

CRASA Secretariat

Concept Note

**SADC Content Sharing Platform**

# **BACKGROUND**

On 24th April, 2020, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Directorate of Infrastructure published a reference list of ICT Initiatives dubbed; ***“Creating a Stronger Digital SADC Through ICT in Supporting the Fight Against COVID-19 and Future Pandemics”***. One of the initiatives envisioned in this publication was the establishment of a content-sharing platform for Member States to share and pool experiences, ongoing initiatives and innovative policy and regulatory measures designed to help the SADC region remain connected during the COVID – 19 Pandemic. The general idea was for Member States to utilise the platform to support one another and harness the potential of ICT to save lives. ​ It was further reasoned that the platform would be structured in such a manner as to assist Governments, National Regulatory Authorities as well as the private sector in ensuring that networks are kept resilient and communications services are available to all during the crisis. In this regard, the Communications Regulators’ Association of Southern Africa (CRASA), was tasked to set up the said platform with assistance from the Southern African Telecommunications Association (SATA).

# **INTRODUCTION**

It is often said that information is power. This is particularly true during the current global pandemic in which receiving the right information at the right time can empower decision-makers to reduce risks, allocate resources, and enhance resilience. Given the dynamism and volatility of the coronavirus situation, there is a growing awareness of the value of information-sharing to not only reduce the public health risks but to also minimize the impact of the impact of the pandemic on public service delivery, health-care infrastructure, business and the economy at large.

While there is no doubt that the information-sharing envisaged above will greatly the SADC Region to navigate the challenges of the current pandemic, there is still a need to define and agree on the particulars as follows:

* Who should share information?
* What should be shared?
* When should it be shared?
* What is the quality and utility of what is shared?
* How should it be shared?
* Why is it being shared?
* What can be done with the information? [[1]](#footnote-1)

Information-sharing typically begins as an ad hoc collaboration, particularly during a crisis that may align disparate sectors and even competitors toward a unified, collective response. Participants in the response are often willing to share information because there is a mutual benefit to be gained from the collective response. In the case of the proposed SADC Information-sharing Platform, the willingness of the participants is more or less a given from the outset, but the challenge is to sustain these ad hoc efforts in a more structured way. This in itself requires careful consideration of the ***what***, ***when***, ***how***, and ***why*** of information sharing.

# **KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SADC INFORMATION-SHARING PLATFORM**

In order to build an effective and sustainable information-sharing platform for the SADC Covid -19 regional response, the careful consideration alluded to above must seek to address the following elements:

1. **Role Players/Participants**

Who needs to share the information, and who will be required to act on the shared information?

1. **Types of Information to be Exchanged**

What information is to be shared, and what is the purpose of sharing it?

1. **Models of Exchange**

What is the impetus behind the information-sharing? Is it going to be shared voluntarily or perhaps a mandatory regulated requirement?

1. **Methods of Exchange**

What will the organisational structure and governance for sharing the said information be?

1. **Mechanisms of Exchange**

How will the information actually be shared?

1. **Scope and Operational Purpose**

How will the information exchange be structured to ensure that it delivers the greatest value to the intended audience?

## **Role Players/Participants**

At national level, there are several state and private actors involved in the fight against the Coronavirus Pandemic. These actors each have their own perspectives, interests, and needs. They may also have varying degrees of technical capability, face significantly different threats, and have separate motivations for acting upon Covid-19 related information. A decision therefore needs to be made from the outset on whether the information from each Member states will be accepted from a single, authorised source or individual contributors from the public and private sector will be permitted to directly share their information on the platform.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Role Players in the proposed SADC Covid-19 Information-sharing ecosystem | |
| Governments | * Official updates on lock-down measures * Official updates on national caseloads * Economic impact of pandemic: sector-specific and/or macro-level * Key Sector-specific Covid-19-related policy measures:   + Education and reopening of schools   + Health   + Tourism   + Manufacturing   + Trade; e.t.c. |
| Health and associated Research Professionals | * Vaccine and treatment initiatives * Testing and contact-tracing best practices * Protective initiatives/best practices |
| Sector-specific National Regulatory Authorities | * Regulatory interventions and best practices to combat the pandemic: * ICT/Communications Regulators * Water and Energy Regulators * Medicines and Pharmaceutical Regulators * Financial Sector Regulators * Trade and Transport Regulators |
| Business and Trade | * Sector-specific updates from relevant business/trade associations and chambers: * Commercial aviation; impact and resumption forecasts * Impact on postal and courier services * Manufactured goods; import and export developments * Agricultural industry developments |
| News Media: Print and electronic | * News-related information on peer-to-peer basis or for public dissemination to regional audience |
| Civil Society and Cooperating Partners | * Aid/support initiatives, appeals for assistance and collaboration e.t.c. |

## **3.2 Types of information to be shared**

While there are typically seven major types of information that may be shared through such a platform, the following conceptual framework illustrates how they relate to one another and how they may be leveraged for towards the regional Covid -19 response:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Types of Covid-19-related Information to be shared on the Platform | |
| Incidence | Statistical information relating to the daily caseloads, recoveries, mortality, testing, new infections and so on |
| Threats | * Theses could be yet-to-be-understood issues with potentially serious implications such as:   + Sudden spikes in infections or mortality associated with a specific location such as borders e.t.c.   + Discovery of new strains of the virus or ineffective treatments; * Threat information can help the Member states to detect or prevent escalation of the threat-situation and better protect their citizens and the region at large. |
| Vulnerabilities | * Vulnerabilities in any of the current measures being deployed by Member States or practices that are proven to be compromising the fight against the spread of the pandemic. |
| Mitigations | * Methods for remedying the known vulnerabilities, containing or blocking the identified threats, and responding to and recovering from incidents. |
| Situational  awareness | * Information that will enable decision-makers to respond to an incident and that may require real-time telemetry of exploited vulnerabilities and evolving threats. |
| |  | | --- | | Best practices | | Cross-cutting and sector-specific information related to successful and/or effective interventions that have proven to lessen the social or economic impact of the pandemic across the region. These could include;  Effective social-distancing measures/regulations  School-reopening considerations and measures  Health screening, testing, tracing, isolation and treatment protocols e.t.c. |
| Strategic analysis | Gathering, distilling, and analysing many types of information  to build metrics, trends, and projections about the pandemic in the SADC Region. This can be combined with projections of potential scenarios to prepare the relevant Regional, Government or Private Sector decision-makers for future pandemics. |

* Building this understanding of the information types provides a valuable insight into the possible architecture of the SADC Information-sharing platform.

## Models of Exchange

Information-sharing can range from sporadic ad hoc exchanges to exchanges established through long-term formal structures. The different approaches most often reflect variables such as the level of trust between the parties, the legal authority of various actors, and the relationships between the stakeholders. Each model has its advantages, but selecting the right model for the right purpose will be vital to the success of the SADC platform.

### Voluntary

The voluntary exchange of information is perhaps the richest and most valuable exchange that can be exploited in the regional Covid-19 response. In the current situation, it can be assumed that the identified role players already have the motivation to share information about the pandemic which is not only of value but also actionable.

### Mandatory Disclosure

The key challenge with mandatory disclosure is the tendency to focus is on the reporting itself and not on how the gathered information will be used. This potentially calls into question the fundamental goals of mandatory reporting. Within the context of SADC and the proposed platform, the added challenge of enforceability in instances of non-compliance must also be considered. The above notwithstanding, mandatory reporting is still being recommended for specific types of information (those that may compromise the ability of the Region to respond effectively to the pandemic if withheld). In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, these may include the incidence, threat and vulnerability types indicated under 3.2.1 above.

## Methods of Exchange

The four most commonly used forms of information-sharing are; formalised, security clearance-based, trust-based, and ad hoc. In the case of the proposed SADC platform, the method of exchange will be determined by the categories of role players and the elements of the platform to which they will contribute information. In this regard, care

## **Format/ Mechanisms of Exchange**

In an effort to ensure the consistency, efficiency, and interoperability of the information to be shared, the use standardised formats and formal communication channels are highly recommended. For the mandatory disclosure category, reporting templates may be deployed to reinforce this point.

## **Scope and Operational Purpose**

The scope of exchange can greatly influence the mechanisms of trust used, whether that scope includes small, regional groups of researchers holding regular meetings and calls to discuss threats and vulnerabilities or that scope involves high-level intelligence sharing between national governments. In the context of the proposed SADC Covind-19 Information-sharing platform, having the right role players providing the right information will be a key success factor. It should be emphasised here that the effective functioning of the platform will be dependent on the community of contributing professionals in the private sector, civil society and governments, who are not only experts in the relevant fields but also able to effect change when required. It is also worth pointing out that two distinct factors will be underpin the nature of the information-sharing relationships within this community of professionals: geographic scope and operational purpose.

### **Geographic Scope**

There is no doubt that the threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic is international in nature. While it is understandable that sharing certain types of information can be problematic to governments who are only inclined to do so with close allies, this challenge is assumed to be significantly mitigated by the Treaty Obligations and associated Protocols that SADC Members are already party to. Member states shall therefore be encouraged to freely share, through the platform, the mandatory elements (incidence, threats and vulnerabilities) within this context.

### **Operational Purpose**

1. Sector-Specific

It is a given that certain information will be sectorial in nature. In light of the unique effects that the pandemic may have on specific industries, sector-specific information-sharing will deliberately be given a place on the platform. As indicated under 3.1 above, the civil aviation industry is one such industry that will benefit greatly from such an opportunity.

1. Common Interest-Driven

It is expected that certain groups of role players will need to come together and interact with regularity to share information (particularly on best practices and research breakthroughs).

While such relationships can be either ad hoc or institutionalised. The latter is being strongly recommended for groups such as the health professionals, news media and the NRAs.

1. Common Concern-Driven

Sometimes groups can come together to share information about a common dependency such as the chain-stores that are now relaying on cross-border road-haulage to obtain their goods and keep our food and other consumer-goods on their shelves during the pandemic. As has been observed at the Nakonde -Tunduma (Zambia - Tanzania) over the past two days however, cross-border truck drivers have become increasingly vulnerable to the pandemic and the ability of this particular group to share information on the platform will be an invaluable asset towards mitigating the spread of the virus.

# **DESIGN, ARCHITECTURE AND TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF THE PLATFORM**

The technical design, actual development and associated aspects of the platform are to be spearheaded by SATA as agreed.

End:/……

1. A framework for cybersecurity information sharing and risk reduction

   Cristin Goodwin and J. Paul Nicholas [↑](#footnote-ref-1)