

Almost half of Malawians consider emigration; most-educated are most likely to look overseas

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 281 | Sadhiska Bhoojedhur and Thomas Isbell

Summary

Between 2000 and 2017, the number of international migrants from Africa grew by 67%, including many professionals opting for greener pastures in developed countries (Pathera, 2014; Wulfhorst, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018; Chloe, 2007). In Malawi, the resulting strain on the health-care system has received particular attention, as the country loses more nurses than it trains and faces serious staffing shortages in the health sector (Masanjala, 2018).

A young population, high population growth rate, high unemployment, and comparatively low salaries for professionals may make emigration a particularly attractive option for many Malawians (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2018; International Organization for Migration, 2014).

In this dispatch, we use Afrobarometer survey data to explore how ordinary Malawians feel about emigration. Almost half of respondents say they have considered emigration, including about one in 25 Malawian adults who say they are taking concrete steps to leave the country. Citizens with post-secondary educational qualifications are particularly likely to consider moving abroad. Most would head for South Africa, although the best-educated are more likely to consider North America and Europe, and most cite escaping poverty or finding work as their reasons.

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 results of Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently being disseminated.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in December 2016 and January 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- Almost half (45%) of Malawians say they have considered emigration, including 28% who say they have thought about it "a lot." Respondents with secondary (58%) or post-secondary (61%) educational qualifications are most likely to say they have considered moving abroad.

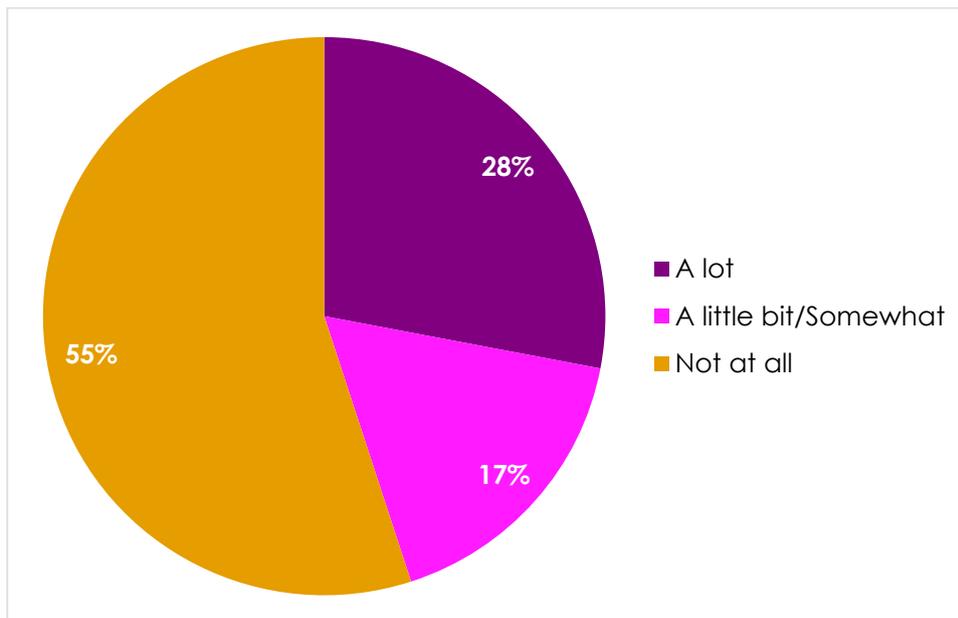
- Among these “potential emigrants,” about one in 12 (8%) say they are making concrete preparations to leave, such as getting a visa. This represents about 4% of the adult population.
- Two-thirds (65%) of potential emigrants say they would probably move to South Africa. Only one in five (20%) say they would leave the continent. But among Malawians with post-secondary educational qualifications, half would head for Europe (25%) or North America (25%).
- The main motivations for Malawians to consider emigration are to escape poverty or economic hardship (51%) or to find work (40%).

Considered emigration

Almost half (45%) of Malawians say they have considered emigrating, including more than one in four (28%) who say they have thought “a lot” about such a step (Figure 1). Malawians’ Interest in emigration is well above the average (37%) across 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018.

In fact, one in four respondents (24%) say they or family members have lived abroad for at least three months during the past three years (not shown).

Figure 1: Considered emigration | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

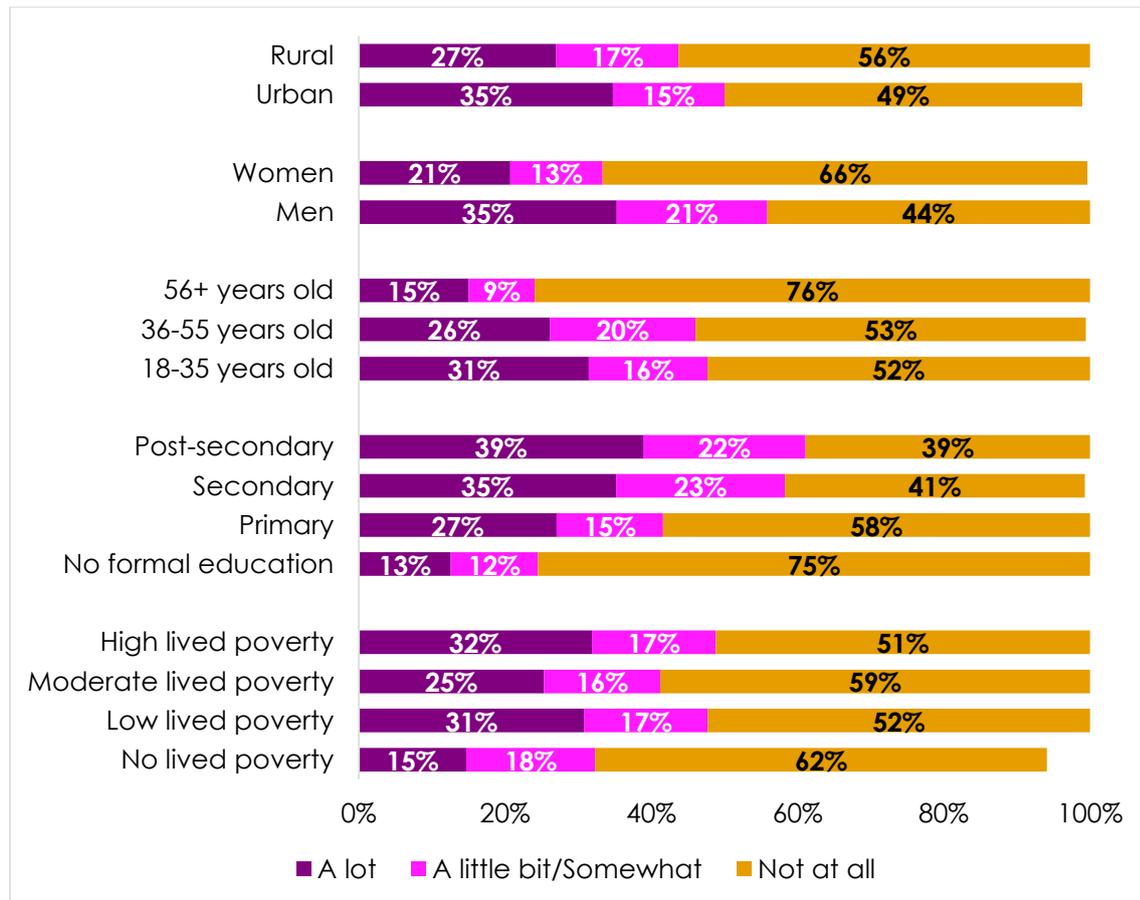
Citizens with the most education are most likely to consider going abroad (“potential emigrants”) (Figure 2). About six in 10 respondents with post-secondary (61%) or secondary (58%) education say they have considered emigration at least “a little bit,” including 39% and 35%, respectively, who have given “a lot” of thought to the idea. By comparison, potential emigrants make up 42% of those with a primary education and 25% of those with no formal schooling.

Men (56%) are considerably more likely to consider moving to another country than women (33%).

Interest in emigration is somewhat stronger in urban areas (50%) than in rural zones (44%) and remains strong through middle age before declining somewhat (to 24%) among Malawians above age 55.

By economic level, the best-off respondents are least likely to consider leaving (32% among those with no "lived poverty"¹).

Figure 2: Considered emigration | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017



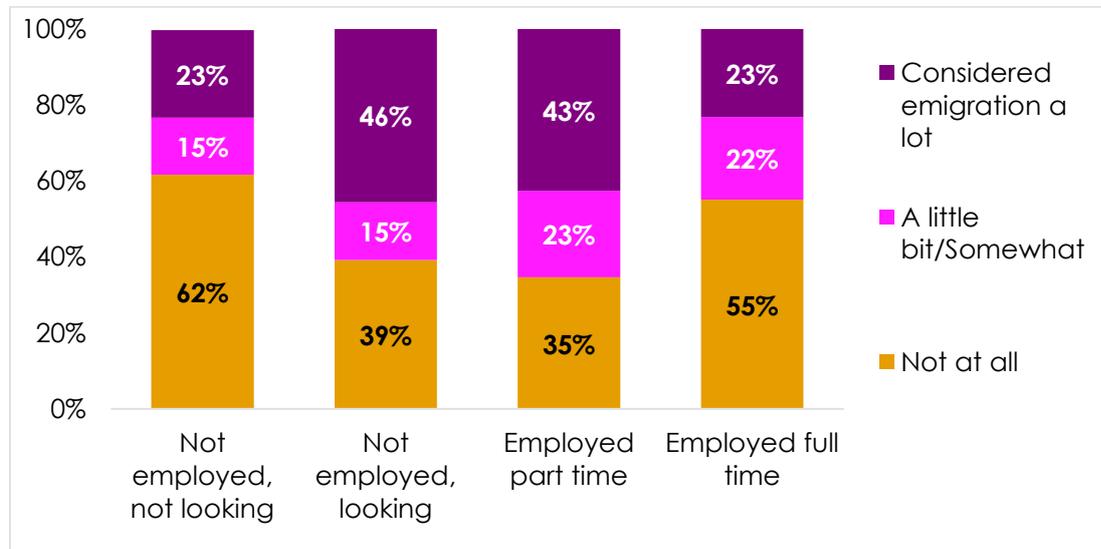
Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

Citizens in uncertain employment conditions appear to be more likely to think about moving abroad. Respondents are about twice as likely to say they have considered emigration "a lot" if they are employed in part-time work (43%) or are not employed but are looking for work (46%) than if they have full-time employment or are not looking for work (23% each) (Figure 3).

Considering emigration "a lot" is most common among students (47%) and those employed in a range of professional/skilled occupations (artisans, skilled workers, clerical workers, mid- or upper-level professionals) (37%) (Figure 4). Those least likely to consider emigration are homemakers (69%), traders/hawkers/vendors (65%), and respondents who say they've never had a job (63%).

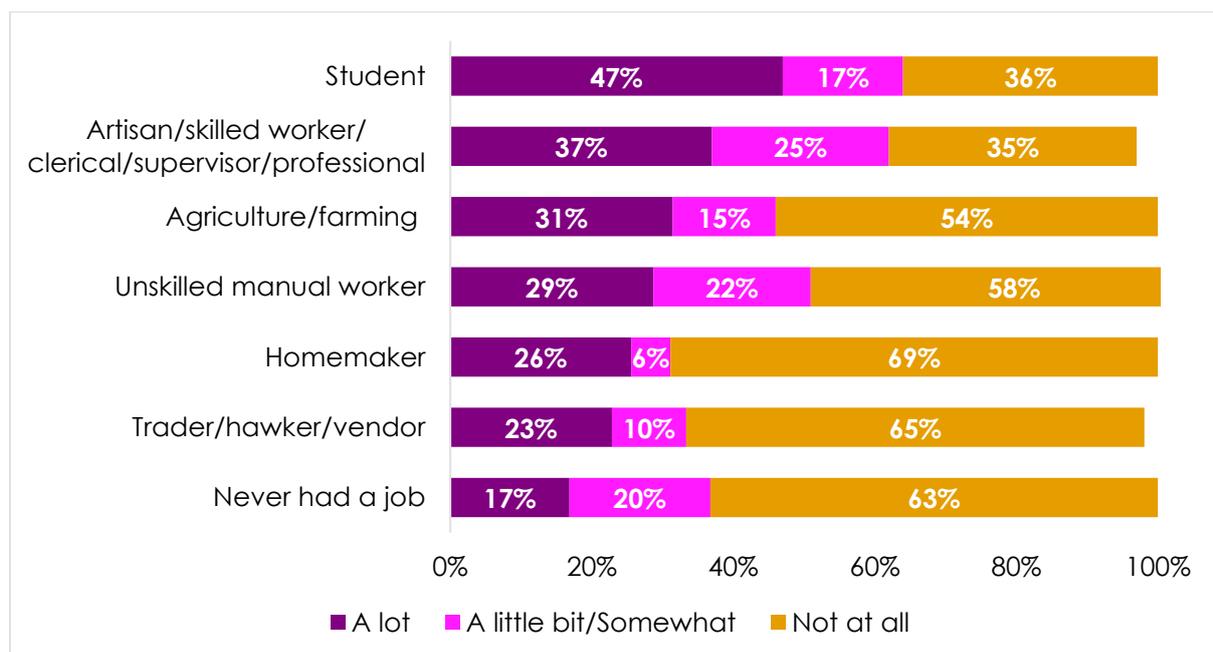
¹ Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?"

Figure 3: Considered emigration | by employment status | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

Figure 4: Considered emigration | by occupation of respondent | Malawi | 2017



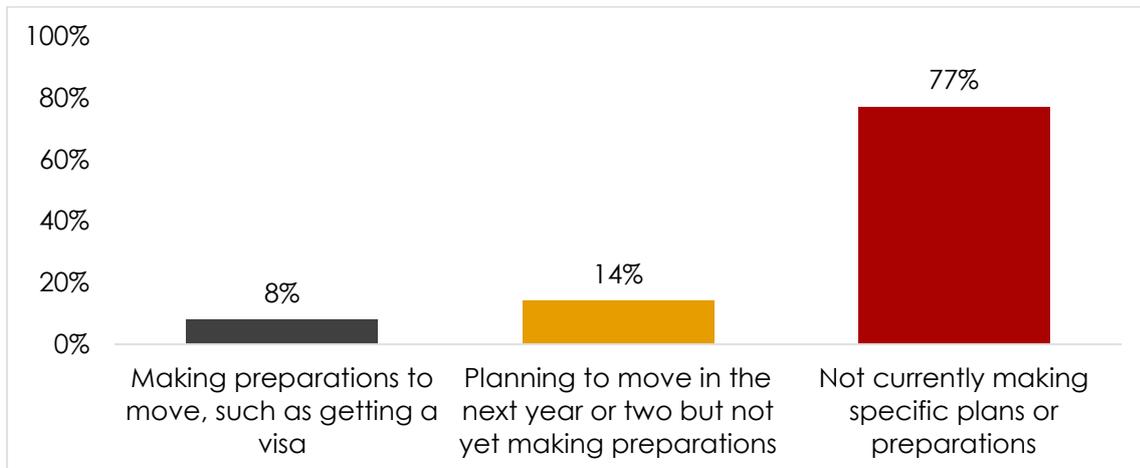
Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?

Making plans to leave

While almost half of Malawians have considered emigration (even if only “a little”), most of these potential emigrants (77%) are not making concrete plans to move abroad, and another 14% say they plan to move in the next year or two but are not yet making specific preparations. Still, about one in 12 (8%) – or about 4% of the total adult population – say they are making concrete preparations to leave, such as getting a visa (Figure 5).

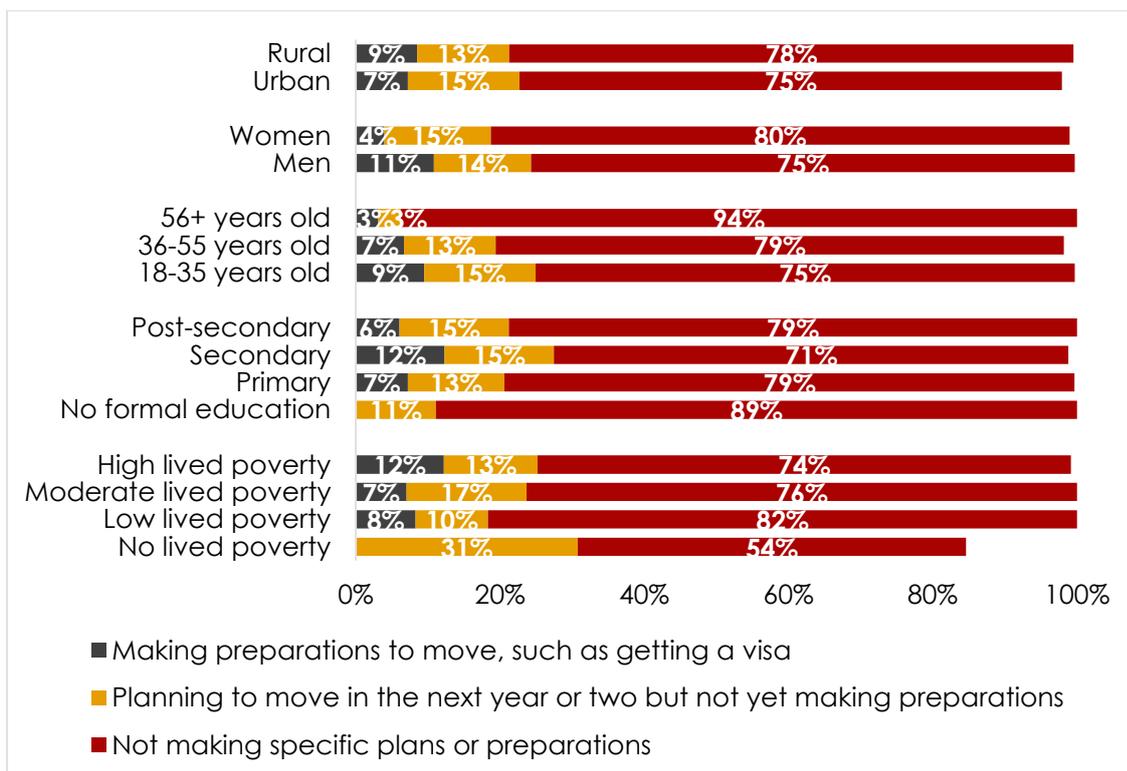
Among potential emigrants, men (11%), citizens with secondary education (12%), and those with high lived poverty (12%) are particularly likely to be making specific plans to move (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Planning to move to another country | Malawi | 2017



Respondents who said they had considered emigration were asked: How much planning or preparation have you done in order to move to another country to live? (Respondents who said they had considered emigration are excluded.)

Figure 6: Planning to move to another country | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017



Respondents who said they had considered emigration were asked: How much planning or preparation have you done in order to move to another country to live? (Respondents who said they had considered emigration are excluded.)

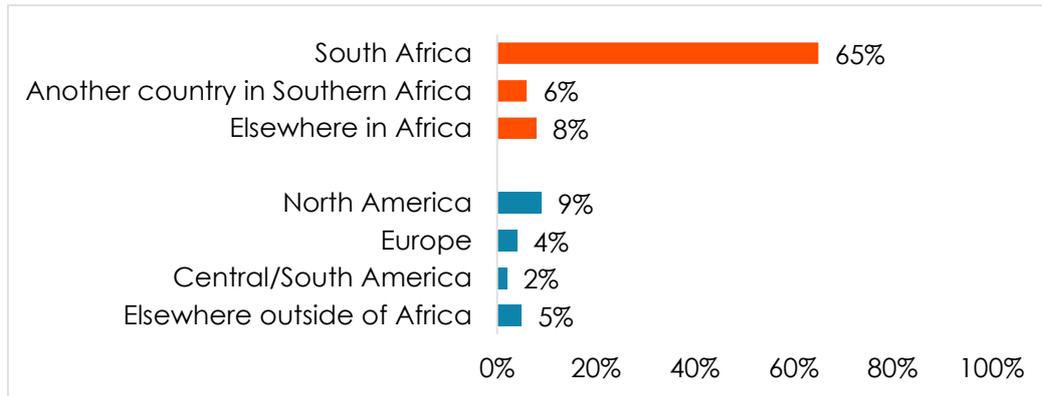
Most likely destination

When asked where they would be most likely to move, two-thirds (65%) of potential emigrants in Malawi say South Africa, the nearby economic powerhouse. Another 6% would

prefer another country in Southern Africa, while 8% would choose an African country outside the sub-region. Only one in five (20%) say they would leave the continent, mostly likely for North America (9%) or Europe (4%) (Figure 7).

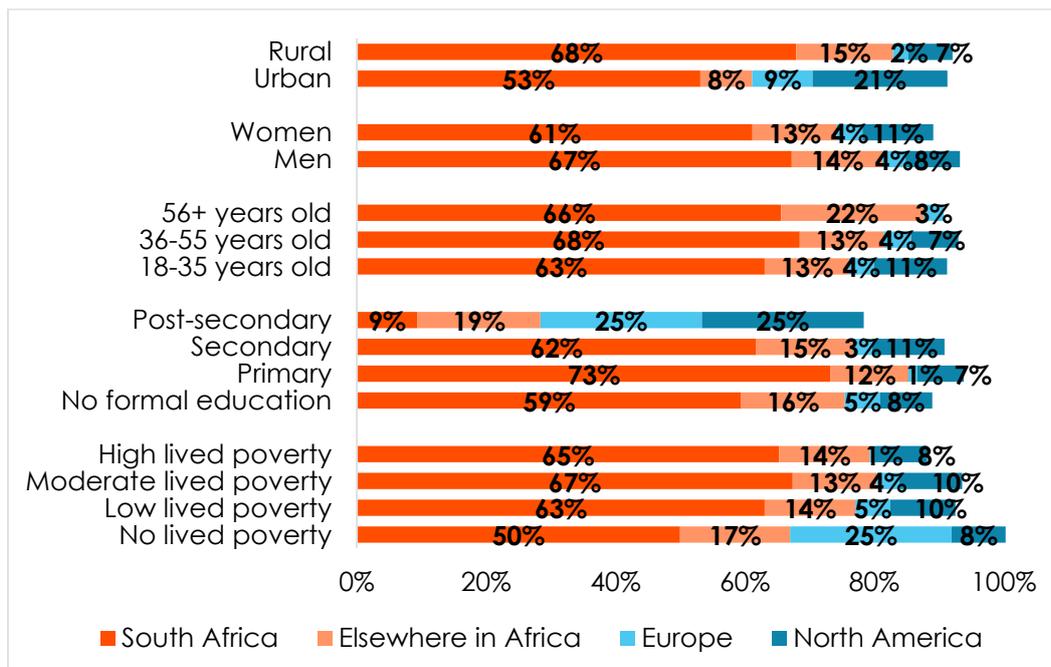
South Africa is the most popular destination across all key socio-demographic groups except among the most-educated respondents (Figure 8). Half of those with post-secondary qualifications instead have their eyes on Europe (25%) or North America (25%), while only one in 10 (9%) would head to South Africa and two in 10 (19%) would prefer another African country. Respondents who are relatively well off economically (i.e. with no lived poverty) are also significantly less likely to choose South Africa than their poorer counterparts.

Figure 7: Most likely destination for potential emigrants | Malawi | 2017



Respondents who said they had considered emigrating were asked: If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Respondents who said they had considered emigration are excluded.)

Figure 8: Most likely destination for potential emigrants | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017

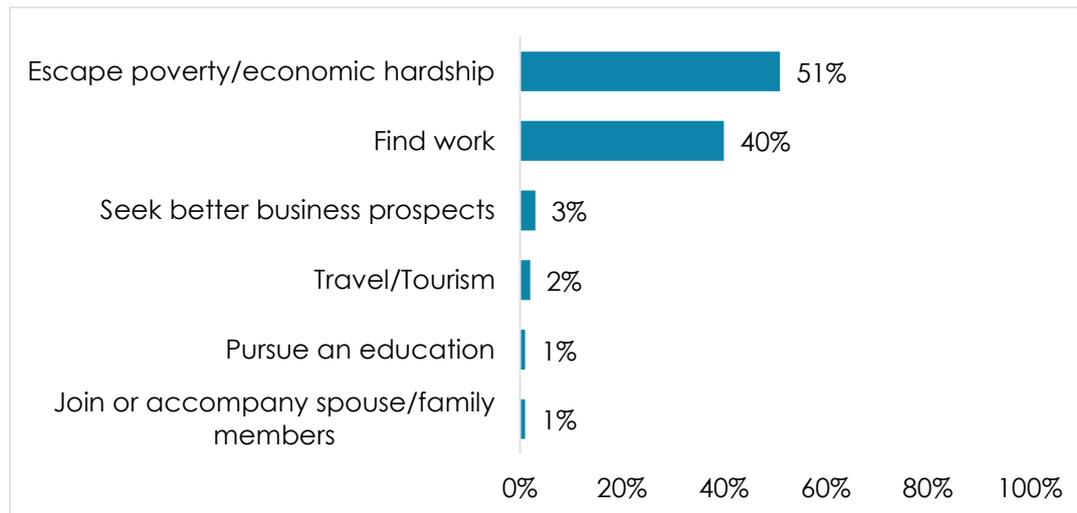


Respondents who said they had considered emigrating were asked: If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Respondents who said they had considered emigration are excluded.)

Why leave Malawi?

By far the most commonly cited reasons to consider emigration is to escape poverty or economic hardship (51%) and to find work (40%). Just a few potential emigrants cite better business opportunities (3%), tourism (2%), or the pursuit of an education (1%) as their main motivation (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Most important reason to consider emigrating | Malawi | 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 Malawi? (Respondents who said they had considered emigration are excluded.)*

Conclusion

Almost half of Malawians say they have considered emigration, including more than one in four who have given it “a lot” of thought. Even if the proportion who are actually making specific plans to leave seems small, they still represent substantial numbers of people – about 4% of the country’s adult population – who are potential near-term emigrants. The fact that one in four respondents say they or family members have in fact lived abroad during the past three years suggests how low a threshold emigration may be for ordinary Malawians.

Moreover, survey findings seem to reinforce concerns about brain drain, as the most-educated citizens are most likely to consider moving abroad.

Unsurprisingly, most are motivated by a search for economic opportunity, and they tend to look for it in South Africa – or, in the case of the best-educated, in Europe or North America. This presents a clear challenge for policy makers who want to keep Malawi’s most capable and energetic human resources in the country.

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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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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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 281 | 6 March 2019