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Amid economic gloom, few Malawians hold hope for improvement

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 782 | Eric Otu Beecham

Summary

The socio-economic landscape of Malawi presents a complex web of opportunities and challenges. The country is rich in potential, resources, culture, and human capital, yet its people have long grappled with poverty, unemployment, and limited access to basic services (World Bank, 2023; Chunga & Tsoka, 2022).

Exacerbated by the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and last year's deadly Cyclone Freddy, the country's economic woes are reflected in high inflation and shortages of petrol and foreign currency. The Malawian kwacha was devalued by 25% in May 2022 and again by 44% in November 2023. In November, President Lazarus Chakwera suspended all international travel for his government, including himself (Jegwa, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2022; World Bank, 2023; African Development Bank, 2023).

The International Monetary Fund (2023) has approved a U.S. \$175 million loan that "aims to support the authorities' commitment to restore macroeconomic stability, build a foundation for inclusive and sustainable growth, including to strengthen resilience to climate-related shocks, and address weaknesses in governance and institutions."

How do ordinary Malawians assess their country's persistent economic challenges?

Findings from Afrobarometer's 2022 survey show that citizens overwhelmingly see their government as failing on economic issues and believe that their country is going in the wrong direction. Few are optimistic that things will improve in the near future.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in April 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 were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

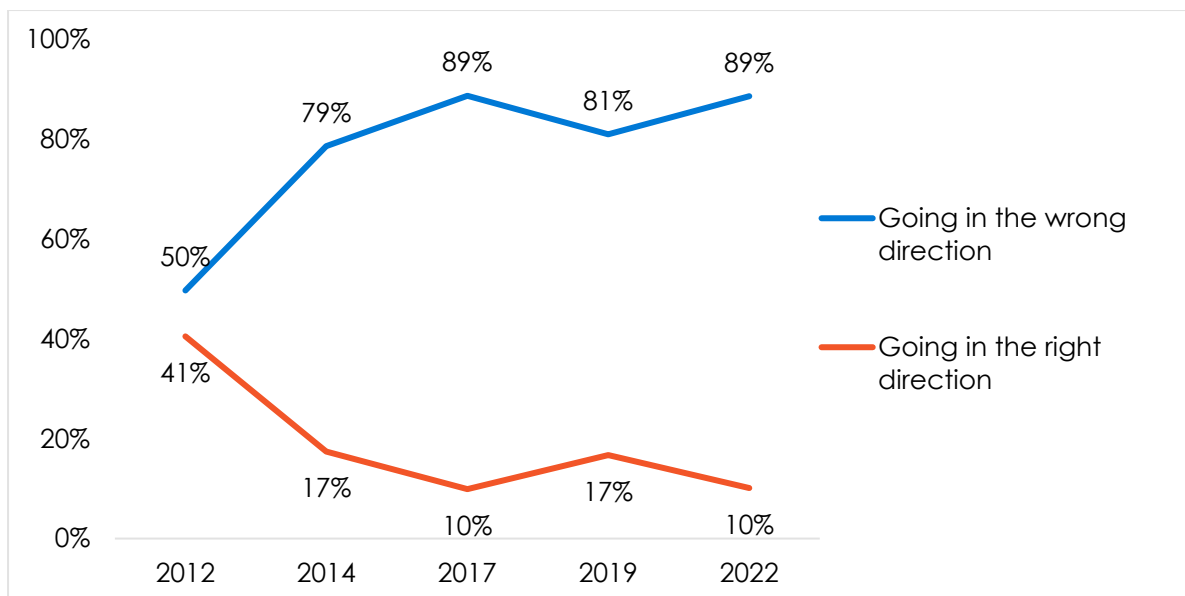
- Nearly nine out of 10 Malawians (89%) say the country is heading "in the wrong direction," a 39-percentage-point increase since 2012.

- Large majorities offer negative assessments of economic conditions: 85% describe the country's economic situation as "fairly bad" or "very bad," and 74% say the same about their personal living conditions.
- Looking ahead, Malawians are pessimistic about the country's economy: Only 16% think things will get better in 12 months' time, while 63% expect them to get worse.
- More than eight in 10 citizens say the government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on management of the economy (85%) and other key economic tasks.
- Management of the economy tops the list of most important problems that Malawians want their government to address.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of citizens say they went without a cash income "many times" or "always" during the previous year, and 35% frequently went without enough food.
- Almost four in 10 Malawians (37%) experienced high levels of lived poverty during the past year, while another 38% experienced moderate lived poverty.

Country's direction and economic conditions

Over the past decade, several administrations have witnessed a substantial deterioration in public sentiment regarding the overall direction of the country. Almost nine out of 10 Malawians (89%) say the country is going in the wrong direction, a 39-percentage-point increase since 2012. Only one in 10 (10%) see things going in the right direction (Figure 1).

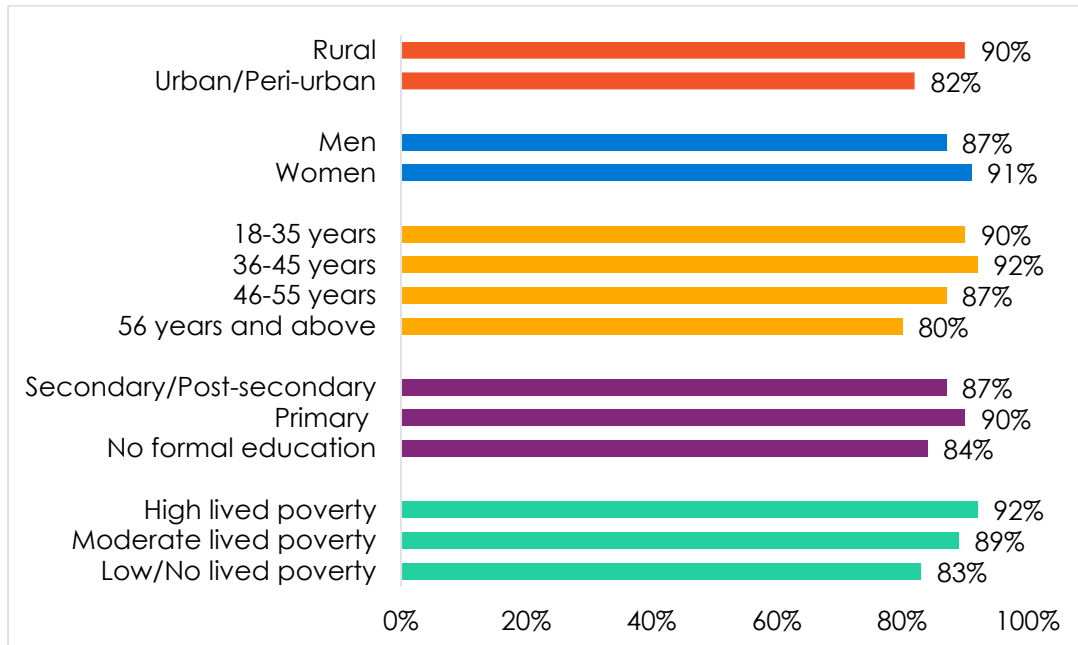
Figure 1: Direction of the country | Malawi | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Negative assessments of the country's direction are most common among rural residents (90%) and younger respondents (90%-92% of those aged 18-45) (Figure 2). They increase with respondents' experience of lived poverty, ranging from 83% of better-off citizens to 92% of the poorest.

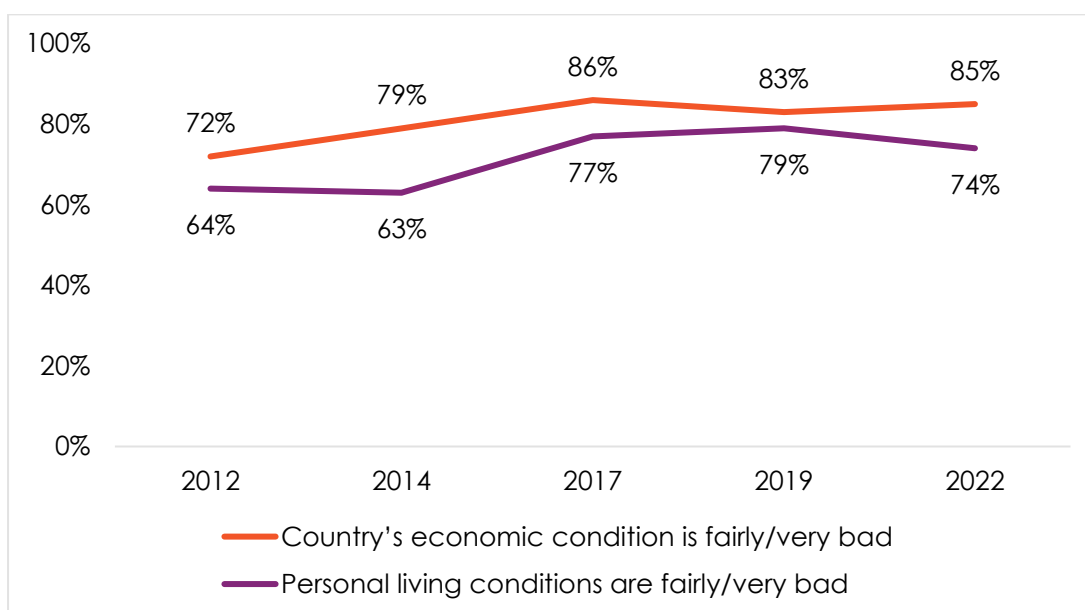
Figure 2: Country going in the wrong direction | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "in the wrong direction")

In line with this gloomy appraisal, large majorities describe both the country's economic condition (85%) and their personal living conditions (74%) as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 3). Both of these negative assessments have seen double-digit increases over the past decade.

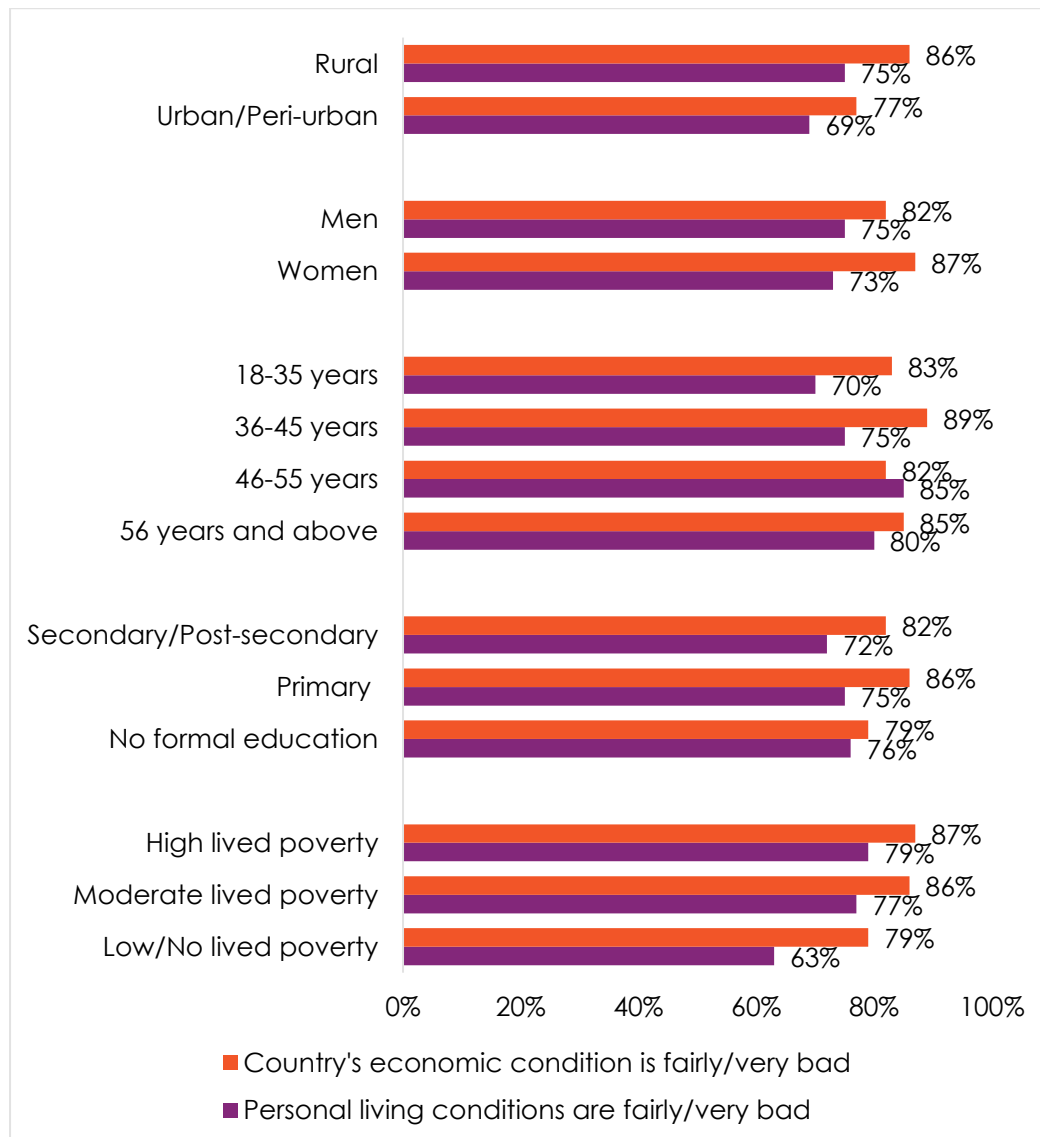
Figure 3: Negative assessments of economic conditions | Malawi | 2012-2022



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?

Negative assessments of the country's economic condition and personal living conditions are widespread across key demographic groups (Figure 4). Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to describe both as bad, as are poor respondents compared to their better-off counterparts. Younger citizens are less likely than their elders to see their personal living conditions as bad, but are just as likely to describe the national economy in negative terms.

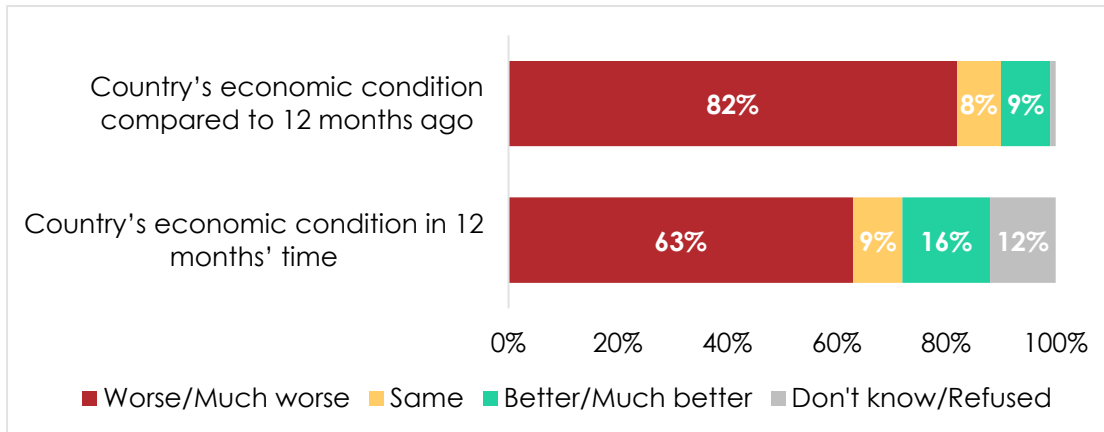
Figure 4: Negative assessments of economic conditions | by demographic group
 | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Most citizens (82%) say the country's economic condition has deteriorated over the past 12 months (Figure 5). Nor are Malawians optimistic when they look ahead: Only 16% think things will get better during the next year, while 63% expect them to get "worse" or "much worse."

Figure 5: Retrospective and prospective assessments of country's economic condition | Malawi | 2022



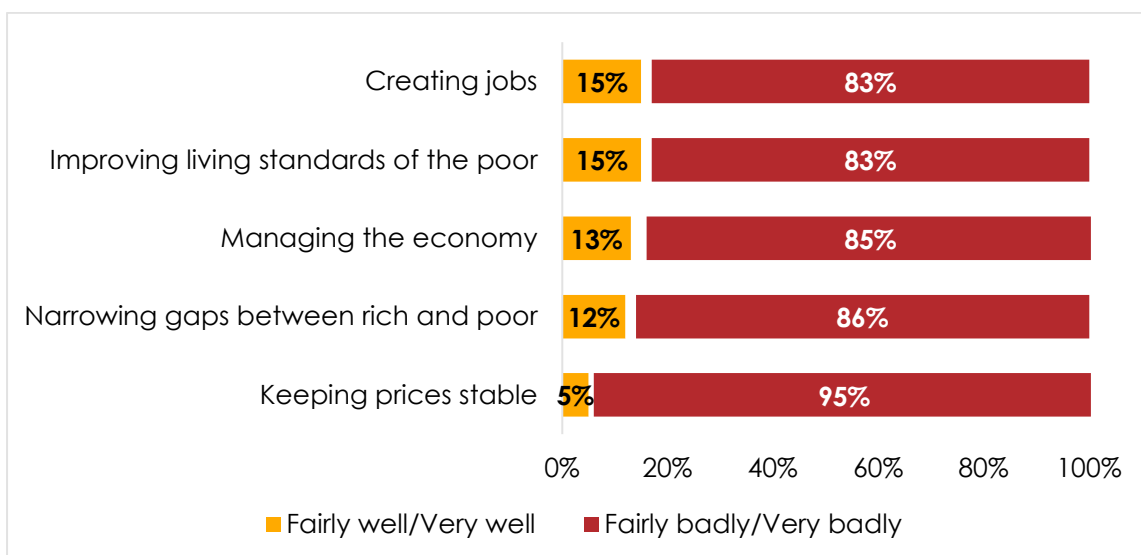
Respondents were asked: Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago? Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Assessment of the government's economic performance

Reflecting their dim views of the economy, Malawians overwhelmingly give their government poor marks on economic indicators. More than eight in 10 say the government has performed "fairly badly" or "very badly" on overall management of the economy (85%) as well as on keeping prices stable (95%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (86%), improving living standards of the poor (83%), and creating jobs (83%) (Figure 6).

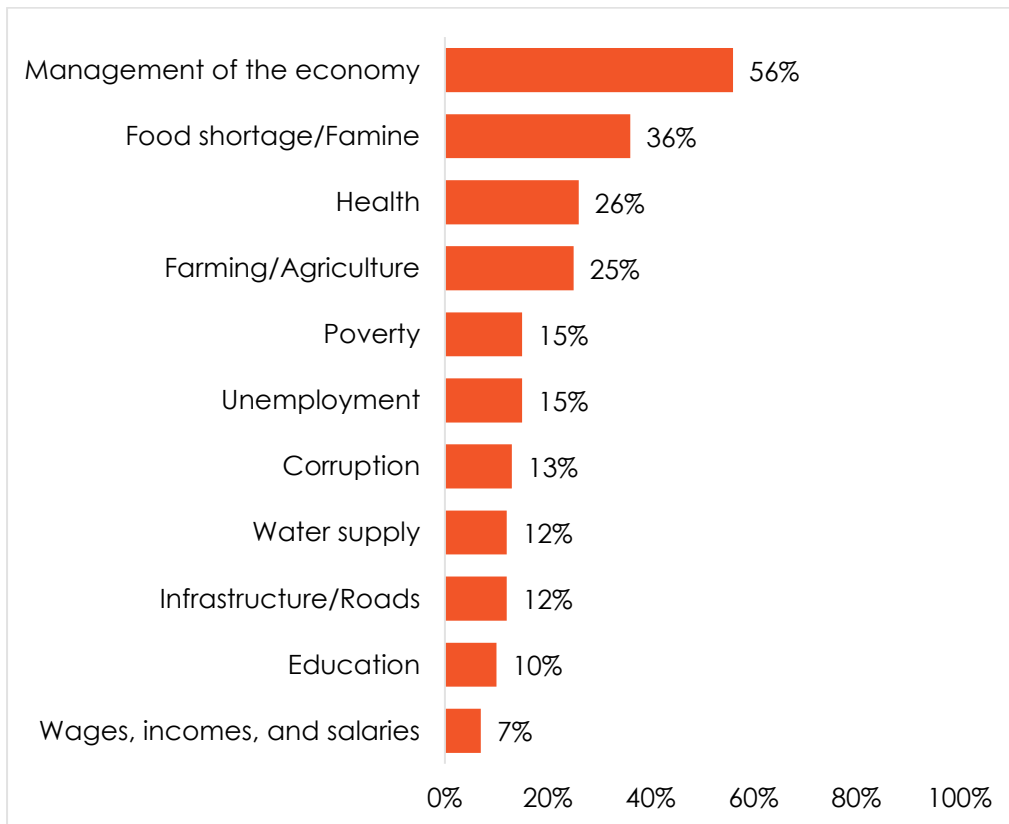
When asked what they consider the most important problems that the government should address, Malawians most frequently cite management of the economy (mentioned by 56% of respondents as one of up to three priorities) (Figure 7). Economic issues such as food insecurity (36%), poverty (15%), and unemployment (15%) also rank high on citizens' agenda for urgent government action.

Figure 6: Evaluation of government's economic performance | Malawi | 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?

Figure 7: Most important problems that government should address | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. The figure shows the % of respondents who cite each problem among their three responses.)*

Lack of basic necessities

Focusing in on the household level, how do ordinary Malawians experience these economic problems in their daily lives? Afrobarometer uses the experiential measure of “lived poverty” to assess deprivation based on the frequency with which households go without five basic life necessities: enough food, enough clean water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income.¹

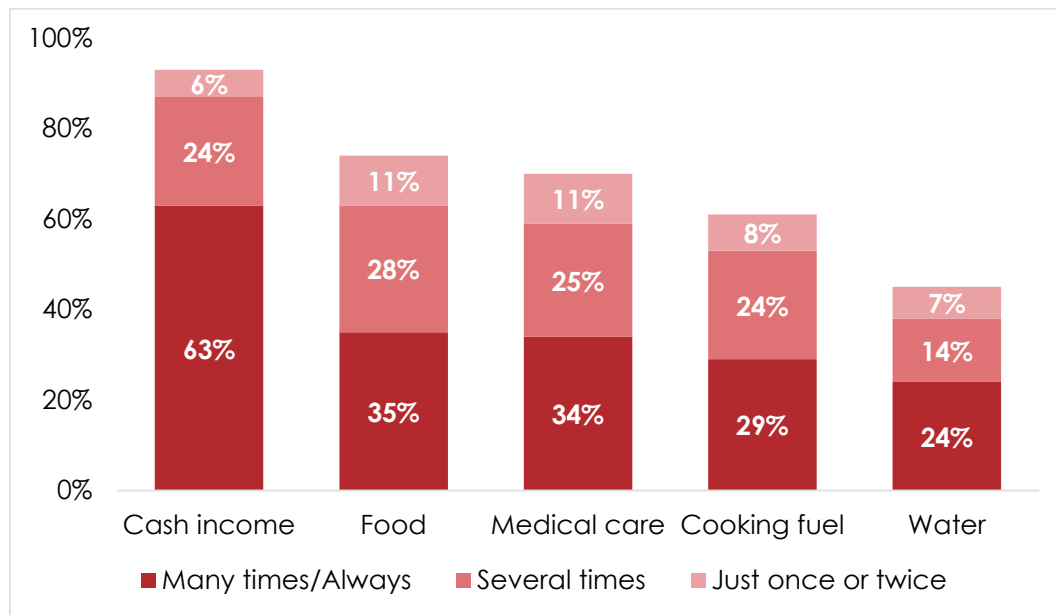
For Malawians, the most frequent unmet need is a cash income: More than nine in 10 respondents (93%) say they went without an income at least once during the previous year, including 63% who say this happened “many times” or “always” (Figure 8).

Almost three-fourths (73%)² experienced food shortages at least once, including 35% who frequently went without enough to eat. The same proportion often went without needed medical care (34%), while slightly fewer suffered frequent shortages of cooking fuel (29%) and clean water (24%).

¹ For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 35% “many times/always,” 28% “several times,” and 11% “just once or twice” sum to 73%).

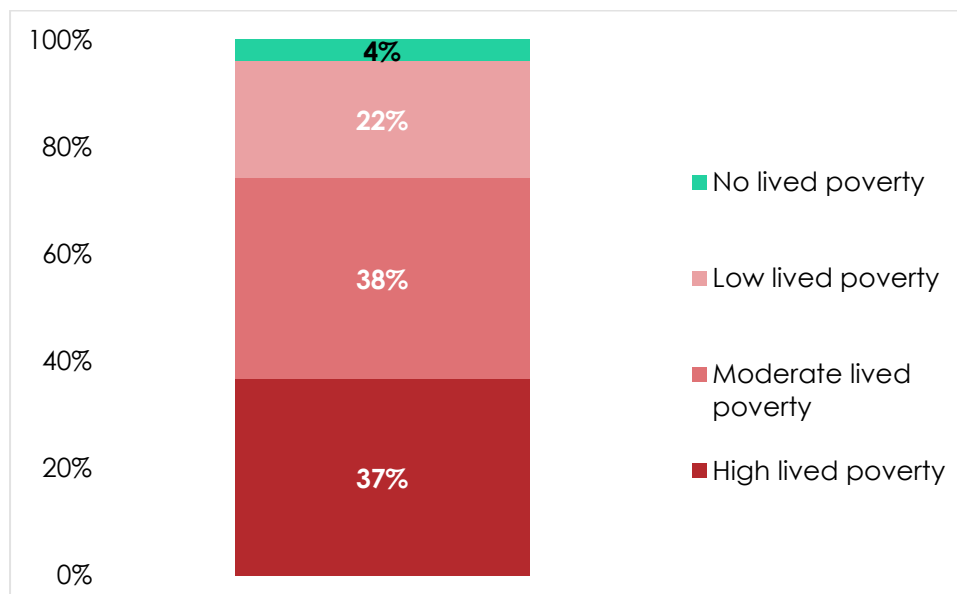
Figure 8: Lack of basic necessities | Malawi | 2022



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?

Calculating Lived Poverty Index scores by averaging responses regarding the lack of basic necessities, we see that in the year leading up to the survey, almost four in 10 Malawians (37%) experienced high lived poverty, while another 38% experienced moderate lived poverty. Only 4% of citizens were free of lived poverty, meaning they suffered no shortages of these five necessities (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Lived poverty levels | Malawi | 2022

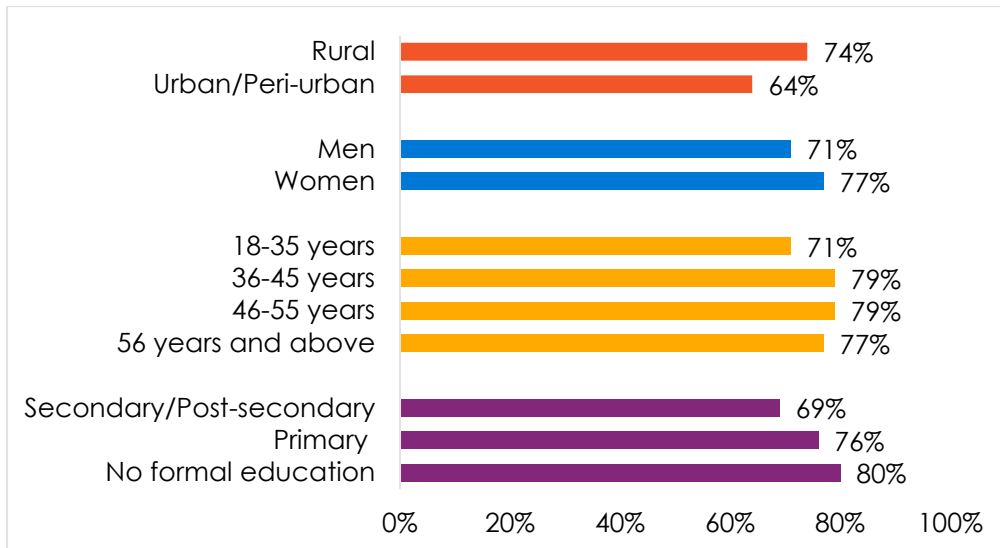


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

The experience of moderate or high lived poverty was particularly common among citizens with no formal education (80%), among women (77%), and among rural residents (74%) (Figure 10).

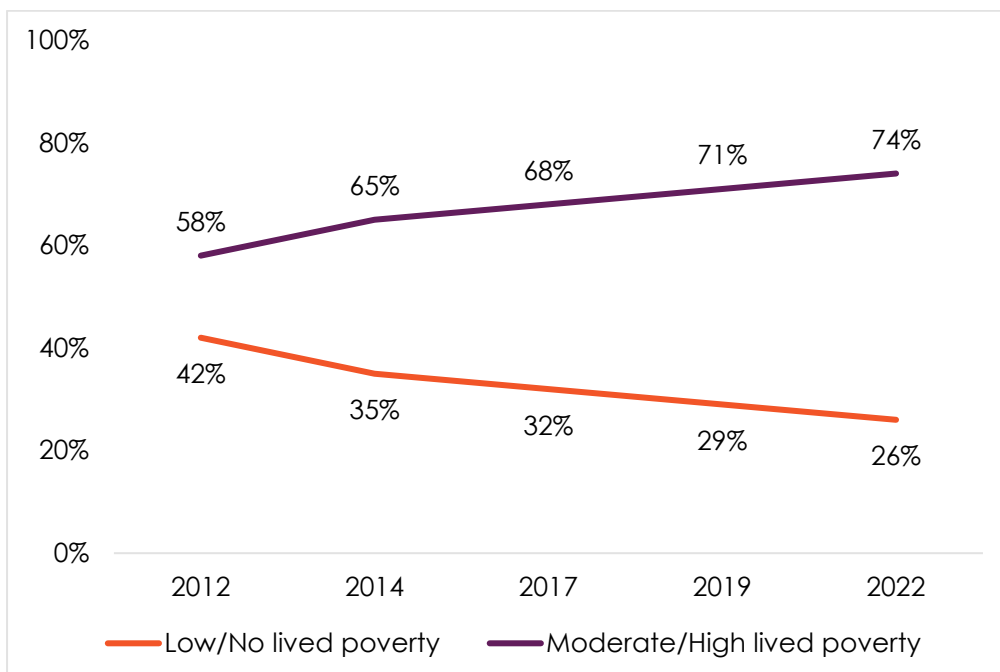
The share of Malawians experiencing moderate or high lived poverty has increased steadily over the past decade, gaining 16 percentage points since 2012 (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Moderate/High lived poverty | by demographic group | 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?

Figure 11: Lived poverty over time | Malawi | 2012-2022



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?

Conclusion

The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey reveals overwhelming dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the economy. Most Malawians express pessimism about the country's direction, and few are optimistic that things will get better anytime soon. As majorities of citizens continue to experience shortages of basic life necessities, economic concerns take center stage as their top priority for government action.

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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Eric Otu Beecham is a monitoring, evaluation, and learning assistant for Afrobarometer. Email: ebeecham@afrobarometer.org.

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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