ZESN COMMEMMORATES INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY DAY

15-September-2024 – The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) joins the global community in commemorating International Democracy Day, observed annually on September 15. This year's theme, *"Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Good Governance,"* highlights both the opportunities and challenges of integrating AI into electoral processes. Established by the UN General Assembly in 2007, International Democracy Day promotes the reflection on democracy's global state and encourages governments to enhance democratic practices.

ZESN views Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool with transformative potential in Zimbabwe's elections. AI can improve various aspects of electoral systems, such as enhancing voter registration through biometric voter registration (BVR) and improving the transparency of vote counting. The technology offers increased efficiency, accuracy, and the ability to detect electoral fraud by analyzing data patterns and irregularities.

Despite these advantages, the Network expresses concern over the lack of transparency in AI systems. Stakeholders such as election observers and civil society have raised concerns about the opacity of AI algorithms. Without proper oversight, AI could be misused to manipulate voter data, reinforce biases, or disenfranchise voters—issues that are particularly troubling in Zimbabwe, where electoral integrity has historically been a sensitive matter.

ZESN is of the view that, while AI can reduce human error and enhance electoral efficiency, ZESN stresses the need for caution. In a country with deep historical and political divides, it is crucial to implement AI systems with transparency and oversight to prevent its misuse. Transparency in AI deployment, including making algorithms publicly accessible and ensuring independent audits, is essential to maintaining trust in elections.

Two key advocacy issues should guide discussions on AI in Zimbabwe's elections:

1. Transparency and Accountability: Stakeholders, including political parties and civil society, must demand transparency in AI's use during elections. Public access to information about AI systems, how they function, and who controls them is vital for maintaining trust. Independent audits and oversight mechanisms are necessary to prevent any misuse.

2. Inclusion and Protection of Marginalized Communities: AI systems should be designed with inclusivity in mind to ensure that marginalized and vulnerable communities are not disenfranchised by algorithmic bias. Electoral reforms must prioritize equitable access to information and voting rights, ensuring that AI supports, rather than deepens, existing divides. Involving local communities in the decision-making processes regarding AI's use will further safeguard democracy.

As Zimbabwe continues to explore AI's integration into its governance systems, ZESN emphasizes that the technology must reinforce democratic values like transparency, accountability, and inclusion. When used responsibly, AI can create more resilient, efficient, and trustworthy electoral processes. However, vigilance is required to ensure the technology does not undermine the very democratic principles it is intended to support.

On this International Democracy Day, ZESN calls for reflection on these critical issues, encouraging collective efforts to ensure that technology strengthens, rather than threatens, Zimbabwe's democratic institutions. Happy International Democracy Day! //ENDS

PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

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