



## Citizens offer bleak outlook on Malawi's economy

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 387 | Jacob Mazalale and Claudia Fiskani Ngoma**

Malawi is among the poorest countries in the world; about half of its population lives below the poverty line (United Nations Development Programme, 2019; National Statistical Office, 2017). Heavily dependent on agriculture, its economy is susceptible to climate and other shocks (World Bank, 2019). Although annual economic growth averaged 4% between 1971 and 2017, this growth fluctuated between a high of 14% in 1971 and a low of -11% in 1994 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2019).

Findings from Afrobarometer's most recent national survey, in late 2019, show that Malawians' perceptions of their country's economic life continue to be bleak. Regardless of gender, location, age, education, socioeconomic status, and political party affiliation, citizens see the country as headed in the wrong direction. Most describe the national economy and their personal living conditions as bad, and even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a majority expected things to get worse. The government earns uniformly poor marks on its management of economic issues, suggesting it must look for new strategies to end the country's economic malaise.

### Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are being conducted in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in November and December 2019. 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

### Key findings

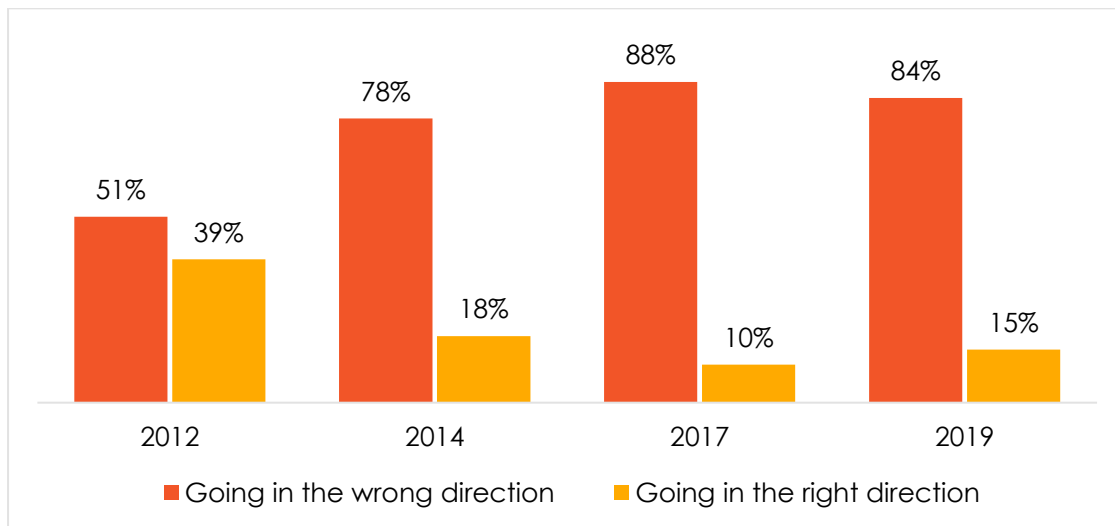
- More than eight out of 10 Malawians (84%) say the country is going "in the wrong direction." This is the majority view regardless of respondents' gender, urban or rural residency, and political party affiliation.
- The same majority (84%) say the country's economic condition is bad, including almost half (48%) who describe it as "very bad."
- Six out of 10 respondents (61%) say they expect economic conditions to be worse in 12 months' time, including 41% who think they will get "much worse."

- Eight out of 10 Malawians (80%) describe their personal living conditions as “fairly bad” or “very bad.”
- Most Malawians say the government is doing a poor job on economic issues, including managing the economy (74%), creating jobs (75%), keeping prices stable (77%), and narrowing gaps between rich and poor (79%).

### General direction of the country

More than eight out of 10 Malawians (84%) say the country is going “in the wrong direction.” While this is a slight improvement from the 2017 survey (88%), negative views of the country’s overall direction have increased dramatically since 2012 (51%) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | Malawi | 2012-2019**



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

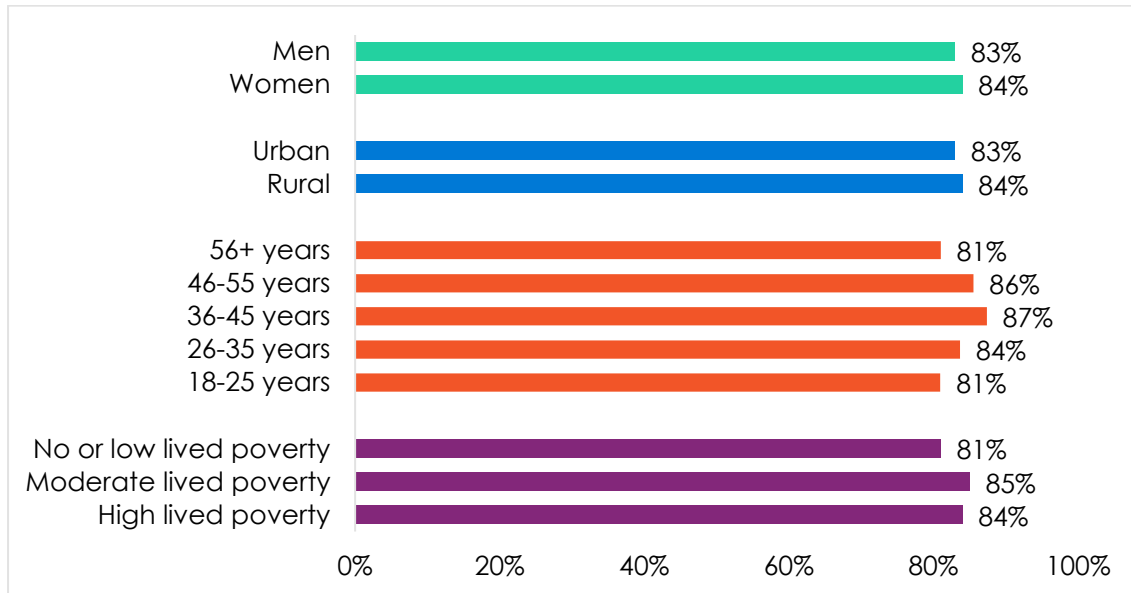
The perception that Malawi is going in the wrong direction is shared by large majorities across key socio-demographic groups, with no differences by respondents’ gender or location (Figure 2). It is lowest (81%) among the youngest and oldest respondents and among those who are economically best off.<sup>1</sup>

This negative assessment of the country’s overall direction is also shared by people belonging to all political parties.<sup>2</sup> Even among respondents who “feel close to” the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the ruling party at the time of the survey, seven out of 10 (71%) see the country as moving in the wrong direction, while this proportion reaches nine out of 10 among supporters of the then-opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (93%) and the United Transformation Movement (UTM) (90%) (Figure 3).

<sup>1</sup> 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).

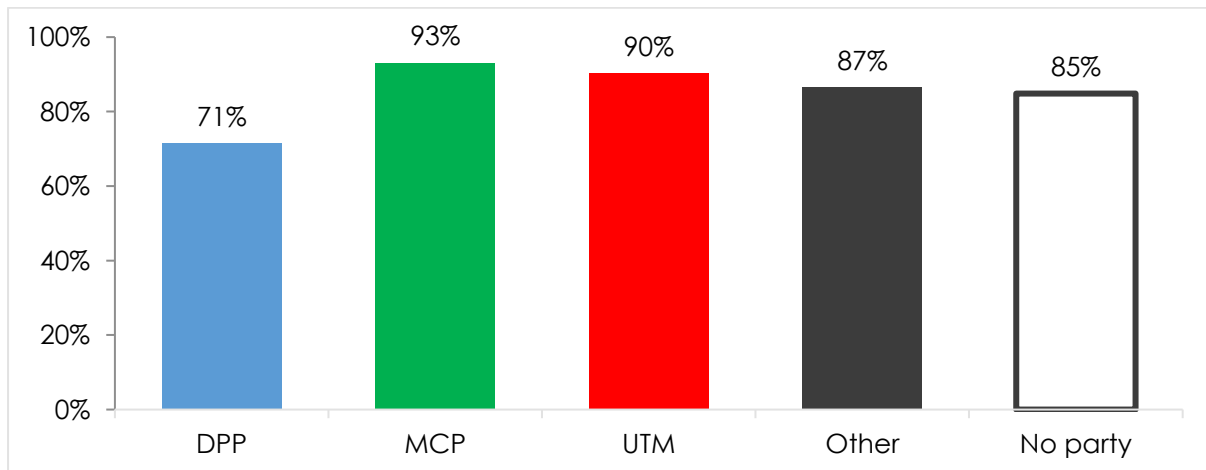
<sup>2</sup> Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

**Figure 2: Overall direction of the country is wrong** | by socio-demographic group  
| Malawi | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "going in the wrong direction")

**Figure 3: Overall direction of the country is wrong** | by political party affiliation  
| Malawi | 2019

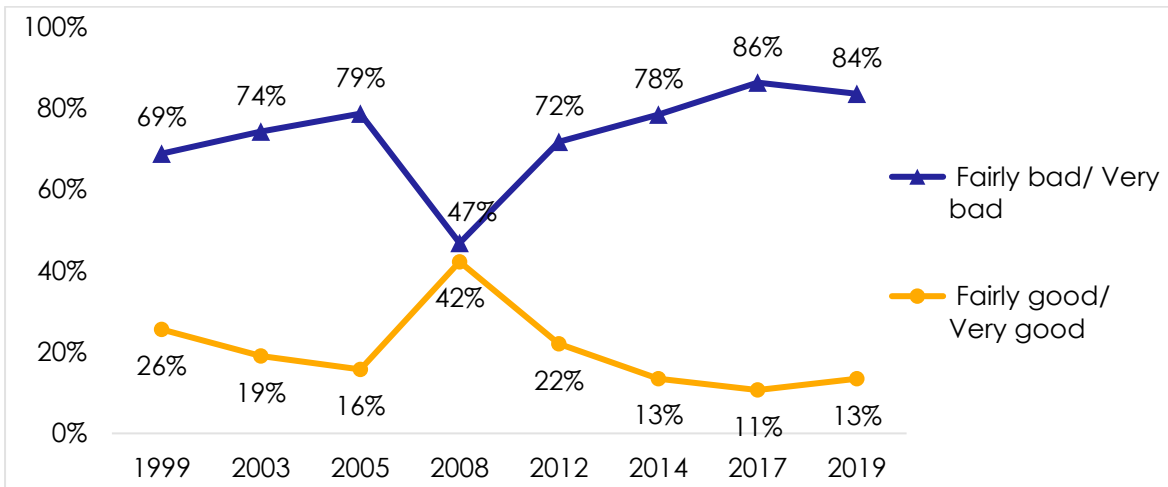


**Respondents were asked:** Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "going in the wrong direction")

### Economic condition of the country

In line with the widespread perception that the country is headed in the wrong direction, more than eight in 10 Malawians (84%) see the country's economic condition as bad, including almost half (48%) who describe it as "very bad." Popular assessments of the economy have typically been overwhelmingly negative since Afrobarometer surveys began in 1999 (Figure 4). The exception was 2008, when views were almost evenly divided (47% bad, 42% good) as the government's successful agricultural program resulted in economic growth of more than 9% (Chirwa & Odhiambo, 2015). But negative evaluations climbed sharply after that, peaking at 86% in 2017.

**Figure 4: Country's economic condition | Malawi | 1999-2019**

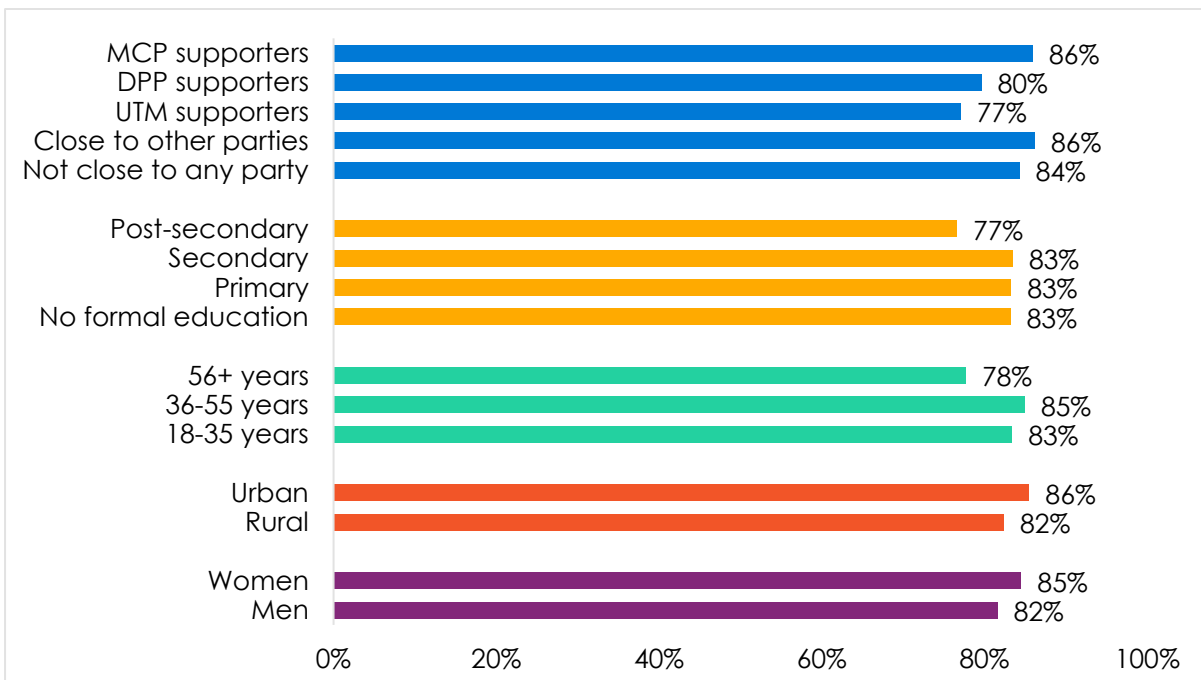


**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

Supporters of the UTM (77%) and the DPP (80%) are somewhat less likely to see the country's economic condition as bad than adherents of the MCP (86%) and respondent who feel close to other parties (86%) or to no party (84%) (Figure 5).

Citizens with post-secondary education (77%) and those above age 55 are also somewhat less negative in their assessments than less educated and younger respondents.

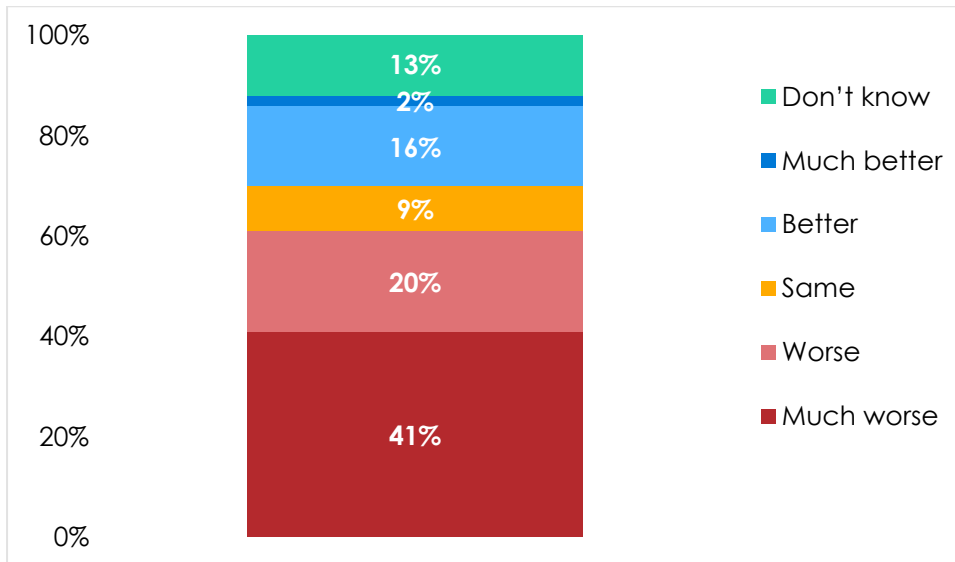
**Figure 5: Country's economic condition is fairly/very bad | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% saying "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Malawians' bleak economic outlook extends into the future as well. Fewer than one in five respondents (18%) say they think economic conditions will be better in 12 months' time, while 61% expect things to get worse – including 41% who think they'll get “much worse” (Figure 6). These responses were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, which is unlikely to improve the economic outlook for most countries.

**Figure 6: Country's economic condition in 12 months' time | Malawi | 2019**

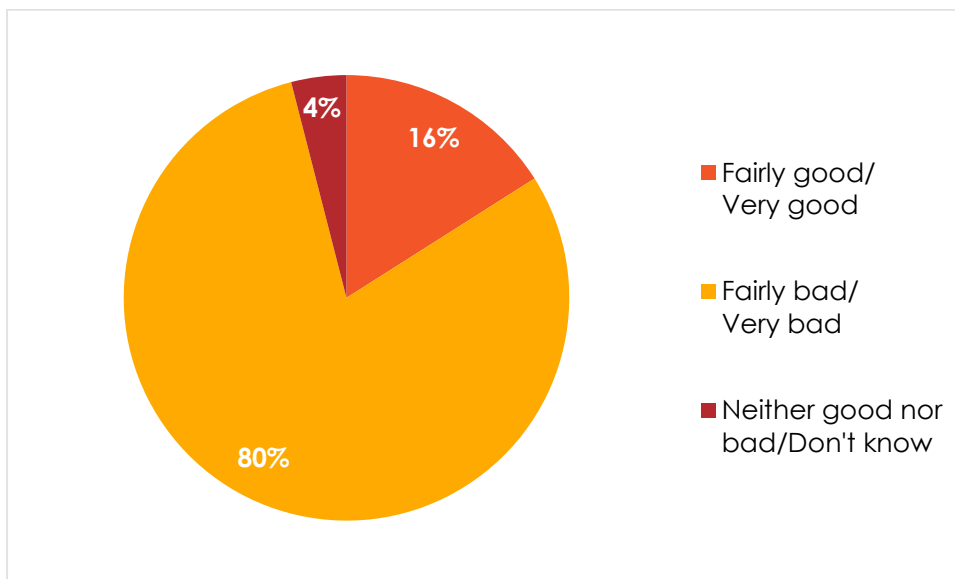


**Respondents were asked:** *In Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?*

### Personal living conditions

In line with their assessments of the national economy, eight in 10 Malawians say their personal living conditions are “fairly bad” or “very bad.” Just one in six (16%) describe them as fairly good/very good (Figure 7).

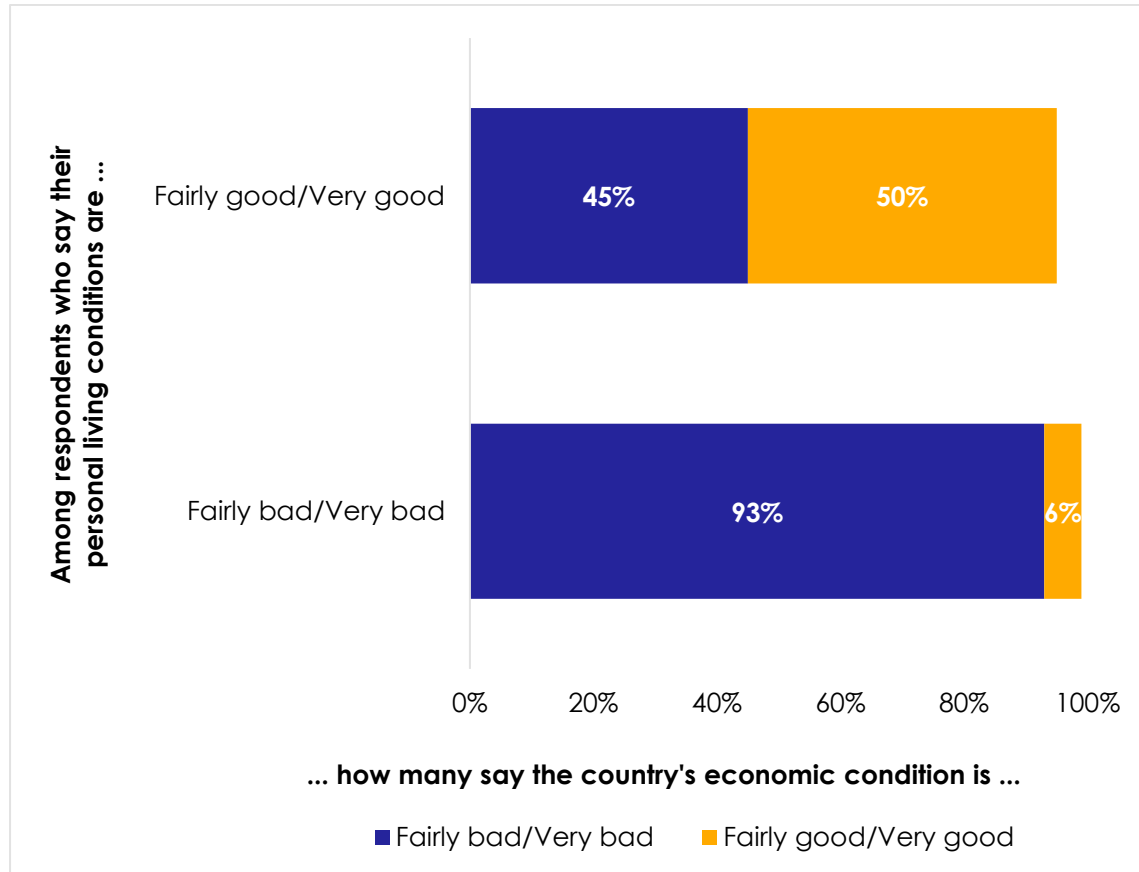
**Figure 7: Personal living conditions | Malawi | 2019**



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

Interestingly, assessments of the country's economic condition vary widely by how respondents see their personal living conditions (Figure 8). Nearly all of those who describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" also see the country's economic condition as bad (93%). But among those who say their personal living conditions are "fairly good" or "very good," fewer than half (45%) say the national economy is bad, while 50% describe it as very or fairly good.

**Figure 8: Country's economic conditions by own living conditions | Malawi | 2019**



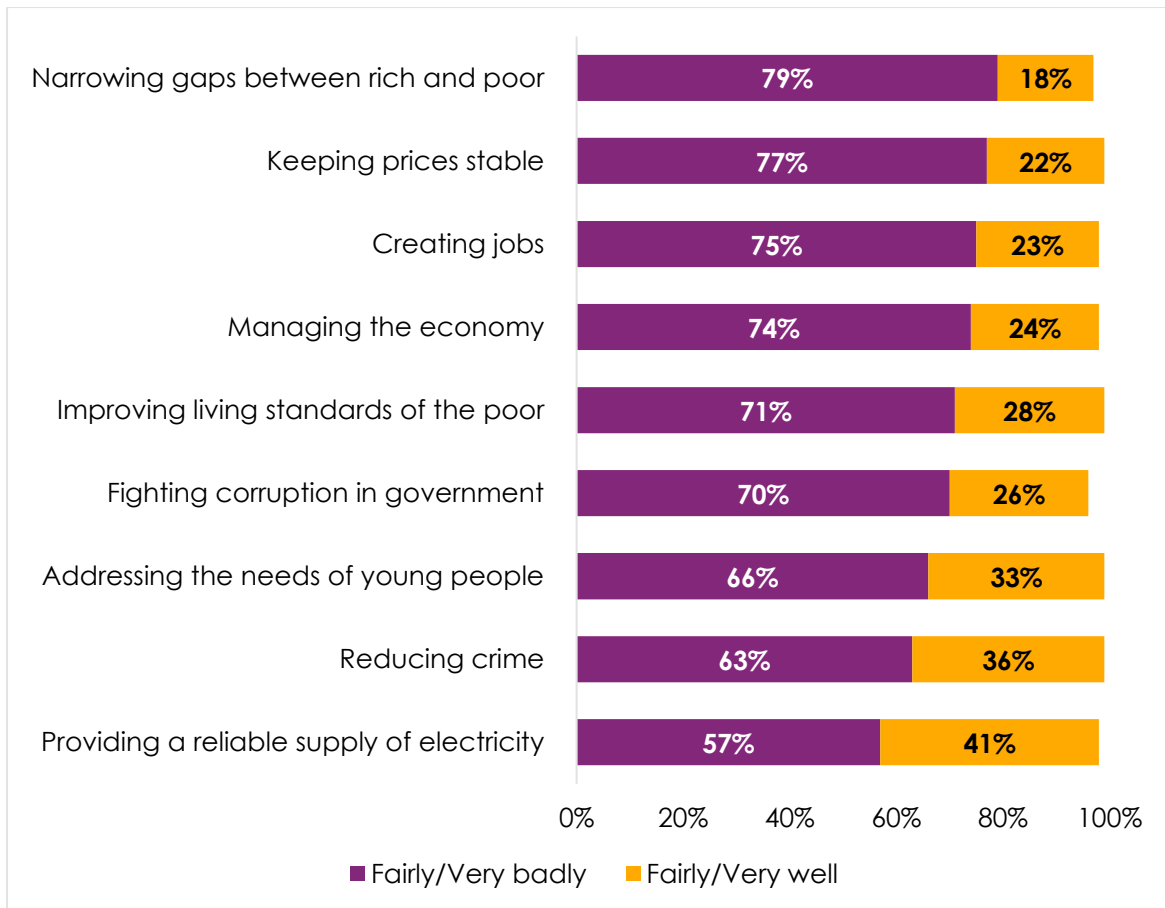
**Respondents were asked:**

*In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?  
 In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?*

**Government performance on economic issues**

Given overwhelmingly negative assessments of the economy, it's little surprise that most Malawians think their government is doing a poor job on economic issues (Figure 9). Nearly eight out of 10 Malawians (79%) say the government is doing a poor job of reducing the gap between rich and poor. And about three in four Malawians describe the government's performance as "fairly" or "very" bad when it comes to keeping prices stable (77%), creating jobs (75%), and managing the economy (74%).

**Figure 9: Government performance on economic issues | Malawi | 2019**



**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 said "very/fairly well" or "very/fairly badly")

## Conclusion

Malawians continue to say loudly and clearly that the national economy and their personal living conditions are bad. The message is the same across key socio-demographic groups and even across different political party affiliations. For the government, it is not enough to inform the population that economic conditions are improving. Only the development and implementation of effective policies to improve people's economic welfare will convince Malawians that things are getting better.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs a pan-African, non-partisan 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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