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Zimbabweans offer bleak outlook on the state of the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 658 | Asafika Mpako and Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

Zimbabwe has been battling a protracted economic depression since the early 2000s. Rampant unemployment, persistent hyperinflation, and rising poverty levels have stifled the growth of the economy and threaten to undermine political and social stability within the country and the Southern Africa region (Chifamba, 2021; Mathekga, 2022; Matiashe, 2022).

At his inauguration in 2018, President Emmerson Mnangagwa promised to introduce radical economic reforms to steer the country toward rapid recovery (Reuters, 2018), but this goal has proven elusive. According to the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, the country's annual inflation rate hit a high of 285% in August 2022, tripling from four months earlier (Africa News, 2022; Hürriyet Daily News, 2022; Economy Next, 2022; BBC, 2023). Some industry leaders and independent economists say that even such jaw-dropping numbers don't reflect the true extent of rapidly deteriorating economic conditions and rising prices for ordinary citizens (Masvingo Mirror, 2022; BBC, 2019).

While some observers blame the country's economic woes on the decades-long sanctions imposed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, others criticise the government's poor economic management (Chifamba, 2021; Moyo-Nyede, 2021; Institute for Security Studies, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have aggravated hardships as well (Chingono, 2021).

What do ordinary Zimbabweans say about the direction of their country, their personal living conditions, and their priorities for government action?

Afrobarometer survey findings show that most Zimbabweans are pessimistic about the country's direction. Few anticipate that the economic situation will get better, and many describe their personal living conditions as bad. Citizens give the government poor marks on economic management and job creation – their top priorities for government action.

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 conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March and 10 April 2022. 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 Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

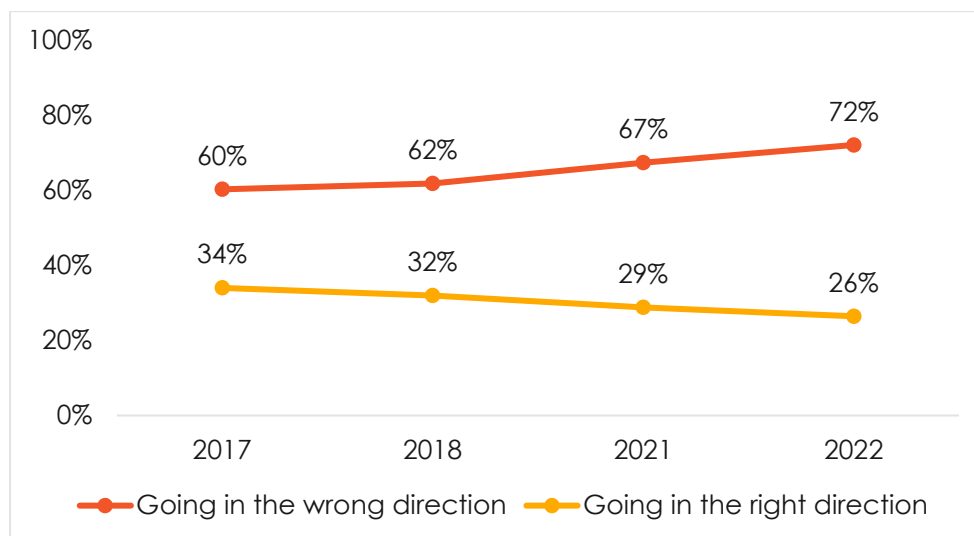
Key findings

- Zimbabweans are pessimistic about national conditions. More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) believe the country is going in “the wrong direction,” up from 60% in 2017.
- Citizens' top concerns are related to the economy: Management of the economy (cited by 45% of respondents) and unemployment (43%) are the most important problems that Zimbabweans want their government to address.
- Only about two in 10 citizens (22%) are optimistic that the country's economy will improve over the next 12 months.
- The share of respondents who describe their personal living conditions as bad has increased by 21 percentage points since 2012, to 64%.
- Not surprisingly, citizens' negative perceptions of the country's economic situation and their own living conditions are reflected in their assessments of government and leadership performance.
 - Large majorities say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at keeping prices stable (87%), creating jobs (86%), narrowing income gaps (79%), improving the living standards of the poor (77%), and managing the economy (76%).
 - Only four in 10 Zimbabweans (41%) “approve” or “strongly approve” of the president's job performance over the past 12 months, and even fewer (34%) give their member of Parliament a passing mark. Both ratings reflect substantial declines over the past decade.

Country's direction

Only one-quarter (26%) of Zimbabweans believe the country is going in “the right direction,” while 72% say it is on the wrong path (Figure 1).

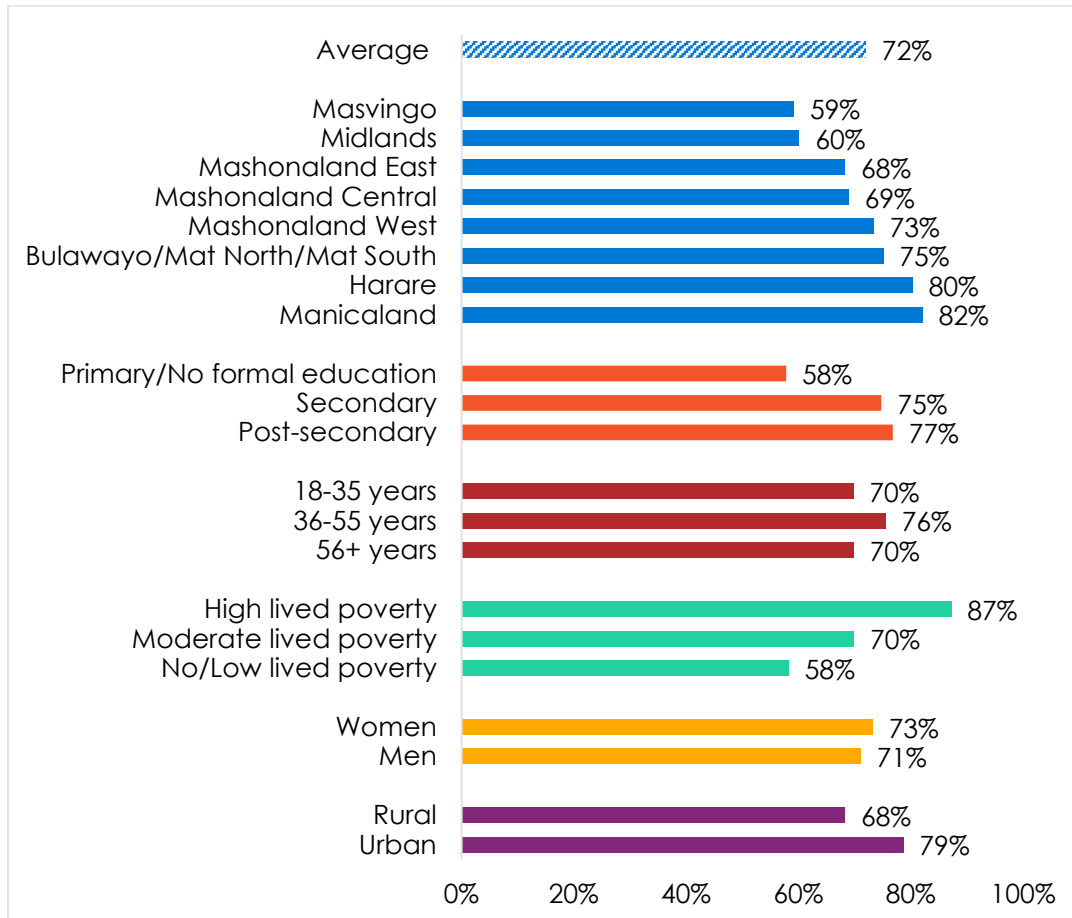
Figure 1: Country's direction | Zimbabwe | 2017-2022



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

Perceptions of the country as heading in the wrong direction increase with respondents' level of poverty, ranging from 58% of the better-off to 87% of those experiencing high lived poverty¹ (Figure 2). This view is also particularly common among urban residents (79%), the middle-aged (76%), and respondents with secondary or post-secondary education (75%-77%). Harare (80%) and Manicaland (82%) record the highest share of citizens who say the country is moving in the wrong direction.

Figure 2: Country going in the wrong direction | by demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "the wrong direction")

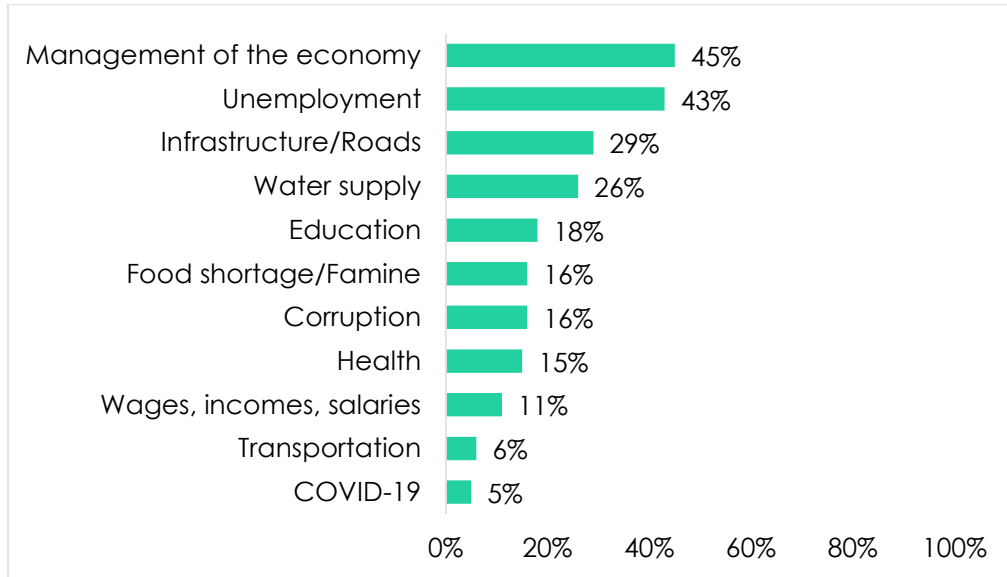
A weak economy and deteriorating economic security

The leading issues in the public eye are management of the economy (cited by 45% of respondents as one of their three priorities for government action) and unemployment (43%) (Figure 3). Other citizen priorities include infrastructure/roads (29%), water supply (26%), education (18%), food shortage/famine (16%), corruption (16%), health (15%), and wages (11%).

¹ 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 and Patel (2022).

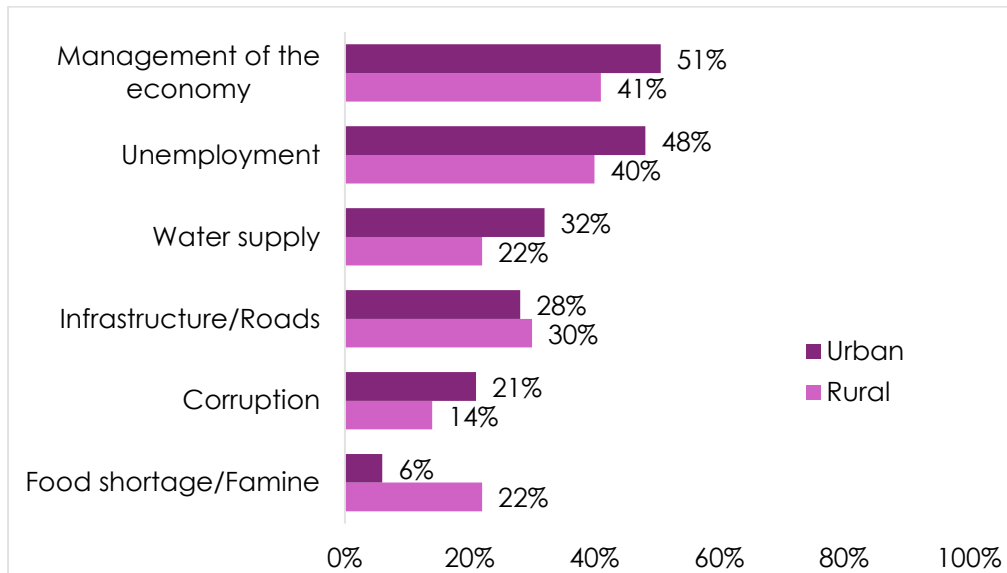
Urbanites are more likely than rural residents to prioritise management of the economy (51% vs. 41%), unemployment (48% vs. 40%), water supply (32% vs. 22%), and corruption (21% vs. 14%). Food insecurity is considered a more urgent problem in rural areas (22%) than in cities (6%) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Most important problems | Zimbabwe | 2022



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; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

Figure 4: Most important problems | by urban-rural location | Zimbabwe | 2022

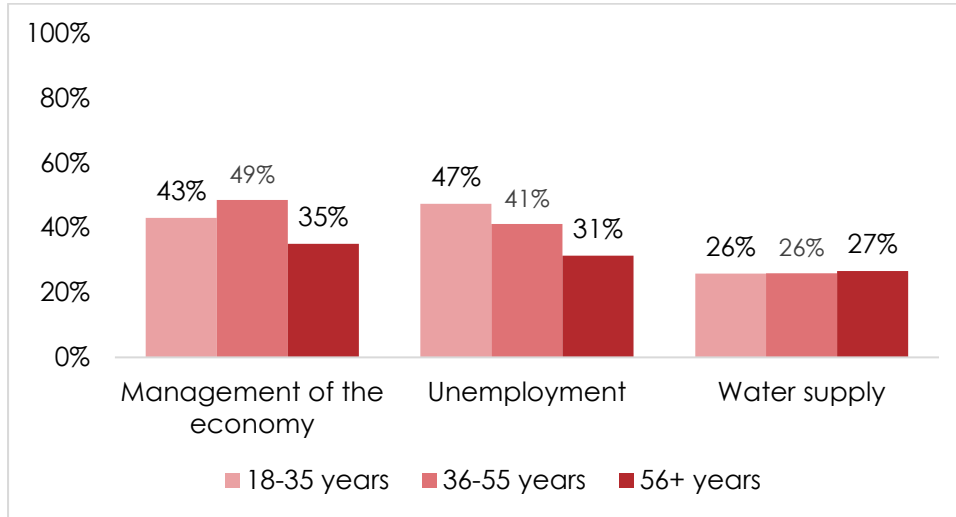


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

Unemployment is an especially pressing problem for young people. Figure 5 shows a stepwise decline in concern about job creation by age: Almost half (47%) of respondents aged 18-35

cite unemployment as one of their main priorities, compared to just 31% of those age 56 or above.

Figure 5: Three most important problems | by age | Zimbabwe | 2022

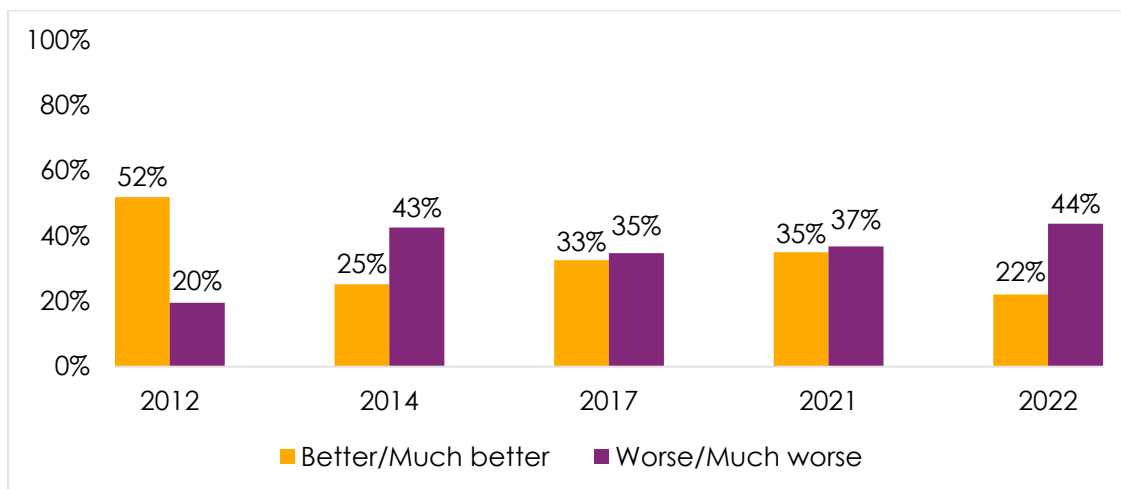


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

Only about two in 10 citizens (22%) foresee improvement in the country's economic health over the next year (Figure 6). This proportion has fallen substantially from its peak in 2012, when more than half (52%) of the population was optimistic about economic conditions in Zimbabwe, perhaps in large part due to a brief period of economic recovery after the Government of National Unity was formed between President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 2009 (Dzirutwe, 2013).

More than four in 10 (44%) anticipate that economic conditions in the country will become "worse" or "much worse," while about one-third think things will stay the same (24%) or say they "don't know" (10%).

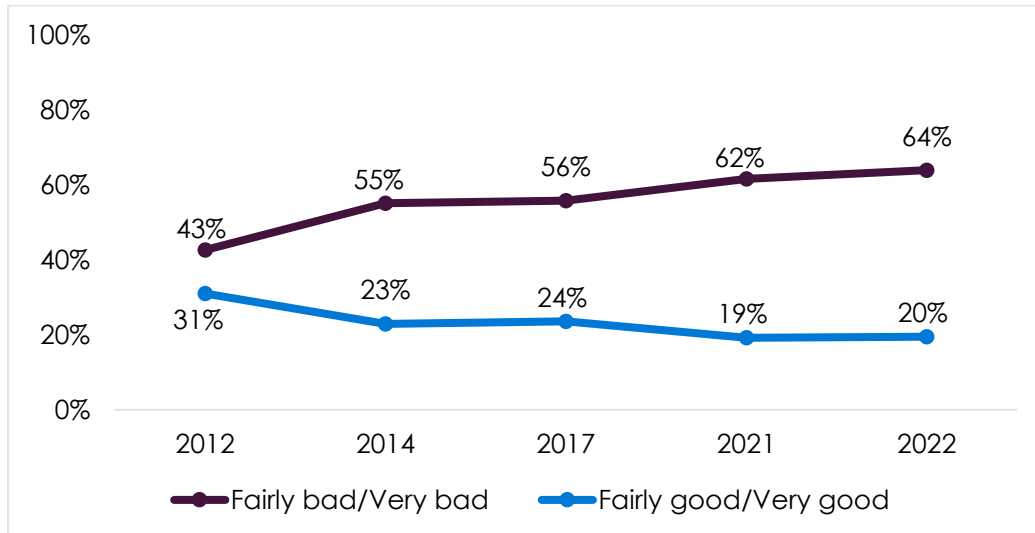
Figure 6: Country's economic conditions in 12 months | Zimbabwe | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Assessments of personal living conditions have worsened as well over the past decade: Just 20% of citizens describe them as “fairly good” or “very good,” while 64% now see their living conditions as bad, up from 43% in 2012 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Personal living conditions | Zimbabwe | 2012-2022



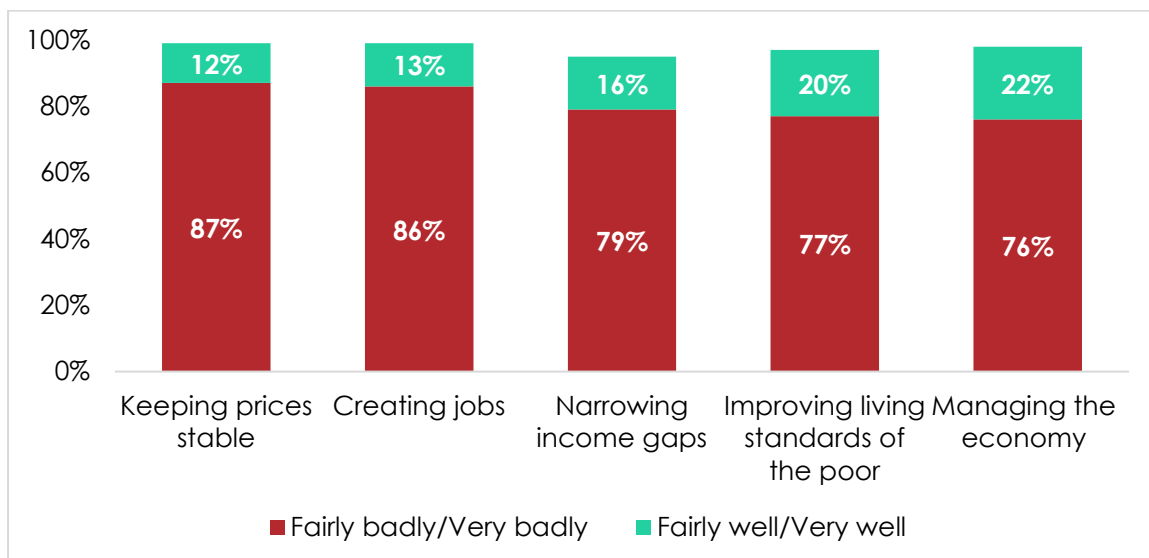
Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

Views on leadership and government performance

Considering the country's economic difficulties, how do citizens evaluate the performance of their government and leadership?

Large majorities say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on key economic issues, including keeping prices stable (87%), creating jobs (86%), narrowing income gaps (79%), improving the living standards of the poor (77%), and managing the economy (76%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Evaluations of government economic performance | Zimbabwe | 2022

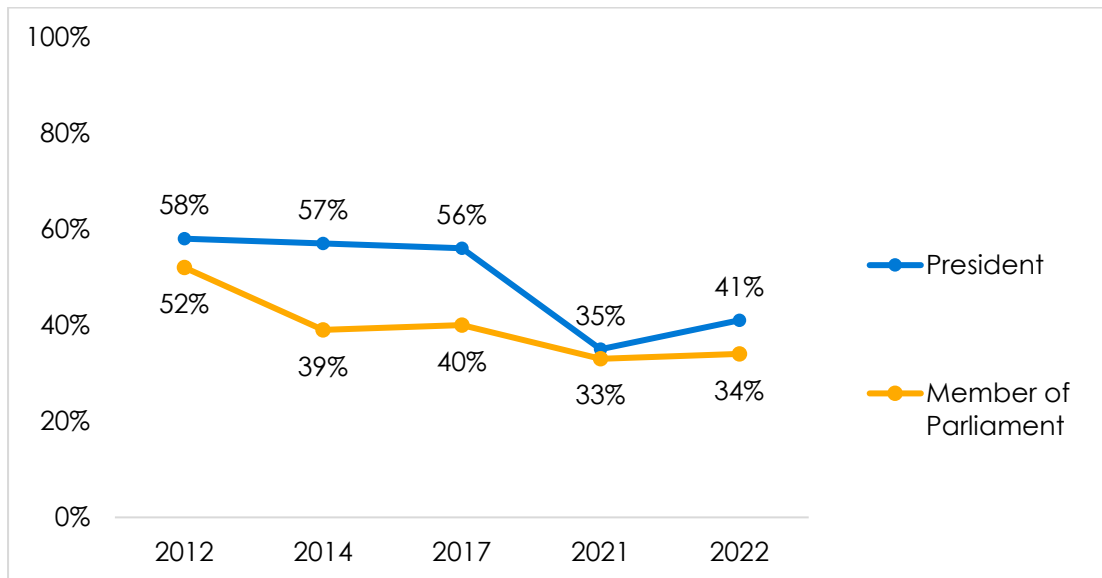


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Assessments of the president and Parliament are somewhat less negative, though hardly glowing (Figure 9). Only four in 10 citizens (41%) “approve” or “strongly approve” of the president’s performance in the past year, while 49% disapprove. Approval ratings dropped sharply between 2017 (56%) and 2021 (35%) and have recovered only slightly since then.

Even fewer citizens (34%) approve of the performance of their members of Parliament, down from 52% a decade ago.

Figure 9: Approval of presidential and parliamentary performance | Zimbabwe
 | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months: The president? Your member of Parliament? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

Conclusion

Most Zimbabweans see the country as moving in the wrong direction, reflecting widespread discouragement about the economy and concerns about their own livelihoods. Few expect things to get better in the near future. Their assessments of the government’s economic performance reflect this bleak outlook, particularly when it comes to keeping prices stable and creating jobs, an especially important priority among the youngest adults. As Zimbabweans approach national elections, an economic turn-around will clearly be at the top of voters’ agenda.

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