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Eswatini youth intent on employment, cast eyes abroad for better prospects

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1064 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In Eswatini, where more than half (56%) of youth aged 15-35 struggle with joblessness (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2023), the government and development partners have established a range of initiatives to facilitate youth participation in the labour market (Africa Press, 2025). Aimed at reducing youth unemployment by 50% by 2030, one of Eswatini's most well-regarded programmes is the Eswatini Youth Development Programme, whose two-pronged approach to the youth unemployment crisis focuses on both graduate placement and artisanal training (Mlangeni, 2022). For aspiring entrepreneurs, the Youth Enterprise Revolving Fund provides collateral-free loans of up to E200,000 to assist young people in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

Despite these efforts, limited job opportunities and a sluggish economy threaten Eswatini's ability to keep its young and energetic human resources at home. While 25,000 young people enter the labour market each year, only 1,000 new jobs are created annually (World Bank, 2025a). More than one in three young Emaswati – 36.5% in 2023 – are not in education, employment, or training (World Bank, 2025b).

The 2023 Global Youth Development Index ranks Eswatini 155th out of 183 countries, placing it ahead of regional neighbours Malawi, Zimbabwe, Angola, Lesotho, and Mozambique but behind Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024).

Against this backdrop, countries such as South Africa, England, Ireland, and Taiwan are attractive destinations for young Emaswati in search of better job prospects and stability. Regrettably, young citizens' desperate attempts to leave the country have in some cases left them vulnerable to fraud, scamming, and human trafficking (Ngwenya, 2024).

Ahead of Africa Youth Day (1 November), this dispatch provides on-the-ground insights into the situation of youth (aged 18-35) in Eswatini. Findings from Afrobarometer's 2025 survey show that while young citizens have more education than their elders, they are also more likely to be unemployed. Half of young Emaswati say they would like to start their own businesses, but they also see job creation as the most important way the government could help young people.

On their top priorities for government action – including unemployment, health, incomes, education, and infrastructure/roads – young citizens give the government negative performance reviews, and a majority see the country as moving in “the wrong direction.” Their assessments of economic and living conditions are just as negative, and jobs and economic opportunity top the list of reasons that many youth have considered emigrating.

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. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Eswatini, led by QA Strategic Information, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult citizens in April-May 2025. 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 Eswatini in 2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2022.

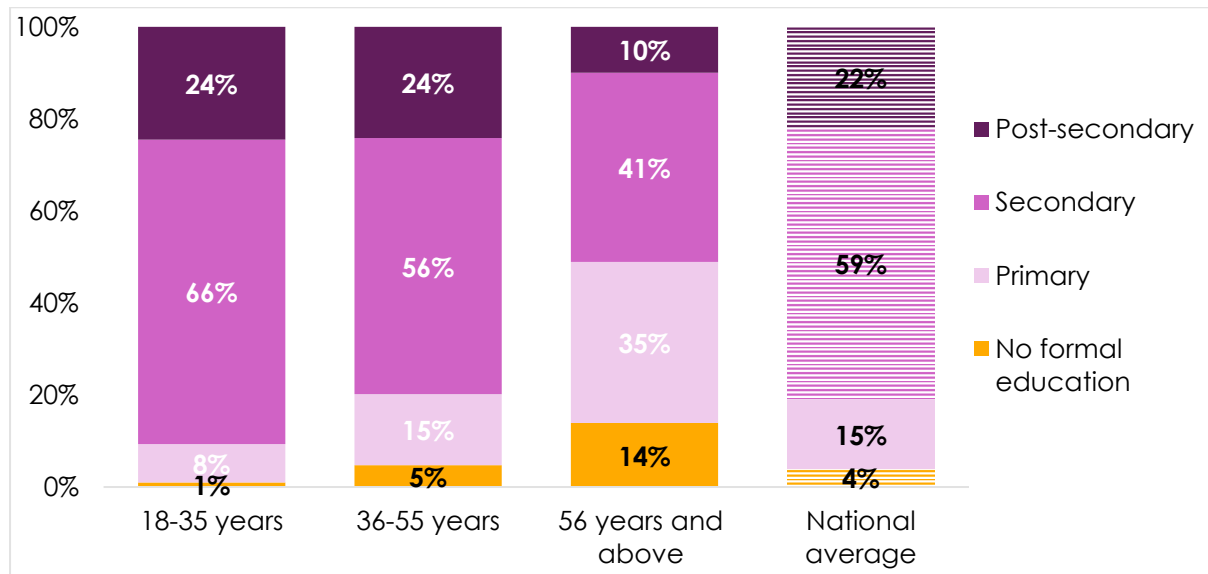
Key findings

- Youth (aged 18-35) in Eswatini are significantly more educated than their elders: 90% report having secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 51%-80% of older cohorts.
- But youth are also more likely to be unemployed: More than half (53%) of young citizens say they are not employed and are actively looking for work, compared to 22%-40% of older groups.
 - Aside from the country's economic situation and scarcity of jobs, young people cite a lack of experience required by employers (25%), a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (21%), and an aversion to jobs in tough sectors (17%) as the main barriers to youth employment.
- Fully half (50%) of youth say they would like to start their own businesses.
- Job creation would be young citizens' top priority for additional government spending to help young people.
- Unemployment ranks as the most important problem that Eswatini youth want their government to address, followed by health, incomes, education, and infrastructure/roads.
- On these key priorities, majorities of youth give the government negative ratings on its performance, including overwhelming disapproval of its efforts on keeping prices stable (89%) and creating jobs (86%).
- A slim majority (54%) of youth believe Eswatini is headed in "the wrong direction."
- Their economic assessments are even less rosy: Only 11% and 23%, respectively, are satisfied with the country's economic situation and their personal living conditions.
- Fully half (50%) of youth have given emigration at least "a little" consideration. Jobs top the list of reasons.

Level of education

The data show a generational shift in educational attainment in Eswatini (Figure 1). Nine out of 10 youth (aged 18-35) have secondary (66%) or post-secondary education (24%), compared to 51%-80% of older cohorts. Very few young citizens (1%) have no formal schooling, compared to 5%-14% among their elders.

Figure 1: Level of education | by age group | Eswatini | 2025



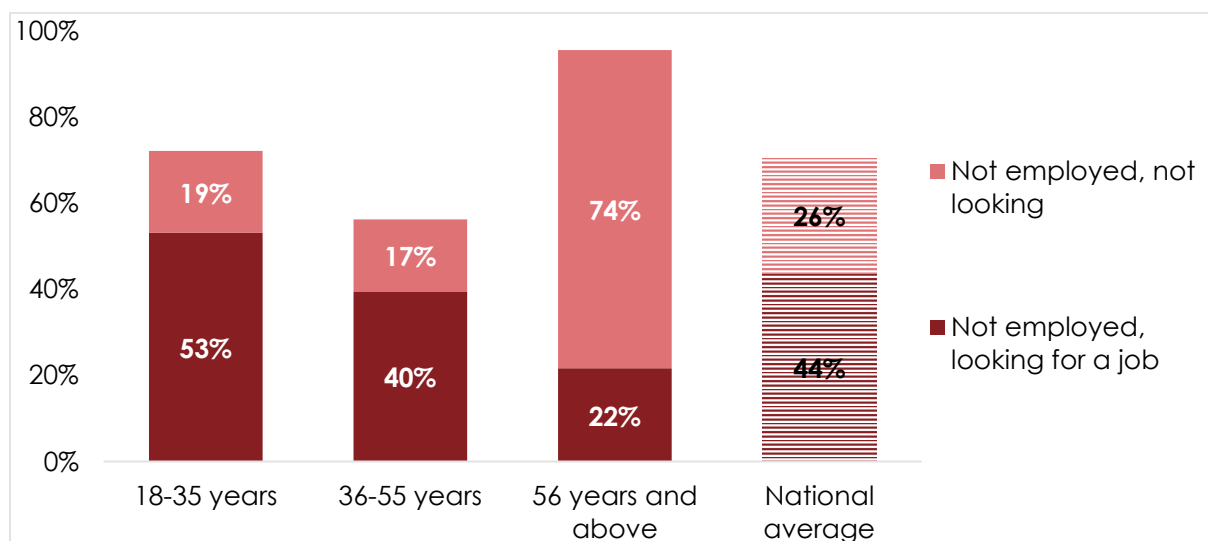
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Employment status

While Eswatini youth have more education than their elders, they are less likely to have jobs (Figure 2). More than half (53%) of young respondents say they are not employed but actively looking for work, compared to 40% of middle-aged respondents and 22% of those over age 55. Another 19% of youth are not employed and not seeking work. About three in 10 young Emaswati report having full-time (18%) or part-time (10%) employment (Figure 3).

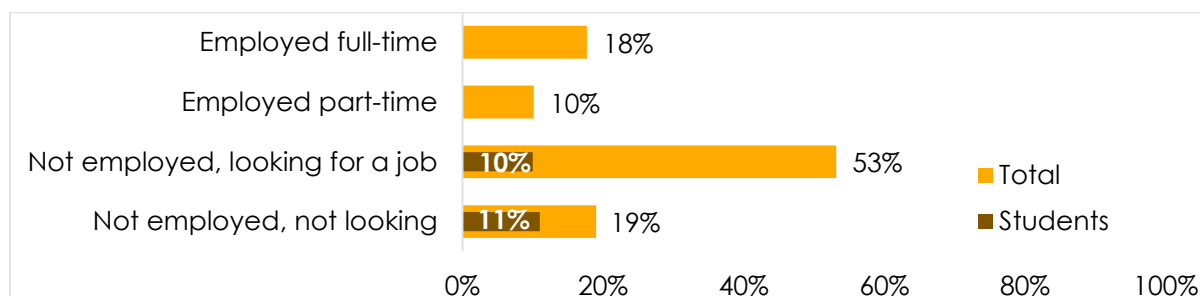
The share of unemployed youth looking for work includes 10% who identify as students, while the group without jobs and not actively looking for work includes 11% who say they are students.

Figure 2: Not employed, looking vs. not looking for a job | by age group | Eswatini | 2025



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?

Figure 3: Employment and student status | respondents aged 18-35 | Eswatini
| 2025

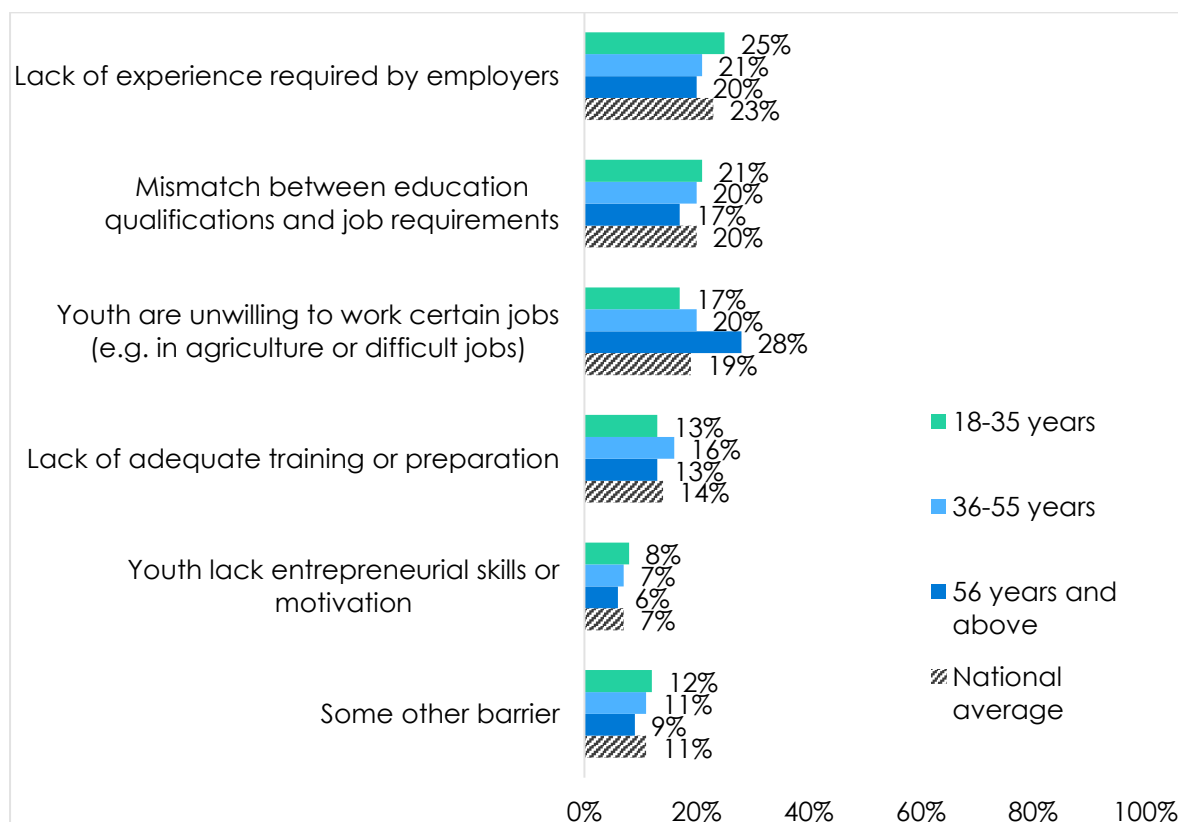


Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? What is your main occupation? [If not currently working:] What was your last main occupation? (% who say "student")

Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, Eswatini youth see a lack of experience required by employers (25%), a mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements (21%), an aversion to jobs in tough sectors (17%), and inadequate training or preparation (13%) as major barriers to youth employment (Figure 4). Other young respondents cite a lack of entrepreneurial skills or motivation (8%) or some other barrier (12%).

Older respondents are more likely to cite youth's unwillingness to work certain jobs (28% vs. 17%-20%). Notably, no group believes that youth face no special employment barriers.

Figure 4: Barriers to youth employment | by age group | Eswatini | 2025

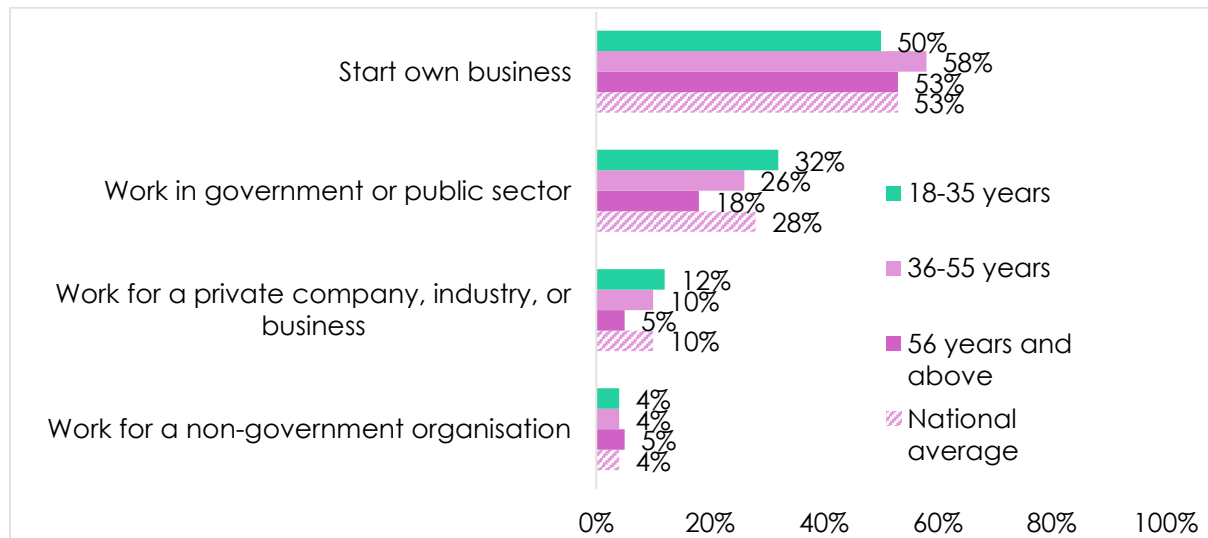


Respondents were asked: Aside from economic conditions and a shortage of jobs, which of the following factors, if any, would you say is the main barrier to young people getting jobs and entering the workforce?

If young Eswatini could choose their own jobs, entrepreneurship dominates as the preferred professional path: Half (50%) of youth say they would like to start their own businesses (Figure 5). Compared to older groups, youth also show greater interest in working in government (32%) and the private sector (12%).

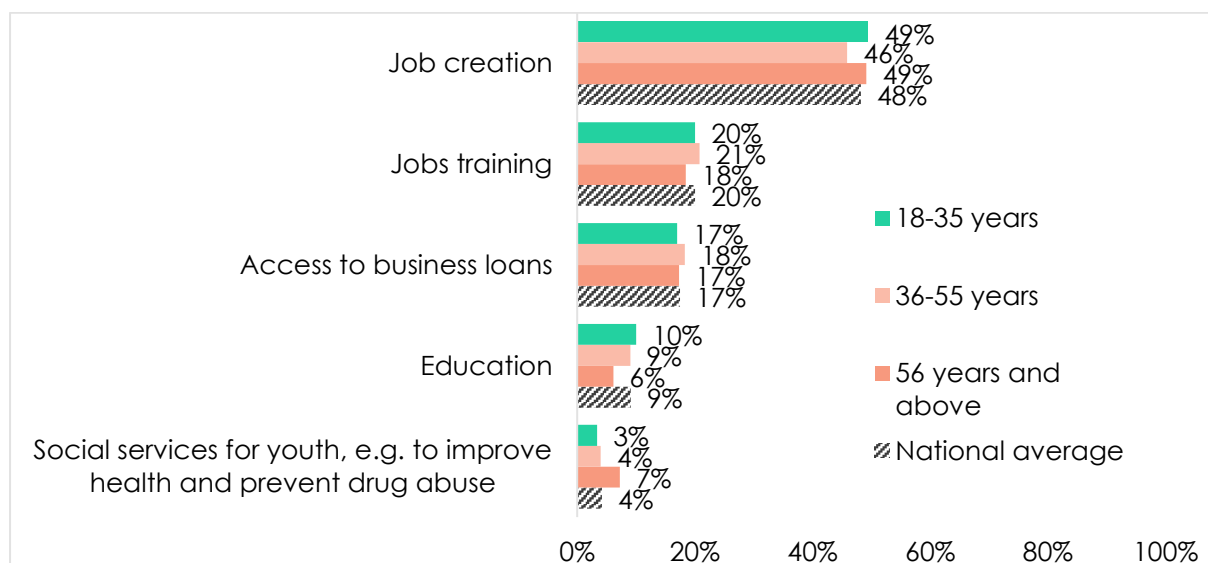
If the government could increase its expenditures to help young people, job creation would be the top priority for young respondents (49%) (Figure 6). Next in importance would be jobs training (20%) and access to business loans (17%), followed by education (10%) and social services (3%). Youth differ very little from older cohorts in their priorities for additional government investment.

Figure 5: Preferred job sector | by age group | Eswatini | 2025



Respondents were asked: If you could work in any sector you wanted, which of the following would be your first choice?

Figure 6: Priorities for government spending to help youth | by age group | Eswatini | 2025



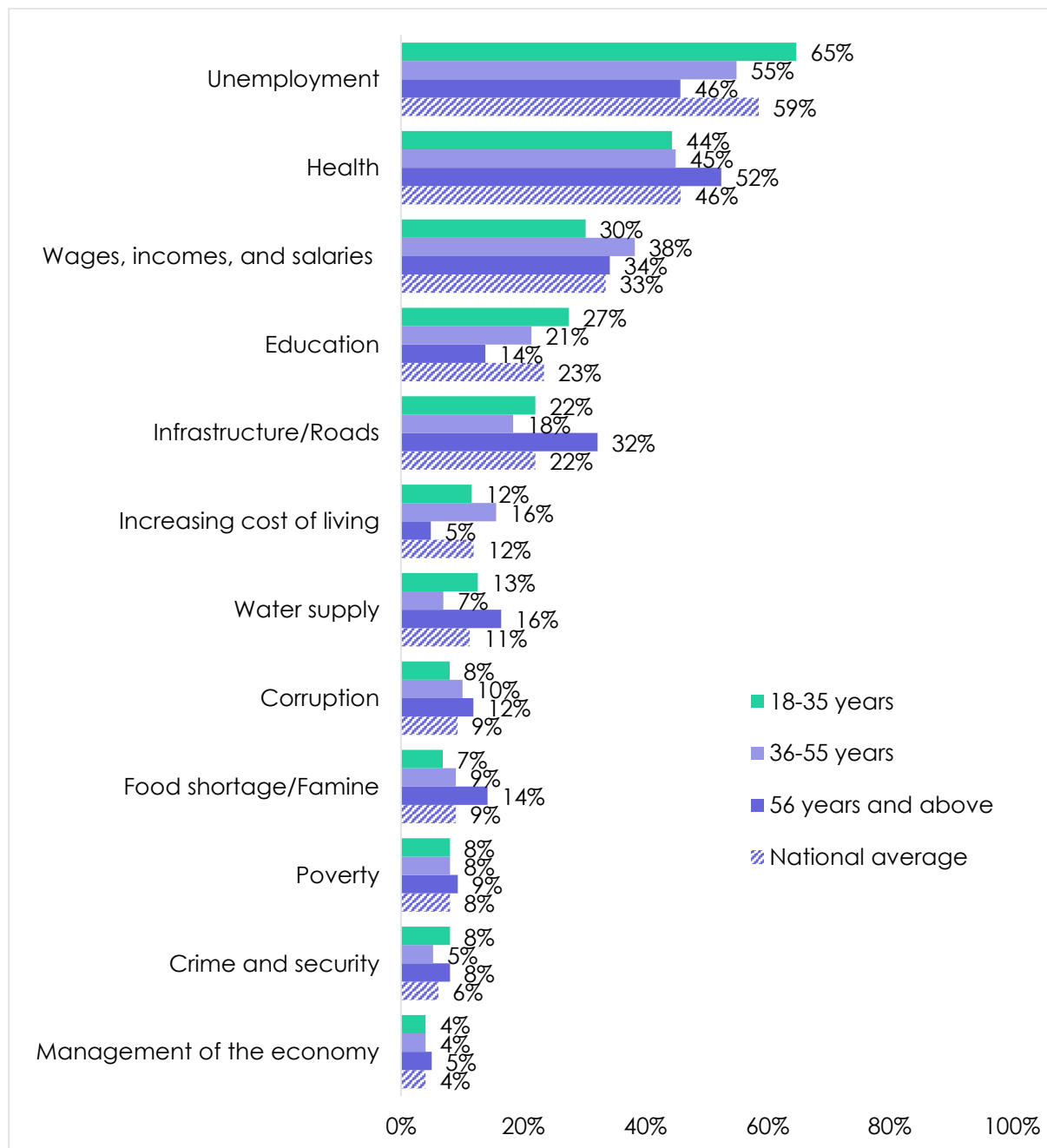
Respondents were asked: If the government could increase its spending on programmes to help young people, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority for additional investment?

National challenges

Unemployment ranks at the top of the list of problems that Eswatini youth say their government should address, cited by 65% of young respondents as one of their three priorities for government action (Figure 7). Health (44%), wages (30%), education (27%), and infrastructure/roads (22%) round out the top five concerns of young Emaswati.

Youth don't differ dramatically from older cohorts in their priorities for government attention, though they are somewhat more likely to emphasise unemployment and education.

Figure 7: Most important problems | by age group | Eswatini | 2025

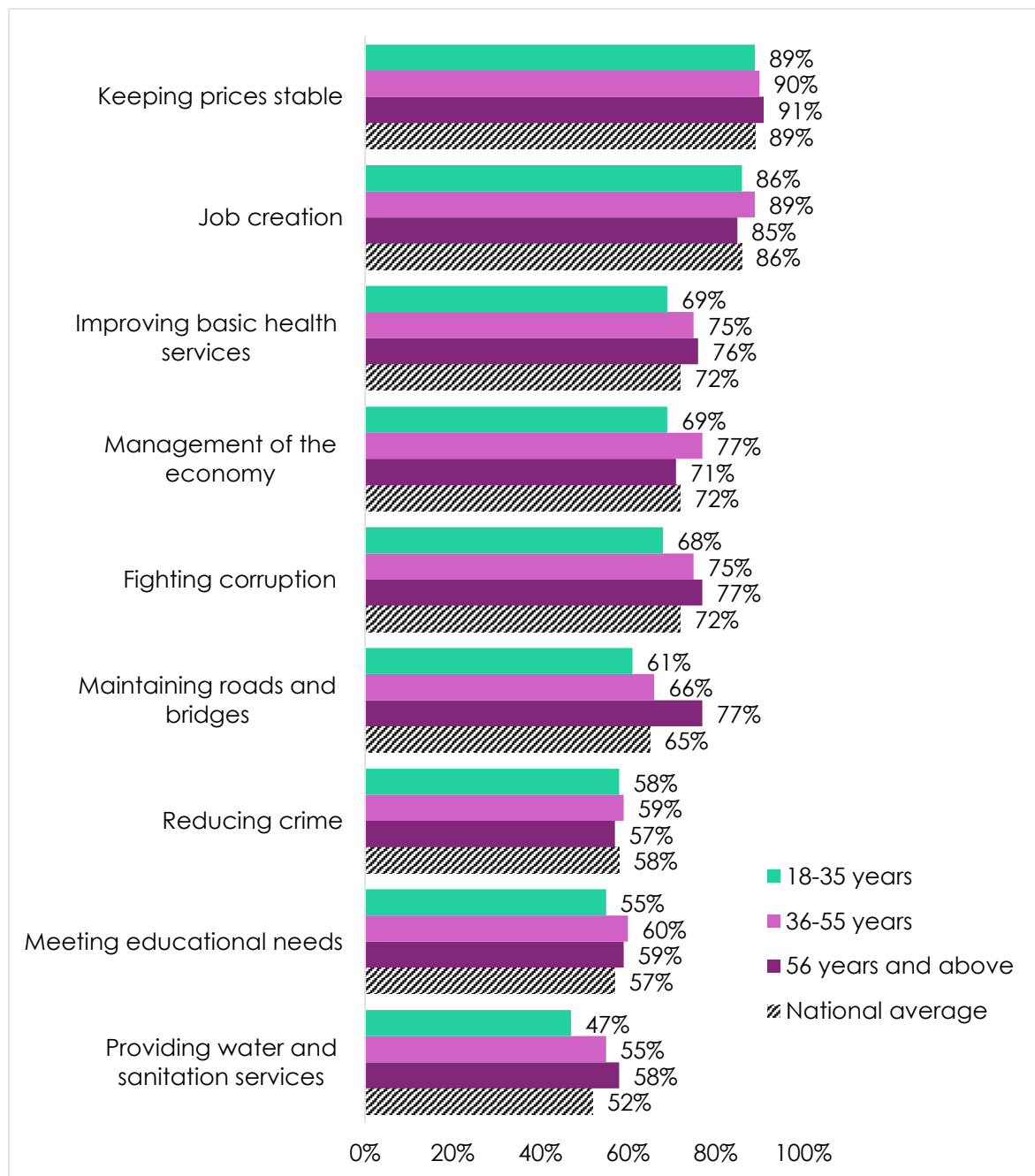


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

Government performance on youth priorities

On almost all of their priorities, majorities of youth say their government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” (Figure 8). Negative ratings range up to 89% on keeping prices stable and 86% on job creation. The only priority on which fewer than half (47%) disapprove of the government’s performance is the provision of water and sanitation services. On most of these issues, older citizens offer even more negative reviews of the government’s performance than the youth.

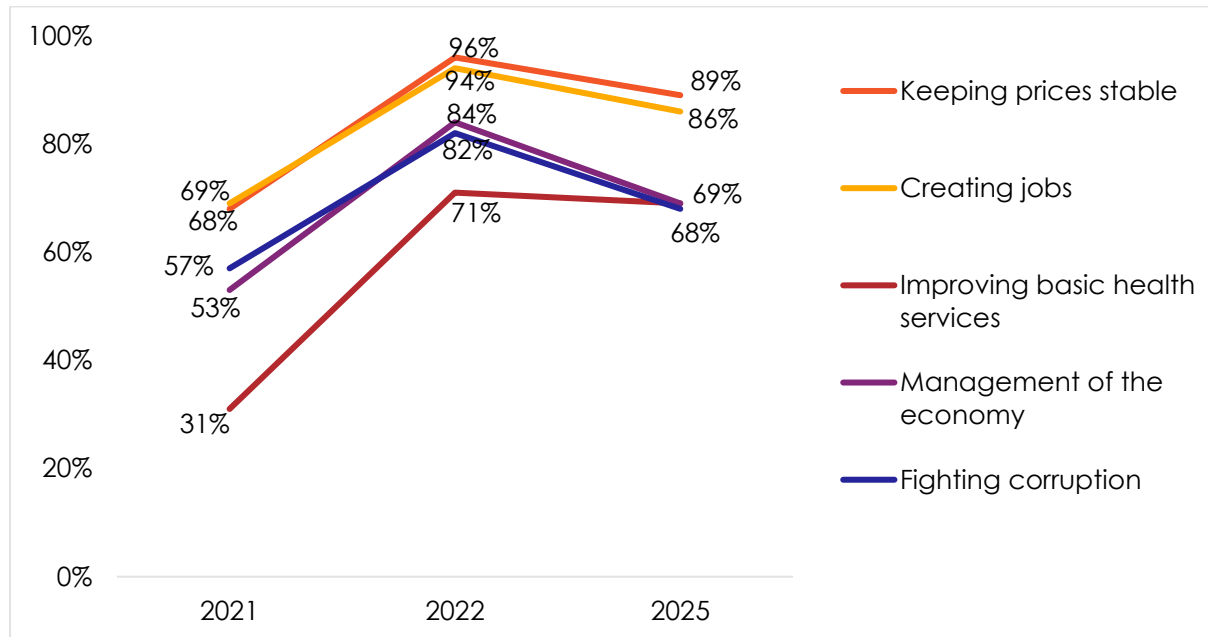
Figure 8: Negative assessments of government performance on youth priorities
| by age group | Eswatini | 2025



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? (% who say “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

Youth disapproval of the government's performance on their top five priorities peaked in 2022 and then dropped back slightly, though negative assessments are still far more widespread than they were in 2021 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Negative assessments of government performance on youth priorities
| respondents aged 18-35 | Eswatini | 2021-2025

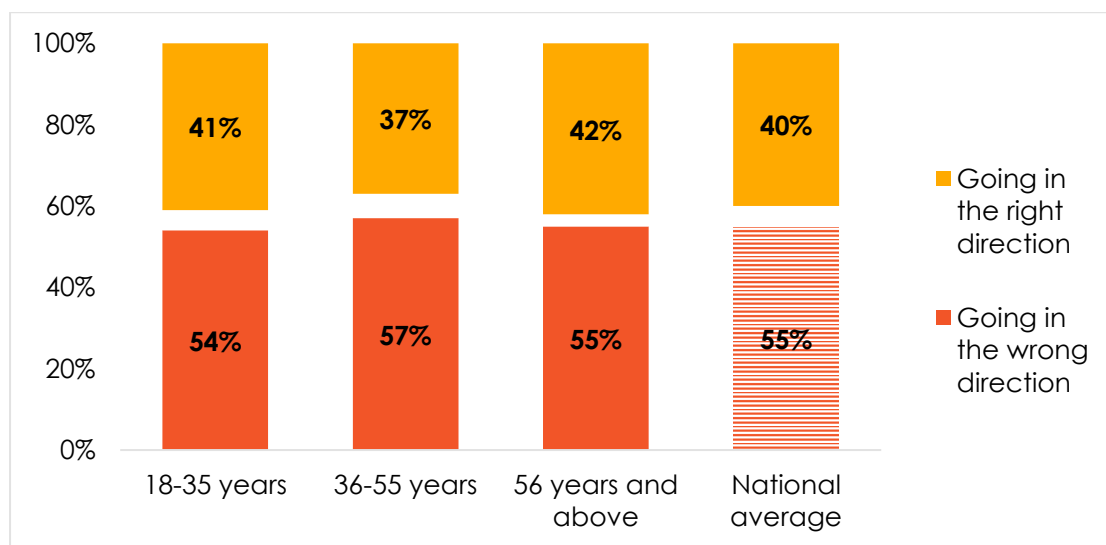


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Country's overall direction and economic conditions

A majority (55%) of Eswatini think the country is headed in "the wrong direction," and youth are no different: 54% of 18- to 35-year-olds say the country is on the wrong path (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Perceptions of the country's direction | by age group | Eswatini | 2025



Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

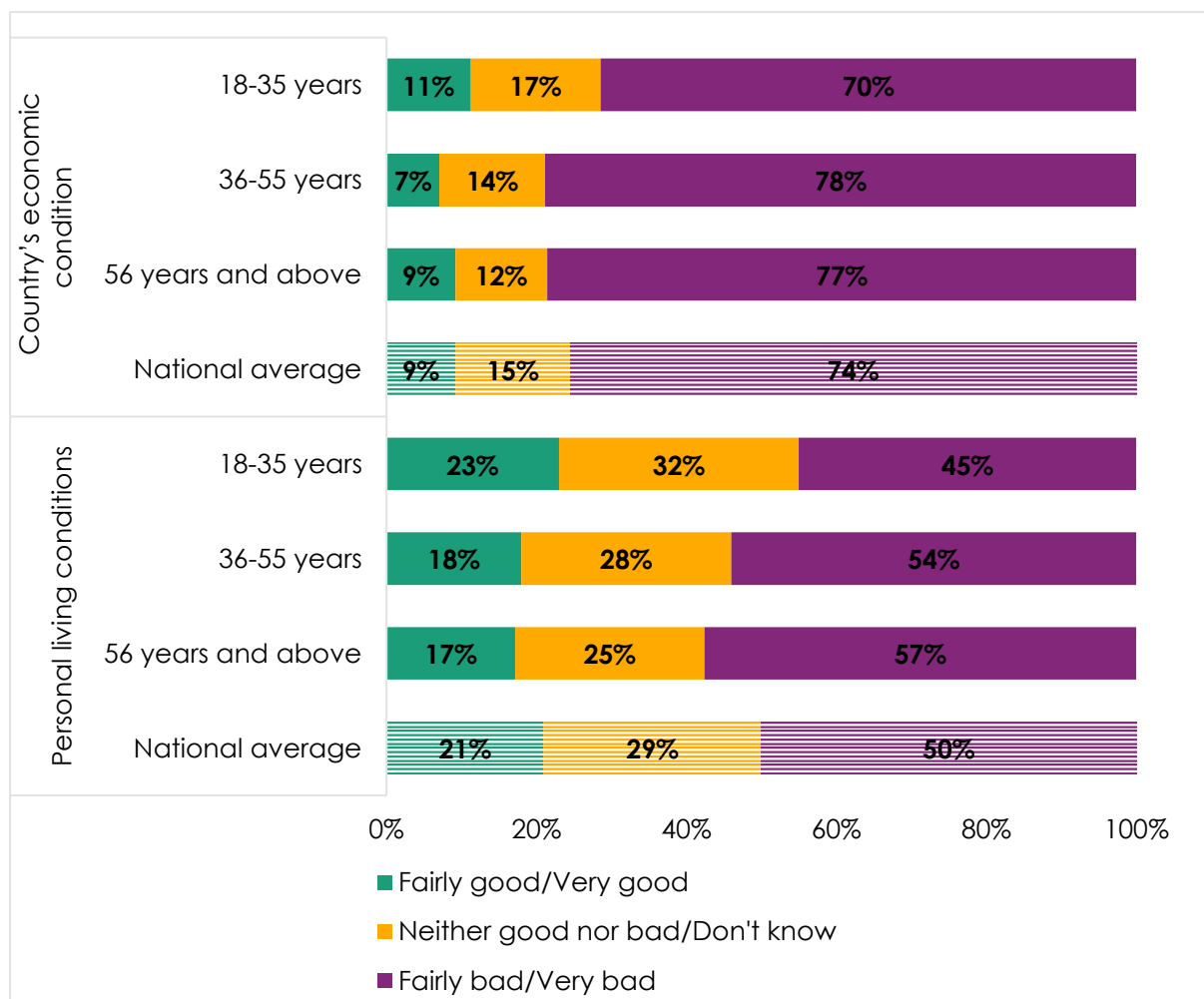
Even more strongly, Eswatini youth disapprove of their country's economic situation and their personal living conditions (Figure 11).

Only one-tenth (11%) of young respondents describe the country's economic condition as "fairly good" or "very good," while fully seven in 10 (70%) think it is bad and 17% say it is "neither good nor bad" or don't offer an opinion.

Similarly, only 23% of youth say their personal living conditions are good, while twice as many (45%) describe them as bad.

Even so, youth are more positive in their assessments than older cohorts.

Figure 11: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions | by age group | Eswatini | 2025

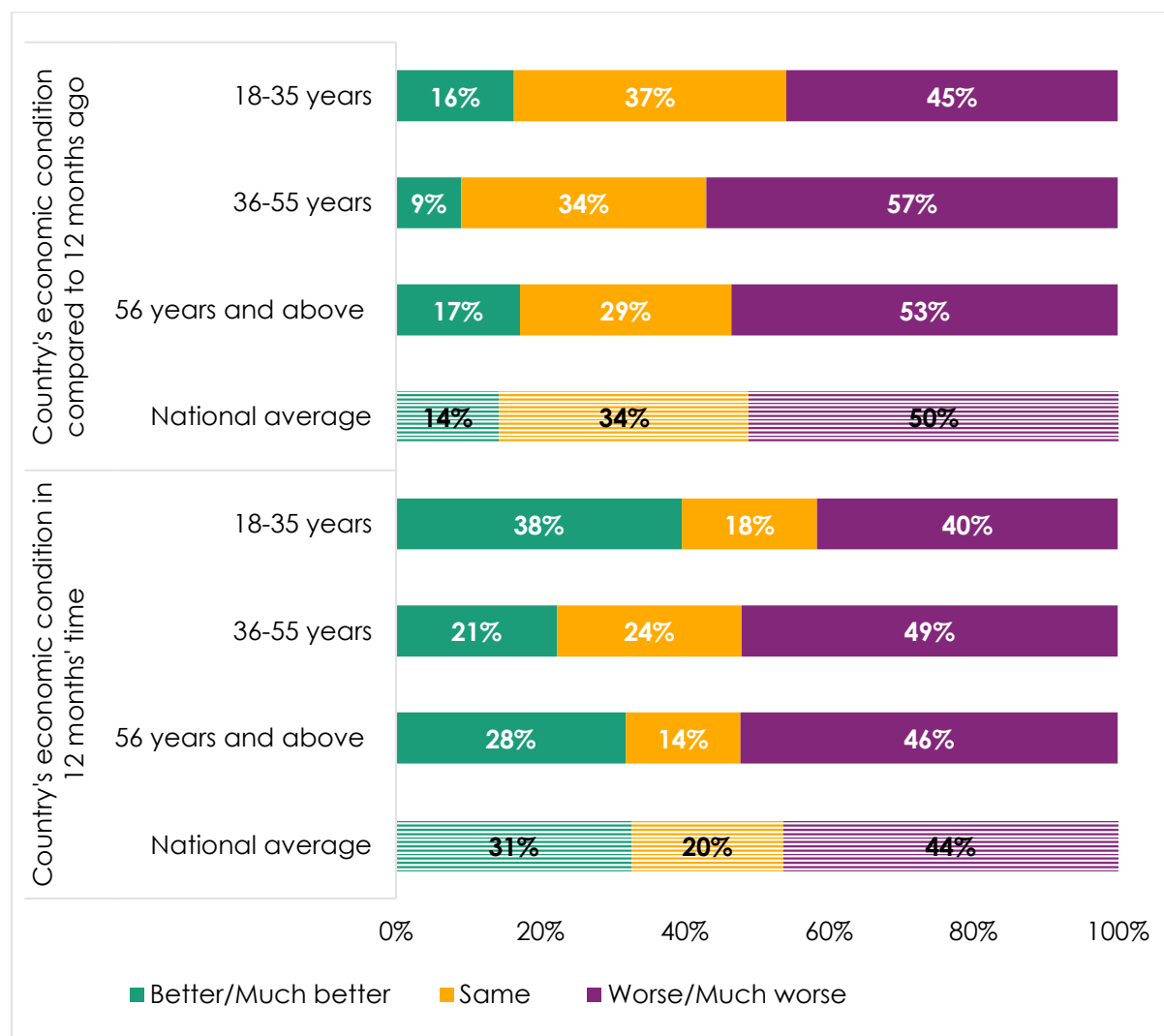


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?

Only 16% of youth say the national economy has gotten "better" or "much better" over the past 12 months, while nearly half say it has worsened (45%) (Figure 12). Older respondents are just as bleak in their assessment: 9%-17% say things have gotten better.

About four in 10 young people (38%) think economic conditions will improve during the coming year, while an equal proportion (40%) think they will worsen. Youth are more optimistic than their elders, by 10-17 percentage points.

Figure 12: Country's economic condition compared to 12 months ago and in 12 months' time | by age group | Eswatini | 2025

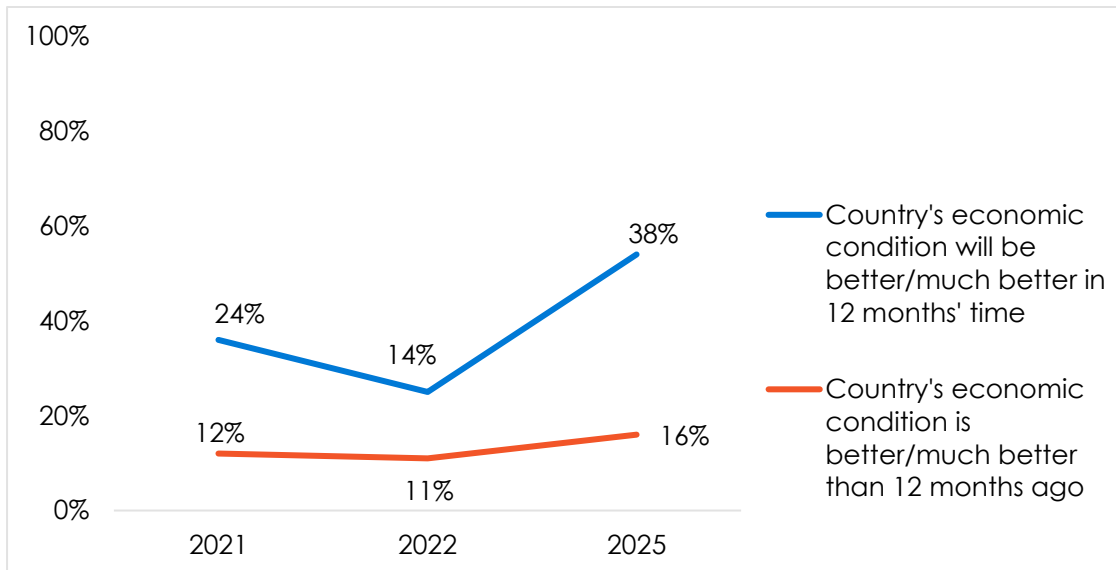


Respondents were asked: Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago? Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

While hardly rosy, young people's economic assessments and outlook show some improvement compared to 2022 (Figure 13). Perceptions of economic progress over the previous year rose by 5 percentage points, while optimism about the near future almost tripled after a sharp drop to 14% in 2022.

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Figure 13: Economic assessments | respondents aged 18-35 | Eswatini | 2021-2025



Respondents were asked:

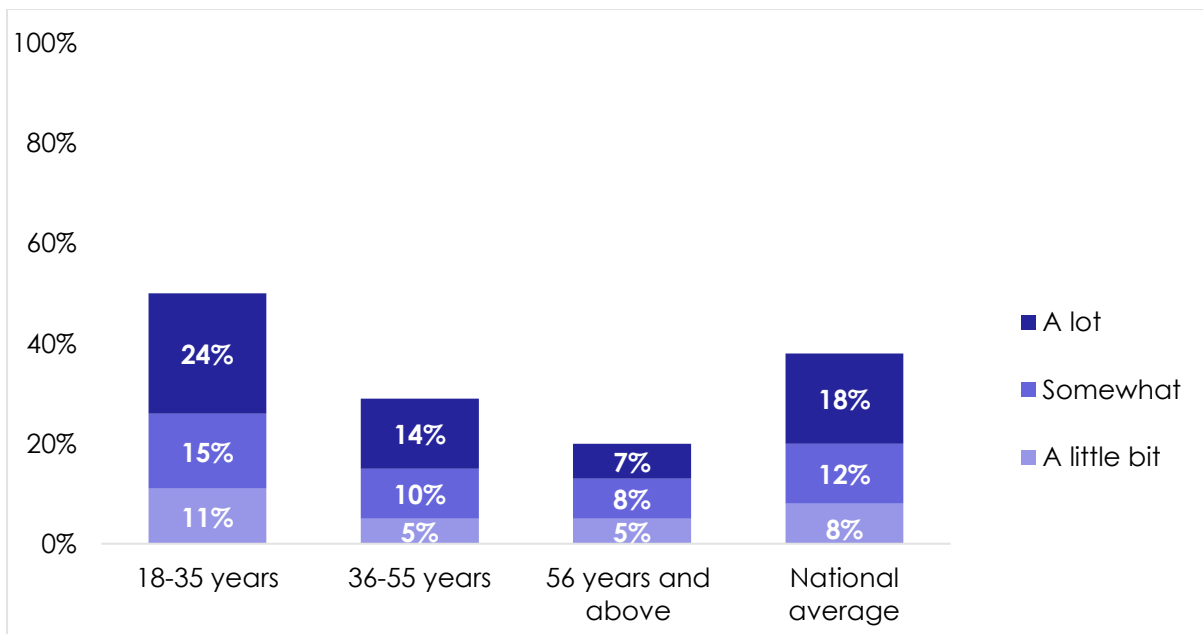
Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Emigration

Fully half (50%) of Eswatini youth say they have given at least “a little bit” of thought to emigrating, including one-quarter (24%) who have considered it “a lot” (Figure 14).

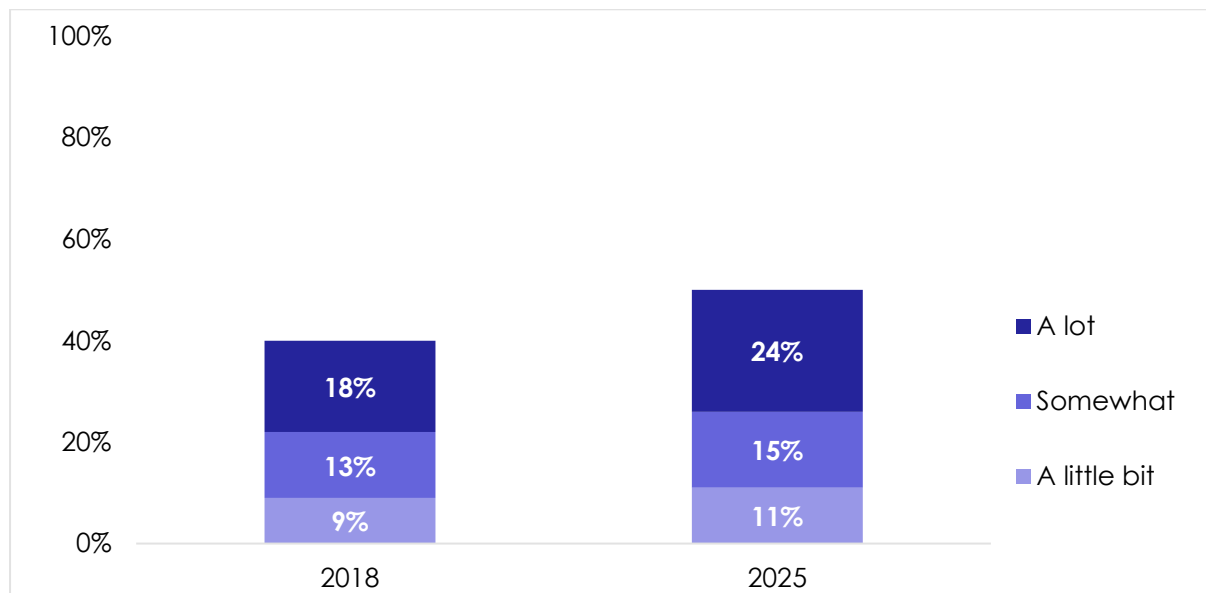
Among youth, the share who have considered emigration at least “a little bit” increased by 10 percentage points between 2018 and 2025 (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Considered emigration | by age group | Eswatini | 2025



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

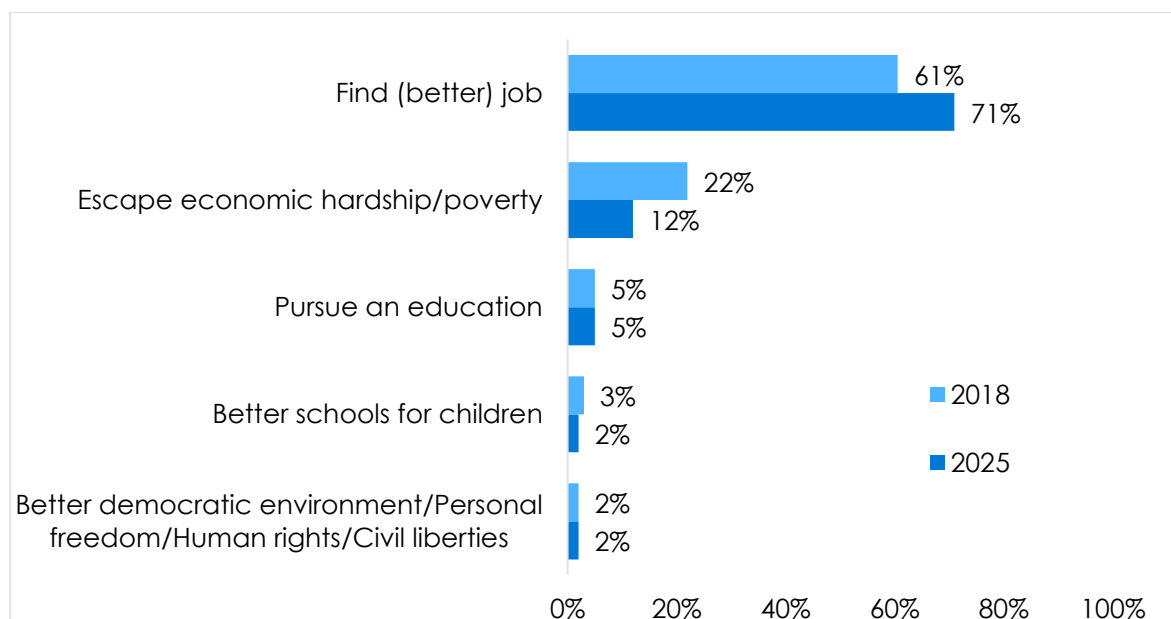
Figure 15: Considered emigration | respondents aged 18-35 | Eswatini | 2018-2025



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

Among youth who have considered emigration, the main motivation is job opportunity (71%) (Figure 16). Compared to 2018, the intensity of better job prospects as a motivating factor has increased by 10 percentage points. Other young potential emigrants cite escaping economic hardship/poverty (12%) and pursuing an education (5%) as their most important reasons.

Figure 16: Reasons for considering emigration | respondents aged 18-35 | Eswatini | 2018-2025



Respondents who have considered leaving the country 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 Eswatini?

Conclusion

Youth represent a critical asset in Eswatini's pursuit of inclusive and sustainable development. The latest Afrobarometer findings reveal a generation of young citizens who are better educated than their elders, but less likely to be employed and not optimistic about the country's direction. While barriers such as limited skills and training gaps persist, many young people show a desire to improve their personal circumstances and actively participate in the labour force.

Unsurprisingly, unemployment is the most important problem that young citizens need to be addressed, and they are critical of their government's perceived failure to create jobs. Other priority concerns include health, incomes, education, and infrastructure/roads – each of which the youth perceive as areas of poor governmental performance.

Economic opportunity tops the list of reasons that many youth have considered emigrating, suggesting that if Eswatini does not address the youth unemployment challenge, the desire to leave will remain prevalent among its young people.

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