

How we know what people think

EDITOR'S NOTE: *We've worked with Afrobarometer for nearly two years. As the most trusted source of public attitude data across this continent, they have allowed us to tell you what people are thinking on issues ranging from corruption to healthcare and climate change. And we can personally vouch for the quality of their data: our news editor cut her teeth doing Afrobarometer surveys for them in Uganda. This week, the Afrobarometer team is meeting in Ghana to plan its tenth round of surveys, and we asked them to explain to us exactly how they collect their information, and what makes it reliable.*

Eight in 10 Gambians (79%) say the country is heading in the wrong direction. Only 46% of Angolans have heard of climate change. In Malawi, 66% of citizens – two thirds – think corruption increased last year.

Says who?

Says Afrobarometer.

Who's that?

Afrobarometer is an African-led network of researchers in more than 35 countries on the continent who conduct public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, quality of life, and related issues. We were created in 1999 by three professors who were tired of hearing self-appointed “experts” (and self-serving leaders) claim to speak on behalf of “the people”.

Our motto is: “Let the people have a say.” And our vision is “a world in which Africa’s development is anchored in the realities and aspirations of its people”.

So our teams travel to every corner of their countries – by car or bus, by canoe,

by motorcycle, by horse, on foot. Once we had to rebuild a washed-out bridge.

The teams randomly select 1,200 to 2,400 people in their country and interview them face to face about their personal realities and aspirations. The interview, lasting an hour or more, is conducted in the language of the respondent’s choice.

We use the same questionnaire in every



All illustrations:
Roland Polman

country, so we can compare attitudes and experiences across the continent. And we repeat the surveys on a two-year cycle so we can track changes over time. We started with 12 countries in 1999, and are now wrapping up our ninth survey round, covering 39 countries – and planning our tenth.

We want people to use our data to make – and demand – good choices for Africa’s development, and to hold their governments accountable. That’s the whole point. And we work hard to nurture the next generation of researchers, as well as data-savvy activists, legislators, and journalists.

We share the results as widely as we can – in briefings and webinars, papers, blogs, social media posts, and more – so that African voices are heard in local, continental, and global policy debates.

We also make all our data available for free. With a few clicks on our website, you can download a data set or do your own data analysis – any country, any survey

round, hundreds of questions. It’s easy, even if you don’t speak statistics.

How do they know?

If we want to report what a country’s citizens are thinking after interviewing just 1,200 of them, the critical principle is “randomness”. As we figure out whom to interview, the selections have to be random at every step in the process – like drawing numbers from a hat. Every person in the country – including you – must have an equal chance of being included in our sample.

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We begin by using census data to allocate our 1,200 slots across regions and across urban and rural areas in the same proportion as their share of the national population. So if the census shows that 10% of a country’s population live in the urban parts of Province Alpha, then we allocate 10% of our sample – 120 cases – to those same areas.

Next we randomly select the census enumeration areas that we will visit. Our national partner organisation sends the interview teams it has trained to every selected area in every region.

Once in the census areas, the team randomly selects a starting point, and all team members walk in different directions, counting households and choosing the



fifth and 10th ones they come to. They visit those households, make a list of adult household members, and – randomly! – select one. That person, and no one else, is our respondent. Meaning that a husband can't step in for his wife, or a father for his daughter. If the selected respondent can't or doesn't want to be interviewed, we start the process again, picking a new household and a new respondent.

This is important, because the quality of our sampling is one of the things that makes our results reliable, and that sets Afrobarometer apart from surveys that may only do interviews in areas that are urban or easy to reach, or that rely on self-selected online respondents.

It's why we can describe our results as “nationally representative”, meaning they represent the views of all people in the country within a few percentage points.

Why 1,200 respondents? Because statistical formulas tell us that's how many we need to talk to in order to get a result that's precise enough.

“Precise enough,” for us, is a survey margin of error of +/- three percentage points. Meaning that if we report that 79% of Gambians say their country is heading in the wrong direction, we can be pretty confident that if we asked *every* person in the country, we would find that between 76% and 82% (79+/-3) feel this way.

How confident? We report results at a 95% confidence level, meaning that if we repeated the survey 100 times with 100

different samples of 1,200 respondents, 95 times we would get a result between 76% and 82%.

We could make our results a little bit more precise if we interviewed a lot more people – and spent a lot more time and money. But samples of 1,200 are widely accepted as representing a good balance between precision and cost.

Afrobarometer's methods have been described as “the gold standard” for survey research in Africa.

So when we report “what the people have to say,” you – our readers – as well as governments, policy makers, activists, and other users can be confident that they reliably represent the views, experiences, and aspirations not just of our respondents – and certainly not of self-appointed “experts” – but of millions of ordinary Africans. ■



Source: Afrobarometer, a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.