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Namibians grow more dissatisfied with government's efforts on electricity provision

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 849 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Namibia's National Electrification Policy aims to achieve universal electricity access by 2040 (Muyamba, 2023). The country's overall electrification rate is estimated at 50%, but between 70% and 80% of rural households remain without power (Brandt, 2022; Namibia Economist, 2022), while 70% of households in urban areas are electrified (Matthys, 2022).

To meet its current energy demands, Namibia relies heavily on power imported from neighbouring South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Tlhage, 2023; Matthys, 2023). Its state-owned power utility, NamPower, generates only 40% of the country's electricity needs (Green Energy Africa Summit, 2023), but the parastatal intends to reduce its dependency on imports by increasing its generating capacity as outlined in its Integrated Strategic Business Plan (2020-2025) (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2023).

In 2021, electricity was the third-most imported product in Namibia (OEC World, 2023). South Africa has historically been Namibia's largest supplier of power, but as its national energy company, Eskom, struggles with power-generation woes of its own, Namibia's vulnerability to energy supply shocks has been exposed (International Trade Administration, 2024).

To ensure energy security in the long term, the Namibian government has articulated a commitment to renewables in its National Renewable Energy Policy (2017), which aims to help the country "meet its short-term and long-term national development goals, and to assist Namibians to climb the development ladder, empowered by access to energy at levels that facilitate engagement in productive activity" (Ministry of Mines and Energy, 2017).

In line with this ambition, Namibia is positioning itself as a leader in the green hydrogen space (Tlhage, 2024). During a recent state visit to Namibia, King Philippe of Belgium met with President Nangolo Mbumba to discuss accelerating the African country's green hydrogen efforts and forging an energy partnership to respond to climate change (Petersen, 2024).

Afrobarometer survey findings provide an on-the-ground look at electricity access in Namibia. While a majority of Namibians live in zones served by the electric grid, fewer than four in 10 enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, including just one-fifth of rural residents.

More than two-thirds of citizens say the government is performing poorly on the provision of reliable electricity, the worst rating recorded in two decades of Afrobarometer surveys.

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.

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The Afrobarometer team in Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Namibians in March 2024. 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 have been conducted in Namibia in 1999, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2021.

Key findings

- Six in 10 Namibians (60%) live in zones served by the national electricity grid.
    - But only 40% of rural residents are within reach of the grid, compared to nearly twice as many urban residents (78%).
- Fewer than half (48%) of Namibians live in households that are connected to the national power grid.
- Among those who are connected to the grid, more than three-fourths (77%) say their electricity works "most of the time" or "all of the time."
- Combining connection and reliability rates shows that fewer than four in 10 Namibians (37%) enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, including just 19% of rural residents and 28% of citizens experiencing high lived poverty.
- About a quarter (24%) of Namibians say they use sources of electricity other than the national grid. The most popular are solar panels (36% of those who use alternative sources) and hydropower (33%).
- Around two-thirds (68%) of respondents say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable supply of electricity.
    - Disapproval has climbed by 24 percentage points over the past decade and is particularly widespread among the elderly (75%), the least educated (74%), rural residents (73%), and poor citizens (73%).

Access to the electricity 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.

Afrobarometer survey teams in Namibia found an electricity grid that most houses can access in 60% of the enumeration areas they visited (Figure 1).[1] But the presence of the electricity grid is far more limited in rural areas: Only 40% of rural residents live within reach of the grid, compared to almost twice as many urban residents (78%).

[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.

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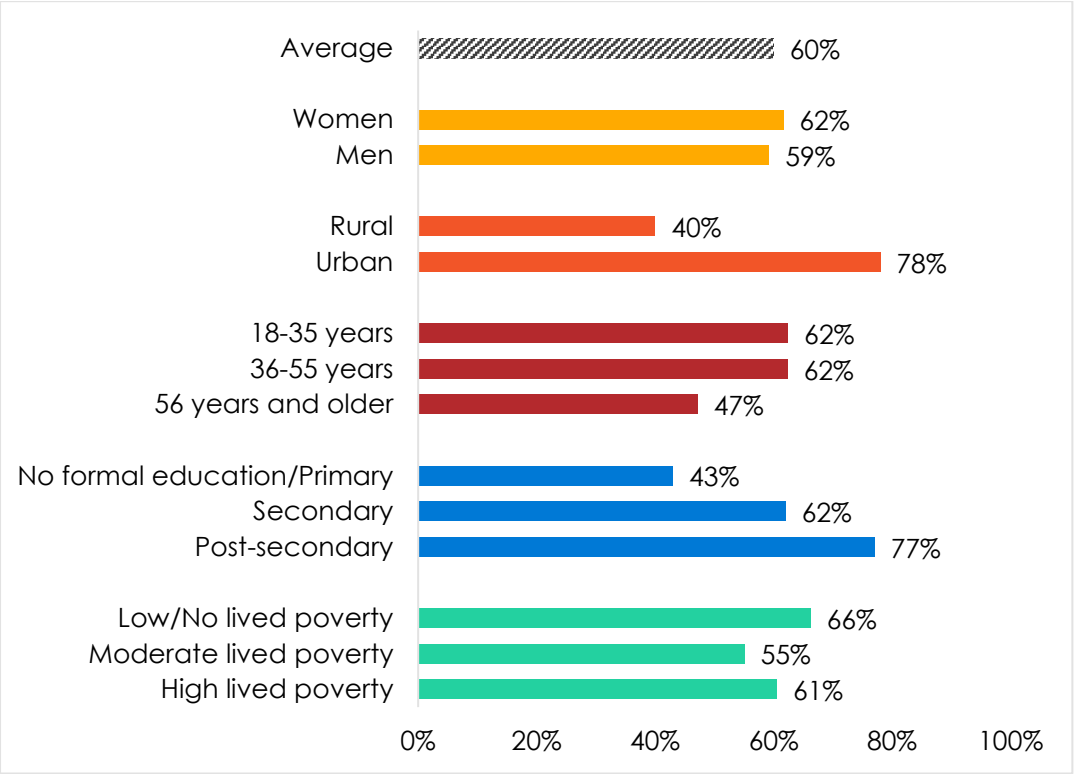
Citizens who have post-secondary qualifications (77%), those who are economically better off[2] (66%), and young and middle-aged respondents (62% of those aged 18-55) are more likely to live in zones served by an electricity grid than the less educated (43%), poorer interviewees (55%-61%), and the elderly (47% of those aged over 55 years).

Figure 1: Presence of electricity grid | by demographic group | Namibia | 2024



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 electricity 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.

Not quite half (48%) of Namibian households actually have an electric connection from NamPower or a regional electricity distributor (Figure 2). As might be expected, urbanities are far more likely to be connected than rural residents (67% vs. 27%) (Figure 3). Those with post-secondary education are 37 percentage points more likely to sport a grid connection than individuals with primary schooling or less (68% vs. 31%), while the difference between the economically well-off and the poorest citizens is 20 points (59% vs. 39%). Younger and middle-aged cohorts (50%-51%) are also more likely to be connected than their elders (35%).

[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).

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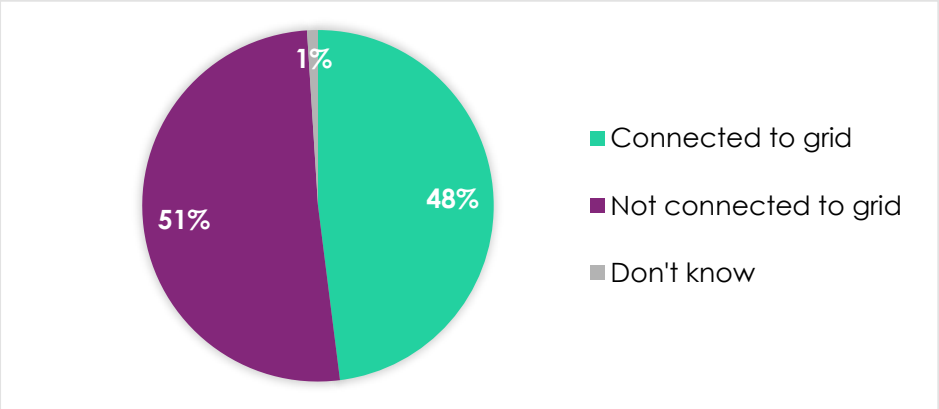
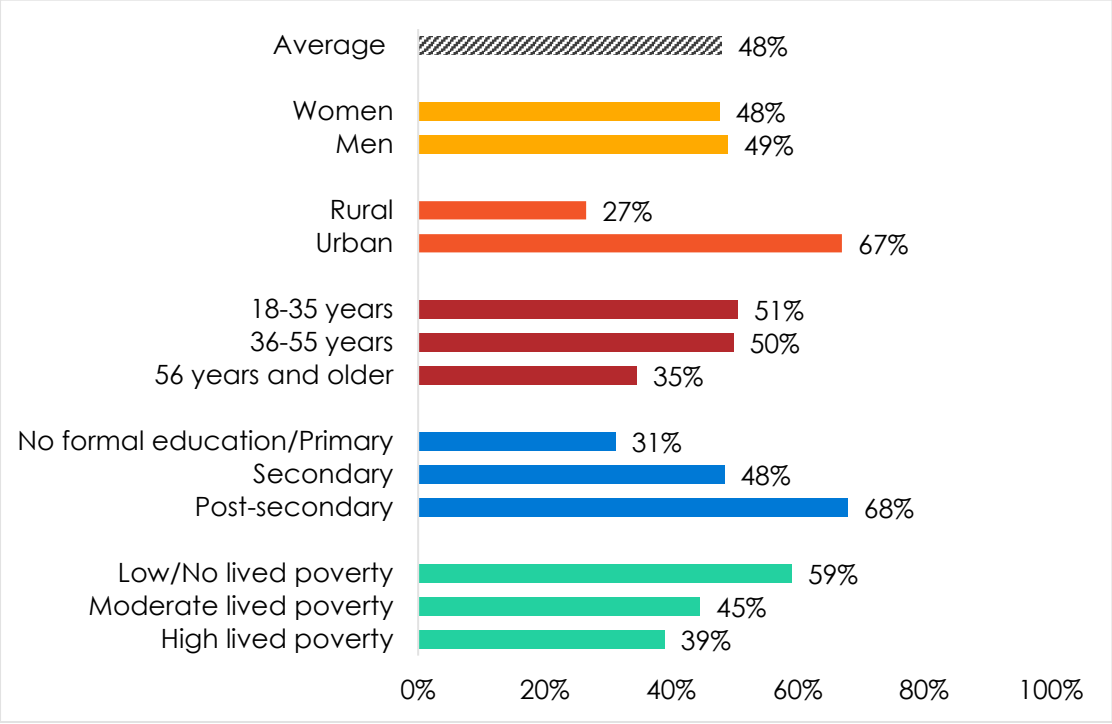
Figure 2: Connection to the national electricity grid | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Do you have an electric connection to your home from NamPower or your regional electricity distributor (RED)?*

Figure 3: Connection to the national electricity grid | by demographic group | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Do you have an electric connection to your home from NamPower or your regional electricity distributor (RED)? (% "yes")*

Reliable supply of electricity

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

Among citizens who report being connected to the power grid, more than three-quarters (77%) say their electricity works "most of the time" (18%) or "all of the time" (59%) (Figure 4). About one in five (19%) report that their grid connection provides them with power only "occasionally" (12%) or "never" (7%).

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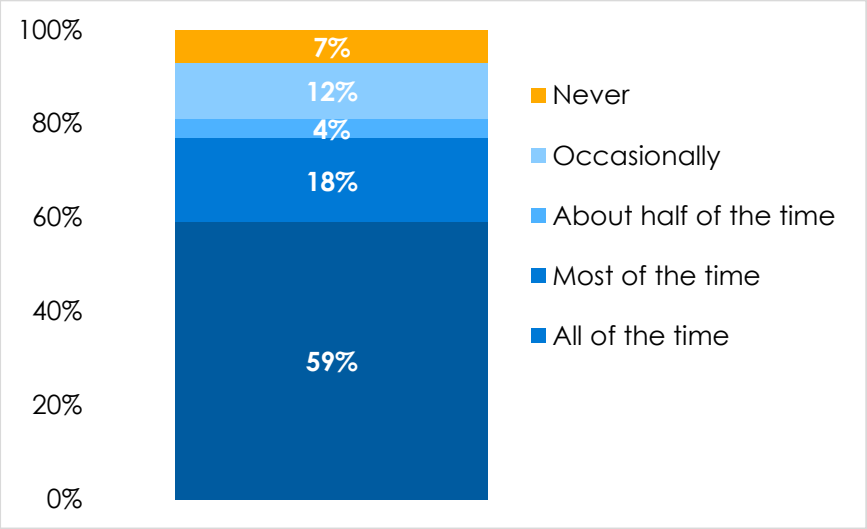
Figure 4: How often is electricity available? | respondents who are connected to the grid | Namibia | 2024

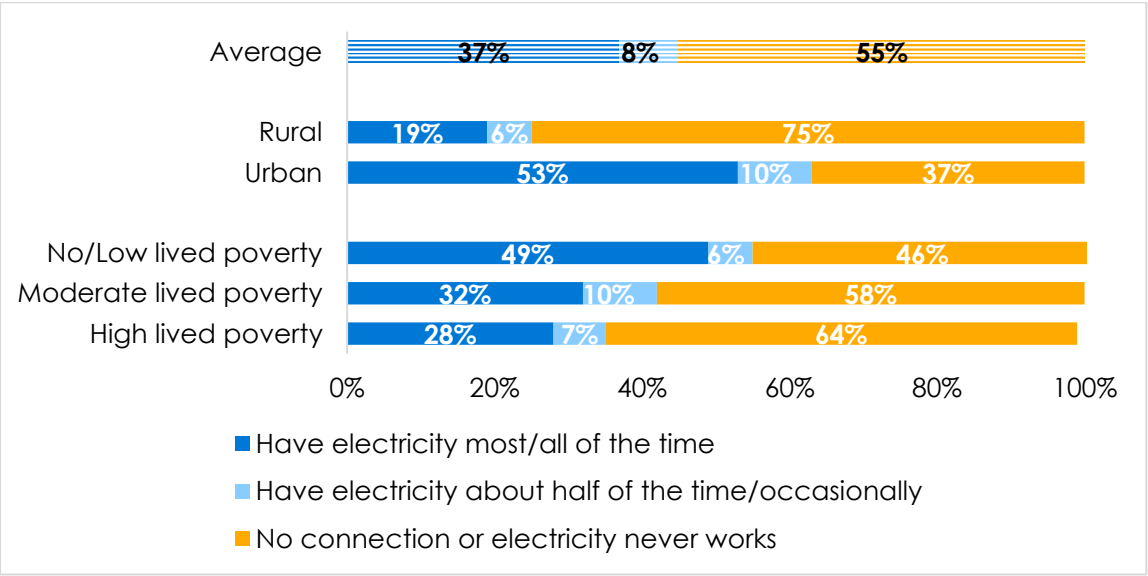


Respondents who say they have a connection to the national electric grid were asked: *How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (Respondents without a connection to the national grid are excluded.)*

While these numbers suggest that existing connections are fairly reliable, looking at the entire population (rather than only those who are connected to the grid) shows that fewer than four in 10 (37%) of all Namibians enjoy electricity that works "most" or "all" of the time, with stark differences by urban-rural location and economic status (Figure 5).

Among poor respondents, only 28% say they have reliable electricity, compared to 49% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty. And in rural areas, only 19% of citizens enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, vs. 53% of urban residents.

Figure 5: How many citizens have reliable electricity? | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Do you have an electric connection to your home from NamPower? (If "yes":) How often is electricity actually available from this connection?*

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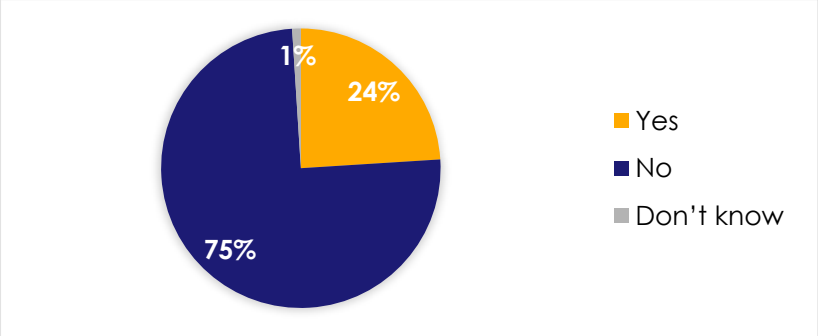
Alternative sources of electricity

About one-quarter (24%) of Namibians say they use sources of electricity other than the national grid – either as their only source or as a supplement to the mains (Figure 6). Citizens with post-secondary qualifications (27%) and the elderly (28%) are most likely to use power sources other than the national grid (Figure 7).

Among respondents who use non-grid power solutions, the most popular alternative is solar panels (36%), followed by hydropower (33%) (Figure 8). Biogas (7%) and batteries or power banks (7%) share distant third place, while only 1% of interviewees use wind power and 2% utilise multiple alternative energy sources.

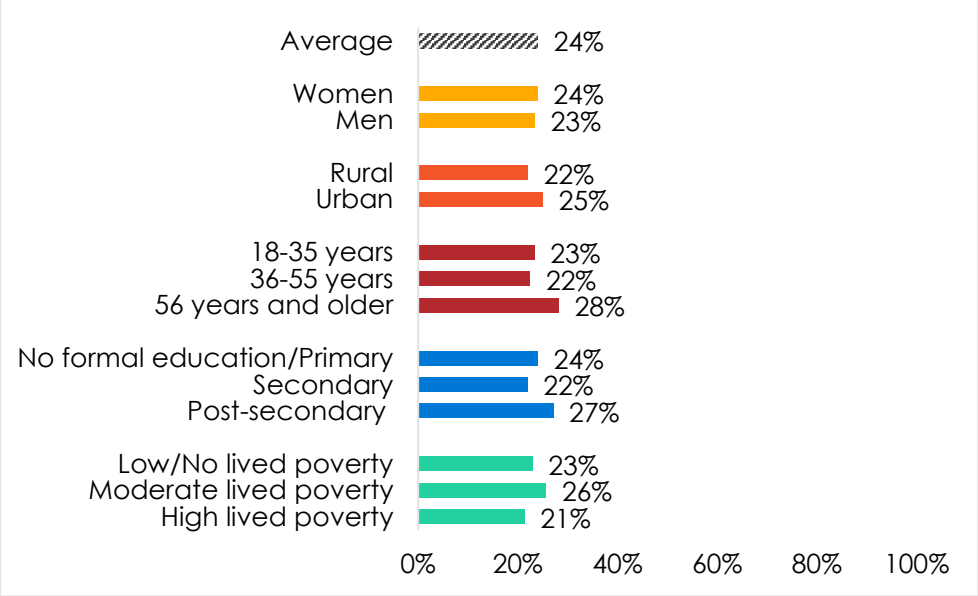
Among those who use alternative energy, more than half (53%) of rural residents use solar panels, compared to fewer than a quarter (23%) of urban dwellers (Figure 9). The well-off are more than twice as likely to use solar panels as their poorer counterparts (43% vs. 20%), whereas the poor are three times as likely to use hydropower (58% vs. 19%).

Figure 6: Do you use other sources of electricity? | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Does your house use electric power from any source other than NamPower or your regional electricity distributor (RED)?*

Figure 7: Use of other sources of electricity | by demographic group | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Does your house use electric power from any source other than NamPower or your regional electricity distributor (RED)? (% "yes")*

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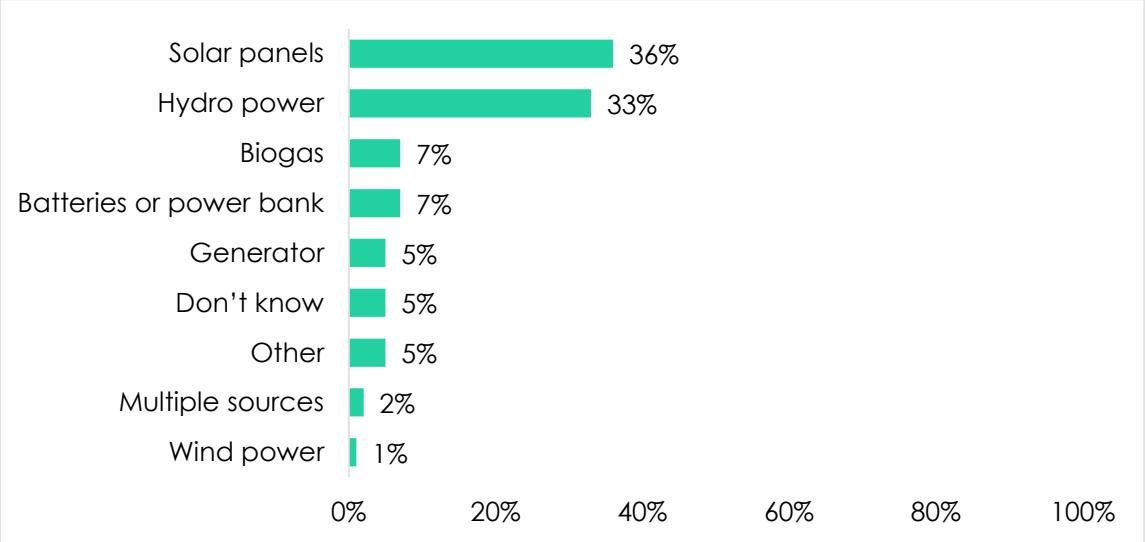
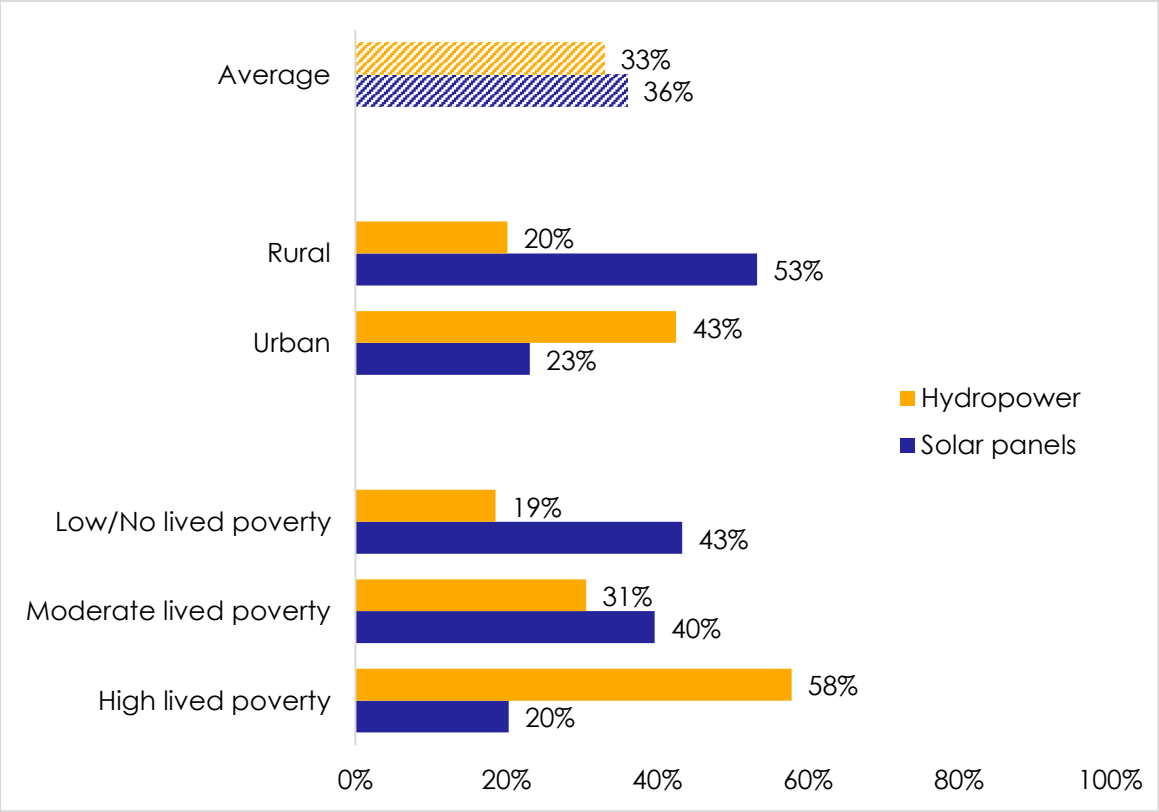
Figure 8: Alternative sources of electricity | respondents who use off-grid electricity | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Does your house use electric power from any source other than NamPower or your regional electricity distributor (RED)? [If "yes":] What is the source of the electricity for this connection? (Respondents who do not use alternative power sources are excluded.)*

Figure 9: Hydropower and solar panel usage | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | respondents who use off-grid electricity | Namibia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Does your house use electric power from any source other than NamPower or your regional electricity distributor (RED)? [If "yes":] What is the source of the electricity for this connection? (Respondents who do not use alternative power sources are excluded.)*

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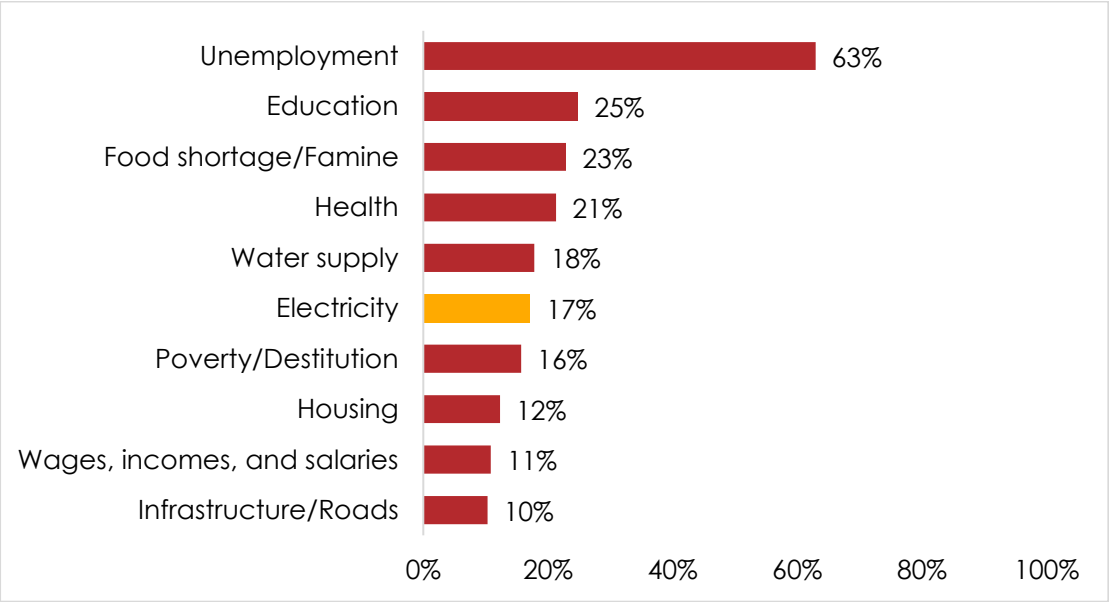
Priorities and government performance

The provision of electricity ranks sixth among the most important problems that Namibians want their government to address, cited by 17% of respondents as one of their top three priorities (Figure 10). Unemployment is far and away citizens' top priority for urgent government action.

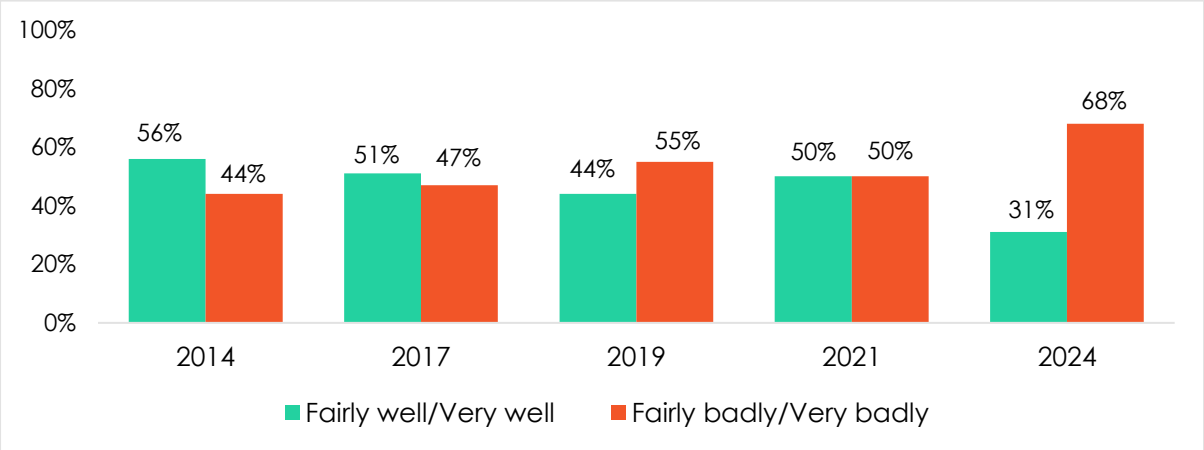
Figure 10: Most important problems | Namibia | 2024



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.)*

More than two-thirds (68%) of Namibians say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable electricity supply, an assessment that is 24 percentage points worse than it was a decade ago (44%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Government performance in provision of reliable electricity supply | Namibia | 2014-2024



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?*

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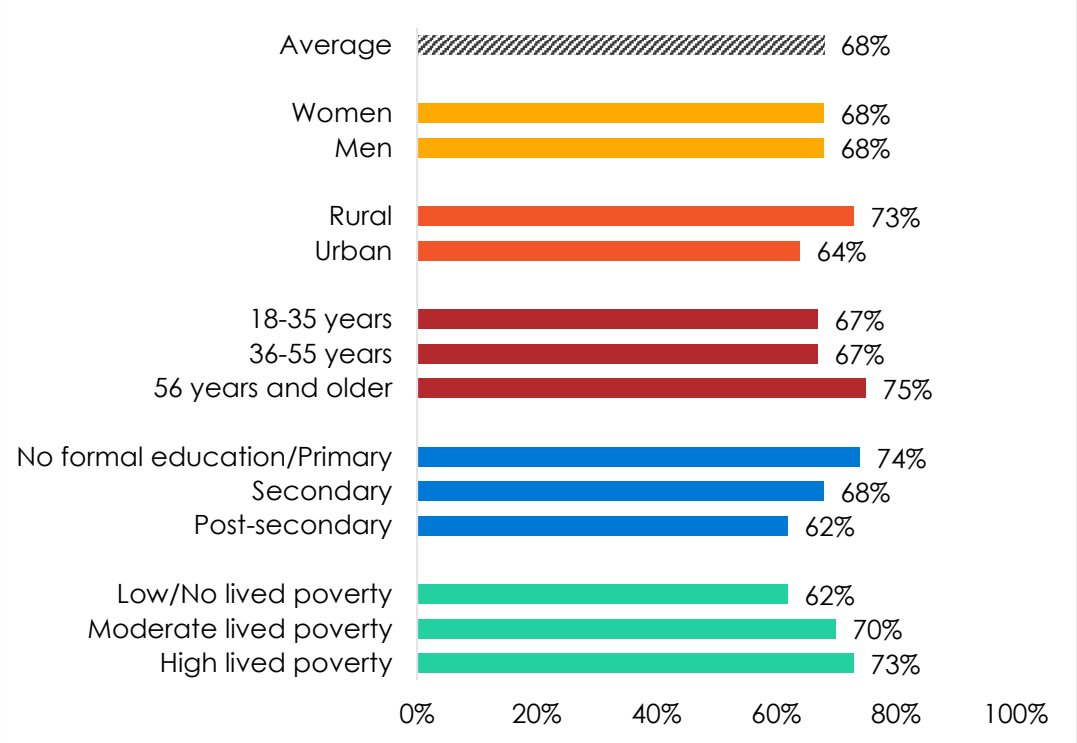
Rural residents (73%) are more likely than urbanites (64%) to disapprove of the government's efforts on electricity provision (Figure 12). Negative ratings are also more pronounced among senior citizens (75%), those with little or no formal education (74%), and poorer respondents (70%-73%).

Figure 12: Government is performing badly on the provision of reliable electricity supply | by demographic group | Namibia | 2024



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 Namibians still lack access and connection to the national power grid, and fewer than four in 10 citizens enjoy a reliable supply of electricity. Rural residents, the poor, and the elderly are particularly disadvantaged, and this is reflected in their dismal ratings of the government's performance on providing reliable electricity.

These findings point to the need to address the challenges of vulnerable communities by accelerating the pace of gains in access to electricity, most urgently by bridging the urban-rural, class, and generational divides.

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Asafika Mpako is Afrobarometer's communications coordinator for Southern Africa. Email: ampako@afrobarometer.org.

Stephen Ndoma is Afrobarometer's assistant project manager for Southern Africa. Email: ndomarashe@gmail.com.

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