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GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DEMOCRACY AND MULTILATERALISM: BACKGROUND PAPER TO THE COMMISSION REPORT

WORKING GROUP 3:

**INNOVATING DEMOCRATIC COOPERATION
THROUGH PLURILATERALISM**

ABOUT THIS REPORT



This report is the result of discussions and consultations with academic experts, civil society and philanthropic leaders, former UN officials, and UN Member States. The process was co-facilitated by Joseph Foti and Alessandro Bellantoni of the Open Government Partnership.

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The recommendations reflect the collective input and exchange that emerged from these consultations and do not necessarily represent the individual views of all the participants.

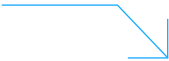
The report is authored by Joseph Foti, Principal Advisor for Emerging Issues the Open Government Partnership. It is intended as a contribution to the work of the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism and as input into the broader debate on the protection and renewal of multilateralism and democracy.

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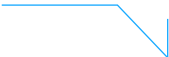


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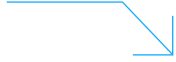
LIST OF ACRONYMS



Acronym	Full Name / Explanation
A-WEB	Association of World Election Bodies
ACE	ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (former Administration and Cost of Elections)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AML/CFT	Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (economic bloc)
BRIDGE	Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections
CCIAO	Christchurch Call Initiative on Algorithmic Outcomes
CICIG	International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala
CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DCO	Digital Cooperation Organization
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
EMB	Electoral Management Body
EU	European Union
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FOC	Freedom Online Coalition
FSRB	FATF-Style Regional Body
G7	Group of Seven
G20	Group of Twenty
GCDM	Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism
GDC	Global Democracy Coalition
GNDEM	Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors
GNfSEI	Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity
GPAI	Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)
IEAB	International Electoral Accreditation Body
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INE	Instituto Nacional Electoral (Mexico's National Electoral Institute)

Acronym	Full Name / Explanation
INTOSAI	International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions
IRM	Independent Reporting Mechanism (OGP)
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MFC	Media Freedom Coalition
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDI	National Democratic Institute
OAS	Organization of American States
OCDS	Open Contracting Data Standard
OCF	Open Contracting Partnership
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OGP	Open Government Partnership
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE)
SAI	Supreme Audit Institution
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
StAR	Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative
TI	Transparency International
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UN	United Nations
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEAD	United Nations Electoral Assistance Division
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy (research project)
WG3	Working Group 3 (GCDM: Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism)
WTO	World Trade Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Democracy around the world is under pressure. For nearly two decades, democratic governance has been in retreat globally, with authoritarian practices advancing in every region. At the same time, the multilateral institutions that once anchored the international order—the United Nations and regional bodies—have struggled to respond, constrained by great-power gridlock, weakened United States engagement, and the ability of authoritarian states to use institutional rules to block oversight of matters they deem "domestic."

Plurilateral initiatives—coalitions of willing states, smaller than universal bodies, flexible in structure, and organized around specific problems—have emerged as an important complement to both universal and regional institutions. They do not replace the United Nations, the African Union, or the European Union. But they fill spaces that those institutions cannot: coordinating information across jurisdictions, setting technical standards that universal forums are too unwieldy to negotiate, catalyzing ambition among like-minded governments, and creating incentives for countries to adopt reforms they would not undertake alone. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has argued, we are entering an age of "variable geometry" in international cooperation—where the shape of cooperation changes depending on the problem.

This report finds that effective models of democratic plurilateralism already exist. Indeed, democracy protection and promotion has often relied on smaller coalitions of states. Effective plurilateral initiatives are more numerous and more varied than is widely recognized. This paper focuses on coalitions that include governments as participants, whether exclusively intergovernmental or structured as partnerships between governments and non-state actors. It examines both explicitly democracy-focused coalitions and issue-specific groups whose work materially affects democratic governance. To look at a few of the examples highlighted in this report:

- The Council of Europe's Venice Commission has provided constitutional and legal guidance to 61 member states, influencing democratic transitions far beyond Europe.
- The Open Government Partnership (OGP) has engaged 75 countries and 150 local jurisdictions in a co-creation model that embeds civil society as a co-equal governance partner for greater transparency of public institutions.
- The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has achieved near-universal behavioral change on anti-money-laundering standards through a combination of peer review and material consequences for non-compliance.
- The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) has demonstrated that multi-stakeholder governance—bringing governments, businesses, and civil society into a single governing framework—can produce tangible improvements in resource governance and management.
- The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC), the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), the Christchurch Call, the Forum on Information and Democracy, and others have shown that diplomatic coordination and multi-stakeholder engagement among committed states can shape norms around internet shutdowns, human rights, the information environment, and artificial intelligence (AI) even without binding enforcement.

Three overarching findings emerge from this analysis.

First, *form should follow function*—and multi-stakeholder governance is among the most consequential design choices. Not all plurilateral initiatives need the same institutional architecture. Bodies that promote standards, like the FATF or the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, require rule-based accountability, independent review, and meaningful consequences for non-compliance. Bodies whose primary purpose is diplomatic coordination or knowledge exchange can operate with lighter structures, but still benefit from transparency about what members have committed to and whether they have delivered. Across both types, one design choice stands out: the initiatives that have demonstrated the strongest results in this report—OGP, EITI, the Christchurch Call—share a common feature. They give non-state actors a formal governance role, not merely a consultative one. The Commission recommends that plurilateral initiatives supporting democracy should, as a default, include the communities they aim to serve as governance partners. Annex 2 offers a framework of eight design principles to guide these choices.

Second, the report urges caution about the impulse to create new institutions when effective platforms already exist. The priority should be to *strengthen, fund, and connect the plurilateral initiatives that are already working*. Many of the bodies surveyed here—the Council of Europe, the OECD, OGP, EITI, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the FOC, the MFC—have demonstrated their value but remain under-resourced, under-coordinated, and vulnerable to the political fragility that comes from dependence on a small number of champion states. Diversifying funding, expanding memberships, embedding secretariats within stable institutional homes, rotating leadership, and building simple coordination mechanisms among bodies with overlapping mandates would do more to strengthen democratic cooperation than launching new coalitions, saving time and money on startup costs and maintaining institutional knowledge.

Third, and at the same time, the mapping conducted for this report reveals significant gaps or fragmentation in plurilateral coverage of issues critical to democracy. Electoral integrity lacks a plurilateral body that combines standard-setting, independent accountability, and broad

membership—a striking absence given how central elections are to democratic governance. The digital technology and AI governance landscape, while crowded with initiatives, has only one instrument—the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on AI—that explicitly centers democratic values; most existing bodies focus on safety and innovation without addressing algorithmic accountability, the information environment, or the concentration of private technological power. And across many domains, coordination among plurilateral initiatives remains a structural weakness:

bodies with overlapping mandates would benefit from collaboration, specialization, and exchange of information.

Democratic governance is not guaranteed by the existence of institutions. It requires sustained political commitment, resilient and evolving frameworks, and multilevel cooperation that can adapt to a shifting landscape. Plurilateral initiatives, well designed and adequately supported, nonetheless are one of the most promising tools available for meeting our moment of international cooperation for democracy.

About This Paper

This paper was produced by Working Group 3 (Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism) of the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (GCDM), established by Club de Madrid and chaired by former Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou. The Commission brings together 19 high-level commissioners, including former heads of state and leaders of international organizations, to develop recommendations on how multilateral and plurilateral frameworks can better protect and promote democratic governance.

At a working level, expert groups met between November 2025 and April 2026 to identify areas to strengthen the international architecture for democracy support. Working groups split their efforts across (1) the United Nations (UN) system, (2) regional mechanisms, and (3) plurilateral groupings.

This paper is one of three thematic inputs to the Commission’s final report. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) led Working Group 3. The report drew on desk research, four rounds of expert deliberations, and structured consultations with institutions and practitioners. It will be published alongside papers on the UN system (led by International IDEA) and regional mechanisms (led by the European Democracy Hub).

The Commission’s final report will be launched in Madrid in June 2026. For more on the Commission’s work, visit clubmadrid.org.





Design Principles for Plurilateral Institutions

Membership criteria and scope. Match eligibility rules to purpose: open membership for reach and peer pressure; selective membership for baseline credibility; tiered structures (observer, associate, regional) where full commitment is premature—but treat Global South representation as a **requirement, not an afterthought**.

Non-state participation in governance. Give civil society, industry, and technical experts formal governance roles. Co-equal partnership improves ambition, resilience, and buy-in.

Review, compliance, and consequences. An independent mechanism that assesses all members equally and attaches material or reputational consequences to non-compliance differentiates credible action platforms from diplomatic approaches.

Mechanisms for learning and peer exchange. Accountability tells members what they must do. Structured peer exchange helps them figure out how.

Institutional durability and succession. Independent secretariats, diversified funding, rotating leadership, and succession mechanisms protect against the collapse when a founding champion loses interest or changes leadership.

Instruments for responding to democratic backsliding. Any initiative with democracy criteria needs graduated, rule-based responses to backsliding: defined triggers, transparent procedures, due process. Ad hoc political decisions invite charges of unfairness and erode credibility.

Coordination with other plurilateral and multilateral bodies. Shared benchmarks, joint reporting templates, and observer status across governance bodies can meaningfully reduce duplication without requiring formal restructuring.

Sunset clauses or periodic mandate reviews. Initiatives should include explicit mechanisms for winding down or transforming when their founding problem is resolved, their mandate absorbed, or their membership universal—institutional accretion is a failure mode, not a sign of success.

1.

WHAT IS PLURILATERALISM? WHEN AND HOW DOES IT WORK?



1.1 Defining Plurilateralism

Democracy is in trouble, and the international institutions built to protect it are struggling to respond. Freedom House has documented nineteen consecutive years of global democratic decline.¹ The Varieties of Democracy Institute has found that nearly three-quarters of the world's population now lives under autocratizing governments.²

Meanwhile, the global multilateral system—the post-war architecture of treaties, conventions, and universal institutions—is under strain from multiple directions: geopolitical fragmentation, great-power competition, and the deliberate efforts of authoritarian states to neutralize or capture international oversight processes.

Into this gap, a different form of cooperation is emerging. Coalitions of willing states, often with civil society, the private sector, or technical experts at the table, are organizing around shared problems that universal or regional institutions have, thus far, been unable to address.

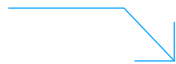
These coalitions are not new. Throughout the Cold War and after, groups of countries formed issue-specific alliances, from the Nuclear Suppliers Group to the G7. Democratic support, in particular, has never relied primarily on universal multilateral institutions. The Council of Europe, International IDEA, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and later the Community of Democracies, OGP, and the Freedom Online Coalition: all are coalitions of willing states, organized around shared values, operating outside the UN General Assembly framework.

¹Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2025: The Authoritarian Advance," Freedom House, 2025.

²According to the V-Dem Institute's 2026 Democracy Report, 74 percent of the world's population—approximately six billion people—now live in countries classified as autocracies.

What is new is not the approach, but the *density* of the current landscape—the sheer number of initiatives, their overlapping mandates, and the urgency of corraling diminishing resources toward shared, ever-more-urgent goals. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has argued, we are entering an age of “variable geometry,” characterized by “dynamic, overlapping, pragmatic coalitions” built around shared values or interests rather than shared institutions.³

Plurilateral initiatives are more than bilateral partnerships or ad hoc diplomatic meetings. The expert group advising this report identified three defining features. First, *membership is limited and values- or interest-driven*. Unlike universal bodies such as the United Nations General Assembly, plurilateral initiatives select or attract members based on shared goals, values, or capacities. Some are open to any qualifying state; others are by invitation. Second, *governance structures are flexible*. Plurilateral bodies range from highly institutionalized organizations with secretariats and formal review cycles (such as the Open Government Partnership or the Financial Action Task Force) to lighter networks that operate through periodic meetings and voluntary commitments. Few are treaty-based. Third, *they are problem-specific*. Plurilateral coalitions typically form around a defined public value, challenge, or approach—anti-corruption, electoral integrity, digital governance, climate resilience—rather than attempting to cover a broad spectrum issue like climate or trade.



Plurilateral coalitions do not replace the United Nations, the African Union, or other multilateral and regional bodies open to all states within a defined geographic area. They complement them, and in some cases feed into them. PM Carney’s metaphor of “variable geometry” is useful: the shape of cooperation changes depending on the problem.⁶ A defense procurement alliance among NATO members looks nothing like a transparency initiative that includes both wealthy democracies and developing countries. A critical minerals buyers’ club solves different problems from a coalition to protect media freedom. What they share is a common logic: when universal consensus is impossible or too slow, a smaller group of committed actors can set standards, pool resources, share information, and create incentives for others to follow.

The relationship between plurilateral and global or regional action as defined in this paper takes several forms.⁷ In some cases, plurilateral agreements serve as proving grounds for standards that later become multilateral norms—a “gold standard” approach in which a committed group establishes ambitious rules and then invites wider adoption.⁸ In others, plurilateral coalitions fill gaps that multilateral bodies cannot, either because of political gridlock (e.g. in sensitive areas like media freedom) or because the problem is too specialized for a general-purpose institution. In still other cases, plurilateral groupings may work inside broader multilateral frameworks, caucuses that drive reform from within.

³Mark Carney, “The Age of Variable Geometry,” *The World Ahead 2026*, *The Economist*, 2025. Carney writes as Canadian Prime Minister.

⁴Moisés Naím, “Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action,” *Foreign Policy*, June 2009.

⁵The WTO Agreement on Government Procurement is a typical example.

⁶Carney, “The Age of Variable Geometry.”

⁷For a discussion of “inside” and “outside” minilateralism relative to established multilateral bodies, see Shannon Kearns and others, “Minilateralism and Effective Multilateralism in the Global Nuclear Order,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2024.

⁸On the distinction between “gold standard” plurilateral agreements and lowest-common-denominator multilateral accords, see William Reinsch, “Plurilateral or Multilateral?,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2025.

This report examines plurilateralism through two lenses.⁹ The first focuses on *explicitly democracy-focused coalitions*—organizations whose stated purpose is to promote or defend democratic governance or some specific feature of it. These include International IDEA, programs within the OECD, the Open Government Partnership, the Community of Democracies, the Freedom Online Coalition, the Media Freedom Coalition, and the platforms that emerged from the Summit for Democracy process. The second lens examines organizations promoting democratic practice beyond traditional domains (e.g., elections). Anti-corruption and anti-money laundering efforts, for example, have significant implications for the rule of law, transborder financial flows, and accountability. While not a focus of this paper, coalitions in climate, biodiversity, and public health often embed transparency, participation, and accountability norms that strengthen democratic practice.¹⁰

This second lens is increasingly important. Rising authoritarianism and new technologies have had profound effects not just on democracy, but on democracy promotion. Over the past decade, democracy cooperation has shifted from outward-looking promotion to inward-looking defense. The 1990s and 2000s saw “consolidated democracies” helping other countries democratize through election observation, constitutional assistance, judicial reform, and civil society support. Today, they aim to protect themselves from transnational and domestic threats like disinformation and foreign

information manipulation, corruption and illicit finance, the erosion of civic space, and the political consequences of ungoverned technology. Because many of these threats involve private-sector platforms, financial intermediaries, and technology companies, the relevant cooperation increasingly involves non-state actors beyond the non-profit sector as integral operational partners. (These are often referred to as multistakeholder approaches, going beyond state-to-state interaction.)

This report's contribution, therefore, is not to argue that plurilateralism is emerging as a response to multilateral failure, but to examine what lessons can be drawn from a sector that has always worked this way. The recommendations in this paper are not aimed at replacement. The UN continues to provide electoral assistance, regional organizations conduct election observation, and bilateral aid and diplomacy remain a primary channel for governance support.

Instead, plurilateral initiatives tend to work in the spaces between and alongside these structures. They can move quickly in coordinating information that no single institution controls, set technical standards that might be negotiated away among universal bodies, and mobilize political will among governments that share enough common ground to act.¹¹ Understanding when plurilateralism works, when it falls short, and how it can be designed to protect democratic values is the central task of this report.

⁹The Expert Working Group endorsed distinguishing between (1) explicitly democracy-focused plurilateral bodies and (2) issue-specific groups whose work materially affects democratic governance.

¹⁰WG3 Thematic Meeting 1, 14 November 2025. Several participants noted the importance of understanding plurilateralism in climate, biodiversity, and public health, where democratic implications arise through participation requirements, transparency of financial flows, and accountability of non-state actors. Due to time constraints, the WG did not delve deeply into this.

¹¹One WG3 member gave an example of how “negotiating down” matters for UN standards in democracy assistance. They observed that the UN “will mostly say yes when a country requests [electoral] assistance, regardless of the regime type or the quality of elections.” The complementarity between plurilateral initiatives and both the UN and regional organizations was a recurring theme in the Commission's discussions.

1.2 Comparative Strengths: When Does Plurilateralism Deliver?

The case for plurilateralism is often stated in terms of speed and flexibility: smaller groups can act faster than universal bodies bogged down by consensus requirements. Speed alone does not mean success, however. Results matter. The useful questions, then, are: Under what conditions do plurilateral arrangements actually produce results for democracy? And when are they merely declaratory?

The outputs of plurilateral fora vary widely: they may produce binding agreements (Council of Europe conventions), compliance standards with material consequences (FATF), voluntary political commitments subject to independent review (OGP), shared principles with varying degrees of follow-through (the Declaration for the Future of the Internet), or one-time diplomatic declarations with no implementation mechanism. Understanding what a given initiative produces is essential to evaluating its effectiveness.

This section contrasts two plurilateral initiatives which serve as useful contrasts in terms of their concrete impacts on democracy—the Summit for Democracy and the Financial Action Task Force.

The Summit for Democracy, launched by the Biden administration in December 2021, is instructive. The United States led the Summit outside of usual multilateral channels, instead opting for an ad hoc plurilateral approach.¹² It generated significant political attention. But its critics were pointed, especially around who was a democracy and who wasn't, according to invitation lists.¹³

The Summit for Democracy has had a mixed legacy thus far. It was more successful as a coalition-building exercise than as a platform for action and reform. Commitments were voluntary, self-defined, largely unmonitored, and neither connected to consequences for non-performance nor incentives for improvement.

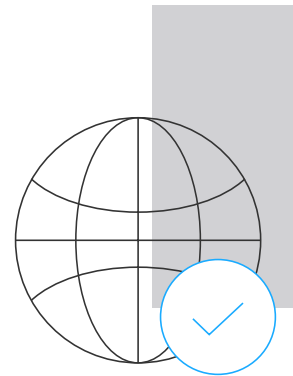
While the Summit for Democracy did not establish a durable implementation architecture, its issue-based cohorts produced some concrete results. The financial integrity cohort, which included Armenia, gained international attention and contributed to concrete anti-money-laundering reforms (see section 2.1, "Responding to Constitutional Breakdowns and Transitions"). The Youth Democracy Cohort (see Section 2.4) has established a multi-stakeholder platform for intergenerational inclusion that continues to operate. The Global Democracy Coalition, a large group of democracy NGOs and think tanks has continued to coordinate and better align their activities. (See Conclusion for further discussion of its role.) Several of the plurilateral initiatives examined in this report—including the Declaration for the Future of the Internet and expanded commitments under OGP—gained political momentum through the Summit process. In the meantime, The lesson is not that the Summit for Democracy failed, but that high-level political mobilization without institutional follow-through produces diminishing returns.¹⁴

¹²Frances Z. Brown and Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Talk Is Cheap," *Foreign Affairs*, January 2022. Brown and Carothers argued that the administration needed to define its pro-democracy priorities in a realistic yet ambitious way, noting that the United States has a long history of advocating for democracy in principle while compromising on it in practice. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Global Views of Biden's Democracy Summit," December 2021. Contributors from Africa, Europe, Japan, Latin America, and South Asia expressed concerns about the invitation criteria, the division of the world into democracies and non-democracies, and the need for concrete follow-through on structural economic enablers of democracy.

¹⁴On the Summit for Democracy's cohort outcomes, see International IDEA, "Democratic Engagement After Two Summits for Democracy," 2024. The financial integrity cohort is notable for connecting S4D political commitments to existing technical infrastructure (FATF standards, beneficial ownership registries), illustrating the value of linking political-level plurilateral initiatives to established operational bodies. <https://bit.ly/3Qpokyf>

By contrast, the Financial Action Task Force has had significant successes. The FATF was created in 1989 as a small G7 initiative to combat money laundering. With 40 members, its reach extends far beyond them through a network of regional bodies.¹⁵ The FATF is effective due to its compliance architecture. The FATF conducts rigorous peer evaluations of member and non-member countries, assessing both legal frameworks and practical effectiveness. Countries that fall short are placed on a publicly available “grey list” of jurisdictions under increased monitoring. Grey listing carries real costs: an IMF study found that international capital inflows decline on average by 7.6 percent of GDP following a grey list designation.¹⁶ The incentive to reform is accordingly strong. Of the 114 countries the FATF has publicly listed since the process began, 86 have implemented sufficient reforms to be removed.

The lesson from these contrasting initiatives is that the relationship between commitments and consequences matters. Plurilateral initiatives that combine clear action, unbiased assessment, and meaningful incentives for compliance tend to produce better outcomes than those that rely on goodwill alone.



When plurilateralism is preferable

Drawing on the evidence from the expert group, existing cases, and the broader literature, we identify four conditions under which plurilateral approaches are most likely to deliver substantive results.¹⁷

When the problem requires coordinated action among a defined group

Some challenges are structurally unsuited to universal negotiation. For example, some issues, such as money laundering or trafficking have chokepoints in certain jurisdictions. Cross-border corruption, for instance, involves specific jurisdictions, financial centers, and legal frameworks. Efforts to end international shell companies, therefore, is useful only if the jurisdictions where those companies are formed participate. Efforts to improve oil revenue transparency matter most for countries where those companies are registered and where the oil is extracted.

When trust or shared values matter

Sometimes trust between countries may be a defining feature. Electoral cybersecurity requires information-sharing among countries that trust one another's agencies. In these cases, the logic of plurilateralism is straightforward: the relevant actors are a defined subset of states, and progress depends on coordination among them, not on universal consensus.¹⁸

When universal institutions are gridlocked or captured

Plurilateral coalitions can fill the gap as venues where willing states set standards and build the technical infrastructure that may later be adopted more broadly. The Plurilateralism Expert

¹⁵While money laundering, at the time, was primarily seen as a matter of counter-terrorism, it has significant implications for fighting bribery, extortion, and embezzlement, which directly affect the quality of democratic governance. As of February 2025, the FATF had reviewed 139 countries and jurisdictions, publicly identified 114 with deficiencies, and seen 86 of them implement sufficient reforms to be removed from the process. See FATF, “Black and Grey Lists,” fatf-gafi.org, updated February 2025.

¹⁶See White & Case, “The Economic Impact of FATF Grey-Listing,” 2024; and the Basel Institute on Governance, “FATF Grey List: Truth and Myths.”

¹⁷See Annex 2 of this report for a full treatment of institutional design dimensions, including decision-making rules, membership criteria, compliance mechanisms, and safeguards against backsliding.

¹⁸Moisés Naím, “Minilateralism: The Magic Number to Get Real International Action,” *Foreign Policy*, June 2009.

Group (see “About this Report,” previous section) highlighted the “information order” as a domain where multilateral bodies have been unable to harmonize responses.¹⁹ The same applies to areas where authoritarian states have used multilateral processes to block scrutiny of their own conduct or to dilute standards. When the UN Human Rights Council cannot pass a resolution on a specific country because of bloc politics, or when the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism is paralyzed, plurilateralism is an option.

When the initiative complements rather than duplicates existing structures

Plurilateral coalitions work best when they occupy a distinct niche in the broader institutional landscape. The UN provides electoral assistance on request to virtually any country.²⁰ Regional organizations conduct election observation. Bilateral donors fund governance programs. Plurilateral initiatives add value when they do something that these other structures cannot: coordinating information across jurisdictions, setting higher technical standards than universal bodies can negotiate, creating forums for peer learning among countries at similar stages of reform, or mobilizing political will through collective action. Rather than “crowding out” in some cases, plurilateral coalitions can act as an accelerant or laboratory.

A note on thematic plurilateralism

These conditions apply not only to explicitly democracy-focused coalitions but also to issue-specific plurilateral groups in climate, trade, health, and other domains. Several expert group members noted that democratic values—transparency, participation, accountability—can be embedded in the design of any plurilateral initiative, even one whose primary mandate is environmental or economic.²¹ The Escazú Agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Aarhus Convention in Europe, (each plurilateral instruments *within* the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and UN Economic Commission for Europe) explicitly build access to information, public participation, and access to justice into legal matters affecting the environment.²² Subgroupings within the Internet Governance Forum may focus on basic freedoms online. These cases suggest that one of the most important opportunities for plurilateralism is not creating new democracy-specific coalitions, but ensuring that democratic principles are woven into the growing number of thematic plurilateral initiatives that are already reshaping governance in other sectors.

The next section turns to the comparative weaknesses of plurilateral approaches, including fragmentation, credibility deficits, and the rise of authoritarian counter-coalitions.

¹⁹WG3 meeting 14 November 2025, §3.2: “The ‘information order’—data governance, platform accountability, AI norms, cybersecurity, and counter-disinformation—was highlighted as a domain requiring international action that multilateral bodies have struggled to harmonize.”

²⁰A working group member noted that the UN will generally provide electoral assistance when requested regardless of regime type, while plurilateral bodies can be more selective and longer-term in their capacity-building approach.

²¹WG3 14 November 2025, §3.4. Several contributions noted the importance of understanding plurilateralism in climate, biodiversity, and public health areas, where democratic implications arise indirectly through participation, transparency of financial flows, and accountability of non-state actors.

²²For a discussion of how the Escazú Agreement embeds access to information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental governance, see ECLAC, “Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean,” 2018. The Aarhus Convention (1998) plays a similar role in Europe.

1.3 Comparative Weaknesses and Risks

The advantages outlined above are real, but they come with structural risks that are equally inherent to the plurilateral form. Understanding risks is not a reason to abandon plurilateral approaches. It is, however, a reason to design them carefully. Five recurring weaknesses deserve attention: fragmentation and duplication, credibility deficits, political fragility, the perception of external imposition, and the emergence of illiberal counter-coalitions.

Crowding and duplication

From a diplomat's perspective, the democracy-support landscape may already seem crowded. Each new coalition absorbs diplomatic bandwidth. Foreign ministries with limited staff must manage reporting obligations, attend meetings, and coordinate across multiple platforms, often without a clear sense of how one initiative relates to another. For smaller democracies and developing countries, this burden is disproportionate.²³

The risk, then, is not that plurilateralism is ineffective. The proliferation of initiatives without coordination and a focus on results produces diminishing returns: overlapping peer reviews, competing reporting requirements, and a diffusion of political energy that leaves none of them with the critical mass to drive meaningful change.

Membership and Credibility

Plurilateral coalitions supporting democracy have a “goldilocks problem.” They must get things “just right” when determining membership. This manifests in two problems: free riders (when members don't deliver but enjoy the status that comes with exclusivity) and discrimination (when potential members cannot participate despite the benefits it would confer).

The Summit for Democracy illustrated this tension. International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report classified the United States itself as a “backsliding democracy” in 2021, the same year Washington hosted the first summit.²⁴ Critics noted that more than thirty percent of the countries invited to the summit were classified by Freedom House as only “partly free,” while several states experiencing documented democratic erosion—including India and the Philippines—received invitations that appeared driven by geopolitical alignment rather than democratic credentials.²⁵

The dilemma intensifies when a powerful member's own democratic performance is contested. The response cannot be to avoid plurilateral action; that would leave the field to actors with no democratic commitments at all. Instead, it requires institutional design choices that share decision-making power, have clear membership criteria, embed independent assessment, and make performance standards apply equally to all members, including the most powerful.

²³The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (DGAP) has noted that developing countries face particular hurdles in joining open plurilateral initiatives, including the need to invest scarce resources in negotiation capacity and undertake domestic reforms. See “Making Plurilateral Initiatives Work for All,” DGAP Policy Brief, May 2023. International Monetary Fund, “Geo-Economic Fragmentation and the Future of Multilateralism,” IMF Staff Discussion Note SDN/2023/001, January 2023. The note argues that where multilateral efforts stall, “open and non-discriminatory plurilateral initiatives (fewer countries wanting to do more) could be a practical way forward,” but emphasizes the need for guardrails.

²⁴International IDEA, Global State of Democracy Report 2021, Stockholm, 2021. The classification was based on the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol and the refusal of the outgoing president to accept the 2020 election results.

²⁵See, among others, Debasish Roy Chowdhury, “Joe Biden's Democracy Summit Is the Height of Hypocrisy,” TIME, December 10, 2021; Cornell American Democracy Collaborative, “Biden's Democracy Summit Should Avoid ‘Us vs. Them,’” Cornell Chronicle, December 2021.

Political Fragility and Durability

Many plurilateral initiatives depend on a small number of political champions whose attention and resources are finite. When those champions lose elections, shift priorities, or face domestic crises, the initiatives they built can atrophy rapidly.

The dissolution of USAID in 2025 demonstrated how quickly sanctioned assets can shift in the democracy space. The Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (GNSEI), launched as a U.S. government commitment at the first Summit for Democracy, was designed to coordinate electoral assistance providers across bilateral donors and implementing organizations. With the dissolution of its host agency, the network's future quickly became uncertain.²⁶

Any coalition anchored to a single government or funding source is vulnerable. Plurilateral initiatives need institutional structures more than they need high-profile launches. That often means independent secretariats, diversified funding, built-in succession mechanisms, and multistakeholder governance. This can help them survive changes of government in any single member state. Initiatives that rely on rotating leadership among members, or that embed their secretariat within an international organization or standalone non-profit rather than a national agency, may be more durable.

Illiberal Counter-Plurilateralism

Democratic plurilateralism does not operate in a vacuum. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes have developed their own coalitions, often explicitly as an alternative to Western-led institutions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), established in 2001, now encompasses states representing roughly forty percent of the world's population.²⁷ BRICS, which expanded in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, has positioned itself as a vehicle for reforming global governance away from Western-centric power. While many BRICS members or candidates are democracies, more than half are classified as authoritarian regimes by the Economist Intelligence Unit.²⁸

These coalitions do not mirror democratic plurilateral organizations in terms of their internal operation and goals. They generally lack compliance mechanisms, independent review, or civil society participation. Their unifying principle is not a shared governance model but rather a shared critique: that Western-led institutions impose political conditionalities that infringe on sovereignty. The BRICS New Development Bank, for example, was explicitly designed to provide infrastructure financing without the governance conditions or safeguards policies attached to World Bank or IMF lending.²⁹

²⁶Following the dissolution of USAID in early 2025, the status of GNSEI remains unresolved at the time of writing (March 2025). From GCDM WG3 meeting discussion, February 5, 2025.

²⁷The SCO was founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined in 2017; Iran in 2023. Belarus became a member in 2024.

²⁸CADAL analysis based on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2023 found that of the 22 countries that are or could become BRICS members, twelve are classified as authoritarian regimes, four as hybrid regimes, and six as flawed democracies. See Carlos Eduardo Piña, "BRICS: Authoritarian Challenge to Democratic Governance," CADAL, 2024.

²⁹The New Development Bank was established in 2014 with \$100 billion in authorized capital and operates on equal governance principles among founding members. It has approved over \$32.8 billion across 96 projects. See Peninsula Foundation, "BRICS, SCO, and Beyond: Multilateralism as a Sovereignty Safeguard," December 2025.

For the purposes of this paper, authoritarian counter-plurilateralism matters for three reasons.

First, it provides authoritarian regimes with practical alternative platforms that reduce the leverage of democratic conditionality. A government facing FATF grey-listing or credible peer review has less incentive to comply if it can access capital and political support through alternative channels.

Second, authoritarian coalitions actively contest democratic norms in international forums. The SCO has conducted joint exercises officially aimed at, “countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism” that are at least partly directed at preventing democratic movements—what some refer to as “colour revolutions.”³⁰

Third, these efforts give oxygen to the (incorrect) concept that democracy, human rights, and public accountability are somehow foreign impositions, rather than demands from their own citizens.

Yet it is also important not to overstate the coherence of these counter-coalitions. BRICS members’ heterogeneity limits the organization’s ability to project a unified governance model. As one analysis noted, the expansion of BRICS may dilute rather than strengthen ideological cohesion, producing something closer to the Cold War’s Non-Aligned Movement than a disciplined authoritarian bloc.³¹



1.4 From Analysis to Application

The risks outlined thus far are crowding and duplication, credibility gaps, political fragility, and authoritarian counter-coalitions. They need to be taken into consideration when designing and evaluating plurilateral initiatives to support democracy.

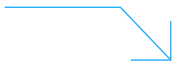
The next five sections examine how plurilateral initiatives have actually operated across five domains critical to democracy: the rule of law, electoral integrity, corruption, civil and political rights, and digital technology. In each domain, the Working Group lays out the achievements of plurilateral bodies, but also where structural gaps have limited impact and where gaps remain.

³⁰SCO Peace Mission exercises have been described by analysts as aimed in part at preventing “external forces” from “provoking a new wave of colour revolutions.” See Clingendael Institute, “The BRICS as an EU Security Challenge,” 2015.

³¹Ben Dubow, “BRICS – The Coalition of the Globally Grumpy,” Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), September 2023.

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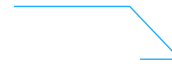
PLURILATERAL SUPPORT IN KEY DEMOCRATIC AREAS



This section moves from plurilateralism as a generalized approach to actual application across five domains essential to democratic resilience: the rule of law, electoral integrity, anti-corruption, civil rights, and digital governance.

It looks at established bodies like the Venice Commission and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) alongside emerging coalitions such as the Freedom Online Coalition. In doing so, we can evaluate how well plurilateral organizations are meeting today and tomorrow's challenges. It maps the existing landscape of initiatives, where they might be strengthened and gaps in coverage. Ultimately, this section provides a preliminary gap analysis, illustrating where plurilateral support is robust and where new or strengthened frameworks are required to counter global democratic backsliding.

2.1 Respect for Constitutions, Checks and Balances, and the RULE OF LAW



The rule of law is not a single thing. It is a bundle of principles and practices: constitutional supremacy, separation of powers, judicial independence, legislative oversight, and the accountability of the executive. Together, these things constrain the arbitrary use of power and protect people's rights. When these principles erode, democracy erodes with them, sometimes from a coup, but nowadays, more often through a slower, subtler process that scholars now call "autocratization."

Plurilateral organizations have emerged as one set of tools for defending and promoting these principles internationally. They do so in two broadly distinct ways: first, by *promoting* the rule of law through standard-setting, technical assistance, constitution-building, and peer learning; and second, and far less frequently, by *responding* to extra-constitutional actions, whether through diplomatic pressure, suspension of membership, or coordinated condemnation.³² This section examines how plurilateral initiatives have performed in both roles, drawing on cases that illustrate both the promise and the limits of this form of cooperation.

This section looks at a few concrete cases where the plurilateral organizations have been used to meet the moment.

Promoting the Rule of Law

The Venice Commission: Constitutional Advice Beyond Europe

Perhaps the most developed plurilateral mechanism for promoting constitutionalism is the European Commission for Democracy through Law, better known as the Venice Commission.³³ Founded in 1990 by the Council of Europe at a time of rapid political transformation in Eastern Europe, it was initially conceived as a vehicle for providing "emergency constitutional aid" to states in transition. Over three decades, it has evolved into one of the world's foremost advisory bodies on constitutional matters.

What makes the Venice Commission a useful case for plurilateralism is its membership structure. Although convened by the Council of Europe, its 61 member states extend well beyond Europe to include countries in Latin America (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru), North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), and East Asia (the Republic of Korea), as well as Canada, Israel, and the United States. Its members are not government delegates but independent experts—constitutional law professors, supreme court judges, and senior legal scholars—who serve in their personal capacity. This design gives the Commission a dual character: it is intergovernmental in its legitimacy but technocratic in its operation.

³² Working Group members were clear on a distinction between "prevention and recovery" functions versus "response" functions, in the context of constitutional breakdowns.

³³ The Venice Commission, formally the European Commission for Democracy through Law, was established by the Council of Europe in 1990. As of 2026, it has 61 member states: the 46 Council of Europe members plus 15 non-European members, including Algeria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Korea, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Mexico, Peru, Tunisia, and the United States (announcing its withdrawal in 2026). See: Council of Europe, "About the Venice Commission," <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/about>.

The Commission's primary function is providing opinions. These opinions are detailed legal assessments of draft constitutions, constitutional amendments, and legislation. They may be at the request of member states, Council of Europe bodies, or partner organizations such as the EU and the Organization of American States.³⁴ Opinions are not legally binding. Their authority rests instead on the Commission's reputation for independence and thoroughness, and on the comparative method it employs, drawing on the constitutional experience of its diverse membership to evaluate the "practicality and viability" of proposed legal reforms.

Beyond country-specific opinions, the Commission has developed general reference standards, most notably its "Rule of Law Checklist," which has become a widely used tool for evaluating compliance with rule-of-law principles across jurisdictions.³⁵ It also operates a network linking constitutional courts worldwide and maintains a database of constitutional jurisprudence, fostering cross-border judicial dialogue.

The Venice Commission's interventions in Poland beginning in 2016 illustrate both the strengths and the limits of the advisory model. When the Polish government undertook sweeping reforms of the judiciary, the Commission issued a series of critical opinions documenting how these reforms undermined the separation of powers.³⁶ These opinions provided an authoritative, expert-driven basis for broader European institutions to act. The European Commission subsequently concluded that the constitutionality of Polish national legislation could no longer be guaranteed and enacted limits on EU funds transfers. Yet the Polish government proceeded with the reforms regardless. The

example shows how the Venice Commission's influence depends heavily on the willingness of other institutions—courts, legislatures, regional bodies—to act on its findings. It is not an enforcer.

The Commission's global reach also faces new challenges. The Commission expelled Russia in 2022 after its invasion of Ukraine. In January 2026, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the body.³⁷ It is an open question as to whether these departures have enhanced or weakened its credibility or legitimacy.

International IDEA: Constitution-Building and Democratic Assessment

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, or "International IDEA," takes a different but complementary approach. Where the Venice Commission provides expert legal opinions on specific legislative proposals, IDEA operates more broadly as a platform for knowledge-sharing, technical assistance, and assessment among its 35 member states. (Note: International IDEA is featured in other thematic sections as well.)

IDEA's constitution-building program has provided technical support to countries undergoing constitutional transitions, including Gambia and Chile.³⁸ These engagements exemplify the "prevention and recovery" end of the spectrum; they are not crisis response. They aim to build constitutional foundations that can sustain democratic governance over time. IDEA's approach emphasizes inclusive process design, encouraging broad stakeholder participation in constitution-making and drawing on comparative experience from its diverse membership.

³⁴Venice Commission opinions cover a wide range of topics including the system of checks and balances, relations among branches of power, fundamental rights and freedoms, organization of constitutional justice, governance of the judiciary and prosecution, and electoral system reforms. See: Council of Europe, "Mandate and Founding Documents," <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/mandate-and-founding-documents>.

³⁵See: Council of Europe, "Venice Commission: Rule of Law Checklist," <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/venice-commission>.

³⁶On the Venice Commission's interventions in Poland, see the series of opinions issued from 2016 onward regarding reforms to the Constitutional Tribunal, the National Council of the Judiciary, and the Supreme Court. The European Commission concluded that the constitutionality of national legislation could "no longer be guaranteed." Opinion on amendments to the Act of 25 June 2015 on the Constitutional Tribunal CDL-AD(2016)001, adopted 11 March 2016. [LINK](#); Opinion on the Act on the Constitutional Tribunal of 22 July 2016 CDL-AD(2016)026, adopted 14–15 October 2016. [LINK](#); Opinion on the Draft Act amending the Act on the National Council of the Judiciary; on the Draft Act amending the Act on the Supreme Court, proposed by the President; and on the Act on the Organisation of Ordinary Courts CDL-AD(2017)031, adopted 8–9 December 2017 [LINK](#); Opinion on the Act on the Public Prosecutor's Office CDL-AD(2017)028, adopted 6–7 October 2017. [LINK](#)

³⁷<https://apnews.com/live/us-trump-updates-01-07-2026>

³⁸<https://www.idea.int/news/national-assembly-gambia-embarks-constitutional-reform-process>; <https://www.idea.int/country/chile>

IDEA has also developed the Global State of Democracy Indices, a quantitative platform for tracking the quality of democracy across multiple dimensions.³⁹ These assessment tools serve a dual function: they inform IDEA's own programming, and they provide a shared evidence base that member states can use for peer learning and early warning.

Member states may approach external assessments with caution, particularly regarding their data and methodology. This is not unique to IDEA—any organization that measures democratic performance risks friction with the governments it assesses. The challenge is to maintain analytical independence while preserving the trust that sustains member engagement.

Other Plurilateral Actors in the Rule-of-Law Space

Several other plurilateral contribute to the promotion of checks and balances, though their contributions to constitutionalism and the rule of law are less thoroughly documented and merit further investigation.⁴⁰

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and ParlAmericas support legislative bodies in fulfilling their oversight functions, a critical element of checks and balances. INTOSAI, the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions, promotes independence and professional standards among national audit bodies—institutions that are frequently targeted during autocratization, as auditors represent one of the few actors with the technical capacity and legal independence to scrutinize executive spending. The OECD, through its governance and regulatory policy work and especially through its accession process, also exerts leverage on rule-of-law reforms, though its primary orientation is economic rather than constitutional⁴¹.

Responding to Constitutional Breakdowns and Openings

Promoting the rule of law in stable or transitional settings is one thing. Responding when a government violates its own constitution is quite another. Here the record of plurilateral initiatives is more mixed, and the cases of Armenia, Zambia, and Thailand are instructive.

Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution illustrates what happens when a democratic opening meets an existing plurilateral infrastructure. Armenia had already joined OGP in 2012 and applied for EITI candidacy in 2017, both before the Revolution. When mass protests brought a reformist government to power, these frameworks provided ready-made channels for translating political energy into institutional change. Through its OGP action plans, Armenia became one of the first countries to establish a public beneficial ownership register, initially covering the extractive sector and later expanding economy-wide. This reform drew simultaneously on EITI disclosure standards and OGP's co-creation process with civil society.⁴² The Venice Commission provided expert opinions on the government's 2019 judicial reform package, offering a broadly positive assessment while cautioning against the immediate removal of Constitutional Court judges appointed under the old regime. This advice shaped the government's eventual approach of phased rather than abrupt judicial transition.⁴³

³⁹International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices provide quantitative assessments of democracy across multiple dimensions. The question of whether member states accept independent assessment is a recurring tension in plurilateral settings. See GCDM WG3 meeting, 14 November 2025.³⁹<https://apnews.com/live/us-trump-updates-01-07-2026>

³⁸<https://www.idea.int/news/national-assembly-gambia-embarks-constitutional-reform-process>; <https://www.idea.int/country/chile>

³⁹International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices provide quantitative assessments of democracy across multiple dimensions. The question of whether member states accept independent assessment is a recurring tension in plurilateral settings. See GCDM WG3 meeting, 14 November 2025.

⁴⁰<https://www.intosai.org/about-us/members/full-members.html>

⁴¹ <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/mena-oecd-governance-programme/rule-of-law.html>

⁴²The register was a commitment under Armenia's fourth OGP National Action Plan (2018–2020). See: EITI, "Armenia: A Model for Economy-Wide Beneficial Ownership Transparency," 2023; Open Ownership, "Armenia Country Profile."

⁴³ Venice Commission, Opinion on the Judicial Reform Package (CDL-AD(2019)024), October 2019. The Commission endorsed the package's overall direction but recommended a "transitional period" for changes to the Constitutional Court's composition, warning that "immediate removal from office does not comply with the principle of irremovability of judges."

The Summit for Democracy's Financial Integrity Cohort gave Armenia additional international visibility for its anti-corruption agenda. The lesson is that plurilateral bodies were most useful not as initiators of reform but as infrastructure — providing standards, peer review, and external credibility that a reformist government could draw on. While none of these bodies could protect Armenia from the geopolitical shock of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and its aftermath, a case could be made that they did ensure that the war did not result in backsliding.

Zambia's trajectory since 2021 offers a more sobering lesson. Hakainde Hichilema's election on an anti-corruption, pro-democracy platform was widely celebrated as a democratic opening. Early actions were encouraging: the government decriminalized presidential defamation, established an Economic and Financial Crimes Court, and pursued beneficial ownership transparency through its longstanding and largely successful EITI membership.⁴⁴ By 2024, the reform trajectory had stalled. The president dismissed the entire board of the Anti-Corruption Commission. More consequentially, the government introduced Constitutional Amendment Bill No. 7 of 2025, which critics argued would centralize executive power, weaken legislative oversight, and reduce democratic accountability. The Constitutional Court ruled the bill unconstitutional for failing to comply with the constitution's requirement of broad public consultation. The government signed it into law regardless, in December 2025⁴⁵. Zambia was not a member of OGP or the Venice Commission. It is unlikely that membership in those organizations alone would stall the concentration of power. But they might have slowed it. EITI's sector-specific transparency standards, do not extend to constitutional governance and membership in a broad-spectrum democracy organization may have given democracy advocates more of a foothold to use and strengthen constitutional restraints.

Thailand presents a different and more cautionary picture. The 2023 general election produced a

decisive mandate for pro-democracy candidates, with unprecedented voter turnout. Yet the 2017 constitution, drafted by the military junta allowed the senate to block the winning party's candidate from forming a government. In August 2024 the Constitutional Court dissolved the Move Forward Party entirely for advocating reform of the *lèse-majesté* law — a decision that led Freedom House to downgrade Thailand from "Partly Free" to "Not Free."⁴⁶ Plurilateral organizations have tried to help. International IDEA partnered with Thai academics to convene roundtables on constitutional reform process design, drawing on comparative experience from Chile, Nepal, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.⁴⁷ Thailand has joined OGP, in an effort to secure important anti-corruption reforms. In February 2026, Thai voters approved the first of three referendums to replace the 2017 constitution, with 60 percent in favor. The Thai case illustrates the limits of plurilateral support when the constitutional framework itself is designed to constrain democracy: external bodies can offer technical expertise and comparative knowledge, and incentives but they cannot override anti-democratic veto points within a country.

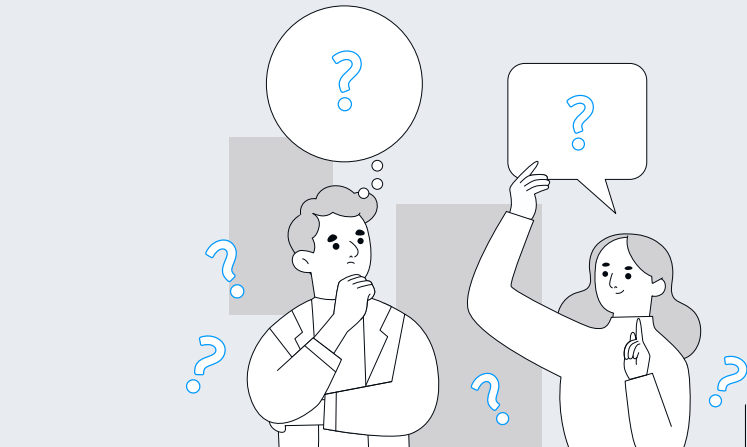
Taken together, these cases suggest that plurilateral initiatives are most effective in democratic transitions when three conditions hold: a domestic reform coalition with sufficient political authority to act; pre-existing membership in or engagement with plurilateral frameworks that provide standards, peer review, and external legitimacy; and a constitutional order that translates votes into actual reforms. Where all three are present, as in post-2018 Armenia, plurilateral bodies can accelerate and consolidate change. Where the constitutional framework itself is the obstacle, as in Thailand or Zambia, the contribution of external bodies is necessarily confined to technical support and normative signaling. The upshot is that membership in plurilateral organizations ahead of potential democratic transitions can be helpful, although there is a downside risk of "open washing" closed regimes that comes with this as well.

⁴⁴Zambia joined EITI in 2008 and achieved a score of 90 points in its 2021 validation against the EITI Standard. See: EITI, "Zambia Country Page," <https://eiti.org/countries/zambia>

⁴⁵Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, No. 7 of 2025. The Constitutional Court ruled in June 2025 that the bill failed to comply with Article 79 of the Constitution, which requires wide public consultation. The Law Association of Zambia, major church bodies, and civil society organizations jointly opposed the bill. See: ConstitutionNet, "Zambia's Proposed Constitutional Amendments: Sowing the Seeds of Crisis?" 2025.

⁴⁶Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025: Thailand. The Move Forward Party was dissolved in August 2024; its successor, the People's Party, continues in opposition.

⁴⁷International IDEA, "Designing a Process for Constitutional Reform in Thailand," 2023. The roundtables, held in partnership with Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science, brought Thai stakeholders together with international experts in constitution-building.



Open Questions and Gaps: Rule of Law and Constitutions

Can plurilateral organizations respond effectively to gradual autocratization? Are they better suited to acute crises right before they happen? The Venice Commission's advisory model works best when governments are willing to engage. CICIG's embedded model proved effective until political will collapsed. The OAS Democratic Charter was designed for dramatic constitutional ruptures. None of these mechanisms is optimized for the slow, incremental dismantling of democratic safeguards that characterizes most contemporary autocratization.

What happens when members disengage from plurilateral rule-of-law mechanisms? The withdrawal of the United States from *the Venice Commission* and the broader weakening of support for democracy-promotion institutions raise questions about the sustainability of the plurilateral architecture. Whether smaller coalitions of committed democracies can fill the gap remains an open question.

Cross-thematic Organizational Profiles

The Open Government Partnership

A Cross-Cutting Plurilateral Model

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a distinctive plurilateral initiative in the democracy space, as it acts less on a particular policy, but rather as a force multiplier for other initiatives. Its institutional design is relevant to nearly every domain discussed in Section 2 of this paper—from anti-corruption and fiscal transparency to civic space, digital governance, and electoral integrity.

Launched in 2011 by eight governments and an equal number of civil society leaders, OGP now includes more than 70 national governments and over 100 local governments.⁴⁸ What makes OGP structurally unusual is its co-creation model: member governments are required to develop national action plans in partnership with civil society, containing specific, time-bound reform commitments. An independent accountability mechanism—the Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM)—assesses both the ambition of commitments and progress toward implementation.⁴⁹

This design embeds multi-stakeholder governance into the initiative’s operating logic. Where most intergovernmental bodies treat civil society as observers or consultants, OGP makes civil society a co-equal partner in the formulation of national commitments. The Steering Committee that governs OGP is itself equally divided between government and civil society representatives. This structure reflects the premise that open governance is not something governments can deliver alone—it requires an active, organized civic counterpart.

OGP’s thematic breadth is notable. Member countries have made commitments spanning anti-corruption (including beneficial ownership registers, open contracting, and extractive-industry transparency), access to information, civic space, public participation, digital governance (including algorithmic accountability in Australia and New Zealand’s algorithm charter), gender and inclusion, and fiscal transparency.⁵⁰ Thirty-three countries have committed to beneficial ownership transparency through OGP action plans, in many cases going beyond what they pledged at the Summit for Democracy.⁵¹

The 2025 Vitoria-Gasteiz Declaration, adopted at the OGP Global Summit in Spain, framed these commitments in explicitly democratic terms, uniting governments and civil society around the protection of civic space and democratic governance.⁵²

OGP also demonstrates a model of national-local integration that is unusual among plurilateral bodies. Its “OGP Local” track includes over 100 subnational governments, from Austin (Texas) to Buenos Aires to Tbilisi, that undertake their own action plans and peer learning processes.⁵³ This multi-level architecture suggests a possible pathway for other plurilateral initiatives seeking to engage subnational actors.

OGP’s limitations are also instructive. Its commitments are voluntary; there is no enforcement mechanism beyond reputational pressure and the IRM’s public assessments. The initiative has struggled to prevent democratic backsliding in some member countries (notably, it placed Azerbaijan under review and eventually delisted it). And, like many plurilateral bodies, OGP has been affected by the withdrawal of U.S. foreign aid, which has reduced resources for open-government programming worldwide. These challenges underscore that even well-designed plurilateral models depend on sustained political commitment and diversified funding.



⁴⁸ The eight founding governments were Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. See: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>. To join OGP, countries must meet eligibility criteria across four dimensions: fiscal transparency, access to information, asset disclosure, and citizen engagement. See: OGP, “How We Work.”

⁴⁹ The IRM tracks the progress of all OGP members through independent assessments of action plan design and implementation.

See: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/irm/>.

⁵⁰ The OGP 2024–2025 Annual Report found that 40 percent of all commitments focused on public participation, with digital transformation, inclusion, and open data also popular. The report also noted that civic space, as measured by V-Dem, improved within OGP priority countries even as it worsened outside OGP. See: OGP Annual Report 2024–2025.

⁵¹ See: OGP, “Open Government Approaches in Summit for Democracy Commitments,” 2022.

⁵² The 2025 Vitoria-Gasteiz Declaration, adopted at the OGP Global Summit in Spain, committed governments and civil society to strengthening democracy, protecting civic space, and advancing open, accountable, and inclusive governance. See: OGP, September 2025.

⁵³ OGP Local includes cities and subnational jurisdictions from Austin (US) to Buenos Aires (Argentina) to Tbilisi (Georgia). The 2025 IRM Local Report documented real-world changes across local open government commitments from 2017–2024. See: OGP, “2025 IRM Local Report,” August 2025.

The OECD's democracy-relevant programs

A Reference Guide

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is not a democracy-promotion body per se, but its governance work spans multiple domains relevant to this paper. The OECD has 38 member countries. Many of its governance instruments extend to non-member adherents, and its accession process is widely considered to exert significant leverage on rule-of-law and governance reforms.⁵⁴ The following is a summary of its major programs with democratic governance implications.

Anti-Bribery Convention and Working Group on Bribery. The only binding international instrument criminalizing the bribery of foreign public officials, with 46 state parties. The Working Group conducts phased peer reviews described by Transparency International as the “gold standard” of anti-corruption monitoring. (See Section 2.3.)

Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes. With 175 member jurisdictions, the Global Forum is the world's largest tax transparency body. It conducts peer reviews of tax information exchange and has been instrumental in eroding offshore banking secrecy, with direct implications for combating illicit financial flows linked to corruption and state capture.

Public Integrity and Anti-Corruption. The OECD Recommendation on Public Integrity (2017) provides a framework for promoting integrity across public institutions. It covers conflict of interest, whistleblower protection, lobbying transparency, and the ethics of public officials—areas where plurilateral standard-setting has been limited outside the OECD.

Regulatory Policy and Governance. The OECD's regulatory policy work promotes evidence-based rulemaking, stakeholder consultation, and regulatory impact assessment. These procedural standards for transparent lawmaking are democratic governance tools, even if they are not typically framed in those terms.

Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The DAC sets standards for development cooperation, including governance-related criteria for aid allocation. Its peer reviews of donor countries' aid programs assess the integration of good governance, human rights, and anti-corruption principles into development practice.

OECD Accession Process. Countries seeking OECD membership must demonstrate alignment with OECD standards across a wide range of governance areas. The accession process has functioned as a powerful lever for rule-of-law and governance reforms in candidate countries—analogueous to the EU accession process but with a stronger economic-governance focus. Recent and ongoing accession discussions with countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, and Peru illustrate the process's continued relevance.

Taken together, these programs make the OECD one of the most consequential plurilateral actors in governance standard-setting, even though it is rarely discussed in explicitly democratic terms. Its primary orientation is economic, but the governance infrastructure it promotes—transparent regulation, independent audit, anti-corruption enforcement, public integrity—is foundational to functioning democracy.



⁵⁴See: <https://www.oecd.org/>

The Community of Democracies

Lessons from Two Decades of Democratic Plurilateralism

The Community of Democracies (CoD), founded in 2000 at the initiative of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronisław Geremek. Along with International IDEA, it represents the most ambitious attempt to date to build a standing plurilateral coalition organized explicitly around democratic governance as a shared norm. The Warsaw Declaration, signed by 106 countries, articulated 19 principles for democratic consolidation, and the CoD subsequently established a Permanent Secretariat in Warsaw, a Governing Council of member states, and working groups on civic space, youth participation, and democratic resilience. Unlike the issue-specific bodies examined elsewhere in this report — which address corruption, electoral integrity, or digital governance — the CoD was designed as a cross-cutting framework: a coalition of democracies that treats democratic governance itself as the organizing commitment.

The CoD's trajectory, however, illustrates several structural vulnerabilities that are relevant to the broader plurilateral architecture. First, the organization's heavy dependence on U.S. political and financial support left it exposed when that support diminished. Second, the CoD's evolution from a high-level diplomatic platform toward operational programming and capacity-building activities blurred its institutional identity, making it harder to articulate what the CoD offered that other bodies (OGP, International IDEA, regional democracy initiatives) did not. Third, and most consequentially for this report's argument about consolidation: when the United States launched the Summit for Democracy in 2021, it built a parallel structure of voluntary commitments and thematic cohorts rather than investing in or expanding the CoD's existing two-decade-old framework. The result was institutional duplication rather than reinforcement (a pattern this report recommends against). The CoD's experience suggests that plurilateral initiatives require not only strong founding commitments but deliberate attention to institutional distinctiveness, funding diversification, and the willingness of successor governments to build on what exists rather than start anew.

UCLG and the Subnational Dimension of Democratic Plurilateralism

Most plurilateral initiatives discussed in this paper operate at the level of national governments. But much of democracy is local. Citizens see the state directly through municipal services, local councils, regional regulations, and their courts. Moreover, independent localities are among the first targets of autocrats, as well as the proving grounds of future democrats. If plurilateralism is to support democracy, it must grapple with the subnational dimension.⁵⁵

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), founded in 2004 and headquartered in Barcelona, is the largest organization of subnational governments in the world.⁵⁶ Its membership encompasses over 240,000 towns, cities, regions, and metropolises and more than 175 national local government associations, spanning 140 countries and representing approximately five billion people. UCLG describes itself as the “united voice and world advocate of democratic local self-government,” and its governance structure—a World Council of elected local leaders, with seven regional sections—mirrors the federal, democratic principles it promotes.

UCLG’s relevance to this paper is twofold. First, it represents a form of plurilateralism that transcends the national-government level. Its members are not states but sub-state entities—cities, provinces, and their associations—which have their own democratic mandates, policy responsibilities, and accountability relationships with citizens. This makes UCLG a natural collaborator with bodies like OGP, the Venice Commission, or IDEA.

Second, UCLG facilitates the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, a coordination mechanism that gives subnational actors a collective voice in global policy processes, from the SDGs and climate negotiations to the New Urban Agenda. This infrastructure could be mobilized for democratic governance objectives—for instance, by connecting local anti-corruption efforts, open government initiatives, or citizen participation practices across borders.



⁵⁵ WG3 Members raised the importance of the inclusion of non-state actors and subnational governments. WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

⁵⁶ See: <https://uclg.org/>

2.2 Electoral Integrity



Elections are the most visible expression of democratic governance, and their integrity is a precondition for legitimate government. But electoral integrity is not reducible to a single event. It encompasses the full electoral cycle: the legal rules that determine who may vote and stand for office, the independence and capacity of the bodies that administer elections, the quality of the information environment in which campaigns take place, the fairness of election-day procedures, and—increasingly—the willingness of losing parties to accept the results.⁵⁷

The plurilateral landscape for electoral integrity is fragmented. Unlike the rule-of-law space, where the Venice Commission offers a relatively coherent advisory model, support for elections is spread across a constellation of bodies with different mandates, memberships, and funding models. Some focus on training electoral officials; others on observation; still others on knowledge-sharing or standard-setting. This section maps the major plurilateral initiatives, examines how they promote and respond to threats to electoral integrity, and identifies the gaps that remain.

The Plurilateral Landscape: Bodies Supporting Electoral Integrity

A-WEB: A Global Body with Limited Reach

The Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB), established in 2013 and headquartered in South Korea, is the largest international organization of electoral management bodies.⁵⁸ With 121 member electoral management bodies (EMBs) from 111 countries, it provides training programs, election visitor programs, and capacity-building assistance. Its ambition is universal coverage—a “big tent” in which EMBs from all types of regimes can participate and learn from one another.

A-WEB’s broad membership may limit its impact in promoting democracy, especially in difficult contexts. Because membership is open to all EMBs regardless of regime type, A-WEB’s roster includes bodies from Russia, Belarus, and other states where elections do not meet democratic standards.⁵⁹ This makes A-WEB more akin to a universal multilateral body than a plurilateral one in the sense used in this paper: a coalition organized around shared values. The body’s credibility has been particularly strained since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and its ability to set or enforce meaningful standards of electoral integrity is limited by the presence of members with no commitment to competitive elections.

⁵⁷This broader definition follows the consensus of the GCDM Working Group 3 discussion of February 5, 2026.

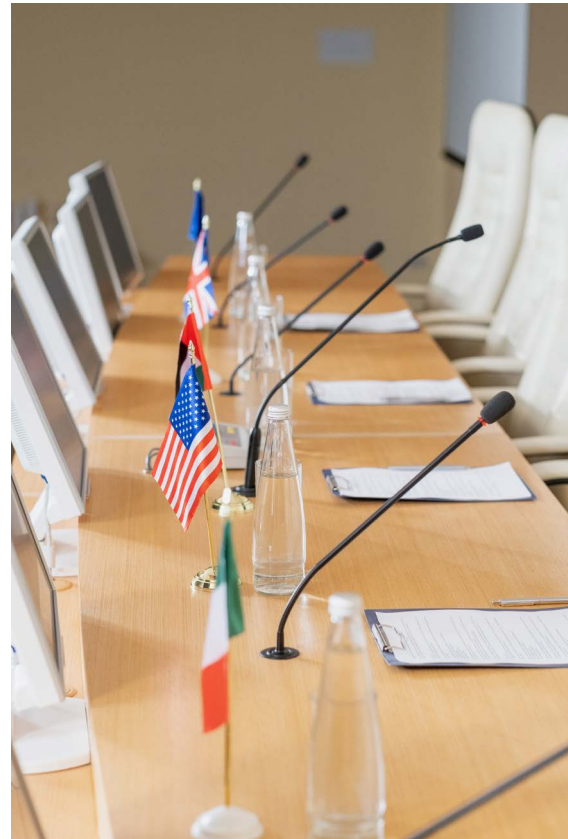
⁵⁸See: <https://www.aweb.org/>

⁵⁹GCDM WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

IDEA's Electoral Management Body Network and the Missing Global Forum

International IDEA maintains an informal network of EMBs drawn from its 35 member states.⁶⁰ This network does not encompass all democratic EMBs globally and it is not formalized yet. Working Group members pointed out that there is currently no *formal* global body of democratic electoral commissions. The closest approximation is IDEA's informal grouping, a network for information sharing, rather than a body with its own mandate, secretariat, or standards.

This gap is significant. EMBs are, by their nature, cautious institutions. They are wary of joining bodies that might appear to compromise their independence or expose them to “outside” political pressure. An expert interviewed in preparation of this report, argued that a formal association of EMBs would be difficult to establish precisely because election administrators are reluctant to be seen joining anything that could be perceived as politically aligned. Consequently, there is no plurilateral forum where democratic EMBs can collectively set standards, share operational knowledge, and present a unified counterweight to the growing phenomenon of authoritarian election management.



GNfSEI: A Post-Summit Initiative Under Pressure

The Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (GNfSEI) was created as a U.S. commitment at the first Summit for Democracy in 2021. It was designed as a network of electoral assistance providers—including bilateral funders (USAID, Global Affairs Canada, and the Swedish International Development Agency), non-governmental organizations (National Democratic Institute, the Carter Center), and intergovernmental bodies (IDEA, IFES)—that would serve as a space for exchanging knowledge and updating global electoral norms. The network illustrates a characteristic strength of plurilateral cooperation: it brought together actors of different types—governmental, intergovernmental, and civil society—under a shared commitment to democratic elections.

It also illustrates a vulnerability of narrow government buy-in. Non-US governments were primarily observers, rather than official members in a steering capacity. When USAID was closed under the Trump administration, the network's primary convener and funder disappeared overnight. IFES has since assumed leadership, and the steering committee collectively decided to preserve the platform.⁶¹

⁶⁰IDEA's rotating chair was held by India's Election Commission in 2025–2026—unusually, an EMB rather than a foreign ministry appointee. WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

⁶¹On the resource crisis noted that many of the organizations discussed in this section are funded primarily by states, and “a lot of that money is going away.” The closure of USAID has already disrupted the GNfSEI and other electoral assistance initiatives. WG3 Meeting: February 5, 2026.

BRIDGE and ACE: Training and Knowledge Infrastructure

Two older initiatives provide foundational infrastructure. BRIDGE, a modular professional development program established in 1999 by a partnership of five organizations, has delivered approximately 900 training courses in 93 countries.⁶² The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network provides an online knowledge portal maintained by a similar consortium.⁶³ Both support practitioner capacity but neither has an institutional certification function.

Standard-Setting and Election Certification

The most significant normative framework is the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, commemorated at the United Nations in 2005 with the endorsement of 22 organizations—a number that has since grown to 55.⁶⁴ Developed through a multi-year process led by NDI, the Carter Center, and the UN Electoral Assistance Division, the Declaration establishes common standards for credible observation: impartiality, comprehensive assessment, independence from host governments, and transparency in methodology. A companion declaration for domestic citizen observers was adopted in 2012.⁶⁵ A newer and more technical instrument, ISO/TS 54001:2019, adapts the ISO 9001 quality management framework to electoral administration, covering the entire cycle from voter registration through dispute resolution.⁶⁶ Adoption remains limited, but the standard offers a potentially important tool for professionalizing electoral management in newer democracies. Peru's 2021 elections illustrate both the value and limits of plurilateral observation.⁶⁷ Held amid deep polarization and a constitutional crisis, the second-round presidential contest was decided by a margin of roughly 50,000 votes. Fourteen to fifteen international missions observed the second round; the OAS deployed 40 observers across 18 provinces, and the EU fielded an expert mission.⁶⁸ Both concluded the election was conducted without serious

⁶²Bridge's five partner organizations are the Australian Electoral Commission, International IDEA, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD). The curriculum includes 16 modules grouped into four families. See: ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, "Electoral Management Training Courses."

⁶³The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (<https://aceproject.org>) is a web-based knowledge portal on electoral administration, created approximately 30 years ago. Its partners include the Carter Center, Elections Canada, Mexico's INE, International IDEA, IFES, UNDP, and UNEAD. The platform provides comparative data, an encyclopedia, and practitioner resources. See: <https://aceproject.org/>.

⁶⁴The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation was initiated by the National Democratic Institute and the UN Electoral Assistance Division in 2001, with The Carter Center as a key collaborator. Originally endorsed by 22 organizations, the Declaration has since grown to 55 endorsing organizations, including the African Union, the European Commission, the OAS, the OSCE/ODIHR, and the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Venice Commission is also an endorser. See: International IDEA, "Declaration of Principles."

⁶⁵The Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations, was developed through the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) and endorsed in 2012. It applies similar standards to domestic observer groups. See: <https://www.gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles/>.

⁶⁶ISO/TS 54001:2019, "Quality management systems — Particular requirements for the application of ISO 9001:2015 for electoral organizations at all levels of government," was developed by ISO Technical Committee 176, with the Organization of American States as a key promoter. The standard was originally published as ISO/TS 17582 in 2014 and revised in 2019. The OAS established the International Electoral Accreditation Body (IEAB) in 2014 to support certification. Jordan's Independent Election Commission became the first EMB in the Middle East and North Africa to achieve certification. See: OAS, "About ISO/TS 54001"; ECES, "ISO Certification."

⁶⁷Peru's 2021 general elections took place amid a long-standing political crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and extreme polarization. President Francisco Sagasti (a commissioner on the GCDM) oversaw the transition. In the second round, Pedro Castillo defeated Keiko Fujimori by approximately 50,000 votes. See: EU Election Expert Mission, "Final Report: Republic of Peru 2021"; OAS, Press Release E-065/21, June 2021.

irregularities.⁶⁹ The losing candidate mounted approximately 300 to 400 legal challenges, all adjudicated by electoral courts and found without merit. The case demonstrates that multiple independent international bodies reaching the same conclusion provides a robust evidentiary basis for legitimacy—but also reveals a growing gap between international validation and domestic trust. Despite uniform endorsement from international observers, public satisfaction with Peruvian democracy remains very low.⁷⁰ International observation can confirm procedural integrity but cannot by itself resolve the deeper crisis of democratic legitimacy that afflicts polarized societies.

A growing counter-phenomenon is the proliferation of “zombie election monitors”—international observation groups that validate flawed or rigged elections to create a veneer of legitimacy.⁷¹ Research has shown that between 2000 and 2020, the proportion of elections monitored by low-quality observers rose from roughly 23 to 39 percent, even as the number of credible monitoring organizations plateaued.⁷² These groups employ tactics including impersonating established organizations, deploying observers affiliated with authoritarian regional bodies, and “stacking” missions with sympathetic representatives. The effect is to create confusion that makes it harder for journalists, donors, and citizens to distinguish credible assessments from manufactured endorsements. A stark example emerged in Myanmar’s 2025 elections, which received no observation from established organizations but were monitored by a coalition including Russia, Belarus, China, and Nicaragua.⁷³

The Broader Electoral Ecosystem

The Working Group’s discussion emphasized that electoral integrity cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political and informational environment. Across the world, disinformation is distorting electoral campaigns and eroding public trust in outcomes. These challenges fall partly within the scope of Section 2.5, but they directly undermine the conditions under which elections can be considered free and fair. Perhaps the most consequential emerging challenge is the refusal by losing candidates to accept electoral outcomes—even when validated by credible observers. The seeds of delegitimization are often planted well before election day through disinformation about the electoral process. Plurilateral bodies and non-state actors, including the Club de Madrid, have played a role in “quiet diplomacy” to encourage pre-electoral commitments to accept results⁷⁴—but these efforts remain ad hoc and difficult to scale.

⁶⁹On gerrymandering, a WG3 member noted that in most countries, electoral districts are constitutionally defined and cannot be easily manipulated; the problem is particularly acute in the United States but less widespread globally. On disinformation’s impact on the electoral ecosystem, he emphasized that the distortion of electoral processes “doesn’t start at the ballot box—it starts a long time before.” WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

⁷⁰The EU Election Expert Mission similarly concluded that the elections were conducted with integrity and that the right to appeal was “abused as a strategy to delegitimise the election process.” See: EU EEM, “Final Report: Republic of Peru 2021,” p. 1.

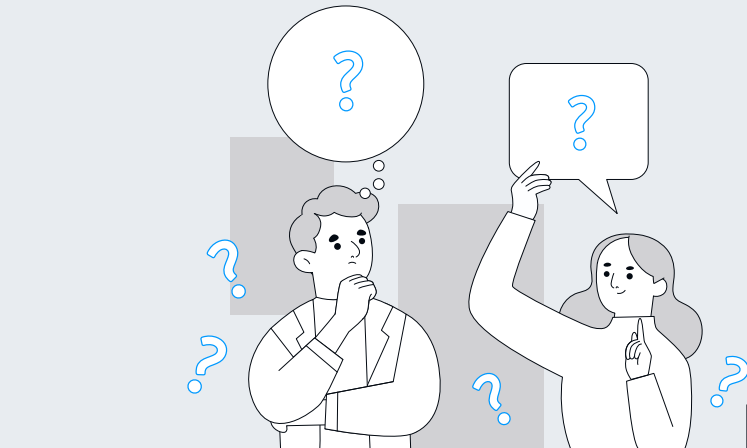
⁷¹As of 2025, more than 88 percent of Peruvians expressed dissatisfaction with how democracy functions. See: International IDEA, “Protecting Elections During the 2021 Peruvian General Elections,” citing IEP 2025 data.

⁷²The term “zombie election monitors” was coined by Christopher Walker and Alexander Cooley in a 2013 article in *Foreign Policy*. It refers to international observation groups that are neither willing nor able to report on election fraud, and that instead validate flawed elections to create a veneer of legitimacy. The phenomenon has been documented in Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Cameroon, Russia, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and many other countries. See: Walker and Cooley, “The Authoritarian Threat: The Hijacking of ‘Soft Power,’” *Journal of Democracy*, 2015; Bush, Cottiero, and Prather, “Zombies Ahead: Explaining the Rise of Low-Quality Election Monitoring,” *Review of International Organizations*, 2024.

⁷³See: Bush, Cottiero, and Prather, “Zombies Ahead,” *Review of International Organizations*, 2024.

⁷⁴Myanmar’s 2025 elections under the military junta received no observation missions from the United Nations or established regional organizations. However, a coalition including Russia, Belarus, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Nicaragua sent official observers. See: WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

⁷⁵See WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

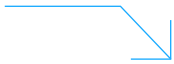


Open Questions

Is there a need for a narrower body of democratic electoral management bodies? A-WEB's universal membership dilutes its ability to set democratic standards. IDEA's informal network may or may not be scaled or formalized. EMBs are wary of joining bodies that might compromise their independence. How to reconcile these tensions is a central design question.

How can international architecture help credentialing credible from illegitimate election observation? The Declaration of Principles provides a normative framework, but signing is voluntary. The rise of zombie monitors suggests that stronger mechanisms—perhaps a certification system building on the BRIDGE or ISO frameworks—could protect the integrity of international observation.

How should plurilateral initiatives address the rules and environment for elections such as gerrymandering, disinformation and the acceptance of results? Most existing bodies focus on electoral administration and observation. The growing challenges of polarization and refusal to accept outcomes suggest a need for efforts extending beyond traditional electoral assistance—requiring cooperation between electoral bodies, media regulators, technology companies, and civil society.



2.3 Anti-Corruption

Corruption is both a cause and a consequence of democratic decline. When public officials can steal with impunity, institutions lose legitimacy; when institutions are weak, corruption flourishes. This corruption is transnational, usually by design.⁷⁵

This cross-jurisdictional character makes anti-corruption a domain where plurilateral cooperation has a natural comparative advantage. No single country can unilaterally address bribery paid by its companies abroad, recover assets hidden in foreign bank accounts, or shut down anonymous corporate structures registered in another jurisdiction. Effective action requires coordination among willing states. This is precisely the kind of coalition that plurilateral initiatives are designed to enable. Further, responsibility and ability to counter corruption is not spread evenly. Certain countries play an outsize role in the international financial and payments system. Others are major transit points, while another group is an attractive place to spend laundered money.

This section examines the major plurilateral anti-corruption mechanisms, organized by function: enforcement and standard-setting (FATF, OECD Anti-Bribery Convention), transparency and accountability (EITI, beneficial ownership initiatives, open contracting), and asset recovery (StAR).

Enforcement and Standard-Setting

FATF: Compliance with Consequences

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is arguably the most consequential plurilateral body in the financial governance space, and its institutional design offers important lessons for democracy-adjacent plurilateralism. Established at the 1989 G7 Summit in Paris to combat money laundering, it has since expanded its mandate to cover terrorist financing and the financing of weapons proliferation.⁷⁶

The FATF's power lies in its listing mechanism. The body maintains two public lists: a “black list” of jurisdictions with fundamental deficiencies in their anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorist-financing (AML/CFT) regimes, and a “grey list” of jurisdictions under increased monitoring that have committed to address identified weaknesses within agreed timeframes. Placement on either list carries real economic consequences: financial institutions worldwide

⁷⁵Cross-border corruption is identified in the GCDM WG3 Thematic Synthesis as a domain particularly well-suited to plurilateral action, because the problem inherently spans jurisdictions: kleptocrats steal domestically but hide assets abroad; bribes are paid by companies headquartered in one country to officials in another; and the financial infrastructure that facilitates corruption—shell companies, offshore accounts, opaque trusts—is global by design.

⁷⁶As of 2025, FATF has 38 full member jurisdictions and two regional organizations (the European Commission and the Gulf Co-operation Council). Through nine FATF-style regional bodies (FSRBs), the FATF network encompasses over 200 jurisdictions. See: <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/>.

apply enhanced due diligence to transactions in vovlinglisted jurisdictions, effectively raising the cost of doing business and deterring foreign investment. This creates powerful incentives for listed countries to reform.⁷⁷

FATF's institutional design is distinctive in several respects. Although it has only 38 full members, its reach is near-universal through a network of nine regional bodies (FATF-style Regional Bodies, or FSRBs) covering over 200 jurisdictions. This hub-and-spoke architecture allows a relatively small core group to set standards that are then transmitted and enforced globally—a model that other plurilateral initiatives might study. FATF's rotating presidency (currently held by Mexico) and its regular plenary sessions three times per year provide a rhythm of review and accountability.

The body is not without its critics. The listing mechanism has been described as coercive, particularly toward smaller countries that lack the administrative capacity to implement complex regulatory frameworks. Research has suggested that the actual recovery rate of criminal proceeds remains extremely low, however. Some suggest the costs of compliance outweigh benefits.⁷⁸ There are also concerns about governance: FATF's membership is dominated by high-income countries, and its standards reflect priorities and regulatory approaches that may not always be appropriate for developing economies.⁷⁹

For the purposes of this paper, FATF is significant because it demonstrates that a plurilateral body can achieve near-universal behavioral change among its members through a combination of standard-setting, peer review, and material consequences for non-compliance. The question for democracy-focused plurilateralism is whether any version of this model could be adapted to address democratic governance deficits, or whether the financial leverage that gives FATF its power is unique to its domain.

The OECD Anti-Bribery Convention: Criminalizing the Supply Side

Public bribery is the act of offering or giving bribes to officials for favors or better treatment. The OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials, signed in 1997 and in force since 1999, is the only binding international instrument that focuses on the “supply side” of bribery.⁸⁰ With 46 state parties, including all OECD members plus several non-member countries, the Convention covers the jurisdictions where most of the world's largest multinational corporations are headquartered.

⁷⁷As of February 2026, the FATF black list (formally “Call for Action”) includes Iran, Myanmar, and North Korea. The grey list (“Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring”) included 22 countries. Since 2000, the FATF has reviewed 139 countries and publicly identified 114; of these, 86 have since made reforms sufficient to be removed. See: FATF, “Black and Grey Lists,” updated February 2026.

⁷⁸In a widely cited 2020 paper, Ronald Pol estimated that less than 1 percent of criminal profits are actually seized, and that the costs of AML/CFT compliance exceed the value recovered by a factor of more than 100. See: Ronald Pol, “Anti-money laundering: The world's least effective policy experiment?,” Policy Design and Practice 3, no. 1 (2020): 73–94.

⁷⁹Russia's participation in the FATF Working Group on Bribery was suspended in April 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine, though it remains technically a party to the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention (next section) and subject to monitoring. See: OECD, “Anti-Bribery Convention Country Monitoring Dashboard.”

⁸⁰The OECD Anti-Bribery Convention was signed on December 17, 1997 and entered into force on February 15, 1999. As of 2025, it has 46 state parties: all 38 OECD members plus Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Croatia, Peru, Romania, the Russian Federation, and South Africa. OECD membership requires accession to the Convention. See: OECD, “Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions.”

The Convention's enforcement architecture is built around the Working Group on Bribery, which conducts a rigorous, multi-phase peer review of each party's implementation and enforcement efforts. Transparency International has described this mechanism as the "gold standard" of anti-corruption monitoring.⁸¹ A critical design feature is the "consensus minus one" rule: a country under evaluation cannot veto the findings of its own review, preventing the kind of self-protective blocking that weakens review mechanisms in other international bodies.⁸²

The Convention's influence can be seen in concrete legislative outcomes. The UK Bribery Act 2010—one of the most comprehensive anti-bribery statutes in the world—was passed in significant part because of sustained pressure from the Working Group, which had repeatedly criticized the UK's inadequate enforcement.⁸³ Research has found that firms subject to the Convention are less likely to engage in bribery than those headquartered in non-member states.⁸⁴

Standard-setting and transboundary coordination

EITI: Multi-Stakeholder Governance in the Extractive Sector

A country which is highly dependent on oil, gas, and mining for its revenue is more likely to suffer from under-development, referred to as the resource curse.⁸⁵

The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) aims to short-circuit this pattern by ensuring that citizens can see how much money their government is taking in and where that money is going. EITI's approach is quite different from the enforcement-driven models of FATF and the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention.⁸⁶

EITI's institutional design is notable for its multi-stakeholder governance. At the international level, the EITI Board includes representatives from implementing governments, extractive companies, civil society organizations, financial institutions, and international organizations. At the country level, each of the 55 implementing countries establishes a national multi-stakeholder group (MSG) comprising government, industry, and civil society representatives, which oversees national implementation. This tripartite structure—government, private sector, civil society—distinguishes EITI from purely intergovernmental bodies and embeds accountability mechanisms into the initiative's DNA.⁸⁷

⁸¹Transparency International, "OECD Anti-Bribery Convention at 25: Time to Step Up Enforcement," April 2024.

⁸²See: OECD, "Working Group on Bribery."

⁸³See: Transparency International, "OECD Anti-Bribery Convention at 25," 2024.

⁸⁴A 2017 study found that after OECD monitoring, firms from Convention parties reported significantly less bribery than firms from non-parties in Vietnam. (Jensen, Nathan M., and Edmund J. Malesky, "Nonstate Actors and Compliance with International Agreements: An Empirical Analysis of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention," *International Organization* 72(1), 2018.) However, a 2021 study found evidence of "displacement"—firms in member states shifting bribery to intermediaries in non-member countries. Samuel Brazys, Andreas Kotsadam, *Sunshine or Curse? Foreign Direct Investment, the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, and Individual Corruption Experiences in Africa*, *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 64, Issue 4, December 2020, Pages 956–967, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa072>

⁸⁵https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/nrgi_Resource-Curse.pdf

⁸⁶EITI was launched in September 2002 by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It was formally established at a conference in London in 2003. As of 2025, the EITI Standard is implemented in 55 countries, with 121 EMBs and 68 supporting companies and financial institutions. See: <https://eiti.org/>

⁸⁷The EITI Board includes representatives from governments, extractive companies, civil society organizations, financial institutions, and international organizations, and is chaired by Helen Clark (former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former UNDP Administrator). At the country level, each implementing country establishes a multi-stakeholder group (MSG) of government, company, and civil society representatives to oversee national implementation. See: EITI, "Our Mission."

The EITI Standard has expanded considerably since its founding. Originally focused on the reconciliation of payments between companies and governments, it now requires disclosure across the entire extractive value chain.⁸⁸ Every implementing country undergoes a “Validation” process at least every three years, assessing compliance with the standard and promoting dialogue at the country level.

The evidence on EITI’s impact is mixed but largely encouraging. A 2025 study found that EITI membership and validation significantly increases foreign direct investment by approximately 50 percent, suggesting that the transparency signal has real economic value.⁸⁹ In Nigeria, EITI recommendations contributed to major oil-sector reforms. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, EITI scrutiny of a major mining deal led to a renegotiated contract worth an additional four billion dollars in infrastructure investment.⁹⁰

Yet EITI also demonstrates the limits of transparency without enforcement. While membership may help reduce state capture, it cannot guarantee democratic practice. Azerbaijan, one of EITI’s earliest pilot countries, has detained a former EITI board member and transparency advocate, Gubad Ibadoghlu, since 2023. This is a stark reminder that a government can comply with disclosure requirements while simultaneously repressing the civil society actors who would use that data to demand accountability.⁹¹ The United States, once a strong EITI supporter, withdrew from participation in 2017. These tensions raise an enduring question for transparency-focused plurilateralism: does disclosure without enforcement merely create the appearance of accountability? How can transparency be more closely tied to markets?

Data Standards: Beneficial Ownership and Open Contracting

Two newer plurilateral transparency efforts deserve attention, both because they address the infrastructure of corruption and because they illustrate how norms can be advanced simultaneously through multiple institutional channels.

Beneficial ownership transparency—the requirement to disclose the real, natural persons who ultimately own or control legal entities—has emerged as a convergence point across several plurilateral forums. The UK, for example, was the first G20 country to create a public register of company beneficial ownership, and has since extended the requirement to overseas territories.⁹²

The convergence of these demands across multiple bodies is itself significant. It suggests that plurilateral initiatives can create a kind of “norm cascade”: when several organizations simultaneously push in

the same direction, the political cost of resistance rises and the perception of an emerging global standard becomes self-reinforcing. Whether this convergence is the product of deliberate coordination or coincidence matters less than the fact that it is happening.

Open contracting addresses a different but complementary problem. Public procurement accounts for roughly one-third of government spending worldwide and is widely recognized as the government activity most vulnerable to corruption.⁹³ The Open Contracting Partnership (OCP) has developed the Open Contracting Data Standard (OCDS), adopted by over 50 governments, which structures procurement data from planning through contract implementation in a machine-readable format. By making the full contracting cycle visible—who bids, who wins, at what price, and whether the contracted goods or services are actually delivered—open contracting enables scrutiny by journalists, civil society, and competing firms.

⁸⁸The EITI Standard was expanded in 2013 to require disclosure of information throughout the extractive value chain, including licensing, contracts, production data, beneficial ownership of extractive companies, and subnational transfers. Prior to 2013, the standard focused primarily on revenue payments. See: Natural Resource Governance Institute “The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative,” NRG Reader, March 2015.

⁸⁹See: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301420725000637?>

⁹⁰See: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2214790X16301423>

⁹¹The case of Gubad Ibadoghlu, a former EITI board member and transparency advocate detained in Azerbaijan since July 2023, illustrates the tension between EITI membership and actual practice. EITI Chair Helen Clark has called for his immediate release. Azerbaijan was one of EITI’s earliest pilot countries. See: EITI LinkedIn, 2024.

⁹²Beneficial ownership transparency—the disclosure of the real, natural persons who ultimately own or control legal entities—has emerged as a priority across multiple plurilateral forums. The EITI Standard now requires disclosure of beneficial owners of extractive companies. FATF Recommendation 24 requires countries to ensure that competent authorities have access to adequate, accurate, and up-to-date beneficial ownership information. The EU Anti-Money Laundering Directives have progressively strengthened beneficial ownership requirements. Several OGP member countries have committed to establishing public beneficial ownership registers through their national action plans. See: FATF Recommendations; EITI Standard 2023.

⁹³See: <https://www.open-contracting.org/>.

OCP is not an intergovernmental body in the traditional sense; it is a non-profit that works with governments, businesses, and civil society to promote procurement transparency. But it operates within the plurilateral ecosystem: its standards are promoted through OGP national action plans, referenced by OECD procurement guidelines, and adopted by multilateral development banks as a condition of lending. This illustrates how a technically focused civil society initiative can punch above its weight by embedding its standards in the commitments of more powerful bodies.

The lesson to take away from these two initiatives is that rather than different efforts crowding one another out, they in fact crowd in—the convergence of reporting standards, data standards, and platforms for action and evaluation have *increased* rather than *decreased* policy reform in areas that are critical to preventing state capture.

Asset Recovery and Control

Asset recovery is the process of tracing, freezing, and returning assets stolen through corruption and kleptocracy. Two contrasting efforts show differing approaches to addressing the issue of assets, one in the corruption space and the other in a related international security.

The Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR), a partnership between the World Bank and UNODC established in 2007, provides technical assistance and advocacy in this area.⁹⁴ The fundamental challenge is structural: stolen assets flow from countries with weaker institutions to financial centers in countries with stronger ones, and recovery requires the active cooperation of receiving jurisdictions—cooperation that is often slow, expensive, and politically fraught. Its impact is most visible in the professionalization of the field. StAR has trained thousands of practitioners and published definitive handbooks on non-conviction based forfeiture and financial disclosure.⁹⁵

Progress toward results has been slower. StAR estimates that \$20 to \$40 billion is lost to developing countries annually through corruption and transnational money laundering. Yet only a fraction of these funds is successfully repatriated. Experts point to "operational barriers" such as onerous Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) requirements, banking secrecy laws in financial centers, and a lack of political will in both origin and destination jurisdictions.⁹⁶ Furthermore, recent data indicates that as of 2025, only 15% of collected cases involved formal agreements for the final disposal of property.⁹⁷

Sanctions Coordination: An Emerging Plurilateral Enforcement Model

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine is the direct result of kleptocracy run amok—extreme concentration of power, with few checks and balances. The response to the invasion, however, shows that, through plurilateral arrangements like the G7, countries can successfully freeze troubled assets.

The Russian Elites, Proxies, and Oligarchs (REPO) Task Force, comprising the G7 nations, Australia, and the European Commission, has blocked or frozen more than \$58 billion in assets belonging to sanctioned Russian individuals and entities, tracked sanctioned assets across jurisdictions, and coordinated enforcement actions against sanctions evasion.⁹⁸

The REPO Task Force is not an anti-corruption body officially. It enforces economic sanctions imposed in response to aggression. It is relevant for three reasons, however. First, it shows that quick, coordinated, cross-jurisdictional asset action is feasible when the political will exists. (Asset recovery does not need to be as slow as it is.) Second, the infrastructure built for sanctions enforcement could be repurposed or adapted for anti-corruption enforcement. Third, the Task Force

⁹⁴<https://www.unodc.org/corruption/en/learn/what-is-uncac/asset-recovery.html>

⁹⁵<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/a764380d-22cf-50bd-9dbb-30669f340247>

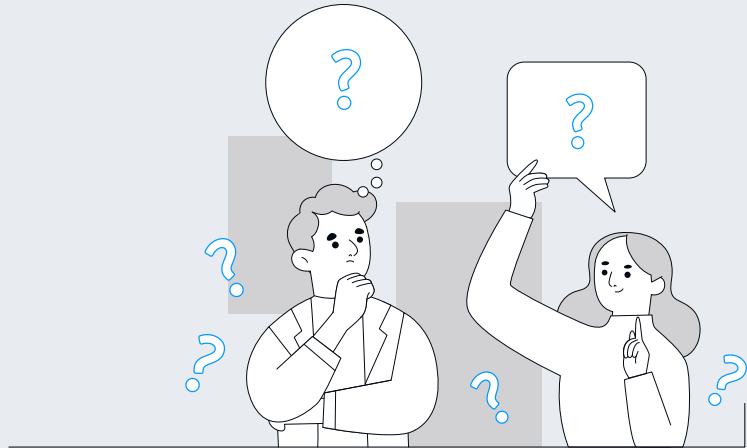
⁹⁶https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/StAR/StAR_Publication_-_Barriers_to_Asset_Recovery.pdf

⁹⁷https://track.unodc.org/track/uploads/res/track/resourcehub/returning_assets_to_advance_development_priorities_partnering_with_multilateral_actors.html/Addis4_Returning_assets_to_advance_development_priorities_partnering_with_multilateral_actors.pdf

⁹⁸U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Joint Statement from the REPO Task Force," March 2023. REPO members include Australia, Canada, the European Commission, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Task Force has coordinated with the European Commission's Freeze and Seize Task Force.

has pioneered the forfeiture and transfer of sanctioned assets as foreign assistance, establishing a legal and operational precedent that asset-recovery advocates have sought for years.⁹⁹

The broader G7 coordination on Russian sovereign assets—including the decision to channel the extraordinary revenues from immobilized Russian central bank assets to Ukraine, amounting to approximately €20 billion through the EU's Extraordinary Revenue Acceleration mechanism by early 2025—represents a further innovation.¹⁰⁰ Whether sanctions coordination will prove to be a one-off response to an extraordinary geopolitical crisis or a template for broader enforcement cooperation remains to be seen.



Open Questions and Gaps

Can the FATF model be adapted to democratic governance?

FATF's effectiveness rests on the financial system's sensitivity to reputation and risk. Democratic governance has no equivalent lever. The analogy is suggestive but may be inherently limited.

Is transparency sufficient without enforcement? EITI and open contracting demonstrate that transparency can create conditions for accountability, but the Azerbaijan case shows that disclosure without a functioning accountability ecosystem—independent media, active civil society, an independent judiciary—may amount to accountability theater.

How should plurilateral anti-corruption efforts relate to UNCAC? The UN Convention Against Corruption has near-universal ratification but a weak review mechanism. Plurilateral bodies like FATF and the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention have stronger enforcement but narrower membership. The relationship between these mechanisms deserves further analysis.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹The REPO Task Force effected the first forfeiture of assets of a sanctioned Russian individual, leading to the transfer of \$5.4 million in funds as foreign assistance to Ukraine—a legal precedent for converting frozen assets into development or reconstruction resources. See: U.S. Department of the Treasury, REPO Task Force joint statements, 2023–2024.

¹⁰⁰https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/hr/ip_25_827

¹⁰¹The relationship between the various plurilateral anti-corruption mechanisms and the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), which is the only universal anti-corruption treaty. UNCAC's Conference of the States Parties has adopted resolutions on political finance, asset recovery, and beneficial ownership that may complement or overlap with the plurilateral initiatives discussed here.

2.4 Civil Rights and Equality

Democracy is not only a set of institutions. It is also a set of rights to speak, to associate, to access information, to participate in public life without fear of reprisal. When these rights are curtailed, the institutional machinery of elections and legislatures continues to operate, but the substance of democratic life drains away. The global trend is troubling: civic space has been shrinking in a majority of countries for over a decade, press freedom is under assault both from authoritarian regimes and from the economic collapse of independent media, and digital technologies have created new vectors for surveillance, censorship, and harassment.¹⁰²

Plurilateral responses to these challenges are relatively new and still evolving. Unlike the anti-corruption space, where bodies like FATF and the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention have decades of institutional history, the plurilateral architecture for civil rights and civic space is younger, lighter in institutional weight, and more dependent on diplomatic coordination than on binding standards or enforcement mechanisms, distinguishing it significantly from the UN and regional human rights architecture. This section examines three initiatives—the Freedom Online Coalition, the Media Freedom Coalition, and the OECD Observatory of Civic Space—that represent different approaches to protecting civil and political rights through plurilateral cooperation.

Civil rights and liberties

The Freedom Online Coalition: Digital Rights as Democratic Rights

The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC), with 41 governments committed to protecting human rights online. Its premise is that the rights people enjoy offline—expression, association, assembly, privacy—must also be protected in digital spaces. Its institutional design is deliberately lightweight: administrative functions are managed by Global Partners Digital, a UK-based civil society organization.¹⁰³ Governance revolves around a rotating chair, a Steering Committee that provides continuity, and an annual Program of Action. An Advisory Network of civil society, academic, and private-sector experts engages with member governments through roundtable meetings and quarterly coordination sessions.¹⁰⁴

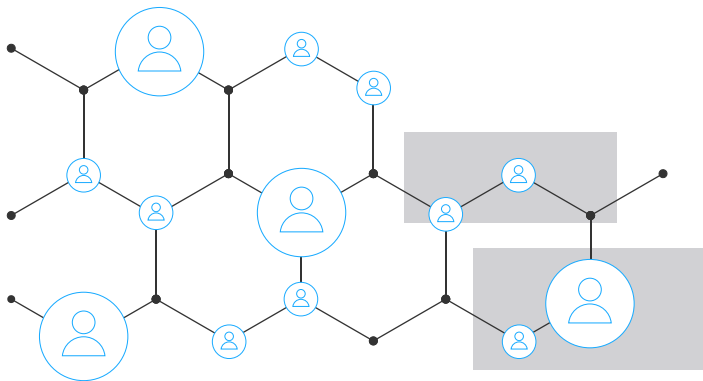
The FOC operates through information-sharing among members, diplomatic coordination (including joint positions and strategies), and engagement with multilateral processes such as the UN Human Rights Council and the International Telecommunication Union. It has established issue-specific task forces on internet shutdowns, artificial intelligence and human rights, and trustworthy information online.¹⁰⁵ Its 2020 Joint Statement on the Spread of Disinformation Online was among the first plurilateral instruments to address

¹⁰²For analysis on current techniques for repression and democracy advocacy, see the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's evolving, "Digital Democracy Network": <https://carnegieendowment.org/projects/digital-democracy-network>

¹⁰³As of December 2024, FoC had 41 full members and one observer (Taiwan). The 2026 chair is Switzerland. Administrative functions are managed by Global Partners Digital, a UK-based organization. See: <https://freedomonlinecoalition.com/>; Wikipedia, "Freedom Online Coalition."

¹⁰⁴The FOC's Advisory Network comprises non-governmental leaders in civil society, academia, and the private sector who engage with FOC governments through roundtable meetings and quarterly Strategy and Coordination meetings. This multi-stakeholder dimension is built into the FOC's operating model, though the Advisory Network is consultative rather than co-equal (unlike, for example, OGP's civil society co-chair model). See: FOC Fact Sheet, 2024.

¹⁰⁵The FOC's sub-entities as of 2024 included the Task Force on Internet Shutdowns, the Task Force on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, and the Task Force on Trustworthy Information Online. These task forces provide multistakeholder platforms for focused, issue-based engagement. See: FOC Fact Sheet, 2024.



disinformation from a human-rights perspective.¹⁰⁶ In 2022, the coalition issued its first consensus condemnation of a specific government—Iran—for repeated internet shutdowns.¹⁰⁷ More recently, the FOC has turned its attention to artificial intelligence, bridging the civil-rights and technology-governance domains discussed in Section 2.5, “Digital and AI.”¹⁰⁸

The FOC’s strengths and limitations are characteristic of the lighter end of the plurilateral spectrum. It provides a valuable coordination mechanism for like-minded governments, and its engagement with civil society adds analytical depth. But it has no enforcement tools, no compliance mechanism, and no binding standards. Its influence depends on the diplomatic weight its members bring to other forums and on the willingness of individual governments to translate FOC positions into national policy.

Other initiatives intersect with the FOC’s mandate. The International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM), proposed as a multilateral mechanism to support independent journalism in low- and middle-income countries, addresses the economic sustainability of the media ecosystem that the MFC’s diplomatic advocacy aims to protect. The Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), a network of media development organizations, provides a platform for coordination among non-governmental actors working on media freedom and information access. Neither is a plurilateral body in the sense used in this report, but both illustrate the broader ecosystem within which the FOC and MFC operate.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶The FOC’s 2020 Joint Statement on the Spread of Disinformation Online was a normative instrument outlining ways to address disinformation and counter its use in undermining human rights, law, and democracy. It was one of the first plurilateral statements specifically addressing the disinformation challenge. See: Wikipedia, “Freedom Online Coalition.”

¹⁰⁷The FOC’s condemnation of Iran’s internet shutdowns was described by Secretary Blinken as “the first time in the group’s history that we’ve publicly issued a consensus statement condemning a government for restricting Internet freedom.” See: U.S. Department of State, “Freedom Online Coalition,” archived content, 2023.

¹⁰⁸The FOC straddles both civil liberties and digital governance domains because internet freedom is simultaneously a civil liberties question and a technology governance question.

¹⁰⁹On IFPIM, see the recommendations of the International Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE). On GFMD, see: <https://gfmd.info/>. Enhancing the relationship between government-led plurilateral bodies (FOC, MFC) and these non-governmental platforms is itself an area where coordination could yield returns.

The Media Freedom Coalition: Defending Press Freedom Through Diplomatic Pressure

The Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), formed in 2019, now comprises 51 member countries and is led by two rotating co-chairs.¹¹⁰ Unlike the FOC, which focuses on the digital dimension of rights, the MFC addresses the protection of journalists and independent media from state persecution, violence, and legal intimidation. Its primary tools are collective diplomatic statements, coordinated embassy-level advocacy in countries where press freedom is under threat, and support for legal and institutional reforms.

The MFC's embassy networks have engaged directly in specific cases. In the DRC, public statements and trial monitoring contributed to the release of journalist Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala in 2024 after six months of detention.¹¹¹ The coalition has also addressed systemic threats, including a 2023 statement on transnational repression of journalists that Freedom House described as establishing a foundation for further action.¹¹² A High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom has published reports on safe refuge for journalists and advised states on media-freedom legislation.¹¹³

A notable design feature—and potential weakness—is that the MFC is purely intergovernmental. Journalists and media organizations engage through a Consultative Network that is advisory rather than structural.¹¹⁴ This gives its statements the weight of state commitment but may limit its legitimacy with the communities it aims to serve. The growing convergence between the MFC and FOC, including a 2025 joint statement on AI and journalism,¹¹⁵ suggests the plurilateral civil-rights architecture is beginning to develop cross-cutting connections.

The OECD Observatory of Civic Space: Data-Driven Standard-Setting

The OECD Observatory of Civic Space, established in 2019, brings the organization's characteristic tools—comparative data, peer review, and standards-based guidance—to civic freedoms. Its 2022 flagship report compiled data from 52 countries across four dimensions: civic freedoms, the enabling environment for civil society, the public-interest information ecosystem, and inclusion and non-discrimination.¹¹⁶

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) *Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation (2021)* complements this work with standards for protecting civic space in the context of international development.¹¹⁷ The Observatory's contribution is distinctive because it creates a shared evidence base for both national reform and international advocacy. Its limitation is reach: the most severe restrictions on civic space occur in countries outside OECD membership.

¹¹⁰The Media Freedom Coalition was formed in July 2019 at the Global Conference for Media Freedom, co-hosted by the United Kingdom and Canada. As of 2025, it has 51 member countries. It is led by two rotating co-chairs (most recently Germany and Finland with the UK as a new co-chair in 2025), with an Executive Group of approximately eight countries providing strategic direction. See: <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/>; GOV.UK, "Media Freedom Coalition: An Overview."

¹¹¹The MFC's High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom has published reports on safe refuge for journalists and reviewed draft legislation for member and non-member states. In DR Congo, a journalist was released from detention in 2024 following MFC public statements and trial monitoring by member-country embassies. See: MFC, "What's the Impact?," updated 2025.

¹¹²The MFC's 2023 statement on transnational repression of journalists helped establish standards around this emerging threat. Freedom House noted that endorsement of the statement was "a good foundation for further efforts to combat the phenomenon." The FOC subsequently endorsed the statement as well. See: MFC, "What's the Impact?," 2025.

¹¹³The Afghanistan and Sudan examples illustrate the MFC's willingness to address membership discipline. Both countries' memberships were addressed by the co-chairs following regime changes and severe deterioration in media freedom. See: MFC co-chairs' statements, 2022 (Afghanistan) and 2023 (Sudan).

¹¹⁴As observed in the WG3 discussion, the MFC "doesn't have civil society or journalists as members as it is primarily government-to-government discussions." The MFC does engage with a Consultative Network of press freedom organizations (including Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists, and others), but this engagement is advisory rather than structural. See: WG3 Meeting, February 5, 2026.

¹¹⁵In the 2025 joint statement for World Press Freedom Day, the MFC and FOC together addressed the impact of AI on press freedom, calling on governments to develop and use AI consistently with human rights obligations. This cross-coalition coordination illustrates growing convergence among plurilateral civil-rights bodies. See: MFC/FOC Joint Statement, May 2025.

¹¹⁶The Observatory of Civic Space is in the OECD's Public Governance Directorate. It builds on almost two decades of OECD work on open government. See: OECD, "Civic Space," <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/civic-space.htm>. The OECD's civic space framework comprises four dimensions: civic freedoms (expression, assembly, association, privacy), the enabling environment for civil society organizations, the public-interest information ecosystem, and inclusion and non-discrimination. As of 2020, 75 percent of OECD countries with data available had adopted strategies to enhance the enabling environment for CSOs. See: OECD, "Government at a Glance 2025," Section 6.4.

¹¹⁷The DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance (2021) includes pillars on protecting civic space and supporting civil society engagement. As the five-year mark of its adoption approaches in July 2026, the DAC is preparing a progress report. See: OECD, "Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space," 2025.

Equality

"Equality before the law" is the principle that all persons are entitled to equal protection and equal treatment by public institutions, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other status. This is a procedural and legal concept, not a claim about economic redistribution. It matters for democracy because where the law treats categories of citizens differently—whether through discriminatory statutes, selective enforcement, or the absence of legal protections—those citizens cannot participate in public life on equal terms. The plurilateral landscape for equality is thinner than for other domains examined in this report, but several initiatives deserve attention.

The Equal Rights Coalition: Intergovernmental Advocacy for LGBTQ+ Rights

The Equal Rights Coalition (ERC), established in 2016 at the Global LGBTIQ Human Rights Conference in Montevideo, is an intergovernmental coalition of more than 40 governments committed to protecting the human rights of LGBTQ+ persons.¹¹⁸ Co-chaired by Colombia and Spain for the 2024–2026 period, the ERC operates through thematic working groups on international diplomacy, inclusive legislation, and data collection. Its primary tools are collective diplomatic statements, coordinated advocacy in multilateral forums, and peer learning among member governments on legislative reform.

The ERC illustrates a common tension in rights-focused plurilateral bodies. Its intergovernmental structure gives its statements the weight of state commitment. Its thematic working groups provide practical forums for policy exchange. But LGBTQ+ persons and civil society organizations participate through consultative mechanisms rather than formal governance roles.



The coalition also faces a challenge common to rights-focused initiatives regarding membership. Its members are predominantly from Europe, the Americas, and Oceania. Expanding membership in regions where LGBTQ+ rights are most contested (sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia) is important and difficult. The ERC's emphasis on dialogue and capacity-building may be well-suited to slow expansion (as opposed to compliance or measurement), but would not be without controversy.

Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: Linking Rights to Development

The Pathfinders initiative, convened by 46 governments and working with over 100 partners, is organized around the implementation of SDG 16—peace, justice, and inclusive institutions.¹¹⁹ Hosted by the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, it works through three pillars: halving global violence, justice for all, and reducing inequality and exclusion.¹²⁰ Pathfinders

¹¹⁸The ERC's founding members included the Netherlands, Uruguay, and other early advocates. Its strategic plan (2021–2026) sets priorities across legislation, international diplomacy, and inclusive development. See: <https://equalrightscoalition.org/>.

¹¹⁹The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies was established in 2016. Its founding document is the Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. See: <https://www.sdg16.plus/about/>.

¹²⁰Pathfinders' three pillars each have flagship reports: the Halving Global Violence Task Force report (2024), the Task Force on Justice report Justice for All (2019), and the inequality flagship Delivering Equality and Inclusion. The Justice Financing Framework (2025) provides guidance on budgeting for people-centered justice, drawing on experience from health and education financing. A February 2026 policy brief, "Closing the Justice Gap: How Open and People-Centered Justice Can Drive the Change," explicitly connects open government and people-centered justice. See: <https://www.sdg16.plus/>.

is notable for its cross-regional membership spanning the Global North and South, its sub-coalitions with regional specificity (including the Ibero-American Alliance and the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice), and its genuinely multi-stakeholder partnership base. Its influence operates through evidence production, coalition convening, and political visibility rather than enforcement—a knowledge-and-convening model that represents a credible approach to translating global commitments into country-level action. Pathfinders is also the secretariat of the Justice Action Coalition (JAC), a multi-stakeholder alliance of countries and organizations working measurable progress in justice for people and communities by the third SDG summit in 2027 and beyond.¹²¹

Pathfinders also played a particular role in SDG recommendations around equality primarily through its dedicated Inequality and Exclusion program.¹²² Hosted by New York University's Center on International Cooperation, this multi-stakeholder coalition brings together member states, civil society, and international organizations to identify practical, politically viable solutions to combat income, wealth, and group-based inequalities. Through resources like the Inequality Solutions Portal and flagship reports such as *From Rhetoric to Action: Delivering Equality and Inclusion*, the organization equips policymakers with actionable strategies to design equitable policies and ensure historically marginalized groups are not left behind.¹²³ Furthermore, Pathfinders has been instrumental in supporting the Global Alliance Against Inequality, which aims to mobilize international commitment toward achieving the equality and inclusion targets of the UN's 2030 Agenda (SDG16+).

GANHRI: Peer Review for National Human Rights Institutions

The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), established in 1993 and operating under the auspices of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, is the international body that accredits and coordinates national human rights institutions (NHRIs) worldwide.¹²⁴ With more than 110 member NHRIs across all regions, GANHRI operates one of the few peer-review mechanisms in the human rights space: the Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA) evaluates each institution against the Paris Principles—the UN standard for NHRI independence, mandate, and effectiveness—and assigns an "A" (fully compliant) or "B" (partially compliant) status, with re-accreditation required every five years.¹²⁵

GANHRI's accreditation mechanism is significant for two reasons. First, it creates a meaningful incentive for institutional quality: A-status NHRIs are accorded speaking rights and seating at UN human rights bodies, including the Human Rights Council. This gives governments a practical reason to invest in the independence and capacity of their national institutions. Second, the peer-review model—where NHRIs assess one another against shared standards—resembles the approach used by FATF and the OECD Anti-Bribery Working Group, though without the financial consequences that give those bodies their particular leverage.

GANHRI is not a plurilateral body in the strict sense used elsewhere in this report—it is a network of independent institutions rather than a coalition of governments. But it operates in the space between state action and civil society advocacy, and its

¹²¹For a list of members of the Justice Action Coalition, see <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-action-coalition/>

¹²²<https://www.sdg16.plus/inequality-exclusion/>

¹²³<https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/from-rhetoric-to-action-delivering-equality-inclusion/>

¹²⁴GANHRI was originally established as the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions (ICC) and renamed in 2016. <https://ganhri.org/>

¹²⁵As of 2024, 88 NHRIs held A-status accreditation and 32 held B-status. The SCA comprises one A-status NHRI representative from each of GANHRI's four regional networks, ensuring geographic balance in the review process. See: OHCHR, "Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions," <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/nhri/>

accreditation function performs a standard-setting role that few other bodies replicate in the human rights domain. Its experience may be instructive for the design of accountability mechanisms in other areas, particularly electoral integrity, where the absence of a comparable credentialing body is a noted gap (Section 2.2).

Emerging Models: The "In Defense of Democracy" Summit Process and the Youth Democracy Cohort

Two newer initiatives illustrate both the energy and the limitations of emerging plurilateral models in the civil rights and equality space.

The Youth Democracy Cohort, launched in 2022 as part of the Summit for Democracy's Year of Action, takes a different approach. Co-led by the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), *AfricTivistes* (Senegal), the European Democratic Youth Network (EDYN), and International IDEA, with the support of the European Commission and the governments of Nepal and Ghana, the Cohort is a global platform to advance youth involvement in democratic processes at national, regional, and global levels.¹²⁶ It has convened young democratic leaders from across regions and produced a "Menu of Commitments" for youth participation that governments can adopt through their national reform processes.

The Youth Democracy Cohort is instructive for the plurilateral architecture because it addresses a structural gap: most democracy-support initiatives are designed by and for established institutions, with limited attention to intergenerational inclusion. The Cohort's multi-stakeholder design—bringing together governments, international organizations, and youth-led civil society on relatively equal

terms—reflects the co-creation logic that has been effective in other contexts. Its challenges are those common to cohorts that emerged from the Summit for Democracy process: uncertain institutional continuity following the withdrawal of U.S. leadership, and the need to demonstrate concrete results beyond convening.

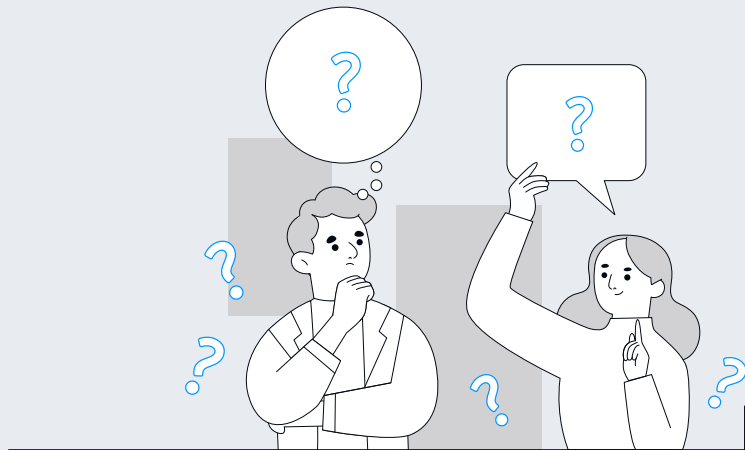
The "In Defense of Democracy" summit process, launched by Brazil and Spain in 2024, is a periodic gathering of heads of state and government organized around the defense of democratic institutions, the regulation of digital platforms, and the fight against disinformation and inequality¹²⁷. Its fourth edition, held in Barcelona in April 2026, drew participation from leaders of Brazil, Spain, Colombia, South Africa, and others, alongside mayors, labor unions, and civil society representatives. The initiative is notable for its high-level political visibility and its explicit framing of democracy defense as a priority for progressive governments in an era of authoritarian resurgence.

As a plurilateral model, however, "In Defense of Democracy" remains institutionally light. It has no permanent secretariat, no formal membership criteria, no accountability mechanism, and no published commitments that can be independently tracked. Its association with progressive political networks—the Barcelona gatherings have been coordinated alongside the Global Progressive Mobilisation convened by the Socialist International and allied bodies—may limit its appeal to governments of other political orientations, even those with strong democratic credentials¹²⁸. Whether the process develops institutional depth or remains a periodic political event will depend on whether its conveners invest in the kind of follow-through mechanisms—specific commitments, independent review, diverse political participation—that distinguish durable plurilateral initiatives from declaratory ones.

¹²⁶The Youth Democracy Cohort was presented at the International Day of Democracy 2022 in Brussels. EPD and *AfricTivistes* serve as co-leaders alongside the European Commission, Nepal, Ghana, EDYN, and International IDEA. <https://youthdemocracycohort.com/>

¹²⁷The "In Defense of Democracy" process originated as a Brazil-Spain initiative in 2024, with Chile as an early co-convenor. Prior editions were held at the United Nations (2024) and in Santiago, Chile (2025). Chile's role as co-convenor has diminished in the most recent edition. See: "Brazil's Lula and Sánchez of Spain headline meetings of progressive leaders in Barcelona," Associated Press, April 17, 2026.

¹²⁸The coordination between the "In Defense of Democracy" summit and the Global Progressive Mobilisation—a gathering of the Socialist International, the Party of European Socialists, and the Progressive Alliance—raises a design question for democracy-focused plurilateralism: whether initiatives that are identified with a particular political tendency can claim to speak for democracy as such, or whether their partisan association limits their credibility and reach.



Open Questions and Gaps

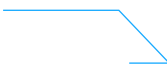
When should civil-rights plurilateral bodies include the communities they aim to protect as governance partners?

Diplomatic pressure may require state authority; standard-setting and monitoring may benefit from civil society partnership. The emerging evidence suggests that initiatives embedding affected communities in governance tend to produce stronger follow-through—but this hypothesis deserves more systematic testing.

Can converging mandates across organizations be better formalized? The FOC, MFC, and OECD Observatory of Civic Space all touch on overlapping dimensions of civic space and rights protection. The ERC's work intersects with broader non-discrimination efforts. These shared elements could evolve into shared working groups, coordinated programs, or selective consolidation. Whether that is useful depends on whether the benefits of integration outweigh the risks of diluting each body's focus.

How should the plurilateral architecture address equality as a precondition for democracy? Some degree of equality before the law—and limitations on oligarchy and state capture—are essential for thriving democracies. Yet most plurilateral bodies treat equality as a sectoral concern (gender, LGBTQ+ rights, racial discrimination) rather than as a systemic condition for democratic participation. Whether a broader, cross-cutting approach to democratic equality is feasible through plurilateral cooperation, and what institutional form it might take, remains an open question.

How can newer initiatives like the "In Defense of Democracy" process and the Youth Democracy Cohort build institutional durability? Both demonstrate political energy and address real gaps—high-level political mobilization for democracy defense, and intergenerational inclusion, respectively. But neither yet has the institutional infrastructure (independent secretariat, diversified funding, accountability mechanisms) associated with durable plurilateral models. The question of how to translate political momentum into lasting institutional capacity is relevant well beyond these two cases.



2.5 Digital Technology and Artificial Intelligence

Digital technology and artificial intelligence pose a distinctive challenge for democratic governance. Unlike the other domains examined in previous subsections, technology governance is being built in real time, by multiple overlapping bodies, under conditions of rapid technological change, powerful companies, and intense geopolitical competition. The density and overlap of the AI governance landscape is itself a governance challenge. A comprehensive mapping by Global Partners Digital identifies dozens of overlapping international AI governance initiatives, illustrating both the breadth of activity and the fragmentation of the field.¹²⁹

International normative foundations already exist. The UN Human Rights Council affirmed in 2012 that the same rights that apply offline also apply online. This resolution has been reaffirmed repeatedly and provides a legal baseline for all subsequent digital governance efforts.¹³⁰ The 2013 UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Information Security established that existing international law applies in cyberspace. The challenge, then, is not the absence of norms but their distribution across multiple systems—international law, technical standards, regional regulations, platform self-governance—and the difficulty of translating general principles into operational guidance for specific problems such as algorithmic accountability, cross-border content moderation, and AI deployment.

Consequently, the relevant question is not whether AI should be governed, but whether the emerging governance architecture reflects democratic values and how it can best reflect competing values. Technologies that shape elections, filter public discourse, deny or revoke citizenship and identification, and enable surveillance are not neutral infrastructure. How they are governed determines, in practical terms, the scope of human choice and the distribution of power between citizens, states, and corporations. This section surveys the major plurilateral initiatives and assesses how far they go in embedding democratic accountability into technology governance.

But digital governance is different from other domains. It is multilayered and inherently has actors well beyond governments¹³¹. It is layered as well, dependent on physical infrastructure, standards, and action platforms. Regulation and incentives take place across different parts of the tech lifecycle: development, deployment, and use. Frameworks for governance take many forms, from international law, to technical standards and specifications, private governance, and national or local regulation.

¹²⁹Global Partners Digital, "Navigating the Global AI Governance Landscape," 2024. Available at: <https://www.gp-digital.org/navigating-the-global-ai-governance-landscape/>. The mapping covers multilateral, plurilateral, regional, and multi-stakeholder AI governance processes and illustrates the challenge of coordination across a crowded institutional landscape.

¹³⁰UN Human Rights Council Resolution 20/8, "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet," 5 July 2012.

¹³¹One advantage of this domain is that multi-stakeholder approaches are not at all novel. The World Summit on the Information Society's Tunis Agenda (2005) established the principle that internet governance should involve governments, the private sector, civil society, and technical communities on equal footing—a principle that has shaped every major digital governance initiative since, from ICANN to the Internet Governance Forum. The 2024 Global Digital Compact, adopted as part of the UN's Pact for the Future, reaffirms this multi-stakeholder approach as the foundation for digital cooperation. For plurilateral initiatives in the digital space, multi-stakeholder design is therefore not an optional enhancement but a structural expectation.

While too many initiatives exist to properly map, we look at three areas of particular focus of plurilateral activity: information integrity, artificial intelligence (with a deeper look into public sector AI), and the complementary issues of market concentration and digital sovereignty. Following that, we move on to imagining what a pro-democracy international governance space might look like.

Information Integrity

The information environment—the content recommendation algorithms and advertising models that shape what citizens see, believe, and discuss—directly affects the quality of democratic deliberation. This is the domain where the gap in plurilateral architecture is most pronounced. No existing plurilateral initiative specifically addresses the structural problem of authoritarian interference in democratic information systems at a transnational level, nor the broader challenge of ensuring that the information environment supports rather than undermines informed democratic participation.¹³²

Three plurilateral initiatives address the online information environment with direct implications for democratic governance: the Christchurch Call, the Declaration for the Future of the Internet, and the Forum on Information and Democracy.¹³³

The Christchurch Call, launched in 2019 by New Zealand and France following the Christchurch mosque shootings, brings together 56 governments, 19 online service providers, and over 50 civil society organizations in a voluntary effort to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.¹³⁴ Its significance for this paper lies less in its specific focus on terrorism than in its institutional innovations. The Christchurch Call Initiative on Algorithmic Outcomes has demonstrated, at proof-of-concept level, that third-party auditing of proprietary

algorithms is technically feasible—a finding with implications far beyond counterterrorism, including for election integrity, content recommendation, and disinformation.¹³⁵ The Call's multistakeholder structure—governments, companies, and civil society in a single framework—also offers a model for technology governance that goes beyond purely intergovernmental approaches.

The Declaration for the Future of the Internet, launched in 2022 with over 60 signatories alongside the Summit for Democracy, takes a broad approach.¹³⁶ It commits signatories to an open, free, interoperable, reliable, and secure internet. These principles are explicitly positioned against the model of digital authoritarianism, in which states use technology to surveil citizens, censor speech, and fragment the global internet into controlled national spaces. The Declaration is non-binding and aspirational, but it represents the most significant plurilateral articulation of what a democratic internet should look like.

A third initiative, the Forum on Information and Democracy (FID), addresses the information ecosystem more directly. Launched in 2018 through the International Partnership on Information and Democracy—now signed by 57 governments—the Forum operates as an independent, non-governmental organization that produces policy recommendations on the structural conditions for a trustworthy information space.¹³⁷ Its institutional design is unusual: the Partnership is intergovernmental (governments sign on to a set of principles), but the Forum itself functions as an independent body, producing research and recommendations without requiring governmental consensus on each output. A consultative committee of signatory states, including Armenia, Brazil, Chile, France, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Ukraine, provides structured input.

¹³²A working group expert noted the absence of a plurilateral initiative addressing transnational authoritarian interference in democratic information systems as one of the most significant gaps in the current architecture. WG3 meeting, March 19, 2026.

¹³³The Freedom Online Coalition, profiled in Section 2.4, "Civil Rights and Equality," a diplomatic coalition for internet freedom and civic space, is also relevant in this chapter. Members issue joint statements on online rights, internet shutdowns, and disinformation. The FOC's placement in Section 2.4 reflects its origins and primary function in human rights, but its mandate is inherently cross-cutting. It is not repeated for length.

¹³⁴The Christchurch Call was launched on May 15, 2019 in Paris, co-chaired by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron. In 2024, the Christchurch Call Foundation was established as a non-governmental organization to coordinate ongoing work. See: <https://www.christchurchcall.org/>.

¹³⁵See: Christchurch Call, "Algorithmic Outcomes," 2024.

¹³⁶See: <https://www.state.gov/declaration-for-the-future-of-the-internet>.

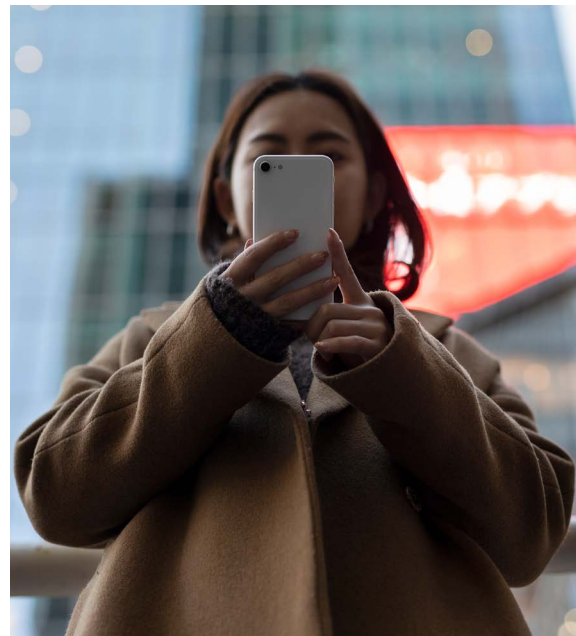
¹³⁷The International Partnership on Information and Democracy was initiated by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and launched at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, building on the Information and Democracy Commission established in 2018. The Forum on Information and Democracy, based in Paris, serves as the implementation body. See: <https://informationdemocracy.org/>.

At the 2025 Paris Peace Forum, twenty-nine governments endorsed the Paris Declaration on Multilateral Action for information integrity, marking an expansion of the initiative's political reach.¹³⁸ The Forum's reports have addressed platform accountability, journalism viability, and the information dimensions of elections. Its significance for this paper is that it represents one of the few plurilateral instruments that explicitly focuses on the *structural conditions* of the information environment—the economic models, platform architectures, and regulatory frameworks that determine what information citizens receive—rather than addressing specific content categories (as the Christchurch Call does with extremist content) or articulating general principles (as the Declaration for the Future of the Internet does).

At this time, the Forum has substantive recommendations but they lack enforcement mechanisms or implementation tracking. How signatory governments translate the Paris Declaration into domestic legislation and regulations remains to be seen.

The Christchurch Call's algorithmic transparency work is a start, but it is narrowly focused on extremist content. The Forum on Information and Democracy addresses structural conditions but lacks enforcement. The Freedom Online Coalition has produced joint statements on disinformation from a human rights perspective, but its tools are diplomatic rather than operational. What is missing is an initiative that combines these elements: structural analysis of information ecosystem failures, operational coordination on cross-border information threats, and some degree of accountability for implementation.

The evidence on content moderation itself is mixed. A Carnegie Endowment review found that tactical interventions—fact-checking, content labeling, platform takedowns—have modest and sometimes temporary effects, and recommended that democracies adopt a "portfolio approach" combining tactical actions with longer-term structural reforms: supporting independent journalism, investing in media literacy, and addressing the economic models that incentivize engagement over accuracy.¹³⁹ This finding has implications for plurilateral design. An initiative focused narrowly on content removal or platform rules is unlikely to address the deeper structural drivers of information ecosystem failure. What is needed is a cross-domain approach that links privacy regulators, election authorities, media policy experts, and technology companies around shared problems—precisely the kind of "translation" and "alignment" function that this report recommends in its conclusion.



¹³⁸"Twenty-nine Governments Join Forces in Defense of Access to Free and Reliable Information Worldwide," Forum on Information and Democracy, October 30, 2025. Ghana became the Partnership's 57th signatory state at the 2025 edition. <http://bit.ly/4cB40RQ>

¹³⁹Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide," January 2024.

Artificial Intelligence

Since 2019, the plurilateral landscape for AI governance has developed with striking speed, spanning three tiers of bindingness.

At the level of *policy coordination*, the OECD AI Principles (40+ endorsing countries) were the first intergovernmental AI standard and are now referenced in the G20 AI Principles.¹⁴⁰ The Global Partnership on AI (roughly 29 countries) connects AI research to public policy through multistakeholder working groups on responsible AI, data governance, and the future of work.¹⁴¹ The G7 Hiroshima AI Process produced a voluntary code of conduct for AI developers, and the Digital Cooperation Organization (16 states, founded 2020) focuses on capacity-building with a particular emphasis on inclusion.¹⁴² None of these bodies has enforcement mechanisms; their influence depends on benchmarking, peer pressure, and the translation of shared principles into domestic regulation.

At the level of technical *safety cooperation*, the AI Safety Summit process—Bletchley Park (2023), Seoul (2024), Paris (2025)—has created emerging infrastructure for frontier AI governance.¹⁴³ The Bletchley Declaration, signed by 28 countries including China, established shared recognition that frontier AI poses risks requiring collective management. The International Network of AI Safety Institutes, established at Seoul, coordinates technical cooperation on AI evaluation and testing among approximately 11 countries. This process is notable for its speed and high-level political engagement, but its signatories skew heavily toward Western-allied democracies; China has participated selectively, and many Global South countries are absent from core discussions.¹⁴⁴

At the level of *binding international law*, two Council of Europe instruments stand out. *Convention 108+*, with 55 state parties including non-European ones, is the only binding international agreement on personal data protection—a foundational issue for AI governance since algorithmic processing depends on data and could result in significant surveillance, intimidation, or targeted disinformation.¹⁴⁵ The Council of Europe's *Framework Convention on AI*, opened for signature in 2024, is the first binding treaty that addresses AI through a human rights and democracy lens, requiring that AI systems respect human rights, democratic processes, and the rule of law.¹⁴⁶ It is the only instrument in this space that explicitly centers democratic governance rather than treating it as one consideration among several. Whether the Convention attracts ratifications beyond the Council of Europe's membership will be an important test of whether binding, rights-based AI governance can achieve global reach.

¹⁴⁰The OECD AI Principles, adopted in May 2019, were the first intergovernmental standard on AI. They have been endorsed by over 40 countries and referenced in the G20 AI Principles. The OECD AI Policy Observatory (OECD.AI) tracks national AI policies and provides benchmarking tools. See: <https://oecd.ai/>

¹⁴¹See: <https://gpai.ai/>

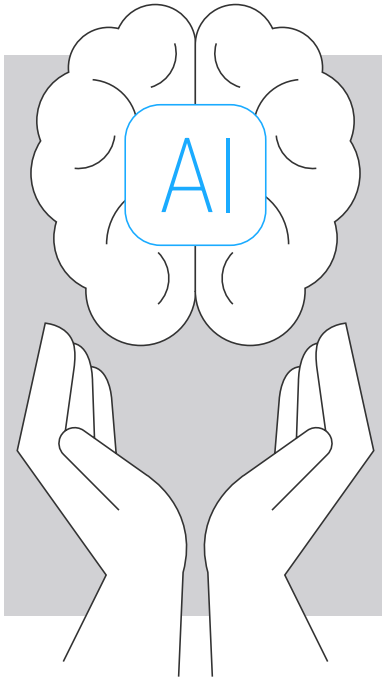
¹⁴²See: G7, "Hiroshima AI Process," 2023 and <https://dco.org/>

¹⁴³See: Brookings, "The Bletchley Park Process," October 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-bletchley-park-process-could-be-a-building-block-for-global-cooperation-on-ai-safety/>

¹⁴⁴As Freshfields noted of the Seoul Declaration, its signatories are "generally limited to a group of Western-allied democracies." China signed the Bletchley Declaration but not the Seoul Declaration, raising questions about whether the emerging AI governance architecture will include or exclude major non-democratic technology powers. See: Freshfields, "Seoul Summit Sees Further Developments," 2024.

¹⁴⁵Convention 108+, the modernized version of the Council of Europe's 1981 Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, has 55 state parties, including non-European states. It is the only binding international data protection treaty and is increasingly relevant to AI governance, since algorithmic processing depends on personal data frameworks. See: Council of Europe, "Convention 108+."

¹⁴⁶The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on AI, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law was opened for signature in September 2024. It is the first binding international treaty specifically addressing AI through a human rights lens. The Convention requires that AI systems respect human rights, democratic processes, and the rule of law—making it the only AI governance instrument that explicitly centers democratic values. See: Council of Europe, "Committee on Artificial Intelligence."



Public Sector AI and Plurilateralism

Algorithmic decision-making in the public sector—AI systems that determine welfare eligibility, criminal sentencing, health-care allocation, or immigration status—raises questions of due process, non-discrimination, and transparency that are fundamentally democratic. When an algorithm denies a benefit or flags a citizen for scrutiny, the affected person has a right to understand why and to challenge the decision. These are not abstract concerns: they are extensions of the same principles of administrative justice and equality before the law examined in Sections 2.1 and 2.4.

A few OGP members have begun to address this through national commitments. New Zealand's Algorithm Charter, adopted through an OGP action plan, requires government agencies to be transparent about their use of algorithms in decision-making. Australia has made similar commitments on algorithmic accountability.¹⁴⁷ But no plurilateral body systematically addresses algorithmic accountability in the public sector. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on AI is the most relevant binding instrument, but its ratification remains limited and its monitoring mechanism is still being established.

At the same time, emerging evidence suggests that AI is not only a threat to democratic governance but a potential tool for strengthening it. A 2025 field experiment published in *Science* found that algorithmically reranking social media content to reduce exposure to antidemocratic attitudes and partisan animosity measurably decreased affective polarization among users.¹⁴⁸ AI-powered tools have shown promise in debunking extremist content, identifying disinformation at scale, and supporting fact-checking operations. These findings suggest that the plurilateral conversation about AI and democracy should not be framed exclusively in terms of risk mitigation. There is a case for coordinated investment in what might be called "pro-democracy AI"—applications that strengthen deliberation, improve the quality of public information, and support institutional accountability. Commissioner Francisco Sagasti has noted the emergence of a "right to accurate information" as a human rights framing that could anchor such efforts.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷On New Zealand's Algorithm Charter, see OGP, "New Zealand Action Plan 2018–2020." On Australia's algorithmic accountability commitments, see OGP, "Australia Action Plan 2020–2022."

¹⁴⁸See: "Reranking partisan animosity in algorithmic social media feeds alters affective polarization," *Science*, 2025. The experiment, conducted during the 2024 US presidential campaign on the X platform, found that decreasing exposure to antidemocratic and partisan animosity content shifted out-party feeling thermometer scores by more than 2 points on a 100-point scale.

¹⁴⁹Commissioner Francisco Sagasti raised the "right to accurate information" as an emerging human rights framing during the WG3 meeting of March 19, 2026. The concept builds on existing rights to information and freedom of expression, but extends them to address the structural conditions under which citizens can access reliable information—a question that existing human rights instruments do not fully address in the context of algorithmic curation and AI-generated content.

Market Concentration and Digital Sovereignty

The concentration of technological power in a small number of private companies that are not democratically accountable but whose decisions have sovereign-scale consequences—from content moderation to AI deployment to data collection—is a structural democratic challenge that plurilateral governance has barely begun to address.

The scale of the problem is worth stating plainly. A handful of companies control the platforms through which most of the world's political communication occurs, the cloud infrastructure on which governments and businesses depend, the AI models that are being integrated into public services, and the data flows that underpin the digital economy. These companies' decisions about content policies, algorithmic design, and market entry have effects comparable to those of sovereign regulatory decisions—but without the democratic accountability that accompanies state action. The withdrawal or modification of platform services can have immediate consequences for elections, protests, and public discourse, as demonstrated by cases ranging from internet shutdowns in Myanmar to platform policy changes affecting political advertising worldwide.

Plurilateral responses to this challenge are nascent. The Frontier Model Forum, established in 2023 by Anthropic, Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI, represents one form of industry self-coordination on AI safety, with a \$10 million AI Safety Fund and commitments to responsible development practices.¹⁵⁰ But the Forum is industry-led, not multi-stakeholder, and its accountability is to its members rather than to the public. The G7 Hiroshima AI Process produced a voluntary code of conduct for AI developers, and at the Seoul AI Safety Summit, sixteen companies made individual pledges on safety testing and transparency. These are useful steps, but they are voluntary commitments from companies that retain full discretion over their implementation and interpretation.

The question for plurilateral governance is whether the concentration of technological power—and the democratic accountability deficit it creates—can be addressed through international cooperation at all, or whether it is fundamentally a domestic regulatory matter. The EU's answer, through the DSA and DMA, suggests that domestic regulation is necessary but insufficient: the companies in question operate globally, and regulatory fragmentation creates both compliance costs and opportunities for regulatory arbitrage. A plurilateral approach could add value by aligning regulatory standards across jurisdictions (reducing arbitrage), sharing enforcement intelligence, and creating a common framework for assessing the democratic implications of platform and AI decisions. Whether governments have the political will to pursue such coordination—given the economic importance of the technology sector and the geopolitical competition for AI leadership—is an open question.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰The Frontier Model Forum was founded by Anthropic, Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI in July 2023. It is open to other organizations that develop frontier AI models. See: <https://www.frontiermodelforum.org/>. Other industry coordination efforts include the World Economic Forum's AI Governance Alliance [<https://www.weforum.org/publications/ai-governance-alliance-briefing-paper-series/>] and various national industry task forces, but none of these qualifies as a plurilateral initiative in the sense used in this report, since they lack governmental participation.

¹⁵¹Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Rethinking EU Digital Policies: From Tech Sovereignty to Tech Citizenship," June 2025, argues for moving from a sovereignty frame (state control over digital infrastructure) to a citizenship frame (ensuring digital systems serve democratic participation). This reframing may be useful for plurilateral initiatives seeking to address market concentration without falling into protectionist dynamics. <https://bit.ly/42jChAi>

Implications: Overcoming fragmentation in the Digital Governance Space to Protect and Promote Democracy

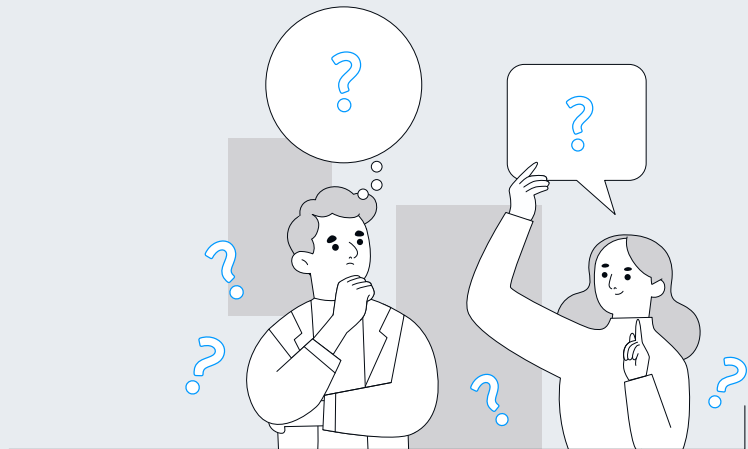
The numerous initiatives surveyed above are significant, but they reveal a structural gap. Most existing plurilateral bodies in the technology space focus on safety, innovation, and interoperability. Some, however, like the Christchurch Call and the Freedom Online Coalition, do specifically focus on democratic governance. But all would benefit from greater coordination.

The fragmentation of the digital governance landscape suggests three potential roles for plurilateral initiatives to bridge existing silos—and improve democratic outcomes.

- **Translation and Alignment:** Plurilateral bodies can serve a critical function at the intersection of overlapping policy domains. Issues such as privacy, disinformation, and online human rights are currently managed within discrete, parallel silos: data protection forums, electoral integrity initiatives, and human rights mechanisms. A targeted plurilateral initiative could convene a standing, cross-domain working group—incorporating regulators, platforms, and civil society—to develop operational guidance for complex trade-offs. For example, such a group could define privacy-respecting approaches to countering disinformation during election cycles, focusing not on generating new norms but on making existing ones usable and aligned in practice.
- **Linking Commitments to Ecosystems:** Plurilateralism can link high-level political commitments to operational ecosystems and action platforms. The Christchurch Call already moves in this direction by connecting governments and technology companies around specific protocols for crisis response. However, a structural gap remains in the interface between these operational responses and broader policy discussions. An effective plurilateral architecture would ensure that technical lessons from crisis management systematically inform platform governance and AI-related regulatory frameworks, rather than remaining contained within a single initiative.¹⁵²
- **A Clearinghouse Function:** A lighter-touch clearinghouse role could reduce the coordination costs inherent in a crowded landscape. Bodies like the Freedom Online Coalition are well-positioned to map the overlaps across AI governance, platform regulation, and digital rights processes. By identifying functional gaps and prompting targeted coordination, a plurilateral clearinghouse would help actors situate their work within the wider ecosystem—reducing duplication and concentrating resources where they are most needed.

Ultimately, the comparative advantage of these approaches lies not in competing for norm-setting authority, but in translation, alignment, and accountability. By making existing standards actionable and ensuring that different communities are not working at cross-purposes, plurilateral initiatives can provide the "last mile" of implementation that universal bodies often struggle to deliver.

¹⁵²An example of this from the climate space is the NDC partnership which shares information across climate actions and connects member states with financial opportunities. <https://ndcpartnership.org/>



Open Questions

Can the plurilateral tech governance landscape move beyond voluntary commitments? With the exception of the Council of Europe instruments, every initiative relies on soft law. Whether the FATF model—compliance through material consequences—could be adapted for technology governance remains speculative, but the gap between the pace of technological change and the speed of norm-setting is widening.

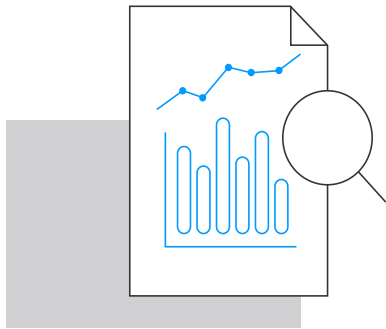
Would an umbrella coordination framework help rationalize the crowded landscape? A Climate Conference of the Parties (COP)-style framework would be a periodic, high-level convening process under which the multiple AI governance, platform governance, and digital rights initiatives could report progress, identify gaps, and align standards. While there is no unifying treaty frameworks behind tech and democracy, a standing coordination process may deserve consideration.

How can the Global South be meaningfully included in AI governance? The AI Safety Summit process, GPAI, and the OECD Observatory are dominated by high-income democracies. If AI governance is shaped exclusively by the countries that build AI, the resulting rules will reflect their priorities, not those of the communities most affected by deployment.

Should the scope of international instruments be expanded? Given the gaps in core democratic concerns, is plurilateralism the right means of regulating giant tech firms or governments that are using new technology to enable undemocratic behavior.



CONCLUSION



This report has surveyed more than two dozen plurilateral initiatives across five domains—the rule of law, electoral integrity, corruption, equality and civil rights, and digital technology and AI—and examined the conditions under which they succeed, fail, or fall short. Three overarching observations emerge.

First, plurilateralism is not a substitute for global or regional multilateralism—but it is an essential complement. Plurilateral initiatives work best when they do what larger bodies mostly do not: setting higher standards among committed states, coordinating technical information, and creating peer pressure that universal consensus makes impossible. The relationship is additive, not competitive.

Second, design matters enormously—and multi-stakeholder governance is among the most consequential design choices. The difference between a plurilateral initiative that changes behavior and one that generates declarations without follow-through comes down to institutional choices: whether there is independent accountability, whether leadership rotates and funding is diversified, and whether the initiative can respond when a member's democratic trajectory reverses. (Annex 2 offers a framework of eight design principles as a diagnostic tool.) Among these choices, one deserves particular emphasis.

Many of the initiatives that have demonstrated the strongest results in this report give non-state actors a formal governance role. OGP's co-creation model places civil society as a co-equal partner in the formulation of national commitments. EITI's tripartite board brings government, industry, and civil society into a single accountability framework. The Christchurch Call includes technology companies and civil society organizations alongside governments in its operational structure. By contrast, initiatives that remain purely intergovernmental may find their legitimacy constrained and their capacity for follow-through limited.

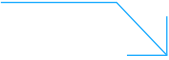
Third, the priority should be to strengthen and consolidate what exists, not to create new institutions by default. The expert working group identified significant gaps that remain in electoral integrity, democratic governance of technology, and coordination across domains. But filling these gaps does not require new organizations most of the time. The landscape is crowded, money is scarce, and each new coalition absorbs diplomatic bandwidth. Where effective platforms already exist, the first instinct should be to expand their mandates, diversify their funding, and deepen their coordination.

This applies with particular force to coordination among plurilateral bodies with overlapping mandates. In some cases, such as anti-corruption and anti-money laundering, the effect can be positive, with efforts combining to achieve real results, “crowding in” resources and attention. In others, lack of coordination spreads resources thin.

This can be solved with stronger coordination functions. Existing cross-domain initiatives can help with this, or sometimes, as in the case of the Global Democracy Coalition (GDC),¹⁵³ can be relatively new. The coordination function is not primarily new norm-setting. Instead, it can carry out three roles for the particular domain:

- *Translation:* Making existing standards and terminology meaningfully actionable across domains;
- *Alignment:* Taking a broad “democracy first” approach to ensuring that communities are not working at cross-purposes. For example, in the digital space this would mean shuttling between work on privacy, disinformation, and online rights; ensuring that they are not at cross-purposes; and
- *Accountability*—encouraging implementation even where commitments are non-binding.

A standing cross-domain working group—convened by an existing body such as the GDC or OGP—could bring together regulators, platforms, and civil society to develop shared guidance on specific problems, such as what civil rights-respecting approaches to countering disinformation look like in electoral contexts. A light-touch clearinghouse function could help actors situate their work within the wider ecosystem, reducing duplication and prompting targeted coordination.



In conclusion, the task now is to strengthen and use what exists, fill what is missing, and ensure that the growing architecture of plurilateral cooperation serves the democratic values it was created to protect.

¹⁵³The Global Democracy Coalition, a multi-stakeholder non-state alliance of over 170 democracy organizations from more than 58 countries, convened by International IDEA in 2021, could serve as connective tissue. The GDC brings together actors that have historically operated in silos—civil society groups, think tanks, academic institutions, philanthropic organizations, and some private-sector entities—into a single platform for coordination and collective action. Its regional forums, held across Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific, and Europe, provide a practical venue for cross-initiative alignment. The GDC does not itself set standards or monitor compliance, but it could function as a coordination mechanism among the plurilateral bodies mapped in this report, helping to reduce duplication, identify gaps, and facilitate the “translation” between domains that is currently missing.

Annex 01: Map of Democracy-Relevant Plurilateral Initiatives

This annex maps the principal plurilateral initiatives discussed in this report, organized into three categories: explicitly democracy-focused coalitions, governance-adjacent bodies whose work materially affects democratic governance, and digital technology and AI governance initiatives. The table is illustrative rather than exhaustive. It draws on the case studies, working group discussions, and research presented in the preceding sections.

Theme abbreviations

RoL = Rule of Law & Constitutions, EI = Electoral Integrity, C = Corruption, ECR = Equality & Civil Rights, DT = Digital Technology & AI

Function categories

"Action Platform" denotes initiatives that set binding or quasi-binding standards, require implementation, and/or impose consequences for non-compliance. "Learning & Diplomacy" denotes initiatives whose primary outputs are knowledge exchange, political coordination, or non-binding norms. "Hybrid" and "Standard-Setting / Advisory" fall between these poles.

Note

Authoritarian and illiberal plurilateral groupings (e.g., SCO, BRICS) are discussed in a separate feature box in the main text of this report and are not included in this mapping.

Table: Existing Democracy Promotion Plurilateral Initiatives Key Characteristics

Initiative	Year Est.	Members	Relevant Themes	Primary Function	Independent Accountability	Non-State Actor Representation
A. Explicitly Democracy-Focused Coalitions						
Summit for Democracy Process Incl. issue-specific cohorts and platforms (e.g., GNSEI)	2021	~100 governments (varied by summit)	RoL, EI, C, ECR, DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Voluntary commitments; issue-based cohorts. Status uncertain after US leadership change.	No: No tracking mechanism. 750+ commitments from ~100 govts; limited follow-through documented.	Partial: Civil society and the private sector participated in summits; not embedded in governance.
International IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices; Constitution-Building Programme; BRIDGE electoral training	1995	35 member states	RoL, EI, ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Data and analysis; technical assistance; capacity-building for electoral and constitutional processes	Partial: Publishes independent democracy assessments (GSoD Indices). No compliance mechanism for members.	No: Intergovernmental. Expert and civil society engagement through programs, not governance.
Venice Commission European Commission for Democracy through Law of the Council of Europe	1990	61 states (incl. non-European)	RoL, EI	Standard-Setting / Advisory: Constitutional and legal opinions; Rule of Law Checklist; electoral standards	Partial: Follow-up opinions track implementation. Non-binding; depends on voluntary engagement.	No: Members serve as individual experts, but composition is intergovernmental.
Open Government Partnership (OGP) Incl. OGP Local (subnational)	2011	~75 countries; 150+ local	RoL, C, ECR, DT	Action Platform: Co-created national action plans; peer learning	Yes Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) assesses all action plans. Procedural review for backsliding members.	Yes: Civil society co-chairs governance at global and national levels. Equal partnership model.
Community of Democracies	2000	~100+ states; Governing Council of ~30	RoL, EI, ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Political declarations; working groups; support for democratic transitions	No: No independent review mechanism. Reputational incentives only.	Partial: Civil Society participation in events and consultations; not in governance.
Global Democracy Coalition	2021	170+ organizations from 58+ countries	RoL, EI, ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Organizations share strategies and approaches across borders and within regions	No: Voluntary civil society organizations	Primarily non-governmental
International Parliamentary Union	1880	180 member parliaments; 15 associate members	RoL, EI	Learning & Diplomacy: Global forum for parliamentary dialogue; technical assistance for parliaments; human rights of parliamentarians.	No: No formal sanctions; relies on peer pressure and universal standards.	No: Parliaments only

Initiative	Year Est.	Members	Relevant Themes	Primary Function	Independent Accountability	Non-State Actor Representation
A. Explicitly Democracy-Focused Coalitions						
INTOSAI	1953	196 Full Members	C, RoL	Action Platform: International standards for public sector auditing; capacity building and knowledge sharing for SAIs.	Partial: Peer reviews (SAI Performance Measurement Framework) but no binding international enforcement.	No: Supreme audit institutions only
Freedom Online Coalition (FOC)	2011	41 governments (+1 observer)	ECR, DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Joint statements; diplomatic coordination; task forces on shutdowns, AI, disinformation.	No: No compliance or review mechanism. Influence depends on member action in other forums.	Partial: Advisory Network of civil society, academia, and private sector. Consultative, not co-equal.
Media Freedom Coalition (MFC)	2019	51 countries	ECR, DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Diplomatic statements; embassy-level advocacy; High Level Panel of Legal Experts	No: No formal review. Co-chairs have addressed membership discipline (Afghanistan, Sudan).	No: Purely intergovernmental. Consultative Network of press-freedom NGOs is advisory only.
"In Defense of Democracy" Summit Process	2024	~15–20 participating heads of state/ government per edition	RoL, ECR, DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Periodic high-level political mobilization for democracy defense; no binding commitments or follow-up mechanism.	No: No formal commitments, tracking, or review. Political declarations only.	Partial: Civil society, labor unions, and mayors participate in associated events. Not embedded in governance or decision-making.
Alliance for Development in Democracy	2021	Small coalition (Costa Rica, Panama, Dom Rep., Ecuador)	RoL, C, DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Regional coordination among like-minded democracies; trade and governance linkages.	No: No formal accountability mechanism.	No: Intergovernmental.
OECD Observatory of Civic Space	2019	38 OECD members + non-member participants	ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Monitoring; benchmarking; policy recommendations on civic freedoms and enabling environment	No: Publishes reports and data; no compliance mechanism.	Partial: Civil society consulted in research and standard-setting; not in governance.
Equal Rights Coalition (ERC)	2016	42 member states + CSOs	ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Intergovernmental body for LGBTQI+ protections.	No: Voluntary partnership; no formal compliance mechanism.	Yes: Civil society organizations are: formal members and co-chairs alongside states.
Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions	1993	110+ National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs)	RoL, ECR	Action Platform: Coordinates the relationship between NHRIs and the UN; manages NHRI accreditation process.	Yes: Rigorous peer-review accreditation process (A, B, or C status) based on the "Paris Principles."	Partial: Members are state-mandated bodies, they must be independent of executives to receive "A" status.
International Development Law Organization	1983	40 member states	RoL, C, ECR	Action Platform: Rule-of-law solutions, training judges and legal professionals, and supporting constitutional and legislative reform processes.	No: No formal external mechanism: Maintains an internal Independent Evaluation Unit and publishes project data through the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI).	Partial: Governance is restricted to Member Parties, but IDLO formally integrates CSOs, customary leaders, and legal practitioners into its programming and initiatives.
B. Explicitly Democracy-Focused Coalitions						
Financial Action Task Force (FATF) <i>Plus 9 FATF-Style Regional Bodies (FSRBs)</i>	1989	38 full members; 200+ jurisdictions via FSRBs	C, RoL	Action Platform: Standard-setting; mutual evaluations; grey/black listing with material financial consequences.	Yes: Mutual evaluations apply to all members. Grey-listing triggers capital flow consequences (~7.6% GDP decline per IMF).	No: Intergovernmental. Private sector (financial institutions) implements standards but has no governance role.
OECD Anti-Bribery Convention <i>Working Group on Bribery in International Business Transactions</i>	1997	46 signatories	C	Action Platform: Binding convention criminalizing foreign bribery; systematic peer review of enforcement.	Yes: Four-phase peer monitoring. Public reports on each signatory's enforcement. Reputational consequences for non-compliance.	No: Intergovernmental. Civil society (e.g., TI) monitors externally but has no formal role.
Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)	2003	59 implementing countries	C	Action Platform: Global standard for extractive sector governance; disclosure of payments, contracts, beneficial ownership.	Yes: Independent validation. Countries can be suspended or delisted for insufficient progress.	Yes: Tripartite governance: governments, companies, and civil society at global and national levels.

Initiative	Year Est.	Members	Relevant Themes	Primary Function	Independent Accountability	Non-State Actor Representation
B. Explicitly Democracy-Focused Coalitions						
Open Contracting Partnership (OCP) <i>Open Contracting Data Standard (OCDS)</i>	2012	50+ governments adopting OCDS	C	Action Platform: Data standard for procurement transparency; technical assistance; civic monitoring tools.	Partial: Standard adoption is tracked. No enforcement; relies on domestic implementation.	Yes: Civil society and the private sector participate in governance and monitoring.
Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) <i>World Bank / UNODC partnership</i>	2007	Global (institutional partnership)	C	Learning & Diplomacy: Technical assistance and advocacy for recovery of stolen assets across jurisdictions.	No: Advisory and research role. No compliance mechanism.	No: Institutional partnership. Engages civil society through advocacy but not governance.
Escazú Agreement <i>Regional treaty on access to information, participation, and justice (LAC)</i>	2018	16 state parties (LAC)	ECR, RoL	Action Platform: Binding treaty embedding access to information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental governance. First treaty with provisions on human rights defenders.	Yes: Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance. Binding obligations.	Yes: Public participation provisions built into treaty governance. Regional civil society engagement.
United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)	2004	240,000+ local/regional govts in 140 countries	RoL, ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Advocacy; peer learning; capacity building for local democratic governance	No: No formal accountability mechanism for members.	Yes: Membership includes local government associations. Engages civil society in policy development.
Pathfinders for Peace, Justice, and Security	2017	39 member states +	RoL, C	Action Platform: Multi-stakeholder partnership to accelerate the delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice, and inclusion (SDG16+).	No: Voluntary coalition; accountability is focused on shared commitment to SDG targets.	Yes: Includes international organizations, civil society, and the private sector as partners.
Global Forum on Tax Transparency	2000	160+ jurisdictions	C	Action Platform: Ensuring the implementation of international standards on tax transparency and exchange of information.	Yes: Robust peer review process with ratings on compliance; failure can lead to being "blacklisted."	No: Intergovernmental body; focused on jurisdictional compliance and peer review.
C. Digital Technology & AI Governance						
Christchurch Call <i>Including the Christchurch Call Initiative on Algorithmic Outcomes</i>	2019	56 govts + 19 online service providers + 50+ CSOs	DT, ECR	Hybrid: Voluntary commitments on extremist content. Algorithmic audit proof-of-concept with broader implications.	Partial: Algorithmic Outcomes initiative demonstrated feasibility of third-party algorithm audits. No enforcement.	Yes: Multistakeholder: governments, companies, and civil society in a single framework. Foundation established 2024.
Declaration for the Future of the Internet	2022	60+ signatories	DT, ECR	Learning & Diplomacy: Political declaration for open, free, interoperable, secure internet. Non-binding.	No: Aspirational statement. No monitoring or follow-up mechanism.	No: Intergovernmental declaration.
OECD AI Principles OECD AI Policy Observatory (OECD.AI)	2019	40+ endorsing countries	DT	Learning & Diplomacy: First intergovernmental AI standard. Benchmarking; policy tracking; referenced in G20 AI Principles.	No: Soft standard. Monitoring through policy observatory, but no compliance mechanism.	Partial: Expert groups and multistakeholder consultations. Not embedded in governance.
Global Partnership on AI (GPAI)	2020	~29 countries	DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Multistakeholder working groups on responsible AI, data governance, future of work	No: Research and policy coordination. No enforcement.	Yes: Multistakeholder by design: researchers, industry, and civil society in working groups.
AI Safety Summit Process <i>Bletchley/Seoul/Paris; Intl. Network of AI Safety Institutes</i>	2023	28+ countries (Bletchley); ~11 in Safety Institutes	DT	Learning & Diplomacy: High-level political engagement on frontier AI risks. Technical cooperation on evaluation and testing.	No: Voluntary commitments. Seoul produced company pledges (16 firms). No binding mechanism.	Partial: Companies made commitments at Seoul. Civil society participation limited; Global South largely absent.
Council of Europe Framework Convention on AI <i>Framework Convention on AI, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law</i>	2024	CoE members (46) + open to others	DT, RoL, ECR	Action Platform: First binding international treaty centering AI governance in human rights and democratic values.	Yes: Treaty-based monitoring (mechanism being established). Binding obligations for ratifying states.	No: Intergovernmental treaty. Developed with multistakeholder consultation.
Convention 108+Modernized CoE Convention on Personal Data Protection	1981 (mod. 2018)	55 state parties (incl. non-European)	DT, ECR	Action Platform: Only binding international data protection treaty. Foundational for AI governance.	Yes: Consultative Committee provides oversight. Binding obligations.	No: Intergovernmental treaty.
Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO)	2020	16 states	DT	Learning & Diplomacy: Digital economy policy; capacity building; cross-border digital governance.	No: No compliance mechanism.	No: Intergovernmental.

Preliminary Gap Analysis

Several patterns emerge from this mapping that merit attention.

Electoral integrity is institutionally thin.

While multiple organizations work on electoral processes—International IDEA, the Venice Commission, the now-defunct GNSEI—no plurilateral body combines standard-setting, independent accountability, and broad membership in this domain. Election observation is primarily conducted by regional organizations (EU, AU, OAS, OSCE) and nongovernmental bodies (Carter Center, NDI), not by plurilateral coalitions as defined in this report. The certification gap identified in the Working Group’s discussion—the absence of a recognized authority to distinguish credible election observers from fraudulent ones—remains unaddressed.

Independent accountability is concentrated in the anti-corruption space.

FATF, EITI, and the OECD Anti-Bribery Working Group all feature systematic peer review or validation with real consequences. Outside this domain, only OGP (through the Independent Reporting Mechanism) and the treaty-based initiatives (Escazú, CoE Framework Convention on AI, Convention 108+) have comparable mechanisms. The democracy-focused coalitions—Community of Democracies, FOC, MFC, Summit for Democracy—rely almost entirely on reputational and diplomatic incentives.

Non-state actor participation varies dramatically.

OGP and EITI stand out for embedding civil society as co-equal governance partners. The Christchurch Call is distinctive for including both companies and civil society alongside governments. Most other initiatives—including the Media Freedom Coalition, which exists to defend the rights of journalists—limit non-state engagement to advisory or consultative roles. This is a significant design choice with implications for legitimacy, responsiveness, and the quality of information available to the initiative.

The digital and AI governance space is crowded but fragmented.

At least eight distinct plurilateral initiatives address some dimension of digital technology governance, but they vary widely in membership, bindingness, and focus. Coordination among them is minimal. The Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on AI is the only instrument that explicitly centers democratic values, but it has not yet achieved broad ratification. The Global South is underrepresented across virtually all AI governance bodies.

Cross-initiative coordination remains a structural weakness.

As the Working Group identified in its first meeting, there is no shared framework, information exchange, or common set of benchmarks among coalitions with overlapping objectives. OGP, the FOC, and the MFC all touch on civic space; FATF, EITI, and the OECD Anti-Bribery Working Group all address corruption; the FOC, Christchurch Call, and AI Safety Summit process all engage with the digital information environment. Where these bodies coordinate, share data, and align standards, they are mutually reinforcing (e.g. in anti-corruption) but where they do not, they may have more limited impact (e.g. civic space).

Consolidation could strengthen, rather than weaken mandates.

A related gap is the absence of deliberate consolidation where redundancy exists. Democracy-focused plurilateral initiatives have proliferated without a corresponding effort to rationalize it. Future efforts should begin with a mapping of whether (and which) existing body is best positioned to absorb a new function, rather than defaulting to institutional creation. In some cases, expanding an existing initiative’s mandate (as FATF expanded from money laundering to terrorist financing) or membership may be more effective than establishing a new body from scratch—preserving institutional knowledge, established relationships, and administrative infrastructure.

Annex 02: Design Principles For Democratic Plurilateral Initiatives

Not all plurilateral initiatives are alike, and their design should reflect their purpose. A body that sets binding standards and monitors compliance requires different institutional architecture than one whose primary function is diplomatic coordination or knowledge exchange. This annex identifies eight design dimensions drawn from the Working Group's analysis of the initiatives surveyed in this report.¹⁵⁴ For each, it notes the core principle and how it applies differently depending on the initiative's function.

1. Membership criteria and scope.

Every plurilateral initiative must decide who can join and on what terms. Open membership (as in EITI) maximizes reach and uses peer pressure to encourage improvement. Selective membership (as in OGP) ensures a higher baseline of capacity but risks appearing exclusionary. For standard-setting bodies, clear eligibility criteria tied to measurable benchmarks help legitimize distinctions between members and non-members. This creates incentives for joining and for suspension. For diplomatic coalitions, a tiered approach—observer status, associate membership, or regional partnerships—can allow engagement without full commitment. All initiatives should treat regional balance and Global South representation as explicit design objectives.

2. Non-state participation in governance.

Whether civil society, the private sector, journalists, or technical experts have a formal governance role—not merely as consultees—is among the most consequential design choices. OGP's co-creation model places civil society as a co-equal partner. EITI's tripartite board includes government, industry, and civil society. The Christchurch Call brings companies and civil society alongside governments. Some only include non-state actors as observers or commenters. Adding non-state actors to formal governance can improve ambition, organizational resilience and political buy-in.

3. Review, compliance, and consequences.

The single most important differentiator among the initiatives surveyed in this report is whether they have an independent mechanism to assess whether members are meeting their commitments. For standard-setting and action platforms, rule-based accountability is essential. FATF's mutual evaluations, with their grey-listing consequences, have driven compliance in over 80 jurisdictions. EITI's validation process has suspended countries for non-compliance. OGP's Independent Reporting Mechanism assesses every action plan and publishes its findings. These mechanisms work because they apply to all members equally—including founding members and major powers—and because the consequences of non-compliance are material or reputational. For learning and diplomacy platforms, independent review is still helpful for learning across jurisdictions.

4. Mechanisms for learning and peer exchange.

Accountability mechanisms tell members what they must do. Learning mechanisms help them figure out how. The dynamic within a plurilateral body should not rest solely on disincentives—sanctions, grey-listing, suspension—but should also create structured opportunities for experience-sharing. International IDEA's facilitated exchanges among election management bodies, OGP's peer-learning programs, and the Venice Commission's comparative constitutional analysis all serve this function. This applies across all initiative types. Even the most enforcement-oriented body benefits from helping members improve, and even the lightest diplomatic coalition can structure its meetings to transfer practical knowledge and shine a spotlight on first movers, improvers, and innovators.

5. Institutional durability and succession.

The fragility of initiatives anchored to a single government or funding source is a recurring lesson of this report. Design choices that enhance durability include: independent secretariats rather than hosting within a single national agency; diversified funding from multiple member contributions; rotating leadership that prevents over-dependence on any single champion state; and succession mechanisms that ensure continuity across changes of government or other governing members. One “middle path” between the high cost of treaty negotiation and the fragility of voluntary coalitions is to embed secretariat functions within an established international organization—as the Venice Commission sits within the Council of Europe—so that the initiative inherits institutional stability.

6. Instruments for responding to democratic backsliding.

Plurilateral initiatives that include democracy criteria must decide how to respond when a member’s democratic trajectory reverses. Options range from quiet diplomatic engagement, to procedural review (as in OGP’s response policy), to formal suspension (as in EITI), to expulsion (as with the Venice Commission’s removal of Russia). For standard-setting bodies, graduated and rule-based responses—with defined triggers, transparent procedures, and due process—are preferable to ad hoc political decisions, which risk appearing selective. For diplomatic coalitions, the MFC’s approach to Afghanistan and Sudan—co-chairs addressing membership status following regime changes—offers a pragmatic model. What is important is that some mechanism exists. An initiative that cannot respond to backsliding among its own members will struggle to maintain credibility when it speaks about democracy elsewhere.

7. Coordination with other plurilateral and multilateral bodies.

The case of complementary functions and workstreams between different organizations shows that reforms can thrive where there is strategic “crowding in.” This only works when there is clear distinctiveness and complementarity in mandate between organizations. Shared benchmarks, joint assessments, or regular information exchange among these bodies could be increased. As plurilateral initiatives to promote democracy and good governance proliferate, their collective impact will depend on whether they can share information, align standards, and avoid duplicative requirements. Simple mechanisms—joint reporting templates, observer status in each other’s governance bodies, or annual coordination meetings—could make a meaningful difference without requiring formal restructuring.

8. Sunset clauses or periodic mandate reviews

Plurilateral coalitions are meant to be dynamic. An initiative whose founding problem has been resolved, whose membership has become universal, or whose mandate has been absorbed by a larger body should have a built-in mechanism for winding down or transforming. This is not a sign of institutional failure; it is a feature of well-designed cooperation. FATF’s periodic reviews of its mandate offer a partial model: the organization’s scope has expanded (from money laundering to terrorist financing to proliferation finance), but its continued existence is at least nominally subject to member review. More explicit sunset provisions would help prevent the institutional accretion crowding the current landscape.

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