



# Voices of ordinary Africans, indicators for the world: Afrobarometer's 25-year journey of survey work in diverse contexts

**Presentation at the WAPOR Webinar 29 February 2024**

**Boniface Dulani,**  
Afrobarometer Director of Surveys  
Email: [bdulani@afrobarometer.org](mailto:bdulani@afrobarometer.org)

# Overview

- The Afrobarometer Journey in brief
- Key Afrobarometer milestones, 1999-2024
- Afrobarometer data as a resource for effective policy-making
- Challenges of doing surveys on a diverse continent
- Innovating for the future



# ...the beginning of the journey



## Problem

For many years, experts, political leaders, donors, media personnel, academics, pundits **claimed knowledge and held opinions about Africans without direct or nuanced understanding of the values, preferences, and thinking of ordinary Africans.**

## Solution

Research that applies rigorous standards and 21st Century social science knowledge designed to institutionalize citizen engagement for inclusive development.



## The Afrobarometer journey

25 years ago, a vision was born by three people:



E. Gyimah-Boadi



Robert Mattes



Michael Bratton



# The Afrobarometer footprint



- Pan-African coverage – represents 75%-80% of Africa's population
  - 259 surveys in 39 countries since 1999
  - 388,000+ interviews in more than 100 languages
  - Hundreds of briefings and publications, thousands of news reports
  - Time series back to 1999
- Public good – All data published on AB website





# Afrobarometer milestones- 1999-2024

## Key milestones over the past 25 years

- Considered the “gold standard” of surveys in Africa
- “Best Data Set Award 2004” from the American Political Science Association
- Top 10 “Best Institutional Collaborations Involving Two or More Think Tanks,” Global Go To Think Tank Index, 2018, 2019, 2020



## Key milestones over the past 25 years

- Expanded footprint from 12 to about 40 countries



Survey rounds  
completed

9



Country surveys

259



Total Interviews

388,004



Survey languages

100+



## Key milestones over the past 25 years

- African-owned and -managed
- 25 years of amplifying voices of ordinary Africans
- An independent, evidence-based check on other data sources
- Proved that public opinion research can be conducted even in fragile, post-conflict, and closed political environments in Africa



## Key milestones over the past 25 years



Hundreds of briefings and publications, thousands of news reports every year



Expanded presence via social media, with infographics and videos



Published two books

## Key milestones over the past 25 years

### Building the capacity of young African researchers

French- and  
English-language  
summer schools



- Thematic workshops
- Mentorships



University outreaches



Staff development  
fellowships



## Key milestones over the past 25 years

AB data are used in global governance indicators generated by





# Afrobarometer data as a resource for effective policy-making

# No policy-making can be considered “informed” without being informed by public opinion

- Policy makers who seriously ask “What do the people think and want?” must turn to public-opinion polling. For Africa, that means Afrobarometer.
- AB data provide independent reality check on official reports and claims, e.g.:
  - AB’s Lived Poverty Index measures **experience** of deprivation of basic necessities, regardless of macro-economic indicators
  - **Quality** vs. mere presence/quantity of supply (such as access to electricity, reliability of supply)
  - Understanding of **citizens’ priorities**: “In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?”

# Afrobarometer data help scope problems, challenges

- For example, on migration:
  - More than one in three Africans (37%) have considered emigration, including about half of young adults (47%) and highly educated citizens (51%). Most are looking for a job and a way out of poverty, and more have their eyes on other African countries than on Europe or North America.
- Or climate change:
  - If most farmers in Tanzania haven't heard of climate change, that's a gap that needs to be addressed if we expect public support for difficult policy choices.
- Disaggregating Afrobarometer data by country and region, gender, urban-rural location, education, age group, party affiliation, etc. enables better targeting of interventions.
- Data like these can secure our footing for action.
  - Example: Three-fourths of Africans support presidential term limits.



# Challenges





# Challenge 1: infrastructure

- Doing face to face surveys means navigating across some of the most difficult terrain and infrastructure .
- Limited (and erratic) electricity)



# Challenge 2: Surveys in autocratic, post-authoritarian, post-conflict societies

- Respondent suspicions regarding interviewer motives, viewing them as government agents
- Tendency to be guarded in their responses to politically sensitive questions for fear of negative reprisals
- Safety and security challenges (physical and political) for AB national partners and fieldworkers

## Challenge 3: Political uncertainty and unpredictability

- Military coups
- Unpredictable political leaders/decisions
- Civil conflicts
- Impact on survey timing and questionnaire content and security of field teams



# Challenge 4: Large number of non/semi-literate respondents

- Inability to conduct self-administered surveys online or by pen and paper
- Tendency to be suspicious of “strangers” who seek to interview them
- Challenges in understanding questions, especially scale questions
- Languages, languages, languages and many languages

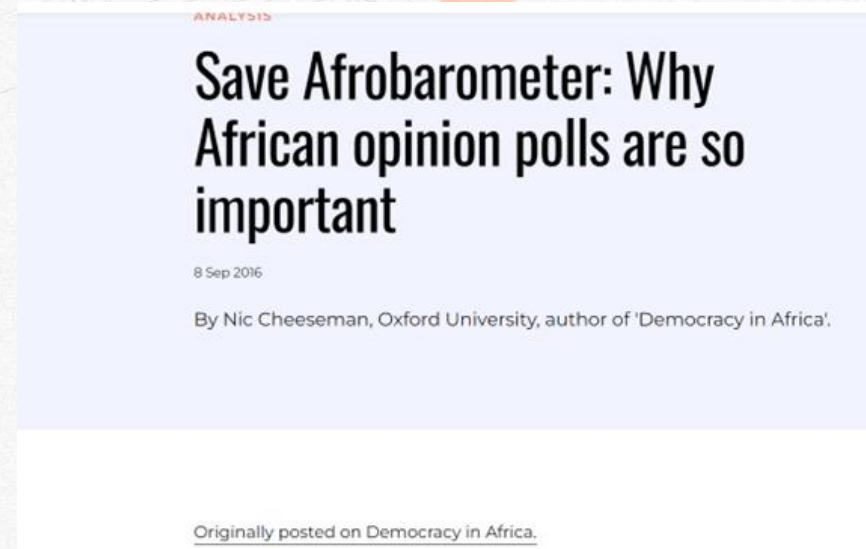


# Challenge 5: Natural disasters such as Ebola, COVID-19

- COVID-19 compelled us to suspend R8 fieldwork for seven months in 2020.
- Took a toll on dissemination activities and meetings with policy makers, intended to amplify citizens' voices.
- But AB adjusted, with initiatives including:
  - Special COVID-19 module capturing the pandemic's impacts on citizens and their evaluations of government responses to it.
  - Improved systems for working remotely
  - Pilot survey via cellphone
  - Able to resume R8 face-to-face fieldwork in the last quarter of 2020 while observing COVID-19 safety precautions.

# Challenge 6: Funding

- Afrobarometer surveys and related activities have been supported by a consortium of donors (including DFID, SIDA, USAID, World Bank, and some philanthropic foundations).
- Due to changing priorities in recent years, G7 country aid agencies that had constituted Afrobarometer's core donors (notably FCDO, CIDA) are unable to provide funding for democracy and governance.
- AB has added professional resource-mobilization staff.



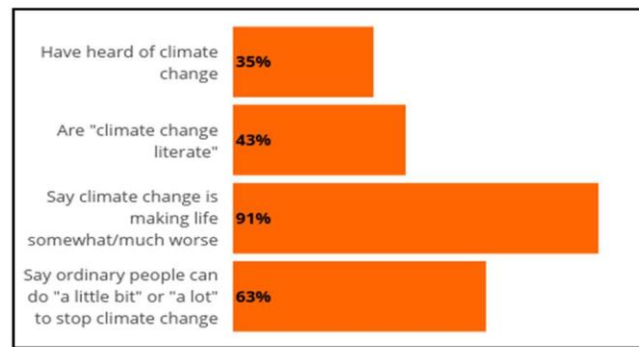
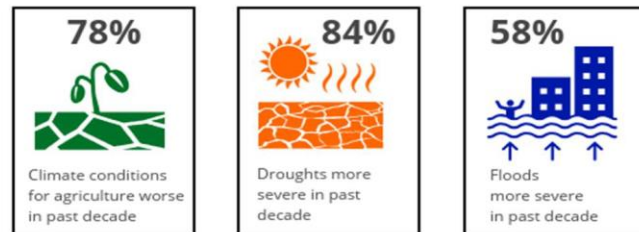
# Challenge 7: Data use

## Perceptions of climate change in Malawi



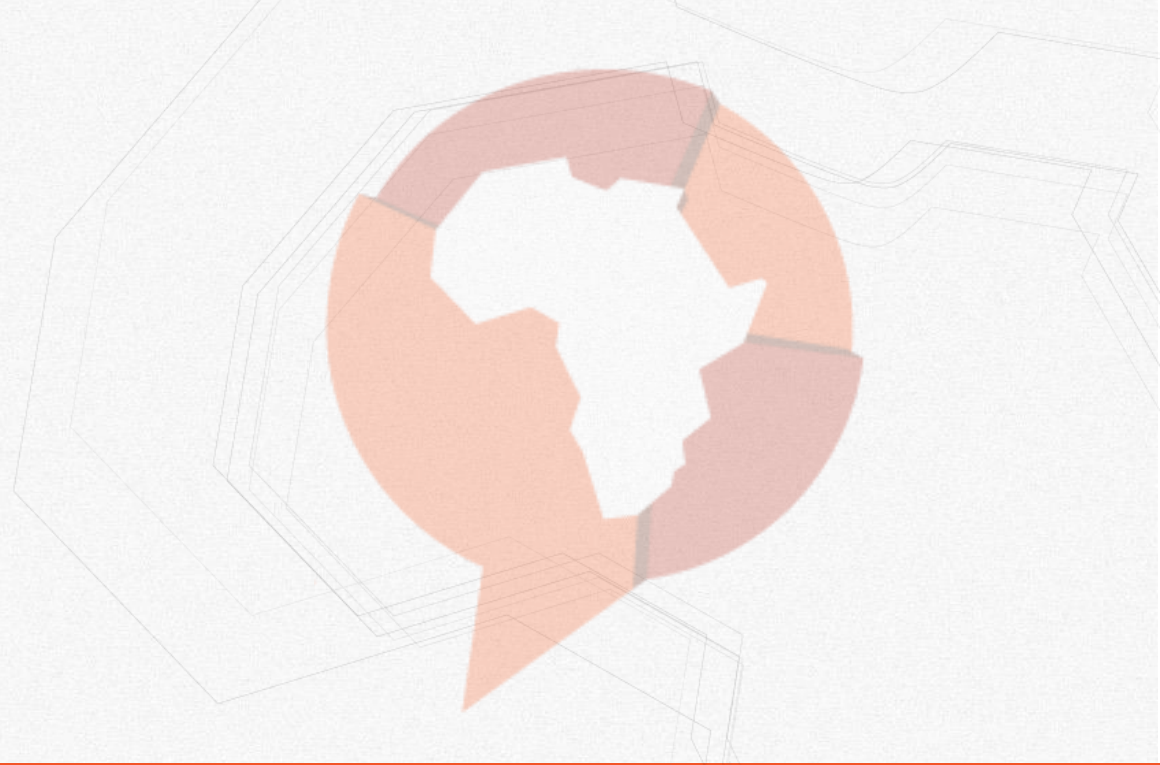
The largest-ever survey of Africans' perceptions of climate change has found widespread reports of worsening quality of life and deteriorating conditions for agricultural production, as well as limited "climate change literacy" among average citizens.

Afrobarometer findings in Malawi include:



See full 34-country report at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

- Resistance to accepting public-attitude data – especially when findings are deemed unflattering, politically unfavorable
- Frequent methodological objections (e.g. “A sample can’t represent a whole country”)
- Accusations of bias
- Challenge of communicating findings in ways that help stakeholders to use them.
- African news media and civil society typically lacking capacity in data use.



# Innovations





# Innovating and investing for the future

- Transition from pen to paper interviewing
- Geocoding of data
- Experimenting with telephone surveys
- Surveying under 18 youth
- Geofencing as a tool for quality control (yet to start...)
- Exploring alternative sampling methods
- Establishment of a new Survey Support Unit
- Investing in a new core of upcoming researchers
- Capacitating AB team in new survey technology

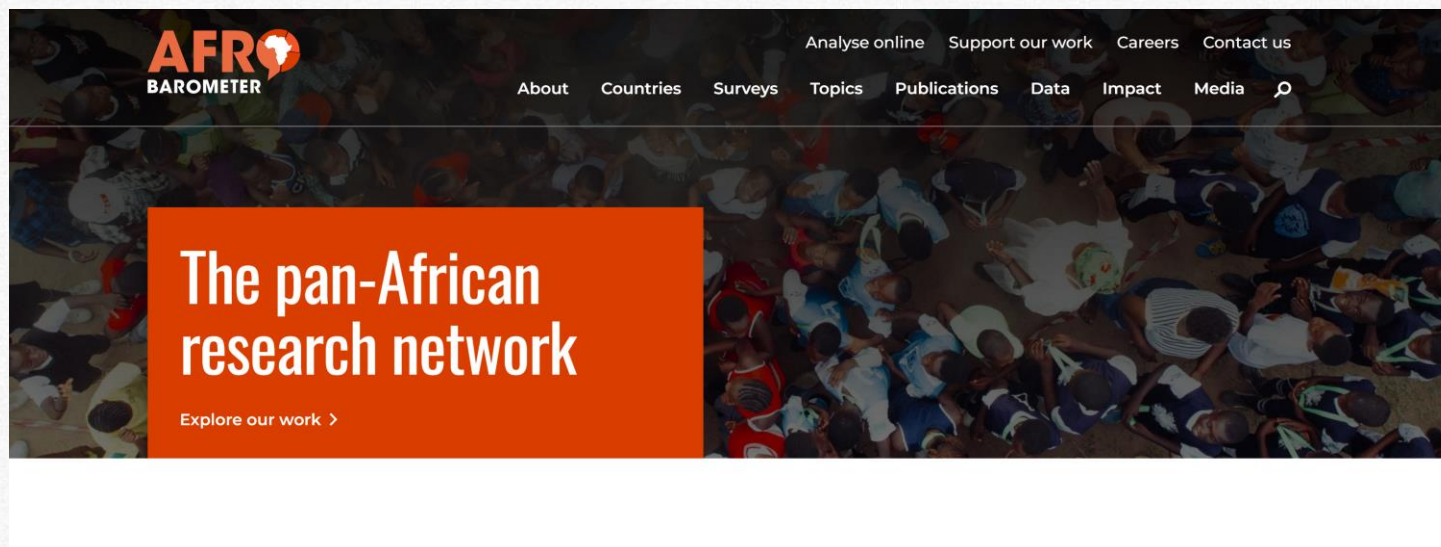


# Concluding thoughts

- Afrobarometer has proven that despite the myriad challenges, it is possible to do high quality public opinion surveys in Africa
- While challenges are many, opportunities abound.
- Afrobarometer continues to innovate to find ways of ensuring that the voices of ordinary Africans are heard and reflected in national policies and global for a.



# Thank you



## [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)

[#VoicesAfrica](#) on Twitter and Facebook

Do your own data analysis – on any question, for any country and survey round.  
It's easy and free at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).