A FOCUS ON ELECTIONS IN MALAWI & ZAMBIA
A STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON ELECTIONS AND INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 23 and 24 April 2025, the Centre for Human Rights (CHR), Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria in collaboration with Panos Institute Southern Africa, with support from the Open Society Foundations (OSF), convened a multistakeholder engagement on elections and information ecosystem with a particular focus on the upcoming elections in Malawi and Zambia. The event was convened in Lusaka, Zambia, in anticipation of the national elections scheduled for 2025 in Malawi and 2026 in Zambia.

The multistakeholder meeting served as a dynamic capacity-building platform, uniting diverse participants to fortify the resilience and integrity of the information ecosystem in Malawi and Zambia. As both nations approach their elections, this engagement was crucial in promoting collaboration and resilience among key stakeholders. The workshop convened key stakeholders in the electoral system namely, Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and electoral stakeholders from both Malawi and Zambia. These stakeholders include Human Rights Commissions, the Ministry of Information & Media in Zambia, Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC), the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), Foundation for Democratic Process (FODEP) in Zambia, SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC PF), Digital Action, Zambian Cyber Security Initiative Foundation, MISA Malawi, Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), Zambia National Women's Lobby, Zambia Council for Social Development, Youth Activists Society (YAS), and the Federation of Disability Organizations in Malawi (FEDOMA). This initiative provided a platform for collaboration and dialogue to enhance information and electoral integrity.

The primary objective of the engagement was to promote dialogue on the implementation of the African Union (AU) framework on freedom of expression and access to information. These key instruments include: the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG); the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights; Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa (2017); the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019); and the recently adopted 2024 Guidelines for the use of Digital and Social Media in African elections. This framework serves as the foundational continental mechanism for promoting electoral transparency, meaningful participation, and accountability. The multi-stakeholder dialogue addressed key issues related to the information ecosystem, providing stakeholders with a comprehensive understanding of the African Union's normative frameworks. It also emphasised the role of freedom of expression, and access to information, in guaranteeing free and fair elections.

Stakeholders engaged in a substantive discussion on the complexities of information rights, examining both the challenges and opportunities inherent in their application. The conversation specifically addressed how these dynamics intersect with their respective mandates and the broader implementation of AU norms, highlighting key considerations for fostering transparency, accessibility, and compliance across governance structures. The stakeholder engagement included a critical discussion on the role of social media in elections, emphasizing both its potential and its challenges. Participants underscored the necessity for

stakeholders to adopt proactive strategies to effectively manage and counter misinformation, disinformation, and broader threats to information integrity both in the lead-up to and during electoral processes.

The central objective of the meeting was to strengthen collaboration among electoral stakeholders and develop practical strategies for managing the electoral information ecosystem. Discussions emphasised the importance of proactive information disclosure by all stakeholders and their role in addressing key challenges related to information integrity. As a culmination of these discussions, stakeholders formulated action plans detailing concrete steps to enhance the information ecosystem within their respective mandates. These plans are expected to reinforce electoral processes and bolster a more informed and engaged electorate in Zambia and Malawi. Ultimately, the meeting aimed to enhance the capacity of electoral stakeholders in both countries, foster stronger coordination, and establish best practices for managing the electoral information ecosystem, contributing to greater transparency, credibility, and public trust in democratic processes.

LIST OF LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

African Union (AU) Instruments

1. Africa Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance 2007.
2. African Commission Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa 2017.
3. The African Charter on Democracy Elections & Governance, 2007.
4. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights,1986.
5. The Declaration Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, 2002.
6. The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa 2019.
7. The Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, 2002.
8. The Guidelines for African Union Election Observation & Monitoring Missions, 2002.
9. The Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa 2024.

SADC Instruments

1. SADC Model Law on Elections 2018
2. The SADC Parliamentary Forum Norms and Standards for Elections, 2001.
3. The SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, Revised, 2015.
4. Treaty of the Establishment of the Southern Africa Development Community, 1992.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAEA	Association of African Election Authorities
ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ACG	African Centre for Governance
ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights
AfEONet	African Election Observers Network
AU	African Union
AUEOM	African Union Election Observation Mission
CHR	Centre for Human Rights
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EMBs	Election Management Bodies EOMs Election Observer Missions
ECZ	Electoral Commission of Zambia
MEC	Malawi Electoral Commission
ZCID	Zambia Centre for Interparty Dialogue

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1.0 BACKGROUND

Free, fair, and credible elections are realised from the collaborative efforts of various electoral stakeholders in promoting the integrity of the election process and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The African Union (AU) normative framework on freedom of expression and access to information during elections recognises the important role of independent and impartial Election Management Bodies (EMBs) in holding transparent, free, and fair elections that allow for meaningful participation of the electorate. Human Rights Commissions, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Media, Election observers, and monitors are crucial actors in contributing to this objective and can be a source of advice and support for EMBs in delivering their mandate. The AU freedom of expression and access to information framework is anchored on the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights 2017 Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa (2017 Guidelines), and the 2019 Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and

Access to Information in Africa (2019 Declaration). Also important are the 2024 Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa adopted by the African Association of Electoral Authorities.

Article 17 of ACDEG and part III (c) of the Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa obligate states to establish and strengthen independent and impartial bodies to manage electoral processes. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms including freedom of expression and access to information are key markers of the freeness, fairness, and transparency of an election. These rights are guaranteed under Article 9 of the African Charter. The protection and interpretation of these rights are enhanced by soft law instruments such as the 2019 Declaration and the 2017 Guidelines.

The 2017 Guidelines outline the responsibilities of non-state actors who are electoral stakeholders to facilitate access to information during elections. These stakeholders are appointing authorities of: EMBs; political parties and candidates; law enforcement agencies; election observers and monitors; media and online media platform providers; media regulatory bodies; and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Beyond reinforcing transparent and credible elections, access to information nurtures active and informed citizens who can meaningfully participate in electoral and democratic processes. Guidelines 13-19 comprehensively dictate the information that EMBs should proactively disclose before, during, and after the election process, as the key election administrators. The Guidelines also impose information disclosure responsibilities on election observers and monitors under Guideline 23. A research series by the Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria (The Centre) on State compliance with the 2017 Guidelines illustrates the state of access to information in elections in select countries in Africa. A key finding of the studies that assessed recent elections in South Africa (2019), Uganda (2020), The Gambia (2021), and Kenya (2022) reveals the need for capacity building of the different electoral stakeholders to promote the implementation of the 2017 Guidelines and other instruments such as the 2019 Declaration.

The 2019 Declaration reinforces the protection of freedom of expression and access to information in the digital age. Digital technologies continue to expand the frontiers for the exercise of these rights for enhanced public and political participation. EMBs similarly have to respect the realisation of these rights in the context of elections. They further have in their purview access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that can facilitate easy and speedy dissemination of information and communication to the public during voter and civic education and election processes to increase election credibility and transparency. Such proactive disclosure of information further arrests the impact of misinformation and disinformation that may suppress voting, affect the outcome of an election, or spark public discord or electoral violence.

All stakeholders have to be aware of the dynamics of technology and elections and the overall impact on the quality of elections. Election observer missions for example should be skilled at observing, assessing, and reporting on digital threats to election integrity. Electoral

stakeholders should also engage with social media companies given the increasing implications of their platforms and actions on meaningful public participation during elections. Social media is a popular source of news and avenues for expression and information for citizens. Access to accurate and credible information online and safe spaces for discourse and exchange of ideas is crucial to the quality of participation. The Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa is a useful reference point for EMBs to navigate the opportunities and threats of social media towards effectively undertaking their election management duties. Election observers and monitors should also reference the principles and guidelines in assessing the impact of digital opportunities and pitfalls in election processes.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Centre, in collaboration with PSAf, convened a capacity-building multistakeholder dialogue on Information Ecosystems and Elections in Zambia and Malawi, held on 23–24 April 2025 in Lusaka, Zambia. The dialogue was anchored on the above-mentioned AU framework on freedom of expression and access to information and other relevant instruments. This report presents summaries of proceedings for the two-day multistakeholder meeting as well as the panel discussion outcomes, key issues, and recommendations.

3.0 PARTICIPATION

The dialogue targeted all electoral stakeholders such as EMBs of Zambia and Malawi, Election Observer Missions (EOMs), Human Rights Commissions, Civil Society Organisations, Academia, and Media. The discussions focused on freedom of expression and access to information in electoral processes, highlighting international legal frameworks, digital media guidelines, and the role of all election stakeholders in promoting transparency and a healthy information ecosystem during elections. Action planning sessions enabled participants to develop strategies for improving information access in elections, particularly for marginalised and vulnerable groups. Notably, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, Honourable Commissioner Ourveena Geereesha Topsy-Sonoo, participated as the keynote speaker.

Participating Organisations:

- Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria (The Centre)
- Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf)
- Ministry of Information & Media, Zambia
- Electoral Commission of Zambia
- Malawi Electoral Commission
- Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)
- National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE)
- Foundation for Democratic Process (FODEP), Zambia
- SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC PF)
- Digital Action
- Zambian Cyber Security Initiative Foundation
- MISA Malawi
- Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA)
- Zambia National Women's Lobby
- Zambia Council for Social Development
- Youth Activists Society (YAS)
- The African Centre for Governance
- Federation of Disability Organizations in Malawi (FEDOMA)

4.0 PURPOSE OF THE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE

Mr Lloyd Kuveya, Assistant Director: Centre for Human Rights

This multi-stakeholder dialogue aimed to share best practices and enhance the capacity of all relevant election stakeholders in Malawi and Zambia. By fostering dialogue and collaboration on information rights in electoral processes, the dialogue sought to empower all stakeholders with the tools and strategies necessary to uphold freedom of expression and access to information during elections.

Specific Objectives of the workshop:

• To establish a platform for consensus-building among electoral stakeholders in Zambia and Malawi and enhance the integrity of information ecosystems, including traditional media, social media, and digital platforms.
• To support electoral stakeholders in fulfilling their obligations under African Union frameworks related to freedom of expression and access to information, ensuring alignment with democratic standards.
• To enhance coordination among stakeholders in view to address emerging challenges in information integrity, promoting effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms during electoral processes.
• To empower youth, marginalised groups, and persons with disabilities through accessible platforms, inclusive policies, and targeted civic education initiatives that facilitate meaningful participation in elections.
• To advocate for the protection of freedom of expression, access to information, and peaceful assembly as fundamental pillars of democracy, ensuring political will for policy implementation in evolving information environments.

Key Discussions and Outcomes:

Stakeholders from both Zambia and Malawi shared their insights and experiences and identified challenges and opportunities in promoting a healthy information ecosystem during elections. Discussions highlighted key regional frameworks, including the 2019 Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, the 2017 Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa; the 2018 SADC Model Law on Elections; and the Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa, all of which provide normative guidance for protecting information rights and ensuring freedom of expression and access to information during elections.

Activities included:
- Scene setting on freedom of expression and access to information. Discussions introduced key regional and continental frameworks.
- Panel discussion on the role of EMBs in promoting access to information and freedom of expression. This panel discussion explored the roles of key stakeholders, including EMBs, Human Rights Commissions, civil society, and election observers and monitors, in promoting access to information and freedom of expression during electoral processes.
- Panel discussion on digital threats and opportunities during elections. This panel discussion explored the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital space and the advancement of technology in cyberspace.
- Panel discussion on facilitating access to information and freedom of expression for marginalised and vulnerable groups. This panel discussion explored ways to advance the information ecosystem among the marginalised populations and to enhance their effective participation in the electoral process.
- Action planning to develop strategic, context-specific responses to challenges in the electoral information ecosystem.

5.0 WORKSHOP DELIBERATIONS

Hlengiwe Dube, CHR

Vusumuzi Sifile, PANOS

Experts from the Centre, PSAf, the Government of Zambia, the EMBs of Zambia and Malawi, and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights delivered opening remarks setting the stage for discussions on strengthening information integrity in Malawi and Zambia. Their remarks underscored the importance of collaborative efforts in ensuring free, fair, and informed elections.

Of note, Mr. Lloyd Kuveya, Deputy Director of the Centre, emphasised the critical need for the effective implementation of and compliance with ratified treaties and governance standards, stressing that mere adoption is insufficient. He underscored freedom of expression and access to information as foundational pillars of democracy, particularly in light of the upcoming elections in Malawi and Zambia. Kuveya urged key stakeholders, including electoral commissions, human rights organisations, civil society, and academia, to strengthen election integrity by fostering a robust information ecosystem. Furthermore, he encouraged participants to critically examine how information is produced, shared, and consumed, cautioning against the dangers of disinformation, misinformation, and eroding public trust. Recognising the transformative power of digital platforms, he called for strategic efforts to enhance the credibility of the information ecosystem and improve electoral transparency. Kuveya also acknowledged the evolving role of electoral systems in managing and disseminating information, noting both the opportunities and challenges introduced by technology.

The Special Rapporteur, on the other hand, reiterated the call on Zambia and Malawi to continue to domesticate and implement these frameworks especially those on freedom of expression and access to information. Noting that Malawi ratified the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance on October 24, 2012, while Zambia ratified it earlier on May 31, 2011. Their commitment to this charter reflects their dedication to strengthening democratic governance and electoral integrity in the region. In conclusion, the Special Rapporteur underscored the importance of a ***multi-stakeholder approach*** in promoting a healthy permissions ecosystem, particularly in the wake of elections, which demand commitment and dedication from various stakeholders.

Hlengiwe Dube, manager of the Freedom of Expression, Access to Information and Digital Rights Unit at the Centre emphasised the connection between access to information and freedom of expression. She underscored the need for stronger protections for journalists and media practitioners, particularly against arbitrary detention and the criminalisation of their work during elections. On media regulation, she advocated for a co-regulation approach, balancing autonomy with oversight, rather than purely state or self-regulation. She noted that whistleblower protection is another critical issue, especially during elections, as existing mechanisms on the continent remain inadequate for safeguarding individuals who expose corruption or wrongdoing.

Dube also noted that digital rights and internet access are fundamental to freedom of expression and information, calling for equitable and affordable access while addressing digital divides linked to geography, gender, and socioeconomic status among others. She stressed the importance of protecting the rights online that are enjoyed offline. She reiterated the concerns regarding internet interference during elections, to prevent unjustified internet shutdowns, citing past cases. Dube further noted the role of content moderation and algorithmic influence, calling for greater transparency in content removal practices and scrutiny of AI-driven online manipulation. Privacy and data protection are highlighted, concerning the Malabo Convention, reinforcing confidentiality and safeguards for personal data. Although privacy is not explicitly recognised under the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the African Commission interprets it as integral to freedom of expression and access to information. The overarching message of the remarks is a call for stronger protections, greater transparency, and equitable digital governance to uphold fundamental rights in electoral and governance processes.

Vusumuzi Sifile, the Executive Director of PANOS, emphasised the critical role of access to information and data protection, particularly within state entities and electoral processes. He highlighted that citizens should have the right to inquire about and challenge the accuracy of information held by public institutions while also requesting updates when necessary. He stressed that effective data protection legislation must clearly define individuals' rights and ensure personal information security, with a well-resourced data protection authority providing oversight and guidance to relevant stakeholders, including political parties and electoral bodies. He noted that technological advancements introduce new privacy concerns. Furthermore, he underscored access to information as a cornerstone of democratic governance, citing international legal frameworks, and Zambian legislation, such as the Access to Information Act as key references. He urged EMBs and stakeholders to proactively disclose information to the public without requiring individual requests and to ensure robust information management practices that maintain data accuracy, accessibility, and security, including efforts toward digitisation. In conclusion, he acknowledged challenges in information dissemination and stressed the importance of structured information management and enforcing penalties for poor information access to strengthen accountability and good governance.

5.1 Setting the Scene: Understanding the information ecosystem under the AU Framework

From left to right: Hlengiwe Dube, MacDonald Chipenzi, Vusumuzi Sifile

Hlengiwe Dube introduced the information ecosystem to the participants, particularly the 2019 Declaration, the 2017 Guidelines, and the 2024 Guidelines on the Use of Social Media in Elections. In setting the scene, she shared some insights on the nature and scope of the information ecosystem under the AU framework and contextualised the meaning in the context of Zambia and Malawi as both nations are preparing for elections. Dube highlighted the existing challenges and opportunities in the information ecosystem during elections and emphasised the importance of the implementation of the regional normative frameworks.

In addition, Dube explored the importance of freedom of expression and access to information in the context of elections, especially in ensuring transparency, accountability, and credibility. She emphasised and paid special attention to the 2019 Declaration as a homegrown, progressive, regional normative instrument that promotes freedom of expression and access to information in Africa in light of the developments in the digital age. Its implementation as per Principle 43, would go a long way in realising freedom of expression and access to information in both Zambia and Malawi.

5.2 Compliance with the Guidelines

Dube encouraged stakeholders in both Zambia and Malawi to comply with the 2019 Guidelines. She argued that compliance with the guidelines is crucial in fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and freedom of expression, especially in the evolving digital landscape in both nations. As Dube emphasised and reiterated, this homegrown and progressive regional instrument serves as a beacon for promoting access to information, ensuring that governments, media institutions, and citizens alike uphold its principles. Principle 43, in particular, underscores the need for strong legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms

that protect and facilitate free speech and the right to information. By championing its implementation, stakeholders including government, policymakers, civil society, and digital rights advocates can work together to create environments where information flows freely, empowering individuals to participate in the governance and decision-making of their country. "Strengthening compliance not only aligns Zambia and Malawi with international best practices but also reinforces their commitment to democratic values, human rights, and inclusive development", she reiterated.

5.3 The role of EMBs in promoting access to information and freedom of expression

The panelists for this discussion included representatives from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), led by Mr. Richard Mveriwa, and Patricia Luhanga, Spokesperson of the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ). The discussion, which underscored the vital role of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) in safeguarding free, fair, and credible elections through a healthy information Ecosystem, was chaired by Hlengiwe Dube.

EMBs in both Zambia and Malawi serve as the custodians of electoral integrity, working in close collaboration with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including civil society organisations, political parties, media, and election observers. Their mandate goes beyond managing elections. It also encompasses safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the electoral process. Ensuring access to information is a crucial responsibility for these EMBs.

Both Commissions shared their unique experiences. However, critical emphasis was placed on the need for both EMBs to strengthen mechanisms for advancing the information ecosystem. Both panelists explored a tailored approach to their countries, recognising the unique electoral landscapes in both Zambia and Malawi. These included the work of both commissions in advancing information rights among marginalised groups for example.

While sharing the unique challenges, both commissions reaffirmed their commitment to refining electoral procedures to align with international best practices and regional democratic principles, such as those outlined in the regional instruments on the information ecosystem. In administering elections, both EMBs are guided by several election instruments, including the revised SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, the AU normative framework on elections, including ACDEG, and the 2017 Guidelines which seek to advance the work of election stakeholders, especially EMBs. The 2017 Guidelines obligate EMBs to facilitate access and proactive disclosure of information during elections. Both EMBs of Malawi and Zambia deliberated on the 2017 Guidelines particularly Section(s) 13-19 which comprehensively dictate the information that EMBs should proactively disclose before, during, and after the election process, as the main election administrator.

Considering the above, the panelists discussed their specific roles, responsibilities, and experiences in promoting access to information and freedom of expression during electoral processes in their respective countries. They shared insights into their work, highlighting challenges and best practices. The following questions guided the discussions.

a. How are members of the Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) in Zambia and Malawi fulfilling their obligations under the 2017 Guidelines and the broader African Union framework on freedom of expression and access to information?
b. In what ways have they integrated the access-to-information ecosystem into their electoral processes to enhance transparency and foster public engagement?

The Malawi Electoral Commission outlined its guidelines for information seekers and its approach to addressing misinformation and disinformation, emphasizing proactive measures to safeguard electoral integrity. Meanwhile, Zambia's efforts in access to information were discussed in the context of ongoing advocacy for a comprehensive legal framework. The panelists acknowledged that while Zambia has made strides in promoting media freedom and transparency, the absence of a fully enacted Access to Information law remains a challenge.

The shared experiences were perceived as valuable lessons for strengthening good practices among EMBs in the region. Finally, members of the EMBs also discussed the challenges in the implementation of the newly adopted Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa, emphasising their relevance in combating misinformation and enhancing voter education through digital platforms.

Both EMBs highlighted the distinct progress and challenges they face within the information ecosystem:

The Electoral Commission of Zambia

Patricia Luhanga, Spokesperson of the Electoral Commission of Zambia

While the Commission has made progress in some areas, the reform efforts like delimitation and biometric registration have raised concerns regarding inclusivity and fairness. Furthermore, how the Commission is tackling issues of external political funding on accountability remains a concern. Political party financing disclosure is essential for integrity and informed decision-making. Anonymous donations and indirect funding raise accountability challenges. Resistance from political parties has hindered progress in enacting political party acts to improve oversight. However, questions were raised about the commission's public trust, particularly perceived political appointments, which are seen to threaten its integrity. On the positive, Zambia's electoral reforms, including removing the Chief Justice as the returning officer for presidential elections, reflect efforts to safeguard impartiality. The role was shifted to the Electoral Commission chairperson and commissioners are appointed based on qualifications rather than political affiliations. Broader concerns remain about the impact of technology on democracy, misinformation risks, and ensuring inclusive voter engagement, particularly for marginalised communities.

The Electoral Commission of Malawi

Richard Mveriwa, Malawi Electoral Commission

Disinformation and misinformation have generated contestation surrounding the appointment of the Chairperson and the Chief Electoral Officer. Moreover, growing distrust has emerged concerning the selection of senior management within the Commission. Although the Commission has repeatedly provided clarifications on the matter, challenges within the digital sphere persist. The use of technology, particularly Smartmatic technology, remains contested due to a lack of knowledge from stakeholders. On several occasions, the Commission has clarified the matter and directed stakeholders to the appropriate offices responsible for the administration of justice and handling complaints.

5.4 The role of election observers and monitors in promoting access to information and freedom of expression

*Left to right Grace Hara (Nice Malawi), Elijah Rubvuta (FODEP),
and Tendai Mbanje CHR)*

The discussion, chaired by Tendai Mbanje of the Centre, included delegates from NICE Malawi, along with representatives of domestic observers from Zambia, specifically the Foundation for Democratic Process. Additionally, Regional Election Observer Missions were represented by the African Centre for Governance (ACG). Election observers and monitors in Zambia and Malawi play a crucial role in ensuring free, fair, and credible elections, reinforcing democratic principles, and safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Their presence enhances electoral integrity and provides essential advice and support to EMBs, particularly in navigating challenges unique to these two countries. Beyond their mandate of observing and reinforcing transparent elections, observers in Zambia and Malawi are required to proactively disclose information about their activities. This transparency fosters active and informed citizen participation, ensuring that voters engage meaningfully in electoral and democratic processes. The AU framework on access to information mandates observers to share key details, including recruitment processes, arrival timelines, accreditation, mandate, methodology, deployment strategies, mission duration, and funding sources. The 2017 AU Guidelines, particularly Guideline 23, impose clear disclosure responsibilities on election observers and monitors, reinforcing accountability in electoral oversight. However, proactive disclosure must be context-sensitive, considering the political economy of elections in Zambia and Malawi.

Observers are also required to disclose their code of conduct with stakeholders and what is contained in the code of conduct. Host countries also require observers to declare their noninterference, and respect for national laws. Sharing this code with critical stakeholders reassures them of the ethical standards and non-partisan nature of observer missions. Zooming into context, election observers in both Zambia and Malawi including regional observers acknowledged the growing influence of election technology and its impact on electoral quality.

They raised the challenges arising from digital threats, including misinformation, cybersecurity risks, and manipulation of electoral data that pose complexity to the work of election observers. Given the increasing reliance on biometric voter registration and electronic result transmission, observers noted the need to refine their methodologies to effectively monitor digital vulnerabilities. Additionally, observers in both countries noted the need to strategically promote access to information and freedom of expression during elections. They expressed the need to adopt the 2017 Guidelines to their context as well as ensure these instruments reflect the evolving electoral landscape in both countries.

Election observers and monitors in Zambia and Malawi noted the benefits related to promoting access to information during elections in their work, especially helping stakeholders, particularly citizens, in making informed decisions about their assessments of elections, human rights situations, and other critical issues related to elections. Having access to comprehensive information enhances the ability of the observers to coordinate, regularly engage with relevant stakeholders, and provide transparent, evidence-based reports, which in turn fosters trust among stakeholders.

Access to information about the election environment allows observers to address issues proactively. For example, observers may align their deployment strategies to the needs on the ground. Finally, both Zambia and Malawi observers were encouraged to consider the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa as a useful reference point for observers to navigate the opportunities and threats of social media towards effectively undertaking their election observation duties. They were encouraged to regularly reference the principles and guidelines in assessing the impact of digital opportunities and pitfalls in election processes.

Critical challenges facing observers that need to be addressed
a. Election observers continue to grapple with significant challenges, including navigating state-driven propaganda and restricted access to information. Their impartiality is frequently scrutinised, as seen in the diplomatic tensions following Dr. Nevers Mumba's assessment of Zimbabwe's elections, which strained relations between Zimbabwe and Zambia. The credibility of observer missions is often undermined by coordinated efforts to discredit their findings.
b. While observer reports propose key electoral reforms, the lack of systematic follow-ups and accountability mechanisms limits their impact. Without clear strategies to track implementation, election irregularities persist across multiple electoral cycles.
c. State and privately controlled media play a significant role in shaping electoral narratives, selectively dismissing reports that expose governance failures or malpractice. Observers often find their assessments sidelined or framed as mere academic exercises rather than actionable insights.
d. Election observers frequently encounter barriers in accessing crucial aspects of the electoral process, such as result tallying, making it difficult to verify transparency and integrity. Even in cases of documented ballot manipulation, elections are still declared 'free and fair,' eroding public trust in observer missions.

e. Another pressing issue is the imbalance between external validation and local expertise. African elections are often subjected to scrutiny by international observer missions, such as those from the EU, whereas African observers rarely participate in assessments of European elections. This discrepancy raises concerns about equitable recognition and the legitimacy of African electoral observation efforts. Strengthening the role of regional observers and ensuring their contributions are valued is essential in fostering a more balanced approach to election observation and monitoring.

These challenges highlight the urgent need for strengthened mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of observer missions, ensure unimpeded access to information, and enhance the credibility of electoral assessments. Greater transparency, accountability, and cooperation between stakeholders will be essential in addressing these persistent obstacles.

5.5   Discussion on the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa

Left to right, Tendai Mbanje, Richard Mveriwa, Patricia Luhanga, and Vusumuzi Sifile

The discussion was chaired by Tendai Mbanje and moderated by Vusumuzi Sifile. Additionally, a representative from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) participated, along with Patricia Luhanga from the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ). Mbanje shared some insights on the development of the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa. The principles and guidelines resulted from a conference on 'Safeguarding Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age: Strategies for Combating Digital Disinformation' held in Cape Town from 02 to 05 March 2020. The sentiment throughout the conference was that digital and social media is a double-edged sword that can either undermine or promote the conduct of elections. The conference highlighted the impact of social media on elections and the work of EMBs, highlighting misinformation and disinformation in elections. It recommended the

development of principles and guidelines to enhance EMBs' capacity to harness social media benefits and effectively address its negative effects.

Mbanje emphasised that "The Principles and Guidelines" provide a comprehensive framework on how EMBs and electoral stakeholders can extract maximum value from the use of digital and social media and how to address the inherent risks. The AAEA General Assembly meeting held in Maputo in November 2022 requested the IEC South Africa to midwife the process.

The Principles and Guidelines intend to achieve their objectives in the following four broad areas:

a. **Regulation:** the creation of a balance between data protection and privacy in terms of determining parameters for the regulation of digital and social media.
b. Monitoring: the inculcation of transparency, accountability, and impartiality in election management to minimise exposure to disinformation through digital and social media.
c. **Enhancement of the normative framework:** augmentation of the existing continental and regional normative frameworks governing the conduct of elections and those promoting access to information by incorporating social media in elections. These include ACDEG, The 2019 Declaration, and the 2017 Guidelines.
d. **Digital literacy:** developing inclusive digital and social media literacy programs that include influencers, peddlers, and users. The Principles and Guidelines contain specific guidelines about the state, EMBs, digital and social media, regulatory bodies, political parties and candidates, African traditional institutions and religious bodies, civil society, journalists and the news media, digital intermediaries, and accountability mechanisms.

Experiences in Both Zambia and Malawi - On the domestication of the guidelines

The discussion emphasised the importance of understanding and domestication of the guidelines, particularly in addressing misinformation and disinformation during elections. Patricia Luhanga from the Electoral Commission of Zambia highlighted some gaps in the domestication of the guidelines although the electoral commission of Zambia was actively involved in the drafting of the guidelines.

Richard, the Communications Officer for the Malawi Electoral Commission, noted that the Commission had not fully adopted the discussed guidelines but the Commission relies on its communication policy. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, X, and the Commission's website are actively used for updates, voter education, and official statements. However, challenges such as the digital divide and accessibility persist.

In conclusion, both Commissions agreed on the need to tailor the guidelines to suit unique political and legal environments, particularly in Malawi, while acknowledging and drawing lessons from other countries. Vusumuzi encouraged and shared a reflection on how election management bodies can adopt these guidelines effectively.

5.6 Digital threats and opportunities to enhance electoral integrity

Discussion on digital threats and opportunities

The discussion was chaired and facilitated by Teldah Mawarire. The panelists comprised Bulanda Nkhowani from Digital Action, John Tshinseki representing the Zambian CyberSecurity Initiative Foundation, Aubrey Chikungwa from MISA Malawi, and Zadziko Mankhambo from MACRA. Each panelist contributed valuable insights, fostering a comprehensive dialogue on the subject at hand. The panelists explored the impact of digital technologies on freedom of expression and access to information during elections. The discussion emphasised the role of media, both professional journalists and citizen media, in ensuring access to accurate and credible election-related information.

In Zambia, the Cyber Security Act No. 3 of 2025 has raised concerns about its potential impact on access to information, particularly during elections. While the Act aims to regulate cyber security and establish the Zambia Cyber Security Agency, panelists expressed concern that its provisions could be used to restrict online discourse and limit transparency in electoral processes. However, it's important to note that the Act is not yet in force despite receiving presidential assent in April 2025. It requires a formal Commencement Order before taking effect, meaning that, for now, Zambia continues to operate under the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act of 2021. The debate surrounding this legislation highlights the delicate balance between cyber regulation and freedom of expression, especially in the context of elections where access to information is crucial for democratic integrity.

Drawing lessons from regional experiences, the panel examined initiatives that safeguard election integrity. In Malawi, organisations such as MISA Malawi have been vocal about the need to protect journalists and uphold freedom of expression, particularly during election periods. They have highlighted concerns about the misuse of cybersecurity laws to silence critical voices and the importance of responsible AI in combating misinformation and disinformation. Similarly, Zambia has seen efforts to strengthen media freedom and access to information, with calls for electoral stakeholders, including EMBs and EOMs, to collaborate closely with the media. This ensures that public interest information on elections is widely disseminated and that voters can make informed decisions.

Social media platforms continue to play a crucial role in shaping the information ecosystem during elections. The panel discussed the need for platforms such as META to enhance transparency regarding content moderation and proactive disclosure of actions taken against harmful and illegal content. While privacy and data protection laws must be respected, there is a growing demand for greater accountability from digital platforms. Importantly, the panel underscored that combating misinformation and disinformation requires **a multi-stakeholder approach**. Civil society, media organisations, and electoral bodies must work together to ensure that voters in Zambia and Malawi have access to credible information, fostering informed debate and decision-making during the elections.

The panelists underscored the capacity of the Principles and Guidelines as a high-level rights-based framework mapping crucial themes, challenges, and action areas for EMBs and those who work in election governance, including state and non-state actors. It helps them understand the landscape of digital technologies and engage with them from a position of authority rather than a reactionary position. Therefore, under the Principles section, users of the document must pay attention to various provisions including the definitions (Article 2), freedom of expression (Article 3.4 and Article 6), and access to information (Article 3.5 and Article 7). Under the Guidelines section, users must pay attention to provisions regarding the role of the state (Articles 9.2, 9.8- 9.9, and 9.12), EMBs (Articles 10.7, and 10.9), Social Media Companies (Articles 11.4- 12), and regulatory bodies (Article 12).

The panelists encouraged stakeholders, particularly EMBs to use the document as a framework for domestication that may help identify areas of action. They can also use it to build partnerships with social media companies, each other, and other electoral stakeholders. Further, the Principles and Guidelines provide convening power to EMBs, capacitating them to speak with

authority on the subject matter. They can use it to understand the landscape better. There is no gainsaying that social media and digital technologies are the current and future realities of all EMBs, and stakeholders must confront this reality. The adoption of the Principles and Guidelines heralded a new era of EMB cooperation in mitigating the challenges threatening to undermine the credibility of elections across the continent of Africa. The document encourages EMBs to use their existing relations with electoral stakeholders and magnify their role while safeguarding their exclusive mandate, autonomy, and authority to make final decisions. EMBs were also encouraged to establish partnerships and liaise with regulators, such as data protection and broadcast licensing authorities, and Information Commissioners. Further, stakeholders should conduct risk assessments of social media's role in elections and develop mitigation plans.

Key insights from the discussion

The discussion on digital threats and opportunities underscores the **collaborative/ multistakeholder** effort needed to improve digital environments rather than fostering competition. Experts in digital rights, cybersecurity, and communications highlighted critical challenges, including internet shutdowns, misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and online gender-based violence. Emerging concerns, such as the influence of artificial intelligence, particularly generative AI, on electoral narratives and confidence, are also raised. The conversation explores the shift from traditional broadcasting to digital platforms, especially in Malawi, where ICT presents opportunities to promote transparency and enhance access to information. In this context, initiatives supporting community radios through equipment, websites, and live-streaming tools aim to bridge the gap for remote audiences. Licensing reforms seek to empower local operators, enabling them to transmit content via handheld devices alongside larger broadcasters. Despite high mobile phone ownership, limited smart device penetration prompts government efforts to expand network coverage in underserved regions. Additionally, the evolving debate around social media regulation highlights tensions between ensuring responsible content creation and protecting free speech, as Malawi's existing laws address public grievances without imposing strict controls on influencers.

The conversation extends to the broader role of media in elections, particularly in Malawi and Zambia, where traditional outlets like radio remain highly influential in shaping public opinion. Key challenges in managing electoral processes include the impact of misinformation and disinformation, as well as the role of major tech platforms such as Facebook, Meta, and Google in shaping electoral discourse. Instances like the manipulated claims of voter roll deletions in Malawi illustrate how viral posts can trigger panic, complicating electoral management bodies' ability to respond effectively. Panelists stressed the need for tech companies to take greater accountability by collaborating with civil society and EMBs to mitigate harmful content. They advocate for tailored election strategies and risk assessments suited to African contexts, akin to the detailed attention given to elections in the US. Strengthening media literacy and moderation mechanisms is deemed essential in countering disinformation. Additionally, the slow adoption of digital electoral systems is scrutinised, with concerns about hacking and reliability inhibiting progress. The discussion ultimately emphasises the necessity for Africa to embrace digital advancements while safeguarding electoral integrity, urging strategic engagement with tech giants to refine digital election management approaches.

5.7. Human Rights Commissions

The following insights were shared by representatives from both the Malawi and Zambia Human Rights Commissions:

Zambia

The Human Rights Commission of Zambia plays a crucial role in ensuring access to information during elections, particularly following the enactment of the Access to Information Act, 2023. This law grants citizens the right to obtain information from public institutions, including electoral bodies, thereby fostering transparency and accountability in governance. The Commission is responsible for overseeing the implementation of this Act, ensuring that government agencies comply with disclosure requirements and that citizens can access electoral information without undue restrictions. Additionally, the Commission has the authority to impose administrative sanctions on officials who fail to respect the law, reinforcing its commitment to safeguarding democratic processes. However, challenges remain, including restrictive legal provisions such as criminal libel and cybercrime law, which have been used to suppress critical voices and limit free speech. The Commission continues to advocate for legal reforms to address these concerns and enhance the effectiveness of access to information mechanisms.

Malawi

The Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC) plays an essential role in promoting access to information during elections, particularly under the Access to Information Act, of 2020. This Act mandates public institutions, including the Malawi Electoral Commission, to proactively disclose electoral information, ensuring that citizens, journalists, and observers can access critical data necessary for informed participation. The MHRC has established an Access to Information Unit, which conducts awareness campaigns and engages stakeholders to enhance understanding and application of the law. However, concerns have been raised regarding digital rights suppression, particularly the restrictive application of criminal defamation laws, such as Section 200 of the Penal Code of Malawi, which poses a threat to freedom of expression and access to information. Additionally, the procurement of surveillance technologies by the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) has raised alarms about potential violations of digital rights during elections. The MHRC continues to work alongside civil society organizations to address these challenges and uphold the principles of transparency and accountability in Malawi's electoral processes.

5.8 Access to information and freedom of expression for vulnerable groups

From left to right: Golden Nachibinga, Leah Mitaba, Mwandida Thou and Belinda Matore

The discussion was facilitated by Belinda Matore from the Centre and brought together speakers who addressed key aspects of inclusion and participation in electoral processes. The panel featured a representative from FEDOMA, focusing on the rights and participation of persons with disabilities, alongside a speaker from YAS, who highlighted youth engagement. Women's political participation was discussed by a representative from the Zambia National Women's Lobby, while Leah Mitaba from the Zambia Council for Social Development provided insights on the involvement of rural communities. The panel explored the challenges faced by vulnerable and marginalised communities in accessing information and freely expressing themselves during elections. The panel sought to identify strategies to enhance inclusivity, ensuring that all citizens can effectively participate in democratic processes.

Panelists all provided insights into how electoral stakeholders have neglected to facilitate measures for the participation of minorities and vulnerable groups during elections. While there have been successful interventions, the panel recognised and emphasised the importance of intentionality. Electoral stakeholders tend to be reactive rather than taking proactive steps to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised groups are represented in electoral processes. The impact on these groups' ability to freely exercise their right to vote is not sufficiently emphasised, leading to the groups being considered an afterthought. There is a need for institutional reform and acknowledgment of the diverse nature of vulnerable and marginalised groups. It is important to note that vulnerable and marginalised groups are not homogenous, and an intersectional perspective should be applied to ensure that obstacles are eradicated.

Zambia and Malawi are both undergoing significant digital transformation, with increasing adoption of digital technologies to enhance citizen engagement, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. However, this shift also presents challenges, particularly for marginalised groups such as persons with disabilities (PWDs), rural communities, and women.

The participants emphasised that assistive technologies and digital platforms are crucial in enabling PWDs to participate effectively in the electoral process. While EMBs in Zambia and Malawi have made strides in improving accessibility, there is still a gap in user-centered design and testing. A thorough evaluation of assistive technologies before implementation is essential to ensure they meet the needs of PWDs. Digital inequalities persist in rural Zambia and Malawi, where communities rely on traditional media for electoral information, facing challenges of media independence and language barriers. Limited digital infrastructure hampers timely access to electoral data, necessitating civic education that respects cultural dynamics. Gender disparities in digital access and gendered disinformation undermine women's political participation, highlighting the need for legislative reforms within SADC and policies like the zebra policy to ensure equal representation. Youth engagement, often misunderstood as apathetic, is hindered by structural barriers and insufficient civic education, but young people actively seek electoral involvement, necessitating meaningful inclusion beyond tokenism.

In conclusion, the panelists agreed that marginalised communities including PWDs, rural populations, economically disadvantaged groups, and youth face significant barriers to electoral participation due to digital exclusion, language constraints, and infrastructural challenges. Gender disparities further limit women's access to electoral information, political leadership, and digital tools, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Institutional interventions, such as Zambia's gender equity policies and Malawi's accessibility efforts, show progress, yet gaps remain in economic empowerment, technological affordability, and community awareness. For youth, political gatekeeping, misinformation, and economic dependence hinder engagement, while long-term incumbency fosters disillusionment. Rural disenfranchisement is exacerbated by poor infrastructure, linguistic exclusion, and restricted access to digital civic spaces. Strengthening electoral inclusivity requires *a multistakeholder approach*, ensuring accessible electoral content, genuine representation of marginalized groups, and ethical leadership to bridge generational and systemic divides.

6.0 ACTION PLANNING

Following the presentations and deliberations, the participants developed action plans outlining specific steps and strategies they will implement to promote access to information and freedom of expression in their respective roles as EMBs, election observers, and other electoral stakeholders. Participants addressed strategies for monitoring and reporting on access to information during elections. They considered collaborations with other relevant stakeholders and proposals on what support measures they require from diverse stakeholders to enable them to effectively undertake their mandates. The recommendations from the action planning are outlined below.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The governments of Malawi and Zambia

1. Enact national laws that align with the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, ensuring legal frameworks explicitly protect freedom of expression and access to information.
2. Harmonise existing laws with international and regional human rights standards, removing restrictive provisions that hinder freedom of expression and access to information.
3. Guarantee the independence of EMBs by insulating them from political interference through constitutional and legal safeguards. Ensure adequate funding for EMBs to enhance operational efficiency, transparency, and accessibility in electoral processes.
4. Develop capacity-building programs for electoral stakeholders in line with the AU framework on freedom of expression and access to information, in view to uphold democratic principles and human rights in election administration.
5. Facilitate regular multi-stakeholder dialogues to promote a robust and inclusive information ecosystem.
6. Adopt policies that protect journalists and media practitioners from harassment, censorship, and undue restrictions.
7. Promote independent media by supporting diverse and pluralistic media landscapes, ensuring fair licensing and regulatory frameworks.
8. Combat digital threats through fact-checking initiatives and public awareness campaigns.
9. Ensure unrestricted internet access and prevent arbitrary shutdowns that limit freedom of expression. Develop open data policies that allow citizens to access government-held information, fostering accountability. Strengthen cybersecurity laws to protect digital freedoms while preventing abuse.

Human Rights Commissions

1. Educate the public on the role and activities of Human Rights Commissions, ensuring citizens understand procedures, and ways they could effectively interact with the Commission.
2. Develop targeted programs for marginalised communities and facilitate discussions on information integrity and accessibility.
3. Enhance institutional capacity through transparency initiatives, proactive data-sharing policies, and public awareness campaigns while refining action planning by implementing open data platforms, streamlined information request processes, and protections against censorship.
4. Enhance public access to governance documents, improve policy transparency, and strengthen accountability mechanisms, ensuring that marginalized communities can effectively exercise their right to information.
5. Conduct training workshops for journalists, civil society organisations, and community radio personnel. Develop modules on ethical reporting and advocacy for full implementation of access to information legislation.

6. In Zambia, there is a need to operationalise the Access to Information Law. While appointing a CEO as an information officer is a step forward, the law requires full implementation to enable effective dispute resolution, particularly in sensitive areas like electoral transparency.
7. In both countries, establishing collaborative frameworks with telecommunication companies, ISPs, regulators, academia, youth groups, women's movements, and disability rights organizations will enhance policy alignment and digital accessibility. Additionally, involving government departments that manage public records will clarify mandates and improve responsiveness to information requests.
8. Drawing insights from Zambia and Malawi's implementation experiences will help refine best practices while leveraging institutions such as the African Network and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression to strengthen advocacy and accountability mechanisms.
9. Training Human Rights Commission staff and local officials will improve citizen responsiveness to information access and violations.

Electoral Management Bodies

EMBs of Zambia and Malawi should implement the following measures:
1. Conduct regular training for Electoral Commission staff on handling public inquiries, processing information requests, and ensuring compliance with access-to-information laws. Appoint an official Information Officer dedicated to managing public inquiries, providing timely responses, and ensuring clear, user-friendly communication channels. Furthermore, increases the visibility of contact persons by publishing communication officers' details in print media and online platforms, making it easier for citizens to request information
2. Develop step-by-step guidelines for the public on how to access electoral information, including legal provisions, procedural requirements, and expected response times.
3. Maintain active digital platforms (websites and social media) to disseminate information efficiently, ensuring real-time updates on elections, voter registration, and policy developments.
4. Regularly train Electoral Commission officials on the importance of proactive information dissemination, ensuring consistent adherence to transparency principles.
5. Ensure rapid response mechanisms for public inquiries, distinguishing between sensitive and non-sensitive information, while establishing clear appeal processes for denied requests.
6. Conduct comprehensive and rigorous testing and audits of electronic voting and registration systems to identify vulnerabilities, ensuring resilience against potential security threats.
7. Proactively share technical evaluations of electronic systems with stakeholders and the public to foster trust and confidence in the electoral process. To thoroughly assess and communicate the track record of technology providers, evaluating their history in maintaining electoral integrity.
8. Publish information proactively across all election phases and train officials on digital tools. Key election-related information should be disseminated in local languages. This approach ensures inclusivity, particularly among marginalised groups.

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Addressing digital threats: Digital Hygiene for Electoral Officials and other stakeholders

1. Use of safe platforms more secure for sensitive electoral discussions.
2. Implementation of Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA) – Ensuring that devices and accounts have an additional layer of authentication.
3. Localising Data Infrastructure – Developing national email systems for secure intra-governmental communication.
4. Avoiding outsourcing election communications to foreign-hosted services may pose risks.

Recommendations to Election Observers

1. To proactively disclose their identity, mission name, methodology, code of conduct, funding sources, and any conflicts of interest upon arrival. This transparency enhances credibility and fosters trust in observation findings.
2. To engage stakeholders to address information access barriers, including restricted access to critical electoral information and procedural limitations that impact the integrity of their assessments. Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring comprehensive election observation monitoring.
3. Domestic and international observers should collaborate closely to enhance the effectiveness of election monitoring.
4. Developing Election Situation Rooms. This mechanism serves as a vital tool for verifying information, and addressing concerns in real-time.
5. To conduct joint initiatives aimed at verifying election-related information and strengthening fact-checking initiatives.

Media

1. Print media with online platforms must adhere to electronic transaction and cybersecurity laws.
2. Media outlets participating in election coverage must follow the required rules and regulations.
3. To proactively communicate the tools and protocols that are needed to detect and remove deepfake content, considering language diversity.
4. To prepare for potential internet disruptions during referendums or elections.
5. To adapt AI systems to local languages and contexts.
6. Fact-check election claims, combat misinformation and hold leaders accountable.
7. Strengthen editorial standards and fact-checking protocols to minimise errors in reporting and reduce the risk of spreading misinformation, particularly during electoral periods.
8. Training of media practitioners on adherence to national laws and regulations governing media conduct, including the Electoral Code of Conduct, the Electronic Transactions Act, and the Cybersecurity Act, ensuring compliance across both print and online platforms.
9. Ensure equitable and impartial coverage of all political actors during election periods, in line with legal obligations and ethical journalism standards.

Political parties

1. Utilise existing structures like presidents, secretary generals, party spokespersons, and branch-level information and publicity secretaries to disseminate information effectively
2. Maintain strong visibility and accessibility to media, ensuring party messages are consistently communicated.
3. Leverage community radio stations and local artists to spread information in local languages, reaching grassroots levels.
4. Work closely with organisations like the Electoral Commissions, Human Rights Commissions, CSOs, and other stakeholders for accurate dissemination of information.
5. Address the low percentage of smartphone users by continuing to use traditional methods of communication while striving for technological improvements.
6. Increase familiarity with laws governing information dissemination, including the cybersecurity law, to ensure compliance and mitigate threats.
7. Train party members and stakeholders on ethical information dissemination and legal frameworks.
8. Enhance efforts to educate the public about party messages and their rights to access accurate information.
9. Expand partnerships with media houses, community organisations, and regulatory bodies to improve transparency and accountability among political parties.

Civil society

1. Using civic education both to disseminate information and to collect feedback that contributes to monitoring efforts.
2. Developing a system informed by needs assessment and stakeholder analysis to track progress.
3. Establishing structured procedures to escalate challenges encountered at different levels.
4. Facilitating cooperation among stakeholders while ensuring roles are clearly defined to avoid redundancy and gaps.
5. Ensuring election-related information is accessible in formats that are relevant to local contexts.
6. Recognising that implementation requires financial, technical, and human resources and being deliberate about securing them.
7. Identifying key stakeholders, their interests, relevance, and potential roles.
8. Creating accessible and inclusive resources based on stakeholder mapping insights.
9. Facilitating cooperation among stakeholders while ensuring roles are clearly defined to avoid redundancy and gaps.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This multistakeholder engagement served as both a consultative process and a capacity-building initiative aimed at strengthening the integrity of electoral processes among electoral stakeholders in Zambia and Malawi. It explored specific challenges and opportunities related to information rights in both countries, as well as the practical applications of AU norms within these contexts. Given the rapidly evolving digital landscape, discussions highlighted the growing influence of social media and digital platforms on electoral processes, particularly their impact on voter education, and various forms of information disorder—namely misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation. Special attention was given to the realities faced by vulnerable and marginalised communities in Zambia and Malawi. This engagement also generated actionable recommendations to assist election stakeholders in integrating information rights into their mandates. A strong emphasis was placed on fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Moving forward, insights shared are expected to shape electoral processes and enhance information accessibility in both countries.