

Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy (EISA) 1996

Transcript

Ilona Tip: In April 1994, millions of South Africans stood in long queues, extending for blocks in cities and in small towns and rural areas for miles down the road. The queues were so long that the then Electoral Commission took the decision to extend the voting from one to two days. Voters over the age of 18 waited in the queues with great patience and pride in having a say in their future, many of whom had never voted for their representatives in their lives, or never voted at all, marked their ballot paper, standing tall to show that “today I am a citizen.” What we built afterwards, what became EISA, really began in those queues.

My name is Ilona Tip. I was one of four founding members of the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa—though when we started in July 1996, we had a different name and a much smaller dream. [We were] started by four women, under the directorship of Dren Nupen, and supported by Bontle Mpakanyane, Mabo Masupye, and myself, and I think that is worth saying out loud.

Before EISA existed, the four of us worked for an organization called IMSSA, the Independent Mediation Service of South Africa. It dealt with conflict, labor disputes, namely, and community disputes, through mediation, negotiation, and arbitration. But IMSSA had something else, something a bit unusual: an elections and balloting service. We ran internal elections [and ballots] for trade unions, civic organizations, and that is where we learned the craft.

Then 1994 happened.

[Prior to the 1994 elections], the African National Congress, the ANC, had been unbanned, and IMSSA was approached and asked to run the elections for their national executive committee for the first time in South Africa. That was the beginning of our proper work. After that, the country itself was preparing for its first democratic election, and we asked ourselves a very practical question. How does a country vote when most of its people have never voted before, and perhaps may not understand how we got to where we were that day?

So we designed a national voter education program, from scratch. We had to develop the curriculum, we had to recruit and train hundreds of voters, voter educators, people drawn from communities, from civic organizations, from student bodies. Literacy levels varied enormously. Language varied. We had to be innovative. We used a series of drawings illustrating the voting process and what an election is about, as well as what it means to be a democratic country, and we used these illustrations to convey the information and to encourage discussion of characteristics of democracy. We made a deliberate choice from the start that women and young people would be at the center of that work.

We were also contracted to monitor the vote count. That meant recruiting, training, and deploying counting monitors at every country counting center in the country. Imagine the scale of it. When

it was over—when the queues had emptied, and the late Dr. Nelson Rohlilala Mandela was president—we sat down and looked at each other, and we knew this work could not stop. The country was going to need an institution that did this full-time beyond polling day. And not only South Africa. We had our vision set on the whole continent, which was changing.

Founding EISA in 1996:

To get there, we held consultations for months before, with people who had run the 1994 elections, where we had an interim electoral commission, with civil society, with prospective donors. The question on the table was simple. Do we need an independent electoral agency, and is it viable? The answer came back, yes, but only if it was built on trust and an equal partnership.

EISA was registered in July 1996, originally as the Electoral Institute of South Africa, a Section 21 not-for-profit company. Our first executive director was Dren Nupen. The four of us founders each took responsibility for one of the early project areas. We had a Southern African Development Community project, because our vision was to go beyond South Africa and to encompass and participate in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The consultancy work, electoral resources, and a program called ELECT, which stood for Enhancing the Legitimacy of Elections in Communities in Transition. And that was what the Elections Department of IMSSA was before, and building on that.

Our first chairperson of the board was Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa. Yes, the current president of South Africa. Around him, we gathered local, regional, and international experts in elections and democratization. We were seven staff members at the start. That was it. Seven of us with a board of directors in an office, trying to imagine what an African Electoral Institute could become.

Our first major undertaking was a national electoral support program in South Africa, because before we could credibly speak about the region, we had to do work on our own soil and get a sense of what it was we were able to do and what we were capable of. The conviction was held, and I want to be precise about this, was that an election is not a day. It is not a single event. It is a cycle, and we saw later on organizations like International IDEA developing an electoral cycle program. There is a before, a during, and an after. Democracy is what happens in all three. If you only show up on polling day, you've already missed the work.

And we believed something else. That democracy in South Africa could not be built in isolation. The Southern African regions, and over time, all regions in Africa mattered. Even when our name said South Africa in our first year, our eyes were already on the region.

To do so, we looked at how do we build networks in order to make this happen. In our first months, we got onto airplanes, we drove, we met with the chairpersons of election management bodies across the SADC region. We met with civil society organizations working in a similar field, and we asked very directly, do you think there's a need for, and would you support a regional collaborative organization? Would you be part of one? The answer was yes.

In 1997, civil society organizations formed themselves into the SADC, (which is the Southern African Development Community), Election Support Network, [the SADC-ESN]. The first civil society elections network in Southern Africa, and EISA acted as its Secretariat. Then in 1998, we facilitated the launch of the Electoral Commission's Forum of SADC, what we know as the ECF-SADC, bringing the official electoral management bodies of the region into a single forum where they could share, compare experiences, and support each other.

We provided technical support to the SADC ECF's first observation [mission and continued providing support in its early formation]. We collaborated on the development of an election conflict management program, with EISA designing the material and training trainers with the Commissions to extend these skills to enable them to manage electoral-related conflict in an alternative way. EISA hosted that Secretariat, too, in the early years.

I would like to underline something. We did not arrive in these rooms claiming to have the answers. We arrived to listen and to learn from each other, and I think that is one of the reasons EISA has earned the reputation it has. We were South African by origin, the first staff members, but we were never the South Africans with a plan. We were partners. [As EISA developed and extended its outreach the composition of its staff, and does so today, reflects the Continent].

In 1999, we launched something I'm very proud of—the Conflict Management Panels. Working with the South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission, the IEC, we built a system for resolving election-related disputes in the run-up to, during, and post-elections before they escalated, and it worked. It worked so well that when EISA opened field offices in other African countries, including SADC, the model went with us.

By 2006, in collaboration with the Election Management Authority, during the Democratic Republic of Congo's first post-Civil War elections, we were deploying more than 3,000 electoral conflict mediators on the ground. 3,000. That is the scale at which a good idea can travel. And the people who went out to train these mediators were Congolese. We trained trainers, and they went out and extended these skills.

In 2000, we changed our name for the first time to the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, to reflect the regional scope of the work. That same year, we launched a democracy and human rights program in South African schools, because we believed that democratic citizenship had to be taught long before anyone's first ballot. We also developed a gender checklist for free and fair elections to mainstream gender equality across the electoral cycle, not as a side project, but as a core lens.

In 2001, we launched the Journal of African Elections, the first accredited journal focusing on elections in Africa. It still runs today. It comes out bi-annually. In 2021, it celebrated its 20th edition. It has an editorial board that assists in the production and the contribution of articles.

By 2002, our work was deepening. We established an electoral resource center at our head office in Johannesburg. We published the first compendium of elections in Southern Africa, covering

1999 to 2002, and we updated it later, up to 2009. Sir Ketumile Masire, the late president and former president of Botswana agreed to become our patron. Mr. Denis Kadima took over as director, and as we deployed our first sub-regional election observation mission to Zimbabwe, from that point on, the work began to push beyond Southern Africa into the rest of the continent.

If we look at the continental turn, 2003 was a turning point. In collaboration with ECF-SADC, we launched the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation, what we called PEMMO. It became a reference document, the standard against which elections in the region were assessed. From 2004 onwards, both EISA and ECF-SADC used it routinely, as did the SADC Election Support Network with civil society observation missions. Two decades later, in 2023, we would launch a revised version with ECF-SADC, updated for the realities of modern elections, but the original framework still holds.

In 2004, eight years after its foundation, EISA established its first field offices in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and Mozambique. Projects focused on accountability, informed citizenry, and electoral reform. Over the years, up to today, we have run field offices in 16 countries across the continent. Each one is grounded in the specific needs of that country.

In 2007, we opened in Madagascar with a particular focus on women's participation in political decision-making. In 2008, we opened our first Western African office in Cote d'Ivoire, and a field office in Sudan for conflict mapping and management. That same year, in 2008, we signed our first Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union on Election Observation Collaboration. Since then, we have supported more than 80 AU election observation missions. We also provided our first parallel vote tabulation support in Mozambique's local elections, a quiet revolution in how citizens could verify a result.

In 2005, we launched the African Elections Calendar, a continental record of every past and upcoming election. A small thing, but a useful one. It is hard to take democracy seriously across 54 countries if you cannot keep track of when people are voting.

In 2006, we marked our 10th anniversary by convening our first annual symposium, bringing academics and practitioners together in the same room. The theme that year was democratic governance and human development in Africa. The symposiums have been one of our great contributions. I think so. It is not academic only. It is not practitioner-based only. It is both, [that is, practical experience, highlighting current trends and sharing suggested solutions through talking to each other]. Over the years, our symposia have covered electoral violence, ICT and democracy, gender equality, state capture, electoral integrity, political transitions, among some other topics. It is a mirror of where the continent is in any given year.

The end of 2000s and the early 2010s were a period of rapid expansion. We opened an office in Chad in 2009, and published the second compendium of elections in Southern Africa, which I mentioned earlier. In 2010, we signed MOUs with the East African community and with the Economic Community of Central African States. We also launched our benchmarks for enhanced

democracy of political parties, and we opened a field office in Kenya following the post-election violence of 2007. We then also began formally training SADC election observation missions.

In 2011, we facilitated the political party's Code of Conduct in Chad. We supported the development of electoral laws in Kenya after its 2010 constitution was formulated, we opened offices in Zimbabwe and Egypt, and we deployed our first long-term election observation mission in the Central African Republic, moving from the model of observers who fly in for a week to observers embedded for months to gain a greater understanding of the context in which the elections were taking place before we gave our assessment. We also began introducing information technology innovations in election observations starting in Zambia.

In 2012, we changed our name one final time. As you can see, we had several name changes, reflecting on how the organization was developing. We changed it to the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa. EISA. It was always EISA. Because by then, the work was no longer about elections alone, it was about governance. It was about what democracy means between elections. That same year, we supported election dispute resolution systems in Kenya, again, based on our conflict management model, and became a standing committee of the Association of World Electoral Bodies.

The rest of that decade was about consolidation and innovation in equal measure. We opened an office in Somalia in 2013 to support democratic institution building and constitutional processes. In 2014, we renewed our African Union Memorandum of Understanding for a further five years, and opened a field office in the Central African Republic. We supported the African Union in piloting election observation data technology in Malawi, and we introduced SMS and e-voting innovations in our balloting and election services. This department mainly conducts elections in South Africa, for boards of trustees, for organizations, for institutions, and we used our electronic voting in order to do so.

In 2015, we piloted what we called Popola. It's a Zulu word meaning to examine. It is an open-source data collection and management system for elections and governance work.

In 2016, we had another milestone, where we marked our 20th anniversary, and we published a book on electoral integrity. In 2017 and 2018, we published two edited volumes that I still think are an essential read: *Checks and Balances: African Constitutions and Democracy in the 21st Century*, and the second book was *State Capture: Old Threats, New Packaging*. We also launched a political party gender audit in multiple countries, and we launched the Observe project with academic partners.

In 2019, we conducted the first independent finance monitoring research of South Africa's elections, and launched a roster of experts for election observation missions, and signed an accord d'établissement with Cote d'Ivoire to strengthen our West African presence.

In 2020, we conducted the first post-COVID election observation mission in Tanzania, and our balloting and electoral services won an Innovation Award for its use of ICT in elections.

I retired in 2022, after 26 years. By then, we had also piloted an online integrity tool during Zambia's 2021 general elections, qualitative electoral assessment in something close to real time.

Mr. Baïdessou Soukolgue has become our third Executive Director, succeeding Denis Kadima. I have to say, when you spend a quarter of a century building something, the question that follows you around is, will it last? I think the honest answer is that institutions only last if the next generation makes them their own. They cannot be museums. They have to be living things. EISA today does not look like the EISA we started in 1996. And I may add, neither do I, after 26 years. And that is exactly as it should be.

I think we have a lot to be proud of. We have tried to keep up, and we have managed to keep up with developments as they've been changing on our continent, so we were not stagnant, but that rather we were responsive to what was happening around us. I will now hand over to Baïdessou, because of the EISA of today, and the EISA of tomorrow, it's not really my story to tell anymore. Thank you.

Baïdessou Soukolgue: My name is Baïdessou Soukolgue. I'm the Executive Director of EISA since 2022. I joined the institution in 2009, so I have spent more than 10 years in the institution before fitting in my new role.

I want to say, before anything else, what Ilona and the founders, as well as, my predecessor, namely Denis Kadima, built is the foundation everything else is done on. None of what we do today is possible without their contribution, without the foundation.

EISA today is headquartered in Johannesburg and Abidjan, which clearly shows the scope of our coverage, our continental location. Over years, EISA has had field offices across the continent. Some of our field offices have been there over years, the case of Madagascar since 2007. Some are more recent. Each field office is led by staff from across the continent and from country of operation, and we make sure that our continental scope reflects also in our staffing, and across the continent, we are working with EMBs embedded in national priorities with political parties, with its way to organization, and also with regional bodies, the African Union, the regional communities, and more and more now also, EMBs networks across the continent, and we recently are working toward establishing the last one in Central African region.

Our work is organized around two main, or main broad pillars. The first one is election and political processes, supporting inclusive, peaceful, and credible elections across the continent, and the second one is around governance, or good governance, where we support mechanisms to enhance interaction between CSO and governance institutions, between parliament and citizen, where also we work towards enhancing electoral reforms, political reforms, and we help citizens to be involved in the conduct of politics in public life.

We are best known on the continent for election observation, and that is true. We deploy observer missions across the continent. We train observers for ourselves, but also for the African Union,

for regional communities, and for CSOs. We have refined our methodology, which is now used by everyone across the continent. The African Union is now using the methodology we have established, and we have also enhanced the use of technology in a lesson observation mission using tablets, and trying to enhance real-time collection data across the continent.

But observation is just a portion of our work. Beyond election, we support governance institutions, conflict prevention initiatives, political dialogue, capacity building for management bodies, CSO engagement with the African peer review mechanism, and research and publication knowledge production, the Journal of African Election, Ilona just mentioned it, and of course, the symposium we regularly organize in different topics.

The context we work in:

And I am to be honest about the moment you are in. The environment for democracy on this continent is more demanding than it has been in a long time. We are seeing democratic backsliding in some places, political polarization, institutions under pressure, civic space shrinking, and conflict and insecurity mainly around elections, because elections are high-stakes moments. But layered on top of that, we have a digital landscape that has changed everything, and I think this is the main trend we have now to consider.

Misinformation moves at its feet we could not have imagined a decade ago. Disinformation campaigns are coordinated, well-funded, and deliberately targeted at electoral integrity. Internet shutdowns, which lead to disruption of our observation, and, the funding side. Donors priorities are now shifting. Resources are more and more tight, and long-term investment in democracy support is harder than before, but it is important, and I don't want to give a picture of pure decline, that would not be accurate. Look at recent elections across the continent. South Africa, Botswana, Ghana, Senegal, Mauritius, all of these have been peaceful, democratic power transitions in recent years.

In 2024, Namibia elected its first female head of state. Youth movements across the continent are mobilizing in ways

we have not seen before. Women political leadership is advancing. Long-dominant parties are no longer guaranteed dominance. We have seen it, mainly in the SADC region. Opposition coalitions are reshaping [the] political landscape, and we are also seeing a generational renewal across the continent. So, democracy in Africa is indeed contested, but it is dynamic. It is sometimes fragile, but it is also resilient, and it is being claimed by a new generation, and that is the truth of it.

Looking ahead, the 2026-2030 strategic plan:

This year, EISA enters the period of our strategic plan 2026 to 2030, 30 years on from our founding, and the plan is, in essence, both a continuation and renewal. Continuity because our core commitment remains: credible and inclusive elections, empowering women, youth, and marginalized people, strengthening political and electoral institutions, working as a trusted, impartial, African-led technical partners, those are not negotiable for us, and they are who we are.

But we are also working towards renewal, because the questions we have to answer now are not the questions of 1996. How do we support digital democracy responsibly? How do we help electoral commissioners counter disinformation without becoming themselves arbiters of truth? How do we observe elections meaningfully when an internet shutdown can cut off observers, then disturbing the process? How do we make sure technology and election is strengthening trust rather than eroding it? We are investing in those answers in digital innovation, in observation, building on the path we started with tablet-based data collection, with Popola, with the online integrated tool we have developed, and which is now used by our partners across the continent, in data analysis as well, in citizen engagement tools, in early learning and conflict prevention mechanisms that move at the speed of the threats they respond to. And more recently, we have even launched a new space of work electoral dispute resolution, which is now becoming also a key area. And we are deepening our partnership with the African Union. And, with regional economic communities, we are preparing to sign a new one with SADC. We have signed some recently, and we will continue doing so. And by deepening our partnership, we'll be able also to continue together to enhance democracy across the continent.

But we don't forget to accompany the regional economic communities, because supporting the African Union means also creating a link with regional economic communities and with people at national level, so that we all work toward enhancing democracy on our continent. But we also work enhancing our partnership with other organizations, like International IDEA, IFES, and the Carter Center. Our work contributes directly to Sustainable Development Goal 16, Peace, Justice, and strong institution, and to Sustainable Development Goal 5, on gender equality, and it's aligned also with the African Union Agenda 2063, which lays out a vision for democratic governance, participation, and accountability across the continent.

Ilona, onto you.

Ilona Tip: Well, we'll look at just some closing reflections. When we started in 1996, we had a staff of seven people and an idea. The idea was that an election is a cycle, not a day, and that an African institution could speak to African democracy, in African languages, in African context, and to be trusted to do so. Almost 30 years later, across more than 80 AU observation missions, 16 field offices over the year, two compendiums, 20-plus editions of the Journal, and uncountable conversations in uncountable rooms, EISA is that institution. I think I and all the people that I've worked with over all the years until I retired in 2022 are very proud of what was built. It was a partnership with people from across the continent.

I'm equally proud of the people under the directorship of Baïdessou who are carrying it forward, and may our work continue. Thank you. Baïdessou, you have something?

Baïdessou Soukolgue: And from where I sit now, I would say the funding inside is more relevant than ever. Democracy is not a moment. It is a continuous practice. It is what happens in the year between elections, in the conversation between citizen and institution, in the everyday work of building trust. EISA exists to support that practice. We will continue to do so, adapting, innovating,

learning, as long as the continent needs us. And we would like also to continue relying on our founders, like Ilona Tip.