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Under one government after another, more and more Malawians live in poverty

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 569 | Maria Mkwawira Chunga and Maxton Tsoka

Summary

Since Malawi's independence in 1964, its leaders have been promising to reduce poverty. After the collapse of the Hastings Banda dictatorship in 1993, the country's first democratically elected government put in place a poverty alleviation programme (Government of Malawi, 1995) and adopted the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (Government of Malawi, 2002) as then-President Bakili Muluzi stated that his focus was on eradicating poverty and hunger and promoting sustainable livelihoods (Muluzi, 2002).

In 2006, Muluzi's successor, Bingu wa Mutharika, introduced the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, whose overarching objective was to reduce poverty (Government of Malawi, 2006). Buoyed by high economic growth rates between 2005 and 2008, the president in 2010 changed the design of the national flag by replacing a rising (half) sun with a blazing white (full) sun, arguing that it aptly represented how the country had developed under his leadership – a change that was reversed shortly after his death in 2012 (Guardian, 2012).

Similarly, the short-lived government of Joyce Banda (2012-2014) claimed to have boosted the economy and made strides in eradicating poverty (Nyasatimes, 2013), and Peter Mutharika boasted that his administration had developed Malawi to the point where young people were “selling cars like bananas along the roads in every town” (Sabola, 2020).

These leaders' claims are bolstered, to some extent, by strong gross domestic product (GDP) growth over the years, ranging from 4% in 2017 and 2018 to 9.6% in 2007 (World Bank, 2019). While the official poverty rate has declined only marginally, from 54% in 1998 to 51% in 2020, extreme poverty declined from 25% in 2010 to 20% in 2020 (National Statistical Office, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

The question is: To what extent do these numbers and government efforts translate into improved living standards for Malawians?

The question can be answered by tracking poverty trends. One way to do this is via the National Statistical Office's poverty estimates based on people's consumption of goods and services. Another way is to use the Lived Poverty Index (LPI), an experiential measure developed by Afrobarometer that examines how frequently people say they went without basic necessities (food, clean water, medicines or medical care, cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the previous year (Mattes, 2020).

Results from Afrobarometer's 2022 survey show that three-fourths of Malawians experienced moderate or high lived poverty during the past year, continuing a negative trend that started in 2008. Moreover, the share of households reporting the most severe level of poverty has increased since 2019. The most frequent shortages in Malawian households are of a cash income and sufficient food. Alongside worsening lived poverty, citizens' ratings of the government's performance on improving life for the poor have been growing increasingly negative since a 2008 assessment of the first-term Bingu wa Mutharika administration.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews with nationally representative samples in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in February 2022. 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 in Malawi were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- Shortages of basic necessities affect most Malawians. More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say they or someone in their family went without a cash income “many times” or “always” during the previous year. Substantial numbers of people report frequently going without enough food (35%), medical care or medicines (34%), cooking fuel (29%), and clean water (24%).
 - All of these reported shortages have been increasing over the past decade.
- Based on these shortages, three-fourths of Malawians experienced either moderate (38%) or high (37%) lived poverty during the previous year.
- Moderate/high lived poverty (described here as “deprivation”) declined substantially between 2003 (77%) and 2008 (55%) but has risen by 19 percentage points since then. Moreover, compared to 2019, high lived poverty has increased by 17 percentage points while moderate lived poverty has decreased by 12 points.
- Examining deprivation under successive governments, moderate/high lived poverty declined under the governments of Muluzi and Mutharika (first term) but has worsened under all subsequent governments.
- Similarly, citizens' assessments of the government's performance on improving the living standards of the poor were most positive for Bingu wa Mutharika's first term (when 60% said the government was doing “fairly well” or “very well”) and have been worsening since then. Only 15% of citizens approve of the current government's efforts to reduce poverty.

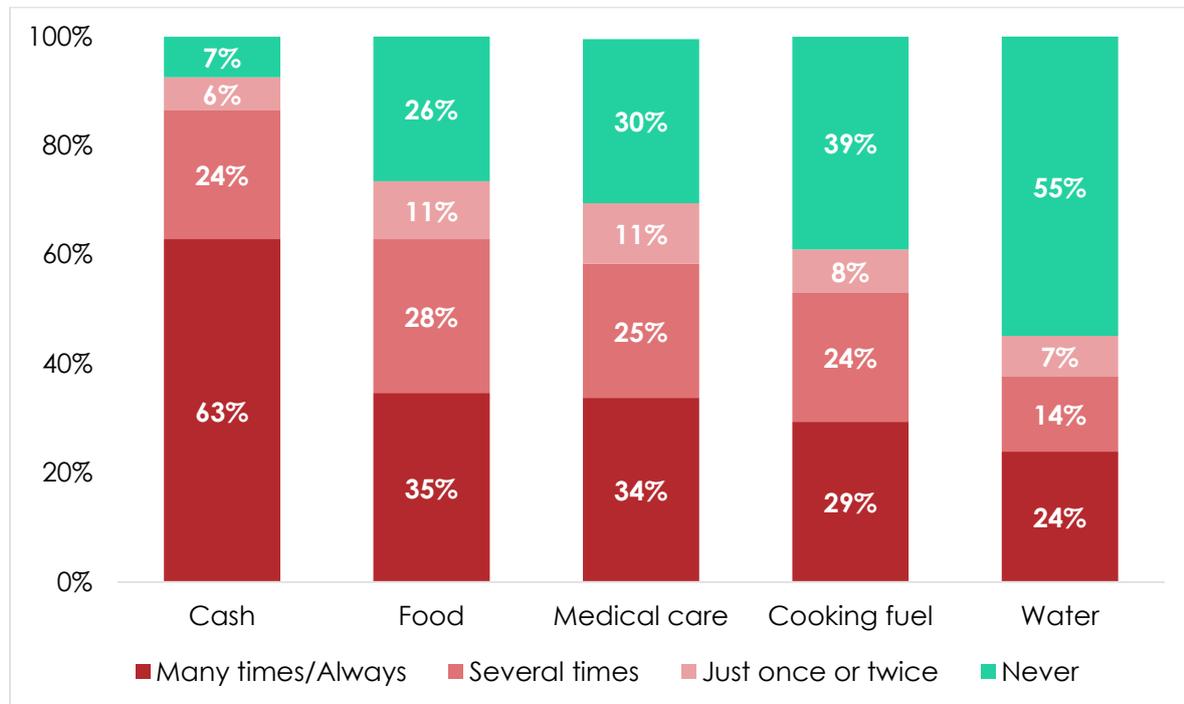
Poverty: Current state and trends

Afrobarometer asks respondents: “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?”

Their responses indicate that most Malawians suffer shortages of basic necessities. A cash income is the scarcest of these items in Malawian households: More than six in 10 citizens (63%) say they or someone in their family went without a cash income “many times” or “always” during the previous year, in addition to three in 10 who say this happened “several times” (24%) or “just once or twice” (6%) (Figure 1).

More than one-third of respondents report frequently going without enough food (35%) or medical care/medicines (34%); only one in four (26%) say they “never” lacked food. Slightly fewer report frequent shortages of cooking fuel (29%) and clean water (24%).

Figure 1: Went without basic necessities | Malawi | 2022



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?

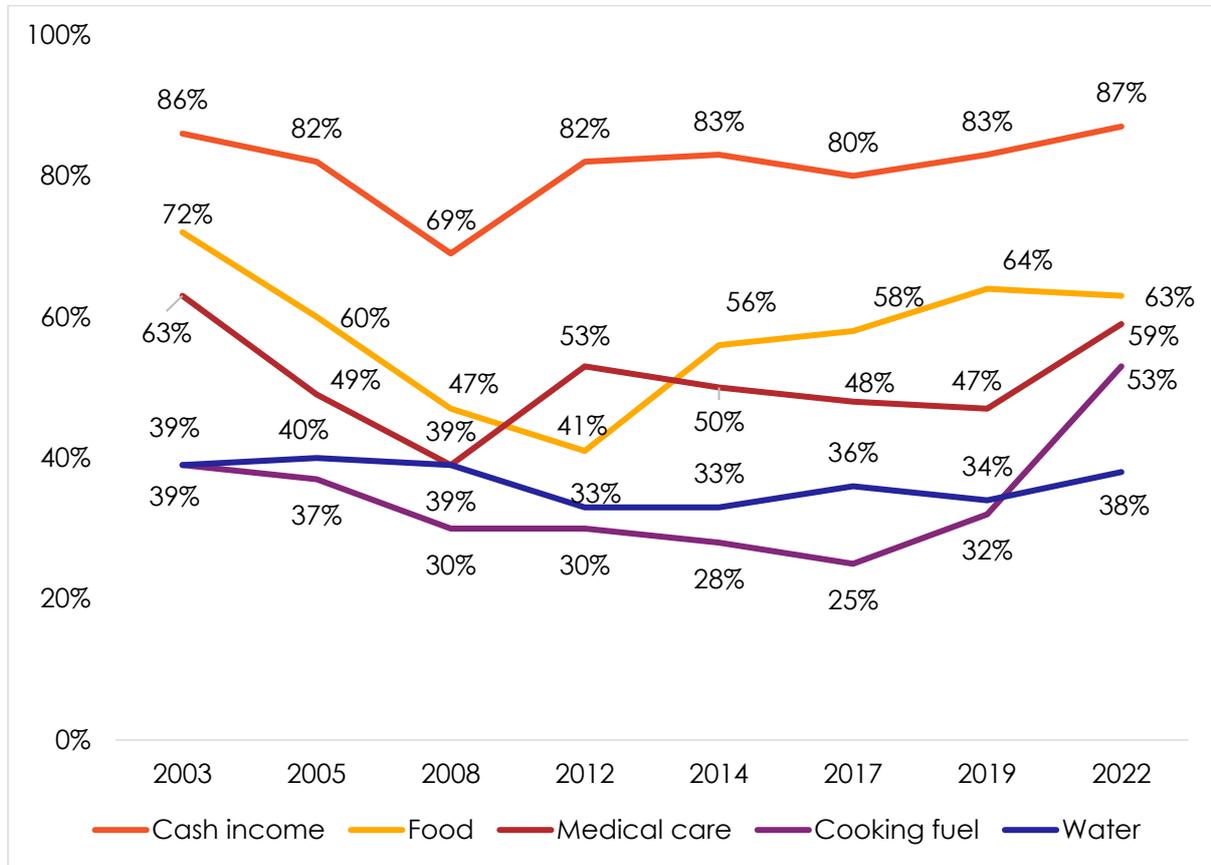
A trend analysis shows that a cash income has consistently been the scarcest of these five necessities: Except for a dip in 2008, more than eight in 10 Malawians have reported going without a cash income at least “several times” in every survey round since 2003 (Figure 2).

The experience of going without enough food at least “several times” declined sharply between 2003 (72%) and 2012 (41%) but has climbed by 22 percentage points since then.

Water shortages have remained relatively stable over time, while shortages of medical care have increased significantly over the past three years. Cooking fuel has generally been the most available item, but shortages have risen sharply since 2019.

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Figure 2: Trend in going without basic necessities at least 'several times' | Malawi
 | 2003-2022



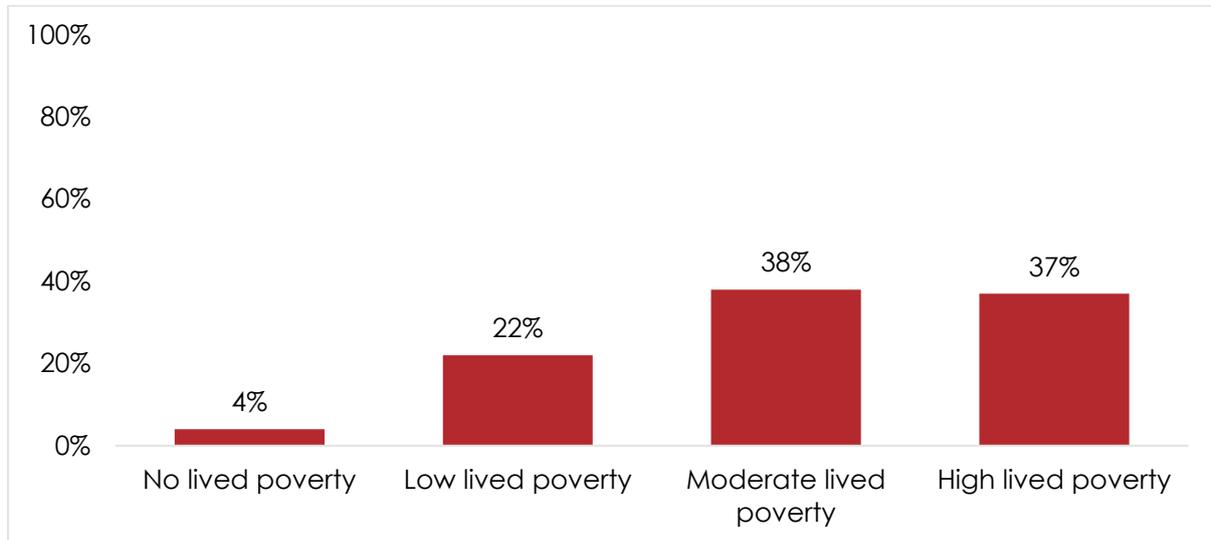
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")

Averaging responses to our five questions about "going without," we can calculate individual Lived Poverty Index scores and group them into four categories: no lived poverty (never went without any of these life necessities in the past year), low lived poverty (went without each of them once or twice, on average), moderate lived poverty (went without several times), and high lived poverty (went without many times or always). (For more on the Lived Poverty Index, see Mattes (2020).)

Using these definitions, very few Malawians (4%) experienced no lived poverty during the past year, and only 22% fall into the "low lived poverty" category (Figure 3). Instead, three-fourths (74%) of citizens experienced either moderate (38%) or high (37%) lived poverty.¹

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 38% moderate lived poverty and 37% high lived poverty sum to 74% moderate/high lived poverty).

Figure 3: Levels of lived poverty | Malawi | 2022

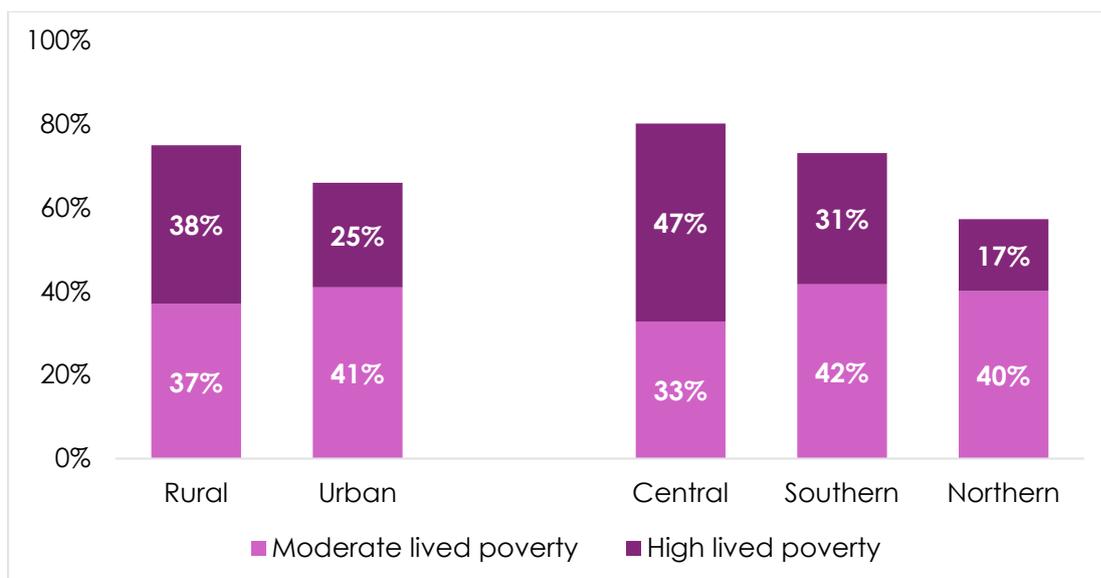


Lived poverty levels are based on responses to the questions: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

If we define “deprivation” as experiencing either moderate or high lived poverty, deprivation is more common in rural areas (75%) than in cities (66%) (Figure 4).

Residents in the Northern Region (57%) are far less likely to suffer deprivation than their counterparts in the Central (80%) and Southern (73%) regions. High lived poverty, in particular, is almost twice as high in the South (31%) and three times as high in the Centre (47%) as in the North (17%).

Figure 4: Deprivation of basic necessities | by urban-rural location and region | Malawi | 2022



Lived poverty levels are based on responses to the questions: 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?

Deprivation is also associated with household demographic characteristics. Higher levels of deprivation are more prevalent among citizens with no formal education (80%), those without employment (74%-77%), women (77%), and those above age 35 (77%-79%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Deprivation of basic necessities | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022

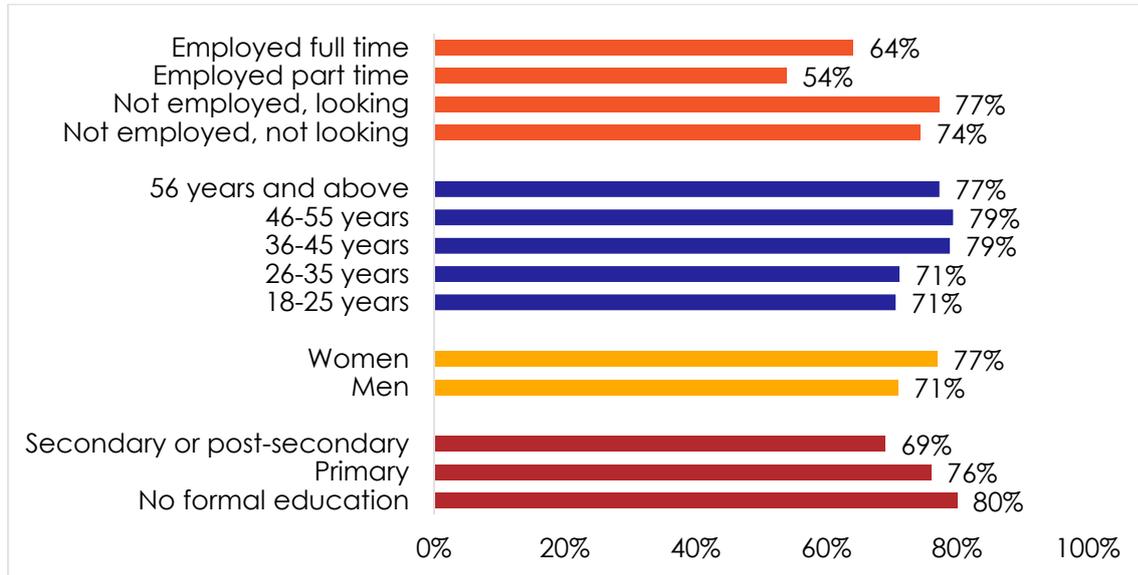
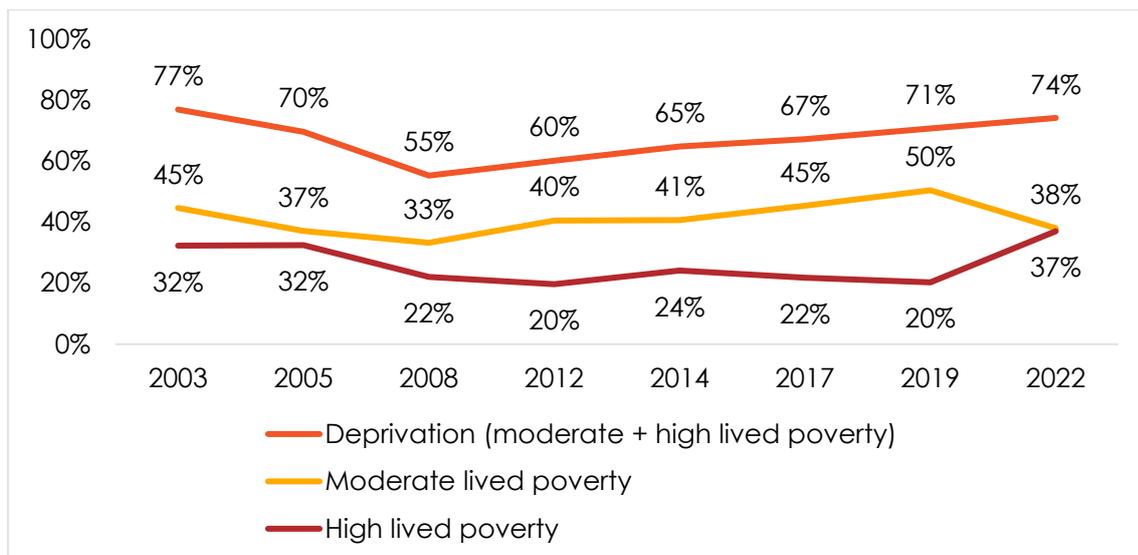


Figure shows % of respondents who experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the previous year.

Deprivation (moderate plus high lived poverty) declined substantially between 2003 (77%) and 2008 (55%) but has been rising consistently since then (Figure 6). Moreover, high lived poverty jumped by 17 percentage points over the past three years after holding fairly steady between 2008 and 2019, while moderate poverty decreased by 12 points compared to 2019.

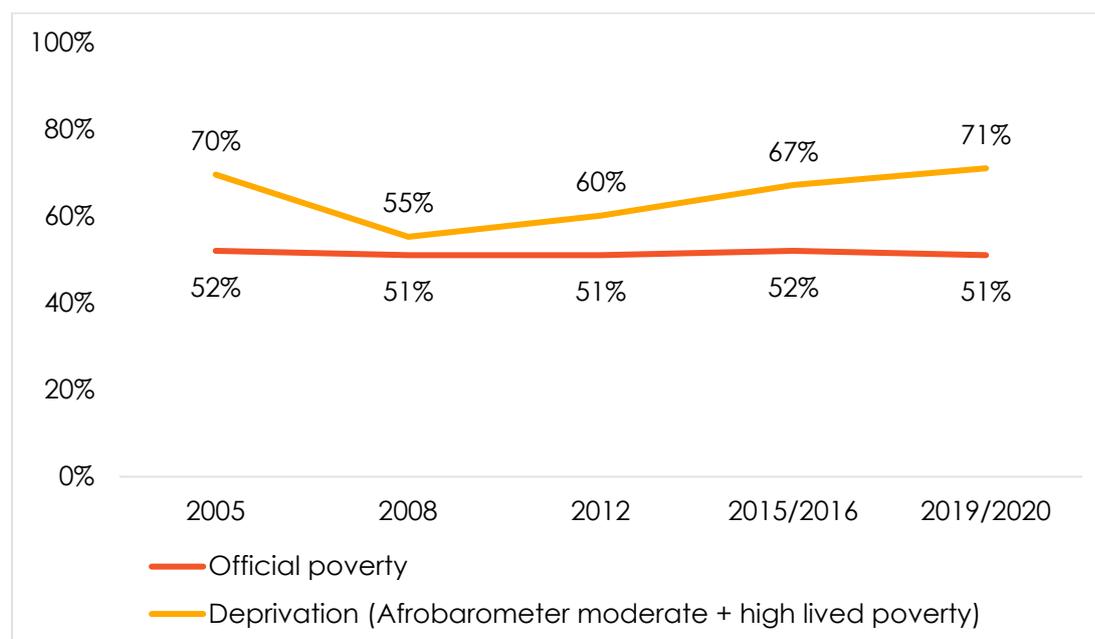
Figure 6: Trends in deprivation | Malawi | 2003-2022



Lived poverty levels are based on responses to the questions: 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?

The rate of deprivation (moderate plus high lived poverty) based on Afrobarometer survey results is generally higher than the official poverty rate calculated by the National Statistical Office based on the results of an integrated household survey. Over the period 2005-2020, the official poverty rate has hovered around 51%, while the deprivation rate dropped between 2005 and 2008 but has been rising since then (Figure 7). The steady increase in deprivation is not mirrored in the official poverty trend.

Figure 7: Official poverty rate vs. Afrobarometer deprivation | Malawi | 2005-2020



Source: World Bank (2020) and National Statistical Office (2020)

Government performance in reducing poverty

Malawi has had five presidents since 2003. Afrobarometer's periodic surveys allow us to compare levels of lived poverty and citizens' assessments of government performance early and late in each president's administration (see Table 1).

Table 1: Presidential administrations and Afrobarometer surveys | Malawi | 2003-2022

Party	President	Afrobarometer survey first year	Afrobarometer survey final year
UDF (United Democratic Front)	Bakili Muluzi	2003	2005
DPP (Democratic Progressive Party)	Bingu wa Mutharika	2005	2008
DPP	Bingu wa Mutharika	2008	2012
PP (People's Party)	Joyce Banda	2012	2014
DPP	Peter Mutharika	2014	2019
Tonse Alliance	Lazarus Chakwera*	2019	2022

* Chakwera became president in 2020. By the time of the 2022 Afrobarometer survey, he had been in office for almost two years.

Deprivation rates in the first and final years of governments since 2003

As measured by the combination of moderate and high lived poverty, deprivation declined under Muluzi's UDF government (from 77% to 70% between 2003 and 2005) and the first term of Bingu wa Mutharika's DPP government (DPP1) (from 70% to 55% between 2005 and 2008) but has risen under all subsequent governments (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Deprivation rates by government | Malawi | 2003-2022

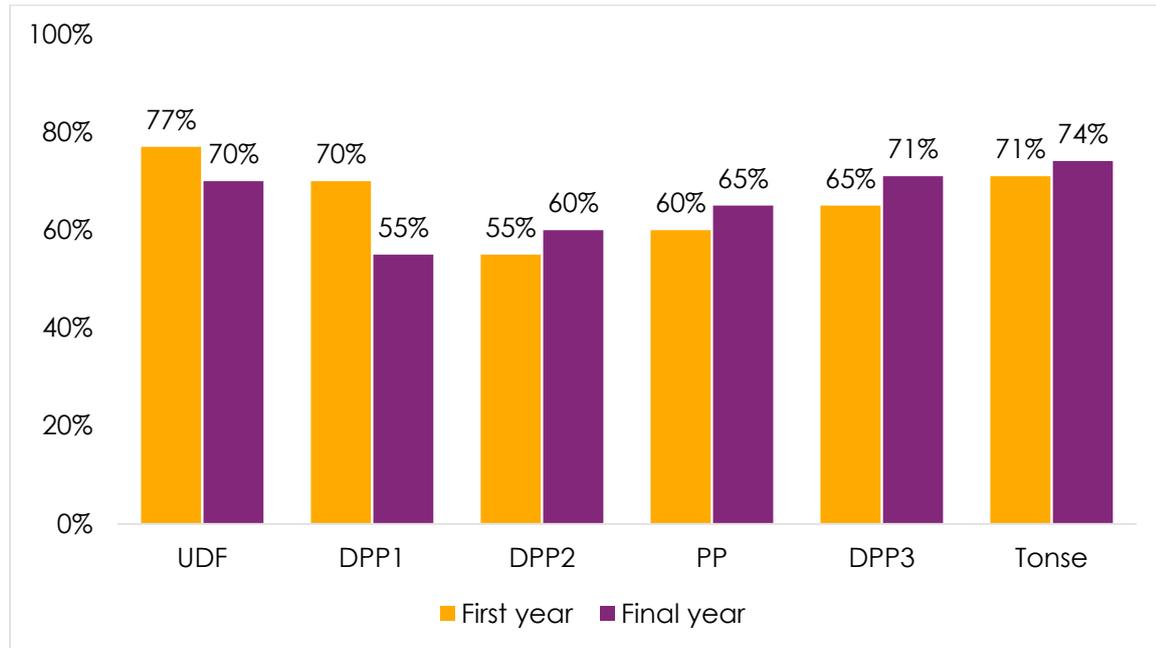


Figure shows % of respondents who experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the previous year.

Improving living standards of the poor

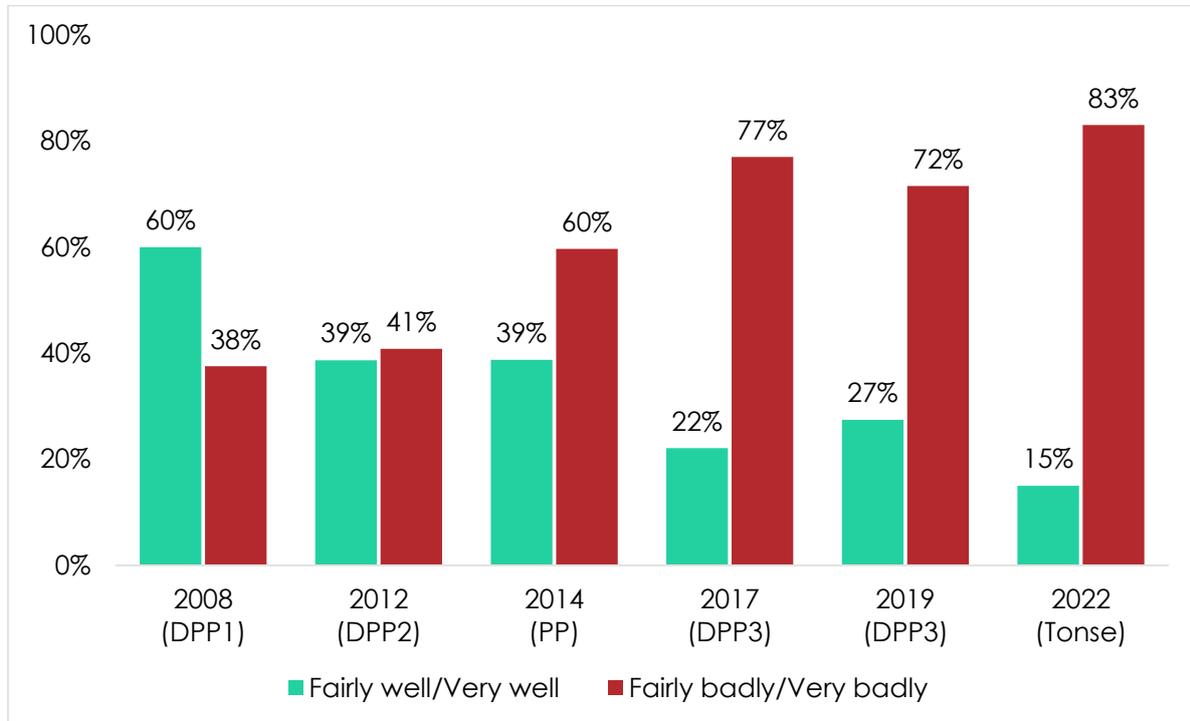
The performance of the various governments in terms of fighting poverty can also be compared using citizens' assessments of how well they have handled improving the living standards of poor people.

Over the period 2008-2022,² the government received its best ratings during Bingu wa Mutharika's first term: In 2008, six in 10 Malawians (60%) said the government was doing "fairly well" or "very well" at improving poor people's living standards (Figure 9).

Approval has been dropping steeply since then, reaching 39% in 2012 (at the end of Bingu wa Mutharika's second term) and 2014 (after Joyce Banda's term), then down to 22% in 2017 (during the Peter Mutharika administration). After a modest rebound to 27% in 2019 (still under Peter Mutharika), it dropped again, to 15% in 2022, after Chakwera's first 21 months in office. The upward trend in disapproval aligns roughly with the upward trend in lived poverty over the past decade.

² This question was not asked in the 2005 survey covering Muluzi's UDF government.

Figure 9: Government performance in improving living standards of the poor
 | Malawi | 2003-2022



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: Improving the living standards of the poor?

Conclusion

There is a disconnect between the government's intentions and rhetoric on poverty reduction and the lived experiences of Malawians. Using lived poverty as a measure, poverty reduction only worked between 2003 and 2008, and has not worked since then.

Survey results also show that lived poverty as a measure aligns with citizens' assessments of government performance on poverty over the period. This is reflected in the favourable ratings for the first term of Bingu wa Mutharika and the unfavourable perceptions of the Peter Mutharika administration – and, unless the trend is reversed, the even worse grade for the Chakwera government.

One deprivation that almost all governments have failed to deal with decisively is access to a cash income, a critical resource with spillover effects for people's ability to meet all their basic needs. This speaks to the need for increased production among rural residents, good produce markets for farmers, employment opportunities for the employable, and business capital and environment for entrepreneurs. In addition, widespread experiences of food shortages point to a need for better management of the agriculture sector and climate-related shocks.

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