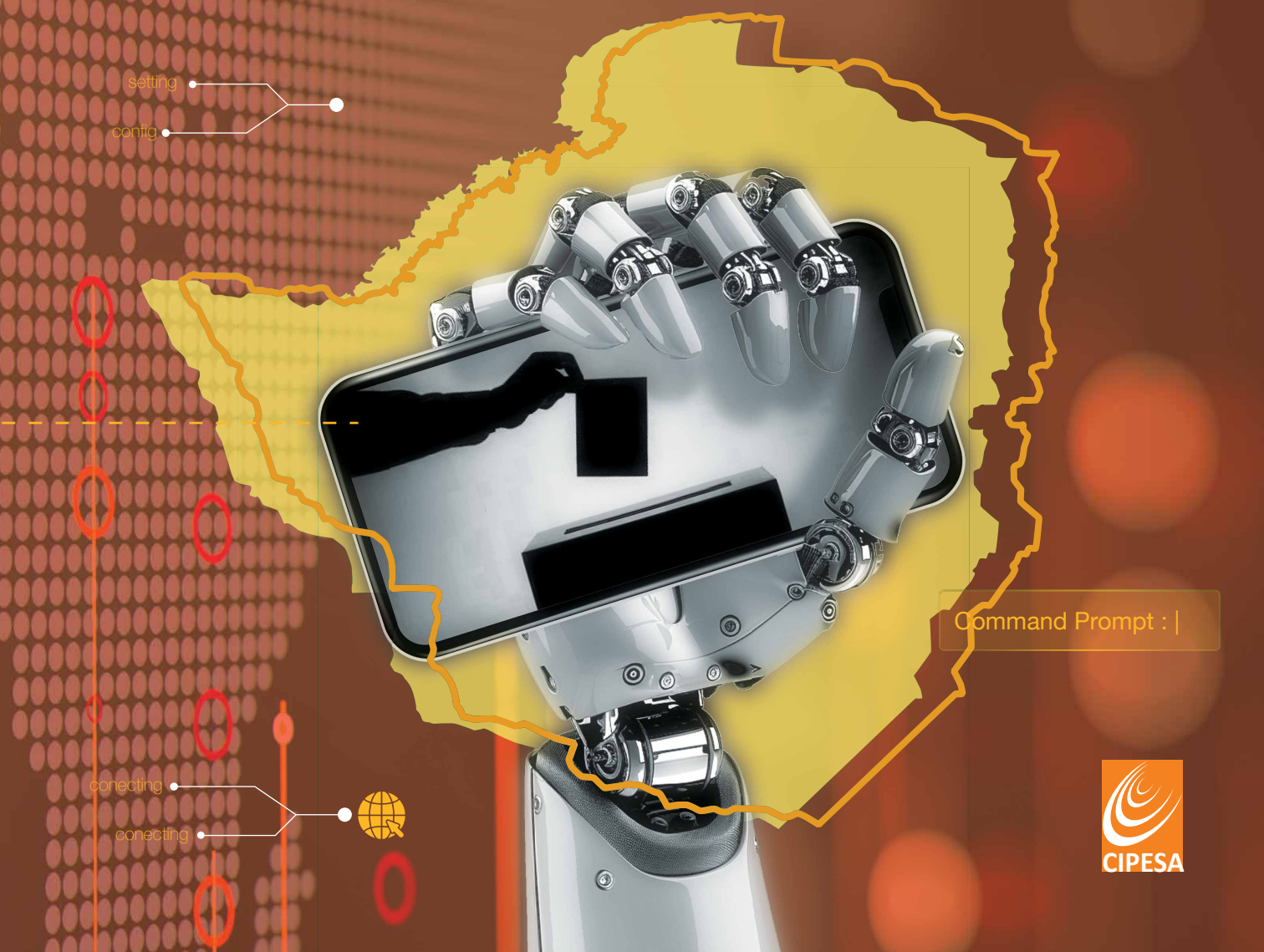
State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2025

Navigating the Implications of AI on Digital Democracy in Zimbabwe

September, **2025**



CIPESA

State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2025
Navigating the Implications of AI on Digital Democracy in Zimbabwe
Written by Natasha Msonza

Published September 2025

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is enabling Zimbabwe's information and governance ecosystems amid uneven digital access, a tightly managed civic space, and piecemeal digitisation. AI-enabled tools are appearing in media production, translation, customer service and analytics, while government-linked deployments cluster around identity systems and surveillance-adjacent smart city initiatives. With limited guardrails in place, AI's trajectory is poised to shape participation, expression and accountability online and offline.

This country report examines how AI's design, deployment and use are affecting civic space and digital rights in Zimbabwe. It maps opportunities and risks across sectors; assesses the adequacy of legal and policy frameworks, and proposes practical steps towards human rights-centred AI governance. The study used a qualitative approach combining desk research, policy and legal analysis, and key informant interviews with purposively selected stakeholders. Evidence was triangulated and analysed thematically to surface patterns around expression, assembly, surveillance and accountability.

Overall, the study highlights the value and opportunities in AI to include workflow gains for journalists and CSOs, enhancing efficiency in e-services, and improving accessibility through language tools. The main risks and harms identified include disinformation and manipulation, opaque platform moderation, AI-enabled surveillance with limited safeguards, bias and exclusion for marginalised groups and affordability and skills gaps that narrow who benefits. In terms of the regulatory posture on AI, the study found that data protection exists but lacks explicit provisions on algorithmic transparency, automated decision-making, explainability, audits and redress. The study also uncovered various governance realities. Interviewees highlighted the absence of an AI policy framework, limited stakeholder engagement, misaligned priorities, weak political will, limited transparency and rights safeguards and fragile public trust in a context of historic digital repression.

The main recommendations were as follows:

- **Government and regulators:** finalise and publish a rights-anchored AI strategy through open consultation; mandate human rights and gender impact assessments for high-risk systems; require algorithmic transparency, auditing and redress; create an independent, multi-stakeholder oversight mechanism; and publish procurement and deployment disclosures.
- **Civil society:** build AI literacy; document harms and case studies; advocate for transparency in public-sector AI; and centre marginalised groups in AI design and oversight.
- **Media:** investigate AI's role in disinformation and platform governance; and expand public-facing digital literacy content on deepfakes, recommender systems and data rights.
- **Private sector and tech companies:** localise tools (languages, access constraints); adopt rights-based documentation (model/dataset cards); and engage in independent audits.
- **Academia:** lead multi-disciplinary research on AI's social impacts; convene citizen dialogues to inform policy.
- **Platforms and international partners:** provide Zimbabwe-specific transparency and due process pathways; support local capacity for standards-aligned, rights-respecting AI governance.

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into governance, commerce, and public life is slowly becoming a reality in Zimbabwe, against a backdrop of growing digitisation, economic fragility, and a constrained civic space.[1] As the country grapples with complex developmental challenges - including high unemployment, restricted media freedom, and weakened public trust in state institutions - emerging technologies such as AI are being used in a governance landscape that is already shaped by surveillance, political polarisation, and uneven access to digital technologies. While public discourse around AI remains limited, recent government interest in Smart City initiatives, AI-driven biometric ID systems,[2] and predictive policing tools[3] marks a critical turning point. These developments present both opportunities and threats for digital rights and democratic participation.

Yet, Zimbabwe lacks a coherent policy, legal, or institutional framework to guide AI development in line with human rights standards. The country does not yet have a national AI law, policy or strategy, and existing laws such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act only partially address concerns about algorithmic decision-making, consent, and transparency. The country is still in the nascent stages of incorporating and adopting AI technologies in selected governance spaces, with limited local expertise. With AI deployments increasingly intersecting with identity systems, electoral technologies, and content moderation, there is a growing risk that digital tools could reinforce existing inequalities and limit public agency, rather than expand it. AI adoption is also occurring in a context of persistent digital exclusion,[4] where internet access remains costly, connectivity is uneven, and data governance frameworks are underdeveloped.

This research seeks to examine AI technologies in Zimbabwe and their implications on civic space and digital democracy. It also interrogates how state and non-state actors are deploying or planning to deploy AI, the regulatory and ethical safeguards, if any, that are in place, and how these intersect with broader digital rights concerns such as access to information, freedom of expression, privacy, and civic participation. It also explores the extent to which AI-related initiatives are inclusive, locally informed, and reflective of the lived realities of Zimbabwean citizens, in particular marginalised groups.

Zimbabwe lacks a coherent policy, legal, or institutional framework to guide AI development in line with human rights standards

1 *Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2025 – Zimbabwe," Freedom House, 2025, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-world/2025 - rates Zimbabwe as 'not free' noting repression of opposition and civil society.*

2 *Zimbabwe govt faces criticism over biometric surveillance project for new Smart City," Biometric Update, 14 February 2023, accessed: 12 July 2025, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202302/zimbabwe-govt-faces-criticism-over-biometric-surveillance-project-for-new-smart-city*

3 *CloudWalk facial recognition deployed in Zimbabwe," SecurityVision Wiki, accessed: 13 July 2025, https://www.securityvision.io/wiki/index.php/CloudWalk_facial_recognition_deployed_in_Zimbabwe*

4 *CIPESA, "State of Internet Freedom in Zimbabwe 2023," Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), 11 October 2023, accessed: 13 July 2025, https://cipesa.org/2023/10/state-of-internet-freedom-in-zimbabwe-2023/.*

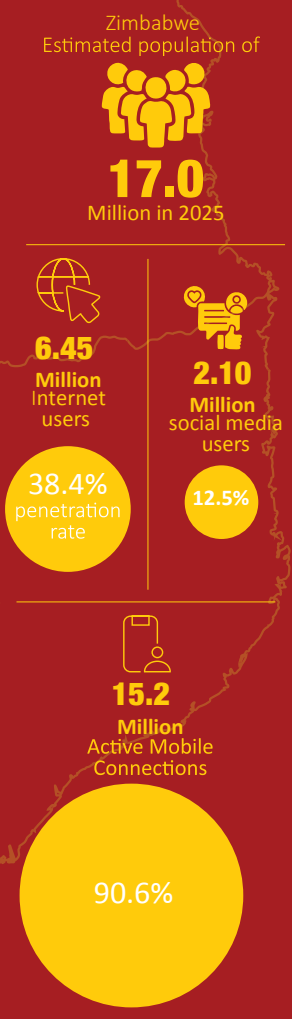
The study is significant because it takes stock of a rapidly evolving technological environment that is outpacing both legal reform and public awareness or comprehension. With the global rise of generative AI, algorithmic profiling, and automated content systems, there is a pressing need to understand how these tools are being used in low-regulation contexts. Zimbabwe, like many African countries, finds itself at the periphery of global AI governance conversations while simultaneously are a site of experimentation, whether through foreign partnerships, pilot deployments, or donor-driven digital transformation agendas. This report seeks to offer a country-level lens on these dynamics, contributing to a broader effort to ensure that AI in Africa is developed and deployed in a manner that supports, rather than undermines, democratic values and digital rights.

2. Country Context

Zimbabwe, with an estimated population of 17.0 million in 2025,[5] has a predominantly young population and high rural residency, which has significant implications for digital inclusion efforts.[6] The country's socio-political environment remains polarised, characterised by contested elections, centralised executive power, and a legacy of repression, all of which shape the broader context for digital rights and civic space.[7]

As of January 2025, Zimbabwe had about 6.45 million internet users (38.4% penetration) and 2.10 million social-media users (12.5%); and 15.2 million mobile connections were active (90.6%).[8] Mobile broadband is the de facto for internet access. About 93% of mobile connections are 3G/4G/5G, yet affordability and quality remain limiting factors. The mobile market is highly concentrated, with Econet having approximately 72.85% of active SIMs in Q1 2025, followed by NetOne (25.03%) and Telecel (2.12%).[9] International internet capacity usage is growing, with Starlink being responsible for 83% of the used incoming bandwidth in Q1 2025.

WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok dominate social media use, and citizen journalism and activism continue to thrive despite an environment of surveillance and frequent self-censorship. As of January 2025, Facebook's potential ad reach in Zimbabwe stood at 2.10 million people (about 12.5% of the population or 32.6% of internet users).[10] It is estimated there are 5 million WhatsApp users nationally, reflecting the app's role as a low-data gateway for news and community organising.[11] Web-traffic analytics show Facebook accounting for about 80–81% of social website visits in August 2025, indicating continued dominance on the open web.[12] There are limited authoritative public country totals for TikTok, despite visible uptake.



5 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "Zimbabwe," UNFPA Data Portal, 2025, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/ZW. Nevertheless, the latest official count is the 2022 census (15,178,957) by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), "Population & Housing Census (PHC) – April 2022," ZIMSTAT, 2022, accessed: 10 September 2025, https://zimstat.co.zw/

6 World Bank, "Population, total – Zimbabwe," World Bank Data, 2024, accessed: 13 July 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZW

7 World Bank, "Zimbabwe Overview," World Bank Country Profile, last updated: 5 April 2024, accessed: 13 July 2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/zimbabwe/overview

8 DataReportal, "Digital 2025: Zimbabwe," DataReportal, 2025, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-zimbabwe

9 Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), "Postal & Telecommunications Abridged Sector Performance Report — First Quarter 2025," POTRAZ (Harare), July 2025, p. 7 (market share pie: Econet 72.85%, NetOne 25.03%, Telecel 2.12%), p. 20 (Starlink ≈83% of used incoming international bandwidth), accessed: 10 September 2025, https://t3n9sm.c2.acecdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Q1-2025-Abridged-Sector-Performance-Report.pdf

10 DataReportal (Simon Kemp), "Digital 2025: Zimbabwe," DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 6 March 2025, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-zimbabwe

11 Tendai Marima, "WhatsApp novelists use messaging app to write and sell books in Zimbabwe," Al Jazeera, 31 August 2024, accessed: 7 September 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/8/31/whatsapp-novelists-use-messaging-app-to-write-and-sell-books-in-zimbabwe

12 Statcounter Global Stats, "Social Media Stats in Zimbabwe — August 2025, Statcounter, accessed: 7 September 2025, https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/zimbabwe

to
114 PB

from
97.2 PB

POTRAZ shows that national internet traffic grew by

17%

in the first quarter of 2025

With respect to cost, the cost 1 GB data bundle has reduced from USD 43.75 in 2023 to USD 3 - 4 per GB in 2024.[13] Device costs also constrain uptake, with good entry-level Android smartphones retailing from about USD 69 in the local market, reinforcing digital exclusion for low-income and rural users.[14] The latest available figures from the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) show that national internet traffic grew by 17% in the first quarter of 2025, from 97.2 PB to 114 PB, driven by growing demand for mobile video streaming, social media usage, and e-learning.[15]

State surveillance and internet disruptions - especially during politically sensitive periods - have become defining features of the online experience in the country. Some of the documented cases include a nationwide shutdown in January 2019 and a throttling incident during an opposition rally in February 2022. Rights monitors also note persistent self-censorship and pressure on online expression.[16]

Zimbabwe continues to grapple with high inflation, currency instability, and constrained public investment in infrastructure. According to the UNDP Human Development Index 2023/24, Zimbabwe's HDI is 0.550, ranking 159 out of 193 countries. The country is classified as medium human development,[17] with persistent inequality, low GDP per capita, and a fragile public service ecosystem that limits access to digital services.[18]

The country's legal and policy framework for the ICT sector has evolved slowly and remains inadequate to respond to the emerging challenges presented by AI, such as algorithmic bias, automated surveillance, profiling and transparency of AI systems. While the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) established foundational privacy rights and a data protection authority, it does not explicitly address the risks associated with AI.[19] Furthermore, while the country has expressed interest in developing a national AI strategy, no formal document has been finalised or made public, and multistakeholder participation in AI governance remains minimal.[20]

13 Cable.co.uk, "The price of 1 GB of mobile data in 237 countries compared — 2023," Cable.co.uk (press release PDF), 26 September 2023, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.cable.co.uk/mobiles/worldwide-data-pricing/2023/worldwide_mobile_data_pricing_press_release.pdf; Farai Shawn Matiashe, "Zimbabwe's surging internet costs wreak havoc on small businesses," Context — Thomson Reuters Foundation, 10 January 2024, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.context.news/digital-divides/zimbabwes-surging-internet-costs-wreak-havoc-on-small-businesses

14 itel Zimbabwe, "itel A06," itel.co.zw (product page), 2025, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://itel.co.zw/

15 POTRAZ, "Sector Performance Report: First Quarter 2025," Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, May 2025, accessed: 15 July 2025, https://www.potraz.gov.zw/?page_id=5780.

16 NetBlocks, "Zimbabwe internet shutdowns amid fuel price protests," NetBlocks, 15 January 2019, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://netblocks.org/reports/zimbabwe-internet-shutdowns-amid-fuel-price-protests-OxAGDdBz

17 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "HDR 2023–2024 Overview: Breaking the Gridlock - Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world," UNDP, March 2024, accessed: 10 September 2025, https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2023-24overviewen.pdf

18 UNDP, "Human Development Reports – Zimbabwe," United Nations Development Programme, 2024, accessed: 15 July 2025, https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/ZWE.

19 Government of Zimbabwe, "Cyber and Data Protection Act, 2021," Zimbabwe Government Gazette, 3 December 2021, accessed: 15 July 2025, https://www.veritaszim.net/node/5102.

20 UNESCO, "Artificial Intelligence Needs Assessment Survey Zimbabwe," UNESCO AI Readiness Report, 2025, p. 34, accessed: 17 July 2025; Freedom House, "Zimbabwe — Freedom on the Net 2024," Freedom House, October 2024, accessed: 10 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2024

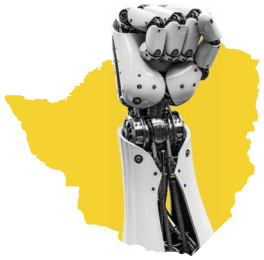
3. Research Methods

This country study employed a qualitative methodology to examine the implications of AI on digital democracy and rights in Zimbabwe. It combined desk-based research, policy and legal analysis, and primary data collection through key informant interviews (KIIs). Secondary data was drawn from select academic literature, media reports, government documents, and civil society publications to map AI adoption trends, regulatory developments, and rights-based challenges linked to civic space.

Primary research involved KIIs with nine purposively selected respondents from civil society, the private sector, academia, media, and government institutions. The researcher noted that AI is not a subject matter majority of targeted respondents felt comfortable with or confident enough to speak authoritatively on, as it is considered a fairly opaque but new and fast-evolving territory. Interviews explored stakeholder experiences with AI deployment, concerns around algorithmic governance, data protection, misinformation, and surveillance, and perceptions of readiness for inclusive and rights-respecting AI governance frameworks. Emphasis was placed on perspectives from underrepresented groups, including women and grassroots organisations.

To maintain reliability and ethics, all interviewees were informed of the study's scope and asked whether they consented to being quoted, anonymously or by name. The research followed guidance provided by CIPESA and its data collection protocols. Responses were triangulated against documented sources and national developments to ensure a balanced and evidence-based presentation of findings.

4. Research Results



4.1 Value of AI to Civic Space and Digital Rights in Zimbabwe

Artificial intelligence (AI) in Zimbabwe is still at a nascent stage, but emerging applications across sectors signal its potential to reshape civic participation, public services, and digital rights dynamics. Some interviewees highlighted practical use-cases for AI in agriculture (forecasting and extension support), health (triage and logistics) and mining (safety and optimisation). However, they cautioned that access and affordability must improve first, otherwise benefits will be captured by a narrow, connected minority.

> *"AI should advance agriculture, health and learning, but without affordable access, it deepens existing divides."*
> *KII: Donald Nyarota.*[21]

The country's increasing digitisation: from e-government portals to biometric identity systems, offers entry points for AI deployment, although the broader civic implications remain largely unexamined in public discourse or policymaking.

At the civic layer, local organisations have begun experimenting with AI-enabled citizen-engagement tools—for example, OpenParlyZW's "Hanzi" WhatsApp bot,[22] CITE's "Alice" virtual presenter,[23] and ZimRights' "Lungie" avatar[24] - aimed at making parliamentary debates, rights education and news more accessible in conversational formats. In the commercial sphere, banks and telecoms are rolling out chatbots and analytics for customer support and fraud detection e.g., Steward Bank's "Batsirai,"[25] First Capital's "Alisa,"[26] and Econet's "Yamurai".[27] Newsrooms and rights groups are also adopting AI transcription and summarisation to document interviews, court proceedings and public hearings, with some reporters using generative-AI assistants for translation and content planning to reach multilingual audiences.[28] Beyond civic and media

21 Donald Nyarota is a Media and Communications consultant affiliated with the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG). Interview was conducted on 1 August 2025.

22 OpenParlyZW, "OpenParlyZW's New AI WhatsApp Chatbot That Brings Parliament to Your Fingertips," OpenParlyZW, 15 April 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://openparly.com/openparlyzws-new-ai-whatsapp-chatbot-that-brings-parliament-to-your-fingertips/

23 Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), "Alice — category hub (AI news anchor posts)," CITE Zimbabwe, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://cite.org.zw/category/alice/

24 Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights), "Rights This Week… our AI presenter #Lungie," ZimRights (Facebook), accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.facebook.com/ZimRightsLIVE/posts/621620580188086/

25 Steward Bank, "Batsirai," Steward Bank - Square Banking, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.stewardbank.co.zw/for-you/square-banking/batsirai/

26 First Capital Bank Zimbabwe (Facebook), "Say hello to ALISA! Introducing an easier way to bank…," 14 April 2021, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.facebook.com/FirstCapitalBankZW/posts/say-hello-to-alisa-introducing-an-easier-way-to-bank-with-us-alisa-is-an-innovat/3613988462063270/

27 Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, "Customer Experience — Yamurai WhatsApp Chatbot Virtual Assistant," accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.econet.co.zw/customer-experience/

28 Ncube, D., "Generative Artificial Intelligence in News: A case study of selected digital-native news outlets in Zimbabwe," Southern African Journal of Communication and Information Science (SAJCIS), 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://journals.nust.ac.zw/index.php/sajcis/article/view/268

use, National University of Science and Technology (NUST) led pilots in agriculture (e.g. crop-monitoring and forecasting apps), illustrate early sectoral uptake,[29] even as questions persist about equitable access and data safeguards.

At the same time, there is visible ecosystem activity supporting AI-adjacent work. University-anchored and independent hubs - including the University of Zimbabwe Innovation Hub, TechVillage (Bulawayo) and Impact Hub Harare — run incubation, prototyping and training that increasingly reference data work and machine-learning applications.[30] The regulator has introduced catalytic instruments such as the POTRAZ Innovation Drive (competitions, ideathons and small grants) and launched an ICT Research Journal to promote applied research and local problem-solving.

On the labour side, there is no public evidence of dedicated, at-scale data-labelling centres inside Zimbabwe. Rather, many Zimbabweans participate remotely in annotation or evaluation tasks via global platforms such as Appen and Toloka.[31] Likewise, there are no known commercial content-moderation hubs operating domestically; moderation of Zimbabwe-linked content is typically handled regionally (historically centred in Kenya), as reflected in court filings and industry reporting on third-party moderation providers.[32]

Beyond monitoring and "tracking," mitigation measures against AI-amplified falsehoods do exist. ZimFact and CITE's FactCheckZW publish routine verifications, run newsroom and community trainings, and partner in election-period debunks that address manipulated media and synthetic claims.[33] Platforms apply third-party fact-checking labels to Zimbabwe-related posts via AFP Fact Check (and, historically, PesaCheck); when content is rated false, distribution is reduced, and a notice is shown to users.[34] Civil-society groups such as MISA Zimbabwe publish practical verification guides and host media-literacy workshops, while newsrooms and NGOs have piloted WhatsApp-based corrective messaging — an approach that research in Zimbabwe found can improve factual knowledge among recipients, demonstrating mitigation beyond mere monitoring.[35]

---

29 *National University of Science & Technology (NUST), "NUST develops crop monitoring app," NUST News, 8 May 2023, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.nust.ac.zw/index.php/all-news/nust-develops-crop-monitoring-app.html*

30 *University of Zimbabwe, "Innovation Hub," University of Zimbabwe, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.uz.ac.zw/index.php/innov-hub; The TechVillage, "The TechVillage," TechVillage (Bulawayo), accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.techvillage.org.zw/; Impact Hub Harare, "About," Impact Hub Harare, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.impacthubharare.net/*

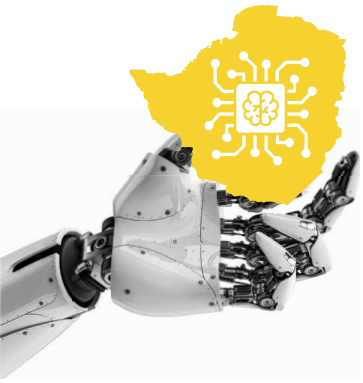
31 *Technomag, "POTRAZ Supports Youth-Led Innovation Through Hackathons and Business Training," Technomag, 10 July 2025, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://technomag.co.zw/potraz-supports-youth-led-innovation-through-hackathons-and-business-training/; Toloka, "Apply to join Toloka Annotators," Toloka, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://toloka.ai/annotator_apply*

32 *Reuters, "Kenya court rules Meta can be sued over layoffs by contractor," 20 September 2024, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenya-court-rules-meta-can-be-sued-over-layoffs-by-contractor-2024-09-20/ ; TechCabal, "Court rules content moderators can seek $1.6bn from Meta," 21 September 2024, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://techcabal.com/2024/09/21/meta-and-sama-case-in-kenya-to-continue/*

33 *ZimFact, "About Us," ZimFact, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://zimfact.org/about-us/; CITE, "FactCheckZW – Zimbabwe," CITE Fact-Checking Platform, accessed: 11 September 2025, https://factcheck.cite.org.zw/; International Media Support (IMS), "Zimbabwean fact-checkers battle a new wave of false coronavirus stories," mediasupport.org, 2020, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.mediasupport.org/in-depth/covid-19/zimbabwean-fact-checkers-battle-a-new-wave-of-false-coronavirus-stories/*

34 *AFP Fact Check, "Zimbabwe election disinformation spreads on WhatsApp," AFP, 4 August 2023, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.33QL94Q; PesaCheck, "FALSE: These images of police brutality in Zimbabwe are not from 2020," PesaCheck, 14 August 2020, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://pesacheck.org/false-these-images-of-police-brutality-in-zimbabwe-are-not-from-2020-d6fce441a3a4*

35 *MISA Zimbabwe, "Guide to Fact Checking and Information Verification (Now Available)," MISA Zimbabwe, 6 May 2024, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2024/05/06/guide-to-fact-checking-and-information-verification-now-available/; Thomson Reuters Foundation / Context, "Zimbabwe fights fake news with lessons in spotting disinformation," Context, 20 October 2022, accessed: 9 September 2025, https://www.context.news/big-tech/zimbabwe-fights-fake-news-with-lessons-in-spotting-disinformation ; Jeremy Bowles, Horacio Larreguy, Shelley Liu, "Countering misinformation via WhatsApp: Preliminary evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe," PLOS ONE 15(10): e0240005, 2020, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0240005*



AI Use by Stakeholders

Zimbabwean government agencies have begun integrating AI tools in public administration, particularly within smart city pilots and digital ID systems. Harare's Smart City program, for instance, includes deployment of AI-powered facial recognition CCTV and traffic monitoring systems under public–private partnerships with UAE-based Vitronic Machine Vision Middle East (initial investment was reportedly USD 60-80 million with a revenue sharing recovery model).[36] Separate smart-city projects have featured facial-recognition CCTV linked to law enforcement led by private contractors.[37]

Private sector actors, including financial institutions and telecom operators, are increasingly exploring AI for fraud detection, customer support (e.g. chatbots), and behavioural analytics. Some local startups and AI enthusiasts have begun experimenting with natural language processing, predictive modelling, and agriculture-based data analysis, although innovation is constrained by limited funding, infrastructure, and skills development pathways.[38]

Steward Bank runs the Batsirai banking chatbot across its channels,[39] while First Capital Bank launched Alisa, a WhatsApp banking bot built with machine-learning and cognitive-computing components.[40] Local studies also report conversational AI deployments improving banking operations, and sector research documents machine-learning for early fraud detection among banks in Harare.[41] EcoCash/Steward Bank's KaShagi instant micro-loans rely on automated scoring and have reached large volumes, pointing to data-driven risk models.[42] In telecoms, Econet Wireless Zimbabwe's "Yamurai" is an AI-powered virtual assistant on WhatsApp and the web.[43] TelOne has deployed AI chatbots to shorten queues and improve response times; and NetOne has rolled out a self-service bot ("Tutsirai").[44] Operators also report using AI-powered analytics to personalise services and optimise networks in real time, building on earlier big-data platforms.[45] On the startup side, Farmhut Africa markets itself as an AI-powered

---

36 *Oscar J. Jeke, "Govt strikes deal for US$60 million investment for new traffic management system," Zimbabwe Now, 4 June 2024, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://zimbabwenow.co.zw/articles/10085/govt-strikes-deal-for-us60-million-investment-for-new-traffic-management-system*

37 *Privacy International, "Huawei and Surveillance in Zimbabwe," privacyinternational.org, 18 November 2021, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/4692/huawei-and-surveillance-zimbabwe; "Zimbabwe Introduces Smart Traffic Management System," Southern African Times, 31 May 2024, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://southernafricantimes.com/zimbabwe-introduces-smart-traffic-management-system/; Ayang Macdonald, "Zimbabwe govt faces criticism over biometric surveillance project for new smart city," Biometric Update, 28 February 2023, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202302/zimbabwe-govt-faces-criticism-over-biometric-surveillance-project-for-new-smart-city*

38 *UNESCO & GIZ, "Artificial Intelligence Needs Assessment for Zimbabwe," Harare, March 2024, accessed: 30 July 2025, [PDF shared].*

39 *Steward Bank, "Batsirai," Steward Bank, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.stewardbank.co.zw/for-you/square-banking/batsirai/; Clickatell, "Steward Bank Launches WhatsApp Chat Banking," 23 April 2019, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.clickatell.com/press-center/zimbabwe-steward-bank-chat-banking-whatsapp/*

40 *Developing Telecoms (V. O'Grady), "Mobile banking chatbot introduced in Zimbabwe," 13 April 2021, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://developingtelecoms.com/telecom-technology/financial-services/10964-mobile-banking-chatbot-introduced-in-zimbabwe.html*

41 *N. Ncube, M. Chinakidzwa, T. Mushayavanhu, "Chatbot task–technology fit and conversational intelligence on customer service encounter satisfaction in the Zimbabwean banking sector," JRISS, April 2025, accessed: 11 September 2025, https://jriss.4ader.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/5.-N-Ncube-M-Chinakidzwa-T-Mushayavanhu-CHATBOT-TASK-TECHNOLOGY-FIT-AND-CONVERSATIONAL-INTELLIGENCE-ON-CUSTOMER-SERVICE-ENCOUNTER--SATISFACTION-IN-THE-ZIMBABWEAN-BANKING-SECTOR.pdf*

42 *Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, "National Financial Inclusion Journey 2016–2020," 30 September 2020, p. 23, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.rbz.co.zw/documents/BLSS/2021/FINANCIAL-INCLUSION--JOURNEY.pdf; EcoCash, "KaShagi Loans," EcoCash Zimbabwe, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://ecocash.co.zw/kashagi-loans/*

43 *Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, "Customer Experience – Yamurai (AI-powered chatbot)," accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.econet.co.zw/customer-experience/; Telecompaper, "Econet Wireless launches AI-powered chatbot to handle increase in customer calls," 10 February 2021, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.telecompaper.com/news/econet-wireless-launches-ai-powered-chatbot-to-handle-increase-in-customer-calls--1371851*

44 *Kommunicate, "How Kommunicate's Chatbots Saved TelOne's Customers From Long Waiting Lines," 27 February 2025, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.kommunicate.io/blog/how-kommunicates-chatbots-saved-telones-customers-from-long-waiting-lines/; TechnoMag, "NetOne Launches Self Service Bot, Tutsirayi and Integrates PayPal," 5 February 2025, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://technomag.co.zw/netone-launches-self-service-bot-tutsirayi-and-integrates-paypal/*

45 *Equity Axis, "Artificial Intelligence drives Econet's strong Q1 FY25 performance," 18 July 2025, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://equityaxis.net/index.php/post/18494/2025/7/artificial-intelligence-drives-econet-s-strong-q1-25-performance*

agritech marketplace, while university-linked teams (e.g. NUST's crop-monitoring tools) and hub communities are experimenting with local-language chatbots, Natural Language Processing (NLP), predictive modelling and agriculture datasets, albeit with constraints around capital, compute and specialist skills.[46]

Civil society and media actors are slowly adopting AI-enhanced tools for transcription, fact-checking, and citizen engagement. One local digital rights group, OpenParlyZW, has trialled AI-based transcription tools for documenting court proceedings and public hearings. They launched "Hanzi" - an AI-powered WhatsApp chatbot that gives citizens on-demand access to parliamentary proceedings and how Parliament works, illustrating practical AI use for civic engagement.[47] Also, some journalists reported use of generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT and other assistants like Poe/Meta tools for recording and transcribing interviews, automating summary generation, content planning, and translation, which can be particularly useful for reaching multilingual audiences.[48] Fact-checking is being operationalised through local initiatives like ZimFact and CITE's FactCheckZW.[49] However, awareness and access remain uneven. Adoption is higher in better-resourced, Harare-based outlets, while lean, regional digital-native newsrooms in Matabeleland rely on freemium tools and face licensing costs, skills gaps and gendered disparities—constraints that slow uptake despite clear utility.[50]

Mitigation measures against disinformation in 2023–2024 election periods included: local fact-checking desks by ZimFact and CITE/FactCheckZW, that verified viral WhatsApp and Facebook claims in real time (for instance, debunking a forged "White House congratulates Mnangagwa" letter);[51] targeted counter-disinformation projects, notably CITE's six-month election initiative training citizens and community reporters, running media-literacy campaigns and rapid debunks that reached over 100,000 people on Facebook;[52] platform-level friction on virality, such as WhatsApp's forwarding limits and "search the web" prompt for highly-forwarded messages (WhatsApp reports these limits cut the spread of such forwards by about 70 percent globally);53 and participation in Meta's third-party fact-checking programme in the region (e.g., AFP Fact Check and PesaCheck), which labels and down-ranks flagged posts.[54]

Mitigation measures against disinformation in **2023–2024** election periods included: local fact-checking desks by **ZimFact** and **CITE/FactCheckZW**

46 *Farmhut Africa, "Company profile," F6S, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.f6s.com/company/farmhut-africa; Africa Business Communities, "Zimbabwe agritech startup Farmhut secures investment to scale operations," accessed: 1 September 2025, https://africabusinesscommunities.com/agribusiness/zimbabwe-agritech-startup-farmhut-secures-investment-to-scale-operations/; National University of Science & Technology (NUST), "NUST develops crop monitoring app (Crop Doctor Solutions)," 8 May 2023, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.nust.ac.zw/index.php/all-news/nust-develops-crop-monitoring-app.html*

47 *OpenParlyZW, "OpenParlyZW's New AI WhatsApp Chatbot That Brings Parliament to Your Fingertips," OpenParlyZW, 15 April 2025, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://openparly.com/openparlyzws-new-ai-whatsapp-chatbot-that-brings-parliament-to-your-fingertips/*

48 *D. Ncube, "The uptake of AI in Zimbabwean mainstream newsrooms," Southern Africa Journal of Communication & Information Systems 3(1), 2025, pp. 46–65, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://journals.nust.ac.zw/index.php/sajcis/article/download/270/246/291*

49 *ZimFact, "About Us," ZimFact, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://zimfact.org/about-us/; "FactCheckZW – Zimbabwe," CITE Fact-Checking Platform, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://factcheck.cite.org.zw/*

50 *D. Ncube, "Generative Artificial Intelligence in News: A case study of selected digital-native news outlets in Zimbabwe," Southern Africa Journal of Communication & Information Systems 3(1), 2025, pp. 21–45, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://journals.nust.ac.zw/index.php/sajcis/article/download/268/245*

51 *ZimFact, "No, the USA did not send any congratulatory message to President Emmerson Mnangagwa," ZimFact, accessed: 2 September 2025, h-ttps://factcheckzw.org/no-the-usa-did-not-send-any-congratulatory-message-to-president-emmerson-mnangagwa/*

52 *Delta Mbonisi Sivalo, "An analysis of the role of disinformation in elections: An exploratory study of the Centre for Innovation and Technology's project...," African Journal of Inclusive Societies, 31 October 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.si-ajis.org/articles/an-analysis-of-the-role-of-disinformation-in-elections/*

53 *TechCrunch, "WhatsApp's new limit cuts virality of 'highly forwarded' messages by 70%," 27 April 2020, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/27/whatsapps-new-limit-cuts-virality-of-highly-forwarded-messages-by-70/; Nieman Lab, "WhatsApp's message forwarding limits do work (somewhat) to stop the spread of misinformation," 27 September 2019, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/09/whatsapps-message-forwarding-limits-do-work-somewhat-to-stop-the-spread-of-misinformation/*

54 *AFP Fact Check, "Zimbabwe election disinformation spreads on WhatsApp," 4 August 2023, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33QL94Q; PesaCheck, "FALSE: These images of police brutality in Zimbabwe are not from 2020," 14 August 2020; and "Our principles and funding," accessed: 2 September 2025, https://pesacheck.org/false-these-images-of-police-brutality-in-zimbabwe-are-not-from-2020-d6fce441a3a4*

Embedded AI tools from content recommendation engines to auto-captioning and real-time translation - are driving new forms of interaction.

Expanding Information Access and Content Creation

Social media platforms - notably WhatsApp, Facebook, X, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram remain a key civic space in Zimbabwe, used for news, mobilisation and public debate, even amid periodic pressures and monitoring.[55] Embedded AI tools - from content recommendation engines to auto-captioning and real-time translation - are driving new forms of interaction. Tools like Meta's AI-powered translation services have expanded accessibility for vernacular language speakers through deployment of its No Language Left Behind (NLLB-200) translation technology across Facebook and Instagram, supporting over 200 languages, including Zimbabwean languages such as Shona and Nyanja/Chewa.[56] Likewise, TikTok and Instagram filters have popularised visual expression among younger demographics. For many activists and creators, these tools serve both aesthetic and strategic purposes, especially in low-resource contexts where professional production is not feasible.

AI's influence on content generation and audience targeting also shapes civic messaging and advocacy campaigns. During national dialogues on electoral reform and economic governance, civil society actors reported using AI-assisted tools to automate WhatsApp message chains, tailor Twitter threads for engagement, and schedule multilingual posts based on algorithmic audience insights. CITE, for example, produces programmes with an AI presenter ("Alice") for explainers and election shows such as Meet Your Candidate and Rate Your Councillor, and uses a scheduling tool to distribute content across platforms. OpenParlyZW's "Hanzi," mentioned earlier, is an AI WhatsApp chatbot that answers questions on Parliament and links to Hansard and bill updates.[57] ZimRights has experimented with an AI avatar presenter ("Lungie") for weekly human-rights updates.[58] These developments suggest growing strategic sophistication in civic engagement through AI-enhanced platforms.[59]

55 Freedom House, "Zimbabwe: Freedom on the Net 2024," Freedom on the Net (country report), 2024, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2024

56 Meta, "New AI Model Translates 200 Languages, Making Technology More Accessible," About Meta Newsroom, 6 July 2022, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://about.fb.com/news/2022/07/no-language-left-behind-ai-translation; "Languages Available — NLLB-200," DL Translate documentation (lists supported languages, incl. Shona sna and Nyanja nya), accessed: 1 September 2025, https://dl-translate.readthedocs.io/en/latest/available_languages/

57 OpenParlyZW, "OpenParlyZW's New AI WhatsApp Chatbot That Brings Parliament to Your Fingertips," 15 April 2025, accessed: 1 Sept 2025, https://openparly.com/openparlyzws-new-ai-whatsapp-chatbot-that-brings-parliament-to-your-fingertips/

58 ZimRights, "Our AI presenter, Lungelo ('Lungie')," post, 2024, accessed: 1 Sept 2025, https://twitter.com/ZimRightsLIVE/status/1843299520467062837

59 International Media Support (IMS), "Holding power to account through generative AI," 17 July 2024, accessed: 1 Sept 2025, https://www.mediasupport.org/holding-power-to-account-through-generative-ai/

Positive Outcomes for Civic Participation

Despite the early stage of adoption, several benefits have begun to surface. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, grammar and style checks (Grammarly), automated transcription (Google Cloud Speech-to-Text) and quick data visualisation (Datawrapper; Flourish) - have allowed journalists to speed up workflows and publish more inclusive content. Some civil society interview respondents who opted for anonymity highlighted that translation engines and sentiment analysis tools (such as Hootsuite/Brandwatch and some in-platform analytics) have helped them better understand public opinion, particularly on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which remain critical for civic mobilisation. AI-enhanced sentiment analysis was also reportedly used by some civil society actors during the 2023 election period to track disinformation trends and inform advocacy strategies. Nevertheless, public documentation of specific sentiment pipelines remains limited.

AI tools have allowed journalists to speed up workflows and publish more inclusive content

E-governance portals are another site where AI could enhance civic participation. Though still limited in scope, platforms such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) website and the national e-government portal provide downloadable notices/forms and act as a gateway to selected online services.[60] The official portal (zim.gov.zw) is described by the government as the centre of e-services and an entry point that routes users to the ZimConnect e-services gateway for transactions (for example, e-visa and immigration e-permits).[61] In theory, such tools could reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks and enhance public access to information, but in practice, usability, access costs, and inconsistent updates undermine their full potential.

Inclusion and Marginalised Groups

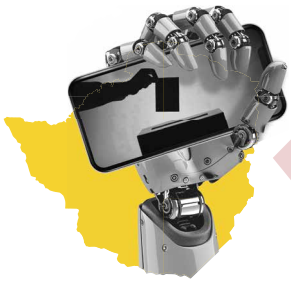
There is limited evidence of AI initiatives intentionally targeting marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. Some interviewed civil society actors indicated that they have tested AI-powered translation and literacy tools such as Masakhane community models (African-language MT/NLP);[62] Microsoft Translator (which added Zimbabwean languages Shona and Nyanja in March 2023) as well as Meta's NLLB (to improve translation for low-resource African languages across Facebook and Instagram) for rural outreach,but uptake remains low.[63]

60 *Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), "Home," ZEC official website, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://old.zec.org.zw/*

61 *Government of Zimbabwe, "The Official Web Portal for the Republic of Zimbabwe," zim.gov.zw, accessed: 1 September 2025, https://www.zim.gov.zw/index.php/en/; ZimConnect – Government Online Services, registration/login pages, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://zimeservices.pfms.gov.zw/*

62 *D. I. Adelani et al., "MasakhaNER: Named Entity Recognition for African Languages," Transactions of the Association for Computational Linguistics 9 (2021): 1116–1131, published October 2021, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://aclanthology.org/2021.tacl-1.66/*

63 *GSMA, "GSMA calls for renewed focus on closing the usage gap as more than 3 billion people remain offline despite available mobile internet services," press release, 10 July 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/gsma-calls-for-renewed-focus-on-closing-the-usage-gap-as-more-than-3-billion-people-remain-offline-despite-available-mobile-internet-services/; Freedom House, "Zimbabwe — Freedom on the Net 2024," October 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2024*



4.2 Challenges and Risks of AI to Digital Rights/ Democracy

While artificial intelligence presents promising opportunities for civic engagement in Zimbabwe, it also brings considerable risks to digital rights, particularly in a context marked by political repression, under-regulated surveillance, and weak data protection enforcement. These risks span disinformation, online manipulation, unchecked surveillance, exclusionary systems, and the absence of effective governance.

Disinformation and Manipulation of Public Opinion

AI-generated and AI-assisted content, including deepfakes, synthetic images, templated replies and automated bot accounts, increasingly surfaces during politically sensitive periods. Ahead of and after the August 2023 general elections, researchers and journalists documented coordinated online campaigns that amplified pro-government narratives and discredited opposition figures and observer missions, including bot-like accounts on X and manipulated videos (for example, audio edited to suggest Nelson Chamisa backed reversing land reform, and a clip fabricated to make it appear President Mnangagwa conceded defeat early).[64]

While many 2023 influence operations in Zimbabwe were not conclusively attributable to AI, multiple signals - algorithmic post scheduling, engagement-boost scripts, and comment-farm style responses- point to AI-assisted amplification layered onto coordinated inauthentic behaviour. From this perspective, some interviewees feared that, in a highly politicised context, AI could be used to shrink civic space, especially when layered on existing surveillance-enabling laws. They argued that this made robust data-protection enforcement and independent oversight urgent.

The lack of transparency from social media platforms about how they deploy AI-powered content moderation or disinformation countermeasures in Zimbabwe further complicates the information environment.[65] Activists and researchers have reported inconsistent enforcement of community standards — with critical political content sometimes flagged or removed while harmful disinformation, including misogynistic and xenophobic posts, remains online — reflecting broader gaps in platform resourcing and language coverage across Africa.[66] These opaque systems risk undermining freedom of expression and can disproportionately affect civil society voices.[67]

One interview respondent also raised concerns about algorithmic exclusion in social-protection eligibility decisions during the pandemic, citing unclear datasets and opaque criteria; public statements at the time referred to a “sophisticated algorithm” using bank and mobile-wallet data to pick beneficiaries.[68] The same respondent flagged the risk of AI-enabled monitoring of

64 *Freedom House, “Zimbabwe — Freedom on the Net 2024,” Freedom on the Net (country report), October 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2024*

65 *Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2024: Africa’s Electoral Democracy and Technology—Pitfalls and Promises, 7 September 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://cipesa.org/download/reports/State_of_Internet_Freedom_in_Africa_Report_2024.pdf*

66 *Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2024: Zimbabwe, 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2024*

67 *Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2024: The Struggle for Trust Online (global report), 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2024/struggle-trust-online*

68 *TechZim (Farai Mudzingwa), “Mthuli Ncube & His ‘Sophisticated Algorithms’ for Corona Relief Funds: Another Privacy Disaster Looming?”, 26 April 2020, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.techzim.co.zw/2020/04/mthuli-ncube-his-sophisticated-algorithms-for-corona-relief-funds-another-privacy-disaster-looming/*

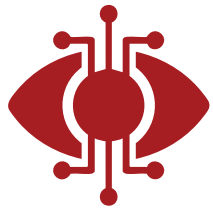
online speech under existing cybersecurity structures — noting that Zimbabwe's Cybersecurity and Monitoring Centre is housed in the Office of the President — and the exposure of children's data via ed-tech tools in the absence of a dedicated child online-safety law (beyond guideline-level instruments).[69] Taken together, these risks underscore the need for transparency, auditability and sector-specific safeguards.

Notably, women's digital rights groups such as Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) and the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) have raised concerns about gendered disinformation campaigns and technology-facilitated abuse targeting, in particular, women journalists, activists and politicians amplified by AI-driven bots, particularly during political seasons.[70]

Documented patterns include sexualised smear narratives, doxxing, coordinated trolling by anonymous/fake accounts (the "Varakashi" ecosystem), and misinformation aimed at delegitimising women's participation.[71] There are growing calls to integrate a gender lens into platform governance and public policy, including AI ethics and digital-rights frameworks, echoing regional standards such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' Resolution 522 (2022) on protecting women against digital violence and follow-on actions in 2024–2025.[72] UN Women, together with local partners (Gender Media Connect, WCoZ), has likewise urged gender-sensitive media and technology practices in Zimbabwean newsrooms, digital tool design and policymaking, including AI ethics frameworks.[73]

AI-Enabled Surveillance and Profiling

Perhaps the most pressing concern in Zimbabwe is the steady expansion of AI-enabled surveillance. In May 2024, the government launched an AI-powered Smart Traffic Management System (STMS) under a public - private partnership with Vitronic Machine Vision Middle East, with an initial rollout in Harare and Bulawayo and a nationwide expansion announced in June 2025.[74] The STMS uses automatic number-plate recognition and camera analytics for automated enforcement. Officials and trade coverage also frame the platform as supporting broader public-security functions such as crowd control and "monitoring of suspicious behaviour."[75]



In May 2024, the government launched an AI-powered Smart Traffic Management System (STMS)

69 *MISA Zimbabwe, "Analysis of the Data Protection Act," 6 December 2021, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2021/12/06/analysis-of-the-data-protection-act/; POTRAZ, Child Online Protection Guidelines for Children, 2015, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.potraz.gov.zw/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/POTRAZ_COP.pdf*

70 *Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) Zimbabwe, "Statement on rising cases of sexual and gender-based violence in Zimbabwe," WLSA Zimbabwe, 5 May 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://wlsazim.co.zw/2025/05/05/wlsa-statement-on-rising-cases-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-zimbabwe/; Gender & Media Connect (GMC) and partners, see UN Women Zimbabwe, "UN Women Zimbabwe and partners champion gender-sensitive reporting in media," UN Women Africa, 9 August 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/08/un-women-zimbabwe-and-partners-champion-gender-sensitive-reporting-in-media*

71 *Admire Mare, "Twitter, Elections and Gendered Disinformation Campaigns in Zimbabwe," in Digital Disinformation in Africa (Routledge, 2023), accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003429081-3/twitter-elections-gendered-disinformation-campaigns-zimbabwe-admire-mare*

72 *ACHPR, "Resolution on the need to undertake a study on digital violence against women's rights in Africa — ACHPR/Res.591 (LXXX) 2024," 13 August 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/achprres591-lxxx-2024-study-digital-violence-against-womens-rights-achprres591*

73 *CIPESA, "African Women's Digital Safety: From Resolution to Reality," CIPESA Blog, 31 January 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://cipesa.org/2025/01/african-womens-digital-safety-from-resolution-to-reality/*

74 *The Southern African Times, "Zimbabwe Introduces Smart Traffic Management System," 31 May 2024, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://southernafricantimes.com/zimbabwe-introduces-smart-traffic-management-system/*

75 *TV BRICS, "Zimbabwe accelerates nationwide rollout of Smart Traffic Management System," 18 June 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://tvbrics.com/en/news/zimbabwe-accelerates-nationwide-rollout-of-smart-traffic-management-system/*

Separately, Zimbabwe has since 2018 pursued facial-recognition partnerships with Chinese firms, notably CloudWalk and Hikvision, reported as enabling real-time facial recognition in public spaces and "smart city" precincts - plans that drew privacy and transparency concerns from civil society and the press, including in the New Harare 'Cyber City' project.[76] Although marketed as tools to enhance service delivery and crime prevention, these technologies raise concerns about opaque data practices and mass surveillance, especially in the absence of clear safeguards or public accountability mechanisms.[77]

Further, there is no clear oversight of how data collected through these systems is used, stored, or shared, nor whether it is subject to any safeguards. This is particularly alarming given Zimbabwe's history of surveillance and intimidation targeting journalists, opposition figures, and civil society organisations. Interviewed activists reported surveillance cameras being installed near NGO offices, protest sites and courts, raising concerns about silent profiling. Rights groups have called for urgent legal protections, independent oversight, and data governance safeguards to prevent AI from deepening civic repression.[78] Without clear legal protections, the expansion of AI-enhanced surveillance technologies poses a direct threat to the rights to privacy, assembly, and expression. In this context, interviewees underscored limited public disclosure or consultation on surveillance deployments and urged clear rules for biometric systems before further scale-up.

Content Moderation, Bias, and Information Inequity

content documenting human rights abuses and activism has occasionally been flagged or suppressed by automated moderation systems

AI systems used for content moderation often struggle with context, especially in multilingual or politically complex environments like Zimbabwe. Interviewed civil society actors reported that content documenting human rights abuses and activism has occasionally been flagged or suppressed by automated moderation systems, especially in non-English or vernacular language contexts, though there is no published legal case confirming these removals as algorithmic errors. They reported that such errors often go unaddressed due to the limited availability of human moderators with knowledge of the Zimbabwean context.

Biases in AI training data can also result in discriminatory or harmful outcomes. Many widely used models (for example ChatGPT, Stable Diffusion and platforms using ResNet, Yolo-based object detection and proprietary Chinese CCTV systems such as CloudWalk and Hikvision) are trained primarily on Western, East Asian or globally scraped image and text datasets - often with sparse representation of Zimbabwean vernaculars, idioms and non-standard dialects.[79] In Zimbabwe, civil society and media scholars have observed misclassifications: for instance, auto-caption or moderation tools erroneously flagging Ndebele or Shona content containing slang or humorous or hyperbolic speech (such as political satire) as disallowed content; or security cameras misidentifying non-lit individuals in low-light settings as suspicious because lighting, body posture and clothing distribution differs from Western or Chinese training samples.[80] These issues

76 *Quartz (QZ), Abdi Latif Dahir, "China is exporting facial recognition to Africa, ensuring AI dominance through diversity," 24 May 2018, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://qz.com/africa/1287675/china-is-exporting-facial-recognition-to-africa-ensuring-ai-dominance-through-diversity*

77 *Zindoga Mukandavire, "Zimbabwe Govt Faces Criticism Over Biometric Surveillance Project for New Smart City," BiometricUpdate.com, 8 February 2023, accessed: 17 July 2025, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202302/zimbabwe-govt-faces-criticism-over-biometric-surveillance-project-for-new-smart-city*

78 *UNESCO, "Country Report: Zimbabwe – Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment Report," UNESCO Digital Tools for Reform, 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394685; MISA Zimbabwe, "Need to exploit the potential of Artificial Intelligence for improved access to information," MISA Zimbabwe, 28 September 2022, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2022/09/28/need-to-exploit-the-potential-of-artificial-intelligence-for-improved-access-to-information/*

79 *Timnit Gebru, et al., "Datasheets for Datasets," Proceedings of the 5th Workshop on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency in Machine Learning (FAT ML), 2021, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://arxiv.org/abs/2012.14305*

80 *D. Ncube, "Generative Artificial Intelligence in News: A study of digital-native news outlets in Zimbabwe," SAJCIS 3(1), 2025, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://journals.nust.ac.zw/index.php/sajcis/article/view/268*

are especially acute when indigenous expressions or traditional dress are interpreted without context. Such misclassification leads to both suppression of legitimate content and amplification of false positives, which can disproportionately harm activists, minority language speakers, and culturally expressive voices.[81]

Exclusion, Digital Literacy, and Uneven Access

Access to AI tools and services in Zimbabwe is uneven. Barriers include the high cost of mobile data, language limitations in AI tools, and low digital literacy, particularly among older and rural populations. AI-enhanced applications such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, AI-powered translation apps and mobile banking fraud detection systems typically come with a financial cost; require high-speed internet, modern smartphones, and significant data usage, all of which are inaccessible for many Zimbabweans due to high costs and poor infrastructure. Zimbabwe's mobile data remains among the most expensive in the region, with 1GB costing up to USD 5-10 across major networks like Econet, NetOne, and Telecel, forcing users to ration usage through daily or weekly bundles.[82] This is particularly acute in rural areas where network coverage is inconsistent, and speeds are often throttled to below 3G levels.[83]

A key informant from a local telecommunications research organisation emphasised that Zimbabwe's "structurally fragile" internet ecosystem, characterised by limited local interconnection, minimal domestic hosting infrastructure, and heavy reliance on expensive international bandwidth, creates a vicious cycle. "We're essentially paying premium prices for substandard connectivity," they noted, "which means AI tools that require constant data streaming or cloud processing are completely out of reach for the average Zimbabwean, especially those in Matabeleland or Mashonaland rural provinces."[84]

Zimbabwe's **"structurally fragile"** internet ecosystem, characterised by limited local interconnection, minimal domestic hosting infrastructure, and heavy reliance on expensive international bandwidth

Marginalised groups, especially women, youth in rural areas, and persons with disabilities, are often excluded from conversations on AI development and deployment. According to research on AI integration in Zimbabwe, investment in infrastructure is a prerequisite if AI is to be fully integrated, as many rural settlements and some urban centres face connectivity problems that exclude marginalised populations.[85] For instance, while some local developers are working on natural language processing for Shona and Ndebele, most AI interfaces, including ChatGPT, Claude, Google Assistant, and Microsoft Copilot, default to English, further entrenching digital divides. Only a few countries in Africa, like Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Ghana, have laid down a solid foundation for the integration of AI into their education systems, while Zimbabwe's AI adoption is still in its infancy.[86] There is also little effort to ensure AI solutions are designed with inclusivity in mind or to gather feedback from affected communities.

81 *Privacy International, "China exports facial recognition to Africa, surveillance expanding," May 2019, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/4692/china-surveillance-zimbabwe*

82 *POTRAZ, "Tariff Schedule Comparison: First Quarter 2025," Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, May 2025, accessed: 30 July 2025, https://www.potraz.gov.zw/?page_id=5780.*

83 *CIPESA, "State of Internet Freedom in Zimbabwe 2023," Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), 11 October 2023, accessed: 13 July 2025, https://cipesa.org/2023/10/state-of-internet-freedom-in-zimbabwe-2023/.*

84 *Interview with telecommunications analyst, Harare, July 2025 (anonymized following request).*

85 *Hlongwane, J., Shava, G. N., Mangena, A., and Muzari, T., "Towards the Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education, Challenges and Opportunities: The African Context, a Case of Zimbabwe," International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, vol. 8, 2024, pp. 417–435, accessed: 30 July 2025, https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/towards-the-integration-of-artificial-intelligence-in-higher-education-challenges-and-opportunities-the-african-context-a-case-of-zimbabwe/.*

86 *Tsekea, S. and Mandoga, E., "The ethics of artificial intelligence use in university libraries in Zimbabwe," Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics, vol. 9, 2025, accessed: 30 July 2025, https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/research-metrics-and-analytics/articles/10.3389/frma.2024.1522423/full.*

Weak Legal and Institutional Safeguards

The absence of a robust legal framework governing AI use in Zimbabwe compounds these challenges. Although Zimbabwe enacted the Cyber Data Protection Act in 2021,[87] its enforcement remains weak, and it does not specifically address automated decision-making, biometric surveillance, or AI governance. The Act recognises biometric data but does not set facial-recognition-specific safeguards (e.g. accuracy testing, PIA requirements and independent oversight), and the Cybersecurity and Monitoring Centre is situated in the Office of the President, gaps spotlighted by rights groups and legal analyses.[88]

Moreover, regulatory bodies such as the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) lack the mandate or capacity to monitor AI-driven technologies in public and private use. Additionally, the country's AI deployment is proceeding without a national AI strategy or appropriate legal framework, ethical guidelines, or institutional mechanisms to protect citizens from misuse. This regulatory vacuum not only exposes users to harm but also limits transparency and accountability for state and corporate actors deploying AI.

4.3 State of AI Regulation in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is steadily laying the groundwork for AI governance, but has not yet adopted a comprehensive legal or strategic framework that explicitly addresses artificial intelligence. However, recent developments in national policies and consultations signal potential progress if matched with institutional commitment.

Ongoing Initiatives and Consultations

In July 2025, Zimbabwe secured UNESCO support for developing its first National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, following high-level discussions between Dr Beaullar Chirume, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of ICT, Postal and Courier Services, and UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay during the COP15 Conference in Victoria Falls.[89] Dr Chirume confirmed that a draft strategy is near completion, with the first national consultative meeting involving local AI experts scheduled for early August 2025, followed by broader public consultation processes to ensure inclusive citizen participation.[90] The government has also signalled its commitment through the Smart Zimbabwe 2030 Master Plan and the National ICT Policy (2022-2027), which identifies AI as a priority area for investment and regulatory review. These documents emphasise principles of democracy, equality, and inclusivity in technology adoption, though implementation remains pending.[91]

87 *Zimbabwe Cyber and Data Protection Act, https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Data%20Protection%20Act%205%20of%202021.pdf accessed 1 August 2025*

88 *Veritas Zimbabwe, "Data Protection Act 5 of 2021," 3 December 2021, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Data%20Protection%20Act%205%20of%202021.pdf*

89 *"UNESCO Backs Zimbabwe's Development of National Artificial Intelligence Strategy," TechAfrica News, 25 July 2025, accessed: 30 July 2025, https://techafricanews.com/2025/07/25/unesco-backs-zimbabwes-development-of-national-artificial-intelligence-strategy/*

90 *Ministry of ICT, Postal & Courier Services Zimbabwe, "UNESCO Pledges Support for Zimbabwe's National AI Strategy Development," X (formerly Twitter), 2025, accessed: 30 July 2025, https://x.com/MICTPCS_ZW/status/1948366602539319671.*

91 *UNESCO, "Zimbabwe | Global AI Ethics and Governance Observatory," UNESCO, accessed: 30 July 2025, https://www.unesco.org/ethics-ai/en/zimbabwe.*

Primary Ethical Issues in AI Deployment

The deployment of AI systems in Zimbabwe has raised significant ethical concerns, particularly around surveillance, privacy, and democratic freedoms. The most contentious development is the Smart City project in New Harare, involving facial recognition systems installed by Chinese firm CloudWalk Technology and UAE-based Mulk International, with a potential investment of USD 500 million.[92] Digital rights activists have expressed alarm that these surveillance systems, implemented without public consultation or adequate legal safeguards, could be used to identify and suppress dissenting voices in a country with a documented history of political repression.[93]

The lack of transparency around data collection and use presents another critical ethical challenge. Under the CloudWalk partnership, the Zimbabwean government reportedly provides citizens' biometric data to train the company's algorithms, raising questions about data sovereignty and consent.[94] As one civil society representative noted: "The government is essentially trading our biometric data to foreign companies without any public debate about the implications for privacy or human rights." Algorithmic bias and exclusion constitute additional ethical concerns.

Most AI systems deployed in Zimbabwe are trained on foreign datasets that fail to represent local contexts, potentially leading to discriminatory outcomes. The absence of requirements for algorithmic transparency or impact assessments means these biases go unchecked, particularly affecting marginalised communities.[95] Some interviewees stressed that any national AI strategy should define the full chain of AI design and use, with clear safeguards for privacy, non-discrimination, data retention limits, and explainability of automated decisions. They also emphasised meaningful, open consultations with affected groups and independent experts, rather than closed or ad-hoc outreach.

"A credible AI policy must set guardrails across design, deployment and oversight, and it must be built through open, meaningful consultations that include those most affected,"

"A credible AI policy must set guardrails across design, deployment and oversight, and it must be built through open, meaningful consultations that include those most affected," noted a technology policy expert interviewed for this study. Another respondent warned against a 'top-down' or 'borrowed' strategy that does not reflect local realities. They called for civil society and marginalised groups to be meaningfully involved so that the policy guards against inequality and control.

Complementing the ICT policy, the Smart Zimbabwe 2030 Master Plan, unveiled by the Ministry of ICT, Postal and Courier Services in 2022, anticipates regulatory structures and standards for emerging technologies by 2030.[96] Though it does not explicitly articulate policies for AI, it provides a strategic vision for digital governance, public–private partnerships, and infrastructure expansion that could support AI regulation once formally translated into detailed frameworks.[97]

92 *"Zimbabwe govt faces criticism over biometric surveillance project foemphasisedr new smart city," Biometric Update, 28 February 2023, accessed: 2 August 2025, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202302/zimbabwe-govt-faces-criticism-over-biometric-surveillance-project-for-new-smart-city.*

93 *"Zimbabwe's cyber city: Urban utopia or surveillance menace?" The Star, 24 February 2023, accessed: 33 August 2025, https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2023/02/24/zimbabwes-cyber-city-urban-utopia-or-surveillance-menace.*

94 *"How Zimbabwe's biometric ID scheme (and China's AI aspirations) threw a wrench into the 2018 election," Global Voices, 30 January 2020, accessed: 3 August 2025, https://advox.globalvoices.org/2020/01/30/how-zimbabwes-biometric-id-scheme-and-chinas-ai-aspirations-threw-a-wrench-into-the-2018-election/.*

95 *Interview with digital rights advocate, Harare, July 2025.*

96 *Ministry of ICT, Postal and Courier Services, "Smart Zimbabwe 2030 Master Plan," Government of Zimbabwe, 2022, accessed: 3 August 2025, https://www.ictministry.gov.zw/assets/documents/Smart%20Zimbabwe%202030%20Master%20Plan.pdf.*

97 *UNESCO, "Zimbabwe | Global AI Ethics and Governance Observatory," UNESCO, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://www.unesco.org/ethics-ai/en/zimbabwe.*

Zimbabwe's Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) created a legal foundation for privacy and data rights, including provisions for biometric, genetic, and sensitive data. It also designates POTRAZ as the data protection authority and requires data controllers to permit individuals the right to object to automated processing that produces legal or similarly significant outcomes (Section 25).[98] Nevertheless, the law does not clearly define or regulate algorithmic transparency, AI ethics, or impact assessments for high-risk systems. It also lacks explicit guidelines on public-sector deployment of AI and omits mandates for AI auditing or explainability mechanisms.[99]

Current institutional architecture has yet to incorporate AI-specific governance mechanisms. While POTRAZ oversees data protection and cybersecurity functions, there remains no dedicated body or formal multistakeholder platform responsible for oversight of AI systems. The consolidation of functions under POTRAZ has drawn criticism from civil society groups, with MISA-Zimbabwe suggesting that data protection and cybersecurity oversight require independent oversight to prevent misuse or conflicts of interest.[100]

The lack of an official AI strategy, coupled with limited technical expertise and minimal stakeholder awareness, poses serious barriers to regulating AI effectively.

Zimbabwe's engagement in the UNESCO AI Ethics global agenda reflects early compliance with international norms on responsible AI adoption: supporting principles such as participation, non-discrimination, fairness, transparency, and accountability. However, national law has not yet translated these principles into enforceable regulations or human rights-based frameworks.[101]

The lack of an official AI strategy, coupled with limited technical expertise and minimal stakeholder awareness, poses serious barriers to regulating AI effectively. Reports have cited skill gaps in academia and government, low public understanding of AI risks, and insufficient funding for Research and Development, all of which constrain policy-making and institutional capacity-enhancement.[102]

98 *Government of Zimbabwe, "Cyber and Data Protection Act, 2021," Zimbabwe Government Gazette, 3 December 2021, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://www.veritaszim.net/node/5102.*

99 *Securiti.ai, "Overview of Zimbabwe New Data Protection Act," Securiti.ai, 3 April 2022, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://securiti.ai/zimbabwe-new-data-protection-act/.*

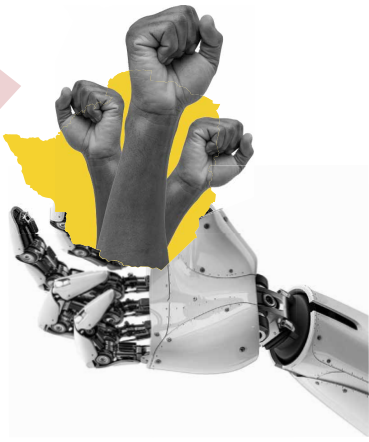
100 *Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zimbabwe, "Cybersecurity and Data Protection Bill entrenches surveillance: MISA Zimbabwe analysis," MISA Zimbabwe, 19 May 2020, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2020/05/19/cybersecurity-and-data-protection-bill-entrenches-surveillance-an-analysis/.*

101 *Thomson Reuters Foundation, "AI governance in Zimbabwe," Thomson Reuters Foundation Toolkit, May 2025, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://www.trust.org/toolkit/part-2-emerging-ai-governance-in-africa/ai-governance-in-zimbabwe/*

102 *Thomson Reuters Foundation, "AI governance in Zimbabwe," Thomson Reuters Foundation Toolkit, May 2025, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://www.trust.org/toolkit/part-2-emerging-ai-governance-in-africa/ai-governance-in-zimbabwe/.*

4.4 Towards Human Rights-Centred AI Governance in Zimbabwe

Despite early-stage efforts to explore AI regulation, Zimbabwe's approach to AI governance remains largely technocratic, with limited grounding in human rights frameworks. The absence of formalised, inclusive, and rights-focused processes raises concerns about the future direction of AI development and its alignment with democratic values and civil liberties. Some interviewed stakeholders called for a rights-centred framework that articulates lawful limits on rights (using the established three-part test), mandates transparency for automated decisions, and addresses data retention and access to redress, particularly for marginalised groups. "We need explicit standards for when and how AI can limit rights, and a path to challenge automated decisions." - KII: Matimbe.



Lack of Multistakeholder Engagement

There is currently no dedicated multistakeholder platform or formal consultation mechanism to shape AI norms or policies in Zimbabwe. While stakeholders from government, academia, and civil society were reportedly engaged during the development of the draft AI policy framework, the process was neither transparent nor inclusive enough to reflect broad-based civic concerns. Some interviewees who opted for anonymity expressed deep scepticism about the state's willingness to prioritise rights-respecting AI governance, noting a history of opaque digital rollouts and limited accountability. They cautioned that the absence of strong safeguards and transparent processes in the context of rapid AI expansion could exacerbate repression and exclusion. Most civil society organisations working on digital rights were not consulted, and parliamentary engagement on AI has been minimal to date.[103]

POTRAZ, as the central data and ICT regulator, has not convened any public consultations specific to AI since the passage of the Cyber and Data Protection Act. This vacuum opens up the risk of reinforcing a top-down approach that excludes marginalised voices and overlooks social justice and rights concerns, particularly around surveillance, automated discrimination, and algorithmic bias.[104]

Limited Technical Capacity and Human Rights Expertise

Stakeholders interviewed noted that many policymakers lack the technical understanding necessary to assess the human rights implications of AI systems. Similarly, civil society and media actors face knowledge gaps in evaluating and responding to AI's impact on issues like expression, access to information, and profiling. While some academic institutions such as the National University of Science & Technology (NUST) and University of Zimbabwe have introduced basic AI modules,[105] Zimbabwe currently lacks national-level AI ethics guidelines or awareness initiatives tailored to civic actors, legislators, or developers.[106]

Moreover, while the Data Protection Act does contain provisions against harmful automated processing, it does not mandate human rights impact assessments or algorithmic audits, leaving little room for accountability in high-risk applications like facial recognition or predictive policing.[107]

103 *National AI policy framework completed," The Herald (Zimbabwe), 14 October 2024, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://www.herald.co.zw/national-ai-policy-framework-completed/.*

104 *Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zimbabwe, "Cybersecurity and Data Protection Bill entrenches surveillance: MISA Zimbabwe analysis," MISA Zimbabwe, 19 May 2020, accessed: 19 July 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2020/05/19/cybersecurity-and-data-protection-bill-entrenches-surveillance-an-analysis/.*

105 *National University of Science & Technology (NUST), "All-News: NUST develops crop monitoring app," NUST News, 8 May 2023, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.nust.ac.zw/index.php/all-news/nust-develops-crop-monitoring-app.html; University of Zimbabwe, "School of Computer Science and Engineering: Postgraduate Programmes," University of Zimbabwe prospectus, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://www.uz.ac.zw/index.php/schools/computer-science-engineering*

106 *AI Readiness for Zimbabwe Report, AI4D Africa, 2024, accessed: 13 July 2025, [PDF].*

107 *Government of Zimbabwe, "Cyber and Data Protection Act, 2021," Zimbabwe Government Gazette, 3 December 2021, accessed: 22 July 2025, https://www.veritaszim.net/node/5102*

Risks to Vulnerable Groups

Existing trends in digital governance suggest that without a rights-anchored AI governance model, vulnerable and marginalised populations may disproportionately bear the risks. For instance, as Smart City technologies, biometric data collection, and AI-powered surveillance tools become more common in Zimbabwe, there are concerns around profiling of informal traders, activists, and migrants - groups already targeted under existing surveillance frameworks.[108]

Although not necessarily AI-powered at this stage, Zimbabwe's rollout of biometric voter registration (BVR) and impending national digital ID systems presents a gateway for automated decision-making and profiling, with little legal clarity on redress or safeguards for minority and marginalised groups. Zimbabwe has long used biometric voter registration, deploying hand-readers and finger scanners ahead of the 2022 elections, and civil society reports raised concerns about ghost voters and possible manipulations in the voters' roll.[109] As of mid-2023, Zimbabwe had not implemented a full foundational digital ID system, though reforms in the civil registry were paving the way for issuance of digital IDs in Harare and Bulawayo, as of an announcement in July 2025.[110] To date, there is no public evidence that AI (e.g., facial recognition and predictive profiling) is embedded in these systems, though existing laws and proposals do not clearly define limitations, oversight, or redress for automated and biometric-based decision-making.

Need for Human Rights-Based Principles

There is currently no explicit articulation of human rights principles (e.g. transparency, accountability, fairness, or redress) in the draft AI governance efforts. While Zimbabwe has supported international declarations such as the UNESCO AI Ethics Recommendation, these commitments remain largely symbolic unless translated into domestic law and supported by independent oversight.[111] Stakeholders emphasised the need for minimum legal standards requiring explainability for algorithmic decisions, the right to appeal automated outcomes, and strong safeguards against surveillance and discrimination. Such standards should also be complemented by gender and disability-sensitive guidelines, training programs, and grassroots consultations that reflect lived experiences of AI's harms.[112]

108 *Paul Adepoju, "Zimbabwe govt faces criticism over biometric surveillance project for new Smart City," Biometric Update, 22 February 2023, accessed: 22 July 2025, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202302/zimbabwe-govt-faces-criticism-over-biometric-surveillance-project-for-new-smart-city.*

109 *IDTechWire, "Zimbabwe Continues Biometric Voter Registration Drive," IDTechWire, 12 April 2022, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://idtechwire.com/zimbabwe-continues-biometric-voter-registration-drive-041205/*

110 *Greater Internet Freedom, "Biometrics and Digital ID in Zimbabwe," Greater Internet Freedom Report, 30 June 2023, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://greaterinternetfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Biometrics-and-Digital-ID-in-Zimbabwe_FINAL-APPROVED-30.06.2023.pdf*

111 *UNESCO, "Zimbabwe | Global AI Ethics and Governance Observatory," UNESCO, accessed: 23 July 2025, https://www.unesco.org/ethics-ai/en/zimbabwe*

112 *Interview with civil society representative, Harare, July 2025 (anonymized following request).*

5. Discussion:

The findings from this study reveal a complex and evolving relationship between artificial intelligence and digital democracy in Zimbabwe. While AI technologies offer considerable potential to enhance access to information, public engagement, and service delivery, the risks to civic space and digital rights are significant, particularly given Zimbabwe's current governance trajectory and broader digital repression trends and history.

5.1 Promise of AI Amid Structural Gaps

Zimbabwe's gradual uptake of AI across sectors such as agriculture, education, health, and electoral systems reflects a regional trend toward digital transformation. However, this transformation is not occurring in a vacuum. It is shaped by longstanding structural issues: underdeveloped infrastructure, opaque policy-making processes, and a weak commitment to human rights guarantees in digital governance.

AI-powered solutions such as chatbots, translation tools, biometric identification systems, and content recommendation engines hold promise for improving public service delivery and enhancing citizen engagement. They have been piloted in limited cases in education and finance, and more visibly in electoral and ID systems. Yet these developments remain largely technocentric, led by government agencies or private sector actors without sufficient civic participation or transparency. Civil society, media, and academic actors remain mostly at the periphery of the AI discourse, with few mechanisms for input into policy and design processes.

5.2 A Surveillance-Heavy Approach

Findings from this study confirm that Zimbabwe's use of AI is increasingly being shaped by securitised, surveillance-driven narratives. AI-powered facial recognition systems, biometric registration technologies, and smart city surveillance projects are already being rolled out, often with minimal safeguards or independent oversight. The overlap of these systems with politically sensitive areas such as national elections, civic mobilisation, and identity documentation raises serious concerns about misuse.

The deployment of surveillance infrastructure under the guise of modernisation, including the construction of smart cities and the adoption of traffic monitoring and biometric access systems, suggests that AI is being harnessed more as a tool of control than of empowerment. In a country where civic space has been consistently shrinking and civil liberties are under threat, the uncritical expansion of AI surveillance without rights-based safeguards risks further entrenching authoritarian practices.

Moreover, while a step in the right direction, Zimbabwe's data protection framework is not adequately equipped to respond to the risks posed by emerging AI systems. There are no explicit regulations on algorithmic transparency, automated decision-making, or the rights of individuals to contest AI-generated outcomes. This legal void opens the door to unchecked deployment of opaque technologies with real-world consequences on expression, privacy, and access to services.

5.3 Content Moderation and Information Integrity

Social media remains a critical space for activism and expression in Zimbabwe. Yet as AI tools become central to platform governance, new risks emerge in shaping what content is seen, amplified, or removed. Disinformation campaigns, algorithmic bias, and the weaponisation of deepfakes are real concerns, particularly during electoral periods. While Zimbabwe has not experienced the same volume of AI-generated disinformation as other countries, the groundwork exists. Political actors and proxy accounts have begun to use AI tools for narrative shaping, often without clear disclosure or accountability. Meanwhile, platform moderation practices, frequently outsourced or automated, risk removing legitimate content, especially from marginalised groups or human rights defenders.

Interviewed stakeholders noted limited understanding of how content is ranked, demoted, or taken down, both by platforms and local regulators. This opacity erodes trust and poses a threat to freedom of expression online. In the absence of localised guidelines and adequate safeguards, AI could exacerbate existing inequalities in online participation and stifle dissent.

5.4 Weak Governance and Exclusion of Rights Perspectives

Perhaps most concerning is the lack of institutional capacity, public awareness, and multistakeholder processes to govern AI in a rights-respecting manner. Zimbabwe's AI policy remains in draft form, and existing regulatory frameworks, such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act, are primarily focused on control rather than empowerment. The policy vacuum means there are no formal checks on how AI is developed, procured, or deployed by state agencies or private actors.

Additionally, there is no formal requirement for human rights impact assessments, transparency mechanisms, or inclusive consultation processes. Civil society and marginalised communities are largely excluded from shaping AI systems that directly impact them, a reality that compounds the risks of discrimination, exclusion, and digital harm.

Zimbabwe's AI journey also reflects broader inequities in global AI development. Many of the tools used locally are trained on datasets that lack African representation, potentially reinforcing bias. Zimbabwe's AI infrastructure is also heavily reliant on foreign actors, raising concerns over sovereignty, data extraction, and alignment with local needs.

5.5 Misaligned Priorities and the Political Economy of AI Governance

A recurrent theme that emerged from interviews and secondary research is the disconnect between stated constraints and observable resource allocations within government institutions. Policymakers often cite budgetary limitations, lack of expertise, and infrastructural gaps as the primary obstacles to developing inclusive, rights-respecting AI strategies. These constraints are also highlighted in the UNESCO 2024 AI readiness report,[113] which notes that "developing comprehensive AI regulations requires funding for research, expert consultations, public engagement, and policy drafting" - all of which Zimbabwe is said to struggle with due to limited resources and capacity.

However, this rationale is increasingly perceived by stakeholders as insufficient or selectively applied. Respondents pointed out that while the state claims to lack the funds to support consultative policy processes or invest in research and public awareness on AI, it consistently manages to fund high-end procurement for government elites, including surveillance equipment, luxury vehicles, and proprietary software with opaque procurement trails.[114] These practices highlight what some civil society actors described as a pattern of "governing through opacity," in which priorities are not shaped by evidence-based needs or public interest but rather by political expedience and control.

This misalignment of political will has direct implications for AI governance. Without deliberate policy choices to invest in public consultation, rights-aligned technical frameworks, or national debate, the default trajectory is the expansion of AI systems designed to entrench state power rather than enable civic participation. Indeed, as one interviewee noted, "the real concern is not that Zimbabwe lacks an AI strategy; it's what kind of AI strategy we might end up with, given our governance track record."

113 *UNESCO, Artificial Intelligence readiness assessment report: Zimbabwe, accessed 2 August 2025, https://www.unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394685?posInSet=1&queryId=0c71f1aa-eae4-4f59-a0c4-2ec902ae737d*

114 *MISA Zimbabwe, "Concern over acquisition and use of surveillance tools in Zimbabwe," MISA Zimbabwe, 10 March 2021, accessed: 2 September 2025, https://zimbabwe.misa.org/2021/03/10/concern-over-acquisition-and-use-of-surveillance-tools-in-zimbabwe/*

There is, therefore, a growing scepticism among digital rights advocates regarding claims of resource scarcity when there is little transparency on how available funds are used. Civil society groups argue that inclusive policy development - particularly public engagement and knowledge mobilisation - need not be prohibitively expensive, especially in a country with a vibrant, engaged citizenry and a strong network of technical expertise in the diaspora. What is lacking is not merely funding or technical know-how, but a demonstrable commitment to participatory governance and an understanding of AI as a socio-political issue, not just a technical one.

These dynamics raise urgent questions about the legitimacy and trajectory of AI policy development in Zimbabwe. As the country moves toward drafting an AI framework, it will be essential to interrogate whose interests are being prioritised, what governance models are being emulated, and who has access to shape the process. Without this reflection, AI risks becoming the next frontier of exclusion and surveillance, rather than a tool for democratic deepening.

5.6 Toward a Human Rights-Based Approach

The study highlights a growing consensus among stakeholders that Zimbabwe must urgently shift toward a more human rights-centred approach to AI governance. This includes embedding principles such as transparency, accountability, inclusion, and redress into both law and practice.

Recommendations emerging from the interviews include the need for a national framework that mandates algorithmic explainability, prohibits high-risk AI applications without safeguards, and establishes strong data governance practices. Such a framework should be backed by meaningful public consultations, cross-sector dialogue, and capacity-building programs for regulators, developers, and rights advocates.

Also essential is a recognition of the intersectionality of digital rights violations. AI systems, whether in policing, education, or welfare, disproportionately affect women, people with disabilities, and economically marginalised groups. A rights-based AI framework must therefore prioritise inclusivity, accessibility, and social justice, grounded in Zimbabwe's constitutional obligations and international human rights commitments.

5.7 Regional and Global Influences

Finally, Zimbabwe's AI trajectory does not exist in isolation. Regional bodies such as the African Union and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), as well as global norms including the AU Continental AI Strategy, UNESCO AI Ethics Recommendations and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) AI Principles,[115] offer important benchmarks. Zimbabwe's alignment with these instruments is uneven and often rhetorical rather than practical. But they provide a window for reform-oriented actors to push for more progressive governance. If Zimbabwe is to harness AI's potential for democratic renewal rather than repression, it must reframe its digital governance from control to co-creation, including communities, not just companies, at the centre of the conversation.

115 *UNESCO, Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, 16 May 2023 https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence, accessed 2 August 2025*

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This research set out to examine the implications of artificial intelligence on digital democracy in Zimbabwe, specifically its intersection with civic space and digital rights. While AI is still at a nascent stage in Zimbabwe, its integration into governance, surveillance, and content moderation systems is growing, often in ways that outpace public understanding and regulatory safeguards.

The study finds that Zimbabwe's AI uptake is driven largely by government-led smart infrastructure initiatives, biometric ID systems, and imported technologies embedded in public sector digitisation. However, this growth occurs in a context marked by weak legal protections, minimal transparency, limited civil society participation, and a history of digital repression. AI-powered surveillance systems are being deployed in cities and at border control under opaque partnerships, raising serious risks for privacy and civic space. Meanwhile, the use of AI by social media platforms, through automated content moderation, algorithmic feeds, and recommender systems, further complicates the exercise of freedom of expression and information access, particularly in an election-sensitive environment.

Despite its promise, Zimbabwe's AI governance ecosystem lacks human rights-centred guardrails. Current laws do not explicitly address AI's unique risks, and the draft national AI strategy remains unavailable to the public, with no clear timeline or participatory process for finalisation. Moreover, stakeholders interviewed from civil society, academia and the private sector express concern that AI is being introduced as a technical or security issue, rather than as a social and political one.

This research faced a number of limitations. Access to official government information was constrained, with draft policies on AI often unavailable or shared only within closed networks. This limited verification of claims around state adoption of AI systems. Key informant interviews were also uneven across stakeholder groups, with government and private-sector actors less forthcoming than civil society and academia. Finding interviewees who felt confident enough to speak openly was difficult, and some stakeholders expressed fear of potential repercussions or unknown consequences for criticising government AI initiatives. Time constraints further meant some potentially valuable perspectives - such as those of teachers trialling ed-tech, or rural farmers using agritech apps - could not be systematically included.

Future research should therefore deepen inquiry into three areas: first, the actual implementation of AI within biometric ID and smart-city systems, including the extent of profiling and surveillance; second, the role of private sector innovators and startups in shaping AI's trajectory in Zimbabwe, especially outside the capital; and third, the gendered impacts of AI adoption, given concerns about disinformation, exclusion, and child online safety raised in this study. Longitudinal work combining technical audits with community-based research would provide a stronger evidence base for rights-centred AI governance in Zimbabwe.

6.2 Recommendations

To unlock AI's potential for inclusion, participation and justice, a fundamental shift in policy, practice and power relations is required. Below are targeted recommendations for stakeholders:

Government and Regulators

- Expedite the finalisation of Zimbabwe's national AI policy with broad-based public consultation and transparency on timelines, implementation frameworks and oversight bodies.
- Embedding rights protections in AI laws can potentially be achieved through revising existing digital laws, including the Cyber and Data Protection Act, to incorporate clear provisions on algorithmic transparency, explainability, rights to redress, and the prohibition of harmful AI use (e.g. mass surveillance without judicial oversight).
- Enforce mandatory human rights and gender impact assessments for all AI systems used in the public sector, including smart city technologies and biometric systems.
- Establish or capacitate an independent multi-stakeholder AI governance body that includes civil society, academia, and the tech community to monitor, audit and advise on AI deployments.

Civil Society and Human Rights Organisations

- Strengthen internal understanding of AI's impacts on civic space through targeted capacity building, South-South knowledge exchange, and active engagement in AI governance discourse.
- Advocate for transparency in AI procurement and deployment, including disclosure of public contracts and technical documentation relating to AI deployments in surveillance, biometric registration, or automated decision-making systems.
- Document harms and elevate affected voices, including through case studies and reporting mechanisms that track and highlight AI-related rights violations, particularly those affecting marginalised communities, women, and human rights defenders.

Media and Journalists

- Investigate and report on AI-powered disinformation and platform governance, including on how algorithmic systems affect information access and online speech, especially during elections and civic moments.
- Strengthen digital literacy content, including by explaining how AI tools such as deepfakes, recommendation engines or facial recognition work, and how citizens can identify manipulation or abuse.

Private Sector and Tech Community

- Encourage the development of AI tools that prioritise inclusion, use local languages, and respond to the Zimbabwean local context and realities — not just imported use cases.
- Align AI practices with regional and international human rights standards, such as the African Commission's Resolution 630/2025 and AU Data Policy Framework.
- Open AI training datasets for scrutiny, including by disclosing training data sources and model documentation to allow civil society and independent experts to assess potential biases and risks.

Academia and Research Institutions

- Conduct independent multidisciplinary AI Research, including on the societal impacts of AI in Zimbabwe, particularly its influence on political participation, media consumption, and public service delivery.
- Host public debates and citizen dialogues where communities can engage with the risks and opportunities of AI and contribute to shaping policy narratives from the ground up.

Regional and International Actors

- Support localised AI governance efforts, including by providing financial and technical support to Zimbabwean institutions working to build rights-aligned AI capacity, including CSOs, regulators, and academic institutions.
- Hold transnational platforms accountable, including by working with digital rights groups to press global tech companies to publish Zimbabwe-specific transparency reports and engage meaningfully with local concerns about content moderation and algorithmic fairness.

Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
+256 414 289 502
programmes@cipesa.org
@cipesaug facebook.com/cipesaug Linkedin/cipesa
www.cipesa.org