



The Southern African Development Community's Non-committal Approach to Crisis Management in Zimbabwe: The Need to Look beyond Norms

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Abstract

The paper argues for the need to look beyond norms in accounting for the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) noncommittal approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards. To justify this need, the paper highlights some notable limitations in the dominant normative explanations for SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe. The paper posits that norms do not account for SADC's inconsistent approach to crisis management despite their popularity. Norms, therefore, provide a partial and incomplete explanation for SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe. The paper concludes that the key factors shaping SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe go beyond just norms to include regional power dynamics in SADC. Therefore, this paper recommends extending the debate on SADC's approach to Zimbabwe beyond the currently dominant issue of norms.

Keywords: Norms; crisis-management; non-interference; SADC; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Norms dominate the debate on the Southern African Development Community (SADC) approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe from 2000 onwards (Aeby 2017; Alden 2010; Chigara 2018; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Nathan 2011, 2012, 2013). The dominant argument in these studies is that SADC's noncommittal approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe is shaped by the regional organisation's (RO's) affinity for regional norms of non-interference and disregard for democracy and human rights (Aeby 2017; Alden 2010; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Nathan 2011, 2012, 2013).

However, this paper contends that norms provide a partial and incomplete explanation for SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe. A notable inconsistency is that despite being intimately involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lesotho, and Madagascar crises over the years, SADC has been reluctant to interfere in the Zimbabwe issue (Cawthra 2010). This is just one of many inconsistencies in SADC's approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe that normative explanations cannot account for.

Moreover, if SADC's approach to crisis management were shaped by the RO's adherence to *regional norms* of non-interference, it would surely not have intervened in the DRC, Lesotho and Madagascar crises. Likewise, if SADC decision-making were genuinely influenced by the so-called regional norm of disregard for democratic principles, then it would not have gone to great lengths to condemn and refuse to recognise Zimbabwe's 2008 Presidential Election runoff amongst other issues. Therefore, explaining SADC's noncommittal stance towards Zimbabwe in terms of norms alone appears to be a misreading of the key dynamics shaping SADC's crisis management approach to Zimbabwe. While they may be critical in shaping RO decisions and behaviour, norms do not appear to be the key reason behind SADC's noncommittal approach towards Zimbabwe.

Noteworthy is that a theoretical or conceptual lens can limit the scope of issues interrogated in a study. Perhaps due to the limitations in the normative frame's conceptual scope, some key dynamics shaping SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe have been disregarded or downplayed in previous studies. Despite strong indications, issues such as relative power dynamics might be a key factor shaping SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe over the

years. However, power dynamics seem to explain that scholars of a normative persuasion who dominate the debate on SADC's approach to Zimbabwe have not been amenable. The effect has been that some key dynamics have remained under-explored, and SADC's approach to Zimbabwe and crisis management, in general, has continued to be misunderstood.

It appears that even some academics struggle to decipher SADC's noncommittal and inconsistent approach to Zimbabwe and crisis management in general. This is a challenge that Martin Nsibirwa and Peacemore Mhodi (2017) attest to. They caution that SADC responses to issues involving Zimbabwe are unpredictable and even controversial as they do not seem to conform to any set of principles, norms, or precedence. Zimbabwe appears to have a different set of rules than everyone else. This disparity appears to be the real issue shaping SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe and not adherence to regional norms of non-interference. Therefore, the paper advocates for expanding the debate on SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe beyond the currently dominant issue of norms.

The paper thus unpacks the concept of norms in international relations. This is followed by an overview of SADC's approach to the Zimbabwe issue from 2000 onwards. A discussion of the pros and cons of the normative explanations of SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe follows. This leads to a discussion or precisely a justification of the need to look beyond norms in accounting for SADC policy on Zimbabwe, followed by the conclusion.

2. The Concept of Norms in the Context of Regional Organisation Decision-Making

The preamble to the SADC Treaty intimates that SADC is an international organisation (IO) (SADC 2014). While it is an IO, SADC precisely falls within the ambit of regional organisations (ROs). According to Jetschke and Lenz (2013: 626), ROs are a form of 'institutionalised cooperation among three or more countries within a geographic space'. Therefore, the main difference between IOs and ROs is the geographical limitedness of ROs. Within ROs, states usually co-operate on issues to do with economics, politics, defence and security. Importantly, regional cooperation arrangements such as SADC require some form of delegation and/or pooling of sovereignty. This is when states delegate

IOs/ROs authority to undertake certain tasks on their behalf and pool their sovereignty by undertaking joint decision-making within the IO/RO (Hooghe and Marks 2014).

Decision-making is, therefore, a key function of IOs/ROs. Kickert (1980: 22) defines decision-making as the process of choosing ‘a particular course of action to change and improve a certain situation’. Notwithstanding this simple definition, IO/RO decision-making is in actual practice a complex process that is shaped by a variety of enabling and constraining political, economic and social dynamics (Cox 2004). Scholars have thus, explained IO/RO decisions and behaviour in terms of these various enabling and constraining variables.

Lately, norms have emerged as a key variable and concept in accounting for IO/RO decisions and behaviour. Defined by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891) as ‘a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity’, proponents of the normative approach to the study of IOs/ROs posit that norms define identity as well as prescribe behaviour for actors, including IOs/ROs such as SADC. Convinced about the conceptual and empirical utility of norms, these scholars, commonly known as constructivists, have applied a normative frame to explain decisions and behaviour of ROs such as the European Union (EU) (Manners 2002, 2011; Whitman 2011). Utilising a normative frame, various studies have proven that the EU’s decisions, behaviour, and relations with other actors are shaped by the RO’s commitment to norms of democracy, the rule of law, social justice, and respect for human rights (Manners 2002, 2011; Whitman 2011).

Perhaps inspired by the successful application of the normative framework to the study of EU decision-making and behaviour, the framework has been increasingly applied to contexts outside the EU. In the case of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional norm that prevents the RO’s interference in the domestic affairs of member states known as the *ASEAN way* has convincingly accounted for ASEAN’s indifference to the Myanmar crises (Alden 2010; Davies 2012, 2018; Pero 2019).

In some cases, however, the normative perspective has not adequately accounted for some IO/RO decisions and behaviour. A case in point is SADC’s noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe from 2000 onwards. The dominant narrative in studies seeking to account for SADC’s noncommittal approach to the Zimbabwe issue has been conceptually normative. Indeed some scholars (Aeby

2017; Alden 2010; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Nathan 2010, 2013) have argued that the RO's affinity influenced SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe for regional norms of non-interference and a disregard for international/democratic principles.

Contrary to these scholars' suggestions, this study asserts that SADC's apparent affinity for regional norms is not enough to account for the RO's consistent reluctance to intervene in Zimbabwe and not in the internal crises of other member states. Similarly, SADC's alleged disregard for democratic principles is inconsistent with the RO's substantial commitment to democratisation in Zimbabwe and the Southern African region. These are some of the conceptual and empirical gaps in the normative explanations for SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards. Therefore, while they may be critical in shaping RO decisions and behaviour, norms do not appear to be the key reason behind SADC's noncommittal approach towards Zimbabwe. Given these notable gaps in the normative arguments, looking beyond the issue of norms might provide more plausible explanations for SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe.

3. An Overview of SADC's Noncommittal Approach to Zimbabwe

In line with Chapter VIII (Article 52–54) of the United Nations (UN) Charter, which recognises the importance of ROs in the maintenance of international peace and security, SADC has been involved in efforts to manage and/or resolve various challenges in Zimbabwe from the year 2000. Also known as the Zimbabwe crisis, these challenges included a series of political, economic and social challenges (Mlambo and Raftopoulos 2010). SADC's approach to these issues has been the subject of intense media and academic interest (Aeby 2017; Alden 2010; Cawthra 2010; Chigara 2018; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Masunungure and Badza 2010; Mlambo and Raftopoulos 2010; Nathan 2010, 2012, 2013).

Critics have accused SADC of reluctance to take a tougher or more active stance against Zimbabwe; a state that these critics allege to have 'blatantly' violated democratic norms and human rights (Aeby 2017; Alden 2010; Chigara 2018; Dzimiri 2013; Mlambo and Raftopoulos 2010; Nathan 2010, 2011, 2013). Domestic and international pressure and condemnation have done little to dissuade SADC from this noncommittal approach, which Dzimiri (2013: 282)

cynically refers to as SADC's 'blind solidarity with Zimbabwe'. Accusations of blind solidarity with Zimbabwe have emerged from the fact that SADC has not shown a willingness to criticise or pass decisions that would otherwise antagonise Zimbabwe when responding to various issues concerning the member state (Aeby 2017; Alden 2010; Cawthra 2010; Chigara 2018; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Nathan 2010, 2011, 2013).

Although respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law are key SADC principles codified under Article 4 of the SADC Treaty, SADC was reluctant to sanction Zimbabwe for allegedly contravening democratic norms and human rights over the years. The democratic norm and human violations included alleged state repression of opposition political parties (Nathan 2012). SADC also stood in solidarity with Zimbabwe on the land reform programme despite accusations that the Zimbabwe government violated the rule of law (Nathan 2012).

Hence, to account for what they viewed as SADC's indifference to the Zimbabwe issue, some scholars (Alden 2010; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Nathan 2010, 2012) proffered normative arguments that the RO's affinity shapes SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe for regional norms of non-interference and disregard for international democratic norms. However, these normative explanations do not adequately explain SADC's noncommittal and inconsistent approach to Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards.

4. Norms: An Inconsistent Explanation for SADC Inconsistency

Several inconsistencies emerge from the normative explanations for SADC's noncommittal and inconsistent approach to Zimbabwe. A notable inconsistency is that no regional norm of non-interference can be gleaned from SADC responses to internal crises in member states.

4.1 Non-Interference: A Misnomer

Proponents of the normative argument, such as Alden (2010), posit that SADC's noncommittal stance towards the Zimbabwe crisis is a product of the RO's adherence to regional norms of non-interference compared to emerging international norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). However, it is

important to highlight that the argument by Alden (2010) and some scholars with a similar perspective appears to be more of a misnomer than a factual understanding of SADC dynamics. This is because there is little empirical evidence to support the notion that SADC crisis management approaches are shaped by a preference for regional norms rather than international norms.

As highlighted above, the norm in SADC responses to internal crises in member states has been more interference than non-interference, as the Lesotho, DRC, and Madagascar cases prove. Therefore, SADC's non-interference in Zimbabwe is an exception rather than a norm in SADC crisis management approaches. A question that emerges from the above scenario is how SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe can be logically attributed to a phenomenon that hardly qualifies as a norm.

It is a fact that the circumstances in Zimbabwe and the three cases cited above (Lesotho, DRC, and Madagascar) somewhat differed. In Zimbabwe, for example, the ruling ZANU-PF party was the alleged driver of the crisis, whereas in the DRC, the country was rundown by armed rebels, and in Lesotho, the military launched a coup (Nsibirwa and Mhodi 2017). While these differences might explain SADC's inconsistent approaches to these cases, they do not invalidate the fact that all four cases were internal crises where SADC had to respond to violations of the RO's principles and norms. Furthermore, these differences do not negate this paper's argument that there is no regional norm of non-interference that can be inferred from SADC responses to internal crises in member states.

In common with Alden (2010), Dzimiri (2013: 282) examines SADC's responses to the 'humanitarian crisis' in Zimbabwe. Dzimiri (2013: 282) argues that regional norms of regime security influence the RO more than human security norms when responding to the Zimbabwe crisis resulting in SADC's 'blind solidarity' with the Zimbabwe government. Dzimiri (2013) concurs with Alden (2010) that 'the norm of non-interference impeded' SADC 'from taking a decisive position on the Zimbabwe crisis' (Dzimiri 2013: 279). Yet, as this study argues, non-interference has never really been a SADC norm in crisis management in member states. Therefore, suggestions that SADC was impeded from taking decisive action on Zimbabwe by a regional norm of non-interference may be misleading.

An important point to note about the concept of norms in international

relations is that norms are observable in the pattern of behaviour they create according to their prescriptions (Finnemore 1996: 23). As SADC's record depicts, there has not been any pattern of non-interference in as far as crisis management approaches are concerned. Hence, non-interference cannot be logically and empirically cited as a SADC norm in crisis management approaches. SADC's non-interference in Zimbabwe is a deviant case of SADC crisis management approaches. Therefore, SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe cannot be logically explained as a regional norm of non-interference.

Even in the case of Zimbabwe, it might be difficult to build a case for a SADC norm of non-interference, as suggested by Dzimiri (2013). This is because, though SADC was initially hesitant to intervene in Zimbabwe, it eventually did so through mediation efforts that resulted in the 2008 power-sharing agreement – the Global Political Agreement (GPA) (Aeby 2017). Therefore, SADC did get involved in efforts to resolve the Zimbabwe crisis suggests that non-interference might not necessarily be the norm in SADC's approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe.

4.2 Misconceptions in SADC's Alleged Norm of Disregarding Democratic Principles

Just like the non-interference issue, the argument that SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe is shaped by a regional norm of disregard for democratic principles seems to overlook several contextual realities in SADC. Proponents of this argument make a number of assumptions that reflect that they could be using an inappropriate lens to view the subject of SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe. An example is Aeby's (2017) analysis of SADC's role in the Zimbabwe crisis from 2007 to 2013.

Aeby (2017) argues that SADC's approach of calling for negotiations rather than forcing Robert Mugabe to concede defeat in the aftermath of Zimbabwe's 2008 Presidential Elections reflects a conflict between the norms of democracy on the one hand and peace, sovereignty, and stability on the other hand. Aeby concludes that 'democratisation was subordinated to state solidarity, stability, and anti-imperialism' (2017: 15). It is, however, worth noting that suggestions that democratisation was subordinated to solidarity, stability, and anti-imperialism are not entirely factual. This is because SADC's involvement in Zimbabwe is

evidence of the RO's commitment to democratisation in Zimbabwe and the region, a fact that is acknowledged by Van der Vleuten and Hoffmann (2010).

Moreover, SADC's refusal to recognise the disputed 2008 Zimbabwe presidential election run-off results is a testament to SADC's fledgling democratisation record. These are all facts that Aeby (2017) appears to disregard when arguing that norms of democratisation were subordinated to state solidarity, stability, and anti-imperialism. If SADC was only influenced by peace, sovereignty and stability and not democracy, as suggested by Aeby (2017), then surely the RO should have been indifferent to the irregularities in the 2008 run-off election. SADC's unequivocal condemnation of democratic norm transgressions by Zimbabwe casts doubts on Aeby's (2017) conclusions that democratisation was subordinated to state solidarity.

4.3 The Incongruity between Norms and SADC's Desultory Approach to Zimbabwe

SADC decision-making on the Zimbabwe crisis and internal crises in other member states has been so inconsistent that it cannot be attributed to the RO's affinity for one set of norms or disregard for another set of norms. The inconsistency in SADC crisis decision-making has been acknowledged in several studies such as Nathan (2010), Cawthra (2010), Nsibirwa and Mhodi (2017). In a study focusing on RO responses to crises, Nathan (2010) posits that SADC's approach to Zimbabwe has been desultory over the years. Nathan (2010) further asserts that SADC's noncommittal stance towards Zimbabwe is shaped by the RO's adherence to the regional norms of solidarity and anti-imperialism and disregard for democratic norms.

Despite arguing that regional norms of solidarity shaped SADC's stance towards the Zimbabwe crisis, Nathan (2010) is self-contradicting when postulating that SADC has no common values. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) explained that a value, principle or idea only becomes a norm when it is shared and held by a community of actors (see also Finnemore 1996). A question that emerges is how can SADC be said to be influenced by norms when there is no shared understanding of key values in the region? Based on Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) assertion, there are no norms to speak of in SADC crisis management.

Similarly, Van Nieuwkerk (2014) contends that there are no shared values amongst decision-makers in SADC in crisis management. This is yet more evidence that the idea of norms influencing decision-making in a RO that does not have a shared understanding of crisis management might not be as plausible as previously argued. The fact that some of the critical tenets of norms are missing in the issues being referred to as norms in previous studies on SADC's approach to Zimbabwe makes the explanations in these studies theoretically questionable (Aeby 2017; Alden 2010; Cawthra 2010; Chigara 2018; Dzimiri 2013, 2017; Nathan 2010, 2011, 2013).

5. The Need to Look Beyond Norms

The argument that SADC's approach to Zimbabwe is shaped by dynamics that go beyond norms is not necessarily new. Indeed, a few scholars and analysts appear to have framed their accounts of SADC's approach to Zimbabwe outside of the dominant normative frame. However, such studies have been few and far between, and the more dominant normative perspective has dwarfed their argument. In some instances, the alternative arguments put forward in some of these studies have not been that convincing either. One such study is Cawthra (2010).

Specifically focusing on SADC's approach to the crises in Zimbabwe and Madagascar, Cawthra (2010) observes that SADC was much more reluctant to intervene in Zimbabwe than in Madagascar. For Cawthra (2010), the key reason behind SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe compared to Madagascar is that the economies of several SADC countries are intertwined with that of Zimbabwe and not Madagascar. While Cawthra (2010) extends the debate beyond the issue of norms, citing the economy as the reason for SADC's noncommittal approach might not be the most plausible explanation. This is because close economic ties are more logical if they are cited as a reason for intervention rather than non-intervention.

Indeed, that was the logic that informed South Africa's 1998 Lesotho intervention, shaped by the close economic ties between South Africa and Lesotho. Van der Vleuten and Hoffmann (2010) also support this assertion, who posit that non-intervention in Zimbabwe was costly to South Africa's material interests. In their study that explains the reasons for RO intervention and non-

intervention in member states, Van der Vleuten and Hoffmann (2010) go beyond the normative frame by arguing that the decision whether an RO should intervene in a member state or not is shaped by both ‘ideational costs of pressure by third parties and the interests of the regional major powers’ (2010: 738).

Hence, for a nuanced understanding of the key dynamics behind SADC’s noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe, there is a need to apply a conceptual lens that goes beyond norms. This is something that Martin Nsibirwa and Peacemore Mhodi (2017) also recommend. They argue that within SADC, Zimbabwe is a powerhouse to which different rules apply. Therefore, when it comes to SADC decision-making on issues involving Zimbabwe, principles, norms, and precedence may be of little significance (Nsibirwa and Mhodi 2017). It appears that Zimbabwe’s powerhouse status is the key issue shaping SADC’s noncommittal stance to Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards. The limited conceptual scope of the normative perspective that dominates debate on this subject is perhaps why these arguments around power have not been pursued further.

6. Conclusion

A highly topical issue since the turn of the millennium, Zimbabwe has divided opinion amongst scholars and analysts, domestically and internationally. Equally interesting has been SADC’s rather controversial and inconsistent approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe. Criticised for being desultory and ineffective, SADC’s approach to Zimbabwe has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the years. Notwithstanding this widespread academic interest, few have been able to pinpoint the exact dynamics shaping SADC’s noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe. This has been partially due to an over-reliance on the normative conceptual perspective, which, as this paper argued, has some notable limitations in accounting for SADC’s noncommittal and inconsistent approach to crisis management in Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards.

An issue that remains largely unresolved two decades on, SADC’s approach is central to the challenges in Zimbabwe as its response can be the difference between containment and calamity. As such, the key dynamics must shape SADC’s crisis management approach to Zimbabwe to be well understood for the benefit of the Zimbabweans, SADC, and the international community.

History has taught us that a misreading of these key dynamics shaping RO crisis management approaches can have disastrous consequences, and the sad case of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the 1994 Rwandan genocide bears testimony to this.

In light of the above, this paper highlighted some inadequacies in the normative explanations of SADC policy on Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards. In doing so, the study argued for the extension of debate on the key dynamics shaping SADC policy in Zimbabwe beyond the currently dominant normative perspective to include, amongst other factors, the regional power dynamics in SADC. Norms appear to be a ready and simple argument to account for IO/RO decisions and actions. It is critical to understand that while normative arguments may have been valid in the EU context, applying this framework to the case of SADC decision-making has some fundamental flaws. Therefore, the normative framework is not convincingly applicable to all contexts, as the case of SADC's approach to Zimbabwe has revealed.

Noteworthy is that SADC's Zimbabwe approach has not been consistent with the key tenets of the concept of norms. The concept of norms emphasises that values, beliefs and identity should be shared amongst actors to be classified as norms. Commenting on norms and decision-making in SADC, Van Nieuwkerk (2014) argues that the set of values and norms that is supposed to shape decision-making in SADC is not unified but is fractured. Therefore, if not erroneous, it is difficult to portray SADC decision-making as being shaped by any set of norms where the RO does not have a shared set of values. There is little basis for arguments that SADC is influenced by a disregard for democratic norms or affinity for regional norms of solidarity and non-interference when there is no shared conception of these norms and values amongst decision-makers in SADC.

Moreover, a key tenet of norms is that a principle or value only becomes a norm when it is consistently enforced (Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Therefore, it is conceptually unjustifiable for one to claim that non-interference is the norm informing SADC crisis management when there is no pattern of SADC non-interference elsewhere except in Zimbabwe. Thus, SADC appears to have followed pragmatic logic in decision-making rather than strict adherence to the norms of non-interference. This pragmatic logic recognises Zimbabwe's regional powerhouse status and influence. A conceptual lens that recognises the nexus between power and decision-making would perhaps

provide a more nuanced understanding of the key dynamics behind SADC's noncommittal approach to Zimbabwe from the year 2000 onwards.

Importantly, this paper's central argument should not be misconstrued as implying that norms are insignificant in regional integration or SADC. Indeed, intergovernmental organisations (including SADC) are anchored by certain norms and principles. While implementing these norms may be contested, this does not mean that they (norms) are not important. Rather, this paper posits that for a complete picture of SADC's noncommittal approach towards Zimbabwe, the debate has to be extended beyond just the issue of norms.

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