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Majority of Sierra Leoneans like universal free education but call for greater investment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 378 | Fredline M'Cormack-Hale, Andrew Lavali, and Hassan Kallon

Summary

Sierra Leone is making significant gains in school enrollment, but learning outcomes, literacy levels, and skills acquisition are among the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2019), Sierra Leone's Human Development Index values place close to the bottom – 181st of 189 countries. While gender parity in enrollment has nearly been reached at the primary and junior secondary school level, girl completion rates still lag behind considerably at the senior secondary school level (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019a).

Although the 2004 Education Act provides for nine years of free and compulsory basic education and the 2007 Child Act recognizes the right to education for every child, free schooling was long limited to primary school. Moreover, parents complained of having to pay bribes and hidden fees to access school services that should have been free.

Since he came to power in 2018, President Julius Maada Bio has made human capital development the cornerstone of his administration's priorities, and the launch of its flagship Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program in August 2018 fulfilled a key campaign promise (Sierra Leone People's Party, 2018). The ambitious FQSE extended free education to the secondary school level. In addition to paying tuition fees, the plan committed to the provision of free textbooks and writing materials; expansion of school feeding at pre- and primary government and government-assisted schools; provision of specialized facilities to accommodate the most vulnerable, particularly girls and the disabled; and the elimination of exam malpractice and other corrupt practices through improved security and governance (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019a; Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2018). Budgetary allocation to education is 22% of total primary expenditures in 2020 (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019b), the highest it has been in years.

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that most Sierra Leoneans support the FQSE policy. A large majority give the government positive ratings for its performance in addressing educational needs (at least before recent school closings due to COVID-19 presented a whole new set of challenges). However, they are split on the quality of education under FQSE and want the government to invest more resources to make the policy a success.

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.

Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 9 and 31 March 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

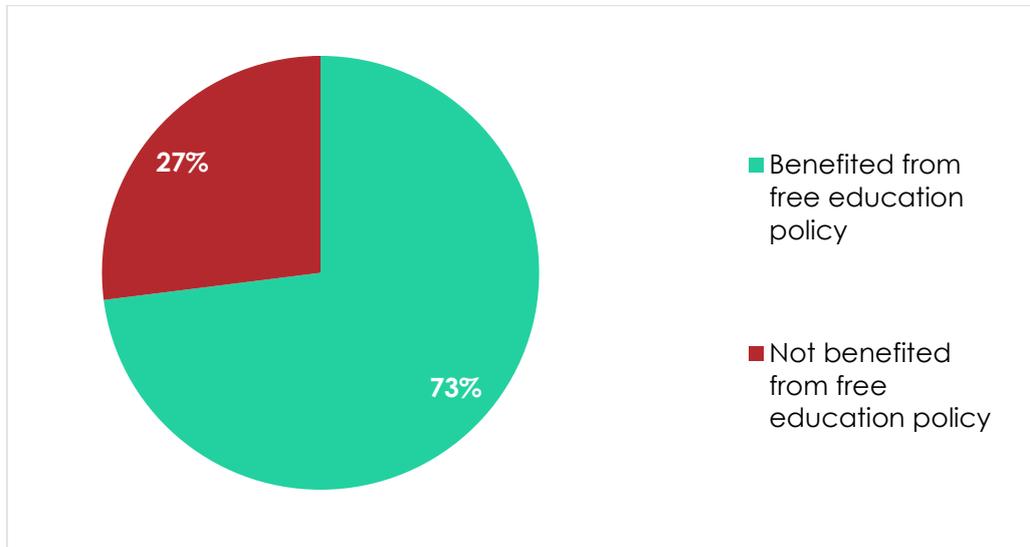
- Almost three-quarters (73%) of Sierra Leoneans say they or a member of their family have benefited directly from the FQSE policy by getting free schooling for children or students in their families.
- But just slightly more than half (53%) think the quality of education has improved “somewhat” or “a lot.” About four in 10 think that education quality has stayed the same (23%) or decreased (18%).
- Seven in 10 Sierra Leoneans (71%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that it is better to have the FQSE even if it leads to an increase in the number of educated citizens who cannot find a job.
 - Majorities oppose the idea that government should save money by limiting the FQSE to pre-primary and primary education (74%) or to serving only the poor (56%).
- Eight in 10 citizens (81%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government needs to invest more resources to ensure that all the necessary facilities, materials, and teachers are available to provide a high-quality education to all students.
- Three-quarters (74%) of citizens say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in addressing the country's educational needs – twice the proportion who held this view in 2015 (38%).

Benefits of the Free Quality School Education policy

An overwhelming majority (73%) of Sierra Leoneans say they or someone in their family have benefited directly from the FQSE program (Figure 1). More rural residents (78%) than urbanites (65%) say the policy has been beneficial. Respondents who are economically well off (those experiencing no lived poverty¹) are more likely to report benefits from the policy (81%) than those who are less well off (70%-73%) (Figure 2).

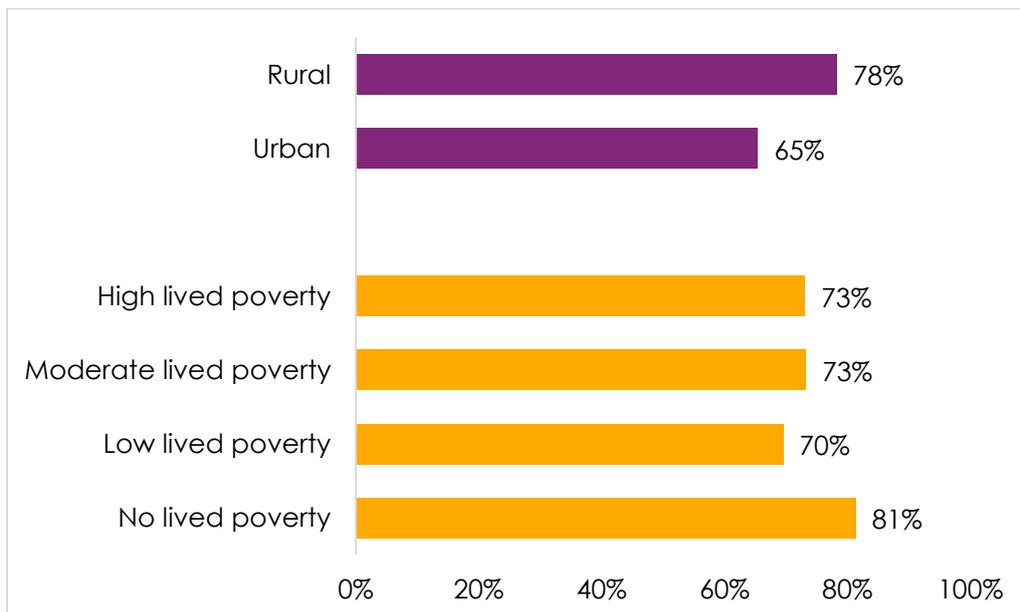
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: Benefited from the FQSE policy | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: Have you or anyone in your family benefited directly from this policy by getting free schooling for children or students in your family?

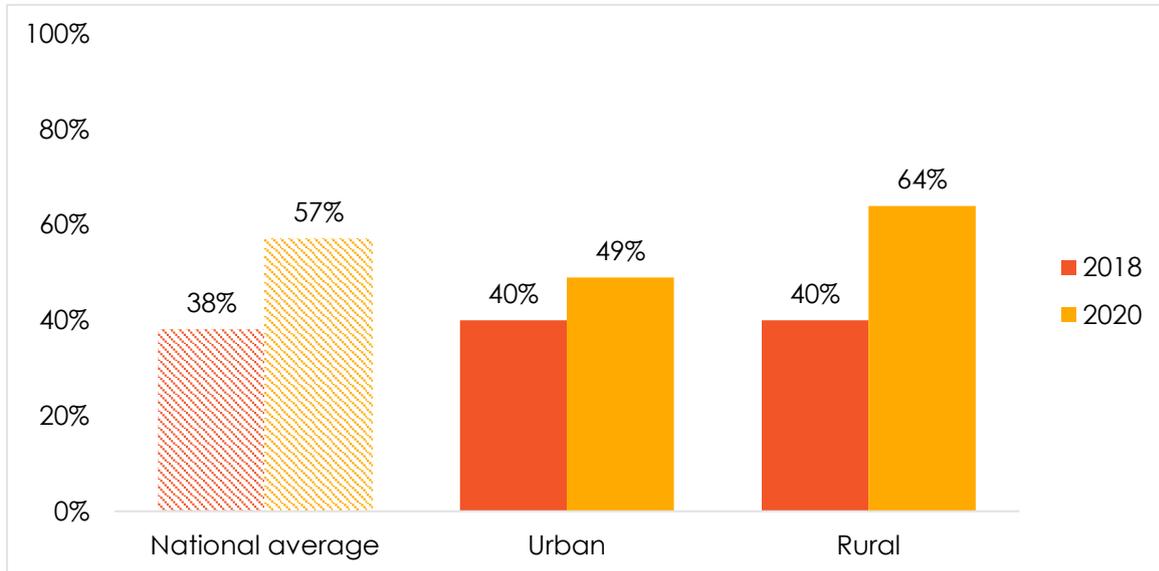
Figure 2: Benefited from the FQSE policy | by rural-urban location and lived poverty | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: Have you or anyone in your family benefited directly from this policy by getting free schooling for children or students in your family? (% who say "yes")

Since the introduction of the FQSE policy, the proportions of Sierra Leoneans who contacted public schools during the previous year has increased substantially, from 38% in 2018 to 57% in 2020 (Figure 3). A much larger increase is recorded among rural residents (24 percentage points) than among urban dwellers (9 percentage points).

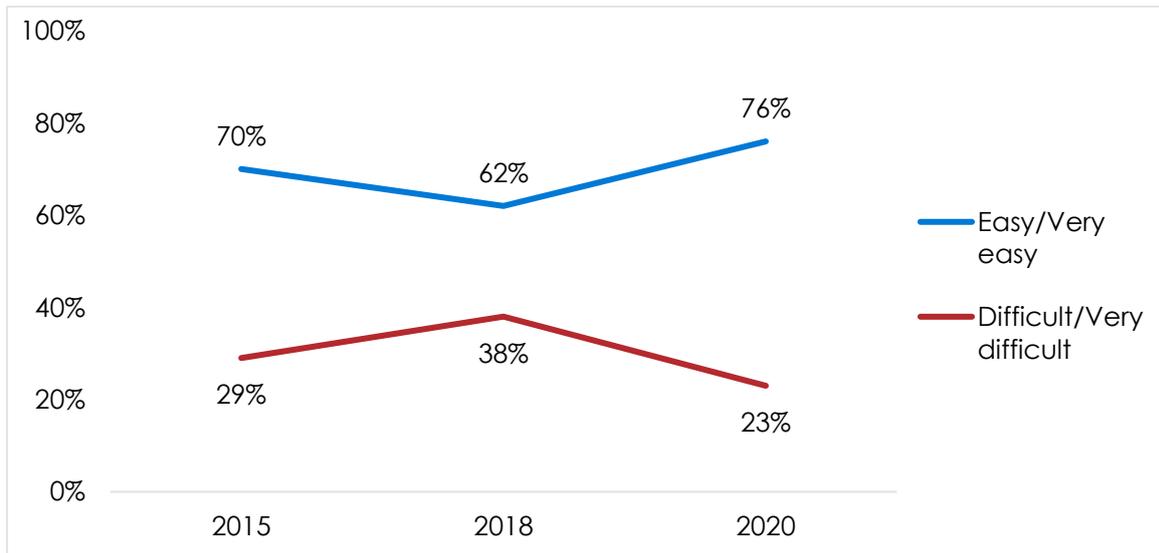
Figure 3: Contact with public schools | by rural-urban location | Sierra Leone | 2018-2020



Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school?

Three-fourths of those who had contact with a public school say they found it “easy” or “very easy” to obtain the services they needed (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Ease of access to public school service | Sierra Leone | 2015-2020

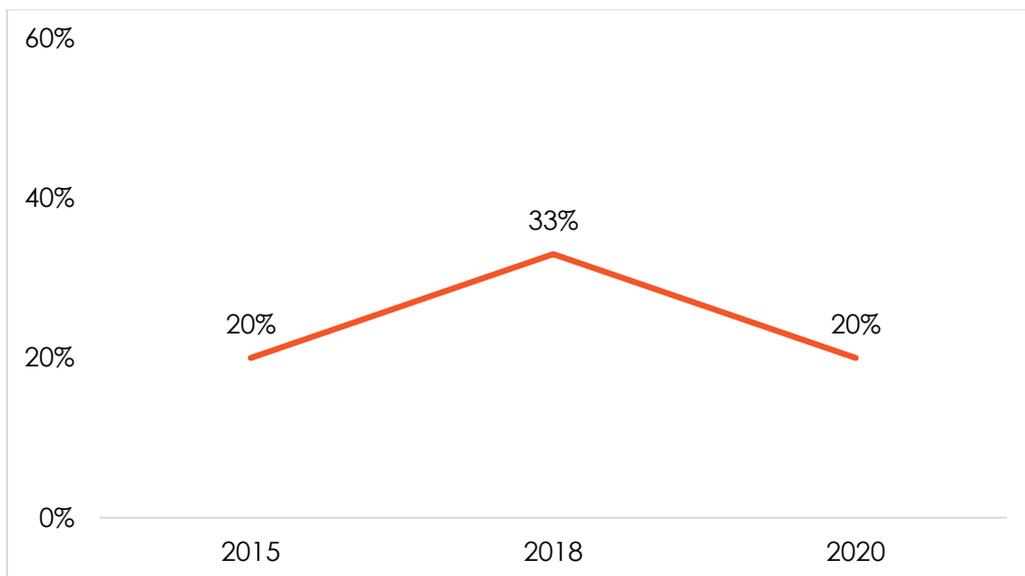


Respondents who had contact with a public school during the previous year were asked: How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed? **Note:** Figure excludes respondents who had no contact with public schools during the previous year.

Weak governance, inefficient public spending, and poor management have often been cited as the greatest barriers to improving education in Sierra Leone (Government of Sierra

Leone, 2019a). In September 2019, for example, the government filed charges against a principal and two teachers for alleged corruption linked to exams (Thomas, 2019). But the recent Afrobarometer survey shows some improvement in the education sector: Among respondents who had contact with a public school during the previous year, two in 10 (20%) say they had to pay a bribe or give a gift in return for school services, a 13-percentage-point drop compared to 2018 (33%) (Figure 5). This follows an increase of the same size between 2015 and 2018.

Figure 5: Paid a bribe to access school services | Sierra Leone | 2015-2020



Respondents who had contact with a public school during the previous year were asked: How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools? (% who say “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often”) **Note:** Figure excludes respondents who had no contact with public schools during the previous year.

Support for the FQSE policy

Although a large majority of citizens have benefited from the FQSE, perceptions of the quality of education under the policy are somewhat less favourable. Slightly more than half (53%) of Sierra Leoneans say the quality of education has improved “somewhat” or “a lot,”

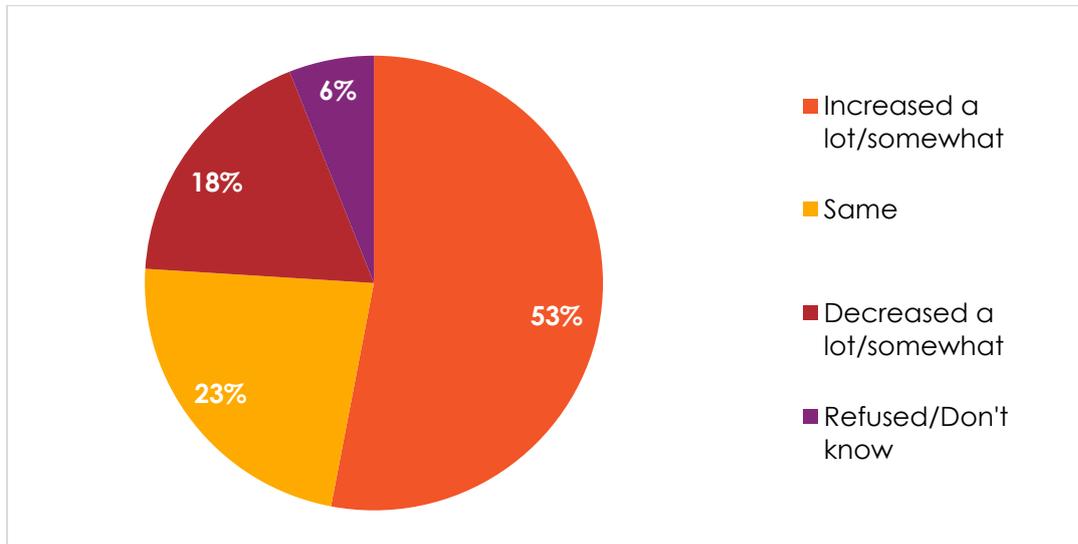
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while about four in 10 think it has stayed the same (23%) or decreased (18%) (Figure 6).

The perception that the quality of education has improved under the FQSE policy is widespread in the governing party’s strongholds – Southern and Eastern regions (73% and 72%,

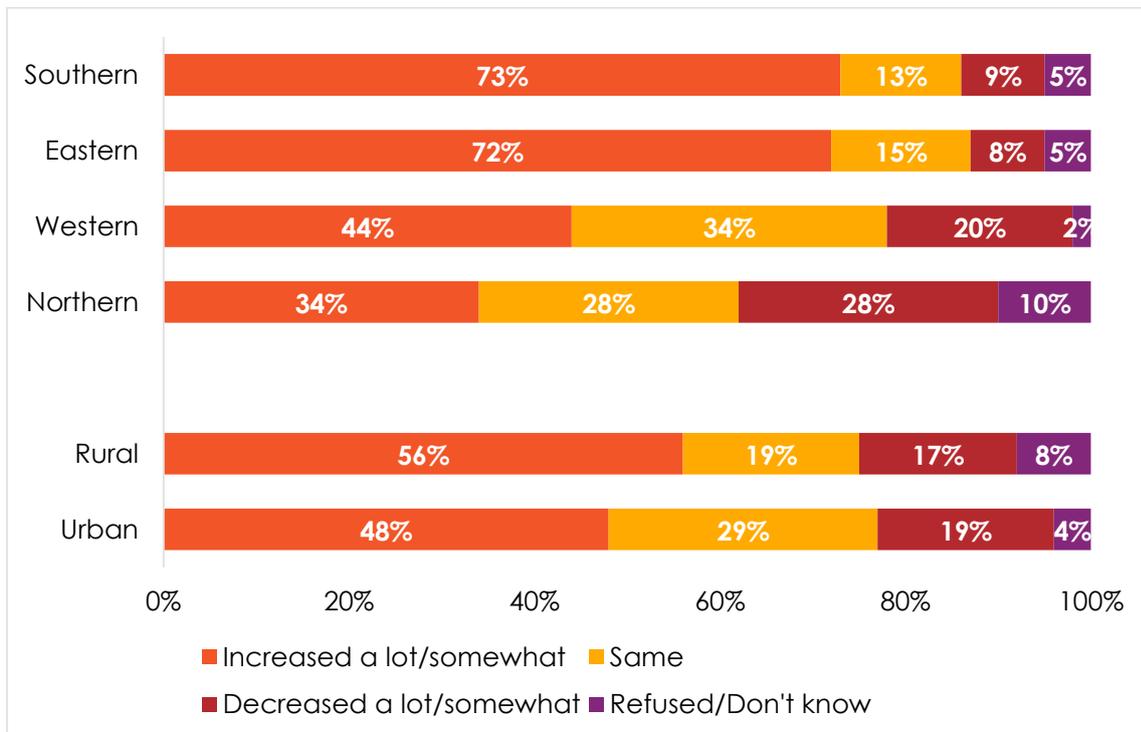
respectively) – whereas far fewer citizens in the Western (44%) and Northern (34%) regions (opposition strongholds) share this view (Figure 7) (Institute for Governance Reform, 2018; Carter Center, 2018). Rural residents are more likely to report improvement than their urban counterparts (56% vs 48%).

Figure 6: Views on quality of education under FQSE | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: Do you think that under the Free Quality School Education policy, the quality of education in Sierra Leone's schools has increased, stayed the same, or decreased, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 7: Views on quality of education under FQSE | by region and rural-urban location | Sierra Leone | 2020

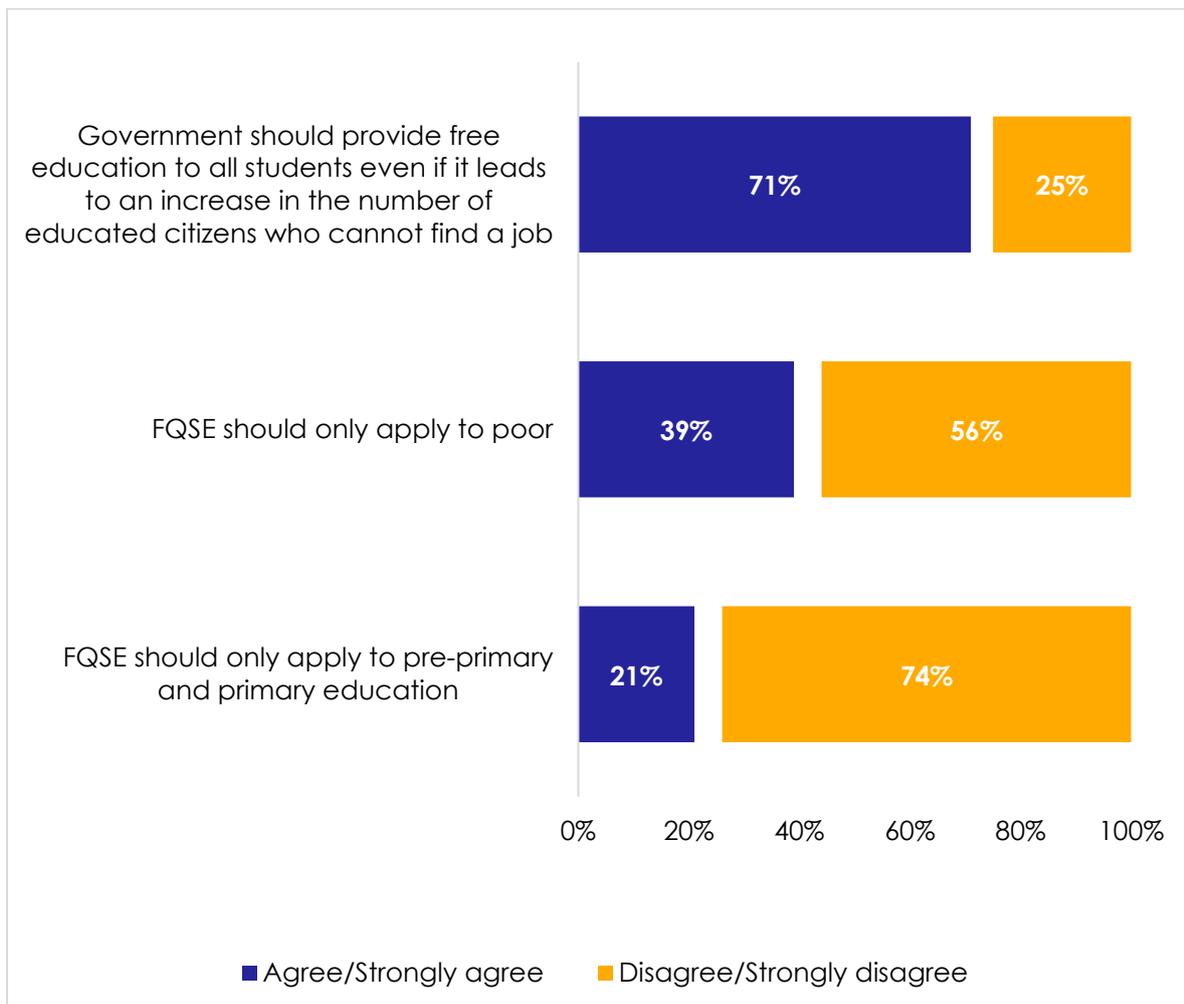


Respondents were asked: Do you think that under the Free Quality School Education policy, the quality of education in Sierra Leone's schools has increased, stayed the same, or decreased, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Despite some reservations about education quality, support for the FQSE policy is high (Figure 8). Seven in 10 Sierra Leoneans (71%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that it is better to have the FQSE even if it leads to an increase in the number of educated citizens who cannot find a job. Only a quarter (25%) “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with this view.

Majorities also oppose limiting the FQSE policy to save money. Three-quarters (74%) “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the idea of applying the FQSE policy only to pre-primary and primary education, rather than including secondary education. And almost six in 10 (56%) oppose applying the policy only to the poor.

Figure 8: Views on the implementation of FQSE | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: Thinking about the future of the Free Quality School Education policy, please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

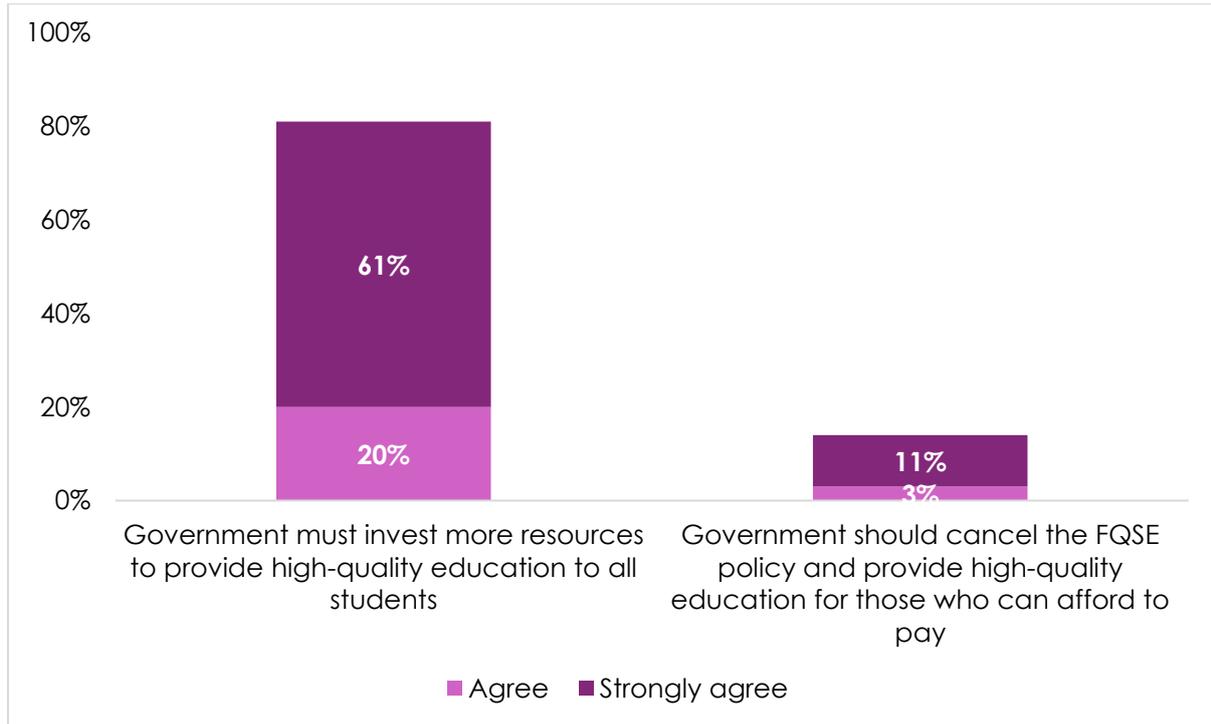
The government should continue to provide free education for all students even if it leads to an increase in the number of educated citizens who cannot find a job.

To save on costs, it would be better if the Free Quality School Education policy only applied to the poor who cannot pay for education, rather than applying to all citizens.

To save on costs, it would be better if the Free Quality School Education policy only applied to pre-primary and primary education, and did not include secondary education.

But while most citizens favour the FQSE policy, an overwhelming majority (81%) believe that the government must invest more resources to ensure that all the necessary facilities, materials, and teachers are available to provide a high-quality education to all students (Figure 9). This includes 61% who “strongly agree” with this view. Only one in seven (14%) say the FQSE policy is too expensive and should be canceled in favour of providing high-quality education for those who can afford to pay.

Figure 9: Investing more resources in education | Sierra Leone | 2020

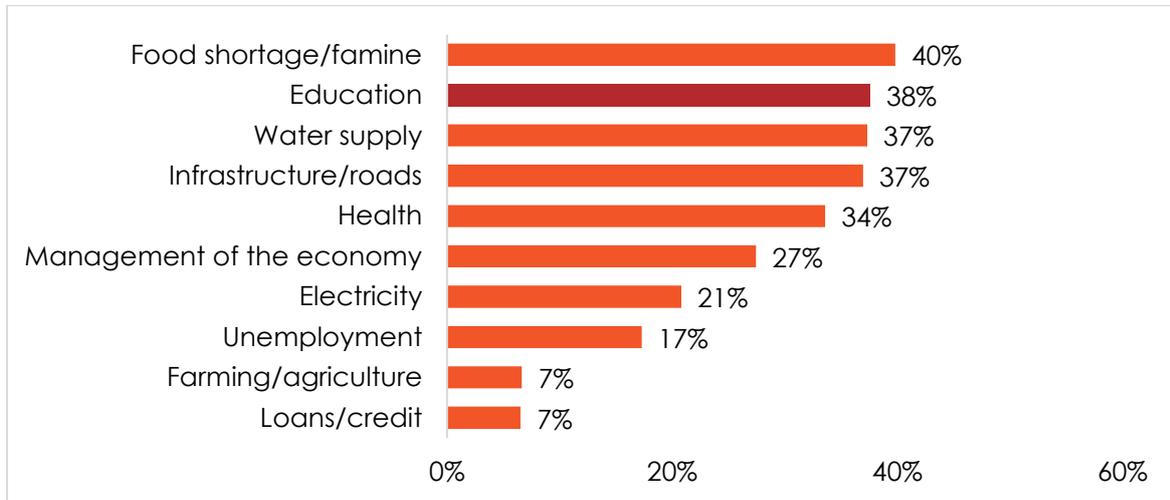


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: To make the free education policy a success, the government must invest more resources in education to ensure that all of the necessary schools, materials, and teachers are available to provide a good quality education to all students.
 Statement 2: The policy of free education for all students is too expensive; the government should cancel the policy and focus on providing high-quality education for those who can afford to pay.

Education as a policy priority and assessment of government performance

Education is the second-most-important problem that citizens want the government to address, cited by 38% of respondents as one of their top three priorities (Figure 10). This is the first time since Afrobarometer surveys began in Sierra Leone that education does not hold the No. 1 spot, taken in 2020 by food shortage/famine.

Figure 10: Top 10 most important problems | Sierra Leone | 2020

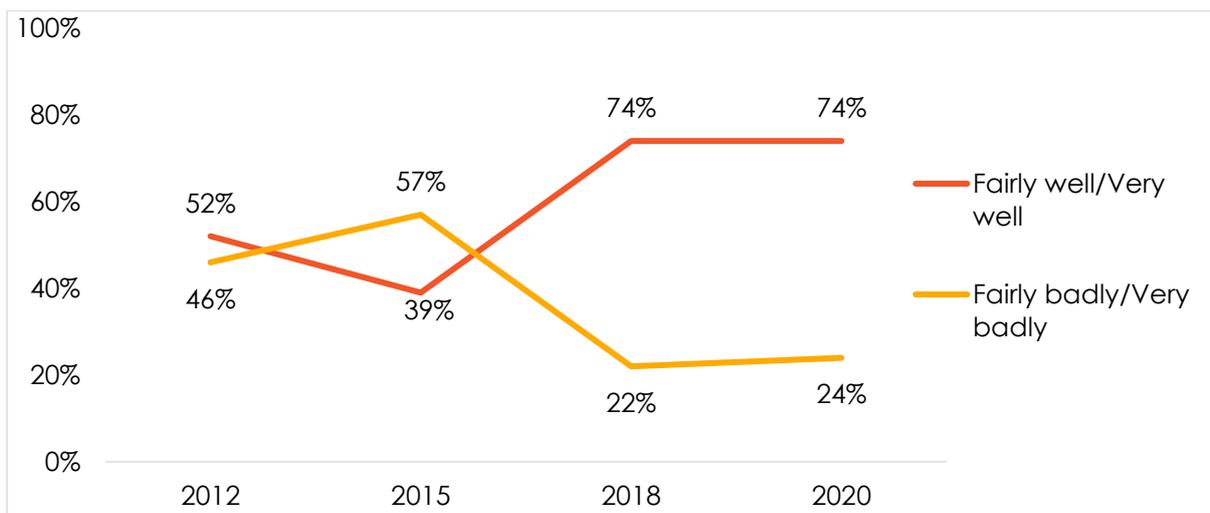


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three answers. Figure shows % who cited each issue among their responses.)

The FQSE was one of the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party's main campaign promises in the last election, and the government has received kudos for its efforts on education since it came to power in 2018. As of March 2020 (i.e. just before school closings due to the COVID-19 pandemic), three-quarters (74%) of citizens said the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in addressing the country's educational needs – the same rating as in 2018, and about twice the approval registered in 2015 (38%) (Figure 11).

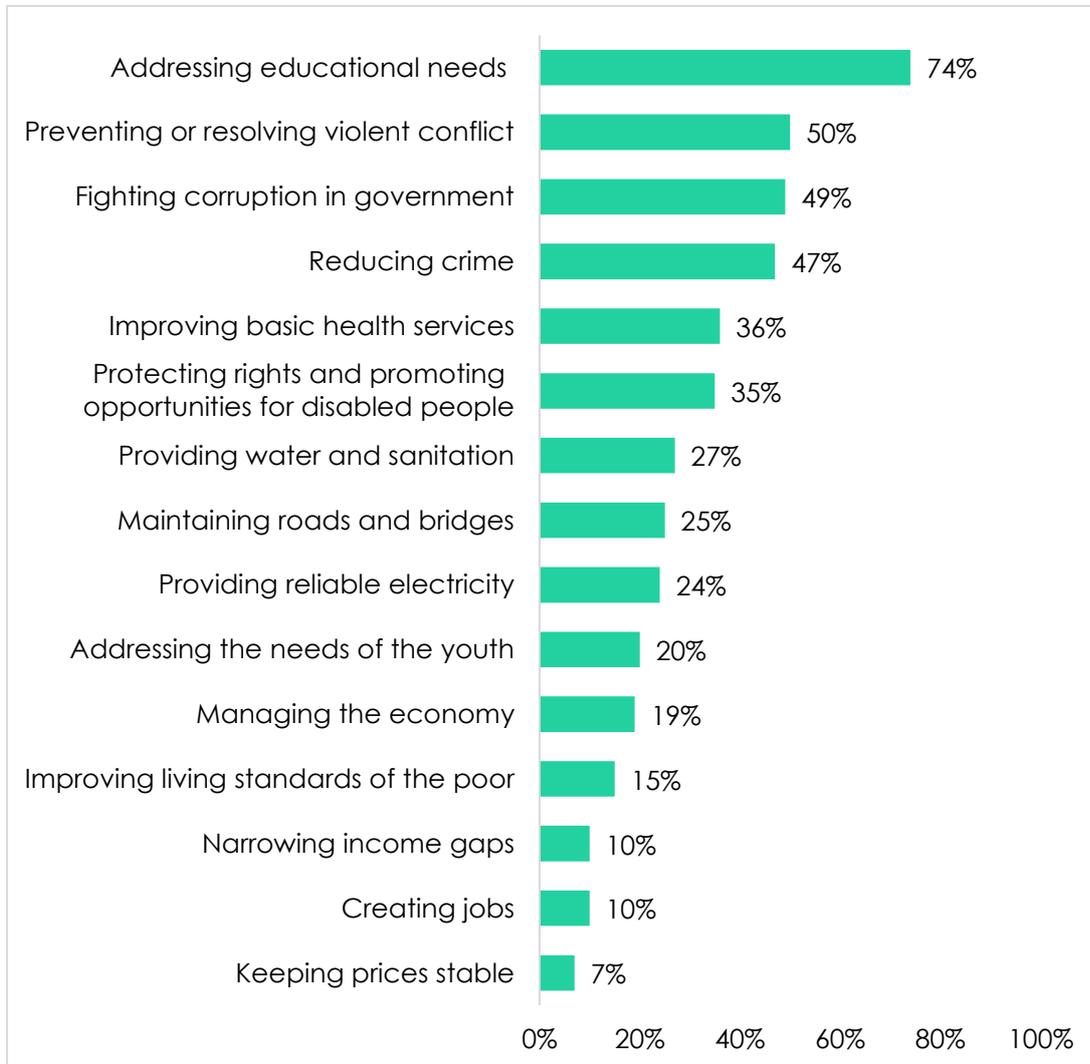
The government receives far higher approval ratings on education than in other performance areas, such as preventing violent conflict (50%), fighting corruption (49%), reducing crime (47%), and managing the economy (19%) (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Assessment of government performance in addressing educational needs | Sierra Leone | 2012-2020



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? Addressing educational needs.

Figure 12: Approval ratings for government performance | Sierra Leone | 2020



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")

Conclusion

The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows that Sierra Leoneans largely support the Free Quality School Education policy for all grade levels. Most families have benefited from the policy, and the proportion of citizens who say they had to pay a bribe to access public school services has declined.

But only about half of citizens say the quality of education has improved under FQSE, and a majority want the government to invest more resources to ensure a high-quality education for all. For policy makers and civil society, these findings point to a need for strategies to mobilize greater funding for education.

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