

Liberians approve of President Weah but are critical of government performance on the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 244 | Taa Wongbe and Marvin Samuel

Summary

After the 12-year rule of Africa's first woman president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a runoff vote brought George Weah to power in Liberia's first democratic transition in 73 years (Aljazeera, 2017). In his inauguration speech in January 2018, Weah promised to grow the economy, expand the revenue base, and improve the lives of the Liberian people through new institutions and pro-poor public governance (Malawian Watchdog, 2018).

In his first few months in office, President Weah has approved a series of projects, including the construction of a military hospital and the revamping of the Doe community in which he was raised. But he has also struggled with economic troubles, lamenting that "our economy is broken, our government is broke, our currency is in freefall, inflation is rising, unemployment is at an unprecedented high and our foreign reserves at an all-time low" (News24, 2018). When the exchange rate of the Liberian dollar peaked at an alarming level in June 2018, the Central Bank of Liberia (CBL) intervened to stabilize the economy (Liberia News Agency, 2018) – and promptly, mysteriously, lost containers filled with 16 billion Liberian dollars (about U.S. \$100 million) that it had planned to bump into the economy (News24, 2018).

A new Afrobarometer survey shows that a majority of Liberians approve of President Weah's performance since he assumed office but rate the government poorly on economic management. Citizens give the government a passing grade on providing infrastructure and basic services but failing marks for its economic performance and efforts to address the country's most important problems.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by The Khana Group, interviewed 1,200 adult Liberians in June 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, and 2015.

Key findings

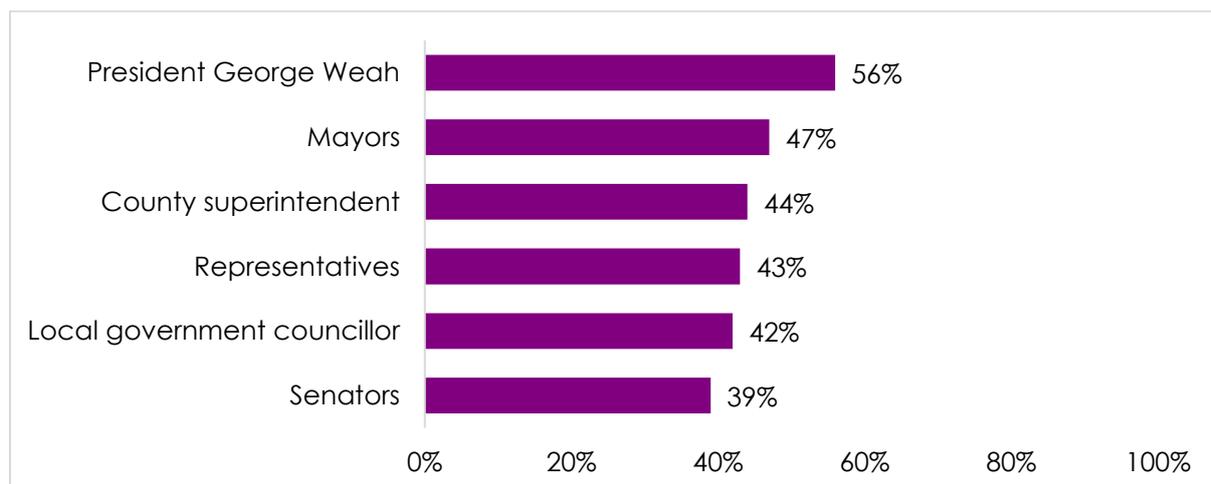
- A majority (56%) of Liberians "approve" or "strongly approve" of President Weah's job performance. His rating is the best among political leaders, followed by mayors (47%) and county superintendents (44%). Senators receive the lowest performance rating (39%).

- In specific key areas, a majority approve of the president's handling of national security (70%), domestic policy (57%), and foreign policy issues (55%).
- About half or more of Liberians say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" in addressing educational needs (59%), maintaining roads and bridges (52%), providing water/sanitation services (51%), and improving basic health services (49%).
- However, only one-third (34%) of citizens say government is performing fairly or very well in managing the economy and creating jobs, and just one in 10 (12%) say it's doing a good job of keeping prices stable.
- Only one in 10 Liberians (11%) say the country's economic condition is "fairly good" or "very good," a 31-percentage-point decline from 2012 (42%). But 59% are optimistic that things will be better in 12 months' time.
- The most important problems that Liberians want the government to address are rates and taxes (55%), food shortage/famine (38%), and infrastructure/roads (38%).
- Two-thirds (66%) of Liberians say the government is addressing the most important problems "fairly badly" or "very badly."

Performance of President Weah

A majority (56%) of Liberians "approve" or "strongly approve" of President Weah's job performance since he assumed office in January 2018. His rating is the best among political leaders, followed by mayors (47%) and county superintendents (44%). Senators receive the lowest performance rating (39%) (Figure 1). Approval of President Weah's performance is highest among men (60%, compared to 51% among women), older citizens (67%-70% among ages 46 and up), and rural residents (57%) (Figure 2).

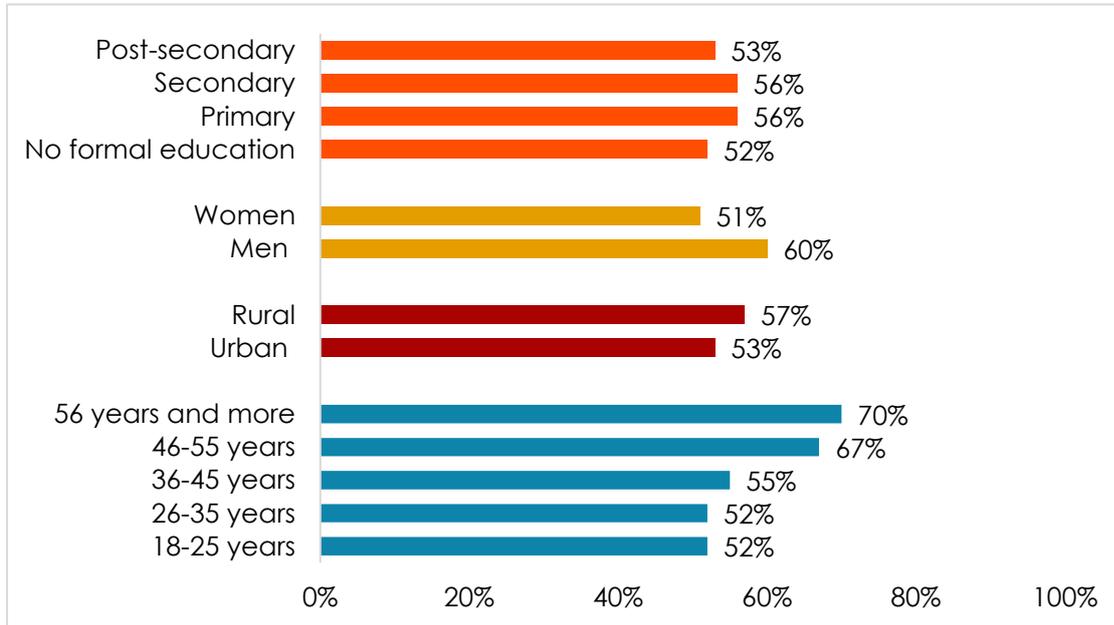
Figure 1: Approval of political leaders' job performance | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked:

- Do you approve or disapprove of the way that President George Weah has performed his job since he assumed office in January 2018, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?
 - Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or, if a new person was elected to the position in the last election in October 2017, do you approve or disapprove of the way they have performed since assuming office, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?"
- (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

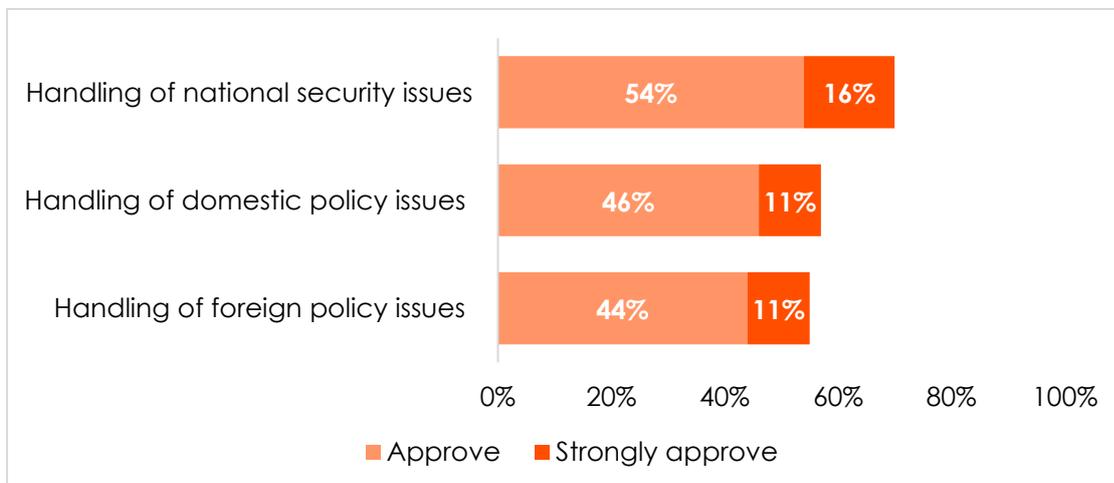
Figure 2: Approval of President Weah's job performance | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that president George Weah has performed his job since he assumed office in January 2018, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (%who "approve" or "strongly approve").

In specific key areas, a majority "approve" or "strongly approve" of the president's handling of national security issues (70%), domestic policy issues (57%), and foreign policy issues (55%) (Figure 3). Key among his early initiatives are the signing of a Liberia-South Africa visa waiver for officials (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018) and collaboration with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to support the final stage of a debt-relief package for Liberia totaling U.S. \$4.6 billion (Front Page Africa, 2018a).

Figure 3: How well is the president handling security, domestic, foreign policy issues? | Liberia | 2018

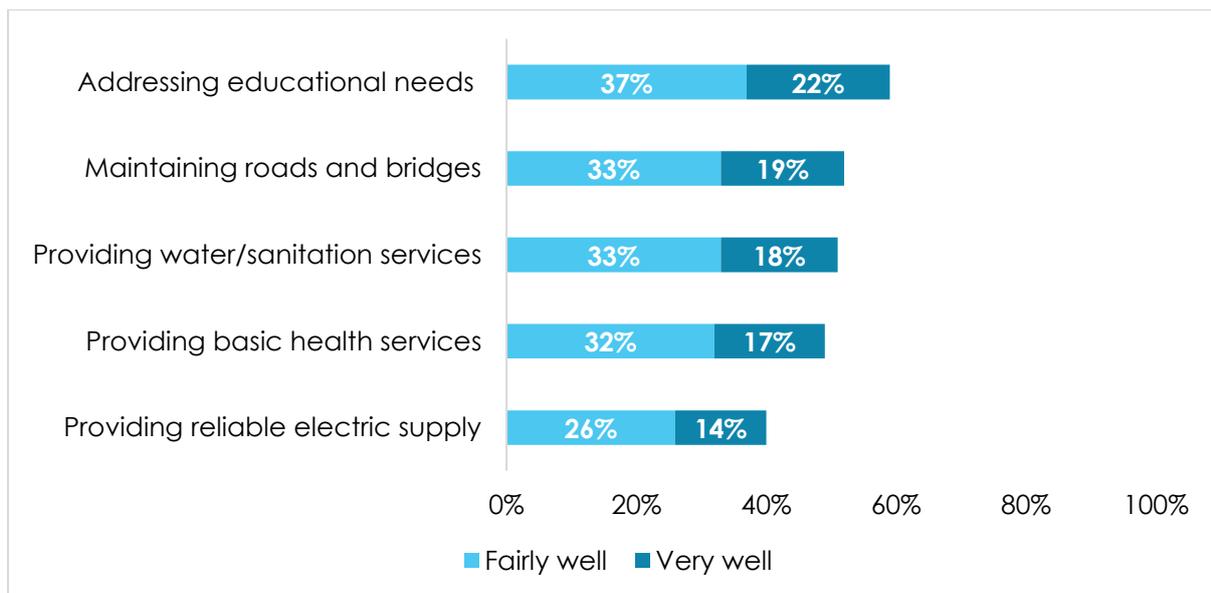


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the way President George Weah is handling the following?

Government performance

In terms of the provision of infrastructure and basic services, about half or more of Liberians say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” in addressing educational needs (59%), maintaining roads and bridges (52%), providing water and sanitation services (51%), and improving basic health services (49%) (Figure 4). Four in 10 citizens (40%) say the government is doing a good job of providing reliable electricity.

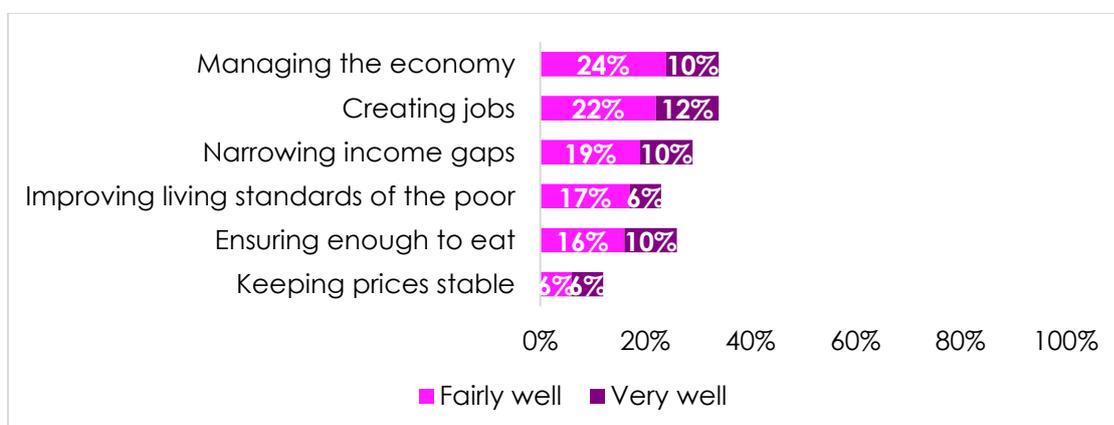
Figure 4: Government’s performance in providing infrastructure and basic services
 | Liberia | 2018



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?

However, the government is rated poorly on economic management. Only one-third (34%) of citizens say it is performing fairly or very well in managing the economy and creating jobs, and even fewer praise the government’s performance on narrowing income gaps (29%). Just one in 10 (12%) say it’s doing a good job of keeping prices stable (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Government’s economic management performance | Liberia | 2018

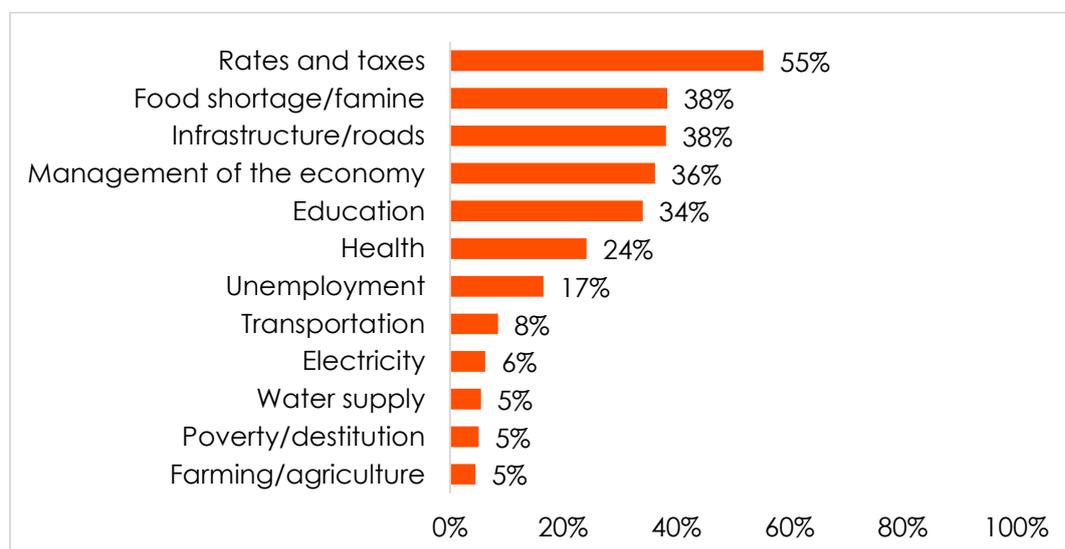


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?

The survey was conducted in June, about the time that an alarming depreciation of the Liberian dollar resulted in price hikes and worsening economic conditions in the country. Dr. Bhofal, speaker of the House of Representatives, has openly blamed former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for the current economic hardship in the country (Front Page Africa, 2018b).

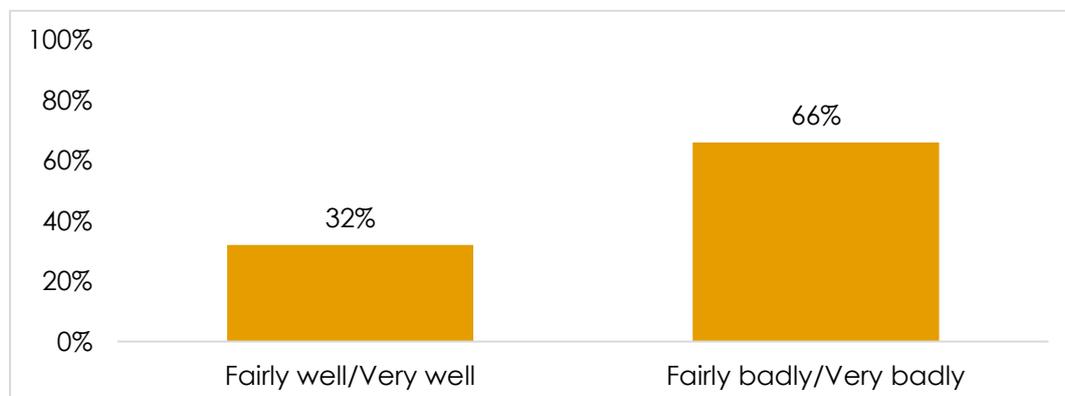
Over a period of two months, the Liberian dollar recorded a steady decline every two or three days – an unprecedented increase in the exchange rate that caused the CBL to close all informal/street bureaus for two weeks. It is little wonder that rates and taxes feature as the most important problem that Liberians want the government to address, cited by 55% of citizens as one of their top three priorities (Figure 6). Food shortage/famine (38%) and infrastructure/roads (38%) hold the No. 2-3 spots, followed by management of the economy (36%) and education (34%). When asked how well the government is addressing their most important problems, two-thirds (66%) of citizens say it is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Most important problem | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents were allowed up to three responses.)*

Figure 7: Government’s performance in handling most important problem | Liberia | 2018



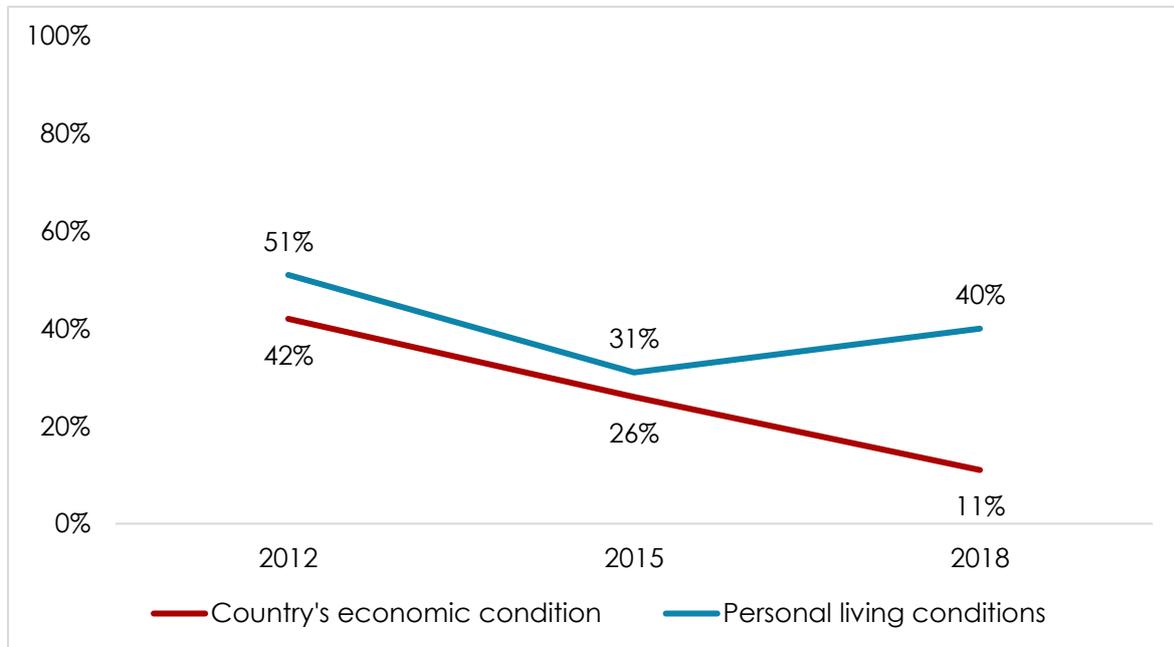
Respondents were asked: *Thinking of the problem you mentioned first, in your opinion, how well or badly would you say the current government is handling this problem, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Economic and personal living conditions

According to the World Bank, multiple shocks contributed to the slowing of Liberia's economic growth, including the Ebola virus disease outbreak, the collapse of commodities prices, withdrawal of United Nations Mission in Liberia peacekeeping forces, and the perception of risk associated with the political transition in January 2018. But the year has also brought encouraging news, including signs of economic growth as a result of increased production of gold and iron ore (World Bank, 2018) and the engagement of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) with business executives and government officials to identify commercially viable investments to bring "leap-ahead" technology to Liberia's economy (U.S. Embassy in Liberia, 2018).

Still, only one in 10 Liberians (11%) say the country's economic condition is "fairly good" or "very good," a 31-percentage-point decline from 2012 (42%) (Figure 8). Four in 10 citizens (40%) describe their personal living condition as "fairly good" or "very good." This represents an improvement from 2015 but is still 11 percentage points lower than in 2012 (51%).

Figure 8: Economic and personal living conditions | Liberia | 2012-2018



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe:*

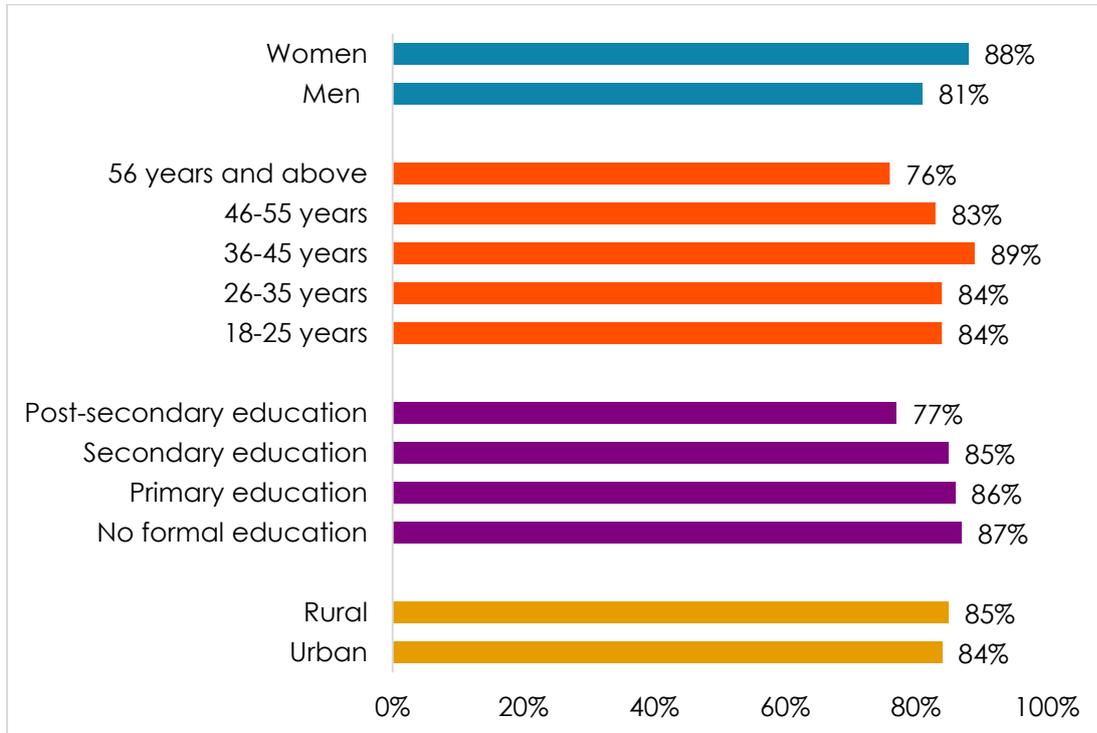
- The present economic condition of this country?
- Your own present living conditions?

(% who say "fairly good" or "very good")

Perceptions of the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" are more common among women (88%) than men (81%). Citizens with a post-secondary education are less likely to see the economy as bad (77%) than their less-educated counterparts (85%-87%) (Figure 9). There is no difference in terms of urban/rural location.

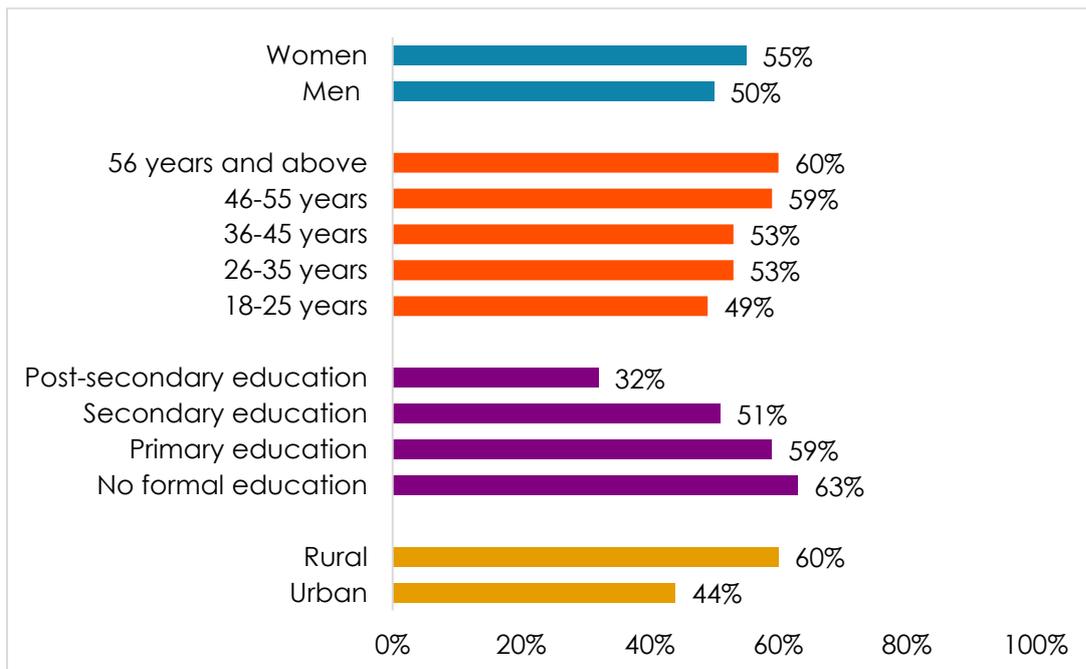
The proportion who describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" increases by age and decreases according to levels of education; respondents with no formal education (63%) are about twice as likely as those with post-secondary qualifications (32%) to see their living conditions as bad (Figure 10). More women (55% compared to 50% of men) and respondents in rural areas (60% compared to 44% in urban areas) say their living conditions are bad.

Figure 9: Perception of country's economic condition as bad | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

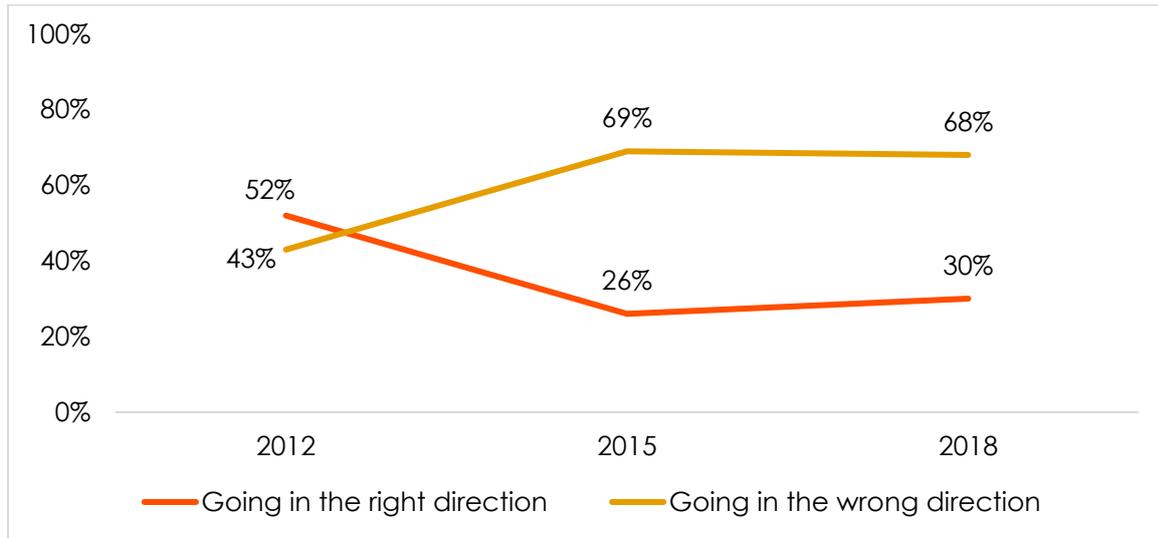
Figure 10: Perception of personal living conditions as bad | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: Your own living conditions? (% who say "fairly bad" or "very bad")

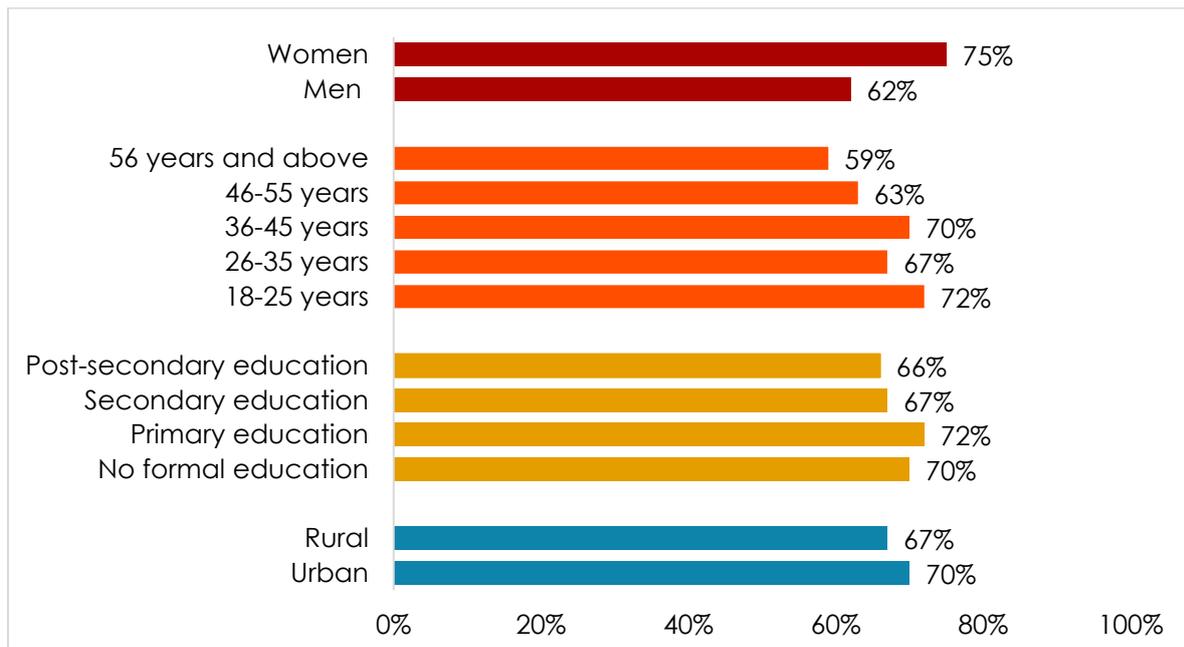
Overall, seven in 10 Liberians (68%) say the country is going in the wrong direction (Figure 11). Though unchanged from 2015, this is dramatically worse than in 2012. The notion that the country is going in the wrong direction is widespread among all demographic groups, but considerably higher among women (75%) than men (62%) and among younger citizens (aged 18-45 years) compared to their elders (Figure 12). Respondents with at least a secondary education are somewhat less likely to say the country is moving in the wrong direction.

Figure 11: Is Liberia going in the right or wrong direction? | Liberia | 2012-2018



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

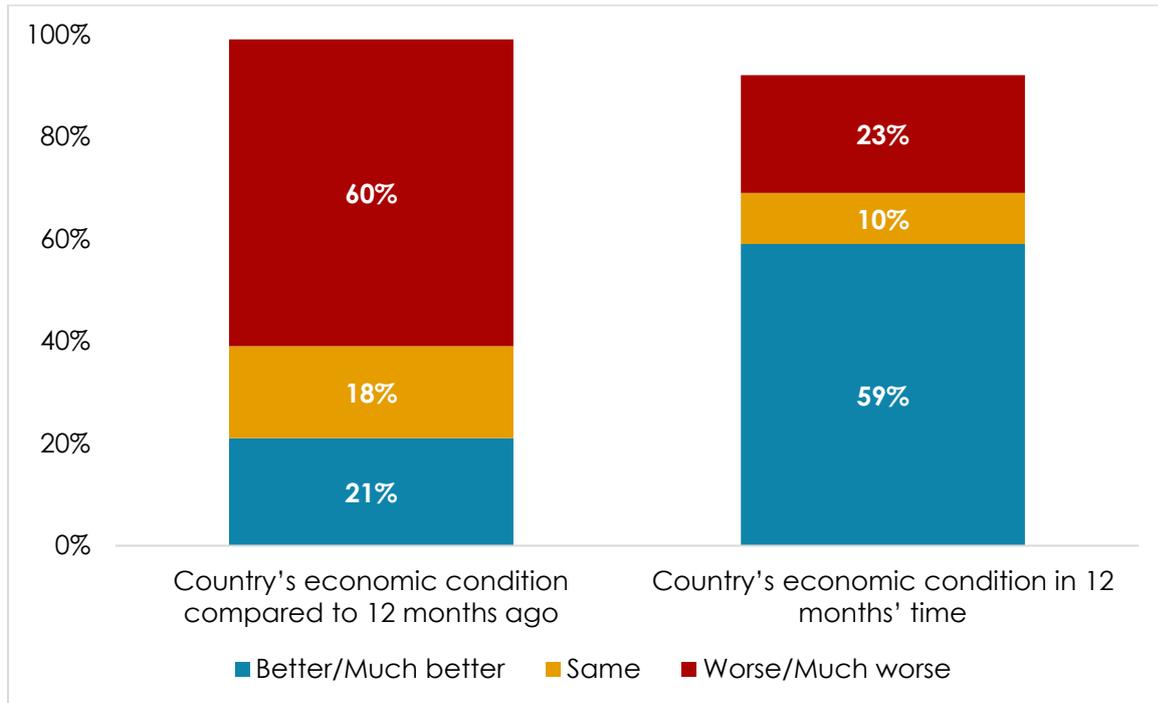
Figure 12: Liberia seen as going in the wrong direction | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2018



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")

A majority (60%) of Liberians also say the country's economic conditions are "worse" or "much worse" compared to 12 months ago (Figure 13). But the same proportion (59%) are optimistic that the country's economic condition will be "better" or "much better" in 12 months' time.

Figure 13: Country's economic condition: Looking back and ahead | Liberia | 2018



Respondents were asked:

- Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
- Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Conclusion

Although Liberians generally approve of President Weah's job performance, they are critical of his government's economic performance. Since he took office, the president has undertaken a number of initiatives aimed at fulfilling some of the promises he made in his inaugural speech, including his commitment to grow the Liberian economy and expand the revenue base in the long term with the use of medium-term aid. Although partnerships with the World Bank and IMF to relieve Liberia's debt and with OPIC to identify commercially viable investments are necessary steps in this direction, a coherent anti-corruption strategy and the diversification of the economy will be critical to winning the approval – and improving the living conditions – of most Liberians.

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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Taa Wongbe is the CEO of The Khana Group Global.
Email: taa.wongbe@thekhanagroup.com.

Marvin Samuel is a research coordinator for The Khana Group in Monrovia, Liberia.
Email: marvin.samuel@thekhanagroup.com.

Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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