UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

Dispatch No. 935 | 10 January 2025

Majority of Kenyans believe country is headed in the wrong direction, cite government's poor handling of the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 935 | Laura Barasa and Paul Kamau

Summary

The size and performance of any economy is typically measured by its gross domestic product (GDP), the total production of goods and services in the economy over a period of time (World Bank, 2023). In the past four years, the global economy has experienced sluggish economic performance due to disruptions emanating from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and tightened monetary policies in most developed economies (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021; World Bank, 2023; Onsomu, Munga, & Nyabaro, 2021). For instance, global real GDP growth in 2023 was estimated at 3.1%, down from 3.5% in 2022 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Similarly, the sub-Saharan Africa region saw a decline in real GDP growth to 3.3% in 2023, compared to 4.0% in 2022.

Kenya's real GDP growth was 5.6% in 2023, up from 4.9% in 2022. However, like most African countries, Kenya is still struggling in the post-COVID-19 era with skyrocketing inflation and ballooning debts. The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated this situation (Kamau & Balongo, 2023; Nechifor et al., 2020). The pandemic hit all sectors, and the Kenyan economy suffered a massive setback after a 5.4% economic growth rate in 2019 (Kamau, 2021). Kenya's robust growth before the pandemic was driven by increased public sector borrowing, resulting in debt vulnerabilities that have been exacerbated amid tightening global financing conditions (Kamau & Balongo, 2023).

According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Kenya, citizens are feeling the pinch of a struggling economy and are blaming the government. A majority of citizens say the country is going in the wrong direction. They assess economic and living conditions as bad and give the government poor marks on its handling of economic issues. Most Kenyans experienced shortages of basic life necessities during the past year, and many say they had to ask for help from others to make ends meet.

Citizens see health, the increasing cost of living, and unemployment as the most important problems requiring government action.

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 10 surveys were launched in 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Kenya, based at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, interviewed 2,400 adult Kenyans in April-May 2024. A sample of this size yields country-

level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Kenya in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019, and 2021.

Key findings

- About six in 10 Kenyans (59%) think the country is going in the wrong direction, although this represents a 15-percentage-point improvement compared to 2021.
- A majority (61%) of citizens describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad." About half (49%) say their personal living conditions are bad, while only one-third (33%) consider them good.
    - Compared to 12 months ago, half (50%) of Kenyans describe the economic condition of the country as "worse" or "much worse," while the other half say they are better (32%) or unchanged (17%).
    - However, a majority (57%) expect economic conditions to be better in 12 months' time.
- Majorities of Kenyans say they or a family member went without basic life necessities at least once during the previous year, including a cash income (90%), medical care (68%), and enough food (58%).
    - About six in 10 respondents (59%) experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the past year.
- Many Kenyans say they had to request assistance from other family members (55%), friends or neighbours (44%), and/or religious, community, or charitable organisations (23%) during the past year in order to make ends meet.
- Most Kenyans are dissatisfied with the government's performance on key economic issues, including its overall management of the economy (62%).
    - About six in 10 (59%) blame the government's poor economic management for the increasing cost of living.
- Health, the increasing cost of living, and unemployment rank as the most important problems that Kenyans want their government to address.

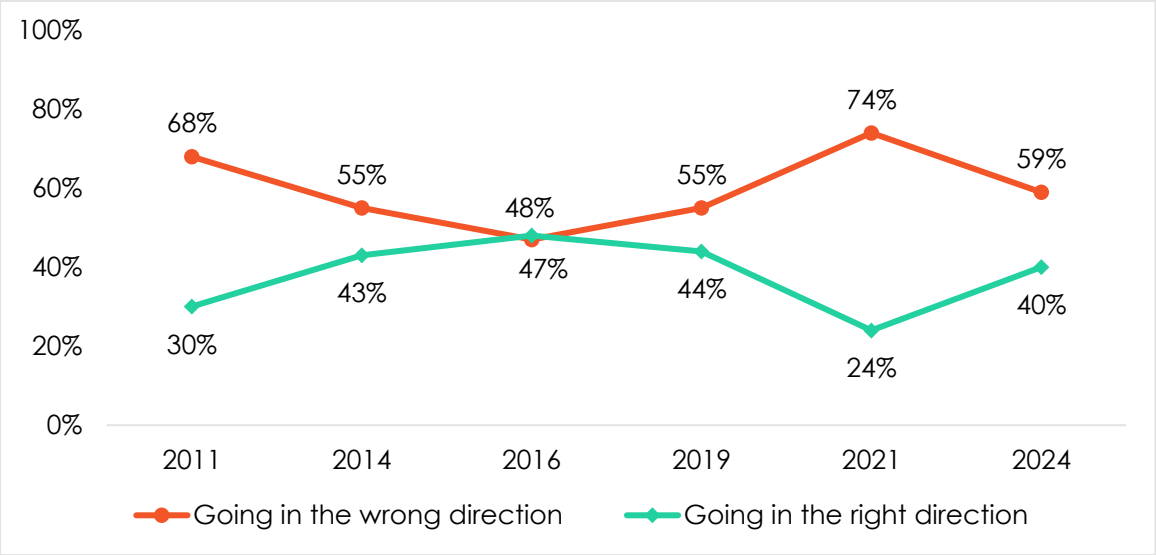
Overall direction of the country

A majority (59%) of Kenyans say the country is heading in the wrong direction, a 15-percentage-point improvement since 2021 (74%) (Figure 1). Except for 2017, a majority of Kenyans have consistently said the country is going in the wrong direction since 2011.

The perception that Kenya is headed in the wrong direction increases with respondents' experience of lived poverty,[1] ranging from just 36% among well-off citizens to 75% among the poorest (Figure 2). It is also more common in cities than in rural areas (64% vs. 56%). The youngest respondents (52%) are somewhat less likely to see the country as headed in the wrong direction than their elders (58%-65%).

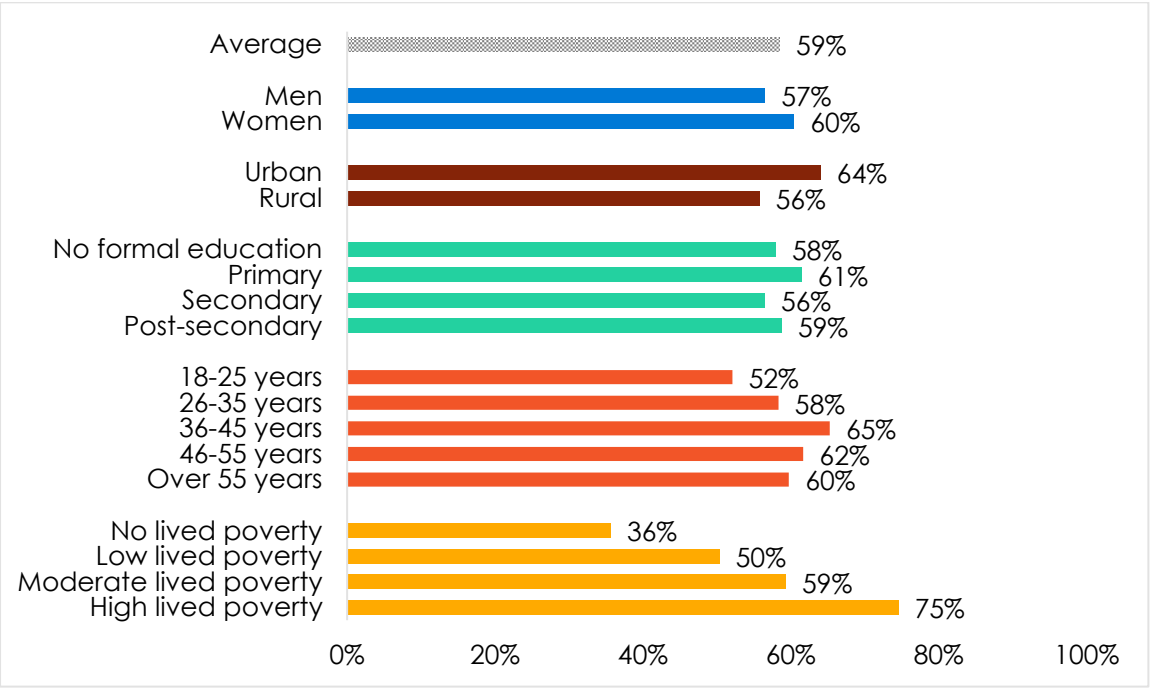
[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: Direction of the country | Kenya | 2011-2024



Respondents were asked: *Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

Figure 2: Country going in the wrong direction | by demographic group | Kenya | 2024



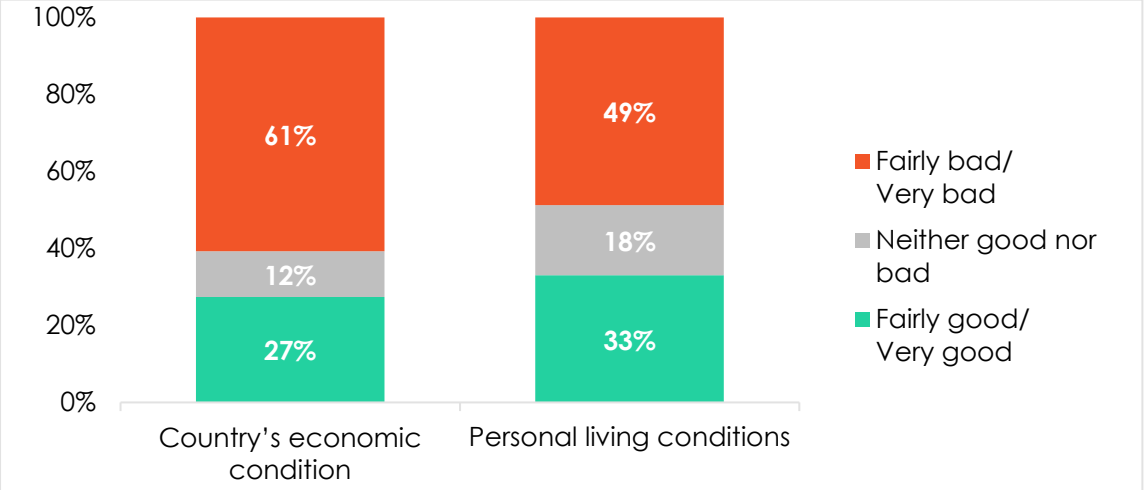
Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "wrong direction")*

Country's economic condition and individual living conditions

More than six in 10 respondents (61%) describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," while only 27% see it as good (Figure 3). About half (49%) say their personal living conditions are bad, compared to just one-third (33%) who say they are good.

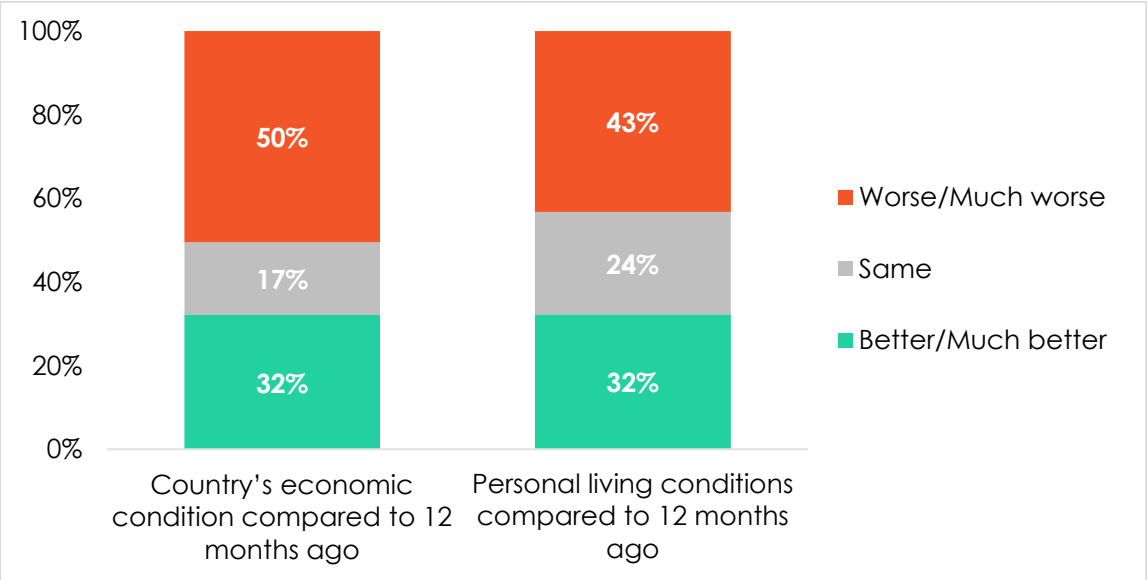
Compared to 12 months ago, half (50%) of Kenyan adults describe the economic condition of the country as "worse" or "much worse," while the other half say it is better (32%) or unchanged (17%) (Figure 4). At the individual level, 43% say their personal living conditions have gotten worse.

Figure 3: Assessments of the country's economic condition and personal living conditions | Kenya | 2024



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

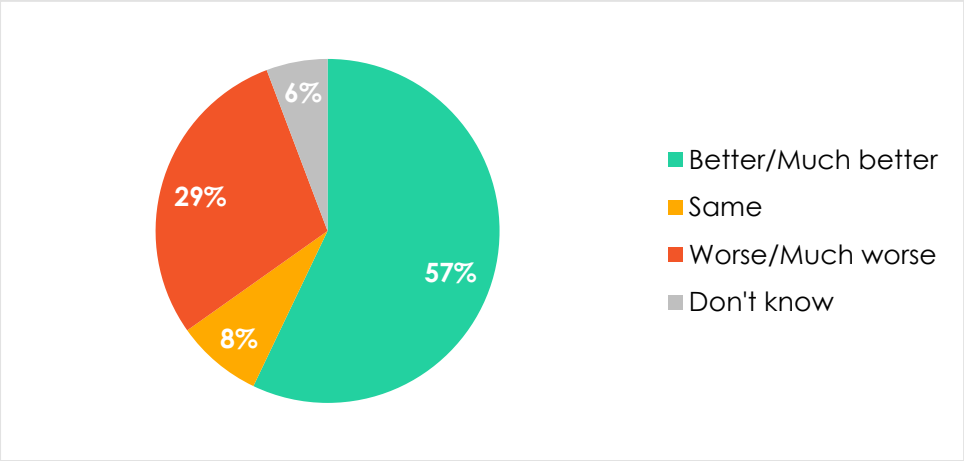
Figure 4: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions compared to 12 months ago | Kenya | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Looking back, how do you rate the following compared to 12 months ago: Economic condition of this country? Your living conditions?*

However, a majority of Kenyans are optimistic about the country's economy: 57% say they expect it to be "better" or "much better" in 12 months' time (Figure 5). Three in 10 respondents (29%) think things will get worse.

Figure 5: Country's economic condition in 12 months' time | Kenya | 2024

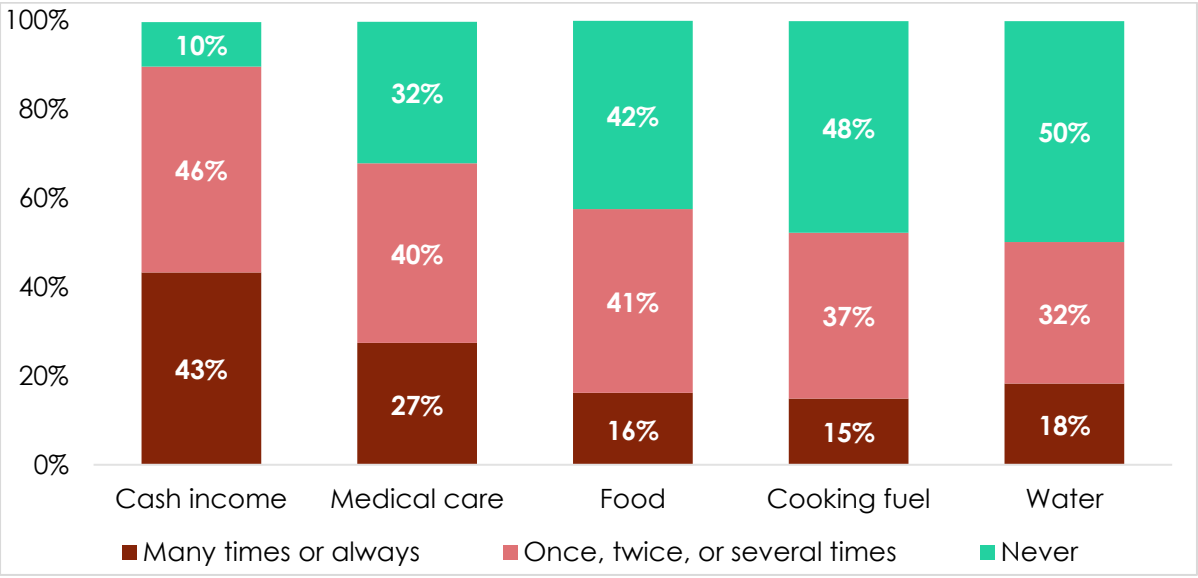


Respondents were asked: *Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?*

Lived poverty

Nine of 10 Kenyans (90%) say they or a member of their family went without a cash income at least once during the previous year, including 43% who did so "many times" or "always"[2] (Figure 6). More than two-thirds (68%) report going without medical care or medicine at least once, while more than half suffered shortages of food (58%) and cooking fuel (52%). Half (50%) say they went without enough clean water.

Figure 6: Lack of basic necessities | Kenya | 2024

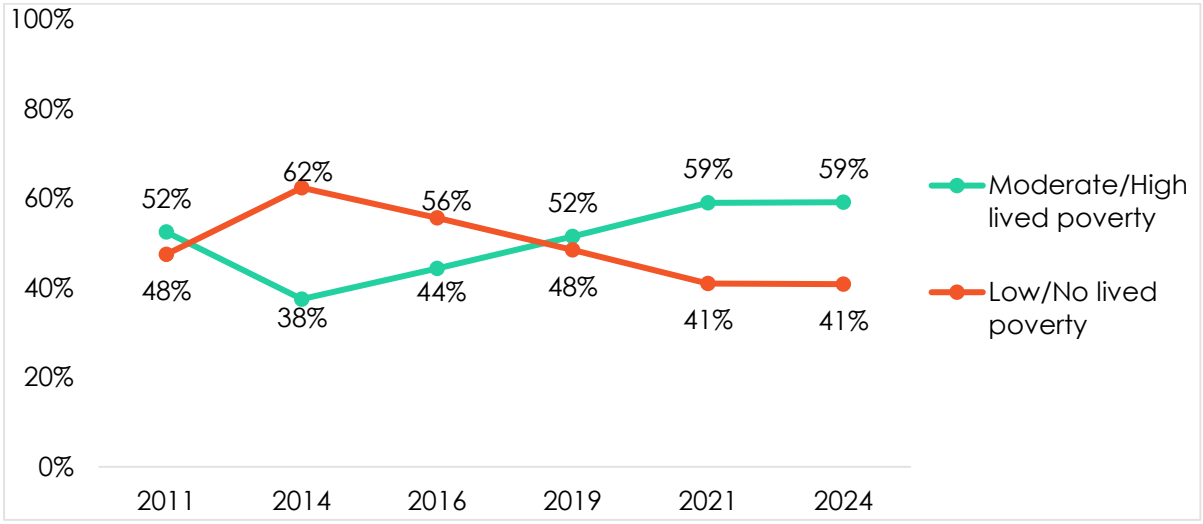


Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

[2] Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. for cash income, 43% "many time or always" and 46% "once, twice, or several times" sum to 90%).

Lived Poverty Index scores, computed based on the frequency of reported shortages, show that about six in 10 Kenyans (59%) experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the year preceding the survey (Figure 7). This proportion has been climbing steadily since 2014 (38%). Only 41% of citizens experienced low or no lived poverty in the past year.

Figure 7: Lived poverty | Kenya | 2011-2024

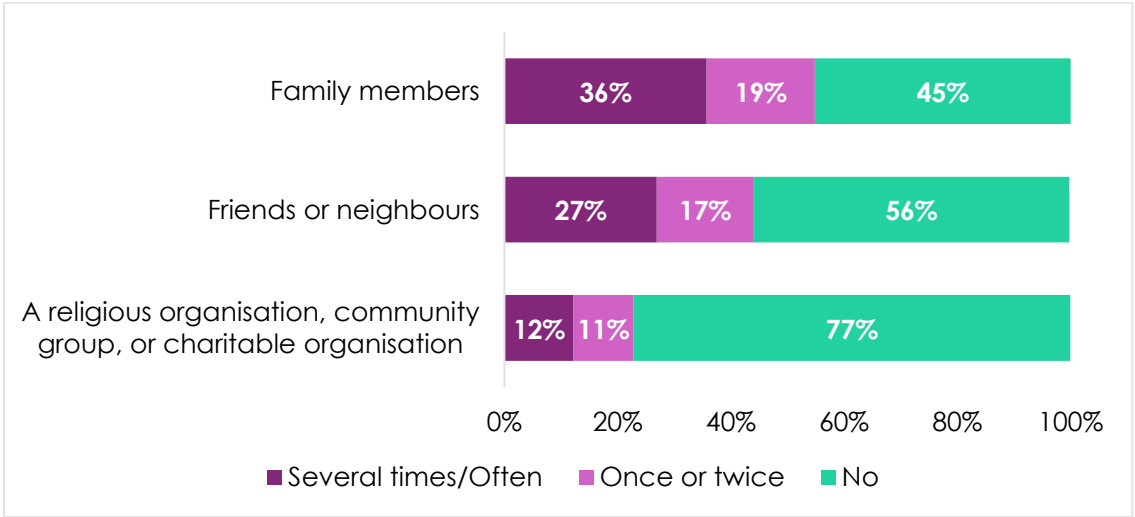


***Lived Poverty Index scores** are computed from responses to the following questions: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

Assistance to make ends meet

Experiencing significant levels of lived poverty and poor economic performance, citizens resort to other means to make ends meet. More than half (55%) say they had to ask other family members for assistance during the previous year, including 36% who say this happened "several times" or "often" (Figure 8). More than four in 10 (44%) turned to friends or neighbours for help, while almost one-fourth (23%) say they had to request assistance from religious, community, or charitable organisations to make ends meet.

Figure 8: Had to request assistance to make ends meet | Kenya | 2024

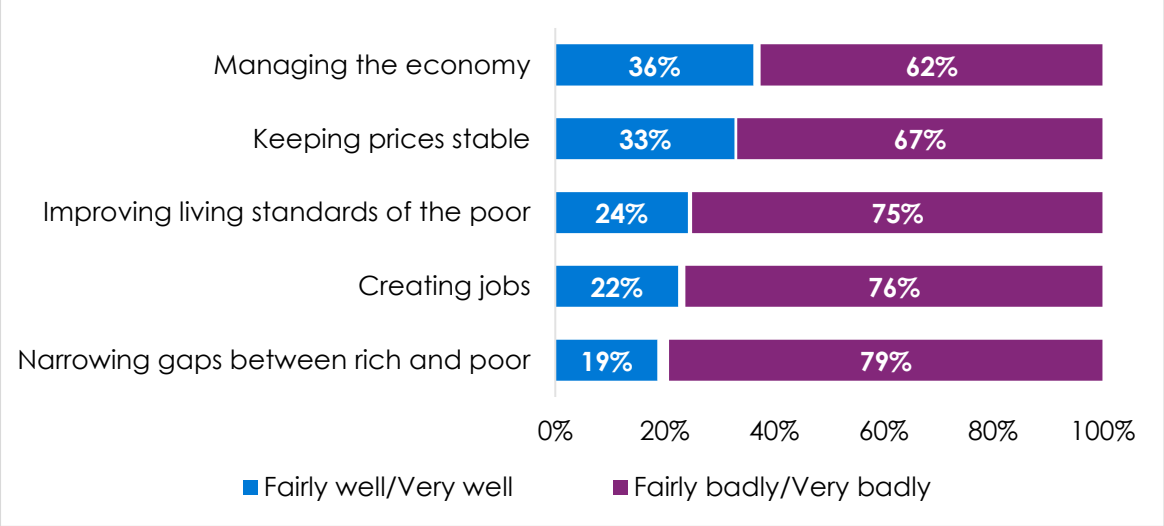


***Respondents were asked:** In the past year, did you have to turn to any of the following for assistance to make ends meet?*

Government performance on the economy

Most Kenyans are dissatisfied with the government's performance on key economic issues (Figure 9). More than six in 10 respondents (62%) say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on managing the economy, and even larger majorities give the government poor ratings on keeping prices stable (67%), improving the living standards of the poor (75%), creating jobs (76%), and narrowing gaps between rich and poor (79%).

Figure 9: Government performance on the economy | Kenya | 2024

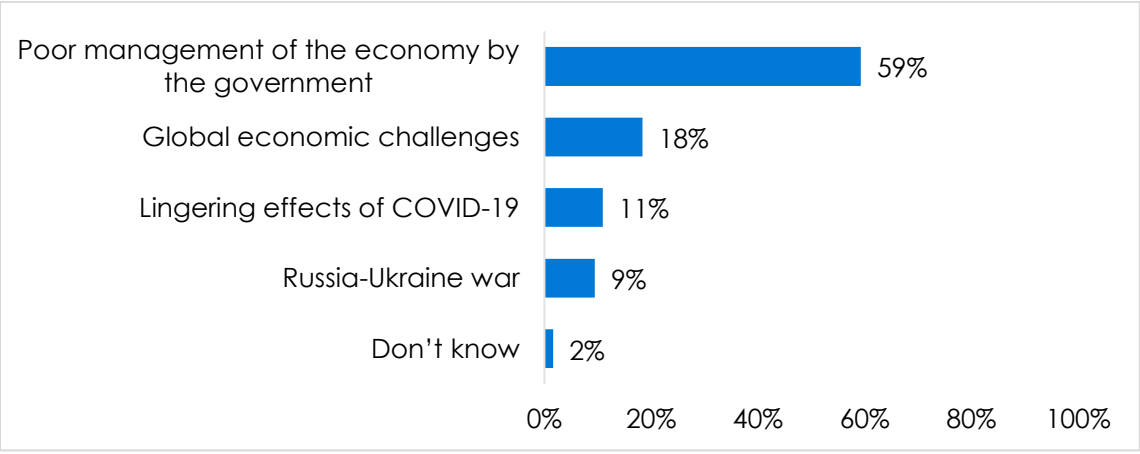


Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Reasons for increasing cost of living

When asked about the causes of the increasing cost of living, about six in 10 Kenyans (59%) say it is the government's poor management of the economy (Figure 10). Far fewer blame global economic challenges (18%), the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (11%), and the Russia-Ukraine war (9%).

Figure 10: Main reason for increasing cost of living | Kenya | 2024



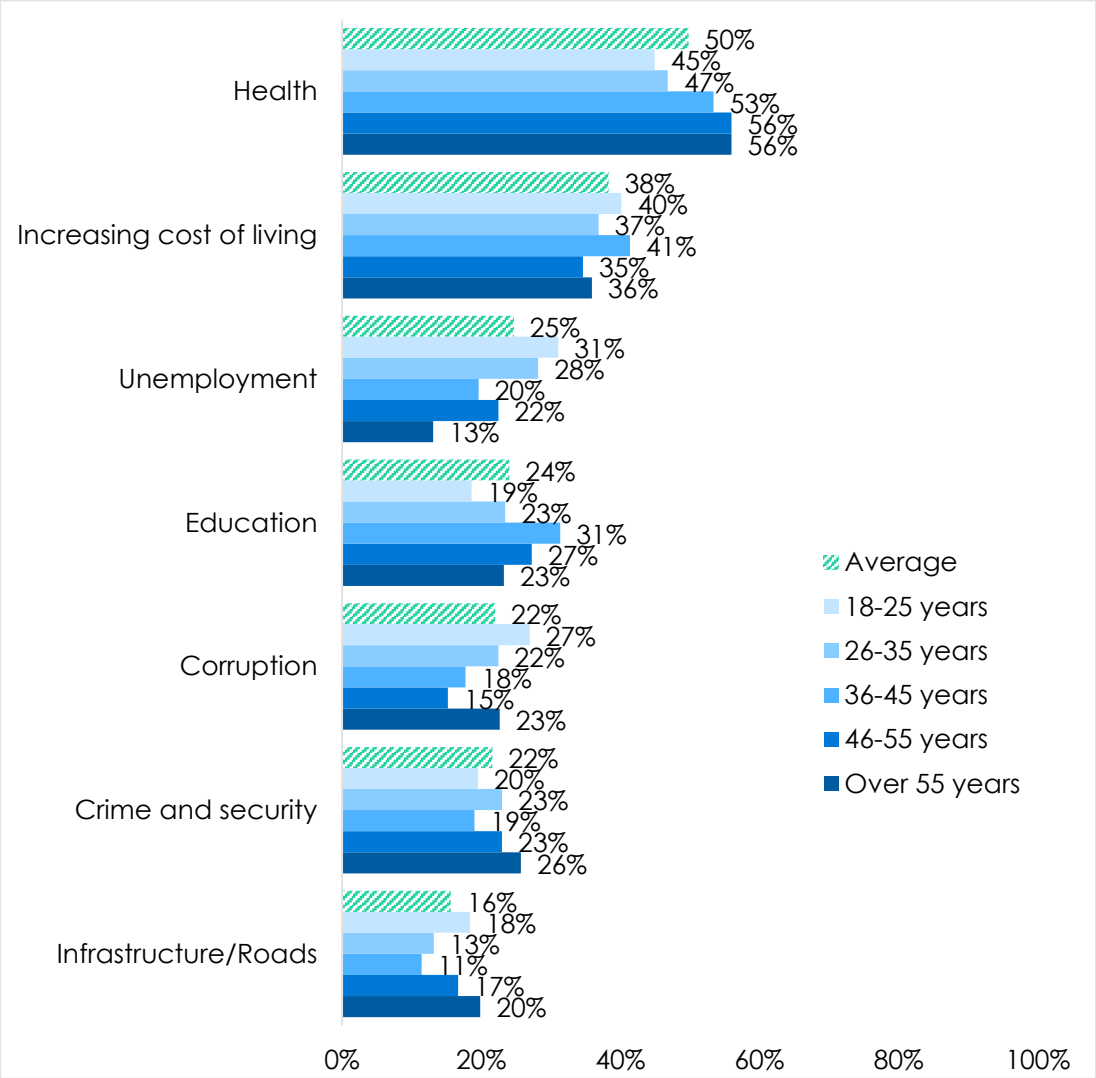
Respondents were asked: *There are several reasons that have been given to explain the increasing cost of living. In your opinion, which of the following is most to blame for the current increased cost of living in Kenya?*

Most important problems

Asked what they consider Kenya's most important problems requiring government action, respondents most frequently cite health (50%), followed by the increasing cost of living (38%) and unemployment (25%) (Figure 11). More than one in five also cite education (24%), crime and security (22%), and corruption (22%) as top concerns.

Health is of particular concern for citizens over age 35 (53%-56%), while unemployment is of greatest concern among youth (28%-31%).

Figure 11: Most important problems in the country | by age group | Kenya | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows the percentage of respondents who cite each issue as one of up to three priorities.)*

Conclusion

The latest Afrobarometer survey findings indicate that most Kenyans are dissatisfied with the country's economic direction. A majority of citizens experienced shortages of basic life necessities during the previous year, and many had to rely on family or friends for assistance to make ends meet.

Citizens cite health, the increasing cost of living, and unemployment as the most important problems that the government should address. But most give the government poor marks on its performance on economic issues, and a majority blame the government's poor economic management for the increasing cost of living.

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.

References

Kamau, P. (2021). Kenyans grow more discontent with country's economic performance. Afrobarometer Dispatch 422.

Kamau, P., & Balongo, S. (2023). For the first time in a decade, Kenyans see management of the economy as their most important problem. Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 754.

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Economic survey 2021.

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2024). 2024 economic survey (popular version).

Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 84.

Nechifor, V., Ferrari, E., Kihiu, E., Laichena, J. Omanyo, D., Musamali, R., & Kiriga, B. (2020). COVID-19 impacts and short-term economic recovery in Kenya. Publications Office of the European Union.

Onsomu, E., Munga, B., & Nyabaro, V. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on industries without smokestacks in Kenya: The case of horticulture, ICT, and tourism sectors. Brookings. 28 July.

World Bank. (2023). Kenya economic update: A balancing act – opportunities for making growth more inclusive during challenging times. 28th edition.

Laura Barasa is co-national investigator for Afrobarometer in Kenya and a senior lecturer in the Department of Economics and Development Studies at the University of Nairobi. Email: lauranelima@uonbi.ac.ke.

Paul Kamau is the National Investigator for the Afrobarometer in Kenya and director of research at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi. Email: pkamau@uonbi.ac.ke.

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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminate, the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a donation to Afrobarometer. To make an online donation, kindly follow this link or this link. To discuss institutional funding, contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org).

For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 935 | 10 January 2025