



REPORT

What are the African people asking from their governments?

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Norad



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Background and purpose

Development cooperation must be firmly grounded in the needs of low- and middle-income countries. What people in these countries define as their most pressing challenges is therefore a key question for any donor country.

The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) recently made an effort to better understand what people in Africa see as the most important challenges for their countries in the coming years. The initiative was part of Norad's Rethinking Development project (Bistand Mot 2030), which sought to analyze important and emerging trends within international development cooperation. Roundtable discussions and interviews were organized in five African countries and supplemented with survey findings. Key messages and contributions from participants and experts across the continent were summarized in the report [Old problems and new realities in Africa – and the role of development cooperation](#).

What answers you get when you ask people about the most important development challenges for their countries may depend on whom you ask. While Norad's roundtable discussions and interviews mainly were with researchers and other knowledge providers, their views are not necessarily representative of those of the broader population.

In this paper, we therefore look at what we can learn from larger and more representative studies. We report what ordinary people in sub-Saharan Africa say in response to the question "*What are the most important problem for your government to address?*", which has been asked by the Afrobarometer surveys in countries across the African continent. We disaggregate the Afrobarometer data to assess how priorities differ across groups, e.g., people with low vs. high socio-economic status, low-income countries vs. middle-income countries, urban vs. rural residents, young vs. old, and male vs. female.

In addition, we report findings from the last round of World Bank Opinion Surveys, which ask development professionals at the national level to identify the most important development problems in their countries.

We find that priorities indeed depend on whom you ask. A consistent pattern, though, is that *jobs and income* is ranked on top by almost any group. The fact that *food security and agricultural development* also ranks very high makes it quite clear that inclusive economic development, broadly speaking, is a top priority. However, more disadvantaged people and countries tend to give higher priority than others to *food security and agriculture* relative to *jobs and income*.

The next priorities are infrastructure (*roads and water*) and human development (*health and education*). More disadvantaged groups tend to put higher priority on infrastructure (especially on *water*) than do others. They also tend to put higher priority on *health*, while the more advantaged tend to put higher priority on *crime and security* and *governance issues* compared to others.

It is also worth noting that some issues that typically are high on the priority list of donors, such as *climate* and *gender issues / women's rights*, are not considered top priorities by the African people, according to these surveys.

Sample and methods

We report results from all the 32 countries in sub-Saharan Africa that were surveyed during the eighth wave of the Afrobarometer survey, taking place between 2019 and 2021.¹

There is a representative sample of respondents from each country and 44,875 respondents in total.

Respondents were asked “*In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?*” and had the opportunity to list up to three problems.

We report the percentage of respondents who reported a specific problem among their top three. We first calculated this percentage for each country, using the sampling weights provided by Afrobarometer, and then calculated averages across countries. Thus, each country has the same weight, regardless of its size/population.

We also report results from the last World Bank Country Opinion Surveys conducted in 41 countries in sub-Saharan Africa between 2018 and 2022.²

Respondents include the World Bank Group’s traditional counterparts: government officials and employees of state-owned enterprises, as well as the private sector, non-government organizations, religious and youth groups, members of the academia, media, and of other organizations working in development in the country.

In total, there are 15,615 respondents to the World Bank Opinion Surveys. They were asked to select the three most important development challenges for their country. The list of potential challenges was partially adapted to the context of each country.

We calculate averages across countries in the same way as for the Afrobarometer data.

Results from the Afrobarometer

Aggregate findings

Unemployment and *health* are the challenges that are prioritized by most people. One third of the population has these challenges among their top priorities (see Figure 1).

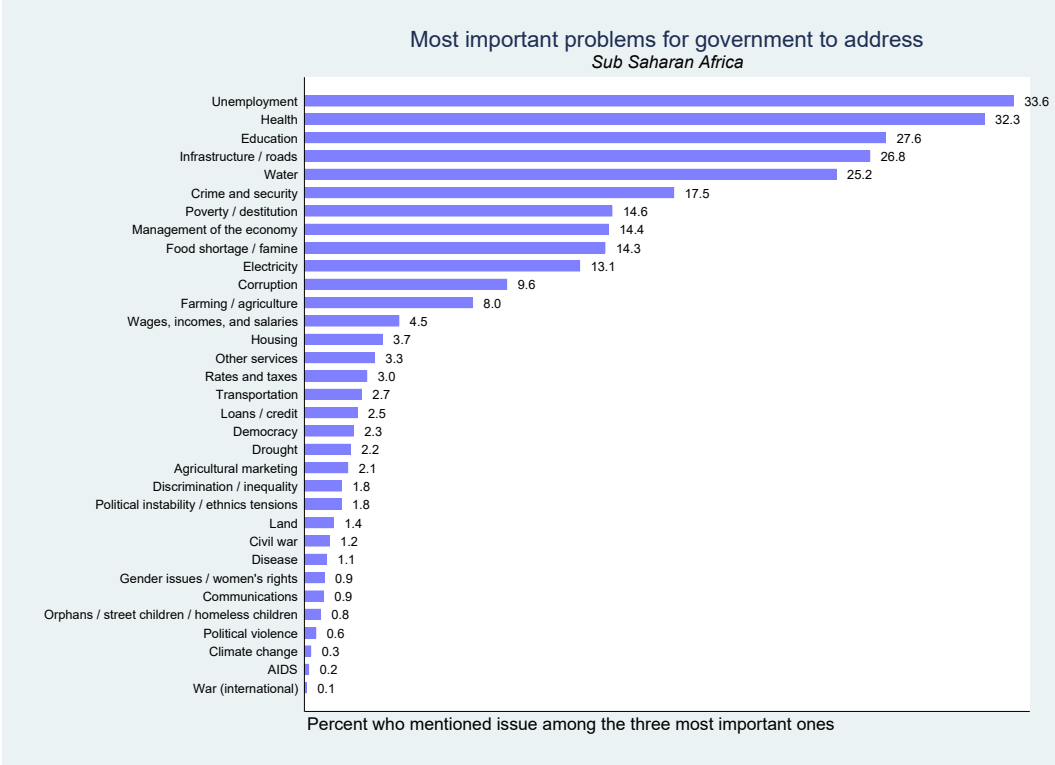
Next on the list are *education*, *infrastructure/roads*, and *water*, prioritized by 25-28 percent of the population.

Then comes *crime and security* with 18 percent, while *poverty/destitution*, *management of the economy*, *food shortage/famine* and *electricity* are ranked among the top three challenges by 13-15 percent of the population.

¹ The countries are Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

² The countries are Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Djibouti, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Figure 1: Most important problems, average across 32 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.



One challenge with this ranking is that there are overlaps between some of the categories. For instance, *unemployment* clearly overlaps with *wages, income, and salaries*, but also with *management of the economy*. To create a more meaningful ranking, we have merged the following categories in the following analyses:

Table 1: Merged categories, Afrobarometer.

Merged category	Includes
<i>Unemployment and income</i>	<i>Unemployment</i> <i>Wages, income, and salaries</i> <i>Management of the economy</i>
<i>Food security and agriculture</i>	<i>Food security / famine</i> <i>Farming / agriculture</i> <i>Agricultural marketing</i> <i>Drought</i>
<i>Infrastructure/roads/transport</i>	<i>Infrastructure/roads</i> <i>Transportation</i>

Some issues that receive considerable attention in development cooperation are not among the top priorities of the African people, according to these data. *Climate change* and *gender issues / women's rights* are notable examples. However, it should be underscored that not making it to the top priorities does not imply that an issue is unimportant; it just means that there are other issues that are regarded as even more important.

Climate change is closely linked with other categories that have higher priority, such as food security, agriculture, and drought. The low score on climate change can also partly be explained by the fact that only 57 percent of respondents had heard about climate change. However, even among those who had heard about climate change and were concerned that it would make life *much worse* in the country, it was only 0.6 percent that regarded it as one of the three top priorities.

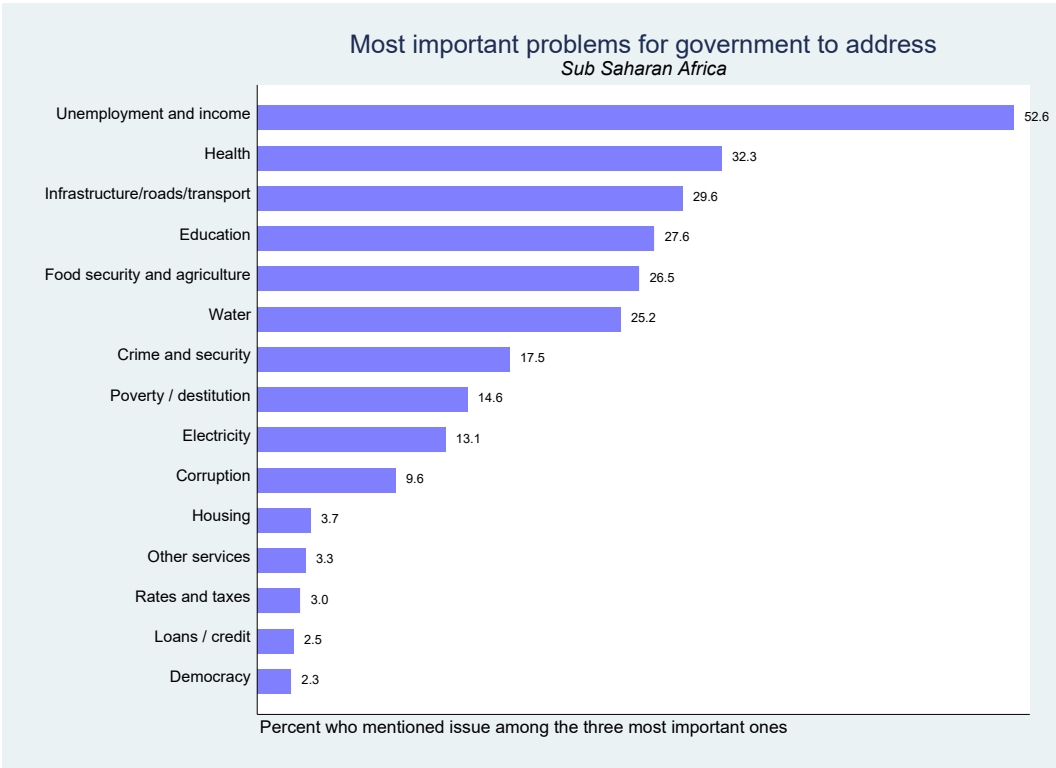
In the following, we will not report problems that received top ranking by less than two percent of the population. Admittedly, some of the categories that are then left out could have been meaningfully merged with higher ranked categories. It would for instance be natural to merge *health* with *disease* and *AIDS*. We have nevertheless not done so, because figures are so small that they would nonetheless make little difference to the overall picture.

With these modifications, the list of top priorities is represented in Figure 2. *Unemployment and income* now clearly stands out as the issue that is ranked on top by most people (53 percent).

Another way of putting this is so say that three broad areas stand out as having the highest priority:

- **Economic development, including agriculture** (unemployment and income 53%, food shortage and agriculture 27%, poverty / destitution 14%).
- **Infrastructure** (infrastructure/roads/transport 30%, water 25%, electricity 13%).
- **Human development** (health 32%, education 28%).

Figure 2: Most important problems, with merged categories. Excluding issues with score < 2%.



As will become clear from the discussion below, the general emphasis on the broad categories of economic development, infrastructure and human development is consistent across subgroups, but the priority given to each specific element varies substantially. Whom you ask clearly matters for priorities.

Socio-economic status matters

We use three different measures of socio-economic status to assess how it relates to people’s priorities.

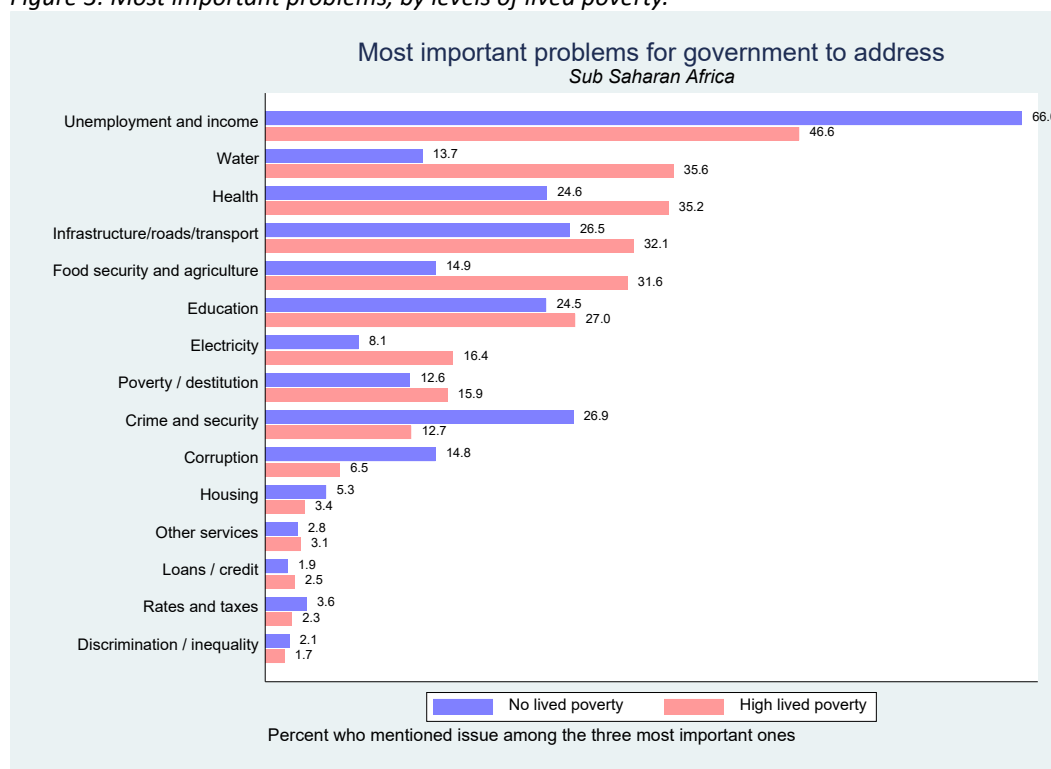
We first use Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index, which is based on a series of survey questions about how often people go without basic necessities during the course of a year. The levels of lived poverty across all countries are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Levels of lived poverty in the population.

Lived poverty	Share of study population (%)
No lived poverty	9.5
Low lived poverty	32.8
Moderate lived poverty	35.0
High lived poverty	22.8

Figure 3 compares the priorities of those who are best off (no lived poverty) with those who are worst off (high lived poverty).

Figure 3: Most important problems, by levels of lived poverty.



Within the economic dimension, the poorest give much higher priority to *food security and agriculture* than the least poor (32% v. 15%) and conversely much less priority to *unemployment and income* (47% v. 66%), though the latter is still the most important issue for both groups.

The poorest also give considerably higher priority to infrastructure than the least poor, and to *water* in particular (36% v. 14%). *Water* is the second most important priority for those in high lived poverty. They also give higher importance to *health* (35% v. 25%), while there is not much of a difference between those in low and high lived poverty when it comes to education.

We also notice a strong socio-economic gradient in the importance attached to *crime and security*; this is a higher priority for the better off (27% v. 13%).

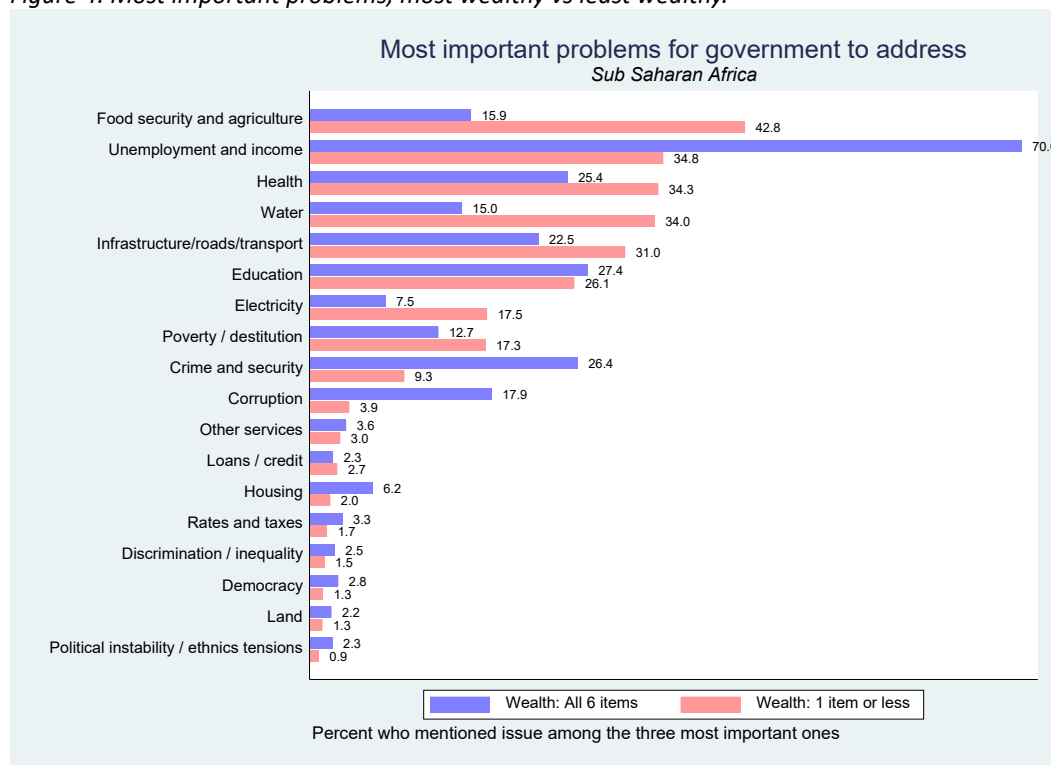
This pattern is largely confirmed if we instead compare people with different levels of wealth. We constructed a simple wealth index based on ownership of six items (radio, TV, motor vehicle, computer, bank account, mobile telephone) and classified people as most wealthy (owning all six items), medium wealthy (owning two to five items) and least wealthy (owning none or one of the items). Wealth levels are distributed as follows:

Table 3: Levels of wealth.

Levels of wealth	Share of study population (%)
Most wealthy: all 6 items	13.9
Medium wealthy: 2-5 items	70.3
Least wealthy: 0-1 items	15.8

Figure 4 compares the priorities of the wealthiest with those of the least wealthy. We observe similar patterns as in Figure 3. For the least wealthy, *food security and agriculture* is actually the top priority (43% v. 16%).

Figure 4: Most important problems, most wealthy vs least wealthy.



For the wealthiest, *unemployment and income* ranks well above all other issues, being among the top three priorities for 70 percent.

The wealthiest put larger emphasis than the least wealthy on governance issues, such as *corruption* (18% v. 4%).

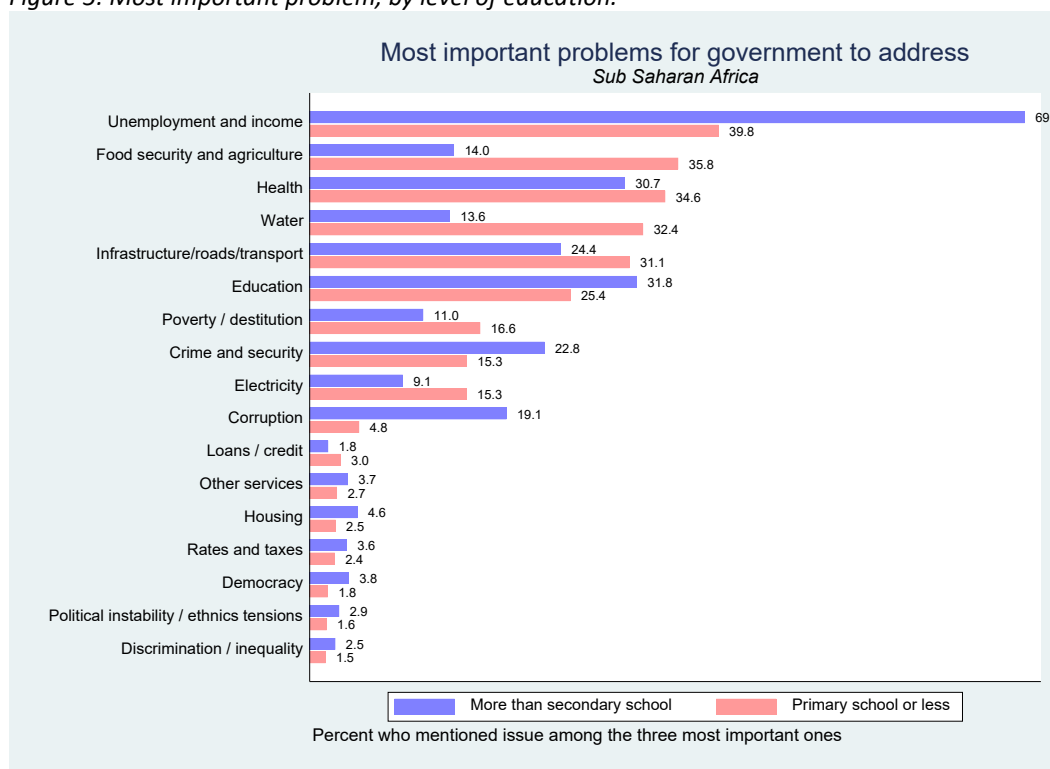
These patterns are also confirmed if we instead use education levels as an indicator of socio-economic status. Education levels among the respondents is described in Table 4.

Table 4: Levels of education.

Levels of education	Share of study population (%)
No formal education	20.1
Primary	27.5
Secondary	35.8
Post-secondary	16.3
Don't know	0.3

Figure 5 compares the priorities of those with post-secondary education with those with only primary school or no formal education. In both groups, *unemployment and income* is the favorite top priority, but much more clearly so among the better educated (70% v. 40%). Conversely, *food and agriculture*, which ranks almost as high for the least well educated, is prioritised to a much lesser extent by the better educated (36% v. 14%).

Figure 5: Most important problem, by level of education.



Country income level and urban vs. rural residency matter too

Considering the strong differences in priorities across socio-economic status, we would expect that country levels of income matter for priorities, too. This is indeed what we observe, but the differences are less stark than at the individual level, probably due to considerable differences in priorities within both low- and middle-income countries.

We classified countries by income levels according to their current World Bank classification.³ In our dataset, there are then 12 low-income countries, 15 lower middle-income countries, and five upper middle-countries. Figure 6 compares priorities between low-income and middle-income countries.

While *unemployment and income* is the top priority in both low- and middle-income countries, people in low-income countries emphasize this aspect less, while they emphasize *food security and agriculture* correspondingly more. We also notice that *health* ranks higher in low-income countries (38% v. 29%).

There are also some clear differences in priorities between people living in urban vs. rural areas. Figure 7 compares priorities of rural residents with those living in urban or semi-urban areas.

We notice two clear patterns: First, rural residents put much higher priority than others on infrastructure development, including *water* (33% v. 16%), *infrastructure/roads/transport* (34% v. 24%), and *electricity* (15% v. 10%).

Second, rural residents give higher priority to *food security and agriculture* (33% vs. 18%). While this is as expected when it comes to agriculture, it is less clear when it comes to food security, which may be a severe

³ [World Bank Country and Lending Groups – World Bank Data Help Desk](#), accessed October 2023. Some countries may have changed status since the time of the last Afrobarometer survey.

challenge also for urban residents. However, the underlying data show that food security also receives considerably higher priority from rural residents.

Figure 6. Most important problems, by country income levels.

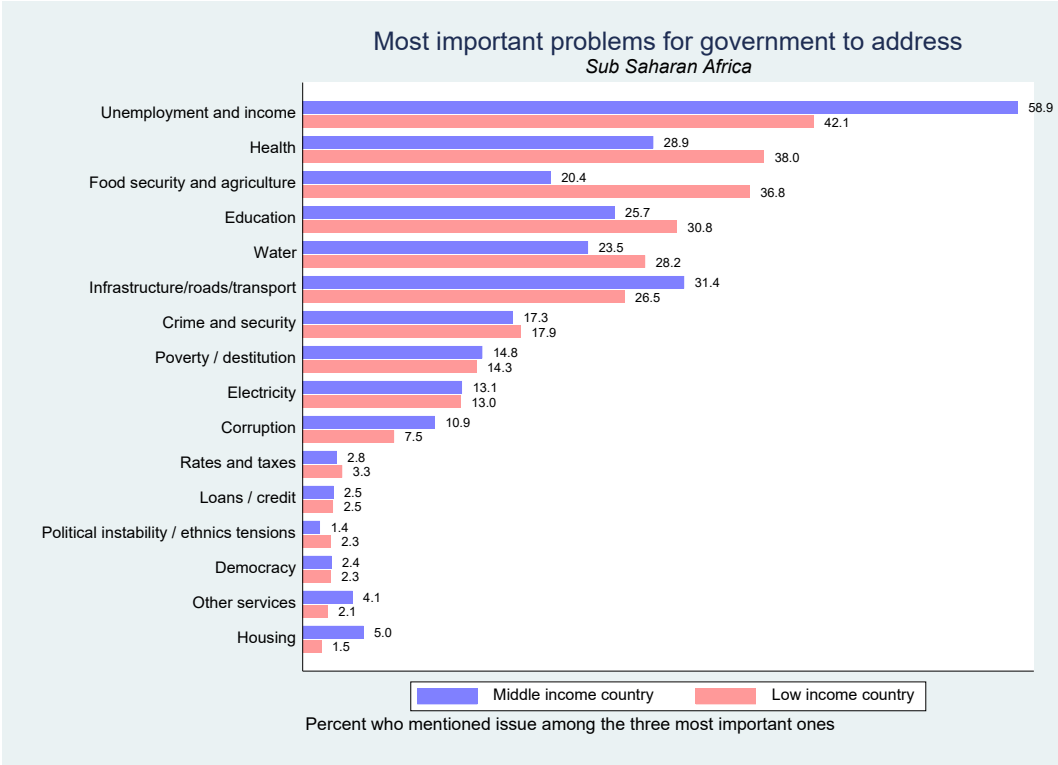
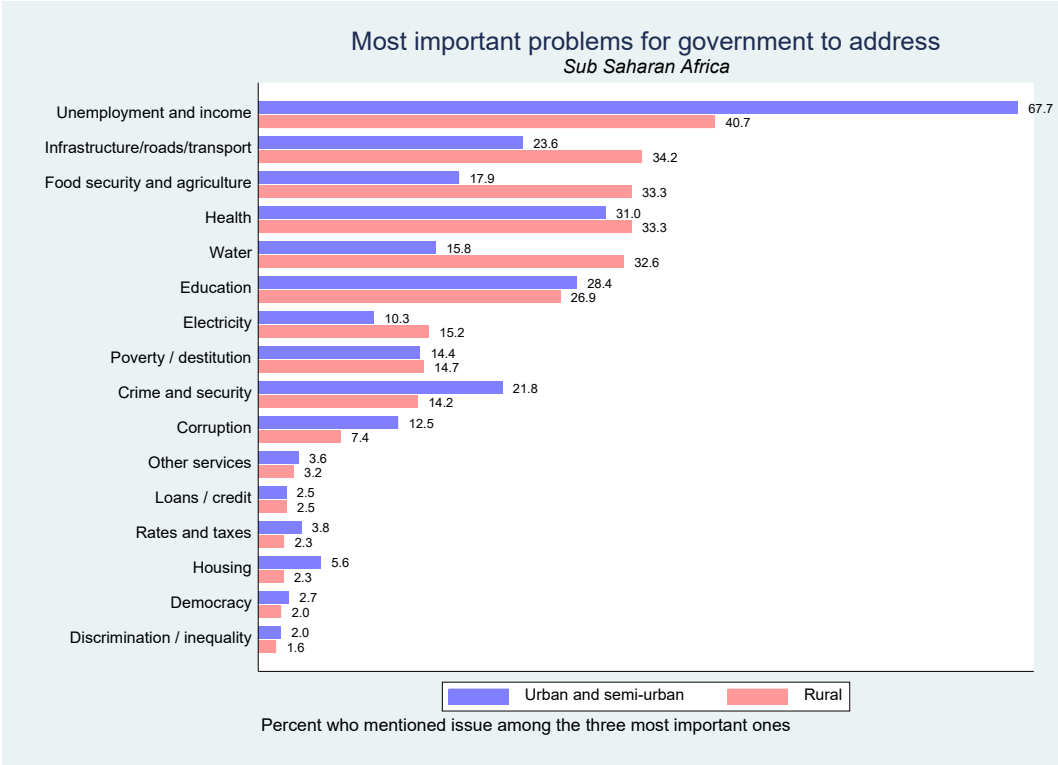


Figure 7. Most important problems, by urban/rural residency.



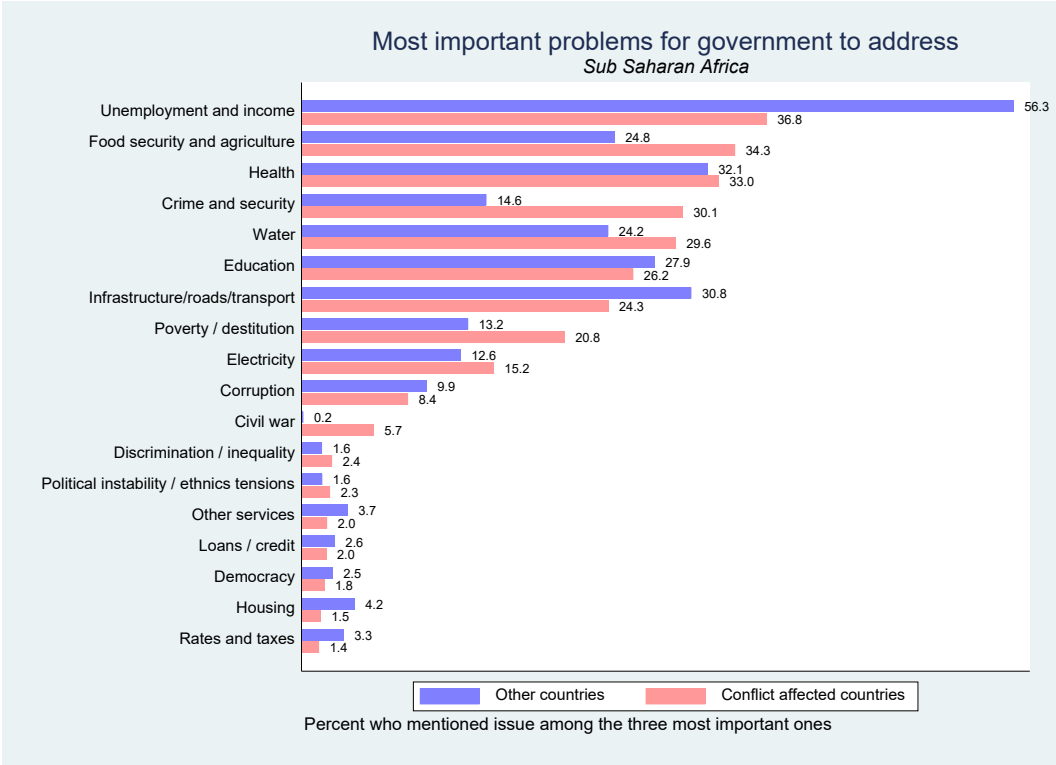
Conflict-affected countries face particular challenges

We distinguish between conflict-affected countries and other countries using the World Bank classification at the time of the survey. Six of the countries in the dataset were then classified as conflict affected (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Nigeria).

The most important problems in conflict-affected countries, like in many other countries, are *unemployment and income, food security and agriculture, and health*.

But as expected, people in these countries attach much higher priority to *crime and security* (30% v. 15%) than people in other countries. We also notice that *civil war* (6%) and *political instability / ethnic tension* (2%) make it into the reported list of issues.

Figure 8. Most important problems, conflict-affected countries.



Age and gender do not make much difference

Figure 9 illustrates priorities by age groups, distinguishing between respondents that are more or less than 30 years of age. There are strikingly few differences between these groups.

Similarly, Figure 10 illustrates that there are almost no significant gender differences in what people identify as important problems for the government to solve.

We also checked whether there is a gender difference in the priority attached to *gender issues / women’s rights*. This issue was considered among the top three priorities by only 0.9 percent of the population. Female respondents ranked it on top somewhat more frequently, but no more than 1.3 percent of the women considered the issue to be among the top three.

Figure 9. Most important problems, by age group.

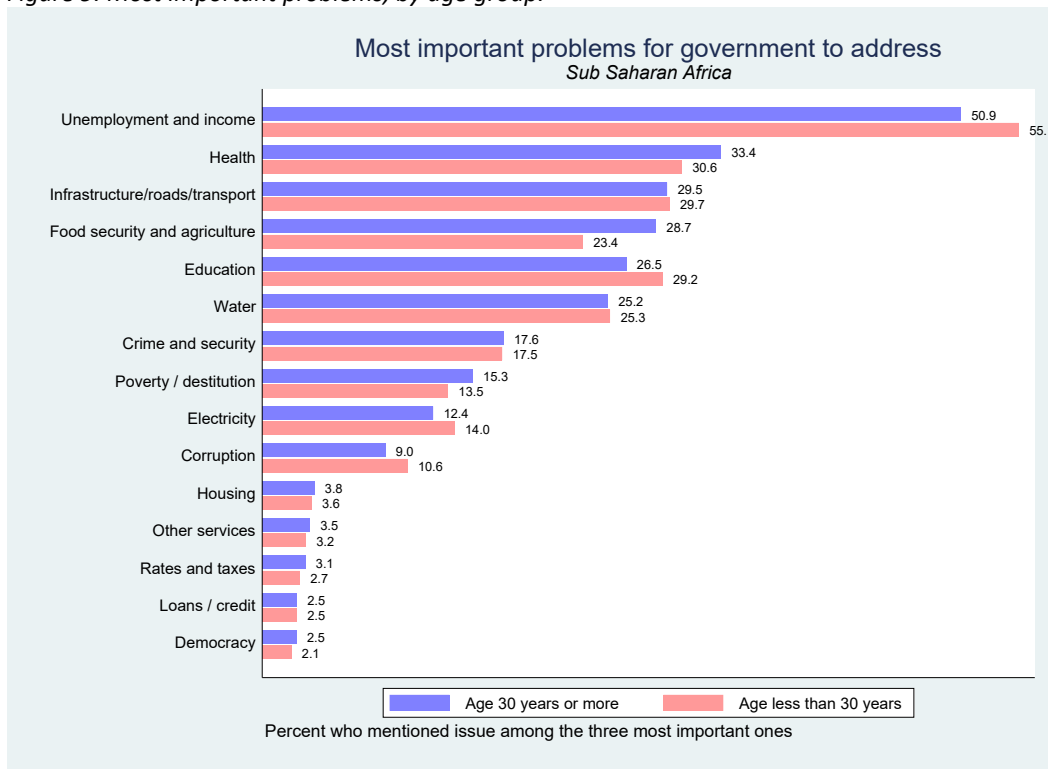
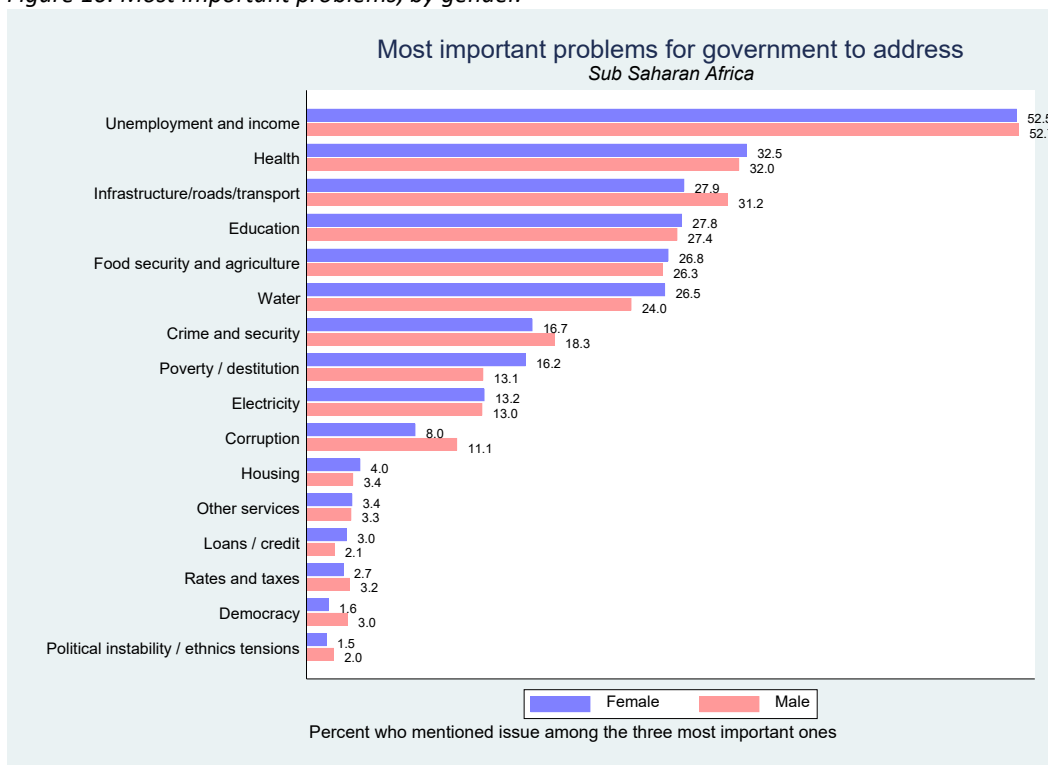


Figure 10. Most important problems, by gender.



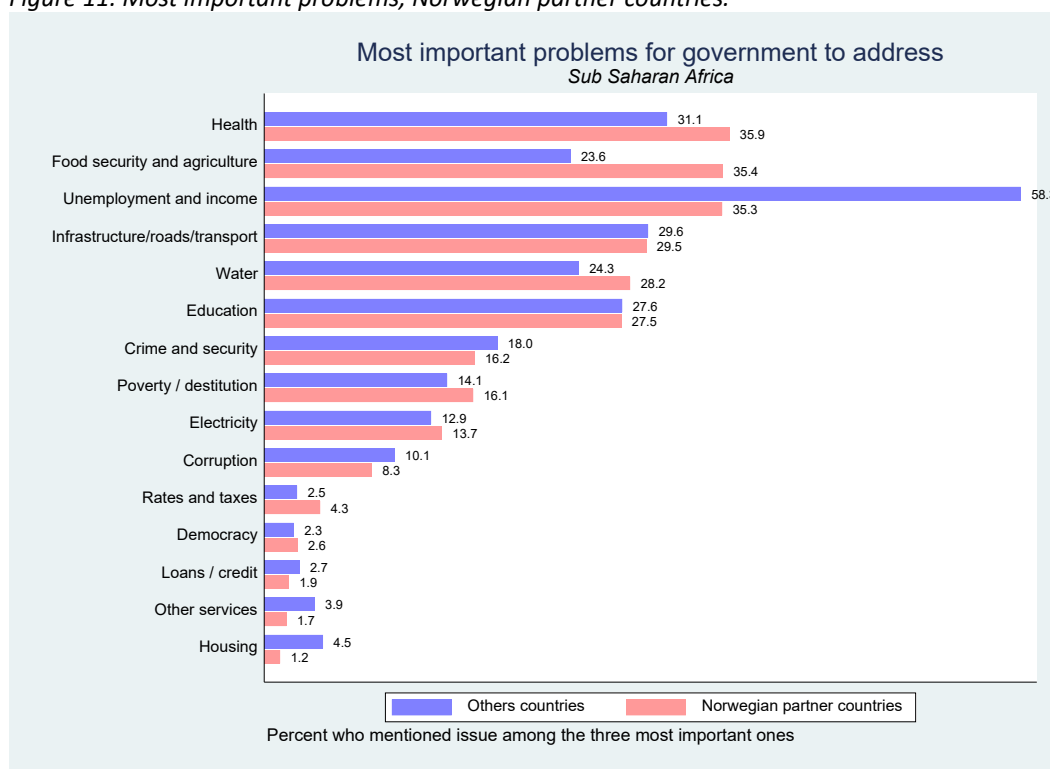
Norwegian partner countries rank health as their main challenge

Finally, we assessed priorities in Norwegian partner countries. Partner countries included in the Afrobarometer data are Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Priorities in these countries are like the average across countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with a few notable differences. First, we notice a significantly higher priority for *food and agriculture* (36% v. 24%) and a much lower priority for *unemployment and income* (26% v. 58%) in these countries. This is the same pattern as we observed above for variables that express lower socio-economic status or level of economic development. Most of the partner countries are low-income countries.

Second, *health* is given a somewhat higher priority than in other countries, in fact making this the top priority in Norwegian partner countries (36%), closely followed by the two issues just discussed.

Figure 11. Most important problems, Norwegian partner countries.



Results from the World Bank Opinion Surveys

While the Afrobarometer surveys represent the views of ordinary people, the World Bank Opinion Surveys reflect the views of development professionals. These perspectives can usefully complement each other. The findings are not directly comparable, though, since the World Bank surveys cover more countries.

Due to the overlap between categories, some of them have been merged in the subsequent analysis (Table 5).

Table 5. Merged categories, World Bank Opinion Surveys.

Merged category	Includes
<i>Employment and income (jobs/growth/private sector)</i>	<i>Job creation / employment Private sector development Economic growth Trade and exports</i>
<i>Public sector governance and anti-corruption</i>	<i>Public sector reform Local governance Anti-corruption Judiciary reform</i>
<i>Security, crime, and violence</i>	<i>Security Crime and violence</i>
<i>Agriculture and food security</i>	<i>Agriculture and rural development Food security</i>
<i>Poverty reduction and social protection</i>	<i>Poverty reduction Social protection</i>

Results are summarized in Figure 12.⁴ Development professionals agree with ordinary people that *employment and income* is a top priority. They also agree that *agriculture and food security*, which is also very much about economic development, is among the top priorities. *Poverty reduction* is also high on the list.

Development professionals and ordinary people also agree that *education* and *health* are among the top priorities.

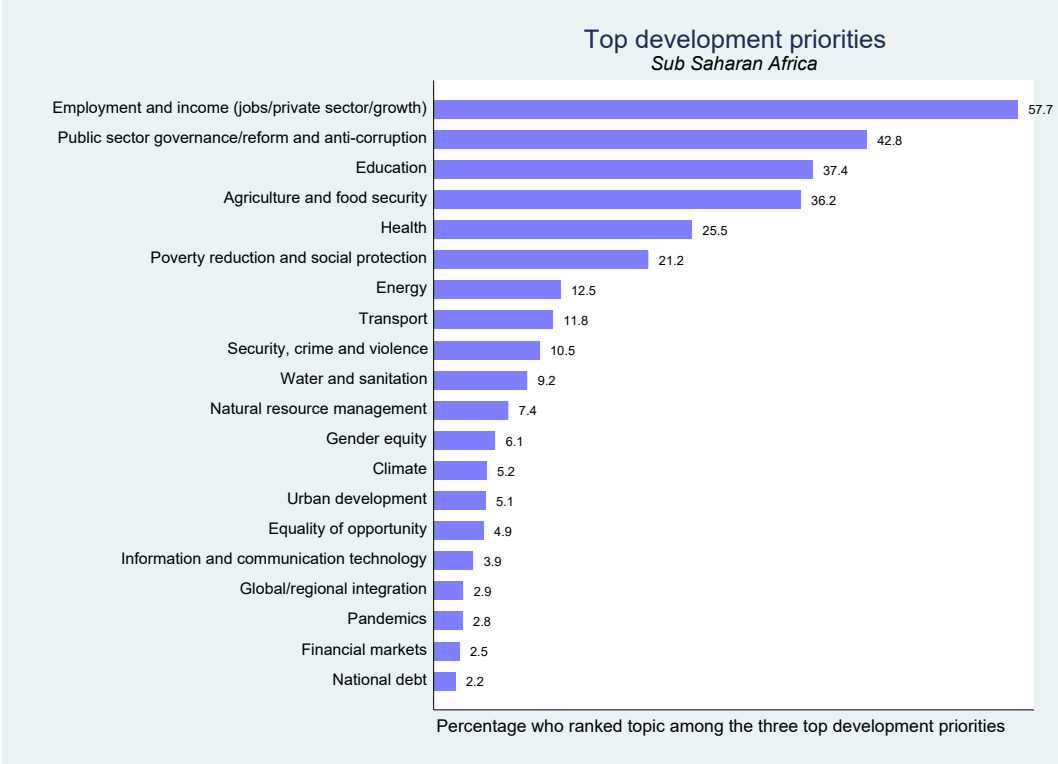
A notable difference though is the high priority that development professionals give to *governance* issues. This difference may be partly due to the framing of the question in the Afrobarometer survey, which may lead respondents to think more on what the government can *provide*, rather than how it *operates*. But we also noted from the Afrobarometer data that corruption was emphasized to a much larger extent by the higher socio-economic strata, including by those with more education. Development professionals probably belong to this group.

Another notable difference is that development professionals give less priority to infrastructure, such as *roads/transport* and *water*, compared to ordinary people. Socio-economic status of respondents is a likely explanation of this difference too, as roads and water typically are a much higher priority among more disadvantaged groups, according to the Afrobarometer data.

⁴ In our analysis, we included only the issues that were considered to be a top priority by at least 2% of the total sample of respondents.

It is more common among development professionals than among ordinary people to think that climate and gender issues are important development challenges, but there is nevertheless only a small share who rank these issues among the top three challenges.

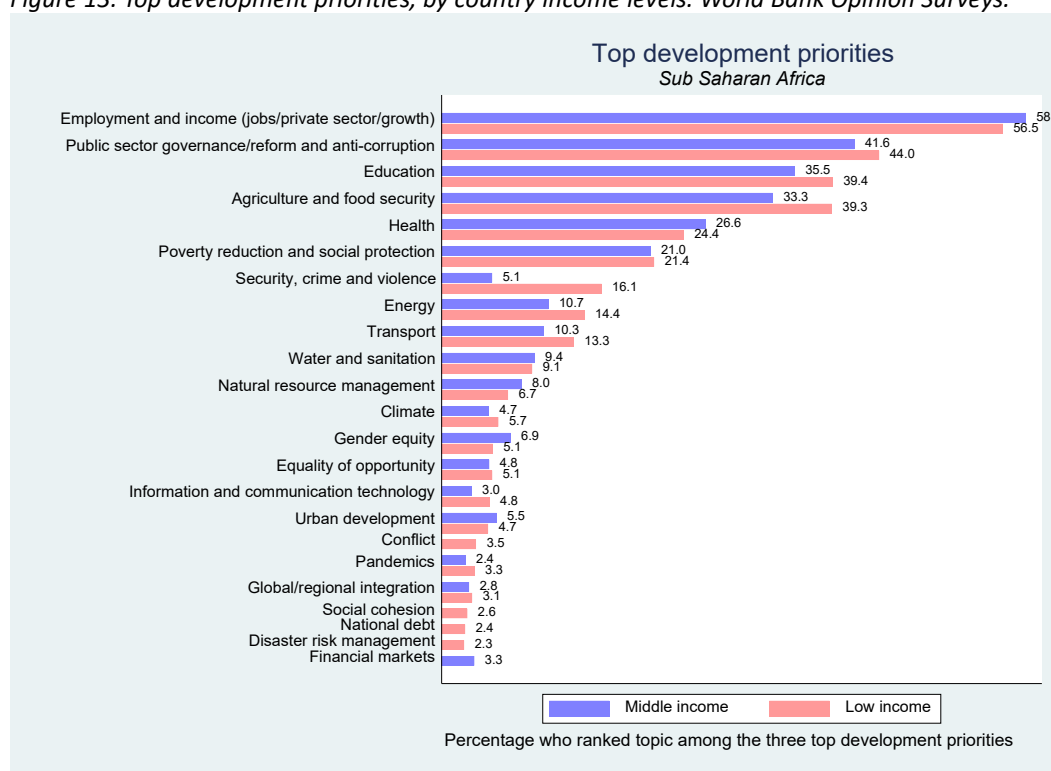
Figure 12. Top development priorities, World Bank Opinion Surveys.



We disaggregated the World Bank data by country income levels (Figure 13). The most striking observation is perhaps how similar the priorities of development professionals seem to be across these groups of countries: the “ranking” of the development challenges is almost identical. Overall, the differences between countries seem smaller than in the Afrobarometer results (Figure 6).

One significant difference, though, is the higher priority given to *security, crime, and violence* in low-income countries, which reflects a higher prevalence of conflicts in these countries.

Figure 13. Top development priorities, by country income levels. World Bank Opinion Surveys.



Conclusions

For people in sub-Saharan Africa, *economic development* (including jobs and income, agriculture and food security, and poverty reduction) stands out as the most important issue for governments to address, followed by *infrastructure development* (roads, water, electricity) and *human development* (health and education).

Priorities differ across people’s economic status, education, and rural vs. urban residency, but do not vary significantly with age and gender. When it comes to economic development, the poorest put higher priority on *food security and agriculture* than do the least poor, who put more emphasis on *jobs and income*. The poorest also give considerably higher priority than others to *water* and somewhat higher priority to *health*. The same patterns are observed for people with lower levels of education and people residing in rural areas.

Development professionals largely agree with ordinary people about the relative importance of various development challenges. They rank *employment and income* at the top, at the same time as they attach high importance to other economic development issues (*agriculture and food security, poverty reduction*). One notable difference is that development professionals seem to attach higher importance to *governance* issues. We also note a tendency for development professionals to respond more similarly to respondents with higher socio-economic status than to the poorest, which may reflect development professionals’ own position in society.

Some issues that typically are high on the priority list of donors, such as *climate* and *gender issues / women’s rights*, are not considered top priorities by the African people, according to these surveys. This does not imply that these challenges are unimportant, but simply that there are other issues that are regarded as even more pressing.



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