



Dispatch No. 485 | 29 October 2021

Zimbabweans blame government, not sanctions, for country's economic meltdown

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 485 | Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

Zimbabwe's economy has been in free-fall for more than two decades. Two major explanations stand in opposition to each other. The first school of thought attributes the country's economic malaise to sanctions imposed by Western countries. The second blames government mismanagement and corruption.

Starting in 2001, the European Union, the United States, and other countries slapped Zimbabwe's ruling elite with economic sanctions in response to alleged electoral rigging and human-rights abuses and the government's radical land reform program (Chingono, 2010). While the sanctions have been softened considerably in recent years, the ruling party and government, war veterans, and many beneficiaries of the land reform program and other disbursements continue to blame them for Zimbabwe's economic woes (Nyoni, 2019; Herald, 2021).

The government has managed to mobilize support against the sanctions. In October 2019, leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) agreed to campaign for the removal of the sanctions, arguing that they destabilize Zimbabwe's economy and adversely affect the region (Human Rights Watch, 2020). A group of ZANU-PF supporters camped out near the U.S. Embassy in Harare since 29 March 2019 has vowed to stay put until the sanctions are removed (ZimEye, 2019).

But critics say the government is using the sanctions as a scapegoat for an economic collapse caused by its own mismanagement and corruption (Magaisa, 2019; Mutongwizo, 2019; ZimEye, 2021). Prominent voices pointing beyond sanctions to the "real causes" of Zimbabwe's economic troubles have included journalist Nqaba Matshazi (2019) and then-U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe Brian Nichols (2019).

In October, a UN special rapporteur said that sanctions have worsened Zimbabwe's "pre-existing social and economic challenges" and called for "meaningful, structured dialogue" to take the place of targeted sanctions to promote political reforms and human rights (Mabuza, 2021).

Where do ordinary Zimbabweans stand in this debate? Recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that a huge majority of Zimbabweans say that government mismanagement, not sanctions, is the main cause of the country's economic troubles.

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe in April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- Two-thirds (65%) of citizens say the main cause of the country's economic woes is government mismanagement. Only three in 10 (29%) see Western sanctions as the main problem.
 - The view that government mismanagement is to blame for economic problems is especially widespread among urban residents (82%) and citizens with post-secondary education (89%).
- Management of the economy is citizens' fourth-highest priority for government action, joined in the top 10 by unemployment (No. 1) and the cash crisis (No. 9).
- More than seven in 10 Zimbabweans (72%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," and 62% say the same about their personal living conditions.
- Only about one-third (35%) of citizens think economic conditions will improve over the next year.
- Large majorities say the government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on managing the economy (69%), keeping prices stable (78%), and creating jobs (91%).
- Citizens are more likely to blame the country's economic troubles on government mismanagement, rather than Western sanctions, if they see the country's economic condition or their personal living conditions as bad, if they expect things to get worse rather than better, and if they think the president and members of Parliament are doing a poor job.

Cause of economic woes

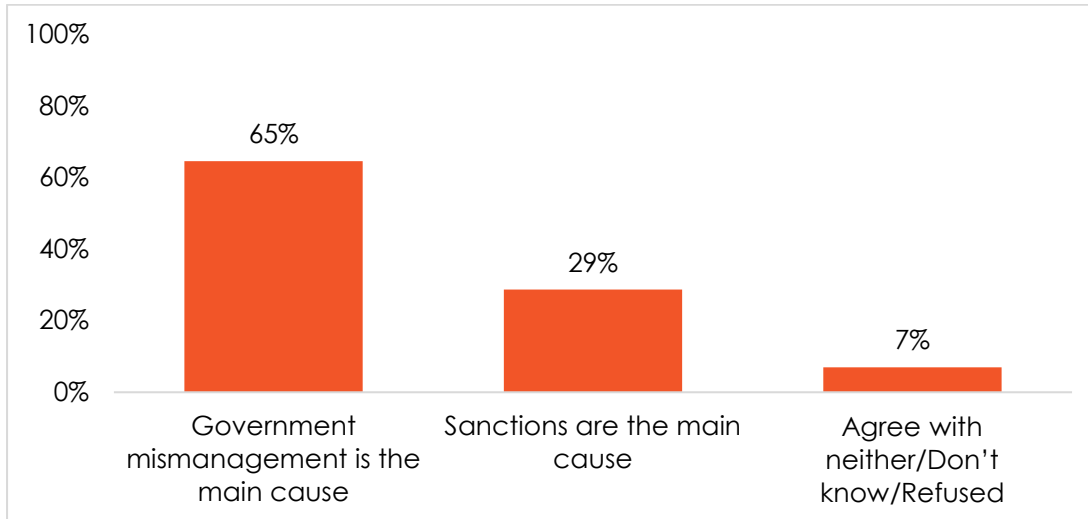
For more than a decade, Zimbabwe's economy has been characterized by run-away inflation and a continually devaluing currency. Although hyperinflation was at its worst in 2008-2009, it is still estimated to be close to 800% annually (Muronzi, 2020), and the currency performs dismally against the U.S. dollar, which is also being used in everyday trade in the country, and other currencies.

Almost two-thirds (65%) of citizens say the main cause of the country's economic meltdown is government mismanagement of the economy. Only three in 10 (29%) blame economic sanctions as the main cause (Figure 1).

Citizens with post-secondary education (89%) are far more likely to blame the country's economic troubles on government mismanagement than their less educated counterparts (43%-67%) (Figure 2). This view is also more widely shared by the poorest respondents (69%, vs. 62%-63% of those who are economically better off).

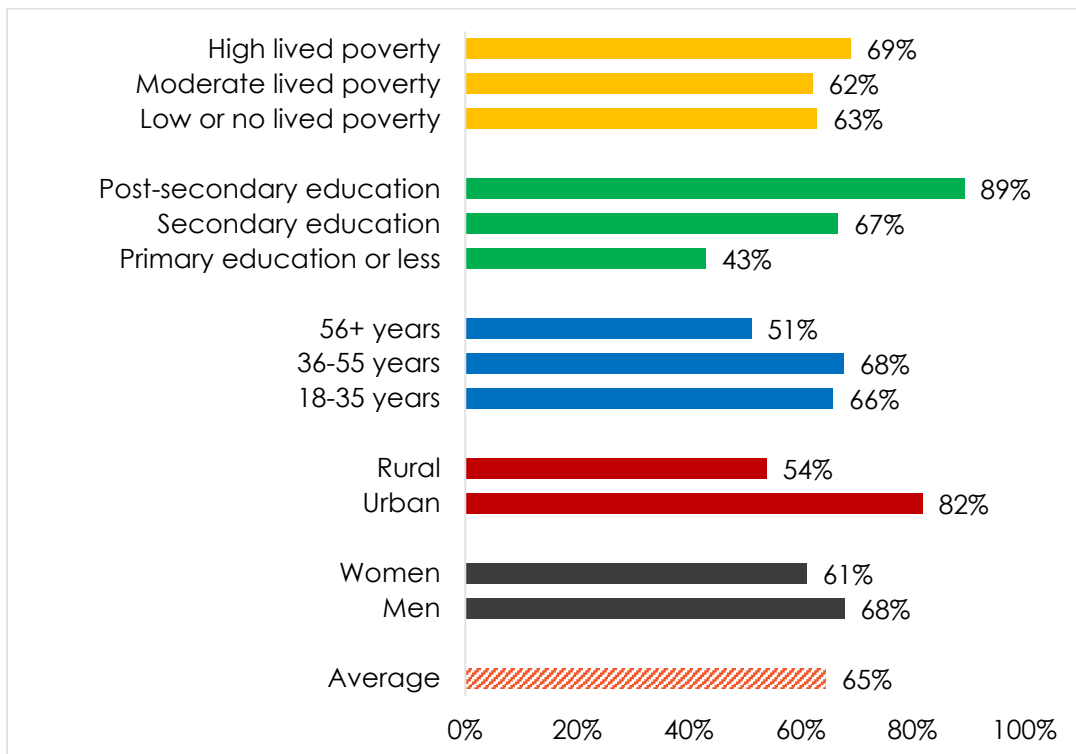
Older citizens (51%), rural residents (54%), and women (61%) are less likely to blame mismanagement than are younger citizens (66%-68%), urban residents (82%), and men (68%).

Figure 1: Cause of economic meltdown: Sanctions or mismanagement? | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Sanctions imposed by the West on Zimbabwe are the main cause for the country's economic meltdown.
 Statement 2: Government's mismanagement of the economy is the main cause for Zimbabwe's economic meltdown.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 2: Mismanagement as main cause of economic meltdown | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021

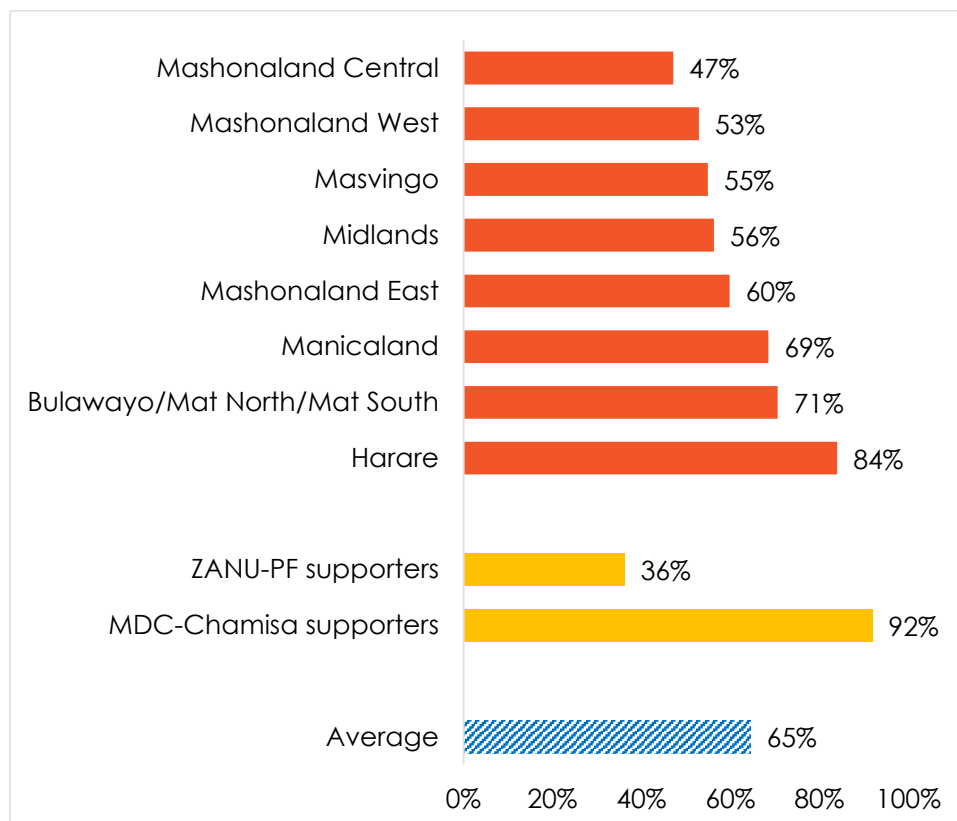


(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that "sanctions imposed by the West on Zimbabwe are the main cause for the country's economic meltdown")

As might be expected, respondents who “feel close to” the opposition MDC-Chamisa party overwhelmingly (92%) attribute economic problems to government mismanagement, a view shared by just 36% of ZANU-PF supporters (Figure 3).

In line with these findings, Harare residents (84%) are most likely to cite mismanagement as the main cause of economic woes, while Mashonaland Central is the only province where fewer than half (47%) of residents agree.

Figure 3: Mismanagement as main cause of economic meltdown | by location and party affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2021



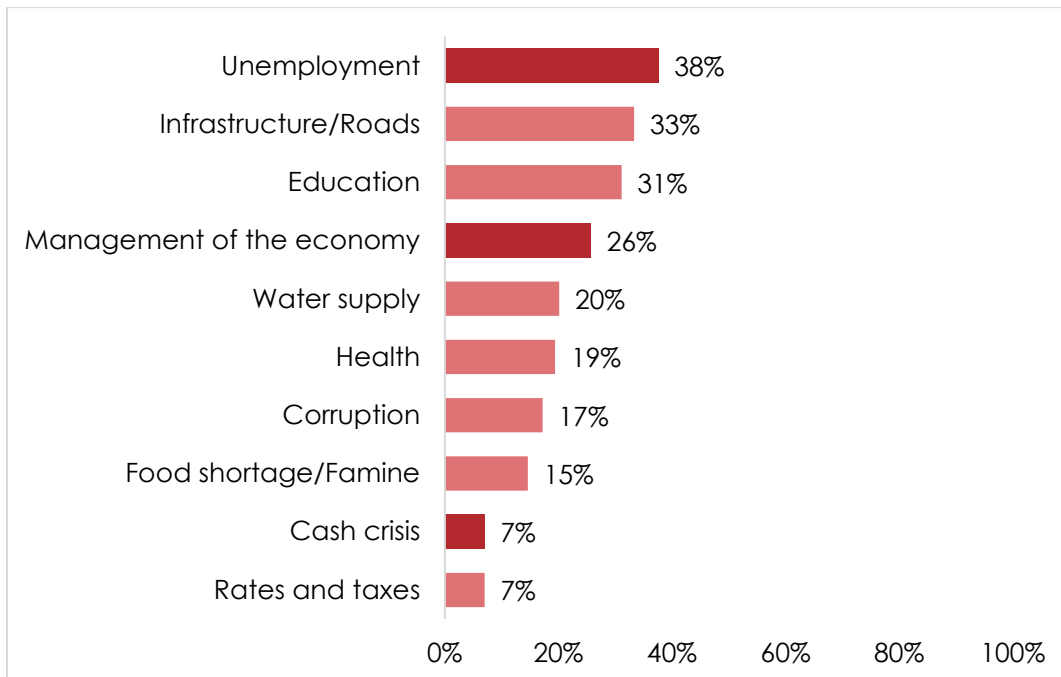
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Sanctions imposed by the West on Zimbabwe are the main cause for the country's economic meltdown.
 Statement 2: Government's mismanagement of the economy is the main cause for Zimbabwe's economic meltdown.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1)

Economic conditions and government performance

Among the many problems that have plagued Zimbabwe, management of the economy ranks fourth among citizens' priorities for government action. In addition, the economic issue of unemployment tops the list, as an estimated 85% of workers are engaged in the informal sector (Kede, 2020), and the cash crisis ranks at No. 9 (Figure 4).

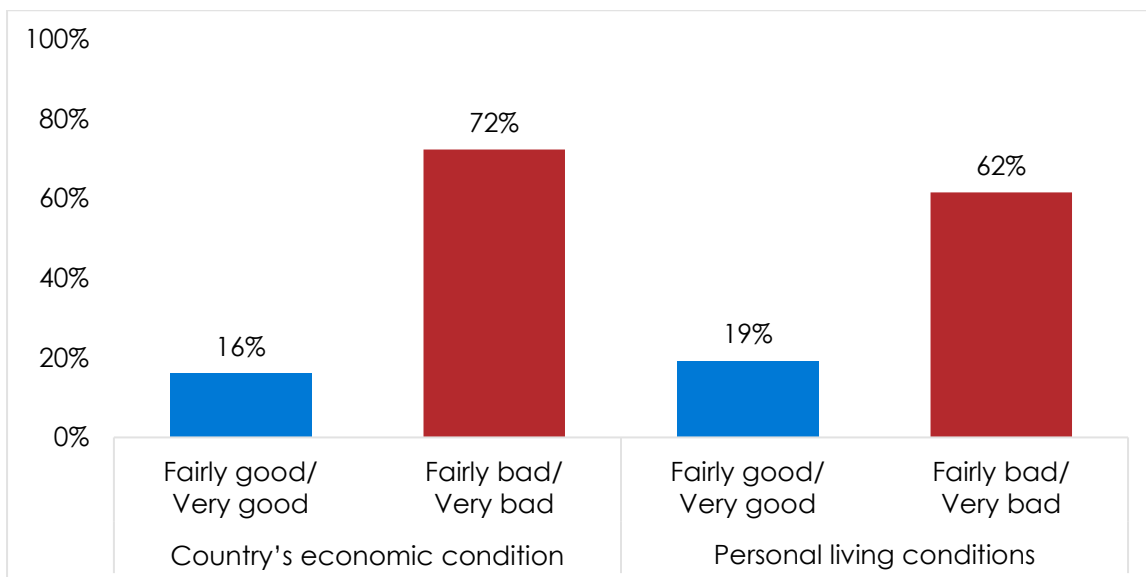
More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) describe the country's economic condition as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” and six in 10 (62%) say the same about their personal living conditions (Figure 5). Fewer than one in five offer positive assessments of the country's economic condition (16%) and their own living conditions (19%).

Figure 4: Most important problems | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person)*

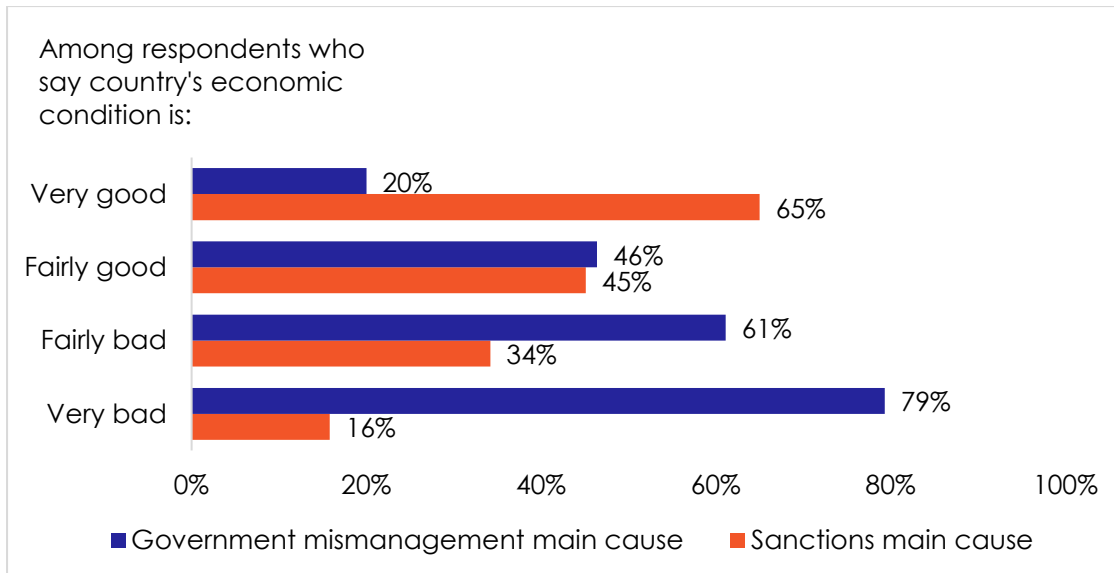
Figure 5: Economic conditions | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?*

Citizens who believe that the country's economy is in poor shape are especially likely to blame its economic troubles on government mismanagement (Figure 6). Among those who describe the economic situation as "very bad," 79% say mismanagement is the main cause, compared to just 20% of those who see economic conditions as good.

Figure 6: Cause of economic meltdown | by views on country's economic condition
 | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked:

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Sanctions imposed by the West on Zimbabwe are the main cause for the country's economic meltdown.

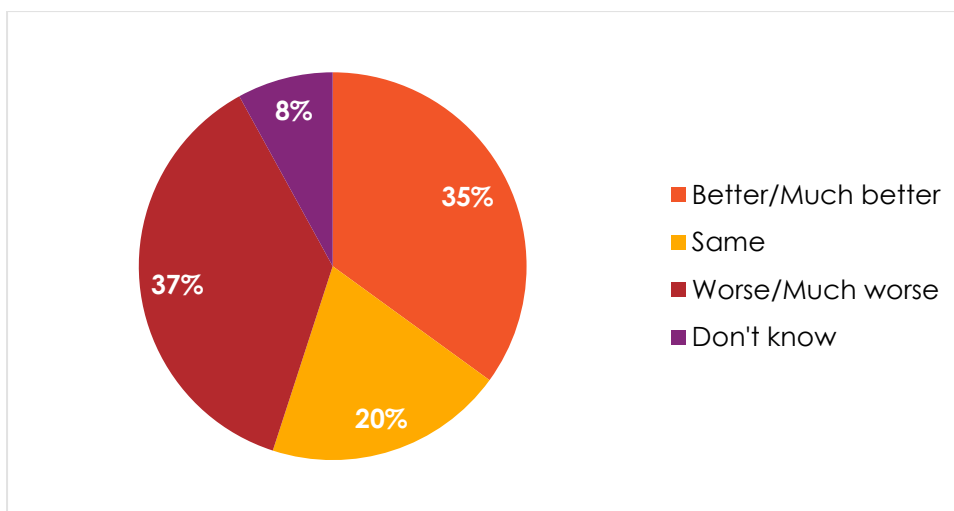
Statement 2: Government's mismanagement of the economy is the main cause for Zimbabwe's economic meltdown.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?

Only about one-third (35%) of Zimbabweans are optimistic that economic conditions will improve over the next 12 months (Figure 7). About the same proportion (37%) think things will get "worse" or "much worse," while 20% expect them to stay about the same.

Figure 7: Projection of future economic conditions | Zimbabwe | 2021

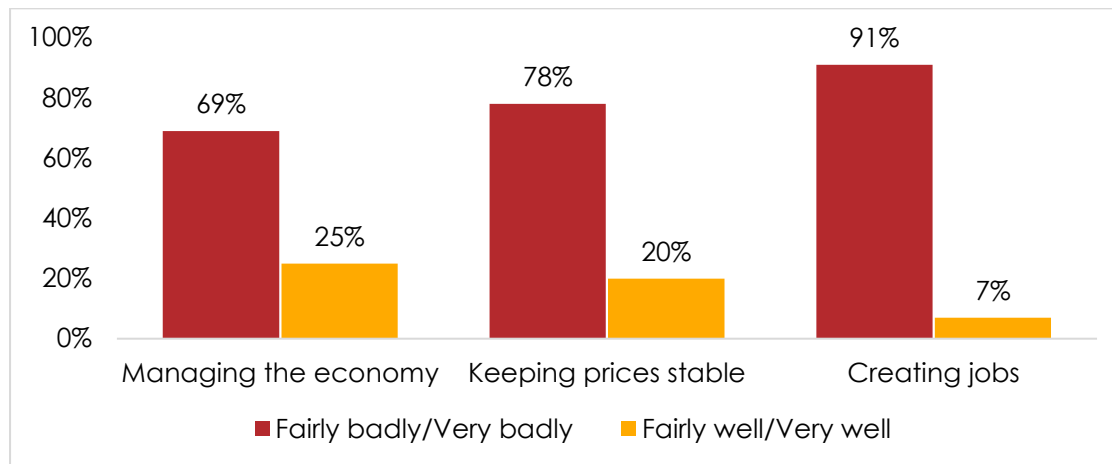


Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Nearly seven in 10 Zimbabweans (69%) say the government is handling the economy “fairly badly” or “very badly.” Only a quarter (25%) think it is doing a good job on economic management (Figure 8).

Even larger majorities give the government poor marks on keeping prices stable (78%), a particular concern as costs of fuel and other basic goods continue to rise, and on creating jobs (91%), citizens' top priority for government action.

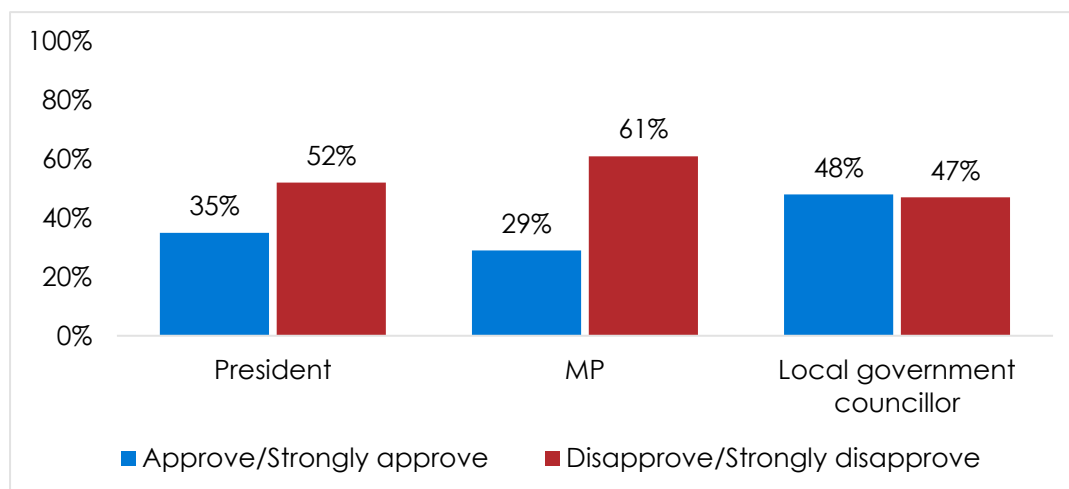
Figure 8: Government performance on economic issues | Zimbabwe | 2021



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: Managing the economy?

Performance ratings of elected officials may also suffer from citizens' grim outlook on the economy. More than half (52%) “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove” of President Emmerson Mnangagwa's performance over the past 12 months, while 61% disapprove of the way their members of Parliament (MPs) have done their jobs. Local government councillors, who may not be seen as having as much influence on overall economic conditions, receive somewhat better ratings (48% approve vs. 47% disapprove) (Figure 9).

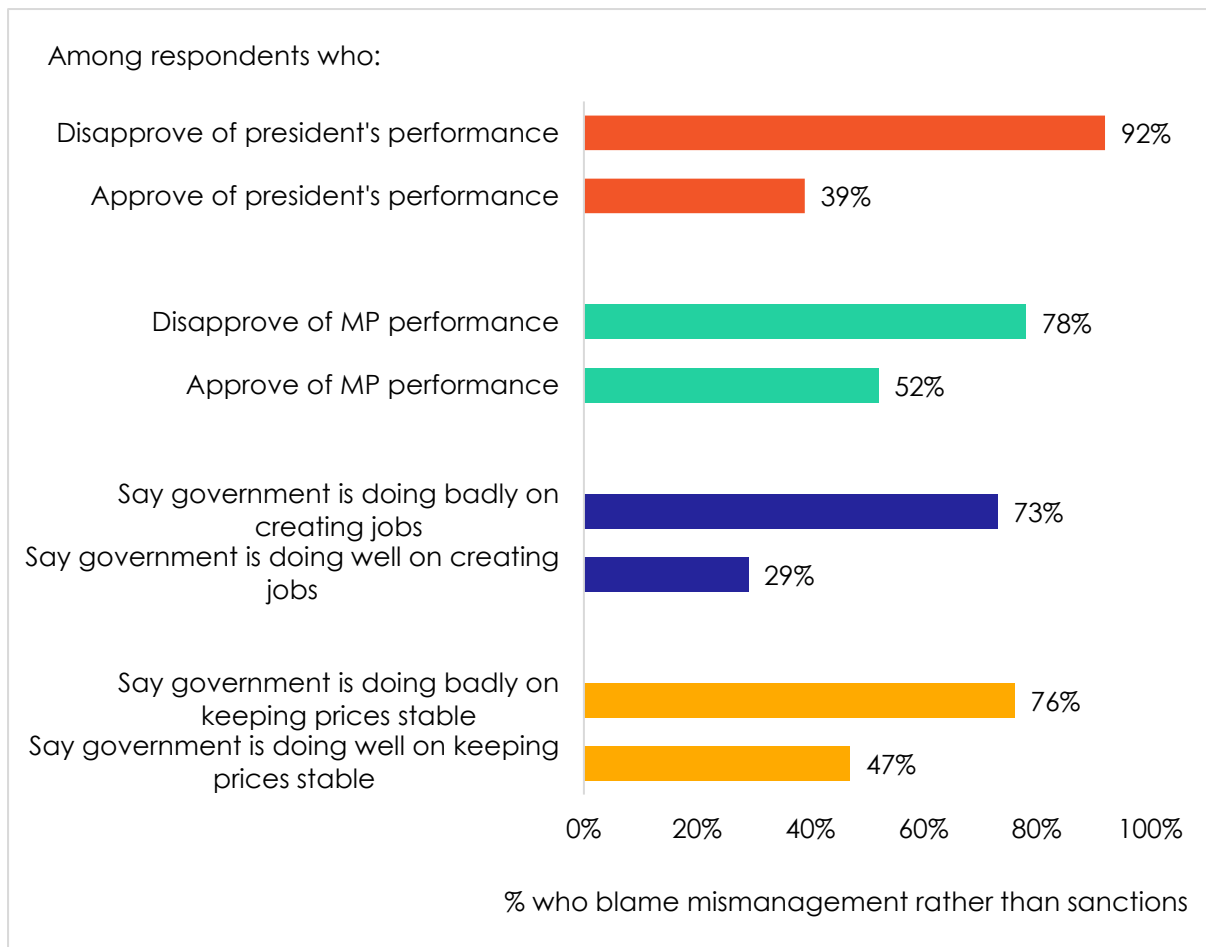
Figure 9: Approval ratings of elected officials | Zimbabwe | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President Emmerson Mnangagwa? Your Member of Parliament? Your elected local government councillor?

Unsurprisingly, citizens who disapprove of the performance of their elected officials and their government are more likely to blame the country's economic problems on government mismanagement rather than on sanctions (Figure 10). For example, 92% of those who say the president is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" cite mismanagement over sanctions, compared to just 39% among those who approve of the president's performance. We see similar differences based on whether respondents approve of their MP's performance and the government's performance on creating jobs and keeping prices stable.

Figure 10: Mismanagement as the main cause, by approval ratings | Zimbabwe
 | 2021



Respondents were asked:

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Sanctions imposed by the West on Zimbabwe are the main cause for the country's economic meltdown.

Statement 2: Government's mismanagement of the economy is the main cause for Zimbabwe's economic meltdown.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 2)

Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President Emmerson Mnangagwa? Your member of Parliament?

How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Creating jobs? Keeping prices stable?

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's economy has been failing for more than a decade, and most citizens see it as continuing to fail. Only about one-third are optimistic that things will improve over the coming year.

While the government says that Western sanctions bear responsibility for the country's economic crisis, most ordinary Zimbabweans lay the blame squarely at the government's door.

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