

In eSwatini, citizens see reasons for hope despite increase in lived poverty

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 261 | Siphon Kunene

Summary

Poverty and inequality, exacerbated by poor economic growth, continue to be challenges for the government of the Kingdom of eSwatini. The World Bank (2018) reports that economic growth in eSwatini declined to 1.9% in 2017, from 3.2% in 2016, reflecting a slow recovery in agriculture and mounting fiscal challenges. Six in 10 citizens (60.3%) live in poverty, including 38% in extreme poverty, which disproportionately affects children, the elderly, the unemployed, as well as female-headed and single-headed households (World Bank, 2018).

The government made economic prosperity one of its focal areas in His Majesty's Government Programme of Action 2013-2018, which seeks to achieve accelerated economic growth that will create jobs, raise incomes, and reduce poverty by 2022 (His Majesty's Government, 2013).

According to findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey, ordinary citizens are keenly aware of eSwatini's economic challenges: Only one in five describe the country's economic condition as good, and lived poverty – a lack of basic life necessities – has increased since the previous survey in 2015. Fewer than half of citizens give the government a passing grade on economic management. Even so, a growing number of eSwatini say their personal living conditions are good, and a majority say the country is moving in the right direction.

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 results of Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently being released. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in eSwatini, led by activQuest, interviewed 1,200 adult citizens in March 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in eSwatini in 2013 and 2015.

Key findings

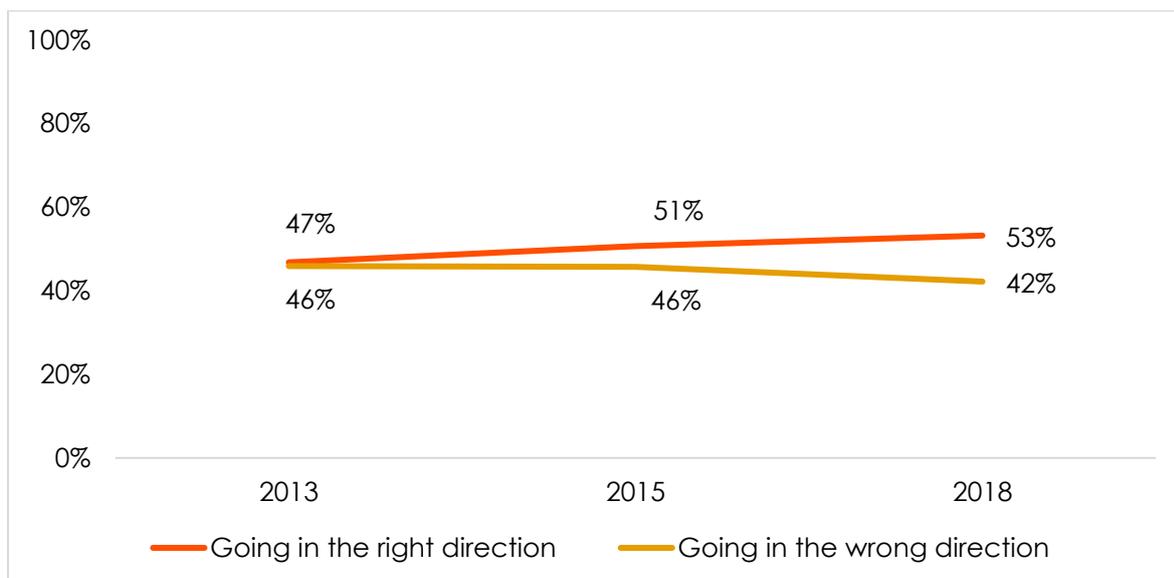
- More than half (53%) of citizens say eSwatini is going "in the right direction," a 6-percentage-point increase from 2013.
- But only one in five (21%) describe the country's economic conditions as "fairly good" or "very good," a decline of 13 points from three years ago.

- A slim majority (52%) believe the economy will improve over the next 12 months.
- Almost half (46%) of respondents see their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good,” a gain of 21 percentage points since 2013.
- But lived poverty has increased since the previous survey in 2015. More than half of respondents report going without enough food (56%, up from 51%) and without needed medical care (53%, up from 33%) at least once during the previous year.
- Fewer than half of citizens approve of the government's performance on economic issues, ranging from 47% on managing the economy down to 29% on narrowing incomes gaps between rich and poor.

Perceptions of the country's direction and the economy

A slim majority (53%) of citizens say the country is going in the right direction, continuing a gradual improvement since 2013 (47%) (Figure 1). The proportion who think the country is going in the wrong direction has declined by 4 percentage points over the same period, to 42%.

Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | eSwatini | 2013-2018



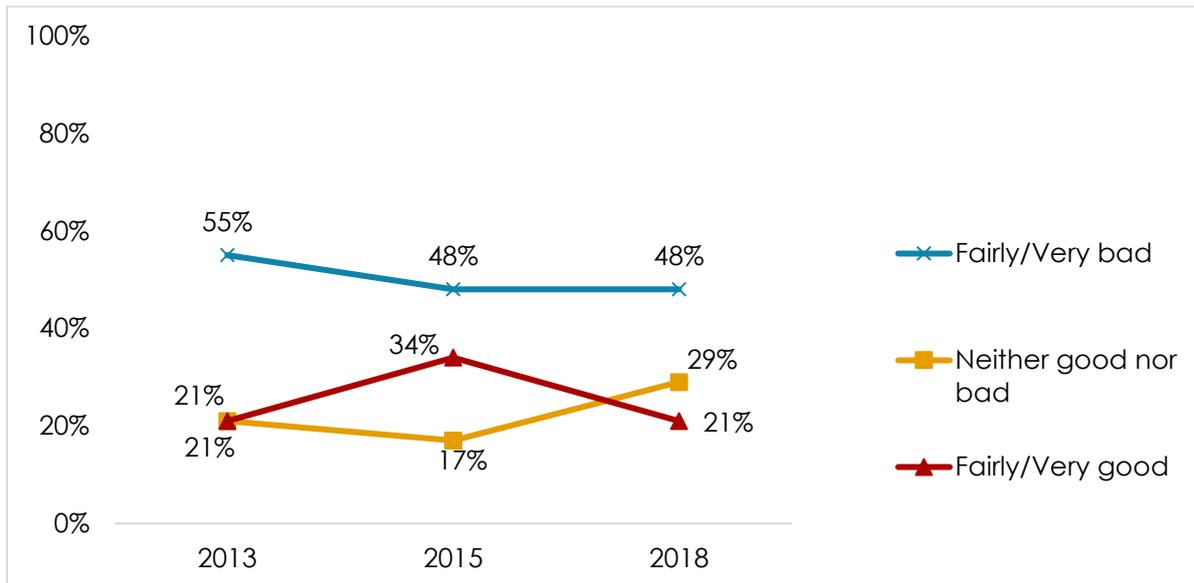
Respondents were asked: Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask YOU about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Despite their somewhat positive outlook overall, only one in five citizens (21%) describe the condition of eSwatini's economy as “fairly good” or “very good.” More than twice as many say it is fairly/very bad (48%), while about one-third say it's neither good nor bad (29%) (Figure 2).

The proportion who saw the economy as doing well had increased by 13 percentage points between 2013 and 2015 but dropped back down to the 2013 level in the most recent survey.

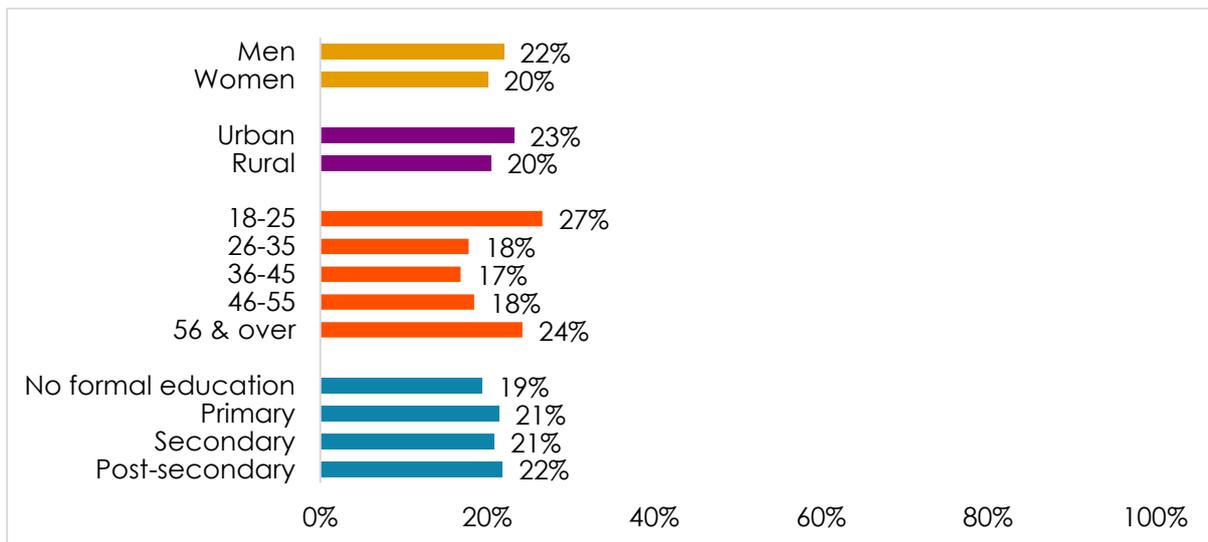
Key socio-demographic groups offer very similar assessments of the country's economy, except that the youngest and oldest respondents are somewhat more positive (27% and 24% fairly/very good, respectively) than other age groups (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Country's economic condition | eSwatini | 2013-2018



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

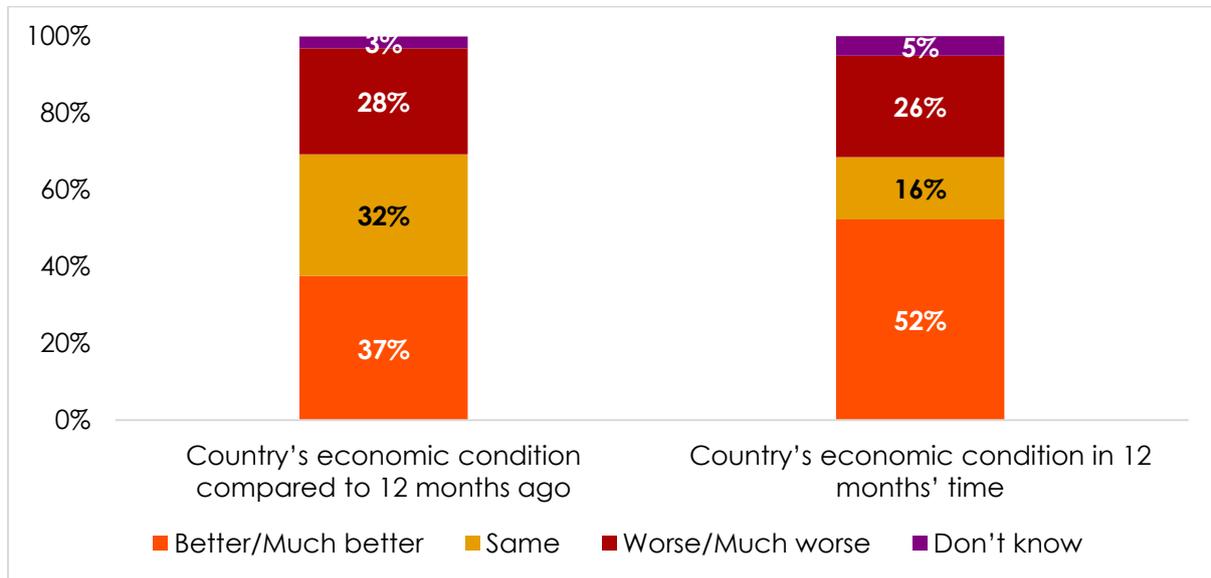
Figure 3: Country's economic condition | by socio-demographic group | eSwatini | 2018



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who say "fairly good" or "very good")

In line with their view that the country is moving in the right direction, a plurality (37%) say that the economy has improved over the previous year, and a majority (52%) expect things to get "better" or "much better" during the 12 months to come (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Country's economy compared to 12 months ago and in 12 months' time
 | eSwatini | 2018



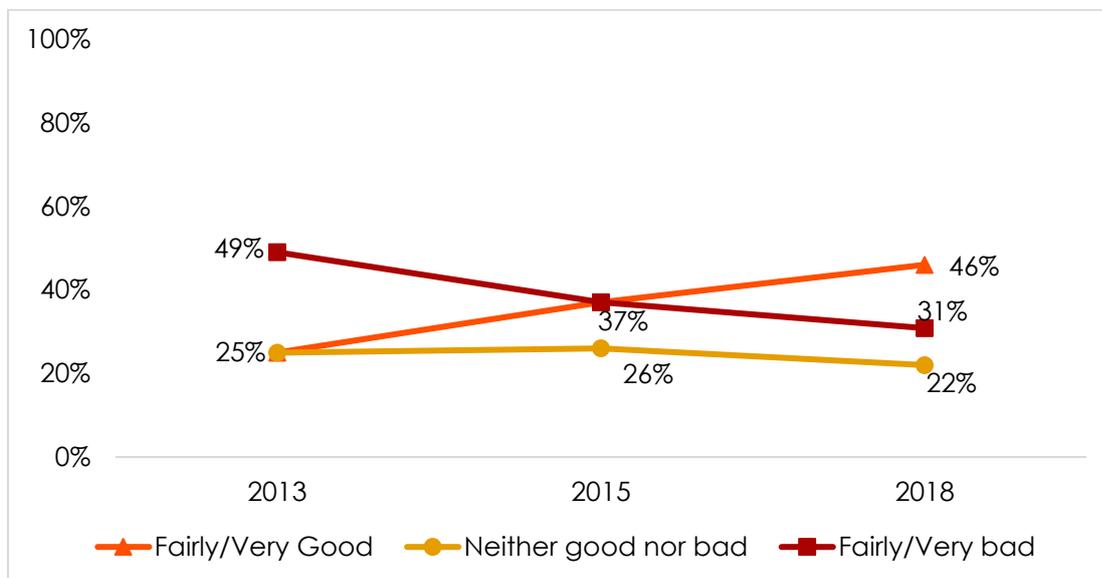
Respondents were asked:

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

Living conditions

In contrast to their negative view of the current economy, a growing number of citizens are satisfied with their personal living condition. The proportion who describe their living conditions as "fairly good" or "very good" increased by 21 percentage points between 2013 and 2018, moving from 25% to 46% (Figure 5). The share of the population who feel their living conditions are bad dropped by 18 points over the same period, to 31%.

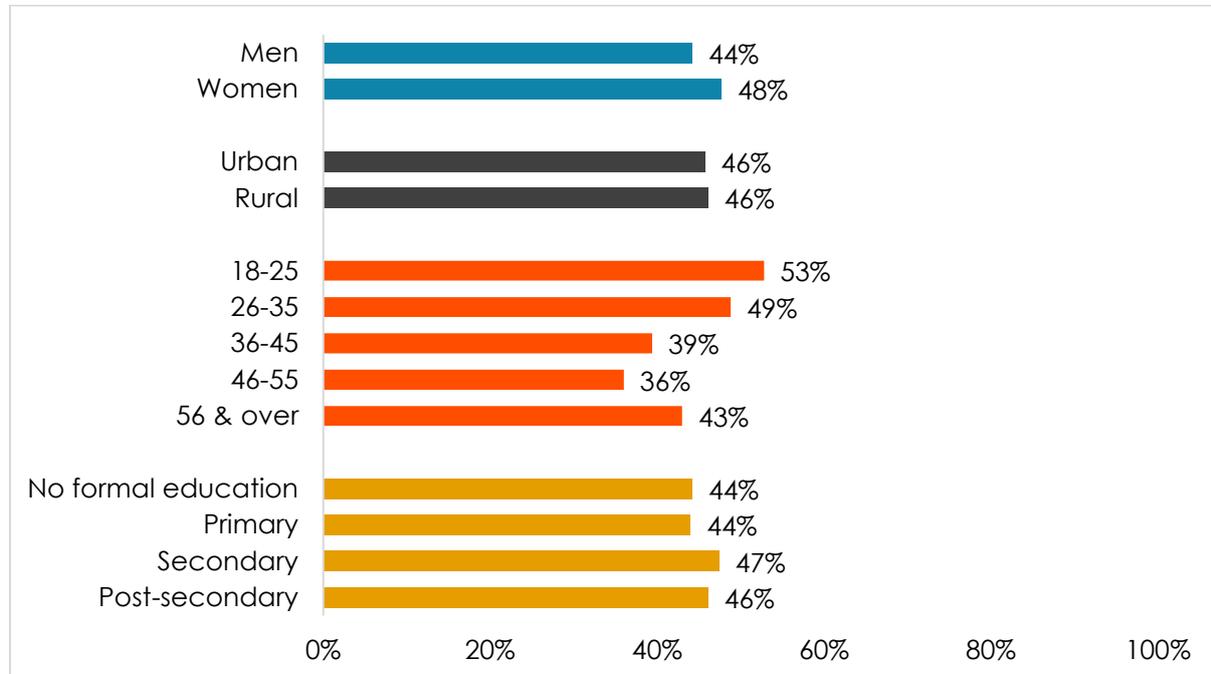
Figure 5: Personal living conditions | eSwatini | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

Young citizens are more inclined than their elders to see their living conditions as good (53% of 18- to 25-year-olds and 49% of 26- to 35-year-olds) (Figure 6). Women are slightly more positive than men, 48% vs. 44%.

Figure 6: Personal living conditions | by socio-demographic group | eSwatini | 2018



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly good" or "very good")*

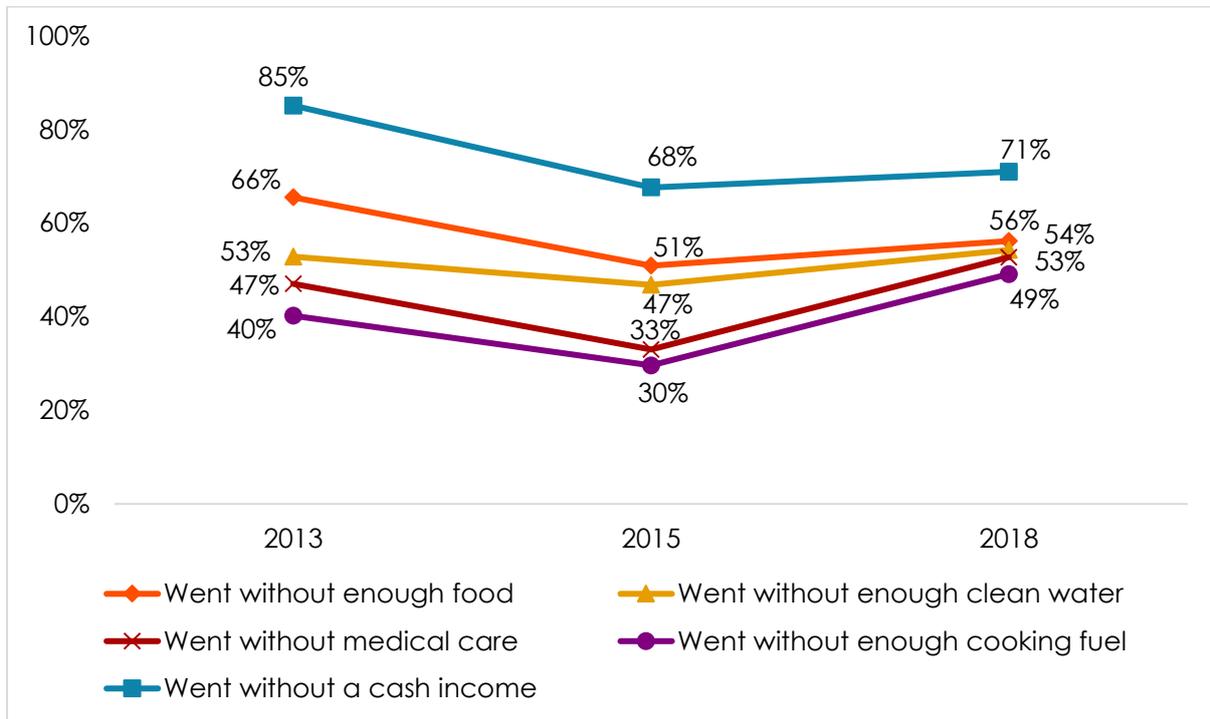
Lived poverty

Despite their improved assessment of their personal living conditions, more eSwatini citizens are going without basic necessities of life. Afrobarometer assesses the prevalence of "lived poverty" by asking respondents how often, over the previous year, they or their family members went without enough food, enough clean water, needed medicine or medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income. Figure 7 shows that while lived poverty had been declining in eSwatini between the years 2013 and 2015, there has been an increase since then.

The share of citizens who went without enough to eat at least once during the previous 12 months increased by 5 percentage points between 2015 and 2018, from 51% to 56%, while those who experienced a lack of clean water grew by 7 points, from 47% to 54%. The largest increases were observed among those who experienced shortages of medical care (from 33% to 53%) and cooking fuel (from 30% to 49%). More than seven in 10 respondents (71%) say they went without a cash income at least once during the previous year, up from 68% in 2015.

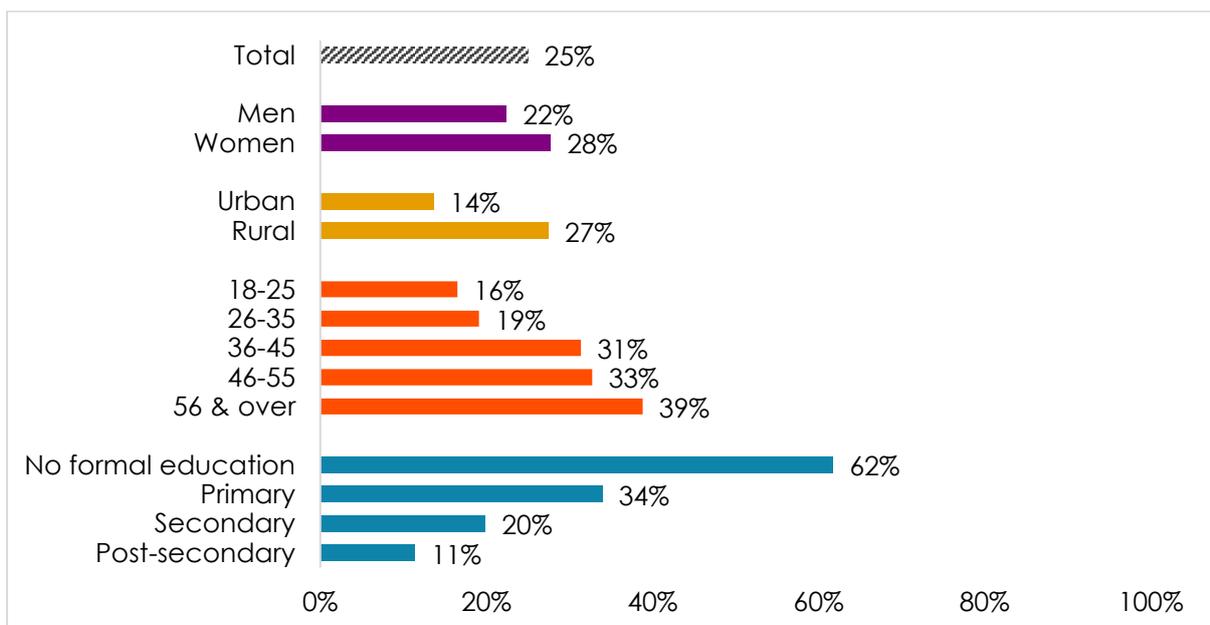
High lived poverty (or frequently going without basic necessities) was experienced by one in four citizens and is twice as common in rural areas as in cities (27% vs. 14%) (Figure 8). It declines steeply as respondents' education level increases: 62% of people without formal education experienced high lived poverty, compared to 34% of those with primary education, 20% of those with secondary schooling, and 11% of those with post-secondary qualifications. And lived poverty increases with age, ranging from 16% of 18- to 25-year-olds to 39% of those who are 56 or older.

Figure 7: Lived poverty | eSwatini | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: 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? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

Figure 8: High lived poverty | by socio-demographic group | eSwatini | 2018

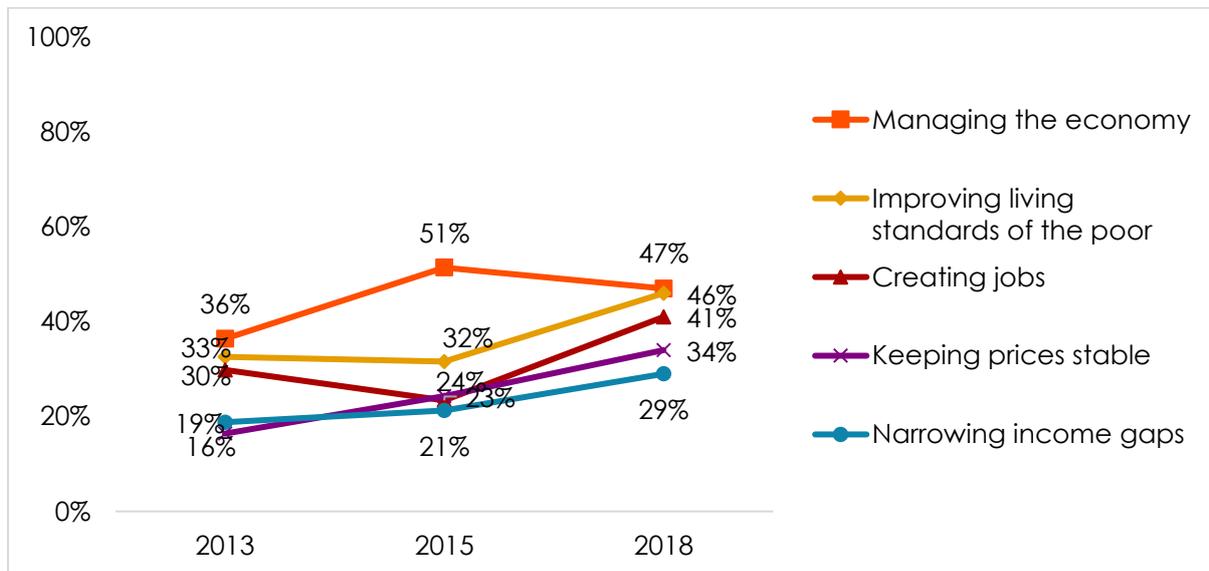


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income? (% who experienced high lived poverty)

Government handling of the economy

Public approval of the government's performance in managing the economy declined slightly, from 51% in 2015 to 47% who say it is doing "fairly well" or "very well." Ratings of government performance on other key economic indicators also remained below 50% approval but increased during the same period: by 14 percentage points on improving living standards of the poor (46%), by 18 points on creating jobs (41%), by 10 points on keeping prices stable (34%), and by 8 points on narrowing income gaps between rich and poor (29%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Government performance in managing the economy | eSwatini
 | 2013-2018



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")

Conclusion

While more than half of citizens see the country as heading in the right direction and expect things to be better in 12 months' time, it must be noted that lived poverty has increased, and few eSwatini have any illusions about their current economic reality. It is therefore incumbent on the government to strengthen implementation strategies that will enable His Majesty's Government Programme of Action to encourage economic growth and improve its citizens' lives.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
 for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

References

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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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