

## In Eswatini, economic conditions worsen; citizens cite poor government performance

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 482 | Siphos Kunene

### Summary

Despite its status as a middle-income country, Eswatini has suffered stagnating economic growth characterized by high unemployment, unequal distribution of wealth, and persistent poverty (World Bank, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges as restrictions on business operations and border closures constrained export-oriented industries, weakened demand, and reduced incomes. The African Development Bank Group (2021) projects modest economic growth of 1.4% in 2021.

Recognizing the negative impact of economic contraction on citizens' livelihoods, the government's post-COVID-19 recovery plan aims to stimulate economic growth through high-impact projects led by the private sector (Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 2020).

The latest Afrobarometer survey in Eswatini suggests that government action is badly needed. After recording significant gains between 2013 and 2018, most economic indicators have taken a nosedive. Large majorities of citizens say the country is headed in the wrong direction and describe both the national economy and their personal living conditions as bad. Increasing numbers are going without basic life necessities, and only two in 10 citizens are optimistic that things will get better during the coming year.

While a majority of Eswatini who accessed key public services last year encountered few difficulties, most say the government is performing poorly on key economic issues.

### 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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. 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 citizens 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 surveys were conducted in Eswatini in 2013, 2015, and 2018.

### Key findings

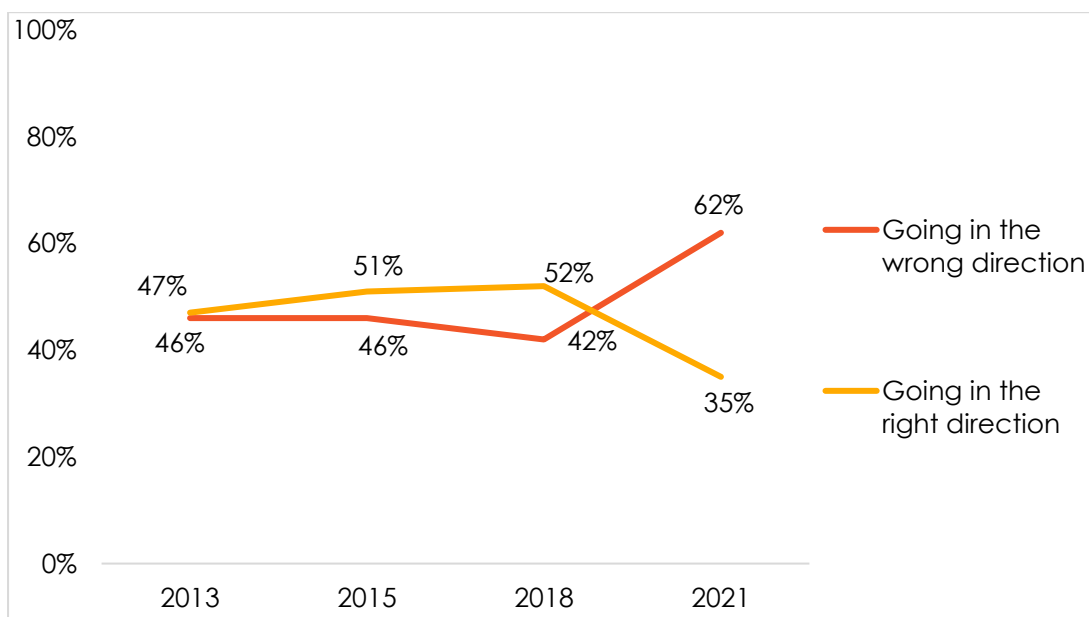
- Only about one-third (35%) of Eswatini say the country is going in the right direction, a sharp decline from 2018 (52%).

- Three-fourths (76%) of citizens say the country's economic condition is "fairly bad" or "very bad," a dramatic increase compared to three years ago (48%).
- Only two in 10 citizens (21%) expect the country's economic condition to improve over the next year.
- The share of Eswatini who describe their personal living conditions as "fairly good" or "very good" dropped from 46% in 2018 to just 9%.
- Increasing numbers of citizens report going without enough food (60%), enough clean water (58%), needed medical care (62%), and a cash income (78%) at least once during the year preceding the survey.
- Fewer than four in 10 citizens approve of the government's performance on managing the economy (38%), improving living standards of the poor (31%), creating jobs (29%), keeping prices stable (27%), and narrowing gaps between rich and poor (22%). All reflect declines since 2018.
- However, among citizens who sought public services during the previous year, majorities say they found it easy to get help from public schools (69%), public health facilities (68%), and the police (63%). Still, some citizens report having to pay bribes to obtain public services.

### Country's direction and economic conditions

Since the current government came into office in 2018, public perceptions of the country's overall direction have worsened dramatically. Only about one-third (35%) of citizens say the country is going in the right direction, a 17-percentage-point decline from 52% in 2018. The proportion who think the country is going in the wrong direction increased by 20 points over the same period, to 62% (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Direction of the country | Eswatini | 2013-2021**

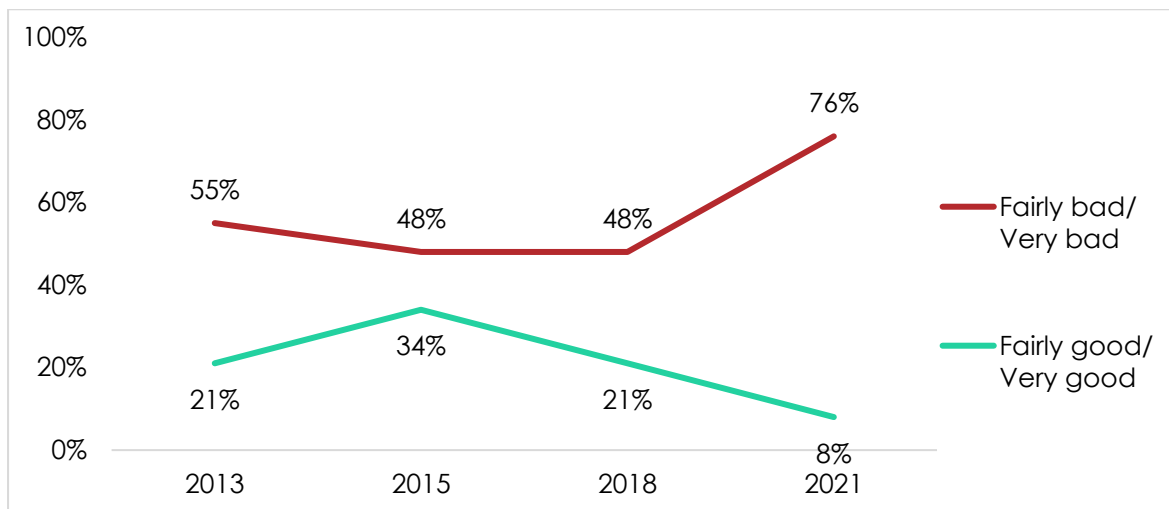


**Respondents were asked:** *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

Similarly, the proportion of Eswatini who describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" has jumped by 28 percentage points since 2018, to 76% (Figure 2). Fewer than one in 10 (8%) think the condition of the economy is good.

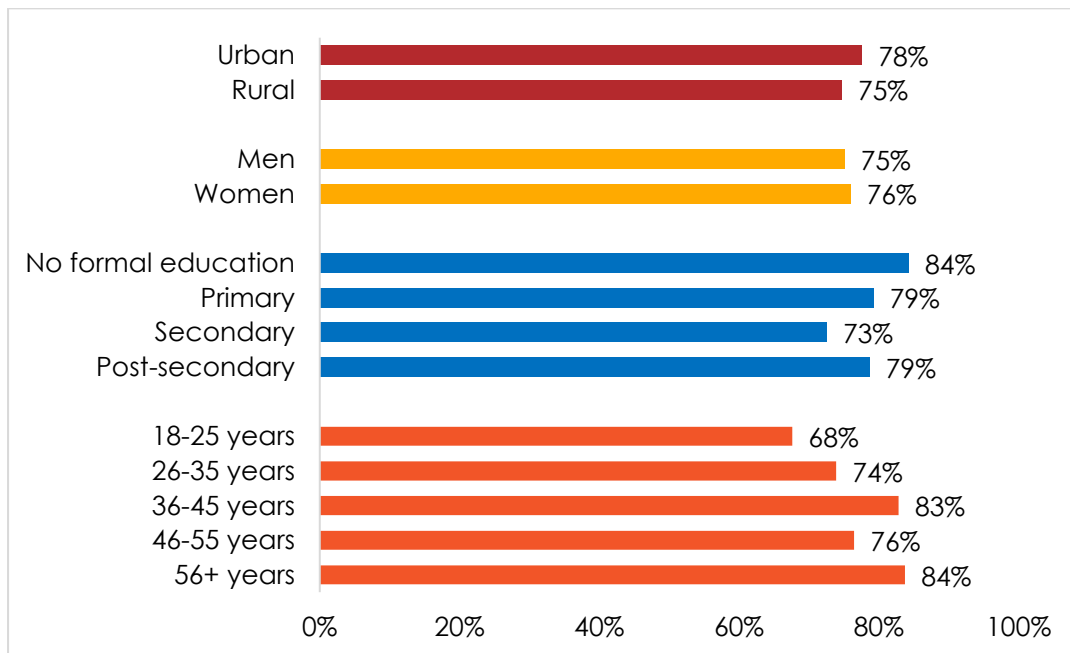
Negative assessments of the economy are fairly consistent across urban and rural areas and genders (Figure 3). Citizens with no formal education (84%) are more likely than their more educated counterparts (73%-79%) to see the country's economic condition as bad. The youngest respondents (68%) are least likely to offer a negative assessment of the economy.

**Figure 2: Country's economic condition | Eswatini | 2013-2021**



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

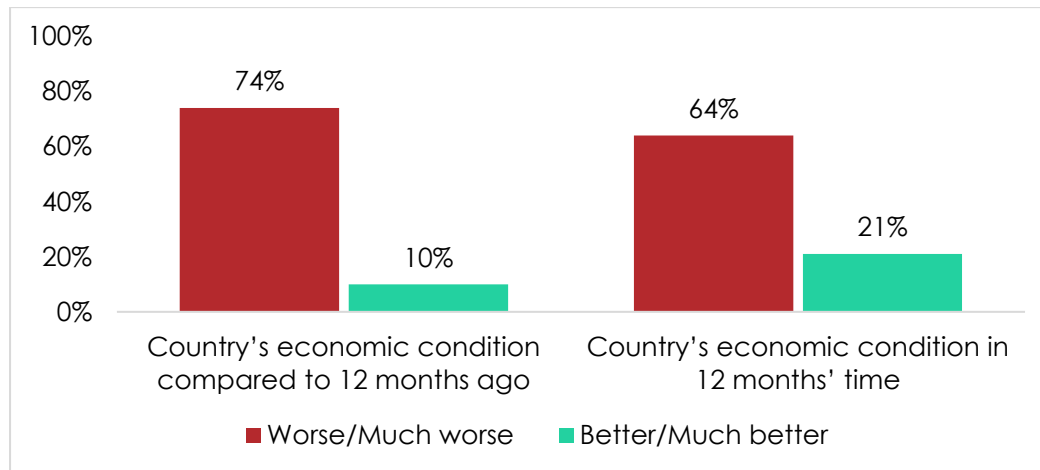
**Figure 3: Negative assessments of the country's economic condition | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021**



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

In line with increasingly negative assessments of the country's overall direction and economic condition, three-fourths (74%) of Eswatini say the economy has worsened over the previous year. And almost two-thirds (64%) expect things to get worse during the coming year, while only 21% are optimistic about the economy (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Country's economic condition 12 months ago and 12 months ahead**  
 | Eswatini | 2021



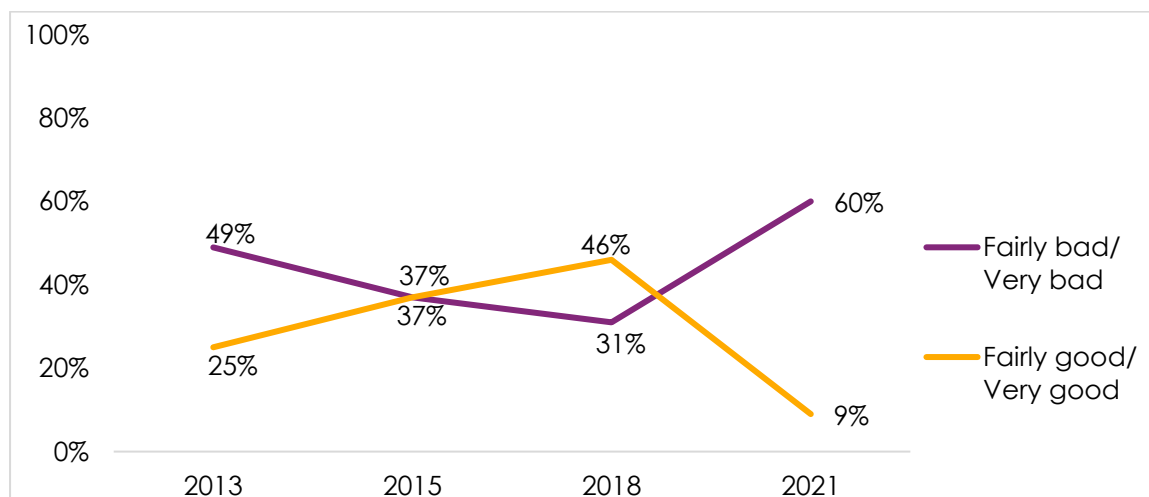
**Respondents were asked:**

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?

**Personal living conditions**

Alongside assessments of the economy, personal living conditions in Eswatini have taken a nosedive over the past three years after improving steadily between 2013 and 2018 (Figure 5). Six in 10 citizens (60%) now describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" – twice the proportion who did so in 2018. Only one in 10 (9%) offer positive assessments of their living conditions, down from 46% in 2018, while 31% describe them as "neither good nor bad."

**Figure 5: Personal living conditions** | Eswatini | 2013-2021

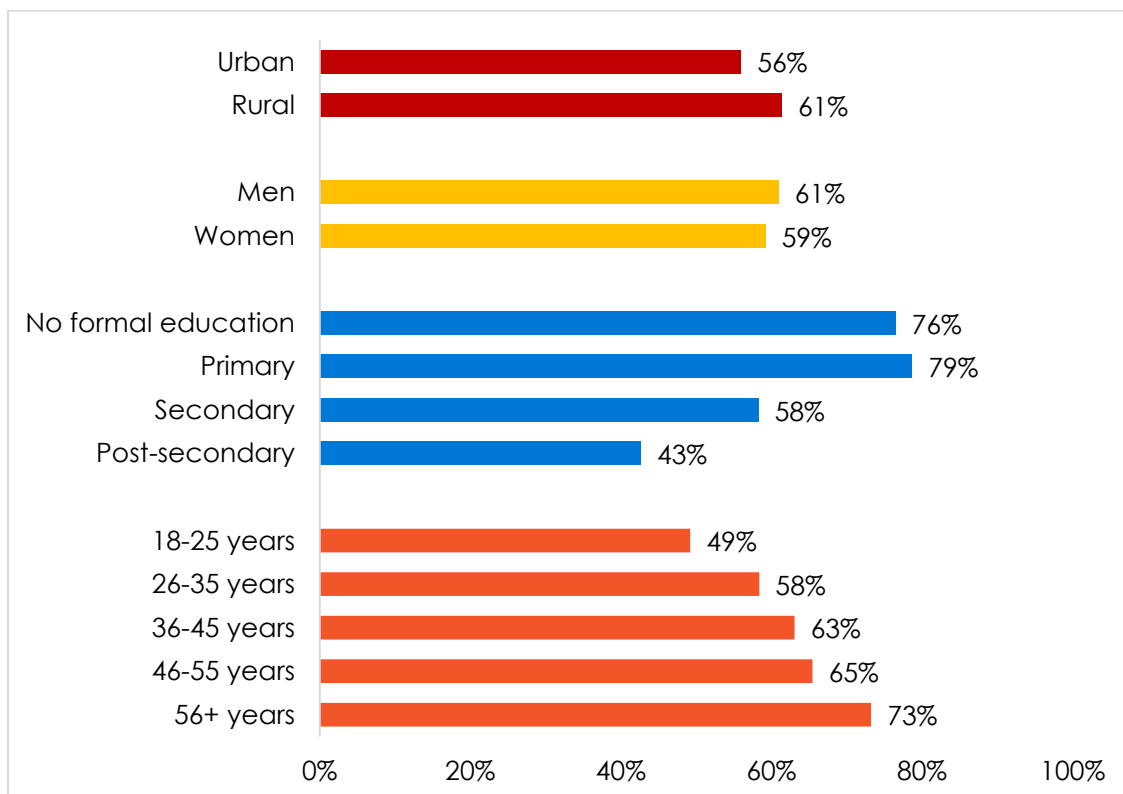


**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

Citizens with only primary education (79%) or no formal schooling (76%) are considerably more likely than their better-educated counterparts (43%-58%) to describe their living conditions as bad, and rural residents (61%) are somewhat more negative than urbanites (56%) (Figure 6).

Negative assessments increase steadily with respondents' age, ranging from 49% of 18- to 25-year-olds to 73% of those over age 55.

**Figure 6: Negative assessments of personal living condition** | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021

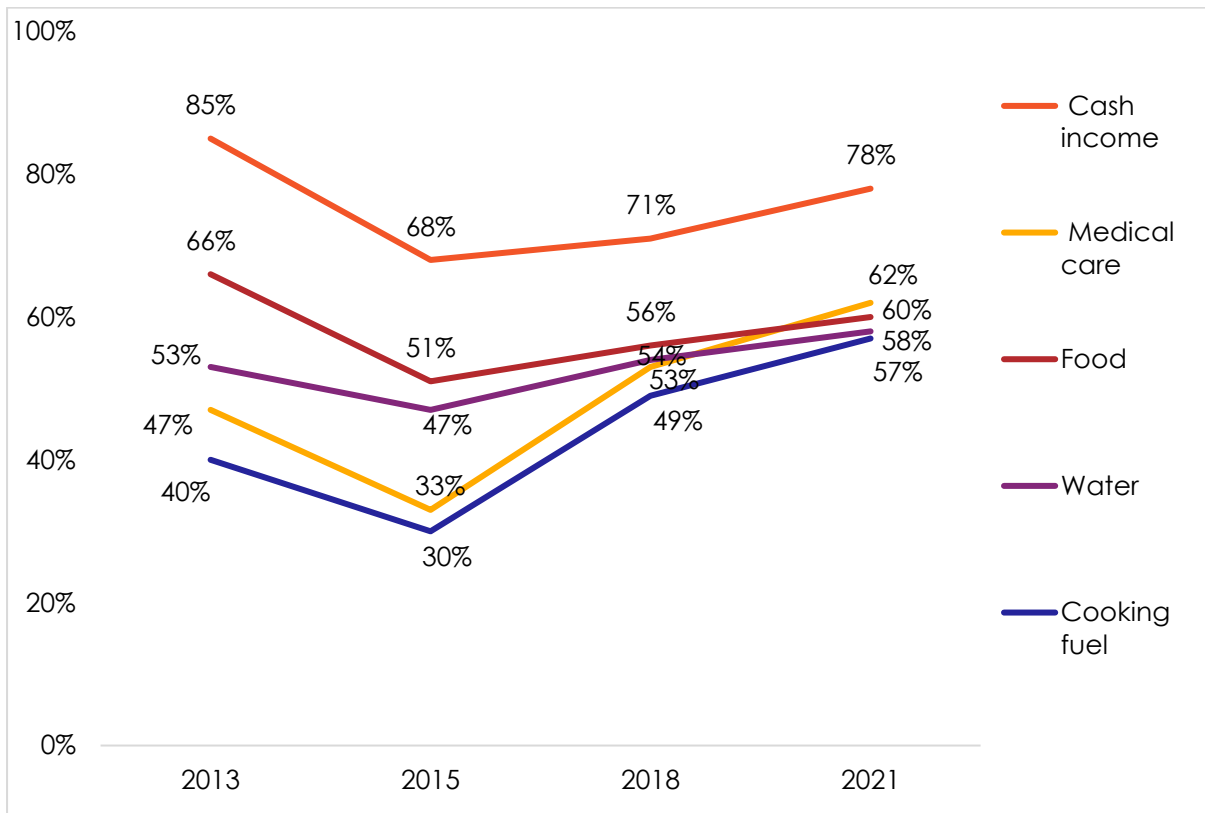


**Respondents were asked:** *In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")*

Afrobarometer's measurement of "lived poverty" confirms the deterioration of living conditions in Eswatini, although here the negative trend started before 2018. After substantial gains between 2013 and 2015, the proportion of people who experienced shortages of five basic life necessities has climbed steadily (Figure 7).

In 2021, almost eight in 10 Eswatini (78%) report going without a cash income at least once during the year preceding the survey, marking a 10-percentage-point increase since 2015. About six in 10 experienced shortages of needed medical care (62%), food (60%), clean water (58%), and cooking fuel (57%) – all reflecting substantial increases compared to 2015 and 2018.

**Figure 7: Went without basic necessities** | Eswatini | 2013-2021



**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”)

### Government performance and most important problems

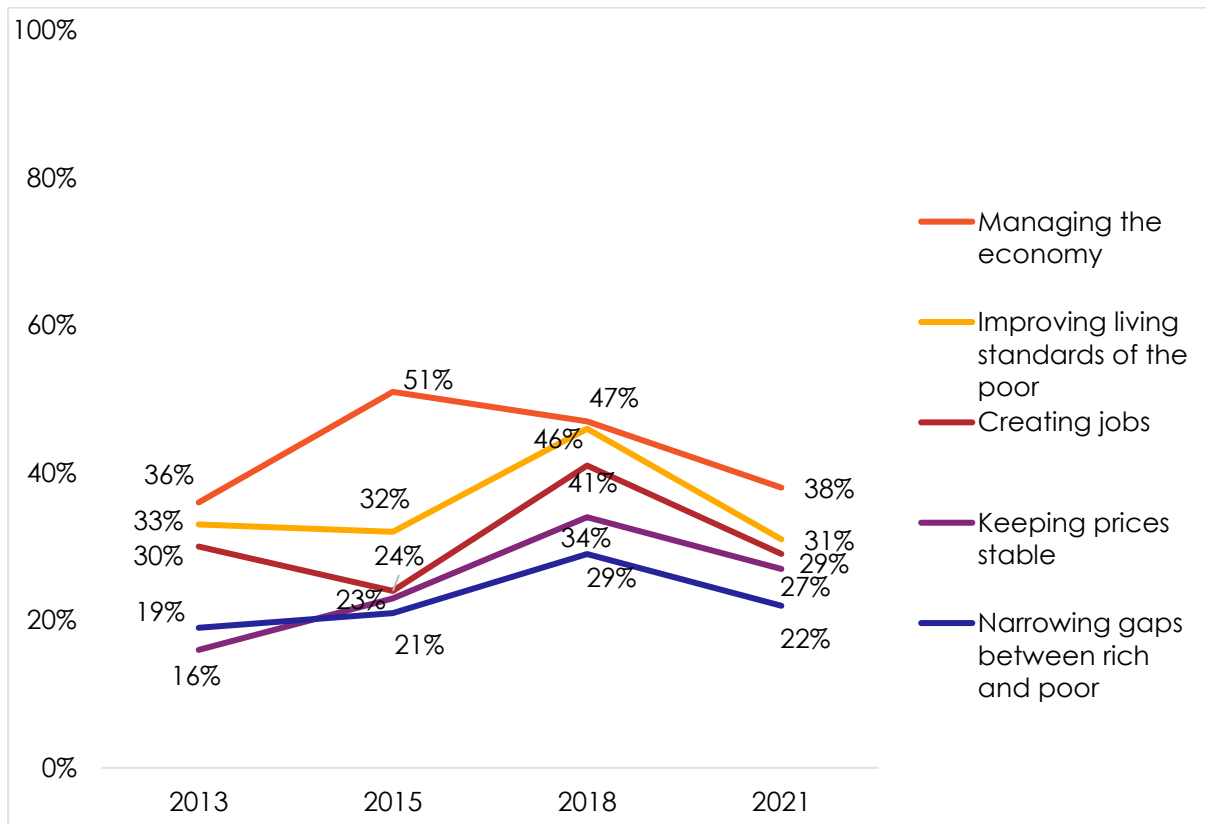
As might be expected, considering increasingly negative assessments of economic and living conditions, citizens’ approval of the government’s performance in managing economic issues has declined since 2018 (Figure 8).

The proportion who say the government is managing the economy “fairly well” or “very well” decreased by 9 percentage points over the past three years, to 38%. Similar declines are seen with regard to the government’s performance on improving living standards of the poor (from 46% approval to 31%), creating jobs (from 41% to 29%), keeping prices stable (from 34% to 27%), and narrowing gaps between rich and poor (from 29% to 22%).

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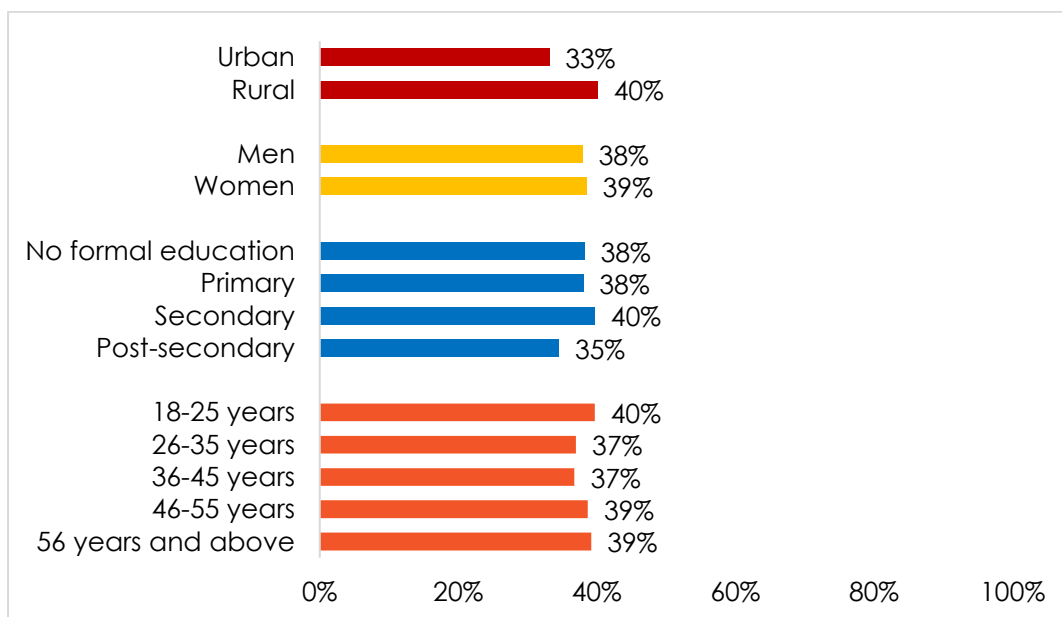
Rural residents (40%) are slightly more likely than urbanites (33%) to approve of the government’s handling of the economy, but assessments are fairly consistent across other key demographic groups (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Government performance on economic issues | Eswatini | 2013-2021**



**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")

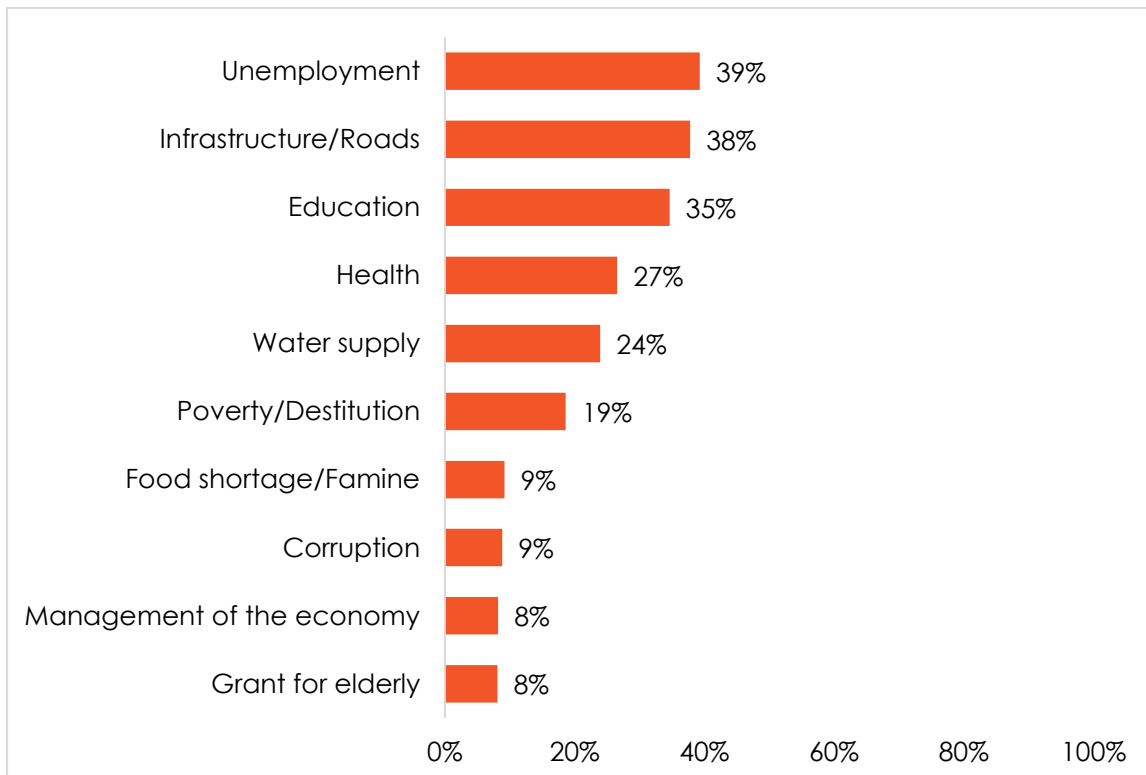
**Figure 9: Government performance on managing the economy | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is managing the economy? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

While management of the economy ranks only ninth among the most important problems that Eswatini want their government to address, the critical economic issue of unemployment ranks No. 1, cited by 39% of citizens as one of their top three concerns (Figure 10). Poverty ranks sixth, and food insecurity, corruption, and grants for the elderly also appear in the top 10 problems.

**Figure 10: Most important problems government should address | Eswatini | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows the % of respondents who cite each problem among their three responses.)*

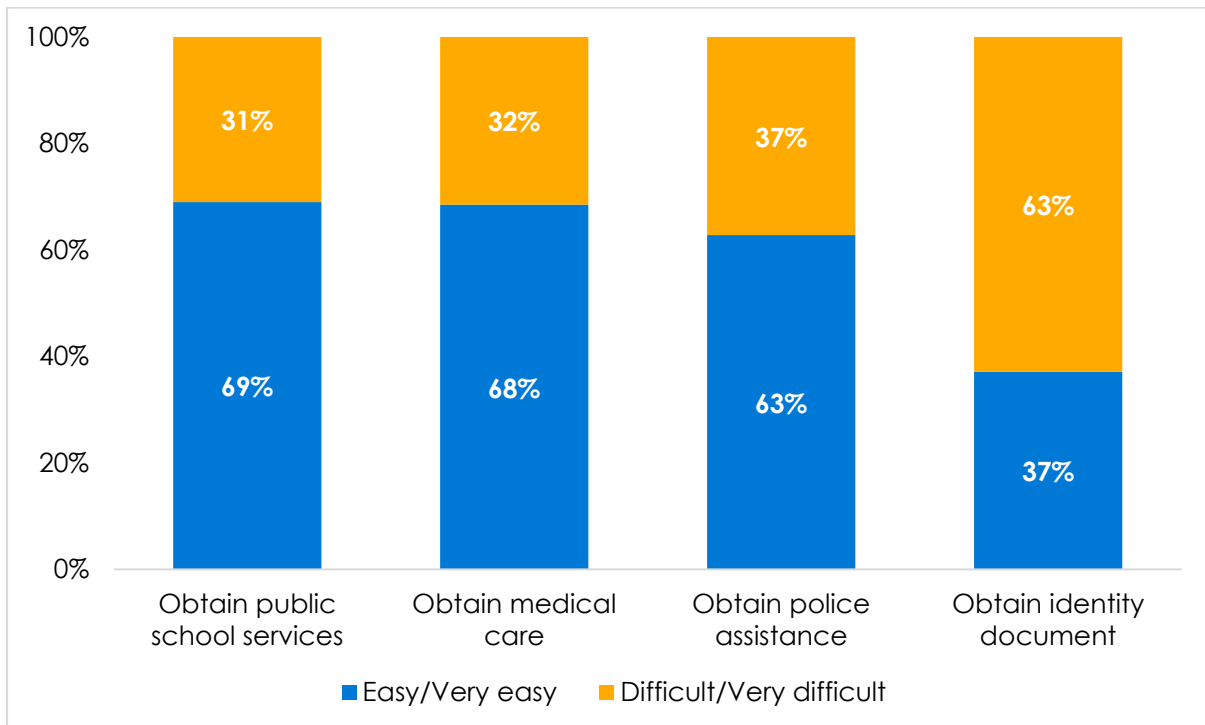
### Public service delivery

Contrary to widespread disapproval of the government's performance on economic issues, a majority of Eswatini who accessed public services say they had an easy time of it. Among those who sought public services during the previous year, about seven in 10 say they found it "easy" or "very easy" to get help from public schools (69%) and public health facilities (68%) (Figure 11). More than six in 10 say the same about their efforts to obtain police assistance (63%). However, only 37% say they found it easy to get a government identity document such as a birth certificate, driver's license, passport, voter's card, or permit.

Still, some citizens say they had to pay bribes, give gifts, or do favours in order to access public services (Figure 12). Among those who had contact with these services, 30% say they had to pay bribes to obtain government identity documents, while smaller proportions report paying bribes to get help from the police (13%), services at a public school (10%), or medical care (5%).

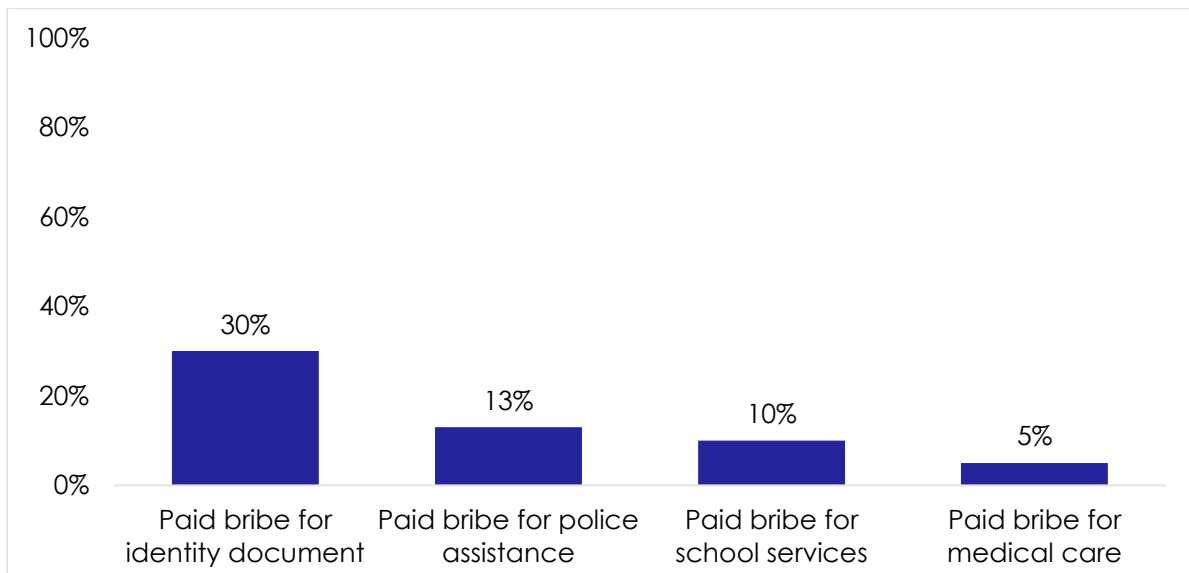


**Figure 11: Accessing public services | Eswatini | 2021**



**Respondents who say they sought selected public services during the previous year were asked:** How easy or difficult was it to obtain [the needed services]? (Respondents who had no contact with these services are excluded.)

**Figure 12: Paid bribes to obtain public services | Eswatini | 2021**



**Respondents who say they sought selected public services during the previous year were asked:** How often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour [to obtain the needed services]? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often") (Respondents who had no contact with these services are excluded.)

## Conclusion

Citizens' assessments of the country's economic condition and overall direction have plummeted, losing ground they gained between 2013 and 2018. An increasing share of the population reports poor living conditions and shortages of basic life necessities, and few expect things to get better anytime soon. While no doubt aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to their difficulties, most also give the government poor marks on managing key economic issues.

These findings suggest that beyond a post-COVID-19 recovery plan, Eswatini will expect the government to ensure strong and efficient economic management strategies and systems that produce economic growth and improve its citizens' lives.

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