

The Economy or Climate? What Africans Prioritize Depends on How You Ask

BLUF: An Afrobarometer survey on public policy priorities across 39 African countries revealed a seeming paradox: respondents overwhelmingly ranked the economy as their top priority, but appeared evenly split over whether governments should address job creation or climate first. These results may say more about the survey's methodology than about actual public sentiment. Development funders and other entities using poll results to guide interventions should recognize that prompted questions can artificially elevate certain issues and interpret results in the broader context of respondents' socioeconomic status.

Development funders reliant on public polling risk over-prioritizing climate.

African governments and major international funders frequently cite public opinion surveys as reasons to prioritize climate action over other issues. For example, the European Investment Bank prioritizes climate action in part because a survey they conducted found that [88% of African respondents](#) believed that climate change was already impacting their daily lives.

But the value and accuracy of public opinion surveys depend heavily on how they ask questions. Results hinge on methodological factors like framing and whether they prompt respondents with possible answers. Development funders relying uncritically on public polling risk prioritizing climate action over other issues—most notably economic development—that may more accurately reflect Africans' true preferences.

A 2024 Afrobarometer survey highlights the tension between climate and economics.

Afrobarometer, an independent research network, [surveyed](#) public attitudes on policy priorities across 39 African countries between 2021 and 2023. What they found exposes a seeming contradiction:

- When asked to identify their top priority in an open-ended question, 77% of respondents (from a sample where 70% reported being unemployed) ranked economic concerns first. Only 1% ranked climate as the top priority.
- But when the same respondents were asked to choose between addressing employment or environmental concerns first, they appeared evenly split: 46% prioritized employment and 46% prioritized the environment.

If the vast majority of respondents prioritize economic issues over any other, why would they appear divided when asked to choose between job creation and environmental action?

A lot depends on how you ask.

Several things could be going on in the Afrobarometer results.

- **Questions that ask people to choose between specific responses tend to produce biased results.** Academic literature on survey design shows that prompting respondents with a preprogrammed list of possible responses can significantly influence results, the so-called ‘menu effect’.¹ The sequence, formatting, and content of the ‘menu’ items can all influence results, including by over-indexing certain responses. In the Afrobarometer survey, prompting respondents to directly compare job creation to environmental action may make the environment seem more urgent.
- **Open-ended questions yield more genuine preferences.** By contrast, open-ended questions yield more authentic preferences. First, they avoid the ‘menu effect’. Second, they avoid social desirability bias, where respondents choose answers they believe are morally or politically acceptable rather than their genuine preference. Climate issues are susceptible to this effect.

Why this matters: Under-prioritizing economic issues risks undermining climate goals in the long term.

In the Afrobarometer survey, 70% of survey respondents identified as unemployed, and 77% prioritized economic concerns above all others. This suggests widespread economic distress. If development funding flows primarily toward climate initiatives while these pressing economic needs remain unaddressed, public support for climate policies and action may erode over time. Addressing the economic priorities that Africans identify could strengthen rather than compete with long-term objectives.

How we can do better.

- **Poll users—not respondents—must account for framing effects.** Survey participants are often unaware of how different question frames affect their preferences. It’s, therefore, up to survey users, analysts, and decision makers to interrogate whether a survey methodology truly captures public sentiment or priority, before using it in policymaking.
- **Consider both survey method and respondent context in understanding African priorities.** Development organizations and philanthropic institutions should consider both the survey methodology and respondents’ economic context when interpreting survey data for program design.

¹ Schuman, Howard, & Presser, Stanley. (1981). *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording, and Context*. New York: Academic Press.