

Africans say governments aren't doing enough to help youth

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 486¹ | Gildfred Boateng Asiamah, Ousmane Djiby Sambou, and Sadhiska Bhojedhur

Summary

Addressing the needs of youth – for education, engagement, and livelihoods – has become a central tenet of global and continental policy discussions over the past decade. The African Youth Charter underscores the rights of youth to participate in political and decision-making processes and calls upon states to prepare them with the necessary skills to do so (African Union, 2006). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) consider youth essential partners for achieving inclusive and peaceful societies (United Nations, 2018). More than one-third of the 169 SDG targets reference youth (UNDP, 2017).



Almost 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25, representing enormous opportunities and challenges (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). The fact that only 14% of lawmakers on the continent are under the age of 40 highlights the gap between youth's voice and the importance of youth to economic and social progress (Brookings, 2019). Youth unemployment rates are double those of adults in most African countries, and 60% of Africa's unemployed are young people (African Capacity Building Foundation, 2017). Almost half of young Africans have considered emigrating – most often in search of jobs (Sanny, Logan, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2019).

Findings from the latest Afrobarometer surveys in 34 countries shed light on challenges confronting Africa's youth. Young citizens do not feel they are getting the support they need from their governments – and their elders agree. Younger Africans have made substantial gains in terms of educational achievement, but they still face huge gaps in paid employment, making job creation the most critical issue on the youth agenda. While both youth and older citizens support more aggressive government efforts to help young people, they give their governments failing marks in meeting these needs.

Africans of all ages seem to understand that if the youth are suffering and unable to establish productive livelihoods, this is not just a “youth problem,” but a “society problem.” But even if their elders support a pro-youth agenda, young Africans could do more to make their own voices heard directly in policy-making processes (Kuwonu, 2017; Resnick & Casale, 2011). The youth of Africa are far less likely to vote than their older compatriots, and they are generally less engaged in day-to-day political processes as well. African states have failed to effectively engage youth in governance and decision-making processes (African Union, 2017), but youth themselves could find ways – including voting – to ensure their voices are heard in the design of policies and programs to overcome the hurdles they face.

¹ An earlier version of this dispatch, based on data from 18 countries surveyed before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pause in Round 8 fieldwork, was published as Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 418.

Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. The network has completed eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys cover 34 countries – 18 countries surveyed between July 2019 and April 2020 and 16 surveyed (after a hiatus due to COVID-19) between October 2020 and July 2021.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 to 2,400 that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Among the various ways in which governments and international entities define “youth,” this dispatch uses the African Union age range of 15-35 years (adjusted to 18-35 since Afrobarometer survey respondents must be at least 18).

Key findings

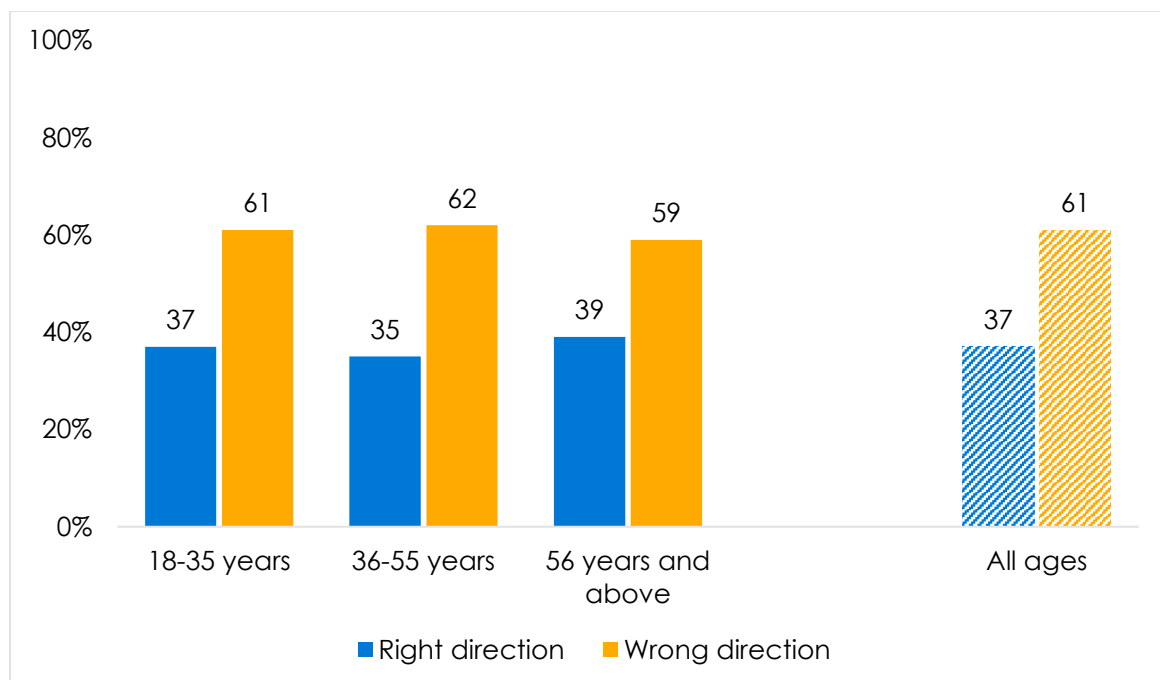
- Like their elders, about six in 10 young Africans (61% of those aged 18-35) say their country is going “in the wrong direction.”
- Unemployment tops the list of the most important problems that young Africans want their government to address, followed by health, education, and infrastructure. Young people are more likely than their elders to prioritize government action on unemployment and education.
- Young Africans are, on average, more educated than their elders. A majority (62%) of 18- to 35-year-olds have at least some secondary school, compared to 46% and 31%, respectively, of the middle and senior age brackets. While almost all youth in Mauritius, Gabon, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Tunisia have been to school, a majority in Niger (60%) and almost half of young Burkinabè (46%), Malians (45%), and Guineans (44%) have no formal education.
- African youth are also considerably more likely than their elders to be out of work and looking for a job (34% of youth vs. 22% of 36- to 55-year-olds and 12% of those above age 55). Unemployment rates reported by young respondents range up to 56% in Lesotho and 53% in Liberia.
- Only a minority of Africans say their government is doing a good job of meeting the needs of youth (28%), creating jobs (21%), and addressing educational needs (46%). Young and older respondents offer almost identical assessments of the government's performance.
- A solid majority (59%) of all Africans say they would be willing to pay higher taxes to support programs to help young people. This is the majority position in all surveyed countries except Angola, Benin, Botswana, and Uganda.
- If their government could increase its spending to help young people, job creation (cited by 50% of respondents) would be Africans' top priority for additional investment. Education ranks a distant second (18%), followed by job training (12%) and business loans (12%). Young Africans see eye to eye with their elders on these priorities.

- Despite concerns about the unmet needs of youth, almost six in 10 respondents (57%) – including 54% of youth – say that in order for their country to do well, “we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders” rather than “to fresh ideas from young people.”
 - Tunisia and Morocco are exceptions: 71% and 67% of citizens, respectively, say young people’s ideas should get more attention.
- Youth are less likely to be politically engaged than older citizens. The largest gaps are observed in the most fundamental form of voice and participation: voting. But they also lag behind in other types of community participation and contact with leaders.

Country going in the wrong direction

On average across 34 countries, six in 10 young Africans (61% of those aged 18-35) say their country is “going in the wrong direction.” Only 37% believe their country is “going in the right direction.” The view that things are moving in the wrong direction is shared almost equally across all age brackets (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



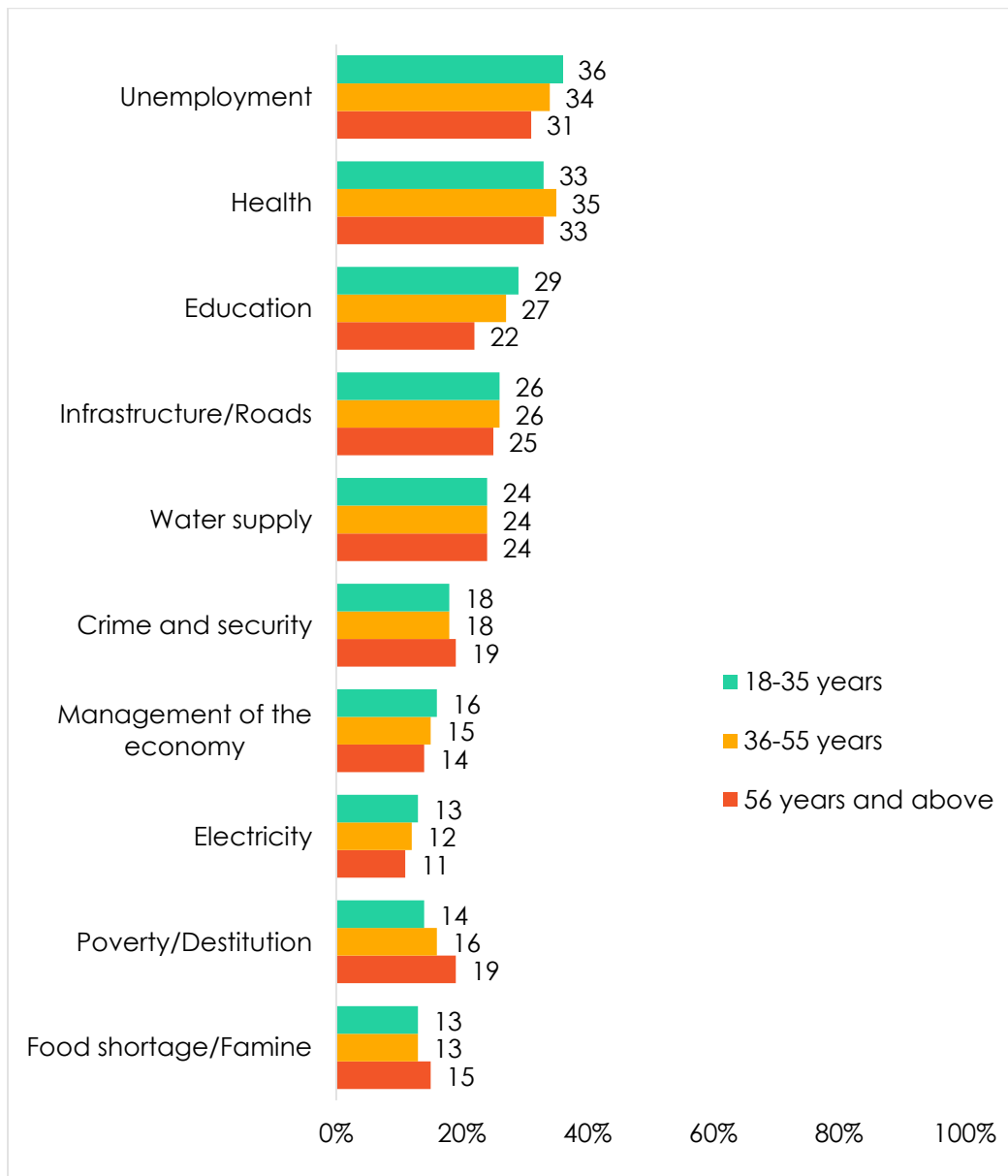
Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Most important problems

When asked what they consider the most important national problems that their government should address, African youth most frequently cite unemployment (36%) among their top three priorities, followed by health (33%), education (29%), infrastructure/roads (26%), water supply (24%), and crime/security (18%) (Figure 2).

On average across 34 countries, young people are somewhat more likely than their elders to identify a lack of jobs as one of their country’s top three problems. Education is a higher priority among youth (29%) than among those aged 56 and above (22%), while the elderly are somewhat more concerned about poverty (19%, vs. 14% of youth). Otherwise priorities are fairly similar across age groups.

Figure 2: Most important problems | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



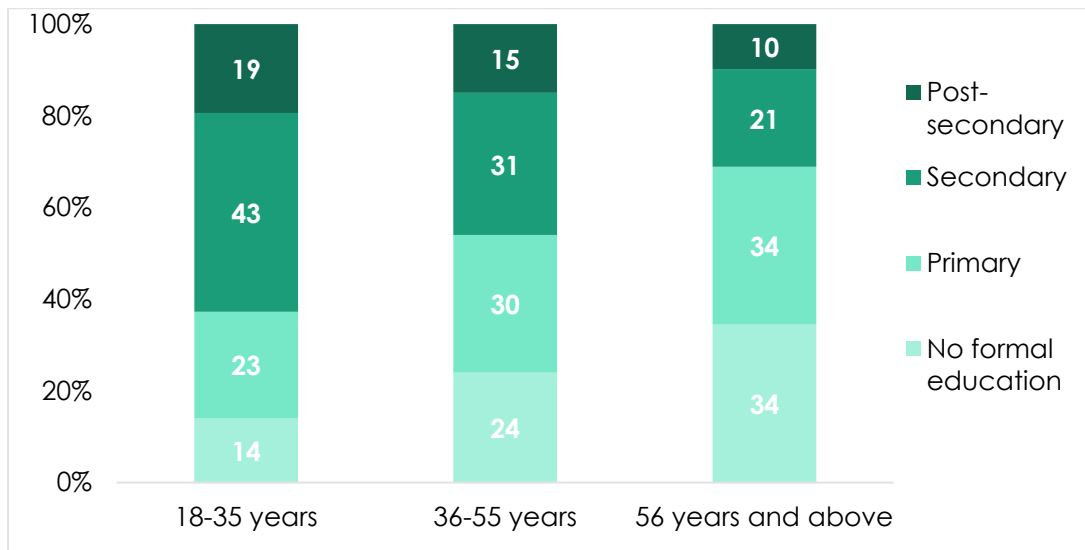
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent)*

The status of youth: More educated, less employed

While youth are more likely than older citizens to cite education as an important problem, they are also more likely to have an education. A majority (62%) of youth have secondary or post-secondary schooling, compared to 46% and 31%, respectively, of the middle and senior age brackets (Figure 3). Youth also have the smallest proportion of those with no formal education (14% vs. 24% and 34%, respectively, of the older groups).

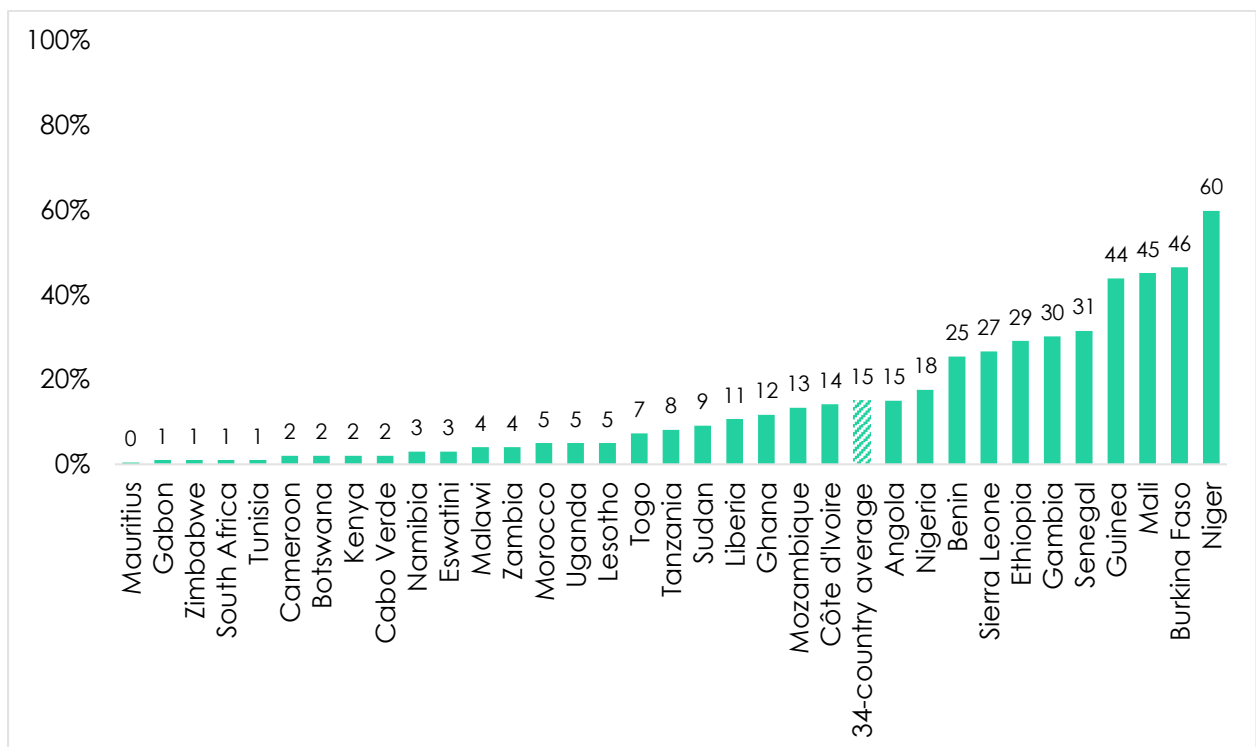
Behind these averages are vast differences in national educational attainment. While almost all youth in Mauritius, Gabon, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Tunisia have been to school, a majority in Niger (60%) and almost half of young Burkina Faso (46%), Malians (45%), and Guineans (44%) have no formal education (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Education level | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

Figure 4: Youth with no formal education | 34 countries | 2019/2021



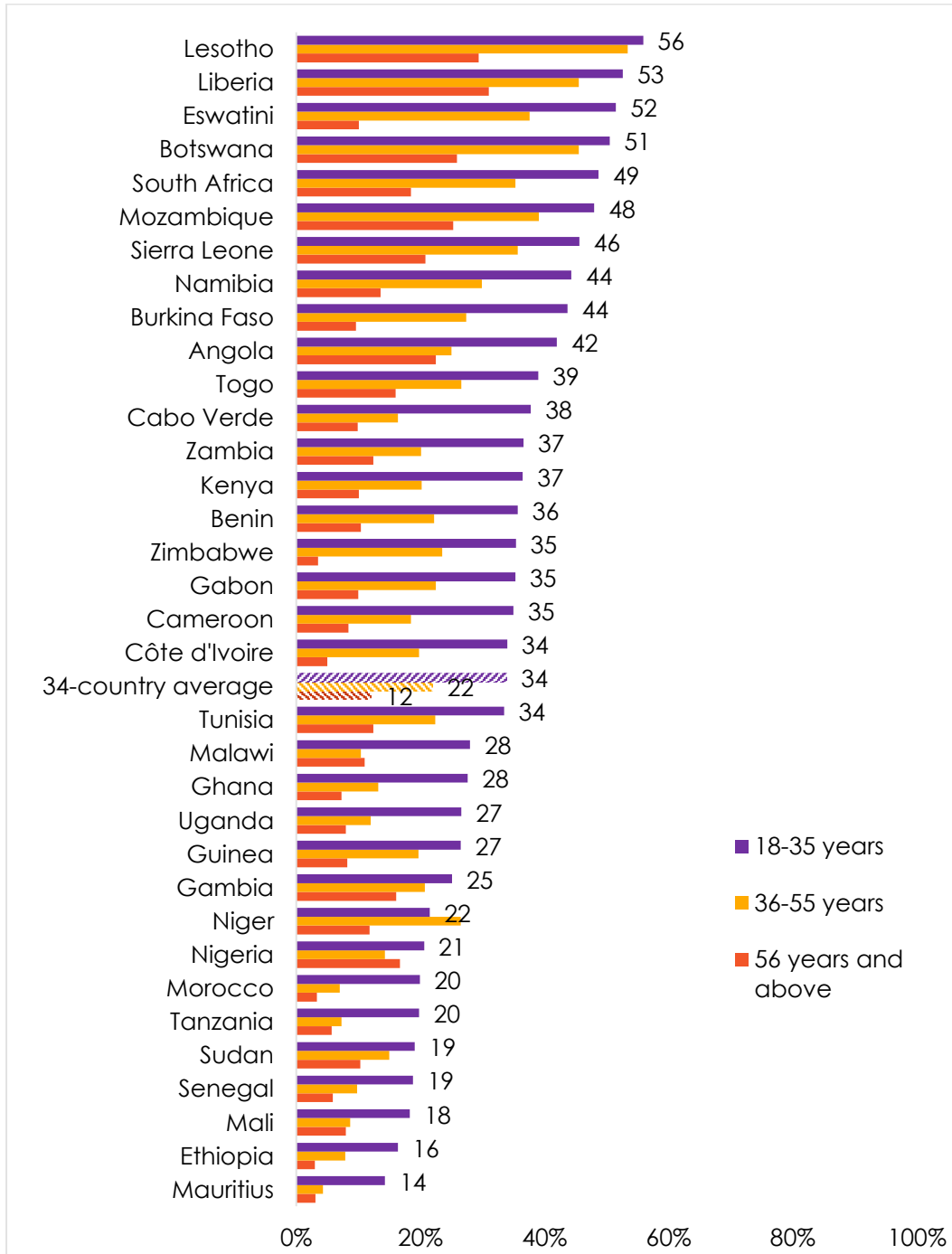
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education? (% of 18- to 35-year-old respondents who say "no formal education")

But despite their educational advantage over their elders, young people are also more likely to be unemployed.

On average across 34 countries, one-third of both young men (33%) and young women (34%) don't have a job but are looking for one, a considerably higher unemployment rate than among the middle (22%) and senior (12%) age categories (Figure 5).

These unemployment rates (which do not count citizens who are not looking for work, such as students, homemakers, and people who have given up searching for a job) are highest among young citizens in every surveyed country except Niger. But rates by country vary widely, ranging from fewer than one in five youth in Mauritius (14%), Ethiopia (16%), Mali (18%), Senegal (19%), and Sudan (19%) to more than half in Lesotho (56%), Liberia (53%), Eswatini (52%), Botswana (51%), and Eswatini (53%).

Figure 5: Not employed and looking for a job | by age group | 34 countries
| 2019/2021



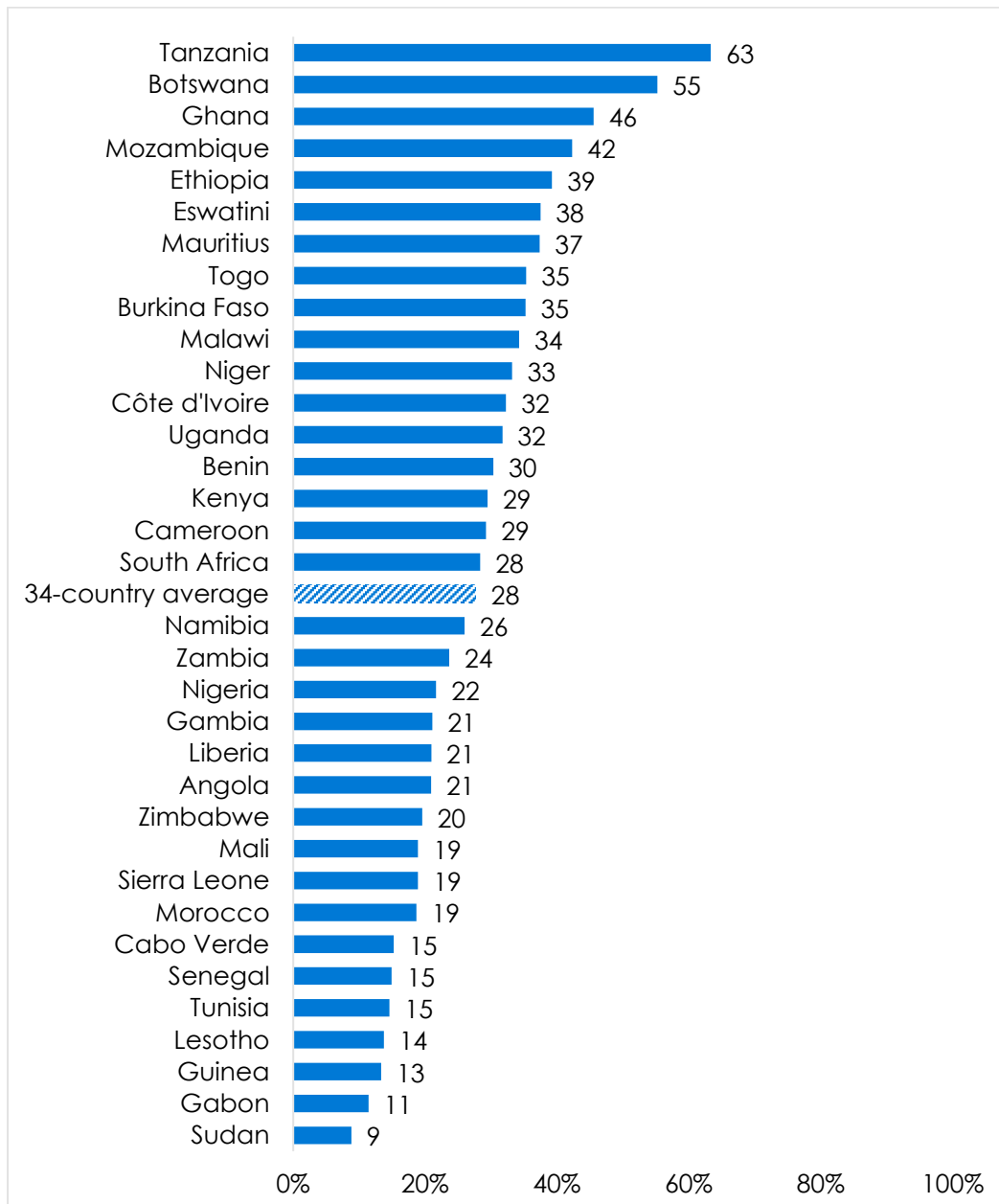
Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (% who say "no, but looking")

Governments failing to meet the needs of Africa's youth

Are governments doing what is necessary to address the challenges faced by their youth? Fewer than three in 10 Africans (28%) think their government is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job of addressing the needs of youth, including just one in 10 Sudanese (9%) and Gabonese (11%) (Figure 6).

Tanzania (63%) and Botswana (55%) are the only surveyed countries where majorities offer favourable assessments of their government's performance on youth.

Figure 6: Government performance in addressing the needs of young people
 | 34 countries | 2019/2021

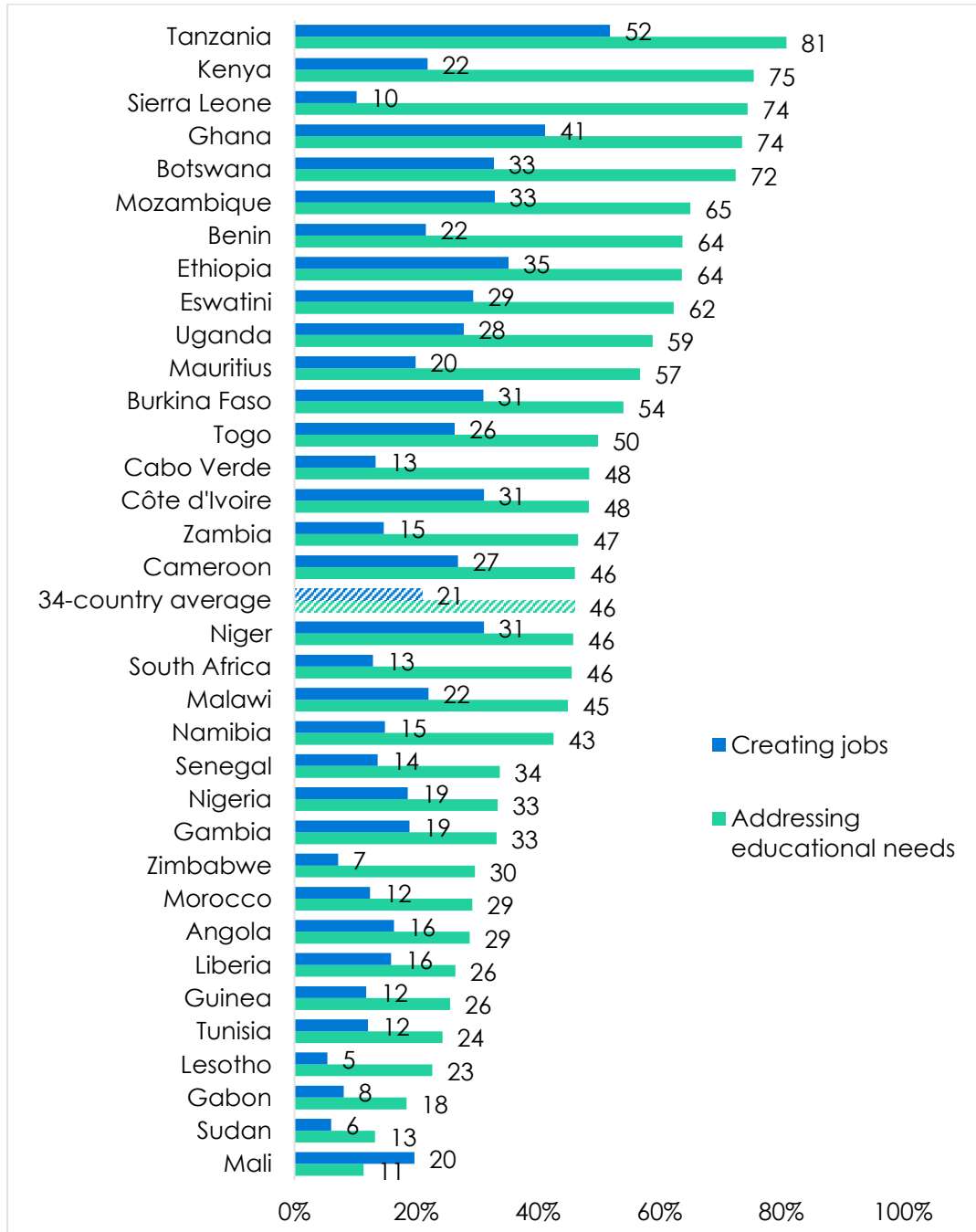


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Handling the needs of young people? (% who say “fairly well” or “very well”)

On the issue that Africans of all ages consider their country's most important problem, unemployment, only two out of 10 respondents (21%) think their government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" (Figure 7).

Tanzania is the only surveyed country that records majority (52%) approval of the government's efforts at job creation, followed by Ghana (41%) and Ethiopia (35%). Fewer than one in 10 citizens agree in Lesotho (5%), Sudan (6%), Zimbabwe (7%), and Gabon (8%).

Figure 7: Government performance on job creation, education | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



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: Handling educational needs? Handling job creation? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Government performance ratings are considerably better, though hardly electrifying, when it comes to addressing education needs. On average, not quite half (46%) of respondents say their government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” on the issue.

Tanzania again stands out, with 81% approval. Kenya (75%), Ghana (74%), and Botswana (72%) also boast stellar scores on education. Sierra Leone offers a striking contrast: Three-fourths (74%) of citizens give the government a passing grade on education, but only one in 10 (10%) do so when it comes to job creation.

Mali (11%), Sudan (13%), and Gabon (18%) get the most abysmal public approval ratings on education. Mali is the only country whose government gets a better rating on job creation than on education, a sector where 87% disapproval includes 72% who describe the government’s performance as “very bad.”

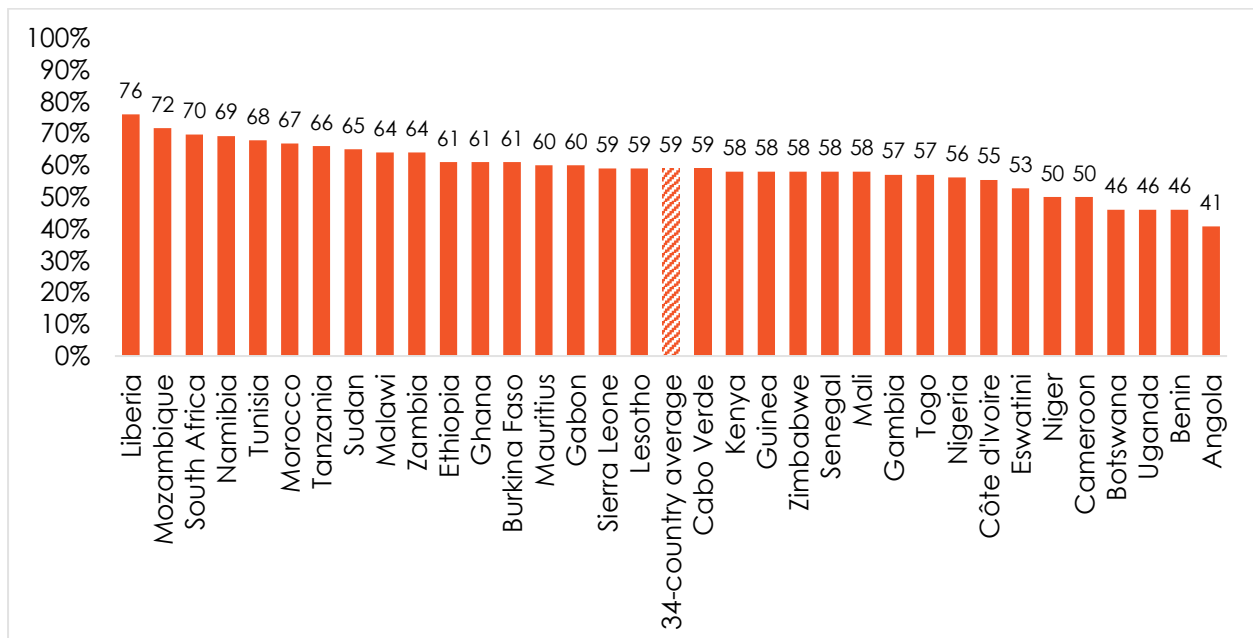
On these measures of government performance, on average across 34 countries, there are no significant differences across the three age groups.

Investing in Africa’s youth

A solid majority (59%) of Africans say they would be willing to pay higher taxes to support programs to help young people (Figure 8). Young citizens are most likely to agree (61%), but majorities of the middle-aged (57%) and seniors (56%) also endorse the idea.

At least half of citizens “somewhat support” or “strongly support” higher taxes to fund youth programs in 30 of the 34 countries, led by Liberia (76%), Mozambique (72%), and South Africa (70%). Opponents significantly outnumber supporters only in Benin (51% vs. 46%), while citizens are about evenly divided in Angola, Botswana, and Uganda.

Figure 8: Support for higher taxes to fund youth programs | 34 countries | 2019/2021

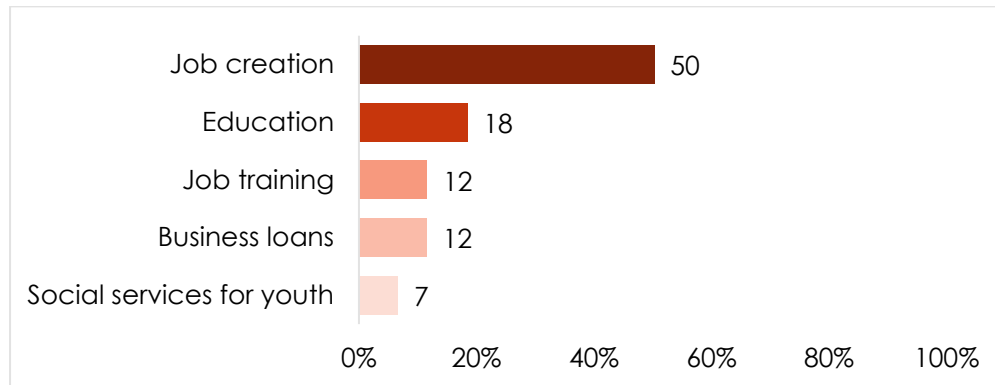


Respondents were asked: *If the government decided to make people pay more taxes in order to support programs to help young people, would you support this decision or oppose it? (% who say “somewhat support” or “strongly support”)*

If their government could in fact increase its spending to help young people, job creation (cited by 50% of respondents) would be Africans’ top priority for additional investment (Figure 9). Education ranks a distant second (18%), followed by other work-related programs – job

training (12%) and business loans (12%). Only about one in 20 respondents (7%) identify social services for youth as a top priority. These priorities are substantially the same across all age groups.

Figure 9: Priorities for government investment in youth | 34 countries | 2019/2021

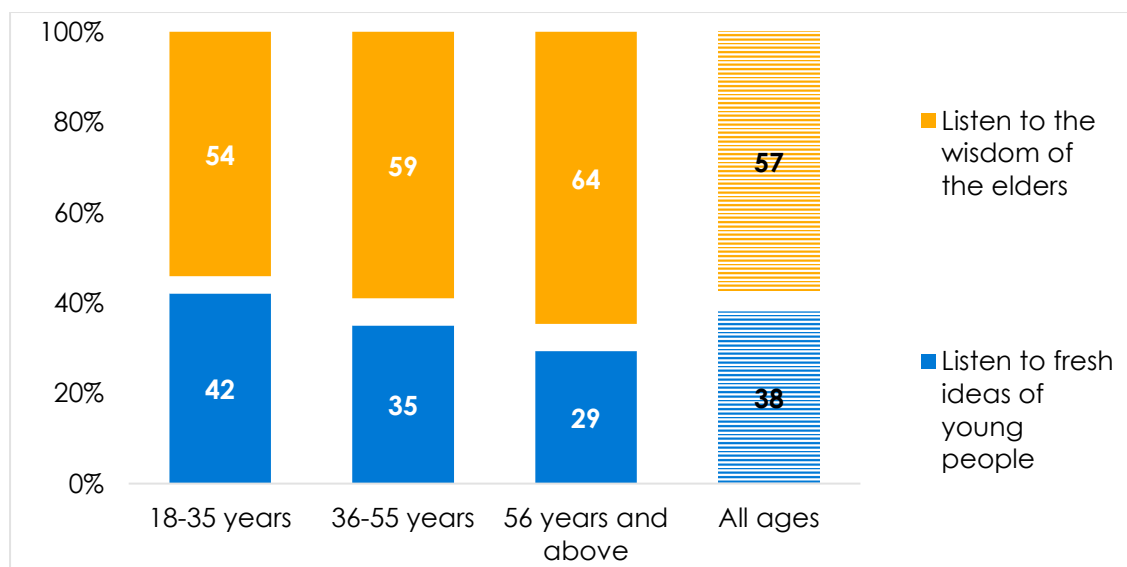


Respondents were asked: If the government could increase its spending on programs to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?

Agents of change: Do Africa's youth have a voice?

Despite concerns about the unmet needs of youth, a majority of Africans consider the ideas of young people secondary to the wisdom of the elders. Almost six in 10 respondents (57%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that in order for their country to do well, "we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders," while only 38% instead prioritize listening more "to fresh ideas from young people" (Figure 10). While young respondents are somewhat more likely than their elders to favour listening to youth, they still solidly value "wisdom" over "fresh ideas" (54% vs. 42%).

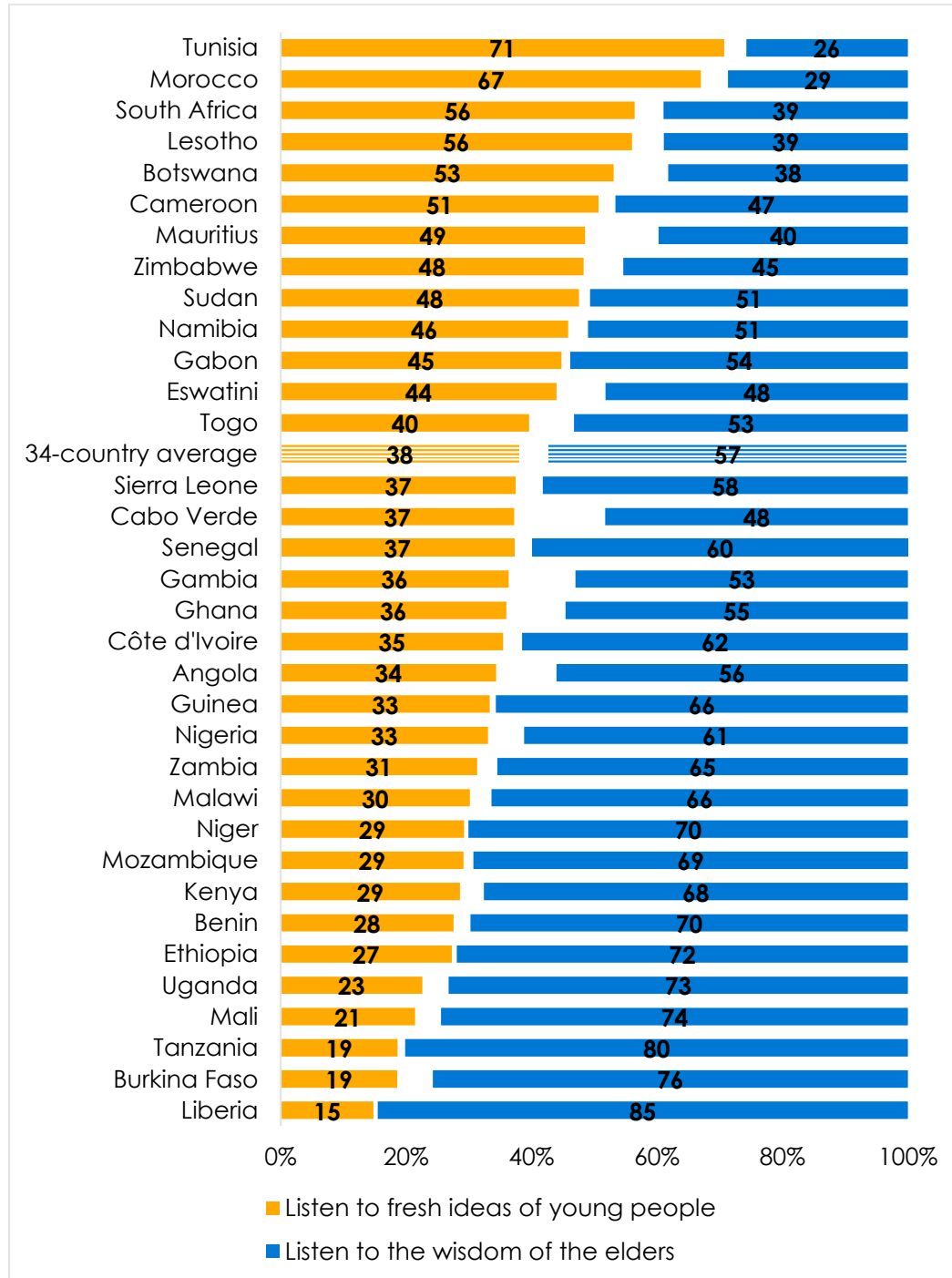
Figure 10: Fresh ideas of youth vs. wisdom of the elders | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders.
 Statement 2: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to fresh ideas from young people.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Two striking exceptions are Tunisia and Morocco, where young people helped spark Arab Spring-style movements a decade ago but continue to struggle for solutions to unemployment and inequality (Tung, 2020; Reguly, 2019; Gabsi, 2019; Köhler, 2021). About seven in 10 Tunisians (71%) and Moroccans (67%) say the country should pay greater attention to the ideas of young people (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Fresh ideas of youth vs. wisdom of the elders | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to the wisdom of our elders.
 Statement 2: In order for our country to do well, we should listen more to fresh ideas from young people.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

South Africa (56%), Lesotho (56%), Botswana (53%), and Cameroon (51%) are the only other countries where a majority of respondents prioritize ideas from the youth. Elsewhere the elders outscore the youth, including an overwhelming majority in Liberia (85%), Tanzania (80%), Burkina Faso (76%), Mali (74%), and Uganda (73%).

But do Africa's youth claim a voice for themselves? Findings reveal that, like youth elsewhere in the world (Barrett, 2018), youth in Africa tend to participate less in most forms of civic action and political engagement. Activists who believe that more youthful voices are needed to address their country's problems may find opportunities for progress by encouraging greater engagement by young people in political and civic activities.

The largest gaps are observed with respect to the most fundamental – and in some ways simplest – mode of democratic participation: voting. Even after excluding those who were too young to vote in the last national election, we find that 18- to 35-year-olds are far more likely (35%) to have skipped voting than middle-aged (20%) and older (16%) citizens (Figure 12). In fact, the gap exceeds 30 percentage points in Côte d'Ivoire (61% of youth who report not voting vs. 26% of the over-55 age group) and Gabon (58% vs. 24%).

One interesting exception is Sierra Leone, where post-civil war reconciliation efforts have emphasized youth civic engagement (Innovations in Civic Participation, 2021); only one in 10 young Sierra Leoneans (11%) say they did not vote, compared to 15% of those over age 55. Non-voting youth are also uncommon in Mauritius (14%), Liberia (15%), Guinea (17%), and Tunisia (18%).

African youth are also less likely to report attending a community meeting during the previous year (55% for youth vs. 65% and 67% for middle-aged and older groups) or joining others to raise an issue (51% vs. 59% and 60% for middle-aged and older) (Figure 13). This is not necessarily surprising, since both actions often involve addressing family and community issues that may be less directly salient to young people, many of whom may still be living with older family members rather than running their own households.

However, when it comes to attending demonstrations or protests, young people are slightly out front (18% vs. 15% and 14% for the older groups).

Youth also trail their elders in contacting leaders. Young adults are nearly equally likely to contact political party officials (17% among youth vs. 20% each among middle-aged and older respondents) and members of Parliament (MPs) (11% vs. 14% and 15%). They are, however, less likely to contact local government councillors (20% vs. 28% and 32%) and traditional leaders (32%, vs. 39% and 42%).

Lower contact rates among youth are hardly surprising. Many do not yet face the same life challenges as their older counterparts who head households. They also have had fewer opportunities than their elders to build networks and make the social and political connections that facilitate contact.

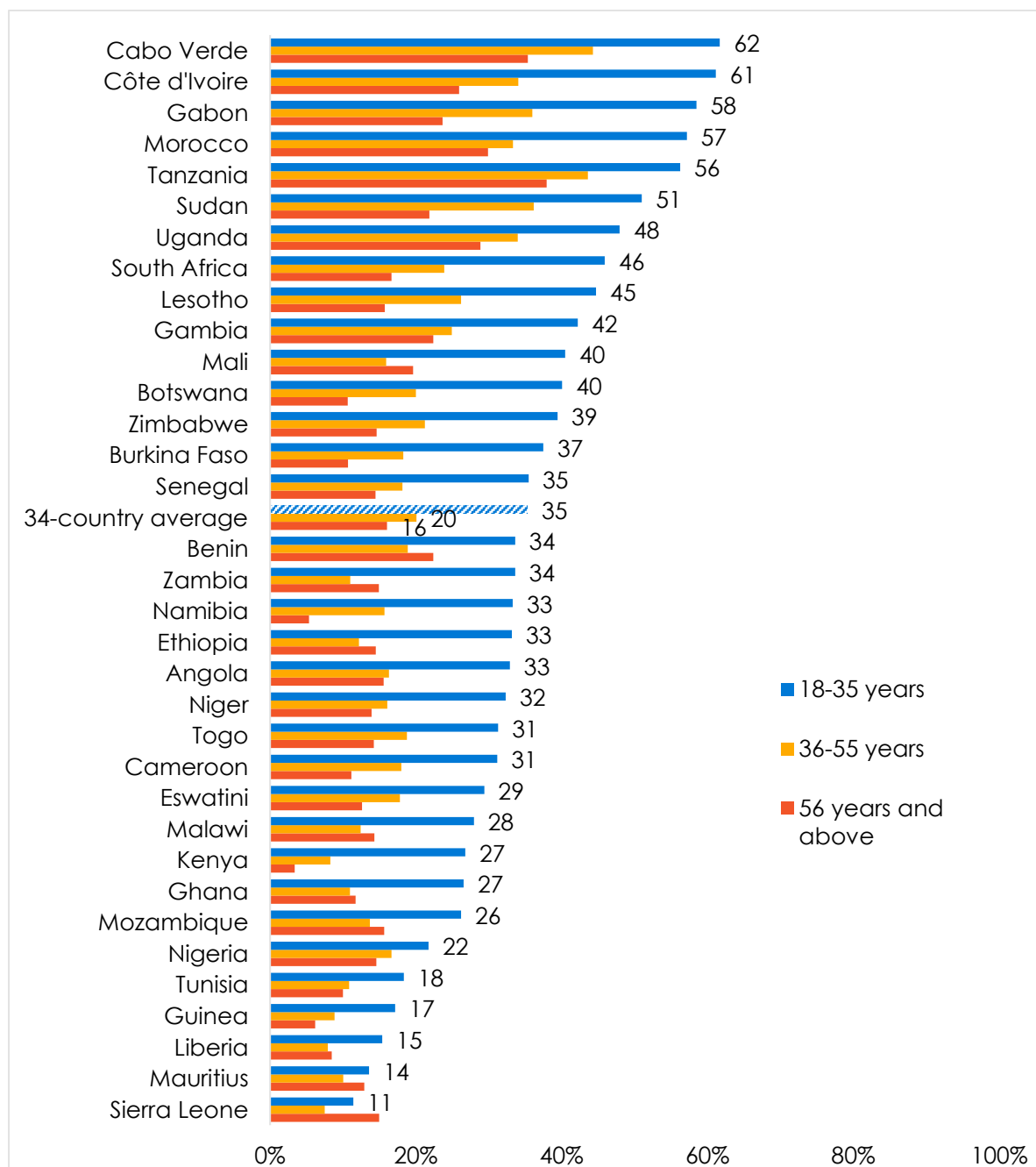
In some respects, these contact rates are quite telling. The nearly equal contact rates for party officials and MPs suggest that youth and elders are equally comfortable – or uncomfortable – contacting these leaders to raise their problems and seek assistance. In contrast, the larger gap in contact with traditional leaders may in part reflect the particular kinds of problem solving that traditional leaders do, which tends to focus on family, property, and community disputes that likely affect older respondents more. But it may also reflect very different comfort levels in turning to traditional authorities, rather than MPs or other elected leaders, for assistance.

In addition, African youth are somewhat less likely than their elders to identify with a particular political party. Still, on average four in 10 young respondents (41%) say they “feel close to” a party, compared to 45% in the middle age category and 48% among older respondents (Figure 14).

Youth in different countries show quite different patterns of party identification (Figure 15). Solid majorities say they feel close to a party in Sierra Leone (75%), Uganda (66%), Malawi (61%), and Guinea (61%). At the other extreme, fewer than one in five young people line up behind a party in Morocco (14%), Sudan (15%), Tunisia (15%), and Ethiopia (15%)

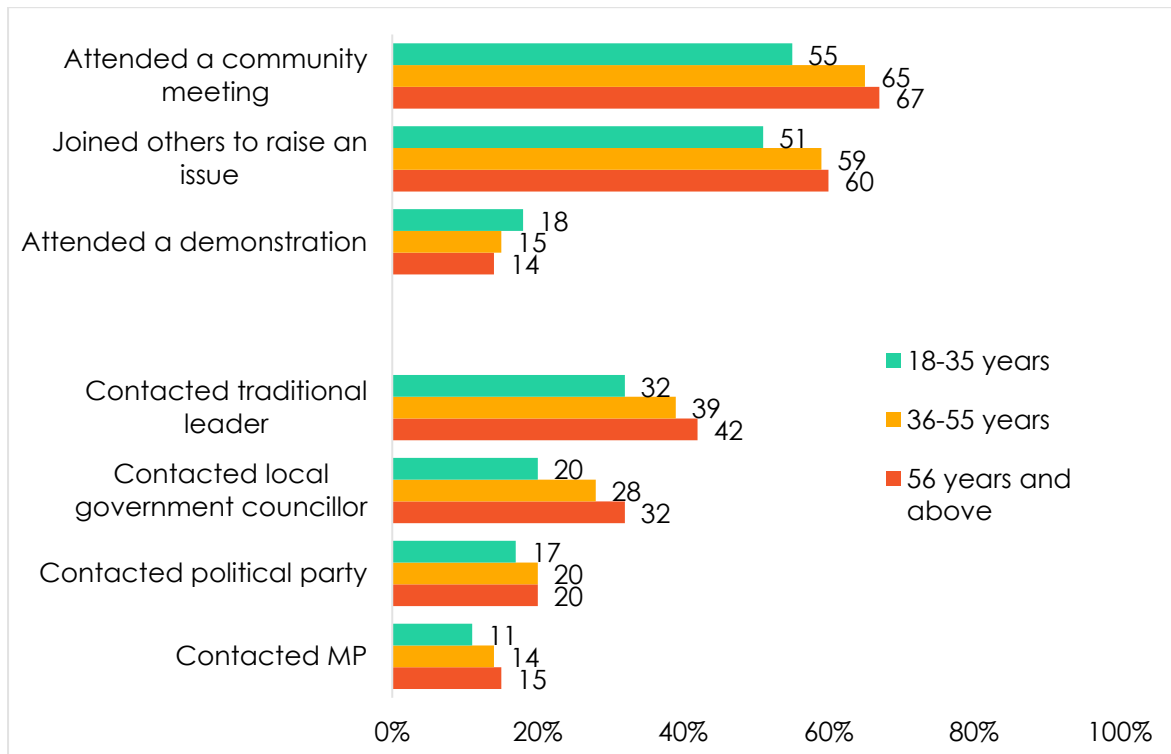
Malawi is the only country where youth (61%) are significantly (by more than 3 percentage points) more likely than seniors (57%) to identify with a political party. In some countries, youth trail the oldest cohort by more than 20 percentage points, including Tanzania (-24 points), Cameroon (-22 points), and Botswana (-21 points).

Figure 12: Did not vote in the last election | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: In the last national election held in [20xx], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say "did not vote," excluding respondents who were too young to vote)

Figure 13: Participation in change-making activities | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021

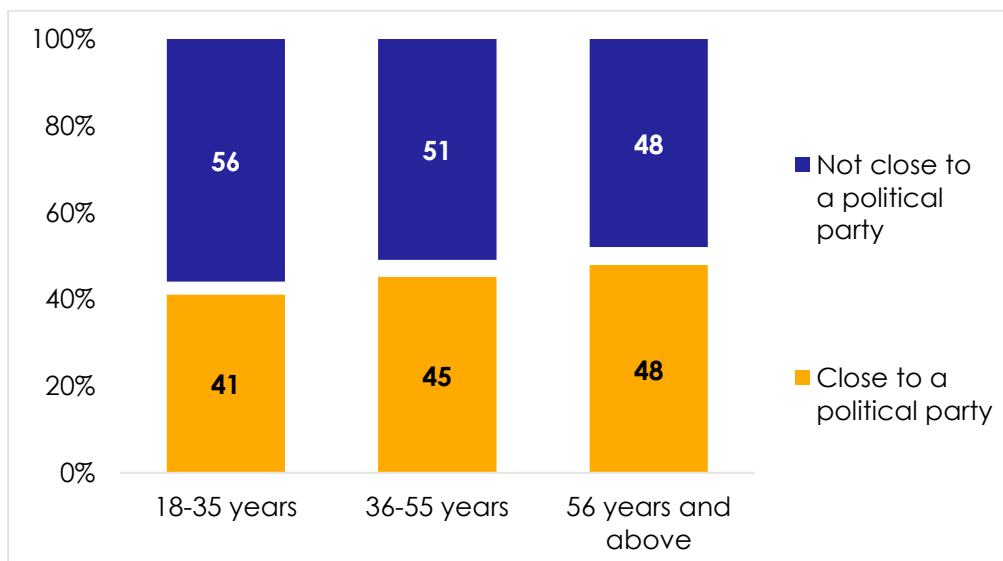


Respondents were asked:

Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Joined others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

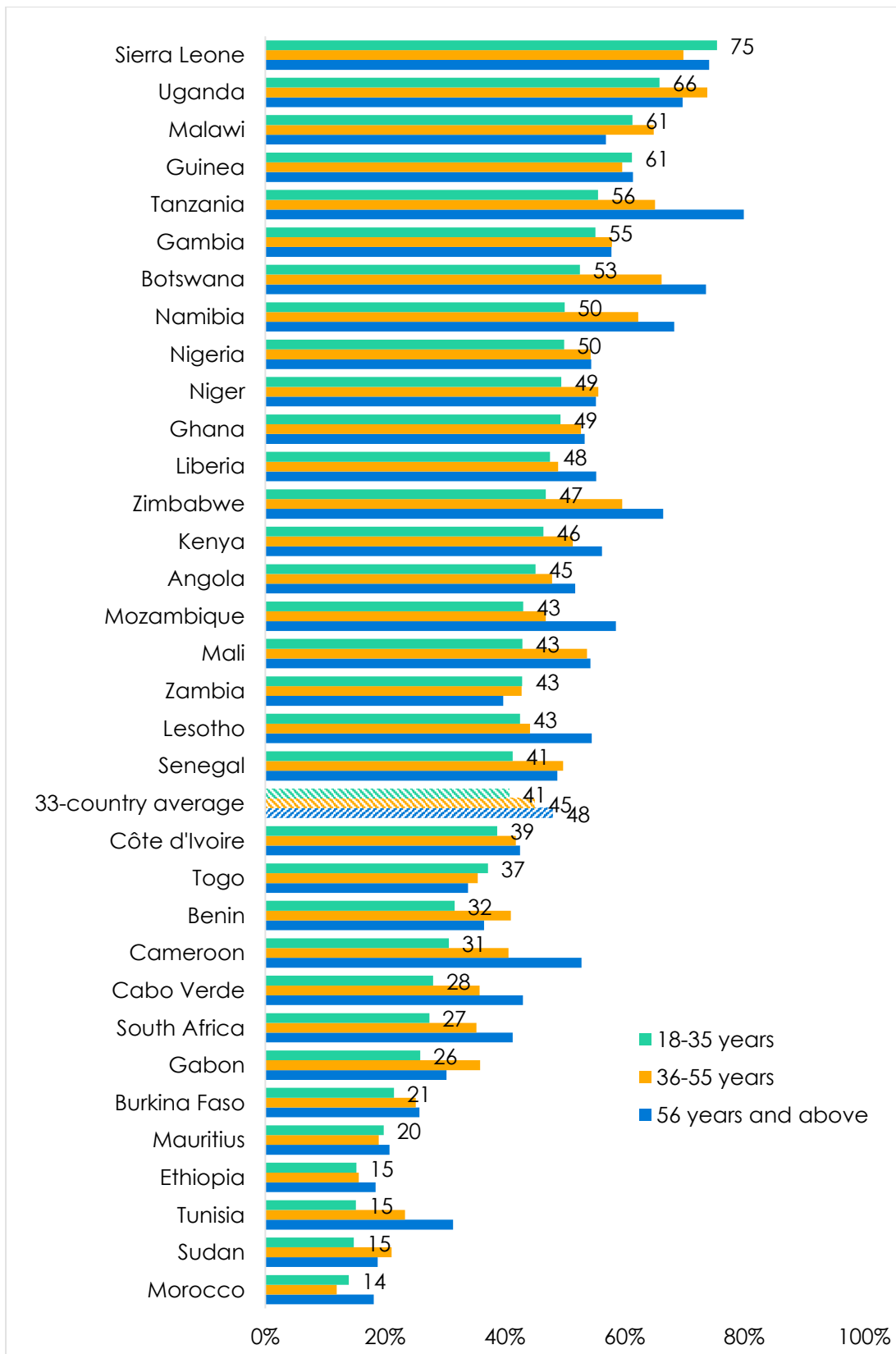
Figure 14: Political party affiliation | by age group | 33 countries* | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party?

* Question not asked in Eswatini

Figure 15: Political party affiliation | 33 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party? (% "yes")

Conclusion

Addressing the key challenges that young Africans face to become secure and productive citizens is fundamental to achieving inclusive and sustainable development on the continent. If their gains in educational achievement cannot be matched by an ability to find work and secure their livelihoods, entire societies pay the price. This is why it is not only youth who are urging governments to pursue more pro-youth policies. Their elders agree. Governments can take advantage of the stated willingness, across all age groups, to commit more resources to addressing the specific challenges faced by youth.

But Afrobarometer findings also reveal that respect for the ideas of youth is low, as is youth engagement in political processes. In an environment where competition for both resources and policy space is high, youth cannot simply rely on their elders to address their needs. They must demand, and governments must facilitate, opportunities for youth representation and inter-generational dialogue to ensure that African societies “leave no one behind.”

If youth want to make their voices heard more powerfully, their easiest option is to take greater advantage of their opportunity to vote. But young people can also be encouraged to move beyond occasional elections and episodic protest to pursue more sustained engagement in advocacy and policy dialogues, make use of new tools such as digital activism that can engage youth, and even run for office to ensure that their views are well and consistently represented in the policy debates that affect them the most.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov.-Dec. 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov.-Dec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	DDc. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	Sept.-Oct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov.-Dec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct.-Dec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov.-Dec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct.-Nov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan.-Feb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Sudan	Feb.-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	Feb.-March 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Togo	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept.-Oct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov.-Dec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017

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