



COMPARABILITY OF AFRICA'S GDP STATISTICS AMONG NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL OUTLETS



African Centre for Statistics, UNECA
Statistical Brief - ECA/ACS/01/2026
11 MAY 2026

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. SCOPE OF GDP AND KEY CONCEPTS	4
2.2. GDP in LCU (Local Currency Units)	4
2.3. GDP in current United States dollars	4
2.4. Observed USD gap	4
2.5. Reconstructed USD gap and unexplained parts	4
3. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY	5
3.1 Data Sources	5
3.2. Coverage and analytical sample	5
3.3. Analytical approach	5
3.4. Decomposition approach	5
3.5. Thresholds and interpretation	6
4. POTENTIAL SOURCES OF DIFFERENCES AND WHY THEY MATTER	6
4.1. Differences in the underlying LCU GDP series	6
4.2. Differences in exchange-rate conversion	6
4.3. Timing, alignment and source-specific revisions	7
5. KEY FINDINGS	8
5.1. Prevalence of Differences Between Official and Internationally Reported GDP Estimates	8
5.2 Repeated Local-Currency Gaps of 3 Percent or More	9
5.3 World Bank-NSO Local Currency Gaps	10
5.4 Differences in GDP in Current USD Across International Sources	11
5.5 Differences in GDP in Current USD Across International Sources	12
5.6 Outlet Patterns and Episodic USD Gaps	13
5.7 Sources of Differences in GDP Across International Estimates	14
5.8 Remaining Differences in GDP Across International Outlets	15
6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USE OF GDP FIGURES	16
7. CONCLUSION	17

Table of Figures

Figure 5.1: Prevalence of Official vs. Internationally Reported GDP Estimates.....	8
Figure 5.2: Intensity of Local-Currency Gaps in NSO Comparisons	9
Figure 5.3: Distribution of Annual WB–NSO Local-Currency Gaps by Countries	10
Figure 5.4: Maximum international-outlet USD gap by country.....	11
Figure 5.5: Distribution of international USD gaps and largest observed values	12
Figure 5.6: Outlet-pattern windows and USD-gap episodes	13
Figure 5.7: Average contribution of local-currency and exchange-rate inputs by outlet pair	14
Figure 5.8: Outlier and remaining-gap-heavy cases in international USD gaps	15

1. INTRODUCTION

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) remains a priority development economic indicator at both the micro (per capita GDP) and macro levels and retains its foundational importance across different well-being measures. This includes the Human Development Index, the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index and the ongoing discussions on a “Beyond-GDP” metric. In Africa, the centrality of GDP is more pronounced, especially at a time when many countries are managing rising debt-service burdens, tighter financing conditions, exchange-rate pressures, and urgent demands for jobs, infrastructure, and social investment. GDP shapes how debt sustainability is rated, how fiscal space is understood, how countries are compared, and how economic performance is communicated to markets, development partners, and citizens. This makes the quality and suitability of GDP figures especially important for the continent. When different sources report different values for the same country and year, even modest differences can alter the reading of ratios such as debt-to-GDP, deficit-to-GDP, and tax revenue-to-GDP.

Across Africa, GDP is generally compiled within national statistical systems, most often by the National Statistical Office. Compilation methods are broadly standardized around internationally recognized national accounts frameworks, specifically the 2008 System of National Accounts. Publication practices, however, are less uniform. Countries first report GDP in their local currency, while international organizations republish the series in both local currency and current United States dollars. In that process, differences arise from timing, rebasing, conversion practices, revisions, the revision status of the estimate (whether it is provisional, revised, or final), and how data are updated across institutions. What appears to be one familiar indicator, therefore, becomes a set of closely related, but not always identical, numbers.

This brief presents an assessment of differences in GDP figures reported for African countries by national statistical offices and the main international sources over the period 2010-2024. It has four objectives: first, establish how large the cross-source differences are and where they persist; second, distinguish whether those differences arise in the underlying local-currency series, in the conversion to current United States dollars, or in timing and revision practices; and third, draw out the implications for United Nations Economic Commission for Africa’s (UNECA) use and publication of GDP figures in policy analysis, projections and forecasts, scholarly articles, and external communication; and fourth develop methodological basis for constructing UNECA’s GDP statistics. The sections that follow clarify the scope of GDP used in the brief, define the concepts and methodology, present the main findings, and conclude with implications for the use of GDP figures.

2. SCOPE OF GDP AND KEY CONCEPTS

This section clarifies the scope of GDP as used in the brief and defines the main concepts employed in the comparison. The focus is on GDP at current prices because it is a foundational measure from which most other GDP-family indicators are derived, including GDP at constant prices, GDP per capita, size comparisons, fiscal ratios, and headline current-USD figures. Beyond-GDP indicators are acknowledged to mark the limits of GDP-based analysis, but they are not themselves compared across dissemination outlets here.

2.1. GDP at current and constant prices

GDP can be measured at both current prices and constant prices. GDP at current prices reflects the nominal value of economic output at the prices prevailing in the year of measurement. In contrast, GDP at constant prices adjusts for changes in price levels over time to show movements in real output. Together, these two measures help distinguish changes driven by inflation from those orchestrated by actual production growth.

2.2. GDP in LCU (Local Currency Units)

LCU GDP in current price is the nominal value of economic output recorded in a country's domestic currency. It is the natural benchmark for identifying whether sources already differ before any conversion into current United States dollars is applied.

2.3. GDP in current United States dollars

Current-USD GDP is the series most often used in cross-country comparison and external communication. It combines the nominal GDP level with a conversion factor, usually expressed as local currency per United States dollar.

2.4. Observed USD gap

The observed USD gap is the published difference in current-USD GDP between any two sources for the same country and year. It captures the spread that users see directly in reported statistics.

2.5. Reconstructed USD gap and unexplained parts

The reconstructed gap uses recorded LCU GDP and exchange-rate inputs reported by each publisher (outlet) to reproduce the published USD difference. The remaining unexplained portion is what is left after that mechanical reconstruction and reflects other outlet-specific construction differences not captured by those inputs alone.

3. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Sources

The analysis is based on a harmonized annual panel covering 54 African countries over 2010 – 2024. It draws on four source families: National Statistics Offices (NSOs), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The NSO benchmark is a compiled current-price GDP series in LCU. The international series are drawn from the UNSD National Accounts Main Aggregates database; the World Bank's World Development Indicators, including GDP in current USD (NY.GDP.MKTP.CD), GDP in current LCU (NY.GDP.MKTP.CN), the official exchange rate (PA.NUS.FCRF), and the alternative conversion factor (PA.NUS.ATLS); and the IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2025, using current-price GDP in USD (NGDPD) and in LCU (NGDP). For the official exchange rate, the World Bank series is sourced from the IMF, so the two series are the same.

3.2. Coverage and analytical sample

The active panel covers 54 African countries from 2010 to 2024, yielding a balanced grid of 810 country-year observations. All 810 country-years are retained in the consolidated panel, but source availability varies across outlets. In LCU terms, UNSD covers all 810 observations, IMF covers 803, WB covers 788, and the NSOs benchmark covers 542. The usable overlap between the NSO series and the international outlets is therefore 542 country-years with the UNSD, 541 with the IMF, and 536 with the WB. In USD terms, UNSD again covers all 810 observations, IMF covers 803, and WB covers 788, with pairwise overlaps of 803 (IMF–UNSD), 788 (UNSD–WB), and 786 (IMF–WB).

3.3. Analytical approach

The analysis proceeds in three stages. Firstly, it compares current-USD GDP across WB, IMF, and UNSD to assess the size and persistence of published spreads. Secondly, it tests whether those USD gaps can be reproduced from recorded LCU GDP and exchange-rate inputs and then separates the explainable portion into local-currency and conversion components. Lastly, it benchmarks the international LCU series directly against NSO values to determine whether any disagreement arises before conversion to USD.

3.4. Decomposition approach

The decomposition approach separates the published current-USD gap into three components: a local-currency component, an exchange-rate component, and a residual component. The local-currency component captures the share attributable to differences in

the recorded LCU GDP series. The exchange-rate component captures the share attributable to differences in the conversion factor used to express GDP in USD. The remaining component captures the remaining unexplained share after those two inputs have been accounted for. This framework allows the analysis to identify cases in which a USD gap is mainly a conversion issue from cases in which the gap originates in the underlying GDP series or reflects other source-specific construction practices.

3.5. Thresholds and interpretation

The main practical thresholds used in the revised figures are 1 percent and 3 percent, with higher bands used to identify more serious cases. These thresholds are not intended to imply that smaller gaps are irrelevant; rather, they provide a consistent way to separate cases of broad agreement from differences that may change the interpretation of the results or warrant further review.

4. POTENTIAL SOURCES OF DIFFERENCES AND WHY THEY MATTER

Differences in current-USD GDP across sources usually arise from three main channels: differences in the underlying GDP series in local currency, differences in the exchange rate used to convert that GDP into USD, and differences in timing and revision practices, including whether the reported figure is provisional, revised, or final. These factors may operate separately or simultaneously.

4.1. Differences in the underlying LCU GDP series

Sources may rely on different National Accounts vintages, benchmark years, or revision rounds. As a result, the GDP estimate in local currency may already differ before any USD conversion takes place. Such differences can reflect rebasing, methodological changes, incorporation of new surveys or administrative data, fiscal-year versus calendar-year treatment, and, in some cases, redenomination.

4.2. Differences in exchange-rate conversion

Even when the underlying local-currency GDP series is the same, current-USD GDP can differ because sources apply different exchange-rate conventions. Divergence may result from the use of annual average versus end-period rates, fiscal-year versus calendar-year exchange rates, or different treatments of official, market, or multiple exchange-rate systems.

4.3. Timing, alignment and source-specific revisions

Sources are updated on different schedules and do not necessarily incorporate revisions simultaneously. For the same country and reference year, one source may still carry a provisional estimate while another has already incorporated a revised or final release. Differences in revision status can therefore contribute to observed gaps even where the broader National Accounts methodology remains the same. Current USD GDP series may also differ because one source reflects a newer National Accounts release, a revised exchange-rate series, or a different alignment between the GDP year and the exchange-rate year. In practice, observed differences often reflect a combination of revision timing, underlying GDP revisions and exchange-rate choices rather than a single cause.

5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1. Prevalence of Differences Between Official and Internationally Reported GDP Estimates

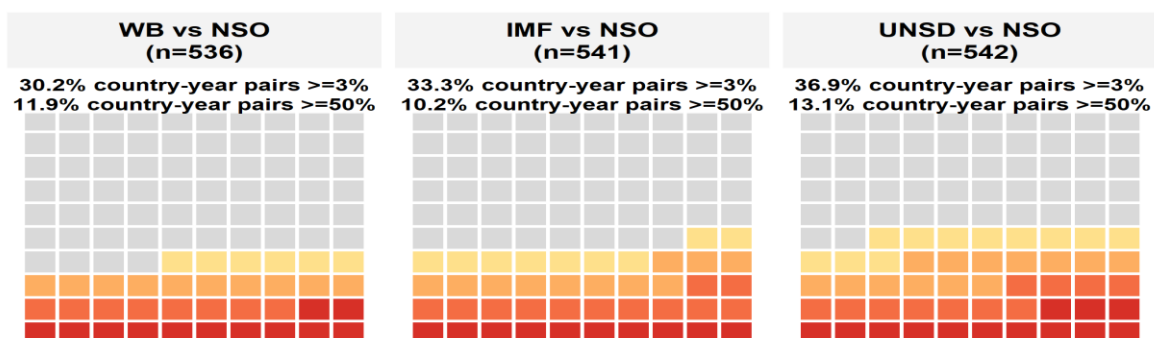
About one-third of the country-year data-point comparisons between NSOs' LCU GDP statistics and the three international outlets are at least 3.0 percent apart, with the largest difference being 36.9 percent between the NSO and the UNSD.

Figure 5.1: Prevalence of Official vs. Internationally Reported GDP Estimates

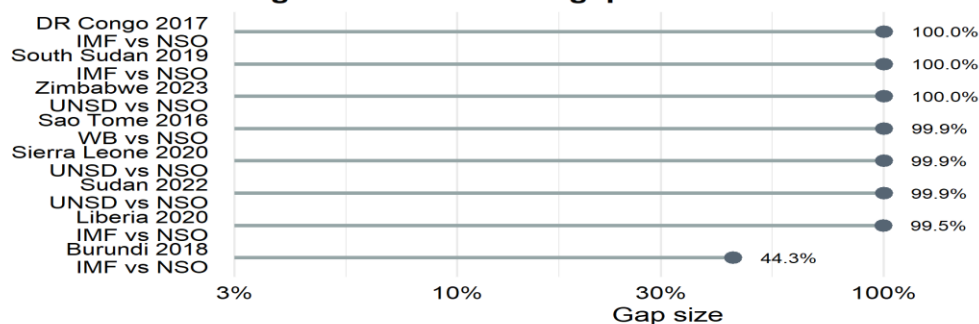
LCU gap distribution

Each tile = 1% of country-year pairs; colors show gap bands for one comparison.

Gap band Below 1% 1% to <3% 3% to <10% 10% to <50% 50% to 100%



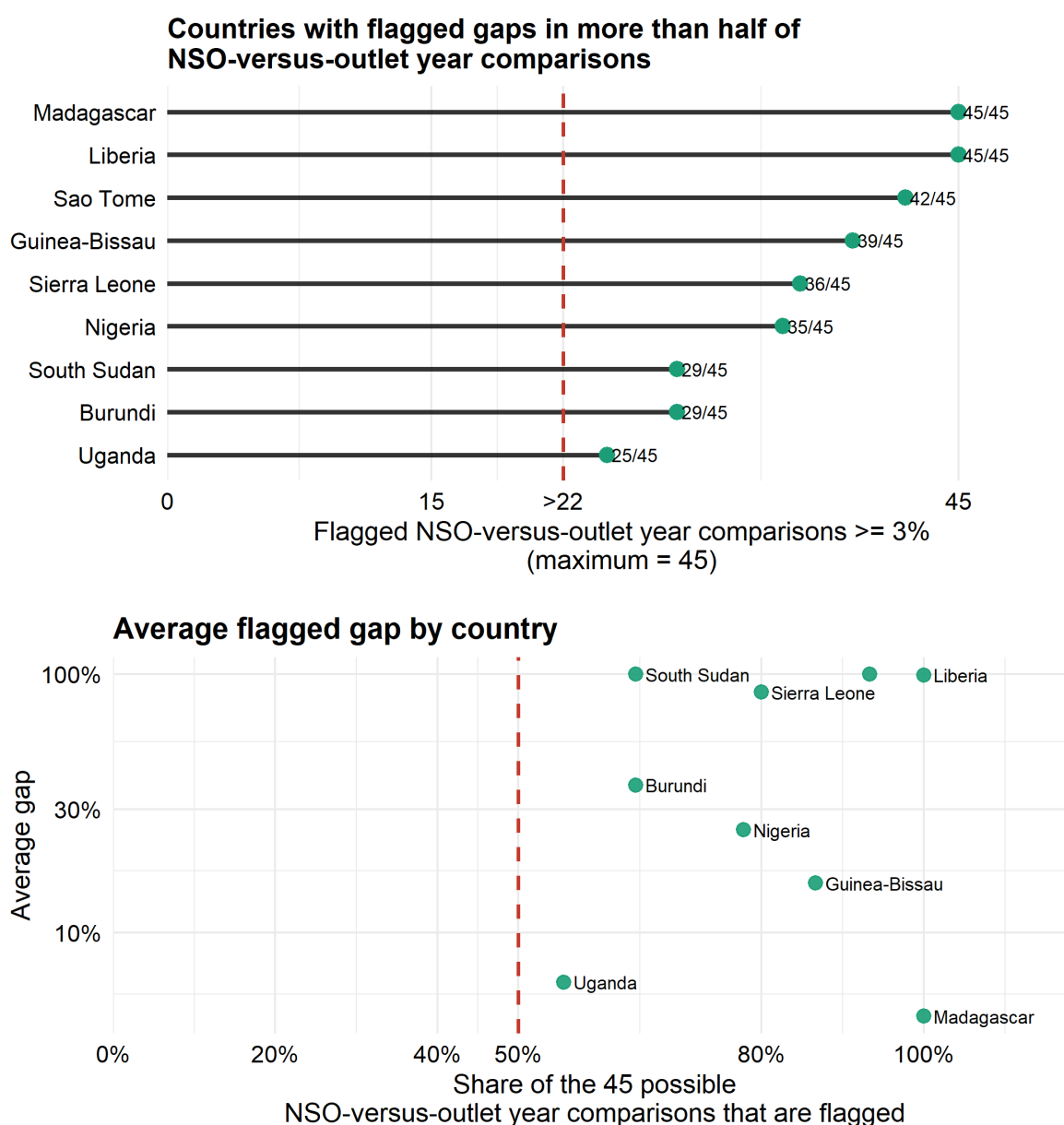
Largest observed LCU gaps



5.2 Repeated Local-Currency Gaps of 3 Percent or More

Eight countries meet the repeated-gap threshold, defined as at least half of the flagged observations out of 45 possible NSO-versus-outlet country-year comparisons: Liberia, Madagascar, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, South Sudan, Uganda and Burundi. Across these countries, the average gap in local-currency GDP is about 52.6 percent.

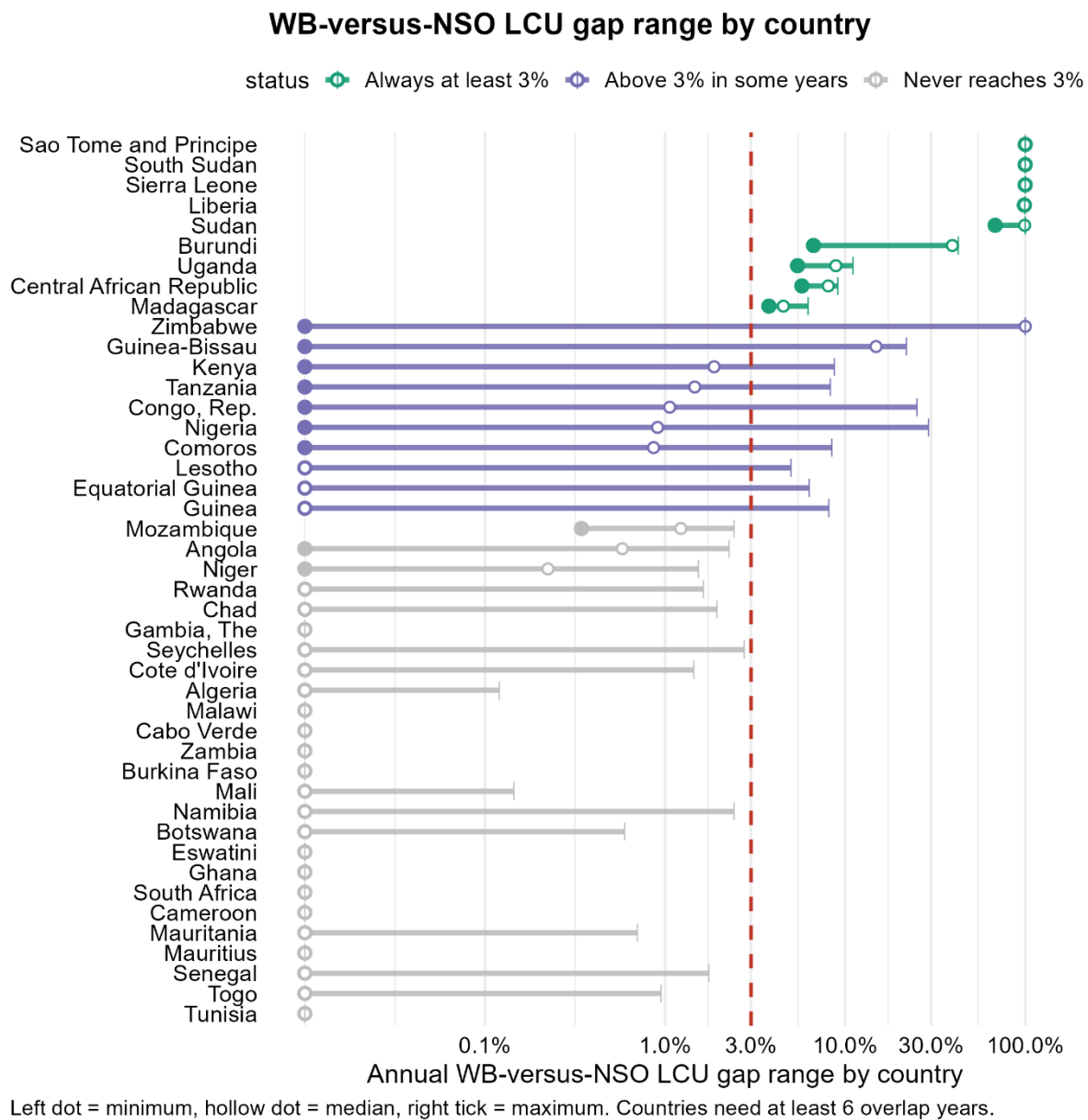
Figure 5.2: Intensity of Local-Currency Gaps in NSO Comparisons



5.3 World Bank-NSO Local Currency Gaps

In 9 African countries, namely Burundi, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, and São Tomé and Príncipe, NSOs and the World Bank LCU GDP statistics consistently differ by at least 3.0 percent from 2010 to 2024.

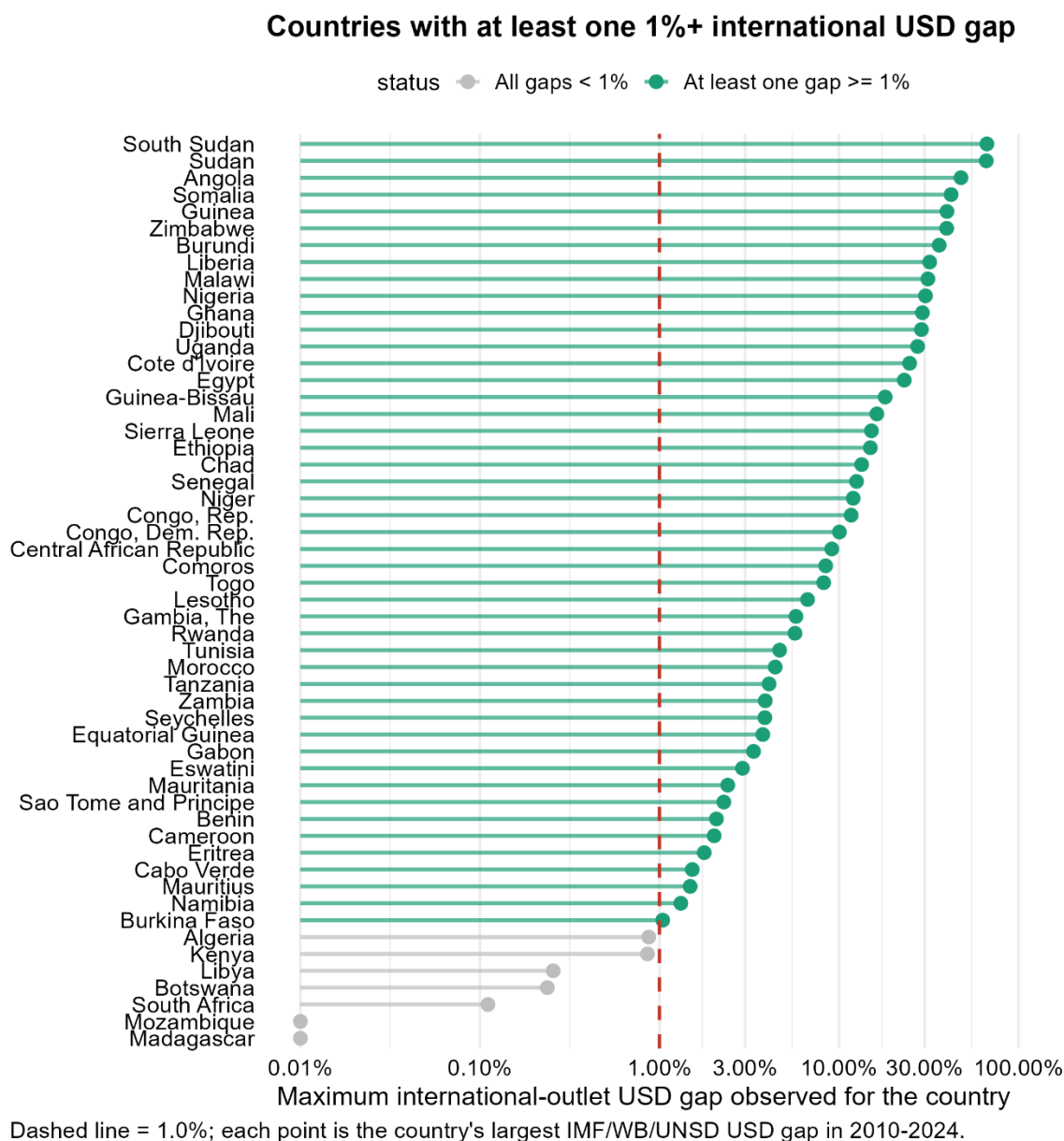
Figure 5.3: Distribution of Annual WB-NSO Local-Currency Gaps by Countries



5.4 Differences in GDP in Current USD Across International Sources

Differences of at least 1.0 percent exist in 47 African countries when comparing USD GDP statistics across the three international outlets.

Figure 5.4: Maximum international-outlet USD gap by country



5.5 Differences in GDP in Current USD Across International Sources

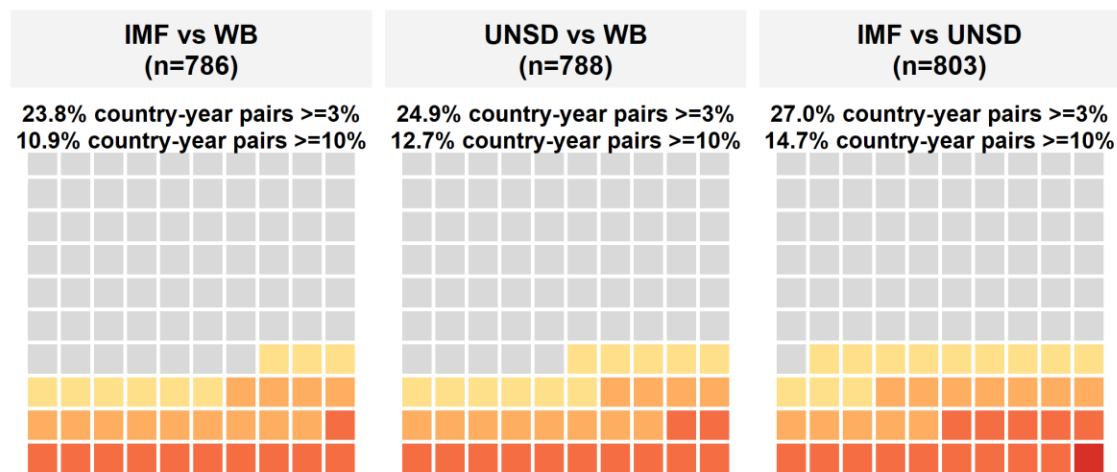
A quarter of the country-year data point comparisons among the three international outlets are at least 3.0 percent, with the largest difference between the UNSD and the IMF at 27.0 percent.

Figure 5.5: Distribution of international USD gaps and largest observed values

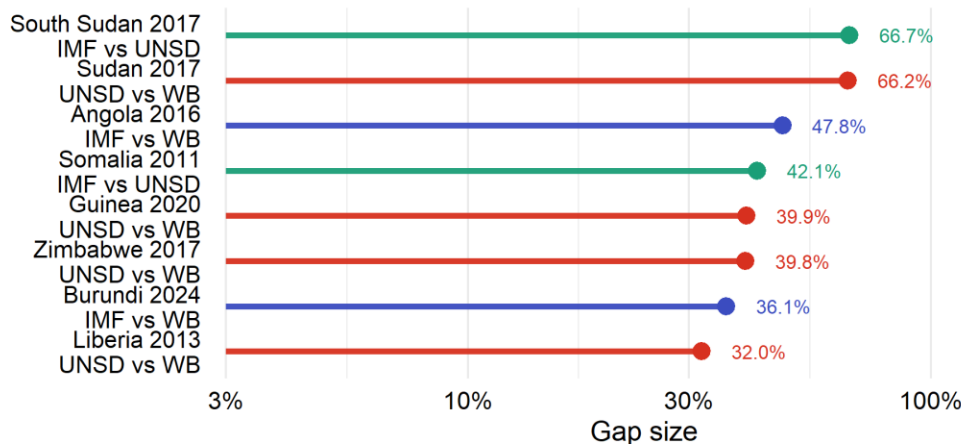
USD gap distribution

Each tile = 1% of country-year pairs; colors show gap bands for one outlet pair.

Gap band Below 1% 1% to <3% 3% to <10% 10% to <50% 50% to 100%



Largest observed USD gaps

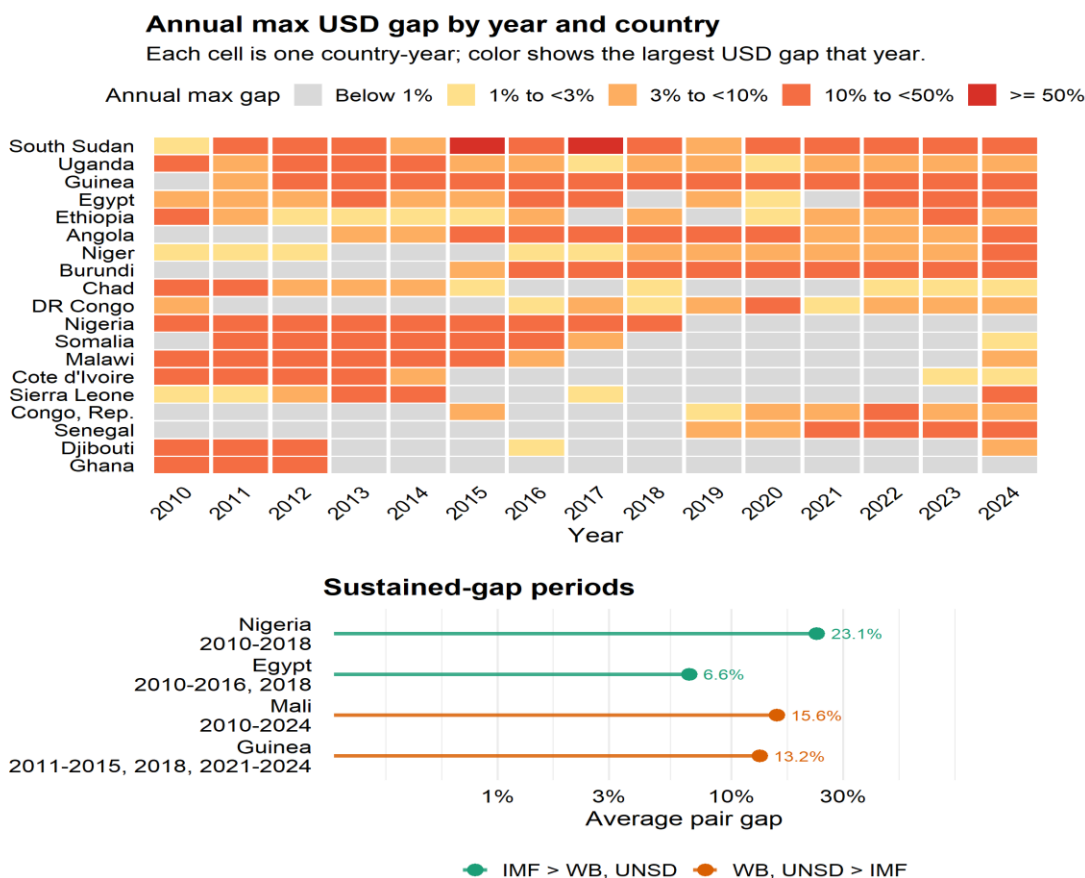


5.6 Outlet Patterns and Episodic USD Gaps

USD GDP statistics from the IMF, the World Bank, and the UNSD show several distinct patterns.

- IMF is above both the World Bank and UNSD for Nigeria in 2010-2018, with an average pair gap of 23.1 percent; Egypt has the relevant IMF-above-both window in 2010-2016 and 2018, with an average pair gap of 6.6 percent.
- The World Bank and UNSD are both above the IMF for Mali throughout 2010-2024, with an average pair gap of 15.6 percent; for Guinea, the joint-above pattern holds in 2011-2015, 2018, and 2021-2024, with an average pair gap of 13.2 percent.
- The clearest episodic cross-outlet USD swings are seen in South Sudan, Angola, Somalia, Ghana, and Djibouti, where annual maximum gaps reach about 66.7, 47.8, 42.1, 29.2, and 28.8 percent, respectively.

Figure 5.6: Outlet-pattern windows and USD-gap episodes



5.7 Sources of Differences in GDP Across International Estimates

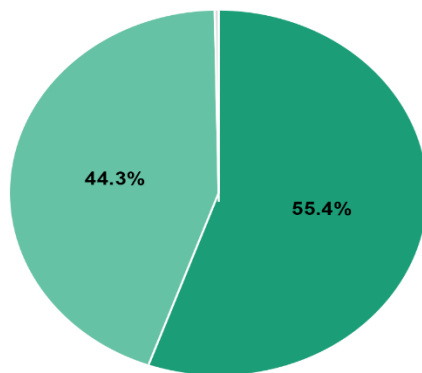
Averaging across country-year observations, local-currency and exchange-rate inputs jointly account for about 99.7 percent of the difference between UNSD and WB, 45.6 percent of the gap between IMF and WB, and 43.1 percent of the gap between IMF and UNSD. For the UNSD-WB pair, the contribution is split almost evenly between local-currency inputs (55.4 percent) and exchange-rate inputs (44.3 percent).

Figure 5.7: Average contribution of local-currency and exchange-rate inputs by outlet pair

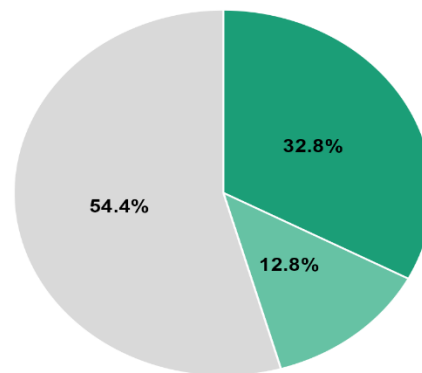
Contribution shares by outlet pair

Local-currency input Exchange-rate input Other remaining gap

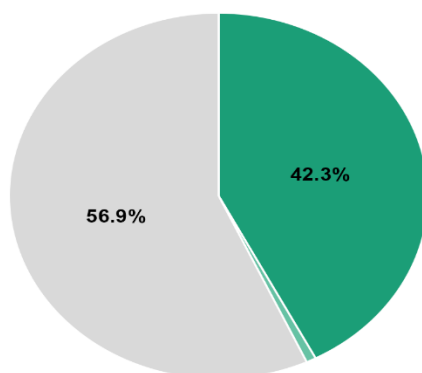
UNSD vs WB



IMF vs WB



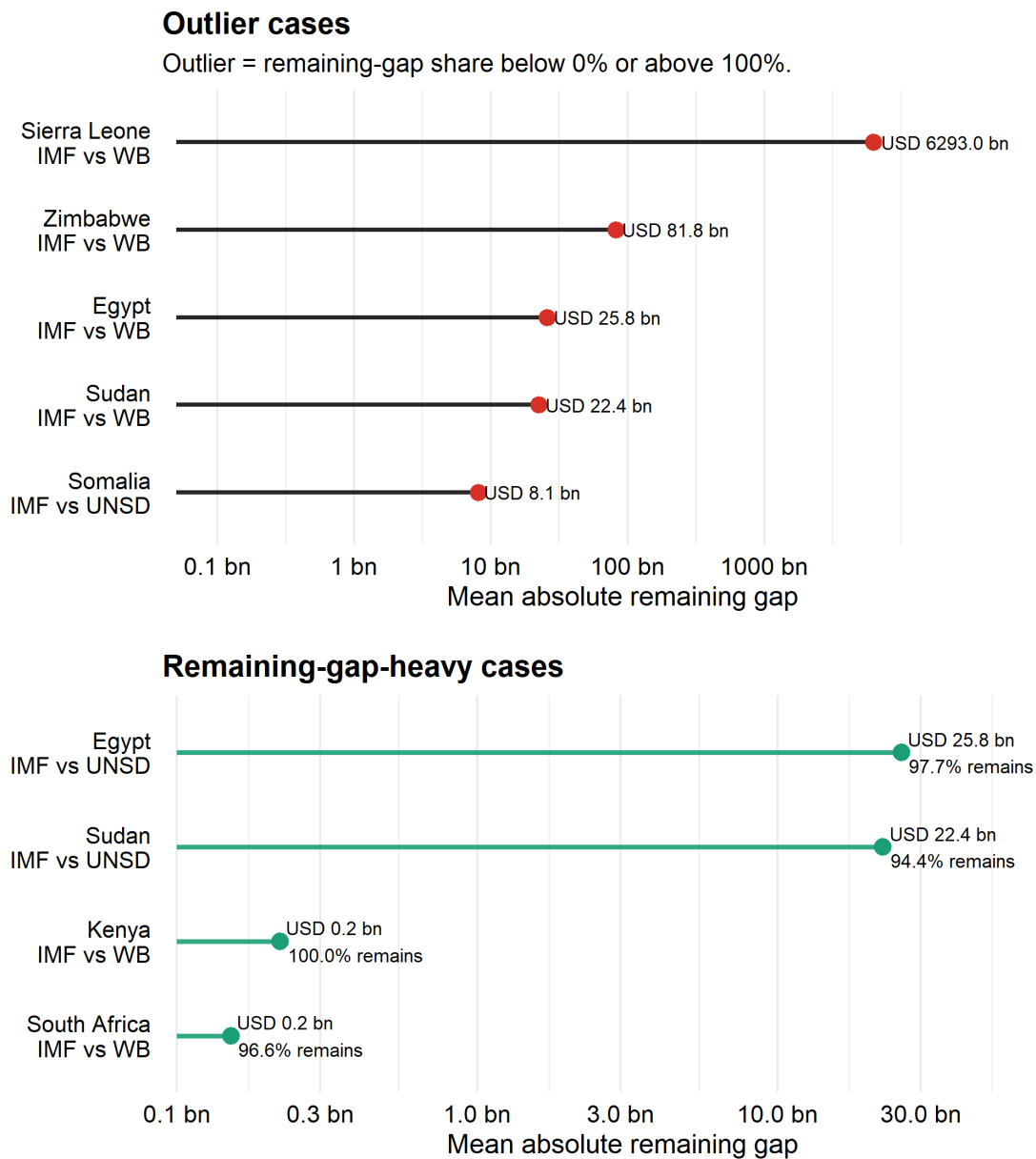
IMF vs UNSD



5.8 Remaining Differences in GDP Across International Outlets

Egypt records the largest gap not accounted for by local-currency and exchange-rate inputs among the three international-outlet pairs: in the IMF-versus-UNSD comparison, the remaining component averages about USD 25.8 billion and represents 97.7 percent of the gap.

Figure 5.8: Outlier and remaining-gap-heavy cases in international USD gaps



6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USE OF GDP FIGURES

The foregoing sparks a discourse on two issues: the request to identify a single source of truth and the need to benchmark the sourcing of official statistics in light of the profound resourcefulness of large language modeling. The contentions and politicking characterizing these issues have constrained the furthering of these important discussions beyond gatherings of official statisticians.

While this brief provides an impetus for development practitioners to question the credibility of a statistic in advancing a policy intervention, the process will strengthen the data-statistics-policy value chain. The brief takes an unwavering position that no single international source should ever displace another, and that the official statistic is the country's publication. This asserted, the imperatives of globalization and peer learning, which are premised on international comparability, underscore this review. This review affirms the indispensability of acknowledging differences in GDP at current price estimates and their sources, and, more compellingly, guides users on their prevalence and acceptable ranges, and presents a justification for the need for a continental declaration of which statistic best identifies the region.

On the premise of state sovereignty and the global collective commitment to relegating colonization to the background, where NSO data is available, it should remain the foundational statistic for any use. In instances where international comparison is needed, differences between NSOs' statistics and international harmonization processes should be acknowledged. In instances where they are delayed, missing, or difficult to access, users should default to international outlets, with a categorical disclaimer. The next section provides preliminary guidance on source selection as the ECA undertakes an African-centered series of GDP estimates at current prices.

Preliminary Guidance on Source Selection and Use of GDP Figures

Accordingly, source choice should be governed by use case, availability and transparency. For country-level policy analysis, fiscal ratios, and official national reporting, the NSO publication should be the starting point where it is current and methodologically clear. International datasets remain necessary for continental analysis, cross-country comparison and standardised coverage, but their use should be disclosed, especially where national data are delayed, missing or not readily accessible.

Current-USD GDP figures should also be accompanied by clear source metadata. Publications should identify the outlet used, indicate whether the estimate is provisional, revised or final where this is known, and state any relevant conversion or proxy method when it materially affects interpretation. This is especially important in rankings, tables and

headline comparisons, where users may otherwise assume that current-USD estimates from different outlets are directly interchangeable.

The findings further suggest a simple review rule before dissemination. Persistent local-currency gaps, current-USD differences above the 3 percent threshold, or large unexplained differences should trigger verification against the latest NSO release and any notes on revisions, rebasing, denomination changes, or methodological updates. Where needed, analysts should also check exchange-rate treatment, fiscal-year alignment and revision timing before deciding which figure to publish.

Consistency within analytical exercise is also essential. A chart, ranking, or time-series comparison should rely on a single outlet throughout unless a clear justification is provided. Mixing sources across countries or years can create artificial differences and weaken interpretation. For ECA, this points to the need for a simple internal protocol that covers source selection, metadata disclosure, and the review of flagged cases, while continuing to support regular, timely, and transparent NSO publication. The aim is not to eliminate all differences across outlets, but to make them visible, interpretable and less likely to distort analysis or dilute the official national statistical voice.

7. CONCLUSION

This brief shows that GDP figures for African countries are often close across NSOs, UNSD, the World Bank, and the IMF, but they are not always interchangeable. A nontrivial share of country-year comparisons differ enough to affect fiscal ratios, cross-country rankings, and narratives about economic size. The analysis also shows that these differences can be attributed to a single cause. Some of those differences begin in the underlying local-currency series; some arise at the conversion stage and in revision timing; and some remain only partially explained after decomposition.

The conclusion is therefore one of disciplined use rather than source hierarchy. No international dissemination outlet should be treated as universally superior, and national publication remains the basis of official statistical authority. At the same time, international datasets remain indispensable for comparability and access. For ECA, the task is to preserve this balance: supporting credible cross-country analysis while ensuring that official national statistics retain their visibility, relevance and authority.