

# Ugandans voice concerns about COVID-19 response, but most are willing to be vaccinated

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 497 | Simon Templer Kodiaga and Mabel Nannozi**

## Summary

Just 10 days after the country's first COVID-19 case in March 2020, the Ugandan government ordered a nationwide lockdown (Kyeyune, 2020). A variety of restrictions have continued in place ever since as the country has recorded more than 128,000 infections and more than 3,260 deaths (Biryabarema, 2021; Ministry of Health, 2021; WHO, 2021).

A year later, the government rolled out a COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Despite misinformation on social media disputing vaccine safety and effectiveness, more than 7.8 million vaccine doses had been administered as of 15 December 2021, out of a population of 43 million (UNICEF, 2021; Ministry of Health, 2021; WHO, 2021). At least 800 people reportedly were so eager for the vaccine that they paid fraudsters for counterfeit jabs (Africanews, 2021).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that a large majority of Ugandans say they are likely to try to be vaccinated, even if far fewer trust the government to ensure that the vaccine is safe.

Overall, most Ugandans approve of the government's management of the COVID-19 response, but majorities also say that pandemic-related assistance was distributed unfairly, that resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to government corruption, and that they worry that politicians will use the pandemic to increase their power.

## 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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

With financial support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 22 December 2020 and 7 January 2021 in 300 enumeration areas across 110 districts. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 11th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

## Key findings

- Almost nine out of 10 Ugandans (88%) say they are "somewhat" or "very" well informed about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it.

- More than half (55%) of Ugandans say a household member lost a job, a business, or a primary source of income due to the pandemic.
- Nine out of 10 citizens (89%) say lockdown restrictions were necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Eight in 10 (84%) also support the closure of schools, although three-fourths (76%) say they should have reopened sooner.
- More than eight in 10 Ugandans (82%) approve of the government's performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - However, only two in 10 citizens (19%) say their household received special government assistance during the pandemic, and three-fourths (75%) say pandemic-related assistance was distributed unfairly.
  - A large majority (81%) believe that at least "some" resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to government corruption.
  - And only half (49%) of Ugandans say they trust the government's statistics on COVID-19 cases and deaths.
- Seven in 10 Ugandans (71%) say they are "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to try to get vaccinated.
- A majority of citizens say the government is justified in using measures that infringe on democratic freedoms during a public health emergency, such as censoring the media (52%) and using security forces to enforce public health mandates (72%). But only 30% would endorse postponing elections or limiting political campaigns because of a pandemic.
  - Seven in 10 citizens (71%) say they are worried about politicians taking advantage of the pandemic to increase their power.
- About six in 10 Ugandans (59%) say the government should invest more in preparing to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

## Awareness

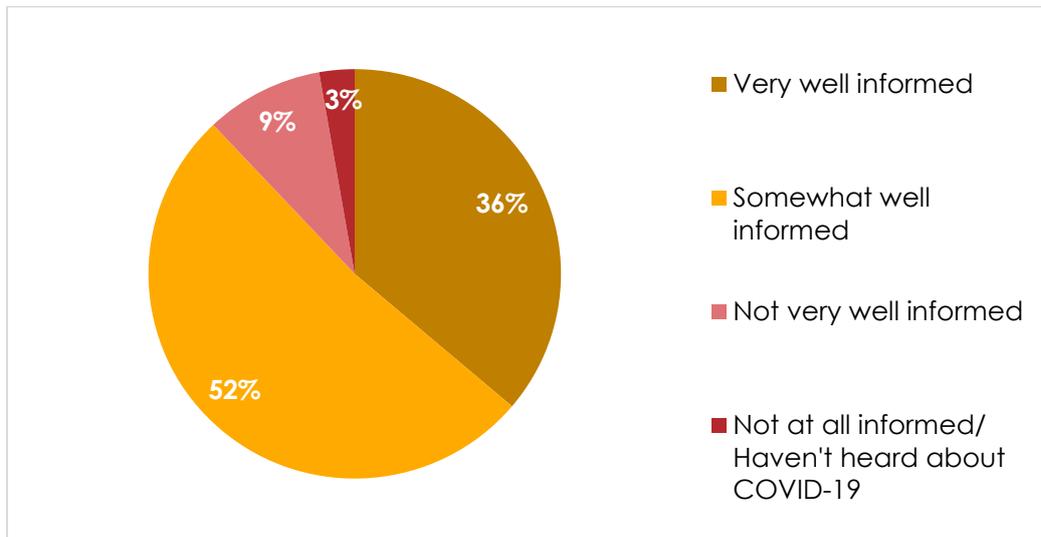
Almost nine out of 10 Ugandans (88%) consider themselves "somewhat well informed" or "very well informed" about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it (Figure 1).

Awareness of the pandemic is consistently high across key socio-demographic groups, showing only modest disadvantages among citizens with less education and those experiencing higher levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (Figure 2).

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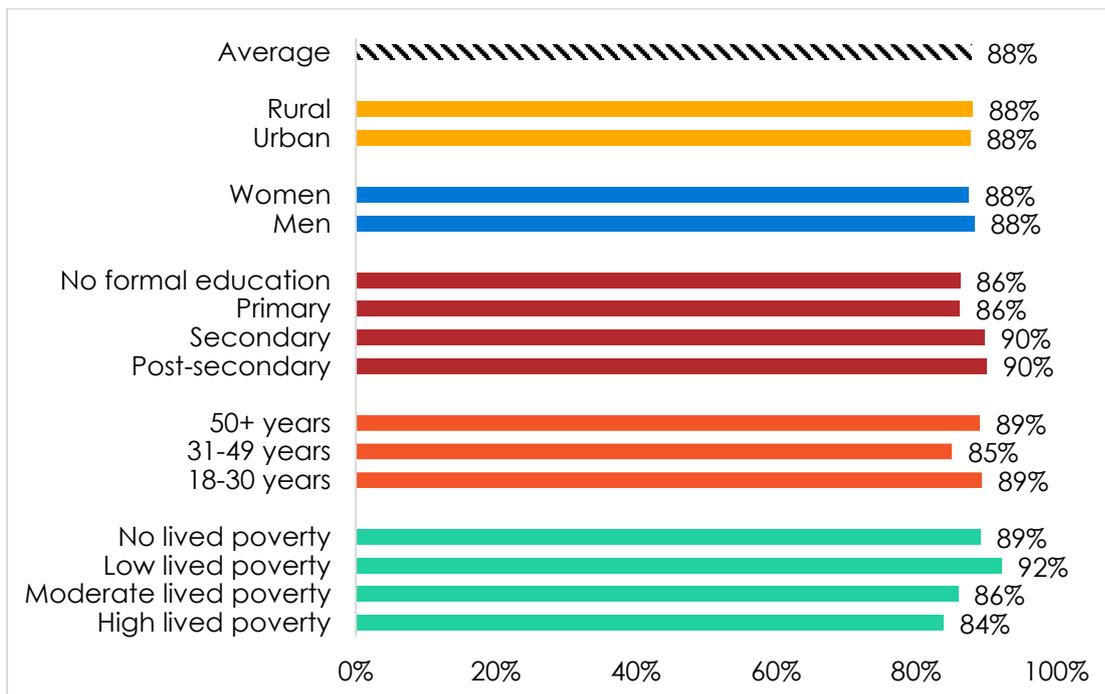
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

**Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

**Figure 2: Awareness of COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say "somewhat" or "very" well informed)

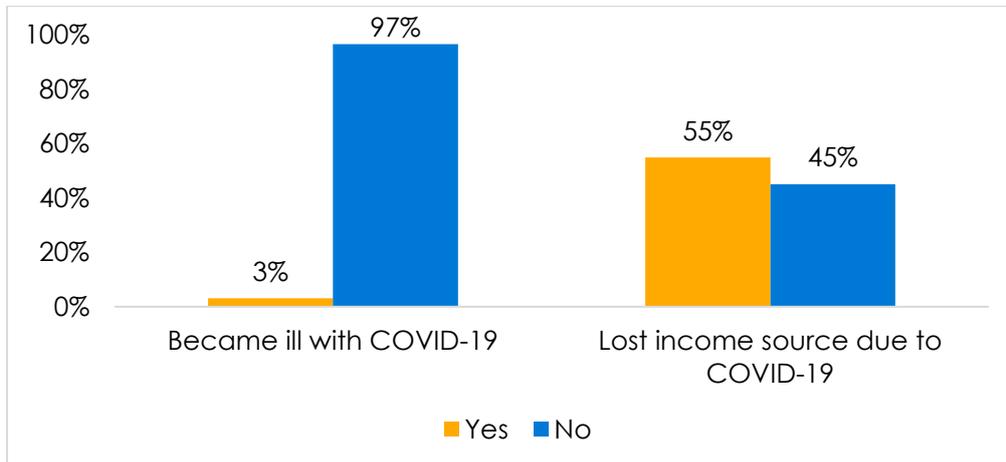
### Impact

More than half (55%) of Ugandans report that a household member lost a job, a business, or a primary source of income due to the pandemic, while 3% say someone in the household became ill with COVID-19 (Figure 3).

Urban residents were more likely than their rural counterparts to experience a loss of income (63% vs. 51%), as were residents in the Central region (65%) compared to those in other

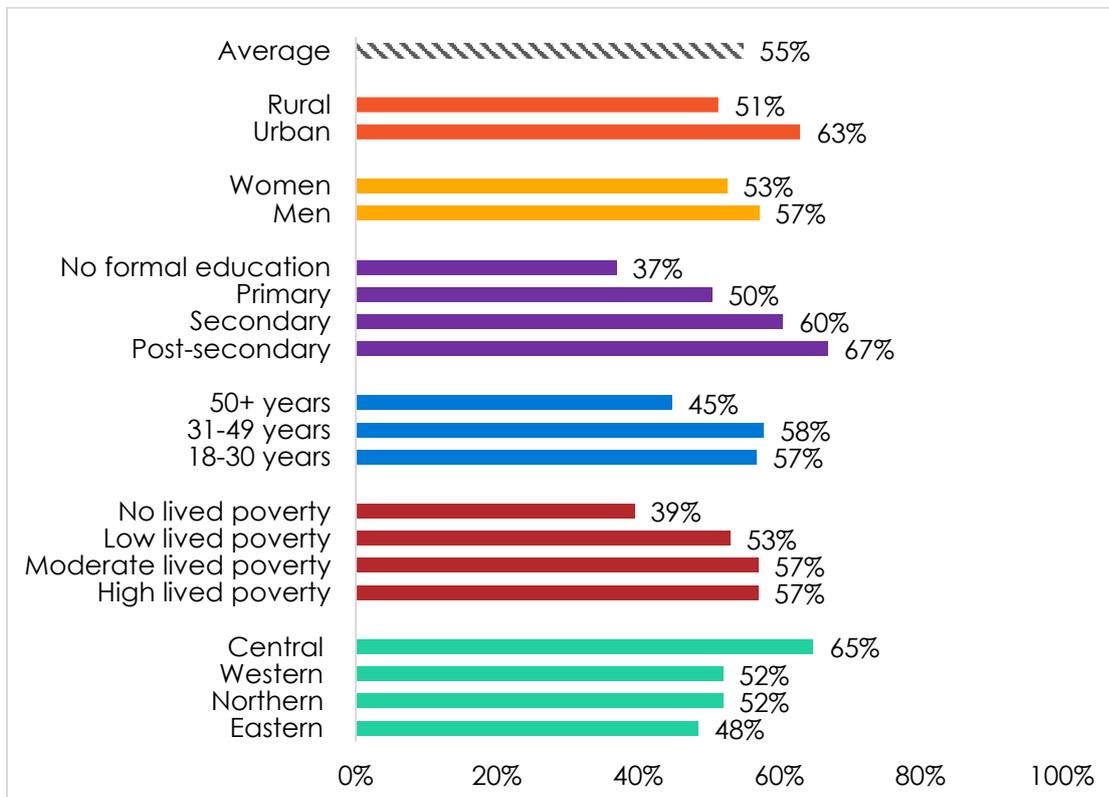
regions (48%-52%) (Figure 4). Loss of income was more common among more educated respondents, ranging from 37% of those with no formal schooling to 67% of those with post-secondary qualifications. But it was a less common experience among the economically well-off (39%) than among more disadvantaged citizens (53%-57%).

**Figure 3: Impacts of the pandemic | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

**Figure 4: Lost income due to the pandemic | Uganda | 2021**



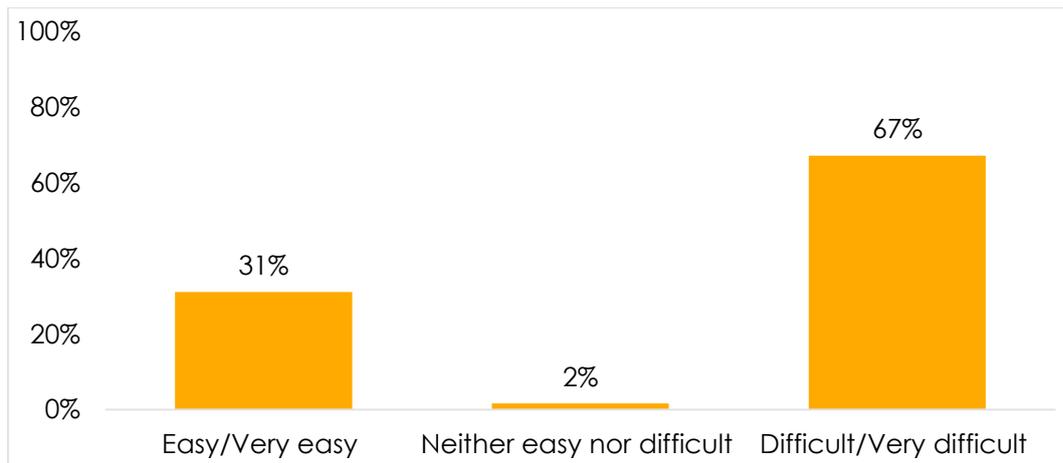
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income? (% "yes")

## Lockdowns and school closures

Two-thirds (67%) of Ugandans say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with lockdown restrictions or curfews imposed by the government to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 5).

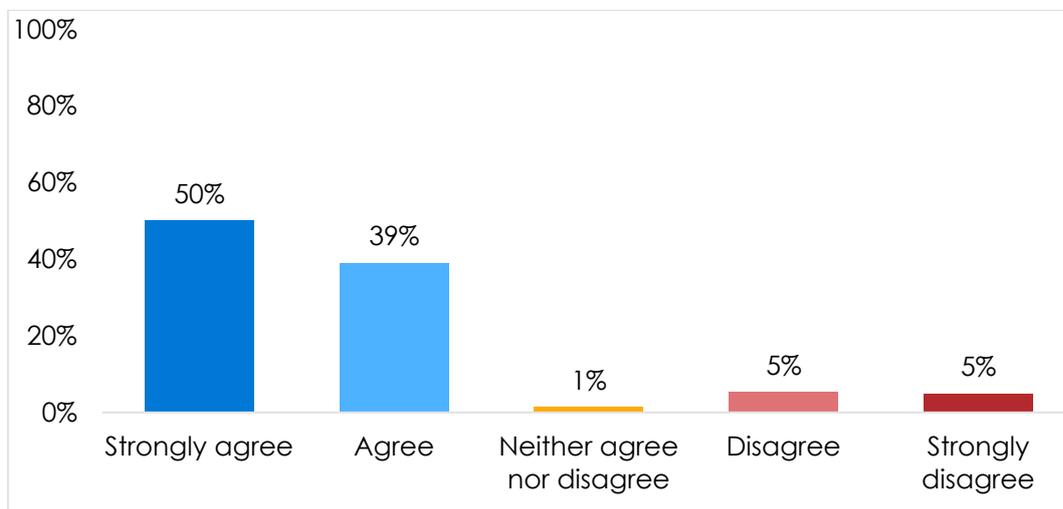
Even so, about nine in 10 (89%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the lockdown was necessary, in spite of the toll it took on the economy and people’s livelihoods (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Difficulty of complying with lockdown** | Uganda | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

**Figure 6: Support for lockdown** | Uganda | 2021

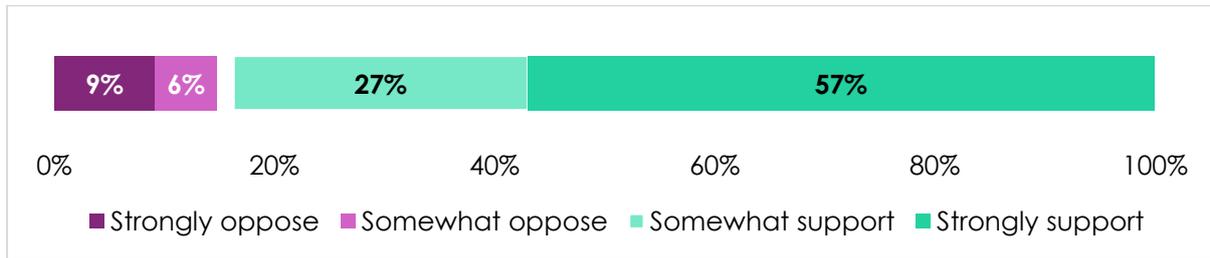


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19?

Likewise, more than eight in 10 citizens (84%) “somewhat support” or “strongly support” the closure of schools to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 7).

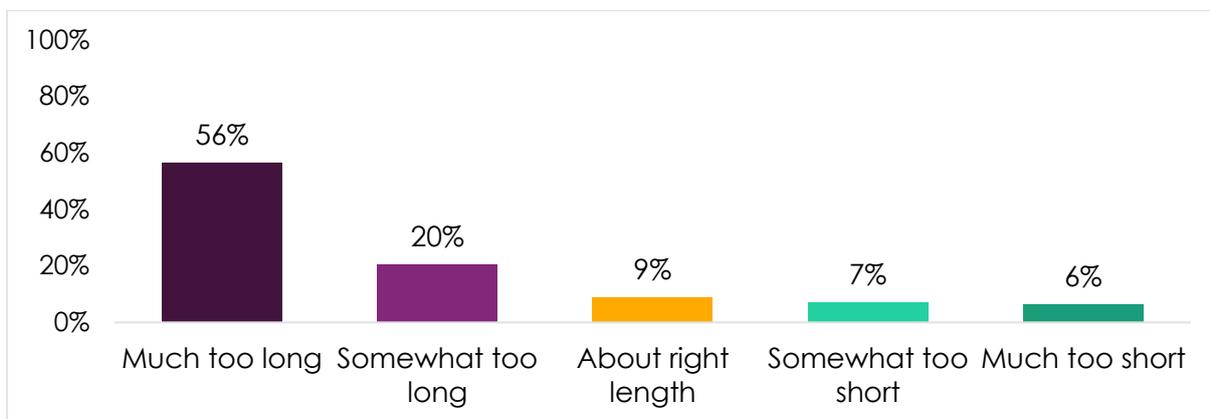
But three-fourths (76%) say the period during which schools were closed was “somewhat too long” (20%) or “much too long” (56%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 7: Support for school closures | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19?

**Figure 8: Length of school closures | Uganda | 2021**

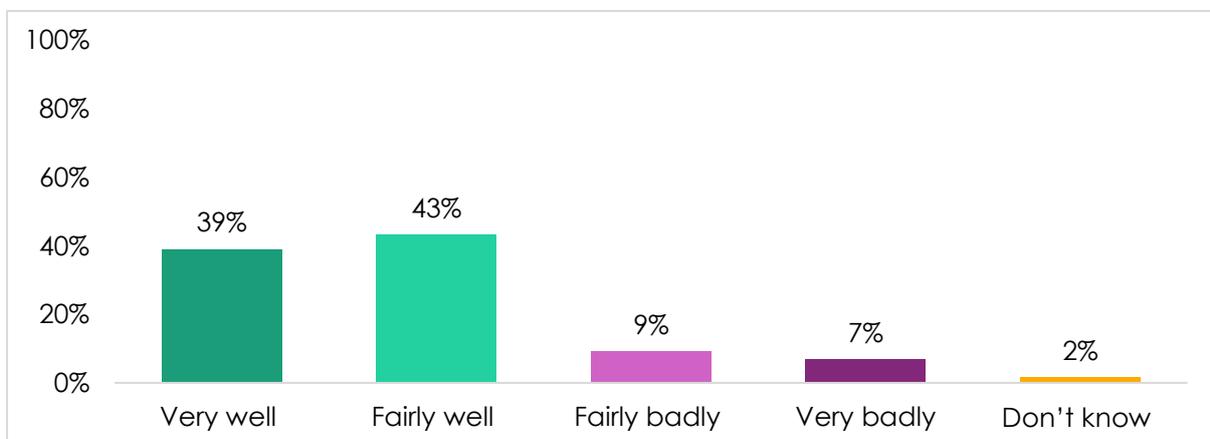


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

### Government assistance and performance

Most Ugandans (82%) say the government has done "fairly well" or "very well" in managing the response to the pandemic (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Government performance in managing the COVID-19 response | Uganda | 2021**

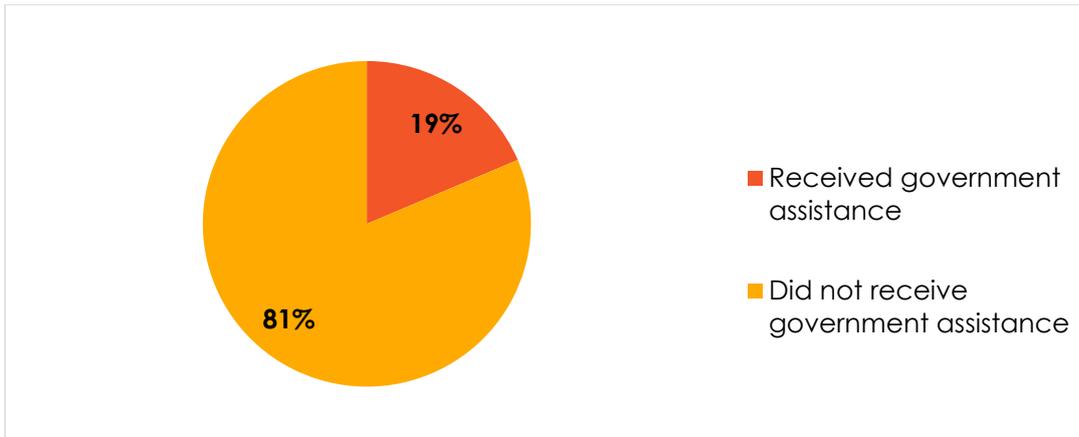


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

However, views on specific aspects of the pandemic response suggest a number of shortcomings. Only two in 10 Ugandans (19%) say they or their households received special government assistance to help them weather the pandemic (Figure 10).

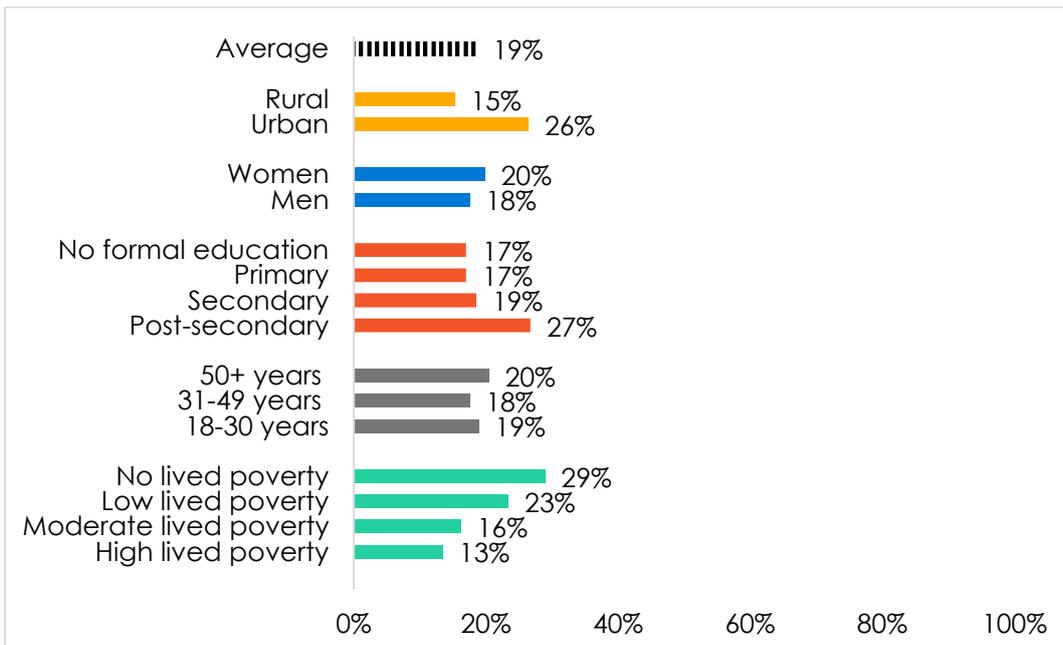
Findings suggest that government assistance did not prioritize the most vulnerable households. According to survey responses, assistance was more likely to go to urban residents (26%, vs. 15% of rural residents), citizens with post-secondary education (27%, vs. 17%-19% of those with less schooling), and the economically best-off (29%, vs. just 13% of the poorest respondents) (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Received government assistance | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

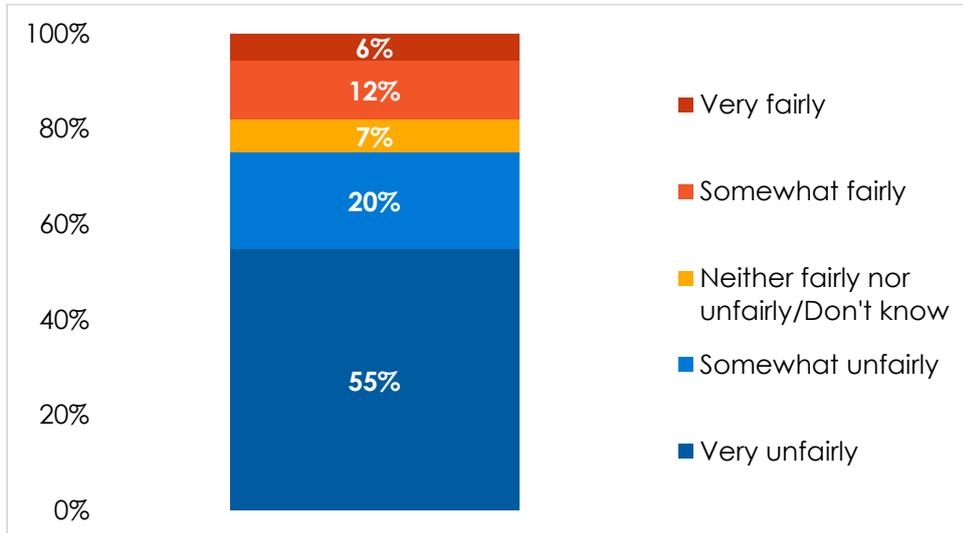
**Figure 11: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% "yes")

Three-fourths (75%) of citizens say the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic were not distributed fairly. This includes a majority (55%) who think the benefits were distributed “very unfairly” (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Fairness of government assistance | Uganda | 2021**

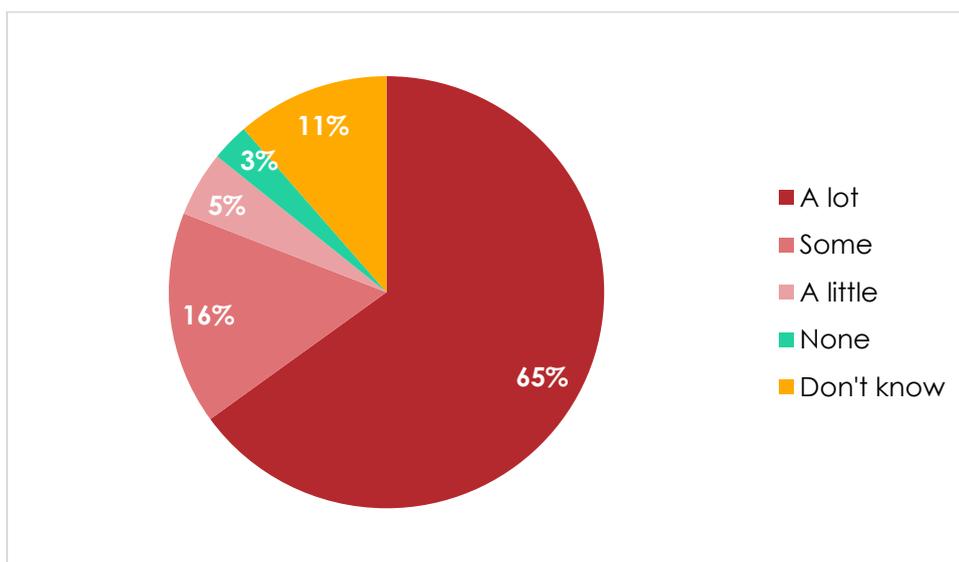


**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favouring certain groups or regions?

A large majority (81%) also believe that “a lot” (65%) or “some” (16%) of the resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to government corruption (Figure 13).

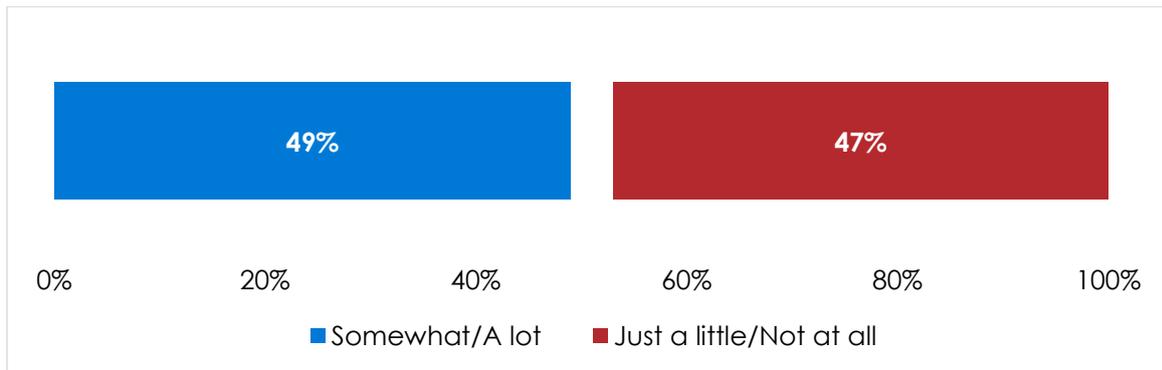
And only about half (49%) of Ugandans say they trust the government’s statistics on COVID-19 cases and deaths “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 14).

**Figure 13: COVID-19 resources lost to government corruption | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combating and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials?

**Figure 14: Trust in government COVID-19 statistics | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

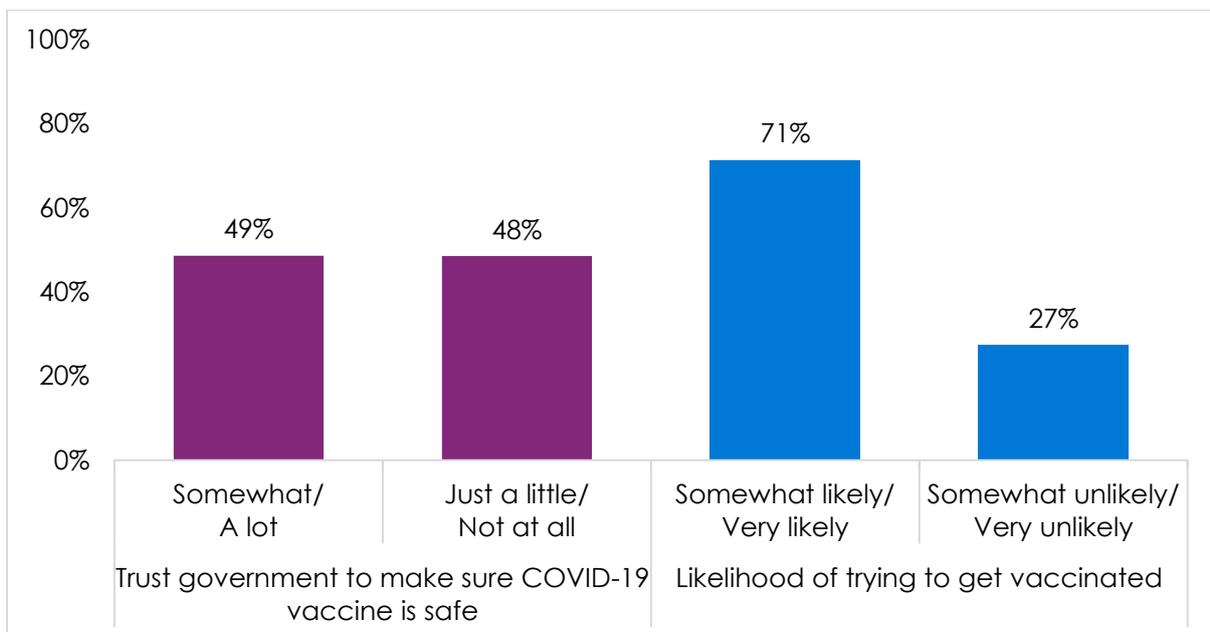
### Vaccines

Despite controversy and misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, an Africa CDC survey found that 79% of Africans would willingly take the vaccine if it were considered safe and effective (Africa CDC, 2020).

In Uganda, Afrobarometer data show that only half (49%) of citizens say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any COVID-19 vaccine is safe before it is used (Figure 15).

Nonetheless, seven in 10 Ugandans (71%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

**Figure 15: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | Uganda | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:**

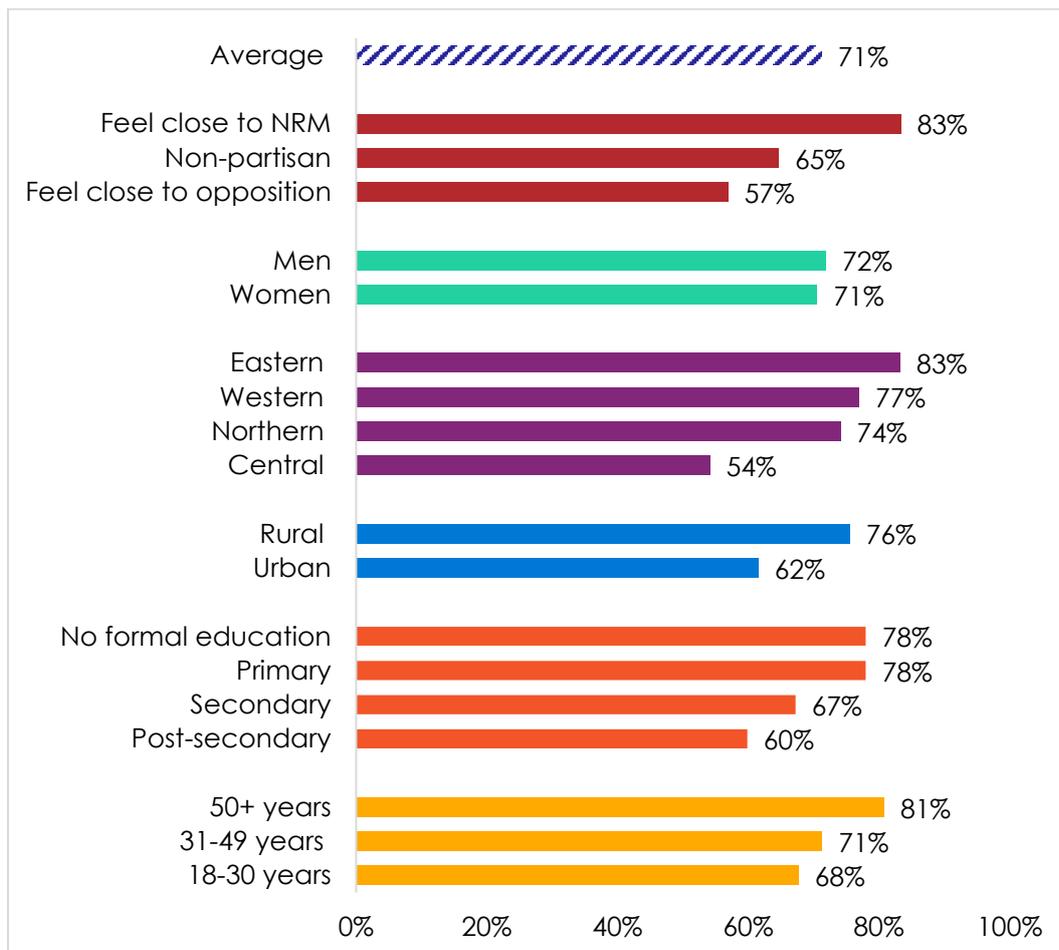
How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Ugandan citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Willingness to take the vaccine seems to decline with respondents' education level, ranging from just 60% of those with post-secondary qualifications to 78% of those with primary or without any formal schooling (Figure 16).

Urban residents are less likely than their rural counterparts to go for vaccination (62% vs. 76%). Vaccine readiness is also relatively low among residents of the Central region (54%), supporters of the political opposition (57%), and youth (68% among 18- to 30-year-olds).

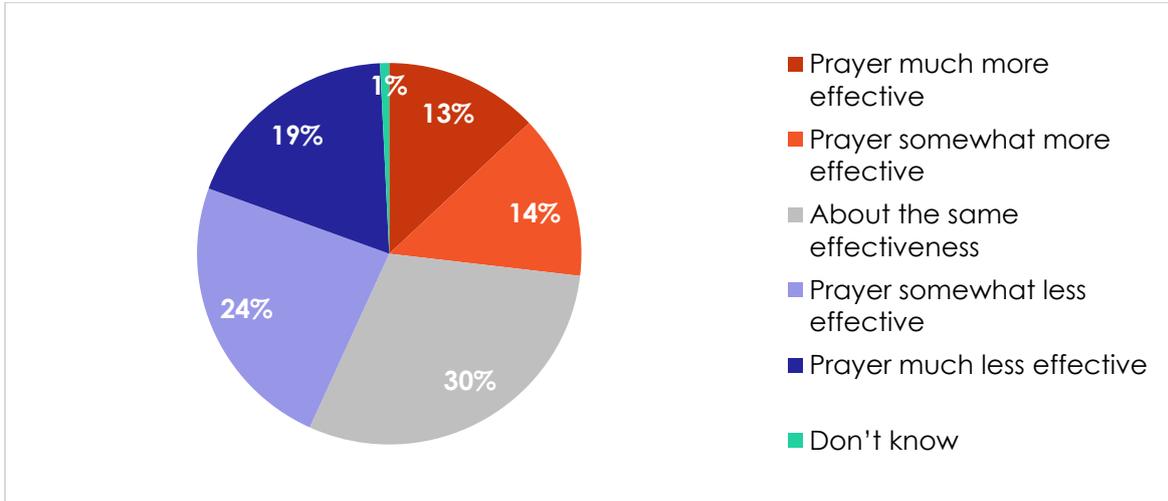
**Figure 16: Likely to try to get vaccinated** | by socio-demographic group  
 | Uganda | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

About one in four citizens (27%) believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection, and 30% consider the two equally effective. A plurality think prayer is "somewhat less" (24%) or "much less" (19%) effective than a vaccine (Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19?**  
 | Uganda | 2021



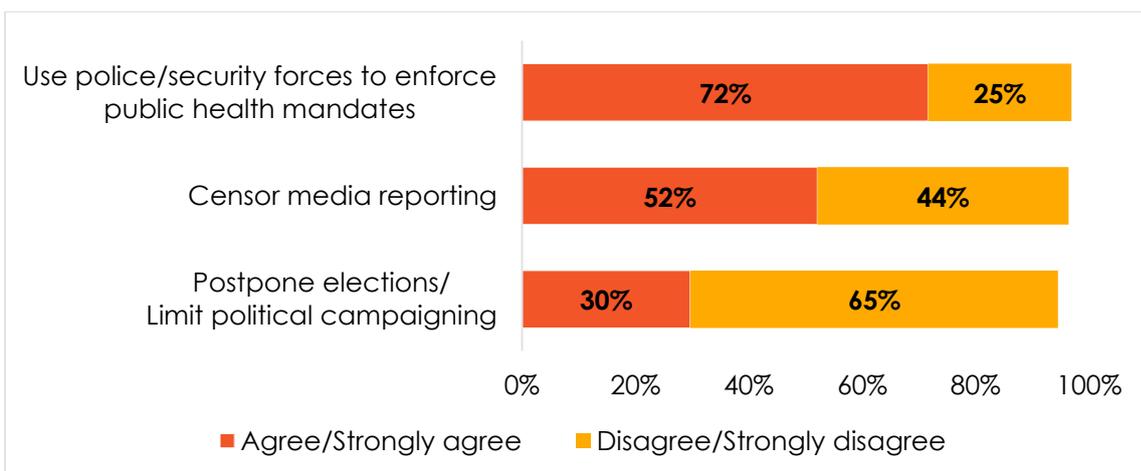
**Respondents were asked:** Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

### Restricting freedoms and democracy?

A majority of Ugandans “agree” or “strongly agree” that in times of a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is justified for the government to use the police or armed forces to enforce public health measures (72%) and to censor media reporting (52%) (Figure 18).

However, about two-thirds (65%) say a pandemic does not justify postponing elections or limiting political campaigning.

**Figure 18: Restrict freedoms during health emergency?** | Uganda | 2021

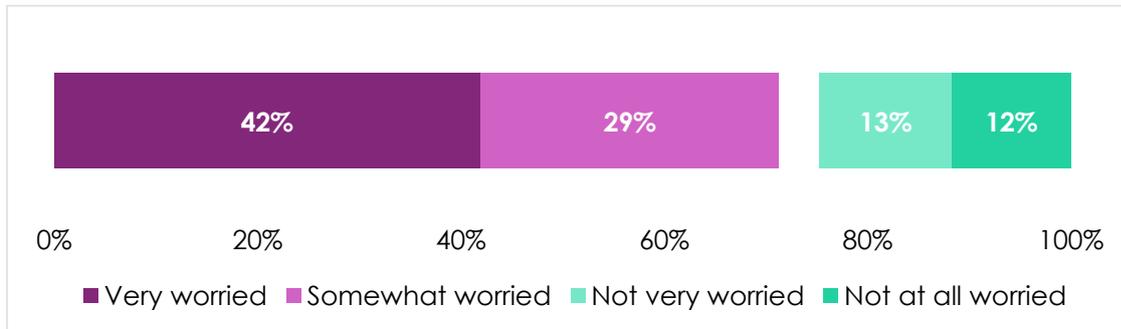


**Respondents were asked:** When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

- Censoring media reporting?
- Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings?
- Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?

Seven in 10 citizens (71%) say they are worried that Ugandan politicians are using or might use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority (Figure 19).

**Figure 19: Worried about politicians' intentions?** | Uganda | 2020



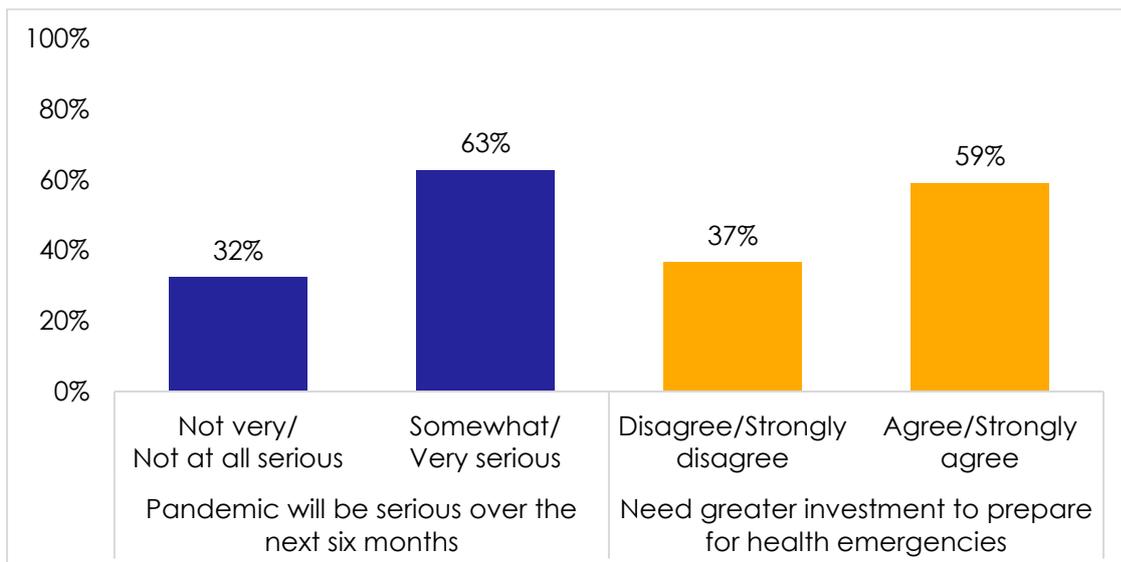
**Respondents were asked:** *In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that the following things are taking place or might take place in Uganda: Politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority?*

### Looking ahead

Even before the recent emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, almost two-thirds (63%) of citizens anticipated that the pandemic would be “somewhat serious” or “very serious” in Uganda in the coming months (Figure 20).

And six in 10 (59%) say the government needs to invest more in preparing to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

**Figure 20: Future impacts of COVID-19** | Uganda | 2021



**Respondents were asked:**

*Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for Uganda over the next six months?*

*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services?*

## Conclusion

A majority of Ugandans approve of the government's management of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdown restrictions, the closure of schools, and the use of security forces to enforce public health mandates.

However, citizens' assessments of specific aspects of the COVID-19 response highlight a number of concerns that may be relevant as the Omicron variant threatens. According to survey responses, pandemic-related assistance was not distributed fairly and reached few of the most vulnerable households. Most people think resources meant for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption, and many worry that politicians will take advantage of the pandemic to increase their power. Fewer than half of citizens trust the government to provide reliable COVID-19 statistics and to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.

Even so, seven in 10 Ugandans say they are likely to take the vaccine – a level of vaccine readiness that might go even higher if the government, civil society, and media continue efforts to sensitize the public and counter anti-vax misinformation.

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