



Dispatch No. 384 | 19 August 2020

'Di gron still dry'¹: Sierra Leoneans increasingly concerned about the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 384 | Fredline M'Cormack-Hale and Andrew Lavali

Summary

Poverty levels in Sierra Leone are high, with health shocks like the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak and the current COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating economic hardship in the country. At least 57% of the population live below the poverty line, while 11% are in extreme poverty (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019a). The economy had been showing some turnaround, with gross domestic product growth in 2019 projected at 5.4%, its highest rate since 2016, but due to disruptions in global trade, travel restrictions, and domestic limitations on mobility as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank (2020) now estimates that the economy will contract by 2.3% to 4% this year.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the government's 2019 Budget Speech had prioritized macroeconomic stability, fiscal discipline, and the creation of an enabling environment for sustainable growth, reforms that were commended by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019b). The government's performance in handling the economy also received the highest approval ratings, compared to other sectors, in the 2019 Bio-Meter, a citizen-driven initiative assessing progress of the administration of President Julius Maada Bio in fulfilling its campaign promises (Institute for Governance Reform & Sensi Hub, 2019). But in the 2020 Budget Speech, the minister of finance acknowledged that the government's financial and economic interventions had not yet overcome what he described as a legacy of mismanagement to produce tangible changes in poverty rates (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019b).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey confirm that economic reforms have not translated materially for citizens. After some optimism with the change in government in 2018, the proportion of Sierra Leoneans who say the country is going in the right direction declined significantly in 2020, mirroring the precipitous drop in satisfaction with the direction of the country during the Ebola period in 2015. Very few citizens believe the government is doing a good job of handling the economy, and large majorities experience shortages of food, clean water, and other basic necessities. Citizens in the opposition-controlled Western and Northern regions are especially bleak in their outlook, but even in the East and South, for many, "di gron still dry."

¹ Literally translated as "the ground is dry," in the local lingua franca, Krio, this phrase has become popularized in the country as a convenient shorthand to express dissatisfaction with the general hardship or inability to make ends meet.

Afrobarometer surveys

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. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 9 and 31 March 2020. 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 Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, and 2018.

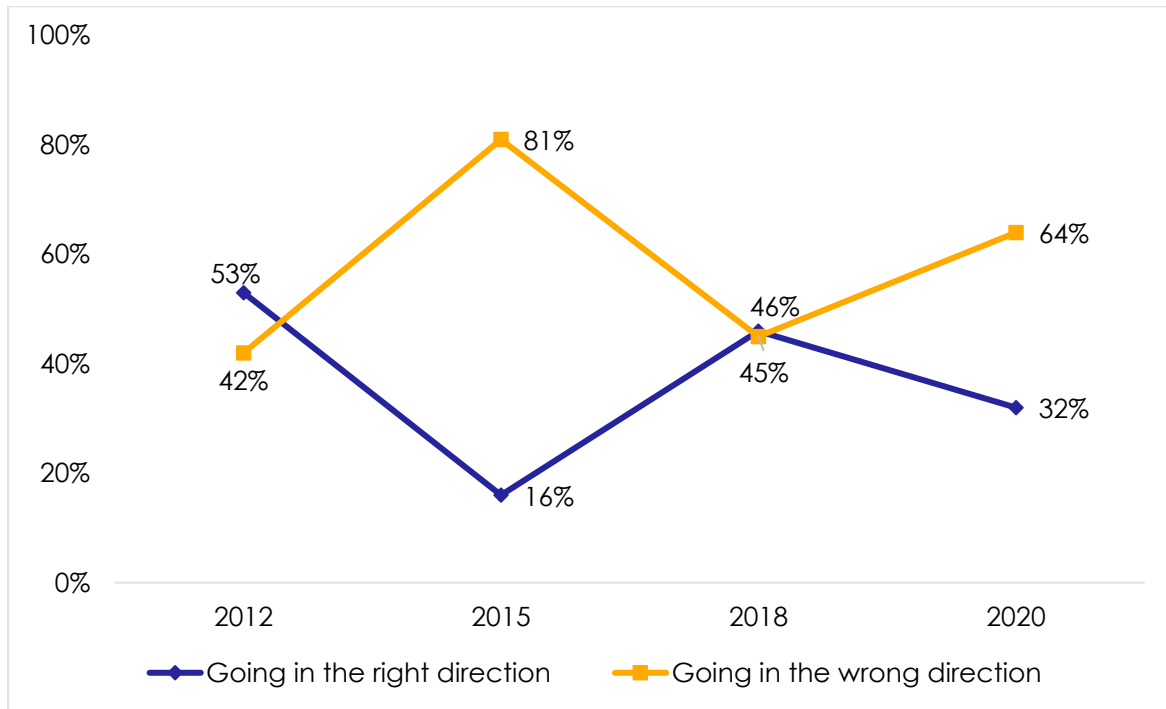
Key findings

- Only one-third (32%) of Sierra Leoneans say the country is going “in the right direction,” a 13-percentage-point decline compared to 2018 (45%). The perception that the country is moving in the right direction is more common in ruling party strongholds – Southern (57%) and Eastern (53%) regions – than in opposition party strongholds – Western (16%) and Northern (14%) regions.
- Just one in 10 Sierra Leoneans (11%) describe the country's economic condition as “fairly good” or “very good.” Negative assessments (84%) have almost doubled since 2012 (46%).
- Only two in 10 citizens (19%) describe their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good.” The proportion who say their living conditions are fairly/very bad (72%) has increased by 32 percentage points since 2012 (40%).
- Nine in 10 respondents (89%) say they went without a cash income at least once during the year preceding the survey, including 43% who did so “many times” or “always.” Almost as many report experiencing shortages of medical care (81%), food (70%), and clean water (68%).
- The government receives lower approval ratings on its economic performance than on other issues. Fewer than two in 10 respondents say the government is doing a good job of handling the economy (19%), improving living standards of the poor (15%), narrowing income gaps (10%), creating jobs (10%), and keeping prices stable (7%).

The direction of the country

Two years into the Bio administration, the proportion of Sierra Leoneans who say the country is going in the right direction has declined by 13 percentage points, to just one-third (32%, compared to 45% in 2018). Although considerably higher than the low of 16% recorded in 2015 during the Ebola outbreak, popular approval is well below the 2012 result, when more than half (53%) of respondents said the country was going in the right direction (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Direction of the country | Sierra Leone | 2012-2020



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

Citizens who are economically well off (those experiencing low lived poverty or no lived poverty²) are more likely than those who are less well off (those experiencing moderate or high lived poverty) to say that the country is going in the right direction (38%-43% vs. 23%-30%). Rural residents (37%) and citizens with no formal education (39%) are more optimistic

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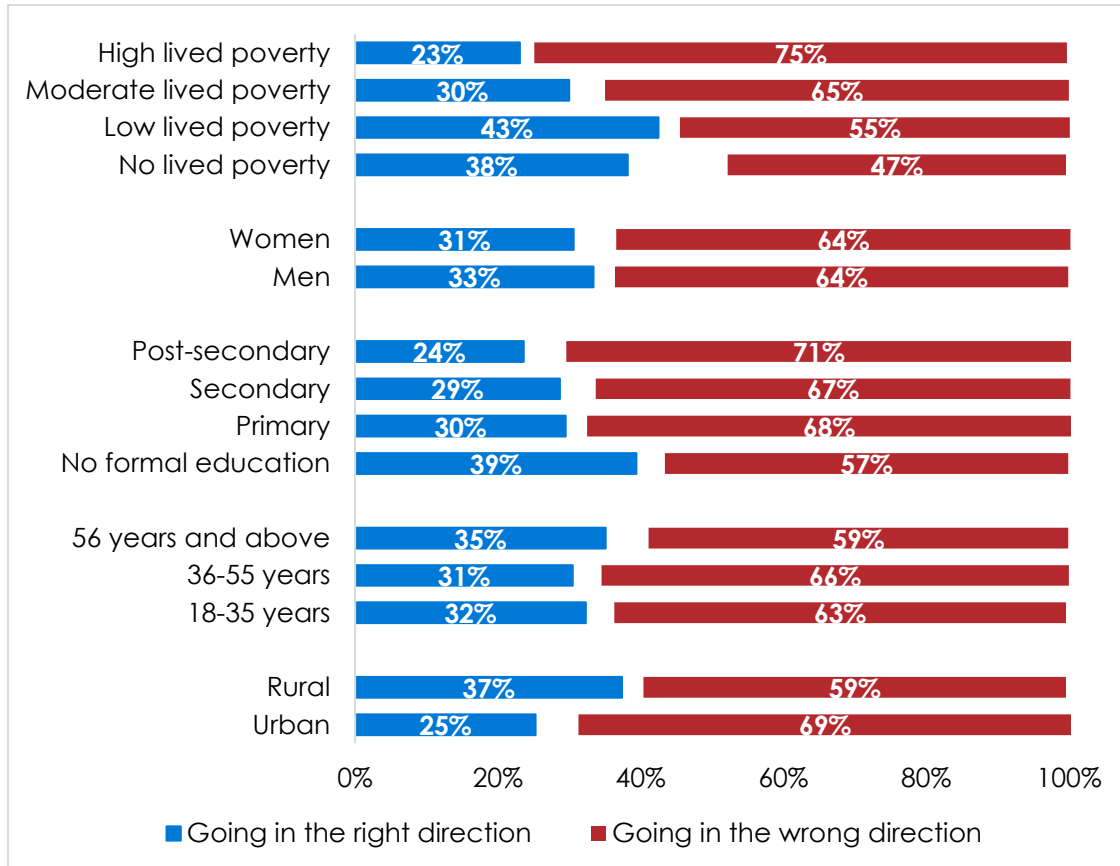
about the direction of the country than urban residents (25%) and citizens with post-secondary education (24%) (Figure 2).

There is also regional variation in the perceived direction of the country. Residents of the Southern and Eastern regions (the current ruling party’s

strongholds) are more than three times as likely to express confidence that the country is moving in the right direction (57% and 53%, respectively) as those in the Western and Northern regions (16% and 14%, respectively) (Figure 3). Recent unrest in the Lunsar mining community and Makeni in the North and the Tombo fishing area in the West were triggered by concerns about poor living conditions and exclusion (Institute for Governance Reform, 2020).

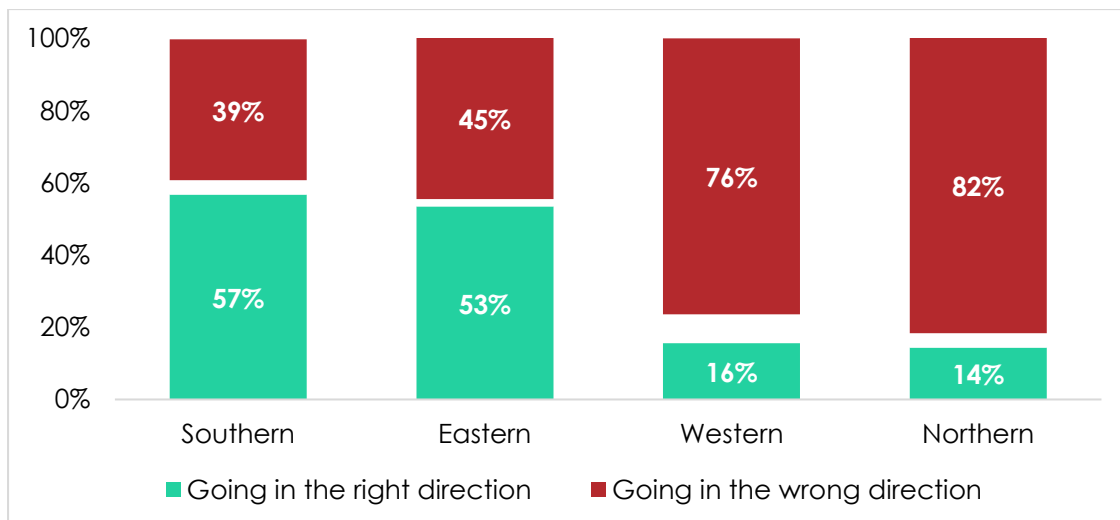
² Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 2: Right or wrong direction? | by socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2020



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

Figure 3: Right or wrong direction? | by region | Sierra Leone | 2020



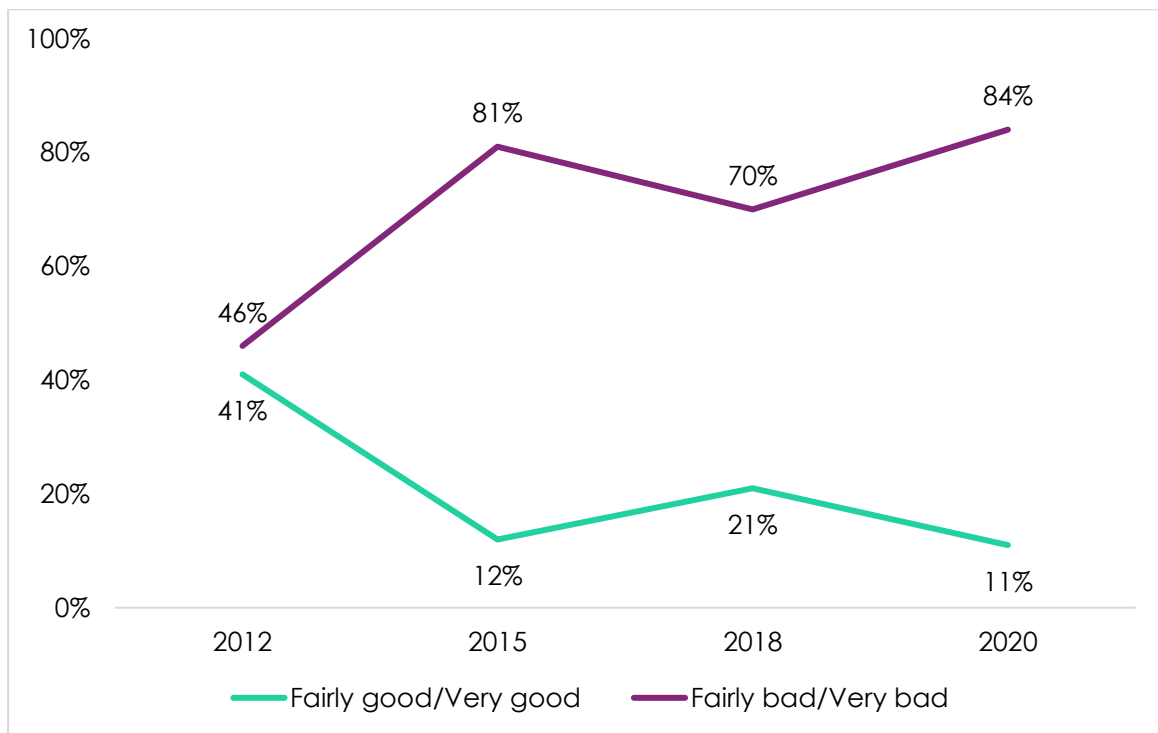
Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Citizens' perceptions about the economy

In line with popular disapproval of the direction of the country, Sierra Leoneans are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the country's economy. Eight in 10 citizens (84%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," almost double the proportion in 2012 (46%) (Figure 4). Only one in 10 (11%) say the country's economic condition is "fairly good" or "very good," about a quarter of the proportion recorded in 2012 (41%) and similar to the 2015 result (12%). This wipes out a modest improvement recorded in 2018 (21%) following the arrival of the new Bio administration.

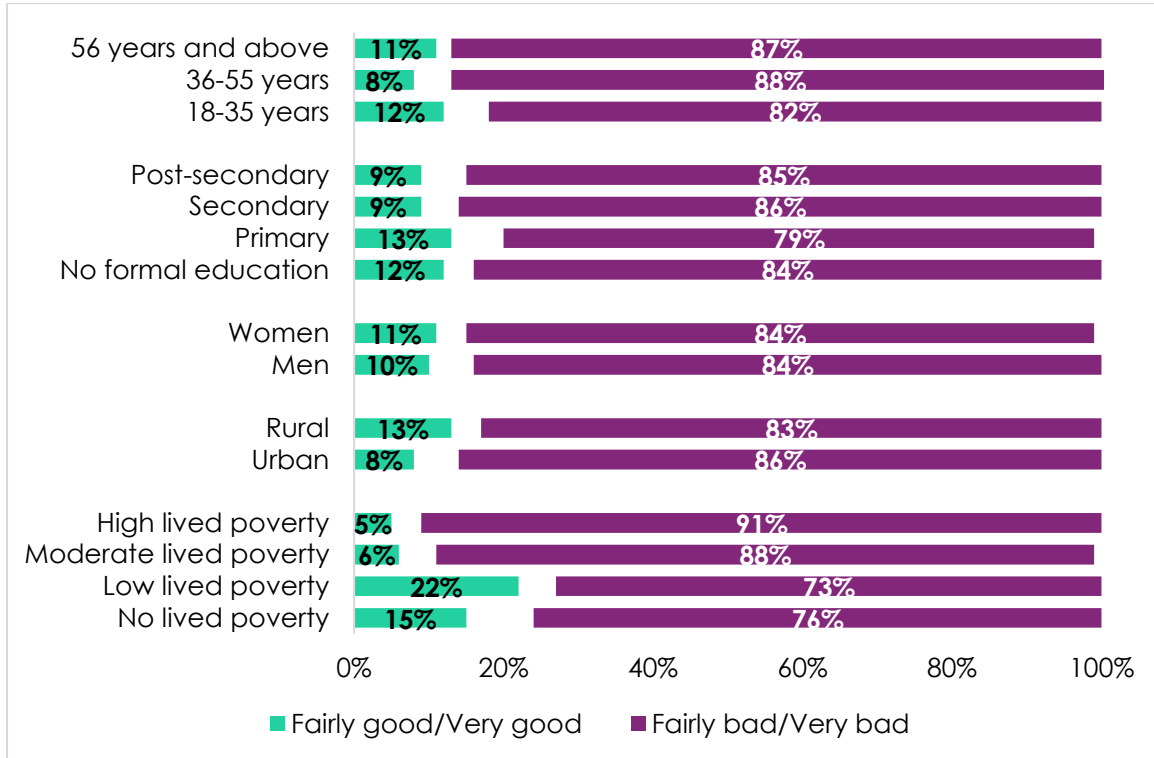
Dissatisfaction with the country's economic condition is high across key socio-demographic groups, dropping to around three-fourths only among respondents with low or no lived poverty (73%-76%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: The country's economic condition | Sierra Leone | 2012-2020



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?*

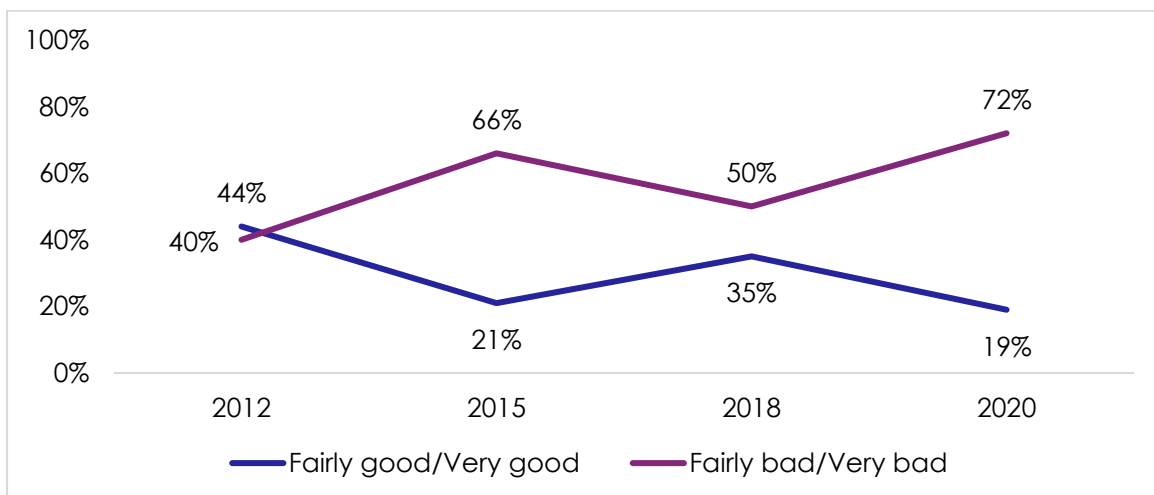
Figure 5: The country's economic condition | by socio-demographic group
 | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

A large majority of citizens are also unhappy with their personal living conditions: 72% describe them as “fairly bad” or “very bad” (Figure 6). Similar to perceptions of the national economy, assessments of personal living conditions have not returned to the pre-austerity period of 2012, when just 40% of citizens said their living conditions were bad.

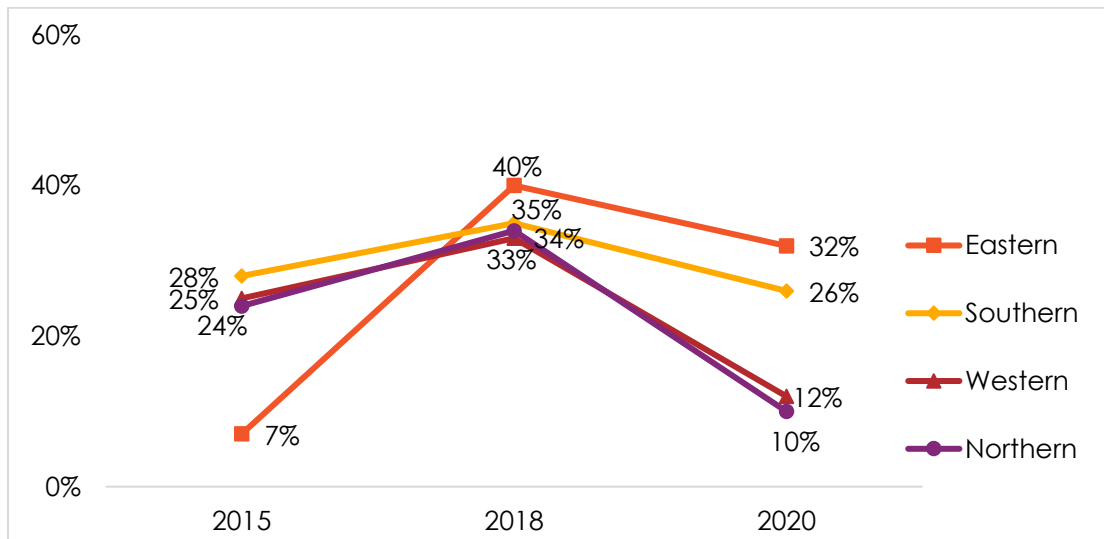
Figure 6: Personal living conditions | Sierra Leone | 2012-2020



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

Again, there are wide regional variations in perceptions of personal living conditions. Positive assessments are not only much less frequent but also show sharper declines since 2018 in the North (10%, a drop of 24 percentage points) and West (12%, down 21 points) compared to the East and South (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Good personal living conditions | by region | Sierra Leone | 2015-2020

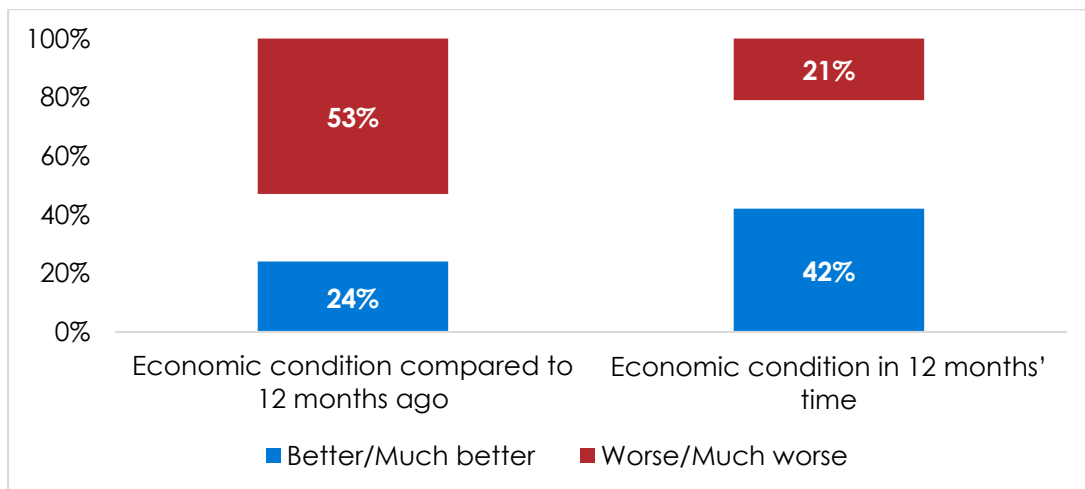


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly good" or "very good")

Hope for the future?

While assessments of the present are gloomy, respondents are more hopeful about future economic prospects. Only a quarter (24%) say economic conditions are better now than a year ago, but four in ten (42%) expect things to improve over the next 12 months (Figure 8).

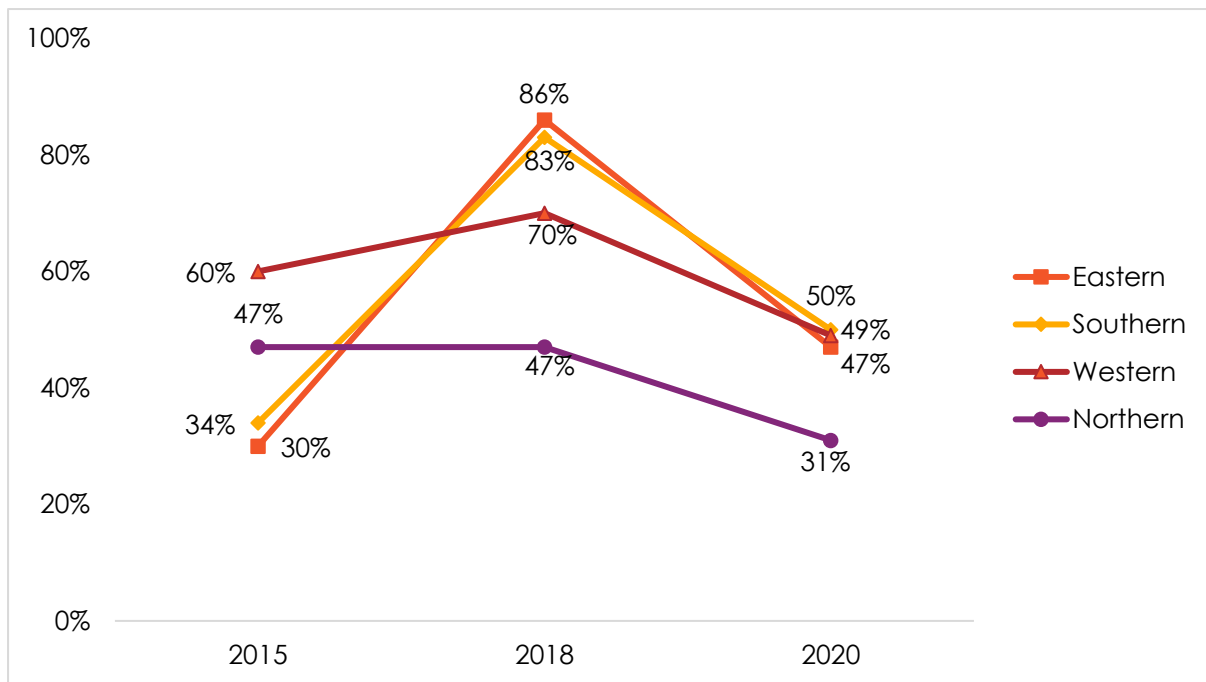
Figure 8: Retrospective and prospective assessments of national economic conditions | Sierra Leone | 2020



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?

Optimism rose spectacularly in the Eastern and Southern regions (by 56 and 49 percentage points) with the change in government in 2018, but has declined in all four regions since then (Figure 9). It is lowest in the Northern region (31%).

Figure 9: Optimism about future economic conditions | by region | Sierra Leone
 | 2015-2020



Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time? (% who say "better" or "much better")

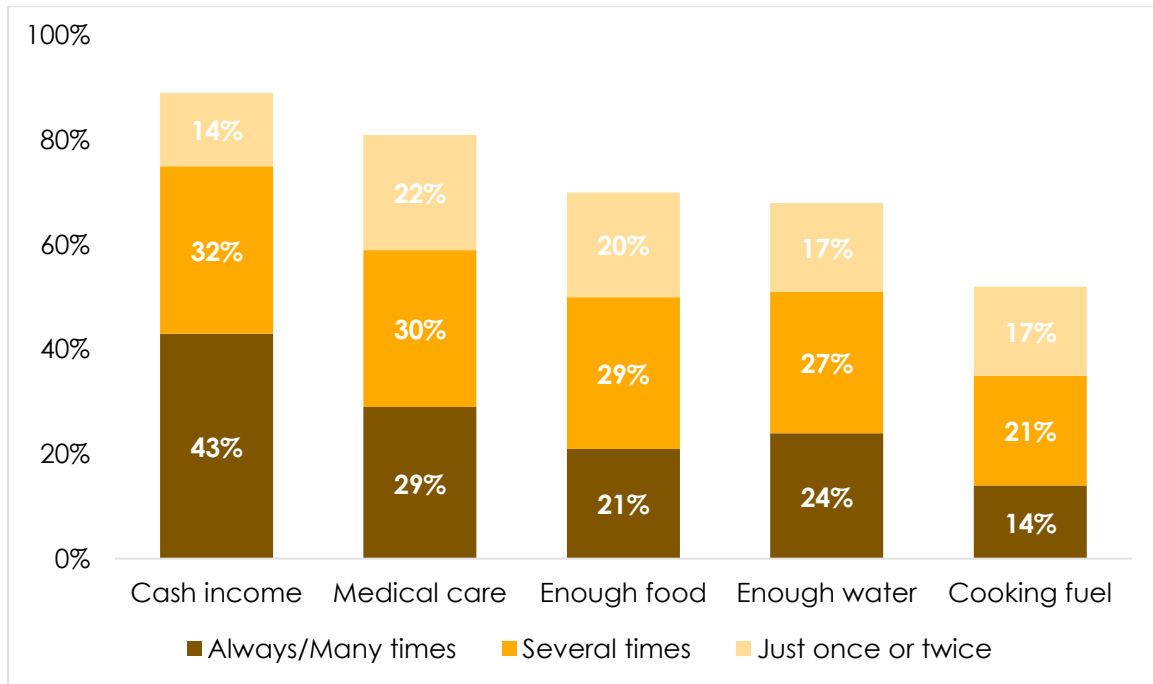
Levels of deprivation

Citizens' views of the country's economy and their personal living conditions are reflective of the increasing levels of deprivation in their everyday lives. To gauge "lived poverty," Afrobarometer asks respondents how often, during the previous 12 months, they or a family has gone with five basic necessities (enough food and clean water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income). Nine in 10 Sierra Leoneans (89%) say they went without a cash income at least once during the previous year, including 43% who lacked a cash income "many times" or "always." Large majorities also experienced shortages of medical care (81%), food (70%), and clean water (68%), while more than half (52%) went without cooking fuel at least once (Figure 10).

Calculated based on the frequency of these reported shortages, Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index shows that two-thirds (67%) of Sierra Leoneans experienced moderate or high lived poverty during the previous year, while one-third (33%) experienced low or no lived poverty (Figure 11).

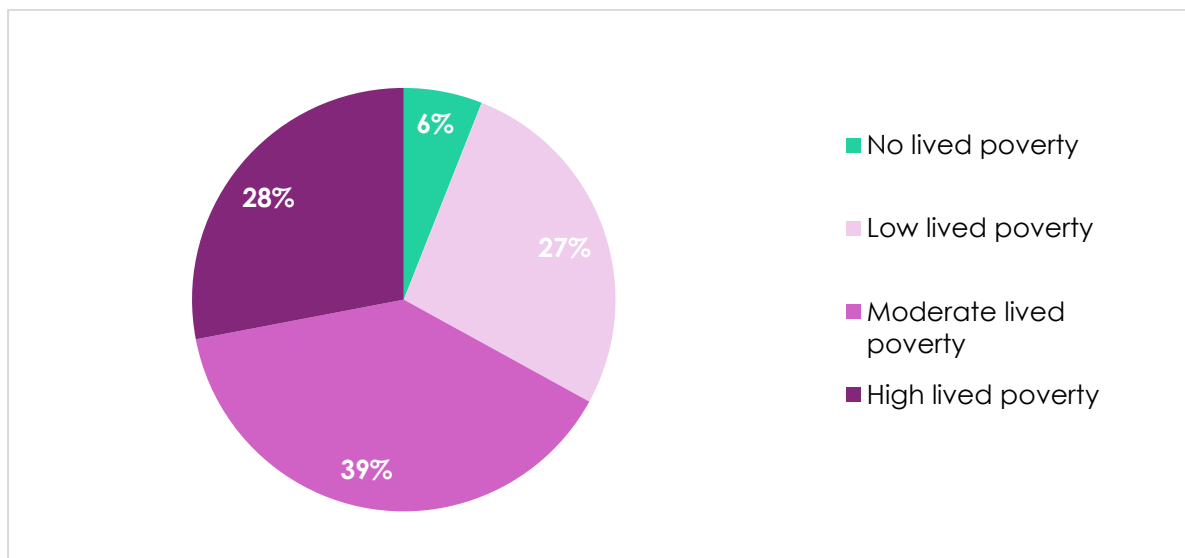
Compared to 2018, the proportion of citizens experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty increased by 15 percentage points (from 52% to 67%) (Figure 12).

Figure 10: Went without basic necessities in the past year | Sierra Leone | 2020



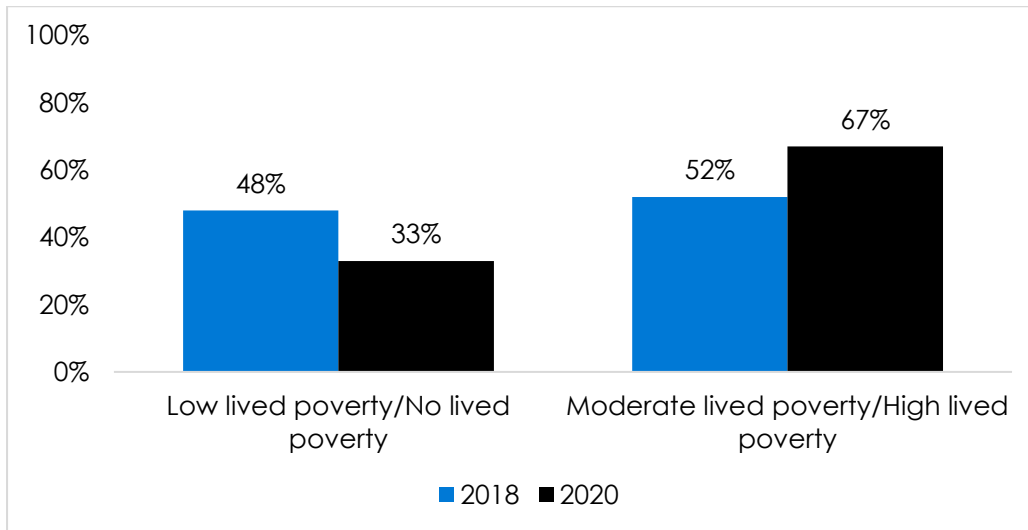
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Figure 11: Lived Poverty Index | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

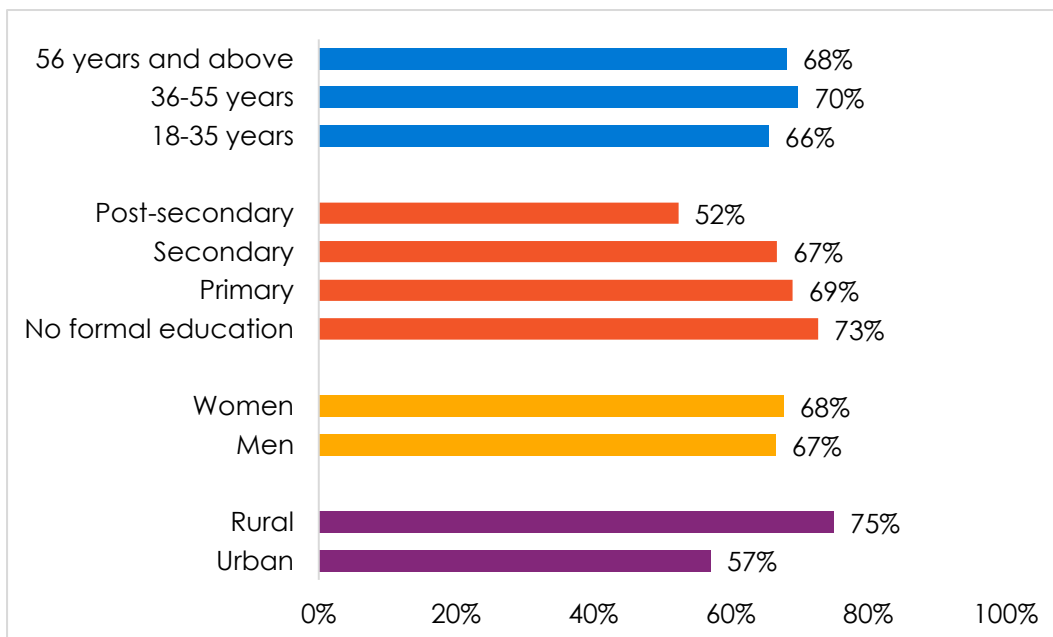
Figure 12: Lived Poverty Index | Sierra Leone | 2018-2020



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Lived poverty is more prevalent in rural areas (75%) than in cities (57%). It decreases with respondents' level of education: Citizens with no formal education are 21 percentage points more likely than those with post-secondary education to experience moderate or high lived poverty (73% vs. 52%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Moderate/high lived poverty | by socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2020

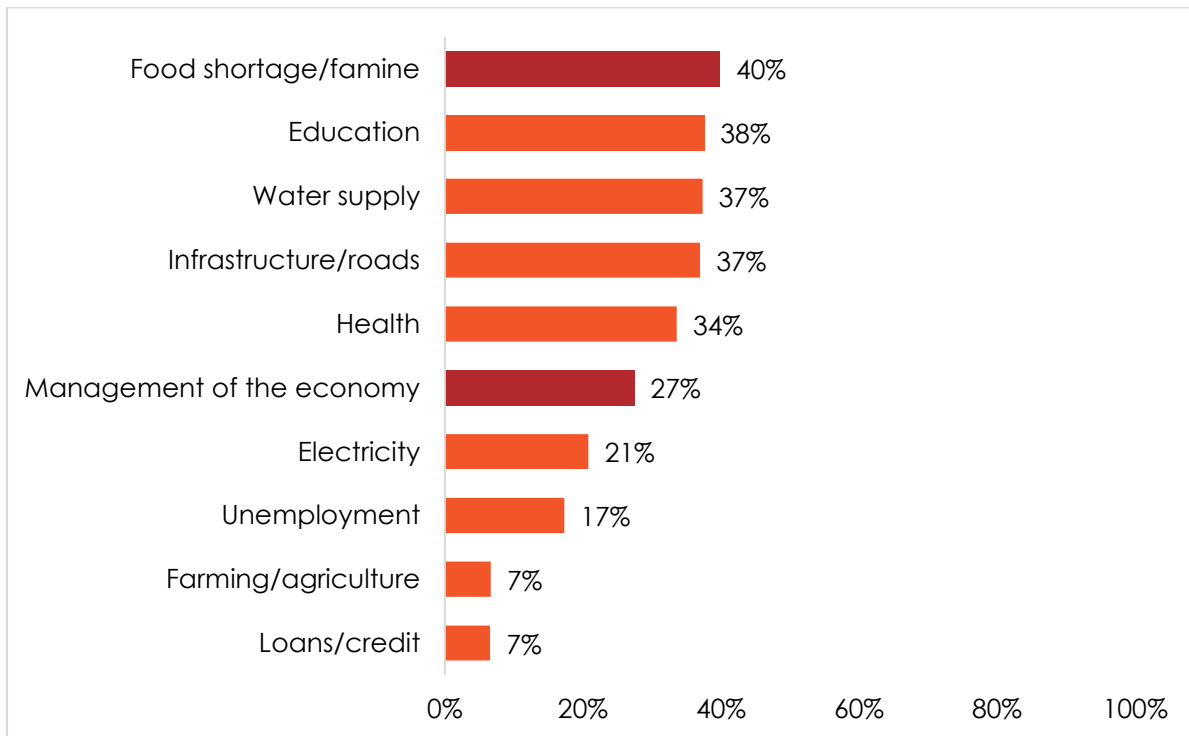


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Government economic performance

While management of the economy ranks sixth among the most important problems that citizens want the government to address, food shortage/famine – which is also clearly related to economic management – is No. 1. Cited by 40% of respondents as one of their three priorities for government action, food shortage overtook education for the first time since Afrobarometer surveys began in Sierra Leone (Figure 14). Another economic-management issue, unemployment, ranks eighth.

Figure 14: Top 10 most important problems | Sierra Leone | 2020



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three answers. Figure shows % who cited each issue among their responses.)*

In 2018, Bio inherited an economy undergoing austerity measures (Africanews, 2020) and faced high expectations of economic improvement. The administration took a series of steps to strengthen the economy, which initially seemed successful. The exchange rate stabilized, and inflation of the Leone dropped from 18% to 14% (Bank of Sierra Leone, 2020). The government regained the support of the International Monetary Fund, receiving loans and budgetary support (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019b). Domestic revenue collection increased to 13.7% in 2018, up from 12.2% in prior years. The government started implementing a treasury single account, which many believed would consolidate government revenues and reduce leakages in public funds usage (Tarawallie, 2020). Public expenditure tracking was reintroduced for education, health, and agriculture, which could increase citizen oversight of these sectors carrying more than 42% of the budget.

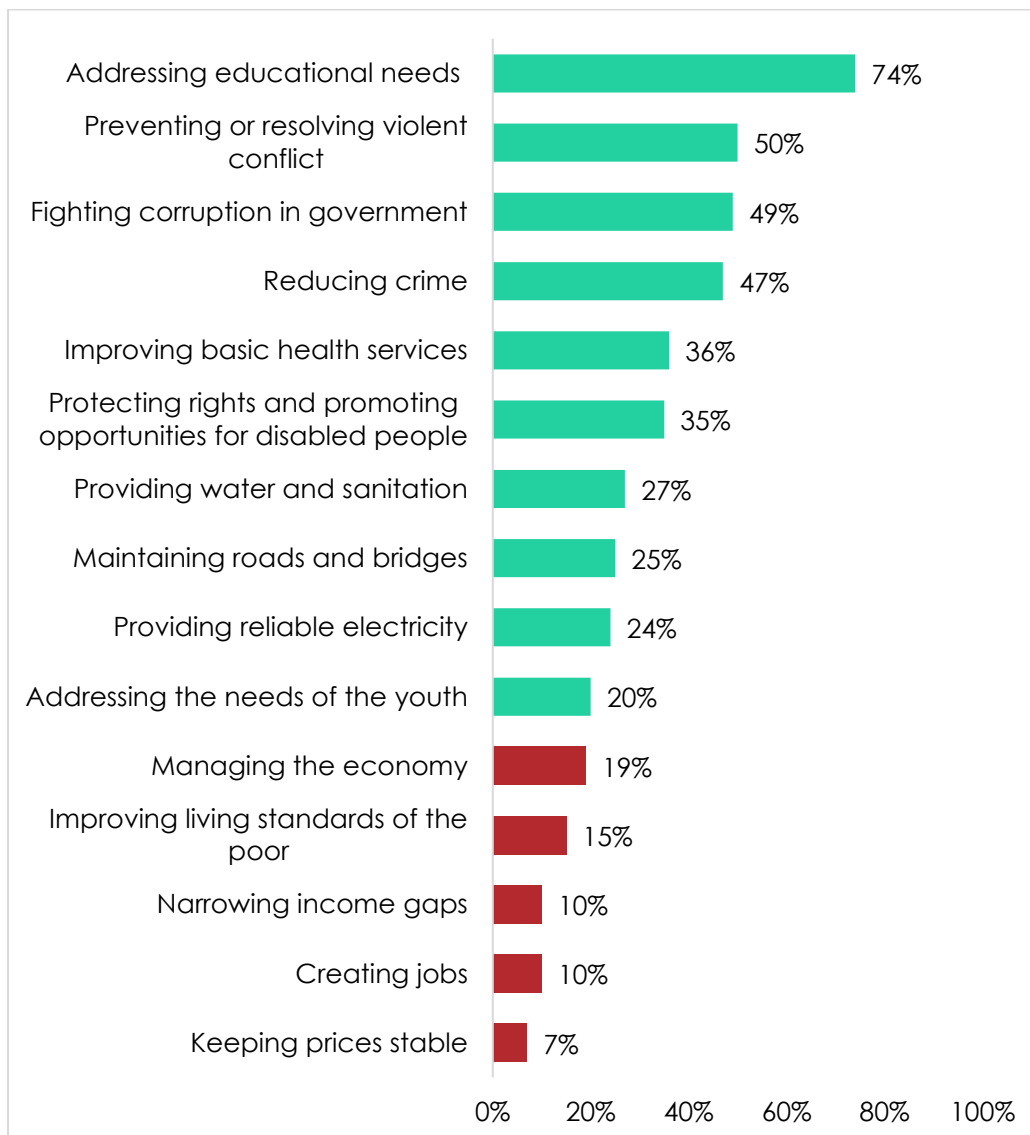
Despite these successes, the economy is still struggling. In 2019, the government canceled or suspended mining agreements negotiated by the previous regime due to concerns that the terms were unfavourable (Hume, 2019). High debt service payments fed inflation and high

unemployment (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019b). Public procurement remained concentrated in the hands of a few, with 94% of government procurement sourced in Freetown (National Public Procurement Authority, 2020).

Afrobarometer survey results show that compared to other performance indicators, the government receives its lowest approval ratings for its economic performance. Only two in 10 citizens (19%) say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in managing the economy (Figure 15). Smaller proportions say it is doing well in improving living standards of the poor (15%), narrowing income gaps (10%), creating jobs (10%), and keeping prices stable (7%).

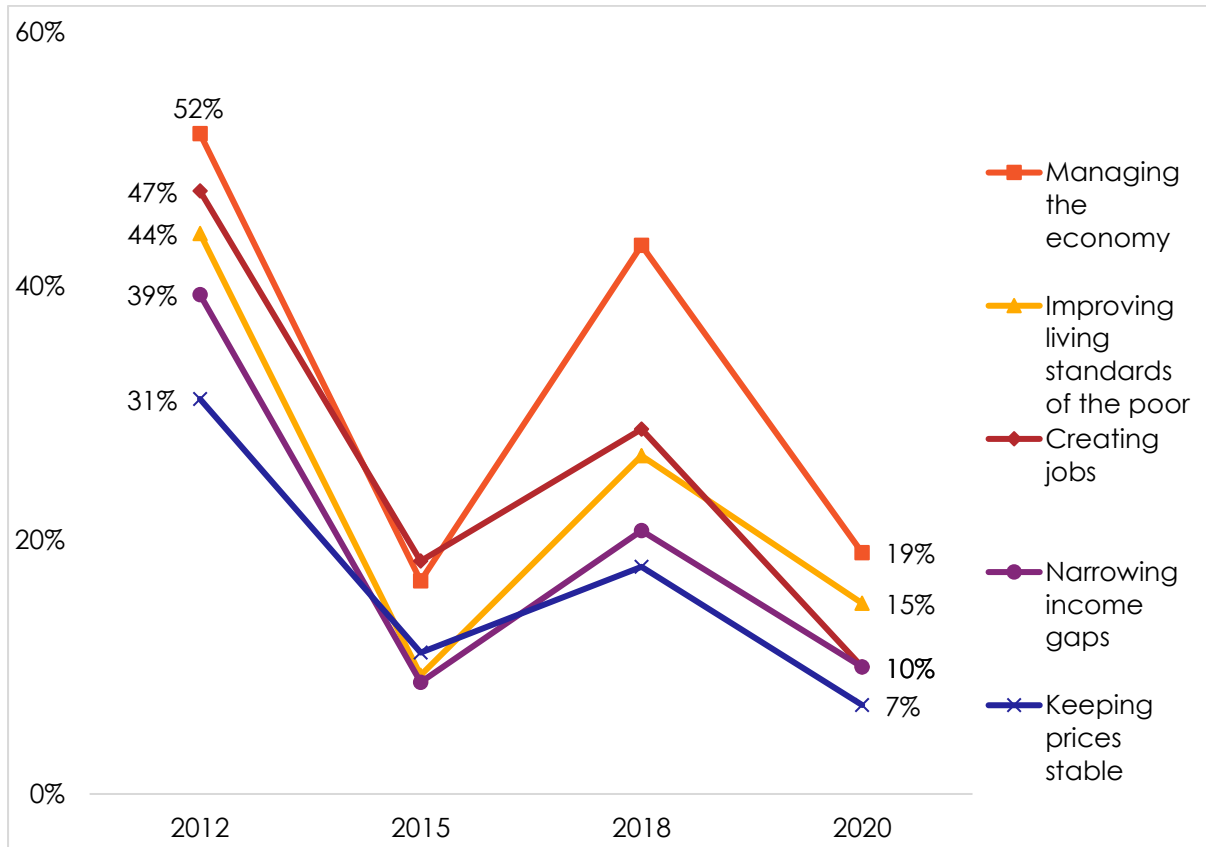
Approval ratings for government performance on all economy-related indicators have dipped to near or below their 2015 levels following a brief period of hope after the 2018 elections (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Approval ratings for government performance | Sierra Leone | 2020



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 well" or "very well")

Figure 16: Approval ratings for government economic performance | Sierra Leone
 | 2012-2020



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? Addressing educational needs. (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Conclusion

The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows that Sierra Leoneans are increasingly concerned about their living conditions, the country's economic condition, and the government's efforts at economic management, which so far have not improved the quality of many citizens' lives.

Residents in the opposition-controlled Western and Northern regions are especially negative on the economy and pessimistic about the future. Although the government has developed a COVID-19 Quick Action Economic Response Programme to address economic hardships brought on by the pandemic, these regionally polarized views indicate that addressing cohesion is equally important. The voices captured in this study suggest that the road to rebuilding the Sierra Leone economy must incorporate inclusive reforms that will benefit the whole country equitably and promote national cohesion.

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