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In conversation with Afrobarometer CEO Joseph Asunka

Q&A with Afrobarometer CEO Joseph Asunka, whose expertise ranges from fieldwork to the funder community to lecturing at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Under his leadership, Afrobarometer has been leading the charge to bridge Africa's data gap by fostering citizen participation to inform the public discourse on the continent. In this sit-down, Joseph provides insights on Afrobarometer's journey, challenges, and opportunities and also shares his views on the climate conference COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt.

Q: You stepped in as Afrobarometer CEO in April of last year. Can you share some of the defining moments in Afrobarometer's journey and tell us why data matter?

Afrobarometer started in 1999 as an academic project with a public interest twist. The three co-founders – Profs. Gyimah-Boadi, Bratton, and Mattes – saw the need to elevate citizens' voices in Africa's newly democratising countries. Their vision was to ensure that the continent's development is anchored in the realities and aspirations of its people. Our journey since then has been marked by several defining moments, but I will highlight one very close to our hearts. The first four rounds of Afrobarometer surveys (conducted between 1999 and 2010) included up to 20 countries. In Round 5, we expanded our coverage to 35 countries. This was and will remain our most significant leap in country coverage. We captured the voices of more than half of the continent's citizens. With this expansion, Afrobarometer left its mark on the continent and beyond as a key player in closing Africa's data gap. Our data are used in constructing the Ibrahim Index of African Governance and other global governance indices, including the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators and Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, among others.

Q: What are the biggest challenges Afrobarometer has faced in the 20+ years it's been working to bridge the data gap in Africa?

The logistics challenges are immense, including bad weather, flooding, rough terrain and bad roads, poor Internet connectivity or phone reception, and many others. Some of our fieldworkers have walked or gone on horseback for many miles, built makeshift bridges, or endured long boat rides to reach remote locations. Severe health risks can delay fieldwork, as happened with the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. COVID-19 compelled us to pause fieldwork for about seven months in 2020. Unexpected political events or conflicts can also derail our plans. It's important to note that these challenges don't necessarily end once we have collected the data. We sometimes encounter resistance from government officials, especially when the findings are deemed unflattering or politically unfavourable. Finally, funding is a constant challenge. Let me take this opportunity to express our most profound appreciation to our long-standing partners, multilateral and bilateral funders, and private foundations for their unwavering support. At Afrobarometer, we are constantly challenging the status quo and rolling out new

tools to expand the scale and scope of our work. This vast undertaking requires additional funding. Despite all these challenges, we remain committed to producing high-quality, reliable, independent survey data.

Q: Afrobarometer has been taking the pulse of African citizens for more than two decades on important and timely issues. Facing the threat of climate change, what is the Afrobarometer data telling us?

Climate change is wreaking havoc across Africa. Increasingly, severe droughts are striking the Sahel; East African glaciers are melting; Cyclone Idai in 2019 and deadly floods in KwaZulu Natal have devastated Southern Africa, among others. Ahead of COP27 in Egypt, we released climate change cards summarising our findings in 20 African countries. On average, only half (51%) of citizens are aware of climate change. This calls for better education on climate urgency. It is reassuring, however, to note that among those who are aware of climate change, majorities want their government to take action now to limit climate change, even if it is costly, causes job losses, or takes a toll on the economy. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres rightly said in his opening speech at COP27, "The clock is ticking. We are in the fight of our lives." At Afrobarometer, we believe change is possible, but only if we collectively move with speed and scale to avoid breaching the 1.5C global warming threshold. Most importantly, African citizens must be heard and should have a front-row seat in future policies and decisions that will affect them.

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