

TRADE STATISTICS IN AFRICA:

STATUS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DISCUSSION



Table of contents

About the Statistics Brief	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Scope and key concepts	5
2.1. Scope of trade data in this brief	5
2.2. Definitions of key concepts	5
3. Data sources and methodology	7
3.1. Data sources	7
3.2. Coverage and analytical samples	7
3.3. Analytical framework at a glance	8
3.4. Adjustments, thresholds and interpretation	9
3.5. Limitations	9
4. Potential sources of differences and why they matter	10
4.1. Differences across international outlets	10
4.2. Why mirror trade records differ	10
4.3. Why national accounts and IMTS differ	11
4.4. What the discrepancies do, and do not, indicate	11
5. Key findings	12
5.1. Availability, recency and historical coverage	12
5.2. Comparability across international outlets	13
5.3. Non-Concordance in intra-African mirror statistics	15
5.4. Differences between IMTS and national accounts	19
5.5. Coverage and integration of informal cross-border trade (ICBT)	20
6. Implications and preliminary guidance	22
7. Conclusion	24
References	25

Table of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Selected evidence on ICBT measurement and integration.....	21
Table 2: Minimum metadata for an ICBT estimate	21
Figure 1: Time coverage of Africa trade statistics, by data source.....	12
Figure 2: Relative differences in percentage in 2023 aggregate exports across international trade sources for African countries	13
Figure 3: Median absolute relative gaps in aggregate exports across international outlets, 2020-2024.....	14
Figure 4: Aggregate exports reported for The Gambia and Cabo Verde by national and international sources, 2020-2024	15
Figure 5: Reported intra-African exports compared with partner-reported mirror imports, 2023.....	16
Figure 6: Reported intra-African imports compared with partner-reported mirror exports, 2023.....	17
Figure 7: Exports and imports of goods in national accounts compared with IMTS, 2023.....	19

About the Statistics Brief

Africa Beyond the Numbers is an African Centre for Statistics series of concise, policy-ready statistical products. The series examines not only the values published for development indicators, but also the availability, production, dissemination, comparability and policy meaning of the underlying statistics.

This edition examines the status of international merchandise trade statistics in Africa. It examines discrepancies and inconsistencies in international trade data across trade data sources. It brings together evidence on national and international coverage, differences across major international outlets, asymmetries in mirror trade records, differences between trade statistics and national accounts, and the treatment of informal cross-border trade. Its purpose is to help producers and users recognize when apparently simple trade figures require additional source documentation, reconciliation or qualification.

The brief does not rank data producers or recommend a single source for every use. National official statistics remain the primary reference for country reporting, while international databases are indispensable for harmonized regional comparison. The right choice depends on the statistical question, the required level of detail, the reference period, and the data's revision status.

Africa Beyond the Numbers explains why the numbers matter, not only what they are. It aims to strengthen the responsible use of official statistics and increase their uptake in policy discussions.

1. Introduction

Africa's participation in global trade remains relatively limited. Recent estimates from UNCTADstat show that the continent contributes only 2.6 per cent of global merchandise exports and 3.0 per cent of global merchandise imports in 2025. This contrast highlights a significant imbalance between Africa's population size and its share in international trade. Such weak trade performance continues to present major obstacles to the continent's economic growth and development.

Africa's limited role in global trade is often linked to its economic structure, including dependence on primary commodities and slow diversification. Measurement also matters. If significant flows are absent from customs records, if partner countries report the same transaction differently, or international outlets apply different adjustments and revisions, the statistical narrative may understate, overstate, or otherwise mischaracterize the scale and direction of trade.

Official merchandise trade statistics rely mainly on customs declarations and other administrative records. They are highly detailed and support analysis by product and partner. However, some cross-border transactions are not recorded through formal channels. The resulting gaps are especially relevant in Africa, where informal cross-border trade is substantial in some corridors. In addition, exports reported by one country do not always match the imports reported by its partner, even after accounting for differences between free-on-board (FOB) and cost-insurance-freight (CIF) valuation.

Differences do not automatically imply that one source is wrong. National sources, international repositories, national accounts and mirror records are produced for different purposes and may draw on international vintages, classifications, coverage rules and estimation procedures. The analytical task is therefore to identify the source of the difference, assess whether it is material for the intended use and document the choice made.

This brief pursues five objectives: (i) assess the availability, recency and historical coverage of trade statistics in Africa; (ii) compare trade statistics across major international outlets; (iii) identify non-concordance in intra-African mirror trade records; (iv) examine differences between international merchandise trade statistics (IMTS) and the goods components recorded in national accounts; and (v) assess the extent to which informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is measured and integrated into official statistics.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 defines the scope and key concepts. Section 3 describes the data sources and methodology. Section 4 explains why the differences may arise, while Section 5 presents the empirical findings. Section 6 provides preliminary guidance for producers and users, and Section 7 concludes with priorities for further work.

2. Scope and key concepts

This section defines the coverage of the brief and the concepts required to interpret the comparisons.

2.1. Scope of trade data in this brief

The coverage assessment includes all 54 African ECA member States. We review historical availability from the 1940s to the latest available observation. Comparisons across outlets, mirror records and national accounts focus primarily on 2000-2024, with detailed cross-sectional comparisons using 2023, as it is the latest year with broad coverage across the selected databases. The brief covers trade in goods; trade in services is outside its scope.

2.2. Definitions of key concepts

Cost, Insurance and Freight (CIF): CIF values include the cost of the goods, insurance, and freight up to the importing country's border or port of entry. Import duties and other domestic charges after entry are excluded.

Free on Board (FoB): FOB values include the cost of the goods and transportation to the exporting country's border or port of shipment, but exclude international freight and insurance beyond that point.

International Merchandise Trade Statistics (IMTS): IMTS record goods that add to or subtract from a country's stock of material resources by entering or leaving its economic territory. They are based principally on the physical movement of goods; in IMTS, exports are generally valued free on board (FOB), while imports are often valued on a cost, insurance and freight (CIF) basis.

Mirror data: Mirror data are the counterpart records reported by trading partners. One country's exports to a partner are compared with that partner's imports from the reporting country, and vice versa.

Trade data outlet and data vintage: An outlet is a national or international platform that disseminates trade statistics; it is not necessarily the original producer of the data. The data vintage is the version available on a stated extraction date. Values for the same reference period can differ across outlets or vintages because of revisions, estimation, and different update schedules.

Balance of payments: The Balance of Payments (BoP) is a statistical statement that summarises transactions between residents and non-residents during a period. It consists of the goods and services account, the primary income account, the secondary income account, the capital account, and the financial account.

Business surveys: Business surveys collect information directly from a sample or census of enterprises. In trade and macroeconomic statistics, they can supplement customs and other administrative records, identify transactions not fully captured in those systems, and support coverage or valuation adjustments.

National Accounts: National accounts measure transactions within an integrated macroeconomic framework. Exports and imports of goods may use IMTS as a major input, but can also incorporate BOP statistics, business surveys and other administrative sources, followed by adjustments for coverage and consistency.

General and special trade systems: Under the general trade system, statistics cover goods entering or leaving the whole statistical territory. The special trade system excludes some flows through customs warehouses, free zones or other areas outside free circulation. Using different systems can create differences between source and mirror data.

Partner attribution and re-exports: Exports may be assigned to the country of last known destination, while imports are usually assigned to the country of origin. Re-exports are foreign-origin goods exported without substantial transformation. Indirect routing and re-exports can therefore cause the two partners to record the same movement under different countries.

Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT): ICBT refers broadly to legitimate goods and services that cross borders outside, or partly outside, the regulatory and recording framework. The broader term may include services, but this brief considers goods only. Countries do not yet apply a single operational definition (FAO, 2017; UNCTAD, 2021).

Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs): IFFs refer to financial flows that are illicit in origin, transfer or use, that reflect an exchange of value and that cross country borders.¹ In the trade context, this mostly refers to mis-invoicing.

¹ <https://unctad.org/publication/methodological-guidelines-measure-tax-and-commercial-illicit-financial-flows-methods>

3. Data sources and methodology

The analysis combines a source-coverage review with pairwise comparisons of published values. It identifies substantial differences that require reconciliation; it is not a quality ranking of countries or data outlets

3.1. Data sources

National trade data were collected from National Statistical Offices, customs administrations, central banks and other official agencies. National sources are treated as the primary reference for country reporting. National sources are treated as the primary reference for country reporting, subject to their published scope and revision status.

Five international trade outlets were reviewed:

- **UN Comtrade**, which disseminates detailed annual and monthly merchandise trade data by product and partner, primarily as reported by national authorities;
- **UNCTADstat**, which combines reported information with harmonization and estimation procedures to provide broad country coverage;
- **WTO Data**, whose values for the indicators examined in this brief align with UNCTADstat;
- The **IMF** International Trade in Goods by Partner Country dataset, which combines merchandise trade information from several sources; and
- The World Integrated Trade Solution (**WITS**), which reproduces UN Comtrade data for the indicators examined while facilitating access and analysis.

For the aggregate indicators examined, WTO aligns with UNCTADstat and WITS with UN Comtrade.

The national accounts comparison uses the United Nations Statistics Division National Accounts Official Country Data, specifically variables P.61 (exports of goods) and P.71 (imports of goods). ICBT evidence was drawn from national reports and official studies, supplemented by regional and international guidance.

3.2. Coverage and analytical samples

Data were collected between 15 May and 15 June 2026. The source inventory covers 54 countries and records the source, extraction date, earliest and latest years, and number of observations. The 2023 outlet comparison covers the countries available in each source pair; mirror comparisons cover 42 countries; the national accounts export comparison covers 21 countries; and usable FOB import comparisons were available for five countries.

Availability was assessed using three related markers: the latest available year, the earliest available year, and the number of available annual observations. For outlet comparisons, the **relative difference (in percentage)** between source A and source B is calculated as:

$$\frac{(A - B)}{B} * 100$$

The second-mentioned source is therefore the denominator.

Values within plus or minus 1 per cent are treated as very close, while plus or minus 10 per cent is used as a practical band for identifying relatively small differences in the mirror and national accounts comparisons. These bands are descriptive, not universal quality thresholds.

Mirror comparisons use total intra-African flows for the 42 African countries with 2023 data available in the UN Comtrade database. Exports are compared with partner-reported imports, and imports are compared with partner-reported exports. Because IMTS records exports FOB and imports commonly CIF, all mirror imports were expressed on an FOB basis. Where UN Comtrade did not provide an FOB import value, the missing value was estimated using the average FOB-to-CIF ratio among countries for which both valuations were available. Zero or missing values were excluded from the corresponding ratio.

For national accounts, the comparison includes 21 countries with both 2023 UN Comtrade exports and national accounts P.61 data. National-currency values were converted to United States dollars using annual average exchange rates. The reported relative difference is:

$$\frac{(P.61 - X(IMTS))}{X(IMTS)} * 100$$

P.61 is exports of goods from National Accounts.

X(IMTS) is exports from international merchandise trade statistics.

3.3. Analytical framework at a glance

Availability was assessed using access to an official source, the earliest and latest years, the historical span, and the number of annual observations. The latest-year comparison subtracts the latest year in UN Comtrade from that in the national source. For value comparisons, the relative difference is calculated as:

$$\frac{(A - B)}{B} * 100$$

The second-mentioned source is the denominator. Medians are reported alongside means where extreme observations could dominate the average.

3.4. Adjustments, thresholds and interpretation

Mirror exports are compared with partner-reported imports and mirror imports with partner-reported exports. To reduce the FOB-CIF valuation effect, mirror imports were expressed on an FOB basis. Where an FOB value was missing, it was estimated from the average FOB-to-CIF ratio among countries with both valuations. Zero or missing denominators were excluded.

Values within plus or minus 1 per cent are treated as very close, while plus or minus 10 per cent is a practical band for relatively small mirror and national accounts differences. These are descriptive screening bands, not pass-fail quality standards. A large aggregate gap prompts examination of monthly, partner, and product data, not a diagnosis by itself.

3.5. Limitations

Results depend on the data vintage, missing values, and published valuation basis. Aggregate comparisons cannot identify the product, partner or month causing a discrepancy. The mirror sample excludes 12 countries without usable 2023 data, and ICBT estimates are not fully comparable because periods, survey designs, geographic coverage and denominators differ. The analytical file should therefore retain reported and adjusted values, formulas, denominators, source vintages, and exclusions.

4. Potential sources of differences and why they matter

This section explains why published trade values may differ across international outlets, mirror records and national accounts, and why large gaps should be interpreted cautiously.²

4.1. Differences across international outlets

International databases do more than display a single, synchronized national series. A country may submit preliminary data to an international repository and later revise its national publication without transmitting the revised series. Outlets also differ in extraction dates, validation routines, missing data treatment, balancing, estimation and the sequence in which these procedures are applied.

UNCTADstat uses UN Comtrade as a major input but also draws on IMF, regional and national sources and may estimate missing values. The IMF dataset likewise combines UN Comtrade with information from national statistical offices and balance-of-payments compilers. WITS and WTO align with UN Comtrade and UNCTADstat respectively. The apparent number of sources therefore overstates the number of distinct estimation systems.

The Gambia and Cabo Verde show why source lineage matters. When national data agree with one outlet but not another, the next step is to compare the outlets' vintages, coverage of re-exports, treatment of special trade, currency conversion and revision history. Investigate discrepancies at the monthly, partner, and product level before using an extreme annual value in a regional aggregate.

4.2. Why mirror trade records differ

The IMTS Compilers Manual identifies several legitimate sources of mirror asymmetry. Coverage can differ when one country includes low-value shipments, military goods, free-zone movements or other transactions that its partner excludes. The general and special trade systems also treat customs warehouses and free zones differently.

Timing matters because exports recorded near the end of one year may arrive and be recorded as imports in the next. Commodity classification differences can affect product-level comparisons, although they are less likely to explain the largest gaps in this brief because the analysis uses total trade. Valuation is a common source of difference, but the mirror calculations reduce this effect by converting imports to FOB.

Partner attribution matters especially for indirect trade and re-exports. The exporting country may record the immediate destination, while the importing country records the country of origin. Goods sold through an intermediary may therefore appear under different partners even when the

² Information is based on data collected between 15 May and 15 June 2026

underlying transaction is legitimate. Confidentiality can also lead one side to suppress a product or partner value that the other side publishes.

Other causes include data-entry errors, incomplete declarations, exchange-rate conversion, late reporting, estimation and differences in the national systems used to compile aggregate totals. Extreme cases such as Djibouti-Ghana and Congo-Togo warrant transaction-level or bilateral review, with timing, commodity, valuation and partner attribution documented.

4.3. Why national accounts and IMTS differ

IMTS measures the physical movement of goods across borders and provides detailed information by product and partner. National accounts measure economic transactions within the GDP framework. They use IMTS but may supplement it with balance-of-payments statistics, enterprise surveys and other administrative records, then adjust the combined information for consistency across the accounts and supply-use framework.

Consequently, a national accounts aggregate can be broader than the corresponding customs-based IMTS value. Adjustments may cover goods without a change of ownership, merchanting, non-monetary gold, informal trade, processing, valuation and other conceptual differences. National accounts are usually the appropriate source for GDP expenditure analysis, while IMTS is normally preferable for detailed bilateral and commodity analysis. The right source depends on the analytical purpose, not on a presumption that one framework is universally superior.

4.4. What the discrepancies do, and do not, indicate

Large and persistent mirror gaps can be a useful risk signal. The UNCTAD methodological guidance on tax and commercial illicit financial flows uses partner-country comparisons as one input to identify potential trade misinvoicing. However, the same gaps can arise from valuation, timing, coverage, partner attribution, confidentiality and ordinary reporting errors. A mirror difference is therefore not, by itself, evidence of an illicit flow.

Any application of the partner-country method should first make reasonable statistical adjustments, then combine the quantitative result with contextual evidence. Customs administrations, national statistical offices, central banks, tax authorities and sector experts need to examine the relevant transactions and compilation rules. The brief's results are best interpreted as a map of where reconciliation and documentation are most needed.

5. Key findings

5.1. Availability, recency and historical coverage

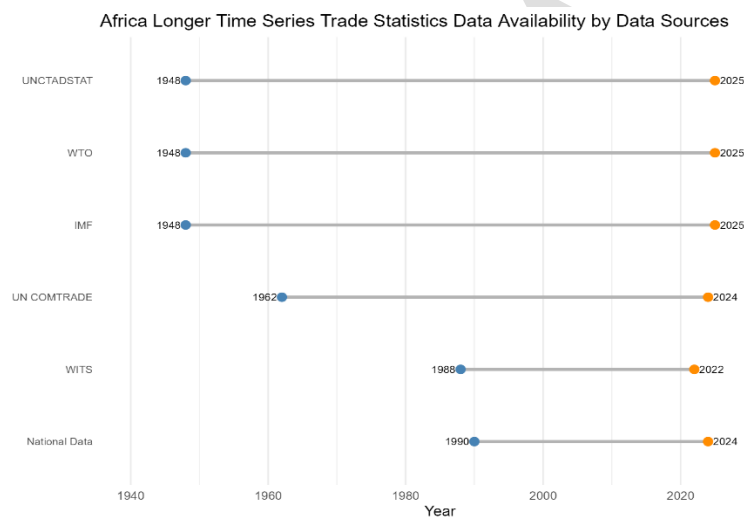
KEY FINDING

International databases generally provide longer historical coverage of African trade statistics. UNCTADstat, WTO and IMF series extend from 1948 to 2025, while UN Comtrade covers 1962-2024 and WITS covers 1988-2022.

The national sources reviewed collectively cover 1990-2024. However, at the country level, national sources are often more current than UN Comtrade.

The latest reference years matched for 27 countries, while UN Comtrade lagged behind national sources by 1 year for 15 countries, 2 years for 1 country, and 4-8 years for 5 countries. Chad presents a separate discontinuity in its time series.

Figure 1: Time coverage of Africa trade statistics, by data source



Source: UNCTADstat, WTO, IMF, UN COMTRADE, WITS and African National Trade Sources websites

In terms of country coverage, complete or partial national merchandise trade data were identified for 51 of the 54 African countries reviewed. During the collection period, no accessible national trade series was identified for the Central African Republic, Eritrea, or Somalia; international databases were therefore the main accessible sources for these countries. UNCTADstat and the WTO covered all 54 countries, while the IMF covered 53, omitting São Tomé and Príncipe. UN Comtrade and WITS contained more missing observations and reporting lags.

Comoros, Sao Tome and Principe and South Sudan had some national data, but no recent regular bulletin or report was identified; this does not necessarily mean that no statistics are produced nationally.

5.2. Comparability across international outlets

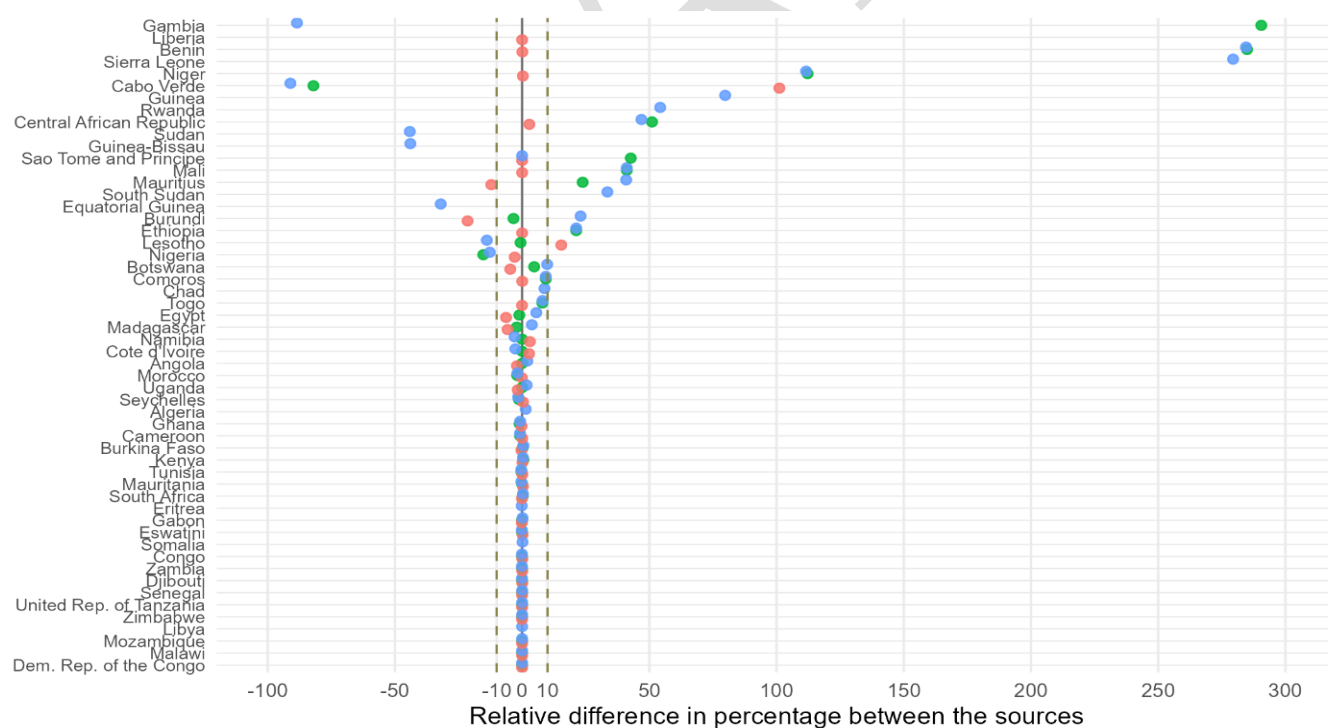
KEY FINDING

Although 5 outlets were reviewed, they reduce to 3 distinct aggregate export series: WTO aligns with UNCTADstat and WITS aligns with UN Comtrade.

In 2023, 20 of 54 countries had pairwise differences within plus or minus 1 per cent and 34 within plus or minus 10 per cent; 20 countries therefore had at least 1 gap above 10 per cent. Median absolute pairwise gaps remained below 5 per cent during 2020-2024.

UNCTADstat and WTO Data reported identical values for the aggregate indicators examined, while UN Comtrade and WITS also matched. To avoid duplication, the detailed comparison therefore focuses on UNCTADstat, UN Comtrade and the IMF trade dataset.

Figure 2: Relative differences in percentage in 2023 aggregate exports across international trade sources for African countries



Difference between: ● IMF vs COMTRADE ● UNCTADSTAT vs COMTRADE ● UNCTADSTAT vs IMF

Source: ECA calculations from UN Comtrade, UNCTADstat, and IMF trade data

Note: For each source pair, the relative difference is calculated against the second source named in the figure legend. The dashed lines mark plus or minus 10 per cent.

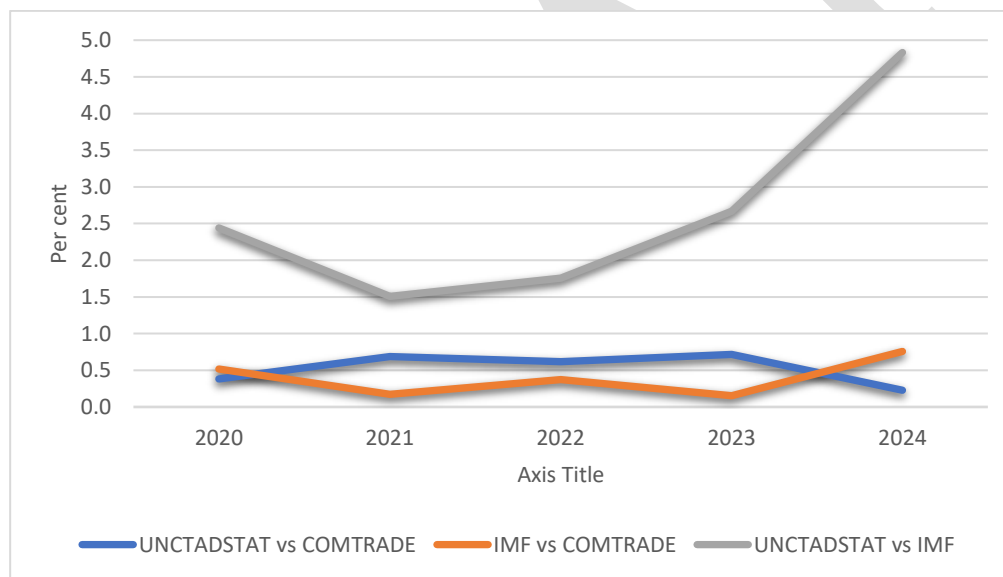
Using 2023 aggregate exports, 20 African countries had pairwise differences within plus or minus 1 per cent across the 3 core outlets, while 34 were within plus or minus 10 per cent. The remaining 20 countries had at least 1 source-pair gap above 10 per cent.

UNCTADstat reported exports at roughly twice the UN Comtrade value for Niger, four times for Benin and The Gambia, and seven times for Liberia. Cabo Verde showed the opposite pattern: UNCTADstat was around one-fifth of the UN Comtrade value.

The IMF series was generally closer to UN Comtrade for Benin, Liberia and Niger, but differed substantially for Cabo Verde and especially The Gambia. For The Gambia, the IMF value was approximately 34 times higher than UN Comtrade.

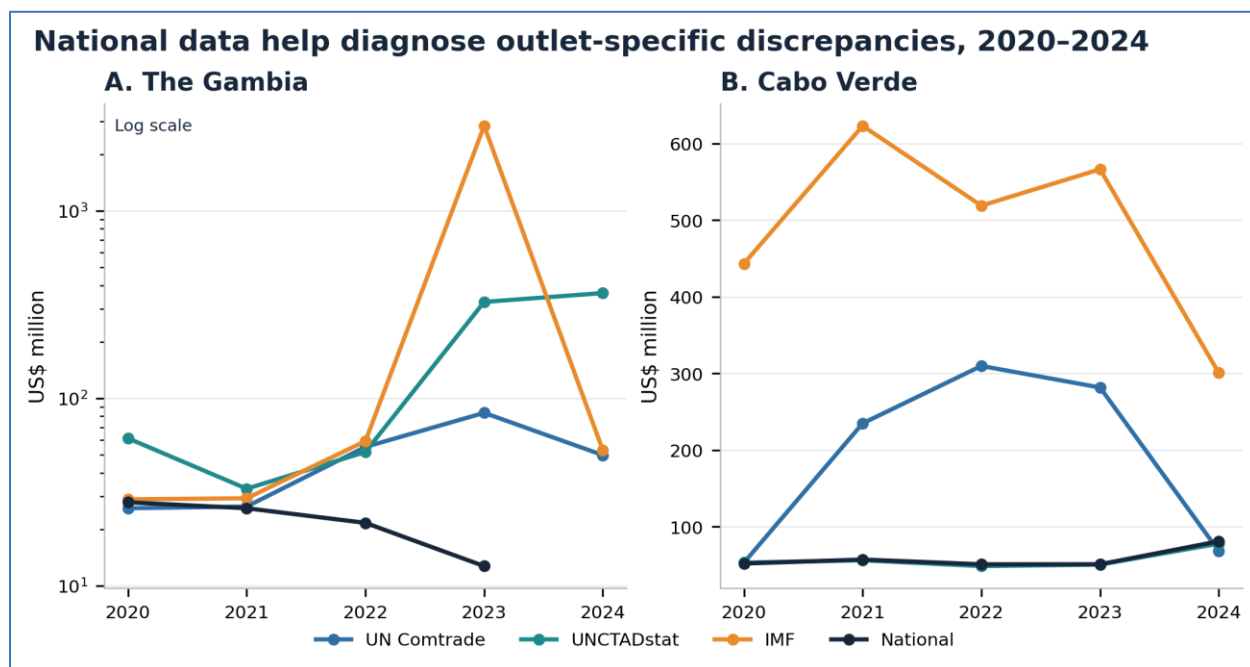
In Sierra Leone, the 2023 exports reported by UNCTADstat are approximately 4 times higher than those reported in the IMF Trade Database. No corresponding observation was available UN Comtrade value.

Figure 3: Median absolute relative gaps in aggregate exports across international outlets, 2020-2024



Source: ECA calculations from UN Comtrade, UNCTADstat, and IMF trade data

Figure 4: Aggregate exports reported for The Gambia and Cabo Verde by national and international sources, 2020-2024



Source: ECA calculations from UN Comtrade, UNCTADstat, IMF trade data, The Gambia Bureau of Statistics and Instituto Nacional de Estatística de Cabo Verde.

Note: For Cabo Verde, National export values closely track UNCTADstat from 2020 to 2024.

5.3. Non-Concordance in intra-African mirror statistics

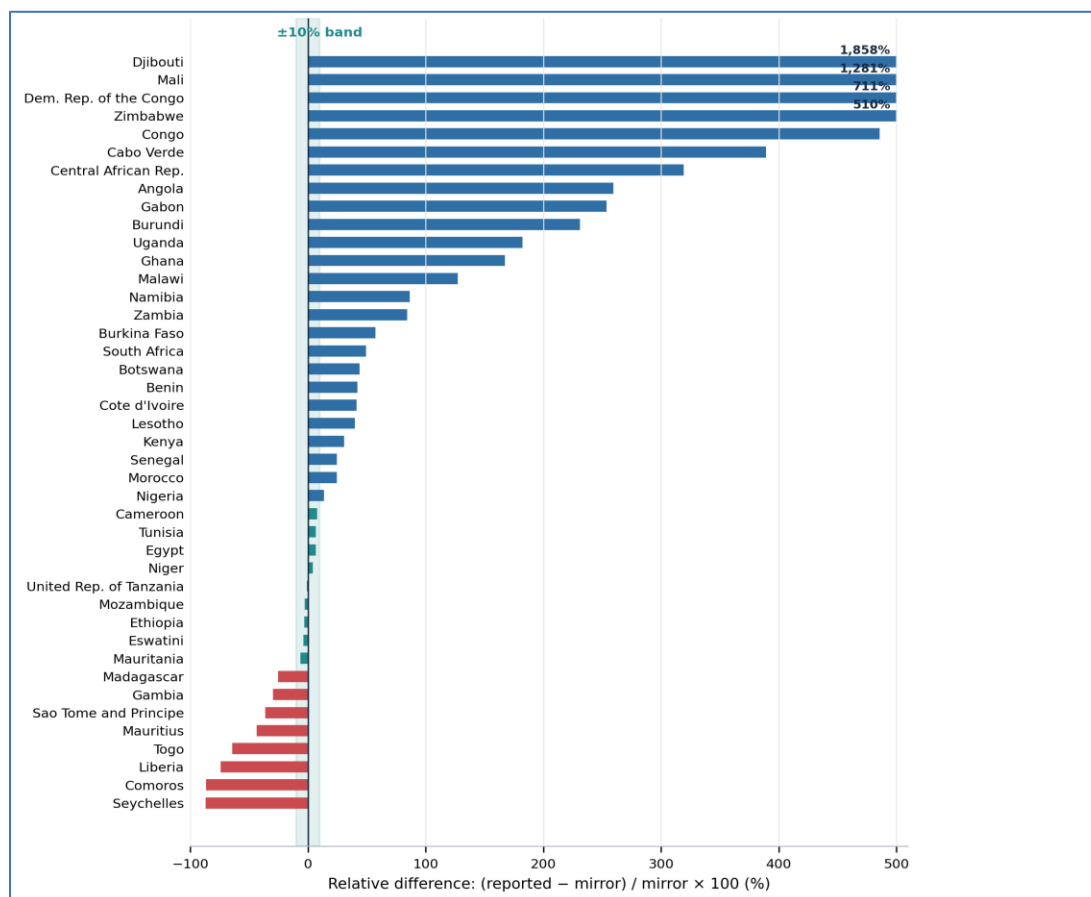
KEY FINDING

After FOB adjustment, only 9 of 42 countries had export differences within plus or minus 10 per cent, and only 4 had import differences within that band.

A total of 13 countries reported exports exceeding twice their mirror imports, while 33 reported imports below partner-reported exports.

Djibouti's reported exports were nearly 20 times their mirror value; Zambia's mirror exports were about 71 times its reported imports

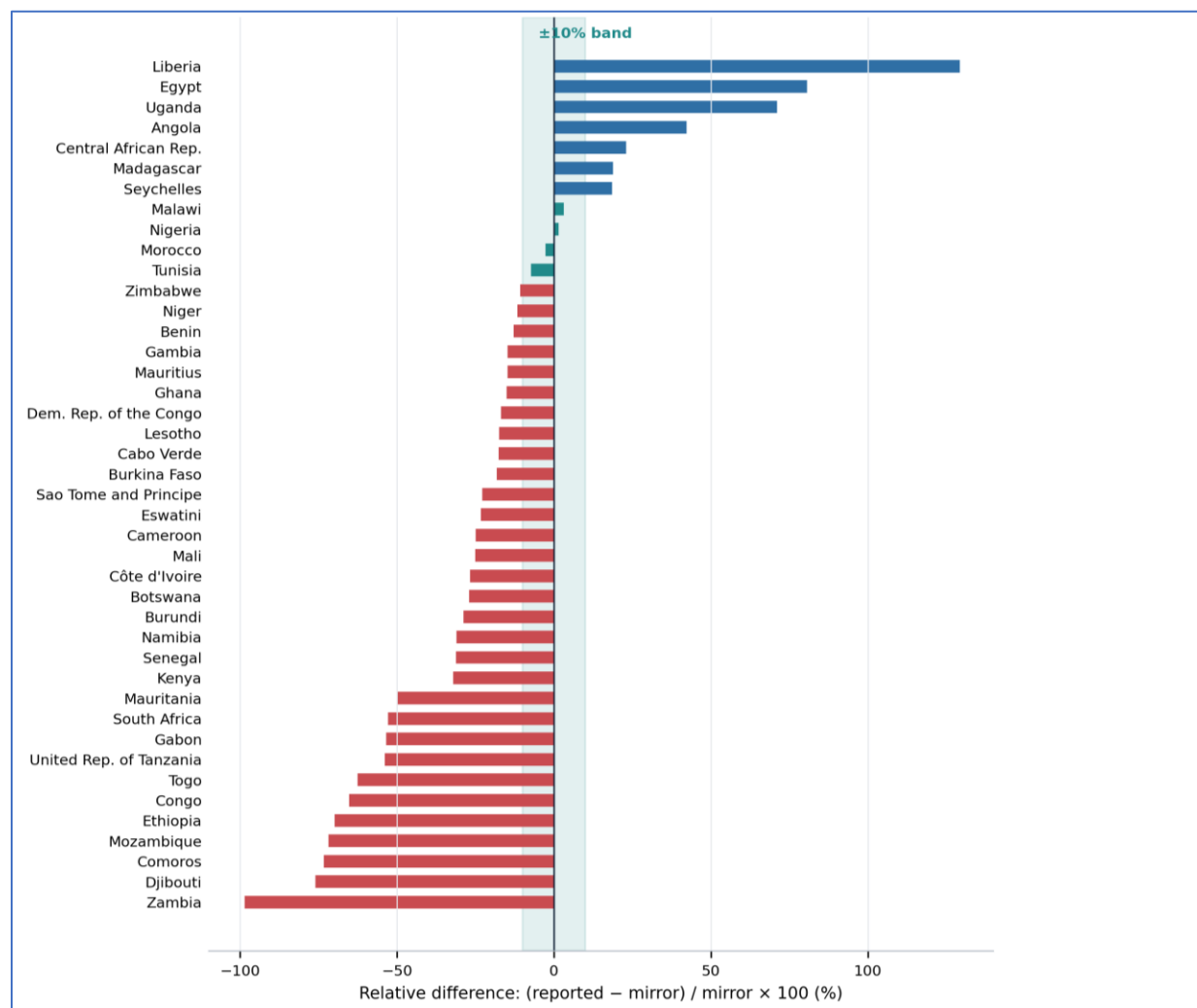
Figure 5: Reported intra-African exports compared with partner-reported mirror imports, 2023



Source: ECA calculations from UN Comtrade data used in the source analysis.

Note: The comparison covers 42 African countries. Relative differences are calculated as $(\text{reported exports} - \text{partner-reported mirror imports}) / \text{partner-reported mirror imports} \times 100$, after converting mirror imports to an estimated FOB basis. The shaded band indicates plus or minus 10 per cent. The bars for Djibouti, Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zimbabwe are truncated at the chart maximum of 500 per cent; the labels show their actual values (1,858, 1,281, 711 and 510 per cent, respectively).

Figure 6: Reported intra-African imports compared with partner-reported mirror exports, 2023



Source: ECA calculations from UN Comtrade data used in the source analysis.

Note: The comparison covers 42 African countries. The denominator is partner-reported exports. Reported imports were converted to FOB before comparison. The shaded band indicates plus or minus 10 per cent.

A country's exports should, in principle, correspond to its partner's imports. In practice, valuation, timing, coverage, partner attribution and reporting practices create differences. The 2023 comparison covers 42 reporters on an FOB basis.

Intra-African exports from Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zimbabwe in 2023 exceeded corresponding mirror data by more than five times. Those from Djibouti and Mali by more than ten times.

For instance, Djibouti provides a striking example: in 2023, it reported approximately US\$4.0 billion in exports to the other 41 African countries, compared with just US\$205.6 million in collectively

reported imports from Djibouti, meaning that its FOB-adjusted reported exports were nearly 20 times higher than the corresponding mirror data.

In 11 countries – Comoros, Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mauritania, Mozambique, South Africa, Togo, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Zambia – Intra-African reported imports from the other 41 African countries were less than half the value indicated by their mirror statistics, in 2023.

Zambia provides one of the most extreme examples, with its reported 2023 imports from the other 41 African countries totalling just US\$57.9 million on an FOB basis, compared with US\$4.1 billion in collectively reported exports to Zambia, making the mirror data approximately 71 times higher than Zambia's reported imports.

At the bilateral level, the source analysis identified 9 especially large discrepancies between reported trade flows and their corresponding mirror data, as follows:

Djibouti	→	Ghana
Congo	→	Togo
Djibouti	→	Zambia
Central African Rep.	→	Gabon
Dem. Rep. of the Congo	→	Mozambique
Dem. Rep. of the Congo	→	Eswatini
Eswatini	→	Congo
Congo	→	Namibia
Zimbabwe	→	Senegal

Some bilateral trade flows exhibit particularly large inconsistencies. For example, according to UN Comtrade, Djibouti reported exports to Ghana of only US\$0.006 in 2023 – a value that appears highly implausible. However, in the same year and in the same database, Ghana reported imports from Djibouti amounting to US\$24,666.5.

Similarly, Congo reported exports to Togo worth US\$153.2 million in 2023, while Togo reported imports from Congo of only US\$765.3. These examples illustrate the magnitude of the discrepancies that can arise between reported trade flows and their corresponding mirror statistics.

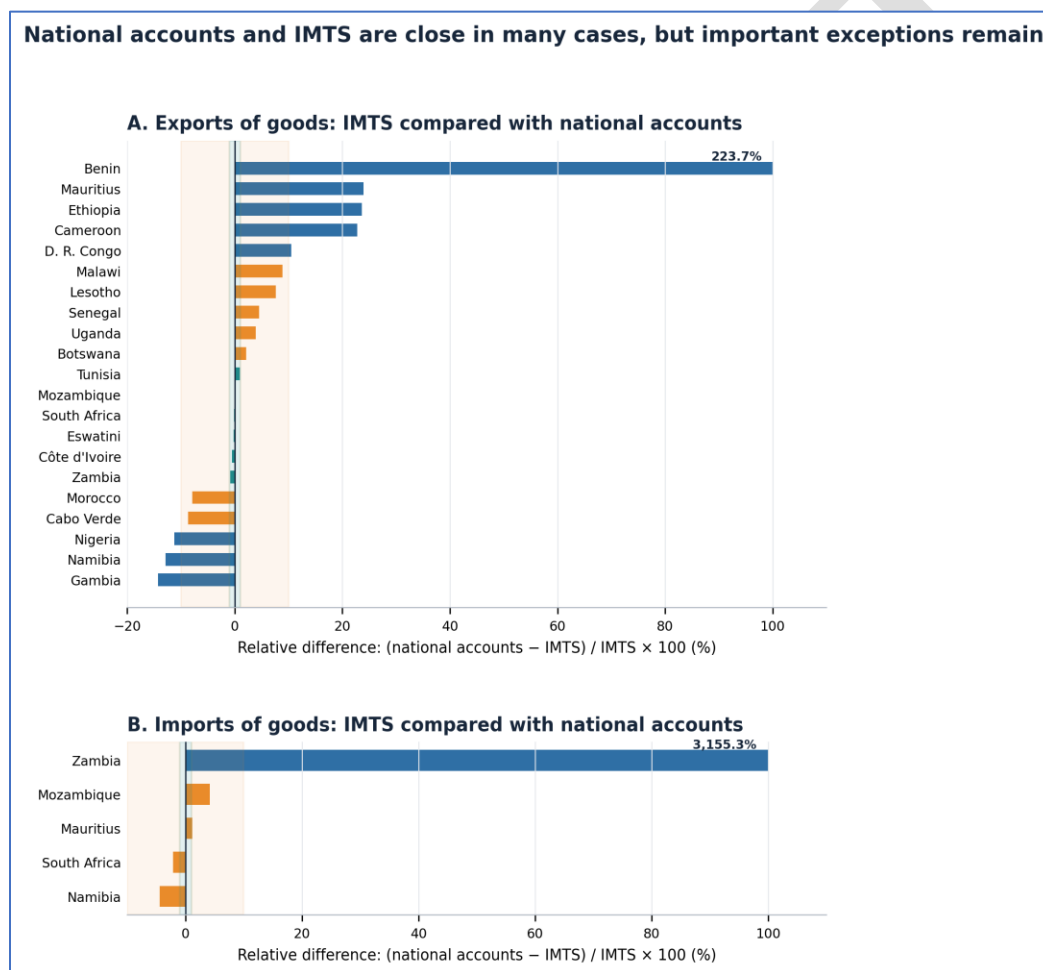
5.4. Differences between IMTS and national accounts

KEY FINDING

Among 21 countries, export differences were within plus or minus 1 per cent in 6, within plus or minus 10 per cent in a further 7 and above 10 per cent in 8.

Usable FOB import comparisons were available for only 5 countries. Benin's national accounts exports were 223.7 per cent above IMTS, while Zambia's national accounts imports were 3,155.3 per cent above the published IMTS FOB value

Figure 7: Exports and imports of goods in national accounts compared with IMTS, 2023



Source: ECA calculations from UN Comtrade and UNSD National Accounts Official Country Data.

Note: The measure is $(\text{national accounts} - \text{IMTS}) / \text{IMTS} \times 100$. The shaded bands mark plus or minus 1 and plus or minus 10 per cent. The bars for Benin and Zambia are truncated at the chart maximum of 100 per cent; the labels show their actual values (223.7 and 3,155.3 per cent, respectively)

The national accounts comparison asks whether two frameworks produced by, or on behalf of, the same country give similar aggregate measures of trade in goods. UN Comtrade exports were compared with P.61 exports of goods in the national accounts for 21 countries. Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Mozambique, South Africa, Tunisia and Zambia differed by less than 1 per cent.

Botswana, Cabo Verde, Lesotho, Malawi, Morocco, Senegal and Uganda were between minus 10 and plus 10 per cent.

The remaining eight countries: Benin, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Mauritius, Namibia and Nigeria, had differences above 10 per cent. In 20 of the 21 countries, the gap was between about minus 15 and plus 25 per cent.

Benin was the clear outlier: national accounts exports were about US\$3.4 billion compared with US\$1.1 billion in UN Comtrade, or 223.7 per cent above the IMTS value.

Imports require greater caution. National accounts record imports of goods on an FOB basis, but valid UN Comtrade FOB values were available for only Namibia, South Africa, Mauritius, Mozambique and Zambia. The gaps were modest for the first four: -4.5, -2.1, 1.2 and 4.2 per cent respectively.

Zambia's national accounts imports were 3,155.3 per cent above the published UN Comtrade FOB value. UN Comtrade reported CIF imports of US\$10.1 billion but FOB imports of only US\$264.5 million, an implausibly large valuation difference that should be verified before use.

5.5. Coverage and integration of informal cross-border trade (ICBT)

KEY FINDING

ICBT studies were identified in at least 16 countries. Available evidence places ICBT at 7-16 per cent of formal intra-African trade across subregions and 30-72 per cent of formal trade between some neighbouring countries.

Clear integration into official series is documented in 3 countries - Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda - while Kenya's integration remains evolving.

ICBT may account for a substantial share of trade in particular corridors and commodity groups. ECA (2021) estimated ICBT at 7-16 per cent of formal intra-African trade across subregions and 30-72 per cent of formal trade between some neighbouring countries. National or corridor studies have been undertaken in at least Benin, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia.

Measurement does not automatically mean integration. Ghana includes ICBT in official trade statistics and reported informal exports and imports at 4.1 and 4.7 per cent of their respective totals in the fourth quarter of 2024. Uganda integrates ICBT survey results into merchandise trade statistics; informal exports were 8.2 per cent of total exports and informal imports 1.0 per cent of total imports in 2023.

Rwanda grosses up informal trade with formal trade for the balance of payments, IMTS and national accounts, with recent estimates averaging about 12 per cent of exports and 3 per cent of

imports. Kenya's survey was designed to inform external trade statistics, the balance of payments and national accounts, but the available documentation indicates that full integration into published official statistics was still evolving.

Nigeria's 2010-2013 estimates quantify ICBT but do not, by themselves, establish systematic integration. Integration status should therefore be documented separately from the existence of an estimate.

Table 1: Selected evidence on ICBT measurement and integration

Country	Reference period	Informal exports (%)	Informal imports (%)	Integration status	Source
Ghana	Q4 2024	4.1	4.7	Included in official trade statistics	GSS (2025)
Kenya	2015-16 survey	n.a.	n.a.	Intended for external-sector compilation; published integration evolving	KNBS (2016)
Nigeria	2010-13 average	3.0	7.0	Estimates available; systematic integration not established	IMF (n.d.2)
Rwanda	Recent-year average	12.0	3.0	Grossed up for BOP, IMTS and national accounts	IMF (n.d.3)
Uganda	2023	8.2	1.0	Integrated into merchandise trade statistics	UBOS (2024)

Source: Ghana Statistical Service (2025), Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2016), Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024), IMF country notes (IMF, n.d.2, n.d.3)

Note: Reference periods, survey coverage and denominators differ. Do not interpret the percentages as a country ranking.

A single continental percentage would be misleading because the reference periods, geographic coverage and denominators differ. Comparable reporting requires metadata on the period, border coverage, commodities, grossing method and the official series into which each estimate is integrated.

A practical next step is to distinguish three stages of maturity: ICBT measured in a survey or study; ICBT routinely produced with a documented method; and ICBT incorporated into IMTS, balance-of-payments or national accounts totals. Publishing this status alongside the estimate would prevent users from assuming that every measured flow is already included in headline trade statistics.

Table 2: Minimum metadata for an ICBT estimate

Metadata field	What should be stated
Reference period	Survey dates and whether the result is quarterly, annual or a multi-year average.
Geographic coverage	Border posts, corridors and neighbouring countries covered, including known exclusions.
Transaction scope	Trader, commodity, value-threshold and formal/informal definitions used.
Valuation and currency	FOB/CIF treatment, currency, exchange rate and price basis.
Estimation method	Sampling, grossing, imputation and treatment of missing days or border posts.
Integration status	Whether the estimate enters IMTS, balance of payments, national accounts or none of these.

6. Implications and preliminary guidance

The evidence has immediate implications for official statistics producers and for analysts who use trade data in policy briefs, dashboards, and regional comparisons. The following guidance is preliminary and should be refined through country consultations and reconciliation among international agencies.

1. **Start with the analytical purpose.** Use the national official series for country reporting unless a documented reason requires another source. Use harmonized international series when cross-country comparability is the principal objective, but disclose the outlet and its vintage.
2. **Record source metadata at extraction.** Document the institution or database, indicator definition, reference year, extraction date, currency and valuation basis, revision status, product classification and any filtering or imputation. A citation without a data vintage is insufficient for a continuously revised database.
3. **Reconcile before publishing an extreme value.** When a source ratio is unusually large, compare national and international releases and check monthly, partner, and product details. Confirm whether revisions, re-exports, special trade, exchange-rate conversion or unit errors explain the difference.
4. **Keep reported and estimated values distinct.** Any FOB/CIF conversion, mirror substitution, missing value estimate or other adjustment should be clearly labelled. Retain the original value, method and parameters so that the result can be reproduced.
5. **Use mirror data diagnostically.** Mirror statistics are valuable for identifying possible omissions and inconsistencies, but should not silently replace reported data. Bilateral reconciliation is preferable when the difference is material.
6. **Strengthen national coordination.** NSOs, customs administrations, central banks and national accounts units should agree on revision calendars, data transmission, confidentiality treatment and responsibility for reconciling external-sector series.
7. **Institutionalize bilateral and regional review.** Regional economic communities and neighbouring countries can establish regular reconciliation exercises for major corridors and products, focusing on timing, partner attribution, re-exports and free-zone movements.

8. **Integrate ICBT transparently.** Countries should move from occasional surveys toward sustainable measurement where ICBT is material. Published totals should state whether ICBT is included, the survey reference period, geographic coverage, grossing method and the statistical domains into which estimates are incorporated.
9. **Treat IFF inference with caution.** Do not label a mirror gap as trade mis-invoicing until non-illicit statistical and operational causes have been assessed. Combine quantitative flags with administrative and contextual evidence.
10. **Publish a compact data companion.** Retain the country-level source inventory, extraction dates, calculations and revision notes outside the main brief. This preserves traceability without allowing a large annex to overwhelm the concise policy product.

7. Conclusion

Africa's merchandise trade statistics are widely available, but availability alone does not guarantee a coherent statistical narrative. International outlets provide long and often near-complete series, while national sources are frequently more current. Five widely used outlets reduce to three distinct series for the aggregate indicators examined, and most country-level differences are small. A limited number of extreme country-years nevertheless produce large divergences that can materially affect totals, rankings and policy messages.

The same caution applies within and between countries. Mirror comparisons show that only nine of 42 reporters were within plus or minus 10 per cent for exports and only four for imports, even after FOB adjustment. National accounts and IMTS are close for many export observations, but not all, and the imports comparison is constrained by the scarcity of valid FOB data. ICBT is increasingly measured, yet integration into official series remains uneven and national estimates cannot be ranked without considering their different designs and reference periods.

These discrepancies are not merely technical. They influence assessments of regional integration, trade performance, food and energy security, value-chain participation and possible illicit financial flows. The appropriate response is not to select whichever source supports the preferred narrative, but to document the source, reconcile material gaps and match the statistical framework to the policy question.

The results are sensitive to data vintage, missing values and valuation basis. A pairwise gap does not establish its cause or determine the preferable source. Aggregate exports cannot reveal whether a discrepancy originates in a product, partner or month; the 42-country mirror sample excludes 12 countries; and ICBT evidence is not fully comparable across countries.

The next phase should maintain a versioned country-source inventory, verify the largest discrepancies with national authorities, undertake bilateral reconciliation for selected corridors and develop common metadata for ICBT integration. The findings and preliminary guidance should then be discussed with national statistical offices, customs administrations, central banks and regional economic communities. This would convert the brief from a one-time comparison into a practical mechanism for improving the coherence and use of Africa's trade statistics.

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