



**AJIS**

African Journal  
of Inclusive Societies

OCTOBER 2024

VOLUME 4

**AFRICA'S QUEST FOR  
INCLUSION: TRENDS  
AND PATTERNS**



# AJIS

African Journal  
of Inclusive Societies

**Volume 4**

DOI: 10.59186/SI.FRLYADTJ

**ISSN 2958-9444**

**<http://si-ajis.org/>**

The African Journal of Inclusive Societies (AJIS) is published by SIVIO Institute and aspires to address the problem of ineffectual participation in public processes by non-state actors in Africa. The journal features independent research and promotes knowledge generation by African scholars by creating a publication space centred on collective action, civil rights, democracy and development in Africa. SIVIO Institute (SI) is an independent organisation focused on ensuring that citizens are at the centre of processes of socio-economic and policy change. It aims to contribute towards Africa's inclusive socio-economic transformation. It is borne out of a desire to enhance agency as a stimulus/catalyst for inclusive political and socio economic transformation.

The **African Journal of Inclusive Societies** is indexed in the following databases and search engines: CrossRef.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Africa's quest for inclusion: Trends and patterns

Belinda R. Chaora 

**Key words:** Inclusion, trend and patterns, social service delivery, markets, trade, socio political spaces

## INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion is a multifaceted concept and is a critical pillar for transformative economic development. Its opposite, social exclusion entails the lack of or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in normal relationships and activities, available to people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political contexts. It affects the quality of life of individuals, the equity and cohesion of society and the lived experiences of citizens (Levitas, Pantazis, Fahmy, Gordon, Lloyd, & Patsios, 2007).

Social inclusion, considers the terms of engagement of individuals and or groups in society, assessing the ability of the system to improve the capability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged based on their identity (World Bank, 2024). The inability of individuals or communities to make meaningful and consistent contributions reflects their exclusion. Exclusion can be based on age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, race, religious beliefs, citizenship, disability, or sexual orientation (World Bank, 2024). There are differing levels of exclusion. When exclusion is deep, it is characterised by a lack of access to one or more domains resulting in severe negative consequences to quality of life, well-being, and future life chances (Levitas et al., 2007).

## INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION, LIVED REALITIES FOR AFRICAN CITIZENS

Africa as a continent has gone through various forms of exclusion. Historically Africa has been a recipient of development models designed outside the continent. Africans and other Global South countries have been excluded from crafting policy and

development models that respond to their deepening challenges of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. There is limited policy autonomy especially when it comes to big development questions that require a global consensus. Fifty-two percent (52%) of Africans face some form of exclusion (Cuesta, Lopez-Noval & Nino-Zarazua, 2022) with vivid examples of segregation observed or experienced in their daily lives. This rate of exclusion is higher than the rest of the world which exhibits approximately 32% exclusion rates. Africans in several different parts of the continent such as Central Africa, West Africa and the Sahel region have experienced regular conflict and climate change disasters with over 40% of the continent being classified as fragile and conflict-ridden (Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal, 2024). Communities are faced with inequality in the form of corruption, hunger, racial or tribal conflict, contested elections, school dropouts due to financial challenges, expensive or unavailable health care, poor access to the internet or electricity and land grabs from corrupt officials and land barons (Atkinson and Hills, 2008; Zulu, 2017). The scale of inequality and therefore exclusion on the continent is high with the top 10% of wealthy individuals accessing 54.3% of resources, the middle class which is 40% accessing 36.9% of resources and the poorest which are 50% of the total population access only 8.8% of all resources (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023). Although the continent has seen high growth rates, the pattern of accumulation disproportionately favours the wealthy rather than reaching the bottom of the pyramid populations (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023). Eleven African countries appear in the list of the world's top 20 unequal countries. These are mostly resource-rich countries such as South Africa, Central African Republic, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Angola and Congo (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023).

Through first- or second-hand accounts, Africans articulate the concept of exclusion and inequality without needing to reference the academic discourse because inequality has been intertwined into our history for hundreds of years. For example, women particularly widows and young girls in varying parts of Africa face discrimination, and harassment, and are denied access propelled by cultural norms and beliefs (Bogain, 2024).

## **Exclusion and Conflict**

Mesfin (2021) proposes that economic exclusion is an important driver of conflict. This assumes that for conflict, unrest, and other political instability to be addressed, the rate of exclusion, poverty and inequality should be prioritised for peaceful and sustainable development. In this volume we considered Africa's quest for inclusion, creating a narrative of the current trends and patterns aiming to understand the level of impact these trends and patterns have on ordinary Africans and indeed for our development goals and agendas.

## **History and African Exclusion**

Our history has been littered with events that have propelled exclusion for many and the inclusion of a few. Colonisation and the scramble for African land which commenced in the 1800s still impact trade and land tenure today allowing the continuance of hegemonic structures perpetuated along racial, tribal and gender lines. In this volume, we considered a broad spectrum of potential sites of contest for inclusion cutting across the major domains found in resource accumulation, level of participation and quality of life. We considered (i) markets (land, housing, labour, and credit); (ii) spaces (political, social, cultural, and physical) and (iii) services such as social welfare (health, education, waste collection and access to modern necessities such as electricity and information).

The concept of inclusion is premised on the notion that there is some form of discrimination whether legal, cultural, or social occurring deliberately or by circumstance. We observed and understood from unpacking varying academic discourse that the contribution (to sustainable development) of those facing discrimination will be curtailed (Levitas et al., 2007; Economic Commission for Africa, 2024; Mesfin, 2021; Krongborg-Bak, 2018; Abdel-Latif, 2024; Bogain, 2024). It is therefore impossible to envision holistic economic participation and equitable development along the lines of Africa's Agenda 2063 when exclusion remains a significant concern for most Africans. By focusing on this aspect, this volume sought to paint a picture of the current levels of inclusion with a particular focus on women, youth and people living with disabilities. The topics in this volume will paint a picture of the levels of exclusion whether it be wide, concentrated or deep through the writing of its various contributors.

## **Access to spaces**

Ideas and ideals of inclusion were central to the quest for liberation of many African countries. The inclusion of the black majority was one of the main agendas that propelled Africans to seek independence from colonial rule. Democracy by its nature is a participatory process requiring the inclusion of all genders and populations to fully succeed. Independent governments introduced constitutions and the process of democratic elections to allow for transitions of power. It must be noted that at least 52 of the continent's 55 countries have amended their constitutions in the last 20 years and are operating on new and/or revised constitutions (Constitute, 2024). These constitutions have largely domesticated regional and international treaties on civil and

political rights (Hatchard, Ndulo and Slinn, 2024). Participation in elections has been historically high at about 70% but has started to waver in recent years as younger voters enter the voting arena but are unmotivated to take part (International IDEA, 2022).

## Human Rights And Good Governance

The Africa Charter on Human and People's Rights has been ratified by 54 African countries with efforts to introduce the rights framework and good governance systems into their constitutions (African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), 2024). Although this is commendable the practice of inclusive democracy is unevenly spread across the continent. There are a number of countries that remain dominated by single parties such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Namibia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (International IDEA, 2022), whilst others are in conflict or have had recent coups namely Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Mali and Zimbabwe (Africa News, 2024).

## Women and Inclusion

There has been some significant progress in ensuring equal or equitable participation of women as voters and their incorporation into leadership in political spaces. As constitutions were modified, African governments accepted the inclusion of women's rights through instruments such as the adoption of the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women](#) (52 African countries), [The Maputo Protocol](#) (43 African countries), [International Labour Organization Conventions](#) (46 African countries) and the [African Charter on Human and People's Rights](#) (49 African countries) (United Nations, 2023b). These conventions and protocols govern the political and economic participation of women and their right to protection and security. Despite these early and commendable

adoptions, concern still exists about the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls, domestic and political violence, female genital mutilation, and child marriages across the continent (International IDEA, 2022). Women's participation in elections is growing with strong strides in some countries like South Africa, Rwanda and Senegal and weak support in others like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Comoros (International IDEA, 2022).

## Youth and Inclusion

The participation of young people in politics must improve. Although there are sufficient frameworks guiding the participation of youth, the policies in place remain focused on rights-based approaches without sufficient enforcement of those policies in political and civic participation and through capacity-building initiatives (Mpungose, 2020). As of 2018, only 22% of African parliamentarians are under the age of 40, and 39% are under the age of 45 yet the total youth population on the continent is close to 70% demonstrating a negative skew towards older representation (Niang, 2019). This skew towards older representation is apparent even amongst populations classified as youth. We discover that youth between ages 26 and 35 are more active in politics than those who are aged 18 to 26 and are therefore more likely to attend community meetings and engage in political processes (International IDEA, 2022). Despite the notable progress made in ratifying international and regional instruments on vulnerable groups the continent still faces the problem of underrepresentation and exclusion of women, youths, and refugees from decision-making roles (International IDEA, 2022).

When we, however, consider inclusion from citizen to citizen without the involvement of the state, a vastly different picture is painted. Murisa (2021) explains that



most Africans do belong to one form of association or another, however, their level of belonging is inclined to social groups (70%) compared to political groups (41%) or economic groups (50%). The lower levels of political participation were notable in countries like Zimbabwe where despair and disappointment in the efficacy of elections to bring power transitions have diminished the levels of citizen trust in the process of democracy and the corresponding election events. However, citizens have found inclusion in religious groups, associations, cooperatives, community clubs and other forms of social formations. They have found ways of working alongside each other to nurture community-based systems of support with or without the involvement of the state.

### **Access to services**

Prior to formalised social welfare systems, African communities relied on kinship networks and extended families to provide social protection (Kalusopa, 2012). At independence, African states relied on and built on existing colonial networks which essentially catered for workers in the public service (Adesina, 2011). The focus of governments has shifted from broader social policy reforms which promote sustainable socio-economic development to narrowly focusing on social protection frameworks with heavy involvement of non-profits and multilateral agencies for their delivery (Adesina, 2011). A sound social policy creates a broader and more sustainable trajectory of development framed around visionary-centred ideals with long-term plans for growth (Adesina, 2011). This shift to social protection has resulted in more straight-jacket approaches on the continent focusing on targeting the poor and vulnerable without an analysis of the primary circumstance creating the vulnerability (Adesina, 2011).

Nevertheless, there has been a notable increase, although still inadequate of delivery and accessibility to social goods and services such as health care, pensions, housing and welfare for vulnerable children and the elderly. Commendably access to education improved tremendously during post-independence years as newly formed governments invested heavily in education fuelled by the desire to address the prior exclusion of non-white communities by colonial governments. Net enrolment rate rose dramatically, for example, a rise from 50% to 68% for the net enrolment rate of girls was experienced between 1990 and 2000 (UNESCO, 2001). However, the challenge African governments are working to overcome requires a lot more investment than what the continent has witnessed. Today education enrolment rate remains a strong area of emphasis for African governments. However, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) still retains the highest rates of exclusion in the education sector globally. Approximately 20% or more of children aged between 6 and 11 years are out of school and 30% plus of youth aged 12 to 14 years are out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Despite this, over 30% of African countries have literacy rates of 75% or higher indicating good progress which needs continued support (UNESCO, 2001).

### **Homelessness, Slums and Housing**

According to Ekpong (2023), Africa has a homeless population of at least 54 million. This is 34% of the world's homeless population. The countries with the highest rate include Nigeria with 24 million, Egypt with 12 million and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 5 million. The main causes of these high figures are conflict, underemployment, and natural calamities. Closely related to this is the need for housing due to natural growth. SSA has the highest rates of urban growth (4.58%) and slum growth (4.53%) in the world (UN-Habitat, 2011). According to UN-Habitat (2020), the

continent is urbanising fast with an estimated 1.3 billion people moving into cities (compared to 470 million at present). It also has the highest proportion of slum dwellers in the world (51.3%) as of 2020 (UN-Habitat, 2020). Governments need to deal with poverty inequality, food insecurity, poor water supply, poor sanitation, climate change and disaster risk reduction on the back of the recent COVID-19 pandemic which caused governments to redirect funding to address the pandemic (UN-Habitat 2020). Currently, housing policies are yet to become sufficiently robust to cater for the large numbers that require new homes. In addition, construction is generally slow, taking approximately 162 days just to obtain a construction permit (World Bank, 2015).

## Child Services and Health Care

Child services on the continent require attention as an estimated 35 million children are without parental care (SOS, 2023). The continent's foster care system is heavily reliant on the work of non-profits with weak intervention by most governments. Abandoned and homeless children automatically become at risk of substance abuse, mental health issues, sexual exploitation, forced labour, trafficking and school dropout (SOS, 2023).

In 2001 AU member states signed the Abuja Declaration and committed to allocating 15% of the annual budget to health care. This was followed by health strategy goals for the continent to achieve by the year 2030 (AHAIC, 2021). It is estimated that more than half the continent struggles to access health care despite the policy commitments by continental governments. At least 15% of the continent's population live 2 or more hours away from a hospital, while 1 in 8 people live more than an hour away from a health centre (Falchetta, Hammad & Shayegh, 2020). Africa

continues to struggle with significant disease burdens including HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis. The recent COVID-19 pandemic placed additional burdens on the healthcare system. Meanwhile, it is estimated that 25.6 million people are living with HIV in Africa with 20,8 million in East and Southern Africa and 4.8 million in West and Central Africa according to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2022). HIV prevalence rates range from 6% to 15 % with some of the worst affected countries being Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

According to the World Health Organization (2024a), there are 200 million cases of Malaria around the globe which result in half a million deaths annually, 90% of the deaths take place in Africa. Tuberculosis (TB) is the second leading cause of death from a single agent with the continent assuming 23% of the world's TB cases and 33% of deaths globally (World Health Organization, 2024a). In 2022, 2.5 million were infected and 424,000 lives were lost in Africa alone (World Health Organization, 2024a)

The continent's population is also generally growing older. Despite earlier shifts in demographics caused by HIV/AIDS, older members of the population are managing to live longer lives with a population older than 65 years likely to reach 67 million in 2025 and 163 million by 2050 according to the World Health Organization (2024b). The older the populations get, the more likely they will suffer from non-communicable diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes which place a heavy burden on the health delivery systems.

In 2018 the African Union adopted [The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities in Africa](#). This charter was introduced to promote the rights of people

living with disabilities (PLWD) to promote, protect and ensure respect for them. For it to become legally binding, 15 member states need to sign and ratify, however as of 2023, only 12 countries in the AU had ratified the protocol. The World Health Organization (2024c) states that approximately 40% of the continent's population is living with some form of disability with 10 to 15% of this group being children of school age. A large proportion of the disabled, 70 to 80% remain unemployed and therefore cannot make meaningful contributions to the development of their communities and nations (Dugbazah, Glover, Mbuli, Kungade, 2021).

## Migration

The continent has a migration challenge demonstrated by the 40 million Africans who are currently displaced and living as refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced persons (African Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023). It is interesting to note that 96% of those who are displaced remain on the continent meaning the burden of refugees is largely borne by African governments more than by other nations as implied in mainstream media. Yet refugees are rarely in focus when development agendas are addressed whether on the continent or in other countries (Betts, Omata, Siu and Sterck, 2023). There is still significant work required for people living with disabilities and their access to social services. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 7% of people have access to related disability benefits (Bridging the Gap, undated).

Largely the continent has neglected a focus on transformative social policy with an emphasis on social protection resulting in a significant dependency on the work of non-profits and multilateral agencies deepening poverty and inequality and stripping communities of their social assets (Adesina, 2011).

## Access to markets

Africa has natural resources and rich environments such as productive land, water, forestry, fisheries and nonrenewable resources like minerals, oil, gas, and coal. It is home to 30% of the world's mineral reserves, 8% of the world's natural gas, 12% of the world's oil reserves, 40% of the world's gold, 90% of the world's platinum and uranium and 65% of the world's arable land providing raw materials to many of the world's industries (United Nations, 2023; Economic Commission for Africa, 2024). African exports have allowed the continent to become a major participant in global supply chains for several industries namely agriculture, mining, automotive, technology for electronics (mobile phones, computers), renewable energy and healthcare (United Nations, 2023). Agriculture, mining, and trade of natural resources dominate national economies and are central to the livelihoods of the poor rural majority (Moti, 2019). Over 70% of SSA's population depends on forests and woodlands for their livelihoods (United Nations, 2023). Despite producing large revenues for governments, the resources paradoxically lead to economic stagnation, waste build-up, decaying infrastructure, and political instability fueled by corruption. Ill-conceived development policies fuel stagnation and therefore limited growth (African Bank, 2007). The 54 countries in Africa combined account for 2.6% of world trade. This figure drops to 0.8% when manufactured goods are considered (UN Comtrade, 2024).

The share of manufactured goods in total exports is only 34% for African countries compared to 83% for East Asia, 68% for South Asia, 45% for Latin America and 70% for the world average (UN Comtrade, 2024).

The continent historically found it easier to trade with other continents than to trade within its borders. The introduction of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in January 2021 will potentially increase trade within the continent by improving access to regional markets with the downstream impact of strengthening production capacity and domestic manufacturing industries in partnering countries. This process will likely improve the contribution that Africa is making to regional and global markets not only to trade for goods but also to create a single market for access to air transport, information and communication, energy infrastructure and financing arrangements (Economic Commission for Africa, 2024).

A key driver of growth and economic inclusion in Africa has been advances in technology following the introduction of mobile phone technology and the internet at the turn of the century. As technology was advancing many African governments were simultaneously introducing financial inclusion policies in efforts to improve the level of access that populations have to credit, pensions, savings accounts, and other banking services and therefore improve their level of resilience against economic shock. Mobile technology has been a significant driver of financial inclusion on the continent pushing rates of inclusion as high as 70% in some countries. Chaora, (2024) notes that advances in internet access have significantly improved the level of access that micro, small and medium enterprises in some countries have to financial products and services however exclusion remains. Exclusion is still evident where communities have limited access to the internet, electricity, information, and older/outdated electronic devices. Language barriers and locations of communities also affect their ability to tap into the financial

inclusion revolution that has aided other parts of the continent to gain access to financial services. The vast majority (approximately 60%) of businesses on the continent are informal and fall into the category of micro, small or medium-sized enterprises. Their informality (lack of formal registration) however is a significant reason for exclusion limiting their access to formal financial products and services (Chaora, 2024).

## OVERVIEW OF VOLUME 4: INCLUSION TRENDS AND PATTERNS

This volume of the African Journal of Inclusive Societies, focusing on inclusion trends and patterns, dwells heavily on the spaces (political, economic, and cultural spaces) dimension with minor contributions to the services and markets dimensions.

### The Impact of Digital Finance on Financial Inclusion In Zimbabwe

Mutale and Shumba in their article entitled *The Impact of Digital Finance on Financial Inclusion*, explain how digital finance, notably mobile money and digital banking services have increased access to financial services in Zimbabwe. The authors adopt a quantitative approach utilising econometric models to measure the impact of digital finance proxied using automated teller machine data in Zimbabwe. They explain how digital banking has improved the rate of financial inclusion for poor and vulnerable communities with significant advantages for cost saving, time saving with fast transaction speeds all the while improving security for the user. They however emphasise the potential disadvantages created by limited internet access, especially in poor and remote communities where the cost and quality of data create exclusion and understanding of technology is limited to a few. Their

contribution includes potential policy changes to promote digital and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

### **Economic Inclusion in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Reform in Zimbabwe**

Siambombe's *Economic Inclusion in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Reform in Zimbabwe* investigates the opportunities and challenges with policy reform in Zimbabwe emphasising economic inclusion. Siambombe using thematic analysis, reviews the efforts by the Zimbabwean government to curb inflation, stabilise the currency and promote economic growth with interventions such as the introduction of a multicurrency system, introduction of new taxes, reforming state-owned enterprises, improving agricultural productivity, and reframing the current land policy. Siambombe uses the theory of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach as frameworks of analysis. The inclusive growth approach assumes that sustainable and inclusive growth must be broad-based touching all sectors and segments of society whilst the capabilities approach explains that for inclusive growth to be a sure process, members of society must have their capabilities expanded through education, access to health care and social protection. The author examines how efforts to promote economic progress, and economic inclusion can become a catalyst for equitable access to resources and opportunities for understanding. The paper demonstrates how economic inclusion is affected by social, political, and economic factors. The paper further explores interlinks between policies and their role in promoting market access. The author tries to demonstrate the effectiveness of social safety nets in the analysis and raises the importance of political consensus in working towards inclusion. According to the author, the lack of robust

institutions and political consensus has in many ways halted the efforts for economic recovery.

### **An Analysis of the Role of Disinformation In Elections**

Sivalo expounds on an intersection of services and spaces (information and politics) dimension by giving an overview of information and disinformation and their effects on inclusion. The article explains how disinformation impacts democratic processes, entrenching existing divisions whilst increasing public distrust in independent institutions. The author argues that credible news and information are critical for democratic societies. Disinformation on the other hand poses a challenge to liberal democracy affecting the very fabric of the deliberative and decision-making processes and changing the quality of decisions made by citizens at the voting booth. The author explains that disinformation has always been present but in recent years it has been accelerated by advances in technology and changes to the way information flows using social media and digital platforms. Sivalo's primary source of focus is electoral disinformation in national and by-elections during the 2023 election process in Zimbabwe through an analysis of a project by the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) to train citizens on how to identify, flag and combat disinformation. Sivalo's article shows that different strategies for truthful information dissemination are required to capture the unique situations of citizens during elections and beyond. Some of these unique situations could include varying levels of education, different locations, different languages, or access to data where information is in digital form.

The remainder of the contributors focused on the political and social dimensions.

## Unveiling Layers of Inclusion in Political Spaces

Sisimayi, Muzorewa and Muperi in *Unveiling Layers of Inclusion in Political Spaces: A Multidimensional Exploration of Inclusion in Zimbabwe* explore the intricate dimensions of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political spaces. Their article is informed by the concept of intersectionality which aims to uncover the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system in Zimbabwe. The study explores how factors such as community empowerment, digital access and intersectionality influence the political inclusion of underrepresented groups in the country. The intersectionality approach critiques the view of gender, race ethnicity or other factors as independent identities but rather sees these as interconnected and influencing each other. They argue that gender does not operate independently from race or geographic location but rather each one builds on the other, deepening the level of exclusion that an individual falling into multiple vulnerable groups may face. Sisimayi, Muzorewa and Mupeti explain this concept by unpacking the exclusion of women, youth and people living with disabilities from politics in Zimbabwe due to financial constraints, male domination, sexualisation of politics, restrictive cultural roles, remote location, lack of resourcing and low levels of education. They explain that although technology has provided new opportunities for expression and participation through digital platforms, the negative attitudes in the country's political space have also moved into these new digital spaces. The authors highlight the important role that financial resources play when attempting to access the internet for people in marginalised areas where connectivity is poor and infrastructure to support internet access is weak.

## Institutionalising Inclusion: A Study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's Role in the 2018 Elections

Bandama's *Institutionalising Inclusion: A Study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's Role in the 2018 Elections* discusses the importance of inclusion within the electoral process as pivotal for a democratic society. The author places Election Management Bodies (EMBs) at the centre of the process. Their role is to ensure all citizens can participate in the election process regardless of background. Bandama posits that where election standards have been set, one can establish levels of inclusion or exclusion of key groups of concern such as women, youth and people living with disabilities. Because of the ability of EMBs to enforce practices legally, an electoral commission has the strength and capacity to ensure inclusion or exclusion. Bandama explains how EMBs facilitate or hinder inclusion through their administrative practices. He uses the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) as a reference with a treatise on the 2018 election examining their performance against predetermined benchmarks for election supervision. He examines the role of the commission in fostering inclusion by establishing standards, parameters procedures and certainty regarding the voting process in addition to removing any bias associated with the quality and accessibility of the voters' roll. Bandama demonstrates through a historiography of ZEC's formation how exclusion practices carried over from Zimbabwe's colonial past may affect voter processes today.

## The Zimbabwe Political Space: An Analysis of the Barriers to Women's Participation in Electoral Processes

Mutizwa's article, *The Zimbabwe Political Space: An Analysis of the Barriers to Women's Participation in Electoral Processes* discusses women's participation, inclusion and exclusion in politics. Mutizwa brings to the fore questions about the role of women as candidates or leaders in the political process noting a steady decline in their involvement since the 2013 elections held in Zimbabwe. The article seeks to understand the interlinkage between economic, social physical and cultural paces within the electoral process in addition to exploring the social inclusion factors affecting political spaces. The article draws on content from the project preventing violence against women in politics, detailing specific hindrances to female participation in elections. This article gives some examples of the toxicity of the election playing field in Zimbabwe. Mutizwa explains how women who have previously achieved political influence have had some form of advantage whether by affiliation or relation, leaving new entrants into the field with many obstacles including sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Notable incidents which have taken place in Zimbabwe are discussed in detail such as incidents involving sexual harassment, assault, sexist slurs, threats, intimidation, public shaming, unlawful arrests, and abduction with specific examples from the Zimbabwean context including excerpts from interviews with women in politics. Mutizwa highlights challenges such as the way political parties are structured, and the challenges raised by cultural and traditional norms. Like Bandama, the author proposes a penalty for non-compliance to election candidate female quotas by political parties as a way of increasing the presence of female candidates as one of the policy measures for redress.

## Zimbabwe's Economic Challenges Beyond Sanctions

Siambombe's *Zimbabwe's Economic Challenges Beyond Sanctions* challenges the narrative put forward by the Zimbabwean government, that economic sanctions are solely to blame for Zimbabwe's economic troubles. The findings reveal that although sanctions do have a role to play, the economic crisis is significantly affected by colonial legacies, corruption, institutional failures, maladministration, and regional and international dynamics that have undermined Zimbabwe's economic potential and performance. The writer uses a mixed methods approach to outline how the ruling party government has failed to implement meaningful economic reforms to address the country's structural problems and improve its development outcomes in light of regional and global changes. Siambombe explains the challenges the government is experiencing as it navigates regional tensions with bordering countries caused by trade disputes, border conflicts, mass migration tensions and water sharing. Over and above the regional challenges Zimbabwe is still struggling with its international reengagement plan. The writer uses a political economy framework to assess the role sanctions have played and are playing on the country's development. The article makes recommendations for political, economic, and social reforms, and regional and international cooperation including a reframing of its treatment of elections, how to handle the country's debt crisis, expanding the manufacturing sector and investment into human and capital.

## **Harnessing the Diaspora Advantage: Building Knowledge Democracy and Inclusive Growth**

Garwe and Thondlana in their article *Harnessing the Diaspora Advantage: Building Knowledge Democracy and Inclusive Growth in Africa* explores the lived realities of Africans in the diaspora. The authors discuss the lived emotions of Africans as they face exclusion from taking part in the development agendas of both their host and home countries. They use the coloniality framework (exploring, race gender and class) to understand the power structure, knowledge and hierarchies that continue to shape modern African societies despite an end to colonial administration. Garwe and Thondlana explain how emigration from Africa was previously perceived as a brain drain but has now shifted to a more positive mindset understanding the potential for contribution to the development discourse of home countries. The article explains how current engagement initiatives through associations, philanthropic activities and different forms of capacity building create a potential for sustainable alignment of diaspora populations within home or host countries. The writers expound on reasons why migrants try to make contributions to their home countries, and the challenges they face in doing so including corruption, minimal trust in institutions, stigma attached to foreign involvement and scrutiny of diaspora endeavours by home governments. They also explain the challenges faced by migrants in host countries such as non-recognition of qualifications, cultural adjustment challenges, and discriminatory practices. The pair put forward potential engagement options to ensure knowledge sharing and participation to promote a culture that capitalises on Africans in global environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contributors of this volume paint broad pictures of inclusion amidst ongoing exclusion with special emphasis on Zimbabwe. The chapter on the African diaspora, however, gives a global picture of the challenges that many African migrants, refugees and internally displaced within and outside the continent face. Although many contributors based their work on Zimbabwe, we can infer the collective trends occurring in other Sub-Saharan countries with similar development trajectories. Through this volume, we can ascertain a picture of the level of inclusion in the political, economic, and social dimensions paying particular attention to the involvement of women, youth and people living with disabilities to understand their level of access to political, economic, and social collateral.

The volume contains several policy recommendations for promoting improved and equitable access to information, power, financial and community resources. Governments taking note of the recommendations can easily find ways to improve levels of citizen inclusion with a corresponding increase in citizen participation to achieve development goals.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.QRTY5NM3>

# Impact of digital finance on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This study looks at how digital finance affects financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. There has been a noticeable change in Zimbabwe's financial services sector with the introduction of digital technology, especially mobile money and digital banking services. The present study investigates the ways in which digital finance initiatives have facilitated the expansion of financial services accessibility, the advancement of financial literacy, and the promotion of economic empowerment among marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. This study offers insights into the potential obstacles related to digital finance in achieving financial inclusion objectives in Zimbabwe through an extensive analysis of current research and empirical data.

**Key words:** Digital finance, financial inclusion, mobile money, digital banking, Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

Access to financial services is vital for poverty reduction and economic growth. Financial inclusion entails ensuring individuals and businesses have access to affordable financial products and services, including transactions, savings, credit, and insurance, delivered sustainably (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2022). It

“ is defined as maximising access to and use of formal financial services while minimising barriers perceived by those outside the formal financial system (Cámara, Tuesta, & Vadillo, 2014, p. 1).

Financial inclusion fosters economic growth (Kim, Lee, & Newby, 2017) and resource mobilisation by promoting savings (Allen, Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, & Peria, 2012). However, globally, 65% of adults in developing nations lack access even to basic transaction accounts, let alone other services like savings, insurance, and credit (World Bank, 2020).

Digital financial services, driven by fintech, have the potential to lower costs, enhance transaction speed, security, and transparency, and offer tailored financial services, particularly benefiting the poor. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of fintech in maintaining financial systems and ensuring safety during times of social distancing and economic uncertainty (World Bank, 2020). Despite the rapid growth in mobile phone and internet usage globally, over 2 billion people still lack internet access, and a third of the global population doesn't own a mobile phone (Hernandez, 2019).

However, there's a concern that a shift towards digital banking could exacerbate financial exclusion, particularly among low-income and technologically disadvantaged individuals (Ozili, 2017). The way digital

finance is introduced in a country, voluntarily or forcibly, can also lead to voluntary financial exclusion if the population is not prepared for it. Hence, this study aims to explore the impact of digital finance on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

Financial inclusion has garnered significant attention since the early 2000s, with countries prioritising providing financial services to the previously unbanked population (Hanning & Jansen, 2008). The United Nations declared 2005 the International Year of Microcredit, highlighting the importance of financial inclusion (Siddik, Kabir, & Marathe, 2014). Over the past decade, there has been a global policy shift towards promoting greater access to finance, with key development institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), African Development Bank (AfDB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) dedicating substantial resources to understanding and promoting financial inclusion. Financial inclusion benefits include freedom from informal lenders, promoting economic growth and formalisation, poverty reduction, and financial stability (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe [RBZ], 2022).

In 2017, nearly 1.7 billion adults worldwide (31% of the adult population) lacked access to financial institutions or mobile money providers. The majority of the unbanked were women and came from the poorest households (World Bank, 2022). In high-income OECD countries, only 6% of adults lack access to financial services, whereas in developing countries, about 80% of adults are financially excluded, with Sub-Saharan Africa having particularly high exclusion rates (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2015).

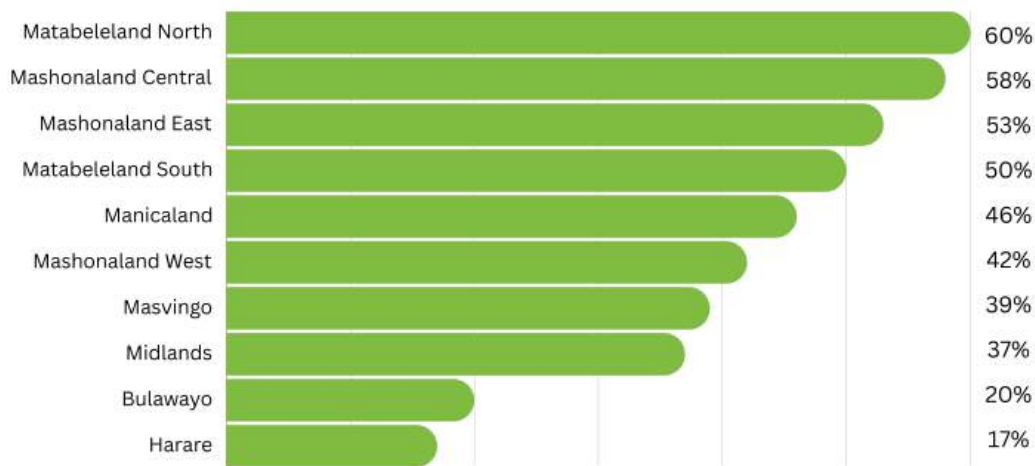
In Zimbabwe, 40% of adults do not have a bank account, and a significant portion

relies on informal or non-formal financial services. Rural areas have the highest rates of financial exclusion, attributed to low income, cultural factors, and financial illiteracy (Mhlanha, 2021; Simbanegavi & Chivasa, 2016). Harare and Bulawayo urban areas exhibit lower rates of financial exclusion due to higher income levels, better financial literacy, and greater accessibility to financial institutions (Simbanegavi & Chivasa, 2016).

In Zimbabwe, the Reserve Bank promotes mobile money interoperability to drive financial inclusion, with digitisation playing a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic (RBZ, 2022). The Reserve Bank of

Zimbabwe (RBZ) has recognised the importance of financial inclusion and implemented the National Financial Strategy (NFIS) to drive inclusion. NFIS I focused on various themes, including improving access for women, youth, and people with disabilities, enhancing Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) access, promoting digital financial services, and improving microfinance (RBZ, 2020). NFIS II is currently being developed based on evidence from surveys conducted to assess the effectiveness of NFIS I strategies and to set targets for financial inclusion (RBZ, 2022). Figure 1 below shows financial exclusion in Zimbabwe.

### Exclusion in Zimbabwe



**Figure 1: Financial exclusion by province in Zimbabwe**

Source: Simbanegavi & Chivasa, (2016) *Zimbabwe National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2016)*, Mhlanga, (2020a).

The Figure 1 above shows that financial exclusion is largely concentrated in rural areas and the current status of Zimbabwe's financial sector does not seem to be promoting financial inclusion. Provinces such as Matabeleland North (60%), Mashonaland Central (58%), and Matabeleland South (53%) exhibit the highest rates of exclusion. These areas are predominantly rural, with limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunities, which contributes to elevated exclusion levels.

Urban centres like Harare (17%) and Bulawayo (20%) report the lowest exclusion rates, likely due to improved access to resources and services commonly found in urban settings. This distribution underscores the contrast between rural and urban regions, with rural provinces experiencing greater challenges related to exclusion, influenced by factors such as geographical isolation and underdeveloped infrastructure.

Empirical evidence indicates that financially inclusive economies tend to record economic growth and a significant reduction in poverty (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Levine, 2007). However, the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region has the greatest proportion of population living in extreme poverty. It is the only region which has been recording an increase in poverty over the past two decades, with the poor getting worse-off compared to other world regions (Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, 2007; Simmons, 2015).

Access to financial services remains challenging for vulnerable groups worldwide, including low-income earners and the unemployed. These groups often face exclusion from the financial sector as institutions close branches in remote areas due to viability challenges (Mayo, Shaw, & Zhang, 1998). Kofi Annan emphasised the need to build inclusive financial sectors to uplift the poor (Agarwal, 2010, p. 2).

Despite efforts, poverty and inequality persist, prompting sustainable development initiatives prioritised by the United Nations (Arner, Barberis, & Buckley, 2020, p. 123). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines strategies toward peace, prosperity, and growth for all (United Nations, 2015, p. 15). Financial exclusion exacerbates deprivation, denying individuals appropriate access to financial services (Carbo, Gardener, & Molyneux, 2007, p. 98). In 2017, 31% of the global population lacked access to formal financial institutions, with 9% unbanked in the European Union (Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, Singer, Ansar, & Hess, 2018, p. 45).

Agufa (2016, p. 45) contends that digital finance in Kenya's banking sector lacks correlation with financial inclusion. Banks adopt digital services primarily to cut costs

and enhance profitability, not to promote inclusion. The study reveals an insignificant negative relationship between agency, mobile, and internet banking with financial inclusion. Ozili (2018, p. 78) argues that digital finance by Fintech providers fosters financial inclusion in both emerging and advanced economies, especially for individuals with irregular incomes who find convenience more valuable than the higher costs associated with traditional banking. Kandpal and Mehrotra (2019, p. 92) suggest that customer confidence in traditional banking may hinder the adoption of new technologies, emphasising the importance of privacy and security in technological advancements. Durai (2019, p. 56) highlights the positive impacts of usability, convenience, and low service charges on mobile banking, mobile wallets, and credit cards, underscoring the significance of digital finance in enhancing financial inclusion. This study aims to evaluate the influence of digital financial innovation on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe, recognising the potential of these services to reach previously marginalised populations.

The rise of digital finance and FinTech offers hope for enhancing financial inclusion. These innovations transform the traditional financial sector into a more digital-driven one (Gomber, Koch, & Siering, 2017, p. 50). With 87% of the EU population already using digital payments and 47% accessing financial services via mobile or internet, digital finance and FinTech have the potential to broaden financial access and reduce barriers (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

Digital innovations contribute to economic growth by bridging geographic distances and enhancing productivity through improved communication (Deloitte, 2007, p. 56; Chimhowu, Hulme, & Mkandawire, 2010, p. 224). Despite the potential benefits, some

studies question the correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion (Agufa, 2016). However, others emphasise its positive impact, particularly in emerging economies (Ozili, 2018). Building customer confidence in traditional banking systems remains crucial for successful technology adoption (Kandpal & Mehrotra, 2019). Meanwhile, factors like usability and convenience drive the adoption of digital finance services (Durai, 2019). This study aims to explore the impact of digital financial innovation on financial inclusion, contributing to efforts to create more inclusive financial systems.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative research design utilising econometric modelling. Quantitative methods were chosen for their ability to systematically collect, analyse, and interpret secondary time series data, which is essential for explanatory purposes in research (Creswell, 2003). The study focused on analysing time series data from 2000 to 2020, employing the fully modified ordinary least squares (FMOLS) method along with cointegration techniques to explore relationships over time.

The secondary data for the study was collected from established economic databases and statistical sources, ensuring reliability and validity in the analysis. Sampling methods were not applicable in the traditional sense since the study utilised existing datasets rather than collecting new data from a specific population or sample.

It's important to note that while the study had access to comprehensive secondary data sources, certain specific sources were unavailable, potentially impacting the comprehensiveness of the findings. This transparency is crucial for assessing the

credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions.

## Digital finance and financial inclusion model

The model assessed the impact of digital finance, specifically using automated teller machines (ATMs), as a proxy on financial inclusion. The selection of ATMs as a proxy for digital finance was based on their widespread adoption and influence in facilitating financial transactions globally. ATMs are a tangible indicator of digital financial infrastructure, enabling access to banking services in both urban and rural areas.

In addition to ATMs, the model included control variables such as gross domestic product (GDP), remittances, and broad money. These variables were chosen to capture broader economic and financial factors that could potentially influence the relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion. GDP reflects overall economic activity, remittances represent external financial flows, and broad money measures the total money supply within an economy.

While indicators like the number and value of mobile money transactions could also be valuable metrics for assessing digital finance's impact on financial inclusion, ATMs were specifically chosen due to their established role in traditional banking infrastructure and their accessibility across different regions. Future research could explore additional indicators to provide a more comprehensive analysis of digital finance's effects on financial inclusion, considering evolving technologies and consumer behaviours in financial services.



$$LFI_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 LATM_{it} + \beta_2 LGDP_{it} + \beta_3 RT_{it} + \beta_4 LBM_{sit} + \epsilon_{it}$$

- $\alpha$  – the constant term;
- $\beta$  – the coefficient of the function;
- $\epsilon_{it}$  – the disturbance or error term (assumed to have zero mean and independent across the time period);
- LFI** – Financial inclusion;
- LATM** – Automated teller machines;
- LGDP** – Gross domestic product;
- LBM** – Financial development (Broad money);
- RT** – Remittances

## Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics on financial inclusion, digital finance (ATM), GDP, remittance and broad money.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values. From the descriptive statistics it can be deduced that there is less variation between the mean and the median, standard deviation values are minimal and the Jarque- Bera statistics indicates that the data its normally distributed.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

	LFI	LBM	LATM	LGDP	RT
Mean	1.364709	3.336929	1.805997	4.775232	5.533615
Median	2.890429	3.166506	1.856298	4.540463	5.443556
Maximum	3.291918	5.020909	2.071913	8.785335	13.61145
Minimum	-1.930708	2.658987	1.413423	4.043258	0.004048
Std. Dev	2.115544	0.542536	0.202844	0.1101993	5.263840
Skewedness	-0.530329	1.628070	-0.520035	2.759088	0.108320
Kurtosis	1.460668	5.619260	1.908950	9.980748	1.349117
Jaque-Bera	3.057719	15.28010	1.988117	69.28346	2.425804
Probability	0.216783	0.000481	0.370072	0.000000	0.297333
Sum	28.65888	70.07552	37.92594	100.2799	116.2059
Sum Sq. Dev	89.51052	5.886910	0.822912	24.28775	554.1602
Observations	21	21	21	21	21

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## Diagnostic test

Before conducting the main regression, the researcher did some diagnostic tests and these include: Unit Root Test (Augmented Dickey Fuller), Co-integration test, Autocorrelation Test and Multicollinearity test.

## Normality test

Figure 2 below shows the normal distributions for the residuals. The Jarque-Bera probability value of 0.182910 is greater than 0.05, therefore we may fail to reject the null hypothesis that errors are normally distributed. This therefore means the errors are normally distributed with a mean zero and a constant variance.

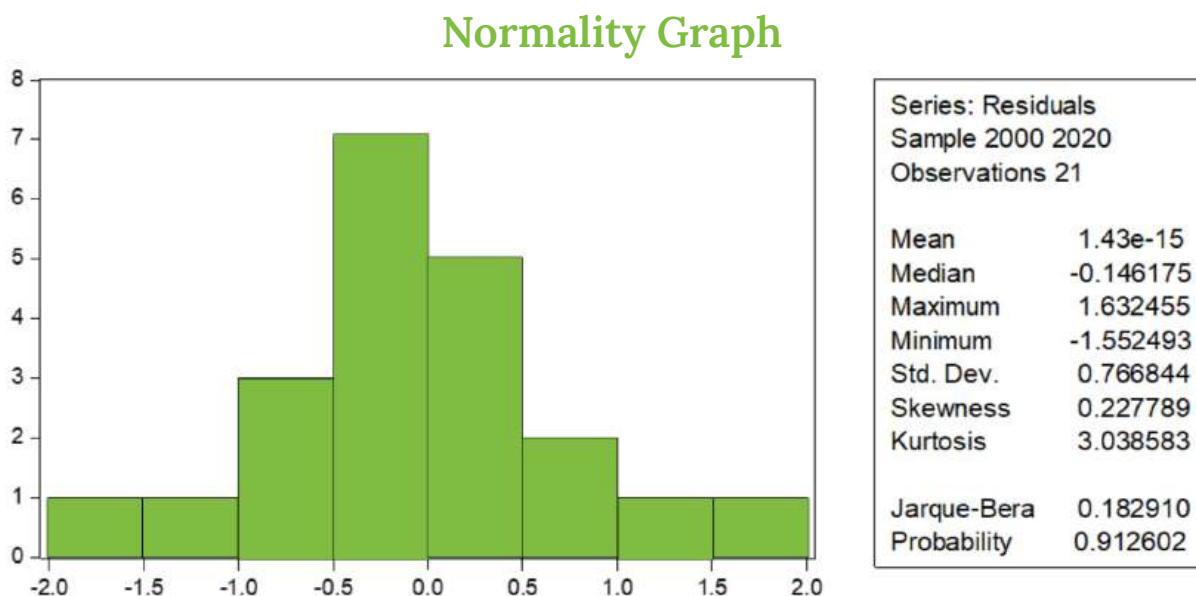


Figure 2: Normality graph

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## Unit root test

This study utilised the Augmented Dickey Fuller test to assess variable stationarity. Gujarati (2004) indicates rejection of the unit root null hypothesis when the ADF statistic exceeds the critical value at different significance levels.

From the Table 2 below, the results suggest that all the variables are not stationary at level. LBM, LATM and RT are stationary at first difference at intercept. However, all the variables are stationary at second difference at both intercept and at intercept and trend.

**Table 2: Unit root test**

Variable	Level		First Difference		Second Difference	
	Intercept	Intercept and Trend	Intercept	Intercept and Trend	Intercept	Intercept and Trend
LFI	0.3851	0.6684	0.4480	0.5965	0.0081	0.00334
LATM	0.0800	0.2823	0.0446	0.1364	0.0004	0.0025
LBM	0.2300	0.4056	0.0032	0.0154	0.0015	0.0096
LGDP	1.0	0.3706	0.4761	0.9972	0.0832	0.0985
RT	0.5242	0.8032	0.0040	0.0177	0.0000	0.0001

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

**Table 3: Unit root test**

Variable	ADF Statistics	Test Critical Value	P-Value	Order of Integration
LFI	-3.963301***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0081	I(2)
LATM	-5.505888***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0004	I(2)
LBM	-4.841801***	1% -3.886751 5% -3.052169 10% -2.666593	0.0015	I(2)
LGDP	-2.764356*	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0832	I(1)
RT	-7.483253***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0000	I(1)
RESID	-5.5666101***	1% -4.004425 5% -3.098896 10% -2.690439	0.0007	I(1)

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

The results from the table 3 above show that all the variables are stationary at second difference with order of integration I(2) at all significant levels that is 1%, 5%

and 10% respectively as indicated by the three asterisks except LGDP which is stationary at first difference at 10% significance level.

## Co-integration results

The co-integration test was done in order to circumvent the problem of spurious results. This was done by conducting a unit root test for residuals generated. The results for model one revealed that residuals are stationary after second differencing which signifies that there is a long run relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion since the ADF statistic 5.5666101 is greater than the critical value at all levels of significance: 1%, 5% and 10% (see table 3).

## Autocorrelation

The Durbin-Watson (DW) statistic was utilised by this study to determine whether the model is safe from a first order serial correlation. In OLS if it is present this will overestimate R squared and simultaneously makes t and F tests invalid hence likely to lead to spurious results. This is the case when R squared is significantly greater than DW. The null hypothesis is stated as: there is no autocorrelation against the alternative of autocorrelation among residuals. The LM test results show a DW value of 1.914167 which falls within the rejection region of the null hypothesis.

The above mentioned DW statistics results is greater than 1.5 as a rule of thumb, and also the p- values are significantly large and greater than 0.05 showing the evidence of no serial autocorrelation among the residuals and hence we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

## Multi-collinearity

This is the presence of a linear relationship among the explanatory variables. As a result of the stochastic nature of most explanatory variables correlation and interrelationships might exist. It has the effect of making equation indeterminate. When multi-collinearity is there the remedy is to drop the variable. Table 4 below shows the zero-order correlation co-efficient of explanatory variable.

Table 4 shows that the pair-wise correlation co-efficient for all the independent variables is less than 0.8, as a rule of thumb, with the exception of RT and LFI. It can therefore be concluded that multi-collinearity is not severe since it is less than 0.8. Therefore, the explanatory variables do not exhibit serious correlation or relationships amongst them. This means that there is no linear relationship among the explanatory variables and it is easy to establish the influence of each one variable on the dependent variable.

**Table 4: Correlation matrix (explanatory variables)**

	LFI	LBM	LATM	LGDP	RT
LFI	1.000000	-0.448822	0.161322	0.465551	0.863241
LBM	-0.448822	1.000000	0.380701	-0.312840	-0.550762
LATM	0.161322	0.380701	1.000000	0.092864	-0.112803
LGDP	0.465551	-0.312840	0.092864	1.000000	0.239739
RT	0.863241	-0.550762	-0.112803	0.239739	1.000000

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

The strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables was measured by performing a correlation matrix. The correlation test shows a positive relationship of 0.161322 between financial inclusion (LFI) and digital finance (LATM). GDP positively correlated to financial inclusion with 0.465551. Broad money (LBM) is negatively correlated with financial inclusion with a coefficient of 0.448822 and finally remittances (RT) is positively correlated with financial inclusion with a coefficient of 0.863241.

To this end, the researcher adopted the do-nothing school of thought as expressed by Blanchard (1967) in Gujarati (2004). This means that there is no linear relationship among the explanatory variables and it is easy to establish the influence of each one variable on the dependent variable, financial inclusion separately. The strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables was measured by performing a correlation matrix.

### Heteroskedasticity

The Bruesch-Pagan Godfrey Test probability value of 0.2993 is greater than the significance level of 0.05. This therefore implies that the errors are homoscedastic and that we may fail to reject the null hypothesis that the errors are homoscedastic.

## REGRESSION RESULTS

The researcher regressed time series data as per the model specified. The regression results are presented in table 5.

Significance and fitness of the whole model is revealed by the F-statistic and the explanatory power predictability capacity of the independent variables shown by R squared (the coefficient of determination). The table 5 above shows model one regression results, the R-squared is 0.838641 thereby showing that about 84% of variations in financial inclusion are explained by the combined variations in the explanatory variables. However, the R-squared statistic cannot really exhibit a true explanation that variations in financial inclusion are explained by combined variations in explanatory variables mainly because when we increase the number of explanatory variables R-squared value will continue to go up even if we add unrelated explanatory variables hence there is need to consider the adjusted R-squared. The adjusted R-squared is at 0.795613 thereby showing that indeed about 80% of variations in financial inclusion are explained by combined variations in the explanatory variables used in this study and the remaining 20% can be credited to other stochastic factors. Since the adjusted R-squared is close to R-squared, we may conclude that the model is a good fit since more than half of the variations in the dependent variable are explained within the model.

It can be deduced from the regression results that LATM, LGDP and RT are significant. LATM a proxy for digital finance exhibits (with a coefficient of 3.116906) a positive strong significant relationship with financial inclusion. This means that a unit increase in digital finance will result to 3.116906 increase in financial inclusion. Meanwhile, a unit increase in gross domestic product proxied by LGDP will result in 0.464005 increase in financial inclusion (LFI). Furthermore, remittances (RT) show a positive relationship with financial inclusion (LFI) and thus a unit increase in remittances will result in 0.369439 increase in financial inclusion.

On the other hand, broad money (LBM) a proxy for financial development depicted a positive relationship with financial inclusion and it's highly insignificant and thus a unit increase in financial development (broad money) will result in 0.039869 insignificant increase in financial inclusion. The significance of variables is measured by the t-statistic values and the P values. A variable is said to be significant if its absolute t-statistic is greater than two or a neighbour of 2 and/or if its p-value is less than 0.05. From the results

three variables are significant in explaining variation in financial inclusion in Zimbabwe for the period 2000 to 2020, that is, digital finance (LATM), GDP and remittances. Digital finance (LATM), gross domestic product (LGDP) and remittance (RT) have t-statistics greater than 2 and p-values less than 0.05 respectively. The focus of the study is on the coefficient of the proxy of digital finance (LATM) which reflects a positive and significant relationship with financial inclusion.

**Table 5: Regression results - fully modified least squares**

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	T-Statistic	Probability	
LBM	0.039869	0.319012	0.124978	0.9022	
LATM	3.116906	0.793673	3.927193	0.0013	*
LGDP	0.464005	0.125435	3.699161	0.0021	*
RT	0.369439	0.030092	12.27715	0.0000	*
C	-8.672733	1.613921	-5.373704	0.0001	
<b>Significant</b>	1%*	5% **	10%***		
<b>R-Squared</b>	0.838641	<b>Mean Dependent Var</b>		1.529479	
<b>Adjusted R-Squared</b>	0.795613	<b>S.D. Dependent Var</b>		2.027544	
<b>S.E of Regression</b>	0.916637	<b>Sum Squared Resid</b>		12.60335	
<b>Long Run Variance</b>	-0.323410				

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## DISCUSSION

The study utilised the Cointegration technique to analyse the relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2020. The findings indicate a positive association between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion. Specifically, a unit increase in digital financial innovation corresponds to approximately a 3.116906 unit increase in financial inclusion. This aligns with expectations and is supported by similar research. Borges (2020) examined the impact of digital financial services on financial inclusion in Mozambique, finding a positive relationship using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model. The study differentiated between traditional and innovative digital payment methods, concluding that innovative methods contribute significantly to financial inclusion.

Ozili (2018) corroborates these findings, suggesting that digital finance, particularly through fintech providers, enhances financial inclusion and stability in both emerging and advanced economies. This is attributed to the convenience digital finance offers, especially to individuals with low and variable incomes. Similarly, Widarwati, Solihin, and Nurmalasari (2022) found a positive impact of digital finance, measured by Average Digital Finance (ADF), on financial inclusion in Indonesia. They emphasise the necessity of digital finance breakthroughs to optimise financial assistance and improve inclusion, highlighting the role of technological support.

Andrianaivo and Kpodar (2012) established a significant positive relationship between mobile phone penetration and financial inclusion, emphasising the role of mobile technology in providing cost-effective financial services to the underserved.

Domeher et al. (2022) further support this, identifying a positive nexus between financial innovation and inclusion. Additional studies by Durai and Stella (2019), Han and Du (2021), and Mutua (2018) also confirm the positive relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion. However, some dissenting voices, like Agufa (2016), argue that digital financial innovations primarily aim to reduce operational costs and improve profitability, rather than foster inclusion.

Generally, the collective body of research suggests a strong positive correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion. While dissenting opinions exist, the majority of studies support the notion that digital financial innovation plays a pivotal role in enhancing access to and usage of financial services, ultimately leading to greater financial inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Given the findings of this research, the following conclusions can be drawn:

### **The relationship between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion**

The study reveals a strong positive correlation between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. Digital finance adoption has risen due to its perceived usefulness and ease of use. Stakeholders, especially banks and the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), should invest in robust digital finance infrastructure. Supporting digital financial innovation is crucial as it drives financial inclusion. Access to digital finance products like mobile banking, internet banking, agency banking, mobile money, and ATMs has enhanced financial inclusion. Thus, fostering the growth

and accessibility of these services is key to promoting greater financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

### Usage of digital finance and financial inclusion

The study shows a significant positive correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. Increased use of mobile banking, internet banking, and agency banking enhances financial inclusion. These digital products are cheaper, reliable, and convenient, supporting financial intermediation theory. Stakeholders should invest in digital financial literacy to promote inclusion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research proposes several recommendations to enhance financial inclusion in Zimbabwe:

**Increase Security Measures:** Establish robust cybersecurity mechanisms to safeguard digital financial services against fraud. Government intervention, through the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe or related ministries, should ensure investment in cybersecurity infrastructure to protect digital innovations.

**Introduce Access to Loans via Digital Platforms:** Enable loan access through digital platforms like mobile banking for financially excluded individuals. Collaborations between mobile network operators and financial institutions can facilitate soft loans via mobile banking.

**Group Schemes Integration:** Design digital platforms to accommodate group schemes, encouraging savings and digital banking usage among communities, particularly low-income earners, rural populations, and marginalised groups.

**Address Barriers to Financial Inclusion:** Banks and regulators should tackle barriers such as financial illiteracy. Empowering individuals with financial knowledge and skills can significantly improve financial inclusion.

**Promote Technological Innovation:** Embrace technological innovation, such as branchless banking and mobile banking, to reach the unbanked population. The government should support this with a conducive legal framework.

**Promote Infrastructure Development:** Invest in infrastructure development in rural and marginalised areas to improve accessibility for financial services. Government support and incentives for private sector investment in ICT infrastructure are crucial.

**Promote Increased Cooperation among Banks:** Encourage collaboration and infrastructure sharing among banks to spread the cost of technology for financial inclusion initiatives. Establishing entities for pooled resources, such as Special Purpose Vehicles, can facilitate shared infrastructure usage.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.4UJ2SRMF>

# Economic inclusion in crisis: Challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's economic crisis, characterised by hyperinflation, currency instability, and high unemployment, has deepened due to COVID-19, disrupting livelihoods and heightening poverty. The government's reform agenda aims to stabilise the economy, attract investments, and improve social protection, yet faces challenges including political resistance and institutional deficits. This paper investigates policy reform challenges and opportunities, emphasising economic inclusion as a catalyst for equitable access to economic opportunities, fostering social cohesion, and boosting competitiveness. Utilising qualitative methods, it assesses the role of policies in enhancing access to assets, markets, and social safety nets. The paper advocates for stabilisation measures to curb inflation and currency volatility, increased financial access for small businesses, trade policy reforms for market integration, strengthened social protections, and educational investments to match economic demands. It synthesises best practices from global economic inclusion strategies across sectors like agriculture and industry. Concluding with recommendations, the study underscores inclusive policies as pivotal for Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy, advocating for synergy between inclusive growth and sustainable development.

**Key words:** Economic inclusion, policy reform, social protection, competitiveness, sustainable growth

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of a protracted economic crisis, Zimbabwe stands at a crossroads, with the potential to redefine its future through strategic policy reforms. According to Maimbo and Luo (2021), the nation's economy, once buoyant, now grapples with the repercussions of hyperinflation, currency instability, and soaring unemployment rates. These challenges, compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic, have not only disrupted livelihoods but also heightened poverty, pushing the socio-economic fabric to its limits. This paper seeks to dissect the intricate web of policy reform challenges and opportunities within Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on economic inclusion as a cornerstone for recovery and growth. Economic inclusion, in this context, is more than a mere buzzword; it is the lifeline that could ensure equitable access to economic opportunities, foster social cohesion, and enhance national competitiveness. Through a qualitative lens, the study delves into the role of policies in augmenting access to assets, markets, and social safety nets, while advocating for robust stabilisation measures to mitigate inflation and currency volatility. It underscores the imperative for increased financial access for small businesses, trade policy reforms for market integration, and fortified social protections, alongside educational investments tailored to meet the evolving economic demands. Drawing from a rich tapestry of global economic inclusion strategies, the paper synthesises best practices across pivotal sectors such as agriculture and industry. It culminates in a set of recommendations that not only align with Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy but also champion the synergy between inclusive growth and sustainable development. As Zimbabwe navigates through these turbulent times, this

research illuminates the path towards a more inclusive and resilient economy, where every citizen has a stake in the nation's prosperity.

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's economy has been in a state of flux, marked by a series of economic challenges that have eroded the foundations of financial stability and growth (Maviza, Maphosa, Tshuma, Dube, and Dube, 2019). The onset of hyperinflation has led to a precipitous decline in the purchasing power of the Zimbabwean dollar (Kavila, 2015), creating a cascade of economic hardships for the populace. The unemployment rate has soared, leaving a significant portion of the population without a steady income or the means to support their families. As of 2023, the unemployment rate stands at approximately 46.7%, affecting more than 2.8 million people of working age (Chikandiwa, 2023). Adding to this is the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated these issues, disrupting the already fragile economic activities and amplifying the vulnerabilities of the population (World Bank, 2020). The health crisis has not only strained the country's medical infrastructure but also imposed additional burdens on the economy, as lockdown measures and global uncertainty have stifled economic transactions and investments.

In response, the government of Zimbabwe has initiated a series of economic reforms aimed at stabilising the currency, curbing inflation, and fostering economic inclusion. To further enhance currency stability, the extension of the United States dollar as legal tender until 2030 has been implemented (Reuters, 2023). This move mitigates policy uncertainty and provides a stable backdrop for economic transactions, both domestic and international.

Efficiency and governance within the public sector have also been areas of focus. The government has initiated reforms to streamline public services and improve the governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aiming to ensure transparency and accountability in their operations (Ncube, 2023; Mlambo, 2016).

Agriculture, as a vital sector of the economy, has seen transformative policies aimed at increasing productivity and modernising practices (Schneidman, 2016). These reforms are expected to boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance food security. The private sector's growth and competitiveness have not been overlooked, with initiatives designed to stimulate economic diversification and job creation (Mlambo, 2016). Similarly, financial sector reforms have been introduced to bolster the stability and functionality of this critical sector (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2023). According to Makaye (2019), Land Policy has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of a 99-year land lease program to improve land use and agricultural productivity. This policy is a cornerstone of the government's strategy to modernise agriculture and ensure its role in economic development.

Tax reforms, including the introduction of new taxes on tobacco turnover and mobile network transactions, have been enacted to widen the tax base and increase government revenue (Saungweme, 2021). These fiscal measures provide the necessary resources for public investment and social services, contributing to the overall reform agenda. Collectively, these reforms represent the Zimbabwean government's resolve to address the economic challenges head-on.

However, these efforts have been met with political resistance and are further complicated by institutional weaknesses that undermine the efficacy of policy implementation (Masiyakurima-January and Muzvidziwa-Chilunjika, 2020). The lack of consensus among political actors and the absence of robust institutions capable of navigating the crisis have impeded the path to economic recovery and inclusion (Maguchu, 2019). The relentless surge of hyperinflation has decimated the value of the Zimbabwean dollar, plunging the economy into a maelstrom of financial instability. This economic turbulence has not only eroded the purchasing power of citizens but has also cast a long shadow over the prospects of economic recovery and development. The unemployment crisis looms large, with a burgeoning segment of the populace relegated to the margins, bereft of steady income or the means to sustain their livelihoods.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded these tribulations, acting as a catalyst for economic disruption and amplifying the vulnerabilities of an already beleaguered population. The pandemic's ramifications have transcended health concerns, exerting a stranglehold on economic activities and investment flows, as stringent lockdown measures and pervasive global uncertainty have throttled the nation's economic pulse (Bui, 2024). In the face of this daunting scenario, the government's reformative thrust seeks to anchor the economy, entice foreign investment, and weave a stronger social safety net. Yet, these laudable initiatives are ensnared in a web of political discord and institutional frailties, which stymie effective policy enactment and execution. The absence of a unified political will and robust institutional frameworks has thwarted efforts to navigate through the economic tempest and chart a course towards inclusive prosperity.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the multifaceted challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe's context of economic crisis. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in providing in-depth insights into complex social phenomena, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and the socioeconomic dynamics at play.

Hannig and Jansen (2010) acknowledged that economic inclusion involves intricate interactions between various economic, social, and political factors that are best captured through qualitative analysis. Cypress (2015) coined that qualitative methods enabled a deep exploration of the specific context of Zimbabwe, which is crucial for understanding the unique challenges and identifying tailored opportunities for reform. More so, the focus on individual and collective experiences aligns with the capabilities approach, emphasising the importance of human agency and the subjective aspects of economic participation. Qualitative data provided rich insights into the effectiveness of existing policies and the potential impact of proposed reforms, directly informing policymaking processes. The study utilised a variety of qualitative methods to analyse secondary data, ensuring a thorough comprehension of the subject matter. This included a detailed review of policy documents, documentaries, economic reports, and scholarly articles to gather a range of viewpoints on the economic crisis and possible policy changes. The aim was to situate the insights within the wider conversation on economic inclusion and policy reform. Data collected was subjected to thematic analysis, where patterns, themes, and narratives were identified and interpreted

in relation to the theoretical framework (Bengtsson and Andersen, 2020) of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach. This analysis highlights the key challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards and special attention was given to the sensitive nature of discussing economic hardships and policy critiques in the Zimbabwean context. In this study, a desktop review was conducted, which negates the need for informed consent and ethical clearance typically associated with primary research involving human subjects as argued by Cilliers and Viljoen (2021). The study's ethical framework was adapted to the nature of a desktop review, focusing on the responsible use of existing literature and data. The review process involved a thorough and respectful engagement with the works of other scholars, ensuring proper attribution and acknowledgement of their contributions. The absence of primary data collection from human participants meant that the procedures for obtaining consent were not applicable.

Moreover, since the study did not involve human subjects, there was no requirement for ethical clearance from a review board. However, the study still adhered to ethical standards by conducting a rigorous and unbiased synthesis of available information, maintaining academic integrity throughout the research process. According to Romm (2018), this approach to ethical practice in a desktop review underscores the commitment to responsible scholarship. It ensures that the study contributes to the field in a manner that is informative, respectful of intellectual property, and reflective of the highest standards of academic rigour.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the theory of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach. Inclusive growth, as defined by Ianchovichina and Lundström (2009), and further elaborated by Felipe (2012), advocates for economic growth that is broad-based across sectors and inclusive of all segments of society. This concept is particularly relevant to Zimbabwe, which is facing a severe economic crisis with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. According to the World Bank (n.d), the poverty rate in Zimbabwe was 38.3% in 2019. Additionally, the unemployment rate was reported at 20.5% in the first quarter of 2024 (Zimstat, 2024). The theory of inclusive growth serves as a transformative vision that aims to ensure the equitable sharing of the benefits of economic progress, offering a pathway towards sustainable development and shared prosperity.

The capabilities approach, pioneered by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and highlighted by Alkire (2005), complements inclusive growth by focusing on expanding individuals' freedoms and capabilities, thus empowering them to lead lives they value. This approach emphasises the importance of enhancing people's capabilities through education, healthcare, and social protection, enabling them to seize economic opportunities and realise their full potential. Applying these theories to Zimbabwe's context allows for an analysis of sectors where growth has been non-inclusive, contributing to poverty and exclusion. It also sheds light on the social barriers that prevent certain groups from participating in the economy, highlighting the urgent need for policy reform to foster economic inclusion and empower marginalised populations.

A critical examination of Zimbabwe's current economic policies, as discussed by Kanyenze (2011), reveals gaps that impede inclusive growth and perpetuate economic exclusion. By identifying these shortcomings and assessing their impact, policymakers can develop tailored strategies to promote economic inclusion and social equity. The inclusive growth theory also guides the dissection of Zimbabwe's economic sectors that have failed to contribute to collective prosperity. It allows for a critical examination of policies that may have inadvertently perpetuated poverty and exclusion, such as those affecting the agricultural sector and the integration of marginalised demographics like women and youth into the economic fabric. Furthermore, the theory addresses income disparity and advocates for reforms aimed at achieving a more balanced economic landscape. It also emphasises the importance of social cohesion, especially considering Zimbabwe's social unrest, advocating for policies that promote unity and stability through shared economic success.

## FINDINGS

To dissect the economic trajectory and policy landscape of Zimbabwe, a thorough review of key policy documents has been undertaken. These documents, each a repository of insights and assessments, provided a panoramic view of the nation's economic reforms and their outcomes. The Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum stands out as a pivotal document, offering a retrospective analysis of Zimbabwe's economic journey since independence. It delves into the critical policy issues that have shaped the nation's economic narrative, emphasising the urgency of reforms aimed at macroeconomic stabilisation and investment attraction to foster growth and development (World Bank, 2023).

Complementing this is the 2023 Mid-Term Budget and Economic Review, authored by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development. This document serves as a barometer for the nation's economic and budgetary health, charting the progress made in the first half of the year. It underscores the government's commitment to economic transformation, advocating for strategies that enhance value addition, diversify the economy, and refine the business climate (Ncube, 2019). According to Mshomba (2009), the World Trade Organisation's Trade Policy Review provided another layer of analysis, focusing on the intricacies of Zimbabwe's trade policies. It helped to evaluate the recent developments and challenges faced by the country in the realm of trade, economics, and investment. The review highlights the integral role of trade policy in the broader spectrum of economic reform, stressing the need for Zimbabwe to weave itself more integrally into the global trading system (World Trade Organisation, 2023).

The Annual Economic Review (Mlambo and R.B.Z. 2016) offered an exhaustive evaluation of the economic policies and their ramifications. This document scrutinises fiscal policies, public expenditures, and revenue collection mechanisms, painting a comprehensive picture of the economic landscape and the efficacy of the reforms implemented (Mlambo and R.B.Z. 2016). Together, these documents mentioned above formed a mosaic of perspectives, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's economic challenges and the policy responses crafted to address them. The findings gleaned from these documents underscored a concerted effort by the government to tackle macroeconomic instability, streamline trade policy, and manage fiscal affairs with the goal of propelling the nation towards sustainable growth and economic resilience.

## **The Main Challenges that Zimbabwe Faces in Achieving Economic Inclusion**

According to Kadyamatimba, (2013), Zimbabwe's economy is heavily dependent on primary agriculture and minerals, which creates vulnerability to external disruptions such as weather-related events or sudden price shocks for minerals. This lack of diversification undermines prospects for longer-term economic growth and hampers economic inclusion. On the other end, obstacles in the financial sphere, such as complex credit application procedures, lack of collateral, high lending costs, inadequate venture capital, and non-bank sources of funding, prevent firms from accessing finance (Mole and Namusonge, 2016). This lack of financial capability hinders economic inclusion during times of crisis.

According to Muzurura (2017), corruption in Zimbabwe is a pervasive and entrenched challenge that is significantly hindering economic inclusion, and perpetuating poverty and inequality at large. Corruption has established an environment which is uneven for the citizens, where only those with strong networks and wealth have access to economic opportunities such as government tenders. At the same time, corruption has destroyed every level of the community, from high-level government officials misappropriating public money to low-level bureaucrats demanding bribes for basic services. Resultantly the lack of trust in institutions is growing and hindering economic growth. The resources which are supposed to be used for essential public services are exploited for personal gains. Additionally, Muzurura (2019) argued that corruption has increased in cronyism, with politically connected businesses and individuals getting favourable contracts and treatment, while entrepreneurs and small businesses are not supported. The impact of corruption has far-reaching effects, with the poor and marginalised being affected.



According to Fernandes, Ferro and Wilson (2019), difficulties in gaining information on product standards in destination markets can result in low entry and survival rates for exporting firms. This information failure affects firm entry and survival in foreign markets and hampers economic inclusion. More so, insufficient infrastructure facilities, such as uninterrupted electricity supply, can hinder economic inclusion by preventing firms from entering, investing, and diversifying economic activity. Protection from government interference is necessary to induce a critical mass of private firms to enter, invest, and diversify economic activity. However, excessive government interference can hinder economic inclusion during times of crisis.

The incentive framework in Zimbabwe needs to be addressed to promote economic inclusion. If the incentive framework remains highly distorted and biased against exports or if sectors face significant entry barriers in the form of tariff or non-tariff barriers, active policies are likely to exacerbate the misallocation of resources. Varying institutional capabilities across countries poses a challenge in achieving economic inclusion. Policymakers must be mindful of policies that match their existing capabilities to effectively address the challenges faced during times of crisis (Aiyar et al., 2023; Lewis, 2001).

## **Zimbabwean Government Economic Reforms**

The Zimbabwean government has implemented various economic reforms to address the issues of access to productive assets, markets, and social protection in the country. These reforms have had a significant impact on the country's economy. One of the key changes has been the improvement in

access to credit and productive assets for small and medium-sized enterprises. This has led to increased entrepreneurship and job creation within the country. The World Bank's Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum suggests that to achieve upper-middle income status by 2030, Zimbabwe needs to improve productivity growth and create quality jobs. This implies a focus on enhancing access to productive assets for the informal sector, which accounts for a significant 70% (UNDP, 2023) portion of the country's output and employment.

Additionally, the government's efforts to promote market access and social protection have resulted in improved living standards for many Zimbabweans. The implementation of these reforms has also attracted foreign investment, leading to economic growth and diversification. Economic reforms have aimed at boosting trade to scale up productivity in the formal sector. However, despite improvements in export performance, exports remain dominated by a few primary products. Lowering tariffs on intermediate and capital goods and addressing trade facilitation issues are suggested measures to help Zimbabwe integrate more successfully into global value chains (World Bank, 2022).

The reforms have also targeted social development, with a focus on fiscal discipline and investment promotion. Efforts to enhance revenue collection through tax reforms and to provide access to credit for farmers indicate a move towards strengthening social protection mechanisms and promoting modern farming techniques, which are crucial for food security and agricultural productivity (Matarise, 2023).

Despite these positive outcomes, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. One major issue is the need for continued monitoring and evaluation of the reforms to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. There is also a need to focus on inclusive growth to ensure that all segments of the population benefit from the reforms. Looking ahead, it will be important for the government to maintain its commitment to economic reforms and address any emerging challenges. Additionally, there is a need for continued collaboration with international partners to support the ongoing reform efforts and ensure their success.

The Zimbabwean government's economic reforms have had a positive impact on the country's economy, leading to increased access to productive assets, job creation, and improved living standards. However, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, as well as a focus on inclusive growth, will be essential for sustaining these positive outcomes in the future. According to Zvavahera and Chigora (2015) these reforms are part of a broader strategy to revitalise Zimbabwe's economy, aiming to stabilise the currency, curb hyperinflation, and attract foreign direct investment. The emphasis on agricultural revival, investment in infrastructure, and the creation of special economic zones are additional steps taken to address these critical issues (Matarise, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

To further enhance currency stability, the extension of the US dollar as legal tender until 2030 has been implemented (Nyamunda, 2021). This move mitigates policy uncertainty and provides a stable backdrop for economic transactions, both domestic and international. Efficiency and governance within the public sector have also been areas of focus. The government has initiated reforms to streamline public services and improve the

governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aiming to ensure transparency and accountability in their operations (Ncube, 2023; Mlambo, 2016).

Agriculture, as a vital sector of the economy, has seen transformative policies aimed at increasing productivity and modernising practices (Schneidman, 2016). These reforms are expected to boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance food security. The private sector's growth and competitiveness have not been overlooked, with initiatives designed to stimulate economic diversification and job creation (Mlambo, 2016). Similarly, financial sector reforms have been introduced to bolster the stability and functionality of this critical sector (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2023). Land policy has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of a 99-year land lease program to improve land use and agricultural productivity (Ministry of Lands, 2023). This policy is a cornerstone of the government's strategy to modernise agriculture and ensure its role in economic development.

Tax reforms, including the introduction of new taxes on tobacco turnover and mobile network transactions, have been enacted to widen the tax base and increase government revenue (Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, 2023). These fiscal measures provide the necessary resources for public investment and social services, contributing to the overall reform agenda. Collectively, these reforms represent the Zimbabwean government's resolve to address the economic challenges head-on. By fostering an environment where growth is inclusive and sustainable, these policies are crucial steps towards achieving Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy. The success of these reforms will be pivotal in charting a path towards recovery and shared prosperity for all Zimbabweans.

## Addressing Access to Productive Assets in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean government has implemented economic reforms to address the issue of access to productive assets in the country. These reforms have included measures to improve access to credit and financing for small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as initiatives to promote land reform and redistribution to increase access to land, which is a crucial productive asset in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, the government has also focused on providing training and capacity-building programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of Zimbabweans in various sectors, thereby improving their ability to utilise productive assets effectively (Zvavahera and Chigora, 2015). Additionally, the government has taken steps to improve access to markets by implementing trade facilitation measures and promoting regional integration (Skalnes, 2016). Social protection has also been a key focus of the Zimbabwean government's economic reforms (Dashwood, 2000). The government has implemented various social protection programs to assist vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income families. These programs aim to improve access to essential services and resources, contributing to the overall wellbeing of the population. Furthermore, the Zimbabwean government has also prioritised infrastructure development as part of its economic reforms. Investments in transportation, communication, and energy infrastructure have been crucial in improving access to markets and increasing economic opportunities across different regions of the country.

The focus on improving access to productive assets, market access, social protection, and infrastructure development

indicates a holistic approach to addressing the underlying challenges in the Zimbabwean economy. The government's emphasis on capacity-building and skill enhancement programs underscores its commitment to fostering sustainable economic development and empowering its citizens. Moving forward, it will be imperative for the government to continue monitoring and evaluating the impact of these reforms, especially in the context of inclusive growth and long-term sustainability. Collaborating with international partners and leveraging external support can further strengthen the implementation of these reforms and ensure their continued success. Skalnes (2016) argued that the Zimbabwean government's economic reforms have demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing the economy and a proactive approach to addressing them. By focusing on access to productive assets, market facilitation, social protection, and infrastructure development, the government has laid a solid foundation for sustainable economic progress. The continued commitment to these reforms and the engagement of stakeholders will be pivotal in shaping Zimbabwe's economic future.

## Policy recommendations to enhance economic inclusion and support Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy

In pursuit of economic inclusion and in support of Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy, a multifaceted approach is essential. Fiscal consolidation is paramount, necessitating the implementation of a fiscal policy framework that promotes budget savings and ensures a stable macroeconomic environment. This foundation is critical for attracting both local and international investment, which is further facilitated by the ease of doing business

reforms. These reforms aim to improve the business climate, reduce operational costs, and create a more conducive environment for economic activities.

Empowerment programs play a crucial role in eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable livelihoods. By focusing on empowering women, youth, and people with disabilities, these programs address the root causes of economic exclusion and foster a more inclusive society. Concurrently, infrastructure development is vital, with investments in electricity and water sources being essential for both economic activities and the overall quality of life.

The enhancement of health and education services is another cornerstone of economic inclusion. By improving the quality and accessibility of these services, Zimbabwe can increase its average life expectancy and develop a skilled workforce capable of driving economic growth. In the agricultural sector, policies that boost agricultural productivity are needed to ensure food security and enhance the sector's export potential, particularly in the face of climate change.

Financial inclusion is a critical driver of entrepreneurship and economic participation, especially for marginalised communities. Expanding access to financial services enables individuals to engage in economic activities and contribute to the nation's prosperity. The engagement of the private sector and diaspora is equally important, as their involvement through incentives and partnerships can significantly bolster economic development efforts.

The Government of Zimbabwe can significantly enhance inclusive economic growth by embracing a technology-driven strategy. This would involve bolstering digital infrastructure to improve connectivity,

thereby granting wider access to information and services. It would also mean harnessing e-learning platforms to democratise education and deploying digital financial services to deepen financial inclusion, particularly in remote areas. By leveraging technology, businesses can boost productivity and competitiveness, while the tech sector itself becomes a fertile ground for job creation across various skill levels. Small businesses can benefit from technological tools that level the playing field against larger firms. In healthcare, digital technologies can revolutionise access to services, improving health outcomes for the population. Furthermore, technology can streamline the implementation and monitoring of social policies, ensuring they are effective and reach those most in need. Collectively, these measures can propel Zimbabwe towards a more equitable and prosperous future, in line with its Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy.

Effective natural resource management is imperative for leveraging Zimbabwe's rich natural resources. Policies must be crafted to ensure sustainable exploitation and equitable benefit-sharing, thus contributing to the nation's economic stability and growth. Lastly, a deepened commitment to good governance—encompassing corporate governance, transparency, and anti-corruption measures—is essential to create a fair and just economic environment that supports long-term development and inclusion. These recommendations align with the overarching goals of Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, aiming to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society (Bvirindi, 2021; Golla, & D'Alessandro, 2024; Chitiyo et al., 2019).

## DISCUSSION

The study's findings reveal a complex interplay of economic, social, and political factors that have contributed to the current state of economic exclusion in Zimbabwe. The reliance on primary agriculture and minerals has exposed the economy to external shocks, while systemic corruption and institutional weaknesses have further exacerbated the situation. These challenges highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to policy reform that addresses not only the symptoms but also the root causes of economic exclusion.

The government's economic reforms, while commendable in their intent to stabilise the economy and improve access to productive assets, face significant hurdles. Political resistance and fiscal constraints underscore the importance of building consensus and ensuring the sustainability of reform efforts. The study underscores the critical role of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach as theoretical frameworks guiding these reforms. By focusing on expanding individuals' freedoms and capabilities, policies can be more effectively tailored to promote economic inclusion and empowerment. The positive outcomes of the government's reforms, such as increased access to credit and improved market access, are promising signs of progress. However, the continued dominance of a few primary products in exports and the need for further trade facilitation measures indicate areas where additional focus is required. The study suggests that lowering tariffs on intermediate and capital goods and addressing trade facilitation issues could enhance Zimbabwe's integration into global value chains.

The engagement with international partners and the leveraging of external support are identified as crucial elements in strengthening the implementation of these reforms. Looking forward, the study advocates for a policy approach that encompasses fiscal consolidation, empowerment infrastructure development, programs, and the enhancement of health and education services. Financial inclusion, technology-driven strategies, effective natural resource management, and a commitment to good governance are also emphasised as key components of a strategy to support Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy. The research posits that by embracing a holistic and inclusive approach to economic reform, Zimbabwe has the potential to overcome its current challenges and pave the way for a more resilient and equitable economy.

## CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe faces significant economic challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to elevated levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The government has initiated economic reforms to stabilise the economy, attract foreign investment, and enhance social protection. However, these reforms face various challenges, such as political resistance, fiscal constraints, and institutional weaknesses. This study has explored the concept of economic inclusion as a key driver of sustainable development and shared prosperity in Zimbabwe. Economic inclusion is essential for ensuring that all segments of society have equal access to opportunities, rights, and services that enable them to participate in and benefit from economic growth. By addressing access to productive assets, markets, and social protection, Zimbabwe can foster social cohesion, reduce inequality, and enhance competitiveness.

The government's economic reforms have shown positive outcomes in improving access to credit, market access, social protection, and infrastructure development. Moving forward, it will be crucial for the government to continue monitoring and evaluating these reforms, focusing on inclusive growth and long-term sustainability. Collaborating with international partners and leveraging external support can further strengthen the implementation of these reforms and ensure their success.

By embracing a multifaceted approach includes fiscal consolidation, empowerment programs, infrastructure development, health and education services, financial inclusion, technology-driven strategies, natural resource management, and good governance, Zimbabwe can unlock economic opportunities, enhance social policies, and build a more equitable future. These policy recommendations align with the goals of Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, aiming to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society. By prioritising economic inclusion and sustainable development, Zimbabwe can overcome its economic challenges and pave the way for a more inclusive and resilient economy.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.HY74FJ87>

## An analysis of the role of disinformation in elections

### An exploratory study of the Centre for Innovation and Technology's project on combatting electoral disinformation in the August 2023 national and December 2023 by-elections

Delta Mbonisi Sivalo 

#### ABSTRACT

Electoral disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic processes, particularly in politically polarised environments like Zimbabwe. This paper examines the efficacy of the CITE project, a six-month high-impact initiative aimed at countering electoral disinformation during the August 2023 plebiscite. The primary objective was to mitigate the impact of disinformation on citizen participation by training citizens and community journalists to identify, flag, and combat misinformation. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative exploratory approach, including workshops, social media campaigns, and a systematic desk review of existing literature and primary data sources. Key findings indicate that the project successfully raised awareness about disinformation, reaching over 100,000 people on Facebook with a campaign debunking election boycott rumours. However, the initiative faced limitations such as poor internet connectivity in rural areas and resistance from political actors benefiting from disinformation. The study underscores the importance of tailored strategies for different media platforms and highlights the efficacy of infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods in building trust. The research also identifies the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and the potential of AI and machine learning in detecting disinformation. The significance of this work lies in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of disinformation in electoral processes and its practical implications for enhancing media literacy and democratic engagement. By comparing Zimbabwe's challenges and solutions with those of other countries, the study offers valuable insights for developing robust counter-disinformation strategies globally.

**Key words:** electoral dis-information, electoral mal-information, electoral mis-information, media literacy, elections, democratic engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been in an indeterminant transition since independence in 1980. The political scene has been coloured by ethnic rivalry, fragile social contexts, deprived human conditions, inflation, systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, and a weak economy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya, 2020), as well as perceived marginalisation, anger, and hatred (Coltart, 2016). Zimbabwe's political landscape is characterised by a history of contested elections, allegations of rigging, voter intimidation, and vote-buying. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) oversees the electoral process, but its impartiality has often been questioned (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). The political environment is highly polarised, with major parties like ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) often at odds. The 2023 elections saw the rise of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), adding another layer of complexity to the political dynamics (Hassan, 2023).

Both state and non-state media have played a central role in the Zimbabwean polity's evolution. All these issues are “offensively, progressively, and relentlessly destroying relationships, heightening animosities across communities, and threatening democratic survival in the country” (Pate, 2018; pg. 56). They are further aggravated by the spread of disinformation on social networks such as religious, ethnic, and political platforms.

Disinformation campaigns have been a significant concern globally, with studies highlighting their impact on democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). In Zimbabwe, disinformation exacerbates existing societal

divisions and undermines trust in public institutions (Mare, Mabweazara, & Moyo, 2019). The theory of motivated reasoning explains why individuals are more likely to believe information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Bartels, 2002).

Disinformation has been defined by McGonagle (2017) as information that has been intentionally made up and circulated intending to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or not questioning verifiable facts, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. News plays a critical part in democratic societies; however, disinformation poses a challenge to liberal democracy as it misinforms people and significantly affects the deliberative process (Humprecht, 2019). Although the dissemination of disinformation was prevalent before recent advancements in information and communications technologies (ICT), the revolution in ICT has simplified its access and facilitated its transmission across space and time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The advent of the Internet, especially social media, has significantly accelerated the spread of disinformation, aided by the expansion of the mobile data subscriber base and the growing availability of affordable smartphones. Social media platforms present new opportunities for engagement through the ease of two-way communication. More than half of Zimbabwe's population uses the internet, and a significant majority use social media platforms, making the problem of the dissemination of disinformation in Zimbabwe very significant (IRI; 2023).

Lately, elections in both liberal and illiberal democracies have been preceded by political (online and offline) information disorders including misinformation, disinformation and mal-information (MDM). MDM has been weaponised by political actors

as information with politically charged content is manipulated. Of course, MDM is not a new phenomenon; however, what is constantly evolving is the context of dissemination. Digital and, especially, social media facilitate the widespread distribution of false assertions with a relatively professional layout at minimal cost. These MDM campaigns attempt to undermine voters' ability to make their decisions based on accurate beliefs about the political system. This poses a danger to the quality and legitimacy of the democratic process, as a well-informed electorate is essential for the collective autonomy of democracies. In some liberal democracies, this proliferation, supported by the burgeoning of personalised filter bubbles online (Sunstein, 2009), has been succeeded by the electoral success of populist candidates. However, in illiberal democracies where there is limited access to information and free speech, low media literacy levels and the lack of access to real-time verified alternative sources of information, states and ruling parties have weaponised and deployed MDM to undermine opposition political parties especially where opposing candidates are popular (Cantarella, Fraccaroli, and Volpe; 2022).

The spread of MDM news before the August 2023 general elections and the December 2023 by-elections in Zimbabwe largely sought to discredit Nelson Chamisa and his Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) party, while presenting Emmerson Mnangagwa and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) as the candidate and party of choice. Coupled with the unlevel media playing field concerning the coverage in elections, partisan politics largely influenced the portrayal of candidates in state and private media.

To mitigate some of the deficiencies highlighted above, the Centre for Innovation and Technology implemented a short-term, six-month, high-impact project to counter electoral disinformation during the August 2023 ballot. The project trained citizens and community journalists to identify, flag and combat misinformation; in addition, the organisation provided access to alternative, real-time verified electoral updates and provided regular updates by hosting conversations on elections. In this context, this paper discusses key issues, lessons and promising practices derived from CITE's experiences in countering electoral disinformation.

The CITE project aimed to mitigate the impact of electoral disinformation in Zimbabwe. A rapid assessment, post-project, revealed several key findings:

- **Efficacy:** The project successfully raised awareness about disinformation through workshops and social media campaigns. For instance, a campaign debunking the rumour that the CCC was boycotting elections reached over 100,000 people on Facebook (CITE, 2023).
- **Reach:** The project engaged with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations, journalists, and community leaders. However, its reach was limited in rural areas due to poor internet connectivity (Mare et al., 2019).
- **Limitations:** The project faced challenges such as limited funding and resistance from political actors who benefited from disinformation (Hassan, 2023).
- **Key Lessons Learned:** Tailored strategies are essential for different media platforms. For example, infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods were effective in areas with low media literacy (CITE, 2023).

Many recent studies on the impact of disinformation on elections have focused on the 2016 US presidential election (Harsin, 2018). In relation to African politics, this study is one of the few (Hassan, 2023) that seeks to highlight the disruptive influence of disinformation on democratic processes (such as elections) from the perspective of civil society, in this instance, in Zimbabwe generally and Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces specifically. Our study focuses on developments limited to the general Matabeleland area. It provides sub-national and national examples as well that have emerged from media coverage and the existing literature to further strengthen relevant points. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in January and February 2024. The interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, meaning interviewees' comments are considered but not attributed in this write-up. However, due to its exploratory character, this study has inherent limitations. Purposive sampling was used to select participants; the selection criteria were based on lived experiences and were, thus, prone to bias. Nevertheless, efforts were made to include diverse participants from each of the project areas in terms of age, social media usage, and professional and educational experience.

## BACKGROUND

Access to unbiased and accurate information regarding elections and related political developments has always been a problem in Zimbabwe, as indeed elsewhere.

The age of digital media and platforms, the deeply fractured character of Zimbabwean society and the high political stakes involved, however, have deepened the possibilities of misinformation and disinformation. Recent events in Zimbabwe aptly demonstrate this. This includes what took place during the 2023 national elections and the December 2023 by-elections, as well as the disturbing events with particular reference to the CCC – notably, the activities of Sengezo Tshabangu and the resignation of Nelson Chamisa. Access to accurate and credible information becomes crucial in this context, particularly in real-time. Indeed, addressing and overcoming these information challenges is crucial for promoting a transparent and democratic culture in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe held the 2023 elections in a highly volatile and contested environment. To begin with, the July 2018 national elections in Zimbabwe witnessed a significant surge in the use of social media and other online platforms as sites for political contestation and campaigns. The bitter contest between the top two presidential contenders, Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa became evident as the war took to online platforms where “Varakashi”<sup>1</sup> and “Nerorists”<sup>2</sup> engaged in various tactics in casting aspersions on the other. Fake news and mudslinging became defining elements during these digital propaganda battles. The allegations and accusations from both sides were so extreme that voters might have found it difficult to separate facts from misinformation. The August 2023 general election and December

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<sup>1</sup> Varakashi is a term commonly used in reference to online/cyber trolls that support the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party.

<sup>2</sup> Nerorists are a group of cyber/online trolls that are viewed to be sympathetic to the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) leader Nelson Chamisa.

2023 by-elections would likely be no different. In mitigation of this strong possibility, CITE undertook a project to empower citizens with basic knowledge on how to identify disinformation on electoral issues through media literacy and fact-checking of content and messages circulating on social media. CITE's countermeasures included fact-checking, media literacy workshops, and social media campaigns. These efforts were partially effective but faced challenges such as limited reach and resistance from political actors. Drawing from global best practices, CITE could enhance its strategies by collaborating with tech companies to develop AI tools for detecting disinformation (Pennycook, Bear, Collins & Rand, 2021). The desired impact was to mitigate the impact of disinformation in undermining citizen participation in electoral processes.

Post the project, CITE commissioned a rapid assessment to understand the influence and contribution of its work in mitigating electoral disinformation. The assessment uses a qualitative exploratory approach to establish major issues, trends, contributions, lessons learned and promising practices. Our research methodology also included a systematic desk review of the existing literature on disinformation, human rights and democracy, relying on four types of sources: official documents, communication from stakeholders, scholarly literature and press articles. In an uneasy and stifled democracy like Zimbabwe where electoral outcomes are always contested with allegations of rigging, voter intimidation and vote buying made against the state, there has been limited investment in probing the impact of disinformation and its impact on democratic processes and electoral outcomes. Additionally, disinformation combined with unresolved historical tensions generates insecurity, tearing cohesion asunder,

inciting hostility, and directly disrupting democratic processes. Moreso, disinformation confuses the electorate and lends citizens to manipulation, creating distrust in electoral governing bodies.

Analysing disinformation trends over multiple election cycles reveals evolving patterns. For instance, the use of deepfakes and sophisticated bots has increased, making it harder to detect disinformation. The long-term effectiveness of countermeasures requires continuous adaptation to these evolving tactics (Pennycook et al., 2021). Comparing Zimbabwe's disinformation challenges with other African countries reveals common issues such as low media literacy and political manipulation. Best practices from countries like Kenya, which has implemented robust fact-checking initiatives, can inform Zimbabwe's strategies (Mare et al., 2020).

In the Zimbabwean context, multiple actors are involved in news dissemination which lends the media to promote, intentionally and unintentionally, the spread of disinformation. Political commentators spread a combination of truth and falsehoods in favour of their political parties on multi-media platforms, in the process weaponising disinformation. In the same process, disinformation, while deployed for political mileage, weakens trust in democratic processes (elections), and institutions (electoral governing bodies). In addition, political parties, state media, and foreign actors use disinformation to achieve different objectives. Political parties use disinformation to delegitimise opponents and glorify their leaders (Guess et al., 2019), while the state often disseminates propaganda to maintain the status quo (Mare et al., 2019), with foreign actors spreading disinformation to destabilise political environments for strategic gains (Hassan, 2023).

Online and offline disinformation are intertwined, shaping and influencing each other. An online rumour started on social media networks can easily influence conventional media outputs and programmes and reach the offline audience in a few hours through well-established rumour networks. For instance, one of the most pervasive rumours that spread across many social media platforms during the August 2023 Zimbabwean general elections was that the CCC was boycotting elections and citizens were discouraged from casting their vote on election day. This fake news was backed up by tampered photos and fliers that were strewn near polling stations. Likewise, another piece of fake news widely circulated on social media suggested that the Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) had rejected the outcome of the 2023 Presidential elections; to substantiate this rumour, multiple media stories were run with quotes from prominent regional leaders. The circulation of disinformation, particularly about the legitimacy of election results, can have deadly consequences.

During the 2023 elections, reports that the chair of SADC's Electoral Observer Mission refused to sign and endorse the election results announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) were shared on a social media platform as if it were a confirmed story. Such disinformation can plague public discourse and decision-making, hindering the process of finding common ground and even threatening public safety. These incidents demonstrate the destabilising effect of the viral spread of disinformation, which can lead to political instability. Disinformation can incite people to violence and lead to the weakening of public confidence in the government. An increasing number of people rely on social media as a source of news. This has led to concerns that fake news can

manipulate public opinion and delegitimise opposing voices. However, research on the dissemination of fake news in Zimbabwe is very limited. Against this background, this study aimed to explore how disinformation impacts public participation in electoral processes.

## DISCUSSION

This study underlines that disinformation is most effective when leveraged on existing narratives and contexts to reinforce/confirm dominant social, ethnic, political and religious divides. Electoral disinformation campaigns discussed here, deployed and led by Zimbabweans, local and in the diaspora, aimed to delegitimise institutions, groups, or personalities; glorify a leader; or, during elections, confuse voters, instigate apathy among people, or marginalise women and other vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the reach of social media extends far beyond those with direct access to social media platforms. Traditional media and pre-existing non-media structures for information dissemination, either intentionally or unintentionally, play an important role in the spread of electoral disinformation. Digital and other content, whether factual or false, is not restricted to online settings. Below is a nuanced discussion of key themes relating to disinformation and its impact on elections with reference to crucial developments marking the 2023 national and subsequent December by-elections.

### **Disinformation and its impact on democratic processes (elections)**

Disinformation has an impact on the basic health and credibility of democratic processes. This has become the core of recent positions taken by international organisations,

such as Resolution 2326 (2020) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in expressing concern about the scale of information pollution in a digitally connected and increasingly polarised world, the spread of disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion, and trends of foreign electoral interference and manipulation. Information and shared narratives are a precondition for good quality democratic public discourse. This paper considers that disinformation erodes trust in institutions by impeding the ability of citizens to make informed decisions. It also warns that disinformation is set to polarise democratic societies by creating or deepening tensions and undermining democratic pillars such as electoral systems.

Nevertheless, this aggregation clouds the fact that exposure to disinformation is extremely concentrated and attributable to specific parts of the population (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). There are indeed fractions of the population that are highly exposed to disinformation, among these youth, women and People with Disability (PWDs). This can act as a gateway for the disruptive influence of disinformation. Hence, to address its direct influence on voter choice, one must focus on the individual rather than the aggregate level. Moreover, we do not assume mere exposure to disinformation has a huge impact in swaying citizens' opinions, but rather believing disinformation to make a difference regarding people's voting decisions has that influence. Studies show that distorted beliefs about a political issue can influence people's vote on a ballot question concerning that issue even when controlling for pre-existing views and political sophistication (Reedy et al., 2014; Wells, Reedy, Gastil, & Lee, 2009). Likewise, there are suggestions that the characterisation of Sengezo Tshabangu as a

CCC sell-out was fostered by prevailing rhetoric that "Ndebeles" (people from the Matabeleland region) are perceived sell-outs because King, Lobengula, 'sold' the country for a spoon of sugar. The same pattern applies to elections. Barrera, Guriev, Henry, and Zhuravskaya (2018) demonstrate that exposure to misleading statements regarding the presence of certain ethnic or religious traits significantly increases or decreases voting intentions for candidates. Additionally, people believing false rumours about candidates are less likely to vote for those candidates, as witnessed by losses in the by-elections experienced by candidates affiliated with the Tshabangu CCC faction.

Three possible circumstances remain for individuals to deal with political confusion and disillusionment at the ballot box. First, the electorate can remain loyal to the established political system and elect one of the popular parties. Second, citizens could voice their dissatisfaction by casting their votes for a right-wing populist or extremist party. And third, they could exit the party system entirely through abstention from the vote (Hirschman, 1970; Hooghe, Marien, & Pauwels, 2011). With no system of compulsory voting and a new populist party, CCC, on the rise, there was both a viable exit and voice option in the 2023 December by-elections. Hence, opting for loyalty does not seem a reasonable electoral consequence of believing disinformation. It should rather stimulate people to turn away from the political parties representing the established political system.

There are several ways in which disinformation weakens democratic institutions. These include the use of social media to channel disinformation in coordinated ways so as to undermine institutions' credibility. As trust in mainstream media has plummeted, alternative news



ecosystems have flourished. The online platforms' business model pushes content that generates clicks and this has increased polarisation. This is because it favours the creation of more homogeneous audiences and undercuts tolerance for alternative views. Research studies also show that disinformation can sow distrust in different pillars of democratic institutions, including public institutions such as governments, parliaments and courts or their processes, public figures, as well as journalists and free media. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that all individuals have the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. In this sense, the will of the people is the basis of the authority of government and must be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which promote universal and equal suffrage by either secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

In this context, voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind. Election interference can be defined as unjustified and illegitimate ways of influencing people's minds and voters' choices, thereby reducing citizens' abilities to exercise their political rights. Many governments' use of disinformation contradicts this injunction. Even where they are not directly using disinformation in electoral campaigns, they may be falling short in protecting this right on behalf of their citizens. Whether or not successful, manipulating elections by affecting voters' opinions and choices through disinformation damages democracy and creates a trail of doubt as to whether democratic institutions work well in reflecting citizens' choices.

## **Disinformation in entrenching pre-existing divisions**

Emotive disinformation exacerbates existing ethno-religious and other divisions that can threaten the peace and stability of any nation. There are thus serious dangers inherent in all the distortions, fake news, and misinformation circulating on social media. For example, many crises are fuelled by these distortions, which may be accompanied by a photoshopped scene or an old image portraying members of one ethnic group attacking those of another ethnic group – on this basis, without putting too much thought into it, people may decide to act and take the law into their own hands. Our study does highlight the potential exacerbating effect of disinformation on existing ethnoreligious divisions and long-standing tensions. The cultural and racial categorisation and fabrication of myths by the public can destroy society (Soyemi, 2016). As different ethnic groups live across the breadth of Zimbabwe, a single act of violence fuelled by such disinformation can spark violent reprisals. A good case in point gained prominence in the build-up to the December 2023 by-election where unverified news circulated concerning the collusion between Tendai Biti, Welshman Ncube and Sengezo Tshabangu to bar CCC candidates from participating in elections. The sum effect of the rumour resulted in divided opinions that reproduced ethno-regional rhetoric around the general untrustworthiness of the Ndebeles as epitomised by Ncube and Tshabangu's 'sell-out' tendencies in undermining the "people's choice". Politicians have come to understand the wide reach of social media, and they employ social media platforms to push election propaganda and trade insults or spread false stories about their political rivals.

Linked to this, disinformation is not only spread by entities with specific interests, such as political parties. Guess et al. (2018) highlight that low media literacy, particularly among those who have just started using social media, contributes to the spread of fake news online. Individuals are more motivated to share posts that align with their personal opinions and avoid content that opposes their views and beliefs. This allows malicious actors to play with public sentiment. Low media literacy among citizens, paired with strong political support for certain parties, has allowed political parties to make advances in information warfare on social media. Thus, the best way to combat fake news is to increase media literacy among social media users.

### **Disinformation and public trust in independent institutions**

Mere exposure to disinformation does not necessarily translate into believing it, which is a conceivable requirement for a direct electoral effect of truth claims. Therefore, our study takes into consideration the (institutional) reasons for perceiving disinformation as true. According to the theory of motivated reasoning, truth judgments are generally driven by two possibly conflicting motivations: the accuracy goal of trying to arrive at a preferably correct conclusion, and the directional goal of preferring a previously desired outcome. Interestingly, there is evidence that individuals are more likely to engage in the latter (Kunda, 1990). People evaluate (political) statements in the light of their predispositions so that factual beliefs align with their (political) stances (Bartels, 2002). Repeated studies have confirmed this partisan, or confirmation, bias in truth judgments (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014; Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). For example, people tend to believe conspiracy theories that correspond to their

political attitudes (Swami, 2012; Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016). Furthermore, selective exposure to partisan (news) media and its content can evoke misperceptions in line with the user's views (Meirick & Bessarabova, 2016). This holds especially true in online environments, where audiences have a wider choice of attitude-consistent messages (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). Taken together, political ideology is one of the most important predictors of the perceived truthfulness of online disinforming news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

### **Disinformation and its temporal dimensions**

The study underlined that disinformation is periodic or temporal and is usually issue or interest-based. For example, disinformation around elections is mostly a temporal issue, usually bound around the immediate period before and after voting day(s), with the obvious goal being to garner votes. In the same vein, disinformation also thrives around issues which are less understood by citizens or their communities, or where serious information gaps exist, a prime example being the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the interests of the person or entity sharing information, it becomes apparent that what information they eventually share is based chiefly on their interests. A case in point is the issue of 'land and land reform' in Zimbabwe which is a very emotive issue prone to significant levels of disinformation. Upon deeper analysis, it becomes apparent that the phenomenon of party-state conflation based on pure political interests is a key driving factor for disinformation. Again, this tends to ride on the extreme polarisation we find in most communities of Zimbabwe.

Another classic example is the electoral process. When looked at from its cyclic nature, it is evident that most citizens know and understand they can participate in the electoral process as voters by casting their votes. However, because of the disjointed character of the electoral cycle and civic and government programming around it, the other attendant processes which are supposed to complete the electoral cycle are often neglected. Resultantly, there has emerged a pattern where citizens view elections as a five-yearly event, rather than an ongoing cycle. As a result of this reality, where disinformation is infused into the governance process, uninformed electoral participation arises, where citizens ignorantly partake in processes, they neither know how to effectively do nor can accurately project what they must get out of partaking in the processes. This usually tends to discredit genuine governance processes as citizens cannot connect their participation to tangible developmental outcomes.

## LESSONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

A closer look at the dynamics around how different media reach out and appeal to or are accessed by different individuals, shows marginality as a thread kneading through the dynamics of how disinformation reaches and influences social groups and their communities. Based on an extensive analysis of existing literature and primary data on key media and sources of news and information, it is evident that social media, mainstream media and traditional media (or word of mouth) are the most popular news sources. Strategies to combat disinformation must be tailored to the needs and peculiarities of each news source, balancing both online and offline strategies. The use of infographics and other low-literacy data packaging methods can shore up trust, especially in areas where

citizen trust in public institutions and processes is waning.

Several civil society organisations are engaged in different initiatives, mostly to raise awareness about disinformation. A few others have purposively incorporated actual activities to combat disinformation including CITE and ZIMFACT, which do fact-checking of stories for the benefit of the online public. However, combating MDM is sometimes hampered by poor coordination of stakeholders who are running various disparate anti-disinformation initiatives. In many instances, there is no inclusivity in terms of getting all possible allies on board; resultantly, where training is offered for example, very few, usually the same faces, continue to attend training initiatives.

Key to the success of any intervention intent on mitigating the impact of disinformation is its ability to contend with the political polarisation prevalent in Zimbabwe's polity. The political polarisation apparent in most communities also acts as a barrier to the effectiveness of initiatives that target citizens, as they seem to fall into default partisan positions when confronted with news or information, which then ultimately determines how they handle disinformation and political choices.

AI and machine learning can play a significant role in detecting and countering disinformation. For example, algorithms can identify patterns in disinformation campaigns and flag suspicious content for review (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Media literacy education empowers citizens to critically evaluate information and resist disinformation. Initiatives such as school programs and community workshops can enhance media literacy, particularly among vulnerable groups (Guess et al., 2019).

Another key lesson and promising practice is around the inclusion of marginalised groups. This is most acute for PWDs, many of whom are left out or excluded by news broadcasters emanating from insensitive or inappropriately packaged information. This is almost similar to cases where recipients of information are illiterate and therefore unable to decipher information on their own and have to rely on a third party to interpret information for them. In a similar vein, issues around literacy and technical know-how remain critical but are experienced differently by different social groups, mostly based on spatial considerations. The major driver of these disparities is traced back to how ICT infrastructure retains an urban bias, with rural and remote areas, the further you move from an urban centre, facing serious challenges of connectivity and bandwidths. This tends to limit the possibilities available to the rural population. However, even within the rural environs, the situation is also not homogenous. It will be found, based on literature, that business centres or growth points within the general rural setup actually experience good connectivity and bandwidth when compared to fast-track farms within the post-2000 FTLRP landscape.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal interesting views from diverse stakeholders on the effect of disinformation on Zimbabwe's political and electoral processes. Zimbabwe's polarised landscape fused with its insecure political and ethnic landscape offers productive ground for the spread of disinformation on traditional and social media platforms, which have an increasing number of users. Combatting online disinformation requires addressing certain broader challenges such as political

polarisation, insecurity and a lack of trust in government officials. However, at the same time, online information can be used to clarify facts that can promote government accountability and transparency. Moreover, it is important to recognise that online disinformation can influence offline content in newspapers or on television and radio. It is, therefore, imperative to strengthen the more positive elements of social media, thereby weakening the threat posed by disinformation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Government regulation of social media to curb the spread of disinformation has been proposed and implemented in some countries; however, it entails serious risks to citizens' freedom of expression. In countries like Zimbabwe, social media companies can play a far more proactive regulatory role by moderating content, particularly in local languages, and by creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry capable of discriminating between true and false information. Continued support should be provided to the media to improve the quality of reporting. Leading media houses should employ fact-checkers to reduce the reproduction or reporting of misleading online content across traditional media. Further, social media platforms should raise awareness among their users about how to report disinformation. In addition, technical support should be provided to government bodies to help them convey accurate and apolitical information using their social media handles.

Thus, we call for future research that explores more mediation and moderation pathways for the control of disinformation on social media platforms and that assesses more fully the impact of providing media literacy to the public on the spread of disinformation.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.A28EXK4N>

# Unveiling layers of inclusion in political spaces: A multidimensional exploration of inclusion in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. It examines representation and intersectionality to explore how diverse perspectives among different interest groups in society contribute to a more comprehensive and equitable political landscape in Zimbabwe. Additionally, it investigates the role of digital inclusion, and community empowerment in fostering genuine participation. The study dissects the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system with an emphasis on youth involvement and the value of civic education. Through emphasising transparency, accountability, and a global perspective, this research article provides a holistic understanding of how political spaces can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure the active engagement of all citizens. The study is informed by the theory of intersectionality and offers a deep understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to influence individuals' experiences of political representation and participation. Through applying the intersectionality theory, the study examines how individuals with intersecting identities face unique barriers and challenges when it comes to accessing and engaging with political spaces. It reveals how privilege and power systems interact and function within political frameworks, influencing the opportunities and experiences that various groups have. To achieve the main goal, the study employs a qualitative approach to examine the dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. The qualitative constituent involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, including politicians, community leaders, and purported relegated groups, to gather insights into their experiences and perceptions of inclusion. Additionally, a survey was conducted among a representative sample of the population to gather data on their attitudes toward political inclusion and their level of engagement in political processes. This enabled a broader understanding of the overall landscape of inclusivity.

**Key words:** Inclusion, representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, youth involvement

## INTRODUCTION

### Unveiling the Multifaceted Landscape of Political Inclusion

This article explores inclusion in Zimbabwean political spheres from several angles, revealing the intricate relationships that enable a truly equitable and inclusive system. A sturdy democracy is contingent upon the principle of political inclusivity, which guarantees the full engagement of every citizen in shaping the political arena (Biswas, 2023; Dahl, 1989). Nevertheless, the notion of inclusivity in political domains surpasses mere representation, delving deeper into recognising the constraints of traditional frameworks that often prioritise numerical representation over the diverse experiences of various groups (Phillips, 2011). Hence, the political climate that exists in Zimbabwe now demands a careful analysis that goes beyond crude notions of inclusivity.

While representation ensuring a diverse array of voices are represented in governance is undoubtedly essential (Alegría & Cheng, 2023; Mansbridge, 1999), a more thorough comprehension is essential. This research delves into the concept of intersectionality, a theoretical structure that acknowledges how different facets of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to mould individuals' encounters within political spheres. Examining inclusivity from this angle helps us identify the unique difficulties faced by people whose identities are intersecting and marginalised, ensuring that their voices are heard.

Our study transcends traditional forms of involvement, examining the role of digital inclusivity in nurturing authentic engagement. With the emergence of technology, digital platforms provide new pathways for political engagement,

particularly for marginalised groups who may encounter conventional barriers to entry. Furthermore, the investigation explores the importance of community empowerment in fostering a sense of ownership and active citizenship. Communities that have historically been marginalised can be empowered, and by doing so, the government can foster an atmosphere in which different points of view are valued and actively incorporated into the democratic process.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the necessity of involving the youth in the political arena. Young people are a critical generation with the potential to shape the future of the political environment (White, 2010). Encouraging adolescent engagement and providing essential civic education can enable the government to raise a generation of knowledgeable and involved citizens (Westheimer, 2002). This holistic strategy, which includes representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth participation, and civic education, aims to "reveal the layers of inclusivity" that are necessary for Zimbabwe's democracy to thrive. Emphasising the need for openness, accountability, and a global perspective, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political environments can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure everyone's active involvement. This exploration seeks to address the following central questions:

1. In what ways do Zimbabwe's political systems support or undermine the representation of various voices and points of view?
2. How do factors such as community empowerment, digital access, and intersectionality affect the engagement of underrepresented people in political spheres?



3. How can the promotion of youth engagement and civic education contribute to fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment in Zimbabwe?

## BACKGROUND

The conventional interpretation of Zimbabwe's historical landscape suggests that the subordination of women, children, and youth has been deeply rooted in the country's sociocultural foundations. Societal gender roles have traditionally separated tasks typically associated with women, such as cooking, food processing, cleaning, preparation, and assisting men with agricultural work, from those typically associated with men, like clearing land and ploughing the fields (Mazonde & Carmichael, 2016; Tarusikirwa, 2017; Mupangwa, 2023). This gender-based segregation manifested in the colonial government where the 1975 parliament of Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) had 16 ministers and 66 legislators, of which only one was female, Mrs. Hatson from Hillside (Gudhlanga, 2013). It was only in the Rhodesia-Zimbabwe parliament in 1979 that four black women were elected to a parliament of one hundred legislators (Gaidzanwa, 2019). This exclusion from active involvement in governance marked a significant departure from the pre-colonial period when women enjoyed less substantial political power.

The liberation struggle in Zimbabwe facilitated positive changes in male-female relations. The national liberation wars of African countries, including Zimbabwe (Second Chimurenga), helped to reshape and insert women's and youth military and political agency into the nationalist narrative (Chaminuka, 2022; Kufakurinani & Nyambara, 2022; Mazambani, 2022). The participation of women and youth in national liberation efforts

was viewed by many as a precursor to a broader agenda of cultural emancipation. It is documented the government of the time cast women in the role of consumers rather than producers of the new nationalist culture (Kajta, 2022; Law, 2020). The post-colonial period from 1980 coincided with the global feminist movement, where women challenged their subservient roles as mothers and wives (Kombo, 2012). The Second Chimurenga provided a platform for women and the youth to challenge colonial views that confined them to subservient roles.

The post-independence period ushered in a new era where women and the youth, having participated in the liberation struggle, renegotiated their roles and statuses. Prominent women and young politicians were included in the new political leadership as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2021; Lotwel, Ongori & Gervasio, 2021). For instance, Joyce Mujuru was appointed Minister of Youth, Sport, and Recreation in 1980 and later became Minister of Community Development and Women's Affairs in 1981. Mujuru, along with other leaders and organisations like the Women's Action Group (WAG), played a crucial role in passing laws that benefitted women, such as the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 and the Equal Pay Act of 1982 (Jung, 2022; Lotwel et al., 2021). The government also introduced the Matrimonial Property Rights Act in 1985, which allowed women to own property and provided protection in cases of divorce (Mhuru, 2023). Additionally, the introduction of universal education at independence ensured that previously marginalised women could access education, improving their chances of participating in the public sphere.

Women are increasingly involved in the leadership of party structures in both ZANU PF and MDC (now Citizens Coalition for

Change), the two dominant political parties in Zimbabwe. Both parties strive to adhere to a policy of at least 30% women in leadership positions (Munamati, 2023). The Government of National Unity (GNU), established by the Global Political Agreement in 2008, included women leaders such as Joyce Mujuru as Vice President and Thokozani Khupe as Deputy Prime Minister. Margaret Dongo, a former ZANU-PF member of parliament, is notable for her independent stance (Zigomo, 2022). She quit the party to contest as an independent candidate, winning the Harare South seat and challenging the ruling party's policies. Her actions exemplify the evolving role of women in Zimbabwean politics, where they are increasingly asserting their independence and challenging traditional norms (Marevesa, 2019).

In contemporary Zimbabwe, media and digital spaces have become pivotal in shaping political discourse and participation. The advent of social media platforms and increased internet penetration has provided marginalised groups, including women and youth, with new avenues to voice their concerns and mobilise for political action (Zeng, 2023). Digital access has enabled these groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information, allowing for more diverse and inclusive representation in political arenas (Chirwa et al 2023). Intersectionality plays a crucial role here, as digital platforms amplify the voices of those at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalisation, such as women of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals. Community empowerment initiatives, often facilitated through online campaigns and digital literacy programmes, have further enhanced the political engagement of these groups (Chirwa et al., 2023). Hence, this study is concerned with the state of an inclusive and equitable political environment that ensures that the voices of all citizens are heard and valued in political processes.

## **Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework for Unveiling Layers of Inclusion**

The theory of intersectionality provides a powerful lens for analysing the complexities of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Developed by feminist scholars like Crenshaw (1989), it critiques traditional approaches that view social identities (race, class, gender, etc.) as independent categories. Intersectionality posits that these identities intersect and interact, shaping individuals' experiences in unique ways (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This framework is crucial for understanding how seemingly separate categories can combine to create distinct forms of marginalisation within political spaces. For example, a young woman from a rural area might face challenges due to her age and gender. However, intersectionality acknowledges that these factors do not operate independently. Her rural socioeconomic background might further limit her access to political information and resources compared to her urban counterpart. This explains the Zimbabwe political landscape which is divided along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and geography (Ndlovu, 2019). Furthermore, intersectionality moves beyond simply ensuring representation based on individual identities. While having diverse voices in government is important (Mansbridge, 1999), it does not guarantee that everyone within those identity groups has equal access and influence. A Black woman politician, for instance, might still face challenges within a male-dominated political system, even if she increases overall racial representation. Intersectionality helps us to understand these internal power dynamics and the specific barriers faced by those with overlapping marginalised identities. Exploring how various identities intersect with power structures, intersectionality reveals how political institutions can benefit certain

groups while marginalising others (Lazar, 2023). For example, political systems that rely largely on conventional media channels may disadvantage people who lack access to these platforms, possibly removing voices from rural or low-income regions.

Intersectionality is not just a critical tool for analysis; it also serves as a framework for designing inclusive political practices (Greer et al., 2023). Understanding how various identities intersect and influence experiences enables the development of targeted strategies to address the specific needs of marginalised groups. For instance, promoting digital inclusion initiatives can empower those who might face traditional barriers to political participation due to geographic location or socio-economic status.

The theoretical idea of intersectionality provides a good framework for studying the processes of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Considering the complex interplay between multiple social categories, intersectionality provides a robust framework for proposing solutions to cultivate inclusivity and increase political participation in Zimbabwe (Morrill & Comas-Diaz, 2022; Zigomo, 2022). Intersectional analysis also demonstrates that men from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. This reality should be juxtaposed with the policy positions enshrined in the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution, such as Sections 60 and 80, which aim to ensure that minority groups are represented without prejudice (Dziva, 2018; Zigomo, 2022). Through leveraging intersectionality as an analytical tool, Zimbabwe can develop a deeper understanding of the unique difficulties faced by marginalised groups, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and participatory political

environment. Our study, therefore, illuminates the myriad issues and prospects associated with establishing a political milieu that is genuinely inclusive and representative of the entire community.

## The Concept of Political Inclusion

The concept of political inclusion has been extensively explored within the democratic theory, emphasising the importance of citizen participation in shaping the political landscape (Dahl, 1989; Sivalo, 2023). However, this study argues that conventional approaches often focus solely on numerical representation, neglecting the lived experiences of diverse groups. This gap in conventional approaches underscores the need to delve deeper into the contextual drivers of political inclusion and exclusion within the political arena.

The research conducted by Mansbridge (1999) serves to emphasise the crucial importance of incorporating a wide array of voices within governmental structures; nonetheless, a more profound comprehension of this topic is deemed necessary for a comprehensive understanding. Conventional frameworks and perspectives may fail to fully acknowledge and address the specific and intricate obstacles encountered by individuals who possess multiple intersecting marginalised identities, as evidenced by the works of Diggs (2022), Alegría and Cheng (2023), and Slaughter and Brown (2022). To illustrate, Crenshaw's (1989) investigation delves into the various forms of discrimination uniquely experienced by black women because of the complex interplay between race and gender. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study identifies and explains how these interconnected aspects of identity affect individuals' ability to engage with and participate in the political arenas of Zimbabwe.

This article stresses the crucial significance of youth involvement, a topic examined by White (2010). White underscores the capacity of young individuals to influence the forthcoming political environment. Nevertheless, there is a need to comprehend the most effective methods to promote youth engagement and provide them with the requisite expertise. Our paper, through a focus on civic education, intends to address this gap. Westheimer's (2002) research accentuates the significance of civic education in nurturing well-informed and involved citizens. Expanding on this understanding, our research delves into understanding how civic education initiatives in Zimbabwe can be customised to stimulate youth participation and enhance a more comprehensive political framework.

## Digital Inclusion in Politics

Expanding beyond the conventional modes of participation as explored in the seminal work of Coppock (2003), our study delves into the intricate role played by digital inclusion in contemporary society. While Coppock primarily concentrates on the digital disparities and challenges related to access to information, a critical aspect, our study pushes the boundaries further by delving into the nuanced ways in which digital platforms can be harnessed to facilitate authentic political involvement. This is especially pertinent for groups at the margins of society who often encounter formidable obstacles to conventional forms of participation. An illustrative case is presented in a study conducted by Chadwick (2017), which probes into the transformative potential of social media in the realm of political mobilisation. Building upon this foundational knowledge, our research explores the specific ways in which enhancing digital inclusion in the context of Zimbabwe serves to amplify the voices of marginalised populations and

cultivate a more inclusive and participatory political environment.

For users, the internet serves two primary purposes which are communication and resource sharing. The Internet is a resource that entertains in addition to education and information. It speeds up networking, transactions, and conversation involvement as a communication tool. To transition to a digital or information society as a nation, adoption and increased usage of digital technology are vital. Three possible outcomes from digital media were discussed by Livingstone and Helsper (2007): (1) the sceptical view that using the Internet adds to the instability of the public sphere; (2) the middle view that Internet communication enhances and supports traditional political participation; and (3) the optimistic view that suggests using the Internet creates new avenues for participation. The Internet has democratised communication and information sources while also facilitating citizen involvement, leading to a better-educated public (Livingstone & Helsper 2007). In addition to providing numerous opportunities for social support and network expansion or maintenance, it also can improve democracy, foster social cohesion, and boost participation. The Internet has empowered citizens by providing more options, facilitating significant new civic practices, and greatly enhancing attention and involvement online.

Our research builds upon existing scholarship by offering a multidimensional exploration of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. It goes beyond representation to examine intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth involvement, and civic education. Through analysing these features, this study sheds light on the multi-layered nature of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political context. Through the submission of insights into these underexplored aspects, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic society.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were used in this study to extract research data. Semi-structured interviews with important stakeholders, such as activists, political figures, and people of marginalised communities, were conducted as part of the qualitative methodology. Convenience and purposive sampling were used in conjunction with these interviews to guarantee a representative and varied sample. To preserve the interviewees' privacy and promote open communication, their identities were kept anonymous due to the delicate nature of the subjects covered, especially those on politics. An essential component of this qualitative method was key informant interviews. The experiences and viewpoints of those directly involved in or impacted by Zimbabwean politics were insightfully revealed through these interviews. Reviewing reports and communications from different interest groups was one of the key data collection methods, providing a wealth of contextual information. Structured surveys were utilised to collect data to corroborate the qualitative findings and offer a more comprehensive framework. These surveys aimed to determine the degree of inclusion in decision-making processes as well as the demographic makeup of political institutions. The survey data made it possible to put a number on the involvement and representation of various demographic groups in political institutions. After data saturation was achieved, the researchers saw that participants were bringing up the same topics repeatedly. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative interview data, which entailed classifying the data and locating significant themes and patterns. This method made it easier to thoroughly analyse the stories and experiences that the respondents provided, which led to a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of the

underlying dynamics. During the research procedure, ethical issues were of the utmost importance. All participants gave their informed consent, and precautions were taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Given the delicate nature of the research issue, the study complied with ethical norms to safeguard the participants' rights and welfare.

## DISCUSSION

### Gender and Youth Representation in Political Institutions

Women's political representation continues to dwindle despite efforts by gender-based civic organisations lobbying for equal representation. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as of the August 2023 harmonised elections, 60 women were among the 280 individuals elected to the parliament. There were substantially fewer women nominated to run in the elections of 2023. Just 68 of the 633 candidates who have registered to contest for the 210 parliamentary seats are women. ZANU-PF fielded 23 candidates out of 68; the CCC fielded 20, and the other 25 came from various minority parties (Mutero et al., 2023). This demonstrates how underrepresented women were in all political parties. Despite constitutional provisions mandating gender equality, women continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making bodies. The findings reveal a troubling pattern of persistent underrepresentation of women in political parties. This automatically undermines their representation of their ideas, policies, and accomplishments as they automatically fall out in parliament.

Women candidates were excluded in part due to a lack of funding. Since the previous elections, the cost of running for

office has increased twentyfold. It was increased from USD 50 to USD 1000 for candidates running for parliament (Mutero et al., 2023). The female presidential contender Linda Masarira was unable to acquire the necessary funds in time to contest at the last minute. The exclusion of Linda Masarira due to her inability to acquire the necessary funds in time highlights the currency issues as a factor of exclusion. The electoral committee required payment of USD in an economy where ordinary citizens earned in local currency. Similarly, Elisabeth Valerio, a female presidential candidate from the United Zimbabwe Alliance (UZA), faced significant challenges during her political campaign. Initially, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) excluded her from the presidential race due to the late submission of her nomination papers and late payment of nomination fees. Valeri took the matter to court and won her case, forcing ZEC to accept her nomination papers. This incident underscores the systematic financial and procedural barriers that women face in Zimbabwean politics (Matshaka & Murambadoro, 2024; Mutingwende, 2023).

Various issues cultivate the widespread exclusion of women from the Zimbabwean political landscape, including male domination and patriarchy, gender identity and sexuality, cultural roles, location, and level of education (Chirawu, 2023). Male dominance in Zimbabwean politics has also extended to media and digital platforms. The media intentionally focuses on male political leaders as exemplified in the previous Zimbabwean harmonised election. Scholars have noted the trend of discriminating against female politicians on social media platforms, challenging their representation, and falling out in parliament (Ncube & Yemurai, 2020).

Responding to a question on the challenges women face in pursuing political careers, and how they can be addressed, a study respondent emphasised the same:

**“ The media needs to stop focusing solely on male politicians and also give women candidates equal coverage. Social media can be a breeding ground for negativity, especially towards women in politics. We need campaigns to challenge these online stereotypes and create a safer space for women to engage in political discourse.**

This trend in media unintentionally perpetuates traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Digital social media replicate the patriarchal attitudes that reinforce sexist attitudes towards women and are used to abuse women. For example, Linda Masarira a female politician intellectually challenged Hopewell Chino'no a seasoned journalist on social media platform X. Instead of engaging her intellectually, the journalist body shamed the female politician, and his followers ridiculed Linda. There were many other incidents where female politicians were attacked on social media over personal matters such as their marital status, age, and private sexual history. Fadzayi Mahere, a former member of the opposition party was repeatedly attacked by trolls for not having a husband and children. If women are unmarried, single parents, or widowed, they are presented as immoral and rebellious, and therefore unfit to be politicians. Fuelled by this prejudice, the persistent attacks make political participation less safe for women and deter them from running for public office (Mutero et al. 2023). Within any electoral procedure, the media possesses considerable power in moulding public opinion and promoting political discussions. Adopting gender-sensitive reporting techniques, challenging ingrained stereotypes, and

amplifying the voices of women could have had a crucial impact on promoting a more inclusive political arena.

Exclusion is also evident among youth. The Zimbabwean government has made efforts to promote youth participation in politics through initiatives such as the National Youth Policy. However, young people still face barriers such as limited access to resources, political patronage systems, and age-based discrimination. The resource model of participation is one of the most well-known theories of political engagement. This paradigm holds that a person's capacity to engage in political arenas depends on their time, money, resources, and civic knowledge. Attending political events in person, such as neighbourhood meetings, rallies, and elections, requires time. Money is also necessary for political contributions and for covering participation-related expenses like childcare and travel. In Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential elections, 52% of youths under 30 reported having cast a ballot. Additionally, youth attendance at rallies during the 2018 election was 18% lower compared to adult attendance at the same rallies (ZESN, 2023). Scholars have long highlighted the lack of meaningful youth participation in policy-making processes contributes to their marginalisation (Masuku & Macheke 2021). In response to a question related to challenges that young people face in engaging with and influencing the political process, one participant had this to say:

“Funding for youth-led political initiatives is scarce, and political parties often treat us like pawns in their games. Age should not be a barrier. We have fresh ideas and a lot of energy, but the system seems rigged against us.

This shows that youth are not taken seriously in politics even though the country boasts of a youthful demography, as revealed by the fact that more than 60% of its approximately 15 million inhabitants are below the age of 25, as reported by the United Nations Population Fund (2023). Nevertheless, this demographic composition fails to manifest itself within the realms of politics, where young individuals encounter a multitude of obstacles hindering their involvement and engagement. Scholars have bemoaned this lack of representation highlighting that it hinders their engagement due to challenges like political interference and marginalisation in decision-making processes (Yingi, 2023). The recently concluded 2023 Harmonised election demonstrates this phenomenon, with only 35 youthful candidates attaining positions in the National Assembly, which is the lower chamber of the Parliament. Within this group, 17 candidates were elected through direct means, 10 candidates gained seats via the allocation of the Youth Quota, and an additional eight candidates secured positions through the Women's Quota (ZESN, 2023). The proportion that makes up 12.5% of the 280-member National Assembly is not proportional to the demographic reality in which more than 60% of Zimbabwe's population is composed of young people. In an interview, a respondent remarked that:

“Our voices as youths are shut out of decision-making processes, and the 2023 harmonised elections are a prime example. Just 35 youth representatives in parliament? That's nowhere near close to reflecting youth representation. We need a system that empowers young people to run for office without relying on quotas or political patronage. Give us a fair shot, and we will show you what we can do. Look at how well youths did in the ZANU-PF primary election.

This statement shows that the youth are interested in politics but sometimes do not have an equal opportunity to participate as politicians. They are only used as pawns to rally voters behind other political candidates.

### **Ethnicity in Zimbabwean and Persons with Disability Representation**

Ethnic minorities, particularly those from marginalised regions such as Matabeleland, face challenges in accessing political representation. The dominance of certain ethnic groups in political parties and institutions can limit the representation of minority voices. One of the residents of Bulawayo in Matabeleland where a minority ethnic group in Zimbabwe is based remarked that:

**“ There is disconnect between the political elite and ethnic minorities. We face hurdles like limited access to resources and institutional barriers that make it difficult to even compete for office. People from Matabeleland are invisible in real Zimbabwean politics. Political parties are dominated by certain ethnicities, and our voices get lost in the shuffle. Look at Matabeleland, a region rich in history and culture, yet underrepresented in government. It's like a system designed to keep certain groups in power. Being a woman from a minority group makes life even more complicated. We need a system that promotes genuine representation, not just token representation.**

The interviewee's thoughts align nicely with intersectionality, as her ethnicity influenced her goal of political representation in addition to her identity as a woman. Similarly, representation of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) is also low. The political participation of persons with disabilities remains low due to physical barriers, lack of accessible

infrastructure, and societal stigma. Efforts to promote PWD inclusion, such as the Disability Act, have been hindered by implementation challenges and inadequate resources and this has also limited their political participation in the political arena. Scholars like Bhawal and Salimath, (2022) have bemoaned the lack of accessible infrastructure, societal stigma, and implementation despite legal efforts. One representative of the PWD hinted that:

**“ Funding for initiatives promoting PWD inclusion is scarce, and resources haven't kept pace with the legal framework. As PWD, we deserve a seat at the table, not on the sidelines, not to let able-bodied people make decisions for us as if they understand us.**

In addition, poor accessibility of public spaces further excludes the disabled from participating in political events. Also, in many cases, caregivers make many of the decisions that impact the disabled in their daily lives, so if caregivers are not active in political and civic spaces this in turn prevents youth with disability from engaging in politics.

### **Digital Divide in Zimbabwe**

There is a need to improve digital access in Zimbabwe to ensure that everyone has affordable internet access and devices. This tackles a layer of exclusion by bringing more voices into the political conversation. Currently, data costs and limited internet infrastructure are preventing participation, particularly in rural areas. Internet access in Zimbabwe is limited, with only 34.8% of the population having internet access as of early 2023 (Mutanda, 2024). This limited access is exacerbated by economic challenges and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Saidi, 2023). There is a disparity in terms of access to the Internet between urban and rural areas. For instance, while 67% of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas,



internet saturation is significantly lower in these regions compared to urban areas, with only 26% of rural residents using social media regularly compared to 67% in urban areas (Mutanda, 2024). The digital divide highlights the challenges faced by rural populations in accessing political information and participating in digital political discourse. Despite these challenges, digital platforms remain a crucial outlet for political participation, especially for marginalised groups who can use these platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information. One member of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services, hinted that the crisis arises from the absence of market competition within the telecommunications sector attributed to the high entry barriers faced by new firms. Such a situation hinders competitive forces and optimal pricing strategies.

The current digital divide illumines vulnerabilities intersect with the internet governance framework in Zimbabwe a case in point is the ban on the use of Starlink (an internet provider) which could provide affordable data and improved internet access. The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) ordered that those who were using Starlink would face arrest since it was unauthorised (Madenga, 2021). Because they wanted a third party to be engaged, the government made it difficult for Starlink services to register. Later, they gave the third-party contract to Wicknell Chivhayo, a controversial and purportedly corrupt businessman. Given that social media is the sole unrestricted public forum for individuals to engage in political discourse without apprehension of repercussions, and a platform for both residents and those in the diaspora to engage, the government needs to commit fully to ensuring universal and

affordable internet connectivity for all citizens. This obligation is compounded by the acknowledgement that technology and online resources are now widely acknowledged as basic human rights (Moyo, 2019).

Political participation in Zimbabwe also intersects with authoritarianism. The government of Zimbabwe has a significant impact on internet access and usage within the country. State-ordered internet shutdowns have been utilised as a form of digital authoritarianism. Mare (2020) observed the same in his paper titled: Internet Shutdowns in Africa: State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns and Digital Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. Shutting down the internet hinders active political participation. A case in point is when the WhatsApp platform was partially closed for nearly 4 hours in July 2016, subsequently followed by a complete shutdown of all internet services for a full week in January 2019. In July 2016, POTRAZ issued a stern written warning to ordinary citizens appeared in one leading local newspaper saying:

**“ We would like all Zimbabweans to know that we are completely against this behaviour and therefore advise that anyone generating, passing on, or sharing such abusive and subversive materials which are tantamount to criminal behaviour will be disconnected and the law will take its course (Chigogo, 2016).**

Remarkably, both events coincided with internal turmoil within the incumbent party, ZANU-PF (Mare, 2019). These shutdowns were prompted by a resurgence of social and digital activism in reaction to constraints on civic space and democratic expression (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). The government employed a law-and-order strategy to impede political engagement (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018).

The confluence of internet connectivity, utilisation, exorbitant data expenses, and inadequate infrastructure impede involvement in political discussions and democratic procedures, especially in rural areas. This predicament is compounded by the absence of competitive dynamics in the telecommunication industry, intersecting with elevated costs and restricted availability. The utilisation of the internet directly influences political engagement and community participation, encroaching upon the fundamental human entitlement to access information and express viewpoints online. Despite acknowledging technology as an essential human prerogative, the authorities persist in prioritising regulation over digital liberties, thereby intensifying the digital disparity and undermining democratic values.

Addressing the digital divide in Zimbabwe requires concerted efforts to ensure universal and affordable internet connectivity, along with safeguarding digital rights and freedoms. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for fostering political participation, democratic expression, and inclusive governance in the country.

## CONCLUSION

### Towards a Democratic System

Intersectional analysis demonstrates that men hailing from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. The examination of intersectionality exposes disparities in political portrayal among women belonging to diverse ethnic groups. In contrast, young individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds come across substantial impediments to engaging in political activities, encompassing restricted educational opportunities, job prospects, and

social connections. The concept of intersectionality brings to light the cumulative impacts of age and socioeconomic standing on the exclusion from political processes. Likewise, ethnic minority populations residing in marginalised areas like Matabeleland encounter institutional obstacles to political representation owing to past marginalisation and political turmoil.

The analysis of intersectionality accentuates the significance of tackling regional variances in political inclusivity. The study shows that a robust democratic system thrives on multiple layers of inclusion, ensuring a tapestry of voices and perspectives is woven into the fabric of political participation. Respect for diversity is essential to encourage political engagement as it facilitates inclusiveness and the embrace of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Within the realm of democratic education, fostering respect for diversity stands as a key objective, particularly within societies characterised by cultural pluralism. However, this is not the scenario in Zimbabwe, where matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are frequently politicised, resulting in discord rather than cohesion. Exploring how attitudes and biases impact women, youths, and those with disabilities can assist policymakers and politicians in cultivating an appreciation for differences, thus enhancing levels of participation.

The study recommends that the 'we versus them' mentality among Zimbabwean leaders needs to change. Discussion and idea-sharing in the political sphere are essential to the health of any democracy. It is critical to have spaces where everybody, regardless of political affiliation, feels free to express themselves. The new political generation that will shape the future, should incorporate diversity, and use technology to heal rather than exacerbate divisions.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.5FF7MKVH>

# Institutionalising inclusion: A study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's role in the 2018 elections

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusion within the electoral process is crucial for democratic societies, ensuring all citizens can participate regardless of background. The study explores how institutional frameworks, particularly electoral management bodies like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), facilitate or hinder inclusivity through their operational mandates. Drawing on data from Election Observation Missions and other sources, this analysis evaluates the ZEC's performance in candidate inclusion, accessibility of polling stations, voter education initiatives, and representation of marginalised groups such as women and youth. Key findings reveal that while ZEC implemented measures to enhance inclusion, challenges persisted, such as accessibility issues for voters with disabilities and uneven voter education coverage. Through a historical backdrop and contextual framework, this paper delves into the role of electoral institutions in promoting democratic processes and enhancing inclusion. The findings underscore both achievements and challenges encountered by the ZEC, suggesting areas for future improvement and policy refinement to strengthen electoral inclusivity through institutional means.

The study concludes by recommending enhanced financial and legislative support for ZEC to bolster its operational capacity and collaboration with other institutions. Addressing these recommendations could mitigate common electoral challenges and further embed inclusive practices within Zimbabwe's electoral framework.

**Key words:** Electoral inclusion, political participation, institutions, accessibility

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is an essential concept that is at the centre of development. The word 'inclusion' can be defined as the level of access to socio-political and economic choice with the added ability to practice these preferences (Dörffel & Schuhmann, 2021). Inclusion additionally means that everyone, irrespective of origin, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or ethnic and religious background, should have an equal opportunity to participate (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). Taking inclusion as the ability to access and practice preference, political inclusion consequently centres elections and the ability of the electorate to alter or reaffirm the political mandate of an administration. The effectiveness of inclusion within this scope of elections varies subject to an individual's perspective and the context in which it is being assessed. On context, Bandama (2023) argues that the prevailing culture within an environment which is the context, is a key determinant towards achieving effectiveness. This aspect of culture is driven and centres on the people and their distinct behaviours and customs which directly shape their context.

By understanding inclusion from the perspective of access and the ability to practice this access within a given context, political inclusion through elections thus brings to the fore institutions that manage elections, namely Election Management Bodies (EMBs) including Election Commissions. EMBs are institutions established to manage and improve the electoral process including nominations, polling processes, voting, counting and results announcements (Langford, Schiel & Wilson, 2021). Furthermore, these institutions look at rates of participation and abstention and based on those results, implement strategies

that are aimed at enabling all eligible voters the right to participate (Scammon, 1967).

Having laid the above foundation of inclusion from the lens of political participation, this paper will interrogate the role of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), evaluating the institution and its role in enhancing or diminishing inclusion using the 2018 elections. Discussing the Electoral Commission within the context of spaces for political participation is based on the reasoning that it is an institution that should ensure that all individuals within eligible franchises are allowed to express their political preferences.

### Significance of 2018 Elections

One of the most pivotal points in Zimbabwe's political history was the November 2017 military-assisted transition which altered the Zimbabwean political landscape. These events put into motion a novel political atmosphere in Zimbabwe which added impetus to the impending elections. The 2018 polls were regarded as an opportunity to "break from the past" (Malunga, 2018). The Institute for Security Studies suggested that the 2018 polls presented an opportunity to develop institutional legitimacy as a breakaway from traditions, however, the proof of this would only be seen post-election (Matyszak, 2017). Another notable aspect of the 2018 elections is that it marked the first time since 2002 that international observers were accredited to monitor the polls.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper does not seek to validate or appraise election outcomes or to judge them as either free or fair, and neither does it seek



to conduct a comparative analysis of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission with its regional or continental contemporaries. Instead, it examines the role of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in ensuring electoral inclusion. While it can be argued that there is no separation between inclusion and 'free and fair,' the function of institutions such as the Commission, should be understood to be that of establishing standards, procedures, and certainty (Tan, 2004). When the standards within the context are established through the institution, one can argue that inclusion would be a certain expectation as all clusters within the voting population would be entitled to practice their access and preference. This underlining of the institution is underscored by the reasoning that institutions regulate the environment or "political domain" (Azari & Smith, 2012). Institutions can enforce measures which have legal significance over the processes thus being well-positioned to facilitate inclusion or exclusion.

## Data Sources

This paper will utilise data from Election Observation Missions (EOM) reports on the 2018 election in Zimbabwe. These reports assess various aspects, including the performance of the Electoral Commission. By analysing this data, the evaluation will measure how effectively the Commission promoted inclusion, judging this against the established definitions of inclusion and the functions of institutions.

## DISCUSSION

### Institutions and Institutionalism

Institutionalism is the study of institutions and the complexities within. This involves looking at the 'rules of the game' within a given society, the constraints and/or

enablers of interaction (North, 2012). Institutionalism does not look at an institution as an isolated structure but rather explores the social, economic, and political interactions that influence the function of the institution (North, 2012). This aspect of interlinkages is further examined through comparative institutionalism where institutionalists explore the institution concerning its environment of operation (Hotho & Saka-Helmhout, 2017).

Institutions are key allies or adversaries within the policy environment as they can either grant or restrict access in addition to being able to make or break ideas (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). The above directly assigns institutions a responsibility within decision-making and when they uphold or relegate this duty, it has implications of positive or negative governance. One can argue that despite there being a deliberate effort to assign obligations to institutions, the measure of success is judged according to the context and environment in which the institutions operate. This underscores the intricate relationship between the institution and its environment. However, despite this, the institution remains at the centre of access for inclusion.

### Background of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)

The historical context of elections in Zimbabwe is filled with examples of the majority being disenfranchised by the minority. Some of these exclusions were based on literacy, specifically the ability to complete a voter application form in English. The imposition of this requirement by an institution aware of the literacy levels of the population demonstrates how the institutional mechanisms of the time facilitated exclusion.

Juxtaposing then and now, Section 59 of the Electoral Act (2:13) recognises “voting by illiterate or physically handicapped people” and allows assistance of such a voter by a person of their choice. This directly highlights how an institution can facilitate access and inclusion mindful of the socio-political context in which the institution operates.

Because the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is the institution in discussion, it is important to lay a historical foundation of how it came about.

The electoral apparatus in Zimbabwe established by the 1980 Electoral Act contained the “Delimitation Commission, the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC), the Registrar General of Elections (RGE), and the Election Directorate” (Makumbe, 2006). Within this system, the ESC supervised the election, with all administrative duties vested in the hands of the RGE.

**Table 1: Responsibilities for electoral entities**

Entity	Responsibility
<i>Elections Directorate</i>	Managed voting logistics, including the provision of materials and equipment
<i>Registrar General of Elections</i>	Registered voters and enforced standards of voter conduct
<i>Delimitation Commission</i>	Conducted delimitation of 120 constituencies every five years
<i>Electoral Supervisory Commission</i>	Supervised and monitored the elections as required by the constitution and invited observers for the polls.

Table designed with data from Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee 3 November 2004 Zimbabwean Ambassador’s briefing. (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2004)

In 2004, after considering several recommendations and through stakeholder meetings, in addition to wanting to align with regional best practices, the ESC submitted a recommendation to establish an institution solely responsible for running elections. This recommendation was adopted and through parliament, Constitutional Amendment No.17 the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) was established. (ZEC, n.d). The formation of ZEC in 2005 was aligned with best practices however the established commission still needed to rely on the Registrar General for electoral operations such as the compilation of the voters roll and registering voters (Sachikonye, 2003). From 2005 until 2013

when a new constitution was drafted, ZEC remained with limited authority over elections despite being the Electoral Commission. In 2013, ZEC became recognised as a Chapter 12 institution, an independent entity according to Section 235 of the constitution. (ZEC, n.d).

It is important to note that, although the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) became an independent institution in 2013, earlier elections in Zimbabwe were still attributed to either the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC) or the ZEC, rather than the Registrar General. This suggests that, despite the administrative complexities within the election structure, the Electoral Commission

was publicly recognised as the body responsible for overseeing the elections. This distinction is crucial when analysing participation using institutional mechanisms.

At this juncture, it can be argued that by looking at the established definitions of institutions as those with the authority to make the “rules of the game” or “the ability to grant or restrict access”, ZEC at this point did not wield that authority but rather the RGE’s office.

### **Present Functions of the Electoral Commission**

After the 2013 changes, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has clearly articulated functions that include “(b) To supervise elections of the President of the Senate and the Speaker and to ensure that those elections are conducted efficiently and in accordance with the law” and to develop the expertise in research and electoral processes (ZEC, n.d). The Constitution of Zimbabwe further highlights the responsibilities of printing the ballot papers, compiling the voters’ roll and register, accrediting observers, and employing their staff in line with employment laws (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2013). From this, the Electoral Commission has the latitude and authority to fully administer all election-related activities in contrast to the former structure where the functions were spread across different departments thereby reducing efficiencies and limiting participation.

Following on the above, the ZEC follows the precepts of the Constitution, Chapter 7 Part 1 (2c) which outlines political and electoral rights to “ensure that all political parties and candidates contesting an election or participating in a referendum have reasonable access to all material and information necessary for them to participate effectively.” This is in stark contrast to the

former responsibility of the ESC which focussed on “supervision.” Based on the above, the Electoral Commission bears a responsibility of ensuring participation which is inclusion, of both parties and voters.

### **Electoral Commission in the 2018 Elections**

This paper has defined inclusion as access and the ability to practice that access within a given context. It has also been outlined that an institution is a formal entity which can determine and regulate the rules of engagement as well as provide or restrict access. As this paper has developed, it has located inclusion within political participation, specifically within elections.

### **Candidate Inclusion**

The 2018 elections saw a high voter turnout which is good for democracy and participation. The research firm Ipsos looks at voter turnout as signifying “interest in politics, desire to vote, stated intention to vote, and depth of party loyalty” (IPSOS, 2024) Within the context of Zimbabwe, all the above can be valid. On interest in politics, the Commonwealth Observer group noted that there were:

“**In 2018, a total of 1,652 National Assembly constituency candidates were successfully nominated for 210 seats. Fifty- five (55) political parties and 247 independent candidates contested in the 210 National Assembly constituencies. For the local council elections, 7,573 candidates were nominated for the 1,958 local authority wards in Zimbabwe**”  
(The Commonwealth 2018).

This is coupled with 23 candidates for the seat of president with four being women, a first-time occurrence in the country.

Looking at the above, the Commission was tasked with ensuring that all candidates were incorporated into the process in a manner that guaranteed inclusivity as outlined in Section 239 of the Constitution. The IRI-NDI observer mission noted that ZEC processed nominations for all candidates on 14 June 2018 with the courts remaining open beyond the official close time to enable candidates to adequately submit their nominations. Considering that the ZEC registered a record number of candidates with the latitude for the candidates to correct errors in their nominations before submission, one can argue that as an institution they enabled and facilitated administrative access for the candidates to exercise their right.

## Accessibility

The Commission set up 10 985 polling stations with 131 000 polling staff across the country including representatives from the youth, women and persons with disabilities. The polling stations were noted to be accessible to voters including those using wheelchairs with the additional measure of having “lowered voting booths.” (IRI-NDI, 2018b). The Carter Center EOM however outlined that access to some polling stations was limited for wheelchair users as outdoor polling booths were in “sandy areas” (The Carter Center, 2020). An additional concern within the polling stations was the lack of braille ballot paper coupled with the absence of assistants to help the visually impaired cast their votes (EODS, 2018). Prior to the election, an individual had filed a petition to have ZEC provide braille, template or tactile voting for the visually impaired, but this was dismissed on account of there being a general lack of adequate braille literacy (EODS, 2018).

The Commission upheld the decision of the High Court but considering the duty of

an institution to provide access, the option to have the ballot should have been provided. Arguably, considering that there was room to have an assistant of the voter’s choice or the provision of one by the commission, this access was still upheld. The Commonwealth and SADC missions observed that there was a mix between the two categories mentioned above with both being able to cast their votes. In ensuring inclusion, ZEC managed to uphold this mandate, but more could have been done to fully include the visually impaired voter through the medium of their preference in contrast to imposing a system upon them.

## Women and Youth

The Electoral Act outlines that political parties must ensure the full participation of women in electoral activities; however, it was observed that at Local Government women’s representation declined from 16 – 14% in the election (Gender Links, 2018). This decline can be attributed to the poor efforts by political parties to mainstream women in electoral activities. The Commission within its inclusion efforts ensured that women and youth are part of the electoral staff that administers elections thus ensuring their inclusion in the process. Outside involving women and youth in administrative positions, the Commission should be empowered to punish political parties that do not abide by Section 5 of the Electoral Act of “ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into electoral processes.”

This aspect of women and youth inclusion is argued through the lens of empowerment despite women being the largest cluster within society. To effectively enable access and inclusion, the Commission should shift this from being a moral argument to a binding requirement.

## Voter Education

To be able to exercise access granted by inclusion, there is a need to have education regarding the latitude to which this access can be exercised. Voter education is enshrined in Section 40 of the Electoral Act to be provided by the Commission and accredited entities other than the institution. An innovation introduced ahead of the 2018 elections was the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) which despite initial apprehension, managed to be accepted through voter education efforts from the Commission and Civil Society Organisations (ZESN, 2017). An illustration of such efforts can be noted through the work of ZESN which designed a factsheet of the BVR including that:

“If implemented in accordance with the internationally accepted principles for voter registration such as inclusivity, transparency, accuracy, integrity, sustainability, comprehensiveness, and security of data, the BVR will result in a clean, comprehensive and credible voters’ roll with no duplicate names and will minimise multiple voting.” (ZESN, 2017).

Additionally, it should be mentioned that by using the BVR, the Commission would be able to update and clean the voters' roll and publish the roll for inspection. The Carter Center report noted that:

“The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) registered a total of 5,695,706 voters, with women comprising 54% of the total. However, more than 92,000 registered individuals were placed on an exclusion list by the ZEC and the Office of the Registrar General. They were excluded due to reasons such as having multiple registrations, incorrect or missing ID information,

and invalidated ID numbers as determined by the registrar general. The ZEC confirmed that those who rectified these issues would be reinstated on the voter roll and allowed to participate in the elections. (The Carter Center, 2020).

The Carter Center (2020) also noted that the Commission managed to conduct voter education including using different communication platforms and translating into 13 languages for reach. The Commonwealth Observer group noted the same however expressed concern at the low level of coverage in rural areas. This low coverage can be attributed to the lack of capacity within the Commission to adequately reach remote areas. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) however noted that the Commission invited village heads into voter education efforts, requesting them to utilise public gatherings to inform the public about the BVR exercise and other election-related issues (ZHRC, 2018).

The Carter Center additionally noted that some stakeholders within voter education

“... considered the existing provisions of the Electoral Act on voter education overly restrictive.” (The Carter Center, 2020).

The restriction in question arguably stems from Section 40C (g) of the Electoral Act which states that:

“the person conducts voter education in accordance with a course or programme of instruction furnished or approved by the Commission; ...”

The above suggests that the Commission exclusively provides or endorses voter education material which can be inferred to as managing or restricting access. Within the strict definitions of the functions of an institution, this is well within the ambits

of their responsibility however, as argued above, the environment in which the institution exists is key in defining success. Within the Zimbabwean context where the Commission has been accused of malpractice (Smith, 2013), “approved by the Commission” can be interpreted as another attempt at underhandedness. On the other hand, as an institution mandated to prepare, conduct, and supervise elections, it may be a measure to ensure that voter education provided aligns with the Electoral Laws within the context and environment of Zimbabwe.

To enhance information for voters, the Commission was noted to have included a toll-free number and SMS number for voters to check their details nonetheless, both the SADC mission and the ZHRC noted that there was still some confusion regarding where to go on election day by the voters (ZHRC, 2018; SEOM, 2018).

It can be asserted that during the 2018 Elections, there were substantial voter education initiatives that underscored the Commission's role in promoting electoral inclusion. The combination of print and digital media, CSOs, faith-based organisations and village Heads widened and diversified the scope of reach of voter education efforts. Furthermore, the Commission has a diversity of stakeholders ensuring that the electorate would be able to access voter information from a source they would trust if they considered the Commission to be biased.

## CONCLUSION

As highlighted above, ZEC was formed in 2005 but was only regarded as a Chapter 12 independent entity in 2013 which accentuates the importance of the 2018 polls. The above discussion centred on the Commission as an institution that either facilitates or restricts inclusion through its electoral operation. What the above highlights is that there are positive measures that the Commission undertook which bolstered inclusion such as updating the voters' roll, facilitating assisted voting, conducting voter education in conjunction with several local stakeholders, and onboarding marginalised and underrepresented groups as electoral staff.

Moving forward, institutions like the ZEC must receive adequate financial and legislative support to fully achieve and implement their intended objectives. The evident lack of funding noticeably restricted the Commission's ability to independently reach remote areas, necessitating reliance on a broader network of stakeholders. Moreover, as the Commission collaborates with other Chapter 12 institutions, it should establish election-focused operational guidelines to ensure each institution fulfils its unique mandate while collectively delivering a successful election. It can be argued that adherence to this suggested guideline by all institutions would address common electoral challenges such as inadequate communication and the under-representation of women, including their targeted harassment, thus further promoting inclusion through institutional mechanisms.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.5FF7MKVH>

# The Zimbabwe political space: An analysis of the barriers to women's participation in electoral processes?

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders'. Since the Beijing conference in 1995, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the 2013 Constitution. The study brings to the fore, findings to respond to 3 fundamental research questions which are: 1) what is the interlinkage between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, 2) what are the complex social inclusion factors in political spaces, and 3) what recommendations can be proffered to enhance inclusion of women in electoral processes. In answering the questions, the research draws on content analysis of reports from the Project on Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics Project (VAWP), face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions to offer insights and investigate the opportunities provided by various legal frameworks to increase women's engagement in electoral and political processes in Zimbabwe. The article further systematically explores other important factors and elements that impede and contribute to women's full participation in electoral processes as candidates. This study contends that the availability of excellent legal provisions does not result in increased women's participation in electoral politics as candidates unless there is political will. The study further asserts that participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates. The study recommends a wholesome approach to dismantling the complex interlinkages between cultural, social, economic, and physical spaces as obstacles affecting the inclusion of women in electoral processes as candidates. Thus, the study further recommends that existing legal instruments should be complemented by progressively dismantling the social, cultural, and physical forces prohibiting women's participation as leaders in electoral processes. Specific provisions in the Electoral Act may further be used to penalise failure by political parties to field a reasonable number of women as candidates in elections.

**Key words:** Political participation, women, elections

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders. Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the introduction of the 2013 Constitution. Female candidates face numerous obstacles, both before and after elections, including insufficient financial support, sexual harassment, and attacks on their character and integrity. These challenges serve as discouragement and hinder the full participation and representation of women in politics. The underlying issue lies in the lack of political will to actively promote the access and substantive presence of women in politics, ensuring that their voices are truly heard and that their membership in political parties is connected to their involvement in leadership positions (Kumar, 2017; Nyawo, 2023). This paper explores the interlinkages between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, and how the complex social inclusion factors shape the political spaces gendered narrative. From a deeper understanding of the issue, it aims to contribute to the discourse on how Zimbabwe can achieve a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all its citizens. By thoroughly studying this rhetoric, the paper aims to set a

practical Zimbabwean/ African agenda for implementing a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all citizens.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant strides have been made globally towards advancing gender equity since 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality (UN Women, 2023), with the increase in female representation in parliaments being a key factor attributed to this progress. Maphosa, Tshuma & Maviza (2015) argue that Zimbabwe has signed and ratified several regional and international instruments that call for gender equality in various spheres of life. However, despite the existence of these supportive instruments, the country has not fared well in advancing the participation of women in politics. The adoption of gender quotas<sup>1</sup> has notably boosted women's presence in legislatures (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2021), as evidenced by the sharp rise observed between 1990 and 2015 (Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg 2017). Concurring with Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg (2017), Fungurai (2024) is of the view that, women currently hold 31.9% of seats in Zimbabwe's parliament, which is an impressive increase from 14.7% in 1995. At the global level currently, only 26.9% of parliamentarians in single or lower houses are women, up from 11% in 1995 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). However, despite the positive impact of quotas, their sustainability and effectiveness in challenging the status quo of male dominance remain under scrutiny, especially in Zimbabwe where the numbers of women representation are dwindling remarkably since 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> The Zimbabwean quota system allows for 70 seats of 280 which is 25% of the full parliament and only 22 women i.e. (11%) were elected to parliament

Højlund Madsen, & Mtero (2023) reveals that the meagre 11% of female representation in the August 2023 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe reflects a major setback in achieving SDG 5.5b, gender equality, and the empowerment of all women and girls. In Africa, efforts have been made to promote women's participation in political leadership roles with Rwanda and South Africa having the highest representation of 56.3% (Kumar, 2017) and 53.5% respectively (Nyawo, 2023). However, disparities with men persist, reflecting deeply ingrained societal beliefs about gender roles, for example, the philosopher Aristotle asserts that men are considered superior to women. This poses a serious dent in women's quest to achieve gender equality in political spheres. Although countries like South Africa and Rwanda have seen notable increases in women's representation due to quotas, the overall representation of women in influential leadership positions on the continent remains low, Zimbabwe included. The current global scenario, where women hold only 23% of parliamentary seats (Chalaby, 2017), highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development (OECD, 2018a).

### **The Toxicity of the Political Playing Field – Violence and Sexual Abuse**

Historical analysis demonstrates that women who have successfully navigated the political landscape since the early 1980s have typically enjoyed certain privileges (occupying

positions of political influence be it locally and nationally), such as being members of the liberation war struggle or having powerful male relatives within the ruling party who can provide protection and financial support for their political campaigns (Padare, 2020). Former Vice President of Zimbabwe Joice Mujuru is a typical example who enjoyed the protection of her husband Solomon Mujuru<sup>2</sup> from independence in 1980 until 2011 when he died, the events that ensued soon after his death led to the dismissal of Joice from her influential position of the vice president of the country. However, when women contest against men, they are often subjected to hate speech, portraying them as unruly and ungovernable, necessitating action to bring them 'back in line.' One common derogatory label used for women candidates is 'prostitute' or 'hure<sup>3</sup>'. Mudiwa (2022) posits that the term 'prostitute' is part of the political grammar in Zimbabwe, used to discipline women's participation in party politics. Such scathing attacks on the moral character of women represent verbal and psychological abuse, aiming to undermine their confidence and dignity when seeking leadership positions in politics.

The political landscape in Zimbabwe is unstable and predicated with violence in all its forms. It is toxic, especially for women as they are easily subjected to numerous challenges that range from sexual abuse physical abuse and recently online abuse. It is especially problematic in politics, where many male politicians utilise SGBV to tame and control women, hence, Open Democracy (2022), posits that men are weaponising online abuse and physical violence to keep women's voices

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Mujuru (born Solomon Tapfumaneyi Mutusva; 5 May 1945 – 15 August 2011), also known by his nom-de-guerre, Rex Nhongo, was a Zimbabwean military officer and politician who led Robert Mugabe's guerrilla forces during the Rhodesian Bush War. He was the husband of the former Vice-President Joice Mujuru.

<sup>2</sup> hure is a Shona word which refers to a promiscuous woman/prostitute

out of politics. Zimbabwean society has normalised the use of violence to silence women who are deemed too politically active. The rise of social media has shown that SGBV is structural and deeply ingrained in Zimbabwean culture. When men lose arguments or fail to back up their opinions with tangible evidence and facts, they often resort to intimidation and emotional and verbal abuse online, (Open Democracy, 2022). Women who are brave enough to speak truth to power and work to close the gender gap in politics are particularly vulnerable to this type of behaviour.

Regrettably, in some instances, this violence has escalated to physical assaults, including beatings, and abductions when women express their political affiliations and challenge men in decision-making positions (Padare, 2020). Joana Mamombe, Netsai Marova, and Cecilia Chimhiri were abducted, sexually assaulted, and jailed in May 2020 for leading a demonstration against the government (Amnesty International, 2020), and disappearances such as Jestina Mukoko<sup>4</sup> in December 2008. These forms of violence and sexual abuse pose significant barriers for women in Zimbabwe who aspire to actively participate in politics and assume leadership positions. Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), and Zim Fact (2023), assert that women candidates frequently face threats, intimidation tactics, and public shaming, albeit varying based on their marital status, age, and party affiliation. The harshness and intolerance against women in politics are done on purpose, ranging from sexist slurs to negative insinuations that breed the potential to discourage women's effective engagement in politics (Nyikadzino, 2023).

Women are sometimes subjected to 'sextortion'<sup>5</sup>, whereby they are coerced into providing sexual favours in exchange for political aggrandisement. A type of violence is semiotic violence (Hay, 2007) perpetrated through images, sexual objectification, words or symbols and is largely targeted toward female electoral candidates, characterising them as unworthy and incompetent (Krook, 2020). Male chauvinism is particularly pronounced when single women challenge men in the political sphere, as men employ tactics of misogyny to denigrate these women for their lack of husbands, thereby weakening their position in the political arena (Padare, 2020). It is important to note that the violence against women in Zimbabwe is not isolated but rather has become a structural and institutionalised phenomenon within electoral and political party systems. The 2018 elections serve as a telling example of how the exploitation and sexual harassment of women through the media, which evolved into cyber violence, resulted in a reduction in women's representation in all political structures from 34% in 2013 to 31% in 2018. Despite the existence of a quota system intended to address gender imbalances (Padare, 2020) the figure further plummeted to 11% during the 2023 elections. A total of 60 seats of the 280 are reserved for women proportional representation which is 21% of the full parliament and only 22 women thus (11%) were elected.

### **Electoral Contests: Voter Intimidation, Persecution, and Arbitrary Arrests**

The Zimbabwean elections have a history of being violent usually characterised by voter intimidation and persecution of the

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<sup>4</sup> Jestina Mukoko is a Zimbabwean human rights activist and the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project

<sup>5</sup> Sextortion (a portmanteau of sex and extortion) employs non-physical forms of coercion to extort sexual favours from the victim.

electorate with divergent views. Violence against women is used as a targeted and damaging strategy throughout the political cycle to discourage women from serving as election administrators, voters, or candidates (Para-Mallam, 2015). Election violence is protracted, and purposeful methods employed by politicians including incumbents and opposition parties to advance their interests or achieve certain political goals during an election (Adolfo et al. 2012). As a result, in rural areas, many politicians deploy illegal electoral techniques, such as militant youth wings, militias, or state security forces, to win elections or boost their post-election negotiating power, (Motau and Tshifhumulo, 2023).

Opposition parties have consistently accused the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party of orchestrating these attacks (Raleigh, 2023). It is estimated that over 200 people lost their lives in 2008 amidst a wave of violence targeting opposition supporters during and after the election (Amnesty International, 2023). According to Zakari (2015), violence against women in elections can be overt or subtle. In addition to physical harm, violence can manifest in the form of gender-based hate speech, with the sinister goal of discouraging women from running for office or voting in elections. Online violent methods are now common in Zimbabwe's political space where opponents, especially women, are subjected to cyberbullying and trolling. Trolling involved sexual assault and rape threats, hate speech, reputation-related blackmailing, and sexualised insults (NDI, 2021). Opposition leader, Linda Masarira<sup>6</sup> is widely trolled on social media platforms, especially on X.

The inability of some countries like Uganda and Kenya to reach the critical mass makes violence, normalised in politics, a potential reason for gender differences in political participation (Krook, 2020). Hence, electoral violence is one issue that has been identified as a barrier to women's full participation in politics and governance (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2018).

## Effects of Institutionalised Party Politics

The political landscape worldwide is deeply rooted in patriarchy, hence it is male-dominated. In this regard, it leaves little room for women to freely participate without retribution either from the outside world or the political parties they represent. Ikebgu (2018) asserts that it is arguably accepted that leadership in Africa both at its traditional, religious, economic, social, and political strands is male-dominated. Before the age of modernity, political participation, and social and economic activism were the exclusive preserve of men with women scantily seen featuring in areas of minor importance. Over the years, the landscape of mainstream politics has seen a retreat of many women from taking up political posts. Those who have chosen to remain often find themselves confined to the women's wings of their respective political parties, serving as praise singers and staunch party supporters but lacking any meaningful decision-making capacity (Kumar, 2017; Højlund Madsen, & Mtero, 2023) in Zimbabwe's main political parties - Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) and Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A).

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Masarira, the president of Labour, Economists and African Democrats party (LEAD), has faced a barrage of online harassment and abuse on various social media platforms due to her outspoken views, particularly those critical of the opposition party Citizen Coalition for Change.

Despite Zimbabwe's constitution providing for equal representation, women's participation in politics remains alarmingly low at 11%, as highlighted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2023). While political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs dedicated to advocating for issues important to female voters, their involvement typically does not translate into real power or inclusion. The male-dominated nature of political parties poses significant challenges for women, as they are often side-lined and their importance disregarded (Maphosa et al, 2015; Kumar, 2017; Padare, 2021). The image of a powerful female leader is a 'psychic threat' (Manne, 2018) to patriarchal structures and the male-dominant political arena (Paxton, Hughes & Barnes, 2020).

Political parties frequently fail to support the political empowerment of women, denying them proper tickets (Kumar, 2017) as doubts are cast on the viability of female candidates and perpetuating the notion that women are unfit for governance and decision-making. These parties, with their entrenched patriarchal structures, lack of internal democracy, and dearth of women in decision-making positions, continue to marginalise women and maintain the existing status quo. Inactive participation and instances of sexual violence further serve as barriers to women's involvement in politics. Political parties' public declarations of commitment to gender

equality often fall short in practice. Women, when chosen for leadership positions are made to fight each other –the case of Jessie Majome<sup>7</sup> and Johanna Mamombe<sup>8</sup> in 2018, a similar case was witnessed earlier in 2014 when Grace Mugabe<sup>9</sup> was put afore to fight and shame Joice Mujuru<sup>10</sup>. Zigomo (2022), and Højlund Madsen, & Mtero. (2023) posit that systematic obstacles such as votes of no confidence in female candidates and clashes with established, male-dominated networks at national and local levels are deliberately designed to deny women nominations and electoral success. Although political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs aimed at advocating for female voters, their primary role has increasingly shifted towards mobilising women during election campaigns and promoting male candidates, rather than fostering the retention of power and inclusion for women in politics (Mlambo et al, 2019; Zigomo, 2022). Moreover, within political party structures, there is a lack of policies that protect candidates, particularly women, from politically motivated violence, hate speech, and sexual harassment. The way political parties are structured, with women's wings and youth wings is a form of gatekeeping that keeps women and young people away from mainstream politics (Dahlerup, 2006). These systemic issues further hinder women's participation and representation in politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Jessie Majome was a Member of the National Assembly of the Parliament of Zimbabwe for Harare West constituency on an MDC-T ticket elected 1st in 2008 and then in 2013 and was demoted to pave way for Johanna Mamombe

<sup>8</sup> Joana Mamombe is a Zimbabwean politician, representing Harare West (Citizens Coalition for Change) who was first elected in Parliament in 2018 after the demotion of Jessie Majome

<sup>9</sup> Grace Mugabe is the former first lady who was influential in the fall of Joice Mujuru

<sup>10</sup> Joice Mujuru, Zimbabwe's first woman vice-President who was demoted and subsequently chased out of ZANU-PF after being accused of fanning factionalism within the party

## Cultural and Traditional Norms

Women are also exposed to the cultural and traditional norms that hinder them from assuming positions of power in the political realm. Violence against women in electoral processes also cascades from the private unit, that is, the family up to the national level. Discrimination against women from assuming political positions in Zimbabwe extends even to their own families, where they are often expected to confine themselves to the domestic sphere (Nyawo, 2023). Men, seeking to maintain their dominance, underestimate women and limit their opportunities (Kumar, 2017). In the realm of politics, women face additional challenges as they are unable to rely on support from their families, which hinders their ability to fully represent themselves in political spheres. Thus Padare (2020) has the notion that the underrepresentation of women is deeply ingrained in a patriarchal system that spans from the pre-colonial era to the colonial and post-colonial periods. This system has become a hegemony, perpetuating gender inequality and suppressing women's voices.

According to Moagi and Mtombeni (2020), it is worth noting that in the pre-colonial era, women held positions of influence in African traditional society - they were very active in the public domain; in politics as Princesses, Queen mothers, and regents; and in religion as prophets, diviners, and rainmakers. However, the advent of colonialism introduced a new framework that defined women primarily through the institution of family and marriage, while men maintained individual identities defined by participation in public institutions (Sheldon, 2018). The problem of gender inequality begins within the confines of the home, where husbands may be uncomfortable with women engaging in the public sphere, especially

considering the levels of toxicity of the politics that prevail in Zimbabwe. Additionally, gender roles and responsibilities place a heavy burden on women's time, as they are often responsible for caregiving duties, including looking after children, sick individuals, domestic chores, and elderly family members. On average, women spend 49.7 hours per week on these tasks, compared to 26.7 hours for men (Lowe, Morna, Makamure, & Glenwright, 2018). The unpaid care work performed by women not only affects their economic productivity but also hinders national development in the country.

## Economic Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics

Access to and control over resources in Zimbabwe heavily favours men, creating a significant disadvantage for women seeking recognition and respect as leaders. To gain prominence and support, leaders in Zimbabwe often need to provide resources to the people (Zigomo, 2022) which is a problem with most female politicians who usually find themselves at the horns of a dilemma as they lack the financial muscle to appease the wants of the general public during campaigns. To participate in leadership positions in elections money is a fundamental aspect, without which many women are relegated to singing praises for those with the funds to finance their campaigns. Economically deprived groups with "less access to money, including women" are disadvantaged (World Bank 2022). However, women candidates often need more resources compared to their male counterparts. While campaign finances are available to political parties through the Political Parties Finance Act, they are predominantly utilised by men rather than women (Padare, 2020) as most political parties doubt the ability of women to be good. This puts women, particularly those under

proportional representation, who mainly rely on the women's quota, in a challenging position as they have to finance themselves to be nominated at the party level. In 2018, the prevailing approach by most parties was to relegate women to the quota, with only a few women actively campaigning for representation in a constituency and receiving funding.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design using in-depth interviews was used to gather data for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with women who had contested for Local Authority, National Assembly and Presidential seats to solicit personal experiences of political violence. Fifteen in-depth interviews comprising 6 women who had contested for Local Authority seats, 8 women who had contested for National Assembly seats and 1 presidential aspirant were conducted. Six (6) FGDs with 10 participants each were conducted in Bulawayo, Harare, Matopo, Shamva, Buhera, and Lupane. The areas were chosen because of their previous history of incidences of physical violence against women in politics. The FGDs had community members, government stakeholders, aspiring members, Councillors and Members of parliament. Also, a validation meeting was conducted in which 35 women from across the country were in attendance. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study to ensure that the women who had participated in public electoral or political processes and had experience in the subject matter were recruited. The method used was effective as it gave the researcher and the participants a chance to deeply engage in the subject matter at hand. This goes into the gist of in-depth interviews which according to Rutledge and Hogg (2020) detailed information that sheds

light on an individual's perspective, experiences, feelings and the derived meaning about a particular topic or issue. During the interviews, the women were asked about the specific forms of political-related violence they had experienced, the causes of such violence, and what they thought could be done to address political violence faced by women in politics. The interviews were conducted in English language, which is one of the country's official languages. The participants consented to have the interview sessions recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

## FINDINGS

The research demonstrated that several factors are limiting the participation of women in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. These include sexual violence, physical violence, emotional or psychological violence, cultural norms and values, party politics, voter intimidation, political persecution, political violence and a general lack of financial means.

Sexual violence which manifests itself through sexualised remarks, altered pornography and rape is one of the most common types of violence experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. This is primarily because of rampant male misogyny in the political and electoral arena in Zimbabwe. Although generally sexual violence is culturally frowned upon in the country, somehow sexual violence against women in politics is not given the same societal disapproval. Possibly, this is due to a general societal assumption that women who venture into politics or electoral processes willingly expose themselves to acts of violence. Women in politics are sexually violated to intimidate and scare them from participating in electoral or political



processes. Anyone was deemed a potential perpetrator of this type of abuse, however, men in influential political party positions, state security personnel and overzealous supporters of political parties they do not support were identified as the main perpetrators of sexual violence against women in politics.

**“ As a woman in politics, I have a lot of abuse that has taken a toll on my mental health. I have experienced altered pornography online, but I cannot do much about it despite the presence of the Data Protection Act as it was sent online by a troll account. I have grown thick skin to survive this male-dominated field. (Excerpt from an in-depth interviewee)**

Despite knowing that they are being sexually violated, in some instances, women in politics tolerate sexual assault from political party gatekeepers to climb the political ladder. This form of violence was rampant due to the ‘first-pass-the-post’ (FTPT)<sup>11</sup>, particularly in party primary elections since they lacked equal means to be on an equal footing to contest with their male counterparts. For example, women reported that sexual favours were rendered to secure party support to represent it in public elections or to be nominated for the women’s quota system.

**“ Men who hold powerful positions in my party are well known for demanding sexual favours from women to sign their papers to contest as party candidates for the women’s quota. Although the government meant well by making provisions for the Women’s Quota in**

**the 2013 Constitution, the provision has been used to sexually assault women in my party. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Psychological violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. The women reported that the most common forms of emotional violence were threats of abduction, kidnapping and disappearance. Although this form of violence is experienced by both men and women in politics, the effects and severity of the threats were reported to be direr for women than men. Given the history of the country in enforced disappearances and kidnappings, this form of violence unsettles women aspiring for public political positions.

**“ Since I joined active politics, I have received countless threats of abduction. During the first days, I used to scare away women from active politics. Politics in Zimbabwe is not child’s play! If not strong and wise, you can easily quit. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Further, the study findings highlighted that women in politics also experienced stalking as a form of psychological violence. The women reported that they experienced stalking both online (social media trolls) and offline where unknown male characters would stalk them both in public and private spaces.

**“ Towards the March 2008 general elections, I had to dump my car at a garage and started using taxis after I noticed that someone was stalking me. I also had to vacate my lodgings and temporarily stay with a friend, as I was afraid that the stalker would harm me or kill me. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

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<sup>11</sup> This system, also known as the "winner-takes-all" system, was introduced in 1987 after the amendment of the Electoral Act and replaced the proportional representation (PR) system that was previously used. As a result of the system, one first satisfies requirements of a political party to be seconded to represent that party in elections

Cyberbullying or online violence is another form of violence experienced by women in politics in Zimbabwe. This form of violence manifests itself in the form of catfishing, name-calling, sexist remarks and threats of physical or sexual harm. In-depth interviewees argued that the aforementioned forms of violence served to depersonalise and systematically exclude them from participating at par with their male counterparts, who although exposed to the same forms of violence have patriarchy as their shield. In addition, in-depth interviews also highlighted that cyberbullying nurtured feelings of low self-esteem, which affected women's participation in politics and electoral processes.

“ The internet has been abused to preserve male hegemony in political and electoral processes. Since the 2018 elections, there has been a steady increase in cyberbullying or online harassment of women in politics. I have been called all vile names from a home wrecker, a good-for-nothing woman, and a whore who has kids with different fathers. It's too much to bear all in the name of politics. Something has to be done to ensure the safety of women in politics and women in general online. (Excerpt from an FGD)

Notwithstanding several pieces of legislation to foster gender equality and women's empowerment in political processes, women continue to experience emotional violence through excessive moral regulation. There is a structural expectation for women in politics and electoral processes to have a high level of morality, chastity and sexual purity compared to their male counterparts. This is done to confine women to the private space where they can be good housewives, or to court potential marriage suitors. In a society

that places high regard on marriage, women's participation in politics is frowned upon by the society as the women are deemed domineering, not suitable for marriage or are classified as home wreckers.

Physical violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes in Zimbabwe. This form of abuse manifests in the form of physical beatings or assaults and kidnappings. The women reported that at times they are beaten or have their hair pulled to deter them from participating in politics. This form of abuse just like sexual violence is perpetrated at family and communal levels.

“ Although I have not experienced physical violence, I have seen women in politics being beaten or kidnapped. This is horrendous and has to be stopped as it drives women away from political processes. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)

General systemic political violence, which is a normal phenomenon in Zimbabwean politics and electoral systems impacts heavily on the participation of women in politics. Women are intimidated by violence that occurs to men in politics.

“ The country's elections and political processes are heavily characterised by political violence. It takes great courage for a woman to participate in the electoral process. (Excerpt from a FGD)

The political environment in Zimbabwe is very toxic to such an extent that families and husbands would not want to let their daughters and wives participate as it is associated with some vices which are not acceptable in the communities. Participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and

influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates.

**“ Who would want to let his wife be a politician in this country where politics is associated with everything bad? If one does not sleep her way up the ladder, she will be ridiculed in front of her family so it's better to stay as a housewife or have other professional jobs. (Excerpt from a FGD)**

The cultural norms in the country are a major setback in allowing one to fully participate in politics as a society usually views women who actively take leading roles in politics as being loose and not fit for the conservative African communities. Men are given the upper hand over their female counterparts and usually feel threatened by women in leadership positions.

**“ Men are not yet prepared to see women leaders, even if there is an elected woman leader during meetings her words are not considered until they get support from men. Our societies do not think women can be leaders. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

## DISCUSSION

This is the first study to focus on violence against women candidates in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. It shows that women in politics mostly experience psychological and sexual violence while fewer women experience physical violence. The findings of this study are void of statistical significance and lack generalisability due to the research design employed. Further, the study did not include experiences of political violence from other groups of women in politics or electoral processes such as election administrators, government officials, party supporters and human rights defenders. The study focused primarily on women as candidates in politics or electoral processes as its main hypothesis was that violence against female candidates was responsible for the continued decline of women participating in electoral and political processes in the country. Notwithstanding the identified limitations of this study, the findings corroborate with findings from Sanin (2018), UN Women (2019) Johnson-Myers (2021), and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) which highlight that there is a high prevalence of political violence against women in politics that is hinged on masculine hegemony and male dominance globally. The study findings highlight that women in politics experienced a wide range of violations. In particular, study participants reported that they experienced sexual violence. These findings corroborate those found in Burundi and Zimbabwe by van Baalem (2017) and the Open Democracy (2022) where women in politics experienced sexual violence.

The findings further highlight that young women, unmarried (never married, divorced or widowed) in politics were more susceptible to sexual violence compared to their married and older women in politics.

This is a shift from the literature van Baalen (2017); Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) and Krause (2020) which did not show how socio-demographic variables contributed to violence against women in politics. Party leaders, male colleagues within political parties, supporters of parties they do not belong to and state security agents, mainly perpetrate sexual violence against women in politics and electoral processes. These findings are similar to Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) on political violence against women in politics in West Africa. For sexual violence, women in politics just like women in general, Rohleder, & Flowers (2018) hardly reported cases to the police for assistance. Partly, this is so because of the general perception that violence against women in politics is a price paid by women who venture into politics or electoral processes (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). There is a need, therefore, for political parties, government, and the electoral management body (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) to produce monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that identify and address sexual violence against women in politics.

The study findings also highlight that women in politics experience sextortion and altered pornography. This study notes that for Zimbabwe, sextortion has been widely researched in other areas such as access to employment opportunities or economic opportunities and social opportunities (Mvelase, Z., & Mvuvu, T. 2021, Transparency International 2020), however, there is a dearth of literature on the subject when it relates to sextortion in political spaces. This study opines that the government and other development partners should economically empower women in politics such that they have sufficient resources to independently participate in politics.

The study also established that women in politics or electoral processes experience psychological abuse in its varied forms such as threats of abduction, rape or killing, stalking both physical and online, and cyber or online violence. All the study participants attested to having experienced this form of violence. These findings are confirmed by literature from other contexts Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), van Baalem (2017), and Krause (2020) which found that women in politics experienced higher levels of psychological violence compared to their male counterparts. The high prevalence of psychological violence calls for a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to managing the scourge. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) reports that women in politics or electoral processes are disproportionately exposed to cyber violence to discredit them as credible candidates. Given that, Zimbabwe has a youthful demography and a huge online presence.

## CONCLUSION

The study noted that the adoption of gender quotas has helped boost women's presence in the legislature, however, the gender quotas have not effectively addressed gender disparities in political office representation of women as evidenced by the continued decline of women seconded by their political parties to contest as members of parliament or councillors in Zimbabwe. Despite global efforts to advance gender equity in governance and politics, women's representation in Zimbabwean elective politics remains low at 11%, as of August 2023, indicating significant gender disparities in political leadership positions. Further, subsequent recalls of elected officials in the aftermath of the 2023 elections have worsened the representation in the legislature as most of the recalled female representatives were replaced by males. Women's participation in elective politics in Zimbabwe

despite the presence of gender quotas is a result of a myriad of factors such as endemic political violence which is characterised by violence, hate speech, intimidation, sexual violence and intimidation which can be interpreted to be meant to scare away women from elective political processes. Patriarchal cultural norms, which reserve the domestic arena to females and the public arena to males, coupled with male hegemony and misogyny, lack of financial resources to compete at an equal footing with their male counterparts also hinder women's

participation in elective politics. Further, lack of a legal framework to govern the operations of political parties and to enforce equal representation of women also affects participation of women in elective political processes. There is therefore an urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development in Zimbabwe as women are subtly forced to assume positions of less influence in the political realm.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.MMQSP5FW>

## Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the causes of the Zimbabwean economic crisis beyond the sanctions imposed by the West. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, blames the sanctions for the economic woes, but this research argues that other factors are also responsible. This study is purely qualitative as it synthesises the existing knowledge and uses interviews to gather data. The findings reveal that the economic crisis is rooted in colonial legacies, corruption, institutional failures, maladministration, and regional and international dynamics that have undermined Zimbabwe's economic potential and performance. The research confirms the negative impact of sanctions on the economy but shows that they are not the main or only cause of the crisis in Zimbabwe. The research concludes with some policy recommendations for addressing economic challenges and restoring growth and stability in Zimbabwe.

**Key words:** Economic crisis, economic stability, colonial legacies, corruption, economic sanction

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's economic struggles have been a subject of debate for years, with the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), often attributing the country's woes to external factors such as sanctions. However, it is essential to critically examine the internal dynamics that have played a significant role in hindering economic growth. Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa that gained its independence from Britain in 1980. Since then, the country has faced multiple challenges in governance and development, such as political instability, economic decline, social unrest, and human rights violations. Zimbabwe has also been subject to various sanctions from different actors, such as the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations, for its alleged violations of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These sanctions have had significant impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society, affecting its trade, investment, aid, and debt.

However, sanctions are not the only factor that explains Zimbabwe's economic challenges. The country's economic performance and prospects are also influenced by other factors, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics. For instance, Zimbabwe inherited a dual economy from its colonial past, characterised by a large informal sector and a small formal sector. The informal sector accounts for about 60% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs about 80% of the labour force (Irshad, 2023). The informal sector faces many challenges, such as low productivity, poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, and lack of social protection (Duma, 2023). The formal sector, on the other hand, has been

shrinking due to deindustrialisation, corruption, policy uncertainty, and macroeconomic instability (Mujeri, 2023).

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's economic challenges have also been influenced by its regional and global environment. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its members. However, Zimbabwe's relations with some of its neighbours have been strained due to various issues, such as migration, trade disputes, border conflicts, and water sharing (World Bank, 2021). Zimbabwe has also faced challenges in re-engaging with the international community and seeking support from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Zimbabwe has accumulated a large external debt of about \$8 billion (World Bank, 2021), which limits its access to concessional financing and debt relief.

This paper aims to analyse Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions. It will examine how sanctions have affected Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects compared with other countries in the region and the world. It will further explore the other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic difficulties and how they can be overcome. It will use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys and indicators with qualitative data from interviews and document analysis. It will employ a political economy framework to analyse the underlying causes and consequences of Zimbabwe's economic challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach, collecting data from a diverse range of sources including journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and speeches from governmental officials both online and during pressers. The research synthesised existing knowledge on key economic indicators such as growth, inflation, unemployment, poverty, and trade. The qualitative data encompasses both published and unpublished interviews and document analyses from key stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organisations, business leaders, and ordinary citizens. The study delved into the historical, political, and social factors that have shaped Zimbabwe's economic trajectory and governance system. By examining these dimensions, the research aimed to uncover the complex interplay of factors contributing to the current economic situation in the country. The methodology involved a detailed document analysis, where various sources were critically examined to extract relevant information. This included analysing policy documents, government reports, and academic literature to understand the broader context of Zimbabwe's economic issues. Additionally, the study incorporated insights from interviews with key stakeholders, providing a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing Zimbabwe.

The authors used a desktop approach for this study, which involved collecting and analysing data from existing sources rather than conducting new fieldwork. This approach was justified for several reasons. Firstly, a vast amount of relevant data and literature on Zimbabwe's economic issues is readily available through online databases, libraries, and official publications. This made it feasible to gather comprehensive information without

the need for extensive fieldwork. Secondly, conducting fieldwork, especially in a country with significant logistical and political challenges like Zimbabwe, can be costly and time-consuming. The desktop approach allowed the researchers to efficiently utilise available resources and complete the study within a reasonable timeframe. Thirdly, by analysing a wide range of existing documents and reports, the study was able to incorporate diverse perspectives and insights from various stakeholders, including those who might be difficult to reach through direct interviews. Lastly, understanding the historical, political, and social factors influencing Zimbabwe's economy requires access to historical documents and records, which are often best accessed through desktop research. By employing a desktop approach, the study was able to provide a thorough and well-rounded analysis of Zimbabwe's economic challenges and potential solutions. This methodology ensured that the research was both comprehensive and efficient, leveraging existing resources to offer valuable insights into the complex economic landscape of Zimbabwe.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopts a political economy perspective to investigate the economic challenges that Zimbabwe faces beyond sanctions. Political economy is an interdisciplinary approach that studies the interplay between politics, institutions, and economic outcomes. It considers how political actors, interests, and power structures shape economic policies and processes, and how economic factors influence political behaviour and institutions (Kohn, 2021). The paper draws on the literature on the political economy of development, which examines the causes and consequences of economic growth and development across countries and regions.

This literature explores how different factors, such as history, geography, culture, institutions, governance, and external influences affect the development trajectories and performance of different countries (Renelt, 1991).

The paper also utilises the literature on the political economy of sanctions, which investigates the effects and effectiveness of sanctions as a foreign policy tool. This literature examines how sanctions affect the target country's economy, politics, and society, and how the target country responds to sanctions through various strategies, such as compliance, defiance, adaptation, or evasion (King & Fullerton, 1984). The paper applies these theoretical insights to the case of Zimbabwe, a country that has faced multiple sanctions from different actors since its independence in 1980. The paper examines how sanctions have impacted Zimbabwe's economic situation and prospects, and how Zimbabwe has coped with sanctions through various political and economic reforms. The paper also explores the other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics.

### **The effects of sanctions on Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects**

Sanctions have affected Zimbabwe in various ways, both directly and indirectly. According to some estimates, Zimbabwe has lost more than \$150 billion due to sanctions imposed by the European Union and countries such as the United States following reports of election rigging and human rights abuses in the early 2000s (Mabvunga, 2023). These sanctions have restricted Zimbabwe's access

to trade, investment, aid and debt relief, as well as its participation in regional and global markets. Sanctions have also contributed to Zimbabwe's isolation from the international community due to its reputation as a risky destination for business and tourism.

According to Brett (2005), Zimbabwe's economic challenges have been exacerbated by its poor governance system, which has been marked by authoritarianism, violence, patronage, and repression. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, has dominated the political scene since independence and has faced little opposition or accountability (Rwodzi, 2024). The party has used its control over the state apparatus to pursue its own interests and agendas, often at the expense of the majority of Zimbabweans. The party has also violated the human rights and freedoms of its citizens, especially those who oppose or criticise it. The party has also failed to implement meaningful political and economic reforms that could address the country's structural problems and improve its development outcomes. The failed implementation of the economic policy reforms includes the land reform program which aimed to redistribute land from white commercial farmers to black Zimbabweans and was poorly executed. The lack of clear policies and support for new farmers led to a decline in agricultural productivity and food security (Africa Check, nd). In addition to this, the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act, a policy that required foreign-owned companies to cede 51% of their shares to local Zimbabweans was substantially abused by political elites and this economic policy deterred foreign investment and led to economic stagnation due to the lack of clear implementation guidelines and the perception of expropriation.

Despite numerous promises, ZANU-PF has failed to effectively tackle corruption using the Anti-Corruption Measures which

have been put in place by the ZANU-PF government. High-profile corruption cases often go unpunished, and there is a lack of transparency and accountability in government operations as highlighted in the *Daily Maverick* (2023, September 19). Politically, ZANU-PF has resisted implementing reforms to ensure free and fair elections. Issues such as voter intimidation, manipulation of voter rolls, and lack of transparency in the electoral process have undermined the credibility of elections (Daily Maverick, 2023). On the other hand, the government of Zimbabwe has not effectively diversified the economy beyond agriculture and mining. This has made the economy vulnerable to external shocks and limited job creation and economic growth (Change Radio Zimbabwe, 2023). Efforts to reform the bloated and inefficient public sector have been inadequate. The public sector remains overstaffed and underperforming, draining public resources that could be used for development (Change Radio Zimbabwe, 2023). These failures have contributed to Zimbabwe's ongoing economic challenges and hindered its development prospects.

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's economic challenges have been influenced by its regional and global environment. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its members. However, Zimbabwe's relations with some of its neighbours have been strained due to various issues, such as migration, trade disputes, border conflicts, and water sharing (BBC News, 2019). Zimbabwe has also faced challenges in re-engaging with the international community and seeking support from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Zimbabwe has accumulated a large external debt of about \$8 billion (Mabvunga, 2023),

which limits its access to concessional financing and debt relief.

Sanctions have affected Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects in negative ways, but they are not the sole cause of its economic challenges. Zimbabwe also faces other factors that hinder its economic growth and development, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics. To overcome these challenges and improve its economic performance and prospects, Zimbabwe needs to implement political and economic reforms that respect the rule of law, human rights, and social justice. It also needs to engage in regional and international cooperation to foster peace, security, and economic integration.

### **The political and economic strategies implemented by Zimbabwe to cope with sanctions and address its economic challenges**

The Transitional Stabilisation Programme (TSP) (October 2018–December 2020), aimed to stabilise the macroeconomic environment, restore fiscal and monetary discipline, liberalise the foreign exchange market, restructure the public sector, and improve the business climate (Mavaza, 2020). The National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) (2021–2025), is the current policy framework that seeks to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth, social development, and poverty reduction. The NDS1 focuses on six key areas: governance, macroeconomic stability and financial re-engagement, inclusive growth, human capital development, environmental protection and resilience building, and international engagement and re-engagement (Chidoko, 2023).

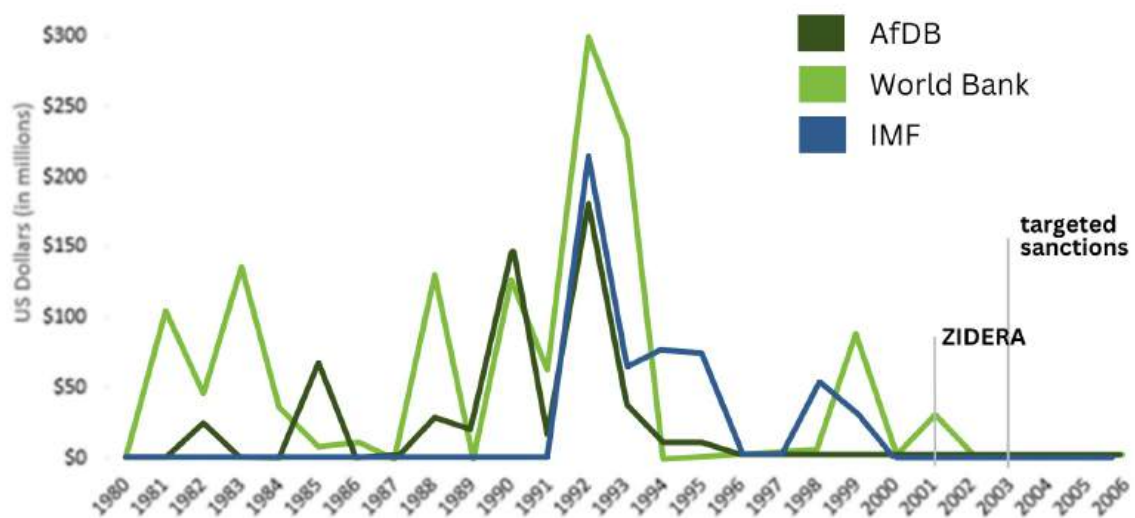
The Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), is a platform for dialogue and cooperation among various political parties and stakeholders in Zimbabwe. The POLAD was initiated by President Mnangagwa after the disputed 2018 elections and aims to promote peace, unity, and national development. The POLAD has established thematic committees to address various issues, such as governance and legislative reforms, economic development, social welfare, media reforms, and international relations (Noyes, 2020). These reforms have shown some positive results, such as reducing inflation, increasing foreign currency inflows, improving public service delivery, and enhancing regional and international cooperation. However, they have also faced some challenges and criticisms, such as lack of transparency, accountability, and participation; resistance from vested interests; inadequate resources and capacity; and persistent sanctions from some countries. Therefore, Zimbabwe needs to continue implementing these reforms comprehensively and consistently to cope with sanctions and to address its economic challenges.

## Other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic difficulties

### *Decrease in multilateral financial institutions' allocations to Zimbabwe.*

The statistics provided by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe from 1980 to 2006 show the relationship between multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB). Zimbabwe enjoyed a significant balance of payments. However, RBZ stated that everything started to change in early 2000 when the EU and USA declared sanctions on Zimbabwe. As we look further at the RBZ data, multilateral institutions suspended their support way back in 1998 and 1999. The decline is due to the failure of the government of Zimbabwe to service its debt. The information corresponds with the interviews conducted with one of the key informants who stated that the economic crisis started way before 2000 due to the government's failure to pay its debts.

## MFI Allocations



**Figure 1: Multilateral financial institutions allocations to Zimbabwe, 1980–2006**

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2007)

### ***Institutional weaknesses***

Zimbabwe suffers from weak institutions that undermine the rule of law, accountability, and transparency. The country ranks low on various governance indicators, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and political stability (Muronzi, 2022). The country also faces challenges in enforcing contracts, protecting property rights, resolving insolvency, and registering businesses. These institutional weaknesses discourage investment, innovation, and competition in the economy.

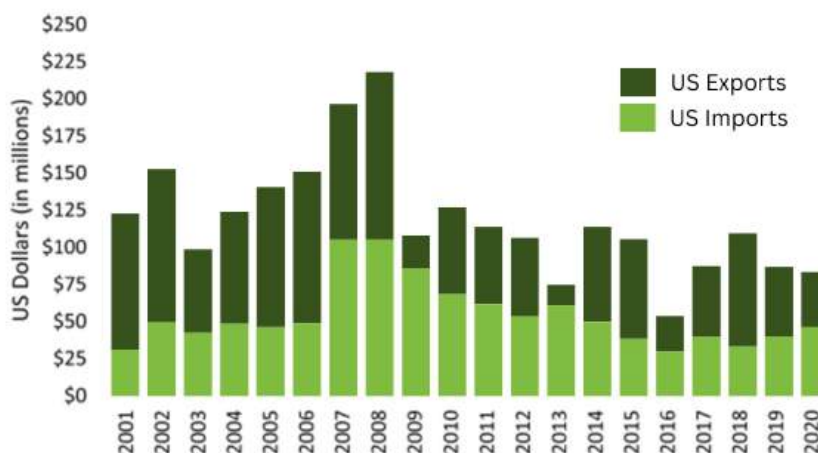
### ***Targeted sanctions and trade***

The data from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe demonstrates that the US has maintained a significant trade relationship with Zimbabwe, despite sanctions. In 2020, the US exported goods and services worth nearly \$45 million to Zimbabwe, while Zimbabwe's exports to the US totalled approximately \$35 million (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2021). This suggests that trade between the two nations has continued, albeit with some restrictions. Additionally, the US has also proffered significant humanitarian aid, totalling \$1.4 billion from 2001 to 2010 and

over \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance and development programs since 2010 (Ndakaripa, 2021). Similarly, according to Nyoni (2019), the European Union has imposed targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe, prohibiting the sale of arms and related materials, while also providing humanitarian aid through non-governmental organisations. However, the sanctions are targeted because they hold the ruling elite accountable and disrupt the illicit financial networks that perpetuate corruption and repression (Chingono, 2010). By targeting companies like Sakunda Holdings, which has been linked to regime insiders, sanctions can limit access to resources that fuel human rights abuses (US Department of State, 2022).

The sanctioning of key economic companies, such as Zisco Steel, Chemplex Holdings and Zimbabwe Fertilizer Company, has disrupted Zimbabwe's agricultural production, worsening food insecurity nationwide (Hupile, 2021). Unfortunately, humanitarian exemptions have fallen short, failing to adequately alleviate the crisis. This has resulted in devastating consequences for vulnerable populations, highlighting the need for a reassessment of targeted sanctions and exploration of alternative solutions to support democratic reforms without harming the broader population.

## **US Exports and Imports**



**Figure 2: The trade relations between the United States of America and Zimbabwe**

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2021)



## The decrease of the Foreign Direct Investment

The data proffered by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe in 2006 indicates that sanctions were pushing negative publicity by portraying Zimbabwe as a risky investment destination. The RBZ further highlighted that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflow declined drastically from USD 444.3 million in 1998 to just 3.8 million registered in 2003 when the sanctions started to hurt Zimbabwe (Ndakaripa, 2021). The decline of FDI is responsible for the economic challenges that Zimbabwe is currently facing.

However, it should be highlighted that the FDI has been declining since the 1990s

when the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs were adopted in Zimbabwe (Ndakaripa, 2021). From the above, it is clear that the FDI inflow has been below USD 50 million from the period of 2000 to 2006. The situation changed in 2009 due to the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). Zimbabwe obtained almost USD 745 million in FDI inflow due to the change of government. Most of the investors were banking their hopes on the change of government. However, in 2019, the FDI decreased to USD 280 million, when it became clear that the political environment was still unpredictable and unstable. Since 2009, there has been an increase in FDI although it is still low.

## FDI Inflows in Zimbabwe

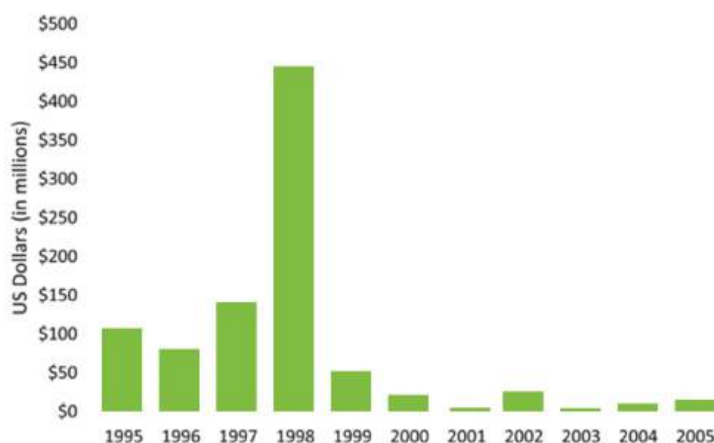


Figure 3: Foreign Direct Investment inflows in Zimbabwe

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2007)

## POSSIBLE REFORMS AND ACTIONS

To overcome these factors and improve its economic performance and prospects, Zimbabwe needs to implement political and economic reforms that respect the rule of law, human rights, and social justice. It also needs to engage in regional and international cooperation to foster peace, security, and economic integration.

**Political reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to undergo a democratic transition that respects the will of the people and ensures free and fair elections. It also needs to strengthen its institutions and processes that uphold the separation of powers, checks and balances, and civic participation. It also needs to protect the human rights and freedoms of its citizens and ensure accountability for past abuses.

**Economic reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to stabilise its macroeconomic environment by reducing inflation, restoring fiscal and monetary discipline, liberalising the foreign exchange market, and resolving its debt crisis. It also needs to diversify its economy by promoting sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, mining, and agriculture. It also needs to improve its business climate by simplifying regulations, enforcing contracts, protecting property rights, and fighting corruption.

**Social reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to invest in human capital development by improving access to quality education, health care, social protection, and food security. It also needs to address the social inequalities and vulnerabilities that affect women, youth, minorities, and rural populations. It also needs to enhance its resilience to shocks such as droughts, floods, pandemics, and conflicts.

**Regional and international cooperation:** Zimbabwe needs to resolve its outstanding issues with its neighbours and strengthen its ties with other African countries and organisations. It also needs to re-engage with the global community and seek support from multilateral agencies for its development agenda. It also needs to comply with international norms and standards on human rights, trade, environment, and security.

## CONCLUSION

Sanctions have had impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society, affecting trade, investment and debt, but they are not the sole cause of Zimbabwe's economic woes. This research has highlighted that poor governance, weak institutions and corruption are responsible for economic challenges. In addition, the inability to borrow from financial institutions, for instance, has more to do with bad debt than sanctions.

To prudently solve Zimbabwe's economic challenges, it is important to consider a multifaceted approach that involves both domestic and international efforts. This may include implementing economic reforms, improving governance, and addressing human rights concerns. The African Union and the Southern African Development Community are integral in fostering behaviour change and persuading the Zimbabwean government to prioritise democratic reforms and human rights. Complementary processes that encourage behaviour change and enable the eventual lifting of sanctions are critical to support Zimbabwe's economic recovery and foster sustainable stability.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.4EJCFRE7>

# Harnessing the diaspora advantage: Building knowledge democracy and inclusive growth in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

As Africa strides towards attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063 for inclusive development, harnessing both internal and external expertise is crucial. Yet, the continent's vast, highly skilled diaspora remains largely sidelined in education systems and knowledge economies. This paper explores the lived experiences of the African diaspora including professionals, innovators, entrepreneurs, and African stakeholders, including academics, university leadership, policymakers, and business leaders, using the coloniality lens to develop a framework for equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge democracy. Data collection involved interviews with 25 diaspora professionals and 15 African stakeholders. Findings revealed a complex interplay of factors which constrain equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge democracy which promotes diaspora contribution to Africa's development. However, both groups expressed a strong commitment to Africa's progress. The paper proposes a framework for collaborative approaches for dismantling colonial dividers through policy supported by building blocks such as incentives and support, knowledge exchange, engagement channels, and impact reviews. By positioning the diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners, Africa can accelerate research translation and fuel sustainable growth.

**Key words:** Africa, diaspora, knowledge democracy, brain gain, collaboration+

## INTRODUCTION

The African diaspora, comprising over 50 million individuals globally, represents a vast untapped potential for transformative development across the continent (Edeh, Osidipe, Ehizuelen, & Zhao, 2021). Despite this rich reservoir of skills, knowledge, and resources, effectively harnessing this potential remains challenging due to historical, socio-economic, and governance factors (Chikanda, Crush, & Walton-Roberts, 2016; Edeh, Zhao, Osidipe, & Lou, 2023).

The discourse on African emigration has shifted from a 'brain drain' paradigm to more optimistic notions of 'brain circulation,' recognising positive impacts such as remittances, skill repatriation, and knowledge exchange. While some African countries have enacted diaspora-focused policies, implementation issues persist, often sidelining broader knowledge exchange opportunities.

Current diaspora engagement initiatives, including grassroots associations, capacity-building programs, and philanthropic endeavours, demonstrate potential but face challenges in sustainability and alignment with local needs. This paper identifies a significant gap in the literature: the lack of a unifying framework that consolidates individual efforts into a cohesive impact strategy and provides mechanisms for sustaining long-term engagement.

By applying the coloniality theory, this study aims to uncover hidden power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies that hinder full diaspora participation in African development. This paper explores the lived experiences of diaspora professionals and African stakeholders to develop a framework for equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge

democracy, using the coloniality lens as a theoretical framework. We define the unit of analysis as the individual and collective experiences and perspectives of these diaspora professionals and institutional stakeholders.

Key findings reveal complex factors driving emigration, challenges in diaspora engagement, and potential solutions for narrowing development gaps. This paper concludes that by reconceptualising diaspora engagement and moving towards strategies emphasising knowledge sharing and active participation, Africa can harness its global human capital to catalyse equitable and sustainable development. The proposed framework offers a pathway to create an environment marked by recognition, respect, and reciprocity, essential for fostering a truly inclusive African knowledge democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'diaspora' itself has evolved, mirroring the complexities of migration (Britannica, 2024; Dufoix, 2011). While historically associated with forced displacement, slavery, civil unrest, and colonialism, it has come to also encompass the modern dynamics of voluntary migration and economic expatriation (Gevorkyan, 2022; Zeleza, 2019; Agunias & Newland, 2012). Despite this expanded definition, existing categorisations, like 'migrant' or 'expatriate,' can impart a transient or privileged status that fails to encompass the diverse contributions of these individuals irrespective of their settlement or socio-economic status (Andresen et al., 2022). Such labels carry political undertones, often marginalising diaspora communities in socio-political discourse by perpetuating otherness (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Brubaker, 2005). It may suggest a sense of otherness or foreignness

that can impact how migrants are perceived and treated, potentially leading to stereotypes, discrimination, or exclusion (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2013; Anderson, 2019). This paper posits a re-conceptualisation of diaspora engagement, valuing all contributions from mobile and settled persons alike as vital to Africa's development.

Historically, the 'brain drain' paradigm dominated discussions on emigration, highlighting concerns over human capital flight from African nations (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Martin & Papademetriou, 1991). This narrative has since transitioned towards optimistic notions of 'brain circulation,' lauding the positive impacts of remittances, skill repatriation, philanthropy, and knowledge exchange (Alem, 2016; Gnimassoun & Anyanwu, 2019). Such a shift has spurred countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Rwanda to enact diaspora-focused policies, endeavouring to capture the beneficial impacts (Gamlen, 2006; Rustomjee, 2018). These policy frameworks, while proactive, often grapple with implementation issues, including bureaucratic rigidity and a predisposition toward economic incentives and high-profile diaspora, consequently sidelining the broader spectrum of knowledge exchange.

Grassroots diaspora associations and networks, such as the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the Network of Diasporic African Scholars (NDAS), have emerged as pivotal in supporting continental collaboration amongst African scholars in the diaspora (Langa, 2018). Their role in facilitating intellectual discourse is undeniable, yet they are frequently beleaguered by funding inconsistencies and difficulties in achieving widespread engagement, which undermines their sustainability (Kuznetsov, 2006). Likewise, capacity-building initiatives such as

the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (CADFP) have made inroads in fostering scholarly communities, but strategic planning and sustainable funding are requisites for ensuring that such impacts endure (Zezeza, 2013).

In the academic arena, initiatives spearheaded by higher education institutions, including the Diaspora Engage program by the University of Ghana and the Diaspora Advisory Board at the University of Cape Town, underscore the potential for universities to nurture diaspora relations. These programs, however, are not immune to challenges, such as faculty and institutional stability, which can disrupt long-term diaspora engagement, highlighting the necessity for institutional commitment and continuity (Pratt & de Vries, 2023).

Philanthropic endeavours also play a noteworthy role in creating educational and scholarly opportunities, for example, the Next Einstein Initiative and Rhodes Scholarships. Despite their contributions, these programs are often limited by their alignment with donor interests, which do not always resonate with local needs, and by the perennial challenge of securing sustainable funding (Knittel et al., 2023).

Through this examination of existing diaspora engagement initiatives, it becomes clear there exists a significant gap within the literature—a deficiency in a unifying framework that consolidates individual efforts into a cohesive impact strategy. Also, it does not provide sufficient analysis of the mechanisms necessary for sustaining long-term engagement through systematic support and collaboration. This gap emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach that

assembles the fragmented landscape of diaspora contributions.

This integrative approach predicates the need for a framework cognisant of the enduring legacies of colonial history on diaspora interactions. The diaspora's relationship to their homelands is often framed within contexts established during colonial rule, with remnants influencing both policy and perception, limiting potential contributions across borders (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). It is evident that an examination and deconstruction of colonial legacies embedded within current diaspora engagement strategies are required to foster a more equitable and effective model of collaboration.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of coloniality provides a critical lens for understanding the persistent power structures and knowledge hierarchies that continue to shape global interactions in the postcolonial era, despite the formal end of colonial rule. Originating in the Latin American decolonial movement, coloniality theory dissects the enduring power structures and knowledge hierarchies that persist despite the formal end of colonial rule influencing culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production, even after the dismantling of colonial administrations. (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Dussel, 1995).

The coloniality theory has evolved to encompass a global perspective, recognising its impact not only on former colonies but also on the colonising powers. Scholars have examined its economic dimensions, highlighting unequal economic relations between the Global North and South (Grosfoguel, 2011), as well as its cultural

aspects, exploring how colonial ideologies continue to shape identities and social practices (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In this paper, we found the coloniality theory particularly relevant for analysing the complex relationship between the African diaspora and their homelands. Specifically, the focus was on how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence engagement policies and practices, shaping how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued. It reveals how Western-centric narratives have historically marginalised African epistemologies, culture and innovations, creating a hierarchy that privileges certain forms of knowledge over others (Elabor-Idemudia, 2021; Kessi et al., 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Quijano, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007). Additionally, the coloniality of migration (Grosfoguel, 2013) demonstrates how contemporary policies often mirror colonial-era restrictions, hindering diaspora engagement (Mbembe, 2017).

Recent scholarship has expanded on the concept of coloniality, exploring its intersections with race, gender, and class (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This nuanced understanding allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities in diaspora engagement. By deconstructing these power dynamics, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive model of knowledge democracy that values diverse perspectives and dismantles structural barriers to participation.

Within the broader field of postcolonial studies, coloniality theory intersects with other critical frameworks such as decoloniality and postcolonial feminism. Decoloniality, as articulated by scholars like Mignolo (2011) and Walsh (2013), emphasises the need to delink from Western-centric epistemologies and ontologies, advocating for the recognition and revitalisation of



indigenous knowledge systems. Postcolonial feminism, represented by the works of Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1984), critiques the gendered dimensions of colonialism and neocolonialism, highlighting the unique experiences and perspectives of women in the postcolonial world.

While a valuable tool, coloniality theory has limitations. Some critics argue that it can be overly deterministic, neglecting agency and resistance (Prakash, 1995) and that it can essentialise experiences of colonialism (Cooper, 2005). Additionally, it has been criticised for its potential Eurocentrism and for oversimplifying complex realities. The theory may also underemphasise agency and overlook the diversity of experiences across the African continent.

Despite these limitations, coloniality theory remains a powerful framework for understanding the complexities of diaspora engagement in Africa. This theoretical framework informs our study design, data collection, and analysis techniques. By interrogating current diaspora engagement approaches and conceptualisations of the diaspora itself using the coloniality theory, this paper underscores the urgency of moving toward strategies that emphasise knowledge sharing and active participation. The resulting framework advocates for a dismantling of the divides that have long segmented talent across the African diaspora while fostering strengthened relationships that capitalise on the synergistic possibilities found across diverse diaspora backgrounds. It is only through such inclusive, forward-looking approaches that the continent can harness the full spectrum of its global human capital and catalyse a development trajectory that is not only sustainable but also equitable and reflective of its rich diversity.

In delineating this comprehensive framework for diaspora engagement, empirical evidence such as the proactive initiatives undertaken by transnational African science communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shaw, 2021) and successful partnerships between diaspora networks, local communities, and governments will be instrumental. These instances provide invaluable insights into creating responsive and sustainable engagement strategies that reflect the complex realities of the African diaspora.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What factors drive the emigration of African diaspora and how do these impact their willingness to contribute to African development?
- What challenges do African institutions face in engaging with and transferring knowledge from the diaspora?
- What are potential solutions for narrowing development gaps and promoting inclusive growth in Africa?
- What framework of diaspora engagement can be derived from these solutions?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper was drawn from a qualitative study to obtain an in-depth understanding of diaspora professionals' and African stakeholders' experiences and perspectives. Qualitative methods facilitate the exploration of complex social phenomena through nuanced, contextual insights not

easily quantifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to select 25 diaspora professionals and 15 stakeholders from professional networks, organisations, and conferences. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews lasting 40-45 minutes using carefully designed interview guides based on literature and theory.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was employed using NVivo software to identify, analyse, and report themes. The research team iteratively reviewed codes and themes to ensure an accurate representation of the data.

Thematic analysis identified, analysed and reported themes to provide a rich interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo assisted in organised, efficient coding. Researchers reviewed codes and themes iteratively to accurately represent data.

Trustworthiness was established through various processes. Credibility involved members checking to confirm the accurate interpretation. Thick description enhances transferability for other contexts. An audit trail maintained through documentation ensures dependability. Lastly, reflexive journals and peer debriefing achieved confirmability by mitigating bias.

Given the theoretical lens, reflexivity and positional awareness recognised the researchers' background could influence interpretation (Haraway, 1988). An ongoing reflexive practice bracketed assumptions for transparency.

We acknowledge the limitations relating to the relatively small sample size may limit the generalisability of findings also considering that the sample may not fully represent the diversity of the African diaspora or the continent's various regions.

Additionally, qualitative analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation, which we have attempted to mitigate through rigorous coding practices and peer review. Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures perspectives at a single point in time, potentially missing longitudinal trends. Through acknowledging these limitations, we aim to provide a transparent and nuanced analysis, contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse on diaspora engagement and knowledge democracy in Africa.

## FINDINGS

The findings from this study illuminate the intricate dynamics that shape the relationship between the African diaspora and their home continent, revealing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in their engagement. Through the lens of coloniality theory, we uncover how historical power structures and knowledge hierarchies continue to influence contemporary diaspora experiences and aspirations, addressing our research questions on factors driving emigration, challenges in engagement, and potential solutions for inclusive growth.

### Factors driving emigration and the consequences

Addressing our first research question, we found that economic disparities, political instability, and the pursuit of better opportunities emerge as key drivers of emigration among African diaspora professionals and innovators. The allure of advanced economies and the promise of professional growth often compel individuals to seek livelihoods abroad. However, their journeys are not without obstacles, reflecting the persistent influence of coloniality in shaping global mobility and opportunity structures.

Many participants encountered systemic barriers in host countries, including the non-recognition of qualifications, cultural adjustment challenges, and discriminatory practices. These experiences underscore the enduring impact of colonial legacies on contemporary migration patterns and integration processes. As one participant noted:

**“ It was a bit of a rude awakening to discover international experience and qualifications are not always valued as highly as domestic ones, contradicting my initial assumption that my degree would smoothly transfer over. But I have since learned cultural adjustments take time and have continued pursuing opportunities to contribute my skills wherever possible while also considering additional training options that may improve my competitiveness in this market.**

This narrative aligns with coloniality theory's emphasis on the persistence of hierarchical knowledge structures that privilege Western credentials over those from the Global South.

The experiences of innovators seeking support for their projects further illustrate the challenges stemming from colonial-era governance structures. One green power developer shared:

**“ I called the President's Office and I told them about my projects as well as where I was coming from. They asked me to bring a DVD with the videos and a short presentation as well as a letter stating what I wanted from the President. They also suggested that I should leave another DVD at the Ministry of Science and Technology office. I did exactly what I was told to do. I waited for a response but none came.**

This account demonstrates how bureaucratic inefficiencies, often rooted in colonial administrative legacies, can impede innovation and contribute to brain drain (e.g. Carbajal and Calvo 2021; Khalid and Urbański 2021; Zanabazar et al. 2021).

Highly skilled migrants, too, narrated tales of economic despair and political volatility back home, which pushed them to seek safety and prosperity abroad. However, the idealised expectations of employment in the host country often collided with the harsh reality of unrecognised qualifications and systemic barriers, as corroborated by the findings of Thondhlana et al. (2016). These individuals encounter a gamut of disabling factors: denied recognition of credentials, inflated tuition fees reserved for foreign students, cultural and language barriers, and discrimination—frequently forcing them into positions that underutilise their skills if they manage to find employment at all.

This complex interplay of factors propelling and discouraging the mobility of diaspora professionals and innovators underscores the persistent influence of coloniality. This is evident in the lack of infrastructural and institutional support for professionals, resulting from historically entrenched disparities. Works such as those by Nkrumah (1965) on neocolonialism and its impact on economic structures, and Mamdani (1996) discussing the lasting effects of colonial governance, provide historical context to the current disparities. Modern studies offer empirical evidence of the direct correlation between these historical disparities and the present-day brain drain phenomenon reinforcing the understanding that the scarcity of support for local talent is rooted deeply in the enduring shadows of colonial history.

## Factors determining diaspora professionals' and innovators' willingness/decisions to contribute to their home countries

Transitioning to our second research question, we explored the factors determining diaspora professionals' and innovators' willingness to contribute to their home countries. Despite the challenges they face, many diaspora members demonstrate a strong commitment to African development, driven by complex personal and cultural motivations.

Individual factors such as familial responsibility, experiences of marginalisation abroad, national pride, and the aspiration to return home fuel the desire to contribute to homeland development. As one participant expressed:

“ When you see what is happening back home, particularly in the health sector, there is a lot of frustration, because you always wonder 'Why can't things not be like the way you see here?' It's not that people are not intelligent, but they don't have the resources, or things have been mismanaged.

This sentiment reflects the tension between the desire to contribute and the recognition of structural challenges, a dynamic that coloniality theory helps explain by highlighting the persistent inequalities in resource distribution and governance.

Cultural expectations and perceived obligations also play a significant role in motivating diaspora engagement. One entrepreneur, inspired by personal experience, initiated a dialysis centre in her home country:

“ When you go to dialysis centres at home, you see loads of people who need help. Some cannot afford to pay and they are left to die. So we decided to help by offering dialysis treatment to about ten poor patients per month for free.

This example illustrates how diaspora members leverage their transnational positions to address development gaps, challenging the notion of a simple "brain drain" and showcasing the potential for "brain circulation" as conceptualised in recent diaspora studies.

These personal drivers, which include both emotional ties and strategic decisions, are echoed in research noting the prominence of identity, homeland pride, and developmental aspirations (Kopchick et al 2022; Madziva et al 2021; Thondhlana and Madziva 2018).

## The challenges and potential solutions for African institutions to engage the diaspora

Our third research question focused on the challenges African institutions face in engaging with and transferring knowledge from the diaspora. The findings reveal a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that hinder effective collaboration. We combined the challenges with the fourth research question on suggested solutions as these were usually tackled by participants as a unified response.

Analyses from studies such as those carried out by Shin et al. (2022) and Olayiwola et al. (2020) have pointed towards a dichotomy where, on one hand, the African diaspora is seen as a beacon of hope and, on the other, engagement with them is fraught with systematic, policy-induced, and sociocultural

hurdles. Insights from scholarly works (Brinkerhoff, 2012) and narratives from participants provided a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted barriers at play including the following challenges and suggested solutions.

### **Trust and physical presence in business operations**

The issue of trust, or rather the lack thereof, in doing business from afar was a major concern as a participant noted:

**“ You hear stories about not doing business in Africa if you are not physically present. People tell you of how they've been burned, and how you're not there. Oh, they're going to siphon your money. Oh, they won't do the job, they won't do this, and they won't do that.**

Echoing a similar challenge, one academic who sought reintegration with a former institution expressed sentiments of being labelled unpatriotic:

**“ I was told that my former Vice Chancellor would never be accepted back as my former colleagues viewed diaspora academics as traitors who were quick to desert their institutions at the slightest sign of economic problems.**

The experience of being labelled as unpatriotic was dismissed by Baser & Swain (2009) who viewed embracing diaspora academics as promoting 'brain circulation' thereby enriching both their host and home countries. However, institutional resistance and stigma often challenge their reintegration, as noted in their research.

Participants suggested that to mitigate this issue, African institutions could develop secure platforms for business transactions that assure both parties. As one noted:

**“ Possible solutions could include providing legal support for diaspora investors and creating transparent mechanisms for project monitoring. Fostering partnerships with reputable diaspora organisations can also help build credibility.**

Additionally, participants also highlighted the need for educational institutions to actively promote programs that facilitate the integration of diaspora members, such as temporary or virtual returns. Promoting success stories of diasporic contributions can change perceptions and highlight the value these academics bring. Utilising technology to create robust and secure platforms for virtual engagement of the diaspora in mentoring, consultancy, and knowledge-sharing can help in overcoming some of the barriers caused by distance. Reinforcing collaborations between diaspora academics and home country institutions through joint research projects and academic exchange programs can help by tapping into cutting-edge research and educational resources.

### **Corruption and institutional reliability**

Corruption emerged as a recurring theme, particularly from the institutional participants as one explicated:

**“ The problem with Africa is still that of corruption. We sat down with the government officials and tried to convince them to consider diasporans as we would get the cheapest possible price... but they weren't buying into it. We suspect that the officials wanted a bribe.**

The account of government officials demanding bribes points to a larger issue that has been well-documented in the literature (Brinkerhoff, 2012). Corruption not only hampers direct investment but also tarnishes the perceived credibility of institutions, which is crucial for the diaspora's involvement.

Participants considered policy reforms and fair implementation as necessary to tackle corruption. This could include strengthening anti-corruption legislation, ensuring the independence of anti-corruption bodies, and creating a culture of accountability. Encouragingly, international collaborations with agencies that have a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption were seen as a strategy to improve the current practices.

### **Institutional and legal barriers**

Institutional stakeholders in Africa often struggle with limited resources, bureaucratic rigidity, and a lack of clear policies for diaspora engagement. This institutional landscape, shaped by colonial and postcolonial governance structures, can create barriers to effective knowledge transfer and collaboration. As one university administrator noted:

**“ We recognise the value of diaspora expertise, but our systems are not always flexible enough to accommodate their unique positions. Sometimes, it's a challenge just to create appropriate contractual arrangements for short-term collaborations.**

This comment highlights the need for institutional reforms that can better facilitate diaspora engagement, addressing the legacy of colonial-era administrative structures that may not be conducive to modern, transnational collaborations.

Participants highlighted institutional barriers as challenges hindering their contribution. For example, an educator with a decade of experience overseas narrated the arduousness of re-establishing a career back home due to immense bureaucratic barriers. Similarly, a diaspora investor dedicated to the proliferation of rural schools underscores the procedural adversities faced by narrating:

**“ Securing permits, finding local partners, it is a constant battle. If the processes were smoother, we could do so much more.**

The frustration voiced here gestures towards an institutional rigidity that not only debilitates proactive change-makers but also implicitly discredits the qualifications and potential of African diaspora members to propound improvements in their own communities.

Moreover, prevailing colonial-era mobility constraints that affect the diaspora, as discussed by a social entrepreneur looking to invest in impactful local projects, demonstrate the failure of policy frameworks to adapt to the contemporary needs of transnational African professionals. The entrenched vision of diaspora members as 'foreigners', rather than as nationals with vested interests and invaluable contributions, exemplifies how policies remain entrenched in archaic, exclusionary paradigms.

By side-lining African know-how and favouring expatriate expertise, these countries inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of dependency and undermine their own pool of highly skilled professionals eager to contribute to their nation's growth and well-being. African institutions must recalibrate their recognition and integration processes, policies, and perceptions to foster an environment that embraces its diaspora as a critical resource for development and innovation.

## Stigma attached to diaspora talent

Beyond institutional and legal barriers, there is a stigma attached to diaspora talent, according to one innovator:

“ I have seen a number of my designs being used in my country mainly in telecoms. Those products were supplied by foreign companies I licensed the technologies to and my countrymen embraced the products because they came through foreign companies - Can you imagine? In Africa, we embrace technologies from abroad, yet a number of these products are African brains.

The stigma attached to diaspora talent is particularly discouraging for African innovators who face obstacles in having their work recognised and valued in their home markets. The preference for foreign products, even when local inventors create them, is a manifestation of postcolonial consumer behaviour that devalues local expertise in favour of foreigners, as discussed by Shizha (2010). This attitude undermines the potential for local industry growth and the cultivation of indigenous innovation ecosystems.

To change the stigma against local innovation, participants suggested the need to promote 'Made in Africa' campaigns that highlight local success stories in innovation and embrace innovations by the African diaspora. As one participant commented:

“ Do you know that one-third of entrepreneurs/innovators in the USA are foreigners? Our sons and daughters are part of designing teams designing cars at those big car makers, amazing computer programmers, fixing aircraft for major airlines, and pioneering medical solutions.

This acknowledgement of the African diaspora's significant contribution to global innovation speaks to the concept of 'brain gain', where the skills and expertise of those living outside the continent can be leveraged for its development. As highlighted by a participant, many Africans abroad are excelling in various sectors such as technology, automotive, aviation, and medicine. Studies by Nkongolo-Bakenda & Chrysostome (2013) emphasise the valuable contributions of the diaspora to entrepreneurship and innovation in their home countries, should effective engagement strategies be employed.

Participants recommended the establishment of effective knowledge networks that tap into the expertise and talent of the diaspora for innovation, research, development, and education such as think tanks or innovation hubs that are partially manned by professionals from the diaspora. It was also noted that African countries can set up dedicated diaspora offices to provide support to repatriates seeking to start businesses, focusing on proper checks without the intention to intimidate them. Recognising diaspora contributions at national events and through media could also foster a supportive environment.

## Scrutiny of Diaspora Endeavours

Participants highlighted instances where successful endeavours are met with scrutiny rather than support. In this regard, some participants felt that there were efforts to “Pull him/her Down” when someone appeared to be doing well. One successful innovator reported:

“ We were investigated by all security agencies, many felt threatened by our business. We were questioned about the source of our funds, our partners, other governments, companies we were doing business with, and some rubbished us.

These findings reflect a broader sense of jealousy, scrutiny and scepticism towards the diaspora as observed by Agyeman (2014). For Mercer et al. (2009) these behaviours can sometimes stem from concerns about unequal wealth distribution, neo-colonial influences, or the perceived allegiance of the diaspora members. This cultural dynamic can discourage diaspora engagement and detract from the collaborative potential between local and international African talents.

To address this, participants suggested the establishment of fair legal frameworks that protect entrepreneurs and investors, including those from the diaspora. These frameworks should standardise the scrutiny process to ensure that it is not arbitrarily applied or used to intimidate successful diasporans but is instead part of a routine due diligence that fosters transparency and confidence among all stakeholders. Where these policies are in place participants decried the unfair implementation processes which tended to favour high-profile diaspora figures at the expense of broader diaspora interests.

## Enabling Diaspora Engagement

Developing financing mechanisms such as diaspora bonds or investment funds to support diaspora-led projects was suggested. This could include providing tax incentives for diaspora investments, offering matching grants for development projects, or reducing bureaucratic hurdles for business setup and

land acquisition. This would go a long way in assisting the diaspora beyond just using them as one participant suggested:

“ We need to move beyond seeing the diaspora as just a source of remittances. There's a wealth of knowledge and experience that can transform our institutions if we create the right channels for collaboration.

This perspective aligns with coloniality theory's call for decolonising knowledge structures and recognising the value of diverse epistemologies in driving development.

Participants indicated a deliberate exclusion from participating in key activities and decisions in their home countries, for example, voting. To facilitate active diaspora engagement, participants recommended the development of programs that are sensitive to the needs of diaspora communities. These might include dual citizenship arrangements, voting rights for the diaspora, and formal channels for diaspora members to input into national development plans. Furthermore, the creation of reintegration programs that assist with professional accreditation, recognition of qualifications, and job placement for returning professionals would make the transition smoother for those willing for permanent return. However, a participant from an African institution cautioned:

“ When the Diaspora Engagement Committee was established, we were all quite optimistic about its potential to better connect our diaspora community. The Partnership Taskforce seemed earnest in its goals of driving investment, knowledge sharing and cultural exchanges. In the early stages, their efforts led to some notable successes.



“ Investments did flow in and capacity-building programs made valuable contributions. But it soon became apparent that institutional support was wavering.

The participant added that:

“ After three years, with no advocacy at higher levels and no champions/members from the diaspora, the Taskforce has become an empty shell. This outcome shows we still have far to go in prioritising the diaspora community through concrete long-term support, not just fleeting gestures.

Constituting diaspora advisory councils must therefore include diaspora leaders and professionals who can provide

insight into the needs and expectations of the diaspora community. These members can advise on policy matters and help design frameworks that are considerate of diaspora sentiments and cultural nuances.

### Framework for diaspora knowledge democracy

Addressing our final research question, we synthesised the insights from diaspora professionals and African stakeholders to develop a framework for more inclusive and effective diaspora engagement. Figure 1 visually depicts the framework wherein policy is at the core supporting the building blocks namely incentives and support, knowledge exchange, engagement channels, and impact reviews.

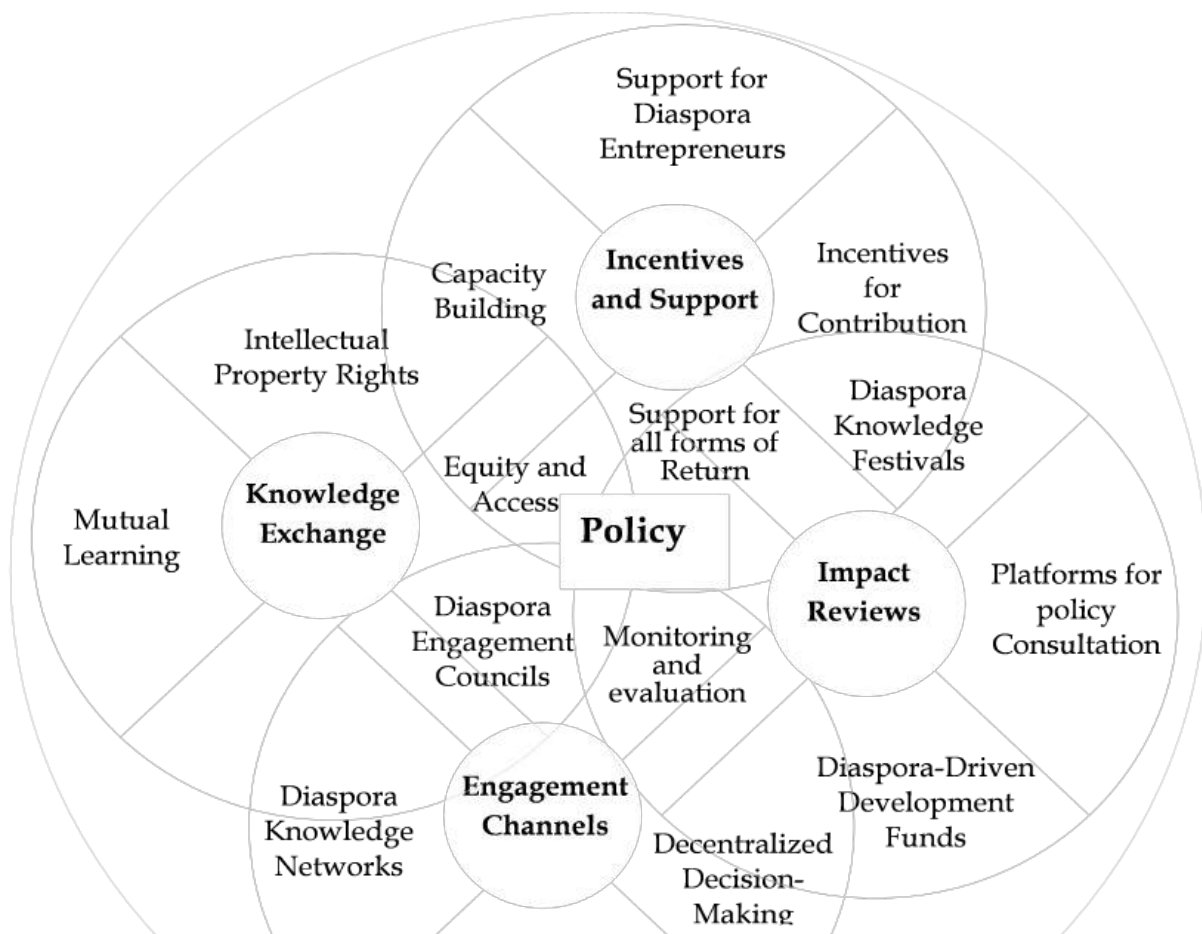


Figure 1: Framework for diaspora knowledge democracy

Enabling policies that dismantle colonial divisions through strengthened mobility and participation rights serves as the foundation for dismantling hierarchical structures and empowers diverse voices. Robust engagement platforms facilitate multidirectional knowledge exchange between diaspora communities and stakeholders across Africa fostering collaboration and aligning with the principles of knowledge democracy. The emphasis on diverse voices and collaborative networks aligns well with the concept of knowledge democracy, moving away from hierarchical structures that concentrate power. The emphasis on coordinated incentives and support for diaspora initiatives is key. By bringing together technical expertise from various settings, these initiatives could accelerate work on pressing issues, capture relevant insights on project implementation and scale successes. Regular evaluation would ensure the initiatives remain responsive.

While ambitious, the viability of this framework could be enhanced through pilot testing of individual elements with staggered rollout. For example, launching an initial engagement platform and paired exchange program between select diaspora networks and institutions may surface practical considerations to refine implementation strategies. Securing multi-stakeholder buy-in and identifying sustainable funding mechanisms early also seem prudent to anchor the approach. Diaspora advisory boards and reciprocal short secondments may aid governance and coordination. Overall, properly operationalised, this inclusionary, collaborative model holds promise for catalysing Africa's development trajectory through optimised diaspora participation and knowledge-sharing for the future benefit of all.

This commitment must be rooted in a shared recognition of the diaspora's unique value. Their cultural competencies, technical skills, and experiential knowledge are all essential assets for Africa's self-determined progress.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of diaspora professionals and African institutions using the coloniality lens. Our findings revealed that while individual and institutional efforts have made inroads, there remains a lack of coordinated strategy to maximise diaspora contributions through knowledge democracy. To overcome these challenges, a paradigm shift is proposed, reframing the diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners and embracing their expertise and contributions.

The study emphasises the importance of mobilising human capital through bridge-building centred on reciprocal knowledge-sharing. Establishing robust diaspora engagement platforms featuring multi-stakeholder participation can address trust issues and bureaucratic challenges. Recognising diverse contributions through support networks nurturing collaboration between technical professionals, entrepreneurs, scholars, and community groups will catalyse inclusive growth. Addressing corruption and promoting accountability strengthens institutional reliability for investors and partners.

Going forward, a coordinated transnational approach is needed to overcome fragmented efforts and resource constraints. Capacity strengthening initiatives must engage grassroots organisations for widespread impact translating research.

Tracking best practices and metrics can optimise programs adapting to complex realities.

Overall, this study calls for reconceptualising diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners as central, not peripheral, to development visions. Operationalising inclusive models demanding interactivity between policymakers,

institutions, and diaspora communities will build the requisite buy-in and ownership for sustainable progress. Only by dismantling divides and forging unity founded on mutual recognition and benefit can Africa harness its full spectrum of human capital to ignite an inclusive, self-determined trajectory of growth.

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African Journal  
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OCTOBER 2024

VOLUME 4

**AFRICA'S QUEST FOR  
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# AJIS

African Journal  
of Inclusive Societies

**Volume 4**

DOI: 10.59186/SI.FRLYADTJ

**ISSN 2958-9444**

**<http://si-ajis.org/>**

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## INTRODUCTION

# Africa's quest for inclusion: Trends and patterns

Belinda R. Chaora 

**Key words:** Inclusion, trend and patterns, social service delivery, markets, trade, socio political spaces



## INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion is a multifaceted concept and is a critical pillar for transformative economic development. Its opposite, social exclusion entails the lack of or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in normal relationships and activities, available to people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political contexts. It affects the quality of life of individuals, the equity and cohesion of society and the lived experiences of citizens (Levitas, Pantazis, Fahmy, Gordon, Lloyd, & Patsios, 2007).

Social inclusion, considers the terms of engagement of individuals and or groups in society, assessing the ability of the system to improve the capability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged based on their identity (World Bank, 2024). The inability of individuals or communities to make meaningful and consistent contributions reflects their exclusion. Exclusion can be based on age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, race, religious beliefs, citizenship, disability, or sexual orientation (World Bank, 2024). There are differing levels of exclusion. When exclusion is deep, it is characterised by a lack of access to one or more domains resulting in severe negative consequences to quality of life, well-being, and future life chances (Levitas et al., 2007).

## INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION, LIVED REALITIES FOR AFRICAN CITIZENS

Africa as a continent has gone through various forms of exclusion. Historically Africa has been a recipient of development models designed outside the continent. Africans and other Global South countries have been excluded from crafting policy and

development models that respond to their deepening challenges of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. There is limited policy autonomy especially when it comes to big development questions that require a global consensus. Fifty-two percent (52%) of Africans face some form of exclusion (Cuesta, Lopez-Noval & Nino-Zarazua, 2022) with vivid examples of segregation observed or experienced in their daily lives. This rate of exclusion is higher than the rest of the world which exhibits approximately 32% exclusion rates. Africans in several different parts of the continent such as Central Africa, West Africa and the Sahel region have experienced regular conflict and climate change disasters with over 40% of the continent being classified as fragile and conflict-ridden (Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal, 2024). Communities are faced with inequality in the form of corruption, hunger, racial or tribal conflict, contested elections, school dropouts due to financial challenges, expensive or unavailable health care, poor access to the internet or electricity and land grabs from corrupt officials and land barons (Atkinson and Hills, 2008; Zulu, 2017). The scale of inequality and therefore exclusion on the continent is high with the top 10% of wealthy individuals accessing 54.3% of resources, the middle class which is 40% accessing 36.9% of resources and the poorest which are 50% of the total population access only 8.8% of all resources (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023). Although the continent has seen high growth rates, the pattern of accumulation disproportionately favours the wealthy rather than reaching the bottom of the pyramid populations (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023). Eleven African countries appear in the list of the world's top 20 unequal countries. These are mostly resource-rich countries such as South Africa, Central African Republic, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Angola and Congo (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023).

Through first- or second-hand accounts, Africans articulate the concept of exclusion and inequality without needing to reference the academic discourse because inequality has been intertwined into our history for hundreds of years. For example, women particularly widows and young girls in varying parts of Africa face discrimination, and harassment, and are denied access propelled by cultural norms and beliefs (Bogain, 2024).

## Exclusion and Conflict

Mesfin (2021) proposes that economic exclusion is an important driver of conflict. This assumes that for conflict, unrest, and other political instability to be addressed, the rate of exclusion, poverty and inequality should be prioritised for peaceful and sustainable development. In this volume we considered Africa's quest for inclusion, creating a narrative of the current trends and patterns aiming to understand the level of impact these trends and patterns have on ordinary Africans and indeed for our development goals and agendas.

## History and African Exclusion

Our history has been littered with events that have propelled exclusion for many and the inclusion of a few. Colonisation and the scramble for African land which commenced in the 1800s still impact trade and land tenure today allowing the continuance of hegemonic structures perpetuated along racial, tribal and gender lines. In this volume, we considered a broad spectrum of potential sites of contest for inclusion cutting across the major domains found in resource accumulation, level of participation and quality of life. We considered (i) markets (land, housing, labour, and credit); (ii) spaces (political, social, cultural, and physical) and (iii) services such as social welfare (health, education, waste collection and access to modern necessities such as electricity and information).

The concept of inclusion is premised on the notion that there is some form of discrimination whether legal, cultural, or social occurring deliberately or by circumstance. We observed and understood from unpacking varying academic discourse that the contribution (to sustainable development) of those facing discrimination will be curtailed (Levitas et al., 2007; Economic Commission for Africa, 2024; Mesfin, 2021; Krongborg-Bak, 2018; Abdel-Latif, 2024; Bogain, 2024). It is therefore impossible to envision holistic economic participation and equitable development along the lines of Africa's Agenda 2063 when exclusion remains a significant concern for most Africans. By focusing on this aspect, this volume sought to paint a picture of the current levels of inclusion with a particular focus on women, youth and people living with disabilities. The topics in this volume will paint a picture of the levels of exclusion whether it be wide, concentrated or deep through the writing of its various contributors.

## Access to spaces

Ideas and ideals of inclusion were central to the quest for liberation of many African countries. The inclusion of the black majority was one of the main agendas that propelled Africans to seek independence from colonial rule. Democracy by its nature is a participatory process requiring the inclusion of all genders and populations to fully succeed. Independent governments introduced constitutions and the process of democratic elections to allow for transitions of power. It must be noted that at least 52 of the continent's 55 countries have amended their constitutions in the last 20 years and are operating on new and/or revised constitutions (Constitute, 2024). These constitutions have largely domesticated regional and international treaties on civil and

political rights (Hatchard, Ndulo and Slinn, 2024). Participation in elections has been historically high at about 70% but has started to waver in recent years as younger voters enter the voting arena but are unmotivated to take part (International IDEA, 2022).

## Human Rights And Good Governance

The Africa Charter on Human and People's Rights has been ratified by 54 African countries with efforts to introduce the rights framework and good governance systems into their constitutions (African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), 2024). Although this is commendable the practice of inclusive democracy is unevenly spread across the continent. There are a number of countries that remain dominated by single parties such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Namibia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (International IDEA, 2022), whilst others are in conflict or have had recent coups namely Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Mali and Zimbabwe (Africa News, 2024).

## Women and Inclusion

There has been some significant progress in ensuring equal or equitable participation of women as voters and their incorporation into leadership in political spaces. As constitutions were modified, African governments accepted the inclusion of women's rights through instruments such as the adoption of the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women](#) (52 African countries), [The Maputo Protocol](#) (43 African countries), [International Labour Organization Conventions](#) (46 African countries) and the [African Charter on Human and People's Rights](#) (49 African countries) (United Nations, 2023b). These conventions and protocols govern the political and economic participation of women and their right to protection and security. Despite these early and commendable

adoptions, concern still exists about the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls, domestic and political violence, female genital mutilation, and child marriages across the continent (International IDEA, 2022). Women's participation in elections is growing with strong strides in some countries like South Africa, Rwanda and Senegal and weak support in others like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Comoros (International IDEA, 2022).

## Youth and Inclusion

The participation of young people in politics must improve. Although there are sufficient frameworks guiding the participation of youth, the policies in place remain focused on rights-based approaches without sufficient enforcement of those policies in political and civic participation and through capacity-building initiatives (Mpungose, 2020). As of 2018, only 22% of African parliamentarians are under the age of 40, and 39% are under the age of 45 yet the total youth population on the continent is close to 70% demonstrating a negative skew towards older representation (Niang, 2019). This skew towards older representation is apparent even amongst populations classified as youth. We discover that youth between ages 26 and 35 are more active in politics than those who are aged 18 to 26 and are therefore more likely to attend community meetings and engage in political processes (International IDEA, 2022). Despite the notable progress made in ratifying international and regional instruments on vulnerable groups the continent still faces the problem of underrepresentation and exclusion of women, youths, and refugees from decision-making roles (International IDEA, 2022).

When we, however, consider inclusion from citizen to citizen without the involvement of the state, a vastly different picture is painted. Murisa (2021) explains that

most Africans do belong to one form of association or another, however, their level of belonging is inclined to social groups (70%) compared to political groups (41%) or economic groups (50%). The lower levels of political participation were notable in countries like Zimbabwe where despair and disappointment in the efficacy of elections to bring power transitions have diminished the levels of citizen trust in the process of democracy and the corresponding election events. However, citizens have found inclusion in religious groups, associations, cooperatives, community clubs and other forms of social formations. They have found ways of working alongside each other to nurture community-based systems of support with or without the involvement of the state.

### **Access to services**

Prior to formalised social welfare systems, African communities relied on kinship networks and extended families to provide social protection (Kalusopa, 2012). At independence, African states relied on and built on existing colonial networks which essentially catered for workers in the public service (Adesina, 2011). The focus of governments has shifted from broader social policy reforms which promote sustainable socio-economic development to narrowly focusing on social protection frameworks with heavy involvement of non-profits and multilateral agencies for their delivery (Adesina, 2011). A sound social policy creates a broader and more sustainable trajectory of development framed around visionary-centred ideals with long-term plans for growth (Adesina, 2011). This shift to social protection has resulted in more straight-jacket approaches on the continent focusing on targeting the poor and vulnerable without an analysis of the primary circumstance creating the vulnerability (Adesina, 2011).

Nevertheless, there has been a notable increase, although still inadequate of delivery and accessibility to social goods and services such as health care, pensions, housing and welfare for vulnerable children and the elderly. Commendably access to education improved tremendously during post-independence years as newly formed governments invested heavily in education fuelled by the desire to address the prior exclusion of non-white communities by colonial governments. Net enrolment rate rose dramatically, for example, a rise from 50% to 68% for the net enrolment rate of girls was experienced between 1990 and 2000 (UNESCO, 2001). However, the challenge African governments are working to overcome requires a lot more investment than what the continent has witnessed. Today education enrolment rate remains a strong area of emphasis for African governments. However, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) still retains the highest rates of exclusion in the education sector globally. Approximately 20% or more of children aged between 6 and 11 years are out of school and 30% plus of youth aged 12 to 14 years are out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Despite this, over 30% of African countries have literacy rates of 75% or higher indicating good progress which needs continued support (UNESCO, 2001).

### **Homelessness, Slums and Housing**

According to Ekpong (2023), Africa has a homeless population of at least 54 million. This is 34% of the world's homeless population. The countries with the highest rate include Nigeria with 24 million, Egypt with 12 million and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 5 million. The main causes of these high figures are conflict, underemployment, and natural calamities. Closely related to this is the need for housing due to natural growth. SSA has the highest rates of urban growth (4.58%) and slum growth (4.53%) in the world (UN-Habitat, 2011). According to UN-Habitat (2020), the

continent is urbanising fast with an estimated 1.3 billion people moving into cities (compared to 470 million at present). It also has the highest proportion of slum dwellers in the world (51.3%) as of 2020 (UN-Habitat, 2020). Governments need to deal with poverty inequality, food insecurity, poor water supply, poor sanitation, climate change and disaster risk reduction on the back of the recent COVID-19 pandemic which caused governments to redirect funding to address the pandemic (UN-Habitat 2020). Currently, housing policies are yet to become sufficiently robust to cater for the large numbers that require new homes. In addition, construction is generally slow, taking approximately 162 days just to obtain a construction permit (World Bank, 2015).

## Child Services and Health Care

Child services on the continent require attention as an estimated 35 million children are without parental care (SOS, 2023). The continent's foster care system is heavily reliant on the work of non-profits with weak intervention by most governments. Abandoned and homeless children automatically become at risk of substance abuse, mental health issues, sexual exploitation, forced labour, trafficking and school dropout (SOS, 2023).

In 2001 AU member states signed the Abuja Declaration and committed to allocating 15% of the annual budget to health care. This was followed by health strategy goals for the continent to achieve by the year 2030 (AHAIC, 2021). It is estimated that more than half the continent struggles to access health care despite the policy commitments by continental governments. At least 15% of the continent's population live 2 or more hours away from a hospital, while 1 in 8 people live more than an hour away from a health centre (Falchetta, Hammad & Shayegh, 2020). Africa

continues to struggle with significant disease burdens including HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis. The recent COVID-19 pandemic placed additional burdens on the healthcare system. Meanwhile, it is estimated that 25.6 million people are living with HIV in Africa with 20,8 million in East and Southern Africa and 4.8 million in West and Central Africa according to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2022). HIV prevalence rates range from 6% to 15 % with some of the worst affected countries being Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

According to the World Health Organization (2024a), there are 200 million cases of Malaria around the globe which result in half a million deaths annually, 90% of the deaths take place in Africa. Tuberculosis (TB) is the second leading cause of death from a single agent with the continent assuming 23% of the world's TB cases and 33% of deaths globally (World Health Organization, 2024a). In 2022, 2.5 million were infected and 424,000 lives were lost in Africa alone (World Health Organization, 2024a)

The continent's population is also generally growing older. Despite earlier shifts in demographics caused by HIV/AIDS, older members of the population are managing to live longer lives with a population older than 65 years likely to reach 67 million in 2025 and 163 million by 2050 according to the World Health Organization (2024b). The older the populations get, the more likely they will suffer from non-communicable diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes which place a heavy burden on the health delivery systems.

In 2018 the African Union adopted [The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities in Africa](#). This charter was introduced to promote the rights of people

living with disabilities (PLWD) to promote, protect and ensure respect for them. For it to become legally binding, 15 member states need to sign and ratify, however as of 2023, only 12 countries in the AU had ratified the protocol. The World Health Organization (2024c) states that approximately 40% of the continent's population is living with some form of disability with 10 to 15% of this group being children of school age. A large proportion of the disabled, 70 to 80% remain unemployed and therefore cannot make meaningful contributions to the development of their communities and nations (Dugbazah, Glover, Mbuli, Kungade, 2021).

## Migration

The continent has a migration challenge demonstrated by the 40 million Africans who are currently displaced and living as refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced persons (African Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023). It is interesting to note that 96% of those who are displaced remain on the continent meaning the burden of refugees is largely borne by African governments more than by other nations as implied in mainstream media. Yet refugees are rarely in focus when development agendas are addressed whether on the continent or in other countries (Betts, Omata, Siu and Sterck, 2023). There is still significant work required for people living with disabilities and their access to social services. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 7% of people have access to related disability benefits (Bridging the Gap, undated).

Largely the continent has neglected a focus on transformative social policy with an emphasis on social protection resulting in a significant dependency on the work of non-profits and multilateral agencies deepening poverty and inequality and stripping communities of their social assets (Adesina, 2011).

## Access to markets

Africa has natural resources and rich environments such as productive land, water, forestry, fisheries and nonrenewable resources like minerals, oil, gas, and coal. It is home to 30% of the world's mineral reserves, 8% of the world's natural gas, 12% of the world's oil reserves, 40% of the world's gold, 90% of the world's platinum and uranium and 65% of the world's arable land providing raw materials to many of the world's industries (United Nations, 2023; Economic Commission for Africa, 2024). African exports have allowed the continent to become a major participant in global supply chains for several industries namely agriculture, mining, automotive, technology for electronics (mobile phones, computers), renewable energy and healthcare (United Nations, 2023). Agriculture, mining, and trade of natural resources dominate national economies and are central to the livelihoods of the poor rural majority (Moti, 2019). Over 70% of SSA's population depends on forests and woodlands for their livelihoods (United Nations, 2023). Despite producing large revenues for governments, the resources paradoxically lead to economic stagnation, waste build-up, decaying infrastructure, and political instability fueled by corruption. Ill-conceived development policies fuel stagnation and therefore limited growth (African Bank, 2007). The 54 countries in Africa combined account for 2.6% of world trade. This figure drops to 0.8% when manufactured goods are considered (UN Comtrade, 2024).

The share of manufactured goods in total exports is only 34% for African countries compared to 83% for East Asia, 68% for South Asia, 45% for Latin America and 70% for the world average (UN Comtrade, 2024).

The continent historically found it easier to trade with other continents than to trade within its borders. The introduction of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in January 2021 will potentially increase trade within the continent by improving access to regional markets with the downstream impact of strengthening production capacity and domestic manufacturing industries in partnering countries. This process will likely improve the contribution that Africa is making to regional and global markets not only to trade for goods but also to create a single market for access to air transport, information and communication, energy infrastructure and financing arrangements (Economic Commission for Africa, 2024).

A key driver of growth and economic inclusion in Africa has been advances in technology following the introduction of mobile phone technology and the internet at the turn of the century. As technology was advancing many African governments were simultaneously introducing financial inclusion policies in efforts to improve the level of access that populations have to credit, pensions, savings accounts, and other banking services and therefore improve their level of resilience against economic shock. Mobile technology has been a significant driver of financial inclusion on the continent pushing rates of inclusion as high as 70% in some countries. Chaora, (2024) notes that advances in internet access have significantly improved the level of access that micro, small and medium enterprises in some countries have to financial products and services however exclusion remains. Exclusion is still evident where communities have limited access to the internet, electricity, information, and older/outdated electronic devices. Language barriers and locations of communities also affect their ability to tap into the financial

inclusion revolution that has aided other parts of the continent to gain access to financial services. The vast majority (approximately 60%) of businesses on the continent are informal and fall into the category of micro, small or medium-sized enterprises. Their informality (lack of formal registration) however is a significant reason for exclusion limiting their access to formal financial products and services (Chaora, 2024).

## OVERVIEW OF VOLUME 4: INCLUSION TRENDS AND PATTERNS

This volume of the African Journal of Inclusive Societies, focusing on inclusion trends and patterns, dwells heavily on the spaces (political, economic, and cultural spaces) dimension with minor contributions to the services and markets dimensions.

### The Impact of Digital Finance on Financial Inclusion In Zimbabwe

Mutale and Shumba in their article entitled *The Impact of Digital Finance on Financial Inclusion*, explain how digital finance, notably mobile money and digital banking services have increased access to financial services in Zimbabwe. The authors adopt a quantitative approach utilising econometric models to measure the impact of digital finance proxied using automated teller machine data in Zimbabwe. They explain how digital banking has improved the rate of financial inclusion for poor and vulnerable communities with significant advantages for cost saving, time saving with fast transaction speeds all the while improving security for the user. They however emphasise the potential disadvantages created by limited internet access, especially in poor and remote communities where the cost and quality of data create exclusion and understanding of technology is limited to a few. Their

contribution includes potential policy changes to promote digital and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

### **Economic Inclusion in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Reform in Zimbabwe**

Siambombe's *Economic Inclusion in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Reform in Zimbabwe* investigates the opportunities and challenges with policy reform in Zimbabwe emphasising economic inclusion. Siambombe using thematic analysis, reviews the efforts by the Zimbabwean government to curb inflation, stabilise the currency and promote economic growth with interventions such as the introduction of a multicurrency system, introduction of new taxes, reforming state-owned enterprises, improving agricultural productivity, and reframing the current land policy. Siambombe uses the theory of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach as frameworks of analysis. The inclusive growth approach assumes that sustainable and inclusive growth must be broad-based touching all sectors and segments of society whilst the capabilities approach explains that for inclusive growth to be a sure process, members of society must have their capabilities expanded through education, access to health care and social protection. The author examines how efforts to promote economic progress, and economic inclusion can become a catalyst for equitable access to resources and opportunities for understanding. The paper demonstrates how economic inclusion is affected by social, political, and economic factors. The paper further explores interlinks between policies and their role in promoting market access. The author tries to demonstrate the effectiveness of social safety nets in the analysis and raises the importance of political consensus in working towards inclusion. According to the author, the lack of robust

institutions and political consensus has in many ways halted the efforts for economic recovery.

### **An Analysis of the Role of Disinformation In Elections**

Sivalo expounds on an intersection of services and spaces (information and politics) dimension by giving an overview of information and disinformation and their effects on inclusion. The article explains how disinformation impacts democratic processes, entrenching existing divisions whilst increasing public distrust in independent institutions. The author argues that credible news and information are critical for democratic societies. Disinformation on the other hand poses a challenge to liberal democracy affecting the very fabric of the deliberative and decision-making processes and changing the quality of decisions made by citizens at the voting booth. The author explains that disinformation has always been present but in recent years it has been accelerated by advances in technology and changes to the way information flows using social media and digital platforms. Sivalo's primary source of focus is electoral disinformation in national and by-elections during the 2023 election process in Zimbabwe through an analysis of a project by the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) to train citizens on how to identify, flag and combat disinformation. Sivalo's article shows that different strategies for truthful information dissemination are required to capture the unique situations of citizens during elections and beyond. Some of these unique situations could include varying levels of education, different locations, different languages, or access to data where information is in digital form.

The remainder of the contributors focused on the political and social dimensions.



## Unveiling Layers of Inclusion in Political Spaces

Sisimayi, Muzorewa and Muperi in *Unveiling Layers of Inclusion in Political Spaces: A Multidimensional Exploration of Inclusion in Zimbabwe* explore the intricate dimensions of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political spaces. Their article is informed by the concept of intersectionality which aims to uncover the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system in Zimbabwe. The study explores how factors such as community empowerment, digital access and intersectionality influence the political inclusion of underrepresented groups in the country. The intersectionality approach critiques the view of gender, race ethnicity or other factors as independent identities but rather sees these as interconnected and influencing each other. They argue that gender does not operate independently from race or geographic location but rather each one builds on the other, deepening the level of exclusion that an individual falling into multiple vulnerable groups may face. Sisimayi, Muzorewa and Mupeti explain this concept by unpacking the exclusion of women, youth and people living with disabilities from politics in Zimbabwe due to financial constraints, male domination, sexualisation of politics, restrictive cultural roles, remote location, lack of resourcing and low levels of education. They explain that although technology has provided new opportunities for expression and participation through digital platforms, the negative attitudes in the country's political space have also moved into these new digital spaces. The authors highlight the important role that financial resources play when attempting to access the internet for people in marginalised areas where connectivity is poor and infrastructure to support internet access is weak.

## Institutionalising Inclusion: A Study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's Role in the 2018 Elections

Bandama's *Institutionalising Inclusion: A Study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's Role in the 2018 Elections* discusses the importance of inclusion within the electoral process as pivotal for a democratic society. The author places Election Management Bodies (EMBs) at the centre of the process. Their role is to ensure all citizens can participate in the election process regardless of background. Bandama posits that where election standards have been set, one can establish levels of inclusion or exclusion of key groups of concern such as women, youth and people living with disabilities. Because of the ability of EMBs to enforce practices legally, an electoral commission has the strength and capacity to ensure inclusion or exclusion. Bandama explains how EMBs facilitate or hinder inclusion through their administrative practices. He uses the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) as a reference with a treatise on the 2018 election examining their performance against predetermined benchmarks for election supervision. He examines the role of the commission in fostering inclusion by establishing standards, parameters procedures and certainty regarding the voting process in addition to removing any bias associated with the quality and accessibility of the voters' roll. Bandama demonstrates through a historiography of ZEC's formation how exclusion practices carried over from Zimbabwe's colonial past may affect voter processes today.

## The Zimbabwe Political Space: An Analysis of the Barriers to Women's Participation in Electoral Processes

Mutizwa's article, *The Zimbabwe Political Space: An Analysis of the Barriers to Women's Participation in Electoral Processes* discusses women's participation, inclusion and exclusion in politics. Mutizwa brings to the fore questions about the role of women as candidates or leaders in the political process noting a steady decline in their involvement since the 2013 elections held in Zimbabwe. The article seeks to understand the interlinkage between economic, social physical and cultural paces within the electoral process in addition to exploring the social inclusion factors affecting political spaces. The article draws on content from the project preventing violence against women in politics, detailing specific hindrances to female participation in elections. This article gives some examples of the toxicity of the election playing field in Zimbabwe. Mutizwa explains how women who have previously achieved political influence have had some form of advantage whether by affiliation or relation, leaving new entrants into the field with many obstacles including sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Notable incidents which have taken place in Zimbabwe are discussed in detail such as incidents involving sexual harassment, assault, sexist slurs, threats, intimidation, public shaming, unlawful arrests, and abduction with specific examples from the Zimbabwean context including excerpts from interviews with women in politics. Mutizwa highlights challenges such as the way political parties are structured, and the challenges raised by cultural and traditional norms. Like Bandama, the author proposes a penalty for non-compliance to election candidate female quotas by political parties as a way of increasing the presence of female candidates as one of the policy measures for redress.

## Zimbabwe's Economic Challenges Beyond Sanctions

Siambombe's *Zimbabwe's Economic Challenges Beyond Sanctions* challenges the narrative put forward by the Zimbabwean government, that economic sanctions are solely to blame for Zimbabwe's economic troubles. The findings reveal that although sanctions do have a role to play, the economic crisis is significantly affected by colonial legacies, corruption, institutional failures, maladministration, and regional and international dynamics that have undermined Zimbabwe's economic potential and performance. The writer uses a mixed methods approach to outline how the ruling party government has failed to implement meaningful economic reforms to address the country's structural problems and improve its development outcomes in light of regional and global changes. Siambombe explains the challenges the government is experiencing as it navigates regional tensions with bordering countries caused by trade disputes, border conflicts, mass migration tensions and water sharing. Over and above the regional challenges Zimbabwe is still struggling with its international reengagement plan. The writer uses a political economy framework to assess the role sanctions have played and are playing on the country's development. The article makes recommendations for political, economic, and social reforms, and regional and international cooperation including a reframing of its treatment of elections, how to handle the country's debt crisis, expanding the manufacturing sector and investment into human and capital.

## **Harnessing the Diaspora Advantage: Building Knowledge Democracy and Inclusive Growth**

Garwe and Thondlana in their article *Harnessing the Diaspora Advantage: Building Knowledge Democracy and Inclusive Growth in Africa* explores the lived realities of Africans in the diaspora. The authors discuss the lived emotions of Africans as they face exclusion from taking part in the development agendas of both their host and home countries. They use the coloniality framework (exploring, race gender and class) to understand the power structure, knowledge and hierarchies that continue to shape modern African societies despite an end to colonial administration. Garwe and Thondlana explain how emigration from Africa was previously perceived as a brain drain but has now shifted to a more positive mindset understanding the potential for contribution to the development discourse of home countries. The article explains how current engagement initiatives through associations, philanthropic activities and different forms of capacity building create a potential for sustainable alignment of diaspora populations within home or host countries. The writers expound on reasons why migrants try to make contributions to their home countries, and the challenges they face in doing so including corruption, minimal trust in institutions, stigma attached to foreign involvement and scrutiny of diaspora endeavours by home governments. They also explain the challenges faced by migrants in host countries such as non-recognition of qualifications, cultural adjustment challenges, and discriminatory practices. The pair put forward potential engagement options to ensure knowledge sharing and participation to promote a culture that capitalises on Africans in global environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contributors of this volume paint broad pictures of inclusion amidst ongoing exclusion with special emphasis on Zimbabwe. The chapter on the African diaspora, however, gives a global picture of the challenges that many African migrants, refugees and internally displaced within and outside the continent face. Although many contributors based their work on Zimbabwe, we can infer the collective trends occurring in other Sub-Saharan countries with similar development trajectories. Through this volume, we can ascertain a picture of the level of inclusion in the political, economic, and social dimensions paying particular attention to the involvement of women, youth and people living with disabilities to understand their level of access to political, economic, and social collateral.

The volume contains several policy recommendations for promoting improved and equitable access to information, power, financial and community resources. Governments taking note of the recommendations can easily find ways to improve levels of citizen inclusion with a corresponding increase in citizen participation to achieve development goals.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Africa's quest for inclusion: Trends and patterns

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**Key words:** Inclusion, trend and patterns, social service delivery, markets, trade, socio political spaces

## INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion is a multifaceted concept and is a critical pillar for transformative economic development. Its opposite, social exclusion entails the lack of or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in normal relationships and activities, available to people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political contexts. It affects the quality of life of individuals, the equity and cohesion of society and the lived experiences of citizens (Levitas, Pantazis, Fahmy, Gordon, Lloyd, & Patsios, 2007).

Social inclusion, considers the terms of engagement of individuals and or groups in society, assessing the ability of the system to improve the capability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged based on their identity (World Bank, 2024). The inability of individuals or communities to make meaningful and consistent contributions reflects their exclusion. Exclusion can be based on age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, race, religious beliefs, citizenship, disability, or sexual orientation (World Bank, 2024). There are differing levels of exclusion. When exclusion is deep, it is characterised by a lack of access to one or more domains resulting in severe negative consequences to quality of life, well-being, and future life chances (Levitas et al., 2007).

## INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION, LIVED REALITIES FOR AFRICAN CITIZENS

Africa as a continent has gone through various forms of exclusion. Historically Africa has been a recipient of development models designed outside the continent. Africans and other Global South countries have been excluded from crafting policy and

development models that respond to their deepening challenges of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. There is limited policy autonomy especially when it comes to big development questions that require a global consensus. Fifty-two percent (52%) of Africans face some form of exclusion (Cuesta, Lopez-Noval & Nino-Zarazua, 2022) with vivid examples of segregation observed or experienced in their daily lives. This rate of exclusion is higher than the rest of the world which exhibits approximately 32% exclusion rates. Africans in several different parts of the continent such as Central Africa, West Africa and the Sahel region have experienced regular conflict and climate change disasters with over 40% of the continent being classified as fragile and conflict-ridden (Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal, 2024). Communities are faced with inequality in the form of corruption, hunger, racial or tribal conflict, contested elections, school dropouts due to financial challenges, expensive or unavailable health care, poor access to the internet or electricity and land grabs from corrupt officials and land barons (Atkinson and Hills, 2008; Zulu, 2017). The scale of inequality and therefore exclusion on the continent is high with the top 10% of wealthy individuals accessing 54.3% of resources, the middle class which is 40% accessing 36.9% of resources and the poorest which are 50% of the total population access only 8.8% of all resources (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023). Although the continent has seen high growth rates, the pattern of accumulation disproportionately favours the wealthy rather than reaching the bottom of the pyramid populations (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023). Eleven African countries appear in the list of the world's top 20 unequal countries. These are mostly resource-rich countries such as South Africa, Central African Republic, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Angola and Congo (Saoudi and Lois-Sarbib, 2023).



Through first- or second-hand accounts, Africans articulate the concept of exclusion and inequality without needing to reference the academic discourse because inequality has been intertwined into our history for hundreds of years. For example, women particularly widows and young girls in varying parts of Africa face discrimination, and harassment, and are denied access propelled by cultural norms and beliefs (Bogain, 2024).

## **Exclusion and Conflict**

Mesfin (2021) proposes that economic exclusion is an important driver of conflict. This assumes that for conflict, unrest, and other political instability to be addressed, the rate of exclusion, poverty and inequality should be prioritised for peaceful and sustainable development. In this volume we considered Africa's quest for inclusion, creating a narrative of the current trends and patterns aiming to understand the level of impact these trends and patterns have on ordinary Africans and indeed for our development goals and agendas.

## **History and African Exclusion**

Our history has been littered with events that have propelled exclusion for many and the inclusion of a few. Colonisation and the scramble for African land which commenced in the 1800s still impact trade and land tenure today allowing the continuance of hegemonic structures perpetuated along racial, tribal and gender lines. In this volume, we considered a broad spectrum of potential sites of contest for inclusion cutting across the major domains found in resource accumulation, level of participation and quality of life. We considered (i) markets (land, housing, labour, and credit); (ii) spaces (political, social, cultural, and physical) and (iii) services such as social welfare (health, education, waste collection and access to modern necessities such as electricity and information).

The concept of inclusion is premised on the notion that there is some form of discrimination whether legal, cultural, or social occurring deliberately or by circumstance. We observed and understood from unpacking varying academic discourse that the contribution (to sustainable development) of those facing discrimination will be curtailed (Levitas et al., 2007; Economic Commission for Africa, 2024; Mesfin, 2021; Krongborg-Bak, 2018; Abdel-Latif, 2024; Bogain, 2024). It is therefore impossible to envision holistic economic participation and equitable development along the lines of Africa's Agenda 2063 when exclusion remains a significant concern for most Africans. By focusing on this aspect, this volume sought to paint a picture of the current levels of inclusion with a particular focus on women, youth and people living with disabilities. The topics in this volume will paint a picture of the levels of exclusion whether it be wide, concentrated or deep through the writing of its various contributors.

## **Access to spaces**

Ideas and ideals of inclusion were central to the quest for liberation of many African countries. The inclusion of the black majority was one of the main agendas that propelled Africans to seek independence from colonial rule. Democracy by its nature is a participatory process requiring the inclusion of all genders and populations to fully succeed. Independent governments introduced constitutions and the process of democratic elections to allow for transitions of power. It must be noted that at least 52 of the continent's 55 countries have amended their constitutions in the last 20 years and are operating on new and/or revised constitutions (Constitute, 2024). These constitutions have largely domesticated regional and international treaties on civil and

political rights (Hatchard, Ndulo and Slinn, 2024). Participation in elections has been historically high at about 70% but has started to waver in recent years as younger voters enter the voting arena but are unmotivated to take part (International IDEA, 2022).

## Human Rights And Good Governance

The Africa Charter on Human and People's Rights has been ratified by 54 African countries with efforts to introduce the rights framework and good governance systems into their constitutions (African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), 2024). Although this is commendable the practice of inclusive democracy is unevenly spread across the continent. There are a number of countries that remain dominated by single parties such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Namibia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (International IDEA, 2022), whilst others are in conflict or have had recent coups namely Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Mali and Zimbabwe (Africa News, 2024).

## Women and Inclusion

There has been some significant progress in ensuring equal or equitable participation of women as voters and their incorporation into leadership in political spaces. As constitutions were modified, African governments accepted the inclusion of women's rights through instruments such as the adoption of the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women](#) (52 African countries), [The Maputo Protocol](#) (43 African countries), [International Labour Organization Conventions](#) (46 African countries) and the [African Charter on Human and People's Rights](#) (49 African countries) (United Nations, 2023b). These conventions and protocols govern the political and economic participation of women and their right to protection and security. Despite these early and commendable

adoptions, concern still exists about the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls, domestic and political violence, female genital mutilation, and child marriages across the continent (International IDEA, 2022). Women's participation in elections is growing with strong strides in some countries like South Africa, Rwanda and Senegal and weak support in others like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Comoros (International IDEA, 2022).

## Youth and Inclusion

The participation of young people in politics must improve. Although there are sufficient frameworks guiding the participation of youth, the policies in place remain focused on rights-based approaches without sufficient enforcement of those policies in political and civic participation and through capacity-building initiatives (Mpungose, 2020). As of 2018, only 22% of African parliamentarians are under the age of 40, and 39% are under the age of 45 yet the total youth population on the continent is close to 70% demonstrating a negative skew towards older representation (Niang, 2019). This skew towards older representation is apparent even amongst populations classified as youth. We discover that youth between ages 26 and 35 are more active in politics than those who are aged 18 to 26 and are therefore more likely to attend community meetings and engage in political processes (International IDEA, 2022). Despite the notable progress made in ratifying international and regional instruments on vulnerable groups the continent still faces the problem of underrepresentation and exclusion of women, youths, and refugees from decision-making roles (International IDEA, 2022).

When we, however, consider inclusion from citizen to citizen without the involvement of the state, a vastly different picture is painted. Murisa (2021) explains that

most Africans do belong to one form of association or another, however, their level of belonging is inclined to social groups (70%) compared to political groups (41%) or economic groups (50%). The lower levels of political participation were notable in countries like Zimbabwe where despair and disappointment in the efficacy of elections to bring power transitions have diminished the levels of citizen trust in the process of democracy and the corresponding election events. However, citizens have found inclusion in religious groups, associations, cooperatives, community clubs and other forms of social formations. They have found ways of working alongside each other to nurture community-based systems of support with or without the involvement of the state.

### **Access to services**

Prior to formalised social welfare systems, African communities relied on kinship networks and extended families to provide social protection (Kalusopa, 2012). At independence, African states relied on and built on existing colonial networks which essentially catered for workers in the public service (Adesina, 2011). The focus of governments has shifted from broader social policy reforms which promote sustainable socio-economic development to narrowly focusing on social protection frameworks with heavy involvement of non-profits and multilateral agencies for their delivery (Adesina, 2011). A sound social policy creates a broader and more sustainable trajectory of development framed around visionary-centred ideals with long-term plans for growth (Adesina, 2011). This shift to social protection has resulted in more straight-jacket approaches on the continent focusing on targeting the poor and vulnerable without an analysis of the primary circumstance creating the vulnerability (Adesina, 2011).

Nevertheless, there has been a notable increase, although still inadequate of delivery and accessibility to social goods and services such as health care, pensions, housing and welfare for vulnerable children and the elderly. Commendably access to education improved tremendously during post-independence years as newly formed governments invested heavily in education fuelled by the desire to address the prior exclusion of non-white communities by colonial governments. Net enrolment rate rose dramatically, for example, a rise from 50% to 68% for the net enrolment rate of girls was experienced between 1990 and 2000 (UNESCO, 2001). However, the challenge African governments are working to overcome requires a lot more investment than what the continent has witnessed. Today education enrolment rate remains a strong area of emphasis for African governments. However, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) still retains the highest rates of exclusion in the education sector globally. Approximately 20% or more of children aged between 6 and 11 years are out of school and 30% plus of youth aged 12 to 14 years are out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Despite this, over 30% of African countries have literacy rates of 75% or higher indicating good progress which needs continued support (UNESCO, 2001).

### **Homelessness, Slums and Housing**

According to Ekpong (2023), Africa has a homeless population of at least 54 million. This is 34% of the world's homeless population. The countries with the highest rate include Nigeria with 24 million, Egypt with 12 million and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 5 million. The main causes of these high figures are conflict, underemployment, and natural calamities. Closely related to this is the need for housing due to natural growth. SSA has the highest rates of urban growth (4.58%) and slum growth (4.53%) in the world (UN-Habitat, 2011). According to UN-Habitat (2020), the

continent is urbanising fast with an estimated 1.3 billion people moving into cities (compared to 470 million at present). It also has the highest proportion of slum dwellers in the world (51.3%) as of 2020 (UN-Habitat, 2020). Governments need to deal with poverty inequality, food insecurity, poor water supply, poor sanitation, climate change and disaster risk reduction on the back of the recent COVID-19 pandemic which caused governments to redirect funding to address the pandemic (UN-Habitat 2020). Currently, housing policies are yet to become sufficiently robust to cater for the large numbers that require new homes. In addition, construction is generally slow, taking approximately 162 days just to obtain a construction permit (World Bank, 2015).

## Child Services and Health Care

Child services on the continent require attention as an estimated 35 million children are without parental care (SOS, 2023). The continent's foster care system is heavily reliant on the work of non-profits with weak intervention by most governments. Abandoned and homeless children automatically become at risk of substance abuse, mental health issues, sexual exploitation, forced labour, trafficking and school dropout (SOS, 2023).

In 2001 AU member states signed the Abuja Declaration and committed to allocating 15% of the annual budget to health care. This was followed by health strategy goals for the continent to achieve by the year 2030 (AHAIC, 2021). It is estimated that more than half the continent struggles to access health care despite the policy commitments by continental governments. At least 15% of the continent's population live 2 or more hours away from a hospital, while 1 in 8 people live more than an hour away from a health centre (Falchetta, Hammad & Shayegh, 2020). Africa

continues to struggle with significant disease burdens including HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis. The recent COVID-19 pandemic placed additional burdens on the healthcare system. Meanwhile, it is estimated that 25.6 million people are living with HIV in Africa with 20,8 million in East and Southern Africa and 4.8 million in West and Central Africa according to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2022). HIV prevalence rates range from 6% to 15 % with some of the worst affected countries being Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

According to the World Health Organization (2024a), there are 200 million cases of Malaria around the globe which result in half a million deaths annually, 90% of the deaths take place in Africa. Tuberculosis (TB) is the second leading cause of death from a single agent with the continent assuming 23% of the world's TB cases and 33% of deaths globally (World Health Organization, 2024a). In 2022, 2.5 million were infected and 424,000 lives were lost in Africa alone (World Health Organization, 2024a)

The continent's population is also generally growing older. Despite earlier shifts in demographics caused by HIV/AIDS, older members of the population are managing to live longer lives with a population older than 65 years likely to reach 67 million in 2025 and 163 million by 2050 according to the World Health Organization (2024b). The older the populations get, the more likely they will suffer from non-communicable diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes which place a heavy burden on the health delivery systems.

In 2018 the African Union adopted [The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities in Africa](#). This charter was introduced to promote the rights of people

living with disabilities (PLWD) to promote, protect and ensure respect for them. For it to become legally binding, 15 member states need to sign and ratify, however as of 2023, only 12 countries in the AU had ratified the protocol. The World Health Organization (2024c) states that approximately 40% of the continent's population is living with some form of disability with 10 to 15% of this group being children of school age. A large proportion of the disabled, 70 to 80% remain unemployed and therefore cannot make meaningful contributions to the development of their communities and nations (Dugbazah, Glover, Mbuli, Kungade, 2021).

## Migration

The continent has a migration challenge demonstrated by the 40 million Africans who are currently displaced and living as refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced persons (African Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023). It is interesting to note that 96% of those who are displaced remain on the continent meaning the burden of refugees is largely borne by African governments more than by other nations as implied in mainstream media. Yet refugees are rarely in focus when development agendas are addressed whether on the continent or in other countries (Betts, Omata, Siu and Sterck, 2023). There is still significant work required for people living with disabilities and their access to social services. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 7% of people have access to related disability benefits (Bridging the Gap, undated).

Largely the continent has neglected a focus on transformative social policy with an emphasis on social protection resulting in a significant dependency on the work of non-profits and multilateral agencies deepening poverty and inequality and stripping communities of their social assets (Adesina, 2011).

## Access to markets

Africa has natural resources and rich environments such as productive land, water, forestry, fisheries and nonrenewable resources like minerals, oil, gas, and coal. It is home to 30% of the world's mineral reserves, 8% of the world's natural gas, 12% of the world's oil reserves, 40% of the world's gold, 90% of the world's platinum and uranium and 65% of the world's arable land providing raw materials to many of the world's industries (United Nations, 2023; Economic Commission for Africa, 2024). African exports have allowed the continent to become a major participant in global supply chains for several industries namely agriculture, mining, automotive, technology for electronics (mobile phones, computers), renewable energy and healthcare (United Nations, 2023). Agriculture, mining, and trade of natural resources dominate national economies and are central to the livelihoods of the poor rural majority (Moti, 2019). Over 70% of SSA's population depends on forests and woodlands for their livelihoods (United Nations, 2023). Despite producing large revenues for governments, the resources paradoxically lead to economic stagnation, waste build-up, decaying infrastructure, and political instability fueled by corruption. Ill-conceived development policies fuel stagnation and therefore limited growth (African Bank, 2007). The 54 countries in Africa combined account for 2.6% of world trade. This figure drops to 0.8% when manufactured goods are considered (UN Comtrade, 2024).

The share of manufactured goods in total exports is only 34% for African countries compared to 83% for East Asia, 68% for South Asia, 45% for Latin America and 70% for the world average (UN Comtrade, 2024).

The continent historically found it easier to trade with other continents than to trade within its borders. The introduction of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in January 2021 will potentially increase trade within the continent by improving access to regional markets with the downstream impact of strengthening production capacity and domestic manufacturing industries in partnering countries. This process will likely improve the contribution that Africa is making to regional and global markets not only to trade for goods but also to create a single market for access to air transport, information and communication, energy infrastructure and financing arrangements (Economic Commission for Africa, 2024).

A key driver of growth and economic inclusion in Africa has been advances in technology following the introduction of mobile phone technology and the internet at the turn of the century. As technology was advancing many African governments were simultaneously introducing financial inclusion policies in efforts to improve the level of access that populations have to credit, pensions, savings accounts, and other banking services and therefore improve their level of resilience against economic shock. Mobile technology has been a significant driver of financial inclusion on the continent pushing rates of inclusion as high as 70% in some countries. Chaora, (2024) notes that advances in internet access have significantly improved the level of access that micro, small and medium enterprises in some countries have to financial products and services however exclusion remains. Exclusion is still evident where communities have limited access to the internet, electricity, information, and older/outdated electronic devices. Language barriers and locations of communities also affect their ability to tap into the financial

inclusion revolution that has aided other parts of the continent to gain access to financial services. The vast majority (approximately 60%) of businesses on the continent are informal and fall into the category of micro, small or medium-sized enterprises. Their informality (lack of formal registration) however is a significant reason for exclusion limiting their access to formal financial products and services (Chaora, 2024).

## OVERVIEW OF VOLUME 4: INCLUSION TRENDS AND PATTERNS

This volume of the African Journal of Inclusive Societies, focusing on inclusion trends and patterns, dwells heavily on the spaces (political, economic, and cultural spaces) dimension with minor contributions to the services and markets dimensions.

### The Impact of Digital Finance on Financial Inclusion In Zimbabwe

Mutale and Shumba in their article entitled *The Impact of Digital Finance on Financial Inclusion*, explain how digital finance, notably mobile money and digital banking services have increased access to financial services in Zimbabwe. The authors adopt a quantitative approach utilising econometric models to measure the impact of digital finance proxied using automated teller machine data in Zimbabwe. They explain how digital banking has improved the rate of financial inclusion for poor and vulnerable communities with significant advantages for cost saving, time saving with fast transaction speeds all the while improving security for the user. They however emphasise the potential disadvantages created by limited internet access, especially in poor and remote communities where the cost and quality of data create exclusion and understanding of technology is limited to a few. Their

contribution includes potential policy changes to promote digital and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

### **Economic Inclusion in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Reform in Zimbabwe**

Siambombe's *Economic Inclusion in Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy Reform in Zimbabwe* investigates the opportunities and challenges with policy reform in Zimbabwe emphasising economic inclusion. Siambombe using thematic analysis, reviews the efforts by the Zimbabwean government to curb inflation, stabilise the currency and promote economic growth with interventions such as the introduction of a multicurrency system, introduction of new taxes, reforming state-owned enterprises, improving agricultural productivity, and reframing the current land policy. Siambombe uses the theory of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach as frameworks of analysis. The inclusive growth approach assumes that sustainable and inclusive growth must be broad-based touching all sectors and segments of society whilst the capabilities approach explains that for inclusive growth to be a sure process, members of society must have their capabilities expanded through education, access to health care and social protection. The author examines how efforts to promote economic progress, and economic inclusion can become a catalyst for equitable access to resources and opportunities for understanding. The paper demonstrates how economic inclusion is affected by social, political, and economic factors. The paper further explores interlinks between policies and their role in promoting market access. The author tries to demonstrate the effectiveness of social safety nets in the analysis and raises the importance of political consensus in working towards inclusion. According to the author, the lack of robust

institutions and political consensus has in many ways halted the efforts for economic recovery.

### **An Analysis of the Role of Disinformation In Elections**

Sivalo expounds on an intersection of services and spaces (information and politics) dimension by giving an overview of information and disinformation and their effects on inclusion. The article explains how disinformation impacts democratic processes, entrenching existing divisions whilst increasing public distrust in independent institutions. The author argues that credible news and information are critical for democratic societies. Disinformation on the other hand poses a challenge to liberal democracy affecting the very fabric of the deliberative and decision-making processes and changing the quality of decisions made by citizens at the voting booth. The author explains that disinformation has always been present but in recent years it has been accelerated by advances in technology and changes to the way information flows using social media and digital platforms. Sivalo's primary source of focus is electoral disinformation in national and by-elections during the 2023 election process in Zimbabwe through an analysis of a project by the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) to train citizens on how to identify, flag and combat disinformation. Sivalo's article shows that different strategies for truthful information dissemination are required to capture the unique situations of citizens during elections and beyond. Some of these unique situations could include varying levels of education, different locations, different languages, or access to data where information is in digital form.

The remainder of the contributors focused on the political and social dimensions.

## Unveiling Layers of Inclusion in Political Spaces

Sisimayi, Muzorewa and Muperi in *Unveiling Layers of Inclusion in Political Spaces: A Multidimensional Exploration of Inclusion in Zimbabwe* explore the intricate dimensions of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political spaces. Their article is informed by the concept of intersectionality which aims to uncover the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system in Zimbabwe. The study explores how factors such as community empowerment, digital access and intersectionality influence the political inclusion of underrepresented groups in the country. The intersectionality approach critiques the view of gender, race ethnicity or other factors as independent identities but rather sees these as interconnected and influencing each other. They argue that gender does not operate independently from race or geographic location but rather each one builds on the other, deepening the level of exclusion that an individual falling into multiple vulnerable groups may face. Sisimayi, Muzorewa and Mupeti explain this concept by unpacking the exclusion of women, youth and people living with disabilities from politics in Zimbabwe due to financial constraints, male domination, sexualisation of politics, restrictive cultural roles, remote location, lack of resourcing and low levels of education. They explain that although technology has provided new opportunities for expression and participation through digital platforms, the negative attitudes in the country's political space have also moved into these new digital spaces. The authors highlight the important role that financial resources play when attempting to access the internet for people in marginalised areas where connectivity is poor and infrastructure to support internet access is weak.

## Institutionalising Inclusion: A Study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's Role in the 2018 Elections

Bandama's *Institutionalising Inclusion: A Study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's Role in the 2018 Elections* discusses the importance of inclusion within the electoral process as pivotal for a democratic society. The author places Election Management Bodies (EMBs) at the centre of the process. Their role is to ensure all citizens can participate in the election process regardless of background. Bandama posits that where election standards have been set, one can establish levels of inclusion or exclusion of key groups of concern such as women, youth and people living with disabilities. Because of the ability of EMBs to enforce practices legally, an electoral commission has the strength and capacity to ensure inclusion or exclusion. Bandama explains how EMBs facilitate or hinder inclusion through their administrative practices. He uses the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) as a reference with a treatise on the 2018 election examining their performance against predetermined benchmarks for election supervision. He examines the role of the commission in fostering inclusion by establishing standards, parameters procedures and certainty regarding the voting process in addition to removing any bias associated with the quality and accessibility of the voters' roll. Bandama demonstrates through a historiography of ZEC's formation how exclusion practices carried over from Zimbabwe's colonial past may affect voter processes today.



## The Zimbabwe Political Space: An Analysis of the Barriers to Women's Participation in Electoral Processes

Mutizwa's article, *The Zimbabwe Political Space: An Analysis of the Barriers to Women's Participation in Electoral Processes* discusses women's participation, inclusion and exclusion in politics. Mutizwa brings to the fore questions about the role of women as candidates or leaders in the political process noting a steady decline in their involvement since the 2013 elections held in Zimbabwe. The article seeks to understand the interlinkage between economic, social physical and cultural paces within the electoral process in addition to exploring the social inclusion factors affecting political spaces. The article draws on content from the project preventing violence against women in politics, detailing specific hindrances to female participation in elections. This article gives some examples of the toxicity of the election playing field in Zimbabwe. Mutizwa explains how women who have previously achieved political influence have had some form of advantage whether by affiliation or relation, leaving new entrants into the field with many obstacles including sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Notable incidents which have taken place in Zimbabwe are discussed in detail such as incidents involving sexual harassment, assault, sexist slurs, threats, intimidation, public shaming, unlawful arrests, and abduction with specific examples from the Zimbabwean context including excerpts from interviews with women in politics. Mutizwa highlights challenges such as the way political parties are structured, and the challenges raised by cultural and traditional norms. Like Bandama, the author proposes a penalty for non-compliance to election candidate female quotas by political parties as a way of increasing the presence of female candidates as one of the policy measures for redress.

## Zimbabwe's Economic Challenges Beyond Sanctions

Siambombe's *Zimbabwe's Economic Challenges Beyond Sanctions* challenges the narrative put forward by the Zimbabwean government, that economic sanctions are solely to blame for Zimbabwe's economic troubles. The findings reveal that although sanctions do have a role to play, the economic crisis is significantly affected by colonial legacies, corruption, institutional failures, maladministration, and regional and international dynamics that have undermined Zimbabwe's economic potential and performance. The writer uses a mixed methods approach to outline how the ruling party government has failed to implement meaningful economic reforms to address the country's structural problems and improve its development outcomes in light of regional and global changes. Siambombe explains the challenges the government is experiencing as it navigates regional tensions with bordering countries caused by trade disputes, border conflicts, mass migration tensions and water sharing. Over and above the regional challenges Zimbabwe is still struggling with its international reengagement plan. The writer uses a political economy framework to assess the role sanctions have played and are playing on the country's development. The article makes recommendations for political, economic, and social reforms, and regional and international cooperation including a reframing of its treatment of elections, how to handle the country's debt crisis, expanding the manufacturing sector and investment into human and capital.

## **Harnessing the Diaspora Advantage: Building Knowledge Democracy and Inclusive Growth**

Garwe and Thondlana in their article *Harnessing the Diaspora Advantage: Building Knowledge Democracy and Inclusive Growth in Africa* explores the lived realities of Africans in the diaspora. The authors discuss the lived emotions of Africans as they face exclusion from taking part in the development agendas of both their host and home countries. They use the coloniality framework (exploring, race gender and class) to understand the power structure, knowledge and hierarchies that continue to shape modern African societies despite an end to colonial administration. Garwe and Thondlana explain how emigration from Africa was previously perceived as a brain drain but has now shifted to a more positive mindset understanding the potential for contribution to the development discourse of home countries. The article explains how current engagement initiatives through associations, philanthropic activities and different forms of capacity building create a potential for sustainable alignment of diaspora populations within home or host countries. The writers expound on reasons why migrants try to make contributions to their home countries, and the challenges they face in doing so including corruption, minimal trust in institutions, stigma attached to foreign involvement and scrutiny of diaspora endeavours by home governments. They also explain the challenges faced by migrants in host countries such as non-recognition of qualifications, cultural adjustment challenges, and discriminatory practices. The pair put forward potential engagement options to ensure knowledge sharing and participation to promote a culture that capitalises on Africans in global environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contributors of this volume paint broad pictures of inclusion amidst ongoing exclusion with special emphasis on Zimbabwe. The chapter on the African diaspora, however, gives a global picture of the challenges that many African migrants, refugees and internally displaced within and outside the continent face. Although many contributors based their work on Zimbabwe, we can infer the collective trends occurring in other Sub-Saharan countries with similar development trajectories. Through this volume, we can ascertain a picture of the level of inclusion in the political, economic, and social dimensions paying particular attention to the involvement of women, youth and people living with disabilities to understand their level of access to political, economic, and social collateral.

The volume contains several policy recommendations for promoting improved and equitable access to information, power, financial and community resources. Governments taking note of the recommendations can easily find ways to improve levels of citizen inclusion with a corresponding increase in citizen participation to achieve development goals.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.5FF7MKVH>

# The Zimbabwe political space: An analysis of the barriers to women's participation in electoral processes?

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders'. Since the Beijing conference in 1995, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the 2013 Constitution. The study brings to the fore, findings to respond to 3 fundamental research questions which are: 1) what is the interlinkage between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, 2) what are the complex social inclusion factors in political spaces, and 3) what recommendations can be proffered to enhance inclusion of women in electoral processes. In answering the questions, the research draws on content analysis of reports from the Project on Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics Project (VAWP), face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions to offer insights and investigate the opportunities provided by various legal frameworks to increase women's engagement in electoral and political processes in Zimbabwe. The article further systematically explores other important factors and elements that impede and contribute to women's full participation in electoral processes as candidates. This study contends that the availability of excellent legal provisions does not result in increased women's participation in electoral politics as candidates unless there is political will. The study further asserts that participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates. The study recommends a wholesome approach to dismantling the complex interlinkages between cultural, social, economic, and physical spaces as obstacles affecting the inclusion of women in electoral processes as candidates. Thus, the study further recommends that existing legal instruments should be complemented by progressively dismantling the social, cultural, and physical forces prohibiting women's participation as leaders in electoral processes. Specific provisions in the Electoral Act may further be used to penalise failure by political parties to field a reasonable number of women as candidates in elections.

**Key words:** Political participation, women, elections

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders. Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the introduction of the 2013 Constitution. Female candidates face numerous obstacles, both before and after elections, including insufficient financial support, sexual harassment, and attacks on their character and integrity. These challenges serve as discouragement and hinder the full participation and representation of women in politics. The underlying issue lies in the lack of political will to actively promote the access and substantive presence of women in politics, ensuring that their voices are truly heard and that their membership in political parties is connected to their involvement in leadership positions (Kumar, 2017; Nyawo, 2023). This paper explores the interlinkages between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, and how the complex social inclusion factors shape the political spaces gendered narrative. From a deeper understanding of the issue, it aims to contribute to the discourse on how Zimbabwe can achieve a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all its citizens. By thoroughly studying this rhetoric, the paper aims to set a

practical Zimbabwean/ African agenda for implementing a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all citizens.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant strides have been made globally towards advancing gender equity since 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality (UN Women, 2023), with the increase in female representation in parliaments being a key factor attributed to this progress. Maphosa, Tshuma & Maviza (2015) argue that Zimbabwe has signed and ratified several regional and international instruments that call for gender equality in various spheres of life. However, despite the existence of these supportive instruments, the country has not fared well in advancing the participation of women in politics. The adoption of gender quotas<sup>1</sup> has notably boosted women's presence in legislatures (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2021), as evidenced by the sharp rise observed between 1990 and 2015 (Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg 2017). Concurring with Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg (2017), Fungurai (2024) is of the view that, women currently hold 31.9% of seats in Zimbabwe's parliament, which is an impressive increase from 14.7% in 1995. At the global level currently, only 26.9% of parliamentarians in single or lower houses are women, up from 11% in 1995 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). However, despite the positive impact of quotas, their sustainability and effectiveness in challenging the status quo of male dominance remain under scrutiny, especially in Zimbabwe where the numbers of women representation are dwindling remarkably since 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> The Zimbabwean quota system allows for 70 seats of 280 which is 25% of the full parliament and only 22 women i.e. (11%) were elected to parliament

Højlund Madsen, & Mtero (2023) reveals that the meagre 11% of female representation in the August 2023 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe reflects a major setback in achieving SDG 5.5b, gender equality, and the empowerment of all women and girls. In Africa, efforts have been made to promote women's participation in political leadership roles with Rwanda and South Africa having the highest representation of 56.3% (Kumar, 2017) and 53.5% respectively (Nyawo, 2023). However, disparities with men persist, reflecting deeply ingrained societal beliefs about gender roles, for example, the philosopher Aristotle asserts that men are considered superior to women. This poses a serious dent in women's quest to achieve gender equality in political spheres. Although countries like South Africa and Rwanda have seen notable increases in women's representation due to quotas, the overall representation of women in influential leadership positions on the continent remains low, Zimbabwe included. The current global scenario, where women hold only 23% of parliamentary seats (Chalaby, 2017), highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development (OECD, 2018a).

### **The Toxicity of the Political Playing Field – Violence and Sexual Abuse**

Historical analysis demonstrates that women who have successfully navigated the political landscape since the early 1980s have typically enjoyed certain privileges (occupying

positions of political influence be it locally and nationally), such as being members of the liberation war struggle or having powerful male relatives within the ruling party who can provide protection and financial support for their political campaigns (Padare, 2020). Former Vice President of Zimbabwe Joice Mujuru is a typical example who enjoyed the protection of her husband Solomon Mujuru<sup>2</sup> from independence in 1980 until 2011 when he died, the events that ensued soon after his death led to the dismissal of Joice from her influential position of the vice president of the country. However, when women contest against men, they are often subjected to hate speech, portraying them as unruly and ungovernable, necessitating action to bring them 'back in line.' One common derogatory label used for women candidates is 'prostitute' or 'hure<sup>3</sup>'. Mudiwa (2022) posits that the term 'prostitute' is part of the political grammar in Zimbabwe, used to discipline women's participation in party politics. Such scathing attacks on the moral character of women represent verbal and psychological abuse, aiming to undermine their confidence and dignity when seeking leadership positions in politics.

The political landscape in Zimbabwe is unstable and predicated with violence in all its forms. It is toxic, especially for women as they are easily subjected to numerous challenges that range from sexual abuse physical abuse and recently online abuse. It is especially problematic in politics, where many male politicians utilise SGBV to tame and control women, hence, Open Democracy (2022), posits that men are weaponising online abuse and physical violence to keep women's voices

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Mujuru (born Solomon Tapfumaneyi Mutusva; 5 May 1945 – 15 August 2011), also known by his nom-de-guerre, Rex Nhongo, was a Zimbabwean military officer and politician who led Robert Mugabe's guerrilla forces during the Rhodesian Bush War. He was the husband of the former Vice-President Joice Mujuru.

<sup>2</sup> hure is a Shona word which refers to a promiscuous woman/prostitute



out of politics. Zimbabwean society has normalised the use of violence to silence women who are deemed too politically active. The rise of social media has shown that SGBV is structural and deeply ingrained in Zimbabwean culture. When men lose arguments or fail to back up their opinions with tangible evidence and facts, they often resort to intimidation and emotional and verbal abuse online, (Open Democracy, 2022). Women who are brave enough to speak truth to power and work to close the gender gap in politics are particularly vulnerable to this type of behaviour.

Regrettably, in some instances, this violence has escalated to physical assaults, including beatings, and abductions when women express their political affiliations and challenge men in decision-making positions (Padare, 2020). Joana Mamombe, Netsai Marova, and Cecilia Chimhiri were abducted, sexually assaulted, and jailed in May 2020 for leading a demonstration against the government (Amnesty International, 2020), and disappearances such as Jestina Mukoko<sup>4</sup> in December 2008. These forms of violence and sexual abuse pose significant barriers for women in Zimbabwe who aspire to actively participate in politics and assume leadership positions. Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), and Zim Fact (2023), assert that women candidates frequently face threats, intimidation tactics, and public shaming, albeit varying based on their marital status, age, and party affiliation. The harshness and intolerance against women in politics are done on purpose, ranging from sexist slurs to negative insinuations that breed the potential to discourage women's effective engagement in politics (Nyikadzino, 2023).

Women are sometimes subjected to 'sextortion'<sup>5</sup>, whereby they are coerced into providing sexual favours in exchange for political aggrandisement. A type of violence is semiotic violence (Hay, 2007) perpetrated through images, sexual objectification, words or symbols and is largely targeted toward female electoral candidates, characterising them as unworthy and incompetent (Krook, 2020). Male chauvinism is particularly pronounced when single women challenge men in the political sphere, as men employ tactics of misogyny to denigrate these women for their lack of husbands, thereby weakening their position in the political arena (Padare, 2020). It is important to note that the violence against women in Zimbabwe is not isolated but rather has become a structural and institutionalised phenomenon within electoral and political party systems. The 2018 elections serve as a telling example of how the exploitation and sexual harassment of women through the media, which evolved into cyber violence, resulted in a reduction in women's representation in all political structures from 34% in 2013 to 31% in 2018. Despite the existence of a quota system intended to address gender imbalances (Padare, 2020) the figure further plummeted to 11% during the 2023 elections. A total of 60 seats of the 280 are reserved for women proportional representation which is 21% of the full parliament and only 22 women thus (11%) were elected.

### **Electoral Contests: Voter Intimidation, Persecution, and Arbitrary Arrests**

The Zimbabwean elections have a history of being violent usually characterised by voter intimidation and persecution of the

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<sup>4</sup> Jestina Mukoko is a Zimbabwean human rights activist and the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project

<sup>5</sup> Sextortion (a portmanteau of sex and extortion) employs non-physical forms of coercion to extort sexual favours from the victim.

electorate with divergent views. Violence against women is used as a targeted and damaging strategy throughout the political cycle to discourage women from serving as election administrators, voters, or candidates (Para-Mallam, 2015). Election violence is protracted, and purposeful methods employed by politicians including incumbents and opposition parties to advance their interests or achieve certain political goals during an election (Adolfo et al. 2012). As a result, in rural areas, many politicians deploy illegal electoral techniques, such as militant youth wings, militias, or state security forces, to win elections or boost their post-election negotiating power, (Motau and Tshifhumulo, 2023).

Opposition parties have consistently accused the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party of orchestrating these attacks (Raleigh, 2023). It is estimated that over 200 people lost their lives in 2008 amidst a wave of violence targeting opposition supporters during and after the election (Amnesty International, 2023). According to Zakari (2015), violence against women in elections can be overt or subtle. In addition to physical harm, violence can manifest in the form of gender-based hate speech, with the sinister goal of discouraging women from running for office or voting in elections. Online violent methods are now common in Zimbabwe's political space where opponents, especially women, are subjected to cyberbullying and trolling. Trolling involved sexual assault and rape threats, hate speech, reputation-related blackmailing, and sexualised insults (NDI, 2021). Opposition leader, Linda Masarira<sup>6</sup> is widely trolled on social media platforms, especially on X.

The inability of some countries like Uganda and Kenya to reach the critical mass makes violence, normalised in politics, a potential reason for gender differences in political participation (Krook, 2020). Hence, electoral violence is one issue that has been identified as a barrier to women's full participation in politics and governance (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2018).

## Effects of Institutionalised Party Politics

The political landscape worldwide is deeply rooted in patriarchy, hence it is male-dominated. In this regard, it leaves little room for women to freely participate without retribution either from the outside world or the political parties they represent. Ikebgu (2018) asserts that it is arguably accepted that leadership in Africa both at its traditional, religious, economic, social, and political strands is male-dominated. Before the age of modernity, political participation, and social and economic activism were the exclusive preserve of men with women scantily seen featuring in areas of minor importance. Over the years, the landscape of mainstream politics has seen a retreat of many women from taking up political posts. Those who have chosen to remain often find themselves confined to the women's wings of their respective political parties, serving as praise singers and staunch party supporters but lacking any meaningful decision-making capacity (Kumar, 2017; Højlund Madsen, & Mtero, 2023) in Zimbabwe's main political parties - Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) and Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A).

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Masarira, the president of Labour, Economists and African Democrats party (LEAD), has faced a barrage of online harassment and abuse on various social media platforms due to her outspoken views, particularly those critical of the opposition party Citizen Coalition for Change.

Despite Zimbabwe's constitution providing for equal representation, women's participation in politics remains alarmingly low at 11%, as highlighted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2023). While political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs dedicated to advocating for issues important to female voters, their involvement typically does not translate into real power or inclusion. The male-dominated nature of political parties poses significant challenges for women, as they are often side-lined and their importance disregarded (Maphosa et al, 2015; Kumar, 2017; Padare, 2021). The image of a powerful female leader is a 'psychic threat' (Manne, 2018) to patriarchal structures and the male-dominant political arena (Paxton, Hughes & Barnes, 2020).

Political parties frequently fail to support the political empowerment of women, denying them proper tickets (Kumar, 2017) as doubts are cast on the viability of female candidates and perpetuating the notion that women are unfit for governance and decision-making. These parties, with their entrenched patriarchal structures, lack of internal democracy, and dearth of women in decision-making positions, continue to marginalise women and maintain the existing status quo. Inactive participation and instances of sexual violence further serve as barriers to women's involvement in politics. Political parties' public declarations of commitment to gender

equality often fall short in practice. Women, when chosen for leadership positions are made to fight each other –the case of Jessie Majome<sup>7</sup> and Johanna Mamombe<sup>8</sup> in 2018, a similar case was witnessed earlier in 2014 when Grace Mugabe<sup>9</sup> was put afore to fight and shame Joice Mujuru<sup>10</sup>. Zigomo (2022), and Højlund Madsen, & Mtero. (2023) posit that systematic obstacles such as votes of no confidence in female candidates and clashes with established, male-dominated networks at national and local levels are deliberately designed to deny women nominations and electoral success. Although political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs aimed at advocating for female voters, their primary role has increasingly shifted towards mobilising women during election campaigns and promoting male candidates, rather than fostering the retention of power and inclusion for women in politics (Mlambo et al, 2019; Zigomo, 2022). Moreover, within political party structures, there is a lack of policies that protect candidates, particularly women, from politically motivated violence, hate speech, and sexual harassment. The way political parties are structured, with women's wings and youth wings is a form of gatekeeping that keeps women and young people away from mainstream politics (Dahlerup, 2006). These systemic issues further hinder women's participation and representation in politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Jessie Majome was a Member of the National Assembly of the Parliament of Zimbabwe for Harare West constituency on an MDC-T ticket elected 1st in 2008 and then in 2013 and was demoted to pave way for Johanna Mamombe

<sup>8</sup> Joana Mamombe is a Zimbabwean politician, representing Harare West (Citizens Coalition for Change) who was first elected in Parliament in 2018 after the demotion of Jessie Majome

<sup>9</sup> Grace Mugabe is the former first lady who was influential in the fall of Joice Mujuru

<sup>10</sup> Joice Mujuru, Zimbabwe's first woman vice-President who was demoted and subsequently chased out of ZANU-PF after being accused of fanning factionalism within the party

## Cultural and Traditional Norms

Women are also exposed to the cultural and traditional norms that hinder them from assuming positions of power in the political realm. Violence against women in electoral processes also cascades from the private unit, that is, the family up to the national level. Discrimination against women from assuming political positions in Zimbabwe extends even to their own families, where they are often expected to confine themselves to the domestic sphere (Nyawo, 2023). Men, seeking to maintain their dominance, underestimate women and limit their opportunities (Kumar, 2017). In the realm of politics, women face additional challenges as they are unable to rely on support from their families, which hinders their ability to fully represent themselves in political spheres. Thus Padare (2020) has the notion that the underrepresentation of women is deeply ingrained in a patriarchal system that spans from the pre-colonial era to the colonial and post-colonial periods. This system has become a hegemony, perpetuating gender inequality and suppressing women's voices.

According to Moagi and Mtombeni (2020), it is worth noting that in the pre-colonial era, women held positions of influence in African traditional society - they were very active in the public domain; in politics as Princesses, Queen mothers, and regents; and in religion as prophets, diviners, and rainmakers. However, the advent of colonialism introduced a new framework that defined women primarily through the institution of family and marriage, while men maintained individual identities defined by participation in public institutions (Sheldon, 2018). The problem of gender inequality begins within the confines of the home, where husbands may be uncomfortable with women engaging in the public sphere, especially

considering the levels of toxicity of the politics that prevail in Zimbabwe. Additionally, gender roles and responsibilities place a heavy burden on women's time, as they are often responsible for caregiving duties, including looking after children, sick individuals, domestic chores, and elderly family members. On average, women spend 49.7 hours per week on these tasks, compared to 26.7 hours for men (Lowe, Morna, Makamure, & Glenwright, 2018). The unpaid care work performed by women not only affects their economic productivity but also hinders national development in the country.

## Economic Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics

Access to and control over resources in Zimbabwe heavily favours men, creating a significant disadvantage for women seeking recognition and respect as leaders. To gain prominence and support, leaders in Zimbabwe often need to provide resources to the people (Zigomo, 2022) which is a problem with most female politicians who usually find themselves at the horns of a dilemma as they lack the financial muscle to appease the wants of the general public during campaigns. To participate in leadership positions in elections money is a fundamental aspect, without which many women are relegated to singing praises for those with the funds to finance their campaigns. Economically deprived groups with "less access to money, including women" are disadvantaged (World Bank 2022). However, women candidates often need more resources compared to their male counterparts. While campaign finances are available to political parties through the Political Parties Finance Act, they are predominantly utilised by men rather than women (Padare, 2020) as most political parties doubt the ability of women to be good. This puts women, particularly those under

proportional representation, who mainly rely on the women's quota, in a challenging position as they have to finance themselves to be nominated at the party level. In 2018, the prevailing approach by most parties was to relegate women to the quota, with only a few women actively campaigning for representation in a constituency and receiving funding.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design using in-depth interviews was used to gather data for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with women who had contested for Local Authority, National Assembly and Presidential seats to solicit personal experiences of political violence. Fifteen in-depth interviews comprising 6 women who had contested for Local Authority seats, 8 women who had contested for National Assembly seats and 1 presidential aspirant were conducted. Six (6) FGDs with 10 participants each were conducted in Bulawayo, Harare, Matopo, Shamva, Buhera, and Lupane. The areas were chosen because of their previous history of incidences of physical violence against women in politics. The FGDs had community members, government stakeholders, aspiring members, Councillors and Members of parliament. Also, a validation meeting was conducted in which 35 women from across the country were in attendance. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study to ensure that the women who had participated in public electoral or political processes and had experience in the subject matter were recruited. The method used was effective as it gave the researcher and the participants a chance to deeply engage in the subject matter at hand. This goes into the gist of in-depth interviews which according to Rutledge and Hogg (2020) detailed information that sheds

light on an individual's perspective, experiences, feelings and the derived meaning about a particular topic or issue. During the interviews, the women were asked about the specific forms of political-related violence they had experienced, the causes of such violence, and what they thought could be done to address political violence faced by women in politics. The interviews were conducted in English language, which is one of the country's official languages. The participants consented to have the interview sessions recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

## FINDINGS

The research demonstrated that several factors are limiting the participation of women in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. These include sexual violence, physical violence, emotional or psychological violence, cultural norms and values, party politics, voter intimidation, political persecution, political violence and a general lack of financial means.

Sexual violence which manifests itself through sexualised remarks, altered pornography and rape is one of the most common types of violence experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. This is primarily because of rampant male misogyny in the political and electoral arena in Zimbabwe. Although generally sexual violence is culturally frowned upon in the country, somehow sexual violence against women in politics is not given the same societal disapproval. Possibly, this is due to a general societal assumption that women who venture into politics or electoral processes willingly expose themselves to acts of violence. Women in politics are sexually violated to intimidate and scare them from participating in electoral or political

processes. Anyone was deemed a potential perpetrator of this type of abuse, however, men in influential political party positions, state security personnel and overzealous supporters of political parties they do not support were identified as the main perpetrators of sexual violence against women in politics.

**“ As a woman in politics, I have a lot of abuse that has taken a toll on my mental health. I have experienced altered pornography online, but I cannot do much about it despite the presence of the Data Protection Act as it was sent online by a troll account. I have grown thick skin to survive this male-dominated field. (Excerpt from an in-depth interviewee)**

Despite knowing that they are being sexually violated, in some instances, women in politics tolerate sexual assault from political party gatekeepers to climb the political ladder. This form of violence was rampant due to the ‘first-pass-the-post’ (FTPT)<sup>11</sup>, particularly in party primary elections since they lacked equal means to be on an equal footing to contest with their male counterparts. For example, women reported that sexual favours were rendered to secure party support to represent it in public elections or to be nominated for the women’s quota system.

**“ Men who hold powerful positions in my party are well known for demanding sexual favours from women to sign their papers to contest as party candidates for the women’s quota. Although the government meant well by making provisions for the Women’s Quota in**

**the 2013 Constitution, the provision has been used to sexually assault women in my party. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Psychological violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. The women reported that the most common forms of emotional violence were threats of abduction, kidnapping and disappearance. Although this form of violence is experienced by both men and women in politics, the effects and severity of the threats were reported to be direr for women than men. Given the history of the country in enforced disappearances and kidnappings, this form of violence unsettles women aspiring for public political positions.

**“ Since I joined active politics, I have received countless threats of abduction. During the first days, I used to scare away women from active politics. Politics in Zimbabwe is not child’s play! If not strong and wise, you can easily quit. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Further, the study findings highlighted that women in politics also experienced stalking as a form of psychological violence. The women reported that they experienced stalking both online (social media trolls) and offline where unknown male characters would stalk them both in public and private spaces.

**“ Towards the March 2008 general elections, I had to dump my car at a garage and started using taxis after I noticed that someone was stalking me. I also had to vacate my lodgings and temporarily stay with a friend, as I was afraid that the stalker would harm me or kill me. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

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<sup>11</sup> This system, also known as the "winner-takes-all" system, was introduced in 1987 after the amendment of the Electoral Act and replaced the proportional representation (PR) system that was previously used. As a result of the system, one first satisfies requirements of a political party to be seconded to represent that party in elections

Cyberbullying or online violence is another form of violence experienced by women in politics in Zimbabwe. This form of violence manifests itself in the form of catfishing, name-calling, sexist remarks and threats of physical or sexual harm. In-depth interviewees argued that the aforementioned forms of violence served to depersonalise and systematically exclude them from participating at par with their male counterparts, who although exposed to the same forms of violence have patriarchy as their shield. In addition, in-depth interviews also highlighted that cyberbullying nurtured feelings of low self-esteem, which affected women's participation in politics and electoral processes.

“ The internet has been abused to preserve male hegemony in political and electoral processes. Since the 2018 elections, there has been a steady increase in cyberbullying or online harassment of women in politics. I have been called all vile names from a home wrecker, a good-for-nothing woman, and a whore who has kids with different fathers. It's too much to bear all in the name of politics. Something has to be done to ensure the safety of women in politics and women in general online. (Excerpt from an FGD)

Notwithstanding several pieces of legislation to foster gender equality and women's empowerment in political processes, women continue to experience emotional violence through excessive moral regulation. There is a structural expectation for women in politics and electoral processes to have a high level of morality, chastity and sexual purity compared to their male counterparts. This is done to confine women to the private space where they can be good housewives, or to court potential marriage suitors. In a society

that places high regard on marriage, women's participation in politics is frowned upon by the society as the women are deemed domineering, not suitable for marriage or are classified as home wreckers.

Physical violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes in Zimbabwe. This form of abuse manifests in the form of physical beatings or assaults and kidnappings. The women reported that at times they are beaten or have their hair pulled to deter them from participating in politics. This form of abuse just like sexual violence is perpetrated at family and communal levels.

“ Although I have not experienced physical violence, I have seen women in politics being beaten or kidnapped. This is horrendous and has to be stopped as it drives women away from political processes. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)

General systemic political violence, which is a normal phenomenon in Zimbabwean politics and electoral systems impacts heavily on the participation of women in politics. Women are intimidated by violence that occurs to men in politics.

“ The country's elections and political processes are heavily characterised by political violence. It takes great courage for a woman to participate in the electoral process. (Excerpt from a FGD)

The political environment in Zimbabwe is very toxic to such an extent that families and husbands would not want to let their daughters and wives participate as it is associated with some vices which are not acceptable in the communities. Participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and

influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates.

**“ Who would want to let his wife be a politician in this country where politics is associated with everything bad? If one does not sleep her way up the ladder, she will be ridiculed in front of her family so it's better to stay as a housewife or have other professional jobs. (Excerpt from a FGD)**

The cultural norms in the country are a major setback in allowing one to fully participate in politics as a society usually views women who actively take leading roles in politics as being loose and not fit for the conservative African communities. Men are given the upper hand over their female counterparts and usually feel threatened by women in leadership positions.

**“ Men are not yet prepared to see women leaders, even if there is an elected woman leader during meetings her words are not considered until they get support from men. Our societies do not think women can be leaders. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

## DISCUSSION

This is the first study to focus on violence against women candidates in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. It shows that women in politics mostly experience psychological and sexual violence while fewer women experience physical violence. The findings of this study are void of statistical significance and lack generalisability due to the research design employed. Further, the study did not include experiences of political violence from other groups of women in politics or electoral processes such as election administrators, government officials, party supporters and human rights defenders. The study focused primarily on women as candidates in politics or electoral processes as its main hypothesis was that violence against female candidates was responsible for the continued decline of women participating in electoral and political processes in the country. Notwithstanding the identified limitations of this study, the findings corroborate with findings from Sanin (2018), UN Women (2019) Johnson-Myers (2021), and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) which highlight that there is a high prevalence of political violence against women in politics that is hinged on masculine hegemony and male dominance globally. The study findings highlight that women in politics experienced a wide range of violations. In particular, study participants reported that they experienced sexual violence. These findings corroborate those found in Burundi and Zimbabwe by van Baalem (2017) and the Open Democracy (2022) where women in politics experienced sexual violence.

The findings further highlight that young women, unmarried (never married, divorced or widowed) in politics were more susceptible to sexual violence compared to their married and older women in politics.



This is a shift from the literature van Baalen (2017); Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) and Krause (2020) which did not show how socio-demographic variables contributed to violence against women in politics. Party leaders, male colleagues within political parties, supporters of parties they do not belong to and state security agents, mainly perpetrate sexual violence against women in politics and electoral processes. These findings are similar to Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) on political violence against women in politics in West Africa. For sexual violence, women in politics just like women in general, Rohleder, & Flowers (2018) hardly reported cases to the police for assistance. Partly, this is so because of the general perception that violence against women in politics is a price paid by women who venture into politics or electoral processes (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). There is a need, therefore, for political parties, government, and the electoral management body (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) to produce monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that identify and address sexual violence against women in politics.

The study findings also highlight that women in politics experience sextortion and altered pornography. This study notes that for Zimbabwe, sextortion has been widely researched in other areas such as access to employment opportunities or economic opportunities and social opportunities (Mvelase, Z., & Mvuvu, T. 2021, Transparency International 2020), however, there is a dearth of literature on the subject when it relates to sextortion in political spaces. This study opines that the government and other development partners should economically empower women in politics such that they have sufficient resources to independently participate in politics.

The study also established that women in politics or electoral processes experience psychological abuse in its varied forms such as threats of abduction, rape or killing, stalking both physical and online, and cyber or online violence. All the study participants attested to having experienced this form of violence. These findings are confirmed by literature from other contexts Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), van Baalem (2017), and Krause (2020) which found that women in politics experienced higher levels of psychological violence compared to their male counterparts. The high prevalence of psychological violence calls for a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to managing the scourge. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) reports that women in politics or electoral processes are disproportionately exposed to cyber violence to discredit them as credible candidates. Given that, Zimbabwe has a youthful demography and a huge online presence.

## CONCLUSION

The study noted that the adoption of gender quotas has helped boost women's presence in the legislature, however, the gender quotas have not effectively addressed gender disparities in political office representation of women as evidenced by the continued decline of women seconded by their political parties to contest as members of parliament or councillors in Zimbabwe. Despite global efforts to advance gender equity in governance and politics, women's representation in Zimbabwean elective politics remains low at 11%, as of August 2023, indicating significant gender disparities in political leadership positions. Further, subsequent recalls of elected officials in the aftermath of the 2023 elections have worsened the representation in the legislature as most of the recalled female representatives were replaced by males. Women's participation in elective politics in Zimbabwe

despite the presence of gender quotas is a result of a myriad of factors such as endemic political violence which is characterised by violence, hate speech, intimidation, sexual violence and intimidation which can be interpreted to be meant to scare away women from elective political processes. Patriarchal cultural norms, which reserve the domestic arena to females and the public arena to males, coupled with male hegemony and misogyny, lack of financial resources to compete at an equal footing with their male counterparts also hinder women's

participation in elective politics. Further, lack of a legal framework to govern the operations of political parties and to enforce equal representation of women also affects participation of women in elective political processes. There is therefore an urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development in Zimbabwe as women are subtly forced to assume positions of less influence in the political realm.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.5FF7MKVH>

# The Zimbabwe political space: An analysis of the barriers to women's participation in electoral processes?

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders'. Since the Beijing conference in 1995, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the 2013 Constitution. The study brings to the fore, findings to respond to 3 fundamental research questions which are: 1) what is the interlinkage between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, 2) what are the complex social inclusion factors in political spaces, and 3) what recommendations can be proffered to enhance inclusion of women in electoral processes. In answering the questions, the research draws on content analysis of reports from the Project on Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics Project (VAWP), face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions to offer insights and investigate the opportunities provided by various legal frameworks to increase women's engagement in electoral and political processes in Zimbabwe. The article further systematically explores other important factors and elements that impede and contribute to women's full participation in electoral processes as candidates. This study contends that the availability of excellent legal provisions does not result in increased women's participation in electoral politics as candidates unless there is political will. The study further asserts that participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates. The study recommends a wholesome approach to dismantling the complex interlinkages between cultural, social, economic, and physical spaces as obstacles affecting the inclusion of women in electoral processes as candidates. Thus, the study further recommends that existing legal instruments should be complemented by progressively dismantling the social, cultural, and physical forces prohibiting women's participation as leaders in electoral processes. Specific provisions in the Electoral Act may further be used to penalise failure by political parties to field a reasonable number of women as candidates in elections.

**Key words:** Political participation, women, elections

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders. Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the introduction of the 2013 Constitution. Female candidates face numerous obstacles, both before and after elections, including insufficient financial support, sexual harassment, and attacks on their character and integrity. These challenges serve as discouragement and hinder the full participation and representation of women in politics. The underlying issue lies in the lack of political will to actively promote the access and substantive presence of women in politics, ensuring that their voices are truly heard and that their membership in political parties is connected to their involvement in leadership positions (Kumar, 2017; Nyawo, 2023). This paper explores the interlinkages between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, and how the complex social inclusion factors shape the political spaces gendered narrative. From a deeper understanding of the issue, it aims to contribute to the discourse on how Zimbabwe can achieve a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all its citizens. By thoroughly studying this rhetoric, the paper aims to set a

practical Zimbabwean/ African agenda for implementing a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all citizens.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant strides have been made globally towards advancing gender equity since 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality (UN Women, 2023), with the increase in female representation in parliaments being a key factor attributed to this progress. Maphosa, Tshuma & Maviza (2015) argue that Zimbabwe has signed and ratified several regional and international instruments that call for gender equality in various spheres of life. However, despite the existence of these supportive instruments, the country has not fared well in advancing the participation of women in politics. The adoption of gender quotas<sup>1</sup> has notably boosted women's presence in legislatures (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2021), as evidenced by the sharp rise observed between 1990 and 2015 (Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg 2017). Concurring with Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg (2017), Fungurai (2024) is of the view that, women currently hold 31.9% of seats in Zimbabwe's parliament, which is an impressive increase from 14.7% in 1995. At the global level currently, only 26.9% of parliamentarians in single or lower houses are women, up from 11% in 1995 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). However, despite the positive impact of quotas, their sustainability and effectiveness in challenging the status quo of male dominance remain under scrutiny, especially in Zimbabwe where the numbers of women representation are dwindling remarkably since 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> The Zimbabwean quota system allows for 70 seats of 280 which is 25% of the full parliament and only 22 women i.e. (11%) were elected to parliament



Højlund Madsen, & Mtero (2023) reveals that the meagre 11% of female representation in the August 2023 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe reflects a major setback in achieving SDG 5.5b, gender equality, and the empowerment of all women and girls. In Africa, efforts have been made to promote women's participation in political leadership roles with Rwanda and South Africa having the highest representation of 56.3% (Kumar, 2017) and 53.5% respectively (Nyawo, 2023). However, disparities with men persist, reflecting deeply ingrained societal beliefs about gender roles, for example, the philosopher Aristotle asserts that men are considered superior to women. This poses a serious dent in women's quest to achieve gender equality in political spheres. Although countries like South Africa and Rwanda have seen notable increases in women's representation due to quotas, the overall representation of women in influential leadership positions on the continent remains low, Zimbabwe included. The current global scenario, where women hold only 23% of parliamentary seats (Chalaby, 2017), highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development (OECD, 2018a).

### **The Toxicity of the Political Playing Field – Violence and Sexual Abuse**

Historical analysis demonstrates that women who have successfully navigated the political landscape since the early 1980s have typically enjoyed certain privileges (occupying

positions of political influence be it locally and nationally), such as being members of the liberation war struggle or having powerful male relatives within the ruling party who can provide protection and financial support for their political campaigns (Padare, 2020). Former Vice President of Zimbabwe Joice Mujuru is a typical example who enjoyed the protection of her husband Solomon Mujuru<sup>2</sup> from independence in 1980 until 2011 when he died, the events that ensued soon after his death led to the dismissal of Joice from her influential position of the vice president of the country. However, when women contest against men, they are often subjected to hate speech, portraying them as unruly and ungovernable, necessitating action to bring them 'back in line.' One common derogatory label used for women candidates is 'prostitute' or 'hure'<sup>3</sup>. Mudiwa (2022) posits that the term 'prostitute' is part of the political grammar in Zimbabwe, used to discipline women's participation in party politics. Such scathing attacks on the moral character of women represent verbal and psychological abuse, aiming to undermine their confidence and dignity when seeking leadership positions in politics.

The political landscape in Zimbabwe is unstable and predicated with violence in all its forms. It is toxic, especially for women as they are easily subjected to numerous challenges that range from sexual abuse physical abuse and recently online abuse. It is especially problematic in politics, where many male politicians utilise SGBV to tame and control women, hence, Open Democracy (2022), posits that men are weaponising online abuse and physical violence to keep women's voices

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Mujuru (born Solomon Tapfumaneyi Mutusva; 5 May 1945 – 15 August 2011), also known by his nom-de-guerre, Rex Nhongo, was a Zimbabwean military officer and politician who led Robert Mugabe's guerrilla forces during the Rhodesian Bush War. He was the husband of the former Vice-President Joice Mujuru.

<sup>2</sup> hure is a Shona word which refers to a promiscuous woman/prostitute

out of politics. Zimbabwean society has normalised the use of violence to silence women who are deemed too politically active. The rise of social media has shown that SGBV is structural and deeply ingrained in Zimbabwean culture. When men lose arguments or fail to back up their opinions with tangible evidence and facts, they often resort to intimidation and emotional and verbal abuse online, (Open Democracy, 2022). Women who are brave enough to speak truth to power and work to close the gender gap in politics are particularly vulnerable to this type of behaviour.

Regrettably, in some instances, this violence has escalated to physical assaults, including beatings, and abductions when women express their political affiliations and challenge men in decision-making positions (Padare, 2020). Joana Mamombe, Netsai Marova, and Cecilia Chimhiri were abducted, sexually assaulted, and jailed in May 2020 for leading a demonstration against the government (Amnesty International, 2020), and disappearances such as Jestina Mukoko<sup>4</sup> in December 2008. These forms of violence and sexual abuse pose significant barriers for women in Zimbabwe who aspire to actively participate in politics and assume leadership positions. Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), and Zim Fact (2023), assert that women candidates frequently face threats, intimidation tactics, and public shaming, albeit varying based on their marital status, age, and party affiliation. The harshness and intolerance against women in politics are done on purpose, ranging from sexist slurs to negative insinuations that breed the potential to discourage women's effective engagement in politics (Nyikadzino, 2023).

Women are sometimes subjected to 'sextortion'<sup>5</sup>, whereby they are coerced into providing sexual favours in exchange for political aggrandisement. A type of violence is semiotic violence (Hay, 2007) perpetrated through images, sexual objectification, words or symbols and is largely targeted toward female electoral candidates, characterising them as unworthy and incompetent (Krook, 2020). Male chauvinism is particularly pronounced when single women challenge men in the political sphere, as men employ tactics of misogyny to denigrate these women for their lack of husbands, thereby weakening their position in the political arena (Padare, 2020). It is important to note that the violence against women in Zimbabwe is not isolated but rather has become a structural and institutionalised phenomenon within electoral and political party systems. The 2018 elections serve as a telling example of how the exploitation and sexual harassment of women through the media, which evolved into cyber violence, resulted in a reduction in women's representation in all political structures from 34% in 2013 to 31% in 2018. Despite the existence of a quota system intended to address gender imbalances (Padare, 2020) the figure further plummeted to 11% during the 2023 elections. A total of 60 seats of the 280 are reserved for women proportional representation which is 21% of the full parliament and only 22 women thus (11%) were elected.

### **Electoral Contests: Voter Intimidation, Persecution, and Arbitrary Arrests**

The Zimbabwean elections have a history of being violent usually characterised by voter intimidation and persecution of the

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<sup>4</sup> Jestina Mukoko is a Zimbabwean human rights activist and the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project

<sup>5</sup> Sextortion (a portmanteau of sex and extortion) employs non-physical forms of coercion to extort sexual favours from the victim.

electorate with divergent views. Violence against women is used as a targeted and damaging strategy throughout the political cycle to discourage women from serving as election administrators, voters, or candidates (Para-Mallam, 2015). Election violence is protracted, and purposeful methods employed by politicians including incumbents and opposition parties to advance their interests or achieve certain political goals during an election (Adolfo et al. 2012). As a result, in rural areas, many politicians deploy illegal electoral techniques, such as militant youth wings, militias, or state security forces, to win elections or boost their post-election negotiating power, (Motau and Tshifhumulo, 2023).

Opposition parties have consistently accused the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party of orchestrating these attacks (Raleigh, 2023). It is estimated that over 200 people lost their lives in 2008 amidst a wave of violence targeting opposition supporters during and after the election (Amnesty International, 2023). According to Zakari (2015), violence against women in elections can be overt or subtle. In addition to physical harm, violence can manifest in the form of gender-based hate speech, with the sinister goal of discouraging women from running for office or voting in elections. Online violent methods are now common in Zimbabwe's political space where opponents, especially women, are subjected to cyberbullying and trolling. Trolling involved sexual assault and rape threats, hate speech, reputation-related blackmailing, and sexualised insults (NDI, 2021). Opposition leader, Linda Masarira<sup>6</sup> is widely trolled on social media platforms, especially on X.

The inability of some countries like Uganda and Kenya to reach the critical mass makes violence, normalised in politics, a potential reason for gender differences in political participation (Krook, 2020). Hence, electoral violence is one issue that has been identified as a barrier to women's full participation in politics and governance (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2018).

## Effects of Institutionalised Party Politics

The political landscape worldwide is deeply rooted in patriarchy, hence it is male-dominated. In this regard, it leaves little room for women to freely participate without retribution either from the outside world or the political parties they represent. Ikebgu (2018) asserts that it is arguably accepted that leadership in Africa both at its traditional, religious, economic, social, and political strands is male-dominated. Before the age of modernity, political participation, and social and economic activism were the exclusive preserve of men with women scantily seen featuring in areas of minor importance. Over the years, the landscape of mainstream politics has seen a retreat of many women from taking up political posts. Those who have chosen to remain often find themselves confined to the women's wings of their respective political parties, serving as praise singers and staunch party supporters but lacking any meaningful decision-making capacity (Kumar, 2017; Højlund Madsen, & Mtero, 2023) in Zimbabwe's main political parties - Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) and Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A).

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Masarira, the president of Labour, Economists and African Democrats party (LEAD), has faced a barrage of online harassment and abuse on various social media platforms due to her outspoken views, particularly those critical of the opposition party Citizen Coalition for Change.

Despite Zimbabwe's constitution providing for equal representation, women's participation in politics remains alarmingly low at 11%, as highlighted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2023). While political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs dedicated to advocating for issues important to female voters, their involvement typically does not translate into real power or inclusion. The male-dominated nature of political parties poses significant challenges for women, as they are often side-lined and their importance disregarded (Maphosa et al, 2015; Kumar, 2017; Padare, 2021). The image of a powerful female leader is a 'psychic threat' (Manne, 2018) to patriarchal structures and the male-dominant political arena (Paxton, Hughes & Barnes, 2020).

Political parties frequently fail to support the political empowerment of women, denying them proper tickets (Kumar, 2017) as doubts are cast on the viability of female candidates and perpetuating the notion that women are unfit for governance and decision-making. These parties, with their entrenched patriarchal structures, lack of internal democracy, and dearth of women in decision-making positions, continue to marginalise women and maintain the existing status quo. Inactive participation and instances of sexual violence further serve as barriers to women's involvement in politics. Political parties' public declarations of commitment to gender

equality often fall short in practice. Women, when chosen for leadership positions are made to fight each other –the case of Jessie Majome<sup>7</sup> and Johanna Mamombe<sup>8</sup> in 2018, a similar case was witnessed earlier in 2014 when Grace Mugabe<sup>9</sup> was put afore to fight and shame Joice Mujuru<sup>10</sup>. Zigomo (2022), and Højlund Madsen, & Mtero. (2023) posit that systematic obstacles such as votes of no confidence in female candidates and clashes with established, male-dominated networks at national and local levels are deliberately designed to deny women nominations and electoral success. Although political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs aimed at advocating for female voters, their primary role has increasingly shifted towards mobilising women during election campaigns and promoting male candidates, rather than fostering the retention of power and inclusion for women in politics (Mlambo et al, 2019; Zigomo, 2022). Moreover, within political party structures, there is a lack of policies that protect candidates, particularly women, from politically motivated violence, hate speech, and sexual harassment. The way political parties are structured, with women's wings and youth wings is a form of gatekeeping that keeps women and young people away from mainstream politics (Dahlerup, 2006). These systemic issues further hinder women's participation and representation in politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Jessie Majome was a Member of the National Assembly of the Parliament of Zimbabwe for Harare West constituency on an MDC-T ticket elected 1st in 2008 and then in 2013 and was demoted to pave way for Johanna Mamombe

<sup>8</sup> Joana Mamombe is a Zimbabwean politician, representing Harare West (Citizens Coalition for Change) who was first elected in Parliament in 2018 after the demotion of Jessie Majome

<sup>9</sup> Grace Mugabe is the former first lady who was influential in the fall of Joice Mujuru

<sup>10</sup> Joice Mujuru, Zimbabwe's first woman vice-President who was demoted and subsequently chased out of ZANU-PF after being accused of fanning factionalism within the party

## Cultural and Traditional Norms

Women are also exposed to the cultural and traditional norms that hinder them from assuming positions of power in the political realm. Violence against women in electoral processes also cascades from the private unit, that is, the family up to the national level. Discrimination against women from assuming political positions in Zimbabwe extends even to their own families, where they are often expected to confine themselves to the domestic sphere (Nyawo, 2023). Men, seeking to maintain their dominance, underestimate women and limit their opportunities (Kumar, 2017). In the realm of politics, women face additional challenges as they are unable to rely on support from their families, which hinders their ability to fully represent themselves in political spheres. Thus Padare (2020) has the notion that the underrepresentation of women is deeply ingrained in a patriarchal system that spans from the pre-colonial era to the colonial and post-colonial periods. This system has become a hegemony, perpetuating gender inequality and suppressing women's voices.

According to Moagi and Mtombeni (2020), it is worth noting that in the pre-colonial era, women held positions of influence in African traditional society - they were very active in the public domain; in politics as Princesses, Queen mothers, and regents; and in religion as prophets, diviners, and rainmakers. However, the advent of colonialism introduced a new framework that defined women primarily through the institution of family and marriage, while men maintained individual identities defined by participation in public institutions (Sheldon, 2018). The problem of gender inequality begins within the confines of the home, where husbands may be uncomfortable with women engaging in the public sphere, especially

considering the levels of toxicity of the politics that prevail in Zimbabwe. Additionally, gender roles and responsibilities place a heavy burden on women's time, as they are often responsible for caregiving duties, including looking after children, sick individuals, domestic chores, and elderly family members. On average, women spend 49.7 hours per week on these tasks, compared to 26.7 hours for men (Lowe, Morna, Makamure, & Glenwright, 2018). The unpaid care work performed by women not only affects their economic productivity but also hinders national development in the country.

## Economic Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics

Access to and control over resources in Zimbabwe heavily favours men, creating a significant disadvantage for women seeking recognition and respect as leaders. To gain prominence and support, leaders in Zimbabwe often need to provide resources to the people (Zigomo, 2022) which is a problem with most female politicians who usually find themselves at the horns of a dilemma as they lack the financial muscle to appease the wants of the general public during campaigns. To participate in leadership positions in elections money is a fundamental aspect, without which many women are relegated to singing praises for those with the funds to finance their campaigns. Economically deprived groups with "less access to money, including women" are disadvantaged (World Bank 2022). However, women candidates often need more resources compared to their male counterparts. While campaign finances are available to political parties through the Political Parties Finance Act, they are predominantly utilised by men rather than women (Padare, 2020) as most political parties doubt the ability of women to be good. This puts women, particularly those under

proportional representation, who mainly rely on the women's quota, in a challenging position as they have to finance themselves to be nominated at the party level. In 2018, the prevailing approach by most parties was to relegate women to the quota, with only a few women actively campaigning for representation in a constituency and receiving funding.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design using in-depth interviews was used to gather data for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with women who had contested for Local Authority, National Assembly and Presidential seats to solicit personal experiences of political violence. Fifteen in-depth interviews comprising 6 women who had contested for Local Authority seats, 8 women who had contested for National Assembly seats and 1 presidential aspirant were conducted. Six (6) FGDs with 10 participants each were conducted in Bulawayo, Harare, Matopo, Shamva, Buhera, and Lupane. The areas were chosen because of their previous history of incidences of physical violence against women in politics. The FGDs had community members, government stakeholders, aspiring members, Councillors and Members of parliament. Also, a validation meeting was conducted in which 35 women from across the country were in attendance. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study to ensure that the women who had participated in public electoral or political processes and had experience in the subject matter were recruited. The method used was effective as it gave the researcher and the participants a chance to deeply engage in the subject matter at hand. This goes into the gist of in-depth interviews which according to Rutledge and Hogg (2020) detailed information that sheds

light on an individual's perspective, experiences, feelings and the derived meaning about a particular topic or issue. During the interviews, the women were asked about the specific forms of political-related violence they had experienced, the causes of such violence, and what they thought could be done to address political violence faced by women in politics. The interviews were conducted in English language, which is one of the country's official languages. The participants consented to have the interview sessions recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

## FINDINGS

The research demonstrated that several factors are limiting the participation of women in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. These include sexual violence, physical violence, emotional or psychological violence, cultural norms and values, party politics, voter intimidation, political persecution, political violence and a general lack of financial means.

Sexual violence which manifests itself through sexualised remarks, altered pornography and rape is one of the most common types of violence experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. This is primarily because of rampant male misogyny in the political and electoral arena in Zimbabwe. Although generally sexual violence is culturally frowned upon in the country, somehow sexual violence against women in politics is not given the same societal disapproval. Possibly, this is due to a general societal assumption that women who venture into politics or electoral processes willingly expose themselves to acts of violence. Women in politics are sexually violated to intimidate and scare them from participating in electoral or political

processes. Anyone was deemed a potential perpetrator of this type of abuse, however, men in influential political party positions, state security personnel and overzealous supporters of political parties they do not support were identified as the main perpetrators of sexual violence against women in politics.

**“ As a woman in politics, I have a lot of abuse that has taken a toll on my mental health. I have experienced altered pornography online, but I cannot do much about it despite the presence of the Data Protection Act as it was sent online by a troll account. I have grown thick skin to survive this male-dominated field. (Excerpt from an in-depth interviewee)**

Despite knowing that they are being sexually violated, in some instances, women in politics tolerate sexual assault from political party gatekeepers to climb the political ladder. This form of violence was rampant due to the ‘first-pass-the-post’ (FTPT)<sup>11</sup>, particularly in party primary elections since they lacked equal means to be on an equal footing to contest with their male counterparts. For example, women reported that sexual favours were rendered to secure party support to represent it in public elections or to be nominated for the women’s quota system.

**“ Men who hold powerful positions in my party are well known for demanding sexual favours from women to sign their papers to contest as party candidates for the women’s quota. Although the government meant well by making provisions for the Women’s Quota in**

**the 2013 Constitution, the provision has been used to sexually assault women in my party. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Psychological violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. The women reported that the most common forms of emotional violence were threats of abduction, kidnapping and disappearance. Although this form of violence is experienced by both men and women in politics, the effects and severity of the threats were reported to be direr for women than men. Given the history of the country in enforced disappearances and kidnappings, this form of violence unsettles women aspiring for public political positions.

**“ Since I joined active politics, I have received countless threats of abduction. During the first days, I used to scare away women from active politics. Politics in Zimbabwe is not child’s play! If not strong and wise, you can easily quit. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Further, the study findings highlighted that women in politics also experienced stalking as a form of psychological violence. The women reported that they experienced stalking both online (social media trolls) and offline where unknown male characters would stalk them both in public and private spaces.

**“ Towards the March 2008 general elections, I had to dump my car at a garage and started using taxis after I noticed that someone was stalking me. I also had to vacate my lodgings and temporarily stay with a friend, as I was afraid that the stalker would harm me or kill me. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

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<sup>11</sup> This system, also known as the "winner-takes-all" system, was introduced in 1987 after the amendment of the Electoral Act and replaced the proportional representation (PR) system that was previously used. As a result of the system, one first satisfies requirements of a political party to be seconded to represent that party in elections

Cyberbullying or online violence is another form of violence experienced by women in politics in Zimbabwe. This form of violence manifests itself in the form of catfishing, name-calling, sexist remarks and threats of physical or sexual harm. In-depth interviewees argued that the aforementioned forms of violence served to depersonalise and systematically exclude them from participating at par with their male counterparts, who although exposed to the same forms of violence have patriarchy as their shield. In addition, in-depth interviews also highlighted that cyberbullying nurtured feelings of low self-esteem, which affected women's participation in politics and electoral processes.

“ The internet has been abused to preserve male hegemony in political and electoral processes. Since the 2018 elections, there has been a steady increase in cyberbullying or online harassment of women in politics. I have been called all vile names from a home wrecker, a good-for-nothing woman, and a whore who has kids with different fathers. It's too much to bear all in the name of politics. Something has to be done to ensure the safety of women in politics and women in general online. (Excerpt from an FGD)

Notwithstanding several pieces of legislation to foster gender equality and women's empowerment in political processes, women continue to experience emotional violence through excessive moral regulation. There is a structural expectation for women in politics and electoral processes to have a high level of morality, chastity and sexual purity compared to their male counterparts. This is done to confine women to the private space where they can be good housewives, or to court potential marriage suitors. In a society

that places high regard on marriage, women's participation in politics is frowned upon by the society as the women are deemed domineering, not suitable for marriage or are classified as home wreckers.

Physical violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes in Zimbabwe. This form of abuse manifests in the form of physical beatings or assaults and kidnappings. The women reported that at times they are beaten or have their hair pulled to deter them from participating in politics. This form of abuse just like sexual violence is perpetrated at family and communal levels.

“ Although I have not experienced physical violence, I have seen women in politics being beaten or kidnapped. This is horrendous and has to be stopped as it drives women away from political processes. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)

General systemic political violence, which is a normal phenomenon in Zimbabwean politics and electoral systems impacts heavily on the participation of women in politics. Women are intimidated by violence that occurs to men in politics.

“ The country's elections and political processes are heavily characterised by political violence. It takes great courage for a woman to participate in the electoral process. (Excerpt from a FGD)

The political environment in Zimbabwe is very toxic to such an extent that families and husbands would not want to let their daughters and wives participate as it is associated with some vices which are not acceptable in the communities. Participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and



influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates.

**“ Who would want to let his wife be a politician in this country where politics is associated with everything bad? If one does not sleep her way up the ladder, she will be ridiculed in front of her family so it's better to stay as a housewife or have other professional jobs. (Excerpt from a FGD)**

The cultural norms in the country are a major setback in allowing one to fully participate in politics as a society usually views women who actively take leading roles in politics as being loose and not fit for the conservative African communities. Men are given the upper hand over their female counterparts and usually feel threatened by women in leadership positions.

**“ Men are not yet prepared to see women leaders, even if there is an elected woman leader during meetings her words are not considered until they get support from men. Our societies do not think women can be leaders. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

## DISCUSSION

This is the first study to focus on violence against women candidates in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. It shows that women in politics mostly experience psychological and sexual violence while fewer women experience physical violence. The findings of this study are void of statistical significance and lack generalisability due to the research design employed. Further, the study did not include experiences of political violence from other groups of women in politics or electoral processes such as election administrators, government officials, party supporters and human rights defenders. The study focused primarily on women as candidates in politics or electoral processes as its main hypothesis was that violence against female candidates was responsible for the continued decline of women participating in electoral and political processes in the country. Notwithstanding the identified limitations of this study, the findings corroborate with findings from Sanin (2018), UN Women (2019) Johnson-Myers (2021), and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) which highlight that there is a high prevalence of political violence against women in politics that is hinged on masculine hegemony and male dominance globally. The study findings highlight that women in politics experienced a wide range of violations. In particular, study participants reported that they experienced sexual violence. These findings corroborate those found in Burundi and Zimbabwe by van Baalem (2017) and the Open Democracy (2022) where women in politics experienced sexual violence.

The findings further highlight that young women, unmarried (never married, divorced or widowed) in politics were more susceptible to sexual violence compared to their married and older women in politics.

This is a shift from the literature van Baalen (2017); Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) and Krause (2020) which did not show how socio-demographic variables contributed to violence against women in politics. Party leaders, male colleagues within political parties, supporters of parties they do not belong to and state security agents, mainly perpetrate sexual violence against women in politics and electoral processes. These findings are similar to Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) on political violence against women in politics in West Africa. For sexual violence, women in politics just like women in general, Rohleder, & Flowers (2018) hardly reported cases to the police for assistance. Partly, this is so because of the general perception that violence against women in politics is a price paid by women who venture into politics or electoral processes (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). There is a need, therefore, for political parties, government, and the electoral management body (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) to produce monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that identify and address sexual violence against women in politics.

The study findings also highlight that women in politics experience sextortion and altered pornography. This study notes that for Zimbabwe, sextortion has been widely researched in other areas such as access to employment opportunities or economic opportunities and social opportunities (Mvelase, Z., & Mvuvu, T. 2021, Transparency International 2020), however, there is a dearth of literature on the subject when it relates to sextortion in political spaces. This study opines that the government and other development partners should economically empower women in politics such that they have sufficient resources to independently participate in politics.

The study also established that women in politics or electoral processes experience psychological abuse in its varied forms such as threats of abduction, rape or killing, stalking both physical and online, and cyber or online violence. All the study participants attested to having experienced this form of violence. These findings are confirmed by literature from other contexts Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), van Baalem (2017), and Krause (2020) which found that women in politics experienced higher levels of psychological violence compared to their male counterparts. The high prevalence of psychological violence calls for a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to managing the scourge. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) reports that women in politics or electoral processes are disproportionately exposed to cyber violence to discredit them as credible candidates. Given that, Zimbabwe has a youthful demography and a huge online presence.

## CONCLUSION

The study noted that the adoption of gender quotas has helped boost women's presence in the legislature, however, the gender quotas have not effectively addressed gender disparities in political office representation of women as evidenced by the continued decline of women seconded by their political parties to contest as members of parliament or councillors in Zimbabwe. Despite global efforts to advance gender equity in governance and politics, women's representation in Zimbabwean elective politics remains low at 11%, as of August 2023, indicating significant gender disparities in political leadership positions. Further, subsequent recalls of elected officials in the aftermath of the 2023 elections have worsened the representation in the legislature as most of the recalled female representatives were replaced by males. Women's participation in elective politics in Zimbabwe

despite the presence of gender quotas is a result of a myriad of factors such as endemic political violence which is characterised by violence, hate speech, intimidation, sexual violence and intimidation which can be interpreted to be meant to scare away women from elective political processes. Patriarchal cultural norms, which reserve the domestic arena to females and the public arena to males, coupled with male hegemony and misogyny, lack of financial resources to compete at an equal footing with their male counterparts also hinder women's

participation in elective politics. Further, lack of a legal framework to govern the operations of political parties and to enforce equal representation of women also affects participation of women in elective political processes. There is therefore an urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development in Zimbabwe as women are subtly forced to assume positions of less influence in the political realm.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.5FF7MKVH>

# Institutionalising inclusion: A study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's role in the 2018 elections

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusion within the electoral process is crucial for democratic societies, ensuring all citizens can participate regardless of background. The study explores how institutional frameworks, particularly electoral management bodies like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), facilitate or hinder inclusivity through their operational mandates. Drawing on data from Election Observation Missions and other sources, this analysis evaluates the ZEC's performance in candidate inclusion, accessibility of polling stations, voter education initiatives, and representation of marginalised groups such as women and youth. Key findings reveal that while ZEC implemented measures to enhance inclusion, challenges persisted, such as accessibility issues for voters with disabilities and uneven voter education coverage. Through a historical backdrop and contextual framework, this paper delves into the role of electoral institutions in promoting democratic processes and enhancing inclusion. The findings underscore both achievements and challenges encountered by the ZEC, suggesting areas for future improvement and policy refinement to strengthen electoral inclusivity through institutional means.

The study concludes by recommending enhanced financial and legislative support for ZEC to bolster its operational capacity and collaboration with other institutions. Addressing these recommendations could mitigate common electoral challenges and further embed inclusive practices within Zimbabwe's electoral framework.

**Key words:** Electoral inclusion, political participation, institutions, accessibility



## INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is an essential concept that is at the centre of development. The word 'inclusion' can be defined as the level of access to socio-political and economic choice with the added ability to practice these preferences (Dörffel & Schuhmann, 2021). Inclusion additionally means that everyone, irrespective of origin, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or ethnic and religious background, should have an equal opportunity to participate (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). Taking inclusion as the ability to access and practice preference, political inclusion consequently centres elections and the ability of the electorate to alter or reaffirm the political mandate of an administration. The effectiveness of inclusion within this scope of elections varies subject to an individual's perspective and the context in which it is being assessed. On context, Bandama (2023) argues that the prevailing culture within an environment which is the context, is a key determinant towards achieving effectiveness. This aspect of culture is driven and centres on the people and their distinct behaviours and customs which directly shape their context.

By understanding inclusion from the perspective of access and the ability to practice this access within a given context, political inclusion through elections thus brings to the fore institutions that manage elections, namely Election Management Bodies (EMBs) including Election Commissions. EMBs are institutions established to manage and improve the electoral process including nominations, polling processes, voting, counting and results announcements (Langford, Schiel & Wilson, 2021). Furthermore, these institutions look at rates of participation and abstention and based on those results, implement strategies

that are aimed at enabling all eligible voters the right to participate (Scammon, 1967).

Having laid the above foundation of inclusion from the lens of political participation, this paper will interrogate the role of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), evaluating the institution and its role in enhancing or diminishing inclusion using the 2018 elections. Discussing the Electoral Commission within the context of spaces for political participation is based on the reasoning that it is an institution that should ensure that all individuals within eligible franchises are allowed to express their political preferences.

### Significance of 2018 Elections

One of the most pivotal points in Zimbabwe's political history was the November 2017 military-assisted transition which altered the Zimbabwean political landscape. These events put into motion a novel political atmosphere in Zimbabwe which added impetus to the impending elections. The 2018 polls were regarded as an opportunity to "break from the past" (Malunga, 2018). The Institute for Security Studies suggested that the 2018 polls presented an opportunity to develop institutional legitimacy as a breakaway from traditions, however, the proof of this would only be seen post-election (Matyszak, 2017). Another notable aspect of the 2018 elections is that it marked the first time since 2002 that international observers were accredited to monitor the polls.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper does not seek to validate or appraise election outcomes or to judge them as either free or fair, and neither does it seek

to conduct a comparative analysis of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission with its regional or continental contemporaries. Instead, it examines the role of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in ensuring electoral inclusion. While it can be argued that there is no separation between inclusion and 'free and fair,' the function of institutions such as the Commission, should be understood to be that of establishing standards, procedures, and certainty (Tan, 2004). When the standards within the context are established through the institution, one can argue that inclusion would be a certain expectation as all clusters within the voting population would be entitled to practice their access and preference. This underlining of the institution is underscored by the reasoning that institutions regulate the environment or "political domain" (Azari & Smith, 2012). Institutions can enforce measures which have legal significance over the processes thus being well-positioned to facilitate inclusion or exclusion.

## Data Sources

This paper will utilise data from Election Observation Missions (EOM) reports on the 2018 election in Zimbabwe. These reports assess various aspects, including the performance of the Electoral Commission. By analysing this data, the evaluation will measure how effectively the Commission promoted inclusion, judging this against the established definitions of inclusion and the functions of institutions.

## DISCUSSION

### Institutions and Institutionalism

Institutionalism is the study of institutions and the complexities within. This involves looking at the 'rules of the game' within a given society, the constraints and/or

enablers of interaction (North, 2012). Institutionalism does not look at an institution as an isolated structure but rather explores the social, economic, and political interactions that influence the function of the institution (North, 2012). This aspect of interlinkages is further examined through comparative institutionalism where institutionalists explore the institution concerning its environment of operation (Hotho & Saka-Helmhout, 2017).

Institutions are key allies or adversaries within the policy environment as they can either grant or restrict access in addition to being able to make or break ideas (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). The above directly assigns institutions a responsibility within decision-making and when they uphold or relegate this duty, it has implications of positive or negative governance. One can argue that despite there being a deliberate effort to assign obligations to institutions, the measure of success is judged according to the context and environment in which the institutions operate. This underscores the intricate relationship between the institution and its environment. However, despite this, the institution remains at the centre of access for inclusion.

### Background of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)

The historical context of elections in Zimbabwe is filled with examples of the majority being disenfranchised by the minority. Some of these exclusions were based on literacy, specifically the ability to complete a voter application form in English. The imposition of this requirement by an institution aware of the literacy levels of the population demonstrates how the institutional mechanisms of the time facilitated exclusion.

Juxtaposing then and now, Section 59 of the Electoral Act (2:13) recognises “voting by illiterate or physically handicapped people” and allows assistance of such a voter by a person of their choice. This directly highlights how an institution can facilitate access and inclusion mindful of the socio-political context in which the institution operates.

Because the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is the institution in discussion, it is important to lay a historical foundation of how it came about.

The electoral apparatus in Zimbabwe established by the 1980 Electoral Act contained the “Delimitation Commission, the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC), the Registrar General of Elections (RGE), and the Election Directorate” (Makumbe, 2006). Within this system, the ESC supervised the election, with all administrative duties vested in the hands of the RGE.

**Table 1: Responsibilities for electoral entities**

<b>Entity</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<i>Elections Directorate</i>	Managed voting logistics, including the provision of materials and equipment
<i>Registrar General of Elections</i>	Registered voters and enforced standards of voter conduct
<i>Delimitation Commission</i>	Conducted delimitation of 120 constituencies every five years
<i>Electoral Supervisory Commission</i>	Supervised and monitored the elections as required by the constitution and invited observers for the polls.

Table designed with data from Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee 3 November 2004 Zimbabwean Ambassador’s briefing. (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2004)

In 2004, after considering several recommendations and through stakeholder meetings, in addition to wanting to align with regional best practices, the ESC submitted a recommendation to establish an institution solely responsible for running elections. This recommendation was adopted and through parliament, Constitutional Amendment No.17 the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) was established. (ZEC, n.d). The formation of ZEC in 2005 was aligned with best practices however the established commission still needed to rely on the Registrar General for electoral operations such as the compilation of the voters roll and registering voters (Sachikonye, 2003). From 2005 until 2013

when a new constitution was drafted, ZEC remained with limited authority over elections despite being the Electoral Commission. In 2013, ZEC became recognised as a Chapter 12 institution, an independent entity according to Section 235 of the constitution. (ZEC, n.d).

It is important to note that, although the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) became an independent institution in 2013, earlier elections in Zimbabwe were still attributed to either the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC) or the ZEC, rather than the Registrar General. This suggests that, despite the administrative complexities within the election structure, the Electoral Commission

was publicly recognised as the body responsible for overseeing the elections. This distinction is crucial when analysing participation using institutional mechanisms.

At this juncture, it can be argued that by looking at the established definitions of institutions as those with the authority to make the “rules of the game” or “the ability to grant or restrict access”, ZEC at this point did not wield that authority but rather the RGE’s office.

### **Present Functions of the Electoral Commission**

After the 2013 changes, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has clearly articulated functions that include “(b) To supervise elections of the President of the Senate and the Speaker and to ensure that those elections are conducted efficiently and in accordance with the law” and to develop the expertise in research and electoral processes (ZEC, n.d). The Constitution of Zimbabwe further highlights the responsibilities of printing the ballot papers, compiling the voters’ roll and register, accrediting observers, and employing their staff in line with employment laws (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2013). From this, the Electoral Commission has the latitude and authority to fully administer all election-related activities in contrast to the former structure where the functions were spread across different departments thereby reducing efficiencies and limiting participation.

Following on the above, the ZEC follows the precepts of the Constitution, Chapter 7 Part 1 (2c) which outlines political and electoral rights to “ensure that all political parties and candidates contesting an election or participating in a referendum have reasonable access to all material and information necessary for them to participate effectively.” This is in stark contrast to the

former responsibility of the ESC which focussed on “supervision.” Based on the above, the Electoral Commission bears a responsibility of ensuring participation which is inclusion, of both parties and voters.

### **Electoral Commission in the 2018 Elections**

This paper has defined inclusion as access and the ability to practice that access within a given context. It has also been outlined that an institution is a formal entity which can determine and regulate the rules of engagement as well as provide or restrict access. As this paper has developed, it has located inclusion within political participation, specifically within elections.

### **Candidate Inclusion**

The 2018 elections saw a high voter turnout which is good for democracy and participation. The research firm Ipsos looks at voter turnout as signifying “interest in politics, desire to vote, stated intention to vote, and depth of party loyalty” (IPSOS, 2024) Within the context of Zimbabwe, all the above can be valid. On interest in politics, the Commonwealth Observer group noted that there were:

**“In 2018, a total of 1,652 National Assembly constituency candidates were successfully nominated for 210 seats. Fifty- five (55) political parties and 247 independent candidates contested in the 210 National Assembly constituencies. For the local council elections, 7,573 candidates were nominated for the 1,958 local authority wards in Zimbabwe”**  
**(The Commonwealth 2018).**

This is coupled with 23 candidates for the seat of president with four being women, a first-time occurrence in the country.

Looking at the above, the Commission was tasked with ensuring that all candidates were incorporated into the process in a manner that guaranteed inclusivity as outlined in Section 239 of the Constitution. The IRI-NDI observer mission noted that ZEC processed nominations for all candidates on 14 June 2018 with the courts remaining open beyond the official close time to enable candidates to adequately submit their nominations. Considering that the ZEC registered a record number of candidates with the latitude for the candidates to correct errors in their nominations before submission, one can argue that as an institution they enabled and facilitated administrative access for the candidates to exercise their right.

## Accessibility

The Commission set up 10 985 polling stations with 131 000 polling staff across the country including representatives from the youth, women and persons with disabilities. The polling stations were noted to be accessible to voters including those using wheelchairs with the additional measure of having “lowered voting booths.” (IRI-NDI, 2018b). The Carter Center EOM however outlined that access to some polling stations was limited for wheelchair users as outdoor polling booths were in “sandy areas” (The Carter Center, 2020). An additional concern within the polling stations was the lack of braille ballot paper coupled with the absence of assistants to help the visually impaired cast their votes (EODS, 2018). Prior to the election, an individual had filed a petition to have ZEC provide braille, template or tactile voting for the visually impaired, but this was dismissed on account of there being a general lack of adequate braille literacy (EODS, 2018).

The Commission upheld the decision of the High Court but considering the duty of

an institution to provide access, the option to have the ballot should have been provided. Arguably, considering that there was room to have an assistant of the voter’s choice or the provision of one by the commission, this access was still upheld. The Commonwealth and SADC missions observed that there was a mix between the two categories mentioned above with both being able to cast their votes. In ensuring inclusion, ZEC managed to uphold this mandate, but more could have been done to fully include the visually impaired voter through the medium of their preference in contrast to imposing a system upon them.

## Women and Youth

The Electoral Act outlines that political parties must ensure the full participation of women in electoral activities; however, it was observed that at Local Government women’s representation declined from 16 – 14% in the election (Gender Links, 2018). This decline can be attributed to the poor efforts by political parties to mainstream women in electoral activities. The Commission within its inclusion efforts ensured that women and youth are part of the electoral staff that administers elections thus ensuring their inclusion in the process. Outside involving women and youth in administrative positions, the Commission should be empowered to punish political parties that do not abide by Section 5 of the Electoral Act of “ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into electoral processes.”

This aspect of women and youth inclusion is argued through the lens of empowerment despite women being the largest cluster within society. To effectively enable access and inclusion, the Commission should shift this from being a moral argument to a binding requirement.

## Voter Education

To be able to exercise access granted by inclusion, there is a need to have education regarding the latitude to which this access can be exercised. Voter education is enshrined in Section 40 of the Electoral Act to be provided by the Commission and accredited entities other than the institution. An innovation introduced ahead of the 2018 elections was the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) which despite initial apprehension, managed to be accepted through voter education efforts from the Commission and Civil Society Organisations (ZESN, 2017). An illustration of such efforts can be noted through the work of ZESN which designed a factsheet of the BVR including that:

“If implemented in accordance with the internationally accepted principles for voter registration such as inclusivity, transparency, accuracy, integrity, sustainability, comprehensiveness, and security of data, the BVR will result in a clean, comprehensive and credible voters’ roll with no duplicate names and will minimise multiple voting.” (ZESN, 2017).

Additionally, it should be mentioned that by using the BVR, the Commission would be able to update and clean the voters' roll and publish the roll for inspection. The Carter Center report noted that:

“The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) registered a total of 5,695,706 voters, with women comprising 54% of the total. However, more than 92,000 registered individuals were placed on an exclusion list by the ZEC and the Office of the Registrar General. They were excluded due to reasons such as having multiple registrations, incorrect or missing ID information,

and invalidated ID numbers as determined by the registrar general. The ZEC confirmed that those who rectified these issues would be reinstated on the voter roll and allowed to participate in the elections. (The Carter Center, 2020).

The Carter Center (2020) also noted that the Commission managed to conduct voter education including using different communication platforms and translating into 13 languages for reach. The Commonwealth Observer group noted the same however expressed concern at the low level of coverage in rural areas. This low coverage can be attributed to the lack of capacity within the Commission to adequately reach remote areas. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) however noted that the Commission invited village heads into voter education efforts, requesting them to utilise public gatherings to inform the public about the BVR exercise and other election-related issues (ZHRC, 2018).

The Carter Center additionally noted that some stakeholders within voter education

“... considered the existing provisions of the Electoral Act on voter education overly restrictive.” (The Carter Center, 2020).

The restriction in question arguably stems from Section 40C (g) of the Electoral Act which states that:

“the person conducts voter education in accordance with a course or programme of instruction furnished or approved by the Commission; ...”

The above suggests that the Commission exclusively provides or endorses voter education material which can be inferred to as managing or restricting access. Within the strict definitions of the functions of an institution, this is well within the ambits

of their responsibility however, as argued above, the environment in which the institution exists is key in defining success. Within the Zimbabwean context where the Commission has been accused of malpractice (Smith, 2013), “approved by the Commission” can be interpreted as another attempt at underhandedness. On the other hand, as an institution mandated to prepare, conduct, and supervise elections, it may be a measure to ensure that voter education provided aligns with the Electoral Laws within the context and environment of Zimbabwe.

To enhance information for voters, the Commission was noted to have included a toll-free number and SMS number for voters to check their details nonetheless, both the SADC mission and the ZHRC noted that there was still some confusion regarding where to go on election day by the voters (ZHRC, 2018; SEOM, 2018).

It can be asserted that during the 2018 Elections, there were substantial voter education initiatives that underscored the Commission's role in promoting electoral inclusion. The combination of print and digital media, CSOs, faith-based organisations and village Heads widened and diversified the scope of reach of voter education efforts. Furthermore, the Commission has a diversity of stakeholders ensuring that the electorate would be able to access voter information from a source they would trust if they considered the Commission to be biased.

## CONCLUSION

As highlighted above, ZEC was formed in 2005 but was only regarded as a Chapter 12 independent entity in 2013 which accentuates the importance of the 2018 polls. The above discussion centred on the Commission as an institution that either facilitates or restricts inclusion through its electoral operation. What the above highlights is that there are positive measures that the Commission undertook which bolstered inclusion such as updating the voters' roll, facilitating assisted voting, conducting voter education in conjunction with several local stakeholders, and onboarding marginalised and underrepresented groups as electoral staff.

Moving forward, institutions like the ZEC must receive adequate financial and legislative support to fully achieve and implement their intended objectives. The evident lack of funding noticeably restricted the Commission's ability to independently reach remote areas, necessitating reliance on a broader network of stakeholders. Moreover, as the Commission collaborates with other Chapter 12 institutions, it should establish election-focused operational guidelines to ensure each institution fulfils its unique mandate while collectively delivering a successful election. It can be argued that adherence to this suggested guideline by all institutions would address common electoral challenges such as inadequate communication and the under-representation of women, including their targeted harassment, thus further promoting inclusion through institutional mechanisms.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.HY74FJ87>

## An analysis of the role of disinformation in elections

### An exploratory study of the Centre for Innovation and Technology's project on combatting electoral disinformation in the August 2023 national and December 2023 by-elections

Delta Mbonisi Sivalo 

#### ABSTRACT

Electoral disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic processes, particularly in politically polarised environments like Zimbabwe. This paper examines the efficacy of the CITE project, a six-month high-impact initiative aimed at countering electoral disinformation during the August 2023 plebiscite. The primary objective was to mitigate the impact of disinformation on citizen participation by training citizens and community journalists to identify, flag, and combat misinformation. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative exploratory approach, including workshops, social media campaigns, and a systematic desk review of existing literature and primary data sources. Key findings indicate that the project successfully raised awareness about disinformation, reaching over 100,000 people on Facebook with a campaign debunking election boycott rumours. However, the initiative faced limitations such as poor internet connectivity in rural areas and resistance from political actors benefiting from disinformation. The study underscores the importance of tailored strategies for different media platforms and highlights the efficacy of infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods in building trust. The research also identifies the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and the potential of AI and machine learning in detecting disinformation. The significance of this work lies in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of disinformation in electoral processes and its practical implications for enhancing media literacy and democratic engagement. By comparing Zimbabwe's challenges and solutions with those of other countries, the study offers valuable insights for developing robust counter-disinformation strategies globally.

**Key words:** electoral dis-information, electoral mal-information, electoral mis-information, media literacy, elections, democratic engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been in an indeterminant transition since independence in 1980. The political scene has been coloured by ethnic rivalry, fragile social contexts, deprived human conditions, inflation, systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, and a weak economy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya, 2020), as well as perceived marginalisation, anger, and hatred (Coltart, 2016). Zimbabwe's political landscape is characterised by a history of contested elections, allegations of rigging, voter intimidation, and vote-buying. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) oversees the electoral process, but its impartiality has often been questioned (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). The political environment is highly polarised, with major parties like ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) often at odds. The 2023 elections saw the rise of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), adding another layer of complexity to the political dynamics (Hassan, 2023).

Both state and non-state media have played a central role in the Zimbabwean polity's evolution. All these issues are “offensively, progressively, and relentlessly destroying relationships, heightening animosities across communities, and threatening democratic survival in the country” (Pate, 2018; pg. 56). They are further aggravated by the spread of disinformation on social networks such as religious, ethnic, and political platforms.

Disinformation campaigns have been a significant concern globally, with studies highlighting their impact on democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). In Zimbabwe, disinformation exacerbates existing societal

divisions and undermines trust in public institutions (Mare, Mabweazara, & Moyo, 2019). The theory of motivated reasoning explains why individuals are more likely to believe information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Bartels, 2002).

Disinformation has been defined by McGonagle (2017) as information that has been intentionally made up and circulated intending to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or not questioning verifiable facts, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. News plays a critical part in democratic societies; however, disinformation poses a challenge to liberal democracy as it misinforms people and significantly affects the deliberative process (Humprecht, 2019). Although the dissemination of disinformation was prevalent before recent advancements in information and communications technologies (ICT), the revolution in ICT has simplified its access and facilitated its transmission across space and time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The advent of the Internet, especially social media, has significantly accelerated the spread of disinformation, aided by the expansion of the mobile data subscriber base and the growing availability of affordable smartphones. Social media platforms present new opportunities for engagement through the ease of two-way communication. More than half of Zimbabwe's population uses the internet, and a significant majority use social media platforms, making the problem of the dissemination of disinformation in Zimbabwe very significant (IRI; 2023).

Lately, elections in both liberal and illiberal democracies have been preceded by political (online and offline) information disorders including misinformation, disinformation and mal-information (MDM). MDM has been weaponised by political actors

as information with politically charged content is manipulated. Of course, MDM is not a new phenomenon; however, what is constantly evolving is the context of dissemination. Digital and, especially, social media facilitate the widespread distribution of false assertions with a relatively professional layout at minimal cost. These MDM campaigns attempt to undermine voters' ability to make their decisions based on accurate beliefs about the political system. This poses a danger to the quality and legitimacy of the democratic process, as a well-informed electorate is essential for the collective autonomy of democracies. In some liberal democracies, this proliferation, supported by the burgeoning of personalised filter bubbles online (Sunstein, 2009), has been succeeded by the electoral success of populist candidates. However, in illiberal democracies where there is limited access to information and free speech, low media literacy levels and the lack of access to real-time verified alternative sources of information, states and ruling parties have weaponised and deployed MDM to undermine opposition political parties especially where opposing candidates are popular (Cantarella, Fraccaroli, and Volpe; 2022).

The spread of MDM news before the August 2023 general elections and the December 2023 by-elections in Zimbabwe largely sought to discredit Nelson Chamisa and his Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) party, while presenting Emmerson Mnangagwa and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) as the candidate and party of choice. Coupled with the unlevel media playing field concerning the coverage in elections, partisan politics largely influenced the portrayal of candidates in state and private media.

To mitigate some of the deficiencies highlighted above, the Centre for Innovation and Technology implemented a short-term, six-month, high-impact project to counter electoral disinformation during the August 2023 ballot. The project trained citizens and community journalists to identify, flag and combat misinformation; in addition, the organisation provided access to alternative, real-time verified electoral updates and provided regular updates by hosting conversations on elections. In this context, this paper discusses key issues, lessons and promising practices derived from CITE's experiences in countering electoral disinformation.

The CITE project aimed to mitigate the impact of electoral disinformation in Zimbabwe. A rapid assessment, post-project, revealed several key findings:

- **Efficacy:** The project successfully raised awareness about disinformation through workshops and social media campaigns. For instance, a campaign debunking the rumour that the CCC was boycotting elections reached over 100,000 people on Facebook (CITE, 2023).
- **Reach:** The project engaged with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations, journalists, and community leaders. However, its reach was limited in rural areas due to poor internet connectivity (Mare et al., 2019).
- **Limitations:** The project faced challenges such as limited funding and resistance from political actors who benefited from disinformation (Hassan, 2023).
- **Key Lessons Learned:** Tailored strategies are essential for different media platforms. For example, infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods were effective in areas with low media literacy (CITE, 2023).

Many recent studies on the impact of disinformation on elections have focused on the 2016 US presidential election (Harsin, 2018). In relation to African politics, this study is one of the few (Hassan, 2023) that seeks to highlight the disruptive influence of disinformation on democratic processes (such as elections) from the perspective of civil society, in this instance, in Zimbabwe generally and Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces specifically. Our study focuses on developments limited to the general Matabeleland area. It provides sub-national and national examples as well that have emerged from media coverage and the existing literature to further strengthen relevant points. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in January and February 2024. The interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, meaning interviewees' comments are considered but not attributed in this write-up. However, due to its exploratory character, this study has inherent limitations. Purposive sampling was used to select participants; the selection criteria were based on lived experiences and were, thus, prone to bias. Nevertheless, efforts were made to include diverse participants from each of the project areas in terms of age, social media usage, and professional and educational experience.

## BACKGROUND

Access to unbiased and accurate information regarding elections and related political developments has always been a problem in Zimbabwe, as indeed elsewhere.

The age of digital media and platforms, the deeply fractured character of Zimbabwean society and the high political stakes involved, however, have deepened the possibilities of misinformation and disinformation. Recent events in Zimbabwe aptly demonstrate this. This includes what took place during the 2023 national elections and the December 2023 by-elections, as well as the disturbing events with particular reference to the CCC – notably, the activities of Sengezo Tshabangu and the resignation of Nelson Chamisa. Access to accurate and credible information becomes crucial in this context, particularly in real-time. Indeed, addressing and overcoming these information challenges is crucial for promoting a transparent and democratic culture in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe held the 2023 elections in a highly volatile and contested environment. To begin with, the July 2018 national elections in Zimbabwe witnessed a significant surge in the use of social media and other online platforms as sites for political contestation and campaigns. The bitter contest between the top two presidential contenders, Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa became evident as the war took to online platforms where “Varakashi”<sup>1</sup> and “Nerrorists”<sup>2</sup> engaged in various tactics in casting aspersions on the other. Fake news and mudslinging became defining elements during these digital propaganda battles. The allegations and accusations from both sides were so extreme that voters might have found it difficult to separate facts from misinformation. The August 2023 general election and December

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<sup>1</sup> Varakashi is a term commonly used in reference to online/cyber trolls that support the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party.

<sup>2</sup> Nerrorists are a group of cyber/online trolls that are viewed to be sympathetic to the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) leader Nelson Chamisa.

2023 by-elections would likely be no different. In mitigation of this strong possibility, CITE undertook a project to empower citizens with basic knowledge on how to identify disinformation on electoral issues through media literacy and fact-checking of content and messages circulating on social media. CITE's countermeasures included fact-checking, media literacy workshops, and social media campaigns. These efforts were partially effective but faced challenges such as limited reach and resistance from political actors. Drawing from global best practices, CITE could enhance its strategies by collaborating with tech companies to develop AI tools for detecting disinformation (Pennycook, Bear, Collins & Rand, 2021). The desired impact was to mitigate the impact of disinformation in undermining citizen participation in electoral processes.

Post the project, CITE commissioned a rapid assessment to understand the influence and contribution of its work in mitigating electoral disinformation. The assessment uses a qualitative exploratory approach to establish major issues, trends, contributions, lessons learned and promising practices. Our research methodology also included a systematic desk review of the existing literature on disinformation, human rights and democracy, relying on four types of sources: official documents, communication from stakeholders, scholarly literature and press articles. In an uneasy and stifled democracy like Zimbabwe where electoral outcomes are always contested with allegations of rigging, voter intimidation and vote buying made against the state, there has been limited investment in probing the impact of disinformation and its impact on democratic processes and electoral outcomes. Additionally, disinformation combined with unresolved historical tensions generates insecurity, tearing cohesion asunder,

inciting hostility, and directly disrupting democratic processes. Moreso, disinformation confuses the electorate and lends citizens to manipulation, creating distrust in electoral governing bodies.

Analysing disinformation trends over multiple election cycles reveals evolving patterns. For instance, the use of deepfakes and sophisticated bots has increased, making it harder to detect disinformation. The long-term effectiveness of countermeasures requires continuous adaptation to these evolving tactics (Pennycook et al., 2021). Comparing Zimbabwe's disinformation challenges with other African countries reveals common issues such as low media literacy and political manipulation. Best practices from countries like Kenya, which has implemented robust fact-checking initiatives, can inform Zimbabwe's strategies (Mare et al., 2020).

In the Zimbabwean context, multiple actors are involved in news dissemination which lends the media to promote, intentionally and unintentionally, the spread of disinformation. Political commentators spread a combination of truth and falsehoods in favour of their political parties on multi-media platforms, in the process weaponising disinformation. In the same process, disinformation, while deployed for political mileage, weakens trust in democratic processes (elections), and institutions (electoral governing bodies). In addition, political parties, state media, and foreign actors use disinformation to achieve different objectives. Political parties use disinformation to delegitimise opponents and glorify their leaders (Guess et al., 2019), while the state often disseminates propaganda to maintain the status quo (Mare et al., 2019), with foreign actors spreading disinformation to destabilise political environments for strategic gains (Hassan, 2023).

Online and offline disinformation are intertwined, shaping and influencing each other. An online rumour started on social media networks can easily influence conventional media outputs and programmes and reach the offline audience in a few hours through well-established rumour networks. For instance, one of the most pervasive rumours that spread across many social media platforms during the August 2023 Zimbabwean general elections was that the CCC was boycotting elections and citizens were discouraged from casting their vote on election day. This fake news was backed up by tampered photos and fliers that were strewn near polling stations. Likewise, another piece of fake news widely circulated on social media suggested that the Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) had rejected the outcome of the 2023 Presidential elections; to substantiate this rumour, multiple media stories were run with quotes from prominent regional leaders. The circulation of disinformation, particularly about the legitimacy of election results, can have deadly consequences.

During the 2023 elections, reports that the chair of SADC's Electoral Observer Mission refused to sign and endorse the election results announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) were shared on a social media platform as if it were a confirmed story. Such disinformation can plague public discourse and decision-making, hindering the process of finding common ground and even threatening public safety. These incidents demonstrate the destabilising effect of the viral spread of disinformation, which can lead to political instability. Disinformation can incite people to violence and lead to the weakening of public confidence in the government. An increasing number of people rely on social media as a source of news. This has led to concerns that fake news can

manipulate public opinion and delegitimise opposing voices. However, research on the dissemination of fake news in Zimbabwe is very limited. Against this background, this study aimed to explore how disinformation impacts public participation in electoral processes.

## DISCUSSION

This study underlines that disinformation is most effective when leveraged on existing narratives and contexts to reinforce/confirm dominant social, ethnic, political and religious divides. Electoral disinformation campaigns discussed here, deployed and led by Zimbabweans, local and in the diaspora, aimed to delegitimise institutions, groups, or personalities; glorify a leader; or, during elections, confuse voters, instigate apathy among people, or marginalise women and other vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the reach of social media extends far beyond those with direct access to social media platforms. Traditional media and pre-existing non-media structures for information dissemination, either intentionally or unintentionally, play an important role in the spread of electoral disinformation. Digital and other content, whether factual or false, is not restricted to online settings. Below is a nuanced discussion of key themes relating to disinformation and its impact on elections with reference to crucial developments marking the 2023 national and subsequent December by-elections.

### **Disinformation and its impact on democratic processes (elections)**

Disinformation has an impact on the basic health and credibility of democratic processes. This has become the core of recent positions taken by international organisations,

such as Resolution 2326 (2020) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in expressing concern about the scale of information pollution in a digitally connected and increasingly polarised world, the spread of disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion, and trends of foreign electoral interference and manipulation. Information and shared narratives are a precondition for good quality democratic public discourse. This paper considers that disinformation erodes trust in institutions by impeding the ability of citizens to make informed decisions. It also warns that disinformation is set to polarise democratic societies by creating or deepening tensions and undermining democratic pillars such as electoral systems.

Nevertheless, this aggregation clouds the fact that exposure to disinformation is extremely concentrated and attributable to specific parts of the population (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). There are indeed fractions of the population that are highly exposed to disinformation, among these youth, women and People with Disability (PWDs). This can act as a gateway for the disruptive influence of disinformation. Hence, to address its direct influence on voter choice, one must focus on the individual rather than the aggregate level. Moreover, we do not assume mere exposure to disinformation has a huge impact in swaying citizens' opinions, but rather believing disinformation to make a difference regarding people's voting decisions has that influence. Studies show that distorted beliefs about a political issue can influence people's vote on a ballot question concerning that issue even when controlling for pre-existing views and political sophistication (Reedy et al., 2014; Wells, Reedy, Gastil, & Lee, 2009). Likewise, there are suggestions that the characterisation of Sengezo Tshabangu as a

CCC sell-out was fostered by prevailing rhetoric that "Ndebeles" (people from the Matabeleland region) are perceived sell-outs because King, Lobengula, 'sold' the country for a spoon of sugar. The same pattern applies to elections. Barrera, Guriev, Henry, and Zhuravskaya (2018) demonstrate that exposure to misleading statements regarding the presence of certain ethnic or religious traits significantly increases or decreases voting intentions for candidates. Additionally, people believing false rumours about candidates are less likely to vote for those candidates, as witnessed by losses in the by-elections experienced by candidates affiliated with the Tshabangu CCC faction.

Three possible circumstances remain for individuals to deal with political confusion and disillusionment at the ballot box. First, the electorate can remain loyal to the established political system and elect one of the popular parties. Second, citizens could voice their dissatisfaction by casting their votes for a right-wing populist or extremist party. And third, they could exit the party system entirely through abstention from the vote (Hirschman, 1970; Hooghe, Marien, & Pauwels, 2011). With no system of compulsory voting and a new populist party, CCC, on the rise, there was both a viable exit and voice option in the 2023 December by-elections. Hence, opting for loyalty does not seem a reasonable electoral consequence of believing disinformation. It should rather stimulate people to turn away from the political parties representing the established political system.

There are several ways in which disinformation weakens democratic institutions. These include the use of social media to channel disinformation in coordinated ways so as to undermine institutions' credibility. As trust in mainstream media has plummeted, alternative news



ecosystems have flourished. The online platforms' business model pushes content that generates clicks and this has increased polarisation. This is because it favours the creation of more homogeneous audiences and undercuts tolerance for alternative views. Research studies also show that disinformation can sow distrust in different pillars of democratic institutions, including public institutions such as governments, parliaments and courts or their processes, public figures, as well as journalists and free media. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that all individuals have the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. In this sense, the will of the people is the basis of the authority of government and must be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which promote universal and equal suffrage by either secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

In this context, voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind. Election interference can be defined as unjustified and illegitimate ways of influencing people's minds and voters' choices, thereby reducing citizens' abilities to exercise their political rights. Many governments' use of disinformation contradicts this injunction. Even where they are not directly using disinformation in electoral campaigns, they may be falling short in protecting this right on behalf of their citizens. Whether or not successful, manipulating elections by affecting voters' opinions and choices through disinformation damages democracy and creates a trail of doubt as to whether democratic institutions work well in reflecting citizens' choices.

## **Disinformation in entrenching pre-existing divisions**

Emotive disinformation exacerbates existing ethno-religious and other divisions that can threaten the peace and stability of any nation. There are thus serious dangers inherent in all the distortions, fake news, and misinformation circulating on social media. For example, many crises are fuelled by these distortions, which may be accompanied by a photoshopped scene or an old image portraying members of one ethnic group attacking those of another ethnic group – on this basis, without putting too much thought into it, people may decide to act and take the law into their own hands. Our study does highlight the potential exacerbating effect of disinformation on existing ethnoreligious divisions and long-standing tensions. The cultural and racial categorisation and fabrication of myths by the public can destroy society (Soyemi, 2016). As different ethnic groups live across the breadth of Zimbabwe, a single act of violence fuelled by such disinformation can spark violent reprisals. A good case in point gained prominence in the build-up to the December 2023 by-election where unverified news circulated concerning the collusion between Tendai Biti, Welshman Ncube and Sengezo Tshabangu to bar CCC candidates from participating in elections. The sum effect of the rumour resulted in divided opinions that reproduced ethno-regional rhetoric around the general untrustworthiness of the Ndebeles as epitomised by Ncube and Tshabangu's 'sell-out' tendencies in undermining the "people's choice". Politicians have come to understand the wide reach of social media, and they employ social media platforms to push election propaganda and trade insults or spread false stories about their political rivals.

Linked to this, disinformation is not only spread by entities with specific interests, such as political parties. Guess et al. (2018) highlight that low media literacy, particularly among those who have just started using social media, contributes to the spread of fake news online. Individuals are more motivated to share posts that align with their personal opinions and avoid content that opposes their views and beliefs. This allows malicious actors to play with public sentiment. Low media literacy among citizens, paired with strong political support for certain parties, has allowed political parties to make advances in information warfare on social media. Thus, the best way to combat fake news is to increase media literacy among social media users.

### **Disinformation and public trust in independent institutions**

Mere exposure to disinformation does not necessarily translate into believing it, which is a conceivable requirement for a direct electoral effect of truth claims. Therefore, our study takes into consideration the (institutional) reasons for perceiving disinformation as true. According to the theory of motivated reasoning, truth judgments are generally driven by two possibly conflicting motivations: the accuracy goal of trying to arrive at a preferably correct conclusion, and the directional goal of preferring a previously desired outcome. Interestingly, there is evidence that individuals are more likely to engage in the latter (Kunda, 1990). People evaluate (political) statements in the light of their predispositions so that factual beliefs align with their (political) stances (Bartels, 2002). Repeated studies have confirmed this partisan, or confirmation, bias in truth judgments (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014; Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). For example, people tend to believe conspiracy theories that correspond to their

political attitudes (Swami, 2012; Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016). Furthermore, selective exposure to partisan (news) media and its content can evoke misperceptions in line with the user's views (Meirick & Bessarabova, 2016). This holds especially true in online environments, where audiences have a wider choice of attitude-consistent messages (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). Taken together, political ideology is one of the most important predictors of the perceived truthfulness of online disinforming news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

### **Disinformation and its temporal dimensions**

The study underlined that disinformation is periodic or temporal and is usually issue or interest-based. For example, disinformation around elections is mostly a temporal issue, usually bound around the immediate period before and after voting day(s), with the obvious goal being to garner votes. In the same vein, disinformation also thrives around issues which are less understood by citizens or their communities, or where serious information gaps exist, a prime example being the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the interests of the person or entity sharing information, it becomes apparent that what information they eventually share is based chiefly on their interests. A case in point is the issue of 'land and land reform' in Zimbabwe which is a very emotive issue prone to significant levels of disinformation. Upon deeper analysis, it becomes apparent that the phenomenon of party-state conflation based on pure political interests is a key driving factor for disinformation. Again, this tends to ride on the extreme polarisation we find in most communities of Zimbabwe.

Another classic example is the electoral process. When looked at from its cyclic nature, it is evident that most citizens know and understand they can participate in the electoral process as voters by casting their votes. However, because of the disjointed character of the electoral cycle and civic and government programming around it, the other attendant processes which are supposed to complete the electoral cycle are often neglected. Resultantly, there has emerged a pattern where citizens view elections as a five-yearly event, rather than an ongoing cycle. As a result of this reality, where disinformation is infused into the governance process, uninformed electoral participation arises, where citizens ignorantly partake in processes, they neither know how to effectively do nor can accurately project what they must get out of partaking in the processes. This usually tends to discredit genuine governance processes as citizens cannot connect their participation to tangible developmental outcomes.

## LESSONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

A closer look at the dynamics around how different media reach out and appeal to or are accessed by different individuals, shows marginality as a thread kneading through the dynamics of how disinformation reaches and influences social groups and their communities. Based on an extensive analysis of existing literature and primary data on key media and sources of news and information, it is evident that social media, mainstream media and traditional media (or word of mouth) are the most popular news sources. Strategies to combat disinformation must be tailored to the needs and peculiarities of each news source, balancing both online and offline strategies. The use of infographics and other low-literacy data packaging methods can shore up trust, especially in areas where

citizen trust in public institutions and processes is waning.

Several civil society organisations are engaged in different initiatives, mostly to raise awareness about disinformation. A few others have purposively incorporated actual activities to combat disinformation including CITE and ZIMFACT, which do fact-checking of stories for the benefit of the online public. However, combating MDM is sometimes hampered by poor coordination of stakeholders who are running various disparate anti-disinformation initiatives. In many instances, there is no inclusivity in terms of getting all possible allies on board; resultantly, where training is offered for example, very few, usually the same faces, continue to attend training initiatives.

Key to the success of any intervention intent on mitigating the impact of disinformation is its ability to contend with the political polarisation prevalent in Zimbabwe's polity. The political polarisation apparent in most communities also acts as a barrier to the effectiveness of initiatives that target citizens, as they seem to fall into default partisan positions when confronted with news or information, which then ultimately determines how they handle disinformation and political choices.

AI and machine learning can play a significant role in detecting and countering disinformation. For example, algorithms can identify patterns in disinformation campaigns and flag suspicious content for review (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Media literacy education empowers citizens to critically evaluate information and resist disinformation. Initiatives such as school programs and community workshops can enhance media literacy, particularly among vulnerable groups (Guess et al., 2019).

Another key lesson and promising practice is around the inclusion of marginalised groups. This is most acute for PWDs, many of whom are left out or excluded by news broadcasters emanating from insensitive or inappropriately packaged information. This is almost similar to cases where recipients of information are illiterate and therefore unable to decipher information on their own and have to rely on a third party to interpret information for them. In a similar vein, issues around literacy and technical know-how remain critical but are experienced differently by different social groups, mostly based on spatial considerations. The major driver of these disparities is traced back to how ICT infrastructure retains an urban bias, with rural and remote areas, the further you move from an urban centre, facing serious challenges of connectivity and bandwidths. This tends to limit the possibilities available to the rural population. However, even within the rural environs, the situation is also not homogenous. It will be found, based on literature, that business centres or growth points within the general rural setup actually experience good connectivity and bandwidth when compared to fast-track farms within the post-2000 FTLRP landscape.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal interesting views from diverse stakeholders on the effect of disinformation on Zimbabwe's political and electoral processes. Zimbabwe's polarised landscape fused with its insecure political and ethnic landscape offers productive ground for the spread of disinformation on traditional and social media platforms, which have an increasing number of users. Combatting online disinformation requires addressing certain broader challenges such as political

polarisation, insecurity and a lack of trust in government officials. However, at the same time, online information can be used to clarify facts that can promote government accountability and transparency. Moreover, it is important to recognise that online disinformation can influence offline content in newspapers or on television and radio. It is, therefore, imperative to strengthen the more positive elements of social media, thereby weakening the threat posed by disinformation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Government regulation of social media to curb the spread of disinformation has been proposed and implemented in some countries; however, it entails serious risks to citizens' freedom of expression. In countries like Zimbabwe, social media companies can play a far more proactive regulatory role by moderating content, particularly in local languages, and by creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry capable of discriminating between true and false information. Continued support should be provided to the media to improve the quality of reporting. Leading media houses should employ fact-checkers to reduce the reproduction or reporting of misleading online content across traditional media. Further, social media platforms should raise awareness among their users about how to report disinformation. In addition, technical support should be provided to government bodies to help them convey accurate and apolitical information using their social media handles.

Thus, we call for future research that explores more mediation and moderation pathways for the control of disinformation on social media platforms and that assesses more fully the impact of providing media literacy to the public on the spread of disinformation.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.5FF7MKVH>

# Institutionalising inclusion: A study of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's role in the 2018 elections

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusion within the electoral process is crucial for democratic societies, ensuring all citizens can participate regardless of background. The study explores how institutional frameworks, particularly electoral management bodies like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), facilitate or hinder inclusivity through their operational mandates. Drawing on data from Election Observation Missions and other sources, this analysis evaluates the ZEC's performance in candidate inclusion, accessibility of polling stations, voter education initiatives, and representation of marginalised groups such as women and youth. Key findings reveal that while ZEC implemented measures to enhance inclusion, challenges persisted, such as accessibility issues for voters with disabilities and uneven voter education coverage. Through a historical backdrop and contextual framework, this paper delves into the role of electoral institutions in promoting democratic processes and enhancing inclusion. The findings underscore both achievements and challenges encountered by the ZEC, suggesting areas for future improvement and policy refinement to strengthen electoral inclusivity through institutional means.

The study concludes by recommending enhanced financial and legislative support for ZEC to bolster its operational capacity and collaboration with other institutions. Addressing these recommendations could mitigate common electoral challenges and further embed inclusive practices within Zimbabwe's electoral framework.

**Key words:** Electoral inclusion, political participation, institutions, accessibility

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is an essential concept that is at the centre of development. The word 'inclusion' can be defined as the level of access to socio-political and economic choice with the added ability to practice these preferences (Dörffel & Schuhmann, 2021). Inclusion additionally means that everyone, irrespective of origin, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or ethnic and religious background, should have an equal opportunity to participate (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). Taking inclusion as the ability to access and practice preference, political inclusion consequently centres elections and the ability of the electorate to alter or reaffirm the political mandate of an administration. The effectiveness of inclusion within this scope of elections varies subject to an individual's perspective and the context in which it is being assessed. On context, Bandama (2023) argues that the prevailing culture within an environment which is the context, is a key determinant towards achieving effectiveness. This aspect of culture is driven and centres on the people and their distinct behaviours and customs which directly shape their context.

By understanding inclusion from the perspective of access and the ability to practice this access within a given context, political inclusion through elections thus brings to the fore institutions that manage elections, namely Election Management Bodies (EMBs) including Election Commissions. EMBs are institutions established to manage and improve the electoral process including nominations, polling processes, voting, counting and results announcements (Langford, Schiel & Wilson, 2021). Furthermore, these institutions look at rates of participation and abstention and based on those results, implement strategies

that are aimed at enabling all eligible voters the right to participate (Scammon, 1967).

Having laid the above foundation of inclusion from the lens of political participation, this paper will interrogate the role of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), evaluating the institution and its role in enhancing or diminishing inclusion using the 2018 elections. Discussing the Electoral Commission within the context of spaces for political participation is based on the reasoning that it is an institution that should ensure that all individuals within eligible franchises are allowed to express their political preferences.

### Significance of 2018 Elections

One of the most pivotal points in Zimbabwe's political history was the November 2017 military-assisted transition which altered the Zimbabwean political landscape. These events put into motion a novel political atmosphere in Zimbabwe which added impetus to the impending elections. The 2018 polls were regarded as an opportunity to "break from the past" (Malunga, 2018). The Institute for Security Studies suggested that the 2018 polls presented an opportunity to develop institutional legitimacy as a breakaway from traditions, however, the proof of this would only be seen post-election (Matyszak, 2017). Another notable aspect of the 2018 elections is that it marked the first time since 2002 that international observers were accredited to monitor the polls.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper does not seek to validate or appraise election outcomes or to judge them as either free or fair, and neither does it seek



to conduct a comparative analysis of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission with its regional or continental contemporaries. Instead, it examines the role of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in ensuring electoral inclusion. While it can be argued that there is no separation between inclusion and 'free and fair,' the function of institutions such as the Commission, should be understood to be that of establishing standards, procedures, and certainty (Tan, 2004). When the standards within the context are established through the institution, one can argue that inclusion would be a certain expectation as all clusters within the voting population would be entitled to practice their access and preference. This underlining of the institution is underscored by the reasoning that institutions regulate the environment or "political domain" (Azari & Smith, 2012). Institutions can enforce measures which have legal significance over the processes thus being well-positioned to facilitate inclusion or exclusion.

## Data Sources

This paper will utilise data from Election Observation Missions (EOM) reports on the 2018 election in Zimbabwe. These reports assess various aspects, including the performance of the Electoral Commission. By analysing this data, the evaluation will measure how effectively the Commission promoted inclusion, judging this against the established definitions of inclusion and the functions of institutions.

## DISCUSSION

### Institutions and Institutionalism

Institutionalism is the study of institutions and the complexities within. This involves looking at the 'rules of the game' within a given society, the constraints and/or

enablers of interaction (North, 2012). Institutionalism does not look at an institution as an isolated structure but rather explores the social, economic, and political interactions that influence the function of the institution (North, 2012). This aspect of interlinkages is further examined through comparative institutionalism where institutionalists explore the institution concerning its environment of operation (Hotho & Saka-Helmhout, 2017).

Institutions are key allies or adversaries within the policy environment as they can either grant or restrict access in addition to being able to make or break ideas (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). The above directly assigns institutions a responsibility within decision-making and when they uphold or relegate this duty, it has implications of positive or negative governance. One can argue that despite there being a deliberate effort to assign obligations to institutions, the measure of success is judged according to the context and environment in which the institutions operate. This underscores the intricate relationship between the institution and its environment. However, despite this, the institution remains at the centre of access for inclusion.

### Background of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)

The historical context of elections in Zimbabwe is filled with examples of the majority being disenfranchised by the minority. Some of these exclusions were based on literacy, specifically the ability to complete a voter application form in English. The imposition of this requirement by an institution aware of the literacy levels of the population demonstrates how the institutional mechanisms of the time facilitated exclusion.

Juxtaposing then and now, Section 59 of the Electoral Act (2:13) recognises “voting by illiterate or physically handicapped people” and allows assistance of such a voter by a person of their choice. This directly highlights how an institution can facilitate access and inclusion mindful of the socio-political context in which the institution operates.

Because the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is the institution in discussion, it is important to lay a historical foundation of how it came about.

The electoral apparatus in Zimbabwe established by the 1980 Electoral Act contained the “Delimitation Commission, the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC), the Registrar General of Elections (RGE), and the Election Directorate” (Makumbe, 2006). Within this system, the ESC supervised the election, with all administrative duties vested in the hands of the RGE.

**Table 1: Responsibilities for electoral entities**

<b>Entity</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<i>Elections Directorate</i>	Managed voting logistics, including the provision of materials and equipment
<i>Registrar General of Elections</i>	Registered voters and enforced standards of voter conduct
<i>Delimitation Commission</i>	Conducted delimitation of 120 constituencies every five years
<i>Electoral Supervisory Commission</i>	Supervised and monitored the elections as required by the constitution and invited observers for the polls.

Table designed with data from Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee 3 November 2004 Zimbabwean Ambassador’s briefing. (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2004)

In 2004, after considering several recommendations and through stakeholder meetings, in addition to wanting to align with regional best practices, the ESC submitted a recommendation to establish an institution solely responsible for running elections. This recommendation was adopted and through parliament, Constitutional Amendment No.17 the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) was established. (ZEC, n.d). The formation of ZEC in 2005 was aligned with best practices however the established commission still needed to rely on the Registrar General for electoral operations such as the compilation of the voters roll and registering voters (Sachikonye, 2003). From 2005 until 2013

when a new constitution was drafted, ZEC remained with limited authority over elections despite being the Electoral Commission. In 2013, ZEC became recognised as a Chapter 12 institution, an independent entity according to Section 235 of the constitution. (ZEC, n.d).

It is important to note that, although the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) became an independent institution in 2013, earlier elections in Zimbabwe were still attributed to either the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC) or the ZEC, rather than the Registrar General. This suggests that, despite the administrative complexities within the election structure, the Electoral Commission

was publicly recognised as the body responsible for overseeing the elections. This distinction is crucial when analysing participation using institutional mechanisms.

At this juncture, it can be argued that by looking at the established definitions of institutions as those with the authority to make the “rules of the game” or “the ability to grant or restrict access”, ZEC at this point did not wield that authority but rather the RGE’s office.

### Present Functions of the Electoral Commission

After the 2013 changes, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has clearly articulated functions that include “(b) To supervise elections of the President of the Senate and the Speaker and to ensure that those elections are conducted efficiently and in accordance with the law” and to develop the expertise in research and electoral processes (ZEC, n.d). The Constitution of Zimbabwe further highlights the responsibilities of printing the ballot papers, compiling the voters’ roll and register, accrediting observers, and employing their staff in line with employment laws (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2013). From this, the Electoral Commission has the latitude and authority to fully administer all election-related activities in contrast to the former structure where the functions were spread across different departments thereby reducing efficiencies and limiting participation.

Following on the above, the ZEC follows the precepts of the Constitution, Chapter 7 Part 1 (2c) which outlines political and electoral rights to “ensure that all political parties and candidates contesting an election or participating in a referendum have reasonable access to all material and information necessary for them to participate effectively.” This is in stark contrast to the

former responsibility of the ESC which focussed on “supervision.” Based on the above, the Electoral Commission bears a responsibility of ensuring participation which is inclusion, of both parties and voters.

### Electoral Commission in the 2018 Elections

This paper has defined inclusion as access and the ability to practice that access within a given context. It has also been outlined that an institution is a formal entity which can determine and regulate the rules of engagement as well as provide or restrict access. As this paper has developed, it has located inclusion within political participation, specifically within elections.

### Candidate Inclusion

The 2018 elections saw a high voter turnout which is good for democracy and participation. The research firm Ipsos looks at voter turnout as signifying “interest in politics, desire to vote, stated intention to vote, and depth of party loyalty” (IPSOS, 2024) Within the context of Zimbabwe, all the above can be valid. On interest in politics, the Commonwealth Observer group noted that there were:

“In 2018, a total of 1,652 National Assembly constituency candidates were successfully nominated for 210 seats. Fifty- five (55) political parties and 247 independent candidates contested in the 210 National Assembly constituencies. For the local council elections, 7,573 candidates were nominated for the 1,958 local authority wards in Zimbabwe”  
(The Commonwealth 2018).

This is coupled with 23 candidates for the seat of president with four being women, a first-time occurrence in the country.

Looking at the above, the Commission was tasked with ensuring that all candidates were incorporated into the process in a manner that guaranteed inclusivity as outlined in Section 239 of the Constitution. The IRI-NDI observer mission noted that ZEC processed nominations for all candidates on 14 June 2018 with the courts remaining open beyond the official close time to enable candidates to adequately submit their nominations. Considering that the ZEC registered a record number of candidates with the latitude for the candidates to correct errors in their nominations before submission, one can argue that as an institution they enabled and facilitated administrative access for the candidates to exercise their right.

## Accessibility

The Commission set up 10 985 polling stations with 131 000 polling staff across the country including representatives from the youth, women and persons with disabilities. The polling stations were noted to be accessible to voters including those using wheelchairs with the additional measure of having “lowered voting booths.” (IRI-NDI, 2018b). The Carter Center EOM however outlined that access to some polling stations was limited for wheelchair users as outdoor polling booths were in “sandy areas” (The Carter Center, 2020). An additional concern within the polling stations was the lack of braille ballot paper coupled with the absence of assistants to help the visually impaired cast their votes (EODS, 2018). Prior to the election, an individual had filed a petition to have ZEC provide braille, template or tactile voting for the visually impaired, but this was dismissed on account of there being a general lack of adequate braille literacy (EODS, 2018).

The Commission upheld the decision of the High Court but considering the duty of

an institution to provide access, the option to have the ballot should have been provided. Arguably, considering that there was room to have an assistant of the voter’s choice or the provision of one by the commission, this access was still upheld. The Commonwealth and SADC missions observed that there was a mix between the two categories mentioned above with both being able to cast their votes. In ensuring inclusion, ZEC managed to uphold this mandate, but more could have been done to fully include the visually impaired voter through the medium of their preference in contrast to imposing a system upon them.

## Women and Youth

The Electoral Act outlines that political parties must ensure the full participation of women in electoral activities; however, it was observed that at Local Government women’s representation declined from 16 – 14% in the election (Gender Links, 2018). This decline can be attributed to the poor efforts by political parties to mainstream women in electoral activities. The Commission within its inclusion efforts ensured that women and youth are part of the electoral staff that administers elections thus ensuring their inclusion in the process. Outside involving women and youth in administrative positions, the Commission should be empowered to punish political parties that do not abide by Section 5 of the Electoral Act of “ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into electoral processes.”

This aspect of women and youth inclusion is argued through the lens of empowerment despite women being the largest cluster within society. To effectively enable access and inclusion, the Commission should shift this from being a moral argument to a binding requirement.

## Voter Education

To be able to exercise access granted by inclusion, there is a need to have education regarding the latitude to which this access can be exercised. Voter education is enshrined in Section 40 of the Electoral Act to be provided by the Commission and accredited entities other than the institution. An innovation introduced ahead of the 2018 elections was the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) which despite initial apprehension, managed to be accepted through voter education efforts from the Commission and Civil Society Organisations (ZESN, 2017). An illustration of such efforts can be noted through the work of ZESN which designed a factsheet of the BVR including that:

“If implemented in accordance with the internationally accepted principles for voter registration such as inclusivity, transparency, accuracy, integrity, sustainability, comprehensiveness, and security of data, the BVR will result in a clean, comprehensive and credible voters’ roll with no duplicate names and will minimise multiple voting.” (ZESN, 2017).

Additionally, it should be mentioned that by using the BVR, the Commission would be able to update and clean the voters' roll and publish the roll for inspection. The Carter Center report noted that:

“The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) registered a total of 5,695,706 voters, with women comprising 54% of the total. However, more than 92,000 registered individuals were placed on an exclusion list by the ZEC and the Office of the Registrar General. They were excluded due to reasons such as having multiple registrations, incorrect or missing ID information,

and invalidated ID numbers as determined by the registrar general. The ZEC confirmed that those who rectified these issues would be reinstated on the voter roll and allowed to participate in the elections. (The Carter Center, 2020).

The Carter Center (2020) also noted that the Commission managed to conduct voter education including using different communication platforms and translating into 13 languages for reach. The Commonwealth Observer group noted the same however expressed concern at the low level of coverage in rural areas. This low coverage can be attributed to the lack of capacity within the Commission to adequately reach remote areas. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) however noted that the Commission invited village heads into voter education efforts, requesting them to utilise public gatherings to inform the public about the BVR exercise and other election-related issues (ZHRC, 2018).

The Carter Center additionally noted that some stakeholders within voter education

“... considered the existing provisions of the Electoral Act on voter education overly restrictive.” (The Carter Center, 2020).

The restriction in question arguably stems from Section 40C (g) of the Electoral Act which states that:

“the person conducts voter education in accordance with a course or programme of instruction furnished or approved by the Commission; ...”

The above suggests that the Commission exclusively provides or endorses voter education material which can be inferred to as managing or restricting access. Within the strict definitions of the functions of an institution, this is well within the ambits

of their responsibility however, as argued above, the environment in which the institution exists is key in defining success. Within the Zimbabwean context where the Commission has been accused of malpractice (Smith, 2013), “approved by the Commission” can be interpreted as another attempt at underhandedness. On the other hand, as an institution mandated to prepare, conduct, and supervise elections, it may be a measure to ensure that voter education provided aligns with the Electoral Laws within the context and environment of Zimbabwe.

To enhance information for voters, the Commission was noted to have included a toll-free number and SMS number for voters to check their details nonetheless, both the SADC mission and the ZHRC noted that there was still some confusion regarding where to go on election day by the voters (ZHRC, 2018; SEOM, 2018).

It can be asserted that during the 2018 Elections, there were substantial voter education initiatives that underscored the Commission's role in promoting electoral inclusion. The combination of print and digital media, CSOs, faith-based organisations and village Heads widened and diversified the scope of reach of voter education efforts. Furthermore, the Commission has a diversity of stakeholders ensuring that the electorate would be able to access voter information from a source they would trust if they considered the Commission to be biased.

## CONCLUSION

As highlighted above, ZEC was formed in 2005 but was only regarded as a Chapter 12 independent entity in 2013 which accentuates the importance of the 2018 polls. The above discussion centred on the Commission as an institution that either facilitates or restricts inclusion through its electoral operation. What the above highlights is that there are positive measures that the Commission undertook which bolstered inclusion such as updating the voters' roll, facilitating assisted voting, conducting voter education in conjunction with several local stakeholders, and onboarding marginalised and underrepresented groups as electoral staff.

Moving forward, institutions like the ZEC must receive adequate financial and legislative support to fully achieve and implement their intended objectives. The evident lack of funding noticeably restricted the Commission's ability to independently reach remote areas, necessitating reliance on a broader network of stakeholders. Moreover, as the Commission collaborates with other Chapter 12 institutions, it should establish election-focused operational guidelines to ensure each institution fulfils its unique mandate while collectively delivering a successful election. It can be argued that adherence to this suggested guideline by all institutions would address common electoral challenges such as inadequate communication and the under-representation of women, including their targeted harassment, thus further promoting inclusion through institutional mechanisms.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.HY74FJ87>

## An analysis of the role of disinformation in elections

### An exploratory study of the Centre for Innovation and Technology's project on combatting electoral disinformation in the August 2023 national and December 2023 by-elections

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#### ABSTRACT

Electoral disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic processes, particularly in politically polarised environments like Zimbabwe. This paper examines the efficacy of the CITE project, a six-month high-impact initiative aimed at countering electoral disinformation during the August 2023 plebiscite. The primary objective was to mitigate the impact of disinformation on citizen participation by training citizens and community journalists to identify, flag, and combat misinformation. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative exploratory approach, including workshops, social media campaigns, and a systematic desk review of existing literature and primary data sources. Key findings indicate that the project successfully raised awareness about disinformation, reaching over 100,000 people on Facebook with a campaign debunking election boycott rumours. However, the initiative faced limitations such as poor internet connectivity in rural areas and resistance from political actors benefiting from disinformation. The study underscores the importance of tailored strategies for different media platforms and highlights the efficacy of infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods in building trust. The research also identifies the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration and the potential of AI and machine learning in detecting disinformation. The significance of this work lies in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of disinformation in electoral processes and its practical implications for enhancing media literacy and democratic engagement. By comparing Zimbabwe's challenges and solutions with those of other countries, the study offers valuable insights for developing robust counter-disinformation strategies globally.

**Key words:** electoral dis-information, electoral mal-information, electoral mis-information, media literacy, elections, democratic engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been in an indeterminant transition since independence in 1980. The political scene has been coloured by ethnic rivalry, fragile social contexts, deprived human conditions, inflation, systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, and a weak economy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya, 2020), as well as perceived marginalisation, anger, and hatred (Coltart, 2016). Zimbabwe's political landscape is characterised by a history of contested elections, allegations of rigging, voter intimidation, and vote-buying. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) oversees the electoral process, but its impartiality has often been questioned (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). The political environment is highly polarised, with major parties like ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) often at odds. The 2023 elections saw the rise of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), adding another layer of complexity to the political dynamics (Hassan, 2023).

Both state and non-state media have played a central role in the Zimbabwean polity's evolution. All these issues are “offensively, progressively, and relentlessly destroying relationships, heightening animosities across communities, and threatening democratic survival in the country” (Pate, 2018; pg. 56). They are further aggravated by the spread of disinformation on social networks such as religious, ethnic, and political platforms.

Disinformation campaigns have been a significant concern globally, with studies highlighting their impact on democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). In Zimbabwe, disinformation exacerbates existing societal

divisions and undermines trust in public institutions (Mare, Mabweazara, & Moyo, 2019). The theory of motivated reasoning explains why individuals are more likely to believe information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Bartels, 2002).

Disinformation has been defined by McGonagle (2017) as information that has been intentionally made up and circulated intending to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or not questioning verifiable facts, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. News plays a critical part in democratic societies; however, disinformation poses a challenge to liberal democracy as it misinforms people and significantly affects the deliberative process (Humprecht, 2019). Although the dissemination of disinformation was prevalent before recent advancements in information and communications technologies (ICT), the revolution in ICT has simplified its access and facilitated its transmission across space and time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The advent of the Internet, especially social media, has significantly accelerated the spread of disinformation, aided by the expansion of the mobile data subscriber base and the growing availability of affordable smartphones. Social media platforms present new opportunities for engagement through the ease of two-way communication. More than half of Zimbabwe's population uses the internet, and a significant majority use social media platforms, making the problem of the dissemination of disinformation in Zimbabwe very significant (IRI; 2023).

Lately, elections in both liberal and illiberal democracies have been preceded by political (online and offline) information disorders including misinformation, disinformation and mal-information (MDM). MDM has been weaponised by political actors

as information with politically charged content is manipulated. Of course, MDM is not a new phenomenon; however, what is constantly evolving is the context of dissemination. Digital and, especially, social media facilitate the widespread distribution of false assertions with a relatively professional layout at minimal cost. These MDM campaigns attempt to undermine voters' ability to make their decisions based on accurate beliefs about the political system. This poses a danger to the quality and legitimacy of the democratic process, as a well-informed electorate is essential for the collective autonomy of democracies. In some liberal democracies, this proliferation, supported by the burgeoning of personalised filter bubbles online (Sunstein, 2009), has been succeeded by the electoral success of populist candidates. However, in illiberal democracies where there is limited access to information and free speech, low media literacy levels and the lack of access to real-time verified alternative sources of information, states and ruling parties have weaponised and deployed MDM to undermine opposition political parties especially where opposing candidates are popular (Cantarella, Fraccaroli, and Volpe; 2022).

The spread of MDM news before the August 2023 general elections and the December 2023 by-elections in Zimbabwe largely sought to discredit Nelson Chamisa and his Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) party, while presenting Emmerson Mnangagwa and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) as the candidate and party of choice. Coupled with the unlevel media playing field concerning the coverage in elections, partisan politics largely influenced the portrayal of candidates in state and private media.

To mitigate some of the deficiencies highlighted above, the Centre for Innovation and Technology implemented a short-term, six-month, high-impact project to counter electoral disinformation during the August 2023 ballot. The project trained citizens and community journalists to identify, flag and combat misinformation; in addition, the organisation provided access to alternative, real-time verified electoral updates and provided regular updates by hosting conversations on elections. In this context, this paper discusses key issues, lessons and promising practices derived from CITE's experiences in countering electoral disinformation.

The CITE project aimed to mitigate the impact of electoral disinformation in Zimbabwe. A rapid assessment, post-project, revealed several key findings:

- **Efficacy:** The project successfully raised awareness about disinformation through workshops and social media campaigns. For instance, a campaign debunking the rumour that the CCC was boycotting elections reached over 100,000 people on Facebook (CITE, 2023).
- **Reach:** The project engaged with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations, journalists, and community leaders. However, its reach was limited in rural areas due to poor internet connectivity (Mare et al., 2019).
- **Limitations:** The project faced challenges such as limited funding and resistance from political actors who benefited from disinformation (Hassan, 2023).
- **Key Lessons Learned:** Tailored strategies are essential for different media platforms. For example, infographics and low-literacy data packaging methods were effective in areas with low media literacy (CITE, 2023).

Many recent studies on the impact of disinformation on elections have focused on the 2016 US presidential election (Harsin, 2018). In relation to African politics, this study is one of the few (Hassan, 2023) that seeks to highlight the disruptive influence of disinformation on democratic processes (such as elections) from the perspective of civil society, in this instance, in Zimbabwe generally and Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces specifically. Our study focuses on developments limited to the general Matabeleland area. It provides sub-national and national examples as well that have emerged from media coverage and the existing literature to further strengthen relevant points. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in January and February 2024. The interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, meaning interviewees' comments are considered but not attributed in this write-up. However, due to its exploratory character, this study has inherent limitations. Purposive sampling was used to select participants; the selection criteria were based on lived experiences and were, thus, prone to bias. Nevertheless, efforts were made to include diverse participants from each of the project areas in terms of age, social media usage, and professional and educational experience.

## BACKGROUND

Access to unbiased and accurate information regarding elections and related political developments has always been a problem in Zimbabwe, as indeed elsewhere.

The age of digital media and platforms, the deeply fractured character of Zimbabwean society and the high political stakes involved, however, have deepened the possibilities of misinformation and disinformation. Recent events in Zimbabwe aptly demonstrate this. This includes what took place during the 2023 national elections and the December 2023 by-elections, as well as the disturbing events with particular reference to the CCC – notably, the activities of Sengezo Tshabangu and the resignation of Nelson Chamisa. Access to accurate and credible information becomes crucial in this context, particularly in real-time. Indeed, addressing and overcoming these information challenges is crucial for promoting a transparent and democratic culture in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe held the 2023 elections in a highly volatile and contested environment. To begin with, the July 2018 national elections in Zimbabwe witnessed a significant surge in the use of social media and other online platforms as sites for political contestation and campaigns. The bitter contest between the top two presidential contenders, Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa became evident as the war took to online platforms where “Varakashi”<sup>1</sup> and “Nerorists”<sup>2</sup> engaged in various tactics in casting aspersions on the other. Fake news and mudslinging became defining elements during these digital propaganda battles. The allegations and accusations from both sides were so extreme that voters might have found it difficult to separate facts from misinformation. The August 2023 general election and December

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<sup>1</sup> Varakashi is a term commonly used in reference to online/cyber trolls that support the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party.

<sup>2</sup> Nerorists are a group of cyber/online trolls that are viewed to be sympathetic to the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) leader Nelson Chamisa.

2023 by-elections would likely be no different. In mitigation of this strong possibility, CITE undertook a project to empower citizens with basic knowledge on how to identify disinformation on electoral issues through media literacy and fact-checking of content and messages circulating on social media. CITE's countermeasures included fact-checking, media literacy workshops, and social media campaigns. These efforts were partially effective but faced challenges such as limited reach and resistance from political actors. Drawing from global best practices, CITE could enhance its strategies by collaborating with tech companies to develop AI tools for detecting disinformation (Pennycook, Bear, Collins & Rand, 2021). The desired impact was to mitigate the impact of disinformation in undermining citizen participation in electoral processes.

Post the project, CITE commissioned a rapid assessment to understand the influence and contribution of its work in mitigating electoral disinformation. The assessment uses a qualitative exploratory approach to establish major issues, trends, contributions, lessons learned and promising practices. Our research methodology also included a systematic desk review of the existing literature on disinformation, human rights and democracy, relying on four types of sources: official documents, communication from stakeholders, scholarly literature and press articles. In an uneasy and stifled democracy like Zimbabwe where electoral outcomes are always contested with allegations of rigging, voter intimidation and vote buying made against the state, there has been limited investment in probing the impact of disinformation and its impact on democratic processes and electoral outcomes. Additionally, disinformation combined with unresolved historical tensions generates insecurity, tearing cohesion asunder,

inciting hostility, and directly disrupting democratic processes. Moreso, disinformation confuses the electorate and lends citizens to manipulation, creating distrust in electoral governing bodies.

Analysing disinformation trends over multiple election cycles reveals evolving patterns. For instance, the use of deepfakes and sophisticated bots has increased, making it harder to detect disinformation. The long-term effectiveness of countermeasures requires continuous adaptation to these evolving tactics (Pennycook et al., 2021). Comparing Zimbabwe's disinformation challenges with other African countries reveals common issues such as low media literacy and political manipulation. Best practices from countries like Kenya, which has implemented robust fact-checking initiatives, can inform Zimbabwe's strategies (Mare et al., 2020).

In the Zimbabwean context, multiple actors are involved in news dissemination which lends the media to promote, intentionally and unintentionally, the spread of disinformation. Political commentators spread a combination of truth and falsehoods in favour of their political parties on multi-media platforms, in the process weaponising disinformation. In the same process, disinformation, while deployed for political mileage, weakens trust in democratic processes (elections), and institutions (electoral governing bodies). In addition, political parties, state media, and foreign actors use disinformation to achieve different objectives. Political parties use disinformation to delegitimise opponents and glorify their leaders (Guess et al., 2019), while the state often disseminates propaganda to maintain the status quo (Mare et al., 2019), with foreign actors spreading disinformation to destabilise political environments for strategic gains (Hassan, 2023).

Online and offline disinformation are intertwined, shaping and influencing each other. An online rumour started on social media networks can easily influence conventional media outputs and programmes and reach the offline audience in a few hours through well-established rumour networks. For instance, one of the most pervasive rumours that spread across many social media platforms during the August 2023 Zimbabwean general elections was that the CCC was boycotting elections and citizens were discouraged from casting their vote on election day. This fake news was backed up by tampered photos and fliers that were strewn near polling stations. Likewise, another piece of fake news widely circulated on social media suggested that the Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) had rejected the outcome of the 2023 Presidential elections; to substantiate this rumour, multiple media stories were run with quotes from prominent regional leaders. The circulation of disinformation, particularly about the legitimacy of election results, can have deadly consequences.

During the 2023 elections, reports that the chair of SADC's Electoral Observer Mission refused to sign and endorse the election results announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) were shared on a social media platform as if it were a confirmed story. Such disinformation can plague public discourse and decision-making, hindering the process of finding common ground and even threatening public safety. These incidents demonstrate the destabilising effect of the viral spread of disinformation, which can lead to political instability. Disinformation can incite people to violence and lead to the weakening of public confidence in the government. An increasing number of people rely on social media as a source of news. This has led to concerns that fake news can

manipulate public opinion and delegitimise opposing voices. However, research on the dissemination of fake news in Zimbabwe is very limited. Against this background, this study aimed to explore how disinformation impacts public participation in electoral processes.

## DISCUSSION

This study underlines that disinformation is most effective when leveraged on existing narratives and contexts to reinforce/confirm dominant social, ethnic, political and religious divides. Electoral disinformation campaigns discussed here, deployed and led by Zimbabweans, local and in the diaspora, aimed to delegitimise institutions, groups, or personalities; glorify a leader; or, during elections, confuse voters, instigate apathy among people, or marginalise women and other vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the reach of social media extends far beyond those with direct access to social media platforms. Traditional media and pre-existing non-media structures for information dissemination, either intentionally or unintentionally, play an important role in the spread of electoral disinformation. Digital and other content, whether factual or false, is not restricted to online settings. Below is a nuanced discussion of key themes relating to disinformation and its impact on elections with reference to crucial developments marking the 2023 national and subsequent December by-elections.

### **Disinformation and its impact on democratic processes (elections)**

Disinformation has an impact on the basic health and credibility of democratic processes. This has become the core of recent positions taken by international organisations,

such as Resolution 2326 (2020) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in expressing concern about the scale of information pollution in a digitally connected and increasingly polarised world, the spread of disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion, and trends of foreign electoral interference and manipulation. Information and shared narratives are a precondition for good quality democratic public discourse. This paper considers that disinformation erodes trust in institutions by impeding the ability of citizens to make informed decisions. It also warns that disinformation is set to polarise democratic societies by creating or deepening tensions and undermining democratic pillars such as electoral systems.

Nevertheless, this aggregation clouds the fact that exposure to disinformation is extremely concentrated and attributable to specific parts of the population (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). There are indeed fractions of the population that are highly exposed to disinformation, among these youth, women and People with Disability (PWDs). This can act as a gateway for the disruptive influence of disinformation. Hence, to address its direct influence on voter choice, one must focus on the individual rather than the aggregate level. Moreover, we do not assume mere exposure to disinformation has a huge impact in swaying citizens' opinions, but rather believing disinformation to make a difference regarding people's voting decisions has that influence. Studies show that distorted beliefs about a political issue can influence people's vote on a ballot question concerning that issue even when controlling for pre-existing views and political sophistication (Reedy et al., 2014; Wells, Reedy, Gastil, & Lee, 2009). Likewise, there are suggestions that the characterisation of Sengezo Tshabangu as a

CCC sell-out was fostered by prevailing rhetoric that "Ndebeles" (people from the Matabeleland region) are perceived sell-outs because King, Lobengula, 'sold' the country for a spoon of sugar. The same pattern applies to elections. Barrera, Guriev, Henry, and Zhuravskaya (2018) demonstrate that exposure to misleading statements regarding the presence of certain ethnic or religious traits significantly increases or decreases voting intentions for candidates. Additionally, people believing false rumours about candidates are less likely to vote for those candidates, as witnessed by losses in the by-elections experienced by candidates affiliated with the Tshabangu CCC faction.

Three possible circumstances remain for individuals to deal with political confusion and disillusionment at the ballot box. First, the electorate can remain loyal to the established political system and elect one of the popular parties. Second, citizens could voice their dissatisfaction by casting their votes for a right-wing populist or extremist party. And third, they could exit the party system entirely through abstention from the vote (Hirschman, 1970; Hooghe, Marien, & Pauwels, 2011). With no system of compulsory voting and a new populist party, CCC, on the rise, there was both a viable exit and voice option in the 2023 December by-elections. Hence, opting for loyalty does not seem a reasonable electoral consequence of believing disinformation. It should rather stimulate people to turn away from the political parties representing the established political system.

There are several ways in which disinformation weakens democratic institutions. These include the use of social media to channel disinformation in coordinated ways so as to undermine institutions' credibility. As trust in mainstream media has plummeted, alternative news

ecosystems have flourished. The online platforms' business model pushes content that generates clicks and this has increased polarisation. This is because it favours the creation of more homogeneous audiences and undercuts tolerance for alternative views. Research studies also show that disinformation can sow distrust in different pillars of democratic institutions, including public institutions such as governments, parliaments and courts or their processes, public figures, as well as journalists and free media. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that all individuals have the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. In this sense, the will of the people is the basis of the authority of government and must be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which promote universal and equal suffrage by either secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

In this context, voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind. Election interference can be defined as unjustified and illegitimate ways of influencing people's minds and voters' choices, thereby reducing citizens' abilities to exercise their political rights. Many governments' use of disinformation contradicts this injunction. Even where they are not directly using disinformation in electoral campaigns, they may be falling short in protecting this right on behalf of their citizens. Whether or not successful, manipulating elections by affecting voters' opinions and choices through disinformation damages democracy and creates a trail of doubt as to whether democratic institutions work well in reflecting citizens' choices.

## **Disinformation in entrenching pre-existing divisions**

Emotive disinformation exacerbates existing ethno-religious and other divisions that can threaten the peace and stability of any nation. There are thus serious dangers inherent in all the distortions, fake news, and misinformation circulating on social media. For example, many crises are fuelled by these distortions, which may be accompanied by a photoshopped scene or an old image portraying members of one ethnic group attacking those of another ethnic group – on this basis, without putting too much thought into it, people may decide to act and take the law into their own hands. Our study does highlight the potential exacerbating effect of disinformation on existing ethnoreligious divisions and long-standing tensions. The cultural and racial categorisation and fabrication of myths by the public can destroy society (Soyemi, 2016). As different ethnic groups live across the breadth of Zimbabwe, a single act of violence fuelled by such disinformation can spark violent reprisals. A good case in point gained prominence in the build-up to the December 2023 by-election where unverified news circulated concerning the collusion between Tendai Biti, Welshman Ncube and Sengezo Tshabangu to bar CCC candidates from participating in elections. The sum effect of the rumour resulted in divided opinions that reproduced ethno-regional rhetoric around the general untrustworthiness of the Ndebeles as epitomised by Ncube and Tshabangu's 'sell-out' tendencies in undermining the "people's choice". Politicians have come to understand the wide reach of social media, and they employ social media platforms to push election propaganda and trade insults or spread false stories about their political rivals.



Linked to this, disinformation is not only spread by entities with specific interests, such as political parties. Guess et al. (2018) highlight that low media literacy, particularly among those who have just started using social media, contributes to the spread of fake news online. Individuals are more motivated to share posts that align with their personal opinions and avoid content that opposes their views and beliefs. This allows malicious actors to play with public sentiment. Low media literacy among citizens, paired with strong political support for certain parties, has allowed political parties to make advances in information warfare on social media. Thus, the best way to combat fake news is to increase media literacy among social media users.

### **Disinformation and public trust in independent institutions**

Mere exposure to disinformation does not necessarily translate into believing it, which is a conceivable requirement for a direct electoral effect of truth claims. Therefore, our study takes into consideration the (institutional) reasons for perceiving disinformation as true. According to the theory of motivated reasoning, truth judgments are generally driven by two possibly conflicting motivations: the accuracy goal of trying to arrive at a preferably correct conclusion, and the directional goal of preferring a previously desired outcome. Interestingly, there is evidence that individuals are more likely to engage in the latter (Kunda, 1990). People evaluate (political) statements in the light of their predispositions so that factual beliefs align with their (political) stances (Bartels, 2002). Repeated studies have confirmed this partisan, or confirmation, bias in truth judgments (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014; Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). For example, people tend to believe conspiracy theories that correspond to their

political attitudes (Swami, 2012; Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016). Furthermore, selective exposure to partisan (news) media and its content can evoke misperceptions in line with the user's views (Meirick & Bessarabova, 2016). This holds especially true in online environments, where audiences have a wider choice of attitude-consistent messages (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). Taken together, political ideology is one of the most important predictors of the perceived truthfulness of online disinforming news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

### **Disinformation and its temporal dimensions**

The study underlined that disinformation is periodic or temporal and is usually issue or interest-based. For example, disinformation around elections is mostly a temporal issue, usually bound around the immediate period before and after voting day(s), with the obvious goal being to garner votes. In the same vein, disinformation also thrives around issues which are less understood by citizens or their communities, or where serious information gaps exist, a prime example being the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the interests of the person or entity sharing information, it becomes apparent that what information they eventually share is based chiefly on their interests. A case in point is the issue of 'land and land reform' in Zimbabwe which is a very emotive issue prone to significant levels of disinformation. Upon deeper analysis, it becomes apparent that the phenomenon of party-state conflation based on pure political interests is a key driving factor for disinformation. Again, this tends to ride on the extreme polarisation we find in most communities of Zimbabwe.

Another classic example is the electoral process. When looked at from its cyclic nature, it is evident that most citizens know and understand they can participate in the electoral process as voters by casting their votes. However, because of the disjointed character of the electoral cycle and civic and government programming around it, the other attendant processes which are supposed to complete the electoral cycle are often neglected. Resultantly, there has emerged a pattern where citizens view elections as a five-yearly event, rather than an ongoing cycle. As a result of this reality, where disinformation is infused into the governance process, uninformed electoral participation arises, where citizens ignorantly partake in processes, they neither know how to effectively do nor can accurately project what they must get out of partaking in the processes. This usually tends to discredit genuine governance processes as citizens cannot connect their participation to tangible developmental outcomes.

## LESSONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

A closer look at the dynamics around how different media reach out and appeal to or are accessed by different individuals, shows marginality as a thread kneading through the dynamics of how disinformation reaches and influences social groups and their communities. Based on an extensive analysis of existing literature and primary data on key media and sources of news and information, it is evident that social media, mainstream media and traditional media (or word of mouth) are the most popular news sources. Strategies to combat disinformation must be tailored to the needs and peculiarities of each news source, balancing both online and offline strategies. The use of infographics and other low-literacy data packaging methods can shore up trust, especially in areas where

citizen trust in public institutions and processes is waning.

Several civil society organisations are engaged in different initiatives, mostly to raise awareness about disinformation. A few others have purposively incorporated actual activities to combat disinformation including CITE and ZIMFACT, which do fact-checking of stories for the benefit of the online public. However, combating MDM is sometimes hampered by poor coordination of stakeholders who are running various disparate anti-disinformation initiatives. In many instances, there is no inclusivity in terms of getting all possible allies on board; resultantly, where training is offered for example, very few, usually the same faces, continue to attend training initiatives.

Key to the success of any intervention intent on mitigating the impact of disinformation is its ability to contend with the political polarisation prevalent in Zimbabwe's polity. The political polarisation apparent in most communities also acts as a barrier to the effectiveness of initiatives that target citizens, as they seem to fall into default partisan positions when confronted with news or information, which then ultimately determines how they handle disinformation and political choices.

AI and machine learning can play a significant role in detecting and countering disinformation. For example, algorithms can identify patterns in disinformation campaigns and flag suspicious content for review (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Media literacy education empowers citizens to critically evaluate information and resist disinformation. Initiatives such as school programs and community workshops can enhance media literacy, particularly among vulnerable groups (Guess et al., 2019).

Another key lesson and promising practice is around the inclusion of marginalised groups. This is most acute for PWDs, many of whom are left out or excluded by news broadcasters emanating from insensitive or inappropriately packaged information. This is almost similar to cases where recipients of information are illiterate and therefore unable to decipher information on their own and have to rely on a third party to interpret information for them. In a similar vein, issues around literacy and technical know-how remain critical but are experienced differently by different social groups, mostly based on spatial considerations. The major driver of these disparities is traced back to how ICT infrastructure retains an urban bias, with rural and remote areas, the further you move from an urban centre, facing serious challenges of connectivity and bandwidths. This tends to limit the possibilities available to the rural population. However, even within the rural environs, the situation is also not homogenous. It will be found, based on literature, that business centres or growth points within the general rural setup actually experience good connectivity and bandwidth when compared to fast-track farms within the post-2000 FTLRP landscape.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal interesting views from diverse stakeholders on the effect of disinformation on Zimbabwe's political and electoral processes. Zimbabwe's polarised landscape fused with its insecure political and ethnic landscape offers productive ground for the spread of disinformation on traditional and social media platforms, which have an increasing number of users. Combatting online disinformation requires addressing certain broader challenges such as political

polarisation, insecurity and a lack of trust in government officials. However, at the same time, online information can be used to clarify facts that can promote government accountability and transparency. Moreover, it is important to recognise that online disinformation can influence offline content in newspapers or on television and radio. It is, therefore, imperative to strengthen the more positive elements of social media, thereby weakening the threat posed by disinformation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Government regulation of social media to curb the spread of disinformation has been proposed and implemented in some countries; however, it entails serious risks to citizens' freedom of expression. In countries like Zimbabwe, social media companies can play a far more proactive regulatory role by moderating content, particularly in local languages, and by creating a more digitally informed and educated citizenry capable of discriminating between true and false information. Continued support should be provided to the media to improve the quality of reporting. Leading media houses should employ fact-checkers to reduce the reproduction or reporting of misleading online content across traditional media. Further, social media platforms should raise awareness among their users about how to report disinformation. In addition, technical support should be provided to government bodies to help them convey accurate and apolitical information using their social media handles.

Thus, we call for future research that explores more mediation and moderation pathways for the control of disinformation on social media platforms and that assesses more fully the impact of providing media literacy to the public on the spread of disinformation.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.MMQSP5FW>

## Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the causes of the Zimbabwean economic crisis beyond the sanctions imposed by the West. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, blames the sanctions for the economic woes, but this research argues that other factors are also responsible. This study is purely qualitative as it synthesises the existing knowledge and uses interviews to gather data. The findings reveal that the economic crisis is rooted in colonial legacies, corruption, institutional failures, maladministration, and regional and international dynamics that have undermined Zimbabwe's economic potential and performance. The research confirms the negative impact of sanctions on the economy but shows that they are not the main or only cause of the crisis in Zimbabwe. The research concludes with some policy recommendations for addressing economic challenges and restoring growth and stability in Zimbabwe.

**Key words:** Economic crisis, economic stability, colonial legacies, corruption, economic sanction

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's economic struggles have been a subject of debate for years, with the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), often attributing the country's woes to external factors such as sanctions. However, it is essential to critically examine the internal dynamics that have played a significant role in hindering economic growth. Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa that gained its independence from Britain in 1980. Since then, the country has faced multiple challenges in governance and development, such as political instability, economic decline, social unrest, and human rights violations. Zimbabwe has also been subject to various sanctions from different actors, such as the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations, for its alleged violations of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These sanctions have had significant impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society, affecting its trade, investment, aid, and debt.

However, sanctions are not the only factor that explains Zimbabwe's economic challenges. The country's economic performance and prospects are also influenced by other factors, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics. For instance, Zimbabwe inherited a dual economy from its colonial past, characterised by a large informal sector and a small formal sector. The informal sector accounts for about 60% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs about 80% of the labour force (Irshad, 2023). The informal sector faces many challenges, such as low productivity, poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, and lack of social protection (Duma, 2023). The formal sector, on the other hand, has been

shrinking due to deindustrialisation, corruption, policy uncertainty, and macroeconomic instability (Mujeri, 2023).

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's economic challenges have also been influenced by its regional and global environment. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its members. However, Zimbabwe's relations with some of its neighbours have been strained due to various issues, such as migration, trade disputes, border conflicts, and water sharing (World Bank, 2021). Zimbabwe has also faced challenges in re-engaging with the international community and seeking support from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Zimbabwe has accumulated a large external debt of about \$8 billion (World Bank, 2021), which limits its access to concessional financing and debt relief.

This paper aims to analyse Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions. It will examine how sanctions have affected Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects compared with other countries in the region and the world. It will further explore the other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic difficulties and how they can be overcome. It will use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys and indicators with qualitative data from interviews and document analysis. It will employ a political economy framework to analyse the underlying causes and consequences of Zimbabwe's economic challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach, collecting data from a diverse range of sources including journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and speeches from governmental officials both online and during pressers. The research synthesised existing knowledge on key economic indicators such as growth, inflation, unemployment, poverty, and trade. The qualitative data encompasses both published and unpublished interviews and document analyses from key stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organisations, business leaders, and ordinary citizens. The study delved into the historical, political, and social factors that have shaped Zimbabwe's economic trajectory and governance system. By examining these dimensions, the research aimed to uncover the complex interplay of factors contributing to the current economic situation in the country. The methodology involved a detailed document analysis, where various sources were critically examined to extract relevant information. This included analysing policy documents, government reports, and academic literature to understand the broader context of Zimbabwe's economic issues. Additionally, the study incorporated insights from interviews with key stakeholders, providing a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing Zimbabwe.

The authors used a desktop approach for this study, which involved collecting and analysing data from existing sources rather than conducting new fieldwork. This approach was justified for several reasons. Firstly, a vast amount of relevant data and literature on Zimbabwe's economic issues is readily available through online databases, libraries, and official publications. This made it feasible to gather comprehensive information without

the need for extensive fieldwork. Secondly, conducting fieldwork, especially in a country with significant logistical and political challenges like Zimbabwe, can be costly and time-consuming. The desktop approach allowed the researchers to efficiently utilise available resources and complete the study within a reasonable timeframe. Thirdly, by analysing a wide range of existing documents and reports, the study was able to incorporate diverse perspectives and insights from various stakeholders, including those who might be difficult to reach through direct interviews. Lastly, understanding the historical, political, and social factors influencing Zimbabwe's economy requires access to historical documents and records, which are often best accessed through desktop research. By employing a desktop approach, the study was able to provide a thorough and well-rounded analysis of Zimbabwe's economic challenges and potential solutions. This methodology ensured that the research was both comprehensive and efficient, leveraging existing resources to offer valuable insights into the complex economic landscape of Zimbabwe.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopts a political economy perspective to investigate the economic challenges that Zimbabwe faces beyond sanctions. Political economy is an interdisciplinary approach that studies the interplay between politics, institutions, and economic outcomes. It considers how political actors, interests, and power structures shape economic policies and processes, and how economic factors influence political behaviour and institutions (Kohn, 2021). The paper draws on the literature on the political economy of development, which examines the causes and consequences of economic growth and development across countries and regions.



This literature explores how different factors, such as history, geography, culture, institutions, governance, and external influences affect the development trajectories and performance of different countries (Renelt, 1991).

The paper also utilises the literature on the political economy of sanctions, which investigates the effects and effectiveness of sanctions as a foreign policy tool. This literature examines how sanctions affect the target country's economy, politics, and society, and how the target country responds to sanctions through various strategies, such as compliance, defiance, adaptation, or evasion (King & Fullerton, 1984). The paper applies these theoretical insights to the case of Zimbabwe, a country that has faced multiple sanctions from different actors since its independence in 1980. The paper examines how sanctions have impacted Zimbabwe's economic situation and prospects, and how Zimbabwe has coped with sanctions through various political and economic reforms. The paper also explores the other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics.

### **The effects of sanctions on Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects**

Sanctions have affected Zimbabwe in various ways, both directly and indirectly. According to some estimates, Zimbabwe has lost more than \$150 billion due to sanctions imposed by the European Union and countries such as the United States following reports of election rigging and human rights abuses in the early 2000s (Mabvunga, 2023). These sanctions have restricted Zimbabwe's access

to trade, investment, aid and debt relief, as well as its participation in regional and global markets. Sanctions have also contributed to Zimbabwe's isolation from the international community due to its reputation as a risky destination for business and tourism.

According to Brett (2005), Zimbabwe's economic challenges have been exacerbated by its poor governance system, which has been marked by authoritarianism, violence, patronage, and repression. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, has dominated the political scene since independence and has faced little opposition or accountability (Rwodzi, 2024). The party has used its control over the state apparatus to pursue its own interests and agendas, often at the expense of the majority of Zimbabweans. The party has also violated the human rights and freedoms of its citizens, especially those who oppose or criticise it. The party has also failed to implement meaningful political and economic reforms that could address the country's structural problems and improve its development outcomes. The failed implementation of the economic policy reforms includes the land reform program which aimed to redistribute land from white commercial farmers to black Zimbabweans and was poorly executed. The lack of clear policies and support for new farmers led to a decline in agricultural productivity and food security (Africa Check, nd). In addition to this, the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act, a policy that required foreign-owned companies to cede 51% of their shares to local Zimbabweans was substantially abused by political elites and this economic policy deterred foreign investment and led to economic stagnation due to the lack of clear implementation guidelines and the perception of expropriation.

Despite numerous promises, ZANU-PF has failed to effectively tackle corruption using the Anti-Corruption Measures which

have been put in place by the ZANU-PF government. High-profile corruption cases often go unpunished, and there is a lack of transparency and accountability in government operations as highlighted in the *Daily Maverick* (2023, September 19). Politically, ZANU-PF has resisted implementing reforms to ensure free and fair elections. Issues such as voter intimidation, manipulation of voter rolls, and lack of transparency in the electoral process have undermined the credibility of elections (*Daily Maverick*, 2023). On the other hand, the government of Zimbabwe has not effectively diversified the economy beyond agriculture and mining. This has made the economy vulnerable to external shocks and limited job creation and economic growth (*Change Radio Zimbabwe*, 2023). Efforts to reform the bloated and inefficient public sector have been inadequate. The public sector remains overstaffed and underperforming, draining public resources that could be used for development (*Change Radio Zimbabwe*, 2023). These failures have contributed to Zimbabwe's ongoing economic challenges and hindered its development prospects.

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's economic challenges have been influenced by its regional and global environment. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its members. However, Zimbabwe's relations with some of its neighbours have been strained due to various issues, such as migration, trade disputes, border conflicts, and water sharing (*BBC News*, 2019). Zimbabwe has also faced challenges in re-engaging with the international community and seeking support from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Zimbabwe has accumulated a large external debt of about \$8 billion (*Mabvunga*, 2023),

which limits its access to concessional financing and debt relief.

Sanctions have affected Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects in negative ways, but they are not the sole cause of its economic challenges. Zimbabwe also faces other factors that hinder its economic growth and development, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics. To overcome these challenges and improve its economic performance and prospects, Zimbabwe needs to implement political and economic reforms that respect the rule of law, human rights, and social justice. It also needs to engage in regional and international cooperation to foster peace, security, and economic integration.

### **The political and economic strategies implemented by Zimbabwe to cope with sanctions and address its economic challenges**

The Transitional Stabilisation Programme (TSP) (October 2018–December 2020), aimed to stabilise the macroeconomic environment, restore fiscal and monetary discipline, liberalise the foreign exchange market, restructure the public sector, and improve the business climate (*Mavaza*, 2020). The National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) (2021–2025), is the current policy framework that seeks to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth, social development, and poverty reduction. The NDS1 focuses on six key areas: governance, macroeconomic stability and financial re-engagement, inclusive growth, human capital development, environmental protection and resilience building, and international engagement and re-engagement (*Chidoko*, 2023).

The Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), is a platform for dialogue and cooperation among various political parties and stakeholders in Zimbabwe. The POLAD was initiated by President Mnangagwa after the disputed 2018 elections and aims to promote peace, unity, and national development. The POLAD has established thematic committees to address various issues, such as governance and legislative reforms, economic development, social welfare, media reforms, and international relations (Noyes, 2020). These reforms have shown some positive results, such as reducing inflation, increasing foreign currency inflows, improving public service delivery, and enhancing regional and international cooperation. However, they have also faced some challenges and criticisms, such as lack of transparency, accountability, and participation; resistance from vested interests; inadequate resources and capacity; and persistent sanctions from some countries. Therefore, Zimbabwe needs to continue implementing these reforms comprehensively and consistently to cope with sanctions and to address its economic challenges.

## Other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic difficulties

### *Decrease in multilateral financial institutions' allocations to Zimbabwe.*

The statistics provided by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe from 1980 to 2006 show the relationship between multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB). Zimbabwe enjoyed a significant balance of payments. However, RBZ stated that everything started to change in early 2000 when the EU and USA declared sanctions on Zimbabwe. As we look further at the RBZ data, multilateral institutions suspended their support way back in 1998 and 1999. The decline is due to the failure of the government of Zimbabwe to service its debt. The information corresponds with the interviews conducted with one of the key informants who stated that the economic crisis started way before 2000 due to the government's failure to pay its debts.

## MFI Allocations

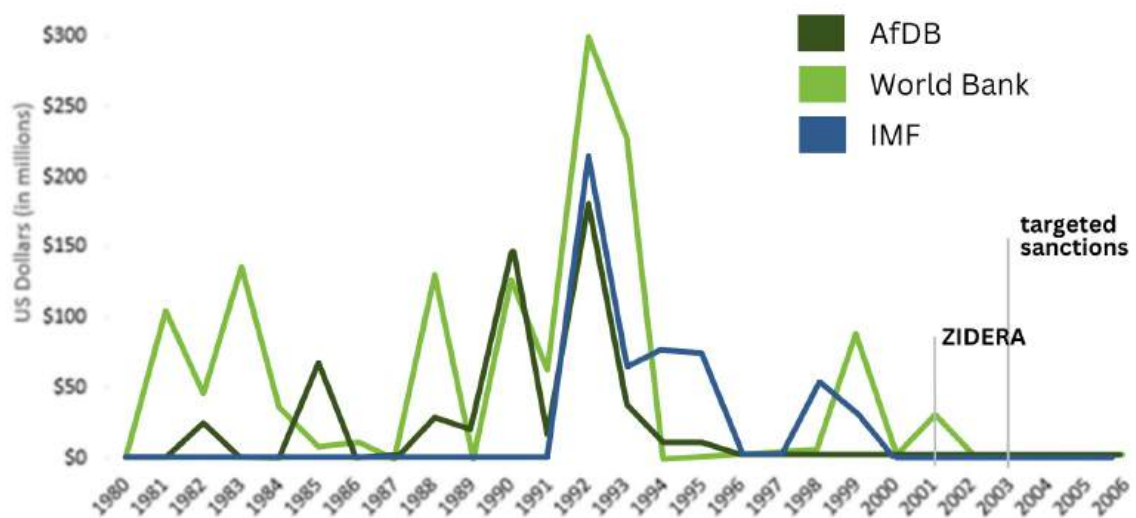


Figure 1: Multilateral financial institutions allocations to Zimbabwe, 1980–2006

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2007)

### ***Institutional weaknesses***

Zimbabwe suffers from weak institutions that undermine the rule of law, accountability, and transparency. The country ranks low on various governance indicators, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and political stability (Muronzi, 2022). The country also faces challenges in enforcing contracts, protecting property rights, resolving insolvency, and registering businesses. These institutional weaknesses discourage investment, innovation, and competition in the economy.

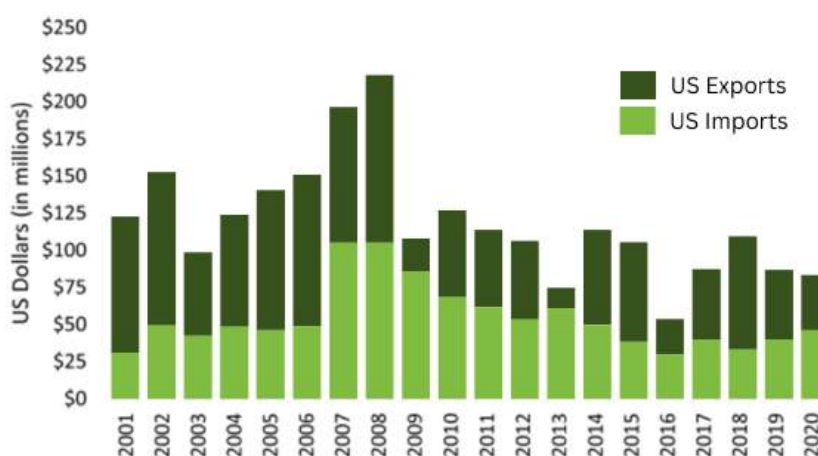
### ***Targeted sanctions and trade***

The data from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe demonstrates that the US has maintained a significant trade relationship with Zimbabwe, despite sanctions. In 2020, the US exported goods and services worth nearly \$45 million to Zimbabwe, while Zimbabwe's exports to the US totalled approximately \$35 million (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2021). This suggests that trade between the two nations has continued, albeit with some restrictions. Additionally, the US has also proffered significant humanitarian aid, totalling \$1.4 billion from 2001 to 2010 and

over \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance and development programs since 2010 (Ndakaripa, 2021). Similarly, according to Nyoni (2019), the European Union has imposed targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe, prohibiting the sale of arms and related materials, while also providing humanitarian aid through non-governmental organisations. However, the sanctions are targeted because they hold the ruling elite accountable and disrupt the illicit financial networks that perpetuate corruption and repression (Chingono, 2010). By targeting companies like Sakunda Holdings, which has been linked to regime insiders, sanctions can limit access to resources that fuel human rights abuses (US Department of State, 2022).

The sanctioning of key economic companies, such as Zisco Steel, Chemplex Holdings and Zimbabwe Fertilizer Company, has disrupted Zimbabwe's agricultural production, worsening food insecurity nationwide (Hupile, 2021). Unfortunately, humanitarian exemptions have fallen short, failing to adequately alleviate the crisis. This has resulted in devastating consequences for vulnerable populations, highlighting the need for a reassessment of targeted sanctions and exploration of alternative solutions to support democratic reforms without harming the broader population.

## **US Exports and Imports**



**Figure 2: The trade relations between the United States of America and Zimbabwe**

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2021)

## The decrease of the Foreign Direct Investment

The data proffered by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe in 2006 indicates that sanctions were pushing negative publicity by portraying Zimbabwe as a risky investment destination. The RBZ further highlighted that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflow declined drastically from USD 444.3 million in 1998 to just 3.8 million registered in 2003 when the sanctions started to hurt Zimbabwe (Ndakaripa, 2021). The decline of FDI is responsible for the economic challenges that Zimbabwe is currently facing.

However, it should be highlighted that the FDI has been declining since the 1990s

when the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs were adopted in Zimbabwe (Ndakaripa, 2021). From the above, it is clear that the FDI inflow has been below USD 50 million from the period of 2000 to 2006. The situation changed in 2009 due to the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). Zimbabwe obtained almost USD 745 million in FDI inflow due to the change of government. Most of the investors were banking their hopes on the change of government. However, in 2019, the FDI decreased to USD 280 million, when it became clear that the political environment was still unpredictable and unstable. Since 2009, there has been an increase in FDI although it is still low.

## FDI Inflows in Zimbabwe

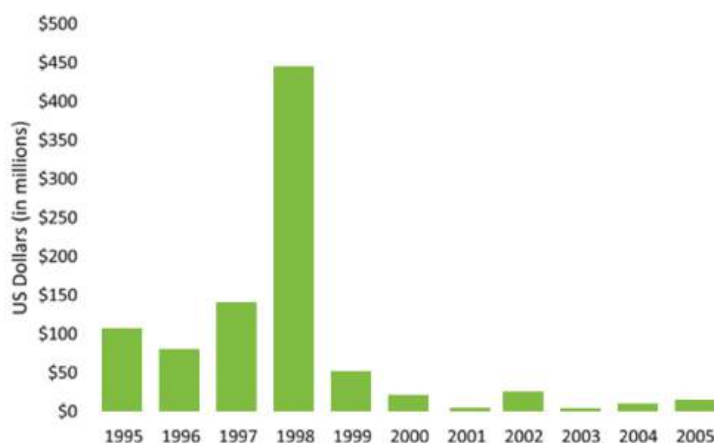


Figure 3: Foreign Direct Investment inflows in Zimbabwe

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2007)

## POSSIBLE REFORMS AND ACTIONS

To overcome these factors and improve its economic performance and prospects, Zimbabwe needs to implement political and economic reforms that respect the rule of law, human rights, and social justice. It also needs to engage in regional and international cooperation to foster peace, security, and economic integration.

**Political reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to undergo a democratic transition that respects the will of the people and ensures free and fair elections. It also needs to strengthen its institutions and processes that uphold the separation of powers, checks and balances, and civic participation. It also needs to protect the human rights and freedoms of its citizens and ensure accountability for past abuses.

**Economic reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to stabilise its macroeconomic environment by reducing inflation, restoring fiscal and monetary discipline, liberalising the foreign exchange market, and resolving its debt crisis. It also needs to diversify its economy by promoting sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, mining, and agriculture. It also needs to improve its business climate by simplifying regulations, enforcing contracts, protecting property rights, and fighting corruption.

**Social reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to invest in human capital development by improving access to quality education, health care, social protection, and food security. It also needs to address the social inequalities and vulnerabilities that affect women, youth, minorities, and rural populations. It also needs to enhance its resilience to shocks such as droughts, floods, pandemics, and conflicts.

**Regional and international cooperation:** Zimbabwe needs to resolve its outstanding issues with its neighbours and strengthen its ties with other African countries and organisations. It also needs to re-engage with the global community and seek support from multilateral agencies for its development agenda. It also needs to comply with international norms and standards on human rights, trade, environment, and security.

## CONCLUSION

Sanctions have had impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society, affecting trade, investment and debt, but they are not the sole cause of Zimbabwe's economic woes. This research has highlighted that poor governance, weak institutions and corruption are responsible for economic challenges. In addition, the inability to borrow from financial institutions, for instance, has more to do with bad debt than sanctions.

To prudently solve Zimbabwe's economic challenges, it is important to consider a multifaceted approach that involves both domestic and international efforts. This may include implementing economic reforms, improving governance, and addressing human rights concerns. The African Union and the Southern African Development Community are integral in fostering behaviour change and persuading the Zimbabwean government to prioritise democratic reforms and human rights. Complementary processes that encourage behaviour change and enable the eventual lifting of sanctions are critical to support Zimbabwe's economic recovery and foster sustainable stability.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.A28EXK4N>

# Unveiling layers of inclusion in political spaces: A multidimensional exploration of inclusion in Zimbabwe

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James Tauya Muperi 

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. It examines representation and intersectionality to explore how diverse perspectives among different interest groups in society contribute to a more comprehensive and equitable political landscape in Zimbabwe. Additionally, it investigates the role of digital inclusion, and community empowerment in fostering genuine participation. The study dissects the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system with an emphasis on youth involvement and the value of civic education. Through emphasising transparency, accountability, and a global perspective, this research article provides a holistic understanding of how political spaces can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure the active engagement of all citizens. The study is informed by the theory of intersectionality and offers a deep understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to influence individuals' experiences of political representation and participation. Through applying the intersectionality theory, the study examines how individuals with intersecting identities face unique barriers and challenges when it comes to accessing and engaging with political spaces. It reveals how privilege and power systems interact and function within political frameworks, influencing the opportunities and experiences that various groups have. To achieve the main goal, the study employs a qualitative approach to examine the dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. The qualitative constituent involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, including politicians, community leaders, and purported relegated groups, to gather insights into their experiences and perceptions of inclusion. Additionally, a survey was conducted among a representative sample of the population to gather data on their attitudes toward political inclusion and their level of engagement in political processes. This enabled a broader understanding of the overall landscape of inclusivity.

**Key words:** Inclusion, representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, youth involvement

## INTRODUCTION

### Unveiling the Multifaceted Landscape of Political Inclusion

This article explores inclusion in Zimbabwean political spheres from several angles, revealing the intricate relationships that enable a truly equitable and inclusive system. A sturdy democracy is contingent upon the principle of political inclusivity, which guarantees the full engagement of every citizen in shaping the political arena (Biswas, 2023; Dahl, 1989). Nevertheless, the notion of inclusivity in political domains surpasses mere representation, delving deeper into recognising the constraints of traditional frameworks that often prioritise numerical representation over the diverse experiences of various groups (Phillips, 2011). Hence, the political climate that exists in Zimbabwe now demands a careful analysis that goes beyond crude notions of inclusivity.

While representation ensuring a diverse array of voices are represented in governance is undoubtedly essential (Alegría & Cheng, 2023; Mansbridge, 1999), a more thorough comprehension is essential. This research delves into the concept of intersectionality, a theoretical structure that acknowledges how different facets of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to mould individuals' encounters within political spheres. Examining inclusivity from this angle helps us identify the unique difficulties faced by people whose identities are intersecting and marginalised, ensuring that their voices are heard.

Our study transcends traditional forms of involvement, examining the role of digital inclusivity in nurturing authentic engagement. With the emergence of technology, digital platforms provide new pathways for political engagement,

particularly for marginalised groups who may encounter conventional barriers to entry. Furthermore, the investigation explores the importance of community empowerment in fostering a sense of ownership and active citizenship. Communities that have historically been marginalised can be empowered, and by doing so, the government can foster an atmosphere in which different points of view are valued and actively incorporated into the democratic process.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the necessity of involving the youth in the political arena. Young people are a critical generation with the potential to shape the future of the political environment (White, 2010). Encouraging adolescent engagement and providing essential civic education can enable the government to raise a generation of knowledgeable and involved citizens (Westheimer, 2002). This holistic strategy, which includes representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth participation, and civic education, aims to "reveal the layers of inclusivity" that are necessary for Zimbabwe's democracy to thrive. Emphasising the need for openness, accountability, and a global perspective, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political environments can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure everyone's active involvement. This exploration seeks to address the following central questions:

1. In what ways do Zimbabwe's political systems support or undermine the representation of various voices and points of view?
2. How do factors such as community empowerment, digital access, and intersectionality affect the engagement of underrepresented people in political spheres?

3. How can the promotion of youth engagement and civic education contribute to fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment in Zimbabwe?

## BACKGROUND

The conventional interpretation of Zimbabwe's historical landscape suggests that the subordination of women, children, and youth has been deeply rooted in the country's sociocultural foundations. Societal gender roles have traditionally separated tasks typically associated with women, such as cooking, food processing, cleaning, preparation, and assisting men with agricultural work, from those typically associated with men, like clearing land and ploughing the fields (Mazonde & Carmichael, 2016; Tarusikirwa, 2017; Mupangwa, 2023). This gender-based segregation manifested in the colonial government where the 1975 parliament of Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) had 16 ministers and 66 legislators, of which only one was female, Mrs. Hatson from Hillside (Gudhlanga, 2013). It was only in the Rhodesia-Zimbabwe parliament in 1979 that four black women were elected to a parliament of one hundred legislators (Gaidzanwa, 2019). This exclusion from active involvement in governance marked a significant departure from the pre-colonial period when women enjoyed less substantial political power.

The liberation struggle in Zimbabwe facilitated positive changes in male-female relations. The national liberation wars of African countries, including Zimbabwe (Second Chimurenga), helped to reshape and insert women's and youth military and political agency into the nationalist narrative (Chaminuka, 2022; Kufakurinani & Nyambara, 2022; Mazambani, 2022). The participation of women and youth in national liberation efforts

was viewed by many as a precursor to a broader agenda of cultural emancipation. It is documented the government of the time cast women in the role of consumers rather than producers of the new nationalist culture (Kajta, 2022; Law, 2020). The post-colonial period from 1980 coincided with the global feminist movement, where women challenged their subservient roles as mothers and wives (Kombo, 2012). The Second Chimurenga provided a platform for women and the youth to challenge colonial views that confined them to subservient roles.

The post-independence period ushered in a new era where women and the youth, having participated in the liberation struggle, renegotiated their roles and statuses. Prominent women and young politicians were included in the new political leadership as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2021; Lotwel, Ongori & Gervasio, 2021). For instance, Joyce Mujuru was appointed Minister of Youth, Sport, and Recreation in 1980 and later became Minister of Community Development and Women's Affairs in 1981. Mujuru, along with other leaders and organisations like the Women's Action Group (WAG), played a crucial role in passing laws that benefitted women, such as the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 and the Equal Pay Act of 1982 (Jung, 2022; Lotwel et al., 2021). The government also introduced the Matrimonial Property Rights Act in 1985, which allowed women to own property and provided protection in cases of divorce (Mhuru, 2023). Additionally, the introduction of universal education at independence ensured that previously marginalised women could access education, improving their chances of participating in the public sphere.

Women are increasingly involved in the leadership of party structures in both ZANU PF and MDC (now Citizens Coalition for

Change), the two dominant political parties in Zimbabwe. Both parties strive to adhere to a policy of at least 30% women in leadership positions (Munamati, 2023). The Government of National Unity (GNU), established by the Global Political Agreement in 2008, included women leaders such as Joyce Mujuru as Vice President and Thokozani Khupe as Deputy Prime Minister. Margaret Dongo, a former ZANU-PF member of parliament, is notable for her independent stance (Zigomo, 2022). She quit the party to contest as an independent candidate, winning the Harare South seat and challenging the ruling party's policies. Her actions exemplify the evolving role of women in Zimbabwean politics, where they are increasingly asserting their independence and challenging traditional norms (Marevesa, 2019).

In contemporary Zimbabwe, media and digital spaces have become pivotal in shaping political discourse and participation. The advent of social media platforms and increased internet penetration has provided marginalised groups, including women and youth, with new avenues to voice their concerns and mobilise for political action (Zeng, 2023). Digital access has enabled these groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information, allowing for more diverse and inclusive representation in political arenas (Chirwa et al 2023). Intersectionality plays a crucial role here, as digital platforms amplify the voices of those at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalisation, such as women of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals. Community empowerment initiatives, often facilitated through online campaigns and digital literacy programmes, have further enhanced the political engagement of these groups (Chirwa et al., 2023). Hence, this study is concerned with the state of an inclusive and equitable political environment that ensures that the voices of all citizens are heard and valued in political processes.

## **Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework for Unveiling Layers of Inclusion**

The theory of intersectionality provides a powerful lens for analysing the complexities of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Developed by feminist scholars like Crenshaw (1989), it critiques traditional approaches that view social identities (race, class, gender, etc.) as independent categories. Intersectionality posits that these identities intersect and interact, shaping individuals' experiences in unique ways (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This framework is crucial for understanding how seemingly separate categories can combine to create distinct forms of marginalisation within political spaces. For example, a young woman from a rural area might face challenges due to her age and gender. However, intersectionality acknowledges that these factors do not operate independently. Her rural socioeconomic background might further limit her access to political information and resources compared to her urban counterpart. This explains the Zimbabwe political landscape which is divided along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and geography (Ndlovu, 2019). Furthermore, intersectionality moves beyond simply ensuring representation based on individual identities. While having diverse voices in government is important (Mansbridge, 1999), it does not guarantee that everyone within those identity groups has equal access and influence. A Black woman politician, for instance, might still face challenges within a male-dominated political system, even if she increases overall racial representation. Intersectionality helps us to understand these internal power dynamics and the specific barriers faced by those with overlapping marginalised identities. Exploring how various identities intersect with power structures, intersectionality reveals how political institutions can benefit certain

groups while marginalising others (Lazar, 2023). For example, political systems that rely largely on conventional media channels may disadvantage people who lack access to these platforms, possibly removing voices from rural or low-income regions.

Intersectionality is not just a critical tool for analysis; it also serves as a framework for designing inclusive political practices (Greer et al., 2023). Understanding how various identities intersect and influence experiences enables the development of targeted strategies to address the specific needs of marginalised groups. For instance, promoting digital inclusion initiatives can empower those who might face traditional barriers to political participation due to geographic location or socio-economic status.

The theoretical idea of intersectionality provides a good framework for studying the processes of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Considering the complex interplay between multiple social categories, intersectionality provides a robust framework for proposing solutions to cultivate inclusivity and increase political participation in Zimbabwe (Morrill & Comas-Diaz, 2022; Zigomo, 2022). Intersectional analysis also demonstrates that men from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. This reality should be juxtaposed with the policy positions enshrined in the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution, such as Sections 60 and 80, which aim to ensure that minority groups are represented without prejudice (Dziva, 2018; Zigomo, 2022). Through leveraging intersectionality as an analytical tool, Zimbabwe can develop a deeper understanding of the unique difficulties faced by marginalised groups, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and participatory political

environment. Our study, therefore, illuminates the myriad issues and prospects associated with establishing a political milieu that is genuinely inclusive and representative of the entire community.

## The Concept of Political Inclusion

The concept of political inclusion has been extensively explored within the democratic theory, emphasising the importance of citizen participation in shaping the political landscape (Dahl, 1989; Sivalo, 2023). However, this study argues that conventional approaches often focus solely on numerical representation, neglecting the lived experiences of diverse groups. This gap in conventional approaches underscores the need to delve deeper into the contextual drivers of political inclusion and exclusion within the political arena.

The research conducted by Mansbridge (1999) serves to emphasise the crucial importance of incorporating a wide array of voices within governmental structures; nonetheless, a more profound comprehension of this topic is deemed necessary for a comprehensive understanding. Conventional frameworks and perspectives may fail to fully acknowledge and address the specific and intricate obstacles encountered by individuals who possess multiple intersecting marginalised identities, as evidenced by the works of Diggs (2022), Alegría and Cheng (2023), and Slaughter and Brown (2022). To illustrate, Crenshaw's (1989) investigation delves into the various forms of discrimination uniquely experienced by black women because of the complex interplay between race and gender. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study identifies and explains how these interconnected aspects of identity affect individuals' ability to engage with and participate in the political arenas of Zimbabwe.

This article stresses the crucial significance of youth involvement, a topic examined by White (2010). White underscores the capacity of young individuals to influence the forthcoming political environment. Nevertheless, there is a need to comprehend the most effective methods to promote youth engagement and provide them with the requisite expertise. Our paper, through a focus on civic education, intends to address this gap. Westheimer's (2002) research accentuates the significance of civic education in nurturing well-informed and involved citizens. Expanding on this understanding, our research delves into understanding how civic education initiatives in Zimbabwe can be customised to stimulate youth participation and enhance a more comprehensive political framework.

## Digital Inclusion in Politics

Expanding beyond the conventional modes of participation as explored in the seminal work of Coppock (2003), our study delves into the intricate role played by digital inclusion in contemporary society. While Coppock primarily concentrates on the digital disparities and challenges related to access to information, a critical aspect, our study pushes the boundaries further by delving into the nuanced ways in which digital platforms can be harnessed to facilitate authentic political involvement. This is especially pertinent for groups at the margins of society who often encounter formidable obstacles to conventional forms of participation. An illustrative case is presented in a study conducted by Chadwick (2017), which probes into the transformative potential of social media in the realm of political mobilisation. Building upon this foundational knowledge, our research explores the specific ways in which enhancing digital inclusion in the context of Zimbabwe serves to amplify the voices of marginalised populations and

cultivate a more inclusive and participatory political environment.

For users, the internet serves two primary purposes which are communication and resource sharing. The Internet is a resource that entertains in addition to education and information. It speeds up networking, transactions, and conversation involvement as a communication tool. To transition to a digital or information society as a nation, adoption and increased usage of digital technology are vital. Three possible outcomes from digital media were discussed by Livingstone and Helsper (2007): (1) the sceptical view that using the Internet adds to the instability of the public sphere; (2) the middle view that Internet communication enhances and supports traditional political participation; and (3) the optimistic view that suggests using the Internet creates new avenues for participation. The Internet has democratised communication and information sources while also facilitating citizen involvement, leading to a better-educated public (Livingstone & Helsper 2007). In addition to providing numerous opportunities for social support and network expansion or maintenance, it also can improve democracy, foster social cohesion, and boost participation. The Internet has empowered citizens by providing more options, facilitating significant new civic practices, and greatly enhancing attention and involvement online.

Our research builds upon existing scholarship by offering a multidimensional exploration of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. It goes beyond representation to examine intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth involvement, and civic education. Through analysing these features, this study sheds light on the multi-layered nature of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political context. Through the submission of insights into these underexplored aspects, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic society.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were used in this study to extract research data. Semi-structured interviews with important stakeholders, such as activists, political figures, and people of marginalised communities, were conducted as part of the qualitative methodology. Convenience and purposive sampling were used in conjunction with these interviews to guarantee a representative and varied sample. To preserve the interviewees' privacy and promote open communication, their identities were kept anonymous due to the delicate nature of the subjects covered, especially those on politics. An essential component of this qualitative method was key informant interviews. The experiences and viewpoints of those directly involved in or impacted by Zimbabwean politics were insightfully revealed through these interviews. Reviewing reports and communications from different interest groups was one of the key data collection methods, providing a wealth of contextual information. Structured surveys were utilised to collect data to corroborate the qualitative findings and offer a more comprehensive framework. These surveys aimed to determine the degree of inclusion in decision-making processes as well as the demographic makeup of political institutions. The survey data made it possible to put a number on the involvement and representation of various demographic groups in political institutions. After data saturation was achieved, the researchers saw that participants were bringing up the same topics repeatedly. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative interview data, which entailed classifying the data and locating significant themes and patterns. This method made it easier to thoroughly analyse the stories and experiences that the respondents provided, which led to a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of the

underlying dynamics. During the research procedure, ethical issues were of the utmost importance. All participants gave their informed consent, and precautions were taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Given the delicate nature of the research issue, the study complied with ethical norms to safeguard the participants' rights and welfare.

## DISCUSSION

### Gender and Youth Representation in Political Institutions

Women's political representation continues to dwindle despite efforts by gender-based civic organisations lobbying for equal representation. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as of the August 2023 harmonised elections, 60 women were among the 280 individuals elected to the parliament. There were substantially fewer women nominated to run in the elections of 2023. Just 68 of the 633 candidates who have registered to contest for the 210 parliamentary seats are women. ZANU-PF fielded 23 candidates out of 68; the CCC fielded 20, and the other 25 came from various minority parties (Mutero et al., 2023). This demonstrates how underrepresented women were in all political parties. Despite constitutional provisions mandating gender equality, women continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making bodies. The findings reveal a troubling pattern of persistent underrepresentation of women in political parties. This automatically undermines their representation of their ideas, policies, and accomplishments as they automatically fall out in parliament.

Women candidates were excluded in part due to a lack of funding. Since the previous elections, the cost of running for

office has increased twentyfold. It was increased from USD 50 to USD 1000 for candidates running for parliament (Mutero et al., 2023). The female presidential contender Linda Masarira was unable to acquire the necessary funds in time to contest at the last minute. The exclusion of Linda Masarira due to her inability to acquire the necessary funds in time highlights the currency issues as a factor of exclusion. The electoral committee required payment of USD in an economy where ordinary citizens earned in local currency. Similarly, Elisabeth Valerio, a female presidential candidate from the United Zimbabwe Alliance (UZA), faced significant challenges during her political campaign. Initially, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) excluded her from the presidential race due to the late submission of her nomination papers and late payment of nomination fees. Valerio took the matter to court and won her case, forcing ZEC to accept her nomination papers. This incident underscores the systematic financial and procedural barriers that women face in Zimbabwean politics (Matshaka & Murambadoro, 2024; Mutingwende, 2023).

Various issues cultivate the widespread exclusion of women from the Zimbabwean political landscape, including male domination and patriarchy, gender identity and sexuality, cultural roles, location, and level of education (Chirawu, 2023). Male dominance in Zimbabwean politics has also extended to media and digital platforms. The media intentionally focuses on male political leaders as exemplified in the previous Zimbabwean harmonised election. Scholars have noted the trend of discriminating against female politicians on social media platforms, challenging their representation, and falling out in parliament (Ncube & Yemurai, 2020).

Responding to a question on the challenges women face in pursuing political careers, and how they can be addressed, a study respondent emphasised the same:

**“ The media needs to stop focusing solely on male politicians and also give women candidates equal coverage. Social media can be a breeding ground for negativity, especially towards women in politics. We need campaigns to challenge these online stereotypes and create a safer space for women to engage in political discourse.**

This trend in media unintentionally perpetuates traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Digital social media replicate the patriarchal attitudes that reinforce sexist attitudes towards women and are used to abuse women. For example, Linda Masarira a female politician intellectually challenged Hopewell Chino'no a seasoned journalist on social media platform X. Instead of engaging her intellectually, the journalist body shamed the female politician, and his followers ridiculed Linda. There were many other incidents where female politicians were attacked on social media over personal matters such as their marital status, age, and private sexual history. Fadzayi Mahere, a former member of the opposition party was repeatedly attacked by trolls for not having a husband and children. If women are unmarried, single parents, or widowed, they are presented as immoral and rebellious, and therefore unfit to be politicians. Fuelled by this prejudice, the persistent attacks make political participation less safe for women and deter them from running for public office (Mutero et al. 2023). Within any electoral procedure, the media possesses considerable power in moulding public opinion and promoting political discussions. Adopting gender-sensitive reporting techniques, challenging ingrained stereotypes, and



amplifying the voices of women could have had a crucial impact on promoting a more inclusive political arena.

Exclusion is also evident among youth. The Zimbabwean government has made efforts to promote youth participation in politics through initiatives such as the National Youth Policy. However, young people still face barriers such as limited access to resources, political patronage systems, and age-based discrimination. The resource model of participation is one of the most well-known theories of political engagement. This paradigm holds that a person's capacity to engage in political arenas depends on their time, money, resources, and civic knowledge. Attending political events in person, such as neighbourhood meetings, rallies, and elections, requires time. Money is also necessary for political contributions and for covering participation-related expenses like childcare and travel. In Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential elections, 52% of youths under 30 reported having cast a ballot. Additionally, youth attendance at rallies during the 2018 election was 18% lower compared to adult attendance at the same rallies (ZESN, 2023). Scholars have long highlighted the lack of meaningful youth participation in policy-making processes contributes to their marginalisation (Masuku & Macheke 2021). In response to a question related to challenges that young people face in engaging with and influencing the political process, one participant had this to say:

“Funding for youth-led political initiatives is scarce, and political parties often treat us like pawns in their games. Age should not be a barrier. We have fresh ideas and a lot of energy, but the system seems rigged against us.

This shows that youth are not taken seriously in politics even though the country boasts of a youthful demography, as revealed by the fact that more than 60% of its approximately 15 million inhabitants are below the age of 25, as reported by the United Nations Population Fund (2023). Nevertheless, this demographic composition fails to manifest itself within the realms of politics, where young individuals encounter a multitude of obstacles hindering their involvement and engagement. Scholars have bemoaned this lack of representation highlighting that it hinders their engagement due to challenges like political interference and marginalisation in decision-making processes (Yingi, 2023). The recently concluded 2023 Harmonised election demonstrates this phenomenon, with only 35 youthful candidates attaining positions in the National Assembly, which is the lower chamber of the Parliament. Within this group, 17 candidates were elected through direct means, 10 candidates gained seats via the allocation of the Youth Quota, and an additional eight candidates secured positions through the Women's Quota (ZESN, 2023). The proportion that makes up 12.5% of the 280-member National Assembly is not proportional to the demographic reality in which more than 60% of Zimbabwe's population is composed of young people. In an interview, a respondent remarked that:

“Our voices as youths are shut out of decision-making processes, and the 2023 harmonised elections are a prime example. Just 35 youth representatives in parliament? That's nowhere near close to reflecting youth representation. We need a system that empowers young people to run for office without relying on quotas or political patronage. Give us a fair shot, and we will show you what we can do. Look at how well youths did in the ZANU-PF primary election.

This statement shows that the youth are interested in politics but sometimes do not have an equal opportunity to participate as politicians. They are only used as pawns to rally voters behind other political candidates.

### **Ethnicity in Zimbabwean and Persons with Disability Representation**

Ethnic minorities, particularly those from marginalised regions such as Matabeleland, face challenges in accessing political representation. The dominance of certain ethnic groups in political parties and institutions can limit the representation of minority voices. One of the residents of Bulawayo in Matabeleland where a minority ethnic group in Zimbabwe is based remarked that:

**“ There is disconnect between the political elite and ethnic minorities. We face hurdles like limited access to resources and institutional barriers that make it difficult to even compete for office. People from Matabeleland are invisible in real Zimbabwean politics. Political parties are dominated by certain ethnicities, and our voices get lost in the shuffle. Look at Matabeleland, a region rich in history and culture, yet underrepresented in government. It's like a system designed to keep certain groups in power. Being a woman from a minority group makes life even more complicated. We need a system that promotes genuine representation, not just token representation.**

The interviewee's thoughts align nicely with intersectionality, as her ethnicity influenced her goal of political representation in addition to her identity as a woman. Similarly, representation of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) is also low. The political participation of persons with disabilities remains low due to physical barriers, lack of accessible

infrastructure, and societal stigma. Efforts to promote PWD inclusion, such as the Disability Act, have been hindered by implementation challenges and inadequate resources and this has also limited their political participation in the political arena. Scholars like Bhawal and Salimath, (2022) have bemoaned the lack of accessible infrastructure, societal stigma, and implementation despite legal efforts. One representative of the PWD hinted that:

**“ Funding for initiatives promoting PWD inclusion is scarce, and resources haven't kept pace with the legal framework. As PWD, we deserve a seat at the table, not on the sidelines, not to let able-bodied people make decisions for us as if they understand us.**

In addition, poor accessibility of public spaces further excludes the disabled from participating in political events. Also, in many cases, caregivers make many of the decisions that impact the disabled in their daily lives, so if caregivers are not active in political and civic spaces this in turn prevents youth with disability from engaging in politics.

### **Digital Divide in Zimbabwe**

There is a need to improve digital access in Zimbabwe to ensure that everyone has affordable internet access and devices. This tackles a layer of exclusion by bringing more voices into the political conversation. Currently, data costs and limited internet infrastructure are preventing participation, particularly in rural areas. Internet access in Zimbabwe is limited, with only 34.8% of the population having internet access as of early 2023 (Mutanda, 2024). This limited access is exacerbated by economic challenges and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Saidi, 2023). There is a disparity in terms of access to the Internet between urban and rural areas. For instance, while 67% of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas,

internet saturation is significantly lower in these regions compared to urban areas, with only 26% of rural residents using social media regularly compared to 67% in urban areas (Mutanda, 2024). The digital divide highlights the challenges faced by rural populations in accessing political information and participating in digital political discourse. Despite these challenges, digital platforms remain a crucial outlet for political participation, especially for marginalised groups who can use these platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information. One member of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services, hinted that the crisis arises from the absence of market competition within the telecommunications sector attributed to the high entry barriers faced by new firms. Such a situation hinders competitive forces and optimal pricing strategies.

The current digital divide illumines vulnerabilities intersect with the internet governance framework in Zimbabwe a case in point is the ban on the use of Starlink (an internet provider) which could provide affordable data and improved internet access. The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) ordered that those who were using Starlink would face arrest since it was unauthorised (Madenga, 2021). Because they wanted a third party to be engaged, the government made it difficult for Starlink services to register. Later, they gave the third-party contract to Wicknell Chivhayo, a controversial and purportedly corrupt businessman. Given that social media is the sole unrestricted public forum for individuals to engage in political discourse without apprehension of repercussions, and a platform for both residents and those in the diaspora to engage, the government needs to commit fully to ensuring universal and

affordable internet connectivity for all citizens. This obligation is compounded by the acknowledgement that technology and online resources are now widely acknowledged as basic human rights (Moyo, 2019).

Political participation in Zimbabwe also intersects with authoritarianism. The government of Zimbabwe has a significant impact on internet access and usage within the country. State-ordered internet shutdowns have been utilised as a form of digital authoritarianism. Mare (2020) observed the same in his paper titled: Internet Shutdowns in Africa: State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns and Digital Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. Shutting down the internet hinders active political participation. A case in point is when the WhatsApp platform was partially closed for nearly 4 hours in July 2016, subsequently followed by a complete shutdown of all internet services for a full week in January 2019. In July 2016, POTRAZ issued a stern written warning to ordinary citizens appeared in one leading local newspaper saying:

**“ We would like all Zimbabweans to know that we are completely against this behaviour and therefore advise that anyone generating, passing on, or sharing such abusive and subversive materials which are tantamount to criminal behaviour will be disconnected and the law will take its course (Chigogo, 2016).**

Remarkably, both events coincided with internal turmoil within the incumbent party, ZANU-PF (Mare, 2019). These shutdowns were prompted by a resurgence of social and digital activism in reaction to constraints on civic space and democratic expression (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). The government employed a law-and-order strategy to impede political engagement (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018).

The confluence of internet connectivity, utilisation, exorbitant data expenses, and inadequate infrastructure impede involvement in political discussions and democratic procedures, especially in rural areas. This predicament is compounded by the absence of competitive dynamics in the telecommunication industry, intersecting with elevated costs and restricted availability. The utilisation of the internet directly influences political engagement and community participation, encroaching upon the fundamental human entitlement to access information and express viewpoints online. Despite acknowledging technology as an essential human prerogative, the authorities persist in prioritising regulation over digital liberties, thereby intensifying the digital disparity and undermining democratic values.

Addressing the digital divide in Zimbabwe requires concerted efforts to ensure universal and affordable internet connectivity, along with safeguarding digital rights and freedoms. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for fostering political participation, democratic expression, and inclusive governance in the country.

## CONCLUSION

### Towards a Democratic System

Intersectional analysis demonstrates that men hailing from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. The examination of intersectionality exposes disparities in political portrayal among women belonging to diverse ethnic groups. In contrast, young individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds come across substantial impediments to engaging in political activities, encompassing restricted educational opportunities, job prospects, and

social connections. The concept of intersectionality brings to light the cumulative impacts of age and socioeconomic standing on the exclusion from political processes. Likewise, ethnic minority populations residing in marginalised areas like Matabeleland encounter institutional obstacles to political representation owing to past marginalisation and political turmoil.

The analysis of intersectionality accentuates the significance of tackling regional variances in political inclusivity. The study shows that a robust democratic system thrives on multiple layers of inclusion, ensuring a tapestry of voices and perspectives is woven into the fabric of political participation. Respect for diversity is essential to encourage political engagement as it facilitates inclusiveness and the embrace of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Within the realm of democratic education, fostering respect for diversity stands as a key objective, particularly within societies characterised by cultural pluralism. However, this is not the scenario in Zimbabwe, where matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are frequently politicised, resulting in discord rather than cohesion. Exploring how attitudes and biases impact women, youths, and those with disabilities can assist policymakers and politicians in cultivating an appreciation for differences, thus enhancing levels of participation.

The study recommends that the 'we versus them' mentality among Zimbabwean leaders needs to change. Discussion and idea-sharing in the political sphere are essential to the health of any democracy. It is critical to have spaces where everybody, regardless of political affiliation, feels free to express themselves. The new political generation that will shape the future, should incorporate diversity, and use technology to heal rather than exacerbate divisions.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.A28EXK4N>

# Unveiling layers of inclusion in political spaces: A multidimensional exploration of inclusion in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. It examines representation and intersectionality to explore how diverse perspectives among different interest groups in society contribute to a more comprehensive and equitable political landscape in Zimbabwe. Additionally, it investigates the role of digital inclusion, and community empowerment in fostering genuine participation. The study dissects the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system with an emphasis on youth involvement and the value of civic education. Through emphasising transparency, accountability, and a global perspective, this research article provides a holistic understanding of how political spaces can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure the active engagement of all citizens. The study is informed by the theory of intersectionality and offers a deep understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to influence individuals' experiences of political representation and participation. Through applying the intersectionality theory, the study examines how individuals with intersecting identities face unique barriers and challenges when it comes to accessing and engaging with political spaces. It reveals how privilege and power systems interact and function within political frameworks, influencing the opportunities and experiences that various groups have. To achieve the main goal, the study employs a qualitative approach to examine the dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. The qualitative constituent involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, including politicians, community leaders, and purported relegated groups, to gather insights into their experiences and perceptions of inclusion. Additionally, a survey was conducted among a representative sample of the population to gather data on their attitudes toward political inclusion and their level of engagement in political processes. This enabled a broader understanding of the overall landscape of inclusivity.

**Key words:** Inclusion, representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, youth involvement

## INTRODUCTION

### Unveiling the Multifaceted Landscape of Political Inclusion

This article explores inclusion in Zimbabwean political spheres from several angles, revealing the intricate relationships that enable a truly equitable and inclusive system. A sturdy democracy is contingent upon the principle of political inclusivity, which guarantees the full engagement of every citizen in shaping the political arena (Biswas, 2023; Dahl, 1989). Nevertheless, the notion of inclusivity in political domains surpasses mere representation, delving deeper into recognising the constraints of traditional frameworks that often prioritise numerical representation over the diverse experiences of various groups (Phillips, 2011). Hence, the political climate that exists in Zimbabwe now demands a careful analysis that goes beyond crude notions of inclusivity.

While representation ensuring a diverse array of voices are represented in governance is undoubtedly essential (Alegría & Cheng, 2023; Mansbridge, 1999), a more thorough comprehension is essential. This research delves into the concept of intersectionality, a theoretical structure that acknowledges how different facets of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to mould individuals' encounters within political spheres. Examining inclusivity from this angle helps us identify the unique difficulties faced by people whose identities are intersecting and marginalised, ensuring that their voices are heard.

Our study transcends traditional forms of involvement, examining the role of digital inclusivity in nurturing authentic engagement. With the emergence of technology, digital platforms provide new pathways for political engagement,

particularly for marginalised groups who may encounter conventional barriers to entry. Furthermore, the investigation explores the importance of community empowerment in fostering a sense of ownership and active citizenship. Communities that have historically been marginalised can be empowered, and by doing so, the government can foster an atmosphere in which different points of view are valued and actively incorporated into the democratic process.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the necessity of involving the youth in the political arena. Young people are a critical generation with the potential to shape the future of the political environment (White, 2010). Encouraging adolescent engagement and providing essential civic education can enable the government to raise a generation of knowledgeable and involved citizens (Westheimer, 2002). This holistic strategy, which includes representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth participation, and civic education, aims to "reveal the layers of inclusivity" that are necessary for Zimbabwe's democracy to thrive. Emphasising the need for openness, accountability, and a global perspective, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political environments can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure everyone's active involvement. This exploration seeks to address the following central questions:

1. In what ways do Zimbabwe's political systems support or undermine the representation of various voices and points of view?
2. How do factors such as community empowerment, digital access, and intersectionality affect the engagement of underrepresented people in political spheres?

3. How can the promotion of youth engagement and civic education contribute to fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment in Zimbabwe?

## BACKGROUND

The conventional interpretation of Zimbabwe's historical landscape suggests that the subordination of women, children, and youth has been deeply rooted in the country's sociocultural foundations. Societal gender roles have traditionally separated tasks typically associated with women, such as cooking, food processing, cleaning, preparation, and assisting men with agricultural work, from those typically associated with men, like clearing land and ploughing the fields (Mazonde & Carmichael, 2016; Tarusikirwa, 2017; Mupangwa, 2023). This gender-based segregation manifested in the colonial government where the 1975 parliament of Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) had 16 ministers and 66 legislators, of which only one was female, Mrs. Hatson from Hillside (Gudhlanga, 2013). It was only in the Rhodesia-Zimbabwe parliament in 1979 that four black women were elected to a parliament of one hundred legislators (Gaidzanwa, 2019). This exclusion from active involvement in governance marked a significant departure from the pre-colonial period when women enjoyed less substantial political power.

The liberation struggle in Zimbabwe facilitated positive changes in male-female relations. The national liberation wars of African countries, including Zimbabwe (Second Chimurenga), helped to reshape and insert women's and youth military and political agency into the nationalist narrative (Chaminuka, 2022; Kufakurinani & Nyambara, 2022; Mazambani, 2022). The participation of women and youth in national liberation efforts

was viewed by many as a precursor to a broader agenda of cultural emancipation. It is documented the government of the time cast women in the role of consumers rather than producers of the new nationalist culture (Kajta, 2022; Law, 2020). The post-colonial period from 1980 coincided with the global feminist movement, where women challenged their subservient roles as mothers and wives (Kombo, 2012). The Second Chimurenga provided a platform for women and the youth to challenge colonial views that confined them to subservient roles.

The post-independence period ushered in a new era where women and the youth, having participated in the liberation struggle, renegotiated their roles and statuses. Prominent women and young politicians were included in the new political leadership as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2021; Lotwel, Ongori & Gervasio, 2021). For instance, Joyce Mujuru was appointed Minister of Youth, Sport, and Recreation in 1980 and later became Minister of Community Development and Women's Affairs in 1981. Mujuru, along with other leaders and organisations like the Women's Action Group (WAG), played a crucial role in passing laws that benefitted women, such as the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 and the Equal Pay Act of 1982 (Jung, 2022; Lotwel et al., 2021). The government also introduced the Matrimonial Property Rights Act in 1985, which allowed women to own property and provided protection in cases of divorce (Mhuru, 2023). Additionally, the introduction of universal education at independence ensured that previously marginalised women could access education, improving their chances of participating in the public sphere.

Women are increasingly involved in the leadership of party structures in both ZANU PF and MDC (now Citizens Coalition for

Change), the two dominant political parties in Zimbabwe. Both parties strive to adhere to a policy of at least 30% women in leadership positions (Munamati, 2023). The Government of National Unity (GNU), established by the Global Political Agreement in 2008, included women leaders such as Joyce Mujuru as Vice President and Thokozani Khupe as Deputy Prime Minister. Margaret Dongo, a former ZANU-PF member of parliament, is notable for her independent stance (Zigomo, 2022). She quit the party to contest as an independent candidate, winning the Harare South seat and challenging the ruling party's policies. Her actions exemplify the evolving role of women in Zimbabwean politics, where they are increasingly asserting their independence and challenging traditional norms (Marevesa, 2019).

In contemporary Zimbabwe, media and digital spaces have become pivotal in shaping political discourse and participation. The advent of social media platforms and increased internet penetration has provided marginalised groups, including women and youth, with new avenues to voice their concerns and mobilise for political action (Zeng, 2023). Digital access has enabled these groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information, allowing for more diverse and inclusive representation in political arenas (Chirwa et al 2023). Intersectionality plays a crucial role here, as digital platforms amplify the voices of those at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalisation, such as women of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals. Community empowerment initiatives, often facilitated through online campaigns and digital literacy programmes, have further enhanced the political engagement of these groups (Chirwa et al., 2023). Hence, this study is concerned with the state of an inclusive and equitable political environment that ensures that the voices of all citizens are heard and valued in political processes.

## **Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework for Unveiling Layers of Inclusion**

The theory of intersectionality provides a powerful lens for analysing the complexities of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Developed by feminist scholars like Crenshaw (1989), it critiques traditional approaches that view social identities (race, class, gender, etc.) as independent categories. Intersectionality posits that these identities intersect and interact, shaping individuals' experiences in unique ways (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This framework is crucial for understanding how seemingly separate categories can combine to create distinct forms of marginalisation within political spaces. For example, a young woman from a rural area might face challenges due to her age and gender. However, intersectionality acknowledges that these factors do not operate independently. Her rural socioeconomic background might further limit her access to political information and resources compared to her urban counterpart. This explains the Zimbabwe political landscape which is divided along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and geography (Ndlovu, 2019). Furthermore, intersectionality moves beyond simply ensuring representation based on individual identities. While having diverse voices in government is important (Mansbridge, 1999), it does not guarantee that everyone within those identity groups has equal access and influence. A Black woman politician, for instance, might still face challenges within a male-dominated political system, even if she increases overall racial representation. Intersectionality helps us to understand these internal power dynamics and the specific barriers faced by those with overlapping marginalised identities. Exploring how various identities intersect with power structures, intersectionality reveals how political institutions can benefit certain

groups while marginalising others (Lazar, 2023). For example, political systems that rely largely on conventional media channels may disadvantage people who lack access to these platforms, possibly removing voices from rural or low-income regions.

Intersectionality is not just a critical tool for analysis; it also serves as a framework for designing inclusive political practices (Greer et al., 2023). Understanding how various identities intersect and influence experiences enables the development of targeted strategies to address the specific needs of marginalised groups. For instance, promoting digital inclusion initiatives can empower those who might face traditional barriers to political participation due to geographic location or socio-economic status.

The theoretical idea of intersectionality provides a good framework for studying the processes of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Considering the complex interplay between multiple social categories, intersectionality provides a robust framework for proposing solutions to cultivate inclusivity and increase political participation in Zimbabwe (Morrill & Comas-Diaz, 2022; Zigomo, 2022). Intersectional analysis also demonstrates that men from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. This reality should be juxtaposed with the policy positions enshrined in the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution, such as Sections 60 and 80, which aim to ensure that minority groups are represented without prejudice (Dziva, 2018; Zigomo, 2022). Through leveraging intersectionality as an analytical tool, Zimbabwe can develop a deeper understanding of the unique difficulties faced by marginalised groups, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and participatory political

environment. Our study, therefore, illuminates the myriad issues and prospects associated with establishing a political milieu that is genuinely inclusive and representative of the entire community.

## The Concept of Political Inclusion

The concept of political inclusion has been extensively explored within the democratic theory, emphasising the importance of citizen participation in shaping the political landscape (Dahl, 1989; Sivalo, 2023). However, this study argues that conventional approaches often focus solely on numerical representation, neglecting the lived experiences of diverse groups. This gap in conventional approaches underscores the need to delve deeper into the contextual drivers of political inclusion and exclusion within the political arena.

The research conducted by Mansbridge (1999) serves to emphasise the crucial importance of incorporating a wide array of voices within governmental structures; nonetheless, a more profound comprehension of this topic is deemed necessary for a comprehensive understanding. Conventional frameworks and perspectives may fail to fully acknowledge and address the specific and intricate obstacles encountered by individuals who possess multiple intersecting marginalised identities, as evidenced by the works of Diggs (2022), Alegría and Cheng (2023), and Slaughter and Brown (2022). To illustrate, Crenshaw's (1989) investigation delves into the various forms of discrimination uniquely experienced by black women because of the complex interplay between race and gender. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study identifies and explains how these interconnected aspects of identity affect individuals' ability to engage with and participate in the political arenas of Zimbabwe.

This article stresses the crucial significance of youth involvement, a topic examined by White (2010). White underscores the capacity of young individuals to influence the forthcoming political environment. Nevertheless, there is a need to comprehend the most effective methods to promote youth engagement and provide them with the requisite expertise. Our paper, through a focus on civic education, intends to address this gap. Westheimer's (2002) research accentuates the significance of civic education in nurturing well-informed and involved citizens. Expanding on this understanding, our research delves into understanding how civic education initiatives in Zimbabwe can be customised to stimulate youth participation and enhance a more comprehensive political framework.

## Digital Inclusion in Politics

Expanding beyond the conventional modes of participation as explored in the seminal work of Coppock (2003), our study delves into the intricate role played by digital inclusion in contemporary society. While Coppock primarily concentrates on the digital disparities and challenges related to access to information, a critical aspect, our study pushes the boundaries further by delving into the nuanced ways in which digital platforms can be harnessed to facilitate authentic political involvement. This is especially pertinent for groups at the margins of society who often encounter formidable obstacles to conventional forms of participation. An illustrative case is presented in a study conducted by Chadwick (2017), which probes into the transformative potential of social media in the realm of political mobilisation. Building upon this foundational knowledge, our research explores the specific ways in which enhancing digital inclusion in the context of Zimbabwe serves to amplify the voices of marginalised populations and

cultivate a more inclusive and participatory political environment.

For users, the internet serves two primary purposes which are communication and resource sharing. The Internet is a resource that entertains in addition to education and information. It speeds up networking, transactions, and conversation involvement as a communication tool. To transition to a digital or information society as a nation, adoption and increased usage of digital technology are vital. Three possible outcomes from digital media were discussed by Livingstone and Helsper (2007): (1) the sceptical view that using the Internet adds to the instability of the public sphere; (2) the middle view that Internet communication enhances and supports traditional political participation; and (3) the optimistic view that suggests using the Internet creates new avenues for participation. The Internet has democratised communication and information sources while also facilitating citizen involvement, leading to a better-educated public (Livingstone & Helsper 2007). In addition to providing numerous opportunities for social support and network expansion or maintenance, it also can improve democracy, foster social cohesion, and boost participation. The Internet has empowered citizens by providing more options, facilitating significant new civic practices, and greatly enhancing attention and involvement online.

Our research builds upon existing scholarship by offering a multidimensional exploration of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. It goes beyond representation to examine intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth involvement, and civic education. Through analysing these features, this study sheds light on the multi-layered nature of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political context. Through the submission of insights into these underexplored aspects, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic society.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were used in this study to extract research data. Semi-structured interviews with important stakeholders, such as activists, political figures, and people of marginalised communities, were conducted as part of the qualitative methodology. Convenience and purposive sampling were used in conjunction with these interviews to guarantee a representative and varied sample. To preserve the interviewees' privacy and promote open communication, their identities were kept anonymous due to the delicate nature of the subjects covered, especially those on politics. An essential component of this qualitative method was key informant interviews. The experiences and viewpoints of those directly involved in or impacted by Zimbabwean politics were insightfully revealed through these interviews. Reviewing reports and communications from different interest groups was one of the key data collection methods, providing a wealth of contextual information. Structured surveys were utilised to collect data to corroborate the qualitative findings and offer a more comprehensive framework. These surveys aimed to determine the degree of inclusion in decision-making processes as well as the demographic makeup of political institutions. The survey data made it possible to put a number on the involvement and representation of various demographic groups in political institutions. After data saturation was achieved, the researchers saw that participants were bringing up the same topics repeatedly. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative interview data, which entailed classifying the data and locating significant themes and patterns. This method made it easier to thoroughly analyse the stories and experiences that the respondents provided, which led to a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of the

underlying dynamics. During the research procedure, ethical issues were of the utmost importance. All participants gave their informed consent, and precautions were taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Given the delicate nature of the research issue, the study complied with ethical norms to safeguard the participants' rights and welfare.

## DISCUSSION

### Gender and Youth Representation in Political Institutions

Women's political representation continues to dwindle despite efforts by gender-based civic organisations lobbying for equal representation. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as of the August 2023 harmonised elections, 60 women were among the 280 individuals elected to the parliament. There were substantially fewer women nominated to run in the elections of 2023. Just 68 of the 633 candidates who have registered to contest for the 210 parliamentary seats are women. ZANU-PF fielded 23 candidates out of 68; the CCC fielded 20, and the other 25 came from various minority parties (Mutero et al., 2023). This demonstrates how underrepresented women were in all political parties. Despite constitutional provisions mandating gender equality, women continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making bodies. The findings reveal a troubling pattern of persistent underrepresentation of women in political parties. This automatically undermines their representation of their ideas, policies, and accomplishments as they automatically fall out in parliament.

Women candidates were excluded in part due to a lack of funding. Since the previous elections, the cost of running for

office has increased twentyfold. It was increased from USD 50 to USD 1000 for candidates running for parliament (Mutero et al., 2023). The female presidential contender Linda Masarira was unable to acquire the necessary funds in time to contest at the last minute. The exclusion of Linda Masarira due to her inability to acquire the necessary funds in time highlights the currency issues as a factor of exclusion. The electoral committee required payment of USD in an economy where ordinary citizens earned in local currency. Similarly, Elisabeth Valerio, a female presidential candidate from the United Zimbabwe Alliance (UZA), faced significant challenges during her political campaign. Initially, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) excluded her from the presidential race due to the late submission of her nomination papers and late payment of nomination fees. Valeri took the matter to court and won her case, forcing ZEC to accept her nomination papers. This incident underscores the systematic financial and procedural barriers that women face in Zimbabwean politics (Matshaka & Murambadoro, 2024; Mutingwende, 2023).

Various issues cultivate the widespread exclusion of women from the Zimbabwean political landscape, including male domination and patriarchy, gender identity and sexuality, cultural roles, location, and level of education (Chirawu, 2023). Male dominance in Zimbabwean politics has also extended to media and digital platforms. The media intentionally focuses on male political leaders as exemplified in the previous Zimbabwean harmonised election. Scholars have noted the trend of discriminating against female politicians on social media platforms, challenging their representation, and falling out in parliament (Ncube & Yemurai, 2020).

Responding to a question on the challenges women face in pursuing political careers, and how they can be addressed, a study respondent emphasised the same:

**“ The media needs to stop focusing solely on male politicians and also give women candidates equal coverage. Social media can be a breeding ground for negativity, especially towards women in politics. We need campaigns to challenge these online stereotypes and create a safer space for women to engage in political discourse.**

This trend in media unintentionally perpetuates traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Digital social media replicate the patriarchal attitudes that reinforce sexist attitudes towards women and are used to abuse women. For example, Linda Masarira a female politician intellectually challenged Hopewell Chino'no a seasoned journalist on social media platform X. Instead of engaging her intellectually, the journalist body shamed the female politician, and his followers ridiculed Linda. There were many other incidents where female politicians were attacked on social media over personal matters such as their marital status, age, and private sexual history. Fadzayi Mahere, a former member of the opposition party was repeatedly attacked by trolls for not having a husband and children. If women are unmarried, single parents, or widowed, they are presented as immoral and rebellious, and therefore unfit to be politicians. Fuelled by this prejudice, the persistent attacks make political participation less safe for women and deter them from running for public office (Mutero et al. 2023). Within any electoral procedure, the media possesses considerable power in moulding public opinion and promoting political discussions. Adopting gender-sensitive reporting techniques, challenging ingrained stereotypes, and



amplifying the voices of women could have had a crucial impact on promoting a more inclusive political arena.

Exclusion is also evident among youth. The Zimbabwean government has made efforts to promote youth participation in politics through initiatives such as the National Youth Policy. However, young people still face barriers such as limited access to resources, political patronage systems, and age-based discrimination. The resource model of participation is one of the most well-known theories of political engagement. This paradigm holds that a person's capacity to engage in political arenas depends on their time, money, resources, and civic knowledge. Attending political events in person, such as neighbourhood meetings, rallies, and elections, requires time. Money is also necessary for political contributions and for covering participation-related expenses like childcare and travel. In Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential elections, 52% of youths under 30 reported having cast a ballot. Additionally, youth attendance at rallies during the 2018 election was 18% lower compared to adult attendance at the same rallies (ZESN, 2023). Scholars have long highlighted the lack of meaningful youth participation in policy-making processes contributes to their marginalisation (Masuku & Macheke 2021). In response to a question related to challenges that young people face in engaging with and influencing the political process, one participant had this to say:

“Funding for youth-led political initiatives is scarce, and political parties often treat us like pawns in their games. Age should not be a barrier. We have fresh ideas and a lot of energy, but the system seems rigged against us.

This shows that youth are not taken seriously in politics even though the country boasts of a youthful demography, as revealed by the fact that more than 60% of its approximately 15 million inhabitants are below the age of 25, as reported by the United Nations Population Fund (2023). Nevertheless, this demographic composition fails to manifest itself within the realms of politics, where young individuals encounter a multitude of obstacles hindering their involvement and engagement. Scholars have bemoaned this lack of representation highlighting that it hinders their engagement due to challenges like political interference and marginalisation in decision-making processes (Yingi, 2023). The recently concluded 2023 Harmonised election demonstrates this phenomenon, with only 35 youthful candidates attaining positions in the National Assembly, which is the lower chamber of the Parliament. Within this group, 17 candidates were elected through direct means, 10 candidates gained seats via the allocation of the Youth Quota, and an additional eight candidates secured positions through the Women's Quota (ZESN, 2023). The proportion that makes up 12.5% of the 280-member National Assembly is not proportional to the demographic reality in which more than 60% of Zimbabwe's population is composed of young people. In an interview, a respondent remarked that:

“Our voices as youths are shut out of decision-making processes, and the 2023 harmonised elections are a prime example. Just 35 youth representatives in parliament? That's nowhere near close to reflecting youth representation. We need a system that empowers young people to run for office without relying on quotas or political patronage. Give us a fair shot, and we will show you what we can do. Look at how well youths did in the ZANU-PF primary election.

This statement shows that the youth are interested in politics but sometimes do not have an equal opportunity to participate as politicians. They are only used as pawns to rally voters behind other political candidates.

### **Ethnicity in Zimbabwean and Persons with Disability Representation**

Ethnic minorities, particularly those from marginalised regions such as Matabeleland, face challenges in accessing political representation. The dominance of certain ethnic groups in political parties and institutions can limit the representation of minority voices. One of the residents of Bulawayo in Matabeleland where a minority ethnic group in Zimbabwe is based remarked that:

**“ There is disconnect between the political elite and ethnic minorities. We face hurdles like limited access to resources and institutional barriers that make it difficult to even compete for office. People from Matabeleland are invisible in real Zimbabwean politics. Political parties are dominated by certain ethnicities, and our voices get lost in the shuffle. Look at Matabeleland, a region rich in history and culture, yet underrepresented in government. It's like a system designed to keep certain groups in power. Being a woman from a minority group makes life even more complicated. We need a system that promotes genuine representation, not just token representation.**

The interviewee's thoughts align nicely with intersectionality, as her ethnicity influenced her goal of political representation in addition to her identity as a woman. Similarly, representation of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) is also low. The political participation of persons with disabilities remains low due to physical barriers, lack of accessible

infrastructure, and societal stigma. Efforts to promote PWD inclusion, such as the Disability Act, have been hindered by implementation challenges and inadequate resources and this has also limited their political participation in the political arena. Scholars like Bhawal and Salimath, (2022) have bemoaned the lack of accessible infrastructure, societal stigma, and implementation despite legal efforts. One representative of the PWD hinted that:

**“ Funding for initiatives promoting PWD inclusion is scarce, and resources haven't kept pace with the legal framework. As PWD, we deserve a seat at the table, not on the sidelines, not to let able-bodied people make decisions for us as if they understand us.**

In addition, poor accessibility of public spaces further excludes the disabled from participating in political events. Also, in many cases, caregivers make many of the decisions that impact the disabled in their daily lives, so if caregivers are not active in political and civic spaces this in turn prevents youth with disability from engaging in politics.

### **Digital Divide in Zimbabwe**

There is a need to improve digital access in Zimbabwe to ensure that everyone has affordable internet access and devices. This tackles a layer of exclusion by bringing more voices into the political conversation. Currently, data costs and limited internet infrastructure are preventing participation, particularly in rural areas. Internet access in Zimbabwe is limited, with only 34.8% of the population having internet access as of early 2023 (Mutanda, 2024). This limited access is exacerbated by economic challenges and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Saidi, 2023). There is a disparity in terms of access to the Internet between urban and rural areas. For instance, while 67% of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas,

internet saturation is significantly lower in these regions compared to urban areas, with only 26% of rural residents using social media regularly compared to 67% in urban areas (Mutanda, 2024). The digital divide highlights the challenges faced by rural populations in accessing political information and participating in digital political discourse. Despite these challenges, digital platforms remain a crucial outlet for political participation, especially for marginalised groups who can use these platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information. One member of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services, hinted that the crisis arises from the absence of market competition within the telecommunications sector attributed to the high entry barriers faced by new firms. Such a situation hinders competitive forces and optimal pricing strategies.

The current digital divide illumines vulnerabilities intersect with the internet governance framework in Zimbabwe a case in point is the ban on the use of Starlink (an internet provider) which could provide affordable data and improved internet access. The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) ordered that those who were using Starlink would face arrest since it was unauthorised (Madenga, 2021). Because they wanted a third party to be engaged, the government made it difficult for Starlink services to register. Later, they gave the third-party contract to Wicknell Chivhayo, a controversial and purportedly corrupt businessman. Given that social media is the sole unrestricted public forum for individuals to engage in political discourse without apprehension of repercussions, and a platform for both residents and those in the diaspora to engage, the government needs to commit fully to ensuring universal and

affordable internet connectivity for all citizens. This obligation is compounded by the acknowledgement that technology and online resources are now widely acknowledged as basic human rights (Moyo, 2019).

Political participation in Zimbabwe also intersects with authoritarianism. The government of Zimbabwe has a significant impact on internet access and usage within the country. State-ordered internet shutdowns have been utilised as a form of digital authoritarianism. Mare (2020) observed the same in his paper titled: Internet Shutdowns in Africa: State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns and Digital Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. Shutting down the internet hinders active political participation. A case in point is when the WhatsApp platform was partially closed for nearly 4 hours in July 2016, subsequently followed by a complete shutdown of all internet services for a full week in January 2019. In July 2016, POTRAZ issued a stern written warning to ordinary citizens appeared in one leading local newspaper saying:

**“ We would like all Zimbabweans to know that we are completely against this behaviour and therefore advise that anyone generating, passing on, or sharing such abusive and subversive materials which are tantamount to criminal behaviour will be disconnected and the law will take its course (Chigogo, 2016).**

Remarkably, both events coincided with internal turmoil within the incumbent party, ZANU-PF (Mare, 2019). These shutdowns were prompted by a resurgence of social and digital activism in reaction to constraints on civic space and democratic expression (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). The government employed a law-and-order strategy to impede political engagement (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018).

The confluence of internet connectivity, utilisation, exorbitant data expenses, and inadequate infrastructure impede involvement in political discussions and democratic procedures, especially in rural areas. This predicament is compounded by the absence of competitive dynamics in the telecommunication industry, intersecting with elevated costs and restricted availability. The utilisation of the internet directly influences political engagement and community participation, encroaching upon the fundamental human entitlement to access information and express viewpoints online. Despite acknowledging technology as an essential human prerogative, the authorities persist in prioritising regulation over digital liberties, thereby intensifying the digital disparity and undermining democratic values.

Addressing the digital divide in Zimbabwe requires concerted efforts to ensure universal and affordable internet connectivity, along with safeguarding digital rights and freedoms. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for fostering political participation, democratic expression, and inclusive governance in the country.

## CONCLUSION

### Towards a Democratic System

Intersectional analysis demonstrates that men hailing from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. The examination of intersectionality exposes disparities in political portrayal among women belonging to diverse ethnic groups. In contrast, young individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds come across substantial impediments to engaging in political activities, encompassing restricted educational opportunities, job prospects, and

social connections. The concept of intersectionality brings to light the cumulative impacts of age and socioeconomic standing on the exclusion from political processes. Likewise, ethnic minority populations residing in marginalised areas like Matabeleland encounter institutional obstacles to political representation owing to past marginalisation and political turmoil.

The analysis of intersectionality accentuates the significance of tackling regional variances in political inclusivity. The study shows that a robust democratic system thrives on multiple layers of inclusion, ensuring a tapestry of voices and perspectives is woven into the fabric of political participation. Respect for diversity is essential to encourage political engagement as it facilitates inclusiveness and the embrace of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Within the realm of democratic education, fostering respect for diversity stands as a key objective, particularly within societies characterised by cultural pluralism. However, this is not the scenario in Zimbabwe, where matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are frequently politicised, resulting in discord rather than cohesion. Exploring how attitudes and biases impact women, youths, and those with disabilities can assist policymakers and politicians in cultivating an appreciation for differences, thus enhancing levels of participation.

The study recommends that the 'we versus them' mentality among Zimbabwean leaders needs to change. Discussion and idea-sharing in the political sphere are essential to the health of any democracy. It is critical to have spaces where everybody, regardless of political affiliation, feels free to express themselves. The new political generation that will shape the future, should incorporate diversity, and use technology to heal rather than exacerbate divisions.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.MMQSP5FW>

## Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the causes of the Zimbabwean economic crisis beyond the sanctions imposed by the West. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, blames the sanctions for the economic woes, but this research argues that other factors are also responsible. This study is purely qualitative as it synthesises the existing knowledge and uses interviews to gather data. The findings reveal that the economic crisis is rooted in colonial legacies, corruption, institutional failures, maladministration, and regional and international dynamics that have undermined Zimbabwe's economic potential and performance. The research confirms the negative impact of sanctions on the economy but shows that they are not the main or only cause of the crisis in Zimbabwe. The research concludes with some policy recommendations for addressing economic challenges and restoring growth and stability in Zimbabwe.

**Key words:** Economic crisis, economic stability, colonial legacies, corruption, economic sanction

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's economic struggles have been a subject of debate for years, with the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), often attributing the country's woes to external factors such as sanctions. However, it is essential to critically examine the internal dynamics that have played a significant role in hindering economic growth. Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa that gained its independence from Britain in 1980. Since then, the country has faced multiple challenges in governance and development, such as political instability, economic decline, social unrest, and human rights violations. Zimbabwe has also been subject to various sanctions from different actors, such as the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations, for its alleged violations of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These sanctions have had significant impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society, affecting its trade, investment, aid, and debt.

However, sanctions are not the only factor that explains Zimbabwe's economic challenges. The country's economic performance and prospects are also influenced by other factors, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics. For instance, Zimbabwe inherited a dual economy from its colonial past, characterised by a large informal sector and a small formal sector. The informal sector accounts for about 60% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs about 80% of the labour force (Irshad, 2023). The informal sector faces many challenges, such as low productivity, poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, and lack of social protection (Duma, 2023). The formal sector, on the other hand, has been

shrinking due to deindustrialisation, corruption, policy uncertainty, and macroeconomic instability (Mujeri, 2023).

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's economic challenges have also been influenced by its regional and global environment. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its members. However, Zimbabwe's relations with some of its neighbours have been strained due to various issues, such as migration, trade disputes, border conflicts, and water sharing (World Bank, 2021). Zimbabwe has also faced challenges in re-engaging with the international community and seeking support from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Zimbabwe has accumulated a large external debt of about \$8 billion (World Bank, 2021), which limits its access to concessional financing and debt relief.

This paper aims to analyse Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions. It will examine how sanctions have affected Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects compared with other countries in the region and the world. It will further explore the other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic difficulties and how they can be overcome. It will use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys and indicators with qualitative data from interviews and document analysis. It will employ a political economy framework to analyse the underlying causes and consequences of Zimbabwe's economic challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach, collecting data from a diverse range of sources including journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and speeches from governmental officials both online and during pressers. The research synthesised existing knowledge on key economic indicators such as growth, inflation, unemployment, poverty, and trade. The qualitative data encompasses both published and unpublished interviews and document analyses from key stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organisations, business leaders, and ordinary citizens. The study delved into the historical, political, and social factors that have shaped Zimbabwe's economic trajectory and governance system. By examining these dimensions, the research aimed to uncover the complex interplay of factors contributing to the current economic situation in the country. The methodology involved a detailed document analysis, where various sources were critically examined to extract relevant information. This included analysing policy documents, government reports, and academic literature to understand the broader context of Zimbabwe's economic issues. Additionally, the study incorporated insights from interviews with key stakeholders, providing a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing Zimbabwe.

The authors used a desktop approach for this study, which involved collecting and analysing data from existing sources rather than conducting new fieldwork. This approach was justified for several reasons. Firstly, a vast amount of relevant data and literature on Zimbabwe's economic issues is readily available through online databases, libraries, and official publications. This made it feasible to gather comprehensive information without

the need for extensive fieldwork. Secondly, conducting fieldwork, especially in a country with significant logistical and political challenges like Zimbabwe, can be costly and time-consuming. The desktop approach allowed the researchers to efficiently utilise available resources and complete the study within a reasonable timeframe. Thirdly, by analysing a wide range of existing documents and reports, the study was able to incorporate diverse perspectives and insights from various stakeholders, including those who might be difficult to reach through direct interviews. Lastly, understanding the historical, political, and social factors influencing Zimbabwe's economy requires access to historical documents and records, which are often best accessed through desktop research. By employing a desktop approach, the study was able to provide a thorough and well-rounded analysis of Zimbabwe's economic challenges and potential solutions. This methodology ensured that the research was both comprehensive and efficient, leveraging existing resources to offer valuable insights into the complex economic landscape of Zimbabwe.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopts a political economy perspective to investigate the economic challenges that Zimbabwe faces beyond sanctions. Political economy is an interdisciplinary approach that studies the interplay between politics, institutions, and economic outcomes. It considers how political actors, interests, and power structures shape economic policies and processes, and how economic factors influence political behaviour and institutions (Kohn, 2021). The paper draws on the literature on the political economy of development, which examines the causes and consequences of economic growth and development across countries and regions.

This literature explores how different factors, such as history, geography, culture, institutions, governance, and external influences affect the development trajectories and performance of different countries (Renelt, 1991).

The paper also utilises the literature on the political economy of sanctions, which investigates the effects and effectiveness of sanctions as a foreign policy tool. This literature examines how sanctions affect the target country's economy, politics, and society, and how the target country responds to sanctions through various strategies, such as compliance, defiance, adaptation, or evasion (King & Fullerton, 1984). The paper applies these theoretical insights to the case of Zimbabwe, a country that has faced multiple sanctions from different actors since its independence in 1980. The paper examines how sanctions have impacted Zimbabwe's economic situation and prospects, and how Zimbabwe has coped with sanctions through various political and economic reforms. The paper also explores the other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic challenges beyond sanctions, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics.

### **The effects of sanctions on Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects**

Sanctions have affected Zimbabwe in various ways, both directly and indirectly. According to some estimates, Zimbabwe has lost more than \$150 billion due to sanctions imposed by the European Union and countries such as the United States following reports of election rigging and human rights abuses in the early 2000s (Mabvunga, 2023). These sanctions have restricted Zimbabwe's access

to trade, investment, aid and debt relief, as well as its participation in regional and global markets. Sanctions have also contributed to Zimbabwe's isolation from the international community due to its reputation as a risky destination for business and tourism.

According to Brett (2005), Zimbabwe's economic challenges have been exacerbated by its poor governance system, which has been marked by authoritarianism, violence, patronage, and repression. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, has dominated the political scene since independence and has faced little opposition or accountability (Rwodzi, 2024). The party has used its control over the state apparatus to pursue its own interests and agendas, often at the expense of the majority of Zimbabweans. The party has also violated the human rights and freedoms of its citizens, especially those who oppose or criticise it. The party has also failed to implement meaningful political and economic reforms that could address the country's structural problems and improve its development outcomes. The failed implementation of the economic policy reforms includes the land reform program which aimed to redistribute land from white commercial farmers to black Zimbabweans and was poorly executed. The lack of clear policies and support for new farmers led to a decline in agricultural productivity and food security (Africa Check, nd). In addition to this, the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act, a policy that required foreign-owned companies to cede 51% of their shares to local Zimbabweans was substantially abused by political elites and this economic policy deterred foreign investment and led to economic stagnation due to the lack of clear implementation guidelines and the perception of expropriation.

Despite numerous promises, ZANU-PF has failed to effectively tackle corruption using the Anti-Corruption Measures which

have been put in place by the ZANU-PF government. High-profile corruption cases often go unpunished, and there is a lack of transparency and accountability in government operations as highlighted in the *Daily Maverick* (2023, September 19). Politically, ZANU-PF has resisted implementing reforms to ensure free and fair elections. Issues such as voter intimidation, manipulation of voter rolls, and lack of transparency in the electoral process have undermined the credibility of elections (Daily Maverick, 2023). On the other hand, the government of Zimbabwe has not effectively diversified the economy beyond agriculture and mining. This has made the economy vulnerable to external shocks and limited job creation and economic growth (Change Radio Zimbabwe, 2023). Efforts to reform the bloated and inefficient public sector have been inadequate. The public sector remains overstaffed and underperforming, draining public resources that could be used for development (Change Radio Zimbabwe, 2023). These failures have contributed to Zimbabwe's ongoing economic challenges and hindered its development prospects.

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's economic challenges have been influenced by its regional and global environment. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its members. However, Zimbabwe's relations with some of its neighbours have been strained due to various issues, such as migration, trade disputes, border conflicts, and water sharing (BBC News, 2019). Zimbabwe has also faced challenges in re-engaging with the international community and seeking support from multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Zimbabwe has accumulated a large external debt of about \$8 billion (Mabvunga, 2023),

which limits its access to concessional financing and debt relief.

Sanctions have affected Zimbabwe's economic performance and prospects in negative ways, but they are not the sole cause of its economic challenges. Zimbabwe also faces other factors that hinder its economic growth and development, such as historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, governance failures, and regional and global dynamics. To overcome these challenges and improve its economic performance and prospects, Zimbabwe needs to implement political and economic reforms that respect the rule of law, human rights, and social justice. It also needs to engage in regional and international cooperation to foster peace, security, and economic integration.

### **The political and economic strategies implemented by Zimbabwe to cope with sanctions and address its economic challenges**

The Transitional Stabilisation Programme (TSP) (October 2018–December 2020), aimed to stabilise the macroeconomic environment, restore fiscal and monetary discipline, liberalise the foreign exchange market, restructure the public sector, and improve the business climate (Mavaza, 2020). The National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) (2021–2025), is the current policy framework that seeks to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth, social development, and poverty reduction. The NDS1 focuses on six key areas: governance, macroeconomic stability and financial re-engagement, inclusive growth, human capital development, environmental protection and resilience building, and international engagement and re-engagement (Chidoko, 2023).

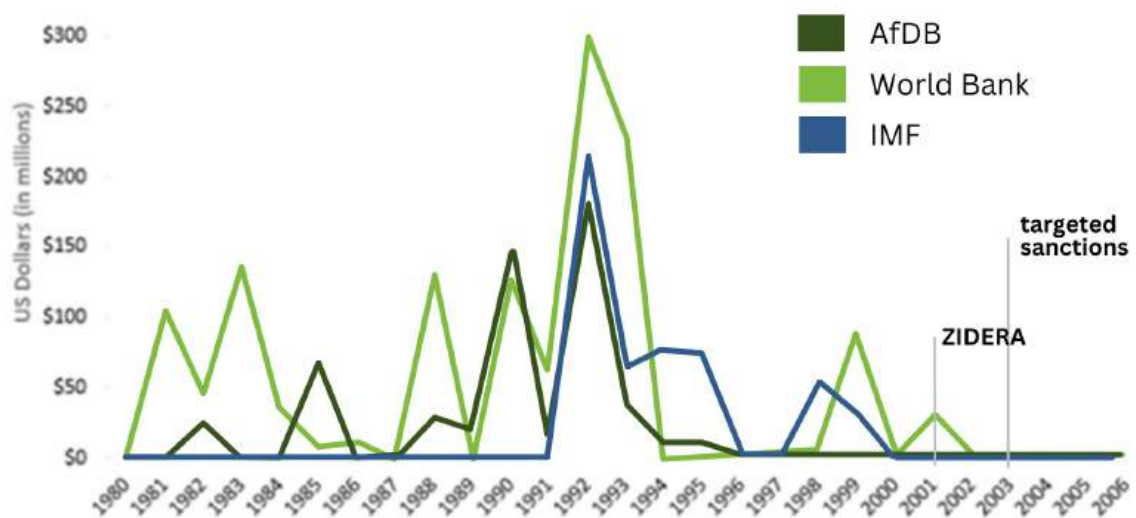
The Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), is a platform for dialogue and cooperation among various political parties and stakeholders in Zimbabwe. The POLAD was initiated by President Mnangagwa after the disputed 2018 elections and aims to promote peace, unity, and national development. The POLAD has established thematic committees to address various issues, such as governance and legislative reforms, economic development, social welfare, media reforms, and international relations (Noyes, 2020). These reforms have shown some positive results, such as reducing inflation, increasing foreign currency inflows, improving public service delivery, and enhancing regional and international cooperation. However, they have also faced some challenges and criticisms, such as lack of transparency, accountability, and participation; resistance from vested interests; inadequate resources and capacity; and persistent sanctions from some countries. Therefore, Zimbabwe needs to continue implementing these reforms comprehensively and consistently to cope with sanctions and to address its economic challenges.

## Other factors that have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic difficulties

### *Decrease in multilateral financial institutions' allocations to Zimbabwe.*

The statistics provided by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe from 1980 to 2006 show the relationship between multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB). Zimbabwe enjoyed a significant balance of payments. However, RBZ stated that everything started to change in early 2000 when the EU and USA declared sanctions on Zimbabwe. As we look further at the RBZ data, multilateral institutions suspended their support way back in 1998 and 1999. The decline is due to the failure of the government of Zimbabwe to service its debt. The information corresponds with the interviews conducted with one of the key informants who stated that the economic crisis started way before 2000 due to the government's failure to pay its debts.

## MFI Allocations



**Figure 1: Multilateral financial institutions allocations to Zimbabwe, 1980–2006**

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2007)

### ***Institutional weaknesses***

Zimbabwe suffers from weak institutions that undermine the rule of law, accountability, and transparency. The country ranks low on various governance indicators, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and political stability (Muronzi, 2022). The country also faces challenges in enforcing contracts, protecting property rights, resolving insolvency, and registering businesses. These institutional weaknesses discourage investment, innovation, and competition in the economy.

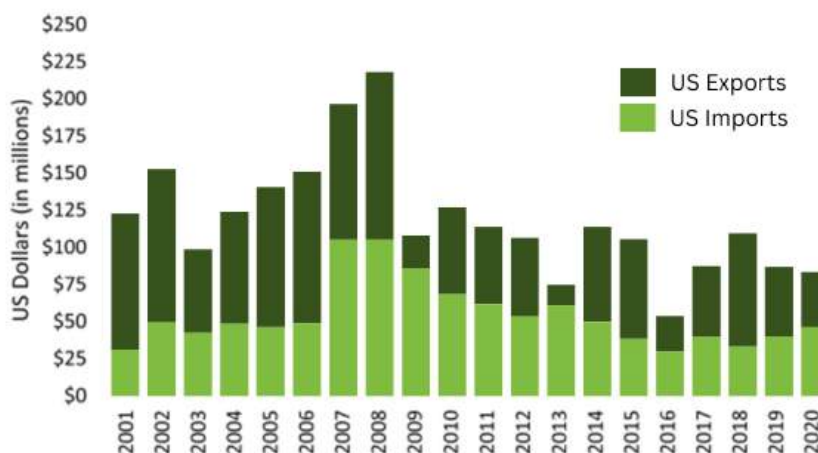
### ***Targeted sanctions and trade***

The data from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe demonstrates that the US has maintained a significant trade relationship with Zimbabwe, despite sanctions. In 2020, the US exported goods and services worth nearly \$45 million to Zimbabwe, while Zimbabwe's exports to the US totalled approximately \$35 million (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2021). This suggests that trade between the two nations has continued, albeit with some restrictions. Additionally, the US has also proffered significant humanitarian aid, totalling \$1.4 billion from 2001 to 2010 and

over \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance and development programs since 2010 (Ndakaripa, 2021). Similarly, according to Nyoni (2019), the European Union has imposed targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe, prohibiting the sale of arms and related materials, while also providing humanitarian aid through non-governmental organisations. However, the sanctions are targeted because they hold the ruling elite accountable and disrupt the illicit financial networks that perpetuate corruption and repression (Chingono, 2010). By targeting companies like Sakunda Holdings, which has been linked to regime insiders, sanctions can limit access to resources that fuel human rights abuses (US Department of State, 2022).

The sanctioning of key economic companies, such as Zisco Steel, Chemplex Holdings and Zimbabwe Fertilizer Company, has disrupted Zimbabwe's agricultural production, worsening food insecurity nationwide (Hupile, 2021). Unfortunately, humanitarian exemptions have fallen short, failing to adequately alleviate the crisis. This has resulted in devastating consequences for vulnerable populations, highlighting the need for a reassessment of targeted sanctions and exploration of alternative solutions to support democratic reforms without harming the broader population.

## **US Exports and Imports**



**Figure 2: The trade relations between the United States of America and Zimbabwe**

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2021)

## The decrease of the Foreign Direct Investment

The data proffered by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe in 2006 indicates that sanctions were pushing negative publicity by portraying Zimbabwe as a risky investment destination. The RBZ further highlighted that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflow declined drastically from USD 444.3 million in 1998 to just 3.8 million registered in 2003 when the sanctions started to hurt Zimbabwe (Ndakaripa, 2021). The decline of FDI is responsible for the economic challenges that Zimbabwe is currently facing.

However, it should be highlighted that the FDI has been declining since the 1990s

when the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs were adopted in Zimbabwe (Ndakaripa, 2021). From the above, it is clear that the FDI inflow has been below USD 50 million from the period of 2000 to 2006. The situation changed in 2009 due to the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). Zimbabwe obtained almost USD 745 million in FDI inflow due to the change of government. Most of the investors were banking their hopes on the change of government. However, in 2019, the FDI decreased to USD 280 million, when it became clear that the political environment was still unpredictable and unstable. Since 2009, there has been an increase in FDI although it is still low.

## FDI Inflows in Zimbabwe

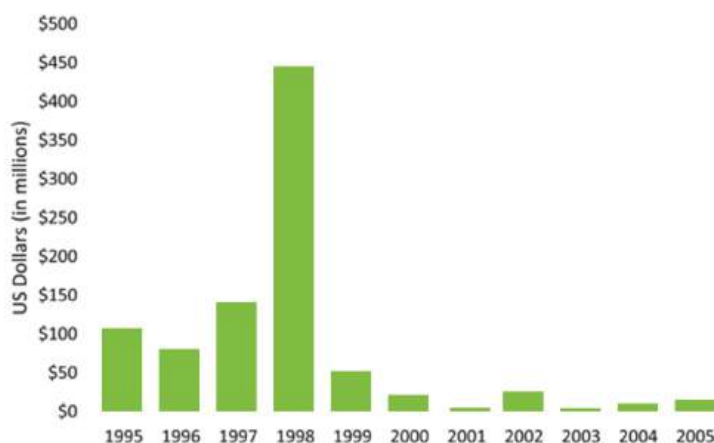


Figure 3: Foreign Direct Investment inflows in Zimbabwe

Source: Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2007)

## POSSIBLE REFORMS AND ACTIONS

To overcome these factors and improve its economic performance and prospects, Zimbabwe needs to implement political and economic reforms that respect the rule of law, human rights, and social justice. It also needs to engage in regional and international cooperation to foster peace, security, and economic integration.

**Political reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to undergo a democratic transition that respects the will of the people and ensures free and fair elections. It also needs to strengthen its institutions and processes that uphold the separation of powers, checks and balances, and civic participation. It also needs to protect the human rights and freedoms of its citizens and ensure accountability for past abuses.



**Economic reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to stabilise its macroeconomic environment by reducing inflation, restoring fiscal and monetary discipline, liberalising the foreign exchange market, and resolving its debt crisis. It also needs to diversify its economy by promoting sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, mining, and agriculture. It also needs to improve its business climate by simplifying regulations, enforcing contracts, protecting property rights, and fighting corruption.

**Social reforms:** Zimbabwe needs to invest in human capital development by improving access to quality education, health care, social protection, and food security. It also needs to address the social inequalities and vulnerabilities that affect women, youth, minorities, and rural populations. It also needs to enhance its resilience to shocks such as droughts, floods, pandemics, and conflicts.

**Regional and international cooperation:** Zimbabwe needs to resolve its outstanding issues with its neighbours and strengthen its ties with other African countries and organisations. It also needs to re-engage with the global community and seek support from multilateral agencies for its development agenda. It also needs to comply with international norms and standards on human rights, trade, environment, and security.

## CONCLUSION

Sanctions have had impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society, affecting trade, investment and debt, but they are not the sole cause of Zimbabwe's economic woes. This research has highlighted that poor governance, weak institutions and corruption are responsible for economic challenges. In addition, the inability to borrow from financial institutions, for instance, has more to do with bad debt than sanctions.

To prudently solve Zimbabwe's economic challenges, it is important to consider a multifaceted approach that involves both domestic and international efforts. This may include implementing economic reforms, improving governance, and addressing human rights concerns. The African Union and the Southern African Development Community are integral in fostering behaviour change and persuading the Zimbabwean government to prioritise democratic reforms and human rights. Complementary processes that encourage behaviour change and enable the eventual lifting of sanctions are critical to support Zimbabwe's economic recovery and foster sustainable stability.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.QRTY5NM3>

# Impact of digital finance on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe

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Darold Shumba 

## ABSTRACT

This study looks at how digital finance affects financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. There has been a noticeable change in Zimbabwe's financial services sector with the introduction of digital technology, especially mobile money and digital banking services. The present study investigates the ways in which digital finance initiatives have facilitated the expansion of financial services accessibility, the advancement of financial literacy, and the promotion of economic empowerment among marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. This study offers insights into the potential obstacles related to digital finance in achieving financial inclusion objectives in Zimbabwe through an extensive analysis of current research and empirical data.

**Key words:** Digital finance, financial inclusion, mobile money, digital banking, Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

Access to financial services is vital for poverty reduction and economic growth. Financial inclusion entails ensuring individuals and businesses have access to affordable financial products and services, including transactions, savings, credit, and insurance, delivered sustainably (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2022). It

“ is defined as maximising access to and use of formal financial services while minimising barriers perceived by those outside the formal financial system (Cámara, Tuesta, & Vadillo, 2014, p. 1).

Financial inclusion fosters economic growth (Kim, Lee, & Newby, 2017) and resource mobilisation by promoting savings (Allen, Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, & Peria, 2012). However, globally, 65% of adults in developing nations lack access even to basic transaction accounts, let alone other services like savings, insurance, and credit (World Bank, 2020).

Digital financial services, driven by fintech, have the potential to lower costs, enhance transaction speed, security, and transparency, and offer tailored financial services, particularly benefiting the poor. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of fintech in maintaining financial systems and ensuring safety during times of social distancing and economic uncertainty (World Bank, 2020). Despite the rapid growth in mobile phone and internet usage globally, over 2 billion people still lack internet access, and a third of the global population doesn't own a mobile phone (Hernandez, 2019).

However, there's a concern that a shift towards digital banking could exacerbate financial exclusion, particularly among low-income and technologically disadvantaged individuals (Ozili, 2017). The way digital

finance is introduced in a country, voluntarily or forcibly, can also lead to voluntary financial exclusion if the population is not prepared for it. Hence, this study aims to explore the impact of digital finance on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

Financial inclusion has garnered significant attention since the early 2000s, with countries prioritising providing financial services to the previously unbanked population (Hanning & Jansen, 2008). The United Nations declared 2005 the International Year of Microcredit, highlighting the importance of financial inclusion (Siddik, Kabir, & Marathe, 2014). Over the past decade, there has been a global policy shift towards promoting greater access to finance, with key development institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), African Development Bank (AfDB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) dedicating substantial resources to understanding and promoting financial inclusion. Financial inclusion benefits include freedom from informal lenders, promoting economic growth and formalisation, poverty reduction, and financial stability (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe [RBZ], 2022).

In 2017, nearly 1.7 billion adults worldwide (31% of the adult population) lacked access to financial institutions or mobile money providers. The majority of the unbanked were women and came from the poorest households (World Bank, 2022). In high-income OECD countries, only 6% of adults lack access to financial services, whereas in developing countries, about 80% of adults are financially excluded, with Sub-Saharan Africa having particularly high exclusion rates (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2015).

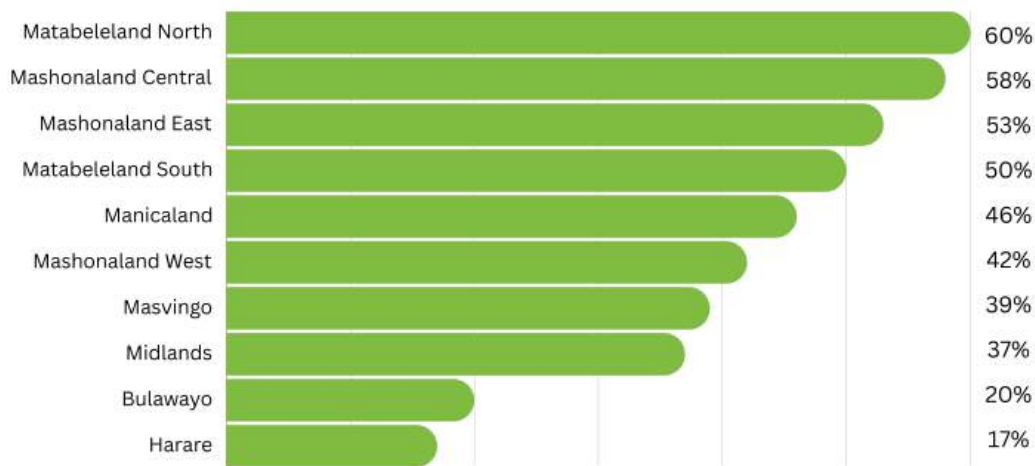
In Zimbabwe, 40% of adults do not have a bank account, and a significant portion

relies on informal or non-formal financial services. Rural areas have the highest rates of financial exclusion, attributed to low income, cultural factors, and financial illiteracy (Mhlanha, 2021; Simbanegavi & Chivasa, 2016). Harare and Bulawayo urban areas exhibit lower rates of financial exclusion due to higher income levels, better financial literacy, and greater accessibility to financial institutions (Simbanegavi & Chivasa, 2016).

In Zimbabwe, the Reserve Bank promotes mobile money interoperability to drive financial inclusion, with digitisation playing a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic (RBZ, 2022). The Reserve Bank of

Zimbabwe (RBZ) has recognised the importance of financial inclusion and implemented the National Financial Strategy (NFIS) to drive inclusion. NFIS I focused on various themes, including improving access for women, youth, and people with disabilities, enhancing Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) access, promoting digital financial services, and improving microfinance (RBZ, 2020). NFIS II is currently being developed based on evidence from surveys conducted to assess the effectiveness of NFIS I strategies and to set targets for financial inclusion (RBZ, 2022). Figure 1 below shows financial exclusion in Zimbabwe.

### Exclusion in Zimbabwe



**Figure 1: Financial exclusion by province in Zimbabwe**

Source: Simbanegavi & Chivasa, (2016) *Zimbabwe National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2016)*, Mhlanga, (2020a).

The Figure 1 above shows that financial exclusion is largely concentrated in rural areas and the current status of Zimbabwe's financial sector does not seem to be promoting financial inclusion. Provinces such as Matabeleland North (60%), Mashonaland Central (58%), and Matabeleland South (53%) exhibit the highest rates of exclusion. These areas are predominantly rural, with limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunities, which contributes to elevated exclusion levels.

Urban centres like Harare (17%) and Bulawayo (20%) report the lowest exclusion rates, likely due to improved access to resources and services commonly found in urban settings. This distribution underscores the contrast between rural and urban regions, with rural provinces experiencing greater challenges related to exclusion, influenced by factors such as geographical isolation and underdeveloped infrastructure.

Empirical evidence indicates that financially inclusive economies tend to record economic growth and a significant reduction in poverty (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Levine, 2007). However, the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region has the greatest proportion of population living in extreme poverty. It is the only region which has been recording an increase in poverty over the past two decades, with the poor getting worse-off compared to other world regions (Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, 2007; Simmons, 2015).

Access to financial services remains challenging for vulnerable groups worldwide, including low-income earners and the unemployed. These groups often face exclusion from the financial sector as institutions close branches in remote areas due to viability challenges (Mayo, Shaw, & Zhang, 1998). Kofi Annan emphasised the need to build inclusive financial sectors to uplift the poor (Agarwal, 2010, p. 2).

Despite efforts, poverty and inequality persist, prompting sustainable development initiatives prioritised by the United Nations (Arner, Barberis, & Buckley, 2020, p. 123). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines strategies toward peace, prosperity, and growth for all (United Nations, 2015, p. 15). Financial exclusion exacerbates deprivation, denying individuals appropriate access to financial services (Carbo, Gardener, & Molyneux, 2007, p. 98). In 2017, 31% of the global population lacked access to formal financial institutions, with 9% unbanked in the European Union (Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, Singer, Ansar, & Hess, 2018, p. 45).

Agufa (2016, p. 45) contends that digital finance in Kenya's banking sector lacks correlation with financial inclusion. Banks adopt digital services primarily to cut costs

and enhance profitability, not to promote inclusion. The study reveals an insignificant negative relationship between agency, mobile, and internet banking with financial inclusion. Ozili (2018, p. 78) argues that digital finance by Fintech providers fosters financial inclusion in both emerging and advanced economies, especially for individuals with irregular incomes who find convenience more valuable than the higher costs associated with traditional banking. Kandpal and Mehrotra (2019, p. 92) suggest that customer confidence in traditional banking may hinder the adoption of new technologies, emphasising the importance of privacy and security in technological advancements. Durai (2019, p. 56) highlights the positive impacts of usability, convenience, and low service charges on mobile banking, mobile wallets, and credit cards, underscoring the significance of digital finance in enhancing financial inclusion. This study aims to evaluate the influence of digital financial innovation on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe, recognising the potential of these services to reach previously marginalised populations.

The rise of digital finance and FinTech offers hope for enhancing financial inclusion. These innovations transform the traditional financial sector into a more digital-driven one (Gomber, Koch, & Siering, 2017, p. 50). With 87% of the EU population already using digital payments and 47% accessing financial services via mobile or internet, digital finance and FinTech have the potential to broaden financial access and reduce barriers (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

Digital innovations contribute to economic growth by bridging geographic distances and enhancing productivity through improved communication (Deloitte, 2007, p. 56; Chimhowu, Hulme, & Mkandawire, 2010, p. 224). Despite the potential benefits, some

studies question the correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion (Agufa, 2016). However, others emphasise its positive impact, particularly in emerging economies (Ozili, 2018). Building customer confidence in traditional banking systems remains crucial for successful technology adoption (Kandpal & Mehrotra, 2019). Meanwhile, factors like usability and convenience drive the adoption of digital finance services (Durai, 2019). This study aims to explore the impact of digital financial innovation on financial inclusion, contributing to efforts to create more inclusive financial systems.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative research design utilising econometric modelling. Quantitative methods were chosen for their ability to systematically collect, analyse, and interpret secondary time series data, which is essential for explanatory purposes in research (Creswell, 2003). The study focused on analysing time series data from 2000 to 2020, employing the fully modified ordinary least squares (FMOLS) method along with cointegration techniques to explore relationships over time.

The secondary data for the study was collected from established economic databases and statistical sources, ensuring reliability and validity in the analysis. Sampling methods were not applicable in the traditional sense since the study utilised existing datasets rather than collecting new data from a specific population or sample.

It's important to note that while the study had access to comprehensive secondary data sources, certain specific sources were unavailable, potentially impacting the comprehensiveness of the findings. This transparency is crucial for assessing the

credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions.

## Digital finance and financial inclusion model

The model assessed the impact of digital finance, specifically using automated teller machines (ATMs), as a proxy on financial inclusion. The selection of ATMs as a proxy for digital finance was based on their widespread adoption and influence in facilitating financial transactions globally. ATMs are a tangible indicator of digital financial infrastructure, enabling access to banking services in both urban and rural areas.

In addition to ATMs, the model included control variables such as gross domestic product (GDP), remittances, and broad money. These variables were chosen to capture broader economic and financial factors that could potentially influence the relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion. GDP reflects overall economic activity, remittances represent external financial flows, and broad money measures the total money supply within an economy.

While indicators like the number and value of mobile money transactions could also be valuable metrics for assessing digital finance's impact on financial inclusion, ATMs were specifically chosen due to their established role in traditional banking infrastructure and their accessibility across different regions. Future research could explore additional indicators to provide a more comprehensive analysis of digital finance's effects on financial inclusion, considering evolving technologies and consumer behaviours in financial services.



$$LFI_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 LATM_{it} + \beta_2 LGDP_{it} + \beta_3 RT_{it} + \beta_4 LBM_{sit} + \epsilon_{it}$$

- $\alpha$  – the constant term;
- $\beta$  – the coefficient of the function;
- $\epsilon_{it}$  – the disturbance or error term (assumed to have zero mean and independent across the time period);
- LFI** – Financial inclusion;
- LATM** – Automated teller machines;
- LGDP** – Gross domestic product;
- LBM** – Financial development (Broad money);
- RT** – Remittances

## Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics on financial inclusion, digital finance (ATM), GDP, remittance and broad money.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values. From the descriptive statistics it can be deduced that there is less variation between the mean and the median, standard deviation values are minimal and the Jarque- Bera statistics indicates that the data its normally distributed.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

	<b>LFI</b>	<b>LBM</b>	<b>LATM</b>	<b>LGDP</b>	<b>RT</b>
Mean	1.364709	3.336929	1.805997	4.775232	5.533615
Median	2.890429	3.166506	1.856298	4.540463	5.443556
Maximum	3.291918	5.020909	2.071913	8.785335	13.61145
Minimum	-1.930708	2.658987	1.413423	4.043258	0.004048
Std. Dev	2.115544	0.542536	0.202844	0.1101993	5.263840
Skewedness	-0.530329	1.628070	-0.520035	2.759088	0.108320
Kurtosis	1.460668	5.619260	1.908950	9.980748	1.349117
Jaque-Bera	3.057719	15.28010	1.988117	69.28346	2.425804
Probability	0.216783	0.000481	0.370072	0.000000	0.297333
Sum	28.65888	70.07552	37.92594	100.2799	116.2059
Sum Sq. Dev	89.51052	5.886910	0.822912	24.28775	554.1602
Observations	21	21	21	21	21

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## Diagnostic test

Before conducting the main regression, the researcher did some diagnostic tests and these include: Unit Root Test (Augmented Dickey Fuller), Co-integration test, Autocorrelation Test and Multicollinearity test.

## Normality test

Figure 2 below shows the normal distributions for the residuals. The Jarque-Bera probability value of 0.182910 is greater than 0.05, therefore we may fail to reject the null hypothesis that errors are normally distributed. This therefore means the errors are normally distributed with a mean zero and a constant variance.

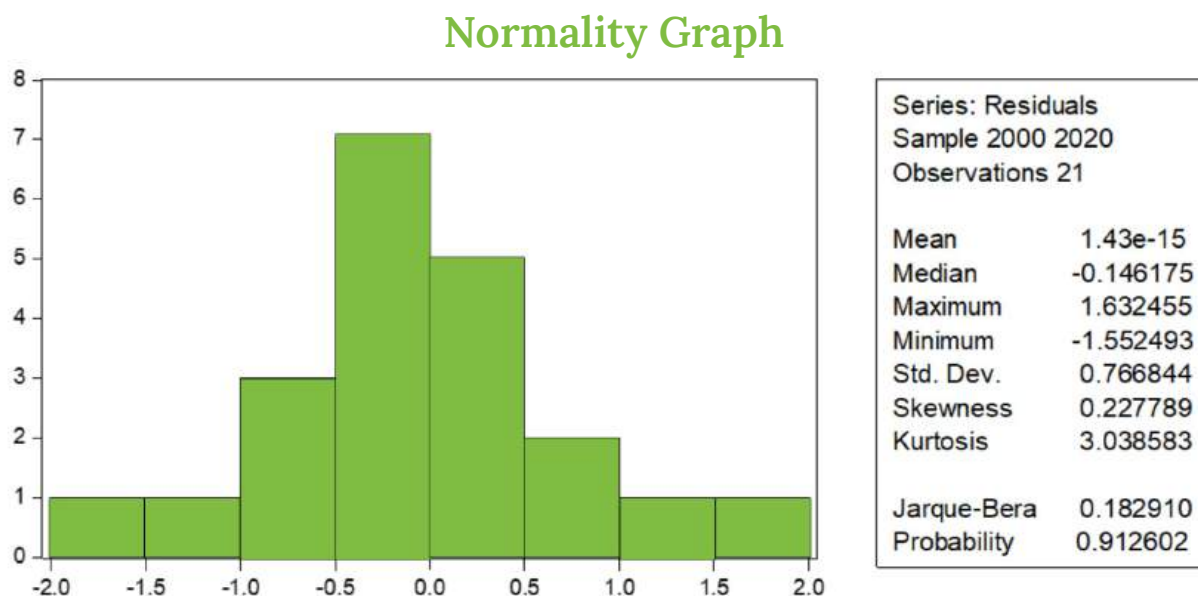


Figure 2: Normality graph

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## Unit root test

This study utilised the Augmented Dickey Fuller test to assess variable stationarity. Gujarati (2004) indicates rejection of the unit root null hypothesis when the ADF statistic exceeds the critical value at different significance levels.

From the Table 2 below, the results suggest that all the variables are not stationary at level. LBM, LATM and RT are stationary at first difference at intercept. However, all the variables are stationary at second difference at both intercept and at intercept and trend.

**Table 2: Unit root test**

Variable	Level		First Difference		Second Difference	
	Intercept	Intercept and Trend	Intercept	Intercept and Trend	Intercept	Intercept and Trend
LFI	0.3851	0.6684	0.4480	0.5965	0.0081	0.00334
LATM	0.0800	0.2823	0.0446	0.1364	0.0004	0.0025
LBM	0.2300	0.4056	0.0032	0.0154	0.0015	0.0096
LGDP	1.0	0.3706	0.4761	0.9972	0.0832	0.0985
RT	0.5242	0.8032	0.0040	0.0177	0.0000	0.0001

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

**Table 3: Unit root test**

Variable	ADF Statistics	Test Critical Value	P-Value	Order of Integration
LFI	-3.963301***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0081	I(2)
LATM	-5.505888***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0004	I(2)
LBM	-4.841801***	1% -3.886751 5% -3.052169 10% -2.666593	0.0015	I(2)
LGDP	-2.764356*	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0832	I(1)
RT	-7.483253***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0000	I(1)
RESID	-5.5666101***	1% -4.004425 5% -3.098896 10% -2.690439	0.0007	I(1)

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

The results from the table 3 above show that all the variables are stationary at second difference with order of integration I(2) at all significant levels that is 1%, 5%

and 10% respectively as indicated by the three asterisks except LGDP which is stationary at first difference at 10% significance level.

## Co-integration results

The co-integration test was done in order to circumvent the problem of spurious results. This was done by conducting a unit root test for residuals generated. The results for model one revealed that residuals are stationary after second differencing which signifies that there is a long run relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion since the ADF statistic 5.5666101 is greater than the critical value at all levels of significance: 1%, 5% and 10% (see table 3).

## Autocorrelation

The Durbin-Watson (DW) statistic was utilised by this study to determine whether the model is safe from a first order serial correlation. In OLS if it is present this will overestimate R squared and simultaneously makes t and F tests invalid hence likely to lead to spurious results. This is the case when R squared is significantly greater than DW. The null hypothesis is stated as: there is no autocorrelation against the alternative of autocorrelation among residuals. The LM test results show a DW value of 1.914167 which falls within the rejection region of the null hypothesis.

The above mentioned DW statistics results is greater than 1.5 as a rule of thumb, and also the p- values are significantly large and greater than 0.05 showing the evidence of no serial autocorrelation among the residuals and hence we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

## Multi-collinearity

This is the presence of a linear relationship among the explanatory variables. As a result of the stochastic nature of most explanatory variables correlation and interrelationships might exist. It has the effect of making equation indeterminate. When multi-collinearity is there the remedy is to drop the variable. Table 4 below shows the zero-order correlation co-efficient of explanatory variable.

Table 4 shows that the pair-wise correlation co-efficient for all the independent variables is less than 0.8, as a rule of thumb, with the exception of RT and LFI. It can therefore be concluded that multi-collinearity is not severe since it is less than 0.8. Therefore, the explanatory variables do not exhibit serious correlation or relationships amongst them. This means that there is no linear relationship among the explanatory variables and it is easy to establish the influence of each one variable on the dependent variable.

**Table 4: Correlation matrix (explanatory variables)**

	LFI	LBM	LATM	LGDP	RT
LFI	1.000000	-0.448822	0.161322	0.465551	0.863241
LBM	-0.448822	1.000000	0.380701	-0.312840	-0.550762
LATM	0.161322	0.380701	1.000000	0.092864	-0.112803
LGDP	0.465551	-0.312840	0.092864	1.000000	0.239739
RT	0.863241	-0.550762	-0.112803	0.239739	1.000000

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

The strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables was measured by performing a correlation matrix. The correlation test shows a positive relationship of 0.161322 between financial inclusion (LFI) and digital finance (LATM). GDP positively correlated to financial inclusion with 0.465551. Broad money (LBM) is negatively correlated with financial inclusion with a coefficient of 0.448822 and finally remittances (RT) is positively correlated with financial inclusion with a coefficient of 0.863241.

To this end, the researcher adopted the do-nothing school of thought as expressed by Blanchard (1967) in Gujarati (2004). This means that there is no linear relationship among the explanatory variables and it is easy to establish the influence of each one variable on the dependent variable, financial inclusion separately. The strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables was measured by performing a correlation matrix.

### Heteroskedasticity

The Bruesch-Pagan Godfrey Test probability value of 0.2993 is greater than the significance level of 0.05. This therefore implies that the errors are homoscedastic and that we may fail to reject the null hypothesis that the errors are homoscedastic.

## REGRESSION RESULTS

The researcher regressed time series data as per the model specified. The regression results are presented in table 5.

Significance and fitness of the whole model is revealed by the F-statistic and the explanatory power predictability capacity of the independent variables shown by R squared (the coefficient of determination). The table 5 above shows model one regression results, the R-squared is 0.838641 thereby showing that about 84% of variations in financial inclusion are explained by the combined variations in the explanatory variables. However, the R-squared statistic cannot really exhibit a true explanation that variations in financial inclusion are explained by combined variations in explanatory variables mainly because when we increase the number of explanatory variables R-squared value will continue to go up even if we add unrelated explanatory variables hence there is need to consider the adjusted R-squared. The adjusted R-squared is at 0.795613 thereby showing that indeed about 80% of variations in financial inclusion are explained by combined variations in the explanatory variables used in this study and the remaining 20% can be credited to other stochastic factors. Since the adjusted R-squared is close to R-squared, we may conclude that the model is a good fit since more than half of the variations in the dependent variable are explained within the model.

It can be deduced from the regression results that LATM, LGDP and RT are significant. LATM a proxy for digital finance exhibits (with a coefficient of 3.116906) a positive strong significant relationship with financial inclusion. This means that a unit increase in digital finance will result to 3.116906 increase in financial inclusion. Meanwhile, a unit increase in gross domestic product proxied by LGDP will result in 0.464005 increase in financial inclusion (LFI). Furthermore, remittances (RT) show a positive relationship with financial inclusion (LFI) and thus a unit increase in remittances will result in 0.369439 increase in financial inclusion.

On the other hand, broad money (LBM) a proxy for financial development depicted a positive relationship with financial inclusion and it's highly insignificant and thus a unit increase in financial development (broad money) will result in 0.039869 insignificant increase in financial inclusion. The significance of variables is measured by the t-statistic values and the P values. A variable is said to be significant if its absolute t-statistic is greater than two or a neighbour of 2 and/or if its p-value is less than 0.05. From the results

three variables are significant in explaining variation in financial inclusion in Zimbabwe for the period 2000 to 2020, that is, digital finance (LATM), GDP and remittances. Digital finance (LATM), gross domestic product (LGDP) and remittance (RT) have t-statistics greater than 2 and p-values less than 0.05 respectively. The focus of the study is on the coefficient of the proxy of digital finance (LATM) which reflects a positive and significant relationship with financial inclusion.

**Table 5: Regression results - fully modified least squares**

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	T-Statistic	Probability	
LBM	0.039869	0.319012	0.124978	0.9022	
LATM	3.116906	0.793673	3.927193	0.0013	*
LGDP	0.464005	0.125435	3.699161	0.0021	*
RT	0.369439	0.030092	12.27715	0.0000	*
C	-8.672733	1.613921	-5.373704	0.0001	
<b>Significant</b>	1%*	5% **	10%***		
<b>R-Squared</b>	0.838641	<b>Mean Dependent Var</b>		1.529479	
<b>Adjusted R-Squared</b>	0.795613	<b>S.D. Dependent Var</b>		2.027544	
<b>S.E of Regression</b>	0.916637	<b>Sum Squared Resid</b>		12.60335	
<b>Long Run Variance</b>	-0.323410				

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## DISCUSSION

The study utilised the Cointegration technique to analyse the relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2020. The findings indicate a positive association between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion. Specifically, a unit increase in digital financial innovation corresponds to approximately a 3.116906 unit increase in financial inclusion. This aligns with expectations and is supported by similar research. Borges (2020) examined the impact of digital financial services on financial inclusion in Mozambique, finding a positive relationship using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model. The study differentiated between traditional and innovative digital payment methods, concluding that innovative methods contribute significantly to financial inclusion.

Ozili (2018) corroborates these findings, suggesting that digital finance, particularly through fintech providers, enhances financial inclusion and stability in both emerging and advanced economies. This is attributed to the convenience digital finance offers, especially to individuals with low and variable incomes. Similarly, Widarwati, Solihin, and Nurmalasari (2022) found a positive impact of digital finance, measured by Average Digital Finance (ADF), on financial inclusion in Indonesia. They emphasise the necessity of digital finance breakthroughs to optimise financial assistance and improve inclusion, highlighting the role of technological support.

Andrianaivo and Kpodar (2012) established a significant positive relationship between mobile phone penetration and financial inclusion, emphasising the role of mobile technology in providing cost-effective financial services to the underserved.

Domeher et al. (2022) further support this, identifying a positive nexus between financial innovation and inclusion. Additional studies by Durai and Stella (2019), Han and Du (2021), and Mutua (2018) also confirm the positive relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion. However, some dissenting voices, like Agufa (2016), argue that digital financial innovations primarily aim to reduce operational costs and improve profitability, rather than foster inclusion.

Generally, the collective body of research suggests a strong positive correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion. While dissenting opinions exist, the majority of studies support the notion that digital financial innovation plays a pivotal role in enhancing access to and usage of financial services, ultimately leading to greater financial inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Given the findings of this research, the following conclusions can be drawn:

### **The relationship between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion**

The study reveals a strong positive correlation between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. Digital finance adoption has risen due to its perceived usefulness and ease of use. Stakeholders, especially banks and the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), should invest in robust digital finance infrastructure. Supporting digital financial innovation is crucial as it drives financial inclusion. Access to digital finance products like mobile banking, internet banking, agency banking, mobile money, and ATMs has enhanced financial inclusion. Thus, fostering the growth

and accessibility of these services is key to promoting greater financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

### Usage of digital finance and financial inclusion

The study shows a significant positive correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. Increased use of mobile banking, internet banking, and agency banking enhances financial inclusion. These digital products are cheaper, reliable, and convenient, supporting financial intermediation theory. Stakeholders should invest in digital financial literacy to promote inclusion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research proposes several recommendations to enhance financial inclusion in Zimbabwe:

**Increase Security Measures:** Establish robust cybersecurity mechanisms to safeguard digital financial services against fraud. Government intervention, through the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe or related ministries, should ensure investment in cybersecurity infrastructure to protect digital innovations.

**Introduce Access to Loans via Digital Platforms:** Enable loan access through digital platforms like mobile banking for financially excluded individuals. Collaborations between mobile network operators and financial institutions can facilitate soft loans via mobile banking.

**Group Schemes Integration:** Design digital platforms to accommodate group schemes, encouraging savings and digital banking usage among communities, particularly low-income earners, rural populations, and marginalised groups.

**Address Barriers to Financial Inclusion:** Banks and regulators should tackle barriers such as financial illiteracy. Empowering individuals with financial knowledge and skills can significantly improve financial inclusion.

**Promote Technological Innovation:** Embrace technological innovation, such as branchless banking and mobile banking, to reach the unbanked population. The government should support this with a conducive legal framework.

**Promote Infrastructure Development:** Invest in infrastructure development in rural and marginalised areas to improve accessibility for financial services. Government support and incentives for private sector investment in ICT infrastructure are crucial.

**Promote Increased Cooperation among Banks:** Encourage collaboration and infrastructure sharing among banks to spread the cost of technology for financial inclusion initiatives. Establishing entities for pooled resources, such as Special Purpose Vehicles, can facilitate shared infrastructure usage.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.QRTY5NM3>

# Impact of digital finance on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

This study looks at how digital finance affects financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. There has been a noticeable change in Zimbabwe's financial services sector with the introduction of digital technology, especially mobile money and digital banking services. The present study investigates the ways in which digital finance initiatives have facilitated the expansion of financial services accessibility, the advancement of financial literacy, and the promotion of economic empowerment among marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. This study offers insights into the potential obstacles related to digital finance in achieving financial inclusion objectives in Zimbabwe through an extensive analysis of current research and empirical data.

**Key words:** Digital finance, financial inclusion, mobile money, digital banking, Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

Access to financial services is vital for poverty reduction and economic growth. Financial inclusion entails ensuring individuals and businesses have access to affordable financial products and services, including transactions, savings, credit, and insurance, delivered sustainably (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2022). It

“ is defined as maximising access to and use of formal financial services while minimising barriers perceived by those outside the formal financial system (Cámara, Tuesta, & Vadillo, 2014, p. 1).

Financial inclusion fosters economic growth (Kim, Lee, & Newby, 2017) and resource mobilisation by promoting savings (Allen, Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, & Peria, 2012). However, globally, 65% of adults in developing nations lack access even to basic transaction accounts, let alone other services like savings, insurance, and credit (World Bank, 2020).

Digital financial services, driven by fintech, have the potential to lower costs, enhance transaction speed, security, and transparency, and offer tailored financial services, particularly benefiting the poor. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of fintech in maintaining financial systems and ensuring safety during times of social distancing and economic uncertainty (World Bank, 2020). Despite the rapid growth in mobile phone and internet usage globally, over 2 billion people still lack internet access, and a third of the global population doesn't own a mobile phone (Hernandez, 2019).

However, there's a concern that a shift towards digital banking could exacerbate financial exclusion, particularly among low-income and technologically disadvantaged individuals (Ozili, 2017). The way digital

finance is introduced in a country, voluntarily or forcibly, can also lead to voluntary financial exclusion if the population is not prepared for it. Hence, this study aims to explore the impact of digital finance on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

Financial inclusion has garnered significant attention since the early 2000s, with countries prioritising providing financial services to the previously unbanked population (Hanning & Jansen, 2008). The United Nations declared 2005 the International Year of Microcredit, highlighting the importance of financial inclusion (Siddik, Kabir, & Marathe, 2014). Over the past decade, there has been a global policy shift towards promoting greater access to finance, with key development institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), African Development Bank (AfDB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) dedicating substantial resources to understanding and promoting financial inclusion. Financial inclusion benefits include freedom from informal lenders, promoting economic growth and formalisation, poverty reduction, and financial stability (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe [RBZ], 2022).

In 2017, nearly 1.7 billion adults worldwide (31% of the adult population) lacked access to financial institutions or mobile money providers. The majority of the unbanked were women and came from the poorest households (World Bank, 2022). In high-income OECD countries, only 6% of adults lack access to financial services, whereas in developing countries, about 80% of adults are financially excluded, with Sub-Saharan Africa having particularly high exclusion rates (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2015).

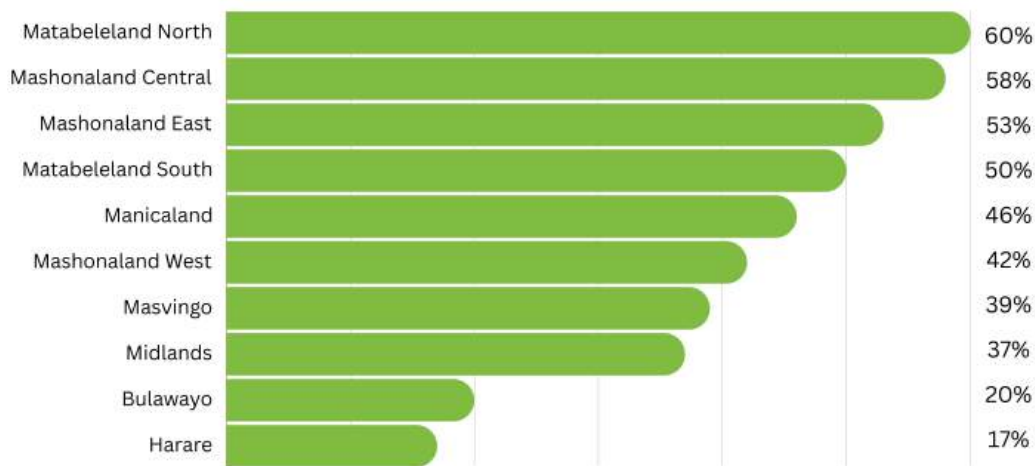
In Zimbabwe, 40% of adults do not have a bank account, and a significant portion

relies on informal or non-formal financial services. Rural areas have the highest rates of financial exclusion, attributed to low income, cultural factors, and financial illiteracy (Mhlanha, 2021; Simbanegavi & Chivasa, 2016). Harare and Bulawayo urban areas exhibit lower rates of financial exclusion due to higher income levels, better financial literacy, and greater accessibility to financial institutions (Simbanegavi & Chivasa, 2016).

In Zimbabwe, the Reserve Bank promotes mobile money interoperability to drive financial inclusion, with digitisation playing a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic (RBZ, 2022). The Reserve Bank of

Zimbabwe (RBZ) has recognised the importance of financial inclusion and implemented the National Financial Strategy (NFIS) to drive inclusion. NFIS I focused on various themes, including improving access for women, youth, and people with disabilities, enhancing Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) access, promoting digital financial services, and improving microfinance (RBZ, 2020). NFIS II is currently being developed based on evidence from surveys conducted to assess the effectiveness of NFIS I strategies and to set targets for financial inclusion (RBZ, 2022). Figure 1 below shows financial exclusion in Zimbabwe.

### Exclusion in Zimbabwe



**Figure 1: Financial exclusion by province in Zimbabwe**

Source: Simbanegavi & Chivasa, (2016) *Zimbabwe National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2016)*, Mhlanga, (2020a).

The Figure 1 above shows that financial exclusion is largely concentrated in rural areas and the current status of Zimbabwe's financial sector does not seem to be promoting financial inclusion. Provinces such as Matabeleland North (60%), Mashonaland Central (58%), and Matabeleland South (53%) exhibit the highest rates of exclusion. These areas are predominantly rural, with limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunities, which contributes to elevated exclusion levels.

Urban centres like Harare (17%) and Bulawayo (20%) report the lowest exclusion rates, likely due to improved access to resources and services commonly found in urban settings. This distribution underscores the contrast between rural and urban regions, with rural provinces experiencing greater challenges related to exclusion, influenced by factors such as geographical isolation and underdeveloped infrastructure.

Empirical evidence indicates that financially inclusive economies tend to record economic growth and a significant reduction in poverty (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Levine, 2007). However, the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region has the greatest proportion of population living in extreme poverty. It is the only region which has been recording an increase in poverty over the past two decades, with the poor getting worse-off compared to other world regions (Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, 2007; Simmons, 2015).

Access to financial services remains challenging for vulnerable groups worldwide, including low-income earners and the unemployed. These groups often face exclusion from the financial sector as institutions close branches in remote areas due to viability challenges (Mayo, Shaw, & Zhang, 1998). Kofi Annan emphasised the need to build inclusive financial sectors to uplift the poor (Agarwal, 2010, p. 2).

Despite efforts, poverty and inequality persist, prompting sustainable development initiatives prioritised by the United Nations (Arner, Barberis, & Buckley, 2020, p. 123). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines strategies toward peace, prosperity, and growth for all (United Nations, 2015, p. 15). Financial exclusion exacerbates deprivation, denying individuals appropriate access to financial services (Carbo, Gardener, & Molyneux, 2007, p. 98). In 2017, 31% of the global population lacked access to formal financial institutions, with 9% unbanked in the European Union (Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, Singer, Ansar, & Hess, 2018, p. 45).

Agufa (2016, p. 45) contends that digital finance in Kenya's banking sector lacks correlation with financial inclusion. Banks adopt digital services primarily to cut costs

and enhance profitability, not to promote inclusion. The study reveals an insignificant negative relationship between agency, mobile, and internet banking with financial inclusion. Ozili (2018, p. 78) argues that digital finance by Fintech providers fosters financial inclusion in both emerging and advanced economies, especially for individuals with irregular incomes who find convenience more valuable than the higher costs associated with traditional banking. Kandpal and Mehrotra (2019, p. 92) suggest that customer confidence in traditional banking may hinder the adoption of new technologies, emphasising the importance of privacy and security in technological advancements. Durai (2019, p. 56) highlights the positive impacts of usability, convenience, and low service charges on mobile banking, mobile wallets, and credit cards, underscoring the significance of digital finance in enhancing financial inclusion. This study aims to evaluate the influence of digital financial innovation on financial inclusion in Zimbabwe, recognising the potential of these services to reach previously marginalised populations.

The rise of digital finance and FinTech offers hope for enhancing financial inclusion. These innovations transform the traditional financial sector into a more digital-driven one (Gomber, Koch, & Siering, 2017, p. 50). With 87% of the EU population already using digital payments and 47% accessing financial services via mobile or internet, digital finance and FinTech have the potential to broaden financial access and reduce barriers (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

Digital innovations contribute to economic growth by bridging geographic distances and enhancing productivity through improved communication (Deloitte, 2007, p. 56; Chimhowu, Hulme, & Mkandawire, 2010, p. 224). Despite the potential benefits, some

studies question the correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion (Agufa, 2016). However, others emphasise its positive impact, particularly in emerging economies (Ozili, 2018). Building customer confidence in traditional banking systems remains crucial for successful technology adoption (Kandpal & Mehrotra, 2019). Meanwhile, factors like usability and convenience drive the adoption of digital finance services (Durai, 2019). This study aims to explore the impact of digital financial innovation on financial inclusion, contributing to efforts to create more inclusive financial systems.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative research design utilising econometric modelling. Quantitative methods were chosen for their ability to systematically collect, analyse, and interpret secondary time series data, which is essential for explanatory purposes in research (Creswell, 2003). The study focused on analysing time series data from 2000 to 2020, employing the fully modified ordinary least squares (FMOLS) method along with cointegration techniques to explore relationships over time.

The secondary data for the study was collected from established economic databases and statistical sources, ensuring reliability and validity in the analysis. Sampling methods were not applicable in the traditional sense since the study utilised existing datasets rather than collecting new data from a specific population or sample.

It's important to note that while the study had access to comprehensive secondary data sources, certain specific sources were unavailable, potentially impacting the comprehensiveness of the findings. This transparency is crucial for assessing the

credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions.

## Digital finance and financial inclusion model

The model assessed the impact of digital finance, specifically using automated teller machines (ATMs), as a proxy on financial inclusion. The selection of ATMs as a proxy for digital finance was based on their widespread adoption and influence in facilitating financial transactions globally. ATMs are a tangible indicator of digital financial infrastructure, enabling access to banking services in both urban and rural areas.

In addition to ATMs, the model included control variables such as gross domestic product (GDP), remittances, and broad money. These variables were chosen to capture broader economic and financial factors that could potentially influence the relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion. GDP reflects overall economic activity, remittances represent external financial flows, and broad money measures the total money supply within an economy.

While indicators like the number and value of mobile money transactions could also be valuable metrics for assessing digital finance's impact on financial inclusion, ATMs were specifically chosen due to their established role in traditional banking infrastructure and their accessibility across different regions. Future research could explore additional indicators to provide a more comprehensive analysis of digital finance's effects on financial inclusion, considering evolving technologies and consumer behaviours in financial services.

$$LFI_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 LATM_{it} + \beta_2 LGDP_{it} + \beta_3 RT_{it} + \beta_4 LBM_{sit} + \epsilon_{it}$$

- $\alpha$  – the constant term;
- $\beta$  – the coefficient of the function;
- $\epsilon_{it}$  – the disturbance or error term (assumed to have zero mean and independent across the time period);
- LFI** – Financial inclusion;
- LATM** – Automated teller machines;
- LGDP** – Gross domestic product;
- LBM** – Financial development (Broad money);
- RT** – Remittances

## Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics on financial inclusion, digital finance (ATM), GDP, remittance and broad money.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values. From the descriptive statistics it can be deduced that there is less variation between the mean and the median, standard deviation values are minimal and the Jarque- Bera statistics indicates that the data its normally distributed.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

	<b>LFI</b>	<b>LBM</b>	<b>LATM</b>	<b>LGDP</b>	<b>RT</b>
Mean	1.364709	3.336929	1.805997	4.775232	5.533615
Median	2.890429	3.166506	1.856298	4.540463	5.443556
Maximum	3.291918	5.020909	2.071913	8.785335	13.61145
Minimum	-1.930708	2.658987	1.413423	4.043258	0.004048
Std. Dev	2.115544	0.542536	0.202844	0.1101993	5.263840
Skewedness	-0.530329	1.628070	-0.520035	2.759088	0.108320
Kurtosis	1.460668	5.619260	1.908950	9.980748	1.349117
Jaque-Bera	3.057719	15.28010	1.988117	69.28346	2.425804
Probability	0.216783	0.000481	0.370072	0.000000	0.297333
Sum	28.65888	70.07552	37.92594	100.2799	116.2059
Sum Sq. Dev	89.51052	5.886910	0.822912	24.28775	554.1602
Observations	21	21	21	21	21

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12



## Diagnostic test

Before conducting the main regression, the researcher did some diagnostic tests and these include: Unit Root Test (Augmented Dickey Fuller), Co-integration test, Autocorrelation Test and Multicollinearity test.

## Normality test

Figure 2 below shows the normal distributions for the residuals. The Jarque-Bera probability value of 0.182910 is greater than 0.05, therefore we may fail to reject the null hypothesis that errors are normally distributed. This therefore means the errors are normally distributed with a mean zero and a constant variance.

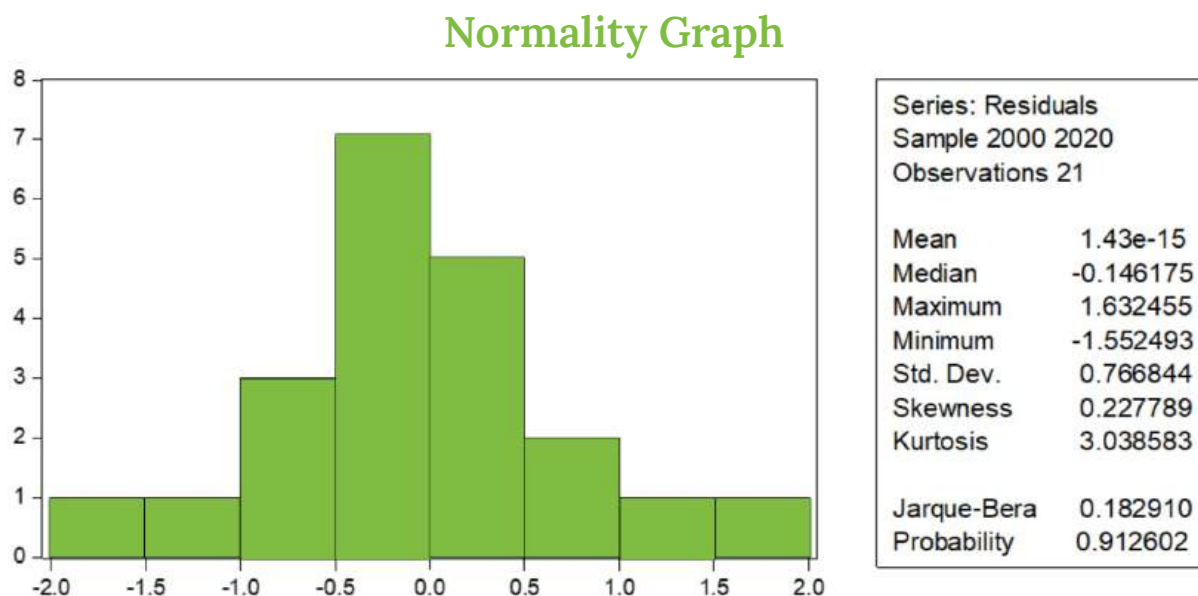


Figure 2: Normality graph

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## Unit root test

This study utilised the Augmented Dickey Fuller test to assess variable stationarity. Gujarati (2004) indicates rejection of the unit root null hypothesis when the ADF statistic exceeds the critical value at different significance levels.

From the Table 2 below, the results suggest that all the variables are not stationary at level. LBM, LATM and RT are stationary at first difference at intercept. However, all the variables are stationary at second difference at both intercept and at intercept and trend.

**Table 2: Unit root test**

Variable	Level		First Difference		Second Difference	
	Intercept	Intercept and Trend	Intercept	Intercept and Trend	Intercept	Intercept and Trend
LFI	0.3851	0.6684	0.4480	0.5965	0.0081	0.00334
LATM	0.0800	0.2823	0.0446	0.1364	0.0004	0.0025
LBM	0.2300	0.4056	0.0032	0.0154	0.0015	0.0096
LGDP	1.0	0.3706	0.4761	0.9972	0.0832	0.0985
RT	0.5242	0.8032	0.0040	0.0177	0.0000	0.0001

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

**Table 3: Unit root test**

Variable	ADF Statistics	Test Critical Value	P-Value	Order of Integration
LFI	-3.963301***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0081	I(2)
LATM	-5.505888***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0004	I(2)
LBM	-4.841801***	1% -3.886751 5% -3.052169 10% -2.666593	0.0015	I(2)
LGDP	-2.764356*	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0832	I(1)
RT	-7.483253***	1% -3.857386 5% -3.040391 10% -2.660551	0.0000	I(1)
RESID	-5.5666101***	1% -4.004425 5% -3.098896 10% -2.690439	0.0007	I(1)

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

The results from the table 3 above show that all the variables are stationary at second difference with order of integration I(2) at all significant levels that is 1%, 5%

and 10% respectively as indicated by the three asterisks except LGDP which is stationary at first difference at 10% significance level.

## Co-integration results

The co-integration test was done in order to circumvent the problem of spurious results. This was done by conducting a unit root test for residuals generated. The results for model one revealed that residuals are stationary after second differencing which signifies that there is a long run relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion since the ADF statistic 5.5666101 is greater than the critical value at all levels of significance: 1%, 5% and 10% (see table 3).

## Autocorrelation

The Durbin-Watson (DW) statistic was utilised by this study to determine whether the model is safe from a first order serial correlation. In OLS if it is present this will overestimate R squared and simultaneously makes t and F tests invalid hence likely to lead to spurious results. This is the case when R squared is significantly greater than DW. The null hypothesis is stated as: there is no autocorrelation against the alternative of autocorrelation among residuals. The LM test results show a DW value of 1.914167 which falls within the rejection region of the null hypothesis.

The above mentioned DW statistics results is greater than 1.5 as a rule of thumb, and also the p- values are significantly large and greater than 0.05 showing the evidence of no serial autocorrelation among the residuals and hence we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

## Multi-collinearity

This is the presence of a linear relationship among the explanatory variables. As a result of the stochastic nature of most explanatory variables correlation and interrelationships might exist. It has the effect of making equation indeterminate. When multi-collinearity is there the remedy is to drop the variable. Table 4 below shows the zero-order correlation co-efficient of explanatory variable.

Table 4 shows that the pair-wise correlation co-efficient for all the independent variables is less than 0.8, as a rule of thumb, with the exception of RT and LFI. It can therefore be concluded that multi-collinearity is not severe since it is less than 0.8. Therefore, the explanatory variables do not exhibit serious correlation or relationships amongst them. This means that there is no linear relationship among the explanatory variables and it is easy to establish the influence of each one variable on the dependent variable.

**Table 4: Correlation matrix (explanatory variables)**

	LFI	LBM	LATM	LGDP	RT
LFI	1.000000	-0.448822	0.161322	0.465551	0.863241
LBM	-0.448822	1.000000	0.380701	-0.312840	-0.550762
LATM	0.161322	0.380701	1.000000	0.092864	-0.112803
LGDP	0.465551	-0.312840	0.092864	1.000000	0.239739
RT	0.863241	-0.550762	-0.112803	0.239739	1.000000

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

The strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables was measured by performing a correlation matrix. The correlation test shows a positive relationship of 0.161322 between financial inclusion (LFI) and digital finance (LATM). GDP positively correlated to financial inclusion with 0.465551. Broad money (LBM) is negatively correlated with financial inclusion with a coefficient of 0.448822 and finally remittances (RT) is positively correlated with financial inclusion with a coefficient of 0.863241.

To this end, the researcher adopted the do-nothing school of thought as expressed by Blanchard (1967) in Gujarati (2004). This means that there is no linear relationship among the explanatory variables and it is easy to establish the influence of each one variable on the dependent variable, financial inclusion separately. The strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables was measured by performing a correlation matrix.

### Heteroskedasticity

The Bruesch-Pagan Godfrey Test probability value of 0.2993 is greater than the significance level of 0.05. This therefore implies that the errors are homoscedastic and that we may fail to reject the null hypothesis that the errors are homoscedastic.

## REGRESSION RESULTS

The researcher regressed time series data as per the model specified. The regression results are presented in table 5.

Significance and fitness of the whole model is revealed by the F-statistic and the explanatory power predictability capacity of the independent variables shown by R squared (the coefficient of determination). The table 5 above shows model one regression results, the R-squared is 0.838641 thereby showing that about 84% of variations in financial inclusion are explained by the combined variations in the explanatory variables. However, the R-squared statistic cannot really exhibit a true explanation that variations in financial inclusion are explained by combined variations in explanatory variables mainly because when we increase the number of explanatory variables R-squared value will continue to go up even if we add unrelated explanatory variables hence there is need to consider the adjusted R-squared. The adjusted R-squared is at 0.795613 thereby showing that indeed about 80% of variations in financial inclusion are explained by combined variations in the explanatory variables used in this study and the remaining 20% can be credited to other stochastic factors. Since the adjusted R-squared is close to R-squared, we may conclude that the model is a good fit since more than half of the variations in the dependent variable are explained within the model.

It can be deduced from the regression results that LATM, LGDP and RT are significant. LATM a proxy for digital finance exhibits (with a coefficient of 3.116906) a positive strong significant relationship with financial inclusion. This means that a unit increase in digital finance will result to 3.116906 increase in financial inclusion. Meanwhile, a unit increase in gross domestic product proxied by LGDP will result in 0.464005 increase in financial inclusion (LFI). Furthermore, remittances (RT) show a positive relationship with financial inclusion (LFI) and thus a unit increase in remittances will result in 0.369439 increase in financial inclusion.

On the other hand, broad money (LBM) a proxy for financial development depicted a positive relationship with financial inclusion and it's highly insignificant and thus a unit increase in financial development (broad money) will result in 0.039869 insignificant increase in financial inclusion. The significance of variables is measured by the t-statistic values and the P values. A variable is said to be significant if its absolute t-statistic is greater than two or a neighbour of 2 and/or if its p-value is less than 0.05. From the results

three variables are significant in explaining variation in financial inclusion in Zimbabwe for the period 2000 to 2020, that is, digital finance (LATM), GDP and remittances. Digital finance (LATM), gross domestic product (LGDP) and remittance (RT) have t-statistics greater than 2 and p-values less than 0.05 respectively. The focus of the study is on the coefficient of the proxy of digital finance (LATM) which reflects a positive and significant relationship with financial inclusion.

**Table 5: Regression results - fully modified least squares**

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	T-Statistic	Probability	
LBM	0.039869	0.319012	0.124978	0.9022	
LATM	3.116906	0.793673	3.927193	0.0013	*
LGDP	0.464005	0.125435	3.699161	0.0021	*
RT	0.369439	0.030092	12.27715	0.0000	*
C	-8.672733	1.613921	-5.373704	0.0001	
<b>Significant</b>	1%*	5% **	10%***		
<b>R-Squared</b>	0.838641	<b>Mean Dependent Var</b>		1.529479	
<b>Adjusted R-Squared</b>	0.795613	<b>S.D. Dependent Var</b>		2.027544	
<b>S.E of Regression</b>	0.916637	<b>Sum Squared Resid</b>		12.60335	
<b>Long Run Variance</b>	-0.323410				

Source: Author's computations from Eviews version 12

## DISCUSSION

The study utilised the Cointegration technique to analyse the relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2020. The findings indicate a positive association between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion. Specifically, a unit increase in digital financial innovation corresponds to approximately a 3.116906 unit increase in financial inclusion. This aligns with expectations and is supported by similar research. Borges (2020) examined the impact of digital financial services on financial inclusion in Mozambique, finding a positive relationship using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model. The study differentiated between traditional and innovative digital payment methods, concluding that innovative methods contribute significantly to financial inclusion.

Ozili (2018) corroborates these findings, suggesting that digital finance, particularly through fintech providers, enhances financial inclusion and stability in both emerging and advanced economies. This is attributed to the convenience digital finance offers, especially to individuals with low and variable incomes. Similarly, Widarwati, Solihin, and Nurmalasari (2022) found a positive impact of digital finance, measured by Average Digital Finance (ADF), on financial inclusion in Indonesia. They emphasise the necessity of digital finance breakthroughs to optimise financial assistance and improve inclusion, highlighting the role of technological support.

Andrianaivo and Kpodar (2012) established a significant positive relationship between mobile phone penetration and financial inclusion, emphasising the role of mobile technology in providing cost-effective financial services to the underserved.

Domeher et al. (2022) further support this, identifying a positive nexus between financial innovation and inclusion. Additional studies by Durai and Stella (2019), Han and Du (2021), and Mutua (2018) also confirm the positive relationship between digital finance and financial inclusion. However, some dissenting voices, like Agufa (2016), argue that digital financial innovations primarily aim to reduce operational costs and improve profitability, rather than foster inclusion.

Generally, the collective body of research suggests a strong positive correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion. While dissenting opinions exist, the majority of studies support the notion that digital financial innovation plays a pivotal role in enhancing access to and usage of financial services, ultimately leading to greater financial inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Given the findings of this research, the following conclusions can be drawn:

### **The relationship between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion**

The study reveals a strong positive correlation between digital financial innovation and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. Digital finance adoption has risen due to its perceived usefulness and ease of use. Stakeholders, especially banks and the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), should invest in robust digital finance infrastructure. Supporting digital financial innovation is crucial as it drives financial inclusion. Access to digital finance products like mobile banking, internet banking, agency banking, mobile money, and ATMs has enhanced financial inclusion. Thus, fostering the growth

and accessibility of these services is key to promoting greater financial inclusion in Zimbabwe.

### Usage of digital finance and financial inclusion

The study shows a significant positive correlation between digital finance and financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. Increased use of mobile banking, internet banking, and agency banking enhances financial inclusion. These digital products are cheaper, reliable, and convenient, supporting financial intermediation theory. Stakeholders should invest in digital financial literacy to promote inclusion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research proposes several recommendations to enhance financial inclusion in Zimbabwe:

**Increase Security Measures:** Establish robust cybersecurity mechanisms to safeguard digital financial services against fraud. Government intervention, through the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe or related ministries, should ensure investment in cybersecurity infrastructure to protect digital innovations.

**Introduce Access to Loans via Digital Platforms:** Enable loan access through digital platforms like mobile banking for financially excluded individuals. Collaborations between mobile network operators and financial institutions can facilitate soft loans via mobile banking.

**Group Schemes Integration:** Design digital platforms to accommodate group schemes, encouraging savings and digital banking usage among communities, particularly low-income earners, rural populations, and marginalised groups.

**Address Barriers to Financial Inclusion:** Banks and regulators should tackle barriers such as financial illiteracy. Empowering individuals with financial knowledge and skills can significantly improve financial inclusion.

**Promote Technological Innovation:** Embrace technological innovation, such as branchless banking and mobile banking, to reach the unbanked population. The government should support this with a conducive legal framework.

**Promote Infrastructure Development:** Invest in infrastructure development in rural and marginalised areas to improve accessibility for financial services. Government support and incentives for private sector investment in ICT infrastructure are crucial.

**Promote Increased Cooperation among Banks:** Encourage collaboration and infrastructure sharing among banks to spread the cost of technology for financial inclusion initiatives. Establishing entities for pooled resources, such as Special Purpose Vehicles, can facilitate shared infrastructure usage.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.4EJCFRE7>

# Harnessing the diaspora advantage: Building knowledge democracy and inclusive growth in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

As Africa strides towards attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063 for inclusive development, harnessing both internal and external expertise is crucial. Yet, the continent's vast, highly skilled diaspora remains largely sidelined in education systems and knowledge economies. This paper explores the lived experiences of the African diaspora including professionals, innovators, entrepreneurs, and African stakeholders, including academics, university leadership, policymakers, and business leaders, using the coloniality lens to develop a framework for equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge democracy. Data collection involved interviews with 25 diaspora professionals and 15 African stakeholders. Findings revealed a complex interplay of factors which constrain equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge democracy which promotes diaspora contribution to Africa's development. However, both groups expressed a strong commitment to Africa's progress. The paper proposes a framework for collaborative approaches for dismantling colonial dividers through policy supported by building blocks such as incentives and support, knowledge exchange, engagement channels, and impact reviews. By positioning the diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners, Africa can accelerate research translation and fuel sustainable growth.

**Key words:** Africa, diaspora, knowledge democracy, brain gain, collaboration+

## INTRODUCTION

The African diaspora, comprising over 50 million individuals globally, represents a vast untapped potential for transformative development across the continent (Edeh, Osidipe, Ehizuelen, & Zhao, 2021). Despite this rich reservoir of skills, knowledge, and resources, effectively harnessing this potential remains challenging due to historical, socio-economic, and governance factors (Chikanda, Crush, & Walton-Roberts, 2016; Edeh, Zhao, Osidipe, & Lou, 2023).

The discourse on African emigration has shifted from a 'brain drain' paradigm to more optimistic notions of 'brain circulation,' recognising positive impacts such as remittances, skill repatriation, and knowledge exchange. While some African countries have enacted diaspora-focused policies, implementation issues persist, often sidelining broader knowledge exchange opportunities.

Current diaspora engagement initiatives, including grassroots associations, capacity-building programs, and philanthropic endeavours, demonstrate potential but face challenges in sustainability and alignment with local needs. This paper identifies a significant gap in the literature: the lack of a unifying framework that consolidates individual efforts into a cohesive impact strategy and provides mechanisms for sustaining long-term engagement.

By applying the coloniality theory, this study aims to uncover hidden power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies that hinder full diaspora participation in African development. This paper explores the lived experiences of diaspora professionals and African stakeholders to develop a framework for equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge

democracy, using the coloniality lens as a theoretical framework. We define the unit of analysis as the individual and collective experiences and perspectives of these diaspora professionals and institutional stakeholders.

Key findings reveal complex factors driving emigration, challenges in diaspora engagement, and potential solutions for narrowing development gaps. This paper concludes that by reconceptualising diaspora engagement and moving towards strategies emphasising knowledge sharing and active participation, Africa can harness its global human capital to catalyse equitable and sustainable development. The proposed framework offers a pathway to create an environment marked by recognition, respect, and reciprocity, essential for fostering a truly inclusive African knowledge democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'diaspora' itself has evolved, mirroring the complexities of migration (Britannica, 2024; Dufoix, 2011). While historically associated with forced displacement, slavery, civil unrest, and colonialism, it has come to also encompass the modern dynamics of voluntary migration and economic expatriation (Gevorkyan, 2022; Zeleza, 2019; Agunias & Newland, 2012). Despite this expanded definition, existing categorisations, like 'migrant' or 'expatriate,' can impart a transient or privileged status that fails to encompass the diverse contributions of these individuals irrespective of their settlement or socio-economic status (Andresen et al., 2022). Such labels carry political undertones, often marginalising diaspora communities in socio-political discourse by perpetuating otherness (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Brubaker, 2005). It may suggest a sense of otherness or foreignness

that can impact how migrants are perceived and treated, potentially leading to stereotypes, discrimination, or exclusion (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2013; Anderson, 2019). This paper posits a re-conceptualisation of diaspora engagement, valuing all contributions from mobile and settled persons alike as vital to Africa's development.

Historically, the 'brain drain' paradigm dominated discussions on emigration, highlighting concerns over human capital flight from African nations (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Martin & Papademetriou, 1991). This narrative has since transitioned towards optimistic notions of 'brain circulation,' lauding the positive impacts of remittances, skill repatriation, philanthropy, and knowledge exchange (Alem, 2016; Gnimassoun & Anyanwu, 2019). Such a shift has spurred countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Rwanda to enact diaspora-focused policies, endeavouring to capture the beneficial impacts (Gamlen, 2006; Rustomjee, 2018). These policy frameworks, while proactive, often grapple with implementation issues, including bureaucratic rigidity and a predisposition toward economic incentives and high-profile diaspora, consequently sidelining the broader spectrum of knowledge exchange.

Grassroots diaspora associations and networks, such as the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the Network of Diasporic African Scholars (NDAS), have emerged as pivotal in supporting continental collaboration amongst African scholars in the diaspora (Langa, 2018). Their role in facilitating intellectual discourse is undeniable, yet they are frequently beleaguered by funding inconsistencies and difficulties in achieving widespread engagement, which undermines their sustainability (Kuznetsov, 2006). Likewise, capacity-building initiatives such as

the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (CADFP) have made inroads in fostering scholarly communities, but strategic planning and sustainable funding are requisites for ensuring that such impacts endure (Zezeza, 2013).

In the academic arena, initiatives spearheaded by higher education institutions, including the Diaspora Engage program by the University of Ghana and the Diaspora Advisory Board at the University of Cape Town, underscore the potential for universities to nurture diaspora relations. These programs, however, are not immune to challenges, such as faculty and institutional stability, which can disrupt long-term diaspora engagement, highlighting the necessity for institutional commitment and continuity (Pratt & de Vries, 2023).

Philanthropic endeavours also play a noteworthy role in creating educational and scholarly opportunities, for example, the Next Einstein Initiative and Rhodes Scholarships. Despite their contributions, these programs are often limited by their alignment with donor interests, which do not always resonate with local needs, and by the perennial challenge of securing sustainable funding (Knittel et al., 2023).

Through this examination of existing diaspora engagement initiatives, it becomes clear there exists a significant gap within the literature—a deficiency in a unifying framework that consolidates individual efforts into a cohesive impact strategy. Also, it does not provide sufficient analysis of the mechanisms necessary for sustaining long-term engagement through systematic support and collaboration. This gap emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach that

assembles the fragmented landscape of diaspora contributions.

This integrative approach predicated the need for a framework cognisant of the enduring legacies of colonial history on diaspora interactions. The diaspora's relationship to their homelands is often framed within contexts established during colonial rule, with remnants influencing both policy and perception, limiting potential contributions across borders (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). It is evident that an examination and deconstruction of colonial legacies embedded within current diaspora engagement strategies are required to foster a more equitable and effective model of collaboration.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of coloniality provides a critical lens for understanding the persistent power structures and knowledge hierarchies that continue to shape global interactions in the postcolonial era, despite the formal end of colonial rule. Originating in the Latin American decolonial movement, coloniality theory dissects the enduring power structures and knowledge hierarchies that persist despite the formal end of colonial rule influencing culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production, even after the dismantling of colonial administrations. (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Dussel, 1995).

The coloniality theory has evolved to encompass a global perspective, recognising its impact not only on former colonies but also on the colonising powers. Scholars have examined its economic dimensions, highlighting unequal economic relations between the Global North and South (Grosfoguel, 2011), as well as its cultural

aspects, exploring how colonial ideologies continue to shape identities and social practices (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In this paper, we found the coloniality theory particularly relevant for analysing the complex relationship between the African diaspora and their homelands. Specifically, the focus was on how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence engagement policies and practices, shaping how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued. It reveals how Western-centric narratives have historically marginalised African epistemologies, culture and innovations, creating a hierarchy that privileges certain forms of knowledge over others (Elabor-Idemudia, 2021; Kessi et al., 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Quijano, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007). Additionally, the coloniality of migration (Grosfoguel, 2013) demonstrates how contemporary policies often mirror colonial-era restrictions, hindering diaspora engagement (Mbembe, 2017).

Recent scholarship has expanded on the concept of coloniality, exploring its intersections with race, gender, and class (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This nuanced understanding allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities in diaspora engagement. By deconstructing these power dynamics, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive model of knowledge democracy that values diverse perspectives and dismantles structural barriers to participation.

Within the broader field of postcolonial studies, coloniality theory intersects with other critical frameworks such as decoloniality and postcolonial feminism. Decoloniality, as articulated by scholars like Mignolo (2011) and Walsh (2013), emphasises the need to delink from Western-centric epistemologies and ontologies, advocating for the recognition and revitalisation of

indigenous knowledge systems. Postcolonial feminism, represented by the works of Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1984), critiques the gendered dimensions of colonialism and neocolonialism, highlighting the unique experiences and perspectives of women in the postcolonial world.

While a valuable tool, coloniality theory has limitations. Some critics argue that it can be overly deterministic, neglecting agency and resistance (Prakash, 1995) and that it can essentialise experiences of colonialism (Cooper, 2005). Additionally, it has been criticised for its potential Eurocentrism and for oversimplifying complex realities. The theory may also underemphasise agency and overlook the diversity of experiences across the African continent.

Despite these limitations, coloniality theory remains a powerful framework for understanding the complexities of diaspora engagement in Africa. This theoretical framework informs our study design, data collection, and analysis techniques. By interrogating current diaspora engagement approaches and conceptualisations of the diaspora itself using the coloniality theory, this paper underscores the urgency of moving toward strategies that emphasise knowledge sharing and active participation. The resulting framework advocates for a dismantling of the divides that have long segmented talent across the African diaspora while fostering strengthened relationships that capitalise on the synergistic possibilities found across diverse diaspora backgrounds. It is only through such inclusive, forward-looking approaches that the continent can harness the full spectrum of its global human capital and catalyse a development trajectory that is not only sustainable but also equitable and reflective of its rich diversity.

In delineating this comprehensive framework for diaspora engagement, empirical evidence such as the proactive initiatives undertaken by transnational African science communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shaw, 2021) and successful partnerships between diaspora networks, local communities, and governments will be instrumental. These instances provide invaluable insights into creating responsive and sustainable engagement strategies that reflect the complex realities of the African diaspora.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What factors drive the emigration of African diaspora and how do these impact their willingness to contribute to African development?
- What challenges do African institutions face in engaging with and transferring knowledge from the diaspora?
- What are potential solutions for narrowing development gaps and promoting inclusive growth in Africa?
- What framework of diaspora engagement can be derived from these solutions?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper was drawn from a qualitative study to obtain an in-depth understanding of diaspora professionals' and African stakeholders' experiences and perspectives. Qualitative methods facilitate the exploration of complex social phenomena through nuanced, contextual insights not

easily quantifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to select 25 diaspora professionals and 15 stakeholders from professional networks, organisations, and conferences. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews lasting 40-45 minutes using carefully designed interview guides based on literature and theory.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was employed using NVivo software to identify, analyse, and report themes. The research team iteratively reviewed codes and themes to ensure an accurate representation of the data.

Thematic analysis identified, analysed and reported themes to provide a rich interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo assisted in organised, efficient coding. Researchers reviewed codes and themes iteratively to accurately represent data.

Trustworthiness was established through various processes. Credibility involved members checking to confirm the accurate interpretation. Thick description enhances transferability for other contexts. An audit trail maintained through documentation ensures dependability. Lastly, reflexive journals and peer debriefing achieved confirmability by mitigating bias.

Given the theoretical lens, reflexivity and positional awareness recognised the researchers' background could influence interpretation (Haraway, 1988). An ongoing reflexive practice bracketed assumptions for transparency.

We acknowledge the limitations relating to the relatively small sample size may limit the generalisability of findings also considering that the sample may not fully represent the diversity of the African diaspora or the continent's various regions.

Additionally, qualitative analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation, which we have attempted to mitigate through rigorous coding practices and peer review. Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures perspectives at a single point in time, potentially missing longitudinal trends. Through acknowledging these limitations, we aim to provide a transparent and nuanced analysis, contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse on diaspora engagement and knowledge democracy in Africa.

## FINDINGS

The findings from this study illuminate the intricate dynamics that shape the relationship between the African diaspora and their home continent, revealing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in their engagement. Through the lens of coloniality theory, we uncover how historical power structures and knowledge hierarchies continue to influence contemporary diaspora experiences and aspirations, addressing our research questions on factors driving emigration, challenges in engagement, and potential solutions for inclusive growth.

### Factors driving emigration and the consequences

Addressing our first research question, we found that economic disparities, political instability, and the pursuit of better opportunities emerge as key drivers of emigration among African diaspora professionals and innovators. The allure of advanced economies and the promise of professional growth often compel individuals to seek livelihoods abroad. However, their journeys are not without obstacles, reflecting the persistent influence of coloniality in shaping global mobility and opportunity structures.

Many participants encountered systemic barriers in host countries, including the non-recognition of qualifications, cultural adjustment challenges, and discriminatory practices. These experiences underscore the enduring impact of colonial legacies on contemporary migration patterns and integration processes. As one participant noted:

**“ It was a bit of a rude awakening to discover international experience and qualifications are not always valued as highly as domestic ones, contradicting my initial assumption that my degree would smoothly transfer over. But I have since learned cultural adjustments take time and have continued pursuing opportunities to contribute my skills wherever possible while also considering additional training options that may improve my competitiveness in this market.**

This narrative aligns with coloniality theory's emphasis on the persistence of hierarchical knowledge structures that privilege Western credentials over those from the Global South.

The experiences of innovators seeking support for their projects further illustrate the challenges stemming from colonial-era governance structures. One green power developer shared:

**“ I called the President's Office and I told them about my projects as well as where I was coming from. They asked me to bring a DVD with the videos and a short presentation as well as a letter stating what I wanted from the President. They also suggested that I should leave another DVD at the Ministry of Science and Technology office. I did exactly what I was told to do. I waited for a response but none came.**

This account demonstrates how bureaucratic inefficiencies, often rooted in colonial administrative legacies, can impede innovation and contribute to brain drain (e.g. Carbajal and Calvo 2021; Khalid and Urbański 2021; Zanabazar et al. 2021).

Highly skilled migrants, too, narrated tales of economic despair and political volatility back home, which pushed them to seek safety and prosperity abroad. However, the idealised expectations of employment in the host country often collided with the harsh reality of unrecognised qualifications and systemic barriers, as corroborated by the findings of Thondhlana et al. (2016). These individuals encounter a gamut of disabling factors: denied recognition of credentials, inflated tuition fees reserved for foreign students, cultural and language barriers, and discrimination—frequently forcing them into positions that underutilise their skills if they manage to find employment at all.

This complex interplay of factors propelling and discouraging the mobility of diaspora professionals and innovators underscores the persistent influence of coloniality. This is evident in the lack of infrastructural and institutional support for professionals, resulting from historically entrenched disparities. Works such as those by Nkrumah (1965) on neocolonialism and its impact on economic structures, and Mamdani (1996) discussing the lasting effects of colonial governance, provide historical context to the current disparities. Modern studies offer empirical evidence of the direct correlation between these historical disparities and the present-day brain drain phenomenon reinforcing the understanding that the scarcity of support for local talent is rooted deeply in the enduring shadows of colonial history.



## Factors determining diaspora professionals' and innovators' willingness/decisions to contribute to their home countries

Transitioning to our second research question, we explored the factors determining diaspora professionals' and innovators' willingness to contribute to their home countries. Despite the challenges they face, many diaspora members demonstrate a strong commitment to African development, driven by complex personal and cultural motivations.

Individual factors such as familial responsibility, experiences of marginalisation abroad, national pride, and the aspiration to return home fuel the desire to contribute to homeland development. As one participant expressed:

“ When you see what is happening back home, particularly in the health sector, there is a lot of frustration, because you always wonder 'Why can't things not be like the way you see here?' It's not that people are not intelligent, but they don't have the resources, or things have been mismanaged.

This sentiment reflects the tension between the desire to contribute and the recognition of structural challenges, a dynamic that coloniality theory helps explain by highlighting the persistent inequalities in resource distribution and governance.

Cultural expectations and perceived obligations also play a significant role in motivating diaspora engagement. One entrepreneur, inspired by personal experience, initiated a dialysis centre in her home country:

“ When you go to dialysis centres at home, you see loads of people who need help. Some cannot afford to pay and they are left to die. So we decided to help by offering dialysis treatment to about ten poor patients per month for free.

This example illustrates how diaspora members leverage their transnational positions to address development gaps, challenging the notion of a simple "brain drain" and showcasing the potential for "brain circulation" as conceptualised in recent diaspora studies.

These personal drivers, which include both emotional ties and strategic decisions, are echoed in research noting the prominence of identity, homeland pride, and developmental aspirations (Kopchick et al 2022; Madziva et al 2021; Thondhlana and Madziva 2018).

## The challenges and potential solutions for African institutions to engage the diaspora

Our third research question focused on the challenges African institutions face in engaging with and transferring knowledge from the diaspora. The findings reveal a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that hinder effective collaboration. We combined the challenges with the fourth research question on suggested solutions as these were usually tackled by participants as a unified response.

Analyses from studies such as those carried out by Shin et al. (2022) and Olayiwola et al. (2020) have pointed towards a dichotomy where, on one hand, the African diaspora is seen as a beacon of hope and, on the other, engagement with them is fraught with systematic, policy-induced, and sociocultural

hurdles. Insights from scholarly works (Brinkerhoff, 2012) and narratives from participants provided a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted barriers at play including the following challenges and suggested solutions.

### **Trust and physical presence in business operations**

The issue of trust, or rather the lack thereof, in doing business from afar was a major concern as a participant noted:

**“ You hear stories about not doing business in Africa if you are not physically present. People tell you of how they've been burned, and how you're not there. Oh, they're going to siphon your money. Oh, they won't do the job, they won't do this, and they won't do that.**

Echoing a similar challenge, one academic who sought reintegration with a former institution expressed sentiments of being labelled unpatriotic:

**“ I was told that my former Vice Chancellor would never be accepted back as my former colleagues viewed diaspora academics as traitors who were quick to desert their institutions at the slightest sign of economic problems.**

The experience of being labelled as unpatriotic was dismissed by Baser & Swain (2009) who viewed embracing diaspora academics as promoting 'brain circulation' thereby enriching both their host and home countries. However, institutional resistance and stigma often challenge their reintegration, as noted in their research.

Participants suggested that to mitigate this issue, African institutions could develop secure platforms for business transactions that assure both parties. As one noted:

**“ Possible solutions could include providing legal support for diaspora investors and creating transparent mechanisms for project monitoring. Fostering partnerships with reputable diaspora organisations can also help build credibility.**

Additionally, participants also highlighted the need for educational institutions to actively promote programs that facilitate the integration of diaspora members, such as temporary or virtual returns. Promoting success stories of diasporic contributions can change perceptions and highlight the value these academics bring. Utilising technology to create robust and secure platforms for virtual engagement of the diaspora in mentoring, consultancy, and knowledge-sharing can help in overcoming some of the barriers caused by distance. Reinforcing collaborations between diaspora academics and home country institutions through joint research projects and academic exchange programs can help by tapping into cutting-edge research and educational resources.

### **Corruption and institutional reliability**

Corruption emerged as a recurring theme, particularly from the institutional participants as one explicated:

**“ The problem with Africa is still that of corruption. We sat down with the government officials and tried to convince them to consider diasporans as we would get the cheapest possible price... but they weren't buying into it. We suspect that the officials wanted a bribe.**

The account of government officials demanding bribes points to a larger issue that has been well-documented in the literature (Brinkerhoff, 2012). Corruption not only hampers direct investment but also tarnishes the perceived credibility of institutions, which is crucial for the diaspora's involvement.

Participants considered policy reforms and fair implementation as necessary to tackle corruption. This could include strengthening anti-corruption legislation, ensuring the independence of anti-corruption bodies, and creating a culture of accountability. Encouragingly, international collaborations with agencies that have a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption were seen as a strategy to improve the current practices.

### **Institutional and legal barriers**

Institutional stakeholders in Africa often struggle with limited resources, bureaucratic rigidity, and a lack of clear policies for diaspora engagement. This institutional landscape, shaped by colonial and postcolonial governance structures, can create barriers to effective knowledge transfer and collaboration. As one university administrator noted:

**“ We recognise the value of diaspora expertise, but our systems are not always flexible enough to accommodate their unique positions. Sometimes, it's a challenge just to create appropriate contractual arrangements for short-term collaborations.**

This comment highlights the need for institutional reforms that can better facilitate diaspora engagement, addressing the legacy of colonial-era administrative structures that may not be conducive to modern, transnational collaborations.

Participants highlighted institutional barriers as challenges hindering their contribution. For example, an educator with a decade of experience overseas narrated the arduousness of re-establishing a career back home due to immense bureaucratic barriers. Similarly, a diaspora investor dedicated to the proliferation of rural schools underscores the procedural adversities faced by narrating:

**“ Securing permits, finding local partners, it is a constant battle. If the processes were smoother, we could do so much more.**

The frustration voiced here gestures towards an institutional rigidity that not only debilitates proactive change-makers but also implicitly discredits the qualifications and potential of African diaspora members to propound improvements in their own communities.

Moreover, prevailing colonial-era mobility constraints that affect the diaspora, as discussed by a social entrepreneur looking to invest in impactful local projects, demonstrate the failure of policy frameworks to adapt to the contemporary needs of transnational African professionals. The entrenched vision of diaspora members as 'foreigners', rather than as nationals with vested interests and invaluable contributions, exemplifies how policies remain entrenched in archaic, exclusionary paradigms.

By side-lining African know-how and favouring expatriate expertise, these countries inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of dependency and undermine their own pool of highly skilled professionals eager to contribute to their nation's growth and well-being. African institutions must recalibrate their recognition and integration processes, policies, and perceptions to foster an environment that embraces its diaspora as a critical resource for development and innovation.

## Stigma attached to diaspora talent

Beyond institutional and legal barriers, there is a stigma attached to diaspora talent, according to one innovator:

“ I have seen a number of my designs being used in my country mainly in telecoms. Those products were supplied by foreign companies I licensed the technologies to and my countrymen embraced the products because they came through foreign companies - Can you imagine? In Africa, we embrace technologies from abroad, yet a number of these products are African brains.

The stigma attached to diaspora talent is particularly discouraging for African innovators who face obstacles in having their work recognised and valued in their home markets. The preference for foreign products, even when local inventors create them, is a manifestation of postcolonial consumer behaviour that devalues local expertise in favour of foreigners, as discussed by Shizha (2010). This attitude undermines the potential for local industry growth and the cultivation of indigenous innovation ecosystems.

To change the stigma against local innovation, participants suggested the need to promote 'Made in Africa' campaigns that highlight local success stories in innovation and embrace innovations by the African diaspora. As one participant commented:

“ Do you know that one-third of entrepreneurs/innovators in the USA are foreigners? Our sons and daughters are part of designing teams designing cars at those big car makers, amazing computer programmers, fixing aircraft for major airlines, and pioneering medical solutions.

This acknowledgement of the African diaspora's significant contribution to global innovation speaks to the concept of 'brain gain', where the skills and expertise of those living outside the continent can be leveraged for its development. As highlighted by a participant, many Africans abroad are excelling in various sectors such as technology, automotive, aviation, and medicine. Studies by Nkongolo-Bakenda & Chrysostome (2013) emphasise the valuable contributions of the diaspora to entrepreneurship and innovation in their home countries, should effective engagement strategies be employed.

Participants recommended the establishment of effective knowledge networks that tap into the expertise and talent of the diaspora for innovation, research, development, and education such as think tanks or innovation hubs that are partially manned by professionals from the diaspora. It was also noted that African countries can set up dedicated diaspora offices to provide support to repatriates seeking to start businesses, focusing on proper checks without the intention to intimidate them. Recognising diaspora contributions at national events and through media could also foster a supportive environment.

## Scrutiny of Diaspora Endeavours

Participants highlighted instances where successful endeavours are met with scrutiny rather than support. In this regard, some participants felt that there were efforts to “Pull him/her Down” when someone appeared to be doing well. One successful innovator reported:

“ We were investigated by all security agencies, many felt threatened by our business. We were questioned about the source of our funds, our partners, other governments, companies we were doing business with, and some rubbished us.

These findings reflect a broader sense of jealousy, scrutiny and scepticism towards the diaspora as observed by Agyeman (2014). For Mercer et al. (2009) these behaviours can sometimes stem from concerns about unequal wealth distribution, neo-colonial influences, or the perceived allegiance of the diaspora members. This cultural dynamic can discourage diaspora engagement and detract from the collaborative potential between local and international African talents.

To address this, participants suggested the establishment of fair legal frameworks that protect entrepreneurs and investors, including those from the diaspora. These frameworks should standardise the scrutiny process to ensure that it is not arbitrarily applied or used to intimidate successful diasporans but is instead part of a routine due diligence that fosters transparency and confidence among all stakeholders. Where these policies are in place participants decried the unfair implementation processes which tended to favour high-profile diaspora figures at the expense of broader diaspora interests.

## Enabling Diaspora Engagement

Developing financing mechanisms such as diaspora bonds or investment funds to support diaspora-led projects was suggested. This could include providing tax incentives for diaspora investments, offering matching grants for development projects, or reducing bureaucratic hurdles for business setup and

land acquisition. This would go a long way in assisting the diaspora beyond just using them as one participant suggested:

“ We need to move beyond seeing the diaspora as just a source of remittances. There's a wealth of knowledge and experience that can transform our institutions if we create the right channels for collaboration.

This perspective aligns with coloniality theory's call for decolonising knowledge structures and recognising the value of diverse epistemologies in driving development.

Participants indicated a deliberate exclusion from participating in key activities and decisions in their home countries, for example, voting. To facilitate active diaspora engagement, participants recommended the development of programs that are sensitive to the needs of diaspora communities. These might include dual citizenship arrangements, voting rights for the diaspora, and formal channels for diaspora members to input into national development plans. Furthermore, the creation of reintegration programs that assist with professional accreditation, recognition of qualifications, and job placement for returning professionals would make the transition smoother for those willing for permanent return. However, a participant from an African institution cautioned:

“ When the Diaspora Engagement Committee was established, we were all quite optimistic about its potential to better connect our diaspora community. The Partnership Taskforce seemed earnest in its goals of driving investment, knowledge sharing and cultural exchanges. In the early stages, their efforts led to some notable successes.

“ Investments did flow in and capacity-building programs made valuable contributions. But it soon became apparent that institutional support was wavering.

The participant added that:

“ After three years, with no advocacy at higher levels and no champions/members from the diaspora, the Taskforce has become an empty shell. This outcome shows we still have far to go in prioritising the diaspora community through concrete long-term support, not just fleeting gestures.

Constituting diaspora advisory councils must therefore include diaspora leaders and professionals who can provide

insight into the needs and expectations of the diaspora community. These members can advise on policy matters and help design frameworks that are considerate of diaspora sentiments and cultural nuances.

### Framework for diaspora knowledge democracy

Addressing our final research question, we synthesised the insights from diaspora professionals and African stakeholders to develop a framework for more inclusive and effective diaspora engagement. Figure 1 visually depicts the framework wherein policy is at the core supporting the building blocks namely incentives and support, knowledge exchange, engagement channels, and impact reviews.

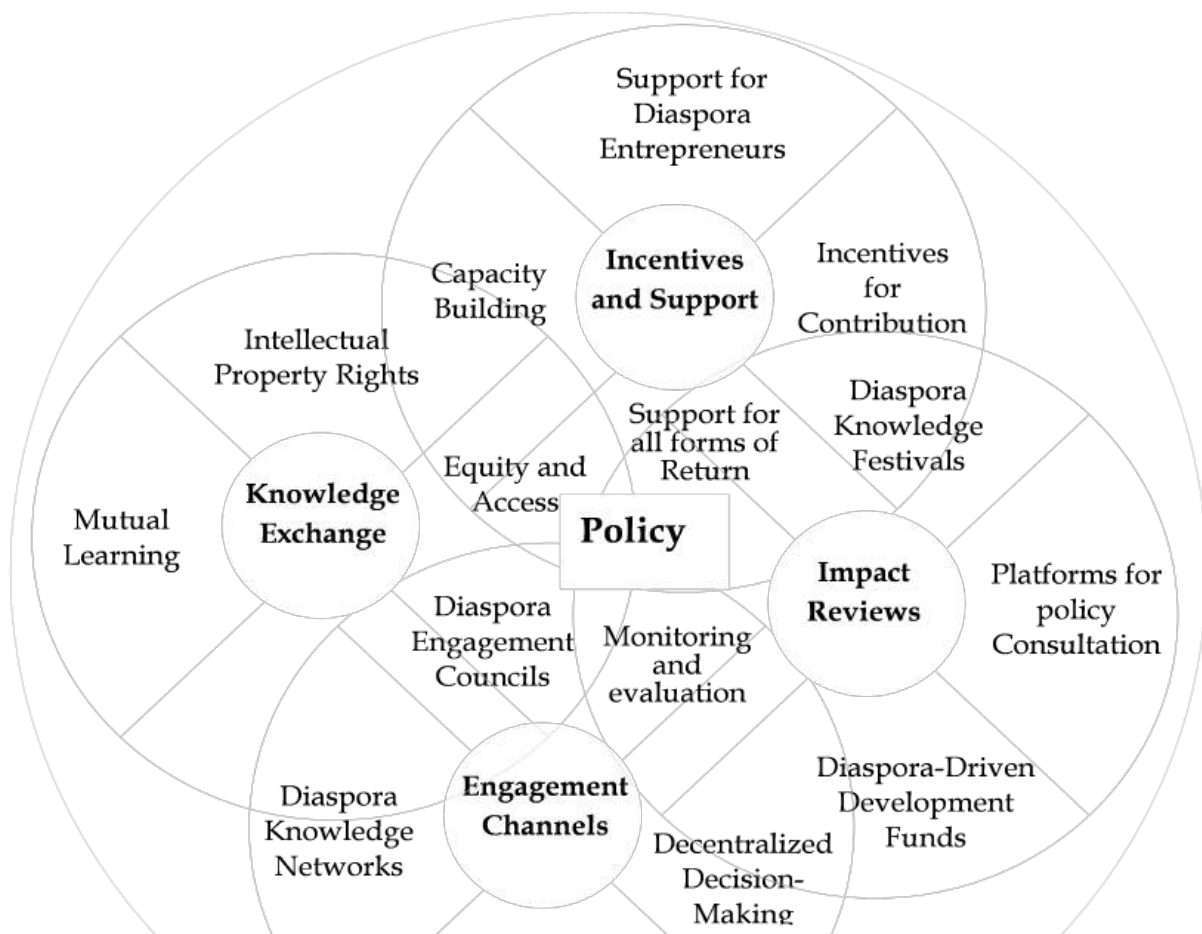


Figure 1: Framework for diaspora knowledge democracy

Enabling policies that dismantle colonial divisions through strengthened mobility and participation rights serves as the foundation for dismantling hierarchical structures and empowers diverse voices. Robust engagement platforms facilitate multidirectional knowledge exchange between diaspora communities and stakeholders across Africa fostering collaboration and aligning with the principles of knowledge democracy. The emphasis on diverse voices and collaborative networks aligns well with the concept of knowledge democracy, moving away from hierarchical structures that concentrate power. The emphasis on coordinated incentives and support for diaspora initiatives is key. By bringing together technical expertise from various settings, these initiatives could accelerate work on pressing issues, capture relevant insights on project implementation and scale successes. Regular evaluation would ensure the initiatives remain responsive.

While ambitious, the viability of this framework could be enhanced through pilot testing of individual elements with staggered rollout. For example, launching an initial engagement platform and paired exchange program between select diaspora networks and institutions may surface practical considerations to refine implementation strategies. Securing multi-stakeholder buy-in and identifying sustainable funding mechanisms early also seem prudent to anchor the approach. Diaspora advisory boards and reciprocal short secondments may aid governance and coordination. Overall, properly operationalised, this inclusionary, collaborative model holds promise for catalysing Africa's development trajectory through optimised diaspora participation and knowledge-sharing for the future benefit of all.

This commitment must be rooted in a shared recognition of the diaspora's unique value. Their cultural competencies, technical skills, and experiential knowledge are all essential assets for Africa's self-determined progress.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of diaspora professionals and African institutions using the coloniality lens. Our findings revealed that while individual and institutional efforts have made inroads, there remains a lack of coordinated strategy to maximise diaspora contributions through knowledge democracy. To overcome these challenges, a paradigm shift is proposed, reframing the diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners and embracing their expertise and contributions.

The study emphasises the importance of mobilising human capital through bridge-building centred on reciprocal knowledge-sharing. Establishing robust diaspora engagement platforms featuring multi-stakeholder participation can address trust issues and bureaucratic challenges. Recognising diverse contributions through support networks nurturing collaboration between technical professionals, entrepreneurs, scholars, and community groups will catalyse inclusive growth. Addressing corruption and promoting accountability strengthens institutional reliability for investors and partners.

Going forward, a coordinated transnational approach is needed to overcome fragmented efforts and resource constraints. Capacity strengthening initiatives must engage grassroots organisations for widespread impact translating research.

Tracking best practices and metrics can optimise programs adapting to complex realities.

Overall, this study calls for reconceptualising diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners as central, not peripheral, to development visions. Operationalising inclusive models demanding interactivity between policymakers,

institutions, and diaspora communities will build the requisite buy-in and ownership for sustainable progress. Only by dismantling divides and forging unity founded on mutual recognition and benefit can Africa harness its full spectrum of human capital to ignite an inclusive, self-determined trajectory of growth.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.4EJCFRE7>

# Harnessing the diaspora advantage: Building knowledge democracy and inclusive growth in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

As Africa strides towards attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063 for inclusive development, harnessing both internal and external expertise is crucial. Yet, the continent's vast, highly skilled diaspora remains largely sidelined in education systems and knowledge economies. This paper explores the lived experiences of the African diaspora including professionals, innovators, entrepreneurs, and African stakeholders, including academics, university leadership, policymakers, and business leaders, using the coloniality lens to develop a framework for equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge democracy. Data collection involved interviews with 25 diaspora professionals and 15 African stakeholders. Findings revealed a complex interplay of factors which constrain equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge democracy which promotes diaspora contribution to Africa's development. However, both groups expressed a strong commitment to Africa's progress. The paper proposes a framework for collaborative approaches for dismantling colonial dividers through policy supported by building blocks such as incentives and support, knowledge exchange, engagement channels, and impact reviews. By positioning the diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners, Africa can accelerate research translation and fuel sustainable growth.

**Key words:** Africa, diaspora, knowledge democracy, brain gain, collaboration+

## INTRODUCTION

The African diaspora, comprising over 50 million individuals globally, represents a vast untapped potential for transformative development across the continent (Edeh, Osidipe, Ehizuelen, & Zhao, 2021). Despite this rich reservoir of skills, knowledge, and resources, effectively harnessing this potential remains challenging due to historical, socio-economic, and governance factors (Chikanda, Crush, & Walton-Roberts, 2016; Edeh, Zhao, Osidipe, & Lou, 2023).

The discourse on African emigration has shifted from a 'brain drain' paradigm to more optimistic notions of 'brain circulation,' recognising positive impacts such as remittances, skill repatriation, and knowledge exchange. While some African countries have enacted diaspora-focused policies, implementation issues persist, often sidelining broader knowledge exchange opportunities.

Current diaspora engagement initiatives, including grassroots associations, capacity-building programs, and philanthropic endeavours, demonstrate potential but face challenges in sustainability and alignment with local needs. This paper identifies a significant gap in the literature: the lack of a unifying framework that consolidates individual efforts into a cohesive impact strategy and provides mechanisms for sustaining long-term engagement.

By applying the coloniality theory, this study aims to uncover hidden power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies that hinder full diaspora participation in African development. This paper explores the lived experiences of diaspora professionals and African stakeholders to develop a framework for equitable and inclusive diaspora knowledge

democracy, using the coloniality lens as a theoretical framework. We define the unit of analysis as the individual and collective experiences and perspectives of these diaspora professionals and institutional stakeholders.

Key findings reveal complex factors driving emigration, challenges in diaspora engagement, and potential solutions for narrowing development gaps. This paper concludes that by reconceptualising diaspora engagement and moving towards strategies emphasising knowledge sharing and active participation, Africa can harness its global human capital to catalyse equitable and sustainable development. The proposed framework offers a pathway to create an environment marked by recognition, respect, and reciprocity, essential for fostering a truly inclusive African knowledge democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'diaspora' itself has evolved, mirroring the complexities of migration (Britannica, 2024; Dufoix, 2011). While historically associated with forced displacement, slavery, civil unrest, and colonialism, it has come to also encompass the modern dynamics of voluntary migration and economic expatriation (Gevorkyan, 2022; Zeleza, 2019; Agunias & Newland, 2012). Despite this expanded definition, existing categorisations, like 'migrant' or 'expatriate,' can impart a transient or privileged status that fails to encompass the diverse contributions of these individuals irrespective of their settlement or socio-economic status (Andresen et al., 2022). Such labels carry political undertones, often marginalising diaspora communities in socio-political discourse by perpetuating otherness (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Brubaker, 2005). It may suggest a sense of otherness or foreignness

that can impact how migrants are perceived and treated, potentially leading to stereotypes, discrimination, or exclusion (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2013; Anderson, 2019). This paper posits a re-conceptualisation of diaspora engagement, valuing all contributions from mobile and settled persons alike as vital to Africa's development.

Historically, the 'brain drain' paradigm dominated discussions on emigration, highlighting concerns over human capital flight from African nations (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Martin & Papademetriou, 1991). This narrative has since transitioned towards optimistic notions of 'brain circulation,' lauding the positive impacts of remittances, skill repatriation, philanthropy, and knowledge exchange (Alem, 2016; Gnimassoun & Anyanwu, 2019). Such a shift has spurred countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Rwanda to enact diaspora-focused policies, endeavouring to capture the beneficial impacts (Gamlen, 2006; Rustomjee, 2018). These policy frameworks, while proactive, often grapple with implementation issues, including bureaucratic rigidity and a predisposition toward economic incentives and high-profile diaspora, consequently sidelining the broader spectrum of knowledge exchange.

Grassroots diaspora associations and networks, such as the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the Network of Diasporic African Scholars (NDAS), have emerged as pivotal in supporting continental collaboration amongst African scholars in the diaspora (Langa, 2018). Their role in facilitating intellectual discourse is undeniable, yet they are frequently beleaguered by funding inconsistencies and difficulties in achieving widespread engagement, which undermines their sustainability (Kuznetsov, 2006). Likewise, capacity-building initiatives such as

the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (CADFP) have made inroads in fostering scholarly communities, but strategic planning and sustainable funding are requisites for ensuring that such impacts endure (Zezeza, 2013).

In the academic arena, initiatives spearheaded by higher education institutions, including the Diaspora Engage program by the University of Ghana and the Diaspora Advisory Board at the University of Cape Town, underscore the potential for universities to nurture diaspora relations. These programs, however, are not immune to challenges, such as faculty and institutional stability, which can disrupt long-term diaspora engagement, highlighting the necessity for institutional commitment and continuity (Pratt & de Vries, 2023).

Philanthropic endeavours also play a noteworthy role in creating educational and scholarly opportunities, for example, the Next Einstein Initiative and Rhodes Scholarships. Despite their contributions, these programs are often limited by their alignment with donor interests, which do not always resonate with local needs, and by the perennial challenge of securing sustainable funding (Knittel et al., 2023).

Through this examination of existing diaspora engagement initiatives, it becomes clear there exists a significant gap within the literature—a deficiency in a unifying framework that consolidates individual efforts into a cohesive impact strategy. Also, it does not provide sufficient analysis of the mechanisms necessary for sustaining long-term engagement through systematic support and collaboration. This gap emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach that

assembles the fragmented landscape of diaspora contributions.

This integrative approach predicates the need for a framework cognisant of the enduring legacies of colonial history on diaspora interactions. The diaspora's relationship to their homelands is often framed within contexts established during colonial rule, with remnants influencing both policy and perception, limiting potential contributions across borders (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). It is evident that an examination and deconstruction of colonial legacies embedded within current diaspora engagement strategies are required to foster a more equitable and effective model of collaboration.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of coloniality provides a critical lens for understanding the persistent power structures and knowledge hierarchies that continue to shape global interactions in the postcolonial era, despite the formal end of colonial rule. Originating in the Latin American decolonial movement, coloniality theory dissects the enduring power structures and knowledge hierarchies that persist despite the formal end of colonial rule influencing culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production, even after the dismantling of colonial administrations. (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Dussel, 1995).

The coloniality theory has evolved to encompass a global perspective, recognising its impact not only on former colonies but also on the colonising powers. Scholars have examined its economic dimensions, highlighting unequal economic relations between the Global North and South (Grosfoguel, 2011), as well as its cultural

aspects, exploring how colonial ideologies continue to shape identities and social practices (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In this paper, we found the coloniality theory particularly relevant for analysing the complex relationship between the African diaspora and their homelands. Specifically, the focus was on how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence engagement policies and practices, shaping how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued. It reveals how Western-centric narratives have historically marginalised African epistemologies, culture and innovations, creating a hierarchy that privileges certain forms of knowledge over others (Elabor-Idemudia, 2021; Kessi et al., 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Quijano, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007). Additionally, the coloniality of migration (Grosfoguel, 2013) demonstrates how contemporary policies often mirror colonial-era restrictions, hindering diaspora engagement (Mbembe, 2017).

Recent scholarship has expanded on the concept of coloniality, exploring its intersections with race, gender, and class (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This nuanced understanding allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities in diaspora engagement. By deconstructing these power dynamics, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive model of knowledge democracy that values diverse perspectives and dismantles structural barriers to participation.

Within the broader field of postcolonial studies, coloniality theory intersects with other critical frameworks such as decoloniality and postcolonial feminism. Decoloniality, as articulated by scholars like Mignolo (2011) and Walsh (2013), emphasises the need to delink from Western-centric epistemologies and ontologies, advocating for the recognition and revitalisation of



indigenous knowledge systems. Postcolonial feminism, represented by the works of Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1984), critiques the gendered dimensions of colonialism and neocolonialism, highlighting the unique experiences and perspectives of women in the postcolonial world.

While a valuable tool, coloniality theory has limitations. Some critics argue that it can be overly deterministic, neglecting agency and resistance (Prakash, 1995) and that it can essentialise experiences of colonialism (Cooper, 2005). Additionally, it has been criticised for its potential Eurocentrism and for oversimplifying complex realities. The theory may also underemphasise agency and overlook the diversity of experiences across the African continent.

Despite these limitations, coloniality theory remains a powerful framework for understanding the complexities of diaspora engagement in Africa. This theoretical framework informs our study design, data collection, and analysis techniques. By interrogating current diaspora engagement approaches and conceptualisations of the diaspora itself using the coloniality theory, this paper underscores the urgency of moving toward strategies that emphasise knowledge sharing and active participation. The resulting framework advocates for a dismantling of the divides that have long segmented talent across the African diaspora while fostering strengthened relationships that capitalise on the synergistic possibilities found across diverse diaspora backgrounds. It is only through such inclusive, forward-looking approaches that the continent can harness the full spectrum of its global human capital and catalyse a development trajectory that is not only sustainable but also equitable and reflective of its rich diversity.

In delineating this comprehensive framework for diaspora engagement, empirical evidence such as the proactive initiatives undertaken by transnational African science communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shaw, 2021) and successful partnerships between diaspora networks, local communities, and governments will be instrumental. These instances provide invaluable insights into creating responsive and sustainable engagement strategies that reflect the complex realities of the African diaspora.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What factors drive the emigration of African diaspora and how do these impact their willingness to contribute to African development?
- What challenges do African institutions face in engaging with and transferring knowledge from the diaspora?
- What are potential solutions for narrowing development gaps and promoting inclusive growth in Africa?
- What framework of diaspora engagement can be derived from these solutions?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper was drawn from a qualitative study to obtain an in-depth understanding of diaspora professionals' and African stakeholders' experiences and perspectives. Qualitative methods facilitate the exploration of complex social phenomena through nuanced, contextual insights not

easily quantifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to select 25 diaspora professionals and 15 stakeholders from professional networks, organisations, and conferences. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews lasting 40-45 minutes using carefully designed interview guides based on literature and theory.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was employed using NVivo software to identify, analyse, and report themes. The research team iteratively reviewed codes and themes to ensure an accurate representation of the data.

Thematic analysis identified, analysed and reported themes to provide a rich interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo assisted in organised, efficient coding. Researchers reviewed codes and themes iteratively to accurately represent data.

Trustworthiness was established through various processes. Credibility involved members checking to confirm the accurate interpretation. Thick description enhances transferability for other contexts. An audit trail maintained through documentation ensures dependability. Lastly, reflexive journals and peer debriefing achieved confirmability by mitigating bias.

Given the theoretical lens, reflexivity and positional awareness recognised the researchers' background could influence interpretation (Haraway, 1988). An ongoing reflexive practice bracketed assumptions for transparency.

We acknowledge the limitations relating to the relatively small sample size may limit the generalisability of findings also considering that the sample may not fully represent the diversity of the African diaspora or the continent's various regions.

Additionally, qualitative analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation, which we have attempted to mitigate through rigorous coding practices and peer review. Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures perspectives at a single point in time, potentially missing longitudinal trends. Through acknowledging these limitations, we aim to provide a transparent and nuanced analysis, contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse on diaspora engagement and knowledge democracy in Africa.

## FINDINGS

The findings from this study illuminate the intricate dynamics that shape the relationship between the African diaspora and their home continent, revealing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in their engagement. Through the lens of coloniality theory, we uncover how historical power structures and knowledge hierarchies continue to influence contemporary diaspora experiences and aspirations, addressing our research questions on factors driving emigration, challenges in engagement, and potential solutions for inclusive growth.

### Factors driving emigration and the consequences

Addressing our first research question, we found that economic disparities, political instability, and the pursuit of better opportunities emerge as key drivers of emigration among African diaspora professionals and innovators. The allure of advanced economies and the promise of professional growth often compel individuals to seek livelihoods abroad. However, their journeys are not without obstacles, reflecting the persistent influence of coloniality in shaping global mobility and opportunity structures.

Many participants encountered systemic barriers in host countries, including the non-recognition of qualifications, cultural adjustment challenges, and discriminatory practices. These experiences underscore the enduring impact of colonial legacies on contemporary migration patterns and integration processes. As one participant noted:

**“ It was a bit of a rude awakening to discover international experience and qualifications are not always valued as highly as domestic ones, contradicting my initial assumption that my degree would smoothly transfer over. But I have since learned cultural adjustments take time and have continued pursuing opportunities to contribute my skills wherever possible while also considering additional training options that may improve my competitiveness in this market.**

This narrative aligns with coloniality theory's emphasis on the persistence of hierarchical knowledge structures that privilege Western credentials over those from the Global South.

The experiences of innovators seeking support for their projects further illustrate the challenges stemming from colonial-era governance structures. One green power developer shared:

**“ I called the President's Office and I told them about my projects as well as where I was coming from. They asked me to bring a DVD with the videos and a short presentation as well as a letter stating what I wanted from the President. They also suggested that I should leave another DVD at the Ministry of Science and Technology office. I did exactly what I was told to do. I waited for a response but none came.**

This account demonstrates how bureaucratic inefficiencies, often rooted in colonial administrative legacies, can impede innovation and contribute to brain drain (e.g. Carbajal and Calvo 2021; Khalid and Urbański 2021; Zanabazar et al. 2021).

Highly skilled migrants, too, narrated tales of economic despair and political volatility back home, which pushed them to seek safety and prosperity abroad. However, the idealised expectations of employment in the host country often collided with the harsh reality of unrecognised qualifications and systemic barriers, as corroborated by the findings of Thondhlana et al. (2016). These individuals encounter a gamut of disabling factors: denied recognition of credentials, inflated tuition fees reserved for foreign students, cultural and language barriers, and discrimination—frequently forcing them into positions that underutilise their skills if they manage to find employment at all.

This complex interplay of factors propelling and discouraging the mobility of diaspora professionals and innovators underscores the persistent influence of coloniality. This is evident in the lack of infrastructural and institutional support for professionals, resulting from historically entrenched disparities. Works such as those by Nkrumah (1965) on neocolonialism and its impact on economic structures, and Mamdani (1996) discussing the lasting effects of colonial governance, provide historical context to the current disparities. Modern studies offer empirical evidence of the direct correlation between these historical disparities and the present-day brain drain phenomenon reinforcing the understanding that the scarcity of support for local talent is rooted deeply in the enduring shadows of colonial history.

## Factors determining diaspora professionals' and innovators' willingness/decisions to contribute to their home countries

Transitioning to our second research question, we explored the factors determining diaspora professionals' and innovators' willingness to contribute to their home countries. Despite the challenges they face, many diaspora members demonstrate a strong commitment to African development, driven by complex personal and cultural motivations.

Individual factors such as familial responsibility, experiences of marginalisation abroad, national pride, and the aspiration to return home fuel the desire to contribute to homeland development. As one participant expressed:

“ When you see what is happening back home, particularly in the health sector, there is a lot of frustration, because you always wonder 'Why can't things not be like the way you see here?' It's not that people are not intelligent, but they don't have the resources, or things have been mismanaged.

This sentiment reflects the tension between the desire to contribute and the recognition of structural challenges, a dynamic that coloniality theory helps explain by highlighting the persistent inequalities in resource distribution and governance.

Cultural expectations and perceived obligations also play a significant role in motivating diaspora engagement. One entrepreneur, inspired by personal experience, initiated a dialysis centre in her home country:

“ When you go to dialysis centres at home, you see loads of people who need help. Some cannot afford to pay and they are left to die. So we decided to help by offering dialysis treatment to about ten poor patients per month for free.

This example illustrates how diaspora members leverage their transnational positions to address development gaps, challenging the notion of a simple "brain drain" and showcasing the potential for "brain circulation" as conceptualised in recent diaspora studies.

These personal drivers, which include both emotional ties and strategic decisions, are echoed in research noting the prominence of identity, homeland pride, and developmental aspirations (Kopchick et al 2022; Madziva et al 2021; Thondhlana and Madziva 2018).

## The challenges and potential solutions for African institutions to engage the diaspora

Our third research question focused on the challenges African institutions face in engaging with and transferring knowledge from the diaspora. The findings reveal a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that hinder effective collaboration. We combined the challenges with the fourth research question on suggested solutions as these were usually tackled by participants as a unified response.

Analyses from studies such as those carried out by Shin et al. (2022) and Olayiwola et al. (2020) have pointed towards a dichotomy where, on one hand, the African diaspora is seen as a beacon of hope and, on the other, engagement with them is fraught with systematic, policy-induced, and sociocultural

hurdles. Insights from scholarly works (Brinkerhoff, 2012) and narratives from participants provided a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted barriers at play including the following challenges and suggested solutions.

### **Trust and physical presence in business operations**

The issue of trust, or rather the lack thereof, in doing business from afar was a major concern as a participant noted:

**“ You hear stories about not doing business in Africa if you are not physically present. People tell you of how they've been burned, and how you're not there. Oh, they're going to siphon your money. Oh, they won't do the job, they won't do this, and they won't do that.**

Echoing a similar challenge, one academic who sought reintegration with a former institution expressed sentiments of being labelled unpatriotic:

**“ I was told that my former Vice Chancellor would never be accepted back as my former colleagues viewed diaspora academics as traitors who were quick to desert their institutions at the slightest sign of economic problems.**

The experience of being labelled as unpatriotic was dismissed by Baser & Swain (2009) who viewed embracing diaspora academics as promoting 'brain circulation' thereby enriching both their host and home countries. However, institutional resistance and stigma often challenge their reintegration, as noted in their research.

Participants suggested that to mitigate this issue, African institutions could develop secure platforms for business transactions that assure both parties. As one noted:

**“ Possible solutions could include providing legal support for diaspora investors and creating transparent mechanisms for project monitoring. Fostering partnerships with reputable diaspora organisations can also help build credibility.**

Additionally, participants also highlighted the need for educational institutions to actively promote programs that facilitate the integration of diaspora members, such as temporary or virtual returns. Promoting success stories of diasporic contributions can change perceptions and highlight the value these academics bring. Utilising technology to create robust and secure platforms for virtual engagement of the diaspora in mentoring, consultancy, and knowledge-sharing can help in overcoming some of the barriers caused by distance. Reinforcing collaborations between diaspora academics and home country institutions through joint research projects and academic exchange programs can help by tapping into cutting-edge research and educational resources.

### **Corruption and institutional reliability**

Corruption emerged as a recurring theme, particularly from the institutional participants as one explicated:

**“ The problem with Africa is still that of corruption. We sat down with the government officials and tried to convince them to consider diasporans as we would get the cheapest possible price... but they weren't buying into it. We suspect that the officials wanted a bribe.**

The account of government officials demanding bribes points to a larger issue that has been well-documented in the literature (Brinkerhoff, 2012). Corruption not only hampers direct investment but also tarnishes the perceived credibility of institutions, which is crucial for the diaspora's involvement.

Participants considered policy reforms and fair implementation as necessary to tackle corruption. This could include strengthening anti-corruption legislation, ensuring the independence of anti-corruption bodies, and creating a culture of accountability. Encouragingly, international collaborations with agencies that have a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption were seen as a strategy to improve the current practices.

### **Institutional and legal barriers**

Institutional stakeholders in Africa often struggle with limited resources, bureaucratic rigidity, and a lack of clear policies for diaspora engagement. This institutional landscape, shaped by colonial and postcolonial governance structures, can create barriers to effective knowledge transfer and collaboration. As one university administrator noted:

**“ We recognise the value of diaspora expertise, but our systems are not always flexible enough to accommodate their unique positions. Sometimes, it's a challenge just to create appropriate contractual arrangements for short-term collaborations.**

This comment highlights the need for institutional reforms that can better facilitate diaspora engagement, addressing the legacy of colonial-era administrative structures that may not be conducive to modern, transnational collaborations.

Participants highlighted institutional barriers as challenges hindering their contribution. For example, an educator with a decade of experience overseas narrated the arduousness of re-establishing a career back home due to immense bureaucratic barriers. Similarly, a diaspora investor dedicated to the proliferation of rural schools underscores the procedural adversities faced by narrating:

**“ Securing permits, finding local partners, it is a constant battle. If the processes were smoother, we could do so much more.**

The frustration voiced here gestures towards an institutional rigidity that not only debilitates proactive change-makers but also implicitly discredits the qualifications and potential of African diaspora members to propound improvements in their own communities.

Moreover, prevailing colonial-era mobility constraints that affect the diaspora, as discussed by a social entrepreneur looking to invest in impactful local projects, demonstrate the failure of policy frameworks to adapt to the contemporary needs of transnational African professionals. The entrenched vision of diaspora members as 'foreigners', rather than as nationals with vested interests and invaluable contributions, exemplifies how policies remain entrenched in archaic, exclusionary paradigms.

By side-lining African know-how and favouring expatriate expertise, these countries inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of dependency and undermine their own pool of highly skilled professionals eager to contribute to their nation's growth and well-being. African institutions must recalibrate their recognition and integration processes, policies, and perceptions to foster an environment that embraces its diaspora as a critical resource for development and innovation.

## Stigma attached to diaspora talent

Beyond institutional and legal barriers, there is a stigma attached to diaspora talent, according to one innovator:

**“ I have seen a number of my designs being used in my country mainly in telecoms. Those products were supplied by foreign companies I licensed the technologies to and my countrymen embraced the products because they came through foreign companies - Can you imagine? In Africa, we embrace technologies from abroad, yet a number of these products are African brains.**

The stigma attached to diaspora talent is particularly discouraging for African innovators who face obstacles in having their work recognised and valued in their home markets. The preference for foreign products, even when local inventors create them, is a manifestation of postcolonial consumer behaviour that devalues local expertise in favour of foreigners, as discussed by Shizha (2010). This attitude undermines the potential for local industry growth and the cultivation of indigenous innovation ecosystems.

To change the stigma against local innovation, participants suggested the need to promote 'Made in Africa' campaigns that highlight local success stories in innovation and embrace innovations by the African diaspora. As one participant commented:

**“ Do you know that one-third of entrepreneurs/innovators in the USA are foreigners? Our sons and daughters are part of designing teams designing cars at those big car makers, amazing computer programmers, fixing aircraft for major airlines, and pioneering medical solutions.**

This acknowledgement of the African diaspora's significant contribution to global innovation speaks to the concept of 'brain gain', where the skills and expertise of those living outside the continent can be leveraged for its development. As highlighted by a participant, many Africans abroad are excelling in various sectors such as technology, automotive, aviation, and medicine. Studies by Nkongolo-Bakenda & Chrysostome (2013) emphasise the valuable contributions of the diaspora to entrepreneurship and innovation in their home countries, should effective engagement strategies be employed.

Participants recommended the establishment of effective knowledge networks that tap into the expertise and talent of the diaspora for innovation, research, development, and education such as think tanks or innovation hubs that are partially manned by professionals from the diaspora. It was also noted that African countries can set up dedicated diaspora offices to provide support to repatriates seeking to start businesses, focusing on proper checks without the intention to intimidate them. Recognising diaspora contributions at national events and through media could also foster a supportive environment.

## Scrutiny of Diaspora Endeavours

Participants highlighted instances where successful endeavours are met with scrutiny rather than support. In this regard, some participants felt that there were efforts to “Pull him/her Down” when someone appeared to be doing well. One successful innovator reported:

“ We were investigated by all security agencies, many felt threatened by our business. We were questioned about the source of our funds, our partners, other governments, companies we were doing business with, and some rubbished us.

These findings reflect a broader sense of jealousy, scrutiny and scepticism towards the diaspora as observed by Agyeman (2014). For Mercer et al. (2009) these behaviours can sometimes stem from concerns about unequal wealth distribution, neo-colonial influences, or the perceived allegiance of the diaspora members. This cultural dynamic can discourage diaspora engagement and detract from the collaborative potential between local and international African talents.

To address this, participants suggested the establishment of fair legal frameworks that protect entrepreneurs and investors, including those from the diaspora. These frameworks should standardise the scrutiny process to ensure that it is not arbitrarily applied or used to intimidate successful diasporans but is instead part of a routine due diligence that fosters transparency and confidence among all stakeholders. Where these policies are in place participants decried the unfair implementation processes which tended to favour high-profile diaspora figures at the expense of broader diaspora interests.

## Enabling Diaspora Engagement

Developing financing mechanisms such as diaspora bonds or investment funds to support diaspora-led projects was suggested. This could include providing tax incentives for diaspora investments, offering matching grants for development projects, or reducing bureaucratic hurdles for business setup and

land acquisition. This would go a long way in assisting the diaspora beyond just using them as one participant suggested:

“ We need to move beyond seeing the diaspora as just a source of remittances. There's a wealth of knowledge and experience that can transform our institutions if we create the right channels for collaboration.

This perspective aligns with coloniality theory's call for decolonising knowledge structures and recognising the value of diverse epistemologies in driving development.

Participants indicated a deliberate exclusion from participating in key activities and decisions in their home countries, for example, voting. To facilitate active diaspora engagement, participants recommended the development of programs that are sensitive to the needs of diaspora communities. These might include dual citizenship arrangements, voting rights for the diaspora, and formal channels for diaspora members to input into national development plans. Furthermore, the creation of reintegration programs that assist with professional accreditation, recognition of qualifications, and job placement for returning professionals would make the transition smoother for those willing for permanent return. However, a participant from an African institution cautioned:

“ When the Diaspora Engagement Committee was established, we were all quite optimistic about its potential to better connect our diaspora community. The Partnership Taskforce seemed earnest in its goals of driving investment, knowledge sharing and cultural exchanges. In the early stages, their efforts led to some notable successes.



“ Investments did flow in and capacity-building programs made valuable contributions. But it soon became apparent that institutional support was wavering.

The participant added that:

“ After three years, with no advocacy at higher levels and no champions/members from the diaspora, the Taskforce has become an empty shell. This outcome shows we still have far to go in prioritising the diaspora community through concrete long-term support, not just fleeting gestures.

Constituting diaspora advisory councils must therefore include diaspora leaders and professionals who can provide

insight into the needs and expectations of the diaspora community. These members can advise on policy matters and help design frameworks that are considerate of diaspora sentiments and cultural nuances.

### Framework for diaspora knowledge democracy

Addressing our final research question, we synthesised the insights from diaspora professionals and African stakeholders to develop a framework for more inclusive and effective diaspora engagement. Figure 1 visually depicts the framework wherein policy is at the core supporting the building blocks namely incentives and support, knowledge exchange, engagement channels, and impact reviews.

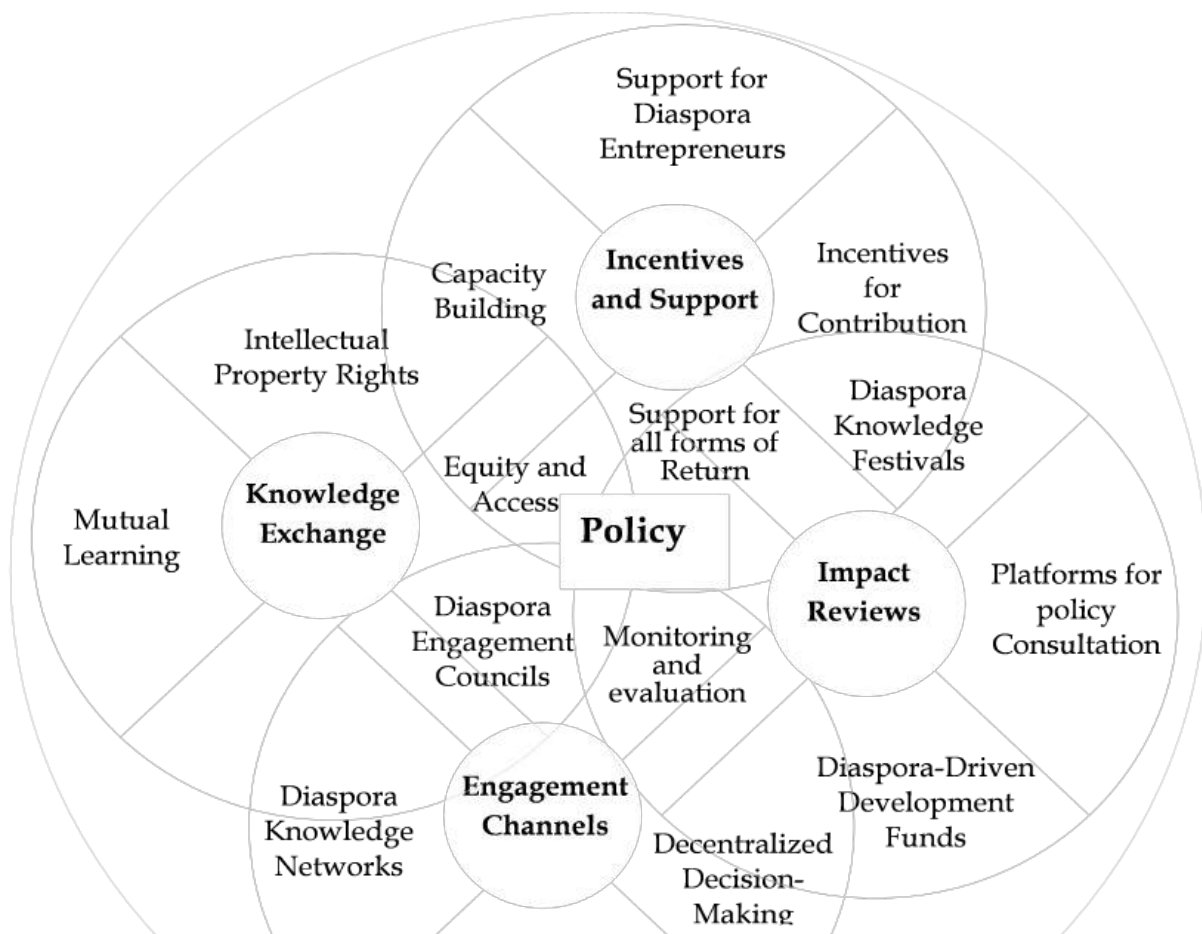


Figure 1: Framework for diaspora knowledge democracy

Enabling policies that dismantle colonial divisions through strengthened mobility and participation rights serves as the foundation for dismantling hierarchical structures and empowers diverse voices. Robust engagement platforms facilitate multidirectional knowledge exchange between diaspora communities and stakeholders across Africa fostering collaboration and aligning with the principles of knowledge democracy. The emphasis on diverse voices and collaborative networks aligns well with the concept of knowledge democracy, moving away from hierarchical structures that concentrate power. The emphasis on coordinated incentives and support for diaspora initiatives is key. By bringing together technical expertise from various settings, these initiatives could accelerate work on pressing issues, capture relevant insights on project implementation and scale successes. Regular evaluation would ensure the initiatives remain responsive.

While ambitious, the viability of this framework could be enhanced through pilot testing of individual elements with staggered rollout. For example, launching an initial engagement platform and paired exchange program between select diaspora networks and institutions may surface practical considerations to refine implementation strategies. Securing multi-stakeholder buy-in and identifying sustainable funding mechanisms early also seem prudent to anchor the approach. Diaspora advisory boards and reciprocal short secondments may aid governance and coordination. Overall, properly operationalised, this inclusionary, collaborative model holds promise for catalysing Africa's development trajectory through optimised diaspora participation and knowledge-sharing for the future benefit of all.

This commitment must be rooted in a shared recognition of the diaspora's unique value. Their cultural competencies, technical skills, and experiential knowledge are all essential assets for Africa's self-determined progress.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of diaspora professionals and African institutions using the coloniality lens. Our findings revealed that while individual and institutional efforts have made inroads, there remains a lack of coordinated strategy to maximise diaspora contributions through knowledge democracy. To overcome these challenges, a paradigm shift is proposed, reframing the diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners and embracing their expertise and contributions.

The study emphasises the importance of mobilising human capital through bridge-building centred on reciprocal knowledge-sharing. Establishing robust diaspora engagement platforms featuring multi-stakeholder participation can address trust issues and bureaucratic challenges. Recognising diverse contributions through support networks nurturing collaboration between technical professionals, entrepreneurs, scholars, and community groups will catalyse inclusive growth. Addressing corruption and promoting accountability strengthens institutional reliability for investors and partners.

Going forward, a coordinated transnational approach is needed to overcome fragmented efforts and resource constraints. Capacity strengthening initiatives must engage grassroots organisations for widespread impact translating research.

Tracking best practices and metrics can optimise programs adapting to complex realities.

Overall, this study calls for reconceptualising diaspora as equitable knowledge democracy partners as central, not peripheral, to development visions. Operationalising inclusive models demanding interactivity between policymakers,

institutions, and diaspora communities will build the requisite buy-in and ownership for sustainable progress. Only by dismantling divides and forging unity founded on mutual recognition and benefit can Africa harness its full spectrum of human capital to ignite an inclusive, self-determined trajectory of growth.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.4UJ2SRMF>

# Economic inclusion in crisis: Challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's economic crisis, characterised by hyperinflation, currency instability, and high unemployment, has deepened due to COVID-19, disrupting livelihoods and heightening poverty. The government's reform agenda aims to stabilise the economy, attract investments, and improve social protection, yet faces challenges including political resistance and institutional deficits. This paper investigates policy reform challenges and opportunities, emphasising economic inclusion as a catalyst for equitable access to economic opportunities, fostering social cohesion, and boosting competitiveness. Utilising qualitative methods, it assesses the role of policies in enhancing access to assets, markets, and social safety nets. The paper advocates for stabilisation measures to curb inflation and currency volatility, increased financial access for small businesses, trade policy reforms for market integration, strengthened social protections, and educational investments to match economic demands. It synthesises best practices from global economic inclusion strategies across sectors like agriculture and industry. Concluding with recommendations, the study underscores inclusive policies as pivotal for Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy, advocating for synergy between inclusive growth and sustainable development.

**Key words:** Economic inclusion, policy reform, social protection, competitiveness, sustainable growth



## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of a protracted economic crisis, Zimbabwe stands at a crossroads, with the potential to redefine its future through strategic policy reforms. According to Maimbo and Luo (2021), the nation's economy, once buoyant, now grapples with the repercussions of hyperinflation, currency instability, and soaring unemployment rates. These challenges, compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic, have not only disrupted livelihoods but also heightened poverty, pushing the socio-economic fabric to its limits. This paper seeks to dissect the intricate web of policy reform challenges and opportunities within Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on economic inclusion as a cornerstone for recovery and growth. Economic inclusion, in this context, is more than a mere buzzword; it is the lifeline that could ensure equitable access to economic opportunities, foster social cohesion, and enhance national competitiveness. Through a qualitative lens, the study delves into the role of policies in augmenting access to assets, markets, and social safety nets, while advocating for robust stabilisation measures to mitigate inflation and currency volatility. It underscores the imperative for increased financial access for small businesses, trade policy reforms for market integration, and fortified social protections, alongside educational investments tailored to meet the evolving economic demands. Drawing from a rich tapestry of global economic inclusion strategies, the paper synthesises best practices across pivotal sectors such as agriculture and industry. It culminates in a set of recommendations that not only align with Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy but also champion the synergy between inclusive growth and sustainable development. As Zimbabwe navigates through these turbulent times, this

research illuminates the path towards a more inclusive and resilient economy, where every citizen has a stake in the nation's prosperity.

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's economy has been in a state of flux, marked by a series of economic challenges that have eroded the foundations of financial stability and growth (Maviza, Maphosa, Tshuma, Dube, and Dube, 2019). The onset of hyperinflation has led to a precipitous decline in the purchasing power of the Zimbabwean dollar (Kavila, 2015), creating a cascade of economic hardships for the populace. The unemployment rate has soared, leaving a significant portion of the population without a steady income or the means to support their families. As of 2023, the unemployment rate stands at approximately 46.7%, affecting more than 2.8 million people of working age (Chikandiwa, 2023). Adding to this is the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated these issues, disrupting the already fragile economic activities and amplifying the vulnerabilities of the population (World Bank, 2020). The health crisis has not only strained the country's medical infrastructure but also imposed additional burdens on the economy, as lockdown measures and global uncertainty have stifled economic transactions and investments.

In response, the government of Zimbabwe has initiated a series of economic reforms aimed at stabilising the currency, curbing inflation, and fostering economic inclusion. To further enhance currency stability, the extension of the United States dollar as legal tender until 2030 has been implemented (Reuters, 2023). This move mitigates policy uncertainty and provides a stable backdrop for economic transactions, both domestic and international.

Efficiency and governance within the public sector have also been areas of focus. The government has initiated reforms to streamline public services and improve the governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aiming to ensure transparency and accountability in their operations (Ncube, 2023; Mlambo, 2016).

Agriculture, as a vital sector of the economy, has seen transformative policies aimed at increasing productivity and modernising practices (Schneidman, 2016). These reforms are expected to boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance food security. The private sector's growth and competitiveness have not been overlooked, with initiatives designed to stimulate economic diversification and job creation (Mlambo, 2016). Similarly, financial sector reforms have been introduced to bolster the stability and functionality of this critical sector (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2023). According to Makaye (2019), Land Policy has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of a 99-year land lease program to improve land use and agricultural productivity. This policy is a cornerstone of the government's strategy to modernise agriculture and ensure its role in economic development.

Tax reforms, including the introduction of new taxes on tobacco turnover and mobile network transactions, have been enacted to widen the tax base and increase government revenue (Saungweme, 2021). These fiscal measures provide the necessary resources for public investment and social services, contributing to the overall reform agenda. Collectively, these reforms represent the Zimbabwean government's resolve to address the economic challenges head-on.

However, these efforts have been met with political resistance and are further complicated by institutional weaknesses that undermine the efficacy of policy implementation (Masiyakurima-January and Muzvidziwa-Chilunjika, 2020). The lack of consensus among political actors and the absence of robust institutions capable of navigating the crisis have impeded the path to economic recovery and inclusion (Maguchu, 2019). The relentless surge of hyperinflation has decimated the value of the Zimbabwean dollar, plunging the economy into a maelstrom of financial instability. This economic turbulence has not only eroded the purchasing power of citizens but has also cast a long shadow over the prospects of economic recovery and development. The unemployment crisis looms large, with a burgeoning segment of the populace relegated to the margins, bereft of steady income or the means to sustain their livelihoods.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded these tribulations, acting as a catalyst for economic disruption and amplifying the vulnerabilities of an already beleaguered population. The pandemic's ramifications have transcended health concerns, exerting a stranglehold on economic activities and investment flows, as stringent lockdown measures and pervasive global uncertainty have throttled the nation's economic pulse (Bui, 2024). In the face of this daunting scenario, the government's reformative thrust seeks to anchor the economy, entice foreign investment, and weave a stronger social safety net. Yet, these laudable initiatives are ensnared in a web of political discord and institutional frailties, which stymie effective policy enactment and execution. The absence of a unified political will and robust institutional frameworks has thwarted efforts to navigate through the economic tempest and chart a course towards inclusive prosperity.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the multifaceted challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe's context of economic crisis. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in providing in-depth insights into complex social phenomena, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and the socioeconomic dynamics at play.

Hannig and Jansen (2010) acknowledged that economic inclusion involves intricate interactions between various economic, social, and political factors that are best captured through qualitative analysis. Cypress (2015) coined that qualitative methods enabled a deep exploration of the specific context of Zimbabwe, which is crucial for understanding the unique challenges and identifying tailored opportunities for reform. More so, the focus on individual and collective experiences aligns with the capabilities approach, emphasising the importance of human agency and the subjective aspects of economic participation. Qualitative data provided rich insights into the effectiveness of existing policies and the potential impact of proposed reforms, directly informing policymaking processes. The study utilised a variety of qualitative methods to analyse secondary data, ensuring a thorough comprehension of the subject matter. This included a detailed review of policy documents, documentaries, economic reports, and scholarly articles to gather a range of viewpoints on the economic crisis and possible policy changes. The aim was to situate the insights within the wider conversation on economic inclusion and policy reform. Data collected was subjected to thematic analysis, where patterns, themes, and narratives were identified and interpreted

in relation to the theoretical framework (Bengtsson and Andersen, 2020) of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach. This analysis highlights the key challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards and special attention was given to the sensitive nature of discussing economic hardships and policy critiques in the Zimbabwean context. In this study, a desktop review was conducted, which negates the need for informed consent and ethical clearance typically associated with primary research involving human subjects as argued by Cilliers and Viljoen (2021). The study's ethical framework was adapted to the nature of a desktop review, focusing on the responsible use of existing literature and data. The review process involved a thorough and respectful engagement with the works of other scholars, ensuring proper attribution and acknowledgement of their contributions. The absence of primary data collection from human participants meant that the procedures for obtaining consent were not applicable.

Moreover, since the study did not involve human subjects, there was no requirement for ethical clearance from a review board. However, the study still adhered to ethical standards by conducting a rigorous and unbiased synthesis of available information, maintaining academic integrity throughout the research process. According to Romm (2018), this approach to ethical practice in a desktop review underscores the commitment to responsible scholarship. It ensures that the study contributes to the field in a manner that is informative, respectful of intellectual property, and reflective of the highest standards of academic rigour.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the theory of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach. Inclusive growth, as defined by Ianchovichina and Lundström (2009), and further elaborated by Felipe (2012), advocates for economic growth that is broad-based across sectors and inclusive of all segments of society. This concept is particularly relevant to Zimbabwe, which is facing a severe economic crisis with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. According to the World Bank (n.d), the poverty rate in Zimbabwe was 38.3% in 2019. Additionally, the unemployment rate was reported at 20.5% in the first quarter of 2024 (Zimstat, 2024). The theory of inclusive growth serves as a transformative vision that aims to ensure the equitable sharing of the benefits of economic progress, offering a pathway towards sustainable development and shared prosperity.

The capabilities approach, pioneered by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and highlighted by Alkire (2005), complements inclusive growth by focusing on expanding individuals' freedoms and capabilities, thus empowering them to lead lives they value. This approach emphasises the importance of enhancing people's capabilities through education, healthcare, and social protection, enabling them to seize economic opportunities and realise their full potential. Applying these theories to Zimbabwe's context allows for an analysis of sectors where growth has been non-inclusive, contributing to poverty and exclusion. It also sheds light on the social barriers that prevent certain groups from participating in the economy, highlighting the urgent need for policy reform to foster economic inclusion and empower marginalised populations.

A critical examination of Zimbabwe's current economic policies, as discussed by Kanyenze (2011), reveals gaps that impede inclusive growth and perpetuate economic exclusion. By identifying these shortcomings and assessing their impact, policymakers can develop tailored strategies to promote economic inclusion and social equity. The inclusive growth theory also guides the dissection of Zimbabwe's economic sectors that have failed to contribute to collective prosperity. It allows for a critical examination of policies that may have inadvertently perpetuated poverty and exclusion, such as those affecting the agricultural sector and the integration of marginalised demographics like women and youth into the economic fabric. Furthermore, the theory addresses income disparity and advocates for reforms aimed at achieving a more balanced economic landscape. It also emphasises the importance of social cohesion, especially considering Zimbabwe's social unrest, advocating for policies that promote unity and stability through shared economic success.

## FINDINGS

To dissect the economic trajectory and policy landscape of Zimbabwe, a thorough review of key policy documents has been undertaken. These documents, each a repository of insights and assessments, provided a panoramic view of the nation's economic reforms and their outcomes. The Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum stands out as a pivotal document, offering a retrospective analysis of Zimbabwe's economic journey since independence. It delves into the critical policy issues that have shaped the nation's economic narrative, emphasising the urgency of reforms aimed at macroeconomic stabilisation and investment attraction to foster growth and development (World Bank, 2023).

Complementing this is the 2023 Mid-Term Budget and Economic Review, authored by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development. This document serves as a barometer for the nation's economic and budgetary health, charting the progress made in the first half of the year. It underscores the government's commitment to economic transformation, advocating for strategies that enhance value addition, diversify the economy, and refine the business climate (Ncube, 2019). According to Mshomba (2009), the World Trade Organisation's Trade Policy Review provided another layer of analysis, focusing on the intricacies of Zimbabwe's trade policies. It helped to evaluate the recent developments and challenges faced by the country in the realm of trade, economics, and investment. The review highlights the integral role of trade policy in the broader spectrum of economic reform, stressing the need for Zimbabwe to weave itself more integrally into the global trading system (World Trade Organisation, 2023).

The Annual Economic Review (Mlambo and R.B.Z. 2016) offered an exhaustive evaluation of the economic policies and their ramifications. This document scrutinises fiscal policies, public expenditures, and revenue collection mechanisms, painting a comprehensive picture of the economic landscape and the efficacy of the reforms implemented (Mlambo and R.B.Z. 2016). Together, these documents mentioned above formed a mosaic of perspectives, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's economic challenges and the policy responses crafted to address them. The findings gleaned from these documents underscored a concerted effort by the government to tackle macroeconomic instability, streamline trade policy, and manage fiscal affairs with the goal of propelling the nation towards sustainable growth and economic resilience.

## **The Main Challenges that Zimbabwe Faces in Achieving Economic Inclusion**

According to Kadyamatimba, (2013), Zimbabwe's economy is heavily dependent on primary agriculture and minerals, which creates vulnerability to external disruptions such as weather-related events or sudden price shocks for minerals. This lack of diversification undermines prospects for longer-term economic growth and hampers economic inclusion. On the other end, obstacles in the financial sphere, such as complex credit application procedures, lack of collateral, high lending costs, inadequate venture capital, and non-bank sources of funding, prevent firms from accessing finance (Mole and Namusonge, 2016). This lack of financial capability hinders economic inclusion during times of crisis.

According to Muzurura (2017), corruption in Zimbabwe is a pervasive and entrenched challenge that is significantly hindering economic inclusion, and perpetuating poverty and inequality at large. Corruption has established an environment which is uneven for the citizens, where only those with strong networks and wealth have access to economic opportunities such as government tenders. At the same time, corruption has destroyed every level of the community, from high-level government officials misappropriating public money to low-level bureaucrats demanding bribes for basic services. Resultantly the lack of trust in institutions is growing and hindering economic growth. The resources which are supposed to be used for essential public services are exploited for personal gains. Additionally, Muzurura (2019) argued that corruption has increased in cronyism, with politically connected businesses and individuals getting favourable contracts and treatment, while entrepreneurs and small businesses are not supported. The impact of corruption has far-reaching effects, with the poor and marginalised being affected.

According to Fernandes, Ferro and Wilson (2019), difficulties in gaining information on product standards in destination markets can result in low entry and survival rates for exporting firms. This information failure affects firm entry and survival in foreign markets and hampers economic inclusion. More so, insufficient infrastructure facilities, such as uninterrupted electricity supply, can hinder economic inclusion by preventing firms from entering, investing, and diversifying economic activity. Protection from government interference is necessary to induce a critical mass of private firms to enter, invest, and diversify economic activity. However, excessive government interference can hinder economic inclusion during times of crisis.

The incentive framework in Zimbabwe needs to be addressed to promote economic inclusion. If the incentive framework remains highly distorted and biased against exports or if sectors face significant entry barriers in the form of tariff or non-tariff barriers, active policies are likely to exacerbate the misallocation of resources. Varying institutional capabilities across countries poses a challenge in achieving economic inclusion. Policymakers must be mindful of policies that match their existing capabilities to effectively address the challenges faced during times of crisis (Aiyar et al., 2023; Lewis, 2001).

## **Zimbabwean Government Economic Reforms**

The Zimbabwean government has implemented various economic reforms to address the issues of access to productive assets, markets, and social protection in the country. These reforms have had a significant impact on the country's economy. One of the key changes has been the improvement in

access to credit and productive assets for small and medium-sized enterprises. This has led to increased entrepreneurship and job creation within the country. The World Bank's Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum suggests that to achieve upper-middle income status by 2030, Zimbabwe needs to improve productivity growth and create quality jobs. This implies a focus on enhancing access to productive assets for the informal sector, which accounts for a significant 70% (UNDP, 2023) portion of the country's output and employment.

Additionally, the government's efforts to promote market access and social protection have resulted in improved living standards for many Zimbabweans. The implementation of these reforms has also attracted foreign investment, leading to economic growth and diversification. Economic reforms have aimed at boosting trade to scale up productivity in the formal sector. However, despite improvements in export performance, exports remain dominated by a few primary products. Lowering tariffs on intermediate and capital goods and addressing trade facilitation issues are suggested measures to help Zimbabwe integrate more successfully into global value chains (World Bank, 2022).

The reforms have also targeted social development, with a focus on fiscal discipline and investment promotion. Efforts to enhance revenue collection through tax reforms and to provide access to credit for farmers indicate a move towards strengthening social protection mechanisms and promoting modern farming techniques, which are crucial for food security and agricultural productivity (Matarise, 2023).

Despite these positive outcomes, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. One major issue is the need for continued monitoring and evaluation of the reforms to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. There is also a need to focus on inclusive growth to ensure that all segments of the population benefit from the reforms. Looking ahead, it will be important for the government to maintain its commitment to economic reforms and address any emerging challenges. Additionally, there is a need for continued collaboration with international partners to support the ongoing reform efforts and ensure their success.

The Zimbabwean government's economic reforms have had a positive impact on the country's economy, leading to increased access to productive assets, job creation, and improved living standards. However, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, as well as a focus on inclusive growth, will be essential for sustaining these positive outcomes in the future. According to Zvavahera and Chigora (2015) these reforms are part of a broader strategy to revitalise Zimbabwe's economy, aiming to stabilise the currency, curb hyperinflation, and attract foreign direct investment. The emphasis on agricultural revival, investment in infrastructure, and the creation of special economic zones are additional steps taken to address these critical issues (Matarise, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

To further enhance currency stability, the extension of the US dollar as legal tender until 2030 has been implemented (Nyamunda, 2021). This move mitigates policy uncertainty and provides a stable backdrop for economic transactions, both domestic and international. Efficiency and governance within the public sector have also been areas of focus. The government has initiated reforms to streamline public services and improve the

governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aiming to ensure transparency and accountability in their operations (Ncube, 2023; Mlambo, 2016).

Agriculture, as a vital sector of the economy, has seen transformative policies aimed at increasing productivity and modernising practices (Schneidman, 2016). These reforms are expected to boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance food security. The private sector's growth and competitiveness have not been overlooked, with initiatives designed to stimulate economic diversification and job creation (Mlambo, 2016). Similarly, financial sector reforms have been introduced to bolster the stability and functionality of this critical sector (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2023). Land policy has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of a 99-year land lease program to improve land use and agricultural productivity (Ministry of Lands, 2023). This policy is a cornerstone of the government's strategy to modernise agriculture and ensure its role in economic development.

Tax reforms, including the introduction of new taxes on tobacco turnover and mobile network transactions, have been enacted to widen the tax base and increase government revenue (Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, 2023). These fiscal measures provide the necessary resources for public investment and social services, contributing to the overall reform agenda. Collectively, these reforms represent the Zimbabwean government's resolve to address the economic challenges head-on. By fostering an environment where growth is inclusive and sustainable, these policies are crucial steps towards achieving Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy. The success of these reforms will be pivotal in charting a path towards recovery and shared prosperity for all Zimbabweans.

## Addressing Access to Productive Assets in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean government has implemented economic reforms to address the issue of access to productive assets in the country. These reforms have included measures to improve access to credit and financing for small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as initiatives to promote land reform and redistribution to increase access to land, which is a crucial productive asset in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, the government has also focused on providing training and capacity-building programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of Zimbabweans in various sectors, thereby improving their ability to utilise productive assets effectively (Zvavahera and Chigora, 2015). Additionally, the government has taken steps to improve access to markets by implementing trade facilitation measures and promoting regional integration (Skalnes, 2016). Social protection has also been a key focus of the Zimbabwean government's economic reforms (Dashwood, 2000). The government has implemented various social protection programs to assist vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income families. These programs aim to improve access to essential services and resources, contributing to the overall wellbeing of the population. Furthermore, the Zimbabwean government has also prioritised infrastructure development as part of its economic reforms. Investments in transportation, communication, and energy infrastructure have been crucial in improving access to markets and increasing economic opportunities across different regions of the country.

The focus on improving access to productive assets, market access, social protection, and infrastructure development

indicates a holistic approach to addressing the underlying challenges in the Zimbabwean economy. The government's emphasis on capacity-building and skill enhancement programs underscores its commitment to fostering sustainable economic development and empowering its citizens. Moving forward, it will be imperative for the government to continue monitoring and evaluating the impact of these reforms, especially in the context of inclusive growth and long-term sustainability. Collaborating with international partners and leveraging external support can further strengthen the implementation of these reforms and ensure their continued success. Skalnes (2016) argued that the Zimbabwean government's economic reforms have demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing the economy and a proactive approach to addressing them. By focusing on access to productive assets, market facilitation, social protection, and infrastructure development, the government has laid a solid foundation for sustainable economic progress. The continued commitment to these reforms and the engagement of stakeholders will be pivotal in shaping Zimbabwe's economic future.

## Policy recommendations to enhance economic inclusion and support Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy

In pursuit of economic inclusion and in support of Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy, a multifaceted approach is essential. Fiscal consolidation is paramount, necessitating the implementation of a fiscal policy framework that promotes budget savings and ensures a stable macroeconomic environment. This foundation is critical for attracting both local and international investment, which is further facilitated by the ease of doing business



reforms. These reforms aim to improve the business climate, reduce operational costs, and create a more conducive environment for economic activities.

Empowerment programs play a crucial role in eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable livelihoods. By focusing on empowering women, youth, and people with disabilities, these programs address the root causes of economic exclusion and foster a more inclusive society. Concurrently, infrastructure development is vital, with investments in electricity and water sources being essential for both economic activities and the overall quality of life.

The enhancement of health and education services is another cornerstone of economic inclusion. By improving the quality and accessibility of these services, Zimbabwe can increase its average life expectancy and develop a skilled workforce capable of driving economic growth. In the agricultural sector, policies that boost agricultural productivity are needed to ensure food security and enhance the sector's export potential, particularly in the face of climate change.

Financial inclusion is a critical driver of entrepreneurship and economic participation, especially for marginalised communities. Expanding access to financial services enables individuals to engage in economic activities and contribute to the nation's prosperity. The engagement of the private sector and diaspora is equally important, as their involvement through incentives and partnerships can significantly bolster economic development efforts.

The Government of Zimbabwe can significantly enhance inclusive economic growth by embracing a technology-driven strategy. This would involve bolstering digital infrastructure to improve connectivity,

thereby granting wider access to information and services. It would also mean harnessing e-learning platforms to democratise education and deploying digital financial services to deepen financial inclusion, particularly in remote areas. By leveraging technology, businesses can boost productivity and competitiveness, while the tech sector itself becomes a fertile ground for job creation across various skill levels. Small businesses can benefit from technological tools that level the playing field against larger firms. In healthcare, digital technologies can revolutionise access to services, improving health outcomes for the population. Furthermore, technology can streamline the implementation and monitoring of social policies, ensuring they are effective and reach those most in need. Collectively, these measures can propel Zimbabwe towards a more equitable and prosperous future, in line with its Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy.

Effective natural resource management is imperative for leveraging Zimbabwe's rich natural resources. Policies must be crafted to ensure sustainable exploitation and equitable benefit-sharing, thus contributing to the nation's economic stability and growth. Lastly, a deepened commitment to good governance—encompassing corporate governance, transparency, and anti-corruption measures—is essential to create a fair and just economic environment that supports long-term development and inclusion. These recommendations align with the overarching goals of Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, aiming to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society (Bvirindi, 2021; Golla, & D'Alessandro, 2024; Chitiyo et al., 2019).

## DISCUSSION

The study's findings reveal a complex interplay of economic, social, and political factors that have contributed to the current state of economic exclusion in Zimbabwe. The reliance on primary agriculture and minerals has exposed the economy to external shocks, while systemic corruption and institutional weaknesses have further exacerbated the situation. These challenges highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to policy reform that addresses not only the symptoms but also the root causes of economic exclusion.

The government's economic reforms, while commendable in their intent to stabilise the economy and improve access to productive assets, face significant hurdles. Political resistance and fiscal constraints underscore the importance of building consensus and ensuring the sustainability of reform efforts. The study underscores the critical role of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach as theoretical frameworks guiding these reforms. By focusing on expanding individuals' freedoms and capabilities, policies can be more effectively tailored to promote economic inclusion and empowerment. The positive outcomes of the government's reforms, such as increased access to credit and improved market access, are promising signs of progress. However, the continued dominance of a few primary products in exports and the need for further trade facilitation measures indicate areas where additional focus is required. The study suggests that lowering tariffs on intermediate and capital goods and addressing trade facilitation issues could enhance Zimbabwe's integration into global value chains.

The engagement with international partners and the leveraging of external support are identified as crucial elements in strengthening the implementation of these reforms. Looking forward, the study advocates for a policy approach that encompasses fiscal consolidation, empowerment infrastructure development, programs, and the enhancement of health and education services. Financial inclusion, technology-driven strategies, effective natural resource management, and a commitment to good governance are also emphasised as key components of a strategy to support Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy. The research posits that by embracing a holistic and inclusive approach to economic reform, Zimbabwe has the potential to overcome its current challenges and pave the way for a more resilient and equitable economy.

## CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe faces significant economic challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to elevated levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The government has initiated economic reforms to stabilise the economy, attract foreign investment, and enhance social protection. However, these reforms face various challenges, such as political resistance, fiscal constraints, and institutional weaknesses. This study has explored the concept of economic inclusion as a key driver of sustainable development and shared prosperity in Zimbabwe. Economic inclusion is essential for ensuring that all segments of society have equal access to opportunities, rights, and services that enable them to participate in and benefit from economic growth. By addressing access to productive assets, markets, and social protection, Zimbabwe can foster social cohesion, reduce inequality, and enhance competitiveness.

The government's economic reforms have shown positive outcomes in improving access to credit, market access, social protection, and infrastructure development. Moving forward, it will be crucial for the government to continue monitoring and evaluating these reforms, focusing on inclusive growth and long-term sustainability. Collaborating with international partners and leveraging external support can further strengthen the implementation of these reforms and ensure their success.

By embracing a multifaceted approach includes fiscal consolidation, empowerment programs, infrastructure development, health and education services, financial inclusion, technology-driven strategies, natural resource management, and good governance, Zimbabwe can unlock economic opportunities, enhance social policies, and build a more equitable future. These policy recommendations align with the goals of Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, aiming to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society. By prioritising economic inclusion and sustainable development, Zimbabwe can overcome its economic challenges and pave the way for a more inclusive and resilient economy.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.59186/SI.4UJ2SRMF>

# Economic inclusion in crisis: Challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's economic crisis, characterised by hyperinflation, currency instability, and high unemployment, has deepened due to COVID-19, disrupting livelihoods and heightening poverty. The government's reform agenda aims to stabilise the economy, attract investments, and improve social protection, yet faces challenges including political resistance and institutional deficits. This paper investigates policy reform challenges and opportunities, emphasising economic inclusion as a catalyst for equitable access to economic opportunities, fostering social cohesion, and boosting competitiveness. Utilising qualitative methods, it assesses the role of policies in enhancing access to assets, markets, and social safety nets. The paper advocates for stabilisation measures to curb inflation and currency volatility, increased financial access for small businesses, trade policy reforms for market integration, strengthened social protections, and educational investments to match economic demands. It synthesises best practices from global economic inclusion strategies across sectors like agriculture and industry. Concluding with recommendations, the study underscores inclusive policies as pivotal for Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy, advocating for synergy between inclusive growth and sustainable development.

**Key words:** Economic inclusion, policy reform, social protection, competitiveness, sustainable growth

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of a protracted economic crisis, Zimbabwe stands at a crossroads, with the potential to redefine its future through strategic policy reforms. According to Maimbo and Luo (2021), the nation's economy, once buoyant, now grapples with the repercussions of hyperinflation, currency instability, and soaring unemployment rates. These challenges, compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic, have not only disrupted livelihoods but also heightened poverty, pushing the socio-economic fabric to its limits. This paper seeks to dissect the intricate web of policy reform challenges and opportunities within Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on economic inclusion as a cornerstone for recovery and growth. Economic inclusion, in this context, is more than a mere buzzword; it is the lifeline that could ensure equitable access to economic opportunities, foster social cohesion, and enhance national competitiveness. Through a qualitative lens, the study delves into the role of policies in augmenting access to assets, markets, and social safety nets, while advocating for robust stabilisation measures to mitigate inflation and currency volatility. It underscores the imperative for increased financial access for small businesses, trade policy reforms for market integration, and fortified social protections, alongside educational investments tailored to meet the evolving economic demands. Drawing from a rich tapestry of global economic inclusion strategies, the paper synthesises best practices across pivotal sectors such as agriculture and industry. It culminates in a set of recommendations that not only align with Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy but also champion the synergy between inclusive growth and sustainable development. As Zimbabwe navigates through these turbulent times, this

research illuminates the path towards a more inclusive and resilient economy, where every citizen has a stake in the nation's prosperity.

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's economy has been in a state of flux, marked by a series of economic challenges that have eroded the foundations of financial stability and growth (Maviza, Maphosa, Tshuma, Dube, and Dube, 2019). The onset of hyperinflation has led to a precipitous decline in the purchasing power of the Zimbabwean dollar (Kavila, 2015), creating a cascade of economic hardships for the populace. The unemployment rate has soared, leaving a significant portion of the population without a steady income or the means to support their families. As of 2023, the unemployment rate stands at approximately 46.7%, affecting more than 2.8 million people of working age (Chikandiwa, 2023). Adding to this is the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated these issues, disrupting the already fragile economic activities and amplifying the vulnerabilities of the population (World Bank, 2020). The health crisis has not only strained the country's medical infrastructure but also imposed additional burdens on the economy, as lockdown measures and global uncertainty have stifled economic transactions and investments.

In response, the government of Zimbabwe has initiated a series of economic reforms aimed at stabilising the currency, curbing inflation, and fostering economic inclusion. To further enhance currency stability, the extension of the United States dollar as legal tender until 2030 has been implemented (Reuters, 2023). This move mitigates policy uncertainty and provides a stable backdrop for economic transactions, both domestic and international.



Efficiency and governance within the public sector have also been areas of focus. The government has initiated reforms to streamline public services and improve the governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aiming to ensure transparency and accountability in their operations (Ncube, 2023; Mlambo, 2016).

Agriculture, as a vital sector of the economy, has seen transformative policies aimed at increasing productivity and modernising practices (Schneidman, 2016). These reforms are expected to boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance food security. The private sector's growth and competitiveness have not been overlooked, with initiatives designed to stimulate economic diversification and job creation (Mlambo, 2016). Similarly, financial sector reforms have been introduced to bolster the stability and functionality of this critical sector (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2023). According to Makaye (2019), Land Policy has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of a 99-year land lease program to improve land use and agricultural productivity. This policy is a cornerstone of the government's strategy to modernise agriculture and ensure its role in economic development.

Tax reforms, including the introduction of new taxes on tobacco turnover and mobile network transactions, have been enacted to widen the tax base and increase government revenue (Saungweme, 2021). These fiscal measures provide the necessary resources for public investment and social services, contributing to the overall reform agenda. Collectively, these reforms represent the Zimbabwean government's resolve to address the economic challenges head-on.

However, these efforts have been met with political resistance and are further complicated by institutional weaknesses that undermine the efficacy of policy implementation (Masiyakurima-January and Muzvidziwa-Chilunjika, 2020). The lack of consensus among political actors and the absence of robust institutions capable of navigating the crisis have impeded the path to economic recovery and inclusion (Maguchu, 2019). The relentless surge of hyperinflation has decimated the value of the Zimbabwean dollar, plunging the economy into a maelstrom of financial instability. This economic turbulence has not only eroded the purchasing power of citizens but has also cast a long shadow over the prospects of economic recovery and development. The unemployment crisis looms large, with a burgeoning segment of the populace relegated to the margins, bereft of steady income or the means to sustain their livelihoods.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded these tribulations, acting as a catalyst for economic disruption and amplifying the vulnerabilities of an already beleaguered population. The pandemic's ramifications have transcended health concerns, exerting a stranglehold on economic activities and investment flows, as stringent lockdown measures and pervasive global uncertainty have throttled the nation's economic pulse (Bui, 2024). In the face of this daunting scenario, the government's reformative thrust seeks to anchor the economy, entice foreign investment, and weave a stronger social safety net. Yet, these laudable initiatives are ensnared in a web of political discord and institutional frailties, which stymie effective policy enactment and execution. The absence of a unified political will and robust institutional frameworks has thwarted efforts to navigate through the economic tempest and chart a course towards inclusive prosperity.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the multifaceted challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe's context of economic crisis. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in providing in-depth insights into complex social phenomena, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and the socioeconomic dynamics at play.

Hannig and Jansen (2010) acknowledged that economic inclusion involves intricate interactions between various economic, social, and political factors that are best captured through qualitative analysis. Cypress (2015) coined that qualitative methods enabled a deep exploration of the specific context of Zimbabwe, which is crucial for understanding the unique challenges and identifying tailored opportunities for reform. More so, the focus on individual and collective experiences aligns with the capabilities approach, emphasising the importance of human agency and the subjective aspects of economic participation. Qualitative data provided rich insights into the effectiveness of existing policies and the potential impact of proposed reforms, directly informing policymaking processes. The study utilised a variety of qualitative methods to analyse secondary data, ensuring a thorough comprehension of the subject matter. This included a detailed review of policy documents, documentaries, economic reports, and scholarly articles to gather a range of viewpoints on the economic crisis and possible policy changes. The aim was to situate the insights within the wider conversation on economic inclusion and policy reform. Data collected was subjected to thematic analysis, where patterns, themes, and narratives were identified and interpreted

in relation to the theoretical framework (Bengtsson and Andersen, 2020) of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach. This analysis highlights the key challenges and opportunities for policy reform in Zimbabwe.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards and special attention was given to the sensitive nature of discussing economic hardships and policy critiques in the Zimbabwean context. In this study, a desktop review was conducted, which negates the need for informed consent and ethical clearance typically associated with primary research involving human subjects as argued by Cilliers and Viljoen (2021). The study's ethical framework was adapted to the nature of a desktop review, focusing on the responsible use of existing literature and data. The review process involved a thorough and respectful engagement with the works of other scholars, ensuring proper attribution and acknowledgement of their contributions. The absence of primary data collection from human participants meant that the procedures for obtaining consent were not applicable.

Moreover, since the study did not involve human subjects, there was no requirement for ethical clearance from a review board. However, the study still adhered to ethical standards by conducting a rigorous and unbiased synthesis of available information, maintaining academic integrity throughout the research process. According to Romm (2018), this approach to ethical practice in a desktop review underscores the commitment to responsible scholarship. It ensures that the study contributes to the field in a manner that is informative, respectful of intellectual property, and reflective of the highest standards of academic rigour.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the theory of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach. Inclusive growth, as defined by Ianchovichina and Lundström (2009), and further elaborated by Felipe (2012), advocates for economic growth that is broad-based across sectors and inclusive of all segments of society. This concept is particularly relevant to Zimbabwe, which is facing a severe economic crisis with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. According to the World Bank (n.d), the poverty rate in Zimbabwe was 38.3% in 2019. Additionally, the unemployment rate was reported at 20.5% in the first quarter of 2024 (Zimstat, 2024). The theory of inclusive growth serves as a transformative vision that aims to ensure the equitable sharing of the benefits of economic progress, offering a pathway towards sustainable development and shared prosperity.

The capabilities approach, pioneered by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and highlighted by Alkire (2005), complements inclusive growth by focusing on expanding individuals' freedoms and capabilities, thus empowering them to lead lives they value. This approach emphasises the importance of enhancing people's capabilities through education, healthcare, and social protection, enabling them to seize economic opportunities and realise their full potential. Applying these theories to Zimbabwe's context allows for an analysis of sectors where growth has been non-inclusive, contributing to poverty and exclusion. It also sheds light on the social barriers that prevent certain groups from participating in the economy, highlighting the urgent need for policy reform to foster economic inclusion and empower marginalised populations.

A critical examination of Zimbabwe's current economic policies, as discussed by Kanyenze (2011), reveals gaps that impede inclusive growth and perpetuate economic exclusion. By identifying these shortcomings and assessing their impact, policymakers can develop tailored strategies to promote economic inclusion and social equity. The inclusive growth theory also guides the dissection of Zimbabwe's economic sectors that have failed to contribute to collective prosperity. It allows for a critical examination of policies that may have inadvertently perpetuated poverty and exclusion, such as those affecting the agricultural sector and the integration of marginalised demographics like women and youth into the economic fabric. Furthermore, the theory addresses income disparity and advocates for reforms aimed at achieving a more balanced economic landscape. It also emphasises the importance of social cohesion, especially considering Zimbabwe's social unrest, advocating for policies that promote unity and stability through shared economic success.

## FINDINGS

To dissect the economic trajectory and policy landscape of Zimbabwe, a thorough review of key policy documents has been undertaken. These documents, each a repository of insights and assessments, provided a panoramic view of the nation's economic reforms and their outcomes. The Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum stands out as a pivotal document, offering a retrospective analysis of Zimbabwe's economic journey since independence. It delves into the critical policy issues that have shaped the nation's economic narrative, emphasising the urgency of reforms aimed at macroeconomic stabilisation and investment attraction to foster growth and development (World Bank, 2023).

Complementing this is the 2023 Mid-Term Budget and Economic Review, authored by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development. This document serves as a barometer for the nation's economic and budgetary health, charting the progress made in the first half of the year. It underscores the government's commitment to economic transformation, advocating for strategies that enhance value addition, diversify the economy, and refine the business climate (Ncube, 2019). According to Mshomba (2009), the World Trade Organisation's Trade Policy Review provided another layer of analysis, focusing on the intricacies of Zimbabwe's trade policies. It helped to evaluate the recent developments and challenges faced by the country in the realm of trade, economics, and investment. The review highlights the integral role of trade policy in the broader spectrum of economic reform, stressing the need for Zimbabwe to weave itself more integrally into the global trading system (World Trade Organisation, 2023).

The Annual Economic Review (Mlambo and R.B.Z. 2016) offered an exhaustive evaluation of the economic policies and their ramifications. This document scrutinises fiscal policies, public expenditures, and revenue collection mechanisms, painting a comprehensive picture of the economic landscape and the efficacy of the reforms implemented (Mlambo and R.B.Z. 2016). Together, these documents mentioned above formed a mosaic of perspectives, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's economic challenges and the policy responses crafted to address them. The findings gleaned from these documents underscored a concerted effort by the government to tackle macroeconomic instability, streamline trade policy, and manage fiscal affairs with the goal of propelling the nation towards sustainable growth and economic resilience.

## **The Main Challenges that Zimbabwe Faces in Achieving Economic Inclusion**

According to Kadyamatimba, (2013), Zimbabwe's economy is heavily dependent on primary agriculture and minerals, which creates vulnerability to external disruptions such as weather-related events or sudden price shocks for minerals. This lack of diversification undermines prospects for longer-term economic growth and hampers economic inclusion. On the other end, obstacles in the financial sphere, such as complex credit application procedures, lack of collateral, high lending costs, inadequate venture capital, and non-bank sources of funding, prevent firms from accessing finance (Mole and Namusonge, 2016). This lack of financial capability hinders economic inclusion during times of crisis.

According to Muzurura (2017), corruption in Zimbabwe is a pervasive and entrenched challenge that is significantly hindering economic inclusion, and perpetuating poverty and inequality at large. Corruption has established an environment which is uneven for the citizens, where only those with strong networks and wealth have access to economic opportunities such as government tenders. At the same time, corruption has destroyed every level of the community, from high-level government officials misappropriating public money to low-level bureaucrats demanding bribes for basic services. Resultantly the lack of trust in institutions is growing and hindering economic growth. The resources which are supposed to be used for essential public services are exploited for personal gains. Additionally, Muzurura (2019) argued that corruption has increased in cronyism, with politically connected businesses and individuals getting favourable contracts and treatment, while entrepreneurs and small businesses are not supported. The impact of corruption has far-reaching effects, with the poor and marginalised being affected.

According to Fernandes, Ferro and Wilson (2019), difficulties in gaining information on product standards in destination markets can result in low entry and survival rates for exporting firms. This information failure affects firm entry and survival in foreign markets and hampers economic inclusion. More so, insufficient infrastructure facilities, such as uninterrupted electricity supply, can hinder economic inclusion by preventing firms from entering, investing, and diversifying economic activity. Protection from government interference is necessary to induce a critical mass of private firms to enter, invest, and diversify economic activity. However, excessive government interference can hinder economic inclusion during times of crisis.

The incentive framework in Zimbabwe needs to be addressed to promote economic inclusion. If the incentive framework remains highly distorted and biased against exports or if sectors face significant entry barriers in the form of tariff or non-tariff barriers, active policies are likely to exacerbate the misallocation of resources. Varying institutional capabilities across countries poses a challenge in achieving economic inclusion. Policymakers must be mindful of policies that match their existing capabilities to effectively address the challenges faced during times of crisis (Aiyar et al., 2023; Lewis, 2001).

## **Zimbabwean Government Economic Reforms**

The Zimbabwean government has implemented various economic reforms to address the issues of access to productive assets, markets, and social protection in the country. These reforms have had a significant impact on the country's economy. One of the key changes has been the improvement in

access to credit and productive assets for small and medium-sized enterprises. This has led to increased entrepreneurship and job creation within the country. The World Bank's Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum suggests that to achieve upper-middle income status by 2030, Zimbabwe needs to improve productivity growth and create quality jobs. This implies a focus on enhancing access to productive assets for the informal sector, which accounts for a significant 70% (UNDP, 2023) portion of the country's output and employment.

Additionally, the government's efforts to promote market access and social protection have resulted in improved living standards for many Zimbabweans. The implementation of these reforms has also attracted foreign investment, leading to economic growth and diversification. Economic reforms have aimed at boosting trade to scale up productivity in the formal sector. However, despite improvements in export performance, exports remain dominated by a few primary products. Lowering tariffs on intermediate and capital goods and addressing trade facilitation issues are suggested measures to help Zimbabwe integrate more successfully into global value chains (World Bank, 2022).

The reforms have also targeted social development, with a focus on fiscal discipline and investment promotion. Efforts to enhance revenue collection through tax reforms and to provide access to credit for farmers indicate a move towards strengthening social protection mechanisms and promoting modern farming techniques, which are crucial for food security and agricultural productivity (Matarise, 2023).

Despite these positive outcomes, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. One major issue is the need for continued monitoring and evaluation of the reforms to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. There is also a need to focus on inclusive growth to ensure that all segments of the population benefit from the reforms. Looking ahead, it will be important for the government to maintain its commitment to economic reforms and address any emerging challenges. Additionally, there is a need for continued collaboration with international partners to support the ongoing reform efforts and ensure their success.

The Zimbabwean government's economic reforms have had a positive impact on the country's economy, leading to increased access to productive assets, job creation, and improved living standards. However, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, as well as a focus on inclusive growth, will be essential for sustaining these positive outcomes in the future. According to Zvavahera and Chigora (2015) these reforms are part of a broader strategy to revitalise Zimbabwe's economy, aiming to stabilise the currency, curb hyperinflation, and attract foreign direct investment. The emphasis on agricultural revival, investment in infrastructure, and the creation of special economic zones are additional steps taken to address these critical issues (Matarise, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

To further enhance currency stability, the extension of the US dollar as legal tender until 2030 has been implemented (Nyamunda, 2021). This move mitigates policy uncertainty and provides a stable backdrop for economic transactions, both domestic and international. Efficiency and governance within the public sector have also been areas of focus. The government has initiated reforms to streamline public services and improve the

governance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aiming to ensure transparency and accountability in their operations (Ncube, 2023; Mlambo, 2016).

Agriculture, as a vital sector of the economy, has seen transformative policies aimed at increasing productivity and modernising practices (Schneidman, 2016). These reforms are expected to boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance food security. The private sector's growth and competitiveness have not been overlooked, with initiatives designed to stimulate economic diversification and job creation (Mlambo, 2016). Similarly, financial sector reforms have been introduced to bolster the stability and functionality of this critical sector (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2023). Land policy has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of a 99-year land lease program to improve land use and agricultural productivity (Ministry of Lands, 2023). This policy is a cornerstone of the government's strategy to modernise agriculture and ensure its role in economic development.

Tax reforms, including the introduction of new taxes on tobacco turnover and mobile network transactions, have been enacted to widen the tax base and increase government revenue (Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, 2023). These fiscal measures provide the necessary resources for public investment and social services, contributing to the overall reform agenda. Collectively, these reforms represent the Zimbabwean government's resolve to address the economic challenges head-on. By fostering an environment where growth is inclusive and sustainable, these policies are crucial steps towards achieving Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy. The success of these reforms will be pivotal in charting a path towards recovery and shared prosperity for all Zimbabweans.

## Addressing Access to Productive Assets in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean government has implemented economic reforms to address the issue of access to productive assets in the country. These reforms have included measures to improve access to credit and financing for small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as initiatives to promote land reform and redistribution to increase access to land, which is a crucial productive asset in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, the government has also focused on providing training and capacity-building programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of Zimbabweans in various sectors, thereby improving their ability to utilise productive assets effectively (Zvavahera and Chigora, 2015). Additionally, the government has taken steps to improve access to markets by implementing trade facilitation measures and promoting regional integration (Skalnes, 2016). Social protection has also been a key focus of the Zimbabwean government's economic reforms (Dashwood, 2000). The government has implemented various social protection programs to assist vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income families. These programs aim to improve access to essential services and resources, contributing to the overall wellbeing of the population. Furthermore, the Zimbabwean government has also prioritised infrastructure development as part of its economic reforms. Investments in transportation, communication, and energy infrastructure have been crucial in improving access to markets and increasing economic opportunities across different regions of the country.

The focus on improving access to productive assets, market access, social protection, and infrastructure development

indicates a holistic approach to addressing the underlying challenges in the Zimbabwean economy. The government's emphasis on capacity-building and skill enhancement programs underscores its commitment to fostering sustainable economic development and empowering its citizens. Moving forward, it will be imperative for the government to continue monitoring and evaluating the impact of these reforms, especially in the context of inclusive growth and long-term sustainability. Collaborating with international partners and leveraging external support can further strengthen the implementation of these reforms and ensure their continued success. Skalnes (2016) argued that the Zimbabwean government's economic reforms have demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing the economy and a proactive approach to addressing them. By focusing on access to productive assets, market facilitation, social protection, and infrastructure development, the government has laid a solid foundation for sustainable economic progress. The continued commitment to these reforms and the engagement of stakeholders will be pivotal in shaping Zimbabwe's economic future.

## Policy recommendations to enhance economic inclusion and support Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy

In pursuit of economic inclusion and in support of Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy, a multifaceted approach is essential. Fiscal consolidation is paramount, necessitating the implementation of a fiscal policy framework that promotes budget savings and ensures a stable macroeconomic environment. This foundation is critical for attracting both local and international investment, which is further facilitated by the ease of doing business

reforms. These reforms aim to improve the business climate, reduce operational costs, and create a more conducive environment for economic activities.

Empowerment programs play a crucial role in eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable livelihoods. By focusing on empowering women, youth, and people with disabilities, these programs address the root causes of economic exclusion and foster a more inclusive society. Concurrently, infrastructure development is vital, with investments in electricity and water sources being essential for both economic activities and the overall quality of life.

The enhancement of health and education services is another cornerstone of economic inclusion. By improving the quality and accessibility of these services, Zimbabwe can increase its average life expectancy and develop a skilled workforce capable of driving economic growth. In the agricultural sector, policies that boost agricultural productivity are needed to ensure food security and enhance the sector's export potential, particularly in the face of climate change.

Financial inclusion is a critical driver of entrepreneurship and economic participation, especially for marginalised communities. Expanding access to financial services enables individuals to engage in economic activities and contribute to the nation's prosperity. The engagement of the private sector and diaspora is equally important, as their involvement through incentives and partnerships can significantly bolster economic development efforts.

The Government of Zimbabwe can significantly enhance inclusive economic growth by embracing a technology-driven strategy. This would involve bolstering digital infrastructure to improve connectivity,

thereby granting wider access to information and services. It would also mean harnessing e-learning platforms to democratise education and deploying digital financial services to deepen financial inclusion, particularly in remote areas. By leveraging technology, businesses can boost productivity and competitiveness, while the tech sector itself becomes a fertile ground for job creation across various skill levels. Small businesses can benefit from technological tools that level the playing field against larger firms. In healthcare, digital technologies can revolutionise access to services, improving health outcomes for the population. Furthermore, technology can streamline the implementation and monitoring of social policies, ensuring they are effective and reach those most in need. Collectively, these measures can propel Zimbabwe towards a more equitable and prosperous future, in line with its Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy.

Effective natural resource management is imperative for leveraging Zimbabwe's rich natural resources. Policies must be crafted to ensure sustainable exploitation and equitable benefit-sharing, thus contributing to the nation's economic stability and growth. Lastly, a deepened commitment to good governance—encompassing corporate governance, transparency, and anti-corruption measures—is essential to create a fair and just economic environment that supports long-term development and inclusion. These recommendations align with the overarching goals of Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, aiming to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society (Bvirindi, 2021; Golla, & D'Alessandro, 2024; Chitiyo et al., 2019).



## DISCUSSION

The study's findings reveal a complex interplay of economic, social, and political factors that have contributed to the current state of economic exclusion in Zimbabwe. The reliance on primary agriculture and minerals has exposed the economy to external shocks, while systemic corruption and institutional weaknesses have further exacerbated the situation. These challenges highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to policy reform that addresses not only the symptoms but also the root causes of economic exclusion.

The government's economic reforms, while commendable in their intent to stabilise the economy and improve access to productive assets, face significant hurdles. Political resistance and fiscal constraints underscore the importance of building consensus and ensuring the sustainability of reform efforts. The study underscores the critical role of inclusive growth and the capabilities approach as theoretical frameworks guiding these reforms. By focusing on expanding individuals' freedoms and capabilities, policies can be more effectively tailored to promote economic inclusion and empowerment. The positive outcomes of the government's reforms, such as increased access to credit and improved market access, are promising signs of progress. However, the continued dominance of a few primary products in exports and the need for further trade facilitation measures indicate areas where additional focus is required. The study suggests that lowering tariffs on intermediate and capital goods and addressing trade facilitation issues could enhance Zimbabwe's integration into global value chains.

The engagement with international partners and the leveraging of external support are identified as crucial elements in strengthening the implementation of these reforms. Looking forward, the study advocates for a policy approach that encompasses fiscal consolidation, empowerment infrastructure development, programs, and the enhancement of health and education services. Financial inclusion, technology-driven strategies, effective natural resource management, and a commitment to good governance are also emphasised as key components of a strategy to support Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy. The research posits that by embracing a holistic and inclusive approach to economic reform, Zimbabwe has the potential to overcome its current challenges and pave the way for a more resilient and equitable economy.

## CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe faces significant economic challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to elevated levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The government has initiated economic reforms to stabilise the economy, attract foreign investment, and enhance social protection. However, these reforms face various challenges, such as political resistance, fiscal constraints, and institutional weaknesses. This study has explored the concept of economic inclusion as a key driver of sustainable development and shared prosperity in Zimbabwe. Economic inclusion is essential for ensuring that all segments of society have equal access to opportunities, rights, and services that enable them to participate in and benefit from economic growth. By addressing access to productive assets, markets, and social protection, Zimbabwe can foster social cohesion, reduce inequality, and enhance competitiveness.

The government's economic reforms have shown positive outcomes in improving access to credit, market access, social protection, and infrastructure development. Moving forward, it will be crucial for the government to continue monitoring and evaluating these reforms, focusing on inclusive growth and long-term sustainability. Collaborating with international partners and leveraging external support can further strengthen the implementation of these reforms and ensure their success.

By embracing a multifaceted approach includes fiscal consolidation, empowerment programs, infrastructure development, health and education services, financial inclusion, technology-driven strategies, natural resource management, and good governance, Zimbabwe can unlock economic opportunities, enhance social policies, and build a more equitable future. These policy recommendations align with the goals of Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, aiming to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous and empowered upper-middle-income society. By prioritising economic inclusion and sustainable development, Zimbabwe can overcome its economic challenges and pave the way for a more inclusive and resilient economy.

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