

DIGITALIZATION AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN THE SADC REGION

The 26th Annual General Conference of the Electoral
Commissions Forum of SADC Countries

Policy Paper No. 35, 2025



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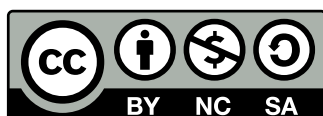
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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
Email: info@idea.int
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

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- the electoral experts, policymakers and stakeholders from across the SADC region who actively participated in the discussions;
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This policy paper is a testament to the collective effort and shared commitment to advancing digitalization and youth engagement in electoral processes across the SADC region. The insights and recommendations presented herein reflect the collaborative spirit and expertise of all those involved in this significant event.

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Abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
CIREN	Cyber and Information Resilience Elections Network
ECF-SADC	Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries
EMB	Electoral management body
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SNYA	Seychelles National Youth Assembly
SNYC	Seychelles National Youth Council
CSO	Civil society organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper synthesizes insights from a distinguished panel of regional and international elections specialists who made presentations at the seminar on 11 December 2024 in Seychelles. The seminar, a key component of the 26th Annual General Conference (AGC) organized by the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF-SADC), focused on two critical themes: digitalization and youth engagement in electoral processes within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

The gathering brought together:

- electoral experts;
- policymakers;
- stakeholders from across the SADC region;
- electoral management body chairpersons and chief electoral officers;
- support staff; and
- regional and international partners.

The seminar was supported by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) under the European Union-funded Strengthening Pan-African Capacities for Electoral Observation and Assistance (SPEC) project.

POLICY PAPER OVERVIEW

This comprehensive policy paper:

- synthesizes the contributions of the expert panel that contributed papers at the seminar;
- provides targeted policy recommendations; and
- offers specific action points for various electoral stakeholders.

The focus on digitalization reflects the growing importance of technology in modern electoral processes. The policy paper explores how digital tools and platforms are transforming various aspects of elections, from voter registration and information dissemination to vote counting and result transmission. The paper addresses the opportunities and challenges entailed by digitalization, including enhanced efficiency and transparency, as well as concerns about cybersecurity and the digital divide.

Equally crucial is the emphasis on youth engagement, recognizing the demographic significance of young voters in the SADC region. The brief outlines strategies to increase youth participation in electoral processes, not just as voters but also as candidates, election officials and civic educators. This focus acknowledges the need to harness the energy and perspectives of young people to strengthen democratic processes and ensure the long-term sustainability of electoral systems.

EMERGING KEY ISSUES

Based on the findings from the thematic key issues discussed, this brief emphasizes the critical need to address digitalization and youth engagement in Southern African electoral processes. The policy paper's discussions and findings have underscored several key points that have informed the key policy recommendations identified in this brief:

1. The digital transformation of electoral processes entails both significant opportunities and challenges for electoral management bodies, requiring a balanced and strategic approach to implementation.
2. Youth engagement in electoral processes is evolving, with a shift towards non-traditional forms of political participation that demand innovative strategies from electoral management bodies and other stakeholders.
3. Cybersecurity has emerged as a paramount concern, necessitating robust measures and regional cooperation to protect the integrity of elections.
4. The gendered impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on women in politics requires urgent attention and targeted interventions to ensure equitable participation.
5. There is a pressing need for comprehensive civic education and digital literacy programmes to empower youth and enhance their participation in democratic processes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Digitalization in elections

Electoral management bodies must develop comprehensive AI strategies to leverage benefits while mitigating risks. This involves implementing robust cybersecurity measures to protect electoral integrity. Additionally, there is a need to address AI-facilitated gender-based violence in politics, as well as a need to enhance transparency and accountability in AI-driven electoral processes.

2. Youth engagement

The definition of youth in the African context should be reconsidered, focusing on ability and capacity rather than age alone. To enhance youth participation, digital literacy programmes should be implemented, and platforms for voter engagement should be enhanced. Targeted outreach for marginalized youth and creative methods for voter education are crucial. Furthermore, organizing annual forums and partnering with schools and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for ongoing civic education initiatives can help sustain youth engagement in the electoral process.

3. Cybersecurity

To address cybersecurity challenges, a regional network similar to the Cyber and Information Resilience Elections Network should be established. This network would foster collaboration between electoral management bodies, technology companies and civil society partners. Developing standardized approaches to cybersecurity threats is also essential to ensure a unified response across the region.

4. Gender and AI

Zero-tolerance policies for hate speech and abuse on legislative and candidate platforms should be implemented. Codes of conduct censuring gender-based abuse by public officials and electoral candidates should be adopted. Technology companies should be encouraged to hire diverse teams to programme AI systems that better reflect societal views, ensuring a more inclusive approach to AI development in the electoral context.

5. Regional cooperation

Promoting gradual harmonization of electoral legislation and best practices across the SADC region is crucial. This includes sharing experiences and best practices in electoral management, particularly in addressing digital challenges. By fostering regional cooperation, countries can learn from each other and develop more robust electoral systems that are better equipped to handle the complexities of modern elections.

A distinguishing feature of this brief is its focus on practicality, providing specific, actionable recommendations tailored to different entities within the elections ecosystem. This approach ensures that insights can be effectively implemented across various levels of electoral management and oversight. The brief goes further by delineating concrete action points for different

stakeholders, including electoral management bodies, national governments, political parties, civil society organizations, media outlets, and international and regional partners. By specifying roles and responsibilities, the policy paper serves as a roadmap for coordinated efforts to enhance electoral processes, making it a valuable resource for all involved in the electoral landscape.

INTRODUCTION

As the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region navigates an era of unprecedented technological advancement and evolving demographics, the intersection of digitalization and youth engagement in electoral processes has become a pivotal area of focus. This policy paper synthesizes insights from a distinguished panel of regional and international elections specialists who made presentations at a seminar held on 11 December 2024, in Seychelles, a key component of the 26th Annual General Conference (AGC) organized by the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF-SADC). This seminar brought together electoral experts, policymakers, stakeholders from across the SADC region, chairpersons of electoral management bodies (EMBs) and chief electoral officers, support staff, and regional and international partners, with support from International IDEA through the EU-funded Strengthening Pan-African Capacities for Electoral Observation and Assistance (SPEC) project (International IDEA n.d).

This policy document serves as a roadmap for enhancing electoral processes within the SADC region, recognizing that youth are not merely passive recipients of policy but active agents of change. As aptly noted in the United Nations Development Programme handbook for EMBs on youth participation, young people set the priorities for the future they want, with particular emphasis on education, employment, and honest and responsive governments (Beeckmans and Matzinger 2017). Young people are increasingly demanding more meaningful participation in decision-making processes to have a say in shaping their future. However, despite their potential, the participation and representation of young people in political and electoral spaces remain limited across the SADC region. This policy paper argues that EMBs must play a crucial role in enhancing youth political participation to ensure that young people are adequately represented in political institutions, processes and decision making, particularly in elections.

This policy paper explores strategies, good practices and entry points for EMBs to foster youth participation throughout the electoral cycle and to ensure that

This policy document serves as a roadmap for enhancing electoral processes within the SADC region, recognizing that youth are not merely passive recipients of policy but active agents of change.

Ultimately, this policy paper aims to provide actionable recommendations for EMBs, governments, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to create more inclusive, transparent and secure electoral processes that empower youth and strengthen the foundations of democracy in Southern Africa.

young people's potential as drivers for change is fully realized. It delves into the transformative potential of digitalization in elections, while also acknowledging the inherent challenges entailed by digitalization, including cybersecurity threats, the digital divide and the spread of disinformation. Furthermore, it addresses the critical issue of gender equity in the digital sphere, particularly in the context of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven technologies.

Ultimately, this policy paper aims to provide actionable recommendations for EMBs, governments, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to create more inclusive, transparent and secure electoral processes that empower youth and strengthen the foundations of democracy in Southern Africa. By embracing innovation, fostering collaboration and prioritizing the voices of young people, the SADC region can harness the power of digitalization to build a brighter and more democratic future for all.

KEY FOCUS AREAS

- *Digitalization in elections.* Exploring the opportunities and challenges of leveraging digital tools for voter registration, information dissemination, vote counting and result transmission.
- *Youth engagement.* Identifying strategies to increase youth participation as voters, candidates, election officials and civic educators.
- *Cybersecurity.* Addressing the growing threats to electoral integrity in the digital age and promoting regional cooperation to mitigate risks.
- *Gender equity.* Examining the gendered impact of AI on women in politics and advocating of policies to promote equitable participation.

This policy paper provides targeted policy recommendations and specific action points for various electoral stakeholders. It is intended to serve as a practical guide for fostering more inclusive, secure and technologically advanced electoral processes within the SADC region, ultimately strengthening the foundation of democracy in Southern Africa.

Chapter 1

DIGITALIZATION AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN THE SADC REGION

1.1. EMERGING TRENDS IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Southern Africa has become a hotbed of youth political engagement, with countries like Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia witnessing a surge in youth participation in electoral processes. This transformation is driven by innovative use of technology and a growing desire for political involvement. Young people are leveraging social media to organize around critical policy issues, as seen in movements like South Africa's 'Fees Must Fall' (Bosch 2017) and Zimbabwe's 'This Flag' (Mawarire 2025).

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Speaker: Mpaiphele Maqutu, CEO IEC, Lesotho.

This surge in youth activism is translating into tangible political representation, as seen in South Africa. Across the region, young candidates are not only contesting elections but also securing victories, bringing fresh perspectives and responsive leadership to the political landscape. Beyond electoral politics, youth are organizing to hold leaders accountable and champion various social causes. The Social Justice Coalition in Southern Africa, the toilet movement in Cape Town (Robins 2014), and activist movements in Zambia demanding representation and accountability are prime examples of this trend. Moreover, the climate justice movement, spearheaded predominantly by youth, has emerged as a significant force in the region.

In light of these developments, electoral commissions must adapt their approach to better engage with the youth demographic. They should actively involve young people in the electoral process, recognizing their potential not just as voters but as valuable election officials. Leveraging youth as partners is another essential strategy, as demonstrated by the success of youth-led social media campaigns for peer mobilization in countries like Botswana and Zambia (African Union 2020). To ensure sustained and meaningful youth participation, electoral commissions should prioritize the development of comprehensive youth engagement strategies, co-created and co-implemented with young people themselves.

This multifaceted approach to civic engagement, combining digital activism, political participation and grassroots organizing, demonstrates young people's determination to shape Southern Africa's future. As these trends evolve, they promise to redefine the region's political and social landscape, ensuring that young people play a crucial role in decision-making processes. The challenge now lies with political institutions and leaders to adapt and create meaningful spaces for this energetic and politically conscious youth demographic, recognizing their potential to significantly shape the future of democracy in Southern Africa.

1.2. THE FUTURE OF DIGITALIZATION AND ELECTORAL PROCESSES: NAVIGATING RAPID CHANGE AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

In an era of unprecedented technological advancement and geopolitical shifts, the landscape of electoral processes is undergoing a profound transformation. Looking towards the future, it is crucial to anticipate and prepare for the rapid changes driven by both technology and global politics. In addition, the interplay

between digital surveillance, censorship and state violence is reshaping the electoral environment, giving rise to distinct scenarios that challenge the integrity and fairness of electoral processes. These scenarios range from an 'Open Internet' with subtle threats through pervasive monitoring, to a 'Restricted Access' scenario with targeted censorship, and finally, a 'Total Shutdown' scenario involving complete Internet shutdowns. As these digital landscapes evolve, they present complex challenges to maintaining democratic integrity (Watson and Habte 2024).

This digital transformation extends to the rise of commercial data markets as critical components of political infrastructure. Africa, in particular, is at the forefront of implementing Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) technologies and digital identification systems, which, while offering potential benefits, also pose significant risks to privacy and electoral integrity (Musoni 2024). The interconnectedness of global markets has created a new paradigm of vulnerability, increasing the potential for cross-border influences on electoral processes.

The social media landscape is also undergoing significant changes, marked by increasing fragmentation and a shift towards encrypted platforms. AI is playing a pivotal role in this evolution—being deployed for various purposes, ranging from enhancing user engagement to more controversial applications such as propaganda dissemination. Major technology companies are retreating from open data policies and democracy commitments, potentially altering the dynamics of future elections and democratic participation.

These rapid shifts in the democracy and human rights landscape are occurring at a pace that challenges traditional regulatory and adaptive mechanisms. As the world looks ahead, it is crucial to distinguish between the hype surrounding AI and its actual capabilities and implications for electoral processes.

In response to these challenges, initiatives like the Cyber and Information Resilience Elections Network (CIREN) are emerging. Launched by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), CIREN brings together key stakeholders to combat the increasing sophistication of cyber- and disinformation attacks on electoral processes (Musoni 2024). It serves as a vital platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing, organizing events that unite regional EMBs with technology giants like Google, Microsoft and Amazon.

As the world navigates the future of digitalization in electoral processes, it is imperative to remain vigilant and adaptive. The rapid pace of technological change, coupled with shifting geopolitical dynamics, necessitates a comprehensive and forward-thinking approach to ensure the integrity, transparency and fairness of elections worldwide. Through continued global cooperation, the world can work towards safeguarding democratic processes in this increasingly digital age.

As the world looks ahead, it is crucial to distinguish between the hype surrounding AI and its actual capabilities and implications for electoral processes.

Chapter 2

DIGITALIZATION AND ELECTIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

2.1. EMB STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL MEDIA

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, EMBs are confronted with a complex array of opportunities and challenges presented by AI technologies. As they navigate this new terrain, EMBs must carefully consider how to harness AI's potential while safeguarding electoral integrity in the realm of digital media and strategic communications.

EMBs must strike a delicate balance between addressing the cybersecurity vulnerabilities introduced by digitalization and AI, and leveraging these same technologies to enhance election security.

At the forefront of these considerations is the AI security paradox. EMBs must strike a delicate balance between addressing the cybersecurity vulnerabilities introduced by digitalization and AI, and leveraging these same technologies to enhance election security. Implementing robust, multi-layered security systems and utilizing AI for threat assessment and monitoring are crucial in this endeavour (Musoni 2024).

Personalization through AI presents another critical challenge. While AI enables tailored voter education and political campaigning, EMBs must prioritize voter agency and establish clear guidelines. This includes implementing rules on targeting transparency and setting limits on microtargeting capabilities to maintain fairness and transparency throughout the electoral process. AI also offers significant potential for optimizing EMB efficiency. By analysing statistics, summarizing documents and facilitating translations, AI can streamline operations and improve decision-making processes. However, to mitigate associated risks, EMBs should require vendors to demonstrate algorithmic audits, diverse data usage and respect for copyright (Harmon 2024).

In the realm of communication, EMBs should approach AI-powered solutions with caution. Limiting AI-generated responses to fixed FAQ-style answers and directing complex queries to human operators can ensure accurate

information dissemination while maintaining the essential human touch in voter interactions.

Perhaps one of the most pressing challenges is the proliferation of AI-generated disinformation. To combat this, EMBs should develop comprehensive strategies, including codes of conduct for political parties, utilization of AI to detect and flag fake content, monitoring for AI-generated false information, and engagement with social media platforms to fulfil commitments to combat disinformation.

To effectively address these AI-related challenges, EMBs should adopt a strategic and comprehensive approach. This includes conducting thorough human rights risk assessments and prioritizing AI use and response strategies. Establishing robust systems for monitoring, reporting and responding to AI-related issues is crucial, as is maintaining a sharp focus on data quality and representativity.

Furthermore, EMBs should prioritize transparency in their AI-related activities, form strategic partnerships with technology companies and fact-checkers, and raise AI literacy among staff, electoral contenders, law enforcement agencies and the general public. This kind of holistic approach by EMBs can



From left: Antony Banbury, IFES; Sy Mamabolo, IEC South Africa; Maureen Sibanda, UN Women; and Guy Berger, Independent consultant and expert in media and digital policy.

proactively assist in managing AI-related challenges while maximizing its potential benefits, ensuring that AI serves as a powerful tool for strengthening democratic processes rather than undermining them (Musoni 2024).

2.2. SUPPORTING AFRICAN EMBs IN ENHANCING CYBERSECURITY CAPABILITIES

The landscape of election management is rapidly evolving, with technological advancements bringing both opportunities and challenges to EMBs across the SADC region. While all SADC member countries now have functioning EMBs, reflecting a growing professionalization of election administration, they face global challenges such as eroding trust, cybersecurity threats, disinformation campaigns and youth disengagement.

Information integrity and cybersecurity have emerged as critical challenges for EMBs worldwide.

Information integrity and cybersecurity have emerged as critical challenges for EMBs worldwide. A recent incident in Romania, where the first round of presidential elections was annulled due to a massive foreign influence operation involving over 25,000 dormant TikTok accounts, underscores the severity of these issues (Muno 2024). The double-edged nature of technology in election management is evident, offering numerous benefits while introducing new risks (Global Witness 2024). With the cost of cybercrime estimated to have surpassed USD 8 trillion in 2024, the magnitude of cyber threats is significant (Softtext 2024).

Africa is not immune to these threats, as is evidenced by Operation Serengeti, which resulted in the arrest of over 1,000 individuals in 19 African countries, including several SADC nations, for cyber-criminal activities (Africanews 2024). EMBs face a complex array of challenges in addressing cybersecurity threats, given EMBs' high-profile status as attractive targets, the rapidly evolving technology landscape, resource constraints, difficulty in acquiring and retaining skilled staff, and the persistent nature of online attacks that can erode public trust.

To combat these challenges, IFES has established the platform CIREN, bringing together EMBs, technology companies and civil society partners to develop standardized approaches to cybersecurity threats. As the world moves into an era dominated by AI and advanced technologies, a proactive, collaborative approach across sectors is essential to develop new strategies for these evolving threats. By fostering multi-stakeholder engagement on cyber threats, EMBs can work towards fulfilling their responsibilities and delivering credible elections, embodying the principle that 'Working together is success'.

2.3. GENDERED IMPACT OF AI ON WOMEN AND ELECTIONS

The intersection of AI, gender and elections presents a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges, particularly for women in politics. AI offers promising applications in electoral processes that could benefit all participants, including enhanced data management, improved election administration and strengthened electoral security. These advancements can potentially level the playing field for women candidates who may have fewer resources.

However, AI also poses significant risks that disproportionately affect women in politics. The digital sphere amplifies existing gender-based violence, with research showing a direct correlation between women's increased Internet access and the rise of online violence against them. The scale of AI-enabled abuse against women is alarming, with the vast majority of deep fakes being non-consensual sexual content targeting women.

Online violence against women in politics and AI systems reflecting and perpetuating real-life discrimination are major concerns. The lack of diversity in AI development leads to inherent biases, further threatening the integrity of political discourse through deep fakes and misinformation. To mitigate these risks, a multifaceted approach is necessary.

Implementing zero-tolerance policies for hate speech and abuse on legislative and candidate platforms is crucial. Social media transparency legislation should include specific reporting requirements on online violence against women in politics. Adopting codes of conduct censuring gender-based abuse by public officials, electoral candidates and their staff can help create a safer political environment. Criminalizing online violence against women and gendered disinformation that results in serious harm is another essential step (National Democratic Institute 2022).

Engaging technology companies is vital in addressing these challenges. Pressuring them to collect and share data on gendered abuse can provide valuable insights for policymaking. Developing a shared global lexicon on gender issues that considers local contexts can help create more inclusive AI systems. Encouraging technology companies to hire diverse teams to programme AI systems will lead to solutions that better reflect societal views (United Nations Population Fund n.d.).

Through these robust safeguards, promoting diversity in AI development and creating a more inclusive digital environment, the world can work towards ensuring that AI serves as a tool for empowerment rather than oppression in women's political participation. Only through such comprehensive efforts can we harness the potential of AI to create a more equitable and representative democratic process for all. This approach not only addresses immediate challenges but also paves the way to a future where technology enhances rather than hinders women's participation in politics (iKNOW Politics n.d.).

The intersection of AI, gender and elections presents a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges, particularly for women in politics.

Chapter 3

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ELECTIONS

Despite high voter registration numbers among young people, many Southern African countries are experiencing a decline in youth voter turnout.

3.1. LESSONS FROM 2024 AS THE BIG YEAR OF ELECTIONS REGARDING VOTER TURNOUT AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The challenge of youth political participation in Southern Africa has emerged as a critical issue, with recent trends indicating a concerning disconnect between youth interest in the electoral process and their actual participation. Despite high voter registration numbers among young people, many Southern African countries are experiencing a decline in youth voter turnout. This paradox suggests a deeper underlying issue that requires urgent attention from policymakers and stakeholders in the region.

One of the key factors contributing to this trend is the shift towards non-traditional forms of political engagement among youth. Young people are increasingly gravitating towards social movements, activism and non-conventional political structures as their preferred means of participation (Timreck and Emmons 2024). This shift reflects a growing dissatisfaction with the established political system and a desire for more direct and immediate forms of political engagement. As a result, traditional voting mechanisms are losing their appeal within the younger demographic.

To address this challenge, there is a pressing need to strengthen civic education and foster greater political awareness among youth. Empowering young people with a comprehensive understanding of their role as citizens and the importance of their participation in the democratic process is crucial. This education should focus not only on the mechanics of voting but also on the broader implications of political engagement and its impact on young people's lives and communities.

However, efforts to increase youth participation are hampered by a significant lack of disaggregated data on youth political engagement. This data gap

makes it difficult to design targeted and effective interventions (Youth Democracy Cohort n.d.). There is a clear need for more in-depth research to better understand the factors influencing youth engagement, or lack thereof, in electoral processes. Such research would provide valuable insights into the motivations and preferences of young voters, as well as into the barriers to their participation, enabling policymakers to craft more responsive and effective strategies.

Addressing the challenge of youth disengagement in Southern Africa requires a multifaceted approach involving various stakeholders—EMBs, political parties, civil society organizations and government institutions. These actors must collaborate to create an environment that encourages and facilitates youth participation (Booyesen 2015). This may involve reforms in governance structures to address the underlying socio-economic concerns of youth, as well as innovations in the electoral process to make it more accessible and appealing to younger voters.



Speaker: Vera Banda, Malawi Electoral Commission. Sitting in front from left: Commissioner Richard Chapweteka and David Banda, Electoral Commission of Malawi.

While digital platforms provide a natural environment for young people to participate, they also risk exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly for rural and low-income youth.

3.2. DIGITALIZATION AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Challenges and opportunities

The digitalization of electoral processes in Africa creates a complex landscape for youth engagement, offering both opportunities and challenges. While digital platforms provide a natural environment for young people to participate, they also risk exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly for rural and low-income youth.

The current definition of youth in Africa, typically ranging from 18 to 35 years old, requires reconsideration. This broad categorization can limit opportunities for individuals still considered 'young' at 35, regardless of their maturity or socio-economic status. An organic approach to youth participation in electoral processes, focusing on ability and capacity rather than age alone, could expand the political space for young people by allowing participation in political activities from the age of 18.

Digital platforms and social media are transforming political engagement among young people, providing a familiar space for them to make their voices heard on democratic and electoral processes. Social media enables youth to organize around topics that matter to them. However, if not managed properly, digital engagement can alienate rural youth and those from low-income groups.

Enhanced youth involvement in democratic processes can lead to increased political accountability, greater innovation in governance, reduced voter apathy and earlier grooming of citizens for leadership roles. However, several factors hinder meaningful youth engagement in electoral processes, including the digital divide, legal barriers, financial constraints, the threat of electoral violence and the risk of politicians exploiting young people to spread disinformation online.

To address these challenges and promote inclusive youth participation, several strategies are recommended. These include reducing the minimum age for all elective offices to 18 years, adopting a competency-based approach, expanding digital access to include rural youth and young women, enhancing political and democracy education, implementing mentorship programmes, establishing youth assemblies at various levels, and exploring online voter registration (United Nations Population Fund 2018).

Southern African nations can harness the potential of digitalization to enhance youth engagement in electoral processes while addressing the challenges of inequality and exclusion. This approach will contribute to the development of more robust and inclusive democratic systems across the continent, ensuring that the voices of young people are heard and their potential for leadership is fully realized.

Chapter 4

CASE STUDY: ONGOING INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE YOUTH ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN THE SADC REGION

4.1. YOUTH RESPONSIBILITIES IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES—A CASE STUDY OF SEYCHELLES

The Seychelles National Youth Council (SNYC) plays a pivotal role in empowering young people to participate actively in society. As of August 2024, Seychelles has 20,198 eligible voters aged 18–35 for the 2025 elections, but only 1,555 are on the Certified Register, highlighting a significant registration gap (Pillay 2020). To address this challenge, the SNYC has implemented various programmes such as Youth Tech, Youth Troup Upgrade 101 and the Young Entrepreneur programme. The Seychelles National Youth Assembly (SNYA) serves as an educational forum to nurture leadership potential and enhance civic awareness among youth.

An Electoral Engagement Forum was organized to ensure meaningful youth participation in electoral dialogues. The forum, which included SNYA representatives, secondary school students and young professionals, revealed key insights and challenges. Young people expressed a desire for more civic education on electoral rights and emphasized the potential of technology to enhance engagement and voter registration (Nicette 2024).

Based on these findings, several recommendations were proposed:

1. *Digital initiatives.* Implement digital literacy programmes and enhance platforms for voter registration.
2. *Outreach and education.* Conduct targeted outreach for marginalized youth and use creative methods for voter education.
3. *Sustained engagement.* Organize annual forums and partner with schools and NGOs for ongoing civic education initiatives.

To implement these recommendations effectively, it was proposed that youth recommendations be integrated into the Electoral Commission's strategies, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their impact.

To implement these recommendations effectively, it was proposed that youth recommendations be integrated into the Electoral Commission's strategies, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their impact. Maintaining partnerships with schools, NGOs and media was seen as crucial for long-term success in fostering a more inclusive and participatory electoral process that empowers young citizens in Seychelles.

Lessons learned

The case study provides several important lessons learned regarding youth engagement in the electoral process in Seychelles:

1. *Registration gap.* There is a significant disparity between eligible young voters (20,198) and those actually registered (1,555) for the 2025 elections, indicating a need for improved voter registration efforts.
2. *Youth empowerment programmes.* The SNYC has implemented various programmes to engage and empower youth, such as Youth Tech, Youth Troup Upgrade 101 and the Young Entrepreneur programme.
3. *Youth Assembly.* The SNYA serves as an educational forum to develop leadership skills and civic awareness among young people.



From left: Jeanetta Ally- Seychelles National Youth Assembly, Fabio Bargiachi-ECES, Abdul Rahman-Electoral Commission of Mauritius, Brown Kasaro. Electoral Commission of Zambia.

4. *Electoral Engagement Forum.* Organizing forums with diverse youth representation helps gather insights contributed by and challenges faced by young people in the electoral process.
5. *Desire for civic education.* Young people have expressed a need for more education on their electoral rights.
6. *Technology potential.* There is recognition of technology's role in enhancing youth engagement and simplifying voter registration.

Chapter 5

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing discussions yielded a comprehensive set of policy recommendations, categorized into eight key thematic areas. These recommendations aim to address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities of the digital age and youth participation, particularly in the context of election management and democratic processes.

1. Digital strategies and cybersecurity
2. Youth engagement and education
3. AI and emerging technologies
4. Collaboration and knowledge sharing
5. Information integrity and media engagement
6. Capacity building and professional development
7. Legal and regulatory frameworks
8. Research and data analysis

These policy recommendations, when implemented, have the potential to significantly enhance the integrity, efficiency and inclusivity of electoral processes in the digital age. Tables 5.1 to 5.8 provide a detailed breakdown of actionable policy interventions for each thematic area, offering a roadmap for policymakers and stakeholders to navigate the complex landscape of modern election management.

Table 5.1. Thematic issue: Digital strategies and cybersecurity

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Develop comprehensive digital strategies for EMBs	• Develop internal digital expertise and dedicated teams to monitor emerging trends • Establish guidelines for responsible use of AI and digital tools in electoral processes	EMBs; ECF-SADC
Enhance cybersecurity measures by investing in robust infrastructure, conducting security audits, and developing incident response plans	• Invest in robust infrastructure and conduct regular security audits • Develop incident response plans and update protocols to address AI-related vulnerabilities • Create partnerships with technology companies to mitigate cyber threats • Work with technology companies to develop and implement politically neutral AI algorithms for election-related content • Advocate increased transparency by social media platforms regarding their policies and practices related to elections	EMBs; ECF-SADC; regional and international partners
Design digital electoral processes that are accessible to all	• Design processes accessible to all voters, including those with disabilities • Address the digital divide to ensure equal participation • Implement measures to protect marginalized groups from online harassment	EMBs; national governments

Table 5.2. Thematic issue: Youth engagement and education

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Develop comprehensive civic education programmes targeting youth to foster political awareness and engagement	• Create youth-friendly digital platforms for voter registration and information dissemination • Develop initiatives focusing on electoral participation and democratic processes • Implement digital literacy programmes to combat misinformation and hate speech • Integrate civic education into school curricula • Leverage creative approaches like videos and celebrity endorsements	EMBs; ECF-SADC; national governments and partners
Implement digital literacy initiatives to combat misinformation and hate speech	• Implement comprehensive digital literacy programmes for voters • Develop targeted campaigns to raise awareness about online manipulation and disinformation • Provide youths with tools and resources to verify information and identify credible sources	EMBs
Develop youth-friendly digital platforms for voter registration and information	• Utilize social media platforms for voter outreach and education campaigns targeting young voters • Develop user-friendly digital platforms for voter registration and information dissemination	EMBs
Address socio-economic concerns affecting youth, such as unemployment, through targeted policies and programmes	• Develop policies and programmes aimed at reducing youth unemployment and improving economic opportunities • Ensure that political platforms and campaigns address key issues affecting young people	National governments; political parties
Support alternative forms of political engagement for youths to encourage participation in electoral processes	• Recognize and engage with youth-led social movements and activism • Create formal channels for youth to participate in decision-making processes beyond voting	National governments
Enhance collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) to encourage youth participation in electoral processes	• Partner with youth-focused NGOs and civil society groups to implement voter education and mobilization initiatives • Support grassroots organizations working on youth political empowerment	EMBs; CSOs; ECF-SADC
Recognize and amplify youth contributions by creating a dynamic environment where young people's insights, initiatives and accomplishments are actively valued and integrated into democracy and electoral processes	• Acknowledge the vital role of youth in strengthening democracy • Support initiatives that foster youth involvement in electoral processes • Create mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making processes beyond voting	National governments; EMBs

Table 5.2. Thematic issue: Youth engagement and education (cont.)

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Enhance the credibility of electoral institutions	• Implement transparency measures to build trust in electoral processes and institutions • Address concerns about corruption and failed promises to combat youth disillusionment	National governments

Table 5.3. Thematic issue: AI and emerging technologies

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Enhance understanding of AI types and applications	• Develop initiatives focusing on electoral participation and democratic processes • Implement digital literacy programmes to combat misinformation and hate speech • Integrate civic education into school curricula • Leverage creative approaches like videos and celebrity endorsements	EMBs; CSOs; ECF-SADC
Mitigate risks and leverage opportunities offered by AIs	• Establish regulatory frameworks to address AI misuse, such as disinformation and voter manipulation, while leveraging AI for election security and efficiency • Invest in AI tools that enhance election security, voter targeting and administrative efficiency while ensuring transparency and accountability • Mitigate risks and leverage opportunities of AI	ECF-SADC; EMBs; national governments
Develop ethical guidelines for AI use in elections to ensure fairness, transparency and neutrality	• Develop and enforce ethical guidelines for the deployment of AI in electoral processes to ensure fairness, transparency and political neutrality	ECF-SADC; EMBs; technology companies; national governments
Advocate marking AI-generated content in election campaigns to prevent misinformation	• Require technology companies to disclose algorithms used in election-related content moderation and voter engagement • Monitor the implementation of AI technologies to ensure compliance with ethical standards and democratic principles	Technology companies; EMBs; national governments

Table 5.4. Thematic issue: Collaboration and knowledge sharing

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Implement multi-stakeholder approaches for fostering collaboration	• Encourage partnerships between EMBs, technology companies, CSOs and academia to address AI-related challenges collectively • Establish forums for dialogue and best practice sharing on the ethical use of AI in electoral contexts	ECF-SADC; EMBs; technology companies
Promote international cooperation and best practice sharing	• Engage in cross-border sharing of best practices and lessons learned • Participate in international forums focused on addressing digital challenges in elections • Support the development of global standards for the use of digital technologies in electoral processes	ECF-SADC; EMBs; partners
Facilitate continuous dialogue among stakeholders to address digital challenges collectively	• Create forums for regular dialogue between EMBs, CSOs and technology companies • Develop joint initiatives to address digital challenges in elections • Encourage sharing of knowledge and best practices across different stakeholder groups	ECF-SADC; EMBs; CSOs; technology companies; partners
Promote youth representation by encouraging political parties to include young candidates and address youth-specific issues in their platforms	• Encourage political parties to include more young candidates and address youth-specific issues in their platforms • Create youth advisory councils or similar structures to involve young people in policymaking processes	Political parties; national governments
Strengthen regional collaboration	• Support the Indian Ocean Electoral Network to promote electoral integrity and justice • Encourage best practice sharing among EMBs in the region	ECF-SADC

Table 5.5. Thematic issue: Information integrity and media engagement

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Combat misinformation and disinformation through targeted campaigns and partnerships with media organizations to promote accurate electoral information	• Implement targeted campaigns to counter election-related misinformation • Partner with media organizations to promote accurate electoral information • Advocate increased transparency from social media platforms regarding election-related policies and practices	EMBs; ECF-SADC; media; social media platforms
Address gendered impacts of AI-facilitated violence	• Develop policies to combat AI-facilitated gender-based violence, including disinformation and harassment targeting women in politics • Implement normative frameworks that promote gender equality and protect women candidates from online abuse during elections	ECF-SADC; national governments; political parties; partners

Table 5.6. Thematic issue: Capacity building and professional development

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Invest in capacity-building initiatives for EMBs to navigate technological advancements effectively	• Invest in capacity-building initiatives for EMBs to stay ahead of technological advancements and effectively navigate the complexities of AI • Provide training on recognizing and countering AI-driven threats such as deep fakes and algorithmic biases • Build expertise on emerging technologies within EMBs by providing training on recognizing and countering AI-driven threats such as deep fakes and algorithmic biases • Promote educational programmes like the Online Master on Electoral Policy and Administration for electoral administrators	ECF-SADC; EMBs; partners

Table 5.7. Thematic issue: Legal and regulatory frameworks

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks governing the use of digital technologies and AIs in elections in the region	• Update electoral laws to address the challenges posed by digital technologies • Develop clear regulations around the use of AI and other emerging technologies in elections • Establish mechanisms to combat digital manipulation and disinformation during electoral periods	National governments; EMBs; ECF-SADC
Develop ethical guidelines for AI use in elections in the region	• Develop and enforce ethical guidelines for the deployment of AI in electoral processes to ensure fairness, transparency and political neutrality • Advocate marking AI-generated content in election campaigns to prevent misinformation	ECF-SADC; national governments

Table 5.8. Thematic issue: Research and data analysis

Policy recommendation	Action	Who
Improve data collection and analysis to inform interventions to support youth participation in elections and digitalization	• Implement robust age-segregated data collection systems for voter registration and turnout • Conduct regular surveys and research to understand youth political attitudes and barriers to participation • Promote research on the implications of different AI models in electoral processes to guide ethical use • Monitor and evaluate the impact of implemented initiatives	EMBs; ECF-SADC technology companies; partners
Promote ongoing collaboration and research	• Facilitate continuous dialogue and knowledge sharing among EMBs • Conduct further studies to enhance electoral processes in the region • Provide sustained support for upcoming elections	ECF-SADC

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

The digitalization of electoral processes entails both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges for the SADC region. To capitalize on the benefits and effectively mitigate the risks of digitalization, EMBs must adopt a proactive, collaborative and adaptive approach that places youth engagement at the forefront.

This requires a concerted effort across multiple fronts, as outlined below:



Members of the National Youth Council of Seychelles.

1. Developing comprehensive AI strategies

EMBs should prioritize the development and implementation of comprehensive AI strategies that leverage the benefits of AI, such as improved efficiency, accuracy and accessibility, while simultaneously mitigating potential risks, including bias, manipulation and lack of transparency. These strategies should include clear ethical guidelines, robust testing and validation procedures, and mechanisms for independent oversight.

2. Implementing robust cybersecurity measures and fostering regional cooperation

The increasing reliance on digital technologies in elections necessitates a heightened focus on cybersecurity. EMBs must invest in robust security measures to protect electoral infrastructure, data and processes from cyberattacks. This includes implementing advanced threat detection and prevention systems, conducting regular security audits and penetration testing, and training staff on cybersecurity best practices. Furthermore, fostering regional cooperation through information sharing, joint training exercises and the development of common security standards is essential to address the evolving cybersecurity landscape.

3. Designing youth engagement initiatives that resonate with modern activism trends

To effectively engage young people in electoral processes, EMBs must design initiatives that resonate with their values, interests and modes of communication. This includes leveraging social media platforms, mobile technologies and gamification techniques to increase voter awareness, registration and participation. It also involves creating opportunities for young people to participate in election observation, civic education and political campaigns. Furthermore, EMBs should actively seek input from youth organizations and youth leaders to ensure that engagement initiatives are relevant, inclusive and impactful.

4. Addressing AI-facilitated gender-based violence in politics

The rise of AI has created new avenues for gender-based violence in politics, including online harassment, disinformation campaigns and the manipulation of images and videos. EMBs must work with law enforcement agencies, social media platforms and civil society organizations to address these issues and protect female candidates, voters and election officials from AI-facilitated abuse. This includes developing policies and procedures for reporting and investigating incidents of online violence, providing support to victims and raising awareness about the dangers of AI-facilitated gender-based violence.

5. Enhancing transparency and accountability in AI-driven electoral processes

To maintain public trust and confidence in elections, EMBs must ensure transparency and accountability in the use of AI technologies. This includes providing clear explanations of how AI systems are used, making

source code and algorithms publicly available for review and establishing mechanisms for independent audits and evaluations. It also involves engaging with stakeholders to address concerns and solicit feedback on the use of AI in elections.

6. Fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships to tackle complex challenges

The challenges and opportunities entailed by digitalization and youth engagement are complex and multifaceted, requiring a collaborative approach which involves a wide range of stakeholders. EMBs must actively foster partnerships with governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, technology companies and international organizations to share knowledge, pool resources and coordinate efforts. This includes establishing platforms for dialogue and collaboration, conducting joint research and development projects, and developing common strategies and action plans.

The SADC region can work towards more inclusive, secure and technologically advanced electoral processes by adopting these recommendations. This approach will not only engage all citizens, particularly youth, but also strengthen the foundation of democracy in Southern Africa, fostering a future where every voice is heard and where every vote counts.

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About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 35 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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We develop policy-friendly research related to elections, parliaments, constitutions, digitalization, climate change, inclusion and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and Democracy Tracker.

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The paper delves into the critical intersection of digitalization and youth engagement in electoral processes within the SADC region. It addresses the opportunities and challenges presented by digital tools in elections, alongside strategies to enhance youth participation as voters, candidates and civic educators. Furthermore, it tackles paramount concerns such as cybersecurity threats, the digital divide, the spread of disinformation and the gendered impact of AI on women in politics. This paper offers targeted policy recommendations and actionable insights, serving as a vital resource for EMBs, national governments, political parties, CSOs, media outlets and international and regional partners committed to strengthening democracy in Southern Africa.



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