



Dispatch No. 280 | 5 March 2019

## Lived poverty on the rise, economic assessments on a slide in South Africa

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 280 | Anyway Chingwete**

### Summary

Africa's second-largest economy has been struggling. High unemployment (27.1% overall) has reached frightening levels among South Africa's youth (54.7%). Rising prices for fuel and basic commodities have eroded consumers' purchasing power. The kickstart provided by the 2010 World Cup is a fond memory, as gross domestic product (GDP) growth sputtered and all but stalled, at 0.6%, by 2016 (International Monetary Fund, 2018; IOL, 2018). The embattled rand rallied as hopes for economic recovery soared with President Cyril Ramaphosa's inauguration in February 2018, but by September, the country was officially traversing its second recession since the democratic transition in 1994 (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

The World Bank (2018) report on the ease of doing business places South Africa 82<sup>nd</sup> out of 190 countries, down from its No. 32 spot in 2008. In his 2019 State of the Nation address in February, Ramaphosa pledged his government's commitment to address challenges affecting businesses with a plan to regain South Africa's position among the top 50 global performers within three years. Among a raft of challenges, he singled out unemployment as needing urgent attention and called upon every South African to help "get our economy working again (News24, 2019).

In Afrobarometer's most recent national survey, citizens confirm the deep sense of unease engendered by South Africa's economic troubles. Most South Africans say the country is headed in the wrong direction and describe economic conditions as bad. More South Africans are experiencing shortages of basic necessities, falling into "lived poverty." Majorities rate the government's performance on economic indicators as poor, and close to two-thirds of citizens say they would be willing to forgo elections if a non-elected leader were able to impose law and order and provide housing and jobs.

### 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. Seven rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

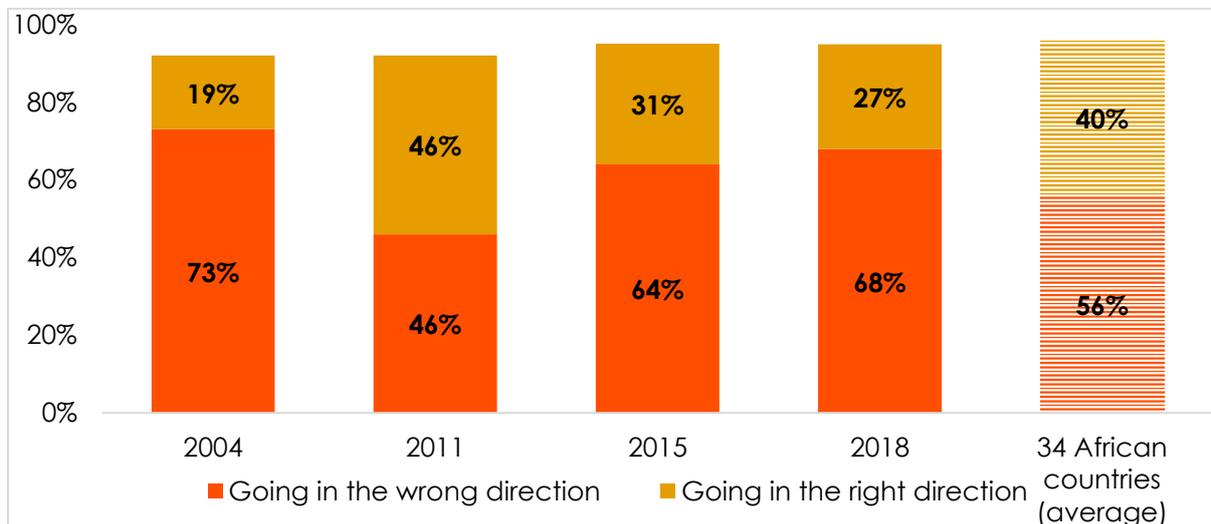
## Key findings

- More than two-thirds (68%) of South Africans see their country as heading in the wrong direction.
- Two-thirds (66%) assess their country's economic condition as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” an increase from 54% recorded in 2015.
- The percentage of South Africans who went without enough food, clean water, and other basic necessities increased by double digits compared to 2015. Close to four in 10 South Africans (38%) experienced a moderate or high level of “lived poverty” during the past year, an increase from 25% recorded in 2015.
- Six in 10 citizens (61%) say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on management of the economy.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of South Africans say they would be willing to forgo elections if a non-elected government or leader were able to impose law and order and provide housing and jobs.

## South Africans pessimistic about the direction of the country

More than two-thirds (68%) of South Africans say the country is going in “the wrong direction,” while just 27% see it as headed in “the right direction” (Figure 1). The level of pessimism has increased by 22 percentage points since 2011 (46%) and is substantially higher than the average across 34 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2016/2018 (56%).

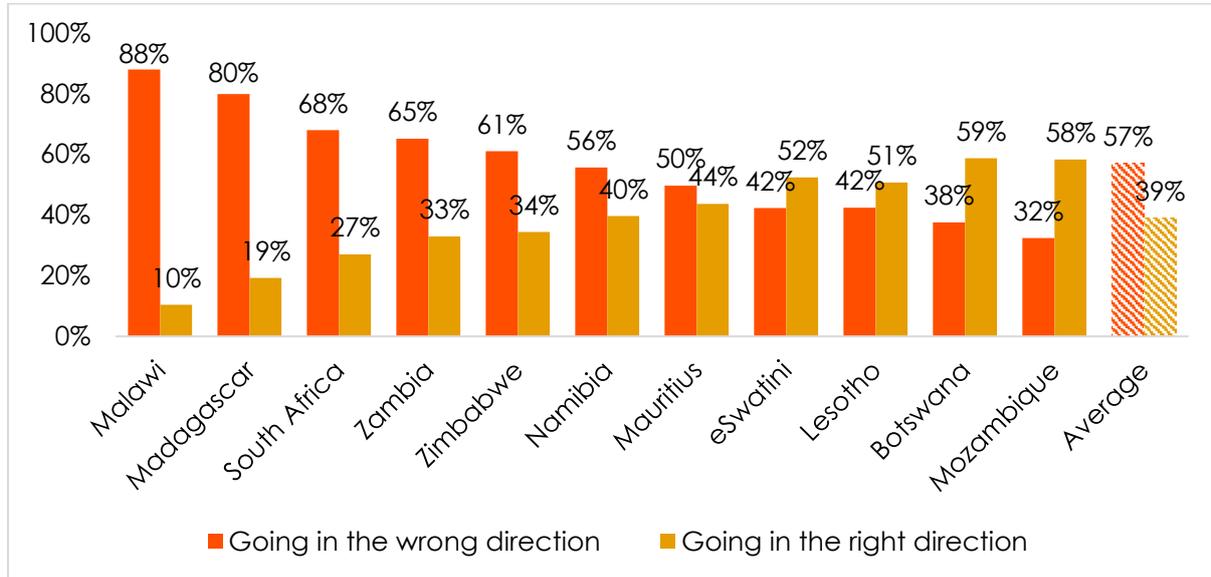
**Figure 1: Direction of the country | South Africa | 2004-2018**



**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 in the right direction?*

Across 11 countries surveyed in Southern Africa, South Africa comes third in negative assessments of their overall direction, after Malawi (88%) and Madagascar (80%) (Figure 2), well above the 57% average. Majorities in Botswana (59%), Mozambique (58%), eSwatini (52%), and Lesotho (51%) see their countries as going in the right direction.

**Figure 2: Direction of the country** | 11 countries in Southern Africa | 2016/2018



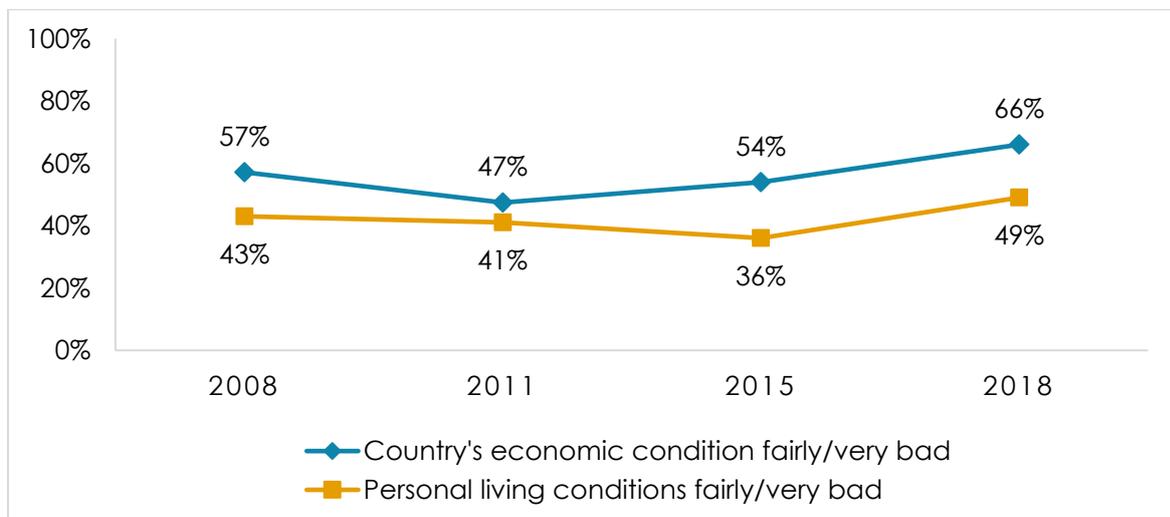
**Respondents were asked:** Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or in the right direction?

**More South Africans view country and personal economic conditions as bad**

Citizens' perceptions mirror the country's economic performance. As of August-September 2018, two-thirds (66%) of South Africans assess the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," a sharp increase in negative assessments from 2011 (47%) and 2015 (54%) (Figure 3).

Similarly, at a micro level, the proportion of South Africans who say their personal living conditions are "fairly bad" or "very bad" has increased to almost half (49%), though that is still significantly less negative than their outlook on the country's economy as a whole.

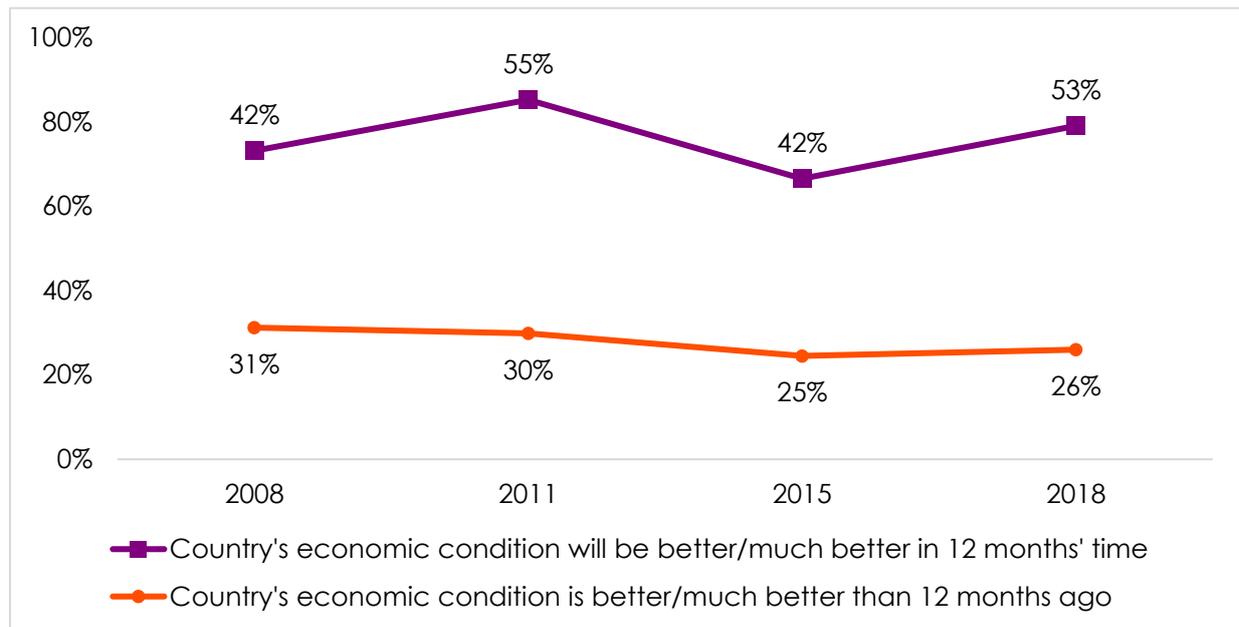
**Figure 3: Perceptions of country's economic and personal living conditions as bad** | South Africa | 2008-2018



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

When asked to compare economic conditions in the country to how they were 12 months earlier, only one in four citizens (26%) say they have improved, about the same response as in 2015 and slightly more negative than in 2008 (31%) and 2011 (30%) (Figure 4). But twice as many South Africans are hopeful for the immediate future: More than half (53%) say they expect things to be “better” or “much better” in 12 months’ time, an 11-percentage-point improvement from 2015.

**Figure 4: Looking back and ahead: Economic conditions better** | South Africa  
 | 2008-2018



**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?*

**Lived poverty on the rise**

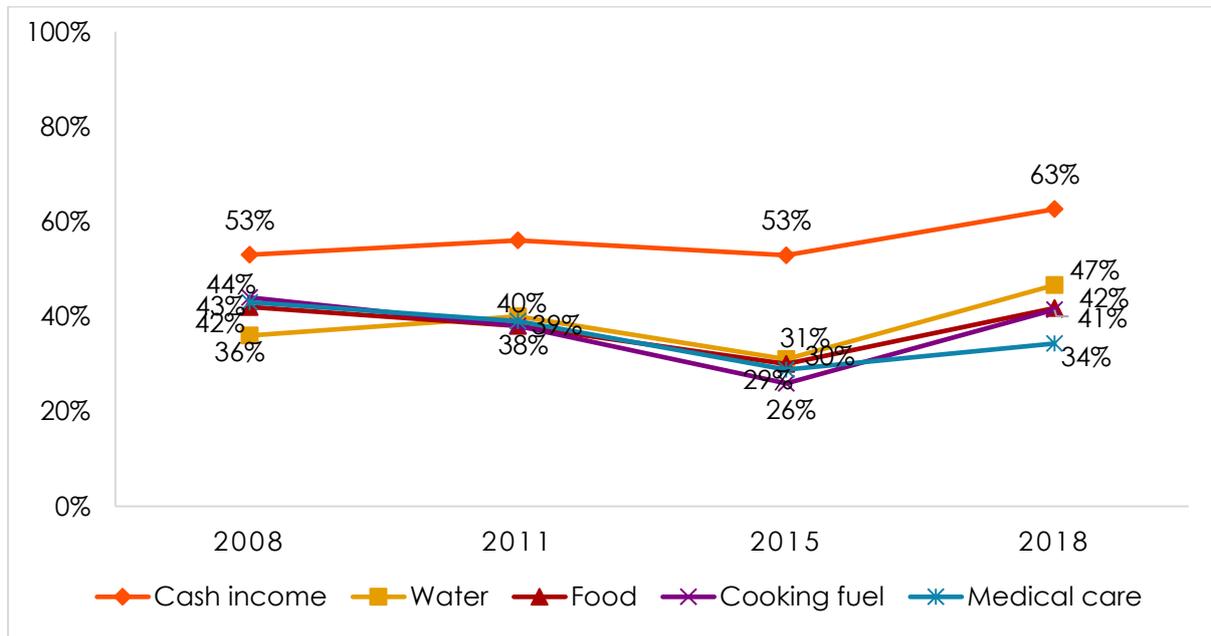
Afrobarometer assesses “lived poverty” by asking respondents how often, within the previous 12 months, they had to do without five basic life necessities: enough food, clean water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income.

Survey responses show that on all five necessities, the experience of shortages increased among South Africans between 2015 and 2018 (Figure 5). Almost half (47%) of all respondents say they went without enough clean water at least once during the previous year, up from 31% in 2015, including 18% who report experiencing shortages of clean water “many times” or “always.”

The proportion of citizens going without enough food to eat increased by 12 percentage points, to 42%. About the same proportion (41%) didn't have enough cooking fuel, while one in three (34%) went without needed medical care at least once.

As always, cash income tops the list, with shortages experienced by almost two-thirds (63%) of South Africans, the highest level recorded in an Afrobarometer survey in the country. As Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016) note, while cash income is not in itself a basic need, access to it can enable citizens to meet their basic and non-basic needs, and income shortages have many spillover effects on people's lives.

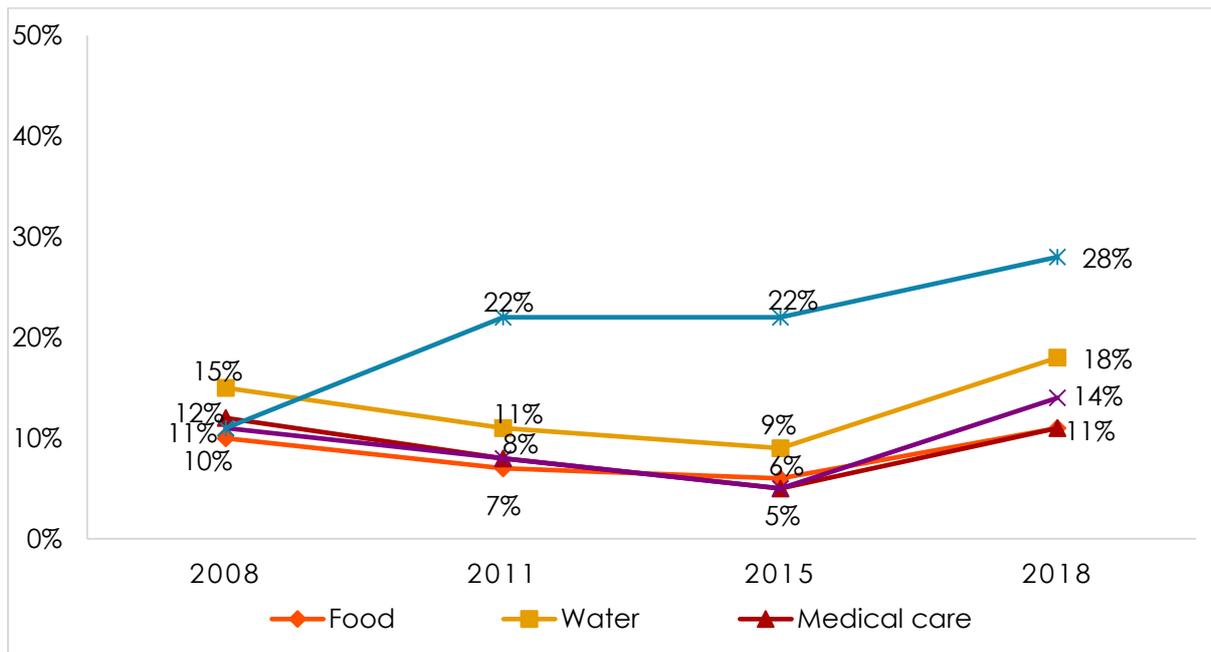
**Figure 5: Going without basic necessities | South Africa | 2008-2018**



**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")

Looking at the extreme side of deprivation, the proportion of South Africans who say they went without the five necessities "many times" or "always" increased substantially between 2015 and 2018, doubling or tripling in all categories except for cash income (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Going without basic necessities "many times" or "always" | South Africa | 2008-2018**

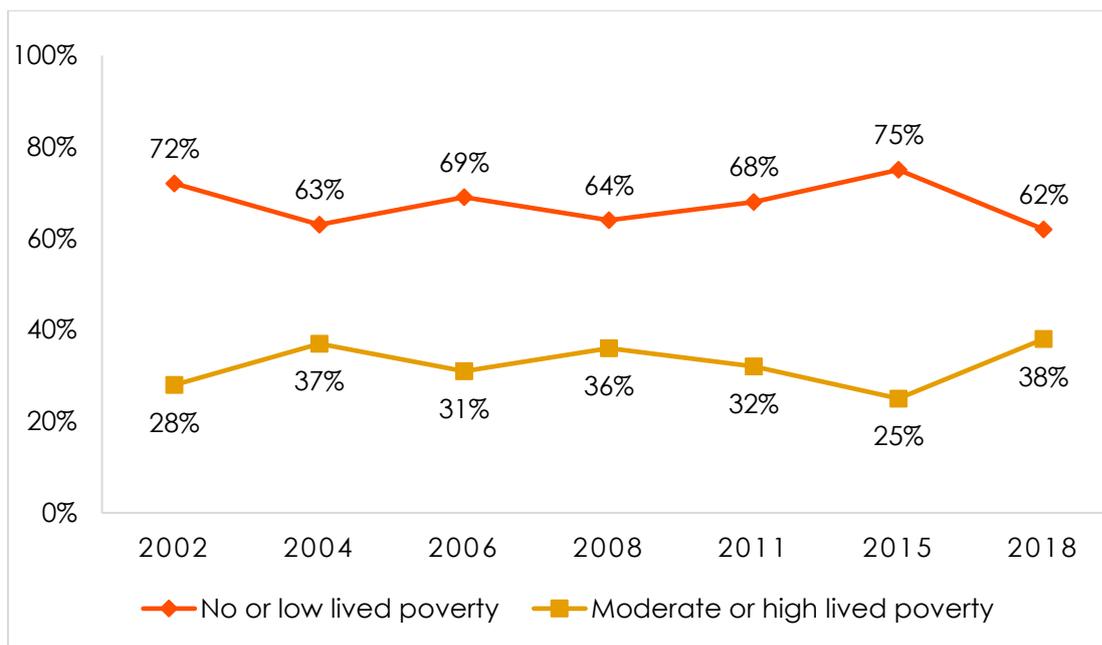


(% who say they went without these necessities "many times" or "always")

Based on these responses, Afrobarometer can calculate a Lived Poverty Index (LPI) score ranging from 0 (no deprivation, or “no lived poverty”) to 3 (frequent or constant deprivation, or “high lived poverty”).

Whilst 2015 Afrobarometer survey findings showed a decline in lived poverty (Chingwete & Nomdo, 2016), the most recent results show a sharp increase in lived poverty, to the highest level recorded going back to 2002. Close to four in 10 South Africans (38%) experienced moderate or high levels of lived poverty in the year preceding the 2018 survey, up from 25% in 2015 and 32% in 2011 (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Lived poverty | South Africa | 2002-2018**



**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?

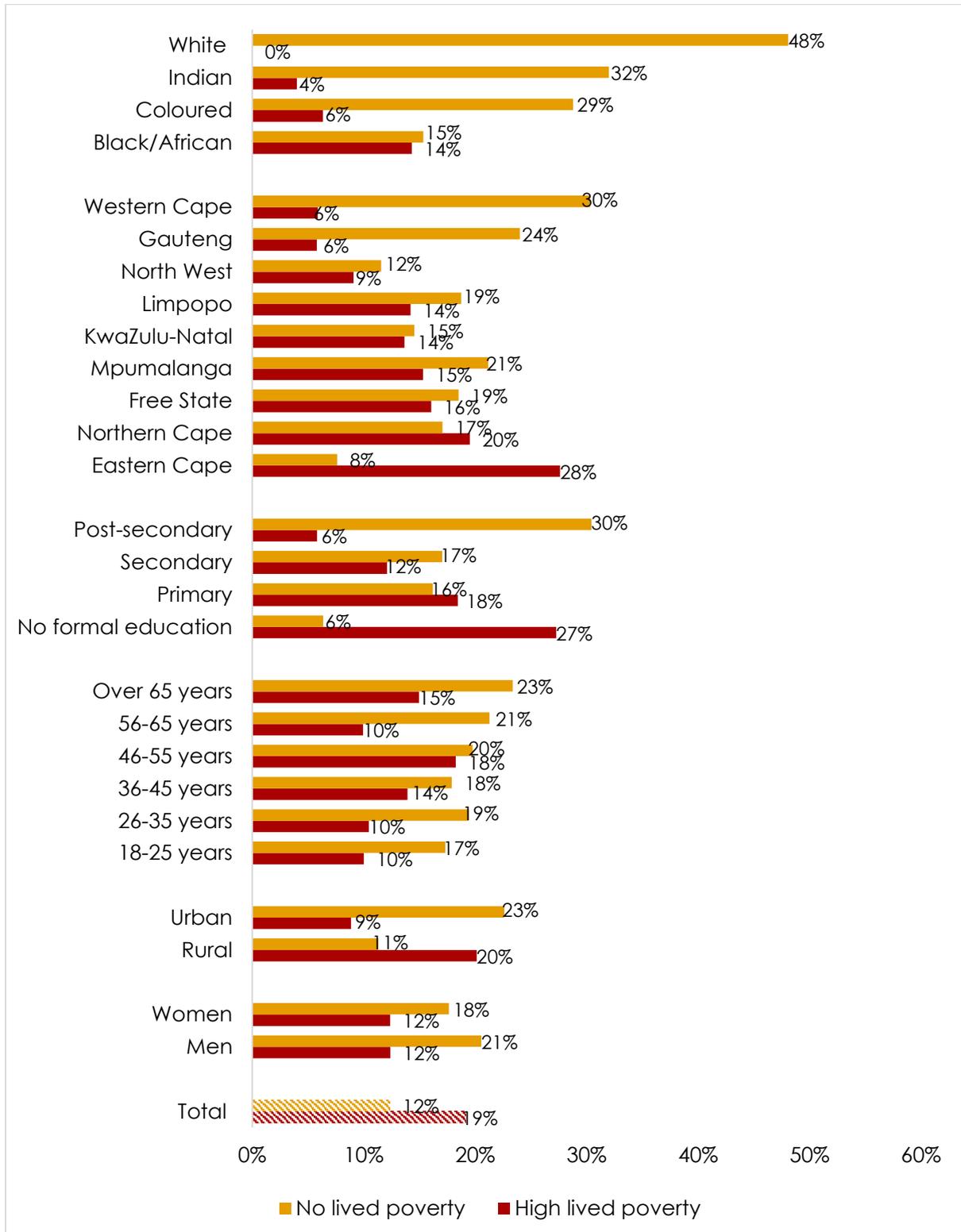
Levels of lived poverty vary significantly by race, province, level of education, and place of residence. Differences by age and gender are smaller, perhaps in part because questions about lived poverty refer both to the respondent and to members of their families.

As shown in Figure 8, which displays the extremes of “high” and “no” lived poverty, high lived poverty is most prevalent amongst Black South Africans (14%), followed by Coloured (6%) and Indian<sup>1</sup> (4%) citizens. No white respondent reported deprivation equivalent to “high lived poverty.”

Provincially, high lived poverty is least common in Western Cape and Gauteng (6% each) and most frequent amongst residents of Eastern Cape (28%). Our findings also show a negative correlation between level of education and poverty: More than one-fourth (27%) of respondents with no formal education experienced high lived poverty, compared to 6% of those with post-secondary qualifications. Rural residents are also more likely to suffer high lived poverty than their urban counterparts (20% vs. 9%).

<sup>1</sup> Because the sample includes only 63 respondents who identified as “Indian,” numeric results for this group have large margins of error. These results should be interpreted with caution.

**Figure 8: 'High' and 'no' lived poverty** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



**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?

Whilst lived poverty has increased in South Africa since 2015, its citizens still compare favourably with most of their peers in the region. In terms of the proportion of respondents experiencing moderate or high lived poverty during the previous year, South Africa ranks fourth amongst 11 Southern African countries, behind Mauritius (3%), Namibia (31%), and Botswana (35%) (Figure 9). At the other extreme are Malawi (where 68% of respondents experienced moderate or high lived poverty), Lesotho (63%), Madagascar (59%), and Zimbabwe (59%).

**Figure 9: Moderate or high lived poverty | 11 countries in Southern Africa**  
 | 2016/2018

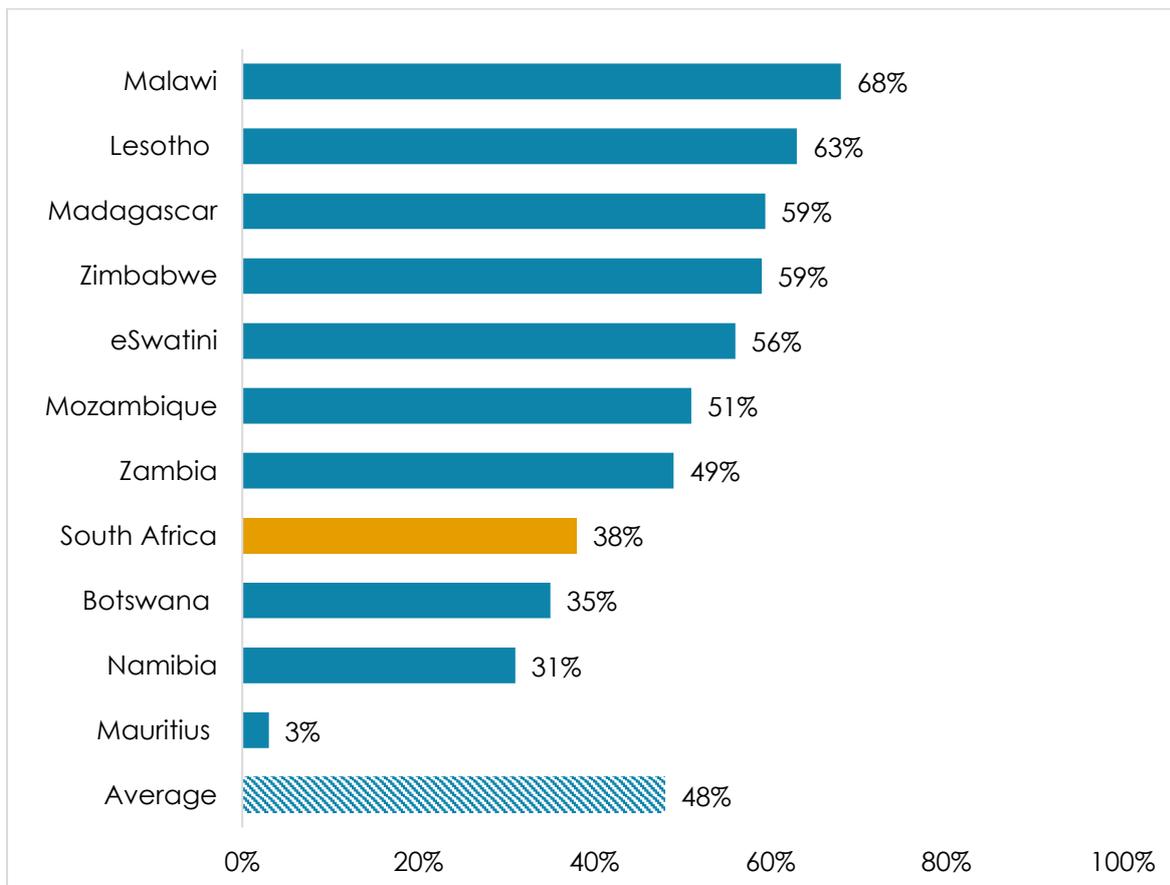


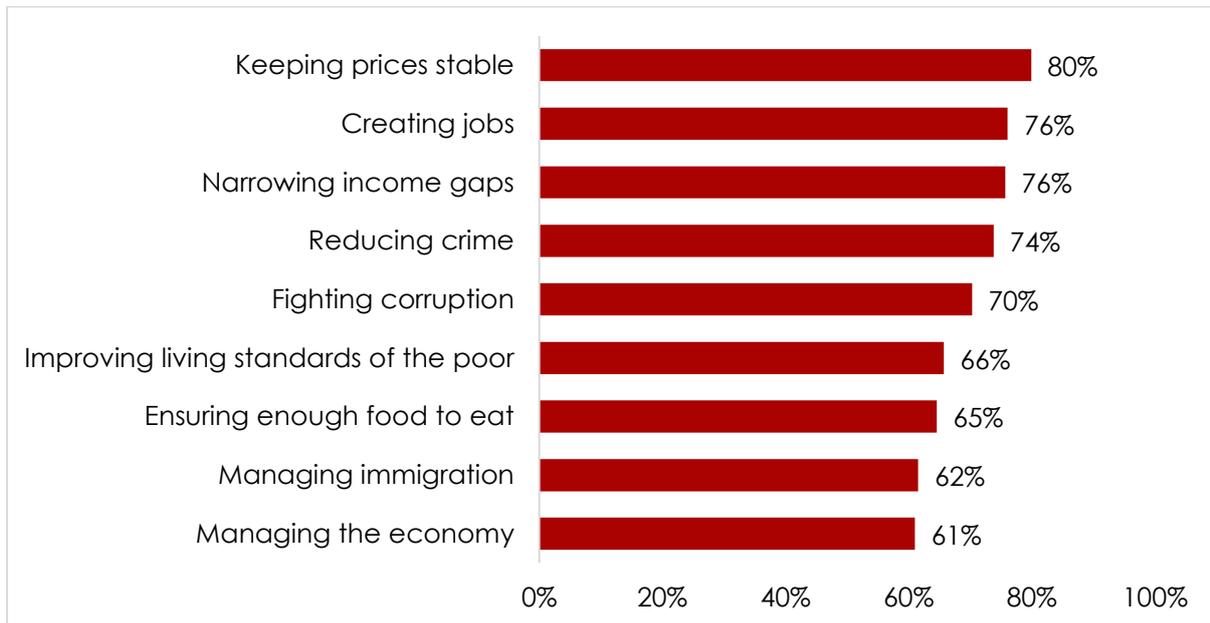
Figure shows % of respondents who experienced moderate or high lived poverty during the previous year.

### Government performance on economic management

Six in 10 South Africans (61%) say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” on managing the economy – one of a host of negative popular assessments of the government’s efforts on economic indicators (Figure 10). Large majorities also give the government poor marks on keeping prices stable (rated fairly/very bad by 80% of respondents), creating jobs (76%), narrowing income gaps (76%), improving living standards of the poor (66%), and ensuring food security (65%).

On economic management, the 61% negative rating actually represents an improvement from 2015 (66%), though the proportion describing the government as performing “fairly well” or “very well” remained unchanged at 33%.

**Figure 10: Government performing badly on economic issues | South Africa | 2018**

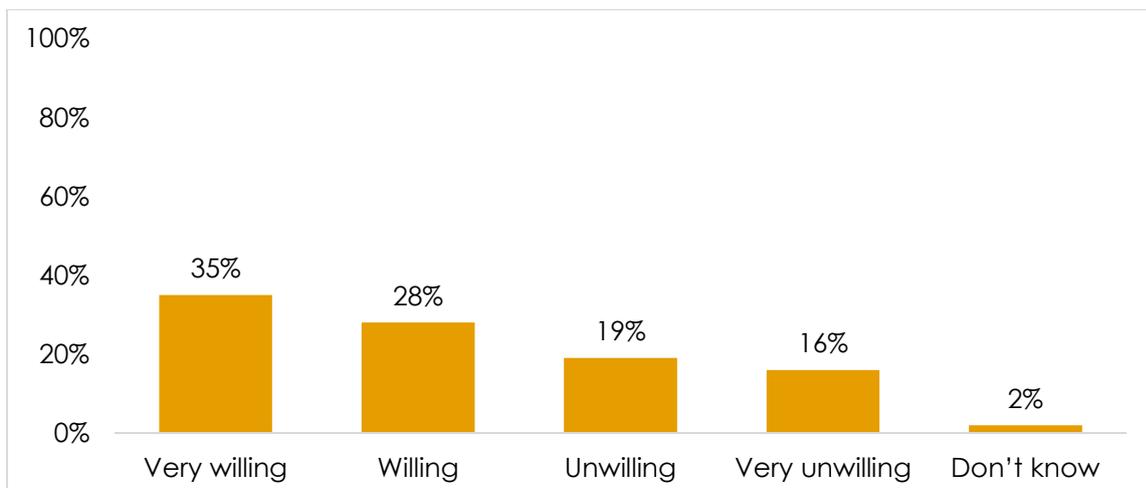


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

### Willing to give up elections in exchange for security, jobs, and housing

One indication of the priority South Africans attach to improving economic conditions is their willingness to support a non-elected government or leader capable of imposing law and order and delivering housing and jobs. In a country where voter turnout for elections is generally high (73.4% in the 2014 national election), almost two-thirds (63%) of citizens say they would be "very willing" (35%) or "willing" (28%) to forgo elections in exchange for security, housing, and jobs (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Willingness to trade in elections for security, housing, and jobs | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** If a non-elected government or leader could impose law and order and deliver houses and jobs, how willing or unwilling would you be to give up regular elections and live under such a government?

## Conclusion

Whilst South Africa still compares favourably to many of its peers on issues of economic performance, rising lived poverty and negative assessments of personal and national economic conditions are serious concerns for the government. Majorities feel the country is heading in the wrong direction and see the government as failing in its management of the economy. In perhaps the strongest message of a desperate citizenry, almost two out of three citizens are willing to give up elections in exchange for security, housing, and jobs. Following on the president's State of the Nation address, South Africans are urgently awaiting well-crafted measures to resuscitate the economy and bring back the shining rainbow nation that has been the pride of South Africans.

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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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

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