

In eSwatini, citizens doubt benefits of legalizing marijuana, but few would report violations

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 323 | Dominique Dryding and Thomas Isbell

Summary

In search of economic growth, employment, and tax revenue, some governments have looked to one of the world's oldest and most lucrative – but often illegal – cash crops: cannabis (Gardner, 2019; Meyer, 2019). Known to most people for its recreational use as marijuana, cannabis also has non-intoxicating forms (known as hemp) that are fast-growing and water-wise and can be used to make fabrics, ropes, papers, and oils, among other uses. But most of the recent cannabis debate has focused on the reported pain-relieving and other health benefits of cannabis-derived cannabidiol (“CBD oil”) and medical marijuana (Grinspoon, 2018, 2019; Volkow, 2015; Mechoulam, Peters, Murillo-Rodriguez, & Hanuš, 2007).

In most countries, the cultivation and consumption of cannabis are illegal. But that may be changing. In some U.S. states and Canada, legislators have taken steps to decriminalize the commercial farming and use of the plant. In 2018, Lesotho became the first African country to legalize the production of marijuana for medical use, and South Africa has recently taken steps to introduce growing licenses through the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (Business Insider, 2019; Business Tech, 2019; Tzusi, 2019). A recent report by Prohibition Partners (2019) says legalization of cannabis could jump-start an economic sector worth \$7.1 billion per year in Africa by 2023.

The southern African Kingdom of eSwatini may be world-famous for its marijuana varietal “Swazi Gold,” but growing the crop is illegal in the country. However, the government recently granted a 10-year license to U.S.-based Profile Solutions Inc. to operate a growing farm and processing plant for medical cannabis and industrial hemp (Globe News Wire, 2019). And the government's website says that, “in anticipating significant economic and medical benefit from the legalization of cannabis for medical and scientific use,” it is “working on an enabling legislative environment for this purpose.” The site links to proposed regulations and invites website visitors to review and comment on them (Government of eSwatini, 2019).

According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey in eSwatini, a majority of citizens disapprove of broadly legalizing the cultivation of marijuana and think that doing so would harm their country. However, most say they would not report someone who was illegally growing or selling marijuana. The survey did not explore views on more limited steps, such as legalization of medical marijuana and hemp.

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 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.

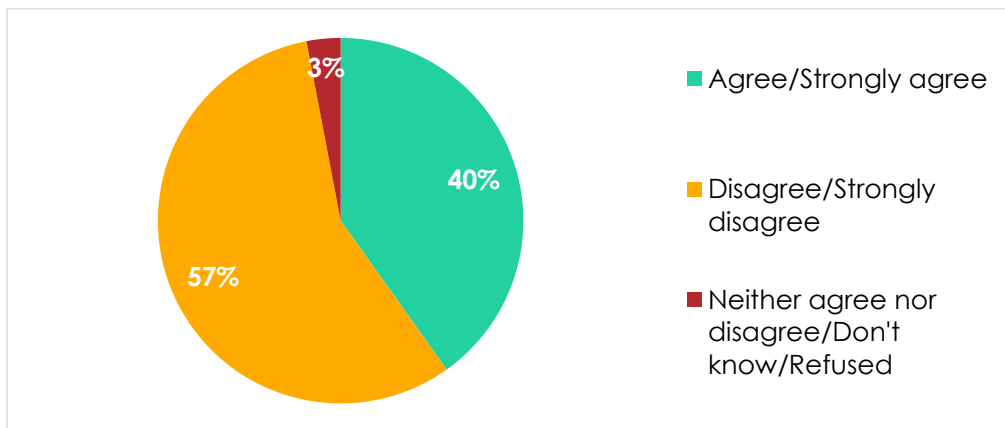
Key findings

- A majority of eSwatini citizens oppose broadly legalizing marijuana cultivation (57%) and think doing so would harm rather than help the country (63%).
- Despite this opposition, most citizens say they would not report people to the authorities for growing or selling marijuana.
- Support for legalizing marijuana cultivation is somewhat higher – though still in the minority – among young, urban, and better-educated respondents, as well as among the unemployed and those who describe the country's economic situation as bad.
- The survey did not explore views on legalization of cannabis cultivation for specific uses, such as medical marijuana, CBD oil, or various hemp products.

Legalization of marijuana cultivation

A majority (57%) of eSwatini citizens “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the idea of broadly legalizing the cultivation of marijuana as a way to create economic opportunity for people. Four in 10 respondents (40%) favour legalization (Figure 1). The survey asked about legalization of marijuana cultivation in general¹ and did not explore views on legalizing specific aspects of the cannabis industry, such as medical marijuana.

Figure 1: Legalize marijuana cultivation | eSwatini | 2018

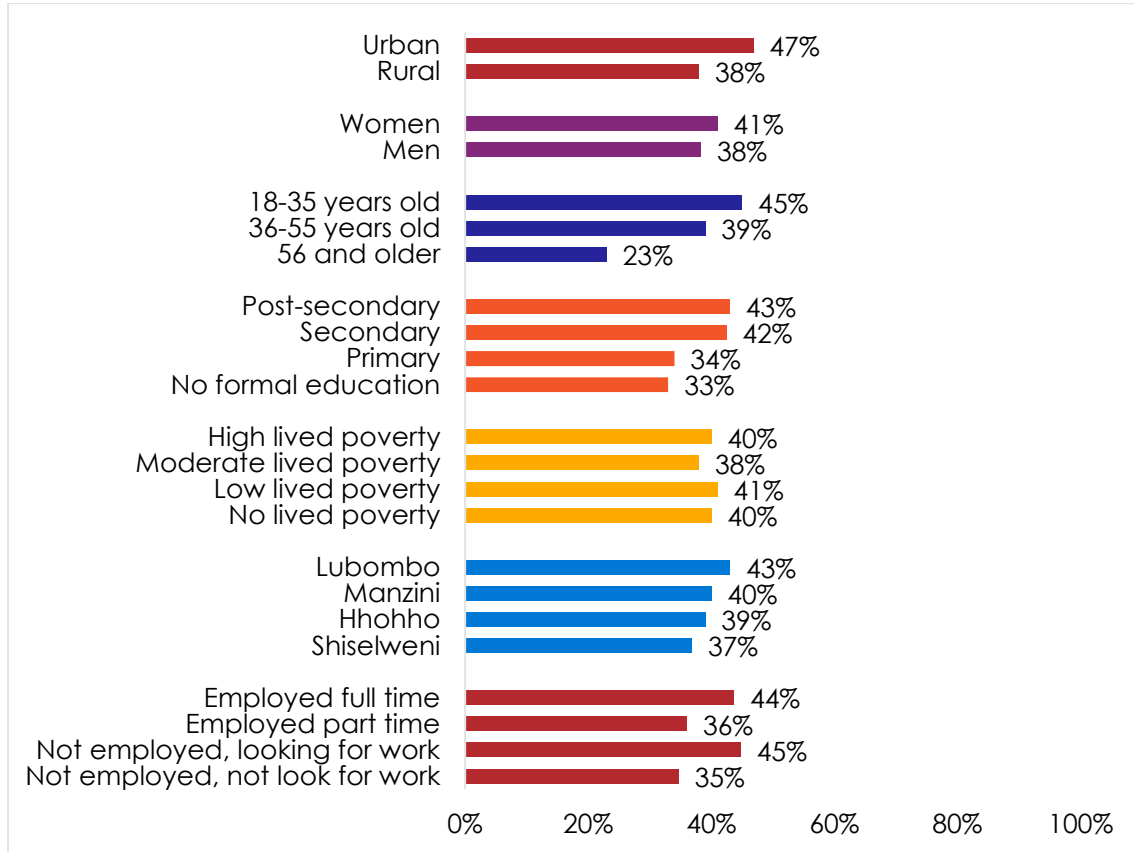


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: eSwatini should legalize marijuana cultivation as a way of creating economic opportunities for her people.

Support for legalizing marijuana cultivation is somewhat higher – though still a minority view – among urban residents (47%), younger respondents (45% of 18- to 35-year-olds), and those with secondary (42%) or post-secondary (43%) education (Figure 2). Respondents' socio-economic level makes little difference on this issue.

¹ The survey question asked about the cultivation of “marijuana” (“*insangu*” in siSwati) rather than the broader category of cannabis (which also includes hemp).

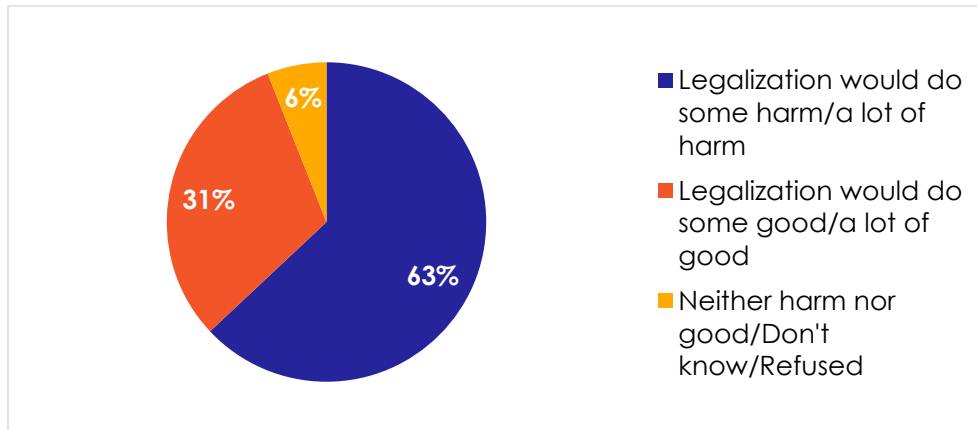
Figure 2: Support for legalizing marijuana cultivation | by socio-demographic group | eSwatini | 2018



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: eSwatini should legalize marijuana cultivation as a way of creating economic opportunities for her people. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Similarly, more than six in 10 respondents (63%) believe that legalization of marijuana cultivation would be harmful to their country (Figure 3).

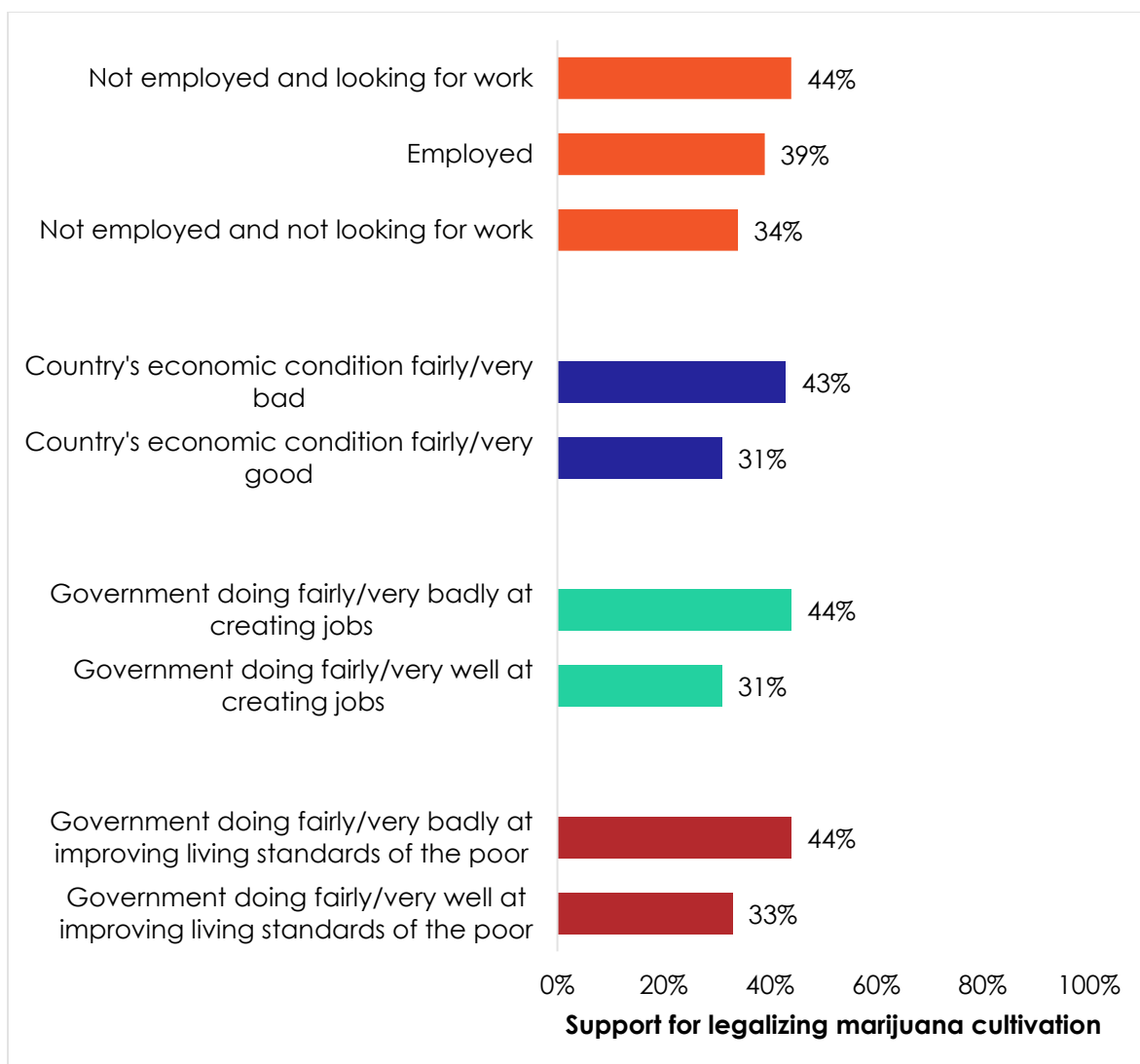
Figure 3: Would legalization harm or help the country? | eSwatini | 2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, do you think legalizing the cultivation and production of marijuana would cause harm or do good to eSwatini?

When citizens in eSwatini are asked what they consider the most important problems their government should address, their top priorities are unemployment (cited by 42% of respondents) and poverty (22%). While the cannabis industry's potential as a source of jobs, income, and tax revenues has not persuaded most citizens that marijuana cultivation should be legalized, support for such a move is somewhat higher than average among respondents who are not employed and looking for work (44%), those who see the country's economic situation as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (43%), and those who think the government is performing poorly on creating jobs (44%) and improving living standards of the poor (44%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Support for legalizing marijuana cultivation | by employment status and views on economic performance | eSwatini | 2018



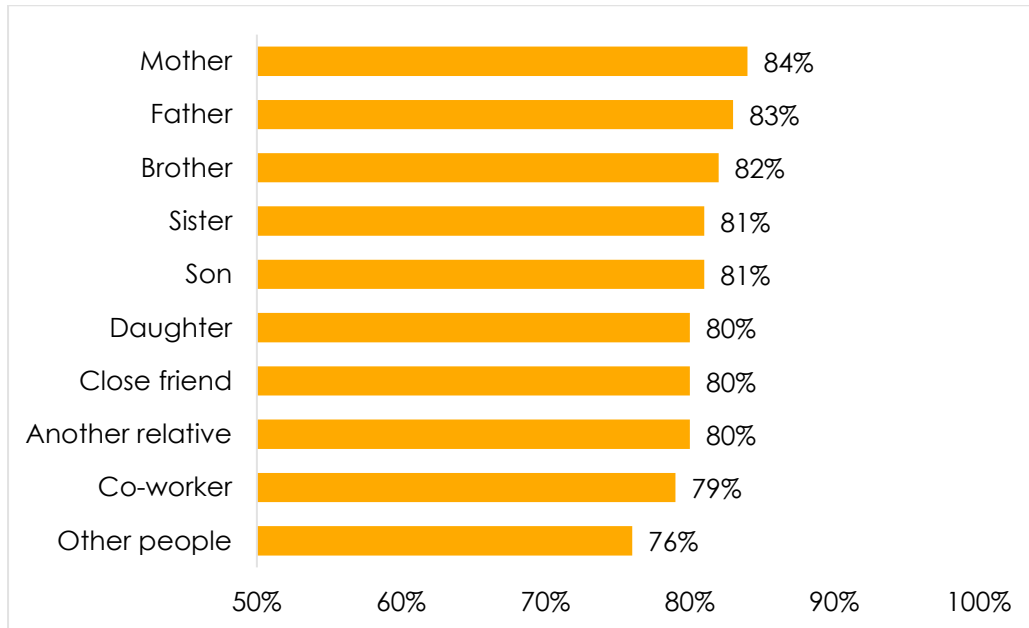
Respondents were asked:

*Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?
 In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?
 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? Improving the living standards of the poor?
 Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: eSwatini should legalize marijuana cultivation as a way of creating economic opportunities for her people?
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with legalization)*

Reporting marijuana growers and sellers

Despite majority opposition to legalizing marijuana cultivation, most citizens say they would not report people to the authorities for cultivating or selling marijuana. Even people outside the family would be safe from being reported, according to more than three-fourths of respondents (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Would not report marijuana growers or sellers | eSwatini | 2018



Respondents were asked: *Since cultivation and selling of marijuana is currently illegal in eSwatini, please tell me if you, personally, would report to the police or any official if you discovered that the following individual is cultivating or selling marijuana? (% who say "no")*

Conclusion

In eSwatini, a majority of citizens are not persuaded that broadly legalizing marijuana cultivation would benefit their country. At the same time, few consider growing or selling marijuana a crime they would report to the police.

As eSwatini follows other countries in exploring an "enabling legislative environment" for controlled production and limited uses of cannabis, clear explanations of the proposed scope and perceived benefits may help the government allay popular doubts about such a move.

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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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