

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

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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 countries 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

M. Anne Pitcher



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