

Reimagining the Future of Human Rights in Africa: Southern Africa Convening



Securing Gains. Centering Dignity. Shaping Futures

Gaborone, Botswana | 26–28 August 2026

Concept Note



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Purpose

This concept note outlines the rationale, focus areas, and design of a sub-regional human rights dialogue for Southern Africa, to be held in Gaborone, Botswana, **from 26-28 August 2026**. The convening is a partnership between Open Society Foundations (OSF), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights), the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANRI), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The dialogue forms part of a broader Africa-wide process to reimagine the future of human rights. The Southern Africa convening is intended to:

- i. Surface region-specific risks, opportunities, and comparative advantages;
- ii. Strengthen collaboration among sub-regional actors; and
- iii. Generate concrete, prevention-oriented inputs to inform a continental human rights flagship initiative aligned with AU and UN priorities under Agendas 2030 and 2063.



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Background and Rationale

Africa's contemporary human rights architecture is anchored in the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981)*, reinforced by subsequent AU treaties, mechanisms, and policy frameworks. Agenda 2063 reaffirmed a collective continental commitment to **dignity, justice, and inclusive, people-centred development**. The adoption of the AU-UN Human Rights Framework in 2023 further strengthened strategic coherence and coordination between continental and global systems.

Despite these foundations, the continent continues to experience democratic regression marked by *unconstitutional changes of government, shrinking civic space, armed conflicts, rising inequality, climate shocks, and geo-economic pressures*. Globally, weakening multilateralism and the rise of populist anti-rights narratives have further constrained support for human rights. At the same time, civil society, social movements, and youth-led actors are demonstrating resilience and innovation, particularly through digital organizing and transnational solidarity.

Within this broader continental context, Southern Africa presents a distinct human rights and governance landscape. The region benefits not only from relative political stability and strong constitutional traditions, but also from comparatively higher levels of economic diversification, regional integration, and state institutional capacity than many parts of East, West, and Central Africa. However, it also faces deep structural inequalities and emerging governance risks.

A dedicated sub-regional dialogue is therefore critical to ensure that its specific challenges, opportunities, and leadership potential meaningfully shape the evolving African human rights agenda.





Southern Africa Context: Risks & Opportunities

Southern Africa has generally experienced lower levels of large-scale armed conflict and political instability than parts of West and Central Africa, and retains comparatively strong constitutional frameworks and institutional guardrails, including courts and national human rights institutions, albeit unevenly and not in all countries. The region has also played a historic leadership role in shaping continental norms through **liberation struggles, anti-apartheid solidarity, and jurisprudence** advancing both civil and political and socio-economic rights.

However, human rights challenges and implementation gaps persist. Southern Africa is the most unequal sub-region globally: seven of the world's ten most unequal countries are located here (**Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia**). Extreme income, spatial, and gender inequalities undermine access to justice, social cohesion, and state capacity, constituting a structural early-warning indicator for instability and rights violations.

The sub-region encompasses diverse economies and risk profiles. Upper-middle-income countries (e.g. Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, and South Africa) continue to grapple with entrenched inequality. Least Developed Countries (Angola, Comoros, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia) face structural constraints, high debt, and acute climate vulnerability. Malawi, Madagascar, and Mozambique consistently rank among the ten poorest countries in the world. Island states confront compounded climate and economic risks. Southern Africa is a climate hotspot, increasingly affected by droughts, floods, heatwaves, and sea-level rise, while limited financing and infrastructure constrain a just transition.

At the same time, Southern Africa holds significant opportunities. The region has access to critical minerals and strong renewable energy potential. It also benefits from comparatively robust legal frameworks and a vibrant civil society.

Its influential role in global and regional blocs, including SADC and BRICS, provides important entry points for shaping more equitable, rights-based development pathways. These opportunities can be realized if governance, accountability, and participation are strengthened.





Thematic Focus Areas for the Convening

The convening will be structured around three interlinked themes, with two cross-cutting lenses, to provide analytical depth while remaining feasible within a three-day dialogue.

Theme 1: Accountability, Security Governance, and Democratic Trust

Persistent abuses of state security power undermine public trust across the region. Security agencies are frequently deployed as tools of social control or to suppress dissent and rely on practices such as mass surveillance, excessive use of force, and political interference in accountability mechanisms. While oversight bodies, courts, and national human rights institutions exist in many countries, their effectiveness is often limited by under-resourcing and politicisation. The dialogue will explore practical pathways to strengthen independent oversight, leverage strategic litigation for systemic reform, and re-shape incentive structures within security institutions to reward rights-respecting conduct.

Theme 2: Extractive Economies, Land, and Inequality

Mining, land pressures, and natural-resource-driven development remain central to Southern Africa's political economy. Weak governance in extractive sectors has contributed to displacement, labour exploitation, environmental harm, and conflict, even as critical minerals position the region as a key actor in the global energy transition. Discussions will focus on transparency, community land rights, accountability mechanisms, and regional cooperation to ensure resource wealth advances equitable, climate-resilient, and rights-based development.

Theme 3: Geopolitics, Regional Influence, and Global Positioning

Southern African countries engagement with emerging geopolitical blocs such as BRICS presents both risks and leverage. Balancing investment, sovereignty, and human rights standards remains a core challenge. The dialogue will examine how middle-power leadership, SADC mechanisms, and collective negotiating power can be used to advance a stronger integration of development, climate, and human rights in regional and global fora.





Cross-Cutting Lenses

- The rise of youth-led, community-based, and leaderless movements as drivers of accountability and renewal.
- Digital transformation and tech governance, including surveillance, data protection, and civic space online.
- Protection of human rights defenders, activists, journalists and whistleblowers



Overall Goal & Objectives

Overall Goal To generate a shared, Southern Africa-driven vision and set of actionable priorities that strengthen prevention, resilience, and accountability within the sub-regional human rights ecosystem and contribute meaningfully to a future-fit African human rights architecture.

Specific Objectives (Convening-Level)

- Develop a concise sub-regional analysis identifying priority risks, structural drivers, early-warning signals, and opportunity spaces specific to Southern Africa.
- Strengthen networks and trust among Southern African human rights actors, including civil society, youth movements, regional bodies (including SADC), and national human rights institutions.
- Identify a limited number of realistic, prevention-oriented pathways and building blocks for a longer-term flagship initiative beyond the convening.
- Articulate a sub-regional call to action that links protection of civic space, democratic accountability, climate justice, and economic equity.





Convening Structure and Approach

The three-day dialogue will combine moderated plenaries, thematic working groups, and strategy sessions focused on Southern Africa-specific dynamics. Emphasis will be placed on peer exchange, forward-looking analysis, and practical collaboration rather than declaratory outcomes alone. Outputs will be synthesised into recommendations and a sub-regional position paper feeding into the continental convening.



Target Participants

- Human rights defenders, social movements, and civil society leaders
- Youth, women, and representatives of marginalised communities eg Eco-Feminists , women cross-border traders
- Community-based and grassroots organisations, eg informal and care workers
- Legal practitioners, policy advocates, and researchers
- Journalists and digital rights actors, bloggers , podcasters , technologists from the private sector
- National human rights institutions
- Regional bodies, including SADC and AU mechanisms
- Selected donors, governments, and strategic allies
- Faith leaders
- Technologists (from the private sector)
- Allies from the security sector (intelligence and police, serving or retired)
- Representatives from the mining sector





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