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Your Excellencies, distinguished members of ECF-SADC, representatives of Electoral Management Bodies, colleagues, partners, ladies and gentlemen, all protocol respected,

Good morning. **Bonjour, Bom Dia, Sanibonani.**

First of all, allow me to sincerely thank **ECF-SADC, International IDEA**, and the **Elections and Boundaries Commission of Eswatini** for inviting me and the European Centre for Electoral Support today.

I would also like to thank the **European Union**, whose long-standing partnership has enabled us at ECES to work across this continent for many years, considering that together with EU Member States, they are our most important donors.

This year, **2025**, marks our **15th anniversary** since I had the honour to establish it back in **2010** with a very clear mandate: **to facilitate electoral cooperation between the European Union, its Member States and their partner countries requesting EU and EU MS electoral support and cooperation.**

For 15 years, we have been honoured to support electoral processes in **more than 50 countries**, mostly in Africa and the Middle East, but also in Eastern Europe and Latin America. We have always done so with the same philosophy: **support national leadership and reinforce national expertise through peer exchanges, political dialogue, mediation, and leadership development.**

When it comes to our continental cooperation in Africa, we have been implementing for the past five years the **“Pro-Electoral Integrity” Programme**, funded by Italy and carried out jointly with the **African Union Commission**, in collaboration with their Units on **Electoral Assistance & Observation** and **Rule of Law**.

Through this initiative, we contribute to:

- **electoral integrity across Africa**, including organising the **Continental Forum on Electoral Matters** every year together with the **Association of African Electoral Authorities**, and deploying peer-learning missions. Since 2022, these missions have taken place in **Kenya, Liberia, Comoros, Ghana, Namibia, Malawi, Gabon, Burundi, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire** and we have also invited, via the ECF SADC Secretariat, EMBs member of this forum that will be continued in 2026.
- **prevention, mitigation and management of electoral conflict and violence;**
- **inclusion of women, youth, and disadvantaged groups** in political and electoral processes, including developing a **school curriculum for primary and secondary levels** to disseminate the principles of the **African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance** for new generations of citizens and voters;
- **transitional justice**, where we collaborate with the AU to organise the **yearly continental forum**, the most recent being held just a few months ago in the **DRC**.

And we have seen something very important: **When countries invest in leadership development, inclusion and quality learning, citizens — especially youth and women — respond decisively, positively, and with great energy.**

Over the years, we have actively collaborated with all the major networks of EMBs in Africa

- **AAEA – African Association of Electoral Authorities (continental),**
- **ECONEC / ECOWAS EMB Network (West Africa),**
- **the Arab Network of EMBs (Tunisia, Libya, Morocco and Algeria),**

- recently we contributed to the establishment of **ROGEAC**, Network of the EMBs among countries of the Economic Community of Central African States and of the **Indian Ocean Electoral network** (regrouping the member States of the Indian Ocean Commission (**IOEN**))

With **ECF-SADC**, our collaboration has already been real and concrete, and following as well the MoU we have signed back in July 2023

For instance, apart the peer learning mission I have already mentioned, through the support of the Italian Government and the European Union, ECES has facilitated numerous scholarships for SADC EMB officials under the:

**Master in Electoral Policy and Administration (MEPA) delivered by the University of Sant Anna of Pisa together with International IDEA and UNITAR**

These scholarships have covered: **individual modules, full Master's degrees** and I am pleased to confirm that: **Italian-funded MEPA scholarships remain available** that we can facilitate to continue supporting your EMB staff with both modules and full Master opportunities. In the meantime ECES **translated MEPA into Portuguese, French, and Arabic**, contributed to the **development of three new modules** and we will now propose adding a **module specifically on Leadership & Artificial Intelligence**

This is concrete cooperation we are proud of. Now, allow me to move to the core of my message. When ECES was created 15 years ago, we made an important observation:

**Elections do not fail because of technology alone. They fail when leadership fails.** They fail when:

- communication breaks down,
- trust erodes,
- conflict escalates,
- institutions cannot cope with pressure.

This is why we created our flagship training methodology: **LEAD which stands for Leadership and Conflict Management Skills for Electoral Stakeholders**. For 15 years, LEAD has:

- trained **tens of thousands** of participants,
- strengthened dialogue and cooperation,
- built national pools of certified trainers,
- supported EMBs, political parties, CSOs, media, security forces, women and youth groups.

But the environment has changed dramatically. In recent years, **Artificial Intelligence** has transformed the electoral landscape and we have already discussed yesterday of:

- **deepfakes**,
- **bot networks**,

- **algorithmic bias,**
- **disinformation at scale,**
- **foreign interference in digital form,**
- **biometric vulnerabilities,**
- **viral manipulation on social media.**

At the same time, AI brings enormous **opportunities**:

- improved biometrics,
- geospatial optimisation of polling stations,
- anomaly detection in results,
- early-warning systems,
- innovative channels for civic and voter education.

This is why we apply a simple principle: **Technology must or at least should serve democracy — not the other way around.** The question is not whether AI will affect elections — **it already does.** The real question is: **Will AI strengthen electoral integrity, or will it undermine it?** For us, most depends on **leadership of the different electoral stakeholders** And this is why **LEAD evolved into LEAD-AI, Leadership & Artificial Intelligent Skills for Electoral Stakeholders.**

LEAD-AI integrates:

1. **Leadership development,**
2. **Conflict prevention and mediation,**
3. **AI literacy and practical digital skills.**

LEAD-AI share knowledge to electoral stakeholders to:

- recognise deepfakes and synthetic media,
- detect bot networks,
- understand algorithmic amplification,
- counter disinformation,
- integrate AI tools across the electoral cycle,
- apply ethical and legal standards,
- and respond effectively to AI-driven crises.

Crucially, LEAD-AI is **not only for EMBs.** It targets the **entire electoral ecosystem**:

- civil society,
- women and youth groups,
- political parties,
- media and fact-checkers,
- security forces,
- community and religious leaders.

Because when misinformation spreads, **young voters** are often the first to be affected. And that is why LEAD-AI includes a strong component of **AI-aware civic and voter education**, providing capacity to youth to:

- verify information,
- recognise manipulation,
- understand how algorithms shape content,
- participate positively on TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube.

To conclude, let me briefly highlight two additional dimensions that are essential to understanding the LEAD AI programme that introduces participants to the **global dynamics of Artificial Intelligence**, including:

- the strategic competition between the **United States, China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Canada and Gulf States**,
- the rise of **BRICS++**,
- critical issues such as **digital sovereignty** and **data colonialism**,
- and the expanding influence of **Big Tech companies** on political communication, public opinion, and information ecosystems.

These global trends directly shape the way AI is deployed — and misused — in electoral contexts across Africa and globally.

LEAD-AI is built as a **structured, certified cascade model**, rooted in the original LEAD experience. It includes:

- a **three-tier certification system**,
- a full **digital “key-in-hand” training kit** (facilitator guides, handbooks, slide decks, exercises),
- methodology for **local replication**,
- and tools to ensure **sustainability and national ownership**.

This enables countries to integrate LEAD-AI into their institutional frameworks and scale it across all levels of the electoral ecosystem.

At the end of the day one of the benefits is that the training ignites innovative ideas that can contribute to efficiencies which allows the EMBs to respond proactively to other other stakeholders in so doing contributing towards transparency and electoral integrity.

To use an analogy. We have become accustomed that elections on the continent is like building the PLANE and trying to take off at the same time. AI and specifically in the context on LEAD-AI can capacitate EMBs to fly the plane using the pilots dashboard and radar. Simple things such as drafting an election calender can be achieved in minutes

To conclude, ECES stands ready to continue support ECF-SADC through four concrete areas:

**1 Delivering LEAD-AI trainings across SADC**,with adaptation to local contexts and certification of national trainers.

**2 Supporting regulatory frameworks and developing guidelines on AI and elections**,aligned with the AU Digital Transformation Strategy and SADC priorities.

③ **Enhancing the MEPA Master with AI modules**, continuing to mobilise Italian scholarships for SADC EMB staff.

④ **Expanding Peer-Learning Missions**, ensuring ECF-SADC members remain central in cross-regional exchanges in Africa and elsewhere since Italy is also funding us to facilitate a peer exchange mission of EMBs in Italy to interact with our Italian EMB

Excellencies, colleagues, friends—

**AI is powerful, but it is not destiny.** It will reshape elections — but *how* it reshapes them is your responsibility to which we would love to continue to contribute.

- **AI can divide — but leadership can unite.**
- **AI can mislead — but informed citizens can resist.**
- **AI can destabilise — but strong, resilient institutions can protect democracy.**

Technology will not decide the future of democracy. **People will. Leaders will. Citizens — especially young citizens — will.** ECES is honoured to walk this journey with ECF-SADC, combining **15 years of experience** with a strong commitment to **innovation and inclusion**. Together, we can continue to collaborate for Artificial Intelligence becoming: **an opportunity, not a threat; a tool for transparency, not confusion; a force that strengthens democracy — and never undermines it.**

**Thank you very much.**

**Merci beaucoup.**

**Obrigado.**

**Ngiyabonga.**