



DEMOCRACY & EMERGENCIES

LESSONS FROM THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR
DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Final Report of the Global Commission
on Democracy and Emergencies

December 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has been a terrible crisis for health and the economy. It has also raised many questions on governance and the ability of different political systems to handle emergencies. In democratic countries, it hit at a time of unease – a crisis of truth and trust, a crisis of representation, growing populism, polarization, and growing questions on democracy’s ability to deliver effective responses to the challenges of the 21st century. The pandemic galvanized those trends, brought the weaknesses of democratic institutions, administrations and leadership in the spotlight, and at the same time spurred a rapid wave of necessary democratic innovation.

Nearly two years into the pandemic, it is incumbent on democracies to draw lessons from their experience of COVID-19 to be better prepared to face future emergencies with an effective and democratic approach. To contribute to that process, based on the unique perspective that senior political leaders can bring, Club de Madrid convened a **Global Commission on Democracy and Emergencies**, bringing together

former Heads of State and Government as well as eminent leaders from multilateral and civil society organizations from around the world, under the chairship of former Prime Minister of Belgium Yves Leterme, with former Prime Minister of Senegal Aminata Touré and Secretary-General of International IDEA Kevin Casas-Zamora as vice-chairs.

Over the course of nine months, the Global Commission held a series of work sessions, deliberations, and regional consultations aimed at identifying, on the basis of the experience of COVID-19 in democracies around the world, and taking into account the dynamic nature of the pandemic, good practices and lessons learned regarding democracies’ ability to keep their democratic institutions in function; to protect fundamental rights within emergency response; to deliver services, including emergency services, inclusively to all citizens; and to respond to the crisis with the kind of leadership that will uphold citizens’ trust in democracy. Three knowledge partners – International IDEA, Oxfam International, and

Edelman – helped guide their reflections by providing data, analysis and basic frameworks for the Global Commission’s recommendations.

This report presents a series of **20 recommendations**, directed at government leaders, public institutions and civil society actors around the world, to help guide their steps as they seek to put in place the conditions that will allow a more effective and more democratic response to the future emergencies that we are bound to face in coming years. As the need for protection from critical risks grows, so must democracy’s ability to deliver.

Leaders must elevate **emergency preparedness** on the political agenda, as well as in civic awareness. National structures for emergency preparedness, and the reports they periodically produce, must command more attention from political leaders, institutions and citizens alike. Democratic institutions, like parliaments, courts and electoral bodies, must also have their own emergency preparedness and contingency plans. They should adopt flexible rules of procedure in case of emergencies, and embed digital technologies in their normal functioning for enhanced flexibility.

It is essential that emergency situations do not permanently tilt the **balance of powers** or damage the rule of law. Parliaments must be able to provide legislative oversight over emergency response in the very early moments of a crisis. Strengthening the role, independence and ability of courts, including Constitutional Courts, to function in an emergency is also fundamental. Parliamentary and judiciary oversight structures must assess the necessity, proportionality and constitutionality of emergency measures, to prevent executive overreach and ensure the transparency, justice, equity and gender responsiveness of emergency response.

Countering disinformation is critical in an emergency. Governments should fill the information space with facts and evidence, support and enable the work of responsible journalism and media, and work with social media platforms and technology experts to devise solutions, within the boundaries of freedom of expression, to stop or slow down the viralisation of harmful content. Governments must bridge the digital divide between their citizens, and improve access to digital connectivity as well as digital literacy for all.

An important pre-condition for democratic resilience during a crisis is the ability for the state to respond to citizens’ needs. Learning from a pandemic that has affected the health and economic well-being of so many citizens, governments must renew their commitment to **inclusive social development**, starting with social protection and healthcare for all. The proposal for a Global Fund for Social Protection, and the UN Secretary-General’s call for a World Social Summit in 2025, are critical steps in that direction. So is the adoption of effective, equity-enhancing fiscal policies and enforcement instruments to mobilize resources for inclusive social development.

Effective leadership in times of crisis requires the ability to navigate uncertainty. Democratic leaders must make decisions based on the best available evidence, and be transparent about what they know and what they don’t know. They must act quickly and decisively; inform parliament, political parties and social actors promptly; and share simple, clear and coherent messages with the public.

They must also invest in strong, long-term **partnerships** with other stakeholders, starting with local administrations. Business alliances are also particularly suited to provide surge capacity for service delivery and foster rapid innovation in emergencies. Civil society organizations can help implement emergency responses, deliver essential services and reach out to communities from a position of proximity.

Finally, to feed a growing appetite for **civic engagement**, democratic institutions and leaders should build upon digital tools developed during the pandemic to create new, wider channels for interaction with citizens. Broader civic engagement in future emergencies will work better if the right mechanisms are already in place and embedded in the normal working of public institutions.

DEMOCRACY & EMERGENCIES: LESSONS FROM COVID-19 FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE GLOBAL
COMMISSION ON DEMOCRACY AND EMERGENCIES

MECHANISMS OF DEMOCRACY & FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

1
Strengthen institutional
resilience & capacity to
deal with crises

- Flexible rules of procedure
- Contingency plans
- Digital technologies

2
Protect checks and
balances, fundamental
rights and the rule of
law

- Constitutional safeguards
- Clear legal frameworks for emergencies
- Effective parliamentary and judicial oversight
- Open government

3
Pre-empt and counter
disinformation

- Proactive evidence-based communication
- Responsible journalism and media
- Information awareness & digital literacy

4
Rethink institutional
design for participation

- New tools for civic engagement in policy-making
- Public dialogue on critical risks and preparedness



SOCIAL INCLUSION

5
Adopt an equity-based
approach to emergency
response

- Oversight mechanism with equity focus
- Equity-sensitive risk management and preparedness plans



8
Ensure that emergency
response meets the
needs of vulnerable
minorities

- Disaggregated data on vulnerable minorities
- Targeted outreach
- Civil society empowerment

9
Encourage corporate
social responsibility in
emergency response

- Responsibility in the use of emergency support funds
- Incentives for corporate contributions to emergency relief

6
Finance emergency
response through
progressive and
effective fiscal
frameworks

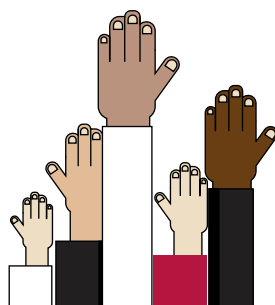
- Temporary fiscal levies & permanent progressive fiscal instruments
- Effective tax collection
- Fight against corruption

7
Build universal social
protection and
healthcare systems

- Contribution- and rights-based schemes
- Complete population registries
- Equitable quality of care
- Global Fund for Social Protection

10
Bridge the digital divide

- Expanded connectivity infrastructure and access
- Digital skills



EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP & DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

11

Be prepared

- Increased political attention for emergency preparedness
- Coherent strategy for emergency risk management
- Clear roles for national vs local governments
- Post-hoc oversight and policy learning

12

Lead with facts and decisiveness

- Evidence-based policy-making
- Strong advisory structures
- Clear hierarchy of policy objectives
- Open consultations with parliament, opposition parties and social actors

13

Communicate with truth and empathy

- Straight talk
- Proximity communication
- Clear and consistent messaging

14

Build partnerships

- Local authorities
- Businesses – with transparency and due diligence
- Civil society



15

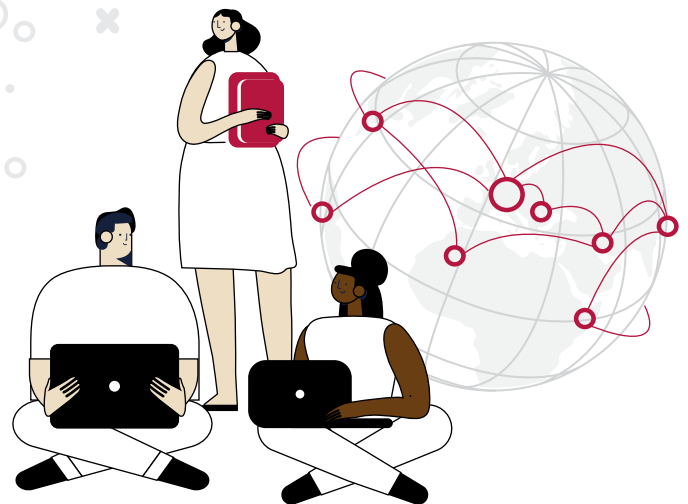
Open up civic space

- Limited restrictions on civic space
- Consultation mechanisms
- Deliberation mechanisms

16

Foster responsible citizenship

- Clear recommendations on appropriate behaviour
- Community engagement in emergency preparedness



EFFECTIVE DEMOCRACY THAT SERVES US ALL

17

Include women in decision-making

- Disaggregated data on gender-differentiated risks.
- Oversight mechanism with gender focus
- Gender balance in emergency management structures

18

Include youth in decision-making

- Mechanisms for youth engagement in emergency preparedness and response
- Capacity-building and empowerment

19

Think of future generations

- Mechanism for policy scrutiny focused on long-term risks and impacts

20

Work with international partners

- Democratic peer networks
- Democratic solidarity between countries
- Multilateral institutions



Club de Madrid is the largest worldwide assembly of political leaders working to strengthen democratic values, good governance and the well-being of citizens across the globe. It is a non-profit, non-partisan, international association of more than 100 democratic former Presidents and Prime Ministers from over 70 countries, supported by a global body of advisors and expert practitioners, who offer their voice and agency on a pro bono basis, to today's political and civil society leaders. Club de Madrid responds to a growing demand for trusted advice from current leaders in addressing the challenges involved in achieving democracy that delivers, building bridges, bringing down silos and promoting dialogue for the design of better policies for all.