



OPHI and UNDP Regional MPI Brief

Leaving no one behind:
Poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa

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Acknowledgements

This brief utilizes the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2021 microdata and conducts an analysis of countries within the region included in the 2021 global MPI database. The microdata were cleaned, standardized and produced for further analysis by Alkire, Kanagaratnam, and Suppa (2020). Significant recognition goes to the hard work of Usha Kanagaratnam and Nicolai Suppa for their role in preparing the data analysed within this report, and to HDRO colleagues for their leadership within UNDP. We are grateful to Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative team members Ross Jennings and Fanni Kovesdi for their analysis. The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the United Nations Development Programme in commissioning, reviewing and contributing to this brief. Special thanks go to Mansour Ndiaye, Nathalie Bouche, Christian Oldiges, and colleagues of the Inclusive Growth team at the UNDP Bureau for Programme and Policy Support (BPPS) for their comments and inputs. All errors remain our own.

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Highlights

The analysis in this briefing is based on the global MPI 2021 data published by Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).¹ The global MPI provides multidimensional poverty data for 42 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and includes trend data for 36 of these countries, enabling a focus on how the levels and composition of poverty are changing in the region.²

Key findings:

- In sub-Saharan Africa, 556 million people are living in multidimensional poverty; 82 percent of them in rural areas.
- Across 19 countries, more than 13 million people moved out of poverty; but there was an increase of 17 million poor people across 16 countries.
- There were reductions in multidimensional poverty in nearly every rural area (although not significant in Benin or Cameroon); in 15 countries where reductions in both rural and urban areas were significant these reductions were pro-poor, with absolute reductions in poorer rural areas exceeding the reductions in urban areas.
- However, reductions in rural poverty were lagging behind those in urban poverty in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique and Tanzania.
- The global MPI disaggregates 39 sub-Saharan African countries into 499 subnational regions. In 312 subnational regions, at least half of the population is multidimensionally poor. In 92 regions, at least 80 percent of the people are MPI poor and 33 regions it is over 90 percent.
- Of the 353 subnational regions with trend data, poverty reduced in 183, with the largest absolute reductions in regions of Senegal, Mauritania and Togo.
- There were increases in 15 countries in the number of people living in rural areas who were multidimensionally poor, corresponding to an increase of over 13 million people.
- Almost a third (31 percent) of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is in severe multidimensional poverty.
- Almost 25 million people moved out of severe poverty across 25 countries; 7 million people moved into severe poverty across 11 countries.
- Compared to the absolute reduction in levels of multidimensional poverty, the reduction among the severely poor was greater in nine countries and less in 15 countries.
- Severe poverty remains a key challenge for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa; in 19 of the 36 countries, more than half of all people who are MPI poor are living in severe poverty.

Introduction

The push for “a better and more sustainable future for all” in the world has seen the adoption of a set of interlinked global goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015). The Preamble to Resolution 70/1, which gives effect to these goals, states:

*“We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that **no one will be left behind.**”*

At a continental level, Agenda 2063 is Africa’s strategic framework for inclusive and sustainable development (Africa Union Commission 2015), arguing for a future in which:

¹ For details on the global MPI, see Alkire, S., Kanagaratnam, U. and Suppa, N. (2021) and accompanying data tables and UNDP and OPHI (2021).

² Where countries have harmonized estimates for three time periods, the changes over time analysis uses the more recent time period estimates. As detailed in Appendix A, the surveys in Year 1 were conducted between 2000 and 2017 and those in Year 2 were conducted between 2010 and 2019/20. All population aggregates in this report use 2019 population data from UNDESA (2019). All discussion of changes in this section refer to statistically significant changes, which can be considered to have occurred with 90 percent confidence.

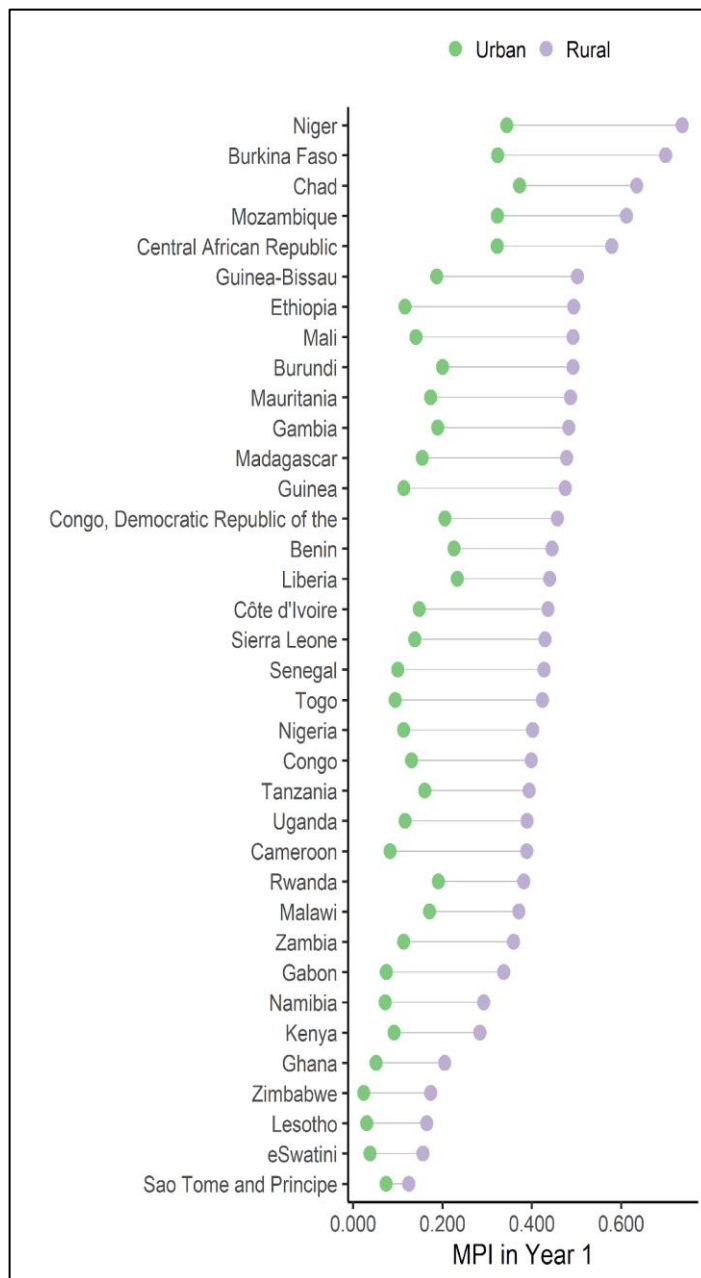
*Africa shall be an inclusive continent where **no child, woman or man will be left behind** or excluded.*

'Leaving no one behind' has become the rallying call of the global fight against poverty. At the 49th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2018, the Commission requested the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) "to clearly determine the dimensions and categories of data disaggregation required for the indicators in the framework, keeping in mind the resources needed and the key principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of no one left behind" (decision 49/101 (e)).

Geographical location is one of the key variables of disaggregation identified by the IAEG-SDGs, particularly given the "persistently higher percentage of poor living in rural areas and...the need to design policies specifically aimed at rural development and at improving the livelihood of people who live outside cities" (IAEG-SDGs, 2019). This briefing, focusing on the disaggregation of geographical location (which includes an urban/rural analysis as well as analysis by subnational region) will detail the poverty trends over time and identify those areas in danger of being left behind. It will then conclude by looking at poverty trends amongst those who are in severe poverty in the region to assess the risk of this critical population being left behind.

The urban/rural divide

Figure 1: MPI in Year 1 by area



In the report *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021 – Unmasking disparities by ethnicity, caste and gender*, UNDP and OPHI (2021) detail the scale of multidimensional poverty in sub-Saharan Africa: 556 million people in the region are living in multidimensional poverty. The headcount ratio of poverty differs significantly across rural and urban areas. Roughly 7 out of 10 (69.9 percent) people living in rural areas are multidimensionally poor, while in urban areas one in four (25.6 percent) people are poor. Given the greater population share in rural areas, this means that the vast majority of those who are poor in sub-Saharan Africa live in rural areas – 457 million (82 percent of the total number of people who are poor).

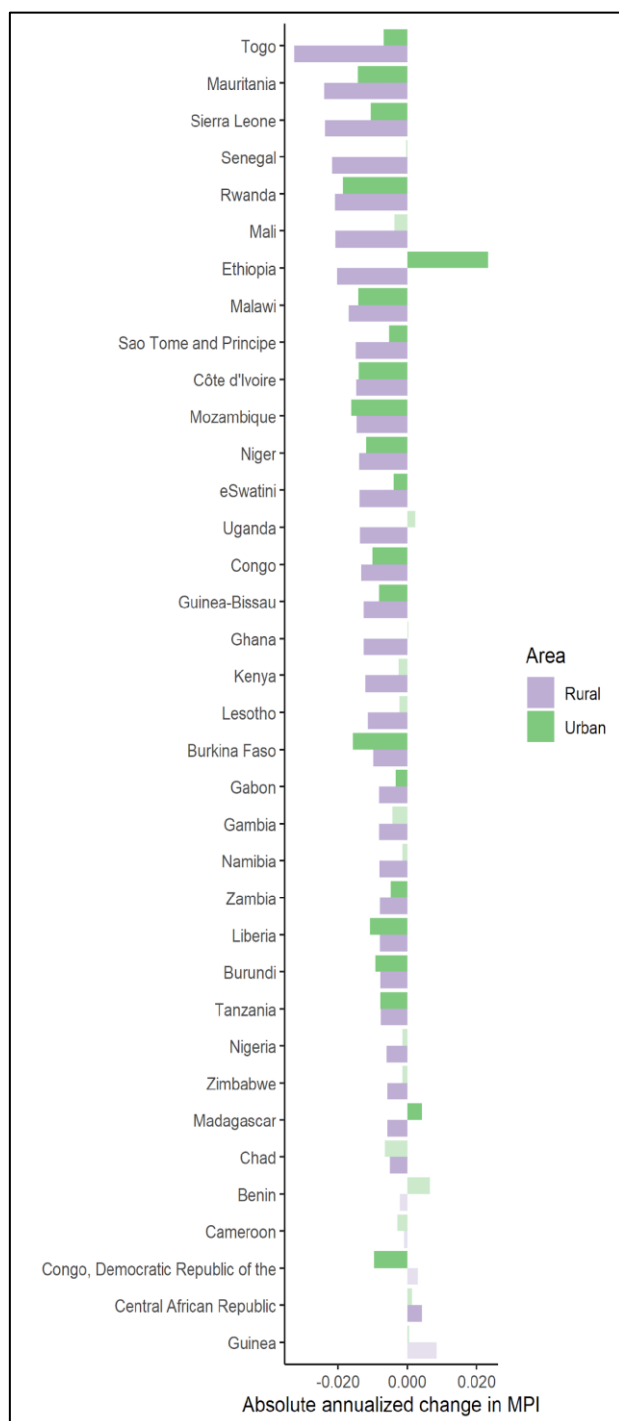
Figure 1 shows the MPI in the first year for all 36 countries for which there is trend data. The countries are arranged from poorest to least poor according to the MPI at the country level. When comparing the MPI in rural areas to that in urban areas within a country, the situation is the same across each and every country. The MPI is larger in rural areas than it is in urban areas. In the poorest country, Niger, the rural MPI of 0.737 is more than twice that of the urban MPI at 0.344. In Congo, the MPI in rural areas (0.399) is three times that of the urban MPI (0.131), while in Zimbabwe, the rural MPI (0.174) is more than seven times greater than the MPI in urban areas (0.024) in the starting period.

Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

UNDP and OPHI (2021) reported on the trends of change in poverty levels which saw a significant reduction in multidimensional poverty for all countries in sub-Saharan Africa, except for Benin, Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal identified four countries from the region as having the fastest reduction in MPI value in absolute terms globally. These countries were Sierra Leone, Togo, Mauritania and Ethiopia. As one would expect, the reductions at a national level were not uniform across urban and rural areas in a country. Figure 2 shows the absolute annualized change in MPI by urban and rural areas in each country.³

³ Where the change is insignificant (at the 90 percent level), this is shown in a lighter hue.

Figure 2: Absolute annualized change in MPI by area



Ethiopia and Madagascar both experienced a significant absolute increase in the MPI in urban areas, with an annual increase of 0.023 in Ethiopia from 2016 to 2019 and an annual increase of 0.004 from 2008/09 to 2018 in Madagascar. These increases can be partially explained by the rate of urbanisation as the urban population more than doubled in Madagascar (an increase of 106 percent) and almost doubled (up 90 percent) in Ethiopia.

Given the higher levels of multidimensional poverty in rural areas across every single country, it is encouraging to observe the reductions in MPI in most rural areas, although these reductions were not significant in Benin and Cameroon. Togo, the country with the second largest reduction in MPI at a national level, reported the biggest absolute reduction (-0.033) per annum in rural areas between 2013/14 and 2017.

Against the framework of ‘leaving no one behind’, it is encouraging to see that annualized reductions in MPI were larger for rural areas than for urban areas in all but seven of the countries – Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Mozambique and Tanzania. As a result of these reductions, the actual numbers of people who are poor in rural areas decreased across 21 countries, despite population increases in many instances. For example, there was an increase of almost 6 million people living in rural areas in Nigeria from 2013 to 2018 and yet the number of MPI poor fell by over 300,000. Similarly, despite an increase in the rural population of Uganda of almost 3 million people from 2011 to 2016, the number of people living in multidimensional poverty decreased by almost one million. Across the 21 countries with reductions, more than 23 million people in rural areas moved out of poverty between the two

survey periods.

Note: Lighter shaded bars represent statistically insignificant changes.

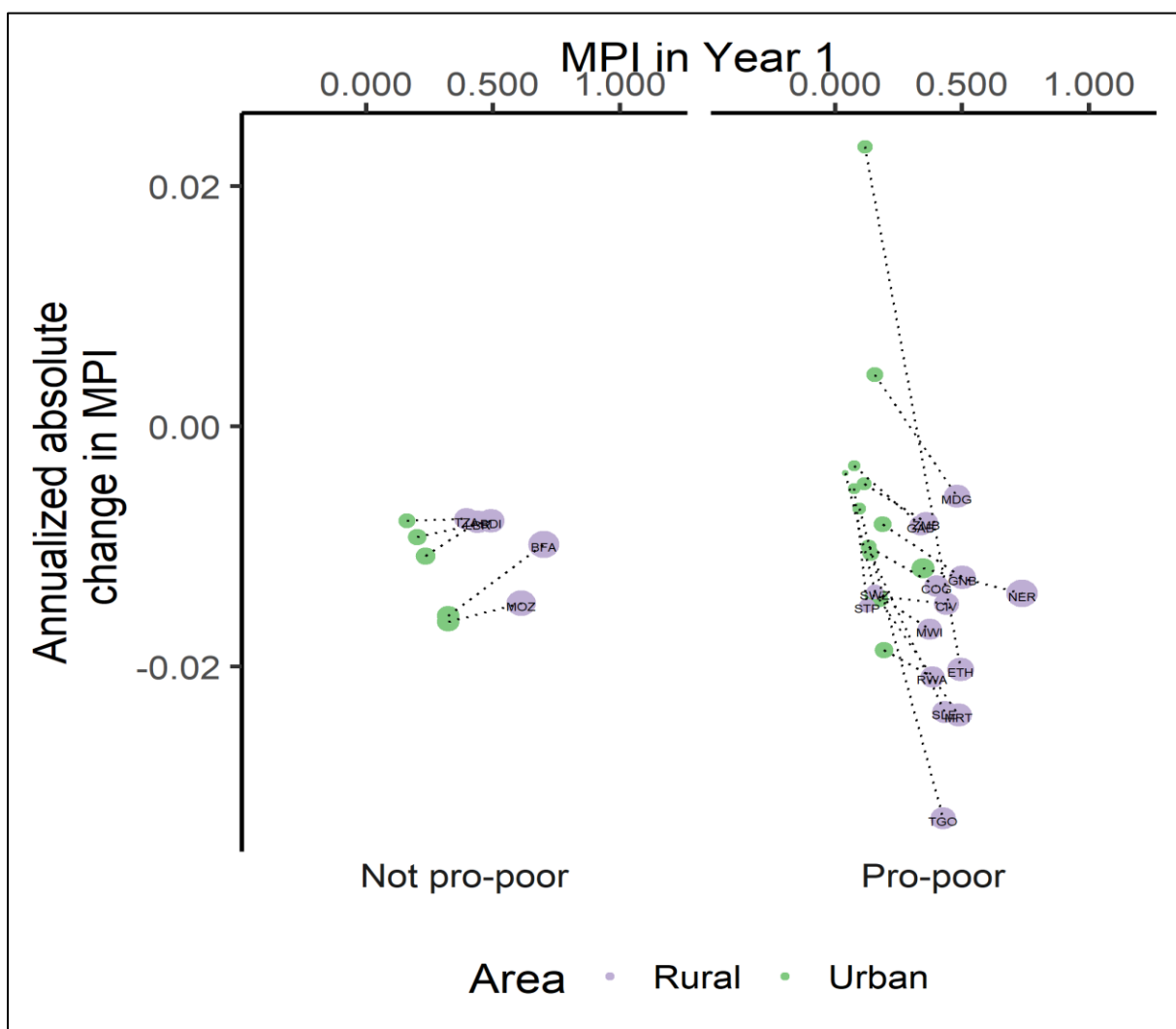
Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

One needs to be mindful of population changes and shifts that may partially account for some of the changes observed. For example, the most impressive reduction in the number of people who are poor in rural areas was in Ethiopia, which saw a decline of over 10 million people from 2016 to 2019. This period coincided, however, with a decline in the total number of people living in rural areas, of almost 6 million people.

In contrast to the decreases, there were increases in 15 countries in the number of people living in rural areas who are multidimensionally poor, corresponding to an increase of over 13 million people. There were large increases in the number of poor people in the rural areas of Niger (increase of almost 3 million from 2006 to 2012) and, more recently, in Chad where those living in poverty increased by over 1.5 million people between 2015 and 2019.

Building on the analysis, one is able to bring the data from Figure 1 – the level of multidimensional poverty in rural and urban areas – together with the data from Figure 2 – the change in those poverty levels – to see whether the change that is happening is of a pro-poor nature. In other words, is the fastest reduction in poverty in a country occurring in the poorest areas. As one would expect, the analysis reveals an array of experiences across the region. In Figure 3, those countries where the change in one or more area is insignificant have been excluded and the remaining countries have been sorted according to where the change in rural areas is greater than in urban areas (the cluster of countries on the right) and where the change is equal or less than in urban areas (the cluster on the left).

Figure 3: Pro-poor analysis of the absolute annualized change in MPI by area



Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

What is apparent from the cluster on the right, which is where the change in levels of poverty is pro-poor, is that this is the case for far more countries than it is where the change is not pro-poor. What is also clear in Figure 3, is that the size of the bubbles (denoting the size of the population) in almost every country is larger for the rural areas than the urban areas. In the bulk of countries that are showing pro-poor change, this change is occurring amongst the larger segment of the population.

Pockets of poverty at subnational level

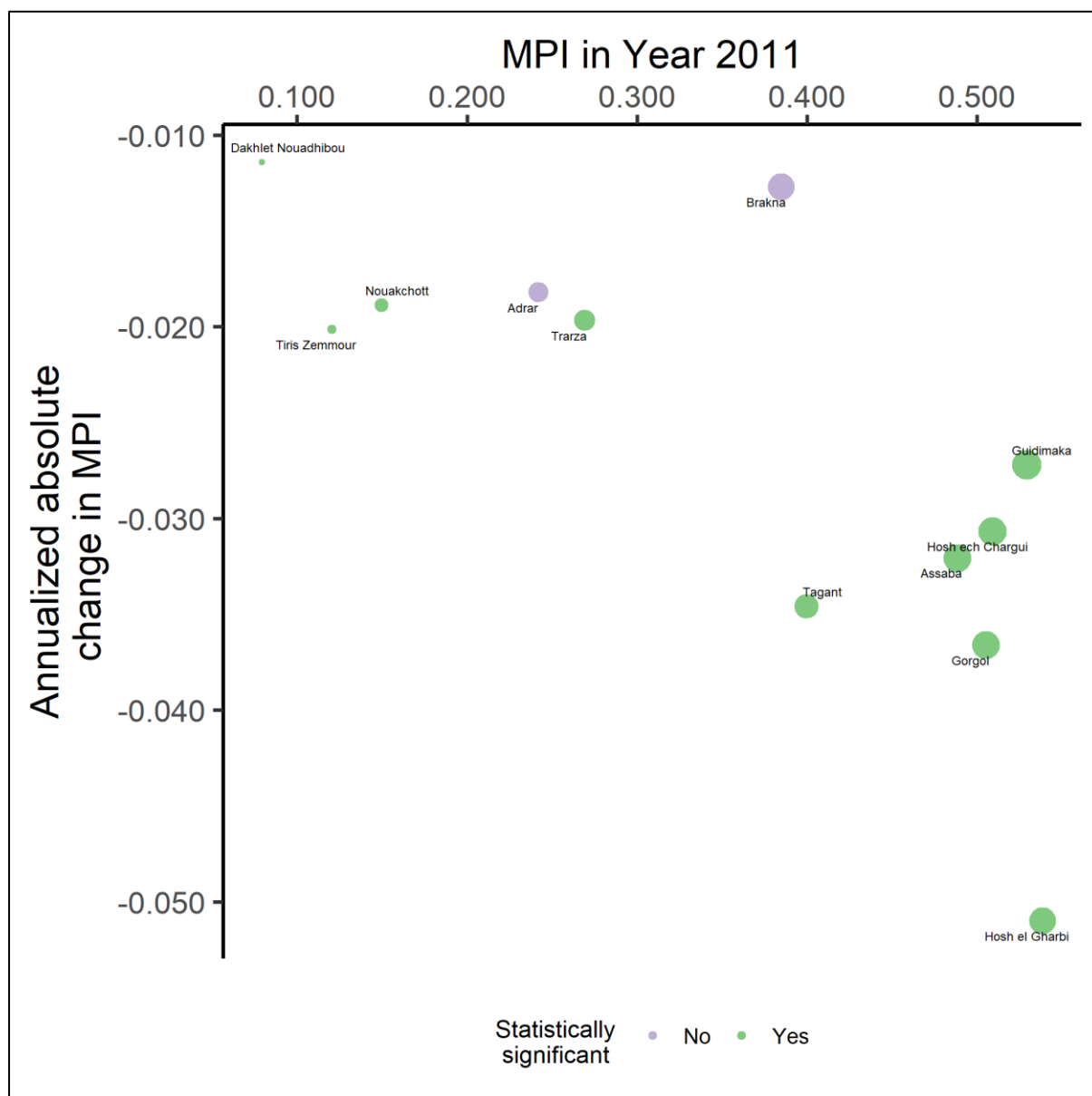
The global MPI is also disaggregated by an additional geographical location variable, that of subnational region. The 2021 global MPI provides subnational data for 39 countries,⁴ across 499 subnational regions in sub-Saharan Africa (Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa 2021). The subnational region with the highest proportion of MPI poor people is Kanem in Chad, where almost everyone (99.3 percent) is multidimensionally poor. Six of the poorest 10 regions (where the headcount ratio is above 95 percent) are found in Chad, with two in Burkina Faso and one each in Uganda and Niger. In total across sub-Saharan Africa, there are 33 subnational regions in which at least 90 percent of the people are MPI poor and 92 regions where 80 percent or more are poor. In 312 subnational regions, at least half of the population are multidimensionally poor.

Looking at the trends in multidimensional poverty at subnational region, data exist for 353 subnational regions. What is again encouraging to see is that across all subnational regions, there were annual absolute increases in MPI in 53 regions, of which the increase was significant in only 12 regions. The region with the highest significant increase was Boké in Guinea, where the MPI went from 0.325 in 2016 to 0.414 in 2018 (an annual increase of 0.044). There were significant decreases in MPI across 183 subnational regions, with the largest absolute annualized decreases in MPI occurring in Tambacounda in Senegal (-0.076), Hosh el Gharbi in Mauritania (-0.051), Plateaux in Togo (-0.043) and Kolda in Senegal (-0.041). With five of the best 10 performing subnational regions coming from Mauritania, it is instructive to profile the changes across all regions to see whether the poorest regions are being left behind.

Figure 4 details how the changes in MPI in Mauritania's subnational regions have been largely of a pro-poor nature. The circle in the bottom right of the graph, representing the region of Hosh el Gharbi, had the highest MPI in 2011 at 0.539. This was followed by Guidimaka (0.529), Hosh ech Chargui (0.509) and Gorgol (0.505). By 2015, Hosh el Gharbi had seen the largest absolute annualized decrease (-0.051) in MPI, followed by Gorgol (-0.037) and Tagant (-0.035). In contrast, the small circle in the top left of the graph, representing Dakhlet Nouadhibou, reflects the lowest MPI in 2011 of 0.079 and it showed the smallest absolute annualized decrease in MPI (-0.011). If this situation persists going forward, the poorer subnational regions in the bottom right of the graph will move toward the better off regions in the top left of the graph.

⁴ There are no subnational data available for Seychelles, South Africa and South Sudan.

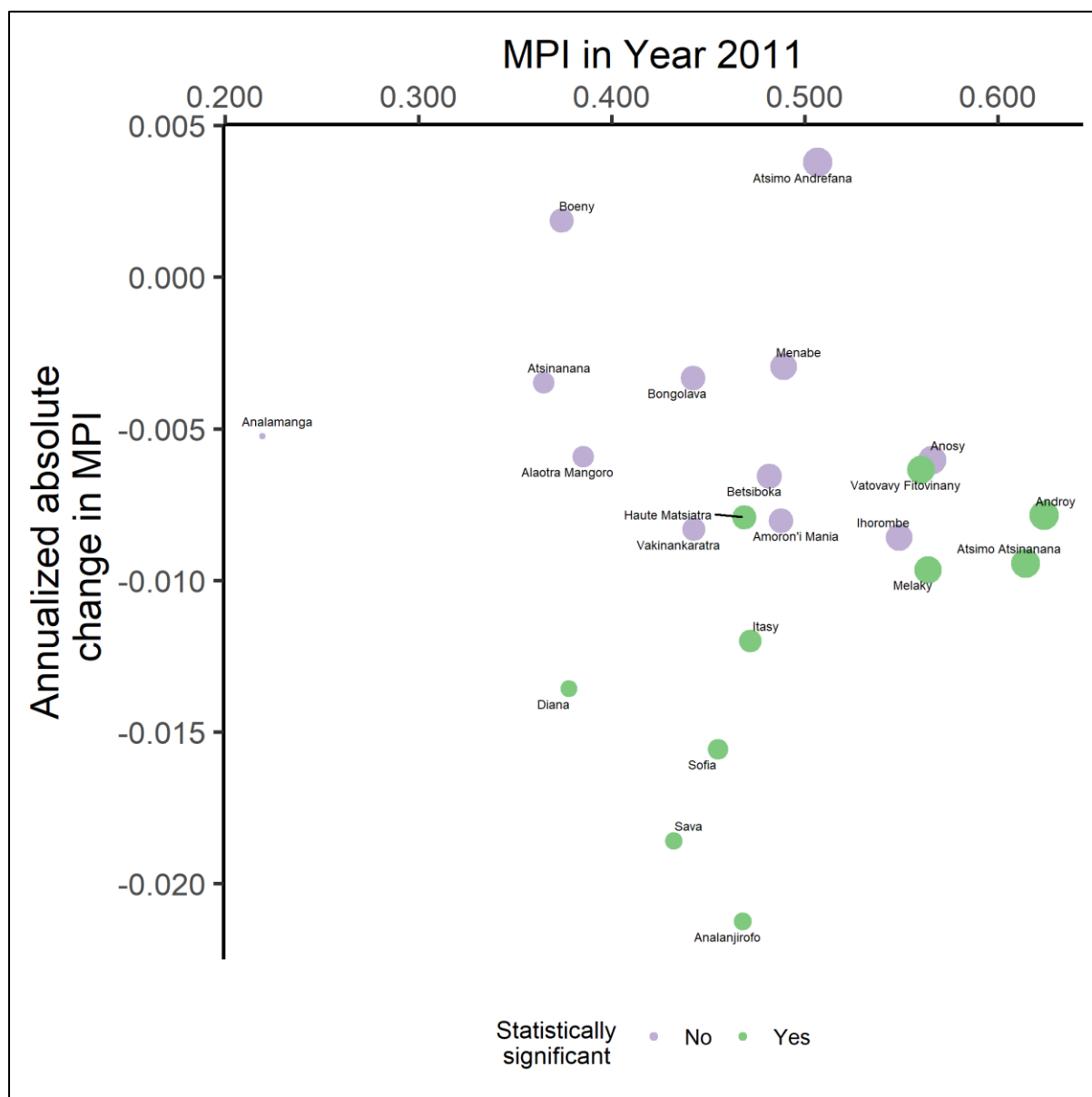
Figure 4: Absolute annualized change in MPI in Mauritania by subnational region, 2011–2015



Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

The trends in poverty reduction across the subnational regions in Madagascar, however, are not as poor as they are in Mauritania (see Figure 5). Of the 22 subnational regions, only 12 showed a significant change in MPI from 2008/09 to 2018. The subnational regions of Androy (0.624) and Atsimo Atsinanana (0.614) had the highest MPI in 2008/09 with high levels of multidimensional poverty also evident in Melaky (0.564) and Vatovavy Fitovinany (0.560). By 2018, however, the largest absolute annualized reduction in MPI was in Analanjirofo (-0.021), Sava (-0.019) and Sofia (-0.016). Even in the least poor region of Diana, which had an MPI of 0.378 in 2008/09, the reduction in MPI was faster (-0.014) than it was in the poorest regions of Androy (-0.008), Atsimo Atsinanana (-0.009), Melaky (-0.010) or Vatovavy Fitovinany (-0.006). If current trajectories in poverty reduction persist in Madagascar, these poorer subnational regions are at risk of being left behind.

Figure 5: Absolute annualized change in MPI in Madagascar by subnational region, 2008/09-2018



Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

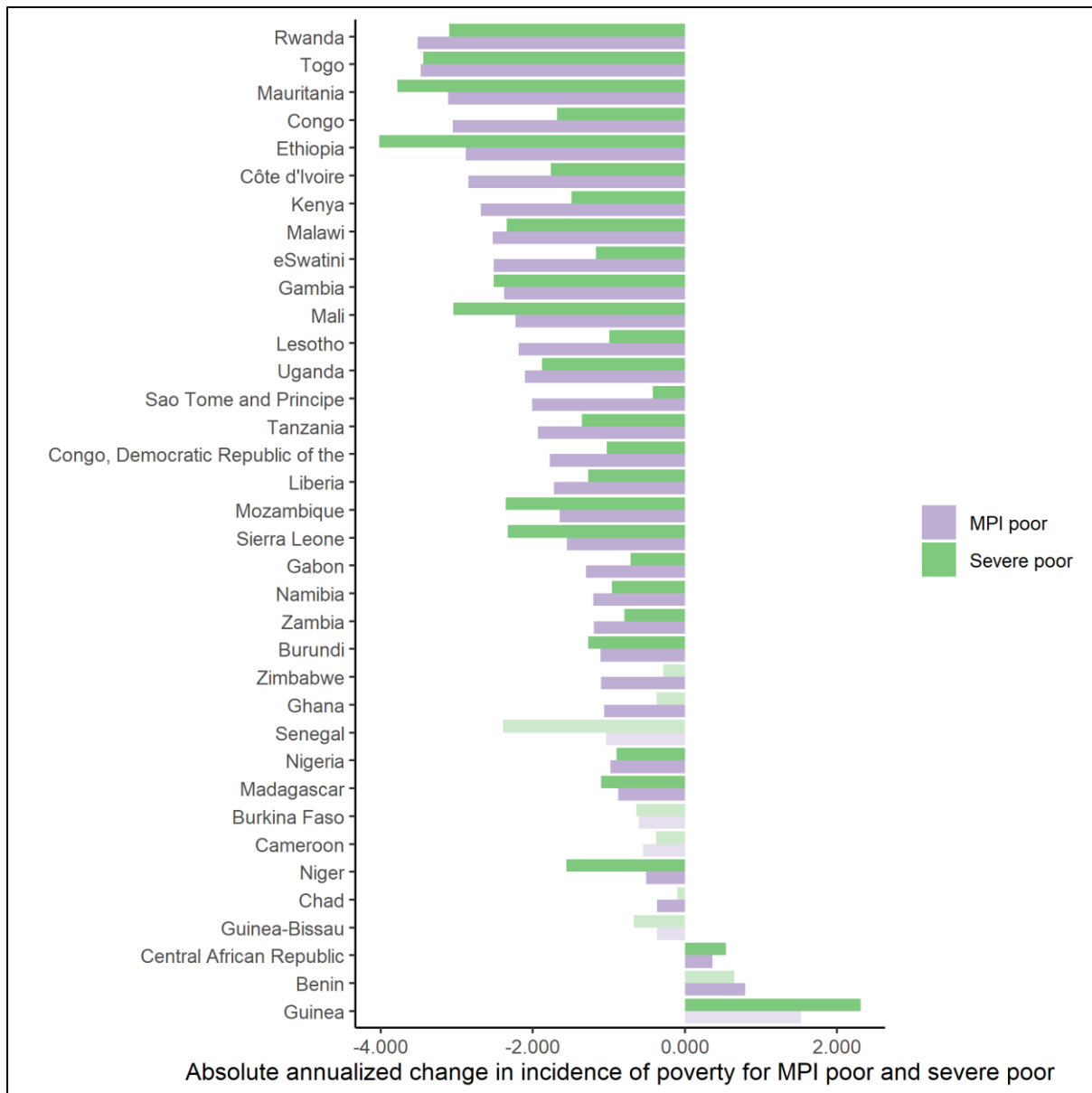
Improving the situation of the severely poor

In addition to identifying those who are multidimensionally poor, the global MPI also identifies those who are living in severe poverty, by specifying a higher poverty cut-off of 50 percent or more of the weighted deprivations (Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa 2021). Almost a third (31 percent) of the population of sub-Saharan Africa are in severe multidimensional poverty, significantly higher than in any other region of the world.

From a pro-poor perspective, one would hope to see, at a minimum, similar trends in poverty reduction among those who are poor and those who are severely poor. Figure 6 compares the rate of absolute annualized change in the incidence of MPI and severe poverty. There are 27 countries in which the annualized changes in both measures are significant. In one of these countries, Central African Republic, the incidence of both measures increased from 2010 to 2018/19. The incidence of severe MPI poor reduced faster in nine countries, while the incidence of MPI poor reduced faster in 16 countries. Of the top five

performers in reducing multidimensional poverty, Rwanda, Togo, Mauritania and, particularly, Ethiopia, were equally impressive in reducing levels of severe poverty. Congo was less effective in reducing levels of severe poverty.

Figure 6: Absolute annualized change in incidence of poverty for MPI poor and severely poor



Note: Lighter shaded bars represent statistically insignificant changes.

Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

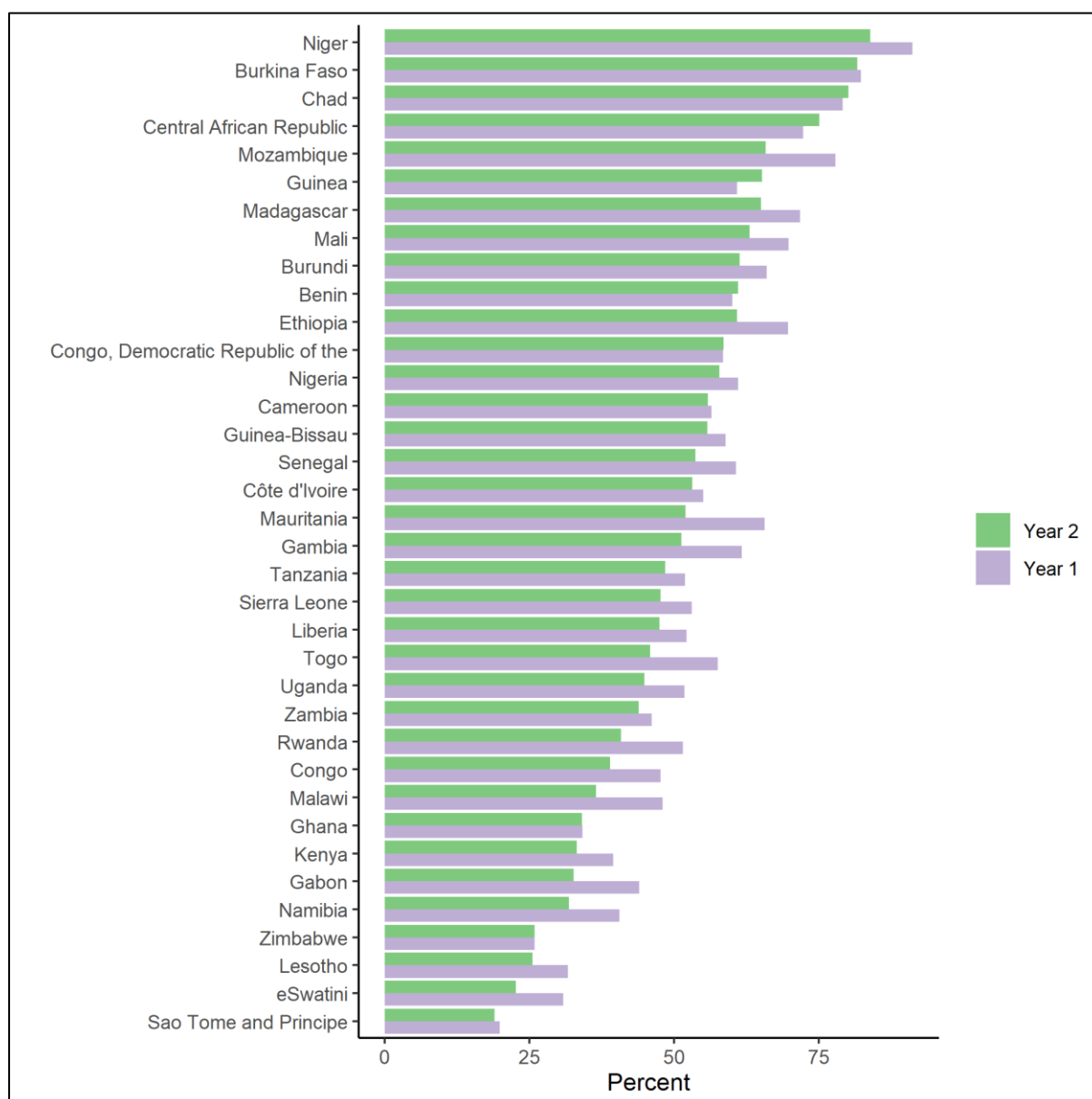
What is also encouraging to see in Figure 6 is that even where progress has been relatively slower in reducing the levels of multidimensional poverty, this has not come at the cost of those who are severely poor. In fact, of the 10 countries with the lowest decreases in multidimensional poverty (and where comparisons are significant), half of them showed larger reductions in poverty levels amongst the severely poor.

What does this mean in terms of actual numbers of people? Across 25 countries there was a real decline in the numbers of people who are severely poor. In total, 24.6 million people moved out of severe poverty in these countries. Particularly successful were Ethiopia (9.0 million), Kenya (2.6 million), Uganda (1.6 million), Mozambique (1.4 million) and Malawi (1.4 million). Across the 11 countries which saw increases in the number of people who are severely poor, a total of 7.3 million people moved into severe poverty.

Increases in the number of people who are severely poor were particularly pronounced in Niger (1.4 million) and Chad (1.2 million).

Figure 7 looks at the proportion of MPI poor people who are severely poor in each country for each of the two time periods. It provides evidence that the proportion of the MPI poor who are in severe poverty has declined in all countries except Guinea, Central African Republic, Chad, Benin and Democratic Republic of Congo. In Mauritania from 2011 to 2015, the proportion of MPI poor who are severely poor declined from 66 percent to 52 percent. Similar reductions were seen in Mozambique (2003 to 2011) and Togo (2013/14 to 2017), with a 12 percentage point decrease in these countries.

Figure 7: Proportion of the MPI poor who are in severe poverty



Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

Despite the gains made and the reductions in the number of people who are severely poor, severe poverty remains a key challenge for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 8 out of every 10 MPI poor people are living in severe poverty in Niger (84 percent), Burkina Faso (82 percent) and Chad (80 percent). In 19 of the 36 countries, more than half of all people who are MPI poor are living in severe poverty. Even countries with lower levels of multidimensional poverty have high proportions of severely poor people. In

Zimbabwe (26 percent) and eSwatini (23 percent), approximately one in four MPI poor people are severely poor, while in Sao Tome and Principe, the country with the lowest proportion, one in five (19 percent) multidimensionally poor people are also severely poor.

Conclusion

This briefing has provided a glimpse of the kind of analysis that is possible in tracking and monitoring poverty reduction efforts across sub-Saharan Africa. The global MPI with its associated changes over time data, provides a wealth of information. One is able to dig deep across the various statistics of multidimensional poverty – MPI, headcount ratio and intensity – and undertake explorations that disaggregate these statistics by geographical location (including both area and region) and other demographic variables (such as age groups).

The focus has been on the rallying call of the SDGs to leave no one behind, a call echoed on the African continent by Agenda 2063. Given the high levels of poverty that exist in sub-Saharan Africa and the actual numbers of people that these levels represent, constant vigilance is required so that no one is left behind. The data presented in this briefing suggest the need to concentrate poverty reduction efforts that are pro-poor in nature. From the disaggregation of geographical location, these efforts should focus on rural areas across the board and target those subnational regions with highest levels of poverty. An additional target group should be those people who live in severe poverty, a substantial proportion in sub-Saharan African and a majority of the poor in many countries.

It is only if poverty reduction efforts are comprehensive, coordinated and coherent that the goal of leaving no one behind will be achieved.

APPENDIX A: Changes over time data

Country	MPI Data Source		Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI _T)		Headcount Ratio (H _T)		Intensity of Poverty (A _T)		Total Population (thousands)		Number of MPI _T Poor People (thousands)	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Benin	2014	2017/18	0.346	0.362	63.2	66.0	54.7	54.9	10,287	11,485	6,504	7,580
Burkina Faso	2006	2010	0.607	0.574	88.7	86.3	68.4	66.5	13,829	15,605	12,272	13,469
Burundi	2010	2016/17	0.464	0.409	82.3	75.1	56.4	54.4	8,676	10,827	7,140	8,131
Cameroon	2014	2018	0.243	0.229	45.4	43.2	53.6	53.1	22,682	25,216	10,306	10,903
Central African Republic	2010	2018/19	0.481	0.516	81.2	84.3	59.2	61.2	4,387	4,745	3,564	4,002
Chad	2014/15	2019	0.578	0.562	89.4	87.7	64.7	64.1	14,111	15,947	12,610	13,986
Congo	2005	2014/15	0.258	0.114	53.8	24.7	48.0	46.1	3,623	4,856	1,947	1,202
Congo, DR	2013/14	2017/18	0.375	0.337	71.9	64.8	52.2	52.1	73,767	84,068	53,060	54,481
Côte d'Ivoire	2011/12	2016	0.310	0.236	58.9	46.1	52.7	51.2	21,547	23,823	12,687	10,975
eSwatini	2010	2014	0.130	0.081	29.3	19.2	44.3	42.3	1,065	1,095	312	210
Ethiopia	2016	2019	0.436	0.367	77.4	68.8	56.3	53.3	103,603	112,079	80,218	77,080
Gabon	2000	2012	0.145	0.068	30.9	15.3	47.0	44.7	1,228	1,750	379	267
Gambia	2013	2018	0.339	0.257	61.9	50.0	54.8	51.5	1,964	2,280	1,216	1,140
Ghana	2014	2017/18	0.130	0.112	28.4	24.7	45.7	45.2	27,224	29,767	7,736	7,352
Guinea	2016	2018	0.336	0.364	61.9	65.0	54.3	56.0	11,738	12,414	7,264	8,063
Guinea-Bissau	2014	2018/19	0.363	0.341	66.0	64.4	55.0	52.9	1,692	1,921	1,118	1,237
Kenya	2008/09	2014	0.247	0.171	52.2	37.5	47.3	45.6	40,902	46,700	21,370	17,502
Lesotho	2014	2018	0.128	0.084	28.3	19.6	45.0	43.0	2,043	2,108	579	413
Liberia	2013	2019/20	0.326	0.259	63.5	52.3	51.3	49.6	4,248	5,058	2,699	2,646
Madagascar	2008/09	2018	0.433	0.372	75.7	67.4	57.2	55.2	20,569	26,262	15,569	17,692
Malawi	2010	2015/16	0.339	0.252	68.1	54.2	49.8	46.5	14,540	17,205	9,908	9,333
Mali	2015	2018	0.418	0.361	73.1	66.4	57.1	54.4	17,439	19,078	12,752	12,675
Mauritania	2011	2015	0.357	0.261	63.0	50.6	56.7	51.5	3,599	4,046	2,268	2,046
Mozambique	2003	2011	0.516	0.401	84.3	71.2	61.2	56.3	19,331	24,188	16,305	17,216
Namibia	2006/07	2013	0.205	0.158	43.0	35.1	47.7	44.9	2,007	2,234	862	785
Niger	2006	2012	0.668	0.594	92.9	89.9	71.9	66.1	14,144	17,795	13,142	15,992
Nigeria	2013	2018	0.287	0.254	51.3	46.4	55.9	54.8	171,766	195,875	88,162	90,919
Rwanda	2010	2014/15	0.357	0.259	70.2	54.4	50.8	47.5	10,039	11,369	7,050	6,184
Sao Tome and Principe	2014	2019	0.091	0.049	22.0	11.9	41.6	41.3	196	215	43	26
Senegal	2017	2019	0.282	0.260	52.4	50.3	53.8	51.6	15,419	16,296	8,074	8,197
Sierra Leone	2017	2019	0.300	0.272	58.3	55.2	51.5	49.3	7,488	7,813	4,368	4,314
Tanzania	2010	2015/16	0.342	0.285	67.8	57.1	50.5	49.8	44,347	53,049	30,047	30,302
Togo	2013/14	2017	0.301	0.213	55.1	43.0	54.5	49.6	7,138	7,698	3,935	3,307
Uganda	2011	2016	0.349	0.281	67.7	57.2	51.5	49.2	33,477	39,649	22,672	22,672
Zambia	2013/14	2018	0.263	0.232	53.3	47.9	49.3	48.4	15,400	17,352	8,207	8,313
Zimbabwe	2015	2019	0.130	0.110	30.2	25.8	43.0	42.6	13,815	14,645	4,173	3,779

Source: Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2021).

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