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Policy Brief

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Public SALO Dialogue:

Enhancing Democratic Electoral Practices in the SADC Region with a Particular Focus on the SADC Principles and Guidelines on Elections

by Tebogo Lekubu, SALO

Executive Summary

The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO), in partnership with the New Zealand High Commission, convened an in-person multistakeholder workshop on the 5th of March 2025 titled *“Enhancing Democratic Electoral Practices in the SADC Region with a Particular Focus on the SADC Principles and Guidelines on Elections”*. SALO has been working with the support of the New Zealand High Commission on a project throughout 2024-25 on promoting the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, including a series of virtual and in-person workshops discussing elections across SADC countries. This particular workshop shared diverse and inclusive viewpoints from countries that have had, or will have, elections, generating knowledge bases for action. It explored key themes of the SADC Principles and Guidelines on Elections, offering an overview of election observation and monitoring in the region and their impact on improving electoral integrity.

The workshop featured a diverse panel of esteemed speakers. Tumelo Mokoena, African Centre for Governance (South Africa); Zoe Titus, Namibia Media Trust (Namibia); Stella Razanamahefa, Election Observation Coordinator and spokesperson for the SAFIDY Observatory (Madagascar); Professor Roukaya Kasenally, African Media Initiative (Mauritius); Habiba Osman, Human Rights Commission (Malawi); Elijah Munyuki, Electoral Support Officer at SADC Secretariat; Ambassador Lindiwe Zulu (South Africa); Laone Tsheole, Organization for Youth and Elections (Botswana); with Ringisai Chikohomero, Institute for Security Studies (Mozambique) and Hermenegildo Mulhovo, Institute for Multiparty Democracy (Mozambique), who both joined virtually. The panel provided a candid and wide-ranging examination of electoral integrity, democratic participation, and institutional accountability across multiple SADC member states.

This policy brief presents a synthesis of the discussion, which explored the extent to which SADC countries are aligning with the Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. Drawing on examples from across the region, the dialogue identified recurrent challenges such as politicised electoral bodies, weak judicial independence, disinformation, voter apathy, and the limitations of observer missions.

The brief also reflects on proposals for strengthening regional democratic norms, enhancing electoral legitimacy, and rethinking the role of both SADC and the international community in safeguarding democratic processes.

Context and Importance

The Evolving Role of the SADC Principles and Guidelines in Electoral Integrity

The SADC Principles and Guidelines on Elections have become the cornerstone of regional efforts to promote democratic norms and credible elections. They have undergone significant evolution since their inception, shaping the landscape of

electoral governance in the region. The SADC observer missions, in particular, have shifted from merely observing to providing substantive recommendations, reflecting a more engaged and critical stance. This has been observed in recent elections in Eswatini, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, where reports have highlighted both achievements and areas needing improvement, thereby reinforcing the importance of continual refinement of the Principles and Guidelines.

This evolution is not merely procedural but has had tangible impacts on election management and the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. As Tumelo Mokoena, Executive Director of the African Centre for Governance, emphasised:

“It is an honour to be invited to make a presentation in this crucial meeting discussing elections in SADC on the relevance and the electoral governance framework enshrined in the SADC principles and guidelines on elections ... My wish is to witness the development of strong democratic and electoral institutions in SADC so that, as SADC member states, we can enjoy peace, security, human rights, democracy and the rule of law entrenched in Article four of the SADC treaty.”

Yet, despite their importance, the application of the SADC Principles and Guidelines remains uneven across member states. The workshop underscored the urgent need to establish robust, transparent mechanisms for tracking, reviewing, and following up on the implementation of observer mission recommendations. Without such mechanisms, lessons learned risk being lost, and recurring issues persist from one electoral cycle to the next. The value of observer missions, therefore, must be matched by concrete reforms that address the root causes of electoral shortcomings. This is critical because, as was highlighted by numerous speakers, the value of these principles lies not only in their existence but in their consistent, meaningful implementation.

Inclusive Participation: Addressing the Needs of Marginalised and Vulnerable Groups

Inclusive participation remains a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy in the SADC region. The participation of women, youth, and other marginalised communities in electoral processes remains inadequate. While the SADC Principles and Guidelines on Elections provide a framework for broadening participation, the dialogue highlighted that implementation is often inconsistent. Structural and social barriers continue to hinder the full participation of these groups, resulting in elections that do not fully reflect the diversity of SADC societies.

Youth voter engagement was identified as particularly urgent, given the region's demographic profile and the risk of growing voter apathy among younger citizens who feel excluded from mainstream politics. Habiba Osman from the Malawi Human Rights Commission spoke to the issue often at the heart of youth voter apathy – the *quality* of participation:

“We must also dwell on the fabric of society and reflect on how the youth, persons with disabilities and other minority groups participate in elections. In this regard, it's not just about their participation, but also the extent to which they can contribute to the development of national policies and legislation that affect their lives.”

Civil society organisations play a vital role in bridging the gap between these communities and electoral institutions, advocating for reforms, and providing civic education. A vibrant, engaged civil society is also essential for democratic oversight and accountability. However, participants noted that civic space is under threat in some SADC countries, with legal and policy barriers restricting the ability of civil society organisations to participate in electoral processes. Participants agreed that achieving genuine inclusion requires more than policy statements. It demands targeted interventions, such as legislative quotas, accessible voter education, and support for women's and youth leadership. The consensus was clear: for democracy to be sustainable in the SADC region, electoral systems must be accessible, responsive, and empowering for all citizens, especially those traditionally left on the margins.

South Africa's Influence and Responsibilities in Regional Electoral Integrity

South Africa's status as a regional leader and democratic exemplar was a recurring theme throughout the workshop, with participants recognising both the country's achievements and its ongoing challenges in upholding electoral integrity within the SADC region. The South African experience was frequently referenced as a model for democratic practice, yet speakers were candid about the areas that require further refinement and vigilance.

The country's recent elections were cited as both a positive reference point and a case study for ongoing improvement. Munjodzi Mutandiri, co-chairing the session, emphasised the dual potential of elections and the importance of South Africa's example:

“...[We] kept talking about elections being a source of conflict and tension. There is a flip side to that; they can be a cornerstone for legitimacy, and they can actually be a foundation for building states and building countries. So, it is important that we recognise that there are two sides to what could happen when elections happen.”

Furthermore, South Africa has the potential, as a leader in the region, to play a larger role than it currently is as a standard-bearer for the wider SADC community in the advancement of electoral policies. Zoe Titus from the Namibia Media Trust raised a point that illustrates this potential:

“The Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa. It was actually an initiative driven by the Electoral

Commission in South Africa and implemented during your local elections, but it has not been taken up in any other country.”

Election Observation and Monitoring: Building Regional Knowledge and Accountability

A central theme of the workshop was the indispensable role of election observation and monitoring in promoting electoral integrity, cultivating knowledge-based action, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability across the SADC region. Participants emphasised that the evolution of SADC observer missions – from their inception to their current, more assertive and analytical approach – has been a driving force in raising standards and expectations for democratic elections. This commitment to observation and knowledge-sharing is seen as foundational for building consensus, improving practices, and ensuring that electoral processes are transparent, inclusive, and credible across the SADC region.

Molly Dhlamini highlighted this evolution and the practical impact of observer missions:

“We have also seen the observer mission of SADC evolving in their approach, and in how they report about elections and recommendations. I think we have seen that with the recent elections in Swaziland and in Zimbabwe, and we appreciate that. Even in South Africa, the beacon of democracy as we want to see it. It's also interesting how reports would also highlight certain things that need improvement and certain gaps, and we have seen that happening.”

Participants asserted that election observation is not a one-off event, but a continuous process of learning, adaptation, and advocacy. By systematically reviewing observer mission findings, sharing experiences across borders, and publishing practical resources such as handbooks, the region is steadily building a knowledge base that informs reforms and empowers civil society. This ongoing commitment is foundational for building consensus, improving electoral practices, and ensuring that elections throughout the SADC region are transparent, inclusive, and credible.

The Role of Media in Electoral Integrity

The role of media in safeguarding electoral integrity across SADC countries emerged as a key theme in the dialogue. Participants acknowledged that while the media plays a vital role in informing the public and promoting transparency, the sector is increasingly constrained by structural, financial, and political pressures. Independent journalism remains fragile in many parts of the region, and the uneven application of media freedoms contributes to distorted public discourse during elections. The proliferation of unregulated digital platforms, coupled with the declining quality of traditional media, has left many voters vulnerable to misinformation and partisan narratives. Speaking to this point, one participant remarked:

“Media in Southern Africa is under strain. Newsrooms are under-resourced. We have a talent drain, our journalists are underpaid, they’re overworked, they’re not sufficiently trained, and all of these are issues that should not be ignored. And all of this has a direct impact on how the electorate is informed, and particularly how the electorate is informed in terms of their choices as far as elections are concerned.”

Digital media was also a focal point of concern, especially its role in spreading misinformation and deepening distrust during elections in the region. Speakers pointed to the growing sophistication of disinformation campaigns, including the use of artificial intelligence to manipulate electoral narratives and impersonate political candidates. While new technologies have expanded access to information, they have also outpaced regulatory frameworks. Participants highlighted the urgent need for regionally coordinated approaches to managing the digital environment during elections – approaches that protect freedom of expression while minimising harm. Media literacy, fact-checking, and transparency from both state and private actors were identified as critical areas for investment to ensure the integrity of information that shapes electoral decisions.

Policy Critiques

- I. **Lack of Follow-Through on Observer Mission Findings:** Despite improvements in SADC observer reporting, systematic follow-up and implementation of their recommendations remain absent, weakening credibility.
- II. **Politicised Electoral Monitoring Bodies (EMB):** EMBs are widely seen as lacking independence, with appointments and operations shaped by ruling party interests, eroding public trust.
- III. **Exclusion of Marginalised Groups:** Women, youth, and other marginalised constituencies remain underrepresented in electoral processes due to enduring structural barriers.
- IV. **Weak Judicial Oversight:** Electoral dispute resolution is undermined by courts perceived as partial, leading to a lack of faith in legal recourse.
- V. **Disinformation Threats:** Misinformation during elections undermines public trust, with media often constrained by hostile regulatory and political environments.
- VI. **Youth Disengagement:** Voter apathy, particularly among youth, reflects a growing disillusionment with the democratic process and its outcomes.

- VII. **Inconsistent Application of SADC Principles:** While standards exist, their enforcement varies widely, leading to fragmented implementation across the region.
- VIII. **Limited Observer Mandates:** Observer missions are often restricted to short-term assessments and lack the scope to address systemic electoral flaws.
- IX. **Uneven Civic Space:** Civil society's ability to monitor elections and promote transparency remains inconsistent, constrained in more closed political environments.
- X. **Persistent Administrative Challenges:** Recurrent logistical and organisational issues in election management continue to affect electoral credibility.

Policy Recommendations

- I. **Implement Observer Mission Findings:** Establish formal mechanisms to track and act on recommendations from election observer reports.
- II. **Safeguard Electoral Body Independence:** Reform legal frameworks to ensure EMB autonomy, transparent appointments, and sufficient resources.
- III. **Promote Inclusive Participation:** Strengthen policies and outreach efforts that support the participation of women, youth, and marginalised groups.
- IV. **Ensure Judicial Independence:** Reinforce safeguards that protect judicial autonomy and impartiality in electoral adjudication.
- V. **Counter Disinformation:** Invest in media literacy, fact-checking initiatives, and protections for independent journalism.
- VI. **Engage Youth:** Expand civic education and leadership programmes tailored to young people's political participation.
- VII. **Harmonise SADC Standards:** Regularly review member states' adherence to the SADC Principles and Guidelines to address implementation gaps.
- VIII. **Strengthen Observer Missions:** Broaden mandates to include pre- and post-election assessments and allocate adequate resources.
- IX. **Protect Civic Space:** Support frameworks that enable independent civil society engagement in electoral oversight and reform.
- X. **Improve Electoral Logistics:** Address recurring administrative failures by acting on observer findings and enhancing planning capacity.

- XI. **Support Media Freedom:** Remove restrictions on independent media and provide support for investigative journalism and capacity-building.

Conclusion

This dialogue brought together a diverse array of voices and expertise from across the SADC region, underlining both the progress made and the significant challenges that persist in aligning national electoral processes with the SADC Principles and Guidelines. The recommendations put forward reflect a clear consensus: regional cooperation, institutional reform, and inclusive engagement are essential for advancing democracy in SADC.

This dialogue was the culmination of a year-long series of dialogues and knowledge-sharing initiatives co-hosted with the New Zealand High Commission, aiming to build a robust foundation for future action and reform in the region. Ongoing commitment to dialogue, learning, and action will be essential for realising the full potential of the SADC Principles and Guidelines and ensuring that elections serve as true foundations for peace, legitimacy, and inclusive development in Southern Africa.

SALO would like to thank the New Zealand High Commission for their direct support of this event:



The analysis and recommendations included in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion presented 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.