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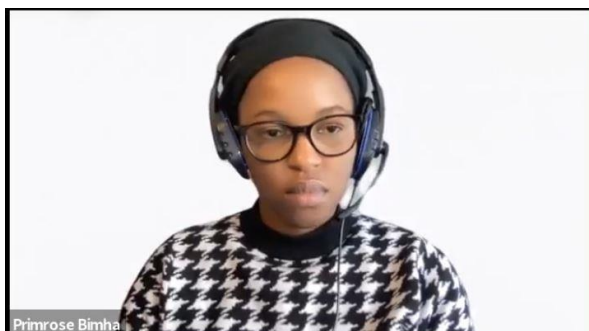
Policy Brief

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Zoom Online Platform

South Africa's Approach to Regional Stability in SADC: Examining Zimbabwe and Mozambique as potential threats to regional security, peace and stability

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Executive Summary

On 26 September 2024, the Southern African Liaison Office (SALO), in collaboration with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, convened a public dialogue via Zoom titled “*South Africa’s Approach to Regional Stability in SADC: Examining Zimbabwe and Mozambique as Potential Threats to Regional Security, Peace and Stability*”. The dialogue brought together experts and policymakers to deliberate on South Africa’s foreign policy within the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The meeting’s purpose was to examine the pressing issues affecting Zimbabwe and Mozambique and assess South Africa’s role in fostering stability through regional mechanisms. The event featured addresses from Dr Primrose Bimha, a researcher and academic whose work focuses on foreign policy, elections management, and regional diplomacy; Dr Phillip Dexter, a trade unionist and former member of South Africa’s Parliament with extensive experience in governance and political processes; and Tendai Mbanje, a doctoral candidate specialising in international human rights law and a seasoned elections analyst.

The dialogue provided a platform to examine South Africa’s responses to regional instability and explore solutions aligned with its foreign policy objectives. Speakers emphasised South Africa’s reliance on multilateral frameworks such as SADC, highlighted the inadequacies in existing mechanisms, and proposed actionable recommendations for fostering regional stability.

Context and Importance

The dialogue centred on two key areas of concern within SADC: Zimbabwe’s post-electoral crisis and Mozambique’s escalating insurgency in Cabo Delgado. These crises exemplify the fragility of regional peace and the necessity for coherent and decisive interventions. The discussions also shed light on the broader governance dynamics, economic inequality, and regional cooperation within SADC.

Zimbabwe: Electoral Crisis and Political Legitimacy

Dr Primrose Bimha’s address provided a detailed analysis of Zimbabwe’s deteriorating political climate, emphasising the fallout from the 2023 elections. She noted that Zimbabwe’s elections have become synonymous with controversy, highlighting the irregularities documented in the SADC Election Observer Mission (SEOM) report, which undermined the credibility of the electoral process. Despite these findings, SADC’s lack of follow-up mechanisms to enforce its principles and guidelines has perpetuated Zimbabwe’s crisis of legitimacy. A critical concern is whether SADC can effectively prevent civilian casualties during elections, especially since the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ falls under the control of the state in international law. This played out in disputes during the 2018 and 2023 elections.

Zimbabwe’s political instability is deeply rooted in decades of contested governance. Since the turn of the century, elections have consistently been marred by violence, voter intimidation, and suppression of dissent. The failure to address these systemic issues has created a cycle of mistrust among the electorate. As highlighted in the dialogue, the Zimbabwean government’s heavy-handed response to political

opposition—including arbitrary arrests, torture, and curtailment of civic freedoms—has contributed to the erosion of public confidence in democratic processes.

Dr Bimha critiqued South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy', which prioritises stability over human rights. This policy emerged as Zimbabwe's economic and political challenges intensified, influenced by factors such as mismanagement under President Robert Mugabe and costly involvement in the Congo conflict. Believing it held significant leverage, South Africa opted for a strategy of discreet engagement and economic tools to mediate the crisis. However, assurances by former President Thabo Mbeki to Zimbabwe's increasingly oppressive regime raised questions about South Africa's commitment to human rights. At the same time, the economic fallout, including the weakening of the rand, underscored the costs of this approach.¹ This is further evidenced by South Africa's facilitation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in Zimbabwe in 2008 instead of addressing systemic electoral malpractice. In her view, *"while Pretoria's intentions may aim to maintain regional stability, its inaction on human rights violations sends the wrong message to authoritarian regimes"*.

The absence of a strong SADC Tribunal (which was dismantled in 2012) further limits regional mechanisms for addressing internal crises. The Tribunal's dissolution, largely influenced by Zimbabwe's objections following rulings against it, represents a broader reluctance within SADC to enforce accountability. The potential for coercive measures, such as sanctions or military interventions, is limited by the need for consensus among member states, complicating timely action. The lack of judicial recourse has left civil society actors and opposition parties in Zimbabwe without meaningful avenues to challenge state overreach.

Mozambique: Insurgency and Governance Challenges

The insurgency in Cabo Delgado was a focal point of Dr Phillip Dexter's presentation, in which he described the situation as a *"powder keg of neglect and exploitation"*. He highlighted Mozambique's struggle with governance, the role of external actors such as Rwanda and the shortcomings of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). Despite its establishment in 2021, SAMIM failed to contain the insurgency due to inadequate funding, weak intelligence-sharing, and strained relations with the Mozambican government. Violence persists, especially in rural areas and strategic districts such as Macomia and Quissanga, and the insurgency remains active in adjacent provinces, including Niassa and Nampula, further destabilising the region. Efforts to counter the insurgency include the continued deployment of Rwandan troops, with approximately 5000 forces now operating alongside Mozambique's Defence Armed Forces (FADM), focusing on key strategic areas such as Palma and Mocímboa da Praia.² However, while Rwandan forces have been praised for their discipline and tactical efficiency, their operations often function independently, undermining broader regional coordination. Logistical and operational inefficiencies, including insufficient training and equipment, have undermined Mozambique's ability

¹ Alden, C. 2002. South Africa's «Quiet Diplomacy» and the crisis in Zimbabwe. *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*. 2:187-211. DOI: 10.4000/cea.1341

² Nhamirre, B. 2024. Are Rwandan troops becoming Cabo Delgado's main security provider? *Institute for Security Studies*. 26 September. Available: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/winning-talk-doesnt-mean-mozambiques-insurgency-is-over> [4 December 2024]

to lead stabilisation efforts and formulate an integrated and sustainable regional approach.

Mozambique's crisis stems from a complex interplay of historical, economic, and social factors. Despite being rich in natural resources such as natural gas and rubies, Cabo Delgado remains one of Mozambique's poorest provinces. The local population has seen little benefit from these resources, fuelling resentment and providing fertile ground for insurgent recruitment. Further, the insurgency, led by Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ), has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, exacerbating humanitarian challenges in the region. Although some displaced populations have returned, this is partially attributed to poor conditions in camps rather than restored stability in their home areas.³ The insurgent groups have exploited the gaps left by SAMIM's withdrawal from 2023 to mid-2024, pivoting from primarily overt violence to strategies aimed at 'winning hearts and minds'.⁴ This includes infiltrating communities to build support and undermine government efforts, further complicating military counter-insurgency strategies. Even so, insurgent incidents increased dramatically in 2024, with over 150 attacks recorded, surpassing previous years' activity and reflecting a resurgence not seen since the 2021 Palma attack.

Dr Dexter underscored the importance of addressing the root causes of instability in Cabo Delgado as part of the solution to the insurgency. This includes tackling poverty, improving governance, and ensuring that local communities benefit from resource extraction. He suggested that poverty reduction is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for long-term peace. Finally, he pointed to the importance of regional solidarity, stating that SADC must speak with one voice if it hopes to effectively address the crisis in Cabo Delgado.

Elections as Catalysts for Instability

Tendai Mbanje's contribution explored the intersection of governance and elections in perpetuating instability. He remarked that "*elections are supposed to be a cornerstone of democracy, not a trigger for conflict*", as he delved into the structural weaknesses of electoral processes in both Zimbabwe and Mozambique. He noted that the Electoral Commissions in both countries are often "*ill-equipped, underfunded, and subject to political influence*", leading to widespread mistrust among voters.

In addition to logistical issues, the lack of transparency in electoral processes has fuelled scepticism among voters. Mozambique's history of contested elections, coupled with its ongoing insurgency, raises concerns about the legitimacy of the upcoming polls. Mbanje highlighted that these unresolved issues could escalate into broader conflicts, particularly in fragile states where democracy remains nascent. He advocated for more robust pre-election assessments and long-term support to strengthen electoral institutions.

³ Nhamirre, B. 2024. Winning talk doesn't mean Mozambique's insurgency is over. *Institute for Security Studies*. 18 July. Available: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/winning-talk-doesnt-mean-mozambiques-insurgency-is-over> [4 December 2024]

⁴ Nhamirre, B. 2024. Winning talk doesn't mean Mozambique's insurgency is over. *Institute for Security Studies*. 18 July. Available: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/winning-talk-doesnt-mean-mozambiques-insurgency-is-over> [4 December 2024]

The Role of SADC in Addressing Regional Challenges

A recurring theme in the dialogue was the effectiveness of SADC as a regional body. While SADC has established frameworks to address political and security challenges, its implementation has been inconsistent. The lack of a unified approach among member states - often influenced by competing national interests - has hindered the region's ability to respond decisively. According to Dr Dexter, *"SADC's principles of sovereignty often clash with the need for intervention. This tension has left the region in a state of paralysis when bold action is needed most"*.

The enduring influence of liberation movements within SADC was also discussed. Parties such as Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF, Mozambique's FRELIMO, and South Africa's ANC share historical ties forged during the fight against colonialism and oppression. While these connections have fostered solidarity, they have also created challenges in holding one another accountable. For instance, South Africa's reluctance to criticise Zimbabwe's governance record may stem from a desire to maintain cordial relations with a fellow liberation movement. This dynamic underscores the need for SADC to prioritise institutional integrity over political alliances to ensure effective governance and accountability.

South Africa, as the region's economic powerhouse, has a critical role to play in strengthening SADC's capacity. This includes advocating for the reinstatement of the SADC Tribunal, enhancing the credibility of electoral observer missions, and fostering greater collaboration among member states. The dialogue underscored the importance of balancing state sovereignty with the need for regional accountability, particularly in addressing human rights violations and governance deficits.

Speakers also highlighted the importance of security sector reform within SADC member states. In Mozambique, the inability of national forces to address the insurgency in Cabo Delgado has necessitated external interventions. Strengthening the capacity of local security forces, coupled with improved intelligence-sharing among SADC states, is essential for sustainable peace. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, addressing the militarisation of politics and ensuring civilian oversight of security institutions could contribute to a more stable political environment. These reforms require concerted effort and investment from both national governments and regional bodies.

Economic Diplomacy and Regional Stability

Another crucial element discussed was the role of economic diplomacy in achieving regional stability. Economic challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality, often underlie political instability. For instance, Zimbabwe's economic collapse has forced millions of citizens to migrate to neighbouring countries, creating additional strain on regional economies. Similarly, the lack of equitable development in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region has exacerbated grievances that fuel the insurgency. As such, South Africa's strategic interests extend beyond immediate political and security concerns. As the most industrialised nation in the region, its economy is deeply intertwined with those of its neighbours. Instability in Zimbabwe and Mozambique has direct repercussions on South Africa, from increased migration flows to disruptions in cross-border trade. Furthermore, fostering regional stability aligns with South Africa's long-term vision of a prosperous and integrated Africa. By

playing an active role in resolving these crises, South Africa not only fulfils its moral obligations but also safeguards its economic and geopolitical interests.

Speakers emphasised the need for South Africa to leverage its economic influence to promote regional development. This includes supporting initiatives under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) to enhance trade and investment within SADC. By fostering economic integration, South Africa can address the root causes of instability while creating opportunities for sustainable growth.

Cross-Border Collaboration, Integration, and Civil Society's Role in Regional Stability

Emphasis was placed on the need for greater cross-border collaboration to address shared challenges. Regional integration initiatives, such as joint infrastructure projects and coordinated economic policies, can foster stability and development. For example, enhancing transport networks between South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique could facilitate trade and create economic opportunities for marginalised communities. Additionally, cross-border collaboration in sectors such as energy and agriculture could help address resource scarcity and reduce competition over limited resources.

Finally, civil society organisations (CSOs) were highlighted as critical in promoting accountability and transparency. CSOs can serve as watchdogs, ensuring that governments adhere to regional principles and guidelines. In Zimbabwe and Mozambique, CSOs have documented human rights abuses, electoral irregularities, and governance failures, providing valuable data for advocacy and policy reform. However, the relationship between CSOs and regional bodies remains fraught with challenges. SADC's limited engagement with civil society has hindered the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. The dialogue called for a more inclusive approach, encouraging SADC to institutionalise mechanisms for CSO participation in decision-making processes. By amplifying the voices of civil society, SADC can enhance its legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing regional challenges.

Policy Critiques and Recommendations

South Africa

- **Critique:** South Africa's reliance on quiet diplomacy prioritises short-term stability over accountability, particularly in its dealings with Zimbabwe and SADC member states.
 - **Recommendation:** South Africa should adopt a proactive diplomatic approach that balances stability with the promotion of human rights. This includes engaging consistently with opposition parties and civil society in Zimbabwe to ensure inclusive governance and stronger accountability measures.
- **Critique:** South Africa's economic dominance in the region has not been fully leveraged to address root causes of instability, such as poverty and unemployment in neighbouring states.

- **Recommendation:** South Africa should lead regional development initiatives under frameworks such as the AfCFTA to promote trade, create jobs, and reduce economic disparities across SADC.

Mozambique

- **Critique:** The insurgency in Cabo Delgado highlights governance challenges and the inability of Mozambique's national forces to effectively manage security threats, necessitating reliance on external interventions such as Rwanda's military presence.
 - **Recommendation:** Strengthen Mozambique's security sector by investing in better training, resource allocation, and coordination with local communities. SADC should support Mozambique in building long-term capacity to handle insurgencies sustainably.
- **Critique:** SAMIM has faced operational inefficiencies, including inadequate resources, poor coordination, and limited intelligence-sharing among member states.
 - **Recommendation:** Improve SAMIM's effectiveness by fostering closer collaboration between Mozambique's government and SADC, increasing funding, and enhancing intelligence-sharing protocols.

Zimbabwe

- **Critique:** Zimbabwe's governance issues, including contested elections and the suppression of opposition, continue to undermine regional stability. Electoral observer missions often lack enforcement mechanisms to ensure adherence to democratic principles.
 - **Recommendation:** Reinstate and empower regional mechanisms, such as the SADC Tribunal, to address electoral grievances and governance failures. South Africa and SADC should advocate for reforms in Zimbabwe's electoral processes and institutions to restore public trust.
- **Critique:** The militarisation of politics in Zimbabwe erodes civilian oversight and perpetuates authoritarian governance.
 - **Recommendation:** Promote security sector reform in Zimbabwe to depoliticise security forces and strengthen civilian governance. This can be achieved through regional pressure and technical support from SADC.
- **Critique:** Zimbabwe's economic collapse has led to widespread migration, placing additional strain on neighbouring countries such as South Africa.
 - **Recommendation:** Encourage economic recovery through targeted regional investments and infrastructure development projects. These should focus on creating sustainable livelihoods within Zimbabwe to reduce migration pressures.

SADC

- **Critique:** The principle of state sovereignty often hinders SADC's ability to intervene in governance and security crises, leaving critical issues unresolved.
 - **Recommendation:** Establish clearer protocols for balancing sovereignty with regional accountability. SADC should prioritise enforcing its governance and human rights principles to ensure collective action against crises.
- **Critique:** The exclusion of CSOs from SADC decision-making processes limits transparency and reduces advocacy for effective governance.
 - **Recommendation:** Institutionalise the role of CSOs in SADC's governance framework to ensure broader accountability and enhance the monitoring of regional initiatives.
- **Critique:** SADC's electoral observer missions lack follow-up mechanisms, reducing their impact on ensuring democratic accountability.
 - **Recommendation:** Develop post-election accountability frameworks that require member states to implement observer mission recommendations. SADC should also enhance its capacity to mediate electoral disputes and enforce reforms.

Conclusion

The dialogue underscored the urgent need for stronger regional institutions, effective governance, and inclusive development to address the intertwined challenges of instability in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Regional crises, including Mozambique's insurgency and Zimbabwe's electoral controversies, highlight the importance of coordinated and decisive action through SADC frameworks.

South Africa's leadership remains critical in fostering stability across the region. By adopting a more assertive and balanced approach that prioritises accountability, economic development, and human rights, South Africa can drive meaningful change within SADC. Strengthening civil society's role in governance and leveraging regional initiatives are key to addressing root causes such as poverty and inequality.

SALO is committed to advancing dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring that regional efforts translate into sustainable peace and prosperity. Through continued advocacy and platforms for engagement, SALO supports initiatives that uphold human rights and contribute to a more stable and integrated SADC region.

The analysis and recommendations included in this brief do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.

About the Southern African Liaison Office:



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

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