



Dispatch No. 671 | 14 July 2023

# Economic conditions worsen in Eswatini; citizens cite poor government performance

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 671 | Sipho S. Kunene**

## Summary

As Eswatini's government concludes a five-year term marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest in June 2021 (Amnesty international, 2023), economic warning signs are flashing red. Gross domestic product growth slowed to an estimated 0.4% in 2022, down from 7.9% in 2021, while unemployment, inequality, and poverty remained stubbornly high, underpinned by weak job creation in the formal economy (World Bank, 2023).

With national parliamentary elections (which will usher in the next government) set for 29 September, the latest Afrobarometer survey in Eswatini suggests that the new government will need to act urgently to improve the quality of life of Eswatini. Most economic indicators have taken a nosedive since 2018. 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 went without basic life necessities during the previous year, and few citizens are optimistic that things will get better anytime soon.

Overwhelming majorities give the government poor marks for its performance on economic issues. On the bright side, a majority of citizens who accessed key public services last year say they encountered few difficulties, although a substantial number say they had to pay bribes.

## 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 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 Eswatini, led by QA Strategic Information, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult citizens in October-November 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 surveys were conducted in Eswatini in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2022.

## Key findings

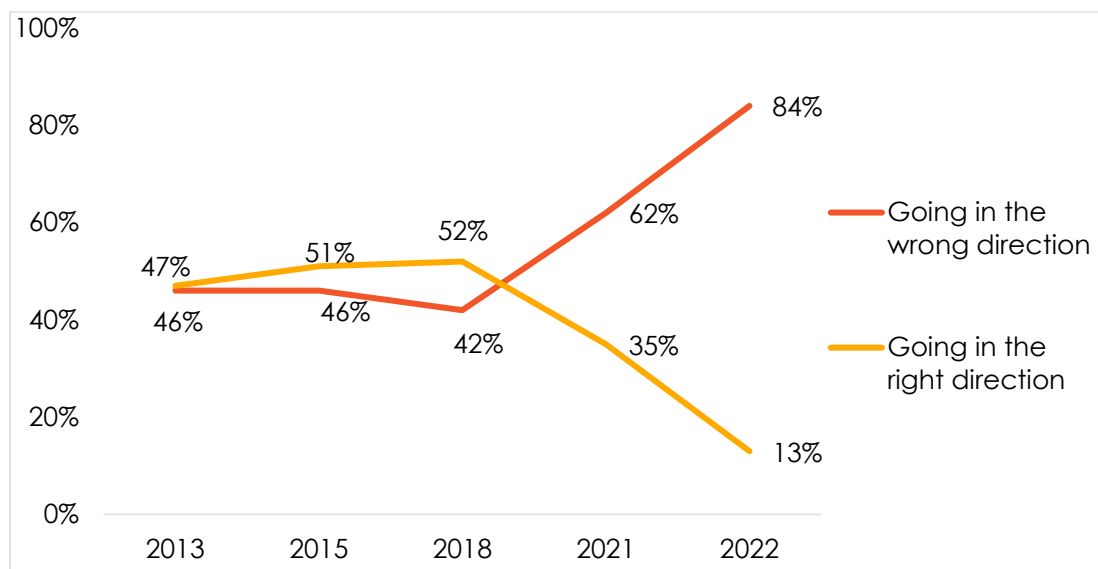
- More than eight in 10 Eswatini (84%) say the country is going in "the wrong direction," twice as many as in 2018 (42%).
- Almost nine in 10 citizens (86%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," an increase of 38 percentage points compared to 2018 (48%).
- Only one in eight citizens (13%) expect the country's economic condition to improve over the next year.

- More than two-thirds (68%) of Eswatini say their living conditions are “fairly bad” or “very bad,” more than double the share in 2018 (31%).
- Increasing numbers of citizens report going without a cash income (78%), medical care (78%), enough food (66%), and enough clean water (55%) at least once during the year preceding the survey.
- Public approval ratings have plummeted for the government's performance on managing the economy (12%), improving living standards of the poor (10%), creating jobs (6%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (5%), and keeping prices stable (4%).
- However, among citizens who sought selected public services during the previous year, majorities say they found it easy to get help from public schools (79%), public health facilities (64%), and the police (63%), though significant minorities also say they had to pay bribes to obtain public services.

### Country's direction and economic conditions

Citizens' perceptions of the country's overall direction have worsened dramatically since the current government's term of office began in 2018. Only 13% of respondents say the country is going in the right direction, a 39-percentage-point decline from 52% in 2018. The proportion who think the country is going in the wrong direction has doubled over the same period, to 84% (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Direction of the country | Eswatini | 2013-2022**

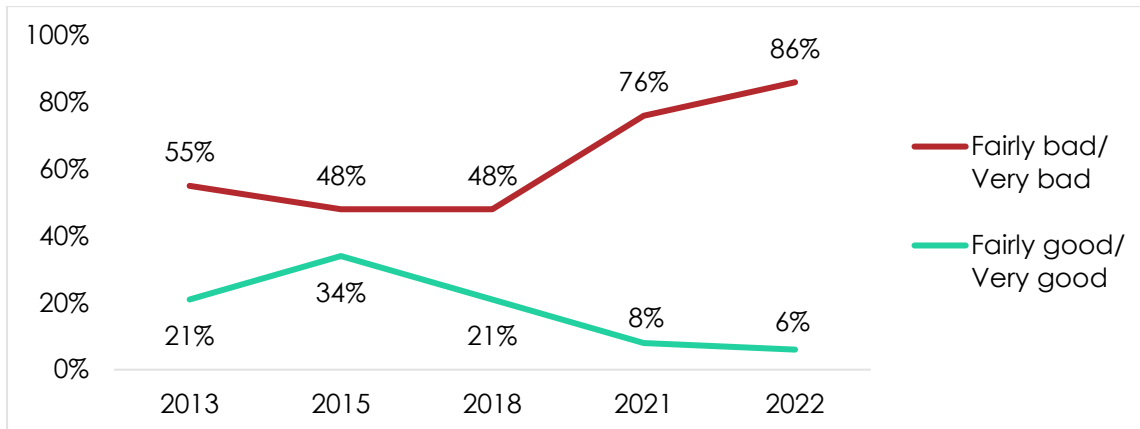


**Respondents were asked:** Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Similarly, most Eswatini hold a bleak view of the country's economic condition. Between 2018 and 2022, the share of respondents who describe the economic situation as “fairly bad” or “very bad” has increased by 38 percentage points, to 86% (Figure 2). Only about one in 20 (6%) consider the condition of the economy good.

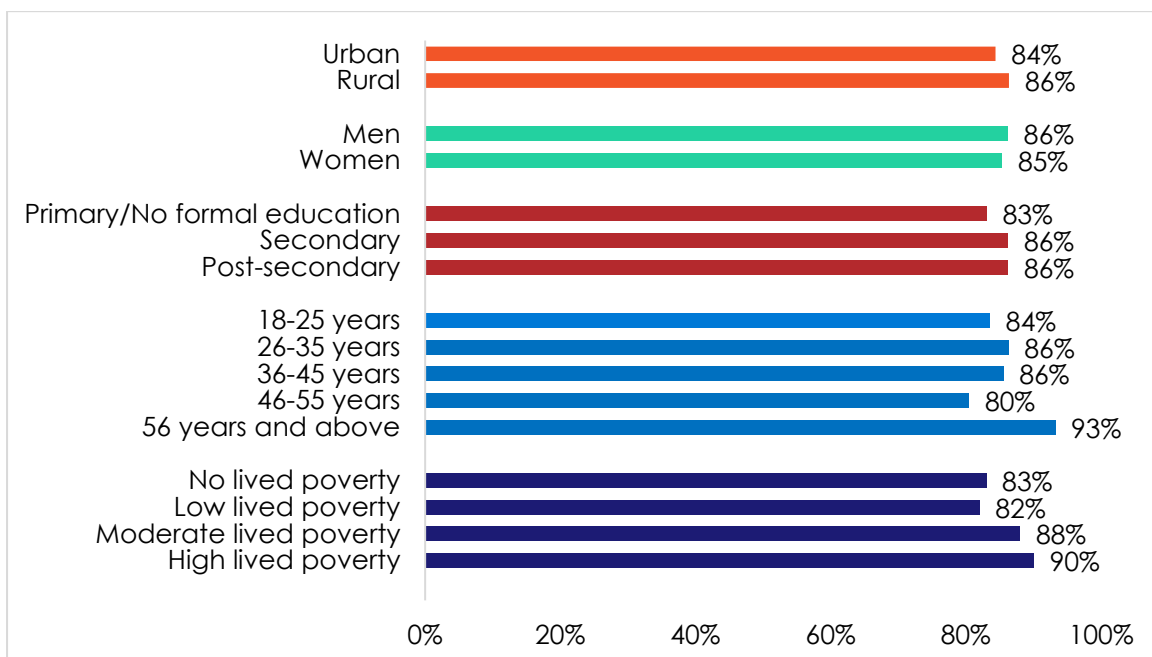
Negative assessments of economic conditions are consistently high across key demographic groups, reaching 93% among citizens over age 55 (Figure 3). Disapproval is more widespread among citizens who have experienced high (90%) or moderate (88%) levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> than among their better-off counterparts (82%-83%).

**Figure 2: Country's economic condition** | Eswatini | 2013-2022



**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 demographic group | Eswatini | 2022

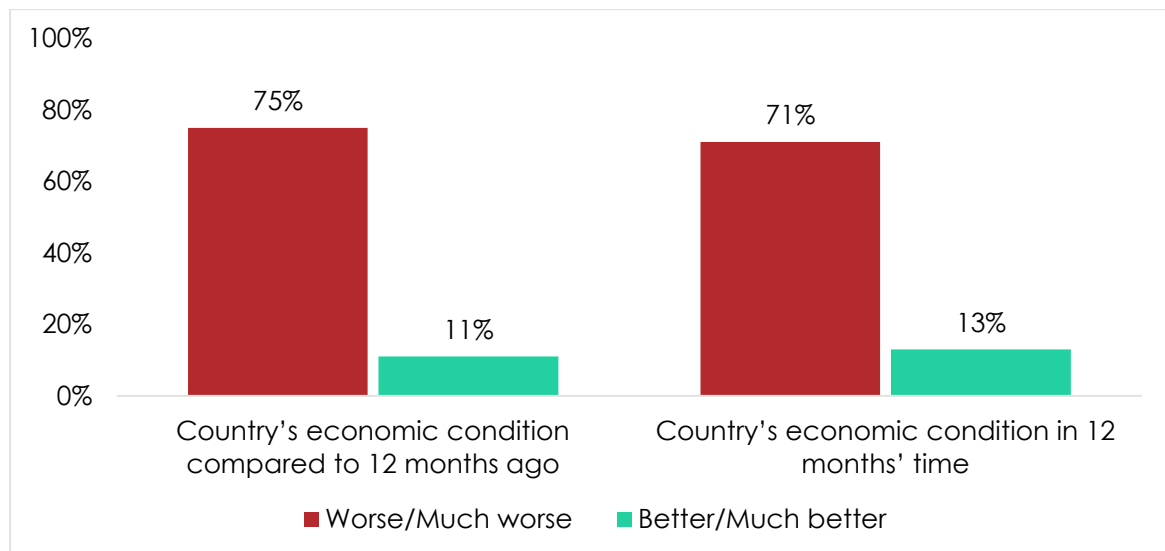


**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

<sup>1</sup> 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).

In line with increasingly negative assessments of the country's overall direction and economic condition, three-fourths (75%) of citizens say the economy has worsened over the previous year. And about seven in 10 (71%) expect things to get worse during the coming year. Only 13% are optimistic about the economy in the near future (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Country's economic condition compared to 12 months ago and projected 12 months ahead | Eswatini | 2022**



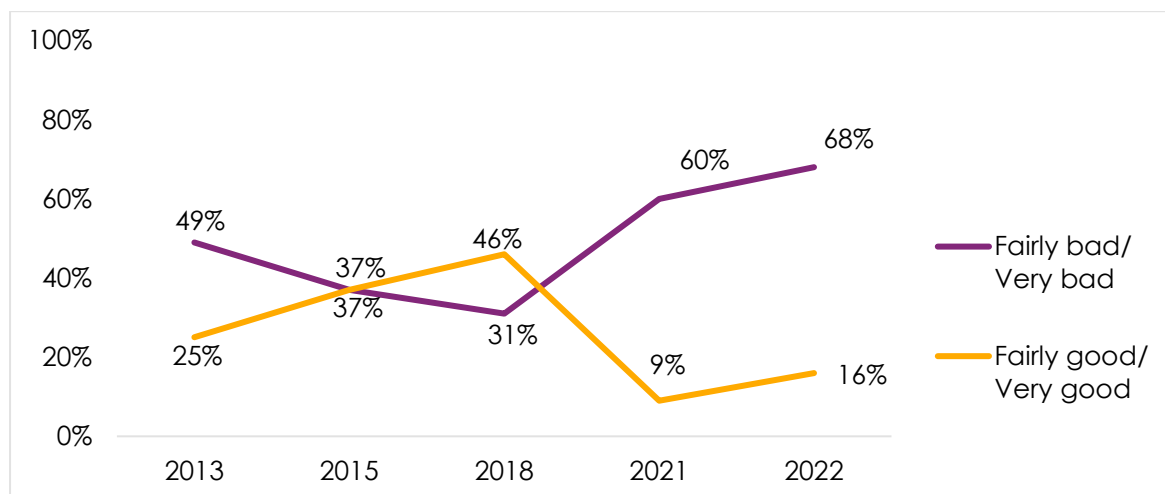
**Respondents were asked:**

*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**

Citizens' assessments of their personal living conditions have continued to worsen as well (Figure 5). Almost seven in 10 respondents (68%) describe their living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad," a 37-percentage-point increase compared to 2018. Only 16% offer positive assessments of their living conditions, recovering slightly from a drop to 9% in 2021.

**Figure 5: Personal living conditions | Eswatini | 2013-2022**

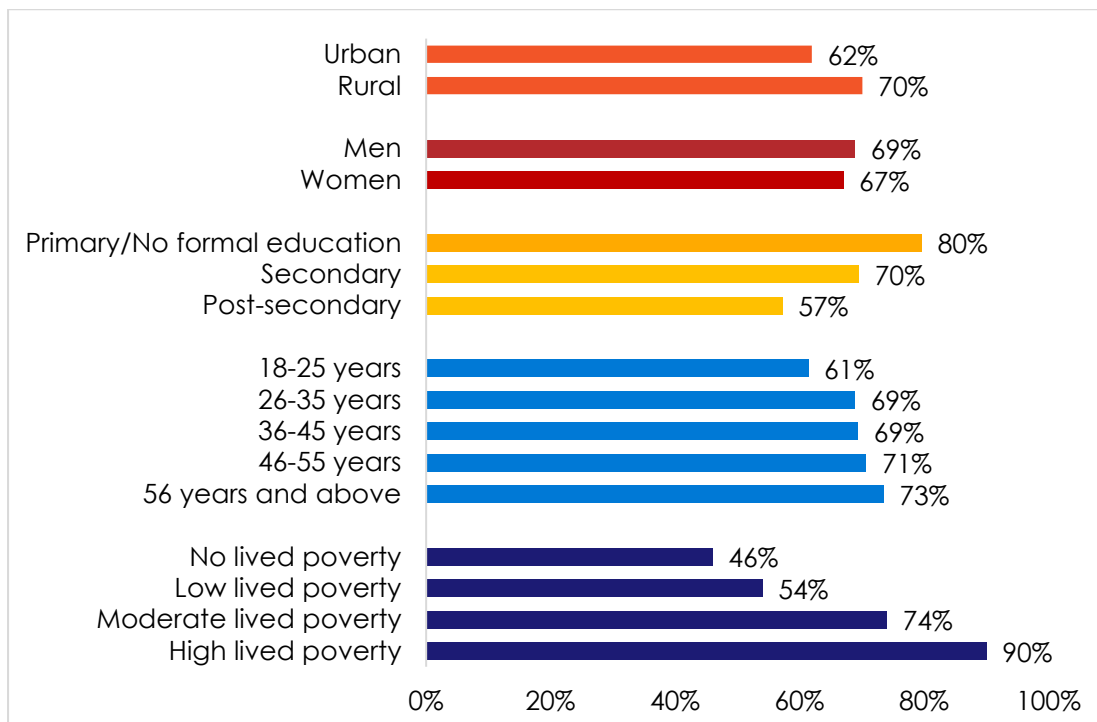


**Respondents were asked:** *In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?*

Citizens with primary schooling or less (80%) are considerably more likely to describe their living conditions as bad than those with secondary (70%) or post-secondary (57%) education (Figure 6). Rural residents (70%) are also more negative than urbanites (63%).

Negative assessments increase steadily with respondents' age, ranging from 61% of 18- to 25-year-olds to 73% of those over age 55. As might be expected, the poorest citizens are twice as likely as the well-off to describe their living conditions as bad (90% vs. 46%).

**Figure 6: Negative assessments of personal living conditions | by demographic group | Eswatini | 2022**



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

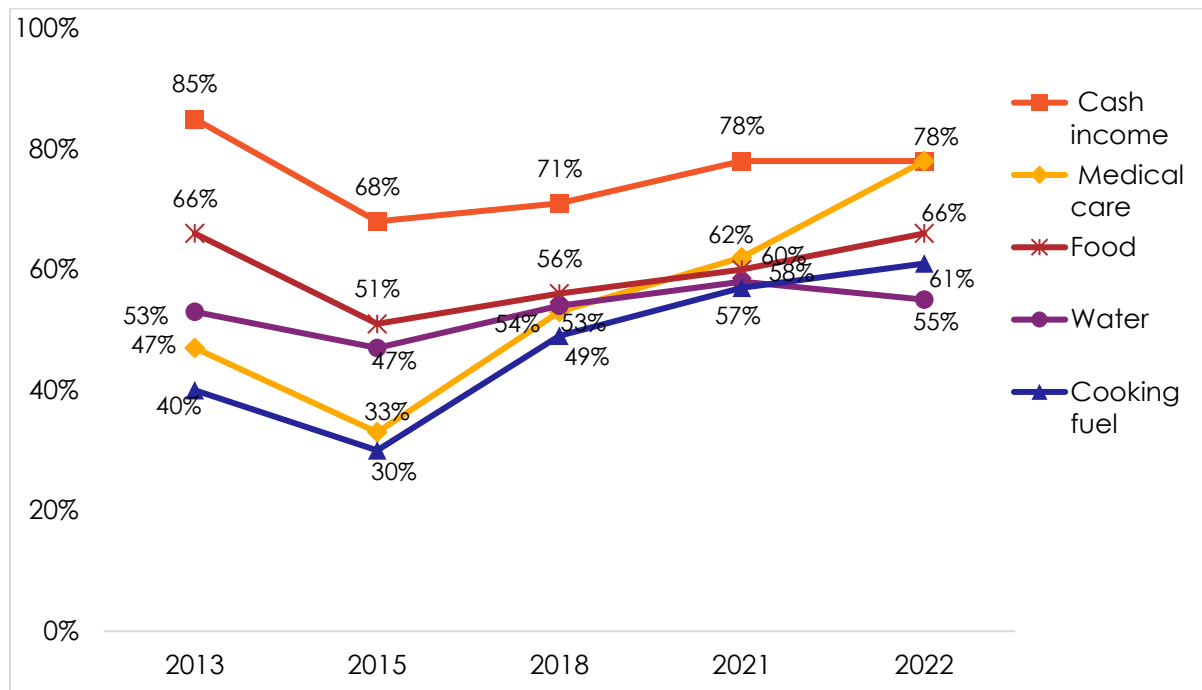
### Lived poverty

Afrobarometer's measurement of "lived poverty" confirms the continued deterioration of living conditions of most Eswatini. After substantial reductions in deprivation between 2013 and 2015, the proportions of citizens going without five basic life necessities have been climbing sharply (Figure 7).

More than three-fourths (78%) of respondents say they or a family member went without medical care at least once during the previous year, a 45-percentage-point increase compared to 2015. The same proportion (78%) report going without a cash income, while two-thirds (66%) went without enough food, 61% without enough cooking fuel, and 55% without enough clean water – all reflecting substantial increases compared to 2015 and 2018.

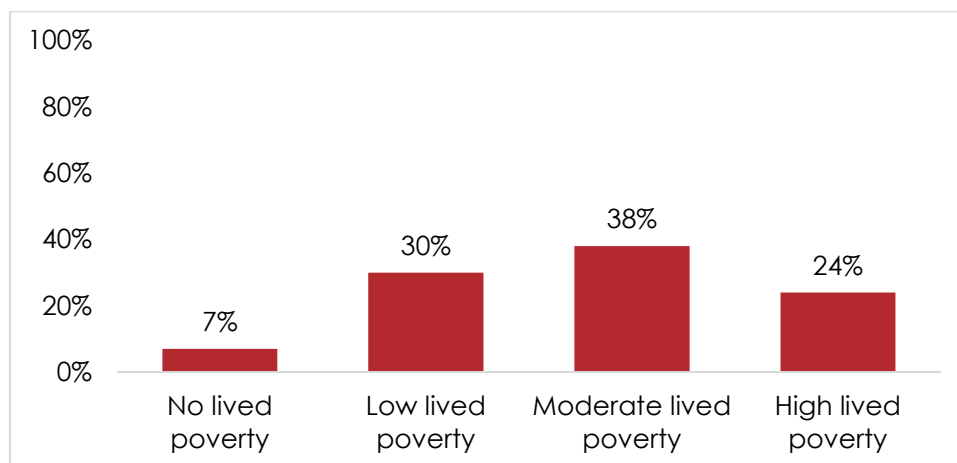
Averaging responses across these five basic needs shows that a majority of citizens suffered high (24%) or moderate (38%) levels of lived poverty during the year preceding the survey, while fewer than four in 10 experienced low (30%) or no (7%) lived poverty (Figure 8).

**Figure 7: Went without basic necessities** | Eswatini | 2013-2022



**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”)

**Figure 8: Levels of lived poverty** | Eswatini | 2022



**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?

### Government performance and most important problems

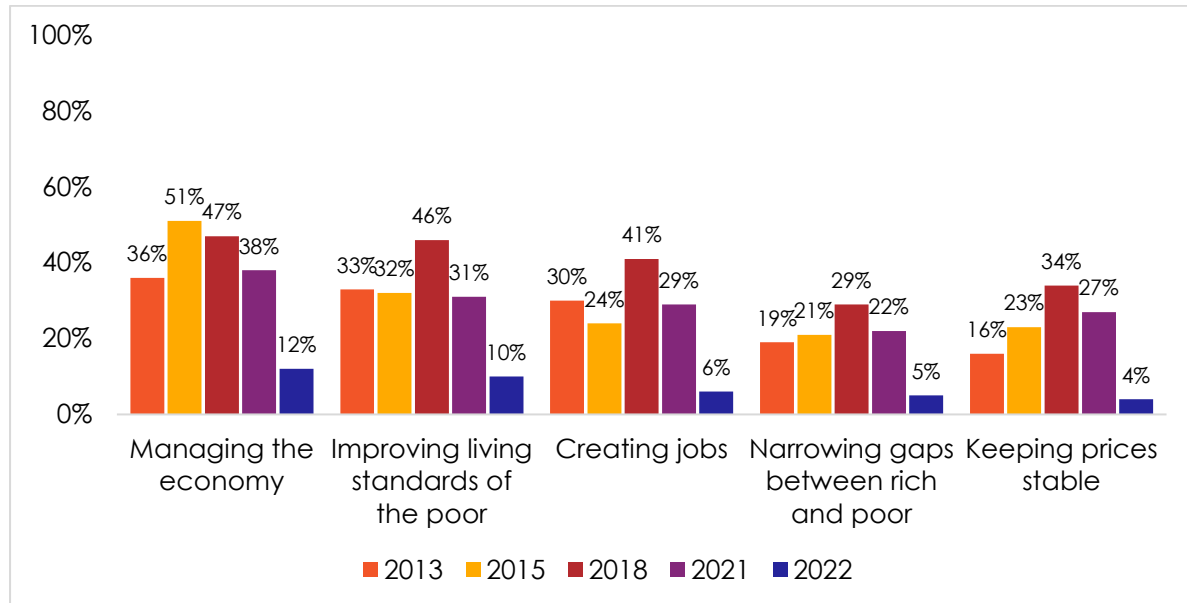
As assessments of economic and living conditions have grown more negative, so have citizens' ratings of the government's performance in managing economic issues (Figure 9).

The proportion who say the government is managing the economy “fairly well” or “very well” has decreased by 35 percentage points since 2018, to 12%. Similar declines are seen with

regard to the government's performance on improving living standards of the poor (from 46% approval to 10%), creating jobs (from 41% to 6%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (from 29% to 5%), and keeping prices stable (from 34% to 4%).

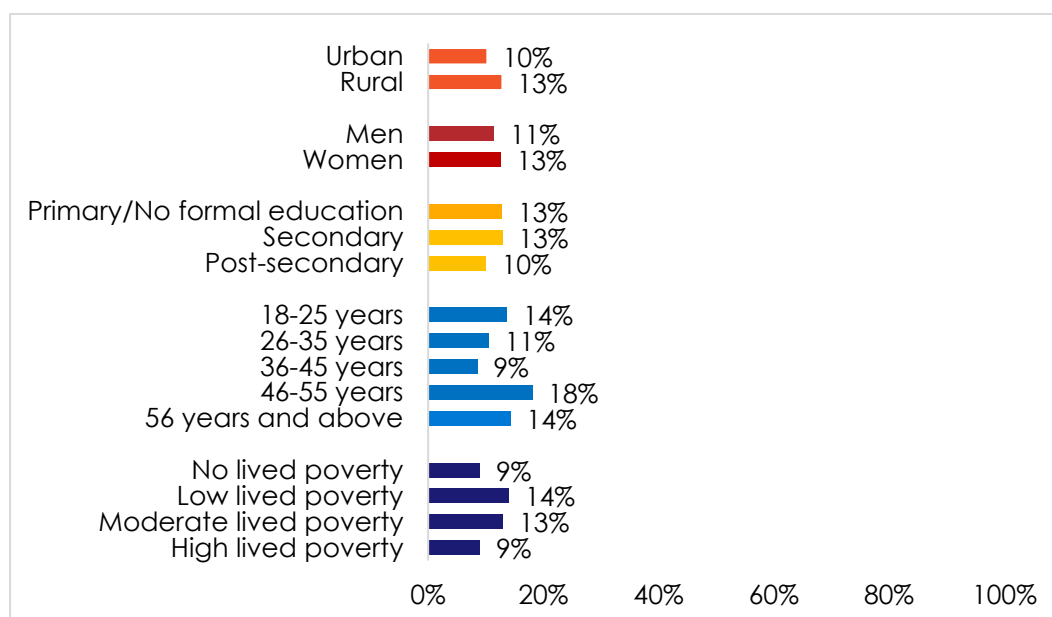
Approval of the government's management of the economy is consistently low across key demographic groups (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Approval of government performance on economic issues | Eswatini | 2013-2022**



**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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

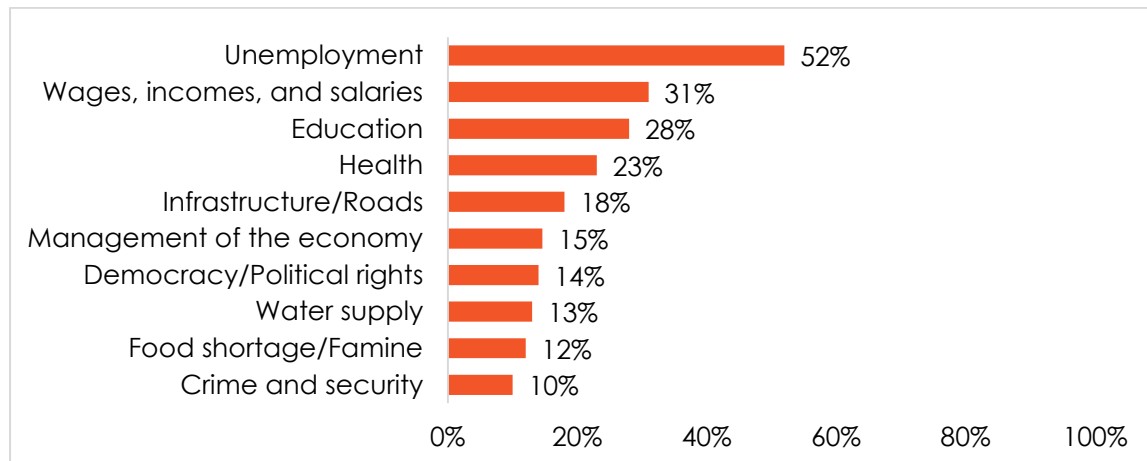
**Figure 10: Approval of government performance on managing the economy | by demographic group | Eswatini | 2022**



**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 sixth among the most important problems that Eswatini want their government to address, the critical economic issues of unemployment and wages rank No. 1 and No. 2, cited by 52% and 31% of citizens, respectively, among their top three concerns (Figure 11). Interestingly, democracy/political rights ranks seventh, higher than food insecurity and crime/security, in the top 10 problems.

**Figure 11: Most important problems government should address | Eswatini | 2022**

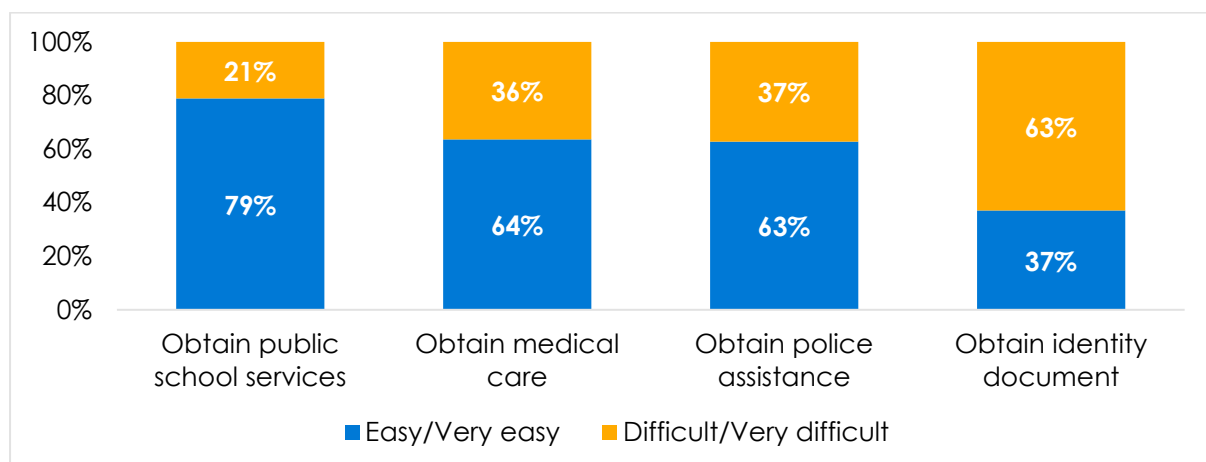


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows the % of respondents who cite each problem among their three responses.)

### Public service delivery

Contrary to widespread disapproval of the government's performance on economic issues, a majority of Eswatini who accessed selected public services say they had an easy time of it. Among those who sought public services during the previous year, about eight in 10 say they found it "easy" or "very easy" to get help from public schools (79%), while almost two-thirds had no trouble obtaining services in public health facilities (64%) or police assistance (63%) (Figure 12). 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.

**Figure 12: Ease of accessing public services | Eswatini | 2022**

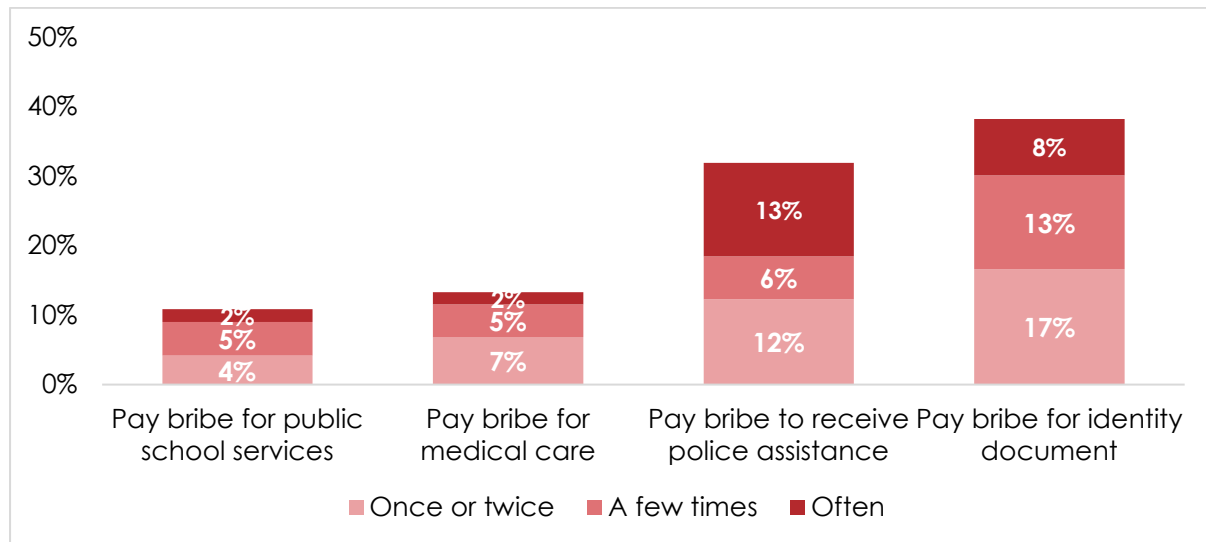


**Respondents who say they sought selected public services during the previous year were asked:** How easy or difficult was it to obtain [the needed services]? (Respondents who had no contact with these services are excluded.)



Still, some citizens say they had to pay bribes, give gifts, or do favours in order to access the public services they needed (Figure 13). Among those who had contact with these services, 38% say they had to pay a bribe once or more to obtain government identity documents, while smaller proportions report paying bribes to get help from the police (31%), medical care (13%), or services at a public school (11%).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 13: Paid a bribe to obtain public services | Eswatini | 2022**



**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]? (Respondents who had no contact with these services are excluded.)

## Conclusion

Citizens' assessments of the outgoing government's performance in managing the economy are overwhelmingly negative. Satisfaction with the country's economic condition and overall direction has continued to plummet, losing any ground the government might have gained between 2013 and 2018. Most citizens report poor living conditions and shortages of basic life necessities, and very few expect things to get better over the coming year.

While downward trends may be blamed in part on the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings suggest that Eswatini will expect the incoming government to deliver effective economic management strategies that regenerate economic growth and improve the quality of their lives.

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](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

<sup>2</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 7% "once or twice," 5% "a few times," and 2% "often" sum to 13% who paid a bribe to obtain medical care).

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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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

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