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Half of South Africans would refuse asylum, bar foreign workers, place refugees in camps

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 360 | Dominique Dryding

Summary

Every few years, since 2008, South Africa is rocked by xenophobic violence. Houses are burnt, shops are looted, and people are killed, injured, or forced out of their homes and communities. This violence usually erupts under the pretext that foreigners take opportunities from South Africans.

Recent attacks in Johannesburg, followed by protests in Pretoria and Cape Town, have reignited the debate in South Africa about immigration policy and the rights of immigrants and refugees. Months-long protests in Cape Town, in particular, have drawn attention as refugees and immigrants demanding to be relocated to a third country camped in front of United Nations offices, then were forcibly removed, sheltered at a local church, taken to court and evicted, and moved to a large tent outside town (Mitchley, 2019; Nombembe, 2020; Shoba, 2020; Kiewit, 2020; Stent, 2020).

The increasingly divisive immigration debate has included disagreements about tighter border controls put in place in early 2020 (Business Tech, 2020) that some observers have likened to “creating Trump’s America in South Africa” (Shivji, 2020).

Further complicating the issue, the COVID-19 outbreak has led the government to close 35 of the country’s 72 ports of entry and suspend the issuing and renewal of permits for asylum seekers (Bornman, 2020). The small business development minister announced that only South African spaza shop owners would be allowed to trade during the coronavirus lockdown, but when police shut down some immigrant-owned shops, residents demanded they be reopened because they are the most accessible places to buy goods in the community (Sizani, 2020).

Amid this flurry of – sometimes contradictory – government, police, and community action, how do ordinary South Africans see immigration? Do new policies reflect or go beyond the apprehensions and preferences of South African society?

This dispatch analyzes Afrobarometer data collected in August-September 2018, before the latest immigration incidents and the COVID-19 outbreak, to provide a baseline reading on South Africans’ perceptions of immigrants and refugees. Findings suggest that fully half of the population would turn away political asylum seekers, bar foreigners from working in South Africa, and place refugees in camps rather than integrate them into communities.

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. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,800 adult South Africans in August-September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

Key findings

- As of mid-2018, close to half (48%) of South Africans “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the idea that the country should always admit people who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries. This opposition to political asylum was strongest in the North West (65%) and KwaZulu-Natal (58%) provinces.
- Half (50%) of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that foreigners should not be allowed to work in South Africa because they take jobs away from citizens.
 - Views on foreign workers do not appear to be associated with respondents’ employment status or assessments of economic conditions. But better-off citizens, those with post-secondary education, and urban residents were less welcoming to foreign workers than their poor, less-educated, and rural counterparts.
- One in two South Africans (48%) said that placing refugees in camps is a good way of managing the influx of people into the country. Again, wealthier, more-educated, and urban respondents were more supportive of such a policy.
- Three in 10 respondents (29%) said they would dislike having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours, one of the highest levels of intolerance among 34 surveyed countries.
- A majority (62%) of South Africans said the government is managing immigration badly, a slight improvement since 2015.

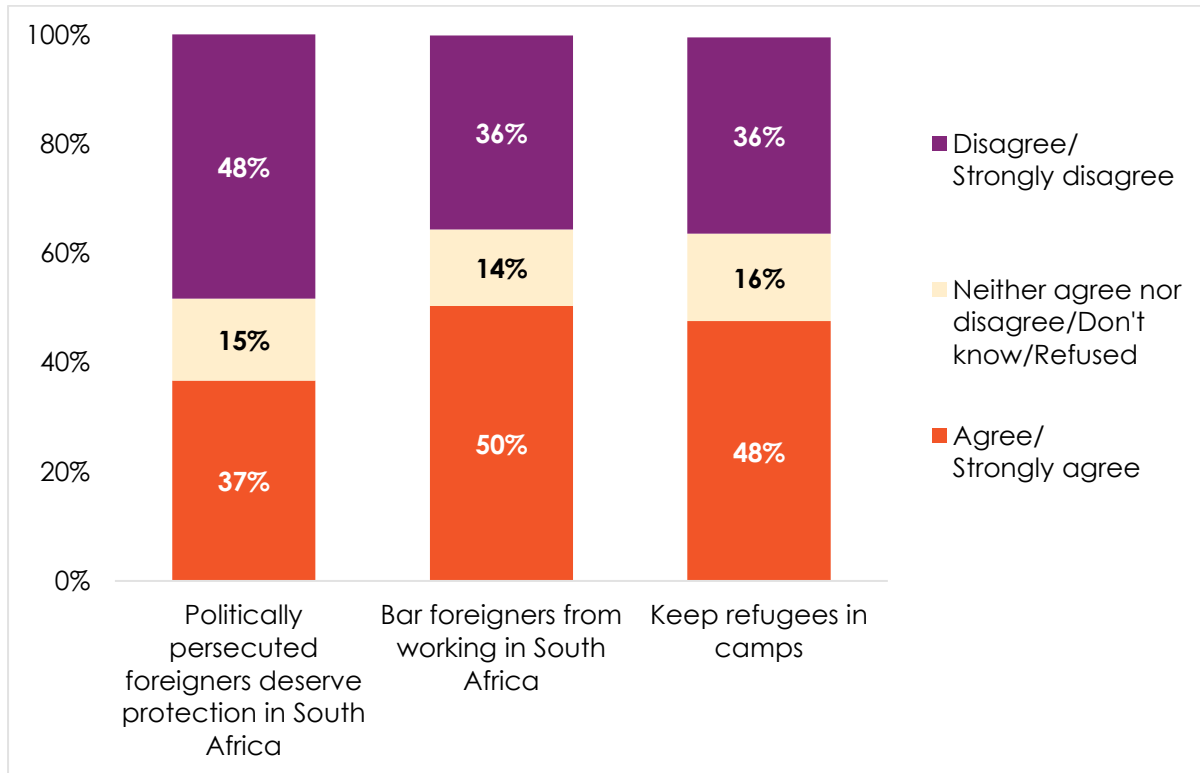
South Africans reject full integration of foreigners

Unlike many African countries that house refugees in camps, South Africa has tried to integrate refugees and immigrants into local communities (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2011). While this integration policy has afforded new arrivals more opportunities for settling and finding income sources, it can also leave them at risk of isolation and attack (Smit, 2015).

In recent years, this approach has been called into question by South Africans who accuse refugees and immigrants of taking jobs from citizens and contributing to high levels of crime, drug use, and prostitution (Heleta, 2019).

Afrobarometer findings show strong anti-foreigner attitudes in South Africa (Figure 1). Half (50%) of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the government should not allow foreigners to work in the country “because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans.” Close to half (48%) “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the idea that South Africa should always accept people who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries. The same proportion of South Africans (48%) said that refugee camps would be a good way to manage the influx of people into the country.

Figure 1: Attitudes toward refugees and immigrants | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't heard enough to say:

South Africa should always accept people who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries?

The government should not allow foreigners to work in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans?

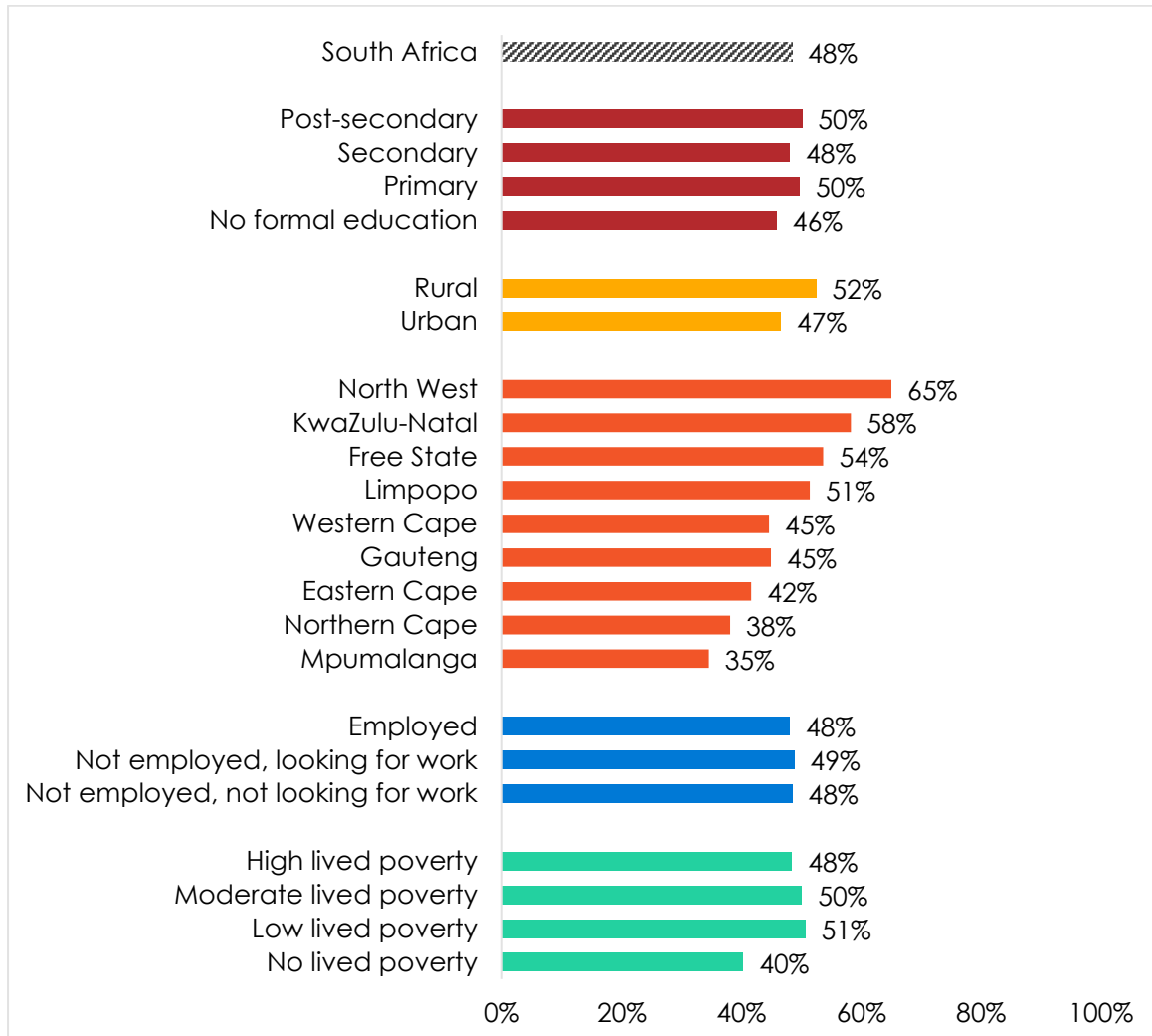
The government proposal to keep all refugees in camps is a good way of managing the influx of people into the country?

Opposition to accepting political asylum seekers was somewhat stronger in rural areas than in cities (52% vs. 47%) and among those with some level of lived poverty¹ (48%-51%) compared to the economically best-off respondents (40%) (Figure 2). Views did not differ by respondents' employment status.

People from the North West (65%) and KwaZulu-Natal (58%) provinces were most averse to accepting political asylum seekers, while Mpumalanga was the only province where a majority (53%) agreed that South Africa should always provide political asylum.

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 (2020).

Figure 2: Should not accept political asylum seekers | by socio-demographic group
 | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't heard enough to say: South Africa should always accept people who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries? (% who "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed")

Regarding allowing foreigners to work in South Africa, survey findings go against the common narrative that the least educated and youngest in society are the most intolerant because

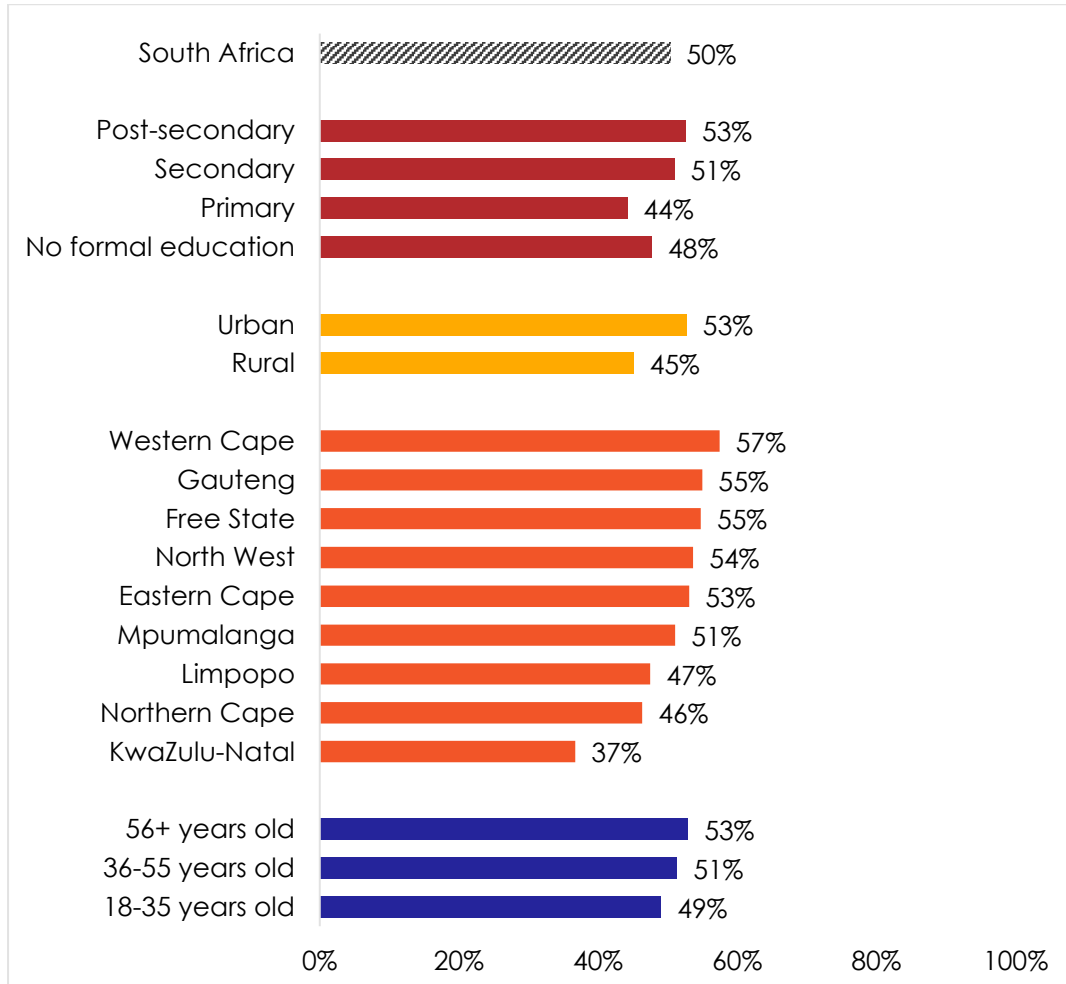
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they fear competition for unskilled work (Figure 3). In fact, respondents with post-secondary education were more likely to support a ban on foreign workers (53%) than their less-educated counterparts (44%-51%). And support for blocking foreign workers increased slightly with age, from 49% among 18- to 35-year-olds to 53% among those over age 55.

Urban residents (53%) were more likely than rural dwellers (45%) to favour barring foreigners from working in the country.

Geographically, the Western Cape (57%), Gauteng (55%), and the Free State (55%) were least accepting of foreign workers, while KwaZulu-Natal (37%) was most welcoming.

Figure 3: Should not allow foreigners to work | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018

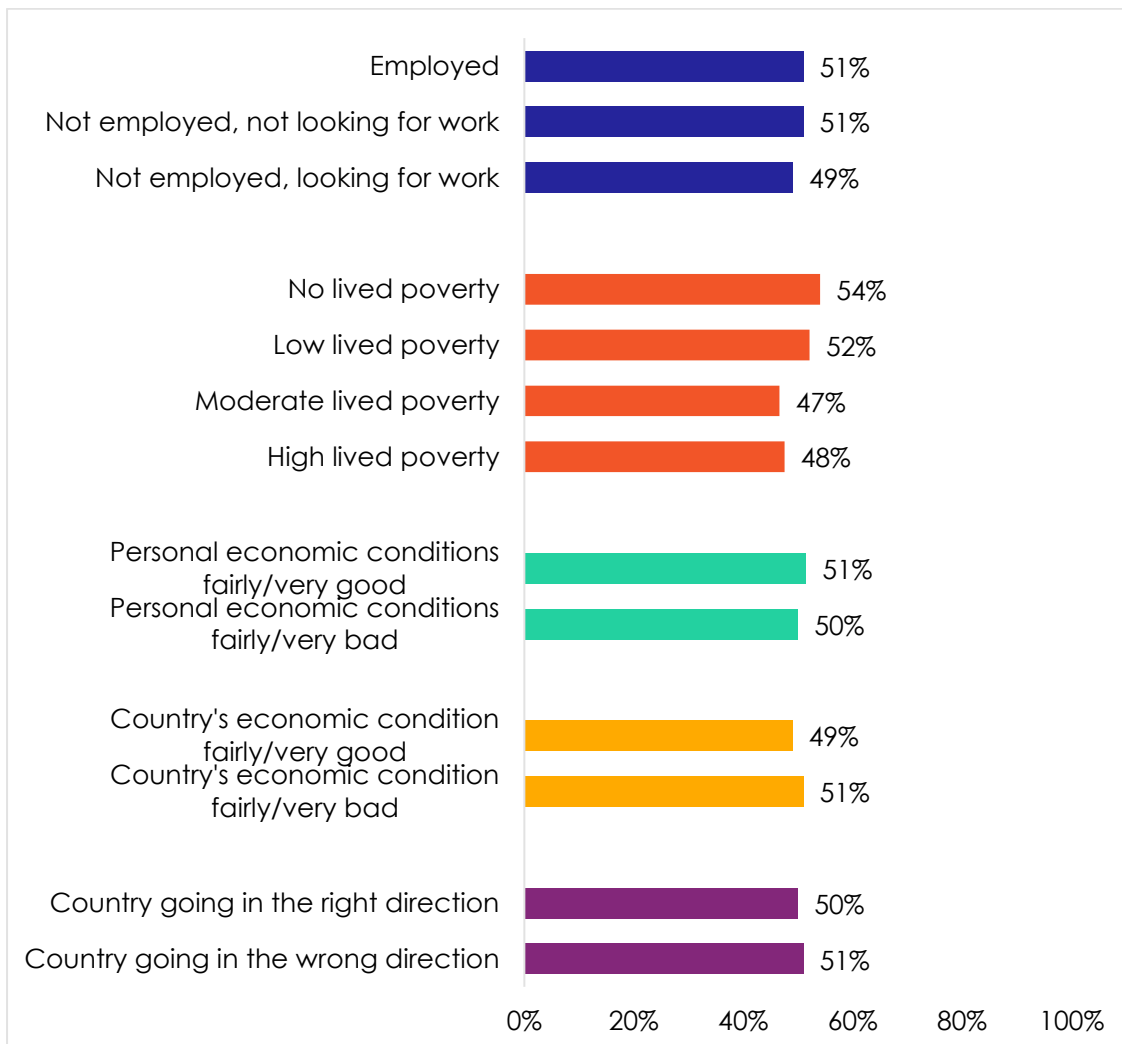


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't heard enough to say: The government should not allow foreigners to work in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans? (% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed")

Respondents' employment status and assessments of economic conditions seem to make no difference in their views on whether foreigners should be allowed to work in South Africa (Figure 4). For example, respondents who saw the country as going in the right direction and economic conditions (both national and personal) as good were just as unwelcoming to foreign workers as were those who saw the country as going in the wrong direction and economic conditions as bad.

Poor respondents (47%-48%) were slightly less likely than their better-off counterparts (52%-54%) to support barring foreign workers.

Figure 4: Should not allow foreigners to work | by economic circumstances and assessments | South Africa | 2018



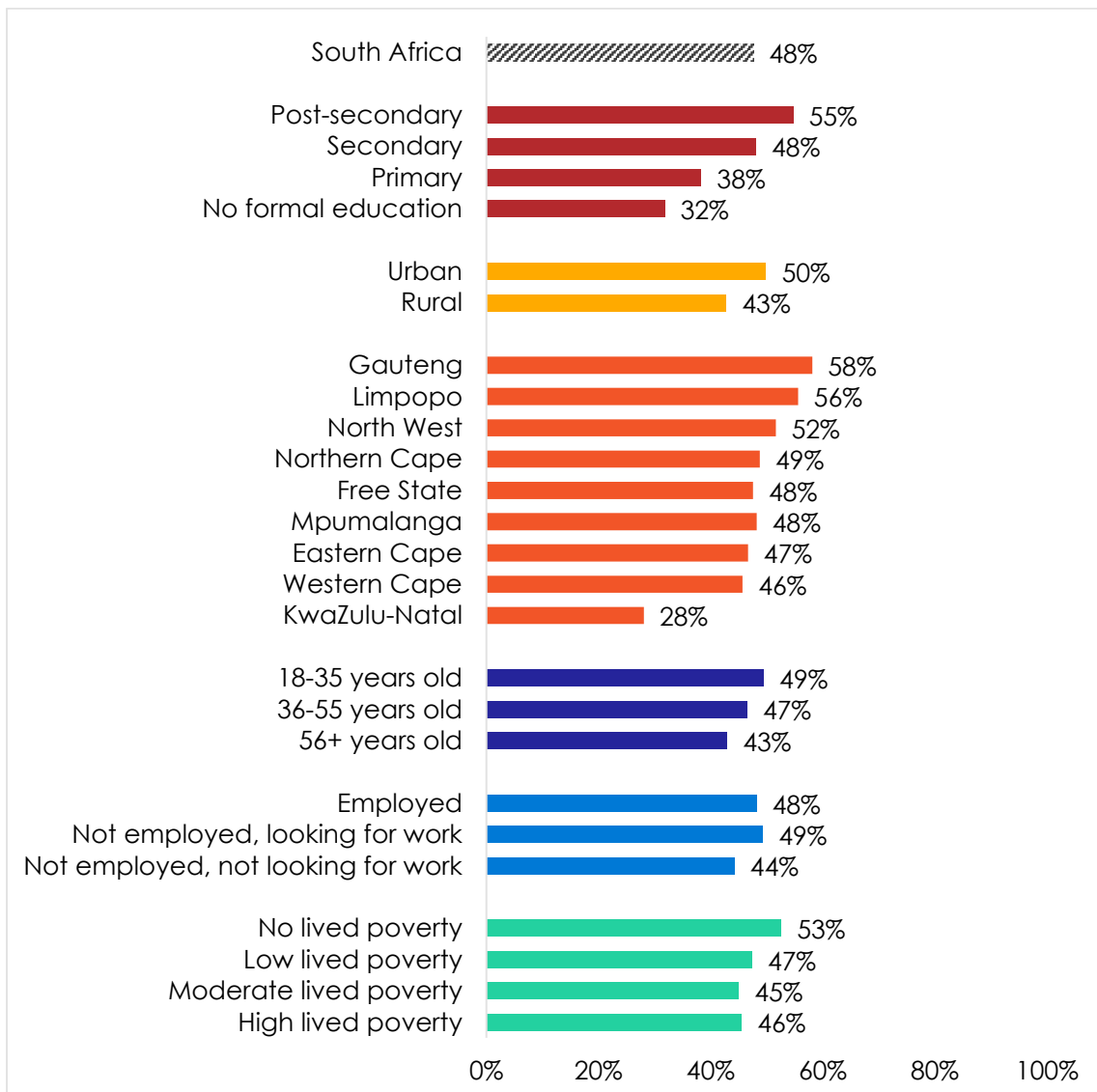
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't heard enough to say: The government should not allow foreigners to work in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans? (%)

During the political campaigns of 2019, immigration and border policy was highly politicized. The right-wing Freedom Front Plus party went so far as to promise, should it win the election, to place foreigners in refugee camps rather than integrating them into society (Heleta, 2019). While close to half (48%) of South Africans "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this position, opinions varied across socio-demographic groups (Figure 5). More than half (55%) of people with a post-secondary education said that refugee camps are a good way of managing the influx of people into the country, but only one-third (32%) of those with no formal education felt the same way.

Camps were also more popular among urban residents (50%), young respondents (49%), and economically better-off citizens (53%) than among their rural, older, and poor counterparts.

Gauteng residents (58%) were the most likely to agree that refugee camps are a good measure for influx control.

Figure 5: Refugees should be placed in refugee camps | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018

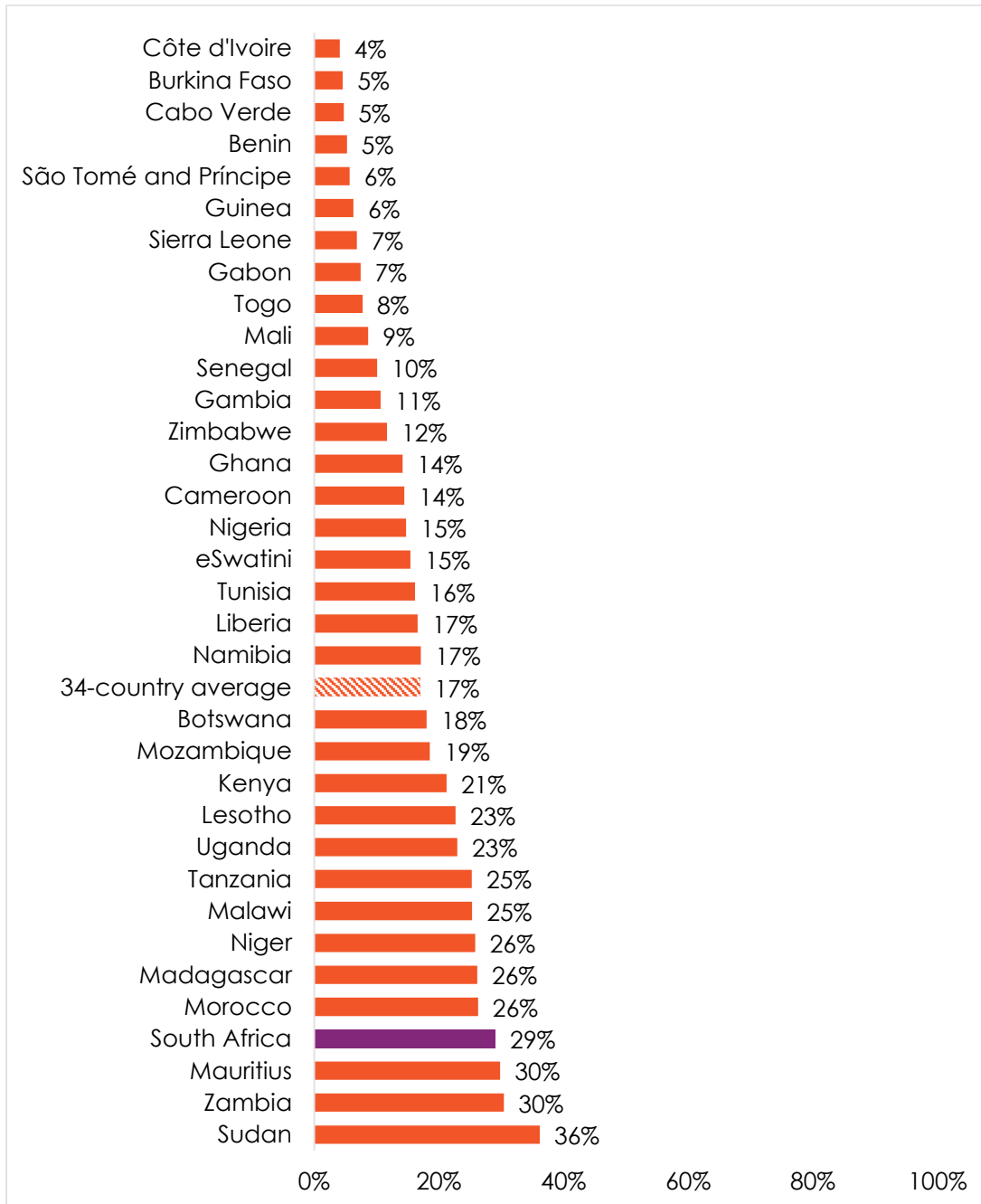


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't heard enough to say: The government proposal to keep all refugees in camps is a good way of managing the influx of people into the country? (% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed")

South Africa remains one of the least tolerant countries in Africa

As in previous Afrobarometer surveys, South Africa remains one of the continent's least tolerant countries when it comes to having foreigners as neighbours (Chingwete, 2016; Krönke, 2015). Three out of 10 respondents (29%) said they would "somewhat dislike" or "strongly dislike" living next to an immigrant or foreign worker. Among the 34 countries that Afrobarometer surveyed between late 2016 and late 2018, South Africa ranked fourth-highest on this measure of intolerance, surpassed only by Sudan (36%), Zambia (30%), and Mauritius (30%) (Figure 6).

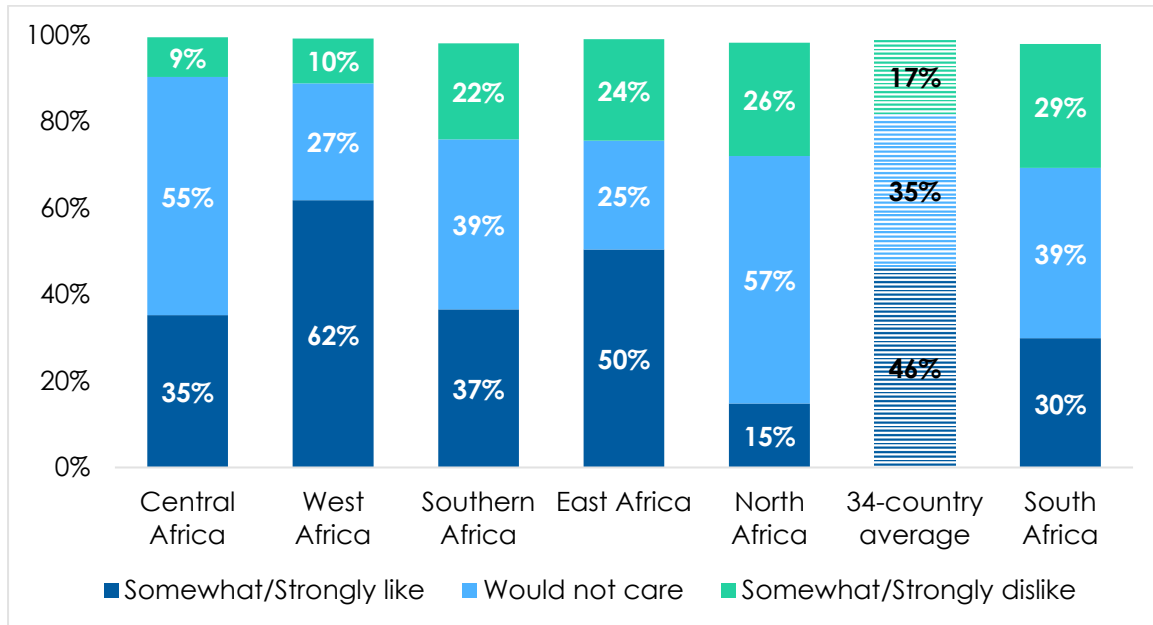
Figure 6: Would dislike having foreigners as neighbours | 34 countries | 2016/2018



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? (% who said “somewhat dislike” or “strongly dislike”)

Central and West Africa were the regions most tolerant of foreigners, with only 9% and 10% of respondents, respectively, saying they would dislike having foreigners as neighbours (Figure 7). This may reflect the relatively high level of integration, with relatively porous national borders, in these regions. North Africa (26%), East Africa (24%), and Southern Africa (22%) were much less tolerant of having foreigners as neighbours.

Figure 7: Attitudes toward having foreigners as neighbours | by region | 34 countries | 2016-2018

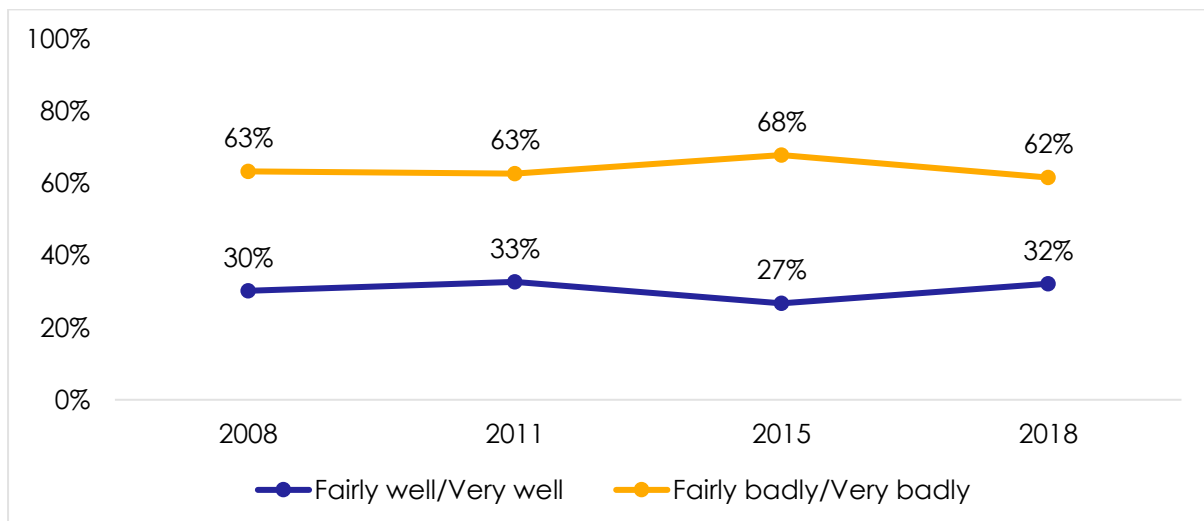


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers?

Government gets poor marks on managing immigration

More than six in 10 South Africans (62%) said the government was managing immigration “fairly badly” or “very badly,” an assessment that has remained fairly consistent since 2008 (Figure 8). This negative perception actually decreased by 6 percentage points after a peak of 68% in 2015, though given South Africans’ expressed intolerance toward foreigners, the perceived improvement might be due to more exclusionary and “anti-African” immigration policies.

Figure 8: Government performance in managing immigration | South Africa | 2008-2018



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing immigration?

Conclusion

South African remains one of the least welcoming countries in Africa for foreigners. While it is important to remember that sizeable minorities do not share these intolerant attitudes, further research and reflection are needed to unpack reasons and possible remedies for the country's high levels of intolerance. Contrary to frequent media portrayals, the poor and unemployed are not disproportionately unaccepting of foreigners. Rather, the negative sentiment permeates all levels of education, employment status, and levels of poverty. With the COVID-19 crisis making life increasingly difficult for immigrants and South Africans alike, anti-foreigner sentiment is unlikely to change in the near future.

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs a pan-African, non-partisan 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 (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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