
Trust, Inequality, and COVID-19 in Low-Income Countries

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In a previous briefing, CIC provided [some rapid analysis of public opinion polling](#) on COVID-19 in high-income and middle-income countries (where the vast majority of such polling is taking place), focusing particularly on trust in institutions, the challenge of rising inequality, and hopes for the future. Key findings included:

- Trust in governments has risen to the highest level in 20 years.
- Trust in governments as a whole is higher than trust in individual political leaders (by 20 percentage points on average). Scientists also command more trust than political leaders.
- Where criticism exists, it tends to be of governments doing too little rather than too much.
- Young people, aged 16-24, show the highest trust levels.
- The high degree of trust in government may not last; most sharp gains in trust during the last 20 years have been lost over the following year.
- Most people are more concerned about saving lives than about reopening economies, although wealthier people are more likely to want to reopen quickly (perhaps because they believe they can protect themselves from health risks).
- Whether or not trust is maintained may hinge on whether and how well governments (are perceived to) take bold action to deal with COVID-19 and inequality.

In this briefing, we explore whether or not these findings hold for low-income countries. The Partnership for Evidence-Based Response to COVID-19 (PERC), a consortium of global public health organizations and private firms, recently published a [survey](#) conducted from March 29–April 17 in 28 cities across 20 African Union member states. IPSOS, a PERC member, has also [analyzed](#) the survey results. Several other national polls in low-income countries also reveal important insights discussed below. However, this data gathering mostly took place a month or more ago, and some countries are already emerging from their lockdowns. It is possible that public opinion has shifted during the intervening period.

COVID-19 is a major concern for most people—at a level comparable to higher-income countries

As in higher-income countries, awareness of and concern about COVID-19 is widespread in low-income countries. In the 20 African countries surveyed by PERC, knowledge about the disease was almost universal, with 98 percent of those surveyed expressing awareness of the virus. Interestingly, the survey found that while the majority (62 percent) believe COVID-19 poses a “big” national challenge, concern

about respondents' own risk of catching the disease was lower (44 percent)—possibly reflecting relatively low infection rates to date in comparison to a relatively high socio-economic impact.

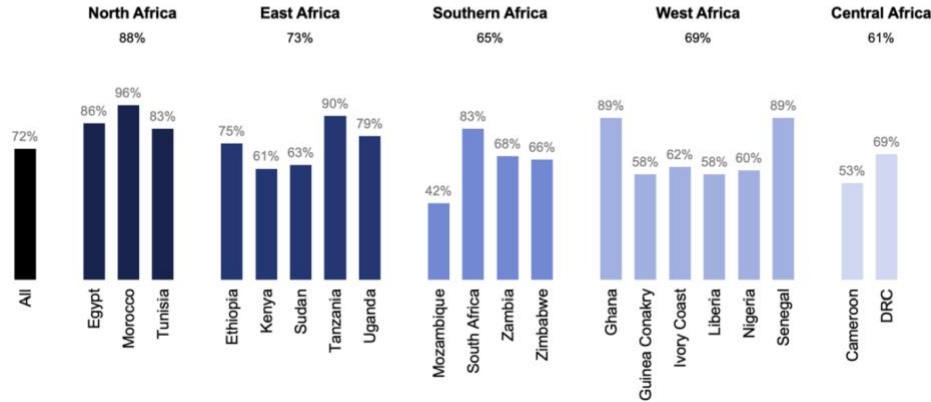
At the same time, risk perception was higher among lower-income Africans than higher-income households. The 62 percent average is just one percentage point higher than the percent of respondents in the IPSOS [survey](#) of high- and middle-income countries that cited COVID as their highest worry.

Trust in government is even higher in low-income countries than in high-income and middle-income countries

As is the case in high-income and middle-income countries, trust in government in lower-income countries is high. In the 20 AU member states covered by PERC, the average trust levels are 72 percent, and 7 of the 20 surveyed countries have trust levels above 80 percent. This figure is notably higher than the 65 percent average—itsself a historic high—in the Edelman survey of high and middle-income countries. It is also higher than the 60 percent of sub-Saharan Africans who expressed confidence in their national governments [prior to the pandemic](#).

Figure 1: Satisfaction in government

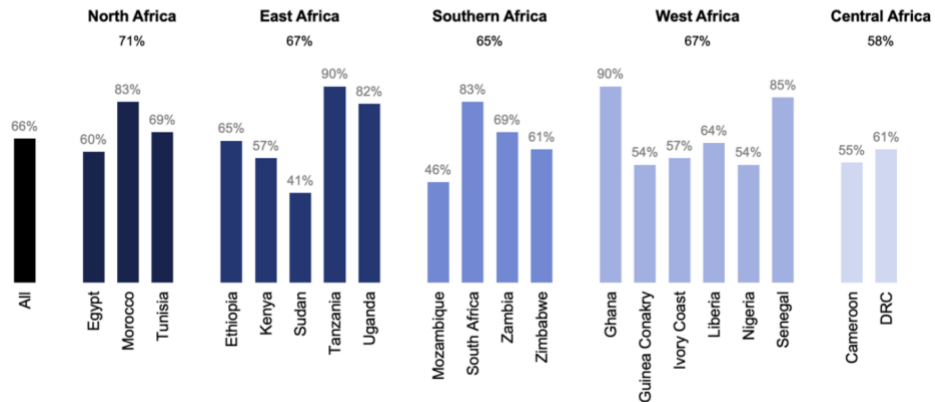
Q12. How satisfied are you with the [COUNTRY] government's response to coronavirus or Covid-19? [% who are very or somewhat satisfied]



Source: [IPSOS](#)

Figure 2: Trust in government

Q13. How much do you trust information from the [COUNTRY] government about the coronavirus or COVID-19? [% who are completely or mostly trusting]



Source: [IPSOS](#)

Other studies also find high levels of faith in government. A survey of [Senegalese](#) found that a vast majority (87 percent) of respondents are supportive of the government, with 86 percent trusting the government to take care of citizens and 87 percent deeming government communication truthful. The levels are similar to those found in the PERC/IPSOS survey.

High trust levels are not universal and may dissipate over time

As noted in our previous analysis, not all high-income country governments enjoy such unprecedented levels of trust, and even where trust remains high, there is evidence that this public support may not endure over time. This appears to be a risk in lower-income countries as well. As indicated in the graphs above, majorities in several African countries do not trust information coming from their governments about the coronavirus. Similarly, polling in [Bangladesh](#) found that people do not fully trust official information, while data from [Pakistan](#) indicates that three in five Pakistanis believe the threat of the coronavirus is being exaggerated. The PERC survey further indicates that doctors and medical institutions are a more trusted source of health information than political leaders.

There is also evidence that trust levels are already declining in some places. Survey data from [Mali](#), for instance, has found a 9 percent drop in recent weeks among those who strongly agree that the national government is enacting policies that enable a satisfactory standard of living, and an 11 percent increase in those who disagree with that statement.

Polling in higher-income countries found the highest rates of trust among young people. Data from [Pakistan](#) echoed those findings, with women and young people reporting the highest levels of satisfaction with the government response (87 percent for both). The survey also found that rural residents have

slightly higher satisfaction than urban residents. However, the PERC study of African countries produced different results. It found that while most respondents expressed satisfaction with their government’s response, people ages 18-25 were less likely to do so (61 percent) than those over 46 (74 percent).

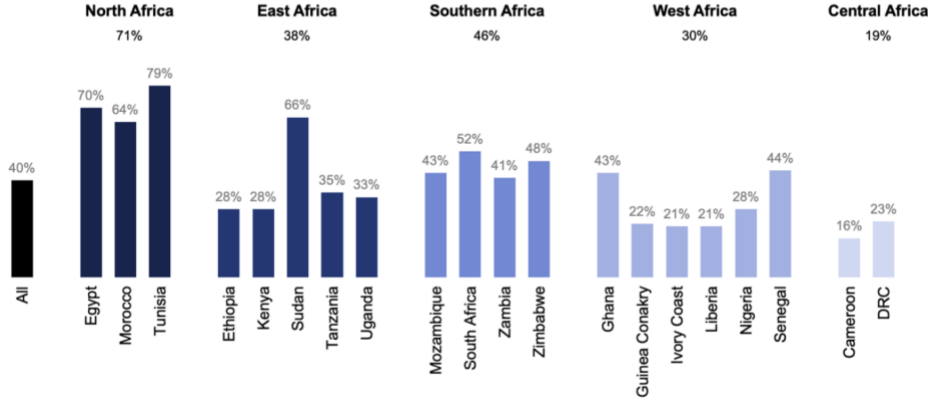
Most agree with public health social measures, but strategies that work in richer countries may be “incomprehensible” in poorer countries

Most people support personal social distancing measures. The PERC study found almost universal support for adopting personal measures to reduce transmission, such as ceasing to shake hands or kiss in greeting, as well as bans on public gatherings such as music concerts and sports fixtures. Banning religious gatherings also garners support from three-quarters of respondents, and only 5 percent oppose school closures. Most people also support measures that directly affect their livelihoods, albeit at lesser rates. Roughly 74 percent support closing transportation between cities; 72 percent support closing off a city for two weeks; 71 percent support closing transportation in and around cities; 70 percent support closing workplaces; and 70 percent support shutting down markets. However, the practical barriers to sustained lockdowns are, as might be expected, higher in low-income countries. The PERC/IPSOS study found significant obstacles to some recommended health and safety measures, detailed as follows.

Most African households lack a room to isolate the sick. Only 40 percent indicated that they have a separate room where someone sick could self-isolate. That figure varies widely by country, falling to 16 percent in Cameroon.

Figure 3: Ability to self-isolate

Q38. Would you have a separate room in your home to keep someone isolated if they are sick? [% who have a separate room available]



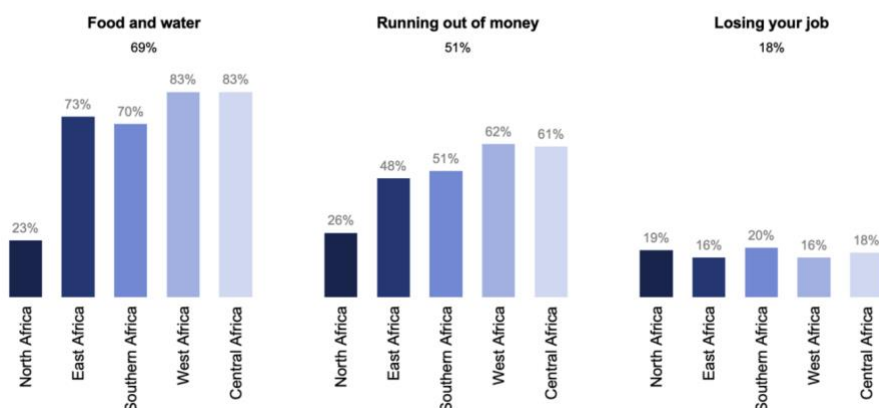
Source: [IPSOS](#)

Most Africans will quickly run out of food, water, medicine, and money. On average, households will run out of food within 10 days, prescription medicine in less than 9 days, and money within 12 days. The lowest-income households can only go one week before running out of food and

money. Africans are most concerned about running out of food and water (69 percent), followed by money (51 percent), and employment (18). An analysis of print and social media also found that food security was cited as a pressing concern throughout Africa.

Figure 4: Barriers to Lockdown

Q17. What would be the biggest problems for people like you to stay at home for 14 days?



Source: [IPSOS](#)

One in five Africans risk losing a job if asked to stay at home for 14 days (18%). Almost four in ten of those surveyed work outside the home (39%), with higher levels of employment among older people (importantly, 63% of people 18-25 are not working). Outside employment is highest in Ethiopia (65%) and Tanzania (55%). Of those employed outside the home, only half (55%) indicate that their workplace could accommodate staggered shifts.

In African countries, poorer households are more likely to support reopening

Unlike in higher-income countries, the PERC/IPSOS survey finds that opposition to closing markets, workplaces, and transport is higher among those with lower incomes (31-35 percent with household incomes less than \$100/month) versus those with higher incomes (18-23 percent for households earning \$500/month). Similarly, opposition to church and mosque closures appears to be higher among households with lower incomes (26 percent opposed) versus those with higher incomes (17 percent). This finding is not altogether surprising, given the disproportionate hardships facing poorer households in lower-income countries. Nonetheless, it is notable that the vast majority of low-income households said they supported these measures despite these hardships, though as noted, such support may not last.

The Senegalese survey cited above adds important nuance to these findings. Conducted by the Center for Global Development in partnership with the Centre de Recherche pour le Développement Économique et Social, it suggests that support for a lockdown is determined less by income *level* than by income *loss*.

[According to the findings](#), “support for a lockdown is 19 percentage points lower among respondents who

report an income loss but only slightly lower for poor people, suggesting that the actual experience of an income loss makes people worry about the economic consequences of the lockdown, rather than their level of income.” As the authors note, this suggests that “a worsening of the economic crisis could quickly turn public opinion against a lockdown.”

This point is also borne out by [evidence](#) from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. An in-depth study found that trust decreased when people actually experienced direct hardship, with the authors suggesting “the possibility of a vicious circle between distrust, non-compliance, hardship and further distrust.”

Adequate and equitable government support is a vital prerequisite to sustaining trust—and thus the global public health response

As in richer countries, the increase in trust precipitated by COVID-19 provides governments in lower-income countries with an unusual chance to take bold action, backed up by public support, to safeguard and improve living conditions through direct, equitable support to households and communities. For instance, the PERC study found that when it comes to sustaining trust, “[a]ttempts to provide relief packages to counter the effects of [the pandemic and responses to it] were particularly well received.” In low income and debt distressed countries, international financing is of course key to this.

At the same time, failure to provide such support may well reduce trust. In [Bangladesh](#), survey respondents report losing trust in government because of delayed assistance and confusion about what assistance will be provided, to whom, when, and how. The study found that respondents were very well aware of government statements about forthcoming assistance at the aggregate level, but they had little clarity about what that would mean for their families. There was also widespread concern that any assistance sent to their communities would “leak” to those with political connections.

Inadequate or inequitable assistance not only jeopardizes trust in the government’s ability to address economic needs—it also jeopardizes the public health response. Evidence from the [West African Ebola outbreak](#), for instance, found that those who experienced sustained hardships during the crisis expressed less trust in government and that those who distrusted government in turn took fewer precautions against the disease and were less likely to comply with disease control policies. Importantly, assistance from international organizations did not improve compliance, “suggesting that while INGOs can contribute in indispensable ways to crisis response, they cannot substitute for government institutions in the eyes of citizens.” That is to say, to ensure the fight against COVID-19 can succeed, governments must prove to their citizens that they are taking action to cope with the socioeconomic problems the pandemic has caused – for which they need, in addition to their own effort, significant international support.