



Elections Bulletin

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"LOCAL AUTHORITY ELECTIONS: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AND SHAPING FUTURES"

ZESN underscores the critical importance of local authority elections in Zimbabwe as an integral component of the democratic process and the foundation of public governance. These elections serve as a fundamental mechanism for citizens to actively participate in decision-making processes that directly affect their communities. However, ZESN expresses deep concern over the persistent trend of low voter turnout and voter apathy observed in recent local authority by-elections held following the August 2023 harmonized elections.

ZESN Chairperson Andrew Makoni said, *"Despite the significance of local authority elections in shaping the development agenda and ensuring effective service delivery at the community level, voter turnout in these by-elections has been alarmingly low. For example, none of the Wards that had local authority by-elections surpassed 50% voter turnout. Harare Ward 36 had 17.8%; Chinhoyi Ward 4 recorded 42.3%; Hurungwe Rural District Council Ward 24 recorded 24.29%; Redcliff Ward 3 recorded 43.7%; Nkayi RDC Ward 11 and Chinhoyi Ward 2 all had a voter turnout of 40% just to name a few."*

This voter apathy poses a significant challenge to the sincerity and representativeness of local government structures, as it undermines the mandate of elected officials and weakens the accountability mechanisms that underpin democratic governance. ZESN acknowledges that various factors contribute to voter apathy, including voter fatigue and limited awareness about the importance of local government in addressing community needs.



ZESN Chairperson Andrew Makoni

"It is imperative for the electorate to exercise its constitutional right to participate in local authority elections and actively engage in the democratic governance of their communities. The Constitution of Zimbabwe in Section 67 enshrines the right of every citizen to vote and to freely choose their representatives at all levels of government, including local authorities. By exercising this right, citizens can contribute to the establishment of responsive, accountable, and inclusive local government structures that prioritize the needs and aspirations of the people they serve," added Makoni.

ZESN calls upon all stakeholders, including political parties, civil society organizations, the media, and the electorate, to collectively work towards addressing voter apathy and promoting increased voter turnout in local authority elections.

It is essential to undertake comprehensive voter education campaigns to raise awareness about the significance of these elections and to empower citizens to actively participate in the democratic process. By strengthening citizen engagement and promoting

ZESN acknowledges that various factors contribute to voter apathy, including voter fatigue and limited awareness about the importance of local government in addressing community needs.

Zimbabwe can advance towards a more vibrant and inclusive democracy that reflects the will and aspirations of its people.



HARNESSING AI FOR ENHANCED AFRICAN ELECTIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

As African nations increasingly embrace Artificial Intelligence (AI) to bolster their electoral processes, there is need to pay careful attention to key considerations such as due diligence, cybersecurity and transparency before the adoption of AI solutions to ensure election observation and election management supports the enhancement of the integrity of their democratic systems. Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) Host Executive Director Rindai Chipfunde Vava made the call while addressing delegates at the inaugural Artificial Intelligence and African Elections Conference that was held in Nairobi Kenyan from 16 to 17 March 2024.

Vava highlighted the pivotal role artificial intelligence (AI) can play in transforming the electoral landscape across the continent.



ESN-SA Host Executive Director Rindai Chipfunde Vava

“One of the most significant contributions of AI lies in elevating the quality of citizen observation during elections. By employing AI-based mechanisms, the efficiency and accuracy of citizen observation can be improved. These systems excel in extracting pertinent information, analyzing sentiments and opinions, and ensuring submissions are made within specified geo-fenced locations,” said Vava.

She outlined the potential benefits and challenges associated with integrating AI into election processes such as image classification, sentiment analysis and tracking the election process, thereby enhancing the speed and accuracy of data collection and analysis. This, in turn, provides election observers with more timely and reliable information.

She added that, *“Alongside the benefits of AI there are also risks. Potential biases in data analysis and privacy concerns are chief among them. To mitigate these risks, there's a pressing need to ensure the security and integrity of AI systems, preventing any manipulation or interference with the electoral process. Capacity building within election observer groups is essential to critically assess AI usage and identify potential biases or risks.”*

Despite the promise of AI, challenges persist. Biases inherent in training data, difficulties in understanding the socio-political context, and infrastructural constraints such as unstable internet connectivity and power supply pose significant hurdles.

Furthermore, ensuring cybersecurity while protecting individuals' privacy rights remains a delicate balance. Transparency and accountability in the use of AI systems must be upheld, with continuous monitoring for compliance.

Picture Below:

Artificial Intelligence and Election Observation Panelists

From Left: Taona Mwanysa, Cynthia Mbamalu, Henry Muguzi, Kay Spencer & Rindai Chipfunde Vava





ZESN IMPLORES POLITICAL PARTIES TO CONSIDER GENDER EQUALITY IN THEIR CANDIDATE SELECTION PROCESSES

ZESN urges political parties to prioritize gender equality in their candidate selection processes. This call comes amidst ZESN's reflection on the dauntingly low participation of women in democratic electoral processes within Zimbabwe.

ZESN Vice Chairperson, Pastor Trever Masuku said, *“the Network has been actively lobbying for the alignment of the Electoral Act with the Zimbabwean Constitution, particularly focusing on Sections 3, 17, 56, and 80 to explicitly incorporate gender equality provisions aimed at promoting and protecting women's participation in politics.”*

Zimbabwe, as a signatory to various regional and international gender equality frameworks, is committed to principles of non-discrimination and equal political rights. However, despite these commitments and the progressive legal frameworks enshrined in the country's Constitution, the reality on the ground paints a bleak picture. *“The August 2023 Harmonised Elections highlighted a concerning decline in women's participation in politics compared to previous elections. Out of 11 presidential candidates, only one woman Elisabeth Valerio contested, a significant drop from the four (4) female candidates in the 2018 elections. Financial obstacles, exemplified by the exclusion of Linda Masarira over non-payment of nomination fees, further hinder women's participation,”* said Masuku.

The plummeting number of women contesting directly elected National Assembly parliamentary seats further underscores the persistent barriers hindering women's political participation. Despite making up 52% of the population, women remain vastly underrepresented in decision-making processes, with only 11% of total candidates in the recent elections being female.



ZESN Vice Chairperson, Pastor Trever Masuku

ZESN emphasizes that this underrepresentation is not merely a numerical issue but a systemic challenge rooted in traditional patriarchal gender stereotypes and gender-based violence, which deter women from engaging in politics.

Masuku added that, *“ZESN advocates for political parties to actively support women aspiring to political office by providing financial and logistical assistance; implementing gender quotas, and creating environments free from violence and intimidation, citizens should reaffirm their commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment; women, including those with disabilities, should actively participate in electoral processes to contribute to a more representative and equitable electoral landscape.”*

Achieving equal representation in politics is crucial for upholding democratic principles and ensuring the voices of all segments of society are heard.

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STAKEHOLDERS URGED TO ENHANCE YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES

ZESN has reiterated the critical importance of youth involvement in electoral processes, echoing the sentiments enshrined in Section 67 of the Zimbabwean Constitution. The call comes against the backdrop of ongoing underrepresentation of youth in significant electoral, governance, policy and legislative matters.

"The global community, including bodies such as the United Nations and the African Union, has consistently emphasized the pivotal role of young people in driving sustainable development and fostering inclusive governance," ZESN Programmes Director Ellen Dingani stated, underscoring the universal recognition of youth as key stakeholders in shaping the future of nations.

Zimbabwe, as a signatory to various international agreements, is obligated to uphold these principles. The Constitution of Zimbabwe, in Section 20 (1), explicitly mandates affirmative action programs to ensure youth access to education, training, and meaningful participation across all aspects of society. However, Dingani expressed concern over the lack of tangible progress, particularly evident in the aftermath of the 2023 Harmonised Elections.

"Out of the 280-member National Assembly, only 35 young individuals secured seats, representing a mere 12.5% of the total membership. This stark disparity is alarming considering youth comprise over 60% of Zimbabwe's population," Dingani remarked, drawing attention to the apparent gap between demographic reality and political representation.

While acknowledging the institutionalization of the Youth Quota in the National Assembly as a positive step, Dingani stressed the need to address gender disparities within youth representation. *"Of the ten (10) youth MPs elected under the Youth Quota, only three (3) are female, undermining not only the principle of gender equality but also hindering the holistic representation of youth voices,"* Dingani emphasized.

Additionally, Dingani highlighted the urgent need for government intervention to revise electoral laws, allocate more seats for young candidates, and enforce gender parity measures within quotas. Collaboration between the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and civil society organizations to implement voter education programs targeting youth was also emphasized as crucial in raising awareness about the importance of electoral participation and rights and responsibilities of

Political parties are thus urged to adopt affirmative action measures promoting the inclusion of young women in leadership positions and electoral candidacy. Stakeholders, including political parties, Civil Society Organizations, and youth themselves, should take decisive action towards enhancing youth involvement in electoral processes and economic development.

Robust youth engagement rooted in governance awareness and continuous involvement in leadership and governance mechanisms holds immense potential to expedite the representation and participation of youth in electoral processes.



ZESN Programmes Director Ellen Dingani



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