Africans see growing corruption, poor government response, but fear retaliation if they speak out

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 421 | Christiaan Keulder

Summary

Developing countries lose $1.26 trillion a year to corruption, theft, and tax evasion, according to analysts' estimates – a sum large enough to lift 1.4 billion people above the poverty line for six years (Fleming, 2019). Unless we control corruption, development experts say, achieving the other Sustainable Development Goals will be all but impossible (United Nations, 2019; Rubio & Andvig, 2019).

Yet corruption scandals make almost daily headlines, in Africa as elsewhere. South Africa continues to wrestle with the fallout of state capture during Jacob Zuma's presidency (Alberts, 2020; Arun, 2020). Namibians are gearing up for one of their most prominent court cases ever, involving two ministers accused and imprisoned in the #Fishrot corruption scandal (Zenda, 2020; Iceland Review, 2020). Allegations of corruption involving COVID-19 pandemic relief pour in from Zimbabwe (Guardian, 2020), Somalia (Daysane, 2020), Kenya (Malalo, 2020), Nigeria (Financial Times, 2020), and other countries.

And ordinary Africans say things are getting worse rather than better. In Afrobarometer surveys in 18 African countries, a majority of citizens say corruption increased in their country during the previous year. Police are the worst offenders in citizens' eyes, but even many health-care providers demand bribes.

Most citizens say their government is doing too little to fight corruption. And in a bad sign for activists working to engage citizens on this issue, most Africans say they risk retaliation should they report cases of corruption to the authorities.

Afrobarometer survey

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 and are expected to cover a total of at least 35 countries.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 18-country analysis is based on 26,777 interviews (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative

samples. When reporting multi-country averages, each country is weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

Extent of corruption

- On average across 18 countries, six in 10 Africans (59%) say that corruption increased in their country during the previous year, including 41% who say it "increased a lot." One in five (21%) believe it decreased at least "somewhat," while 16% say it stayed at the same level (Figure 1).

  - o Perceptions of increased corruption levels are most widespread in Gabon (82%), Lesotho (79%), and Mali (74%), as well as in Namibia (74%) – even though survey fieldwork in Namibia was completed *before* the #Fishrot corruption scheme was exposed in November 2019 (Figure 2). Angola is the only surveyed country where more people see a decrease (44%) than an increase (33%) in corruption.

  - o The situation has worsened significantly over the past six years in seven of the 16 countries surveyed in both 2014/2015 and 2019/2020 (Figure 3). Perceptions of increasing corruption have risen most dramatically in Mali (from 31% to 74%, or +43 percentage points), Gabon (+30 points), Côte d'Ivoire (+25 points), and Guinea (+25 points). In contrast, in three countries the number who report that corruption is increasing has dropped by large margins: Sierra Leone (-30 percentage points), Ghana (-23 points), and Nigeria (-20 points).

Who is corrupt

- Among key public institutions, the police are most widely seen as corrupt; on average, almost half (48%) of Africans say "most" or "all" police officials are involved in corruption, in addition to 36% who see "some of them" as corrupt (see also Sanny & Logan, 2020). More than one-third of citizens see corruption in most/all members of Parliament (38%), civil servants (37%), judges and magistrates (35%), tax officials (35%), and Presidency officials (35%). Local government councillors fare only slightly better (33%) (Figure 4).

  - o In nine of the 18 countries, half or more of the adult population believe that "most" or "all" police officials are corrupt (Figure 5). This proportion exceeds two-thirds in Gabon (69%), Uganda (68%), and Kenya (68%) – more than three times the levels recorded in Cabo Verde and Tunisia (both 22%). But even in these countries with relatively low levels of perceived police corruption, police perform more poorly than most other public institutions.

  - o Perceptions of institutional corruption have increased modestly over the past decade (Figure 6). On average across 11 countries consistently interviewed between 2008/2009 and 2019/2020, the proportion of citizens who see "most" or "all" officials as corrupt increased by 11 percentage points for the Presidency, by 9 points for MPs, and by 7 points for judges/magistrates while remaining steady for the police, civil servants, and local government councillors.

  - o While perceived corruption varies greatly across countries and institutions, three countries – Guinea, Gabon, and Mali – appear consistently among the five worst

performers for all seven institutions (Figure 7), suggesting that in these countries corruption can be seen as endemic. In some other countries, perceptions of official corruption are notably high for some but not all institutions; this is the case in Uganda (civil servants, police, judges, tax officials), Kenya (MPs, local government councillors, police), and Lesotho (Presidency, MPs, civil servants).

o Cabo Verde consistently ranks at the least corrupt end of the scale across all institutions, often joined by Botswana and Tunisia (for six and five institutions, respectively) (Figure 8).

Experience of bribery

- Bribery is not an uncommon experience in most African countries (Figure 9). On average across 18 countries, fully one-third of citizens who dealt with the police during the previous year say they had to pay a bribe (35% of those who sought police assistance, 33% of those who encountered the police in other situations, such as a traffic stop or investigation).

  o The same is true for one in four citizens (25%) who tried to obtain a government document, and one in five who went for medical care (20%) or requested assistance at a public school (19%).

  o Self-reported bribe-paying varies widely across countries (Figure 10). Among citizens who sought a government identity document, for example, half (50%) of Kenyans and more than four in 10 Sierra Leoneans (43%) say they had to pay a bribe. In contrast, fewer than one in 20 Cabo Verdeans (3%) and Batswana (4%) report having to bribe someone to obtain such a document.

  o Looking at the share of the whole population who had to pay a bribe to obtain any of these public services, Cabo Verde again stands out (4%), followed by Namibia (7%) and Botswana (9%). But in Uganda (53%), Guinea (47%), Sierra Leone (46%), and Kenya (45%), around half the population was exposed to bribery in exchange for public services during the previous 12 months (Figure 11).

Fight against corruption

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Africans say their government is doing a "fairly bad" or "very bad" job of fighting official corruption. Only three in 10 (30%) approve of their government's performance (Figure 12).

  o Botswana is the only surveyed country where a majority (56%) of citizens approve of their government's anti-corruption efforts, and Sierra Leone is the only other country where positive appraisals outnumber negative (Figure 13).

  o In 12 of the 18 countries, fewer than one in three citizens give their government passing marks on corruption, including fewer than one in five Gabonese (15%), Cabo Verdeans (17%), Guineans (18%), Tunisians (19%), and Basotho (19%). Considering that Cabo Verdeans report lower levels of corruption in key institutions than any other surveyed country, one might be surprised at how critical they are of their government's anti-corruption efforts, suggesting that the level of perceived corruption in a country can be a poor predictor of the level of popular satisfaction with the government's performance on the issue.

- On average across 11 countries surveyed in both 2008/2009 and 2019/2020, positive assessments of the government's handling of corruption declined by 11 percentage points, including huge drops in Malawi (-35 points) and Namibia (-26 points) (Figure 14). Burkina Faso (+8 points) and Kenya (+6 points) are the only countries that show increases in popular approval of the government's performance. Nigeria and Ghana recorded spikes in approval in 2017 (perhaps reflecting optimism under relatively new presidents promising to fight corruption) but dropped back below 2008 levels by the following survey round.

Fear of retaliation

- Almost three-fourths (72%) of Africans say that ordinary citizens risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they report corruption to the authorities. Only one in four (24%) believe they can speak up without fear (Figure 15).
  - Even in Angola, the country with the lowest perceived risk of retaliation, a majority (55%) fear negative consequences if they report corruption. In Gabon, fear of retaliation is nearly universal (91%) (Figure 16).
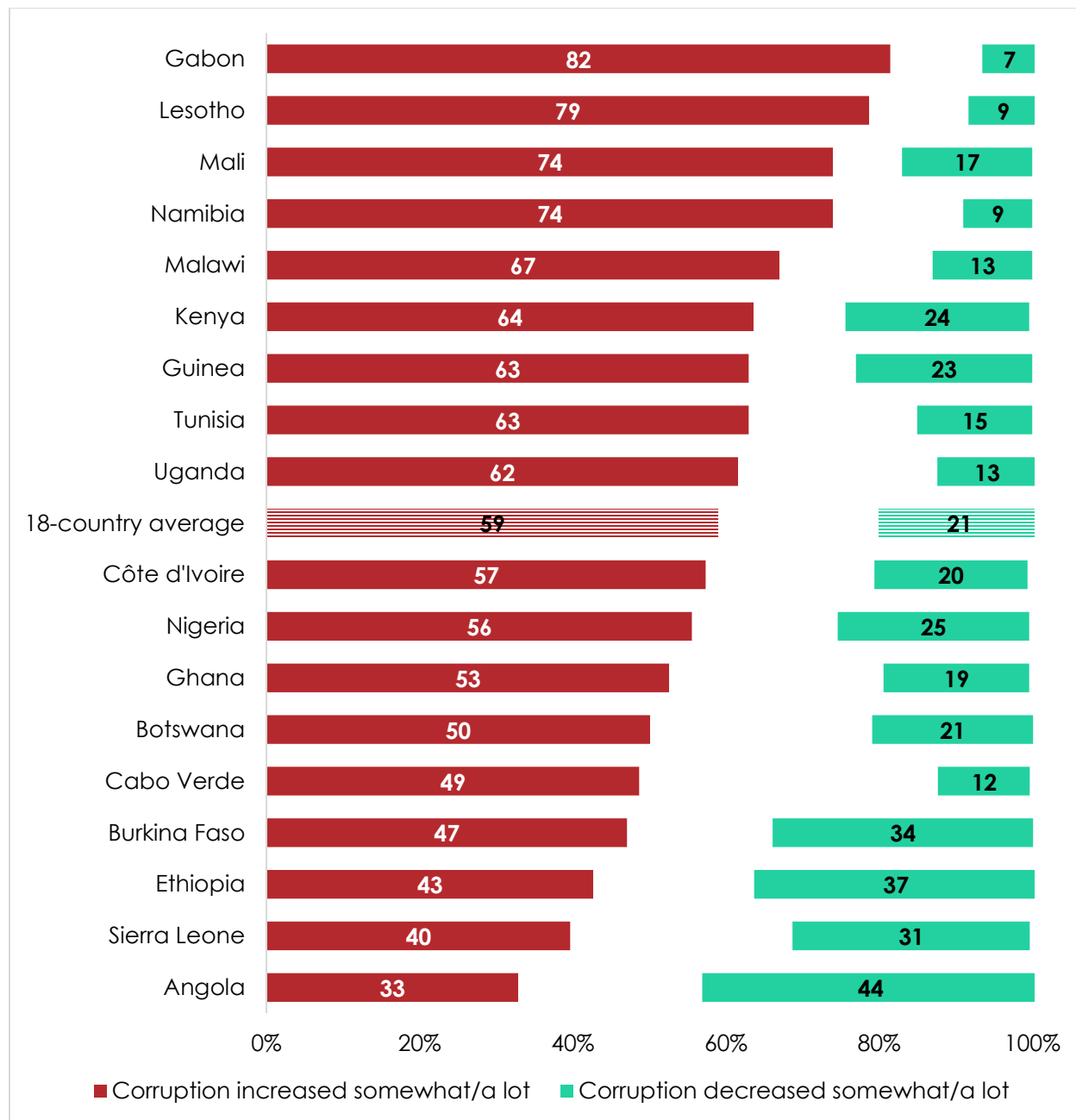
Charts

Extent of corruption

Figure 1: Corruption increased/decreased in previous 12 months | 18 countries | 2019/2020
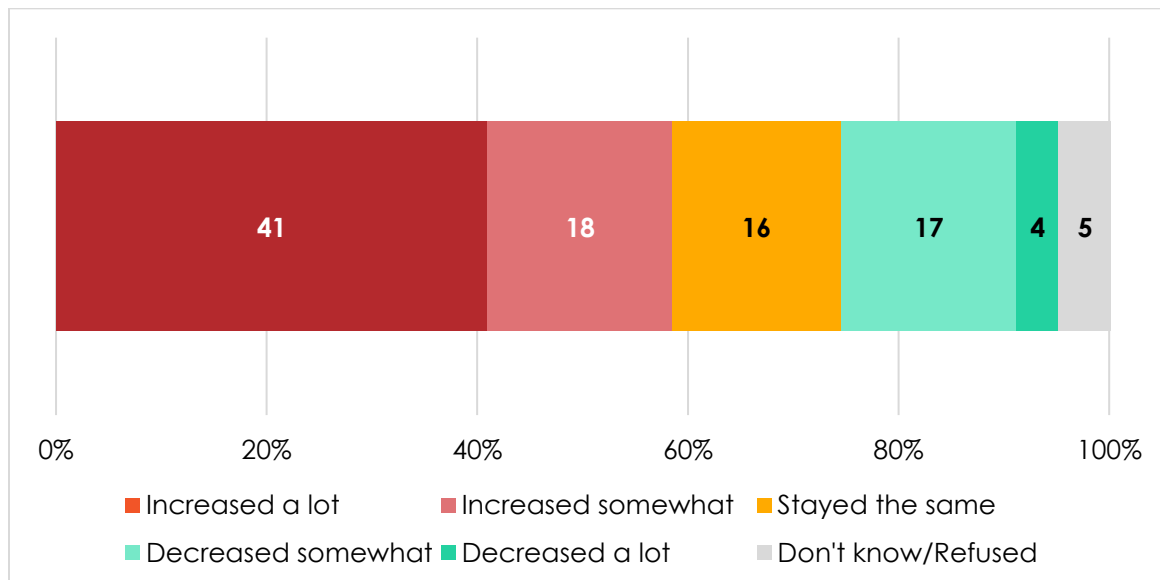
■ Increased a lot ■ Increased somewhat ■ Stayed the same
■ Decreased somewhat ■ Decreased a lot ■ Don't know/Refused

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Figure 2: Corruption increased/decreased in previous 12 months | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Country	Corruption increased somewhat/a lot	Corruption decreased somewhat/a lot
Gabon	82	7
Lesotho	79	9
Mali	74	17
Namibia	74	9
Malawi	67	13
Kenya	64	24
Guinea	63	23
Tunisia	63	15
Uganda	62	13
18-country average	59	21
Côte d'Ivoire	57	20
Nigeria	56	25
Ghana	53	19
Botswana	50	21
Cabo Verde	49	12
Burkina Faso	47	34
Ethiopia	43	37
Sierra Leone	40	31
Angola	33	44

■ Corruption increased somewhat/a lot ■ Corruption decreased somewhat/a lot

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?*

Figure 3: Perception that corruption is increasing | 16 countries* | 2014-2020
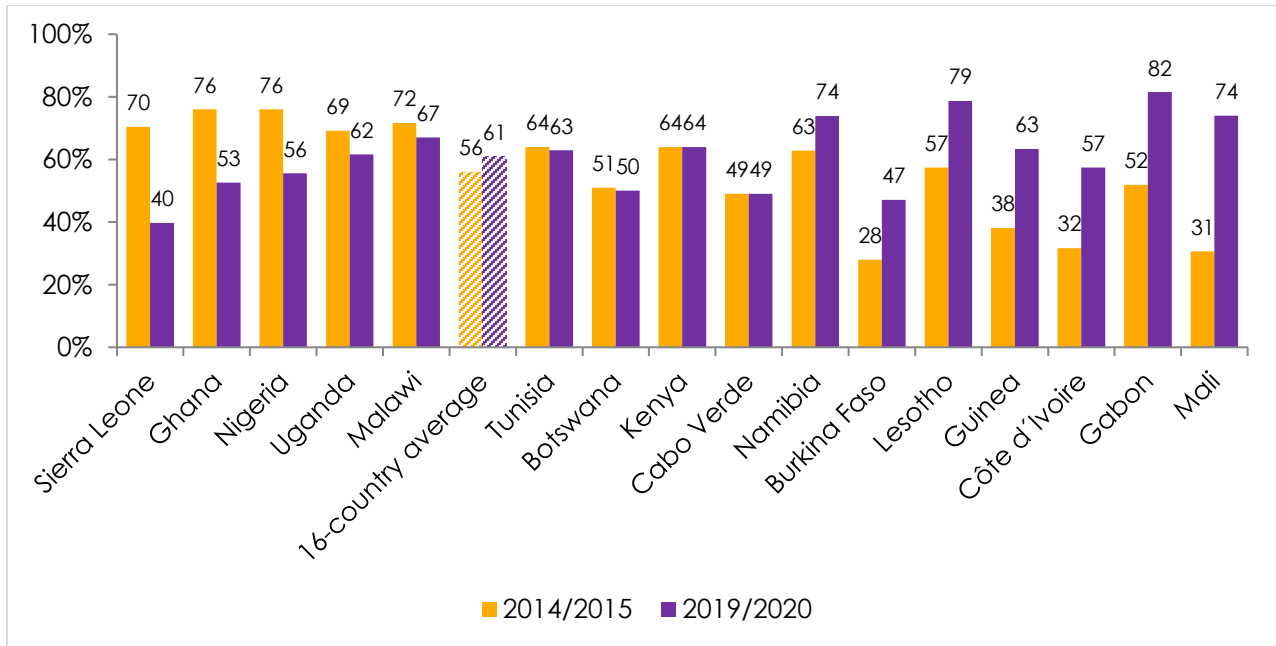
*Figure shows the change (in percentage points) between survey rounds in 2014/2015 and 2019/2020 in the proportion of respondents who say corruption increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the previous year. Positive numbers indicate increases in corruption. *Angola and Ethiopia were not surveyed in 2014/2015.*
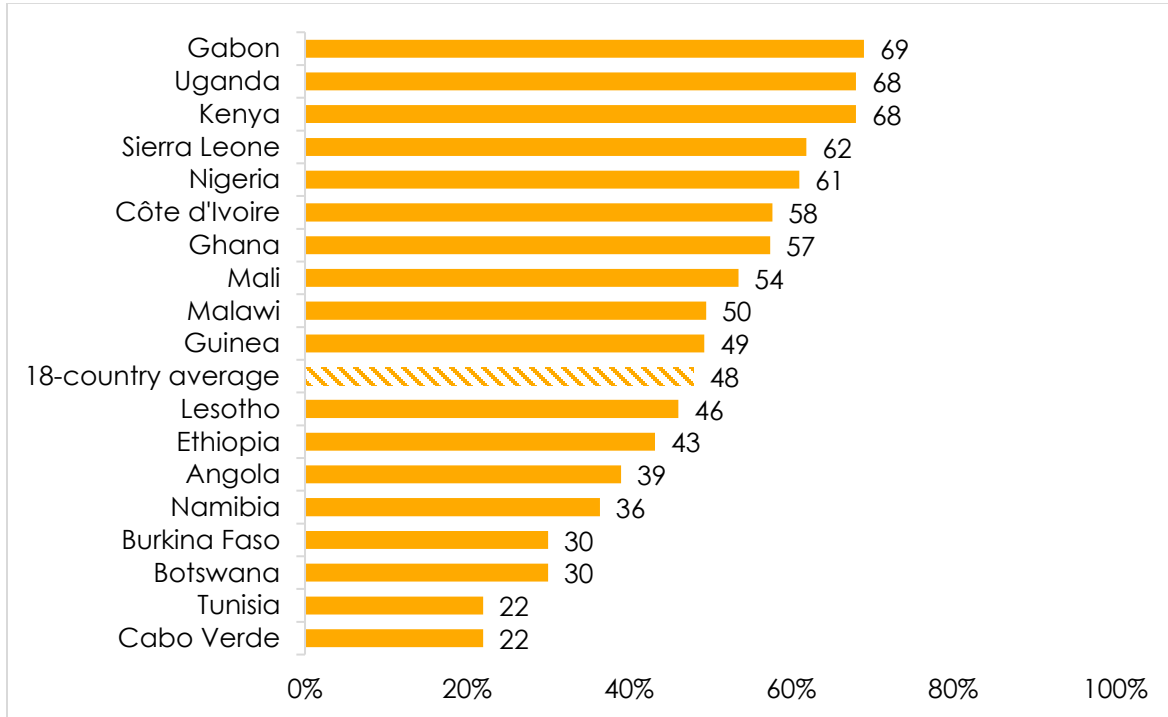
Who is corrupt

Figure 4: Corruption in key public institutions | 18 countries* | 2019/2020
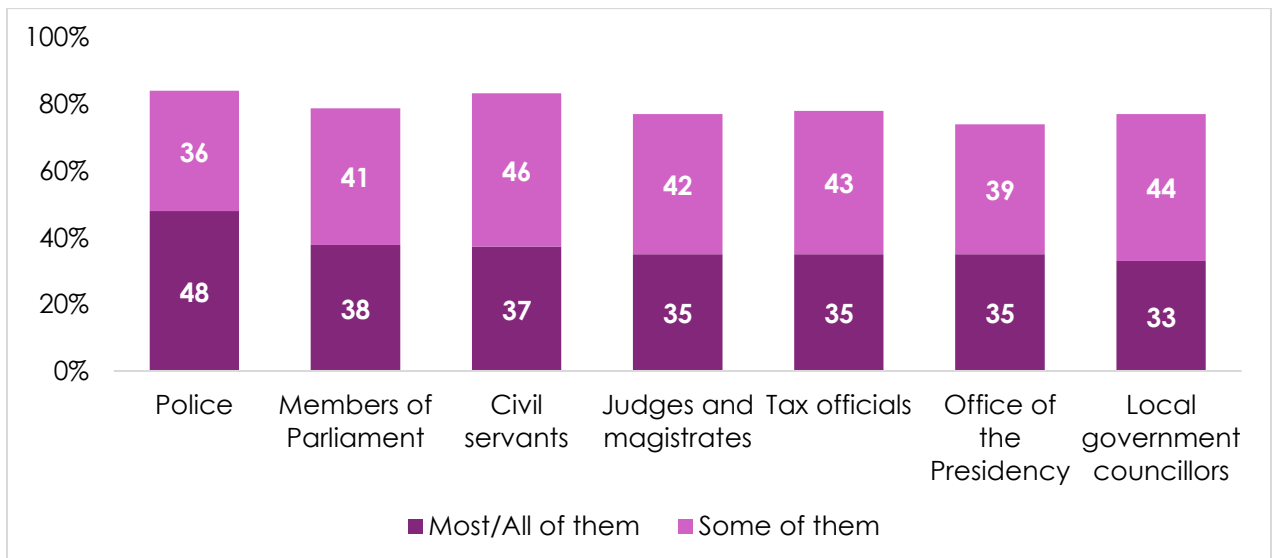
Respondents were asked: *How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most" or "all")*
**The question about local government councillors was not asked in Angola.*

Figure 5: Perceived corruption among the police | 18 countries | 2019/2020

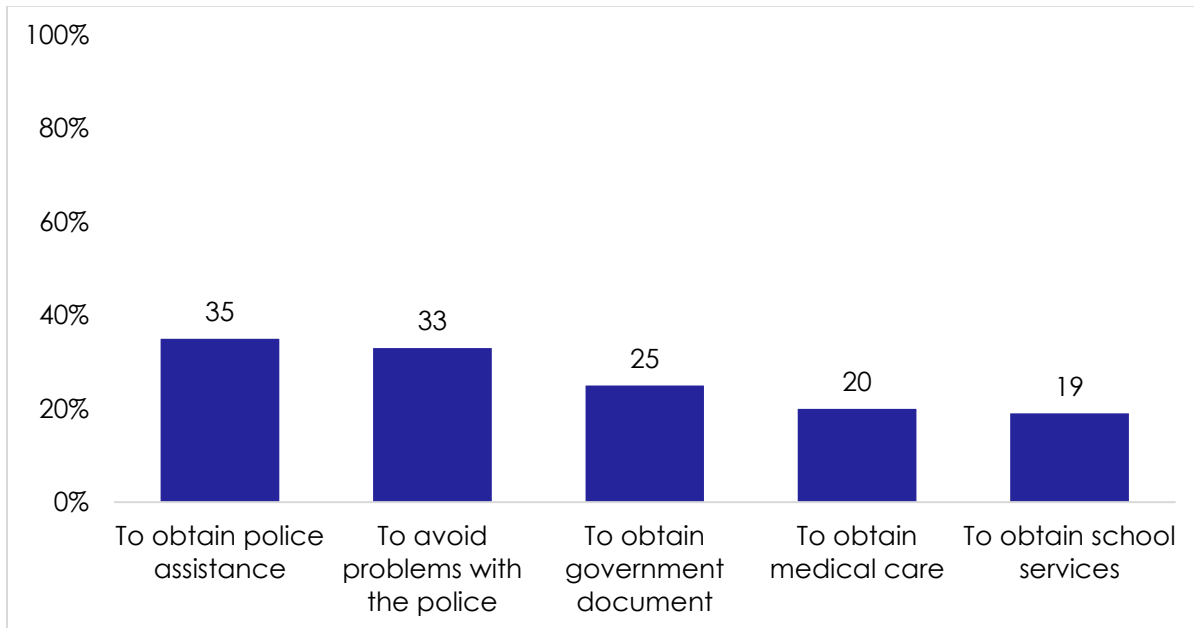| Country	Value
Gabon	69
Uganda	68
Kenya	68
Sierra Leone	62
Nigeria	61
Côte d'Ivoire	58
Ghana	57
Mali	54
Malawi	50
Guinea	49
18-country average	48
Lesotho	46
Ethiopia	43
Angola	39
Namibia	36
Burkina Faso	30
Botswana	30
Tunisia	22
Cabo Verde	22

Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Police? (% who say "most" or "all")

Figure 6: Changes in perceived corruption | by key institution | 11 countries | 2008-2020
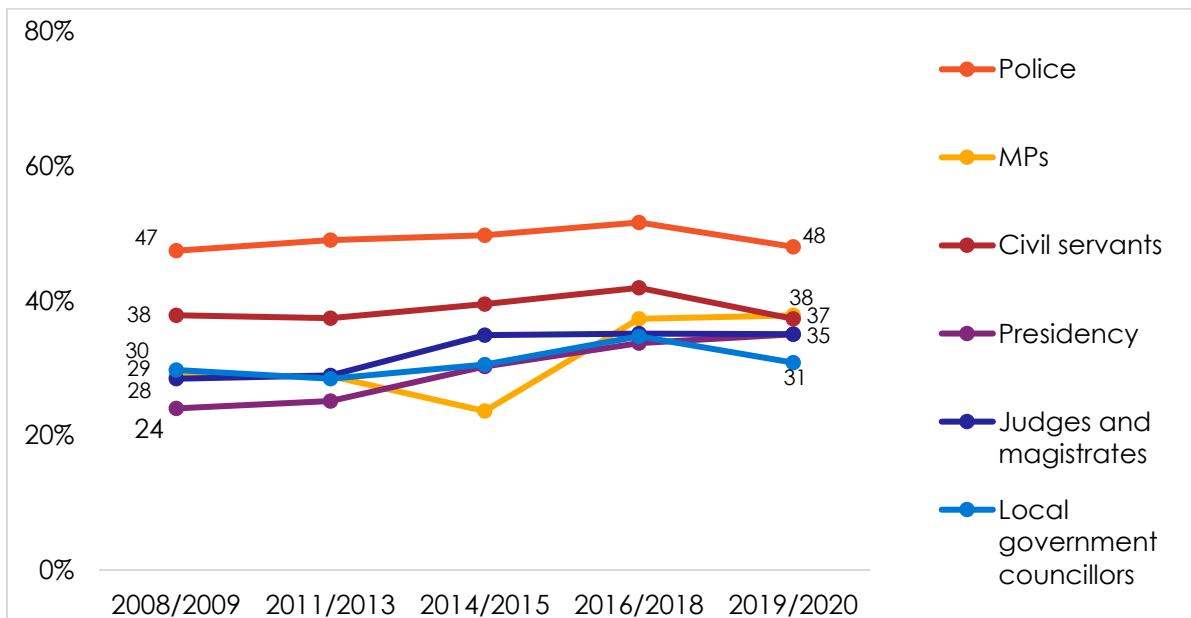
Police: 47, ..., ..., ..., 48
Civil servants: 38, ..., ..., ..., 38
MPs: 30, ..., ..., ..., 37
Judges and magistrates: 29, ..., ..., ..., 35
Local government councillors: 28, ..., ..., ..., 31
Presidency: 24, ..., ..., ..., 35

X-axis: 2008/2009, 2011/2013, 2014/2015, 2016/2018, 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most" or "all")

Figure 7: Countries with highest perceived corruption | by key institution | 18 countries | 2019/2020
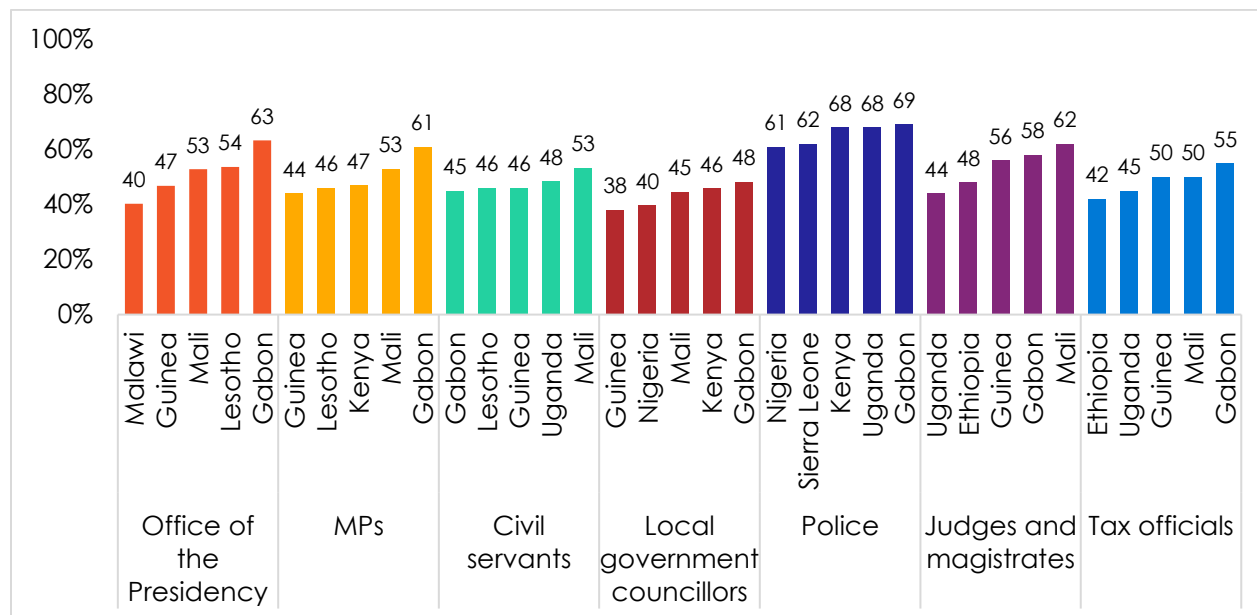
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (Figure shows, for each of seven institutions, the five countries where the largest proportions of respondents say "most" or "all" officials are corrupt.)

Figure 8: Countries with lowest perceived corruption | by key institution | 18 countries | 2019/2020
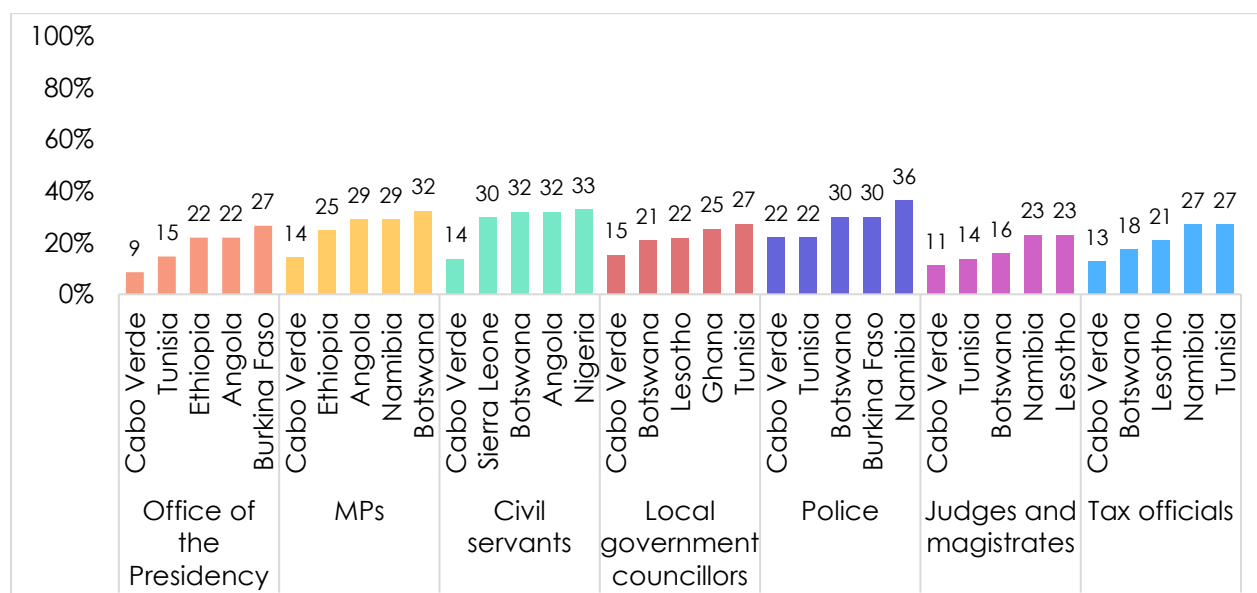
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (Figure shows, for each of seven institutions, the five countries where the smallest proportions of respondents say "most" or "all" officials are corrupt.)

Figure 9: Share of service users who had to pay a bribe to obtain each public service
| 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked:

In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?

In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public clinic or hospital? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?

In the past 12 months, have you tried to get an identity document like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport or voter's card, or permit from government? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] How often, if ever did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?
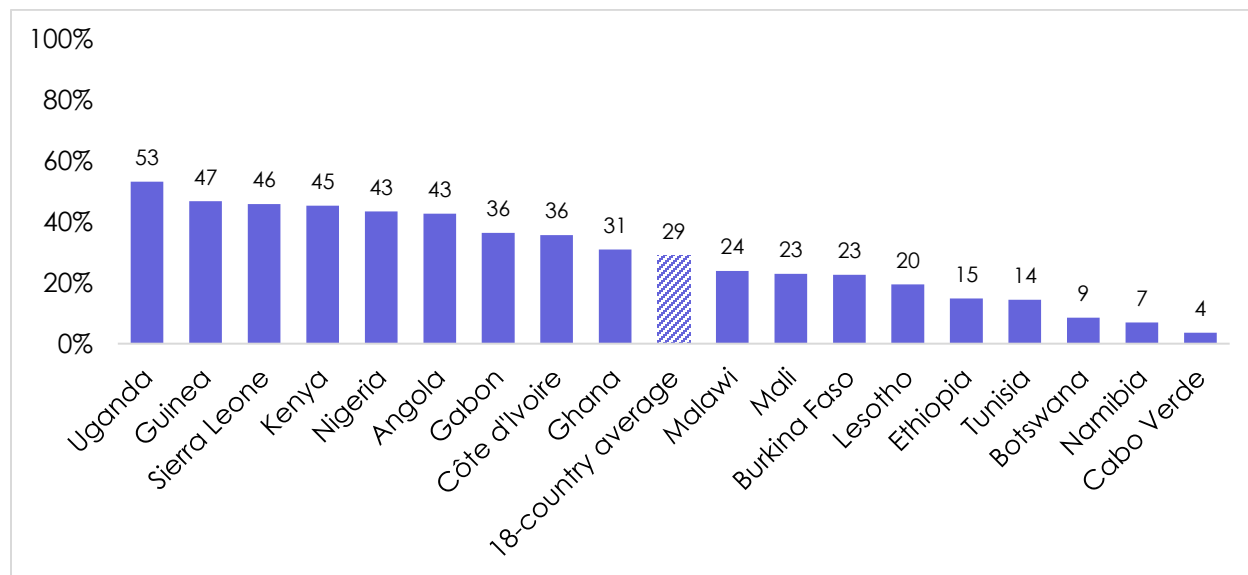
(% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often." Respondents who did not have contact with these services are excluded.)

Figure 10: Share of citizens seeking identity documents who had to pay a bribe
| 18 countries | 2019/2020
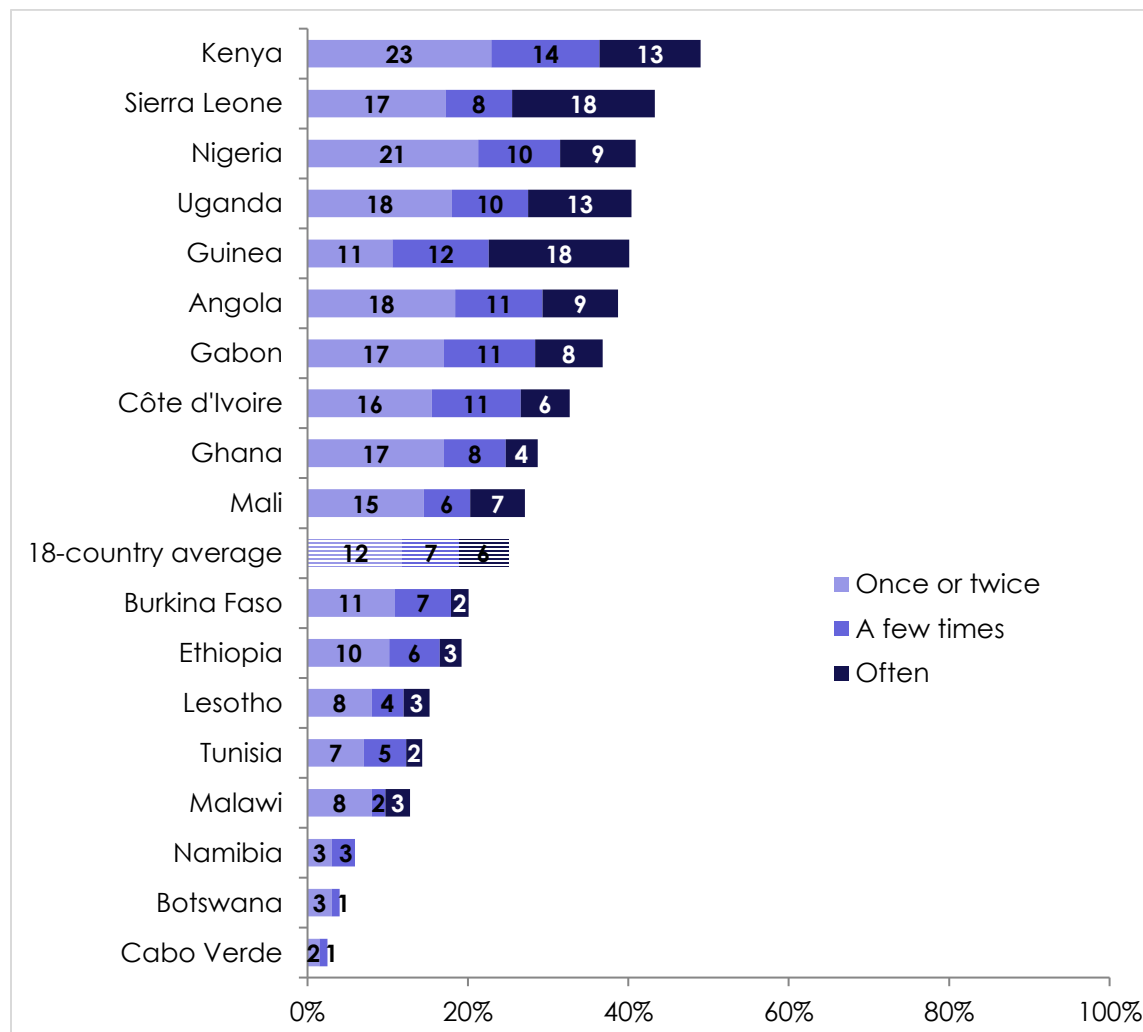
Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you tried to get an identity document like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport or voter's card, or permit from government? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?
(Respondents who did not try to get an identity document are excluded.)

Figure 11: Share of total population exposed to bribery to obtain any public service
| 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked:

In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public school? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a teacher or school official in order to get the services you needed from the schools?

In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public clinic or hospital? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed?

In the past 12 months, have you tried to get an identity document like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport or voter's card, or permit from government? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the document you needed?

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?
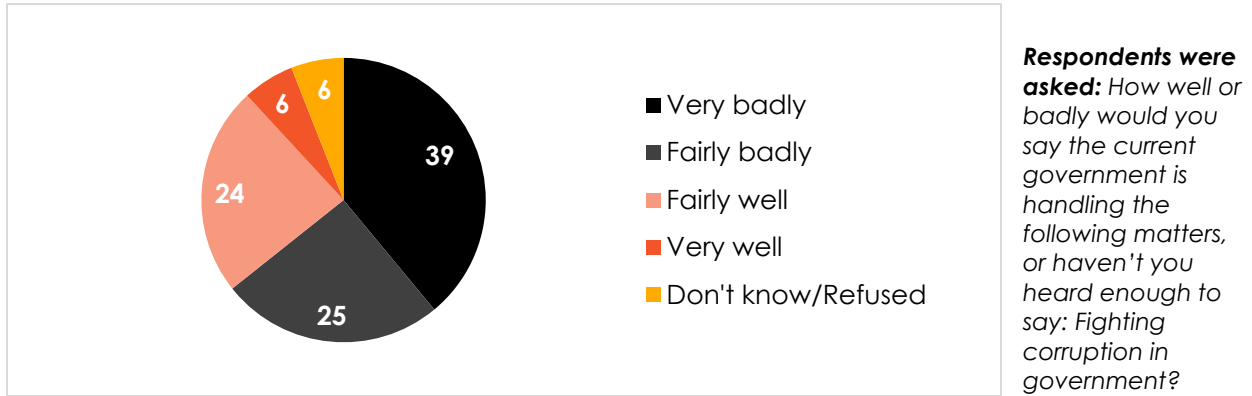
In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If yes:] How often, if ever did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

*(% of **all respondents** who say they ever paid a bribe ("once or twice," "a few times," or "often") for **any** of these services or to avoid problems in the past year)*
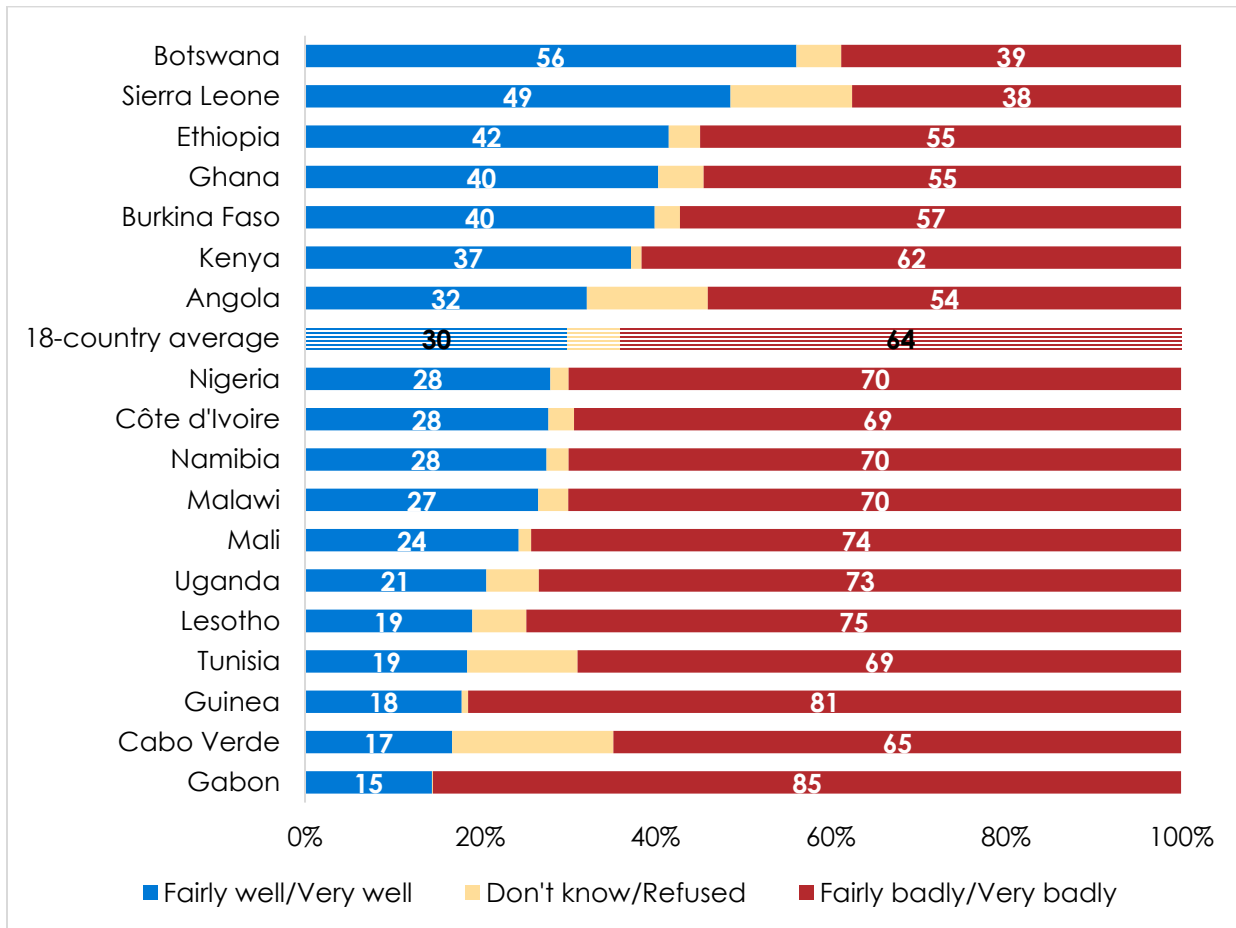
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Fight against corruption

Figure 12: Government performance in fighting corruption | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Legend:
- ■ Very badly — 39
- ■ Fairly badly — 25
- ■ Fairly well — 24
- ■ Very well — 6
- ■ Don't know/Refused — 6

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

Figure 13: Government performance in fighting corruption | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Country	Fairly well/Very well	Don't know/Refused	Fairly badly/Very badly
Botswana	56		39
Sierra Leone	49		38
Ethiopia	42		55
Ghana	40		55
Burkina Faso	40		57
Kenya	37		62
Angola	32		54
18-country average	30		64
Nigeria	28		70
Côte d'Ivoire	28		69
Namibia	28		70
Malawi	27		70
Mali	24		74
Uganda	21		73
Lesotho	19		75
Tunisia	19		69
Guinea	18		81
Cabo Verde	17		65
Gabon	15		85

■ Fairly well/Very well ■ Don't know/Refused ■ Fairly badly/Very badly

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

Figure 14: Change in approval of government performance in fighting corruption
| 11 countries | 2008-2020
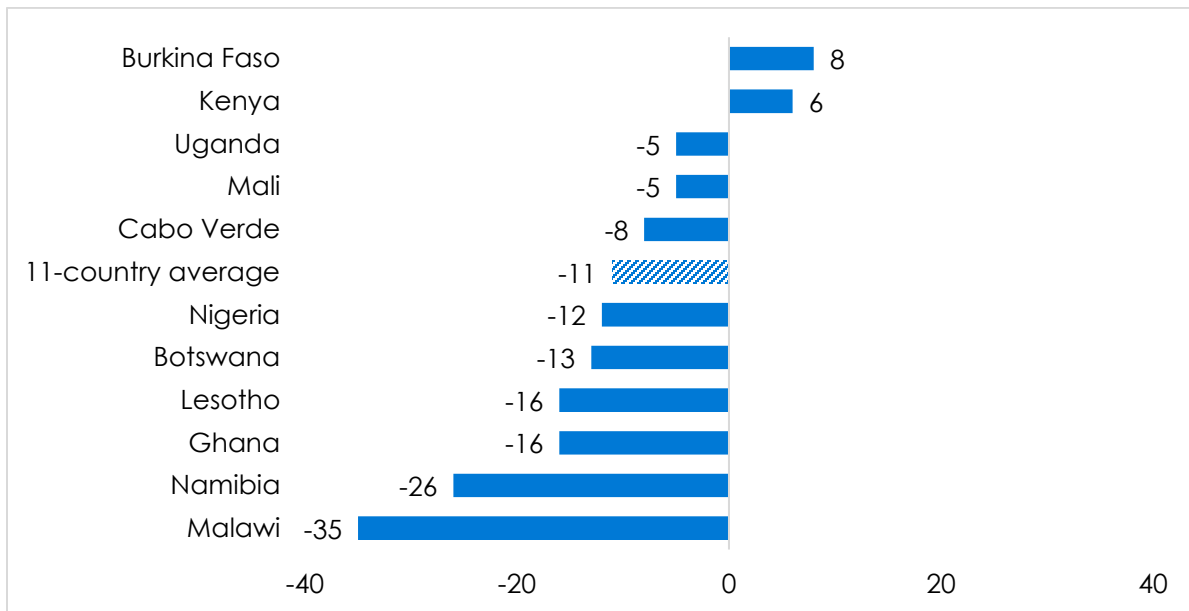
Figure shows the change (in percentage points) between survey rounds in 2008/2009 and 2019/2020 in the proportion of respondents who say the government is handling the fight against corruption "fairly well" or "very well." Positive numbers indicate increases in approval.
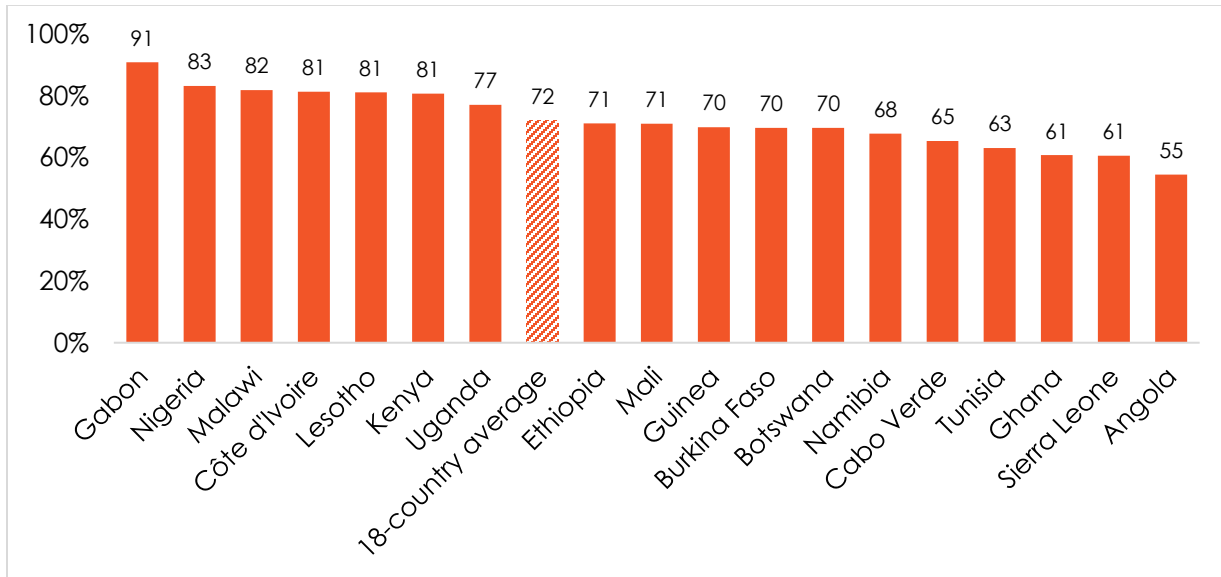
Fear of retaliation

Figure 15: Do you risk retaliation if you report corruption? | 18 countries | 2019/2020
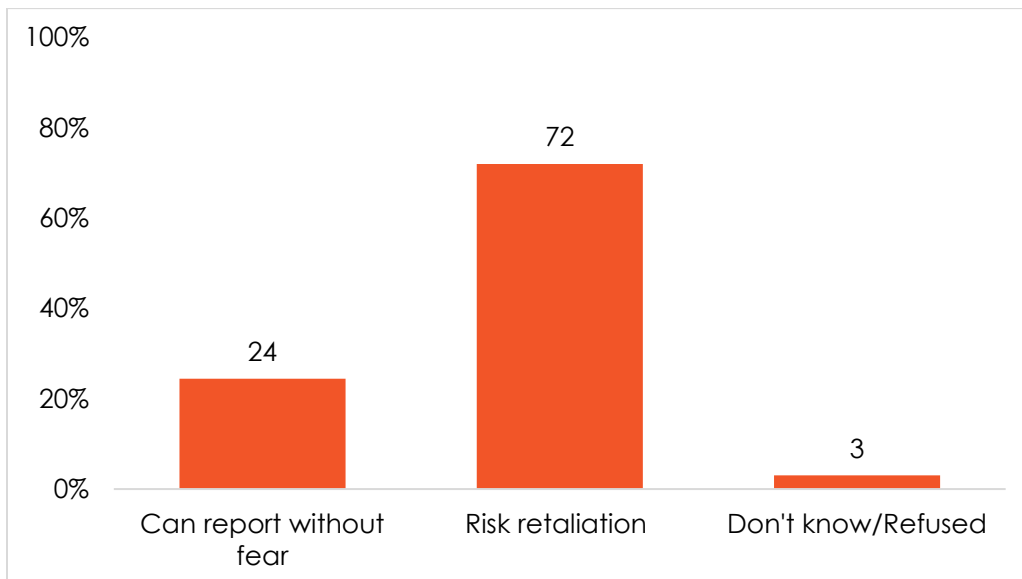
Respondents were asked: *In this country, can ordinary people report incidences of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out?*

Figure 16: Risk retaliation if report corruption | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: In this country, can ordinary people report incidences of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak out? (% who say they risk retaliation)

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Months when Round 7 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov-Dec 2019	N/A
Botswana	July-Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2-17
Cabo Verde	Dec 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Ethiopia	Dec 2019-Jan 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb 2020	2015, 2017
Ghana	Sept-Oct 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov-Dec 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	Aug-Sept 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Malawi	Nov-Dec 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Namibia	Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Nigeria	Jan-Feb 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Tunisia	Feb-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept-Oct 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017

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