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Veiled transparency: Access to public information remains elusive despite progress on right-to-information laws

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 771 | **Anne Okello, Sophie Sunderland, and Joseph Asunka**

Summary

“GRA-SML contract: Finance Ministry denies Manasseh’s RTI request.” This headline on a story about investigative journalists denied access to a contract between the revenue authority and a private company (Modern Ghana, 2024) is all-too-common news on the continent, even in countries with right-to-information (RTI) laws. While a growing number of African states have enacted RTI laws – Zambia became the 28th in December (Africa Freedom of Information Centre, 2024) – significant implementation gaps persist.



Asogwa and Ezema (2017) attribute the poor implementation of RTI laws in Africa to “restrictive clauses, lack of understanding of the laws by public officials and citizens, lack of political will and oversight mechanisms and the inability of institutions to comply with access to information law obligations.”

In a case study of RTI laws in four African countries, the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (2021) found large inconsistencies in compliance with RTI provisions among public institutions in Nigeria and Zimbabwe and concluded that effective implementation is a function of political goodwill and the capacity and commitment of public institutions.

The right of citizen access to public information has been part of Africa’s continental policy discourse for many decades. Article 9(1) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, adopted in 1981, provides that “every individual shall have the right to receive information” (African Union, 1981). To give effect to this provision, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (2013) adopted a model law to provide a blueprint for access-to-information laws and facilitate the work of lawmakers in member states. More recently, the African Union’s (2015) Agenda 2063 (Aspiration 3) and the United Nations’ (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 16) have included specific objectives on public access to information, giving governments, policy actors, and activists clear markers to measure progress and lending momentum to the right of public access to information agenda.

The push for public access to information at continental and global levels is palpable, evidenced in part by the spread of RTI laws. But what are the experiences of ordinary Africans regarding access to public information? Do they think they have the right to access information held by government authorities? How likely do they think it is that they can access such information if they make a request? We draw on the latest Afrobarometer survey data to explore these questions.

Across 39 countries surveyed in 2021/2023, a majority of Africans express support for public access to information such as local government budgets, local government bids and contracts, and even the salaries of public officials and teachers. But although demand for public information is high, few citizens think they could obtain such information.

While public officials may argue in favour of keeping information secret, the data show that access to information is strongly associated with perceptions of corruption and trust: Citizens are more likely to view their elected leaders as corrupt, and less likely to trust them, in countries where access to information is perceived to be difficult.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

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

This analysis is based on 53,444 interviews in 39 countries. The data are weighted to ensure comparable nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

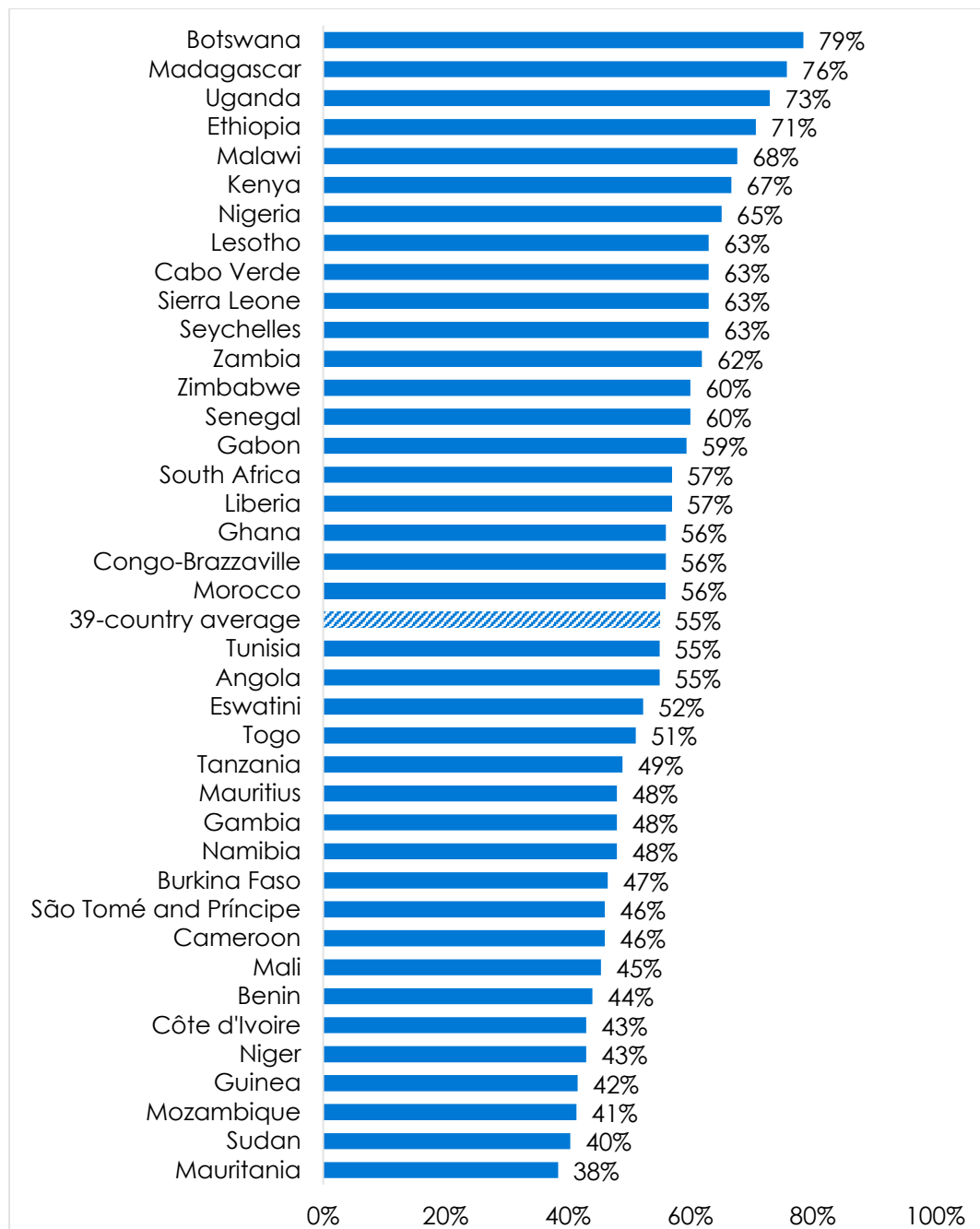
- On average across 39 countries, a majority (55%) of Africans reject the proposition that information held by public officials and agencies is exclusively for government use and should not have to be shared with the public.
 - Popular demand for access to information held by public officials exceeds three-fourths of citizens in Botswana (79%) and Madagascar (76%) but drops as low as 38% in Mauritania.
- Specifically, about eight in 10 respondents say information about local government budgets (81%) and local government bids and contracts (78%) should be accessible to the public. A slimmer majority (55%) favour public access to information about the salaries of local government officials and teachers.
- However, most Africans believe access to this information is restricted. More than seven in 10 respondents consider it unlikely that they could obtain information about local government bids and contracts (72%) and local government budgets (71%), and 65% hold the same view regarding local school budgets.
 - With just two exceptions, no surveyed country records a majority who think they could access any of these types of information. The exceptions are Niger and Zimbabwe, where 52% and 51%, respectively, believe citizens could obtain information about local school budgets.
- Access to information is strongly associated with perceptions of corruption and trust: Citizens who consider it unlikely that they could access local government and school information are more likely to perceive widespread corruption among government officials at all levels, including the Presidency. And trust in local government officials and members of Parliament is much lower in countries where citizens feel they cannot access information about their local governments and schools.

Demand for public access to information

The right to seek and receive information held by public officials or entities is integral to transparent, accountable, and participatory governance. Do Africans believe in their right to public information?

Across 39 countries surveyed in 2021/2023, a majority (55%) reject the idea that information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials (Figure 1). About four in 10 (38%) endorse limiting access to such information, while 7% don't offer an opinion.

Figure 1: Support for public access to information | 39 countries | 2021/2023

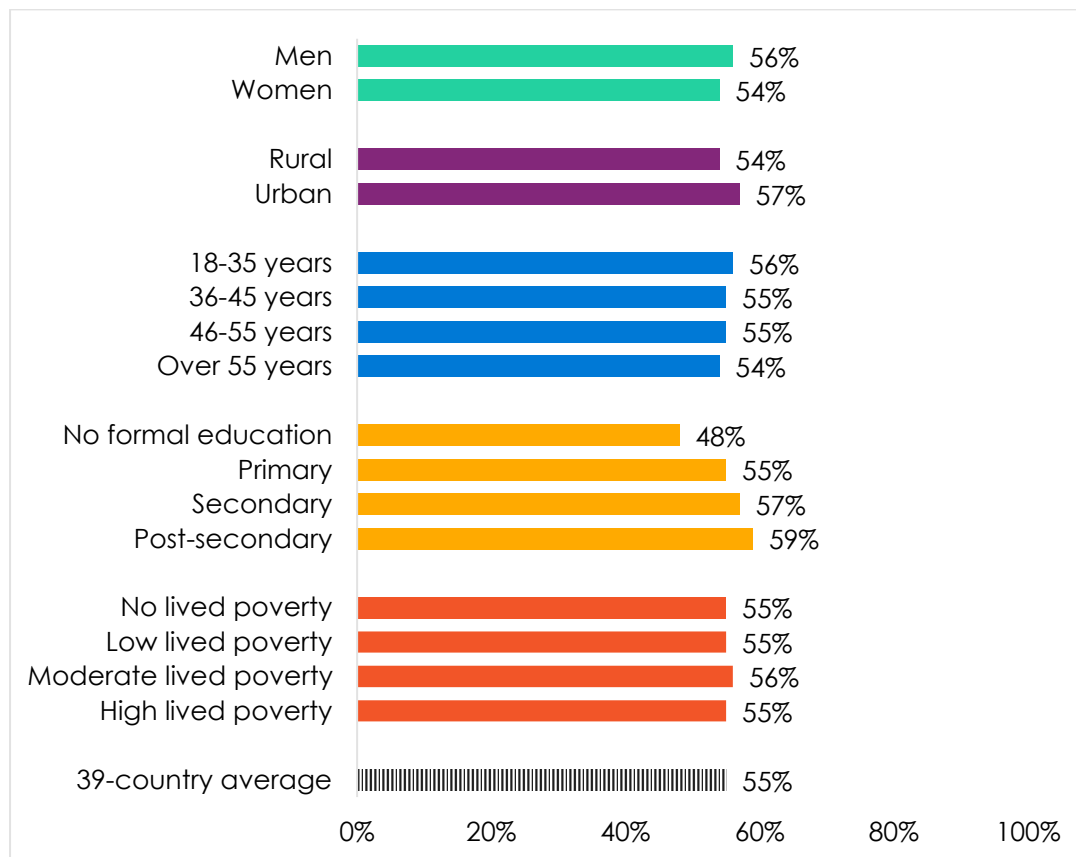


Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public? (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

Majorities in 24 of the 39 surveyed countries support access to information. Demand for public information is particularly high in Botswana (79%), Madagascar (76%), Uganda (73%), and Ethiopia (71%). On the other hand, only about four in 10 respondents in Mauritania (38%), Sudan (40%), Mozambique (41%), and Guinea (42%) are opposed to the notion that information held by public officials is for exclusive use by the government.

Popular support for access to public information does not vary much across respondents' demographic characteristics except for education. Respondents with post-secondary education are significantly more likely to express support for access to public information (59%) compared to those without a formal education (48%). Urban residents are also slightly more likely to demand access to public information (57%) than rural residents (54%) (Figure 2).

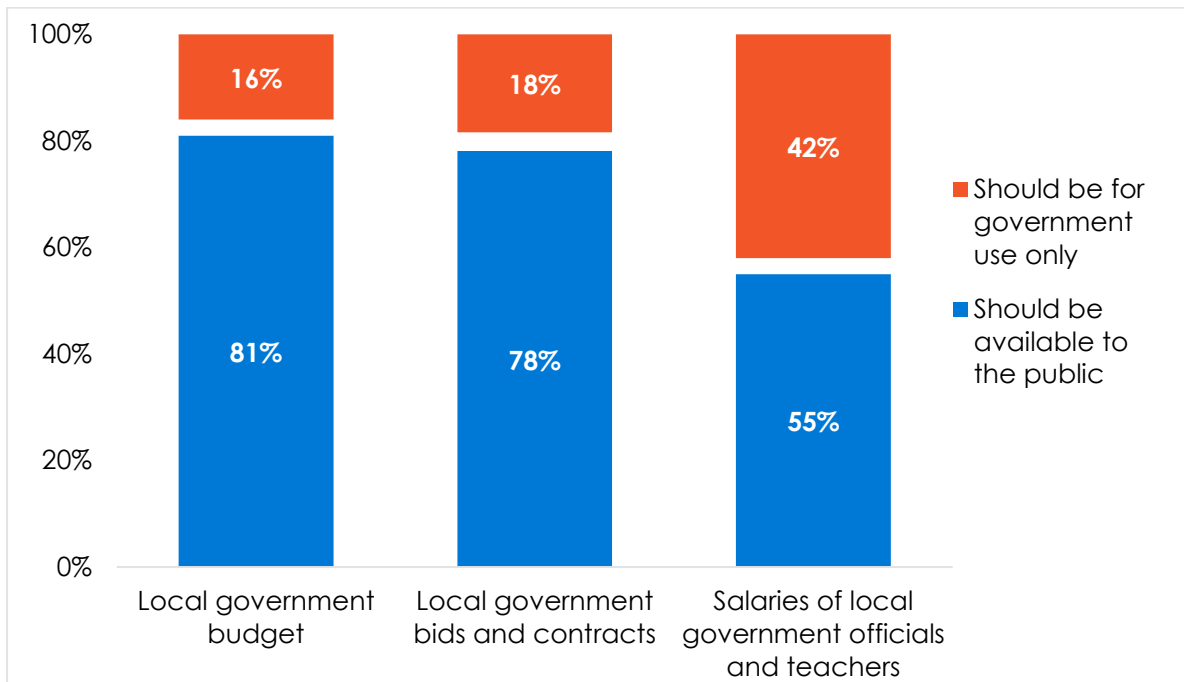
Figure 2: Support for public access to information | by demographic group
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public? (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

Still on the demand side, we asked respondents whether ordinary citizens and the media should have the right to obtain three key pieces of information: local government budgets, local government bids and contracts, and salaries of government officials and teachers. Large majorities support access to local government budgets (81%) and local government bids/contracts (78%), while a slimmer majority (55%) demand access to information about the salaries of government officials and teachers (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Demand for public information | 39 countries* | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: For each of the following, please tell me whether ordinary citizens and news media should have the right to obtain this information from government, or whether government should be allowed to keep the information away from the public?

* Questions about local government budgets and salaries were not asked in Seychelles.

Across 33 countries for which we have comparable data from survey rounds in 2016/2018 and 2021/2023, the share of citizens who support access to public information has stayed about the same on average (Figure 4). But there are notable cross-country changes in this period. Sixteen countries record significant increases (of at least 3 percentage points) in popular demand for access to public information, led by Madagascar (+17 percentage points) and Botswana (+15 points). On the other hand, demand for access to public information declined significantly in 12 countries, with Liberia and Tanzania (-22 percentage points each), the Gambia (-19 points), and Eswatini (-17 points) recording the largest declines.

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.

Figure 4: Change in support for public access to information | 33 countries
 | 2016-2023

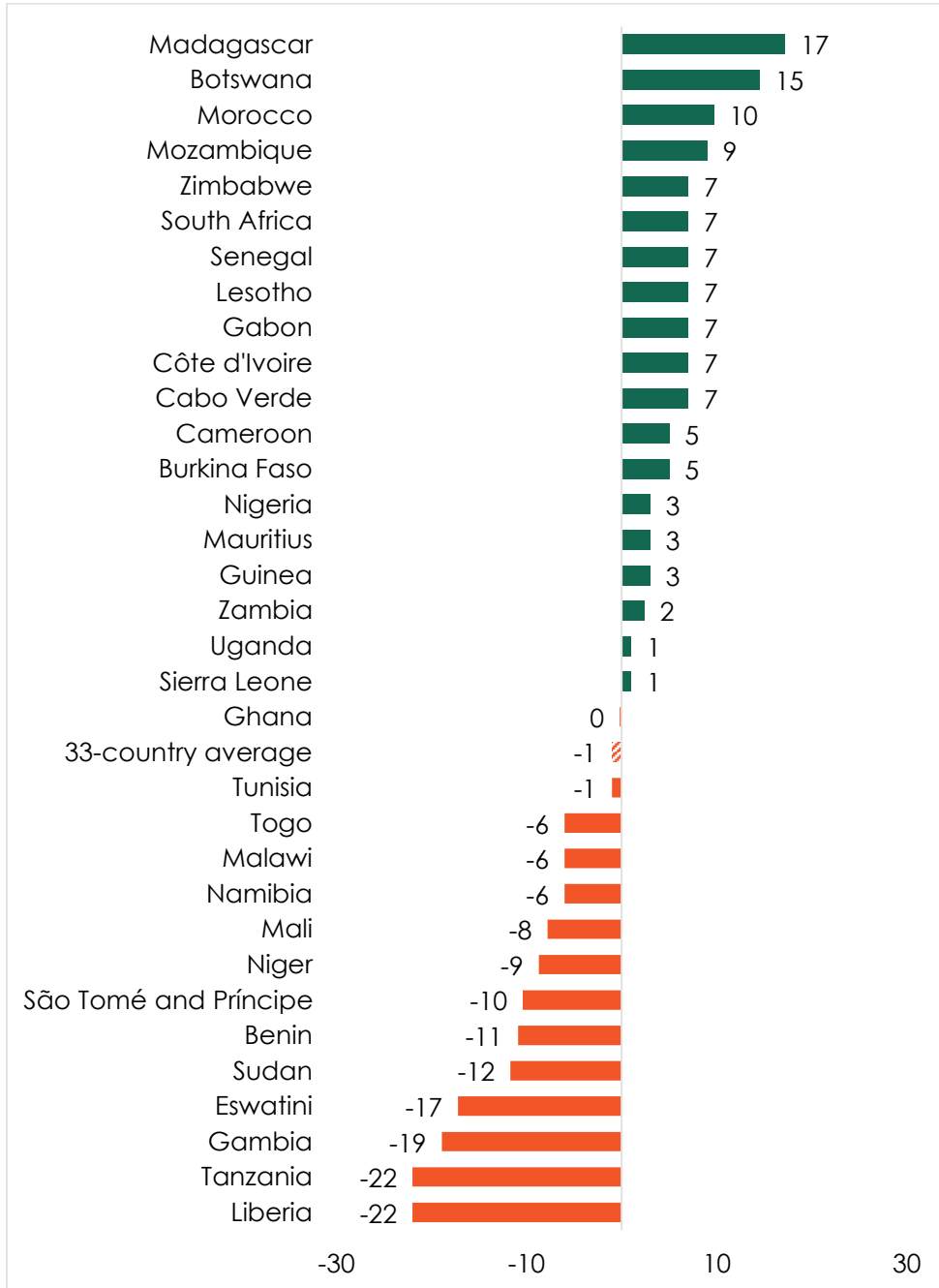


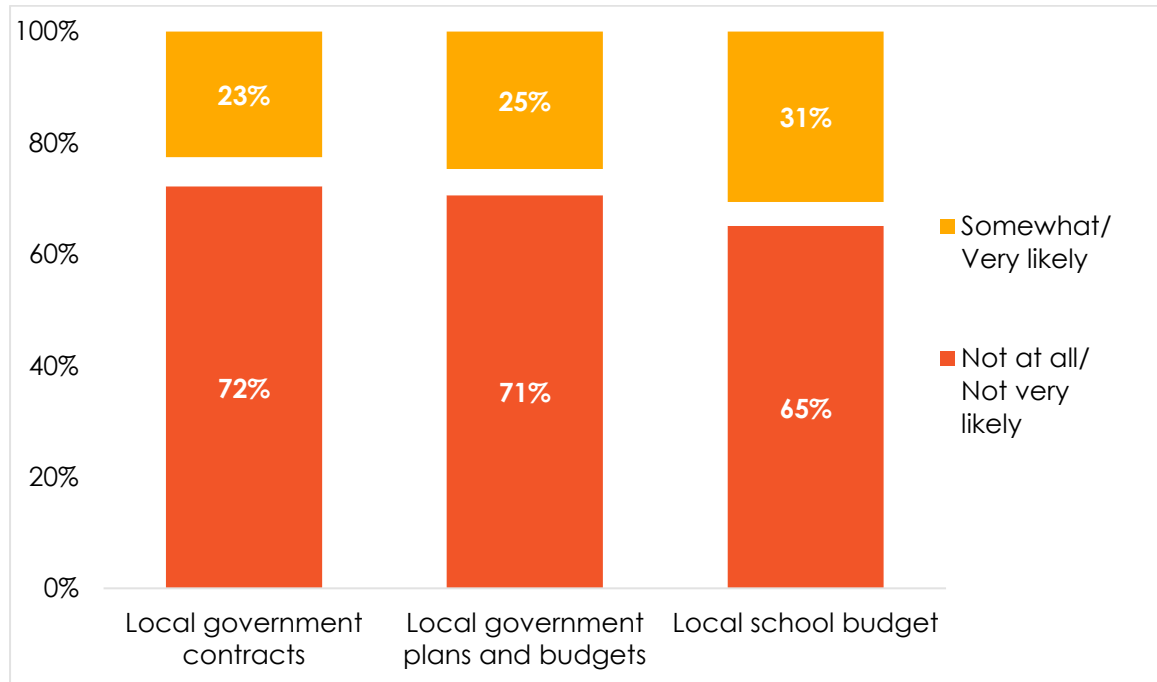
Figure shows change, in percentage points, between 2016/2018 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the following statement: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public.

Supply of public access to information

Demand for access to public information is widespread on the continent and growing in some countries. But do ordinary Africans think they are able to access information held by public authorities? Data from the 39-country survey in 2021/2023 suggest they do not.

Large majorities of Africans say it is “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” that they could access information about local government contracts (72%), local government development plans and budgets (71%), and local school budgets (65%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Access to information held by public officials | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say:

If you contacted the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?

If you contacted your local government office to find out about the local development plan and budget?

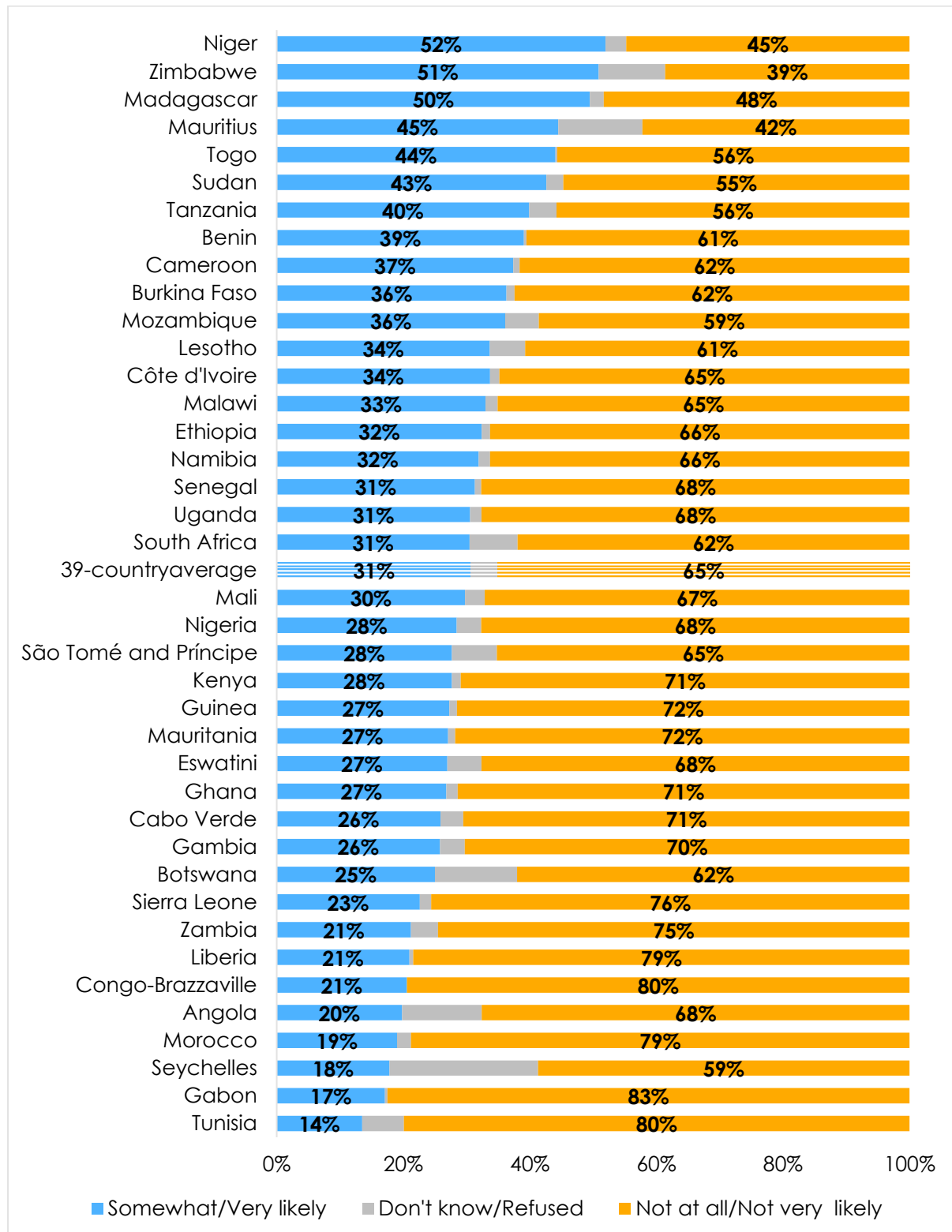
If you contacted your local government office to request to see a contract for a government-funded project or purchase?

Only two countries record majorities who believe they could access information about their local school budgets: Niger (52%) and Zimbabwe (51%). Fewer than one in five citizens share this confidence in Tunisia (14%), Gabon (17%), Seychelles (18%), and Morocco (19%) (Figure 6).

Perceived public access to information about local government development plans and budgets is even more limited. Solid majorities in every surveyed country consider it unlikely that they could access such information, including overwhelming majorities in Congo-Brazzaville (87%), Sierra Leone (85%), Gabon (85%), Morocco (81%), and Liberia (80%) (Figure 7).

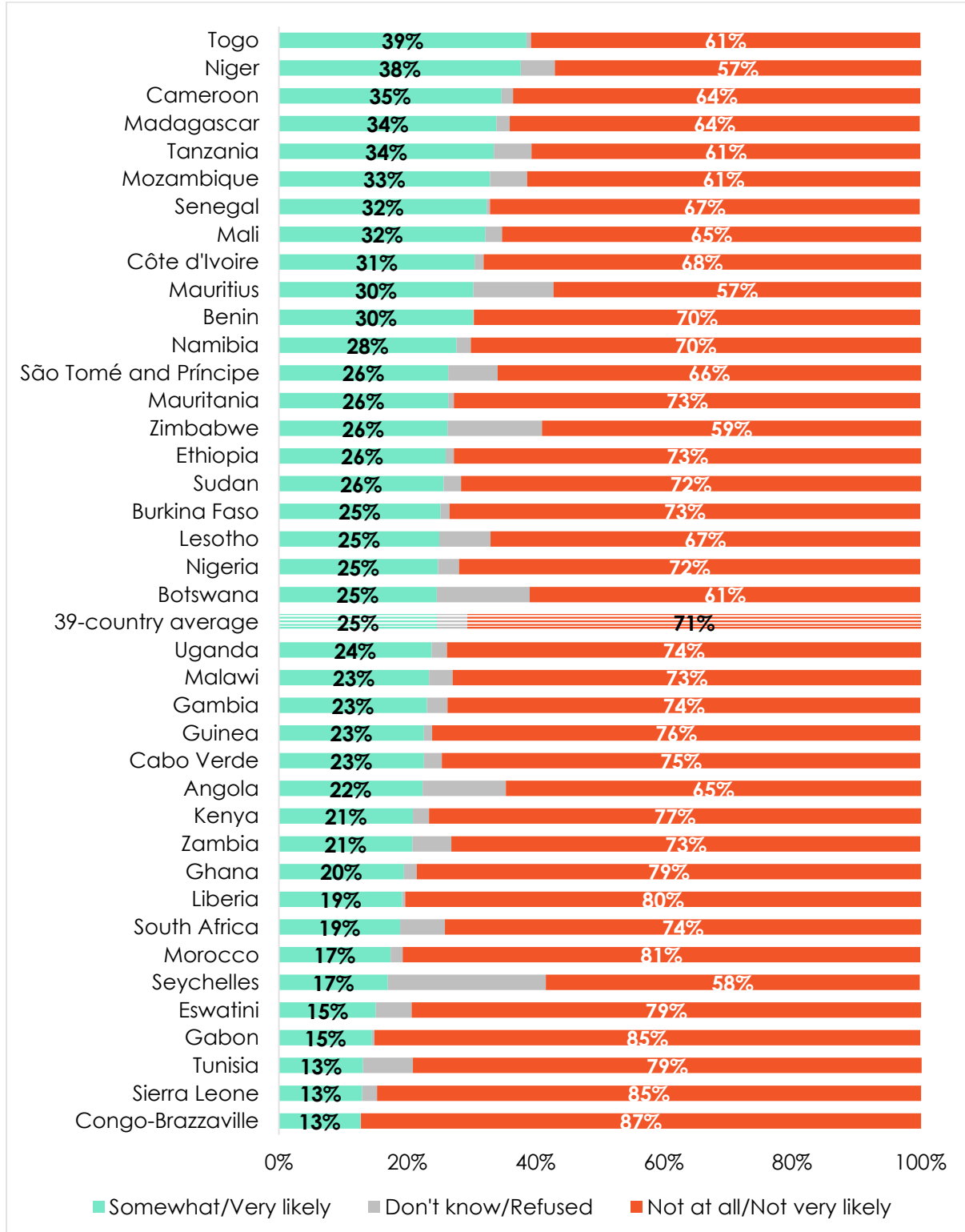
Similarly, perceived access to information about public contracts is extremely limited across the continent. Majorities in all surveyed countries say it is unlikely that they could access local government contracts. Even in Tunisia, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Ghana, and Liberia, which as members of the global Open Government Partnership have voluntarily committed themselves to transparent and accountable governance, more than eight in 10 citizens do not think they could access information about local public contracts (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Access to local school budget | 39 countries | 2021/2023



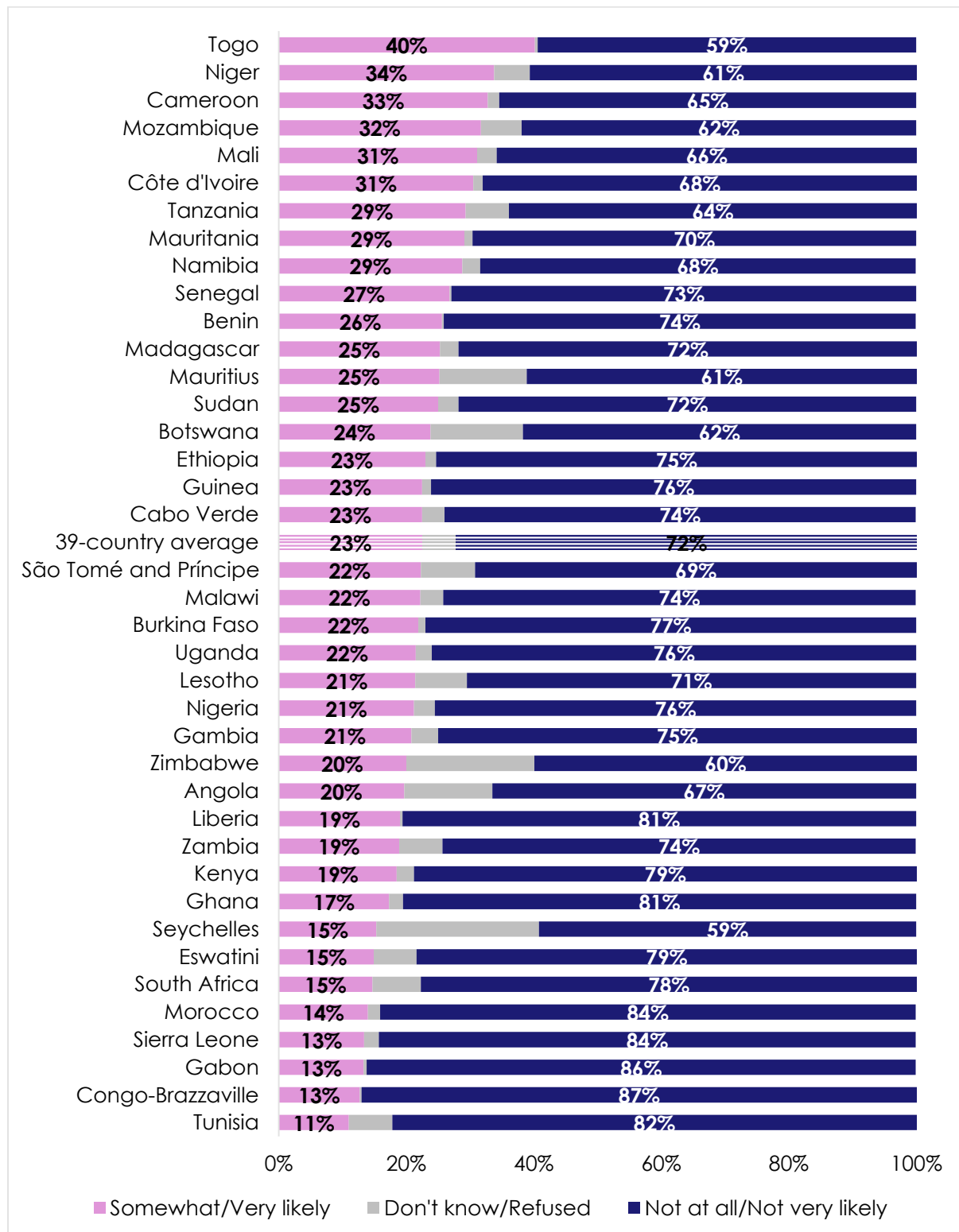
Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you contacted the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?

Figure 7: Access to local government development plan and budget | 39 countries
 | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you contacted your local government office to find out about the local development plan and budget?

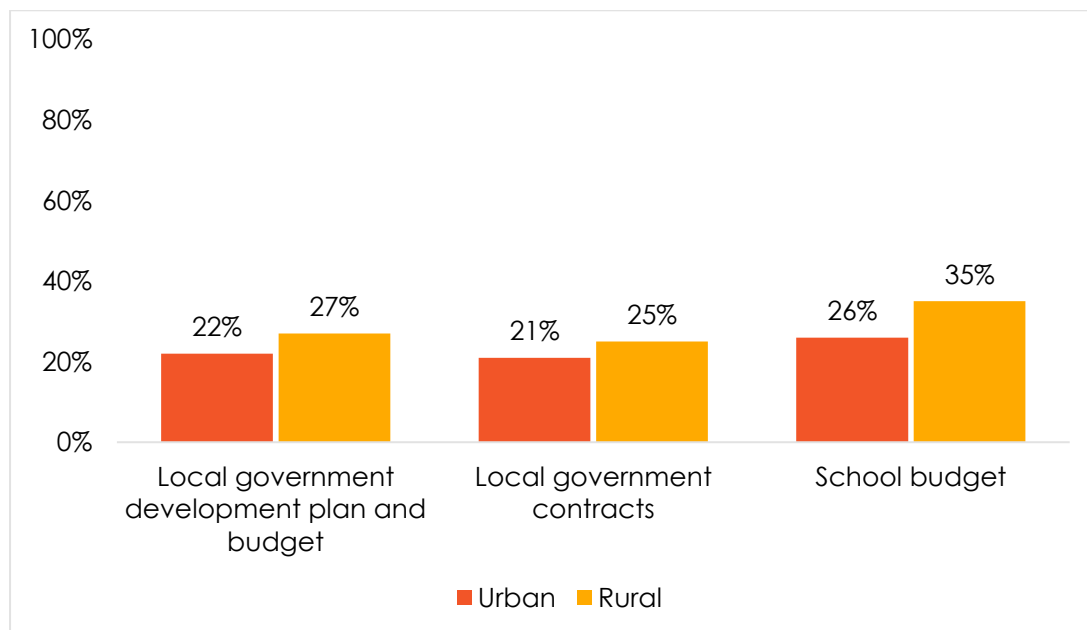
Figure 8: Access to local government contracts | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you contacted your local government office to request to see a contract for a government-funded project or purchase?

Perceptions of the accessibility of public information vary remarkably little by respondents' demographic characteristics. On average across 39 countries, rural residents are somewhat more likely than their urban counterparts to think they could access information about local development plans and budgets (27% vs. 22%), local government contracts (25% vs. 21%), and school budgets (35% vs. 26%) (Figure 9). But other differences are more modest or non-existent, suggesting that no matter citizens' gender, age, education level, or economic status, they are largely getting the same message – that information held by public authorities is not theirs to see.

Figure 9: Access to information held by public officials | by urban-rural location
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say:

If you contacted your local government office to find out about the local development plan and budget?

If you contacted your local government office to request to see a contract for a government-funded project or purchase?

If you contacted the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?

(% "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

Links to public trust and perceptions of corruption

Governments spend significant proportions of their national budgets on contracts with private businesses to provide public goods and services to citizens. Making information about budget allocations and contracts inaccessible to the public is bound to raise suspicion among citizens. Afrobarometer data show that the opacity of public information about government budgets and contracts, especially at the local level, is highly correlated with public perceptions of corruption among officials at all levels of government (Table 1). In countries where access to information about local government plans and budgets is seen as limited, citizens are more likely to view local government councillors, members of Parliament (MPs), and the president and officials in the Presidency as corrupt. Similarly, perceived lack of access to local government contracts and school budgets is associated with increased perceptions of corruption among these officials.

Local government councils and Parliament also suffer a trust deficit when citizens feel they cannot access local government and school information, though the correlation with trust in the president is not statistically significant (Table 2).

Table 1: Access to information and perceived corruption | 39 countries | 2021/2023

	High corruption (most/all of them)		
	Local government councillors	Members of Parliament	President and officials in the Presidency
Access to local government plans and budgets not very likely/not at all likely	.527**	.553**	.437**
Access to local government contracts not very likely/not at all likely	.494**	.550**	.439**
Access to school budgets not very likely/not at all likely	.472**	.435**	.342*

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 of them" or "all of them")

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: Data are not available on perceived corruption among MPs in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan, and Tunisia, and on perceived corruption among local government councillors in Angola and Seychelles.

Table 2: Access to information and trust | 39 countries | 2021/2023

	Trust (somewhat/a lot)		
	Local government council	Parliament	President
Access to local government plans and budgets not very likely/not at all likely	-.584**	-.418*	-0.224
Access to local government contracts not very likely/not at all likely	-.551**	-.476**	-0.258
Access to school budgets not very likely/not at all likely	-.520**	-.395*	-0.111

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

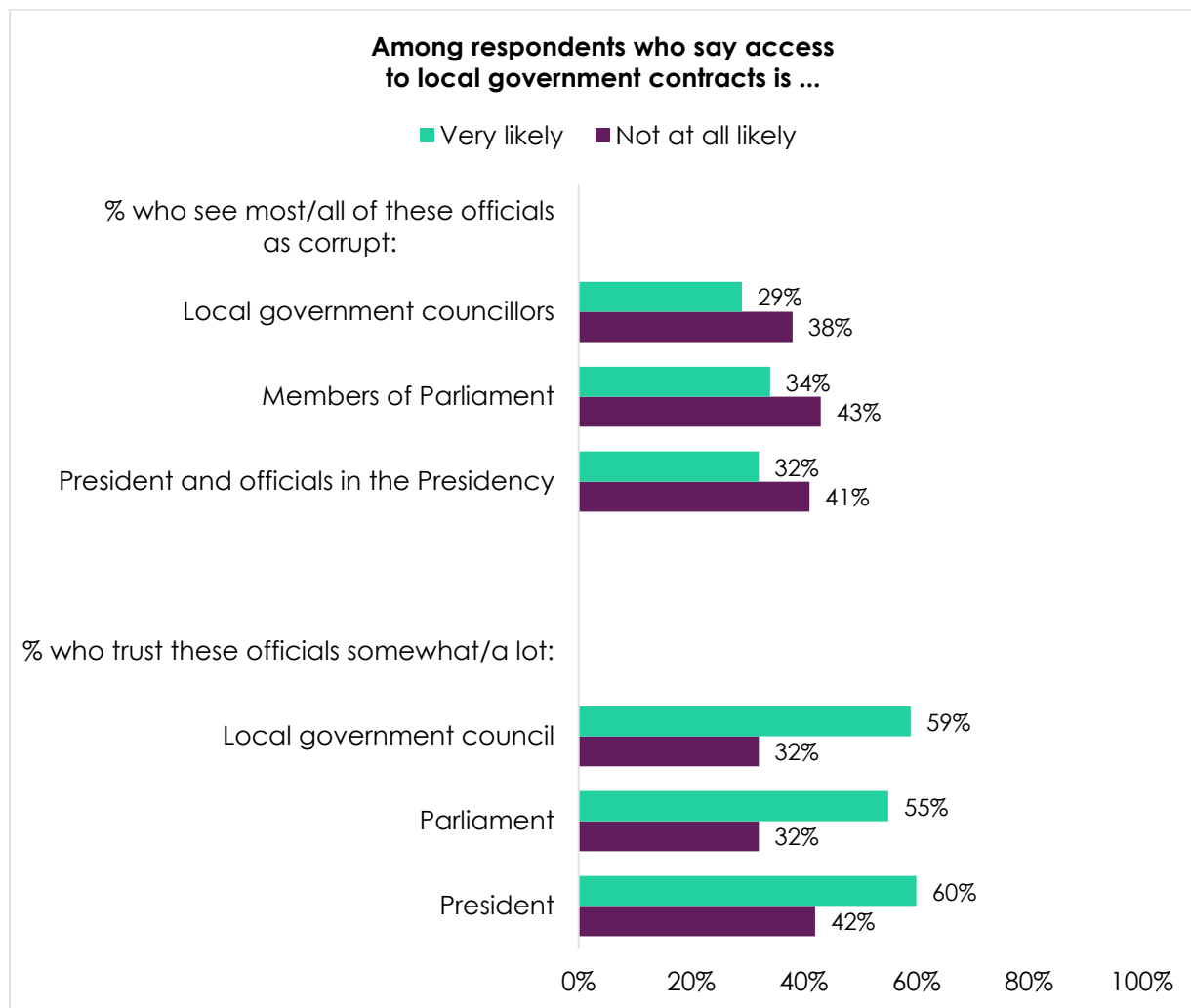
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: Data are not available on trust in Parliament in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan, and Tunisia, and on trust in local government councils in Angola and Seychelles.

Figure 10 illustrates the association between access to information about local government contracts and perceptions of government officials at all levels. On average across 39 countries, assessments of local government councillors, MPs, and officials in the Presidency as mostly corrupt are more common – by 9 percentage points – among respondents who say getting access to such information is "not at all likely" than among those who consider such access "very likely."

And trust in these officials drops by 18-27 percentage points between the "very likely access" and "not at all likely access" groups.

Figure 10: Access to information and perceptions of government officials
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked:

How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you contacted your local government office to request to see a contract for a government-funded project or purchase?

How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

While these correlations do not prove that a perceived lack of transparency causes mistrust and greater public perceptions of corruption among elected officials, it is plausible to consider, and to explore in further research, the role that shielding public information from public view might play in citizens' assessments of their government.

Of particular interest is that the actions or inactions of government officials at the local level, those closest to citizens, are correlated with public views about the entire government. While officials at the national level – such as MPs and officials in the Presidency – may question why citizens view them as corrupt, these results suggest part of an answer: The actions of public officials at the local level, in this case shielding public information from citizens, may matter for how citizens view government officials at all levels.

Conclusion

Transparency and accountability are core tenets of a functioning democracy. Citizens, the principals of a democratic society, have the right to information held by public officials, a right that is guaranteed in regional and international instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Article 9) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19) (United Nations, 1948). Afrobarometer survey data reveal that a majority of African citizens want to exercise this right: They want information held by public officials to be accessible to them, including information about local government budgets, contracts, and related spending plans as well as the salaries and benefits of public officials. Unfortunately, a vast majority of citizens say they are unlikely to be able to access any of this information if they try.

While the global and continental push for government transparency has strengthened over the years, resulting in a growing number of right-to-information laws in Africa, access to public information remains restricted for most citizens. Survey findings suggest that advocates of transparent and accountable governance may need to explore new strategies if they want to advance the RTI agenda.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 9 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 9 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Feb.-March 2022	2019
Benin	Jan. 2022	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020
Botswana	June-July 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Burkina Faso	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Cabo Verde	July-Aug. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019
Cameroon	March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Congo-Brazzaville	June-July 2023	NA
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019
Eswatini	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Ethiopia	May-June 2023	2013, 2020
Gabon	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2015, 2017, 2020
Gambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2018, 2021
Ghana	April 2022	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Guinea	Aug. 2022	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019
Kenya	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Liberia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
Madagascar	April-May 2022	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Feb. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Mali	July 2022	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Mauritania	Nov. 2022	NA
Mauritius	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Morocco	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Mozambique	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021
Namibia	Oct.-Nov. 2021	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Niger	June 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Nigeria	March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020
São Tomé and Príncipe	Dec. 2022	2015, 2018
Senegal	May-June 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021
Seychelles	Dec. 2022	NA
Sierra Leone	June-July 2022	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
South Africa	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021
Sudan	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Tanzania	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Togo	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Uganda	Jan. 2022	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Zambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Zimbabwe	March-April 2022	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021

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