



DEMOCRACY AND MULTILATERAL COOPERATION:

REVITALIZING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

A REPORT OF THE GLOBAL COMMISSION ON
DEMOCRACY AND MULTILATERALISM

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1. WHY A GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DEMOCRACY AND MULTILATERALISM?

Club de Madrid was created in 2001 from the conviction that democracy is the most reliable guarantor of human dignity, and that those who have governed democratically carry a continuing responsibility to help defend and renew it. Its Members have committed themselves to place their experience at the service of the citizens, movements and institutions that advance democracy from within their own societies. That responsibility carries through to moments of democratic transition, consolidation and backsliding. It also extends to periods such as the present, when democratic institutions are under intense pressure, public trust is seriously weakening, and the international conditions that allow democracy to endure are increasingly contested.

In today's interdependent world, democracy cannot survive in isolation. The freedoms, rights and institutions that citizens secure within their own societies depend, in part, on an international environment in which power is constrained by rules, commitments are honored, and cooperation can address risks that no state can manage alone. Multilateralism, understood in its broadest sense, matters for democracy because many of the pressures that weigh on democratic life today reach across borders.

Some threats to democracy are systemic, including conflict, climate disruption and pandemics. Others are driven by powerful forces, including the concentration of economic and technological power, organized crime, illicit financial flows, foreign interference and disinformation. Still others are embedded in the structure of the international order itself, including inequalities, debt burdens and asymmetries of voice and power that shape what states are able to do for their citizens. Without effective cooperation at global, regional and plurilateral¹ levels, democracies are left to confront these pressures with fewer tools to deliver and protect their values and purposes.

Democracy and multilateralism are both facing profound challenges, and each is weakened at the moment it most needs the other. Democratic institutions are under pressure across regions, public trust in them is falling, and the gap between citizens and those who govern continues to widen. The multilateral system is strained and, on the gravest questions, often paralyzed, drained of political and financial support by some of the powers that built it, and weakened by the selective application of its own rules, which have too often bound the vulnerable while sparing the powerful. These are not two separate crises running in parallel. They are interconnected expressions of a wider crisis of trust, accountability and delivery, visible within states and among them alike.

Democracy needs effective multilateral cooperation to help manage the cross-border and domestic pressures that shape people's lives and how they govern themselves. Multilateralism, in turn, needs strong democracies to uphold rules, defend rights, sustain public trust in cooperation, and ensure that democratic principles are reflected in the institutions through which states act together. Neither can be fully renewed without the other.

It is in this context that Club de Madrid established the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism, with a clear purpose: to identify how multilateral cooperation can better protect, strengthen and renew democracy, and how stronger democracies can, in turn, help sustain and defend a multilateral system grounded in rules, accountability, participation and respect for human dignity.

¹ Plurilateral cooperation refers to flexible coalitions of States and other actors collaborating to address specific challenges.

The Commission brought together nineteen Commissioners from across regions: democratically elected former Heads of State and Government, alongside leaders and expert practitioners from international institutions, civil society and philanthropy, and scholars specializing in democracy. Over the course of a year, they drew on this breadth of experience to develop the analysis and recommendations presented in this report.

To carry out this work, the Commission examined an extensive body of democracy-related activities at three levels of multilateral action: the United Nations system, regional organizations with democracy-related mandates, and plurilateral initiatives working across a multitude of thematic issues related to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. While each level of multilateral cooperation has its distinct roles, strengths and limitations in supporting democracy, the Commission sought to identify how these different levels can complement one another in strengthening and renewing multilateral support for democracy at a time of democratic retrenchment and declining trust.

For each multilateral level, working groups of experts and practitioners, led by the Commission's main partners – International IDEA,² the European Democracy Hub,³ and

the Open Government Partnership (OGP)⁴ – met for several rounds of discussions to review current research and analysis and propose recommendations for reform. Their respective Working Group papers elaborating on their findings and proposals will be published alongside this report and available online. The Commission is deeply grateful for the substantive contributions they made throughout our deliberations.

This report does not seek to address every challenge facing democracy or multilateralism, nor does it suggest that international cooperation can substitute for domestic political agency. Of the two dimensions tackled, the Commission concentrated primarily on the first: how multilateral cooperation – at global, regional and plurilateral levels – can better support democracy within states. The second dimension – how democracies that are responsive, accountable and able to deliver can, in turn, help renew multilateralism – is also present throughout the report. The recommendations that follow are offered not as an endpoint, but as a basis for continued engagement, advocacy and reform with all relevant stakeholders working across global, regional and plurilateral frameworks to strengthen democracy and multilateral cooperation.



² See Working Group 1, *Revitalizing Support for Democracy Within the UN System*, expert input paper prepared by International IDEA for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

³ See Working Group 2, *Regional Organizations and Democracy Support*, expert input paper prepared by the European Democracy Hub for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

⁴ See Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).



2.

FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR

Humanity has entered an age where capital, technology and information have globalized; yet they remain unaccountable to and unchecked by our sovereign citizens. No nation alone can now govern the forces that shape its citizens' lives. Citizens are increasingly asked - or forced - to adapt to decisions, policies, and socio-economic and environmental conditions that affect them every day, yet have little or no say in them. We feel it directly: the vote we cast does not reach the algorithm that curates our reality, the capital that moves faster than any parliament, or the carbon that alters our seasons, our lives.

At the heart of this gap lies an unprecedented concentration of wealth, economic power, technological capability, data, knowledge and influence in the hands of a relatively small number of actors - state and, increasingly non-state actors. This concentration of power has become a major driver of deepening inequalities, weakened public trust, the erosion of democratic agency, the abuse of power, violent conflict and, too often, the capture of democratic institutions. Step by step, it turns our institutions - national and global alike - from inclusive to extractive: away from arrangements that distribute power and opportunity broadly, and toward ones built so that a few may extract from the many and block the very changes that would threaten their hold. It has deepened a sense of injustice and fostered a culture in which the law of the powerful too often prevails over the power of law.

Our unprecedented interdependence, combined with concentrated and unaccountable power operating too often beyond effective public scrutiny, democratic oversight, or the reach of existing institutions, has called into question the legitimacy of our policies and our national and international institutions. A loss of trust in such a highly interdependent world, increasingly run by unaccountable powers with little respect for the rule of law, creates a spiral of competition for domination, fragmented geopolitical alliances, and the search by the less powerful for protectors, greater strategic autonomy, or both. This becomes the fodder for isolationist nationalism, authoritarianism and proxy wars, further weakening our ability to manage international affairs for the common good. It can easily descend into ever deeper fragmentation, mistrust and violence - precisely when our global challenges demand the opposite. This vicious circle is becoming the defining democratic challenge of the twenty-first century.

The crisis we face is therefore not only a crisis of democracy, nor only a crisis of multilateralism. It is a crisis of governance, of legitimacy, and of collective capacity and will. The institutions that govern power grow more fragmented, bounded, even captured, while the forces shaping our lives have become global, interconnected and increasingly autonomous.

The capacity and power of our citizens to be agents of their own self-rule must be enhanced — locally, regionally and globally. Without healthy and diverse sources of public information on which citizens and their representatives may make decisions, they have no common baseline of facts and therefore no true agency to exercise their fundamental right to participate in self-government. Democracy and multilateralism must therefore evolve together: not simply to survive, but to restore democratic control over concentrated power and to build humanity's collective capacity to govern the immense forces we have unleashed. Our task is to ensure that power serves the common good rather than narrow interests; that innovation is guided by human values; and that our growing interdependence is governed wisely, fairly, democratically and peacefully.

The central question of our age is no longer whether humanity possesses sufficient power to transform the world. We do. It is whether we possess the wisdom, the democratic institutions, and the collective imagination necessary to govern that power in the service of human dignity, justice, freedom, and the well-being of future generations.

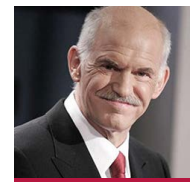
The difficulty of this undertaking cannot be underestimated. To make power serve the common good is not a matter of incremental adjustment or technical reform; it requires a profound transformation in the way we govern ourselves — a genuine reorientation of our institutions, national and global alike, toward the common good rather than the interests of the few. It is the work of a generation, and it will not be accomplished by any single commission, country or institution.

Yet the direction of that transformation is, to my mind, clear. Democracy and multilateralism do not stand apart; each depends upon the other. Democracy needs a multilateral system that protects and sustains it — that helps to shield it from external interference, supports it where it is fragile, and holds power to account beyond the reach of any single state. And multilateralism, in

turn, needs healthy, resilient democracies that help sustain it and, why not, help to democratize it: to make the institutions of international cooperation more transparent, more representative and more accountable, and so more just and more effective. The two must evolve together, or neither will endure.

This is an immense and ambitious agenda, and this Commission has not sought to address it in its entirety. We have chosen, instead, to take up one concrete part of it, as a contribution to a much larger debate. We have asked how multilateral cooperation — with all its shortcomings — can nonetheless help to protect and strengthen democracy at the national level; and where the limits of such cooperation lie, for they are real and must be acknowledged honestly. We have also begun to ask the reciprocal question: how stronger democracies might, in turn, help to make multilateralism itself more efficient and democratic. The first of these questions has occupied the greater part of our work; the second we offer here in more preliminary terms, as an agenda for the road ahead.

This report does not claim to resolve all the great questions of our age. It is a modest contribution to that debate — an attempt to bring clarity and light to one part of a debate on which a great deal will depend. If it helps those who share these concerns — in governments, in international institutions, in philanthropy and civil society, and among citizens themselves — to see more clearly how democracy and multilateralism may strengthen one another, it will have served its purpose.



George Papandreou

Prime Minister of Greece (2009-2011)

Member of Club de Madrid



3.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines today's crises facing democracy and multilateral cooperation as two parts of the same problem. Across regions, democratic institutions are under pressure, public trust is weakening, and the gap between citizens and those who govern continues to widen. At the same time, the multilateral system is strained, politically divided, underfunded and often discredited by selectivity, unequal voice and the failure to hold the powerful to the rules applied to others.

Three important findings⁵ underpin this report:

First, support for democracy as an ideal remains strong, including in societies where democratic institutions are weak, contested or under attack.

Second, substantial evidence shows that high-quality, well-functioning democracies can deliver tangible benefits for citizens while advancing peace, sustainable development and human rights. What has weakened is not belief in democracy, nor its potential, but confidence in the democracy people actually experience: their sense of agency, institutions' capacity to deliver, and trust that public power serves the common good.

Third - and most fundamentally - democratic life is being eroded by corruption; oligarchic, criminal and economic capture; widening inequality; information manipulation; executive overreach; shrinking civic space; and weakening international institutions and international law. These are not separate failures. They are interconnected expressions of a single condition - the concentration of power in fewer hands, increasingly beyond the reach of the democratic institutions meant to guide and restrain it - representing a dangerous drift from the rule of law towards the rule of the powerful.

The Commission starts from another important premise: democracy cannot be imposed from outside, and no international institution can substitute for domestic political agency. Citizens, parliaments, courts, independent media, civil society, alongside local and national authorities, remain the primary actors in democratic life. Yet democracy can no longer be fully protected by domestic action alone. Illicit financial flows, transnational corruption and organized crime, foreign interference, the unaccountable cross-border power of digital platforms, surveillance technologies, transnational repression, disinformation and climate-related instability all operate across borders. Authoritarian actors also increasingly learn from and support one another. Globalized financial structures and governance systems that shield concentrated wealth and power from democratic accountability further narrow the capacity of national governments to deliver for their citizens. International cooperation is therefore not an intrusion into democracy but an increasingly necessary means of protecting the conditions under which democracy can survive and adapt.

This relationship runs in both directions. Multilateral cooperation can help protect democracy; democracy, in turn, underpins the legitimacy and effectiveness of multilateralism. International institutions will not command public trust if people cannot understand their decisions, influence their actions or hold their leaders to account. A multilateral system that excludes affected communities, denies underrepresented countries and regions an equitable voice in decision-making, tolerates impunity or allows unaccountable power to determine whose rights matter undermines its own foundations. Making multilateral cooperation more representative, participatory, transparent and accountable is therefore not separate from protecting democracy; it is part of the same task.

⁵ For the supporting evidence, see the relevant sections and accompanying references throughout this report.

The report assesses the capacities and limits of the three main levels through which international cooperation supports democracy: the United Nations system, regional organizations and plurilateral initiatives. Universal institutions provide common standards, legal and political legitimacy and convening power. Regional organizations offer political proximity, peer leverage and, in some cases, more explicit democratic commitments. Plurilateral coalitions can act faster, experiment more freely and give non-state actors a more meaningful role than traditional intergovernmental settings. None can replace the others. Their value lies in working as complementary parts of an interconnected system capable of identifying threats early, defending civic actors and institutions under pressure, coordinating responses and turning agreed commitments into action.

The report is equally clear, however, about the limitations of multilateralism in its current form. Many parts of the world do not experience the international order as a neutral framework of common rules. Instead, they confront unequal representation in international institutions, the selective application of international law, debt arrangements that place disproportionate burdens on vulnerable countries and economic rules that often privilege the powerful. These are not marginal grievances; they affect the credibility of multilateralism itself. A democratic international order⁶ cannot be sustained by states that exempt themselves from the standards they urge others to uphold.

A further premise of the report is that democracy cannot be reduced to elections alone, nor defended only by preserving existing institutions in their current form. Democracy is the continuing and innovative practice of ensuring that power can be questioned, limited, shared and corrected without violence. It requires free and fair elections, the rule of law, independent courts, a pluralist information environment, protected civic space, meaningful and nonviolent political competition and equal rights. It also requires the practical ability of citizens to exercise those rights – to obtain reliable information, organize collectively, influence decisions and hold power to account.

Against this background, the Commission proposes four cross-cutting recommendations for a revitalized international agenda for renewing democracy:

- **Prioritize international support for democracy that delivers both material improvements in people's lives and the essential guarantees of freedom, dignity and justice.**

Delivery of public services and fundamental rights must not be treated as competing objectives. The report emphasizes that this relationship runs in both directions: the fulfillment of economic and social rights is essential to democratic self-rule, while democracy itself is an enabler of inclusive and sustainable development rather than a secondary concern. International institutions and actors working across finance, trade, business, health, technology and development should align their actions with both objectives, helping societies deliver tangible results for people's well-being while respecting human rights. Donors should reverse the collapse in financing for democracy and tie democratic standards to tangible benefits. This means supporting concrete progress towards fulfilling citizens' rightful demands for decent jobs, clean air and water, public safety, and quality education, while strengthening the democratic safeguards essential to public trust, including free and fair elections, a healthy information ecosystem, equal rights for all, and separation of powers.

⁶ A democratic international order is understood here as one in which all States are subject to common rules, countries and regions are equitably represented, international institutions are transparent and accountable, and those affected by global decisions have meaningful opportunities to influence them.

- **Democratize multilateral decision-making and bring people and democratic institutions closer to it.**

The breach between those affected by international decisions and the institutions that make them must be narrowed. At the same time, formal and functional imbalances in decision-making power among Member States must be addressed, including through permanent African representation on the United Nations Security Council and similar reforms to rebalance power in multilateral institutions. This also requires greater participation not only by civil society, but also by parliaments, elected local and regional authorities, electoral bodies, human rights institutions, oversight bodies and other democratic institutions beyond the executive. The report supports stronger channels for civil society participation that influence outcomes, not merely consultation without consequence, and greater use of deliberative and participatory democratic practices in both national and multilateral settings.

- **Invest strategically in plurilateral cooperation for democracy.**

In a world of vetoes, fragmentation and unequal political will, smaller coalitions of like-minded actors can help develop solutions, demonstrate workable reforms and build momentum where broader consensus is blocked. Plurilateralism should not, however, become a means of bypassing inclusion or accountability. Coalitions should be transparent in their commitments, open to wider participation, consistent with international law and human rights, attentive to lower-capacity states and designed to strengthen – not displace – established multilateral institutions. Before creating new initiatives, states should strengthen and adapt what already exists, build accountability into the design of coalitions, and broaden regional ownership and participation, particularly by countries and actors from Africa and other parts of the Global South.

- **Support the democratization of power itself.**

Over time, economic and technological power converts concentrated ownership, financial power, media dominance and control of data and digital infrastructure into political influence, weakening the practical meaning of democratic choice. The report therefore treats the governance of economic and technological power as part of the democracy agenda. This includes stronger action on corruption, tax havens and illicit finance, money in politics, lobbying and revolving doors, international tax cooperation, accountability for digital platforms and artificial intelligence, support for public administration that is rules-based and capable, investing in the foundations of civic life including the care economy, and recognizing forms of collective socio-economic organization as part of democracy's infrastructure.

Within this framework, the Commission and its three Working Groups identify five thematic priorities where democratic decline is acute and international cooperation can make a practical difference. In each area, we propose specific recommendations for cooperation at different multilateral levels to help democracies deliver better results. We start with what the Commission has concluded is the most serious risk facing citizens' ability to govern themselves – the malign use of digital technology and artificial intelligence.

- **Digital Technology and Artificial Intelligence.**

- Strengthen democratic safeguards in global digital and artificial intelligence governance.
- Subject public and private algorithmic and machine-learning power to democratic accountability.
- Prevent the use of digital technology for political surveillance and repression.
- Invest in inclusive and pro-democracy uses of digital technologies and artificial intelligence.
- Establish standing forums to imagine and shape the future of democracy.

- **Respect for Constitutions, Checks and Balances, and the Rule of Law.**

- Integrate democratic and constitutional risks into UN conflict prevention strategies.
- Elevate constitutionalism and equip multilateral cooperation to address gradual erosion.
- Strengthen regional mechanisms that defend constitutional order and apply them consistently.
- Support directly the institutions and networks that constrain power.

- **Electoral Integrity.**

- Protect and adequately resource international electoral assistance and observation.
- Uphold the credibility and strengthen the capacity of international electoral observation.
- Address manipulation of the information environment and foreign interference in elections.
- Close technological gaps in electoral integrity without reopening established frameworks.
- Support preventive commitments to respect credible results and lawful dispute resolution.

- **Corruption and Political Capture.**

- Turn international anti-corruption commitments into national practice beginning with money in politics.
- Close the enforcement gap on grand corruption and recovery of stolen assets.
- Strengthen and connect regional and plurilateral anti-corruption mechanisms.
- Recognize and protect the civic movements at the frontline against corruption.

- **Equality and Civil Rights.**

- Protect and adequately resource institutions that uphold equality and civil rights.
- Turn monitoring of civic space restrictions into coordinated protection and response.
- Protect and sustain independent civic action.
- Make equality in political participation a measurable part of international support and review.
- Strengthen and connect plurilateral coalitions defending equality and civil rights. Democracy and multilateralism must now be renewed together. Democracies need international cooperation to govern the cross-border forces shaping citizens' lives. Multilateral institutions, in turn, need democracies that uphold democratic principles and decision-making processes that are more representative, participatory and accountable if they are to act legitimately, uphold common rules and serve the public good. The aim is neither to preserve an inadequate order nor to surrender to fragmented power politics, but to reorganize and constrain power—within states and across borders – and to ensure that decisions take account of present and future generations. Achieving this ambitious goal requires renewed commitment to democratic principles; investment in democratic institutions, public servants, civic capacity and deliberative processes; and international cooperation able to translate common commitments into action.

The benchmarks of progress are clear: greater citizen agency; more accountable public institutions; effective democratic oversight of concentrated economic and technological power; and common rules applied consistently to all States, regardless of their power. This is a demanding task, but it is achievable. Now is the time for leaders and citizens committed to democracy to show that democratic governance can deliver tangible results while also reinforcing participation, accountability and rights, and to act together across borders in the spirit of pluralism and the rule of law, which give democracy and multilateral cooperation their true meaning.

4.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Democracy rests on a few fundamental ideas with deep roots across centuries and cultures: everyone is entitled to a set of universal rights including the right to participate, directly or through elected representatives, in the decisions that affect them; no one is above or below the law; the power to govern is limited, shared, checked and peacefully transferred; and conflicts are resolved through dialogue and fair justice, rather than violence and tyranny.

While these first principles have taken many different shapes in a variety of political systems, they share the overarching goal of respecting both individual freedoms and the common good while also allowing space for constant adaptation, self-correction and renewal. Yet the practices of democracy today, across established and newer democracies, reveal tensions and contradictions that are weakening democratic institutions and principles from within and undermining social cohesion. We are now living through a historic period when the need for democratic revitalization and innovation is urgent.

Although democracy as an ideal still commands wide popular support,⁷ even where leaders invoke it without upholding its principles, the Commission recognizes that, as practiced today, it is failing to meet the needs and aspirations of vast numbers of people around the world. We are reminded every day that democracy is hard-won and fragile. It is a constant work in progress, requiring citizens to be empowered to participate in the decisions that affect them and to hold power to account.

At this crucial time in history, with multiple crises weakening human and planetary well-being, we must continuously re-examine democracy's strengths and weaknesses and have the courage to renew it. Likewise, we believe it is important to re-evaluate the purposes and instruments the international community has used to support peoples' democratic aspirations. We recognize, for example, the harmful and counterproductive record of some initiatives where "democracy promotion" has been used as an instrument of geopolitical power, rather than as an expression of deeply held values.

Our goal is to learn from past mistakes and successes, make use of the self-correcting mechanisms democratic systems inherently afford, reinforce the spirit of multilateralism, and move forward on the basis of our common humanity. We believe multilateral cooperation based on mutual respect and the rule of law offers the strongest basis for societies to address shared challenges and pursue peace, justice, dignity and hope.

In the following sections, we review the current context for revitalizing democracy and the contributions multilateral cooperation can make to defend and strengthen it.

⁷ Pew Research Center, *Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, but People Around the World Are Critical of How It's Working* (Washington, D.C., February 2024); Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk – The People's Perspective* (2024); Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe Latinobarómetro 2024: La Democracia Resiliente* (Santiago, 2024).

4.1 Democracy in Retreat

For the past two decades, respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law has significantly deteriorated around the world. The documented trends, according to multiple studies, are unambiguous.⁸ Political rights and civil liberties, especially freedom of expression and association, are under attack, constraints on executive power are eroding, and the rule of law is weakening. Paradoxically, while social media has expanded access to information, it has also contributed to the fragmentation of the information ecosystem, the rapid spread of disinformation and the weakening of high-quality, independent news media as a source of reliable information for public debate.

What is driving this degradation in democratic performance and concomitant rise in authoritarian rule? The factors, which vary country by country, are complex and dynamic, local and global, political and economic, analog and digital.⁹

We see, for example:

- Political systems captured by concentrated wealth or penetrated by organized crime fail to respond to people's demands for improvements in their daily lives, exacerbating inequality and dimming their hope for a better future.¹⁰
- A deepening crisis of ethical leadership in which some elites from politics, business and the media are using their growing political, economic and technological power and wealth to put their own interests ahead of the public good.¹¹
- Disaffected voters who turn toward populists promising quick and easy solutions where they feel the system is failing them — whether through inequality, economic decline, insecurity, migration or cultural change, in combinations that differ from country to country.
- Tensions between democratic procedures and performance, particularly when checks and balances are captured, instrumentalized or perceived as serving elite interests, weakening citizens' confidence in the capacity of democratic institutions to respond to their needs.
- Structural barriers to economic growth and social development, many of them transnational and built into the international economic order, that constrain the ability of some democracies to deliver tangible outcomes for their citizens.
- Declining trust in information sources and the increasing concentration of control over the information ecosystem in a few private hands, which together fuel polarization, grievance and a retreat into like-minded groups.¹²
- Polarization further exacerbates the critical task of building broad-based agreements to solve common problems for people and thereby frustrates democracies' ability to deliver results.

⁸V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (University of Gothenburg, 2026); International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2026: Democracy in an Age of Conflict* (Stockholm, 2026); International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move* (Stockholm, 2025); Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights* (Washington, D.C., 2025).

⁹The social science literature on the main drivers of democratic decline suggests a wide variety of causes, ranging from power elites capturing state institutions to technological trends that both facilitate and fragment citizen engagement in political life. For a summary of recent analyses, see Joseph Foti, "Explaining Democratic Decline: Competing Camps, Diverging Solutions," TAI Collaborative, 11 August 2025.

¹⁰According to the *Edelman Trust Barometer*, only 32 percent of those surveyed in 28 countries from every region of the world said the next generation will be better off compared to today. Some of the biggest declines were reported in India, Singapore, Thailand and China.. See also Eli G. Rau and Susan Stokes, *Income inequality and the erosion of democracy in the twenty-first century*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS), Dec. 30, 2024, Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (July 2024).

¹¹Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (July 2024).

¹²2026 *Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report*.

SEEDS OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE

Democracy's retreat is only half the picture. Time and again, in every region, citizens continue to defend and demand it. Voters and independent institutions have defended the results of contested elections against attempts to overturn them. Youth-led movements have risen against discrimination, repression and kleptocracy. Sustained non-violent resistance has worn down entrenched leaders who had spent years hollowing out democratic institutions from within. And in countries under attack, people continue to fight and sacrifice for their freedom and for a peace grounded in self-government.

Even in the most repressive environments, the aspiration to freedom and justice endures. Public demand for democracy remains strong across the world: survey data continue to show that large majorities regard democracy as highly important, a normative aspiration that persists even where institutions are weak or absent.¹³

This resilience has a common engine. Civil society organizations, grassroots movements and, very often, women and youth remain among the most underestimated forces sustaining democratic life — through local organizing, door-to-door campaigning and direct engagement, online and offline. Even under repression, civic activism of this kind has been central to democratic renewal, a durable force amid institutional and financial decline.¹⁴

¹³ Nira Data and Alliance of Democracies, Democracy Perception Index 2025 (2025)

¹⁴ Sabine Donner, Hauke Hartmann and Sebastian Plate, Repression Meets Resistance: BTI 2026 Global Findings. Bertelsmann Stiftung (2026)

These factors, among many others, breed a corrosive dissatisfaction with democratic systems that seem captured by the powerful, that deliver elections but not poverty reduction, good jobs, or access to basic services, leading citizens to question the value of voting itself.¹⁵

This erosion of trust in leaders and institutions has a social dimension. Lower-income individuals report significantly lower trust in governments, media, NGOs and businesses than higher-income individuals,¹⁶ a gap that reflects a wider sense that institutions work for some and not for others.

Against this backdrop, authoritarian-minded leaders do not merely benefit from distrust; they actively cultivate it, consolidating their hold on power through a mix of appeals to populist or ethno-nationalist sentiments, entrenched corruption, cooperation with like-minded actors across borders, and outright repression of legitimate opposition voices.

Two points deserve particular emphasis. First, dissatisfaction with democratic performance should not be mistaken for rejection of democracy itself. Across regions, support for democracy as an ideal remains strong, including where democratic institutions are weak or under attack.¹⁷ What has eroded is confidence in democracy as people experience it: whether institutions respond to their needs, deliver essential services and give them meaningful influence over the decisions that shape their lives.

Second, these trends are not separate failures. They reflect a common underlying condition: the concentration of political, economic and technological power beyond effective democratic control. Democratic forms may remain in place — elections are held, courts sit and institutions continue to operate — while consequential

decisions increasingly migrate to actors and arenas beyond public scrutiny and accountability.

Concentrated power operates through different channels. Some involve direct or unlawful capture, including bribery, criminal penetration and illicit political finance. Others arise from structural conditions or practices that may be lawful, including concentrated ownership, opaque lobbying and revolving doors, clientelist transactions and favors, control over media, digital platforms, data and computing infrastructure, and the transfer of environmental costs to people without an effective voice, including future generations.

This concentration of power has been accompanied, in many contexts, by a weakening of the intermediary institutions through which citizens translate shared interests into sustained collective action. Political parties, trade unions, cooperatives, professional bodies, local associations and other membership-based organizations have lost reach or capacity. New networks, campaigns and digital communities can mobilize people rapidly, but often do not provide the durable representative structures needed to pool resources, negotiate with power, sustain collective pressure and hold leaders accountable over time.

To translate this diagnosis into concrete areas for action and recommendations, the Commission and its three Working Groups focused on five main features of recent democratic decline and their relationship to multilateral cooperation. These five areas were selected because they are fields in which democratic decline is undermining societies across a wide range of contexts, and where multilateral cooperation — global, regional and plurilateral — can plausibly make a difference, by strengthening existing norms and institutions, improving their application, or addressing gaps between them.

¹⁵ Annika Silva-Leander, “*Democracy as Engine for Social Development and Shared Prosperity*” (International IDEA, 2026).

¹⁶ 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, *Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, but People Around the World Are Critical of How It’s Working* (Washington, D.C., February 2024); Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk – The People’s Perspective* (2024); Corporación Latino-barómetro, *Informe Latinobarómetro 2024: La Democracia Resiliente* (Santiago, 2024).

1. Digital Technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Social media platforms and the business models behind them have become a powerful engine for manipulation, disinformation, and propaganda, and damaging the information ecosystem on which healthy democracies depend. Poorly governed AI systems risk intensifying these harms — from synthetic media to automated influence — undermining the deliberation and human agency that democracy and human rights require. At the same time, responsibly designed and governed digital technologies can strengthen access to information, participation and democratic deliberation.

2. Respect for Constitutions, Checks and Balances, and the Rule of Law

Executive overreach at the expense of robust legislatures and independent judiciaries has become a prevalent trend in both established and younger democracies.¹⁸ It increasingly advances not through sudden rupture but through legal and quasi-legal means, capturing courts, neutralizing legislatures and hollowing out institutions from within.

3. Electoral Integrity

Regular, free and fair elections are under serious pressure across the electoral cycle: from opaque political finance, politicized oversight bodies and efforts to restrict access to the vote to information manipulation, foreign interference and campaign strategies designed to cast doubt on the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. These pressures weaken public confidence not only in individual results, but in elections as a credible mechanism for resolving political competition peacefully.

4. Corruption and Political Capture

The capture of politics by powerful actors, including oligarchs, corporations and criminal networks, distorts public decision-making toward private interests at the expense of the common good. Beyond the resources it diverts, this capture corrodes the public trust on which democratic legitimacy rests.

5. Equality and Civil Rights

Respect for freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and the equal rights of women and minorities are in decline around much of the world, curtailing the ability of ordinary people to speak, organize and live as equals under the law. Those who defend these rights, including activists, non-governmental organizations, journalists and independent judges, face mounting harassment, intimidation and criminalization.

These five areas share a feature that shapes the rest of this report: they raise challenges that cannot be fully resolved by domestic action alone. In part this is because the threats themselves cross borders — the technologies that distort public debate, the illicit finance that fuels corruption, the foreign interference that targets elections, and the transnational networks that repress activists—all outrun the reach of any single state. The response, therefore, must also be national and international: democratic reformers, institutions, and civil society working within their own societies can be strengthened, protected and sustained by support from beyond their borders. This is the central premise of this report: that multilateral cooperation, without ever substituting for domestic political struggle, can help to protect and strengthen democracy at the national level.

¹⁸ V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (University of Gothenburg, March 2026). See in particular the findings on legislative constraints and autocratizing countries.

The international system can support democracy at three levels, each with distinct strengths. Global institutions, such as the United Nations, can set universal norms, encourage democratic processes, and provide technical support to states that seek it, even if their mixed membership limits how far they can go. Regional organizations can bind their members to shared democratic commitments, deter backsliding, and act with the political proximity and leverage that neighbors possess. And more flexible plurilateral coalitions of willing states and other actors can move faster, set higher standards, and pioneer forms of support that broader bodies are too slow to adopt. Across all three, cooperation can help domestic actors defend civic space, uphold rights, safeguard elections and hold power to account.

Yet the capacity of this multi-layered system to play that role cannot be taken for granted. The multilateral order is itself under strain — contested, underfunded, and in important respects experienced by much of the world as neither neutral nor fair. Before turning to how cooperation can better support democracy, then, this report must first examine the condition of the multilateral system itself.

4.2 The Limits of Multilateralism

The traditional multilateral system, built up over decades as the principal way states resolve disputes and take collective action to address common problems, is experiencing a period marked by high expectations and disappointing delivery. Long-standing forums remain essential, yet their capacity to act is constrained by a convergence of pressures including intensifying geopolitical rivalry, the withdrawal of political and financial support by key powers, the persistent use of double standards, and the fact that many of these institutions were never designed to ensure an equitable distribution of voice and decision-making power.

These dynamics are reflected in recurrent tensions between North and South due to inherent power imbalances and anachronistic structures; in intensifying competition between major powers; and in a growing fragmentation within multilateral bodies. Some Member States have shifted from more or less reliable leadership of the multilateral order toward coercion and outright hostility actively undermining international law and institutions and cutting the funding on which they depend.¹⁹ Others are promoting an alternative vision, calling for “an equal and orderly multipolar world and international relations of a new type, including a more just and rational system of global governance”²⁰ while leading efforts to weaken international involvement in governance and human rights matters they consider internal affairs. Together these trends have exacerbated longstanding fractures in political will to sustain the forms of international cooperation developed after the Second World War and further degraded the ability of institutions to respond coherently to global and regional crises.

At the global level, the UN Security Council’s paralysis in the face of major conflicts has become emblematic of these shortcomings, crystallizing longstanding concerns about double standards and selective application of international law, and fueling a wider erosion of trust in the system’s fairness and legitimacy. Structural power imbalances embedded in the UN Security Council and many other multilateral organizations continue to leave the global majority sidelined and under-represented, and rightfully demanding greater voice. The UN’s Pact for the Future itself recognizes the need for a Security Council and UN institutions that are more representative, inclusive, transparent, effective, democratic and accountable, with particular attention to the historic under-representation of Africa and other regions.²¹ These pressures interact with a wider financing shortfall in bilateral and multilateral aid for sustainable development, including in the democratic governance sector,²² exposing a gap between the expanding scope of multilateral mandates and the means available to implement them.

¹⁹ The White House, ‘[Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States](#)’, Presidential Memorandum, 7 January 2026.

²⁰ Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, Beijing, 20 May 2026.

²¹ United Nations General Assembly, [Pact for the Future](#), (2024), section on Security Council reform; see also The Elders, [Global Cooperation in a Fragmented World](#) (September 2025); High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, [A Breakthrough for People and Planet](#) (United Nations University, 2023). Working Group 1, [Revitalizing Support for Democracy Within the UN System](#), expert input paper prepared by International IDEA for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

²² OECD, [preliminary 2025 official development assistance data \(2026\)](#); Global Democracy Coalition, [When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem](#) (2025).

For many countries, moreover, the international order is not experienced as a neutral framework of common rules. It is experienced through persistent asymmetries: unequal voting power in international financial institutions; debt arrangements that can impose prolonged hardship on vulnerable economies while wealthier states retain far greater fiscal room for manoeuvre; trade and investment rules shaped disproportionately by powerful interests; national and cross-border tax systems that allow wealth and profits to escape effective taxation, reducing public revenues and shifting a disproportionate burden on ordinary taxpayers; and the selective application of international law when its demands conflict with the interests of the powerful. These are not separate grievances from the question of democracy. They are manifestations, at the global level, of the same underlying condition: concentrated power insufficiently accountable to those affected by its exercise.

Regional organizations vary greatly in design and capacity, and face limits of their own. Most remain relatively shallow in their degree of integration — the European Union being the principal exception — which can limit the collective leverage available to them. Their mechanisms tend to operate by consensus or broad agreement, and Member States are often reluctant to bring pressure to bear on their peers, which can blunt collective responses to crises in particular countries. Many have also grown more internally divided in recent years, as members adjust to a shifting geopolitical landscape and the rivalry among major powers plays out within them. Limited financing is a further constraint in most regions, leaving little capacity for sustained engagement. As a result, even where regional organizations have developed substantial democracy-related norms and instruments, their application is often uneven.

The strains on the system are also reshaping the dynamics of cooperation itself. New groupings and coalitions continue to form outside, alongside or within the established institutions, driven by very different motives: some by the long-standing demand of under-

represented regions for a greater say in global affairs; others by the pragmatic search for solutions where established institutions are unable to act; and still others by the preference of powerful states for arrangements less constraining than those they helped build. The result is a more fluid and contested landscape, in which the terms of cooperation are increasingly negotiated outside the forums designed for that purpose.

Yet the same crisis is also generating a more constructive impulse: a willingness among states to find new ways of solving shared problems, with or without the most dominant powers, as Prime Minister Carney has pointed out: *“We are entering an era of ‘variable geometry, characterized by dynamic, overlapping, pragmatic coalitions, built around shared interests, and occasionally shared values, rather than shared institutions’”*.²³

Much of this activity takes plurilateral form — smaller, flexible groupings of States and, increasingly, non-state actors from civil society and the private sector, organized around a specific problem rather than a shared geography or a permanent institution. Plurilateralism is not new, but its prominence is: when universal or regional bodies are deadlocked or constrained, it has become one of the principal ways cooperation can still get done. For democracy support in particular, it carries a distinct promise, and distinct risks, to which this report returns in detail.

Together these factors help explain why the effectiveness and legitimacy of international institutions are increasingly questioned, even as demand for collective solutions continues to grow. These dynamics illustrate the dual pressures facing the multilateral system: the imperative to adapt to new realities while addressing longstanding deficits of trust and effectiveness. This is the international context in which the Commission situated its work: a multilateral order under immense strain, long characterized by selectivity and double standards, but still essential for managing interdependence and forging global consensus for the common good.

²¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Pact for the Future*, (2024), section on Security Council reform; see also The Elders, *Global Cooperation in a Fragmented World* (September 2025); High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet* (United Nations University, 2023). Working Group 1, *Revitalizing Support for Democracy Within the UN System*, expert input paper prepared by International IDEA for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

²² OECD, *preliminary 2025 official development assistance data (2026)*; Global Democracy Coalition, *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem* (2025).

²³ Mark Carney, ‘The World Is in a New Age of Variable Geometry’, *The Economist*, *The World Ahead 2026*, 12 November 2025.



5. REVITALIZING MULTILATERAL COOPERATION TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY

The Commission is under no illusion about the world into which this report arrives. The multilateral system today faces acute pressures: active wars, humanitarian emergencies, accelerating climate disruption, and profound doubts about the future of international cooperation itself. This report does not seek to rank these crises, nor does the Commission claim that its mandate reaches the full breadth of what the moment demands. Its purpose is deliberately narrower: to examine how international cooperation can better support democracy, and how committed democracies can help sustain a multilateral system grounded in rules, accountability, participation and human dignity.

We are also aware that some question whether democracy belongs on the multilateral agenda at all. The founding texts of the current international order enshrine the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs. From this perspective, how a country chooses to govern itself is primarily a matter of national sovereignty and should therefore remain outside the remit of multilateral institutions.

The Commission takes this objection seriously. Democracy cannot be imposed from outside. But this does not place democracy beyond the legitimate scope of international cooperation. Nor is its place in the multilateral system a foreign imposition. Member States themselves have woven its core values into the system's stated goals and practices. For example, the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the human rights covenants, and decades of subsequent practice embody the principles that give democracy meaning: the right of all people to take part in public affairs, freedom of expression and association, equality before the law, and the accountability of those who govern. To support these universal principles is not to impose a particular model of government, still less to intrude on legitimate sovereignty. It is to uphold commitments that nearly all states themselves have made, democracies and non-democracies alike, and that belong to people as rights-holders, not only to governments as sovereign actors.

Nor is multilateral cooperation confined to the United Nations. In the area of democracy, some of the clearest mandates and most developed instruments are found in other multilateral institutions. Regional organizations have adopted democratic commitments in explicit terms, binding their members to standards their governments accepted freely and giving those standards the legitimacy that comes from agreement among neighbors rather than imposition from outside. Plurilateral coalitions of states and other actors, formed around specific problems, have proved able to move faster and set higher standards than universal bodies can readily negotiate. Each level carries its own authority and its own limits. The question is therefore not which of them should act, but how global, regional and plurilateral cooperation can work together more effectively.

The work already under way is much more substantial and wide-ranging than is often recognized. Within the United Nations, democracy-related activity is dispersed across all three pillars of the organization (peace and security, sustainable development and human rights): electoral assistance provided at the request of Member States since 1991; constitutional and rule-of-law support; human rights monitoring through the treaty bodies and special procedures as well as peer-to-peer mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review; anti-corruption work under the UN Convention against Corruption; the advancement of women's political participation; media development and the protection of journalists; and support for civil society, for example through the UN Democracy Fund.

Some regional organizations have in formal terms gone further, adopting explicit democratic charters and, in several cases, binding commitments against unconstitutional changes of government.²⁵ And a dense layer of plurilateral initiatives has grown up around specific problems — open government, electoral processes, anti-corruption and financial transparency, media freedom, digital rights — frequently bringing governments together with civil society and technical bodies. The result, built over decades, is a significant, if

sometimes fragile, international ecosystem to support democracy that is fragmented and lacks coherent coordination.

What has changed is less the existence of this architecture than the conditions in which it operates — and its purpose. Where the 1990s and 2000s were characterized by established democracies assisting others to democratize, through election observation, constitutional advice, judicial reform and support to civil society, part of today's effort is directed at strengthening their own resilience against transnational threats such as information manipulation, illicit finance, the erosion of civic space and the political consequences of ungoverned technology. This shift has also changed who must be involved. Because so many of these threats run through privately controlled platforms, financial intermediaries and technology firms, effective cooperation increasingly requires non-state actors as operational partners rather than as observers.

At the same time, the means to support democratic governance have contracted sharply. International assistance for democracy has fallen markedly over the past decade, and the decline is visible even in the most established areas of work: United Nations spending on electoral assistance dropped from a peak of some USD 35 million in 2016 to around USD 13 million in 2024.²⁷ Regional organizations, with the partial exception of the European Union²⁸ and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), allocate little to no dedicated funding to democracy work. And the withdrawal of the sector's largest single donor, the United States, has left programs and coalitions without their principal source of support, among them plurilateral initiatives such as the Community of Democracies and the Summit for Democracy process, which gained early momentum but have since lost much of it.²⁹

Resources are not the only constraint. The credibility of democracy support has also been damaged. The democratic practices of countries long treated as reference points are themselves under strain, weakened

²⁵ Working Group 2, *Regional Organizations and Democracy Support*, expert input paper prepared by the European Democracy Hub for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

²⁶ Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

²⁷ Working Group 1, *Revitalizing Support for Democracy Within the UN System*, expert input paper prepared by International IDEA for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

²⁸ Working Group 2, *Regional Organizations and Democracy Support*, expert input paper prepared by the European Democracy Hub for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

²⁹ Global Democracy Coalition, *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem* (2025).

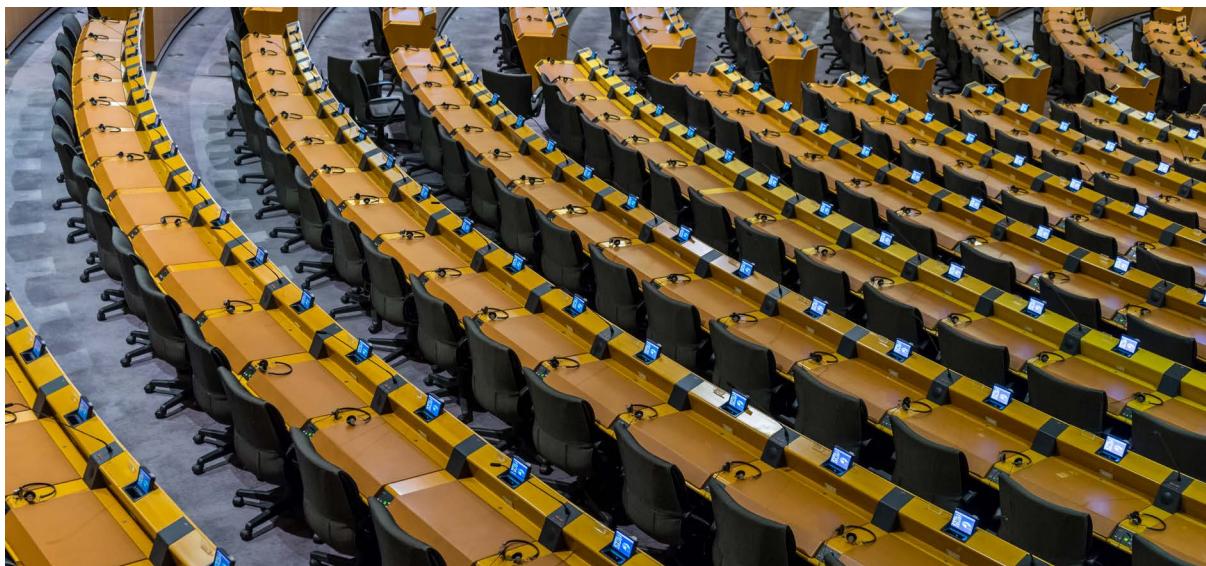
by polarization, capture by special interests, and the erosion of checks and balances. Contradictions between declared democratic values and foreign policy interests, nowhere more visible than in responses to recent conflicts, have deepened the perception that democratic principles are applied selectively. And democracy assistance has long been seen by some as an expression of Western or Global North agendas rather than the universal experience it embodies — a perception sustained less by the substance of the work than by the distance between rhetoric and practice.

These pressures fall differently on each level of the system. At the United Nations, a reassertion of national sovereignty and more assertive diplomacy from non-democratic Member States have weighed against efforts to embed democracy support more firmly in the organization's work,³⁰ even as the UN retains advantages no other actor possesses: Its universal and highly diverse membership, convening power and capacity to connect electoral and constitutional support to peacebuilding, sustainable development and human rights at global scale. Regional organizations enjoy a legitimacy that global bodies cannot match — standards agreed among neighbors are harder to dismiss as external imposition, and many states prove readier to discuss democracy with regional peers than in universal forums — yet they remain constrained by consensus rules and scarce resources. Plurilateral coalitions can provide greater scope for

the meaningful participation of non-state actors than traditional intergovernmental processes, can move faster and set higher standards, but reach fewer states and depend more heavily on the political commitment and resources of a few.

Taken together, these dynamics present a paradox. Multilateral frameworks remain essential to managing global interdependence, yet their capacity to deliver consistent, inclusive and legitimate outcomes is increasingly questioned. For democratic forces under pressure, this creates a dilemma: the very institutions that should support their domestic efforts are themselves fragile and contested.

It is on this uneven ground that the Commission proceeds. Its first step is to reaffirm a conviction that has guided its deliberations: democratic institutions and practices, including effective mechanisms for accountability and self-correction, are essential to advancing the universal goals of peace and security, sustainable development and human rights for all, within and across societies. The recommendations that follow rest on the Commission's conclusion that supporting democracy is a legitimate purpose of international cooperation at every level. It is a purpose firmly grounded in commitments that states made when establishing the multilateral system, even as the political will and practical means to pursue it are increasingly under strain.



³⁰ One prominent example is the failure to secure consensus on an explicit reference to democracy in the 2030 Agenda. The eventual compromise was Sustainable Development Goal 16, through which States agreed to “[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. See Working Group 1, *Revitalizing Support for Democracy Within the UN System*, expert input paper prepared by International IDEA for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026); United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1 (25 September 2015), Goal 16.

THE CASE FOR DEMOCRACY

Beyond its intrinsic value as an expression of human dignity and self-government, a substantial body of comparative research finds that democracies tend, on average, to deliver better outcomes across several dimensions of peace, human development and environmental governance.³¹ These dividends are strongest where democratic institutions are durable and inclusive, power is subject to effective checks, the rule of law is upheld, and public institutions are capable of delivering.

- **Peace.** Consolidated democracies with effective checks on power are markedly less likely to go to war with one another. They are also less prone to civil conflict and domestic instability. Free and fair elections, constraints on executive power and an active civil society help channel political competition and public discontent through nonviolent mechanisms. When these safeguards are weakened, the risk of violence rises. Because democratic transitions themselves can be volatile, credible elections, inclusive power-sharing and sustained international support are essential to consolidating peace.³²
- **Health and longevity.** Democratic systems are associated with longer life expectancy and lower infant and child mortality, while democratic erosion is associated with deterioration in life expectancy and health-care coverage.³³
- **Long-term growth.** Democracy is, on average, associated with stronger and less volatile long-term growth in GDP per capita. Its distributional effects depend on the strength of welfare institutions, public services and political inclusion.³⁴
- **Education.** Democratization is associated with substantial long-term increases in school enrolment, average years of schooling and public expenditure on education, with particularly important benefits for low- and middle-income households and rural communities.³⁵
- **Gender equality and women's empowerment.** Gender equality tends to advance more strongly in democratic contexts, especially when States translate democratic commitments into practice through successive competitive elections, well-designed and effectively enforced gender quotas, and measures enabling women's meaningful political participation.³⁶
- **Public Goods.** Democracies with strong accountability mechanisms have been shown to provide safer water access, more immunization to young children, and more electricity access than non-democracies.³⁷
- **Famine prevention.** No liberal democracy has suffered famine, as Amartya Sen showed over 25 years ago. Democratic accountability can help safeguard against famine: free media provide early warning, competitive elections create pressure to act, and civil society mobilizes resources and public pressure.
- **Corruption:** Corruption diminishes as democracy matures with fully free and fair elections and freedom of expression including media freedom.³⁹

³¹ International IDEA, *Democracy as an Engine for Social Development and Shared Prosperity: An Overview of Evidence and Pathways* (Stockholm, 2026); Maya Tudor, 'What Democracy Does . . . And Does Not Do', *Journal of Democracy* 36, no. 4 (2025).

³² V-Dem Institute, *The Case for Democracy: Does Democracy Bring International and Domestic Peace and Security?*, Policy Brief No. 30 (11 May 2021); David Altman, Francisco Rojas-de-Galarreta and Francisco Urdinez, 'An Interactive Model of Democratic Peace,' *Journal of Peace Research* (2020); Håvard Hegre, Michael Bernhard and Jan Teorell, 'Civil Society and the Democratic Peace,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 1 (2020): 32–62; Hanne Fjelde, Carl Henrik Knutsen and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, 'Which Institutions Matter? Re-Considering the Democratic Civil Peace,' *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2021): 223–237.



We propose, more specifically, that advocates for strengthening international support for democracy focus on four ambitious cross-cutting goals:

- Prioritize support for democracy that delivers both tangible improvements to people's lives and the essential guarantees of freedom, dignity and justice;
- Democratize multilateral decision-making and bring people and democratic institutions closer to multilateral decision-making;
- Invest strategically in plurilateral cooperation for democracy;
- Support the democratization of power itself.

³³ V-Dem Institute, *The Case for Democracy: Does Democracy Increase Global Health?*, Policy Brief No. 29 (11 May 2021); Thomas J. Bollyky et al., "The Relationships between Democratic Experience, Adult Health, and Cause-Specific Mortality in 170 Countries between 1980 and 2016: An Observational Analysis," *The Lancet* 393, no. 10181 (2019): 1628–1640; Simon Wigley et al., "Autocratisation and Universal Health Coverage: Synthetic Control Study," *BMJ* 371 (2020).

³⁴ Daron Acemoglu et al., "Democracy Does Cause Growth," *Journal of Political Economy* 127, no. 1 (2019): 47–100; V-Dem Institute, *The Case for Democracy: Does Democracy Cause Economic Growth, Stability, and Work for the Poor?*, Policy Brief No. 27 (11 May 2021); Tudor, "What Democracy Does . . . And Does Not Do."

³⁵ V-Dem Institute, *The Case for Democracy: Does Democracy Have Dividends for Education?*, V-Dem Policy Brief No. 35 (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, January 2022)

³⁶ V-Dem Institute, *Does Democracy Promote Gender Equality?*, V-Dem Policy Brief No. 37 (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, December 2022)

³⁷ V-Dem Institute, *The Case for Democracy: Does Democracy Improve Public Goods Provision?*, Policy Brief No. 33 (2022).

³⁸ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1999). In a more recent analysis of 22 famine events across post-colonial Africa, 59% occurred under closed autocracies, 36% under electoral autocracies, and just 4.5% under electoral democracies. Zero famines have struck liberal democracies. Raffael Hueberli, World Peace Foundation, Tufts University, July 2025.

³⁹ V-Dem Institute, *Can Democracy Limit Corruption?*, V-Dem Policy Brief No. 36 (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, December 2022).

5.1 Prioritize support for democracy that delivers both tangible improvements to people's lives and the essential guarantees of freedom, dignity and justice

As noted above, people still believe in the values of democracy but they are dissatisfied with the way their governments respond to their daily struggles for decent wages, safe neighborhoods and affordable healthcare and housing. The feedback loop between citizens' demands and social and economic outcomes is not working in large part because the political process has been captured by elites for their own interests. To compound the problem, public debt,⁴⁰ interest payments and military budgets are climbing,⁴¹ while direct international assistance of all kinds is falling, including steep cuts in aid for democratic governance, human rights and the rule of law. In 2025, official development assistance recorded the largest annual decline in its history,⁴² and democracy assistance was among the sectors most severely affected. This retreat is not an accounting matter: it is a delivery matter. Declining and unpredictable funding is one of the most systemic constraints on the capacity of the international system to help democracies function for their citizens.

We believe democracy and its promise to deliver tangible improvements in people's lives are too important to be undermined by unaccountable concentrations of power, short-term fiscal decisions or economic pressures insulated from democratic scrutiny.

Delivery and freedom should not be treated as competing objectives. International cooperation should help democratic institutions improve people's lives while protecting their rights, dignity and agency.

Toward these ends, the Commission recommends international action along four mutually reinforcing lines:

5.1a. Anchor democracy in the international development agenda, from Doha to the post-2030 framework.

Evidence considered by the Commission shows that democratic institutions and practices can enable and accelerate sustainable development by strengthening accountability, participation and institutional responsiveness, and by improving equitable access to public services.⁴³ The Doha Political Declaration⁴⁴ adopted at the Second World Summit for Social Development in 2025 reaffirmed democracy as an essential foundation for social development, building on the commitments made in

⁴⁰ UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *A World of Debt 2025* (Geneva: United Nations, 2025).

⁴¹ Xiao Liang et al., *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2025*, SIPRI Fact Sheet (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2026), p. 1.

⁴² OECD, *A Historic Decline in Foreign Aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA Data (2026)*. For the democracy sector, see Global Democracy Coalition, *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem* (2025).

⁴³ Working Group 1, *Revitalizing Support for Democracy Within the UN System*, expert input paper prepared by International IDEA for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026). Working Group 2, *Regional Organizations and Democracy Support*, expert input paper prepared by the European Democracy Hub for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026). Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026). United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration, *Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development*; German Development Institute/Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik and UNDP Oslo Governance Centre, *Connections That Matter: How the Quality of Governance Institutions May Be the Booster Shot We Need to Reduce Poverty and Inequality* (2022).

⁴⁴ Doha Political Declaration of the Second World Summit for Social Development, adopted 4 November 2025, endorsed by General Assembly resolution A/RES/80/5 (2025).

Copenhagen in 1995.⁴⁵ We call on United Nations Member States to build on these commitments and to ensure that any framework succeeding the 2030 Agenda reflects and advances the contribution of democracy to sustainable development, including through stronger commitments on accountable and inclusive institutions, meaningful participation, the rule of law, access to information and fundamental freedoms.

Any post-2030 framework for sustainable development should also integrate the material conditions needed for democratic agency to function and in a form that can be measured. This requires understanding social protection as entitlements rather than discretionary benefits, together with the institutional quality to deliver, as well as the associational and cooperative economy described at recommendation 5.4a as an objective in its own right.

The selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General also provides an opportunity to reinforce this agenda. This Commission would welcome an incoming Secretary-General who recognizes the contribution that democratic institutions, processes and principles can make across the United Nations' development, human rights, and peace and security pillars. We hope that the next Secretary-General will help foster greater coherence across the United Nations system in this area, encourage more consistent diplomatic and political leadership in the face of democratic erosion, and support Member States, at their request, in strengthening democratic resilience.

5.1b. Reverse the collapse in financing for democracy — and make its flows transparent.

At a time when democratic institutions, civic freedoms and human rights are under sustained pressure, the multilateral capacity to protect them is itself at risk. Continued underfunding could lead to the loss of expertise, institutional reach and independent scrutiny that cannot easily be rebuilt once weakened. Member States, philanthropies and other donors are therefore encouraged to treat the provision of robust, predictable and sustained funding as a matter of urgency, including for UNDP's governance programming, the United Nations' Electoral Assistance Division, the United Nations Democracy Fund and the United Nations human rights pillar, including the Special Procedures. For democratic Member States, their stated commitment

to democracy should be reflected in the pledges they make and the resources they provide to these valuable multilateral initiatives. Such funding should safeguard the independence and integrity of these mechanisms and enable them to plan and operate beyond short-term funding cycles.

The same urgency applies to established plurilateral institutions and coalitions that sustain international cooperation on democracy, electoral integrity, open government, anti-corruption, media freedom and digital rights.⁴⁶ Organizations and initiatives such as International IDEA, the Open Government Partnership, the Freedom Online Coalition and other specialized groupings have built expertise, trusted networks and mechanisms for cooperation and accountability that would be difficult to replace. Yet many remain under-resourced and dependent on a limited number of supporting governments. Funding reductions risk weakening precisely those institutions that offer practical avenues for cooperation when broader multilateral consensus is difficult to achieve. Democratic Member States, philanthropies and other donors are therefore encouraged to protect and diversify these groups' funding, including through predictable core contributions, while safeguarding their institutional independence. Before establishing new initiatives, priority should be given to sustaining, strengthening and connecting those that have demonstrated their value.

Regional and subregional organizations should establish or strengthen dedicated financing arrangements for democracy support, with ringfenced resources for priorities such as electoral integrity, anti-corruption, the rule of law, civic freedoms and digital rights. Member States should assume greater responsibility for financing these arrangements, complemented, where appropriate, by contributions from philanthropy, responsible private actors and international partners. Stronger financing from within each region can reinforce regional ownership and help counter perceptions that democracy support is externally driven. Such arrangements should include safeguards against political or private influence and ensure independent, transparent and inclusive governance.

External assistance is not the only variable, and in the medium term not the decisive one. The capacity of states to fund the institutions and services on which democratic

⁴⁵ International IDEA, *From Copenhagen 1995 to Doha 2025: Democracy as an Engine of Social Development and Shared Prosperity*, Policy Brief (2025).

⁴⁶ Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

legitimacy depends rests above all on their ability to tax, and that ability is constrained internationally as well as domestically. The international tax and transparency agenda discussed at 5.4 should therefore be understood as part of the financing picture for democracy rather than as a separate technical field.

To strengthen accountability, we also call for greater international transparency regarding democracy assistance. Building on existing reporting systems where possible,⁴⁷ a publicly accessible tracker encompassing both public and private democracy assistance should provide comparable information on commitments and disbursements, their sources, recipients and intended purposes, while incorporating safeguards to protect organizations and individuals where disclosure could create security risks. This would allow citizens and institutions to assess how international organizations, governments and donors are providing the resources required to fulfil their stated commitments.

5.1c. Tie democratic standards to tangible benefits.

Experience suggests that democratic commitments are more likely to be sustained when they are connected to benefits that governments and people can see and value. The European Union's enlargement process has demonstrated the influence that a credible prospect of economic and political integration can exert when linked to democratic reform, even if results have varied across countries and over time. Beyond the democracy field, the Financial Action Task Force's mandate to tackle money laundering shows how clear standards, peer review, support for implementation and credible consequences can together create strong incentives for compliance.

International financial, trade, business, health, technology and development actors should therefore steer their policies and partnerships toward helping democratic institutions deliver tangible improvements in people's lives, particularly for women, young people and the elderly. Multilateral financial and development institutions should work with governments, civil society, communities, workers and responsible private actors in developing democracies to shape mutually agreed programs that connect democratic governance with priorities such as decent work, quality education, public health, clean air and water, and safe communities. Support should strengthen institutions, citizen input and

public accountability while ensuring that benefits reach people directly.

Regional organizations, in turn, should treat democracy, constitutional government and the rule of law as integral to the economic integration, political stability, public security and shared prosperity that regional cooperation seeks to advance. Positive incentives, practical cooperation, peer learning and review, and direct support for reform should be the starting point. Where agreed standards are persistently disregarded, responses should be transparent, proportionate and predictable, and may include material or reputational consequences. These measures should distinguish, as far as possible, between governments responsible for non-compliance and the populations they serve.

5.1d. Treat economic and social rights as conditions of self-rule and design programs accordingly.

The multilateral system's own founding commitments answer a question this report cannot avoid: what does democracy owe its citizens materially? When we argue that democracy belongs on the multilateral agenda, we ground the claim in commitments States themselves have made through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and nine core human rights treaties. It would be inconsistent to invoke that foundation selectively. The same instruments contain both the civil and political rights that constitute democratic process and the economic, social and cultural rights that constitute the security without which that process risks being merely a formal exercise.

We therefore underline what much of this report implies: social and economic rights are conditions of self-rule, not substitutes for it. They are enablers of democratic agency, not discretionary outputs of good governance. This distinction matters because it prevents the argument from collapsing into its opposite. If material outcomes were the sole measure of legitimacy, any regime that delivered them could claim democratic standing. They are not the measure; they are an essential condition, and only when held as rights rather than granted as favors.

The Commission recommends that international cooperation support social protection floors as part of the institutional foundations of democracy, drawing on existing international standards, and treat their

⁴⁷ Relevant existing sources include the OECD DAC Creditor Reporting System, particularly the purpose codes under sector 150 (government and civil society); the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI); and program and funding data published by International IDEA and the United Nations Democracy Fund.

design — rules-based entitlement, published criteria, and independent adjudication of claims — as a democratic and not merely a social question. The United Nations, international financial institutions, regional organizations and development partners should apply these rights-based design principles when designing development and financing programs, including those described in section 5.1c. The Commission also encourages Member States to strengthen the implementation of their commitments under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and to consider ratification of its Optional Protocol.

5.2 Democratize multilateral decision-making and bring people and democratic institutions closer to it

Nation states created the traditional multilateral system for the purpose of finding common ground for collective action to tackle shared challenges. It has delivered many important accomplishments, from preventing global war and containing nuclear proliferation to protecting the environment and expanding global trade. Yet it is hamstrung by an unequal distribution of formal and functional decision-making power among Member States and by limits on the participation, voice and talents of millions of people who should have a say in how they are governed at the international level. This is especially true for people living in non-democratic countries where their representation in domestic politics is heavily constrained if not outright blocked. If we are to imagine a democracy-friendly multilateralism, we must find more room at the governing table for the great diversity of humanity.

We recognize that multilateral institutions were built by and for Member States and should remain accountable principally to them, and that wider participation does not displace intergovernmental decision-making. We know from experience, however, that expanding meaningful participation in multilateral processes improves the information on which decisions are based, makes institutions more responsive to the people they affect, and strengthens their transparency, effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. At several plurilateral initiatives, for example, civil society, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders are not only in the room but have a vote in important decisions that guide collective action.⁴⁸

This has particular value for international cooperation on democracy, where the most effective mechanisms draw on independent sources of information rather than on self-assessment alone. Civil society organizations, journalists, researchers, human rights defenders and independent public institutions bring evidence, local knowledge and early warning at a stage when international support can still make a difference. Such arrangements serve governments as well, providing earlier information and lending credibility to findings that would otherwise be open to challenge.

Toward these ends, the Commission recommends action along four mutually reinforcing lines:

⁴⁸ Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

5.2a. Democratize multilateral governance.

The multilateral system cannot effectively support democracy without addressing its own imbalances of representation and power. As this report has argued, many countries experience the international order not as a neutral framework of common rules, but as a system marked by unequal voice, entrenched privileges and the selective application of international law. These imbalances weaken multilateral legitimacy and effectiveness and undermine the credibility of international support for democracy.

The Commission therefore calls on Member States to democratize multilateral governance by reforming institutions whose distribution of decision-making power no longer reflects contemporary realities. This is not simply a matter of widening consultation. It requires changes in who holds authority in form and practice and how consequential international decisions and appointments are made.

One immediate step would be for Member States to address the commitments contained in the Pact for the Future to make the Security Council more representative, inclusive, transparent, effective, democratic and accountable. Correcting the historic underrepresentation of Africa should be treated as a priority, including through permanent African representation on the Council under arrangements to be determined by African States. Other multilateral institutions, including in the finance and development sectors, similarly need reforms to give Africa, projected to account for 40% of the global youth population by 2030 and with high levels of popular support for international institutions,⁴⁹ a bigger voice at their governing tables.

5.2b. Include key democratic institutions in multilateral decision-making.

United Nations, regional and relevant plurilateral processes should draw more systematically on the knowledge of national parliaments, elected local and regional authorities, and independent electoral, human rights and oversight institutions. In accordance with their respective constitutional roles and applicable standards of independence, these bodies should be able to submit evidence and contribute to relevant consultations and review processes in their own institutional capacity. This would complement, not displace, intergovernmental

decision-making, while ensuring that government executives are not the sole source of information on their own democratic performance.

Existing international and cross-regional networks offer the most practical route forward. Cooperation with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and regional parliamentary bodies should be strengthened, while networks of electoral authorities, national human rights institutions, public auditors, ombuds institutions,⁴⁹ judicial bodies and local authorities should be connected more consistently to relevant multilateral processes. These networks can provide comparative evidence and early warning, facilitate peer support and help institutions under pressure obtain legal, technical and professional assistance.

5.2c. Ensure that civil society participation influences outcomes.

The debate over civil society's place in multilateral affairs is longstanding. Although some Member States continue to resist greater access, civil society engagement is now an established feature of many United Nations, regional and plurilateral processes. Secretary-General António Guterres's call for a more inclusive and networked multilateralism⁵⁰ has reinforced this direction. The question is therefore no longer simply whether civil society should participate, but whether its participation is organized in ways that improve the quality, credibility and implementation of intergovernmental decisions.

Civil society organizations, independent media, researchers, human rights defenders, trade unions and community organizations provide independent evidence, local knowledge and early warning; generate policy innovation; mobilize communities; and often help implement what is agreed. Their contributions are especially important in democracy-related processes, where official reporting may not fully reflect restrictions on civic space, threats to electoral integrity or pressure on independent institutions. To improve the quality of intergovernmental decision-making, therefore, multilateral processes should operate on an "open by default" basis whenever possible, including broader access for civil society, students, and journalists. Unions, cooperatives, mutual societies, professional bodies, tenants' and farmers' associations, religious congregations and local federations are among the institutions through which citizens exercise collective agency, and international engagement should reach them

⁴⁹ See previous sections of the report.

⁵⁰ United Nations Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, UN Doc. A/75/982 (5 August 2021).

as membership organizations, not only as contracted providers of services. Where support is available solely on a project basis, it may favor organizations skilled at reporting to donors over those accountable to members.

At the United Nations, civil society participation should be integrated more consistently into consultations and deliberations, rather than confined to parallel tracks running alongside them. We encourage Member States to depoliticize accreditation arrangements by creating a technical administrative body to handle the vast majority of applications through clear, objective and time-bound criteria, reasoned decisions and reasonable limits on repeated deferrals. States should also support candidates for the ECOSOC Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations who demonstrate a genuine commitment to civic freedoms and constructive civil society engagement.

As sustained in-person engagement in New York and Geneva remains beyond the reach of many organizations, we strongly encourage all efforts to facilitate accessible online and hybrid participation modalities across relevant processes, and to support the practical costs of participation, including preparation, travel, interpretation, accessibility and connectivity. The UN system as a whole would also benefit from identifying a senior official responsible for proactively integrating civil society in UN processes and explaining how civil society contributions are taken into account.

Regional organizations require approaches adapted to their different mandates, institutional cultures and political contexts. Some have established advisory bodies or formal registration systems, while others engage civil society mainly through forums held alongside official meetings; across these different models, however, formal access is often insufficiently connected to program design, implementation and follow-up. We call on Member States to support and resource periodic independent civil society assessments of their regional democracy commitments and to encourage cross-regional civic networks to identify good practices. They should also press collectively for a stronger regional contribution to the global democracy agenda. These processes should deliberately include local organizations, young people and actors working in restrictive environments.

In plurilateral initiatives, the appropriate scope of civil society participation should depend on the initiative's purpose and institutional design. Initiatives established as multistakeholder partnerships should give civil society and affected communities defined roles in co-creation, governance and independent review.

5.2d. Support deliberative participation and explore its use in multilateral governance.

Alongside representative institutions, deliberative participation can give citizens a more structured role in public decision-making between elections. One important instrument is the citizens' assembly: a body selected by lot to form a broadly representative cross-section of the population and convened to consider questions that electoral processes may struggle to address — including those that cross party lines, require a long-term perspective or place incumbents in a potential conflict of interest, such as constitutional reform, climate and intergenerational justice, and the governance of artificial intelligence.

Given sufficient time, access to diverse expertise and skilled facilitation, such assemblies can help produce informed and considered judgements. Their remit and relationship with representative institutions should be clearly defined. Depending on the constitutional and institutional context, their conclusions could inform public policy, trigger a reasoned public response from the legislature or, where appropriate, be submitted for wider public consideration. The objective should be to connect deliberation meaningfully with decision-making, rather than treat it as a one-off consultation.

Related instruments also merit consideration. These include offices or other mechanisms representing the interests of future generations; participatory budgeting, one of the most widely tested forms of participatory decision-making; and digital platforms designed to support deliberation rather than reaction. When appropriately designed, selection by lot can help improve representation across gender, socio-economic background, age and region. Deliberative processes should also accommodate testimony, lived experience and local knowledge alongside expert-informed argument, so that they do not reproduce existing patterns of exclusion.

These instruments also carry risks. Deliberative processes can be influenced by how questions are framed, which experts are selected and how discussions are facilitated. Sortition also raises questions of accountability, legitimacy and representation. Decisions about who convenes an assembly, defines its remit and selects its sources of expertise should therefore be transparent, governed by clear rules and open to independent scrutiny.

International and regional organizations can make a practical contribution in this area. They can build a

shared evidence base of experience with different models and develop principles of good practice to help distinguish meaningful deliberation from exercises with little influence. They can support peer networks of practitioners across regions and, at the request of Member States, provide resources and technical support for pilot deliberative processes without controlling their agendas or outcomes. The United Nations and regional organizations should also explore the use of deliberative instruments in their own processes, including by piloting citizens' assemblies to gather informed and representative public input on specific questions of long-term or intergenerational consequence, such as climate action and the governance of artificial intelligence. Such mechanisms complement, not displace, representative institutions and intergovernmental decision-making.

5.3 Invest Strategically in Plurilateral Cooperation for Democracy

Global and regional organizations remain indispensable for addressing transnational challenges. Their broad membership, however, together with asymmetries of influence and the need to build intergovernmental consensus, can limit their capacity to adopt ambitious standards or act collectively on sensitive questions concerning democracy. Plurilateral initiatives—smaller groupings of willing states, sometimes working alongside civil society, industry and technical experts—can complement and help shape universal and regional efforts where broader agreement is difficult to achieve. They can coordinate action across jurisdictions, develop standards, mobilize political ambition, facilitate trusted exchanges and test approaches that may subsequently gain wider adoption.

Effective models already exist and are more varied than is generally recognized. International IDEA demonstrates the value of structured expertise and peer learning. The Open Government Partnership and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative show how governments and non-state actors can share responsibility for commitments, governance and review. Other initiatives, including the Freedom Online Coalition and the Media Freedom Coalition, demonstrate the contribution that lighter forms of diplomatic coordination can make to emerging or politically sensitive issues. None of these models can simply be transplanted from one field to another, but together they provide a body of experience on which future cooperation can build.

Investing in plurilateral cooperation also means addressing its weaknesses. The evidence considered by the Commission⁵¹ points to recurring fragmentation and duplication, difficulties in establishing credible and inclusive membership, dependence on a small number of champion governments or funding sources, and insufficient ownership across regions. It also reveals different kinds of institutional gaps: cooperation on electoral integrity remains comparatively thin, while the field of digital technology and artificial intelligence is crowded but fragmented and continues to under-represent the Global South.

There is no single institutional model capable of addressing these challenges. Form should follow function. Initiatives that set standards or seek measurable changes in state conduct require stronger arrangements for review and accountability. Coalitions focused primarily on diplomatic coordination, learning or information exchange may operate through lighter structures, while remaining transparent about their commitments and follow-up. Across these different models, durability, coordination, clear membership criteria and broad ownership remain common requirements. The Commission therefore recommends action along three mutually reinforcing lines.

⁵¹ Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

5.3a. Strengthen, connect and adapt what already exists before creating new initiatives.

Plurilateral cooperation in support of democracy now encompasses a growing and varied range of initiatives. This expansion has created new opportunities for action, but the density of the landscape also carries risks of fragmentation and duplication. Overlapping mandates, competing reporting requirements and limited coordination can diffuse political attention, compete for limited resources and create disproportionate burdens for smaller and less-resourced states. Meanwhile several initiatives that have demonstrated their value remain under-resourced, under-coordinated and dependent on a small number of supporting governments.

Where effective platforms already exist, priority should be given to expanding their mandates, diversifying their funding and deepening their coordination, which is faster and less costly than building afresh and preserves institutional knowledge that new bodies must acquire from the beginning. This is above all a question of resources and political will; abrupt funding reductions can dismantle expertise and trusted networks that took years to build. As noted above, we urge democratic Member States, in particular, to treat sustained and predictable financing of these initiatives as a direct expression of their stated commitment to democracy, providing core contributions where possible and diversifying support so that no initiative depends on any single donor.

5.3b. Build durability and fit-for-purpose accountability into the design of coalitions.

The Commission recommends that States and other actors establishing or reforming plurilateral coalitions build durability and fit-for-purpose accountability into their institutional design from the outset. Durability should be supported through secretariat arrangements that depend on diversified funding, rotating leadership and succession arrangements capable of surviving changes of government. Where appropriate, locating secretariat functions within an established international organization or academic institution can provide greater institutional stability while preserving the initiative's operational autonomy.

Initiatives whose membership is based on democratic criteria should also agree in advance how they will respond when a member's trajectory reverses, through graduated and rule-based procedures with defined triggers and due process, rather than ad hoc decisions that invite charges of selectivity. An initiative unable to respond to backsliding among its own members will struggle to speak credibly about democracy elsewhere.

5.3c. Broaden regional ownership and participation.

Plurilateral cooperation for democracy will be more credible and effective when its priorities and institutions are shaped across all regions from the outset. We encourage those forming or reforming plurilateral initiatives to treat regional balance and the effective participation of actors from the Global South as requirements of institutional design rather than as matters addressed once the founding decisions have been taken, and to use tiered arrangements — observer status, associate membership, regional partnership — where full commitment is premature but engagement is valuable.

Where participation places disproportionate financial, technical or administrative demands on smaller and less-resourced states, initiatives should provide appropriate support, including for staffing, travel, technical capacity, interpretation and sustained engagement. The same logic extends to governance: initiatives that give civil society, affected communities and technical experts a formal role, rather than an opportunity to be consulted, have proved more ambitious and more resilient, and better able to withstand the argument that democratic cooperation belongs to one part of the world alone. Ownership constructed in this way is not a concession; it is what distinguishes a coalition that others wish to join from one they are asked to accept.

5.4 Support the democratization of power itself

The three goals above concern how international support for democracy is financed, who participates in it, and through which institutions it is organized. This fourth goal addresses a different question: the distribution of power itself. Conventional instruments of public control, such as taxation, transparency, competition enforcement, auditing and data protection, are necessary to protect public welfare but their limits should be recognized. They regulate concentrated power; they do not redistribute it. They constrain some of the ways in which economic and technological power is converted into political influence, but leave its underlying concentration largely intact.

This distinction matters. Economic and technological power rarely remains separate from politics. Over time, concentrations of wealth, ownership and control over technology can be used to shape public policies in favor of those who hold them.

A democracy cannot remain strong if citizens can vote freely but have no meaningful say over the economic forces that shape their lives. The Commission therefore argues that measures to hold concentrated political power to account must be complemented by efforts to broaden the ownership and control of the economic assets and technologies through which that power is exercised. The measures proposed under this goal should not be treated simply as an optional social policy add-on. They form part of creating the conditions necessary for effective democratic self-government.

For example, tax avoidance and evasion by some of the biggest corporations and wealthiest individuals affect democracy in four interconnected ways. First, they create a perception of injustice when obligations that bind ordinary taxpayers appear optional for those best able to pay, thereby eroding the reciprocity on which social cohesion and willing compliance rest. Second, they reduce the revenue base on which social protection, public services and the material conditions of democratic agency described in section 5.1d depend. Third, they deprive developing countries of significant domestic resources at a time when external assistance has declined sharply (5.1b). Fourth, they permit further concentrations of wealth that can be used to fund political influence, facilitate regulatory capture, concentrate media ownership and shape the terms of public debate. In this way, tax avoidance and evasion can ease the conversion of concentrated wealth into greater political power, one of the conditions contributing to the democratic malaise identified in this report. A tax system from which powerful actors can effectively opt out is a democratic problem as well as a fiscal one.

Relevant international tax cooperation instruments already exist and have advanced considerably. Through the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting, 147 countries and jurisdictions agreed in January 2026 on key elements of a “side-by-side” package for the coordinated operation of global minimum tax arrangements.⁵² The Inclusive Framework has also developed standards for country-by-country reporting and common measures to address base erosion and profit shifting.⁵³ Through the

⁵² OECD, ‘International Community Agrees Way Forward on Global Minimum Tax Package’, press release, 5 January 2026. Base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS) is a tax avoidance strategy used to “shift” profits from higher-tax jurisdictions to lower-tax jurisdictions or no-tax locations, thus “eroding” the “tax-base” of the higher-tax jurisdiction.

⁵³ OECD, ‘Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS)’, webpage, accessed 9 September 2026.

OECD's Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes, States have strengthened cooperation against offshore tax evasion through the automatic exchange of financial account information and standards on access to ownership information. The Crypto-Asset Reporting Framework is designed to extend automatic reporting to crypto-asset transactions.⁵⁴

Practical assistance in this field carries demonstrable returns. According to its 2024 Annual Report, Tax Inspectors Without Borders, operated jointly by the OECD and UNDP, had helped tax administrations in developing countries collect USD 2.30 billion in additional revenue and raise USD 6.05 billion in additional assessments as of 31 December 2023, including more than USD 1.8 billion collected in Africa.⁵⁵ The draft United Nations Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, currently expected to be concluded in 2027, marks the first negotiation of a global tax convention through a universal United Nations process in which all Member States can participate on an equal footing.⁵⁶

The Commission encourages Member States to treat the completion of this agenda as a valuable means of supporting democracy as well as raising revenue. Member States would agree to implement agreed minimum tax and transparency standards; extend cooperation to the taxation of extreme concentrations of individual wealth, an area in which international cooperation remains limited; strengthen action against the use of secrecy jurisdictions to conceal income and assets, particularly where this deprives developing countries of domestic resources; and support domestic revenue mobilization, including through Tax Inspectors Without Borders and the Global Forum's capacity-building programs, as part of a durable response to the decline in external financing described in section 5.1b. Member States should negotiate the United Nations convention in good faith and ensure it complements rather than duplicates existing mechanisms while broadening Member State participation in international tax rule-making.

One caution follows from this argument. Arrangements that accord the most powerful jurisdictions special treatment risk reproducing, in the tax field, the selective

application of common rules identified earlier in this report. A standard that the strongest can decline is not a standard. The Commission further recommends that Member States direct additional revenue raised through this agenda, in accordance with section 5.1d, to claimable entitlements rather than discretionary outputs, and report transparently on its use, following the model proposed in section 5.1b.

In each of the areas of action recommended below, democratic accountability is currently limited. To address that deficit, international cooperation can do something specific: protect, resource, convene, standardize, finance, and support adaptation across different contexts.

Three qualifications apply to all of them. None of these approaches substitutes for the minimum standard of free and fair elections. Each instrument proposed below may itself concentrate authority and must meet the same standards of transparency, contestability and accountability that this report demands of concentrated private power. Nor should any of these approaches be used to justify the withdrawal of public provision or responsibility.

Recognizing that these questions extend beyond the Commission's core mandate, the Commission does not prescribe a single economic model. It identifies the following approaches for further examination, particularly where they may help strengthen democratic agency and accountability.

5.4a. Treat the associational and cooperative economy as democratic infrastructure.

Cooperatives, mutual aid societies, credit unions, community energy companies, housing associations and trade unions are more than economic institutions. These organizations can combine four democratic functions: distributing ownership and its returns; forming associations based on membership and shared rules; developing the capacity for self-government; and providing material security held as a right or stake rather than received as a favor. By combining these functions, they link economic democratization,

⁵⁴ OECD, *Crypto-Asset Reporting Framework: 2025 Monitoring and Implementation Update*, Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes (Paris: OECD, 2025).

⁵⁵ OECD, *Tax Inspectors Without Borders – Annual Report 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).

⁵⁶ United Nations General Assembly, *Promotion of Inclusive and Effective International Tax Cooperation at the United Nations*, A/RES/79/235, 24 December 2024. See also United Nations, *Intergovernmental Negotiations for UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation*.

associational renewal, civic formation and social security as interconnected parts of a single democratic agenda.

This sector is global and has strong and diverse traditions: the self-employed women's associations of South Asia, the agricultural and savings cooperatives of East and West Africa, the cooperative and solidarity economies of Latin America and southern India, the consumer cooperatives of East Asia, and the rotating savings and credit associations found across regions. A democratic program built on these foundations draws on experience from regions in which these practices are well established and demonstrates that these forms of democratic participation are not confined to Western traditions.

The Commission encourages Member States, supported where appropriate by international financial institutions and development banks, to explore four general directions rather than a single blueprint:

- make it easier for workers to own and manage businesses, including through tax incentives, access to long-term finance and opportunities to acquire a firm when it is sold, restructured or closed;
- explore collective funds that invest on behalf of citizens, allowing them to share in the returns and participate in the governance of those funds;
- give citizens and communities a greater say in investment decisions through accountable and transparent public, cooperative and mission-oriented financial institutions; and
- support community-owned or community-managed resources, services and organizations, including municipal and platform cooperatives and other parts of the social and solidarity economy.

International instruments for this agenda already exist but are rarely used as part of the democracy field. The International Labour Organization's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193), is an agreed tripartite instrument that the Commission encourages States to implement as democracy support policy. The Commission also encourages international financial institutions and development banks to consider making cooperative, mutual and community ownership an explicit financing objective. The Commission also encourages regional organizations to consider establishing legal frameworks and financing facilities for the sector. And, as noted at 5.1a, Member States are encouraged to consider including the associational and cooperative economy as a measurable objective in whatever framework succeeds the 2030 Agenda.

5.4b. Democratize the governance of technology and information.

A small number of private firms now control much of the digital infrastructure through which people access information, associate, conduct transactions and increasingly interact with government. This concentration shapes not only the decisions citizens make but the cognitive conditions under which they make them. Disinformation, surveillance and algorithmic manipulation are facilitated by the way digital platforms and infrastructures are designed and used. Transparency, auditing, data protection and public-interest data trusts remain necessary, but they do not by themselves distribute control over that power: transparency, for example, may show citizens how a power they do not control is exercised over them with no tools to correct it.

The Commission recommends action in five areas:

- Member States and regional organizations should ensure that the most essential platforms, networks and computational infrastructures are governed with public participation, appropriate taxation and limits on excessive concentration. Public and cooperative alternatives should be developed where private concentration restricts participation in public life.
- Member States, the United Nations and regional organizations should explore public-interest, commons-based and public-trust models for data governance, as well as support public capacity in computing and foundational models, so that democratic control over the decisive technologies of the century does not become the privilege of the wealthiest governments and firms.
- Access to reliable information should be protected against States' attempts to define "truth" or determine what citizens may hear. This requires safeguarding the institutional conditions of trustworthy public information: pluralistic and independent media, transparency about algorithmic curation, and protection of the information commons on which democratic self-correction depends.
- Relevant stakeholders should protect the cognitive commons through design standards, limits on manipulative and addictive techniques, and genuine public-interest digital spaces.
- Member States, international financial institutions and development partners should support technologies built to strengthen association, rather than only brief or superficial engagement, and offer tools that help people organize, hold meetings, keep accounts, decide collectively and sustain membership over time.

The Commission recognizes that each of these measures could be used against the freedom it is intended to protect. Efforts to safeguard access to reliable information, in the wrong hands, can become a license to decide what citizens may hear, and the governance of artificial intelligence can become a means of surveillance. The safeguard is the principle governing this report as a whole: such powers must themselves be transparent, contestable, shared and bound by law.

The Commission encourages relevant international, regional and plurilateral initiatives to consider aligning their work around this substantive agenda in response to the crowded and fragmented field of digital and AI initiatives identified at 5.3. As set out in section 5.3c, regional balance and the effective participation of actors from the Global South from the outset are not optional refinements but conditions of legitimacy.

5.4c. Invest in democratic culture and the foundations of civic life: association, education, time and care.

Democratizing power requires not only reforming institutions. Citizens also need associations through which they can act together, education that develops democratic knowledge and skills, sufficient time to participate, and care arrangements that enable them to do so on equal terms. Self-government therefore requires lifelong civic formation: informed judgement, critical enquiry, respect for difference, cooperation, public deliberation and the courage to defend equal rights. Independent associations are not simply a product of a healthy democracy; they also help to sustain it, and strengthening them is a legitimate focus of public policy and international support.

Education is one of the means through which democracy is renewed in each generation. This requires more than adding a small number of civic education lessons to the curriculum. Democratic learning takes place not only in schools, but also in workplaces, communities, associations, media, cultural life and digital spaces. Schools themselves should provide experiences of democratic community, allowing young people to develop the skills and habits of self-government by practicing them, rather than merely learning about a theoretical democracy they do not experience. Education for citizenship does not end at the school gate: participation is itself a form of learning, and civic education should prepare people to participate with empathy and

critical learning skills. The value of local assemblies, cooperatives, participatory budgeting and trade union branches lies not only in the decisions they yield but in the citizens they form. A safeguard is nevertheless essential: civic education must respect pluralism and freedom of thought. Schools and independent membership-based associations should provide opportunities to practice democracy, rather than transmit official narratives or prescribed loyalty.

Time and care are conditions of equal voice rather than merely logistical considerations. Participation requires time, but time is distributed unequally according to socio-economic circumstances and the gendered distribution of paid work and unpaid care. Working hours, the availability of paid civic and care leave, and the design of participatory bodies – including remuneration, practical support and care arrangements – determine who is able to participate. Much of this work remains unpaid and falls disproportionately on women.⁵⁷ The daily and generational work of care underpins every other area considered here. Finally, the forms of participation taught and practiced should be drawn from the world's diverse traditions of deliberation – including councils and commons-based practices – rather than a single canon. Learning should run in both directions: capacity-building that flows in only one direction risks reproducing relations of tutelage rather than partnership.

The Commission recommends that Member States, international and regional organizations and development partners invest in democratic culture and civic capacity by providing sustained and flexible support to independent, membership-based and locally rooted organizations, drawing on financing arrangements described at 5.1b and 5.3a and including safeguards to protect their independence. As part of this effort, existing international instruments on education for peace, human rights and global citizenship should be used to support democratic education, with explicit safeguards against their conversion into state loyalty programs.

It is essential that Member States address the unequal distribution of time and care responsibilities as a barrier to equal democratic participation. They should also ensure that relevant international organizations, including UN Women and the ILO, have adequate and predictable resources to support national efforts to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work.

⁵⁷ UN Women, 'FAQs: What Is Unpaid Care Work and How Does It Power the Economy?', 23 October 2025.

5.4d. Support capable, accountable and rules-based public administration.

In designing better democratic governance, an apparent contradiction must be addressed directly. If concentrated power is the problem, how can a stronger and more capable State be part of the answer? The problem is not State capacity itself, but capacity exercised without democratic accountability. A capable state that plans, invests and guides markets towards public goals, including the ecological transition, the reduction of inequality and the strengthening of technological capacity, and does so in ways that are fully accountable to citizens through transparency, deliberation and elections, is not in itself a form of dangerous concentration. It is public capacity reclaimed from private capture.

This argument must not be used to justify elected leaders and officials abusing such power to weaken or dismantle the checks and balances around them. Democratic renewal rests on a pluralist constitutional order: independent courts, free media, local self-government, protected civic associations, and strong checks on executive and administrative power. Public capacity exercised without clear rules and accountability risks becoming patronage rather than serving the public interest. Merit-based appointments, independent auditing, and transparent allocation of public resources are among the conditions that allow a State to be both capable and democratic.

International cooperation already works extensively on public administration, auditing and anti-corruption. The Commission recommends that the United Nations, international financial institutions, regional organizations and development partners frame and evaluate this work in democratic terms. It should contribute to building public administrations that are bound by clear rules, subject to public scrutiny and capable of delivering claimable entitlements. This work should be connected to the institutional networks described in section 5.2b and assessed against the entitlement test set out in section 5.1d.

5.5 Recommendations on Five Thematic Priorities

The Commission concentrated on five thematic priorities, examined in depth by its three Working Groups: (1) digital technology and artificial intelligence; (2) constitutions, checks and balances and the rule of law; (3) electoral integrity; (4) corruption; and (5) equality and civil rights. These are not the only challenges democracies face, but they are areas where the stakes are high, where the erosion of democratic practice is particularly visible and where cooperation at the global, regional and plurilateral levels can make a practical difference. For each, the Commission sets out how the challenge is evolving and proposes concrete measures at all three levels to support reform and renewal within states.

5.5.1 Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence.

Digital technologies, including social media platforms and artificial intelligence, have expanded access to information, enabled new forms of civic organization and political participation, and created tools that can strengthen public accountability. They have also generated new and serious democratic risks. Some engagement-driven platform models amplify sensational or polarizing content, while the concentration of data control, digital infrastructure and algorithmic power in a small number of private companies moves critical decisions outside democratic institutions with far-reaching effects on public discourse. Disinformation, deceptive human- and AI-generated content, digital surveillance and technology-enabled harassment can distort public debate, deter participation, invade privacy and erode trust. Artificial intelligence can intensify these harms by increasing the speed, scale and personalization of manipulation, even as it creates new possibilities for democratic participation, access to information and institutional accountability.

These technologies are not neutral infrastructure. Their design, ownership and governance shape the choices available to citizens and the distribution of power among people, states and corporations. The proper foundations for their governance are evident: international law and human rights norms apply online as they do offline. The difficulty lies in applying these general commitments consistently to rapidly evolving technologies. Relevant norms and institutions are dispersed across international law, technical standards, regional regulation, national legislation and corporate governance; their legal force and reach vary; and operational guidance remains uneven or absent in areas such as algorithmic design and accountability, cross-border platform governance, voter data, political advertising, public-sector AI and the use of AI in electoral processes. The result is not a rules-free environment, but a dense and fragmented architecture in which democratic safeguards, if they exist, are unevenly developed and applied.

The international architecture has nevertheless begun to take more concrete form. Following endorsement of the Global Digital Compact⁵⁸ in 2024, the General Assembly established the Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence⁵⁹ and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance.⁶⁰ The Panel presented its Preliminary Report and the Dialogue held its inaugural session in Geneva on 6–7 July 2026, while the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20)⁶¹ process has moved from review to implementation. These developments provide a stronger institutional and evidentiary basis for international cooperation. They do not, however, guarantee that democratic considerations will be integrated consistently into a field also shaped by security, development, commercial and geopolitical priorities. For example, election integrity, the rule of law and anti-corruption – areas in which AI-enabled threats are accelerating – do not yet have a dedicated place in the Dialogue’s agenda.

The underlying challenge is therefore broader than the mitigation of individual technological harms. Rapid technological change is redistributing political, economic and informational power across societies, while existing institutions have not adapted consistently. This exposes

elections, public debate, public decision-making and the rule of law to new forms of manipulation, opacity and concentration of power, while the democratic potential of these technologies remains insufficiently developed.

The Commission recommends action along five mutually reinforcing lines:

5.5.1a Strengthen democratic safeguards in global digital and AI governance.

The Commission recommends that the United Nations and its Member States use the emerging international architecture for digital and AI governance to ensure that implications for democracy, human rights and the rule of law are addressed systematically rather than incidentally. Building on the Global Digital Compact, the WSIS+20 outcome, the Global Dialogue on AI Governance and the evidence produced by the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, Member States should identify democratic deficits in AI governance and close concrete gaps in standards, institutional capacity and oversight, while avoiding further fragmentation.

Within the United Nations system, the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) should use its strengthened coordination role to connect digital and AI governance with relevant work on human rights, elections, development, peace and security, media freedom, data governance and anti-corruption. This coordination should promote consistent democratic safeguards throughout the lifecycle of digital technologies and AI systems. OHCHR, UNDP, UNESCO, UN Women and other relevant United Nations entities should be adequately resourced to contribute expertise within their respective mandates.

The Commission also calls on regional organizations to integrate democratic safeguards into their digital transformation and AI governance frameworks, develop adequately funded implementation capacity and contribute regional experience to global processes. Particular support should be provided to regions that currently lack the regulatory and institutional capacity needed to oversee transnational technology companies.

⁵⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *Pact for the Future*, annex I, “Global Digital Compact”, A/RES/79/1, 22 September 2024.

⁵⁹ United Nations, Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence, *Preliminary Report* (United Nations, 2026).

⁶⁰ United Nations, *Global Dialogue on AI Governance: Inaugural Dialogue*, Geneva, 6–7 July 2026.

⁶¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Outcome Document of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Overall Review of the Implementation of the Outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society*, A/RES/80/173, December 2025; and International Telecommunication Union, *WSIS Forum 2026: Highlights and Outcomes*.

We recommend building on existing platforms for information integrity, such as the Christchurch Call, the Forum for Information and Democracy, and the Freedom Online Coalition to launch a global multistakeholder initiative – linking privacy regulators, election authorities, media policy experts, and technology companies – to examine the underlying structural deficits of the current information ecosystem, enable operational coordination on cross-border information threats, and include some degree of transparency and accountability for implementation. The aim of such an initiative should also include guidelines for how democratic societies can shape these technologies toward truth-seeking, consensus-building, and participatory governance—while protecting pluralism and minority viewpoints.

5.5.1b Subject public and private algorithmic and machine-learning power to democratic accountability.

As AI systems increasingly influence public decisions and shape the conditions of democratic participation, accountability must extend to both the authorities that deploy them and the private actors that develop and control them. Where AI systems, including large language models, affect access to rights, public benefits or essential services, their use should be transparent and subject to prior assessment and testing, meaningful human oversight and effective rights to explanation, review and remedy; systems that cannot meet basic requirements of legality, non-discrimination and accountability should not be used for decisions with substantial consequences for individuals. This responsibility falls first to states — but many cannot meet it alone, since the systems in question are supplied by a handful of transnational firms and are often too opaque for any single government to audit unaided. Shared principles and common methods for assessment and independent audit, developed through bodies such as UNESCO⁶² and the Council of Europe,⁶³ help states hold public AI to account. They can also help ensure that democratic control over these systems does not become the privilege of the wealthiest governments alone.

Private algorithmic and machine-learning power requires comparable scrutiny. A small number of companies control much of the data, infrastructure, platforms and

AI systems on which public institutions and democratic debate increasingly depend, with an influence over public discourse comparable to public entities but without their transparency or checks. Voluntary commitments cannot provide adequate accountability for decisions of this reach. States and regional organizations with regulatory capacity should therefore establish enforceable and proportionate requirements on these companies — covering human rights due diligence, systemic-risk transparency, and access for independent research and audit.

These tasks fall differently across the three levels of cooperation. Universal bodies are best placed to set shared principles for trustworthy, rights-respecting AI. Binding regulation of private power, by contrast, has so far been built mainly at the national and regional level and unevenly — most developed within the European Union; the task is to help all regions and nations build the means to regulate these actors, and to align approaches so that transnational companies cannot escape scrutiny by relocating from one jurisdiction to another. Plurilateral coalitions can move fastest, letting willing governments, regulators, companies and civil society share enforcement information and common methods. They matter for a further reason: no single state, and few regions, can face the largest technology companies on equal terms, and acting together allows smaller and less powerful democracies to set collectively the terms that none could impose alone. Across all three levels, cooperation must treat concentrated digital control as a question of democratic power, not only market power.

5.5.1c Prevent the use of digital technologies for political surveillance and repression.

The Commission calls for coordinated action against technologies that can be used for political surveillance and repression. Member States, regional organizations and plurilateral initiatives should strengthen standards and export controls on commercial spyware, facial recognition and other surveillance technologies, particularly where they may be used against journalists, human rights defenders, political actors or civil society organizations.

⁶² UNESCO, *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* (Paris, 2021).

⁶³ Council of Europe, *Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law*, (Vilnius, 2024); Council of Europe, *HUDERIA Methodology and Model: Methodology for Assessing the Risks and Impacts of Artificial Intelligence Systems from the Perspective of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law* (Strasbourg, 2026).

5.5.1d Invest in inclusive and pro-democracy uses of digital technology and AI.

Digital and AI governance should not be framed exclusively around the mitigation of harm. These technologies, if used wisely, can also widen access to reliable information, support civic education, facilitate public deliberation, improve the accessibility of democratic institutions and strengthen public accountability. Governments, international organizations, regional bodies and responsible private and philanthropic actors should support the development and evaluation of applications designed explicitly for these purposes.

Investment should prioritize initiatives that respond to demonstrated democratic and public needs, including tools that facilitate participation by under-represented groups, enable citizens to understand and scrutinize public decisions, make public information more accessible, strengthen independent journalism and support deliberation across political and social divisions. Such initiatives should be subject to independent evaluation and appropriate safeguards. Their value should be assessed by their contribution to democratic participation, evidence-based consensus building and accountability, rather than by technological novelty or profit motives alone.

Regional organizations can help explore how digital technologies may support forms of democratic participation adapted to different political, social, cultural and linguistic contexts. Cooperation across regions should enable the exchange of experience on digital participation, civic education, youth engagement, access to reliable information and institutional accountability, while recognizing that no single model can be transferred unchanged from one context to another.

5.5.1e Establish standing forums to imagine and shape the future of democracy.

Every generation has had to adapt the institutions of self-government to the conditions of its time. The present generation must do so as artificial intelligence enters the functioning of public authority, synthetic information changes how citizens perceive and debate reality, and control over data, digital infrastructure and advanced AI systems becomes concentrated in a small number of public and private actors. The task is not only to protect the democracy we have inherited from technological harm, but to consider what democratic institutions must become if human agency, political equality, pluralism and accountable government are to endure.

The Commission invites Club de Madrid to take this agenda forward by convening a sustained international process of democratic foresight and institutional design, beginning with its 2027 Policy Dialogue on democracy and artificial intelligence. Drawing on the experience of its Members, this process should bring political leaders into dialogue with citizens, young people, civil society, social scientists, business leaders and technologists from all regions, while remaining connected to relevant international and regional processes on AI governance and democracy.

Its purpose should be to confront questions of constitutional and democratic principle that cannot be resolved through technical standards alone: which public powers and decisions must never be delegated to machines; how political responsibility can be preserved and strengthened when public decisions are shaped by AI; how cognitive autonomy and a sufficiently shared basis for public reasoning can be protected when propaganda and synthetic content operate at scale; how artificial intelligence can expand citizen voice without displacing elections, parliaments or constitutional accountability; and how the interests of those who will inherit today's technological choices can be represented before they are able to vote.

These deliberations should produce concrete and usable outcomes capable of informing national reform and international cooperation. These are questions of policy, but also of first principles. If democracies do not address them deliberately, the conditions of democratic government will increasingly be shaped by actors and systems that are not democratically accountable.

5.5.2 Respect for Constitutions, Checks and Balances, and the Rule of Law.

Constraining power through constitutions, independent courts and accountable legislatures is a defining feature of democratic government. Today, those constraints are being dismantled in two distinct ways. The first is familiar: the outright rupture of constitutional order, which continues to recur despite international and regional efforts to deter it.

The second method is quieter, more widespread and harder to confront: elected leaders who hollow out constraints on their own power from within by manipulating electoral rules and term limits, capturing courts, neutralizing legislatures and independent oversight bodies, and restricting media freedom and civic space. Each step may appear lawful in appearance, while its cumulative effect is to dismantle constitutional

government. Because no single measure necessarily crosses an obvious threshold, this gradual autocratization rarely triggers the multilateral mechanisms designed to respond to sudden breakdown. It has consequently become one of the principal threats to established and younger democracies alike.

International cooperation cannot substitute for the domestic institutions and citizens who are the first line of defense of constitutional order and must act with particular care in an area so closely connected to national sovereignty. Yet it is not powerless. The challenge is to shift from reacting to constitutional breakdown towards preventing it; to develop responses to gradual erosion alongside those addressing outright ruptures; and to strengthen the institutions and networks that sustain constitutional constraints over time.

It is along these lines that the Commission presents the following proposals:

5.5.2a Integrate democratic and constitutional risks into United Nations conflict prevention strategies.

The connection between serious constitutional crises, democratic erosion and conflict provides an important entry point for preventive United Nations engagement. Sudden or violent ruptures of constitutional order can spill across borders, displace populations, intensify conflict and encourage similar actions elsewhere. Where democratic or constitutional erosion heightens the risk of violence or prolonged instability, the United Nations should address it within its conflict-prevention work, building on the Sustaining Peace framework and acting consistently within its mandates and the principle of national ownership. This should include stronger political analysis and early warning; more robust use of the Secretary-General's good offices and preventive diplomacy; support for mediation and dialogue; constitutional advisory assistance; and adequately resourced political missions able to engage before a crisis becomes violent or irreversible. Early engagement can be more effective and less politically contested than intervention after a breakdown. Cuts to rule-of-law and prevention funding weaken precisely this capacity and should be reversed.

5.5.2b Elevate constitutionalism and equip multilateral cooperation to address gradual erosion.

The multilateral system remains better prepared for coups and sudden interruptions than for the incremental dismantling of checks and balances that now predominates. Within the United Nations,

constitutionalism remains underdeveloped as a distinct concern and is too often reduced to technical rule-of-law or constitution-making assistance. United Nations constitutional, rule-of-law and peacebuilding work should address more directly the institutional vulnerabilities associated with democratic decline, including executive constraints, term limits, judicial independence, legislative oversight and civilian oversight of the security forces. Relevant human rights mandates, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, should receive the political and financial support necessary to fulfil their functions effectively and independently.

Member States should work through regional organizations to upgrade their monitoring and review mechanisms to identify incremental erosion, using objective benchmarks, independent expertise, regular assessment and graduated responses. At the plurilateral level, states should strengthen and connect existing sources of constitutional expertise and peer support, including the Venice Commission, International IDEA and networks of courts, parliaments and oversight institutions. Courts, legislatures and independent bodies facing political pressure should have access to peer support, technical assistance and independent expert advice.

5.5.2c Strengthen regional mechanisms that defend constitutional order and apply them consistently.

A number of regional and subregional organizations have developed specific international instruments for responding to threats to constitutional democratic order. These include the African Union's norms on unconstitutional changes of government, the commitments contained in the Inter-American Democratic Charter and democracy clauses adopted by subregional organizations. Their principal weakness lies not in the absence of commitments but in their weak or uneven application. Political divisions among Member States frequently delay collective action, produce inconsistent decisions and weaken follow-up.

Regional organizations should establish clearer criteria for activating their democratic instruments, transparent procedures, objective assessment, regular follow-up and reasoned decisions. These mechanisms should address not only coups and other abrupt interruptions but also unconstitutional alterations that progressively undermine democratic order. National institutions directly harmed by executive overreach should be empowered to present their case for engagement directly to regional organizations. Dialogue, mediation and positive incentives should be

used wherever they offer a credible path to restoring constitutional government. Where suspension, sanctions or other restrictive measures become necessary, they should be targeted, proportionate, time-bound and subject to regular review, with safeguards to limit harm to the population.

5.5.2d Support directly the institutions and networks that constrain power.

Executive overreach falls first on courts, parliaments, supreme audit institutions, ombudspersons, electoral authorities and other independent bodies whose autonomy is precisely what makes them targets. These institutions are increasingly connected through transnational associations and peer networks, including the Inter-Parliamentary Union, INTOSAI, judicial networks and associations of ombudspersons and electoral authorities. Such networks can provide solidarity, independent expertise, external visibility and standards to which national institutions under pressure can appeal. Experience from democratic transitions and openings also shows that plurilateral bodies are often most valuable as an existing infrastructure of standards, advice and peer support that domestic institutions can draw upon.

The Commission recommends that states and donors provide sustained support for these networks while safeguarding their autonomy. They should be equipped, consistent with their mandates, to provide rapid peer assistance, document threats to institutional independence, offer independent scrutiny and express public solidarity when a member institution comes under attack. International and regional organizations should also create more systematic channels through which the findings and concerns of these networks can inform their monitoring, diplomatic engagement and preventive action.

5.5.3 Electoral Integrity.

The right of every citizen to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections, conducted by universal and equal suffrage and by secret ballot, is a cornerstone of democratic government and a right recognized in international law.⁶⁴ Their integrity, however, cannot be reduced to the conduct of polling on election day. It extends across the entire electoral cycle: the rules determining who may vote and stand for office, the

independence of the bodies that administer elections, the fairness of the information environment in which campaigns unfold and, increasingly, the willingness of those who lose to accept legitimate results and pursue any challenges through lawful procedures. Across this cycle, elections face converging pressures, including opaque political finance, politicized or under-resourced electoral administration, information manipulation amplified by artificial intelligence, foreign interference and deliberate efforts to cast doubt on legitimate outcomes.

National authorities bear primary responsibility for conducting elections, but international cooperation can help protect the standards, institutions, capacities and independent scrutiny on which their integrity depends. The following recommendations concentrate on where it can add most value at each level of the multilateral system.

5.5.3a Protect and adequately resource international electoral assistance and observation.

International electoral assistance and observation are among the most established forms of international support for electoral integrity. United Nations electoral assistance is provided at the request of the State concerned or pursuant to a mandate of the General Assembly or Security Council, while international and regional observation operates under different mandates and invitation arrangements. Both contribute to the implementation of the right to genuine periodic elections affirmed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

These support systems, however, are also in retreat: OECD Creditor Reporting System data indicate that ODA disbursements reported by United Nations entities under the “Elections” purpose code fell by approximately 63 per cent, from USD 35 million in 2016 to USD 13 million in 2024, while regional observation, including the widely respected missions of the Organization of American States, continues to operate on limited and precarious funding. This decline is occurring precisely as threats to electoral integrity multiply.

The Commission considers the protection and adequate resourcing of this work a priority. It calls for predictable funding for United Nations electoral assistance and regional and independent observation, alongside closer

⁶⁴ United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), 16 December 1966, art. 25(b); Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 25, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7 (27 August 1996).

coordination between the United Nations' role in technical assistance and quiet diplomacy and the more direct role played by regional and independent observers.

5.5.3b Uphold the credibility and strengthen the capacity of international electoral observation.

The value of election observation depends on its impartiality and methodological integrity. That value is increasingly diluted by the spread of partisan observers, invited by governments seeking to legitimize flawed elections, who attempt to lend credibility to processes they have not genuinely scrutinized in accordance with international standards.⁶⁵ A normative foundation for observers already exists in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, endorsed by more than fifty intergovernmental and international organizations, but adherence remains voluntary and is not independently verified.

The Commission recommends that States, regional organizations, donors and international partners recognize only those international observers that demonstrate conformity with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation; they should also refrain from sponsoring, financing or relying on observation missions that do not disclose their methodology. Organizations conducting joint missions should require participating bodies to meet the same standards. Ultimately, States should uphold standing commitments to invite credible international observers, as OSCE participating States have undertaken to do, and encourage regional and plurilateral organizations with democracy mandates to incorporate comparable commitments into their rules.

Credible missions must be able to assess the full electoral cycle, engage a wide range of societal actors and operate without intimidation or restrictions on their ability to validate the electoral process and its results. Their findings should also lead to action. Regional organizations and national authorities should establish transparent arrangements for following up

recommendations, linked where appropriate to technical assistance, political dialogue and mediation.

5.5.3c Address manipulation of the information environment and foreign interference in elections.

The distortion of the information environment has become one of the most serious threats to electoral integrity, and artificial intelligence is intensifying it. Manipulated content, deceptive impersonation, opaque political advertising and the exploitation of personal data can undermine informed political choice and public trust. These challenges cross borders and operate through private platforms; no State can address them alone.

Rather than establishing new bodies, the Commission recommends building on existing plurilateral efforts, such as the Forum on Information and Democracy, to bring together electoral authorities, media regulators, technology companies, political actors, journalists, civil society and independent experts around shared standards. These should include safeguards preventing artificial intelligence from making unreviewable decisions affecting electoral rights, alongside requirements for transparency and accountability in its use by electoral authorities, political actors and digital platforms. Measures to address manipulation must remain consistent with freedom of expression and should not provide governments with new grounds for restricting legitimate political debate.

Cooperation should strengthen the capacity to identify and attribute foreign interference and improve transparency around covert or prohibited foreign financing intended to influence electoral outcomes, while protecting legitimate international assistance, independent journalism, civil society cooperation and the political participation of diaspora communities. It should further support coordinated action against the transnational repression of activists, candidates, journalists and diaspora communities participating in electoral life from abroad.

⁶⁵ Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers (New York, 27 October 2005), <https://electionstandards.cartercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-and-Code-English-revised.pdf>; Sarah Sunn Bush, Christina Cottiero and Lauren Prather, 'Zombies Ahead: Explaining the Rise of Low-Quality Election Monitoring', *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 20 (2025), pp. 261–291, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-024-09554-3>; see Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

5.5.3d Close the technological gaps in electoral integrity without reopening the established framework.

The Commission considers that existing international principles and commitments on elections provide an essential foundation that should be preserved, while recognizing that the wider normative framework remains fragmented in some areas and is not always applied consistently. In relation to technological change, clearer guidance is needed on how those principles and commitments apply to technologies they did not anticipate.

The Commission recommends that the United Nations and regional organizations, working with electoral authorities and technical experts, develop operational guidance on the protection and use of voter data, biometric systems, digital voter registration and digital technologies used in electoral campaigns, including online political advertising, voter profiling and targeting, and AI-generated content.

It further recommends that Member States and electoral assistance and observation bodies strengthen the technical capacity of electoral authorities and missions, including expertise in data protection and digital analysis, so that these risks can be assessed across the full electoral cycle.

5.5.3e Support preventive commitments to respect credible results and lawful dispute resolution.

One of the most consequential emerging threats to electoral integrity is the refusal of losing candidates to accept credible results; a refusal often prepared well in advance through the deliberate delegitimization of electoral authorities and the wider process.⁶⁶ Because this danger is political rather than technical, it cannot be addressed through electoral assistance alone. Diplomatic efforts to secure public commitments from parties and candidates before an election to respect its outcome and pursue disputes only through lawful channels have been used to help defuse tensions, but such efforts remain ad hoc and difficult to sustain.

The Commission, whose members have direct experience of this work, recommends that such preventive engagement be strengthened and placed on a more sustained footing, drawing on the standing and impartiality of former leaders, the good offices of the United Nations and regional organizations, and other trusted actors. Engagement should begin before campaigning becomes polarized and continue through the announcement and adjudication of results and the peaceful transfer or continuation of authority.

Political leaders and candidates and their advisors and key donors should publicly commit to non-violence, respect for the independence of electoral and judicial authorities, acceptance of results established through credible processes and the exclusive use of lawful procedures to pursue substantiated allegations of irregularities.⁶⁷

5.5.4 Corruption and Political Capture.

Corruption is both a cause and a consequence of democratic decline: when public office is used for private gain with impunity, institutions lose their legitimacy, and where institutions are weak, corruption spreads. Corrupt leaders, complicit public officials, oligarchs, business interests and criminal groups — supported in some cases by professional enablers who knowingly facilitate the concealment or movement of illicit wealth — capture public decisions for private ends, distorting political competition, draining public resources and deepening inequality.

Corruption's most damaging forms are transnational by design: stolen wealth is moved, laundered and hidden across borders, through anonymous companies, tax havens and financial centers far from where the theft occurred.⁶⁸ This is precisely why anti-corruption is among the areas where international cooperation has the clearest comparative advantage: no State acting alone can recover assets concealed abroad, prosecute bribery paid by its companies overseas, or close down opaque corporate tax havens in another jurisdiction.

⁶⁶ Working Group 3, *Innovating Democratic Cooperation through Plurilateralism*, expert input paper prepared by the Open Government Partnership for the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism (2026).

⁶⁷ Comparable commitments have been adopted through publicly signed codes of conduct and electoral peace accords. Examples include Ghana's 2016 *Accra Declaration*, facilitated by the National Peace Council; The Gambia's 2021 *Peace Pledge*, also known as the *Janjanbureh Peace Accord*, developed by the Inter-Party Committee, and the related Code of Conduct signed by presidential candidates; and Nigeria's 2015 *Abuja Accord* and subsequent *National Peace Accords*.

⁶⁸ Charles G. Davidson and Ben Judah, 'How Financial Secrecy Undermines Democracy', *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 4 (October 2023).

Two cautions frame the recommendations that follow. Anti-corruption powers must be exercised consistently with human rights, due process and equality before the law, and must not be used selectively to persecute political opponents, independent media or civil society. At the same time, transparency without independent institutions and actors able to investigate, challenge and remedy what it reveals risks amounting to little more than disclosure with impunity.

5.5.4a Turn international anti-corruption commitments into national practice, beginning with money in politics.

The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) is the only legally binding universal anti-corruption instrument. In December 2025, its Conference of the States Parties adopted Resolution 11/7,⁶⁹ setting out agreed measures on transparency and integrity in political finance. The value of these commitments now depends on national implementation, which remains uneven.

The Commission calls on States to implement Article 7(3) of UNCAC and Resolution 11/7 by taking legislative and administrative measures to enhance transparency in the funding of political parties, candidates and electoral campaigns. In line with the Resolution, these should include regular reporting of revenues, expenditures and donations; the timely public availability of financial reports and relevant information on private donors; appropriate regulation of campaign spending by third parties seeking to influence an election; and disclosure of the sponsors and cost of political advertising; independent and adequately resourced oversight bodies; and effective mechanisms for monitoring compliance, addressing violations and applying sanctions where appropriate.

Effective national implementation also depends on independent oversight bodies, credible audit and anti-corruption authorities, investigative journalists and civil society, which States should protect and support. At the international level, States Parties should give effect to their agreement to strengthen the second phase of the UNCAC Implementation Review Mechanism, particularly by ensuring greater transparency and meaningful civil society participation.

5.5.4b Close the enforcement gap on grand corruption and the recovery of stolen assets.

Grand corruption is not only a criminal justice issue; it can become a means of capturing and retaining political power. When senior officials and their associates divert public resources, conceal the proceeds abroad and act with impunity, they weaken political equality, distort public decision-making and erode trust in democratic institutions. Stolen assets may also sustain patronage networks, political influence and the concentration of power long after the original corruption has occurred.

The weakest link in the international response is not standards but enforcement. Grand corruption frequently goes unpunished where national institutions are unable, unwilling or politically constrained from acting, while the tracing, confiscation and return of stolen assets remain slow, costly and limited in relation to the scale of the problem. This allows corrupt actors to exploit gaps between jurisdictions and, in some cases, the financial and legal systems of democratic States to protect wealth obtained through the abuse of public office.

States should strengthen the practical mechanisms required for effective enforcement, including the timely exchange of financial and beneficial-ownership information, mutual legal assistance, joint or coordinated investigations, and the capacity to trace, freeze, confiscate, manage and return stolen assets. Receiving jurisdictions and financial centers bear a particular responsibility to prevent their systems from shielding the proceeds of corruption and sustaining the political structures from which those proceeds derive.

The United Nations, regional organizations and relevant international initiatives should support this cooperation through technical assistance, practitioner networks, compatible standards and more effective channels for cross-border investigation and asset recovery. Existing mechanisms, including the Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative and regional networks of anti-corruption and judicial authorities, should be adequately resourced and better connected.

The Commission also recommends sustained examination of proposals to strengthen international enforcement where national systems fail, including an International

⁶⁹ UNODC, *Conference of the States Parties: 11th Session – Resolutions and Decisions*, Resolution 11/7, December 2025.

Anti-Corruption Court as a complementary mechanism of last resort.⁷⁰

5.5.4c Strengthen and connect regional and plurilateral anti-corruption mechanisms.

Regional and plurilateral mechanisms help translate international commitments into closer monitoring, operational cooperation and stronger incentives for implementation. They are especially important in addressing the cross-border networks through which illicit wealth is concealed and used to influence public decisions and entrench political power.

A substantial architecture already exists, including regional anti-corruption conventions and review bodies, the Financial Action Task Force and its regional bodies, the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, and initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, the Open Government Partnership and the Open Contracting Partnership. Rather than creating new mechanisms by default, States should provide existing bodies with sustained political and financial support, broaden participation where appropriate and strengthen cooperation among them. Regional organizations should reinforce cross-border investigations, prosecutions and asset recovery, ensure transparent follow-up to their reviews and enable independent civil society scrutiny.

These mechanisms are most effective when monitoring is linked to technical assistance, positive incentives and, where appropriate, proportionate consequences for persistent non-compliance. Such measures should be applied transparently, with due process and safeguards against adverse effects on civic space, financial inclusion and legitimate economic activity. Closer coordination with UNCAC would allow the universal legitimacy and reach of the Convention to be reinforced by the technical expertise, operational cooperation and closer monitoring offered by regional and plurilateral bodies.

5.5.4d Recognize, resource and protect the civic movements at the frontline against corruption.

Some of the most powerful forces against corruption are not international bodies but citizens: the anti-corruption movements, investigative journalists and civil society organizations that expose wrongdoing and demand

accountability, and whose struggles have been central to broader demands for democratic reform across many regions. These actors are increasingly the targets of the corrupt interests they confront, through legal harassment, financial pressure and worse.

The Commission recommends that anti-corruption cooperation treat the protection and support of these movements as integral to its purpose. This includes safeguarding civic space, defending journalists and whistle-blowers, and grounding anti-corruption efforts in the human rights principles and democratic accountability they are intended to serve. At the same time, safeguards are needed to prevent anti-corruption powers from being applied selectively or used as instruments of political persecution.

5.5.5 Equality and Civil Rights.

Democracy requires more than institutions and elections. It depends on the ability of all people to speak, associate, assemble, access information and participate in public life without discrimination or fear of reprisal. Equality in this context does not mean identical outcomes. It means equal status before the law, equal protection by public institutions and a genuine equal opportunity to influence the decisions that affect one's life. Where women, minorities, young people, persons with disabilities or other groups are denied these conditions, political participation may be formally open while remaining unequal in practice.

Restrictions on these rights are also among the first signs of democratic decline. Governments rarely dismantle civic freedoms at once. They narrow them through restrictive registration and foreign-funding laws, selective policing, surveillance, censorship, legal harassment and attacks on journalists, human rights defenders and protest movements. Discriminatory measures directed against particular groups can then be used to mobilize political support and test whether institutions will resist wider encroachments. International cooperation has a clear role in protecting the universal standards already agreed, supporting the institutions and civic actors that uphold them, and ensuring that violations identified through international and regional mechanisms lead to practical action.

⁷⁰ Integrity Initiatives International, 'An International Anti-Corruption Court', accessed 14 September 2026. [Integrity Initiatives International](#).

5.5.5a Protect and adequately resource the institutions that uphold equality and civil rights.

The United Nations human rights architecture provides an established framework for protecting the rights on which democratic participation depends. Through OHCHR, the treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, the Special Procedures and other mechanisms, it monitors compliance and provides channels for independent scrutiny. UN Women and other United Nations entities complement this work by supporting gender equality, political participation and national implementation. Yet funding cuts increasingly limit these mechanisms' country visits, communications, reporting and engagement with affected communities.

The Commission calls on Member States to provide adequate, predictable and sustained funding for the United Nations human rights pillar, including OHCHR, the treaty bodies and the Special Procedures. Their independence must be protected, and reform under the UN80 Initiative⁷¹ should improve coherence without weakening mandates, reducing independent scrutiny or diluting the institutional capacity dedicated to gender equality and women's rights.

The Commission welcomes the establishment of the United Nations Human Rights Group as a positive step towards greater system-wide coherence. It should help strengthen coordination and ensure that human rights analysis informs relevant political, development and country-level work, while preserving the distinct mandates and independence of human rights mechanisms.

Parallel to the UN, regional bodies such as the Organization of American States, the African Union and the Council of Europe have established their own human rights courts, commissions, and other independent mechanisms to monitor state compliance with their treaty obligations to protect and defend human rights. These institutions deserve full political support and financial resources to continue fulfilling their important mandates.

National human rights institutions provide an important bridge between international commitments and domestic protection but their establishment is not universal and

their independence is often compromised by executive authorities. States should safeguard their independence through transparent appointments, broad and secure mandates, pluralistic composition and adequate resources. International and regional organizations should support the GANHRI⁷² peer-review accreditation process and use its findings to inform institutional support and participation in relevant international and regional forums.

5.5.5b Turn monitoring of civic-space restrictions into coordinated protection and response.

International and regional mechanisms produce extensive information on restrictions affecting expression, association, assembly, privacy and access to information. Their findings, however, do not consistently inform political engagement, development cooperation or preventive diplomacy.

The Commission recommends that the United Nations secretariat undertake an independent, system-wide assessment of the implementation of its Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space.⁷³ It should identify gaps, clarify institutional responsibilities and establish arrangements for follow-up, with findings reported to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly.

OHCHR and other relevant United Nations entities should analyze more systematically when restrictions on civic freedoms form part of a broader pattern of democratic decline. Relevant Special Procedures should be supported, consistent with their mandates and independence, in strengthening cross-mandate cooperation through joint communications, visits and public reporting where appropriate. Such cooperation should address attacks against journalists and human rights defenders, restrictions on protest and association, digital surveillance, internet shutdowns and discriminatory measures. These findings should shape decisions by other parts of the UN system, for example, conflict prevention and political affairs.

Regional organizations should similarly connect the findings of their human rights courts, commissions,

⁷¹ <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en>.

⁷² The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) is the global network of national human rights institutions. It administers the peer-review accreditation process assessing their compliance with the Paris Principles, with "A status" institutions granted independent participation rights before UN human rights bodies.

⁷³ United Nations, *Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space* (September 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/>; see also OHCHR, 'Role of the United Nations in Protecting and Promoting Civic Space'.

rapporteurs and monitoring bodies with their political, mediation and assistance functions. Regional early-warning arrangements should identify patterns of restriction and prompt proportionate responses, ranging from confidential engagement and technical assistance to public reporting and wider political action in serious or persistent cases.

5.5.5c Protect and sustain independent civic action.

Civil society cannot defend democratic freedoms if those exposing abuses face reprisals or if independent civic action depends on short-term funding and government approval. Human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists, whistle-blowers, women's movements, youth-led initiatives and organizations representing marginalized groups too often face surveillance, legal harassment, financial pressure, detention or violence. Reprisals against those engaging with international institutions are direct attacks on those claiming their rights and on the integrity of those institutions by restricting the evidence available to them.

The Commission calls on States, the United Nations and regional organizations to treat the prevention of reprisals as a collective responsibility. Reports of intimidation linked to international engagement should receive systematic follow-up and, where necessary, coordinated diplomatic and public responses. Consultation, accreditation and reporting procedures should provide civil society with confidential channels, informed consent, secure digital participation and alternatives where travel or public identification would create risks.

Protection must extend across borders. States and international and regional bodies should cooperate to prevent and respond to the surveillance, intimidation, forced return or targeting of activists, journalists, opposition figures and diaspora communities. Diplomatic missions, law-enforcement authorities and human rights mechanisms should establish clearer arrangements for identifying and responding to transnational repression.

Protection must be accompanied by sustained support. The Commission calls for increased and predictable funding for locally led civil society through the United Nations Democracy Fund and other mechanisms capable of supporting independent actors without requiring government approval. Funding arrangements should be designed to reach smaller and informal organizations, including through appropriate intermediary and rapid-response mechanisms, and should cover core costs, legal defense, security and emergency protection, as well as program activities.

Regional organizations should establish dedicated democracy funds or protected civic-space and equality windows within existing funds, financed primarily from within their regions where possible. These mechanisms should be independently governed and protected from political interference. Particular attention should be given to women's movements, youth-led initiatives and organizations representing groups that face structural barriers to participation.

5.5.5d Make equality in political participation a measurable part of international support and review.

Formal equality does not guarantee equal participation. Discriminatory laws, inaccessible institutions, unequal care responsibilities, political violence, online harassment and disparities in resources can prevent people from voting, standing for office, organizing or exercising influence.

The Commission calls on Member States and international organizations to integrate equality in political participation into human rights review, electoral assistance and development cooperation. Recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review, treaty bodies and regional mechanisms should inform the design of electoral and governance support. Follow-up should address discriminatory laws, barriers to voter registration and candidacy, accessibility, political violence and the exclusion of particular groups from decision-making.

UN Women's work on political participation, constitutional reform, electoral systems and temporary special measures should be protected and adequately funded. International and regional assistance should support context-appropriate measures, including gender quotas, accessible institutions and protection against technology-enabled gender-based violence. Reversals affecting women's equality and autonomy should also be recognized as barriers to their participation as equal citizens.

Progress should be assessed through reliable and appropriately disaggregated data, with safeguards for privacy and security. Measurement should examine not only representation, but also whether those represented can exercise authority, influence decisions and participate without intimidation.

5.5.5e Strengthen and connect plurilateral coalitions defending equality and civil rights.

Plurilateral initiatives already address media freedom, digital rights, civic space, equality and youth participation. These include the Freedom Online Coalition, Media Freedom Coalition, Equal Rights Coalition, OECD Observatory of Civic Space, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and Youth Democracy Cohort. Their institutional capacity and mechanisms for follow-up, however, remain uneven.

The Commission recommends investing in and better connecting existing initiatives before creating new ones. Cooperation should include shared analysis and early warning, joint diplomatic action and clearer links with United Nations and regional human rights mechanisms. The recent initiative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to launch a multistakeholder Global Alliance for Human Rights,⁷⁴ including a Global Helpdesk on Business and Human Rights, a RightsX Summit on digital innovation, and a Human Rights in Every Classroom program to embed rights education at all levels of schooling, is a positive step in the right direction.

Those directly affected should have formal roles in setting priorities, developing commitments and assessing implementation. Journalists, civil society organizations, women's and youth-led movements, LGBTQI+ organizations and representatives of other affected communities should participate in the governance of initiatives established to protect their rights, rather than being confined to consultation.

Clear commitments, diversified funding, stable secretariat capacity and independent reporting would give these coalitions greater durability and accountability. Their purpose should be to reinforce the universal human rights framework through focused cooperation and practical protection, not to create separate or selective standards.

⁷⁴ United Nations News, 'Human Rights Are Part of Our DNA': UN Launches Global Alliance to Counter Rising Threats', 11 June 2026.



6. CONCLUSION

In an era of radical interdependence, the choice before us is not between national sovereignty and multilateral cooperation, nor between democracy and the capacity to act. It is whether power — within States and across borders — will be subject to law, public scrutiny and the participation of the people it affects. What we propose is a democratic multilateralism: international cooperation governed by law, open to review, representative of those it affects, adequately financed and willing and able to hold the strongest States and the largest private actors to the same standards applied to others. If democracy retreats, multilateralism loses its legitimacy. If multilateralism fragments and gives way to the rule of the powerful, democracies lose the capacity to protect their citizens and govern the forces shaping their lives. Their futures are now inseparable.

This Commission has not argued that democracy offers a simple answer to every crisis, nor that democratic States have consistently upheld abroad the principles they profess at home. Democracies can be exclusionary, unequal and unresponsive. Their institutions can be captured, their public debate manipulated and their majorities indifferent to the rights of minorities. Elections alone do not prevent abuses of power, and lawful procedures alone do not guarantee just outcomes. We state these failures plainly because they are not reasons to abandon democracy. On the contrary, they make the case for its renewal.

Democracy is not a fixed model, nor a status that a government acquires once and retains indefinitely. It is the continuing practice of ensuring that power can be questioned, limited, corrected and replaced without violence. It holds that no person, institution or majority should exercise unlimited authority; that those affected by decisions should have a voice in making them; and that disagreement should be resolved through law, dialogue and peaceful political competition rather than by force. Democracy requires free and fair elections, independent courts, a free and plural media, protected civic space, genuine political competition and equal rights guaranteed in law and practice. It also requires citizens who are informed, engaged and able to exercise those rights: to organize with others, challenge decisions, demand accountability and shape the conditions of their own lives. Rights that cannot be exercised have not yet been fully realized.

These capacities inherent to good democratic governance are being eroded. Political equality cannot endure where economic and technological power becomes so concentrated that it can shape public debate, political finance, regulation and policy beyond the effective reach of citizens and their representatives. Wealth can be converted into influence through lobbying, overt and covert political finance and control over the information people receive; that influence can then be used to preserve the arrangements from which it benefits. Democratic renewal cannot therefore stop at defending institutions. It must also address the conditions that hollow them out: corruption and clientelism, hidden influence, inequality, concentrated ownership, unaccountable digital power and the weakening of the associations through which citizens act together.

No democracy can govern these forces alone. Capital, digital platforms and artificial intelligence, disinformation, organized crime, climate disruption, pandemics, inequality and conflict all cross borders and exceed the reach of any single State. International cooperation is therefore not an alternative to self-government. It is increasingly one of the means through which the capacity for self-government can be recovered and strengthened. Yet multilateralism cannot simply be defended as it stands today. A system marked by unequal representation, selective application of common rules, chronic underfunding and weak accountability will neither command trust nor meet the challenges it was established to address.

Progress need not wait for universal agreement. Democratic change has often been advanced by organized citizens and civic movements; women's and youth organizations; reformers in public institutions; cities and regions; and coalitions of willing States prepared to act when broader consensus remains beyond reach. Successful reforms can be tested locally, adapted across societies, taken up by regional organizations and, in time, incorporated into common rules. Those who move first nevertheless carry responsibilities: to remain open to wider participation, act consistently with international law and human rights, include States and communities with fewer resources, and strengthen shared institutions rather than circumvent them.

Protection through renewal requires a revitalized commitment to democratic principles, sustained investment in the people and institutions that give them effect, and international cooperation capable of translating shared commitments into action.

This responsibility rests particularly with States that claim democratic leadership and possess the greatest resources and influence. Their credibility will be measured not by their declarations, but by whether they apply international law consistently, accept scrutiny, confront hidden and illicit influence at home, protect civic freedoms, bring concentrated power under democratic oversight, support democratic institutions and actors beyond their borders and accept the political costs that principle may demand.

Progress should be judged against clear questions, asked repeatedly and in public. Can citizens organize, deliberate and influence decisions more effectively than before? Are public institutions more open, representative and accountable? Is concentrated economic and technological power more firmly subject to democratic oversight? Are international institutions more inclusive, adequately resourced and as willing to constrain the powerful as they have long been to constrain the weak? Are young people and future generations given a meaningful place in decisions whose consequences they will inherit?

We should also be clear about what failure would look like, because it may arrive without announcement. It may not take the form of a coup or institutional collapse. It is more likely to emerge gradually: elections still held, courts still sitting and treaties still signed, while the decisions that matter are increasingly taken elsewhere, by people — or algorithms — that citizens did not choose and cannot remove. Citizens would still vote, but would no longer rule. That is the dire outcome this report seeks to prevent, and it is not inevitable. It is a drift, and a drift can be reversed.

Democracy has rarely been renewed from the top alone. It has been renewed by people who organized in workplaces and neighborhoods, unions and cooperatives, courtrooms and newsrooms, universities, parliaments and city halls, and who insisted on having a voice before solutions were designed for them. The answer to the claim that ordinary people are not ready to govern is that the capacity for citizenship is developed through its exercise. We are not here to defend an order in which self-government has been quietly taken from people. We are here to renew the promise that ordinary people can and should be the authors of their common life. This responsibility belongs to everyone who would rather be a citizen than a subject. Above all, its fulfilment will depend on an empowered citizenry working together to demand a greater say in how we govern ourselves.

7.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the Commission and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the institutions or individuals named above, or of the donors and partners who supported the process.

Key Definitions

Democracy: In the context of this Commission, democracy is understood as a political system in which governmental authority derives from the consent of the people expressed through free and fair elections and other forms of civic participation and deliberation, fundamental rights and freedoms are respected, and the exercise of power is constrained by the rule of law, checks and balances, and accountability to citizens. As shorthand, we also use “democracy” to encompass three broad elements that give life to its meaning – democratic governance and institutions, human rights, and the rule of law. The Commission acknowledges that political systems around the world have exhibited a wide range of forms and practices encompassing some or all of these traits; its analysis and recommendations aim broadly at strengthening and deepening democratic governance accountable to citizens through a constant process of reflection, self-correction, and renewal.

Multilateral Cooperation is understood as a set of global, regional and plurilateral institutions, norms and practices through which nation states, and increasingly other actors, cooperate to address shared challenges. It includes the United Nations and its specialized agencies, but also regional organizations, thematic alliances, issue-specific coalitions and hybrid arrangements in which governments, sometimes alongside civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, work together for a common purpose.

Plurilateralism, in which like-minded states and other relevant stakeholders cooperate to address a range of specific transnational issues in more flexible coalitions, is a form of multilateral cooperation increasingly seen under current conditions as a more viable path forward for supporting democracy.

Democracy support is understood in a broad and inclusive sense, as the range of international, regional, bilateral and other cross-border efforts through which actors contribute to the protection, strengthening and renewal of democratic governance, including through peer learning, technical assistance, and bilateral and multilateral development and financial assistance.

Multistakeholder processes involve a combination of governments, international organizations, civil society, private sector, philanthropists, academic and technical experts, and other relevant actors participating in various forms of multilateral governance and deliberations.

Sovereignty: The Commission uses the term in two related senses. In its conventional external sense, it refers to the independence of a State from outside interference, a meaning retained throughout this report. It also has an internal democratic dimension: the effective capacity of a people to govern themselves – to deliberate, decide and shape the rules under which they live. In this democratic sense, sovereignty is best understood as belonging to the people and operating across interconnected levels, from local communities and cities to the national, regional and global levels.

List of Acronyms

ACRONYM	FULL TERM
AI	Artificial intelligence
BEPS	Base erosion and profit shifting
BMJ	The BMJ (formerly British Medical Journal)
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN document symbol used in Human Rights Committee materials)
DAC	OECD Development Assistance Committee
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (Switzerland)
G20	Group of Twenty
GANHRI	Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions
GDP	Gross domestic product
GWL Voices	Global Women Leaders Voices
HUDERIA	Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law Impact Assessment
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
International IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
ILO	International Labour Organization
INTOSAI	International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
NGO(s)	Non-governmental organisation(s)
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OGP	Open Government Partnership
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PNAS	Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
TAI	Trust, Accountability and Inclusion Collaborative
UN	United Nations
UN80	UN80 Initiative (United Nations institutional reform process)
UNCAC	United Nations Convention against Corruption
UNCTAD	UN Trade and Development (formerly United Nations Conference on Trade and Development)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGIS	United Nations Group on the Information Society
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USD	United States dollar
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society
WSIS+20	World Summit on the Information Society 20-year review process



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