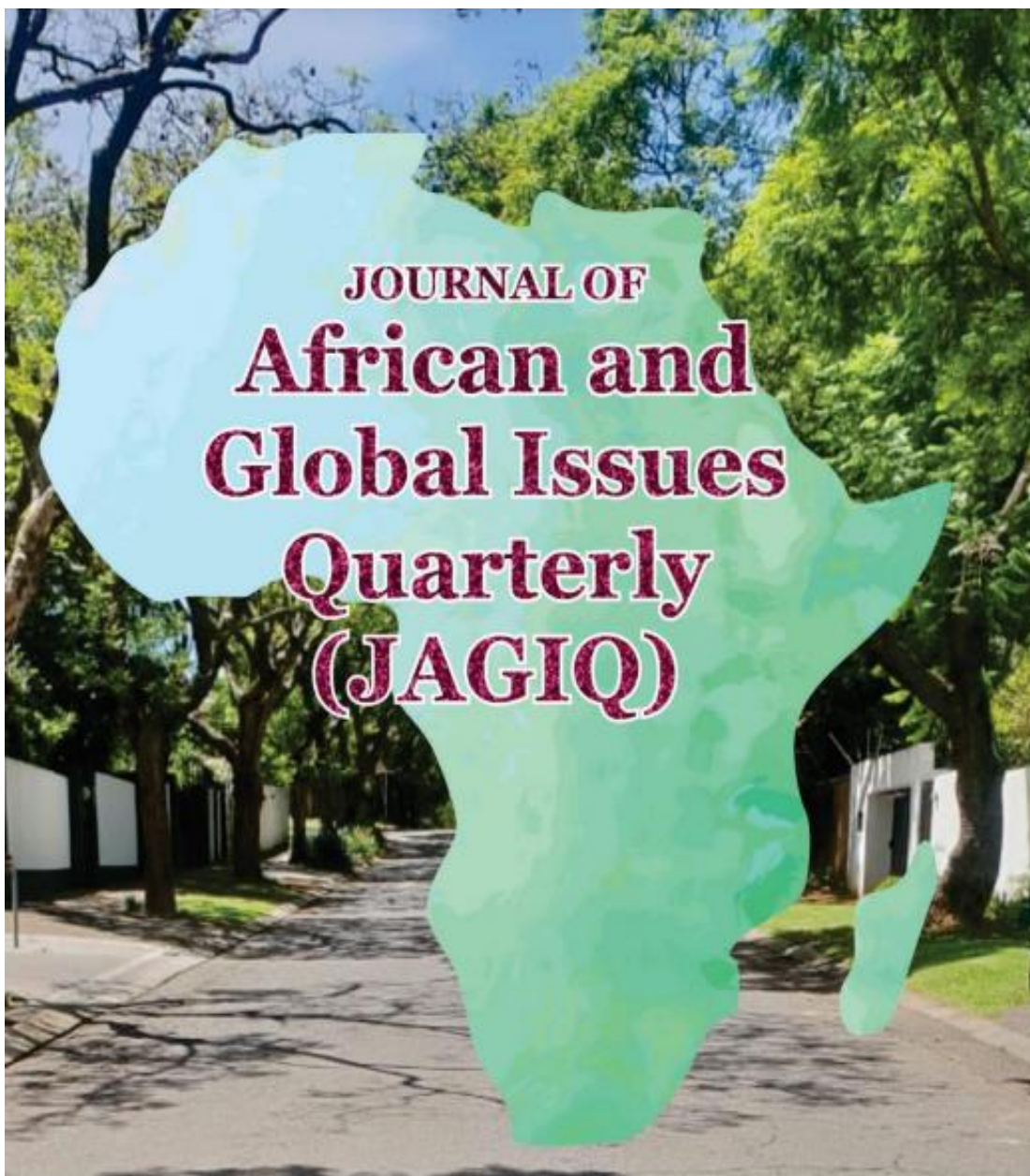




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## **Editorial Note**

### **Indigenous Knowledge, Institutional Capacity, And Africa's Quest For Self-Determination**

Welcome to the October 2026 issue of the African and Global Issues Quarterly. The collection of articles assembled here reflects the journal's enduring commitment to interrogating the multifaceted challenges and opportunities confronting the African continent and its place in the global order. The contributions in this volume share a common thread: a determination to look inward for solutions while engaging critically with external frameworks and legacies.

Several articles in this issue foreground the imperative of harnessing indigenous knowledge and frameworks as vehicles for progress. Nkemakolam and Amaechi propose "Igbozealotism" as an indigenous framework for socio-political and economic advancement, challenging scholars and policymakers to centre African philosophical traditions in contemporary governance discourse. Similarly, Mthethwa, Kolanisi, and Singh explore the repositioning of indigenous knowledge in fostering "studentpreneurship," while Mahlala and colleagues examine indigenous governance systems through a public administration lens. Kilonzo and her co-authors contribute a profile of indigenous banana cultivars, reminding us that agricultural biodiversity and traditional knowledge are integral to food security and rural livelihoods. These contributions collectively affirm that sustainable development in Africa must be rooted in, rather than detached from, local epistemologies and practices.

The issue also engages critically with questions of institutional effectiveness and the delivery of public goods. Lamidi and Hofisi examine the implementation gap in South African public service delivery, highlighting the centrality of bureaucratic capacity. Malope's study of community health worker programmes illuminates the intersection of recruitment, governance, and the democratisation of public administration. These articles underscore that institutional strengthening is not merely a technical exercise but a deeply political one, requiring accountability, inclusivity, and responsiveness to community needs.

On the continental and global stage, Odaudu's analysis of post-Françafrique dynamics in the Sahel offers a penetrating account of shifting dependencies and external realignments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, a region of immense strategic significance. Taleat, Lukamba, and Diedericks examine the localisation of the

Sustainable Development Goals, arguing that global agendas must be adapted to local realities if they are to deliver meaningful prosperity. Maeresera's study of strategic communication and nation branding during Zimbabwe's COMESA chairmanship illustrates the role of media in projecting regional leadership.

Finally, the issue addresses pressing social and demographic concerns. Omopo and Pillay investigate the psychological distress associated with food insecurity and housing conditions among school-going children and adolescents, while Ifanayajo, Palamuleni, and Adebowale provide a decomposition analysis of fertility rates among women of reproductive age in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Taken together, these thirteen articles offer a rich and diverse body of scholarship. They challenge us to think deeply about the relationship between indigenous agency and institutional effectiveness, between local realities and global agendas. We trust that this issue will stimulate further research and debate and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of knowledge on African and global affairs.

We thank our authors, reviewers, and readers for their continued support.

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## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND NATION BRANDING: MEDIA INSTRUMENTALITY IN PROJECTING ZIMBABWE'S REGIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING THE COMESA CHAIRMANSHIP, 2026–2027

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### **Abstract**

*This article analyses media instrumentality and strategic communication as primary mechanisms for projecting Zimbabwe's regional leadership during its 2026–2027 chairmanship of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). The 25th COMESA Summit in Harare directly intersects with the national implementation of the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2) and Vision 2030. Drawing on agenda-setting, framing, and public diplomacy theories, this article utilises a qualitative case study design. It compares Kenya's 2024–2025 and Rwanda's 2017–2018 COMESA chairmanships to argue that the media serves as a vital instrument of economic diplomacy. The findings reveal that without a coordinated nation-branding strategy, high summit visibility does not automatically yield foreign direct investment or enhanced trade. Evidence from Kenya and Rwanda shows that institutional bonds among the executive, investment promotion agencies, and the media are the critical differentiator in socio-economic outcomes. Consequently, this paper introduces a four-phase Strategic Communication Framework aligned with NDS2 and offers six targeted policy recommendations. It concludes that for Zimbabwe to leverage its chairmanship effectively, the media must be institutionalized as a core pillar of the foreign policy architecture.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic Communication, Nation Branding, Public Diplomacy, COMESA, Zimbabwe, NDS2, Vision 2030, Agenda-Setting, Economic Diplomacy,*

### **1. Introduction: Summitry as Statecraft in the African Regional Architecture**

In contemporary African international relations and political economy, hosting regional summits has evolved

far beyond the administrative confines of protocol, hospitality, and logistics. States increasingly deploy it as a deliberate, calculated instrument of high-level statecraft (Kornegay, 2019). Within the institutional design of

African multilateralism, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) serve as the primary operational building blocks for the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the continuous rollout of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (African Union, 2015). Standing at the apex of these RECs is the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)—a sprawling 21-member trade bloc encompassing a market of over 583 million citizens and a combined gross domestic product exceeding USD 1 trillion.

Commanding the rotating chairmanship of such an expansive institutional architecture provides an incumbent state with a powerful, albeit brief, window of disproportionate agenda-setting authority, soft power projection, and targeted access to sub-regional consumer and capital markets (Hartzenberg, 2011). Kornegay (2019) characterizes this strategic deployment of multilateral hosting as a form of “soft infrastructure.” This infrastructure allows developing states to temporarily drive the institutional agenda of regional integration while simultaneously advancing localized national interests.

## **2. The Harare Nexus: The 25th COMESA Summit and Macroeconomic Re-alignment**

On 22 October 2026, the Republic of Zimbabwe will assume this institutional mantle by hosting the 25th COMESA Summit of Heads of State and

Government at the new Parliament Building in Mt. Hampden, Harare. Under the theme “*One Market, One Future: Advancing Inclusive Industrialisation, Investment and Regional Integration in COMESA*,” this high-level summit will be preceded by the COMESA Business Forum on 20 October and the Council of Ministers meeting on 21 October. Succeeding the Republic of Kenya, Zimbabwe's entry into the 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship occurs at an extraordinary, path-defining juncture for its domestic political economy.

The year 2026 marks the official termination of the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) and the formal launch of the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2, 2026–2030). NDS2 is the final, critical medium-term blueprint guiding the nation toward its overarching target: Vision 2030, which aims to transform Zimbabwe into an empowered, prosperous upper-middle-income society. The structural priorities of NDS2 are clear: macroeconomic stability, private sector-led industrialization, value-addition and beneficiation of critical minerals, extensive infrastructure development, and an aggressive push for international re-engagement and external debt restructuring.

Consequently, the 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship cannot be evaluated as an ordinary, ceremonial calendar event. As Bayne and

Woolcock (2017) synthesize, it is a high-stakes economic instrument. This platform allows Harare to showcase its ongoing regulatory and currency reforms, roll out trade facilitation measures like the COMESA electronic Certificate of Origin, and position the country as an attractive destination for regional capital.

### **3. The Core Literature Gap and Problem Statement**

Despite the strategic importance of regional chairmanships, a deep conceptual gap persists within contemporary political economy and communication literature. While scholars have written extensively on the institutional and legal dimensions of regional integration in Africa (Hartzenberg, 2011) and the broader role of legacy media in African democratization processes (Banda, 2010), there is almost no academic work analyzing the strategic use of media architecture during REC chairmanships to secure hard economic outcomes (Gilboa, 2008). Traditional international relations scholarship remains skewed toward "high politics"—focusing on regional peace and security architectures, protocol signing, and state-to-state elite signaling (Kornegay, 2019).

This focus leaves the communicative, narrative-driven, and mediated dimensions of institutional leadership profoundly under-theorized. The literature consistently fails to explore how a state can convert the brief visibility of a summit into long-term

trade agreements or tangible investments (Anholt, 2007). This omission creates a significant policy blind spot for developing states like Zimbabwe. It leaves the country without an empirical blueprint for managing its national image or coordinating its communication apparatus when stepping onto major international stages.

### **4. Research Objectives, Questions, and Core Argument**

This article directly addresses this empirical vacuum by providing a structured analysis of how strategic state communication can convert temporary institutional authority into lasting soft power and economic capital. To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following primary research question:

- **Primary Research Question:**  
How can strategic communication and mass media architecture be structurally deployed to project Zimbabwe's regional leadership and advance the core macroeconomic targets of NDS2 and Vision 2030 during the 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship?

To systematically answer this question, the article pursues three specific sub-objectives:

- a. Evaluate the media management strategies and economic outcomes of Kenya's (2024–2025) and

Rwanda's (2017–2018) previous COMESA chairmanships.

b. Identify the primary institutional, financial, and narrative challenges within Zimbabwe's existing state communication structures.

c. Develop a comprehensive, actionable four-phase strategic communication framework tailored to the unique economic realities of the 2026 summit.

- **The Central Argument:** This paper argues that for a nation-state to achieve its foreign policy goals during a regional chairmanship, the media must be thoroughly reconceptualized. It can no longer be treated as a passive, detached recorder of events. Instead, it must be institutionalized as an active, coordinated instrument of economic diplomacy and nation branding (Hallahan et al., 2007).

In an interconnected global information economy, hosting a summit alone does not automatically guarantee positive economic returns (Anholt, 2007). Without a proactive, unified, and well-funded strategic communication plan that actively shapes public agendas and shifts negative external risk narratives, the immense visibility of a regional chairmanship will be confined to localized audiences and quickly forgotten. By treating media diplomacy as a vital part of foreign policy,

Zimbabwe can ensure its chairmanship yields real, measurable economic value—transforming diplomatic themes into industrial development, sustainable employment, and enhanced regional standing (Gilboa, 2008).

## **5. The Politics of Chairmanship and Regional Integration**

Within the contemporary architecture of African multilateralism, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) serve as the operational linchpins for continental integration, acting as the primary building blocks for the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (African Union, 2015). Hartzenberg (2011) argues that the institutional design of African RECs grants the rotating chairmanship disproportionate agenda-setting power. This leadership position allows the incumbent state to steer bureaucratic priorities, broker stalemates, and subtly align regional integration trajectories with its own domestic national interests. Kornegay (2019) conceptualises this institutional stewardship and summitry as a critical form of "soft infrastructure." This infrastructure is deemed as necessary for regional cohesion as the physical trade corridors spanning the continent.

However, a critical gap persists in mainstream integration literature. As Kornegay (2019) observes, historical analyses of African chairmanships are heavily skewed toward high-politics outcomes, specifically conflict

resolution, peace, and security architectures. This preoccupation leaves the operational and communicative dimensions of institutional leadership profoundly under-theorised. For the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), this intellectual omission is particularly stark. While mainstream economic diplomacy literature examines how regional integration lowers tariff barriers (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017), an empirical gap remains in how member states strategically use the 12-to-24-month chairmanship window to execute state brand repair, trade diplomacy, and regional power projection. This institutional blind spot obscures the reality that in an interconnected global political economy, the efficacy of an integration agenda is fundamentally tied to how it is structurally communicated to regional and international markets.

## **6. Strategic Communication, Nation Branding, and the Competitive Identity of Emerging States**

To understand how state actors bridge the gap between institutional policy and regional perception, this study synthesises the paradigms of strategic communication and nation branding. Hallahan et al. (2007) foundational framework defines strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission.” When transposed to the state apparatus, this requires the deliberate orchestration of multi-

layered communication channels—from state media broadcasts to digital diplomatic channels—to advance foreign policy objectives, national security, and macroeconomic development agendas (Cull, 2008). Strategic communication is not merely an exercise in public relations; it is an instrument of statecraft designed to manufacture consensus, project soft power, and shape the external geopolitical environment.

This operational imperative intersects directly with Anholt’s (2007) conceptualisation of “competitive identity” or nation branding. Anholt argues that in a hyper-globalised economy, nation-states compete vigorously for finite global capital, tourism, skilled human resources, and geopolitical influence. A nation’s brand is a complex matrix of cultural heritage, export quality, policy predictability, and diplomatic conduct. For post-colonial African states, nation branding carries a double burden. As Banda (2010) notes, African states do not operate on a neutral branding canvas; they must actively contest deeply entrenched patterns of “Afro-pessimism”—the systematic international media bias that reduces the continent to a homogeneous site of crises, corruption, and instability.

The strategic deployment of nation branding during high-profile multilateral events can radically alter state trajectories. For instance, empirical studies of Rwanda’s post-1994 diplomatic resurgence demonstrate how the tightly managed

“Rwanda Works” and “Visit Rwanda” campaigns systematically shifted global perceptions of the state from a site of genocide to a premier technocratic hub for investment and international conferences (Gilboa, 2008). However, the literature also reveals a cautionary structural flaw: without a sustained, institutionalised strategic communication apparatus, the hosting of regional summits becomes a fleeting, episodic event. Entman (1993) notes that without proactive communicative frameworks, historic summits are quickly consumed by localised domestic political noise, leaving no lasting footprint on regional or global elite perceptions.

## **7. Mediatised Diplomacy: Agenda-Setting and Framing in Multilateral Interventions**

Operationalising strategic communication during a regional chairmanship relies heavily on the structural mechanics of mass media. This article draws on the classic Agenda-Setting Theory pioneered by McCombs and Shaw (1972), which posits that the mass media does not necessarily tell the public what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its audience *what to think about*. In multilateral diplomacy, the media’s agenda-setting role operates at a systemic level. By elevating certain regional themes—such as digital trade facilitation, industrialisation, or infrastructure connectivity—the media forces these issues into the legislative

crosshairs of regional elites, ministers, and heads of state.

Beyond mere salience, Framing Theory provides a deeper analytical lens. As Entman (1993) famously conceptualised, to frame is to select aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. In mediatised diplomacy, how a state's chairmanship is framed determines its ultimate geopolitical legitimacy. Gilboa (2008) asserts that contemporary international relations are defined by "media diplomacy," where state actors actively contest and negotiate foreign policy outcomes through global media scripts.

In the Southern African context, Banda (2010) emphasizes that despite the rise of decentralized digital media, state-aligned public broadcasters and legacy print media continue to hold immense institutional authority. They remain the primary verifiers of political reality for both domestic populations and regional diplomatic missions. Consequently, this study extends the McCombs and Shaw (1972) paradigm into the specific theater of REC chairmanships. We argue that the interaction between state-directed strategic communication and media framing serves as the decisive variable determining whether regional stakeholders frame Zimbabwe's COMESA chairmanship as a bureaucratic exercise in "signing protocols" or as an action-oriented era

of "economic deals" and regional trade breakthroughs.

## **8. Economic Diplomacy and Macroeconomic Re-alignment under NDS2**

Ultimately, the soft power generated through nation branding and media framing must be converted into tangible economic assets through economic diplomacy. Bayne and Woolcock (2017) conceptualise economic diplomacy as the decision-making, policy-making, and negotiation of a state's international economic relations, utilizing the full spectrum of diplomatic tools to secure trade access, attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and manage international financial obligations. Within this matrix, strategic communication acts as a vital signaling mechanism. It signals domestic policy consistency, regulatory transparency, and property rights protections to highly sensitive international financial markets (Hallahan et al., 2007).

For developing states within SADC and COMESA, economic diplomacy has eclipsed traditional geopolitical diplomacy. This shift is driven by severe infrastructure financing gaps and the urgent need to integrate into regional value chains (African Development Bank, 2022). The Republic of Zimbabwe provides a distinct case study for this transition. The state's National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2), covering 2026–2030, explicitly articulates an

aggressive economic transformation agenda, targeting a cumulative USD 30 billion in FDI inflows by 2030 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021).

To achieve these ambitious macroeconomic targets, the state requires a high-visibility platform to signal its structural reforms and investment readiness. The COMESA chairmanship for 2026–2027 represents exactly this kind of catalytic economic instrument. It provides Zimbabwe with the institutional mandate to lead a trade bloc of over 583 million people with a combined GDP exceeding USD 1 trillion. Consequently, as synthesized from Bayne and Woolcock (2017), the chairmanship cannot be viewed merely as a rotating political honor. It must be analysed as a high-stakes economic instrument. Through deliberate strategic communication, this instrument can re-author the nation's competitive identity, mitigate perceptions of sovereign risk, and anchor the country as a primary destination for regional capital.

## **9. The Tripartite Nexus: Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Public Diplomacy**

To rigorously interrogate how media architecture projects sub-regional leadership, this study avoids a mono-theoretical approach. Instead, it deploys a tripartite, interlocking theoretical framework. This framework synthesizes Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Cull's Taxonomy of Public Diplomacy.

While these paradigms have legacy roots in communication and political science, their convergence provides a powerful analytical tool for studying a Regional Economic Community (REC) chairmanship. This framework allows us to examine how a state can convert temporary bureaucratic authority into lasting regional soft power and economic capital.

### **9.1 First- and Second-Level Agenda-Setting: Establishing Salience in Regional Multilateralism**

The foundational pillar of this study's analytical matrix is Agenda-Setting Theory, pioneered by McCombs and Shaw (1972). In its classical formulation, the theory posits a direct, mathematically verifiable correlation between the volume of media coverage dedicated to an issue and the level of importance the public assigns to it. The media does not dictate *what* individuals think, but it effectively dictates *what* they think *about*. In the context of Zimbabwe's 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship, this study extends this paradigm beyond the domestic public sphere into elite regional diplomacy.

To achieve academic depth, this article operationalizes both first-level and second-level agenda-setting:

- **First-Level Agenda-Setting (Object Salience):** This level focuses on how the state utilizes media channels to push macro-themes onto the regional stage. During a chairmanship, the incumbent state commands the

institutional bully pulpit (Hartzenberg, 2011). By orchestrating systematic media campaigns across state-aligned legacy networks and regional syndicates, Zimbabwe can elevate specific developmental objects—such as digital trade facilitation, regional value-chain industrialization, or the harmonization of non-tariff barriers—to the top of the COMESA agenda.

- **Second-Level Agenda-Setting (Attribute Salience):** This level moves beyond the object itself to focus on which specific properties or attributes are emphasized. The media does not just introduce an issue; it highlights specific characteristics that shape how audiences understand it.

When applied to Zimbabwe's economic diplomacy, second-level agenda-setting is critical. For instance, when the media covers alignment with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), it can choose which attributes to highlight. It can focus on either "bureaucratic delays" or "transformative market opportunities." By strategically managing these attributes, the state can use media infrastructure to position its regional leadership as action-oriented and economically progressive.

## **9.2 Framing Theory: The Strategic Management of Sovereign Perceptions**

While agenda-setting establishes an issue's salience, Framing Theory provides the cognitive architecture that shapes how that issue is interpreted. As Entman (1993) notes, to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. This promotes a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. In international relations, framing is the primary mechanism through which states contest and negotiate political reality.

During Zimbabwe's 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship, framing is an active tool for repairing its sovereign brand. Historically, external media representations of Zimbabwe have suffered from restrictive frames. These frames often over-emphasize sovereign risk and economic volatility, effectively sidelining the country's structural advantages. This article examines how state-directed communication and public media counter these narratives. They do this by actively constructing an alternative frame: "Zimbabwe: The Regional Integration Hub and Open for Business." This counter-framing strategy operates across Entman's four functional dimensions:

1. Defining the Problem: Shifting the narrative away from historical constraints and

toward the collective challenge of regional infrastructure gaps.

2. Diagnosing Causes: Framing trade bottlenecks as shared structural issues that require collective regional solutions, rather than isolated domestic policy failures.
3. Making Moral Judgements: Highlighting Zimbabwe's consistent compliance with regional trade protocols, portraying the nation as a reliable and predictable partner.
4. Suggesting Remedies: Positioning Zimbabwe's specific chairmanship priorities—such as private sector integration and agricultural value chains—as the primary drivers for regional economic recovery.

By managing these frames, the media helps shift the country's image away from old risk paradigms (Anholt, 2007). Instead, it presents Zimbabwe as a stable, forward-looking leader capable of steering a trillion-dollar economic bloc.

## **9.3 Cull's Public Diplomacy Taxonomy: Operationalizing Multilateral Engagement**

To translate the conceptual insights of agenda-setting and framing into actionable policy, this study uses Nicholas Cull's (2008) taxonomy of public diplomacy. Cull argues that modern public diplomacy goes far

beyond traditional government-to-government interaction. Instead, it involves a sophisticated mix of five core elements designed to build relationships with foreign publics.

When applied to a COMESA chairmanship, these five components must look beyond domestic borders to engage all 21 member states:

1. **Listening:** This is the baseline of effective public diplomacy. Before launching foreign policy initiatives, a state must systematically collect and analyze opinion data from foreign publics. For Zimbabwe, this means its diplomatic missions and media institutions must track how regional business communities, civil society groups, and trade ministries perceive its chairmanship priorities. This feedback loop ensures that the country's leadership agenda remains responsive to the broader region, avoiding charges of diplomatic unilateralism.
2. **Advocacy:** It involves active communication campaigns designed to explain a state's policy choices and core values to international audiences. During the chairmanship, Zimbabwe's media architecture must actively pitch the tangible benefits of its policy initiatives to regional stakeholders. This

ensures that key decisions made at summits are effectively communicated across the entire COMESA trading bloc.

3. **Cultural Diplomacy:** Involves the use of a nation's creative outputs, heritage, and language to build trust and find common ground with foreign publics. Zimbabwe can leverage its hosting duties to showcase its cultural assets, technological innovations, and human capital. This helps humanize the state brand, shifting regional perceptions away from dry, technocratic agreements and toward shared values.
4. **Exchange:** Focuses on managing reciprocal educational, professional, and cultural exchange programs with other nations. In the context of COMESA, Zimbabwe can foster long-term institutional ties by hosting regional trade expos, media fellowships, and collaborative academic symposia. These initiatives build strong, enduring networks among the next generation of regional policymakers and journalists.
5. **International Broadcasting:** Refers to a state's use of television, radio, and digital media platforms to engage directly with foreign populations. Historically,

African nations have relied heavily on external, international networks to tell their stories, which often leaves them vulnerable to biased coverage. Zimbabwe's public diplomacy strategy requires its national broadcaster (ZBC) and digital media outlets to produce high-quality, syndicated content that speaks directly to audiences across East and Southern Africa, rather than focusing purely on domestic viewers (Banda, 2010).

#### **9.4 The Interlocking Matrix: A Tripartite Analytical Model**

This paper integrates these three theoretical perspectives into a unified analytical matrix. Agenda-setting provides the initial structural power by identifying which core trade and integration issues the chairmanship prioritizes. Framing then shapes the cognitive narrative, defining *how* those prioritized issues are presented to the public to maximize political legitimacy and counter negative stereotypes. Finally, Cull's public diplomacy framework provides the practical communication tools needed to share these messages across the 21 member states of the COMESA bloc.

By combining these theories, the model offers a comprehensive approach to analyzing state communication. It allows us to examine the entire lifecycle of a nation's branding strategy—from the initial policy design in Harare to its

final reception and impact across the broader region.

#### **10. Case Study Architecture and Qualitative Foundations**

To capture the fluid political-economic realities and strategic communication dynamics surrounding Zimbabwe's 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship, this study adopted a qualitative, instrumental case study design, augmented by comparative case analysis (Yin, 2018). Because these contemporary phenomena are deeply embedded in complex institutional power struggles and shifting narrative dimensions, a purely quantitative approach would obscure the nuanced meanings at play. Structurally, Zimbabwe's upcoming chairmanship serves as the primary, instrumental case. To ensure analytical depth, this case is contextualized and evaluated against two recent institutional precedents: the Kenyan COMESA chairmanship (2024–2025) and the Rwandan COMESA chairmanship (2017–2018).

##### **10.1 Data Collection Protocols and Triangulation Matrix**

To ensure structural validity and multi-layered perspective triangulation, data collection was systematically split across primary and secondary sources:

a. **Primary Qualitative Data:** The empirical core of the primary data consists of twelve (N=12) semi-structured, purposively sampled key informant interviews conducted

virtually in July 2026. The informants were drawn from two primary institutional nexuses within the Government of Zimbabwe: six (n=6) senior communication directors, state media strategists, and public diplomacy officers within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade; and six (n=6) investment promotion specialists, brand managers, and economic analysts from the Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency (ZIDA). This approach targeted officials intimately involved in the operational, logistical, and narrative design of the upcoming October 2026 summit.

#### **b. Secondary Document Analysis:**

Primary data was contextualized alongside a comprehensive document analysis of national and regional policy frameworks. This included Zimbabwe's *National Development Strategy 1 and 2 (NDS1/NDS2)*, *Vision 2030* planning blueprints, official *COMESA Communiqués* spanning the 2017–2024 cycles, and the historical cabinet resolutions authorising the structural deployment of the summit.

**c. Comparative Media Archives:** To establish baseline metrics for media framing, the study analyzed regional and international media content surrounding the 24th COMESA Summit in Nairobi, Kenya (October 2024), and the 20th COMESA Summit in Kigali, Rwanda (2018).

## **10.2 Data Analysis and Coding Architecture**

The qualitative dataset was analysed using Content and Thematic Analysis, operationalized through NVivo computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding architecture was structured into three primary structural nodes:

- "Agenda" Nodes: Mapping references to issue salience, industrial priorities, and the structural translation of NDS2 objectives into regional policy targets.
- "Framing" Nodes: Categorizing occurrences of sovereign risk narratives versus economic opportunity scripts, investment readiness markers, and the linguistic choices used to counter legacy Afro-pessimism.
- "Outcome" Nodes: Distinguishing between purely bureaucratic, protocol-driven outcomes and concrete, transaction-oriented economic diplomacy deliverables (such as Foreign Direct Investment inflows, memorandums of understanding, and cross-border trade agreements).

### **10.3 Methodological Limitations and Predictive Mitigation**

A clear limitation of this article is its prospective and predictive nature: the 25th COMESA Summit in Harare is scheduled for 22 October 2026, so the ultimate efficacy of the communication strategy cannot yet be assessed using retrofitted, ex-post facto empirical data. However, as Yin (2018) establishes, prospective case study designs retain high internal validity when backed by robust comparative analysis. By examining the operational execution, media management, and economic outcomes of Kenya and Rwanda's past chairmanships, this study establishes a strong comparative baseline. This predictive value provides a reliable blueprint for understanding how specific communication inputs generate predictable diplomatic and economic outcomes.

### **10.4 Empirical Alignment: NDS2, Vision 2030, and the COMESA Mandate**

The empirical data demonstrates a precise strategic alignment between Zimbabwe's domestic macroeconomic turnaround strategies and the institutional priorities of the COMESA trade bloc. Under the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2) and the overarching Vision 2030 economic roadmap, the Government of Zimbabwe has committed to transitioning the economy toward

upper-middle-income status, an ambition anchored on achieving an aggressive Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) target of USD 30 billion by 2030 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021). Crucially, empirical evidence indicates that state elites view the 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship not merely as a routine, rotating political honor, but as an instrument of economic diplomacy. Assuming this leadership role grants Zimbabwe a prominent platform to engage a market of 583 million people boasting a combined gross domestic product exceeding USD 1 trillion (COMESA, 2023).

Data gathered from primary interviews in July 2026 confirms that the state's communication apparatus acutely recognizes this economic potential. A senior official within the Foreign Affairs and International Trade characterized the upcoming October 2026 summit as an unprecedented state-branding milestone, marking the nation's most significant promotional opportunity since the advent of the Second Republic. Institutionally, the summit serves as a critical conduit for economic diplomacy, allowing the state to signal domestic stability, market its 'open for business' ethos, and anchor its sub-regional leadership.<sup>1</sup>

Operational realities, however, present a critical challenge to Zimbabwe's economic diplomacy. Although the Cabinet ratified the industrialization

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with author, Harare, 5 July 2026.

theme for the October 22 summit, interviews with economic diplomacy analysts indicate that the current fiscal framework relies primarily on existing ministerial allocations rather than an independent, international communication budget.<sup>2</sup> This presents an operational opportunity for structural alignment. At the same time, the state aims to secure a competitive regional media presence on prominent networks such as DStv, SABC, and CNBC Africa, the current funding model operates through traditional domestic departmental lines. Transitioning to a centralized, strategic communication funding model would reduce the risk of narrative fragmentation, ensuring Zimbabwe's nation-branding efforts achieve optimal resonance alongside regional peers.

### **10.5 Comparative Analysis 1: Kenya's Tech-Centric Framing and the 2024 Nairobi Summit**

To understand how integrated communication strategies can drive economic outcomes, this study analyzed Kenya's leadership during the 2024–2025 COMESA cycle. Kenya hosted the 24th COMESA Summit in Nairobi in October 2024, deploying a highly coordinated public diplomacy model driven by the "Brand Kenya" framework (COMESA, 2023). This initiative was managed through a joint task force linking the Kenya Investment

Authority (KenInvest) directly with the communications unit of State House.

This coordinated institutional architecture yielded quantifiable economic outcomes. By synchronizing state communication strategies with targeted commercial objectives, Kenya utilized its summit business forums to secure 18 prominent memorandums of understanding (MOUs). These agreements generated USD 2.1 billion in pledged investment, concentrated within the renewable energy, agribusiness, and digital technology sectors (Kenya Ministry of Trade, 2024). Observers note that this outcome demonstrates the value of structural coordination, where executive media teams work in tandem with investment promotion agencies to ensure that strategic public communication feeds directly into investment-generation platforms.<sup>3</sup>

However, the comparative analysis also reveals a notable strategic gap in the Kenyan approach. Kenya's media campaigns focused heavily on its "Silicon Savannah" tech identity, a frame that resonated well with international venture capitalists but missed key regional industrial opportunities (Entman, 1993). Furthermore, Kenya failed to engage effectively with Francophone media markets across the COMESA region. This dynamic meant that major investors from French-speaking

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews with author, Harare, 5-8 July 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Telephone interview with author, Harare, 11 July 2026.

member states like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Madagascar were largely left out of the core trade discussions (Banda, 2010).

### **10.6 Comparative Analysis 2: Rwanda's Digital Diplomacy and the 2017–2018 Kigali Blueprint**

Rwanda's 2017–2018 chairmanship of COMESA offers an informative case study in using disciplined state communication to alter external risk perceptions. Facing historical baggage and regional geopolitical complexities, the Government of Rwanda used the 20th COMESA Summit as a platform to deploy its "Rwanda Works" narrative (Gilboa, 2008). This public diplomacy campaign relied heavily on digital channels, featuring coordinated social media engagement led directly by the presidency (Cull, 2008).

The economic results were substantial: the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) reported a 40% year-on-year increase in inbound foreign direct investment during its chairmanship cycle, positioning Kigali as a major logistical and business-tourism hub in East Africa (Rwanda Development Board, 2019).

The key lesson for Zimbabwe lies in Rwanda's proactive approach to media capacity building. Rather than waiting for international media houses to set the narrative, the Rwandan government selected and trained 150 local and regional journalists on the technical details of "economic diplomacy reporting" months before the summit

started (Interviewee 9, July 2026). This media intervention ensured that when the summit launched, press coverage moved past standard political rhetoric. Instead, journalists provided detailed, high-quality analysis of how regional integration policies would impact local supply chains and trade facilitation agreements (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This strategic alignment minimized negative media framing and kept public attention focused squarely on Rwanda's image as an efficient, technocratic state (Anholt, 2007).

### **10.7 The Mediatised Projection of Leadership: Operationalising Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Public Diplomacy**

Synthesizing these insights with the core theoretical framework reveals the exact communication strategies Zimbabwe must use to project its regional leadership successfully:

#### **First- and Second-Level Agenda Setting**

The media must move away from superficial coverage of summit pageantry and focus instead on high-value economic issues. With official data showing that nearly 80% of current intra-COMESA trade consists of low-value raw materials (COMESA, 2023), Zimbabwe has a distinct opportunity. It can use its chairmanship to focus the regional media agenda on domestic value addition for critical minerals—such as lithium, platinum, and chrome—alongside regional agro-processing value chains. Setting this

specific media agenda allows Harare to align its regional leadership with the industrial goals of NDS2, shifting the focus from simple trade protocols to regional industrialization (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021).

### **Counter-Framing Strategic Inversion**

Zimbabwe must work to actively invert historical, negative media frames that label the country as a high-risk jurisdiction (Entman, 1993). Media coverage must lead with solid, verified macroeconomic data, highlighting the country's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), generous fiscal incentives for investors, and ongoing ease-of-doing-business reforms (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017). Just as Rwanda successfully reframed its national image from an aid-dependent state to an investment-ready economy, Zimbabwe must use its public media platforms to position itself as a reliable, predictable partner for regional capital (Gilboa, 2008).

### **Broad-Spectrum Public Diplomacy**

To build a sustainable regional brand, Zimbabwe's public diplomacy must look beyond the domestic media environment in Harare and speak directly to three key international audiences (Cull, 2008):

a. **Global Institutional Capital:** Actively pitching projects to sovereign wealth funds and private investors in key markets like the United Arab Emirates, China, and South Africa.

b. **The Domestic and Regional Public:** Building broad grassroots support for trade integration by clearly explaining how COMESA agreements benefit local businesses and cross-border traders.

c. **The Zimbabwean Diaspora:** Engaging the global diaspora community, which contributes over USD 1.7 billion annually in formal remittances (World Bank, 2023). This group represents a highly valuable, under-tapped source of direct investment for national development projects.

### **10.8 Institutional and Structural Challenges**

Despite these opportunities, the qualitative data highlights four main institutional challenges that could limit the effectiveness of Zimbabwe's communication strategy:

1. **Resource Constraints:** The lack of a dedicated, ring-fenced international broadcasting budget makes it difficult to produce and distribute high-quality, multi-language content across regional television and digital networks (Interviewee 3, July 2026).
2. **Coordination Deficit:** There is a persistent structural disconnect between key institutions like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Information, and ZIDA. This lack of coordination often leads to parallel,

disconnected messages rather than a single, unified national voice (Interviewee 5, July 2026).

3. Sovereign Credibility Gap: Entrenched negative narratives in the media regarding currency reforms and broader economic volatility can undermine the state's official "open for business" messaging, making international investors more hesitant (Anholt, 2007).
4. The Regional Digital Divide: While digital and social media campaigns are highly effective for engaging elite stakeholders, over 60% of ordinary COMESA citizens still lack access to reliable internet services (Banda, 2010). This digital gap means that traditional shortwave radio, regional print syndicates, and vernacular broadcasting remain vital tools for building broad public support for regional integration.

## **11. A 4-Phase Strategic Communication Framework for Zimbabwe**

To address these challenges and apply the lessons learned from Kenya and Rwanda, this study proposes a structured, four-phase communication framework based on the principles of strategic alignment developed by Hallahan et al. (2007).

### **Phase 1: Pre-Chairmanship (June 2026 – 19 October 2026) – Regional Agenda-Building**

- Action Item 1: Launch the unified campaign brand "One Market, One Future" across all state, regional, and international media networks to establish a clear theme for the chairmanship (Anholt, 2007).
- Action Item 2: Publish at least six high-level op-eds from key cabinet ministers in prominent regional newspapers across the COMESA bloc, ensuring publication in English, French, and Arabic to reach all member states (Banda, 2010).
- Action Item 3: Produce and distribute three high-quality documentary features focusing on Zimbabwe's primary growth sectors: lithium value-addition, agro-processing capabilities, and tourism infrastructure (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021).

### **Phase 2: Summit Week (20 October 2026 – 22 October 2026) – Peak Media Diplomacy**

- Action Item 1: Establish a fully equipped, 24-hour Strategic Communication Command Centre within the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) to coordinate all international

press briefings and media releases (Cull, 2008).

- Action Item 2: Hold daily media briefings built around an "NDS2 Scorecard", explicitly linking high-level summit decisions to real-world job creation, infrastructure development, and trade facilitation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).
- Action Item 3: Provide high-definition, live-streamed coverage of all major summit events and business forums with real-time interpretation in the four official languages of the African Union (Banda, 2010).

### **Phase 3: Chairmanship Year (October 2026 – October 2027) – Narrative and Policy Delivery**

- Action Item 1: Publish comprehensive quarterly reports detailing the implementation progress of resolutions passed during the Harare summit, keeping regional stakeholders engaged (Hartzenberg, 2011).
- Action Item 2: Manage international media coverage around presidential diplomatic visits, explicitly showcasing successful cross-border development projects and industrial partnerships (Gilboa, 2008).

### **Phase 4: Legacy Phase (Post-October, 2027) – Institutionalization and Knowledge Transfer**

- Action Item 1: Develop a comprehensive, institutional "REC Chairmanship Communication Manual" for use across all government ministries, ensuring the lessons learned from this cycle are retained for future leadership roles (Hallahan et al., 2007).
- Action Item 2: Archive all media assets, communication metrics, and qualitative research reports within the national library system to build a strong foundation of knowledge for future public diplomacy efforts (Yin, 2018).

## **12. Policy Recommendations and Strategic Interventions**

To translate this study's theoretical insights and empirical findings into an actionable policy roadmap, the Government of Zimbabwe must move beyond ad hoc, reactive public relations. It must embrace a highly coordinated, adequately funded economic diplomacy strategy. The following six strategic recommendations provide a structural path to maximize the geopolitical and macroeconomic returns of the 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship.

## **12.1 Establish a Centralized COMESA Strategic Communication Taskforce under the OPC**

The current fragmentation of state communications—where ministries run parallel, disconnected messaging tracks—represents a major vulnerability for Zimbabwe's nation-branding efforts. The government must establish a dedicated, centralized COMESA Strategic Communication Taskforce housed permanently within the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC).

This taskforce should serve as the singular institutional node coordinating communication activities across the Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade; and the Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency (ZIDA) (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Crucially, this body must be backed by a ring-fenced, independent international broadcasting budget allocated directly from the treasury. This structure ensures communication decisions are treated as vital components of national security and economic strategy, rather than secondary administrative tasks.

## **12.2 Shift to Outcome-Based Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

To evaluate the chairmanship's success, the state's communication apparatus must abandon superficial, output-oriented metrics—such as the number of press releases distributed or domestic news segments aired. Instead, the OPC Taskforce must adopt rigorous, outcome-based Key

Performance Indicators (KPIs) that track real economic value (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017). These empirical metrics should include:

- **FDI Lead Tracking:** Quantifying the volume and dollar value of verified investment inquiries generated directly during the October 2026 summit and its concurrent business forums.
- **Media Sentiment Mapping:** Utilizing automated digital media monitoring tools to measure shifts in regional and international press framing, tracking the reduction of negative "sovereign risk" frames in favor of positive "open for business" narratives.
- **Export Deal Generation:** Measuring the volume of concrete bilateral trade agreements and supply contracts signed between Zimbabwean exporters and regional buyers during the chairmanship year.

## **12.3 Build Media Capacity: Train 200 Journalists on Economic Diplomacy Reporting**

To ensure high-quality media coverage that shapes regional perspectives, the Ministry of Information must run a proactive capacity-building program. The state should select and train a cohort of 200 domestic and regional journalists on the technical complexities of economic diplomacy, regional integration protocols, and the operational goals of NDS2 (Banda, 2010).

By hosting intensive workshops before the October 2026 summit, the government can equip reporters to look past simple political pageantry. This initiative ensures that

media coverage focuses on substantive issues, such as rules of origin, digital trade facilitation, and the harmonization of regional value chains. This approach directly leverages second-level agenda-setting, encouraging the media to frame the Harare summit around concrete, action-oriented economic deliverables (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

#### **12.4 Deploy an Integrated Diaspora and Digital Public Diplomacy Strategy**

Zimbabwe must look beyond traditional state-to-government media channels and actively engage broader international audiences by deploying an integrated digital public diplomacy strategy (Cull, 2008). Given that the national diaspora community contributes over USD 1.7 billion annually in formal remittances, this group represents a massive source of capital for national development (World Bank, 2023).

The OPC Taskforce should partner with prominent Zimbabwean and regional influencers based in major migration hubs—such as South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates—to share positive, data-driven content about the country's investment incentives, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and regulatory reforms. This decentralized approach uses trusted networks to bypass hostile external media coverage, allowing the state to speak directly to international investors and diaspora communities.

#### **12.5 Institutionalize Multilingual Content Production and Syndication**

The COMESA trading bloc is a diverse, multilingual community spanning 21 member states. To prevent the strategic communication gaps that limited Kenya's 2024 campaign, Zimbabwe's state media architecture must prioritize multilingual content distribution (COMESA, 2023). All official summit documents, investment guides, promotional videos, and live-streamed events must be systematically translated and distributed in the region's four primary working languages: English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese.

The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and national print groups must establish syndication agreements with major regional networks across East and North Africa. This content sharing ensures that Zimbabwe's leadership priorities are clearly communicated to decision-makers in Cairo, Kinshasa, and Lusaka alike, broadening the country's diplomatic reach.

#### **12.6 Innovate via Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Funding Models**

To address persistent fiscal constraints, the government should move away from relying entirely on public funding for its nation-branding campaigns. Instead, it should develop innovative Public-Private Partnership (PPP) funding models (Anholt, 2007). Major domestic commercial banks, telecommunications giants, mining

conglomerates, and agricultural exporters have a direct economic stake in the success of the COMESA chairmanship, as regional trade integration opens new markets for their goods and services.

The state should create a co-funded branding vehicle in which private-sector companies provide financial resources and marketing expertise in exchange for high-visibility sponsorship slots, business match-making access, and prominent placement during international trade expos. This alignment pulls resources effectively, ensuring a well-funded, world-class strategic communication campaign that benefits both state diplomacy and private enterprise.

### **13. Conclusion**

This study has examined the vital link between strategic communication, nation branding, and economic diplomacy during Zimbabwe's 2026–2027 COMESA chairmanship. As regional integration accelerates across the African continent under the flags of Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, the traditional markers of state power are shifting. Geopolitical influence is no longer measured solely by military strength or political agreements; it is increasingly driven by a state's soft power, its narrative legitimacy, and its ability to attract global capital into its domestic economy.

For the Republic of Zimbabwe, hosting the 25th COMESA Summit on 22 October 2026 is far more than a routine,

rotating diplomatic obligation. It represents a vital test of strategic statecraft (Kornegay, 2019). It gives the nation a highly visible platform to shift long-standing negative perceptions, demonstrate institutional stability, and assert its role as a key driver of sub-regional economic integration.

The article's core argument is that structural visibility must be deliberately converted into economic value (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017). If the country relies on outdated, passive communication methods, the historic discussions in Harare risk becoming episodic events that are consumed by domestic audiences and quickly forgotten by regional markets (Entman, 1993). To avoid this outcome, the state must treat its media architecture as a core pillar of its foreign policy and economic diplomacy strategies (Gilboa, 2008).

By implementing the comprehensive four-phase strategic framework and the institutional changes proposed in this study, Zimbabwe can bridge the gap between policy design and external perception. This proactive approach will help ensure that the chairmanship's theme, "One Market, One Future", moves beyond standard diplomatic rhetoric. Instead, it can drive real-world development—attracting sustainable investment, creating jobs, and securing Zimbabwe's standing as an upper-middle-income regional leader by the close of its historic chairmanship in October 2027 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

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