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Still lacking reliable electricity from the grid, many Africans turn to other sources

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 514 | Hee Eun Lee, Woo Young Kim, Hyo Kang, and Kangwook Han

Summary

Electricity is a basic prerequisite for human development. The United Nations (UN) highlight "access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all" as its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 7 (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Electrification powers the provision of resources for economic transformation and improved living conditions, especially for poor people (Blimpo & Cosgrove-Davies, 2019).

Globally, access to electricity improved significantly between 2000 and 2019, expanding



coverage from 79% of the population to 90%. In sub-Saharan Africa, where basic electricity infrastructure is particularly weak, access improved from 26% to 47% over the same period (World Bank, 2022).

But the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are reversing some of these gains. In Africa, up to 30 million people who previously enjoyed access to electricity can no longer afford it (IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank, & WHO, 2021).

Afrobarometer survey findings from 34 African countries show little progress in electrification. While experiences vary by country, on average access to a power grid improved by just 4 percentage points over the past decade. And even where connections to the grid exist, unreliable supply remains a major problem.

Overall, fewer than half of Africans enjoy a dependable supply of electricity from a national grid, with rural residents and poor people at a huge disadvantage. Instead, almost a quarter of Africans rely on other sources of electricity, mainly solar panels and generators.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries – 18 surveyed between July 2019 and April 2020 and 16 surveyed (after a hiatus due to COVID-19) between October 2020 and July 2021.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples¹ that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

¹ The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.



This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). Due to rounding, reported totals may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.

Key findings

- Access: On average across 34 countries, about two-thirds (68%) of Africans live in areas served by an electric grid.
 - This proportion has increased by just 4 percentage points over the past decade. Tanzania (+39 percentage points) and Liberia (+22 points) recorded large gains in the extension of the electric grid, while Nigeria (-26 points), Sudan (-11 points), and Mozambique (-11) experienced significant declines.
 - Rural residents are only half as likely as their urban counterparts to have access to an electric grid (45% vs. 94%).
- **Connection:** Fewer than six in 10 African households (57%) are actually connected to an electric grid. Citizens in Tunisia (99%), Mauritius (99%), and Morocco (98%) enjoy nearly universal coverage, but fewer than one in four households in Malawi (14%), Burkina Faso (22%), and Niger (24%) are connected.
 - Economically well-off households are twice as likely to be connected to the electric grid as households experiencing high lived poverty (84% vs. 43%).
 - Connections are more than twice as common in cities (85%) as in rural areas (35%).
- **Reliability:** Fewer than half (43%) of Africans enjoy a supply of electricity that works "most" or "all" of the time. On average across 31 countries surveyed consistently since 2014/2015, this proportion has increased by just 3 percentage points.
 - While almost all households in Mauritius (98%) and Morocco (95%) report having a reliable supply of electricity, the same is true for only 5% of Malawian households.
 - Reliable electric service is far more common in cities (65%) than in rural areas (24%) and increases with respondents' economic status, ranging from 28% of the poorest households to 73% of the wealthiest.
- Priority and government performance: The provision of electricity ranks 10th among the most important problems that Africans want their government to address. Citizens lacking reliable electricity are more likely to consider this a top-priority problem.
 - Fewer than half (46%) of Africans are satisfied with their government's performance on electricity provision.
- Alternative sources of electricity: Almost one-fourth (23%) of Africans use sources of electricity other than the national grid, including 16% who rely exclusively on other sources.
 - The most popular alternative source of electricity is solar panels (62%), followed by generators (16%) and batteries or power banks (9%).
 - Rural residents (30%) are twice as likely as urbanites (14%) to use power sources other than the national grid.



• The use of other power sources tends to be more common in countries where fewer households enjoy a reliable supply of electricity from the national grid.

Access to the electric grid

On average across 34 countries, about two-thirds (68%) of African citizens live in enumeration areas with access to an electric grid. This proportion has increased little in recent years. Across 30 countries surveyed consistently since Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011/2013), the share of enumeration areas served by an electric grid has gained 4 percentage points (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Access to the electric grid | 30 countries | 2011-2021

Surveyors recorded whether enumeration areas had an electricity grid that most houses could access. (% "yes")

The accessibility of electric grids varies widely across countries. While all enumeration areas in Tunisia and Morocco are served by a grid, only about one-third in Burkina Faso (31%), Ethiopia (32%), and Niger (35%) enjoy the same access (Figure 2).

Among the 30 countries surveyed consistently over the past decade, 14 have recorded significant gains (of more than 3 percentage points), led by a 39-point jump in Tanzania. Liberia (+ 22 points), Togo (+16 points), and Lesotho (+15 points) also report major improvements (Figure 3). Six countries have recorded significant deterioration, most notably Nigeria (-26 points).

While improved access to electricity is critical for achieving rural development and reducing urban-rural gaps in living conditions, rural areas trail cities as badly as they did a decade ago in the reach of the electric grid. On average across 34 countries, only a minority (45%) of rural residents are in zones served by an electric grid – less than half the proportion of urban residents (94%) (Figure 4).







Surveyors recorded whether enumeration areas had an electricity grid that most houses could access. (% "yes")





Figure 3: Changes in access to the electric grid | 30 countries | 2011-2021

Figure shows the increase or decrease, in percentage points, between 2011/2013 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents living in zones served by an electric grid.





Surveyors recorded whether the enumeration area had an electricity grid that most houses could access. (% "yes")



Connection to the grid

The existence of an electric grid does not, of course, guarantee that households actually have electricity, as cost considerations may prevent some households from connecting to the grid (Jamasb, Nepal, & Timilsina, 2017; Golumbeanu & Barnes, 2013). Afrobarometer found that while 68% of enumeration areas are served by an electric grid, only 57% of surveyed households are connected. So 43% of households lack an electricity connection, either because there is no electric grid or because they are not connected to an existing grid.

As might be expected, connection to the electric grid is less common among poor people and rural residents (Figure 5). On average across 34 countries, households experiencing high lived poverty² are only half as likely as those with no lived poverty to have an electricity connection (43% vs. 84%). And only 35% of rural respondents report a connection to the grid, compared to 85% of urban residents.

Figure 5: Connection to the grid | by lived poverty and urban-rural location | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? (% "yes")

While almost all Tunisians, Moroccans, and Mauritians enjoy a connection to the electric grid, the same is true for fewer than half of citizens in 15 of the 34 surveyed countries. Connection rates are particularly low in Malawi (14%), Burkina Faso (22%), and Niger (24%).

In some countries, large gaps separate the availability of an electric grid and the proportion of connected households (Figure 6). In Kenya, for example, while grids cover 80% of enumeration areas, only 50% of respondents report a connection. In Tanzania and Malawi, the gaps are 26 and 33 percentage points, respectively.

While individual countries record changes in connection rates compared to 2016/2018, overall we find no evidence that the first year or so of the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the proportion of households connected to the grid: Average rates for the group of countries surveyed before the pandemic and the group of countries surveyed since the start of the

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 (2020).



pandemic have both remained essentially unchanged. New data from Afrobarometer's Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) may shed more light on this question.



Figure 6: Access to grid and connection to grid | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Surveyors recorded whether enumeration areas had an electricity grid that most houses could access. (% "yes")

Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? (% "yes")



Service reliability

Even if households are connected to an electric grid, the reliability of their power supply may vary considerably. Across 34 countries, considering only the 57% of respondents whose households are connected to the grid, three-fourths enjoy a reliable supply of electricity, that is, electricity that works "all of the time" (38%) or "most of the time" (36%) (Figure 7). One in four say their connection works "about half the time" (10%), "occasionally" (13%), or "never" (2%).



Figure 7: Reliability of connections to the grid | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection?

This means that when we consider all households – including those with no access to a grid or no connection to an existing grid – fewer than half (43%) of Africans enjoy a reliable supply of electricity. The range across countries is vast, from almost all Mauritians (98%) and Moroccans (95%) to fewer than one in five citizens in eight countries, most remarkably just 5% of Malawians (Figure 8).

The difference between having a connection and having a reliable power supply is strikingly illustrated in Nigeria, where 65% of respondents are connected to the grid but only 14% report having electricity that works most/all of the time. Sudan (62% connected, 17% reliable) and Cameroon (82% vs. 43%) show similarly large gaps between connection and reliable service.





Figure 8: Who has a reliable supply of electricity? | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection?



Among the 32 countries surveyed in both 2016/2018 and 2019/2021, 13 have seen significant increases (of more than 3 percentage points) in the proportion of citizens enjoying reliable electricity (Figure 9). South Africa and Guinea lead with 14-percentage-point gains, followed by Cameroon (+12 points), Benin (+11 points), and Lesotho (+10 points).

Eight countries have recorded significant declines. Interestingly, the three worst performers – Sudan (-38 points), Zambia (-13), and Eswatini (-11) – were surveyed in late 2020 and early 2021, many months into the COVID-19 pandemic. But excluding the extreme decline in Sudan, average changes in pre-pandemic and post-pandemic-onset groups of countries differ little, offering no evidence of a COVID-19 impact.

Figure 9: Changes in proportion of households with electricity most/all of the time | 32 countries | 2016-2021



Figure shows the change, in percentage points, between Round 7 (2016/2018) and Round 8 (2019/2021) in the proportion of all respondents saying they have electricity that works "most" or "all" of the time.



The disadvantages of rural residents and poor people are again reflected in how many enjoy reliable electricity (Figure 10). On average across 34 countries, only 24% of rural households have a reliable electric connection, compared to 65% of their urban counterparts. And while about three-fourths (73%) of wealthy respondents say they have electricity that works most/all of the time, only about one-fourth (28%) of households experiencing high lived poverty can say the same.





Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (% of all respondents who say they have electricity that works "most" or "all" of the time)

South Africa is the only surveyed country where more rural than urban residents report a reliable supply of electricity from the national grid (75% vs. 71%), while the grids in Mauritius and Morocco serve cities and rural areas equally well (Figure 11). In most other countries,

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It is easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis. rural residents trail urbanites by double digits, including deficits of 50 percentage points or more in Niger, Mali, Guinea, Gabon, Togo, and Mozambique. In Guinea and Sierra Leone, only 1% of rural residents report a steady supply of electricity.

These findings make it plain that poor people suffer not only from a lack of access to the national grid, but also from lower-quality

service. Among wealthy respondents (those experiencing no lived poverty) who are connected to the grid, 86% say they receive a reliable supply of electricity. Among poor respondents who can afford a connection to the grid, that number is 20 percentage points lower (66%) (Figure 12).





Figure 11: Reliable electricity supply in urban vs. rural areas | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (% of all respondents who say they have electricity that works "most" or "all" of the time)





Figure 12: Poverty and reliable electricity supply | 34 countries | 2019/2021

The proportion of Africans enjoying a reliable supply of electricity has increased by just 3 percentage points since 2014/2015, on average across 31 countries surveyed consistently over the period. This very modest improvement appears to have benefited economically well-off households most (Figure 13). The share of households experiencing no or low lived poverty who report a reliable connection rose by 8 and 9 percentage points, respectively, while gains among households with moderate or high lived poverty were only 5 and 3 points, respectively.³



Figure 13: Changes in proportion of households with electricity most/all of the time | by lived poverty | 31 countries | 2014-2021

Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (% who say "most of the time" or "all of the time")

Respondents who have a connection to the electric grid were asked: How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (Respondents with no connection to the electric grid are excluded.)

³ The larger increases in reliable electricity supply among respondents with no or moderate lived poverty did not produce a larger overall increase in part because the number of respondents in the economically better-off categories decreased significantly over the time period, while the sub-groups with high or moderate lived poverty became larger.



Electricity supply: Popular priority and government performance

Among issues that Africans consider the most important problems that their governments need to address, the provision of electricity ranks at No. 10, well behind unemployment and health but ahead of corruption and agriculture (Figure 14). On average across 34 countries, 12% of respondents cite electricity as one of their top three priorities for government action.



Figure 14: Most important problems | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of their three priorities.)

But about three times as many Nigerians (35%), Ethiopians (33%), and Guineans (33%) consider electricity one of the most urgent issues their government should tackle, while very few Tunisians, Moroccans, or Mauritians (1% or less) prioritise electricity (Figure 15).

As might be expected, our analysis at the country level shows that people's prioritisation of electricity supply as a "most important problem" is strongly correlated with whether they have a reliable supply of electricity. That is, countries where more households enjoy reliable electricity are less likely to report electricity supply as a priority need for government action (Pearson's r=-0.4126, p<0.05) (Figure 16).

We see a similar negative correlation between prioritisation of electricity supply and connection to the grid, but this relationship is statistically insignificant. It is having a *reliable* supply, rather than a mere connection to the grid, that appears to carry weight in perceptions of electricity supply as a "most important problem."







Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % who cite electricity as one of their top three priorities.)







On average, fewer than half (46%) of respondents say their government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" on the provision of a reliable supply of electricity (Figure 17). This is hardly surprising, since only 43% report that they enjoy a reliable electricity supply.

Governments receive their worst ratings in Sudan (12% approval) and Guinea (18%) – two of the worst performers on reliable supply (17% and 21%, respectively, Figure 8). Other poor performers on reliable electricity also rank near the bottom in citizen approval of government performance, including Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zambia, Liberia, and Ethiopia.

At the other extreme, Mauritius and Morocco, the top performers on reliable supply, also rank highest on government performance, with 86% and 80% approval, respectively.

But while these ratings suggest that citizens' experiences indeed shape their assessments of government performance, there are a few countries where large proportions of citizens enjoy reliable electricity but satisfaction with the government's performance is relatively low. In Tunisia, for example, 87% of respondents report reliable electricity, but only 47% approve of the government's handling of electricity provision. Gabon (81% reliable connection, 30% approval) and South Africa (72% and 35%) reflect a similar pattern.





Figure 17: Government doing a good job of providing electricity | 34 countries | 2019/2021

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 well" or "very well")

Other sources of electricity

In addition to electricity supplied by their country's grid, a substantial number of African households rely on other sources of power, such as solar panels and generators. On average across 34 countries, almost one in four respondents (23%) say their household uses electric power from a source other than the national grid – either as their only source (16%) or as a supplement to the mains (6%).⁴

The use of alternative energy sources varies widely by country (Figure 18). Mali is the only surveyed country where a majority (56%) of citizens rely exclusively on sources other than the grid, in addition to 3% who use both the grid and other sources. But citizens who rely exclusively on alternative sources also outnumber those who rely only on the national grid in Burkina Faso (45% vs. 19%), Zimbabwe (42% vs. 27%), Tanzania (38% vs. 36%), Uganda (32% vs. 20%), Ethiopia (30% vs. 20%), Guinea (29% vs. 27%), and Malawi (27% vs. 12%).

In contrast, reliance on alternative sources is non-existent or rare in Mauritius, Morocco, Tunisia, South Africa, Eswatini, Cabo Verde, and Ghana – all countries where more than eight out of 10 citizens are connected to the national grid.

Nigeria stands out with its large proportion (31%) of citizens who use both the national grid and other sources – likely a response to the highly unreliable service from the national grid shown in Figure 8.

⁴ Due to rounding, the overall total (23%) differs by 1 percentage point from the sum of the sub-categories (16% + 6%).







Respondents were asked:

Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains?

Does your house use electric power from any source other than the national power grid?



Reflecting their disadvantage in access to the national grid, rural residents are twice as likely as their urban counterparts to use alternative sources, 30% vs. 14% (Figure 19). Alternative sources are also more widely used by citizens experiencing some degree of lived poverty (22%-25%) than in well-off households (14%).





Respondents were asked: Does your house use electric power from any source other than the national power grid? (% who say "yes")

Among those who use electricity sources other than the grid, by far the most popular source is solar panels (62%), followed by generators (16%) and batteries or power banks (9%) (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Alternative sources of electricity | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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



In about half of the surveyed countries, solar panels are far more popular than generators as alternative sources of electricity (e.g. used by 45% vs. 1% of all Zimbabweans) (Figure 21). But generators are the dominant alternative power source in Nigeria (37%), Liberia (15%), and Angola (14%), while the two sources are fairly even in popularity in Guinea, Cameroon, Sudan, and Sierra Leone.



Figure 21: Use of solar panels vs. generators | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: Does your house use electric power from any source other than the national power grid? [If yes:] What is the source of the electricity for this connection? (Figure shows % of all respondents who say they use solar panels and generators.)



In almost nine out 10 cases (87%), the non-grid sources of power are owned by the households using them. As a proportion of the entire population, one in five adults (20%) live in households that own alternative sources of electricity, while 3% rely on non-grid power sources owned by someone outside the household (Figure 22).





Respondents were asked: Does your house use electric power from any source other than the national power grid? [If yes:] What is the source of the electricity for this connection? Is the electricity source owned by your household, or does it come from outside of your household?



As might be expected, the data show that at the country level, the use of electricity sources other than the national grid is significantly correlated with a lack of a reliable supply of electricity from the grid (Pearson's r=-0.744; p<0.01). In other words, countries where fewer households receive a reliable supply of electricity from the national grid tend to have more households using alternative power sources (Figure 23).

Mali is an extreme example: Among the 74% of households that lack a reliable electricity supply, more than eight out of 10 (85%) compensate by turning to other sources of electricity.

Figure 23: Reliable connection to the grid and use of alternative sources of electricity



| 34 countries | 2019/2021

Conclusion

A majority of Africans still lack reliable electricity from the national grid, whether because the grid doesn't reach them, they can't afford to connect to it, or service from the grid is unreliable. Each of these barriers requires a different response, and all require major investments of funds and political will.

In some countries, a substantial number of citizens appear to be taking matters into their own hands, turning to alternative sources of electricity to compensate for non-existent or poorquality service from the national grid. Detailed country-level analysis must inform the most appropriate role of the state in either facilitating or obviating the need for such alternatives.



The COVID-19 pandemic heightens the challenges of achieving SDG 7. But it also highlights the importance of finding sustainable solutions, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged communities, given the critical role of electrification in the pursuit of most development goals.



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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	NovDec. 2019	N/A
Benin	NovDec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	FebMarch 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	DDc. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	SeptOct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	NovDec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	FebMarch 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	OctDec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	NovDec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	OctNov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	JanFeb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Sudan	FebApril 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	FebMarch 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Тодо	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	FebMarch 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	SeptOct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	NovDec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017



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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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 (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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