

Lived poverty remains high despite Uganda's poverty-alleviation initiatives

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 531 | Makanga Ronald Kakumba

Summary

Over the past three decades, Uganda's national poverty rate has fallen by more than half, from 56% in 1992/1993 to 21.4% in 2019/2020, owing mostly to improved agricultural incomes among poor households and improved regional markets after the end of conflict in Northern Uganda (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2020; World Bank Group, 2016).

Yet Uganda remains one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2019/2020, 12.3 million people (30.1% of the population) lived below the poverty line of U.S. \$1.77 per person per day (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The number of Ugandans who are not poor but vulnerable increased as well, as did the number of those who shift in and out of poverty. The proportions of people who are not poor but vulnerable to poverty increased by 10 percentage points, from 33% in 1992/1993 to 43% in 2016/2017 (World Bank Group, 2016). Between 2015 and 2019, 8.4% of households moved out of poverty, while 10.2% slipped into poverty (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2020). And the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem, causing 300,000 more Ugandans to slide back into poverty (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2020, 2021; Independent News, 2021).

In an effort to address poverty, the government has initiated a variety of programmes. In the late 1980s, the Rural Farmers Scheme aimed to boost agricultural productivity and farmers' livelihoods through credits, but most farmers were unable to benefit from the initiative, which ultimately failed.

In 1995, a similar credit finance scheme known as Entandikwa ("seed capital") provided loans to the rural and urban poor, youth, disabled people, and women, but only about 40% of loans advanced to the target groups were recovered.

A slew of more recent poverty-alleviation initiatives has included Bonna Bagaggawale ("prosperity for all"), National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), Plan for Modernization of Agriculture, Operation Wealth Creation, and Emyooga. These interventions, too, have yielded little or no success, and most have been abandoned.

Critics point to corruption as the main obstacle to success of these poverty-alleviation programmes (Independent News, 2021; Monitor News, 2021). Among other hurdles, they cite political patronage, mismanagement, poor planning, bureaucratic red tape, inflated administrative costs, nepotism, poor monitoring, and financial illiteracy among intended beneficiaries (Parliamentary Watch, 2021; NTV, 2021).

Recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that a majority of Ugandans continue to experience frequent shortages of basic necessities in their daily lives. Relatively small proportions report that someone in their household ever benefited from various government poverty-alleviation programmes, and a majority give the government poor marks on its efforts to improve living standards of the poor and create jobs.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that has provided reliable data on experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys in up to 39 African countries have been conducted since 1999. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

With financial support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed 2,400 adult Ugandans between 22 December 2020 and 7 January 2021 in 300 enumeration areas across 110 districts. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 11th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda.

Key findings

- Nine in 10 Ugandans (89%) say they or a family member went without a cash income at least once during the year preceding the survey, including 42% who did so "many times" or "always."
 - Three-fourths (74%) went without medical care at least once, while more than half experienced shortages of food (58%), cooking fuel (57%), and clean water (55%).
- Six in 10 citizens (62%) experienced moderate (43%) or high (19%) lived poverty during the past year, not substantially different from results in 2019 (64%) and 2017 (60%).
 - Residents in Northern (78%) and Eastern (69%) regions and in rural areas (65%) are more likely to experience moderate or high lived poverty than their counterparts in other regions (49%-58%) and in urban areas (54%).
- Relatively small proportions of the population have benefited from key government anti-poverty initiatives such as the National Agricultural Cluster Development (NACD) programme (15%), the Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE) for the elderly (12%), Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) (10%), Emoyaoga (9%), the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) (6%), and the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) (6%). More than seven in 10 (72%) say their households have not benefited from any of these programmes.
- A majority of citizens say the government is doing a "fairly bad" or "very bad" job at improving the living standards of the poor (59%) and creating jobs (72%).

Lived poverty in Uganda

In Uganda, national poverty estimates are derived from national household surveys conducted every three years. The national poverty line is calculated based on the estimated cost of meeting basic caloric requirements as well as other consumption and non-consumption household expenditures (World Bank Group, 2016).

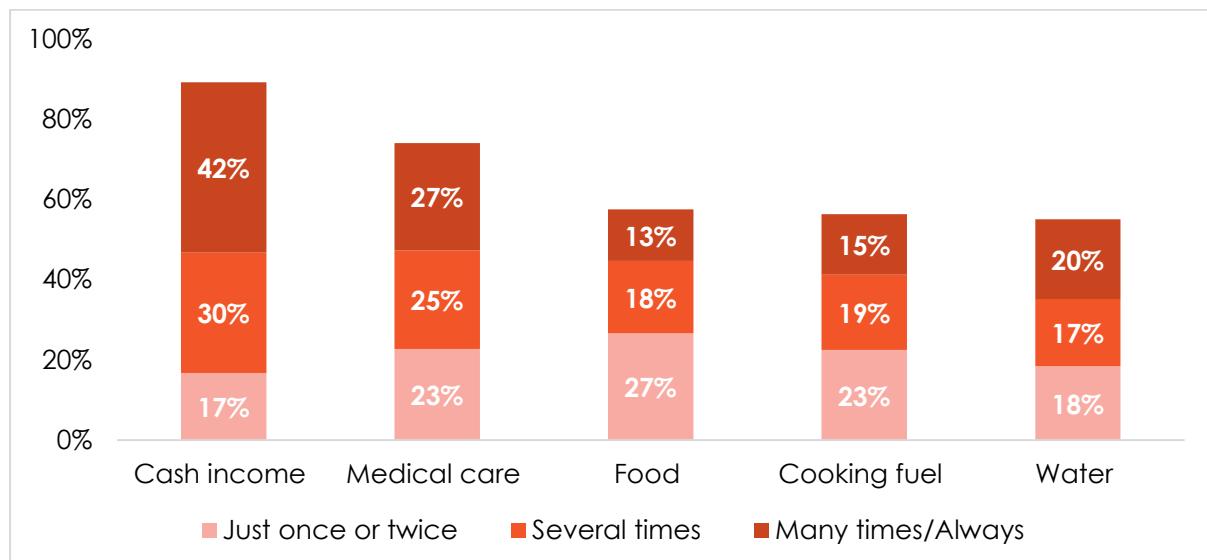
As a complementary measure, Afrobarometer uses its Lived Poverty Index (LPI), an experiential assessment based on how often people say they went without basic life necessities (enough food, enough clean water, medicines or medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) over the course of the previous year (Mattes, 2020).

According to 2021 Afrobarometer findings, most Ugandans are still unable to meet their most basic requirements. Nine in 10 citizens (89%) said they went without a cash income at least

once during the year preceding the survey. While a cash income is not a basic need in and of itself, it can help citizens meet their basic and non-basic demands (Matten, 2020). Three-fourths (74%)¹ of citizens reported going without medical care, while more than half experienced shortages of food (58%), cooking fuel (57%), and clean water (55%) (Figure 1).

The frequency of deprivation is worrying. During the year preceding the survey, four in 10 Ugandans (42%) said they went without a cash income “many times” or “always.” Substantial proportions encountered frequent shortages of medicine or medical treatment (27%), clean water (20%), cooking fuel (15%), and food (13%).

Figure 1: Going without basic necessities | Uganda | 2021



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 Index

We take an average of the responses to the questions on deprivation of basic necessities to calculate Lived Poverty Index scores, which range from 0 (no lived poverty) to 4 (high lived poverty). More than six in 10 Ugandans (62%) experienced moderate (43%) or high lived poverty (19%) during the year preceding the survey, not substantially different from results recorded in 2019 (64%) and 2017 (60%) (Figure 2).

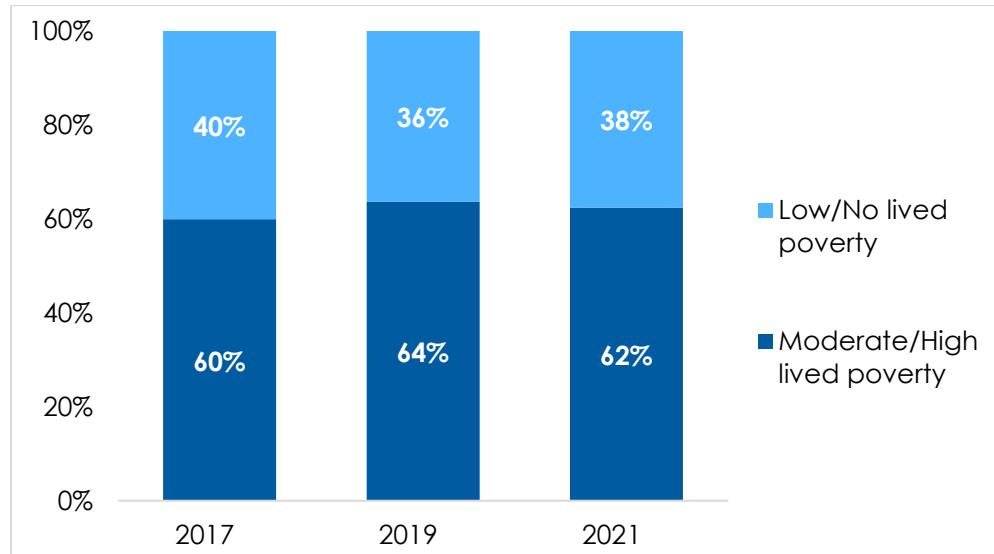
While high lived poverty levels are similar in rural areas and cities (20% vs. 17%), moderate lived poverty is considerably more common in rural areas (45%, vs. 37% in cities) (Figure 3).

The experience of moderate/high lived poverty is more widespread among residents in the Northern (78%) and Eastern (69%) regions than among their counterparts in the Western (58%) and Central (49%) regions. Looking only at high lived poverty, the pattern is the same: Northern (30%) and Eastern (26%) residents are more likely to live in high poverty than those in Western (15%) and Central (11%) regions.

These findings are in line with a recent report by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2020) indicating that the Northern area had the highest percentage of chronically poor people (21.6%), followed by the Eastern (10.7%), Western (4.9%), and Central (0.5%) regions.

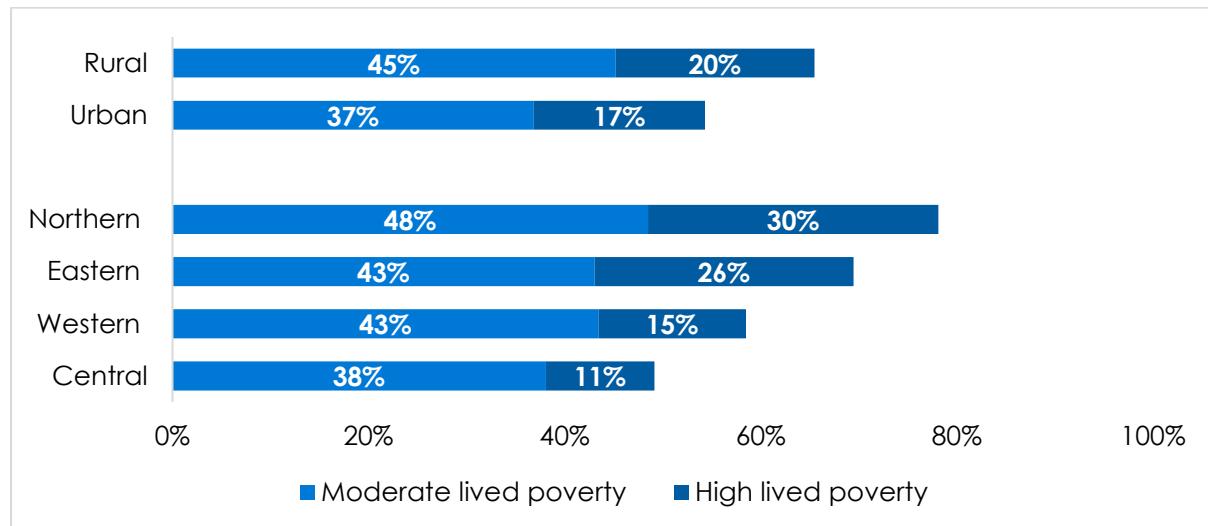
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories.

Figure 2: Lived poverty | Uganda | 2017-2021



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 3: Moderate/High lived poverty | by residential location | Uganda | 2021



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?

Who has benefited from poverty-alleviation programmes?

Over the past decade, the government of Uganda has implemented a number of poverty-alleviation measures in response to high unemployment and poverty rates in the country. One way to assess whether these programmes are reaching intended beneficiaries is to ask ordinary citizens whether their household has taken part in them.

According to Afrobarometer findings, 15% of citizens say someone in their household has benefited "somewhat" or "a lot" from the National Agricultural Cluster Development (NACD) programme, which aims to improve farm productivity and marketability of products at

subsidized prices for 450,000 farmer households in 56 of the country's 136 districts (Agriculture Cluster Development Project, 2019, 2021). (Figure 4).

About one in eight (12%) say a household member has benefited from the Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE), intended to reduce vulnerability among the elderly. Piloted in a few districts in 2010, SAGE was later rolled out nationally to target about 1 million people aged 65 years and above (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Republic of Uganda, 2021).

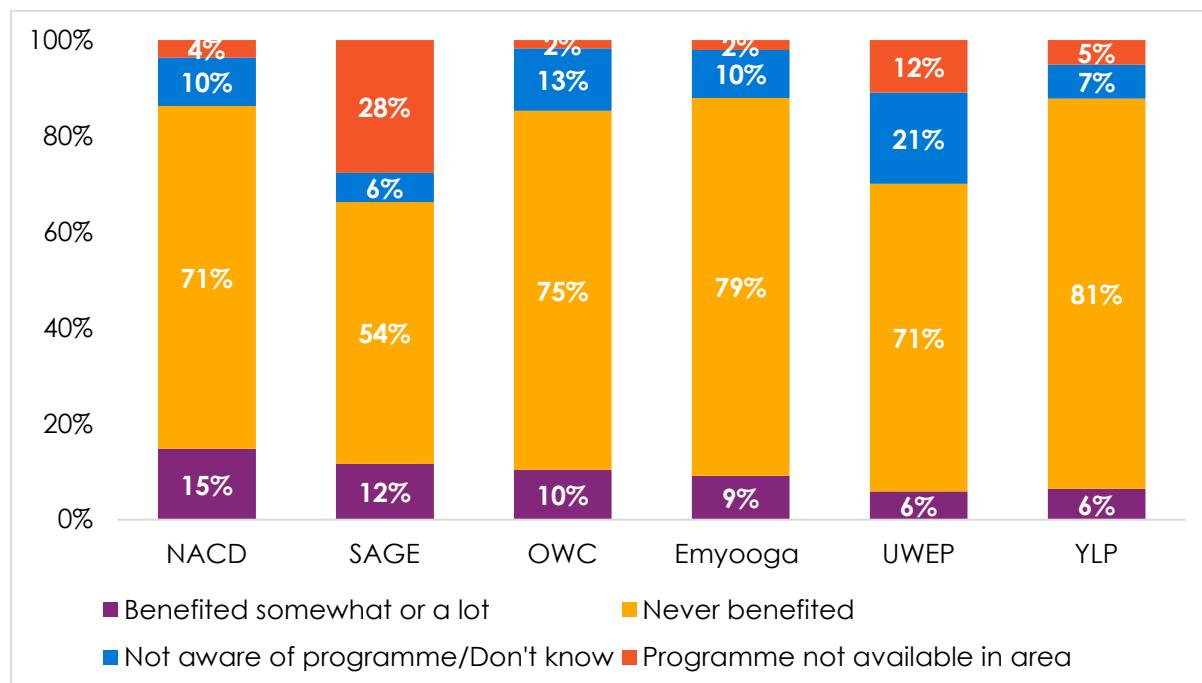
Similarly, about one in 10 report a household member benefiting from Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) (10%) and Emyooga (9%). OWC, launched in 2013, is designed to transform subsistence farmers into commercial farmers, targeting about 7 million households (Operation Wealth Creation, 2013; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Emyooga, implemented in 2019, aims to promote job creation and improve household incomes by advancing credit to groups (Microfinance Support Centre, 2019).

About one in 20 (6%) report that a household member has benefited from the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP), which targets about 9.1 million women nationwide (Ministry of Labour, Gender, and Social Development, 2015; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

The same proportion (6%) say a household member has benefited from the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), an initiative launched in 2014 to address high unemployment and poverty among 6.5 million youth aged 18-30 in all districts of the country (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2013).

More than seven in 10 (72%) say their households have not benefited from any of these programmes.

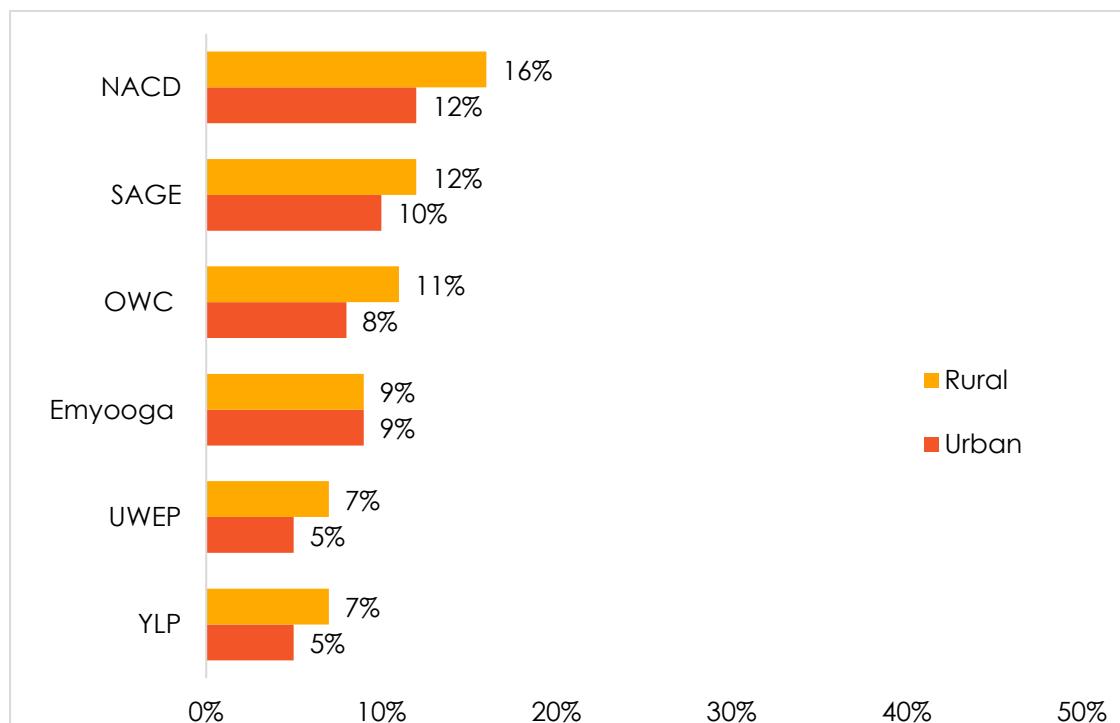
Figure 4: Benefited from government poverty-alleviation programme | Uganda | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much have you or any member of your household benefited from each of the following government programmes, or haven't you heard of this programme: Operation Wealth Creation or OWC? Youth Livelihood Programme or YLP? Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment for the elderly, or SAGE? Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme, or UWEP? National Agricultural Cluster Development, or NACD? Emyooga/Savings and Credit Cooperatives, or SACCOs?

Rural residents were somewhat more likely than urbanites to benefit from the NACD programme targeting farmer households (16% vs. 12%). Findings show no other significant urban-rural differences (of more than 3 percentage points) in the share of citizens who benefited from these initiatives (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Benefited from government poverty-alleviation programme | by urban-rural location | Uganda | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much have you or any member of your household benefited from each of the following government programmes, or haven't you heard of this programme? (% who say they "benefited somewhat" or "benefited a lot")

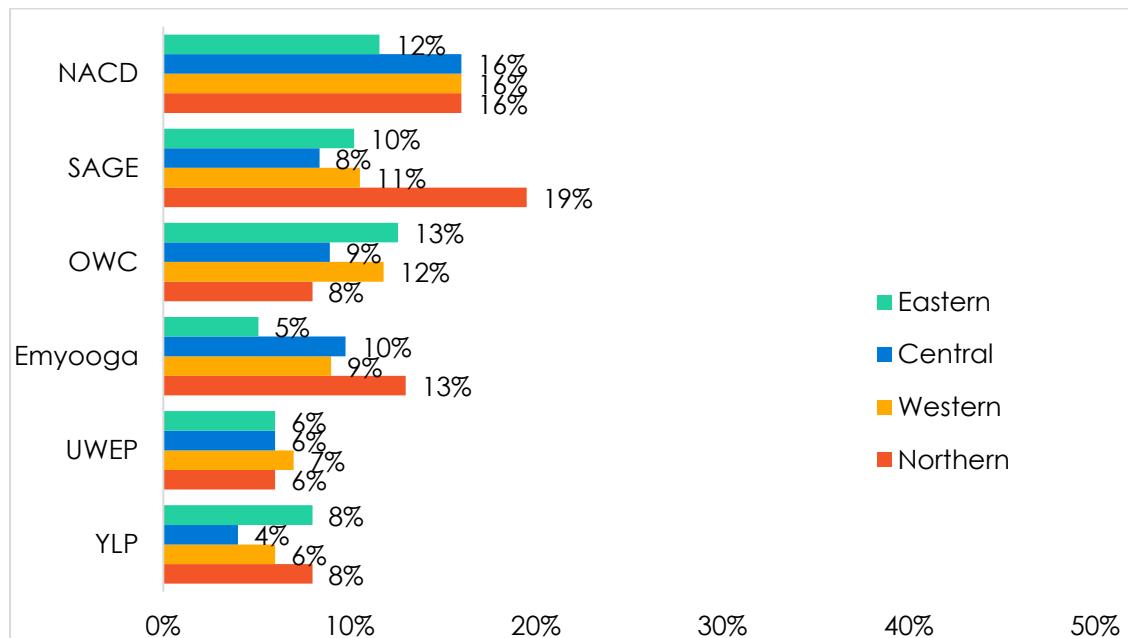
Regions differ slightly in their participation in some programmes (Figure 6). Residents in the Northern region were more likely to receive support from SAGE for the elderly (19%) and Emoyaoga (13%) than their counterparts in other regions (8%-11% for SAGE, 5%-10% for Emoyaoga) (Figure 6).

On the other hand, more households in the Eastern (13%) and Western (12%) regions than in the Northern (8%) and Central (9%) regions report having benefited from the OWC programme.

Surprisingly, better-off citizens benefited more often than poorer citizens from these poverty-alleviation programmes. For example, citizens with no lived poverty were far more likely to receive support from SAGE for the elderly (27%) and Emoyaoga (24%) than their counterparts (10%-13% for SAGE, 6%-13% for Emoyaoga) (Figure 7).

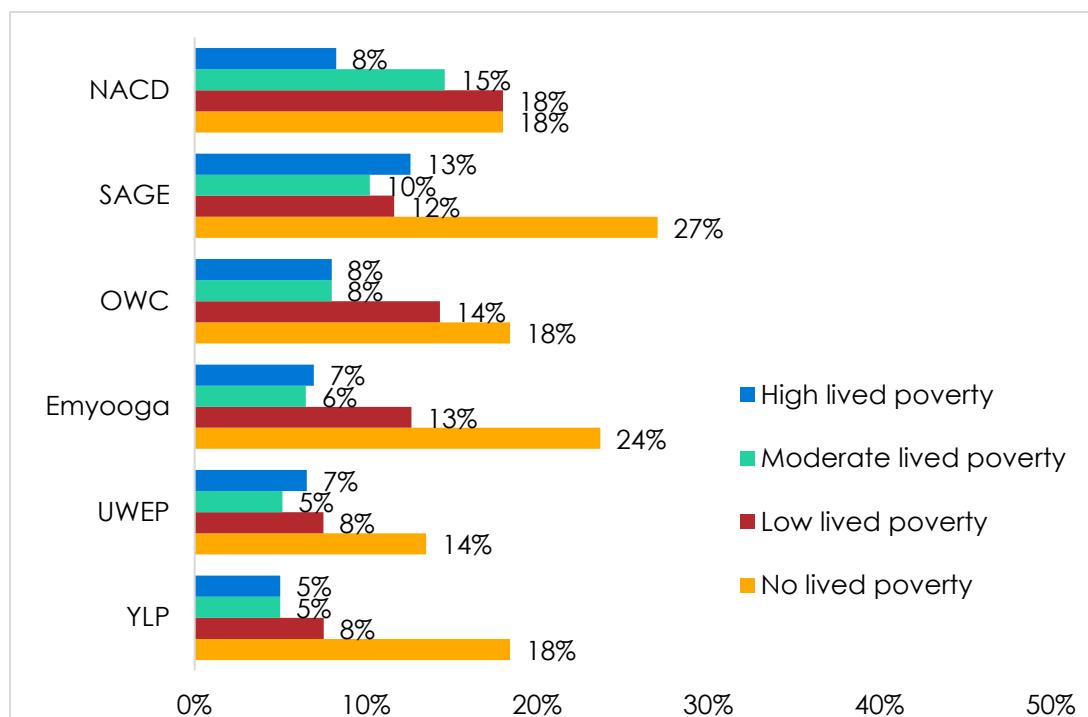
Similarly, the wealthiest citizens (those who experienced no lived poverty) were more likely to benefit from YLP (18%) and UWEP (14%) than those with moderate, low, or high lived poverty (5-8% for both YLP and UWEP).

Figure 6: Benefited from government poverty-alleviation programme | by region | Uganda | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much have you or any member of your household benefited from each of the following government programmes, or haven't you heard of this programme? (% who say they "benefited somewhat" or "benefited a lot")

Figure 7: Benefited from government poverty-alleviation programme | by lived poverty | Uganda | 2021



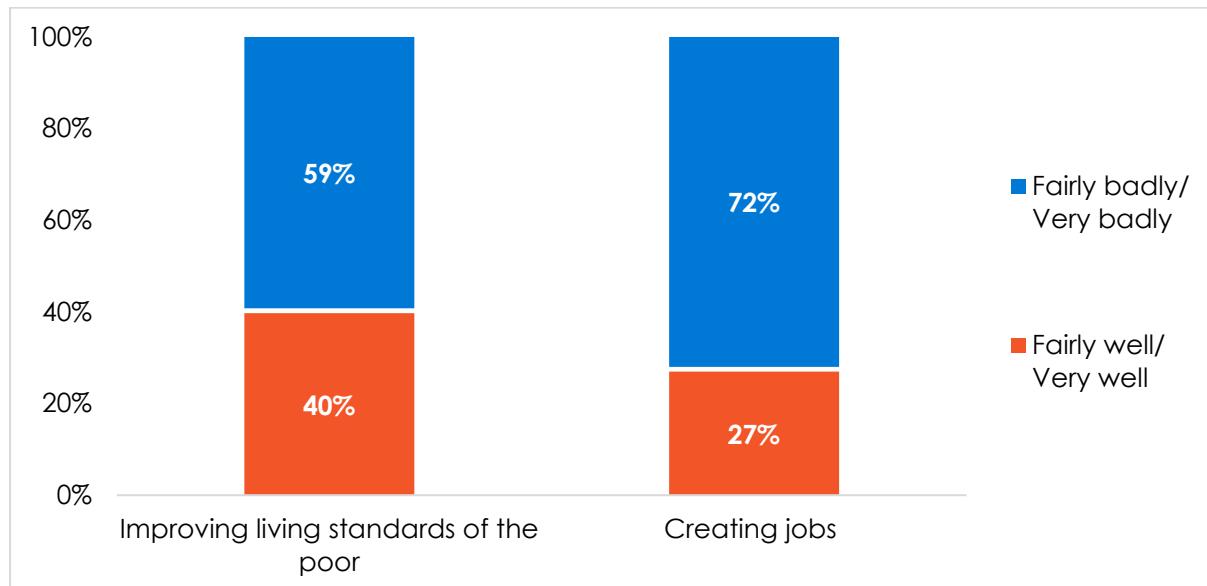
Respondents were asked: How much have you or any member of your household benefited from each of the following government programmes, or haven't you heard of this programme? (% who say they "benefited somewhat" or "benefited a lot")

Government performance on jobs and poverty

Given Uganda's high prevalence of poverty and the fact that government anti-poverty programmes benefit relatively small proportions of the population, it may not be surprising that most citizens are dissatisfied with the government performance on poverty.

About six in 10 respondents (59%) say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in its efforts to improve the living standards of the poor. On job creation – perhaps the most effective anti-poverty programme – even more (72%) rate the government poorly (Figure 7).

Figure 8: Government performance on poverty and jobs | Uganda | 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?

Conclusion

Despite a significant drop in the national poverty rate over the past three decades, Uganda remains one of the world's poorest countries, and survey findings show that a majority of citizens continue to suffer frequent shortages of basic life necessities.

Government poverty-alleviation programmes have reached relatively small proportions of the population, leaving the poverty problem unaddressed for a majority of Ugandans.

These findings point to a need for a thorough evaluation of the successes and failures of the government's anti-poverty initiatives to inform new strategies to tackle implementation hurdles such as corruption and management challenges.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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