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A National Dialogue Guide for SADC Civil Society:

Harnessing Mozambique's Model and Lessons from the Region



A guide for Civil Society Organisations and Regional Stakeholders

Executive Summary

Mozambique's National and Inclusive Dialogue, initiated following the disputed 2024 elections, offers critical lessons for managing post-election tensions across Southern Africa. This brief draws on five months (August - December 2025) of engagement with Mozambican civil society, youth, women's organizations, and regional stakeholders to identify practical lessons for SADC countries and civil society organizations navigating similar challenges.

The experience demonstrates that effective political dialogue depends not only on formal structures but on meaningful non-state actor participation, sustained trust-building, and explicit linkage to regional governance frameworks. Key lessons include the importance of parallel civic organising, the risks of elite capture, the necessity of clear implementation mechanisms, and the value of regional solidarity in sustaining domestic reform processes.

This brief is intended for civil society organisations, youth and women's movements, regional policymakers, and SADC structures engaged in conflict prevention, civic space defense, and democratic governance.

1. Introduction: Why Mozambique's Dialogue Matters Regionally

Between October 2024 and early 2025, Mozambique experienced its most serious post-election crisis in recent history. Violent protests following disputed presidential and parliamentary elections resulted in deaths, detentions, and a breakdown of public trust in formal institutions. By mid-2025, while overt violence had subsided, the political environment remained fragile, marked by power legitimacy questions and competing visions of political reform.

In this context, Mozambique's government initiated a National and Inclusive Political Dialogue, structured around a National Technical Dialogue Commission (COTE) comprising nine political parties and **limited** (just 3 representatives in a 21 member COTE) civil society representation. The dialogue's stated aim was to address **governance fractures, advance constitutional and electoral reforms, and rebuild public confidence.**

Mozambique's experience is far from unique. Across the SADC region during 2023-2025, countries including Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Eswatini, and Madagascar faced contested elections, political instability, protest movements, and restrictions on civic participation. Madagascar's constitutional crisis, which cut short its SADC chairship, highlighted both the fragility of democratic institutions and the limits of regional mechanisms to respond rapidly to political breakdown.

These parallel challenges underscore the regional significance of Mozambique's dialogue process. How Mozambique navigates post-election tensions, protects civic space, and ensures meaningful inclusion in its reform agenda and processes offers practical lessons for civil society across Southern Africa facing similar struggles.

This brief synthesises insights from three virtual public dialogues, two field visits to Maputo, and a hybrid regional workshop held in Maputo, convened between August

and December 2025, involving over 200 participants from eight SADC countries. It integrates comparative reflections from Zimbabwe's national dialogue experience and South Africa's own post-transition governance challenges to identify recurring patterns, common risks, and strategies for strengthening civil society engagement in political dialogue processes region-wide.

2. Understanding Political Dialogue: Structure, Phases, and Participation Dynamics

The Formal Architecture

Mozambique's National and Inclusive Dialogue was structured in three anticipated phases:

Phase 1 (Preparatory): Establishing COTE, defining mandates, and conducting initial stakeholder consultations.

Phase 2 (Substantive Engagement): Thematic discussions on constitutional reform, electoral systems, decentralization, justice, and economic inclusion.

Phase 3 (Implementation): Translating dialogue outcomes into legislative and policy reforms.

COTE, composed primarily of political parties with limited civil society representation, became the formal decision-making body. This centralisation created an immediate challenge: how could non-state actors, particularly youth, women, and grassroots organizations, influence processes where they lacked formal authority?

The Insider-Outsider Dynamic

A critical finding from Mozambique's experience is that dialogue processes inevitably create **insider-outsider dynamics**. Those with formal seats at COTE (insiders) gain direct access to information, agenda-setting, and decision-making. Those outside formal structures (outsiders) including most civil society, youth, and women's organisations, must engage through indirect channels: public consultations, parallel processes, media advocacy, and regional pressure.

This dynamic is not unique to Mozambique. Zimbabwe's 2019-2023 political dialogue faced similar critiques of elite capture, with civil society actors expressing frustration that the dialogue would not translate into substantive reform outcomes. South Africa's post-1994 transition, while more inclusive, also demonstrated that formal representation does not automatically guarantee meaningful participation if feedback mechanisms are weak or power asymmetries remain unaddressed. The contestations around the TRC exemplified this point.

Key Lesson for Civil Society

Civil society must engage both inside and outside formal structures. Where direct representation is limited, influence depends on:

- **Collective articulation** of shared priorities through coordinated platforms
- **Strategic use of regional frameworks** (such as SADC protocols on governance and human rights) to reinforce domestic demands

- **Sustained public oversight** through documentation, media engagement, and knowledge production
- **Parallel civic processes** that maintain independent space for critical reflection and agenda-setting

3. Recurring Risks in Political Dialogue Processes

Drawing on Mozambique's experience and comparative regional insights, several recurring risks threaten the credibility and sustainability of political dialogue:

3.1 Elite Capture and Limited Inclusivity

When dialogue structures are dominated by political elites, civil society participation risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. In Mozambique, youth and women participants repeatedly noted that consultations felt procedural, with limited evidence that inputs would shape outcomes.

Regional Pattern: Zimbabwe's political dialogues (both the one leading to a Government of National Unity (GNU) and the post-2018 Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD)) faced similar critiques. Despite extensive publicisation, civil society actors reported that there was no space for their recommendations to be adopted, with politically sensitive reforms sidelined.

Mitigation Strategy: Civil society should insist on **clear participation criteria** that specify how non-state inputs will be integrated, demand **public documentation** of consultation outcomes, and use **regional platforms** to amplify concerns when domestic influence is constrained.

3.2 Weak Feedback Loops and Accountability Gaps

A dialogue process lacking transparent feedback mechanisms undermines trust. If participants do not know how their contributions were considered, or why certain recommendations were excluded, frustration and disengagement follow.

Mozambican Example: By late 2025, civil society actors expressed uncertainty about how Phase 1 consultations would inform Phase 2 thematic discussions, highlighting the absence of clear reporting on what had been heard, what was under consideration, and what had been rejected.

Lesson for SADC: Feedback loops must be **institutionalised, not discretionary**. This includes public summaries of consultations, regular progress reports, and explicit responses to major civil society submissions.

3.3 Implementation Deficits

The credibility of dialogue depends ultimately on implementation. Mozambican participants emphasised that dialogue outcomes would be judged by whether they translate into tangible reforms, constitutional amendments, electoral changes, institutional accountability, or remain aspirational. Such sentiments were repeatedly surfaced in our engagements with Mozambican CSO actors:

- ***“My main concern is just that the process be not just a symbolic process, but an effective process... many people are waiting to see”*** - Bishop Manuel Ernesto, (Mozambican Anglican Bishop) | SALO Virtual Dialogue, 11/12/2025
- ***“...what matters now is whether these discussions [the National Dialogue] will really change the situation on the ground”*** - David Fardo, Youth Parliament of Mozambique | SALO Virtual Dialogue, 11/12/2025

Comparative Insight: The scepticism expressed by Mozambican participants-who emphasised that dialogue will only be judged successful once outcomes are implemented-reflects a wider regional condition across Southern Africa. In several countries, including South Africa and Zimbabwe, civil society actors have observed that public consultations and associated reform commitments are increasingly perceived as procedural or performative, particularly where they are not followed by sustained or visible change. This has shaped a more guarded public orientation toward dialogue processes, especially among younger generations, informed by long-standing experiences of delayed post-liberation reform delivery and limited accountability. In this context, dialogue is less readily accepted as a means of restoring political legitimacy and is instead evaluated through a narrower lens: whether it produces binding decisions, institutional reform, and credible pathways for implementation. This dynamic heightens the significance of Mozambique’s dialogue outcomes, which will be interpreted not only domestically but also as part of a broader regional pattern of post-election engagement and reform.

Civil Society Role: Sustained oversight during implementation is as critical as participation during dialogue. Civil society must prepare for **long-term monitoring**, demanding regular updates on legislative and policy follow-through.

3.4 Security and Civic Space Constraints

Political sensitivity following elections often creates a climate of fear that constrains open civic engagement. In Mozambique, unresolved concerns about detentions and reprisals limited who felt safe participating in dialogue activities. The situation in the Northern parts of the country particularly Cabo Delgado adds a more complex layer to the conduciveness of an environment for an effective and genuine dialogue process.

Regional Reality: Across SADC, shrinking civic space, manifested through restrictive legislation, harassment of activists, and constraints on assembly, creates uneven access to dialogue processes, particularly for marginalised communities.

Protection Measure: Regional solidarity and international attention can provide protective space for domestic civil society. SADC civil society networks should **coordinate cross-border advocacy**, using regional forums to highlight civic space violations and reinforce norms of inclusion and protection.

4. Strategies for Strengthening Non-State Actor Engagement

4.1 Build Collective Voice Through Coordination

Fragmented civil society engagement reduces influence. Mozambique's experience demonstrated that **coordinated platforms** such as the Comissão de Observação e Participação Juvenil (COPJ) - a youth platform that coordinates more than forty Mozambican youth organisations' engagement with the Dialogue - and the **civil society support mechanism** to the dialogue, consolidating shared priorities on employment, education, and peace, enabled more strategic engagement with dialogue structures.

Practical Steps:

- Establish **thematic working groups** (e.g., on youth participation, gender inclusion, land rights, minerals, climate) to consolidate positions
- Align with existing initiatives (such as Mozambique's Manifesto Cidadao) to avoid duplication and strengthen collective impact
- Use **regular coordination meetings** to share information, align messaging, and identify joint advocacy opportunities

4.2 Leverage Regional Frameworks

National dialogue processes do not occur in isolation. SADC's governance architecture, including the Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, provides normative frameworks that civil society can invoke to reinforce domestic demands.

Example from Mozambique: Regional civil society actors positioned Mozambique's dialogue as relevant to SADC conflict prevention and governance reform, creating additional entry points for regional diplomatic engagement and strengthening the legitimacy of civil society concerns.

Application: Civil society should explicitly **link national dialogue outcomes to SADC commitments**, using regional forums to report on progress, highlight gaps, and secure solidarity from counterparts across the region.

4.3 Prioritise Youth and Women's Participation - Beyond Tokenism

Inclusion of youth and women in dialogue processes is often procedural. Meaningful participation requires deliberate facilitation, capacity support, and recognition of structural barriers.

Key Enablers Identified:

- **Portuguese-English interpretation** (or other multilingual support) to ensure linguistic accessibility
- **Subsidised participation costs** (transport, accommodation) to enable grassroots engagement
- **Facilitation that prioritises marginalised voices**, ensuring youth and women are not just present but actively shaping discussions
- **Capacity-building** on dialogue architecture, policy advocacy, and regional governance frameworks

4.4 Maintain Parallel Civic Processes

Even while engaging formal dialogue structures, civil society must preserve independent space for critical reflection, alternative agenda-setting, and public accountability.

Mozambican Example: Civil society are fighting hard to maintain parallel consultations, public forums, and knowledge production outside COTE, ensuring that civic analysis is not constrained by the limitations of the formal dialogue.

Lesson: Parallel processes are not alternatives to formal engagement; they are **complementary strategies** that sustain civic agency, enable critical oversight, and provide fallback platforms if formal processes stall or fail.

5. The Role of Regional Solidarity and Cross-Border Learning

One of the most significant findings from this project was the value of **regional exchange** in sustaining domestic civil society engagement.

5.1 Reducing Isolation

Mozambican civil society actors operating in a politically sensitive environment found that engagement with regional peers, facing similar challenges in Zimbabwe, Eswatini, and elsewhere, provided validation, encouragement, and strategic insight.

Participant Reflection:

- *"Knowing that civil society across the region is facing similar struggles reminds us that we are not alone, and that our experience matters beyond Mozambique - SALO Hybrid Regional Workshop | Maputo, 09/12/2025*

5.2 Comparative Learning

Regional dialogue revealed common patterns, elite capture, weak implementation, language barriers, allowing participants to anticipate risks and adapt strategies based on others' experiences.

Zimbabwe-Mozambique Exchange: Zimbabwean civil society participants shared lessons on sustaining public oversight when formal dialogue momentum slows, emphasising the importance of documentation, media engagement, and regional reporting.

5.3 Strengthening Regional Advocacy

By positioning Mozambique's dialogue as a SADC-wide concern, civil society elevated the issue beyond national politics, creating space for regional institutions and international actors to reinforce demands for inclusivity and accountability.

Strategic Implication: Civil society should treat **regional platforms as strategic assets**, using SADC forums, AU mechanisms, and international partnerships to amplify domestic concerns and secure protective solidarity.

6. Practical Recommendations for SADC Civil Society

For Civil Society Organisations Engaging National Dialogue Processes:

1. **Map the dialogue architecture early:** Understand formal structures, decision-making processes, and participation channels, both official and informal.
2. **Coordinate collectively:** Establish thematic coalitions to consolidate positions, avoid fragmentation, and amplify influence.
3. **Engage inside and outside:** Participate in formal consultations while maintaining parallel civic processes for independent analysis and accountability.
4. **Demand transparency:** Insist on public documentation of consultations, clear feedback mechanisms, and regular progress reporting.
5. **Prepare for long-term engagement:** Dialogue does not end with agreement; sustained oversight during implementation is critical.
6. **Protect civic space:** Document restrictions, coordinate regional advocacy, and use international forums to highlight civic space violations.

For Youth and Women's Organizations:

7. **Assert agency, not just representation:** Move beyond consultative participation to demand substantive influence over outcomes.
8. **Build capacity strategically:** Invest in understanding dialogue structures, regional frameworks, and advocacy strategies.
9. **Connect national and socio-economic concerns:** Frame political reform demands around everyday issues, employment, education, land, security, to strengthen public relevance.

For Regional Civil Society Networks:

10. **Facilitate cross-border learning:** Create platforms for comparative reflection on national dialogue experiences.
11. **Provide multilingual support:** Language barriers, particularly between Lusophone and Anglophone civil society, constrain regional solidarity; invest in interpretation and translation.
12. **Leverage SADC frameworks:** Use regional protocols, peer review mechanisms, and diplomatic channels to reinforce domestic civil society demands.

For SADC Institutions and Policymakers:

13. **Strengthen preventive diplomacy:** Engage proactively with national dialogue processes before crises escalate.
14. **Institutionalize civil society engagement:** Create formal mechanisms for regional civil society input into SADC conflict prevention and governance reform.
15. **Monitor implementation:** Dialogue outcomes must translate into reforms; SADC should track implementation and support accountability mechanisms.

7. Conclusion: Dialogue as Process, Not Event

Mozambique's National and Inclusive Dialogue is not yet complete. As of December 2025, the process remains in transition, with Phase 2 substantive discussions anticipated in early 2026. Whether the dialogue succeeds in advancing meaningful reform depends on sustained civic engagement, transparent implementation, and regional support.

For SADC civil society, Mozambique's experience offers both cautionary lessons and strategic insights. Political dialogue can create openings for reform, but only if non-state actors engage strategically, maintain collective voice, and insist on accountability. Where formal structures constrain influence, parallel civic processes, regional solidarity, and international attention become critical enablers of domestic change.

Ultimately, dialogue is not a singular event but an ongoing process, one that requires patience, persistence, and the recognition that incremental gains, relationship-building, and sustained oversight are as important as immediate outcomes. Across Southern Africa, where democratic governance remains under strain, the lessons from Mozambique remind us that civic space is defended not only through formal rights but through deliberate, coordinated, and regionally connected action.

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