

Providing basic public services remains a challenge for Namibia's government

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 209 | Ellison Tjirera

Summary

In its Harambee Prosperity Plan, the Namibian government echoes concerns about its ability to deliver high-quality services as “a prerequisite for rapid growth, job creation and poverty eradication” (Republic of Namibia, 2016, p. 19; City of Windhoek, 2017; Weber & Mendelsohn, 2017; Delgado, 2017). The plan calls for stronger performance management, including citizen satisfaction surveys. The first such survey, in 2017, found satisfaction levels averaging 54% across 19 public institutions, well below the 70% target (Immanuel, 2018).

Complementary data from a new Afrobarometer survey provide insights on the presence of needed infrastructure and citizens' perceptions and experiences with regard to accessing four key public services – serviced land/housing, water/sanitation, health care, and electricity.

The government receives a failing grade on the provision of serviced land and housing in urban areas. Citizen assessments are more favourable when it comes to health care, water/sanitation, and electricity. But many Namibians still lack access to basic service infrastructure, especially in rural areas, and challenges such as difficulty obtaining services, long wait times, and unreliable supply are common.

These results, while often complimentary of government efforts, suggest that providing basic services to most citizens will require a redoubling of efforts and resources to realize pledges made in national development plans.

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 are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Namibia, led by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), interviewed 1,200 adult Namibians in September-October 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 Namibia in 1999, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, and 2015.

Key findings

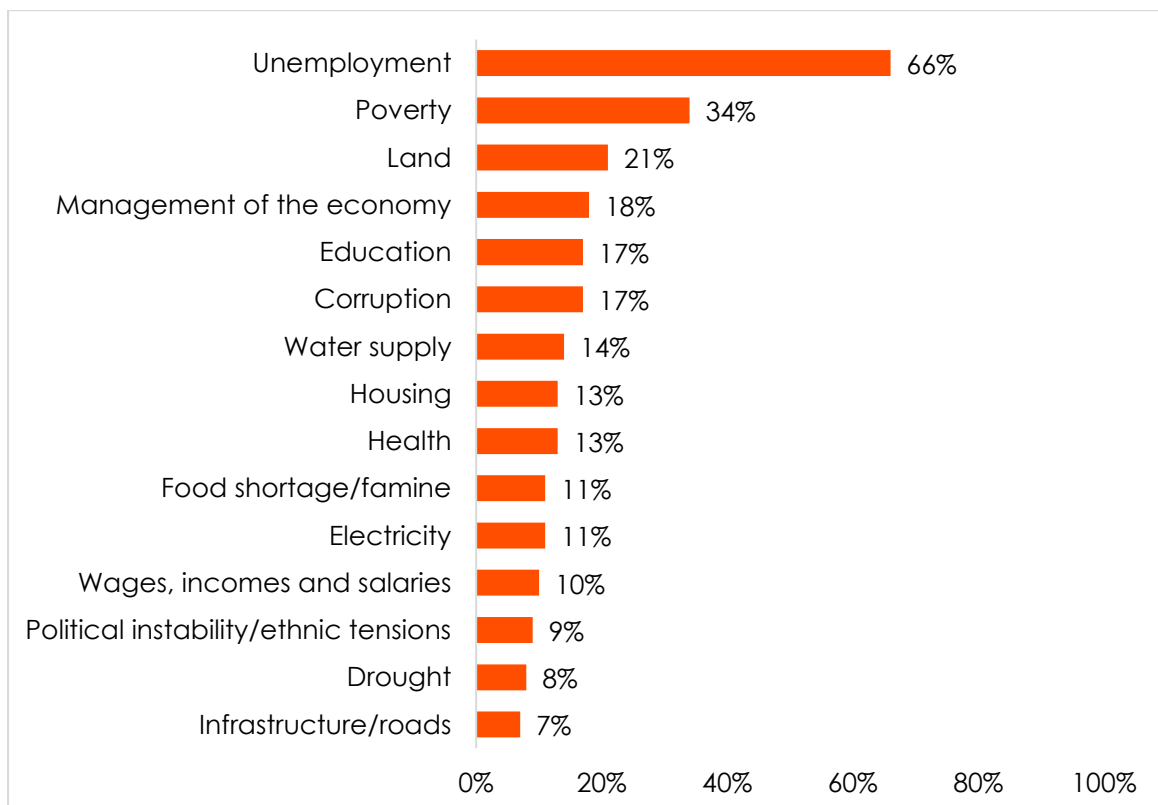
- A majority (52%) of Namibians say the government has not been effective in providing serviced land and housing in urban areas.

- A majority (57%) of respondents say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” in providing water/sanitation services, even though most rural residents lack access to infrastructure for these services.
- Substantial minorities of the population say that obtaining medical care is difficult (35%) and requires long wait times (44%). Still, 57% say that their ability to get health care has improved in recent years.
- Two-thirds (67%) of Namibians say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” on improving basic health services, but that is the lowest approval rating since 2002.
- While only 43% of Namibians say they have electricity most or all of the time, a slim majority (51%) approve of the government’s performance in providing a reliable electricity supply.

Most important problems

As in many African countries, unemployment and poverty rank as the most important problems that Namibians say their government should address. But land (No. 3) and housing (No. 8) also make the top 10; when combined, they tie with poverty for the No. 2 position. And water (No. 7), health (No. 9), and electricity (No. 11) also draw substantial votes as priority problems (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Most important problems facing the country | top 15 | Namibia | 2017

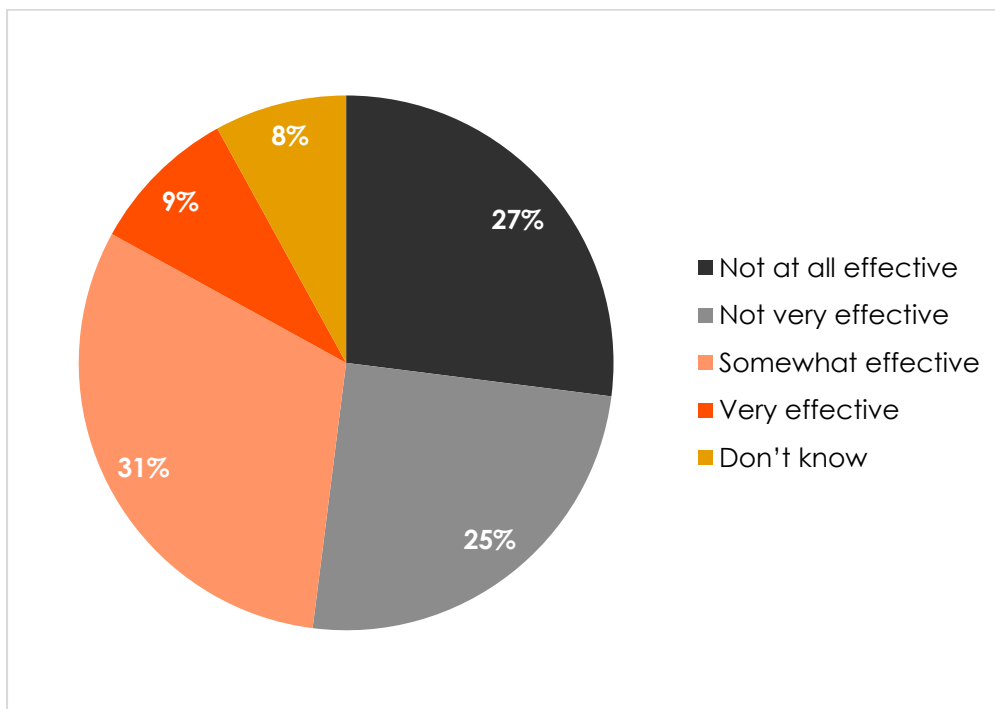


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses were recorded per respondent. Figure shows percentage of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)*

Serviced land/housing

Until about three years ago, little public discourse focused on land reform. Meanwhile, informal settlements have mushroomed in urban centers across the country, a clear consequence of the government's failure to service enough land and provide decent housing (Remmert & Ndhlovu, 2018; Weber & Mendelsohn, 2017). When asked how effective they think the government has been in providing serviced land and housing in urban areas, a majority (52%) of Namibians say it has been "not at all effective" (27%) or "not very effective" (25%), while 40% describe its performance as "somewhat" or "very" effective (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Government performance in providing serviced land/housing | Namibia | 2017



Respondents were asked: How would you rate each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: Government effectiveness in providing serviced land and housing in urban areas?

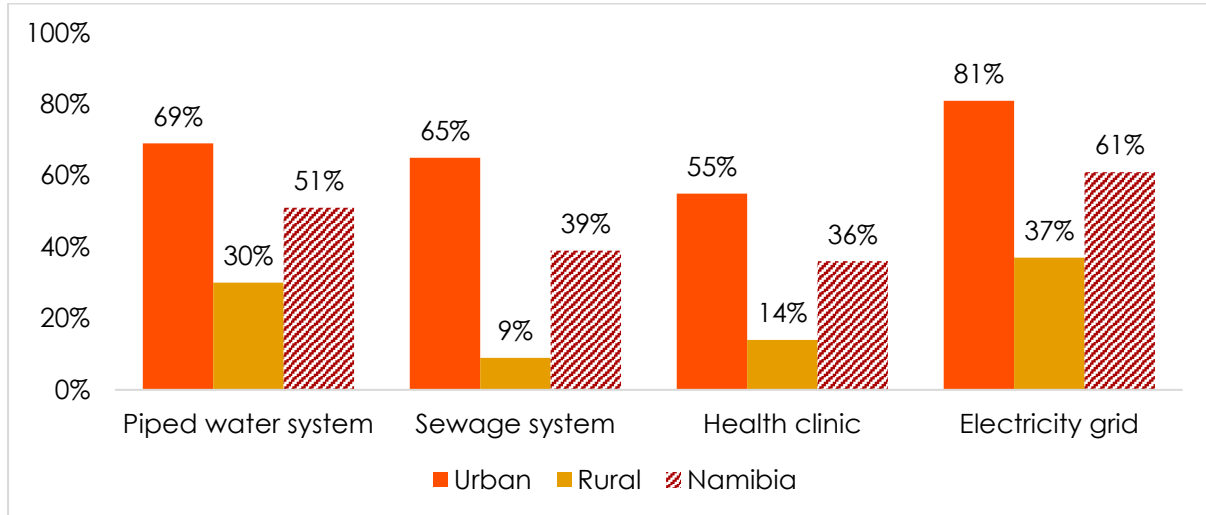
Access to basic service infrastructure

Quality delivery of basic services presupposes the presence of infrastructure to deliver these services. But in Namibia, large majorities of rural residents, and substantial proportions of urban residents, do not have access to the infrastructure needed to receive services.

Afrobarometer asked its survey enumerators to record whether key service-delivery infrastructure is present within the enumeration area. Based on their observations, rural areas remain severely underserved: Only 30% of rural respondents live in areas with a piped-water system, 9% are within reach of a sewage system, 14% live within walking distance of a health clinic, and 37% live in areas served by an electric grid (Figure 3).

While infrastructure is more frequently present in urban areas, overall, barely half (51%) of Namibians have access to a piped-water system, and fewer than four in 10 are within reach of a sewage system (39%) or within walking distance of a health clinic (36%). Six in 10 (61%) live in areas served by an electric grid.

Figure 3: Access to basic service infrastructure | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 2017

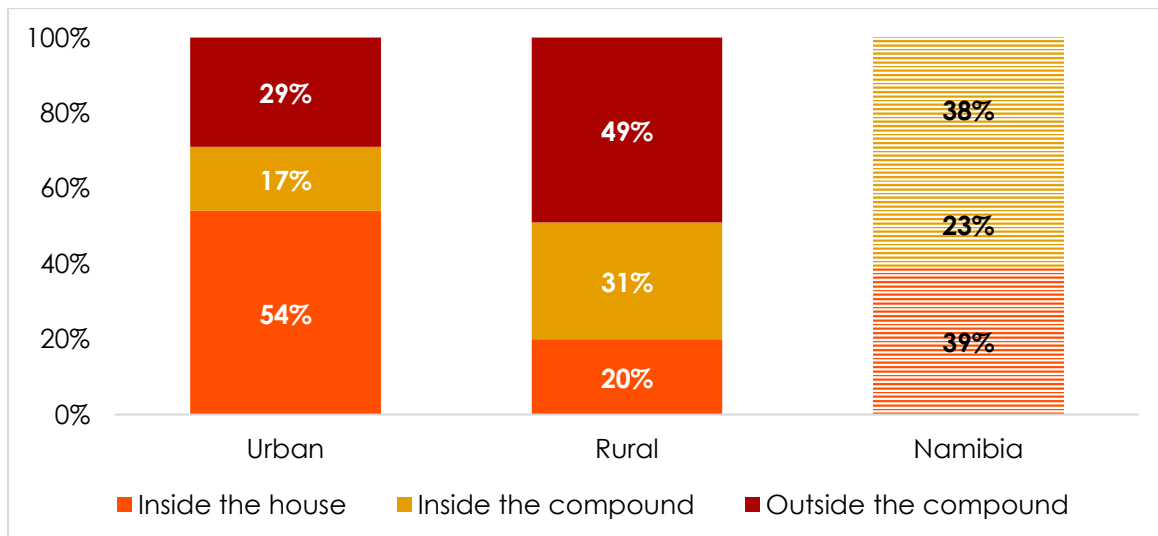


Survey enumerators were asked: Are the following services or facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: A piped-water system that most houses can access? A sewage system that most houses can access? A health clinic? An electricity grid that most houses can access? (% "yes")

Provision of water and sanitation services

Given the substantial proportions of the population who live in areas without water and sanitation infrastructure, it is not surprising that relatively few Namibians – especially in rural areas – have running water or toilets in their homes or compounds. About half (49%) of rural Namibians say their main source of water is located outside their compounds; only one in five (20%) have running water in their homes (Figure 4). In the cities, more than half (54%) of residents have running water in their homes, but three in 10 (29%) still have to go outside their compounds to get water.

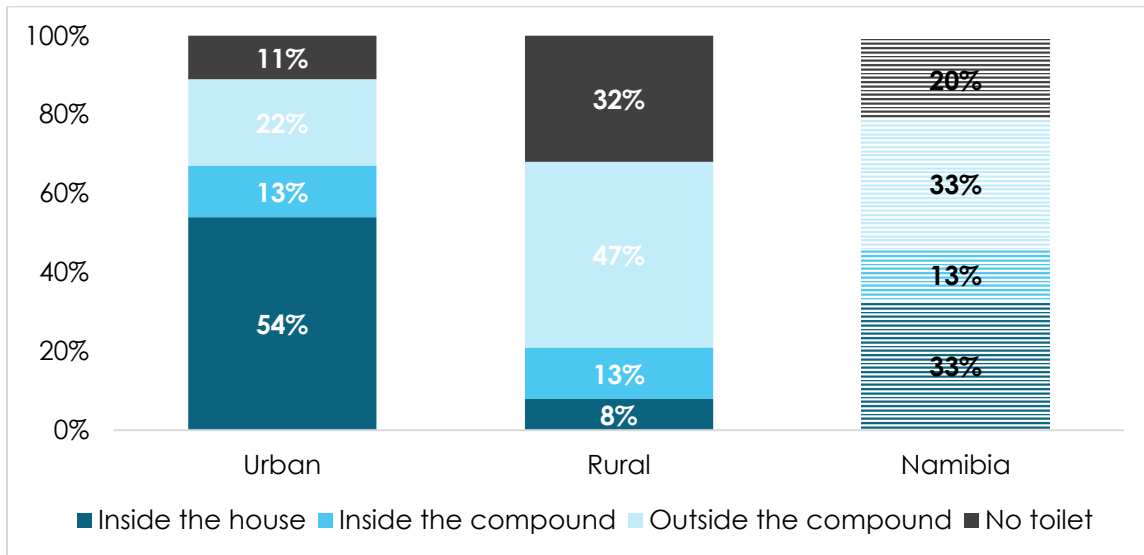
Figure 4: Main source of water for household use | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether each of the following are available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: Your main source of water for household use?

The pattern is similar when it comes to toilets. One in three rural Namibians (32%) say they have no access to toilets at all, while almost half (47%) use toilets outside their compounds (Figure 5). Overall, only one in three Namibians (33%) have toilets inside their homes, and one in five (20%) have no access to toilets.

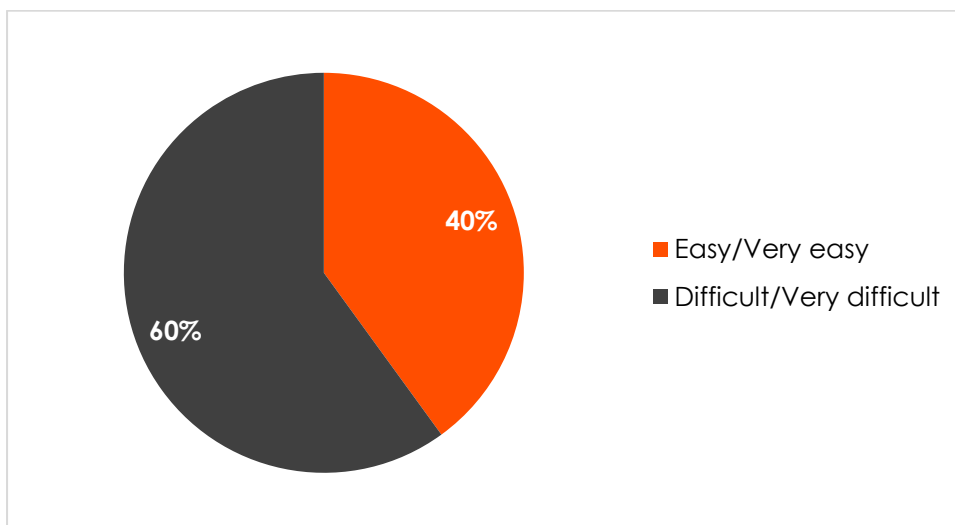
Figure 5: Location of toilet | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether each of the following are available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: A toilet or latrine?

Among the 14% of respondents who say they tried to get water, sanitation, or electricity services from the government during the previous year, 60% found it "difficult" or "very difficult" to do so (Figure 6), and 8% say they had to "pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official" in order to get the services they needed.

Figure 6: Difficulty of obtaining water, sanitation, or electricity services | Namibia | 2017

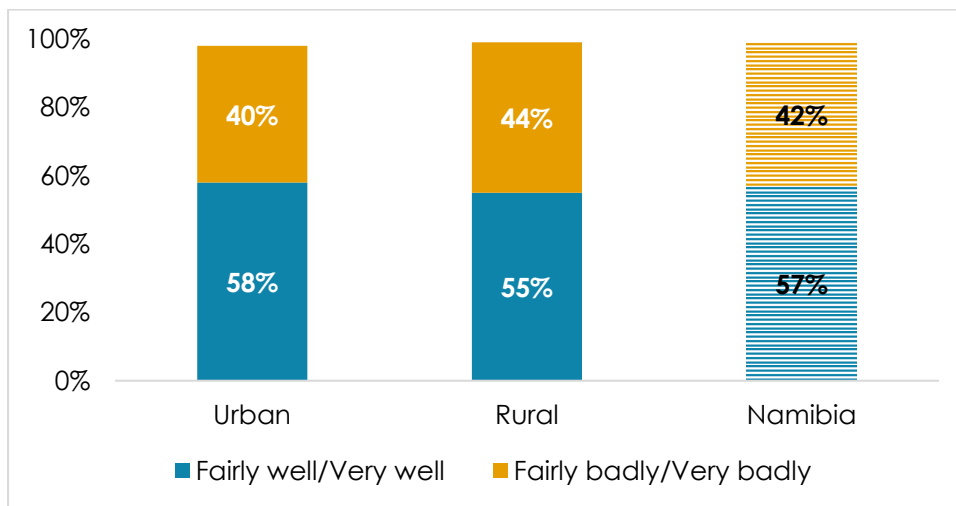


Respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, have you tried to get water, sanitation, or electric services from government? [If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the services you needed? (Respondents who did not try to obtain these services are excluded.)

Despite these shortcomings, a majority (57%) of Namibians say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” in providing water and sanitation services, while 42% say the government is handling this matter “fairly badly” or “very badly.” Urban and rural residents offer similar assessments (Figure 7).

Overall, these results suggest that the provision of water and sanitation services continues to require government attention and investment. The absence of clean running water and ablution facilities invites the risk of disease, impacting quality of life and putting additional strain on the health system. Namibia’s recent outbreak of hepatitis E is quite instructive in foregrounding the cost of neglecting the provision of sanitation services (World Health Organization, 2018; Likela, 2018).

Figure 7: Government performance in providing water and sanitation services | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 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: Providing water and sanitation services?

Health care

As seen above, most rural Namibians, and almost half of urban residents, do not have a health clinic within walking distance. Nonetheless, Namibians say health care has improved in recent years, and assessments of the government’s performance in improving basic health services are generally favourable – though not as favourable as a few years ago.

In the 2017 survey, 58% of respondents say they had contact with a public clinic or hospital during the preceding 12 months. (Men are more likely than women to report “no contact” with a public health-care facility, 48% vs. 35%, providing evidence for the view that men are less likely than women to seek health care.)

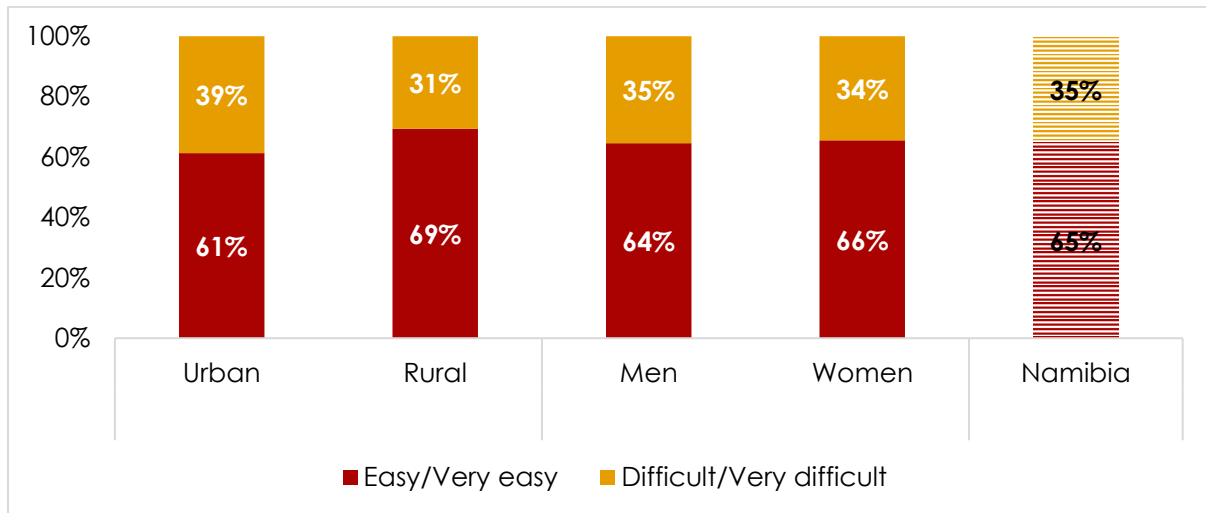
Of those who had contact with health facilities, about two-thirds (65%) say it was “easy” or “very easy” to obtain care (Figure 8). Urban residents are more likely than rural dwellers to say it was difficult/very difficult (39% vs. 31%). This suggests that access is not determined solely by the availability of nearby health facilities.

One factor that might contribute to perceptions of difficulty in obtaining care is the time it takes to access medical attention. Literature on health access in Namibia is replete with reports of long queues and attendant lengthy waiting times (Bauleth, Van Wyk, & Ashipala, 2016; Van Rooy, Mufune, & Amadhila, 2015; Van Rooy et al., 2012).

A majority (55%) of Afrobarometer survey respondents say they received care “right away” (18%) or “after a short time” (37%). But that still leaves almost half of Namibians who say they waited “a long time” (43%) or “never” received the care they sought (1%) (Figure 9). Urban residents are somewhat more likely than their rural counterparts to complain of not receiving quick service (47% vs. 42%), reflecting the fact that long queues at health facilities are more of a concern in densely populated urban areas.

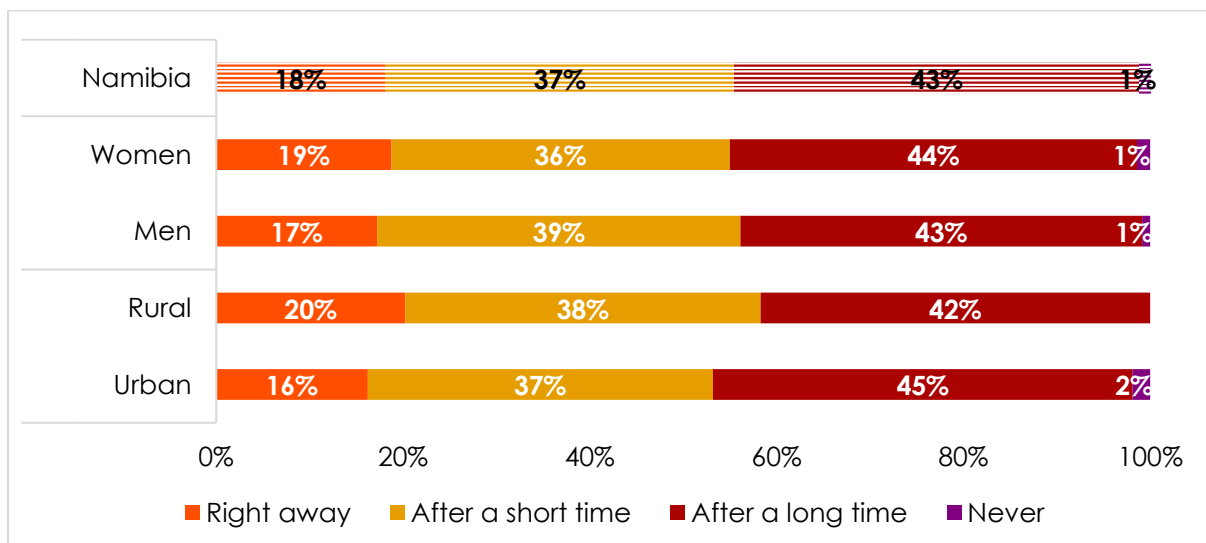
Despite long waits for many Namibians, only 4% of respondents who sought medical care during the previous year say they had to “pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff” in order to get the medical care they needed.

Figure 8: Difficulty in obtaining medical treatment | Namibia | 2017



Respondents who said they had contact with a public clinic or hospital during the previous year were asked: How easy or difficult was it to obtain the medical care you needed? (Respondents who had no contact with public health-care facilities are excluded.)

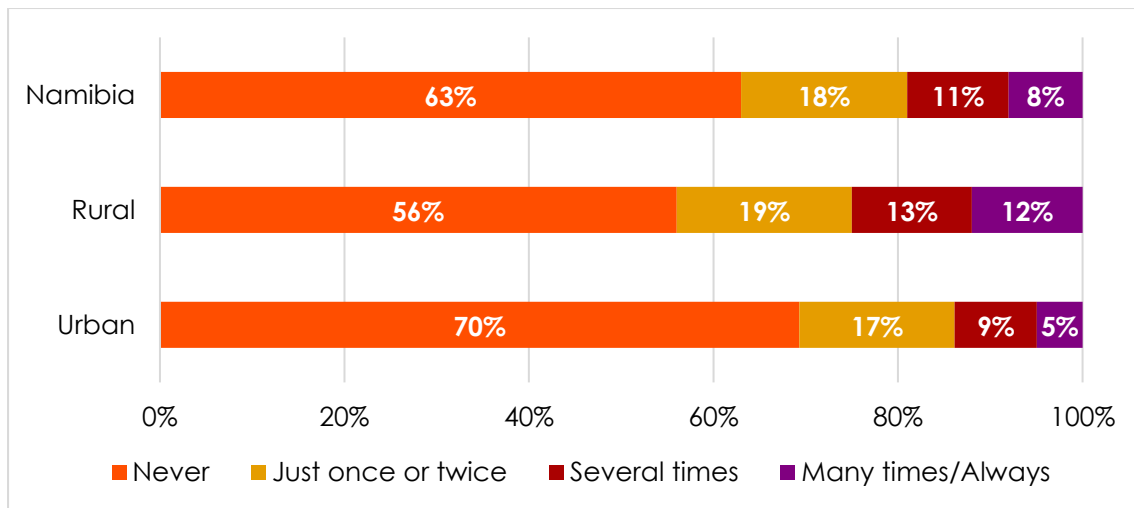
Figure 9: Time taken to receive medical care | Namibia | 2017



Respondents who said they had contact with a public clinic or hospital during the previous year were asked: How long did it take you to receive the medical care that you needed? Was it right away, after a short time, after a long time, or never? (Respondents who had no contact with public health-care facilities are excluded.)

Whether due to lack of access, long waits, cost, or other factors, more than one in three Namibians (37%) say they went without needed medicine or medical care at least once during the previous year, including 19% who were deprived of health care “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 10). The lack of medical care was a more common experience in rural (25%) than in urban (14%) areas.

Figure 10: Went without medical care | Namibia | 2017



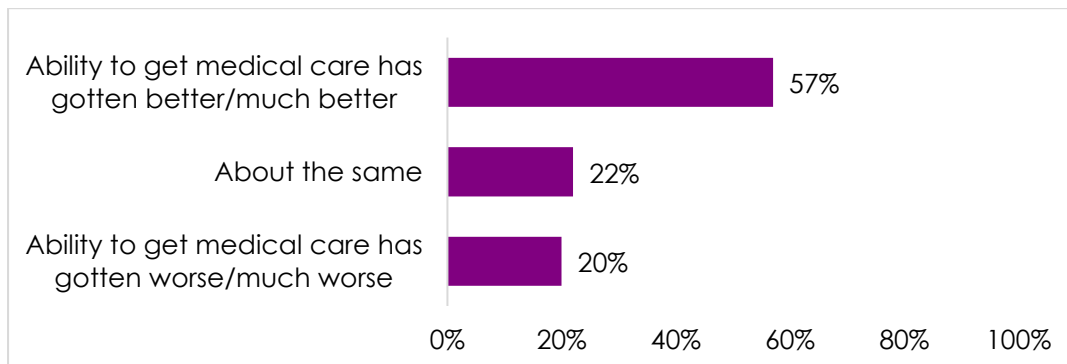
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without medicines or medical treatment?

Despite challenges that significant portions of the population face in obtaining health care, a majority (57%) of Namibians say that access to medical care has improved in recent years (Figure 11).

And two-thirds (67%) of Namibians say the government has performed “fairly well” or “very well” in improving basic health services, while one-third (32%) say the opposite. While positive overall, this is Namibians’ lowest approval rating on this issue since Afrobarometer’s 2002 survey (Figure 12).

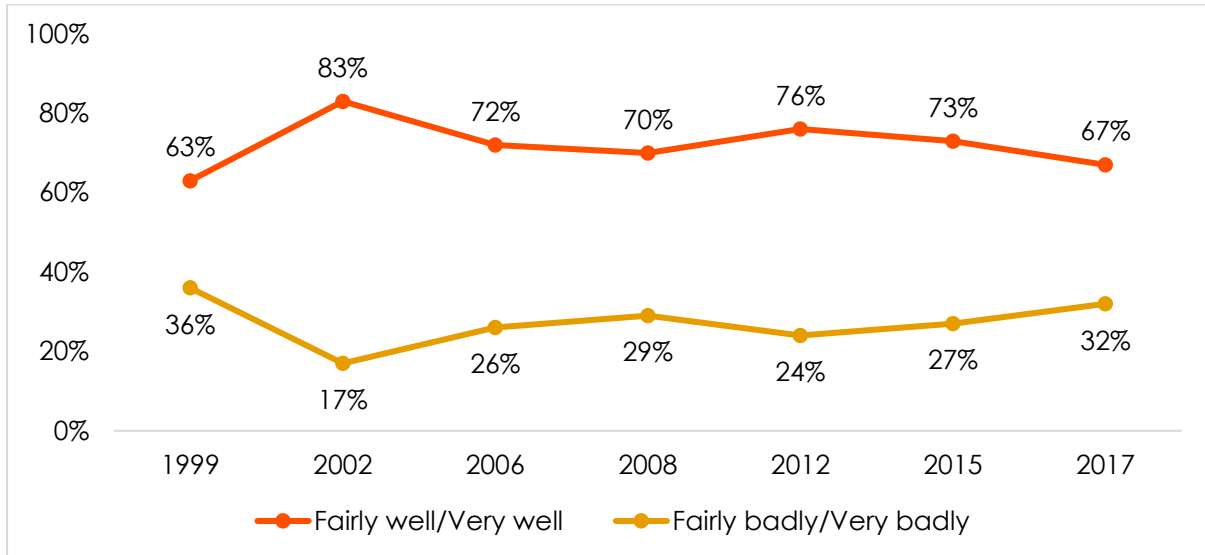
Rural residents are more positive in their evaluation of the government’s efforts: 70% describe them favourably, vs. 64% of urbanites (Figure 13).

Figure 11: Ability to get medical care compared to a few years ago | Namibia | 2017



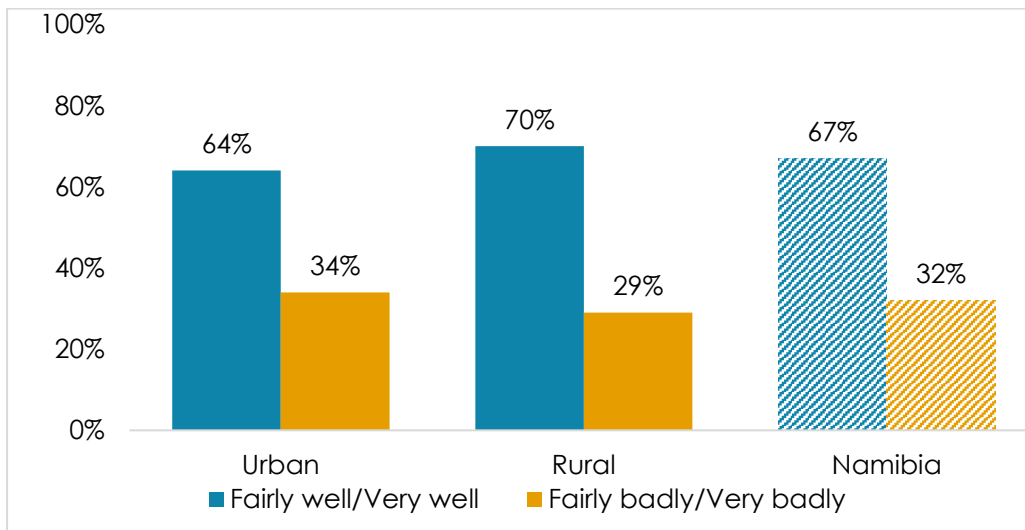
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than were a few years ago, or are they about the same: Your ability to get medical care when you need it?

Figure 12: Government performance in improving health services | Namibia | 1999-2017



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 basic health services?

Figure 13: Government performance in improving health services | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 2017

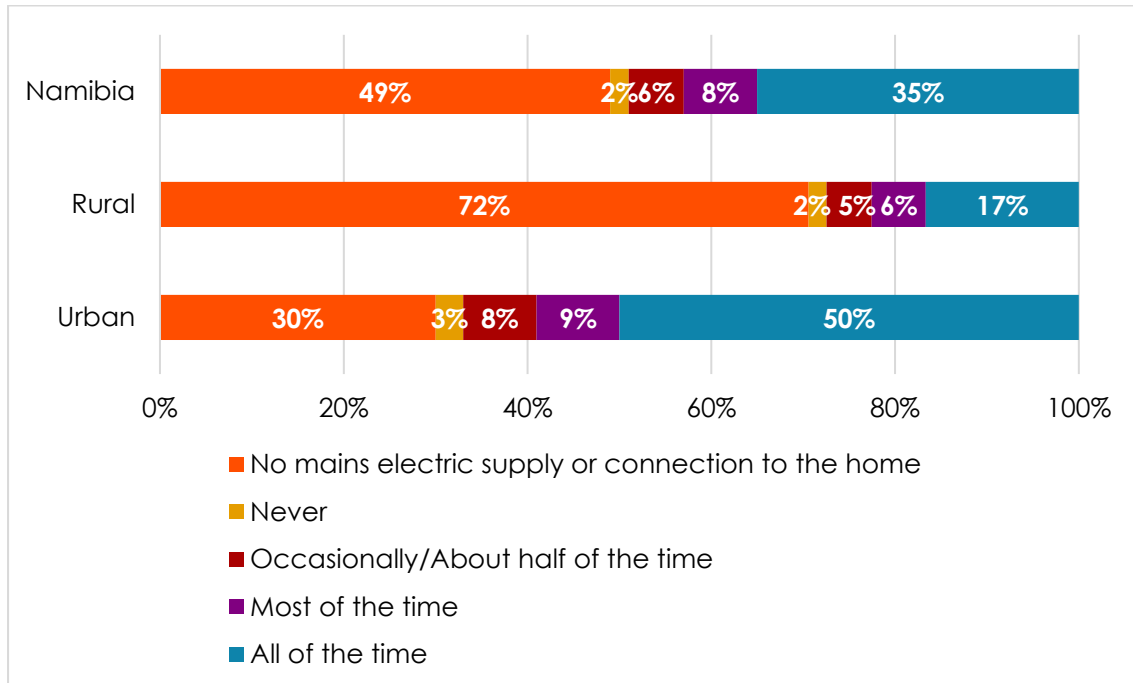


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Improving basic health services?

Electricity

As we saw in Figure 3 above, 81% of urban Namibians live in a zone with an electric grid, but the same is true of only 37% of rural residents. Moreover, living within proximity of an electric grid does not guarantee a reliable supply of electricity. As shown in Figure 14, while 51% of Namibians say they are connected to an electric grid, only 43% say they have electricity "most" or "all" of the time. In urban areas, 59% say they have reliable electricity (most/all of the time), while in rural areas, only 23% say the same.

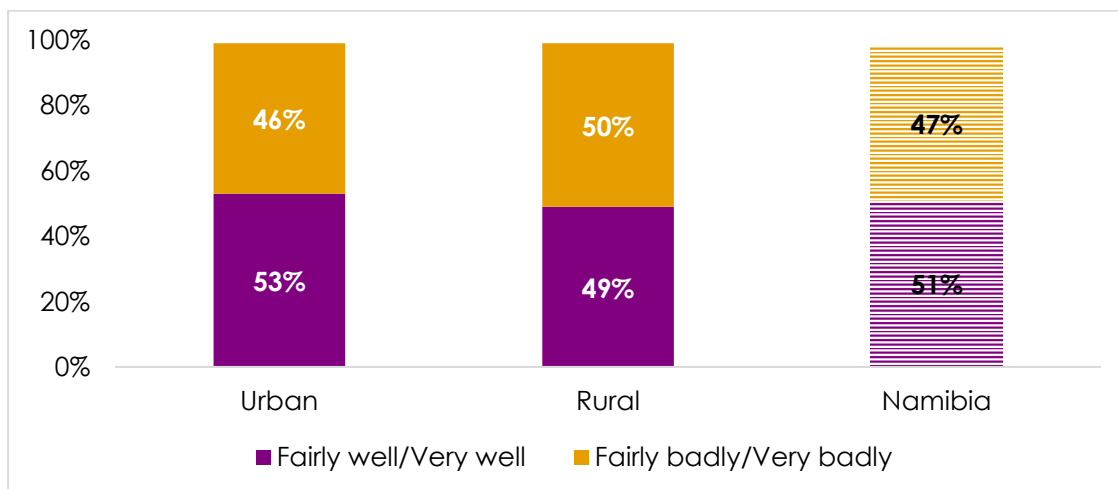
Figure 14: Electric connection from mains | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 2017



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is the electricity actually available?

Namibians are almost evenly divided in their assessments of the government's performance in providing a reliable supply of electricity: 51% say "fairly well" or "very well," while 47% say "fairly badly" or "very badly" (Figure 15). Even in rural areas, where 72% of respondents say they have no connection to an electric grid, about half (49%) of respondents approve of the government's performance on this issue.

Figure 15: Government performance in providing reliable electricity | by urban-rural residence | Namibia | 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: Providing a reliable supply of electricity?

Conclusion

With its performance-management initiatives, the Namibian government has taken steps to improve its delivery of basic services. Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that Namibians appreciate their government's efforts but still, too often, remain under- or unserved. Particularly with regard to serviced land and housing in urban areas, popular dissatisfaction provides a clear message to the government. And even where the government's performance wins majority approval, such as health care, substantial proportions of the citizenry experience difficulties and delays that require government attention.

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Ellison Tjirera is a research associate with the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in Namibia. Email: etjirera@gmail.com.

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