

Advison Lesotho



Dispatch No. 910 | 26 November 2024

## Basotho favour open trade, neutrality in war, greater African voice in international affairs

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 910 | Maakwe Cumanzala

### Summary

Lesotho faces persistent economic challenges. Landlocked and surrounded by South Africa, the country relies heavily on external aid and trade within the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), which supplies nearly half of its government revenue. This dependency renders it vulnerable to fluctuations in trade dynamics, especially trade with South Africa, its largest partner (World Bank, 2024; International Monetary Fund, 2024).

While textile exports have been boosted by duty-free access to U.S. markets under the African Growth and Opportunity Act, other exports such as diamonds, water, wool, and mohair play a more substantial role in the nation's economy, along with remittances from Basotho working abroad, mainly in South Africa. Experts emphasise the urgent need for fiscal reforms and economic diversification to ensure the country's long-term economic stability (Heritage Foundation, 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2024).

Politically, Lesotho has repeatedly relied on intervention by South Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to maintain peace and stability (Williams, 2020).

Lesotho has long enjoyed friendly relations with China and is a participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative, most prominently completing the Chinese-funded Ha Mpiti-Sehlabathebe Road this year (Owolabi, 2024; Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

The country ratified the African Continental Free Trade Agreement in 2020 (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2020). Early this year, with SADC support, Lesotho joined Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zambia in implementing a coordinated border management strategy aimed at enhancing border efficiency (Southern African Development Community, 2024).

How do Basotho view their economic and political relations with the rest of the world?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that Basotho are largely supportive of international trade and political cooperation. They welcome the economic and political influence of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), China, and the United States. In particular, perceptions that China's influence on Lesotho is substantial and positive have increased sharply.

Most Basotho endorse open trade, though many would privilege trade with African countries. But only about one in 20 Basotho are aware of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Citizens generally express satisfaction with the way Lesotho's needs and interests are recognised in SADC and AU decision making, but they say African countries need a stronger voice in global platforms like the United Nations.

## 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 Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Basotho 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 were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

## Key findings

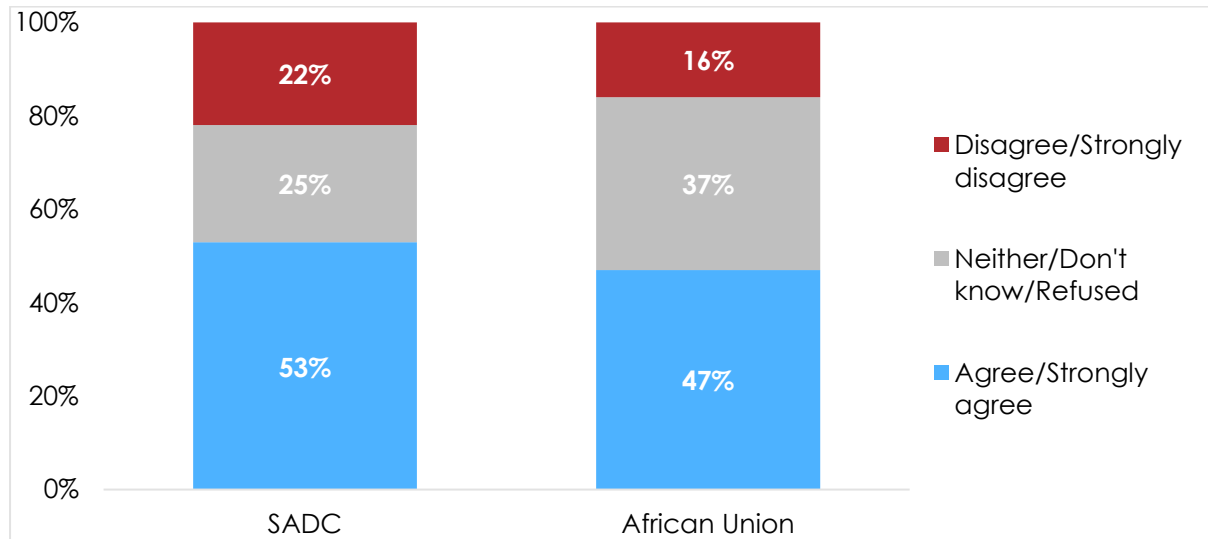
- Basotho are more satisfied than dissatisfied with the way that SADC and the AU recognise Lesotho's needs and interests in their decision making.
  - But more than two-thirds (68%) say African countries should have a greater say in international decision-making bodies like the United Nations.
- About seven in 10 citizens (69%) prefer free trade over limiting international trade to protect domestic producers.
  - A majority (59%) favour open trade with countries around the world, while about four in 10 would privilege trade with African countries (23%) or with countries in Southern Africa (15%).
- Only 6% of respondents say they have heard of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).
- Majorities of Basotho welcome the economic and political influence on their country of SADC (76%), China (71%), the United States (62%), and the AU (55%). But only 14% see the influence of Russia as positive.
- Asked who helped Lesotho most during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents most frequently cite China (37%), followed by the United States (17%) and the AU or Africa CDC (9%).
- The proportions of citizens who see China's influence on Lesotho as substantial (68%) and positive (71%) have risen significantly over the past few years.
- Among Basotho who are aware of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two-thirds (67%) favour taking a neutral stance in the war.

## Africa's voice in global affairs

Basotho offer mixed assessments of their voice in international affairs. By more than 2 to 1 (53% to 22%), respondents say their country's needs and interests are adequately recognised in SADC decisions (Figure 1). Similarly, by 47% to 16%, they express satisfaction with the way the African Union takes Lesotho's needs and interests into account when it makes decisions for the continent. However, large proportions (25% and 37%, respectively) decline to take a stand on these questions.

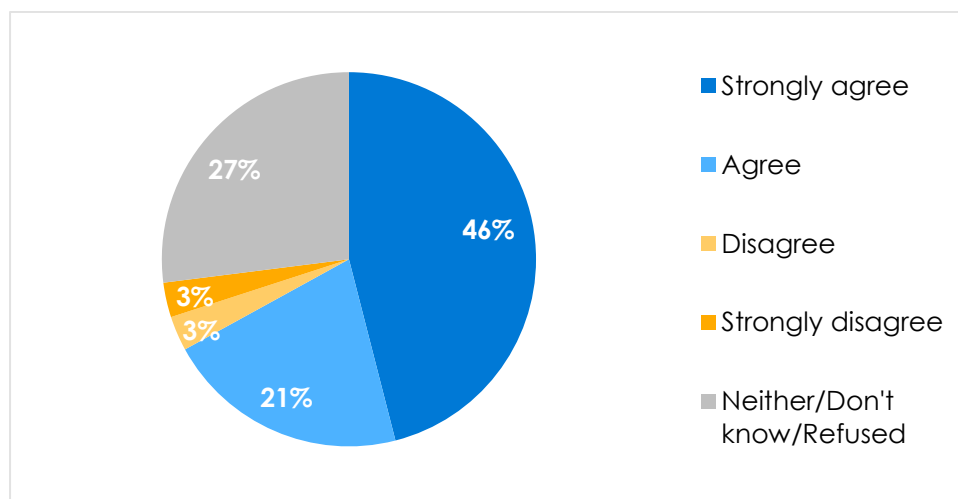
In contrast, when it comes to international bodies such as the United Nations, more than two-thirds (68%)<sup>1</sup> of Basotho “agree” or “strongly agree” that African countries should be given greater influence in decision making (Figure 2). Only 6% disagree with the idea, while 27% don’t offer an opinion.

**Figure 1: Recognition of Lesotho’s interests in continental affairs | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say:  
 The needs and interests of Lesotho are adequately recognised in the decisions of SADC?  
 The needs and interests of Lesotho are adequately recognised by the African Union when it is making decisions for the African continent?

**Figure 2: Should African countries have more say in international bodies such as the United Nations? | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you agree or disagree with the following statement, or haven't you heard enough to say: African countries should be given greater influence in the decision making of international bodies like the United Nations?

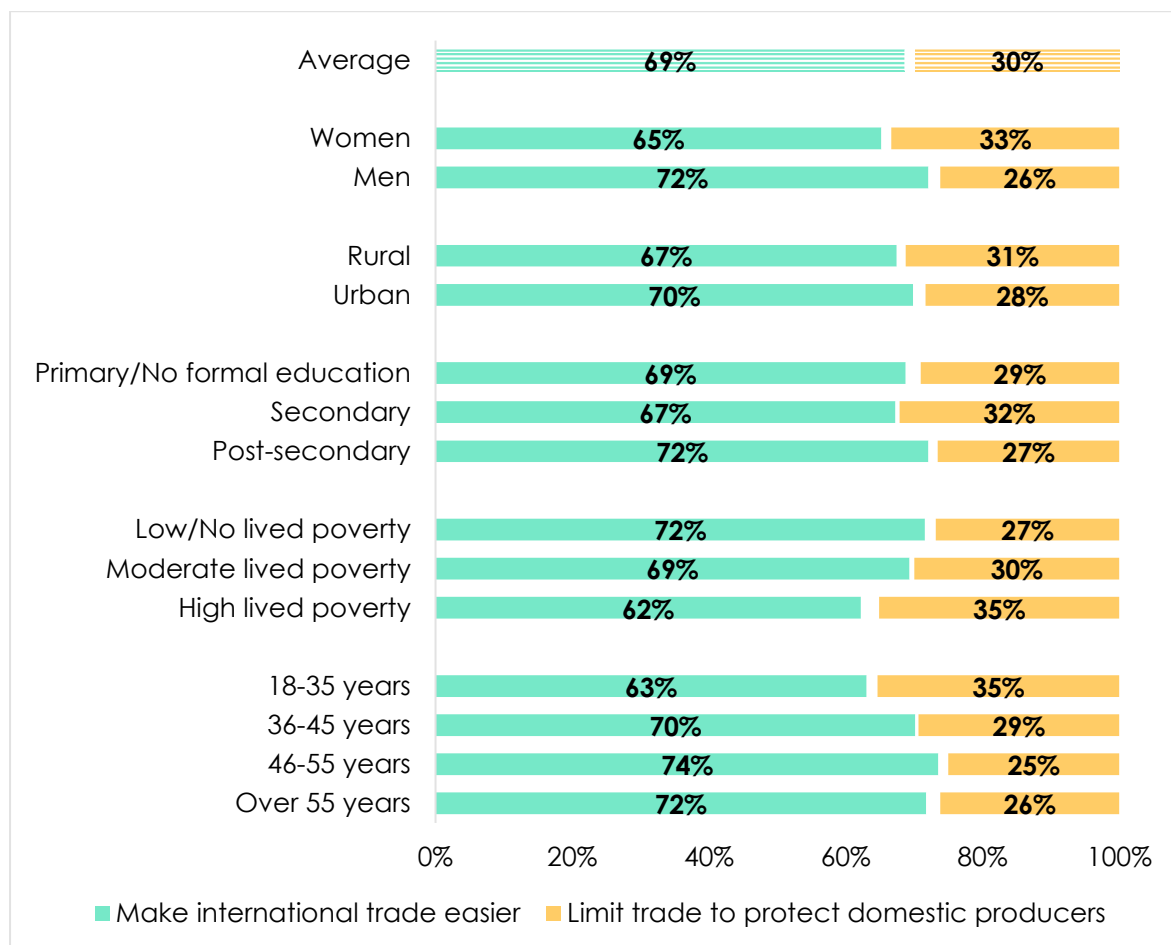
<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 21% “agree” and 46% “strongly agree” sum to 68%).

### Trade with other countries

Most Basotho support free trade with the rest of the world. More than two-thirds (69%) say it is better for their economy if the government creates economic opportunities by making it easier to trade with other countries (Figure 3). Three in 10 (30%) would instead limit international trade to protect Lesotho businesses.

Support for open trade is particularly strong among men (72%), the most educated citizens (72%), the economically best-off respondents<sup>2</sup> (72%), and those over age 35 (70%-74%).

**Figure 3: Open trade or limit trade? | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: It is better for our economy if the government makes it easier for Lesotho to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities.

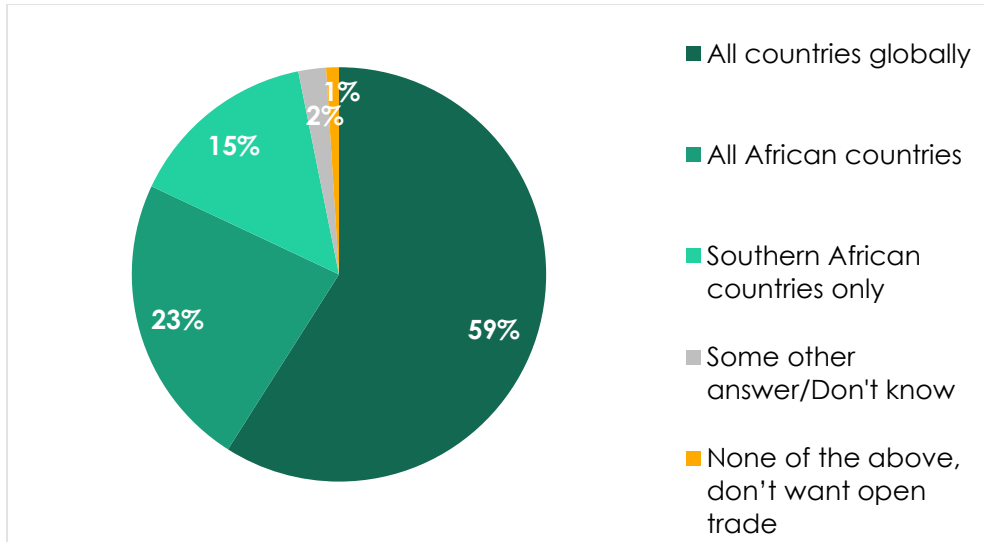
Statement 2: Our country should limit trade with other countries in order to protect Lesotho producers.

If the government wanted to make it easier to trade with other countries, a majority (59%) of citizens would favour open trade with all countries worldwide, rather than limiting it to certain

<sup>2</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).

countries (Figure 4). About one-fourth (23%) would privilege all African countries for trade, while 15% would prefer that the focus be on countries in Southern Africa.

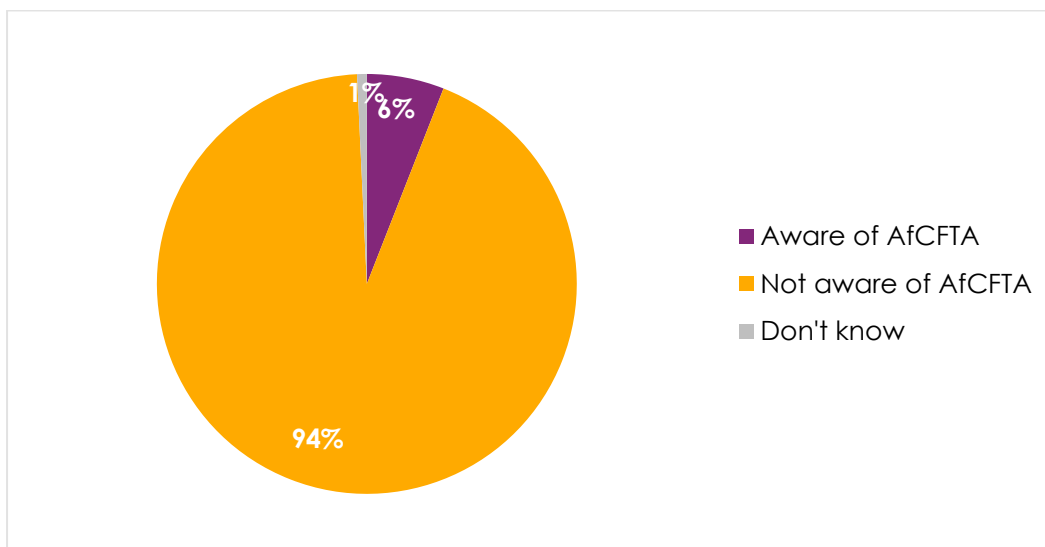
**Figure 4: Which countries should leaders make it easier to trade with? | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** *If Lesotho's leaders are going to make it easier to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities, which countries should they make it easier to trade with?*

While Basotho favour open trade, most are not aware of an important way in which their government makes this happen. Only 6% of respondents say they have heard of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), while an overwhelming 94% are unfamiliar with the initiative aimed at creating a single market for goods and services across the African continent (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Awareness of AfCFTA | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** *Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?*

### Influence of external actors

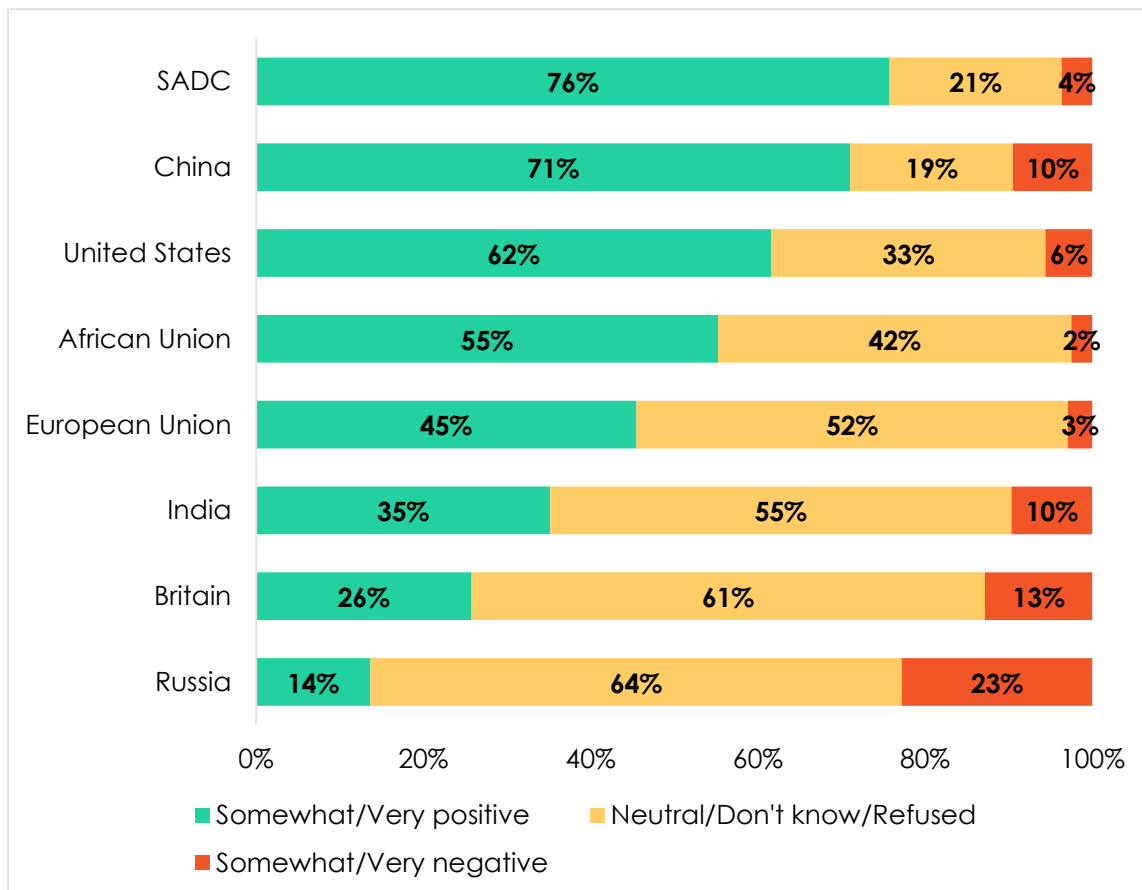
Three-fourths (76%) of Basotho see the economic and political influence of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on their country as “somewhat positive” or “very positive,” the most favourable perception among eight foreign countries and organisations that the survey asked about (Figure 6).

Solid majorities also hold positive views of China (71%) and the United States (62%), and 55% appreciate the influence of the African Union. Fewer than half welcome the influence of the European Union (45%), India (35%), Britain (26%), and Russia (14%).

But negative appraisals are rare, generally 10% or less. Russia is an exception, with 23% of respondents saying its influence is “somewhat” or “very” negative.

More often, Basotho decline to offer an appraisal, ranging up to 64% with regard to Russia.

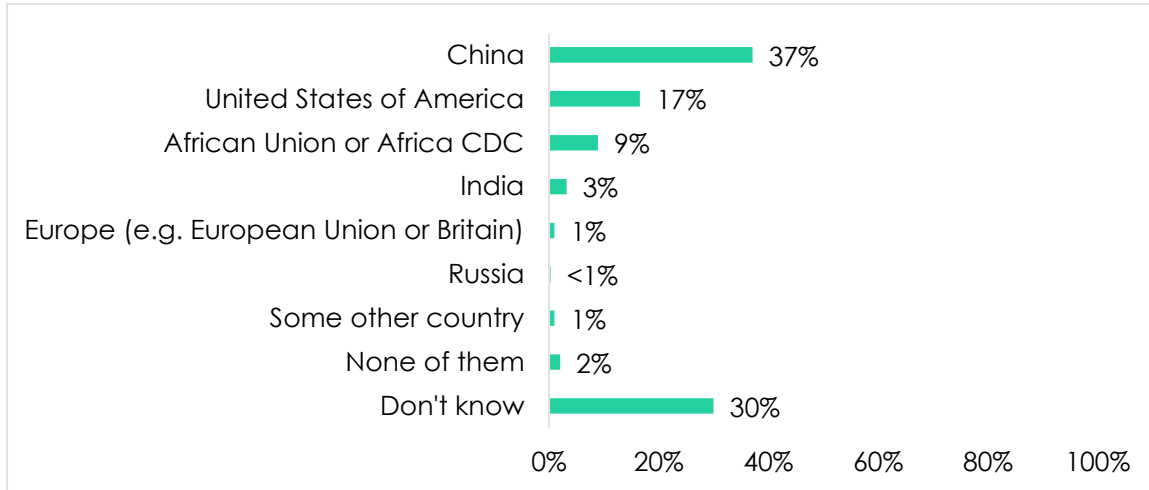
**Figure 6: Influence of foreign powers | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Lesotho is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Asked which countries or organisations were the most helpful to Lesotho during the COVID-19 pandemic, 37% of respondents cite China as the most supportive (Figure 7). The United States comes second (17%), followed by the AU or the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (9%). Very few Basotho cite assistance from Europe (1%) or Russia (less than 1%) during the pandemic.

**Figure 7: Helpful countries or organisations in managing negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic | Lesotho | 2024**



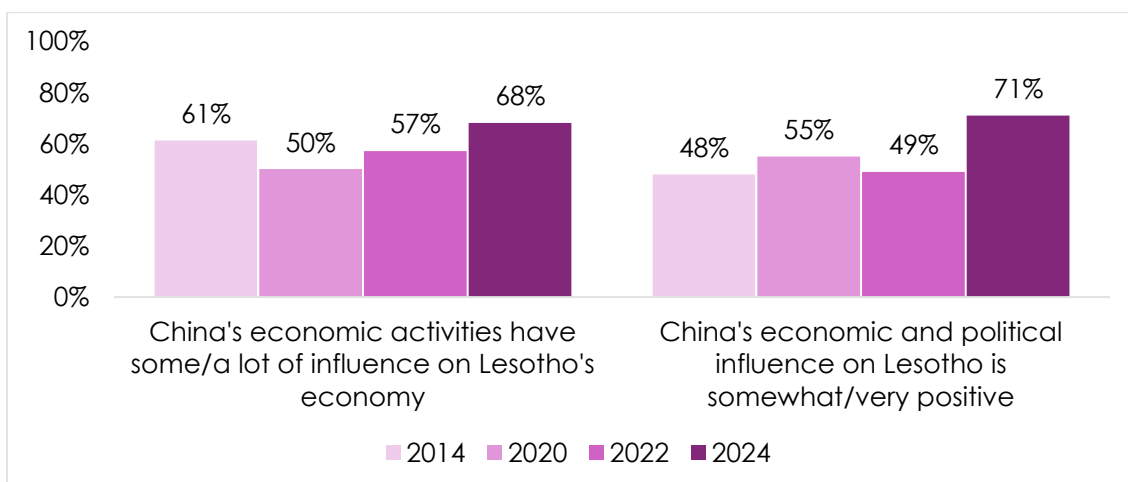
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following countries or organisations, if any, did the most to help Lesotho manage the negative impacts of COVID-19, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Perceptions that China was helpful during the pandemic and high-profile projects like the Ha Mpti-Sehlabathebe Road may be factors contributing to an upswing in perceptions of the extent and value of China's influence in Lesotho.

The share of Basotho who say that China's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on Lesotho's economy dropped to 50% in 2020 but has since climbed to 68%, an 18-percentage-point gain (Figure 8).

Similarly, the proportion who see China's economic and political influence on Lesotho has "somewhat positive" or "very positive" has increased by 22 points since 2022.

**Figure 8: Trends in perceptions of Chinese influence | Lesotho | 2014-2024**



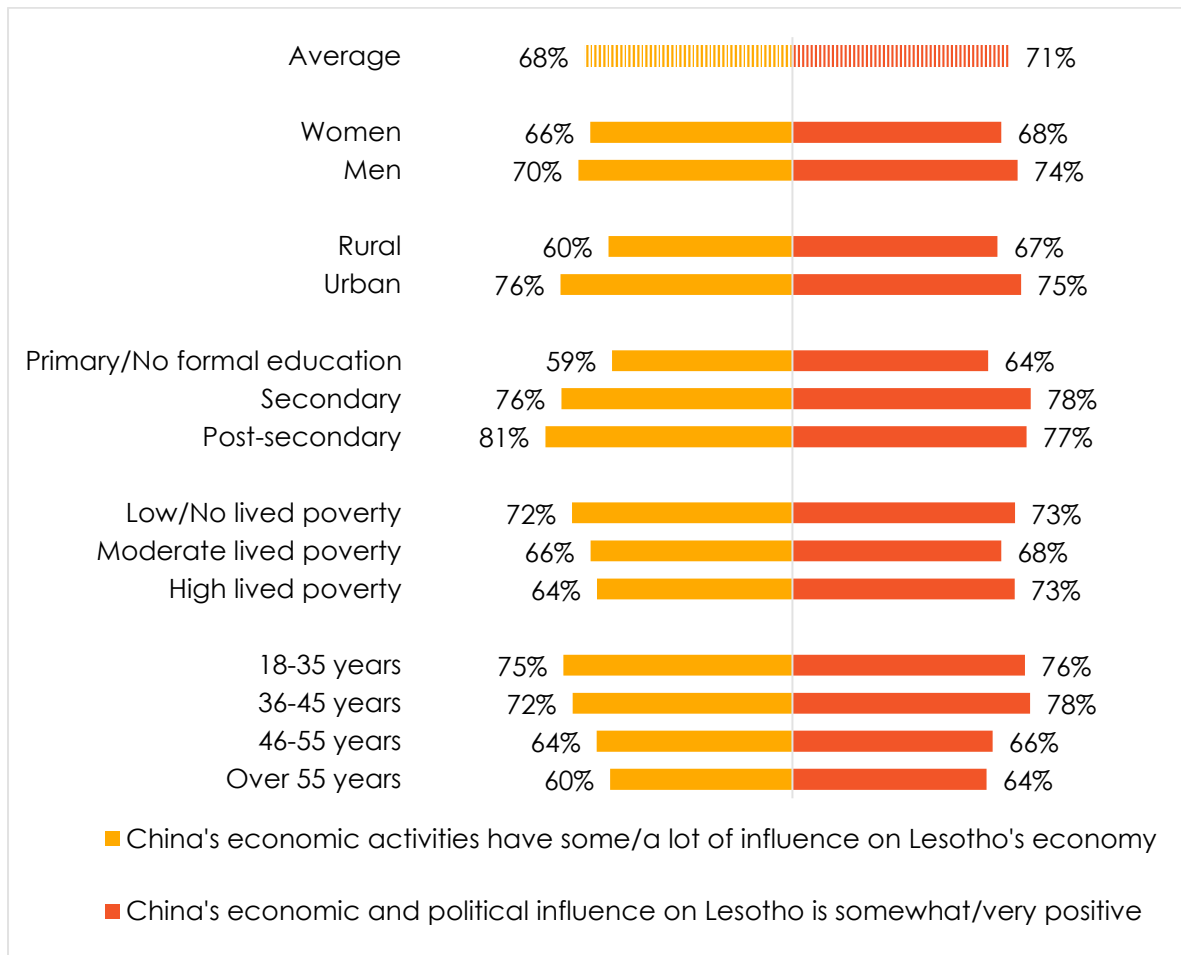
**Respondents were asked:**

How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Lesotho have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Lesotho is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China?

Perceptions that China's influence is substantial and positive are more common among men than women and among urbanites than rural residents (Figure 9). They increase sharply with respondents' level of education and decrease with age.

**Figure 9: Perceptions of Chinese influence** | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



**Respondents were asked:**

*How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Lesotho have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

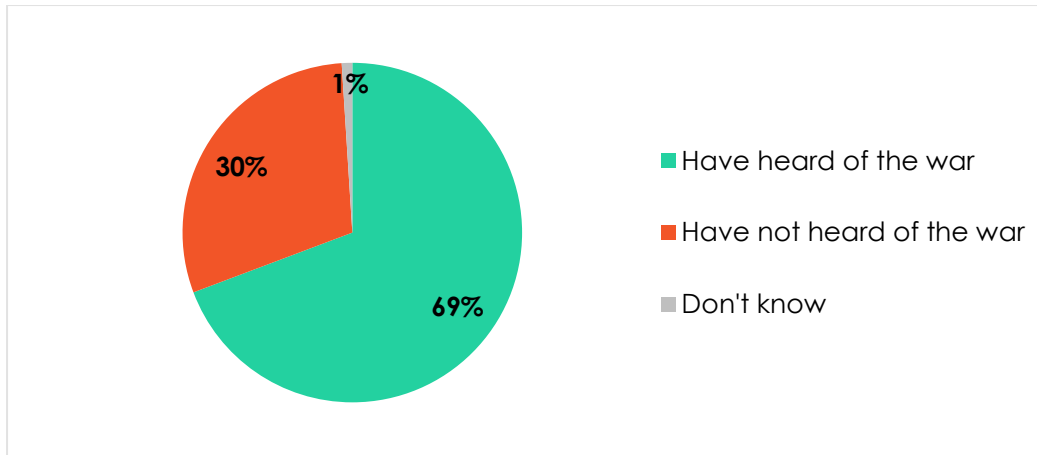
*Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Lesotho is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China?*

**Russia-Ukraine war**

Turning to another important international topic, Afrobarometer asked Basotho about their perceptions of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. About seven in 10 respondents (69%) report having heard about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Figure 10). Among those who are aware of the war, two-thirds (67%) say Lesotho should adopt a neutral stance rather than support Ukraine (16%) or align with Russia (8%).

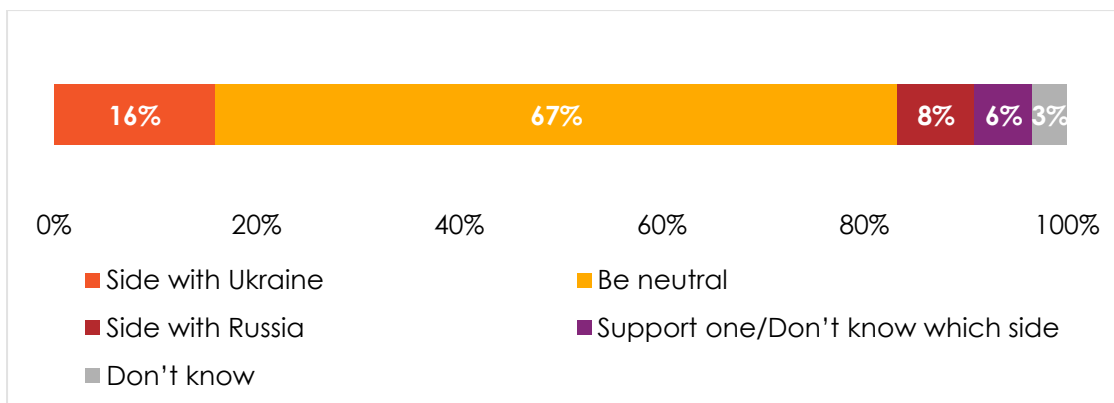


**Figure 10: Awareness of the war between Russia and Ukraine | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about the war between Russia and Ukraine or haven't you had a chance to hear about it yet?

**Figure 11: Support Russia or Ukraine? | Lesotho | 2024**



**Respondents who have heard of the war were asked:** Should Lesotho be neutral or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If "support one side":] Which side? (Respondents who have not heard of the war are excluded.)

## Conclusion

Survey findings show that most Basotho favour open trade and international collaboration. Majorities approve of the economic and political influence on Lesotho exerted by organisations such as SADC and the AU, as well as by China and the United States. Notably, notwithstanding critics' concerns about "debt trap" dangers of China's Belt and Road Initiative (Observer Research Foundation, 2023), perceptions that China's influence in Lesotho is both substantial and positive have increased sharply.

While few Basotho feel under-represented in SADC and AU decisions, there is strong support for enhancing Africa's global voice. When it comes to global conflicts, however, most citizens approach the implications of the Russia-Ukraine war with caution, preferring that Lesotho maintain a position of non-alignment.

While most Basotho support fostering international trade to create economic opportunities that extend beyond national borders, few know about the AfCFTA, suggesting a clear need for awareness raising if citizens are to support this initiative.

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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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