ZESN REAFFIRMS COMMITMENT TO GENDER AND YOUTH INCLUSION IN GOVERNANCE

As Zimbabwe commemorated both International Women's Day on 8 March and National Youth Day on 21 February, ZESN reiterated its unwavering commitment to advancing inclusive democratic participation. These twin commemorations provided a critical moment to reflect on the progress made and the work that remains in empowering women and youth to participate fully and equally in national governance and electoral processes.

Under the global theme for International Women's Day, "Accelerate Action: Advancing Gender Equality Now," ZESN called for urgent, coordinated efforts to dismantle the persistent structural and societal barriers hindering women's full political, social, and economic participation.

"In a democratic society, the exclusion of women from governance not only limits diversity of perspectives but also undermines the legitimacy of decision-making structures," said ZESN Programmes Director Ellen Dingani. "We must act with urgency to ensure women are not merely represented but meaningfully included in shaping the policies that govern their lives."

The decline in women's representation in Zimbabwe's National Assembly from 14.4% in 2018 to 11% in the 2023 Harmonised Elections was cited as a setback in the journey toward gender parity

ZESN underscored the need for gender-sensitive policy interventions, including gender quotas, comprehensive protections against Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWIE), and support mechanisms for female political candidates.

ZESN Executive Director Rindai Chipfunde-Vava emphasised the urgency of safeguarding digital and physical spaces for women's participation. "Cyber bullying and online intimidation are emerging forms of political violence disproportionately affecting women. We must implement proactive strategies that allow women to engage safely and confidently in political discourse," she said.

In addition to political inclusion, ZESN advocates for women's economic and civic empowerment. Education and vocational training were identified as pivotal tools in equipping women and girls with the knowledge, confidence, and resources to engage as active citizens and leaders. The Network called on stakeholders to invest in inclusive civic education programmes, particularly those that address women's rights, electoral systems, and leadership development.

"Our democratic institutions are strongest when they reflect the lived realities of all Zimbabweans. Empowered women make informed choices not only at the ballot box, but also in their homes, workplaces, and communities," added Dingani.
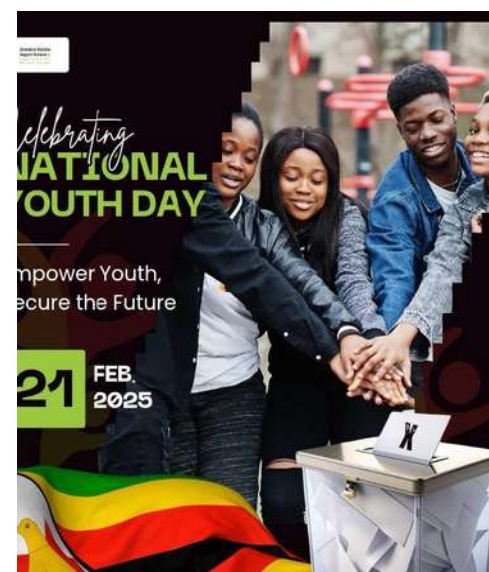
In a complementary reflection on National Youth Day, celebrated under the theme "Empower Youth, Secure the Future," ZESN acknowledged the vital role that young people play in shaping Zimbabwe's democratic and developmental trajectory.

"Young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow they are active participants in today's political, social, and economic life," said Chipfunde-Vava. "Their energy, innovation, and courage are indispensable assets in our collective pursuit of a just and inclusive society."

ZESN welcomed the introduction of the Youth Quota and the National Youth Policy, which mandate a minimum youth representation in governance structures. These frameworks, the Network noted, offer a critical foundation for integrating youth voices into national decision-making.

"By embedding young leaders in governance processes, we foster institutions that are responsive to the needs of all citizens. But more than that, we build a culture of leadership renewal grounded in integrity, equity, and service," said Dingani.

The Network also called on government and civil society to strengthen opportunities for youth civic engagement through leadership training, civic education, and platforms for policy influence. ZESN reiterated that youth participation must go beyond symbolic representation to include genuine access to power, decision-making, and public accountability mechanisms.
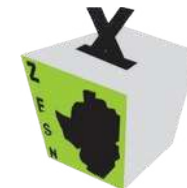

Pic: National Youth Day Flyer

"Youth empowerment must be about more than seats at the table; it must be about voice, influence, and leadership," said Chipfunde-Vava. "When we invest in young people, we invest in a stable and forward-looking democracy."

As Zimbabwe celebrates the milestones of women and youth, ZESN urged all stakeholders including government, political parties, the private sector, and civil society to recommit to creating enabling environments for inclusive participation. This includes challenging discriminatory norms, enacting supportive legislation, and ensuring access to quality education, economic opportunities, and leadership pathways. A democratic Zimbabwe must be one where both women and youth have the agency and the opportunity to lead, to serve, and to thrive.

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STRENGTHENING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: ESN-SA ELECTIONS ACADEMY SHOWCASES REGIONAL COLLABORATION AND INNOVATION

The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) convened the Elections Academy in South Africa from 24 to 25 April 2025 under the theme "Strengthening Electoral Integrity in Southern Africa." The meeting brought together Representatives from Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), Civil Society Organisations, academics, international partners, and citizen observers. Against the backdrop of the 2024 electoral year across the SADC region, the Academy served as a timely and vital forum for reflection, dialogue, and forward-looking strategising.

Opening the proceedings, ESN-SA host Executive Director Mrs Rindai Chipfunde-Vava underscored the Academy's critical role in providing a neutral, inclusive platform for collective evaluation. She noted that the 2024 elections had tested democratic institutions and citizen engagement across the region, highlighting the urgency for practical, collaborative solutions. Chairperson Ms Emma Kaliya echoed these sentiments, praising the Academy for fostering mutual learning and reaffirming shared aspirations for credible and transparent elections.

Representing the European Union Delegation in South Africa, Mr Simelane Nkanyiso lauded recent democratic milestones, including Namibia's election of its first female President and South Africa's transition to coalition governance. However, he cautioned that declining voter turnout remains a cause for concern, requiring sustained attention and analy-

The Academy benefited from the scholarly insights of Professors Everisto Benyera and Khabele Matlosa, who highlighted structural challenges including electoral violence, administrative hurdles, and technological disruptions. Professor Matlosa emphasised the need for increased investment in electoral systems, arguing that building trust and boosting participation depend upon robust institutional foundations.

UNDP Africa's Mr Robert Gerenge expanded on the issue of trust deficits between electoral actors, while raising alarms about the "over-judicialisation" of electoral disputes. He advocated for more balanced, transparent, and inclusive approaches to dispute resolution and stakeholder engagement.

A key focus of the Academy was the 2024 electoral cycle across Southern Africa. EMB representatives from Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa shared operational insights and innovations. Mr Peter Shaama, Chief Electoral Officer of the Namibia Electoral Commission emphasised advances in technology for voter registration and observation. The Chief Information Education Officer for the Independent Electoral Commission of Botswana, Ms Mavis Ngatangua Mukungu noted peaceful transitions and operational success, though acknowledged challenges around diaspora voting and logistical supply. South Africa's Chief Elections Officer for the Independent Electoral Commission, Mr Sy Mamabolo spoke to the benefits of digital systems in enhancing efficiency and accuracy throughout the electoral process.

Pic: Group Photo elections academy

Observer missions also played a central role in discussions. Ms Lenny Taabu of EISA noted recurring issues with late legal reforms and youth disengagement. The African Union's Mr Samuel Atuobi stressed the need to rebuild trust among electoral stakeholders, while Mr Magabolle Mafiri of the SADC Organ Directorate on Politics, Defence and Security Affairs raised concerns over the disruptive influence of social media and information disorders. Furthermore, the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF SADC) Executive Secretary Ms Hilda Modisane observed that the 2024 elections across the SADC region were largely conducted in a peaceful and credible manner, as affirmed by both domestic and international observers

ESN-SA also launched two landmark publications: the 2024 Southern Africa Election Compendium of Observers' Recommendations and the General Observers Training Manual. The Compendium offers comprehensive reflections on seven electoral processes, while the Manual equips observers with core methodologies and ethical principles.

Emerging themes from across the continent enriched the Academy's deliberations.

From Mozambique, Namibia, Madagascar, and beyond, civil society leaders highlighted the importance of inclusive electoral frameworks, women's political participation, and grassroots civic engagement. YIAGA Africa's Executive Director Mr Samson Itodo and Media Monitoring Africa's Mr William Bird interrogated the growing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital media on elections, stressing the need for regulatory foresight and democratic safeguards.

A core consensus emerged around the potential of Artificial Intelligence as both a tool and a threat in electoral management. While AI can enhance efficiency, participants voiced concerns about its capacity to exacerbate inequalities or be exploited for disinformation. The Academy thus called for careful, strategic integration of AI, guided by transparency, inclusivity, and democratic oversight.

In closing, Ms Kaliya issued a call to action: to move beyond incrementalism and embrace transformative reforms that promote full and equal participation across gender, age, and ability. As the region reflects on 2024 and prepares for future electoral cycles, the ESN-SA Elections Academy stands as a testament to the power of regional solidarity, critical reflection, and innovation in service of democratic integrity.

CONCERNS RISE OVER VOTER APATHY IN RECENT ELECTIONS

In recent electoral events, voter apathy has emerged as a pressing concern, with notable declines in voter turnout recorded during both harmonised and subsequent by-elections. Statistics from the 2018 Harmonised Elections show a robust turnout of 85%, a figure that sharply declined to 68.9% in the 2023 elections. The downward trend continued into by-elections, with voter participation plummeting to alarmingly low levels.

During the Glenview South National Assembly by-elections held on 12 April 2025, the voter turnout was 17.2% after 4,833 voters turned out to vote. The same trend was noted during the Harare East and Mount Pleasant National Assembly by-elections held in 2024, the voter turnout was strikingly low, with rates of 15.2% and 11.6% respectively.

These figures underscore a growing disinterest among eligible voters in engaging with the democratic process through elections.

ZESN has highlighted this concerning trend, observing similarly low turnouts in other by-elections across the country in the year 2024. In Mkoba North, Pelanda-ba-Tshabalala, Chegutu West, Seke, Zvimba East, and Goromonzi South Constituencies, voter participation ranged from 11.3% to 33.5%. The situation was mirrored in local authority by-elections, with Umzingwane Ward 15, recording a voter turnout of 38.64 out of 1,563 registered voters; Harare Municipality Ward 36 and Chinhoyi Municipality Ward 4 recording turnout rates of 17.8% and 42.3% respectively.

The 2023 Harmonised Elections witnessed a relatively higher turnout, attributed to factors such as an updated Biometric Voters' Roll, intensified party mobilisation, sustained campaigning efforts, and heightened media coverage locally, regionally and internationally. However, subsequent by-elections have struggled to sustain this level of enthusiasm.

The observed decline in voter participation underscores the need for ongoing voter education initiatives aimed at encouraging and informing citizens about the importance of participating in all electoral processes, including by-elections.

Electoral stakeholders must redouble efforts to reverse this trend and ensure that voter apathy does not undermine the democratic foundation of Zimbabwe.

> *Statistics from the 2018 Harmonised Elections show a robust turnout of 85%, a figure that sharply declined to 68.9% in the 2023 elections.*

#YOUR V☑TE IS YOUR RIGHT

WILL AI VOTE FOR US? REFLECTIONS ON AFRICA'S ELECTORAL FUTURE WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

As artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly evolves, its potential impact on African elections is sparking both excitement and concern. A recent study by ZESN's partner, YIAGA Africa reveals a continent grappling with the nascent stages of AI adoption in its electoral processes, highlighting both the opportunities and significant challenges ahead.

The study found that only five African countries (20%) – South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Eswatini, and Madagascar – are currently deploying AI for key election administration functions. In contrast, 21 countries (80%) reported no AI adoption in their electoral management.

"AI isn't a new phenomenon, but its application in elections is still in its infancy across Africa," stated Samson Itodo, Executive Director of YIAGA Africa. "It's crucial to distinguish between general technology and true AI, which transcends simple information integrity."
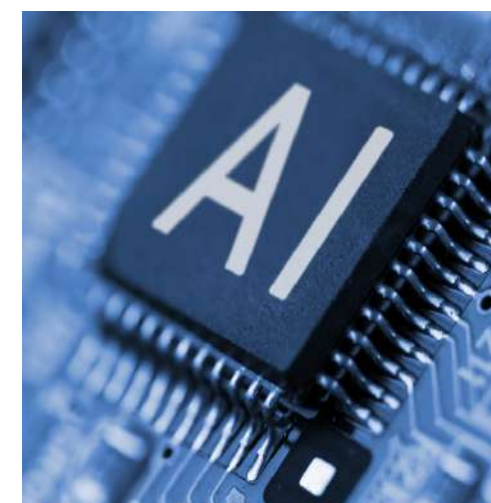
The reasons for non-adoption are multifaceted, with electoral commissions citing concerns such as the risk of bias in AI systems, the complexity of AI, and a lack of trust, high deployment costs, limited expertise, and the absence of clear AI policies or legislation.

Despite these challenges, the study identified several promising applications of AI in countries that have embraced the technology. Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa have utilized chatbots for voter education, while Kenya and Nigeria have employed AI for biometric verification and election results management. Kenya has also explored AI's potential in countering disinformation, and South Africa has focused on cyber threat detection.

However, Itodo also underscored the significant risks associated with AI in elections, including algorithmic bias, the potential for misuse, hallucinations and inaccuracies, the privatization of core electoral functions, assaults on human rights ...

(particularly privacy), and cyber-attacks on critical electoral infrastructure.

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BALLOT NEWSLETTER

Zimbabwe Election Support Network
Promoting Democratic Elections In Zimbabwe

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...CONTINUATION FROM PAGE 3: WILL AI VOTE FOR US? REFLECTIONS ON AFRICA'S ELECTORAL FUTURE WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

"AI is fallible," Itodo cautioned. "We must be aware of the potential for algorithmic bias, misuse, and the risk of hallucinations, which can lead to inaccurate information."

He said, the study identified key hurdles to AI adoption, including AI sovereignty, weak digital infrastructure, and limited data access. Itodo emphasized the need for a balanced approach, advocating for ethical and responsible AI adoption guided by principles of transparency, fairness, human oversight, data privacy, and AI sovereignty.

"We need to develop robust regulatory and governance frameworks," Itodo stressed. "Keeping humans-in-the-loop (HITL) is essential, along with conducting readiness assessments, independent audits, and impact assessments."

The study also highlighted the potential of AI to address some of the biggest challenges facing African elections, such as trust deficits, logistical inefficiencies, human interference, electoral fraud, and shrinking civic space. AI can assist in data collection for voter registration and constituency delimitation, accelerate data analysis, improve accessibility to election information, fast-track decision-making, and pre-bunk and debunk disinformation.

In conclusion, the report calls for a proactive and cautious approach to AI adoption in African elections, emphasizing the need for collaboration among electoral commissions, governments, civil society, and technology experts to ensure that AI is used to strengthen, rather than undermine, democratic processes.

YIAGA Africa Executive Director, Samson Itodo

"Will AI vote for us?" Itodo asked rhetorically, highlighting the need for careful reflection on the future of African elections in the age of AI. "The answer lies in our ability to harness AI's potential while mitigating its risks, ensuring that technology serves democracy and not the other way around." Government, civil society, and all electoral stakeholders should ensure that AI technology, if integrated into elections, aligns with democratic values like transparency, accountability, inclusion as well as collective effort to ensure technology serves the people and strengthens the democratic process.