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**Poverty, Poverty Measurement,  
and Democracy in Southern Africa**

**How does poverty shape the prospects for consolidating democratic government?**

Political analysts have long believed that sustaining democratic government in a poor society is harder than in a relatively wealthy one.<sup>1</sup> This is a sobering thought for all those committed to democracy in Africa.

Precisely *why* poverty undermines democracy, however, is much less clear. Perhaps poor people have far less time to devote to political participation. Or, given the imperative to satisfy basic survival, people may sacrifice “higher order” needs like self-government, freedom and equality. Or, poverty may inhibit modernization processes – like education, urbanization, or use of the mass media – that are commonly held to breed democratic values.<sup>2</sup> Finally, perhaps poorer societies are less able to distribute wealth equitably and thereby to facilitate compromise in clashes over resources.<sup>3</sup>

To explore the political dynamics of poverty, we use data from seven 1999-2000 Afrobarometer surveys in Southern Africa to develop an index of poverty and then test its impact on political attitudes and behaviours critical to democracy.

This *Briefing Paper* summarizes the most important conclusions, as follows.<sup>4</sup>

**A Lived Poverty Index describes peoples’ ability to obtain the basic necessities of life.**

The Afrobarometer introduces a short battery of survey questions that quickly but reliably assess poverty and well being without having to do a detailed mapping of household income, expenditure, consumption, or assets. We ask about the existential experience of “lived

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<sup>1</sup> The latest contribution to this venerable research tradition is Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker, “Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values,” *American Sociological Review* 65: February (2000): 19-51.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization In the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). pp. 59-72.

<sup>4</sup> For the full study, see Robert Mattes, Michael Bratton & Yul Derek Davids, *Poverty, Survival and Democracy in Southern Africa*, Afrobarometer Working Papers, No. 23 (Accra / Cape Town / East Lansing: Afrobarometer, 2002) ([www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)).

poverty.” If Amartya Sen is right and the value of one’s standard of living lies in the living itself,<sup>5</sup> what really matters is whether people are able to secure the basic necessities of life. Borrowing from an approach pioneered in Central and Eastern Europe,<sup>6</sup> we present survey respondents with a list of basic necessities and ask: “In the last twelve months, how often have you or your family gone without (these things): Was it often, sometimes, rarely or never?” The list includes seven items: food, water, home safety, medical treatment, a cash income, home fuel, and electricity. We also pose a series of standard questions about the respondents’ educational attainment, employment status, occupation, and household access to services. Finally, Afrobarometer interviewers observe the conditions of the household and immediate surrounding community.

Is there a single underlying dimension running through the 35 separate measures we use? Or is “poverty” a multifaceted concept?<sup>7</sup> Either way, we want to know whether individuals who are deprived in one respect tend also to be deprived across all other items. In fact, we find six separate, though related, dimensions.

The most important dimension of poverty concerns “going without” basic necessities.<sup>8</sup> This scale of seven interrelated items comprises the Afrobarometer’s composite measure (or index) of lived poverty. It forms one part of overall wellbeing and is empirically distinct from, though related to, other factors such as employment, health status, and access to public services. In contrast to recent efforts to simplify the concept of poverty, wellbeing in Southern Africa is multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to a single measure that combines securing basic necessities with other indicators.

### **The Lived Poverty Index paints a sombre picture of poverty across Southern Africa.**

*Food* Hunger was already a significant problem across the region in 1999-2000, particularly in Lesotho. The median respondents in Lesotho, Zambia and Namibia reported “sometimes” going “without enough food to eat” in the previous twelve months.<sup>9</sup> Only in Botswana did the median respondent “never” go without.

*Water* Water deprivation was worst in Zambia, where the median respondent either “sometimes” or “rarely” went without “enough clear water to drink and cook with.” Only in Botswana and South Africa was the central tendency “never” to go without potable water.

*Home Security* The average Zimbabwean reported “sometimes” feeling “unsafe from crime in (the) home”. That the average South African “rarely” felt unsafe is inconsistent with the fact that South Africans rate crime as the “most important problem facing the country” and

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<sup>5</sup> For his most recent work, see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rose, *Getting Things Done With Social Capital: New Russia Barometer VII*, Studies In Public Policy no. 303 (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1998).

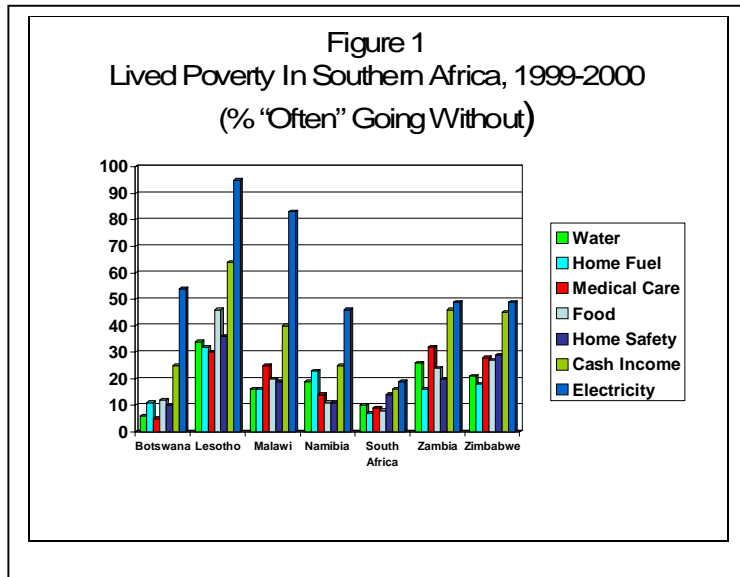
<sup>7</sup> Robert Chambers, “Poverty and Livelihoods: Whose Reality Counts?” *IDS Discussion Paper No. 347* (Brighton, University of Sussex, Institute of Development Studies, 1995) p. vi.

<sup>8</sup> The scale was verified through factor analysis, which extracted a single unrotated factor that explains 41 percent of the common variance and scales reliably at  $\alpha = .75$ .

<sup>9</sup> The median is the value that divides the sample into two equal halves: for ordinal response scales, the median is the best estimate of central tendency.

the existence of a heated public debate surrounding the ANC government's performance at fighting crime.

**Medical Treatment** There is wide variance in people's ability to secure health care across the region. The average Namibian, Zambian and Zimbabwean had "sometimes" "gone without medicine or medical treatment that (they) needed." Again, the average Batswana said they "never" went without.



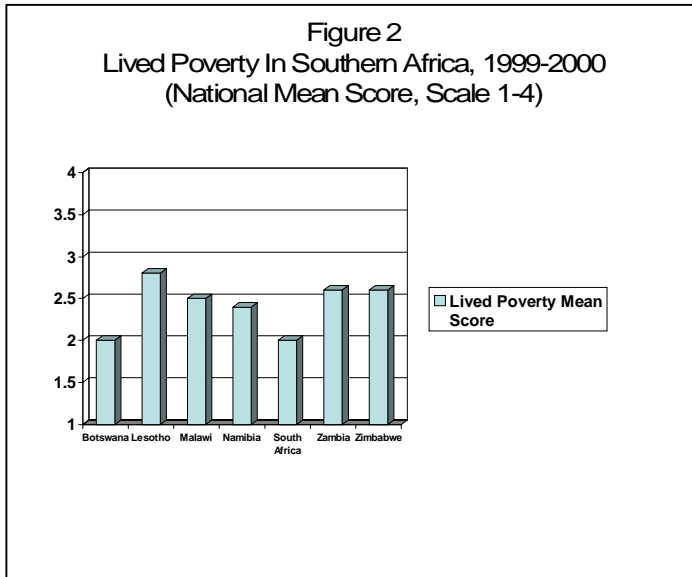
**Cash Income** Rather than asking people how much money they make, which seldom elicits reliable responses, the Afrobarometer asked how often people had "gone without a cash income" during the previous twelve months. The median Basotho (fully 64 percent) say they or their families had "often" done so, a figure far higher than any other country in Southern Africa. Only in South Africa, where the state provides welfare

and maintenance payments, did the average respondent "rarely" go without cash. However, this result masks great income inequalities within a country where the average black person goes without "sometimes," compared to "never" for whites, coloureds and Indians.

**Home Fuel** In most of Southern Africa, the average person said they or their family had "rarely" "gone without enough fuel to heat your home or cook food." In South Africa and Botswana, the average person "never" experienced this form of deprivation.

**Electricity** In general, the typical Southern African had "often" (most probably meaning "always") "gone without electricity in (the) home." In Namibia, the average response is to "sometimes," and in South Africa, with its giant electrical parastatal – Eskom – the average response was "rarely."

In general, then, it appears that Southern Africans in 1999-2000 were most likely to go without electricity, medical treatment, and food. They were more likely to secure water, home fuel and home safety. For the typical citizen, it appears that difficulties are likely to be intermittent rather than chronic. Nevertheless, a focus on central tendencies obscures the significant proportions of people who are destitute. Figure 1 summarizes how each country performs across each basic necessity displaying the proportions who "often" go without. It is evident that considerable proportions of Southern Africans experience chronic shortages of basic necessities.



Summarising the information in another way, Figure 2 presents the Lived Poverty Index for each country on a scale that runs from 1 (complete satisfaction of basic needs) to 4 (frequent shortages of basic needs). Viewed in this way, Botswana (1.98) and South Africa (2.00) are the least impoverished countries in the region, and statistically indistinguishable from each other. Namibia (2.39) is third, with Malawi (2.48), Zimbabwe (2.55) and Zambia (2.60) tie for fifth. Lesotho rates seventh, the

poorest country of those we have surveyed in Southern Africa (2.76). The standard deviations around these mean scores are largest in Zimbabwe and South Africa, indicating that inequalities in the enjoyment of basic necessities are greatest in these countries.

**The Lived Poverty Index offers an efficient way to estimate poverty levels, monitor poverty trends, and examine the causes and consequences of poverty.**

The Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index is based on individuals' subjective responses to a short battery of questions in small and relatively inexpensive sample surveys. Yet this existential measure produces virtually the same cross-national and within-country results as conventional and more expensive formal indicators derived from national accounts (e.g. GNP per capita) or massive censuses and surveys of household income, expenditure, and infrastructure.

As Figure 3 shows, we find that a country's aggregate mean score on the Lived Poverty Index (LPI) correlates almost perfectly with World Bank estimates of GNP per capita<sup>10</sup> (Pearson's  $r = -.93$ ). It also predicts GNP per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP)<sup>11</sup> ( $r = -.84$ ).

In addition, the Afrobarometer's LPI score is an efficient proxy for various national "poverty line" estimates. The strongest correlation is with the World Bank's International Poverty Line indicator that uses data gathered from national household surveys to calculate the proportion of people living on an income of less than US \$1 a day at purchasing power parity<sup>12</sup> (Pearson's  $r = .66$ ). The same holds for the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP's) indicator that measures the proportions living below nationally defined poverty

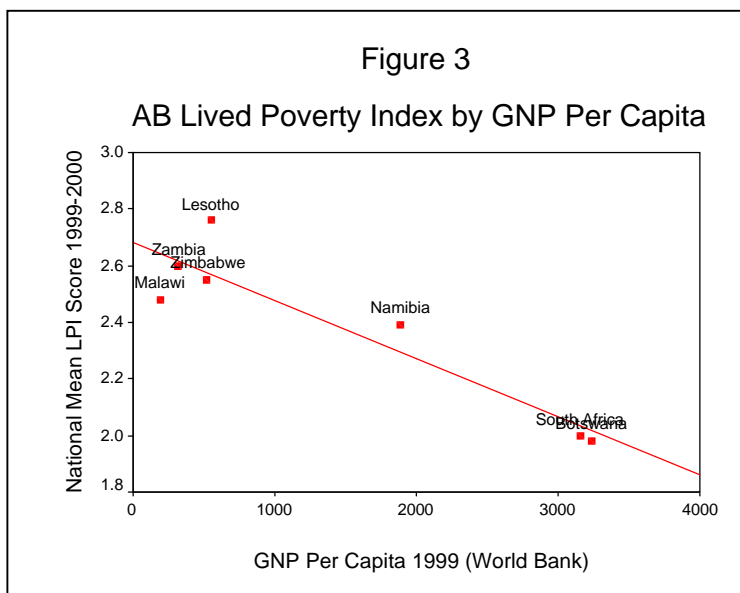
<sup>10</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report, 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 274.

<sup>11</sup> *World Development Report, 2000/2001*, p. 274.

<sup>12</sup> *World Development Report, 2000/2001*, p. 280.

lines<sup>13</sup> ( $r = .63$ ). One reason that these correlations are weaker than with GNP per capita may be that the World Bank and UNDP data are gathered via household surveys that confront many challenges in accurately measuring assets, incomes, and expenditures.<sup>14</sup>

Correlations are also strong between the LPI score and various measures of poverty's antecedents and consequences. These include the World Bank's estimates of Under Five Mortality<sup>15</sup> ( $r=.59$ ) and Infant Mortality<sup>16</sup> ( $r=.63$ ), as well as with the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) ( $r=-.55$ ). The HDI combines average life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, school enrolment, and adjusted per capita income in PPP\$.<sup>17</sup> Correlations are substantially lower for the UNDP's Human Poverty Index which measures percentages of individuals expected to die by age 40, adults who are illiterate, people without access to safe water and health services, and underweight children under five<sup>18</sup> ( $r = .35$ ).



We also investigate whether the Lived Poverty Index obtains the same results as other measurements at sub-national levels. Using a poverty study recently conducted by Statistics South Africa, we find that mean LPI scores for administrative provinces are closely related to the percentages of people living in households with per capita monthly income under Rand 800 ( $r=.90$ ).<sup>19</sup> Finally, we calculate LPI scores by *apartheid* racial categories and find that these correlate almost

perfectly with official South African estimates of the percentages of each race living in households with an imputed monthly household expenditure of less than Rand 600 ( $r = .99$ ).

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> For a review of such challenges, see Anne Inserra, *A Review of Approaches for Measurement of Macroeconomic and Household Income*, AIMS Brief No. 8 (Washington D.C.: United States Agency for International Development, September 1996).

<sup>15</sup> *World Development Report, 2000/2001*, p. 276.

<sup>16</sup> *World Development Report, 2000/2001*, p. 276.

<sup>17</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report, 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> *Human Development Report, 1999*, p. 127. Data taken from Vivienne Taylor, *South Africa: Transformation for Human Development, 2000* (Pretoria: UNDP, 2000), p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Alderman et al, "Combining Census and Survey Data to Construct A Poverty Map of South Africa," *Measuring Poverty in South Africa* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2000), pp. 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Alderman et al, "Combining Census and Survey Data," pp. 59-60.

Thus, the Afrobarometer Lived Poverty Index closely mirrors a variety of alternative measures of poverty, thereby helping to cross-validate all indicators. In general, the LPI accords most closely with money metric indicators, whether the data is based on national accounts or household surveys. But our index of lived poverty shows weaker linkages with measures of expenditure, and the accompaniments of poverty such as education, literacy or health.

The high cost of national household income and expenditure surveys usually prohibits their frequent use in developing countries. A key advantage of the Lived Poverty Index is that it can be applied regularly on surveys of relatively small, nationally representative samples. Thus policy makers can track reliably national and sub-national trends in the overall extent of poverty or any of its subcomponents such as hunger. And because it is based on a short battery of questions, the Index can be inserted on various types of surveys, thus enabling analysis of the connections between poverty and a range of economic, social and political phenomena.

**Poverty does not seriously inhibit the development of citizenship values and behaviours that are conducive to democracy.**

Here we investigate the micro-political consequences of lived poverty. Other things being equal, does lived poverty affect political attitudes and political behavior? The conventional expectation is that poverty decreases both mass support for democracy and popular participation in democratic life.

Much of the current wisdom is based on qualitative data that is not necessarily representative of whole societies. For example, rather than include measures of political participation in household surveys, the World Bank sponsored focus groups based “Participatory Poverty Assessments” in 50 countries, 28 of these in Africa. Analysts concluded that poor people’s experiences of poverty include a dimension of powerlessness characterised by a dependency on others, and a lack of voice and options. Poor people lack information about and access to government (especially the police and courts) and were regularly victimised by public officials and encountered increasing levels of crime.<sup>21</sup> But Ravi Kanbur and Lyn Squire have noted that “we do not have household-level measures of vulnerability and powerlessness and so cannot distinguish the poor (in these dimensions) from the non-poor.”<sup>22</sup> Yet this is precisely what the Afrobarometer allows because it contains an unusual combination of data on both lived poverty and individual political values and behaviours.

First, is an individual’s poverty status linked to political awareness? We measure awareness by interest in politics,<sup>23</sup> use of newspapers and television, and a sense of political efficacy. In doing so, we statistically control for the impact of other factors which are themselves related to poverty and may have independent impacts (such as education, ill health, rural-urban location, and employment status). Net of these factors, we find that poverty not only fails to

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<sup>21</sup> Deepa Narayan, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (World Bank: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Ravi Kanbur & Lyn Squire, *The Evolution of Thinking About Poverty: Exploring the Interactions* (September 1999), p. 22 (<http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/sk145/>).

<sup>23</sup> For information on the exact question items used to measure political attitudes and behaviours, see Mattes, Bratton and Davids, *Poverty, Survival and Democracy in Southern Africa*, ([www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)).

decrease respondents' interest in politics, but is associated with a slight increase.<sup>24</sup> However, poverty does appear to reduce people's exposure to news media through television and newspapers,<sup>25</sup> and also slightly reduces people's sense of political efficacy.<sup>26</sup>

Second, does poverty shape key political values? Interpersonal trust, for example, has been argued to be a key predictor of political participation and effective political institutions.<sup>27</sup> We also test whether poverty shapes the way people understand democracy. Are poor people more likely to view democracy as a way to effect substantive outcomes than as a set of political procedures to make decisions? In order to ensure we isolate the effect of poverty, we add the measures of political awareness examined above to our list of controls. Other factors thus controlled, we see that poverty reduces levels of interpersonal trust very slightly,<sup>28</sup> and has no effect on the extent to which people define democracy as a set of political procedures.<sup>29</sup> However, increased poverty is associated with a slightly greater propensity to define democracy as a set of substantive outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

Third, when we turn to examine the linkages of poverty and political participation, the common wisdom is turned on its head. Net the impact of correlates such as education, ill health or political awareness, the most impoverished respondents are as likely as the least impoverished to have voted in their most recent national election,<sup>31</sup> or taken part in political protest.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, those who suffer frequent shortages of basic necessities are actually more likely to say they attend meetings of community organisations,<sup>33</sup> contact political leaders,<sup>34</sup> participate in conventional political processes,<sup>35</sup> or comply with the law.<sup>36</sup> It is true however, that the poor are more likely to be the victims of abuse or extortion from government leaders who demand payments or favours in return for delivering services,<sup>37</sup> but the differences are very slight.

Fourth, we test whether poverty shapes citizens' policy preferences. Again we ask: "What are the most important problems facing the country that government should address?" While there are some differences in policy preferences, they are not large. Poor respondents are twice as likely (12 percent) as non-poor (6 percent) to list problems around food as an important national problem requiring government attention. They are also more likely to cite problems concerning water, farming, transportation, the national economy, health and health care, and poverty; however the difference is never more than four percentage points. They are also more likely to cite job creation, education, housing and corruption, but the greatest difference on these issues is no more than seven percentage points.

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<sup>24</sup> Pearson's  $r=.05$ , Significance = .000,  $N = 7412$ .

<sup>25</sup> Pearson's  $r=-.22$ , Significance = .000,  $N=7412$ .

<sup>26</sup> Pearson's  $r=-.06$ , Significance = .000,  $N=7412$ .

<sup>27</sup> Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Pearson's  $r=-.03$ , Significance = .000,  $N=5659$ .

<sup>29</sup> Pearson's  $r= .01$ , Not Significant at .05 level,  $N=5659$ .

<sup>30</sup> Pearson's  $r= .06$ , Significance = .000,  $N=5659$ .

<sup>31</sup> Pearson's  $r=.01$ , Not Significant at .05 level,  $N=4936$ .

<sup>32</sup> Pearson's  $r=.09$ , Significance = .000,  $N=4936$ .

<sup>33</sup> Pearson's  $r=.11$ , Significance = .000,  $N=4936$ .

<sup>34</sup> Pearson's  $r=.08$ , Significance = .000,  $N=4936$ .

<sup>35</sup> Pearson's  $r=.10$ , Significance = .000,  $N=4936$ .

<sup>36</sup> Pearson's  $r=.13$ , Significance = .000,  $N=4936$ .

<sup>37</sup> Pearson's  $r=.07$ , Significance = .000,  $N=4936$ .

Finally, we test whether poverty reduces support for democratic political regimes. We find that lived poverty has no observable impact on the extent to which people see democracy as the preferred form of government,<sup>38</sup> though it does – net all other influences – reduce slightly the extent to which people reject authoritarian alternatives to a present multi-party regime.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, while social scientists have consistently found strong aggregate correlations between indicators of national wealth and democratic endurance, we are unable to find any important linkages at the individual level between the reported existence of poverty and the citizenship behaviours and preferences that are critical to the health of democracy. To the extent that these findings from seven southern African countries can be replicated elsewhere, they suggest that the key dynamics behind the link between democracy and wealth occur at a macro level. In other words, poor citizens may be no less democratic in thought and deed than their wealthier compatriots. Instead, we suspect that poor countries are less able to afford or maintain the things vital for sustainable democracy, ranging from formal state institutions such as quality electoral machinery and a well-resourced legislature, to societal institutions such as effective political parties, an independent news media, and a vibrant web of civil society organizations. In short, while poverty undermines the functioning of democratic institutions, it does not automatically breed an anti-democratic culture.

**The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 15 African countries. It is coordinated by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), and Michigan State University. Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For more information, including reports with complete findings, see:**

**[www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)**

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<sup>38</sup> Pearson's  $r = -0.02$ , Not Significant at .05 Level,  $N=5163$ .

<sup>39</sup> Pearson's  $r = -0.05$ , Significance = .000,  $N=5163$ .