

CITIZENS' SUPPORT FOR ECONOMIC REFORMS IN  
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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*Abstract*

The objective of this paper is to investigate the factors that influence citizens' support for costly economic reforms in sub-Saharan Africa. This is relevant for several reasons, but the most obvious perhaps is that economic reform will be difficult if faced by strong resistance from citizens. In this paper, individual data from Round 4 of the Afrobarometer surveys is used to investigate how support for economic reforms is influenced by factors falling under the following broad categories: (i) Economic variables; (ii) group identity and fairness variables; (iii) Institutional and state/government variables; (iv) Demographic and control variables. An individual's trust in the president and the belief that the government manages the economy well are two of the most significant and robust factors. This is in keeping with the results found in Williamson (The Political Economy of Policy Reform, Institute for International Economics, Washington, DC, 1994). Another robustly significant variable is satisfaction with how democracy works in the country. Variables related to ethnic identity and community membership also play a significant role in support for costly economic reforms, which is in line with the theories put forward by van de Walle (African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979–1999, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001). Females are less likely to support economic reforms, while individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to support economic reforms.

*JEL Classification:* H310, H590, O550

*Keywords:* Economic reform, policy, democracy, trust, Afrobarometer

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A number of sub-Saharan African countries began liberalising their economies from the early 1980s and onwards, often taking part in structural adjustment programs. Despite this, the need for economic reforms in many sub-Saharan African continues to the present day. While there has been a great deal of research in general into the subject of economic reforms, the focus has often been on the economic policies per se, or issues of implementation of these policies on the part of the government. The role of citizens and their attitudes towards economic reforms has, however, received much less attention. Many observers and academics appear to assume by default that citizens have a negative attitude towards economic reforms, particularly in Africa. For example, when writing about structural adjustment programs in Africa, some authors refer to the "sheer unpopularity of the programme" (Mkandawire and Olukoshi, 1995:3), while Rodrik (1996) argues that it is a widely held view that economic reforms will generally meet with resistance. Despite this, there is a lack of empirical evidence documenting whether it necessarily is the case that most citizens are in fact against economic reforms in general, as well as which factors influence popular attitudes towards reform.

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# Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa

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## **Table of Contents Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa**

1. Understanding the eBook Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - The Rise of Digital Reading Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Exploring Different Genres
  - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
  - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
  - Popular eBook Platforms
  - Features to Look for in an Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Personalized Recommendations
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa User Reviews and Ratings
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa and Bestseller Lists

5. Accessing Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa Free and Paid eBooks
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa Public Domain eBooks
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa eBook Subscription Services
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa eBook Formats
  - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa Compatibility with Devices
  - Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
  - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Highlighting and Note-Taking Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Interactive Elements Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
8. Staying Engaged with Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Joining Online Reading Communities
  - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
  - Following Authors and Publishers Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Benefits of a Digital Library
  - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
  - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
  - Minimizing Distractions
  - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Setting Reading Goals Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Economic Reform In Sub Saharan Africa
  - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning

- Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
- Exploring Educational eBooks

### 14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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