

Unemployment mars favourable assessment of Botswana government performance

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 184 | Mogopodi Lekorwe, Kabelo Moseki, and Mokaloba Mokaloba

Summary

In his final State of the Nation Address, delivered in November 2017, President Ian Khama offered a positive economic outlook for Botswana, citing a recovery to 4.3% growth in 2016 and projected growth of 4.7% and 5.3% in 2017-2018 (Khama, 2017). But while reporting some gains in employment and training programs, he was less bullish about job creation than he had been a year earlier, when he promised "job creation ... increasingly linked to private sector growth, with government playing an enabling role" (Khama, 2016).

Even with a strong economy, unemployment is certain to remain a challenge for Botswana after Khama steps down in 2018. Statistics Botswana (2017) announced in 2017 that unemployment had dropped from 19.9% in 2011 to 17.6% in 2016 – an estimate that many commentators consider too low following job losses in the mining sector and the freezing of posts in government (Masokola, 2017). Vice President Mokgweetsi Masisi, who will succeed Khama as president, has already confronted the challenge as head of the government's job creation agenda (Balise, 2015).

According to the latest Afrobarometer survey in Botswana, ordinary citizens are generally positive in their assessments of the government's performance on key economic issues – with the clear exception of job creation, which they view as the most important problem facing the country.

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 2016, and Round 7 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Botswana, led by Star Awards (Pty) Ltd, interviewed 1,200 adult Botswana in July 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Botswana in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- Unemployment tops citizens' list of the most important problems that the government should address, cited by almost three-fourths (73%) of all respondents as one of their three priorities. Other pressing concerns include poverty/destitution (24%), education (21%), health (19%), and food shortage (14%).

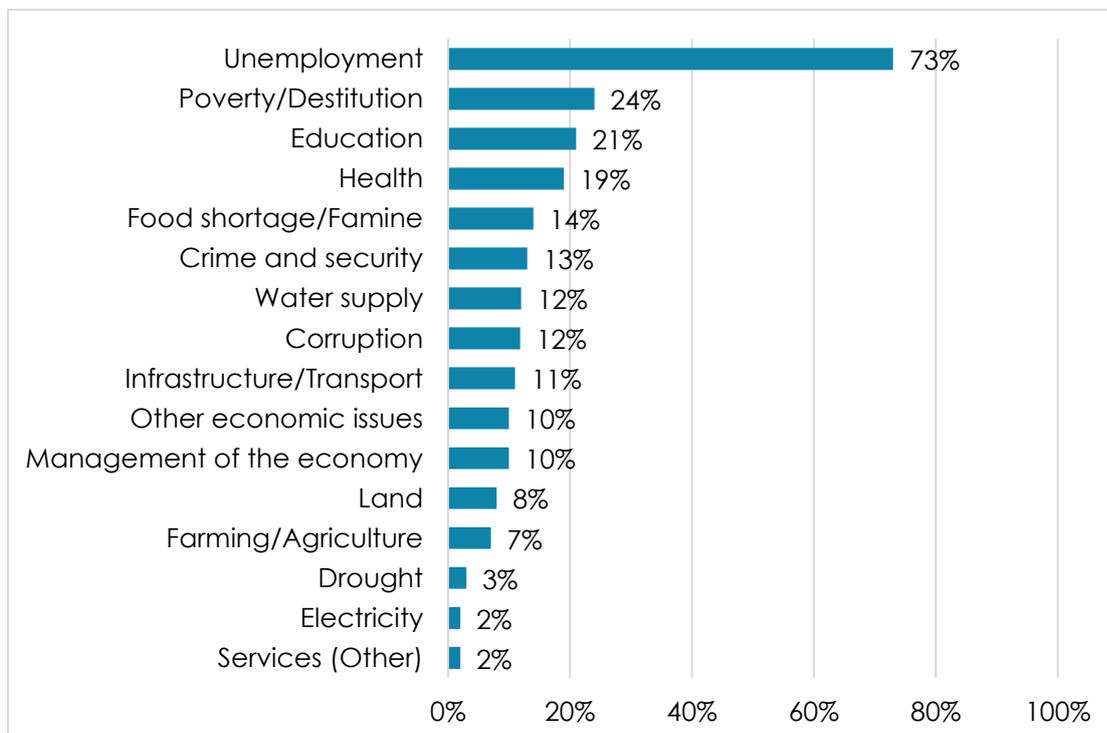
- More than two-thirds (68%) of Batswana say the government is failing in its mandate of job creation.
- On overall economic management, six in 10 Batswana (59%) say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well,” though this continues a steady decline in popular approval since 2008.
- On several other key issues, strong majorities say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well,” including improving the living standards of the poor (73%), fighting crime (64%), providing educational services (66%), and addressing youth needs (67%). But only 40% say the same about government efforts to narrow gaps between rich and poor.

Unemployment as Botswana's most important problem

Among the varied challenges confronting developing countries, unemployment consistently ranks near the top; across 36 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2014/2015, unemployment was the most frequently cited problem that citizens said their government should address (Bentley, Olapade, Wambua, & Charron, 2015).

Botswana does not escape the challenge of unemployment: In 2017, almost three-fourths (73%) of survey respondents cite a lack of jobs as one of the three most important problems that the government should address (Figure 1). Unemployment ranks well ahead of poverty/destitution (24%), education (21%), health (19%), food shortage (14%), and crime and security (13%), while overall management of the economy (10%) and other economic issues (10%) come lower on the priority list.

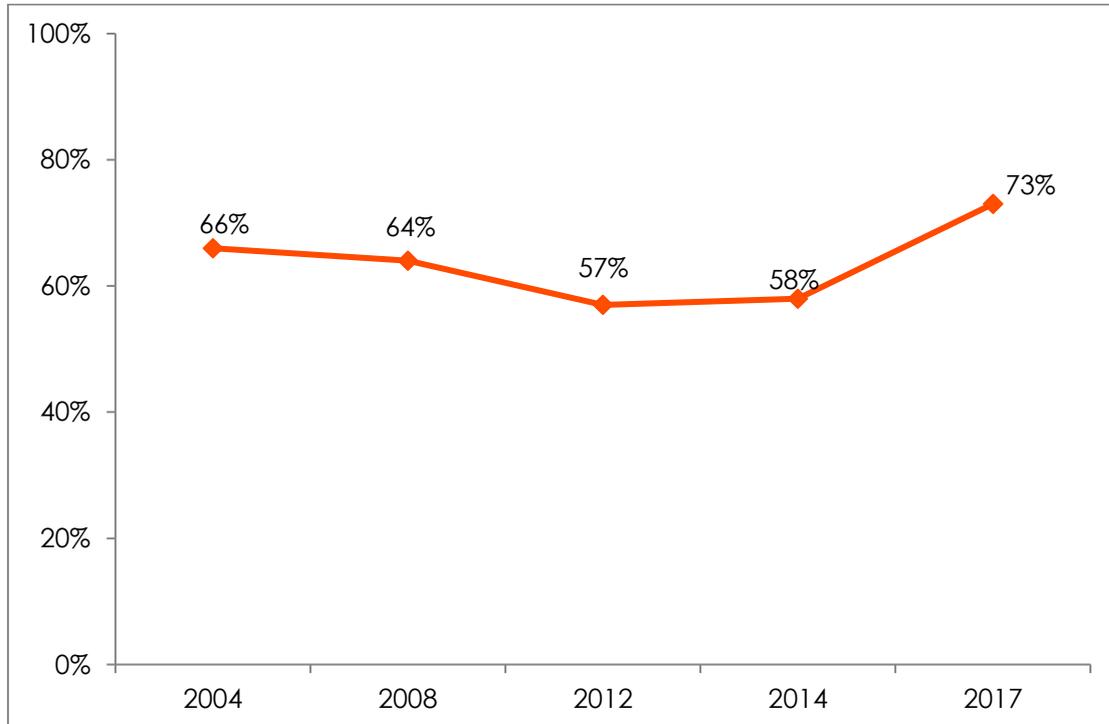
Figure 1: Most important problems that government should address | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their top three.)

Indeed, public concern about job creation seems to be increasing: The proportion of citizens who cite unemployment as a top problem increased by 15 percentage points from 2014 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Unemployment as a ‘most important problem’ | Botswana | 2004-2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (% of respondents who cited unemployment among their three most important problems)*

Government performance on job creation

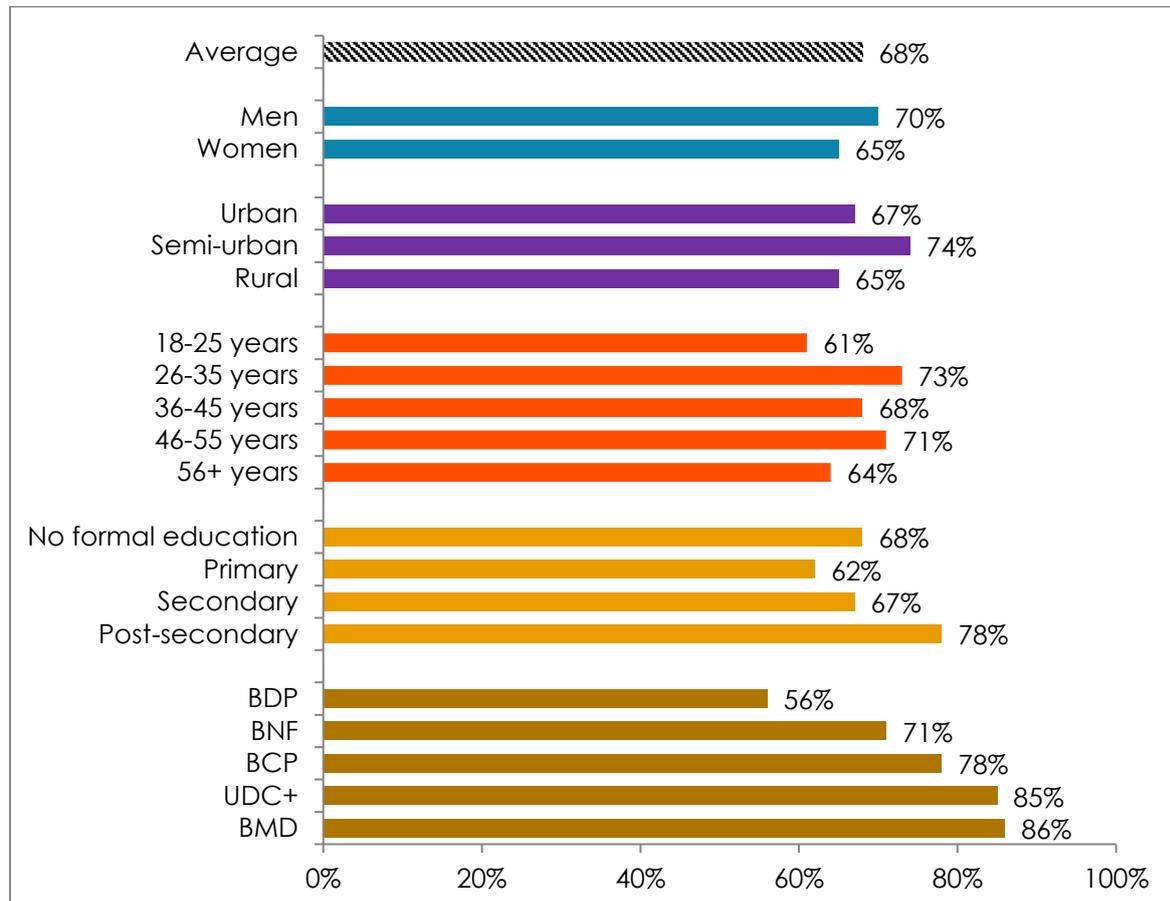
The government of Botswana is the largest employer in the country. While some international financial institutions such as the World Bank have advised against further increasing the government's wage bill, this does not diminish the expectations of the citizenry that the government create employment.

When asked how well or badly the government is doing in creating jobs, more than two in three Botswana (68%) say the government is failing on this front (Figure 3). Assessments are negative across major socio-demographic groups. While young respondents are less critical (61% say fairly/very badly) than their elders, citizens with post-secondary educational qualifications are considerably more likely to disapprove of the government's performance on job creation (78%) than their less-educated counterparts.

By political-party affiliation,¹ supporters of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) are least critical (56%), while more than three-fourths of adherents of the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD) (86%), Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC+) (85%), and Botswana Congress Party (BCP) (78%) say the government is performing fairly/very badly.

¹ Afrobarometer measures party affiliation based on responses to the questions “Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?”

Figure 3: Government performing poorly at creating jobs | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



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: Creating jobs? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

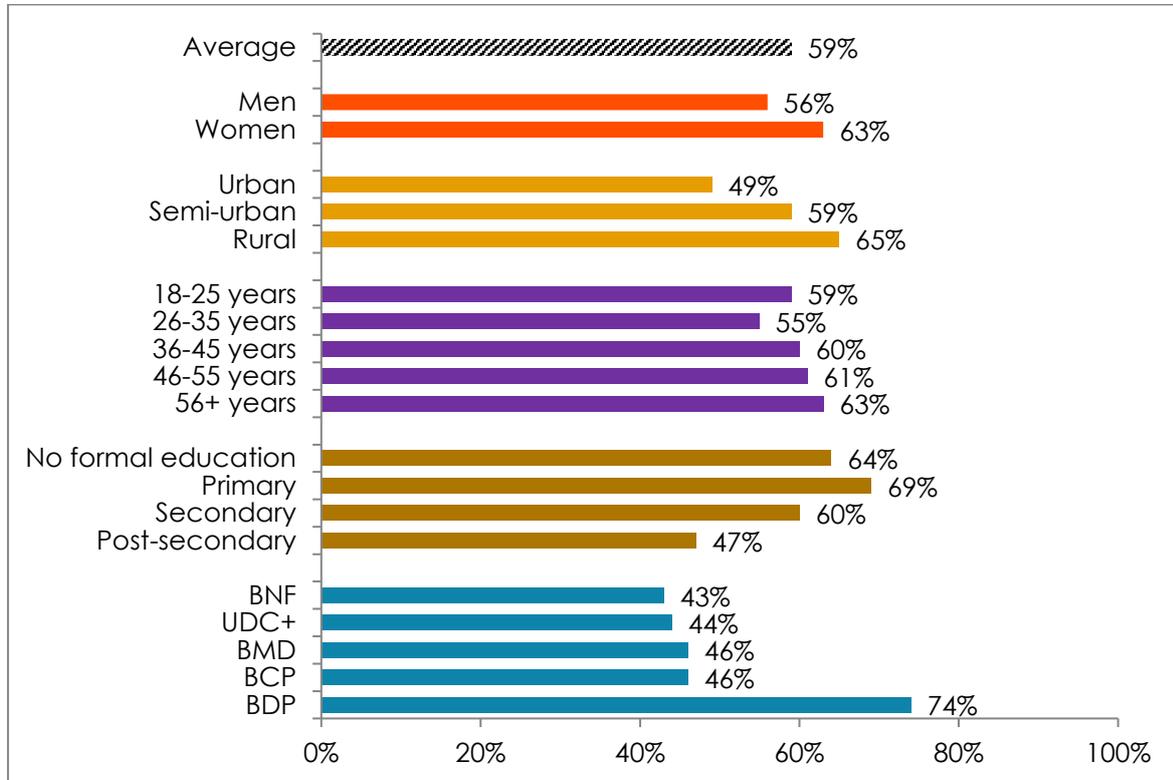
Government management of the economy

Beyond low marks on job creation, the government is generally seen as effective in managing the economy – a central task if it is provide social rights such as the right to employment and desirable and dignified standards of living to its citizens. Six in 10 Batswana (59%) say the government is handling the economy "fairly well" or "very well." Women (63%) and rural residents (65%) are more likely to praise the government's economic management than are men (56%) and urbanites (49%) (Figure 4). The best-educated respondents are least complimentary; only 47% describe the government's performance as fairly/very good.

Unsurprisingly, BDP supporters overwhelmingly approve the government's economic management, but even among adherents of opposition parties, more than four in 10 approve.

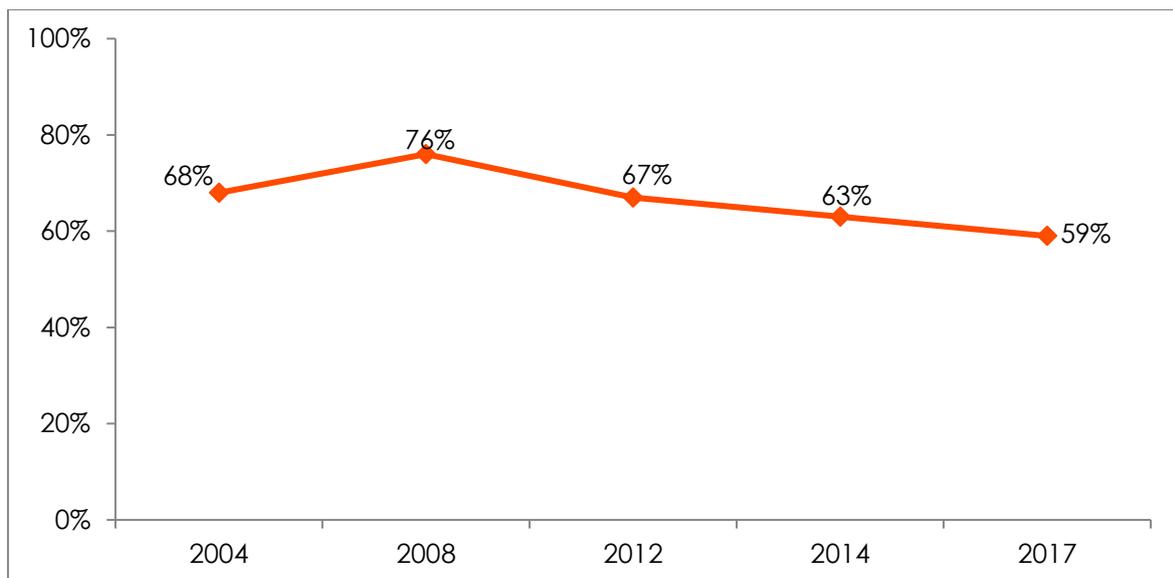
However, this positive assessment represents a continuation of declining popular appraisals of the government's economic management (Figure 5). High approval (68%) in 2004 rose to a peak of 76% in 2008., But that year, a recession hit the global and Botswana economies, and since then, the proportion of Batswana expressing approval of the government's economic management has been on a steady slide, losing 17 percentage points over a nine-year period.

Figure 4: Government managing the economy well | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



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

Figure 5: Trend in government's management of the economy | Botswana | 2004-2017



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

Improving living standards of the poor

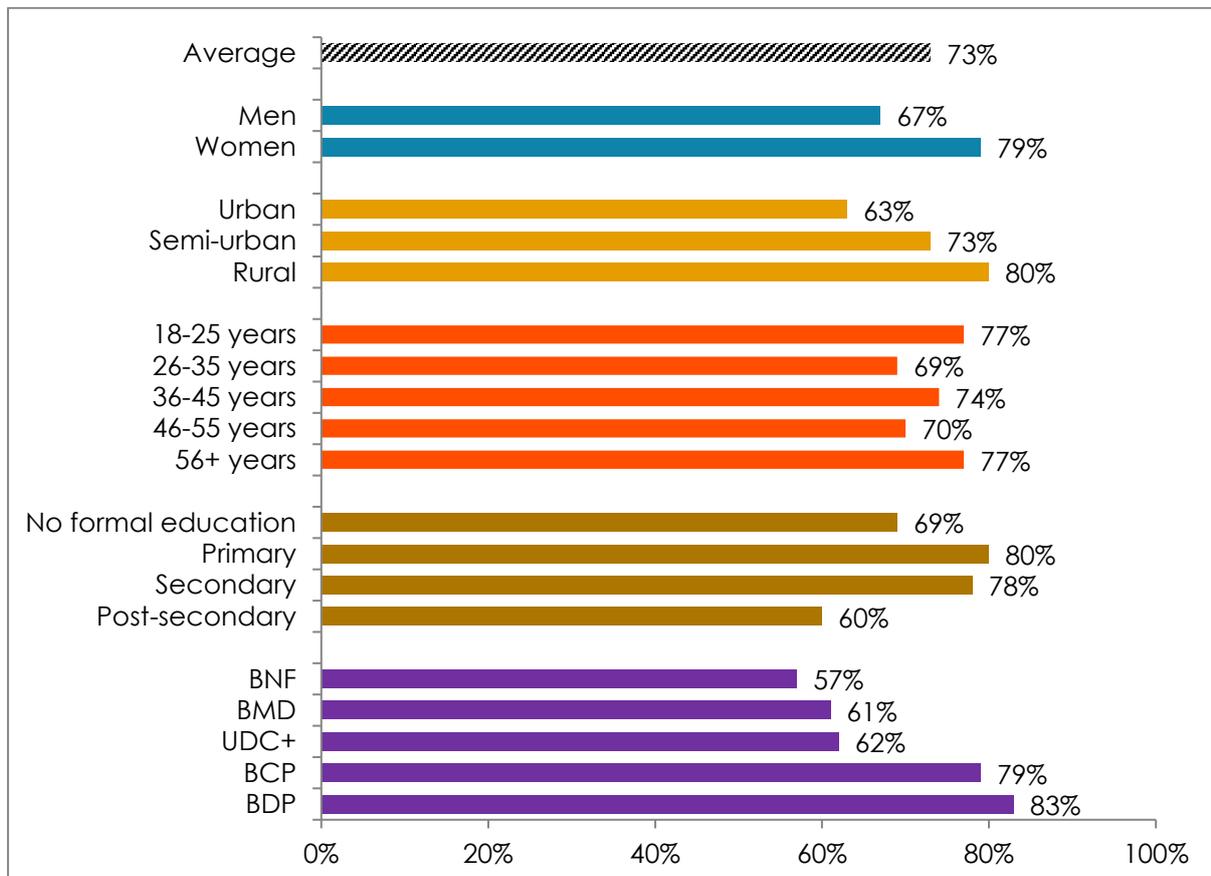
Social protection has become a critical part of the public policy debate in recent years, and governments around the world have reacted by offering various programs targeting vulnerable members of the community. These efforts have largely aligned themselves with United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals addressing poverty as one of the most challenging policy problems in developing countries.

The Botswana government has put in place a number of strategies to help the estimated 6.5% of Batswana living in abject poverty (Khama, 2017), including its flagship Poverty Eradication Program.

Close to three-quarters (73%) of Batswana say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in improving the living standards of the poor (Figure 6). Women (79%) and rural residents (80%) are considerably more appreciative of the government's efforts than are men (67%) and urbanites (63%). So are respondents with a primary (80%) or secondary education (78%) compared to those with post-secondary qualifications (60%) or no formal education at all (69%).

Supporters of the BDP (83%) and BCP (79%) are significantly more likely to approve of the government's performance in improving life for poor citizens than adherents of other political parties.

Figure 6: Government performing well in improving living standards of the poor
 | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017

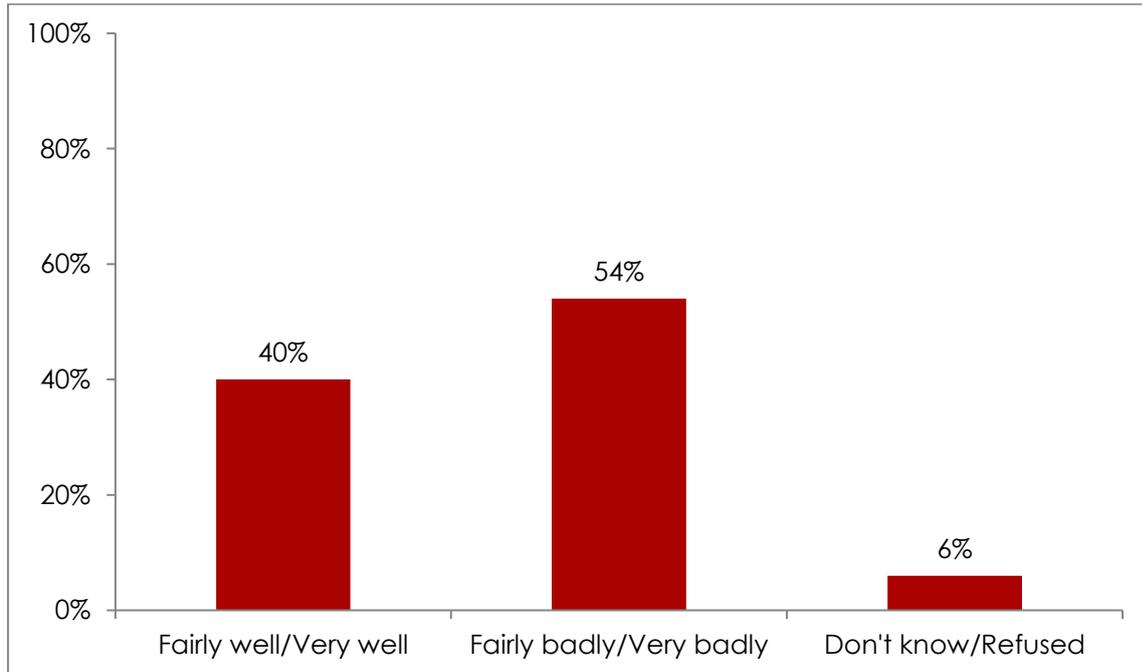


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Improving the living standards of the poor? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Narrowing gaps between rich and poor

Despite anti-poverty efforts, Botswana is one of the most unequal societies in the world (Sunday Standard, 2015), and a majority (54%) of citizens say the government has not done enough to reduce gaps between rich and poor. Only 40% say the government has performed “fairly well” or “very well” on this issue (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Government performance on narrowing gaps between rich and poor | Botswana | 2017



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: Narrowing gaps between rich and poor?

Reducing crime

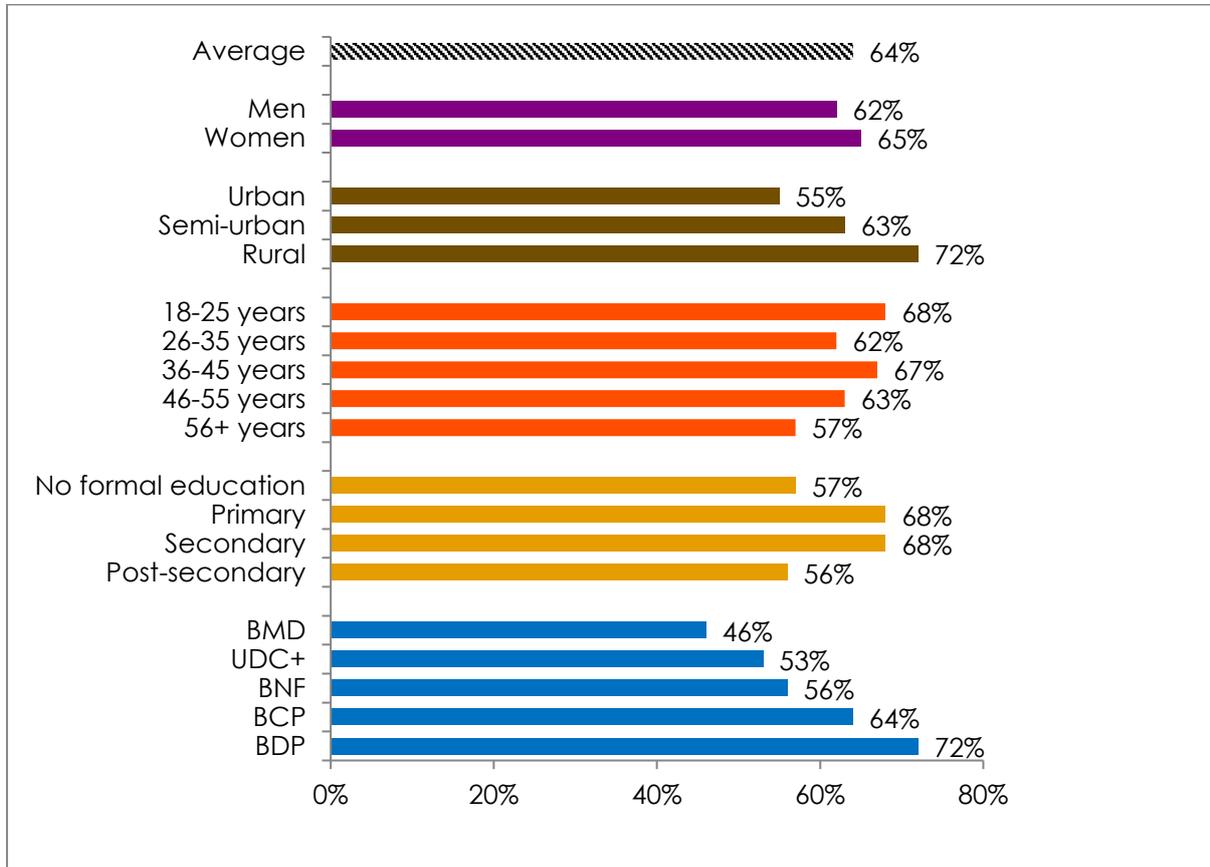
The government has made fighting crime a priority, operationalized through the Botswana Police Service's integrated strategy of visible policing and stakeholder partnership. The Botswana police rank No. 1 in Africa and 47th out of 127 countries in the World Internal Security and Police Index (2016) released by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) and the International Police Science Association (IPSA).

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Among ordinary citizens, about two in three (64%) rate the government positively on reducing crime (Figure 8). Rural dwellers are more impressed with the government's anti-crime efforts than urban residents (72% vs.

55% who say “fairly well” or “very well”), and both the least-educated and best-educated are less appreciative than their compatriots with a primary or secondary education.

Figure 8: Government performing well on crime reduction | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



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: Reducing crime? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Addressing education and youth needs

Education is critical to a knowledge-based economy. For many, the debate has shifted from the need for universal access to the quality of education, especially at the tertiary level, and to the question of whether the education system is providing the type of graduates that the market requires. This has obvious implications for job-creation policy; some commentators argue that unemployment, especially of the youth, has everything to do with a mismatch between skills and the job market.

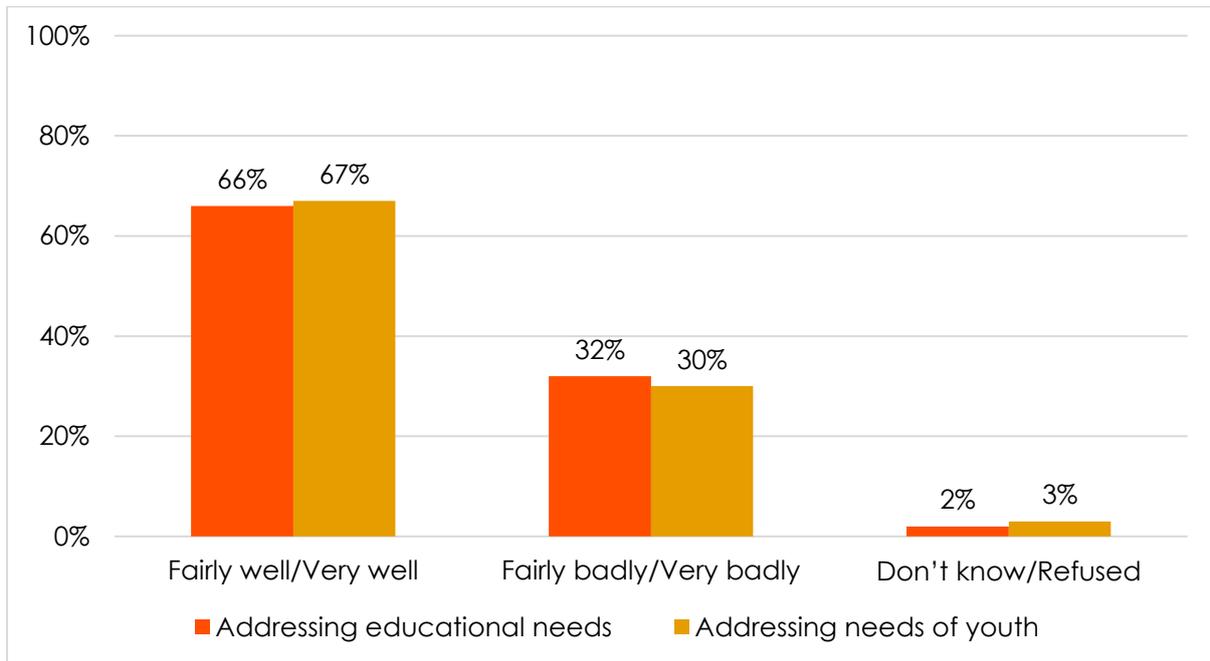
To help address youth unemployment, the government has launched a number of youth empowerment programs, such as the Youth Development Fund and national internship programs.

When ordinary citizens are asked how well the government is addressing the country's educational needs, two-thirds (66%) say it is doing "fairly well" or "very well" (Figure 9).

Roughly the same proportion (67%) approve of the government's performance in addressing the needs of the youth.

By socio-demographic group, responses follow a similar pattern as on economic management, with urban and highly educated respondents significantly less likely to approve of the government's performance and no consistent differences in views by age group.

Figure 9: Government performance in addressing educational and youth needs | Botswana | 2017



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: Addressing educational needs? Addressing the needs of youth?

Conclusion

The economy of Botswana may be classified as upper-middle-class, but the country still faces a number of challenges that are prominent in developing nations. Unemployment ranks at the top as a problem of increasing popular concern. While most Botswana are satisfied with the government's efforts to address education and youth needs and reduce poverty, these remain thorny policy issues with direct implications for job creation. Overall, Botswana seem to trust their government to handle the economy, although popular approval is consistently lower among urban and highly educated citizens.

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