

Corruption, mistrust, and praise? Assessing governments' management of the COVID-19 pandemic in West Africa

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 439 | Aminatou Seydou

Summary

African governments have won praise for their rapid action to limit the spread of COVID-19, which may have helped the continent avoid, so far, the massive death tolls experienced elsewhere. (Bearak & Paquette, 2020; Smith, 2020). Many also provided some assistance to help businesses and vulnerable families weather the pandemic (Zane, 2020).

But lockdowns and other restrictions, often implemented within days of the first recorded COVID-19 cases (Goitom, 2020), and sometimes harshly enforced by the police and army, have also drawn criticism and, in some countries, large-scale protests (Carothers & Press, 2020; Africa News, 2020a; Ben Ahmed, 2020).

Moreover, democracy watchdogs charge that some African leaders – perhaps most blatantly in Uganda – have used the pandemic as an excuse to restrict democratic rights, limit political competition, and consolidate their power (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Freedom House, 2020; Gargard, 2020; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020; Africa News, 2020b).

How do ordinary Africans, who have borne the brunt of both the pandemic and measures to contain it, see their governments' performance?

New Afrobarometer surveys in five West African countries (Benin, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo) show that people found it difficult to comply with lockdowns and thought school closures dragged on too long, but they generally supported both measures as necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19. Government assistance eased lockdown-related difficulties for only a minority of citizens; Senegal is the only surveyed country where a majority received such support.

Majorities in all five countries reported that assistance was distributed unfairly, and that a substantial share of resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to corruption. In addition, majorities don't trust their governments to provide reliable statistics on COVID-19 cases and deaths, or to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe.

Despite these negative assessments, majorities in all countries gave their governments positive marks for their management of the COVID-19 response – a seeming contradiction that may reflect low public expectations of government or a sense that COVID-19 was an unusually difficult challenge.

When it comes to whether people will accept trade-offs between preserving political rights and measures to protect public health during a pandemic, majorities in most countries endorsed the use of police and other security forces to enforce public health measures, but views were more mixed on postponing or limiting election campaigns and censoring the media.

Except in Niger, majorities said their government should invest more in preparing for health emergencies like COVID-19, 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 Africans' experiences and evaluations democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys were completed in 18 countries between August 2019 and March 2020 before fieldwork was suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Round 8 surveys started up again in October 2020 with a new question module on COVID-19.

This dispatch is based on data collected during the period October 2020-January 2021 in five West African countries: Benin, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. In each country, Afrobarometer conducted face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens that yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- On average across five West African countries, most citizens who experienced COVID-19-related lockdowns or curfews said they were difficult to comply with (75%) but necessary to limit the spread of the disease (66%).
- Six in 10 citizens (61%) agreed that closing the schools was necessary, but more than three-fourths (78%) believe they should have reopened sooner.
- Seven in 10 Senegalese (71%) said they received some form of government aid to help them through the pandemic, but fewer than one in 10 Liberians (9%) and Beninese (4%) benefited from such assistance.
 - In Senegal, poor, older, rural, and less educated citizens were more likely to receive government assistance. But the pattern was different in the other countries.
- Majorities across the five countries held critical views of their government's role in managing the pandemic, saying that:
 - The distribution of government assistance was unfair (71% on average).
 - Resources intended for the COVID-19 response were lost to government corruption (67%).
 - They don't trust official numbers on COVID-19 cases and deaths (62%).
 - They don't trust the government to make sure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe (68%).
 - They are worried that politicians are using or will use the pandemic to increase their power (58%).
- Despite these negative views, majorities in all five countries – 67% on average – said their governments were doing a “fairly” or “very” good job of managing the response to COVID-19.
- Except in Niger, majorities endorsed the use of police and other security forces during an emergency to enforce compliance with public health measures.

- Views were more mixed on postponing or limiting election campaigns and censoring the media, with most Liberians saying they are justified during public health emergencies and most Senegalese and Nigeriens disagreeing.
- Looking ahead, most West Africans did not expect COVID-19 to be a serious problem in their country during the next six months. But except in Niger, majorities said their government should invest more in preparing for health emergencies like COVID-19.

Impact of the pandemic

The five West African countries of Benin, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo have all recorded significant numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths (see Table 1), as well as painful restrictions on economic activities and school closures. With 39,024 cases and 1,063 deaths as of 6 April, Senegal has been hit hardest.

Table 1: COVID-19 in 5 West African countries

Country (population, 2019)	COVID-19 cases*	COVID-19 deaths*	Highlights of government response announced in 2020
Benin (11.8m)	7,313	93	Emergency declaration; sanitary cordon isolating the most affected cities. Closure of all schools (six weeks), religious and recreational spaces; travel restrictions. \$148 million economic stimulus, including cash transfers.
Liberia (4.9m)	2,061	85	Emergency declaration; nationwide lockdown/curfew. Closure of all schools (15 weeks), government offices, religious and recreational spaces; travel restrictions. \$25 million economic stimulus, including food aid, support for small traders and household utility bills.
Niger (23.3m)	5,041	188	Emergency declaration; lockdown/curfew in Niamey. Closure of all schools (10 weeks), government offices, religious and recreational spaces; travel restrictions. \$121 million economic stimulus, including cash transfers and food aid.
Senegal (16.3m)	39,024	1,063	Emergency declaration; nationwide lockdown/curfew. Closure of all schools (14 weeks), government offices, religious and recreational spaces; travel restrictions. \$801 million economic stimulus, including cash transfers and food aid.
Togo (8.1m)	11,187	112	Emergency declaration; nationwide lockdown/curfew. Closure of all schools (13 weeks), government offices, religious and recreational spaces; travel restrictions. \$131 million economic stimulus, including cash transfers.

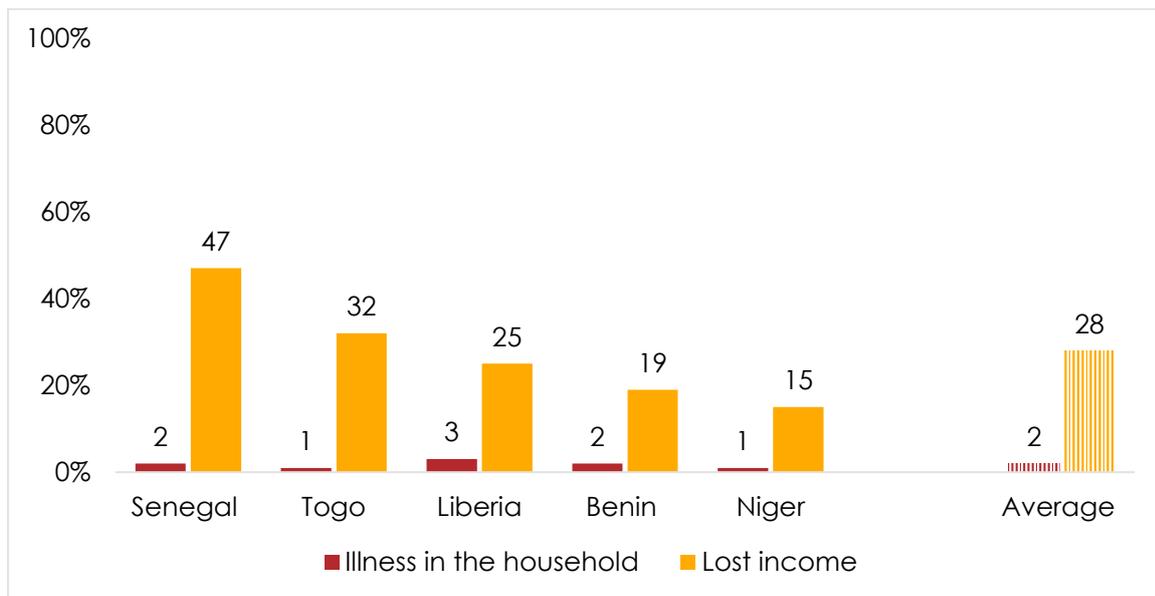
*As of 6 April 2021

Sources: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard (World Health Organization, 2021); Milken Institute, 2020; Karmo, 2020; Parley, 2020; Primature Niger, 2020; BBC, 2020; Ledy, 2020

In all five countries, Afrobarometer surveys found that most citizens (92% on average) said they were “somewhat well informed” or “very well informed” about the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to combat it.

While two in 100 citizens said a member of their household became ill with COVID-19, more than one in four (28%) reported that a household member lost a job, a business, or other primary source of income due to the pandemic. The economic impact of the pandemic was particularly strong in Senegal, where almost half (47%) of citizens reported a loss of income – about three times as many as in Niger (15%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Impact of COVID-19 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



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?

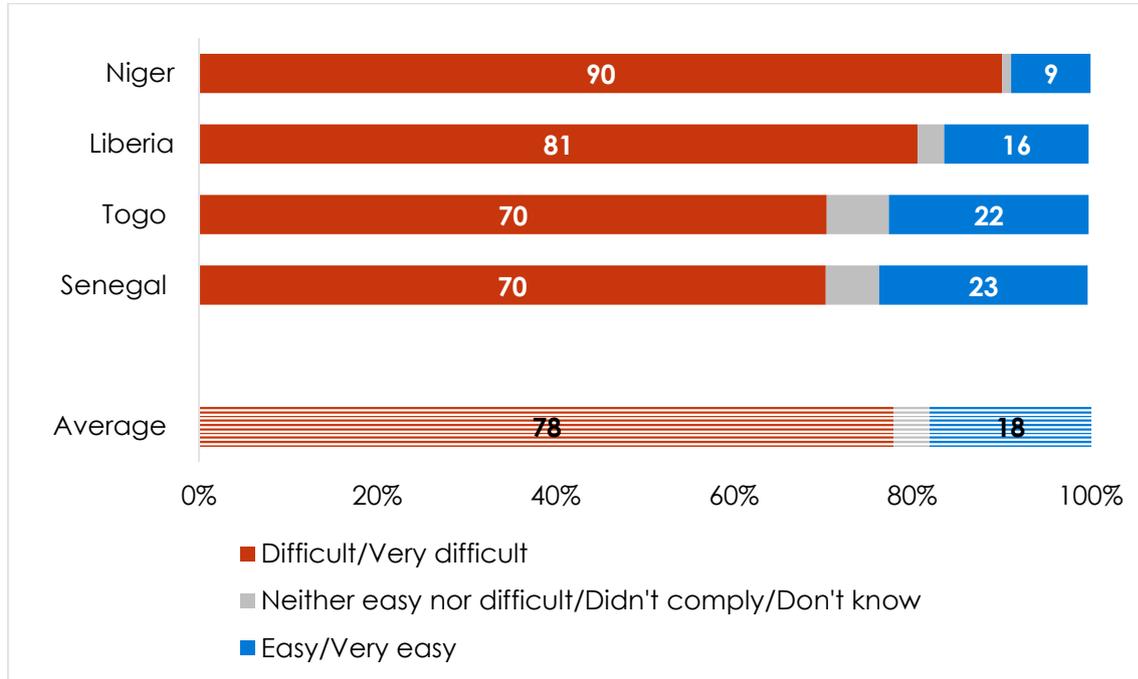
Lockdowns and school closures

As shown in Table 1, lockdowns or curfews were part of the pandemic response in Liberia, Niger, Senegal, and Togo, while Benin focused a sanitary cordon on isolating the most affected cities. While compliance appeared to be the norm, non-compliant citizens and protesters clashed with police in Liberia, Niger, and Senegal (Reuters, 2020; Ben Ahmed, 2020; Africa News, 2020a). All five countries implemented a variety of other measures extending beyond lockdown periods, such as more limited restrictions on public movement and gatherings and mask mandates.

In the four countries that experienced a lockdowns or curfews, large majorities said compliance with the restrictions was “difficult” or “very difficult.” On average almost eight in 10 people (78%) agreed with that assessment, including nine in 10 Nigeriens (90%) (Figure 2). In Togo, 3% of respondents said they did not comply with the lockdown, a response given by fewer than 0.5% in the other countries.

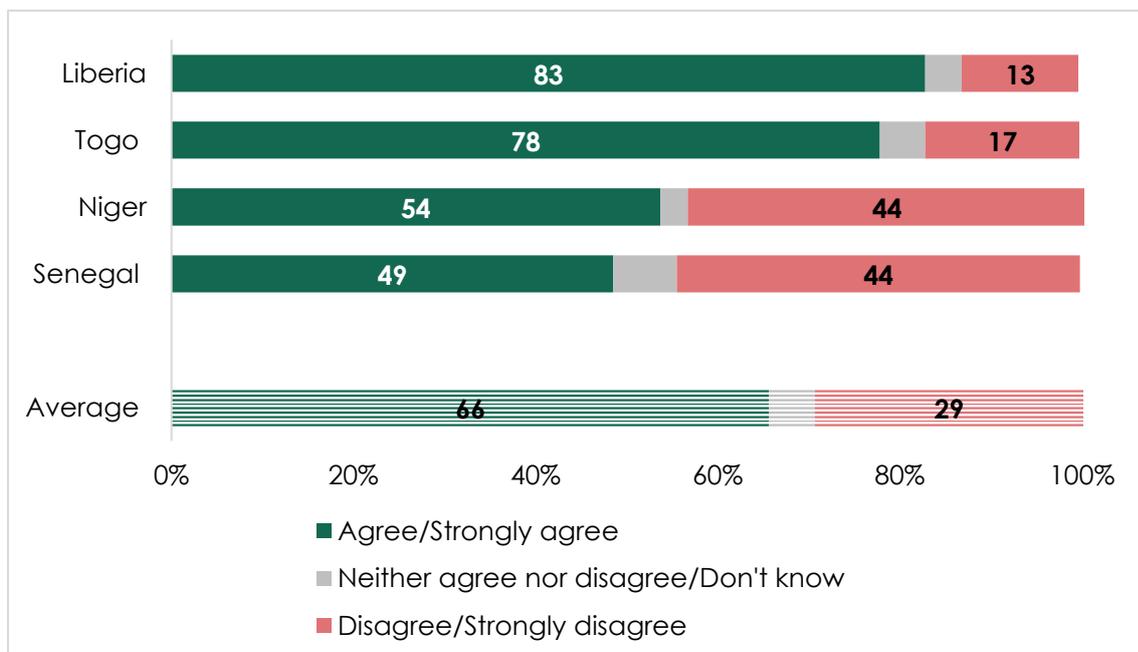
Nonetheless, two-thirds (66%) of respondents said that despite their negative impact on people’s livelihoods, the lockdown was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19. Support for the restrictions was overwhelming in Liberia (83%) and Togo (78%), but views were more mixed in Niger (54% support vs. 44% opposition) and Senegal (49% vs. 44%) (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Difficulty of complying with COVID-19 lockdowns | 4 West African countries* | 2020/2021



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? *This question was not asked in Benin, where no full lockdown was implemented in 2020.

Figure 3: Lockdown was necessary to limit COVID-19 spread | 4 West African countries* | 2020/2021

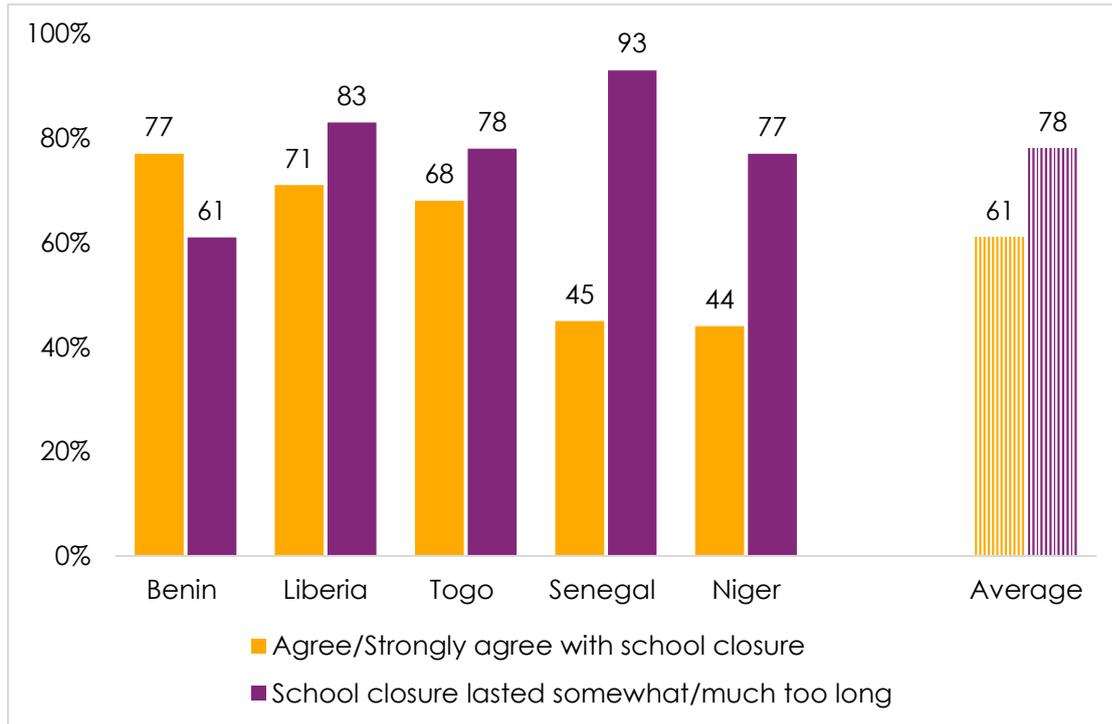


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people's livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19? *This question was not asked in Benin, where no full lockdown was implemented in 2020.

Views were similar regarding nationwide school closures, which occurred in all five countries, receiving strong approval in Liberia (71%) and Togo (68%), as well as Benin (77%), and weaker support in Senegal (45%, vs. 50% opposed) and Niger (44%, vs. 53% opposed) (Figure 4).

But majorities in all countries said the schools remained closed “somewhat too long” or “much too long.” This sentiment tended to be strongest in countries where nationwide school closures lasted longest: 83% in Liberia (where all schools were closed for about 15 weeks) and 93% in Senegal (14 weeks), compared to 61% in Benin (about six weeks).

Figure 4: Views on school closures | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



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?

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

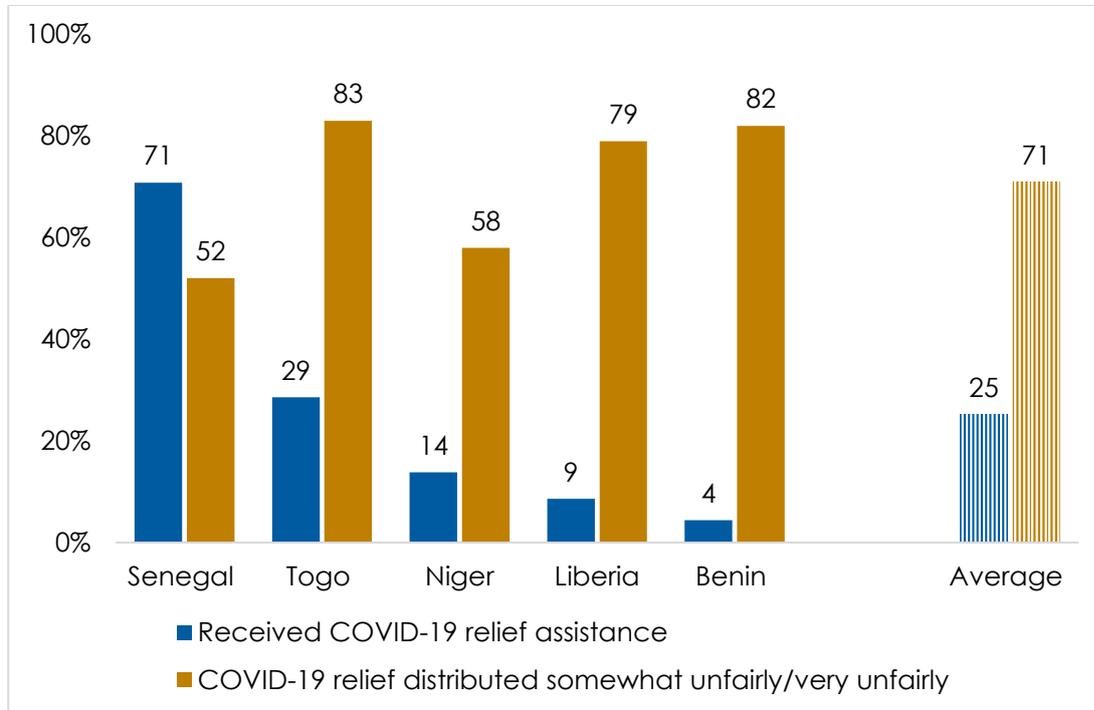
Government assistance

All five countries announced plans to provide significant support to households and businesses affected by the pandemic (see Table 1). But Senegal is the only country where a majority (71%) of citizens reported receiving such assistance, while the same was true of just 29% of Togolese, 14% of Nigeriens, 9% of Liberians, and 4% of Beninese (Figure 5).

And even in Senegal, a majority (52%) said that the distribution of government assistance was “somewhat” or “very” unfair, a complaint voiced by larger majorities in Niger (58%), Liberia (79%), Benin (82%), and Togo (83%).

In all five countries, perceptions of unfair distribution were considerably more common among respondents who had not received government assistance, ranging up to a 2-to-1 gap in Senegal (82% among those who had not received aid vs. 40% among those who had). But even among beneficiaries, a majority (56 percent on average) saw the distribution as unfair.

Figure 5: Received government assistance and perceived unfairness of COVID-19 relief | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked:

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

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?

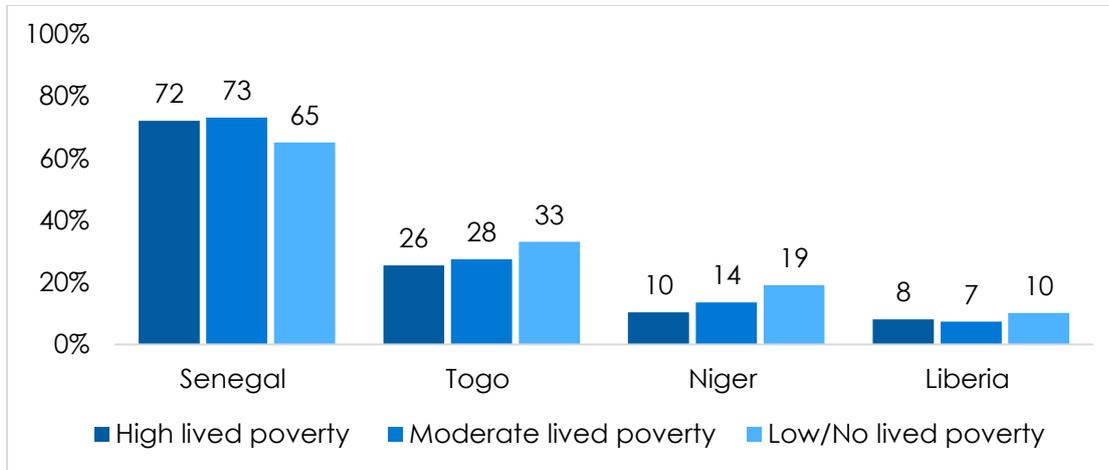
Whether by design or accident, countries varied widely in terms of who received government assistance.¹ Senegal stands out for focusing more on helping poor, older, and rural citizens, as well as those with less than a post-secondary education.

Men and women differed little in their responses, which makes sense since the question concerned households rather than individuals. But in Senegal, poor citizens² were somewhat more likely than their better-off counterparts to report having gotten aid. In contrast, Niger and Togo show the opposite pattern; in the latter, respondents with low or no lived poverty were twice as likely to have received assistance than the poorest households (19% vs. 10%) (Figure 6).

¹ Note that relatively small sub-samples of respondents who received government assistance yield results with large margins of errors, so findings should be interpreted with caution. We do not report disaggregated findings for Benin because the number of respondents who received assistance (n=53) is too small to provide meaningful results.

² 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 6: Received government assistance | by level of lived poverty | 4 West African countries* | 2020/2021

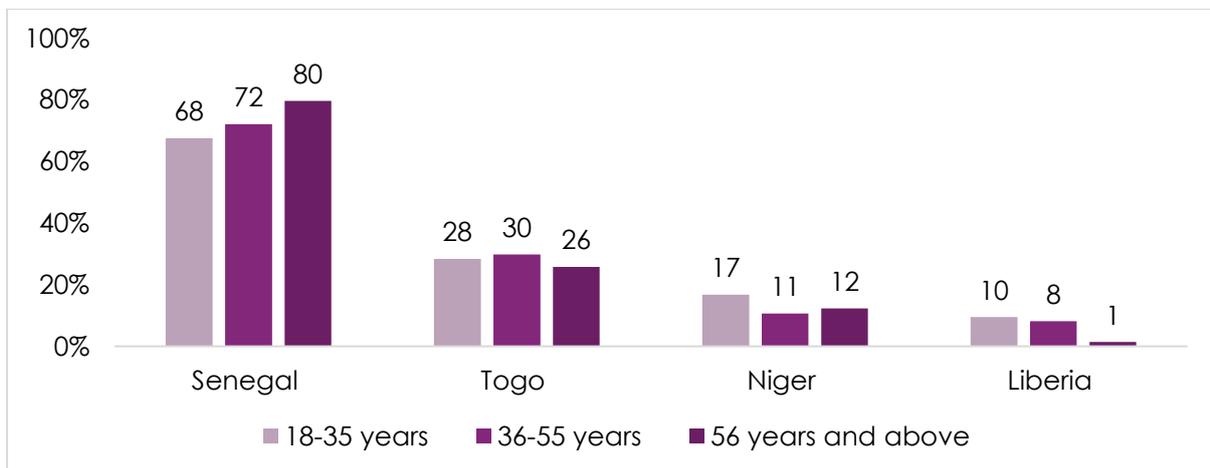


Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% "yes")

* Results for Benin are not shown in figures 6-9 because the sub-sample of respondents who received assistance (n=53) was too small to provide meaningful results.

Older citizens were most likely to report receiving assistance in Senegal (80% of those aged 56 years and above, compared to 68% of 18- to 35-year-olds). But in the other three countries, elders were least likely to have gotten help, including just 1% in Liberia (Figure 7).

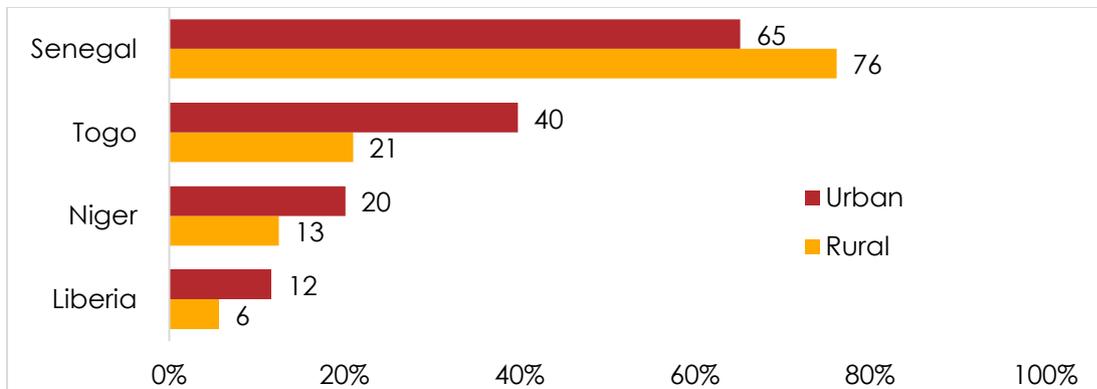
Figure 7: Received government assistance | by age | 4 West African countries | 2020/2021



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")

Senegal again stands alone in providing assistance to a greater share of residents in rural areas (76%) than in cities (65%). The other countries were more likely to help urban residents, including a 2-to-1 advantage in Togo (40% urban vs. 21% rural) (Figure 8).

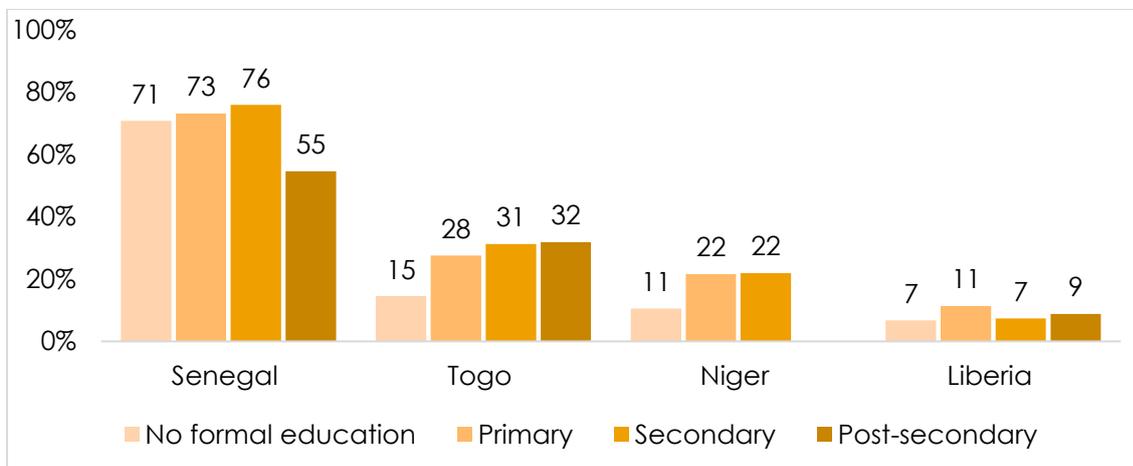
Figure 8: Received government assistance | urban vs. rural | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



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”)

In Senegal, the best-educated citizens were less likely to report receiving assistance (55% of those with post-secondary qualifications vs. 71%-76% of those with less education). The pattern is reversed in Togo and Niger, where those with at least secondary schooling were twice as likely to have gotten aid as those with no formal schooling (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Received government assistance | by education level | 4 West African countries | 2020/2021



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”)

Note: For Niger, “secondary” and “post-secondary” categories are combined into “secondary” due to small sample sizes.

Assessing government performance

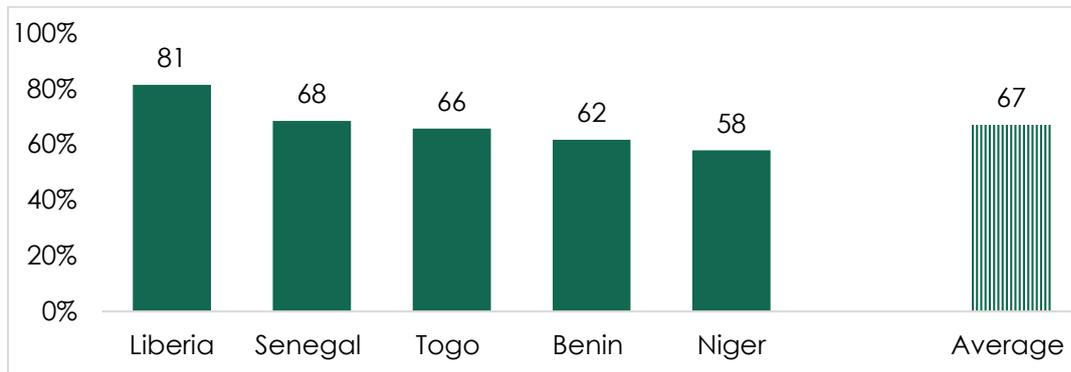
In addition to complaints that government assistance was not distributed fairly, large majorities – 67% on average – believed that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost to corruption among government officials. Concern about corruption was highest in Liberia (81%) but was the majority view in all surveyed countries (Figure 10).

Moreover, most citizens said they mistrust their government regarding COVID-19 statistics (62%) and the safety of COVID-19 vaccines (68%) (Figure 11). A majority in every country, ranging from 54% of Beninese to 69% of Liberians, expressed “just a little” or no trust in official numbers on COVID-19 infections and deaths.

Similar proportions, ranging up to 83% of Senegalese, indicated little or no trust that their government will ensure that any COVID-19 vaccine is safe before it is offered to citizens.

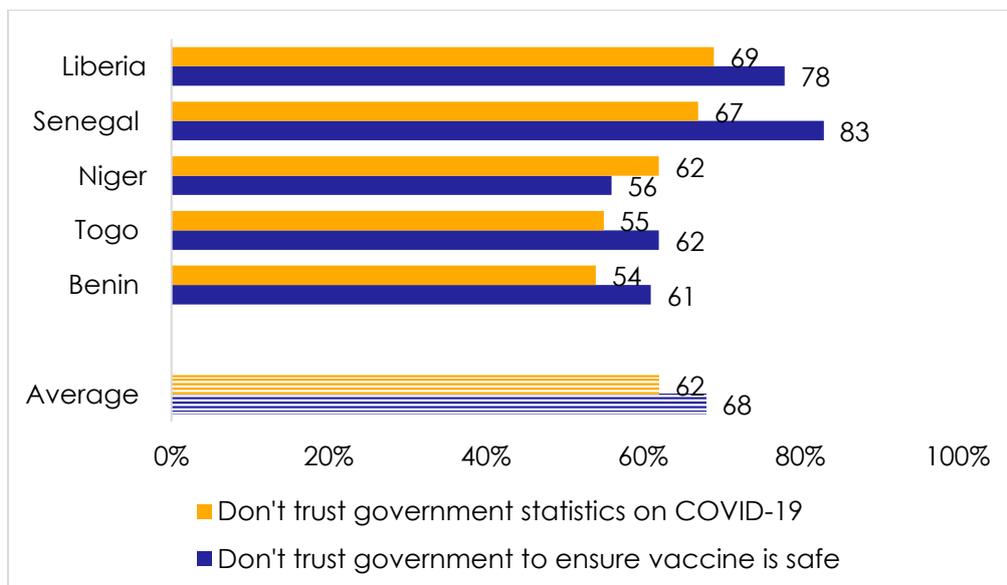
Little surprise, then, that as reported previously, six in 10 respondents (60%) across these five countries said they are unlikely to try to get vaccinated (Seydou, 2021).

Figure 10: COVID-19 resources lost to corruption | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: 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? (% who said “some” or “a lot”)

Figure 11: Mistrust government on COVID-19 statistics, vaccine safety | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021

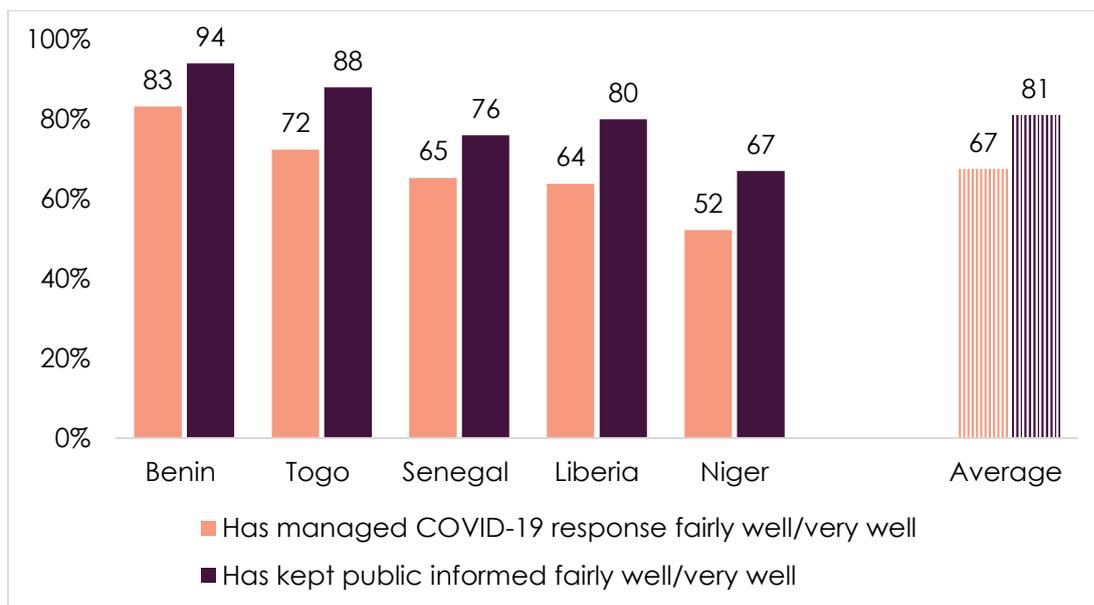


Respondents were asked:
 How much do you trust the official statistics provided by the government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered citizens is safe before it is used in this country?
 (% who said “not at all” or “just a little”)

Despite these negative assessments, two-thirds (67%) of citizens across these five countries said their governments have done “fairly well” or “very well” in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beninese (83%) were most appreciative of their government's efforts, while views were considerably more mixed in Niger (52% favourable vs. 42% unfavourable) (Figure 12).

Respondents were especially positive regarding how well their governments have kept the public informed about the pandemic: On average, 81% said they've done a good job.

Figure 12: Managing the COVID-19 response and keeping the public informed
 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



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?

Pandemic as cover for restricting freedoms?

Democracy watchdogs have complained that some governments have been using the pandemic as an opportunity to scale back political rights or restrict political competition (Africa News, 2020b). What measures do ordinary Africans consider justified during a public health emergency like COVID-19?

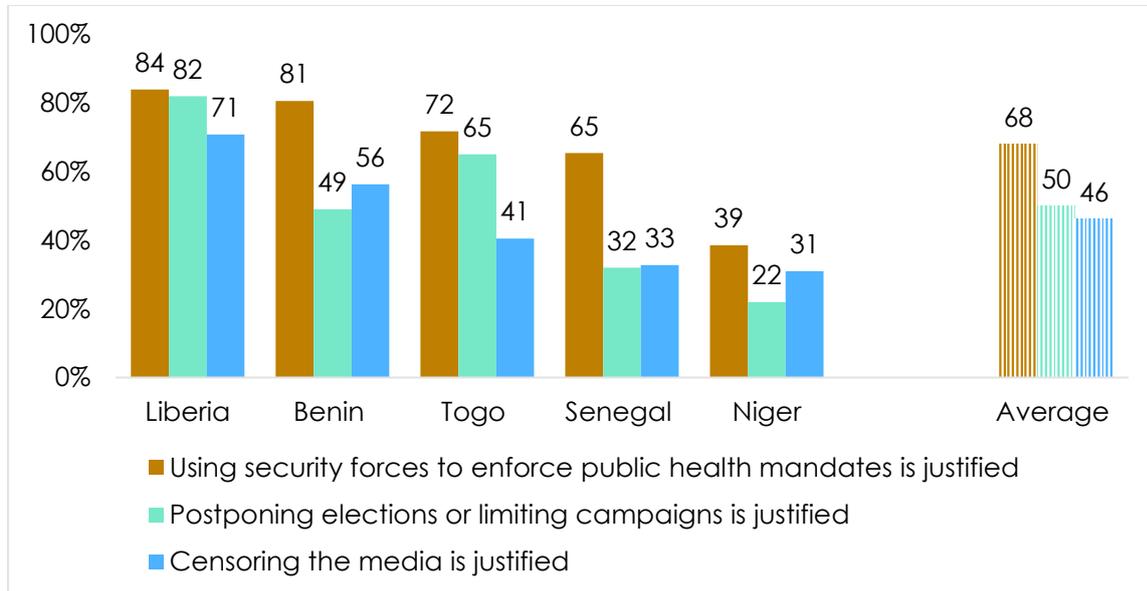
Strong majorities in four countries “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that governments are justified in using the police and other security forces to enforce compliance with public health mandates, ranging from 65% in Senegal to 84% in Liberia. The exception was Niger, where only 39% of citizens agreed (vs. 56% who disagreed) (Figure 13).

Views were more mixed on whether postponing elections and limiting political campaigns is justified during an emergency. While substantial majorities in Liberia (82%) and Togo (65%) endorsed such steps, only minorities agreed in Benin (49%), Senegal (32%), and Niger (22%).

Support was even weaker for media censorship, though it still won majority endorsements in Liberia (71%) and Benin (56%).

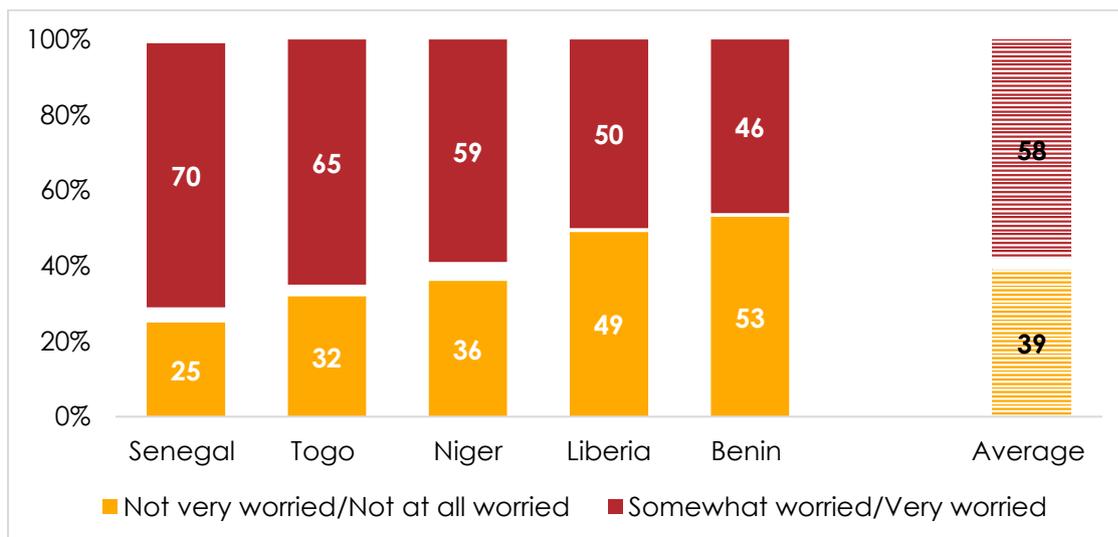
But many West Africans said they are worried that politicians are using or will use the pandemic to increase their power (Figure 14). Large majorities expressed this concern in Senegal (70%), Togo (65%), and Niger (59%), and about half of Liberians (50%) and Beninese (46%) agreed.

Figure 13: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



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:
 Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings?
 Censoring media reporting?
 Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 14: Worried about politicians' intentions? | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021

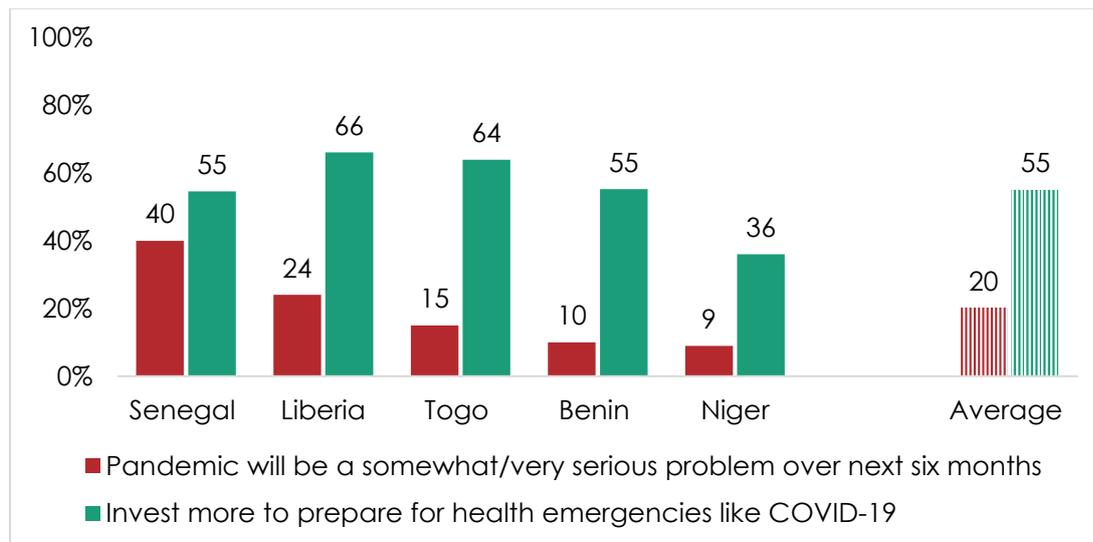


Respondents were asked: In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that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

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, as of late 2020/early 2021, only minorities expected COVID-19 to be a serious problem in their country during the next six months (Figure 15). But majorities (55% on average) wanted their government to invest more in preparing for health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources available for other health services, in every country except Niger.

Figure 15: Future impacts of COVID-19 | 5 West African countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for your country 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? (% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed")

Conclusion

New Afrobarometer survey findings from five West African countries show that a majority of citizens approve of their government's overall performance in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the imposition of lockdowns and school closings.

At the same time, majorities say that pandemic relief was distributed unfairly, that resources intended for the pandemic response were lost to government corruption, that they don't trust their government to provide accurate statistics on COVID-19 or to ensure that vaccines are safe, and that they are worried that politicians are using the pandemic to increase their own power.

These almost-contradictory assessments raise the question of how high – or low – citizens' expectations of their government should be during a crisis as complex as the COVID-19 pandemic. In any case, these citizens' voices offer governments both encouragement and a challenge to do better.

They also provide pointers on several specific aspects of a pandemic response. In four countries, a majority of citizens endorse the use of the police and army to enforce public health measures during an emergency, though we have no data on where they draw the line between reasonable and unreasonable methods of enforcement. In contrast, citizens

express significant reservations about limiting election-related activities and censoring the media as part of a pandemic response. And they indicate substantial support for spending more to prepare for the next public health crisis.

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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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