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Emaswati youth rank unemployment top of the priority list, think greater efforts are needed

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 828 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

According to the Eswatini Integrated Labour Force Survey 2023, unemployment for youth aged 15-35 stands at a staggering 56%, compared to the national average of 35.4% (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2023). In a country where more than 70% of people are under the age of 35 (Mlangeni, 2022), this figure paints a gloomy picture of youth job prospects and threatens Eswatini's opportunity to capitalise on a large share of its population's most productive years.

Employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation make up one of the nine key pillars of Eswatini's National Youth Policy, which is supported by a variety of projects and initiatives facilitated by the government and its development partners (Ministry of Sports, Culture & Youth Affairs, 2020; UNFPA Eswatini, 2020a, 2023). These include the Youth Empowerment Programme and the Youth Enterprise Revolving Fund, which seek to address youth joblessness through work placements, skills training, and access to finance (Ntshakala, 2024; Kwanele, 2022). The launch of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Youth Development and the resurrection of Tinkhundla youth associations provide opportunities to integrate youth issues into government programmes and to coordinate youth interventions (UNFPA, 2020b).

The 2023 Global Youth Development Index ranks Eswatini 155th out of 183 countries when it comes to promoting youth education, employment, health and well-being, equality and inclusion, peace and security, and political and civic participation (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024). It trails regional neighbours Mauritius (No. 69), Namibia (No. 126), South Africa (No. 141), Botswana (No. 142), and Zambia (No. 152) but outranks Malawi (No. 168), Zimbabwe (No. 169), Angola (No. 171), Lesotho (No. 173), and Mozambique (No. 177).

Ahead of International Youth Day (12 August), this dispatch provides an on-the-ground look at the situation of youth in Eswatini. Findings from the latest Afrobarometer survey, in late 2022, show that Emaswati youth (defined here as aged 18-35) have more education than their elders but are also more likely to be unemployed. In a list that includes education, health, infrastructure, and management of the economy, unemployment is by far the most important problem that young Emaswati want their government to address.

Youth are critical of the government's performance on job creation and other priorities, and few approve of the performance of their political leaders. But survey findings also suggest that young Emaswati could make greater use of political and civic avenues to make their voices and priorities heard.

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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys

are currently underway. 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 Eswatini 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

- Unemployment is the most important problem that Eswatini youth (aged 18-35 years) want their government to address, followed by education, incomes, and health.
- Among youth, only small minorities say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on creating jobs (5%), improving the living standards of the poor (9%), managing the economy (12%), and improving basic health services (29%).
- Only about two in 10 young respondents approve of the job performance of their elected local government councillor (22%) and member of Parliament (22%).
- Eswatini youth have more education than their elders. Nine in 10 young citizens (90%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling, compared to 83% in the 36-55 age group and 56% in the over-55 age group.
- But they are also more likely to be unemployed: Half (50%) of young Eswatini say they are looking for a job, compared to 31% of middle-aged and 17% of older citizens.
- About two-thirds (65%) of young Eswatini describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad," while 19% say they are good.
- Young Eswatini are less likely than their elders to engage in some political and civic activities, including voting and contacting leaders.

Most important problems

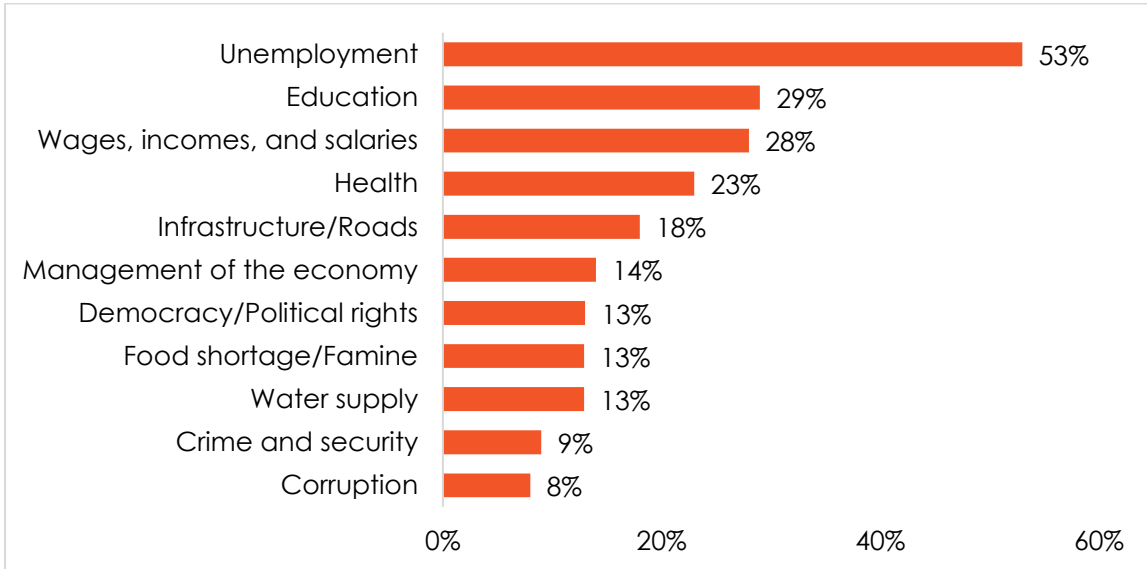
When asked what they consider the most important problems that their government should address, Eswatini youth (aged 18-35 years) most frequently mention unemployment: More than half (53%) of young respondents cite jobs as one of their top three priorities (Figure 1). Unemployment is followed by education (29%), incomes (28%), health (23%), and infrastructure/roads (18%). Perhaps surprisingly, management of the economy (14%) ranks only sixth among their most urgent concerns.

How do young Eswatini see their government's performance? Only small minorities report that the government is doing a good job of addressing their top priority problems (Figure 2).

Only one in 20 young respondents (5%) say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on creating jobs. About one in 10 approve of its performance on improving the living standards of the poor (9%) and managing the economy (12%), while about three in 10 applaud the government's efforts on improving basic health services (29%), maintaining roads and bridges (31%), and addressing educational needs (32%). Four in 10 young Eswatini (40%) give the government good marks for its provision of water and sanitation services.

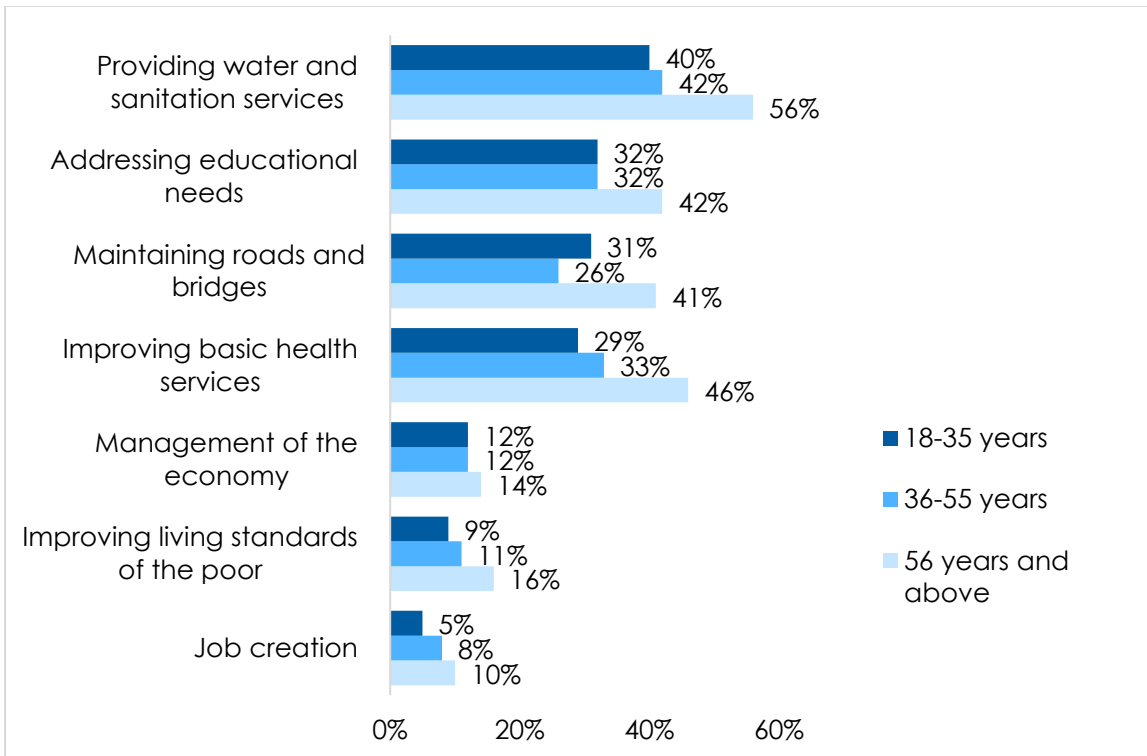
In general, young and middle-aged respondents are less complimentary of the government's efforts than their elders.

Figure 1: Most important problems | 18- to 35-year-olds | Eswatini | 2022



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

Figure 2: Government performance on youth priorities | by age group | Eswatini | 2022



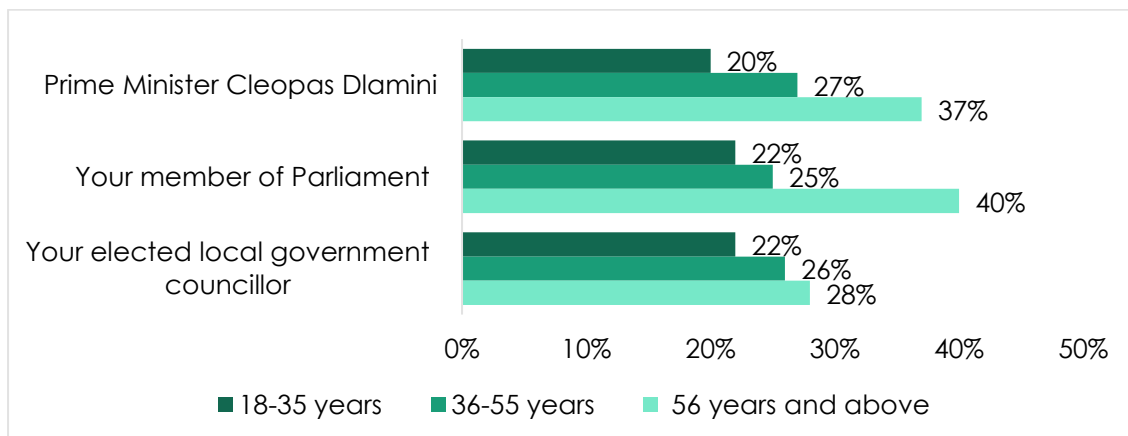
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Given the government's perceived failure to address key socio-economic challenges facing Eswatini, it is unsurprising that public performance ratings of their political leaders are low among all age groups, but especially among young people.

Only about two in 10 young citizens “approve” or “strongly approve” of the performance of their elected local government councillor (22%) and member of Parliament (22%). Similarly, the prime minister at the time of the survey, Cleopas Dlamini, received a passing grade from just 20% of young respondents (Figure 3).

Again, younger respondents are significantly more critical than senior respondents.

Figure 3: Performance of political leaders | by age group | Eswatini | 2022

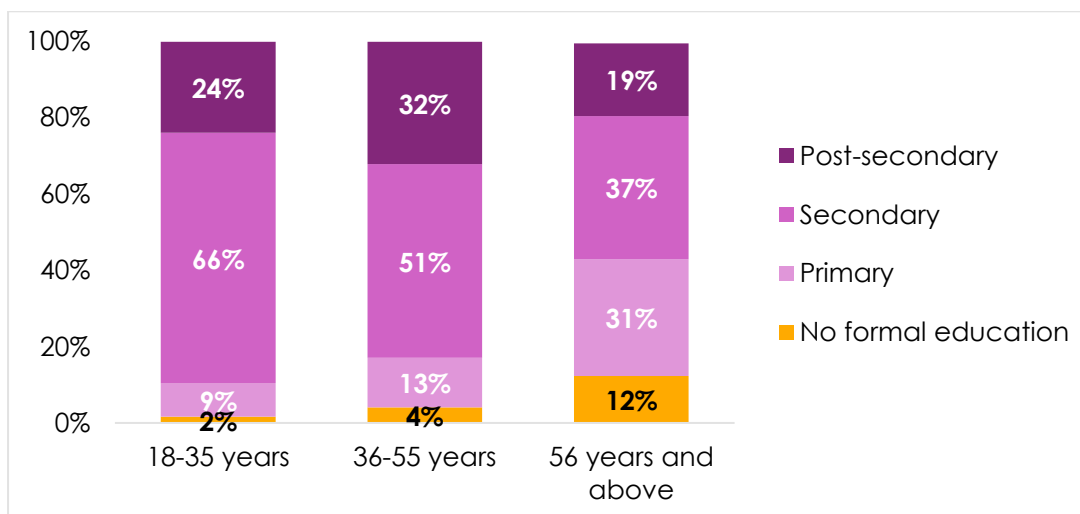


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

The status of young people: More educated, less employed

Eswatini youth are more likely than their elders to have an education, but they are less likely to have a job. Fully nine in 10 young Eswatini (90%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling, compared to 83% in the 36-55 age group and 56% in the over-55 age group (Figure 4). Only 2% of youth lack formal education altogether.

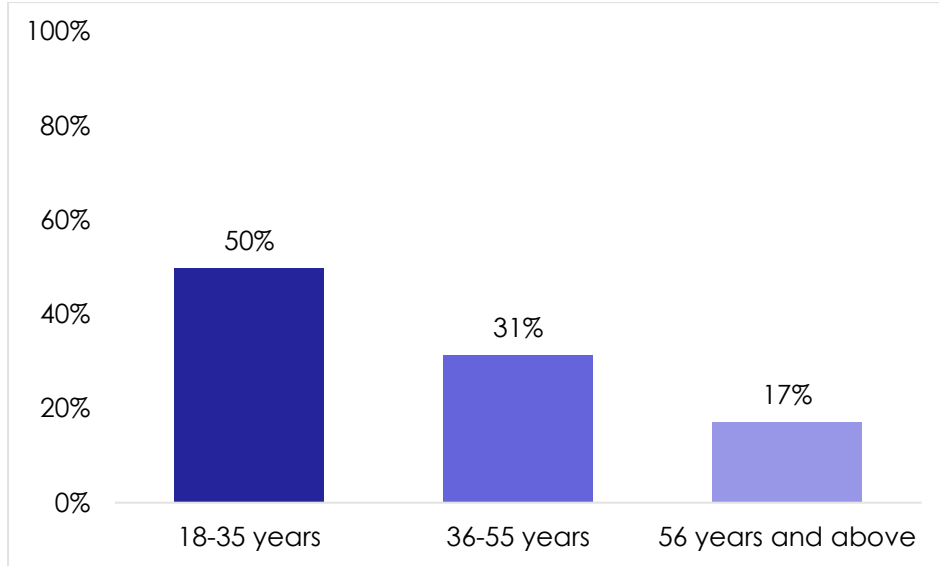
Figure 4: Education level | by age group | Eswatini | 2022



Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Even though they are more likely than their elders to be educated, young people are also more likely to be looking for cash-income jobs. Half (50%) of youth report being unemployed and looking for work, compared to 31% of middle-aged and 17% of older citizens (Figure 5).

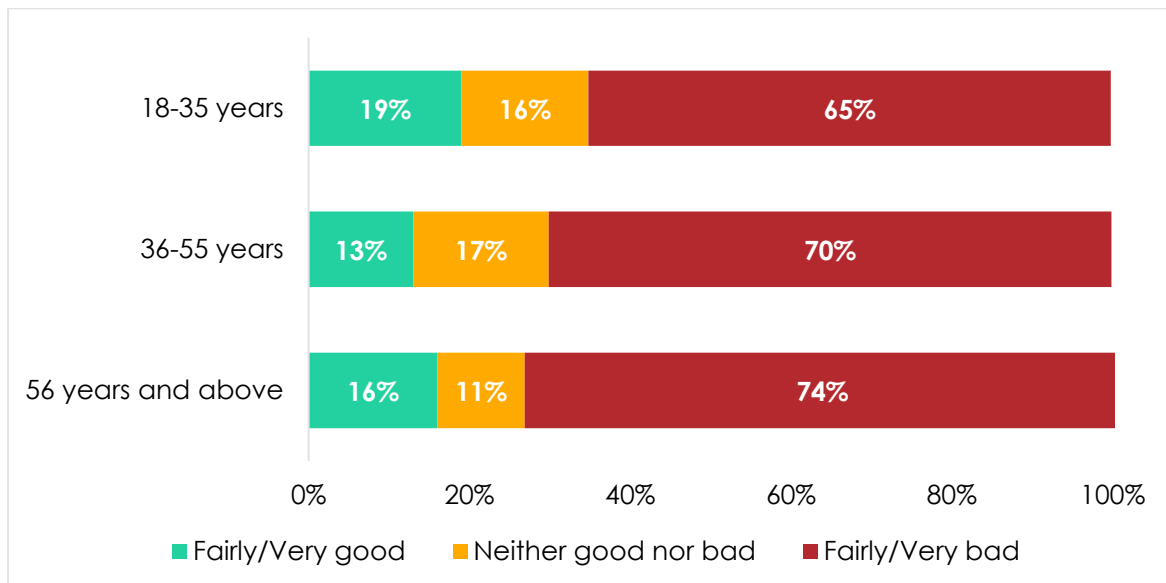
Figure 5: Unemployed | by age group | Eswatini | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (% who say “no, but looking”)

About two-thirds of youth (65%) describe their personal living conditions as either “fairly bad” or “very bad,” while only 19% describe them as “fairly good” or “very good” (Figure 6). Even so, young people are less negative in their assessments than their elders (70%-74% fairly/very bad).

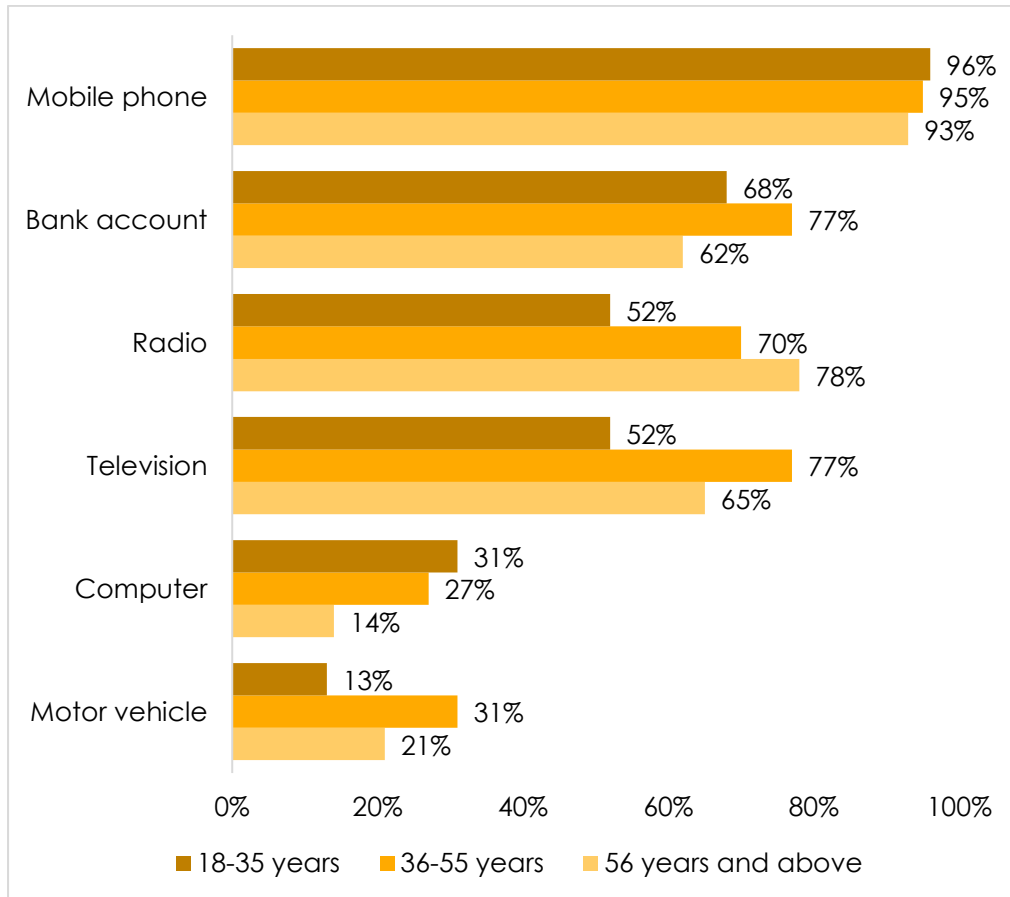
Figure 6: Personal living conditions | by age group | Eswatini | 2022



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

Like their elders, almost all young Emaswati (96%) own a mobile phone (Figure 7). They are less likely than middle-aged citizens to own a bank account (68% vs. 77%), a radio (52% vs. 70%), a television (52% vs. 77%), and a motor vehicle (13% vs. 31%), but are slightly more likely to own a computer (31% vs. 27%).

Figure 7: Asset ownership | by age group | Eswatini | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

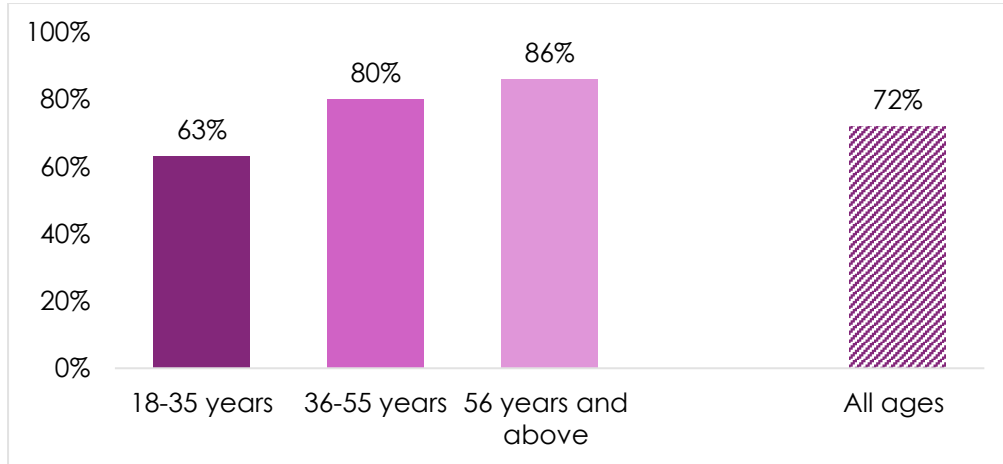
Political and civic engagement by the youth

Around the world, young people are generally less likely than their elders to vote in elections (Barrett, 2018). Survey findings show that this is true in Eswatini, too. Excluding respondents who were too young to vote at the time, 72% of Emaswati of all ages say they voted in the 2018 election (Figure 8). But only 63% of 18- to 35-year-olds say they voted, compared to 80% of middle-aged and 86% of older citizens.

Similarly, young Emaswati are less likely than their elders to report having contacted a local government councillor (18% vs. 32%) or a traditional leader (32% vs. 51%-52%) during the previous year (Figure 9).

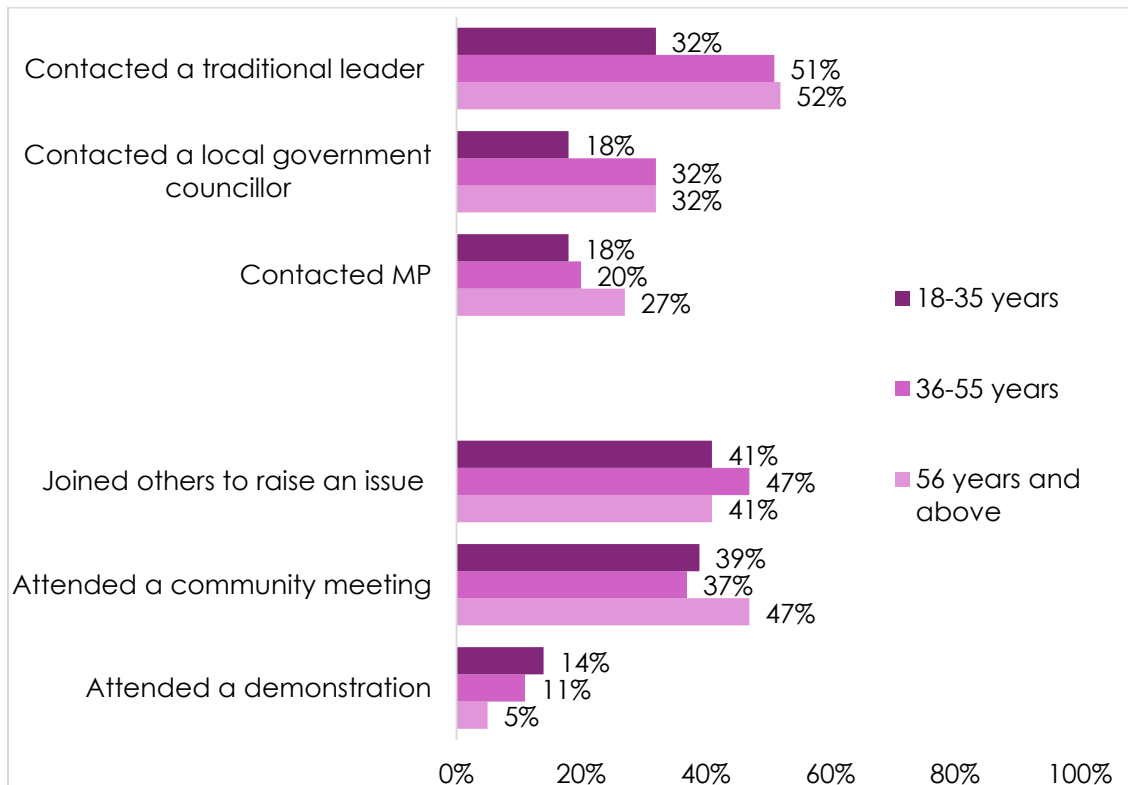
But they match their middle-aged counterparts when it comes to contacting a member of Parliament (18% vs. 20%) and attending a community meeting (39% vs. 37%), and they match their senior counterparts when it comes to joining others to raise an issue (both 41%). Young respondents are more likely than their elders to engage in protest action (14% vs. 5%-11%).

Figure 8: Self-reported voting in the 2018 election | by age group | Eswatini
 | 2022



Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in 2018, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2018 are excluded.)

Figure 9: Participation in civic and political activities | by age group | Eswatini
 | 2022



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often") Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Conclusion

The latest Afrobarometer survey shows that young Emaswati see unemployment as the most important problem that needs to be addressed, and they are critical of their government's perceived failure to create jobs. Other priority concerns include education, income, health, and public infrastructure – each of which the youth perceive as areas of governmental failure.

But findings also reveal that youth engagement in political and civic processes is limited, suggesting that there is scope for young citizens to make their voices heard more powerfully – and for the government and civil society to engage their creative energies more effectively.

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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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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