



Dispatch No. 420 | 20 January 2021

Liberians laud government's COVID-19 response but claim unfair distribution of relief assistance

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 420 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Oscar Bloh

Summary

Liberia has won international praise for its response to the coronavirus (Front Page Africa, 2021). Perhaps drawing on its experience with the Ebola pandemic, the government moved early with measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including screening at airports and a Special Presidential Advisory Committee on Coronavirus (SPACOC) set up months ahead of the first recorded case in the country.

A week after Liberia reported its first COVID-19 case in March 2020, the Ministry of Health declared a national health emergency and imposed a 21-day lockdown in Montserrado and Margibi counties (Goitom, 2020). On 8 April, President George Weah declared a three-week nationwide lockdown that included curfews, travel restrictions, and closure of non-essential businesses, government offices, schools, churches, mosques, bars, and beaches (Rouse, 2020). As the number of infections increased, lockdowns were extended – and at times enforced by police using force (Reuters, 2020).

As of 19 January 2021, Liberia had recorded 1,898 confirmed cases and 84 deaths (Ministry of Health, 2021). The pandemic delayed special senatorial elections and a national referendum (Koinyeneh, 2020) and has taken a toll on the economy, resulting in a projected gross domestic product (GDP) contraction of 2.6% (World Bank, 2020). The legislature approved a \$25 million stimulus package to provide food for vulnerable communities in collaboration with the World Food Program, offset loans to vulnerable traders, and pay utility bills for some households, among other things (Parley, 2020). However, the COVID-19 National Steering Committee admitted doing a poor job of delivering relief packages, blaming bad roads and other factors (Karmo, 2020).

A new Afrobarometer survey in Liberia shows that even though majorities say the government is doing well in managing the response to the pandemic and keeping the public informed, the most vulnerable citizens were least likely to benefit from relief assistance, and a majority of citizens believe the relief assistance was distributed unfairly. While most Liberians support the lockdown as necessary, most also found it difficult to comply with the restrictions. Many citizens support the school closures but think the closures lasted too long.

Very few citizens trust their government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, and only about a third say they are likely to try to get vaccinated when a vaccine becomes available. Liberians also overwhelmingly believe prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Going forward, a majority of citizens want the government to invest more in preparing to respond to health emergencies even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

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 Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between October and December 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

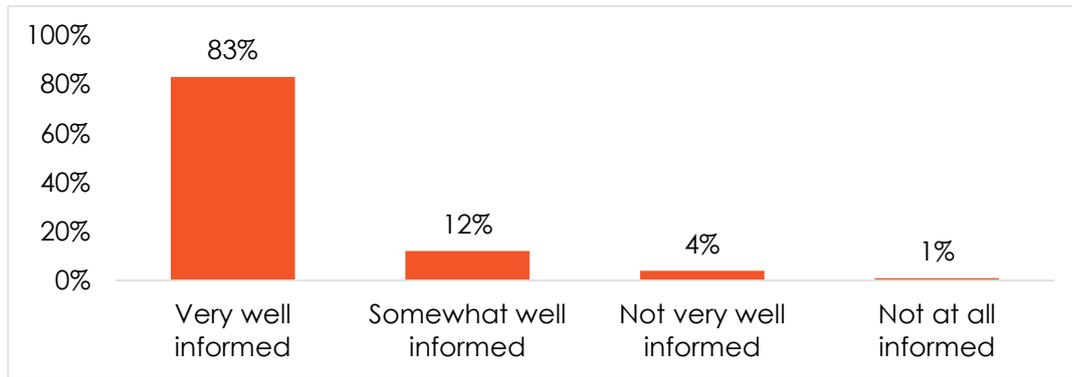
- Three in 100 citizens (3%) say they or a member of their household became ill with COVID-19, and a quarter (25%) say they lost income because of the pandemic.
- About eight in 10 Liberians (81%) say they and their households found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.
 - But a similar majority (83%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the lockdown was necessary, in spite of the toll it took on the economy and people’s livelihoods.
- Seven in 10 (71%) also “somewhat support” or “strongly support” the closure of schools to limit the spread of the coronavirus.
 - But most think the period during which schools were closed was “somewhat too long” (23%) or “much too long” (59%).
- Fewer than one in 10 Liberians (9%) say they or their households received government assistance during the pandemic.
- About eight in 10 (78%) say the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic were not fairly distributed.
- Majorities say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the response to the pandemic (64%) and keeping the public informed (80%).
- But only two in 10 Liberians (20%) 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.
 - Only one-third (34%) say they are likely to try to get vaccinated if a vaccine becomes available.
- Almost nine in 10 citizens (86%) say prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection, including 61% who think prayer is “much more effective.”
- Majorities “agree” or “strongly agree” that in times of a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is justified for the government to use the police or armed forces to enforce public health measures (84%), to postpone elections or limit political campaigning (81%), and to censor media reporting (71%).
- Two-thirds (66%) say the government needs to invest more in preparing to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

Awareness

Almost all Liberians say they are “very well informed” (82%) or “somewhat well informed” (13%) about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it (Figure 1). Only one in 20 citizens (5%) say they are “not very well” or “not at all” informed about the pandemic.

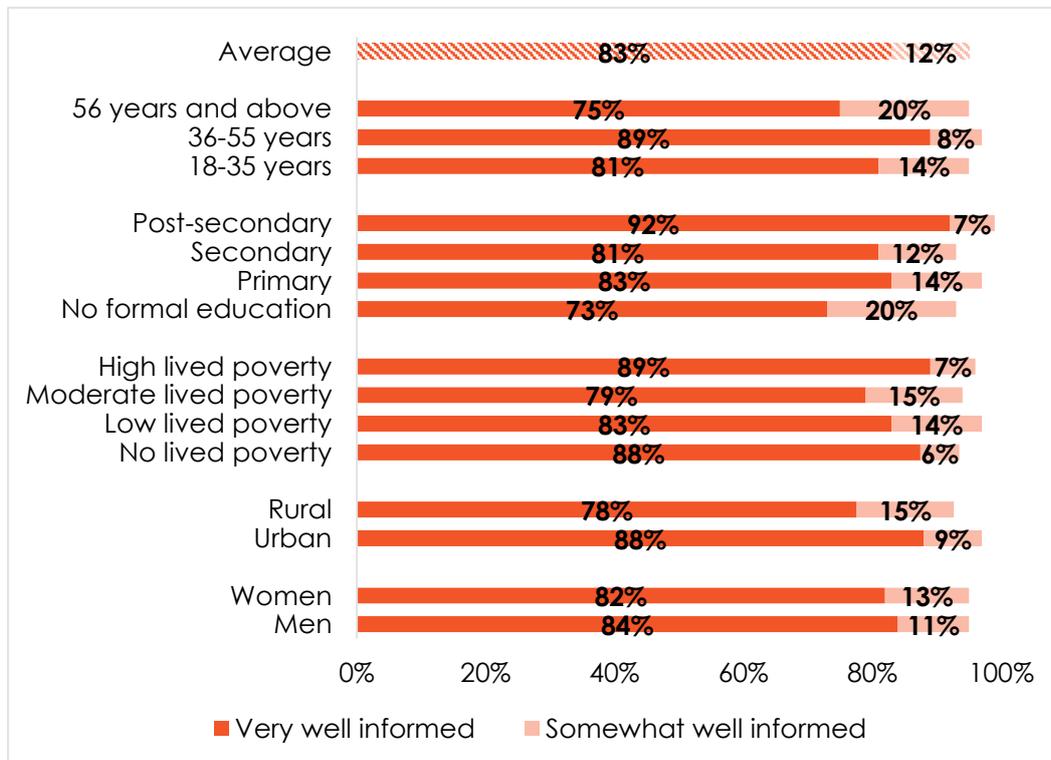
Awareness of the pandemic is widespread across key socio-demographic groups. However, urban citizens are more likely to be “very well informed” than rural dwellers (88% vs. 78%) (Figure 2). Being “very well informed” about the pandemic also increases with one’s level of education (92% among citizens with post-secondary education vs. 73% among those with no formal education) and is less common among senior citizens (75%).

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Liberia | 2020



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 | Liberia | 2020

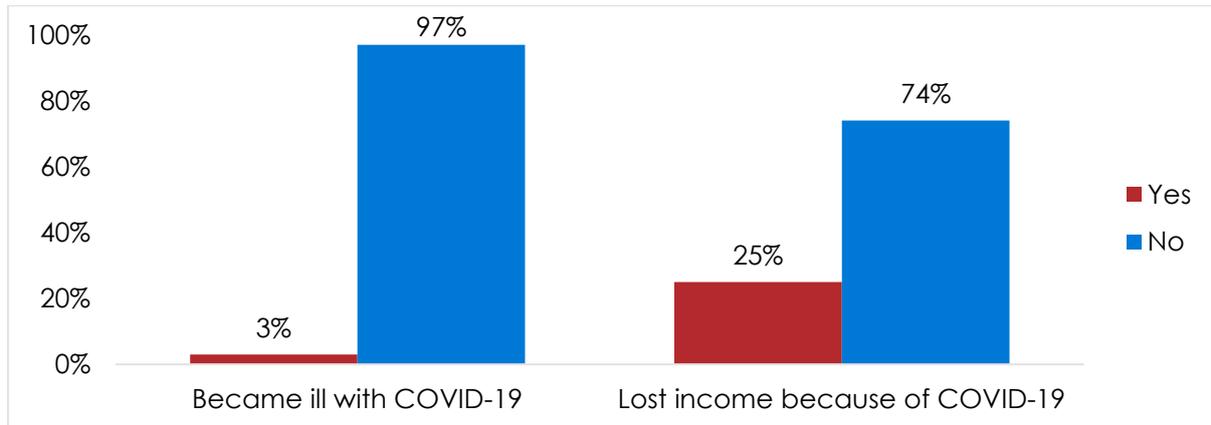


Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

Impact

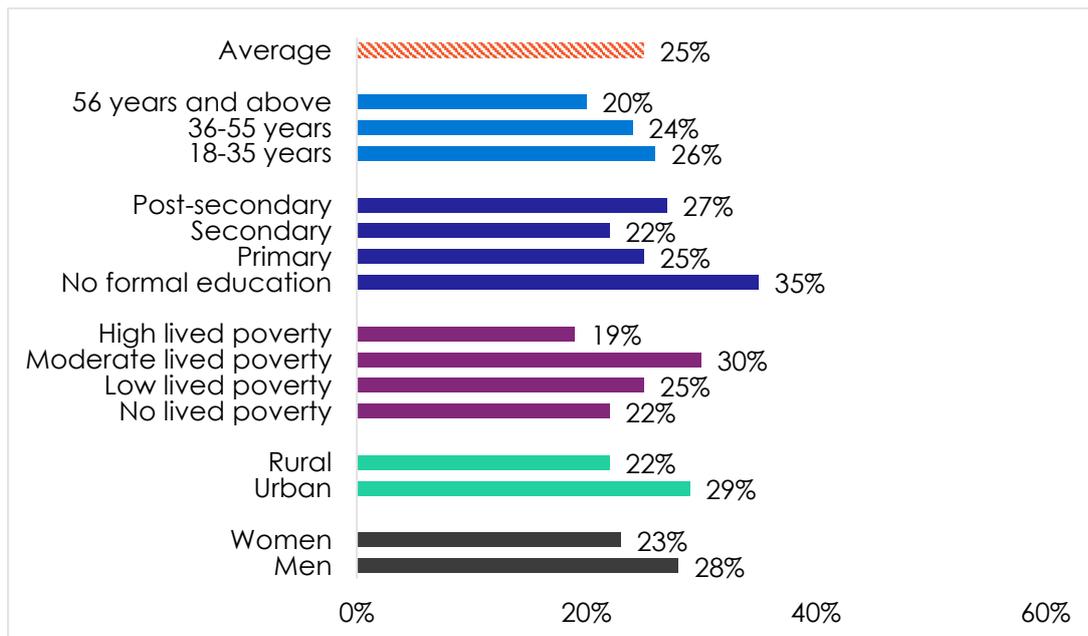
Three in 100 citizens (3%) say they or a member of their household became ill with COVID-19, while a quarter (25%) say they lost a job, business, or primary source of income as a result of the pandemic (Figure 3). The report of loss of income decreases with age (20% among citizens aged 56 and above vs. 26% among those aged 18-35) (Figure 4). It is also more common among citizens with no formal education (35%), men (28%), and urban residents (29%) compared to those with at least a primary education (22%-27%), women (23%), and rural residents (22%).

Figure 3: Impacts of the pandemic | Liberia | 2020



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 socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2020



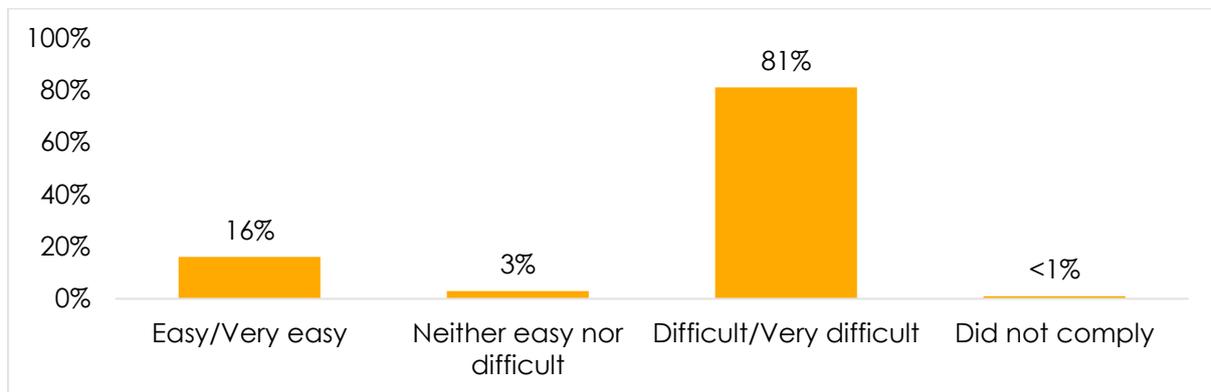
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business or primary source of income? (% "yes")

Lockdowns and school closures

About eight in 10 Liberians (81%) say they and their households found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with lockdown restrictions or curfews imposed by government to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 5). Only one in six (16%) say compliance was “easy” or “very easy.”

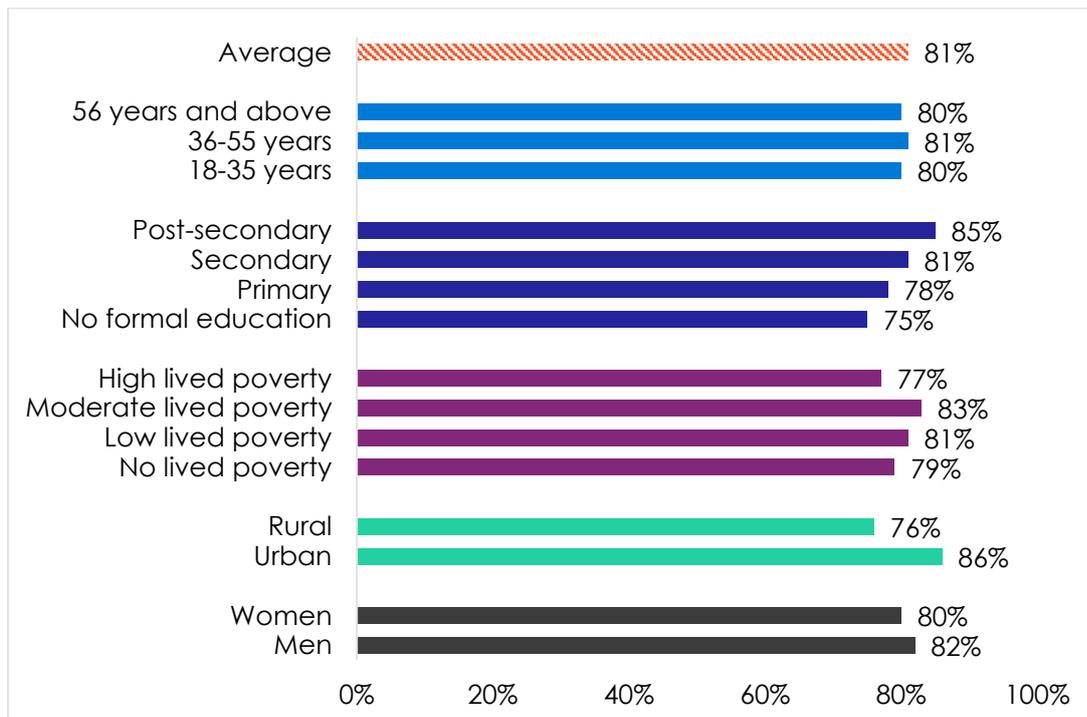
Urban residents (86%) and highly educated citizens (85%) are more likely than rural dwellers (76%) and the less educated (75%-81%) to report that it was difficult to comply with the lockdown restrictions (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Compliance with lockdown or curfew restrictions | Liberia | 2020



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?

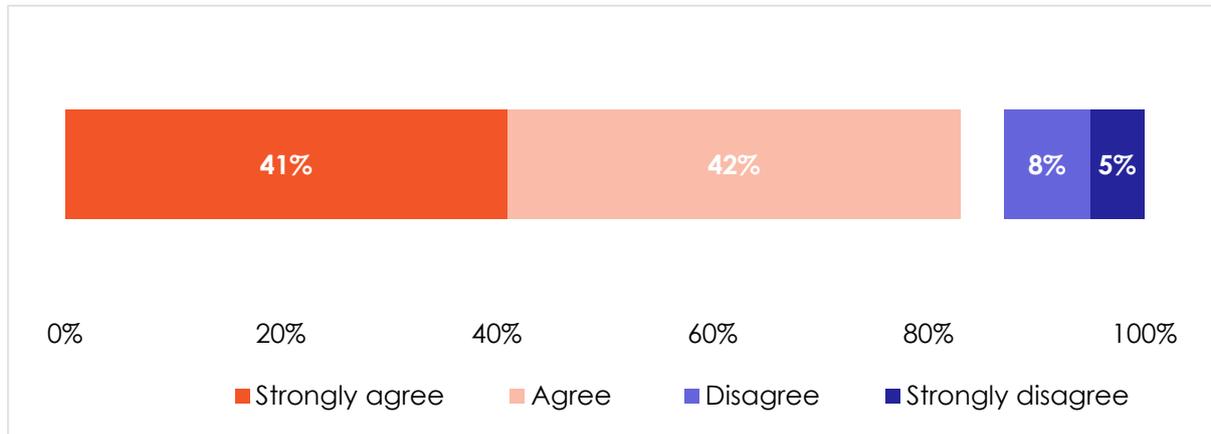
Figure 6: Difficulty complying with lockdown restrictions | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2020



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? (% who say “difficult” or “very difficult”)

Even though most citizens found it difficult to comply with the restrictions, a similar majority (83%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the lockdown was necessary even if it took a toll on the economy and people’s livelihoods (Figure 7). Only one in eight citizens (13%) disagree with this view.

Figure 7: Support for lockdown | Liberia | 2020

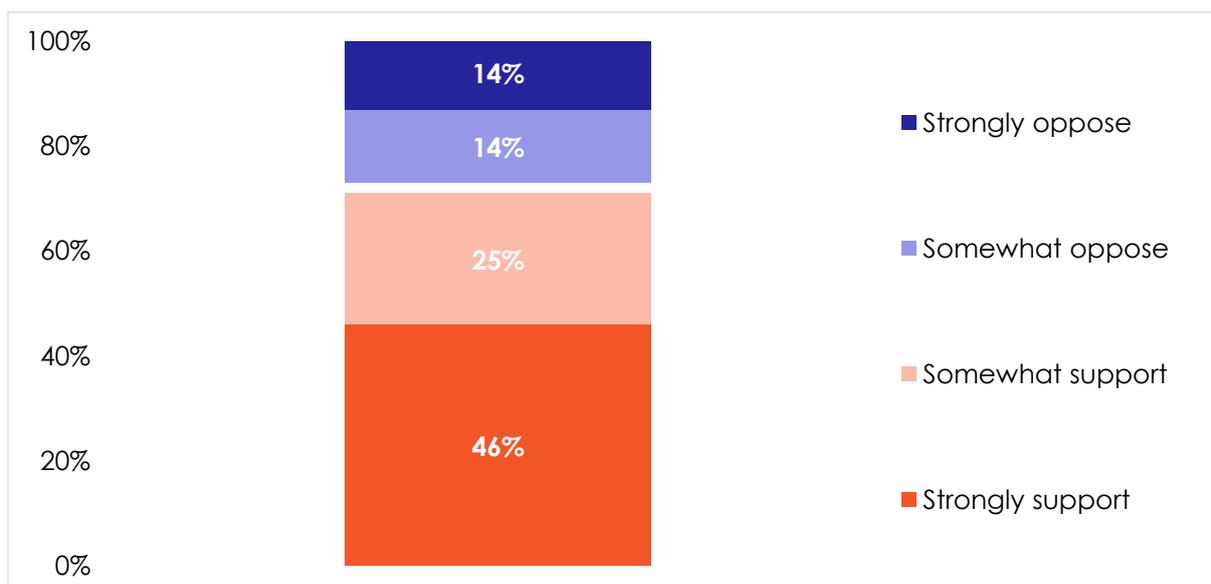


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19?

A large majority (71%) also support the closure of schools to limit the spread of COVID-19, including almost half (46%) who “strongly support” this decision (Figure 8). Only about three in 10 (28%) oppose closing the schools.

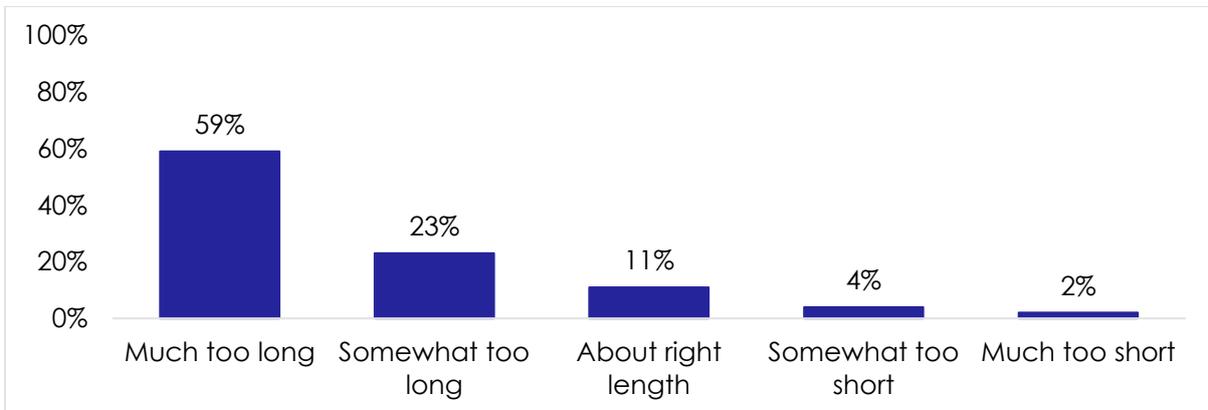
However, many are not happy about the duration of the school closure. Eight in 10 citizens think the period during which schools were closed was “somewhat too long” (23%) or “much too long” (59%) (Figure 9). One in 10 (11%) say the duration was just about right, while one in 20 (6%) think it was “somewhat too short” or “much too short.”

Figure 8: Support for school closures | Liberia | 2020



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 9: Length of school closures | Liberia | 2020



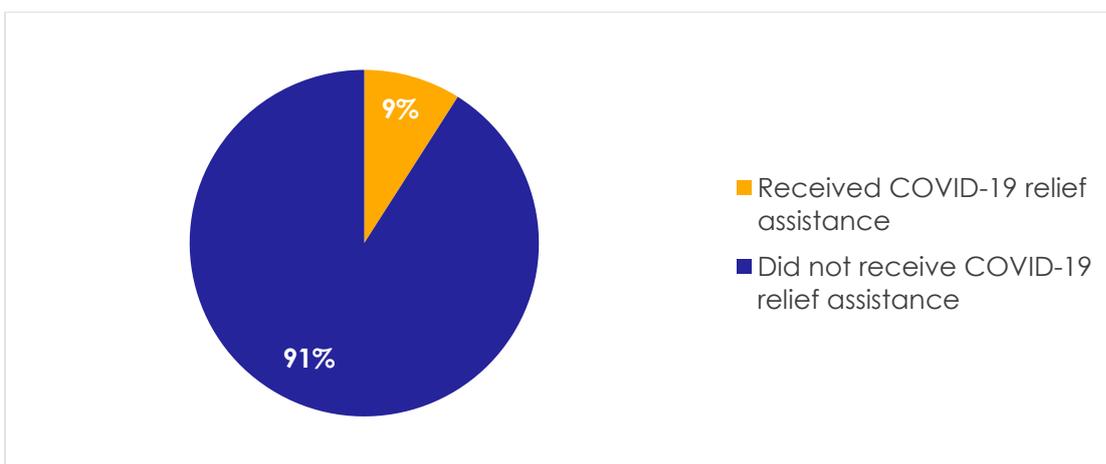
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?*

Government assistance and performance

Fewer than one in 10 Liberians (9%) say they or their households received government assistance during the pandemic, while 91% did not receive any assistance (Figure 10).

Contrary to the intent to provide relief for vulnerable groups during the pandemic, the most vulnerable appear to have benefited less from the relief packages. Economically well-off citizens (those experiencing no lived poverty¹) (16%) are twice as likely as relatively poorer citizens (those experiencing low, moderate, or high lived poverty) (7%-9%) to report receiving assistance (Figure 11). Urban residents were twice as likely as rural dwellers to receive relief (12% vs. 6%). And only 1% of those aged over 55 say they received assistance.

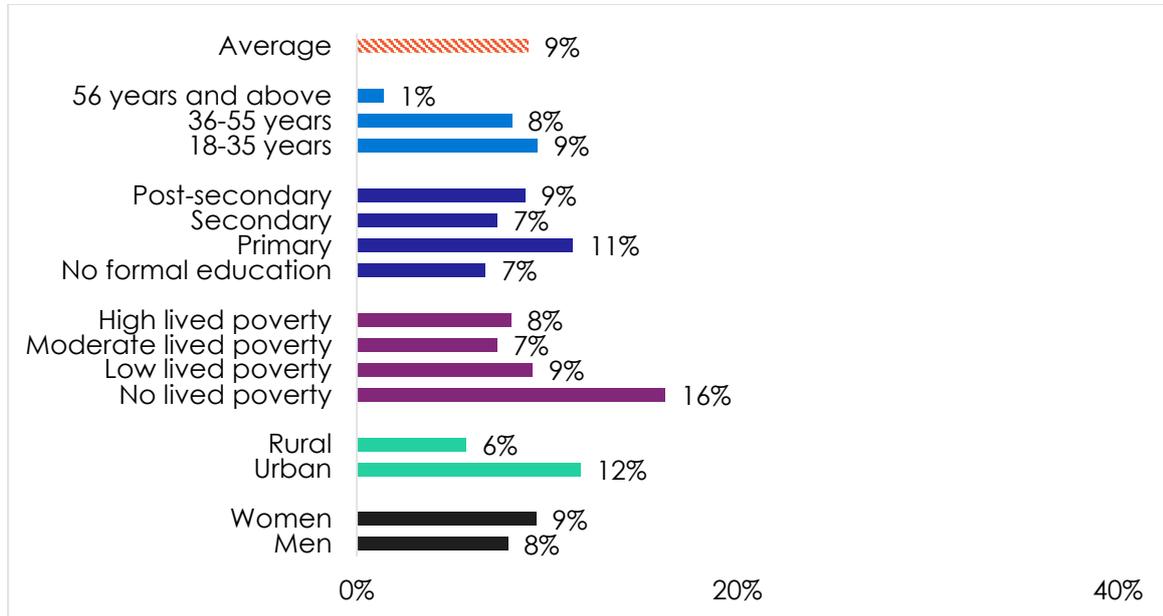
Figure 10: Received government assistance | Liberia | 2020



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?*

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).

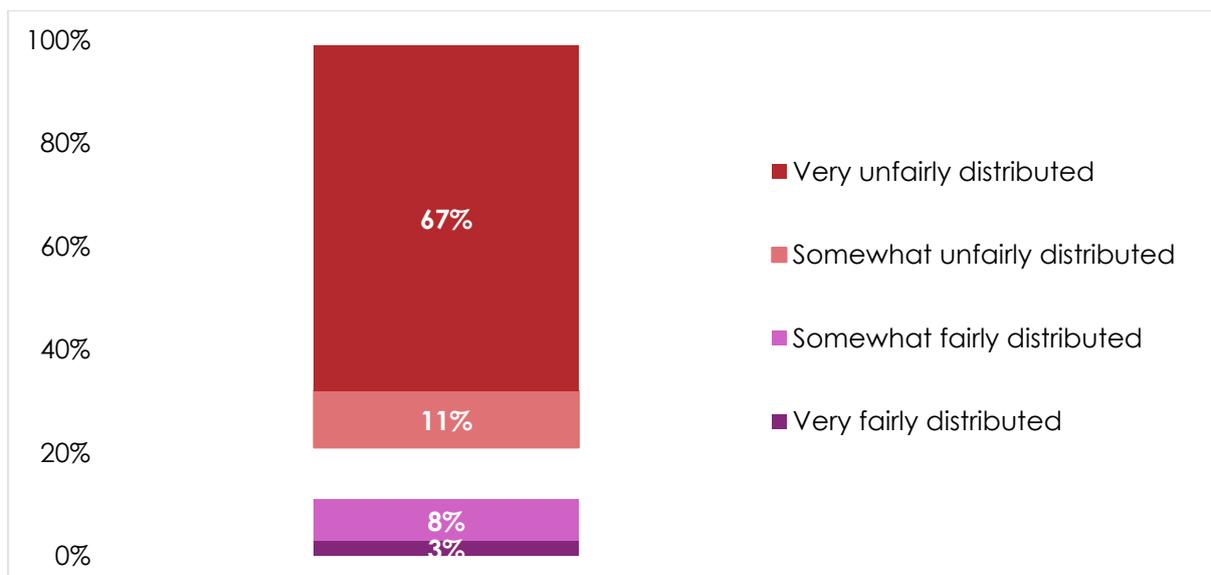
Figure 11: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2020



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”)

About eight in 10 citizens (78%) say the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic were not distributed fairly (Figure 12). This includes 67% who think the distribution of benefits was “very unfair.” Only one in 10 (11%) say the benefits were distributed fairly.

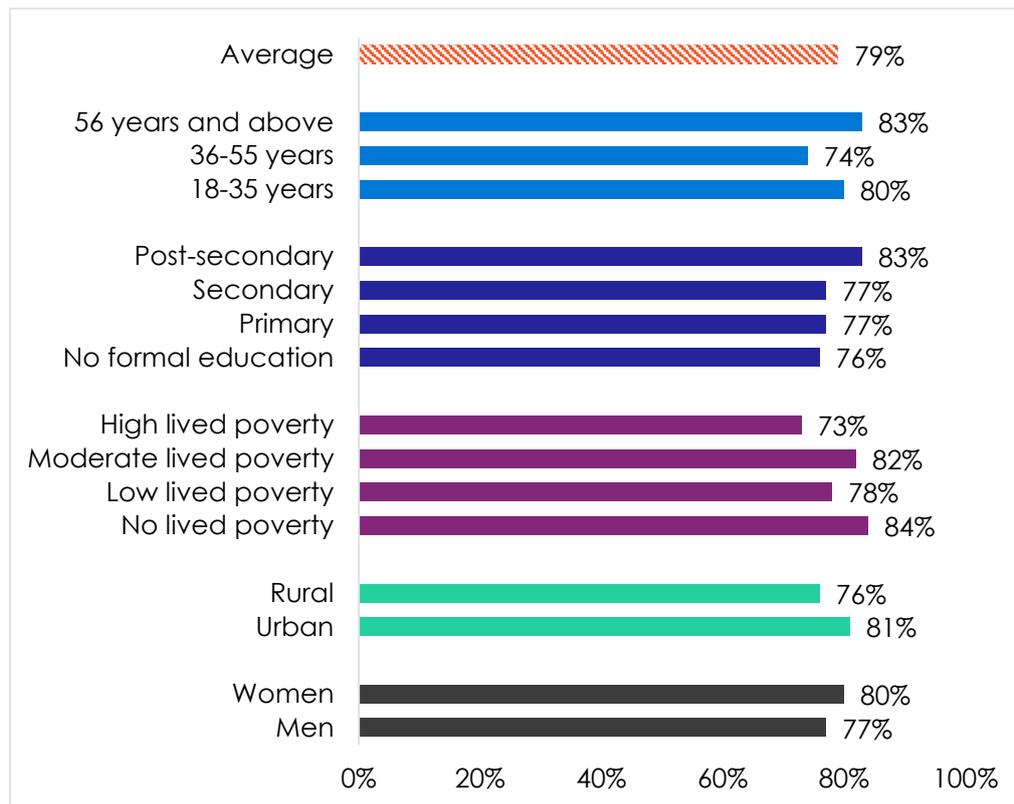
Figure 12: Fairness of government assistance | Liberia | 2020



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 favoring certain groups or regions?

The view that assistance was not distributed fairly is more common among highly educated citizens (83%) than among their less educated counterparts (76%-77%) (Figure 13). It is also slightly more common among urban residents (81%) and women (80%) than among rural residents (76%) and men (77%).

Figure 13: Perceived unfair distribution of assistance | by socio-demographic group
 | Liberia | 2020



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 favoring certain groups or regions? (% who say “somewhat unfairly” or “very unfairly”)

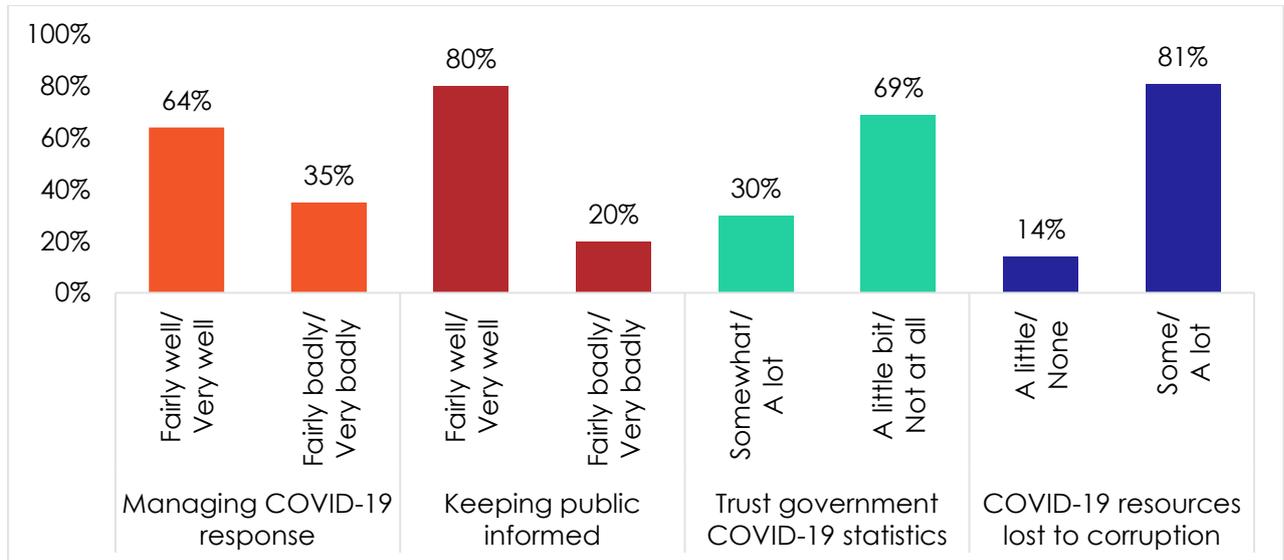
Public perceptions of the government's efforts in fighting COVID-19 are mixed. Overall, almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the response to the pandemic. And even more (80%) praise the government's performance in keeping the public informed (Figure 14).

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.

However, public trust in the government's official statistics on the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths is low. Only three in 10 (30%) say they trust these figures “a lot” or “somewhat,” while 69% say they trust the statistics just “a little bit” or “not at all.”

A large majority (81%) also think that “some” or “a lot” of the resources that were available for combatting the COVID-19 pandemic were lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials.

Figure 14: Assessment of government efforts during the pandemic | Liberia | 2020



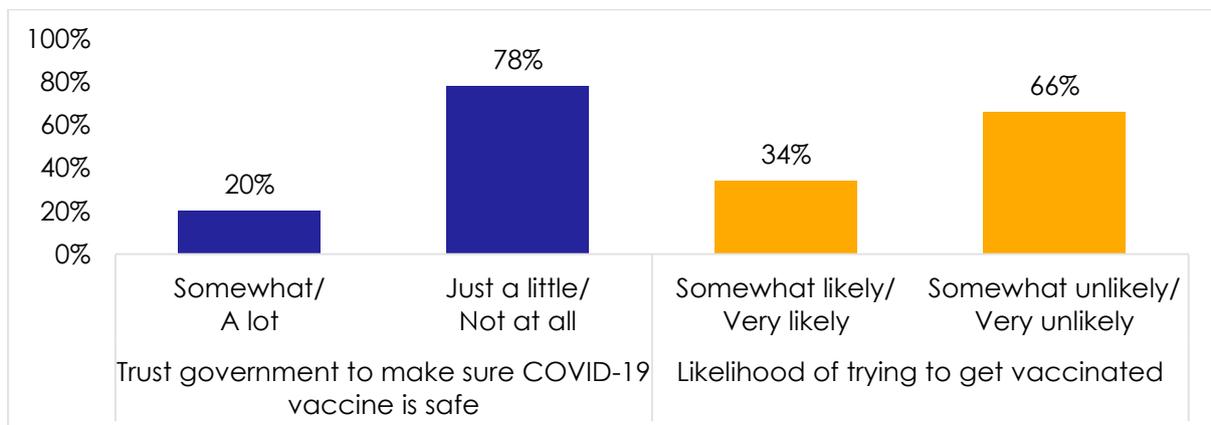
Respondents were asked:

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?

Vaccines

Only two in 10 Liberians (20%) 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 (Figure 15). And only one-third (34%) say they are likely to try to get vaccinated if a vaccine becomes available and the government says it is safe, while 66% say they are not likely to do so.

Figure 15: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | Liberia | 2020

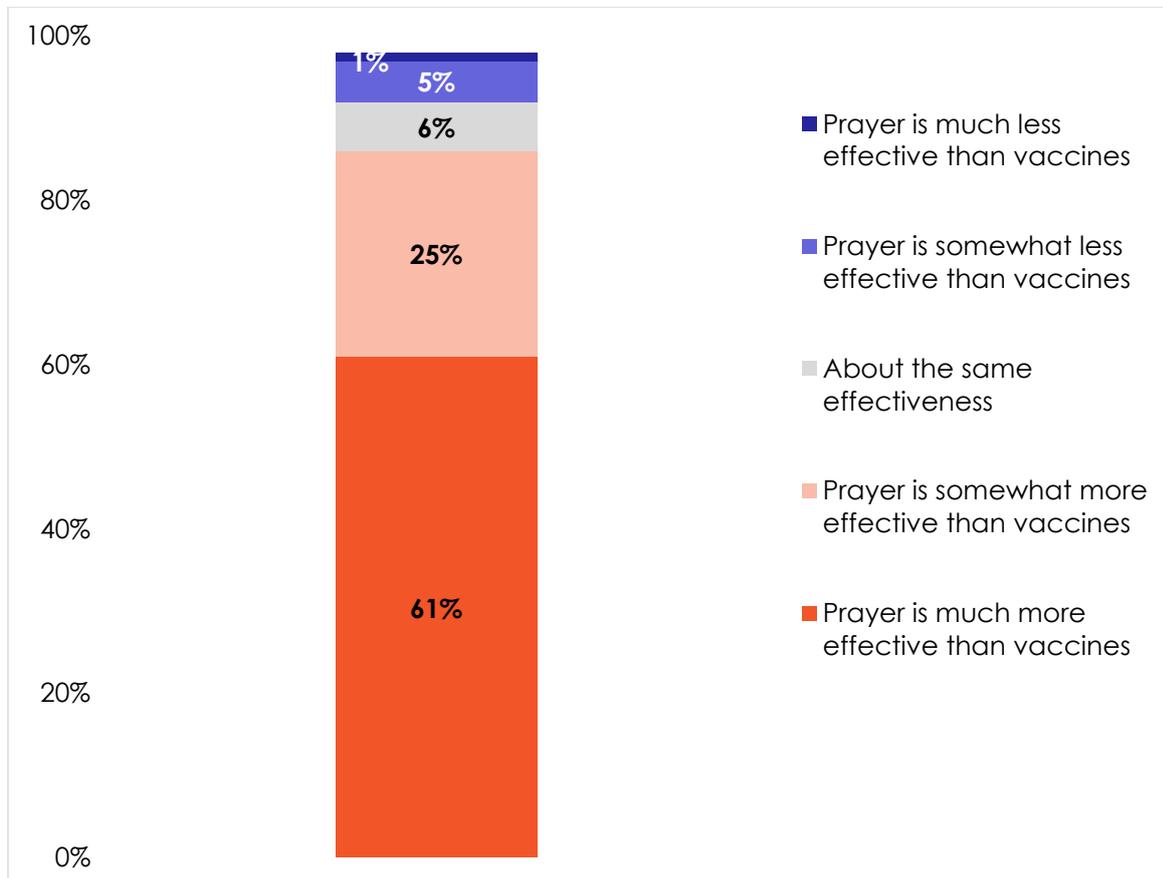


Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Liberian 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?

An overwhelming majority (86%) of Liberians say prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection, including 61% who believe that prayer is “much more effective” (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19?
 | Liberia | 2020

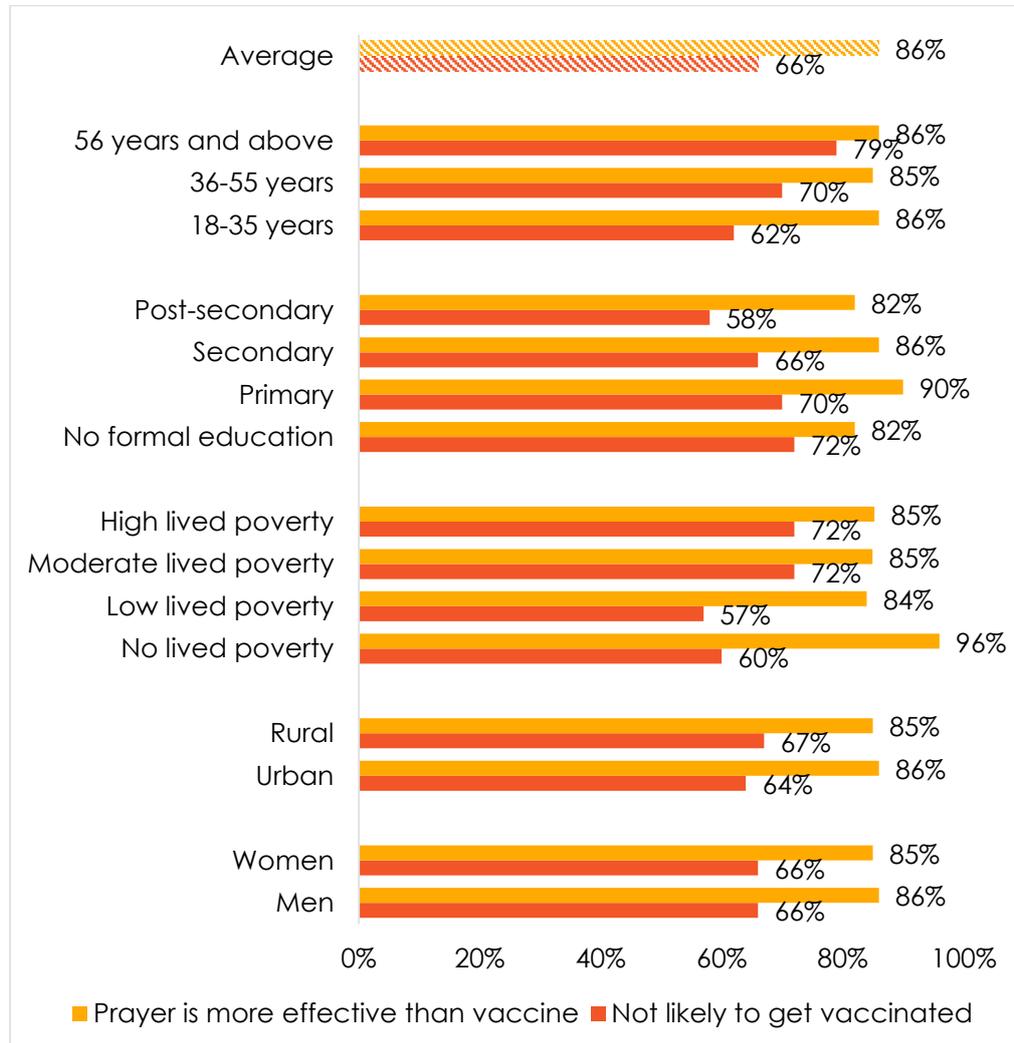


Respondents were asked: Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19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

Reluctance to get vaccinated increases with age (79% of those aged 56 years and above vs. 62% of those aged 18-35) and decreases with one's level of education (72% of citizens with no formal education vs. 58% of those with post-secondary education) (Figure 17). Citizens experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (72%) are also more unlikely to try to get vaccinated than the economically better off (57%-60%).

The view that prayer is more effective than a vaccine dominates across key demographic groups but is particularly high among citizens experiencing no lived poverty (96%).

Figure 17: Not likely to get vaccinated; believe prayer is more effective | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2020



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 unlikely" or "very unlikely")

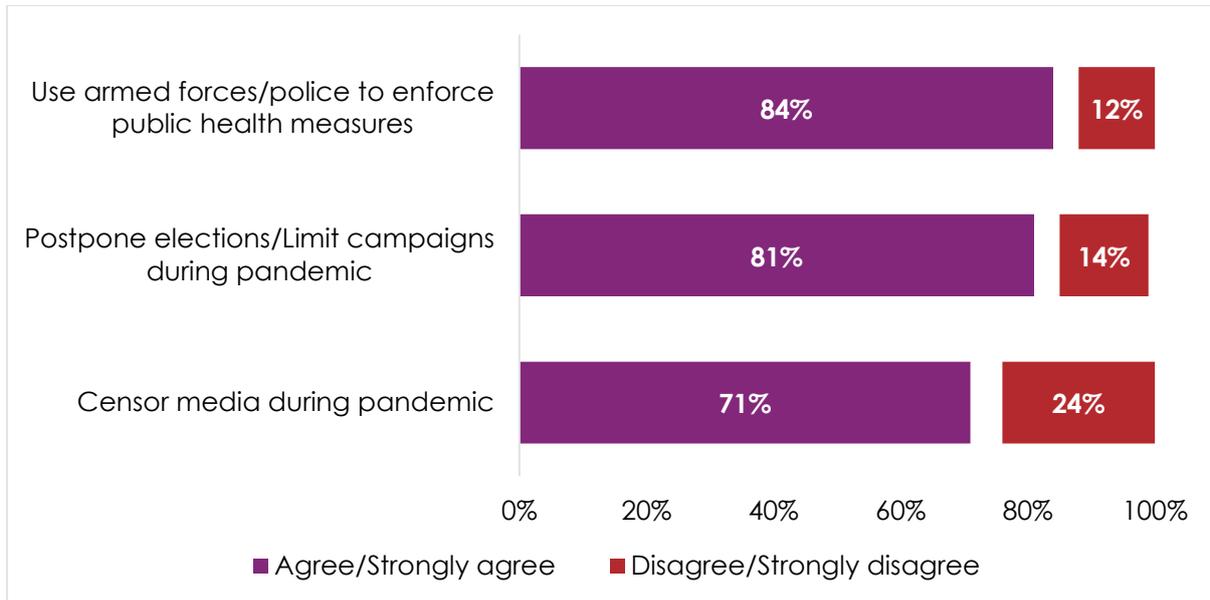
Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection? (% who say prayer is "somewhat more effective" or "much more effective")

Restricting freedoms and democracy?

In their bid to enforce compliance with lockdown restrictions, some security forces reportedly meted out inhumane treatment to citizens (Harmon, 2020). However, most citizens "agree" or "strongly agree" that in times of a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is justified for the government to use the police or armed forces to enforce public health measures (84%), as well as to postpone elections or limit political campaigning (81%) and censor media reporting (71%) (Figure 18).

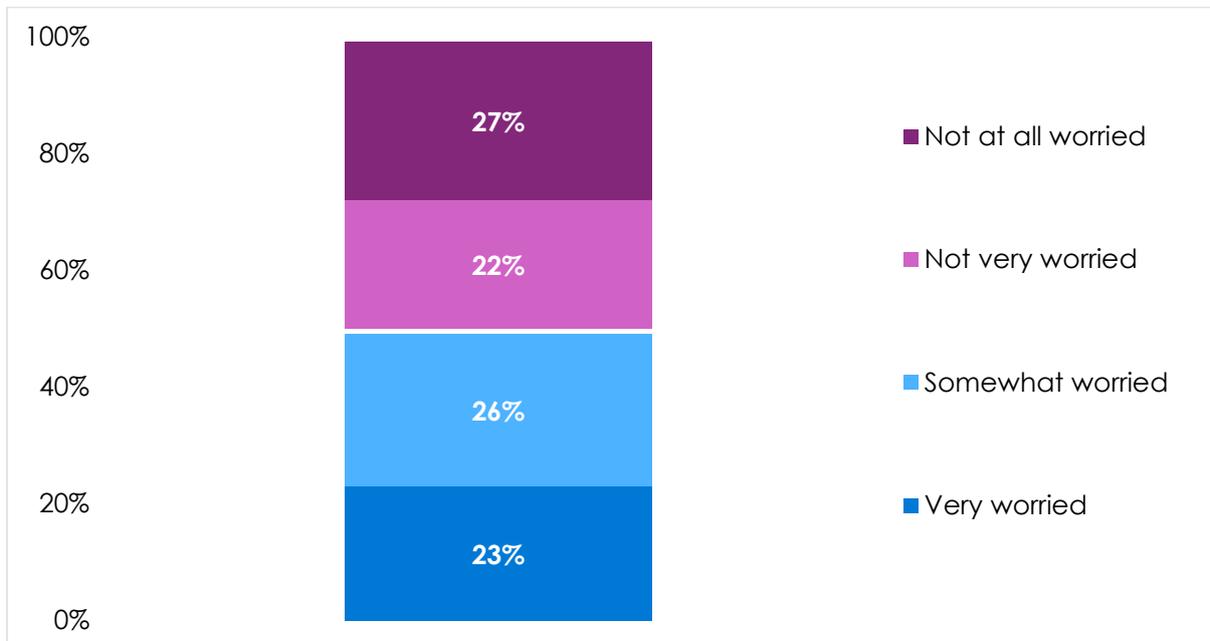
Liberians are divided as to whether the pandemic might provide cover for politicians' ulterior motives. While half (49%) say they are "somewhat" or "very" worried that politicians might use the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their wealth or power or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition, the same proportion (49%) are "not very worried" or "not at all worried" about that (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | Liberia | 2020



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?

Figure 19: Worried about politicians' intentions? | Liberia | 2020

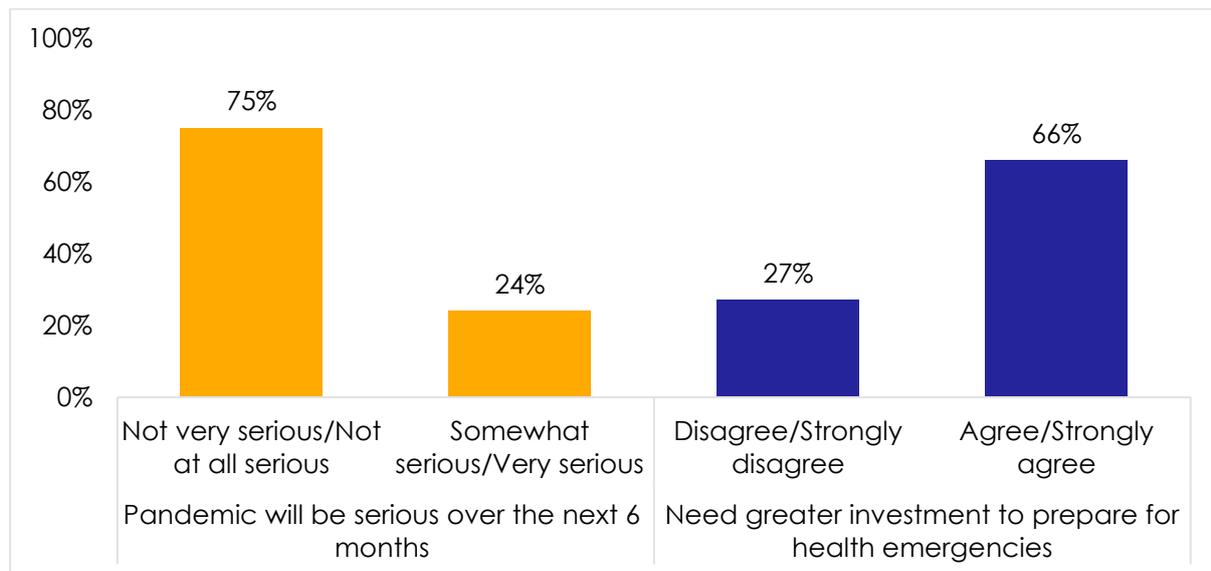


Respondents were asked: In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that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

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, only a quarter (24%) of citizens anticipate that the pandemic will be "somewhat serious" or "very serious" in Liberia in the next six months (Figure 20). Nonetheless, a majority would prioritize funding to prepare for health emergencies like COVID-19 over other health needs. Two-thirds (66%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that the government needs to invest more in such preparations, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services.

Figure 20: Future impacts of COVID-19 | Liberia | 2020



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for Liberia 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 a majority of Liberians approve of the government's performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including necessary lockdowns. But most believe that COVID-19 relief was not distributed fairly. Better-off citizens and urban residents were about twice as likely as the poor and rural residents to benefit from this assistance, and older citizens appear to have been largely overlooked. This suggests that appropriate data was not used to properly target or identify the vulnerable groups that the initiative was intended to assist.

The study also shows a less-than-encouraging attitude toward vaccines: Few Liberians trust their government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, and only one-third say they are likely to try to get vaccinated. Most say prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing the spread of COVID-19. If mass vaccination is to succeed, the government, civil society, and media will have to sensitize the public to increase confidence in vaccines and enhance uptake when they become available.

References

- Front Page Africa. (2020). Former Center for Disease Control boss hails Liberia for COVID-19 prevention. 4 January.
- Goitom, H. (2020). Liberia government measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. 5 May.
- Harmon, W. Q. (2020). Liberia: State security brutality mars early days of lockdown. Daily Observer. 15 April.
- Karmo, H. (2020). Liberia: Sen. Varney Sherman expresses disappointment in stimulus package distribution, Minister Tareh admits delinquency. Front Page Africa. 7 October.
- Koinyeneh, G. (2020). Liberia: Legislature adopts resolution postponing midterm senatorial elections, referendum to December 2020. Front Page Africa. 24 June.
- Mattes, R. (2020). Lived poverty on the rise: Decade of living-standard gains ends in Africa. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 62.
- Ministry of Health. (2021). Coronavirus (COVID-19) situational reports.
- Parley, W. W. (2020). Liberia: Weah offloads stimulus package for lockdown. New Dawn. 15 April.
- Reuters. (2020). Liberia coronavirus lockdown off to chaotic start. 12 April.
- Rouse, L. (2020). Liberia braces for coronavirus with defunct health system. Aljazeera. 3 April.
- World Bank. (2020). Amid COVID-19 pandemic, Liberia has a chance for a robust recovery, says New World Bank report. 30 July.

Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny is Afrobarometer regional communications coordinator for anglophone West Africa, based at the Ghana Center for Democratic Development. Email: jappiah@afrobarometer.org.

Oscar Bloh is the executive director of the Center for Democratic Governance in Liberia. Email: varpubloh@gmail.com.

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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, the European Union Delegation to the African Union, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Bruno van Dyk (bruno.v.dyk@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 420 | 20 January 2021