

Land redistribution: South Africans prioritize land taken in forced removals, support 'willing seller' approach

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 254 | Sibusiso Nkomo

Summary

In 1913, South Africa's Land Act set aside 87% of the country's land for exclusive use and ownership by white people, helping to divide the nation into a relatively prosperous white heartland and a cluster of increasingly impoverished black reserves on the periphery and within cities (Walker, 2017). More than a century later, South Africa is still struggling to redress this historical injustice and the inequality it continues to foster.

In December 2017, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) resolved to move ahead with land expropriation without compensation to speed up its land-reform program, although a multitude of policy details remain hotly contested (Grootes, 2018). The National Assembly has adopted a motion by the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) endorsing this approach despite warnings of economic meltdown from the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) (Goba, 2018). While the public debate rages on, Parliament's Joint Constitutional Review Committee has been reviewing comments and submissions on the issue and is expected to announce its recommendation in November regarding a possible constitutional amendment (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2018).

How do average citizens view land reform? Findings from the 2018 Afrobarometer survey show that South Africans want the government to prioritize redistributing land taken during forced removals of Black South Africans half a century ago, followed by agricultural land and vacant land in cities. But the survey also shows majority support for the government's "willing seller-willing buyer" policy and for the right of farmers to retain ownership of land tenanted by laborers.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys were completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by Plus94 Research and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2012, and 2015.

Key findings

- When asked which type of land the government should prioritize for redistribution, more than eight out of 10 South Africans (84%) state a priority; only one in 20 (5%) say that land should not be redistributed.
- The most frequently cited priority for land redistribution is land taken away during the government's forcible removals of black South Africans, followed by agricultural land and urban vacant land.
- A slim majority (53%) of citizens say the government should maintain its "willing seller-willing buyer" policy in acquiring property, including paying the seller. Only 26% disagree.
- A majority (55%) of respondents say the government should allow farmers to retain ownership of land on which their laborers live. The strongest support for farmers retaining ownership is in Limpopo (71%) and the Western Cape (64%).
- More than half (55%) of respondents think it's unlikely they could obtain information about who owns land in their community from a deeds office.
- Three-fourths (76%) of South Africans say women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land.

Land redistribution

The nonprofit Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy reported last year that more than 20% of agricultural land had been transferred from white to black ownership under the government's land-reform program, against a target of 30% set in 1994 (Phakathi, 2017). But the slow pace has fueled intense debate over the best ways to redress inequalities in access to and rights over land (Walker, 2017).

When Afrobarometer asked survey respondents which type of land the government should prioritize for redistribution, more than eight out of 10 (84%) state their priority; only one in 20 (5%) say that land should not be redistributed, while 10% say they "don't know" or refuse to answer the question.

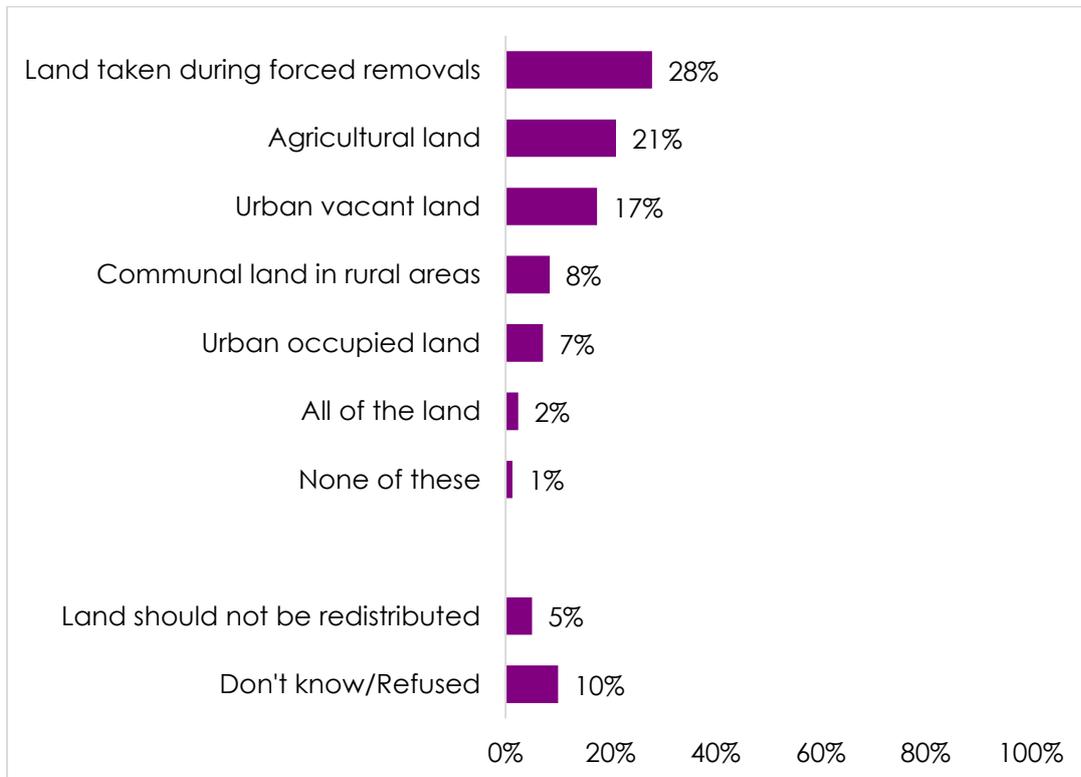
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The most frequently cited citizen priority for land redistribution, cited by 28% of respondents, is land taken away during the government's forcible removals of black South Africans. According to the Overcoming Apartheid – Building Democracy project

(2018), between 1960 and 1983, the apartheid government forcibly moved 3.5 million Black citizens in order to divide and control racially separate communities. African farm laborers made up the largest number of forcibly removed people, to be replaced by mechanized agriculture. Removals were an essential tool of the apartheid government's Bantustan (or homeland) policy aimed at stripping black Africans of political rights as well as their citizenship in South Africa.

The next-highest priorities for land redistribution, according to survey respondents, are agricultural land (21%) and urban vacant land (17%). Smaller numbers of citizens say the government should prioritize communal land in rural areas (8%), urban occupied land (7%), or all land (2%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Type of land government should prioritize for land redistribution | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: *In recent months, the government has held several meetings to debate land distribution and the methods of land acquisition. In your own opinion, which of the following types of land should government prioritize for redistribution?*

As might be expected, the view that land taken by forced removals should be prioritized for redistribution is somewhat more common among Black African (29%) and Coloured (26%) respondents (Figure 2). It is also more frequently held by older citizens (43% of those over age 65), perhaps because they are most likely to have experienced the forced removals. The wealthiest South Africans (those who experience no “lived poverty”¹) are somewhat more likely to prioritize redistributing land taken in forced removals (33%) than their less-wealthy counterparts. Views differ little based on employment status, education level, rural vs. urban location, and gender.

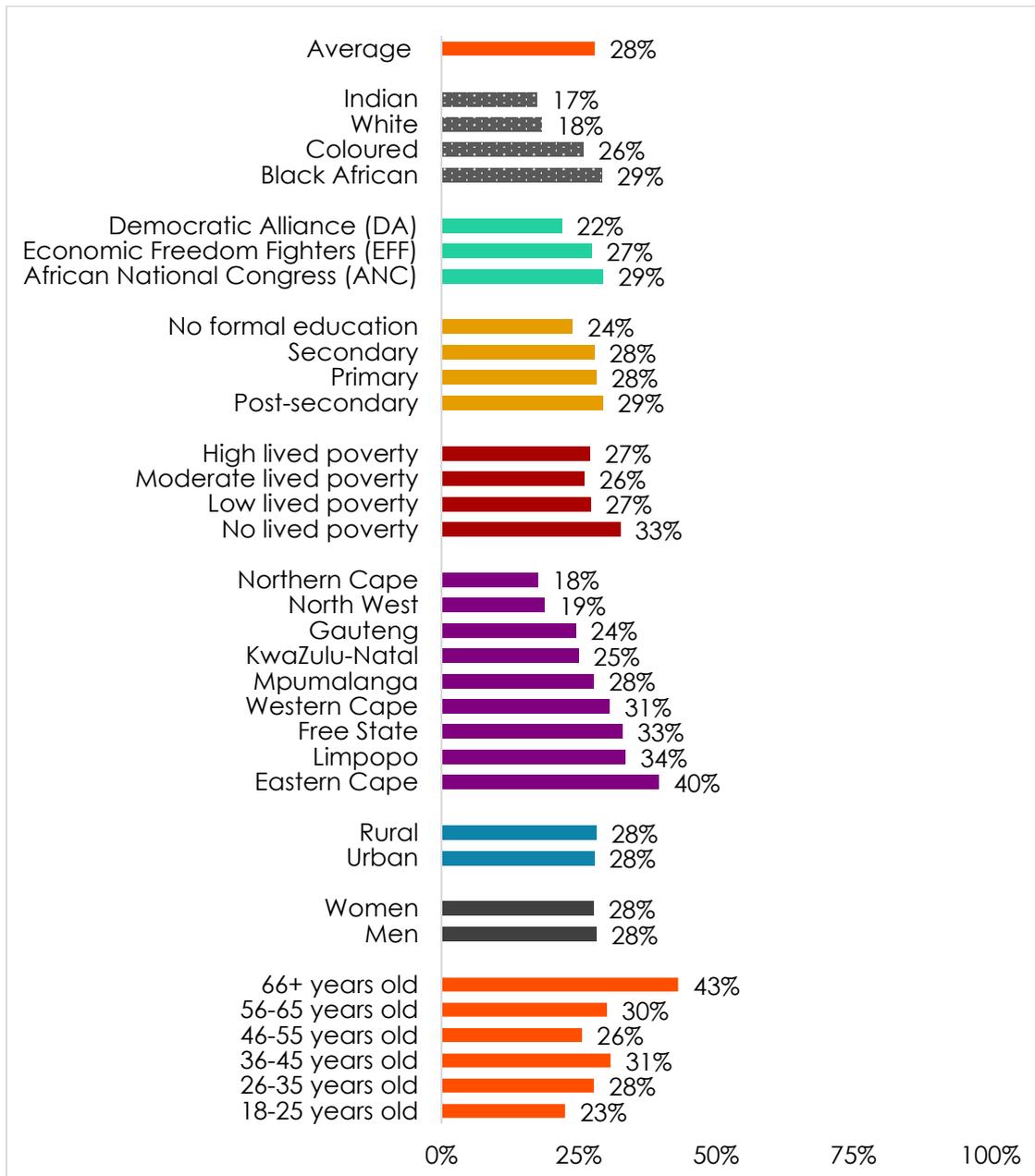
This prioritization of land taken during forced removals is most frequently cited in the Eastern Cape (40%), Limpopo (34%), Free State (33%), and Western Cape (31%), provinces that make up the agricultural heartlands of South Africa.

Supporters of the ANC are most likely to prioritize land taken during forced removals (29%, compared to 27% of EFF and 22% of DA supporters).²

¹ Afrobarometer assesses respondents’ “lived poverty” based on responses to the following questions: “Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?”

² Afrobarometer determines party identification based on responses to the questions “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

Figure 2: Prioritize land taken during forced removals | by socio-demographic group
 | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: In recent months, the government has held several meetings to debate land distribution and the methods of land acquisition. In your own opinion, which of the following types of land should government prioritize for redistribution? (% who say "land taken during forced removals")

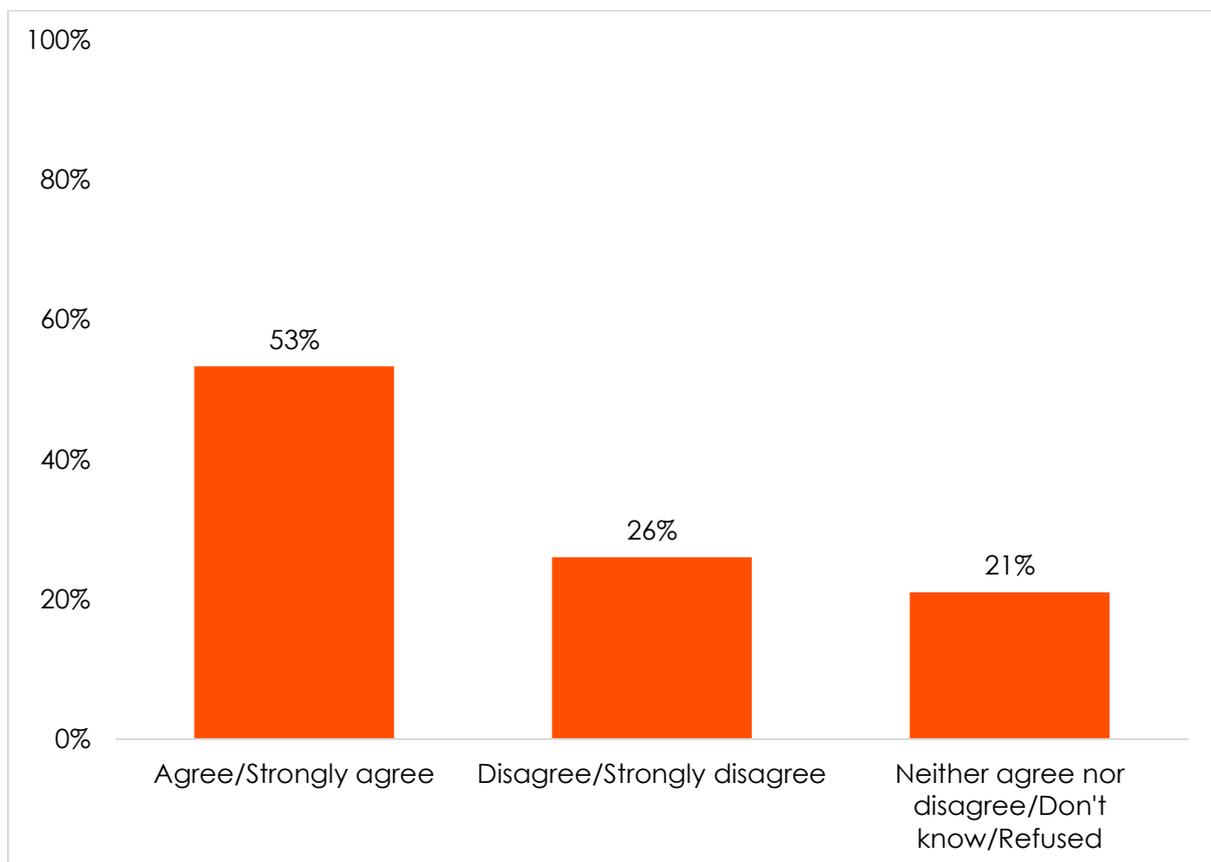
Land ownership policy

Until now, South Africa's government has followed a "willing buyer-willing seller" policy to redistribute land from white owners to black beneficiaries. However, many landowners have avoided offering their land for sale for land-reform purposes and chosen to go to the open market instead, and since the state does not have the power of first refusal and intended beneficiaries have to compete for available land at market prices, the redistribution process has been slow (Lahiff, 2005).

Even so, the survey shows that a majority (53%) of citizens want the government to maintain the “willing seller-willing buyer” policy, including paying the seller. Only one in four (26%) disagree, while one in five say they neither agree nor disagree or don’t know (Figure 3).

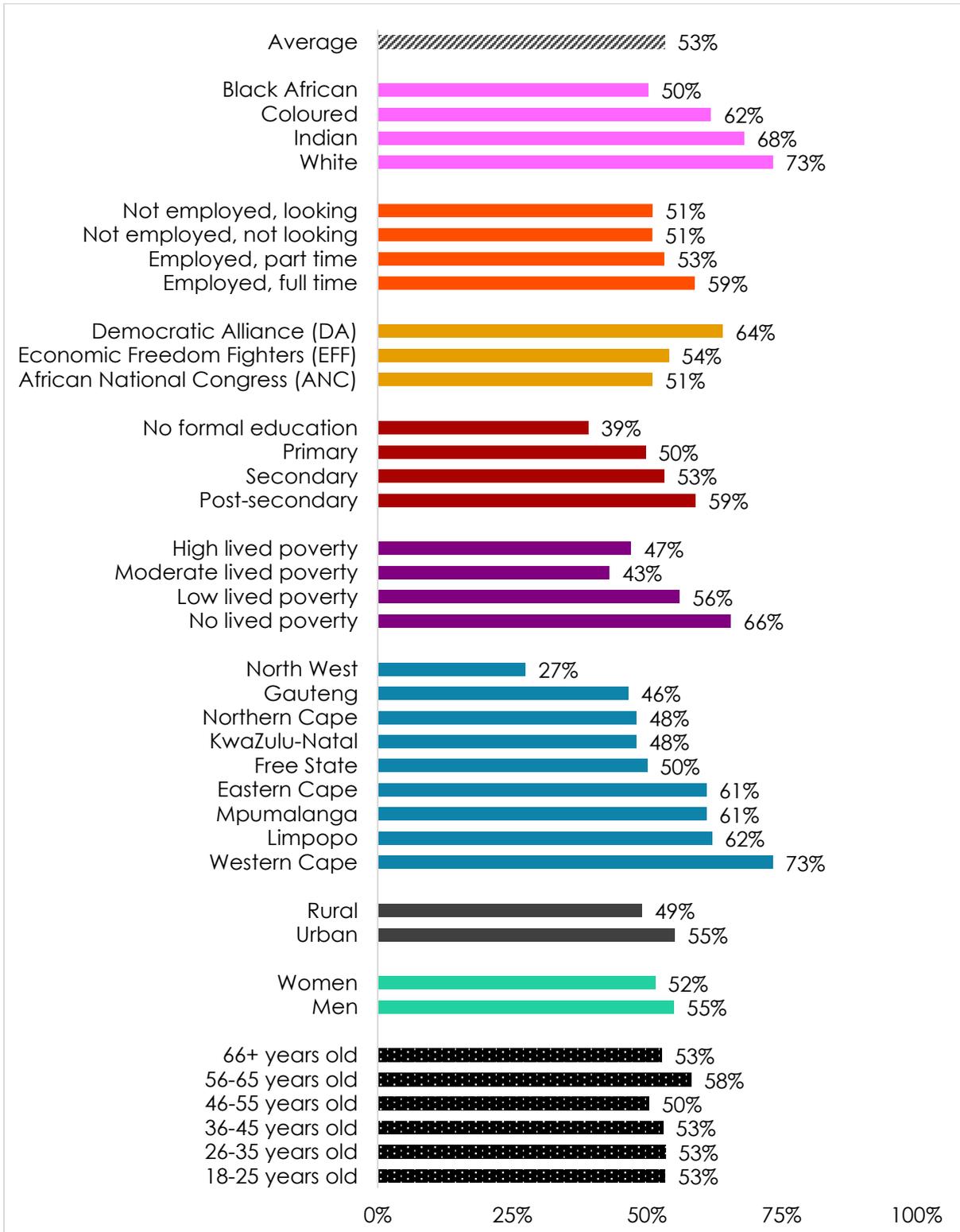
Black African citizens are least likely to agree with keeping this policy (50%, vs. 62% of Coloured, 68% of Indian, and 73% of white respondents) (Figure 4). Those who have full-time employment, the highly educated, and the wealthy are more likely to favour the policy than the unemployed, the less educated, and the poor. The policy is more popular among DA supporters (64%) than among adherents of the EFF (54%) and the ANC (51%). Support for keeping the “willing seller-willing buyer” policy is strongest in the Western Cape (73%) and weakest in the North West (27%).

Figure 3: Government should abide by ‘willing seller-willing buyer’ policy | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The government must abide by the policy of willing buyer-willing seller in acquiring any property, including paying the current owners?

Figure 4: Government should abide by 'willing seller-willing buyer' policy
 | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The government must abide by the policy of willing buyer-willing seller in acquiring any property, including paying the current owners? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

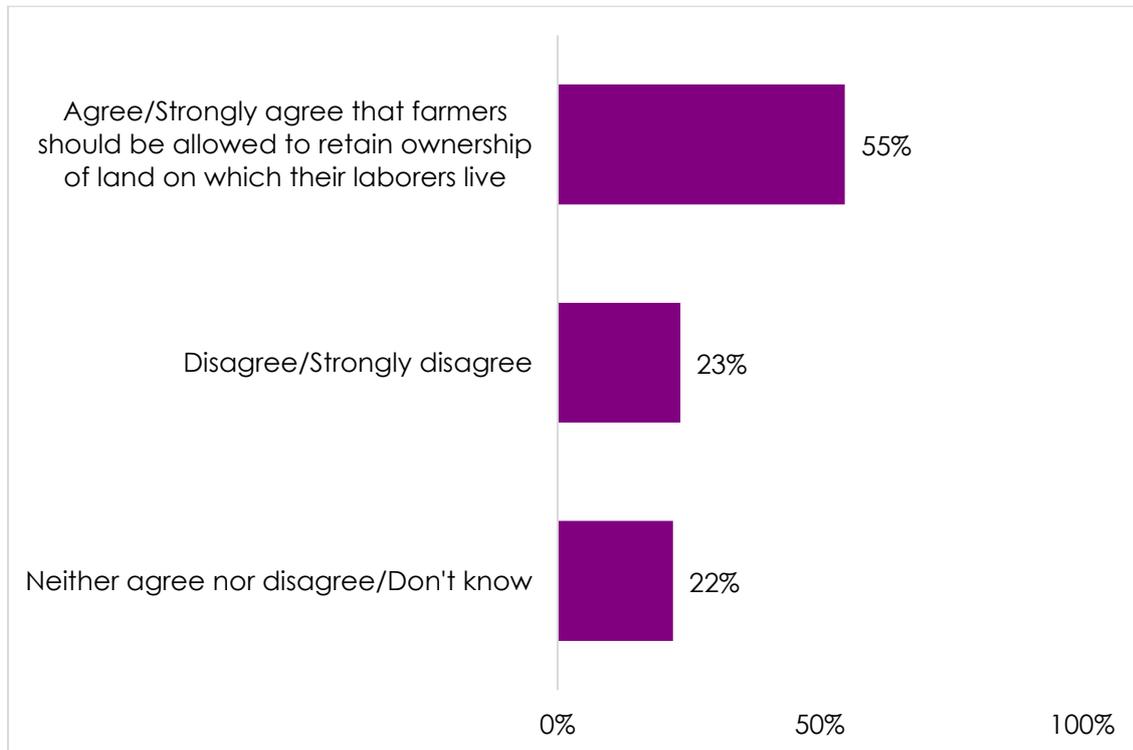
Farmers' ownership of land with laborers

Farm laborers in South Africa tend to be tenants who do not own the land they live on or use. Labor tenancy goes back to the 1930s when farm owners started allowing people to live, raise livestock, and grow crops on their farms in exchange for their labor (Philips, 2016). Restrictions on permitted forms of tenancy on white-owned farms aimed to separate Africans from independent production and change labor tenants into wage laborers (Hall, 2004).

In 1996, Parliament passed the Labour Tenants Act to protect tenants' rights, including against eviction. In 2014, then-Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa called for a moratorium on farm evictions, over the protests of organized agriculture (City Press, 2014).

Unexpectedly, Afrobarometer data show that a majority (55%) of citizens "agree" or "strongly agree" that the government should allow farmers to retain ownership of land on which their laborers live. About one-fourth (23%) disagree, while about the same proportion say they neither agree nor disagree or "don't know" (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Farmers' ownership of land tenanted by laborers | South Africa | 2018

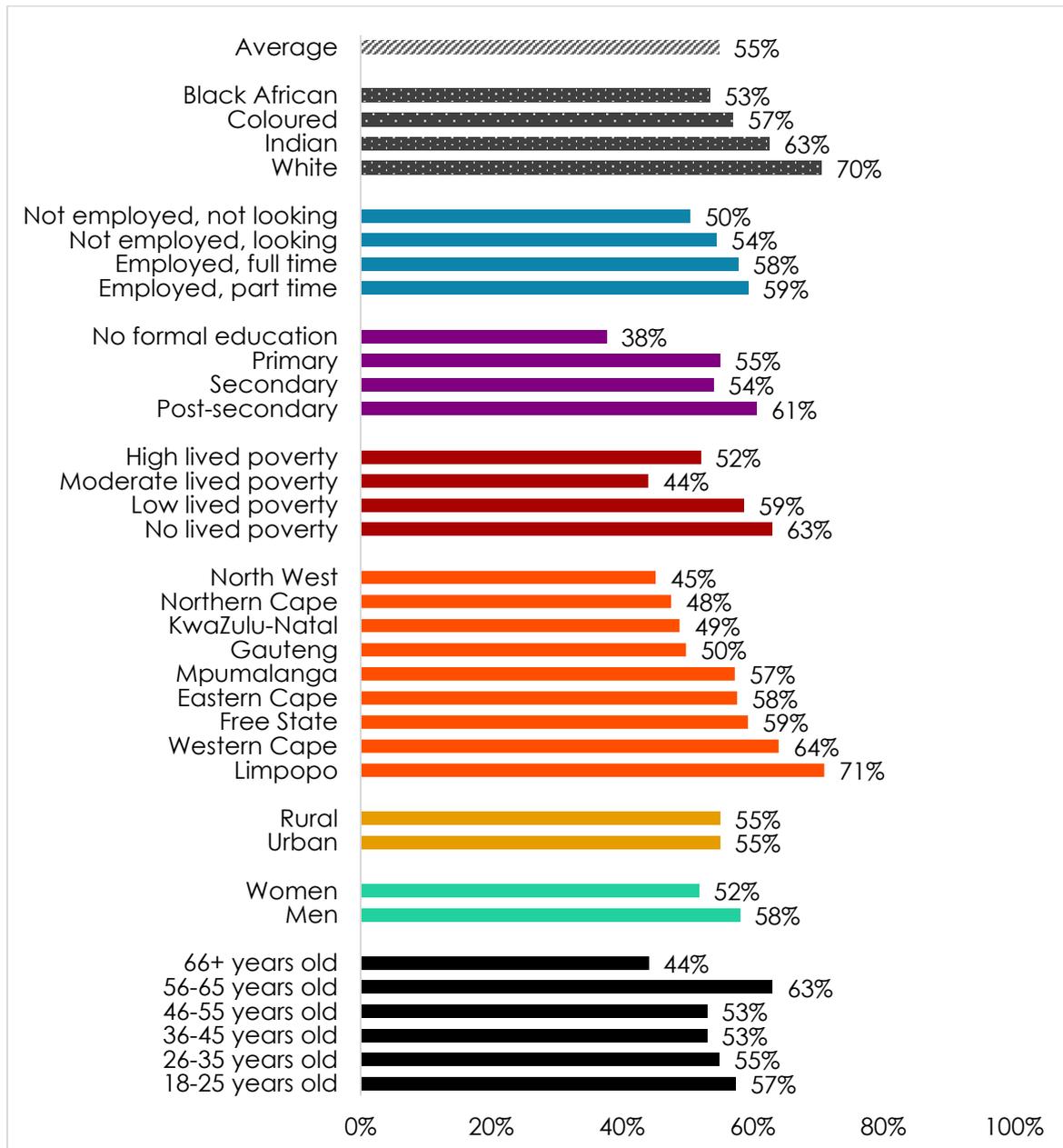


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The government should allow farmers to retain ownership of land on which their laborers live?

Not surprisingly, White respondents (70%) are more likely to agree that farmers should be allowed to retain ownership of tenanted land than Black citizens (53%) (Figure 6). Agreement is also stronger among the employed, the educated, wealthier respondents, and men than among the unemployed, those without formal education, poorer respondents, and women. Rural and urban residents hold identical views on this question.

Support for this policy is highest in Limpopo (71%) and Western Cape (64%) and lowest in North West (45%) and Northern Cape (48%).

Figure 6: Farmers should retain ownership of land tenanted by laborers
 | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The government should allow farmers to retain ownership of land on which their laborers live? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Acquisition and control of land

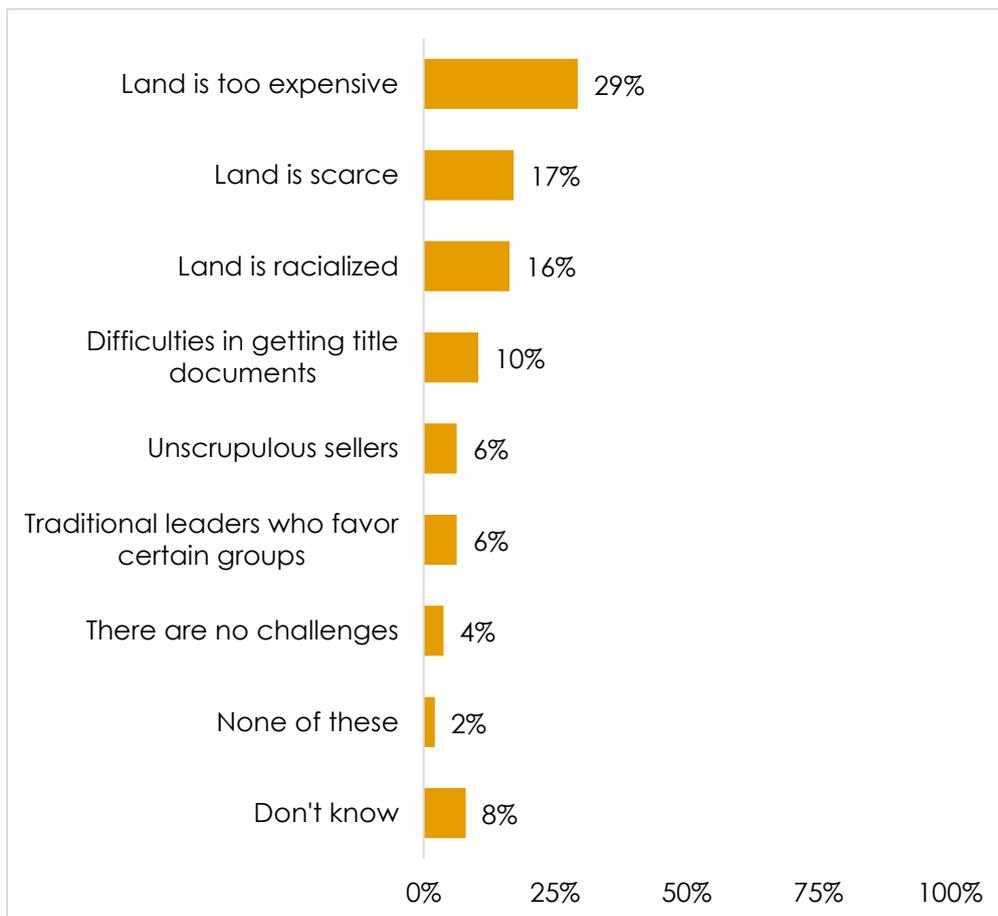
Land acquisition is a hot issue in South Africa, both in rural areas and in big cities, where an influx of people leads to crowded slums with poor public services and frequent service-delivery protests. In Cape Town, for example, gentrification and business development of old neighborhoods close to the city have sparked protests from locals who can no longer afford the steeply rising property rates (BBC, 2018).

In rural areas, the government has been at loggerheads with traditional leaders over communal land. While some reformers in the ANC want to provide people on communal

land with direct property ownership, traditional leaders resist losing control over access to resources on such lands (Stoddard, 2018). The Constitutional Court, in a recent ruling against a mining company, affirmed control of communal land directly by the community rather than traditional leaders (Nicholson, 2018).

When asked what they consider the greatest challenge for people wishing to buy land in South Africa, citizens' most frequent response is that land is too expensive (29%), followed by the scarcity (17%) of land and its "racialization," or lingering effects of past racial policies that hindered land acquisition by non-White citizens (16%). One in 10 (10%) mention difficulties in getting title documents (Figure 7).

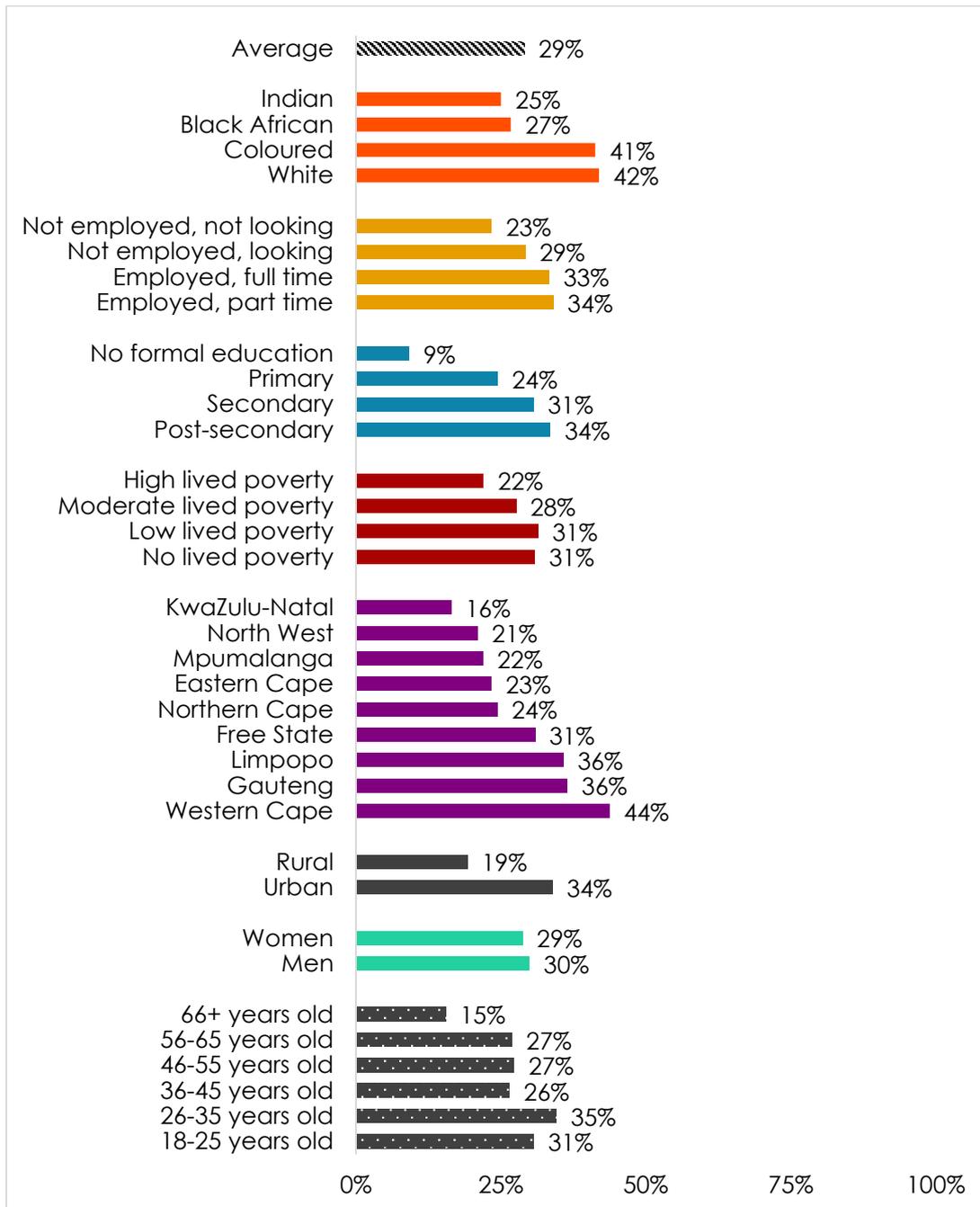
Figure 7: Greatest challenge to acquiring land | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: Let us talk for a moment about the challenges in the acquisition of land in South Africa. In your opinion, which of the following is the greatest challenge for individuals wishing to acquire land in South Africa today?

White and Coloured citizens, the employed, the highly educated, and the wealthy – in short, those most likely to be able to buy land – are more likely to cite high price as a challenge than are Black citizens, the unemployed, the less educated, and the poor (Figure 8). Land prices are of particular concern in the Western Cape (44%), Gauteng (36%), and Limpopo (36%), as well as among younger respondents (31%-35% among those aged 18-35).

Figure 8: Land is too expensive to acquire | by socio-demographic group
 | South Africa | 2018

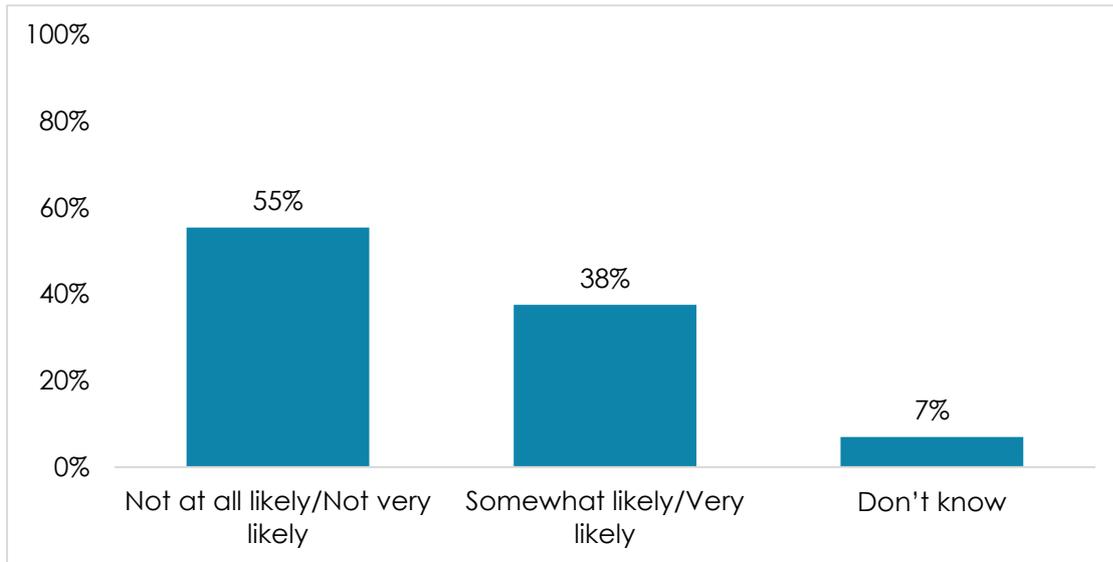


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following is the greatest challenge for individuals wishing to acquire land in South Africa today? (% who say land is too expensive)

In addition to asking about challenges in acquiring land, Afrobarometer asked respondents whether they think they could access information about who owns a piece of land in their community. More than half (55%) say it is “not at all likely” or “not very likely” that they could obtain this information from a deeds office (Figure 9). This finding is somewhat surprising since there are 11 deeds offices across the country in all provinces, each with centralized

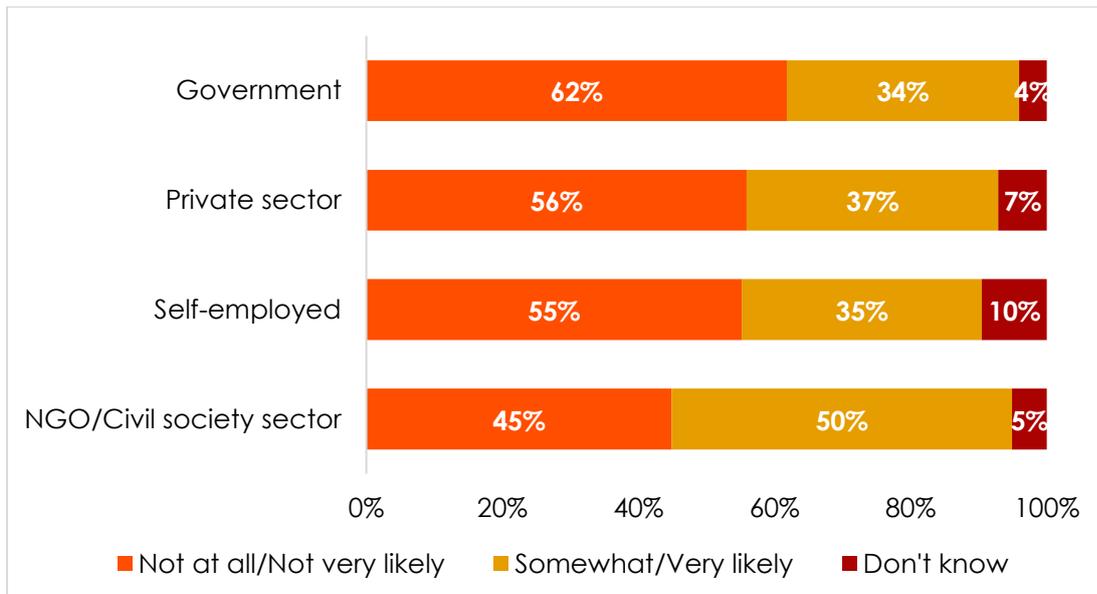
information on land (South African Government, 2018). Curiously, respondents employed by the government are more doubtful about their ability to obtain such information (62%) than those employed in the private sector (56%), the self-employed (55%), and those in the civil-society sector (45%) (Figure 10). Urban dwellers are less confident in their ability to find out who owns land than rural residents (58% vs. 49% who say “not very likely” or “not at all likely,” not shown).

Figure 9: Access to information about land ownership | South Africa | 2018



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 went to the deeds office to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?

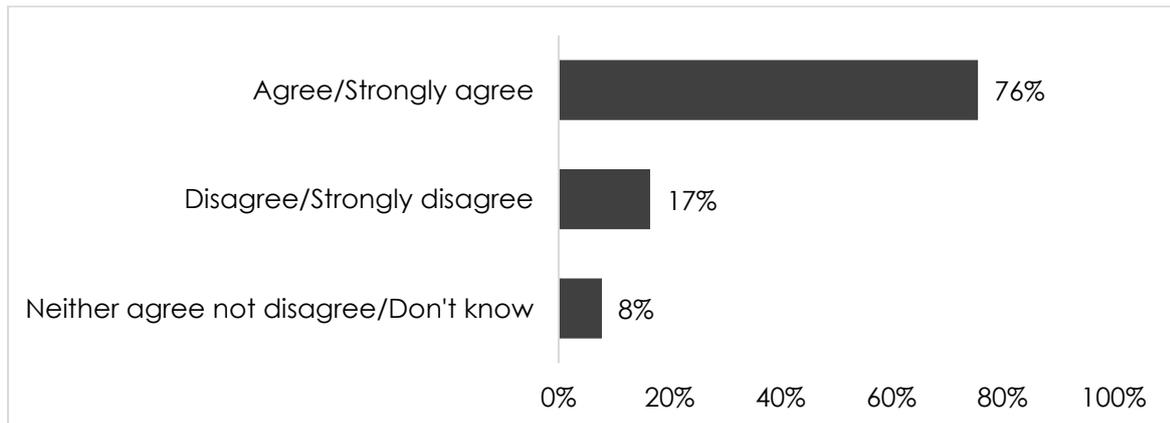
Figure 10: Access to information about land ownership | by employer of respondent | South Africa | 2018



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 went to the deeds office to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?

When it comes to who should be able to own land, most South Africans believe in gender equality: Three-fourths (76%) of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Women should have same rights as men to own and inherit land | South Africa | 2018

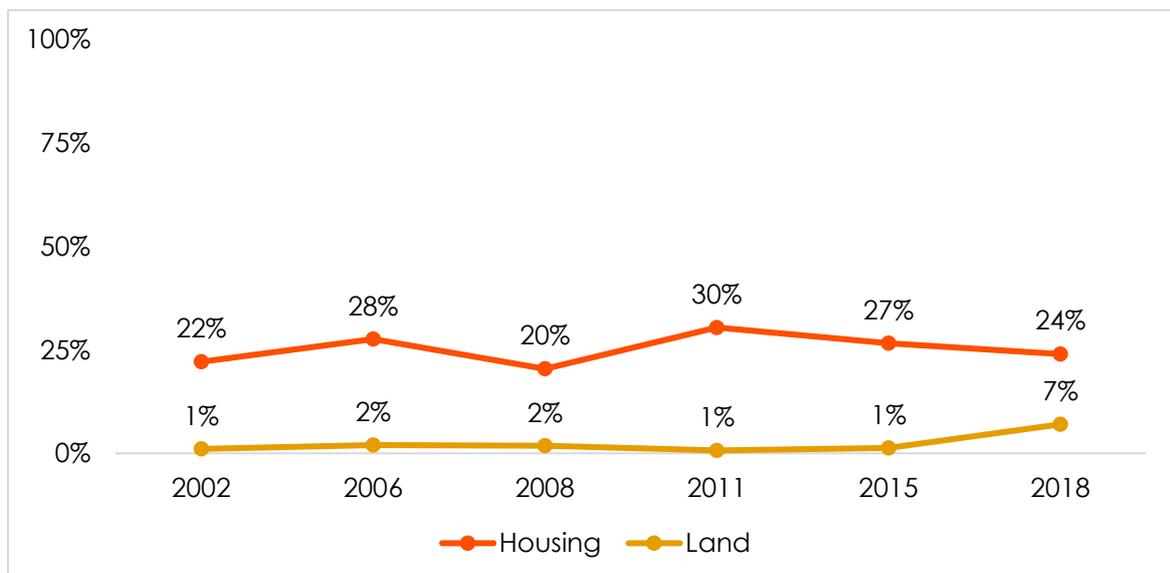


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land?

Priorities on housing and land

While land issues have sparked heated public debate, it appears that South Africans are far more concerned about housing than about other types of land (Figure 12). When asked to rank the most important problems facing the country that government should address, housing ranks as the third priority, cited by 24% of respondents as one of the three problems they consider most important, behind unemployment and crime/security. The issue of “land” in general, on the other hand, ranks at No. 13, cited by just 7%. While relatively small, this proportion is more than three times its score in any previous survey.

Figure 12: Importance of housing and land as problems | South Africa | 2002-2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

Conclusion

Land taken away during forced removals of Black South Africans half a century ago is citizens' highest priority for land redistribution, followed by agricultural land and vacant land in the cities. Only one in 20 South Africans assert that there should be no redistribution of land.

Perhaps surprisingly, more than half of South Africans want to keep the "willing seller-willing buyer" policy that the government's land redistribution program has used since 1994, and a similar proportion want farmers to be able to retain ownership of land on which tenants live and work.

Housing appears to be the most highly prioritized land issue for South African citizens, who cite the high cost of land, along with its scarcity and "racialization," as significant barriers to acquiring land.

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