

Gambians approve of government's handling of COVID-19 but don't trust vaccines

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 447 | Sait Matty Jaw and Charles Ebere

Summary

Within days after the Gambia registered its first coronavirus case on 17 March 2020, the government declared a state of public emergency. As the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths climbed, it closed the country's airspace as well as sea and land borders, banned public gatherings, closed schools and universities, and instituted a night curfew to contain the spread of the virus (Darboe, 2020; Xinhua, 2020).

With the support of civil society organizations, philanthropists, and development partners, the government announced plans to mitigate the impact of the pandemic through food relief intended to help 84% of needy households, as well as support for Gambians studying abroad, additional equipment for the health sector, and fertilizer for farmers (Camara, 2020; Jawo, 2020).

On 10 March 2021, President Adama Barrow was first in line as the country launched its COVAX-supported vaccine rollout. The government plans to vaccinate 20% of the population in 2021 and has embarked on a campaign to inform the populace about vaccine safety (Africanews, 2021).

As of 25 April 2021, the country had reported 5,820 cases and 173 deaths due to COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2021).

A new Afrobarometer survey in the Gambia shows that while a majority of citizens approve of the government's overall response to the pandemic, they also voice significant concerns, including that the schools should have reopened more quickly and that government assistance to help citizens weather the pandemic was not distributed fairly. Most think that corrupt government officials stole resources intended for the pandemic response.

Most don't trust the government to ensure that vaccines are safe, say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated, and think prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing COVID-19 infections.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CePrass), interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Gambians in January and February 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. A previous Afrobarometer survey was conducted in the Gambia in 2018.

Key findings

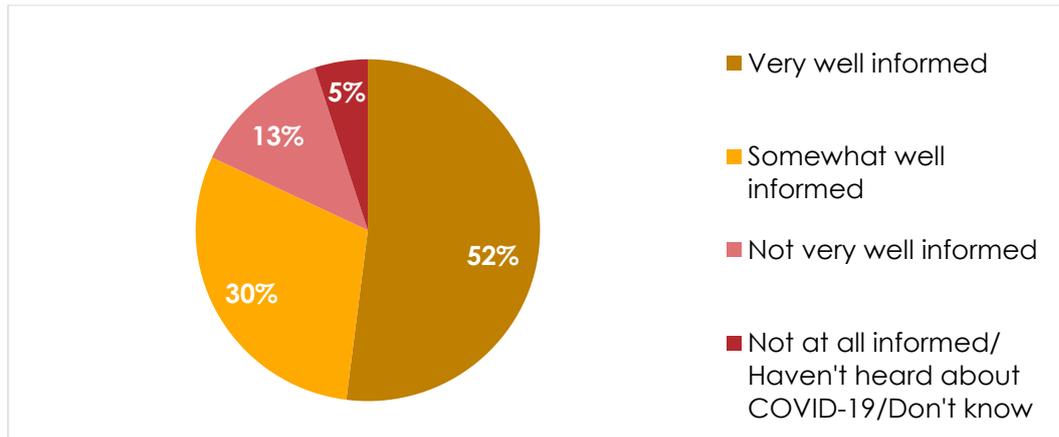
- More than eight in 10 Gambians (82%) consider themselves “somewhat” or “very” well informed about the COVID-19 pandemic.
- About two in 100 Gambians (2%) say a household member had become ill with COVID-19 as of early 2021, while four in 10 (42%) report that someone in the household had lost a job, business, or primary source of income as a result of the pandemic.
- A majority of Gambians say they went without needed health care during the pandemic due to a lack of money (76%) or transportation (54%) or because of restrictions on movement (54%).
- Three-fourths (74%) of Gambians say complying with lockdown restrictions was difficult, including 40% who describe it as “very difficult.” Even so, most (79%) consider the lockdown necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 infection.
- But views are divided (48% for, 49% against) regarding school closures, and citizens are almost unanimous (90%) in saying the school closures lasted too long.
- Almost eight in 10 citizens (79%) say their households received pandemic-related assistance from the government.
 - But a majority (52%) say that government assistance was distributed unfairly.
- Overall, the government receives good marks for its handling of the pandemic (60%) and the way it kept the public informed (75%).
 - But only two in 10 (22%) say they trust official COVID-19 statistics, and two-thirds (68%) believe that resources intended for responding to the pandemic were lost to government corruption.
- Fewer than one-fourth (23%) of Gambians say they trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.
 - More than three-fourths (78%) say they are “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” to try to get vaccinated.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Gambians believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection.
- A majority of citizens say a pandemic does not justify government measures that infringe on democratic freedoms by censoring the media (62%) and postponing elections or limiting political campaigns (63%). But they support the government’s use of security forces to enforce public health mandates (63%).
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents also say they are worried that politicians in Gambia will use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority.
- Looking ahead, only two in 10 Gambians (22%) expect COVID-19 to be a “somewhat” or “very” serious problem for their country over the next six months. But a majority (60%) would prioritize funding to prepare for health emergencies like COVID-19 over other health needs.

Awareness of COVID-19

More than eight in 10 Gambians consider themselves “very well informed” (52%) or “somewhat well informed” (30%) about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it (Figure 1).

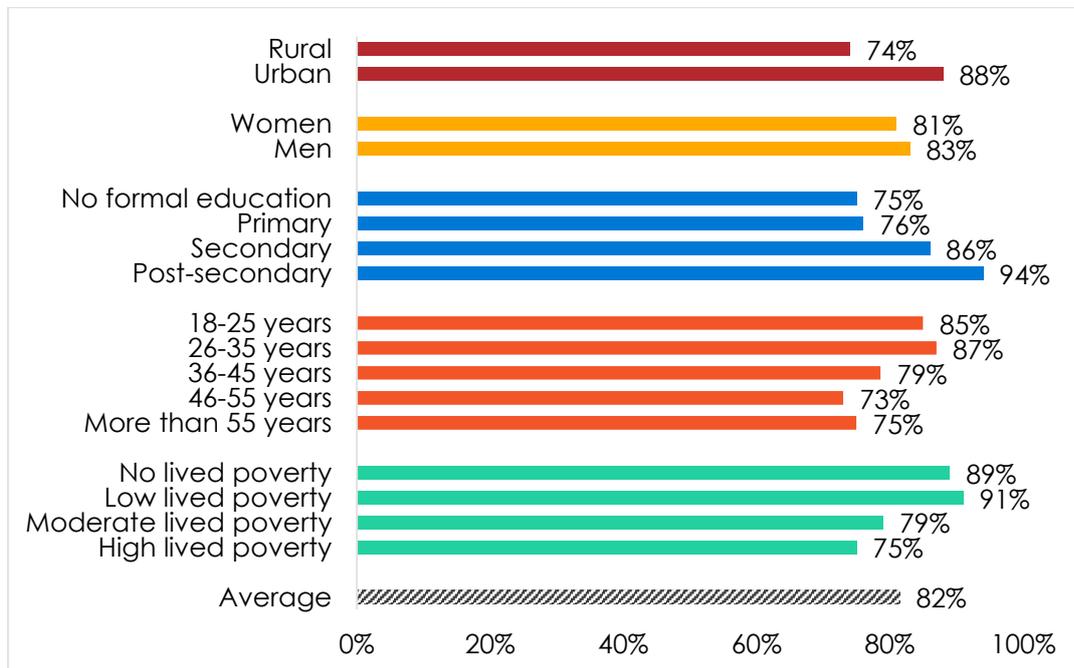
Urban residents (88%) and citizens with post-secondary education (94%) are more likely to report that they are well informed about COVID-19 than are rural dwellers (74%) and those with less education (75%-86%) (Figure 2). Awareness is higher among youth (85%-87%) than among their elders (73%-79%), as well as among economically better-off citizens (89%-91%) compared to those experiencing high (75%) or moderate (79%) levels of lived poverty.¹

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

Figure 2: Awareness of COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say "somewhat" or "very" well informed)

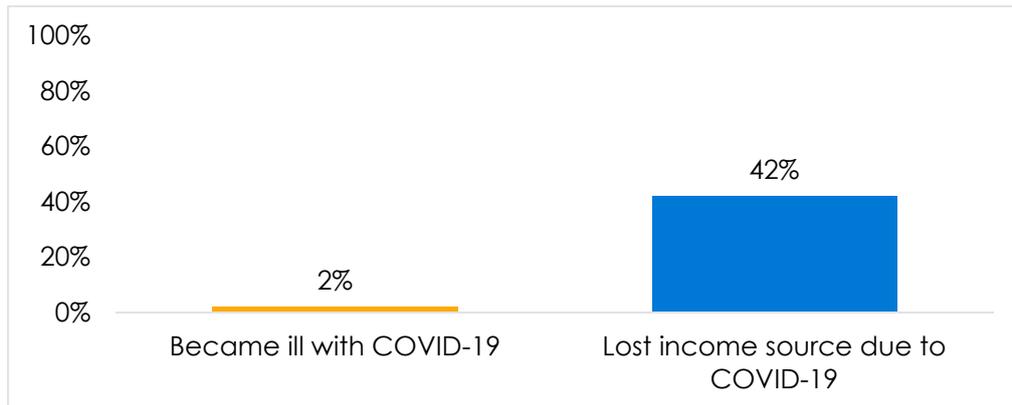
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Impact

Two out of 100 citizens (2%) say they or a member of their household had become ill with COVID-19 as of early 2021, while four in 10 (42%) say they or a household member had lost a job, a business, or other primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 3).

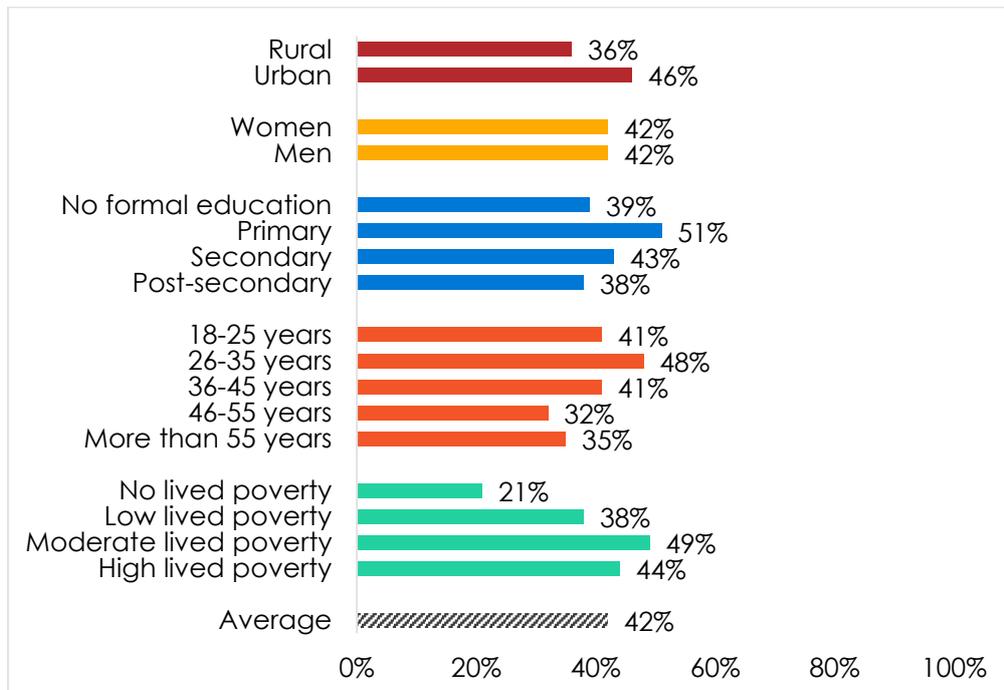
Loss of income due to COVID-19 was more common among urban (46%) than rural (36%) residents (Figure 4). The economically best-off citizens (21%) were about half as likely to suffer the loss of a major income source as those experiencing low, moderate, or high levels of lived poverty (38%-49%).

Figure 3: Impact of the pandemic | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

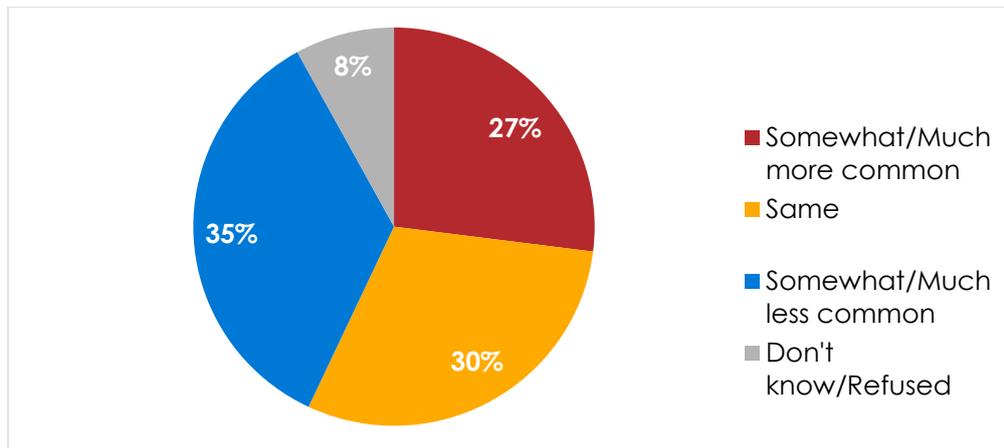
Figure 4: Lost income due to the pandemic | by demographic group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income? (% "yes")

While observers in some countries have voiced concerns that domestic violence increased during lockdown periods (BBC, 2020), most Gambians indicate that wasn't the case in their country: Only one-fourth (27%) of respondents say domestic abuse was "somewhat" or "much" more common during the lockdown, whereas 30% believe the level of abuse stayed the same and 35% say it decreased (Figure 5).

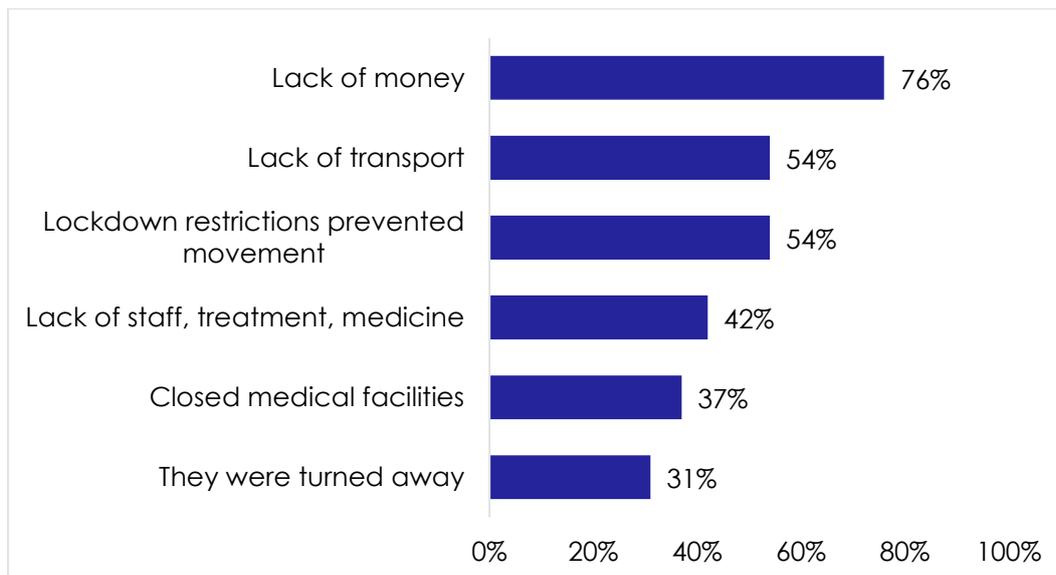
Figure 5: Did domestic abuse become more common during lockdown?
 | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: During the period when your community was under lockdown or curfew, do you think problems of domestic abuse in your community became more common, less common, or stayed the same?

However, COVID-19 appears to have exacerbated weaknesses in the Gambia's health-care system (Kazel, 2020). A majority of Gambians say they were unable to access health care during the pandemic because of a lack of money (76%) or transportation (54%) or because of restrictions on movement during lockdowns (54%). Many others cited a lack of medical staff or medicines (42%), closed health-care facilities (37%), or being turned away (31%) as reasons they could not access health care (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Lack of access to health care during pandemic | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or other members of your household been unable to seek or obtain health care for any of the following reasons?

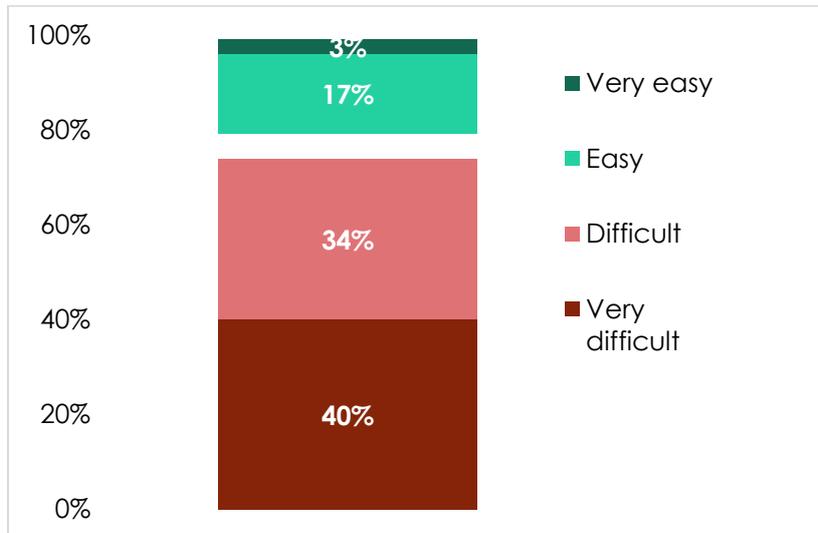
Lockdowns and school closures

The Gambia implemented nationwide school closures and periodic nationwide lockdowns during a six-month period to limit the spread of the virus. During these periods, weekly rural markets were halted and all non-essential service providers such as gyms, nightclubs, salons, etc. were closed.

About three-fourths of respondents say it was “difficult” (34%) or “very difficult” (40%) to comply with lockdown measures, while just 20% describe it as easy (Figure 7).

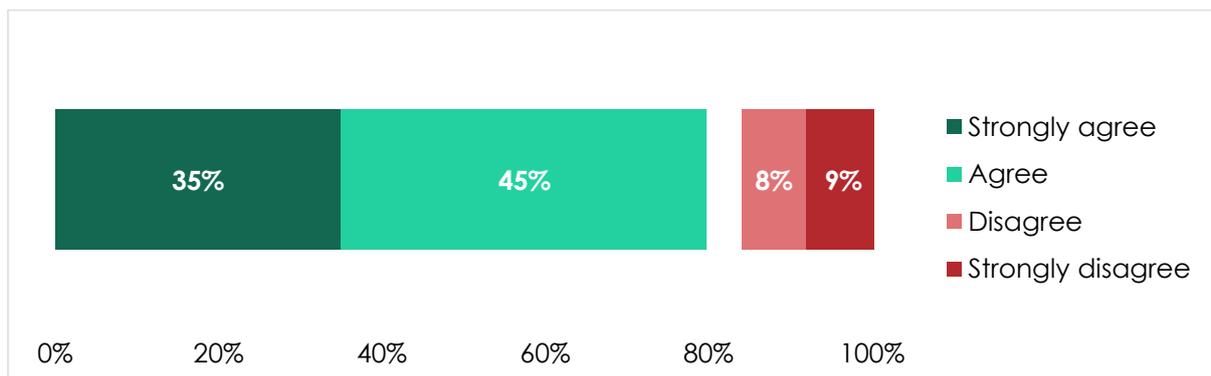
Still, more than three-fourths (79%) say that despite their negative impact on people’s livelihoods, the restrictions were necessary to help prevent COVID-19 infections (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Difficulty complying with lockdown | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

Figure 8: Support for lockdown | The Gambia | 2021

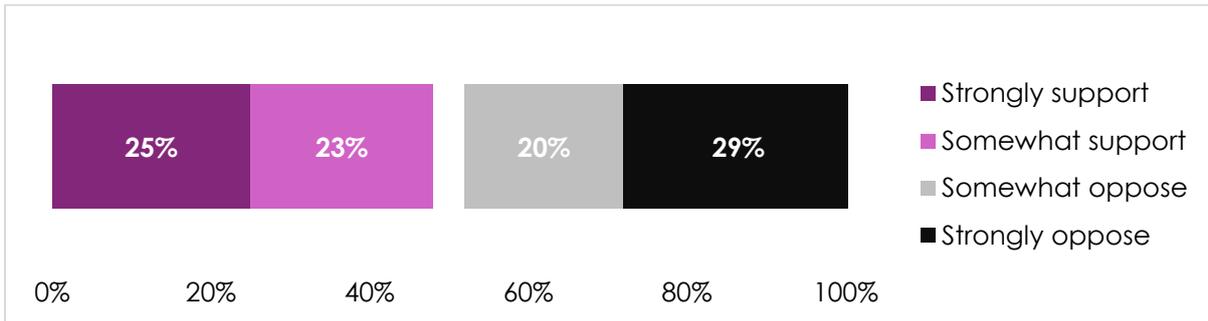


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19?

(Note: Due to rounding, the sum of subcategories may differ by 1 percentage point from the reported total, e.g. 35% “strongly agree” + 45% “agree” = 79% “agree/strongly agree”)

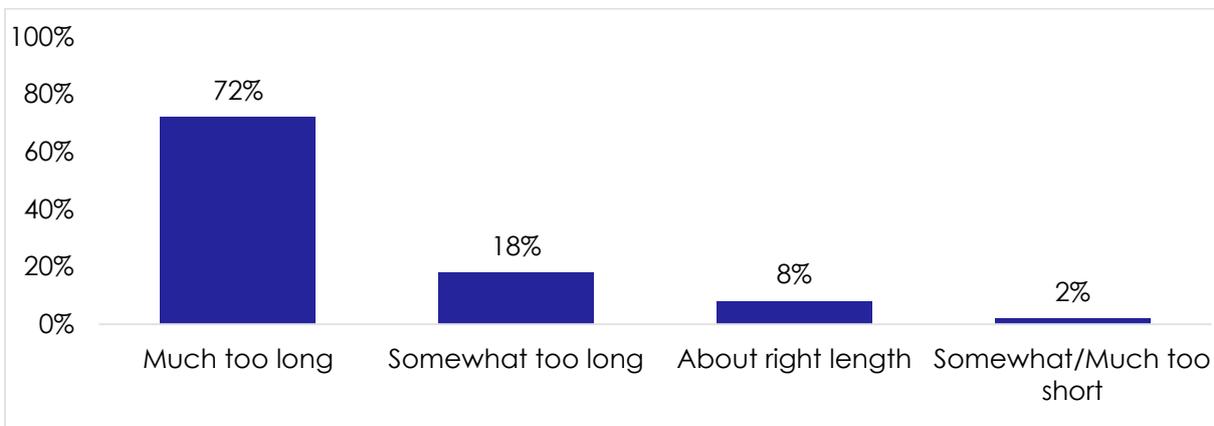
However, the school closures are considerably more controversial, with 48% expressing support and 49% opposition (Figure 9). And citizens are unified in saying the closures lasted too long (90%), including 72% who think they lasted “much too long” (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Support for school closure | The Gambia | 2021



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

Figure 10: Views on length of school closures | The Gambia | 2021

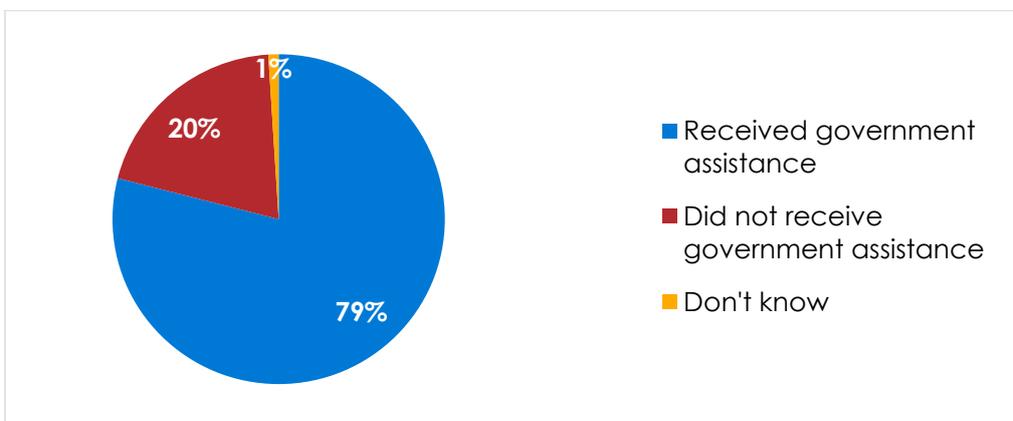


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

Government assistance and performance

Eight in 10 (79%) Gambians say they or their household received assistance from the government during the pandemic (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Received government assistance | The Gambia | 2021

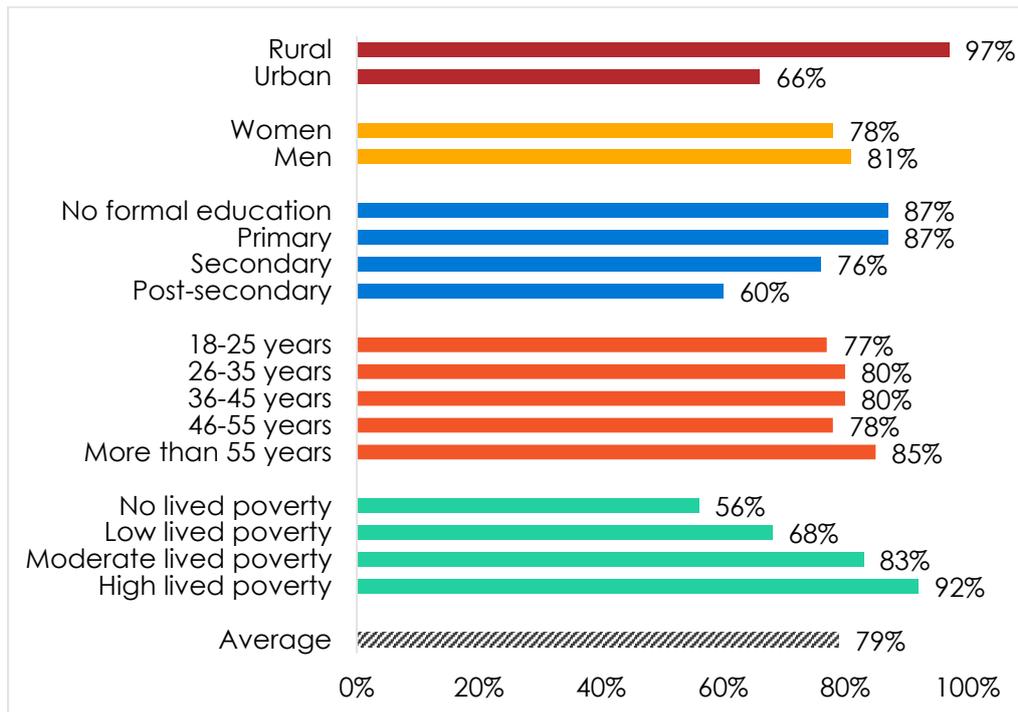


Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

COVID-19 assistance appears to have reached some of the most vulnerable demographic groups. The poorest (92%) and least educated (87%) citizens are far more likely to report having received aid than the economically best-off (56%) and most highly educated (60%) (Figure 12). Rural residents benefited more than urbanites (97% vs. 66%), as did the elderly (85%) compared to younger citizens (77%-80%).

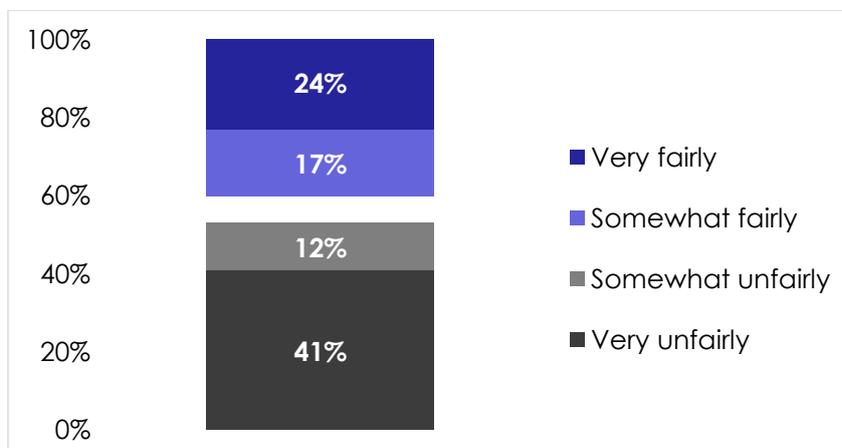
But more than half (52%) of respondents say that government assistance during the pandemic was not distributed fairly (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% "yes")

Figure 13: Fairness of government assistance | The Gambia | 2021

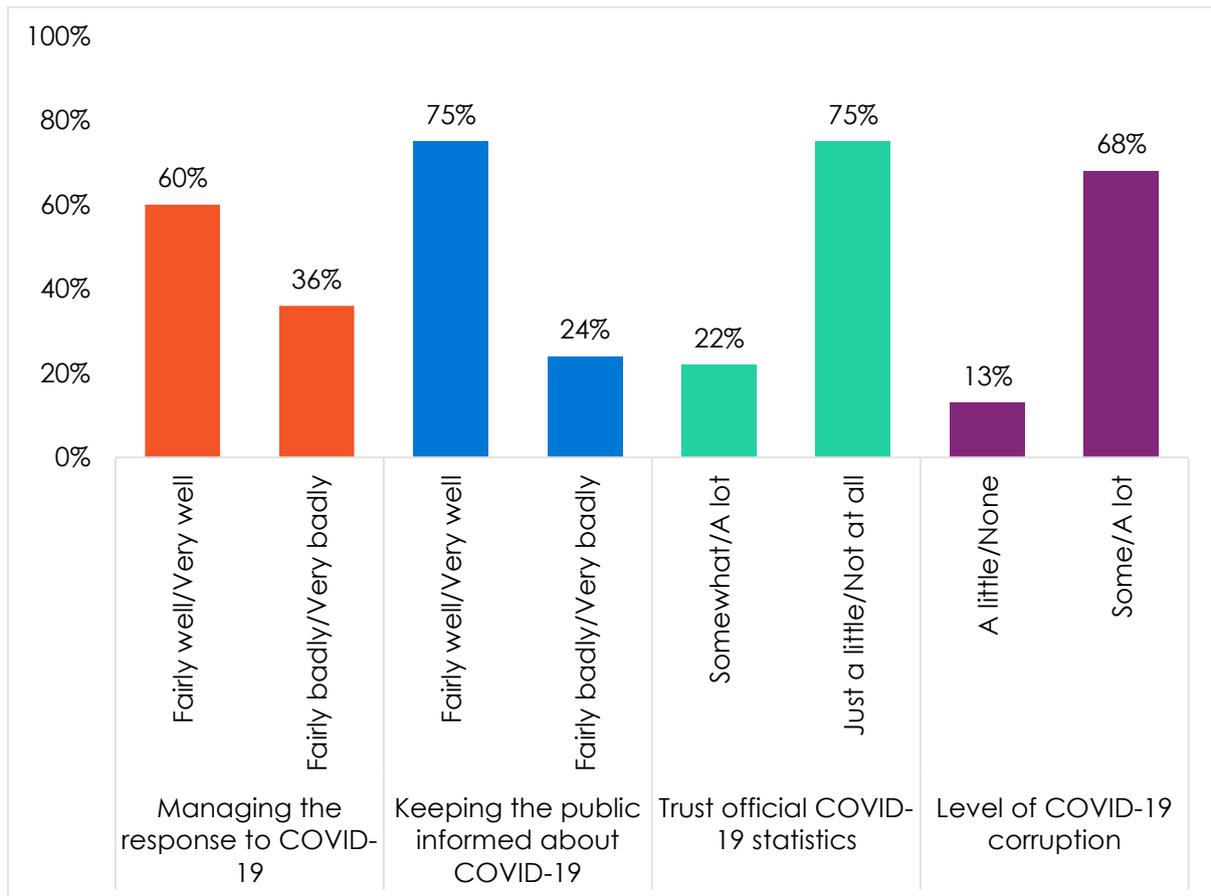


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favouring certain groups or regions?

Overall, six in 10 Gambians (60%) say the government did “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the pandemic (Figure 14), and an even larger majority (75%) say it did a good job of keeping the public informed.

However, three-fourths (75%) have their doubts about the government’s COVID-19 statistics, saying they trust them “just a little” or “not at all.” And more than two-thirds (68%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for the pandemic response were lost due to corruption among government officials.

Figure 14: Assessment of government efforts during the pandemic | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked:

How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Keeping the public informed about COVID-19?

How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combatting and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials?

Views on vaccines

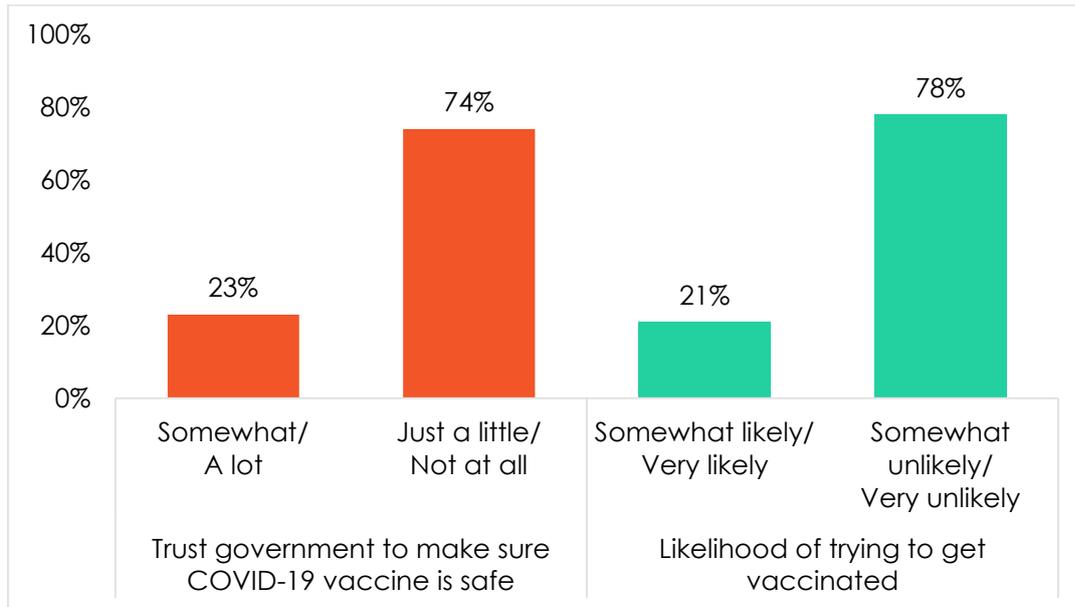
Fewer than a quarter (23%) of Gambians say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any COVID-19 vaccine is safe before it is used in the country.

And even fewer (21%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated (Figure 15).

About seven in 10 citizens (69%) believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection, including 52% who think prayer is “much more effective” (Figure 16).

Both the belief that prayer is more effective than a vaccine and the unlikelihood of trying to get vaccinated are somewhat higher in rural areas than in cities and decrease as respondents' education and socio-economic levels increase (Figure 17). More women (82%) than men (74%) say they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated.

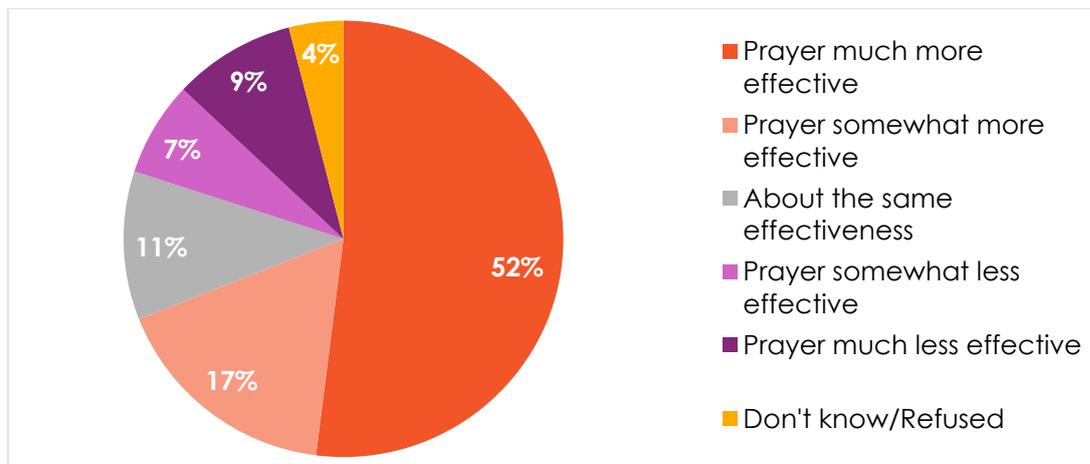
Figure 15: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked:

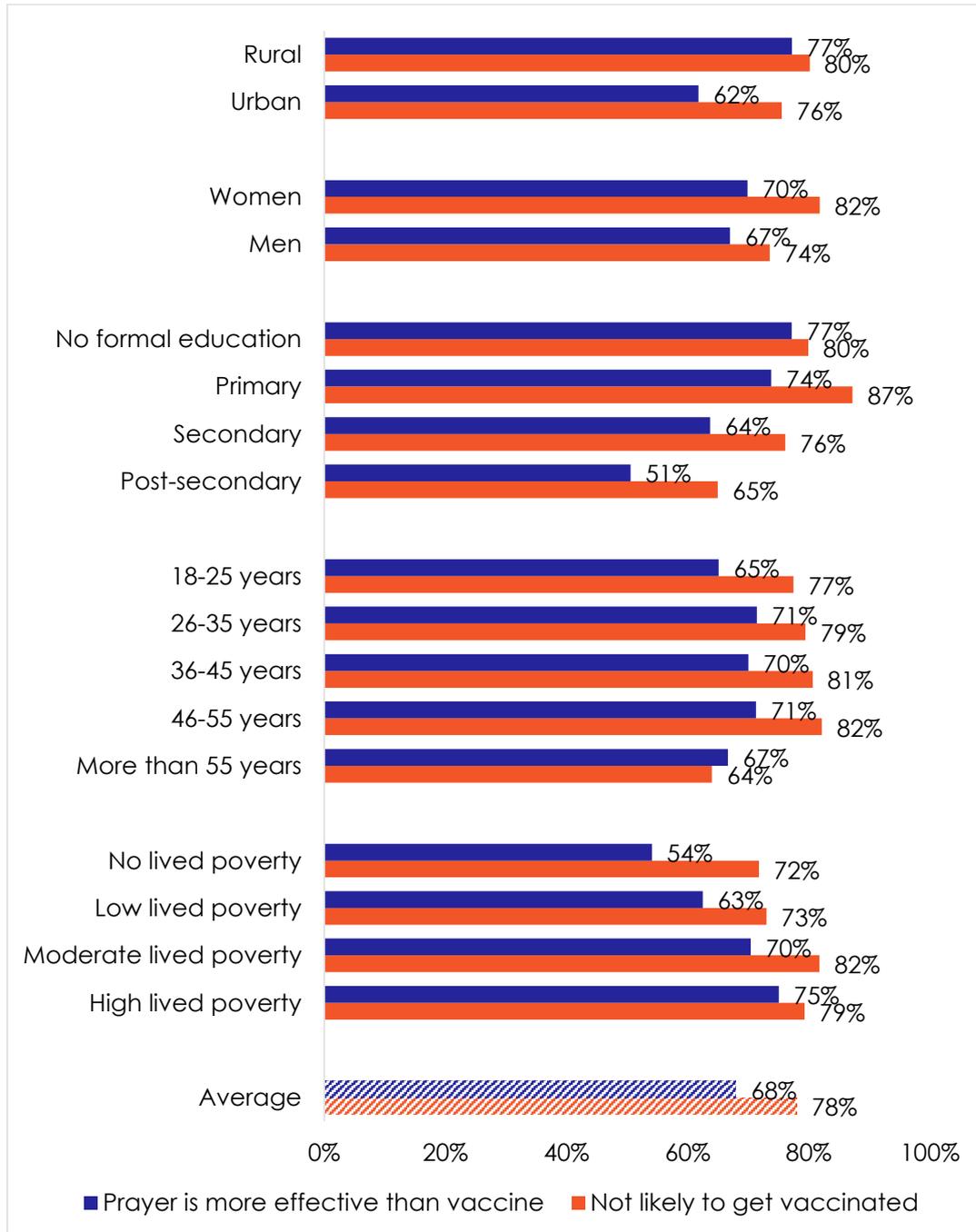
How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to [Gambian] citizens is safe before it is used in this country?
 If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Figure 16: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19? | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

Figure 17: Believe prayer is more effective and not likely to try to get vaccinated
 | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2021

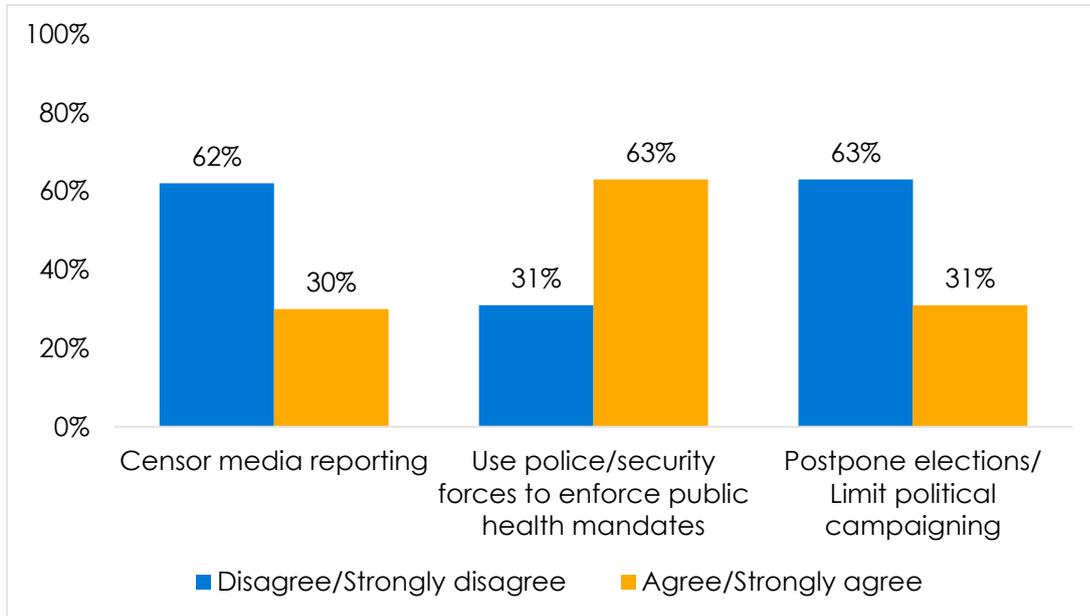


Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

Restricting freedoms and democracy?

Almost two-thirds (63%) of Gambians "agree" or "strongly agree" that during a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, the government is justified in using the police or armed forces to enforce public health measures. But similar proportions do not think a pandemic justifies censoring media reporting (62%) or postponing elections and limiting campaign activities (63%) (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

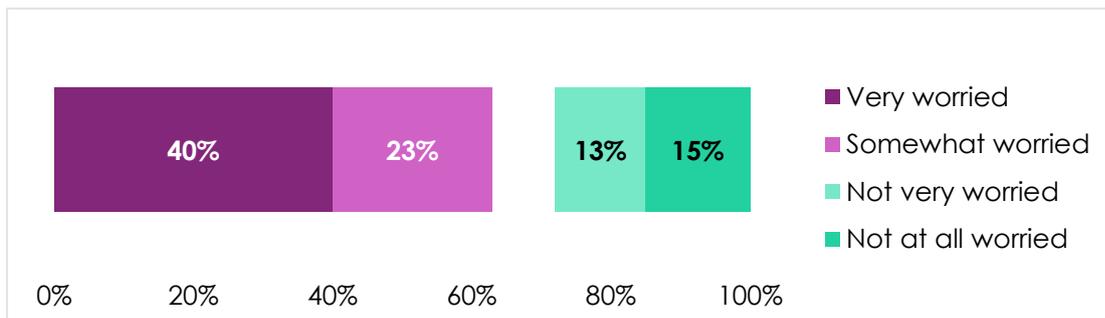
Censoring media reporting?

Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings?

Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?

Two-thirds (63%) of citizens are also worried that Gambian politicians might use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Worried about politicians' intentions? | The Gambia | 2021

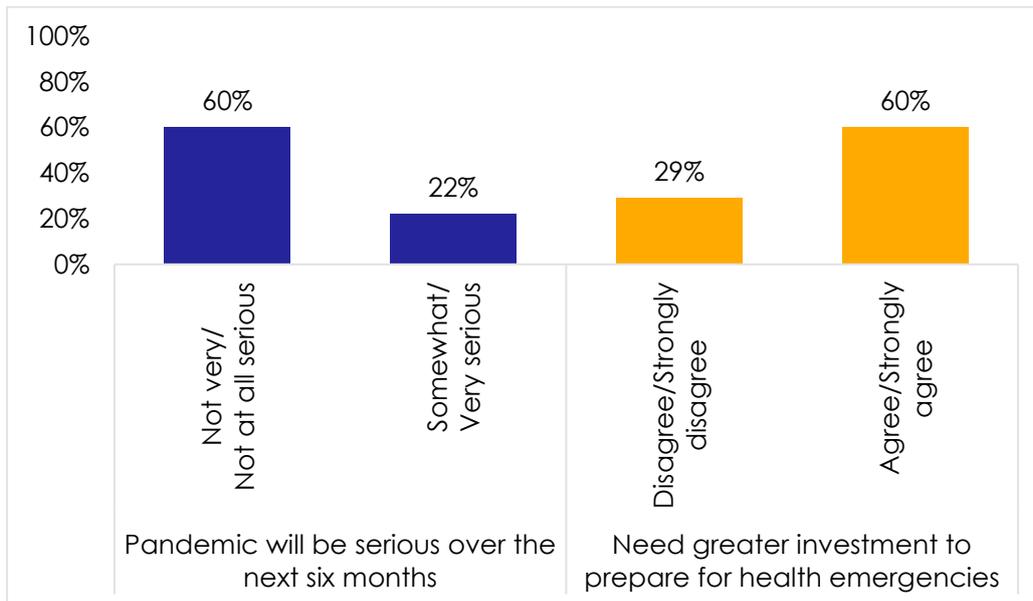


Respondents were asked: In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that the following things are taking place or might take place in Gambia: Politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority?

Looking ahead

Only two in 10 citizens (22%) anticipate that the pandemic will be “somewhat serious” or “very serious” in the Gambia in the next six months. But six in 10 (60%) say the government should invest more in preparing to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Future impacts of COVID-19 | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for [The Gambia] over the next six months?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

Conclusion

New Afrobarometer survey findings show that while a majority of Gambians are appreciative of the government's efforts to combat COVID-19, many say that assistance was not distributed fairly, that resources were lost to corruption, and that they don't trust the government to ensure that vaccines are safe.

Most Gambians have more faith in prayer than in vaccines, and only one in five say they are likely to try to get vaccinated.

As the government rolls out COVID-19 vaccines, it must find ways of improving public trust and transparency in its pandemic response.

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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