

# Gambians with clear message to government: Focus on service delivery

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 322 | Sait Matty Jaw and Thomas Isbell**

## Summary

Efficient and effective public service delivery is a necessity for citizens' well-being (Armah-Attoh, 2015). However, in Africa, access to quality public services remains a challenge. According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2018), "the average African public service displays a lack of capacity, ... with higher costs than in other regions and large country disparities." In the Gambia, prominent human-rights activist Madi Jobarteh (2017) has criticized public service delivery as "incredibly inefficient."

Since the defeat of former President Yahya Jammeh in the December 2016 election and the liberalization of the political environment, Gambians have grown bolder in demanding quality public services. For example, in November 2017, a group of activists using the hashtag #OccupyWestfield organized a march to protest poor water and electricity services (Touray, 2017). In March 2018, Gambian doctors in public hospitals embarked on a sit-down strike to demand health-service and Ministry of Health reforms as well as the resignation of the then-minister of health, who had blamed service-delivery problems in part on doctors stealing medicines to sell them in their private pharmacies (Camara & Ceesay, 2018; Sarr, 2018). In September, teachers followed with a strike for better remuneration (Jawo, 2018).

While the protest was quelled by the police (Fatu Network, 2017a, 2017b) and doctors and teachers returned to work within a month, these events have highlighted popular dissatisfaction with public service delivery in post-Jammeh Gambia.

This dispatch analyzes Gambians' perceptions and experiences with regard to major public services that citizens want their government to prioritize: Health care, infrastructure (including water and electricity supply), education, and security. Findings from Afrobarometer's 2018 survey show that while citizens are appreciative of the government's efforts, many are going without needed medical care and lack access to reliable electricity, not to mention sanitation. Views are mixed on whether personal security is improving, and a majority say police assistance is difficult to obtain.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer directs a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Centre for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult Gambians in July and August 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

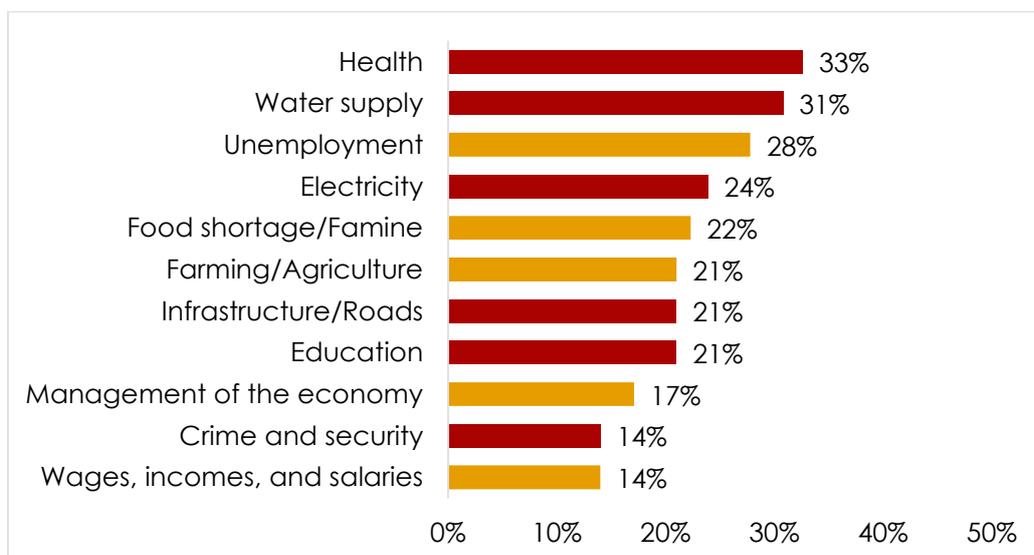
## Key findings

- Key public services dominate the list of problems that Gambians want their government to address, led by health care and water supply. Infrastructure, education, and security also rank in the top 10.
- Health care: Six out of 10 Gambians (60%) – including 99% of the poorest citizens – say they went without needed medical care at least once during the previous year. But a slim majority (52%) say the government is doing a good job of improving basic health services.
- Infrastructure: More than six in 10 Gambians live in areas served by an electric grid (63%) and piped-water infrastructure (69%), but only about one in 20 (6%) live within reach of a sewage system. Only four out of 10 (42%) enjoy a reliable supply of electricity. Among citizens who tried to obtain water, sanitation, or electricity services from the government during the 12 months preceding the survey, almost three-fourths (72%) say they found it difficult to get the services they needed, and about one in eight (13%) say they had to pay a bribe.
- Education: A majority (56%) of respondents approve of the government's performance on education, although only 43% say it has become more effective in addressing educational needs.
- Security: A slim majority (54%) of Gambians say the government is doing a good job of reducing crime. But among those who sought police assistance during the previous year, more than half (56%) say it was difficult to get help, and one in five (20%) say they had to pay a bribe.

## Service delivery among top problems that government should address

When asked what they consider the most important problems that the government should address, Gambians cite key public services among their top priorities. Health is the most frequently mentioned problem (by 33% of respondents), followed by water supply (31%). Electricity is No. 4 (cited by 24%), while infrastructure comes in at No. 7 (21%) and security at No. 10 (14%) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Most important problems** | The Gambia | 2018



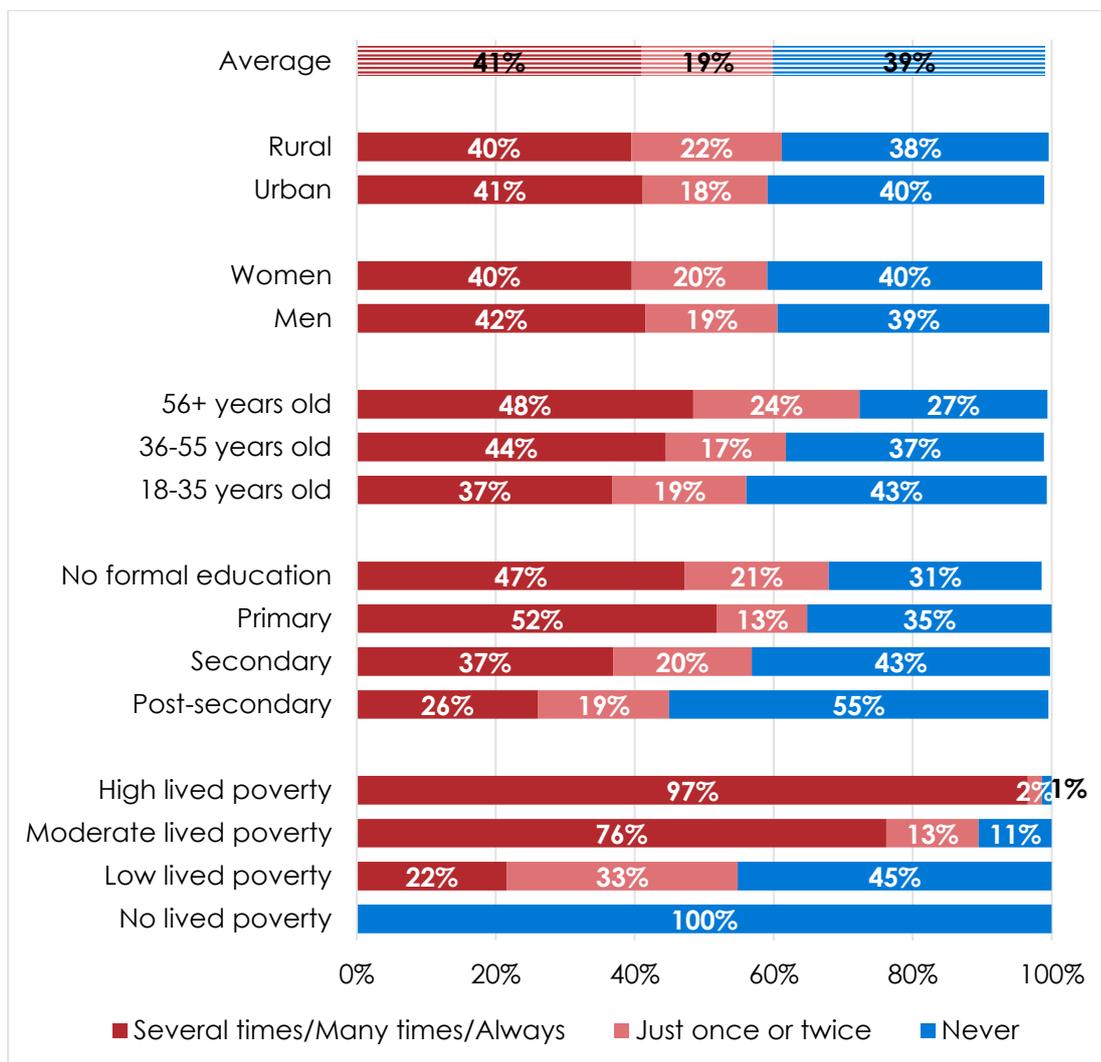
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person were recorded.)*

**Health**

The Gambia's National Health Policy Framework 2007-2020 "seeks to promote equity in access and affordability of quality services, maintain ethics and standards, promote health system reforms and improve staff retention and client satisfaction" (Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Despite modest gains over the past two decades, the health sector continues to face a plethora of challenges, including inadequate funding and human resources, a weak referral system, and high staff attrition.

Afrobarometer data show that six in 10 Gambians (60%) say they went without needed medical care at least once during the 12 months preceding the survey, including 41% who say this happened "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Went without medical care | by socio-demographic group and region | The Gambia | 2018**



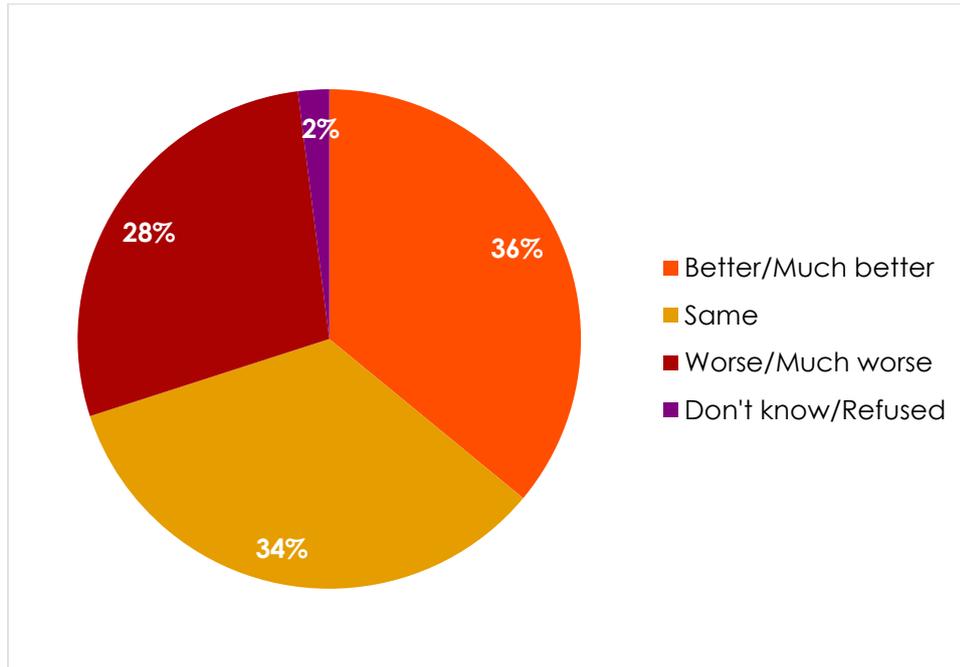
**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without medicines or medical treatment?

Rural and urban residents are about equally likely to report going without care, as are women and men. But a lack of care is more common among older respondents (72% of those over age 55, compared to 56% of those aged 18-35).

As would be expected, poorer Gambians<sup>1</sup> are far more prone to be deprived of medical care: Almost all respondents in the “high lived poverty” category say this happened at least once in the previous year, while none of those in the economically best-off category (“no lived poverty”) experienced a lack of care. In line with differences by economic status, Gambians with higher levels of education are less likely to go without care.

Only about one in three Gambians (36%) say their ability to get medical care when they need it has improved over the past few years, while about the same proportion (34%) say it has stayed the same and 28% see it as having gotten “worse” or “much worse” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Better or worse: Access to medical care | The Gambia | 2018**



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

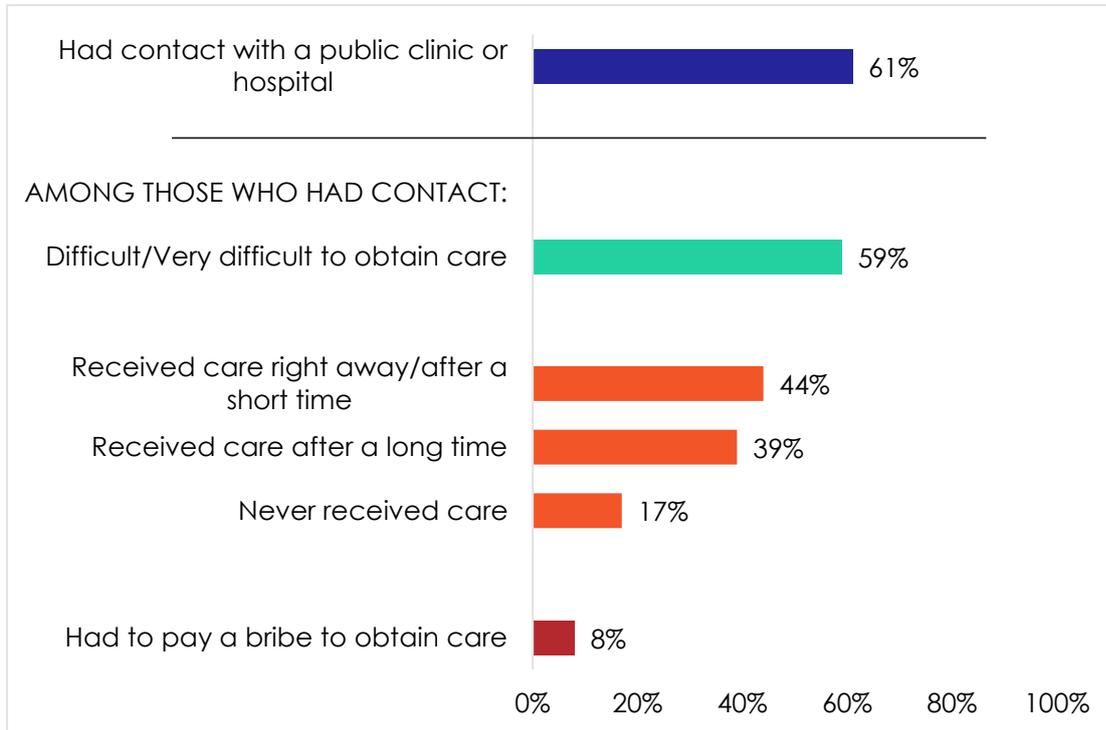
Among the 61% of respondents who said they had contact with a public clinic or hospital during the 12 months preceding the survey, almost six in 10 (59%) say it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to obtain the care they needed, while 40% say it was “easy” or “very easy” (Figure 4).

Fewer than half (44%) say they received care “right away” or “after a short time. Almost the same proportion (39%) say they had to wait “a long time,” while 17% say they never received the care they sought.

Among those who sought health-care services, almost one in 10 (8%) say they had to “pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour” to obtain care.

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

**Figure 4: Contact and experience with public clinic or hospital | The Gambia | 2018**

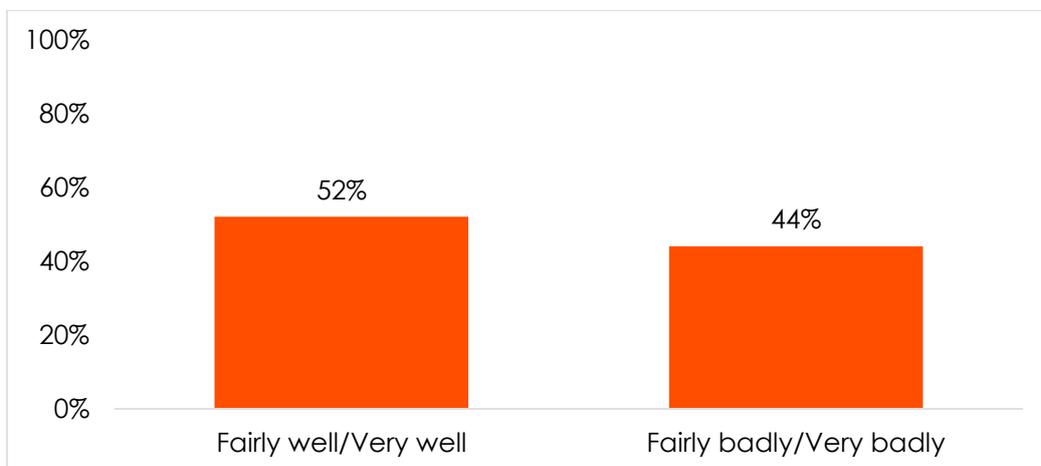


**Respondents were asked:**

*In the past 12 months, have you had contact with a public clinic or hospital?  
 [If yes:]  
 How easy or difficult was it to obtain the medical care you needed?  
 How long did it take you to receive the medical care that you needed?  
 And how often, if ever, did you have 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 you needed?*

Overall, Gambians are divided in their assessment of the government's performance in improving basic health services. Slightly more than half (52%) say it is doing "fairly well" or "very well," while 44% say it is doing a poor job (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Government performance in improving basic health services | The Gambia | 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: Improving basic health services?*

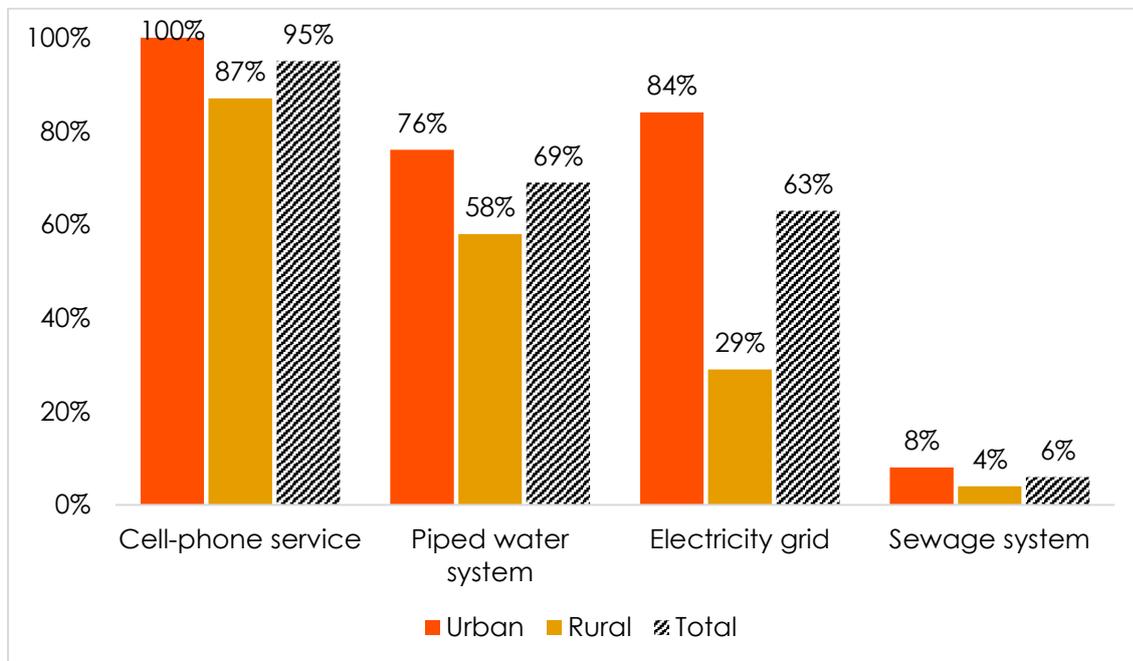
## Infrastructure for household services

Water supply, electricity, and infrastructure/roads all rank among the seven most important problems that Gambians say their government should address. While visiting communities to collect survey data, Afrobarometer field teams make on-the-ground observations about the services and facilities that are available in each enumeration area, providing indicators of infrastructure and service availability.

In the Gambia, a majority of respondents live in areas served by an electric grid (63%) and piped-water infrastructure (69%), but only about one in 20 (6%) live within reach of a sewage system. Cell-phone coverage is almost universal (95%) (Figure 6).

Unsurprisingly, rural areas are at a disadvantage when it comes to infrastructure. Gaps are particularly large with regard to electricity (84% urban vs. 29% rural) and piped water (76% vs. 58%), and less pronounced with regard to cell phone service (100% urban vs. 87% rural).

**Figure 6: Infrastructure in enumeration areas** | by urban-rural residency  
 | The Gambia | 2018



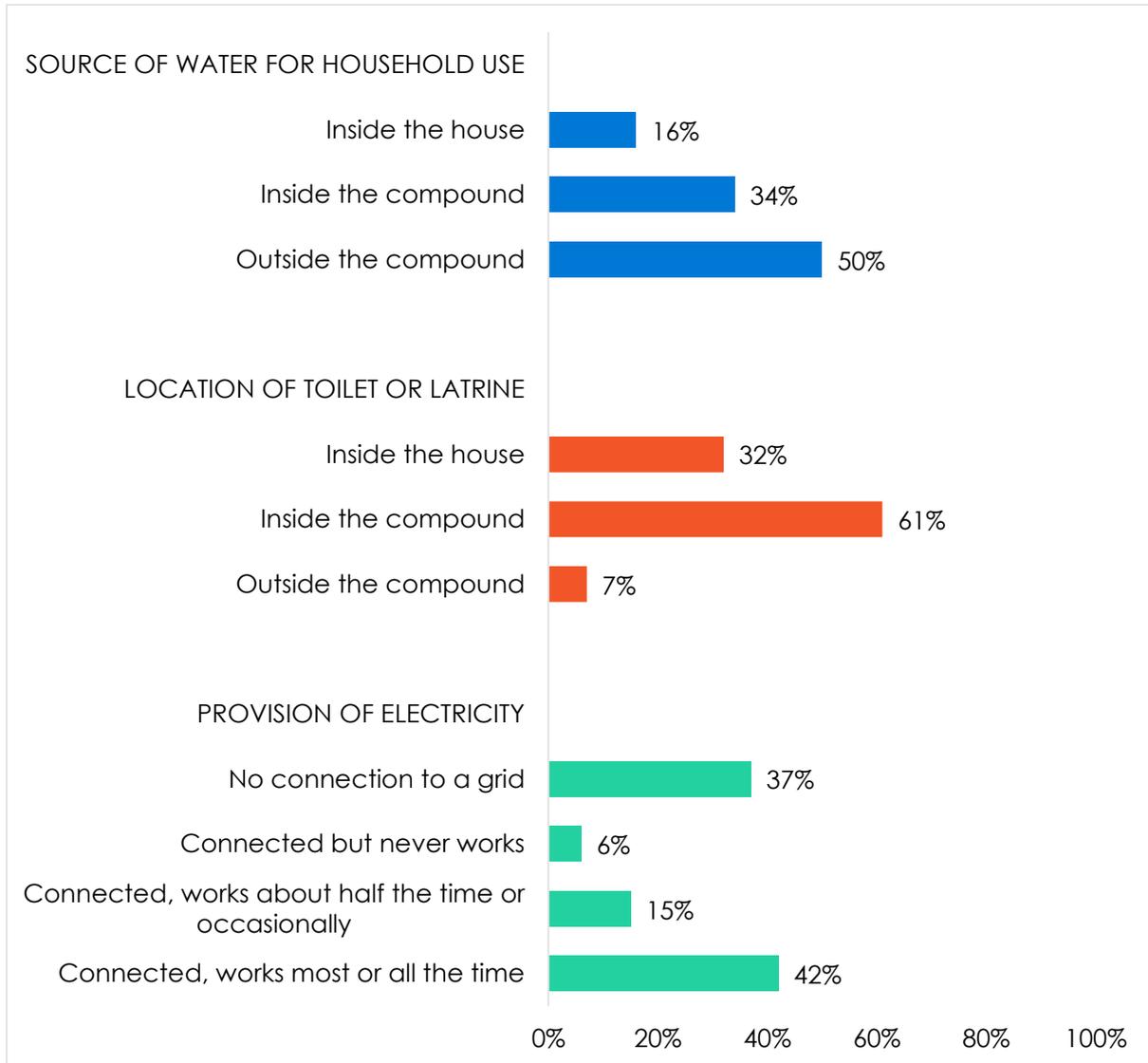
**Survey enumerators were asked:** Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access? Piped water system that most houses can access? Sewage system that most houses can access? Mobile phone? (% "yes")

Infrastructure is essential, but it is not the only factor that determines whether and how residents receive household services. Only about one in six Gambians (16%) say their main source of water for household use is inside their home, while 34% say it is inside their compound but outside their house. Half (50%) of Gambians have to leave their compound to get water (Figure 7).

All but 7% of respondents have a toilet or latrine either within the home (32%) or within the compound (61%), though given the lack of sewage systems in the country, it is likely that most of these are self-sufficient and non-flushing.

While almost two-thirds (63%) of Gambians report having a connection to an electric grid, only 42% say they have a reliable supply of electricity (i.e. it works "most" or "all" of the time).

**Figure 7: Household utilities** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:**

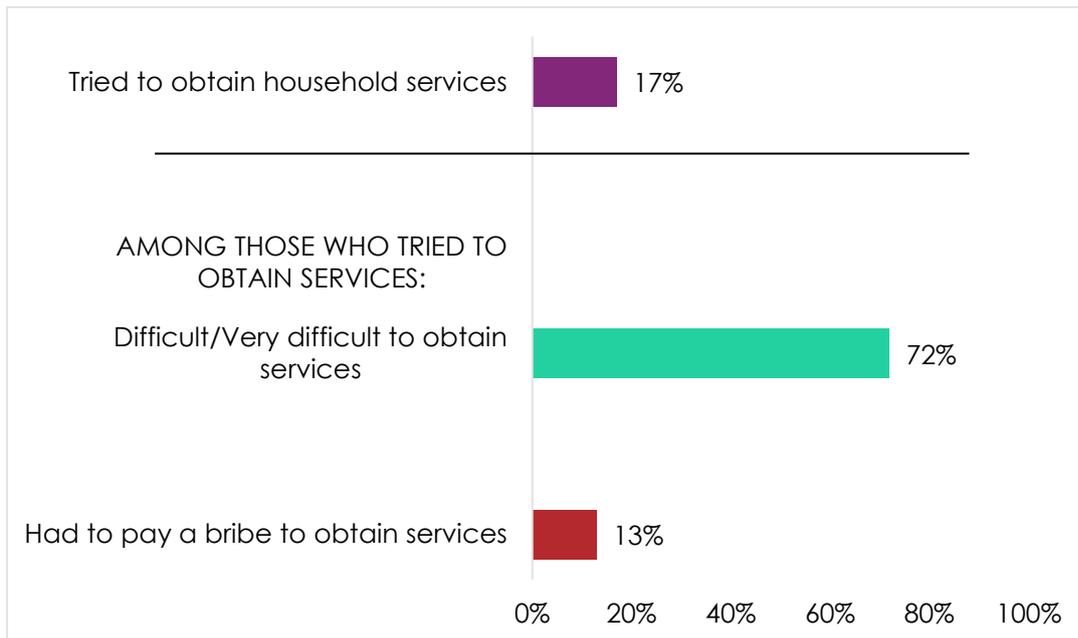
*Please tell me whether each of the following are available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: Your main source of water for household use? A toilet or latrine?*

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

Among the 17% of Gambians who say they tried to obtain water, sanitation, or electricity services from the government during the 12 months preceding the survey, almost three-fourths (72%) say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to get the services they needed, and about one in eight (13%) say they had to pay a bribe (Figure 8).

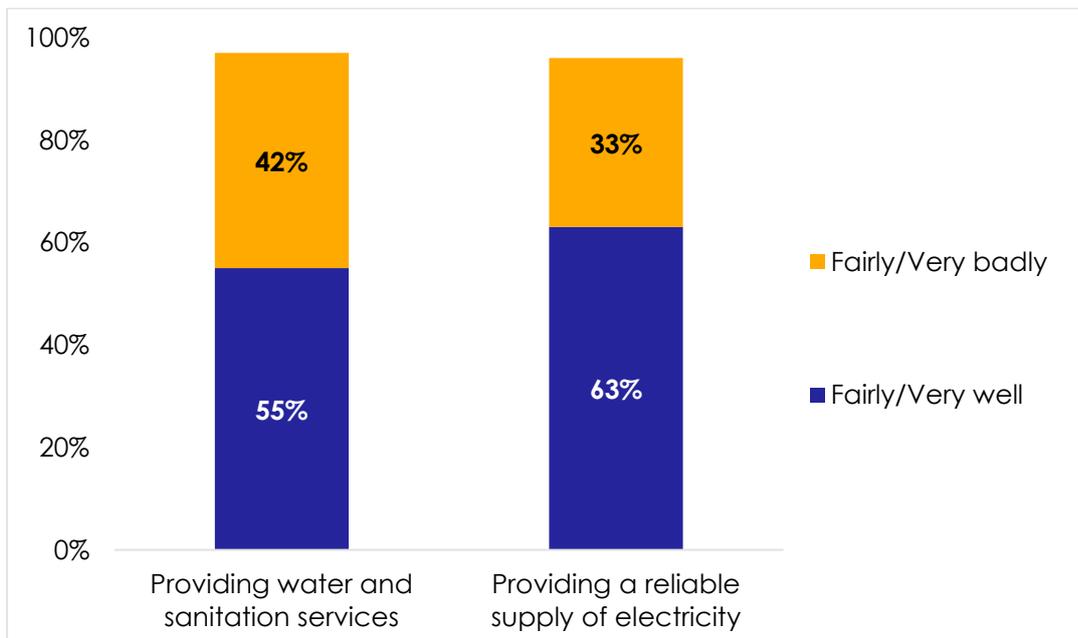
Even so, a majority of Gambians say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in providing water and sanitation services (55%) and a reliable electricity supply (63%) (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Obtaining household services** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** Now I would like to talk to you about experiences that some people have in accessing certain essential government services. 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? And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a government official in order to get the services you needed?

**Figure 9: Government performance in providing water/sanitation and electricity** | The Gambia | 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: Providing water and sanitation services? Providing a reliable supply of electricity?

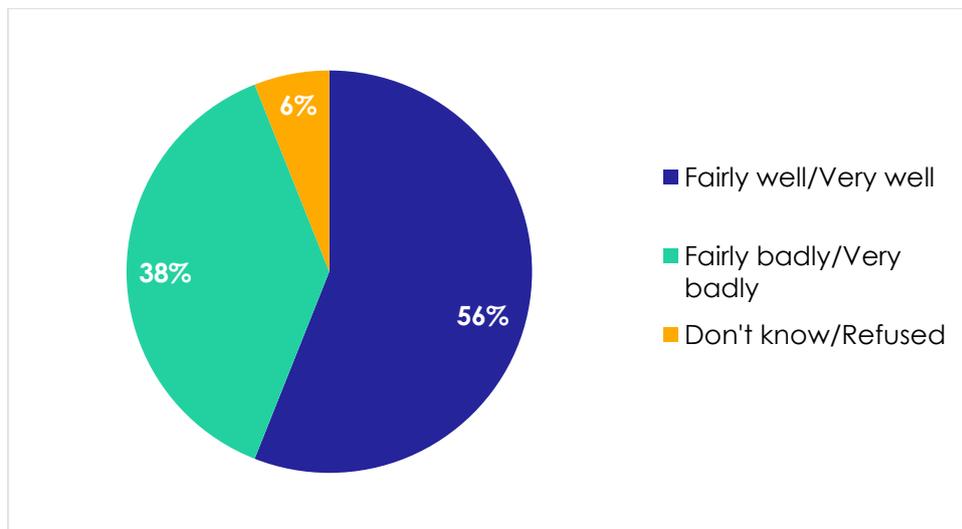
## Education

Education ranks eighth on the list of Gambians' priorities for government action, and a majority (56%) of citizens believe that the government is already doing "fairly well" or "very well" on the issue (Figure 10).

But fewer than half (43%) say the government's effectiveness in meeting educational needs has actually improved compared to "a few years ago," while 24% believe it has gotten worse and 29% say little has changed (Figure 11).

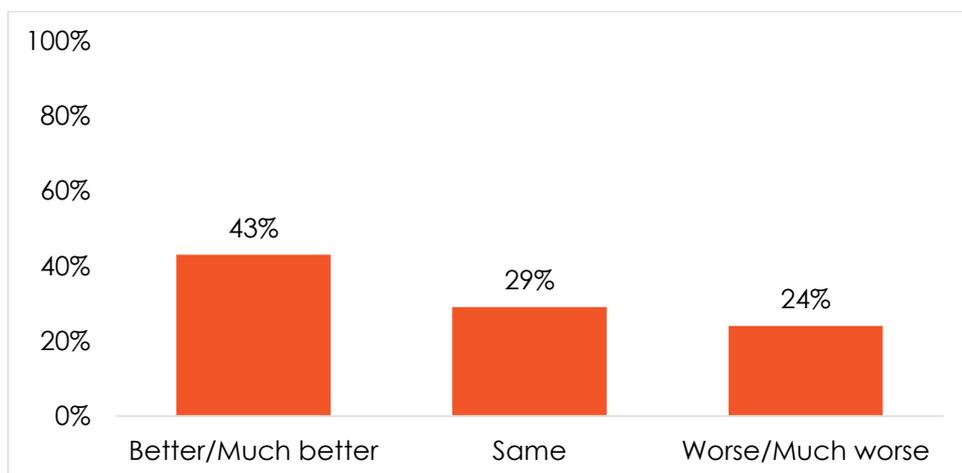
Among the 37% of respondents who say they had contact with a public school during the previous year, about three-fourths (74%) say it was "easy" or "very easy" to get the services they needed, although almost one in 10 (9%) say they had to pay a bribe (not shown).

**Figure 10: Government performance in addressing educational needs | The Gambia | 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: Addressing educational needs?

**Figure 11: Better or worse: Government effectiveness on education | The Gambia | 2018**

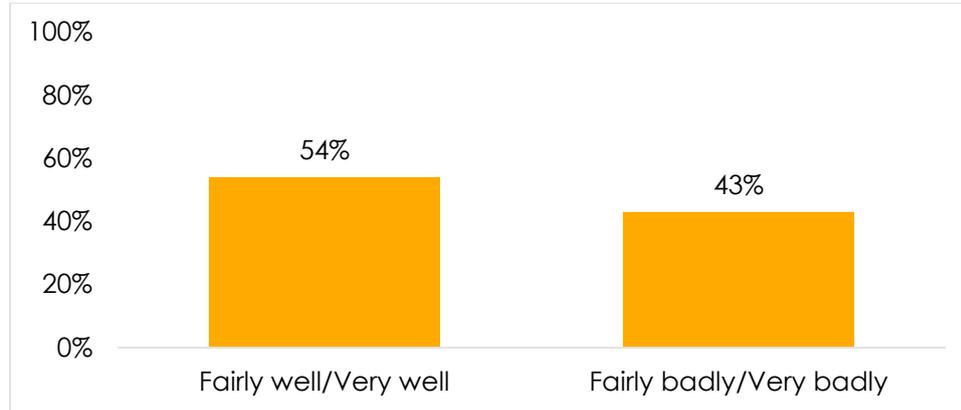


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: The government's effectiveness in addressing educational needs?

## Security

Crime and security rounds out the top 10 list of Gambians' most important problems. A slim majority (54%) of respondents think the government is doing a "fairly" or "very" good job of reducing crime, but a substantial minority (43%) assert the opposite (Figure 12).

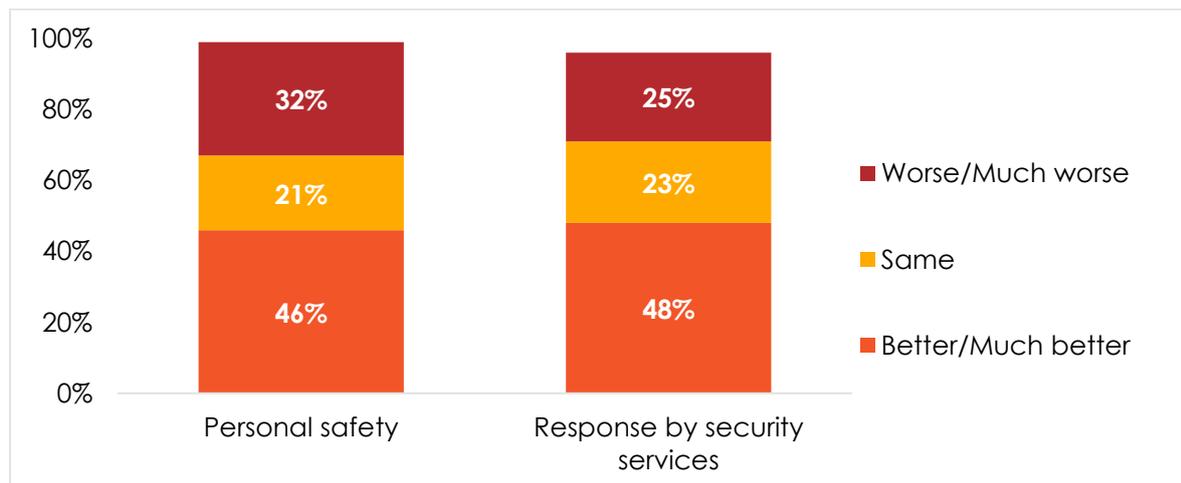
**Figure 12: Government performance on reducing crime | The Gambia | 2018**



**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: Reducing crime?

Compared to "a few years ago," Gambians are more likely to say that their personal safety from crime and violence has improved (46%) than deteriorated (32%). Similarly, respondents who say that the ability of security services to respond to security problems has improved outnumber those who think it has gotten worse (48% vs. 25%) (Figure 13).

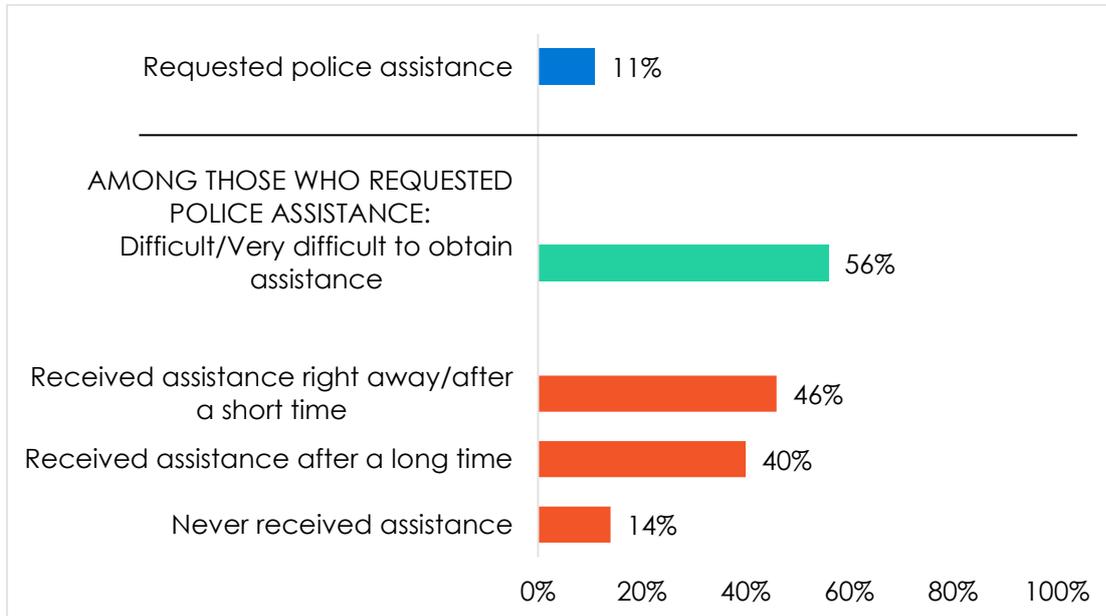
**Figure 13: Better or worse: Personal safety and response by security services | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: Your personal safety from crime and violence? The ability of the security services to respond to security problems?

While most Gambians (89%) say they didn't request police assistance during the year prior to the interview, among those who did, more than half (56%) say it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to get the assistance they needed. Moreover, they often had to wait "a long time" (40%) or never received the requested assistance (14%) (Figure 14).

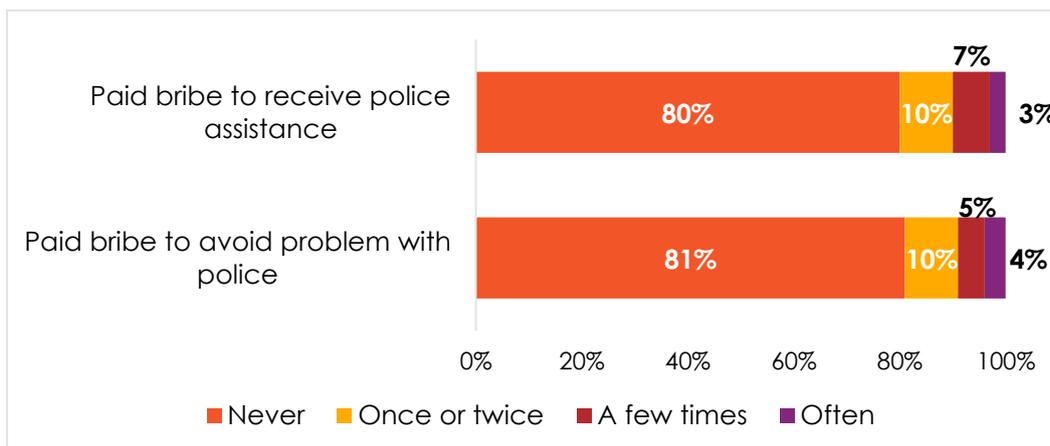
**Figure 14: Experience with the police** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** Now I would like to talk to you about experiences that some people have in accessing certain essential government services. In the past 12 months have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed? How long did it take you to receive the help you needed from the police?

Among those who asked the police for help, one in five (20%) say they had to pay a bribe to get the needed assistance, including 10% who say this occurred “a few times” or “often.” About the same proportion (19%) say they paid a bribe to avoid problems when they encountered the police in other situations, such as at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Experienced police corruption** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:**

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police? [If yes:] And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to get the assistance you needed?

In the past 12 months, how often have you encountered the police in other situations, like at checkpoints, during identity checks or traffic stops, or during an investigation? [If at least once:] How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a police officer in order to avoid a problem during one of these encounters?

## Conclusion

Gambians clearly want their government to prioritize delivery of key public services such as health care, water and sanitation, electricity, education, and public safety. While the government receives more positive than negative evaluations on how it is handling these issues, substantial shares of the population still do not enjoy adequate services. A majority of all citizens – and almost all of the poorest citizens – experience a lack of needed health care, and only a minority enjoy a reliable supply of electricity. Citizens too often find it difficult to obtain services, and sometimes have to pay bribes. For Gambia's new democratic government, these findings point to opportunities to place citizens' demands at the top of its agenda.

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**Sait Matty Jaw** is a lecturer in political science and Afrobarometer project manager for the Centre for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies at the University of the Gambia. Email: [saitjaw@gmail.com](mailto:saitjaw@gmail.com).

**Thomas Isbell** is a PhD student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Email: [tisbell@afrobarometer.org](mailto:tisbell@afrobarometer.org).

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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