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Africans say governments aren't doing enough to help youth

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 418 | Gildfred Asiamah, Ousmane Djiby Sambou, and Sadhiska Bhoojedhur

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 decisionmaking 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).

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 their importance 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 18 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.

Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys were completed in 18 countries between August 2019 and March 2020 before fieldwork was suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and are continuing in late 2020 and 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 18-country analysis is based on 26,777 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, each country is 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, more than six in 10 young Africans (64% 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 (60%) of 18- to 35-year-olds have at least some secondary school, compared to 43% and 28%, respectively, of the middle and senior age brackets. But almost half of young Burkinabe (48%), Malians (45%), and Guineans (44%) have no formal education at all.
- 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 15% of those above age 55). Unemployment rates reported by young respondents range up to 49% in Botswana and 57% in Lesotho.
- Only a minority of Africans say their government is doing a good job of meeting the needs of youth (27%), creating jobs (21%), and addressing educational needs (46%). Young and older respondents offer almost identical assessments of the government's performance.
- A solid majority (57%) 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 Botswana, Uganda, and Angola.
- If their government could increase its spending to help young people, job creation (cited by 51% of respondents) would be Africans' top priority for additional investment. Education ranks a distant second (17%), 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 (58%) – including 56% 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."
 - One striking exception is Tunisia, where 70% of citizens 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. Youth are 20 points less likely to vote than those 56 years and above. But they also lag behind in most other types of community participation and contact with leaders.



Country going in the wrong direction

On average across 18 countries, more than six in 10 young Africans (64% of those aged 18-35) say their country is "going in the wrong direction." Only one in three (33%) 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).

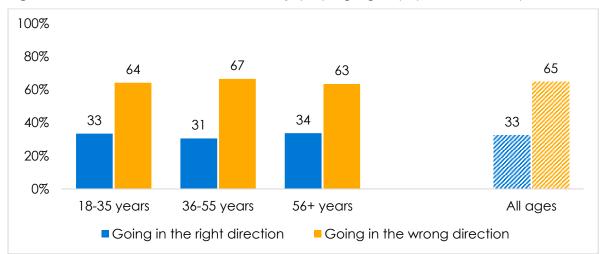


Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | by age group | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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

Most important problems

Asked what they consider the most important national problems that their government should address, African youth most frequently cite unemployment, followed by health, education, infrastructure/roads, water supply, and crime/security (Figure 2).

On average across 18 countries, young people (35%) are somewhat more likely than their elders (28%-32%) to identify a lack of jobs as one of their country's top three problems. Education is a higher priority among youth (27%) and those in the middle age range (27% of 36- to 55-year-olds) than among older respondents (20%).

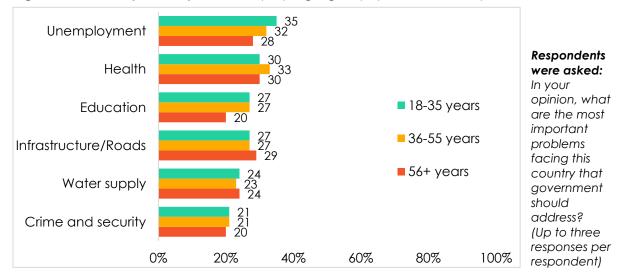


Figure 2: Most important problems | by age group | 18 countries | 2019/2020



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 (60%) of young Africans have some secondary (41%) or post-secondary (19%) schooling, compared to 43% and 28%, respectively, of the middle and senior age brackets (Figure 3). Youth also have the smallest proportion of those with no formal education (16% vs. 26% and 35%, respectively, of the older groups).

Behind these averages are vast differences in national educational attainment. While almost all youth in Gabon, Tunisia, Kenya, Cabo Verde, Botswana, Namibia, and Malawi have been to school, almost half of young Burkinabe (48%), Malians (45%), and Guineans (44%) have no formal education (Figure 4).

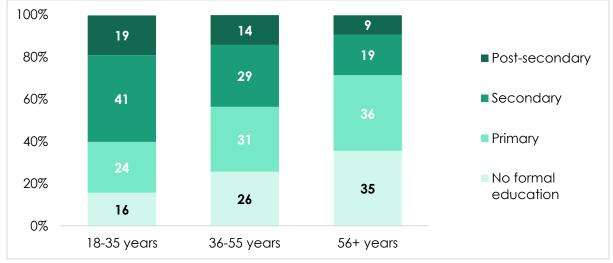
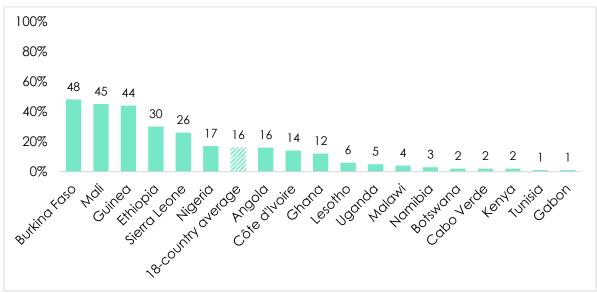


Figure 3: Education level | by age group | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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





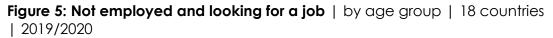
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education? (% of 18- to 35-year-old respondents who say "no formal education")

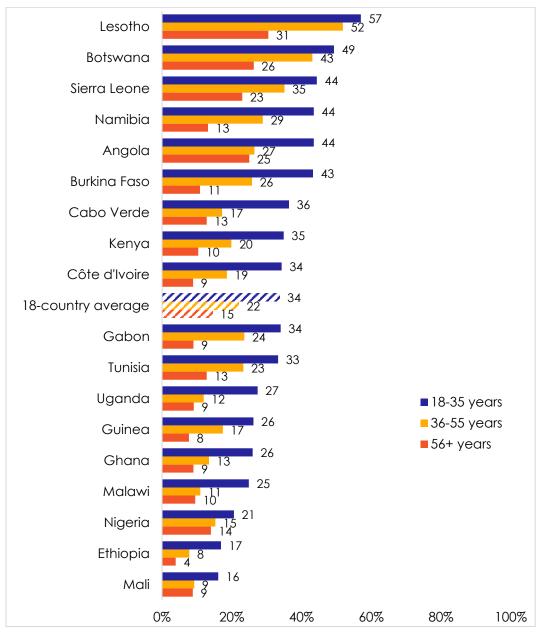


But despite their educational advantage over their elders, young people are also more likely to be unemployed.

On average across 18 countries, one-third of both young men (33%) and young women (35%) don't have a job but are looking for one, a considerably higher unemployment rate than among the middle and senior age categories (22% and 15%, respectively) (Figure 5).

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. But rates by country vary widely, ranging from fewer than one in five youth in Mali (16%) and Ethiopia (17%) to about half or more in Botswana (49%) and Lesotho (57%).





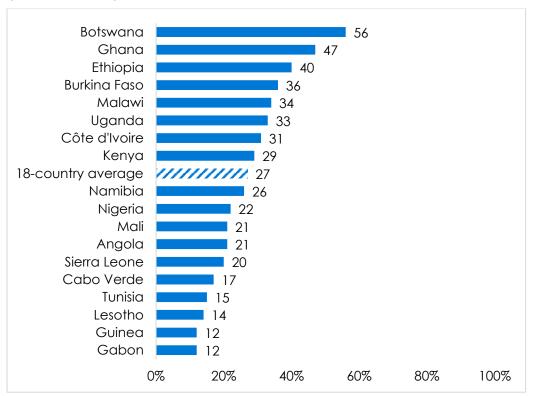
Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (% who say "no, but looking")



Governments failing to meet the needs of Africa's youth

Are governments doing what is necessary to address the challenges faced by their youth? Only about one in four Africans (27%) think their government is doing a "fairly" or "very" good job of addressing the needs of the youth (Figure 6). Fewer than one in five citizens agree in Gabon (12%), Guinea (12%), Lesotho (14%), Tunisia (15%), and Cabo Verde (17%). Botswana (56%) is the only country where a majority praise the government's performance on youth issues, perhaps reflecting public awareness, despite high levels of youth unemployment, of initiatives such as the Youth Development Fund (Republic of Botswana, 2020) and recent setasides to support youth-owned businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic (allAfrica.com, 2020).

Figure 6: Government performance in addressing the needs of young people



| 18 countries | 2019/2020

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: 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).

None of the 18 surveyed countries records majority approval of the government's efforts at job creation; Ghana (42%) and Ethiopia (37%) fare best. No more than one in 10 citizens praise the government's performance on the job front in Sierra Leone (10%), Gabon (8%), and Lesotho (5%).

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. Kenya (75% approval),



Ghana (74%), Sierra Leone (74%), and Botswana (72%) stand out for their strong performance, while Gabon (19%) and Lesotho (20%) again rank low. 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, there are no significant differences across the three age groups.

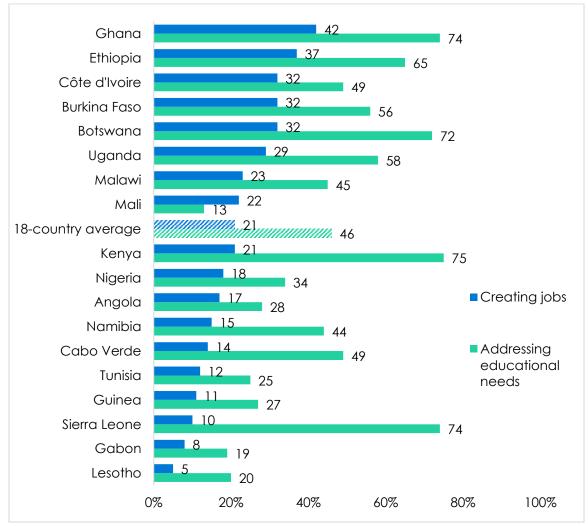


Figure 7: Government performance on job creation, education | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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

Investing in Africa's youth

A solid majority (57%) of Africans say they would be willing to pay higher taxes to support programs to help young people (Figure 8). All age groups are again largely in agreement on this: 59% of youth agree, as do 56% of middle-aged and 55% of senior Africans. This is also the majority position in all but three countries, exceeding two-thirds support in Tunisia and Namibia (each 68%). Botswana is the only country where opponents significantly outnumber supporters (50% vs. 43%), while Ugandans (46% against, 47% for) and Angolans (40% vs. 39%) are about evenly divided on the question.



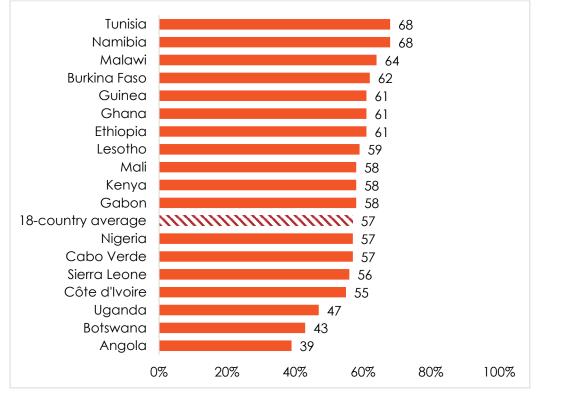


Figure 8: Support for higher taxes to fund youth programs | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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 51% of respondents) would be Africans' top priority for additional investment (Figure 9). Education ranks a distant second (17%), followed by other work-related programs – job training (12%) and business loans (12%). Only about one in 20 respondents (6%) identify social services for youth as a top priority. These priorities are substantially the same across all age groups.

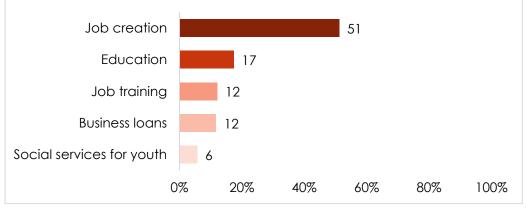


Figure 9: Priorities for government investment in youth | 18 countries | 2019/2020

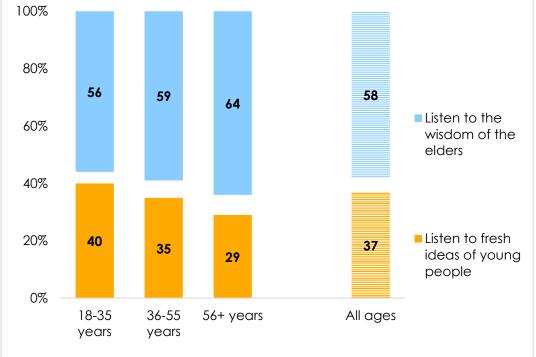
Respondents were asked: If the government could increase its spending on programs to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?



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

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 (58%) "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 37% instead prioritize listening more "to fresh ideas from young people" (Figure 10). While young respondents are somewhat more likely than their elders to favor listening to youth, they still solidly value "wisdom" over "fresh ideas" (56% vs. 40%).





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)

One striking exception is Tunisia, where young people sparked democratic changes through the 2011 Jasmine Revolution but continue to struggle for solutions to unemployment, poverty, and other problems (Tung, 2020; Reguly, 2019; Gabsi, 2019). Seven in 10 Tunisians (70%) say the country should pay greater attention to the ideas of young people.

Lesotho (56%) and Botswana (53%) are the only other surveyed countries where a majority of respondents prioritize ideas from the youth. Elsewhere the elders outscore the youth, including three-fourths preference in Burkina Faso (76%), Mali (75%), and Uganda (74%) (Figure 11).



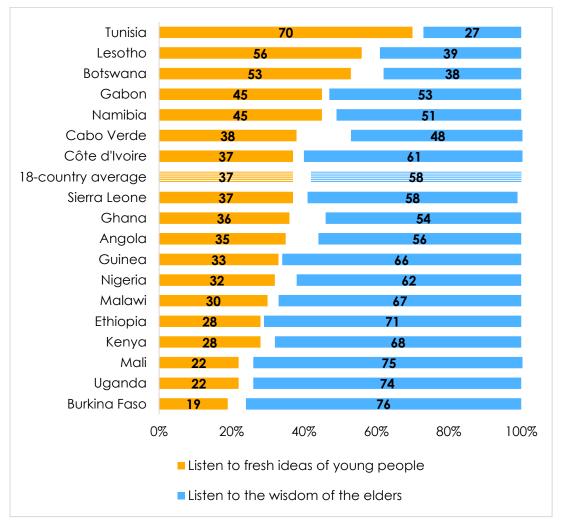


Figure 11: Fresh ideas of youth vs. wisdom of the elders | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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)

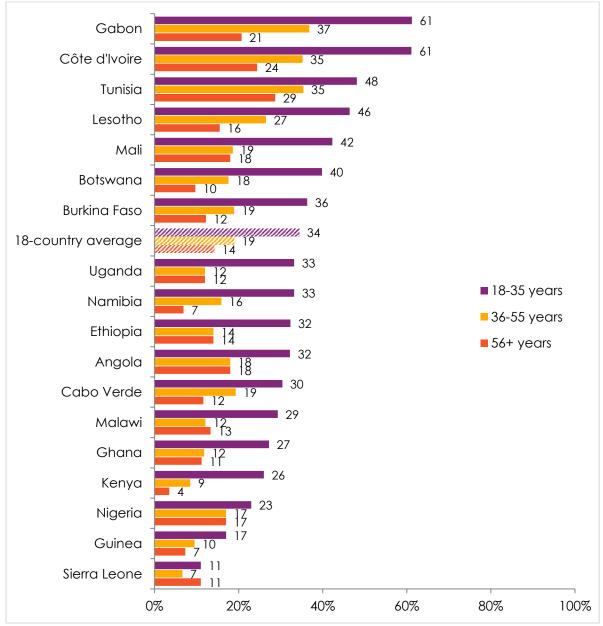
But do Africa's youth claim a voice for themselves? Findings reveal that, like youth elsewhere in the world (Barrett, 2018), youth in Africa tend to participate less in most forms of civic action and political engagement. Activists who believe that more youthful voices are needed to address their country's 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 about twice as likely (34%) to have skipped voting as middle-aged (19%) and older (14%) citizens (Figure 12). In fact, the gap meets or exceeds 30 percentage points in Botswana (40% of eligible youth report not voting vs. 10% of the elderly), Lesotho (46% vs. 16%), Côte d'Ivoire (61% vs. 24%), and Gabon (61% vs. 21%).

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, the same proportion as among older



citizens. But Nigeria is the only other country where the no-voting gap falls below 10 percentage points (23% of eligible youth did not vote, compared to 17% each for the middle and older groups).





Respondents were asked: People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? 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)

African youth are also less likely to report attending a community meeting during the previous year (54% for youth vs. 65% and 66% for middle-aged and older groups) or joining others to raise an issue (52% vs. 59% for both 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 unmarried, childless, and/or living with older family members rather than running their own households. This is reinforced by the finding that participation is even lower among 18- to 25year-olds than among 26- to 35-year-olds (50% vs. 59% attended a community meeting).

The exception, as might be expected, is protest. Nearly one in five youth (18%) say they participated in a protest during the past year, about 50% higher than the rate among those aged 56 or older (13%).

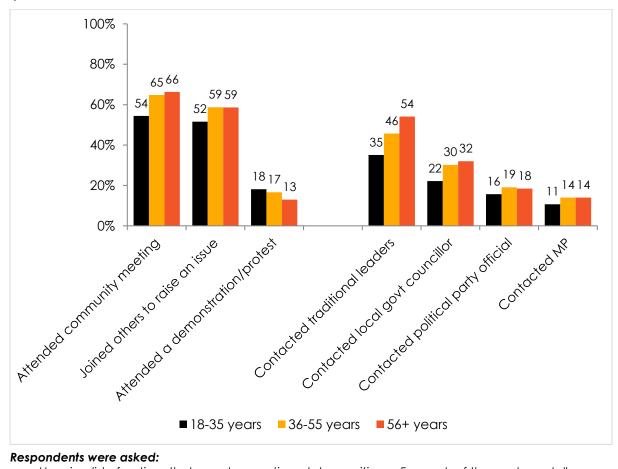


Figure 13: Participation in change-making activities | by age group | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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")

In general, youth are also less likely to contact their leaders, although the gaps vary considerably. Young adults are actually nearly equally likely to contact political party officials (16% among youth vs. 19% and 18% among middle-aged and older respondents) and MPs (11% vs. 14%). They are, however, substantially less likely to contact local government councillors (a 10-percentage-point gap) and especially traditional leaders (19-point gap).

Lower contact rates among youth are hardly surprising. Many do not yet face the same life challenges as their older counterparts who head households and are raising children and/or



caring for elders. 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 large 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,

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. 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 more than four in 10 young respondents (44%)

say they "feel close to" a party, compared to 48% in the middle age category. Only among older respondents does a slim majority (51%) align with a political party (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 (76%), Uganda (66%), Guinea (62%), and Malawi (61%). At the other extreme, fewer than one in five young people line up behind a party in Tunisia (16%) and Ethiopia (17%).

Again, Sierra Leone stands out as the only surveyed country where young respondents are more likely to indicate a party affiliation than their elders. In some countries youth trail the middle age category by substantial gaps, including Namibia and Botswana (each by 13 percentage points) as well as Mali, Cabo Verde, and Gabon (each by 10 points).

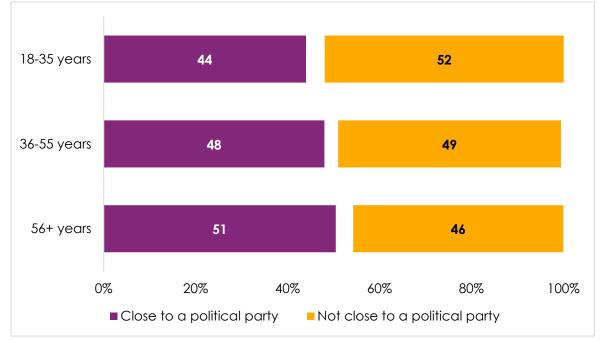
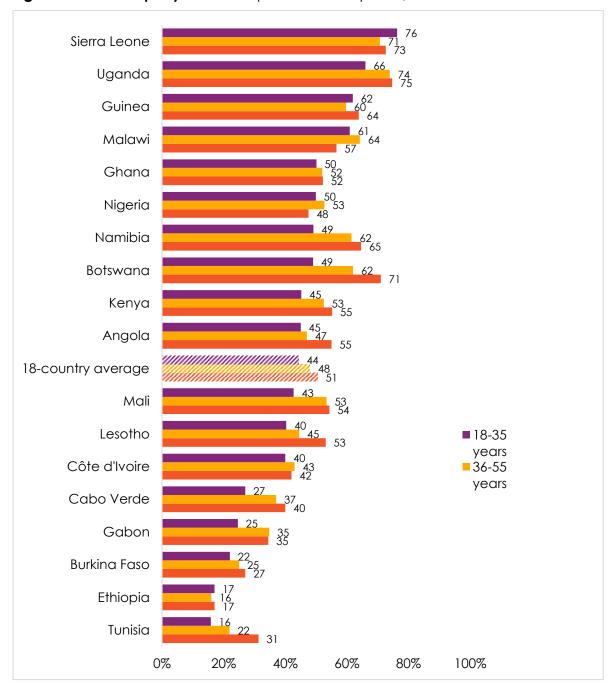


Figure 14: Political party affiliation | by age group | 18 countries | 2019/2020

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







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.



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Appendix

Country	Months when Round 8 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov-Dec 2019	N/A
Botswana	July-Aug 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
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Ethiopia	Dec 2019-Jan 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb 2020	2015, 2017
Ghana	Sept-Oct 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov-Dec 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	Aug-Sept 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Malawi	Nov-Dec 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Namibia	Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Nigeria	Jan-Feb 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Tunisia	Feb-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept-Oct 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017

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



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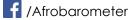
Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (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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