

Advison Lesotho



Dispatch No. 918 | 6 December 2024

Many Basotho eye jobs in South Africa, but most favour limited in-migration

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 918 | Libuseng Malephane

Summary

High unemployment, persistent poverty, and rising food insecurity due to climate-change impacts on agriculture (Lesotho Times, 2024) make out-migration a central issue in Lesotho. The 2016 Population and Housing Census estimated that about one in 12 Lesotho citizens were living outside the country (Bureau of Statistics, 2018; International Organization for Migration, 2024), though unofficial estimates place the total far higher (Public Eye, 2024a). More than 99% of those migrating go to South Africa, their economically powerful neighbour, where Basotho make up about 11% of immigrants (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

Remittances from labour migrants made up about 24% of gross domestic product in 2023 (Global Economy, 2024). But many Basotho who leave for better work opportunities, particularly those entering South Africa illegally, are at risk of exploitative labour practices, human trafficking, and sexual abuse (U.S. State Department, 2024).

They also contend with high costs for sending money home from South Africa, even though both countries are in the Common Monetary Area (World Bank, 2018; Christianson, 2023). A more stringent and costly electronic funds transfer regime that became operational in October has made the situation worse (South African Reserve Bank, 2024; Post, 2024).

To address these issues, the government developed the Lesotho Remittance Strategy in 2018 and the Lesotho National Migration Development Policy in 2021 (European Union Global Diaspora Facility, 2024). Several meetings between Lesotho and South Africa officials have attempted to ease cross-border movement by Basotho (Public Eye, 2024b). The Lesotho government also established an Anti-Trafficking Multi-Sectoral Committee to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts and allocated a budget for awareness, training, and prevention activities (U.S. State Department, 2024).

Ahead of International Migrants Day (18 December), the latest Afrobarometer survey sheds light on Basotho perspectives on migration. Findings show that while citizens favour the free movement of people to work and trade in Southern Africa, most want fewer foreigners to come into their own country. This view prevails even though a majority of respondents profess no reservations about living next door to foreign workers or refugees.

Meanwhile, nearly half of adults have themselves considered emigration, mostly in search of work in South Africa. Young and highly educated citizens are especially likely to contemplate moving abroad.

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 standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020 and 2022.

Key findings

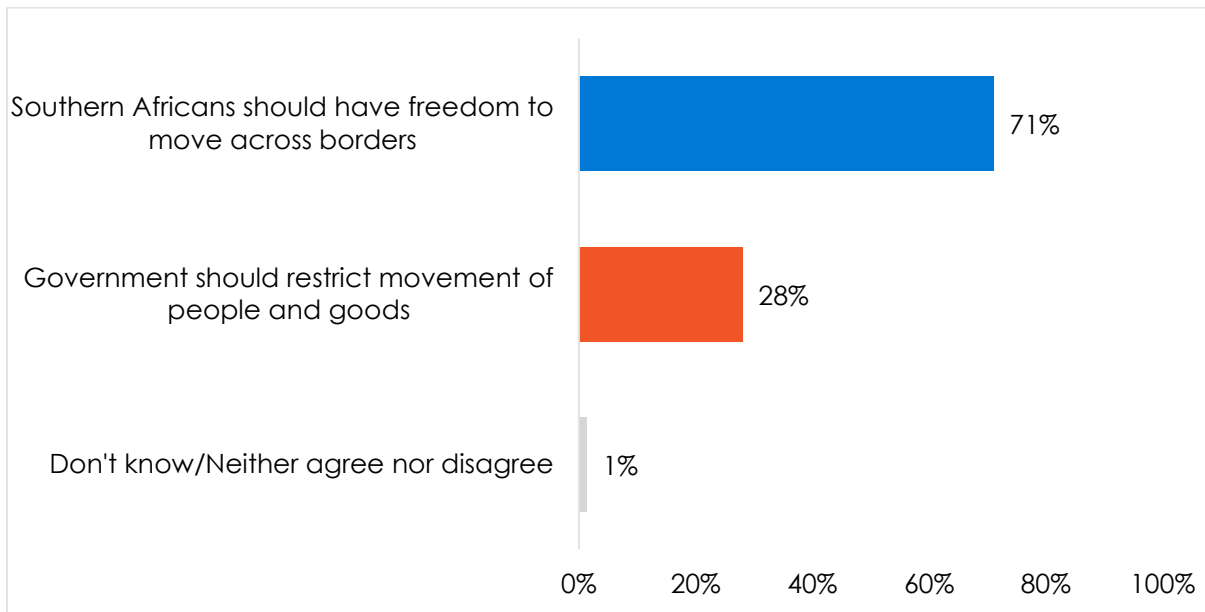
- Seven in 10 Basotho (71%) say Southern Africans should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.
 - But three-quarters (76%) say that in practice, crossing international borders is difficult, an assessment that has been increasing steadily.
- Only one in 20 Basotho (5%) say they have heard of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).
- Basotho are divided on immigrants' economic impact on Lesotho: 46% see it as positive, while 49% say it is negative.
- Majorities say they would like or wouldn't mind living next door to foreign workers or immigrants (75%) and refugees (64%).
- Even so, two-thirds of Basotho say the government should reduce the number of foreign job seekers it allows to enter the country (37%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (28%).
 - A similar majority favour reducing (37%) or eliminating (29%) entry by refugees.
- Nearly half (46%) of respondents say they have considered leaving Lesotho.
 - This figure is highest among citizens with post-secondary education (62%), youth (56%), urban residents (53%), and men (51%).
- The most common reasons cited for potential emigration are economic, led by the search for work opportunities (72%).
- The most popular destination among potential emigrants is South Africa (72%).

Freedom of movement and the AfCFTA

Freedom of movement is a basic human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 13 allows for all human beings to travel across borders, while Article 14 provides for anyone to seek refuge from persecution (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). What do Basotho think about the free movement of people in the region?

Most Basotho (71%) agree that "people living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders to trade or work in other countries" (Figure 1). About three in 10 (28%) would prefer that the government limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

Figure 1: Views on free movement of Southern Africans | Lesotho | 2024



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

Statement 1: People living in Southern Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.

Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, the Lesotho government should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

But how easy is cross-border travel in reality? Three-fourths (76%) of Basotho say it is “difficult” or “very difficult” for people in Southern Africa to enter other countries in order to work or trade (Figure 2).

This assessment is fairly consistent across key demographic groups. Even among the least pessimistic groups – youth (71%) and respondents with post-secondary education (67%) – more than two-thirds say cross-border travel is hard.

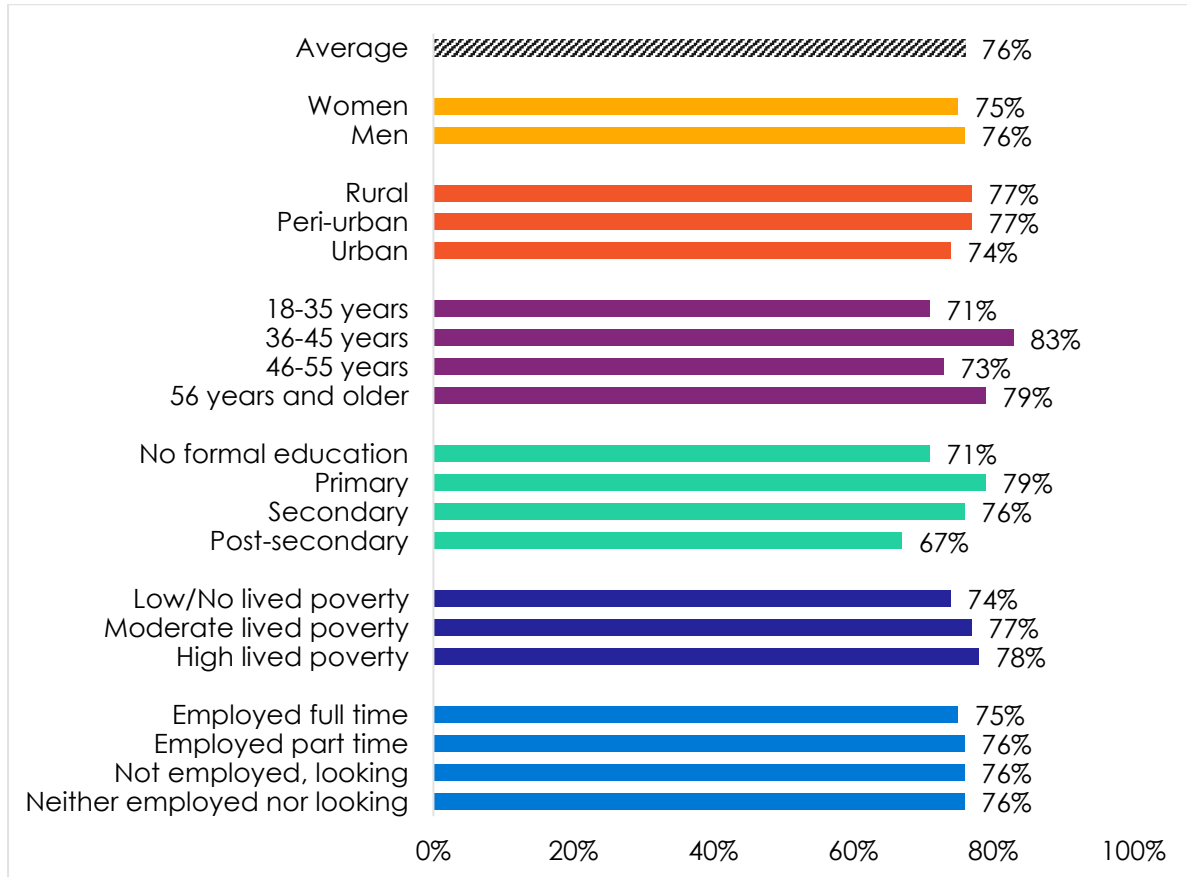
The perception of difficulty in crossing borders has been increasing steadily, from 65% in 2017 to 76% in 2024 (Figure 3).

Cross-border movement is a central aspect of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its complement, the Free Movement of Persons Protocol. The agreement establishing the AfCFTA, signed by 54 African Union (AU) member states, seeks to create a single continental market and boost trade between African countries by eliminating trade barriers, thereby fostering industrialisation, spurring investment, and creating jobs for millions of Africans (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

While the AfCFTA focuses on the free movement of goods and services, the free movement protocol, adopted by AU heads of state in 2018, promotes labour mobility across the continent by, among other provisions, eliminating visa requirements for intra-African travelers (ISS Africa, 2022). However, as of 2023, only four countries had ratified the protocol (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

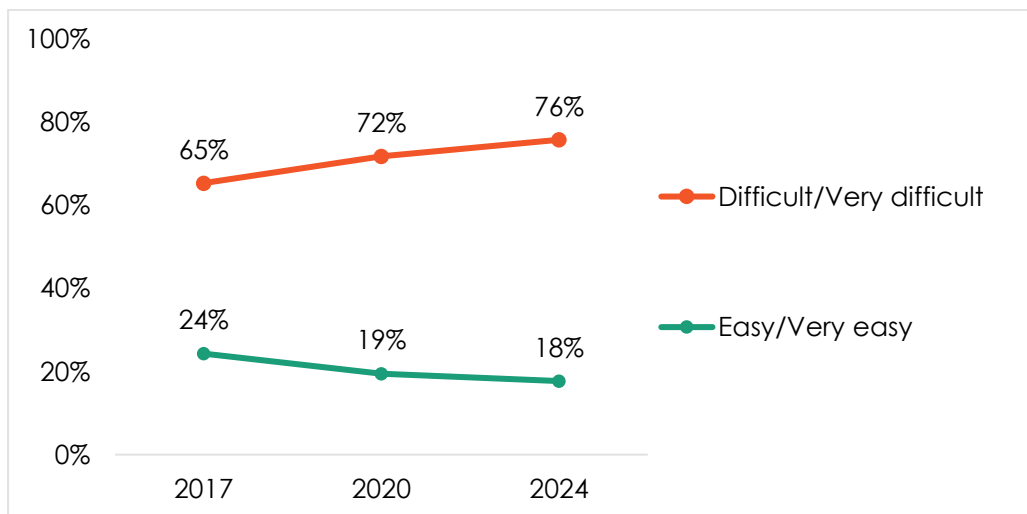
The AfCFTA entered into force in 2019, and trade commenced under the banner of the agreement on 1 January 2021. However, the effects of this agreement don't seem to be felt very widely as yet. Three years after trading began, a vast majority (94%) of Basotho surveyed have not heard of the AfCFTA (Figure 4).

Figure 2: Difficulty in cross-border movement | by demographic group | Lesotho
 | 2024



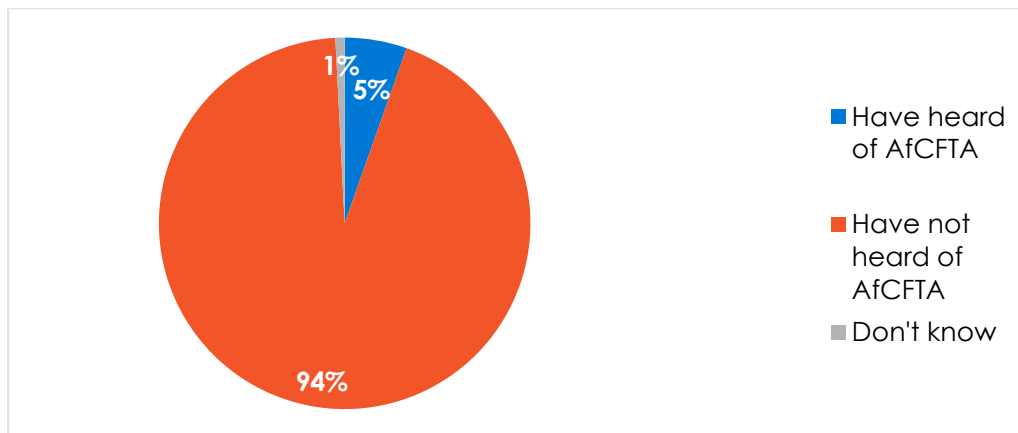
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in Southern Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "difficult" or "very difficult")

Figure 3: Difficulty in cross border movement | Lesotho | 2017-2024



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in Southern Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Figure 4: Heard of the AfCFTA? | Lesotho | 2024



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

Attitudes toward migrants

Most Basotho support freedom of movement, at least for people within the region. Are their views consistent with their attitudes toward immigrants?

Basotho are split on the economic impact of migration. Nearly half (46%) of citizens believe that migrant workers are good for their nation's economy, compared to 49% who say it is "fairly bad" or "very bad" for the economy "if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years" (Figure 5).

Fully six in 10 respondents with post-secondary education (60%) see the value in having foreign workers, compared to just 40%-45% of those with primary schooling or less. Positive assessments of immigrants' economic contributions are also somewhat higher among men than women (48% vs. 44%), urbanites than rural residents (49% vs. 44%), and younger respondents (48%-50%) than older age groups (42%-44%).

Basotho also express largely tolerant attitudes toward living next door to immigrants. Three-quarters (75%) say they wouldn't mind having foreign workers or immigrants as neighbours, including 35% who would "somewhat" or "strongly" like the idea (Figure 6).

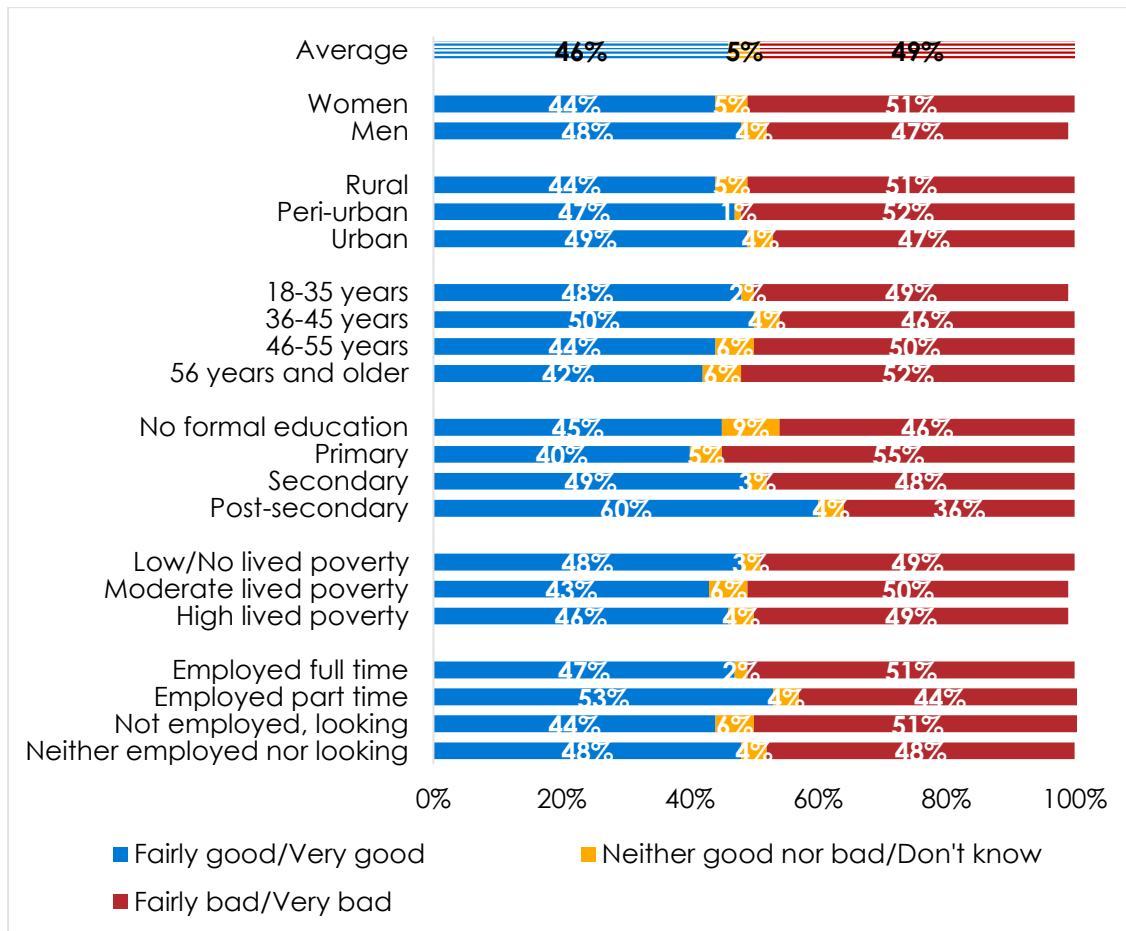
The majority expressing tolerant attitudes toward refugees is weaker (64%), suggesting that some citizens may accept foreigners conditionally, perhaps based on preconceptions about the likely contributions of foreign workers and refugees.

Men are somewhat more likely than women to express tolerant attitudes toward both foreign workers (81% vs. 69%) and refugees (55% vs. 46%) (Figure 7). So are urbanites compared to rural and peri-urban residents.

Immigrants and refugees also find more tolerant attitudes among the most educated citizens than among those with less schooling, as well as among the poorest respondents compared to their better-off counterparts.¹

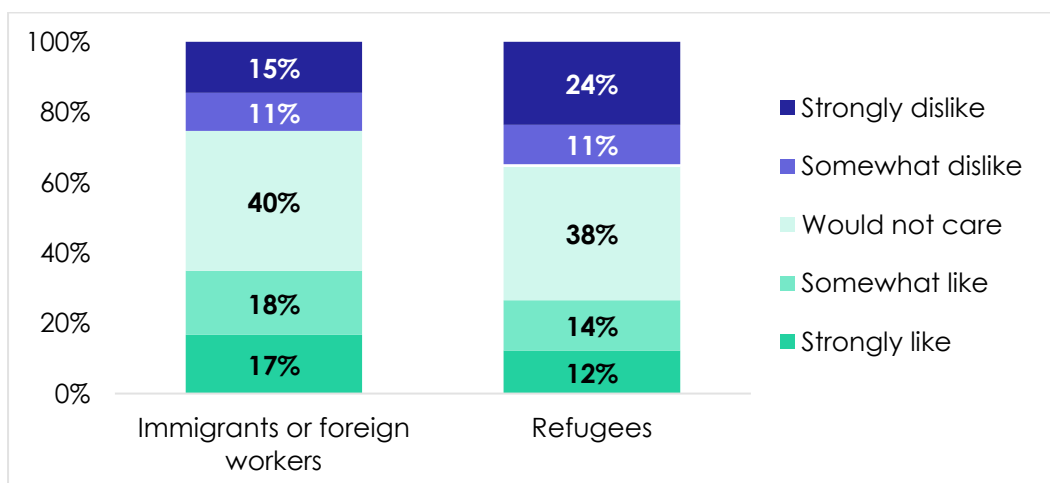
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the previous year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 5: Economic impact of immigration | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



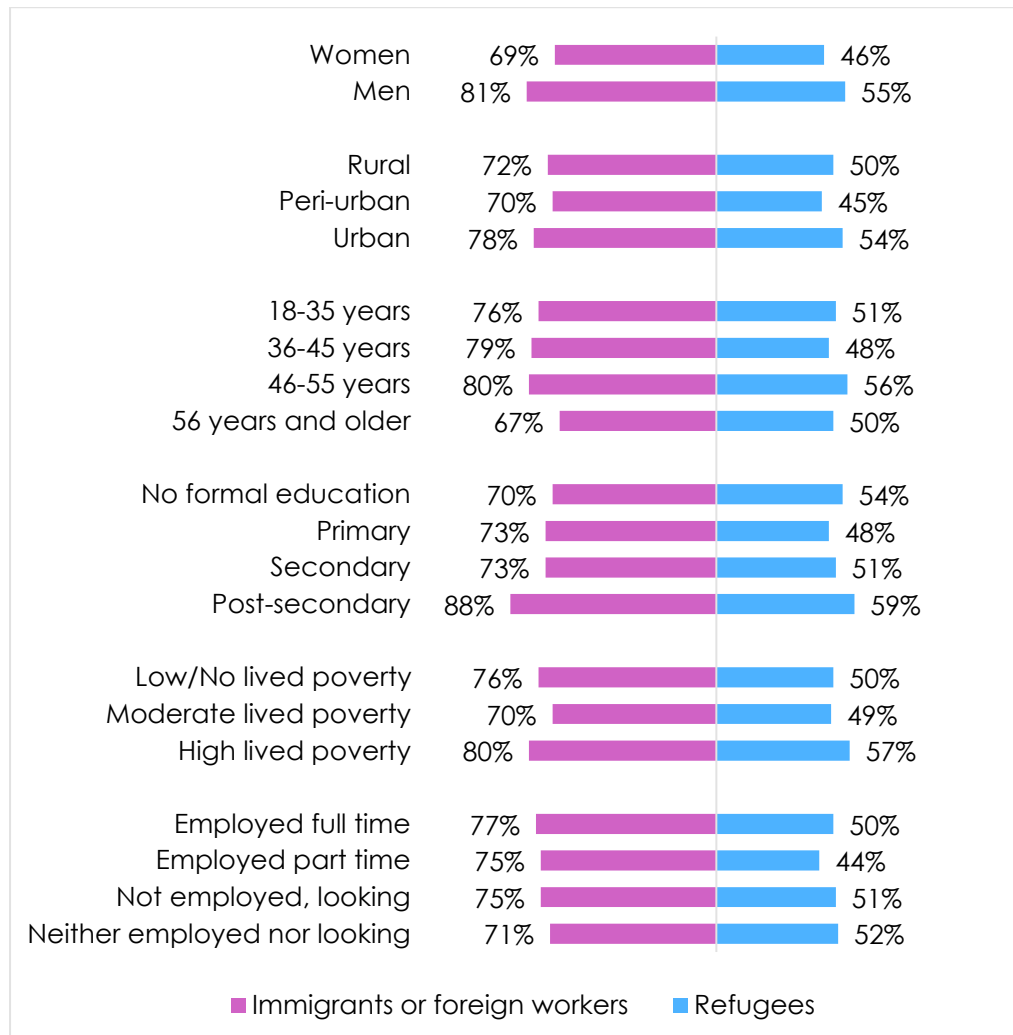
Respondents were asked: Would you say it is generally bad or good for Lesotho's economy if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years?

Figure 6: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution?

Figure 7: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | by demographic group
 | Lesotho | 2024

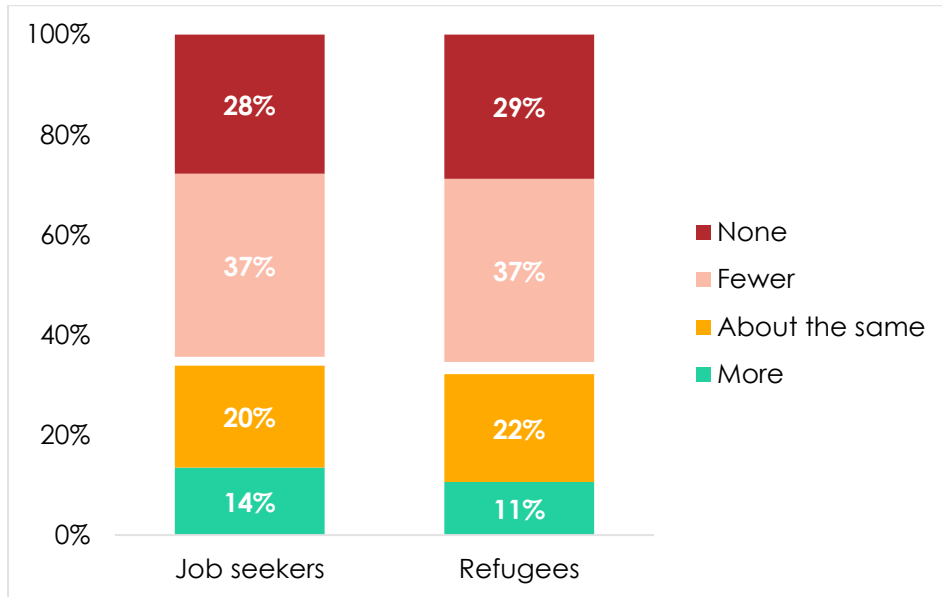


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution? (% who say “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “would not care”)

Despite these generally favourable views of immigrants, survey findings show that Basotho are apprehensive about letting foreigners into their country: About two-thirds (65%) say the government should reduce the number of job seekers it allows to enter (37%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (28%) (Figure 8). Similarly, 66% favour reducing (37%) or eliminating (29%) entry by refugees.

Only slightly more than one in 10 respondents would welcome more prospective workers (14%) and asylum seekers (11%).

Figure 8: How many migrants should be allowed into the country? | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked:

Do you think Lesotho should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country?

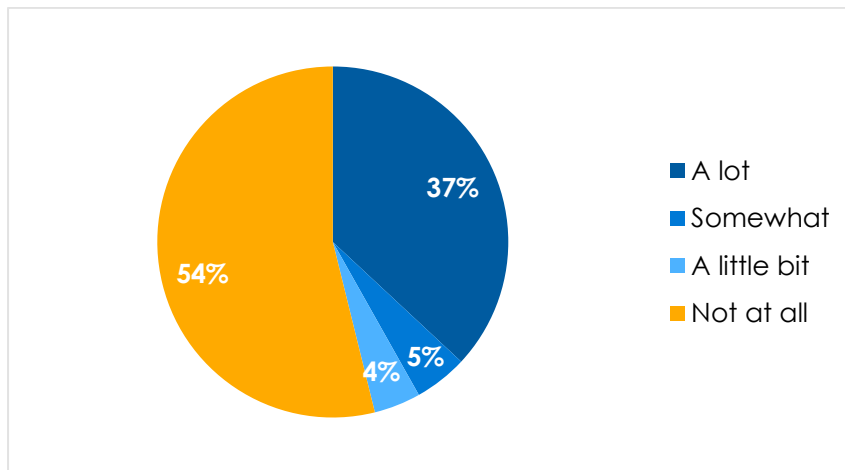
Do you think Lesotho should allow more or fewer refugees from other countries to come and live in this country?

Looking abroad: Basotho’s attitudes toward emigration

People leave home for a variety of reasons: to escape conflict or resource scarcity, to avoid discrimination and oppression, to pursue better economic opportunities, or for any one or more of a myriad other reasons. Do Basotho think about emigrating? If so, what propels them to do so?

When it comes to leaving their country, nearly half (46%) of Basotho say they have contemplated the possibility, including 37% who have considered it “a lot,” 5% “somewhat,” and 4% “a little bit” (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Considered emigrating | Lesotho | 2024

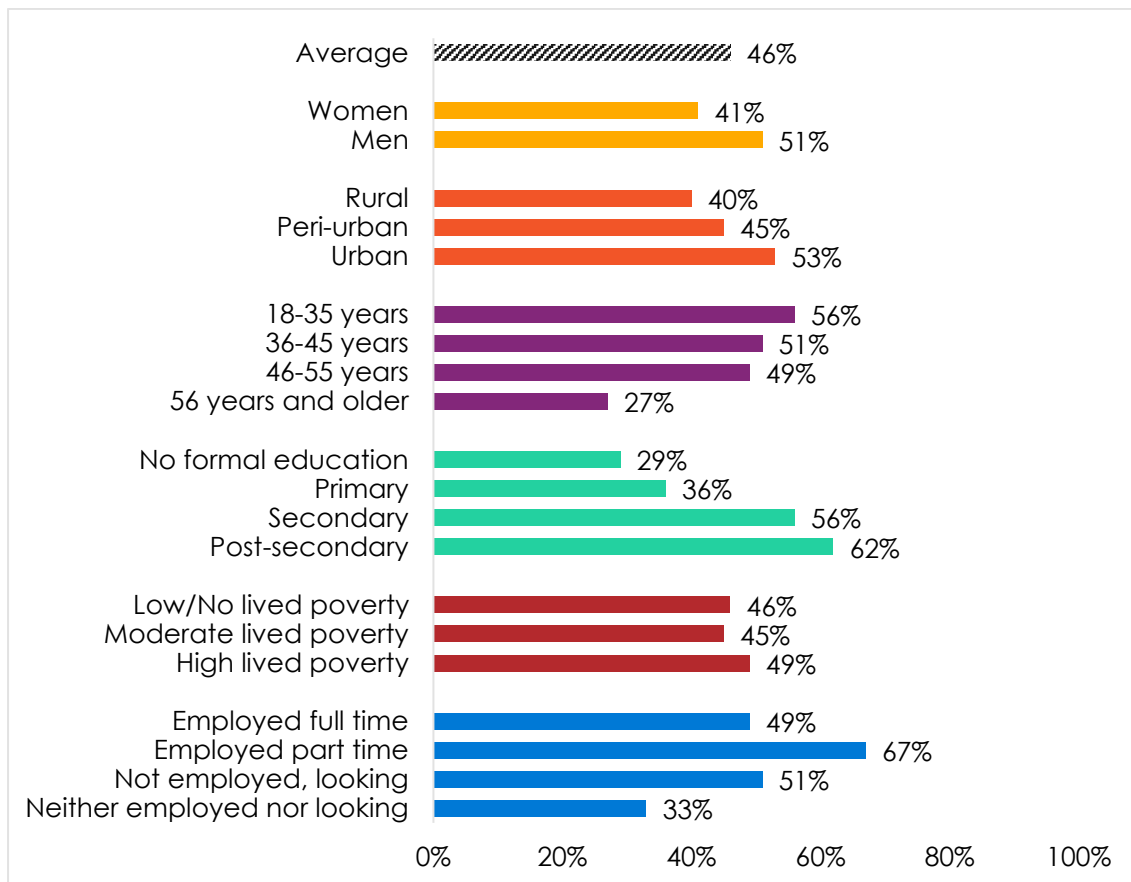


Respondents were asked: *How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?*

Interest in leaving the country increases with respondents' education level, ranging from just 29% of those lacking formal education to 62% of the most educated, and decreases with age, from 56% of the youth to 27% of the elderly (Figure 10). Urbanites are significantly more likely to consider emigrating than rural residents (53% vs. 40%).

The poorest respondents (49%) are slightly more likely than their better-off counterparts (45%-46%) to say they have thought about leaving the country. Two-thirds (67%) of those employed part time and about half of those employed full time (49%) and those looking for work (51%) have also considered emigrating.

Figure 10: Considered emigrating | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024

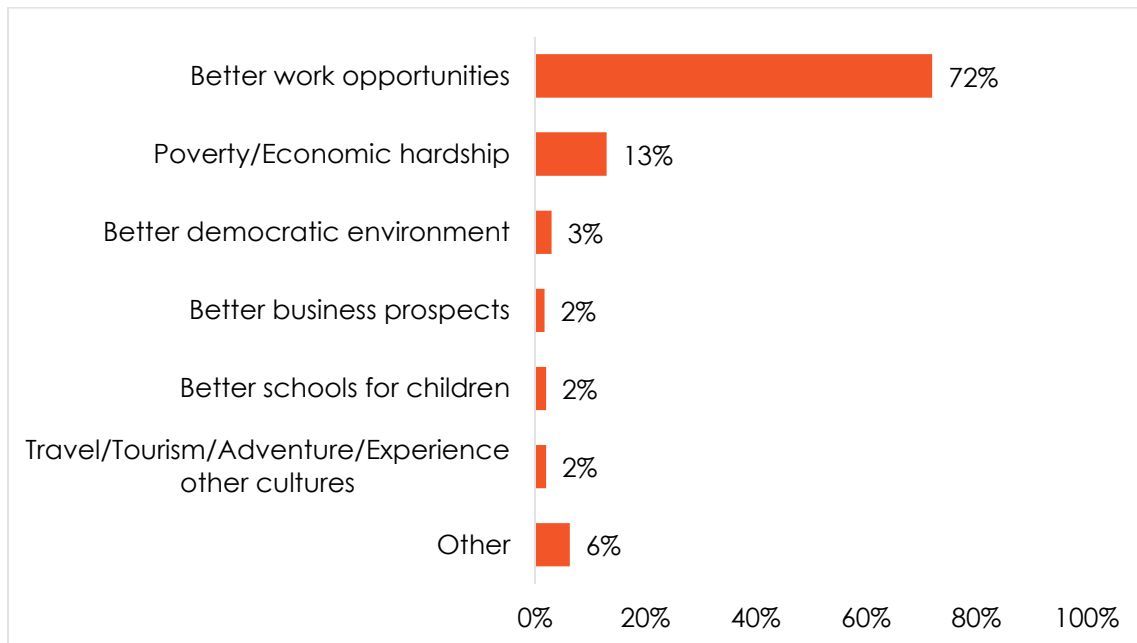


Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live? (% who say "a little bit," "somewhat," or "a lot")

Among those who have considered emigration, the most frequently cited reasons are economic: 72% would leave for work opportunities, and 13% to escape poverty or economic hardship (Figure 11).

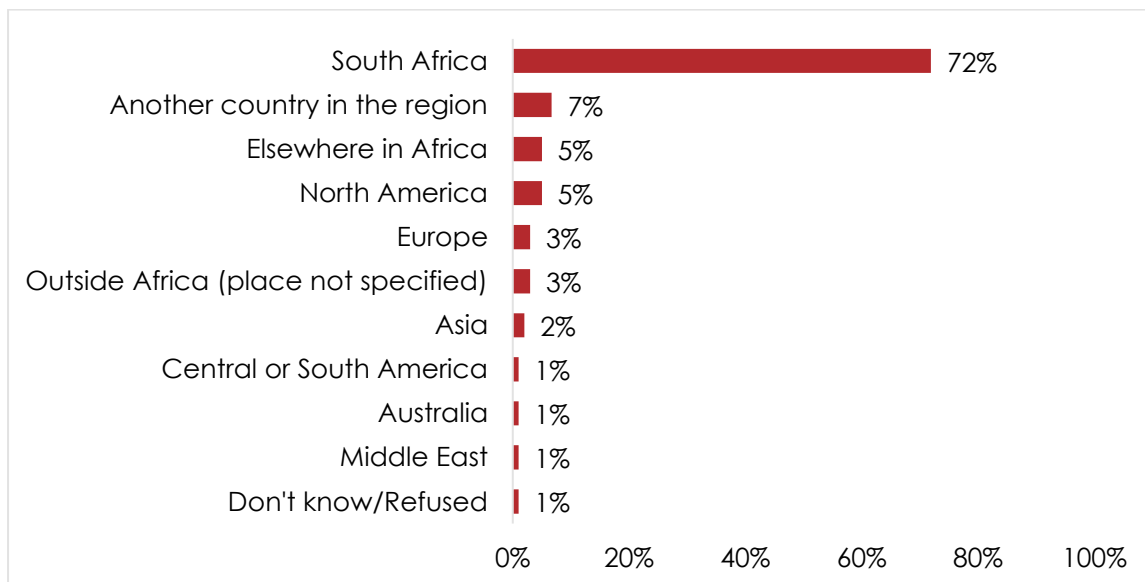
The most popular destination for potential Basotho emigrants is South Africa (72%) (Figure 12). About one in eight (12%) would move elsewhere in Africa, either within (7%) or outside (5%) the Southern African region. Only about one in 10 would opt for North America (5%), Europe (3%), or Asia (2%).

Figure 11: Reasons to emigrate | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked: There are several reasons why people leave their home to live in another country for an extended period of time. What about you? What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from Lesotho? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)

Figure 12: Preferred destination for emigration | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked: If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)

Conclusion

Migration is an important and multifaceted challenge in Lesotho, whose government is actively working to ease cross-border movement for its citizens. While Basotho express

support for free movement across international borders, they are less inclined to welcome immigrants and refugees; indeed, a majority report a desire to have fewer or none at all.

Officials are also trying to mitigate problems facing outgoing labour migrants, especially nationals working in South Africa. As Afrobarometer's survey data confirm, many Basotho are thinking about seeking greener pastures abroad, specifically in South Africa.

Most who have considered emigration cite economic reasons. This suggests that, until Lesotho makes progress on deep-seated economic challenges, the desire to leave will remain prevalent among its citizens.

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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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

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