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Despite government efforts, most Ugandans still lack reliable electricity

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 912 | Caroline Nakayiza, Eric Otu Beecham, and Madrine Namubiru

Summary

Achieving universal access to affordable electricity in the sub-Saharan Africa region by 2030 would require connecting 90 million people annually, which is three times the current rate of progress (International Energy Agency, 2022). In Uganda, despite abundant energy resources, the energy sector faces significant challenges, including high electricity access costs and rising power demand (Daily Express, 2023).

Uganda's electricity infrastructure is concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural communities – where more than three-fourths of the population live – with limited access to dependable electricity. According to the Uganda National Household Survey 2019/2020, only 18.9% of Ugandans are connected to the national grid, with most connections located in urban areas (Rüdenauer, 2024). This urban-rural gap in electricity access is a significant obstacle to economic development, the provision of social services, and the overall quality of life in rural regions.

In collaboration with international partners, the Ugandan government has initiated programmes to promote off-grid solutions, including solar power, to enhance electricity access in rural areas (GIZ, 2023). In 2022, the World Bank (2022) allocated U.S. \$568 million (Sh2 trillion) to Uganda's Electricity Access Scale-up Project, which aims to increase electricity access for households, businesses, industrial parks, and public institutions (Umeme, 2022). Despite these initiatives, progress remains slow, and substantial investment and policy reforms are needed to achieve universal electricity access in Uganda. Expanding access to reliable and affordable electricity is vital for advancing the country's broader development goals, including poverty alleviation and improvements in education and health care.

A recent Afrobarometer survey provides an on-the-ground look at electricity access in the country. Findings show that while a majority of citizens live in zones served by the national electricity grid, fewer than one in five enjoy a reliable electricity supply. Rural residents and poor citizens are especially unlikely to have reliable power.

Even so, more than half of Ugandans say the government is doing a good 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 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 Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans in January 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Key findings

- More than six in 10 Ugandans (62%) live in areas served by the national electric grid.
 - A slim majority (53%) of rural residents live within reach of the grid, compared to 80% of urban residents. Citizens with post-secondary education and economically better-off citizens are far more likely to live in areas served by the grid than those with less schooling and lower economic status.
- Fewer than three in 10 Ugandans (28%) are connected to the national power grid.
 - Among those who are connected to the grid, 55% say their electricity works “most of the time” or “all of the time.”
 - Among all Ugandans, only 15% enjoy electricity that is available most/all of the time, including just 7% of rural residents and 12% of those experiencing high lived poverty.
- Electricity ranks ninth among the most important problems that Ugandans want their government to address.
- More than half (55%) of citizens say the government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of providing a reliable electricity supply.

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.

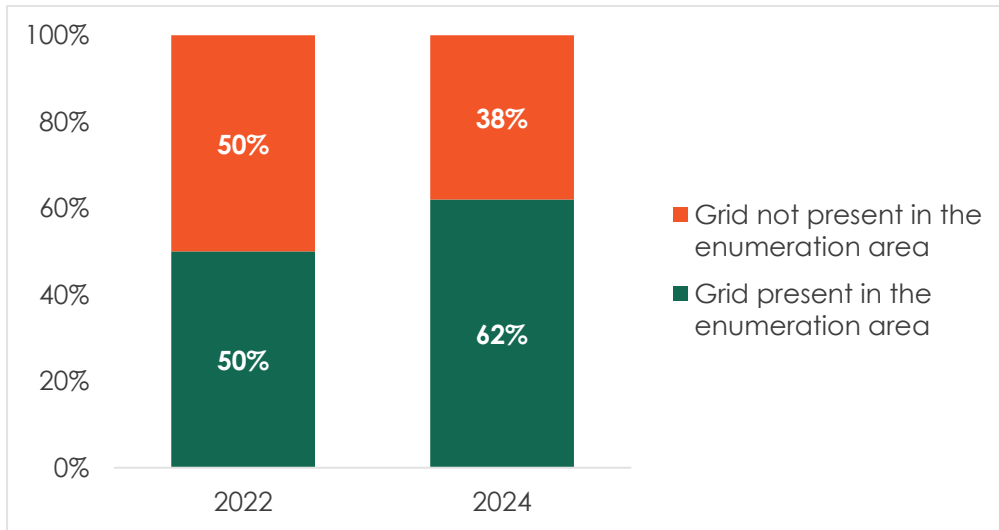
According to Afrobarometer's 2024 survey in Uganda, more than six in 10 citizens (62%) live in areas served by an electricity grid, a proportion that has increased by 12 percentage points since 2022 (Figure 1).¹

The presence of the electricity grid is far more limited in rural areas (53%) than in cities (80%). Respondents with post-secondary education (84%) and citizens who are economically well off (67%) are more likely to live in areas served by an electricity grid than people with no formal education (41%) and the poorest respondents (57%) (Figure 2).²

¹ Afrobarometer samples are based on a selection of enumeration areas (EAs) drawn randomly from the national census frame. In most countries, eight interviews are conducted in each selected EA, so interview teams usually visit between 150 (for surveys with n=1,200) and 300 (for surveys with n=2,400) EAs. 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 figures reported here for presence of an electric grid is higher than for findings captured in individual interviews.

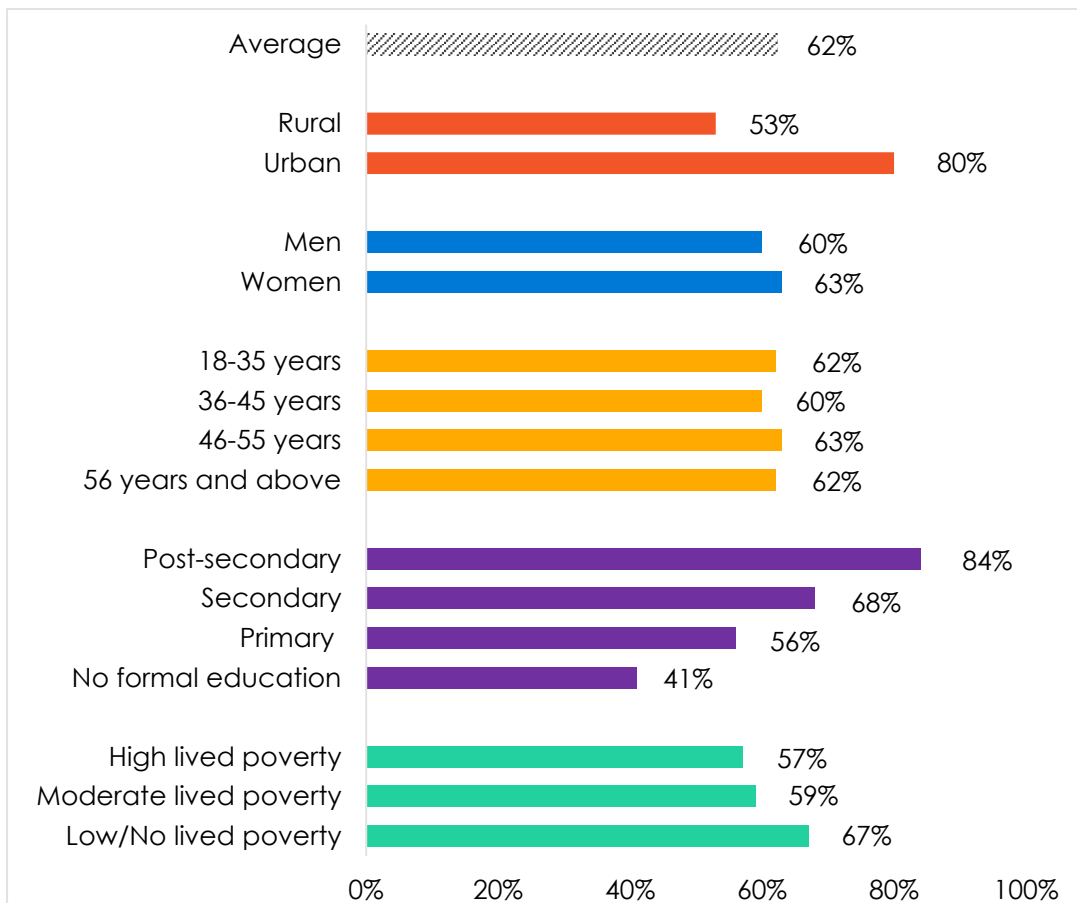
² Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: Presence of electricity grid | Uganda | 2022-2024



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?

Figure 2: Presence of electricity grid | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



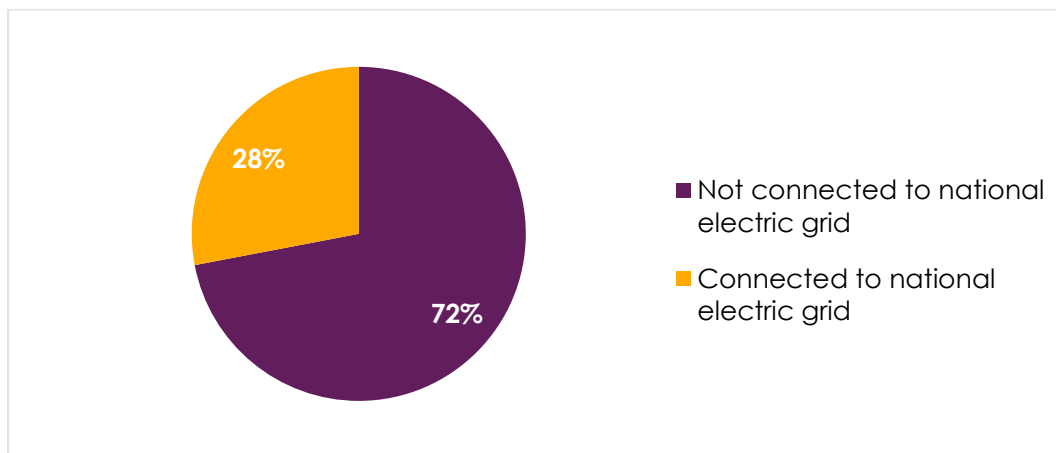
Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access?

Connection to the electricity grid

Living in areas served by an electricity grid does not 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.

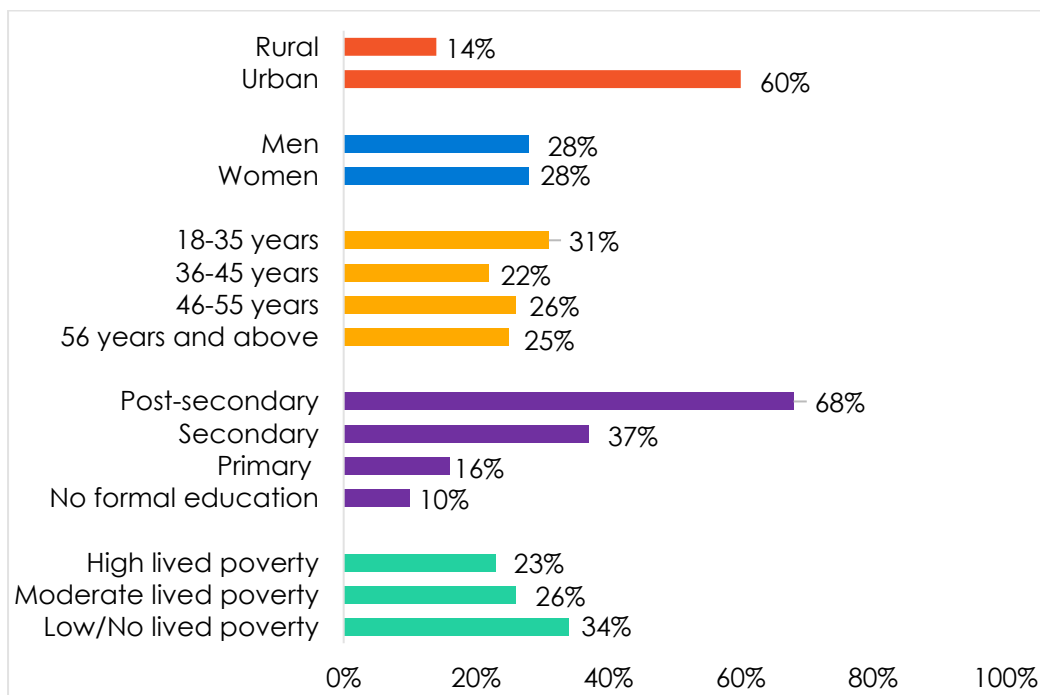
Fewer than three in 10 Ugandans (28%) live in households that are connected to the national power grid (Figure 3). Connections are particularly rare among rural residents (14%), citizens with no formal education (10%), and those experiencing high lived poverty (23%) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Connection to electricity grid | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from Uganda Electricity Distribution Co. Ltd. or Umeme?

Figure 4: Connection to electricity grid | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



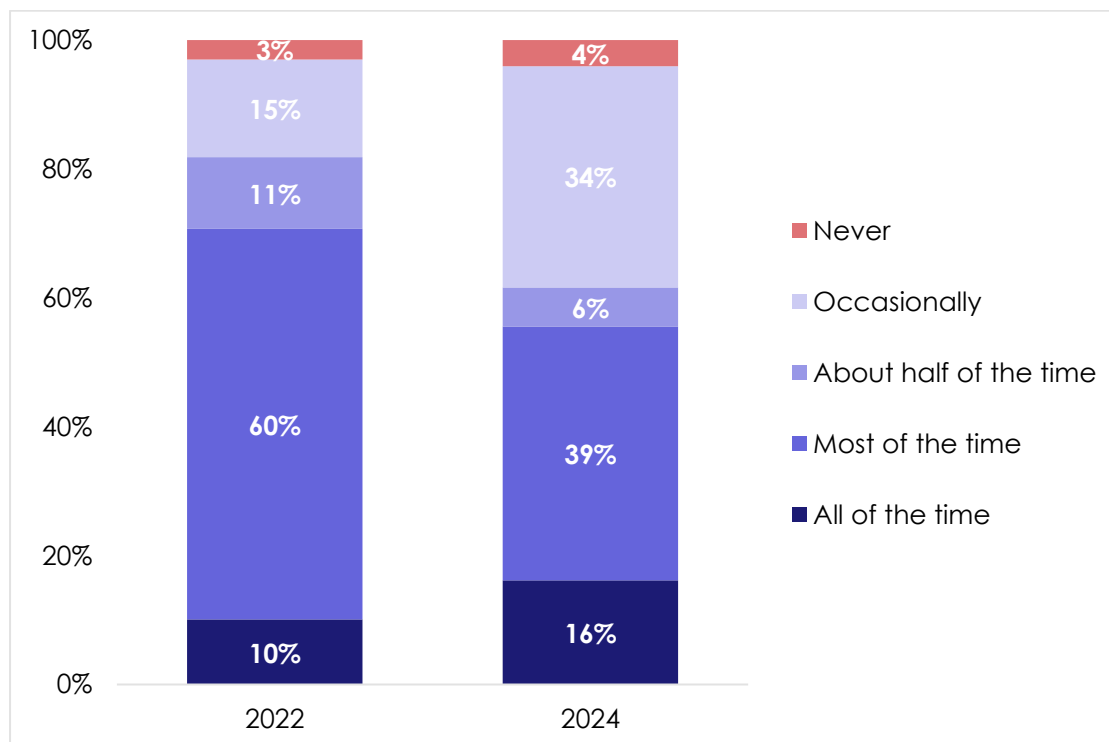
Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from Uganda Electricity Distribution Co. Ltd. or Umeme?

Reliable supply of electricity

Among citizens who report being connected to the electricity grid, 55% say that power is available “most” or “all” of the time, while the rest say it works “about half of the time” (6%), “occasionally” (34%), or “never” (4%) (Figure 5).

The share of connected respondents who enjoy reliable electricity (i.e. that is available most/all of the time) has dropped by 15 percentage points compared to 2022.

Figure 5: Reliable electricity supply | Uganda | 2022-2024

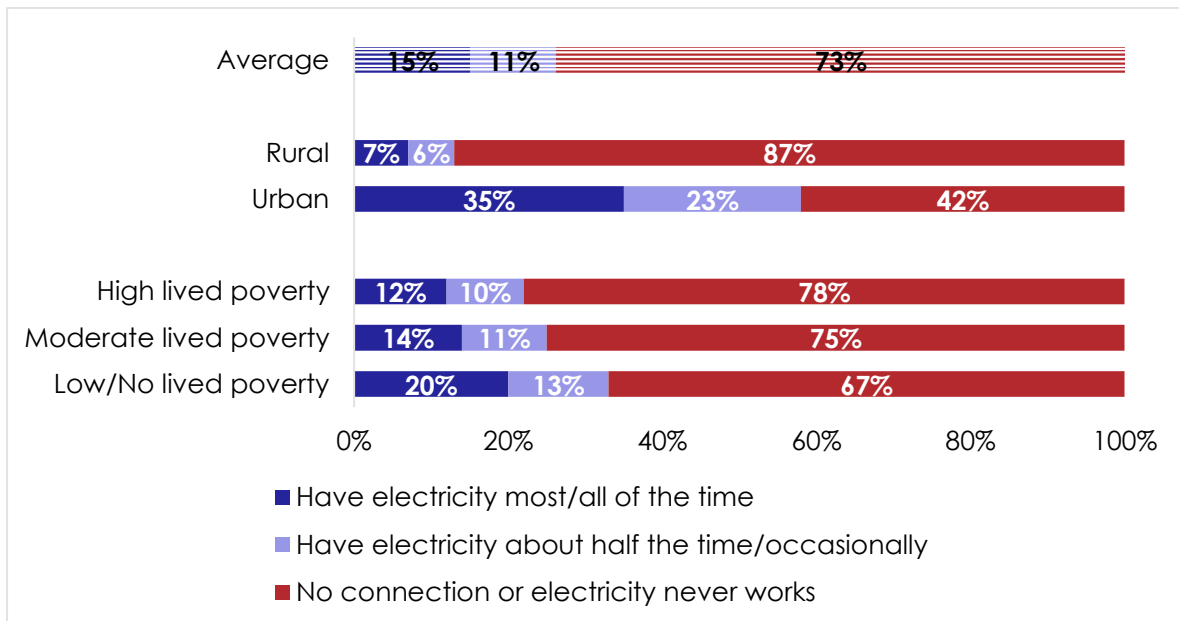


Respondents with connections to the national electricity grid were asked: How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (Respondents without a connection to the grid are excluded.)

This means that when we consider all households – including those with no access to a grid or no connection to an existing grid – only 15% of Ugandans enjoy electricity that is available most/all of the time, including just 7% of rural residents and 12% of those experiencing high lived poverty (Figure 6).

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Figure 6: Reliable electricity supply | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024

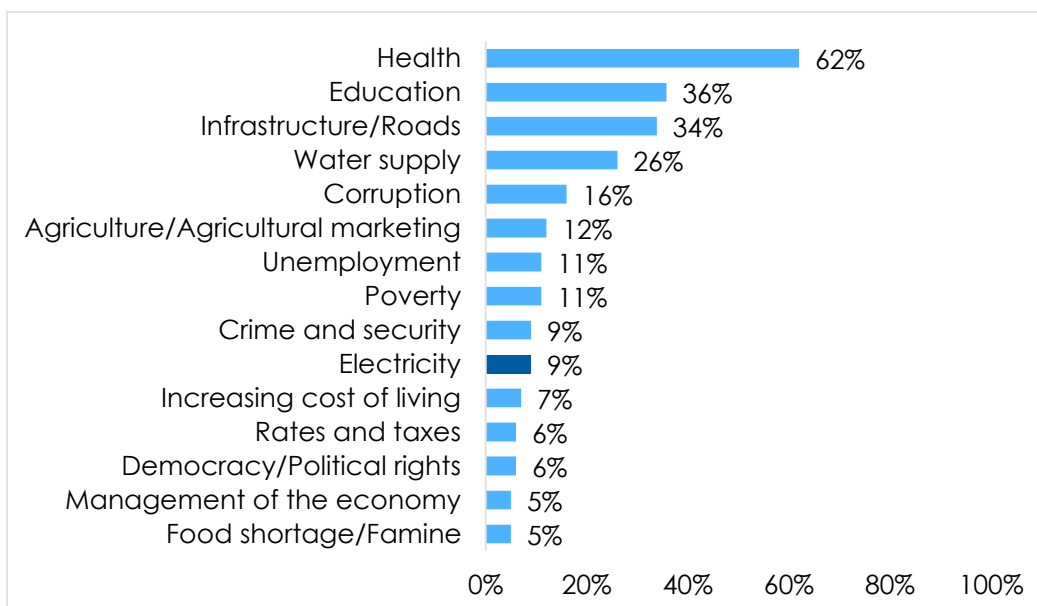


Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from Uganda Electricity Distribution Co. Ltd. or Umeme? [If "yes":] How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

Priority and government performance

When Ugandans were asked to cite the most important problems that the government should address, electricity comes out in ninth place, cited by 9% of respondents as one of their top three priorities for government action (Figure 7).

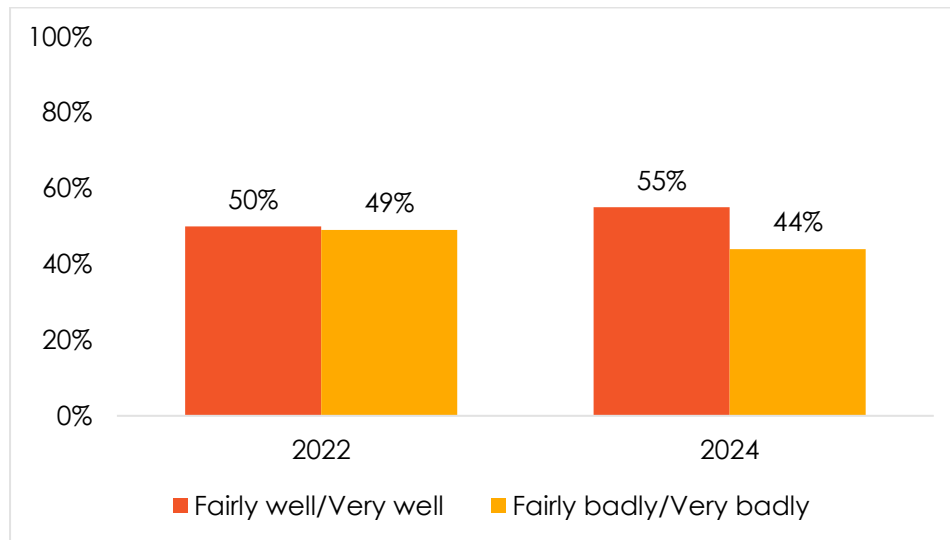
Figure 7: Most important problems | Uganda | 2024



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)

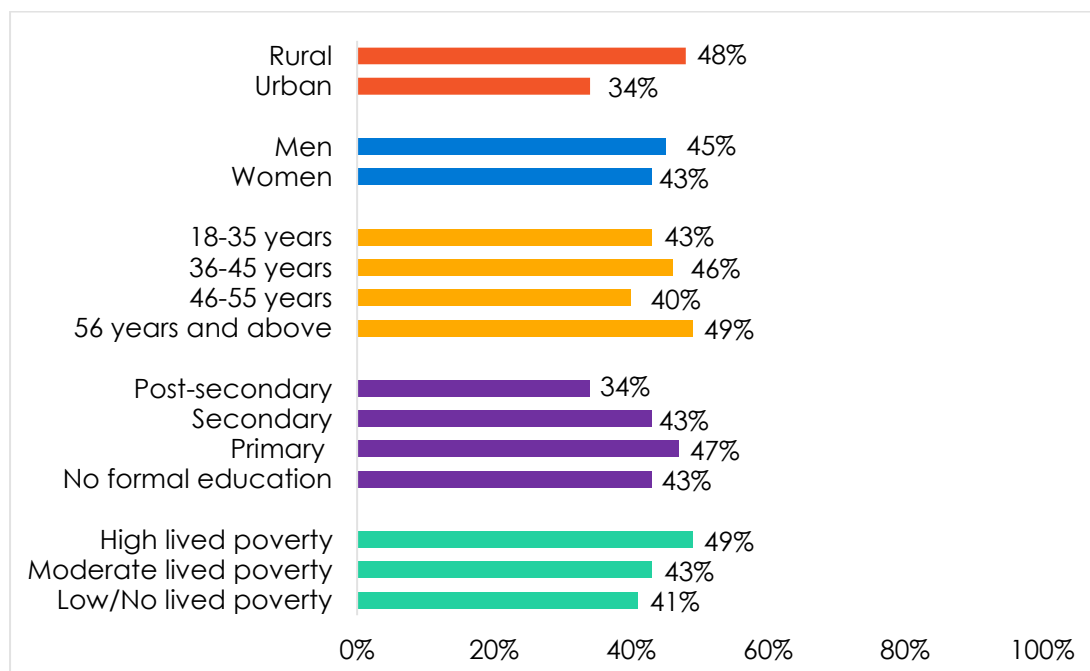
Even so, more than half (55%) of Ugandans say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” on providing a reliable supply of electricity, a 5-percentage-point improvement compared to 2022 (Figure 8). More than four in 10 (44%) say it is doing a poor job, an assessment that is especially common in rural areas (48%), among the elderly (49%), and among those experiencing high lived poverty (49%) (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Government performance on electricity supply | Uganda | 2022-2024



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?

Figure 9: Government performing badly on electricity supply | by demographic group | Uganda | 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

Uganda's provision of electricity faces considerable challenges of access and reliability. While a substantial portion of the population live within reach of the national grid, most remain unconnected, and many of those who are connected deal with frequent outages.

Public assessments of the government's performance in this sector have improved slightly, but almost half of citizens say it is doing a poor job, underscoring the need to expand the grid, enhance its reliability, and pursue efforts to promote alternative sources of electricity to meet the needs and expectations of the Ugandan populace.

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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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