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Turning policy into action: Overcoming policy failures and bridging implementation gaps for real-world impact

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A policy landscape marked by uneven implementation outcomes

One of the biggest challenges policymakers face around the world is bridging the gap between policy intentions and implementation outcomes, whether in meeting public demand for development, education, health, security, or foreign policy, or achieving more specific policy goals.¹ Successful policy implementation is critical at every level of policymaking in both advanced and developing economies, yet its drivers are often overlooked and underexplored,² and policymakers do not often engage with the literature on policy implementation. This is especially salient when it comes to addressing Africa's development challenges.³ This essay addresses the existing shortfalls by providing a concise, systematic account of the causes of policy failures and implementation gaps. It proposes an integrated policy implementation model that builds on the drivers of successful implementation and offers context-specific actionable options to bridge the implementation gap while strengthening governance and policymaking for the effective delivery of policy outcomes that meet the expectations of citizens and stakeholders.

- 1 Landry Signé, "Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure," *OCP Policy Center*, no. PP-17/03 (2017), <https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/OCP-PP-1703.pdf>; 28; Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; Or, Why It's Amazing That Federal Programs Work at All, This Being a Saga . . . Morals on a Foundation*, Third edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); "Chapter 2: 'Enhancing Governance for Development: Why Policies Fail,'" in *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law* (Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2017), 51–81, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>; I have contrasted the findings in the World Development Report 2017 with the early thinking ideas from which this report builds: Landry Signé, "Why Do Development Policies Often Fail in Africa? Perspectives on the World Development Report 2017" *Africa Up Close - Wilson Center* (blog), December 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/why-do-development-policies-often-fail-in-africa-perspectives-on-the-world-development-report-2017>.
- 2 Landry Signé, "Public Service Delivery – What Matters for Successful Implementation and What Can Policy Leaders Do?," *OCP Policy Center* PP-17/04 (2017): 24, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/public-service-delivery-%E2%80%93-what-matters-successful-implementation-and-what-can-policy>.
- 3 Landry Signé, "Development Strategies in a Changing Global Political Economy" in *Development Co-Operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System* (Paris: OECD, 2023), 26, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/development-co-operation-report-2023_bdba0621-en; Landry Signé, *African Development, African Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108575041>; Landry Signé, *Innovating Development Strategies in Africa: The Role of International, Regional and National Actors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316779699>.

Successful policy implementation is critical at every level of policymaking in both advanced and developing economies, yet its drivers are often overlooked and underexplored.

The effect of implementation challenges on achieving sustainable development

Even in cases where there is an overall alignment of motivation, resources, and plans, there is often a divergence in policy successes and failures both between and within continents, countries, cities, etc. For example, despite global coordination on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which spell out clear targets and a range of strategies to achieve them, globally, only 16% are on track to be met by the 2030 deadline, while 84% are facing limited progress or a reversal of progress.⁴ Uneven levels of policy success are apparent both across and within regions and continents. Across regions, countries like Finland, Sweden, and Denmark score 85 (out of 100) or more across the 125 indicators that make up the SDG index, whereas countries such as Yemen, Afghanistan, and Papua New Guinea score only 46.9, 48.2, and 52.0 points respectively. Similarly, within Africa, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritius lead the way with over 70 points according to the 2024 ranking, while Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are lagging with less than 50 points.⁵ Overall, the gap in SDG achievement between the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries and the global average has widened since 2015.⁶

Implementation challenges are bound up with governance, fragility, and public opinion

Divergence in policy outcomes is not unique to the SDGs. Despite global efforts to combat state fragility through the infusion of resources and the implementation of numerous policies, many countries “have remained ‘trapped’ in fragility for decades.”⁷ The “complexity and multidimensionality of fragility” make policy implementation strategies critical to success and explain how the same region can experience a wide range of outcomes.⁸ For example, according to the Fragile States Index, Africa is home to 14 of the 20 most fragile countries in the world, yet it is also home to Mauritius, one of the least fragile states in the world, which outperforms countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, and Costa Rica.⁹

Policy implementation success—and, importantly, policy implementation failure—do not go unnoticed by the public. According to new data from Afrobarometer, of 39 African countries surveyed, “only a quarter (26%) of citizens say their government is doing ‘fairly well’ or ‘very

4 Jeffrey Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune, and Grayson Fuller, “The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024” (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.25546/108572>.

5 The respective scores are as follows: Tunisia (75.53 points), Morocco (70.85 points), and Mauritius (70.45 points) are leading the way, while Chad (45.07 points), Somalia (45.42 points), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (48.71 points) are lagging.

6 Sachs, Lafortune, and Fuller, “The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024.”

7 Landry Signé, “Leaving No Fragile State and No One Behind in a Prosperous World: A New Approach,” in *Leave No One behind: Time for Specifics on the Sustainable Development Goals.*, ed. Homi Kharas, John W. McArthur, and Izumi Ohno (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/LNOB_Chapter11.pdf.

8 Signé, “Leaving No Fragile State and No One Behind in a Prosperous World: A New Approach.”

9 “Fragile States Index,” (The Fund for Peace), accessed December 9, 2024, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/excel/>.

well' in managing the economy, while 71% think they are doing a poor job."¹⁰ More specifically, the public's approval of their government's ability to deliver is strikingly low: Only 22% approve of their governments' efforts to improve the living standards of the poor, 20% approval on creating jobs, 16% for narrowing income gaps, and 12% for keeping prices stable.¹¹

These low approval ratings are reflected in governance trends at large. According to the Mo Ibrahim Index report,¹² overall governance performance scores have deteriorated across Africa for 47.9% of the population (across 21 countries) and have improved for 52.1% of the population (across 33 countries) in the past decade (2014-2023). However, improvement has mostly stalled since 2018.¹³ The deterioration of some countries (e.g., Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, and Tunisia are among the top 10 scorers in governance performance as of the 2023 rankings, yet are also some of the countries that have deteriorated the most since 2014) and the improvement of others (e.g., Seychelles is the best performing and most improved) reflect how policy implementation is a continuous process that, without coordination, can lead to diverging policy outcomes.

Review of the policy implementation literature: Various approaches to a complex issue

What drives different policy outcomes when it comes to effective service delivery and good governance? The study of policy implementation provides frameworks for understanding how contextual factors impact the success or failure of policies and can help policymakers better address the implementation gap.¹⁴ While scholars agree that implementation cannot be understood through a single theory,¹⁵ the following systematic review of the implementation literature can help explain why and how the implementation gap exists.¹⁶

Scholars offer many definitions of implementation, but at its core, implementation refers to *how* a practice, activity, or policy will be carried out,¹⁷ and implementation science is the

10 Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, "Africans' Bleak Views of Economic Conditions Match Their Escalating Experience of Poverty, Afrobarometer Surveys Find" (Accra: Afrobarometer, May 27, 2024), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/africans-bleak-views-of-economic-conditions-match-their-escalating-experience-of-poverty-afrobarometer-surveys-find/>.

11 Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny. "Africans' Bleak Views of Economic Conditions Match Their Escalating Experience of Poverty, Afrobarometer Surveys Find."

12 "2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Index Report" (Accra, Ghana: Mo Ibrahim Foundation, October 2024), <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf>.

13 Africa's overall governance score has not improved since 2018, aside from a +0.1-point increase in 2022, according to the Mo Ibrahim Index Report.

14 Landry Signé, "How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model," *OCP Policy Center* PB-16/23 (July 2016), <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/how-implement-domestic-resource-mobilization-drm-successfully-effective-delivery>: 10; Jamie F Chriqui et al., "Advancing the Science of Policy Implementation: A Call to Action for the Implementation Science Field," *Translational Behavioral Medicine* 13, no. 11 (November 5, 2023): 820–25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibad034>.

15 Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonardo Morlino, eds., "Implementation," in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412994163>.

16 Signé, "Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure."

17 Abraham Wandersman et al., "Bridging the Gap Between Prevention Research and Practice: The Interactive Systems Framework for Dissemination and Implementation," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41, no. 3 (June 1, 2008): 171–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-008-9174-z>.

study of “how best to engage in the delivery of specific innovations.”¹⁸ Early research on implementation gaps identified a number of decision points—what has been referred to as the “complexity of joint action”—that create a barrier to implementation and serve as the foundation for the following models.¹⁹ Top-down policy implementation models emphasize the ability of top authorities to administer policies and the availability of resources,²⁰ often focusing attention on policy enforcers rather than those affected by a policy.²¹ These models measure policy success by evaluating legislative objectives. Bottom-up implementation models,²² on the other hand, emphasize the perspectives of service deliverers and those affected by a policy, often focusing on flexibility and the need to adapt policies to local conditions based on standards developed by users and deliverers.²³

While these models are the most often discussed, other approaches which may or may not contain elements of top-down or bottom-up approaches, exist.²⁴ Governance approaches attempt to synthesize the different stages of the implementation process. One example is the “quality implementation framework” which includes four phases, each of which is considered a variable of implementation success or failure: 1) initial considerations regarding the host setting, 2) creating an implementation structure, 3) the ongoing structure post-start, and 4) improving future applications.²⁵ The literature also discusses potential causes of failure, often pointing to the level of ambiguity of a particular intervention, the degree of discretion of front-line implementers, access to funding and resources, and politics and conflict as key determinants of policy failure.²⁶

- 18 Per Nilsen et al., “Never the Twain Shall Meet? - A Comparison of Implementation Science and Policy Implementation Research,” *Implementation Science* 8 (2013): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-8-63>; Trisha Greenhalgh et al., “Diffusion of Innovations in Service Organizations: Systematic Review and Recommendations,” *Milbank Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (December 2004): 581–629, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0887-378X.2004.00325.x>; R. Grol, “Twenty Years of Implementation Research,” *Family Practice* 17, no. 90001 (February 1, 2000): 32S – 35, https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/17.suppl_1.S32.
- 19 Pressman and Wildavsky, *Implementation*; Badie, Berg-Schlosser, and Morlino, “Implementation.”
- 20 Paul A. Sabatier, “Top-down and Bottom-up Approaches to Implementation Research: A Critical Analysis and Suggested Synthesis,” *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 1 (1986): 21–48; Daniel A. Mazmanian, *Implementation and Public Policy: With a New Postscript* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).
- 21 Lucie Cerna, “The Nature of Policy Change and Implementation: A Review of Different Theoretical Approaches,” *Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development*, 2013, 31.
- 22 Steven Maynard-Moody, Michael Musheno, and Dennis Palumbo, “Street-Wise Social Policy: Resolving the Dilemma of Street-Level Influence and Successful Implementation,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1990): 833–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/448738>; Benny Hjern and Chris Hull, “Implementation Research as Empirical Constitutionalism - HJERN - 1982 - European Journal of Political Research,” *European Journal of Political Research* 10, no. 2 (June 1982): 105–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1982.tb00011.x>; Richard F. Elmore, “Backward Mapping: Implementation Research and Policy Decisions,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 601–16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149628>; Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Publications of Russell Sage Foundation (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).
- 23 Søren C. Winter, “Implementation Perspectives: Status and Reconsideration” in *The Sage Handbook of Public Administration*, ed. B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C.: SAGE Publications, 2012), 265–78, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292392013_Implementation_Perspectives_Status_and_Reconsideration.
- 24 Another model is the rational choice model, which focuses on the assumption of fixed preferences and rational behavior to explain implementation success. Some scholars also rely on game theory to explain potential collaboration throughout the implementation process and opportunities to influence cooperation. As some scholars have noted, rational choice models may be more helpful in understanding how decisions were made after the fact, rather than how they came to be; Signé, “Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure.”
- 25 Duncan C. Meyers, Joseph A. Durlak, and Abraham Wandersman, “The Quality Implementation Framework: A Synthesis of Critical Steps in the Implementation Process,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 462–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9522-x>.
- 26 Signé, “Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure.”

An integrated policy implementation model for effective delivery

How can these models and approaches be integrated in a systematic way to allow policymakers to bridge the implementation gap between policy intentions and policy outcomes?²⁷ In the context of this review of the implementation literature, I expand and apply an explanatory model for different outcomes in effective policy implementation that builds on Matland's integrated implementation model²⁸ complemented by my work on the causes of policy failure,²⁹ and an expansion of the drivers of successful implementation.³⁰

Matland's ambiguity-conflict model reconciles both top-down and bottom-up models in an integrated approach to propose that, within a given context, degrees of 1) policy ambiguity and 2) policy conflict impact the factors driving the success or failure of policy implementation.³¹ The level of policy ambiguity depends on how clear the goals or means of a policy are and can vary based on the availability of technology, the degree of coordination among players, and the ability to leverage tools or financing to reach a goal. For example, high policy ambiguity might exist within public service delivery if the tools, technology, or means of coordination required to deliver on a policy are not clear. The level of policy conflict depends on the intensity of disputes or incompatibilities between different players over the means or goals of a policy. For example, policy conflict might exist within public service delivery when there are political disagreements or divergences among players that make it impossible to move public service delivery forward.

Four implementation scenarios emerge from four possible combinations of policy ambiguity and policy conflict (Table 3). Each of these scenarios represents a unique context, that, if properly understood, can yield insight into what factors might be the most impactful for overcoming implementation barriers to achieving public service delivery outcomes. These scenarios can be identified at various levels—from countries to ministries to specific policies—and can change over time and across different implementation phases. Despite these varied and layered configurations, the model can help disentangle specific barriers to implementation and lead policymakers toward actionable policy options.

27 Signé, "How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model."

28 Richard E. Matland, "Synthesizing the Implementation Literature: The Ambiguity-Conflict Model of Policy Implementation," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART* 5, no. 2 (1995): 145–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1181674>.

29 Signé, "Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure," Causes of failure include ambiguity in a particular intervention, implementers at the front lines, funding and resources, and politics, conflict, and the political economy.

30 Signé, "Public Service Delivery – What Matters for Successful Implementation and What Can Policy Leaders Do?"; Some drivers of implementation include resources; motivation, learning; staff competency, processes, power, autonomy, governance, leadership, contextual conditions, institutional factors, organizational structure, culture, coalition strength, incentives and constraints, network management, and communication.

31 Matland, "Synthesizing the Implementation Literature."

TABLE 3

AMBIGUITY-CONFLICT MODEL OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION, REVISITED

The model below can lead policymakers toward actionable policy options

	Low policy conflict	High policy conflict
Low policy ambiguity	<p>ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLEMENTATION</p> <p>Context: Clear goals and strategy, but need labor, capital, or technological resources for implementation.</p> <p>Driver of success: Resources, human capital, technology, motivation, learning, staff competency, and appropriate processes.</p>	<p>POLITICAL IMPLEMENTATION</p> <p>Context: Clear goals and strategy, but clash of ideology stymies implementation.</p> <p>Driver of success: Power, autonomy, governance, and agile leadership.</p>
High policy ambiguity	<p>EXPERIMENTAL IMPLEMENTATION</p> <p>Context: General strategies or theories that lack specific clarity or have undefined roles.</p> <p>Driver of success: Contextual conditions, institutional factors, organizational structure, agility, and culture.</p>	<p>SYMBOLIC IMPLEMENTATION</p> <p>Context: Unclear goals or strategy, but deeply conflicting on an ideological basis.</p> <p>Driver of success: Coalition strength, incentives and constraints, network management, communication, political economy, and strategic agility.</p>

Source: Matland, "Synthesizing the Implementation Literature: The Ambiguity-Conflict Model of Policy Implementation." 145–74; Signé, "Policy Implementation – A Synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure."; Signé, "Public Service Delivery – What Matters for Successful Implementation and What Can Policy Leaders Do?"

Low policy ambiguity and low policy conflict: Administrative implementation

In contexts where both policy ambiguity and policy conflict are low, a focus on "administrative" implementation is needed, with the most important factors for overcoming implementation barriers being the availability of resources, motivation, learning, staff competency, and processes. For example, when government actors and external actors agree (low conflict) that digital health services could help more citizens access health care and improve health outcomes (low ambiguity), a solution can be implemented if the technology and resources are available.³² In the Central African Republic, actors agree that security forces are needed

³² Signé, "How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model."

for enforcing citizen security (low policy ambiguity and conflict), but insufficient resources hinder successful implementation.³³ Potential solutions, therefore, include securing technical knowledge and investing in available financing.³⁴

High policy ambiguity and high policy conflict: Symbolic implementation

In contexts where policy ambiguity and policy conflict are both high, a focus on “symbolic” implementation is needed. In this case, the most important factors for overcoming implementation barriers are the strength of the coalition on the local level and the most important strategies include strengthening democracy and building capacity. For example, if the goal of a public service program is unclear (high policy ambiguity) and multiple players are trying to impose a way forward (high policy conflict), implementation will become highly political and dominated by local actors as different coalitions form and coercion and bargaining become the means to arriving at a solution. For example, Nigeria’s attempt to implement a diversity program within the civil service recruitment process, known as the Federal Character Principle, has yet to achieve the diversity it sought to create since its addition to the constitution in 1999. This is due to ambitious and unclear goals (high policy ambiguity) and the numerous political cleavages have led to immense differences of opinion on how to best implement the policy, either weighted by the population of each state or a set number per state (high policy conflict).³⁵ The implementation of the policy depends on the perception that leaders hold and their responses.³⁶

In contexts where fragility, violence, and instability are prevalent, such as Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Mali,³⁷ the delivery of public services, especially in alignment with a long-term implementation plan, becomes extremely complex. Leaders in fragile democracies or transitional governments are likely to be preoccupied with a multitude of problems and with the quest for power. In such contexts, resources alone will not be enough to implement public service policy goals.³⁸ In addition to resources, these countries will need to focus on reducing conflict, supporting democratic elections, and informing and incentivizing leaders to commit to solutions.

Low policy ambiguity and high policy conflict: Political implementation

In contexts with low policy ambiguity and high policy conflict, a focus on “political” implementation is needed, with the most important factors for overcoming implementation barriers being strong political direction and sound governance among other top-down considerations. This combination appears when the goals of a policy are clearly defined (low policy ambiguity), but the means or steps to achieving these goals are contested among players

33 Signé, “Why Do Development Policies Often Fail in Africa?”

34 Signé, “How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model.”

35 Timothy Onimisi and Shakira Hannah Osasona, “Factors Affecting Effective Policy Implementation in Nigeria: Focus on Federal Character Principle,” *Zamfara Journal of Politics and Development* 2, no. 1 (2021): 12–12.

36 Signé, “How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model.”

37 “Sahel Human Development Report 2023: Sustainable Energy for Economic and Climate Security in the Sahel” (New York: UNDP, January 2024), 9789210030571, <https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/sahel-human-development-report-2023>.

38 Signé, “Leaving No Fragile State and No One Behind in a Prosperous World: A New Approach.”

(high policy conflict), either or both internally or externally.³⁹ For example, a government might have figured out how to adopt and expand electronic financial systems, but external conflict from the informal sector, which might have competing interests, could threaten successful implementation. In Chad, despite a widespread belief in the need to preserve resources (low policy ambiguity), leaders often disagree on how to prioritize government spending (high policy conflict), leading to saving policies that are highly impacted by commodity prices.⁴⁰ Whoever has the power and whether or not they can promote compliance in these contexts will be the deciding factors of if, or how, public service delivery will be implemented. Accountable leadership will be key.

High policy ambiguity and low policy conflict: Experimental implementation

In contexts with high policy ambiguity and low policy conflict, a focus on “experimental” implementation is needed, with the most important factors for overcoming implementation barriers being contextual conditions, institutional factors, organizational structure, and culture. For example, in countries that have the political commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (low policy conflict) but lack clarity as to the means to achieve such goals (high policy ambiguity), implementation will rely on experimental factors. Most African countries are facing such a challenge. By aligning the goals and means, actors can move toward taking action to implement their policies. Potential solutions may include focusing on evaluation, enabling knowledge development and transfer, bolstering the role of civil society organizations, and aligning goals with institutions.⁴¹

Conclusion

This extended version of Matland’s model in conjunction with other implementation science models can help leaders think systematically through an aspect of public policy that is often overlooked: The different factors that might be more or less important for overcoming implementation barriers within a given context.⁴² While resources will always be necessary, it is clear from these four scenarios that they will likely need to be complemented by other interventions to successfully bridge the implementation gap. Given the vast differences between the 54 African countries, and the fact that continents, regions, countries, ministries, and policies move across the spectrum of policy conflict and ambiguity, leaders must constantly evaluate contextual conditions to better understand the necessary drivers of successful implementation. By doing so, attempts to improve governance can find a firm foundation, and true commitment to moving beyond strategies and goals and toward strategic action can take shape.

39 Signé, “How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model.”

40 Signé, “Why Do Development Policies Often Fail in Africa?,” “Regional Focus: Africa’s Oil Exporters: Balancing Saving and Spending,” *IMF Survey* 36, no. 009 (May 31, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781451938432.023.A008>.

41 Signé, “How to Implement Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) Successfully for Effective Delivery of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa: An Innovative Policy Delivery Model.”

42 Chriqui et al., “Advancing the Science of Policy Implementation.”

People-centered development: Why the policy priorities and lived experiences of African citizens should matter for national development policy

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Development agenda setting is a key function of governments. But since the Millennium Declaration was adopted in 2000,¹ national development agendas have been increasingly shaped by global and continental development policy frameworks, notably the United Nations (U.N.) Millennium Development Goals and their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063.

As governments seek to align their national development priorities with global and continental frameworks in order to facilitate tracking, reporting, and accountability, we argue that a critical place to start should be citizens' policy priorities and lived experiences. People-centered development—inclusive growth and sustainable development that “leaves no one behind”—must be at the core of both national development agendas and the international development frameworks to which governments collectively commit.²

What are the policy priorities of African citizens, and how have these changed over time? How do people assess the performance of their governments on their priority issues? We draw from recent survey data from Afrobarometer to point policymakers toward critical inputs for their agenda setting.

Citizens' top policy priorities

Across 39 African countries surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, unemployment, management of the economy, and health top the list of the “most important problems” that Africans want their government to address (Figure 24). Water supply and infrastructure/roads round out the top five, followed by education and crime/security.

Since priorities vary by context, careful analysis by country and demographic group, as detailed in this Afrobarometer's Pan-Africa Profile, is essential.³ For example, while unemployment is

1 “United Nations Millennium Declaration,” 55/2 General Assembly resolution (2000), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-millennium-declaration>.

2 Swati Banerjee, Stephen Carney, and Lars Hulgård, *People Centered Social Innovation: Global Perspectives on an Emerging Paradigm*, eds. Swati Banerjee, Stephen Carney and Lars Hulgård., 1st ed., Routledge Studies in Social Enterprise & Social Innovation (New York: Routledge, 2020).

3 Mohamed Najib Ben Saad and Carolyn Logan, “Keeping up with the People's Agenda: Popular Priorities for Government Action, and How They are Evolving,” Afrobarometer Dispatch (Accra: Afrobarometer, August 9, 2024), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/AD833-PAP17-Africans-priorities-for-government-action-and-how-they-are-changing-Afrobarometer-7aug24.pdf>.

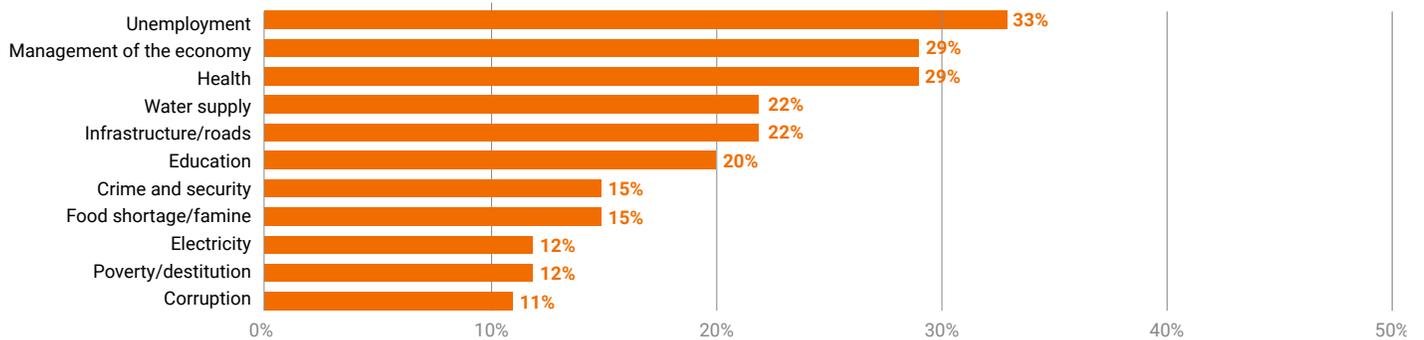
the top-ranked concern in 11 surveyed countries, and is of particular concern among young people and urban residents, other issues take first place in 28 other countries and among certain subgroups (Figure 25).

The data also reveal important shifts in citizen priorities over the past decade. Across 30 countries surveyed consistently since 2011, management of the economy has almost doubled its share, highlighting the importance that citizens attach to economic management in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impacts.

FIGURE 24

MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS | 39 AFRICAN COUNTRIES | 2021/2023

Africans believe unemployment, management of the economy, and health are the biggest issues they face

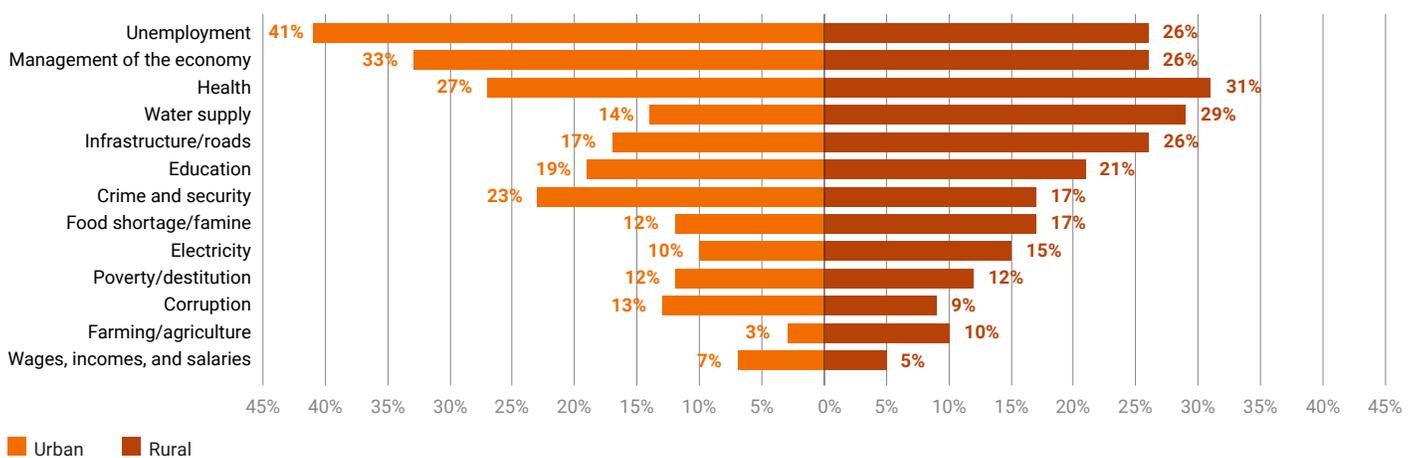


Note: Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of their top three priorities, for all problems cited by at least 10% of respondents.) Source: Afrobarometer

FIGURE 25

MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS | BY URBAN-RURAL LOCATION | 39 AFRICAN COUNTRIES | 2021/2023

Priorities are dependent on the demographics of the respondent



Note: Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of their top three priorities, for all problems cited by at least 10% of respondents.) Source: Afrobarometer.

Crime/security also climbed among priorities, up by 7 percentage points between 2011 and 2023, claiming first place in Burkina Faso and Nigeria and second in Botswana, Cabo Verde, Madagascar, Mali, Senegal, and South Africa.

Shifts like these in citizens’ priorities should matter to policymakers and suggest that governments and development stakeholders must periodically revisit their development policy priorities to ensure broad alignment with the concerns of the people they seek to serve.

Government performance on citizens’ top policy priorities

How do Africans rate the performance of their governments in addressing their top policy concerns? Data from Afrobarometer surveys reveal a gloomy picture (Figure 26). Across 39 countries, fewer than three in 10 Africans say their governments are doing “fairly well” or “very well” on the top priorities: creating jobs (20%) and managing the economy (26%). Positive ratings are equally low for government performance on improving living standards of the poor (22%), reducing inequality (16%), and controlling inflation (12%).

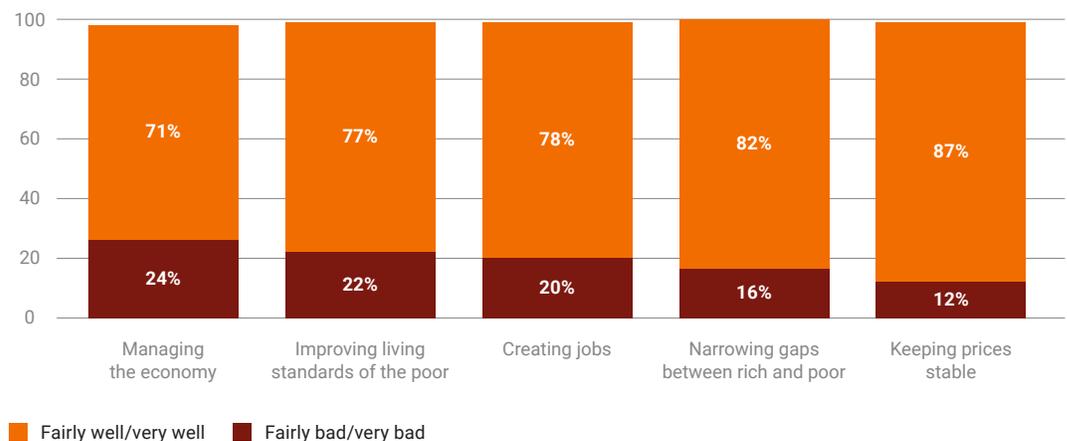
Across 39 countries, fewer than three in 10 Africans say their governments are doing “fairly well” or “very well” on the top priorities.

Over the past decade, a period that coincides with the 10-year implementation window of the AU Agenda 2063, these performance ratings show significant deterioration. Across 30 countries for which we have complete longitudinal data, approval of governments’ overall management of the economy is down by 12 percentage points, from 39% in 2014 to 27% in 2023, and approval on job creation is down by 7 points (Figure 27). Satisfaction with government performance has also declined in other areas, including improving living standards of the poor (-6 points), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (-5 points), and keeping prices stable (-14 points).

FIGURE 26

EVALUATION OF GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

African respondents overwhelmingly thought their government's economic performance was fairly bad or very bad

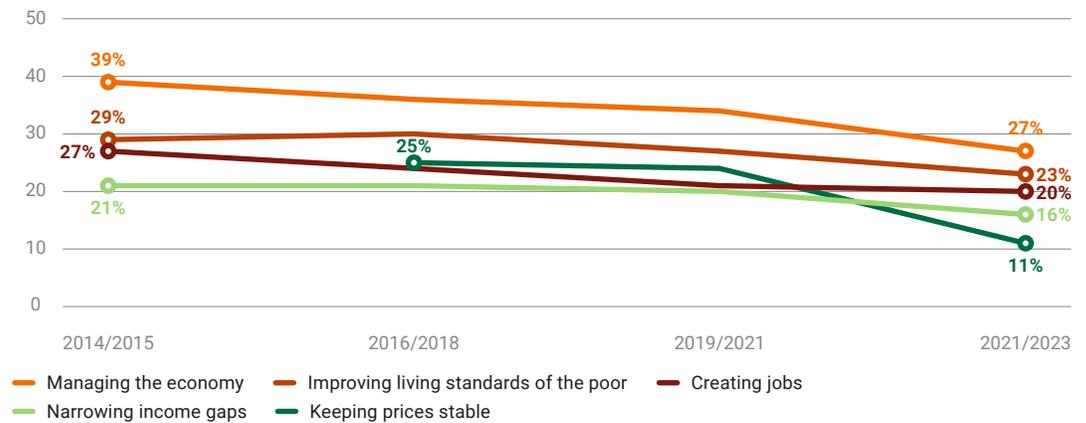


Note: Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?
Source: Afrobarometer.

FIGURE 27

AFROBAROMETER RESPONDENTS WHO HAD A POSITIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

The decline over time is most stark regarding inflation



Note: 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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well").
Source: Afrobarometer.

Deteriorating perceptions of economic and living conditions

Mirroring their economic performance ratings, popular evaluations of perceptions of economic conditions have also deteriorated. Across 30 countries surveyed consistently since 2011, two-thirds (66%) of respondents see their country as moving in "the wrong direction," in the most recent round of the survey, a 20-percentage-point increase from 46% in the 2011/2013 survey round (Figure 28).

Similarly, the share of respondents who rate their country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad" has climbed from about half (51%) in the 2014/2015 survey round to two-thirds (66%) in the 2021/2023 survey round (Figure 29). Negative evaluations of personal living conditions increased by 7 points, from 46% to 53%.

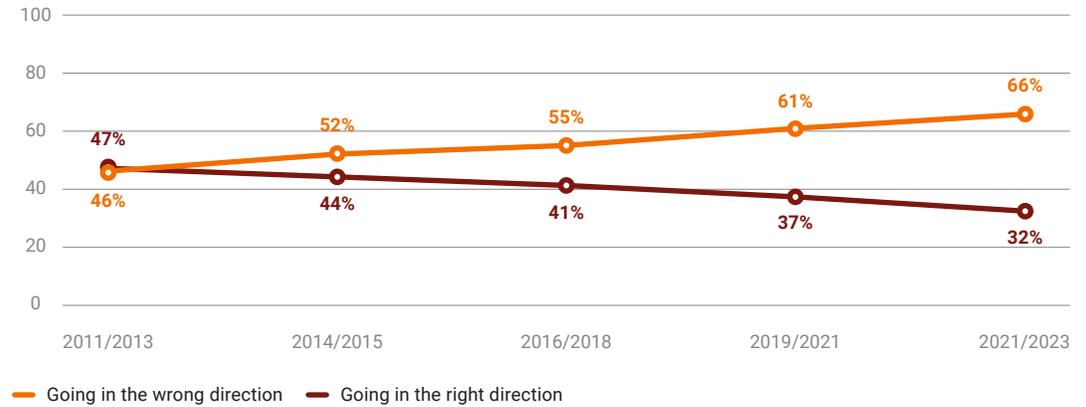
Although raising real per-capita income was one of the first 10-year targets to which African governments committed under Agenda 2063, respondents indicating they are experiencing income poverty remains widespread and has worsened over time. Across 31 countries where we have longitudinal data, more than eight in 10 respondents (81%) say they or a family member went without a cash income at least once during the previous year, a 6-point increase from the 2014/2015 survey (Figure 30). The proportions of respondents who went without medical care (65%) and suffered shortages of food (57%), water (56%), and cooking fuel (50%) all recorded double-digit increases between 2014 and 2023.

Taking these indicators together to measure levels of "lived poverty," we find that a growing share of respondents are experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty: 60% in the 2021/2023 survey round, up from 48% in the 2014/2015 survey round.

FIGURE 28

AFROBAROMETER RESPONDENTS PERCEPTION OF THE OVERALL DIRECTION OF THEIR COUNTRY

Africans increasingly perceive their country as going in the wrong direction

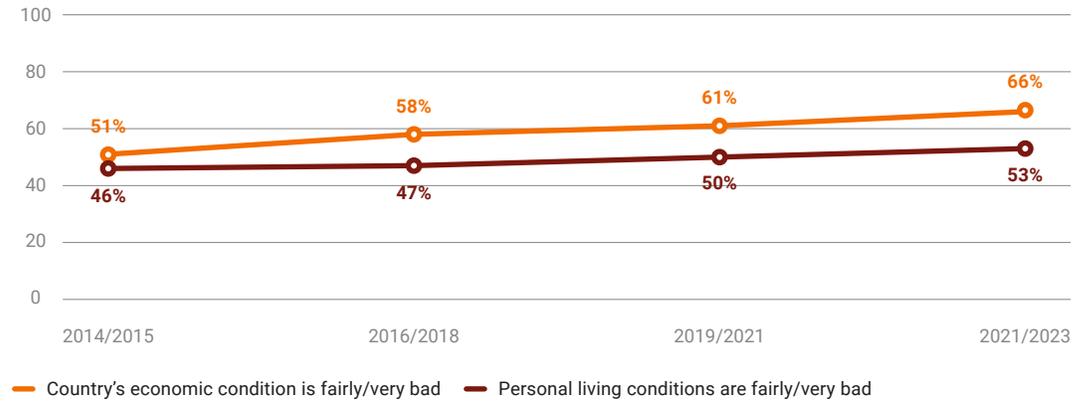


Note: Respondents were asked: Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So, let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
Source: Afrobarometer.

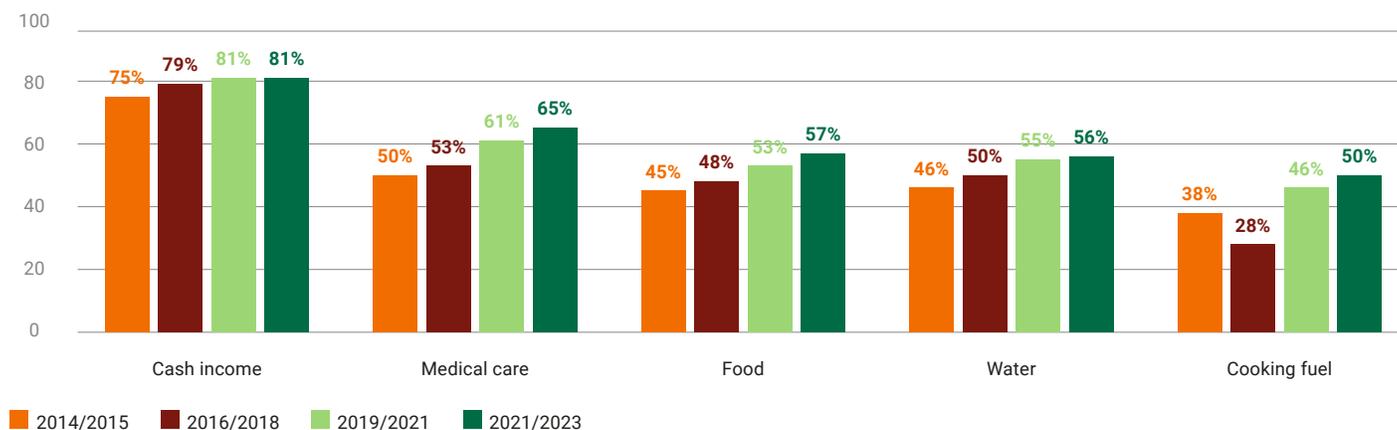
FIGURE 29

AFROBAROMETER RESPONDENTS WHO RESPONDED NEGATIVELY TO THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC CONDITION AND THEIR OWN PERSONAL LIVING CONDITIONS

As with other governance metrics, those responding negatively has increased over time



Note: Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?
Source: Afrobarometer.

FIGURE 30**AFROBAROMETER RESPONDENTS WHO WENT WITHOUT BASIC NEEDS***The percentage of people who report going without basic needs continues to increase*

Note: 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? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”).

Source: Afrobarometer.

Taking stock, looking ahead

The early to mid-2010s were a period of enthusiasm and hope for Africa. Relative peace and stability, rapid economic growth in some countries, and declining poverty fueled the “Africa rising” narrative.⁴

A decade later, the assessments and lived experiences of citizens on the continent indicate that these optimistic expectations have not been realized. A growing number of Africans struggle to secure the basic necessities of life. Income stands out as the most widespread unmet need, which may partly explain why unemployment ranks at the top of citizens’ policy priorities. Clearly, the basics of development—effective and sustainable poverty reduction—are still on the action agenda and governments must take the necessary steps to address the escalating incidence of poverty. Citizens’ focus on unemployment and, to a growing extent, economic management, suggests that they hold their governments responsible for creating conditions in which the quality of their lives can improve.

While poverty reduction remains urgent, African governments must also pay attention to emerging issues of concern to their citizens, notably insecurity. This is particularly so across the Sahel region, where security has displaced key basic social issues such as health and education as a public priority.

Clearly, the basics of development—effective and sustainable poverty reduction—are still on the action agenda and governments must take the necessary steps to address the escalating incidence of poverty.

4 Lorenzo Fioramonti, “The ‘Africa Rising Story’ was Based on Faulty Logic – Here’s How to Fix it,” *The Conversation* (blog), October 30, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/the-africa-rising-story-was-based-on-faulty-logic-heres-how-to-fix-it-86327>.

Africa's governance landscape: A tale of mixed progress and unmet expectations

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The results of the 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) are sobering. After several years of steady progress at the beginning of the 21st century—which saw hopeful strides in development, democracy, and the end of many long-standing conflicts—Africa's overall public governance performance has stalled since 2018, grounding to a complete halt in 2022. For nearly half of the continent's population, overall governance performance is worse in 2023 than it was in 2014.¹

As highlighted in the report, a deepening security crisis and shrinking participatory environment across most of the continent are driving this trend and are offsetting any progress still being made in human and economic development. Of course, escalating conflicts and growing mistrust in democracy are sadly not unique to Africa. However, this trend is particularly concerning for Africa because it threatens both the progress already achieved and that which has yet to be built.

However, as a continent of 54 countries, Africa cannot be summarized by a single average. Indeed, the 2024 IIAG highlights notably divergent trends between countries.

On one hand, we watch concerning deteriorations in Sudan, in countries that underwent a coup in recent years, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in Tunisia, and even in Mauritius, which lost its first place ranking on the continent for the first time in IIAG history. Various lessons can be drawn here from each case, for both African countries and their partners.

The recent deterioration of governance in Mauritius makes it clear that resting on one's laurels is not sufficient. Maintaining success requires an ongoing commitment, with no room for complacency. Tunisia has shown us that trade-offs between economic development and democracy are not sustainable. Although progress was still recorded in economic terms, the country has experienced the greatest decline in the participation indicator over the decade and the second largest decline in the accountability and transparency indicator.

¹ 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Index Report (London: Mo Ibrahim Foundation, October 2024), <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf>.

The DRC's widening gap between national wealth and its citizens' poverty can only fuel increased instability. Africa's wealthiest country when it comes to minerals, the DRC also ranks in the lowest end of the Human Development Index (HDI), having lost almost 20 points over the last decade in the security and safety category alone.

But partners also play a role.

The ongoing proxy war in Sudan led by non-African countries, and the international community's hesitation in enabling the swift delivery of the dividends of a peaceful, civil transition, bear as much responsibility in Africa's biggest crisis, as the Sudanese stakeholders.

The international community's predilection for condemning a coup after the fact and calling for the "reestablishment of democratic institutions" comes too late for countries affected by coups. Often, it only fuels the mistrust of local populations toward these lesson-giving entities. To safeguard the international system, reactions should begin as soon as warning signs of overthrown democratic rules and practices by "democratically elected governments" are detected. There too, partners should strengthen efforts to help provide relevant economic and social prospects for the youth who often feel defeated by a poor economy and incentivized to join rebellions, enhancing the likelihood for violence. The inability of "democracy" to provide such opportunities was a key trigger for instability in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Central African Republic, all of which sit on the lowest rungs of the latest (HDI).

On the other hand, many countries have made remarkable progress over the 2014-2023 decade. For thirteen countries—including Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, and Togo—governance performance is not only significantly better in 2023 than in 2014, but progress has accelerated over the decade. Gambia, Seychelles, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Djibouti feature among the ten best-improved countries over the decade, gaining between 4 and 10 points, compared to the only marginal continental improvement of 1 point overall.

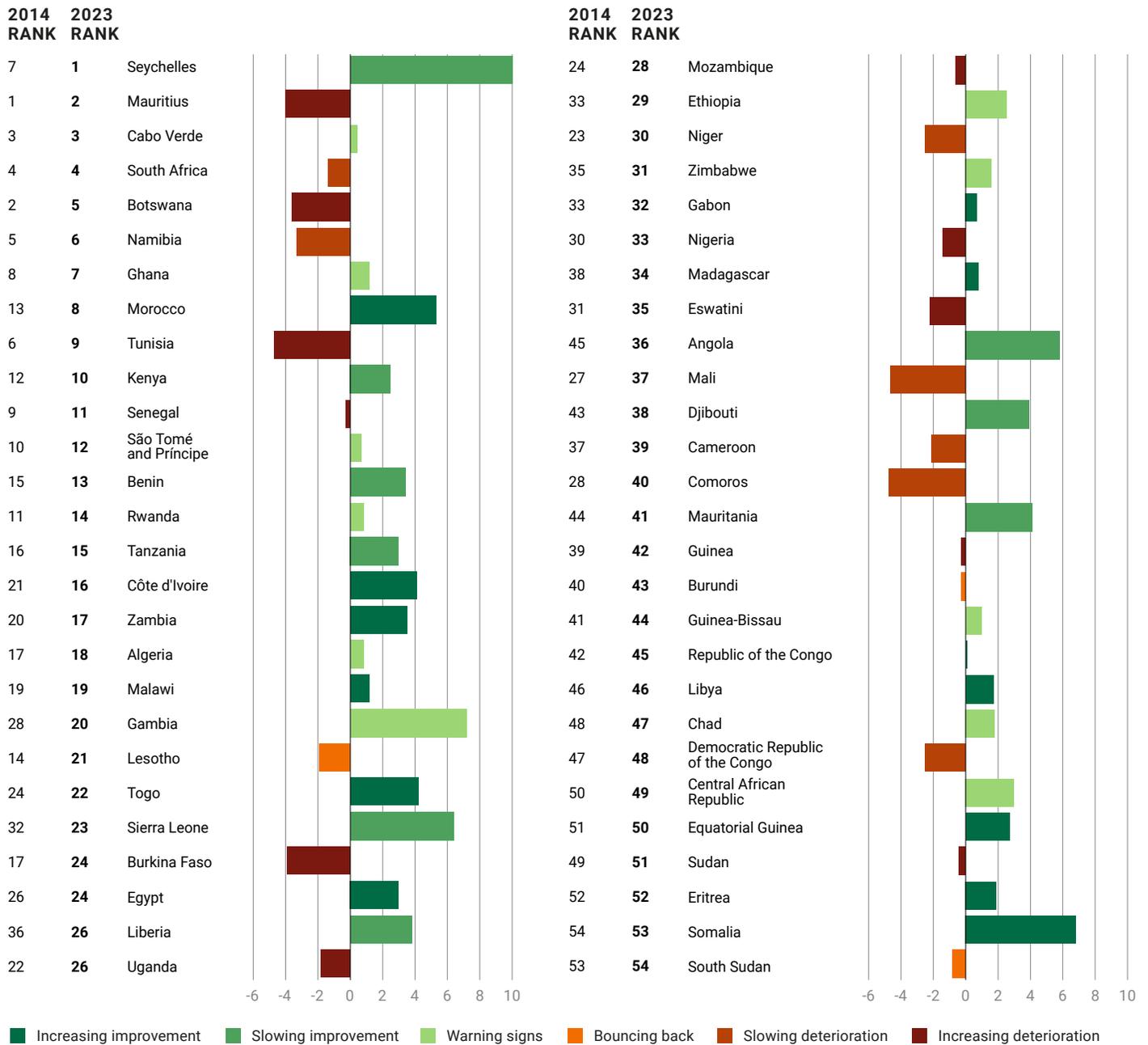
Every country that exhibited marked improvement over the decade was able to balance their progress across most governance dimensions without any damaging trade-off between development and democracy. Seychelles, which gained 10 points, landing in first place, managed to progress in all 16 Index sub-categories, the only country, along with Sierra Leone, to achieve this.

Many countries showed a notable improvement in the public administration dimension of the IIAG index, with the largest improvements registered by Somalia, Benin, and Morocco. Mostly, this is driven by impressive progress in the capacity of the statistical system indicator, which measures the extent of statistical data coverage and openness within a given country, the independence of national statistics offices, and a government's cybersecurity capacity. Overall, the continent experienced a 7.9 point improvement on this metric. This is crucial to define relevant public policies and ensure their efficient implementation.

FIGURE 31

10-YEAR CHANGE AND TREND OF OVERALL GOVERNANCE SCORES

Governance across the continent has seen extreme variation since 2014



Increasing improvement (13): Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Morocco, Somalia, Togo, Zambia
Slowing improvement (9): Angola, Benin, Djibouti, Kenya, Liberia, Mauritania, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Tanzania
Warning signs (11): Algeria, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Zimbabwe
Bouncing back (3): Burundi, Lesotho, South Sudan
Slowing deterioration (7): Cameroon, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Namibia, Niger, South Africa
Increasing deterioration (11): Botswana, Burkina Faso, Eswatini, Guinea, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda

Note: The Ibrahim Index of African Governance takes into consideration a country's security and safety, rule of law and justice, accountability and transparency, anti-corruption, participation, rights, inclusion and equality, women's equality, public administration, business and labour environment, infrastructure, rural economy, health, education, social protection and welfare, and sustainable environment.

Source: 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Index Report (London: Mo Ibrahim Foundation, October 2024).

Even when governments make progress in areas like infrastructure and economic opportunities, many citizens perceive a lack of tangible improvements in their daily lives.

The tax and revenue mobilization indicator, however, remains a challenge. This component has lost almost two points at continental average over the decade under review. African governments can benefit from the expertise of various partners on this issue. Key to governance, it is the best way to ensure the delivery of public goods and services expected by citizens and the sovereignty and ownership of public policies.

But one of the most striking findings of the 2024 IIAG is the widening gap between governance improvements and the perceptions of Africa's citizens. Even when governments make progress in areas like infrastructure and economic opportunities, many citizens perceive a lack of tangible improvements in their daily lives, or at least unmet expectations. And unmet expectations, especially among young people, fuel frustration and anger, which are strong drivers of unrest and conflict which undermine successful governance.

Creating jobs for millions of unemployed young Africans is the way out of fragility

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In Africa, various dimensions of fragility—economic, political, climate-related, and capacity-based—are evident and deeply interwoven.

According to the United Nations, nearly half of the world's 1.1 billion poor live in conflict-affected settings.¹ The World Bank predicts that nearly 60% of the world's extreme poor will live in fragile and conflict-affected situations by 2030.²

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, fragility is “the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system, and/or communities to manage, absorb, or mitigate those risks.”³

In Africa, various dimensions of fragility—economic, political, climate-related, and capacity-based—are evident and deeply interwoven.

Economically, many of the continent's key sectors were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed 23 million Africans into extreme poverty in 2020.⁴ Recent conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have further complicated the macroeconomic situation in sub-Saharan African countries.⁵

Politics has also caused disruptions across much of Africa. Between August 2020 and August 2023, the continent recorded seven coups d'état, causing severe economic and social consequences.⁶ Looking closely at their specific contexts, we can observe some trade-offs between security spending and social spending. For example, according to International Monetary Fund estimates, security spending in the Sahel countries (except Mauritania) averaged 3.9% of GDP in 2022, which corresponded to an average of 25% of their tax revenues excluding grants.⁷ Security spending has stretched budgets thin, leaving other priorities without sufficient funds.

1 “Nearly Half the World's 1.1 Billion Poor Live in Conflict Settings,” *UN News*, October 17, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155821>.

2 “Fragility, Conflict & Violence | Overview,” *World Bank*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview>.

3 “States of Fragility 2022” (Paris: OECD, 2022), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2022/09/states-of-fragility-2022_9ee73e08.html.

4 Kibrom A. Abay et al., “Revisiting Poverty Trends and the Role of Social Protection Systems in Africa during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.136411>.

5 Sherilyn Raga et al., “Impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on Africa,” *ODI*, January 2024, <https://odi.org/en/publications/impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-on-africa-policy-implications-for-navigating-shocks-and-building-resilience/>.

6 Alex Vines, “Understanding Africa's Recent Coups,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (blog), April 13, 2024, <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2024/04/13/understanding-africas-coups/>.

7 “The Sahel, Central African Republic Face Complex Challenges to Sustainable Development | IMF Country Focus,” *IMF News*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/11/16/cf-the-sahel-car-face-complex-challenges-to-sustainable-development>.

Climate-fueled disasters are becoming commonplace, resulting in an increase in migration and strained government budgets.⁸ African countries are disproportionately affected by global warming, despite contributing the least to climate change. Without climate change adaptation measures, 86 million Africans could migrate internally, with an estimate that climate change will cost African countries \$50 billion per year by 2050.⁹

Capacity issues have been exacerbated by the economic and security shocks across Africa. As a matter of social contract, the state is expected to provide the necessary safety and other basic services for its citizens. The Maslow Pyramid, a psychological theory of human needs, places physiological need at the base, immediately followed by safety and security needs.¹⁰ When states are fragile, citizens become more vulnerable, which feeds into a vicious cycle where governments are challenged to effectively implement policies for structural change to cope with external shocks, debt crises, climate change, or natural disasters without the capacity to do so effectively.

These dynamics are not without consequences. Social unrest due to power cuts, rising prices, and tax reforms highlights the erosion of social cohesion. Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional and systemic approach, integrating economic development, governance reform, and climate resilience. To rise to this challenge, African nations should consider the following recommendations:

1. Role of governments: More people-centric and inclusive policies focusing on youth and women are needed. These are critical to successfully address people's vulnerabilities and strengthen the rule of law. Governments should utilize their growing youth population in addressing these issues given the growing rate of youth across the continent.¹¹ Including women in the creation and implementation of such policies will ensure that policy recommendations are tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable citizens.
2. Role of the private sector: The African working-age population is expected to be roughly 450 million by 2035. Without appropriate reforms, the continent will only be able to create 100 million jobs for these millions of young people.¹² Strengthening public institutions to create a conducive environment for private investment is essential. Public-private partnerships can drive job creation and economic diversification, particularly in countries experiencing fragility, conflict, and violence (FCVs).

8 Desmond Oklikah Ofori et al., "A Systematic Review of International and Internal Climate-Induced Migration in Africa," *Sustainability* 15, no. 22 (January 2023): 16105, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152216105>.

9 Ofori et al., "A Systematic Review of International and Internal Climate-Induced Migration in Africa."

10 "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," January 24, 2024, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

11 "Africa's Future Hinges on Youth Leadership, Says ECA's Gatete," *United Nations Economic Commission for Africa*, September 21, 2024, <https://www.uneca.org/stories/africa%E2%80%99s-future-hinges-on-youth-leadership%2C-says-eca%E2%80%99s-gatete>

12 "The Africa Competitiveness Report 2017: Addressing Africa's Demographic Dividend" (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2017), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/733321493793700840/the-africa-competitiveness-report-2017-addressing-africa-s-demographic-dividend>.

3. Role of the United Nations: Of the 44 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), 33 are in Africa, highlighting the continent's distinct challenges and opportunities for advancing sustainable development. Recognizing LDCs as the most vulnerable nations globally, the United Nations established the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States to advocate for their needs and drive solutions to their development challenges.¹³ The implementation of the Doha Programme of Action for the LDCs (DPOA) serves as a comprehensive framework with specific targets, commitments, and deliverables to support these nations in six issue areas associated with fragility: investing in people to eradicate poverty and building capacity, leveraging innovation to achieve the SDGs, supporting structural transformation, enhancing international trade, addressing climate change, and mobilizing global partnerships.¹⁴
4. Efficiency is essential: For the social contract to yield results, it will be critical to develop service delivery mechanisms that will be more agile. Institutions will need to consider speed of delivery, scale of resources, and impact of proposed solutions. A key discussion during the International Development Association's 21st replenishment process (IDA21) will be streamlining its operations by cutting the number of required metrics from 1,011 (the number used for IDA20) to under 500 (to be used for IDA21).¹⁵
5. Increased concessional financing for countries in fragile situations: A comparison of investments needed for mitigation and adaptation by 2030 and net official development assistance received in recent years shows the extent of the financing gap of four FCV countries in the Sahel. According to the Country Climate and Development report of the G5 Sahel (Figure 32) countries, without appropriate financing, 13.5 million people will be in extreme poverty by 2050 due to climate change-related shocks.¹⁶ To address these development challenges, fragile countries need predictable and long-term financial resources more than ever.

The cost of inaction for countries remaining in fragile situations will be very high for the international community. The recent migration crises and global pandemic highlight some of the costs of inaction.

13 "Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States," *United Nations*, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/>.

14 "Doha Programme of Action | 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5)," *United Nations*, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://www.un.org/lcd5/doha-programme-of-action>.

15 "IDA21 Replenishment: An Overview of the Draft IDA21 Policy Framework: Ending Poverty on a Livable Planet: Delivery Impact with Urgency and Ambition | Draft for Comments, November 7-14, 2024," *World Bank*, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/11c71e495b590f17c365c7b69398162c-0410012024/original/IDA21-Policy-Package-for-Discussion-10-15-2024.pdf>.

16 "G5 Sahel Region: Country Climate and Development Report," (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2022), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/50936c70-3771-5618-8b3e-52e7c01be5f8>.

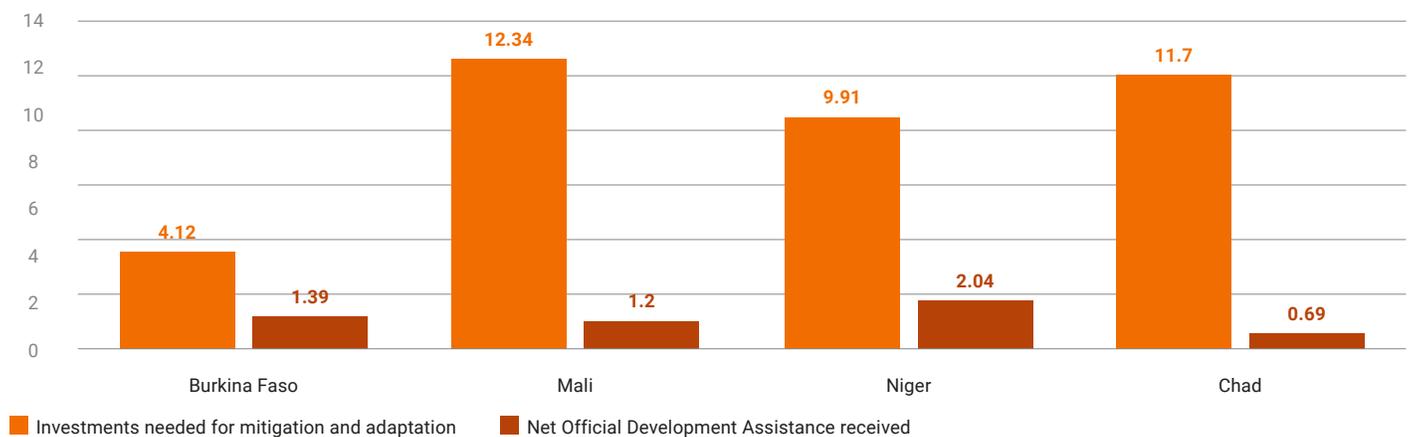
Conclusion

Creating jobs for millions of unemployed youths in Africa, strengthening governance, and fostering international collaboration are critical to breaking the cycle of fragility. Integrated approaches, such as those outlined in the DPOA and supported by initiatives from the World Bank, other international financial institutions, and multilateral development banks provide a pathway for opportunities and growth.

FIGURE 32

COMPARISON INVESTMENTS NEEDED FOR MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION BY 2030, AND NET OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE RECEIVED FOR 4 FRAGILE COUNTRIES

With an expectation that climate-related shocks will lead to 13.5 million people living in extreme poverty through Africa by 2050, fragile countries need predictable and long-term financial resources more than ever



Source: World Bank DataBank.

Debt, development, and democracy: Prospects for meeting the SDGs in Africa

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Policymakers and politicians are increasingly concerned about the impact of sovereign debt on meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In 2023, debt servicing costs and interest payments in low and middle-income countries reached a record high of \$1.4 trillion.¹ This diverts much-needed resources for investments in health care, education, and agriculture, all of which are essential for meeting several of the SDGs. In Africa, the concern is particularly acute given that governments' debt burdens have returned to levels witnessed in the late 1990s when the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative began.² The expansion into Eurobonds and other commercial financing during the 2010s, as well as diversification toward other donors outside the Paris Club of creditors,³ rising global interest rates, and the COVID-19 pandemic collectively contributed to the region's re-escalating debt.⁴

However, as previous debt crises from the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate, tackling rising debt poses distinct challenges for African governments since obtaining a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) typically requires adopting unpopular austerity and revenue mobilization measures.⁵ The challenge is especially daunting in electoral democracies where governments fear the consequences of retrenching subsidies, freezing civil servants' wages, and raising taxes. For instance, even after former President Edgar Lungu of Zambia defaulted on the country's debt in late 2020, he refused to abandon \$500 million in contracts to support the fertilizer subsidy program in advance of the 2021 elections.⁶ In Kenya, President William Ruto's attempts to raise taxes as part of the country's 2024 Finance Bill, precipitated weeks of public protests in July 2024 that culminated with not only rescinding the Bill but also reshuffling his cabinet.⁷

1 "International Debt Report 2024," (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-2148-6.a>.

2 "State of Play of Debt Burden in Africa 2024 Debt Dynamics and Mounting Vulnerability" (Cairo: Afreximbank, 2024), <https://www.afreximbank.com/reports/state-of-play-of-debt-burden-in-africa-2024-debt-dynamics-and-mounting-vulnerability/>.

3 Paris Club creditors are represented by 22, mostly OECD countries, that meet regularly to coordinate on debt management once a debtor country has reached an agreement on an IMF program. See: "Office of Finance Development, Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs: The Paris Club," *U.S. Department of State*, March 1, 2000, https://1997-2001.state.gov/issues/economic/fs_000301_parisclub.html.

4 "Unpacking Africa's Debt: Towards a Lasting and Durable Solution" (New York: United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, 2024), <https://www.un.org/osaa/content/unpacking-debt-africa-towards-lasting-and-durable-solution>.

5 Nicolas van de Walle, *African Economics and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

6 Danielle Resnick, "How Zambia's Opposition Won," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (January 2022): 70–84, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-zambias-opposition-won/>.

7 Evelyne Musambi, "Kenyan President Dismisses Cabinet Ministers after Weeks of Protests over Taxation, Poor Governance" *Associated Press*, July 11, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/kenya-cabinet-ministers-dismissed-0832b7c3c95b1242097cc0d135e56840>.

It will be pivotal to identify savvy policy options to reconcile rising debt costs with public resistance to economic reforms.

In Nigeria, protests erupted after President Tinubu removed costly fuel subsidies in 2023,⁸ which were then partially reinstated a year later as price inflation escalated.⁹

Consequently, it will be pivotal to identify savvy policy options to reconcile rising debt costs with public resistance to economic reforms, even those that will have long-term national welfare benefits. In this regard, the lessons from prospect theory—an approach from behavioral economics that highlights that people are naturally more risk averse to certain short-term losses than they are accepting of longer-term, uncertain gains—are instructive.¹⁰ This is particularly true in settings where citizens have high mistrust in their governments' intentions and institutions, which Afrobarometer data reveals has become more pronounced across the continent over the last decade.¹¹ This implies that international financial institutions and governments should be intentional about debt reform measures that could adversely affect the poorest citizens and make sure that adjustment measures, including targeted cash transfers and other forms of social protection, are in place to cushion vulnerable communities before the substantive retrenchment of more unproductive expenditures. In Zambia, for instance, the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement provided by the IMF in 2022 emphasized the need to expand the country's Social Cash Transfer program to help cushion the impacts of macroeconomic reform on the most vulnerable populations.¹²

Encouragingly, the largest replenishment of International Development Assistance (IDA) finance—intended to provide grant or low-interest assistance—was announced in December 2024, which will be an important mechanism to help debt-constrained, low-income countries in Africa tackle their development needs as the SDG 2030 deadline approaches.¹³ While democratic contexts make managing debt more challenging due to the pressures from the electoral cycle, they also may be more likely to provide the foundations for better budget management over the longer-term compared to more autocratic settings due to the former's higher transparency and information flows. In this regard, the IDA replenishment represents a possible fresh start, providing an opportunity for impartial civil society actors, parliamentarians, and national audit bodies to monitor how governments are sourcing and spending financing to ensure greater expenditure accountability going forward.¹⁴

8 Camillus Eboh and Felix Onuah, "Nigeria's Main Labour Federation to Strike over Fuel Subsidy Removal," *Reuters*, June 2, 2023, sec. Africa, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-main-labour-union-strike-over-fuel-subsidy-removal-local-media-2023-06-02/>.

9 Libby George, "In Deluge of Protests, Fuel Subsidies Prove Hard to Abolish," *Reuters*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/deluge-protests-fuel-subsidies-prove-hard-abolish-2024-08-08/>.

10 Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>.

11 Koffi Amessou Adaba and David Boio, "AD891: Across Africa, Public Trust in Key Institutions and Leaders is Weakening," *Afrobarometer* (dispatch), October 31, 2024, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad891-across-africa-public-trust-in-key-institutions-and-leaders-is-weakening/>.

12 "Zambia: Request for an Arrangement under the Extended Credit Facility" (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 2022).

13 "World Bank Group Announces Record \$100 Billion IDA Replenishment," *World Bank*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/12/05/donors-and-world-bank-group-boost-IDA-development>.

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Strengthening the rule of law in Africa by 2030

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Certain values and characteristics have the power to determine whether a group of people can live together in peace and engage in entrepreneurial activities to create the wealth that they need to confront poverty and significantly improve their living conditions or remain trapped in chaos and extreme poverty. Fidelity to the rule of law is one such value. As stated in my 2020 publication, it is not only “the heart and soul of a democratic society, but without it, members of a society would find it very difficult to live together peacefully” and successfully engage in activities to improve their welfare.¹ Most countries in Africa are characterized by significant levels of ethnolinguistic and religious diversity. In order to successfully manage the conflicting economic interests of these diverse subcultures and foster sustainable human development, all citizens must be subject to the rule of law. Hence, a governing process that is “characterized or undergirded by the rule of law is the key to peaceful coexistence and development in Africa.”² It is on such a governing process that Africans must build and sustain their democratic systems.

What is the rule of law?

Promotion of the rule of law and an independent, robust, and fully functioning judiciary, particularly ones that have the capacity to check on the exercise of government power and promote and protect human rights are major goals of Africa’s Agenda 2030³ and Agenda 2063.⁴

The rule of law is said to embody three important principles: The law is supreme; all citizens are equal before the law; and the rights of individuals, which are established through court decisions, must be accepted and respected.⁵ Hence, where there is fidelity to the rule of law, all individuals within the jurisdiction of a state, regardless of their social, economic, and political positions—whether they are government officials vested with either executive, legislative, or judicial power—“should be bound by and entitled to the benefit of laws publicly and prospectively promulgated and publicly administered in the courts.”⁶

1 John Mbaku, “Threats to the Rule of Law in Africa,” *Georgia Journal of International & Comparative Law* 48, no. 2 (April 22, 2020): 293, <https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/gjicl/vol48/iss2/2>.

2 Mbaku, “Threats to the Rule of Law in Africa.”

3 Lina Henao, Mary Hui, and Gordon Shaw, “Africa 2030: How Africa Can Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals” (Kigali: The Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa, November 2017), https://sdgcafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/SDG_2030_Nov_2017.pdf.

4 “Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want” (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, September 2015), https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf.

5 Mbaku, “Threats to the Rule of Law in Africa.”

6 The Rt. Hon. Lord Bingham of Cornhill KG, “The Rule of Law,” (Sir David Williams Lecture, Centre for Public Law, University of Cambridge, November 16, 2006), <https://www.cpl.law.cam.ac.uk/sir-david-williams-lectures/rt-hon-lord-bingham-cornhill-kg-rule-law>

As Africans look forward to 2030 and beyond, they must understand and appreciate the role played by the rule of law in peaceful coexistence, social and economic mobility, wealth creation, poverty eradication, and human development. The rule of law is not only the cornerstone of any legitimate democratic state, it is also one of the essential characteristics of modern constitutionalism.⁷

Strengthening the rule of law in Africa

As Africans approach 2030, they must be cognizant of the importance of strengthening the rule of law and ensuring that governance is undergirded by fidelity or adherence to the rule of law.

First, Africans must strengthen their judiciary systems and civil societies so that they can guard against government impunity, which creates distrust in the government and undermines the principle that law is superior to all members of society. During the last several years, states like Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa have made significant progress in strengthening judicial independence as evidenced by rulings by domestic courts that have reversed decisions by the executive or legislative branches of government.⁸

Second, Africans should enshrine in their constitutions specific grounds for the removal of a president and how to constitutionally effect such a process. A military coup is an unconstitutional regime change and should be constitutionally prohibited. Popular discontent with a president's performance should not be grounds for his or her removal by military coup. Courts in several African countries are using their power to interpret the constitution to make clear that in all their actions, the army and all security agencies must be bound by the Bill of Rights, as well as international and regional human rights law.⁹

7 Mbaku, "Threats to the Rule of Law in Africa."

8 In *Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua and 7 Others v. The Attorney General*, Writ No. J1/14/22 (Ghana Sup. Ct.) (May 23, 2023), the Supreme Court of Ghana ruled unconstitutional and null and void, the Imposition of Restrictions Act 2020 (Act 2020), which had been enacted by the Parliament to provide the government with the legal framework to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In *David Ndii and Others v. Attorney General and Others* [2021]KEHC 9746 (KLR) (also known as the BBI Judgment), five High Court judges of the High Court of Kenya at Nairobi blocked a plan by the Kenyatta government to make fundamental changes to the country's constitution. Also, in *Raila Odinga & Another v. Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission & Others* [2017] KESC 31 (KLR), the Supreme Court of Kenya nullified the presidential results of the 2017 General Elections in Kenya. In *Democratic Alliance v. Minister of International Relations and Cooperation and Others* [2017] ZAGPPHC 53; 2017 (3) SA 212 (GP), the North Gauteng High Court (Pretoria) ruled that South Africa's decision to withdraw from the International Criminal Court through executive decision was unconstitutional, irrational, procedurally flawed, and invalid.

9 For example, in *Khosa and Others v. Minister of Defence and Military Defence and Military Veterans and Others* [2020] ZAGPPHC 147; 2020 (7) BCLR 816 (GP), the North Gauteng High Court, Pretoria, ruled that the South African National Defence Forces, the South African Police Service, and all metropolitan police departments, "must act, and must instruct their members to act, in accordance with the Constitution and the law, including customary international law and international agreements binding on the Republic [of South Africa]."

Third, the constitutional coup, which involves the amending of the constitution to eliminate term limits or age requirements specifically to unconstitutionally extend the incumbent's mandate should be prohibited. The judiciary must be constitutionally empowered to prevent such political opportunism. Unfortunately, several African countries continue to manipulate their constitutions to allow incumbent presidents to remain in power indefinitely.¹⁰

Fourth, judicial independence must be constitutionally guaranteed in order to minimize political interference with the functioning of the judiciary and the administration of justice. Political interference can undermine the people's trust in the judiciary and the system of justice. Although many African countries enshrine judicial independence in their constitutions, the reality is that executive interference in the administration of justice remains a major challenge.¹¹

Fifth, each African country should adopt a popular education program that enhances the ability of citizens to understand and appreciate the constitution. The rule of law cannot function effectively if the majority of citizens do not understand and appreciate the constitution's role in their lives, and most importantly, its ability to regulate socio-political interaction and provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Several African countries are actively participating in programs sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development to educate their citizens on the rule of law and a "people-centered justice" approach.¹²

Sixth, African countries should sign, ratify, and domesticate important international and regional human rights instruments. In order to strengthen the rule of law, each African country must mainstream international human rights law into national constitutional law, either by legislation or by amending/repealing domestic laws (e.g., vagrancy laws) where they do not conform to provisions of international human rights instruments. Some African countries have revised their constitutions to make customary international law and provisions of treaties that they have ratified directly justiciable in their domestic courts.¹³

10 For example, on April 19, 2024, the Togolese National Assembly amended the constitution and eliminated universal suffrage for the presidency while at the same time, effectively adopting a parliamentary system that evades presidential term limits. See "Togo Revises Constitution to Eliminate Term Limits: An Explainer," African Center for Strategic Studies, April 23, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/togo-revises-constitution-to-eliminate-term-limits-an-explainer/> (Nov. 21, 2024). Other African countries that have eliminated presidential term limits include Cameroon (Biya, 2008); Uganda (Museveni, 2005, 2017); Rwanda (Kagame, 2015); Republic of the Congo (Nguesso, 2015); Egypt (el-Sisi, 2019); and Côte d'Ivoire (Ouattara, 2020). See "Term Limit Evasions and Coups in Africa: Two Sides of the Same Coin," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Oct. 24, 2023 (updated on June 6, 2024), <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/term-limit-evasions-coups-africa-same-coin/> (Nov. 21, 2024).

11 Although Article 37 of the Constitution of Cameroon states that "[t]he Judicial shall be independent of the executive and legislative powers," that same article also grants the President of the Republic the power to guarantee that independence. In addition, the Supreme Court is under the Ministry of Justice and hence, is directly controlled by the executive branch of government. On the other hand, the Constitutional Court of South Africa (ZACC), the country's highest court, has developed significant jurisprudence that has elaborated the elements of judicial independence and affirmed the constitutional guarantee of judicial independence in South Africa. See, e.g., Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Section 165(2). See also *De Lange v. Smuts* 1998 (3) SA 785 (CC).

12 Some of these countries include South Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Guinea, Liberia, Namibia, and Democratic Republic of the Congo. See *USAID Rule of Law Achievement Review, 2005–2020*, <https://www.usaid.gov/democracy/rule-law/achievements> (Nov. 21, 2024).

13 For example, according to the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, "[t]he general rules of international law shall form part of the law of Kenya" (Article 2(5)) and "[a]ny treaty or convention ratified by Kenya shall form part of the law of Kenya under this Constitution." Constitution of the Republic of Kenya, 2010, art. 2(5) & (6). Similarly, the Constitution of Angola also provides that customary international law shall form "an integral part of the Angolan legal system." Constitution of Angola, 2010, Article 13(1).

Seventh, African countries should directly address extreme poverty. Individuals and groups that are frustrated at their continued marginalization may resort to violent mobilization to minimize their continued exclusion from political and economic markets. Such violence can lead to pervasive economic and political instability or worse, invite the military to intervene or extremist groups (e.g., Boko Haram, al-Shabaab) to exacerbate the violence. Hence, tackling extreme poverty can significantly strengthen the rule of law. Although several African countries have been quite successful in reducing extreme poverty during the last several decades, others have actually seen increases in their poverty rates.¹⁴

To strengthen the rule of law by 2030, Africans must undertake institutional reforms to establish governing processes that can deepen and institutionalize the rule of law. For example, if the judiciary is fully independent, judges can check on the exercise of government power, minimize impunity, significantly enhance access to justice, and generally improve citizens' trust in their government.

14 Countries that have seen significant progress in fighting poverty include Tanzania, Chad, Republic of the Congo, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Namibia, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Uganda. See Simeng Zheng, et al., "Here are the Top 10 sub-Saharan African Countries that have Reduced Poverty the Most," *World Bank*, Sept. 16, 2019, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/here-are-top-10-sub-saharan-african-countries-have-reduced-poverty-most#:~:text=Congo%2C%20Ethiopia%2C%20Tanzania%2C%20Kenya,reducers%20listed%20in%20Figure%201>. Others, however, have seen increases in their poverty rates. For example, according to the World Poverty Clock, in 2018, Nigeria, despite being one of the wealthiest countries in Africa, overtook India as the country with the world's highest number of people living in extreme poverty. See Peter Beaumont and Isaac Abrak, "Oil-rich Nigeria Outstrips India as Country with Most People in Poverty," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/16/oil-rich-nigeria-outstrips-india-most-people-in-poverty#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20authors%2C%20energy,with%20India's%2073%20million%20people>.