

Emaswati approve of government's COVID-19 response, but remain skeptical about vaccines

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 470 | Siphosiso S. Kunene

Summary

Since its first case in March 2020, Eswatini has recorded 26,628 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 806 deaths as of 4 August 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). To contain the outbreak, the government quickly declared a national emergency and instituted night-time curfews, school closures, restrictions on non-essential travel, limited sales of alcohol, social distancing, and mandatory wearing of face masks (Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 2020).

After this initial partial lockdown lasting for 20 days, restrictions on the movement of people and non-essential business operations were gradually relaxed, and a phased reopening of schools began in July 2020.

The pandemic has had a significant negative impact on Eswatini's economy and development programs. According to the African Development Bank Group (2021), the economy contracted by 3.2% in 2020, reversing growth of 2.2% in 2019. More than 350,000 learners were affected by school closures (Gwebu, 2021), and accessing distance-learning alternatives was a challenge for learners without Internet, computers, television sets, and radios.

To ease pressure on the health system and allow for the full reopening of the economy, the government aims to vaccinate 80% of the 1.16 million population. The vaccination rollout began in March 2021, and a total of 70,781 vaccine doses had been administered by 4 August 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). The government's health response to the pandemic is being supported by development partners, including a U.S. \$8 million loan from the World Bank (2021) to purchase vaccines for 40% of the population.

The latest Afrobarometer survey in Eswatini shows that most citizens are satisfied with the government's efforts to manage the pandemic even though half of them found it difficult to comply with lockdown restriction and most felt that the schools were closed for too long.

But a majority of Emaswati say that government assistance was distributed unfairly, and almost half say they are worried that politicians will take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their power and authority. A majority do not trust the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, and only about one-third say they are likely to try to get vaccinated.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Eswatini, led by ActivQuest, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Emaswati in March-April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Eswatini in 2013, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

- The overwhelming majority of Emaswati consider themselves “somewhat well informed” (54%) or “very well informed” (32%) about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it. Awareness is lower among citizens with no formal education (62%).
- About one in seven respondents (15%) say a household member became ill with COVID-19, while one in two (49%) report that someone in the household lost a job, business, or primary source of income as a result of the pandemic.
- While most Emaswati agree that lockdown restrictions and school closures were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19, half (49%) say they found it difficult to comply with the restrictions, and nine out of 10 (93%) say the schools were closed for too long.
- Only three in 10 citizens (29%) say their household received special government assistance during the pandemic. Two-thirds (65%) say pandemic-related assistance was distributed unfairly.
- Overall, most citizens are satisfied with the government's efforts to manage the COVID-19 response (83%) and keep the public informed (90%).
 - However, only 38% say they trust official COVID-19 statistics, and more than three-fourths (77%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost to government corruption.
- Fewer than one-third (29%) of citizens say they trust the government to ensure the safety of any COVID-19 vaccine, and only a minority (37%) indicate that they are likely to try to get vaccinated.
 - Interestingly, citizens with no formal education (51%) and older citizens (55% of those above age 55) are more likely to indicate a willingness to get vaccinated than their more educated and younger counterparts.
- More than four in 10 Emaswati (43%) believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection.
- A majority of citizens say the government is justified in using measures that infringe on democratic freedoms during a public health emergency, such as censoring the media (52%), using security forces to enforce public health mandates (72%), and postponing elections or limiting political campaigns (63%).
 - However, 47% of citizens say they are worried about politicians taking advantage of the pandemic to increase their power.

Awareness

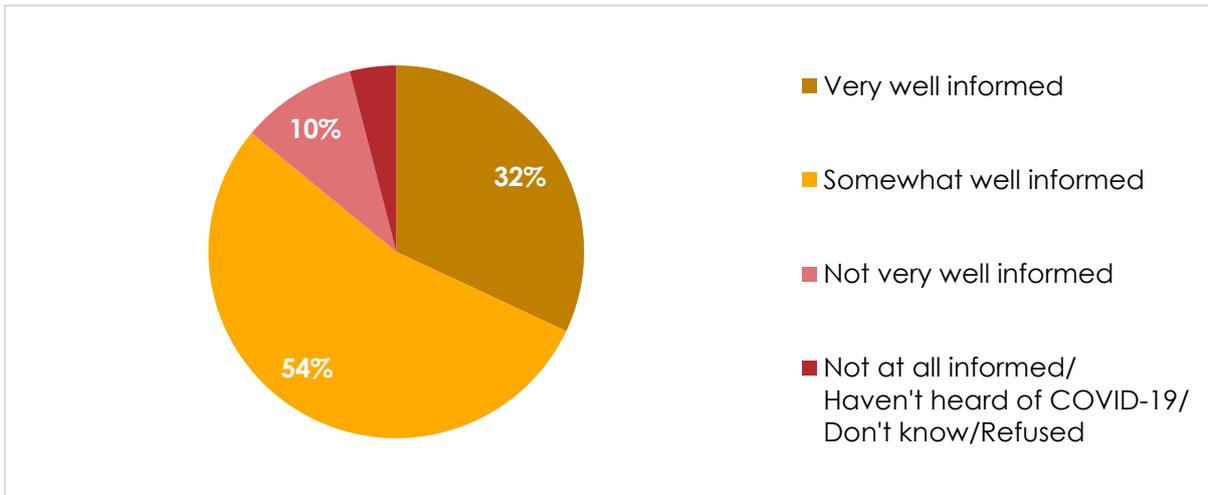
Almost nine out of 10 Emaswati consider themselves to be “somewhat well informed” (54%) or “very well informed” (32%) about COVID-19 and efforts to combat it (Figure 1).

Awareness of COVID-19 increases with respondents' education and economic levels (Figure 2). Citizens with no formal education (62%) are far less likely to say they are at least

“somewhat well informed” than those with secondary (89%) or post-secondary (93%) schooling. Poor respondents (82%) are less aware than their better-off counterparts (89% of those experiencing no or low levels of lived poverty¹).

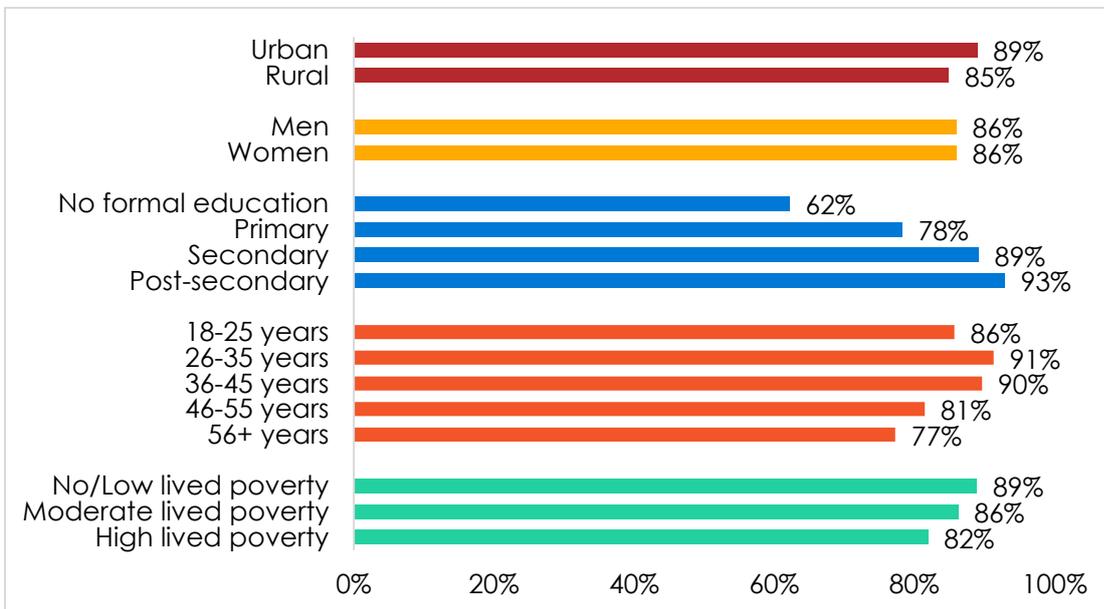
Awareness of COVID-19 drops off somewhat among older citizens (77% among those above age 55).

Figure 1: Awareness of COVID-19 | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it?

Figure 2: Awareness of COVID-19 | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well informed would you say you are about the coronavirus, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to combat it? (% who say “somewhat” or “very” well informed)

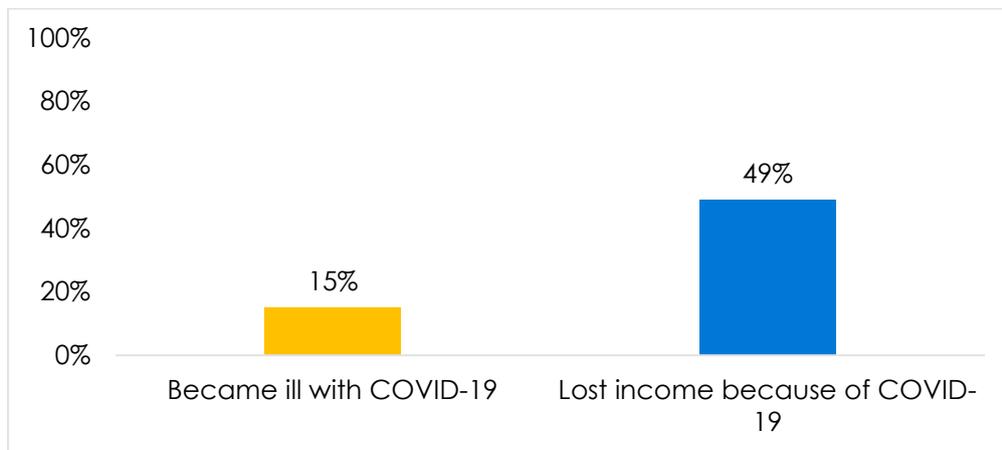
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures levels of material deprivation by asking how often respondents or their families went without basic necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the previous year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Impact

As of March-April 2021, about one in seven Eswatini (15%) say that someone in their household became ill with COVID-19, while about half (49%) report that a household member lost a job, a business, or a primary source of income due to the pandemic (Figure 3).

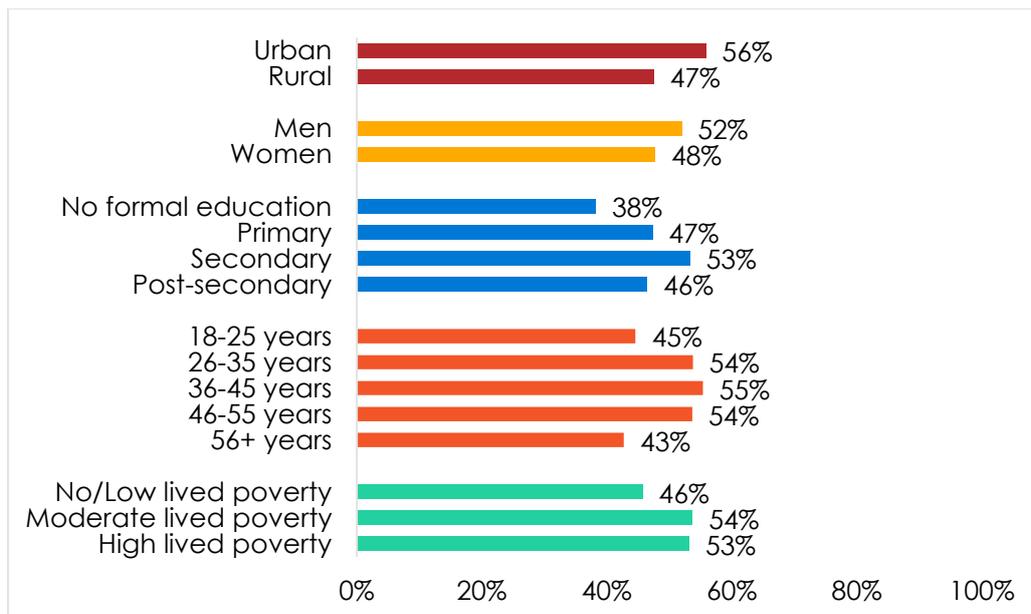
Urban residents are somewhat more likely than their rural counterparts to report experiencing a loss of income (56% vs. 47%). But loss of income was somewhat less likely to affect economically better-off respondents (46%, vs. 53%-54% of those with high or moderate lived poverty) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Impacts of the pandemic | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Became ill with COVID-19? Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income?

Figure 4: Lost income due to the pandemic | Eswatini | 2021



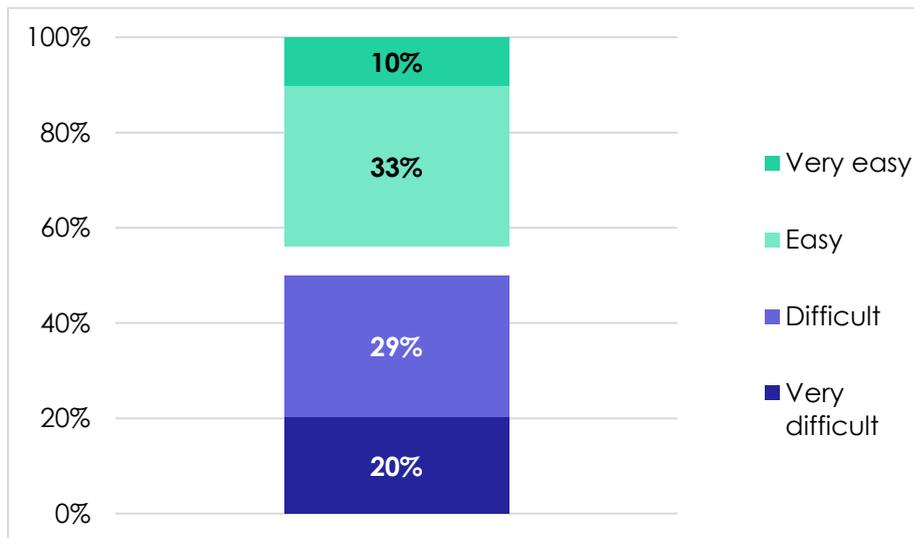
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you personally or any other member of your household have been affected in any of the following ways by the COVID-19 pandemic: Temporarily or permanently lost a job, business, or primary source of income? (% "yes")

Lockdowns and school closures

To limit the spread of the coronavirus, government instituted partial lockdown restrictions, including school closures.

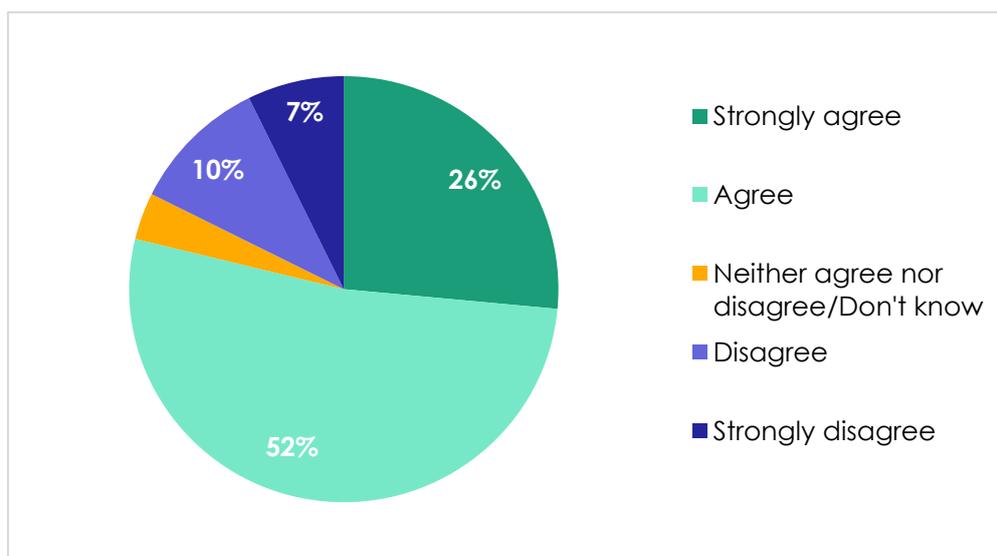
About half (49%) of Emaswati say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to comply with the lockdown restrictions imposed by the government, while 43% describe it as “easy” or “very easy” (Figure 5). Despite difficulties, most Emaswati (78%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that the restrictions were necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Difficulty of complying with lockdown | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: How easy or difficult was it for you and your household to comply with the lockdown or curfew restrictions imposed by the government?

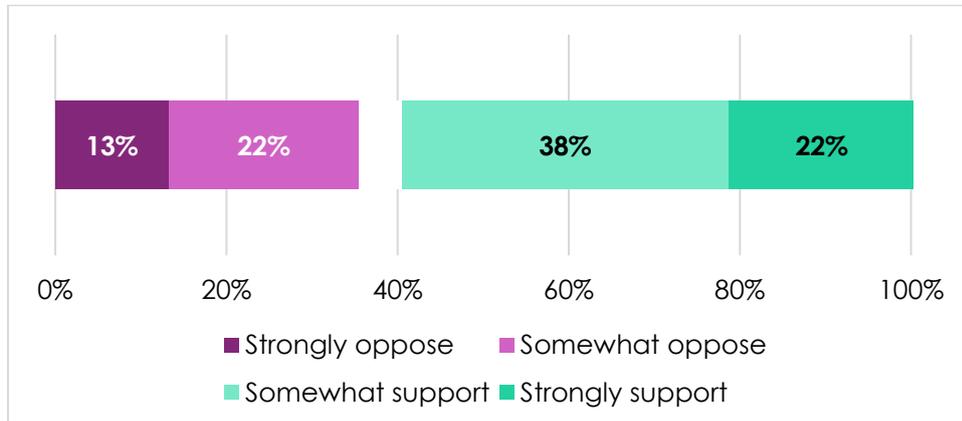
Figure 6: Support for lockdown | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Even if the lockdown or curfew had negative impacts on the economy and people’s livelihoods, it was necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19?

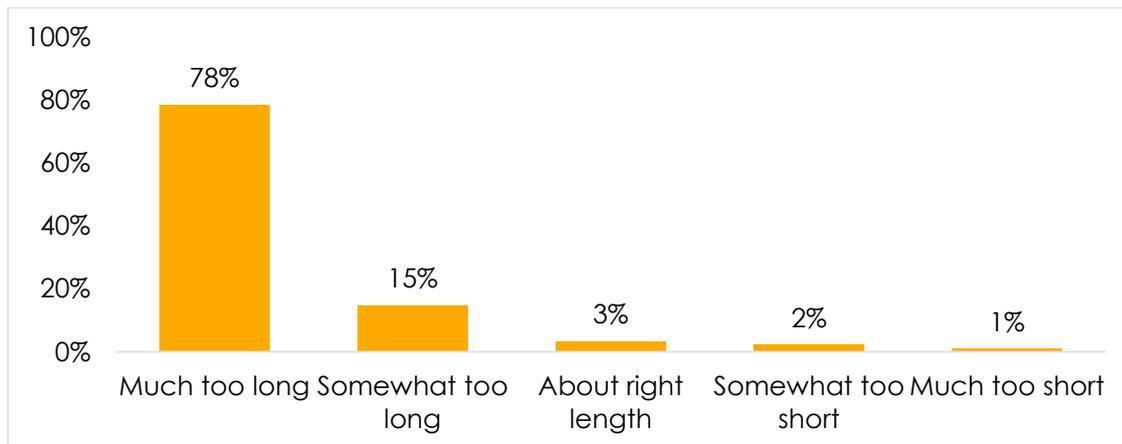
Similarly, six in 10 Eswatini (60%) support the government's decision to close the schools (Figure 7), although most believe the schools were closed for "much too long" (78%) or "somewhat too long" (15%) (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Support for school closures | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: Did you support or oppose the government's decision to close schools in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19?

Figure 8: Length of school closures | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, was the period during which schools were closed too long or too short?

Government assistance and performance

In recognition of the impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, the government set up relief programs. But the Afrobarometer survey shows that only three in 10 citizens (29%) say that their household received special government assistance during the pandemic (Figure 9).

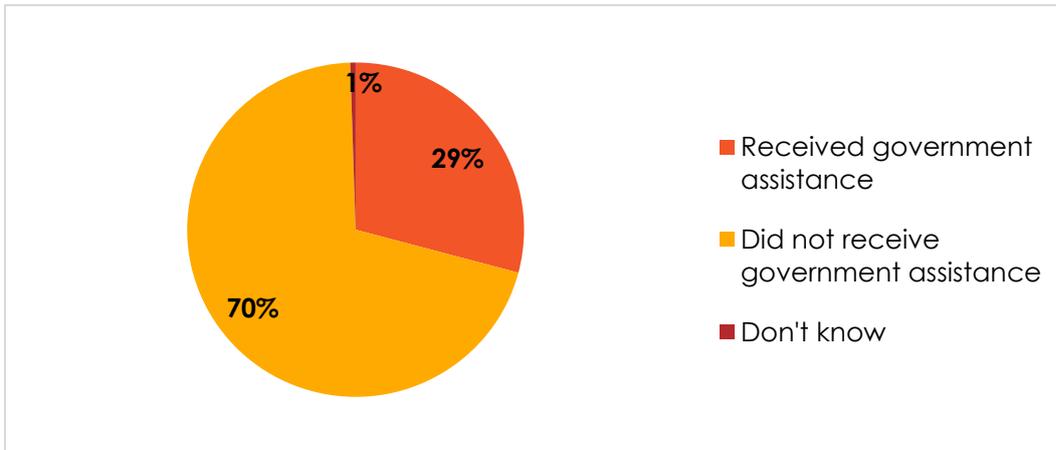
Rural residents (32%) are more likely than urbanites (20%) to report having received government assistance, as are poor citizens (35%) compared to the economically best off (21%) (Figure 10).

Relief was also more likely to assist citizens with no formal education (41%) or with only primary schooling (43%) than those with secondary (27%) or post-secondary (17%) qualifications.

Two-thirds (65%) of citizens say government assistance during the pandemic was distributed unfairly, while only 8% feel that government assistance did not favour certain groups or regions but was distributed fairly (Figure 11).

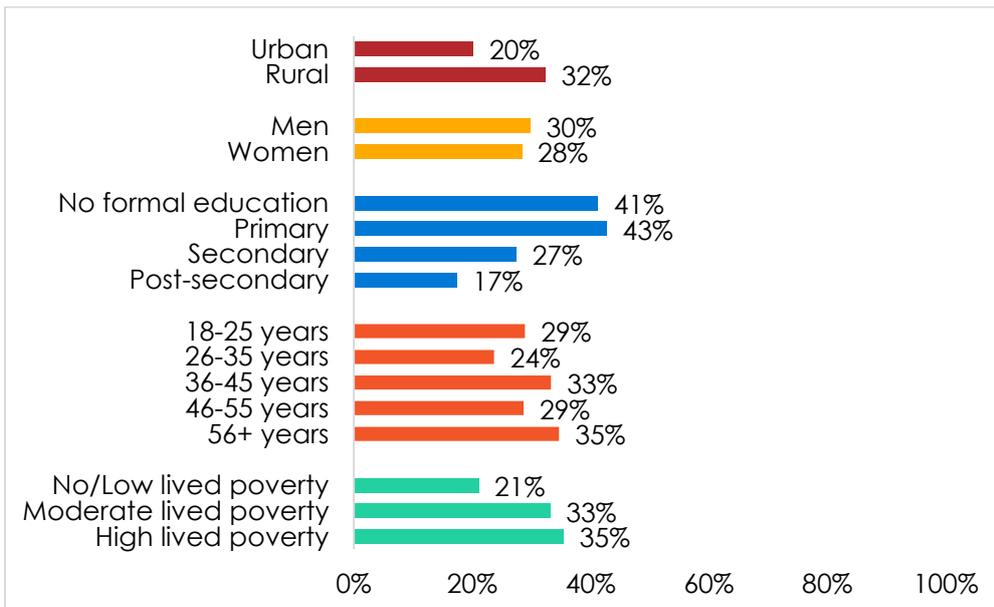
Overall, overwhelming majorities say the government has done “very well” or “fairly well” in managing the response to the pandemic (83%) and keeping the public informed (90%) (Figure 12). However, only 38% say they trust official COVID-19 statistics “somewhat” or “a lot,” and more than three-fourths (77%) believe that “some” or “a lot” of the resources available for responding to the pandemic were lost or stolen due to government corruption.

Figure 9: Received government assistance | Eswatini | 2021



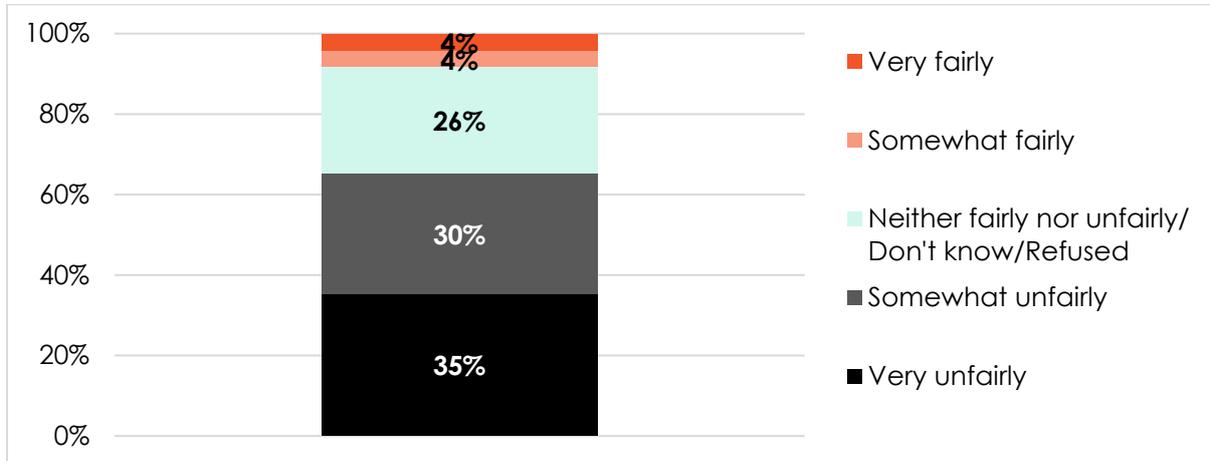
Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic?

Figure 10: Received government assistance | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021



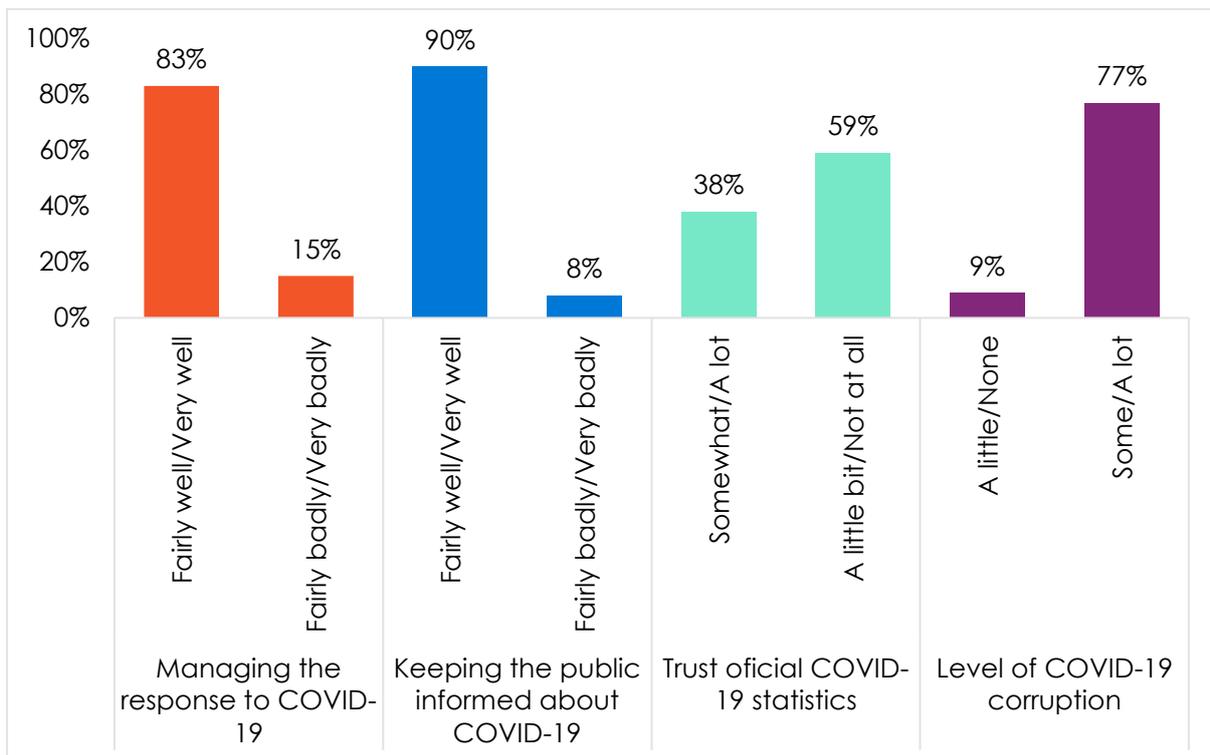
Respondents were asked: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have you or your household received any assistance from government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that you were not normally receiving before the pandemic? (% “yes”)

Figure 11: Fairness of government assistance | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the benefits of government programs to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through food packages or cash payments, have been distributed fairly, or that the distribution was unfair, for example by favouring certain groups or regions?

Figure 12: Assessment of government efforts during the pandemic | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked:

How well or badly would you say the current government has handled the following matters since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Keeping the public informed about COVID-19?

How much do you trust the official statistics provided by government on the number of infections and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

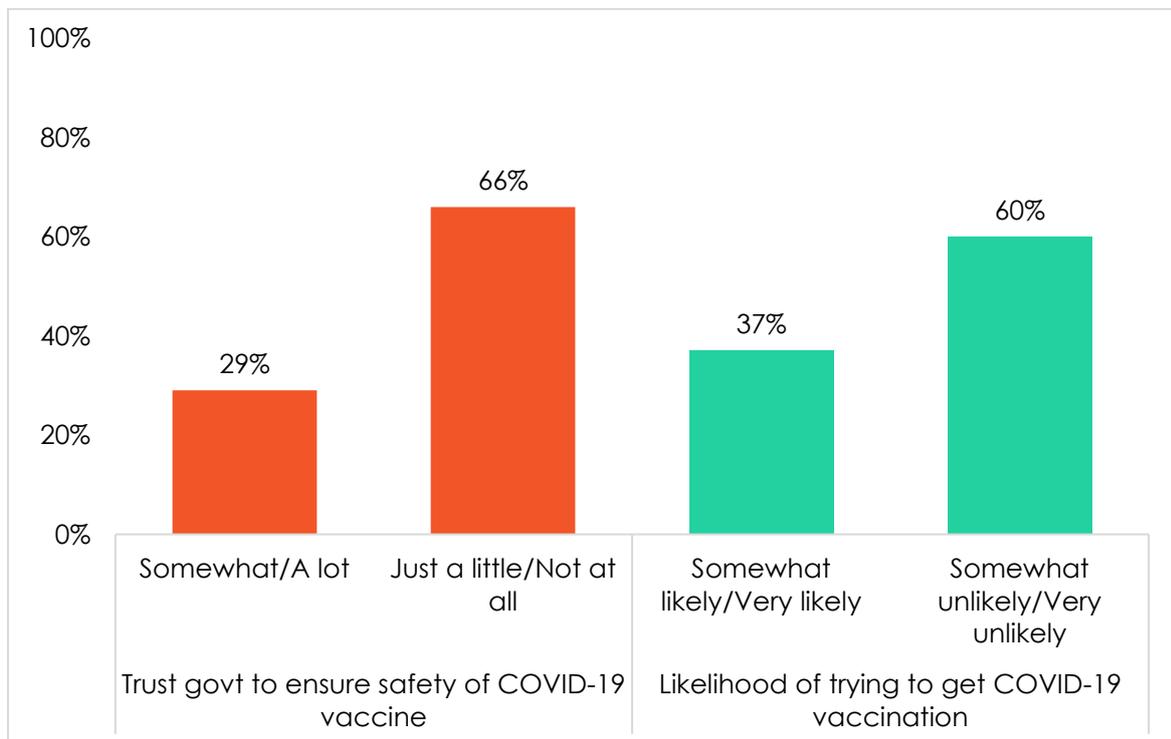
Considering all of the funds and resources that were available to the government for combatting and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much do you think was lost or stolen due to corruption among government officials?

Vaccines

While the government has launched a COVID-19 vaccination program to protect the population from severe disease and try to build herd immunity, only about three in 10 citizens (29%) say they trust the government “somewhat” or “a lot” to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Eswatini is safe (Figure 13).

And fewer than four in 10 (37%) say they are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated.

Figure 13: Attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to Swati citizens is safe before it is used in this country?

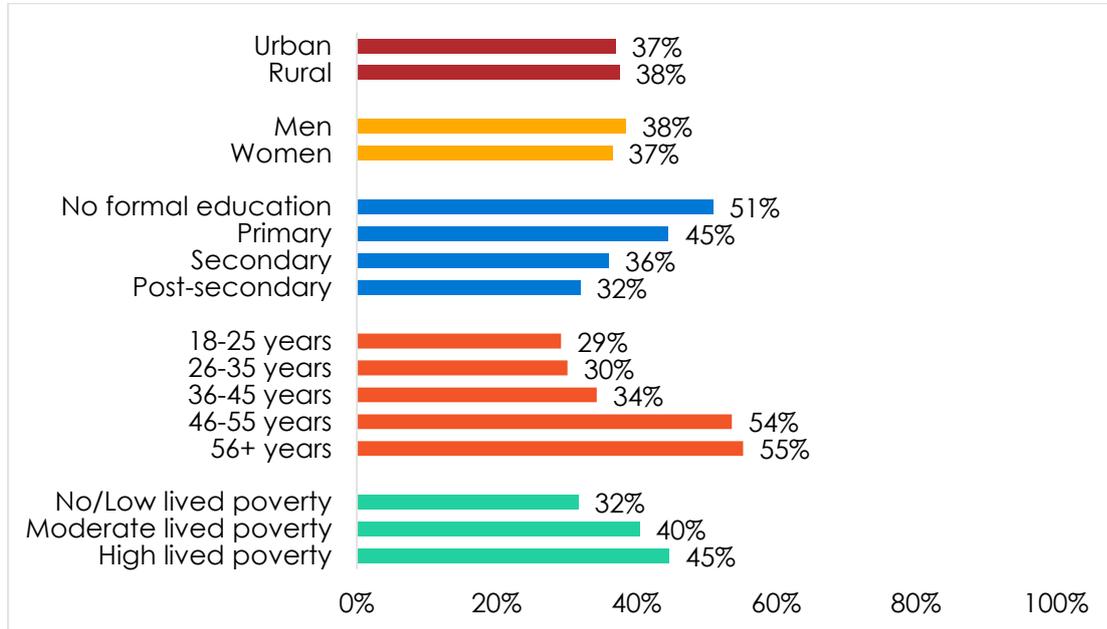
If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated?

Men and women are equally likely to indicate a willingness to get vaccinated, as are urban and rural residents. But clear differences emerge by respondents' age, education, and economic levels (Figure 14). Poor respondents (45%) are more open to vaccination than those who are economically better off (32%-40%).

Those with less education are more likely to express a willingness to be vaccinated, ranging from 51% of those with no formal education down to 32% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

And willingness to be vaccinated increases with age, ranging from just 29% of those aged 18-25 to 55% of those over age 55.

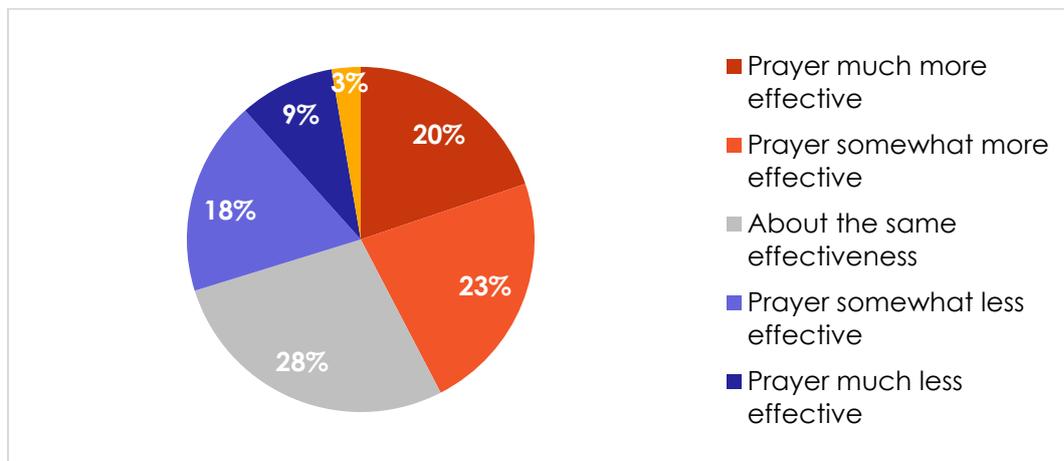
Figure 14: Likely to try to get vaccinated | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

Although 37% of Eswatini indicate they are at least "somewhat likely" to try to get vaccinated, only 27% believe that a vaccine is more effective than prayer at preventing coronavirus infection. More than four in 10 (43%) say prayer is "somewhat more" or "much more" effective than a vaccine, while 28% assess the two as about equally effective (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Prayer vs. vaccine: Which is more effective against COVID-19? | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: *Some people think that prayer is an effective way to alter events in the world. Others put more faith in science to solve problems. Some people believe in both. What about you? Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?*

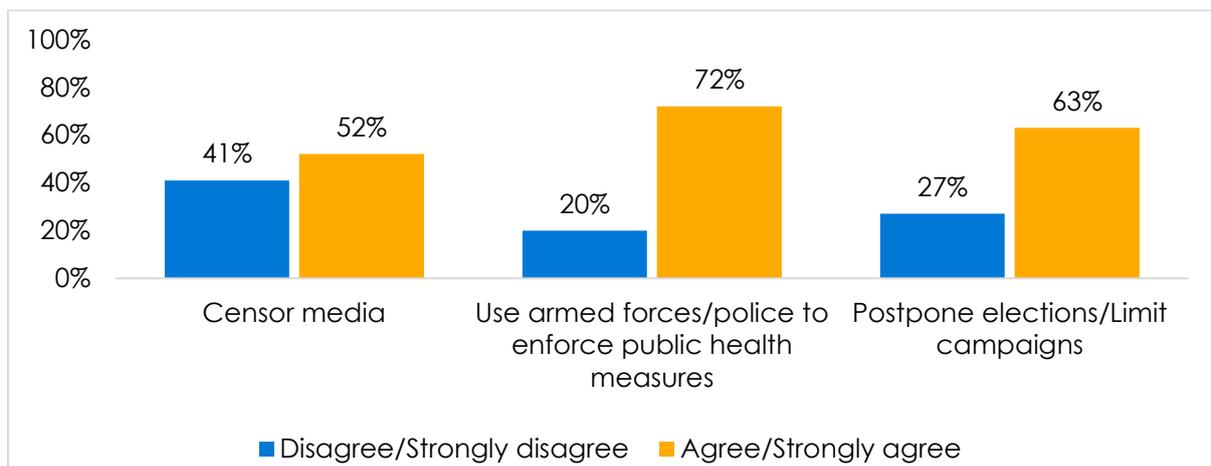
Restricting freedoms and democracy?

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Eswatini saw the activation of COVID-19 regulations that allowed the government to temporarily restrict certain freedoms for public health reasons. To what extent are Eswatini willing to accept limitations on their personal rights during a health emergency?

More than seven in 10 (72%) say the government is justified in using the police and security forces to enforce public health measures during a pandemic (Figure 16). Somewhat smaller majorities endorse the government's right to postpone elections and/or limit political campaigns (63%) and to censor media reporting (52%) during a public health crisis.

However, almost half (47%) of citizens say they are "somewhat worried" or "very worried" about politicians taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their power and authority (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Restrict freedoms during health emergency? | Eswatini | 2021



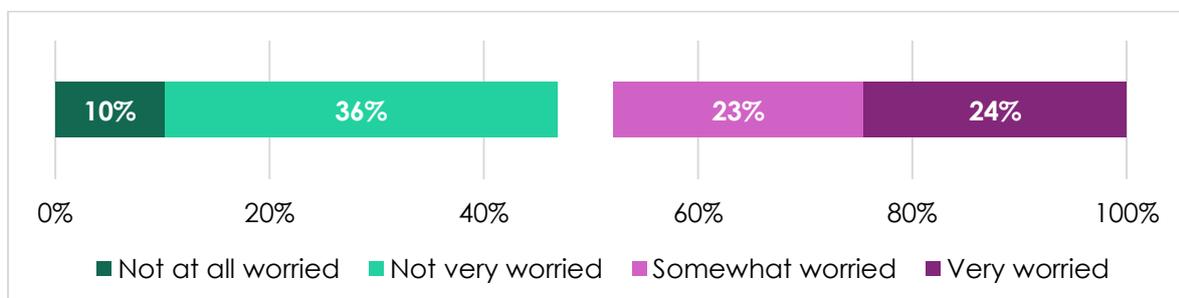
Respondents were asked: When the country is facing a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, do you agree or disagree that it is justified for the government to temporarily limit democracy or democratic freedoms by taking the following measures:

Censoring media reporting?

Using the police and security forces to enforce public health mandates like lockdown orders, mask requirements, or restrictions on public gatherings?

Postponing elections or limiting political campaigning?

Figure 17: Worried about politicians' intentions? | Eswatini | 2020



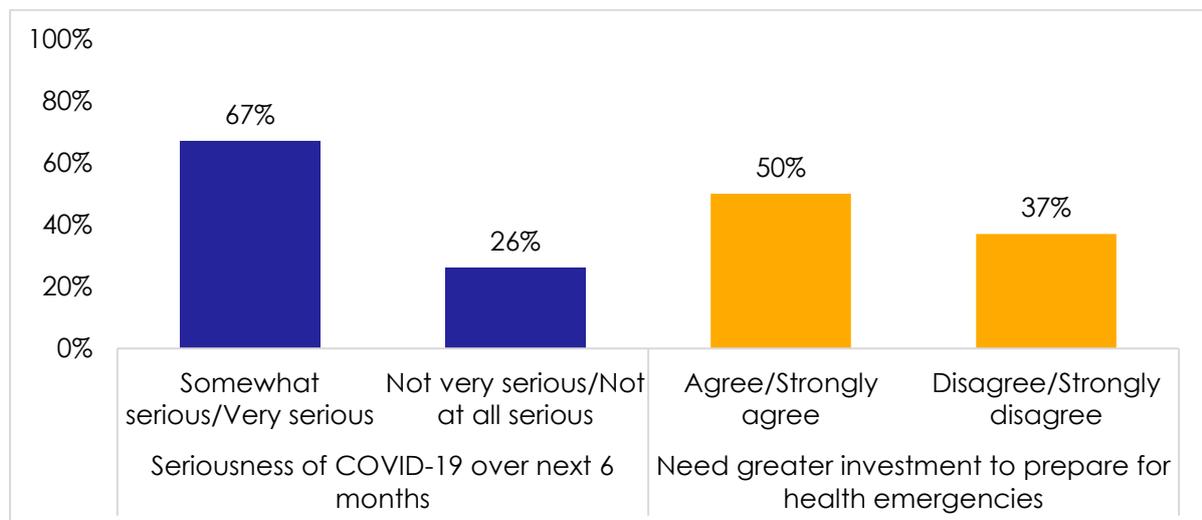
Respondents were asked: In some countries, people have been worried that governments and politicians are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their wealth or power, or to permanently restrict freedoms or political competition. What about you? How worried are you, if at all, that the following things are taking place or might take place in Eswatini: Politicians are using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power and authority?

Looking ahead

With the looming threat of a third wave of COVID-19 infections in Eswatini, two-thirds (67%) of citizens think that the pandemic will be “somewhat serious” or “very serious” in their country over the next six months (Figure 18).

But only half (50%) say the government should increase its investments in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19 if that would mean fewer resources are available for other health services.

Figure 18: Future impacts of COVID-19 | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked:

Looking ahead, how serious of a problem do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will be for Eswatini over the next six months?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our government needs to invest more of our health resources in special preparations to respond to health emergencies like COVID-19, even if it means fewer resources are available for other health services?

Conclusion

While citizens are satisfied with the government’s overall management of the COVID-19 response, survey data also highlight challenges that the government faces. These include distributing assistance in a manner that is perceived as fair, eliminating corruption from the management of pandemic-related resources, and building public trust in the motivations of political leaders and in the government’s ability to ensure the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

With only about one-third of citizens indicating a willingness to be vaccinated, the government’s vaccination campaign will require extensive public education and persuasion if it is to succeed.

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.

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Sipho S. Kunene is a research consultant for ActivQuest Strategic Information in Mbabane, Eswatini. Email: sipho@activquest.com.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is 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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