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Pan-Africa Profiles

Lived poverty resurgent

COVID-19 restrictions feed economic contraction to drive down living standards in Africa

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Summary

Lived poverty – measured as the frequency with which people go without basic necessities – declined steadily in Africa between 2005 and 2015 (Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016), a trend matched by consumption-based estimates of poverty produced by the World Bank (2018). However, results from Afrobarometer Round 7 surveys (conducted in 2016/2018) suggested that the decade-long trend of improving living standards had come to a halt and that lived poverty was once again on the rise (Mattes, 2020).

The most recent findings, from Afrobarometer Round 8 surveys conducted in 34 African countries between July 2019 and July 2021, confirm that deprivation is indeed resurgent. This trend has its roots in a continent-wide slowdown that began in 2014: Economic growth decelerated sharply in 2016, and turned to economic contraction in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increases in national levels of lived poverty tend to be largest in countries where the economy has stagnated or contracted, measured by changes in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.

But the *way* African governments reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic has also shaped trends in poverty: Among countries whose Round 8 survey followed the first wave of COVID-19, more restrictive government responses were associated with larger increases in lived poverty. And increases in poverty were also larger where higher percentages of respondents told interviewers that it had been difficult to comply with these restrictions.

Key findings

- Lived poverty varies widely across the continent. In Mauritius, people rarely endured shortages of a basket of basic necessities (food, clean water, health care, cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the previous year. At the other extreme, the average Guinean and Gabonese reported that they frequently went without several of these basic necessities.
- Lived poverty is clearly moving upward, reversing a decade-long trend of steadily improving living conditions that we saw coming to an end in Afrobarometer Round 7 surveys in 2016-2018. For countries that have conducted the longest time series of surveys, deprivation of basic necessities captured by our Lived Poverty Index has returned to the same levels as measured in 2005-2006. The trend is similar for "high lived poverty," the proportion of people who experience frequent shortages of basic necessities.
- Increases in national levels of lived poverty over the past decade tend to be largest in countries where the economy has stagnated or contracted, as measured by changes in GDP per capita.
- Comparing levels of lived poverty recorded in Round 7 and Round 8 surveys, there was no statistically significant difference in the extent of change based on whether the Round 8 survey was conducted before or after COVID-19 lockdowns.
- However, among countries whose Round 8 survey followed the first wave of COVID-19, more stringent government responses were associated with larger increases in lived poverty. And increases in poverty were also larger where higher percentages of respondents told interviewers that it had been difficult to comply with these restrictions.

Afrobarometer survey

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries – 18 countries surveyed between July 2019 and April

2020 and 16 surveyed (after a hiatus due to COVID-19) between October 2020 and July 2021.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews representing the views of more than three-fourths of Africans (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples.[1] When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). Due to rounding, reported totals may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories.

The extent of lived poverty today

To measure lived poverty, 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?*

A range of response options are offered: "*never*" for those who experienced no shortages, "*just once or twice*," "*several times*," "*many times*," and "*always*." Because these questions are asked in all surveyed countries, we are able not only to monitor shifts in the levels and nature of poverty over time, but also to compare experiences across countries and regions.

Large numbers of Africans fail to meet their most basic needs. Across 34 countries surveyed in 2019/2021, six in 10 respondents (61%) reported facing shortages of medicine or medical services at least once in the previous 12 months, and nearly as many experienced shortages of clean water (55%) and food (52%). Nearly four in 10 experienced shortages of cooking fuel (46%) (Figure 1).

Measuring poverty

Poverty can be measured in a number of different ways. At the national level, all countries produce national accounts data to calculate their gross national income (GNI), which is used to summarize national wealth and the total state of the economy. However, some analysts have questioned the capacity of many African countries' national statistics systems to generate these numbers reliably (Jerven, 2013).

At the personal or household level, national statistics offices conduct large household surveys to measure incomes, expenditures, assets, and access to services, which are then used to calculate national poverty lines and place individuals above or below these lines. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 1 focusing on reducing the number of people living on less than $1.90 a day is a good example. However, such surveys are expensive and are conducted infrequently in many African countries. Other development organizations' collect data on the consequences of poverty in a given country, such as the proportion of people who don't use improved drinking water sources or the proportion of children under age 5 who are underweight.

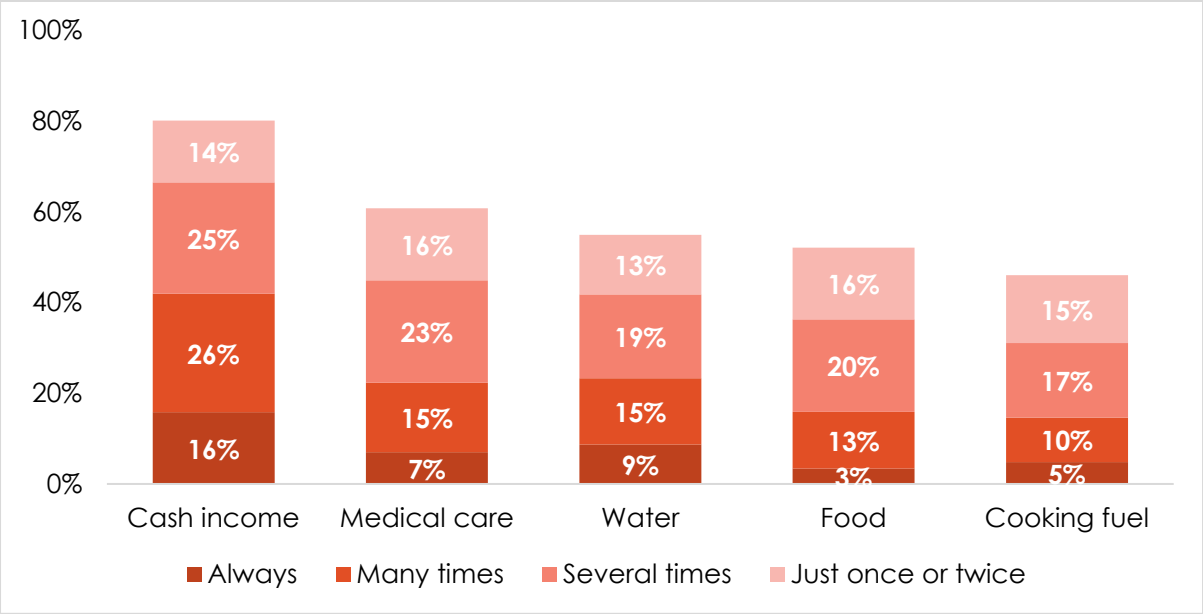
As a contribution to the tracking of poverty in Africa, Afrobarometer offers the Lived Poverty Index (LPI), an experiential measure that is based on a series of survey questions about how frequently people actually go without basic necessities during the course of a year. The LPI measures a portion of the concept of poverty that is not captured well by other measures, and thus offers an important complement to official statistics on poverty and development (Mattes, 2008). Because people are the best judges of their own interests, survey respondents are best placed to tell us about their quality of life, though they might not be able to do it with a great deal of precision. If Amartya Sen (1999) is right and the value of one's standard of living lies in the living itself, an experiential measure of shortages of the basic necessities of life takes us directly to the central core of the concept of poverty.

[1] The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.

Reflecting the continent's ongoing employment crisis, the most commonly cited form of deprivation remains access to cash income, with four-fifths (80%) reporting that they went without cash income at least once in the previous year. While cash income is not in itself a basic need, access to it can enable citizens to meet their basic and non-basic needs. Income shortages therefore have many spillover effects on people's lives. The fact that four-fifths of Africans report having gone without cash income at least once – and that 42% did so frequently – poses a major development challenge, as many adults on the continent cannot afford to buy resources for immediate use or to invest in assets.

These average figures, however, mask a great deal of variation across the continent, as well as within societies. In terms of food, for instance, one in 10 Mauritians (10%) experienced a shortage in the previous year, compared to three-quarters of Liberians (73%), Zambians (75%), Nigeriens (76%), and Malawians (79%) (not shown). Similarly, one in five Mauritians (17%) and about one in three Ghanaians (31%) and Cabo Verdeans (34%) went without needed medicine or clinic visits, compared to four in five citizens in Benin (78%), Zambia (79%), Gabon (81%), Sierra Leone (82%), Liberia (83%), and Guinea (84%) (not shown).

Figure 1: Components of lived poverty | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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?*
(Note: Due to rounding, summed response categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of categories shown in graphics.)

The Lived Poverty Index (LPI)

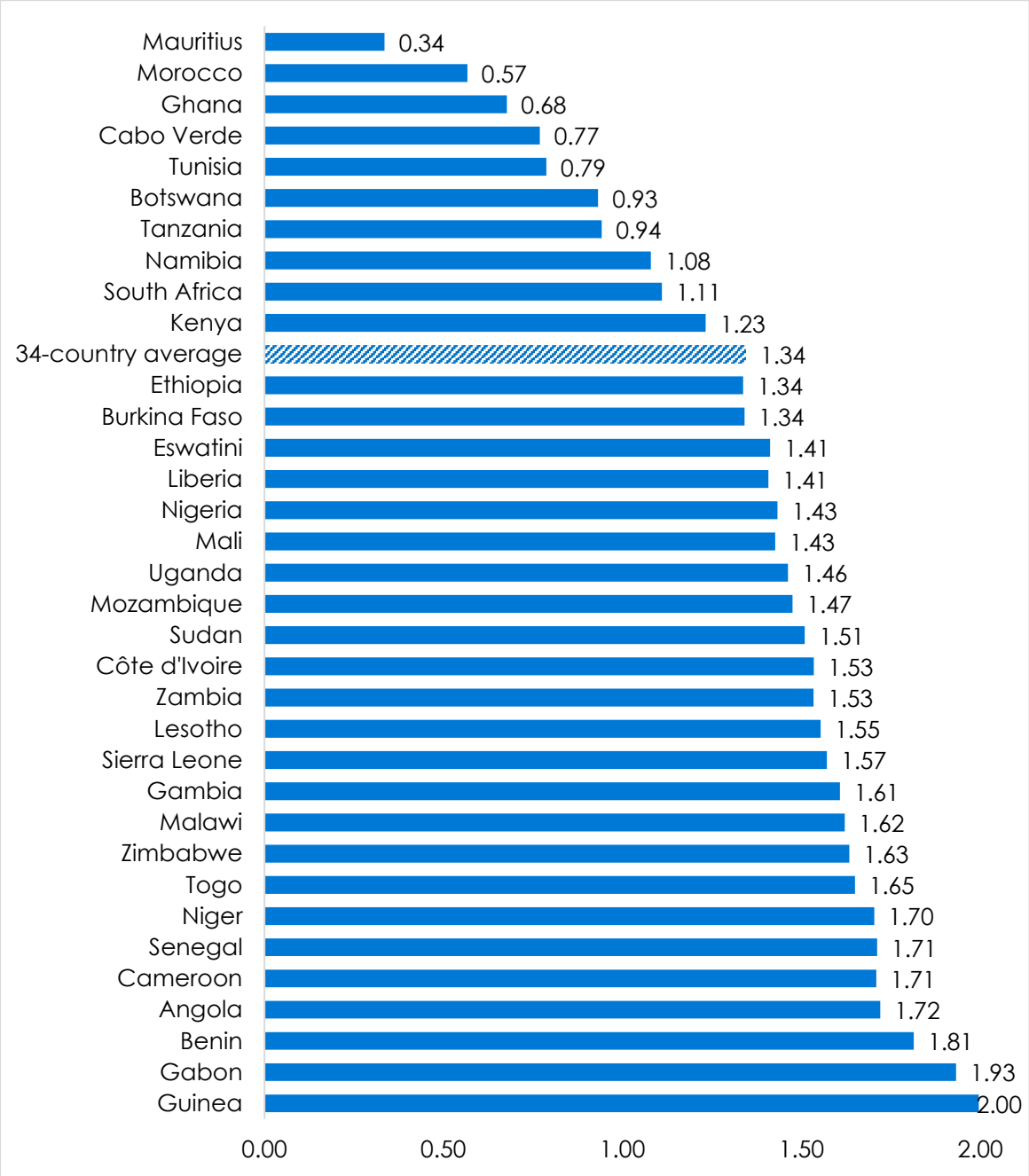
Treating the responses to Afrobarometer's five "gone without" questions as a continuous scale, we can combine them to calculate an average score for each respondent, and for each country, that captures the overall level of a phenomenon we call "lived poverty." The Lived Poverty Index (LPI) score ranges along a five-point scale from 0, for someone who never goes without any necessity, to a high of 4, which implies an individual is experiencing a constant absence of *all* basic necessities.[2] Afrobarometer describes those who score "0" as

[2] Previous research has demonstrated that this scale has impressive internal validity as well as reliability that is strong and consistent across all country samples and across all survey rounds (see Mattes, 2008). In the most recent Round 8 surveys, factor analysis extracted a single dimension with an Eigenvalue of 2.60 that explains 51.9% of the common variance (reliability (alpha) = .765). For independent validations of the scale, see Meyer and Keyser (2016) and Odhiambo (2019).

having "no lived poverty," those with scores of 0.2 to 1.0 as having "low lived poverty," those with scores of 1.2 to 2.0 as experiencing "moderate lived poverty," and those with scores above 2.0 as experiencing "high lived poverty."

The score for the mean level of lived poverty across all 34 countries surveyed in 2019/2021 is 1.34, and the median African respondent went without each of these basic necessities once or twice over the previous year. However, as suggested above by the responses to specific questions, there are significant cross-national variations around that mean. The highest index scores can be found in Guinea (2.00), Gabon (1.93), and Benin (1.81) – the median person in these countries experienced shortages across everything in our basket of basic necessities several times a year. In sharp contrast, the typical person in Mauritius (0.34) never or rarely went without (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Lived Poverty Index | 34 countries | 2019/2021



Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities).

High lived poverty

Even more troubling is the intensity of deprivation. Across Africa, between one in seven and four in 10 people encountered *frequent* shortages ("many times" or "always") in the previous year with respect to cash income (42%), water (24%), medicine or medical treatment (22%), food (16%), and cooking fuel (15%).

One of the potential statistical limitations of the LPI is that it treats each additional increment in the response scale the same (e.g. the difference between "never" and "just once or twice" is treated the same as that between "sometimes" and "many times"), which may not be strictly appropriate. One way to check this is by calculating the most intense or extreme reports of shortages – those who said they went without "many times" or "always" – and see whether these responses follow the same general pattern across countries as the overall index.

Thus, we calculate the proportion of people who, on average, experienced frequent shortages across each dimension.[3] Across all 34 countries, an average of nearly one in four people (22%) experienced high lived poverty, going without food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and cash income on a frequent basis.

High lived poverty is almost non-existent in Mauritius (2%) and Morocco (3%), and is relatively rare in Tanzania (9%), Botswana (7%), Cabo Verde (6%), and Ghana (4%). At the other extreme, half of all citizens live in severe poverty in Guinea (48%), and four in 10 do so in Gabon (43%) and Benin (38%) (Figure 3). Despite a few differences between the country rankings for the LPI and those for high lived poverty, overall the scores for the two scales are strongly correlated.[4]

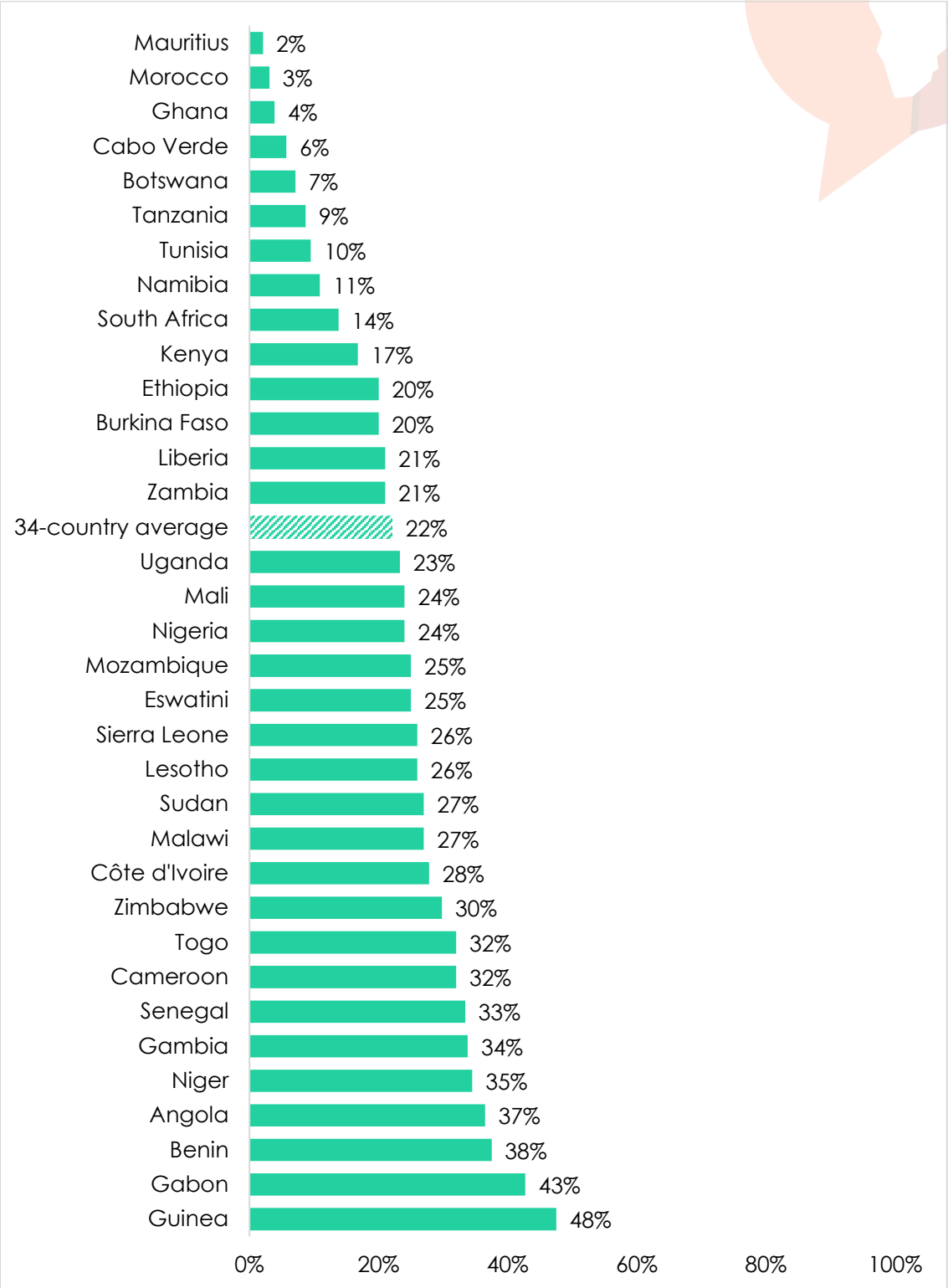
Across the 32 countries surveyed in both Round 7 and Round 8, the mean individual level of lived poverty increased by 0.13 points, led by the Gambia (+0.63), Nigeria (+0.46), and Sierra Leone (+0.39) (Figure 4). Twenty countries recorded an increase of 0.08 points or more (that is, greater than the largest country-level standard error, or .035 points), and only three countries recorded significant reductions in lived poverty: Niger (-0.08), Togo (-0.19), and Tanzania (-0.21).

Across the same period, the proportion experiencing high lived poverty increased by a mean of 3 percentage points across 32 countries (Figure 5). Fourteen countries recorded an increase of 4 points or more in the proportion of people experiencing high lived poverty. The largest increases were in the Gambia (+22 percentage points), Nigeria (+14 points), and Sierra Leone (+11 points), showing a strong correlation with changes in the overall index scores (see Figure 4). Three countries reported decreases of more than 4 points: Togo (-9 points), Tanzania (-5 points), and Niger (-5 points) – the same countries that saw significant improvements in overall index scores. Twelve countries did not record a significant change on this indicator (i.e. they recorded only changes between +2 and -2 percentage points).

[3] Statistically, this involves counting only those who score 2.20 or higher on the 0-4 scale. While other combinations of individual scores may produce this average score, what it basically entails is that the typical respondent experienced shortages "many times" across all dimensions and "always" on at least one.

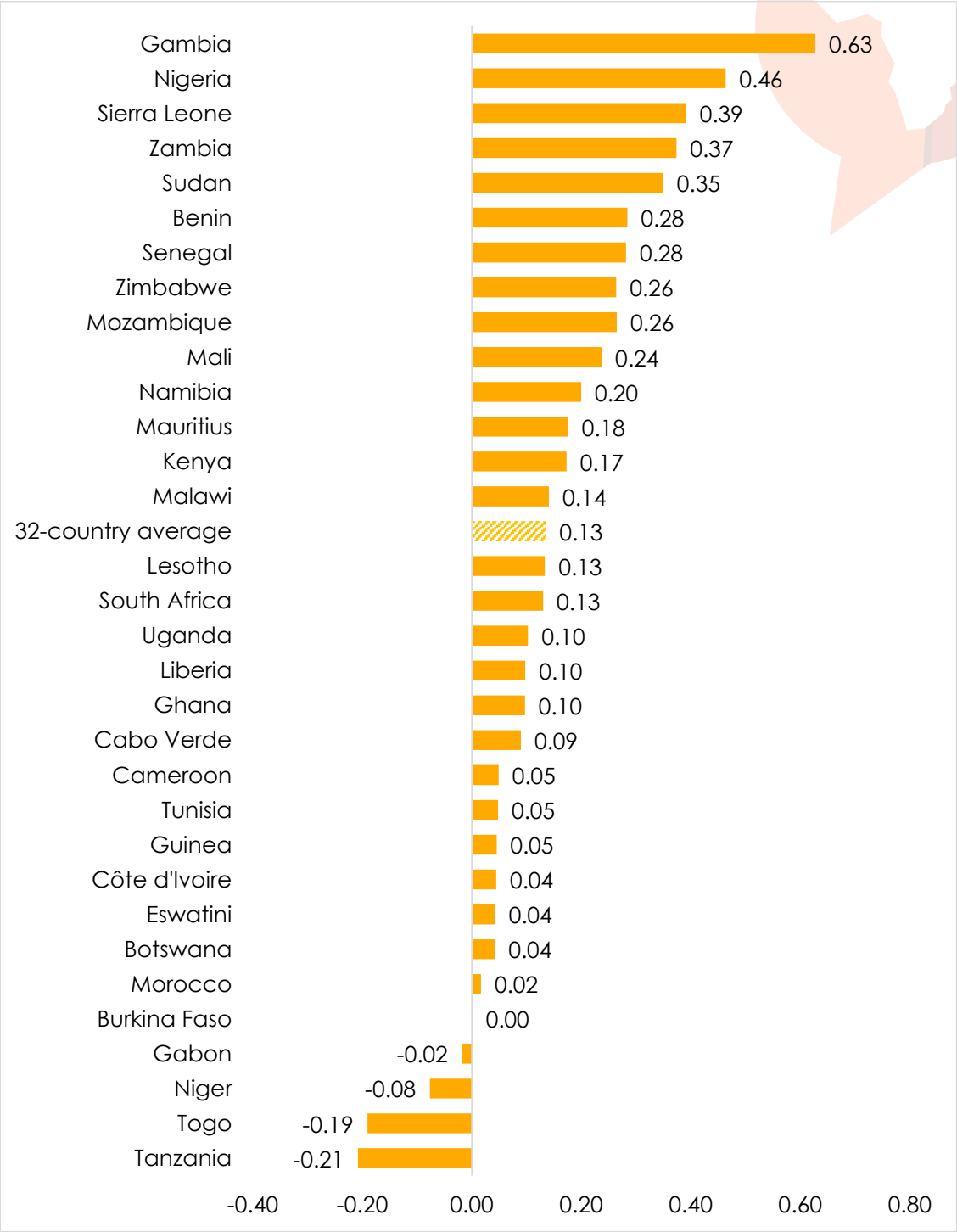
[4] At the macro level, Pearson's r=.947, p=.000 (N=34). At the micro level, Pearson's r=.751, p=.000 (N=48,084).

Figure 3: High lived poverty (average of frequent shortages) | 34 countries | 2019/2021



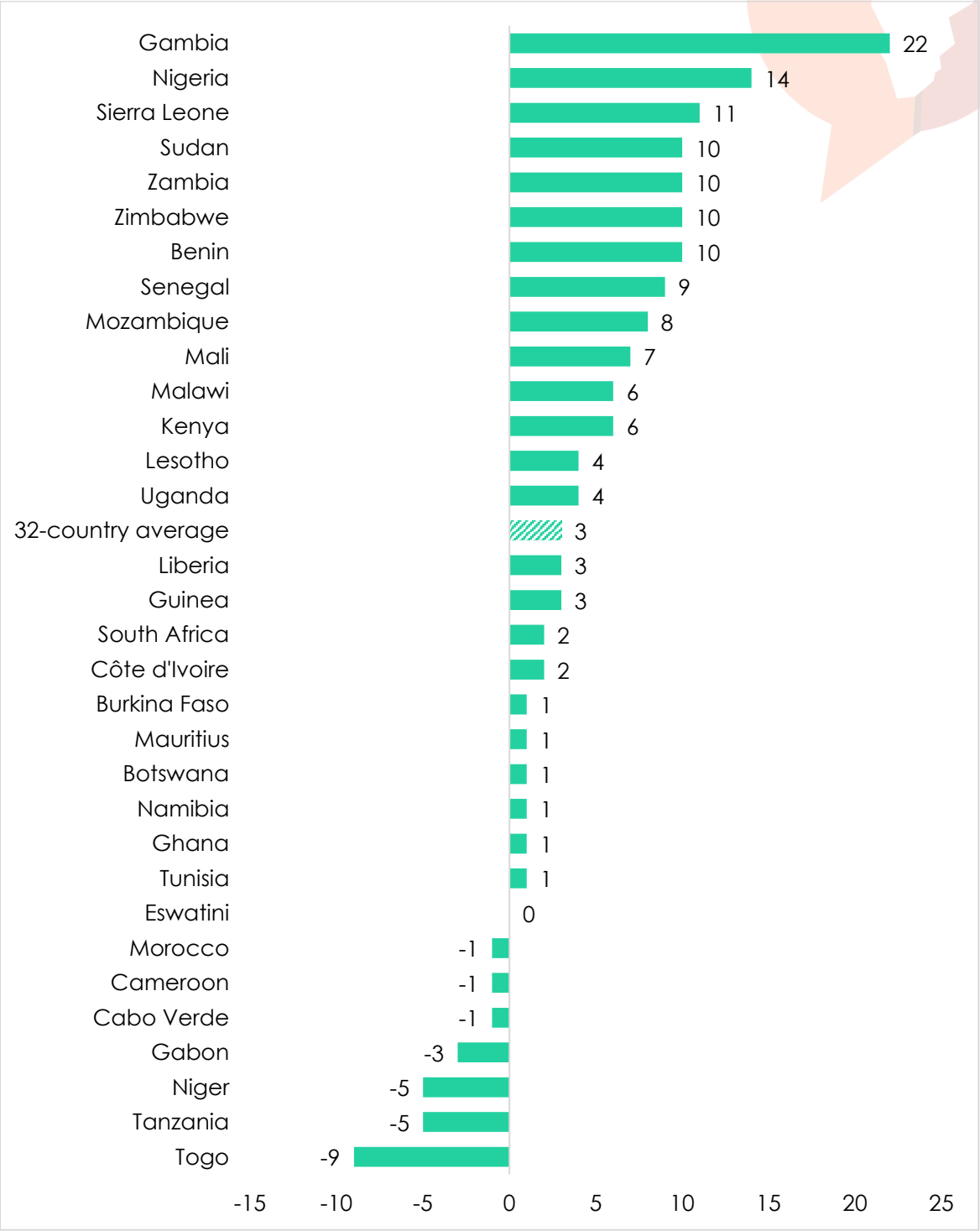
Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income? (The figure shows the average proportion who said "many times" or "always.")*

Figure 4: Changes in Lived Poverty Index scores | 32 countries | 2016-2021



Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities). The figure shows changes in LPI scores between Round 7 (2016/2018) and Round 8 (2019/2021).

Figure 5: Changes in high lived poverty (percentage points) | 32 countries | 2016-2021



Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities). The figure shows changes, in percentage points, between Round 7 and Round 8 in the proportion of respondents scoring above 2.0 on the LPI (i.e. experiencing high lived poverty).

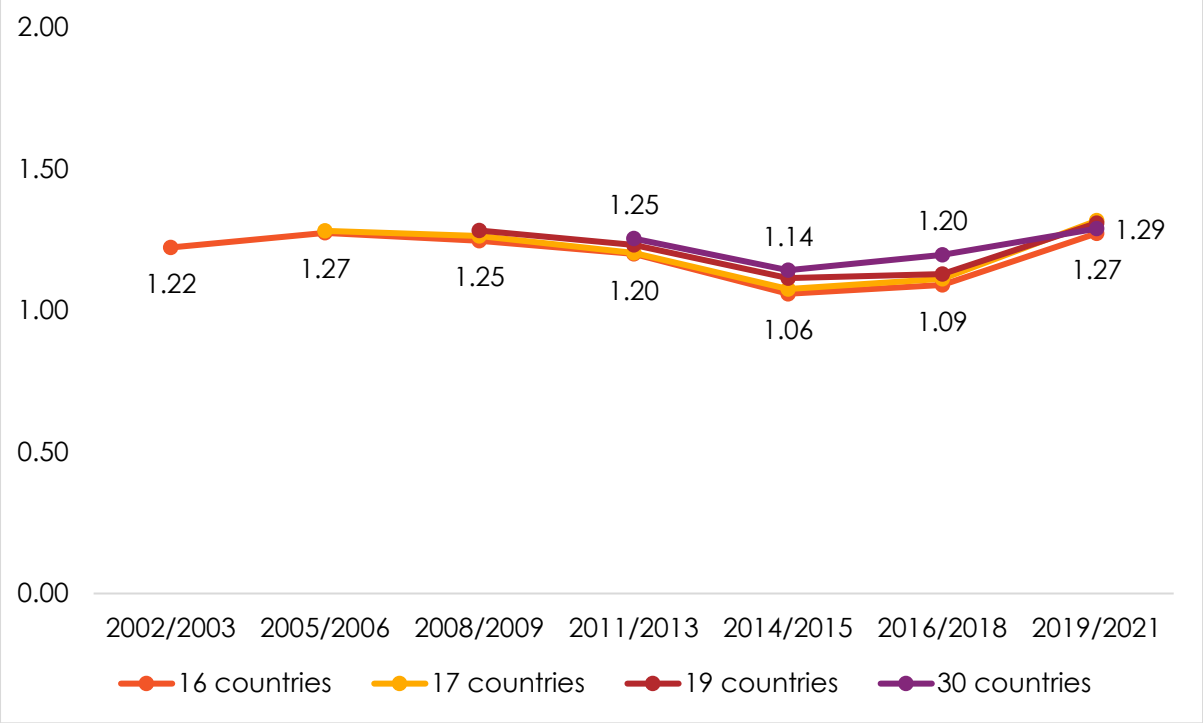
Resurgent lived poverty

Examining longer-term trends is complicated by the fact that Afrobarometer has expanded over time. Thus different sets of countries have to be examined over different time spans.

The longest trend can be observed across the 16 countries that have been included in each round of Afrobarometer since Round 2 (2002/2003).[5] For this group, average LPI scores peaked at 1.27 (on a scale running from 0 to 4) in 2005/2006 and then fell consistently to a low of 1.06 in 2014/2015 (Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). However, since then, these economies have given back almost all of their hard-earned gains. As of Round 8, their mean LPI score again stands at 1.27, precisely where it stood in 2005/2006 (Figure 6).

We can also examine larger sets of countries over shorter time frames, and observe the same trends. Across the largest group of 30 countries that have been included since 2011/2013,[6] the average LPI score initially fell from 1.25 to 1.14 in 2014/2015 before climbing to 1.29 in 2019/2021.

Figure 6: LPI over time, various country samples (average index score) | up to 30 countries | 2002-2021



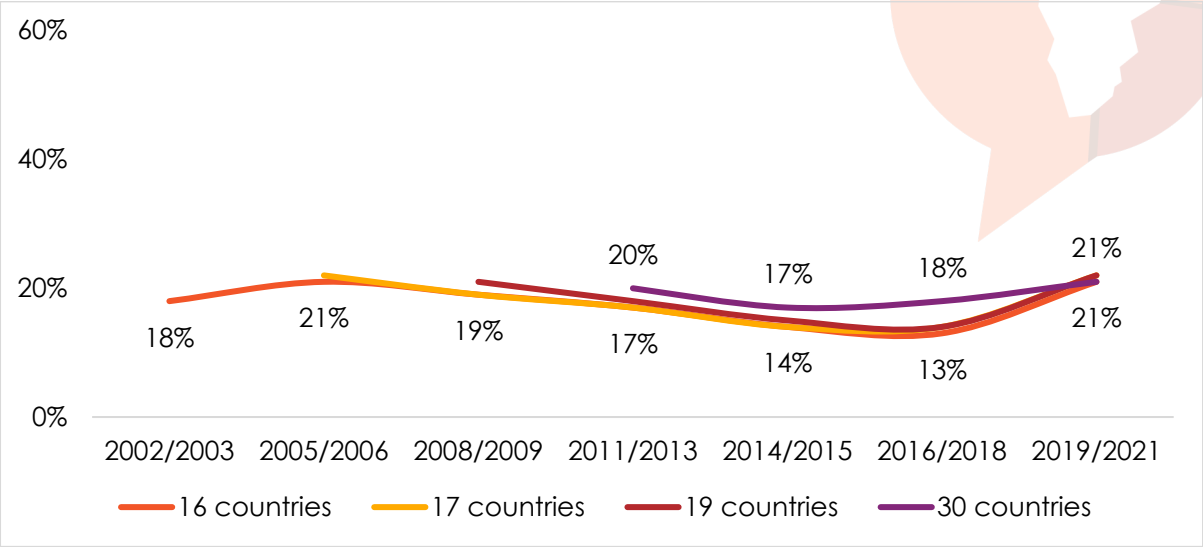
Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities).

The patterns are similar if we examine trends in the proportions who experienced high lived poverty, except that the best results were observed as recently as Round 7 (2016/2018), followed by a very sharp rise in the three-year period between Round 7 and Round 8. Across 16 countries, high lived poverty peaked at 21% in 2005/2006 and fell as low as 13% in 2016/2018, only to return to 21% – the same level recorded in 2005/2006 – just three years later (Figure 7).

[5] Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

[6] The 16 countries listed in Footnote 5, plus Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Tunisia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Togo.

Figure 7: High lived poverty over time, various country samples | up to 30 countries | 2002-2021

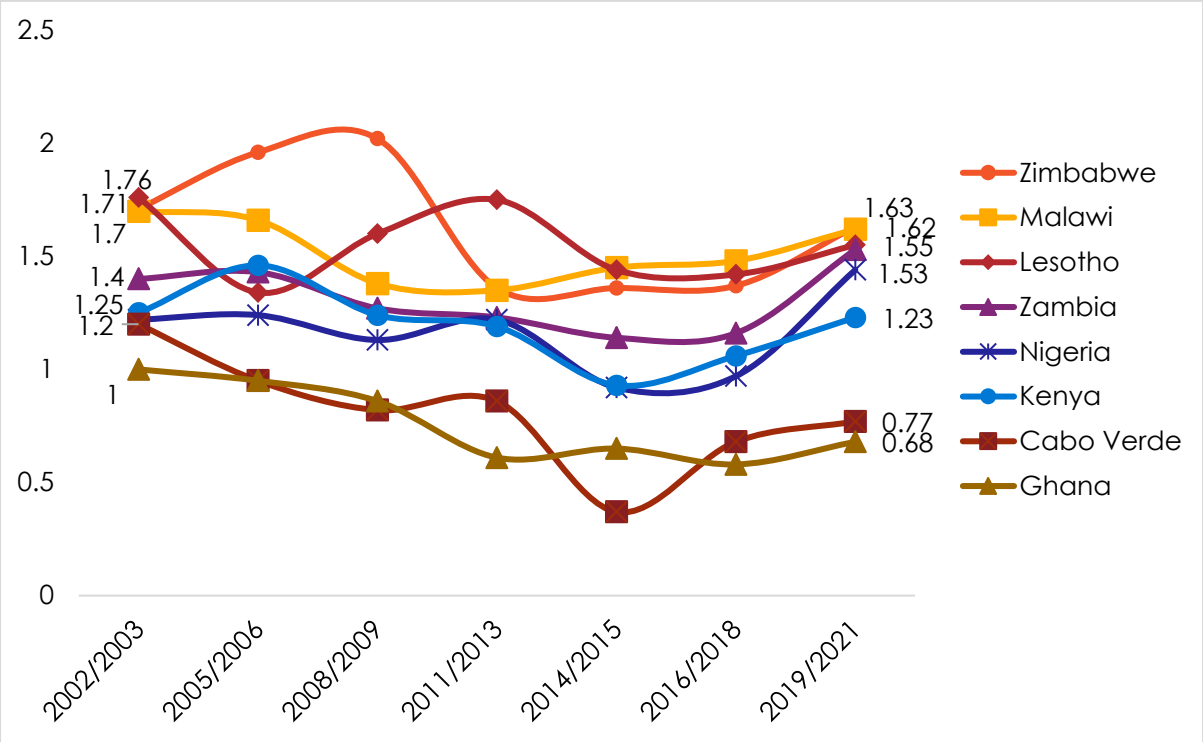


Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities). The figure shows the percentage of respondents with LPI scores above 2.0 (i.e. experiencing high lived poverty).

Dashed hopes: Lived poverty reduction in specific countries?

In our last report (Mattes, 2020), we identified a set of nine countries that had exhibited real, consistent decreases in lived poverty over at least the four previous surveys. However, once we include the 2019/2021 results, we find that compared to 2016/2018, with the exception of Burkina Faso, poverty has now risen in each case (Figure 8).

Figure 8: An end to long-term decreases in LPI scores | 8 countries | 2002-2021



Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities).

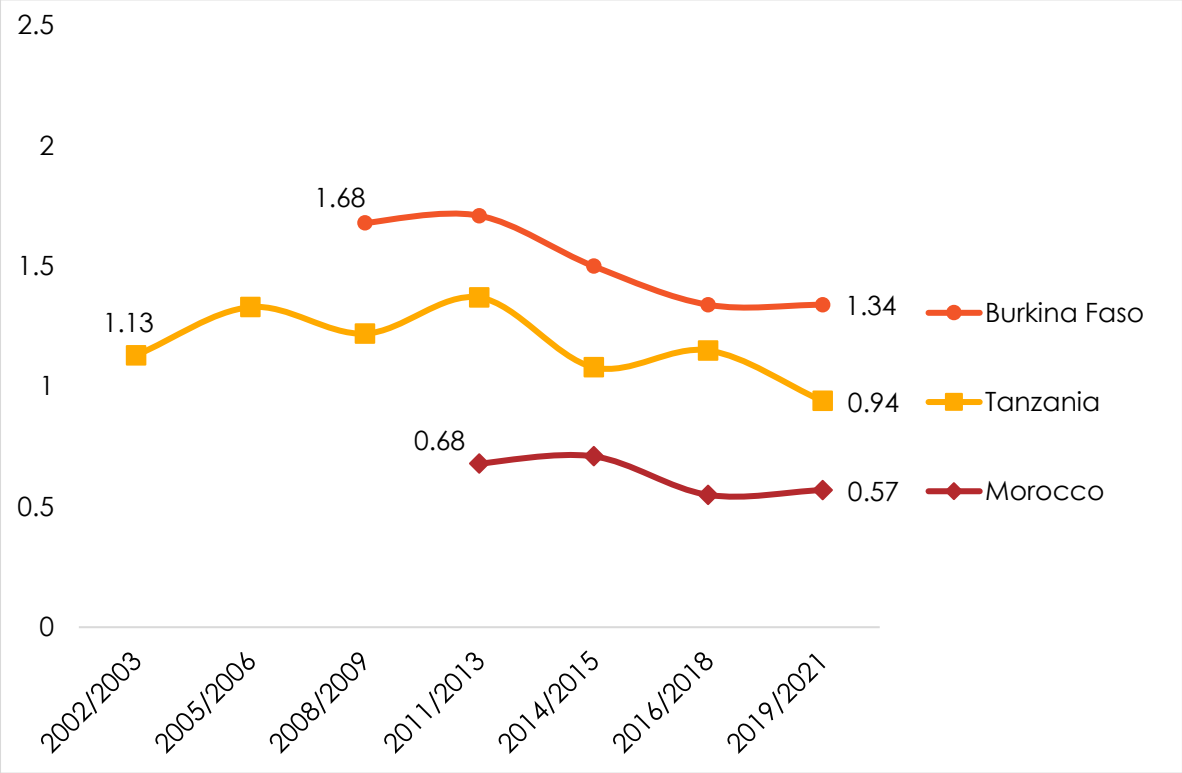
In only three countries – Tanzania, Burkina Faso, and Morocco – do we find sustained lived-poverty reduction compared to our first measurements (Figure 9). The more positive patterns in these countries may reflect government and donor investment in food security.

For example, in Tanzania, improved service delivery and social safety net programmes such as the Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF) and Productive Social Safety Nets (PSSN) may have contributed to these trends (Rosas et al., 2019). In 2019, the World Bank reclassified Tanzania from "low income" to "lower-middle income" country status (Battaile, 2020).

In Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world, innovations in agriculture that aim to "regreen" the Sahel may be showing results, reportedly helping 500,000 Burkinabè to become food secure (Eckas, 2020). At the same time, significant proportions of the population have increasingly come under attack by non-state armed groups. This has fuelled a humanitarian crisis and created the Sahel's largest displaced population – challenges that could undermine the country's gains (ReliefWeb, 2022).

Morocco, meanwhile, benefited from large increases in development assistance over the course of the decade, with inflows more than doubling from $940 million in aid in 2010 to a peak of $2.55 billion in 2017 (TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022), which may help to explain the modest observed decrease in poverty (European Court of Auditors, 2019).

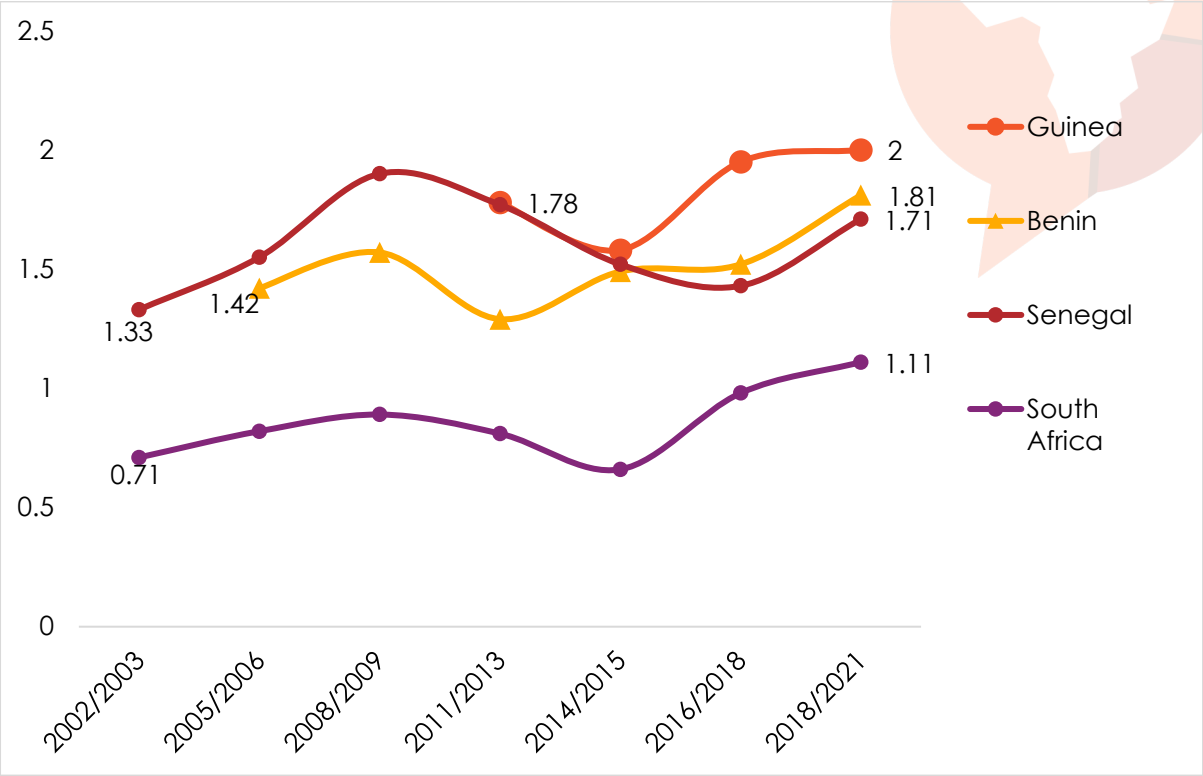
Figure 9: Sustained decreases in LPI scores | 3 countries | 2002-2021



Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities).

Finally, in four countries – Guinea, Benin, Senegal, and South Africa – lived poverty has, on average, increased over the last 10-20 years, and in all cases is now higher than when it was first measured by Afrobarometer (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Long-term increases in LPI scores | 4 countries | 2002-2021



Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of five basic necessities on a scale of 0 (no deprivation) to 4 (constant absence of all basic necessities).

Poverty escalation: Driving trends?

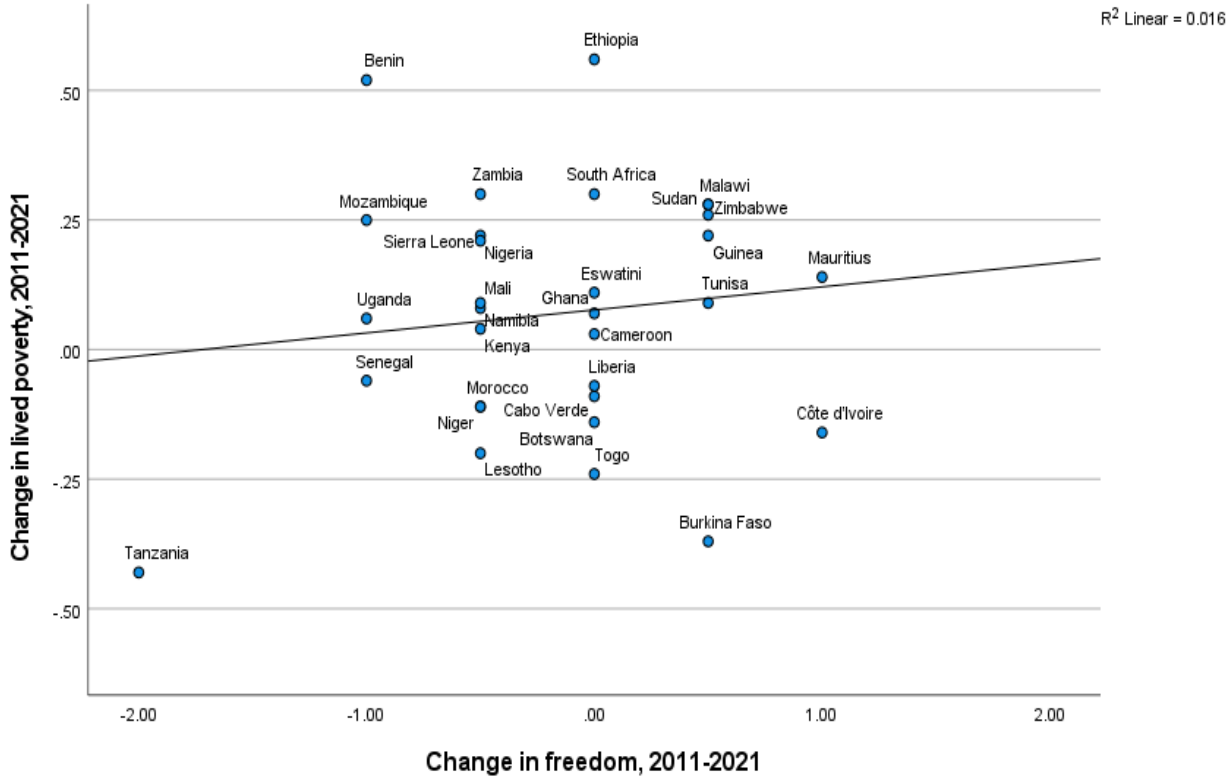
We know that there are several important country-, local-, and individual-level factors that consistently correlate with individual levels of poverty at any given point in time. In Round 7, for instance, we found that the most important predictors of individual levels of lived poverty were the length of time the country had sustained democratic rule and the quality of local service-delivery infrastructure (such as the presence and quality of water and electricity grids and good roads), as well as individual characteristics such as gender, age, education, occupation, and employment (Mattes, 2020). Most of these factors, however, are relatively fixed and thus cannot account for significant and relatively rapid national shifts in individual well-being.

Extent of democracy

One factor that has shifted around the world recently is the extent of democracy. Various projects that track the level and quality of democracy across countries agree that we are now in a "reverse wave of democracy" (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022) or a period of "autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) in which the extent of democratic regression outstrips the extent of democratic progress around the world. Africa has not been immune to these trends, with significant retrograde movements of democracy in places such as Benin, Senegal, Tanzania, Mozambique, and, up until its recent election, Zambia.

In order to test whether negative trends in democracy have anything to do with recent increases in lived poverty, we calculate the difference in Freedom House (2022) "Status of Freedom" scores at the time of our Round 5 and Round 8 surveys and examine how these trends correlate with the resurgence in lived poverty. We find no clear pattern (Pearson's r=.125, p=.503) (Figure 11). Even when we remove Tanzania, the clear outlier, the overall relationship is still statistically insignificant.

Figure 11: Poverty reduction and trends in the quality of democracy | 30 countries | 2011-2021



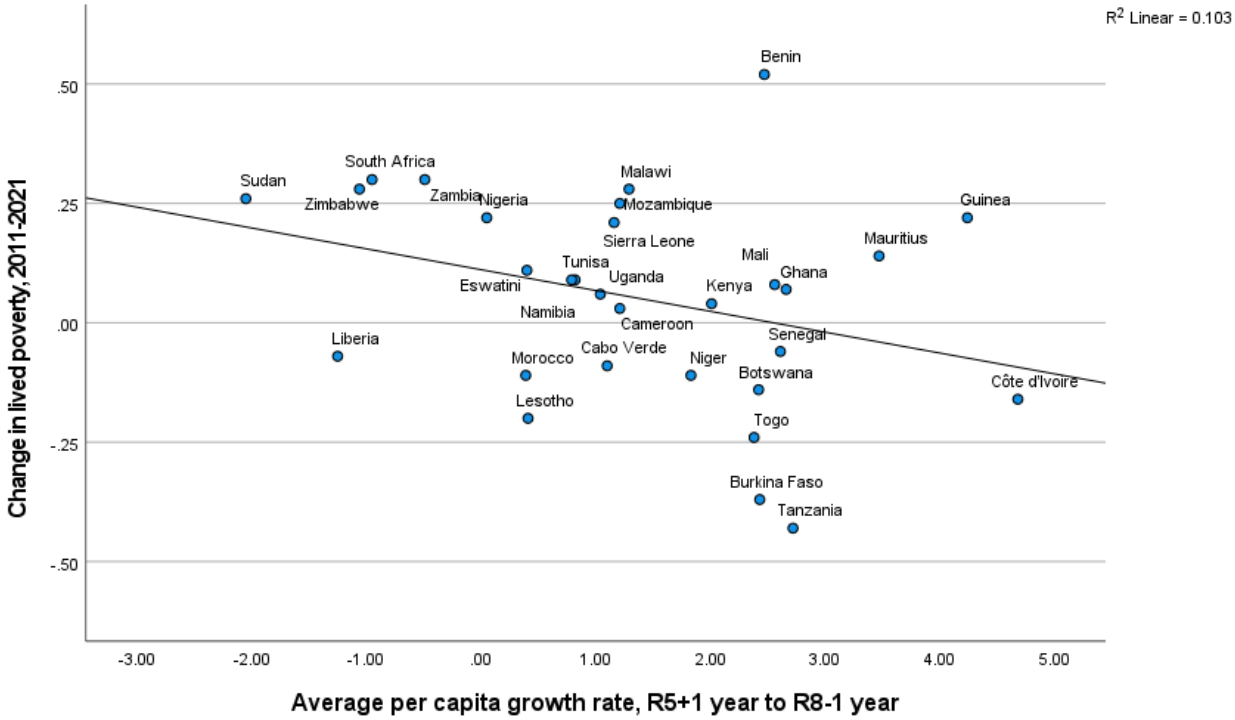
Economic growth

Another factor that has changed across Africa is the overall rate of economic growth, which began to slow in 2014, decelerated sharply in 2016, and turned to economic contraction in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the continent's worst year of economic performance on record (Selassie & Hakobyan, 2021; Macrotrends, 2022). Countries dependent on resource extraction were particularly hard hit. For example, in Zambia, falling prices for copper, a key export commodity, resulted in falling production (Hill & Mitimingi, 2022) and a consequent plunge in per-capita income. The country has been reclassified by the World Bank (2021) from a lower-middle to a low income country.

In order to examine whether national-level growth paths are related to trends in lived poverty, we compare changes in LPI to the average annual rate of growth in GDP per capita from one year after the Round 5 survey to one year before the Round 8 survey. We observe that countries that experienced economic contraction, such as Sudan, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Zambia, were also more likely to report increases in lived poverty (Pearson's r=-.321, p=.08) (Figure 12). Similarly, countries that had higher rates of growth over the period, such as Togo, Burkina Faso, and Tanzania, tended to experience decreases in lived poverty.

But the relationship is far from perfect, and many countries do not fit the pattern, especially Benin, which had an average growth rate of more than 2% during this period yet saw the highest increases in poverty in this sample.

Figure 12: Lived poverty trends and GDP per capita growth | 30 countries | 2011-2021



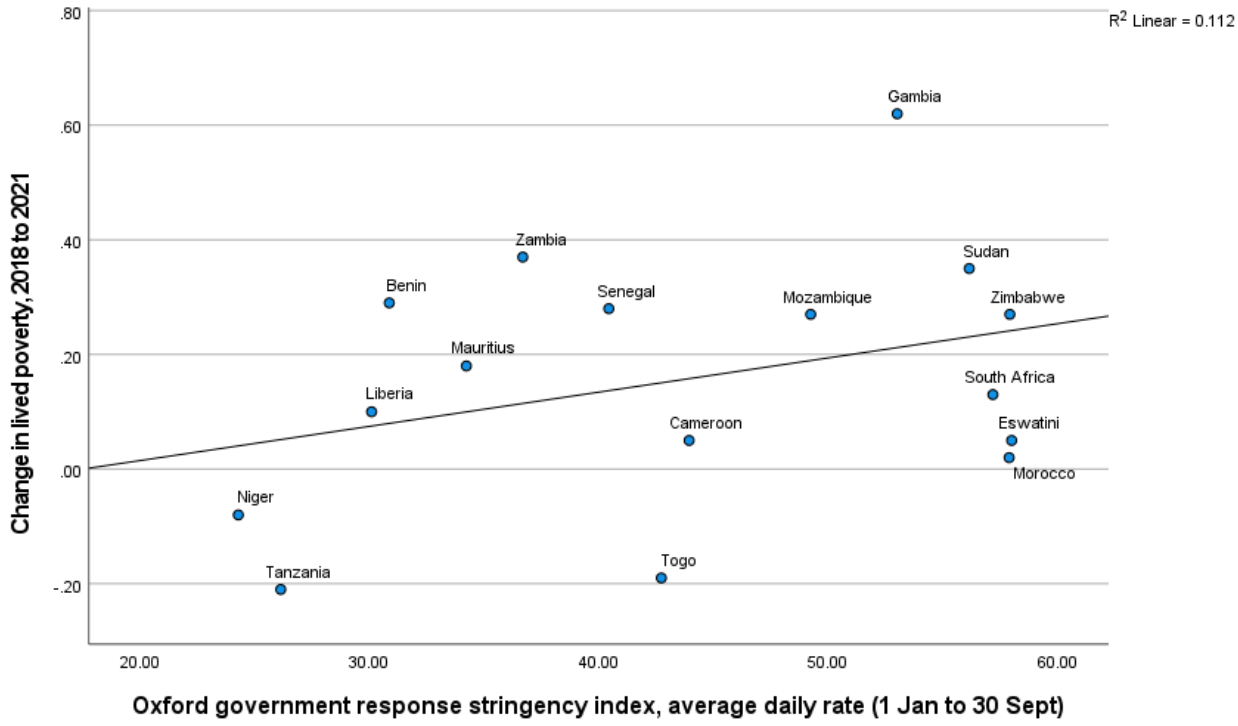
As noted above, while economic growth had begun to slow in 2014, economies across the continent tended to experience sharp contraction in 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even without government-mandated mitigation policies, economic activity would have been affected due to individual countries' decisions to limit social exposure. However, government orders closing borders, restricting domestic travel, closing businesses and schools, and even ordering people to stay indoors are likely to have had much more far-reacting effects on trade, sales, employment, and personal income and in turn limited people's ability to access other amenities, such as clean water and cooking fuel. The International Energy Agency (IEA), for instance, notes that with few exceptions (such as Nigeria), African governments were unable to intervene to maintain affordability for consumers, bringing about a decrease in access to electricity in sub-Saharan Africa of about 4 percentage points compared to pre-pandemic levels (Cozzi, Wetzel, Tonolo, & Hyppolite, 2022). The IEA estimates that 15 million people who had recently gained access to electricity could no longer afford it. Thus a number of organisations, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Bank, predicted massive increases in the number of people cut off from basic services and sliding into income poverty (UNCTAD, 2021; Lakner, Yonzan, Mahler, Castaneda Aguilar, & Wu, 2021).

On its face, however, the evidence at hand does not support the argument that COVID-19, on its own, significantly increased lived poverty. Of the 16 countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in Round 7 and again in Round 8 *before* the COVID-19 lockdowns, lived poverty increased by an average of 0.14 points. But in the 16 countries surveyed in Round 7 that were then surveyed in Round 8 *after* the initial COVID-19 lockdowns, lived poverty increased by an almost identical average of 0.16 points.

But we do have evidence that the specific nature of national COVID-19 response and mitigation strategies may have had a significant impact on lived poverty. First, for countries where Afrobarometer conducted Round 8 surveys after the first wave of COVID-19, we examine data collected by researchers at Oxford University that measure the overall stringency of the national response across eight dimensions (closure of (1) schools, (2) public transport, and (3) workplaces; (4) cancellation of public events; (5) restrictions on the size of

gatherings; restrictions on (6) domestic and (7) international movement; and (8) requirements to stay at home) for each country for the period of 1 January-30 September 2020 (Hale et al., 2020). We observe a modest trend of countries whose governments imposed more stringent responses for longer periods of time experiencing larger increases in lived poverty (Pearson's r=0.335) (Figure 13). However, due to the wide spread of countries around the prediction line, the estimate is not statistically significant (p=.204).

Figure 13: Lived poverty trends and stringency of national COVID-19 response | 16 countries | 2016-2021



We can also test the impacts based on respondents' own assessments of how they actually experienced lockdowns, as expressed in responses to a set of questions included in the post-COVID-onset Afrobarometer surveys. For instance, in Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Eswatini, at least 45% of respondents said they lost income or employment due to COVID-19, while in Niger, Benin, and Sudan, the figure was less than 20%. However, the proportion of people who said they lost income is not related to overall shifts in poverty in these countries between Round 7 and Round 8.

But another question probed people's ability to conform to national lockdown measures, asking respondents whether they found it easy or difficult to comply. At one end of the spectrum, more than 50% of Zimbabweans said it was "very difficult," while at the other extreme, fewer than 15% in Togo and Niger said the same. On this measure, we observe a strong relationship between the reported difficulty of complying with lockdowns and trends in both the aggregate Lived Poverty Index (r=.676, p=.011) (Figure 14) and the specific proportions who experienced high lived poverty (r=.734, p=.004) (Figure 15).[7] Increases in average lived poverty, and especially trends in the proportion experiencing high lived poverty, were consistently larger where more people told interviewers they found it "very difficult" to comply with the COVID-19 restrictions.[8]

[7] This question was asked in only 13 of the 16 post-COVID-onset Round 8 surveys.

[8] It is also possible that the relationship runs in the opposite direction, i.e. increasing poverty making it more difficult for respondents to cope with government lockdown policies.

Figure 14: Lived poverty trends and individual difficulty of lockdown compliance | 13 countries | 2016-2021

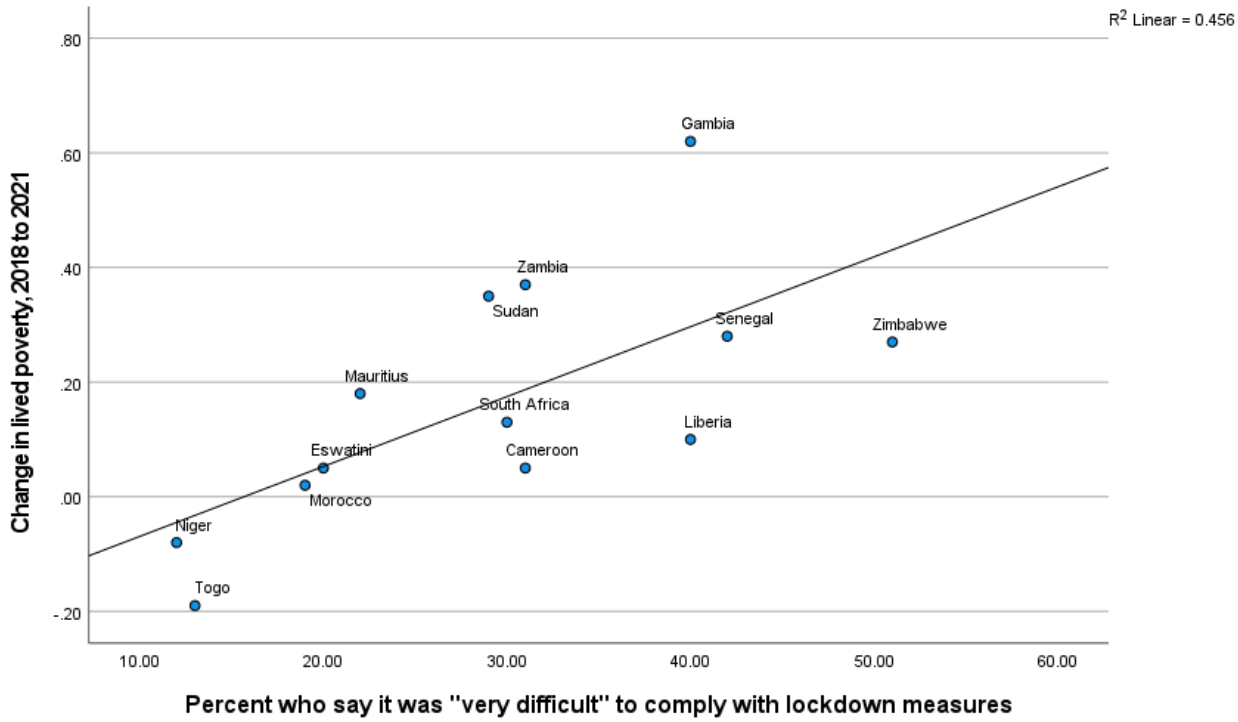
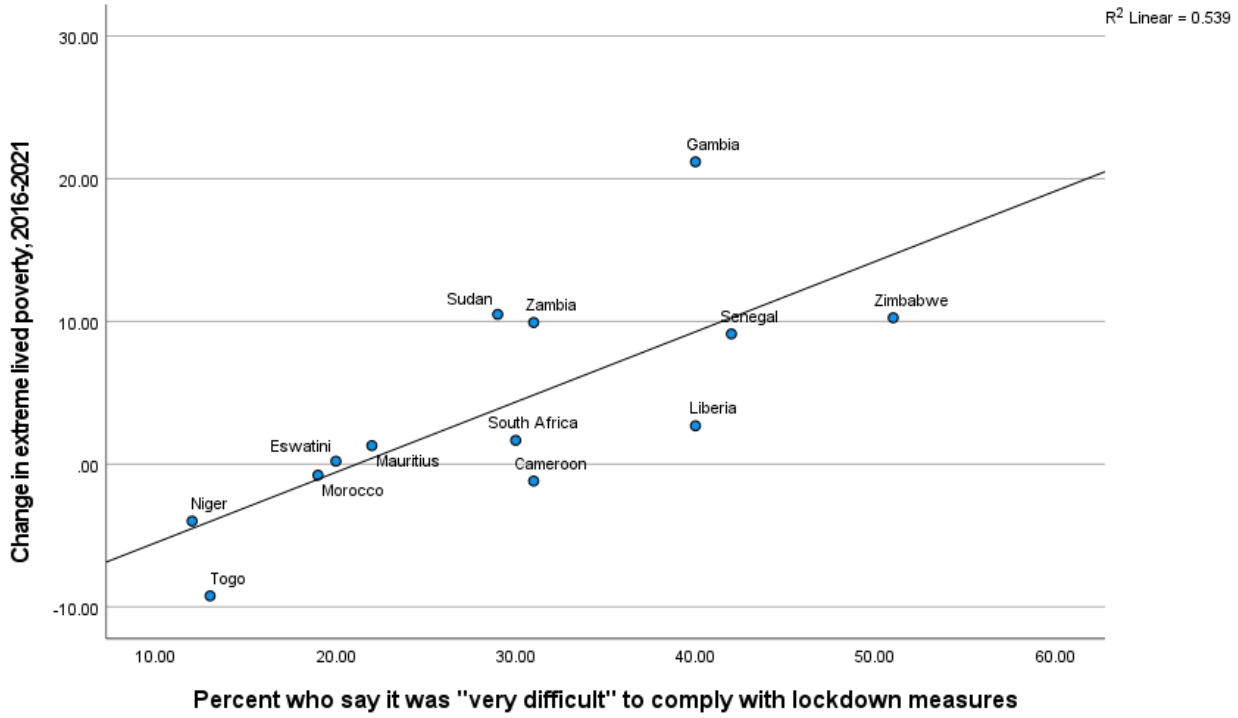


Figure 15: High lived poverty trends and individual difficulty of lockdown compliance | 13 countries | 2016-2021



Conclusions

Increasing numbers of Africans are going without basic life necessities on a regular basis. While living standards across Africa improved steadily between 2005 and 2015, that trend has clearly reversed: By our measure of lived poverty, most countries surveyed by Afrobarometer have lost the gains they achieved in the early 21st century.

Our analyses provide some evidence for two likely drivers of increasing lived poverty: the economic contraction of the past six years exacerbated by stringent government restrictions after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, increases in national levels of lived poverty tend to be largest in countries where the economy has stagnated or contracted and where government responses to the pandemic included the most severe restrictions.

While it is possible that increasing poverty is what made it difficult for people to comply with lockdown measures, we think it is more plausible that people's assessments of their difficulties are telling us both about how government requirements were experienced on the ground and about how appropriate these requirements were given the social and economic situation of ordinary people in that country. Thus global macroeconomic contraction did not, according to our analysis of the data, drive up lived poverty to the same extent as stringent restrictions on microeconomic activity. As such, programmes geared toward poverty alleviation might yield greater success if aimed at the micro or individual level by returning agency to ordinary Africans.

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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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov.-Dec. 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov.-Dec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	Dec. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	Sept.-Oct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov.-Dec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct.-Dec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov.-Dec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct.-Nov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan.-Feb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Sudan	Feb.-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	Feb.-March 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Togo	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept.-Oct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov.-Dec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is 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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