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Zimbabweans grow increasingly dissatisfied with government's provision of electricity

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 952 | Asafika Mpako and Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

Following major nationwide power outages at the end of last year, Zimbabwe's crippling electricity crisis has been thrust into the spotlight once more (Zimbabwe Mail, 2024a). In a spectacular display of the country's dire electricity situation, Parliament was unexpectedly submerged in darkness during Finance and Investment Promotion Minister Mthuli Ncube's 2025 national budget speech (ZimEye, 2024).

Members of Parliament have been demanding a decisive plan of action from the government to deal with extensive "load shedding" – power cuts – that often last up to 18 hours per day (Zimbabwe Mail, 2024a, 2024b).

In his speech, Ncube predicted that the energy crisis will endure until at least 2030, citing insufficient capacity to meet growing demand (Matola, 2024). In the face of this challenge, the government has set aside ZiG259.8 million (about U.S. \$10 million) of the 2025 budget for the Ministry of Energy and Power Development to increase investment in power generation, transmission, and distribution as well as rural electrification, and stakeholders have been urged to invest in energy generation to help tackle the deficit (Nyoni, 2024). The government has also committed to generating 1,100 megawatts of power from renewable energy sources by 2025 and 2,100 megawatts by 2030 (Bulawayo24, 2024).

Amid this crisis and recent calls by Zimbabwean activists for the government to declare a state of disaster over the matter (Mbofana, 2024), a 2024 Afrobarometer survey provides an on-the-ground look at electricity access in the country.

Findings show that while roughly half of citizens live in zones served by the national electricity grid, only about one in seven enjoy a reliable supply of electricity from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), including fewer than one in 20 rural residents.

Half of Zimbabweans say they use alternative sources of energy. Solar power is the preferred off-grid power solution, utilised by nine in 10 respondents who resort to other sources of energy.

Two-thirds of citizens are critical of the government's performance on providing electricity, compared with fewer than half of respondents who expressed dissatisfaction in 2021.

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 Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 1 and 15 June 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 surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2022.

Key findings

- A slim majority (52%) of Zimbabweans live in zones served by the national electricity grid.
- About one-third (34%) of respondents live in households that are connected to the national power grid.
 - Fewer than one in 10 rural residents (8%) are connected to the grid, compared with a large majority (69%) of urban residents.
- Among those who are connected to the grid, only four in 10 say their electricity works “most of the time” (34%) or “all of the time” (6%).
- Combining connection and reliability rates shows that a mere 14% of all Zimbabweans enjoy a reliable supply of electricity from the national grid. Only 4% of rural residents report a reliable electricity supply.
- Half (50%) of those surveyed use sources of energy other than the national grid, among whom nine in 10 (89%) say they use solar panels.
 - Better-off Zimbabweans are nearly twice as likely as poor citizens to utilise alternative energy sources (64% vs 35%).
 - Rural residents are also more likely than urban inhabitants to rely on electricity from a source other than the national provider (55% vs. 43%).
- Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable supply of electricity, a figure that is up by 19 percentage points compared with 2021.
 - Negative appraisals are particularly widespread among the poor (75%).

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.

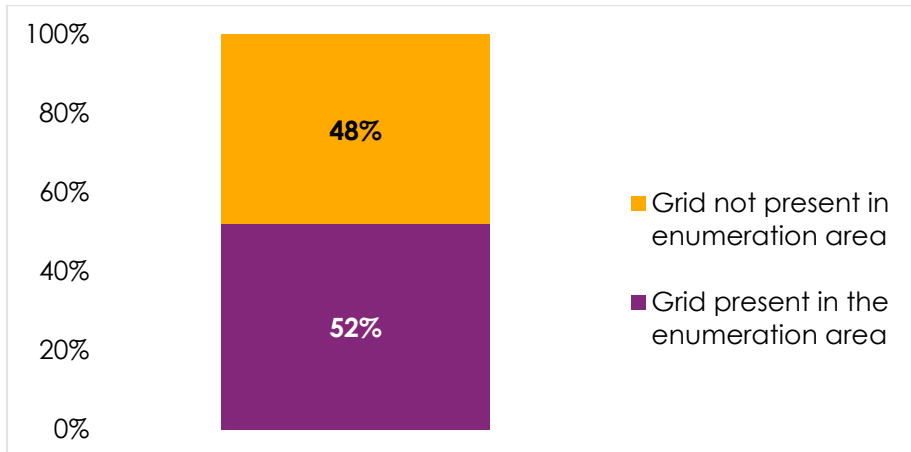
According to Afrobarometer’s 2024 survey in Zimbabwe, a slim majority (52%) of citizens live in areas served by an electricity grid (Figure 1).¹

The presence of the electric grid is drastically limited in rural areas: Only one-quarter (25%) of rural residents live within reach of the grid, compared with about nine in 10 urban dwellers (89%) (Figure 2). Zimbabweans with post-secondary education are almost three times as likely as those with primary schooling or less to have access to the grid (76% vs. 27%). Younger

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.

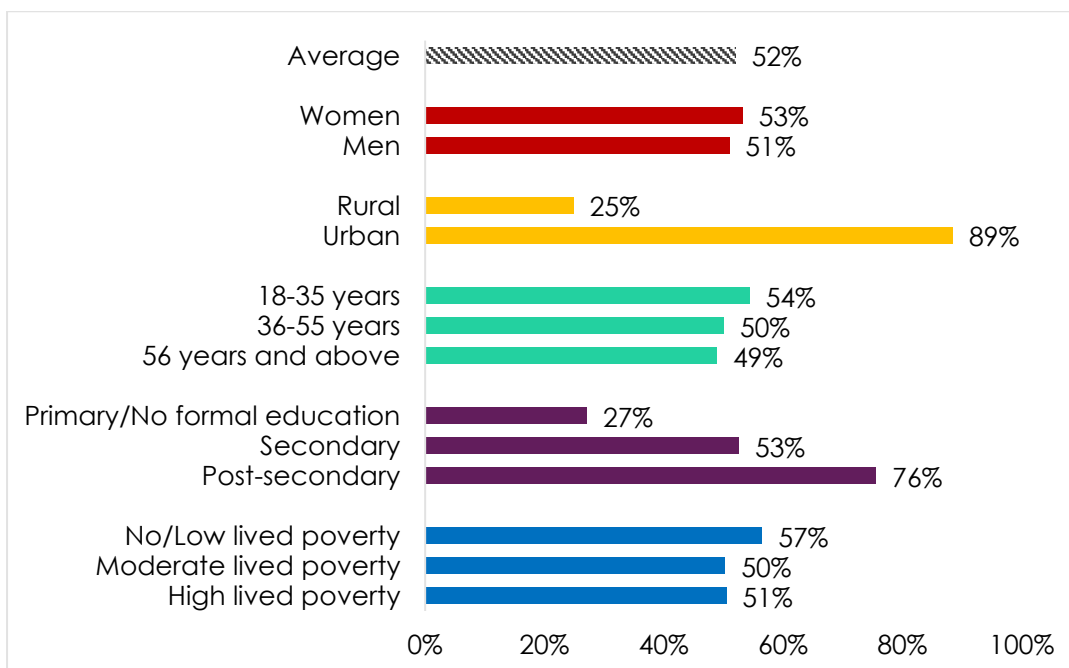
citizens (54% of those aged 18-35 years) and economically better-off respondents (57% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty²) are marginally more likely to live in zones served by an electricity grid than older citizens (49% of those aged 56 years and above) and the less well-off (50%-51%).

Figure 1: Presence of electricity grid | Zimbabwe | 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 | Zimbabwe | 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")

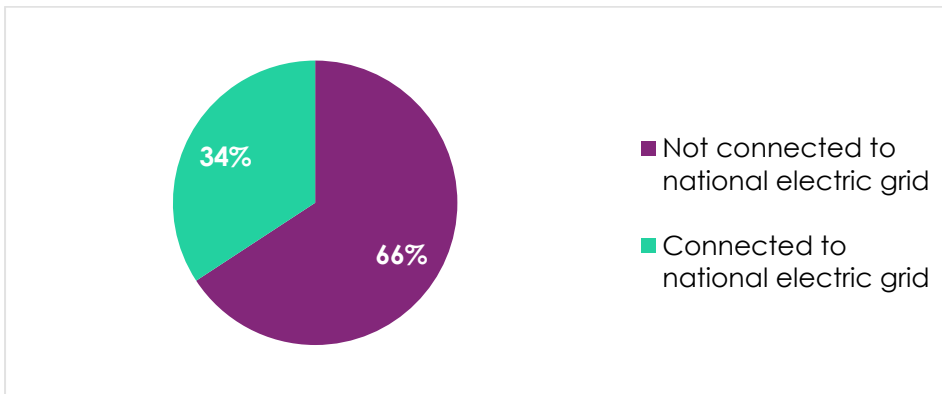
² Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

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. How many Zimbabweans are actually connected to the national grid?

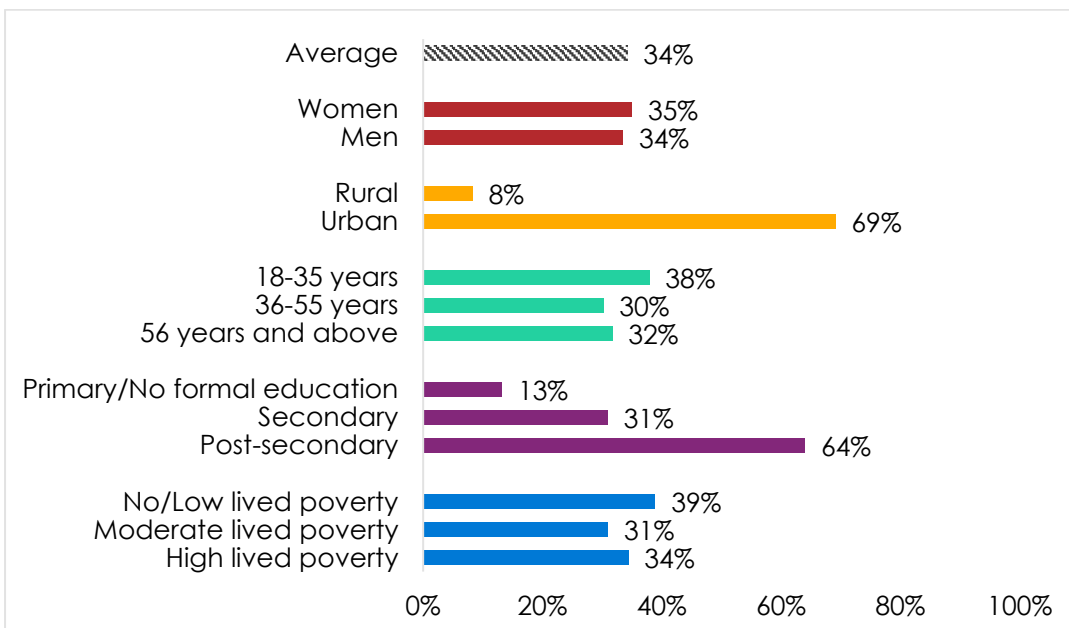
One-third (34%) of citizens live in households that are connected to the electricity grid, leaving two-thirds (66%) who have no connection (Figure 3). As might be expected, urbanities are far more likely to be connected to the power grid than rural residents (69% vs. 8%), as are citizens with post-secondary education (64%) compared with those with primary schooling or less (13%) (Figure 4). Younger citizens (38% of those aged 18-35 years) are also more likely to be connected than their elders (30%-32%).

Figure 3: Connection to the national electricity grid | Zimbabwe | 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA?

Figure 4: Connection to the national electricity grid | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2024



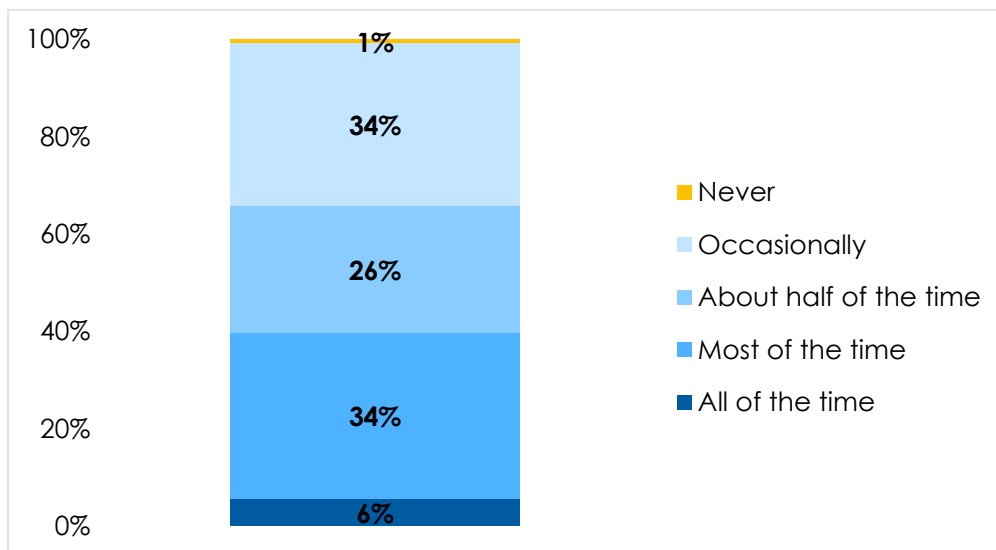
Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (% who say “yes”)

Reliable supply of electricity

Even if houses are connected to an electricity grid, their power supply may be erratic. How many Zimbabweans actually have reliable electricity?

Among citizens who report being connected to the power grid, four in 10 say their electricity works “most of the time” (34%) or “all of the time” (6%) (Figure 5). One-fourth (26%) say power is available only “about half of the time,” while a further one-third (34%) report only occasional electricity and 1% say they “never” receive power via the grid.

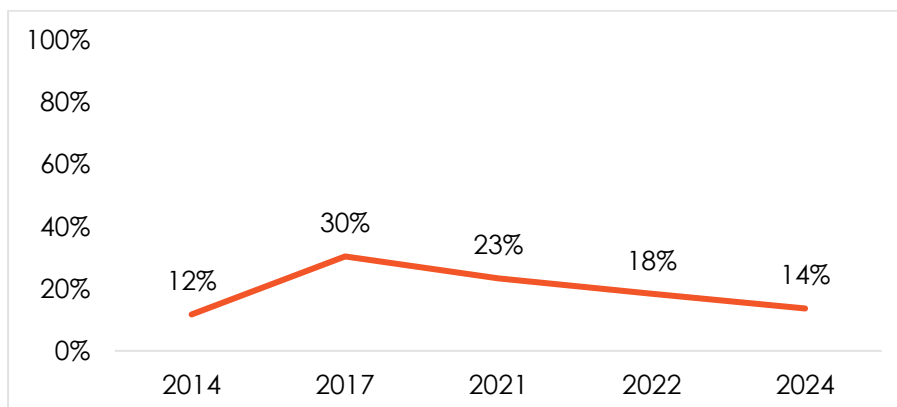
Figure 5: How often is electricity available? | Zimbabwe | 2024



Respondents who say they have a connection 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.)

Looking at the entire population (rather than only those who are connected to the grid), about one in seven Zimbabweans (14%) report having electricity from the national grid that works “most” or “all” of the time (Figure 6). The share of citizens with reliable electricity has halved since 2017, nearing the level it was at in 2014 (12%).

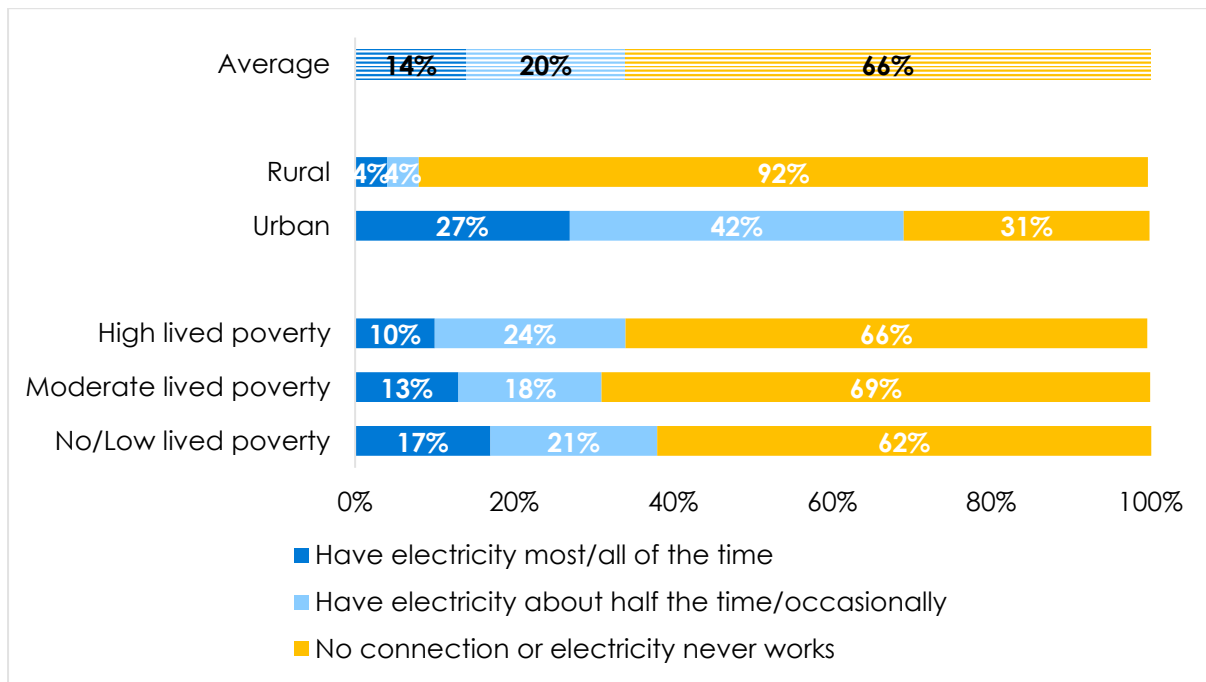
Figure 6: How many citizens have reliable electricity? | Zimbabwe | 2014-2024



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (If “yes”:) How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (% who say “most of the time” or “all of the time”)

Among the poorest respondents, 10% say they have reliable electricity, compared with 17% of those experiencing no or low lived poverty (Figure 7). And in rural areas, fewer than one in 20 citizens (4%) enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, as against more than one-fourth (27%) of urban residents.

Figure 7: How many citizens have reliable electricity? | by urban-rural location and lived poverty | Zimbabwe | 2024

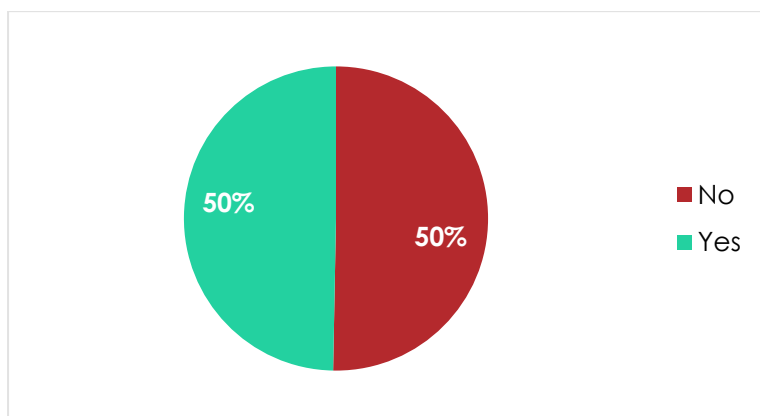


Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (If "yes":) How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

Alternative sources of electricity

Half (50%) of Zimbabweans say they use sources of electricity other than the national grid, either as their only source or as a supplement to the mains; the other half make no use of any other sources of energy (Figure 8).

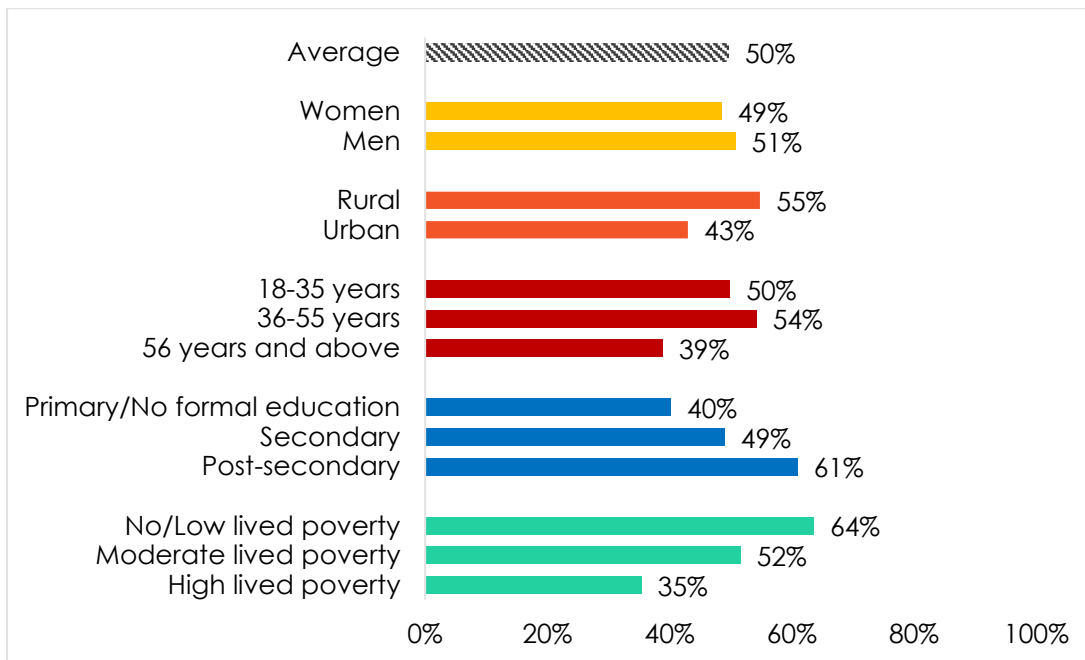
Figure 8: Do you use other sources of electricity? | Zimbabwe | 2024



Respondents were asked: Does your house use electric power from any source other than the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA?

Those most likely to use power sources other than the national grid include better-off individuals (64%) and Zimbabweans with post-secondary education (61%) (Figure 9). Perhaps as a result of the widespread lack of connection to the mains, rural inhabitants are more likely than their urban counterparts to rely on alternative sources of electricity (55% vs. 43%).

Figure 9: Use of other sources of electricity | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2024

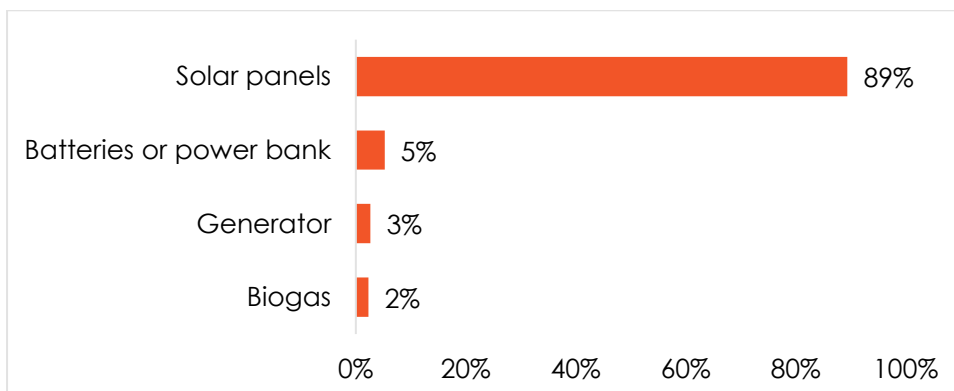


Respondents were asked: Does your house use electric power from any source other than the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? (% who say "yes")

Among respondents who use non-grid power solutions, by far the most popular alternative is solar panels (89%) (Figure 10). Batteries or power banks (5%) are a distant second, followed by generators (3%) and biogas (2%).

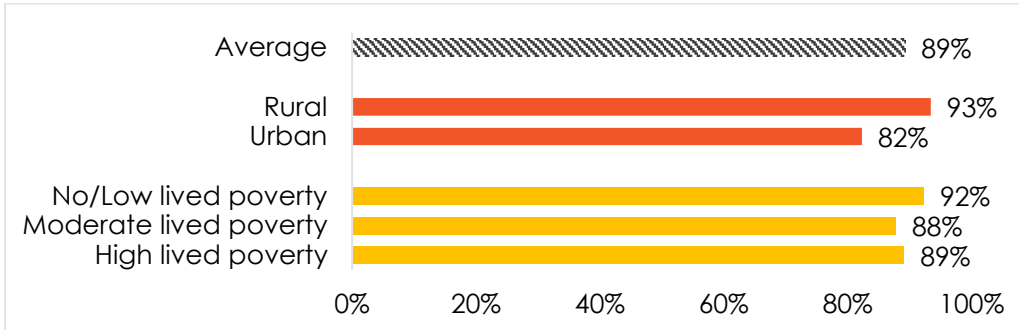
Among those who use alternative energy sources, rural residents are 11 percentage points more likely to use solar panels than their urban compatriots (93% vs. 82%) (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Alternative sources of electricity | Zimbabwe | 2024



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

Figure 11: Solar panel usage | by urban-rural location and lived poverty
 | Zimbabwe | 2024

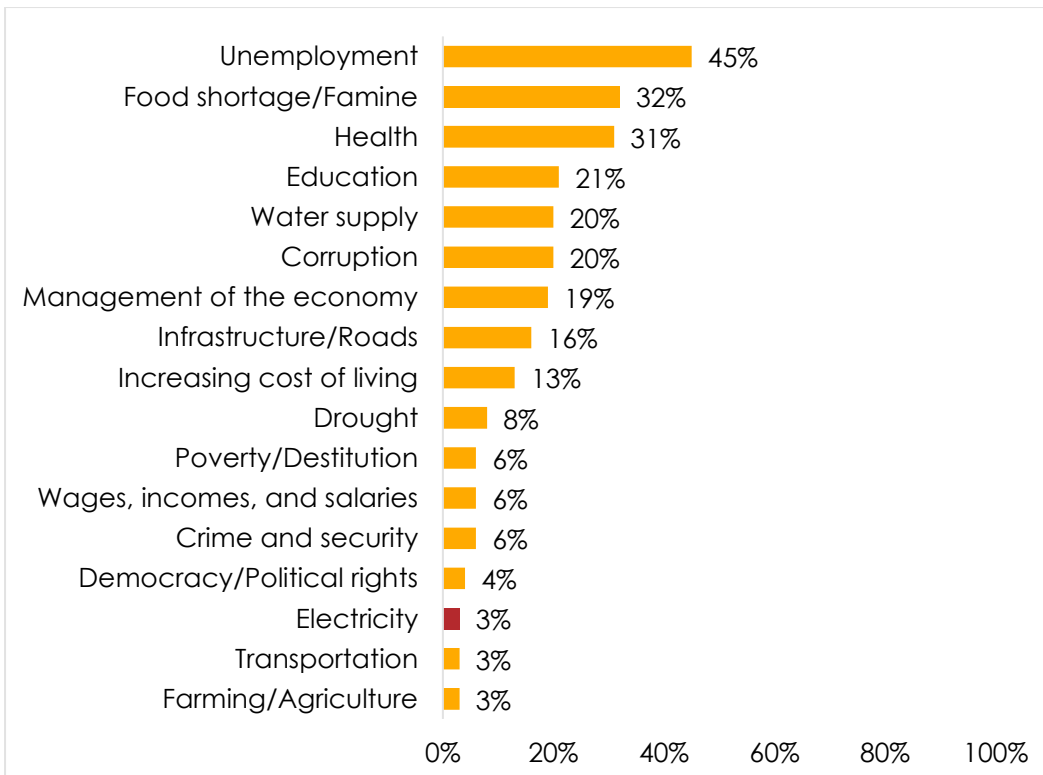


Respondents were asked: Does your house use electric power from any source other than the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority or ZESA? [If yes:] What is the source of electricity for this connection? (% who say they use solar panels) (Respondents who do not use alternative power sources are excluded.)

Priorities and government performance

On Zimbabweans' list of most important problems that their government should address, electricity ranks well down the list. As of June 2024, only 3% of respondents cite it among their top three priorities for government action, placing it 15th on a list of concerns (Figure 12). Unemployment is citizens' top priority for urgent government action (cited by 45% of respondents), followed by food shortage/famine (32%) and health (31%).

Figure 12: Most important problems | Zimbabwe | 2024

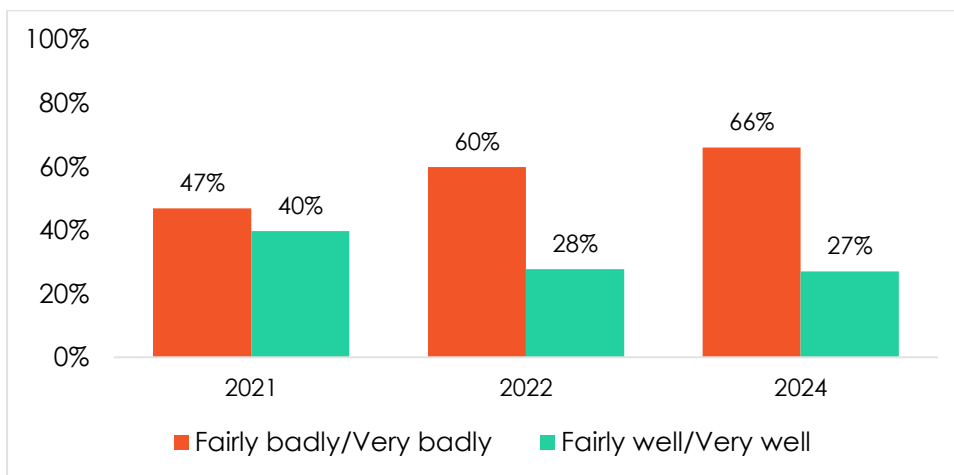


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows percentage of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)

That does not mean citizens do not care about electricity shortages: Two-thirds (66%) of Zimbabweans say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable electricity supply, up by 19 percentage points since the 2021 Afrobarometer survey (Figure 13). About one-fourth (27%) consider its performance “fairly” or “very” good.

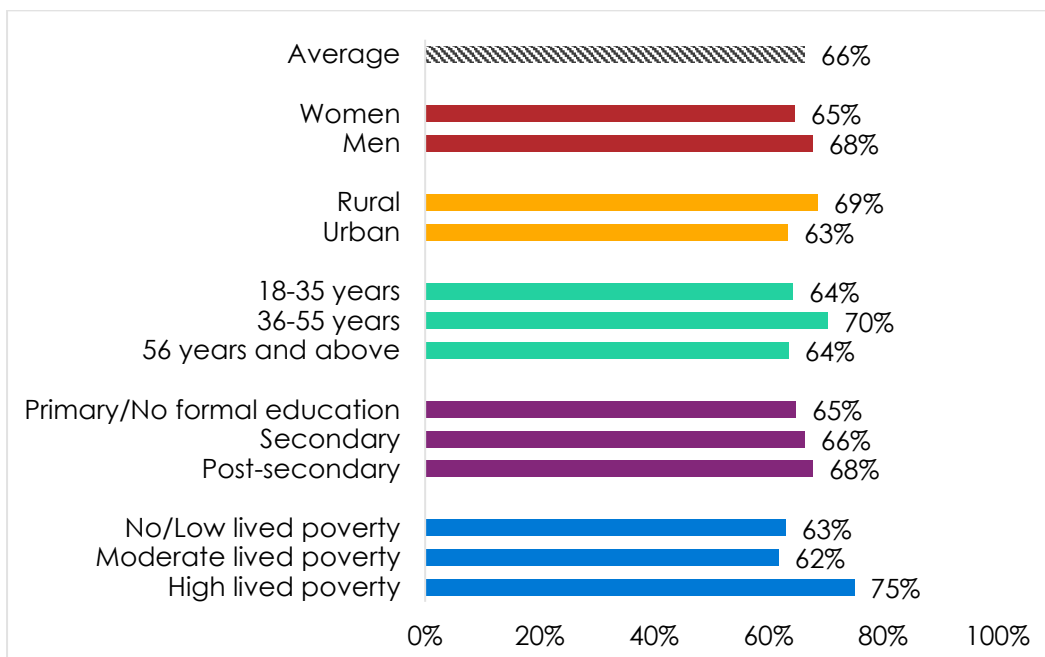
The poor (75%) are especially likely to disapprove of the government's efforts on electricity (Figure 14). Negative ratings are also high among middle-aged respondents (70% of 36- to 55-year-olds) and rural residents (69%).

Figure 13: Government performance on provision of reliable electricity supply
 | Zimbabwe | 2021-2024



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 14: Government is performing badly on the provision of reliable electricity supply
 | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 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

Afrobarometer survey findings show that Zimbabweans, particularly rural residents and the least educated citizens, continue to suffer from inadequate access to and poor service by the national electricity grid. Only one in seven citizens enjoy a reliable supply of electricity from the national provider, leading half the population to use alternative sources of energy.

Citizen dissatisfaction with the government's performance on electricity provision continues to climb, underscoring the urgent need to broaden access to electricity and improve service reliability, especially for rural residents.

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