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Ugandans optimistic about country's direction but unhappy with economic management

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 962 | Caroline Nakayiza and Ategeka J. Kamara

Summary

Uganda's economic growth has remained steady with visible improvements in infrastructure, such as better roads, increased electrification, and the expansion of public facilities (PwC, 2024). These developments, often associated with government initiatives like the Parish Development Model (PDM), create tangible evidence of progress and foster a sense of national advancement.

The country recorded 6% growth in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023/2024, and projections indicate further acceleration as preparations for commercial oil production proceed (African Development Bank, 2024). Inflation declined to 3.2% in Fiscal Year 2024, reflecting improved macroeconomic conditions (World Bank, 2024), and the government has announced policies aimed at economic stability and revenue mobilisation, including plans to increase tax collections and reduce the budget deficit to 4.5% of GDP.

Despite this positive trajectory, observers voice concerns about the government's economic management as rising public debt, which reached 52% of GDP in June 2023, and increasing debt-servicing costs raise questions about fiscal sustainability (Sanday, 2024). Persistent high rates of poverty and unemployment and high commodity prices add to public concerns (KPMG, 2024).

According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, a growing majority of Ugandans say the country is on the right track. But a majority still describe the country's economic condition as bad, and only half are optimistic that things will get better in the near future. Citizens' ratings of the government's performance on key economic issues remain overwhelmingly negative.

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 January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans in January 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 standard surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Key findings

- Nearly six in 10 Ugandans (56%) believe the country is going "in the right direction," up 6 percentage points since 2022.
- But the same proportion (56%) of citizens describe the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad."
  - Compared to 12 months earlier, nearly half (48%) of Ugandans say the economy has gotten "worse" or "much worse," while the other half say it is better (30%) or unchanged (20%).
  - Four in 10 respondents (42%) expect things to get better over the next 12 months.
- Almost half (47%) of Ugandans say their personal living conditions are "fairly bad" or "very bad." More than half (55%) say they worsened during the previous year.
- Most Ugandans experienced some form of lived poverty during the previous year, including large majorities who say they or a family member went without a cash income (91%), medical care (74%), enough food (65%), and/or enough cooking fuel (64%) at least once.
  - Seven in 10 respondents (70%) experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty during the previous 12 months.
- A majority of Ugandans are dissatisfied with the government's performance on key economic issues. More than half (54%) describe its management of the economy as "fairly bad" or "very bad," and larger majorities offer poor ratings on improving the living standards of the poor (58%), creating jobs (63%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (76%), and keeping prices stable (80%).
- Economic issues take a back seat to public services in Ugandans' list of priorities for government action, led by health, education, infrastructure/roads, and water supply. But unemployment, poverty, the increasing cost of living, food shortage/famine, and management of the economy also rank among the top 12.

Overall direction of the country

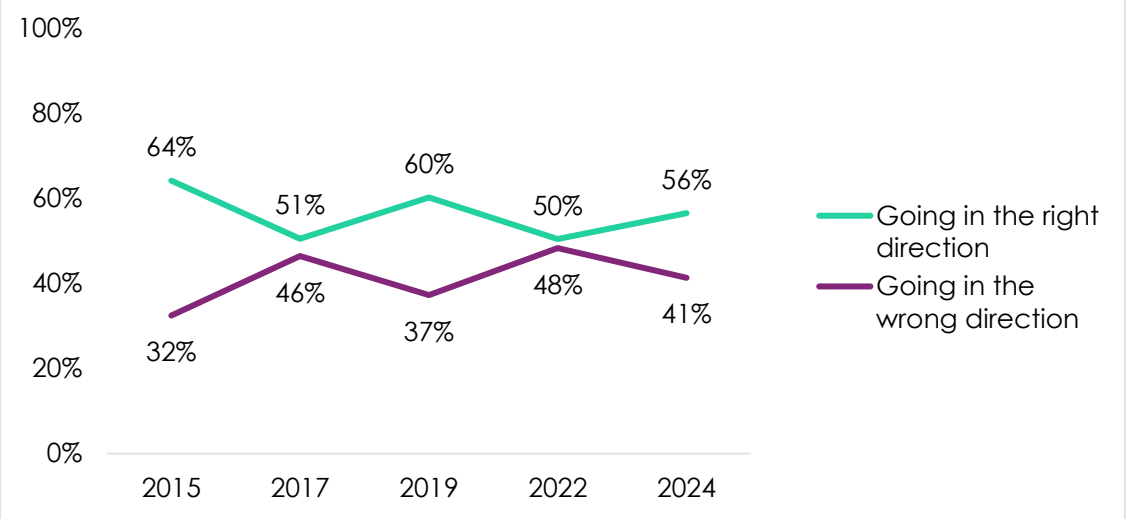
More than half (56%) of Ugandans say the country is heading in "the right direction," a 6-percentage-point increase since 2022 (50%) (Figure 1). The proportion of citizens who see the country as headed in "the wrong direction," 41% in 2024, has fluctuated between 32% and 48% over the past decade.

Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to say the country is going in the right direction (60% vs. 49%) (Figure 2). Favourable assessments of the country's overall direction decrease as respondents' education level rises, ranging from 61% among those with no formal schooling to 45% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

But approval of the country's direction is significantly higher among economically well-off respondents (65%) than among those experiencing moderate high levels of lived poverty (52%).[1]

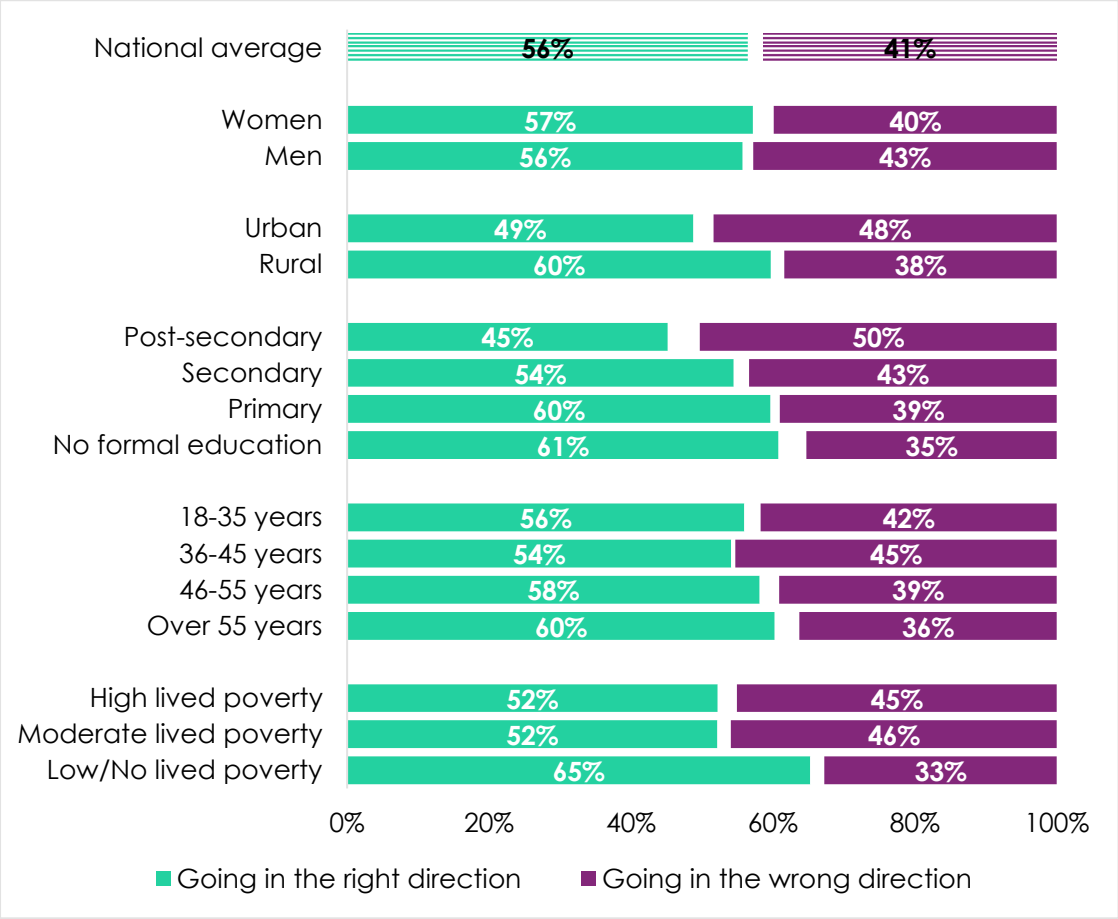
[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

Figure 1: Direction of the country | Uganda | 2015-2024



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: Direction of the country | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024

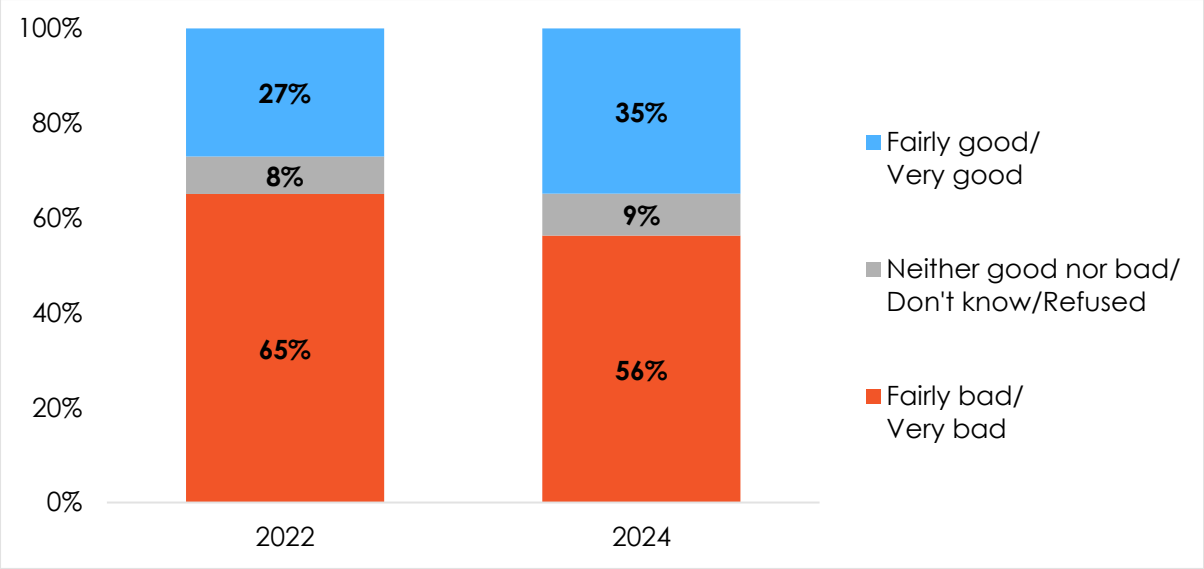


Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

Country's economic condition and individual living conditions

Even though a majority of Ugandans see the country as moving in the right direction, only about one-third (35%) describe its current economic situation as "fairly good" or "very good" (Figure 3). Still, that's an 8-percentage-point improvement compared to 2022.

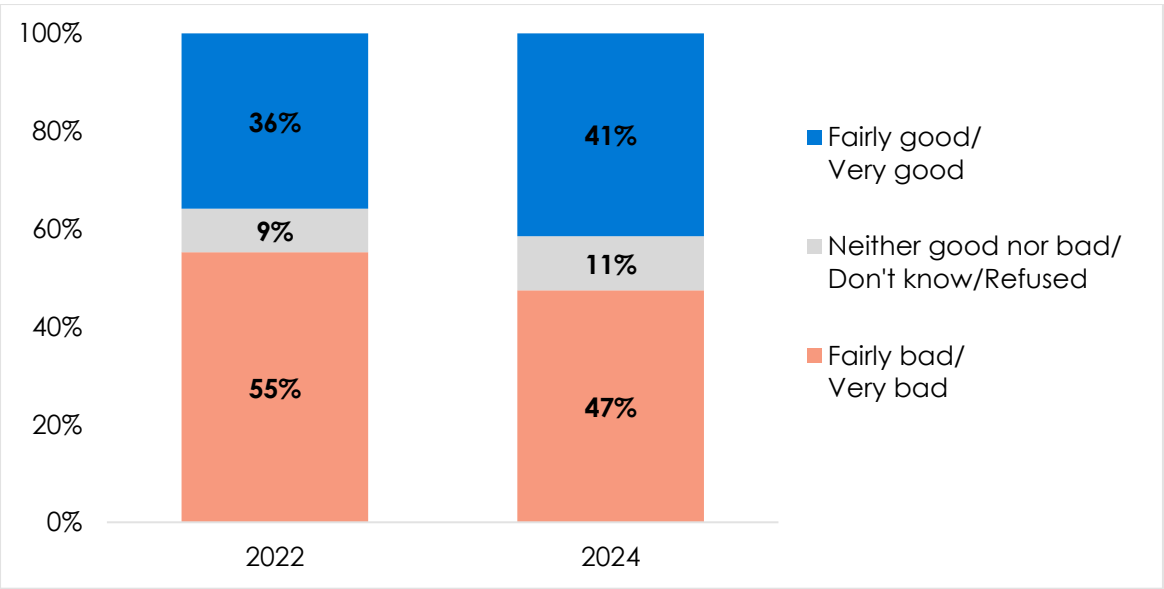
Figure 3: Country's economic condition | Uganda | 2022-2024



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

Ugandans' assessments of their personal living conditions show a slight improvement compared to 2022. Fewer than half (47%) now describe their living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad," down from 55% in 2022, while 41% say they are good (Figure 4).

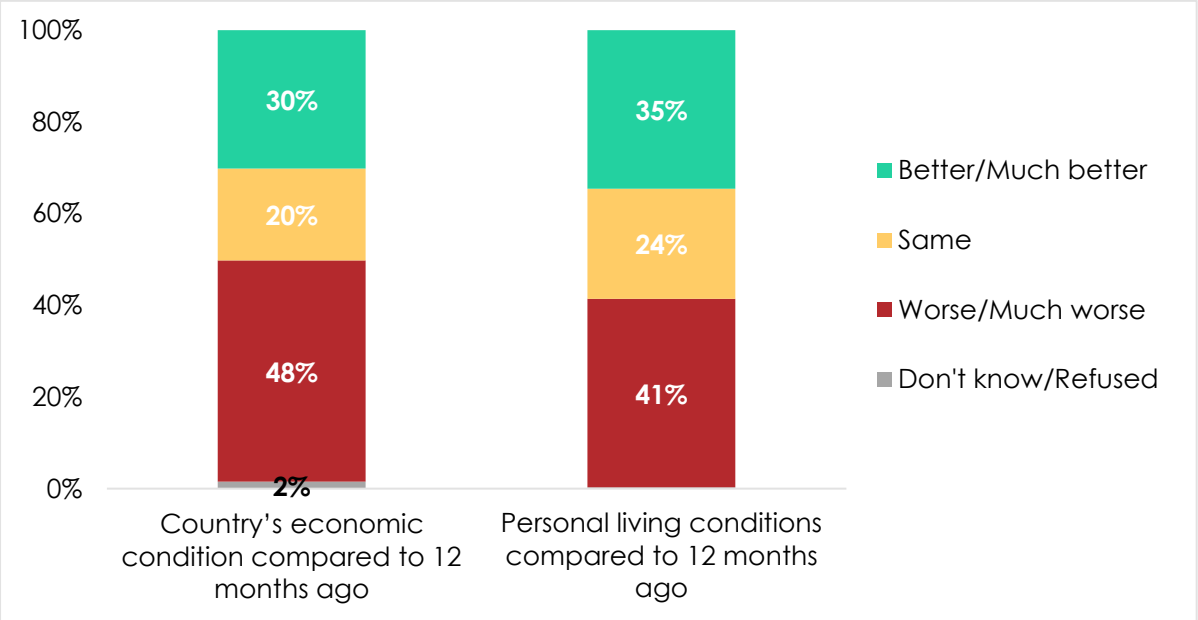
Figure 4: Personal living conditions | Uganda | 2022-2024



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

Only 30% of respondents think the country's economic situation improved over the previous 12 months, while 48% say it got worse and 20% see no change (Figure 5). Similarly, while 35% say their personal living conditions improved, 41% say they deteriorated.

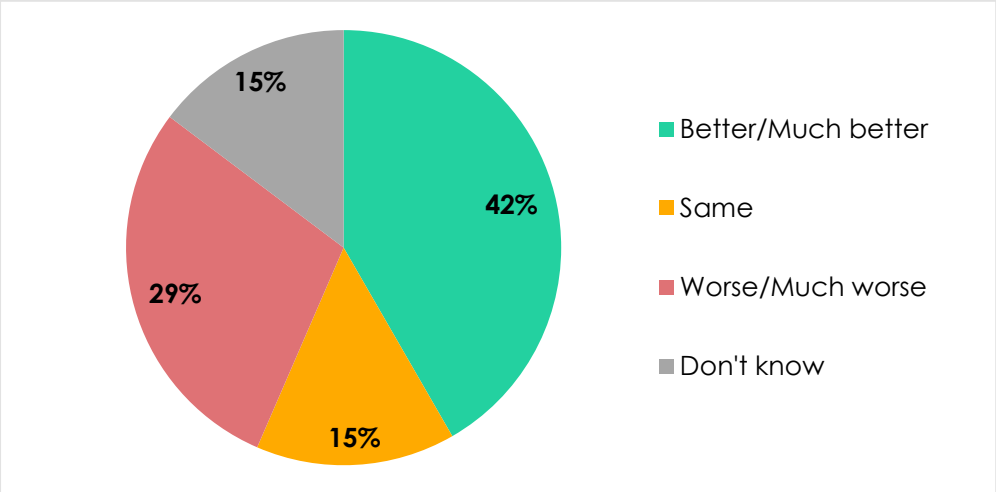
Figure 5: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions compared to 12 months ago | Uganda | 2024



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

Fewer than half (42%) of Ugandans believe that the country's economic condition will get "better" or "much better" over the next 12 months (Figure 6). Three in 10 (29%) expect things to get worse, while 15% foresee no change and 15% offer no opinion.

Figure 6: Country's economic condition in 12 months' time | Uganda | 2024



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

Lived poverty

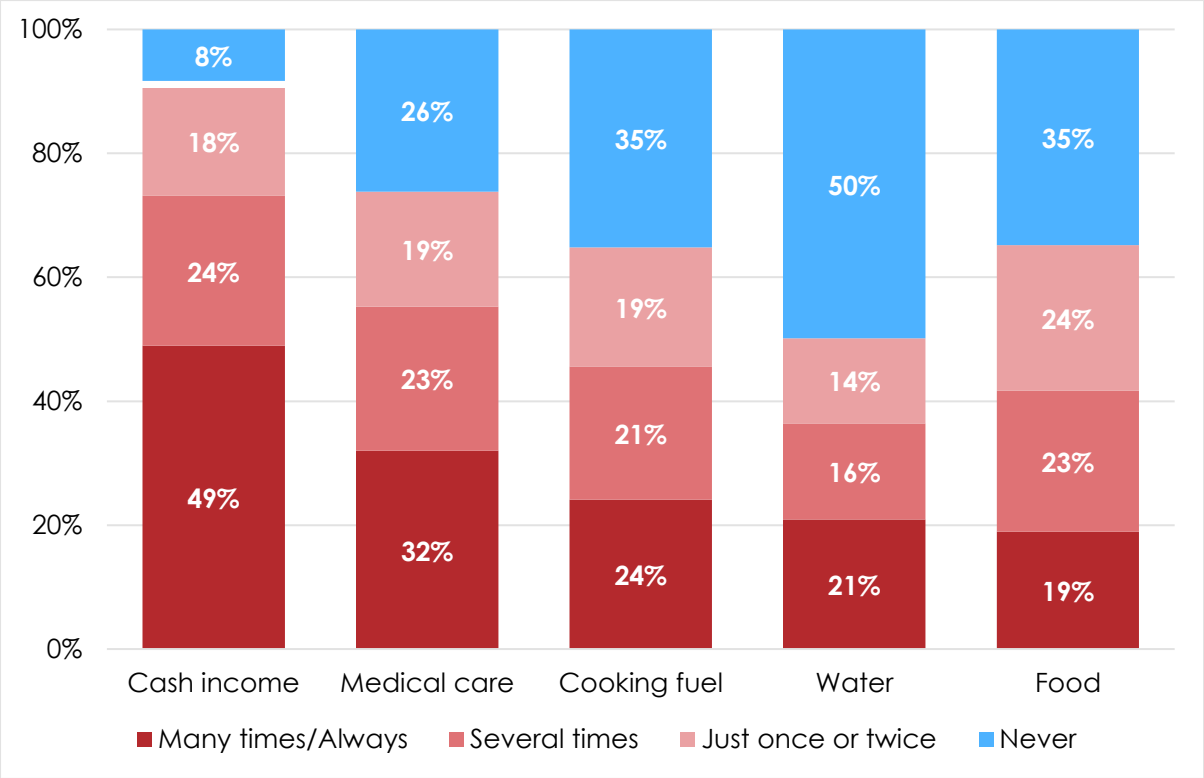
Ugandans' less-than-rosy assessments of the economy and their living conditions reflect a widespread experience of lived poverty, or going without five basic life necessities.

About three-fourths (74%) of respondents say they or a family member went without needed medical care at least once during the previous year, including 32% who say this happened "many times" or "always" (Figure 7).

About two-thirds report experiencing shortages of food (65%) and cooking fuel (64%), and half (50%) say they went without enough clean water.

The most common form of material deprivation was a lack of a cash income, experienced at least once by nine out of 10 Ugandans (91%), including half (49%) who say this occurred "many times" or "always."

Figure 7: Lack of basic necessities | Uganda | 2024

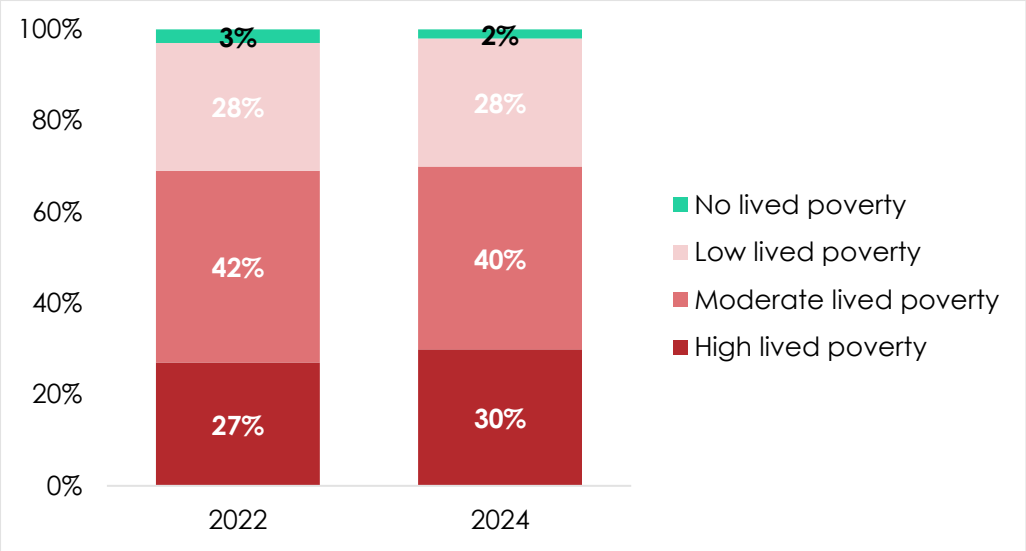


Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

Based on responses to the reported shortages of the five necessities, Lived Poverty Index scores indicate that seven in 10 Ugandans (70%) experienced moderate (40%) or high (30%) levels of lived poverty during the preceding year (Figure 8). Only one in 50 (2%) enjoyed no lived poverty (i.e. suffered no shortages of the five necessities).

These levels are similar to those recorded in 2022, with a marginal increase (+3 percentage points) in the "high lived poverty" category.

Figure 8: Levels of lived poverty | Uganda | 2022-2024

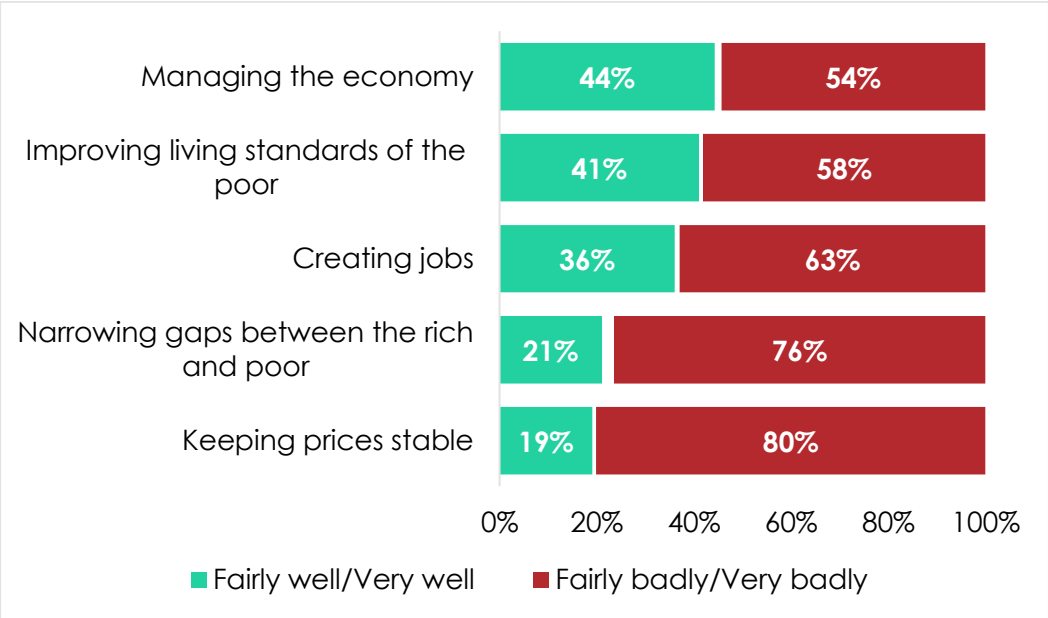


***Lived Poverty Index scores** are computed from responses to the following questions; Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

Government performance on the economy

A majority of Ugandans are dissatisfied with the government's performance on key economic concerns (Figure 9). Overall, more than half (54%) say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on managing the economy, and even larger majorities give the government poor ratings on improving the living standards of the poor (58%), creating jobs (63%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (76%), and keeping prices stable (80%).

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



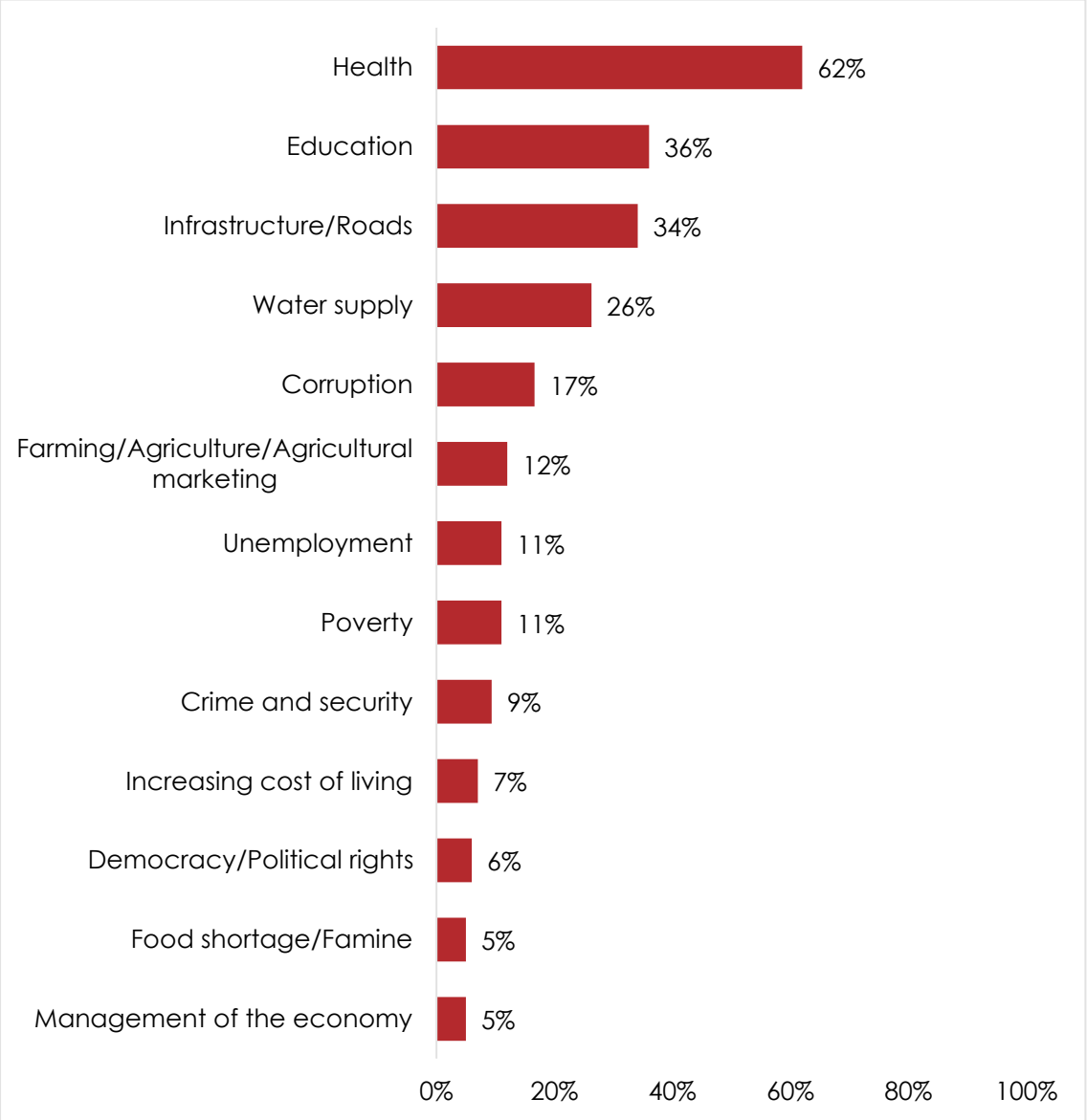
***Respondents were asked;** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Most important problems

Despite their experience of poverty and dim perceptions of the economy, economic issues do not top the list of citizens' concerns in Uganda. Asked what they consider the most important problems requiring government action, respondents most frequently cite service-delivery issues – health (62%), education (36%), infrastructure/roads (34%), and water supply (26%) (Figure 10).

Unemployment (11%) and poverty (11%) rank seventh and eighth on the list, while the increasing cost of living (7%), food insecurity (5%), and management of the economy (5%) also make the top 12.

Figure 10: Most important problems that government should address | Uganda | 2024



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 were recorded; figure shows percentage of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)*

Conclusion

Even though a majority of Ugandans believe that their country is headed in the right direction, their economic realities paint a more challenging image of the national condition. Afrobarometer Round 10 survey findings show widespread dissatisfaction with the economy, personal living conditions, and the government's performance on key economic indicators. As many families contend with frequent shortages of basic life necessities, addressing economic challenges will be paramount in upholding public confidence and ensuring that the optimism expressed by many Ugandans translates into tangible improvements in their daily lives.

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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