

Amid rising dissatisfaction, Zambians give government poor marks on the economy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 203 | Brian Howard and Gugu Nonjinge

Summary

For a decade, Zambia had one of the world's fastest-growing economies: Between 2004 and 2014, the gross domestic product (GDP) averaged annual growth of 6.7% (Index Mundi, 2017). In 2011, the World Bank reclassified Zambia from a low-income to a middle-income country (Guardian, 2011).

But according to the government's 2015 Living Conditions Monitoring Survey Report, poverty levels have consistently remained above 60% (Central Statistical Office, 2016). In rural areas, three out of four persons (75%) are poor.

Then economic growth dropped by more than half in 2015 and 2016, to just under 3%, as copper prices fell, power generation was reduced, and the value of the kwacha declined to unprecedented levels before rebounding slightly in early 2017 (Index Mundi, 2017; Trading Economics, 2017).

In Afrobarometer surveys, Zambian citizens' perceptions of the country's economic situation and their personal living conditions follow a similar trend. After reaching a record high in 2013, positive assessments have dropped back to more typical economic dissatisfaction by the majority. Citizens cite economic issues as the country's most important problems and are largely critical of the government's performance in addressing them.

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 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zambia interviewed 1,200 adult Zambians in April 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2014.

Key findings

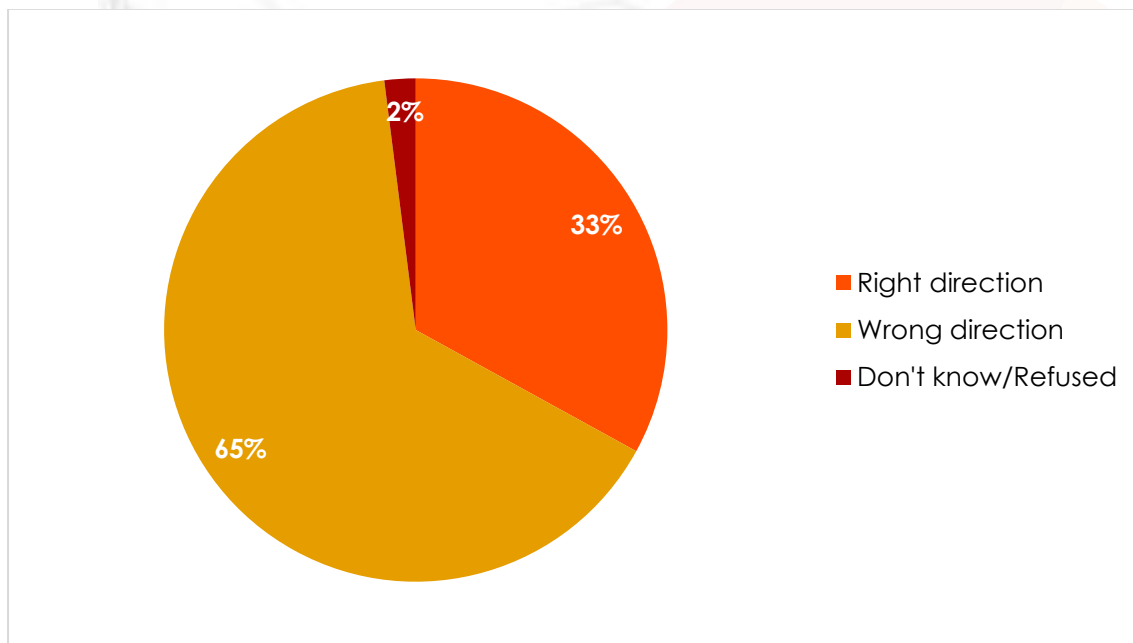
- Nearly two-thirds of Zambians (65%) see the country as heading in the wrong direction.
- Economic issues rank high among the most important national problems identified by citizens and dominate reasons that one in four Zambians have considered emigrating.
- Six in 10 Zambians (60%) describe the country's current economic conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad," a sharp increase from 36% in 2013.

- A similar proportion (62%) think the current administration is performing poorly in managing the economy, an increase from 35% in 2013.
- Almost half (46%) of Zambians describe their personal living conditions as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” an improvement from 2009 but considerably worse than in 2013.
- More than half of Zambians say they went without enough food (58%), without needed medical care (53%), or without a cash income (85%) at least once during the previous year.

Country's overall direction and most important problems

By a 2-to-1 margin (65% to 33%), Zambians perceive the country as heading in the wrong direction (Figure 1).

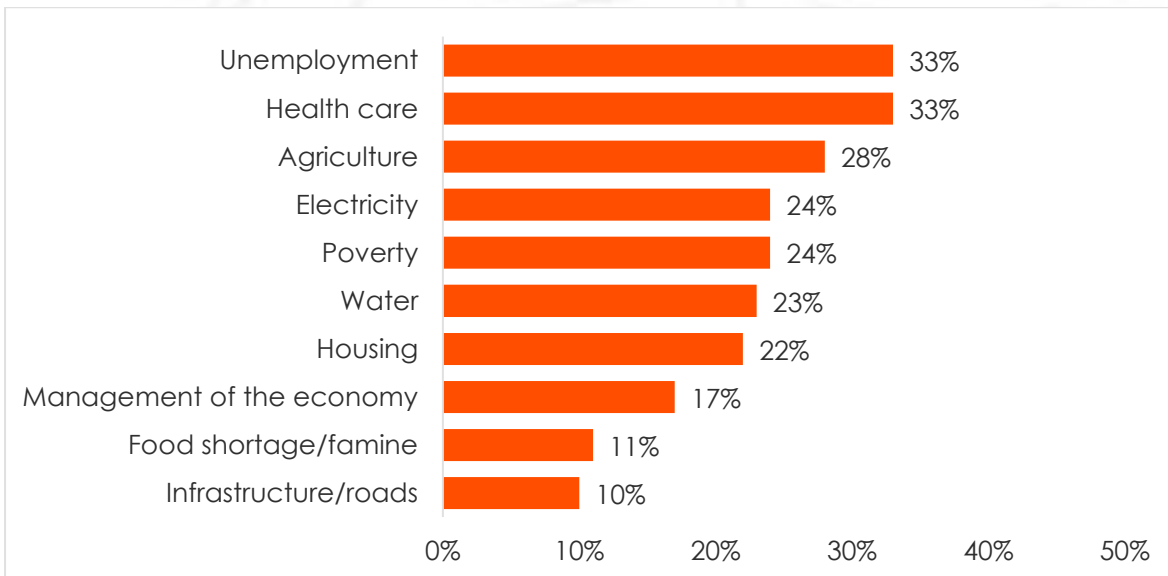
Figure 1: Country's overall direction | Zambia | 2017



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?

Economic issues rank high among the most important problems that Zambians say their government should address (Figure 2). At the top are unemployment and health care, each cited by 33% of respondents as one of their top three priorities. Agriculture (28%), poverty (24%), management of the economy (17%), food shortage/famine (11%), and infrastructure/roads (10%) are other economic issues that rank in the top 10.

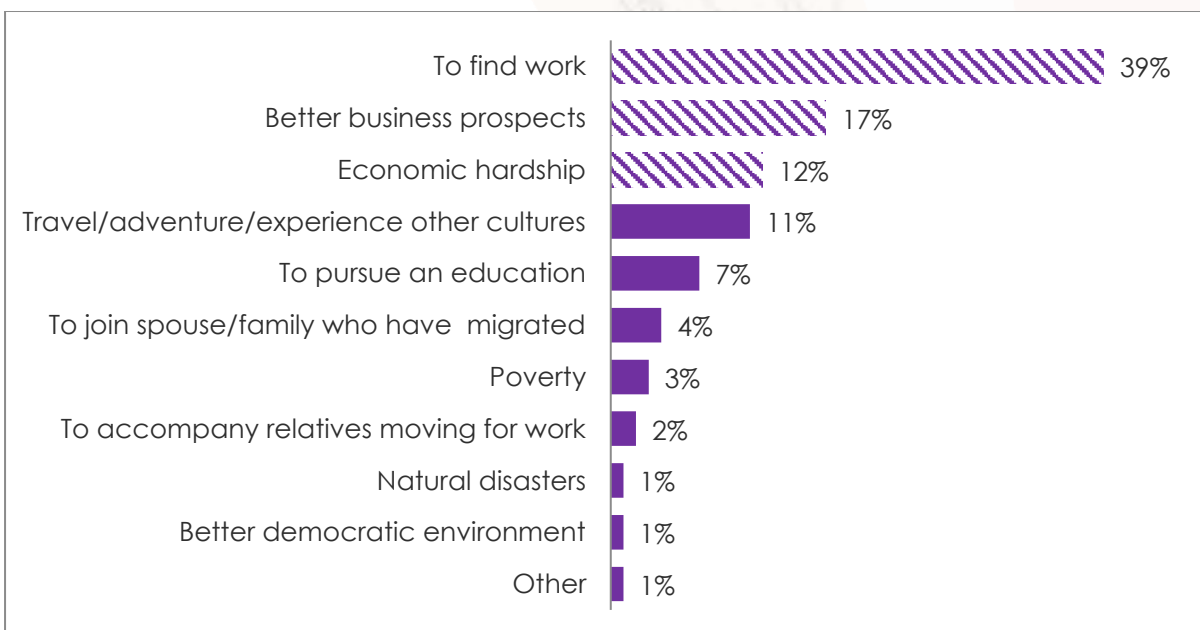
Figure 2: Most important problems facing the country | Zambia | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents were allowed to give up to three responses. The figure shows % of respondents who cited each issue among their three responses.)*

Moreover, economic considerations dominate reasons that Zambians consider emigrating from their country. Among the 26% of respondents who say they have given at least "a little bit" of thought to the possibility of emigrating, the most frequently cited reasons are to find work (39%), to find better business prospects (17%), and to escape economic hardship (12%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Most important reason for considering emigration | Zambia | 2017

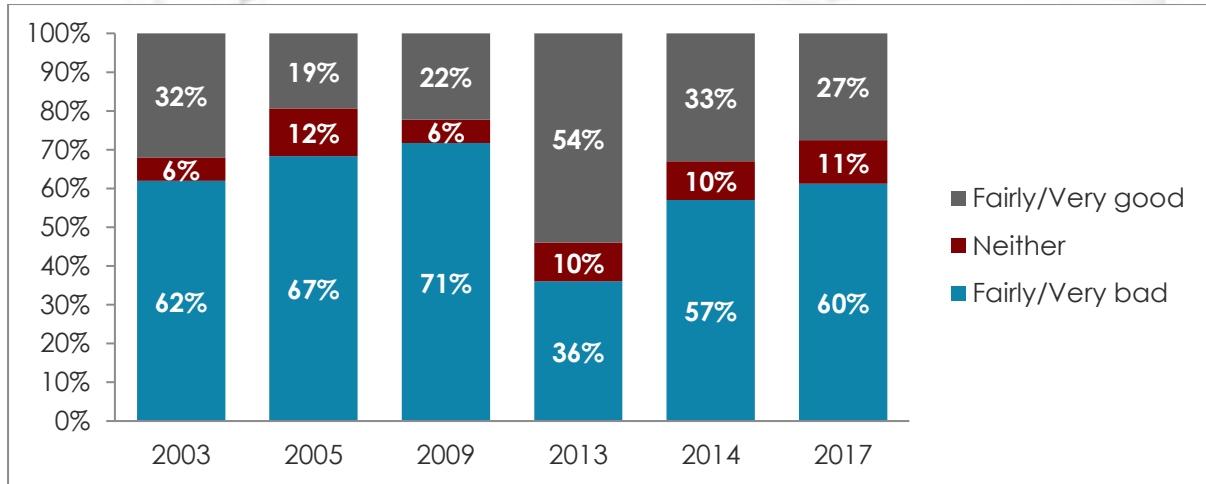


Respondents who said they had considered emigrating were asked: *There are several reasons why people leave their home to live in another country for an extended period of time. What about you? What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from Zambia? (Note: Respondents who said they had not considered emigrating are excluded.)*

National economic conditions

A majority (60%) of Zambians see the country's present economic conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 4). The proportion who see conditions as "fairly" or "very" good has dropped to 27%, a modest decrease from 2014 (33%) and a huge decline compared to 2013 (54%). Still, Zambians are more positive about the present economy than they were in the years before 2013, when negative perceptions averaged 67%.

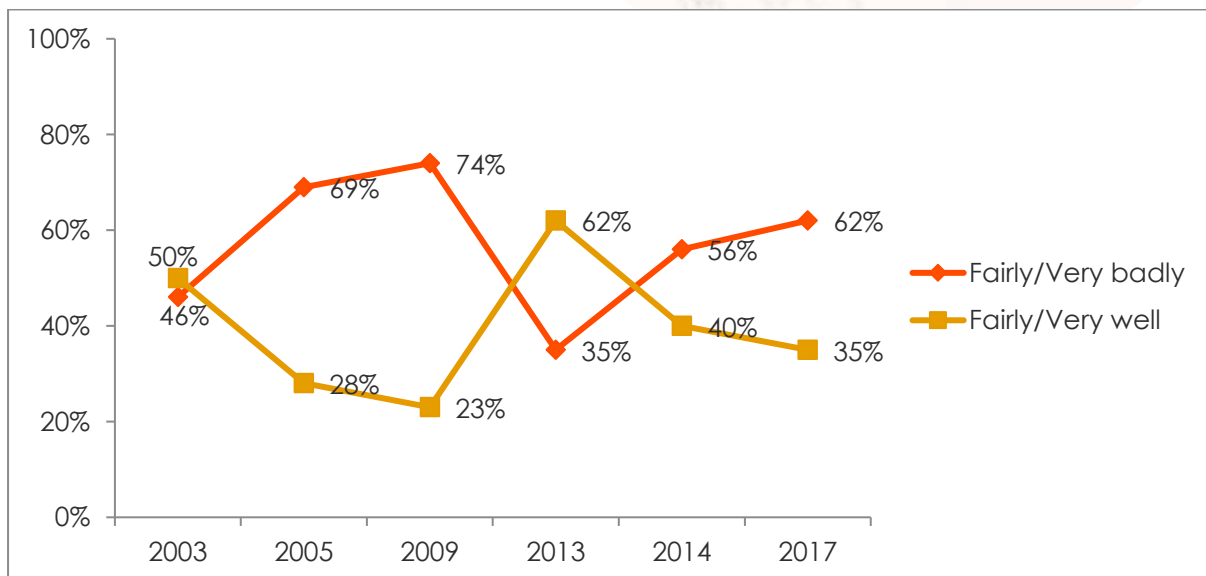
Figure 4: Country's economic condition | Zambia | 2003-2017



Respondents were asked: How would you describe the present economic condition of Zambia?

Citizens' assessments of the government's performance on economic management reflect a similar pattern, showing an upswing between 2009 and 2013 followed by a strong decline (Figure 5). In 2017, six in 10 respondents (62%) say the government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in managing the economy, an increase from 35% in 2013.

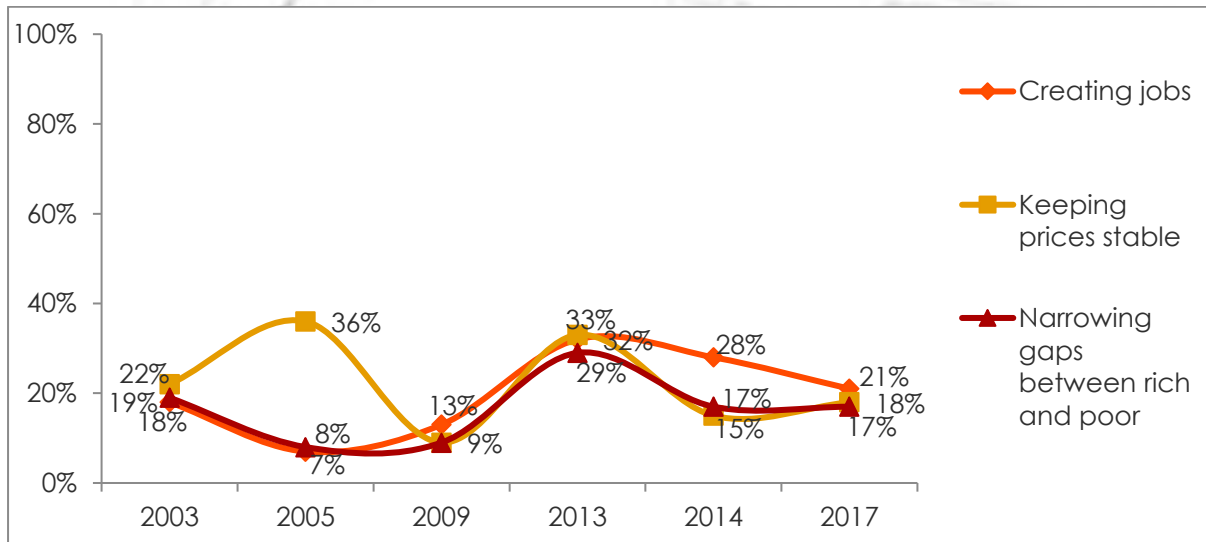
Figure 5: Government performance on managing the economy | Zambia | 2003-2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling managing the economy?

Negative assessments of the government performance on overall management of the economy are also reflected with regard to specific economic issues such as creating jobs, keeping prices stable, and narrowing gaps between rich and poor (Figure 6). On unemployment, for example, only one in five Zambians (21%) think the government is performing well, a proportion that has declined from 32% in 2013 and 28% in 2014.

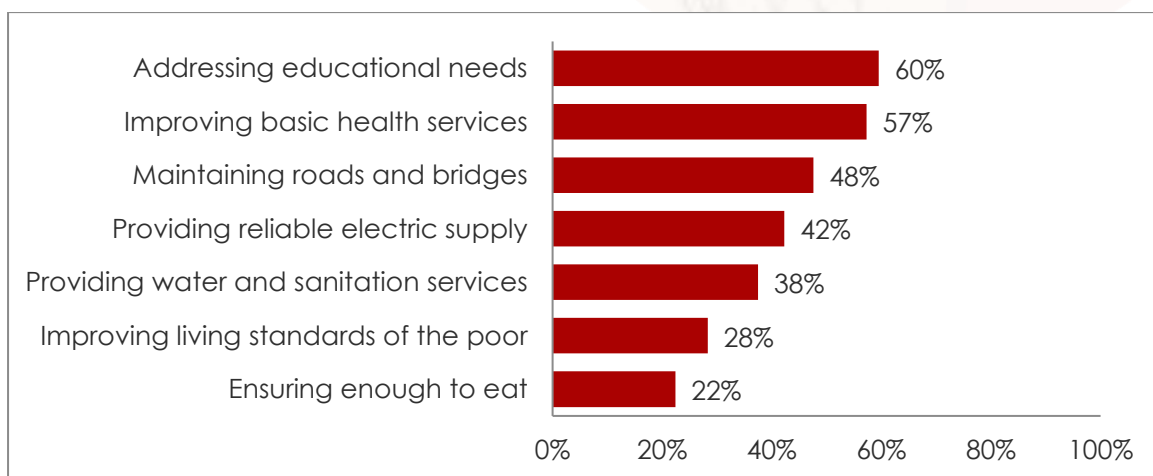
Figure 6: Government performance on economic indicators | Zambia | 2003-2017



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: Creating jobs? Keeping prices stable? Narrowing gaps between rich and poor? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Assessments are equally negative with regard to the government's efforts to ensure that people have enough to eat (22% fairly/very well) and to improve the living standards of the poor (28%). On the other hand, the government gets majority positive ratings on addressing education needs (60%) and improving basic health services (57%) (Figure 7).

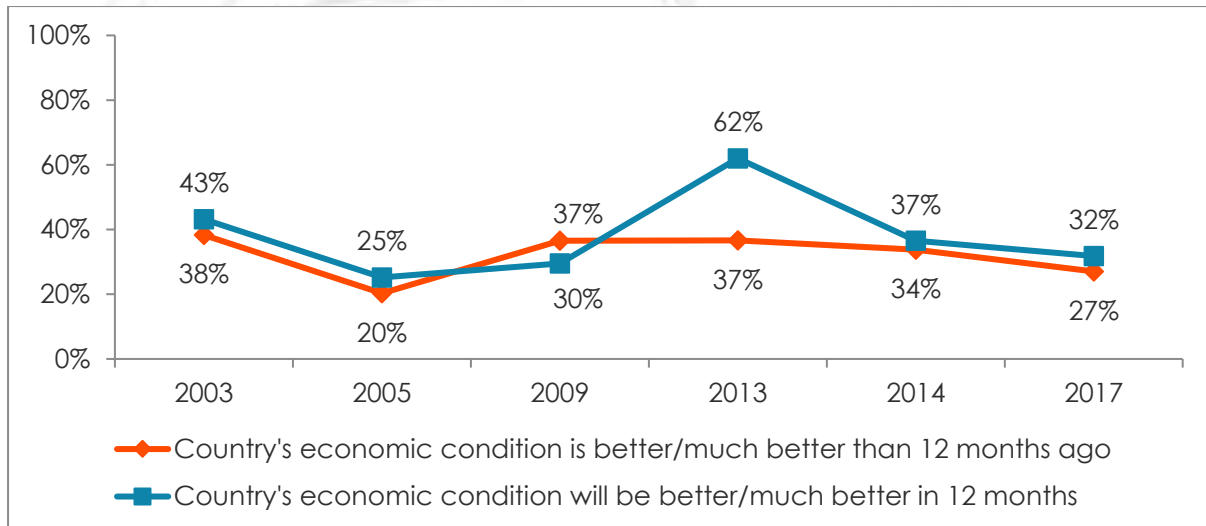
Figure 7: Government performance on various indicators | Zambia | 2017



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: Addressing educational needs? Improving basic health services? Maintaining roads and bridges? Providing a reliable supply of electricity? Providing water and sanitation services? Improving the living standards of the poor? Ensuring everyone has enough to eat? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Only about one in four Zambians (27%) think the economy improved over the 12 months preceding the survey, and just one in three (32%) expect things to get “better” or “much better” over the next 12 months (Figure 8). Optimism about the country’s economy, which shot up between 2009 and 2013, has since dropped by almost half.

Figure 8: Economic conditions looking back and ahead | Zambia | 2003-2017



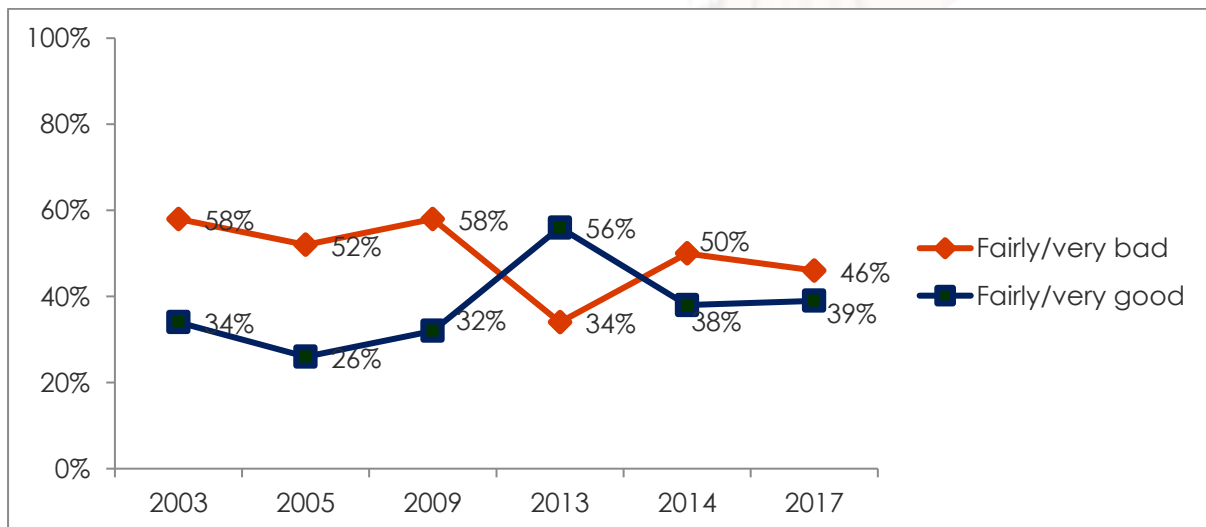
Respondents were asked:

- 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?

Personal living conditions

Zambians are divided in their perceptions of their current living conditions: 39% describe them as “fairly good” or “very good,” while 46% say they are fairly/very bad (Figure 9). Positive assessments have increased since 2005 (26%) but fall short of the high of 56% recorded in 2013 – the only survey year in which negative responses did not significantly outpace positive responses.

Figure 9: Personal living conditions | Zambia | 2003-2017



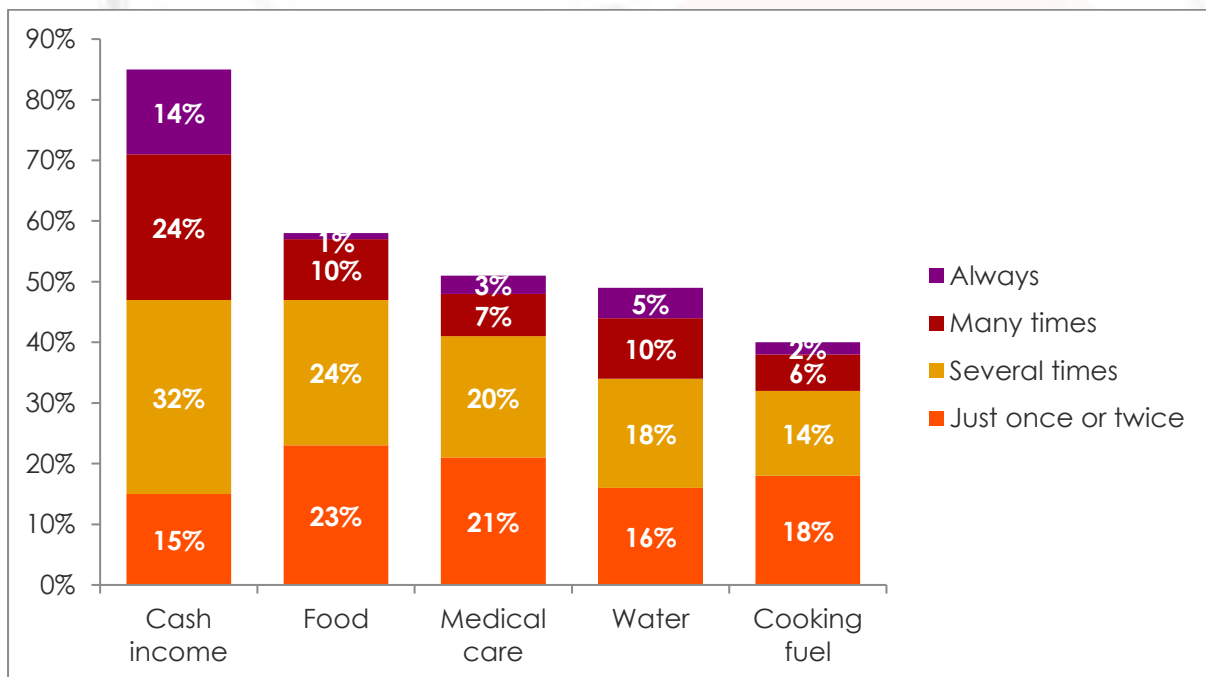
Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

Survey findings on lived poverty align with negative assessments of government economic management and confirm that many Zambians face substantial challenges in meeting their basic needs. Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty by asking respondents how often, during the previous year, they or their families went without enough food, enough clean water, medical care or medicine, enough cooking fuel, or a cash income.

More than half (58%) of Zambians say they experienced a shortage of food at least once during the past year, including 24% who say they went hungry “several times” and 11% who did so “many times” or “always” (Figure 10). About half report going without needed medical care (53%)¹ or enough clean water (48%).

By far the most common deprivation is of a cash income, which affected 85% of Zambians during the previous year, including 14% who say they “always” went without a cash income while about one-fourth (24%) did so “many times” and (32%) “several times.”

Figure 10: Going without basic necessities | Zambia | 2017



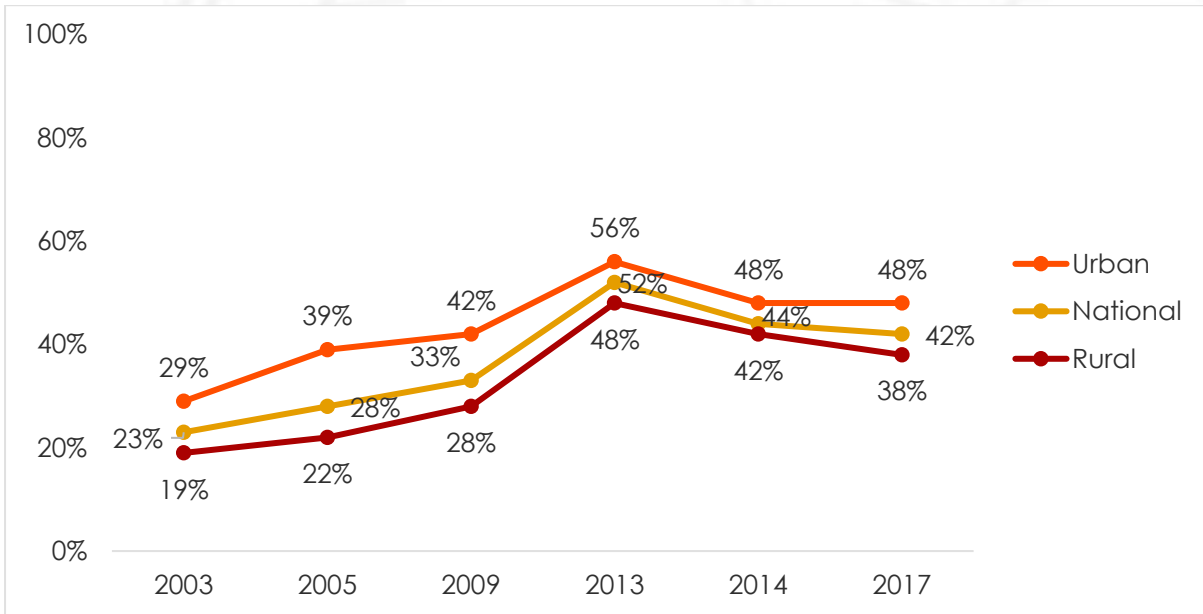
Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income?

The proportion of Zambians never experiencing hunger has almost doubled since 2003 (23%). But only in the 2013 survey did a majority (52%) report never suffering a shortage of food during the previous year (Figure 11).

Going without enough food is more prevalent in rural areas. The gap between urban and rural areas was greatest (17 percentage points) in 2005 (39% vs. 22% who said they went without enough food at least once). The difference was smallest in 2014 (48% vs. 42%). Overall, the gap between urban and rural residents was greater in the years before 2013.

¹ Due to rounding, the total percentage of combined categories (e.g. 53% who went without needed medical care at least once) may differ from the sum of reported sub-categories (21% just once or twice + 20% several times + 7% many times + 3% always).

Figure 11: Never went without enough food to eat | by urban-rural residency
 | Zambia | 2003-2017



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without enough food to eat? (% who say "never")

Conclusion

Amid growing dissatisfaction, Zambians give their government poor marks on economic management. Citizens' experiences and assessments support the Living Conditions Monitoring Survey Report (2016) conclusion that reducing poverty and economic inequality, especially among the rural population, remains a challenge. The Zambian economy's vulnerability to changes in world copper prices still points to the Zambia Development Agency's (2015) argument that diversification in non-mining sectors is vital if the country is to attain sustainable economic growth.

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