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Africans' bleak views of economic conditions match their escalating experience of poverty

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 807 | Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Maakwe Cumanzala

Summary

The African continent has been navigating economic turbulence. Fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine, and rising U.S. interest rates, among other factors, have strained African economies already grappling with high public debt levels and constrained fiscal resources (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023). In the face of these challenges, Africa has demonstrated remarkable resilience, with projected average growth stabilising at 4.1% in 2023-2024, up from an estimated 3.8% in 2022 (African Development Bank, 2023).

Pan-Africa Profiles

But tightening global financial conditions, inflationary pressures, supply-chain disruptions, and the impacts of climate change pose threats to the continent's economic recovery. In addition, African countries continue to contend with a range of structural issues, from infrastructure deficits and growing insecurity to power shortages (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023). About 40% of the population still live below the poverty line (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2021), and unemployment rates remain high, particularly among youth (International Organisation of Employers, 2024).

Afrobarometer surveys in 39 African countries between late 2021 and mid-2023 show that public concerns about economic management have surged in recent years, placing the issue second only to unemployment among the top priorities that Africans want their government to address. Citizens offer increasingly gloomy appraisals of their country's economic condition and their personal living conditions, and fewer than half expect things to improve in the near future.

In growing numbers, Africans report going without basic necessities such as a cash income, medical care, food, and water. In most surveyed countries, majorities are experiencing moderate or high lived poverty, and citizens' ratings on key indicators of their government's economic performance are bleak and getting worse.

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. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with samples of 1,200-2,400 adults that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

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This 39-country analysis is based on 53,444 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). For more details on country-level findings, see country dispatches at www.afrobarometer.org.

Key findings

- On average across 39 countries surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, unemployment and management of the economy top the list of the most important problems that Africans want their government to address, along with health.
  - Across 31 countries surveyed consistently since 2014/2015, the proportion of citizens citing management of the economy among their top priorities has more than doubled.
- About two-thirds (65%) of citizens assess their country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad." More than half (52%) also hold gloomy views of their personal living conditions.
  - Both assessments have worsened significantly since 2014/2015.
  - Citizens are divided as to whether economic conditions will get better (40%) or worse (35%) over the next 12 months.
- Eight in 10 respondents (81%) say they or a family member went without a cash income at least once during the previous year, including 43% who did so "many times" or "always."
  - Two-thirds (65%) report having gone without medical care at least once, and about six in 10 suffered shortages of food (59%) and water (56%).
  - Six in 10 Africans (61%) experienced moderate or high lived poverty during the past year. Moderate-to-high lived poverty has been increasing and affected majorities in all but eight of 39 surveyed countries, including more than eight in 10 citizens in Congo-Brazzaville (86%), Mauritania (84%), Niger (84%), and Cameroon (81%).
- Only a quarter (26%) of Africans say their governments are doing "fairly well" or "very well" in managing the economy.
  - Even fewer give their governments passing marks for their efforts to improve the living standards of the poor (22%), create jobs (20%), narrow income gaps (16%), and keep prices stable (12%).

Policy priorities

Across 39 countries surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, two economic issues top the list of most important problems that citizens want their government to address: unemployment (cited by 33% of respondents) and management of the economy (tied with health at 29%) (Figure 1). In addition, 13% cite poverty and 6% mention wages as top priorities for government action.

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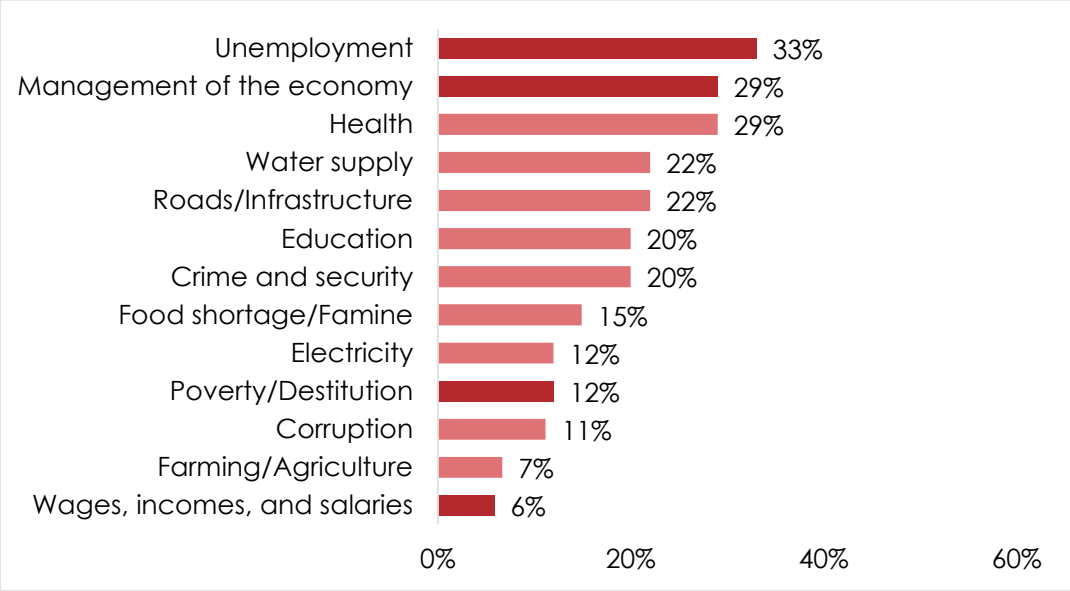
Figure 1: Most important problems | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)*

Unemployment consistently ranks at the top of Africans' concerns, reflecting the fact that, on average across 39 countries, about one-third (32%) of adults report that they are unemployed and looking for work (Figure 2). Three in 10 say they are employed either full time (20%) or part time (10%), while 38% are not in the job market. The only countries where half or more of citizens report being employed are Seychelles (67%), Tanzania (58%), Ghana (55%), Morocco (52%), and Ethiopia (50%), while respondents are most likely to be unemployed but looking in Angola (60%), São Tomé and Príncipe (53%), and Botswana (52%).

Management of the economy is a top policy priority for an overwhelming 92% of citizens in Tunisia (Figure 3), hit hard by escalating prices and stagnant wages (Guardian, 2023). Economic management is also a major concern for a majority of Sudanese (62%) and Malawians (56%). On the other hand, fewer than one in 10 citizens prioritise this issue in South Africa (6%), Lesotho (7%), Congo-Brazzaville (9%), Mozambique (9%), and Guinea (9%).

On average across 31 countries surveyed consistently between 2014 and 2023, the proportion of citizens who cite management of the economy as a top priority has more than doubled (from 12% to 30%) (Figure 4). Increases are particularly striking in Tunisia (a 63-percentage-point jump), Sudan (+36 points), Mauritius (+32 points), Zambia (+31 points), Sierra Leone (+31 points), Senegal (+31 points), and Malawi (+30 points). Liberia is the only country that has recorded a decrease (-8 points) on this indicator.

While African youth are far more concerned about unemployment than their older counterparts (Sanny, van Wyk-Khosa, & Asunka, 2023), management of the economy is an equal priority for all age groups (Figure 5). Concerns about economic management are particularly common among the economically well off (33% of those experiencing no lived poverty vs. 23% of those with high lived poverty[1]) and urban residents (33% vs. 26% among

[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. See Mattes and Patel (2022).

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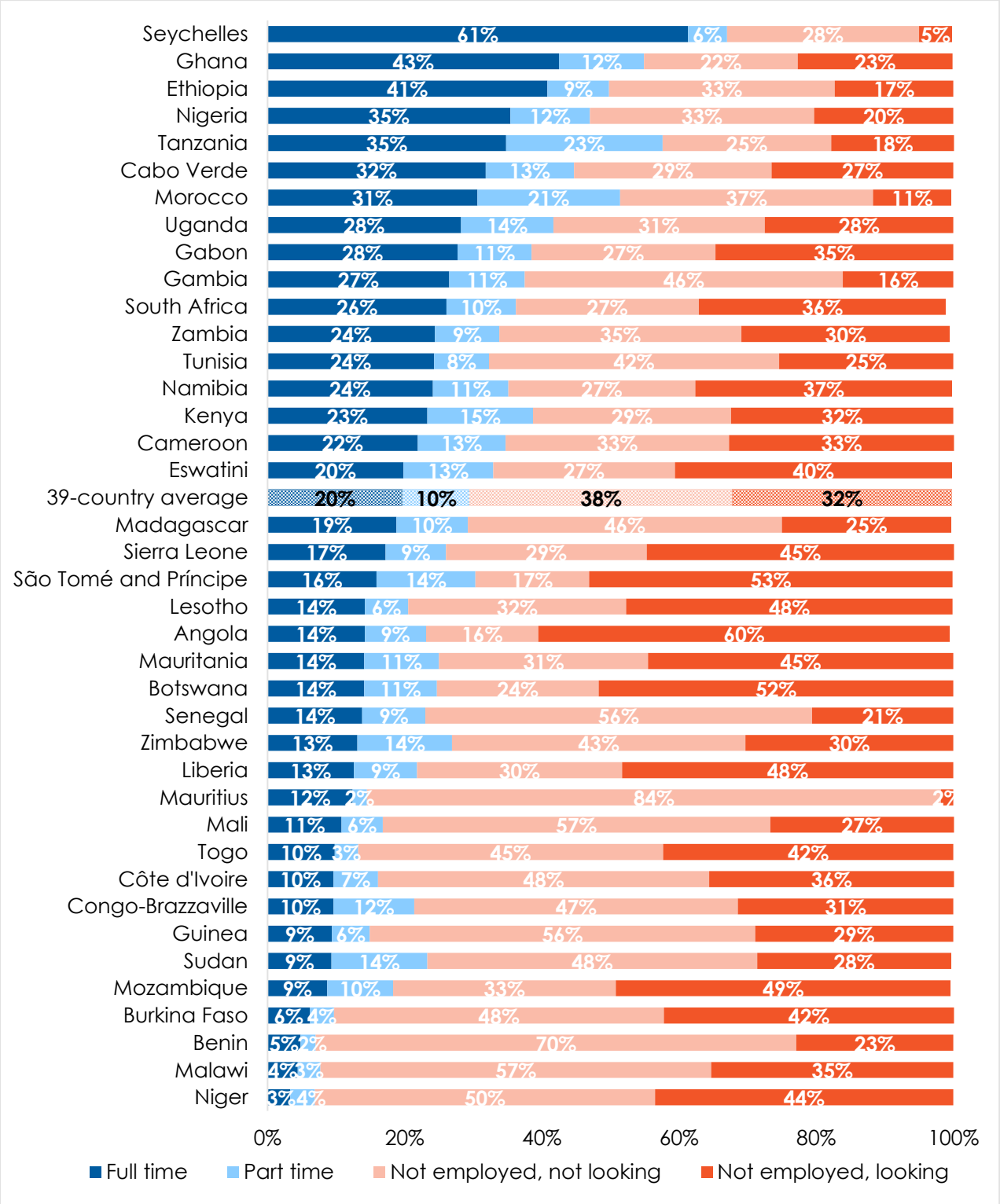
rural residents). They also increase with individuals' level of education, ranging from 24% of those with no formal schooling to 33% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

Figure 2: Employment status | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job?*

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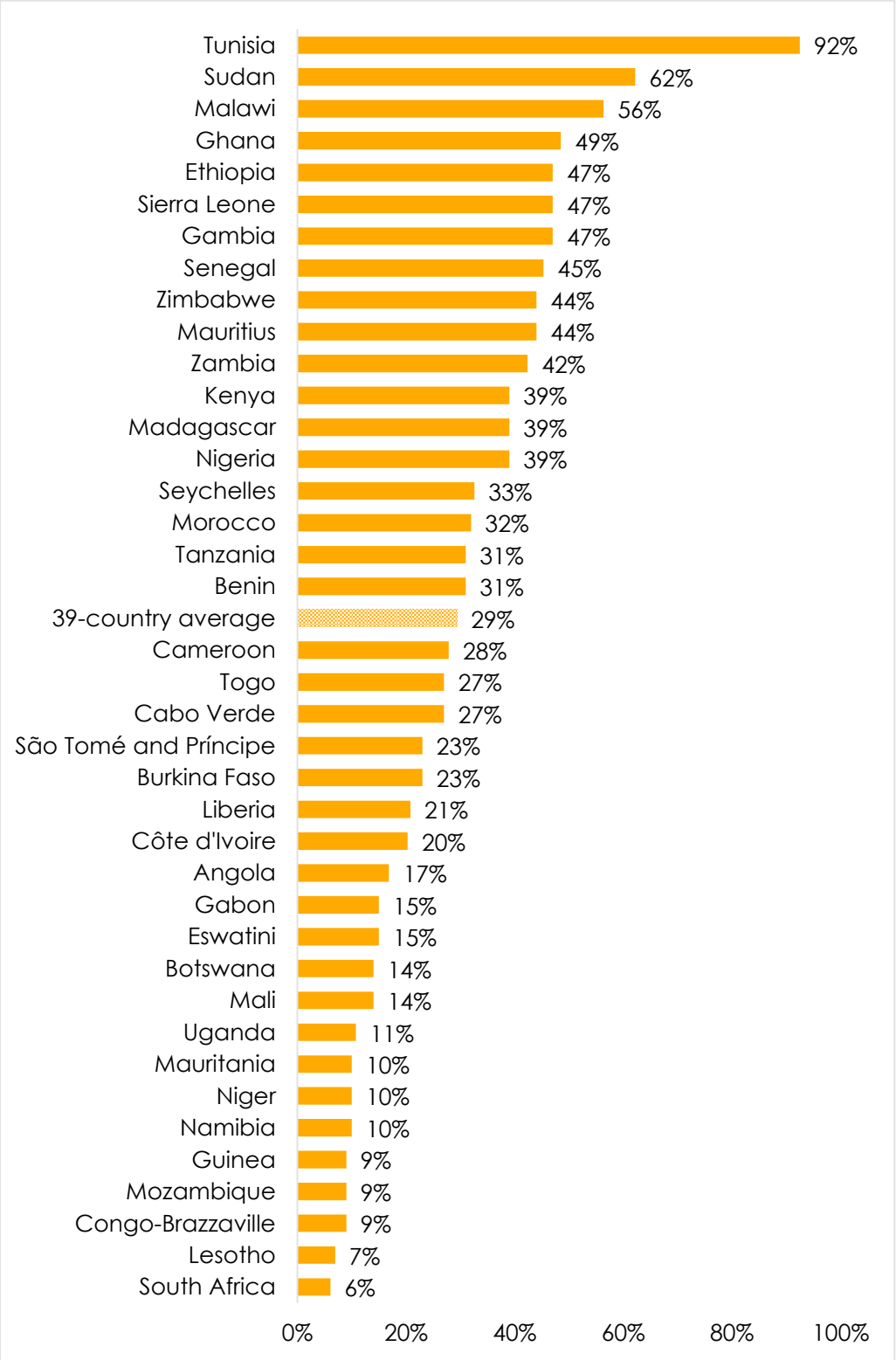
Figure 3: Management of the economy as a top priority | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent; figure shows % of respondents who cite management of the economy as one of up to three priorities.)*

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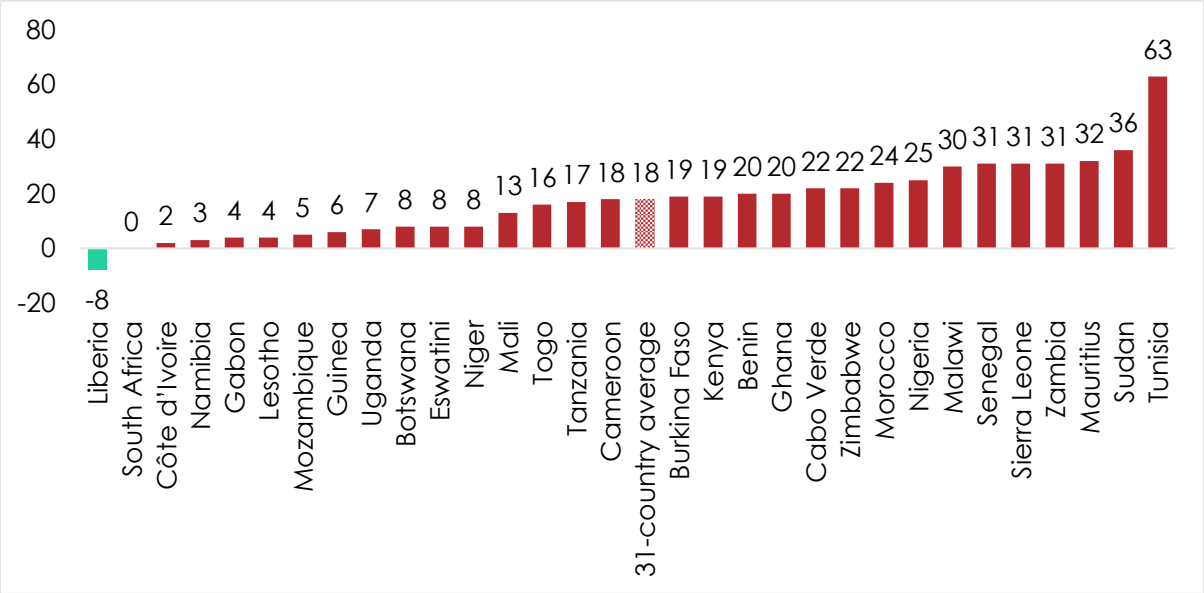
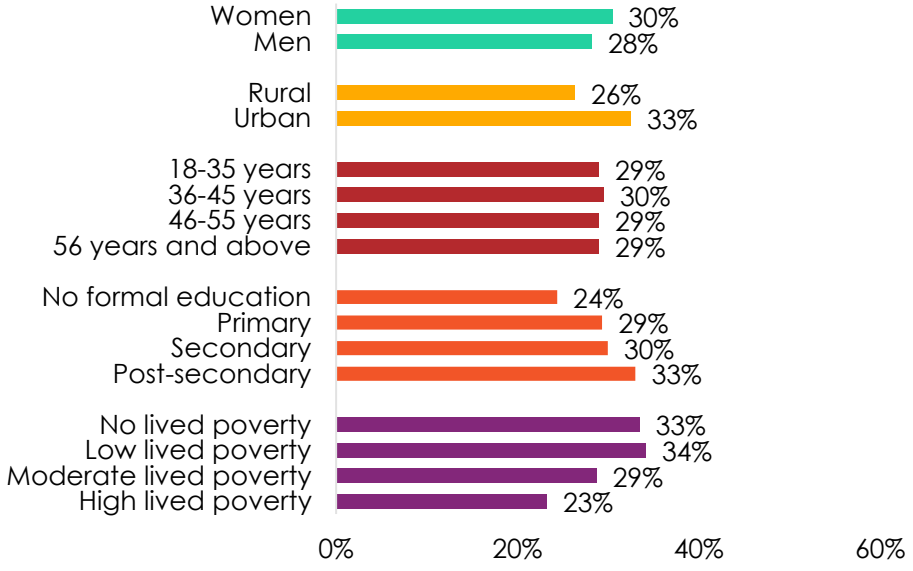
Figure 4: Changes in proportion who cite management of the economy as a top priority | 31 countries | 2014-2023



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? Figure shows change (in percentage points) between 2014/2015 and 2021/2023 in the proportion of respondents who cite management of the economy as one of up to three priorities.*

Figure 3: Management of the economy as a top priority | by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent; figure shows % of respondents who cite management of the economy as one of up to three priorities.)*

Views on economic conditions

Mirroring high levels of concern about economic management, most Africans offer gloomy assessments of their national economy. On average, about two-thirds (65%) describe their country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 6). These negative views

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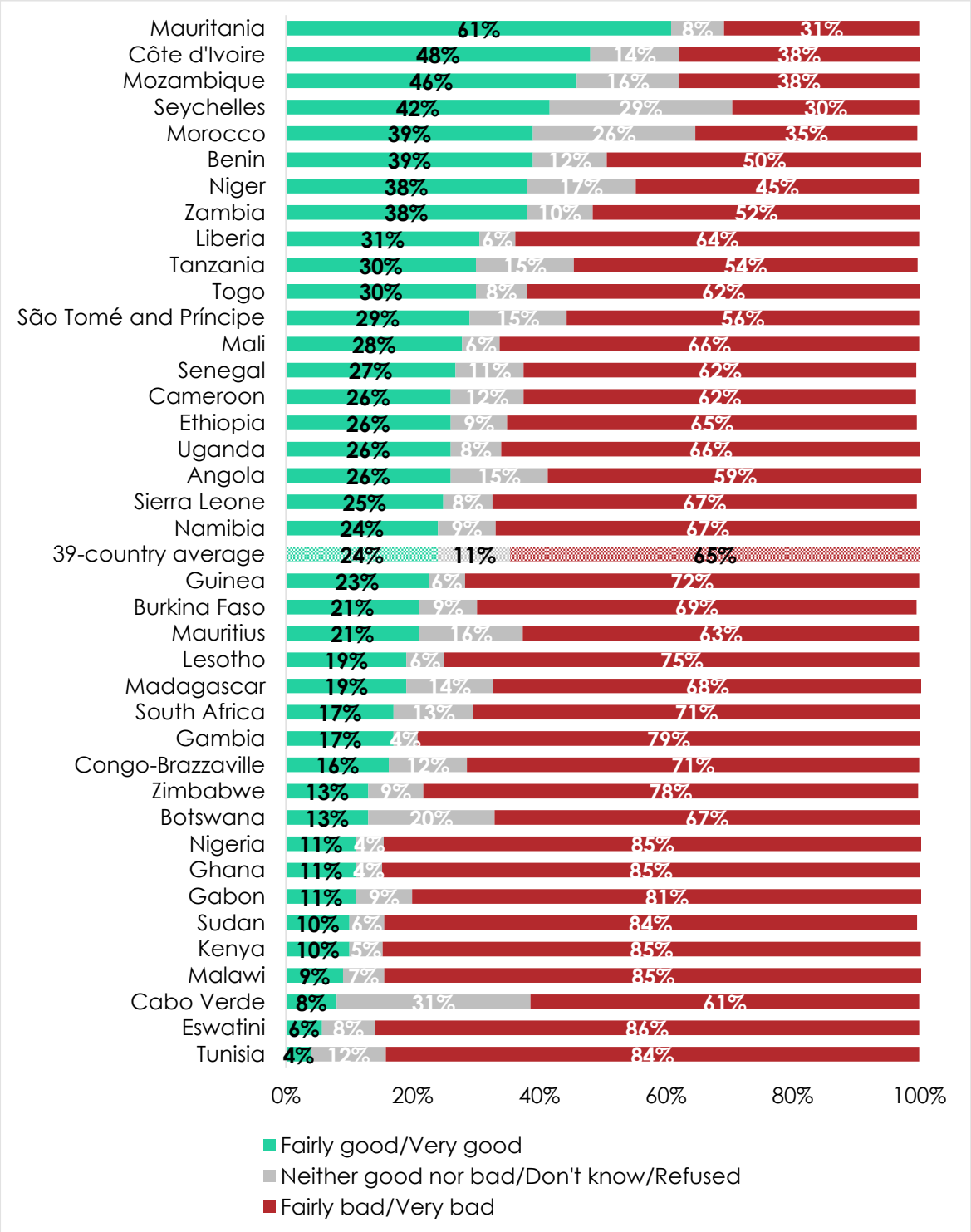
are almost unanimous in Eswatini (86%), Nigeria (85%), Ghana (85%), Kenya (85%), and Malawi (85%). Only a quarter (24%) of citizens see their county's economic condition as good. Mauritania is the only country where a clear majority (61%) of citizens believe their economy is doing well.

Figure 6: Country's economic condition | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?*

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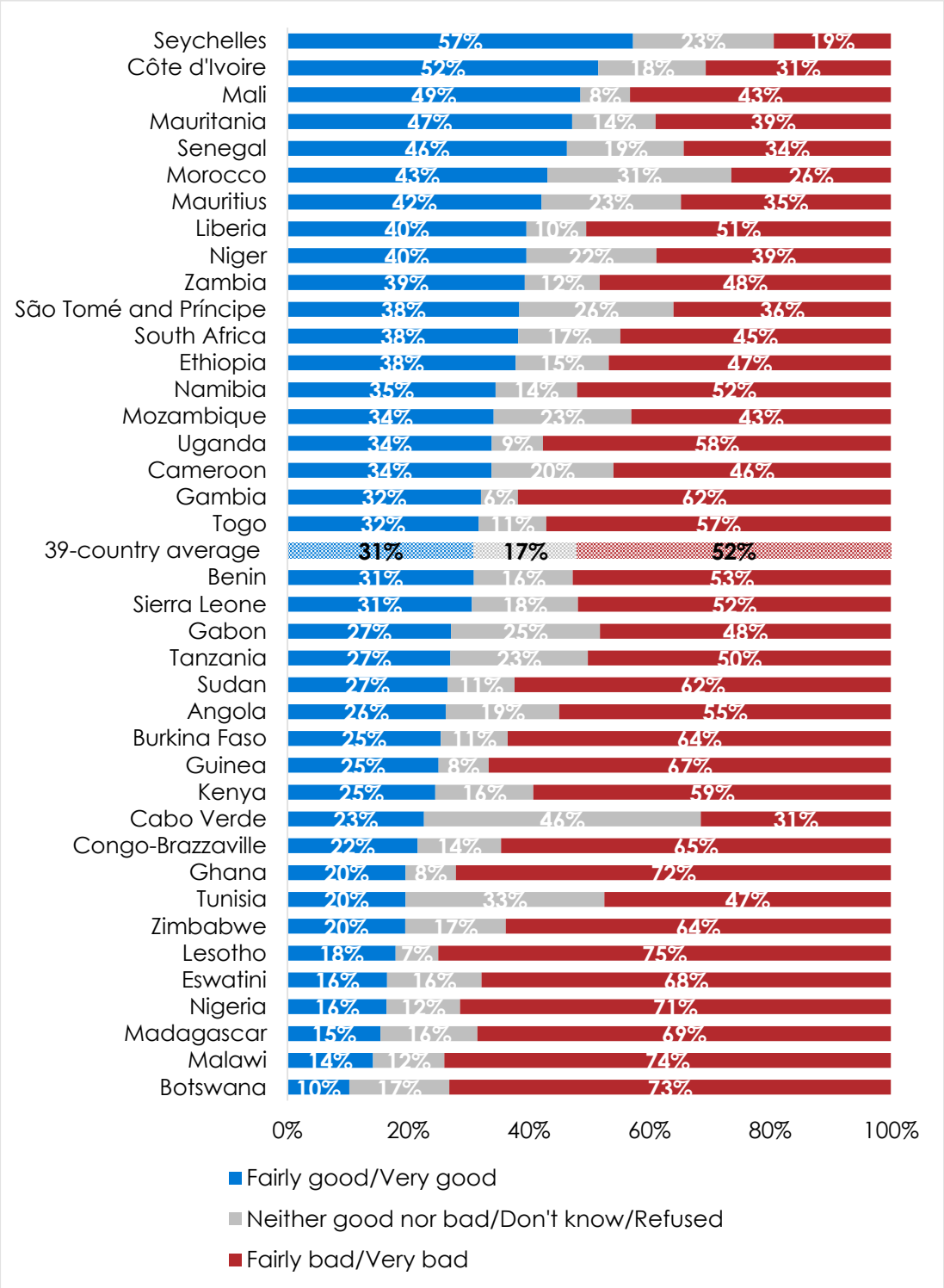
Similarly, only three in Africans (31%) describe their personal living conditions as good (Figure 7). A slim majority (52%) say their conditions are bad, including about three-fourths of citizens in Lesotho (75%), Malawi (74%), and Botswana (73%). Seychelles (57%) and Côte d'Ivoire (52%) are the only countries where majorities believe their living conditions are good.

Figure 7: Personal living conditions | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?*

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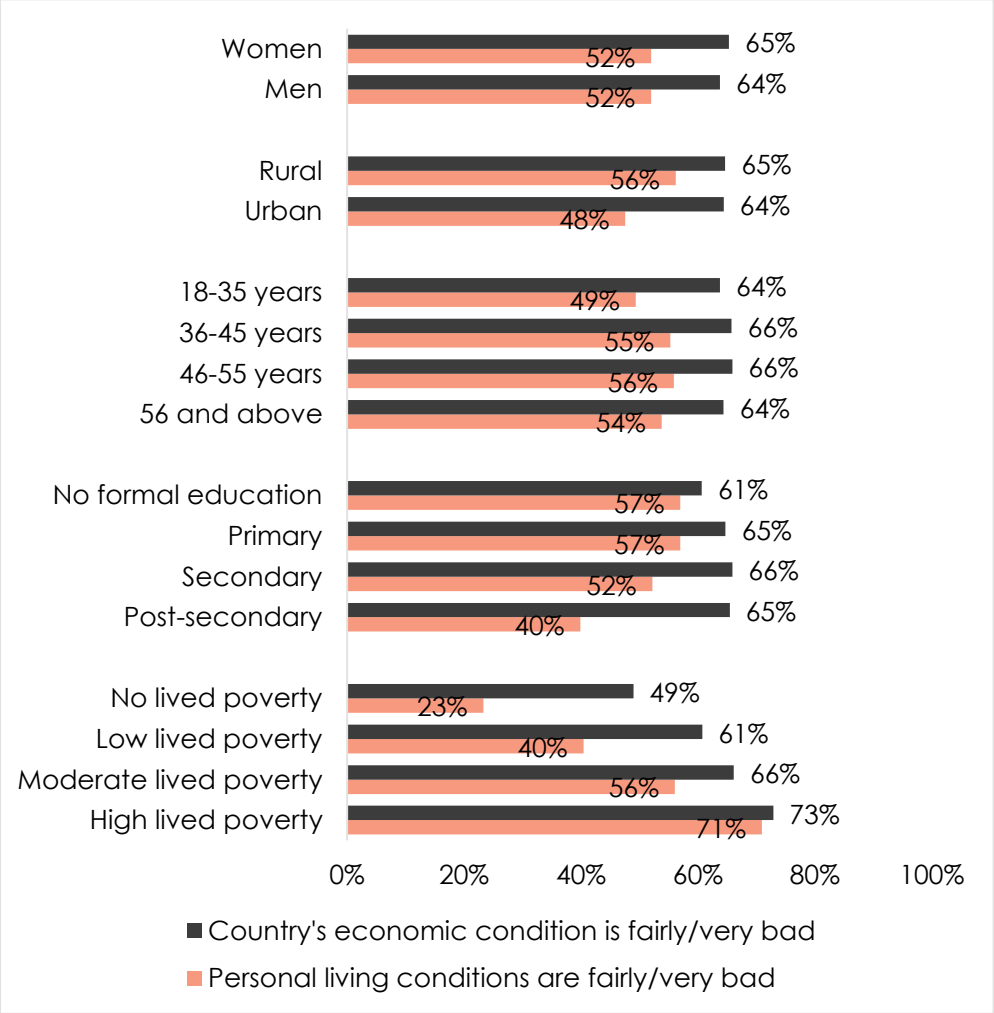
Not surprisingly, negative assessments of the country's economy and personal living conditions increase sharply with citizens' experience of lived poverty: Compared to the best-off respondents, the poorest are 24 percentage points more likely to say the economy is bad and 48 points more likely to report bad living conditions (Figure 8). Other demographic groups differ only modestly in their evaluations of their national economies.

Complaints about personal living conditions are more common in rural areas than in cities (56% vs. 48%) and among citizens with no or low formal education (57%) compared to those with post-secondary education (40%).

Figure 8: Negative assessments of economic and living conditions | by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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

These assessments have grown increasingly negative in recent years. On average across 31 countries surveyed consistently since 2014/2015, negative reviews of the country's economic condition have risen by 15 percentage points, and those of personal living conditions by 7 points (Figure 9).

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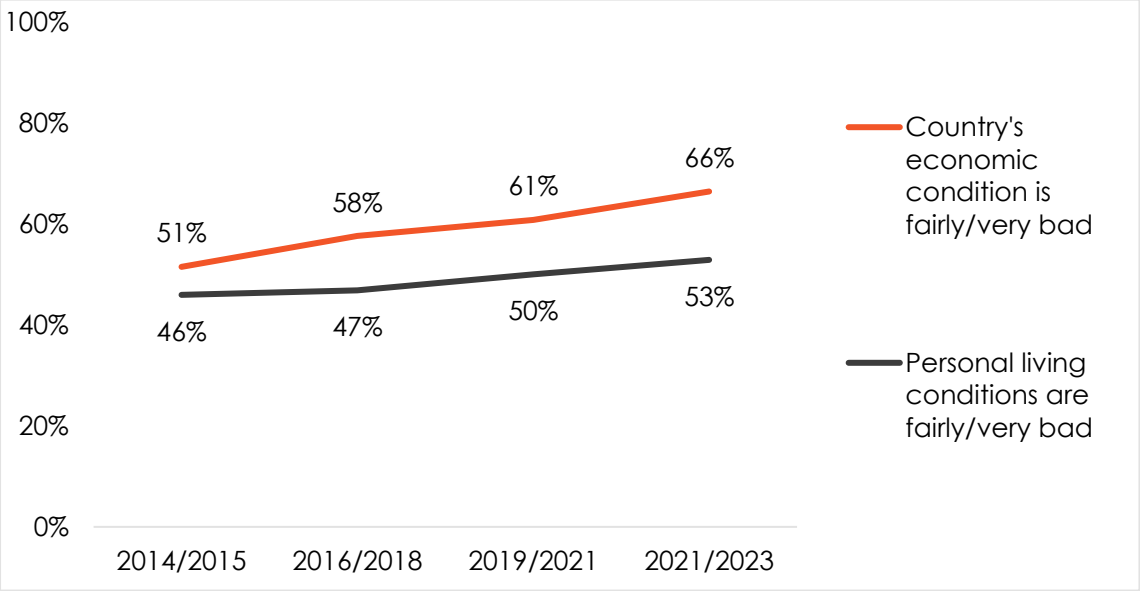
Figure 9: Negative assessments of economic and personal living conditions | 31 countries | 2014-2023



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

In line with these evaluations, a majority (58%) of citizens across 39 countries say current economic conditions are "worse" or "much worse" compared to 12 months before the survey (Figure 10). Only 20% believe things have improved, while 21% think they've remained the same.

No surveyed country has a majority who see improvement over the previous year. Even in the countries with the largest proportions who say economic conditions are better – Mali (45%) and Zambia (44%) – almost equal proportions think they have gotten worse. At least three-quarters of citizens report worsening economic conditions in Malawi (82%), Sudan (76%), Eswatini (75%), and the Gambia (75%).

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But optimists outnumber pessimists when we look ahead: Four in 10 citizens (40%) forecast better conditions within 12 months after the survey, while 35% think things will get worse and 18% expect no change (Figure 11). Citizens in São Tomé and Príncipe (86%), Mali (77%), and Angola (70%) have the brightest outlook about future economic conditions, whereas optimists are rare in Mauritius (11%), Eswatini (11%), Congo-Brazzaville (14%), and Gabon (15%).

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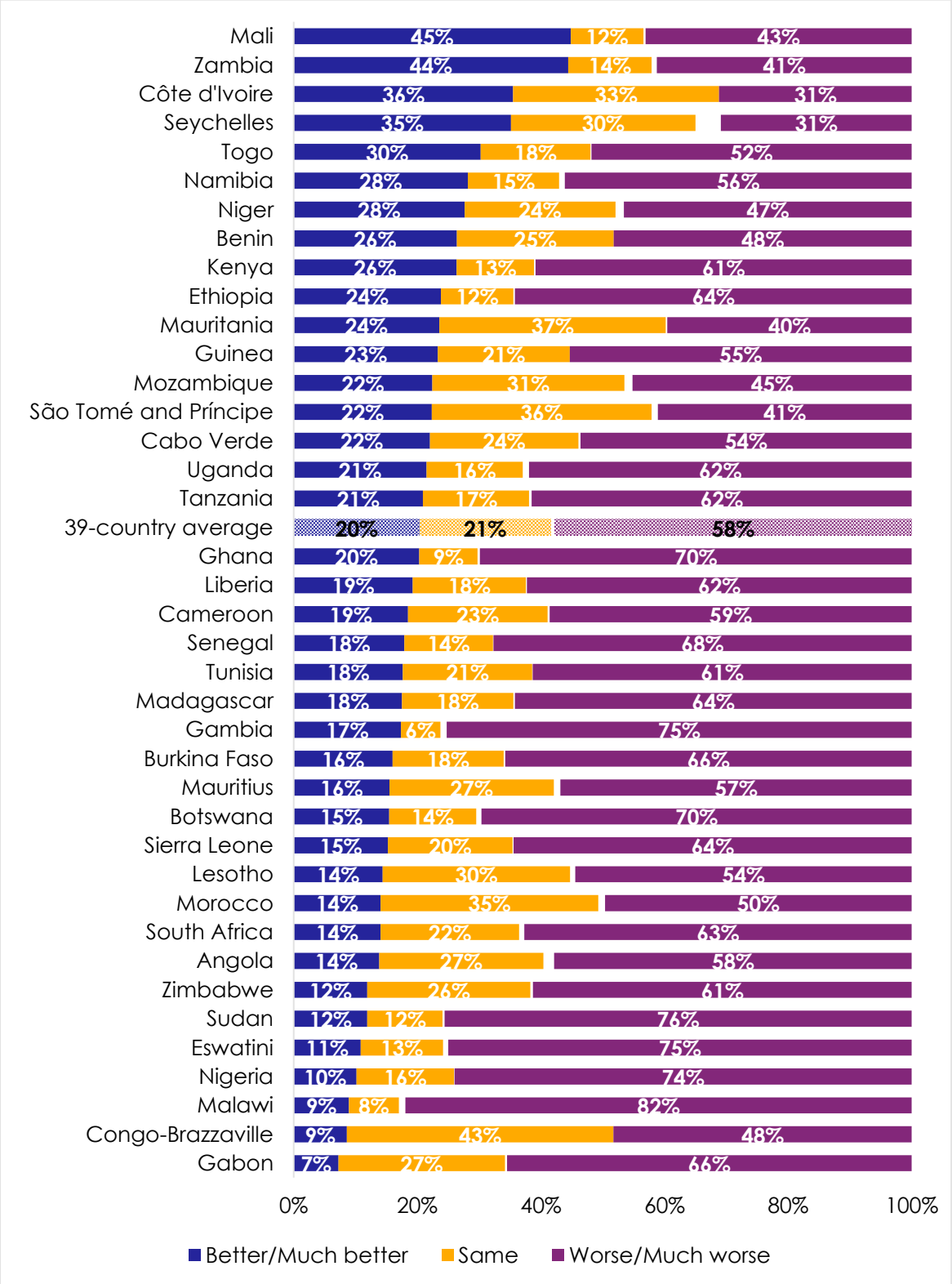
Figure 10: Economic conditions compared to 12 months ago | 39 countries | 2021/2023



***Respondents were asked**: Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?*

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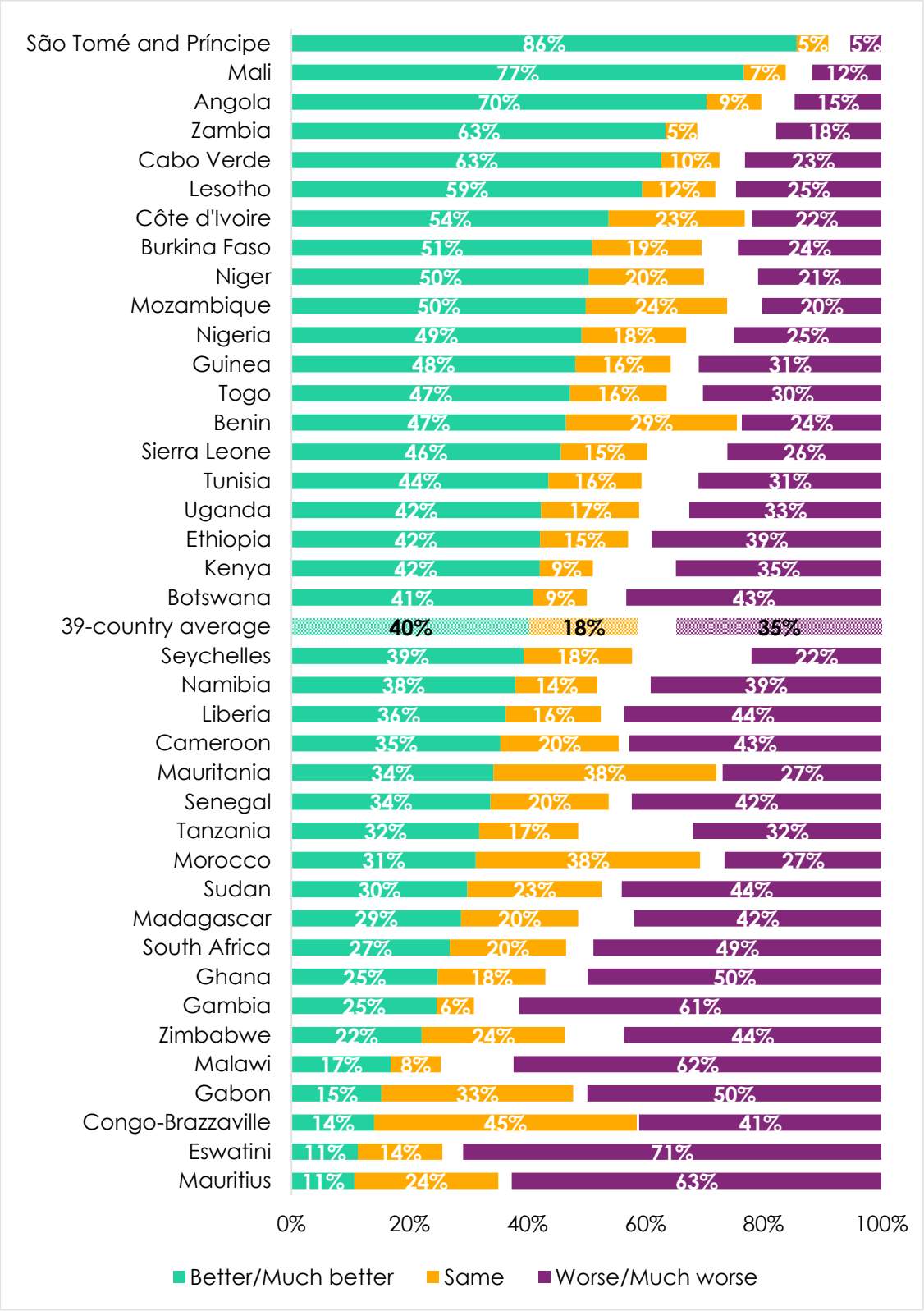
Figure 11: Economic conditions in 12 months' time | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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

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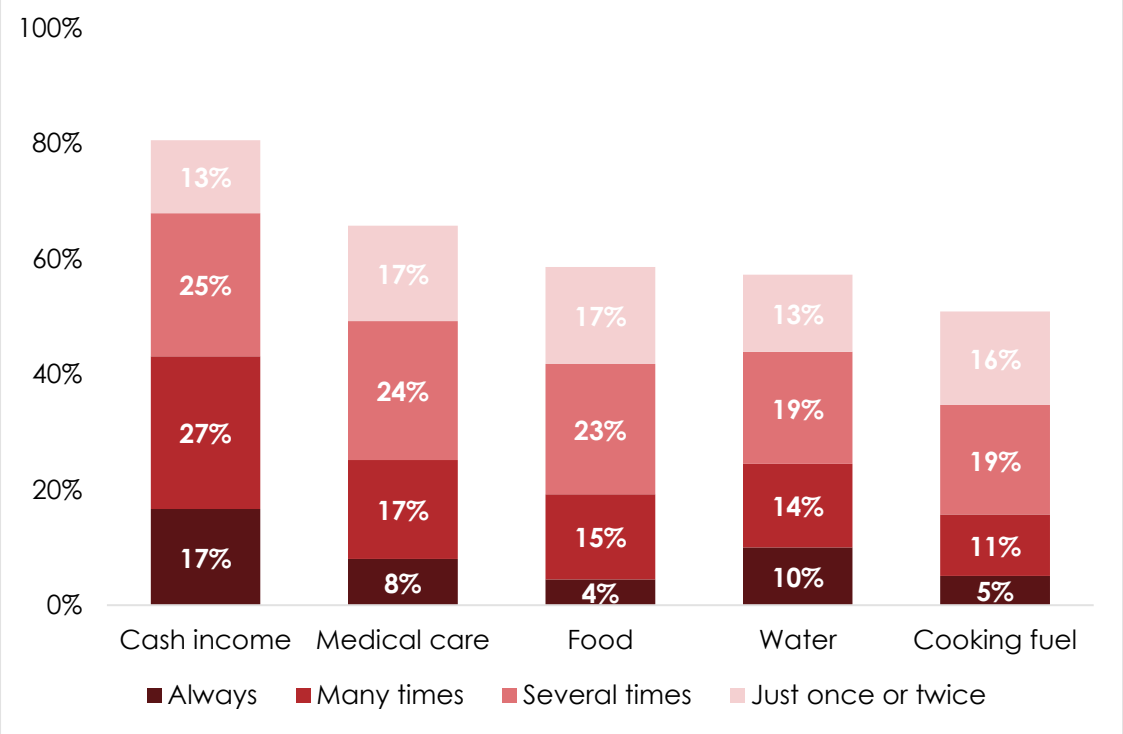
Lack of basic necessities

Afrobarometer explores Africans' experience with poverty by recording the frequency with which they say they or their families went without five basic necessities – enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income – during the previous year. On each of these indicators, majorities across 39 countries report having experienced shortages. The most common form of deprivation concerns a cash income: Eight in 10 citizens (81%) say they went without an income at least once, including 43% who say they did so "many times" or "always" (Figure 12).[2] Two-thirds (66%) went without medical care at least once, and about six in 10 suffered shortages of food (59%) and water (56%).

Across 31 countries surveyed consistently since 2014/2015, there has been a steady increase in deprivation of all five basic necessities (Figure 13). The largest increases concern the lack of medical care (15 percentage points), food (12 points), and cooking fuel (12 points).

Figure 12: Went without basic necessities | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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?*

[2] Due to rounding, summed response categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of categories shown in graphics.

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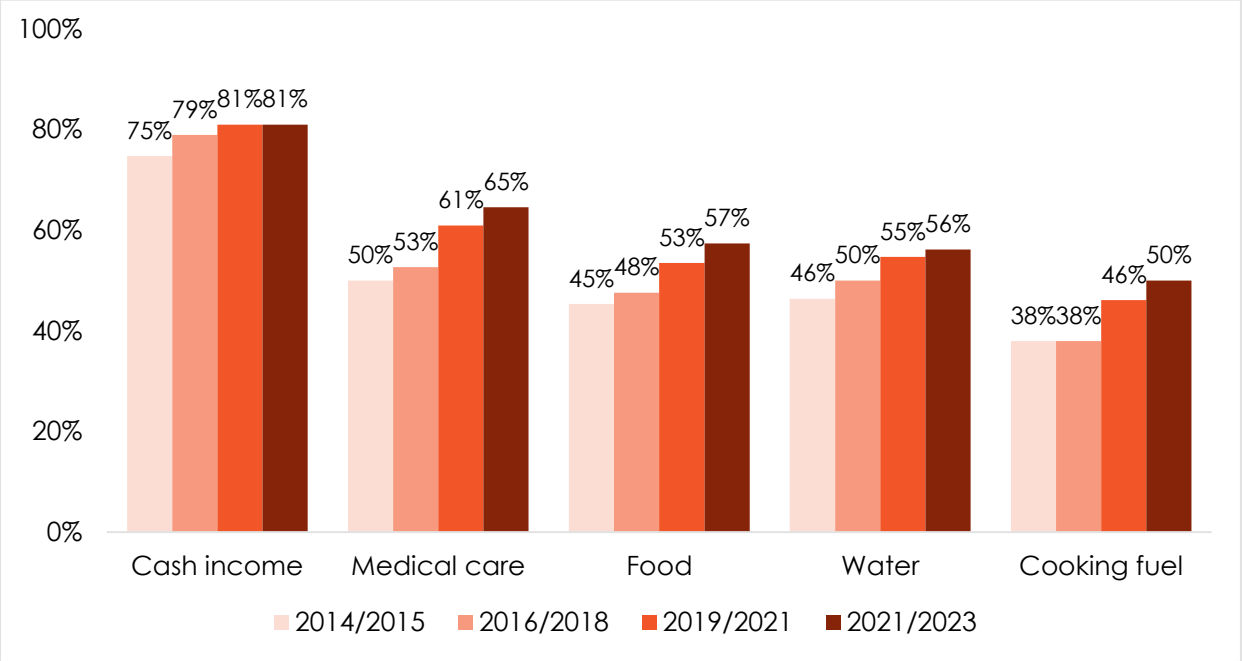
Figure 13: Went without basic necessities | 31 countries | 2014-2023



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 "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")*

While the frequency of going without basic necessities varies significantly by country, majorities share the experience in most surveyed countries (Table 1). Income insecurity affected at least nine out of 10 households in 17 surveyed countries, led by Madagascar (98%), Togo (96%), Nigeria (96%), and Congo-Brazzaville (95%). Seychelles (19%), Morocco (39%), and Mauritius (45%) are the only three countries where fewer than half of citizens report going without a cash income at least once during the previous year.

Similarly, at least two-thirds of citizens in 23 countries report going without medical care at least once, including about nine out of 10 in Mauritania (90%) and Congo-Brazzaville (87%).

And food shortages affected more than eight in 10 individuals in Congo-Brazzaville (87%), Niger (86%), Nigeria (84%), Mauritania (82%), and Angola (81%).

On all three of these indicators, Seychelles, Mauritius, Morocco, and Cabo Verde are among countries recording the least deprivation of basic necessities.

Averaging respondents' reported frequency of "going without," Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index gauges citizens' experience of poverty, from "no lived poverty" (respondents who did not experience any shortages) to "high lived poverty" (those who experienced a lack of all five basic necessities). Across Africa, only one in 10 citizens (10%) experienced no lived poverty during the past year, while more than six in 10 (61%) suffered moderate (36%) or high (26%) levels of lived poverty (Figure 14).

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Table 1: Going without basic necessities | 39 countries | 2021/2023

	Cash income	Medical care	Food	Water	Cooking fuel
Madagascar	98%	69%	73%	55%	48%
Togo	96%	78%	68%	66%	57%
Nigeria	96%	80%	84%	76%	73%
Congo-Brazzaville	95%	87%	87%	84%	66%
Benin	94%	79%	67%	70%	51%
Zimbabwe	93%	65%	66%	67%	42%
Cameroon	93%	75%	75%	82%	71%
Niger	93%	74%	86%	65%	60%
Uganda	93%	78%	62%	55%	57%
Guinea	93%	73%	61%	67%	48%
Malawi	93%	69%	74%	45%	61%
Burkina Faso	92%	66%	62%	52%	50%
Zambia	91%	83%	60%	49%	41%
Kenya	91%	63%	61%	51%	46%
Gabon	90%	77%	73%	79%	61%
Senegal	90%	73%	50%	68%	60%
Mauritania	90%	90%	82%	87%	85%
Sierra Leone	88%	76%	66%	58%	47%
Ethiopia	87%	68%	60%	65%	46%
Lesotho	86%	50%	67%	49%	59%
Tanzania	85%	50%	43%	45%	25%
Mali	84%	50%	47%	43%	43%
Mozambique	82%	74%	67%	65%	52%
Côte d'Ivoire	82%	65%	49%	68%	37%
Angola	79%	84%	81%	79%	75%
Namibia	79%	58%	64%	51%	49%
Ghana	79%	43%	36%	39%	31%
Eswatini	78%	78%	66%	55%	61%
Liberia	78%	82%	76%	61%	56%
Gambia	78%	76%	49%	49%	56%
São Tomé and Príncipe	71%	69%	60%	62%	63%
Botswana	70%	65%	59%	53%	50%
Sudan	69%	67%	48%	65%	63%
South Africa	65%	49%	52%	60%	59%
Cabo Verde	64%	35%	29%	45%	42%
Tunisia	57%	50%	29%	52%	42%
Mauritius	45%	29%	16%	23%	25%
Morocco	39%	45%	17%	21%	19%
Seychelles	19%	20%	13%	12%	10%
39-country average	81%	66%	59%	57%	51%
Key	81%-100%	61%-80%	41%-60%	1%-40%	

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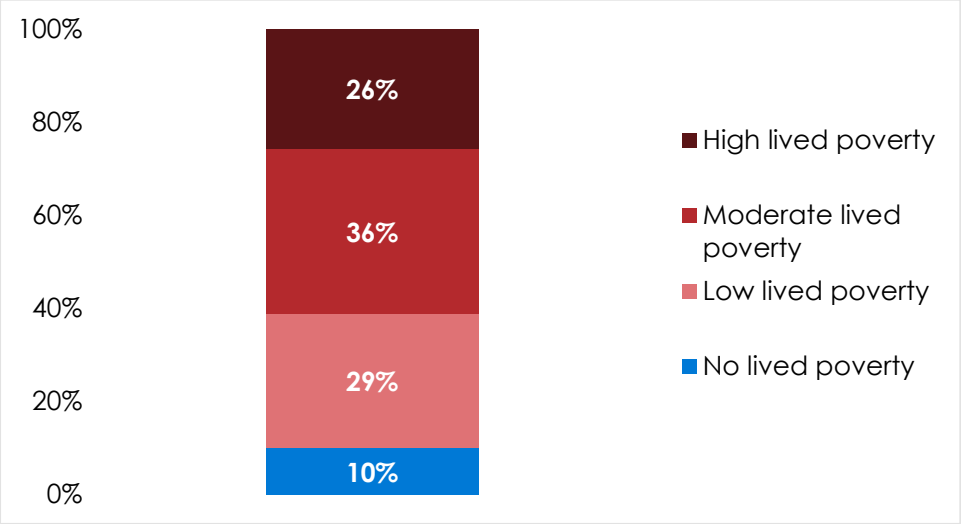
Figure 14: Lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023

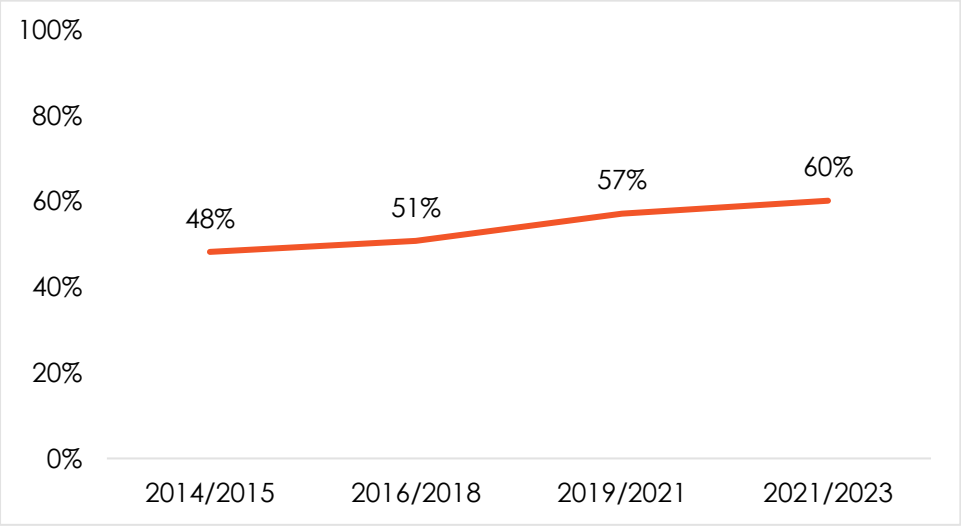


Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income? (Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores reflect average deprivation of these five basic necessities.)*

Across the 31 countries surveyed consistently over the past decade, the proportion of citizens living in moderate/high poverty has increased steadily, from 48% to 60% (Figure 15).

Moderate-to-high lived poverty affected majorities in 31 of the 39 surveyed countries, most widely in Congo-Brazzaville (86%), Mauritania (84%), Niger (84%), and Cameroon (81%) (Figure 16). Only four countries record moderate/high lived poverty for fewer than one-third of their citizens: Seychelles (9%), Mauritius (10%), Morocco (17%), and Ghana (33%).

Figure 15: Moderate/High lived poverty | 31 countries | 2014-2023



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 experienced "moderate" or "high" lived poverty based on Lived Poverty Index scores reflecting average deprivation of these five basic necessities)*

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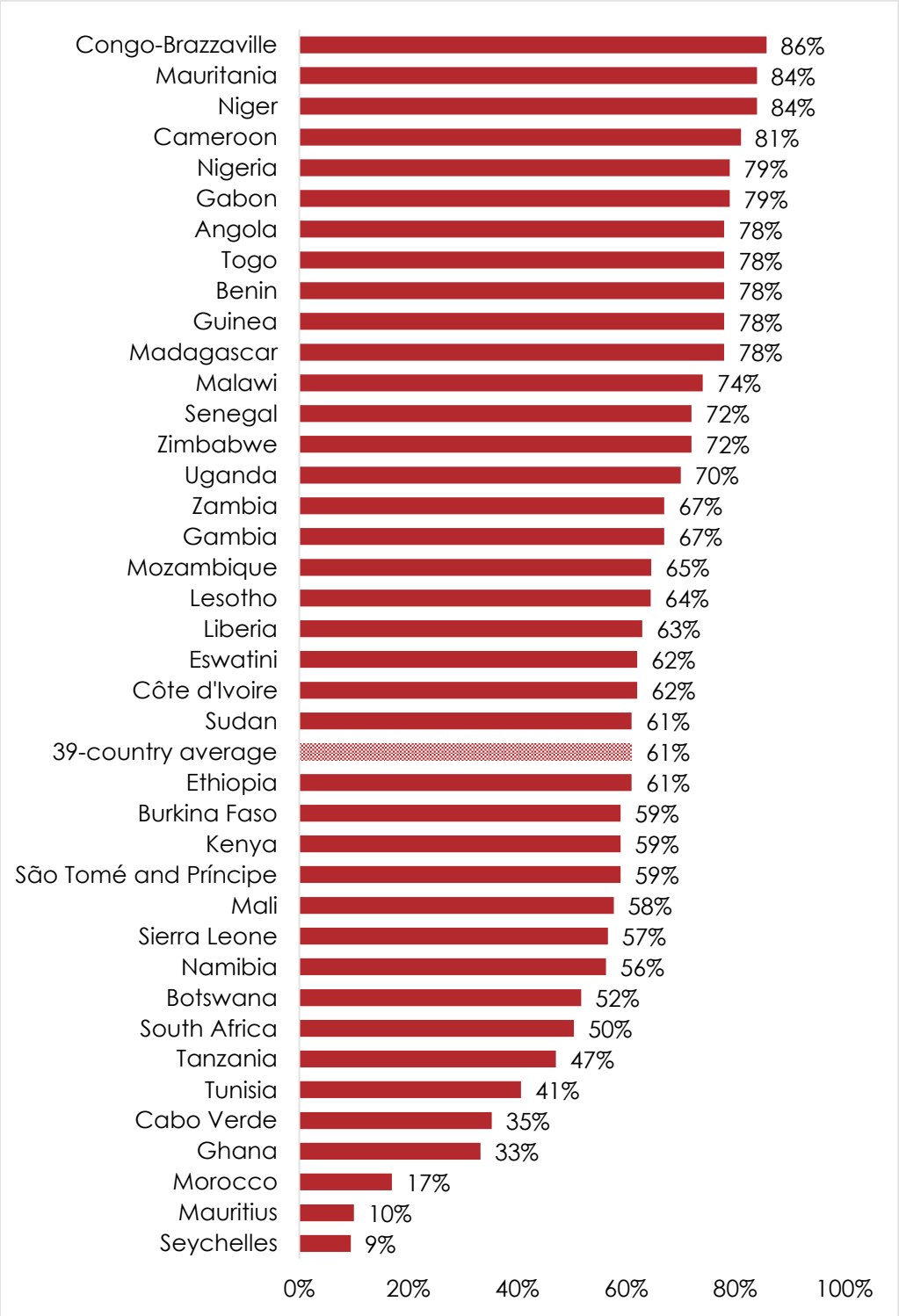
Figure 16: Moderate/High lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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 experienced "moderate" or "high" lived poverty based on Lived Poverty Index scores reflecting average deprivation of these five basic necessities)*

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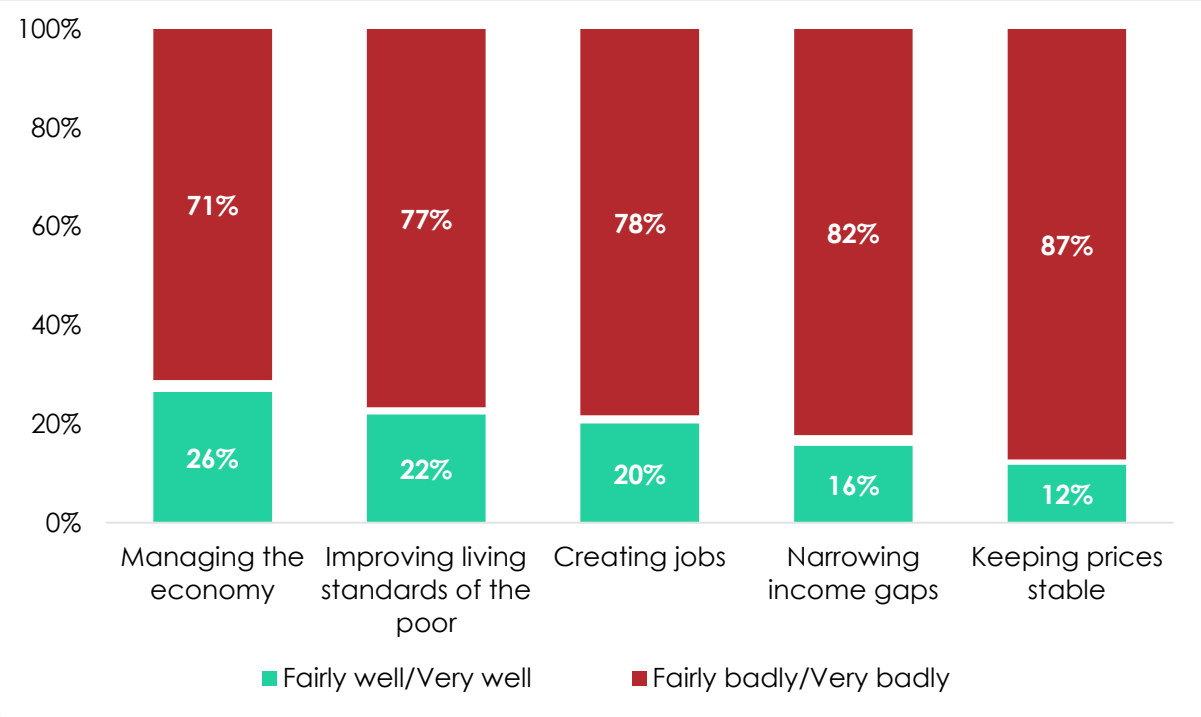
Government performance

Africans rate their governments poorly on key indicators of economic performance. On average across 39 countries, only a quarter (26%) of citizens say their government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in managing the economy, while 71% think they are doing a poor job (Figure 17). About two in 10 give their governments a passing mark for their efforts to improve the living standards of the poor (22%) and create jobs (20%), while even fewer offer positive assessments of their performance on narrowing income gaps (16%) and keeping prices stable (12%).

Figure 17: Evaluation of government's economic performance | 39 countries | 2021/2023



***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?*

Only Zambia and Seychelles record majority positive assessments of their governments' performance on both managing the economy and creating jobs, including very strong approval among Zambians of their government's efforts on employment (72%) (Figure 18). Economic management also gets majority approval in Tanzania (61%) and Mali (55%).

But on both the economy and jobs, fewer than one in 10 citizens give their government a passing mark in Gabon, Sudan, and Lesotho.

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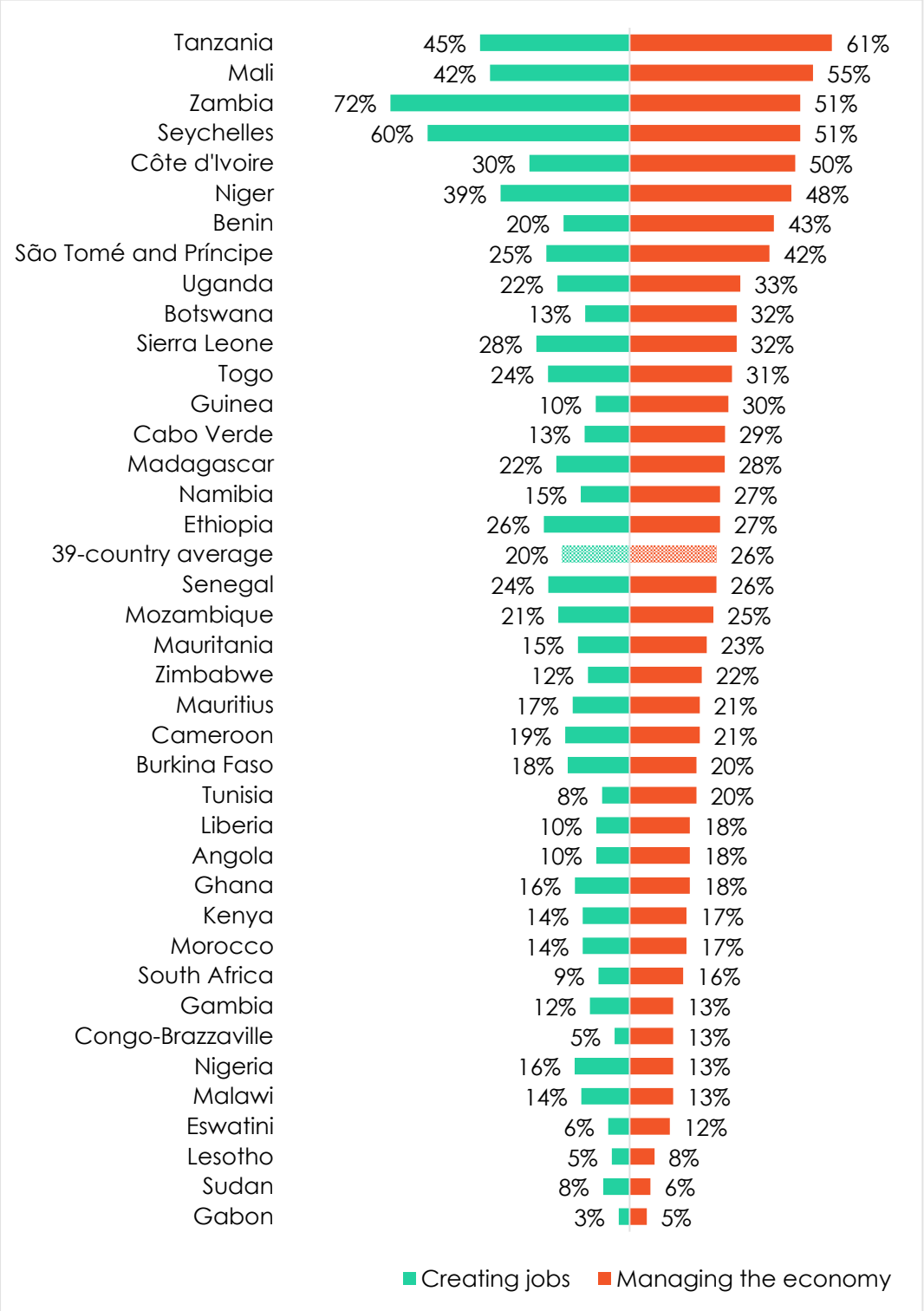
Figure 18: Positive assessments of government's performance on managing the economy and creating jobs | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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: Managing the economy? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

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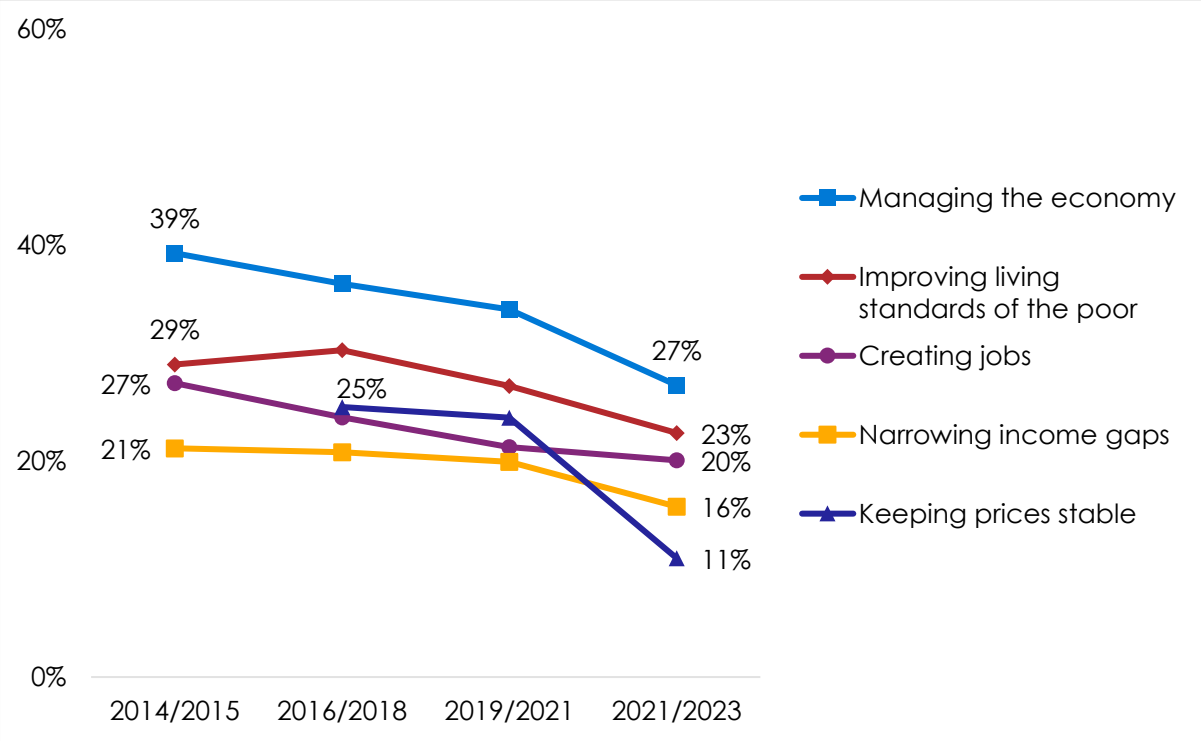
Assessments on key indicators of government economic performance are trending downward. Approval of the overall management of the economy records a 12-percentage-point decline since 2014-2015, from 39% to 27%, across the 30 countries for which we have complete data (Figure 19). We also see significant declines in favourable assessments of government efforts to create jobs (-7 points), improve living standards of the poor (-6 points), and narrow income gaps (-5 points). Approval of government performance on keeping prices stable has dropped by more than half since 2016/2018, from 25% to 11%.

Figure 19: Positive assessments of government's economic performance
| 30 countries | 2014-2023



***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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

Conclusion

Economic management has surged as a public priority for government action, joining unemployment at the top of Africans' concerns. Citizens' bleak appraisals of economic conditions match their escalating experience of lived poverty and align with their increasingly negative evaluations of their government's performance on key economic indicators.

African governments will need creative strategies, committed partners, and sustained investments in areas such as job creation, infrastructure, education, health care, and technology if they hope to make economic recovery a household reality.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 9 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 9 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Feb.-March 2022	2019
Benin	Jan. 2022	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020
Botswana	June-July 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Burkina Faso	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Cabo Verde	July-Aug. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019
Cameroon	March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Congo-Brazzaville	June-July 2023	NA
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019
Eswatini	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Ethiopia	May-June 2023	2013, 2020
Gabon	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2015, 2017, 2020
Gambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2018, 2021
Ghana	April 2022	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Guinea	Aug. 2022	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019
Kenya	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Liberia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
Madagascar	April-May 2022	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Feb. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Mali	July 2022	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Mauritania	Nov. 2022	NA
Mauritius	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Morocco	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Mozambique	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021
Namibia	Oct.-Nov. 2021	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Niger	June 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Nigeria	March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020
São Tomé and Príncipe	Dec. 2022	2015, 2018
Senegal	May-June 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021
Seychelles	Dec. 2022	NA
Sierra Leone	June-July 2022	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
South Africa	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021
Sudan	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Tanzania	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Togo	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Uganda	Jan. 2022	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Zambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Zimbabwe	March-April 2022	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021

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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, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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