

Ugandans report inability to meet basic needs, look to government to improve their well-being

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1001 | Kansime Grace, Kamanyire Venance, Nakkazi Winfred Margret, and Asimwe Ann

Summary

Alongside disease, poverty is one of the biggest threats to human survival and flourishing. Globally, 8.5% of the world population, approximately 700 million people, are classified as living in extreme poverty, defined as surviving on less than U.S. \$2.15 per day (World Bank, 2024). Although the COVID-19 pandemic is over, developing-world economies, particularly in Africa, have been deeply scarred by pandemic-related job losses, investment declines, and interruptions in global trade flows (Sánchez-Páramo, Hill, Mahler, Narayan, & Yonzan, 2021). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also had significant impacts on African economies, especially through commodity price shocks (Phillis & Raga, 2025). Even before COVID-19, African economies were not growing fast enough or with sufficient inclusion to reduce poverty (World Bank, 2024). Thus, while poverty levels have been trending downward in other developing countries, they are on the rise in sub-Saharan Africa, as has been captured in Afrobarometer surveys (United Nations Commission for Africa, 2024; Mattes & Lekalake, 2025).

In Uganda, the National Resistance Movement's top priority when it came to power in 1986 was to build an "independent, integrated, self-sustaining national economy" (Mulera, 2020). Under this pillar of the governing party's 10-point programme, the government has launched a series of poverty-alleviation initiatives since the 1990s (Observer, 2022). However, these programmes have mostly failed due to high levels of graft, nepotism, inflated administrative costs, red tape, and financial illiteracy among intended beneficiaries (Sharon, 2025). Currently, the government is implementing the third iteration of the National Development Plan as a way to spur economic growth and tackle poverty (National Planning Authority, 2020). Yet even before the COVID-19 shocks, poverty in Uganda was barely coming down, declining from 31% in 2012/2013 to 30% in 2019/2020 (World Bank, 2023).

This dispatch presents findings on Ugandans' experience of material deprivation based on Afrobarometer survey data from 2024. Lived poverty remains at record levels as majorities of households had to do without needed medical care, enough food, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income on one or more occasions during the previous year. More than half of respondents sought financial assistance from family members, while almost half requested help from friends or neighbours to make ends meet.

Despite government efforts to deal with poverty, nearly six in 10 Ugandans rate the government poorly on its poverty-fighting efforts. And majorities say it is doing a poor job of reducing inequality, creating jobs, and managing the economy.

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 random stratified 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 Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Key findings

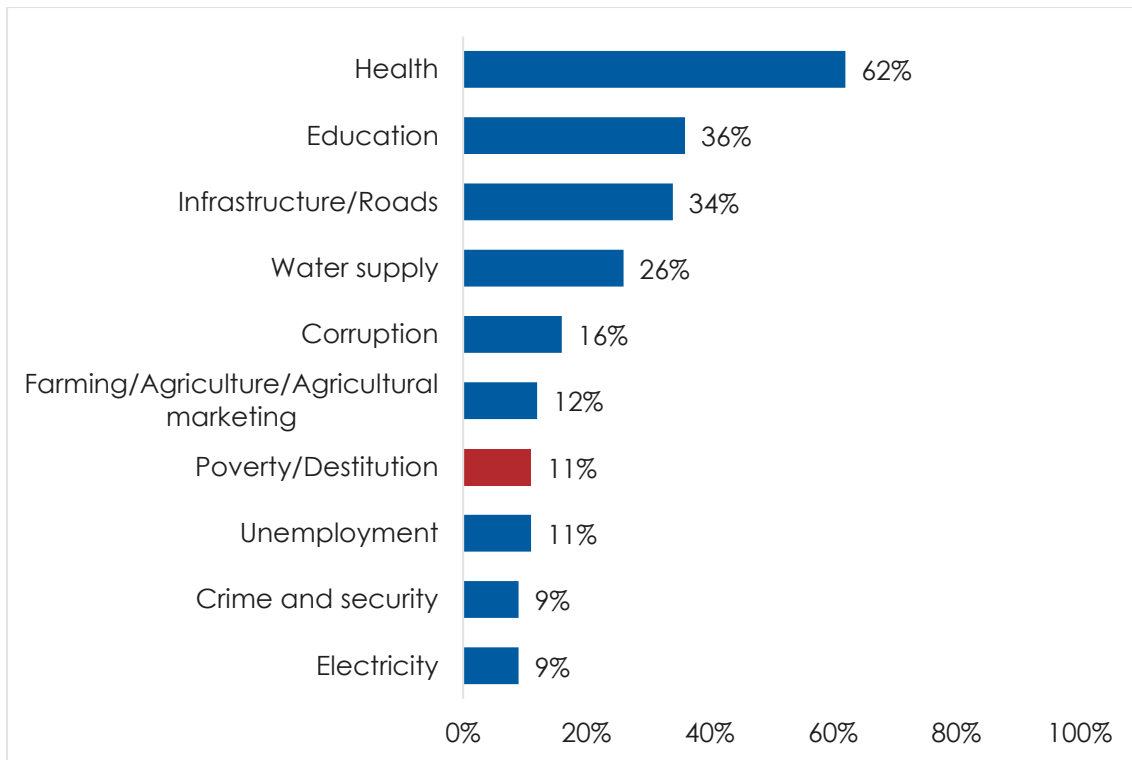
- Nine in 10 Ugandans (91%) say they or their family members went without a cash income at least once during the past year.
 - Three-fourths (74%) say they went without medical care, while about two-thirds lacked cooking fuel (65%) and food (65%) at least once. Half (50%) had insufficient clean water on one or more occasions.
 - Rural Ugandans are more likely than their urban counterparts to have gone without water (+10 percentage points), food (+9 points), and medical care (+7 points).
- Seven in 10 Ugandans experienced high (30%) or moderate (40%) levels of lived poverty during the previous year.
 - The share of citizens experiencing moderate or high lived poverty is unchanged from 2022 (70%) but up by 23 percentage points from 2015 (47%).
- A majority (56%) of respondents say they sought financial assistance from family members in the preceding year, including 35% who did so "several times" or "often."
 - Almost half (48%) say they turned to friends or neighbours for help to make ends meet.
- Nearly six in 10 Ugandans (58%) say the government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in tackling poverty, while three-fourths (76%) disapprove of its efforts to reduce economic inequality.

Poverty as a priority for government to address

Despite several poverty-reduction interventions by the Ugandan government, poverty remains a priority area that citizens want the government to address. Poverty ranks seventh among citizens' priorities for government action, cited by 11% of respondents as one of the country's three most important problems (Figure 1).

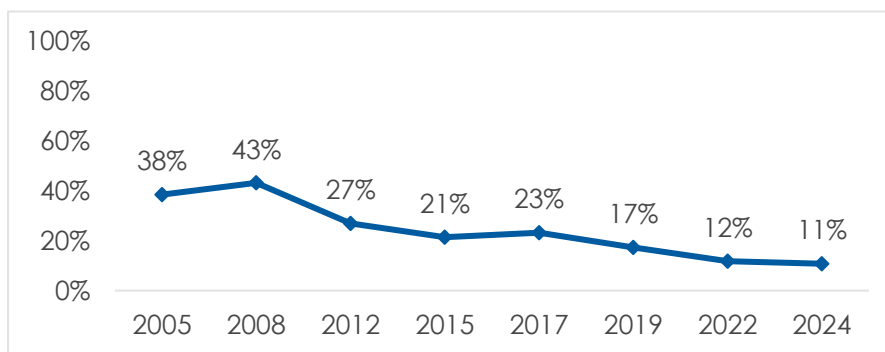
However, the share of Ugandans who cite poverty or destitution as a top priority has declined by 32 percentage points since 2008 (43%), and by about half since 2017 (23%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Poverty as a most important problem | 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 person; figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

Figure 2: Poverty as a most important problem | Uganda | 2005-2024



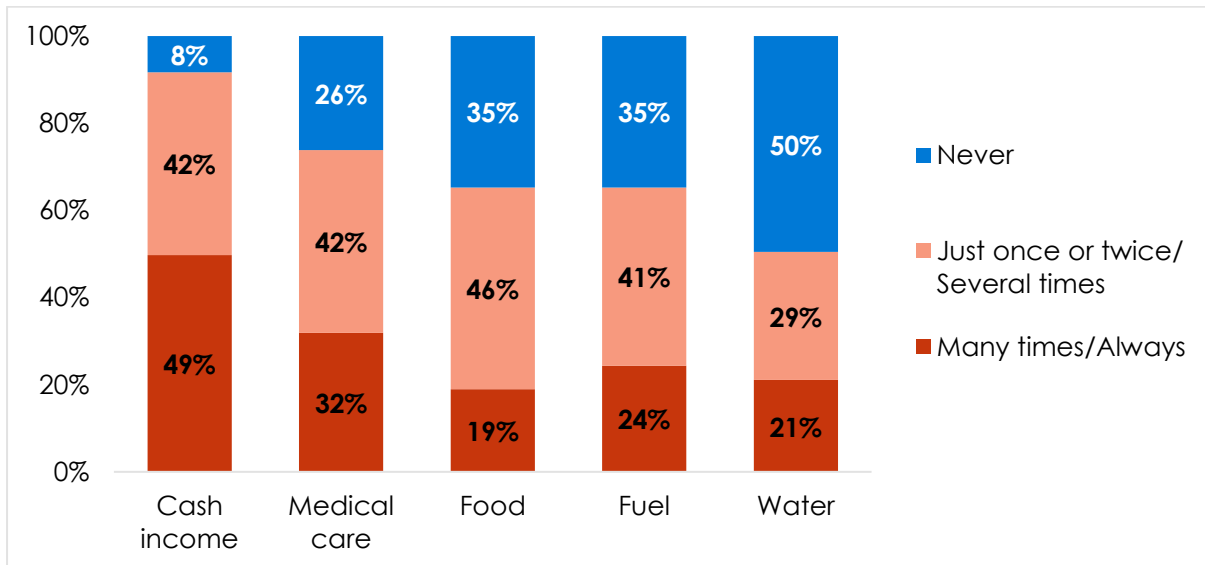
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Figure shows % of respondents who cite poverty and destitution as one of up to three priorities.)

Lived poverty: Going without basic necessities

As a way of measuring material deprivation, Afrobarometer asked respondents how often they or someone in their family had gone without certain essentials, namely enough food, enough clean water, enough cooking fuel, medical care, and a cash income.

Survey results show that large majorities of Ugandans struggle to meet their basic needs. Nine in 10 (91%) went without a cash income at least once in the year preceding the survey, including half (49%) who missed out “many times” or “always” (Figure 3). Majorities experienced shortages of medical care or medicines (74%), food (65%), and fuel (65%) on one or more occasions, while half (50%) lacked water.

Figure 3: Went without basic necessities in past 12 months | Uganda | 2024

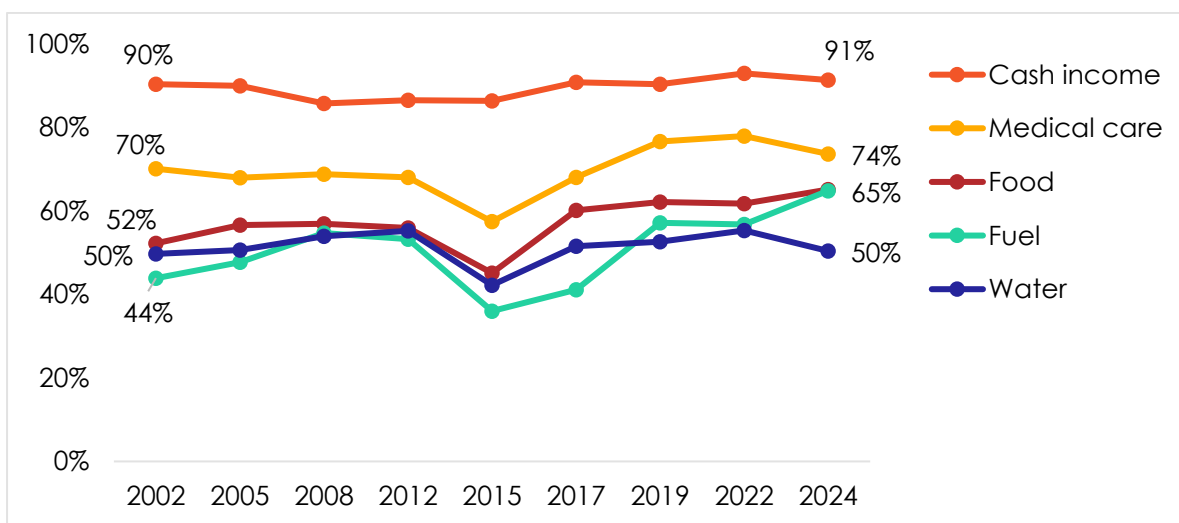


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Historically, a cash income has consistently been the most commonly cited of these basic necessities that citizens have gone without, hovering around the nine-tenths mark since 2002 (Figure 4).

The proportions of Ugandans going without the other four essentials show a dip in 2015 but have since lost those gains. Compared to 2002, a lack of medical care is up by 4 percentage points, and shortages of food and fuel are up by 13 and 21 points, respectively. The share of citizens experiencing a shortage of water is the same as it was in 2002.

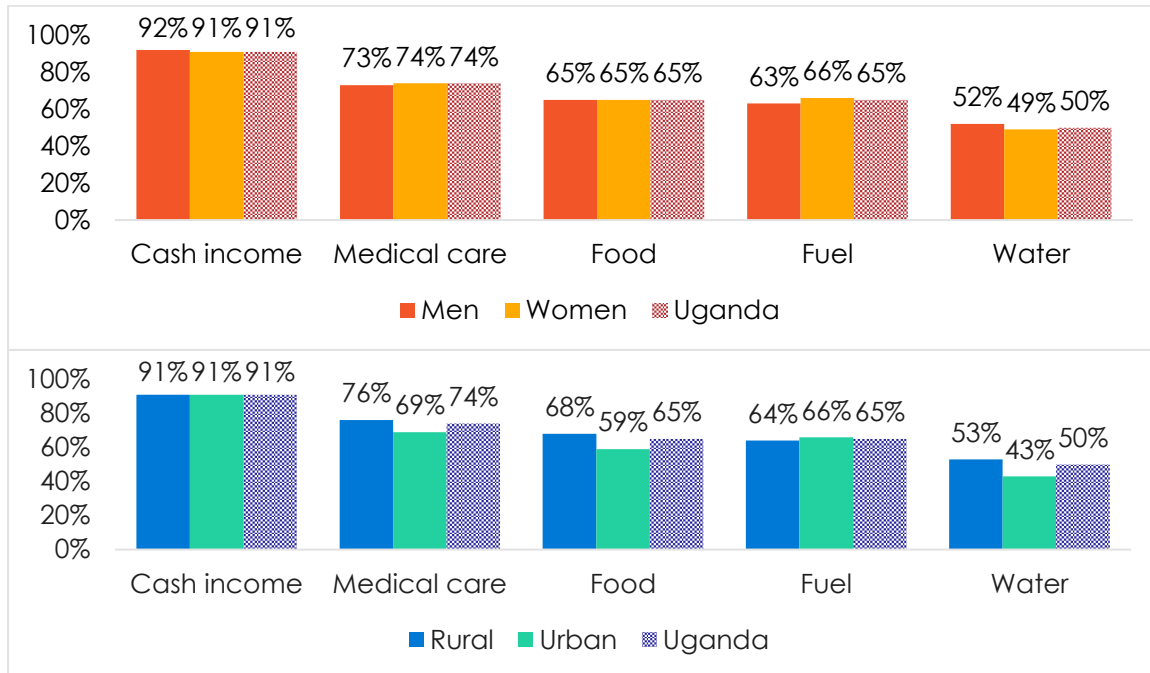
Figure 4: Went without basic necessities in past 12 months | Uganda | 2002-2024



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? (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

Men and women report experiences of deprivation at similar rates (Figure 5). But rural residents are more likely than urbanities to have gone without water (53% vs. 43%), food (68% vs. 59%), and medical care (76% vs. 69%).

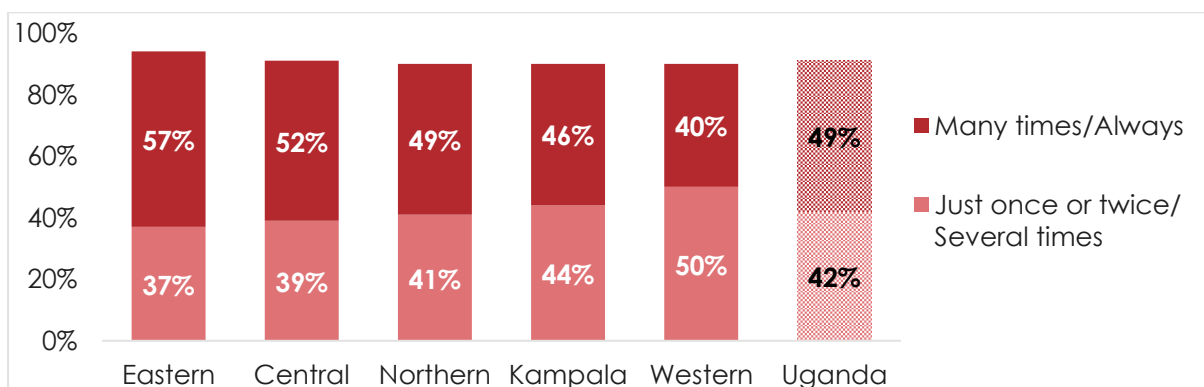
Figure 5: Went without basic necessities in past 12 months | by gender and urban-rural location | Uganda | 2024



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? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

Going without a cash income is a pervasive problem across the country; in every region, at least nine in 10 respondents say they lacked an income at least once (Figure 6). And the intensity of monetary deprivation is high: Majorities in Eastern and Central Uganda report going without a cash income “many times” or “always,” while between four and five in 10 residents from other regions say the same.

Figure 6: Went without a cash income in past 12 months | by region | Uganda | 2024



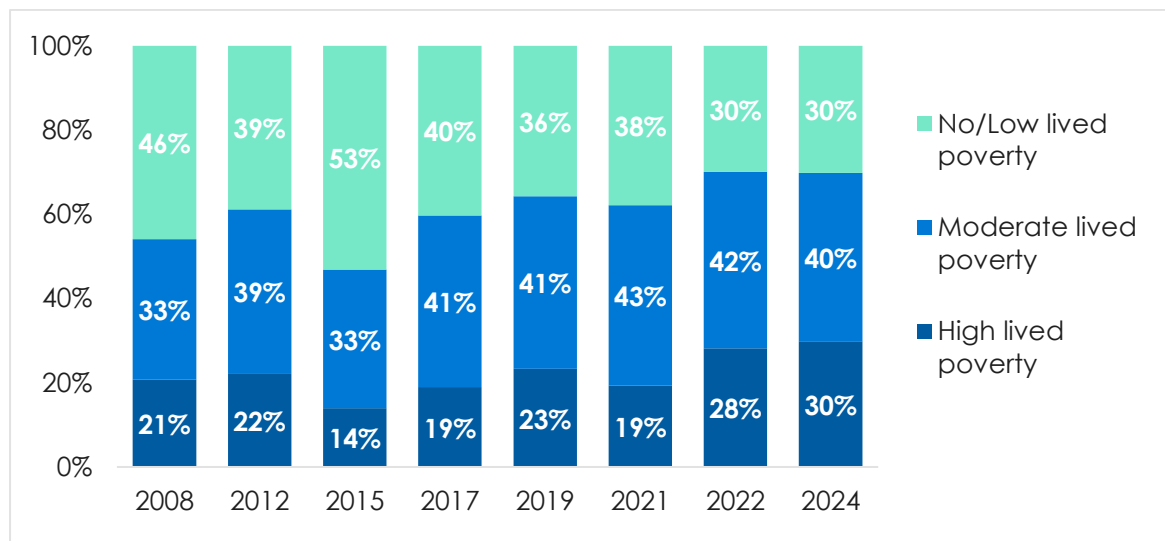
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: A cash income?

Lived Poverty Index (LPI)

Averaging responses to the five questions about going without basic necessities allows us to calculate and compare Lived Poverty Index (LPI) scores for individuals, demographic groups, and countries (Mattes & Lekalake, 2025).

Three in 10 Ugandans (30%) experienced high lived poverty during the past year, while a further 40% lived with moderate levels of poverty (Figure 7). The 70% who experienced moderate or high lived poverty matches the record high registered in 2022, an increase of 23 percentage points compared to 2015 (47%).

Figure 7: Levels of lived poverty | Uganda | 2008-2024



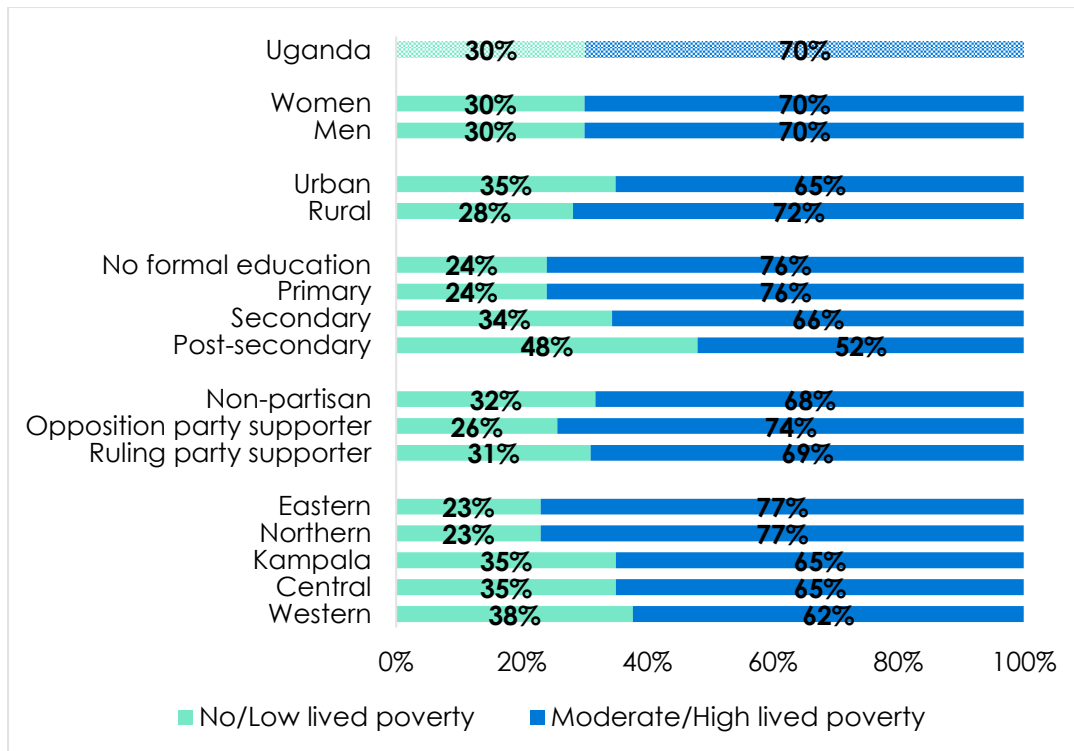
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Rural communities record a greater prevalence of moderate/high lived poverty than urban areas (72% vs. 65%), as do the Northern and Eastern regions (both 77%) compared to the other three parts of the country (62%-65%) (Figure 8). Opposition party supporters are slightly more likely to report moderate/high lived poverty than supporters of the regime (69%) and non-partisans (68%).

The greatest differences are found across education levels: About half (52%) of citizens with post-secondary education experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty, compared to three-fourths of respondents with primary education or less (76%).

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Figure 8: Levels of lived poverty | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



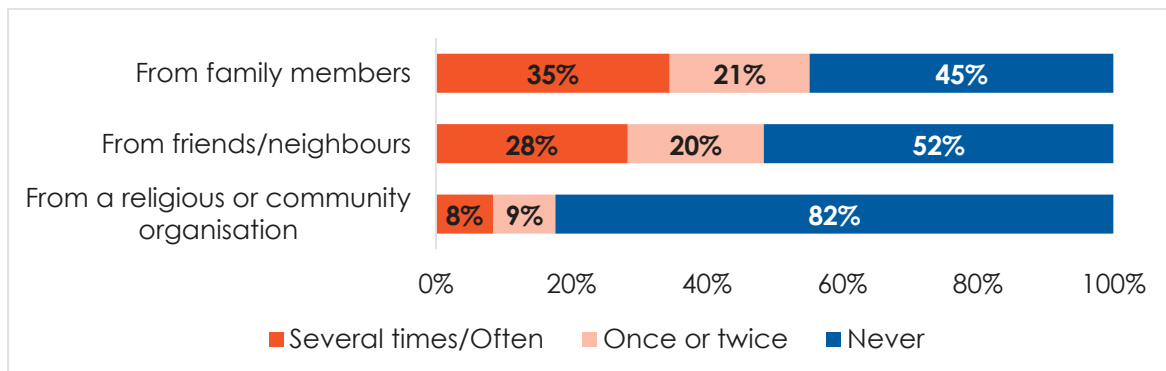
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?

Sought assistance to make ends meet

Seeking financial assistance may be another indicator of poverty, since it suggests that one is incapable of covering one's expenses. Asked whether they had to turn to someone else for help to make ends meet in the past year, more than half (56%) of respondents say they requested assistance from a family member, including 35% who did so "several times" or "often" (Figure 9).

Similarly, nearly half (48%) report asking friends or neighbours for financial assistance, while one-sixth (17%) turned to a religious or community organisation.

Figure 9: Requested financial assistance in the past 12 months | Uganda | 2024



Respondents were asked: In the past year, did you have to turn to any of the following for assistance to make ends meet: Was this often, several times or once or twice?

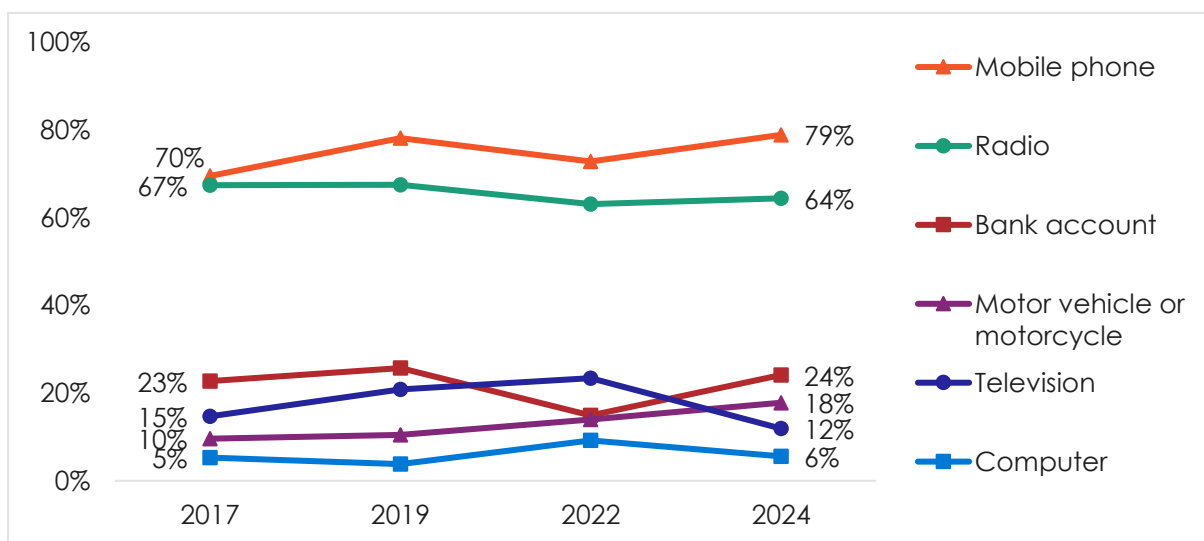
Asset ownership

Asset ownership is one of the elements that contribute to material welfare. How have levels of asset ownership in Uganda changed over time?

Eight in 10 respondents (79%) say they own a mobile phone, up from seven in 10 (70%) in 2017 (Figure 10). Ownership of motor vehicles or motorcycles has also increased, from 10% to 18%.

Ownership levels of other key assets have fluctuated over the past survey rounds, but remain close to 2017 levels. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans have their own radio. But fewer than one-fourth have a bank account (24%), a television (12%), or a computer (6%).

Figure 10: Asset ownership | Uganda | 2017-2024

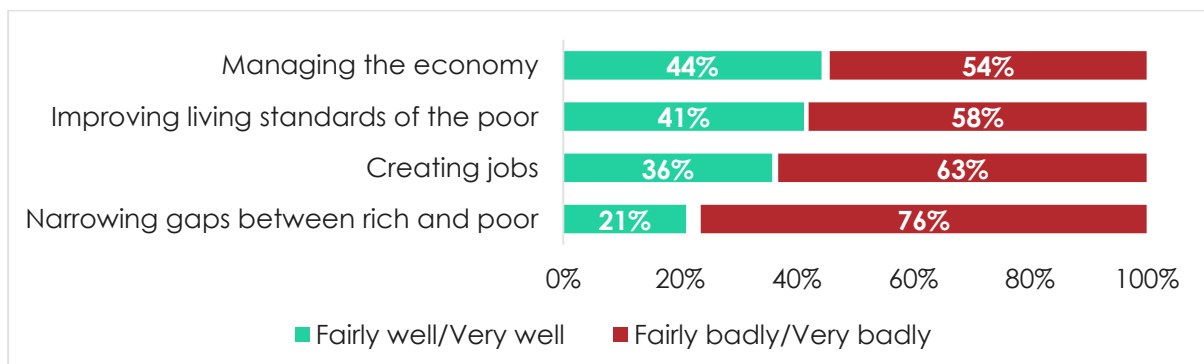


Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

Government performance on key economic indicators

Majorities of Ugandans rate the government poorly for its performance on several key economic indicators. Three-fourths (76%) say it is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on reducing gaps between the rich and the poor (Figure 11). Almost two-thirds (63%) say it doing a poor job on job creation, while more than half negatively appraise its efforts on poverty (58%) and overall economic management (54%).

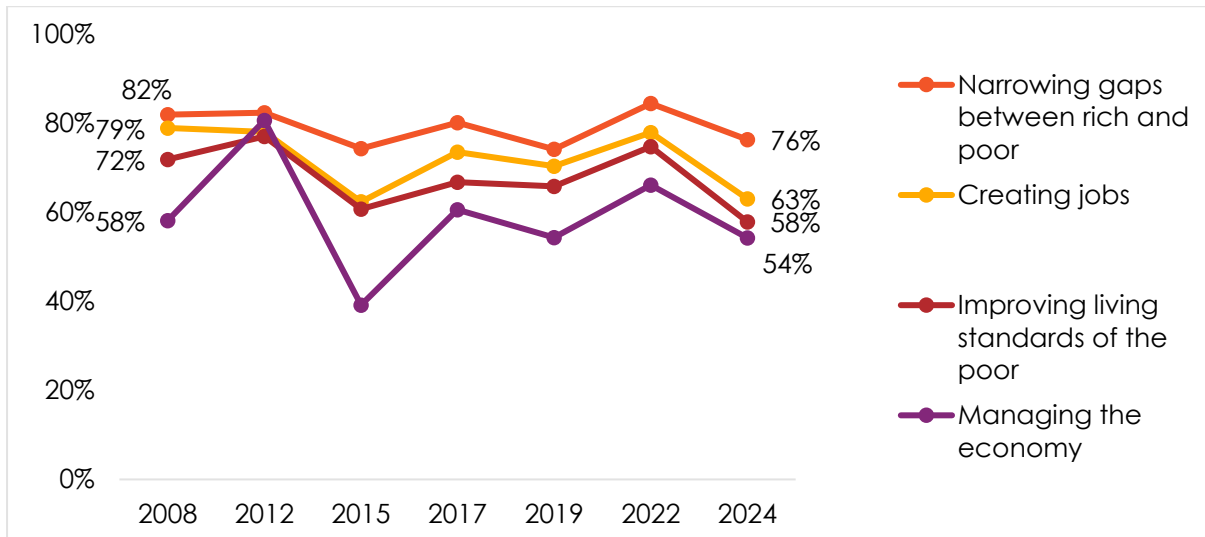
Figure 11: Government performance on key economic indicators | Uganda | 2024



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?

Over the years, negative ratings of the government's performance on key economic indicators have consistently been a majority position (Figure 12). However, the proportion who criticise it for its poverty-reduction efforts (58%) is at a new low, down by 17 percentage points from 2022. The three other economic indicators considered – reducing inequality, creating jobs, and managing the economy – are also down since the previous survey.

Figure 12: Negative assessments of government performance on key economic indicators | Uganda | 2008-2024



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? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey findings show that a majority of Ugandans continue to struggle to meet their basic needs for food, medical care, and a cash income. The government's efforts to reduce poverty have fallen short of ensuring acceptable standards of living for many households, and a majority of citizens report having to ask family and/or friends for help to make ends meet.

The findings suggest a need to assess poverty-reduction strategies implemented by the government, which most citizens see as failing on key economic performance indicators.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 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 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, and GIZ.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1001 | 19 June 2025