



Dispatch No. 794 | 15 April 2024

Zimbabweans increasingly dissatisfied with government efforts on electricity provision

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 794 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Zimbabwe has been battling power cuts for more than two decades, compromising the country's ability to resuscitate an ailing economy marked by a hyperinflation crisis (Africa News, 2019). Estimates suggest that power shortages cost the state 6.1% of gross domestic product (GDP) per year in excessive network losses, generation inefficiencies, and supply-chain losses (World Bank, 2023).

The country's National Development Strategy 1 (2021-2025) highlights access to energy as a fundamental driver of economic growth and stability. It declares the state's intention to achieve universal access to electricity and develop reliable, adequate, low-priced power (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, 62% of citizens currently have access to electricity (Nyakurerwa-Matinde, 2023).

In 2022, electricity was the fourth-most-imported product in Zimbabwe, mostly from South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, and Botswana (OEC World, 2024). In an effort to steer away from an over-reliance on foreign imports and to secure the long-term energy needs of the country, the government aims to increase the share of renewables in the overall energy mix (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019).

Amid Zimbabwe's reintroduction of harsh power cuts (Bulawayo24 News, 2024), and following recent disturbances to citizens' access to prepaid power caused by the country's migration to the new Zimbabwe gold (ZiG) currency (Ndoro, 2024; Ngwenya, 2024), a 2022 Afrobarometer survey provides an on-the-ground look at electricity access in Zimbabwe.

Findings show that while one-third of citizens live in zones served by the electric grid, only about one-fifth enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, including fewer than one in 10 rural residents. A majority of citizens say the government is doing a poor job of providing electricity.

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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct 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 2022 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

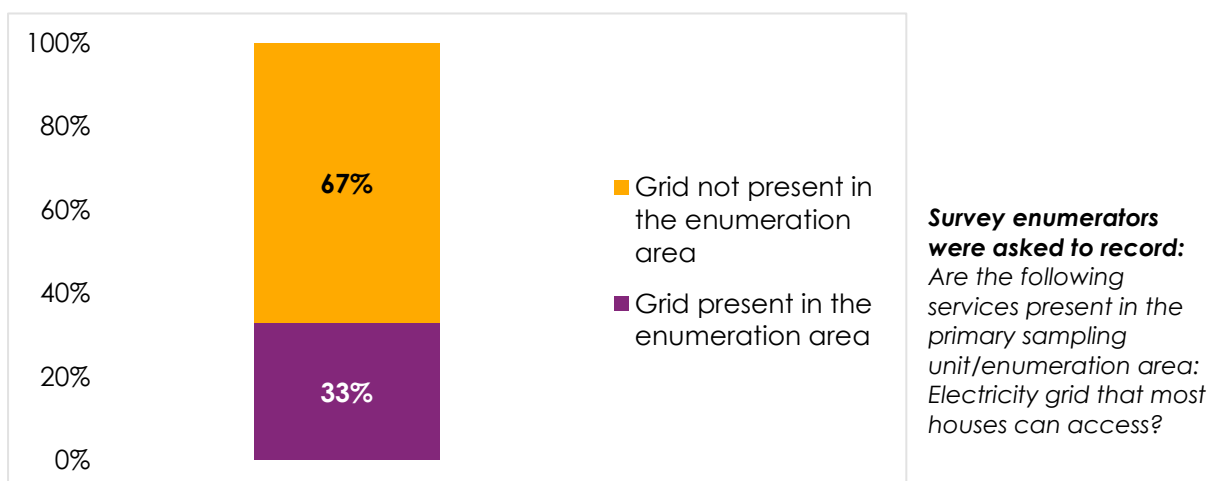
- One-third (33%) of Zimbabweans live in zones served by the national electric grid.
 - Only 18% of rural residents are within reach of the grid, compared to 58% of urban residents. More educated citizens are also far more likely to live in zones served by the electric grid than those with less schooling.
- Three in 10 Zimbabweans (30%) live in households that are connected to the national power grid.
- Among those who are connected to the grid, 61% say their electricity works “most of the time” or “all of the time.”
- Combining connection and reliability rates shows that 19% of all Zimbabweans enjoy a reliable supply of electricity from the national grid, down by 11 percentage points since 2017. Only 8% of rural residents and 13% of citizens experiencing high lived poverty report a reliable electricity supply.
- Six in 10 citizens (60%) say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable supply of electricity, up 13 percentage points compared to 2021. This assessment is particularly widespread among urban residents (76%) and the poor (77%).

Access to the electric grid

For most households, having access to an electricity grid will remain a prerequisite for obtaining power until alternative energy resources become more widely available.

According to Afrobarometer's 2022 survey in Zimbabwe, one-third (33%) of citizens live in areas served by an electricity grid (Figure 1).¹

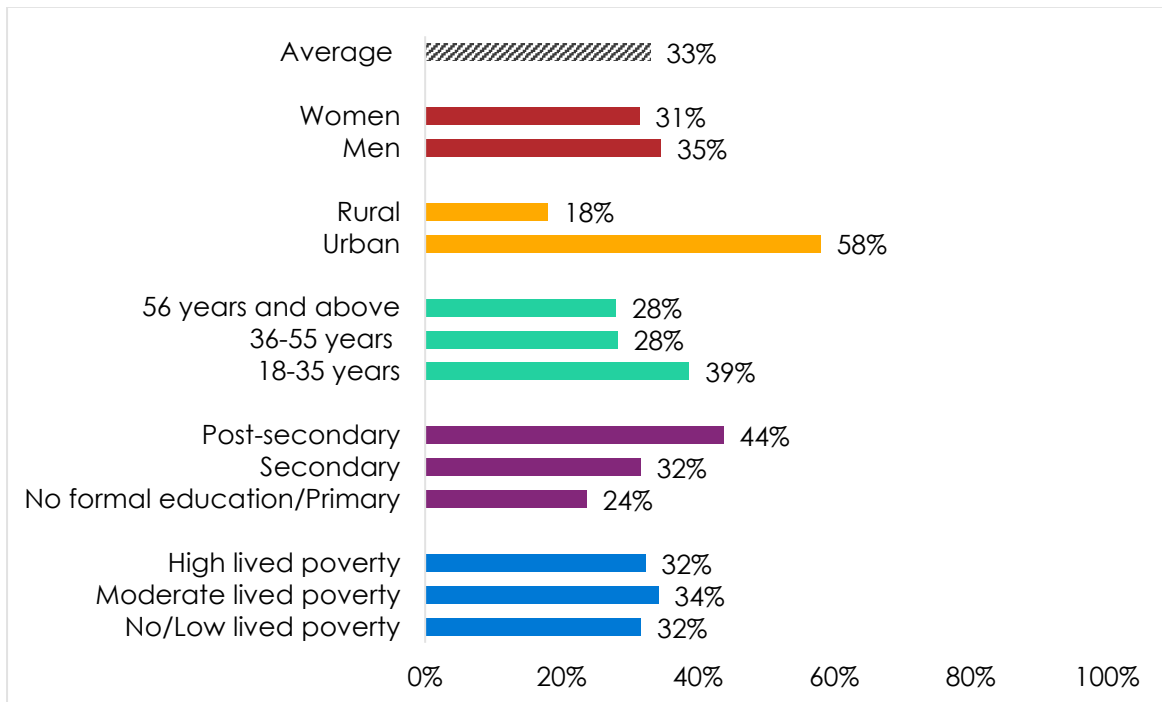
Figure 1: Presence of electricity grid | Zimbabwe | 2022



¹ Afrobarometer samples are based on a selection of enumeration areas (EAs) drawn randomly from the national census frame. Eight interviews are conducted in each selected EA, so interview teams usually visit about 150 EAs (for surveys with n=1,200). In each EA, the team records the presence or absence of basic services (such as electricity supply) and infrastructure (such as schools). Because of the smaller sample sizes, the margin of error on the figure reported here for presence of an electric grid is higher than for findings captured in individual interviews.

The presence of the electric grid is especially limited in rural areas: Only 18% of rural residents live within reach of the grid – one-third as many as in cities (58%) (Figure 2). Younger citizens (39% of those aged 18-35 years) and those with post-secondary education (44%) are more likely to live in zones served by an electricity grid than older respondents (28%) and the less educated (24%-32%).

Figure 2: Presence of electricity grid | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access? (% "yes")

Connection to the electric grid

Living in a zone served by an electricity grid does not, of course, guarantee a supply of electricity. Costs associated with service from the power grid – including fees for inspection, house wiring, and connection – may present prohibitive hurdles for many citizens.

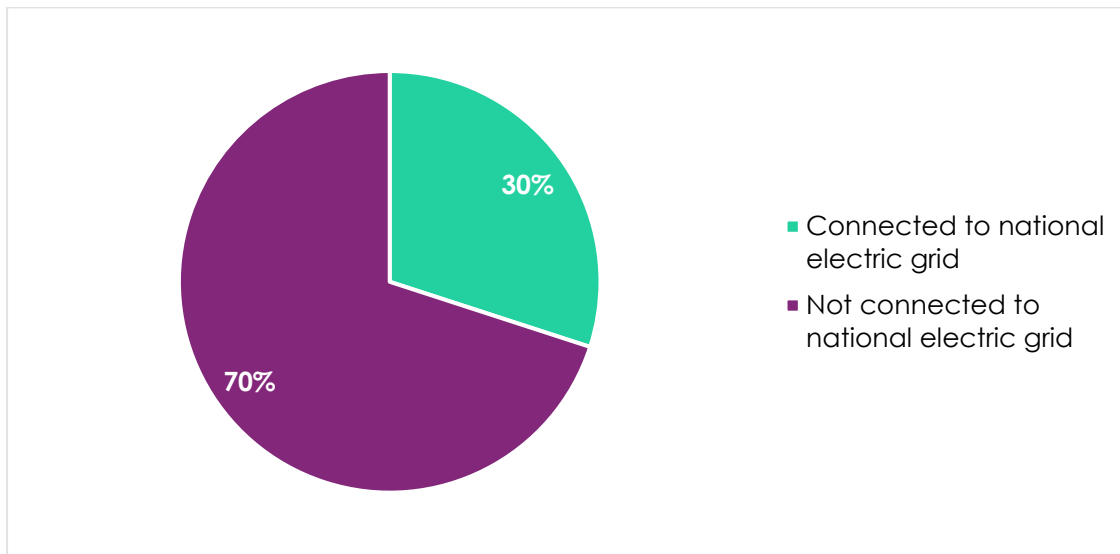
How many Zimbabweans are actually connected to the national grid?

Three in 10 citizens (30%) live in households that are connected to the electric grid (Figure 3). As might be expected, urbanities (55%) are far more likely to be connected to the power grid than rural residents (15%), as are citizens who are economically well off² (34%) and those with post-secondary qualifications (47%) compared to the poorest respondents (25%) and those with primary schooling or less (15%) (Figure 4).

Younger citizens are also more likely to be connected (35% of those aged 18-35 years) than their elders (25%-26% of those aged 36 years and above).

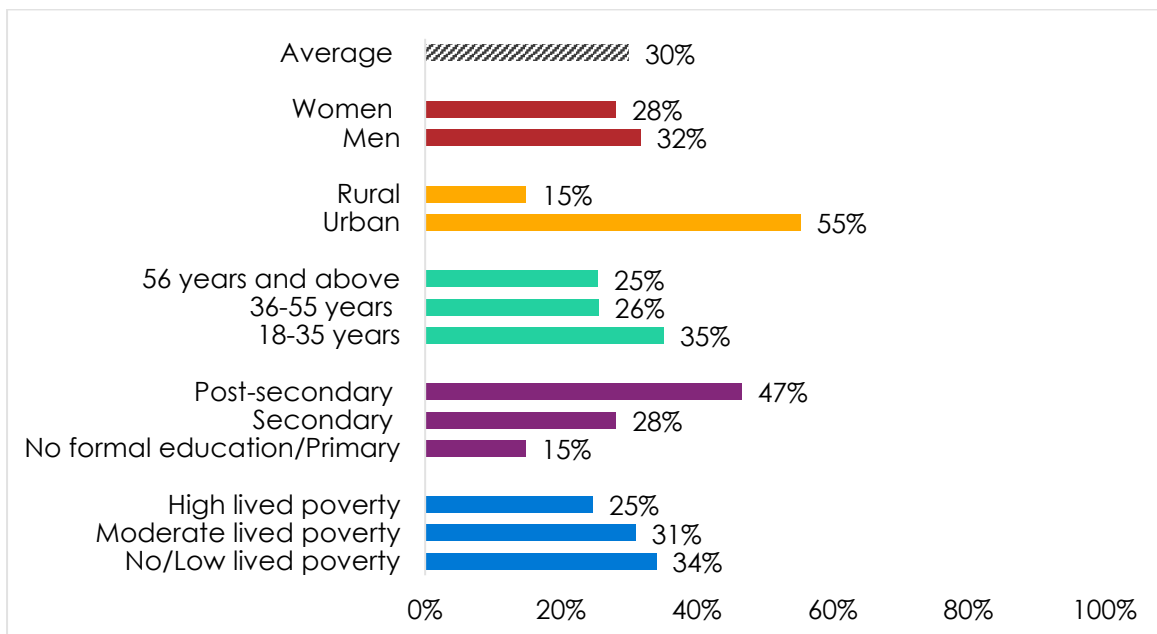
² Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 3: Connection to the national electric grid | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA?

Figure 4: Connection to the national electric grid | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (% "yes")

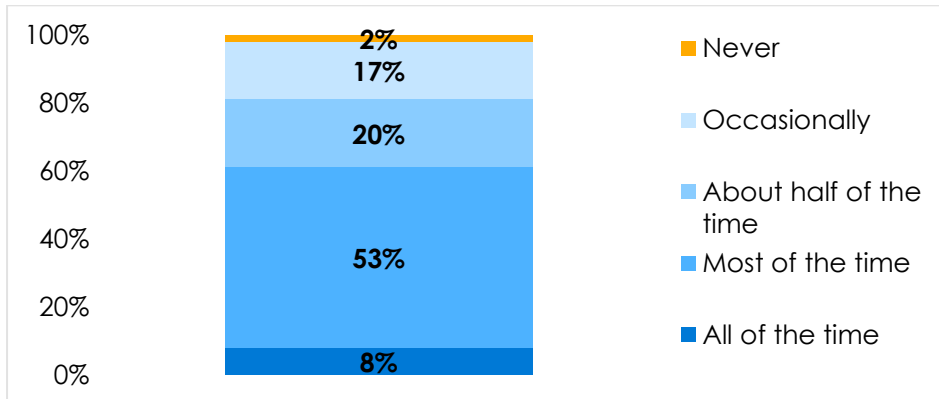
Reliable supply of electricity

Even if houses are connected to an electric grid, the reliability of their power supply may be poor. How many Zimbabweans actually have reliable electricity?

Among citizens who report being connected to the power grid, more than six in 10 (61%) say that their electricity works "most of the time" (53%) or "all of the time" (8%) (Figure 5). About four in 10 (39%) say that power is available only "about half of the time" or less.

Figure 5: How often is electricity available (for households connected to the grid)?

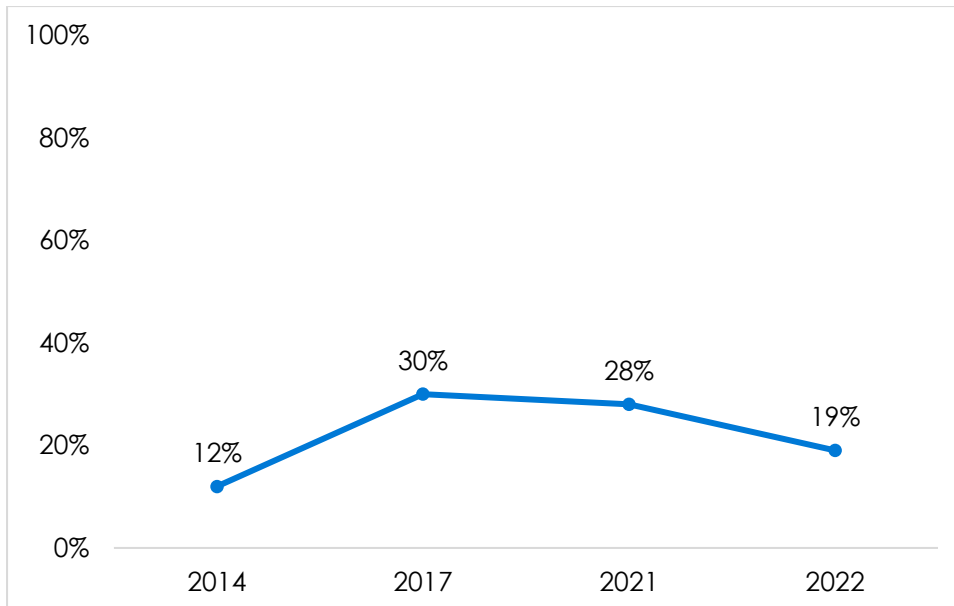
| Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents who said they have a connection to the national electric grid were asked: How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (Respondents without a connection to the national grid are excluded.)

Looking at the entire population (rather than only those who are connected to the grid), we see that about one in five Zimbabweans (19%) report having electricity from the national grid that works “most” or “all” of the time. After more than doubling between 2014 and 2017, the share of households with reliable electricity has declined by 11 percentage points (Figure 6).

Figure 6: How many citizens have reliable electricity? | Zimbabwe | 2022

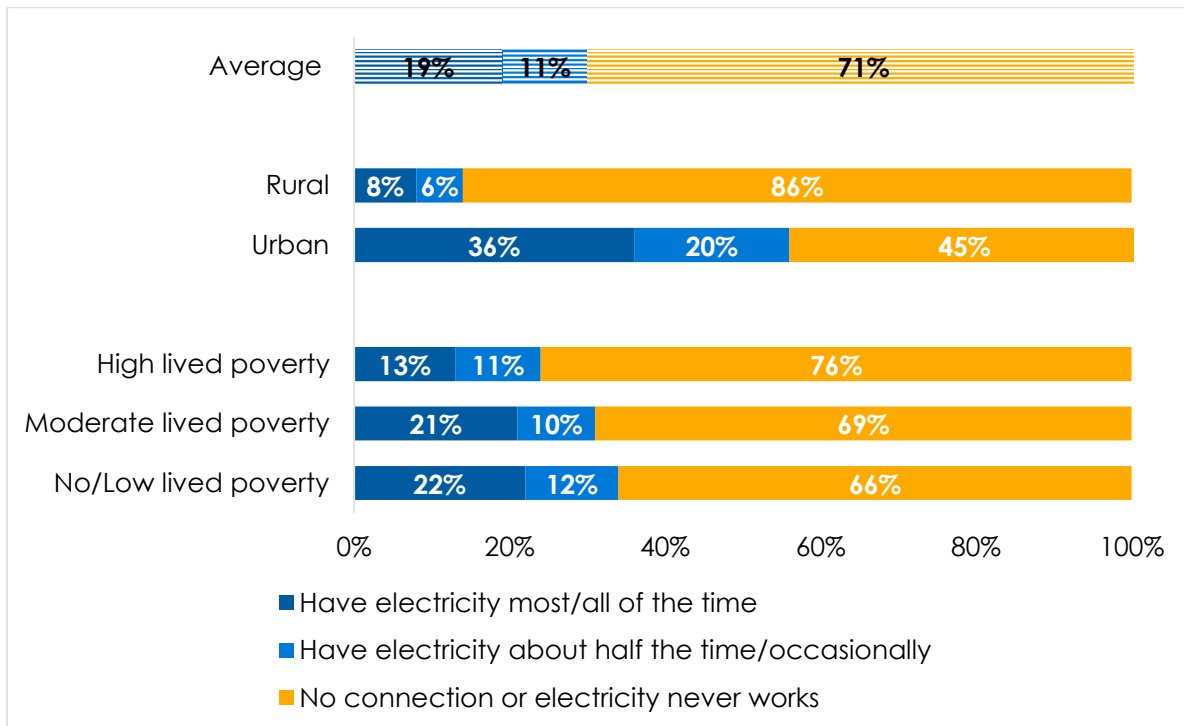


Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (If “yes”:) How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (% who say “most of the time” or “all of the time”)

Among the poorest respondents, only 13% say they have reliable electricity, compared to 22% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty (Figure 7).

And in rural areas, fewer than one in 10 citizens (8%) enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, vs. 36% of urban residents.

Figure 7: How many citizens have reliable electricity? | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (If “yes”:) How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

Priorities and government performance

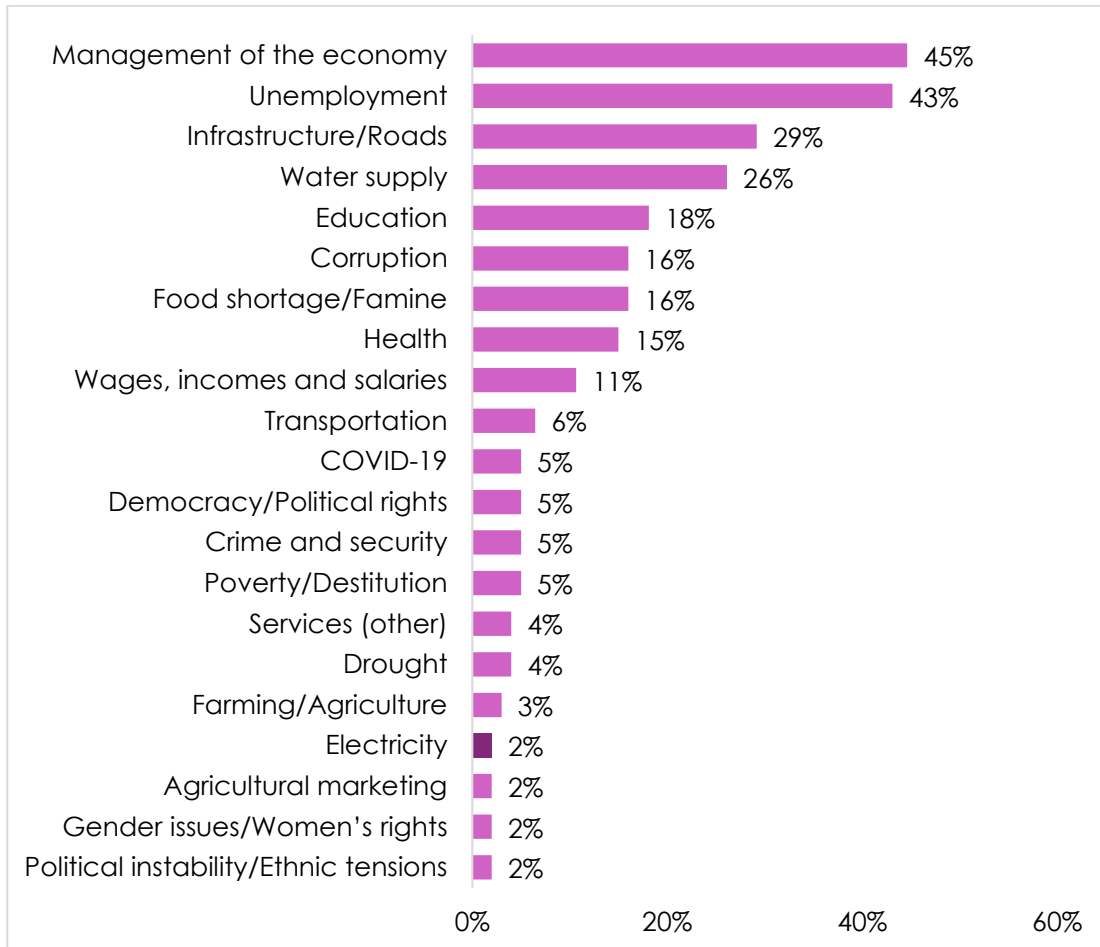
On Zimbabweans' list of most important problems that their government should address, electricity ranked far down the list as of March-April 2022 – only 2% of respondents cited it among their top three priorities for government action. Management of the economy and unemployment were far and away citizens' top priorities for urgent government action (Figure 8).

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Six in 10 Zimbabweans (60%) say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable electricity supply, worse by 13 percentage points since the previous Afrobarometer survey in 2021. About three in 10 (28%) consider its performance “fairly” or “very” good (Figure 9).

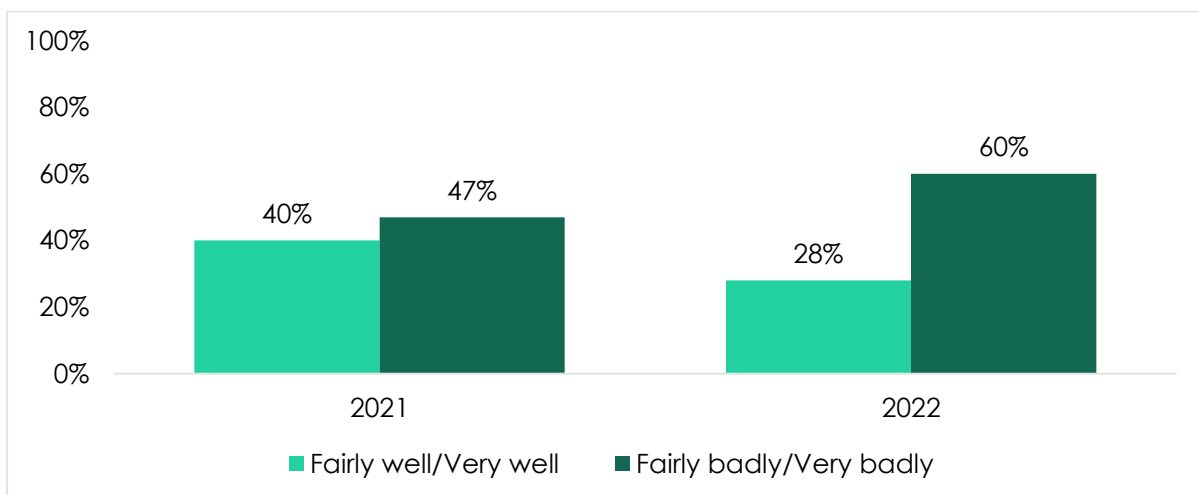
Despite more reliable electricity provision, urbanites (76%) are more likely than rural dwellers (50%) to disapprove of the government's efforts on electricity. Negative ratings are also higher among women (62%), middle-aged respondents (67%), citizens with post-secondary qualifications (71%), and the poor (77%) than among men (57%), older and younger age cohorts (52%-56%), the less educated (47%), and better-off citizens (52%) (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Most important problems | Zimbabwe | 2022



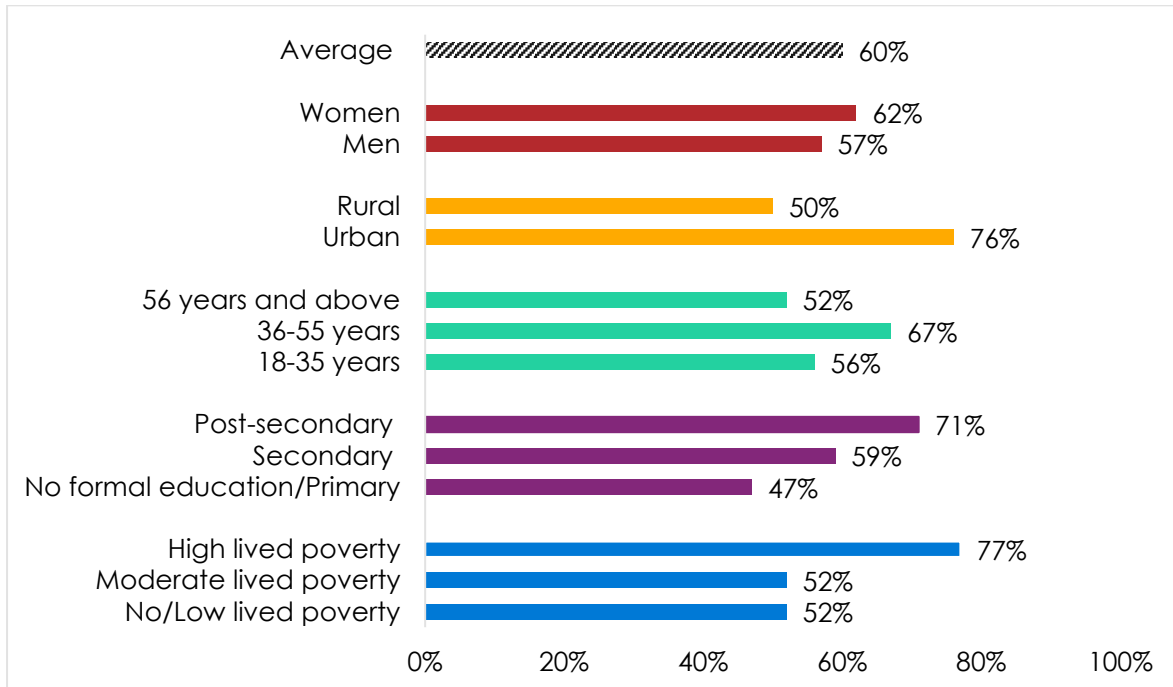
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows percentage of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)

Figure 9: Government performance on provision of reliable electricity supply | Zimbabwe | 2021-2022



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: Providing a reliable supply of electricity?

Figure 10: Government is performing badly in the provision of reliable electricity supply | 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: Providing a reliable supply of electricity? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Conclusion

Many Zimbabweans still lack access and connection to the national power grid, and only about one-fifth enjoy a reliable supply of electricity. Rural residents and the poor are particularly disadvantaged. Widespread disapproval of the government's performance on providing electricity points to the need to promote development by expanding access to electricity and improving service reliability, especially in rural and poor communities.

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey 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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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