



# The Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery, Government Performance and Lived Poverty Conditions in Kenya

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## Abstract

The post-COVID-19 era has witnessed intensive engagements on latest datasets on COVID-19 experiences and the need for robust data systems to understand emerging policy pathways. There have also been extensive deliberations on how public organisations can deliver beyond immediate concerns with economic recovery and improved livelihoods. This paper draws insights from the Afrobarometer round 9 dataset on how different African governments' economies have been recovering from COVID-19 and how this has affected citizens' well-being in Kenya. The results show that despite the good recovery progress, the government has yet to stabilise high food prices, inflation, debts, job creation, etc. While national policy priorities may explain how this situation plays out, these challenges remain complex and linked to external factors that African governments may have little control over.

**Keywords** Lived Poverty Index · Social Protection · Afrobarometer · COVID-19 · Africa · Data Systems

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a game changer in how public administration activities are being ordered to respond to it and its consequences (Ansell et al., 2021; Onyango & Ondiek, 2022)—the crisis left behind by the pandemic tested and reasserted the need for effective organisation of and innovations around state-society and government-citizen relations worldwide. Like the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19 once more consolidated the state's role in governance. But more than that it demonstrated the essence of the quality of government systems while simultaneously proving that more than ever, modern state systems' vulnerabilities are inextricably

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interconnected. The isomorphic nature of contemporary public sector reforms may have created ubiquitous organisational vulnerabilities, which became increasingly imminent with COVID-19 crisis interventions (e.g., Murithi et al., 2020; Dunlop et al., 2020; Paul, 2021). No country was safe enough despite similarly outstanding contextual specific interventions and variables that underpinned COVID-19 response variations between countries (see, for example, the dataset by Pan-European Response to the Impacts of COVID-19 and future Pandemics and Epidemics (PERISCOPE) and Afrobarometer).

In the post-COVID-19 era, the economy's performance and improving citizens' welfare remain the top priority in most governments' political agendas and public administration activities. Policy systems and bureaucratic capacities have been profoundly strained, and most governments' expenditures expanded to counter post-COVID-19 challenges and have remained high to induce economic recovery. In the United Kingdom, for example, reports by the National Audit Office (NAO), Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) show that in the 2020/21 financial year, the government spent between £310 billion and £410 billion. This was £177 billion higher than initially planned before the COVID-19 pandemic and is the equivalent of about £4,600 to £6,100 per person in areas such as health and support for individuals and businesses (see Brien et al., 2023). This situation is the same in the United States (see USAspending.gov) and across Latin America (e.g., Cepal and Adenauer, 2021), Asia (Wang et al., 2023) and African countries (e.g., Sennoga & Balma, 2022).

But while public expenditures shot, governments' revenue collection streams shrank. The result witnessed an exacerbated inability of the government to address public service deficits effectively, an expanded underlying socio-economic inequalities, and the creation of other wicked policy challenges (Agwanda et al., 2021; Adeola et al., 2021). This notwithstanding, more recent reports show good progress towards economic recovery following effective vaccination policies, especially in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) region (OECD, 2021; IMF 2023). Developing African countries are also devising or implementing more intentional post-COVID-19 recovery policies, which has set them towards a brighter path of economic performance. However, more empirical works need to be done to know exactly how African state and society deals with these issues in line with recent trends and trajectories in the mainstream public administration and public policy literature. A part of such a discussion should focus on how emerging policies and systems impact citizens' livelihoods in African countries. But this debate may only be more impactful if done from a perspective that is solidly built on locally generated and more elaborate datasets like that of the Afrobarometer, as this paper intends to do.

It builds on the fact that the impact of COVID-19 on African people's livelihoods is gaining increased consideration, and for a good reason. Most African governments have been acquiring 'policy government' status; broadly connoting policy consciousness and realising effective feedback mechanisms as the state becomes more citizen than regime centred. Since the mid-2000s, albeit variations between countries, many African countries have made tremendous gains towards economic growth with the expansion of democracy and increased pressure on governments to perform (Agwanda et al., 2021; Onyango, 2022; 2023).

Underpinned by this progress, the last three years have also witnessed a plethora of studies focusing on African governments' responses during the Pandemic, raising pertinent concerns about people's livelihoods and bureaucratic capacities to address

post-pandemic policy wickedness (e.g., Foli & Ohemeng, 2022 in Ghana; Magocha 2021 in Zimbabwe; Ssali 2020 in Uganda; Onyango & Ondiek, 2022 in South Africa and Kenya). Even so, whereas these studies provide intriguing insights into state-society relations during a crisis, bureaucratic control and capacity, citizen welfare and rights, and vaccination policy responses, economic recovery and lived poverty issues relatively remain at the periphery of this research agenda.

At the global level, the usual pessimism has also prevailed. International development agencies are not sure whether African countries will make it out of the post-COVID-19 repercussions as soon as expected. According to the World Bank's COVID-19 response and the recent World Economic Outlook reports (IMF 2023), economic growth in Africa was expected to decelerate from 4.1% in 2021 to 3.3% in 2022. Yet, even in advanced economies, economic recovery efforts and social policy outcomes vary and remain problematic. If the World Bank (2022) report is anything to go by, poor economic conditions and citizens' livelihoods are still adversely affected despite economic recovery policies in advanced and developing countries.

This paper builds on these trajectories using recent Afrobarometer survey data and other statutory findings on economic recovery policies. It unpacks lived poverty and government policies in the post-COVID-19 policy efforts in African contexts using the Kenyan experience. Kenyan policy and political landscapes present an interesting study context. The new United Democratic Alliance (UDA) government is pursuing more drastic measures like increasing the tax. Despite the growing public discontent, the government marshalled legislative support to pass a highly contested Finance Bill 2023 arguing that it is meant to drive post-COVID-19 economic recovery and address the rising public debt, among other policy problems, like urban housing (e.g., Nation, 2023).

Moreover, Kenya's employment sector was the most hit by COVID-19. Out of the 19 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2021/22, Kenya stands at 55.1%. It is the only country that scored 50% and above, showing the loss of jobs, with Benin (12%) and Niger (13%) being the least affected in Africa. At the same time, Kenyans were among the least vaccinated Africans at 27%, behind Gabon (14%), Cameroon (19%), Madagascar (23.7%) and Malawi (28.3%). So, it would be intriguing to explore why despite being one of the most economically affected African countries, the Kenyan population had the least vaccination response in Africa. To understand this, this paper's central question is: *how did the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery policies affect citizens' lived poverty conditions or welfare?* Understanding these dimensions may assist with generating further insights into what the populations' lived economic experiences in post-COVID-19 policies may mean for the study and practice of public affairs and administration. The next section presents the data source or background of Afrobarometer surveys, followed by the results, discussion, and conclusion.

## Data Sources

### Afrobarometer Survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and

quality of life. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, United States ambassador to the United Nations, once described Afrobarometer as "[...] the gold standard for independent opinion polls in Africa. ... There are no organisations like Afrobarometer on the continent that provide reliable projections and polling" (<https://www.afrobarometer.org/about/>). Like other regional research networks, mainly Eurobarometer and Asia Barometer, Afrobarometer datasets provide timely macro-data, at national and continental levels, on governance outcomes and government performances in almost forty African countries. Between 1999 and 2022, the organisation completed nine rounds of surveys in up to 39 countries. The Afrobarometer team in Kenya is based at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi.

The methodology Afrobarometer uses, including sampling principles and weighting, sample size and design, sample stages and data weights, is rigorous and elaborate (see <https://www.afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods/sampling/>). Afrobarometer surveys were conducted through face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice. The Kenyan survey interviewed 2,400 adult Kenyans from 12th to 30th November 2021, with a 41.4% response frequency. The sample size yielded country-level results with a margin of error of  $\pm 2$  percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Kenya since 2003.

## Study Variables

The Afrobarometer dataset is divided into nine broad thematic areas, including Democracy, freedom and citizen engagement, Economy, poverty and development, Energy and infrastructure, Environment and climate, Health, education and social services, Identity, society and gender, Institutions, leadership and governance, Regional and global relation, and Safety and security. In addition to these themes are country-specific questions. COVID-19 was also a thematic area in the 2022 or Round 9 survey. Analysing the impact of post-COVID-19 recovery policies on lived poverty conditions of citizens looked into data on the Economy, poverty and development (food security, cash income, access to basic necessities) and Leadership and governance (job creation, handling COVID-19 and managing economy) variables, as shown below.

## Results

### COVID-19 and Economic Conditions

In their assessment of the government's handling of the COVID-19 conditions, slightly more than half of Kenyans (51%) think that the government did fairly well in managing the pandemic, with 23.7% saying the government did very well. But when asked whether their households have received any assistance from the government, like food, cash payments, relief from bill payments, or other assistance that they were not normally receiving before the pandemic, an overwhelming majority (91.6%) stated no, with only 8.4%, saying yes. Also, when asked Do you think the distribution of government support to people during the COVID-19 pandemic, for

**Table 1** COVID-19 Relief Assistance is Fairly Distributed

Category	Frequency	%/Total	%/ (Total-No answer)
Very unfairly	1,361	56.7%	56.7%
Somewhat unfairly	372	15.5%	15.5%
Somewhat fairly	284	11.8%	11.8%
Very fairly	316	13.2%	13.2%
Don't know	66	2.7%	2.7%

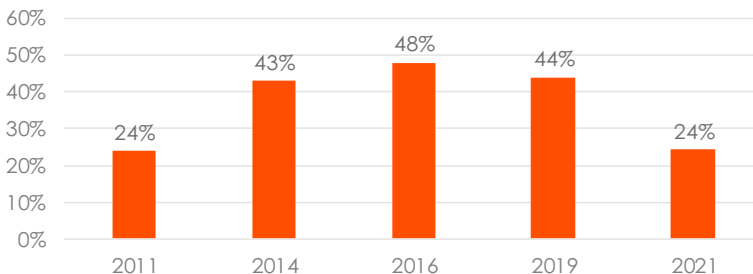
Source: Afrobarometer online analysis tool

example, through food packages or cash payments, has been fair or unfair? Table 1 below presents the findings:

The satisfaction level was also very low, with only 10.2% saying they were satisfied with the government’s handling of COVID-19. 32.4% were very unsatisfied, and 29.4% were not at all satisfied. Similar confidence levels were shown concerning the government’s future preparedness towards a COVID-19-like crisis. Only 30.1% of Kenyans considered the government to be somewhat prepared, 19.7% said the government was very prepared, and 26.7% said that the government was very unprepared.

In assessing how these responses reflect on the economic impact and household livelihood, most Kenyans provided varied responses on whether the country’s economy was going in the right or wrong direction. In 2021/2022, most (76%) of respondents felt that the country was headed in "the wrong direction," while only 24% thought it was going in "the right direction." As shown in Fig. 1, this represents almost a double decline among those who believed the economy was going in the right direction in previous surveys. In 2019, the majority (66%) said the country was headed in the wrong direction, while 44% approved that the country was headed in the right direction. Compared to the 2016 survey, we note a steady decline in public confidence concerning the economy’s performance. This trend reflects the 2011 and 2014 surveys.

Most respondents (above 70%) agreed that the government was performing poorly, that is, the economy was going in the wrong direction, with slightly above 20% stating it was going in the right direction. Responses varied across different



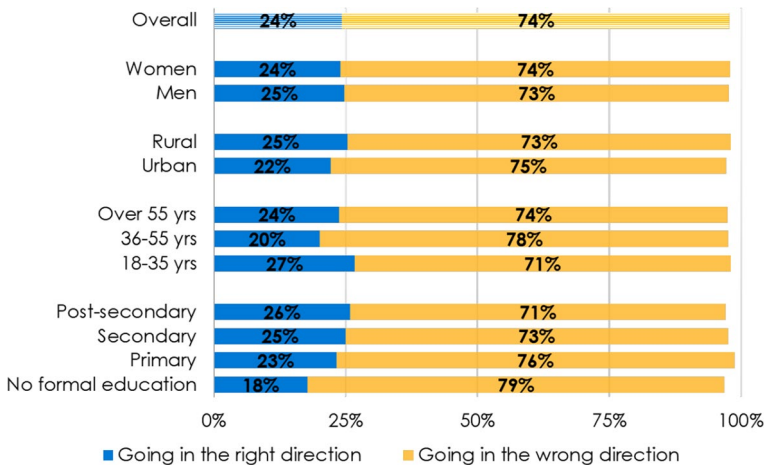
**Fig. 1** Direction of the economy: going in the right direction | Kenya | 2011–2021. Respondents were asked: Let’s start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. 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? (% who say "right direction")

demographics. As shown in Fig. 2 below, there was a slightly positive perception of the government's performance on economic recovery, saying that the country is going in the right direction among young respondents (27% of 18- to 35-year-olds). This was less than those between 35–55 (20%) and over 55 (24%). One way of understanding this variation may be that those between 35 and 55 years are actively involved in the production and are active providers for families more than the younger and older respondents.

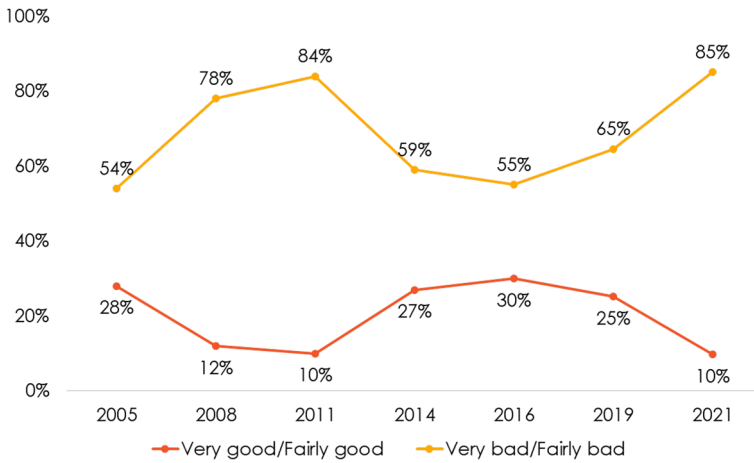
Again, women were less positive (24%) than men (25%). Rural residents (25%) were relatively more optimistic about the country going in the right direction than their urban residents (22%), who stated that the economy was going in the wrong direction. However, these differences are insignificant.

Assessments of the country's general economic condition were even more negative. About 85% of Kenyans stated that the economic situation was "fairly bad" or "very bad," a 20 and 30 -percentage-point increase from 2016 and 2019, respectively. Figure 3 shows these findings reflect or surpass the 2011 situation despite notable improvements indicated in 2014, 2016 and 2019 surveys. This way, it is questionable whether the impact of COVID-19 could be wholly responsible, given that there was already an upward curve concerning the poor management of the economy. Secondly, most of the population did not feel the government's efforts to cushion citizens from the harsh effects of the economy due to the pandemic. Thus, future changes remain to be seen. Accordingly, we further assessed Kenyans' perception of the economy in the last 12 months. And whether they thought there was a likelihood that the situation may change for the better in the next 12 months. Figure 4 gives a mixed basket of answers.

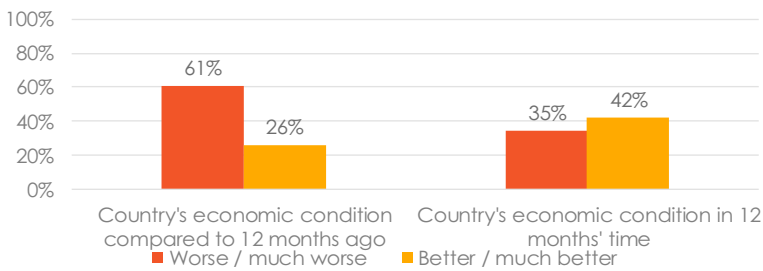
More than half of Kenyans interviewed (61%) said the country's economic condition had worsened over the previous 12 months. Nonetheless, they were also optimistic that things would likely be better or much better in the coming 12 months



**Fig. 2** Country going in the right direction | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021. Respondents were asked: "Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "right direction")"



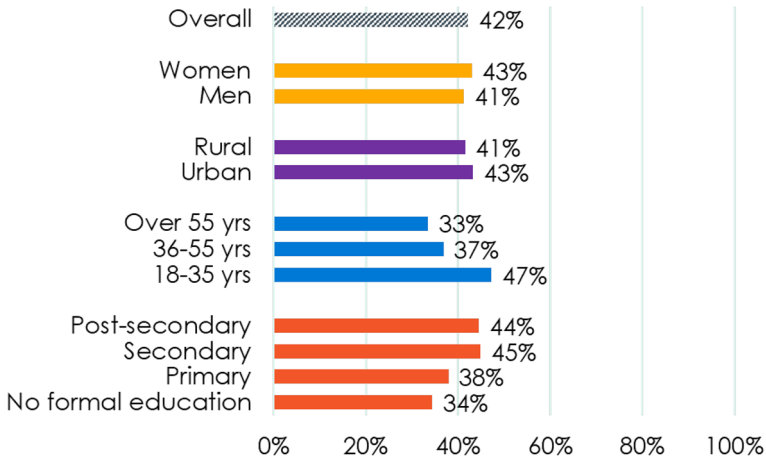
**Fig. 3** Country’s economic condition | Kenya | 2005–2021. Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?



**Fig. 4** Examining country’s economic conditions in the past 12 months and prospects in the next 12 months| Kenya | 2021. 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?

at 41%, four percentage points less than 45% in 2019. However, 35% said that the economy might remain worse or much worse in the next 12 months. This indicates a one percentage point less compared to 2019’s survey, whereby 36% of the citizens said it would get worse.

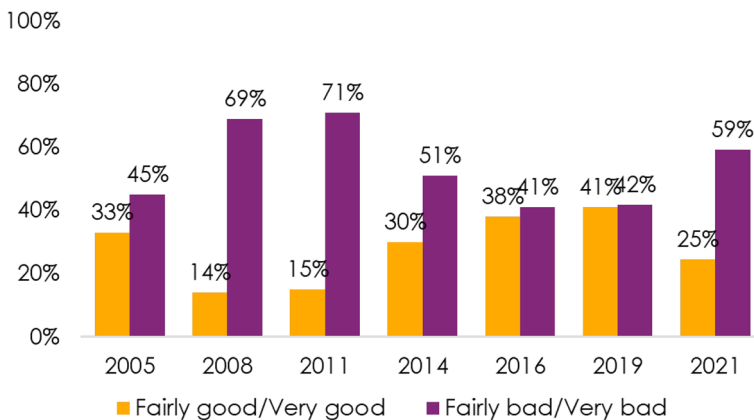
A further demographic assessment shows that youth (ages 18 – 35) were still more optimistic at 47% (though down from 50% in 2019). This is compared to 37% for ages 36–55 and 33% for those aged 55 and above. Women (43%) were more optimistic about future economic performance than men (41%). Moreover, those with no formal education were less optimistic at 34%. This contradicts the 2019 survey, where this group were more confident at 51%. Those with post-secondary school were relatively more optimistic that the economy might improve or improve in the next 12 months at 44%. This is one per cent less than what was recorded in the 2019 survey, as shown in Kamau (2017 and 2021). Figure 5 summarises these results.



**Fig. 5** Prospects for better economic conditions in 12 months | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021. Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time? (% who say "better" or "much better")

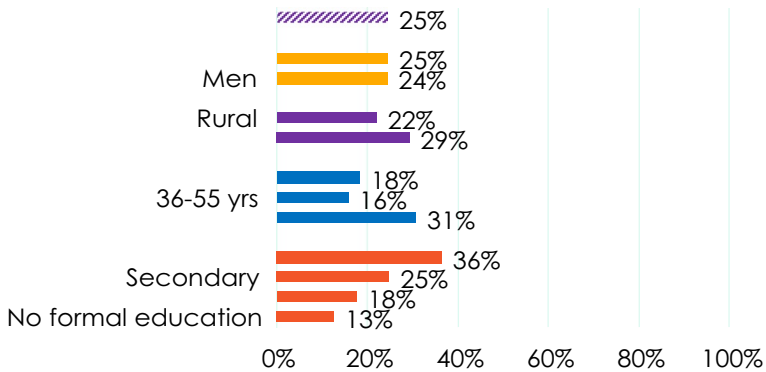
**Personal Living Conditions**

Following the above assessment, how did these economic conditions impact Kenyans' personal living conditions? This is an essential assessment in discerning poverty levels in Kenya, especially since 2005, as captured in Figs. 6 and 7. Figure 6 on living conditions shows that 59% of Kenyan citizens stated that their personal living conditions were fairly bad or very bad, a 17% increase from the 2019 survey at 42% who described their personal living conditions as "fairly" or "very" bad. Similarly, 25% said that their personal living conditions were fairly good or very good. This was a decline from the 2019 survey, whereby 41%



**Fig. 6** Personal living conditions | Kenya | 2005–2021. Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?





**Fig. 7** Personal living conditions' fairly good' or 'very good' by demography| Kenya | 2021. Source: Afrobarometer analysis

described their personal living conditions as fairly/very good. In other words, despite improved personal living conditions in the previous years from 2012 onwards, in 2019, most Kenyans felt that the worsening economic conditions negatively impacted their personal living conditions. We can tie these worsening living conditions to the surging food, fuel prices, etc., due to COVID-19 and other international political conditions, mainly the Ukrainian war.

The survey further probed a demographic assessment of personal living conditions to understand how the economy impacted different members of the society in Kenya, as shown in Fig. 7 below. Approximately 22% of the rural population stated that their personal living conditions were fairly good or very good. This was contrary to urban dwellers at 29% who stated that their living conditions were fairly good or very good. Among the youth (aged 18–35), 31% said their living conditions were fairly good or very good (see Kamau, 2021). Women and Men were respectively at 25%, and 24% stated that their personal living conditions were either fairly good or very good. Kenyans with post-secondary education at 36% describe their living conditions as fairly good or very good, and those with no formal education at 13%. The older population at 18%, and those between 36 and 55 years, at 16%, stated that their living conditions were fairly good or very good.

These findings may have exposed the informal sector's vulnerabilities. It is more likely that the informal sector is dominated or is a source of livelihood for most Kenyans, especially those with no formal education. Therefore, given that only 13% of the latter felt that their living conditions were fairly or very good puts to question the extent to which the existing economic policies and ERS impact them. It is also unclear why those with post-secondary schooling who are likely to be active jobseekers (36%) stated that their living conditions were fairly good or very good. This was more than the middle-agers. This is especially so considering Kenya's troubled labour market and low employment rates.

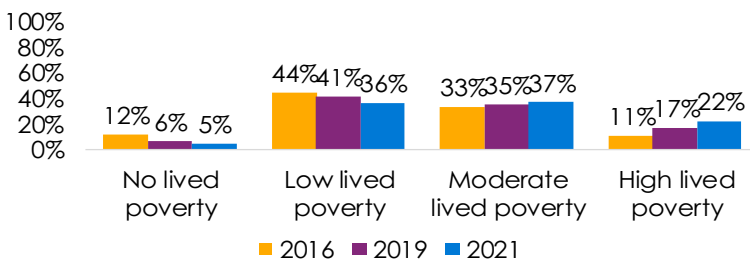
## Lived Poverty and Access to Basic Necessities

Understanding personal living conditions, mainly cash income, medicare, food security, access to clean water, and fuel, was further assessed alongside lived poverty experiences, as shown in Fig. 8.

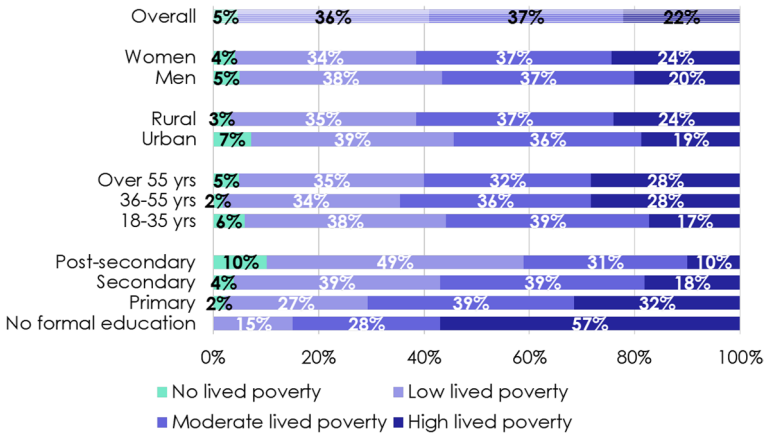
Most Kenyans experienced low-lived or moderate-lived poverty. This varied since 2016, with 37% stating that they experienced moderate poverty in 2021, representing a rising trend from 2016 (33%) to 2019 at 35%. High-lived poverty experiences have also been gaining an upward trend, with 22% saying they experienced it in 2021, 17% in 2019 and 11% in 2016. Only 5% experienced no lived poverty in 2021, presenting another downward trend compared with previous years. While 44% experienced low-lived poverty in 2016, the number has reduced in subsequent years, with 41% in 2019 and 36% saying the same in 2021, respectively.

Figure 9 shows that lived poverty index further varied by location, gender, age and level of education. Urban residents relatively experienced lower lived poverty experience than the rural population at 39% and 35%, respectively, in 2021. They also experienced lower high poverty lived experience than the rural population at 19% against 24%, respectively. This implies the levels of poverty and deprivation in Kenya, where a majority still live in rural areas. More men than women experienced low-lived poverty at 38% and 34%, respectively. However, both genders were at 37% concerning moderate lived poverty experience. But more women than men experienced high-lived poverty at 24% and 19%, respectively. These findings provide critical insights for the implementation of the national policy on gender and development. More research is needed to address underlying relative inequalities between rural and urban dwellers and between genders.

Most importantly, those with no formal education experienced high-lived poverty at 57%, presenting a massive margin of 47% between them and those with post-secondary education (10%). Youth poverty stands mostly at 38% and 39% representing low-lived and moderately-lived poverty experiences, respectively. These percentages were relatively higher than old age poverty experiences, at 35% and 32%, respectively. However, the old experienced the same high-poverty



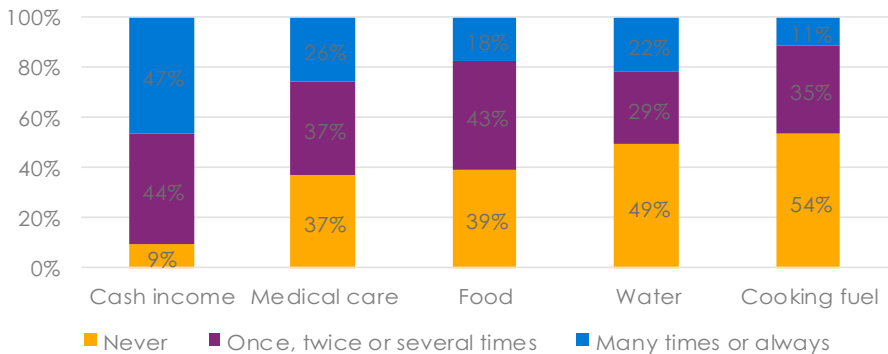
**Fig. 8** Personal experience of poverty: Lived Poverty Index (LPI) | Kenya | 2016–2021/22. LPI computation: An average of the responses from these five variables: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?



**Fig. 9** Lived Poverty Index | by demographic group | Kenya | 2021. LPI computation: An average of the responses from these five variables: 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?

lived experiences as middle-agers at 28%. Overall, levels of education, gender and location seem to have something to do with high-lived poverty levels from Fig. 9.

These findings may explain the deprived situation experienced by most Kenyans regarding their access to critical services and basic needs, as shown in Fig. 10. About 37% of Kenyans have gone without medical care once, twice, or several times. Approximately 26% of the citizens said they have many times or always gone without medical care, and 37% said they have never gone without Medicare. On cash income, 44% said they have once, twice, or several times gone without it, and 47% stated that they have many times or always gone without cash income. Almost



**Fig. 10** Going without basic necessities in the past year | Kenya | 2021. 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?

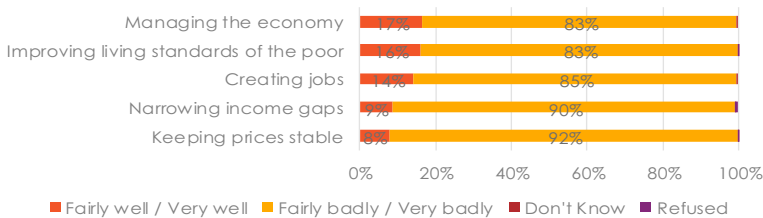
half (49%) said they have never gone without food, and more than half (54%) said they have never gone without cooking fuel. Still, a good percentage (43%) have gone without food once, twice, or several times. And 35% have gone without cooking fuel once, twice, or several times. This means the lived poverty dimensions remain challenging to the current administration and call for the need to design and implement social security systems.

These findings mainly provide insights into food security policy issues and related safety net programmes. On clean water, 29% said that they have once, twice, or several times went without clean water, 49% have never gone without clean water, and 22% said they have many times or always gone without clean water. Overall, access to basic necessities is at worrying levels. These findings also questioned the extent to which the decentralised units are addressing public service delivery deficits in Kenya. This is consistent with previous surveys where cash income remains the most deprived basic necessity in Kenya (see Afrobarometer round 8 findings).

### How is the Government Performing in Handling these Issues?

Given the above findings and our earlier overview of the economy, the Afrobarometer survey probed how Kenyans thought the government was handling these economic issues or managing the economy. Figure 11 below indicates the problems pertinent to most Kenyans, representing how they felt the government has dealt with them. As expected, most Kenyans (83%) thought the economy was fairly or badly managed. Also, 83% stated that the government was fairly badly or very badly improving the living standards of people experiencing poverty. More than these percentages, or 85% of Kenyans, thought that the government was fairly badly or very badly dealing with issues of job creation. 90% of respondents agreed that the government was fairly badly or very badly narrowing income gaps between different groups in Kenyans. An overwhelming majority (92%) believed that the government was fairly badly or very badly keeping prices stable.

Other data dimensions of Afrobarometer data show that the widespread injustice and corruption may have exacerbated these conditions at the local government levels. For example, the majority (49.3% saying the government has mishandled corruption issues) shy away from reporting corruption for fear of retaliation. On the extent to which the government has handled high prices, most Kenyans think it has



**Fig. 11** Government handling of issues | Kenya | 2021. 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?

**Table 2** Perceptions of the government keeping prices stable

Category	Total	Gender of respondent	
		Man	Woman
Very badly	65.5%	64.7%	66.3%
Fairly badly	26.3%	27.3%	25.4%
Fairly well	6.4%	6.5%	6.3%
Very well	1.5%	1.4%	1.6%
Refused	0.1%	-	0.1%
Don't Know / Haven't heard enough to say	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%

Source: Afrobarometer online data analysis tool

done very badly at 65.5%. Table 2 shows how these responses varied between genders, with more women than men stating that the government has done poorly in keeping the prices stable.

The above notwithstanding, other statutory evidence shows that the government has been doing something about inflation but with minimal impact on the economy to improve poor living conditions. According to the Treasury's latest quarterly report, as of March 2022, Kenya reduced inflation from 5.6% down from 5.9% in March 2021 (Republic of Kenya, 2022). However, if very recent reports on Kenya's economic performance are also anything to go by, the government needs to be more intentional in securing the vulnerable population from economic insecurity. Beyond the statistics that show recovery, Kenyans are still dealing with the high cost of living, a surge in fuel prices, and diminishing cash income. Therefore, these issues remain high in the current administration's priority. The government should find practical means of addressing the emerging trends of worsening economic situations to change for the better.

## Discussion

If Kenya is to sustain the current gains of building back stronger from the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and political mismanagement of the economy, the government needs to increase its current efforts of stabilising prices and creating jobs. It should move from rather cosmetic promises like the allocation of the Hustler Fund to sustainable ways of improving the financial health of informal sector employees through established conventional credit systems, which are currently exclusive to formal employees and formal businesses. Notably, despite Kenya's overperformance in ordinary revenue, which has resulted in an excess collection of KSh.14.3 billion over and above the target of 1,506.6 billion, devolved governments need to be adequately funded by public exchequer effectively regulated. At the local government units, essential public services like healthcare and education should be effectively delivered.

However, the underfunding and lack of effective accountability mechanisms in the local government units have profoundly threatened this possibility (Anonymous, 2021; Kamau, 2021). Indeed, 73.3% of Kenyans thought that a lot of money meant to counter COVID-19 was lost to corruption, according to the Afrobarometer survey under analysis. The result is increased poor living conditions due to a lack of clean water, healthcare and education for those who need it most. These findings provide essential insights into the government's performance in economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts toward improving people's living conditions.

These data further show that the functioning of government remains a crucial tenet of understanding democratic outputs and measuring the quality of government, which is often understood in the manner of public organisations' performance (see EUI, 2021; Rothstein & Teorell, 2012). Generally, while COVID-19 may have been a game changer in how public administration activities were ordered to respond to it (Ansell et al., 2021), especially regarding technological innovations (Anonymous, 2022), it left behind many tattered and struggling livelihoods worldwide (Alradhawi et al., 2020). This was evident in the recent strikes in the United Kingdom, France and South Africa, with labour tensions in the education and transportation sectors. In Kenya, the Civil Service Unions have been organising peaceful demonstrations against the government's intentions to levy more taxes through the Finance Bill 2023. In particular, like most developing countries, the Kenyan government is still wrestling with stabilising high food prices, skyrocketing inflation, reducing crime and ballooning debts (Mwangi, 2022).

The pandemic hit all sectors equally. The economy suffered a massive setback despite a 5.4% economic growth rate in 2019 (see Afrobarometer Round 8; October 2021). Thus, whereas governments are doing what is economically possible to get back on track, finding and creating sustainable social systems remains challenging (Nchanji & Lutomia, 2021; Onyango & Ondiek, 2022). A report by the Kenyan Treasury in September 2021 confirms Afrobarometer findings that in 2020 Kenya experienced unprecedented job loss in both sectors, with a drop in the employed to 17.4 million from 18.1 million (Wasike, 2021). The same conclusions were also made in a research brief by Kenya Institute for Public Policy, Research and Analysis (KIPPR), a government think tank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF), showing that Kenya's economic growth drifted from 5.4% in 2019 to -0.1% in 2020 following the COVID-19 outbreak, that resulted to job losses in the formal sector (see, Nechifor et al., 2020; Onsomu et al., 2021).

Because of this and considering additional dilemmas like the War in Ukraine's impact (World Bank, 2023), the government is making headways in reviving the economy through its Economic Recovery Strategy (ERS). The ERS is executed in addition to other ongoing funding and implementation of social protection programmes. In KEU's December 2021 and June 2022 reports and the recent Central Bank of Kenya survey, the country made commendable steps in the post-COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery (Mathenge et al. 2022).

However, underlying challenges remain, and public confidence is minimal. It is worth noting that during the round 9 Afrobarometer survey in Kenya, the economy was just recovering from COVID-19, and many intentional efforts were underway to

reset the economy (e.g., Onyango & Ondiek, 2022). The informal economy, where most Kenyans are (approximately 7.4 million), was hit as hard by the pandemic as the formal sector, destabilising the tax base for the economy. According to the World Bank Kenya Economic Update (KEU) (2022), the informal sector hosts 94% of unlicensed Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

But, if the previous Afrobarometer studies are anything to go by, the severity of the poor economic performance has been here for some time for most Kenyans. And the pandemic may have only exacerbated the situation. Despite Kenya's GDP growth rate in 2019 and 2020 at 5.4% and 2.9%, respectively, Kenyans perceive the country's economic performance has taken a nosedive since 2016. This has featured an unsteady growth curve, especially under the previous political leadership, posing an uphill task for the new administration. In 2019, two-thirds (65%) of Kenyans described the country's economic performance as "fairly bad" or "very bad,". This represented a 10% increase from 2016. This is a trend across Africa, except for Benin and Cote d'Ivoire, where more than half (59.8%) and (55.6%) thought the economy was going in the right direction. This may mean the government's under-performance and poor economic situation are more intricate and feature winding uncertainties.

The most outstanding dimensions of this situation and its implications for lived poverty experiences relate to the current inflation experienced by most Kenyans. Notably, the pandemic further constrained a Kenyan economy that was already struggling with problems of drought, high fuel costs, and other internal risks such as increased food prices and inflation (Kamau, 2021). As of December 2022, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) reported that the "overall year-on-year inflation rate as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 9.1 per cent [noting that] the rise in inflation was largely due to increase in prices of commodities under food and non-alcoholic beverages (13.8%); transport (13.0%) and housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels (6.2%) between December 2021 and December 2022" (KNBS 30 December, 2022). Moreover, Kenya's National Assembly study shows that the current high fuel prices due to the Russian-Ukrainian war has also adversely affected the economy (Parliament of Kenya, 2022). In addition to the ballooning national debt, these realities put Kenyans in a precarious economic situation, affecting the quality of life of most Kenyans.

Even so, through its elaborate National Development Plan or Vision 2030, Kenya has generally made notable policy efforts to secure the vulnerable population from the adverse effects of economic situations such as extreme poverty, unemployment, affordable housing, healthcare and fuel costs. For instance, in the third Medium Term Plan of Vision 2030 and the *Big 4 Agenda*, the Kenyan government rolled out programmes targeting job creation for the youth (*Kazi kwa vijana*) and the Hustler fund to improve the financial health of deprived citizens, mainly in the informal sector.

The Hustler Fund is described as means to offer "affordable credit to sections of the population that have been left behind for far too long" (<https://www.hustlerfund.go.ke/>). The Fund lends to small-scale businesses at 8 per cent annually, the lowest interest ever charged in Kenya. As a result, citizens can start or boost their hustles

without being crushed by predatory lenders, shylocks, and over-the-roof interest rates.

But there is a reason to doubt the Hustler fund and its potential to improve the quality of life of most poor Kenyans and informal businesspeople. For one, the Fund capitalised on political messaging by the current administration on the mismanagement of the economy by the previous administration than on the practicalities and challenges underpinning credit systems in the country. Neither is the Fund anchored on any policy nor structured so that it can uplift 'unbanked' or start-up businesses in the country. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the fund will alleviate the informal small businesses with limited chances of accessing credit services to substantially boost their businesses' growth.

The medium-term plan (as policy implementation and monitoring phases) also deals with hunger eradication, education bursaries, school feeding programmes, youth enterprise funds and fee waivers in public health facilities. The Kenya National Social Protection Policy mainly builds on these initiatives. The policy pays attention to Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), older persons' cash transfers and other forms of social security (Republic of Kenya, 2011). Therefore, the government is consciously addressing the 'wicked' economic situation. Nevertheless, the prevailing economic inequalities and poverty continue to limit the rural and urban poor' access to healthcare, water and electricity. The Afrobarometer survey findings provide insights into citizen perceptions, experiences, and realities to enable policymakers and other actors, including politicians, to design or develop appropriate governance approaches, actions, and inclusive development.

## Conclusion

Understanding the impact of post-COVID-19 realities on people's living conditions essentially contributes to the growing agenda on how data can be used to map the COVID-19 experiences and governance, which seeks to establish future crisis preparedness. Studying complexities around COVID-19 realities feature prominently in the efforts to generate knowledge on the recent state-society relations during and after the pandemic, the shifting politics and market principles of governance, social change and the central role of public and private organisations in driving this change and unpacking the emerging globalisation and national administration interfaces. As ongoing PERISCOPE studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science and others by Di Mascio et al. (2020) regarding Italy and Su et al. (2022) concerning the COVID-19 repercussions on employment dimensions in Europe, empirical evidence from Afrobarometer, particularly Kenya in this case, may assist in unpacking the overall picture of post-COVID recovery policies and how these efforts in Africa impact citizens' livelihoods (Ataguba, 2020; Ozili, 2021). Therefore, country-specific empirical analyses like the one in this paper are essential today as citizens innovate ways to cope with the economic issues that characterise their living conditions. This will help understand what has worked and what does not work regarding COVID-19 recovery in any given context, as some health studies have already explored (e.g., Rutayisire et al. 2021).



In the post-COVID-19 era, there is a need for more deliberations on recent findings to understand the emerging pathways in how government systems deliver. And whether core economic systems like agriculture and the private sector's resilience can be improved for a full recovery. Countries suffered and have been impacted differently due to varying post-COVID-19 economic shocks and threats to individual well-being. The current policy actions targeting these shocks have also produced different outcomes relating to the economy and citizens' living conditions. Reporting data on these outcomes is critical because they help understand what has worked and what does and does not work regarding COVID-19 recovery in any given context of public administration. Accordingly, this research report provided essential insights from recent findings concerning African public affairs contexts, mainly Kenya. The survey showed that most Kenyans feel the government has performed poorly in improving their livelihoods. They have become more deprived of essential services, with the worsening economic situation, mainly due to COVID-19 and other economic challenges beyond the government's control. Surprisingly, a significant majority see prospects for economic improvement in the next 12 months.

Still, ongoing implementation of post-COVID Economic Recovery Strategies and third Medium Term Plan policies in Kenya need to be more intentional in developing and implementing practical short-term and long-term solutions to the problems established by the Afrobarometer survey. Part of the solution is significantly addressing public trust deficits and strengthening the financial and institutional capacities and public accountability mechanisms at the devolved government levels to improve public service delivery. For example, realising and strengthening the National Action Plan IV on Open Government Partnership (mainly OGP Locals) may go a long way in helping with reversing the emerging trend of the country's poor economic performance if things are to change for the better.

**Authors' Contribution** Single authored.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** N/A.

**Ethics Approval** N/A.

**Consent** N/A

**Data** <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>

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