



# **Statistical report: African trade in biodiversity-based products**

**2025**

*This report as well as the TraBio statistical tool were developed under the “Global BioTrade Programme: Linking trade, biodiversity and sustainable development”, funded by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO.*

## Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

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### Acknowledgments

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Further information about the UNCTAD’s TraBio statistical tool, please contact [biotrade@un.org](mailto:biotrade@un.org).

## Abbreviations

GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Development Cooperation Agency)
GDP	Gross domestic product
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
KMGBF	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
P&C	(BioTrade) Principles and Criteria
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SECO	Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs
TraBio	(UNCTAD) Trade and Biodiversity statistical tool
UNCTAD	UN Trade and Development
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

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## 1. Introduction

Africa is rich in biodiversity, including a variety of ecosystems, species and genetic resources, as well as a wealth of indigenous and local knowledge and cultural heritage (African Union Commission, 2024). It hosts nearly one-fifth of the world's mammal, bird and plant species (Dejene, 2018), including the “largest intact assemblages of large mammals” (UNEP-WCMC, 2016: iv). The Global and Africa Regional Assessment (2018) prepared by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) underscored the critical role of biodiversity “in providing for the continent's food, water, energy, health and secure livelihood needs” (IPBES, 2018: 10). Biodiversity is also essential for the development of a sustainable bioeconomy. Moreover, the “flow of [products] and services from diverse ecosystems directly supports over 62 per cent of Africa's rural population” (Africa Union Commission, 2024: 1). Examples of biodiversity-based products traded on regional and global markets include those based on indigenous species such as marula, buchu and rooibos (GIZ, n.d.).

This statistical report provides a comprehensive analysis of the African trade of biodiversity-based products within Africa and globally, focusing on the range of products derived from the continent's flora and fauna.<sup>1</sup> The report aims to enhance understanding of Africa's trade patterns and growth trends, and the economic impact of biodiversity resources' trade.

The analysis draws on data from the Trade and Biodiversity (TraBio) database of the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The report includes data on exports and the trade balance of Africa's biodiversity-based products, along with key economic indicators, including the share of these products in total exports, gross domestic product (GDP) and Market and Product Concentration Indexes. The report draws on data from 2021, the latest year with sufficient reported information at the time of this writing.

This report as well as TraBio statistical tool were developed with the support of the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO under the Global BioTrade Programme: Linking trade, biodiversity and sustainable development implemented by UNCTAD.

### *The TraBio statistical tool*

UNCTAD developed the TraBio statistical tool to better monitor and understand the trade flows of biodiversity-based products. It provides data on these trade flows to help identify trends, growth rates and the economic impact of trade in biodiversity-based products. The data provided by the tool is relevant to reporting and tracking progress on biodiversity-relevant goals and targets, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF).

The tool is comprised of the following (UNCTAD, 2023):

- **Product classification of biodiversity-based products** covering over 1,800 products selected from the Harmonized System nomenclature. These products are grouped into 13 groups and then divided into 86 subgroups, which are further subdivided into 230 categories, and 79 subcategories (see table 1). For example, users can access trade flows of ornamental fish which fall under the product group “A. Live animals and plants”, the subgroup “Live animals”, category “Fish”, and the subcategory “Ornamental fish”.
- **Online database** on trade flows of these products and related indicators updated annually from 2010 onward and covering 193 economies.
- **Visualization tool** with interactive maps and charts.

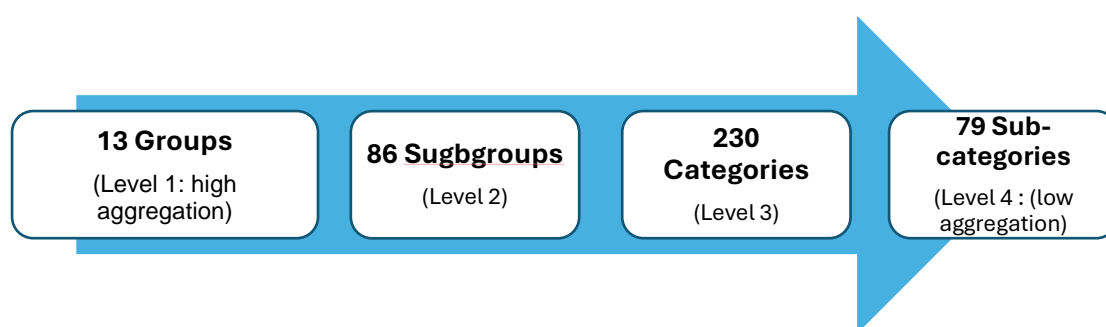
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<sup>1</sup> A biodiversity-based product, as defined by UNCTAD (2023), is a product with a biological origin that meets one of the following criteria:

- It is intrinsically and integrally based on biological resources at a non- or low-processed stage (e.g. cocoa beans)
- When used as an input, it includes processed products that solely or principally use biological-resource-based ingredients (e.g. wooden furniture);
- When it is a derivative, it is derived mainly from biological resource-based products (e.g. glycerol from natural oils and fats)

Products from the extraction of minerals, ores or metals such as sands, oil and gas are not considered biodiversity-based products.

**Table 1. Trade and Biodiversity (TraBio) product classification and its product groups**



**Groups of the Trade and Biodiversity product classification**

A. Live animals and plants
B. Food and beverage
C. Agricultural inputs
D. Natural ingredients
E. Perfumery, cosmetic, personal care and room care preparations
F. Pharmaceuticals
G. Hides, skins, leather, furskins and products thereof
H. Natural fibres and articles thereof
I. Wood and derived products
J. Vegetable plaiting materials and articles thereof
K. Other products of animal origin
L. Other products of plant origin
M. Miscellaneous

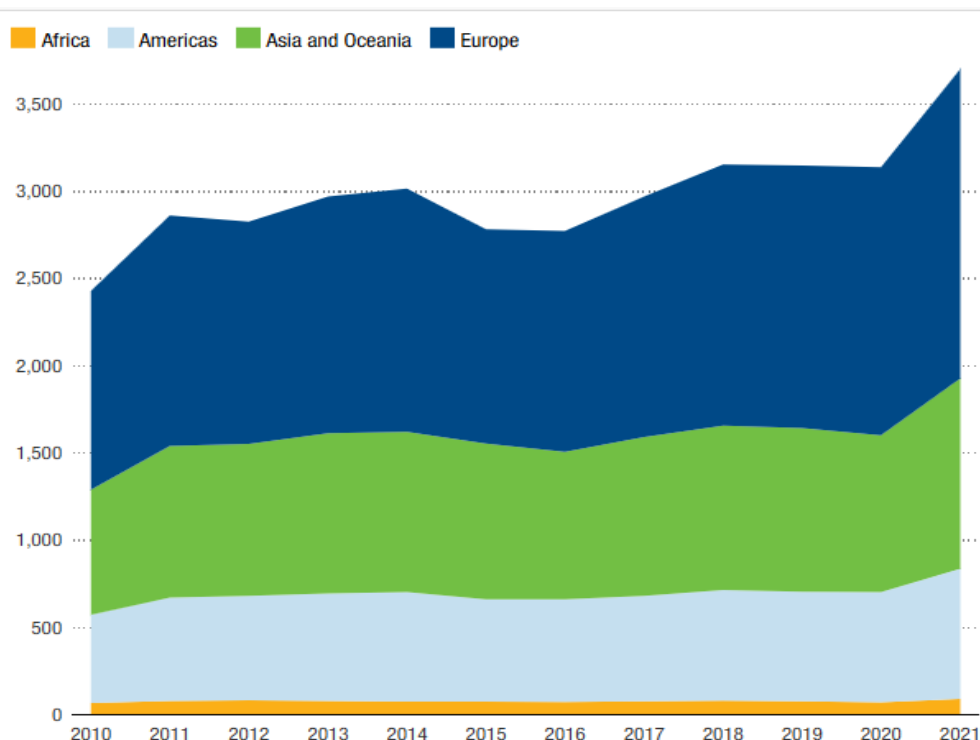
Source: UNCTAD (2023).

## 2. Trade of African biodiversity-based products continues to grow

Exports of biodiversity-based products from Africa reached US\$92.59 billion in 2021, accounting for 16.5 per cent of total African exports and 7.9 per cent of the continent's GDP. This compares to a total of US\$3.7 trillion global trade in biodiversity-based products was valued at in 2021, accounting for 17 per cent of global exports in 2021 and 7.6 per cent of world GDP

However, African exports of biodiversity-based products accounted for only 2.5 per cent of global exports of such products, which were valued at US\$3.7 trillion (table 2). Intra-African exports of biodiversity-based products reached nearly US\$26 billion in 2021, representing 28 per cent of Africa's total trade in these products. Notably, 68 per cent of the intra-African exports came from countries in Eastern and Southern Africa.

**Table 2. Exports of biodiversity-based products, 2010-2021**  
(billions of United States dollars)



Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

Between 2010 and 2021, African exports of biodiversity-based products fluctuated. Exports ranged from US\$68.69 billion in 2010 to a peak of US\$83.4 billion in 2019, before dropping to US\$72.46 billion in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (table 3). However, exports recovered in 2021, increasing by US\$20 billion from 2020, a growth rate of 27.8 per cent.

The trade balance<sup>2</sup> of African exports of biodiversity-based product was negative for the period 2010-2021 (table 4). The highest deficit of US\$47 billion was recorded in 2011, followed by US\$46 billion in 2015 and US\$41 billion in 2016. Only two product groups had a trade surplus during this period: natural fibers and

<sup>2</sup> As described in United Nations (2025: 4), "The value of exports is mostly recorded as the free-on-board (FOB) value, whereas the value of imports includes cost, insurance and freight (CIF). The trade balance is calculated as the difference between the values of exports and imports."

articles thereof<sup>3</sup>, and other products of plant origin<sup>4</sup>. Hides, skins, leathers, furskins and products thereof recorded a trade surplus for all years between 2010 to 2021, except for 2020. Live animals and plants had a trade surplus from 2012 to 2021. In 2021, the natural ingredients product category recorded the highest trade deficit (US\$10.26 billion), followed by food and beverage (US\$9.45 billion) and pharmaceuticals (US\$9.34 billion).

**Table 3. Exports of biodiversity-based products from Africa, 2010-2021**  
(billions of United States dollar; and per cent share of biodiversity-based products)

Year	Total exports	Exports of biodiversity-based products	Share of exports of biodiversity-based products
2010	518.97	68.69	13.2%
2011	613.36	80.45	13.1%
2012	638.60	85.29	13.4%
2013	601.41	80.45	13.4%
2014	581.99	76.60	13.2%
2015	415.29	76.26	18.4%
2016	380.71	74.01	19.4%
2017	437.03	78.33	17.9%
2018	513.60	83.42	16.2%
2019	481.51	78.84	16.4%
2020	396.41	72.46	18.3%
2021	562.02	92.59	16.5%

Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

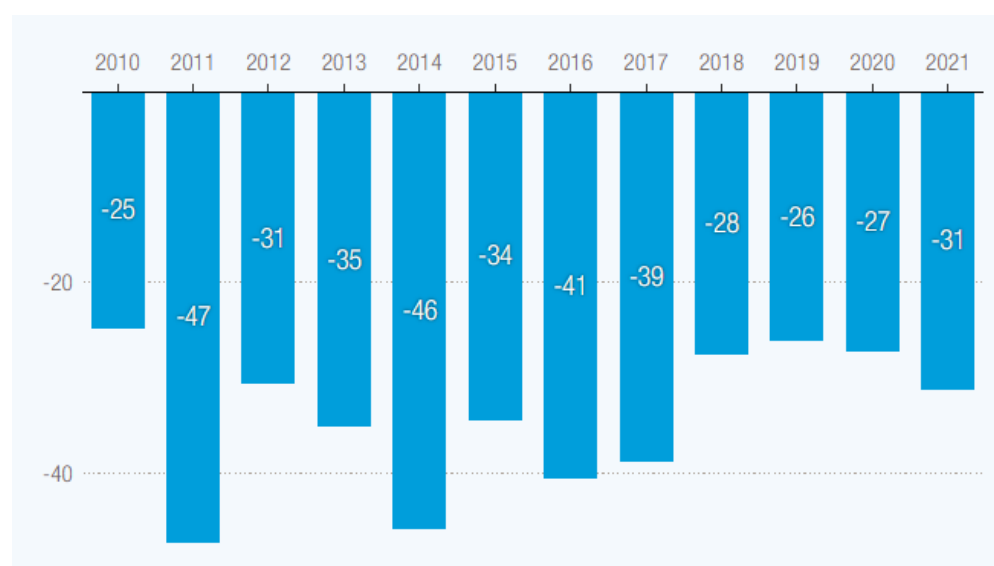
Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

<sup>3</sup> UNCTAD (2023: 17) describes the natural fibers and articles thereof product group as those "...frequently used in handicrafts and manufacturing....[This group] contains subheadings originating from or made of natural fibers of either animal or plant origins, such as silk, wool, cotton and others."

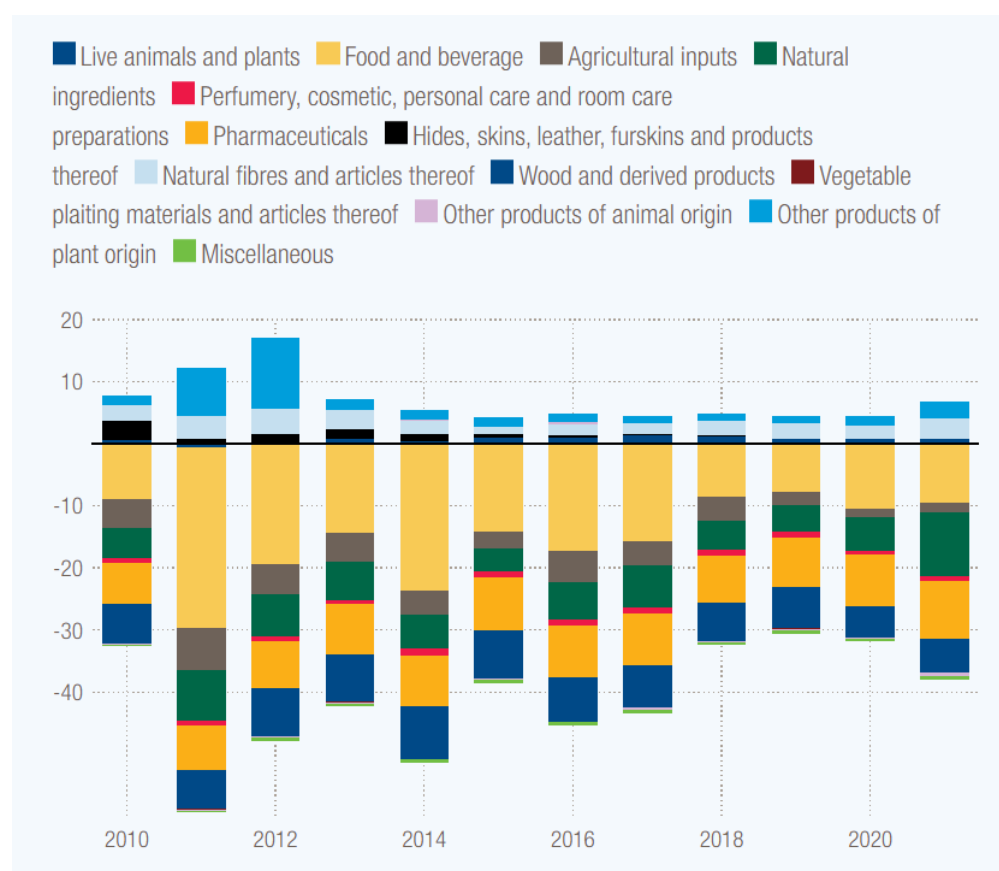
<sup>4</sup> UNCTAD (2023: 18) describes the product category of *other products of plant origin* as those that "do not fit specifically in one of the previous groups, but that have a plant origin. Examples are headings such as tobacco (HS24.02 and 24.03), rubber (HS 40.01), cork (HS 45.01 and 45.02)."



**Table 4. Trade balance of biodiversity-based products from Africa, 2010-2021**  
(billions of United States dollar)



**Trade balance per biodiversity-based products category, 2010-2021**  
(billions of United States dollar)

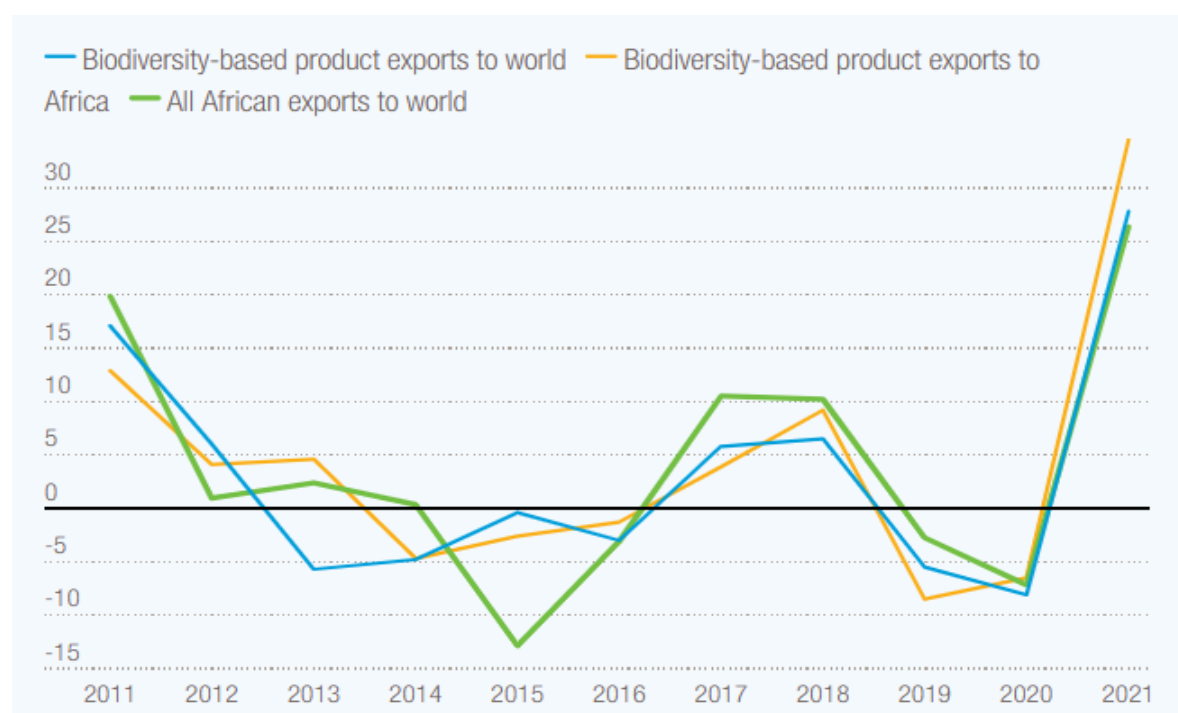


Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

From 2010 to 2021, the average growth rate of African exports of biodiversity-based products to the rest of the world was 3.2 per cent, while intra-African exports grew at an average rate of 4.1 per cent (table 5). The most significant growth occurred from 2020 to 2021, with a 34.5 per cent growth in intra-African trade of biodiversity-based products and 27.8 per cent growth for the exports of such products to the world. These growth rates are higher than the trade of all African products, which reached 26.4 per cent for the period 2020 to 2021.

**Table 5. Growth rates of African exports of biodiversity-based products and all exports, 2010-2021 (per cent)**



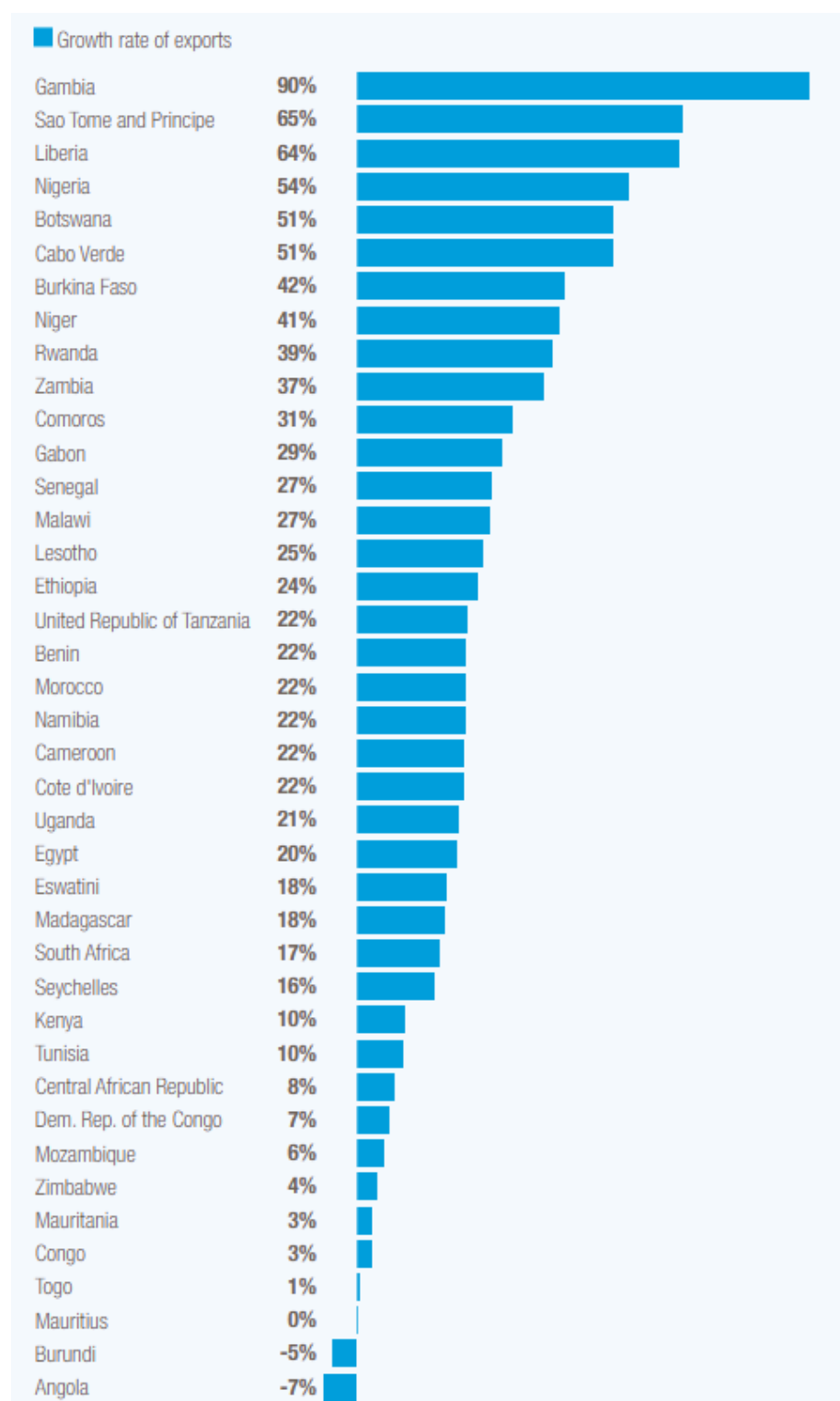
Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

The growth of exports of biodiversity-based products in 2021 varied among countries, with almost all countries having double-digit growth over the previous year (table 6). Gambia's growth was 90 per cent, followed by São Tomé and Príncipe (65 per cent), Liberia (64 per cent), Nigeria (54 per cent) and Botswana and Cabo Verde (both with 51 per cent). Negative growth rates were experienced by Angola (-6.6 per cent) and Burundi (-4.6 per cent).

**Table 6. Growth rate of exports of biodiversity-based products by African countries from 2020 to 2021**

(per cent)



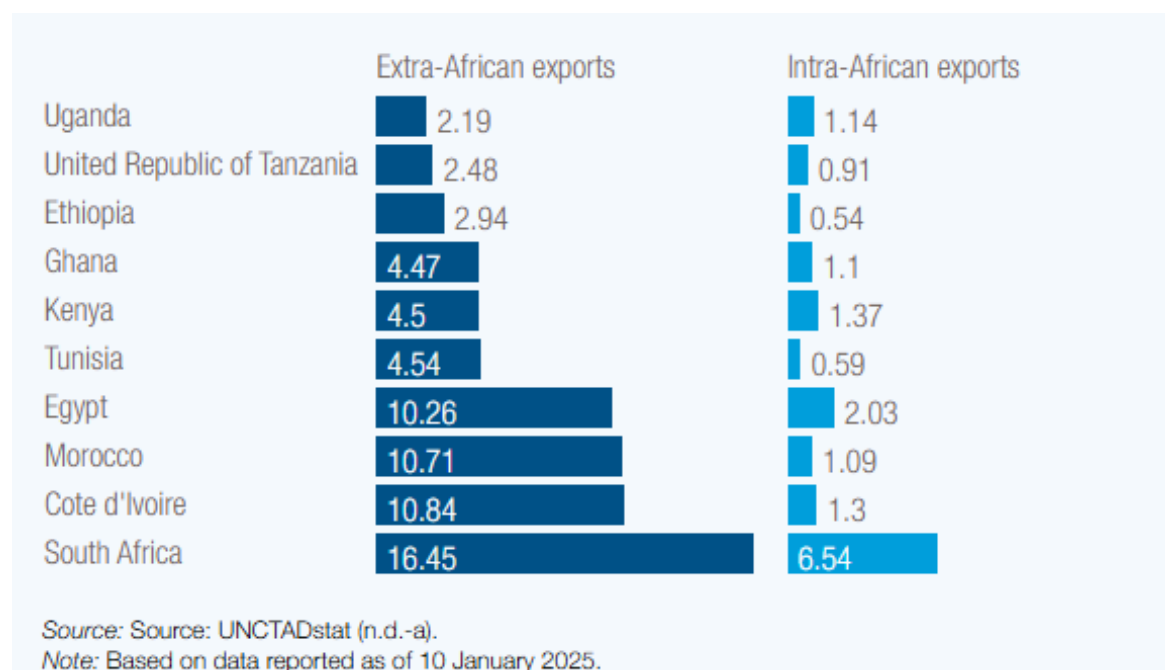
Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025

### 3. Top African exporters of biodiversity-based products account for 75 per cent of the total trade

The top 10 exporting African countries account for 75 per cent of Africa's exports of biodiversity-based products (table 7). South Africa is the leading exporter both to Africa and the rest of the world, with exports valued at US\$16.5 billion in 2021. This represents 17.8 per cent of all African exports of biodiversity-based products to the world and 25 per cent of intra-African exports. Following South Africa are Côte d'Ivoire (US\$10.8 billion), Morocco (US\$10.7 billion) and Egypt (US\$10.26 billion).

**Table 7. Top African exporters of biodiversity-based products, 2021**  
(billions of United States dollars)



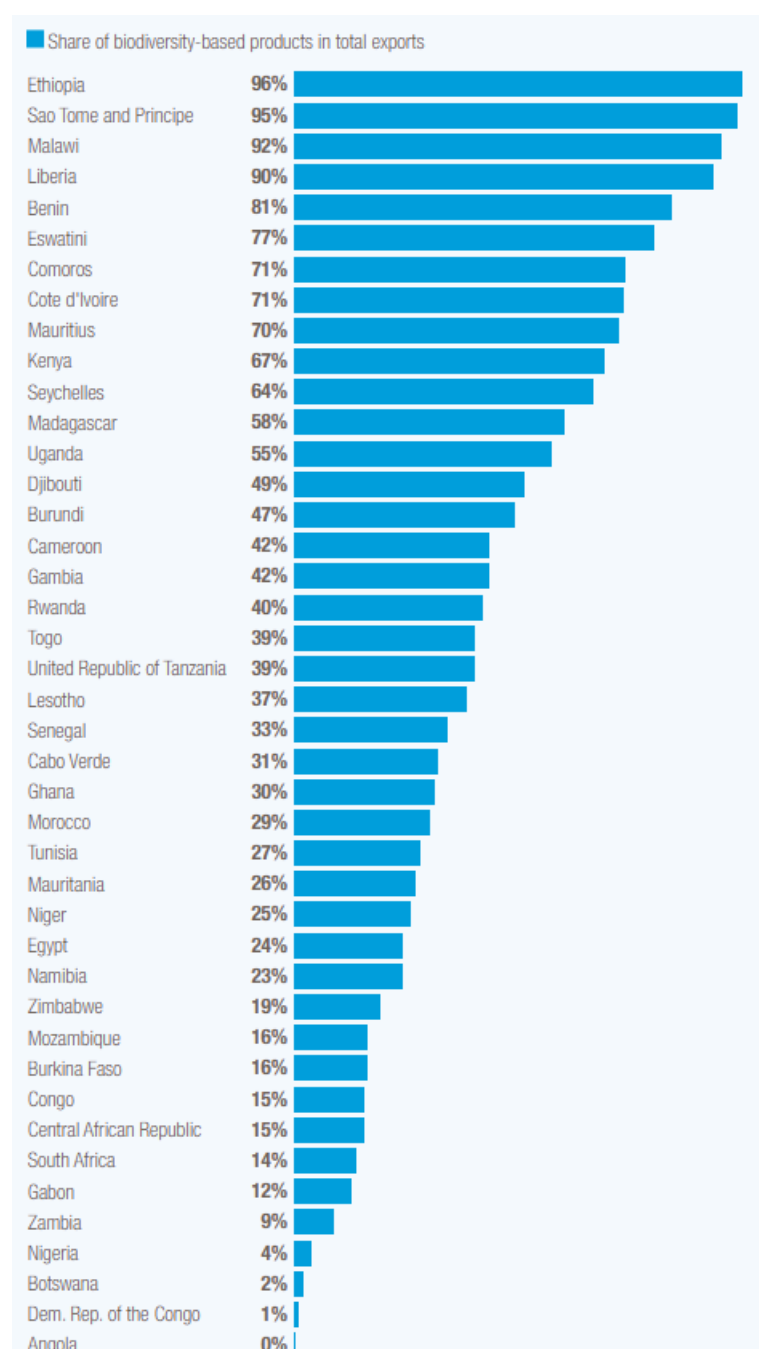
Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

The geographic and economic diversity among these exporters underscores the broad impact of biodiversity-based trade across the continent (table 8). In 2021, biodiversity-based exports represented over 96.2 per cent of total exports for Ethiopia, 95.2 per cent for São Tomé and Príncipe, 91.8 per cent for Malawi and 90 per cent for Liberia (table 5). In contrast, these exports represented less than 2 per cent of total exports for Angola (0.4 per cent) and the Democratic Republic of Congo a mega diverse biodiversity country (1.1 per cent).

The importance of trade in biodiversity-based products also varies between countries. For Seychelles, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mauritius, Liberia, Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Mozambique and Namibia, this trade represents between 20 and 55.5 per cent of their GDP (table 9).

**Table 8. Share of biodiversity-based products in total exports of selected African countries, 2021**  
(per cent)



Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

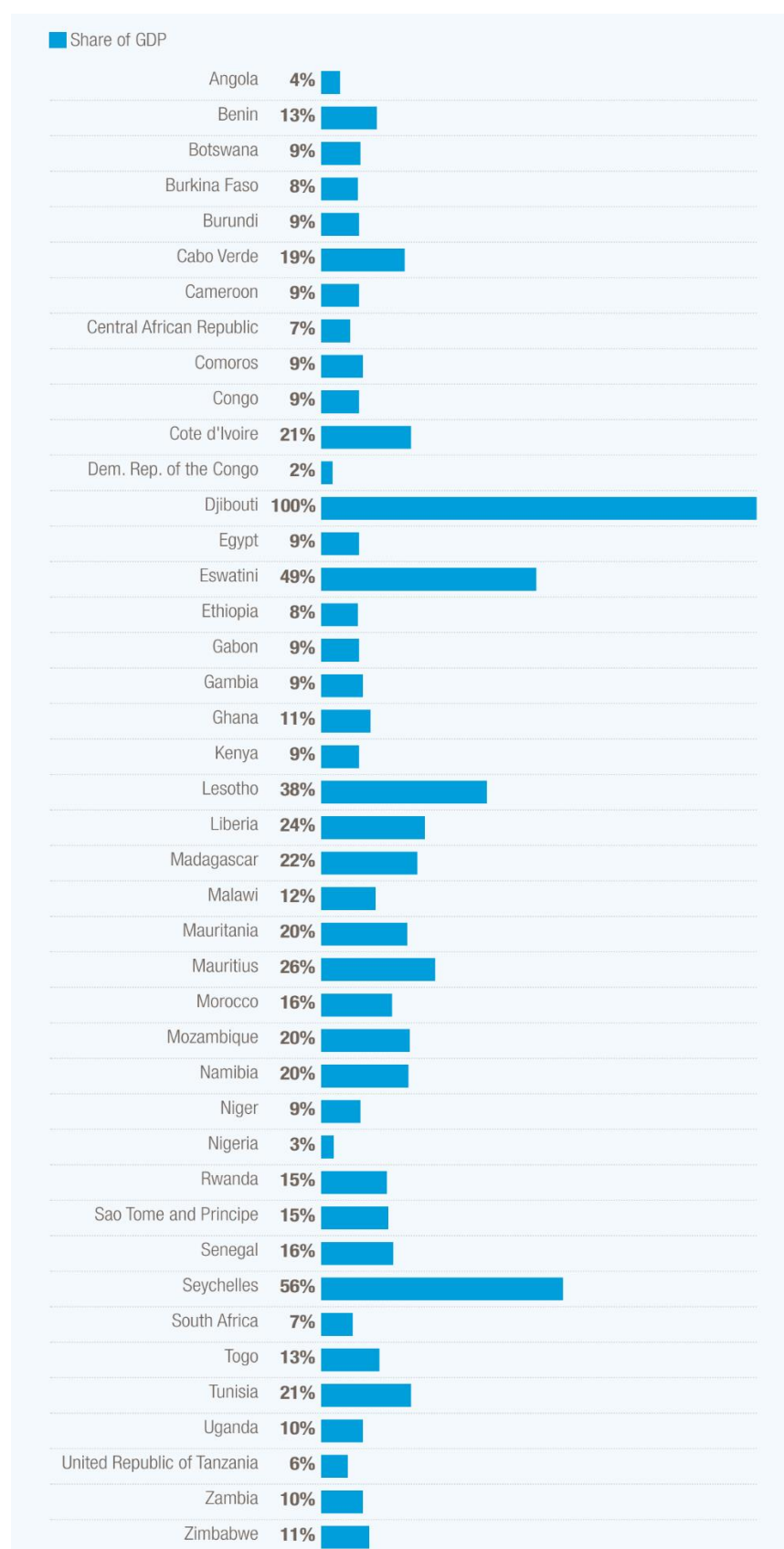
#### 4. Growing importance of trade in biodiversity-based food and beverage products in Africa

Food and beverage products dominated Africa's exports of biodiversity-based products at US\$52.67 billion (table 10), accounting for 56,89 per cent of total biodiversity-based trade in 2021. Leading export products were cocoa and cocoa preparations (US\$10.25 billion), fresh or dried fruits and derived products (US\$9.77 billion), fresh, chilled or dried vegetables and derived products (US\$4.32 billion) and fish (US\$4.3 billion). These products accounted for 54 per cent of African exports in the food and beverage category. Intra-African trade was also important, with food and beverage exports totaling US\$13.28 billion in 2021, representing 51 per cent of total intra-African exports of biodiversity-based products.

The second-largest export product category was natural fibres and articles thereof, with exports valued at US\$11.87 billion in 2021, accounting for 12.8 per cent of total biodiversity-based product exports. Cotton and articles thereof dominated this category with total exports valued at US\$7.5 billion. Natural ingredients was the next-largest category, with exports valued at US\$8,18 billion, representing 8.83 per cent of total African exports of biodiversity-based products. Within this category, oil-bearing crops and vegetable fats, oil and waxes accounted for the largest share at US\$ 2.63 billion.

When comparing global exports of biodiversity-based products from Africa with intra-African trade, three product categories stand out where intra-African exports exceed exports to the rest of the world: perfumery, cosmetic, personal care and room care preparations (78 per cent of intra-African exports), pharmaceuticals (59 per cent), and natural ingredients (45 per cent) (table 11).

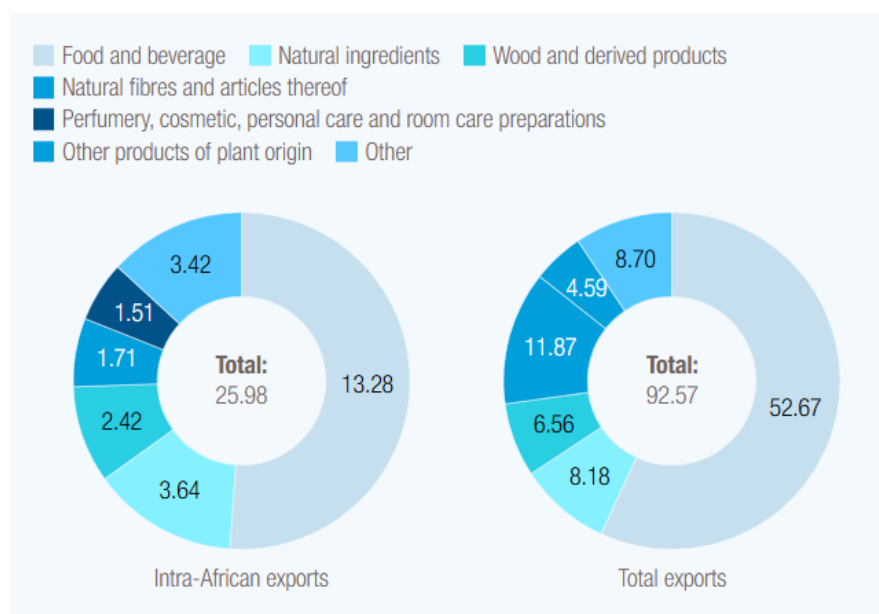
**Table 9. Share of the trade in biodiversity-based products in GDP in selected African countries, 2021**  
(per cent)



Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

**Table 10. Food and beverages led exports of biodiversity-based products in Africa in 2021**  
(billions of United States dollars)



Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

**Table 11. Intra-African versus extra-African exports of biodiversity products and the share of these products in intra-African exports, 2021**  
(billions of United States dollars, per cent)

	Intra-African exports	Extra-African exports	Share of intra-African exports (per cent)
Food and beverage	13.3	52.7	25.0
Natural ingredients	3.6	8.2	45.0
Wood and derived products	2.4	6.6	37.0
Natural fibres and articles thereof	1.7	11.9	14.0
Perfumery, cosmetic, personal care and room care preparations	1.5	1.9	78.0
Other products of plant origin	1.2	4.6	27.0
Agricultural inputs	0.9	2.1	40.0
Pharmaceuticals	0.5	0.8	59.0
Live animals and plants	0.4	1.9	20.0
Miscellaneous	0.3	0.8	34.0
Hides, skins, leather, furskins and products thereof	0.1	0.8	13.0
Other products of animal origin	0.1	0.3	30.0
Vegetable plaiting materials and articles thereof	0.0	0.1	20.0

Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.



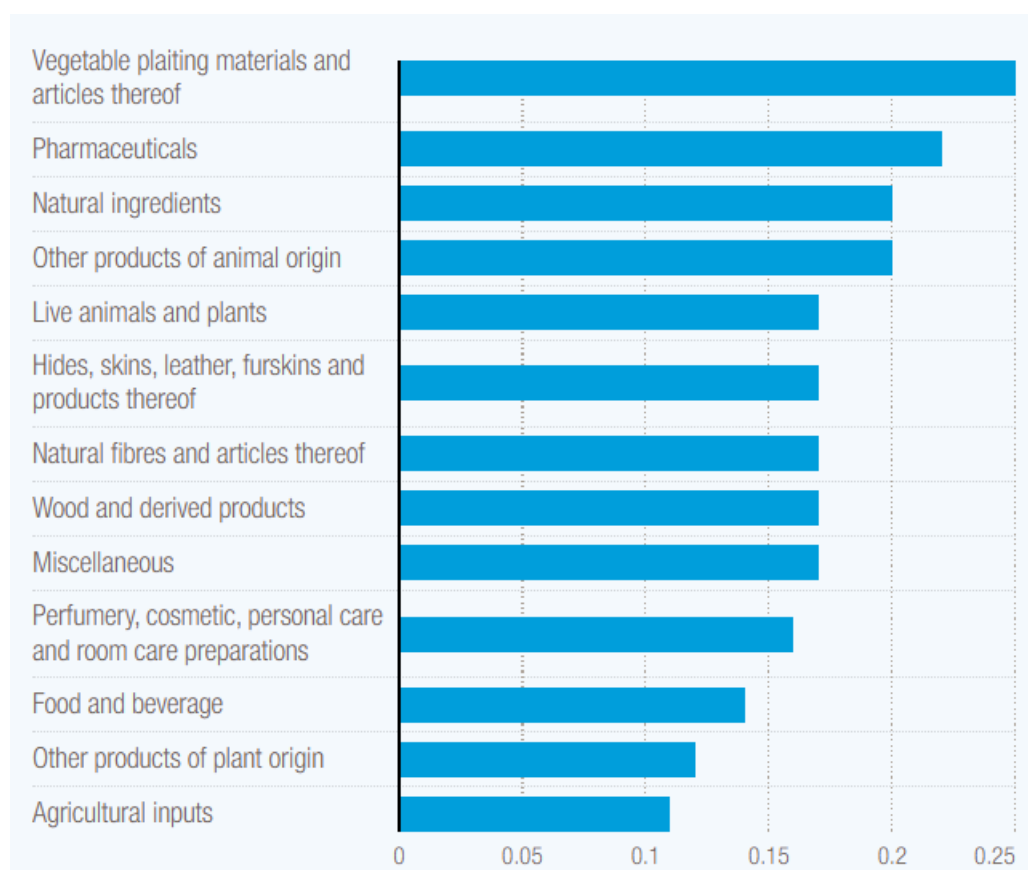
## 5. Concentration of African exports for biodiversity-based products

Overall, the Market Concentration Index score for Africa in 2021 was 0.15.<sup>5</sup> The product groups with the most diversified export markets in 2021 were agricultural inputs (0.11), followed by other products of plant origin (0.12) and food and beverages (0.14) (table 12).

Vegetable plaiting materials and articles thereof, pharmaceuticals, and natural ingredients and other products of animal origin were the groups with the most concentrated export markets, with indexes of 0.25, 0.22, 0.20 and 0.20, respectively.

Europe was the most important export market for vegetable plaiting materials and articles thereof, representing 51.9 per cent of its exports (US\$28 million). France alone accounted for 22.2 per cent of total exports, followed by the United States of America with 14.8 per cent. For pharmaceuticals, African countries are the main export market, representing 58.5 per cent of the total exports valued at US\$839 million. For the natural ingredients category, intra-African exports represent 44.5 per cent of the total exports (US\$3.6 billion) with Ethiopia accounting for 10.46 per cent, followed by China with 8.8 per cent of total natural ingredients exports.

**Table 12. Market Concentration Index scores for African exports of biodiversity-based products, 2021**



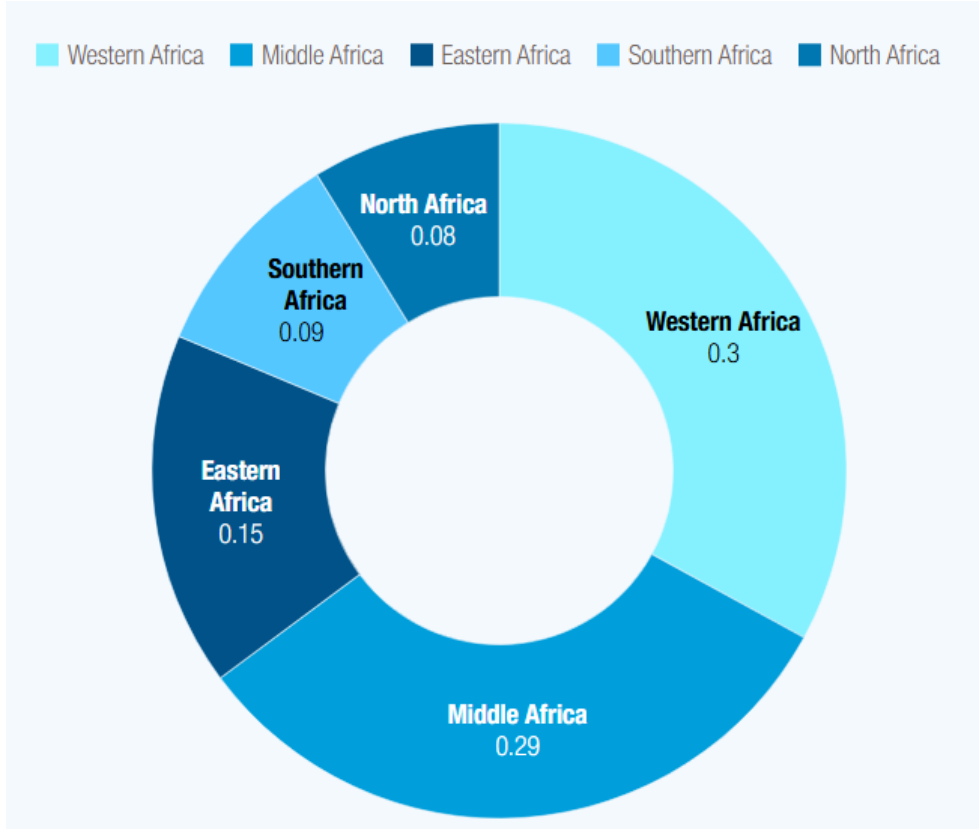
Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).

Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

<sup>5</sup> As described in UNCTADstat (n.d.-c), "The market concentration index measures the degree of concentration of exports and imports of a product around few markets, or whether it is traded more homogeneously by a larger number of countries. A value close to 1 indicates that export or imports for the analyzed product are highly concentrated around few markets. On the contrary, a value closer to 0 reflects a more homogeneous distribution of market shares among economies".

Overall, Africa’s Product Concentration Index score for 2021 was 0.09.<sup>6</sup> North Africa was the region with the most diversified exports of biodiversity-based products (0.08), followed by Southern Africa (0.09) and Eastern Africa (0.15) (table 13). In contrast, the most concentrated regions were Western Africa (0.3) and Middle Africa (0.29).

**Table 13. Product Concentration Index scores for African exports of biodiversity-based products, 2021**



Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-a).  
Note: Based on data reported as of 10 January 2025.

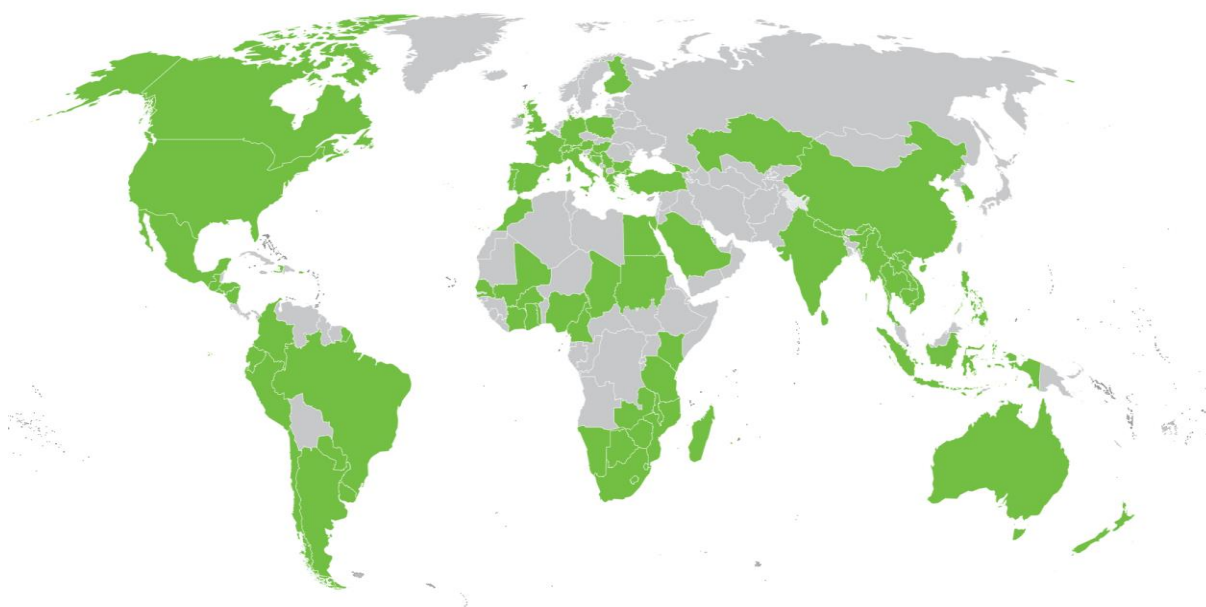
<sup>6</sup> As described in UNCTADStat (n.d.-d), “The product concentration index is a measure of the degree of concentration of the trade of an economy, meaning whether the composition of biodiversity-related exports and imports is concentrated around few products or more homogeneously distributed. An index value closer to 1 indicates that the country’s exports or imports are highly concentrated around a few products. On the contrary, values closer to 0 reflect exports or imports more homogeneously distributed among a series of products”.

## 6. UNCTAD's BioTrade Initiative and partners in action

BioTrade is defined as the collection, production, transformation and commercialization of biodiversity-based goods and services that meet specific social, economic and environmental sustainability criteria (UNCTAD, 2020).

UNCTAD launched its BioTrade Initiative in 1996 to support the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity through trade and investment (UNCTAD, 2020). The initiative “reconciles the need for economic development with poverty alleviation as well as the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, through trade in biodiversity-based products and services” (UNCTAD, n.d.). It supports achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the objectives of several multilateral environmental agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. It is also supportive of UNCTAD's broader development mandates. At the core of its work are the BioTrade Principles and Criteria, which are a set of guidelines for governments, businesses and civil society to promote sustainability across the entire value chain in 80 countries, as of 2024 (table 14). These Principles and Criteria support the implementation and achievement of the SDGs, KMGBF as well as emerging topics and initiatives such as bioeconomy, nature-based solutions, among others.

**Table 14. Countries implementing the BioTrade Principles and Criteria, 2024**



Source: UNCTADstat (n.d.-b).

Under the Global BioTrade Programme: Linking trade, biodiversity and sustainable development implemented by UNCTAD from 2018 to 2025 and funded by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO, activities were conducted in collaboration with partners in Africa, Asia, America and Europe.

For example, the BioInnovation Africa Project, implemented by the German Development Cooperation Agency (GIZ), supports implementation of the BioTrade Principles and Criteria in Cameroon, Madagascar, Namibia and South Africa. During 2019–2022, the project supported the sustainable use of more than 320 000 hectares of wild collection, mobilized more than €1.3 million through private sector investment, and trained more than 150 stakeholders (48 per cent being women) on the value of genetic resources, biological ingredients and access and benefit-sharing contracts, among other initiatives (GIZ, 2023;

UNCTAD, n.d.). From 2023 to 2025, the project is supporting 13 value chains in its four partner countries, including those for marula, beeswax, honeybush, rooibos and devil's claw, among others (GIZ, 2024).

In South Africa, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment, in partnership with the South African Biodiversity Institute, is developing the Conservation and Sustainable Use BioTrade Charter through a participatory process. The charter, which is currently being piloted (Naicker, 2024), will serve as a precursor to a national standard and certification scheme that has been informed by the BioTrade Principles and Criteria (Matibe, 2024; UNCTAD, 2025).

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