

Despite criticism of economic performance, Swazis optimistic about future gains

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 120 | Nelson Isidoro, Tengetile Tsabedze, and Sibusiso Nkomo

Summary

In its Vision 2022 agenda, the Kingdom of Swaziland lays out its goal of being “in the top 10% of the human development group of countries founded on sustainable development, social justice and political stability” (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 2013, p. 10). As a lower-middle-income country with a per-capita gross domestic product of about \$3,000 (World Bank, 2016), the country will have to confront a number of economic challenges, including its dependence on tariff payments from the Southern African Customs Union trade revenue pool, which cover 60% of the nation’s 2015/2016 budget (tralac, 2014), as well as on foreign aid, such as from the United States for its HIV/AIDS program (U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, 2015) and from Taiwan for rural electrification and information and communications technology (Embassy of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 2016). The country’s economy is closely linked to South Africa, which accounts for about 85% of imports and 60% of exports (World Bank, 2016).

The government’s Programme of Action (2013-2018) aims to fast-track progress toward Vision 2022, using the Swaziland Development Index (SDI) as a tool to monitor progress on economic prosperity and other key indicators (His Majesty’s Government, 2013).

Public perceptions highlight both challenges and optimism for Swaziland’s path forward. As recorded in the latest national Afrobarometer survey, assessments of the country’s economic situation and of personal living conditions are mixed, and only minorities approve of the government’s performance on some key economic indicators. Nonetheless, lived poverty has declined since 2011, and a majority of Swazis are optimistic about future improvement.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Swaziland, led by activQuest, interviewed 1,200 adult Swazis in April and May 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

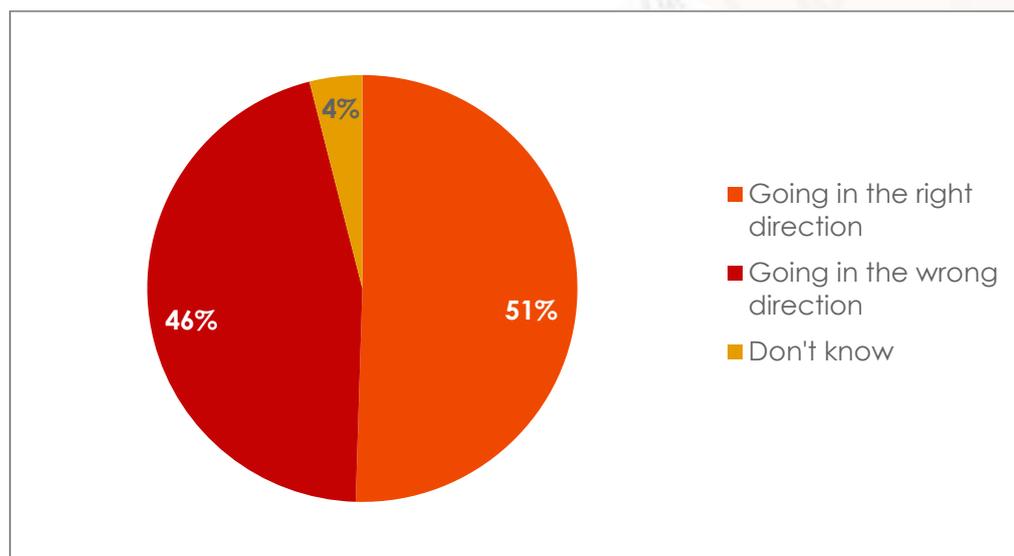
- About half (51%) of Swazi citizens say their country is going in the right direction, while almost as many (46%) say it is headed in the wrong direction.

- Almost four in 10 Swazis (37%) describe their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good,” while an equal proportion say they live in “fairly bad” or “very bad” conditions. One-fourth (26%) say their living conditions are “neither good nor bad.”
- Since the previous survey round (2011/2013), “lived poverty” has declined more sharply in Swaziland than in other countries in Southern Africa. Still, about half of Swazis went without enough food (51%) and without enough clean water (47%) at least once during the past year.
- Almost half (48%) of Swazis describe the country's economic condition as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” and another 17% say it is “neither good nor bad.” Only one-third (34%) say the economy is in “fairly” or “very” good shape.
- Views are split on whether the country's economic condition has improved compared to 12 months before the survey: 29% say it is “better” or “much better,” 33% say it is “worse” or “much worse,” and 36% say it has stayed the same.
- A majority of Swazis are optimistic about the future: 56% say the country's economic condition will be “better” or “much better” in 12 months' time, while only 19% believe it will be “worse” or “much worse.”
- Half (51%) of Swazis say the government has managed the economy “fairly well” or “very well.” But public approval is lower on specific aspects of economic management, including improving living standards of the poor (32%), keeping prices down (24%), creating jobs (24%), and narrowing income gaps (22%).

Overall direction of the country

Swazis are almost evenly split in their views on the country's overall direction: About half (51%) say the country is going in the right direction, while almost as many (46%) say it is headed in the wrong direction (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | Swaziland | 2015



Respondents were asked: Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask YOU about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Personal living conditions, lived poverty, and perceptions of the economy

Personal living conditions

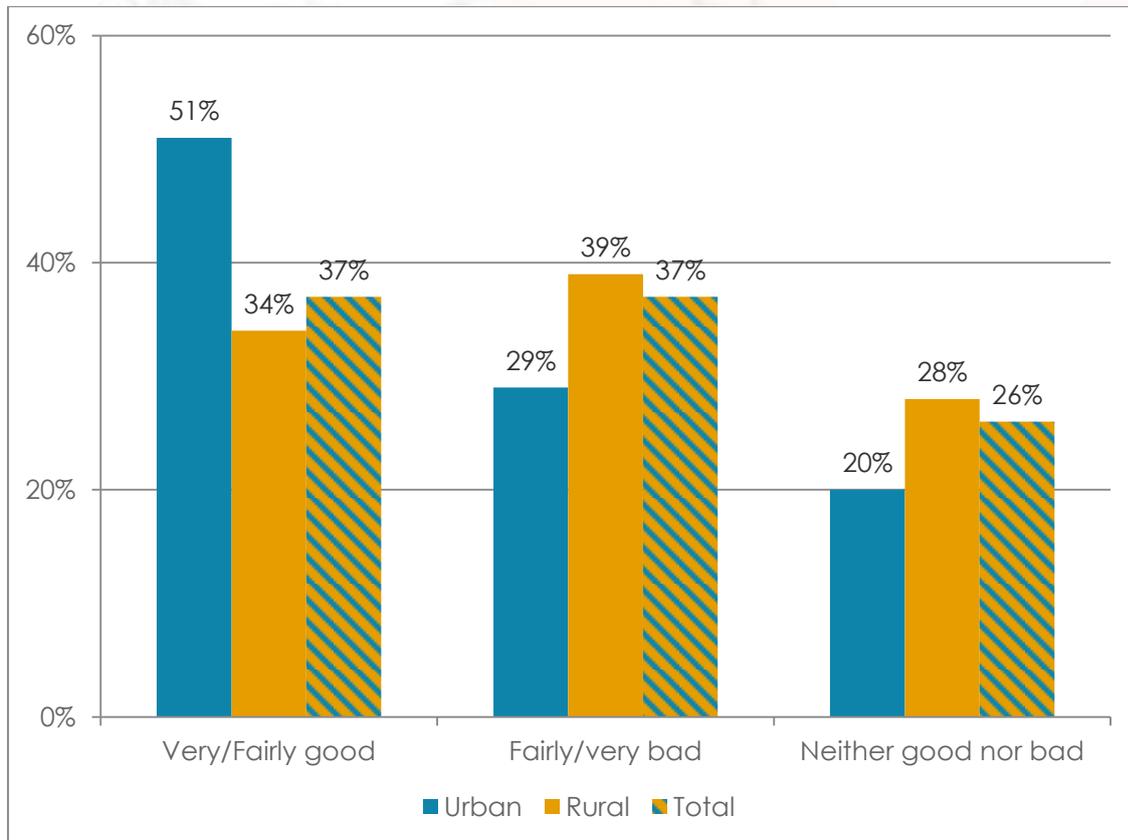
Almost four in 10 Swazis (37%) describe their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good,” while an equal proportion say they live in “fairly bad” or “very bad” conditions (Figure 2). One-fourth (26%) say their living conditions are “neither good nor bad.”

Urban residents are more likely than rural dwellers to see their living conditions as good, 51% vs. 34%. Disaggregation by gender showed no difference in perceptions.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

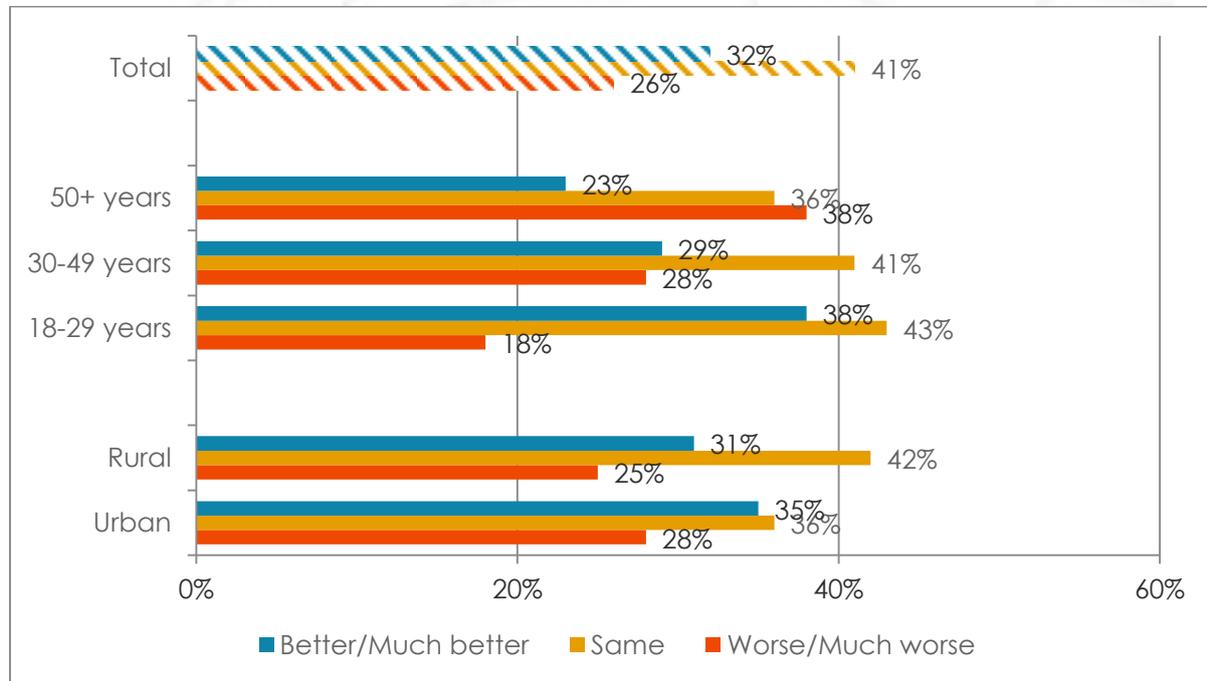
When comparing their living conditions with those of other Swazis, one-third (32%) of respondents say they are living in “better” or “much better” conditions, while 26% describe their living conditions as “worse” or “much worse” and 41% say they are the same. Younger Swazis are more likely to see themselves as living in better conditions than their compatriots (38% of 18- to 29-year-olds vs. 29% of 30- to 49-year-olds and 23% of those aged 50 and older) (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Personal living conditions | urban vs. rural residence | Swaziland | 2015



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe: Your present living conditions?*

Figure 3: Personal living conditions compared to other Swazis | by urban vs. rural residence and age | Swaziland | 2015



Respondents were asked: *In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other Swazis?*

Lived poverty

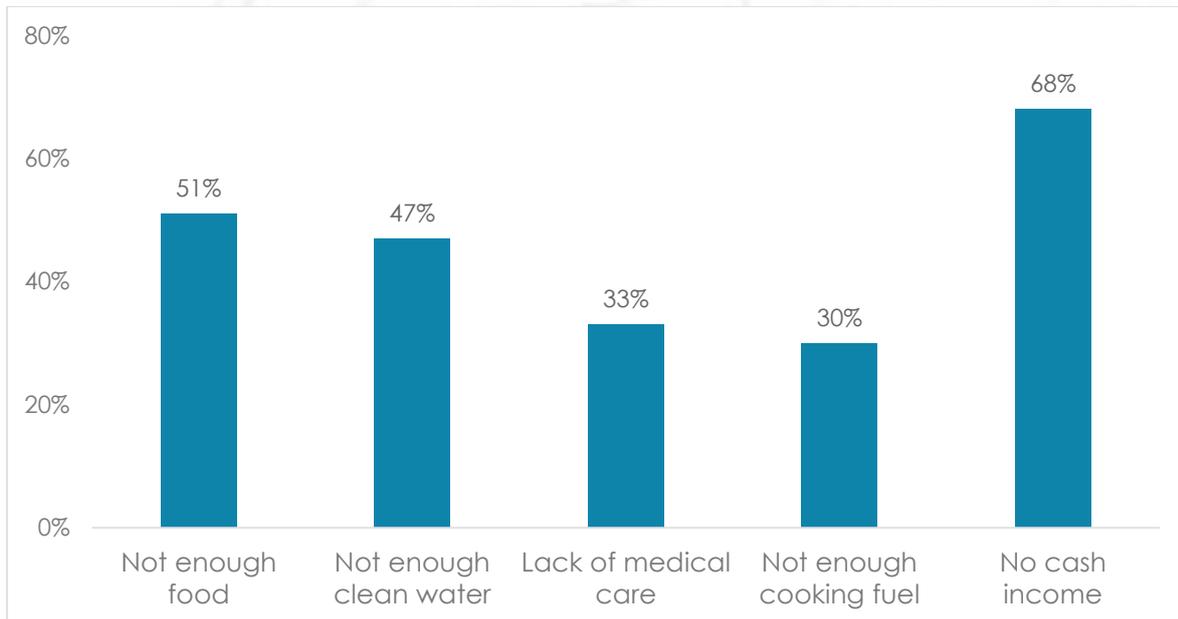
Afrobarometer assesses how the prevalence of “lived poverty” by asking respondents how often, over the previous year, they or their family members went without five basic necessities of life (enough food, enough clean water, needed medicine or medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income). In Swaziland, lived poverty has declined but remains a formidable challenge.

For the first time, new evidence from the past decade of economic growth shows broad-based reductions in poverty in Africa (Mattes, Dulani and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016), Swaziland included. Through measuring lived poverty (an index that measures the frequency over the course of a year, with which people experience shortages of basic necessities – food, clean water, medical care, cooking fuel and cash income).

About half of Swazis say they went without enough food (51%) and without enough water (47%) at least once during the previous year. One-third experienced shortages of medical care (33%) and cooking fuel (30%) at least once, and two-thirds (68%) went without a cash income (68%) (Figure 4).

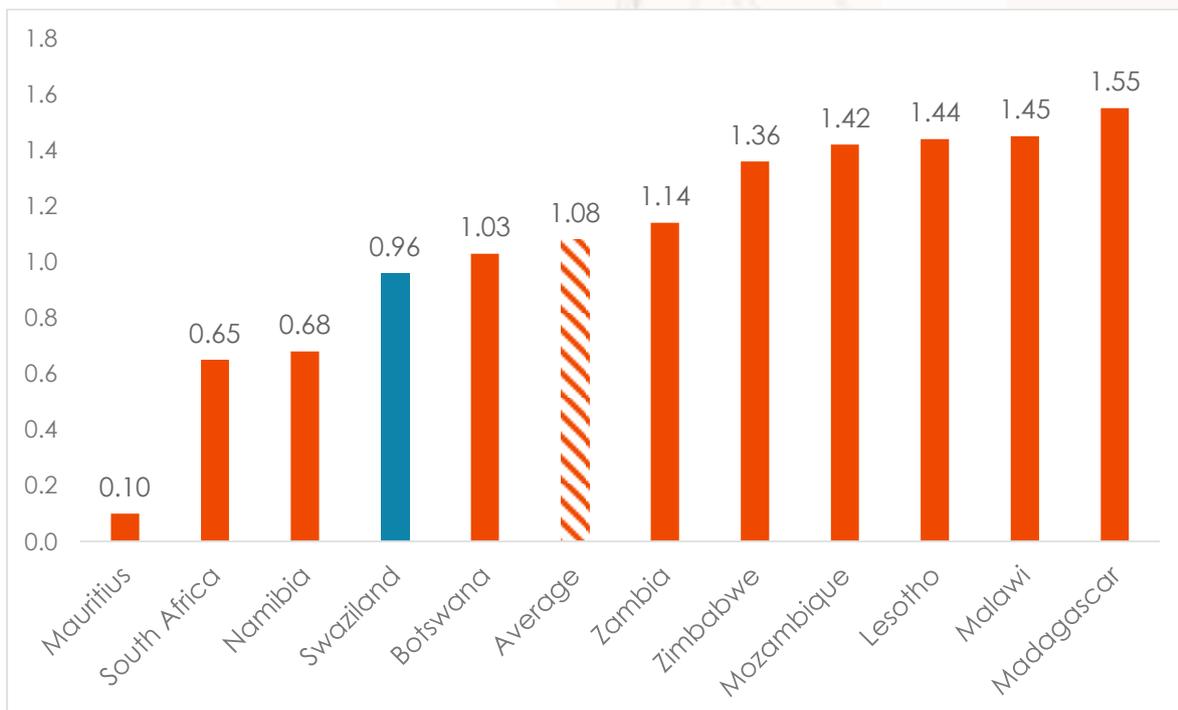
When responses to these questions are combined in Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI), Swaziland has the fourth-lowest level of lived poverty among 11 countries in Southern Africa surveyed in 2014/2015 (Figure 5). Moreover, since the last Afrobarometer survey round (2011/2013), lived poverty has declined more sharply in Swaziland than in any of the other 10 Southern African countries, by -0.35 points compared to a regional average decline of -0.11 points (Figure 6). (For more on lived poverty in Swaziland and other African countries, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016.)

Figure 4: Lived poverty | Swaziland | 2015



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income?
 (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

Figure 5: Average lived poverty | 11 Southern African countries | 2014/2015



Lived Poverty Index scores range along a five-point scale from 0 (no shortage of any basic necessities) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities).

Figure 6: Point changes in Lived Poverty Index score | 11 Southern African countries | 2011-2015

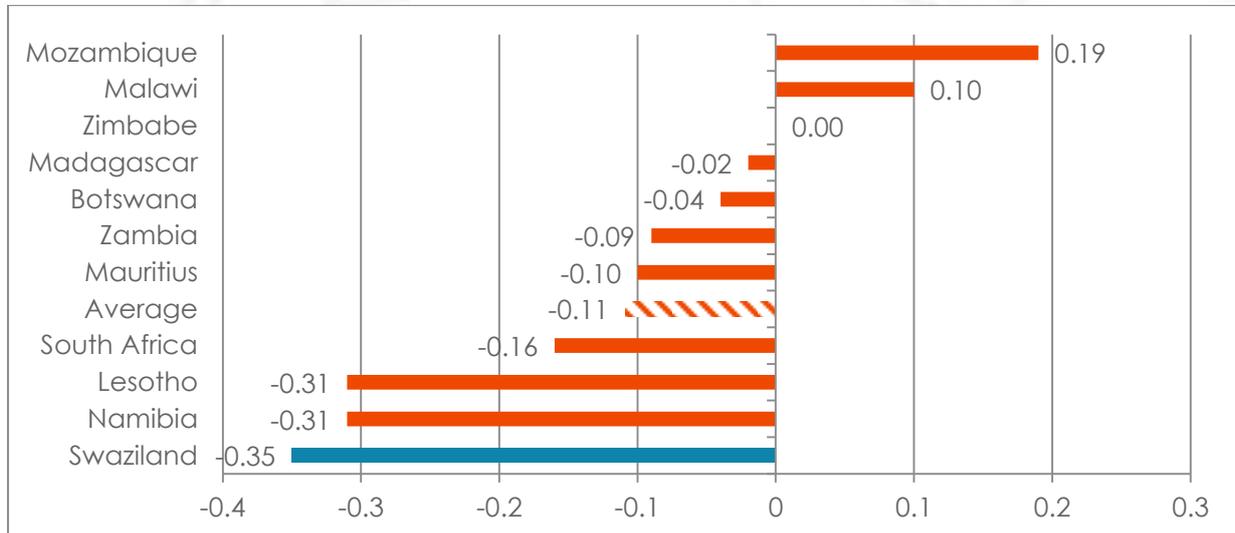


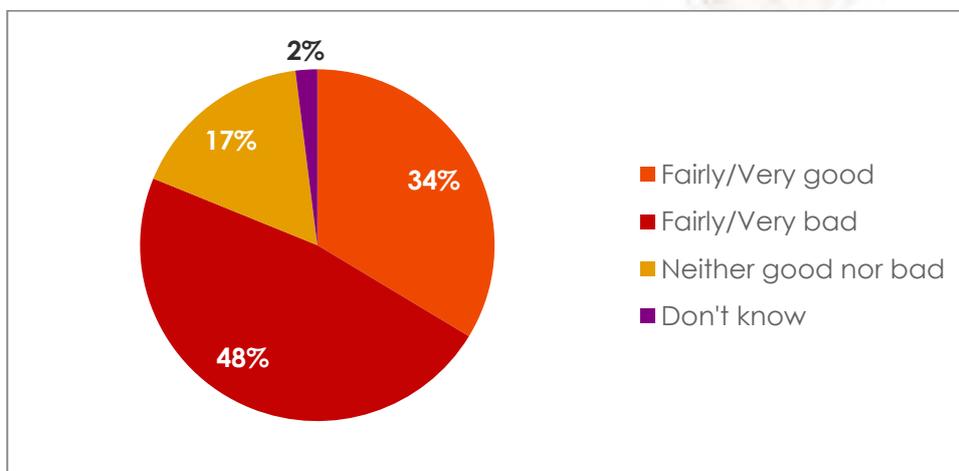
Figure shows the difference, on a five-point scale, between LPI scores in Round 5 (2011/2013) and Round 6 (2014/2015) surveys. Positive numbers indicate an increase in lived poverty; negative numbers indicate a decrease.

Perceptions of the economy

About half (48%) of Swazis describe the country's overall economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," while one-third (34%) say it is "fairly good" or "very good" (Figure 7). These perceptions are similar regardless of respondents' sex, age, or urban vs. rural location.

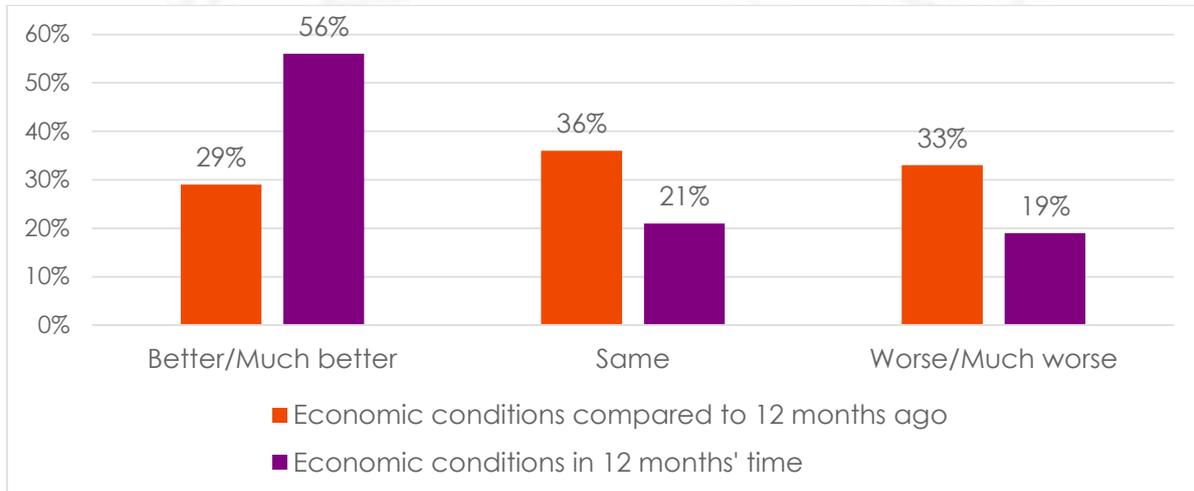
One-third (33%) of Swazis say the country's economic condition has gotten "worse" or "much worse" compared to 12 months earlier, while 29% say it is now "better" or "much better." Looking ahead, a majority of Swazis express optimism: 56% expect the economy to be "better" or "much better" in 12 months' time (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Country's economic condition | Swaziland | 2015



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

Figure 8: Country's economic condition: Looking back and ahead | Swaziland | 2015



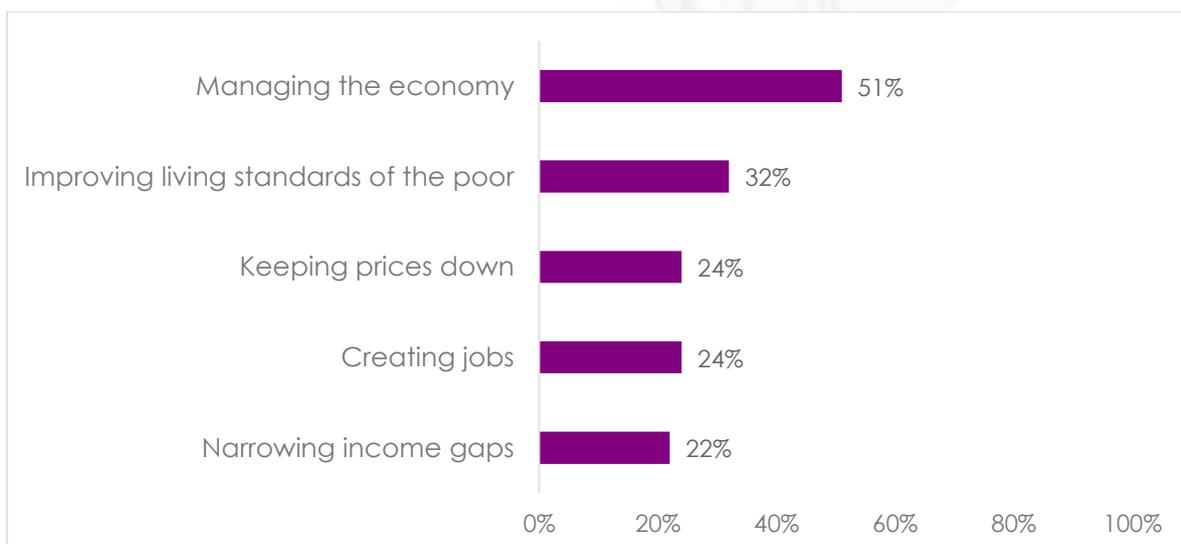
Respondents were asked:

1. Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
2. Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Government handling of the economy

Half (51%) of Swazis praise the government's overall management of the economy as "fairly good" or "very good," but on specific aspects of economic management, public approval is lower. One one-third (32%) approve of the government's performance on improving living standards of the poor, and fewer than one-fourth praise the government's efforts on keeping prices down (24%), creating jobs (24%), and narrowing income gaps (22%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Government performance on the economy | Swaziland | 2015



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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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