

Nothing Other Than Speaking Out: the struggle for electoral participation and accountability in Zimbabwe



A Democracy Constructed via Violence

Despite the presence of the formal structures and institutions of participatory political democracy in Zimbabwe – local, national and presidential elections; local councils and a national parliament - the most superficial acquaintance with the history of post-independence Zimbabwe reveals profound problems with how it functions in practice. Joy Mabenge, ActionAid's Country Director in Zimbabwe contends that this dysfunction is rooted in the origins of the modern state, *"The nature of our democracy has been constructed via violence...Independence itself came through an armed liberation struggle...Although we seemingly had dealt with a violence that was based on race, we immediately got into violence that was informed by tribe and ethnicity"*. He points to the notorious Matebeleland 'Gukurahundi' massacres of the immediate post-independence era in the 1980s and the continued violence that has defined politics up to the present. *"What does this do to society? It polarises society. So our society, our politics is polarised along political grounds."*



Joy Mabenge, Country Director, ActionAid Zimbabwe - ©ActionAid

Barriers to Participation

Violence, and the intimidation that the fear of violence generates, are major factors that have a deadening effect on political participation, particularly for marginalised sectors of society including women, young people and people living with disabilities. There are also many other factors that build barriers to participation. Nkosilathi Moyo, a prodemocracy campaigner and Director of the Zimbabwe Organisation for Youth in Politics (ZOYP), highlights the lack of access to relevant information, particularly in rural areas: *"People do not have access to information. For instance, the issue of national budgets. National budgets are advertised in papers, in national papers. So, how many people afford newspapers? ... I attended quite a lot of public consultations on the national budget. They are poorly attended because people do not know about that...This is to do with voter education, civic education, registering of candidates, registering of voters, there's still a lot of work that needs to be done"*. Joana Mamombe, elected as MP for Harare West in 2018 at the age of 25, the youngest woman representative in Parliament, also emphasises this point, *"The main challenge is access to information... The budget making process assumes that people have information about income and expenditure of government or councils to make a meaningful input. Without this information it is difficult to make meaningful participation in a budget making process"*.



Nkosilathi Moyo, Director, Zimbabwe Organisation for Youth in Politics



Joana Mamombe, MP for Harare West

Social and religious attitudes inhibit many women from speaking out openly. Putting themselves forward for public positions can attract hostile attention. Polite Ziwenga is a Councillor on Nyaminyami Rural District Council, *“According to cultural and religious beliefs, in most communities, it is even seen as a wastage of money to support a woman to get into leadership positions. At times you can even be labelled as a prostitute as they believe that a decent woman should not be one who moves around too much but should stay at home and bear children”*. She adds, *“Men also take advantage of women campaigning for office. They ask for sexual favours for them to support you: ‘if you have sexual intercourse with me I will support you’. Sexual harassment is a major problem that we women face when it comes to political participation”*.

An assertion that is corroborated by findings of the [International Foundation for Electoral Systems \(IFES\)](#) research, that women engaging in elections as candidates, voters and journalists in 2018 were experiencing devastating sexual extortion, physical violence, harassment and intimidation from their bosses, colleagues, religious leaders and domestic partners, both in physical and online forms.

Nkosilathi Moyo agrees, *“Women who run for public office are labelled, they are called all sorts of names and there are the stereotypes that in politics women cannot make it on their own without using their bodies, all those stereotypes... There’s still this general perception to say, men are better leaders than women. I appreciate the role of civil society and women’s rights organisations, the work which they are doing in terms of advocating for equal participation of men and women but at the moment the political terrain still favours men because of religious beliefs, cultural beliefs and the stereotypes.”*

Despite being a demographic majority, young people are marginalised by ageist attitudes that attempt to deny them a voice. Nkosilathi Moyo, from his position with ZOYP has witnessed that, *“People do not believe that young people can hold public office and the opinion of young people is not taken very seriously”*. There is a wide belief that authority and competence still belong to the men of the Independence war veterans’ generation. Fear is a major disabling factor for youth, *“Where I work we encourage young people to participate in political processes, so we encourage them to run for public office. The most common response they give you is that politics is dangerous, ‘I can get killed, I can get harmed, I can get targeted’”*.



Polite Ziwenga, Councillor, Nyaminyami Rural District Council - ©ActionAid

Lovemore Maiko is an exception, a young person who has, with the support of the Activista youth movement, successfully been elected Councillor and Mayor of Zimbabwe's third largest city. He explains that even the simple process of registering to vote can be alienating for young people, *"The way they do it, officers frustrate people to the point that they finally lose interest. It's not just a system when you turn 18, he or she is on the voters roll without going through that process of queuing, being asked a lot of questions. It really frustrates, particularly young people"*. Joana Mamombe confirms, *"There are several requirements to register to vote including proof of residence which are an impediment to millions of young people and other non-home owners. This disenfranchises many would-be participants in the electoral process"*.




Lovemore Maiko, Mayor, Chitungwiza City Council

There are also many other structural barriers that act to discourage participation, particularly of marginalised groups including:

- **The discrepancy in age requirements to vote and stand for elections: while citizens must be 18 years or older to vote, they must be 21 years or older to contest the Local Authority Elections and the National Assembly (lower house) elections. Meanwhile, citizens must be 40 years or older to be appointed to the Senate (upper house) or to contest the Presidential Elections.**
- **A lack of term limits for Local Government and National Assembly seats restricts opportunities.**
- **Restrictive requirements such as proof of residency.**
- **Election candidate registration fees are out of reach for many women and young people.**

Poverty is a huge disabling factor. It discourages engagement by those who can spare little time for involvement in meetings if they have insufficient resources to feed their families. Joy Mabenge observes, *"People are concerned about putting food on the table and they ask themselves 'what does it help me to go and participate in a meeting around reform or electoral processes at a time I could actually be in my field and cultivating, to ensure that this coming season I will get something to feed my children? What does it help me to go and participate in a meeting at a time I must be queuing for food aid?"* This disincentive can be even greater for women. Due to the unfair distribution of care work in society, women are still frequently expected to be responsible for the provision of food, water, firewood and other domestic resources that can severely limit time and energy for engagement in activities outside the home.

Those standing for election, even at local level, can incur substantial costs. Apart from registration fees, transport to visit communities around a ward or constituency can be a barrier, as can printing any campaign materials – posters, leaflets, manifestos, t-shirts etc. These resources are often not provided by political parties. This clearly advantages those with personal resources who can not only make their candidacy far better known but also offer inducements. Barbra Saunyama, a former Councillor came up against this issue: *"When contesting with men, usually they buy beer for people and automatically they will be voted for"*. Lovemore Maiko protests that campaigning has become transactional: *"People are saying that your opponent is actually pumping out money and how do you navigate that?"* Joana Mamombe adds, *"Political parties generally don't pay for candidates fees - candidates have to find the money and register on their own. This increases the cost of participating in the electoral process. Coupled with the high costs of campaigns many capable candidates, especially women, do not participate in elections because it is very expensive"*.



Joy Mabenge highlights that, *“In Zimbabwe it is very difficult to distinguish the state from the ruling party... As ZANU-PF said in the past ‘You are either with us or you are an enemy of the state’. So that construct itself makes it difficult for people to freely participate.”* This not only contributes to the abuse of force but also to the unequal resourcing of candidates. *“So, those who have access to state resources would deploy them for the benefit of their candidates. Those that do not have would be left to fend for themselves”.* State assets (media, venues, transport etc) can be mobilised to support candidates on a partisan basis. Joana Mamombe also adds partisan food distributions to the list of abuses.

Nkosilathi Moyo draws on experience in his home town, *“Kwekwe is a mining city. For one to access [permits for] those mines, one is expected to be a supporter of a certain political party. You don’t need your national ID, you use a membership card of a certain political party. Due to the high level of unemployment, there’s no other way that young people can earn a living, mining is our only source of employment. So, this forces them to align themselves with a certain political party as a means of survival... They use their stomachs to control them, how they vote, how they participate, who can be a candidate...”.*

Poverty also leaves young unemployed and disaffected men, in particular, vulnerable to be manipulated as a destabilising element that reinforces the atmosphere of violence and intimidation. Lovemore Maiko observes, *“In most cases they are the ones who are normally used to victimise other groups...young people, in most cases they are the ones that are used as tools to promote that polarisation”.*

The Critical Role of Civil Society

Unsurprisingly, in this context, confidence in the democratic process is undermined. Nkosilathi Moyo reports that, *“People have lost confidence in electoral democracy. One research we did, we found people saying, ‘even if we vote, nothing changes’. They have a feeling that voting is failing to reflect the will of the people, so why wasting time doing it? So that is also what causes apathy... There are allegations of rigging, allegations of the electoral body aligning with certain political parties, yet supposedly a referee...”.*

Lovemore Maiko agrees, *“the issue of polarisation - people feel their views are not really considered, take it as a show, a lip service, not something that will result in their voice being heard”.*

However, despite 40 years of this challenging context, civil society has displayed a remarkable resistance to being pushed out of the political sphere. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have consistently asserted citizens rights and continued to engage with the state and its agencies.

Joy Mabenge stresses the importance of being non-partisan and non-violent. However, that does not mean being non-political. *“In a highly polarised society it is important for civil society to remain non-partisan. Civil society can be political, there is nothing wrong with that. Being political means dealing with political matters. Electoral matters are political matters, so there is nothing wrong with civil society dealing with political matters, ensuring the push for electoral democracy etc. But civil society must remain non-partisan, meaning that it is not inclined towards any particular political party at any particular point in time... ActionAid takes pride in siding with people living in poverty. We unapologetically take sides with people living in poverty, exclusion and those that are vulnerable in society.”* Joana Mamombe agrees that, *“CSOs must remain independent and non-partisan so that their objectives are not confused with those of political parties... CSOs are independent and help disseminate reliable information to communities and also create safe and non-partisan spaces for communities to interact with candidates for elections and make informed choices”.*

In 2018 ActionAid Zimbabwe partnered with the European Commission Pan African Programme to bring together different political parties, MPs and local government authorities to adopt a monitoring system to allow citizens to track delivery against electoral promises and manifestos. The performance management system is managed by Parliament and reports will be made available to promote transparency and accountability.

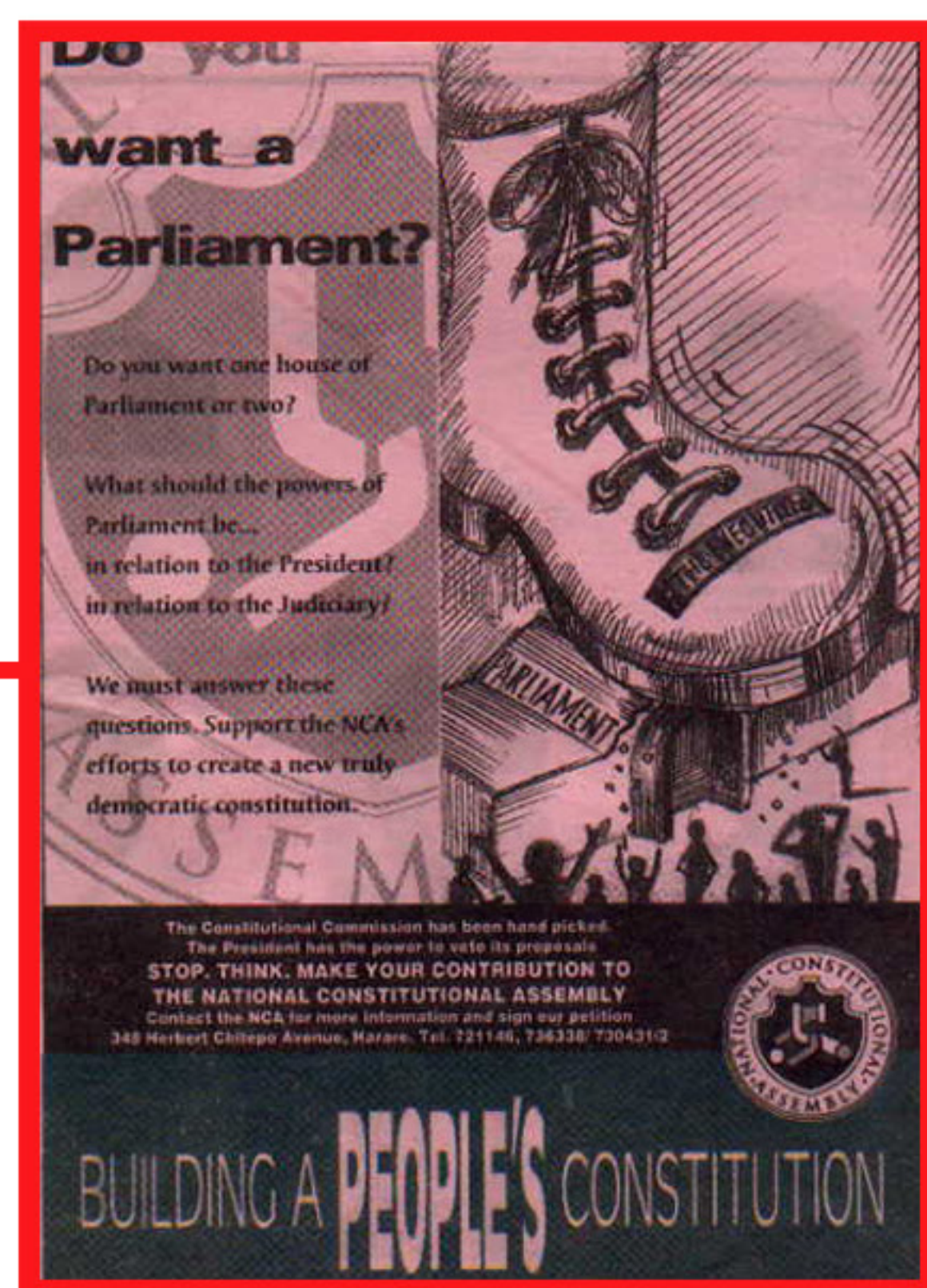


Joy Mabenge defines civil society as, "That space between the family and the broader society which includes the state and the market... Civil society itself under normal circumstances, is viewed as that society that people voluntarily associate with, in order for them to be able to access duty bearers where direct access is not possible. It is not everybody, in a polarised society, who is able to access their Members of Parliament or Councillors or any such other duty bearers". As such civil society has an essential bridging role. Where society is as sharply polarised as in Zimbabwe it is essential to have intermediaries that can narrow the gap between the rulers and the ruled. Not everyone has direct access to their formal representatives but civil society organisations can continue to represent their views. It is an on-going necessity in a hostile environment to constantly re-establish that CSOs are not enemies of the state. In many situations they complement the capacity of the state to deliver essential services to citizens but they also have the legitimate role as watchdog.

Nkosilathi Moyo points out, "Civil society is playing a very pivotal role in complementing what the government is supposed to be doing. We have a government which does not have enough resources, it is bankrupt, to carry out all these things here in our nation. Therefore the civil society is there, not to compete with the government, but to complement the efforts of what the government is doing, what the government is not doing... It's not true that the civil society is here to challenge the regime. The civil society is there to just provide checks and balances to the government. So, the civil society must continue to engage with the government".

Lovemore Maiko agrees, "It is important that we engage with central government to understand what they mean to do, no ulterior motive, capacitating citizens to become active citizens... As local authorities, through interfacing we definitely do understand the kind of work that the civic society might be doing in our area and we'll be very supportive. The same applies, the same must happen with central government."

Despite all the serious challenges, there is no sense of abandoning hope. That hope is reinforced by several substantial achievements over the years – the rejection of the Constitutional Convention's draft Constitution in January 2002 by a popular referendum and the eventual adoption of the 2013 Constitution; the quota for women and reserved seats for people living with disabilities in parliament.



People's Constitution press ads

Joy Mabenge is realistic about the achievements, "We have the 2013 Constitution and many other auxiliary legislations. There are attempts to make society more inclusive. But remember, we can have attempts in terms of policy, we can have attempts in terms of desires, but what matters most is what actually happens on the ground. There have been attempts to be a little more inclusive when you look at the quota system for women, when you look at the reserve seats for representation of people with disability. What really lacks is the genuine political will at the level that actually hold power."

In broader society they has been considerable progress. Polite Ziwengwa has experienced this. "I'm proud of myself and my community who selected me into office considering that our culture and some religions do not allow women to stand in front of men addressing a meeting. But the people of my community supported me. I really appreciate that."

Lovemore Maiko emphasises the need for more voter education that leads to behavioural change, "Civic society must also try to empower citizens, it's not about, you should choose leaders based on how much he has paid you but you have to chose a leader in terms of how much she or he can offer. Is she or he able to deliver? Equal to the task? It has to be contestation of ideas, not contestation of how much money do you have".

Engaging Citizens - participatory tools and processes

Participatory tools and processes are essential to engage citizens within the context of alienation and limited access to information. These interactions provide support and encouragement for citizens' own participation and their voices to be heard.

ActionAid, together with civil society partners, has deployed a range of targeted activities before, during and after election periods. These are conducted alongside the long-term interventions that are encouraging women and young people to develop their self-confidence to express their opinions on issues that affect them. Joy Mabenge describes ActionAid's approach: *"Our strength is on the ground, our strength is in communities where we work, our strength is building capacities around rights holders, ensuring that they are steeped enough to be able to claim their rights from duty bearers, narrowing the gap... between those that have power, who must distribute it and those who are on the other side who do not have power but who must benefit from redistribution, who must benefit from rights, who must benefit from resilience."*



Barbra Saunyama, former Councillor

Barbra Saunyama a former Councillor and member of the Nyanga District Rural Women's Assembly confirms that, *"ActionAid's programmes and initiatives have helped women to be able to stand in positions ...which were [previously] held by men only. Women have more confidence to make their own decisions"*. Tools that have evolved to encourage citizens to analyse their situation and formulate their own solutions and demands include baseline surveys, community scorecards, and campaigns. [Afrobarometer](#) has been a key partner in conducting baseline surveys to assess levels of understanding of electoral processes. [The Mass Public Opinion Institute \(MPOI\)](#) has administered the scorecards to measure citizens' opinions on governance issues and [The National Association of Youth Organisations \(NAYO\)](#) has been a key partner of the Activista youth movement in the #LeaveNoYouthBehind campaign to mobilise young people to register and to vote.

Acting within civil society coalitions, as part of a well-deliberated strategy, a range of other actions has evolved to strengthen citizen participation. New forms of inclusion, consultation and mobilisation have involved citizens actively in town hall meetings and breakfast meetings with CSO leaders and parliamentarians as well as pre- and post-election monitoring. Accountability is increased alongside citizens' active involvement.

Citizens Forums have emerged as a new space for citizens, officials, business and other sectors to meet and discuss local issues. National Citizens' *"Women have more confidence to make their own decisions"*

Conventions have been held in 2018 (addressed by Kofi Annan) and 2019 under the banner of [Citizens' Manifesto](#) – a platform to define a common national vision for Zimbabwe.

These engagements have led to tangible outcomes, including:

- An increase in voter registration and turnout, particularly by youth. 44.5% of registered voters in the 2018 general election were youth, many of whom registered to vote for the first time.
- Women's participation as voters and polling officials was significantly increased. Of the total registered voters, 54% were women, with many more women registering for the first time.
- Women actively participated in conducting the elections, serving at all levels, including as polling officials, presiding officers and constituency electoral officers.
- The 2018 Harmonised Elections marked the first-time women stood as presidential candidates. Of the 23 presidential candidates, four (representing 17 per cent of the total) were women.
- An increase in the number of youths, including Activista members, contesting for office as Councillors and Members of Parliament.
- Young people elected into office as Councillors and MPs e.g. Lovemore Maiko (elected as councillor and now Mayor for Chitungwiza City Council), Joana Mamombe as MP for Harare West constituency.
- Pre- and post-election monitoring by young people, including Activistas, through [ZIMRIGHTS](#).

Polite Ziwenga describes how the engagement and support provided led to her becoming a Councillor in Nyaminyami Rural District Council. From first of all being encouraged to join water point committees, women were encouraged to take part in further training. She became a lead farmer and formed an income savings and lending group. *"All this has benefited many women in my community ...Those initiatives helped us and other women a lot. We are now equipped with knowledge to stand on our own. It also helped to build women's capacity to effectively participate in leadership...So now [there are] positive attitudes towards women in leadership and they have realized that women can lead to develop our area".* All this engagement eventually led to Polite standing for public office, *"Yes, in 2015 I was elected as first coordinator in the water resilience committee before I was elected to become a Councillor. Currently I am the Chairperson of the water resilience committee".*

Lovemore Maiko also credits these interventions for laying the path for him to be elected as a City Councillor and then Mayor, *"I am also here as product of such a process of being capacitated by civil society through Activista, through ActionAid. So, I have a strong conviction that civil society can help change the scope of our society through capacity building".* Prior to her election as Parliament's youngest member, Joana Mamombe participated in the 2017 Activista International Youth Day Commemorations. A former student leader, she has championed the inclusion and participation of young people in public life.

Key lessons that have been gathered from these achievements are that nonpartisan social movements are effective in promoting an inclusive national debate. Participatory processes leading to specific citizen demands are the way to achieve transformation – as demonstrated by the rejection of the Constitutional Convention's draft Constitution in January of 2000 by a popular referendum and the eventual adoption of the 2013 Constitution.



2nd Citizens' Convention 2019

ACDEG – an African charter of hope

From an advocacy perspective, ACDEG, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, adopted by the African Union in 2007, has become a priority initiative. Joy Mabenge has embraced it wholeheartedly, *“Where there are no national remedies it only makes sense for the remedies to be found elsewhere”*. He argues that the shared experience of colonialism and the impacts of globalisation have helped shape a continental identity that can provide mutual support and influence. *“All we need is political willingness by our political leaders and also consciousness by the citizens of the continent in terms of what it entails and the possibilities that are sitting in ACDEG”*. He sees it, together with its review mechanisms as a means for setting continental standards and holding leadership accountable.

The Charter was signed by President Mnangagwa in March 2018, ahead of the presidential election but is not yet integrated into national legislation. There are contradictory signals as, at the same time as approving ACDEG, increasingly repressive legislation has also been introduced. A new Freedom of Information Bill is intended to replace the current Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Maintenance of Order and Security Act to replace the Public Order and Security Act – in both cases threatening to further limit freedom of expression. Despite this, ACDEG and the Constitution of 2013 present opportunities for advocacy and are considered as necessary wedges that can be utilised to open up space for greater political freedom. Despite not being fully implemented Joana Mamombe can see immediate benefits, *“The reports by various observer missions have constantly referred to the ACDEG standards and procedures and implored Parliament, ZEC and government to take on its recommendations. This has allowed the various institutions to be more aware and has helped sharpen understanding on the need for democratic governance”*. Even if outcomes in Zimbabwe are not those which are aspired to, she believes it has value, *“The state reporting mechanisms which requires states to submit biannual reports under the African Charter has also shaped the accountability mechanism for the ACDEG. This helps tracks progress of states”*.

But such high level instruments and charters can seem distant from, and irrelevant to, the reality of life for the majority of people. ActionAid, together with other civil society partners, has been involved in extensive outreach to help raise awareness using social media and podcasts as well as trainings and workshops. ActionAid and NAYO conducted training on ACDEG for 100 young people including Activista Zimbabwe and other youth led organizations and movements.

The aim is to ensure that the principles of ACDEG are incorporated into Zimbabwe’s Electoral Act. One key strategy is to engage the Zimbabwean media to popularize the ACDEG charter to the general populace. Among journalists (print, broadcast and online) invited to a workshop held in 2019 it was discovered that many had little knowledge or understanding of the Charter. The goal of the workshop was that they should be able to identify areas of divergence with current electoral practice in Zimbabwe, e.g. the imposition of fees on domestic observer groups or the lack of enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with ACDEG standards. Workshops have also been held for parliamentarians to support them in their examination of how domestic law is complying with ACDEG. Until disrupted by COVID-19, further workshops, dialogues and events were planned for early 2020 including a Democratic Elections and Governance Awards event to celebrate the work of journalists who published effectively on the subject. Lovemore Maiko is investing hope in the ACDEG process, *“We look forward to seeing it going through parliament, being regarded as not just a document but as something to be implemented so as to change the political landscape in our country. ACDEG is an important tool. It’s a necessary for us if we are gong to change our country from where we are to where we want to take it to be, to promote participatory democracy”*.

Civil society advocacy so far has been influential in achieving:

- Signing of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance by President Mnangagwa on the 21st of March 2018 ahead of the 2018 presidential elections.**
- The amendment of the Zimbabwe Electoral Act in line with ACDEG in May 2018, to align it with provisions of the 2013 constitution, two months ahead of the general elections.**
- Increase in the reporting, awareness and publicity of ACDEG by trained journalists and Activista Zimbabwe members in the print, broadcast and online media.**
- Translation of ACDEG into three local languages by members of Activista Zimbabwe i.e. Shona, Ndebele and Tonga.**

Stand Up and Reclaim Rights

Committed to non-partisan, non-violent action in a highly restrictive context, Joy Mabenge insists *“there is nothing, other than speaking out, that civil society can do to actually repel or push back against the state. It is the only weapon available to civil society to push back against state excesses ... That led to the defeat of the Constitutional Commission’s draft in January of 2000”*.

Even faced with the full force of the state citizens can still bring about change. Nkosilathi Moyo insists that, *“People must stand up and demand their space, reclaim their space, reclaim their rights... Read the constitution, and identify clauses which they can use to substantiate or support their cause... let’s know what is there for us, let’s demand for the respect of our own constitution and use it to address all those challenges...”* He acknowledges that electoral setbacks are deeply discouraging, particularly to young people and that it is necessary to maintain engagement and not just to reach out at election time: *“Let’s prepare our young people, let’s keep them prepared, let’s keep them engaged, let’s keep them motivated so that they just don’t think that you will need them when the elections are approaching ... Let’s keep the fire burning. Because if we don’t do that, we are going to face a challenge of apathy. Because young people are now getting to a point of saying, ‘what does it help?’ We need to keep on... we need to keep them motivated”*.

Joy Mabenge agrees, *“It is an uphill task. But what is important is for civil society to keep pushing, so that Zimbabwe is not left out of the continental community of nations where governments do the right thing and where citizens openly and actively participate in democracy, elections and governance without fear or victimisation”*.

In order to continue to fulfil this role, it is essential for civil society organisations to receive sufficient support and resources. Nkosilathi Moyo warns against donor fatigue in the face of what may seem like intractable problems, *“Because failure to support civil society means this area will be completely shut down. There will be no-one to fill in this void of keeping the people conscious and aware of their fundamental rights”*.

Afterword – criminalisation of dissent

Many of the issues that this case study refers to were exposed in the most horrific manner when Joana Mamombe, MP for Harare West, was abducted, beaten, tortured and sexually abused together with two other opposition Movement for Democratic Change female colleagues on Wednesday 13th May 2020. They were arrested for taking part in a protest against the lack of government support for poor and vulnerable families during the COVID-19 lockdown and were abandoned badly injured by a roadside around 60 miles from Harare two days later.

Joana Mamombe has been an outspoken advocate for vulnerable Zimbabweans and has been previously harassed, detained and charged with subversion. Over the preceding weeks she has been critical of the government’s response and had been working to distribute food and hygiene supplies to vulnerable families in her constituency. At the time of writing she is remanded in custody, together with the two other young women, facing charges of contravening the lockdown and faking their abduction and torture.



Hon. Joana Mamombe, MP (far right) attending ActionAid's International Youth Day event