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Lived Poverty in Africa: Desperation, Hope and Patience

In this paper, we examine data that describe Africans' everyday experiences with poverty, their sense of national progress, and their views of the future. The source is nationally representative sample surveys in 15 countries conducted from June 2002 to October 2003 in Round 2 of the Afrobarometer.

The data demonstrate that many Africans lead desperate lives: few do well. Significant proportions of Africans experience frequent shortages of formal income and other basic necessities of life. However, they do not believe that this situation is normal; they are keenly aware that things have become worse over the past decade.

Yet as Africans endure the impacts of economic crisis and subsequent adjustment, they do not conclude simply and cynically that "things fall apart." To the contrary, our data demonstrate that hope prevails: most fully expect that their children will lead better lives than themselves. Even though most people feel that the era of economic liberalization has been an era of economic decline, they are willing to give economic reform more time to work. It appears that this is no accident: we find that the societies that display higher levels of hope for their children are the same societies that express the greatest level of patience with the economic reform process.

Rather than "things fall apart," a more accurate popular adage might be: "things will fall apart even more before coming together again."

Lived Poverty in Africa

One way to assess poverty in Africa is through hard statistics on Gross National Income, or household income and expenditure, assets, access to services, and individual longevity. An alternative method is to ask people how often they are unable to secure the basic necessities of life. Through a series of such questions the Afrobarometer provides an experiential index of "lived poverty" that provides an important complement to other objective data.

Across the 15 African countries surveyed in 2002-2003, substantial proportions of all adults interviewed faced at least some shortages of basic necessities. Over one half (53 percent) say they or their family had "gone without enough food to eat" at least once in the previous year, and almost one fifth (18 percent) had done so frequently ("many times" or "always"). Just under one half (46 percent) had gone without enough clean water (18 percent did so frequently). A majority faced shortages of needed medicines or medical treatment (57 percent, 19 percent frequently). And a substantial minority (43 percent) went without enough fuel to cook their food (12 percent frequently) (see Figure 1).

Underlying this deprivation (and reflecting Africa's "unemployment crisis" described in Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 10), fully three quarters of the Africans we interviewed (75 percent) report going without a cash income at least once, and over a third did so frequently (36 percent).

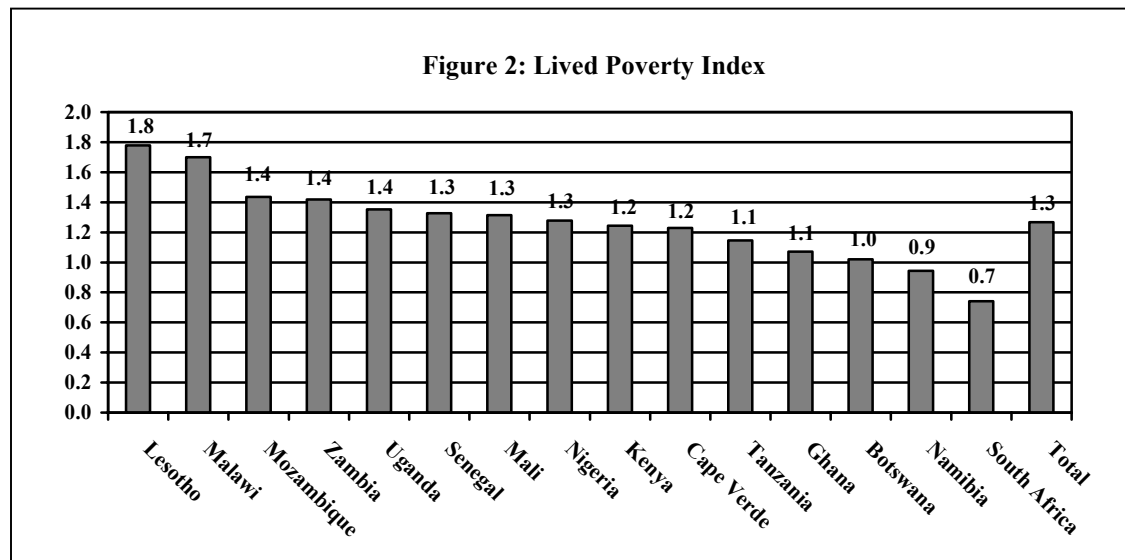
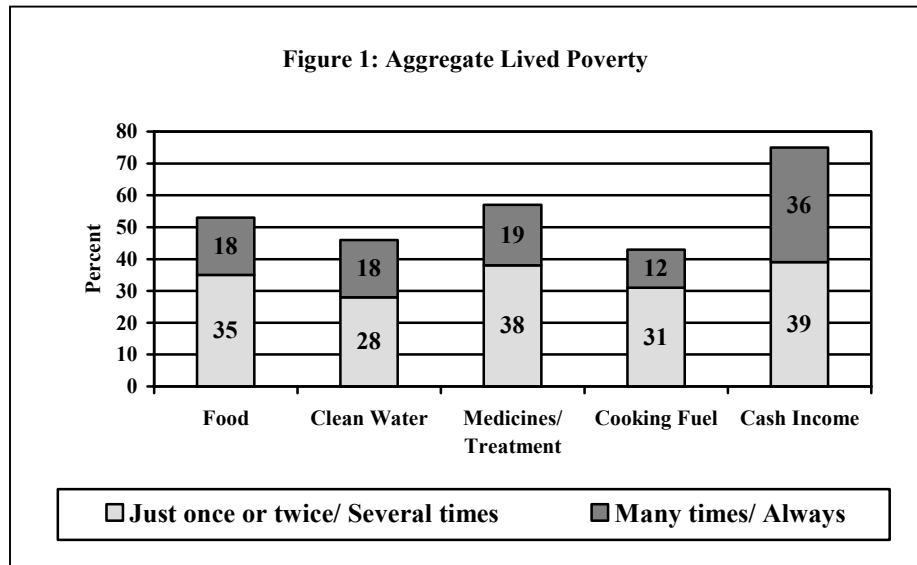
Yet while people with higher self-reported incomes experience less poverty, the correlation is far from perfect.¹ This suggests that unemployed or poorly paid Africans can often fall back on other social

¹ The Pearson's *r* correlation coefficient is only -.264 ($p < .001$, $N = 15,126$).

and kinship networks to avoid severe shortages; and that even those who are regularly employed and relatively well paid may still encounter shortages, either due to high prices, or structural problems of availability.

We can group these responses together as a single index because the more people experience shortages on any one indicator, the more likely they are to

face shortages on the others, demonstrating that these items tap a common underlying dimension of “lived poverty.”² When the composite answer is put on a scale that ranges from 0 (“Never Going Without Basic Necessities”) to 4 (“Always Going Without”) and aggregated to the national level, Lesotho and Malawi register the highest average levels of lived poverty (1.8 and 1.7 respectively), and South Africa the least (0.7) (see Figure 2). These national scores are correlated strongly and negatively - though not perfectly - with money metric indices, such as Per Capita Gross National Income³.



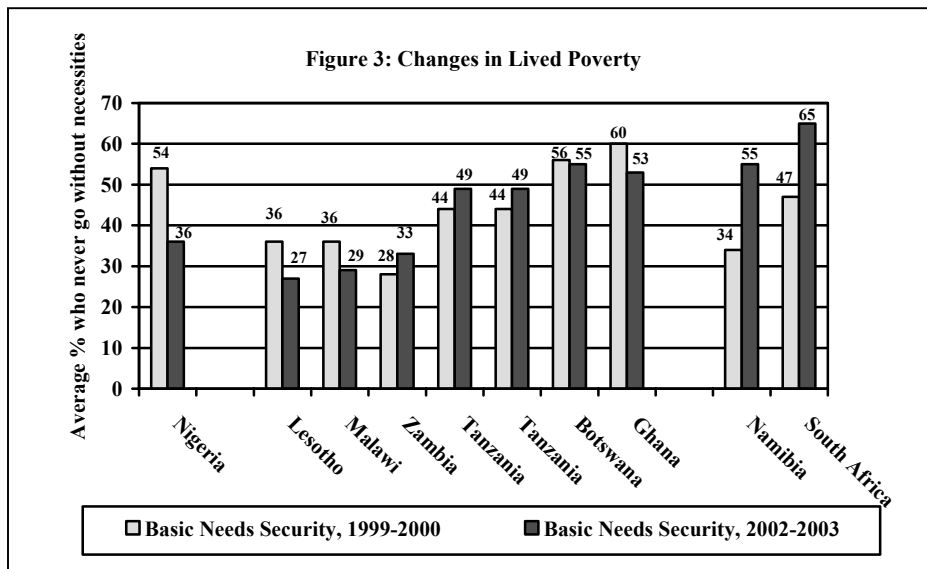
Because the response scales were not exactly the same between Round 1 (conducted between July 1999 and October 2001) and Round 2 of the Afrobarometer, a straightforward comparison of average Lived Poverty is not possible. What we can compare, however, are the proportions of people who say they “never” go without a given basic necessity. In doing so, we recognize that it is far preferable to have at least three observations so that any changes are due to real, secular trends rather than random

² A single factor explains 43.9 percent of the common variance and has a Reliability Score (Cronbach’s Alpha) of .725.

³ National mean Lived Poverty Index scores correlate with GNI Per Capita at -0.678 ($p < .01$, $N = 15$), and with GNI Per Capita Adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity at -0.684 ($p < .01$, $N = 15$). Where the correlation weakens is amongst countries with GNI Per Capita under \$500; while they tend to be grouped together in money metric terms, the LPI finds significant differences amongst these countries in terms of their people’s ability to secure basic necessities.

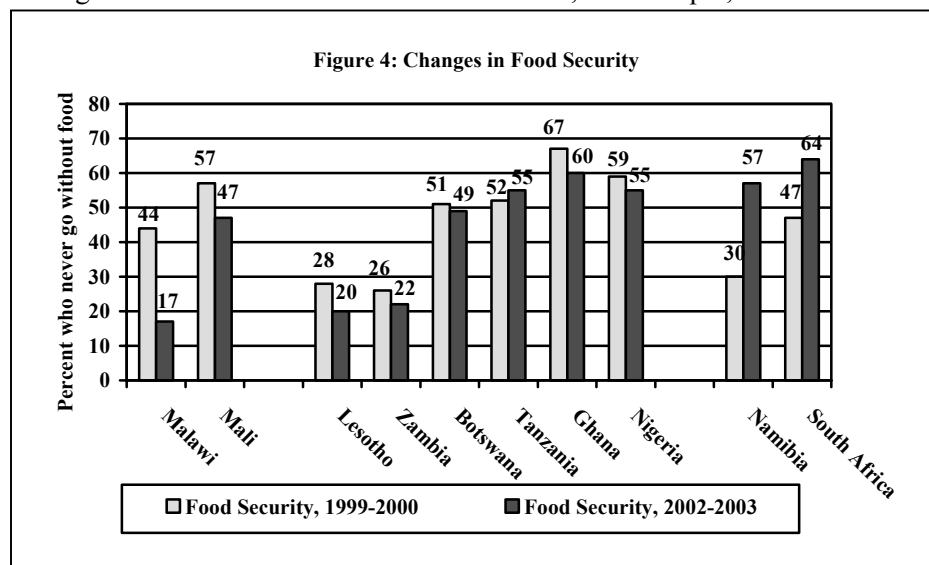
fluctuation or measurement error. Thus, in order to minimize the chances of arriving at faulty conclusions we only draw attention to differences in results of 10 percentage points or more: for any given Afrobarometer survey the confidence interval is plus or minus 3 percent; this interval doubles to 6 percent when two surveys are compared. We prefer to use an even larger margin (at least 10 percentage points) before speculating that any observed differences between Round 1 and Round 2 survey results reflect emerging changes in people’s experiences or opinions.

Given this stricture, the data suggest that Nigerians’ overall living standards have declined quite considerably over the past four years, but that security in basic necessities has increased substantially in Namibia and South Africa over the same time period. In all other countries, however, no apparent trend is sufficiently large to allow us to say anything with confidence (see Figure 3).



Because the Afrobarometer Lived Poverty Index is multifaceted, it not only allows us to monitor shifts in overall trends, but also within specific basic needs. Perhaps the most important over the past two years, particularly in Southern Africa, is access to food.

In this region, we can see the impact of the drought most clearly in Malawi, where the proportion of respondents who “never” go without enough food fell by over half, from 44 to 17 percent. Yet we also see significant shifts outside of Southern Africa, for example, in Mali where those enjoying a secure food supply dropped from 57 to 47 percent. Levels of food security are disturbingly low in Lesotho (22 percent) and Zambia (22 percent), but these were already very low in 1999-2000. As with the shifts in overall lived poverty, we see important increases in food security in Namibia (see Figure 4).

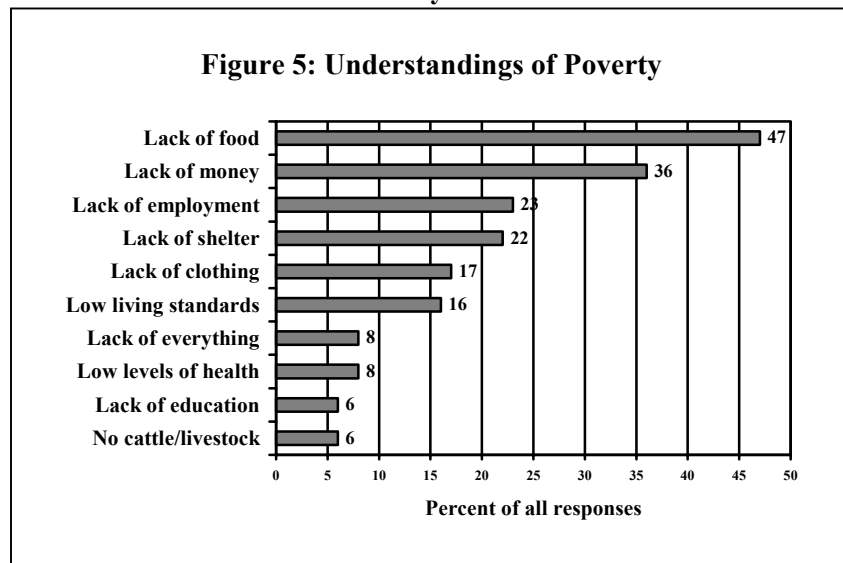


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Finally, our multifaceted measurement approach also allows observation of important successes in South Africa attributable to that country’s massive program extending water grids (the proportions who “never” go without clean water went from 63 to 72 percent), and providing free medicines to mothers and

children and building clinics in rural areas (the proportion who “never” go without necessary medicines or treatment increased from 41 to 66 percent).

How Africans Understand Poverty



The face validity of a multi-dimensional, experiential measure of poverty was confirmed when we asked people: “In your opinion, what does it mean to be poor?” To be sure, cash is an important part of the popular conception; yet just one third (37 percent) mention “lack of income” or “money” (see Figure 5). A significantly larger proportion cite “lack of food” (47 percent), and one quarter mention “lack of shelter” (23 percent) and “lack of employment” (23 percent). Another 16 percent mention generally “low living standards” (because respondents could

In your opinion, what does it mean to be “poor”?

offer up to three meanings, figures may total to more than 100 percent). We found that these understandings spanned the wealth spectrum; that is, those who experience lived poverty regularly conceptualize it in basically the same way as those who experience it only rarely.

Poverty and Public Preferences

These everyday encounters with poverty inform Africans’ political demands. Across the 15 countries surveyed almost one in three respondents (29 percent) explicitly mentioned “poverty” or “destitution” as one of the three most important problems facing their country that their government should address. “Unemployment” was also specifically mentioned by one half of all respondents (51 percent), as well as “health” (24 percent), “water” (16 percent), “orphans” or “street children” (3 percent), and drought (2 percent) (again, responses can total to over 100 percent).

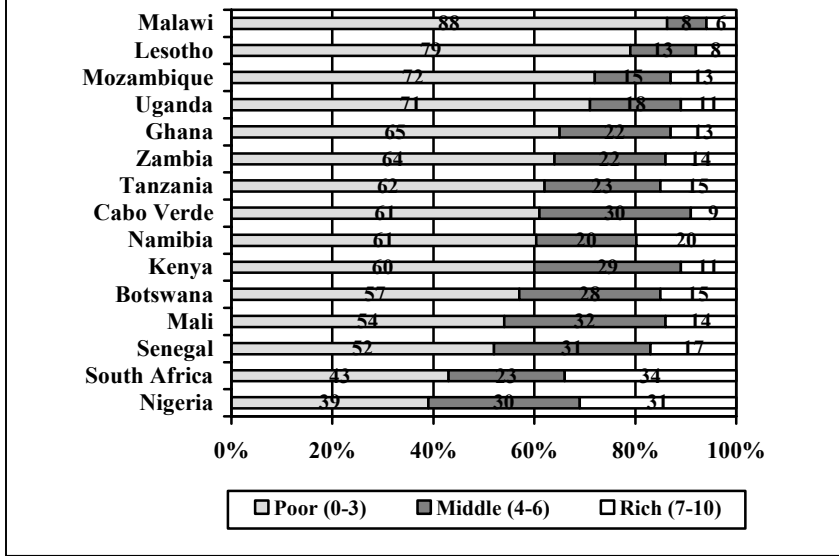
Development in Africa’s New Democracies

Regardless of what our Lived Poverty Index might conclude about the state of our respondents’ daily lives, do they *see themselves* as poor? In order to answer this, we asked people to put themselves “on a scale between 0 and 10, where 0 are poor people and 10 are rich people.” Across 15 countries, the average (mean) score was 3.6, with a median score of 4, meaning that a majority of respondents placed themselves on the bottom five pegs of this eleven point scale. Only in South Africa and Nigeria did the average (median) person even put themselves at the midpoint (5); in Malawi, the median score of 1 means that at least 50 percent of respondents place themselves at 0 or 1! (See Figure 6)

While the Lived Poverty Index illustrates that Africans regularly face shortages of basic necessities, these self-ratings indicate that Africans are keenly aware of what frequent shortages say about their own socio-economic status: the more often people experience shortages, the more likely they are to rate themselves as “poor.”⁴

⁴ The correlation for one’s lived poverty index score and their self rating on the poor-rich scale is -.312 (p=<.000, N=17,574).

Figure 6: Self-Defined Economic Status

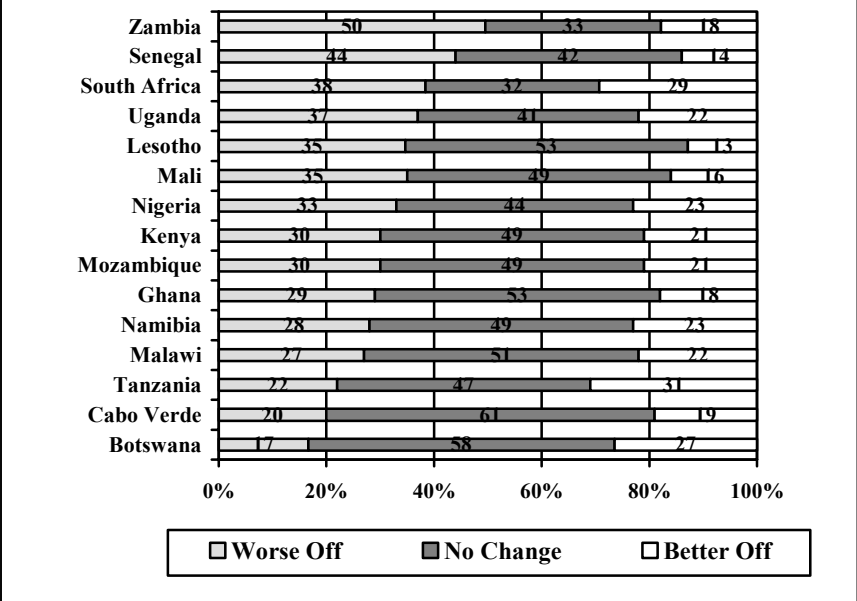


Do Africans see these desperate straits as “natural” or as a “given,” or do they think that things have been better or worse in the past? And do they expect things to change for the better or for the worse in the future? To get at this question, we asked respondents to give a score on the same scale to the status of their “parents ten years ago,” as well as the status “you expect your children to attain in the future.”

What we find is that a majority of Zambians (50 percent), four in ten Senegalese (44 percent), and about one third of South Africans, Ugandans, Basotho, Malians and Nigerians say they are “worse off” today than their parents were ten years ago. In no country does more than one third say they are “better off” than their parents⁵ (see Figure 7).

Collectively, these assessments are broadly consistent with popular responses to a series of questions that ask people to assess the success of their country’s economic reform process. Just four in ten (43

Figure 7: Economic Status Compared to Parents

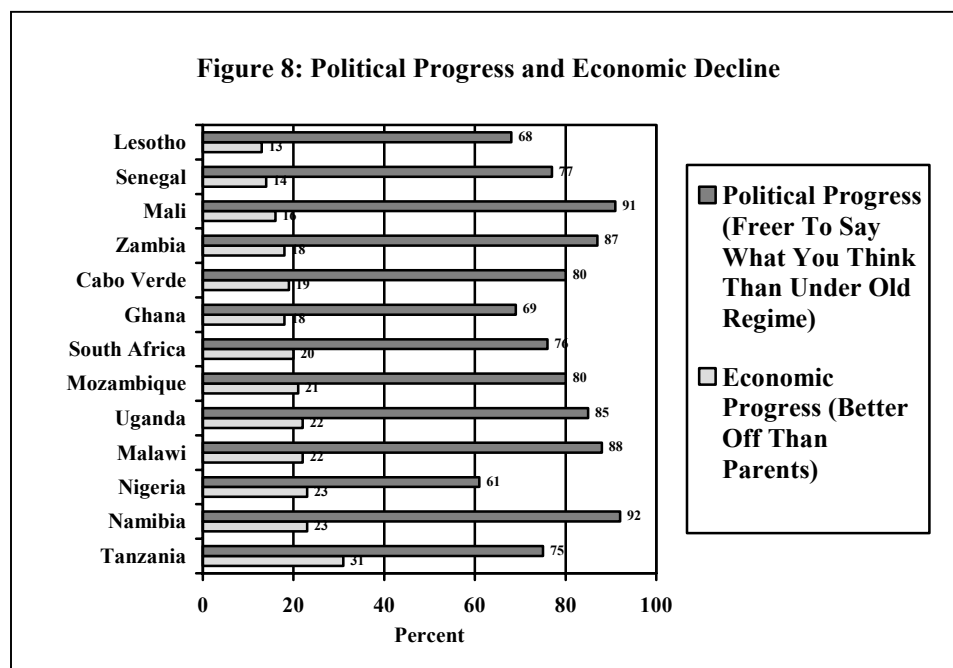


percent) are satisfied with the way the government’s policy to “reduce its role in the economy” has worked. Requesting people to “compare our present economic system with the economic system a few years ago,” six in ten (60 percent) say that “the availability of jobs” had gotten “worse” or “much worse,” as well as the “gap between rich and poor” (58 percent). People were more evenly split over whether standards of living had become worse (42 percent) or better (40 percent). Perhaps most importantly, six

⁵ To derive a measure of perceived decline or progress, we subtracted the score that people gave their parents from the score they gave themselves on the 0-10 scale, thus yielding a potential scale ranging from 10 (complete progress) to -10 (complete regression). We coded differences from -10 to -2 as “worse off”, from -1 to 1 as “no change” and 2 to 10 as “better off.”

in ten (57 percent) say that “the government’s economic policies have hurt most people and only benefited a few.”

Taken together, these responses clearly suggest that people associate the era of economic liberalization with economic decline. Yet because the era of liberalization in most cases corresponds fairly closely with the era of democratization, a logical question is whether people may be willing to throw out the democratic baby with the economic bathwater: however, we note people’s responses to a series of questions that ask them whether they are politically better or worse off than under the former authoritarian regime. Three quarters say they are freer to say what they think, to join any organization they want, and to vote without pressure (all 76 percent) and that they are less likely to suffer from an unjust arrest (also 76 percent). We also take note of findings reported in Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 9, which details substantial popular support for democracy and rejection of alternative, non-democratic ways of running their country.



Perhaps there is no starker illustration of the conundrum faced by citizens in Africa’s nascent democracies: they clearly see that political democratization has delivered a tangible basket of political goods which they appreciate; yet they are keenly aware that economic liberalization has left them worse off, resulting in decline rather than progress (see Figure 8).

However, views of past trends need to be complemented by expectations of the future. Do people merely project recent declines as a straight line of descent into future economic chaos and destitution? On the contrary, when we ask people to forecast how their children will fare, people turn guardedly optimistic. With one exception (in Lesotho), most people clearly expect their children to live better lives than themselves.

Yet the fact that people forecast that their children will live better lives than themselves needs to be taken in the context of the desperate situation in which most people clearly see themselves. Do they merely see economic fortunes returning to the status quo ante, or do they forecast real inter-generational advancement from their parents to their children? When we compare where people place their parents ten years ago, and what they project their children will attain, we again see that most people expect their children to enjoy real advances in quality of life, except in Lesotho and Malawi (see Figure 9).

One might conclude, at first glance, that this apparent optimism is either misplaced, given the continent’s economic situation, or illusory – representing respondent’s desire not to curse their children’s’

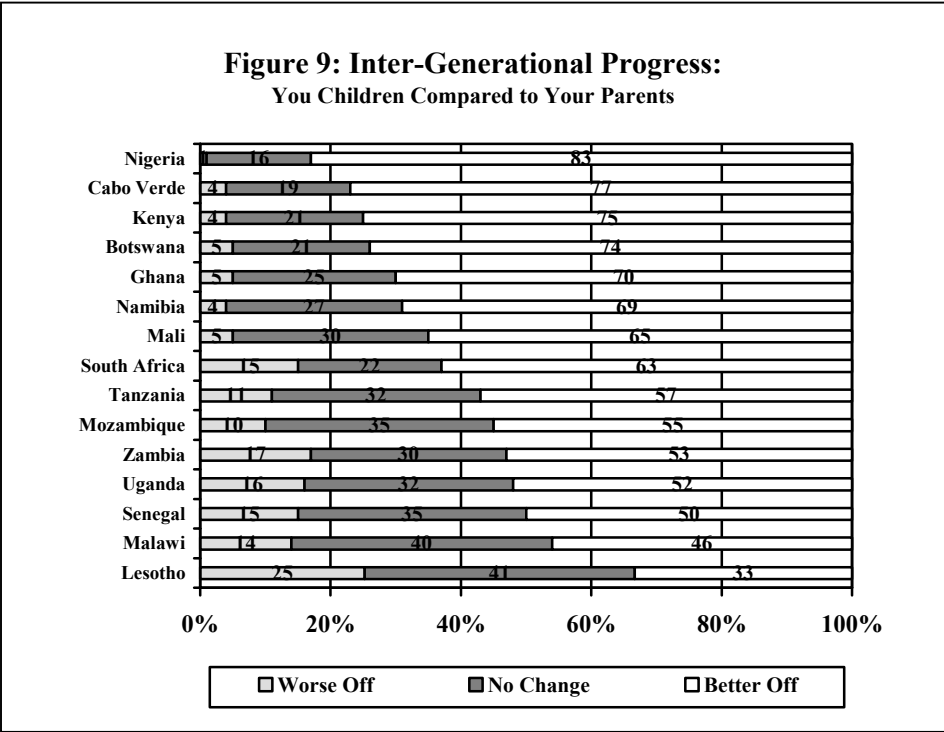
future more than a realistic assessment of their prospects. However, there appears to be at least some element of realism in these future projections: the more a country experiences lived poverty today, and the less a society rates itself as wealthy, the smaller that society's anticipated inter-generational advances in quality of life.⁶

Perhaps this helps to explain the apparent paradox of why most Africans

display patience with economic reform, even though they clearly feel that results to date have not been positive. Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 10 reports that 60 percent believe "it is necessary for us to accept some hardship now" "in order for the economy to get better in the future." In fact, we find that the societies that harbour higher degrees of optimism about intergenerational economic progress (that is, increases in quality of life from one's parents to one's children) are the societies that also tend to display higher levels of patience with economic reform.⁷

Public opinion trends in post-communist Eastern Europe indicated that while people felt the short term pain associated with moving away from Soviet style economies, they held out hope that things would get better over the long run.⁸ In much the same way, the evidence reported here suggests that Africans understand that the move away from their own controlled and corrupt economies entails short term pain that must be endured before longer-term benefits are realized. Perhaps, they feel that the pain they experience today is a necessary sacrifice for a better life for their children. In this sense, Africans may not simply look at their economic plight and conclude that "things fall apart." Rather they may be saying: "things will far apart even more before coming together again."

The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 16 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), and Michigan State University. Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org



⁶ The correlation between the societal level of lived poverty and the societal extent of anticipated intergenerational progress in quality of life for their children is $r = -.647$ ($p < .01$, $N = 15$). The correlation between the national mean self rating on a 0 to 10 scale on one hand, and anticipated gains of one's children compared to themselves on the other is $r = .705$ ($p < .01$, $N = 15$).

⁷ The correlation between the percent of people who support maintaining their country's economic reform program on one hand, and the percentage of people who think their children will be better off than their parents, on the other is $r = .435$ ($N = 15$).

⁸ See Richard Rose, William Mishler & Christian Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives: Understanding Post Communist Societies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, ch. 8.