

Trusted and influential: Religious and traditional leaders can be assets in COVID-19 fight

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 355 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Gildfred Boateng Asiamah

Summary

In late March, the Ghanaian government locked down parts of the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions to slow the spread of COVID-19 and deployed security personnel to enforce the restrictions. In announcing the measures, President Nana Akufo-Addo said he was aware that many citizens operate in the informal sector, depend on their daily earnings to survive, and rely on essential services not readily available in their homes or compounds. He asked key stakeholders from the private, informal, and religious sectors to support implementation of the partial lockdown.

Three weeks in, the public's initial cooperation with lockdown directives, including a ban on public gatherings, began to wane. There were reports of people going to the beach and organizing parties, wedding ceremonies, and traditional rites (Bokpe, 2020; Ghanaweb, 2020a). Traffic began building back up in some parts of Accra (Modern Ghana, 2020a). More than 400 people from 13 of the country's 16 regions were arrested for flouting the lockdown orders as security personnel intensified efforts to enforce compliance (Dapaah, 2020; Modern Ghana, 2020b). Another worrying trend was community resistance and protests against the siting of isolation centers in some areas (Ghanaweb, 2020b).

With the number of COVID-19 cases in Ghana rising, and the government's recent decision to lift the partial lockdown, there is an urgent need to scale up the sensitization of Ghanaians on the pandemic and steps – and very real sacrifices – needed to contain the virus. And government may need all the help it can get.

Results of an Afrobarometer survey conducted in late 2019 suggest that religious and traditional leaders could be an important asset in this effort. They enjoy greater popular trust and more contact with citizens than most other leaders. A broader consultation with traditional and religious leaders who have close interaction with the people they lead might be an effective way to court public cooperation in the implementation of anti-COVID-19 measures.

Afrobarometer survey

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. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), interviewed 2,400 adult Ghanaians between 16 September and 3 October 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

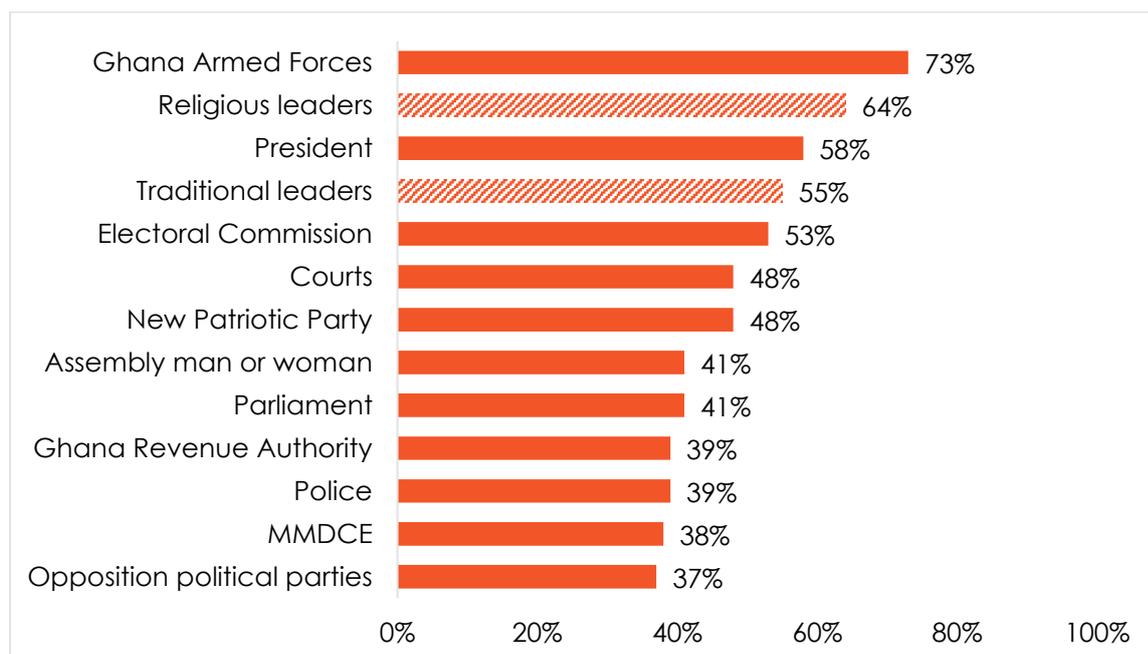
Key findings

- Religious and traditional leaders are among the most trusted officials in Ghana, trusted “somewhat” or “a lot” by 64% and 55% of Ghanaians, respectively. They enjoy greater popular trust than parliamentarians (41%), assembly men and women (41%), and metropolitan, municipal, and district chief executives (38%).
- Trust in religious and traditional leaders is high in most key socio-demographic groups. But rural, less uneducated, older, and relatively poor citizens tend to trust them more than their urban, younger, highly educated, and relatively well-off counterparts.
- Ghanaians are more likely to contact religious and traditional leaders than most other officials to discuss important problems. Four in 10 respondents (40%) said in 2017 that they had contacted a religious leader at least once during the past year. One in four (26%) report having contacted a traditional leader in the year preceding the 2019 survey, compared to 20% for political party officials and 15% for parliamentarians.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Ghanaians believe traditional leaders have “a lot” or “some” influence in the governance of their local communities. Recognition of traditional leaders’ influence is widespread among key socio-demographic groups, including urban, young, and economically well-off respondents.

Trust in religious and traditional leaders

In the Afrobarometer survey in late 2019, respondents were presented with a list of formal and informal leaders and asked, “How much do you trust each of the following?” Responses show that religious and traditional leaders are among the most trusted leaders in Ghana. Almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens say they trust religious leaders “a lot” or “somewhat,” second only to the army. Traditional leaders ranked fourth, just behind the president, with 55% of citizens saying they trust them “a lot” or “somewhat.” These two outrank other key public leaders, including members of Parliament (41%), assembly men and women (41%), and metropolitan, municipal, or district chief executives (MMDCEs) (38%) (Figure 1).

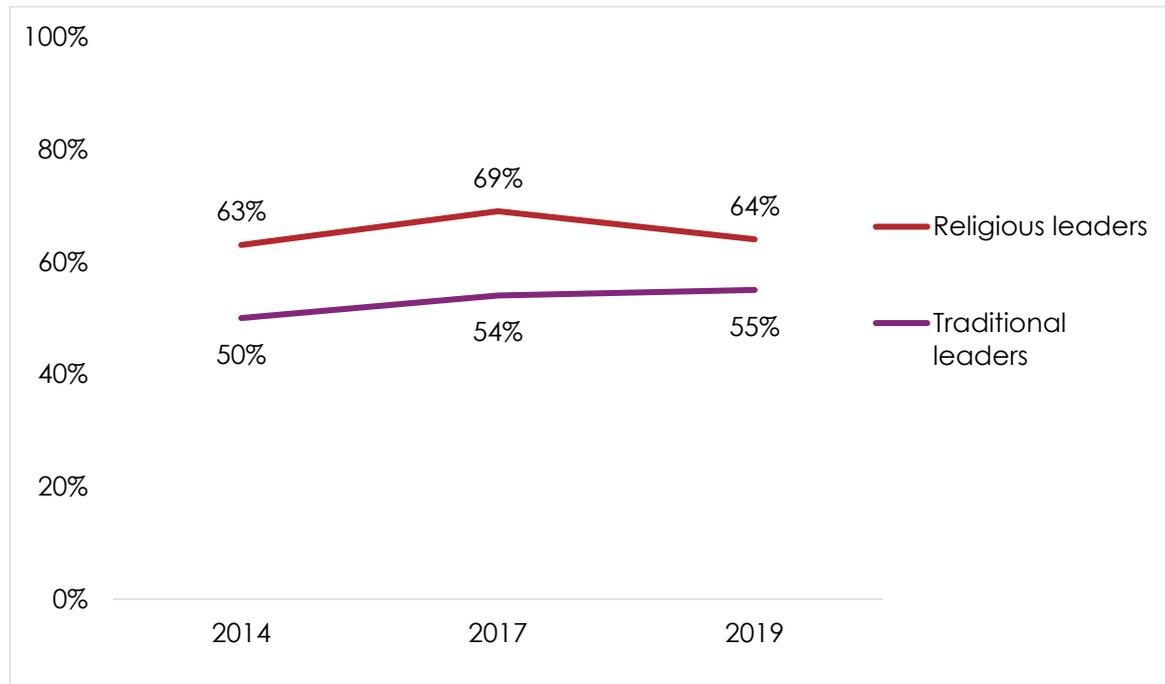
Figure 1: Trust in leaders | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “a lot,” or “somewhat”)

Compared to 2014, the level of popular trust in religious leaders is about the same (after briefly peaking at 69% in 2017), while that in traditional leaders has increased by 5 percentage points (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Trust in religious and traditional leaders | Ghana | 2014-2019



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "a lot" or "somewhat")

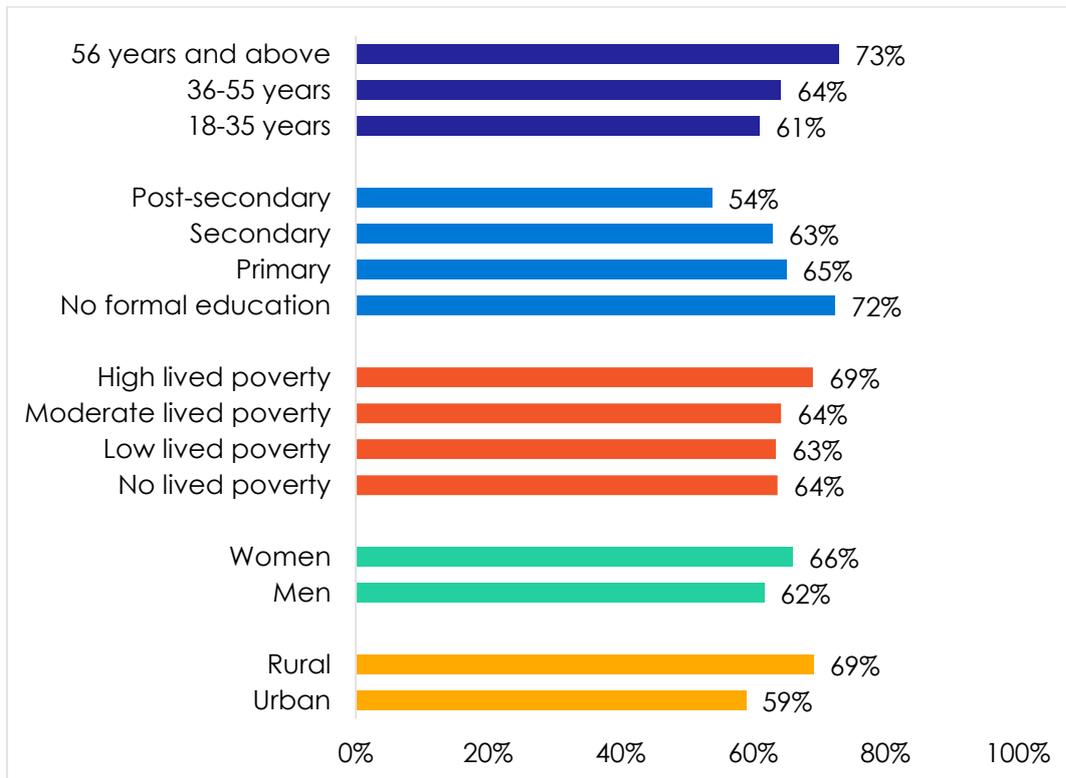
Trust in religious leaders is widespread across key socio-demographic groups, but it is more common among rural than urban residents (69% vs. 59%). It is also higher among older citizens (73% of those aged 56 years and above) than among young adults (61% of those aged 18-35 years) (Figure 3).

Citizens with no formal education are 18 percentage points more likely than those with post-secondary education (72% vs. 54%) to trust religious leaders, while trust is slightly higher among those with high lived poverty¹ (69%) than among economically better-off respondents (63%-64%).

Trust in traditional leaders is also high in most key socio-demographic groups, but there are wider gaps according to rural-urban residency (64% vs. 46%), level of education (68% among those with no formal education vs. 47% among those with post-secondary education), experience with poverty (65% among citizens with high lived poverty vs. 54% among those with no lived poverty) (Figure 4).

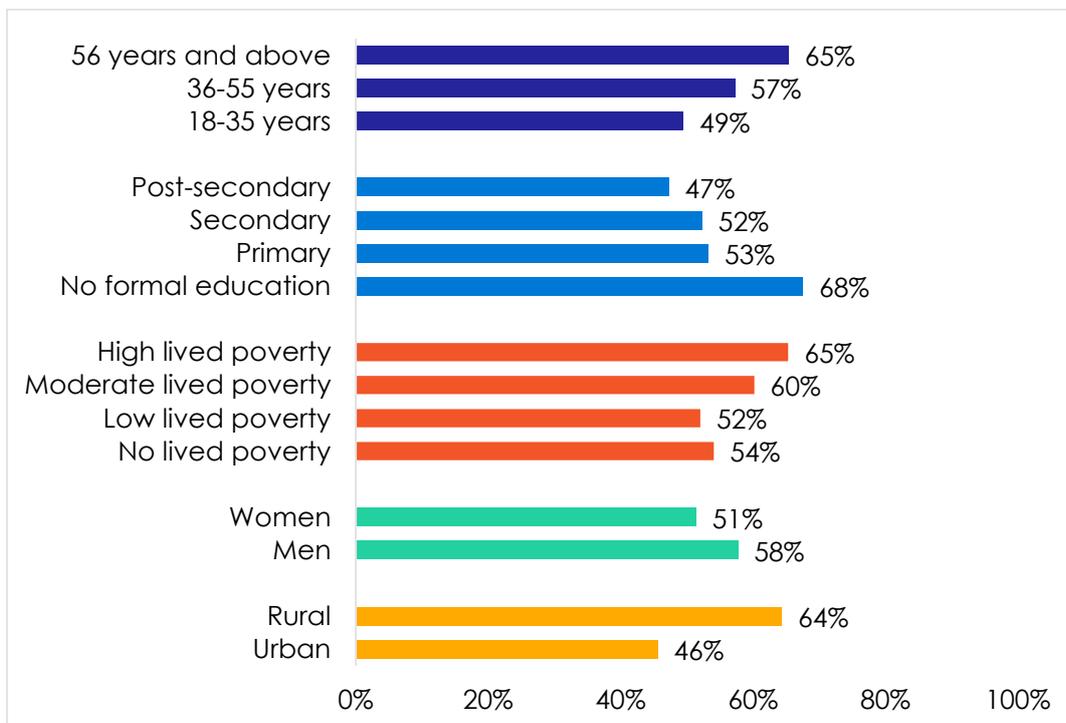
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

Figure 3: Trust in religious leaders | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "a lot" or "somewhat")

Figure 4: Trust in traditional leaders | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Traditional leaders? (% who say "a lot" or "somewhat")

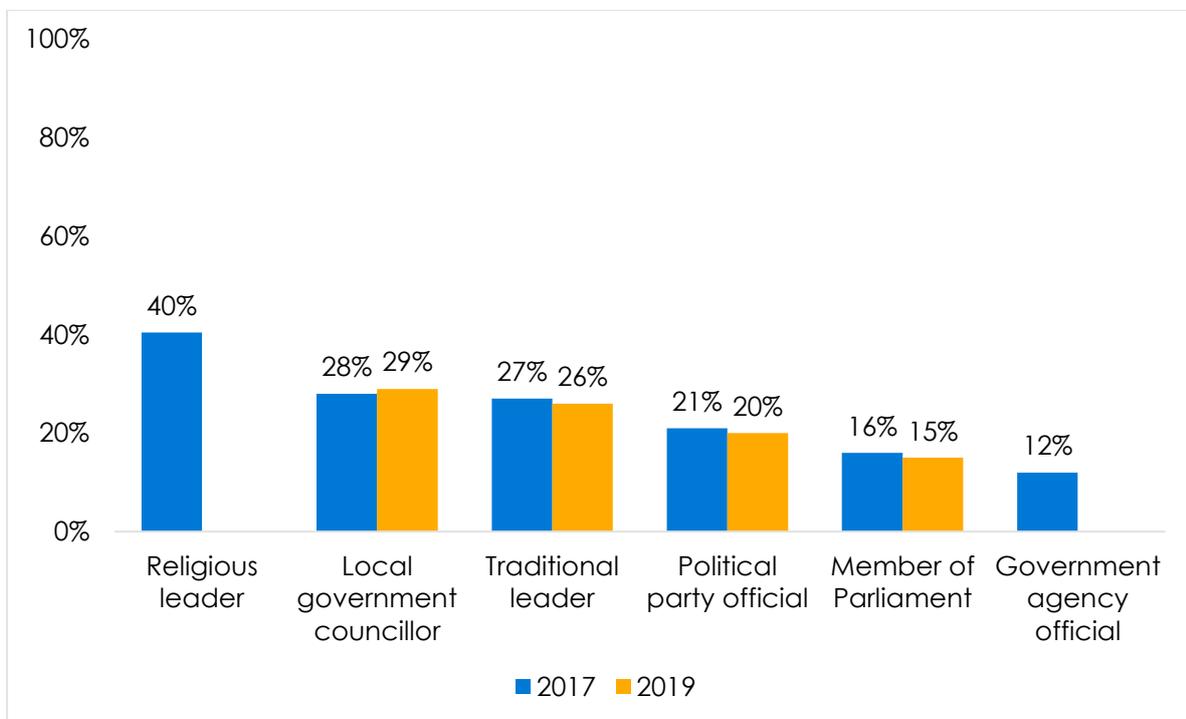
Whom do Ghanaians contact about important problems?

Afrobarometer asked respondents in late 2019 how often, during the past year, they had contacted certain formal and informal leaders about important problems. Traditional leaders were the second-most-contacted group of leaders: One in four respondents (26%) say they contacted them at least once during the previous year, second only to local government councillors (29%) (Figure 5).

When religious leaders were included in a similar question during the Round 7 survey conducted in September 2017, four in 10 respondents (40%) said they had contacted a religious leader at least once during the previous year, a higher rate of contact than for any other group.

In both survey rounds, fewer than a quarter of respondents said they contacted a political party official, their members of Parliament, or an official of a government agency about their problems.

Figure 5: Whom do Ghanaians contact about important problems | Ghana | 2017

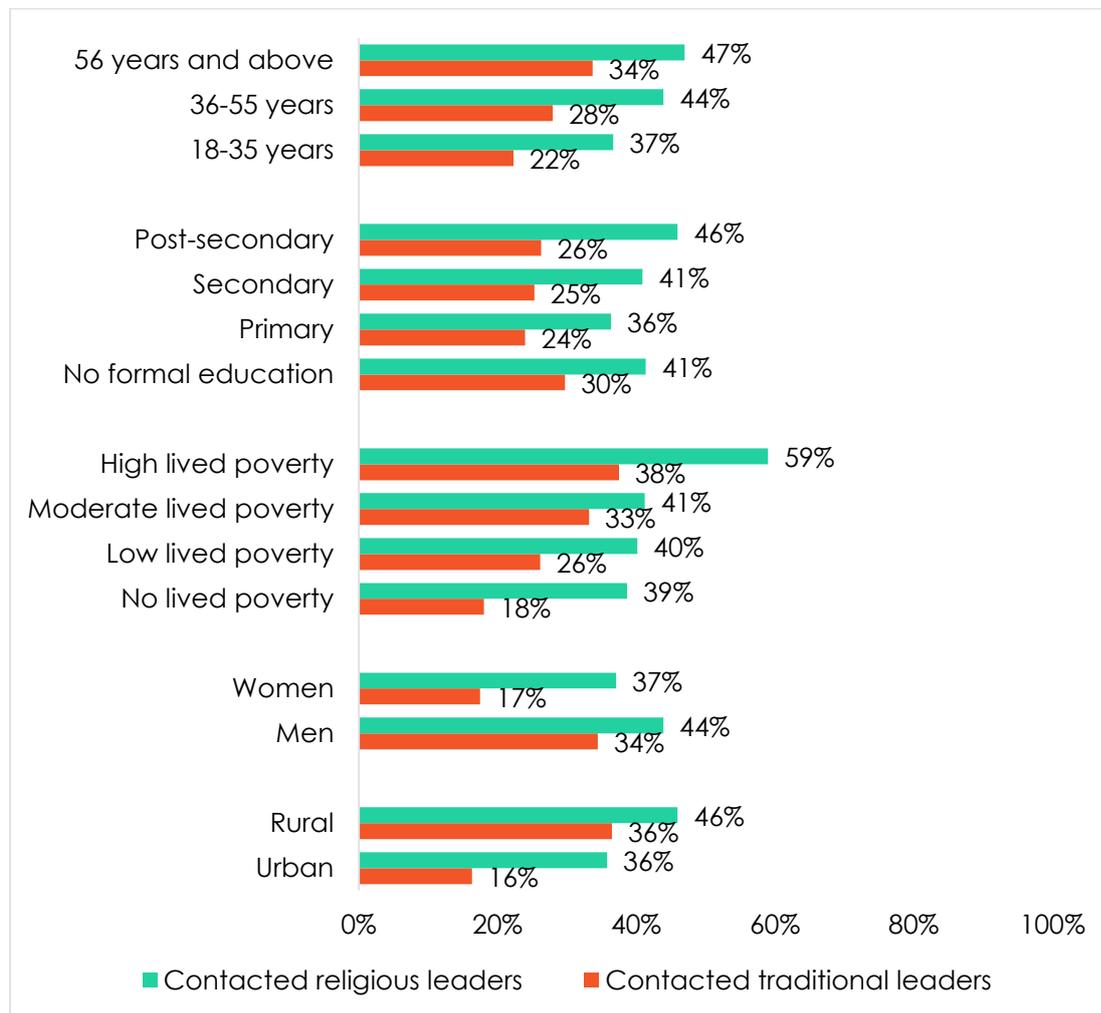


Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who said “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Disaggregating the data on contact with religious leaders (from 2017) and traditional leaders (from 2019) shows that older citizens, rural residents, men, and people experiencing high lived poverty are more likely than younger citizens, urbanites, women, and economically better-off respondents to contact both religious and traditional leaders.

Citizens with high lived poverty are 20 percentage points more likely than those with no lived poverty to contact religious leaders (59% vs. 39%) and traditional leaders (38% vs. 18%). Men are twice as likely as women to contact traditional leaders about problems (34% vs. 17%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Contact religious and traditional leaders about problems | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2017/2019



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”; percentages on contact with religious leaders are from the 2017 survey, while those on contact with traditional leaders are from the 2019 survey.)

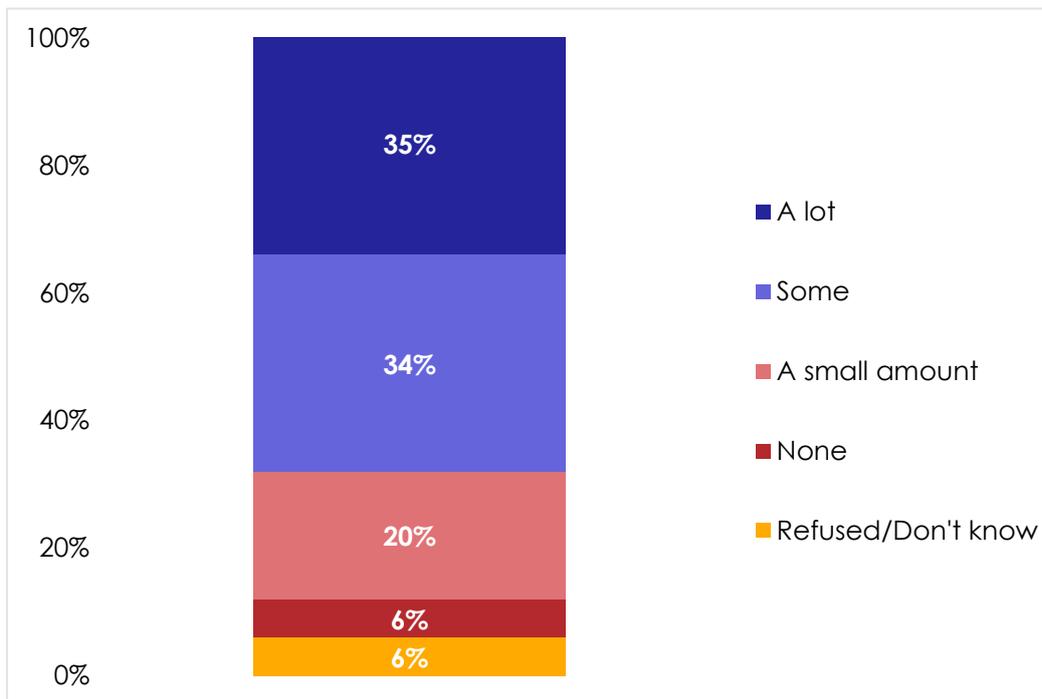
Influence of traditional leaders

The influence of traditional leaders is recognized by a large majority of Ghanaians. About seven in 10 (69%) say traditional leaders have “a lot” or “some” influence in the governing of local communities. Only a quarter (26%) think they have just “a small amount” or no influence at all (Figure 7). Recognition of traditional leaders’ influence is widespread among key socio-demographic groups, even in urban areas (67%) and among the youngest adults (67%), and is notably high among the economically best-off respondents (73%, vs. 63% among the poorest) (Figure 8).

Further, a majority of Ghanaians (58%) say traditional leaders mostly cooperate with elected leaders to get things done, including 33% who “agree very strongly” with this view (Figure 9). Only a quarter (27%) say traditional leaders are mostly in competition with elected leaders for resources, power, and influence.

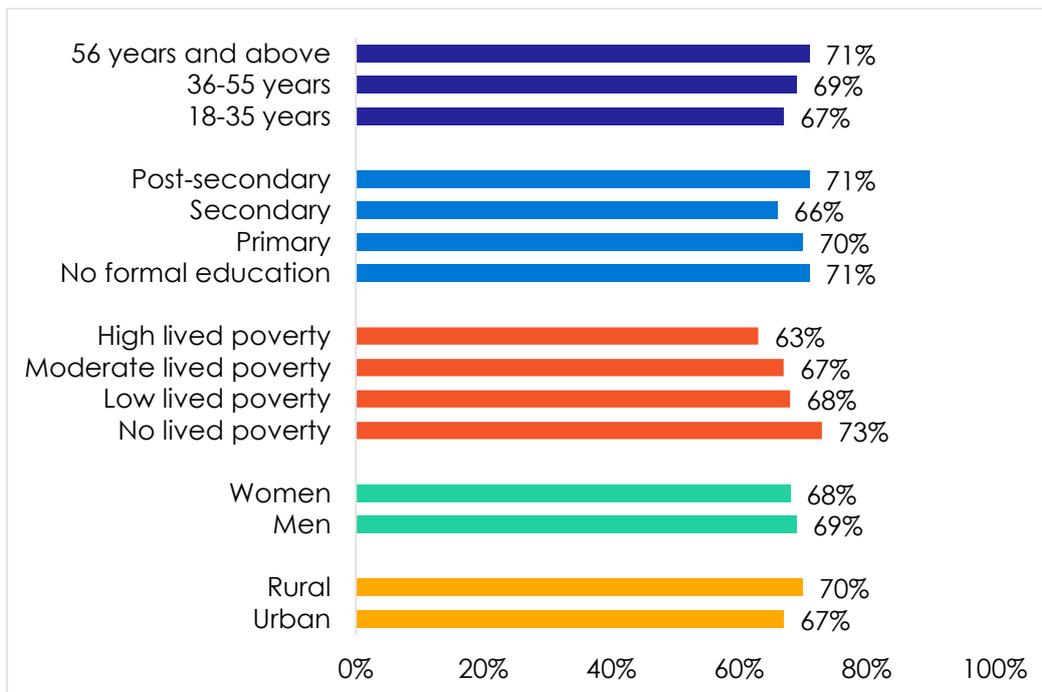
Close to half (46%) of Ghanaians would like to see the influence of traditional leaders increase “somewhat” or “a lot,” while only 15% say it should decrease (Figure 10).

Figure 7: Influence of traditional leaders in governing local communities | Ghana | 2019



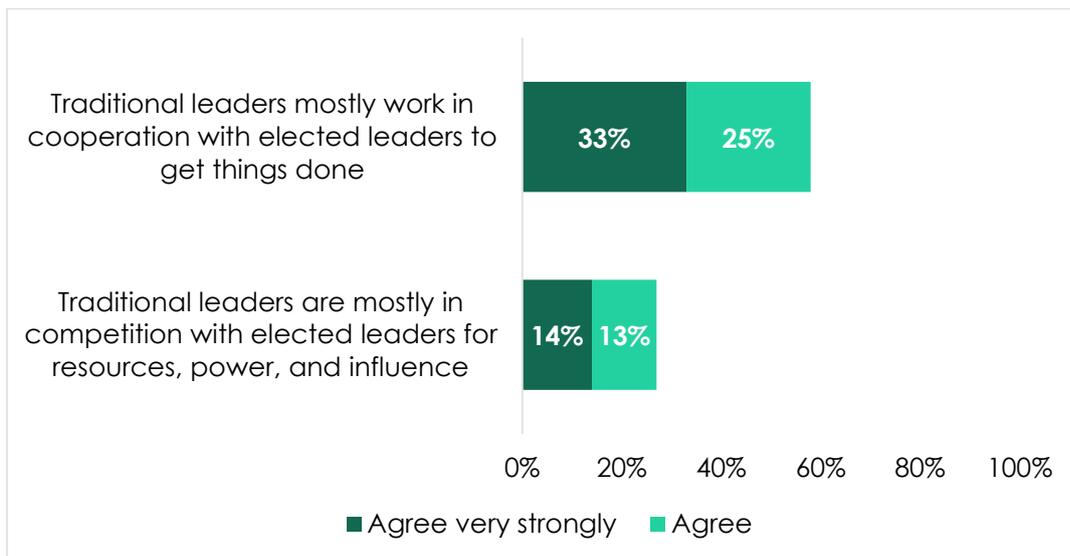
Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Governing your local community?

Figure 8: Traditional leaders have some/a lot of influence | by socio-demographic group | Ghana | 2019



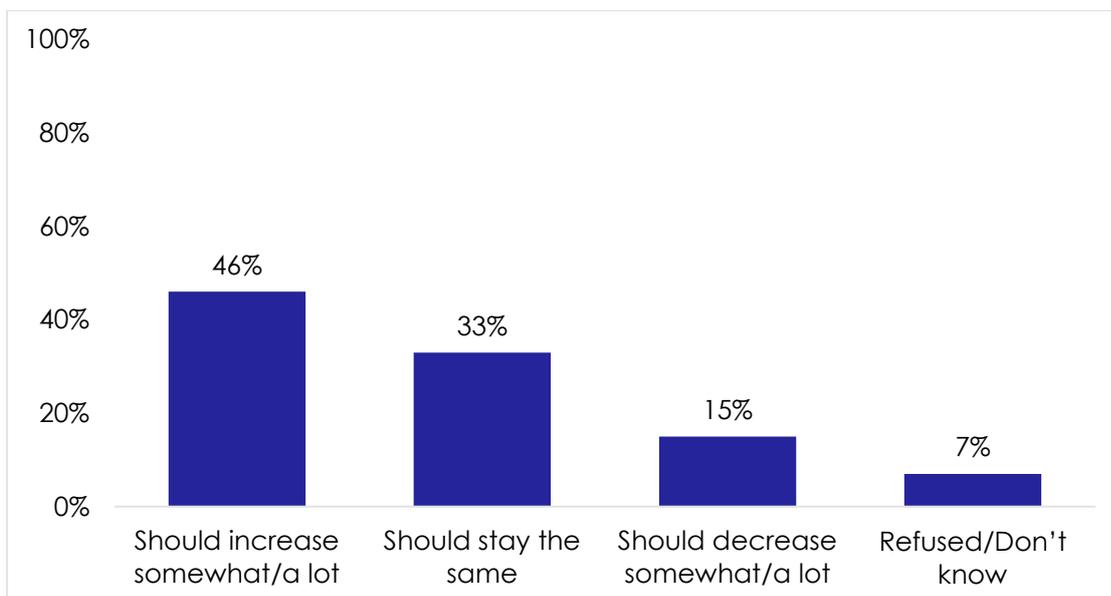
Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Governing your local community? (% who say "a lot" or "some")

Figure 9: Do traditional leaders cooperate or compete with elected leaders?
 | Ghana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Figure 10: Should influence of traditional leaders increase or decrease? | Ghana
 | 2019



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease?.

Conclusion

The Afrobarometer survey conducted in late 2019 shows relatively high levels of popular trust in religious and traditional leaders. Trust is especially high among rural residents, the uneducated, and poor citizens – precisely the populations least likely to be well-informed about COVID-19 and the measures needed to contain it.

The government has eased restrictions on people's movements but maintains social-distancing directives and the ban on public gatherings. There remains an urgent need for

increased public sensitization to ensure that Ghanaians act responsibly to minimize the spread of the virus. An effective strategy might be to leverage the influence of trusted informal leaders as key resources in increasing public awareness and courting public cooperation. Broader consultations and active involvement of religious and traditional leaders, along with other local stakeholders, are likely to improve compliance with social-distancing measures and produce community-based solutions at little or no political or financial cost to the government.

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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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan 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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