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News release

Approaching AfCFTA launch, citizens in Southern African Customs Union states hold mixed views on free trade and open borders

Citizens of the five Southern African Customs Union (SACU) member states hold decidedly mixed views on the union's goals of achieving economic integration and ease of trade and movement across the region, Afrobarometer surveys show.

Findings in Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa show that attitudes toward free cross-border movement range from massive support in Lesotho to equally solid rejection in Botswana, while South Africans are more likely to ban than welcome foreign workers. Support is high, but variable across countries, for protecting domestic businesses from foreign competition.

The member countries come closer to consensus on two issues: that it is difficult to cross international borders and that foreign traders should be allowed to do business to ensure a good selection of low-cost consumer goods.

All SACU member states have signed on to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in hopes that it will unlock new economic growth opportunities – especially critical for a post-COVID-19 recovery – after its launch on 1 January 2021. But the Afrobarometer findings suggest that the concepts of free trade and cross-border movement that the customs union and AfCFTA promote do not have as solid a popular foundation as leaders might like.

Key findings

■ Free cross-border movement:

- Citizens in SACU member countries hold widely divergent views on free movement across borders, with support ranging from just three in 10 Botswana (30%) to about half of citizens in South Africa (49%) and Namibia (50%) and more than two-thirds in eSwatini (68%) and Lesotho (75%) (Figure 1).
- Half (50%) of all South Africans said the government should not allow foreign nationals to work in South Africa because they would take jobs and benefits away from citizens (Figure 2).
- A majority of citizens in Lesotho (72%), eSwatini (58%), Namibia (52%), and South Africa (51%) said it's "difficult" or "very difficult" to move across borders in Southern Africa in order to work or trade in other countries (Figure 3).

■ Free trade:

- More than six in 10 Basotho (63%) and Botswana (62%) said that in order to develop, their country must protect local producers rather than open its borders to foreign competition. Namibians were more narrowly divided on the issue (Figure 4).
- But similar majorities in Botswana (62%) and Lesotho (63%) said their government should allow foreign individuals and companies to conduct retail

trade in the country to ensure that consumers have a wide selection of low-cost goods. A smaller majority (52%) of Namibians agreed (Figure 5).

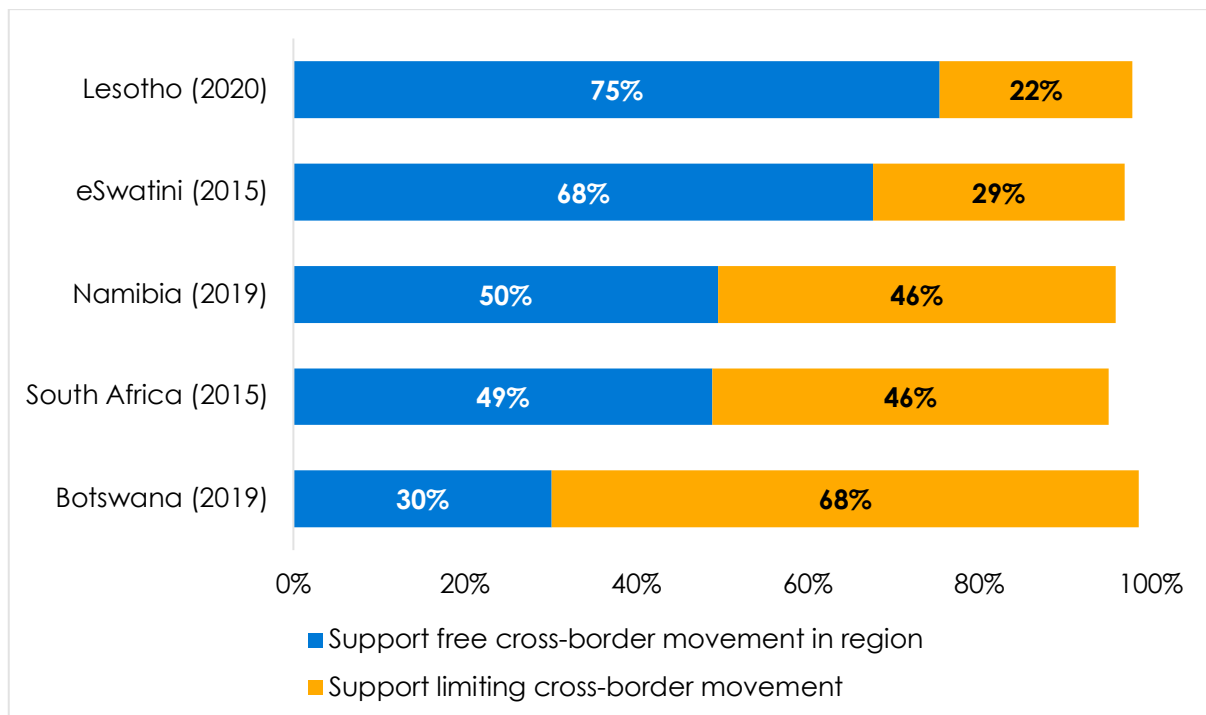
Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan 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. Round 8 surveys, completed in 18 countries before being interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue in at least 17 more countries in late 2020 and early 2021. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200-2,400, which yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This analysis draws on the most recent data available for Botswana (2019), eSwatini (2018), Lesotho (2020), Namibia (2019), and South Africa (2018).

Charts

Figure 1: Free vs. limited movement across borders in the region | 5 SACU countries | 2015-2020*



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

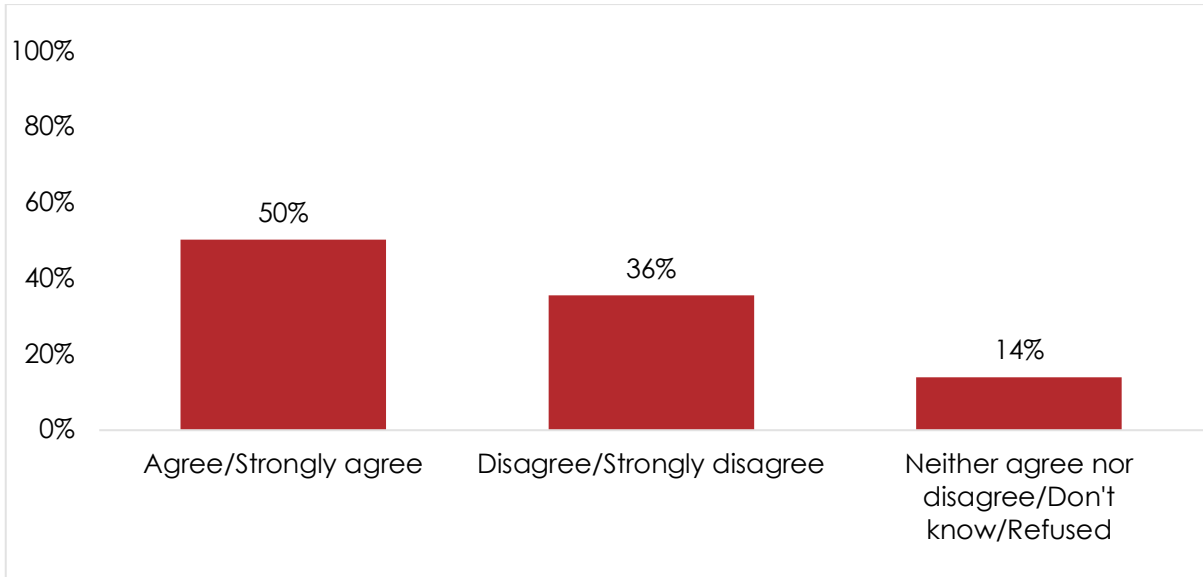
Statement 1: People living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.

Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, governments should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with each statement)

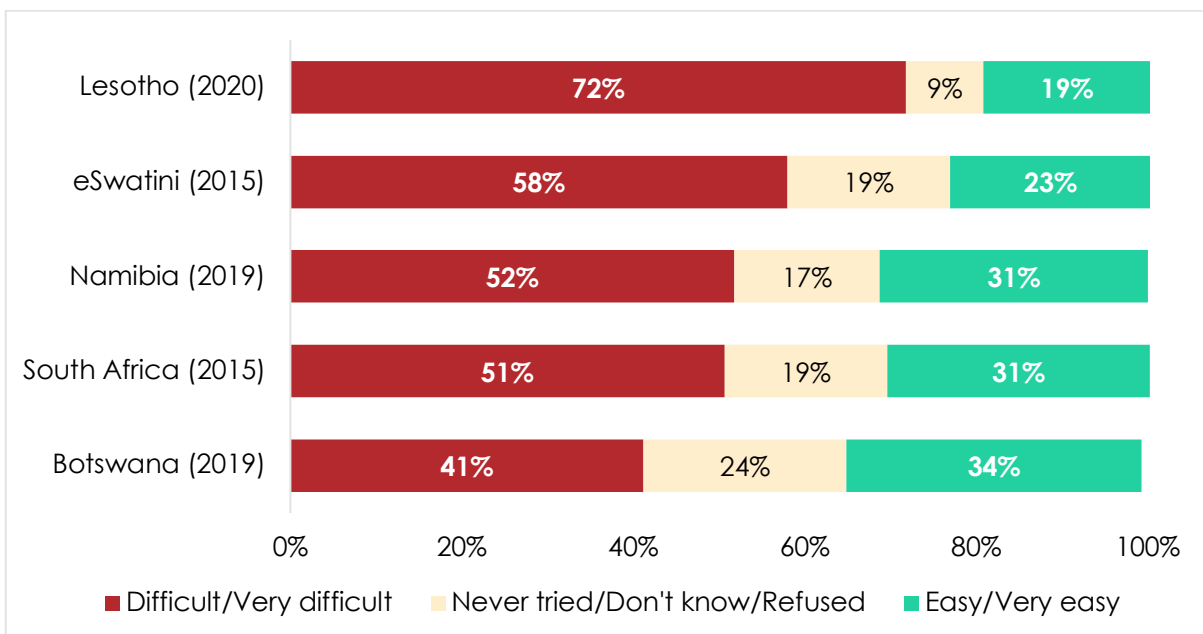
* The Round 6 question (reported here for South Africa and eSwatini) used a slightly different wording for Statement 2: Because foreign migrants take away jobs and foreign traders sell their goods at very cheap prices, governments should protect their own citizens and limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

Figure 2: South Africans' support for restrictions on foreign workers | South Africa | 2018



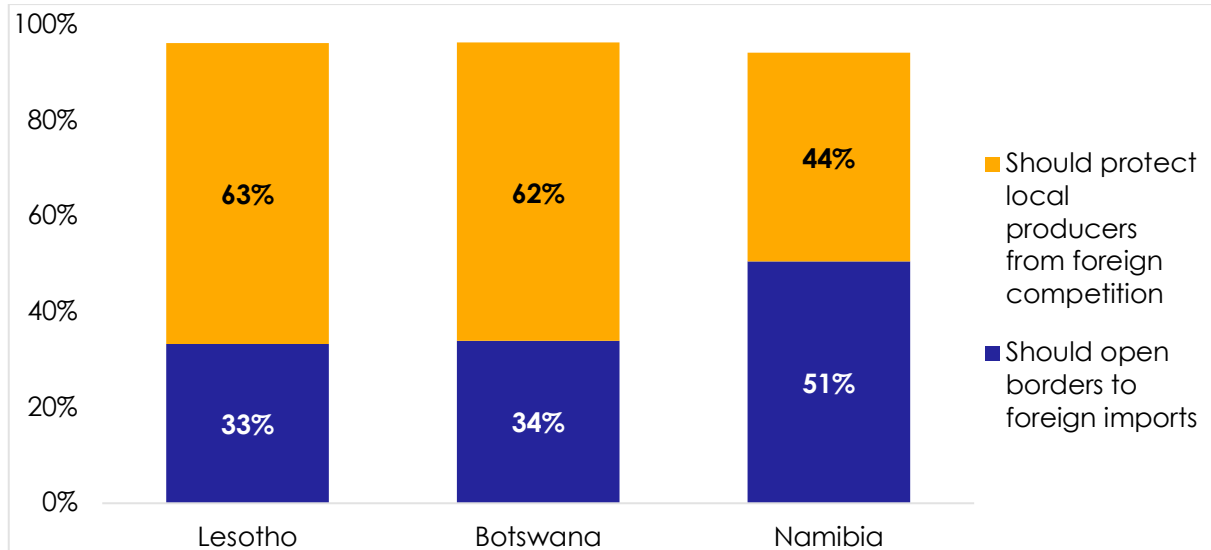
Respondents were asked: For the following statement, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't heard enough to say: The government should not allow foreigners to work in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans.

Figure 3: Difficulty or ease of movement across borders | 5 SACU countries | 2018-2020



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in Southern Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 4: Open trade vs. protection for local producers | Botswana, Lesotho, and Namibia | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: In order to develop, our country must rely on trade with the rest of the world, including by opening our borders for foreign imports.
 Statement 2: In order to develop, our country must rely on local production and protect local producers from foreign competition.
 (% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 5: Support for foreigners trading in consumer goods | Botswana, Lesotho, and Namibia | 2019/2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should only allow citizens and companies of our own country to trade in consumer goods, even if this means we will have fewer goods or higher prices.
 Statement 2: The government should continue to permit foreigners and foreign corporations to set up retail shops in this country to ensure we have a wide choice of low-cost consumer goods.
 (% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with each statement)

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