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POPULAR APPRAISALS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN LIBERIA, 2008

Introduction

From the 1970s through to the early 1980s, the Liberian economy and individual living conditions were in decline. This was one factor that gave rise to popular discontent in the country, which was further fuelled by the political exclusion of the majority of Liberians. These undercurrents finally led to the military overthrow of the civilian political administration in April 1980. But army rule, lasting nearly 10 years, did little to change the economic situation in the country: there was little or no improvement in the living conditions of the majority of Liberians.

By the mid-1980s, reaction to the military's failure to introduce electoral politics was turning violent, as prominent politicians sought to force the military to disengage from politics. In late 1989 this agitation broke out into full scale civil war. For the next 14 years, the country was torn by conflict. Calm was only restored with the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement in Accra, Ghana in August 2003, leading to the establishment of a transitional government.

Between October and November 2005, presidential and legislative elections were held, which placed control of government and the economic management of the country in the hands of a democratically-elected civilian administration. From 2005 to 2008, the government reported improvements in many economic indicators, particularly revenue collection. The enormous support provided by international institutions and foreign governments also signaled the likelihood of improvements in the Liberian economy and the living conditions of the people.

This paper seeks to present a snapshot of what ordinary Liberians think about the country's current economic conditions, their appraisals of the government's efforts to manage the economy, and their perceptions of how the country's economic situation is changing over time, using data from the first Afrobarometer survey conducted in Liberia in 2008.

The Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, markets and economic conditions. The Afrobarometer started in 1999 and has now conducted four rounds of surveys, expanding from 12 countries in Round 1 (1999-2001) to 20 in Round 4 (2008-2009). Fieldwork for the first Afrobarometer survey in Liberia was undertaken between December 8 and 21, 2008 by Subah Belleh Associates under the supervision of the Liberia Democratic Institute. The survey is based on a randomly selected national probability sample of 1,200 respondents, representing a cross-section of adult Liberians aged 18 years or older. Samples of this size yield a margin of error of approximately ± 3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. The survey was conducted in all 15 counties, with each county, as well as urban and rural areas, sampled in proportion to its share of the national population. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent's choice.

Key Findings

The key findings of the 2008 Liberia survey with respect to the country's economic conditions include the following:

- A majority of Liberians rate the country's present economic condition, as well as their own personal living conditions, as fairly or very bad.
- On average, Liberians rate their own living conditions as worse than those of others.
- Majorities think that economic conditions are the same or worse now compared to one year ago.
- Nearly two-thirds of Liberians nonetheless anticipate that both the economic condition of the country and their own personal living conditions will improve in the next year.
- Nearly half of Liberians go without enough food to eat occasionally or often. However, the efforts of NGOs and others have perhaps helped to keep the levels of hardship experienced by the average Liberian in check.
- Liberians prioritize management of the economy, education, and health as the most important problems facing the country.
- The most important national priority of Liberians is to improve the economic conditions of the poor.
- A solid majority of Liberians is of the opinion that the current government is handling management of the economy badly.
- A majority thinks that the government's economic policies have hurt most people and only benefitted a few.
- On average, Liberians are nonetheless willing to accept some hardships now in order for the economy to get better in the future.

General Economic and Personal Living Conditions

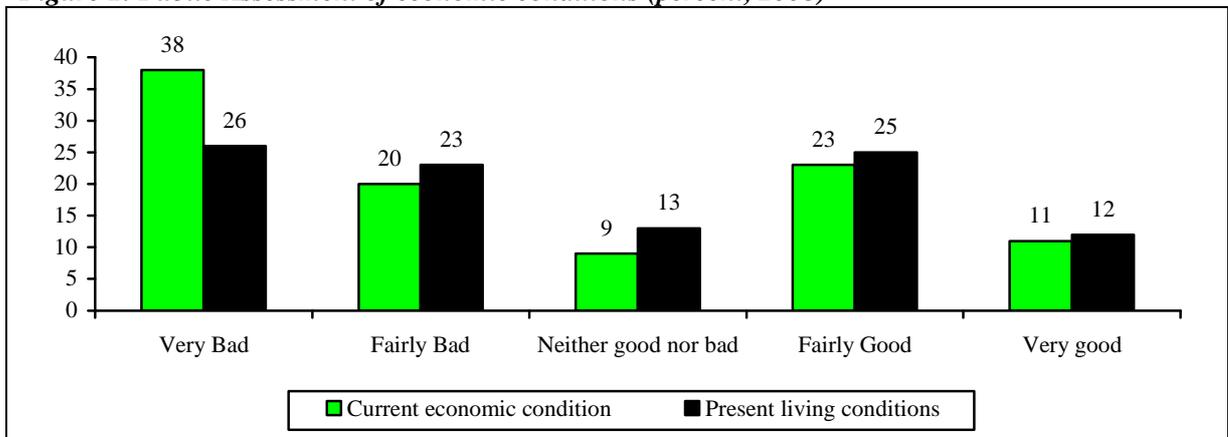
In general, Liberians describe the country's present economic conditions and their own personal living conditions in unfavourable terms. A majority (57 percent) reports that the country's present economic condition is fairly or very bad, while half of Liberians (50 percent) also assessed their present living conditions negatively. These figures are much higher than the third (34 and 37 percent respectively) who rate the country's current economic conditions as well as their own present living conditions positively (Figure 1).¹

Furthermore, a sizeable minority of Liberians does not think that there has been appreciable improvement in the general economic conditions of the country (Figure 2). Four in every 10 Liberians (40 percent) say the country's economic condition has worsened compared to one year ago, while just a third (34 percent) perceive improvements.

At the personal level things look only slightly better. A plurality (41 percent) report that their own living conditions have improved in the past year, compared to 30 percent reporting decline. A similar number (40 percent) also believe that they are better off compared to other Liberians, compared to about a third (32 percent) who think they are worse-off than others (Figure 3).

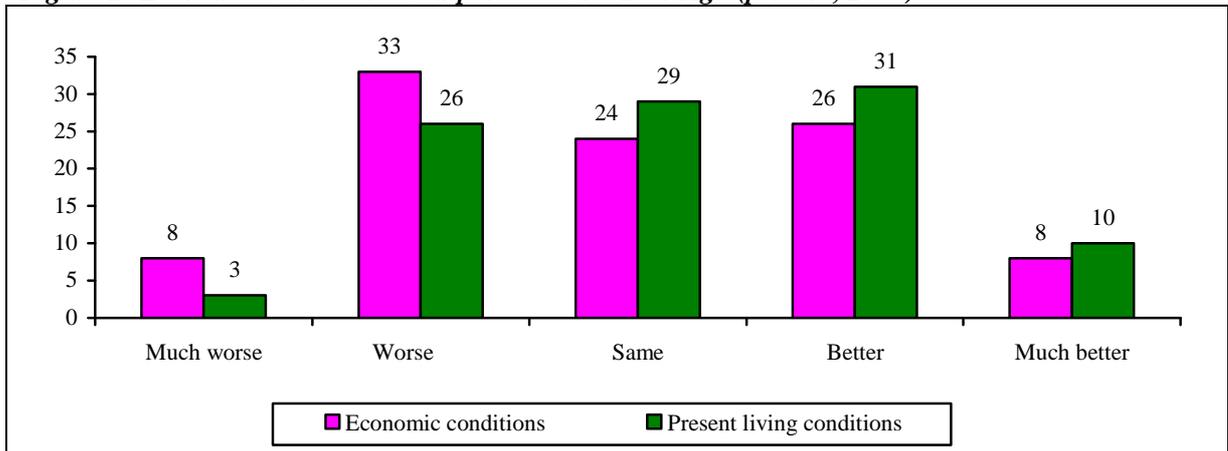
¹ Small apparent differences with the numbers shown in Figure 1 are due to rounding.

Figure 1: Public Assessment of economic conditions (percent, 2008)



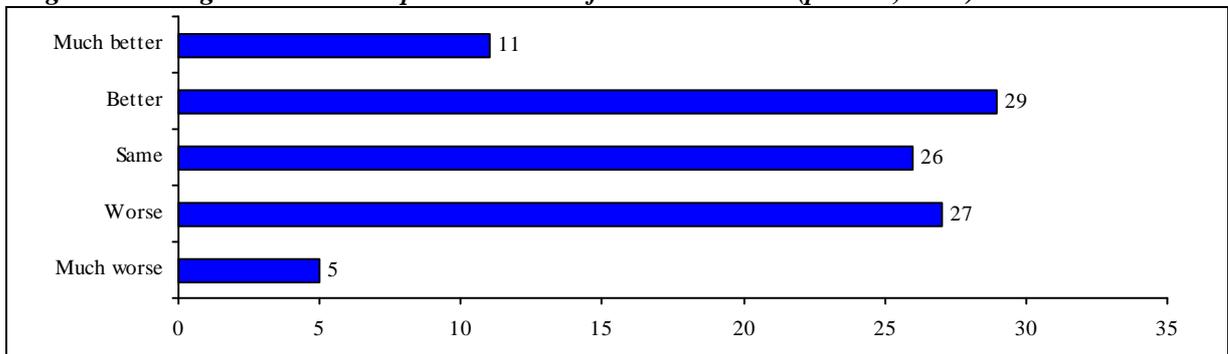
Question: Let's discuss economic conditions. In general, how would you describe (a) The present economic condition of this country; and (b) Your own present living conditions?

Figure 2: Economic Conditions Compared to One Year Ago (percent, 2008)



Question: Looking back, how do you rate the following compared to twelve months ago: (a) Economic conditions in this country; and (b) Your living conditions?

Figure 3: Living conditions compared to those of other Liberians (percent, 2008)

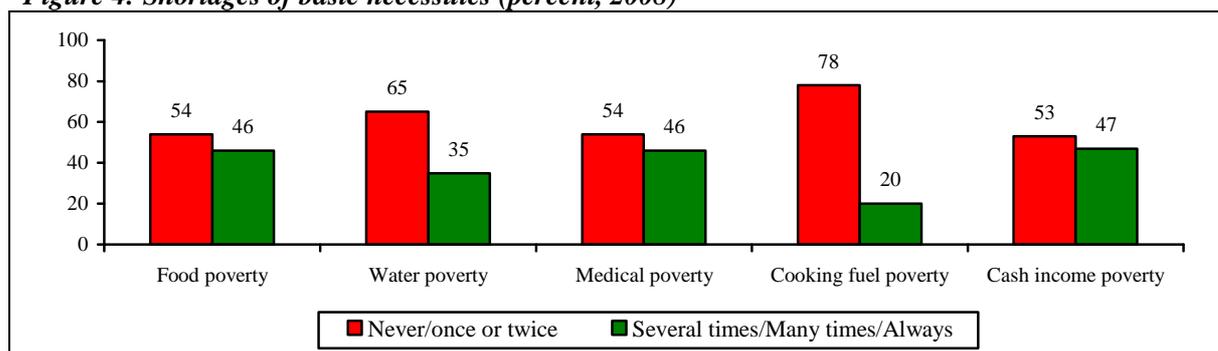


Question: In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other Liberians?

The Experience of Poverty

Coming out of war, Liberia, one of the poorest countries in the world, has had to contend with myriad socio-economic challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, high unemployment, inadequate medical facilities, and the lack of educational opportunities. Under these circumstances, Liberians crave the bare necessities of life. It is therefore encouraging that considerable numbers of Liberians say they experienced shortages of these necessities relatively infrequently or not at all. Fully 8 out of 10 (78 percent) experienced shortages of cooking fuel either “never” or “only once or twice” during the past year, although shortages were more common with respect to potable water (65 percent never/once or twice), food and medical care/medicine (54 percent each) and cash income (53 percent) (Figure 4). This may in part reflect the considerable assistance provided during and especially after the war by both local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donor institutions. Together with the international peacekeepers, these organizations have constructed a considerable number of water wells that are still in use throughout the country, as well as supplying food and providing medical care. These contributions are likely reflected in the fact that majorities do not report experiencing regular shortages of these necessities. Nonetheless, more than one-third of Liberians have experienced regular shortages of food, potable water, health care and cash, so despite external assistance and their own efforts, many Liberians still experience serious hardship on a regular basis.

Figure 4: Shortages of basic necessities (percent, 2008)



Question: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without (a) Enough food to eat? (b) Enough clean water for home use? (c) Medicines or medical treatment? (d) Enough fuel to cook your food? And (e) A cash income?

Government Performance at Economic Management

To ordinary Liberians, the government’s performance at economic management is highly disappointing. Seven in every ten Liberians believe the government has performed “very” or “fairly badly” in improving living conditions for the poor (70 percent), and the figures are even worse with respect to creating jobs (75 percent), ensuring enough for everyone to eat (76 percent), keeping prices low (79 percent), and narrowing income gaps (80 per cent) (Table 1). The government gets better ratings for its general management of the economy, but even so, a solid majority of 57 percent believes it is doing a poor job of handling this critical task. These negative assessments also appear to be broadly reflected in the fact that three quarters (74 percent) believe that the government’s economic policies have hurt most people, compared to just 25 percent who believe they have helped more people than they have hurt.

Table 1: Assessment of government's performance (percent, 2008)

	Managing economy	Improving living conditions of the poor	Creating jobs	Keeping prices low	Narrowing income gaps	Ensuring enough to eat
Very Badly	36	47	50	57	54	46
Fairly Badly	21	23	25	22	26	30
Very/fairly badly	57	70	75	79	80	76
Fairly Well	30	25	21	17	15	19
Very Well	10	4	3	4	3	4
Very/fairly well	41	29	24	21	18	23

Question: Now let's speak about the performance of the present government of this country. How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (a) Managing economy, (b) Improving living conditions, (c) Creating jobs (d) Keeping prices low, (e) Narrowing income gaps, and (f) Ensuring enough to eat.

These poor assessments of government performance in economic management found expression in Liberians' response to the question "If you had to choose, which one of the following things: (a) is most important; and (b) which would be the next most important? Over half of Liberians (52 percent) think improving the economic conditions of the poor ought to be the most important national priority, and another 35 percent rank it as the second most important goal. The public's second priority, though, is freedom: 29 percent ranked it the top priority, and another 41 percent placed it second, an opinion which Liberians may have formed largely as a result of the worthless destruction of so many lives during the war (Table 2).

Table 2: National priority (percent, 2008)

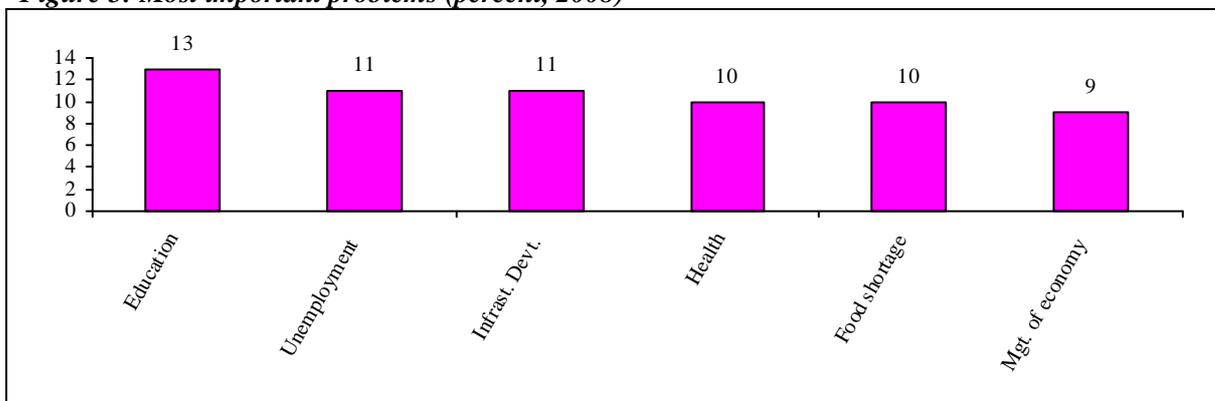
	Most important national priority	Second most important national priority
Improving economic conditions for the poor	52	35
Protecting people's right to live freely	29	41
Maintaining order in the nation	15	15
Giving people more say in government decisions	4	8

Question: If you had to choose, which one of the following things: (a) Is most important? (b) And which would be the next most important?

Liberia's Most Important Problems

In general, Liberians identify issues with direct impact on their well-being as their predominant concerns. We asked, "In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address," and respondents could give up to three responses. Of a total of 3583 responses to the question, education ranked top with 13 percent, followed by unemployment and development of infrastructure/roads (11 percent each). Health and food shortages/famine were close behind with 10 percent each, and economic management followed with (9 percent) (Figure 5). But poverty and the economy, rather than social issues, clearly dominated first responses to this question, with economic management identified by 26 percent as a first response, followed by unemployment (24 percent), food shortage (10 percent) and wages and incomes (9 percent) (not shown). The popular focus on unemployment is not surprising. Though the 2008 Liberia Census is yet to report on the level of unemployment, the physical and social effects of a society with high unemployment, particularly among the youth, are evident throughout the country.

Figure 5: Most important problems (percent, 2008)



Optimism About the Future

The Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs of Liberia recently accepted that the government poverty reduction strategy has failed. He also acknowledged that the country lacks the necessary supporting environment to ensure the attainment of the millennium development goal of reducing chronic poverty by half by 2015. Despite the difficult and challenging economic situation, a sizeable majority of Liberians (69 percent) nonetheless agrees that for the economy to get better in the future, it is necessary for citizens to accept some hardships now. Less than a third (29 percent) think the costs of reforming the economy are too high and that the government should abandon its current economic policies.

This willingness to endure present hardships in the hopes of a better future is consistent with the finding that a majority of Liberians express optimism about improved future economic and living conditions. Nearly two thirds (64 percent) of Liberians expect the country's general economic conditions to be better in 12 months time, while only 18 percent expect the situation to worsen. Similarly, 67 percent anticipate better personal living conditions in the coming year (Table 3).

Table 3: Economic expectations in 12 months time (percent, 2008)

	General economic conditions	living conditions
Much worse	4	4
Worse	14	11
Worse	28	15
Better	46	43
Much better	18	24
Better	64	67
Same	9	11
Don't know	8	7

Questions: Looking ahead, do you expect the following to be better or worse? (a) Economic conditions in this country in twelve months time? (b) Your living conditions in twelve months time?

Conclusion

The postwar government in Liberia faces enormous challenges regarding economic management and improving the living conditions of the people. But the willingness of Liberians to endure hardships in anticipation of improvement in national economic conditions and their own living conditions in the near future is a positive sign. Liberians are known to be overly tolerant of bad governance, as well as resilient to hardship. But they can also be ruthless in responding to government excesses and a loss of hope. This partly explains the devastating displays of violence that characterized the civil war. In order to maintain the current semblance of stability in the country and avert future disruption of the peace that has been attained, it is imperative that government pay attention to economic management in the country and do its utmost to help improve the living conditions of the people.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Alaric Tokpa, Dan Saryee and Daniel Armah-Attoh.

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RDMFA/DANIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 4 research, capacity building and outreach activities. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org