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Emaswati applaud government's provision of electricity, though reliability issues remain

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 826 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

With an overall electrification rate of 85% (UNDP Eswatini, 2024), Eswatini boasts one of the highest rates of electricity access in sub-Saharan Africa, second in Southern Africa behind South Africa (Nzima, 2021).

Imports make up a large share of electricity consumed in the country (Government of Eswatini, 2018a; ISS African Futures, 2023). Conservative estimates suggest that Eswatini imports about 60%-80% of its energy supply from South Africa's Eskom and Mozambique's Electricidade de Moçambique (African Development Bank, 2021; Club of Mozambique, 2022; Government of Eswatini, 2023), while other approximations place imports from South Africa alone at up to 90% (World Bank, 2024). This makes energy security a significant concern for the country, especially as the current iteration of the import agreement with South Africa's embattled power utility is set to expire next year (Pachymuthu, 2022). In 2022, electricity was the third-most imported product in Eswatini (OEC World, 2024).

To address its over-reliance on imports and ensure a more sustainable energy future, the government of Eswatini has committed to accelerate renewable energy generation (United Nations, 2019). According to the country's Energy Masterplan 2034, Eswatini aims to have a 50% share of renewable energy in the national energy mix by 2030, to be met primarily through the adoption of biomass, hydro, solar, and wind energy technologies (Government of Eswatini, 2018b; UNDP Eswatini, 2021). Embracing the transition toward cleaner sources of energy also promises to contribute to limiting climate change, which is an important item on the government's to-do list (UNDP Eswatini, 2023).

Eswatini's Independent Power Producer Policy, adopted in 2016, aims for greater private-sector participation in the electricity sector (USAID Southern Africa Trade Hub, 2016). Speaking at the 2024 Standard Bank Eswatini Energy Indaba, Eswatini Electricity Co. Managing Director Ernest Mkhonta indicated that the national power utility is eager to collaborate with independent power producers to increase domestic power generation, including by bringing them online to the national electricity grid (Sikhondze, 2024).

A recent Afrobarometer survey provides an on-the-ground look at electricity access in Eswatini. Findings show that while the country enjoys almost total grid coverage, only about six in 10 citizens enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, including fewer than half of the poor.

Even so, electricity ranks far down the list of problems that Emaswati want their government to address, and most citizens applaud the government's performance in providing a reliable electricity supply.

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 10 surveys

were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct 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 Emaswati 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 2021.

Key findings

- Practically all Emaswati (99%) live in zones served by the national electric grid.
- More than nine in 10 citizens (92%) live in households that are connected to the national power grid.
 - Of those who are connected to the grid, about two-thirds (65%) say their electricity works "most" or "all" of the time.
 - Combining connection and reliability rates shows that about six in 10 (59%) of all Emaswati enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, though these figures are lower among rural residents (57%) and citizens experiencing high levels of lived poverty (45%).
- Electricity ranks far down the list of most important problems that Emaswati want their government to address, cited by only 1% of respondents as a top priority.
- More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say the government is doing a "fairly" or "very" good job of providing a reliable supply of electricity.

Access to the electricity grid

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

According to Afrobarometer's 2022 survey in Eswatini, virtually all citizens (99%) live in enumeration areas served by the national electricity grid (Figure 1).¹ This has been the case since Afrobarometer first conducted surveys in the country in 2013. The presence of the grid is even across the board: There are no significant differences by demographic group (not shown).

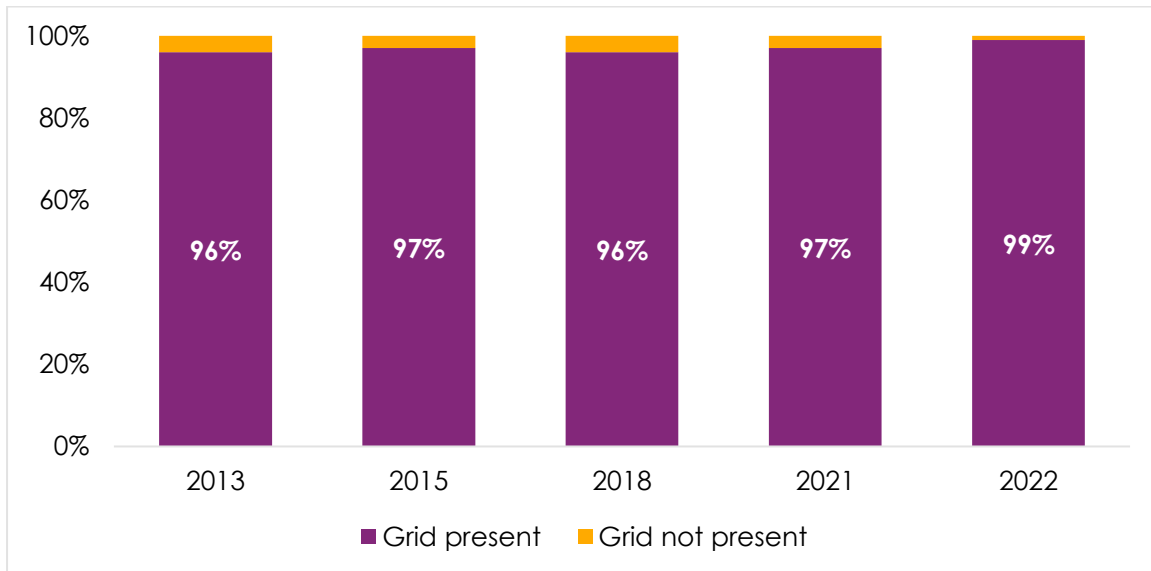
Living in a zone served by the grid does not, of course, guarantee a supply of electricity. Costs associated with service from the power grid – including fees for inspection, house wiring, and connection – may present prohibitive hurdles for some citizens.

In Eswatini, more than nine in 10 citizens (92%) live in households that are connected to the Eswatini Electricity Co.'s grid (Figure 2). Connection rates are lower than average among the

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.

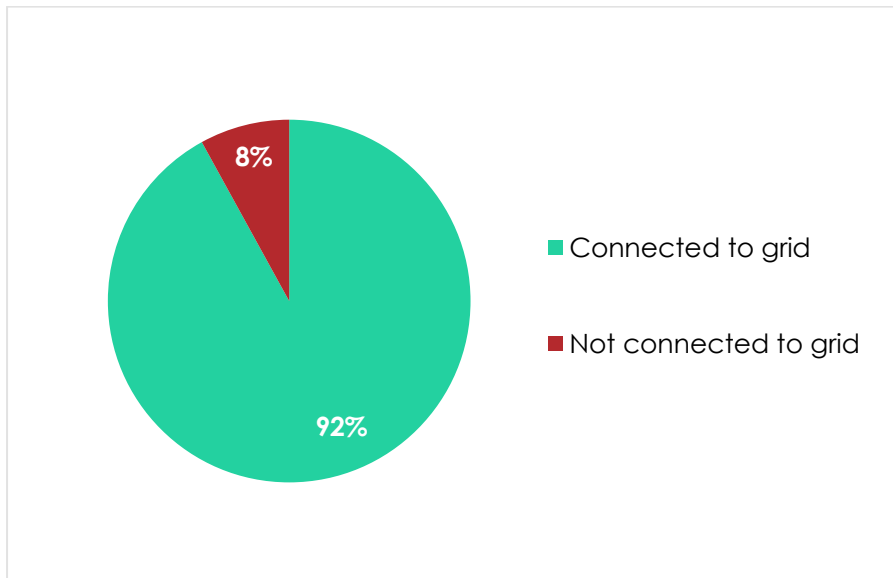
poorest respondents² (84%), those with primary schooling or less (76%), and older citizens (82% among those aged 56 or older) (Figure 3). But the gap between urban (94%) and rural (91%) areas is marginal.

Figure 1: Presence of electricity grid | Eswatini | 2013-2022



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?

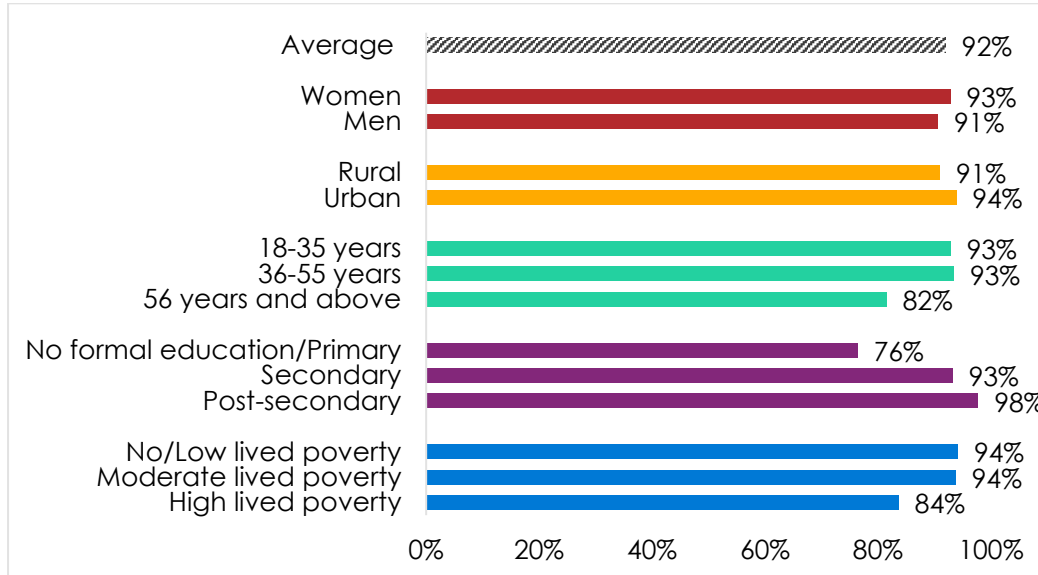
Figure 2: Connection to the national electric grid | Eswatini | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Eswatini Electricity Co.?

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 past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 3: Connection to the national electric grid | by demographic group
 | Eswatini | 2022



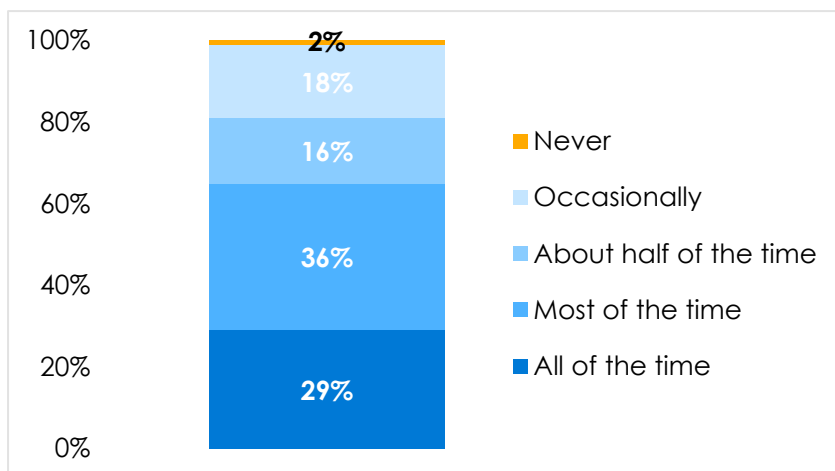
Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Eswatini Electricity Co.? (% who say “yes”)

Reliable supply of electricity

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

Among citizens who report being connected to the power grid, about two-thirds (65%) say that their electricity works “most of the time” (36%) or “all of the time” (29%) (Figure 4). The remainder (35%) say that power is available only “about half of the time” or less.³

Figure 4: How often is electricity available (for households connected to the grid)?
 | Eswatini | 2022



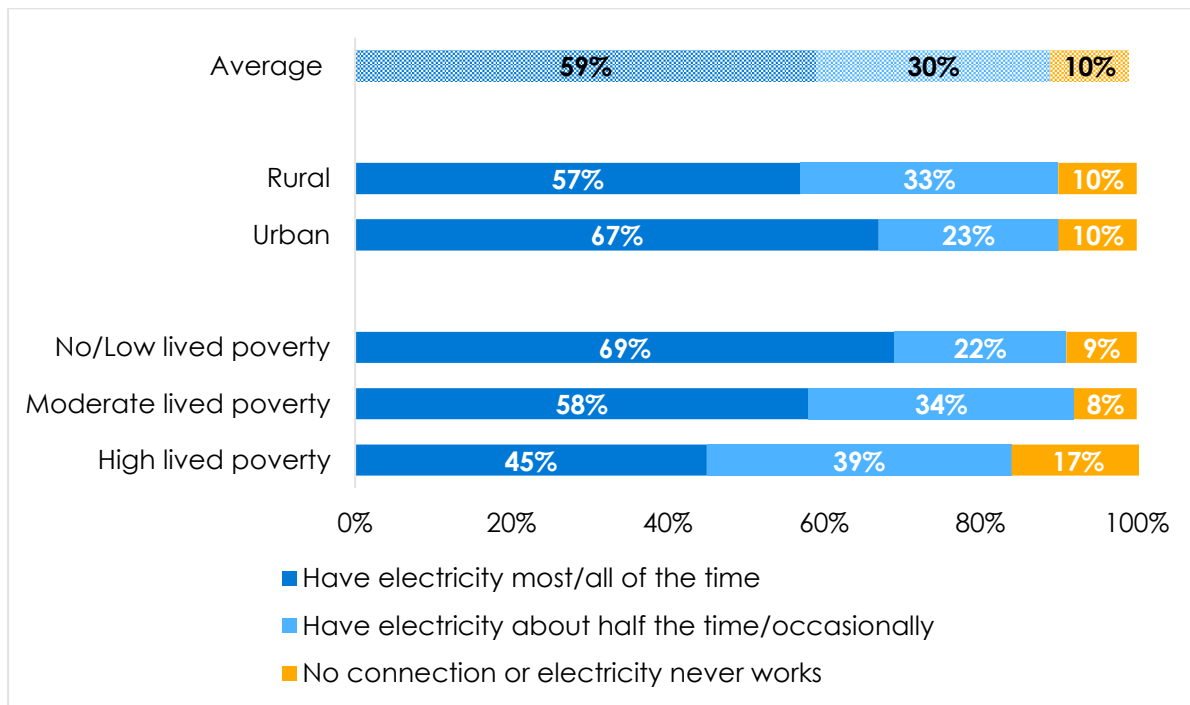
Respondents who said they have a connection to the national electric grid were asked: How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (Respondents without a connection to the national grid are excluded.)

³ 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. 16% “about half of the time,” “18% occasionally,” and 2% “never” sum to 35%).

Looking at the entire population (rather than only those who are connected to the grid), we find that about six in 10 (59%) of all Eswatini report having electricity that works “most” or “all” of the time, with some notable differences by economic status and urban-rural location (Figure 5).

Among the poorest respondents, fewer than half (45%) say they have reliable electricity, compared to 69% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty. And in rural areas, 57% of citizens enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, against two-thirds (67%) of urbanites.

Figure 5: How many citizens have reliable electricity? | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | Eswatini | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Eswatini Electricity Co.? [If “yes”:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

Priorities and government performance

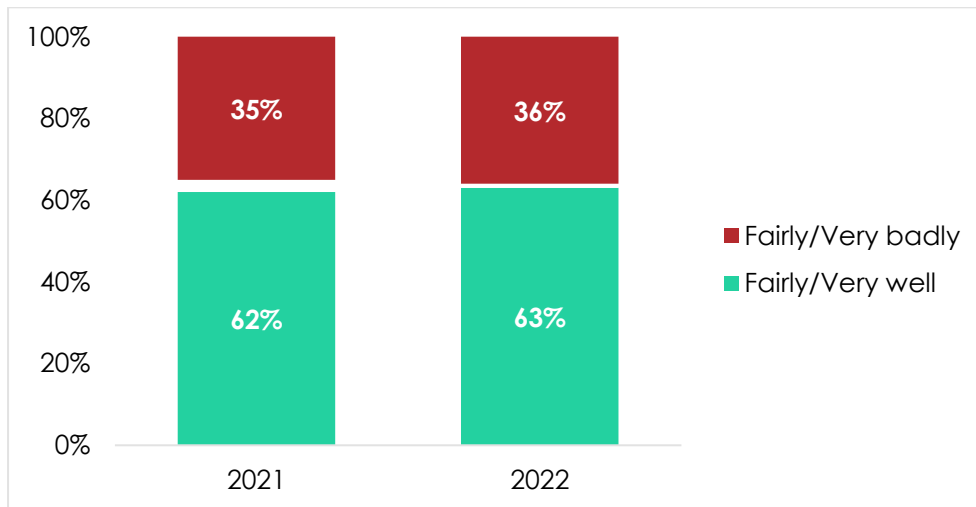
On citizens' list of most important problems that their government should address, electricity ranks 24th – only 1% of respondents cite it among their top three priorities for government action (not shown). Unemployment, the top concern, is cited by fully half (50%) of citizens.

But while the provision of a reliable electricity supply may not be the foremost concern for individuals, the most recent World Bank (2016) Enterprise Survey found that Eswatini businesses identify limited access to electricity as one of their main obstacles to growth.

Survey respondents' rating of the government's performance in providing a reliable electricity supply has remained stable since the last Afrobarometer survey in 2021: More than six in 10 citizens (63%) consider its performance “fairly” or “very” good (Figure 6).

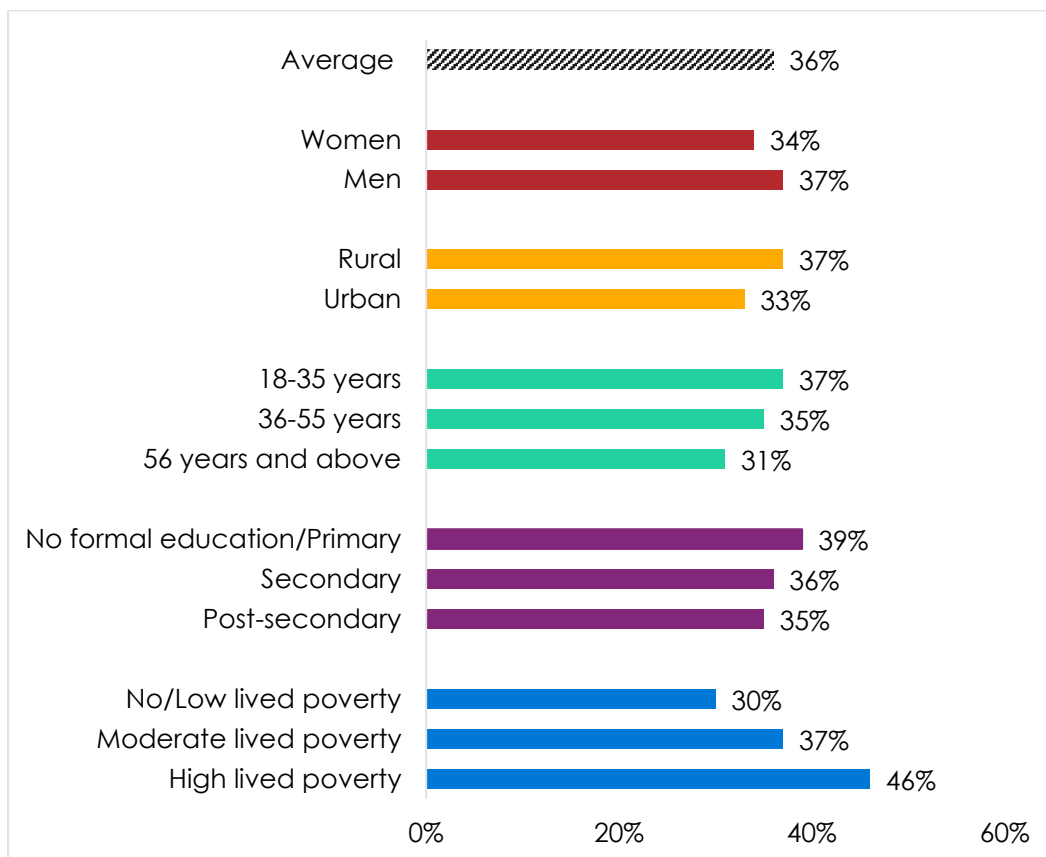
Negative assessments of the government's performance on electricity are slightly more common among men than women (37% vs. 34%) and in rural areas than in cities (37% vs. 33%) (Figure 7). Young respondents (37%) are more likely to disapprove of the government's efforts than the elderly (31%), as are citizens with primary schooling or less (39%) compared to those with more education (35%-36%). A 16-percentage-point gap separates the poor (46% disapproval) from those experiencing low or no lived poverty (30%).

Figure 6: Government performance in the provision of a reliable electricity supply
 | Eswatini | 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 7: Negative assessments of government performance in the provision of a reliable electricity supply | Eswatini | 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

Most Eswatini have access and connection to the national power grid, and a majority of citizens are satisfied with the government's performance on providing reliable electricity. Only one in 100 cite electricity as a top priority requiring urgent government action.

Even so, four in 10 Eswatini lack electricity that works most or all of the time, and rural residents and the poor remain disadvantaged compared to urban denizens and the wealthy, suggesting that service improvements may require a targeted focus on vulnerable communities to accelerate the pace of gains.

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.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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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