



# Data for Governance Alliance Policy Brief No. 3

---

Declining performance: Africans demand more government attention to educational needs.

**Kelechi Amakoh**

15 March 2022



**This policy brief was previously published as Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 511**

## Summary

Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation.”

Mandela's faith in the dividends of an educated population echoes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which highlights quality education as the most powerful tool for lifting children and adults out of poverty (UNESCO, 2020). It is also reflected in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 4, which calls on governments to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030 (United Nations, 2022).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, sub-Saharan Africa was leading the world with impressive gains in primary school enrollment, though the continent still faced enormous challenges of equity and education quality (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Musau, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). The pandemic threatens to wipe out two decades' worth of progress on education, with millions of children set back by lengthy school closures, lack of access to distance learning, and the diversion of education funding to other priorities (United Nations, 2021; UNICEF, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2020). But Afrobarometer survey findings from 34 African countries show that citizens' satisfaction with their educational systems was declining even before the pandemic, as countries surveyed in 2019 and early 2020 record the same drops in public approval ratings as those surveyed since the onset of the pandemic. Overall, for the first time in more than two decades, a majority of respondents in an Afrobarometer survey round say their governments are failing them on education.

## 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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) 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 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.<sup>1</sup> When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). Due to rounding, reported totals may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.

## Key findings

- On average across 34 countries, one in five African adults (20%) reporting having no formal education, 27% attended primary school, 37% attended secondary school, and 17% attended institutions of higher learning. These proportions have changed little over the past decade.
  - Educational attainment varies widely across countries, from 99% of Gabonese with some formal schooling to 70% of Nigeriens with none.
  - Women, rural residents, and the poor face persistent disadvantages when it comes to educational attainment.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens who had contact with a public school last year say they found it easy to obtain the services they needed. But

---

<sup>1</sup> The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.

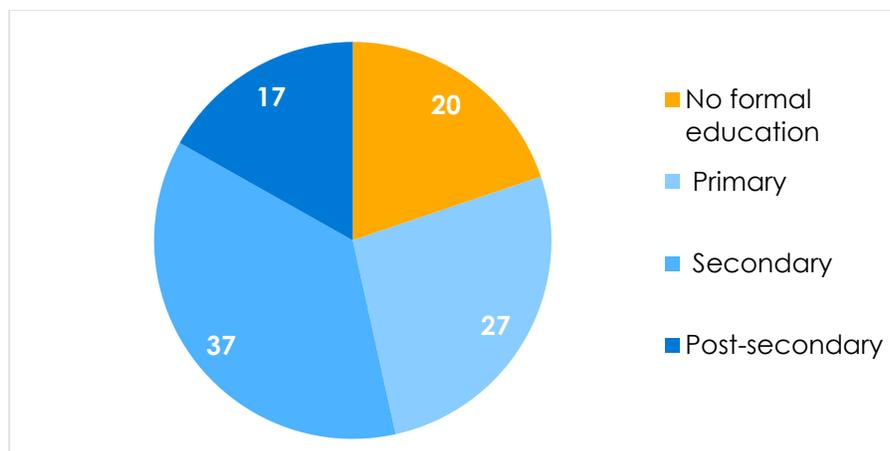
almost one in five (18%) say they had to pay a bribe to get the services they needed.

- For the first time since Afrobarometer surveys began more than two decades ago, a majority (53%) of respondents in a survey round say their governments are doing a poor job on education.
  - Across 29 countries tracked since 2011/2013, approval of the government's performance on education has declined by 12 percentage points over the past decade, including an 8-point drop since 2016/2018.
  - But survey findings suggest that this decline occurred independently of the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - Most citizens approve of their governments' decision to close schools to limit the spread of COVID-19, though they also overwhelmingly think schools should have reopened more quickly.

## Educational attainment

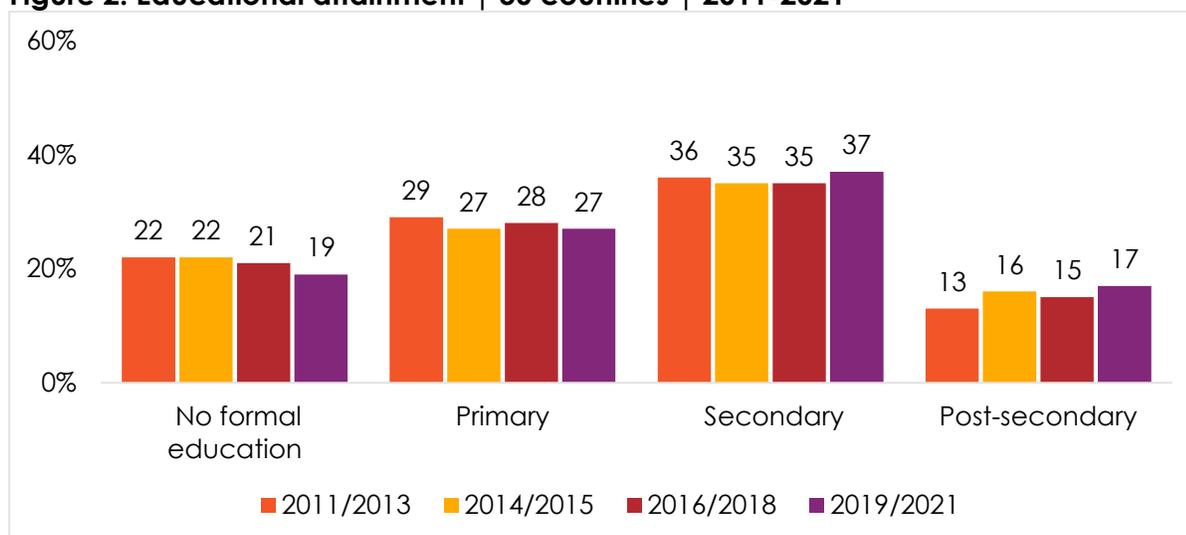
On average across 34 African countries, one in five African adults (20%) have no formal education, 27% have attended or completed primary school, 37% have attended or completed secondary school, and 17% have attended or completed institutions of higher learning (Figure 1). These proportions have changed very little over the past decade; on average across 30 countries where this indicator has been tracked over the last four survey rounds, the share of citizens with post-secondary qualifications has increased by 4 percentage points, while other categories have remained stable (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Educational attainment** | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

**Figure 2: Educational attainment | 30 countries | 2011-2021**



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

Educational attainment varies widely by country and by demographic factors such as gender, age, urban-rural location, and economic status.

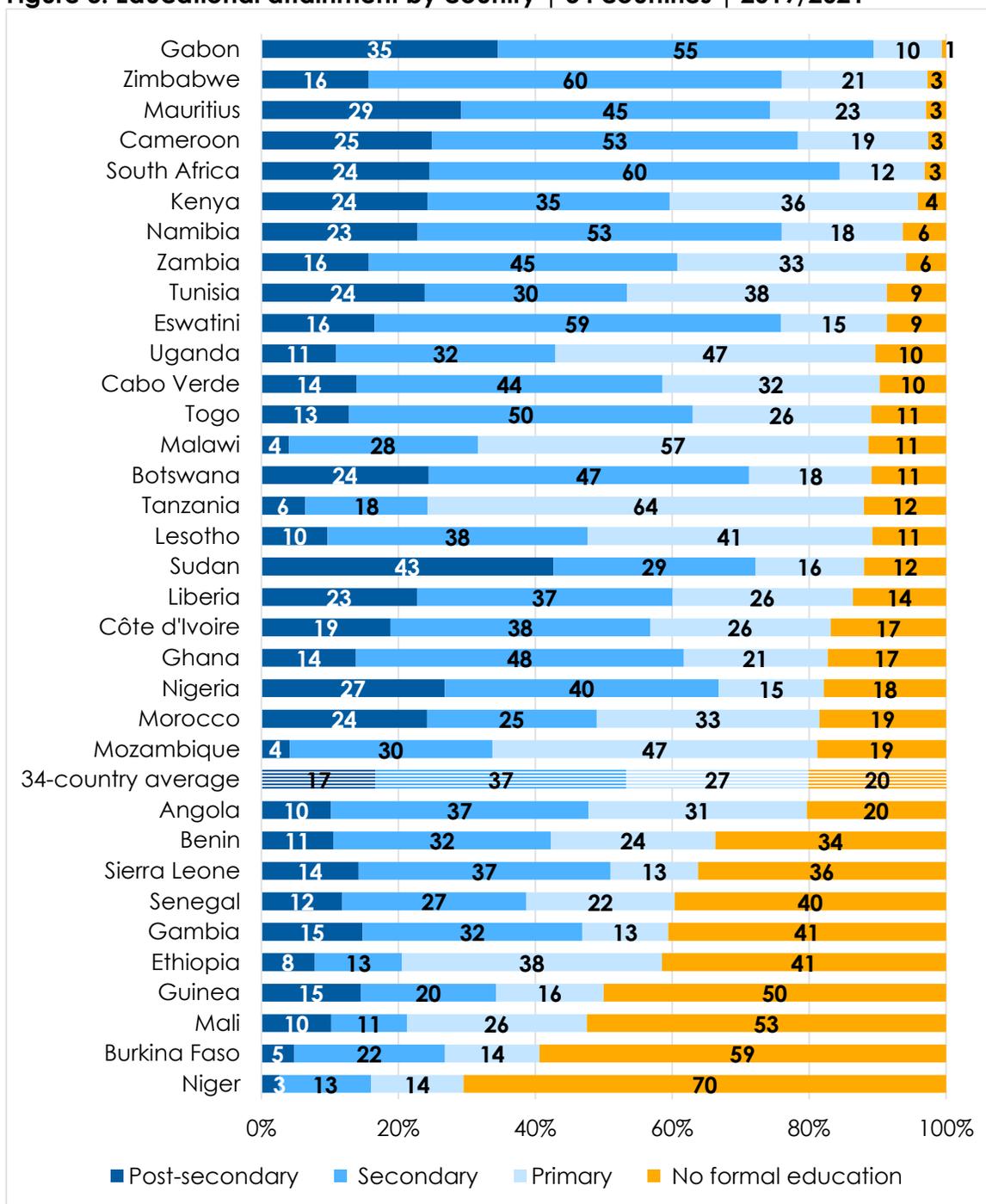
At the high-achieving end, six of the 34 surveyed countries boast more than 95% of their adult populations with at least some formal schooling: Gabon (99%), Zimbabwe (97%), Mauritius (97%), Cameroon (97%), South Africa (96%), and Kenya (96%) (Figure 3).

Gabon also records some of the highest levels of post-secondary (35%) and secondary (55%) education, surpassed at the post-secondary level only by Sudan (43%) and at the secondary level by Zimbabwe (60%), South Africa (60%), and Eswatini (59%).

Primary school is by far the most common attainment level in Tanzania (64%) and Malawi (57%).

In four countries, half or more of adults have no formal schooling: Niger (70%), Burkina Faso (59%), Mali (53%), and Guinea (50%).

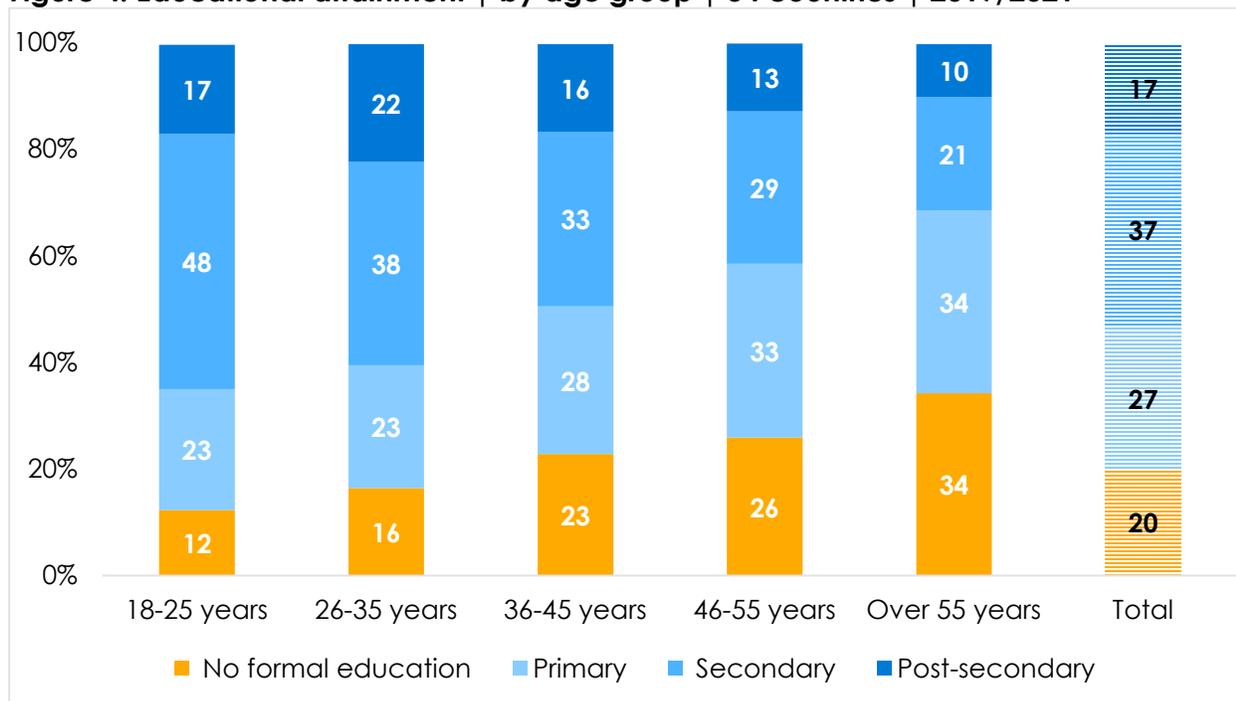
**Figure 3: Educational attainment by country | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



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

Educational attainment by age group reflects the extension of formal schooling – though still incomplete in many countries – over generations (Figure 4). The proportion of adults without formal education is about one-third as large among 18- to 25-year-olds (12%) as it is among those above age 55 (34%), while the share of those with secondary or higher education has grown to 65% in the youngest group, compared to 31% among the oldest.

**Figure 4: Educational attainment | by age group | 34 countries | 2019/2021**

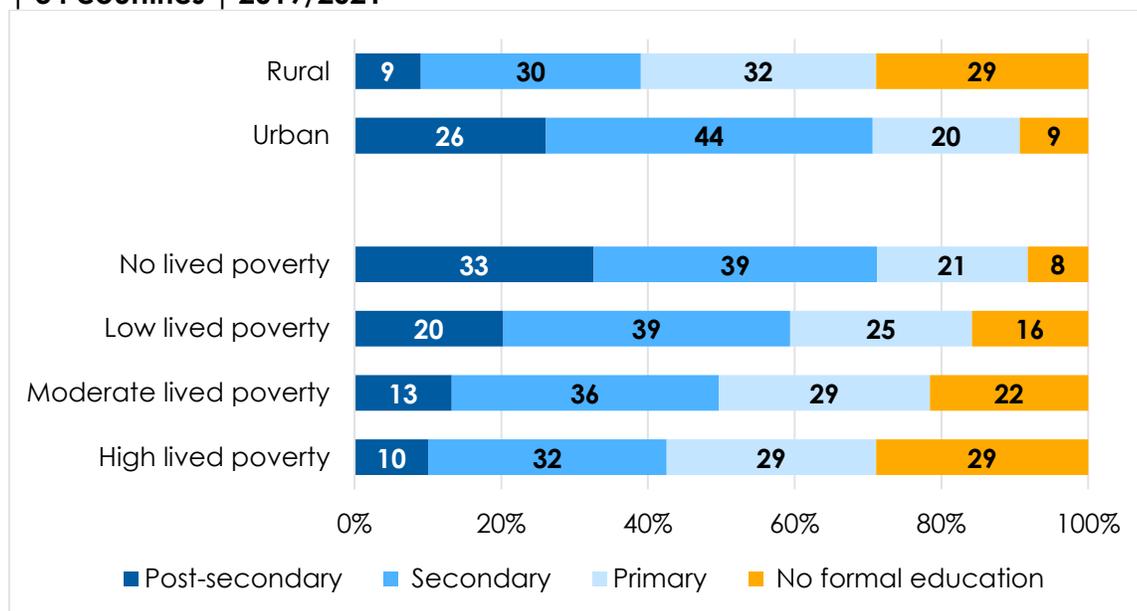


**Respondents were asked:** *What is your highest level of education?*

Rural residents and poor people are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to education (Figure 5). A lack of formal schooling is three times as common in rural areas as in cities (29% vs. 9%), while post-secondary qualifications are three times as common in cities (26% vs. 9% in rural areas). Similar gaps separate the poorest citizens (those experiencing high lived poverty<sup>2</sup>) from those who are economically well off.

<sup>2</sup> 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 5: Educational attainment | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



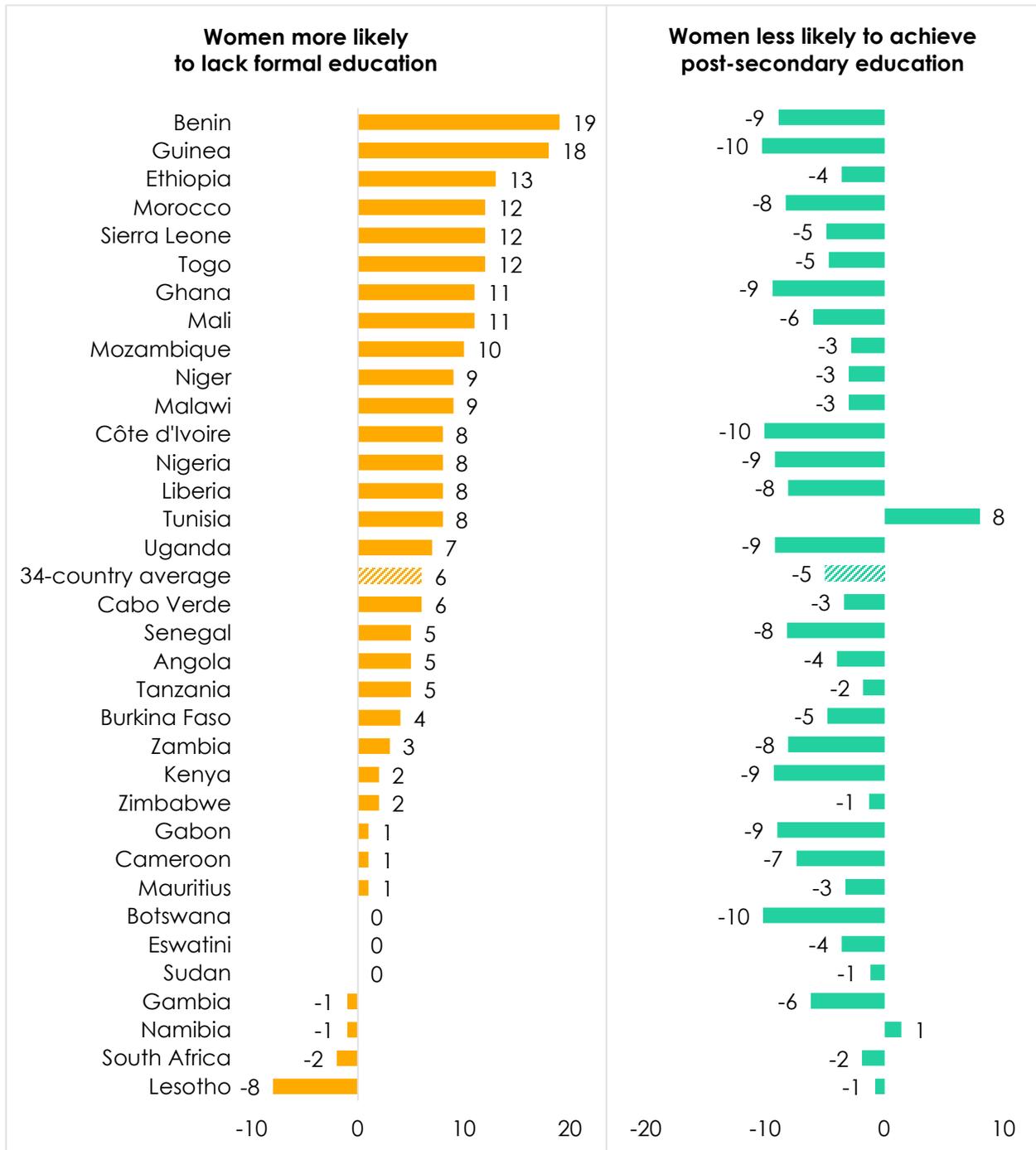
**Respondents were asked:** *What is your highest level of education?*

While some countries have eliminated gender gaps in education, they persist in most countries (Figure 6). On average across 34 countries, more women than men lack formal schooling altogether (a 6-percentage-point gap), and fewer women than men have post-secondary education (a 5-point gap). Lesotho is the only surveyed country where significantly more men than women lack formal education (an 8-percentage-point difference), while 12 other countries show no significant gender gap (i.e. no gap of more than 3 percentage points) on this indicator. In 21 countries, however, more women than men have no formal schooling, including double-digit gaps in Benin (19 points) and Guinea (18 points). When it comes to post-secondary education, Tunisia stands alone with more women than men attaining this level (by 8 percentage points). Eleven other countries show no significant gender difference. The largest gaps, of 10 points each in men's favour, are in Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea.

Even among the youngest adults, women continue to face education disadvantages (Figure 7). On average in the 18-25 age group, women are more likely than men to be without formal education (by 6 percentage points).

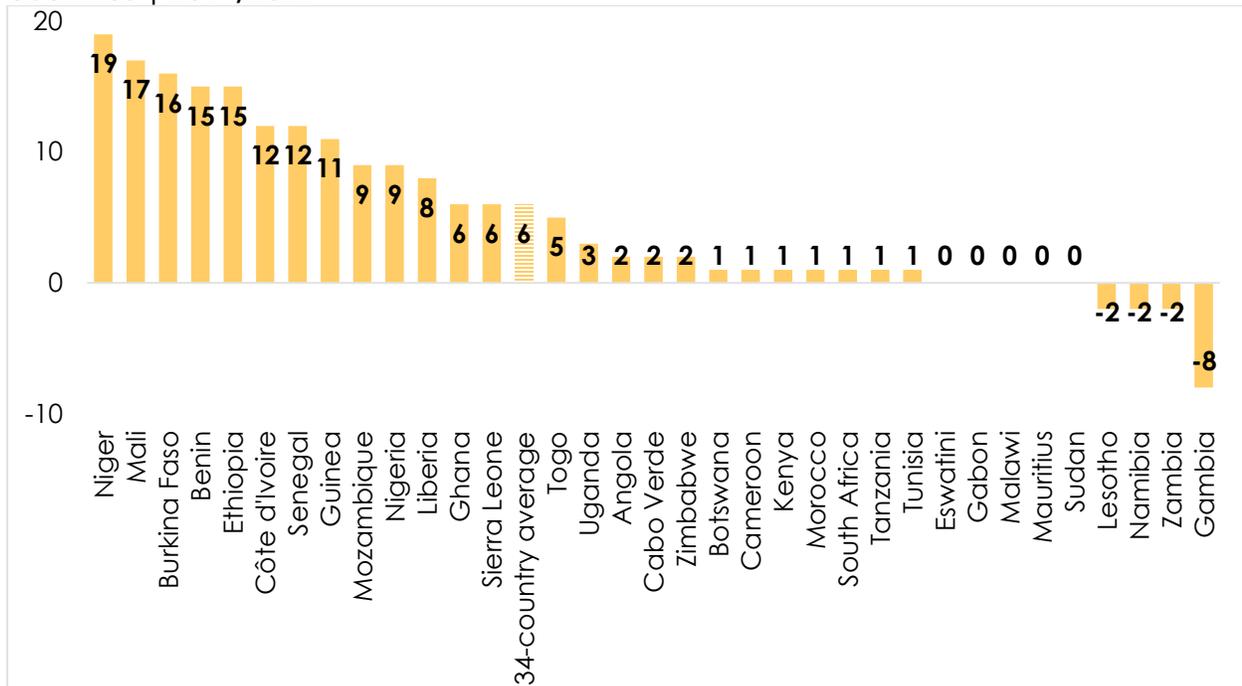
Fourteen countries show double-digit gaps, led by Niger (19 points), Mali (17 points), Burkina Faso (16 points), Benin (15 points), and Ethiopia (15 points). The Gambia is the only country where young men significantly outnumber young women (by 8 points) when it comes to lack of formal schooling.

**Figure 6: Gender gaps in lack of formal education and achievement of post-secondary education | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



**Respondents were asked:** What is your highest level of education? (The figures show the percentage of women minus the percentage of men reporting lack of formal education (left) and achievement of post-secondary education (right). Positive numbers indicate more women than men; negative numbers indicate fewer women than men.)

**Figure 7: Gender gap among 18- to 25-year-olds in lack of formal education countries | 2019/2021**



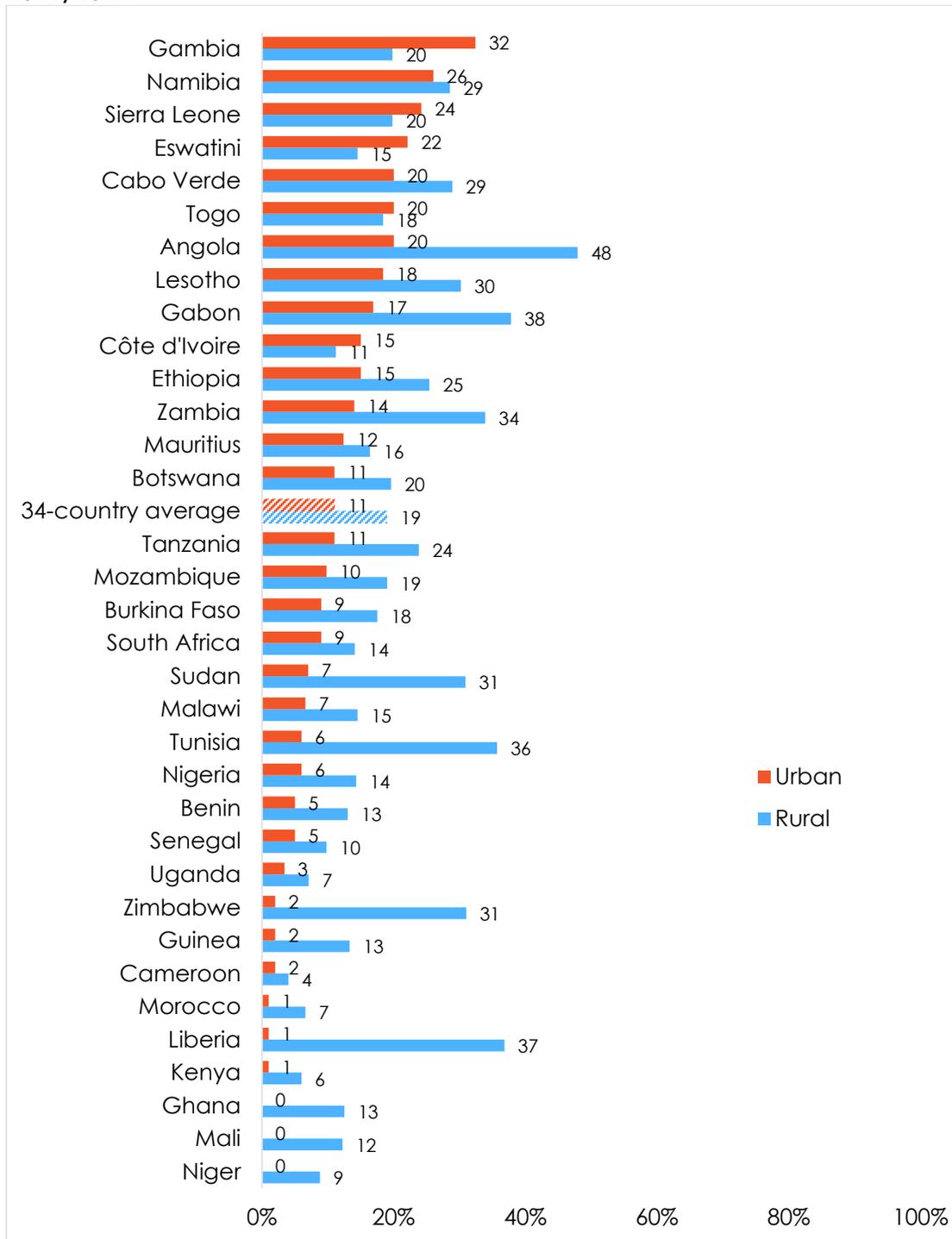
**Respondents were asked:** What is your highest level of education? (Figure shows the percentage of young women minus the percentage of young men reporting no formal education. Positive numbers indicate that more women than men have no formal education; negative numbers indicate fewer women than men.)

### Citizens' experience with public schools

People's interactions with schools will shape their perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of their education system. How easy do Africans find it to obtain the services they need from their schools? Accessibility of schools is one key starting point. Afrobarometer enumerators found that 84% of the enumeration areas they visited have at least one public or private school within easy walking distance. Urban zones are somewhat more likely than rural areas to have a nearby school (89% vs. 81%).<sup>3</sup> Looking at zones that don't have a school within easy walking distance, the rural disadvantage is particularly large in Liberia (a 36-percentage-point gap), Tunisia (30 points), Zimbabwe (29 points), and Angola (28 points) (Figure 8).

<sup>3</sup> Afrobarometer samples are based on a selection of enumeration areas (EAs) drawn randomly from the national census frame. In most countries, eight interviews are conducted in each selected EA, so interview teams usually visit between 150 (for surveys with n=1,200) and 300 (for surveys with n=2,400) EAs. In each EA, the team records the presence or absence of basic infrastructure, such as schools, and services, such as electricity supply. Because of the smaller sample sizes, the margin of error on the figures reported here for presence of school facilities is higher than for findings captured in individual interviews.

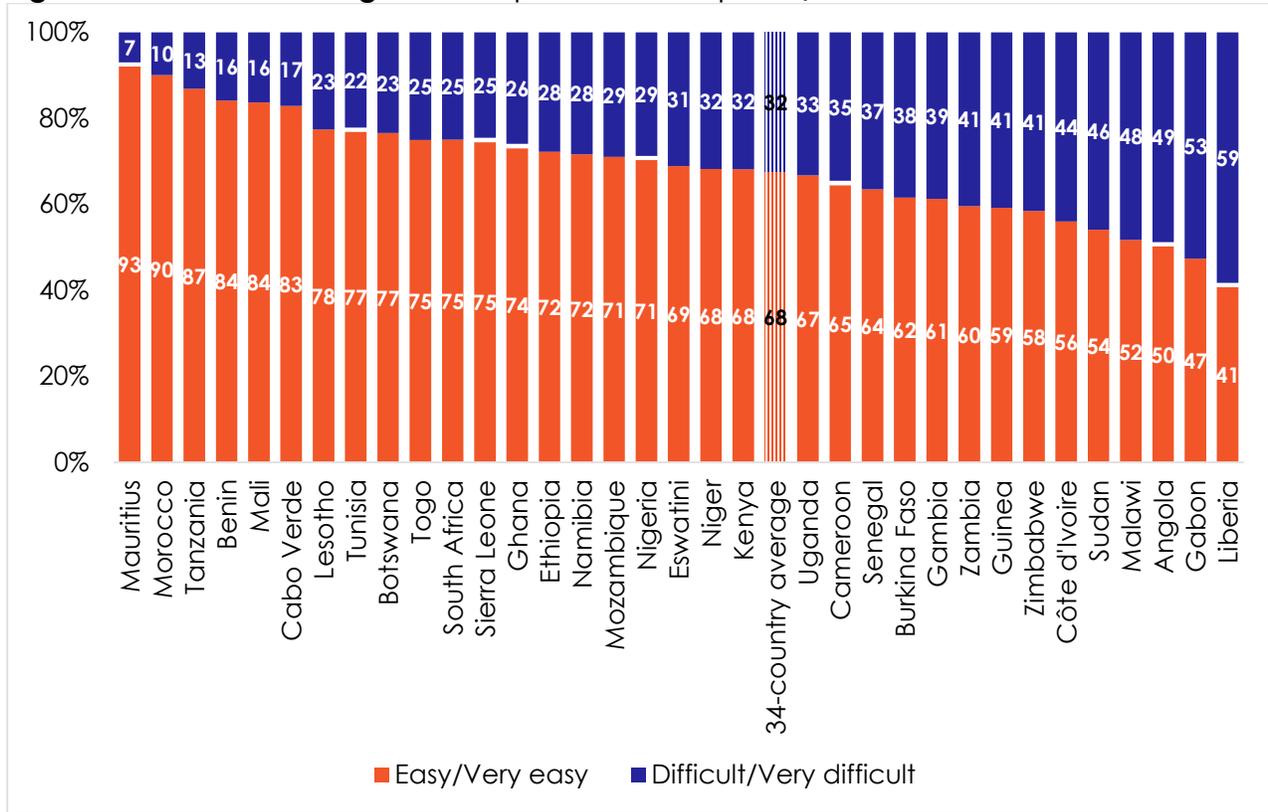
**Figure 8: No school within easy walking distance | by urban-rural location | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



**Survey enumerators were asked:** Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or within easy walking distance: A school (private or public or both)? (% "no")

Among the 39% of respondents who say they had contact with a public school during the previous year, more than two-thirds (68%) say they found it "easy" or "very easy" to obtain the services they needed from teachers or school officials (Figure 9). Nine out of 10 Mauritians (93%) and Moroccans (90%) say they encountered no major difficulties. Liberia (41%) and Gabon (47%) are the only surveyed countries where fewer than half of citizens report easily obtaining the services they needed.

**Figure 9: Ease of obtaining services | 34 countries | 2019/2021**

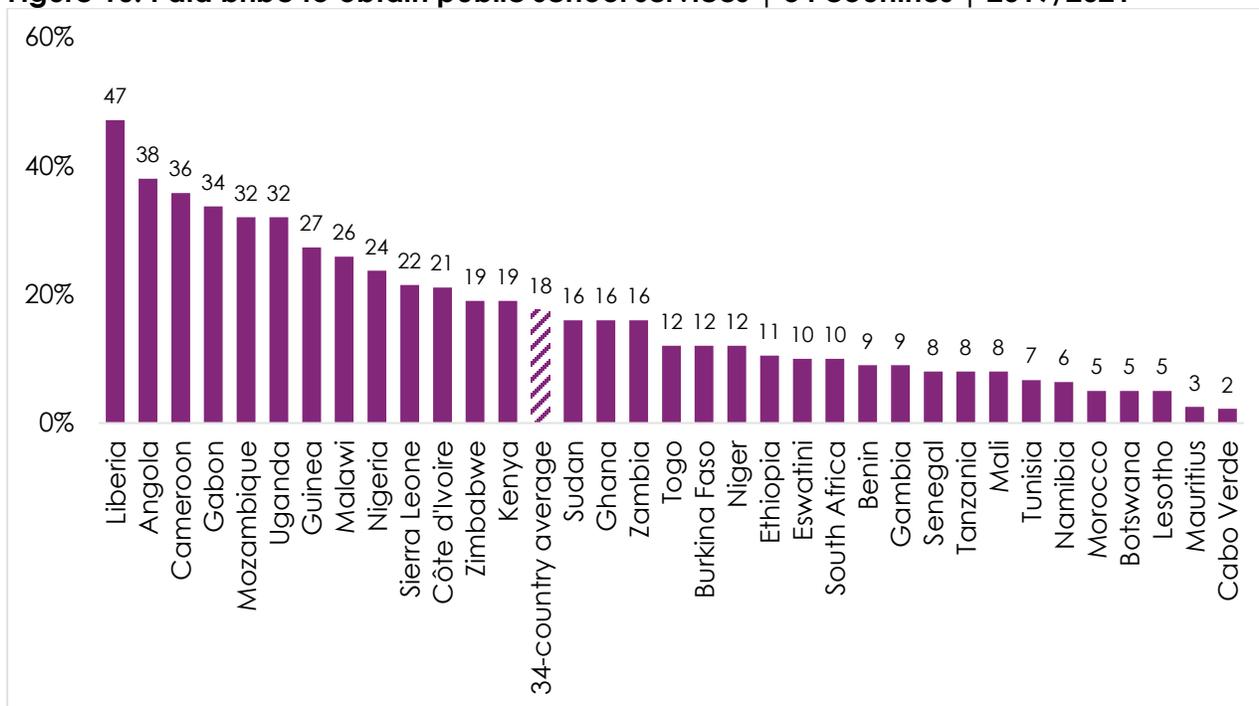


**Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school?**  
**[If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed from teachers or school officials? (Respondents who had no contact with a public school are excluded.)**

Even so, almost one in five (18%) of those who had contact with schools during the previous year say they had to pay a bribe “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often” to get the services they needed (Figure 10). In Liberia, almost half (47%) of all respondents who dealt with public schools say they had to pay a bribe, and the same is true of more than one-third of Angolans (38%), Cameroonians (36%), and Gabonese (34%).

At the other extreme, fewer than one in 20 Cabo Verdeans (2%) and Mauritians (3%) who had contact with public schools report having to pay a bribe.

**Figure 10: Paid bribe to obtain public school services | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



**Respondents who had contact with a public school during the previous 12 months 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 to get the services you needed from the schools? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often") (Respondents who had no contact with a public school are excluded.)**

### Government performance on education

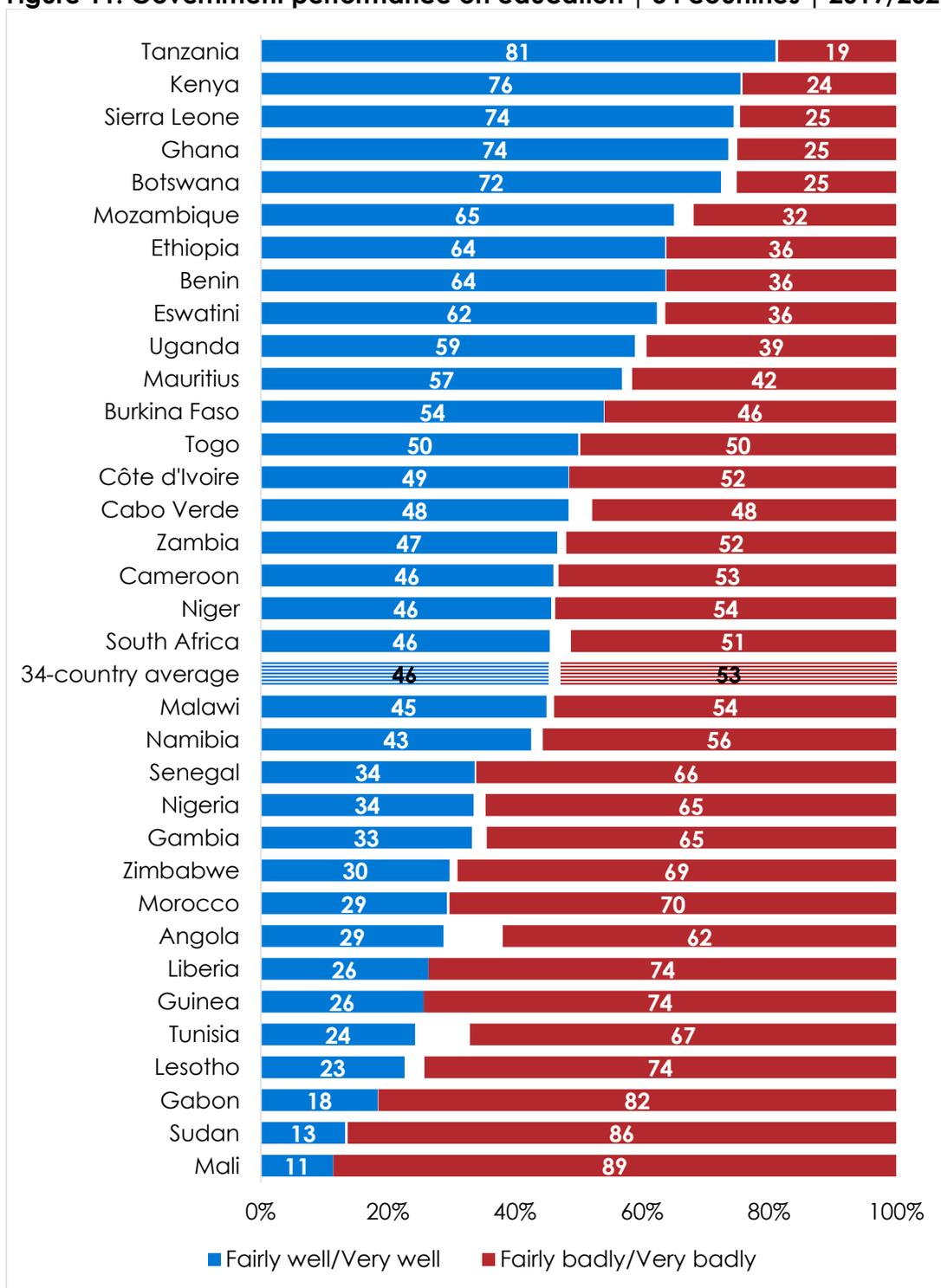
Against this background of educational attainment and public-school service, are Africans satisfied with what they are getting in the education sector?

For the first time since Afrobarometer surveys began in 1999, a majority of respondents in a survey round say no. On average across 34 countries, 53% of Africans think their governments are performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on education (Figure 11).

Tanzania stands out with 81% approval, followed by Kenya (76%), Sierra Leone (74%), and Ghana (74%). But citizens offer crushing judgments of their governments' efforts to meet educational needs in Mali, Sudan, and Gabon, with disapproval by 89%, 86%, and 82% of the population, respectively. Overall, only 12 countries record majority approval of government performance on education.

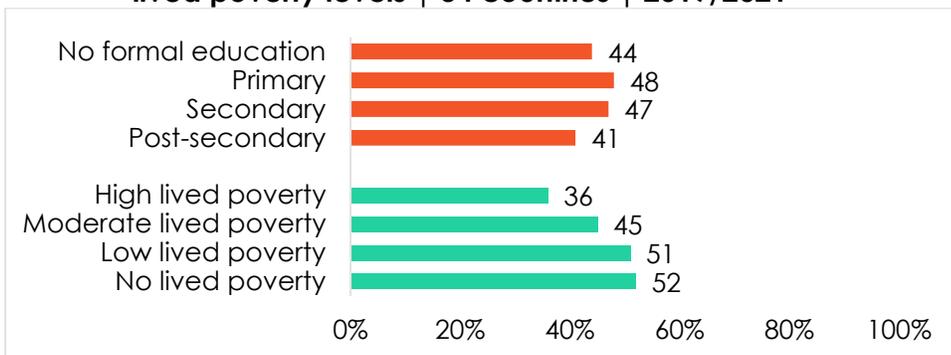
Views on the government's performance vary little by gender, age, and urban-rural location. Citizens with post-secondary education are somewhat less likely to approve (41%) than those with less schooling (44%-48%). And poorer respondents are significantly less satisfied (36% of those with high lived poverty, compared to 52% of the best-off respondents) (Figure 12).

**Figure 11: Government performance on 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: Addressing educational needs?

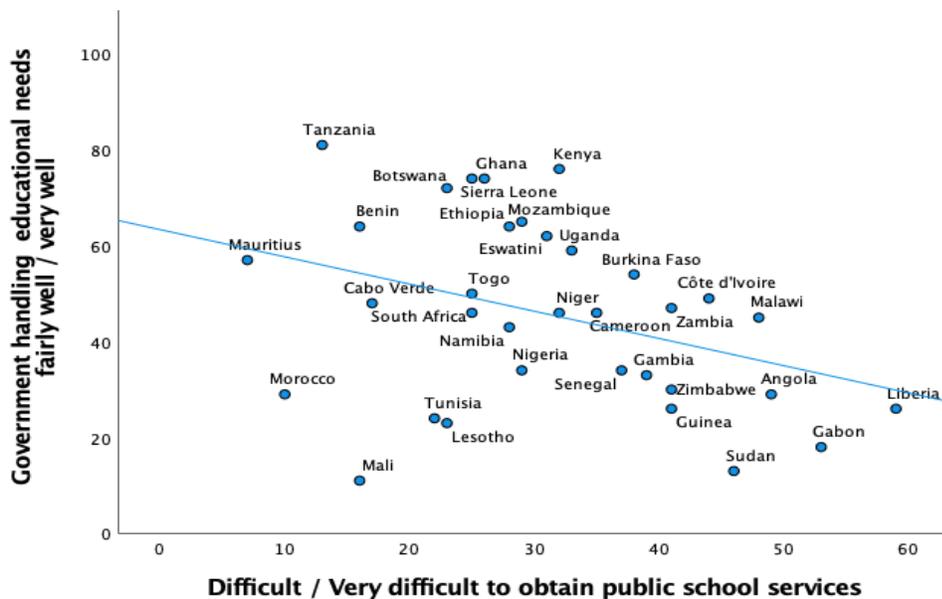
**Figure 12: Satisfied with government performance on education | by education and lived poverty levels | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



**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: Addressing educational needs? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

At the country level, approval ratings of the government's performance on education are negatively correlated with respondents' difficulty in obtaining public school services. In other words, countries where more citizens report finding it difficult to get the services they need from teachers or school officials tend to record lower levels of satisfaction with government efforts to meet educational needs (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Ease of obtaining services and satisfaction with government performance on education | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



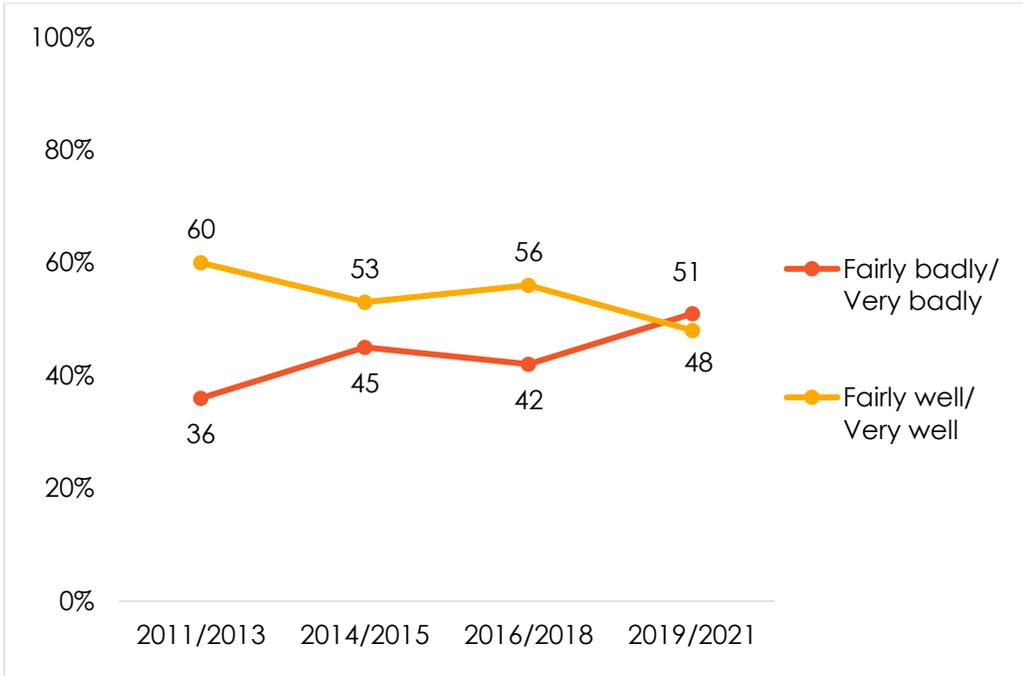
**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Addressing educational needs?

**Respondents who had contact with a public school during the previous 12 months were asked:** How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed from teachers or school officials?

Across 29 countries tracked on this indicator in each survey round since 2011/2013, approval of the government's performance has dropped by 12 percentage points over the past decade, from 60% to 48%, including an 8-point drop since 2016/2018 (Figure 14).

Approval ratings declined significantly (by more than 3 percentage points) in 21 of the 29 countries, most dramatically in Liberia (-47 percentage points), Mali (-43), Zimbabwe (-42), Namibia (-34), and Mauritius (-33). They improved in just four countries: Tanzania (+26 points), Sierra Leone (+22), Ghana (+14), and Uganda (+4) (Figure 15).

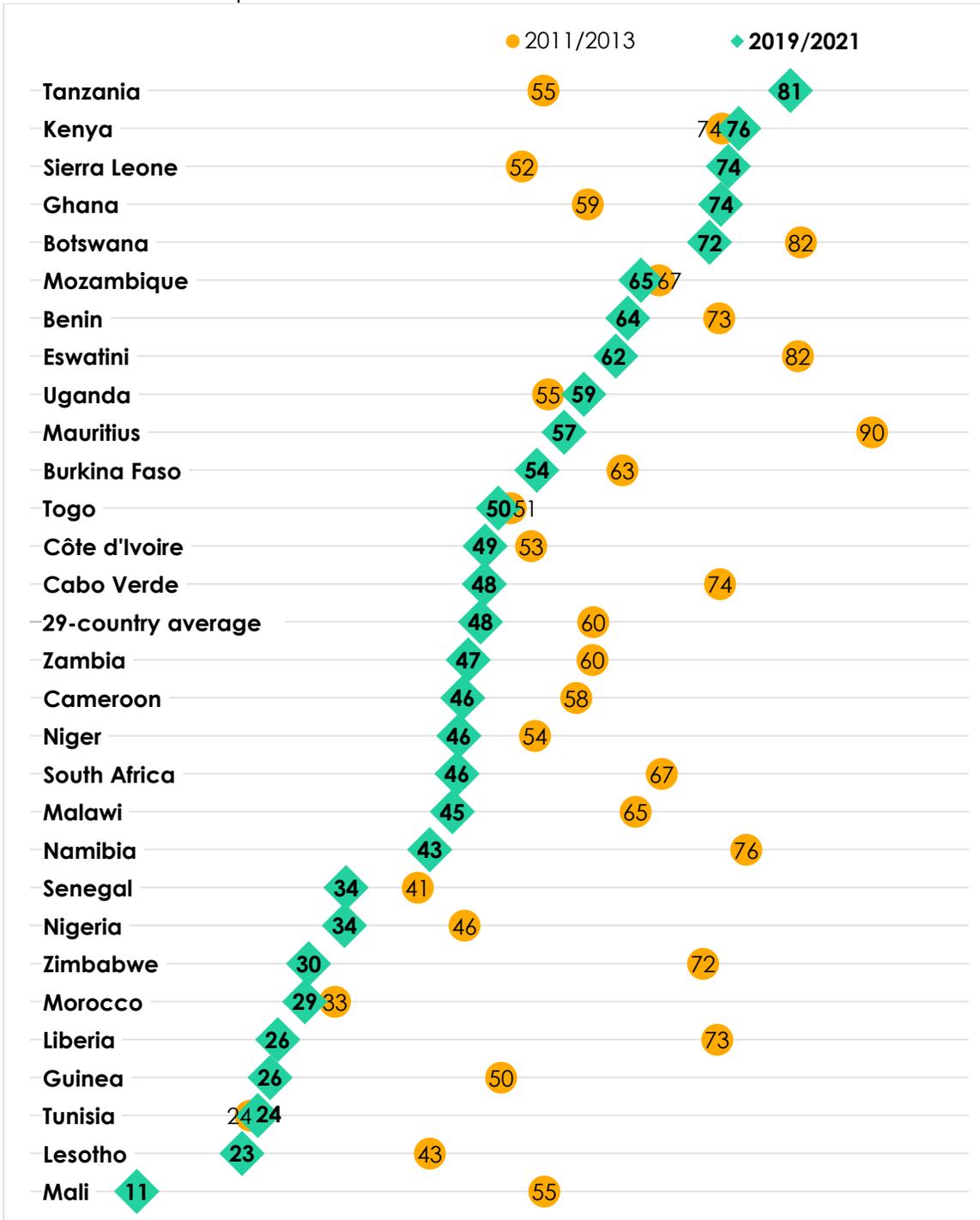
**Figure 14: Approval of government performance on education | 29 countries\***  
2019/2021



**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: Addressing educational needs?

\* Question was not asked in Sudan in 2014/2015.

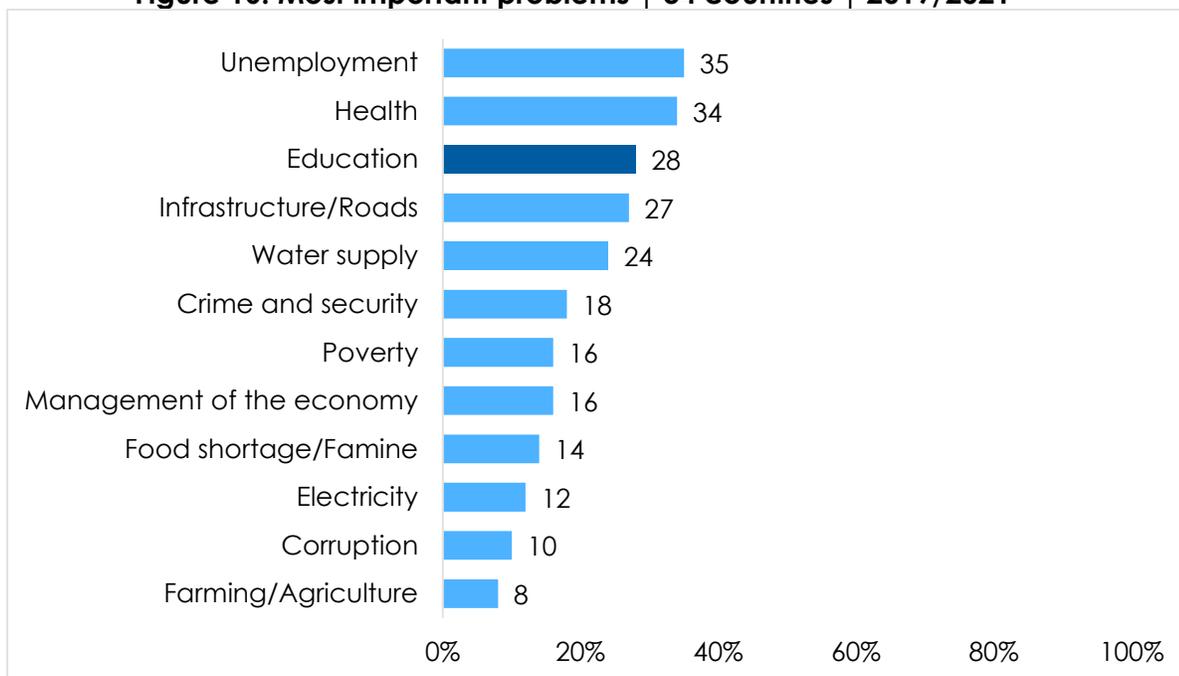
**Figure 15: Change in approval of government performance on education | 29 countries | 2011-2021**



**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 educational needs? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Africans' unmet expectations regarding education are also reflected in what they consider the most important problems their governments should address: Education comes third after unemployment and health, well ahead of poverty and management of the economy (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Most important problems | 34 countries | 2019/2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of their three priorities.)*

## Education and COVID-19

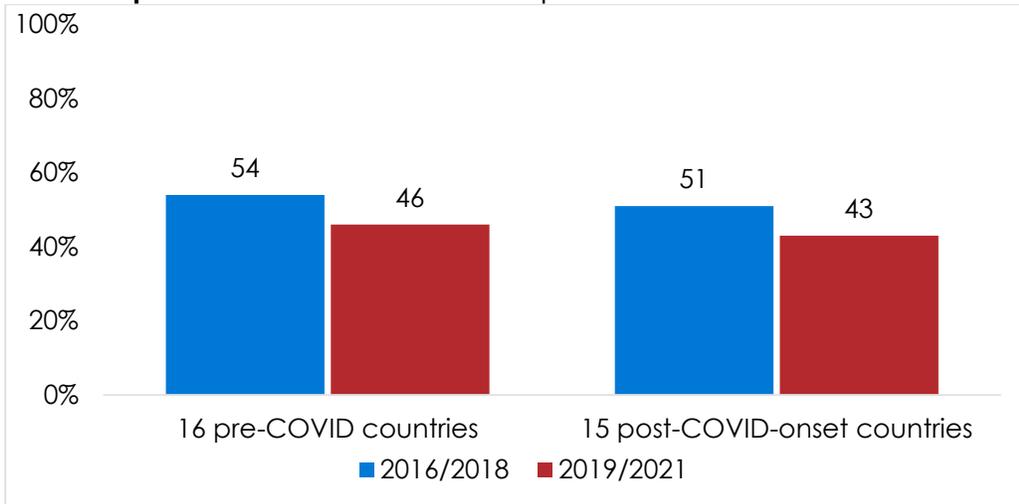
While the steep drop in public approval of the government's performance on education since the previous survey round may appear to coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic, we find no evidence that the pandemic contributed to this decline.

Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys were interrupted, about midway through, by a seven-month hiatus in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively splitting the round into "pre-COVID" and "post-COVID-onset" groupings.

If we compare changes between Round 7 (2016/2018) and Round 8 (2019/2021) in 16 countries where the Round 8 survey was completed before the pandemic and 15 countries surveyed since the onset of the pandemic, we see that the average government performance ratings on education for both groups recorded identical 8-percentage-point declines (Figure 17). It thus appears that public dissatisfaction with the government's education efforts was growing independently of the pandemic, though Afrobarometer's Round 9 (2021/2022) may provide further insights.

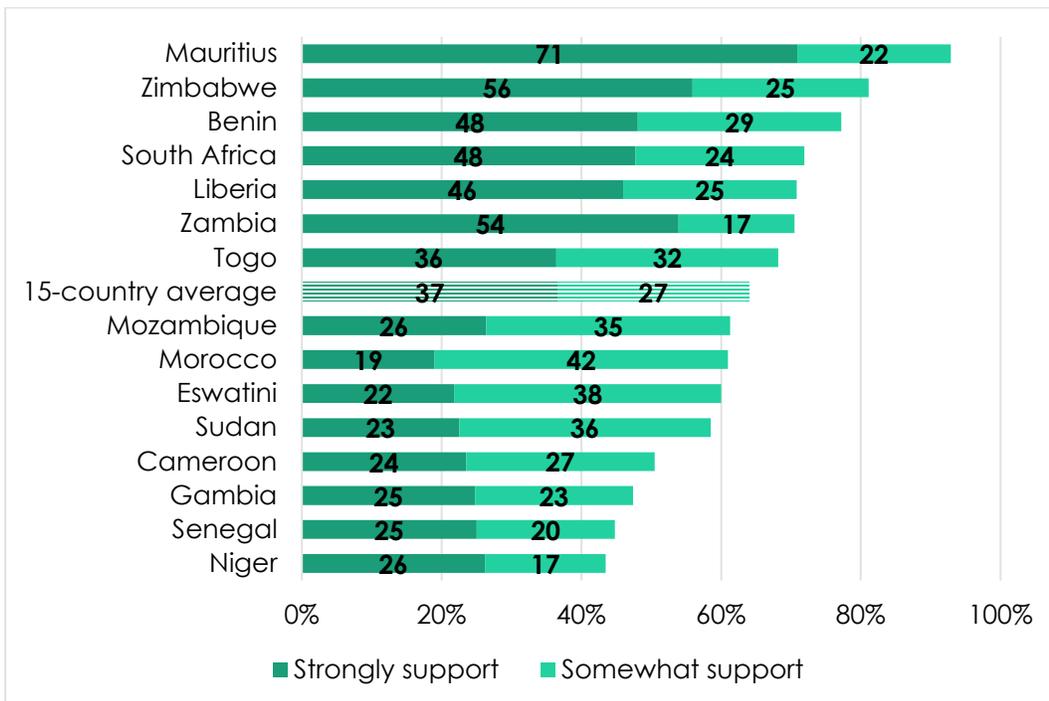
Moreover, in most of the 15 countries where Afrobarometer was able to add questions about COVID-19 to its Round 8 questionnaire, governments receive strong support for their decision to close schools to limit the spread of the coronavirus (Figure 18). On average, almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents say they supported the move. Closing the schools had majority support in all countries except the Gambia (47%), Senegal (45%), and Niger (41%).

**Figure 17: Satisfaction with government performance on education | pre-COVID vs. post-COVID-onset countries | 2016-2021**



**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 educational needs? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

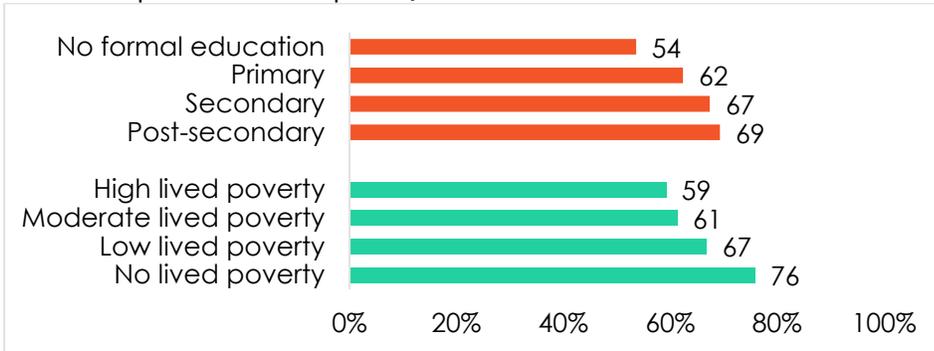
**Figure 18: Support for school closures | 15 countries | 2020/2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools to limit the spread of COVID-19?

Support for the school closures was particularly strong among more educated and better-off respondents, ranging up to 76% of those experiencing no lived poverty (Figure 19).

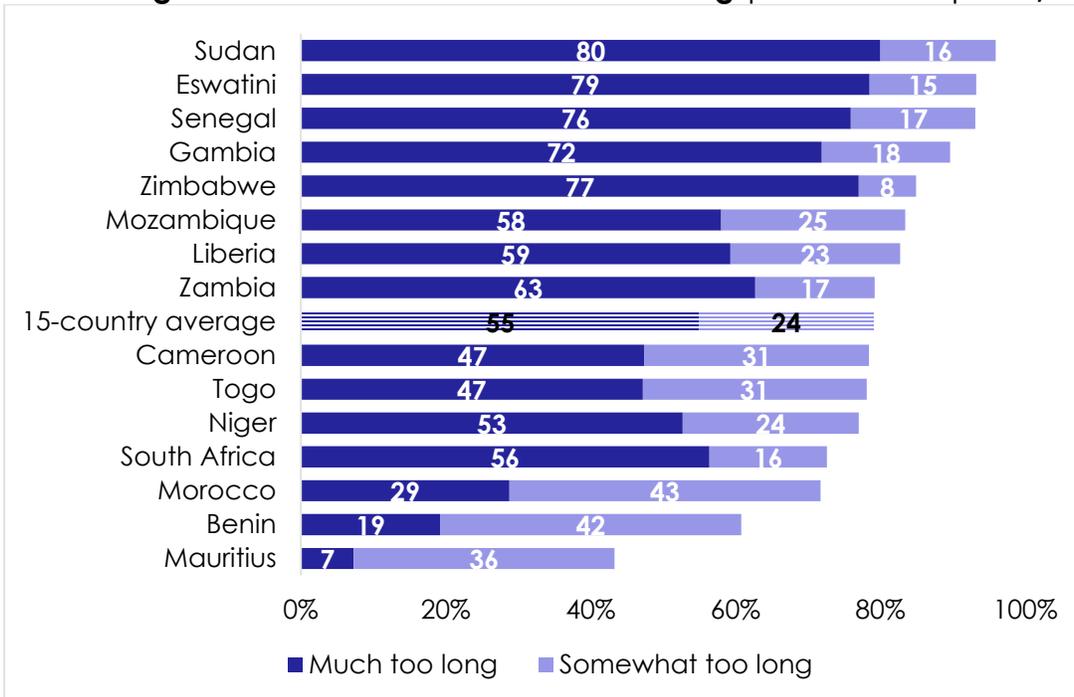
**Figure 19: Support for school closure | by education and lived poverty levels | 15 countries | 2019/2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools to limit the spread of COVID-19? (% who say "somewhat support" or "strongly support")

However, despite their support for closing the schools, respondents are adamant in saying they should have reopened more quickly. On average, 79% say the schools in their country were closed for too long, including 55% who say "much too long" (Figure 20). Mauritius is the only country where fewer than half (43%) wanted the kids back in school sooner.

**Figure 20: Schools were closed for too long | 15 countries | 2019/2021**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

## Conclusion

Africans clearly expect more from their governments when it comes to education. Persistent demographic disparities and demands for bribes suggest particular areas requiring attention. While burning issues of quality and relevant learning outcomes extend beyond the scope of these survey findings, these topics will be explored further in Afrobarometer's Round 9 surveys (2021/2022). Importantly, citizens' growing dissatisfaction with their educational systems predated COVID-19. No doubt the pandemic wreaked havoc on the education sector, reversing progress toward SDG 4. Afrobarometer Round 9 data may show whether Africans hold their governments responsible for setbacks during difficult times. But either way, the action they demand on education is never more urgent than in the current pandemic/post-pandemic context.

## References

- Human Rights Watch. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on children's education in Africa.
- Mattes, R. (2020). Lived poverty on the rise: Decade of living-standard gains ends in Africa. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 62.
- Musau, Z. (2018). Africa grapples with huge disparities in education. *Africa Renewal.*
- UNESCO. (2017). More than one-half of children and adolescents are not learning worldwide. Fact Sheet No. 46.
- UNESCO. (2020). What you need to know about the right to education.
- UNICEF. (2021). COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost a full year, says UNICEF. Press release. 2 March.
- United Nations. (2021). The sustainable development goals report 2021.
- United Nations. (2022). Make the SDGs a reality.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2022). Goal 4: Quality education.

## 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

## **Author**

**Kelechi Amakoh** is a data analyst for Afrobarometer and a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University. Email: amakohke@msu.edu.

## **About Data for Governance Alliance**

The Data for Governance Alliance is a four-year project that promotes data-based advocacy and engagement between pan-African civil society organisations (CSOs) and African Union organs. The project is led by Afrobarometer with partners, including CDD Ghana, the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Laws.Africa. The project is funded by the European Union.



**Christiaan Keulder** is the owner of Survey Warehouse and national investigator for Afrobarometer in Namibia. Email: [c.keulder@surveywarehouse.com.na](mailto:c.keulder@surveywarehouse.com.na).

The Data for Governance Alliance is a four-year project that promotes data-based advocacy and engagement between pan-African civil society organisations (CSOs) and African Union organs. The project is led by Afrobarometer with partners, including CDD Ghana, the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Laws.Africa. The project is funded by the European Union.



# Data for Governance Alliance

African voices for African policy

Partners



Funded by  
the European Union