

UNEMPLOYMENT STATISTICS IN AFRICA:

Status and Implications for Policy Discussions



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About the Statistics Brief

This edition of the Africa Beyond the Numbers series examines whether unemployment statistics, when used alone, provide an adequate account of labour market conditions in Africa. The continent's labour markets are characterized by extensive informality, seasonal and episodic work, multiple jobholding and survival-oriented livelihoods. These conditions complicate the interpretation of unemployment and require it to be considered alongside measures of labour underutilization, employment quality and worker welfare.

The brief assesses the production, dissemination and interpretation of six complementary indicators: the unemployment rate, unemployed population, underemployment, NEET, vulnerable employment and working poverty. It documents differences in data coverage, recency, periodicity, sources and definitions; shows how these differences can generate competing labour market narratives; and proposes a relational framework for more coherent policy diagnosis. Informal employment is used as an additional contextual indicator where comparable data are available.

Africa Beyond the Numbers is part of the African Centre for Statistics' efforts to produce concise, policy-ready statistical products that communicate why the numbers matter, not just what they are. The aim is to present the status of the availability, production, and dissemination of relational development indicators to enhance policy uptake.

1. Introduction

Africa's unemployment rate remains comparatively low, at about 6.3 per cent in 2025, despite persistently high levels of poverty, inequality, and the exposure of jobs and earnings to shocks. This apparent paradox points to the limits of using unemployment trends and patterns alone to assess labour market conditions and the continent's economic outlook. Widespread informality, weak earnings growth and high labour market vulnerability mean that many people work without secure or adequate incomes and job creation do not necessarily translate into changes in employment and unemployment rates due to high labour mobility. In 2025, working poverty in Africa was estimated at 35.6 per cent, compared with 3.1 per cent in Asia and the Pacific and less than 1 per cent in Europe and Central Asia (ILO, 2026a). In 2024, nearly four in five workers in Africa were in informal employment, often with low earnings, limited social protection and poor working conditions (ILO, 2026a; ILO, 2023). These trends suggest that headline unemployment statistics do not fully capture policy responses because of inherent job market imperfections.

The challenge is especially acute for Africa's growing youth population. Millions of young people enter the labour market each year, but many face limited pathways into productive, secure and adequately paid work. Broader indicators point to underemployment, vulnerable employment, youth not in employment, education or training (NEET), and unmet demand for decent work. Many workers combine casual jobs, informal activities and subsistence livelihoods because survival requires continuous economic activity, not because available work provides sustainable income.

These realities point to what may be described as conceptual endogeneity¹ in labour market measurement. Under prevailing statistical definitions, individuals who engage in even limited economic activity are classified as employed. However, in contexts where social protection systems are weak, and livelihoods depend heavily on informal and survival-oriented activities, poverty and vulnerability themselves may increase the likelihood of being classified as employed. In effect, individuals work because they are poor rather than escape poverty because they work. This creates the low unemployment paradox, where low measured unemployment coexists with widespread labour market distress. The paradox is most evident in the coexistence of low unemployment rates with high levels of working poverty, underemployment, vulnerable employment, and youth exclusion. The challenge is compounded by fragmentation across statistical systems, as unemployment estimates produced by national statistical offices, international organisations, and modelled datasets frequently diverge because of differences in survey instruments, definitions, reference periods, and estimation methodologies. Comparability is further weakened by the inconsistent application of strict and relaxed definitions of unemployment across countries and over time (ILO, 2013; ILO, 2023). In some cases, changes in unemployment

¹ Conceptual endogeneity refers to a situation in which the same conditions that signify labour market distress such as poverty, vulnerability, and weak social protection simultaneously increase the likelihood that individuals engage in survival-oriented economic activities and are therefore classified as employed. In such contexts, employment status may reflect economic necessity rather than successful labour market integration.

rates may reflect changes in statistical definitions rather than genuine improvements or deteriorations in labour market conditions, making both intertemporal comparisons and assessments of labour market progress difficult to interpret.

These patterns raise a broader development question: does Africa's apparent labour absorption reflect development-led job creation or survival-driven economic activity? They also suggest that the continent's unemployment paradox should be examined alongside labour mobility, job durability, and firms' capacity to survive. Against this background, the brief pursues four objectives. First, it assesses the comparability of unemployment statistics across international and national data sources, highlighting the extent of measurement divergence. Second, it uncovers gaps and fragmentation in labour market statistics, including inconsistencies in data coverage, reporting frequency, survey sources, and methodological approaches. Third, it investigates whether unemployment statistics adequately reflect labour market conditions in Africa by examining their relationship with working poverty, underemployment, vulnerable employment, and other indicators of labour market welfare. Fourth, it advances a relational statistical framework that integrates unemployment with complementary indicators, namely underemployment, vulnerable employment, NEET, and the unemployed population, to support more coherent labour market diagnostics and strengthen the role of statistics in evidence-based policy design across African economies.

2. Approach and Methodology

This section explains the key concepts and indicators used in the brief, as well as the data sources and methods used in the analyses.

2.1 Definition of Key Concepts

This section explains the key concepts and indicators used in the brief, as well as the data sources and methods applied in the analysis. Labour market concepts are primarily based on standardized definitions developed by the ILO, particularly the Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization (19th ICLS, 2013).²

Work refers to any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or provide services for use by others or for own use.

Employment comprises all persons of working age who, during a short reference period, were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit, including wage employment, self-employment, and contributing family work.

Labour force refers to all persons of working age who are either employed or unemployed.

Unemployment includes all working-age persons who were not in employment, carried out activities to seek employment during a specified recent period, and were currently available to take up employment given a job opportunity.

Unemployment rate refers to the proportion of the labour force that is unemployed (ILO, 2013).

Strict unemployment refers to persons who are not employed, are actively seeking work, and are available to start work.

Relaxed unemployment refers to persons who are not employed and are available for work regardless of whether they are actively seeking employment. This measure often captures discouraged job seekers who have stopped searching for work.

Underemployment (time-related) refers to employed persons whose working time is insufficient relative to a specified threshold and who are willing and available to work additional hours.

Vulnerable employment refers to the share of own-account workers and contributing family workers in total employment. Such workers are generally less likely to have formal work arrangements, stable earnings, and access to social protection.

² Labour market concepts in this brief are primarily based on International Labour Organization (ILO) standards (19th ICLS, 2013). NEET is included as a complementary indicator of youth labour market transition, and the unemployed population is a derived measure rather than a distinct ILO labour market category

Informal employment refers to jobs that are, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to employment benefits. It is commonly measured as the proportion of informal employment in total employment (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026a).

Working poverty refers to the proportion of employed persons living in households below a specified poverty line despite being engaged in economic activity. It highlights situations where employment does not necessarily translate into adequate living standards.

NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) refers to the proportion of young persons who are not engaged in employment, education or training (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026c).

Unemployed population refers to the total number of persons in the labour force who meet the criteria for unemployment (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026b).

ILO Modelled Estimates are internationally comparable labour statistics produced by the ILO using nationally reported data and model-based imputations to fill data gaps and generate consistent country, regional and global series (ILO, 2026b).

ILO National Estimates are labour statistics drawn from country-reported national sources, usually surveys or administrative systems, and disseminated by the ILO, reflecting each country's available data and statistical practices (ILO, 2026a).

2.2 Data Sources and Methods

This brief adopts a multi-source, multi-indicator approach to examine the availability, production, dissemination, comparability, and interpretation of unemployment-related statistics across Africa. The analysis draws on data from key global and national custodians of labour market statistics and integrates datasets from:

- ILO Modelled Estimates, which provide harmonized and internationally comparable labour market indicators based on nationally reported data and statistical modelling (ILO, 2026b).
- ILO National Estimates, which reflect country-reported labour market statistics derived from national surveys and administrative systems and disseminated by the ILO with limited modelling adjustments (ILO, 2026a).
- World Development Indicators was used to source regional estimates on vulnerable employment.
- National Statistical Offices (NSOs), which are the primary producers of labour market data through Labour Force Surveys (LFS), Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES), Living Standards Measurement Studies (LSMS), population censuses, and administrative records.

The brief combines these data with descriptive, comparative, and diagnostic analytical methods. Comparative techniques assess differences among national, modelled, and official national statistics across countries. A range-based diagnostic framework is applied to evaluate the degree

of consistency and fragmentation in unemployment estimates across data sources. In addition, graphical analysis highlights variations in data recency, reporting frequency, survey coverage, estimate divergence, and other dimensions of labour market fragmentation.

To provide a more comprehensive assessment of labour market conditions, the analysis adopts a relational approach that examines unemployment alongside complementary indicators, including the unemployed population, underemployment, NEET and vulnerable employment. Rather than treating unemployment as a standalone measure of labour market performance, the framework evaluates its relationship with broader indicators of labour demand, job quality, and welfare outcomes. This approach enables the brief to move beyond isolated statistics and develop a more coherent and policy-relevant interpretation of labour market dynamics in Africa.

2.3 Coverage

The analysis covers African countries for which data were available across the selected labour market indicators. Coverage varies by indicator due to differences in data availability, reporting practices, and survey implementation across countries.

For unemployment, ILO National Estimates cover 52 of the 54 African countries and span the period 1970–2025, while ILO Modelled Estimates cover 53 countries and span 1991–2027. Underemployment, measured as time-related underemployment, covers 37 countries for the period 1991–2025. NEET statistics cover 49 countries over the same period, while vulnerable employment statistics cover 53 countries from 2000–2025. Additional indicators, including informal employment and working poverty, are included where comparable data are available. Coverage counts and periods reflect the ILOSTAT extracts used for this brief (ILO, 2026a). Countries with missing observations for specific indicators were excluded from the corresponding indicator-specific analyses, comparisons, and visualizations.

2.4 Statistical Markers

2.4.1 Data Recency (Latest Estimate and/or Publication Year)

Data recency refers to the most recent reference year or publication year available for a given indicator at the time of this analysis. It indicates the timeliness of the underlying statistics.

2.4.2 Earliest (First) Estimate and/or Publication Year

This marker captures the earliest available observation or publication year for a given indicator within the period covered by the analysis. It provides insight into the historical depth of the data series.

2.4.3 Data Range

Data range refers to the span of years between the earliest and latest available estimates for a given indicator. It reflects the data's temporal coverage.

2.4.4 Number of Data Points

The number of data points represents the total count of available observations for a country or indicator within the specified period of analysis. It indicates data completeness and continuity.

2.4.5 Periodicity

Periodicity refers to the average interval between available estimates for a given indicator. In this brief, it is calculated as the difference between the latest and earliest estimate years divided by the number of available observations for the labour market indicator in question. Lower values indicate more frequent reporting, while higher values suggest less frequent data collection or dissemination.

2.4.6 Publication Year and Survey Year

Survey year refers to the year in which the underlying data were collected, while publication year refers to the year in which the resulting estimate was released or disseminated. Differences between survey and publication years may affect the timeliness, interpretation, and comparability of labour market indicators across countries and data sources.

2. Key Findings on the Status of Unemployment Statistics in Africa

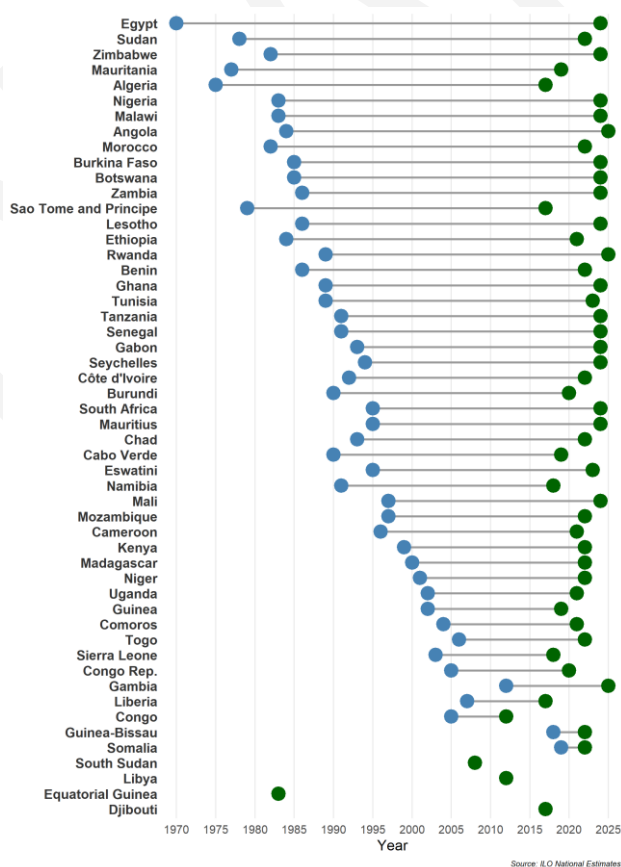
This section presents the empirical evidence in two stages. It first examines the statistical foundations of unemployment estimates, including their recency, coverage, periodicity, sources, and comparability. It then considers the narratives produced by those statistics, including the low-unemployment paradox and the disconnect between employment, poverty and wider labour market distress.

3.1 Differences in the Recency and Range of National Unemployment Estimates

National unemployment statistics production varies significantly across Africa: the first estimates span 1970-2019, while the latest available statistics range from 1983-2025, with the following specificities:

- Egypt had the first estimate in 1970 and the maiden statistic for Somalia was in 2019.
- Thirteen countries have national unemployment statistics preceding the 2020, with Equatorial Guinea reporting the farthest, 1983.
- Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, and South Sudan have only one estimate for national unemployment statistics.

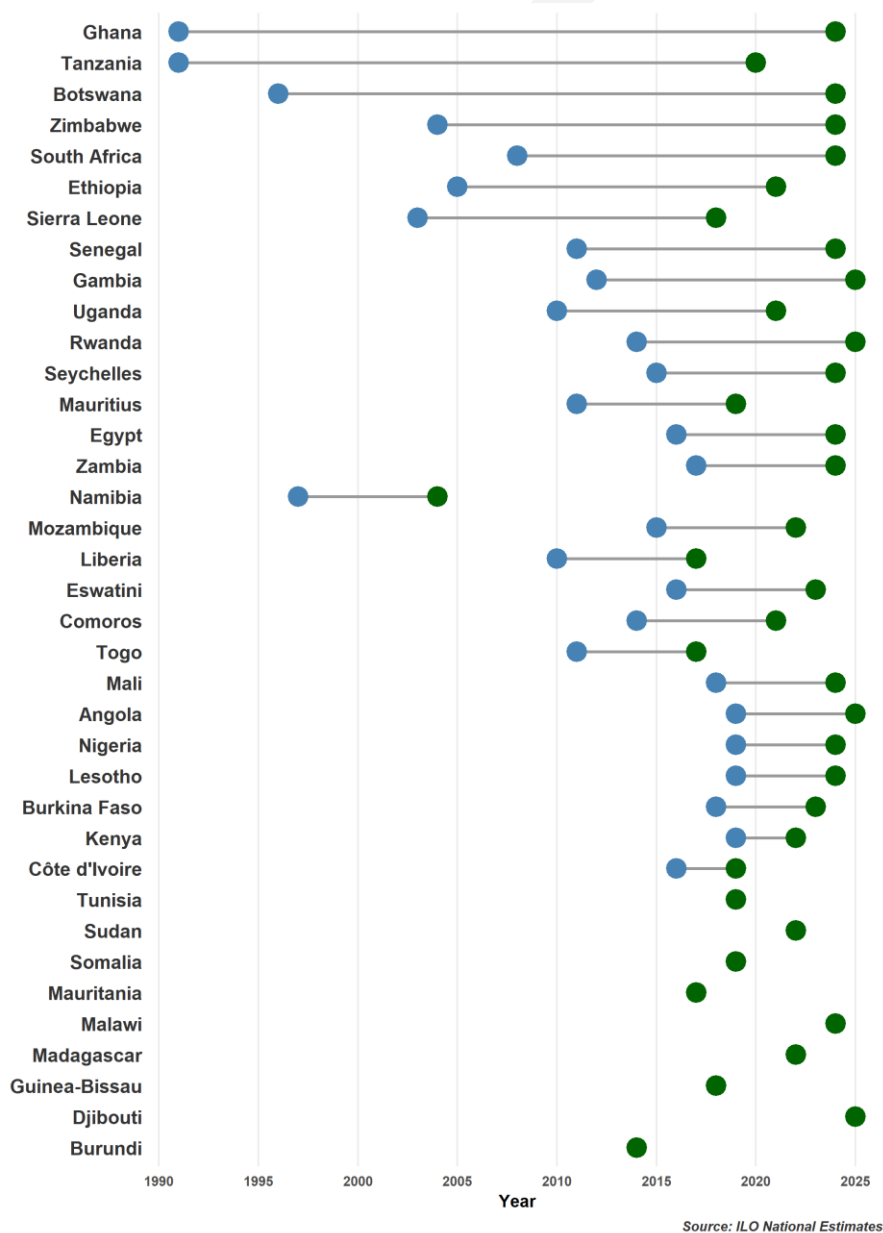
Figure 1: Data recency, latest year and ranges for national unemployment statistics across African countries



National underemployment statistics production also varies significantly across Africa: the first estimates span 1991-2025, while the latest available statistics range from 2004-2025, with the following specificities:

- Ghana and Tanzania reported the first estimates in 1991, while Djibouti reported its maiden estimate in 2025.
- Eleven countries have national underemployment statistics preceding 2020, with Namibia reporting the farthest, 2004.
- Burundi, Djibouti, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia have only one estimate for national underemployment statistics.

Figure 2: Data recency, latest year and ranges for national underemployment statistics across African countries

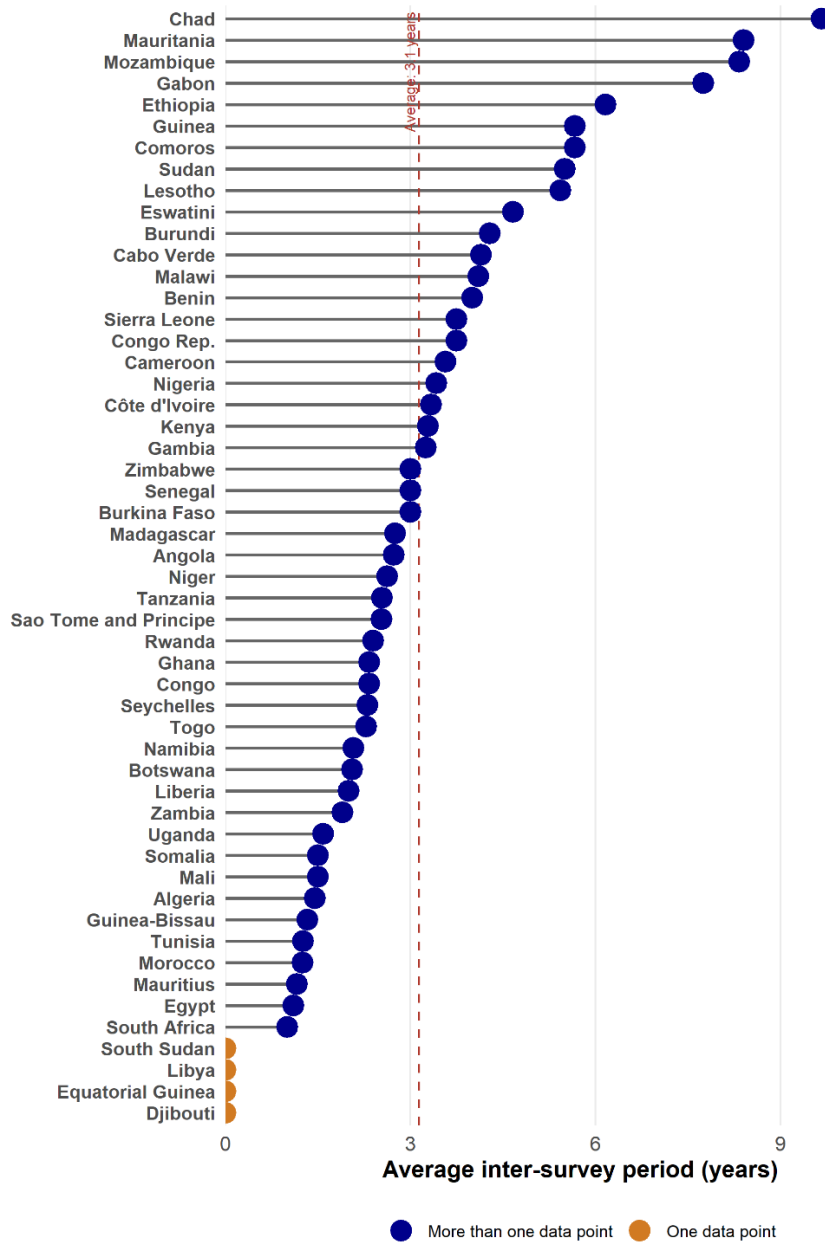


3.2 Differences in the Periodicity of National Unemployment Estimates

National unemployment reporting is irregular across Africa, with an average inter-survey period of about 3.1 years.

- 21 of 52 countries record gaps above the regional average.
- Chad has the widest average gap, about 9.7 years, followed by Mauritania and Mozambique at over 8 years.
- Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, and South Sudan have only one national unemployment estimate.
- Coverage is incomplete: the analysis covers 52 countries, excluding Central African Republic and Eritrea.

Figure 3: Irregular reporting of national unemployment estimates



Source: ILO National Estimates
Countries with one data point are highlighted separately

3.3 Differences between National and Modelled Unemployment Estimates

ILO modelled and national unemployment estimates are broadly consistent, but with country-level divergences.

- Malawi records the largest national-over-modelled gap: 15.4% nationally versus 5.1% modelled.
- Congo, Somalia and Rwanda show the largest cases where modelled estimates exceed national estimates, with gaps of 9.5, 8.0 and 6.0 percentage points respectively.
- Four countries record gaps above five percentage points: Malawi, where the national estimate is higher by 10.4 points, and Congo, Somalia and Rwanda, where modelled estimates are higher by 9.5, 8.0 and 6.0 points, respectively

Figure 4: ILO modelled and national unemployment estimates

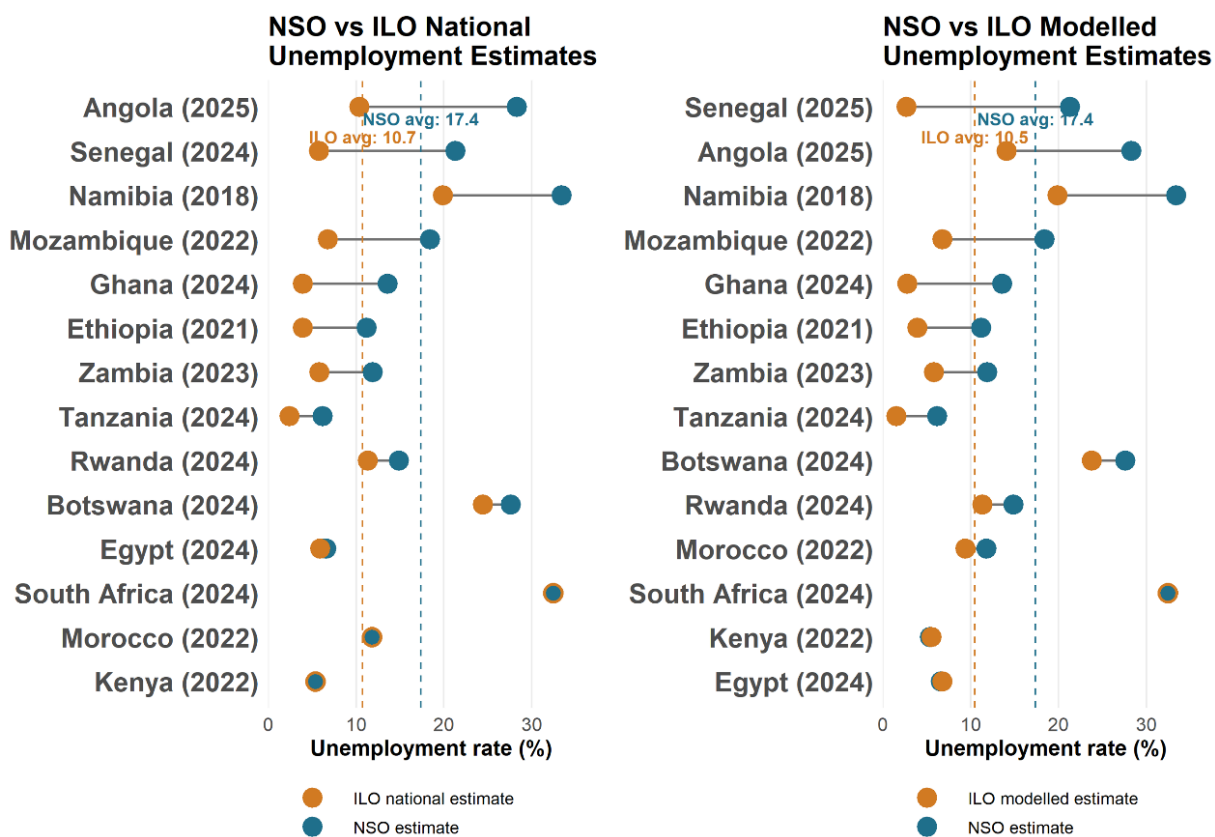


Source: ILO National Estimates and ILO Modelled Estimates
Latest available national estimate year by country. Two-colour nodes indicate identical estimates.

NSO estimates diverge substantially from both ILO national and ILO modelled estimates for the selected countries.

- The average NSO unemployment rate is 17.4%, compared with 10.7% for ILO national estimates and 10.5% for ILO modelled estimates.
- 7 of 14 countries have NSO-ILO gaps above five percentage points in both comparisons.
- The largest divergences are observed in Angola, Senegal, Namibia, Mozambique, and Ghana.
- Estimates are closely aligned only in a few cases, notably Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, and Morocco.

Figure 5: Divergent evidence on unemployment estimates across selected African countries³

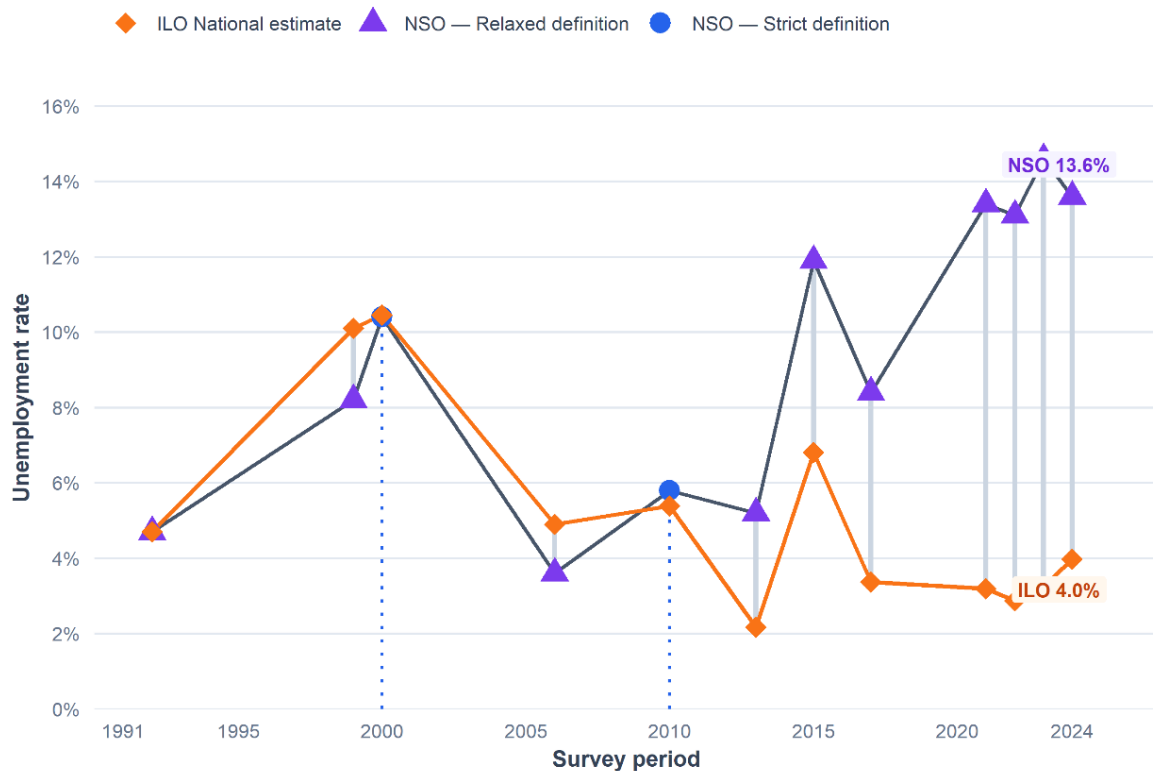


³ Country comparisons use the latest available estimate for each source, so the figures may refer to different reference years across countries. Year labels in parentheses indicate the estimate year used

3.4 Types and Changes in Scope of Unemployment Measures: The Case of Ghana

Ghana's unemployment estimates diverge sharply after the shift from the strict to relaxed NSO definition: by 2024, the NSO estimate reaches 13.6%, while the ILO national estimate is only 4.0%, showing how definitional changes can substantially alter the measured level of unemployment

Figure 6 : Strict versus relaxed unemployment estimates over time in Ghana



Source: NSO Reports and ILO National estimates.

3.5 Regional Labour Market Statistical Blocks

Regional labour market statistical blocks show that unemployment alone gives an incomplete picture of labour market conditions.

- Africa is the only continent with higher underemployment (9.8%) than unemployment (6.3%).
- Africa has the highest disparity (more than 10 times) between unemployment (6.3%) and vulnerable employment (70.8%).
- Africa's labour market profile illustrates the low-unemployment paradox: headline unemployment is relatively low at 6.3%, but underemployment is higher at 9.8% and vulnerable employment remains very high at 70.8%, pointing to deeper labour market stress
- Africa combines a relatively high employment-to-population ratio of 60.8% with very high vulnerable employment of 70.8%, suggesting that many people are working, but often in insecure or low-quality jobs.

Figure 7: Labour market statistical blocks

Africa				Americas			
	2024	2025		2024	2025		
Unemployment	6.3%	6.3%		5.3%	5.1%		
Underemployment	9.8%	9.8%		4.7%	4.7%		
Vulnerable Employment	71.1%	70.8%		-	-		
NEET	22.9%	22.9%		16.8%	16.9%		
Unemployed Population	37,733	38,643		27,392	26,724		
Emp. to Pop. Ratio	60.8%	60.8%		59.3%	59.3%		

Arab States				Asia and the Pacific			
	2024	2025		2024	2025		
Unemployment	9.5%	9.5%		4.1%	4.1%		
Underemployment	3.8%	3.8%		3.9%	3.9%		
Vulnerable Employment	21.8%	21.7%		35.6%	35.3%		
NEET	32.3%	32.4%		19.8%	19.9%		
Unemployed Population	6,307	6,425		86,489	87,532		
Emp. to Pop. Ratio	44.9%	44.8%		58.1%	57.9%		

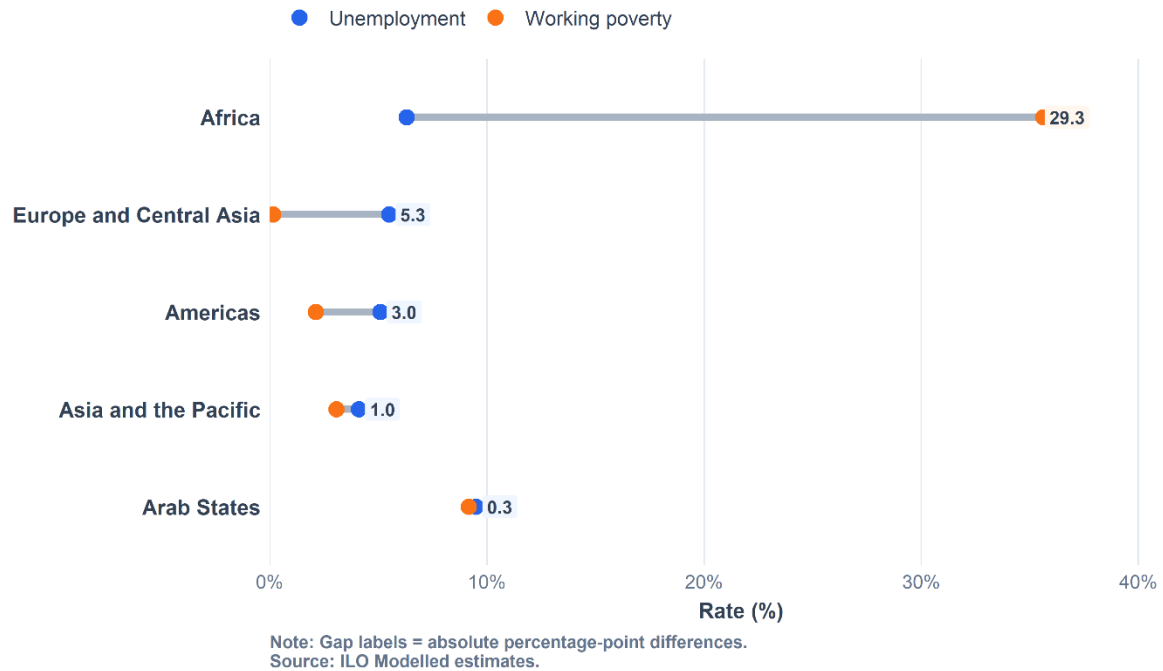
Europe and Central Asia							
	2024	2025					
Unemployment	5.5%	5.5%					
Underemployment	3.3%	3.3%					
Vulnerable Employment	13.0%	12.9%					
NEET	13.2%	13.2%					
Unemployed Population	24,956	24,902					
Emp. to Pop. Ratio	55.3%	54.9%					

Source: ILO Modelled estimates and WDI
 Note: Emp. to Pop. Ratio means Employment to Population Ratio
 Note: Vulnerable employment for Africa excludes North Africa

3.6 The Unemployment-Poverty Disconnect

Africa stands out as the only region where working poverty exceeds unemployment, with a gap of 29.3 percentage points. In all other regions, working poverty is lower than unemployment, making Africa a clear outlier and reinforcing that employment does not necessarily protect workers from poverty.

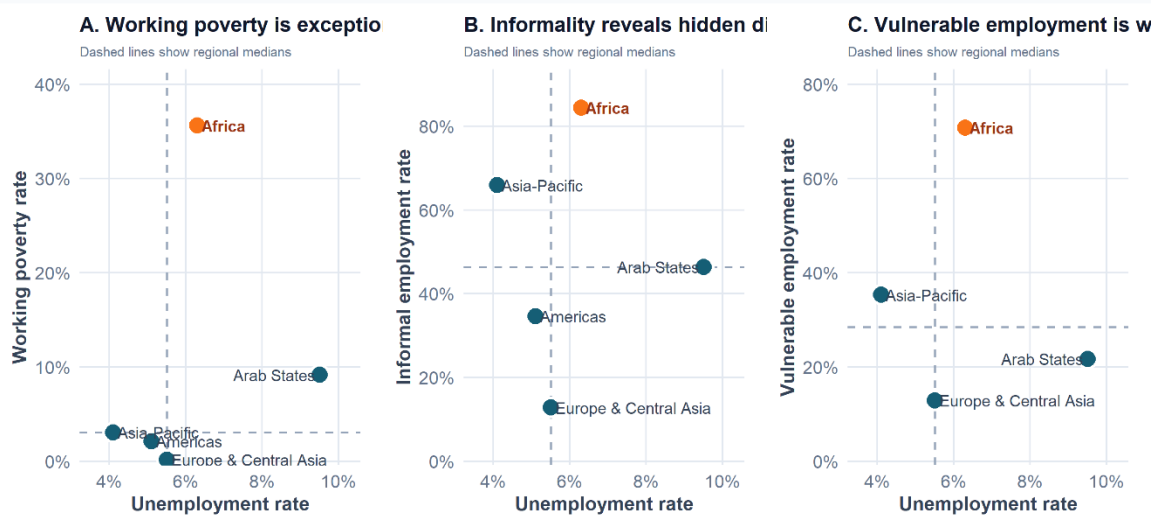
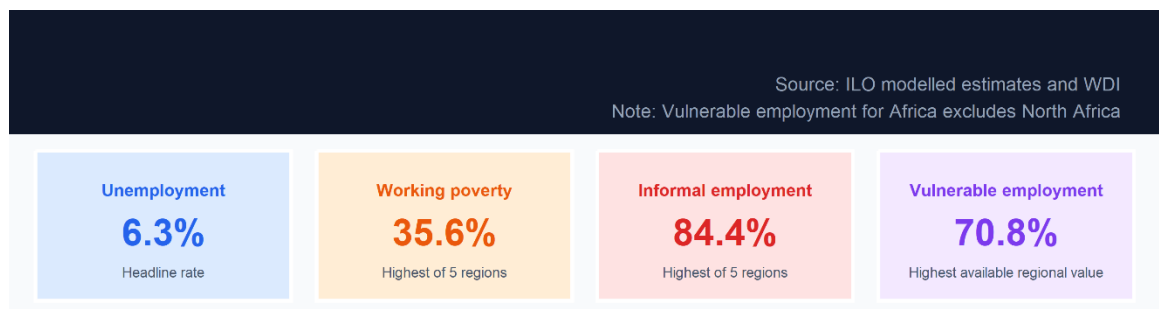
Figure 8: Absolute gaps between unemployment and working poverty across regions



3.7 Low Unemployment and Labour Market Distress

Africa's relatively low unemployment masks severe labour-market distress, with high working poverty of 35.6 percent, informality of 84.4 percent and vulnerable employment of 70.8 percent.

Figure 9: Low unemployment and high labour market distress

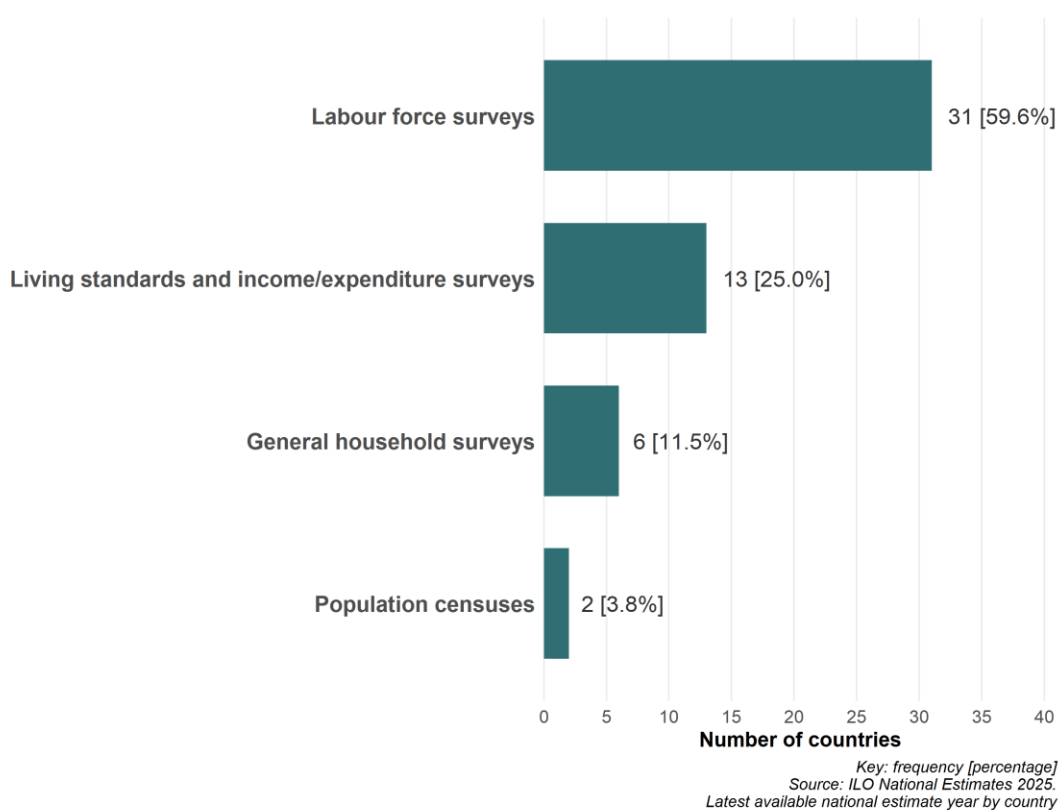


3.8 Survey Diversity and Structural Fragmentation in Unemployment Data Systems

Survey sources for national unemployment statistics vary widely across countries, confirming fragmentation in unemployment data systems.

- 31 of 52 countries rely on Labour Force Surveys, the main source for unemployment statistics.
- 13 countries use Household Income/Expenditure Surveys, while 6 countries rely on general Household Surveys.
- Equatorial Guinea and South Sudan rely on Population Census sources.

Figure 10: Survey diversity⁴ across countries



⁴ **Note:** Source categories are grouped by the primary purpose of the data collection instrument. Labour force surveys are designed mainly for labour-market measurement; living standards and income/expenditure surveys primarily measure household welfare, poverty, income, or consumption; general household surveys are broader multi-topic surveys that include labour questions; and population censuses are full population counts conducted at longer intervals

4. Reinterpreting Unemployment Statistics in Africa

The findings establish two related problems. First, unemployment estimates are not always comparable across sources, countries, or time. Cross-country summaries may conceal differences in survey timing, definitions, missingness, source type, and whether estimates are modelled or observed. Second, even comparable estimates may not reflect the same levels of employment security, income adequacy, or labour market vulnerability. This section moves from statistical production to interpretation, showing how definitions, mobility, informality, and survival employment can weaken the link between measured unemployment and lived labour market conditions.

4.1 Comparability of Unemployment Statistics

Internationally comparable unemployment statistics are essential for monitoring labour market performance, benchmarking countries, and tracking progress towards development goals. The adoption of standardized ILO definitions has substantially improved the comparability of unemployment estimates across countries. Nevertheless, important differences remain due to variations in survey instruments, sample designs, reference periods, estimation procedures, and reporting practices.

The analysis presented in this brief shows that some countries exhibit a high degree of consistency between national and international unemployment estimates, while others display moderate or severe fragmentation. In several cases, differences are small and unlikely to affect broad policy conclusions. In others, however, alternative sources produce markedly different unemployment estimates for the same country and year, creating uncertainty regarding the true magnitude of labour market challenges. Such discrepancies complicate cross-country comparisons and may lead to differing policy narratives depending on the source consulted. Cross-country summaries should therefore be interpreted with caution. They can hide differences in survey timing, definitions, missingness, source type, and whether estimates are modelled or observed. Regional averages should therefore be read as diagnostic signals, not as exact substitutes for country-level evidence.

More fundamentally, statistical comparability does not necessarily imply conceptual comparability. Even when unemployment estimates are numerically similar, underlying labour market realities may differ substantially because of variations in informality, labour force participation, job quality, and social protection systems. Consequently, unemployment statistics should be interpreted alongside complementary indicators that provide additional insight into labour market conditions.

4.2 Conceptual Fragmentation

Unlike unemployment, labour market well-being cannot be fully captured by a single measure. While unemployment statistics seek to identify individuals without work who are actively seeking and available for employment, they do not directly capture the quality, stability, productivity, or adequacy of employment. As a result, unemployment may present only a partial view of labour market conditions.

This limitation is particularly relevant in African economies where labour market distress often manifests through informal employment, underemployment, vulnerable employment, and working poverty rather than open unemployment. Two countries with similar unemployment rates may therefore exhibit vastly different labour market outcomes. Similarly, a decline in unemployment does not necessarily imply improved labour market welfare if low earnings, limited productivity, or poor working conditions characterise the additional employment generated.

The coexistence of relatively low unemployment rates with high levels of working poverty, informal employment, and vulnerable employment suggests that unemployment statistics may not always move in tandem with broader indicators of labour market well-being. This creates conceptual fragmentation, where different labour market indicators convey different narratives about the same economy. Understanding these relationships requires moving beyond isolated indicators towards a more relational interpretation of labour market statistics.

4.3 Strict versus Relaxed Unemployment: The Ghana Experience

Another challenge to interpreting unemployment statistics arises from differences in the operational definition of unemployment. While the strict definition requires that individuals be without work, actively seeking employment, and available to work, the relaxed definition removes the job-search requirement. It includes persons who are available for work but may have become discouraged from actively searching.

The distinction is particularly important in contexts where employment opportunities are limited and prolonged joblessness may discourage active job search. Under such circumstances, strict unemployment measures may understate labour market distress by excluding discouraged workers who remain willing and available to work.

Ghana provides a useful illustration of this challenge. Over time, unemployment estimates have been produced using different definitions and survey methodologies, making direct comparisons across periods difficult. Changes in measured unemployment may therefore reflect definitional adjustments rather than genuine changes in labour market conditions. Similar concerns arise in other African countries where variations in labour force survey design and reporting practices complicate the interpretation of trends. Consequently, caution is required when using unemployment statistics to assess labour market progress over time.

4.4 Job Creation, Industrial Survival and Labour Mobility

Most labour market statistics provide a snapshot of an individual's status at a particular point in time. Such statistics classify individuals as employed, unemployed, or outside the labour force but provide limited information on movements between these states. Labour markets, however, are inherently dynamic.

In many African economies, workers frequently transition between formal employment, informal activities, self-employment, casual labour, subsistence production, and periods of inactivity. Others combine multiple jobs simultaneously to diversify income sources and manage economic risk. These movements are often invisible in conventional unemployment statistics.

The relationship between job creation and unemployment also depends on firms' survival and the durability of the jobs they provide. Where industries and enterprises face unstable operating conditions, newly created jobs may be temporary, and workers may repeatedly move between formal, informal, casual and self-employed activities. Job creation may therefore generate mobility among people already classified as employed without producing a corresponding reduction in unemployment. This raises a central development question for Africa: whether employment growth represents the creation of sustainable, welfare-enhancing jobs or the continued absorption of labour into insecure and survival-oriented activities. A narrow focus on job creation may therefore overlook important aspects of labour market functioning. New jobs may be created while labour market dissatisfaction, skills mismatches, and labour mobility challenges persist. Similarly, low unemployment may coexist with substantial worker movement between unstable or low-productivity activities. Understanding labour market dynamics therefore requires greater attention to labour mobility, job transitions, and employment quality alongside traditional unemployment measures.

4.5 Informality and Survival Employment

Perhaps the most important limitation of unemployment statistics in Africa is the prevalence of informal and survival-oriented employment. In many countries, the absence of comprehensive social protection systems means that individuals cannot afford prolonged periods without work. Consequently, economic necessity often compels participation in informal trading, subsistence agriculture, casual labour, and other low-productivity activities.

Under standard labour market definitions, such activities are classified as employment. Yet participation in these activities does not necessarily imply labour market success, adequate earnings, or economic security. Rather, they often represent coping mechanisms adopted in response to poverty and limited employment opportunities.

This reality gives rise to what may be described as conceptual endogeneity in labour market measurement. The same poverty and vulnerability that signal labour market distress may simultaneously increase the likelihood that individuals engage in survival-oriented work and are therefore classified as employed. As a result, low unemployment rates may coexist with widespread labour market hardship. This helps explain why Africa records relatively modest unemployment rates while simultaneously experiencing high levels of working poverty, informal employment, vulnerable employment, and youth exclusion.

In summary, these observations suggest that unemployment should not be interpreted as a standalone measure of labour market performance. Rather, it should be viewed as one component of a broader system of labour market indicators that can capture the multiple dimensions of employment, welfare, and economic opportunity.

5. A Relational Framework for Labour Market

Diagnostics

The diagnosis points to a practical implication: unemployment remains necessary, but it should no longer be interpreted in isolation. A coherent assessment must distinguish open joblessness from labour underutilization, youth exclusion, employment insecurity and the welfare outcomes associated with work.

The brief therefore proposes a relational framework that combines complementary indicators across four questions: how many people lack work (unemployed population); how fully labour is utilized (underemployment); what quality and security employment provides (vulnerable employment); and whether work supports an adequate standard of living (working poverty). The framework does not replace unemployment statistics. It provides the context needed for sound interpretation.

5.1 The Five-Core Labour Market Statistical Block

The proposed framework consists of five relational indicators: the unemployment rate, unemployed population, underemployment, NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) and vulnerable employment. Together, these indicators capture different but interconnected dimensions of labour market performance. While the unemployment rate and unemployed population measure the extent and scale of open joblessness, underemployment captures hidden labour market underutilisation, NEET reflects youth exclusion and barriers to labour market entry, and vulnerable employment provides insight into employment quality and economic security. Examined collectively, these indicators provide a more comprehensive understanding of labour market realities than any single indicator considered in isolation and help distinguish between labour market participation, underutilisation and employment quality.

5.2 Regional Labour Market Profiles

The value of a relational framework becomes apparent when labour market indicators are examined simultaneously. Africa provides a particularly striking example. Although unemployment rates are broadly comparable to those observed in several other regions, the continent records substantially higher levels of working poverty, vulnerable employment, and youth exclusion. This suggests that unemployment alone provides an incomplete account of labour market conditions. In contrast, regions with similar unemployment rates often exhibit significantly lower levels of labour market vulnerability and working poverty, indicating stronger links between employment and welfare outcomes.

The evidence therefore supports the view that unemployment should be interpreted as one component of a broader labour market diagnostic framework rather than as a standalone indicator of labour market success. A low unemployment rate may reflect genuine employment opportunities in some contexts, but in others it may coexist with widespread labour market insecurity and economic vulnerability.

5.3 From Labour Market Statistics to Labour Market Narratives

Labour market indicators are often interpreted independently, resulting in fragmented narratives about labour market performance. A relational framework encourages a shift from isolated statistics to integrated labour market narratives. For example, a country with low unemployment, high working poverty, high vulnerable employment, and elevated NEET rates would present a fundamentally different labour market picture from a country with similar unemployment but low levels of poverty and labour market vulnerability.

Such an approach is particularly relevant for Africa, where labour market distress frequently manifests through informality, underemployment, and poor-quality employment rather than open unemployment. By examining the relationships among multiple indicators, policymakers can better distinguish between labour market expansion, labour market inclusion, employment quality, and welfare outcomes.

Ultimately, the proposed framework recognizes that no single indicator can adequately capture the complexity of labour markets. A more coherent and policy-relevant assessment of labour market conditions requires a dashboard of complementary indicators that jointly reflect labour demand, labour utilization, employment quality, and worker welfare.

6. Policy Guidance for the Use of Unemployment Statistics

The evidence does not support abandoning unemployment statistics. It supports disciplining how they are produced, communicated and used. Governments and statistical institutions should treat the unemployment rate as one element of a labour market diagnostic rather than as a standalone verdict on labour market performance.

6.1 Publish a Core Labour Market Statistical Block

National statistical offices should publish the unemployment rate together with the unemployed population, underemployment, NEET, vulnerable employment and working poverty. Where available, informal employment should provide additional context. Joint publication would make trade-offs visible and reduce the risk that a favourable headline rate obscures poor-quality work or exclusion.

6.2 Strengthen Metadata and Comparability

Every release should clearly identify the survey source, reference period, population coverage, strict or relaxed unemployment definition, revisions and modelling status. When methods change, statistical offices should provide a bridge series or explain the expected effect on comparability. National and international producers should also document why estimates for the same country and year differ.

6.3 Align Statistical Production with Policy Cycles

Labour force surveys and complementary indicators should be produced on schedules that support national planning, budgeting and employment-policy review. Countries with long or irregular reporting gaps require sustainable survey financing and greater use of administrative records to improve continuity between survey rounds.

6.4 Build Country-Led Labour Market Narratives

Governments should interpret indicators relationally and in their national context. A country combining low unemployment with high working poverty or vulnerable employment requires a different response from one combining low unemployment with secure, productive work. National statistical offices should lead this narrative and explain what the indicators jointly imply for job creation, social protection, skills and productivity policy.

7. The Potential of Emerging Data Sources for Labour Market Statistics

Conventional labour market statistics remain essential for measuring unemployment and related indicators. However, they are often collected intermittently, may not adequately capture labour mobility and informal work, and provide only periodic snapshots of rapidly evolving labour markets. Emerging data sources offer opportunities to complement official statistics and strengthen labour market diagnostics in Africa.

7.1 Administrative Data

Administrative records, including social security, tax, business registration, and employment service databases, can provide more timely information on employment dynamics than traditional surveys. These data can improve the monitoring of job creation, labour market transitions, and labour force participation, particularly within the formal sector.

7.2 Mobile Phone Data

Mobile phone data can provide insights into population mobility, commuting patterns, seasonal migration, and labour market transitions. Such information is particularly valuable in African labour markets where workers frequently move between locations, jobs, and economic activities.

7.3 Digital Labour Platforms

Data from digital labour platforms can help capture emerging forms of work, including gig work, online freelancing, delivery services, and ride-hailing activities. These data can improve understanding of multiple jobholding, underemployment, and evolving employment arrangements that are often missed by conventional surveys.

7.4 Satellite and Geospatial Data

Satellite imagery and geospatial data can serve as proxies for economic activity and employment opportunities. Indicators such as night-time lights and commercial activity can help identify spatial patterns of economic growth, informality, and labour market concentration, particularly in areas where conventional data are limited.

7.5 Towards Integrated Labour Market Information Systems

Emerging data sources should complement, not replace, official labour market statistics. Their greatest value lies in improving the measurement of labour mobility, underemployment, informal work, and rapidly changing employment arrangements. Integrating administrative, mobile phone, platform, and geospatial data with traditional labour market statistics can support the development of more timely, comprehensive, and policy-relevant labour market information systems across Africa.

8. Conclusion and Way Forward

This brief identifies a labour market anomaly with direct implications for policy interpretation in Africa. Relatively low unemployment frequently coexists with high working poverty, informality, underemployment and vulnerable employment. Unemployment remains an important measure, but it cannot, by itself, establish whether work is productive, secure, or sufficient to support an adequate standard of living. Statistical fragmentation also affects interpretation. Differences between national, international and modelled estimates; irregular survey schedules; changing sources; and strict or relaxed definitions can alter both the level and trend of unemployment. Comparability therefore requires transparent metadata, stable methods and explicit communication of breaks in series.

The proposed five-indicator block offers a practical response by publishing unemployment alongside the unemployed population, underemployment, NEET, and vulnerable employment. Informal employment and working poverty should provide additional context where reliable data are available.

The way forward is to institutionalize this relational approach within national statistical systems and policy cycles. National statistical offices should strengthen survey regularity and metadata, reconcile divergent estimates, lead country-specific labour market narratives and integrate appropriate administrative and emerging data. The policy question is therefore not only whether people are working, or jobs are being created, but whether firms and jobs survive, whether new employment draws people out of unemployment or mainly redistributes already-employed workers, and whether work is productive, secure and capable of improving well-being.

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