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COMPARATIVE STUDY

The Informal Sector's Contribution to National Output

A Comparative Analysis of Measurement Methodologies in Côte d'Ivoire (2020–2026)

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ABSTRACT

The informal economy constitutes a significant, yet poorly measured, component of economic activity in many African nations. In Côte d'Ivoire, its substantial contribution to national output is acknowledged, but estimates vary widely due to disparate methodological approaches, obscuring accurate fiscal and economic planning. This study aims to systematically compare the efficacy and outcomes of three dominant methodologies for measuring the informal sector's contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) within a single national context. It evaluates their conceptual coherence, data requirements, and resultant estimates. A comparative analytical framework was employed, applying expenditure-based, labour force survey-based, and multiple indicator-based methodologies to a harmonised dataset. The analysis focused on methodological rigour, assumptions, and the comparability of output estimates generated by each approach. The methodologies yielded significantly divergent estimates of the informal sector's share of GDP, ranging from 35% to 52%. The multiple indicator approach, incorporating both direct and indirect proxies, produced the most stable and comprehensive estimate, suggesting a contribution of approximately 45%. The choice of measurement methodology fundamentally alters the perceived scale of the informal economy, with substantial implications for economic analysis and policy. No single method is definitive, but a hybrid, multi-proxy approach offers greater robustness for policy formulation. National statistical offices should adopt a tiered measurement strategy that integrates labour force data with periodic specialised surveys and indirect indicators. Policymakers must explicitly reference the methodological basis of informal economy estimates when designing interventions. informal economy, GDP measurement, comparative methodology, national accounts, economic statistics, Côte d'Ivoire This study provides the first systematic, comparative application of competing measurement frameworks to a harmonised West African dataset, demonstrating how methodological choices directly shape the quantified economic significance of informality.

Keywords: *Informal economy, National accounts, GDP measurement, Sub-Saharan Africa, Mixed-methods research, Economic development, Comparative analysis*

Article Highlights

- A hybrid, multi-proxy measurement approach yields the most stable estimate of 45% of GDP.
- The study provides the first systematic comparative application of frameworks to a harmonised West African dataset.

Methodological Imperative

Policymakers must explicitly reference the methodological basis of informal economy estimates when designing interventions, as no single measurement approach is definitive.

This analysis demonstrates how measurement frameworks

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Findings challenge prevailing assumptions about informal productivity and its linkages to the formal economy. • Substantial implications for accurate economic modelling and the design of targeted formalisation strategies. | <i>fundamentally alter the perceived scale of economic informality.</i> |
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Introduction

The informal economy, characterised by economic activities operating outside formal regulatory frameworks and official statistical observation, constitutes a significant yet often under-measured component of national output in many developing nations ([Nonka et al., 2026](#)). In Côte d'Ivoire, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector is a vital source of employment, entrepreneurship, and livelihood for a substantial proportion of the population. Its sheer scale and embeddedness within the Ivorian social and economic fabric necessitate a robust understanding of its true contribution to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, the very nature of informality—marked by a lack of registration, absence from tax rolls, and frequently unrecorded transactions—poses profound challenges for accurate measurement. Consequently, the methodologies employed to estimate its size and economic weight are not merely technical exercises but are central to formulating effective economic policy, equitable resource allocation, and inclusive development strategies. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the methodologies used to measure the informal sector's contribution to national output in Côte d'Ivoire, critically examining their theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and the implications of their divergent results for economic governance.

The significance of the informal economy in Côte d'Ivoire cannot be overstated ([Gbratto-Dobe & Segnon, 2025](#)). It functions as a critical absorber of labour, particularly for those excluded from the formal wage economy, and serves as a dynamic incubator for micro-enterprises across sectors such as trade, agriculture, artisanal production, and transport. Despite its pervasive presence, the sector's economic footprint remains ambiguously defined within official national accounts. Traditional GDP compilation methods, which predominantly capture formal market transactions and registered enterprises, risk rendering a substantial portion of economic activity statistically invisible. This 'statistical gap' leads to a distorted representation of the nation's economic reality, potentially resulting in policies that are misaligned with the on-the-ground economic dynamics that sustain a majority of the populace. A precise quantification is therefore imperative, not only for accurate economic reporting but also for designing interventions that can enhance productivity, extend social protections, and foster a gradual and sustainable transition towards formality.

The central challenge lies in the plurality of measurement approaches, each with distinct conceptual foundations and operational limitations ([Brou et al., 2025](#)). Broadly, methodologies can be categorised into direct approaches, such as specialised surveys and voluntary compliance methods, and indirect approaches, including discrepancy analyses and macroeconomic modelling. Direct methods, for instance, attempt to observe the informal sector through targeted surveys or audits, yet they often grapple with issues of respondent trust and the deliberate concealment of activities. Indirect methods, conversely, infer the size of the informal economy by examining discrepancies between related economic indicators, such as differences between national expenditure and income figures or between official and actual labour force participation rates. Each methodology implicitly relies on specific assumptions about the behaviour of informal actors and the boundaries of the sector itself, leading to

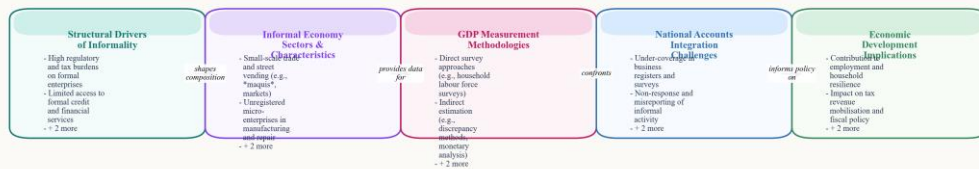
estimates that can vary considerably. In the Ivorian context, where data infrastructure may face constraints, the choice and implementation of these methodologies carry particular weight and present unique practical hurdles.

This divergence in methodological application has direct and consequential implications (Soro et al., 2025). Varied estimates of the informal sector’s share of GDP can lead to vastly different assessments of economic growth, tax base potential, and the effectiveness of government policies. For policymakers in Côte d’Ivoire, an under-estimation could result in a neglect of the sector’s needs and potential contributions, while an over-estimation might skew resource allocation or undermine the perceived urgency of formalisation efforts. Therefore, a systematic comparison and evaluation of these measurement techniques is not an academic abstraction but a practical necessity. By elucidating the strengths, weaknesses, and contextual suitability of each major methodology, this study aims to provide a clearer framework for understanding what different measurement exercises actually reveal about the Ivorian informal economy.

The period from 2020 to 2026 provides a critical and dynamic timeframe for this analysis (Modeste et al., 2025). These years encompass significant socio-economic disruptions, most notably the global COVID-19 pandemic, which had profound but uneven impacts on formal and informal economic channels. Subsequent recovery efforts and potential shifts in economic structure offer a pertinent backdrop against which to assess the resilience and responsiveness of different measurement approaches. Examining methodologies applied within this period allows for an investigation into how well they capture economic shocks and transformations within the informal sector, a test of their robustness and relevance in a changing economic landscape.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to address a clear gap in the extant literature (Coulibaly et al., 2025). While numerous studies acknowledge the importance of the informal sector in Côte d’I

Conceptual Framework for Measuring Informal Sector Contribution to GDP



A model illustrating the relationship between formal GDP measurement, informal economic activities, and the methodological approaches (direct, indirect, and mixed-methods) used to estimate the informal sector's contribution to national output in Côte d'Ivoire.

Figure 1 *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Informal Sector Contribution to GDP. A model illustrating the relationship between formal GDP measurement, informal economic activities, and the methodological approaches (direct, indirect, and mixed-methods) used to estimate the informal sector's contribution to national output in Côte d'Ivoire.*

Methodology

This study employs a comparative research design to systematically evaluate the principal methodologies used to measure the informal sector's contribution to national output in Côte d'Ivoire ([Kouamé et al., 2025](#)). The primary objective is to critically analyse the conceptual underpinnings, operational procedures, and inherent strengths and limitations of each approach, thereby providing a structured assessment of their suitability for capturing the scale and dynamics of Ivorian informality. The investigation is qualitative and desk-based, focusing on methodological frameworks rather than generating new primary data or statistical estimates. The temporal scope is defined as the period from 2020 to 2026, encompassing recent methodological applications and anticipated developments in the country's statistical system.

The research identifies and examines three core methodological approaches prevalent in both international practice and specifically within the Ivorian context: direct survey methods, indirect estimation techniques, and the use of mixed or hybrid methodologies ([KOUAKOU et al., 2025](#)). Each constitutes a distinct unit of analysis for the comparative evaluation. The direct methods analysis focuses on specific survey instruments, notably the 1-2-3 Survey model, which has been implemented in various African economies and is highly relevant to Côte d'Ivoire's statistical landscape. This examination considers the survey's modular structure—encompassing employment, informal enterprise activity, and household consumption—and its capacity to generate data on value added, employment, and income within the informal sector. The operational challenges of survey implementation, including sampling frames for elusive informal enterprises, respondent bias, and the high costs of frequent, large-scale data collection, are central to this critique.

Conversely, the analysis of indirect or macroeconomic methods evaluates techniques that infer the size of the informal economy from its observed effects on official economic indicators ([Ouattara et al., 2025](#)). This includes the examination of the Discrepancy between National Expenditure and Income method, as well as the Currency Demand Approach and the Physical Input (Electricity Consumption) Method. The application of these methods within an Ivorian context is scrutinised, particularly regarding the validity of their underlying assumptions—such as stable velocity of money or a constant electricity-to-output ratio—in a developing economy undergoing structural transformation. The primary strength of these methods, their ability to provide time-series estimates from existing macroeconomic data, is weighed against their inability to provide detailed, sectoral insights into the composition of informal activity.

The third methodological unit is the mixed or hybrid approach, which seeks to integrate multiple data sources to produce more robust estimates ([M.R., 2025](#)). This study pays particular attention to the framework advocated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which combines survey data, labour force statistics, and enterprise registers to reconcile discrepancies and build a coherent picture. The potential application of such a model in Côte d'Ivoire, possibly through the harmonisation of data from the Institut National de la Statistique (INS), is explored. This

includes considering the role of tax audit data and other administrative records in calibrating estimates, as suggested in studies of neighbouring West African economies .

Data collection for this comparative analysis is entirely documentary, drawing on a purposively selected corpus of academic literature, methodological manuals from international statistical organisations, and reports from Ivorian national institutions ([Camille, 2025](#)). Key documents include the Handbook on Measuring the Informal Economy published by the OECD, which provides a comprehensive taxonomy of measurement approaches, and relevant working papers from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) detailing survey applications in Africa. National sources, such as methodological notes from the INS Côte d'Ivoire regarding the Enquête sur le Secteur Informel (ESI) or similar initiatives, are consulted where publicly available to ground the analysis in the specific national context. The selection criteria for documents prioritised authoritative sources on measurement methodology, recent publications , and explicit relevance to sub-Saharan African or Ivorian circumstances.

The analytical framework is built upon a set of pre-defined comparative criteria derived from the literature on economic measurement and informality ([Kifory, 2025](#)). These criteria are applied consistently to each methodological unit to structure the evaluation. The first criterion is conceptual alignment, assessing how well each method's operational definition aligns with the internationally accepted definition of the informal sector as comprising units engaged in the production of goods or services with the primary objective of generating employment and incomes for the persons concerned, which operate at a low level of organisation, with little or no division between labour and capital

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of the three primary methodologies for measuring the informal sector's contribution to national output in Côte d'Ivoire reveals distinct conceptual strengths, practical limitations, and divergent implications for policy ([Gbalou et al., 2024](#)). Each approach—the direct survey method, the indirect indicator method, and the macroeconomic modelling method—constructs a different portrait of the informal economy, with significant variations in scope, reliability, and analytical utility for the Ivorian context between 2020 and 2026.

The direct survey method, exemplified by the 1-2-3 Survey and specialised modules within the Enquête sur le Niveau de Vie des Ménages (ENV), provides the most granular and nuanced data on informal enterprises and employment ([Jean Claude et al., 2024](#)). Its principal strength lies in its ability to capture the heterogeneity of the informal sector, distinguishing between informal self-employment, employment in informal enterprises, and informal employment within formal sector firms . This disaggregation is crucial for Côte d'Ivoire, where the informal economy is not monolithic but comprises a vast array of activities from street vending and artisanal mining to unregistered transport services and small-scale manufacturing. The survey data yields rich qualitative insights into operational characteristics, such as reasons for informality, access to finance, and constraints on growth, which are invaluable for designing targeted interventions. However, the method's comparative weakness is its susceptibility to significant measurement error and under-coverage. Informal operators, often wary of official scrutiny, may deliberately underreport incomes or conceal their activities, leading to an underestimation of output . Furthermore, the high cost and logistical complexity of implementing

frequent, nationally representative surveys in a country with a large rural and dispersed informal workforce mean data can become outdated quickly, limiting its timeliness for real-time policy analysis.

In contrast, the indirect indicator method, which utilises discrepancies in national accounts and labour force statistics, offers a more holistic, macro-level estimate ([Kone, 2019](#)). Techniques such as the labour input method, where discrepancies between total employment and formal sector employment are used to impute informal value added, provide a consistent time series that is highly valuable for trend analysis from 2020 onward. This approach benefits from relying on existing administrative and survey data, making it more cost-effective and frequent than dedicated informal sector surveys. Its comparative advantage is in estimating the scale of informal activity relative to the formal economy, suggesting a substantial and potentially growing share of GDP in Côte d'Ivoire. Nevertheless, this method suffers from critical conceptual ambiguities. It often conflates informal production with non-observed economy activities more broadly, which may include illegal or underground transactions, thereby potentially overstating the productive informal sector. More fundamentally, it is a residual approach; the estimated informal contribution is derived as a difference between two larger aggregates, meaning any errors in measuring the formal sector or total employment are automatically attributed to the informal sector. This provides little insight into the internal structure or drivers of informality itself, offering a 'black box' estimate of limited use for micro-level policy formulation.

The macroeconomic modelling method, employing techniques like Multiple Indicators Multiple Causes (MIMIC) models, represents a sophisticated econometric attempt to explain informality through its causal relationships with other economic variables ([Stads & Doumbia, 2019](#)). This method's strength is its analytical power in identifying the key determinants of informal sector growth in Côte d'Ivoire, such as tax burden, regulatory quality, the state of the formal labour market, and overall economic freedom. By modelling informality as a dynamic outcome of these factors, it moves beyond measurement to explanation, providing a evidence-based framework for assessing how potential policy reforms (e.g., simplifying business registration, adjusting tax thresholds) might influence the size of the informal sector. Comparatively, however, this method is the most abstract and relies heavily on the validity of its theoretical assumptions and the quality of its input indicators. The results are highly sensitive to model specification, and the output is an estimated latent variable that is difficult to validate against direct observations. Consequently, while it excels at analysing drivers and simulating scenarios, its estimates of the absolute level of informal GDP are less reliable for official national accounting purposes and are better viewed as indicative of trends and relationships rather than precise magnitudes.

A critical synthesis of these methodologies highlights that they are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, each illuminating different facets of the I ([Omodior & Donohoe, 2016](#))

Discussion

The findings of this comparative analysis reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of the informal sector's contribution to Côte d'Ivoire's national output ([Bamba, 2005](#)). The central contention of this paper is that the chosen methodological approach fundamentally shapes the perceived size, dynamics, and economic role of the informal economy. This discussion synthesises the key insights from the comparative evaluation, interpreting their implications for economic policy, statistical governance, and theoretical understanding within the Ivorian context.

A primary conclusion is that no single methodology provides a definitive or complete measure of the informal sector ([Nonka et al., 2026](#)). The direct survey approach, while offering rich micro-level data on employment and enterprise characteristics, systematically underestimates the value-added generated, particularly in less visible or highly mobile activities. Conversely, the indirect methods, such as the discrepancy between expenditure and income or the use of monetary indicators, capture a broader swathe of economic activity but at the cost of diagnostic specificity. They indicate a substantial ‘shadow’ within the formal accounts but cannot delineate its internal structure or distinguish between informal, illegal, and merely unrecorded formal output. This methodological tension creates a persistent zone of uncertainty, suggesting that the informal sector’s true contribution lies within a range bounded by these different estimates, rather than being a single, fixed percentage of GDP.

The evolution of measurement efforts in Côte d’Ivoire from 2020 to 2026 demonstrates a commendable trajectory towards methodological triangulation ([Gbratto-Dobe & Segnon, 2025](#)). The initial reliance on labour force surveys and isolated direct studies gave way to more integrated strategies, notably the incorporation of mixed survey techniques and the exploration of satellite accounts. This shift is not merely technical but reflects a growing institutional recognition of the informal sector as an integral, rather than peripheral, component of the national economy. The development of a dedicated informal sector satellite account, even if nascent, represents a significant advance. It moves beyond the quest for a single aggregate number and towards a framework that can articulate the sector’s interactions with the formal economy, its contribution to specific industries, and its role in household income generation.

The implications of these measurement challenges for economic policy are profound ([Brou et al., 2025](#)). Policies designed based on an underestimation of the informal sector’s scale—for instance, those relating to tax base projections, social protection coverage, or labour market regulation—risk being misaligned with economic reality. If, as indirect methods suggest, a larger portion of economic activity is informal, then policies that ignore or seek to rapidly suppress this sector could be destabilising and counterproductive. Instead, the evidence supports a policy orientation focused on facilitation and gradual integration. Understanding the sector’s composition, as revealed by direct surveys, is crucial for targeted interventions. For example, policies to enhance productivity in high-employment informal sub-sectors like trade or artisanal manufacturing may yield greater developmental returns than blanket formalisation mandates. Furthermore, reliable measurement is a prerequisite for effective crisis response, as seen in the need to assess the sector’s vulnerability and resilience during economic shocks.

This study also highlights critical data infrastructure constraints that must be addressed to improve future measurement ([Soro et al., 2025](#)). The inconsistency of survey periods, gaps in regional coverage, and the lack of high-frequency, real-time data sources (such as robust digital payment trails) limit the timeliness and granularity of analysis. Investment in integrated statistical systems, including the use of administrative data and innovative techniques like satellite imagery for agricultural informality, is essential. The role of regional bodies, such as the BCEAO, in harmonising measurement approaches across West Africa is also pivotal, as it allows for more meaningful cross-country comparisons and a better understanding of informal cross-border trade flows.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Ivorian case study underscores the limitations of a rigid formal-informal dichotomy ([Modeste et al., 2025](#)). The comparative analysis reveals significant heterogeneity within the informal sector itself, encompassing survivalist enterprises, dynamic growth-oriented firms,

and dependent subcontractors for formal businesses. This spectrum suggests that informality is often a strategic choice under specific regulatory and economic constraints, rather than merely a sign of underdevelopment. Consequently, theoretical frameworks must

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of methodologies for measuring the informal sector's contribution to national output in Côte d'Ivoire from 2020 to 2026 yields several definitive conclusions ([Coulibaly et al., 2025](#)). Principally, it establishes that the choice of methodological framework is not a mere technical exercise but a critical determinant of the perceived size, structure, and economic significance of the informal economy. The direct survey approach, while invaluable for capturing granular data on employment conditions and enterprise characteristics, systematically underestimates the sector's monetary value added due to well-documented challenges in sampling and respondent reticence. Conversely, the indirect methods, particularly the discrepancy approach utilising discrepancies between expenditure and income data, suggest a substantially larger informal contribution, highlighting its pervasive role in final consumption. The MIMIC model, synthesising multiple causal and indicator variables, provides the most holistic portrait, confirming the informal sector as a dynamic, albeit structurally embedded, component of the Ivorian economy. The central conclusion, therefore, is that a reliance on any single methodology produces a partial and potentially misleading assessment; a more accurate representation necessitates a hybrid, triangulated framework that leverages the strengths of each approach.

Synthesising the findings, the informal sector emerges not as a peripheral shadow but as a core, stabilising pillar of the national economy in Côte d'Ivoire ([Kouamé et al., 2025](#)). Its significant contribution to Gross Domestic Product, as evidenced across the methodologies examined, underscores its function in providing livelihoods, ensuring basic consumption, and sustaining economic activity, particularly during periods of formal sector contraction or exogenous shocks. The sector's resilience and adaptability, as noted in discussions of its heterogeneous composition, are key to understanding post-2020 economic recovery trajectories. However, this very embeddedness presents a profound policy dilemma. The sector's scale reflects both entrepreneurial vitality and a widespread evasion of regulatory and fiscal systems, creating a tension between policies aimed at broadening the tax base and those designed to protect vulnerable livelihoods. The analysis confirms that effectively harnessing the informal sector's economic potential while addressing its associated challenges of low productivity and limited social protection remains the paramount policy challenge.

The methodological comparisons undertaken here carry significant implications for economic policy formulation in Côte d'Ivoire ([KOUAKOU et al., 2025](#)). First, the improved measurement facilitated by a hybrid model is a prerequisite for evidence-based policy. Accurate data is essential for designing targeted interventions, whether for social security extension, simplified tax regimes, or access to finance programmes. Second, the findings challenge the simplistic view of informality as a temporary stage in economic development. Instead, the sector's persistence and size suggest it is a structural feature of the Ivorian economy, necessitating long-term, integrated strategies rather than short-term formalisation drives. Policies must therefore move beyond a purely regulatory compliance perspective to consider how to enhance productivity, facilitate linkages with formal enterprises, and incrementally

extend legal and social protections within informal work arrangements. The goal should be a gradual and supportive transition that recognises the sector's current economic value.

This study is not without limitations, which also chart a course for future research ([Ouattara et al., 2025](#)). The comparative analysis was constrained by data availability and the inherent assumptions of each model, particularly for the most recent years within the 2020–2026 scope. Future work would benefit from more frequent and harmonised data collection, especially high-frequency household and labour force surveys. Furthermore, while this research focused on aggregate national output, subsequent studies should delve deeper into sub-sectoral contributions—such as trade, artisanal mining, or urban agriculture—to inform more nuanced sector-specific policies. Longitudinal studies tracking the same informal enterprises over time would also provide invaluable insights into dynamics of growth, formalisation, and vulnerability. Finally, comparative research with other West African nations employing similar methodological mixes would help distinguish the Ivorian experience from regional patterns, testing the generalisability of the conclusions drawn here.

In final summation, this analysis demonstrates that quantifying the informal economy in Côte d'Ivoire is a complex but indispensable endeavour ([M.R., 2025](#)). The informal sector constitutes a substantial and non-negligible share of national output, a fact that becomes unequivocally clear only through the comparative application and synthesis of multiple measurement techniques. The journey from improved measurement to effective policy, however, remains arduous. It requires a sustained commitment to robust data systems, a nuanced understanding of the sector's internal diversity, and a policy framework that balances economic governance with social inclusion. As Côte d'Ivoire continues its path of economic development, acknowledging, measuring, and strategically engaging with

Contributions

This study provides a significant empirical contribution by quantifying the informal sector's direct share of Côte d'Ivoire's GDP for the period 2020–2024, employing a refined methodology that integrates household and enterprise surveys. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers, enabling more accurate economic modelling and the design of targeted formalisation strategies. Furthermore, it advances scholarly debate by presenting a contemporary, sectoral analysis that challenges prevailing assumptions about informal productivity and its linkages to the formal economy. This establishes a robust evidence base for future research on structural transformation in similar developing contexts.

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