

# For Sudanese, deep economic discontent underpins mass movement for change

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 293 | Thomas Isbell and Elmogiera Elawad**

## Summary

Sudan's mass protests that ended the 30-rule of President Omar al-Bashir in April started last December with citizens unhappy about the high price of food (BBC News, 2019a).

And while the protest movement grew beyond its initial economic agenda to demand fundamental political change, one certainty amid the dramatic events in Khartoum is that the country's deep-seated economic problems will still be awaiting solutions by whichever military or civilian leadership take up the reins.

Despite long-standing government and international anti-poverty initiatives (Siddig, El-Fatih, & Fareed, 2016; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2015), poverty remains a central reality for many Sudanese, and recent economic developments have offered little cause for optimism. Sudan is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 167<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries in the 2017 Human Development Index ranking (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), with about one in five Sudanese suffering from extreme poverty (Cuaresma et al., 2018).

Causes of poverty in Sudan are manifold, ranging from political conflict, corruption, and drought to a bias in development initiatives in favour of the central riverine region and urban populations, to the detriment of rural areas and agricultural sector on which a majority of Sudanese depend (Yagoob & Zuo, 2016; Mohsin, 2002). A number of studies have also argued that structural adjustment programs implemented in the early 1990s, emphasizing economic liberalization and market mechanisms in the management of resources and economic activities, have increased poverty and unemployment and contributed to the disappearance of the middle class (Suliman, 2007; Randolph & Hassan, 1996).

The loss of oil-export revenues after the 2011 separation of South Sudan (Sharfi, 2014) and, until recently, U.S. economic sanctions (Siddig, 2010) added to economic pressures and scarcities of basic commodities.

Ordinary Sudanese were keenly aware of their economic predicament well before the dramatic political events of the past four months. In the most recent Afrobarometer public opinion survey, conducted in July-August 2018, citizens were almost unanimous in citing economic management as their country's most urgent problem that the government should address. A majority described economic and living conditions as bad, and only a minority saw hope for the immediate future. Most saw their country as going in the wrong direction and gave their government negative marks on handling the economy, improving living standards, and narrowing gaps between rich and poor.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys

were completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer national partner in Sudan, Sudan Polling and Statistics Centre, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Sudanese between 22 July and 25 August 2018. A sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Sudan in 2013 and 2015.

## Key findings

- As of mid-2018, management of the economy was by far the most important problem that Sudanese wanted their government to address, cited by 85% of citizens as a top priority.
- More than seven in 10 Sudanese (72%) described the country's economic situation as "fairly bad" or "very bad," and a majority (59%) expected things to get worse during the coming year. About half (48%) said their personal living conditions were bad.
- One-third (33%) of Sudanese said they had gone without enough food (33%) at least once during the year preceding the survey, while more than half had lacked sufficient clean water (57%), needed medical care (51%), and cooking fuel (68%). Frequent shortages of basic necessities were most common among rural residents, young citizens, those with little or no formal education, and residents of the Darfur region.
- Overall, more than three-fourths (77%) of Sudanese saw the country as headed in the wrong direction, a sharp increase from 47% in 2015.
- About nine out of 10 Sudanese said the government was performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in managing the economy (88%), raising living standards of the poor (90%), creating jobs (86%), and narrowing gaps between rich and poor (89%).

## Management of the economy as a top priority

When asked, in mid-2018, what they considered the most important problems that the government should address, ordinary Sudanese overwhelmingly focused on management of the economy (cited by 85% of respondents). Unemployment (32%), poverty and destitution (21%), and education (21%) followed at a considerable distance. Compared to 2015, the proportion of citizens who identified management of the economy as a top priority more than tripled (Figure 1).

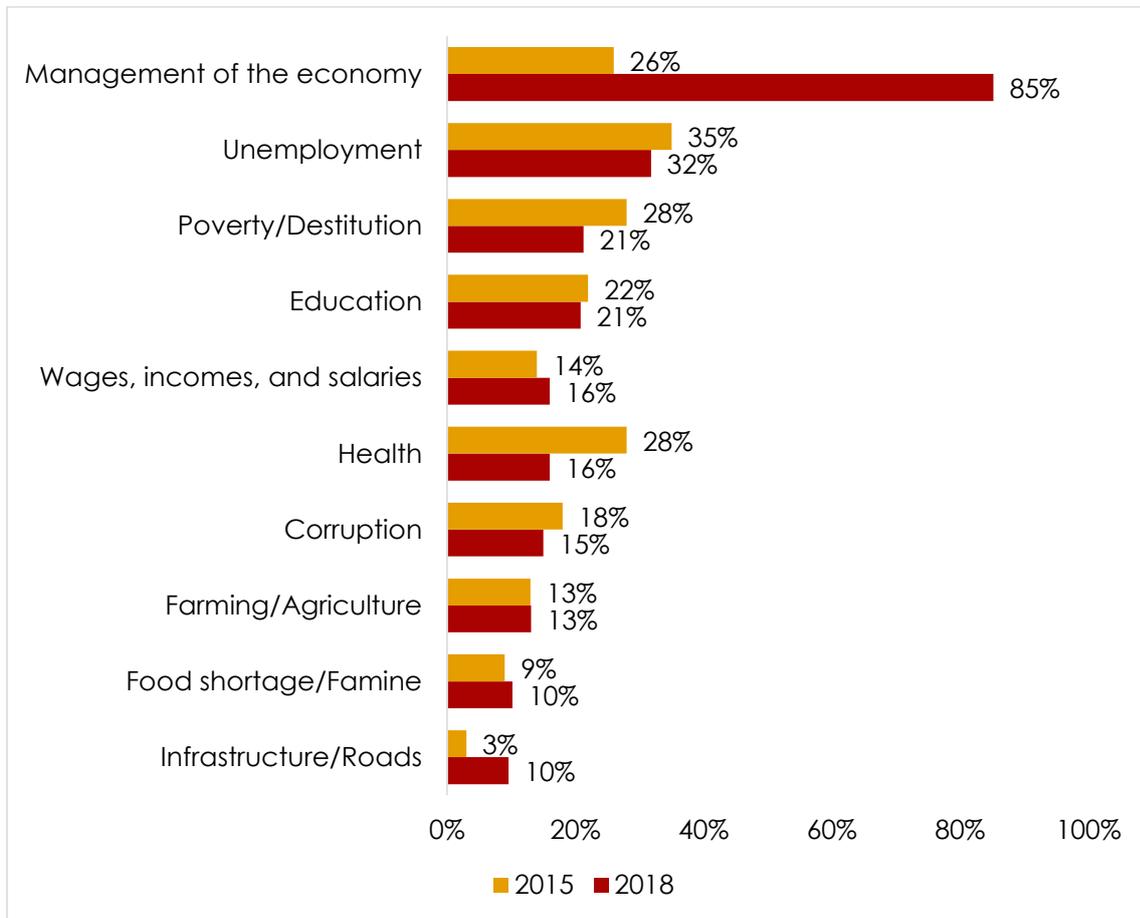
More than seven in 10 Sudanese described the country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad." Popular assessments of the economy had improved sharply in 2015, to an almost even split between negative (49%) and positive (41%), but worsened again in 2018 (Figure 2). Between 2015 and 2018, the share of Sudanese who saw their country's economic situation as "fairly good" or "very good" dropped from 41% to 11%.

Negative assessments of the national economy were particularly common among older citizens (8% of those above age 55) and poorer respondents (89% of those with high lived poverty<sup>1</sup>). Respondents with no formal education were less likely to share this bleak view (74%) than their more-educated counterparts (83%-84%) (Figure 3).

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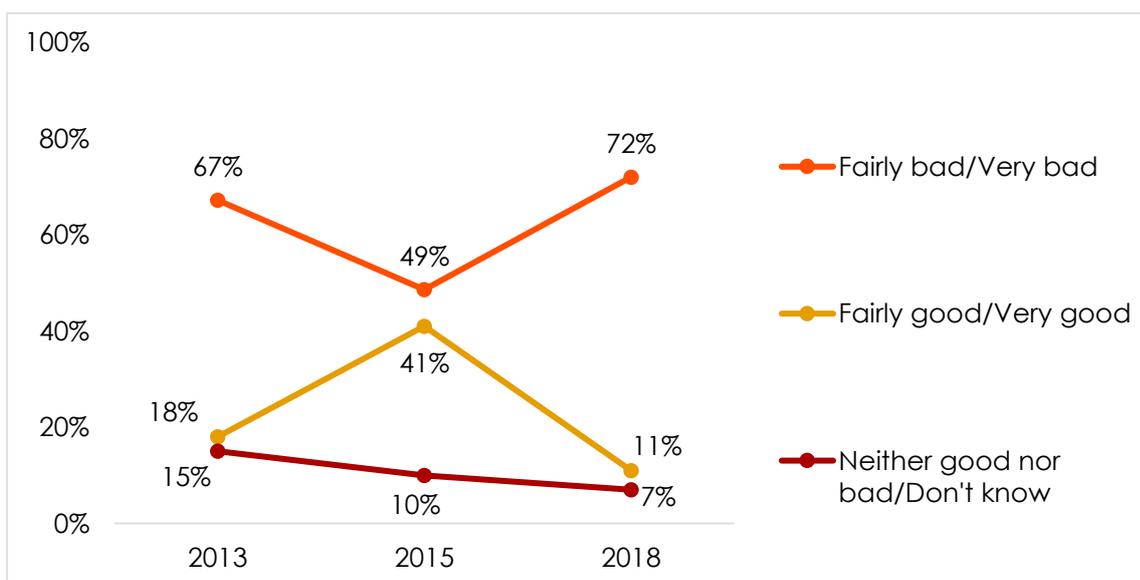
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food?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

**Figure 1: Most important problems government should address | Sudan | 2015-2018**



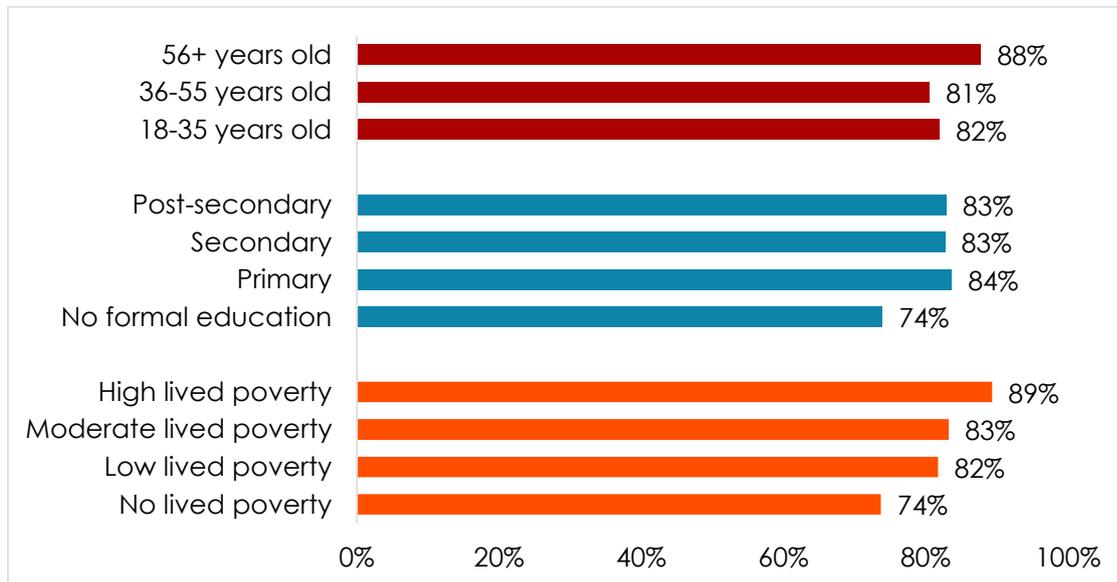
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per respondent were recorded.)

**Figure 2: Country's economic condition | Sudan | 2013-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

**Figure 3: Country's economic condition is bad** | by socio-demographic group  
 | Sudan | 2018

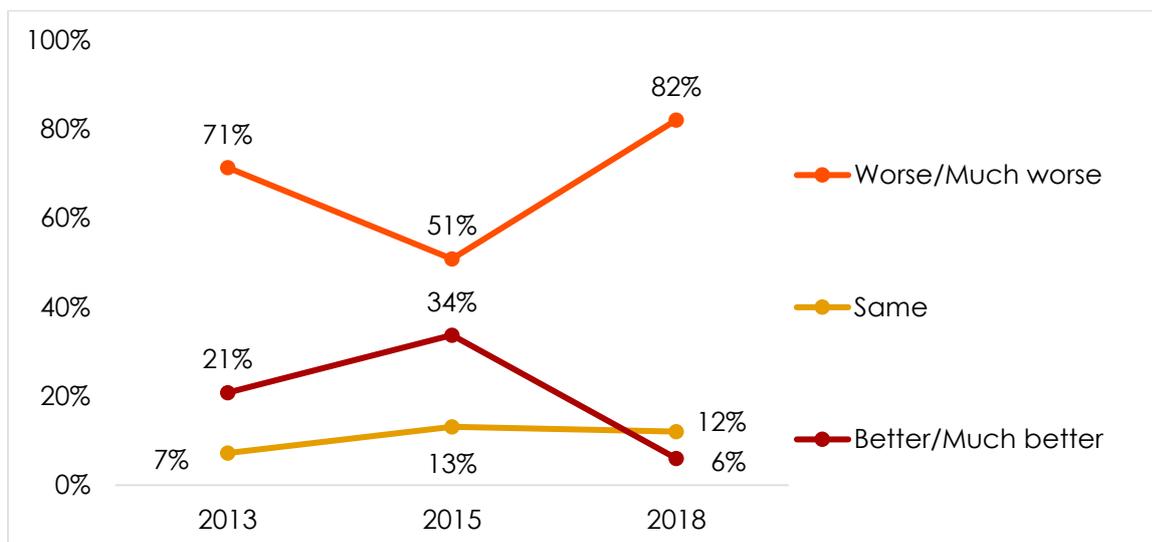


**Respondents were asked:** *In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who said "fairly bad" or "very bad")*

Compared to a year prior, 82% of Sudanese felt that the economic situation had become "worse" or "much worse," again a sharp deterioration after an improvement in 2015 (Figure 4).

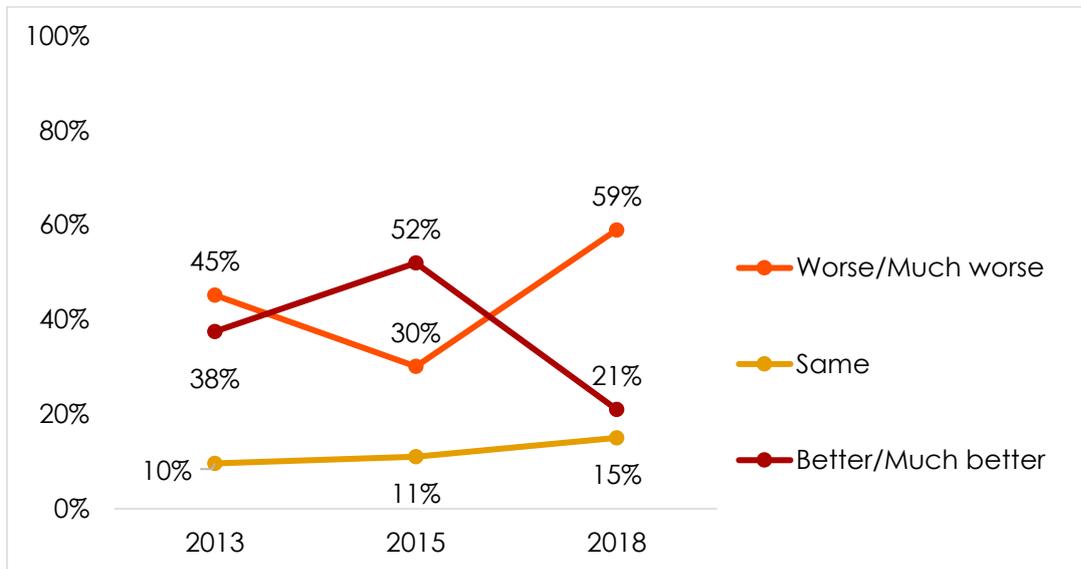
Projections for the future showed a similar pattern, though somewhat less negative: 59% of Sudanese said they expected the country's economic condition to be "worse" or "much worse" in 12 months' time, up from 30% in 2015. Only one in five (21%) expected things to improve in the near future (Figure 5).

**Figure 4: Country's economic condition compared to 12 months ago** | Sudan  
 | 2013-2018



**Respondents were asked:** *Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?*

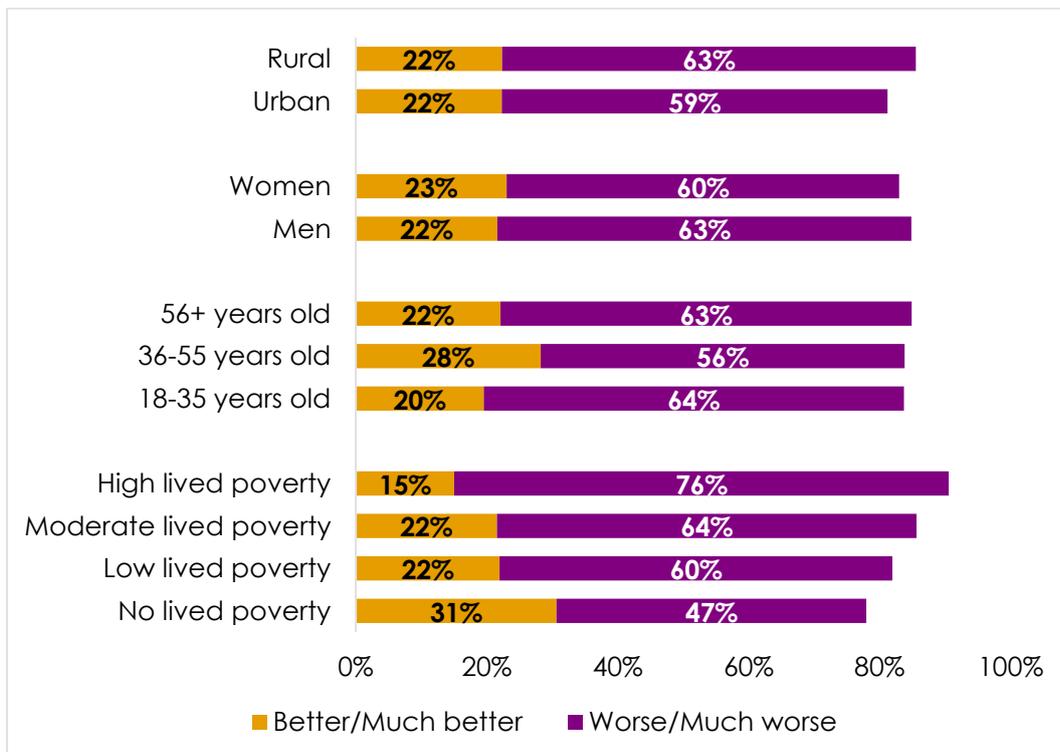
**Figure 5: Country's economic condition in 12 months' time | Sudan | 2013-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Poor respondents were particularly pessimistic about the short-term economic future of Sudan: Among those who experienced high lived poverty, more than three in four (76%) said they thought the economy would be worse in 12 months' time (Figure 6). Middle-aged citizens were more optimistic about the economy than their elders and younger respondents.

**Figure 6: Country's economic condition in 12 months' time | Sudan | 2018**

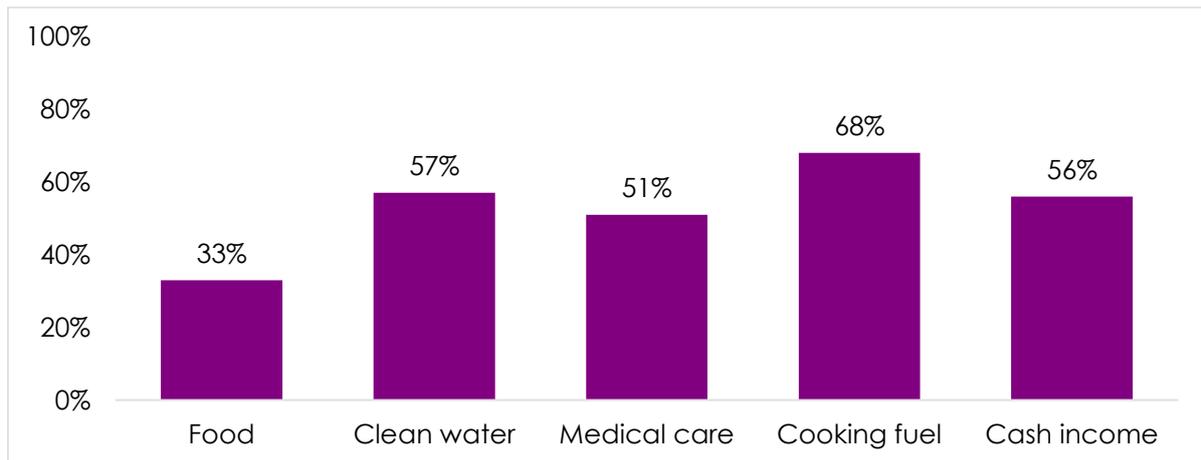


**Respondents were asked:** Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

## Personal living conditions

One-third (33%) of Sudanese said they went without enough food at least once during the year preceding the survey, including 21% who said this happened “several times,” “many times,” or “always” (Figure 7). More than half experienced shortages of clean water (57%), needed medical care (52%), cooking fuel (68%), and a cash income (56%).

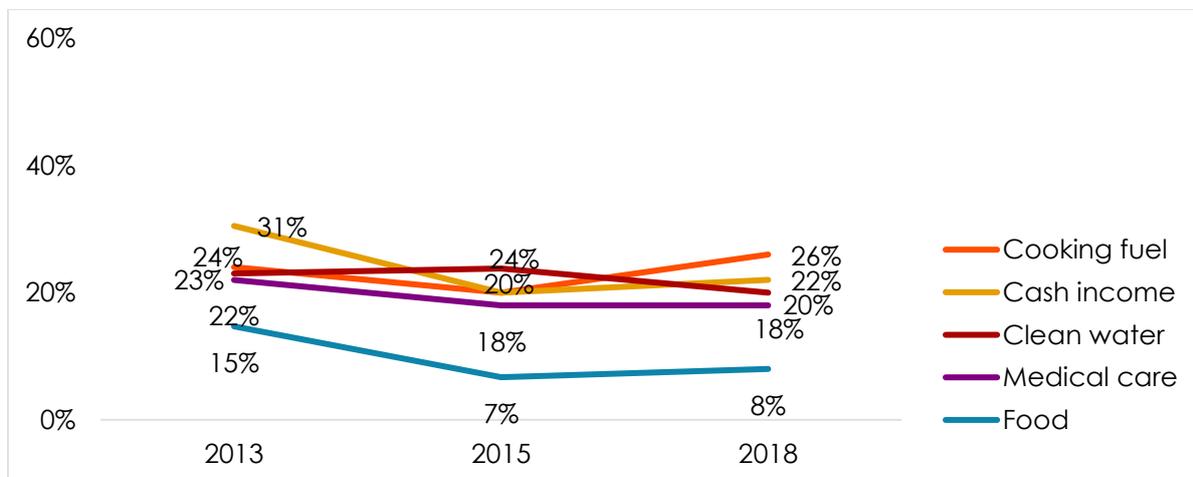
**Figure 7: Went without basic necessities | Sudan | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? 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? (% of respondents who said “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”)

Despite widely negative views on the state of the economy, experiences of frequent deprivation (“many times” or “always”) of basic necessities decreased somewhat compared to 2013. For example, the proportion of respondents who often went hungry declined from 15% in 2013 to 8%, and fewer citizens went without needed medical care (18% vs 22% in 2013) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Went without basic necessities ‘many times’ or ‘always’ | Sudan | 2013-2018**



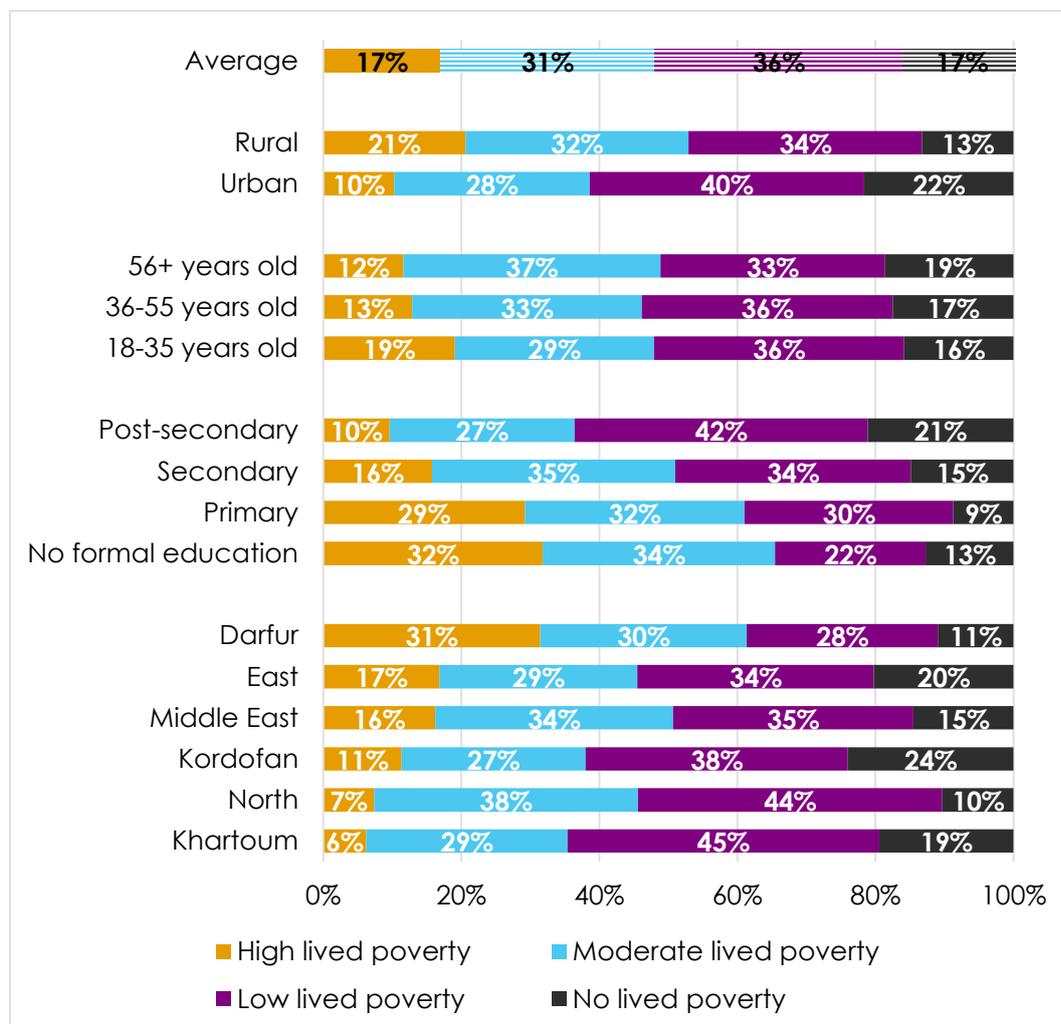
**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income? (% of respondents who said “many times” or “always”)

Based on their responses to the five questions about going without basic necessities, respondents can be grouped according to their experience of high, moderate, low, or no lived poverty. On average, 17% of Sudanese suffered high lived poverty during the year preceding the survey, while 31% and 36%, respectively, experienced moderate and low lived poverty. Fewer than one in five experienced no deprivation of basic necessities (no lived poverty) (17%).

High lived poverty was twice as common among rural residents (21%) as urbanites (10%), and higher among young respondents (19% of 18- to 35-year-olds) than their elders (12%-13%) (Figure 9). Disparities were even larger between citizens with different levels of education, ranging from 10% among those with post-secondary qualifications to 32% among those with no formal education.

Among regions, Darfur had by far the largest proportion of citizens experiencing high lived poverty (31%), compared to 6% in Khartoum and 7% in the North region.

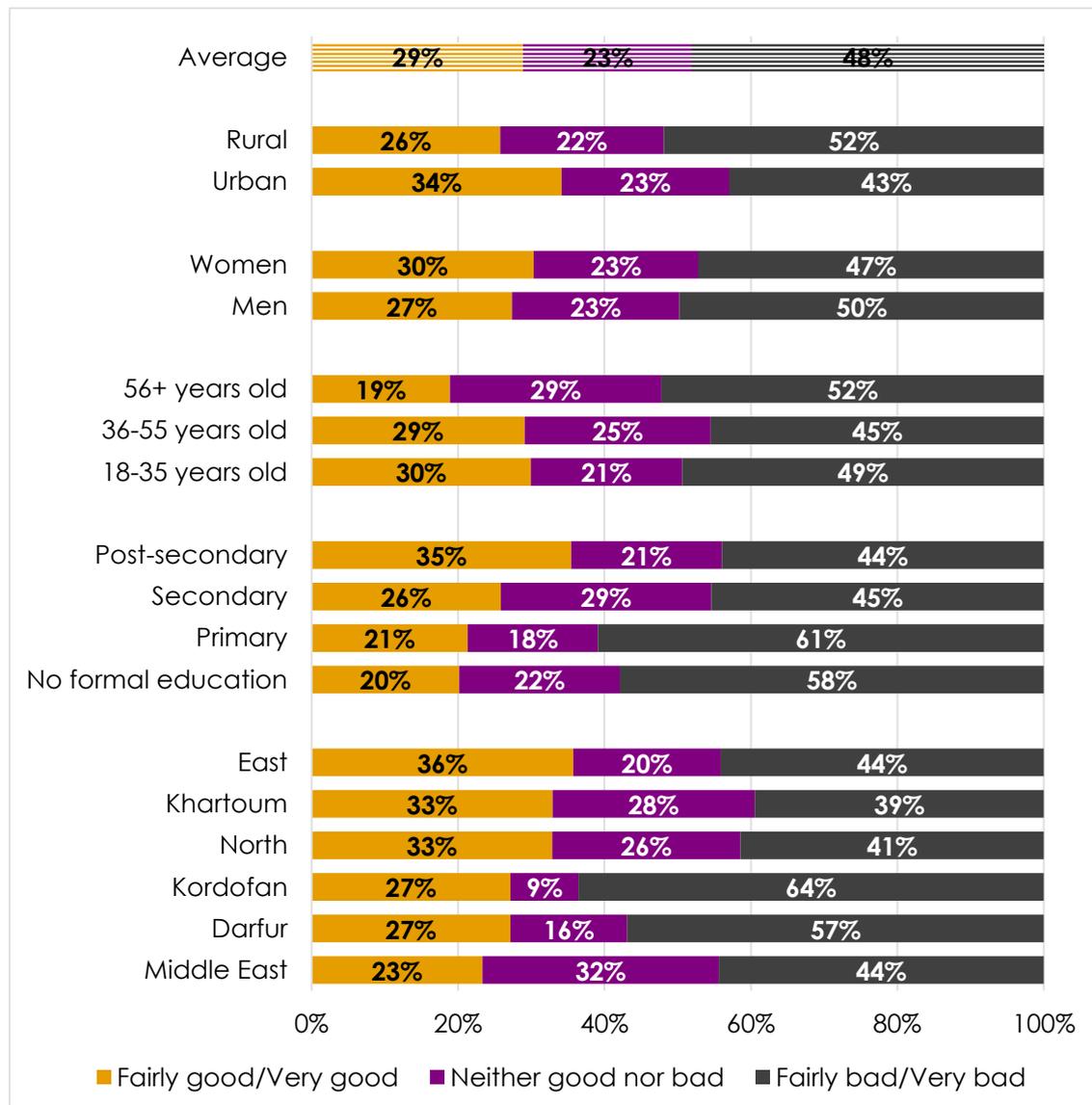
**Figure 9: Lived poverty | by socio-demographic group | Sudan | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? 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?

When asked to evaluate their personal living situation, almost half (48%) of Sudanese said it is “fairly bad” or “very bad.” Negative responses exceeded positive ones across all major socio-demographic groups (Figure 10). Majorities of rural residents (52%), older citizens (52% among those older than 55), and respondents with no formal education (58%) or only primary education (61%) described their living conditions as bad, as did almost two-thirds (64%) of residents in Kordofan and a majority (57%) of residents in Darfur.

**Figure 10: Personal living conditions | Sudan | 2018**

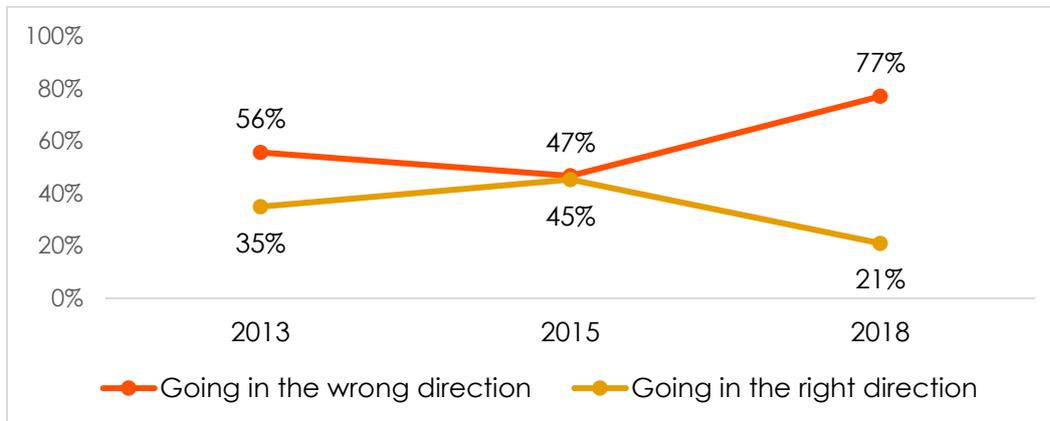


**Respondents were asked:** In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

### Overall direction of the country and government performance

Assessments of the country's overall direction aligned closely with perceptions of economic conditions: More than three in four (77%) said the country was headed in the wrong direction, while only 21% saw Sudan as moving in the right direction. In 2015, views on the country's direction were about evenly divided (45% right vs. 47% wrong) (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Overall direction of the country | Sudan | 2013-2018**

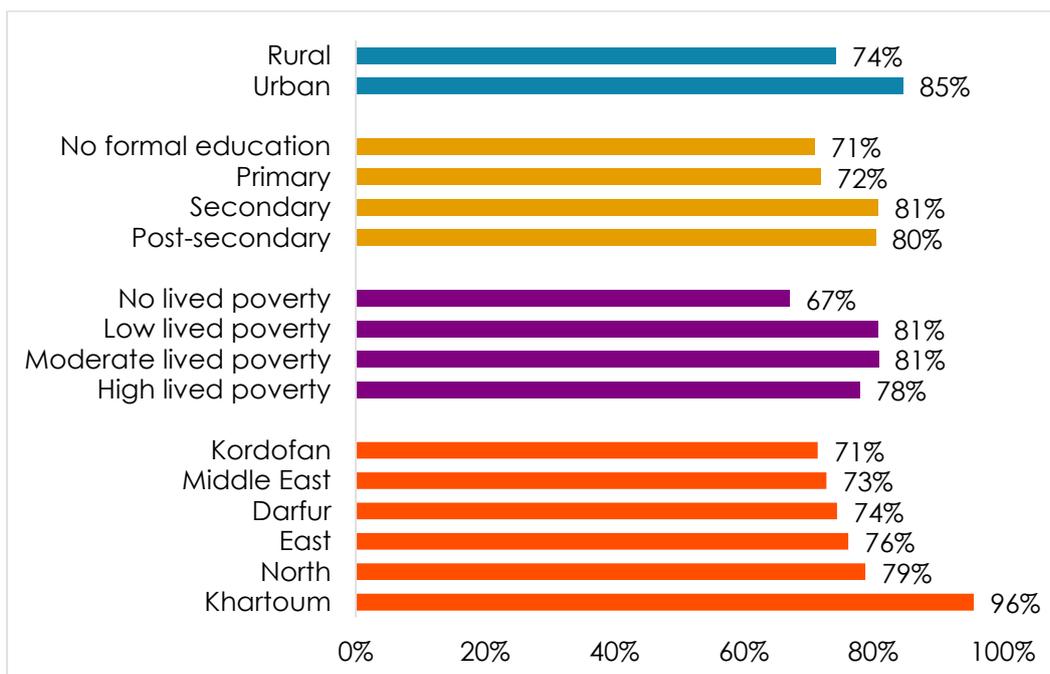


**Respondents were asked:** Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction, So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

While a majority across all major socio-demographic groups saw the country as headed in the wrong direction, urban residents (85%) were more critical than their rural counterparts (74%) (Figure 12). Respondents with secondary (81%) or post-secondary (80%) education were also more likely to see things going the wrong way than less-educated citizens (70%-71%). But the economic elite (67% of those with no lived poverty) were less pessimistic than those with fewer resources (78%-81%).

Geographically, the perception that the country was moving in the wrong direction was strongest in Khartoum (96%).

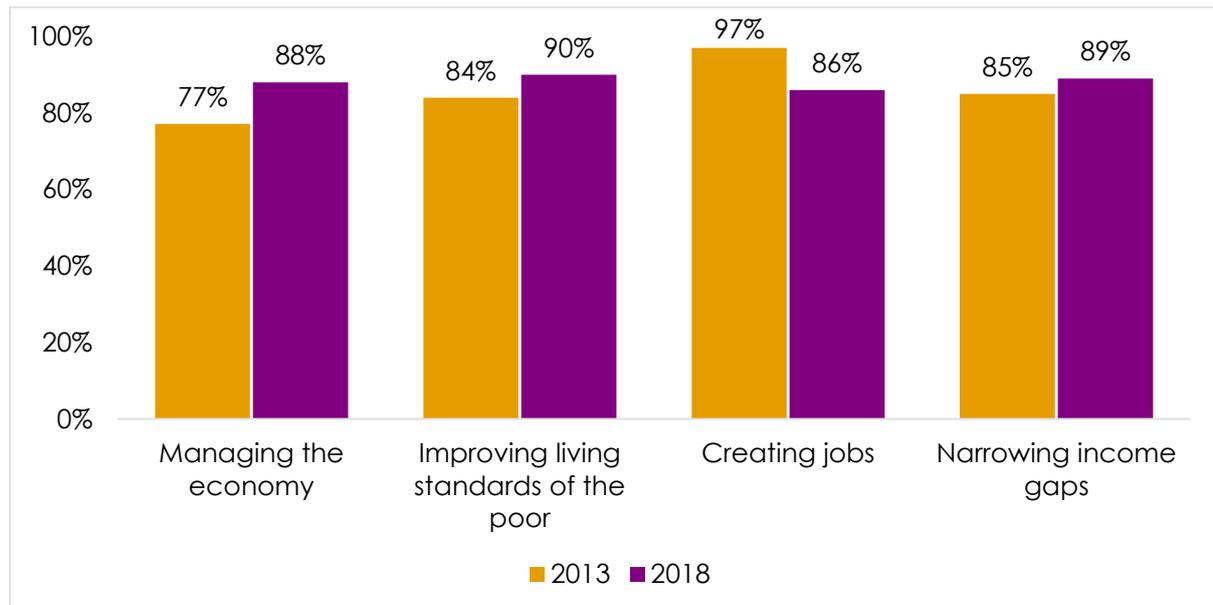
**Figure 12: Country going in the wrong direction | by socio-demographic group | Sudan | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who said "wrong direction")

In line with the findings above, most Sudanese gave the government poor marks for its handling of key economic policy issues (Figure 13). About nine out of 10 respondents said the government was doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in managing the economy (88%, up from 77% in 2013), improving the living standards of the poor (90%, up from 84% in 2013), and narrowing gaps between the rich and the poor (89%, up from 85% in 2013). Almost as many citizens said the government was doing poorly in creating jobs (86%), though that was an improvement from 97% in 2013.

**Figure 13: Government performing badly on economic issues | Sudan | 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: Managing the economy? Improving the living standards of the poor? Creating jobs? Narrowing gaps between rich and poor? (% who said “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

## Conclusion

In the eyes of its citizens, Sudan was in trouble well before the mass protests of the past four months. A majority of families had experienced going without basic necessities, and most saw economic conditions as worsening. While few were optimistic about the near future, Sudanese overwhelmingly looked to their government to do better – a demand that will await whichever entity wields power in Sudan's near future.

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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.

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