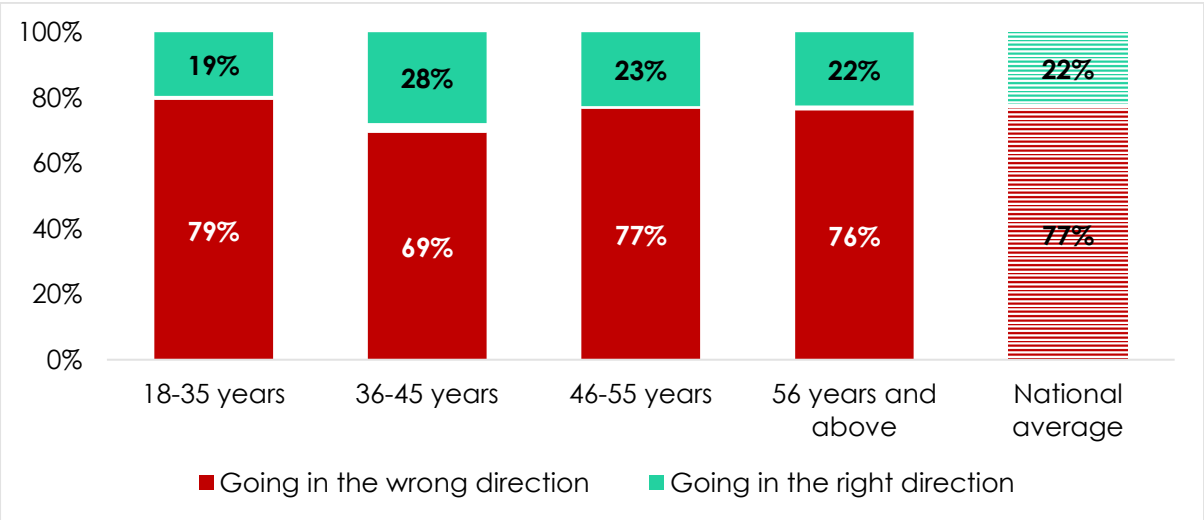


Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

Country's overall direction and economic conditions

More than three-fourths of young Gambians (79%) see the country as going in "the wrong direction," the most negative appraisal across age cohorts (Figure 10).

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



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

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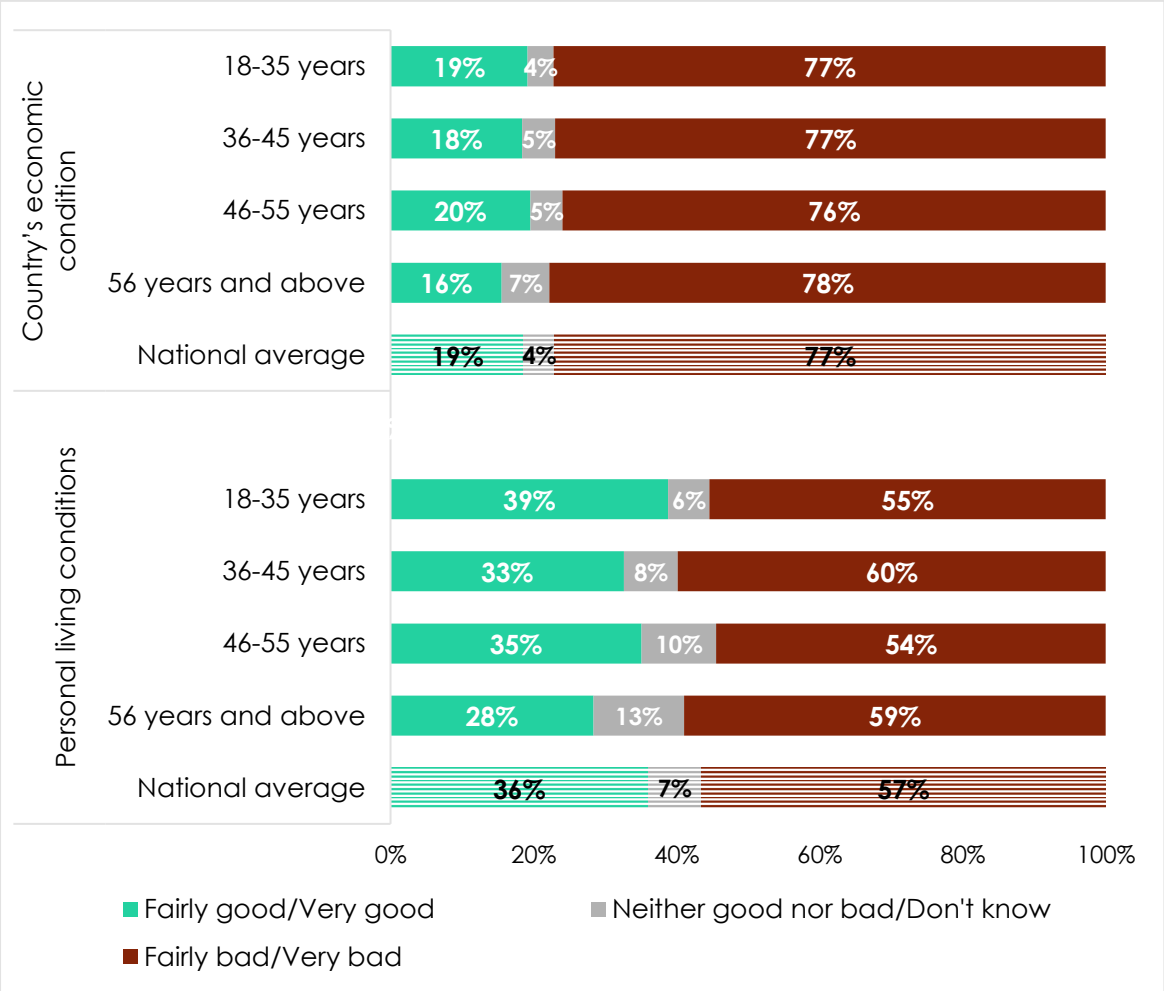
Similarly, 77% of youth describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 11). Somewhat fewer, though still a majority (55%), see their personal living conditions as bad.

Figure 11: Economic and living conditions | by age group | The Gambia | 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 in five young Gambians (19%) think the country's economic condition has improved over the past year, while more than two-thirds (68%) say it has gotten worse (Figure 12).

Looking ahead, youth are slightly more optimistic than their elders: 28% expect the economy to improve over the next 12 months, though a majority (55%) expect it to worsen.

Between 2018 and 2022, young people's economic assessments declined precipitously, dropping by up to 51 percentage points (in optimism about the next 12 months). The most recent survey shows no further decline, and assessments of personal living conditions have regained 5 points (Figure 13).

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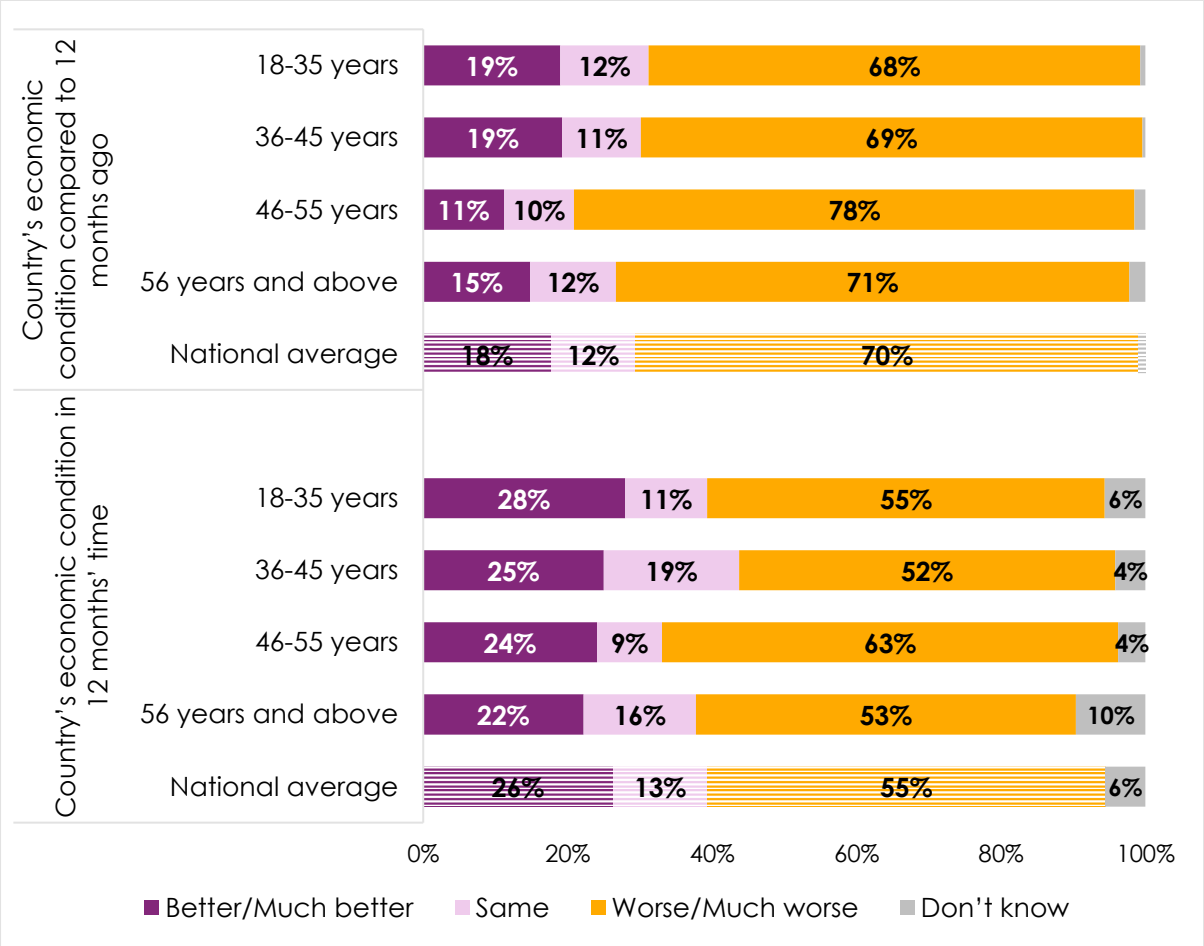
Figure 12: Country's economic condition compared to 12 months ago and in 12 months' time | by age group | The Gambia | 2024



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?

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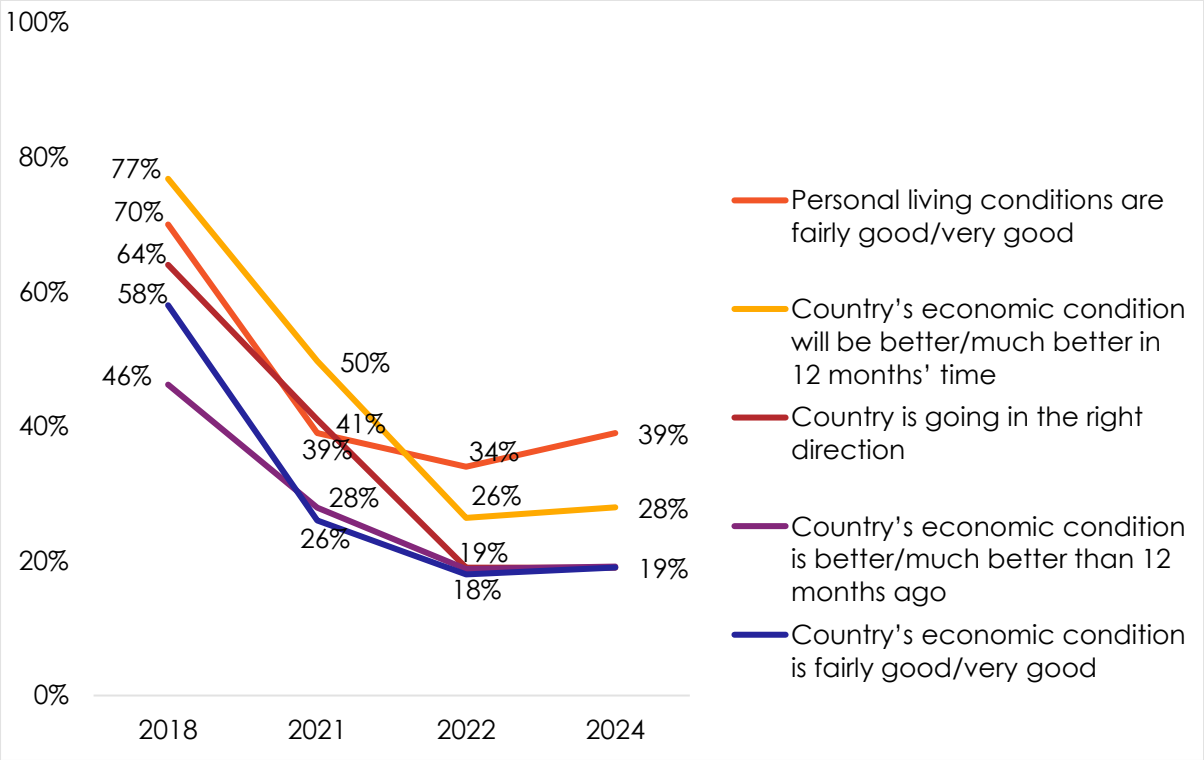
Figure 13: Economic assessments | respondents aged 18-35 | The Gambia | 2018-2024



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

In the context of these bleak appraisals of economic conditions and government performance, fully three out of four young Gambians (75%) say they have given emigration at least "a little bit" of thought, including 62% who have thought about it "a lot" (Figure 14). Interest in emigration declines with increasing age; among seniors, 37% say they have considered leaving the country.[1]

Compared to 2018 survey findings, the share of youth who have thought "a lot" about emigrating has increased from 35% to 62%, a 27-percentage-point jump (Figure 15).

Among those who have thought at least "a little bit" about emigration, economic reasons dominate: 43% cite finding work or better job opportunities, and 41% want to escape economic hardship or poverty. The share citing a desire to escape economic difficulties has increased by 10 percentage points compared to 2018, while the proportion looking to pursue an education has dropped from 19% to just 5% (Figure 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 56 years and above, 25% "a lot," 2% "somewhat," and 11% "a little bit" sum to 37%).

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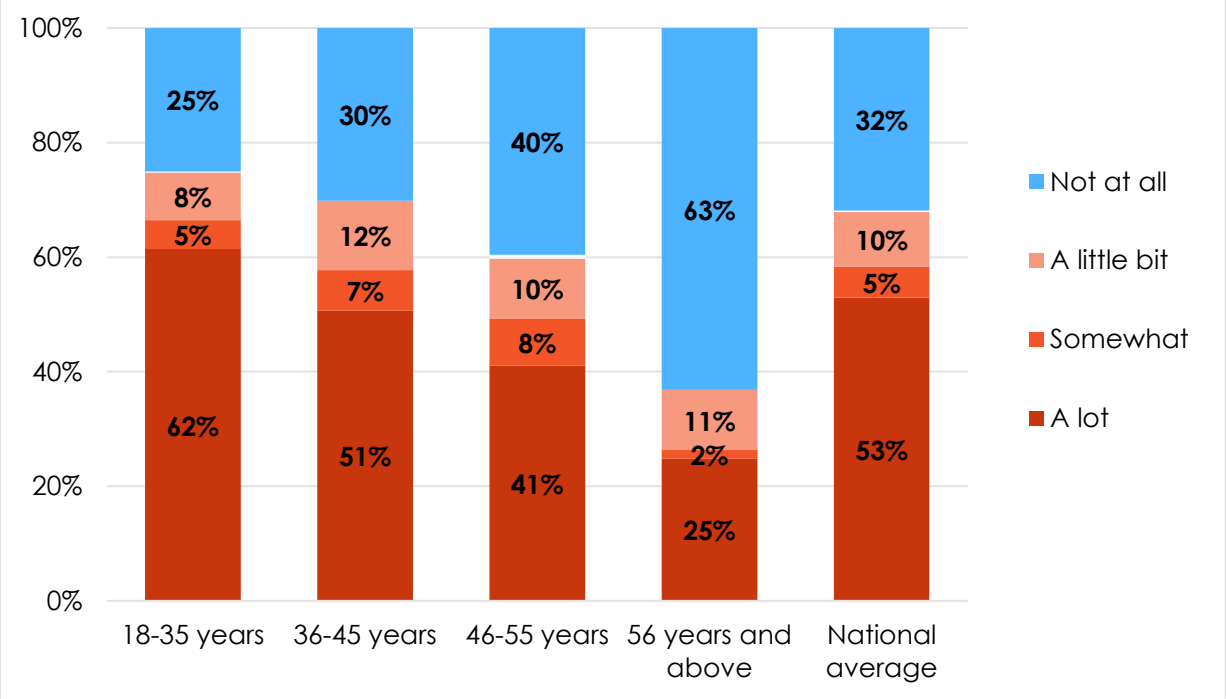
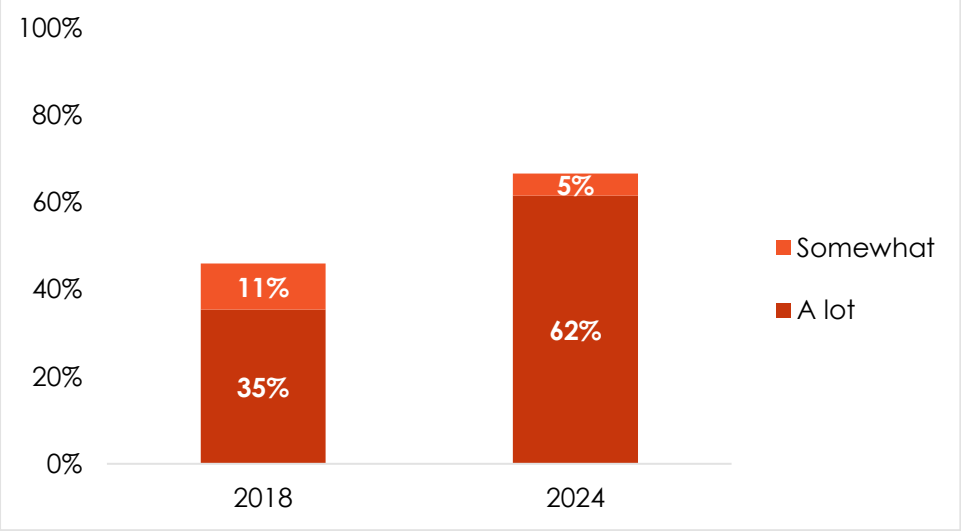
Figure 14: Considered emigrating | by age group | The Gambia | 2024



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

Figure 15: Considered emigration 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | respondents aged 18-35 | The Gambia | 2018 vs. 2024



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

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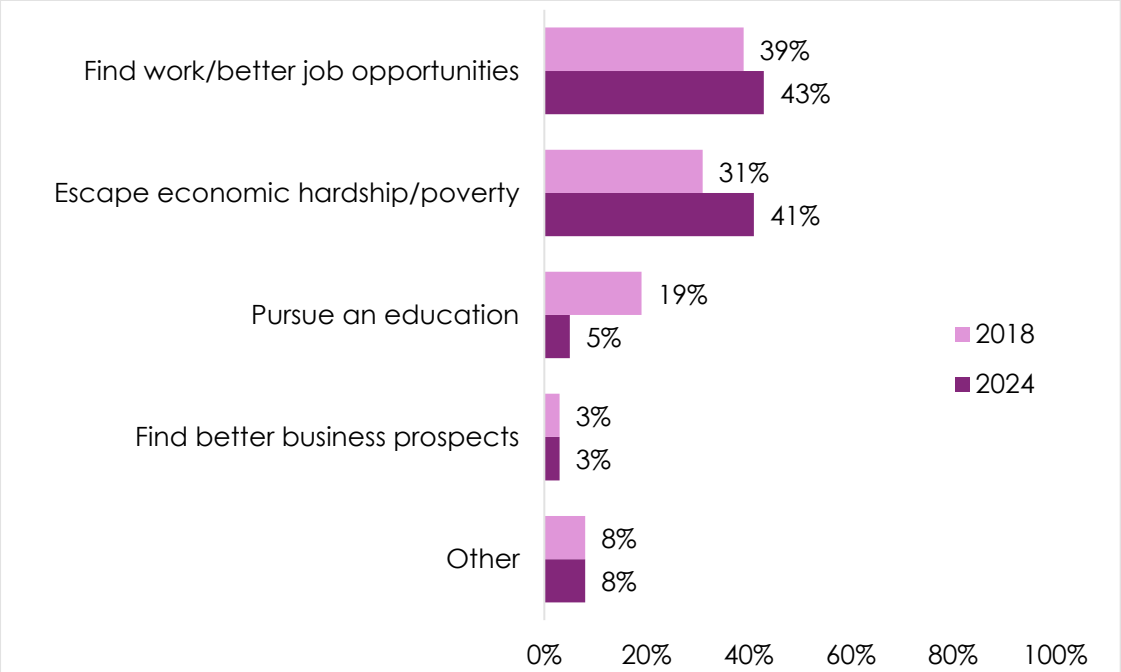
Figure 16: Reasons for considering emigration | respondents aged 18-35 | The Gambia | 2018-2024



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

Conclusion

Gambian youth hold a fairly bleak view of their circumstances, offering overwhelmingly negative assessments of economic conditions, their country's overall trajectory, and their government's performance on key priorities – health, the increasing cost of living, crime and security, and unemployment. Few expect things to get better in the near future.

Against this backdrop, a growing majority of young Gambians say they have thought about emigrating in search of better job and economic opportunities abroad.

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Richard Kweitsu is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Florida and is managing editor of *African Studies Quarterly*, an interdisciplinary journal published at the university's Center for African Studies. Email: kweitsurichard@ufl.edu.

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