

Namibians look to government, one another for action on climate and environment

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 510 | Christiaan Keulder and Alfred Kwadzo Torsu

Summary

Namibia is an arid land between two deserts, the Kalahari in the East and the Namib in the West. Droughts and water scarcity are common (World Bank, 2020). Yet most Namibians depend on agriculture, relying on natural rain for crop and livestock production – and are thus highly vulnerable to climate change (Thomson, 2021).

The country is also a tourist destination with pristine landscapes and a thriving wildlife population, including some of the world's most iconic free-roaming animals. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent collapse of international travel and leisure tourism, tourism contributed more than 10% of Namibia's gross domestic product and employed, directly or indirectly, more than 100,000 citizens (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2021). It is a sector that depends very much on sound environmental protection policies, anti-pollution measures, and conservation regulations to manage the country's natural resources.

Namibia is endowed, too, with precious minerals (World Bank, 2021). Recent exploration projects for oil and gas in the ecologically sensitive Okavango basin and for uranium near the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System have raised concerns among environmentalists and local communities about water contamination and damage to fragile human and wildlife habitat, linking resource extraction to agricultural production and tourism (Barbee & Neme, 2021; Coleman, 2021).

In Namibia, as in most countries, climate change and environmental governance intersect to raise fundamental questions for human health and well-being. From air and water pollution to extreme weather events and global warming, causes and effects are often intertwined, and may also be tightly linked to people's economic lives. Understanding popular perspectives and priorities can help strengthen efforts to prevent or mitigate negative outcomes, whether through policy advocacy or direct action.

This dispatch reports on special survey modules included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Namibians' experiences and perceptions of climate change, pollution and environmental governance, and natural resource extraction.

Findings show that while climate change is still an unknown concept to more than half of Namibians, those who are aware of it expect far more action from both the government and their co-citizens to fight it.

More Namibians are focused on pollution and environmental protection, rating trash disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community and describing plastic bags as a major source of pollution in the country.

But if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, citizens are sharply divided as to which should be prioritized. And by a margin of almost 2 to 1, Namibians say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs, outweigh negative impacts such as

pollution. Still, most want the government to regulate natural resource extraction more tightly to protect the environment.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed 1,200 adult Namibians in October-November 2021. 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 Namibia in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

On climate change:

- About four in 10 Namibians (39%) say droughts have become more severe over the past 10 years; only half as many (18%) say the same about floods.
- Fewer than half (45%) of Namibians have heard of climate change. Among those who are aware of climate change:
 - Half (49%) say it is making life in Namibia worse.
 - Seven in 10 believe that ordinary citizens can help curb climate change (71%), and two-thirds (67%) want the government to take immediate action to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy.
 - Only small minorities are satisfied with efforts by the government (6%), business and industry (7%), developed countries (9%), and ordinary citizens (13%) to fight climate change.

On pollution and environmental governance:

- Two-thirds (67%) of Namibians say pollution is a "somewhat serious" or "very serious" problem in their community.
 - Citizens say trash and plastic disposal (cited by 29%), deforestation (19%), and human waste management (17%) are the most important environmental issues in their community.
 - Two-thirds (67%) of citizens see plastic bags as a major source of pollution in Namibia.¹
- If environmental-protection policies threaten jobs and incomes, citizens are about evenly divided as to which should be prioritized.

¹ An earlier version of this dispatch reported incorrectly that 67% of respondents say the government should ban the production and use of plastic bags. No question about government action on plastic bags was asked. Afrobarometer regrets the error.

- Six in 10 Namibians (60%) say the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping communities clean rests with local citizens. Far fewer would defer that responsibility to their local governments (17%) or the national government (12%).

On natural resource extraction:

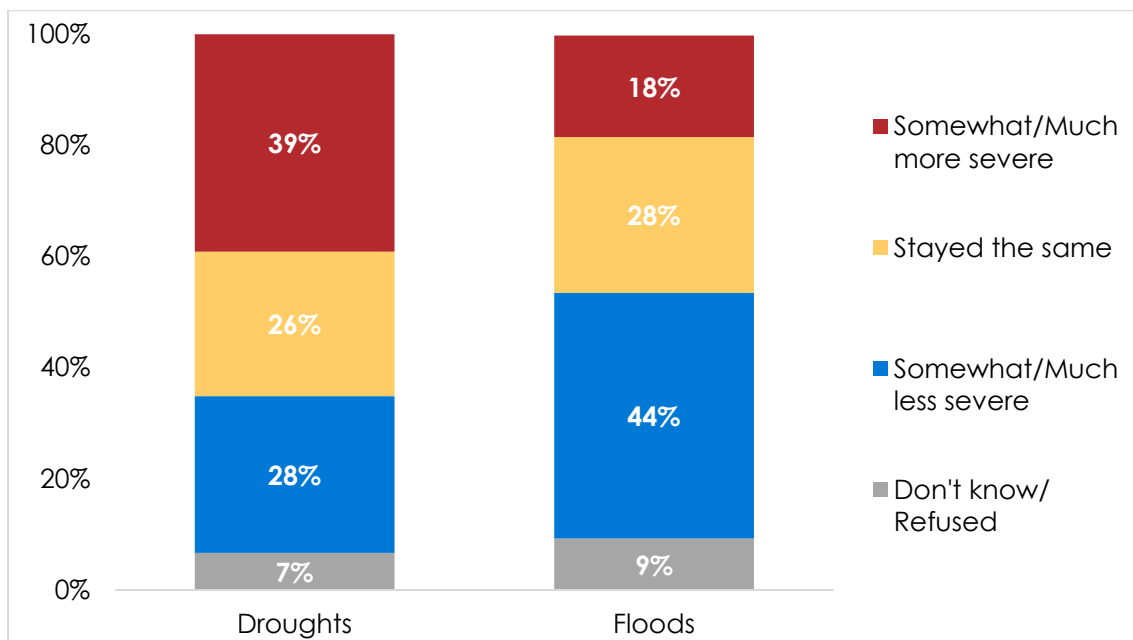
- By a margin of almost 2 to 1, Namibians say the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution.
 - However, a large majority (70%) want the government to regulate natural resource extraction more tightly in order to reduce its negative impact on the environment.

Severity of extreme weather conditions

Before asking about climate change, Afrobarometer asked respondents about their experiences with extreme weather conditions. A plurality (39%) of Namibians say droughts have become “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe” over the past 10 years, while 28% say they have become less severe and 26% say they have stayed the same (Figure 1).

In contrast, more than four in 10 (44%) say that the severity of floods has *decreased*, while fewer than half as many (18%) say they have gotten worse.

Figure 1: Severity of droughts and floods | Namibia | 2021



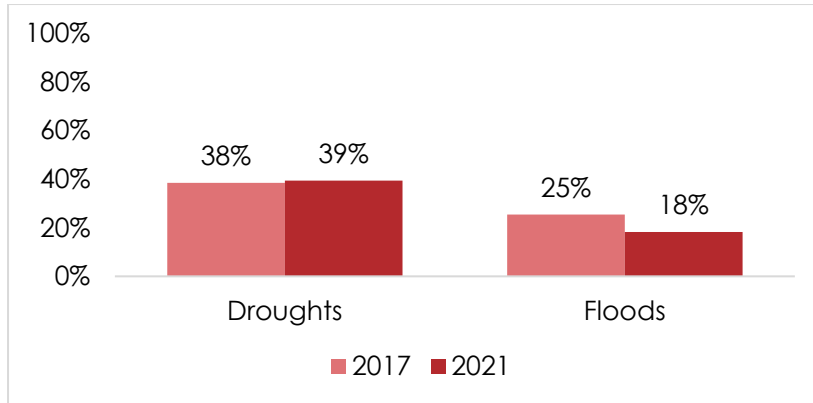
Respondents were asked: *In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? Have they become more severe, less severe, or stayed about the same?*

Compared to 2017, the proportion who say droughts have gotten more severe has remained unchanged, while perceptions of worsening floods have decreased by 7 percentage points (Figure 2).

Rural residents are more likely than urban residents to report increasingly severe droughts (46% vs. 34%), perhaps reflecting a greater awareness of the effects of a lack of rainfall in

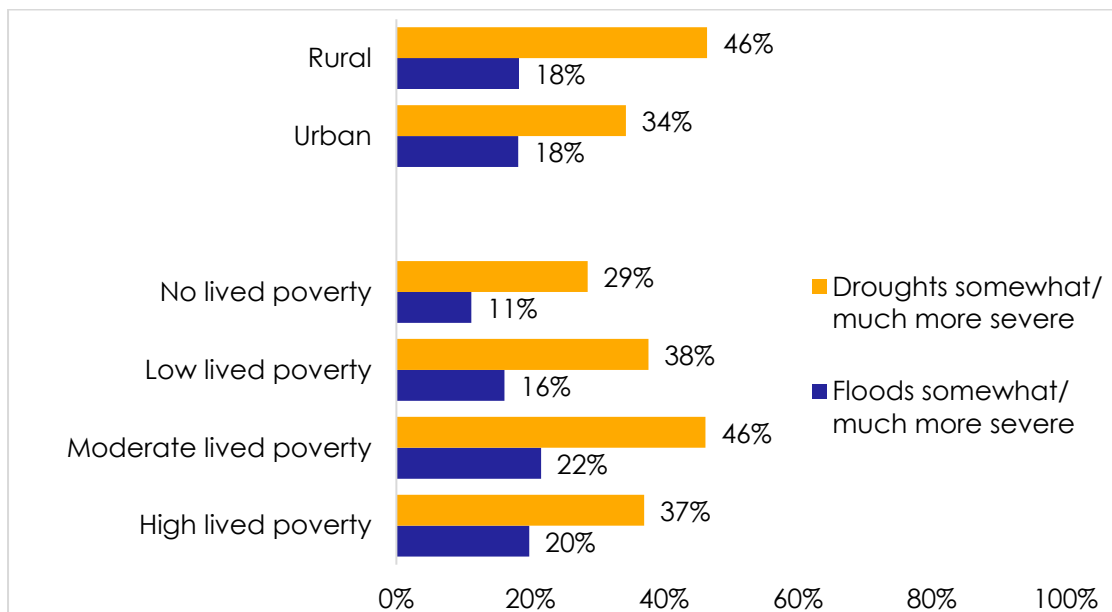
more agricultural areas (Figure 3). Economically well-off respondents (those experiencing no “lived poverty”) are less likely to see increasingly severe droughts or floods, conceivably because they are more sheltered than their less-well-off counterparts.

Figure 2: Severity of droughts and floods | Namibia | 2017-2021



Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? (% who say “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe”)

Figure 3: More severe droughts and floods | by urban-rural residence and lived poverty | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your experience, over the past 10 years, has there been any change in the severity of the following events in the area where you live? (% who say “somewhat more severe” or “much more severe”)

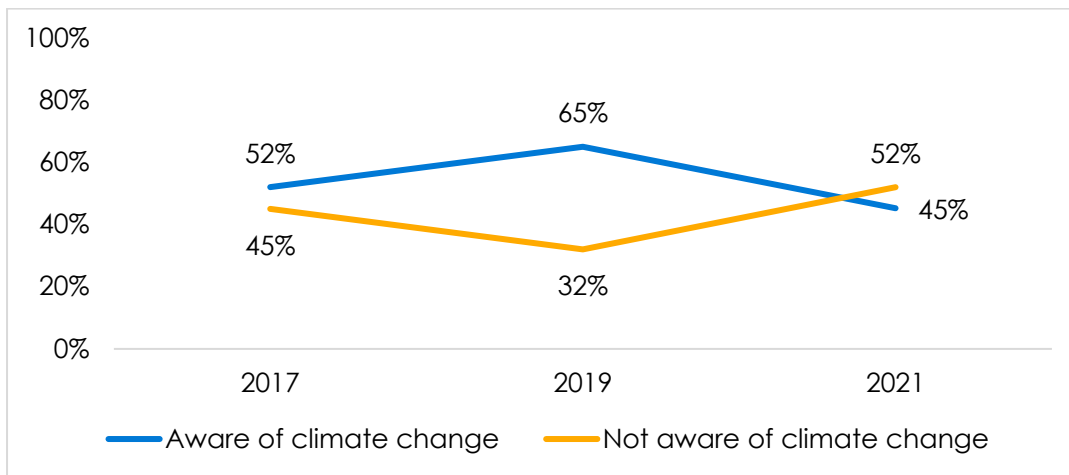
Climate change

Awareness of climate change

Fewer than half (45%) of Namibians say they have heard of climate change. This is a 20-percentage-point decline from 2019 (65%), perhaps reflecting high public awareness of the lack of rain – though not necessarily of “climate change” – in 2019 (Figure 4).

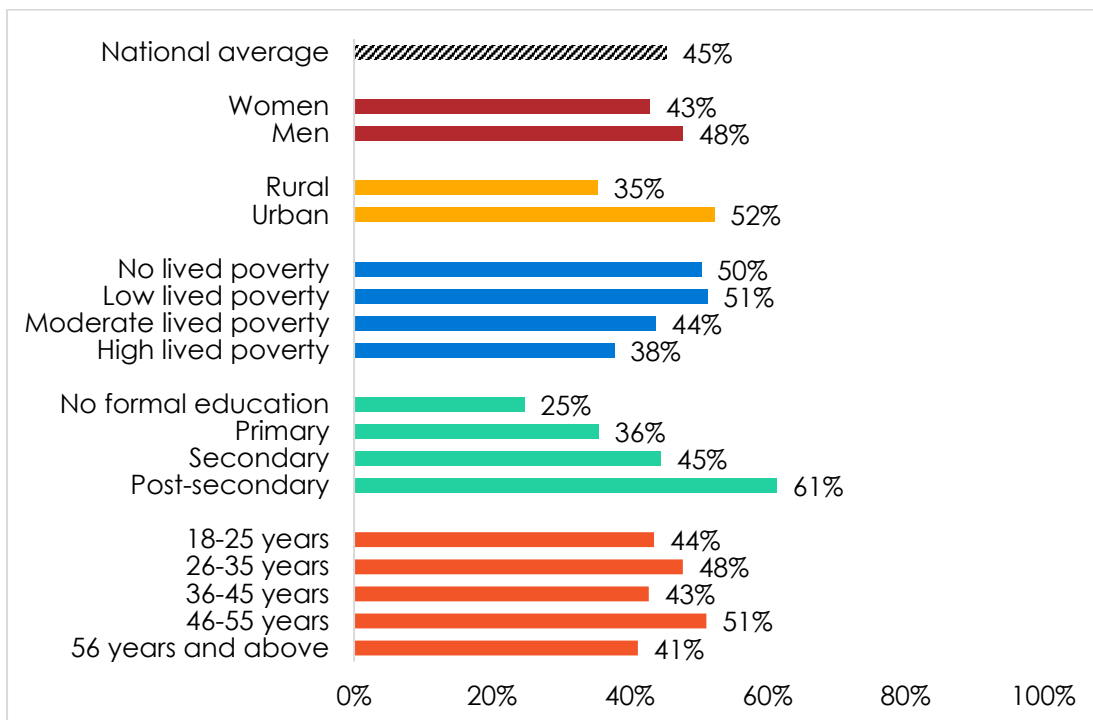
Although the experience of severe drought is more common in rural areas, awareness of climate change is far lower among rural residents than urban residents (35% vs. 52%) (Figure 5). Poorer citizens are less familiar with the term “climate change” (38% among those with high lived poverty vs. 50% among those with no lived poverty), and citizens with at least secondary education are about twice as likely as the uneducated to have heard of climate change (45%-61% among those with secondary or post-secondary education vs. 25% among those with no formal education). Men are also slightly more aware of the concept than women (48% vs. 43%).

Figure 4: Awareness of climate change | Namibia | 2017-2021



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet?

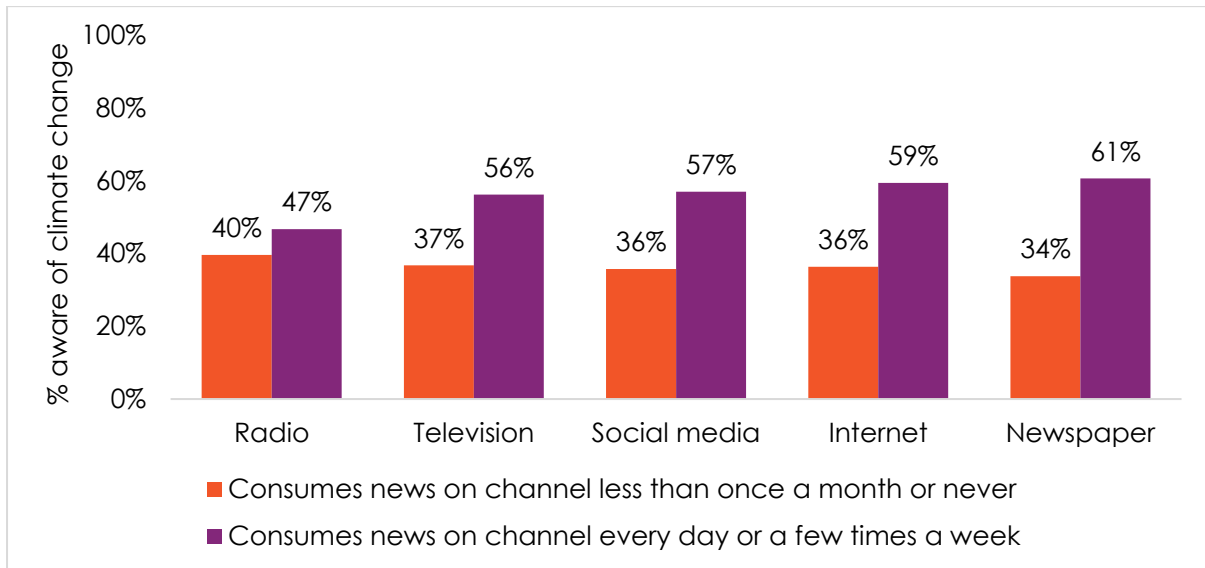
Figure 5: Awareness of climate change | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say “yes”)

Awareness of climate change also increases with respondents' news consumption. Among those who never or seldom (less than once a month) get news from the radio, television, social media, the Internet, or newspapers, only 34%-40% have heard of climate change (Figure 6). But awareness of climate change is as high as about six in 10 among respondents who frequently get news from newspapers (61%), the Internet (59%), social media (57%), and television (56%).

Figure 6: Awareness of climate change | by news media consumption | Namibia | 2021

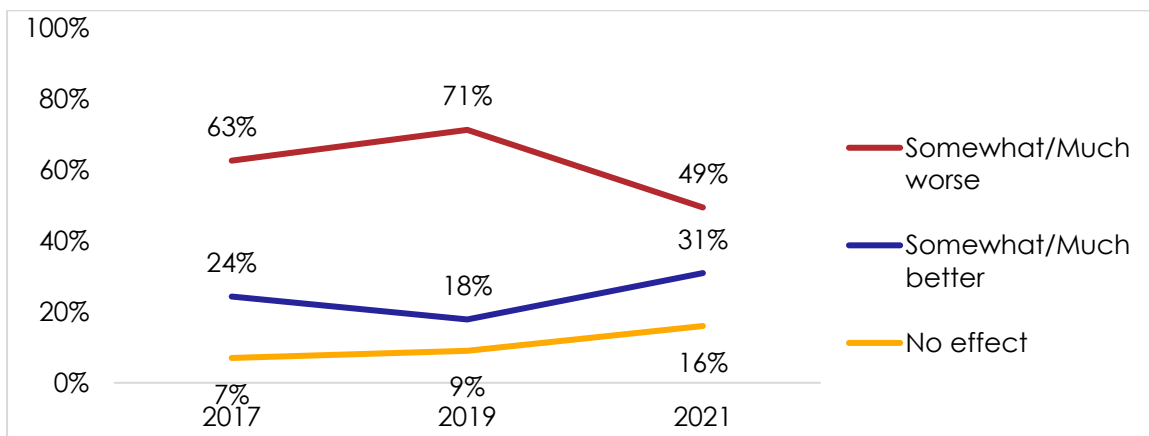


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about climate change, or haven't you had the chance to hear about this yet? (% who say "yes")

Effects of climate change

Half of citizens who are aware of climate change say it is making life in Namibia "somewhat worse" (27%) or "much worse" (22%). But a similar proportion say it is making life better (31%) or has had no effect on their lives (16%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Effect of climate change | Namibia | 2017-2021

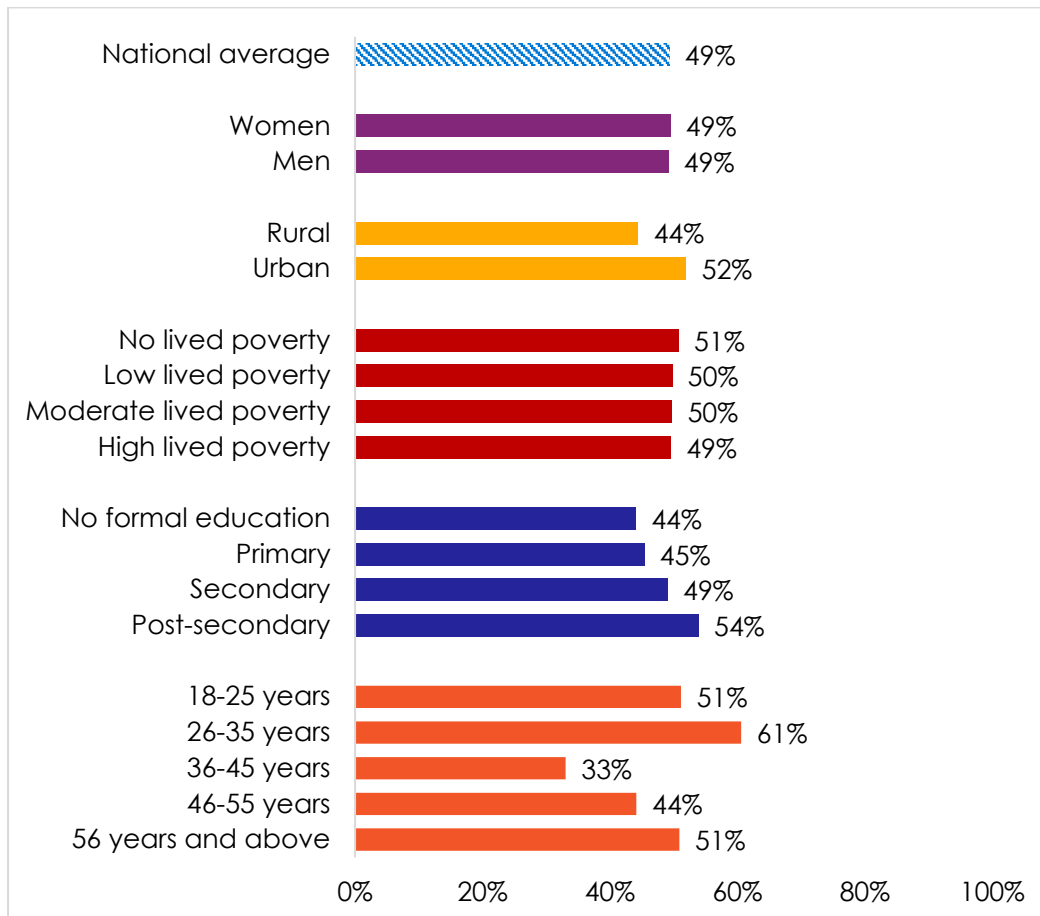


Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Namibia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Perceptions of the adverse effect of climate change have declined sharply from 2019 (71%) after increasing from 2017 (63%).

The negative impact of climate change is more strongly felt among urban residents than rural residents (52% vs. 45%) and among the highly educated than among the unschooled (54% vs. 44%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Climate change is making life worse | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



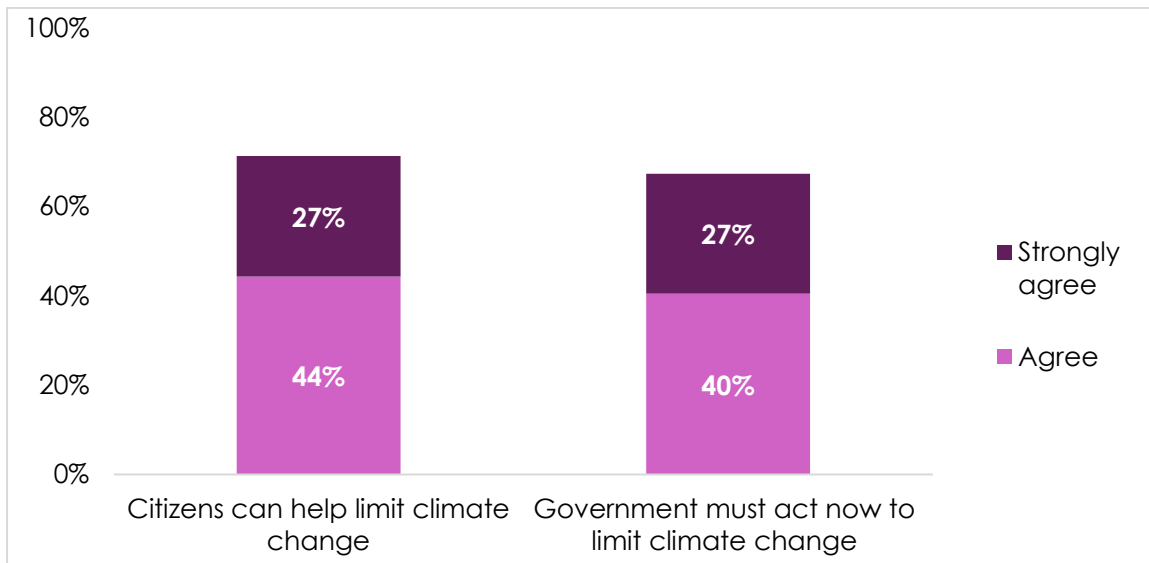
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think climate change is making life in Namibia better or worse, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat worse" or "much worse") (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Fighting climate change

Large majorities of Namibians believe that both ordinary citizens and governments have a role to play in limiting climate change. About seven in 10 respondents who are aware of climate change (71%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that citizens can help curb climate change (Figure 9). And a similar proportion (67%) want their government to take steps now to limit climate change, even if it is expensive, causes job losses. Or takes a toll on the economy.

In fact, in Namibians' eyes, the government (39%) and ordinary people (38%) share primary responsibility for fighting climate change and reducing its impact. Survey respondents assign less responsibility to businesses and industries (9%), developed countries (8%), and traditional leaders (2%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Limiting climate change | Namibia | 2021



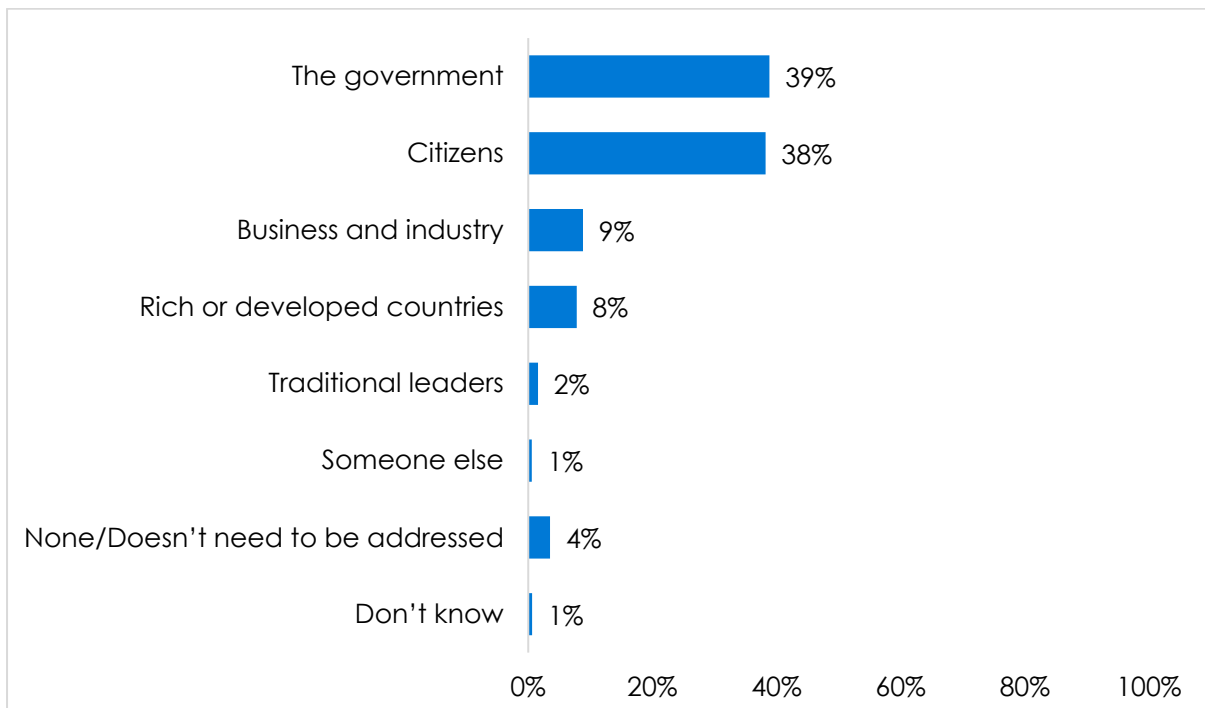
Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

Ordinary Namibians can play a role in limiting climate change.

It is important for our government to take steps now to limit climate change in the future, even if it is expensive or causes some job losses or other harm to our economy.

(Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

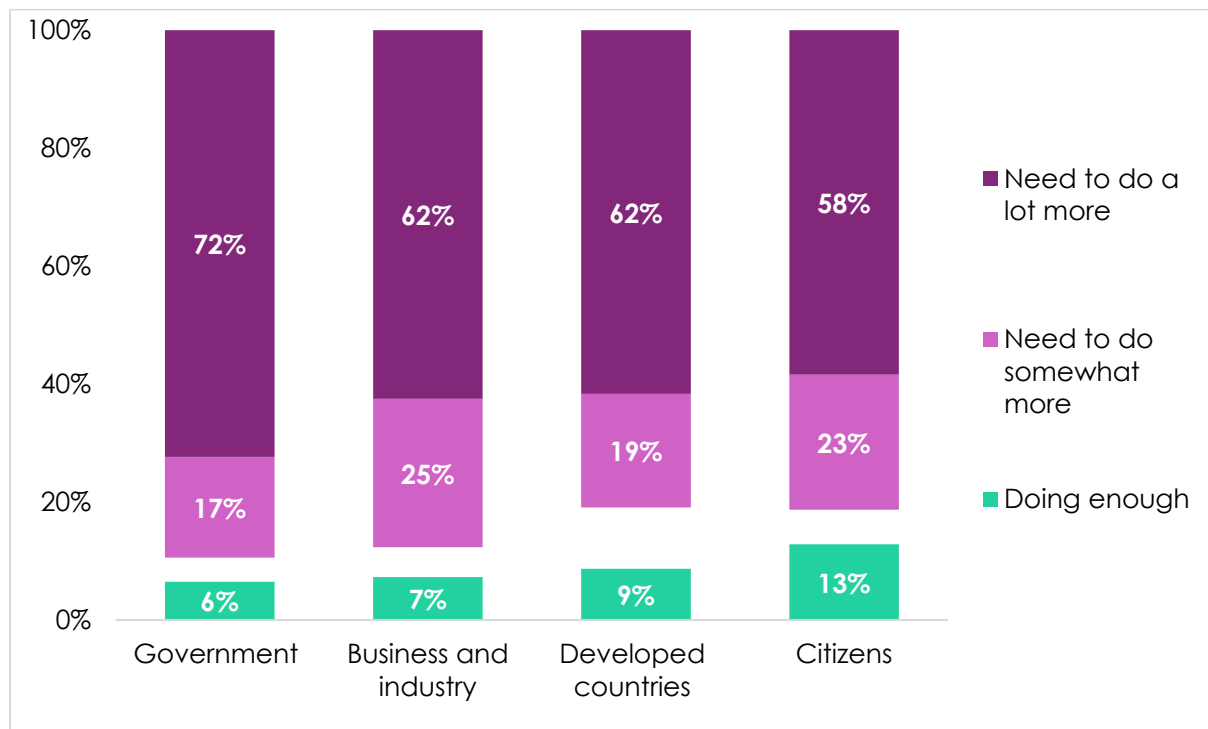
Figure 10: Who has primary responsibility for limiting climate change? | Namibia | 2021



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for trying to limit climate change and reduce its impact? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? Respondents answer with a resounding “No.” Only small minorities say the government (6%), business and industry (7%), developed countries (9%), and citizens (13%) are making enough of an effort to fight climate change (Figure 11). Large majorities believe more needs to be done, including 72% who say the government needs to do “a lot more.”

Figure 11: Are stakeholders doing enough to limit climate change? | Namibia | 2021



Respondents who are aware of climate change were asked: Do you think each of the following are doing enough to limit climate change, or do they need to do more, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Respondents who are not aware of climate change are excluded.)

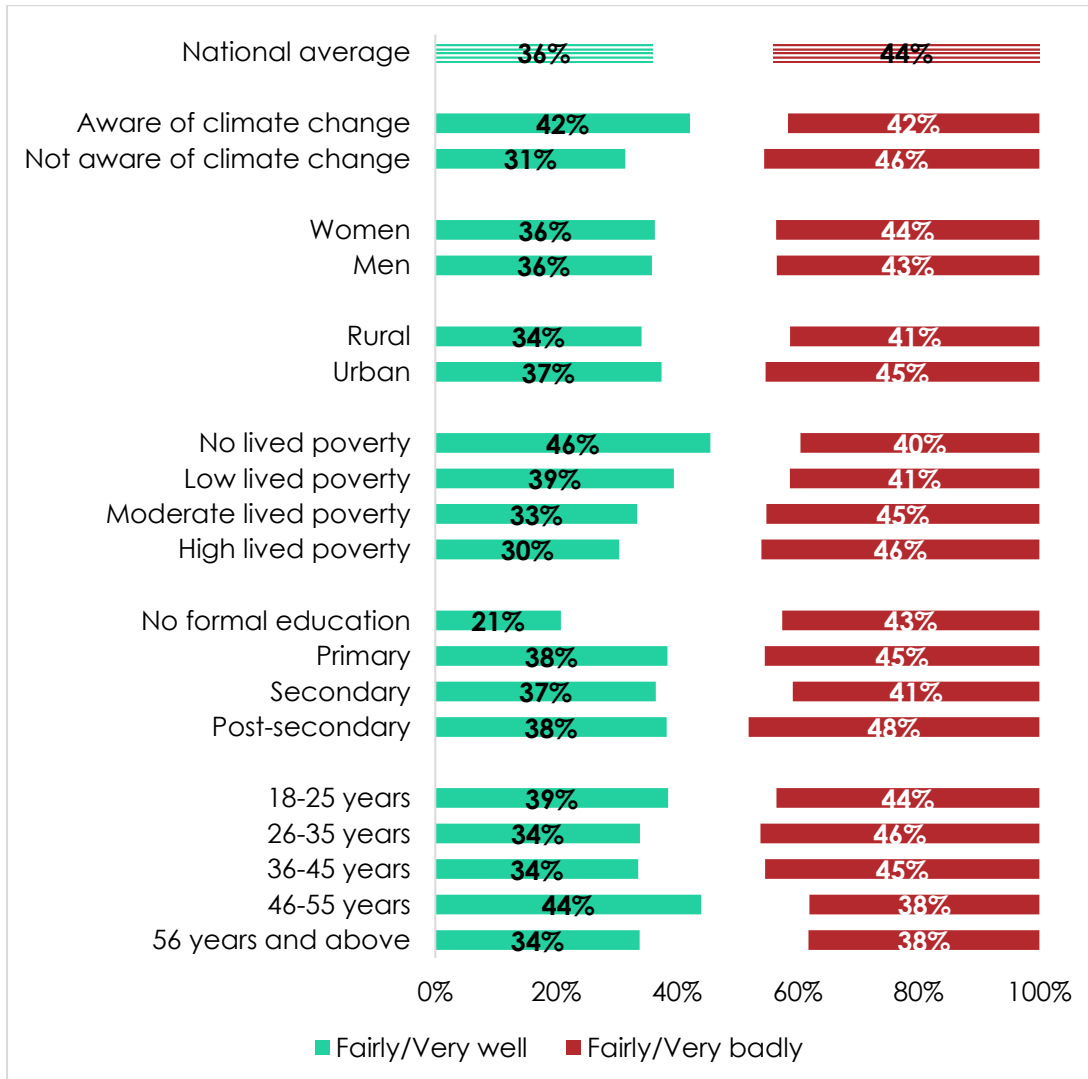
When asked to assess how well the government is addressing the problem of climate change, only about one-third (36%) of all survey respondents describe the government's performance as “fairly” or “very” good, while 44% give the government a failing grade on this issue (Figure 12).

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Respondents who are aware of the term “climate change” are more likely to rate the government favourably than those who are not (42% vs. 31%). Poor and uneducated citizens are more critical of the government's efforts than their better-off and more educated counterparts.

Respondents who are aware of the term “climate change” are more likely to rate the government favourably than those who are not (42% vs. 31%). Poor and uneducated citizens are more critical of the government's efforts than their better-off and more educated counterparts.

Figure 12: Government performance in handling climate change | by demographic group | Namibia | 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: Addressing the problem of climate change?

Pollution and environmental governance

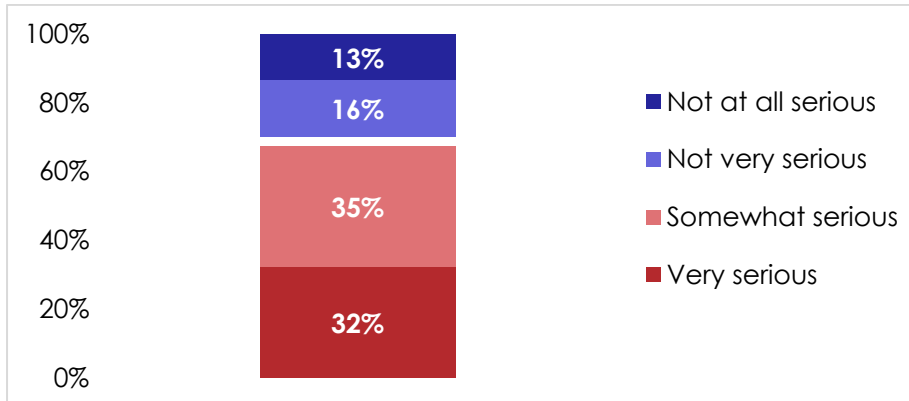
Pollution: The scope of the problem

If the concept, effects, prevention, and mitigation of climate change still appear to be distant considerations for many Namibians, the same is not true when it comes to environmental pollution.

Two-thirds of Namibians consider pollution in their communities, such as accumulation of trash or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land to be "somewhat serious" (35%) or "very serious" (32%) (Figure 13).

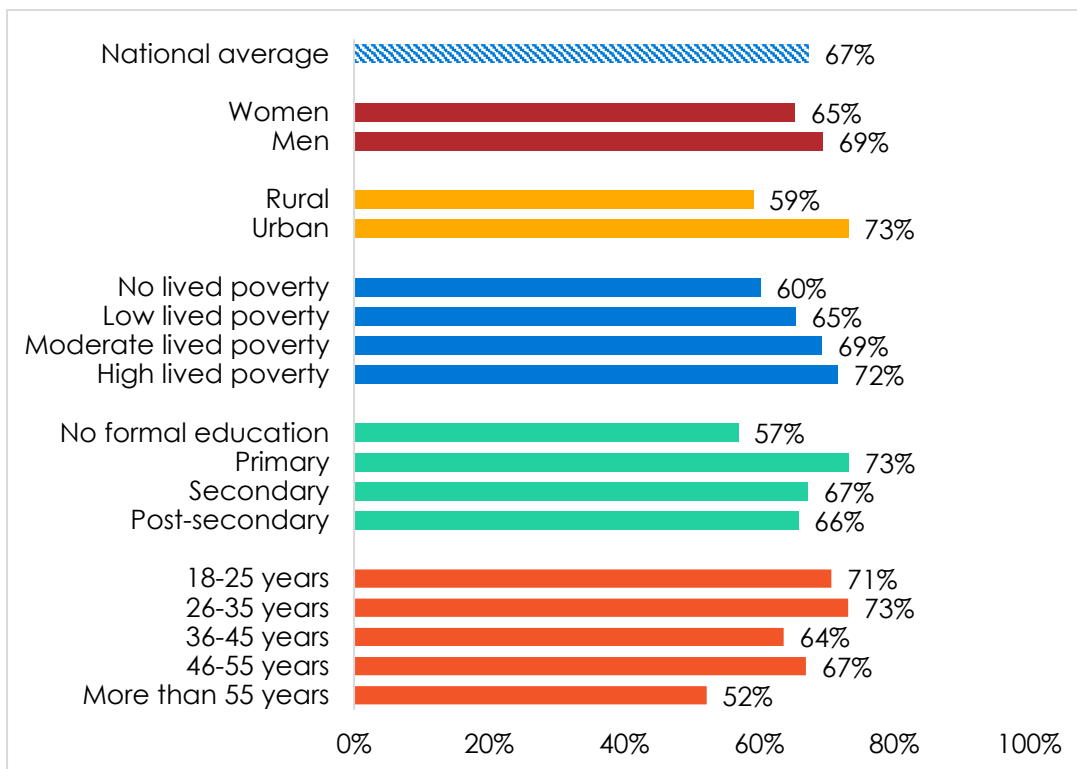
Urban residents are more concerned about pollution than rural residents (73% vs. 59%) (Figure 14). Concerns about pollution also increase with one's experience of poverty, ranging from 60% among those with no lived poverty to 72% among those with high lived poverty. Younger adults are also more likely than their elders to consider pollution a serious problem.

Figure 13 : Extent of pollution in the community | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community?

Figure 14: Pollution is a serious problem in the community | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021

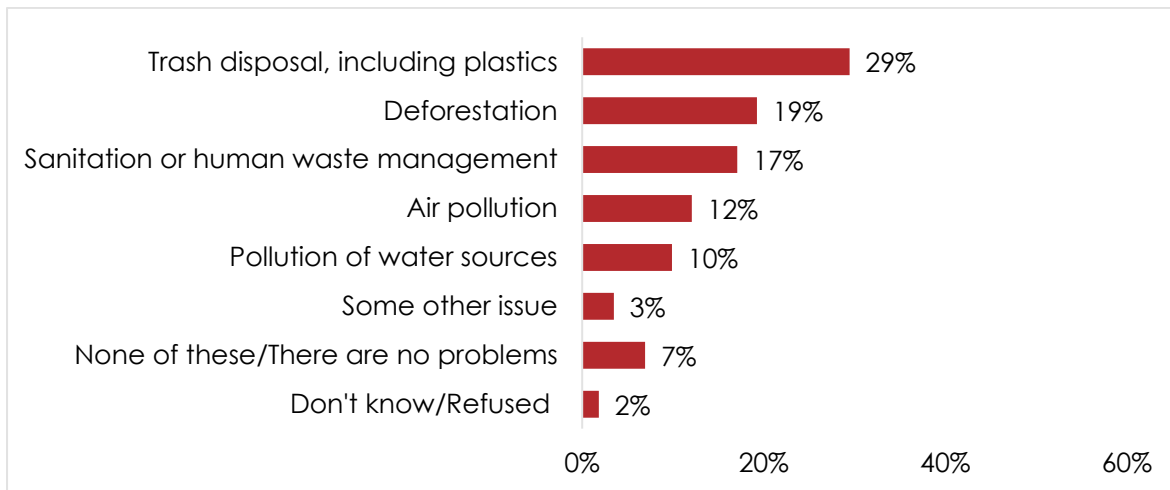


Respondents were asked: How serious a problem is pollution, such as the accumulation of trash or garbage, or damage to the quality of the air, the water, or the land in your community? (% who say "somewhat serious" or "very serious")

Namibians rank trash and plastic disposal as the most important environmental issue in their community (29%), followed by deforestation (19%) and human waste management (17%) (Figure 15). About one in 10 cite pollution of the air (12%) and water sources (10%).

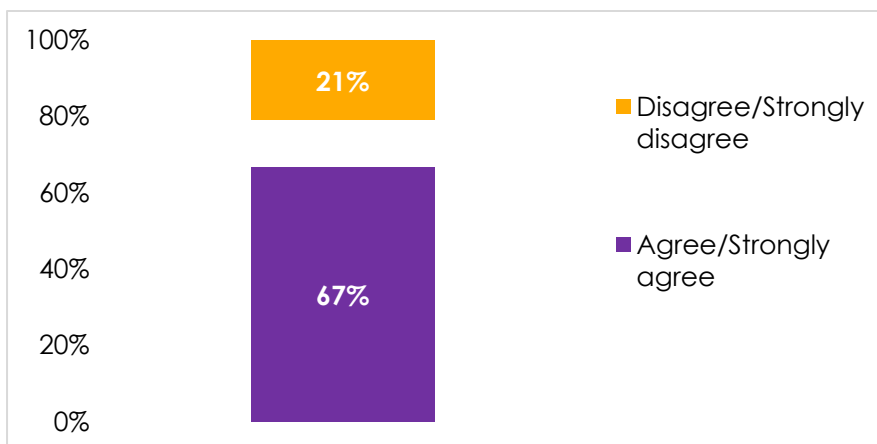
Fully two-thirds (67%) of citizens "agree" or "strongly agree" that plastic bags are a major source of pollution in Namibia (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Most important environmental issue in the community | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following is the most important environmental issue in your community today?

Figure 16: Are plastic bags a major source of pollution? | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Plastic bags are a major source of pollution in this country.

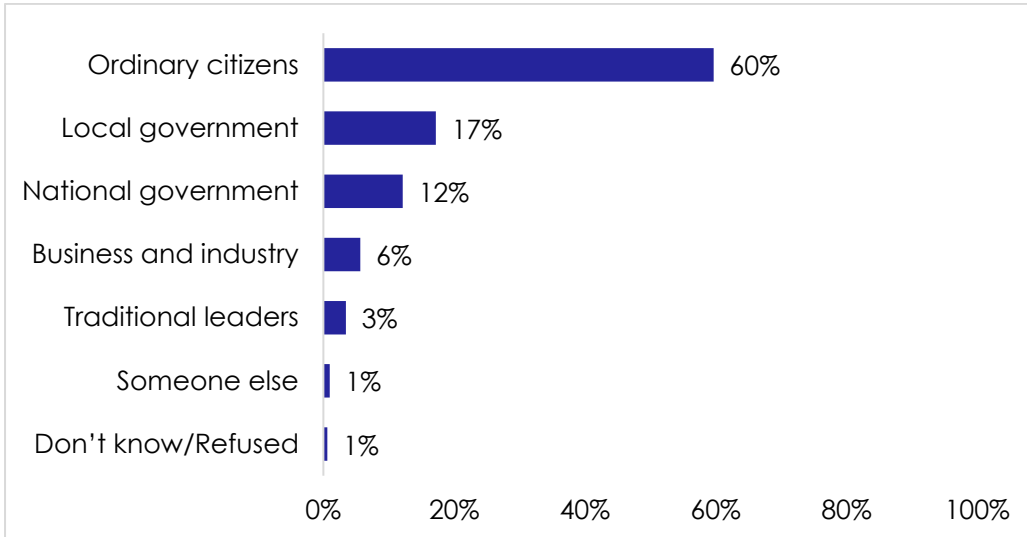
Protecting the environment

Actions to reduce pollution can range from making small every-day adjustments to once-in-a-generation game-changers – from shifting (back) to reusable shopping bags to dismantling a coal-burning industry.

For Namibians, protecting the environment starts at home: Six in 10 respondents (60%) say ordinary citizens have the primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping their communities clean (Figure 17). Only 17% would instead place that responsibility on the local government, and even fewer would look to the national government (12%), to business and industry (6%), and to traditional leaders (3%).

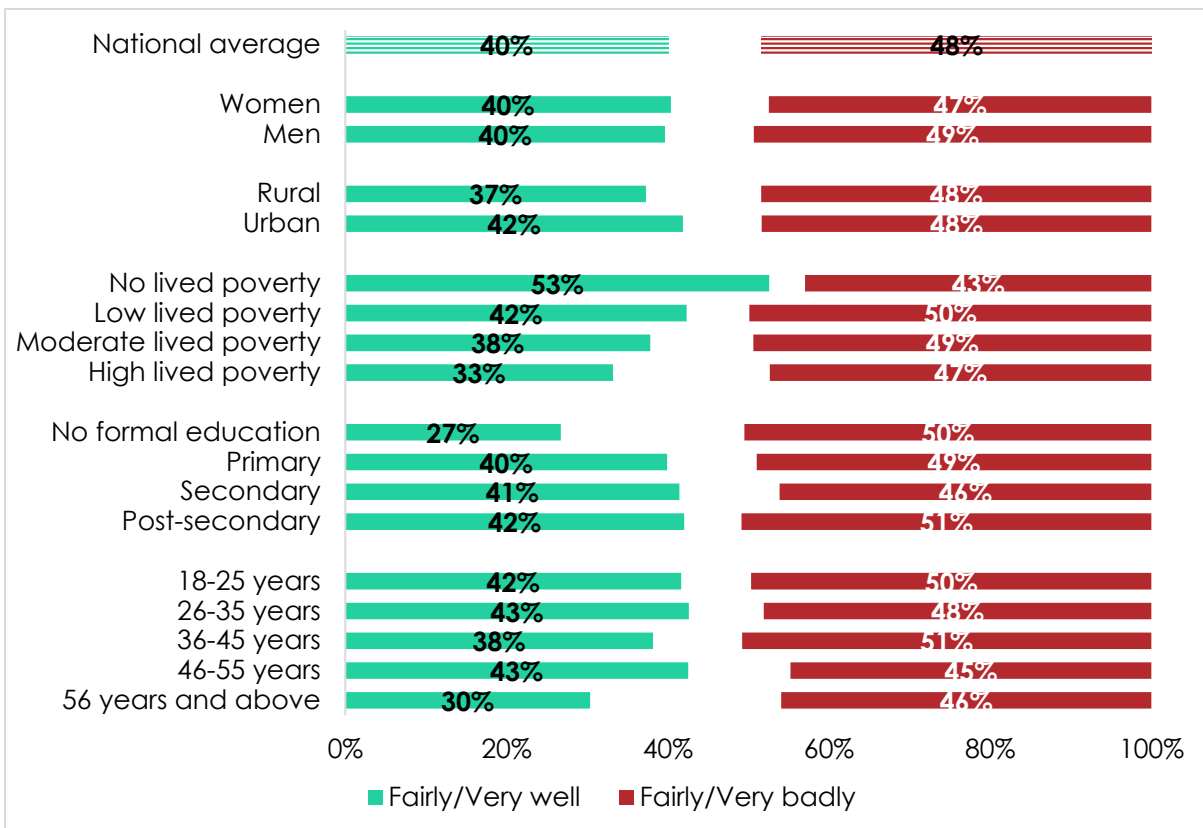
Only about four in 10 citizens (40%) think the government is doing a good job of reducing pollution and protecting the environment, while about half (48%) rate the government's efforts poorly (Figure 18). Favourable positive ratings are more common among urban than rural residents (42% vs. 37%) and increases with respondents' level of economic stability (53% among those with no lived poverty vs. 33% among those with high lived poverty).

Figure 17: Who should be responsible for reducing environmental pollution?
 | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Who do you think should have primary responsibility for reducing pollution and keeping your community clean?

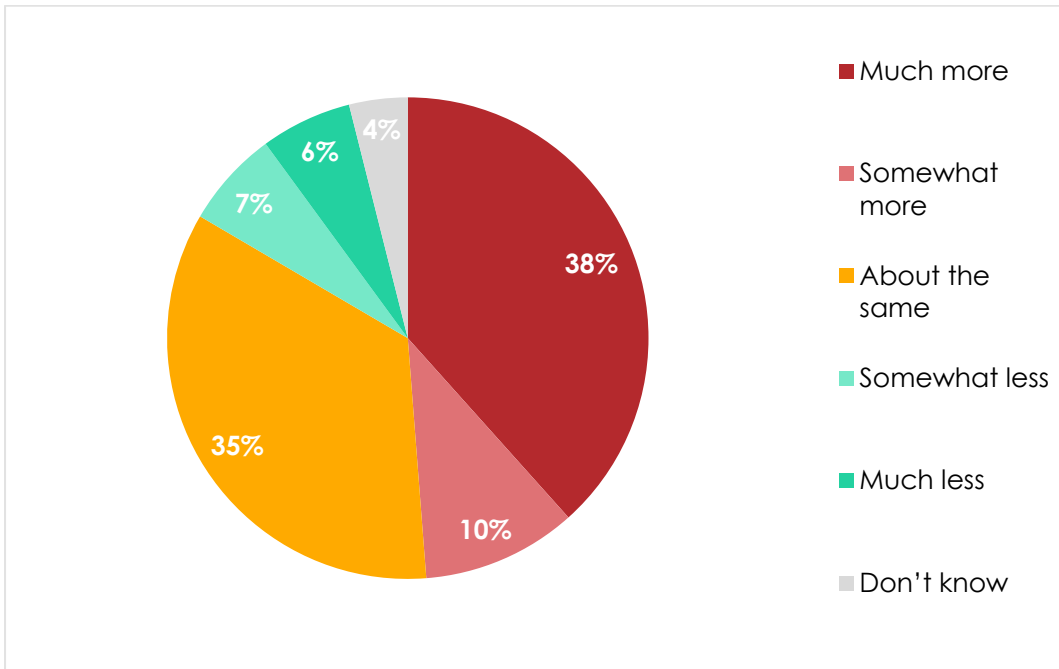
Figure 18: Government performance in reducing pollution and protecting the environment | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



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: Reducing pollution and protecting the environment?

About half (48%) of Namibians believe that the government should be doing more to limit pollution and protect the environment, including 38% who want government to do “much more” (Figure 19). One-third (35%) want the government to keep doing what it is currently doing, while only 13% think it should do less to protect the environment.

Figure 19: Should government do more to limit pollution? | Namibia | 2021

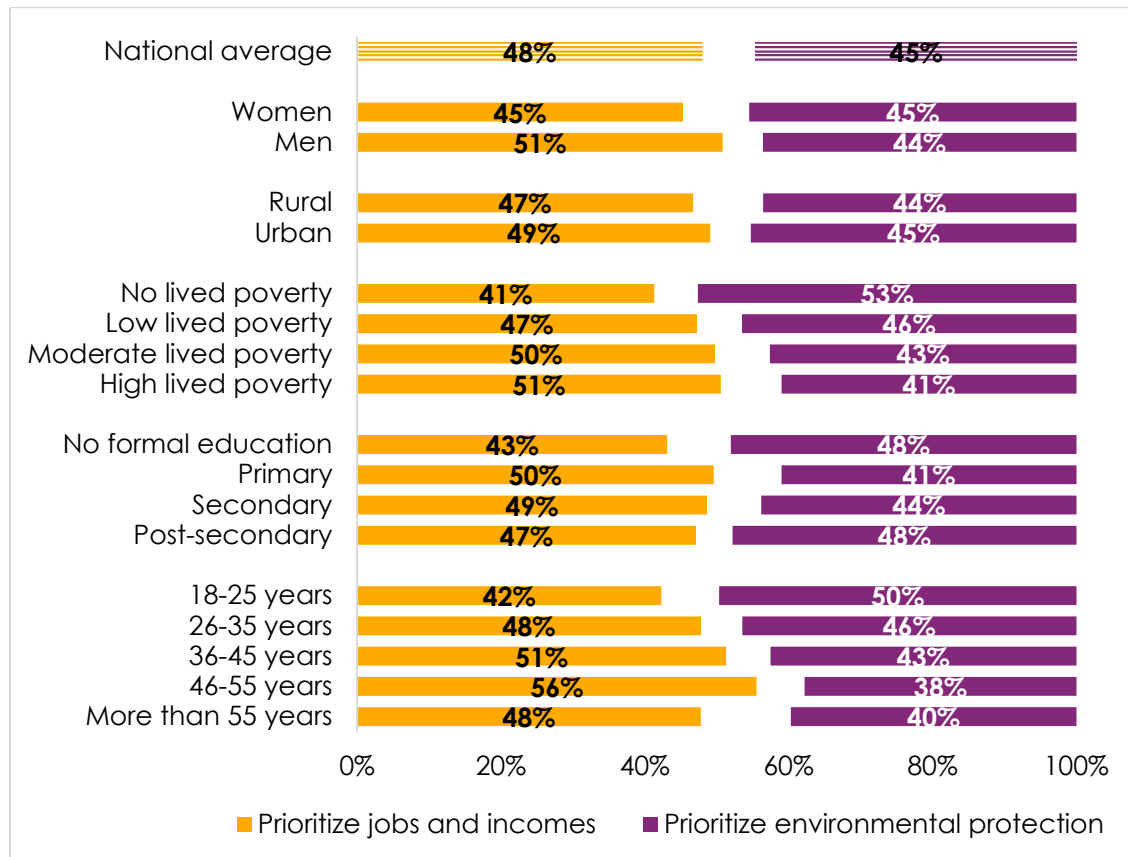


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, should our government be doing more or less than it is currently doing to limit pollution and protect the environment in this country?*

However, if environmental-protection policies threaten jobs or incomes, Namibians are divided as to which should take priority. About half (48%) of respondents say reducing pollution or other environmental damage must take a back seat to job and income creation, while almost as many (45%) would prioritize protecting the environment, “even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives” (Figure 20).

Men (51%) and economically well-off citizens (51%) are more likely than women (45%) and citizens experiencing high lived poverty (41%) to prioritize job creation over environmental protection, even though concerns about pollution increase with one’s experience with poverty.

Figure 20: Should government prioritize jobs or the environment? | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should focus on creating jobs and increasing incomes, even if that means increasing pollution or other environmental damage.
 Statement 2: The government should focus more on preventing pollution and protecting the environment, even if this means there will be fewer jobs or there will be other disruptions to our daily lives.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Natural resource extraction

In Namibia, the mining of diamonds, uranium, and zinc contributes about 10% of the country’s gross domestic product (International Trade Administration, 2021). But resource extraction can also be a major source of local-level environmental damage.

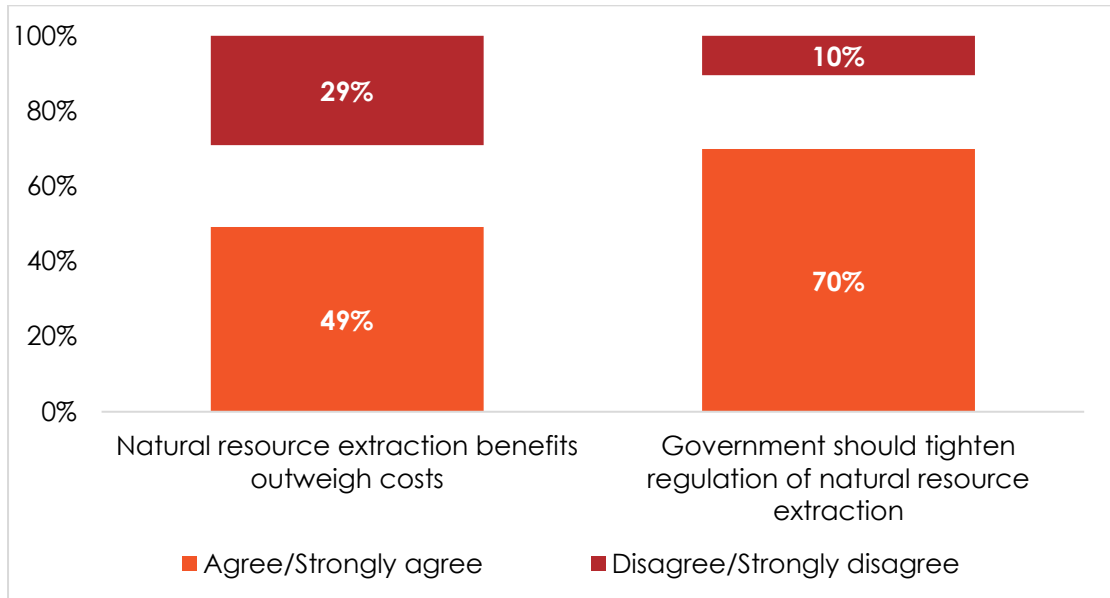
About half (49%) of Namibians “agree” or “strongly agree” that overall, the benefits that natural resource extraction brings to communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh negative impacts such as pollution. Only about half as many (29%) disagree with this assessment (Figure 21).

Nevertheless, in order to reduce the negative impact of natural resource extraction on the environment, a large majority (70%) of citizens want the government to regulate the industry more tightly.

Positive assessments outweigh negative ones when it comes to the stake of ordinary citizens in natural resource extraction (Figure 22). A majority (55%) of respondents say that people have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities, while three in 10 (30%) disagree.

And by a 47% to 34% margin, respondents think local communities receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction.

Figure 21: Natural resource extraction: Costs vs. benefits | Namibia | 2021

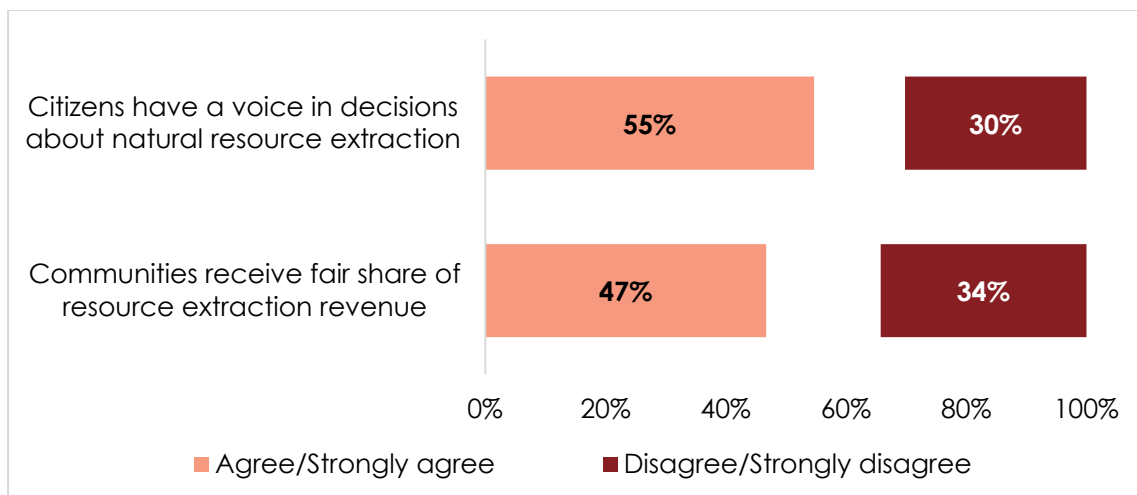


Respondents were asked: Natural resource extraction such as mining, oil drilling, or wood harvesting can have benefits, such as jobs and revenue. But it can also pose problems for nearby communities, such as pollution or deforestation. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

In general, the benefits of resource extraction activities to local communities, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh the costs, such as pollution.

In this country, natural resource extraction should be more tightly regulated by government to reduce the negative impacts on the environment.

Figure 22: Natural resource extraction: Citizens' voice and benefit | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Ordinary Namibians currently have a voice in decisions about natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.

Local communities currently receive a fair share of the revenues from natural resource extraction that takes place near their communities.

Conclusion

Given the importance of agriculture, tourism, and natural resource extraction for Namibia's future, climate-change mitigation and environmental governance are critical issues the country must confront.

The survey data presented show that Namibians have a substantial but not sufficient understanding of the threats associated with climate change. General awareness of climate change is relatively low, especially in rural areas and among those with limited education and infrequent access to news – factors that suggest avenues for increasing knowledge and preparedness through education and information campaigns. Among those who are aware of climate change, however, clear majorities say that no one – not government, business, the international community, or citizens themselves – is doing enough to fight it.

Environmental pollution seems to be a more immediate concern for Namibians, particularly in the cities and among the poor. Trash and plastic disposal ranks at the top of the list of pollution problems. Namibians assign themselves, as ordinary citizens, a leading role to play in reducing environmental pollution.

Given the country's continuing recession, with high unemployment exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not surprising that many Namibians feel that the benefits of natural resource extraction, such as jobs and revenue, outweigh potential negative impacts such as pollution. Yet most citizens also call for tighter regulation of the mining and exploration sector, clearly expecting the government to balance benefits of natural resource extraction in environmentally sensitive areas with the basic needs of local communities and businesses.

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