



Where's the *dēmos* in Democracy?

**Building Democratic Futures
and Resisting Autocracy**

Front cover image: Illustration showing fractures in democracy when institutions and political leaders fail to engage citizens. Credit: Bushra Saleem

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Suggested citation: Nampoothiri, N. *et al.* (2026) *Where's the Demos in Democracy?* Building Democratic Futures and Resisting Autocracy, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: **10.19088/IDS.2026.008**

Published March 2026



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IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England
Charity Registration Number 306371
Charitable Company Number 877338

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Tony Roberts and Alex Shankland for their inputs to the report. Thank you to the funders who supported much of the research cited in this report, including the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and Open Society Foundations. Thank you to researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and partners who have led the studies that contributed to this report.

We dedicate this report to John Gaventa, for his scholarly contributions to understanding and deepening democracy, and to all the political activists and civil society actors who are actively resisting authoritarianism in their contexts and fighting for more inclusive and just societies.

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Executive summary

democracy

noun, from the Greek, *dēmokratía*, from *dēmos* 'people' and *krátos* 'rule'

Democracy is in crisis. Anti-democratic politicians and anti-rights movements are becoming more popular. Simultaneously, growing inequality around the world – a product of neoliberal capitalist societies – has left millions of people feeling left behind and alienated. This, in turn, plays into the hands of anti-democratic groups who are using it for exclusionary politics. Questions are being raised about whether democracy delivers results for the people.

This report responds to these challenges by demonstrating that democracy delivers development better than other regimes. The authors argue there is an urgent need to rethink democracy by centring people, power, and inequality, and put forward eight building blocks to strengthen democracy and resist democratic decline. This is important not only for democracy's intrinsic values in terms of representation and inclusion, but also for the positive impacts it has on social and economic development globally.

For too long, work on strengthening democracy was about building the effectiveness of state and civil institutions, norms and processes. Although 'democracy' can conjure notions of elections, checks and balances, judicial systems, and independent media – all critically important – this report finds that the missing ingredient in many contexts is the extent to which people (the *demos*) are able to engage in democratic practice in meaningful ways.

Strengthening democracy is not a technical exercise; it includes democratising institutions and processes alongside making the actions and behaviours of various actors more representative, inclusive, and equitable. The eight building blocks put forward here suggest ways in which policymakers and other actors can work to support democratic changes within regimes of different hues. They include building and strengthening:

- active citizenship
- informal mobilisation
- digital agency
- civil society organisations
- de-polarisation
- accountability mechanisms
- political participation through informal institutions
- more effective donor support.



Concept photo showing U.S. President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Credit: miss.cabul | Shutterstock.com

Introduction: democracy in crisis

Falling trust in institutions, dissatisfaction with democratic governments, and the rise of authoritarian leaders is driving democratic backsliding. The number of autocracies in the world now surpasses the number of democracies for the first time in 20 years (Nord *et al.* 2025). This democratic erosion is a global phenomenon witnessed across a wide variety of countries including traditionally stable democracies in North America and Western Europe. Since the turn of the century, trust in governments, parliaments, and elected representatives has been falling in democratic countries (Valgarðsson *et al.* 2025), with more than two-thirds of people worldwide perceiving that they have little influence over the decisions made by their government (UNDP 2024). Discontent over the lack of basic needs and services is a major driver of contemporary protests, with younger generations seeing government corruption as a major cause of poverty, inequality, failing service provision, and a lack of prospects (Huff *et al.* 2025; Nazneen 2024; Oosterom and Gukurume forthcoming) (see Box 3).

In some countries, autocrats have risen to power. In many others, populist leaders on the left and right are driving political polarisation and weakening democratic safeguards, including free and fair elections, freedoms of expression, assembly, and free media, and institutional checks and balances in order to centralise power and weaken opponents (Scheiring *et al.* 2024; Ruth-Lovell and Grahn 2023; Wunsch and Blanchard 2023). The erosion of checks and balances on state power is a key feature of democratic backsliding. Undermining of independent judiciaries, manipulation of elections, and attacks on civil society or the media all result in power being increasingly concentrated in the executive and a subsequent loss of accountability.

Exclusionary populists, primarily associated with parties on the far right, are gaining power in Europe. France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden are just some of the countries where far-right parties are driving polarisation and gaining in popularity. Belarus, Hungary, Russia, and Türkiye have experienced dramatic democratic backsliding. Democracy has also been eroded across Africa, Latin America, and Asia to different degrees in the past decade, notably in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Tanzania, Tunisia; in Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela; and in India, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Since the 2010s, digital authoritarianism has been on the rise globally, seeding disinformation, increasing digital surveillance, and breaching rights to repress political opposition (Roberts and Oosterom 2025). Online and

offline civic spaces have also been closing year on year, reducing peaceful assembly and freedoms of expression. In 2025, only 39 out of 198 countries had an 'open' civic space rating (CIVICUS Monitor 2025). Where civic space is restricted, civil society organisations (CSOs) and anyone critical of incumbents is at risk, notably journalists, social movement leaders, and (often) representatives of minority groups. They may face administrative and financial hurdles but also subtle forms of surveillance, harassment, and outright persecution (Fransen and Dupuy 2024). This undermines democratic freedoms as these actors are less likely to speak out, take part in demonstrations, and join civic associations that are critical of the government (Anderson *et al.* 2021). Moreover, constraints on civic space limit the realisation of inclusive development goals (Hossain and Oosterom 2021).

Well-funded groups and movements are promoting exclusionary rhetoric and undermining democratic values, most evident in 'anti-gender', 'anti-migrant', and radical-right movements – all claiming to pursue rights and security. There is also an evident transnationalisation of illiberalism, where 'anti-wokeness' is a common political position that aligns with a range of conservative ideas such as opposition to abortion and LGBTQI+ rights, as well as to stoke division and call for the rollback of rights and freedoms of people based on culture, sexuality, religion, or ethnicity (Caiani and Eren 2025).

Human rights defenders are also coming under increasing threat as democracy weakens. According to a report by the Business and Human Rights Centre (2024), 6,400 attacks were reported against human rights defenders across 147 countries between 2015 and 2024. In 2024, at least 324 human rights defenders were killed in 32 countries (Frontline Defenders 2025).

The recent dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the drastic reduction of aid budgets across Europe means further reductions in funding for programmes designed to strengthen democracy (Carothers 2025). The closure of USAID also resulted in funding cuts to more than 700 independent news outlets around the world (Kenner and Ellefson 2025) – one contributing factor behind the global state of press freedom being classified as a 'difficult situation' for the first time in the history of the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index (RSF 2025).

This report reflects on some of the reasons for these autocratic trends. Taking a people-centred approach, it focuses on how democratic systems can connect better with people, and what citizens and social movements can do to build greater democratic resilience against the threats of rising autocracy and closing civic space.

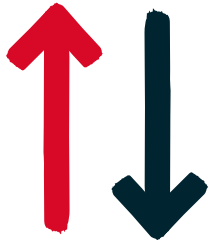
The report is aimed at policymakers, thinktanks, donors, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements, and grass-roots organisations that are all working to strengthen democracy.

First, we outline why democracy matters – its intrinsic value in terms of equality, inclusion, and fairness, and its critical importance for social and economic development. Next, we explore some of the failings around work in recent decades to strengthen democracies, focusing on the premise that while efforts to build democratic systems around the world have focused on institutions, they have neglected the needs of people.

Finally, we propose that those focused on democracy promotion must take a new approach to strengthening and deepening democracy for the future, and rebuilding trust in democratic institutions. We argue that effective democracy does not happen through the creation of democratic systems alone but through engaging citizens with those systems and institutions in a meaningful, equal, and inclusive way. Crucially, we argue that repairing democracy will require understanding the relationship between inequality and the erosion of democracy.

Box 1: How we define democracy

Democracy is often equated with elections or idealised as a form of governance that encompasses everything. Neither is helpful. A useful way to think of democracy is in terms of its quality, or how it is experienced by people. This more real-world version of democracy was termed 'polyarchy' by Dahl (1971), and has two essential components: contestation and inclusion. Put simply, 'contestation' is the opportunity for citizens to make up their own minds about their political choices; to express them publicly in fair and free elections; and to have government decisions be based on these choices. 'Inclusion' measures the degree to which these opportunities extend to all citizens equally. Political freedom and political equality are thus foundational elements of democracy (Munck 2016). They are also increasingly missing from democracies around the world.



The number of **autocracies** in the world now surpasses the number of democracies for the first time in 20 years (Nord et al. 2025)



More than two-thirds of people worldwide perceive that they have **little influence** over the decisions of their government (UNDP 2024)



In 2025, **only 39** out of 198 countries had an 'open' civic space rating (CIVICUS Monitor 2025)



In 2024, at least **324** human rights defenders were killed in 32 countries (Frontline Defenders 2025)



Trust in parliament has declined by around nine percentage points from 1990 to 2019 across democracies globally (Valgarðsson et al. 2025)



700 independent news outlets around the world had funding cuts as a result of the closure of USAID (Kenner and Ellefson 2025)

Does democracy matter?

Before we make a case for strengthening democracy, we need to ask whether it matters. With democracy faltering even in high-income countries, it risks no longer being the default model for all countries to aspire to. Examples of a few non-democratic countries delivering well on basic services to their citizens further complicate this discussion. So, we need to ask: can democracy help tackle societal challenges? Is it the best model to deliver security, services, and prosperity for all citizens?

The evidence shows that democracy can deliver on a range of development outcomes, including education, health, peace, and prosperity. Let us look first at the two indicators of human wellbeing that matter most – health and education. Evidence suggests that even when a state has limited capacity, democracy can result in increased access to education, and result in people living longer (Tudor 2025). A study of 170 countries from 1900–2012 shows that a transition from a closed autocracy to a high-quality democracy reduces infant mortality by 94 per cent (Wang, Mechkova and Andersson 2019), and that autocratising countries performed worse on life expectancy and health coverage in the 10 years after the start of autocratisation, than if they had not autocratised (Wigley *et al.* 2020). Another 170-country study found that, HIV-free life expectancy at age 15 years improved significantly during the study period (1970–2015) in countries after they transitioned to democracy, on average by three per cent after 10 years, (Bollyky *et al.* 2019: 1628). For a number of non-communicable diseases, democracy explains more of the variation in mortality rates between countries than do differences in gross domestic product (GDP). Democracy is also correlated with increases in health spending (Bollyky *et al.* 2019). The findings are similar on education. Democratisation – i.e. moving from being an autocracy to becoming a democracy – has led to increased education spending by up to 30 per cent (Ansell 2008). A systematic cross-national study on democracy and education confirms that democracy is superior to autocracies in terms of providing access to education, enhancing educational enrolment, and increasing years of schooling. It also shows less variation in quality of education (Dahlum and Knutsen 2017).

A meta-analysis of 188 studies found that democracies also have a positive and direct effect on economic growth (Colagrossi, Rossignoli and Maggioni 2020). One study of 1,100 cross-country analyses since the year 2000 found that democratically governed countries are better governed overall than autocratically governed countries (Gerring, Knutsen and Berge 2022: 373). In particular, this study showed that democracy has produced positive

effects around quality of government, health/human development, trade, transparency, and human rights. Initiatives to improve governance in areas such as transparency and accountability have a higher likelihood of working better in more democratic settings (Gaventa and McGee 2013).

Autocratic states that restrict freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and participation undermine the progress that those states can make on development. For example, Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley (2011) find that better health outcomes in democracies compared to autocracies is partly explained by greater media freedom in the former.



One challenge that democracy seems unable to tackle comprehensively is inequality

Rights-based approaches to development have long presented the ability of people to participate in society as a fundamental part of development. Seen in this way, development includes the work of building political capabilities and consciousness – something that can be best achieved in democratic settings (Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004).

One challenge that democracy seems unable to tackle comprehensively is inequality. Studies suggest that democracy fares no better than autocracy in terms of reducing inequality (Tudor 2025). Although democracy is sometimes associated with less inequality and poverty when linked with strong welfare programmes and public services, on the whole, there is no clear case that it reduces inequality (Gerring *et al.* 2022). In many countries, democratic processes have not been able to unpick the complex power relations that are the real reasons for sustained inequality (Menoca 2017). This inability to effectively address inequality is leading to democracy being weakened, as we will see in the next section.

Nevertheless, a strong body of evidence supports the fact that there is a strong, symbiotic relationship between democracy and prosperity that can work in both directions. As people's lives become more prosperous, they may mobilise to increase their demands for more voice in decision-making spaces. More importantly for our purpose here, and as already evidenced, democratisation can lead to greater prosperity. At a time when support for democracy is flagging globally, it is important to be reminded of the fact that democracy can make people's lives better.

How have people become excluded from democracy?

Strengthening democracy is neither straightforward nor easy. In this section, we outline some of the reasons why interventions designed to build democracy, whether by governments or external actors, have not been successful at building democratic resilience.

Focusing exclusively on formal institution-building

Since the 1990s, the dominant strategy of building democracy was the 'endpoint approach'. This strategy focused on the belief that strengthening democracy could be achieved by shaping its institutions, such as the legislature, judiciary, and electoral commissions. The goal – often pursued by international donors – was to reform these institutions into their idealised, often Western, models of how they should function (Carothers 2025).

These democracy programmes did not get it entirely wrong – the intrinsic positive link between strong institutions and democratic outcomes is well established (see, for example, Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001). However, evidence has shown that institution-building is not enough on its own to ensure democratic outcomes (Coelho and von Lieres 2010), and that it did not always translate to the spread of democratic politics – i.e. a culture of participation, pluralistic media, active civil society, and competing political parties through which citizens can get political voice (Luckham, Kaldor and Goetz 2000: 5). Where democracies are rooted in unequal systems of power – a factor true of many countries in Africa and Asia following decolonisation – unequal and unjust outcomes are likely to arise, no matter how strong the formal democratic institutions are.

For example, ensuring that elections are free and fair does not deal with the fact that voters may not be able to make autonomous electoral decisions or be able to participate fully because of economic and social inequality, as has been the case with many women voters in Pakistan (Cheema *et al.* 2022). In addition, many countries with strong electoral systems and judiciary, such as the United States and India, have been prone to democratic backsliding; in other countries, such as the UK, trust in governments has deteriorated even where formal institutions continue to function well. Institutions are important for building and strengthening democracies, but they are not enough on their own.

Failing to understand the role of power and citizens

How we understand the role of citizens has a crucial bearing on the design of democratic interventions and institution-building.

Citizens have often been conceptualised in ways that strip them of agency – as users and choosers of state services who may hold the state accountable for failing services, but do not get involved in policy design; as beneficiaries of services provided by NGOs who step in to deliver in places where state capacity is weak; as voters during elections but largely silent in the periods between elections; and even as holders of legal rights, where they remain silent bystanders that push responsibility to the state to fulfil their legal rights (Benequista and Gaventa 2011). All of these view citizens as passive recipients of the benefits that accrue from democratic-strengthening.

The exclusion of citizens from a role in policy and decision-making spaces leads to 'hollow' citizenship: citizenship in theory, but not in practice (Luckham *et al.* 2000: 22–23). In response to increased awareness of the shortcomings of approaches to democracy promotion that only emphasised institution-building, new forms of participatory governance were encouraged in the 1990s and 2000s. Within the context of international development, development interventions and projects organised citizen participation to enhance project outcomes.

In parallel, new legislation enabled citizen participation outside of electoral participation to improve the governance of (local) service delivery, budgeting and budget allocations, and other decision-making processes through democratic innovations that created deeper interfaces between citizens and the state (Cornwall and Coelho 2006). Participatory budgeting in Brazil, for example, became a famous example of such an innovation for deepening democracy (Piper 2014). However, it soon became clear that just creating spaces for citizen engagement would not automatically lead to more inclusive decision-making and outcomes, as prevailing power dynamics often inhibit actual change (see Box 2).

Analysis of how power affects citizens' ability to engage with democratic processes helps us understand contemporary threats to democracy. In numerous countries, anti-democratic actors have appropriated discourse on rights that denies the rights of others, which has contributed to a normalisation of forms of exclusion: a new form of invisible power (Lewin 2021; McGee and Pettit 2020). In more autocratic settings, fear can function as a form of invisible power, caused by past and present experiences of (state) violence that are deeply gendered, undermining the ability to speak out (McGee 2017; Oosterom 2017). Urgent and complex policy issues increasingly lack democratic oversight, while constraints on civic space inhibit civil society mobilisation to demand transparency (Gaventa, Shankland and McGee 2025).

Box 2: How an understanding of power can support citizen engagement

Making democracy more people-centred requires us to understand how power works in different spaces, in order to develop strategies for supporting the forms of citizen engagement that help promote and sustain inclusive democracies.

Often, knowing how power works is obvious – we know that politicians have more power than ordinary citizens, whose principal formal moments for exercising power come every few years in the shape of elections. But power is wielded in many more subtle ways than that, and building an awareness of how power works can help with efforts to counter backsliding (McGee 2017).

The Powercube is a tool that can be used to help understand how different forms of power operate in different spaces and to develop the right strategies for maximising citizen engagement (Gaventa 2021, 2019, 2006a). **Visible power** refers to the known rules and actors that shape decisions. However, decision-making is often shaped by **hidden power** – the power to keep issues off the agenda and exclude certain groups (Gaventa 2006a). The notion of **invisible power**, which refers to internalised social norms and discourses that constrain a sense of agency, was widely taken up by feminist movements in particular. These groups have used diverse strategies to strengthen self-confidence, critical consciousness, and social networks and relationships to overcome the invisible power that keeps many women silent (Rowlands 2019).

Invited spaces are initiated by government or other actors to create opportunities for citizen engagement. However, even these participatory spaces are imbued with power dynamics that inhibit actual change as citizens have little control over the agenda and who gets invited, or the rules for engagement. To reduce the risk of citizen participation becoming tokenistic, citizens and civic actors need multiple strategies to shift the rules of engagement in their favour. Different strategies are required to influence and open **closed spaces** – where decision-making happens behind closed doors entirely. Further, mobilisation by citizens and civil society actors themselves in so-called **claimed spaces** can be used to support those active in invited spaces, and complement strategies aimed at opening up closed spaces from the local to national and international level to achieve real change.

Ignoring inequality

There is increasing evidence that unequal economic distribution within democracies can contribute to democratic backsliding. A cross-national analysis revealed that economic inequality – including both wealth and income inequality – is one of the strongest predictors of where and when democratic backsliding occurs (Rau and Stokes 2025). Higher levels of economic inequality can enhance the perception that society is collapsing and that a strong leader is needed – a leviathan willing to restore order even if that means challenging democratic values (Sprong *et al.* 2019). A study of Latin America and the United States found that the root causes of democratic backsliding in these regions are the significant gap in wages and rising cost of basic necessities for middle-income workers (Leonard 2025).

Other forms of inequality – political, cultural, social, gender, linguistic, and knowledge-based – can impact the effectiveness of democracy. Socioeconomic status significantly shapes political participation in democracies. Poorer people are less likely to participate in voting, activism,



Cologne, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany – December 22 2023: Volunteers from Juttas Suppenküche e.V. serve soup, food and gifts to homeless and people in need at the Domforum. Credit: cc-images | Shutterstock.com

or political parties (Dacombe and Parvin 2021), and with the gap between the haves and have-nots widening in recent years, political inequality has also increased. Even in high-income democracies, policies tend to reflect the preferences of wealthier citizens who participate in politics more (Elsässer and Schäfer 2023). This entrenching of inequality in political participation and representation results in unequal influence, and undermines the promise of equality within democracies.

Participatory spaces designed to enable members of the public to engage in decision-making can also paradoxically reflect and, at times, reinforce existing inequalities. Experiences in participatory spaces across the world – such as hospital facility boards in South Africa, a national-level deliberative process in Canada, participatory policy councils in India, participatory budgeting in Argentina, and a health and community regeneration forum in the UK – have been shaped by inequalities (Cornwall and Coelho 2006).

Poorer people who face discrimination and exclusion can experience participatory spaces as extremely intimidating. The embedded inequalities in status, power, and technical knowledge also skew these spaces (Cornwall and Coelho 2006; Chandhoke 2003), making equitable citizen participation challenging. In contexts where there is a history of distrust, manipulation, authoritarian tendencies, and entrenched inequalities, participatory arenas can even reinforce power imbalances instead of offering an inclusive and deliberate space for democratisation.

Religious inequality can have a similar effect, with religious minorities in democracies such as India and Nigeria experiencing greater poverty and less access to education and public services (Tadros, Mader and Cheeseman 2023; Aderounmu *et al.* 2022). In established democracies such as Spain, income inequality and ethnic antagonisms shape low trust in government institutions and affective polarisation (Balcells and Kuo 2023). Unequal distribution of power and the normalisation of (for instance) racial and class inequalities perpetuate these complex dynamics (Oosterom and Scott-Villiers 2016).

Overconfidence in digital solutions

Excitement and optimism around the use of digital technology for democratic purposes increased during the Arab Spring as social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook played an important role in mobilising protests (Treré 2016). However, over time, it has become clearer that the optimism was misplaced and that there have been limited gains

from digital technologies as a force for democratisation and improving transparency and accountability (Hernandez and Roberts 2018; McGee *et al.* 2018). Initiatives in Africa that tried to improve citizen engagement and participation through digital tools were often mismatched with local needs and management capacities, and were guilty of isomorphic mimicry (where global best practices are adopted in order to hide a persistent lack of function) (Khene, Siebörger and Thinyane 2024). Digital innovations in public service delivery (such as in social protection) have worsened accountability because it is hard to seek accountability when there is no human to interact with (Khene *et al.* 2025).

Digital technologies are also being used by regimes and other actors around the world to support a descent into authoritarianism. Such practices include mass surveillance, internet shutdowns, and online disinformation to close civic space, breach human rights, and suppress dissent (Roberts and Oosterom 2025). Over the past ten years, significant abuse of digital surveillance technologies and disinformation has come to light. Examples include revelations of how Cambridge Analytica and similar companies used Facebook to influence democratic elections; Edward Snowden's revelations of mass state surveillance; and use of Pegasus spyware by multiple governments to illegally spy on their own citizens (Roberts and Mare 2025).

In a study of ten African countries by Roberts (2021), states were found to be using twice the number of tactics and techniques to close civic space than to open it. When civic space closes offline, citizens tend to respond by opening online civic space – but when this occurs, governments take measures to close online civic space, leading citizens to find new ways to express themselves: a kind of 'whack-a-mole' of civic space (Roberts 2021).

When SMS (short message service) text messages were used in Tunisia and Egypt during the 2011 Arab Spring, governments in more than 50 African countries imposed compulsory SIM card registration to increase surveillance and reduce dissent. Just as in Iran and Uganda in early 2026, complete internet shutdowns have been enforced in various countries during periods of unrest to prevent protest mobilisation, and repressive media laws are used to suppress dissenting voices (Anthonio and Roberts 2025). Additionally, governments across Africa are spending billions of US dollars on digital mass surveillance that often falls outside existing legal frameworks and in countries with weak legal protections, checks and balances, or independent oversight (Roberts and Mare 2025). The reality is that technological advances, including artificial intelligence (AI), are being used more to weaken democracy rather than to strengthen it.



Ugandan Presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, commonly known as Bobi Wine of the National Unity Platform (NUP) party attends a campaign rally, in Kampala. Credit: Reuters

Eight building blocks for centring people in democracy

How can democracies be made more resilient, so that they can resist the descent into authoritarianism?

In this section, we identify multiple ways in which people can be enabled to participate more meaningfully in democratic processes, whether that is through formal elections or more informal methods of political participation.

1. Building active citizenship

The democratic innovations promoting citizen engagement in the 1990s and 2000s underscore the importance of addressing power and building active citizenship from the bottom up. Active citizenship recognises that citizenship does not only refer to having a legal status as a resident of a particular place or country, but to the capability or practice of claiming rights, engaging in decision-making processes, and with public authorities (Kabeer 2005). Refugees and other groups who lack formal citizenship status also engage in active citizenship practices to claim rights and recognition from state authorities, international actors, and others in society (Mehta and Napier-Moore 2011). Active citizenship can also extend to the private and domestic spheres, especially for women, when they seek greater autonomy over (for instance) decisions pertaining to the household and bodily integrity, or seek respectful treatment in their marriage and redress where this is lacking (Lister 2017).

Besides tangible outcomes in terms of policy change or state responsiveness, engagement in democratic spaces can generate a sense of rights and citizenship, build practical experience with participatory processes and collective action, and generate alternative visions for those who are often marginalised from decision-making (Cornwall and Shankland 2013). These are important prerequisites for maintaining or strengthening democratic resilience within society. In liberal democracies, nurturing active citizenship happens, in part, through formal citizenship education, but existing modalities that teach knowledge about democracy need to be supplemented by approaches that nurture active and experiential learning, and allow young people to gain experience with democratic practice (Jerome *et al.* 2024). In contexts of democratic backsliding, building and strengthening active citizenship may need to happen in innovative ways as autocratic actors restrict civic space. Arts and culture offer alternative

avenues for political expression even when subjected to illiberal cultural policy (Čufar and Hawlina 2025; Taş 2017). Associations for tenants and those facing housing insecurities build active citizenship and mobilising structures while addressing real material needs (Sebály 2022). In contexts where civic space is constrained, support to such organisations can continue to maintain and strengthen active citizenship and thus counter backsliding in indirect ways.

Although there was a strong belief among development actors that active citizenship could be built through external interventions, it has become increasingly clear that people can build active citizenship effectively themselves, through self-organised or claimed spaces. In particular, feminist movements have demonstrated the need for and importance of safe spaces where women can spend time building confidence, solidarity, and a shared recognition of their rights before they engage with authorities (Nasr 2023). The same has been found for youth and minority groups that have been exposed to exclusion and discrimination, and also violence (Oosterom, Pan Maran and Wilson 2019).



External actors can support civil society actors who are opening up civic space

For external actors that want to support democratic resilience, it remains a challenge to find the best ways of supporting such claimed spaces, as their methods and ways of thinking may not align with how small groups and movements function (Rennick *et al.* 2024). External actors can support civil society actors who are opening up civic space, provide platforms for actors to learn from other actors operating under similar conditions, provide resources for civil society actors to independently ideate, and imagine and create safe spaces that support active citizenship.

2. Informal mobilisation: people power matters

Citizen participation in claimed democratic spaces has the potential to translate into benefits such as more representative outcomes and policies, trust in institutions, and increased government legitimacy. Informal political participation is important as an expression of active citizenship, especially where formal channels for participation are inadequate. Ultimately, many rights have come about through struggle rather than dialogue with legislators (Gaventa 2006b). In several countries, autonomous movements by women, landless, and indigenous people have brought change from clientelism to active citizenship (Benequista and Gaventa 2011: 14).

Informal mobilisation in claimed spaces at scale has led to the realisation of new rights and recognition for women and minorities in diverse contexts, including through grass-roots mobilisation and social movements. In several cases, grass-roots civil society groups have succeeded in negotiating new rights and freedoms independent of international funding. For example, by connecting local issues to global discourse on rights while employing contextually relevant strategies, grass-roots civil society groups were able to achieve the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Right to Information Act in India (Baviskar 2010). In the case of the Right to Information Act, strategies used included running local people's courts, forming a broad-based coalition of grass-roots organisations, joining an international network on the right to information, and finding state-level policy champions (*ibid.*).

Informal citizen mobilisation can be mediated through NGOs and associations (Coelho and von Lieres 2010). In contexts of fragile democratic institutions and strong centralised governments, such as Bangladesh and Angola, NGOs and their networks fostered political skills among citizens and nurtured the capacities of grass-roots leaders – although it led to new state-citizen interactions rather than policy change (*ibid.*: 8). In other cases, citizens have mobilised to ensure that rights are realised or to protect rights from being rescinded. South Africa was the first country to legislate the right to water, but the government did not secure its provision, so the Coalition Against Water Privatisation organised protests and legal action to ensure that the government was upholding people's right to water (Mehta 2005).

Where previously gained rights for women and sexual minorities are being reversed and have to be defended, feminist movements are at the forefront of countering the backlash against gender rights, often as part of broader dynamics of backsliding (Edström *et al.* 2024). Anti-gender backlash actors often appropriate a discourse of rights such as the right to life and the traditional family to undermine the rights of others (Lewin 2021). To counter

this, the primary tactic is to build solidarities between different groups and movements, amplify diverse voices, embrace intersectional ways of working, and centre mutual care (Baek *et al.* 2024).

In diverse settings such as Pakistan and Mozambique, women have been able to gain a sense of political enfranchisement after unconventional forms of protest (Khan and Taela 2023). In Mozambique, women used theatrical performances to push for change. In Pakistan, the collective action of Hazara minority women who refused to bury the dead until the state acted (revoking religious norms that require the dead to be buried on the same day) led to a sense of empowerment and citizenship (Haider and Loureiro 2021).

Under regimes where rights-claiming actions are contentious, successful protests use diverse strategies to pressure governments to accede to demands. These include: forming broad coalitions; framing issues that resonate with the government and the people, such as leveraging the constitution; and involving previous rulers, powerful champions, international organisations, and diasporas to exert pressure on the state (Nampoothiri 2024).

Non-violent mass mobilisation has produced regime transitions around the world – as seen in Nepal and Madagascar in 2025 – and has proven more successful than violent insurgencies, with even violent flanks in movements reducing their chances of success (Chenoweth 2023). Non-violent forms of mobilisation are more inclusive and attract more women, leading to their visibility, resilience, and effectiveness of movements, as numbers count. The success of non-violent movements has declined in recent years, potentially due to overreliance on public demonstrations rather than diverse repertoires of action and fewer efforts going into building a diverse and sustainable following (Chenoweth 2020).

In sum, people power matters, and supporting and connecting to informal forms of mobilisation is important.



8th Sept, 2025. Kathmandu, Nepal. Gen Z Protest Against Nepalese Government. Credit: Pratisha Manandhar | Shutterstock.com

Box 3: Youth-led movements

Recent years have demonstrated how young people are key players in democratic movements. In 2024, Bangladeshi students mobilised to protest against a quota reform. The mass protests that evolved in light of police violence and extra-judicial murders resulted in the end of the 15-year rule of Sheikh Hasina and her government. An interim government subsequently committed to electoral reforms, while demonstrations demanded greater accountability and freedom of speech (Nazneen 2024).

In the case of Senegal, the interaction between youth protests and the country's Constitutional Council prevented an attempt by former President Macky Sall to postpone the national elections (Khalafallah, Ojewale and Oosterom 2025). In 2025, mass protests by 'Gen Z' youth toppled governments in Nepal and Madagascar. That same year, youth protests in Indonesia, Kenya, the Maldives, Morocco, and the Philippines were met with fierce repression, but will likely continue out of deep dissatisfaction over the political status quo and corruption that has produced failures in service delivery and employment prospects. The year 2026 started with anti-regime protests in Iran, of which young people have been an important part.

When producing regime change, youth movements often lack a sustained presence at negotiation tables and get sidelined or co-opted (Sika 2019). But even when not actually realising a democratic transition, mass protests produce other democratic gains: the act of protest produces legacies that can assist future mobilisation, in the form of social networks, memories of empowerment, and repertoires of action and inclusion (Acar and Uluğ 2025). For instance, youth-led initiatives against gender-based violence emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, producing repertoires of knowledge and skills that can allow for the re-emergence of political agency (Tadros 2015).

Although mass protests attract a lot of attention, the more everyday acts of young people in support of democracy and peace are of significant importance because they often prefigure democratic values such as inclusion, deliberation, and collective decision-making and action (Oosterom *et al.* 2019). Through everyday action, therefore, young people model political behaviours and keep democratic sentiments alive. They also produce counter-narratives that resist autocratic discourse coming from above.

3. Reclaiming digital agency

Whereas authoritarians can use technology to silence citizens' voices, citizens can and do respond by building digital citizenship (Roberts and Bosch 2024).



Digital citizenship can be a powerful tool for uniting citizens to confront injustice.

Digital citizenship can be a powerful tool for uniting citizens to confront injustice. The case of #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, for example, reveals how citizens came together to confront the state against police brutality and to promote citizen security and inclusion. The movement expanded digital citizenship through solidarity across ethnic and religious lines in its pursuit of seeking accountability from the state (*ibid.*). Combining online campaigns and street protests, the movement achieved partial success with the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, which was one of several demands made by citizens for ending police brutality.

Earlier in this report we discussed how governments, supported by the private sector, are adopting surveillance technologies. However, citizens are finding ways to respond to such digital authoritarian practices. Different methods include strategic litigation, use of virtual private networks, using *#002# (a code to stop a call from being forwarded), using software to detect surveillance (such as from Pegasus spyware), changing phone numbers every six months, using multiple phone numbers, and engaging in advocacy (Roberts and Mare 2025: 4).

Other options for citizens include increasing awareness of the right to privacy and the importance of resisting digital surveillance, and reviewing existing security and privacy laws to ensure that rights-violating surveillance is checked and blocked (Appiah-Adjei and Oladapo 2025).

An additional strand of action is for more nationally relevant research on surveillance. Most research in this field is based on Western studies, theories, and contexts, and led by researchers from the global North. Critical surveillance studies in Africa and elsewhere need to be deepened and widened by: grounding research in the local historical, political, economic, and cultural context; using chronologies; undertaking a political economy approach to the research; focusing on normative commitments to rights, justice, and equity; and providing practical recommendations on how to overcome rights-violating surveillance (Roberts and Mare 2025: 27–28).

4. Civil society organisations as democratic actors

Local and grass-roots organisations can keep democratic sentiments alive. Even in challenging political environments, bottom-up, self-organised civil society organisations (CSOs) and movements offer an avenue for citizens to learn about their rights and to gain the confidence and skills needed for mobilising, interacting with public authorities, and participating in decision-making processes. As such, they can contribute to a sense of agency and a culture of civic engagement, breaking through fears resulting from prior experiences of stigmatisation but also state violence (Gaventa and Barrett 2012). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the rise in anti-democratic civil society actors that are pushing anti-rights narratives and supporting authoritarian leaders (Molnár 2016).

It is often acknowledged that a 'democratic stock' – the accumulated experience of democratic rule (Edgell *et al.* 2020) – can help counter autocratisation, but this is often looked at in terms of institutions such as party systems and judiciary. Yet, democratic stock can also be generated in society: where day-to-day democratic practices help to build democratic stock at the grass-roots level (Khan Mohmand and Oosterom 2025). Even in countries that have witnessed stark democratic backsliding, local associational life has built forms of solidarity that overcome divisions fuelled by populist-autocratic rulers (Coelho, Fontes and Sanchez 2024). As argued in the earlier section on people power, these experiences build active citizenship and people power.

Indigenous forms of mobilisation and civil society, including alternative forms of justice and accountability, have often been ignored in democracy support interventions (Llanos *et al.* 2024). Democracy support that is channelled through or involves Northern NGOs is needed to maintain democratic alliances, especially when working transnationally and at scale. But it needs to be committed to decolonial approaches that shift power dynamics to equal and collaborative relationships between Northern and Southern organisations, which applies not only to democracy support but international development more broadly (Banks *et al.* 2026).

Operating in difficult environments

In contexts where CSOs are labelled as threats to national interests and security due to foreign funding, there is limited scope for policy dialogue and influence, and so certain implementation strategies will be considered contentious (Hossain and Oosterom 2021).

At the same time, organisations find new ways to cope with and navigate civic space constraints to continue their work, albeit in different forms and

at reduced scale (*ibid.*). For instance, they shift to seemingly less political activities such as service delivery, while seeking to embed a notion of rights when interacting with local communities to promote an awareness about rights to services. Some adopt new discourse in policy dialogue: a language that is less challenging to regime actors but aligned with inclusion and other democratic values, thus navigating hostile policy environments (Anderson *et al.* 2026). For instance, where they provide services to certain minority groups, they avoid mentioning these ethnic groups but instead speak of 'inclusive development' in policy dialogue. Others work hard to build relationships with state officials they can work with more constructively to secure space for their operations.

These tactics indicate how CSOs that are active in the field of service provision are seeking to change gears and tactics. However, this kind of expertise may not be widely promoted. To enable more CSOs to adapt to closing civic space, there is a need for more mutual exchange and learning within and across contexts.



Abuja Nigeria - July 26, 2021: Community meeting incorporating Community Sensitization on Covid 19, Health and Water Hygiene of Indigenous Africa Villages. Election Campaign Meeting. Cancer Awareness Program and Empowerment. Credit: Oni Abimbola | Shutterstock.com

5. Supporting de-polarisation

The concept of civil society as democratic actors is complicated by the fact that space has opened for societal groups that support authoritarian tendencies and practices – challenging notions of ‘civil’ society (Lorch 2023). In highly polarised contexts, not only are political parties pitted against each other, but the supporters of each party increasingly view each other in negative terms and their partisan identity becomes the social identity for citizens (Wagner 2021). This phenomenon, known as affective polarisation, is exacerbated by social media, where content based around stereotypes, extreme opinions, prejudice, and hate speech is prioritised by algorithms. It affects the behaviour of social movements and civic organisations, along with that of citizens.

One impact of this trend is that whereas historically, pro-democracy CSOs had focused on pushing for rights and recognition from the state, now they need to also target other societal groups and citizens that promote anti-democratic agendas.

A major question becomes: how can dialogue be established between opposing groups? Civil society actors can play an important role in facilitating such dialogues, given their vast experience with organising inclusive dialogue and exercises in deliberative democracy such as MiniPublics – interventions that bring a highly diverse group of citizens together to discuss tangible issues and policies, and come up with recommendations (Romão Netto and Cervellini 2021).

The design of such MiniPublics and other interventions that promote deliberative democracy cannot simply be transported to new contexts; they need to be attuned to the contextual cultures of participation and the nature of polarisation, and require a broader mobilisation by movements or civil society actors in order to be effective (Cornwall and Shankland 2013). Moreover, citizen-led democratic innovations may not necessarily need to aim at policy change but can focus on impacting the public sphere (della Porta and Felicetti 2022). Yet, more research is needed to understand how these interventions operate in contemporary political contexts, and under which conditions they are successful in countering affective polarisation (Setälä and O’Flynn 2025; Caluwaerts *et al.* 2023).

6. Strengthening accountability mechanisms

Accountability mechanisms play a significant role in halting democratic decline (Laebens and Lührmann 2023). Horizontal mechanisms such as judicial and parliamentary oversight, vertical mechanisms such as elections, and diagonal accountability mechanisms such as civil society and media pressure are all effective in preventing democratic breakdown (*ibid.*). But accountability reforms challenge entrenched power-holders who would lose out from an increase in transparency and increased protection of citizens' rights and entitlements, and so they can be challenging to implement, especially in contexts characterised by high inequality.

The answer once again lies in empowering citizen action. Schedler (1999) defines accountability as having two main components: answerability (that power-holders should have to justify their actions); and enforcement (that they can be sanctioned when they break rules). Although these dynamics are often studied across formal institutions, informal mobilisation and civic action can also apply pressures and demand accountability. An important example here is that of social accountability initiatives that have been popular within international development since the 2000s, especially in contexts where traditional vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms were weak (Joshi and Houtzager 2012). Social accountability includes mechanisms such as citizen juries, citizen assemblies, and community report cards, through which citizens directly demand accountability from providers (*ibid.*).

There are several other examples, many funded by external donors, that highlight citizens' pivotal role in accountability through vertical aggregation, where local people in programmes such as Pakistan's AAWAZ and Mozambique's Diálogo (originally known as the Mozambique Democratic Governance Support Programme) escalated their service claims to higher authorities, securing improvements and policy shifts (Anderson, Fox and Gaventa 2020). Citizens have also built horizontal networks, as in Pakistan's Alif Ailaan for education reform coalitions, while multi-level advocacy in Nigeria and Myanmar connected community demands to national policy, and adaptive citizen strategies navigated uncertainty in Egypt (*ibid.*).

The example of the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria, formed in response to the abduction of 276 girls by Boko Haram in 2014, demonstrates how movements can hold governments accountable and pressure them to respond to their demands by using a wide variety of tactics, including social media activism, protests, daily sit-outs, and internationalisation of the issue. The movement's advocacy for government action led to government response in the form of setting up a probe panel, pushing the military to be

more active in North–East Nigeria, sending a government delegation to the school where the abduction took place, and an attempt by the President to visit the area. The movement made the Boko Haram insurgency a bigger electoral issue (with President Jonathan eventually losing the election) and resulted in 107 girls being released or rescued (Aina *et al.* 2019).



States must have the institutional capacity to respond to citizen voices

In their review of transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs), Gaventa and McGee (2013: 20) highlight the need to strengthen both state (supply) and citizen (demand) sides of the equation. On the side of citizens, they note that transparency alone is insufficient; citizens' capabilities to analyse new information also matter. TAIs can gain traction by being linked to other mobilisation strategies such as protest movements, litigation, and electoral pressure, and it is important to engage citizens in formulating accountability policies and programmes. On the side of the state, democratic space and commitment of state actors to accountability is insufficient; broader political economy, legal frameworks, and incentive structures within which state officials and political representatives operate are also important. Fox (2016) shows that states must have the institutional capacity to respond to citizen voices to trigger virtuous cycles of voice-triggering reforms, which in turn trigger more citizen voice.

In difficult settings with a weak state and numerous non-state actors seeking power, setting up strong accountability mechanisms is particularly challenging (Joshi 2023). Research from Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan highlights three key lessons: the need to recognise and engage with historical legacies and social norms rather than overlook them; the importance of working at the very local level to build meaningful alliances; and the value of aiming for small, tangible successes rather than pursuing overly ambitious goals (*ibid.*).

7. Increasing political participation through informal institutions

The relationship between informal institutions and formal processes

Citizen engagement in political processes is shaped not just by the nature of formal institutions but also by informal institutions and authorities that lie wholly or partly outside formal state structures and take on various governance-related functions. These unwritten rules of the game exist almost everywhere, in the global North and the global South. They determine who citizens will engage with, how, and why, and are especially critical to individuals resolving grievances and addressing everyday concerns.

In difficult and autocratising settings, many marginalised citizens avoid approaching state authorities to resolve problems. The public authorities that many poorer and marginalised citizens engage with more regularly (and possibly more comfortably) are often informal intermediaries or brokers, who can be local elites or civil society activists (Barnes *et al.* 2021), besides a host of other local actors and institutions. Crucially, recognition of these institutions by states and funders as governance actors can improve citizen participation, encourage inclusive decision-making, and promote improved local service delivery (Khan Mohmand and Mihajlovic 2014).

A range of evidence shows the disadvantages of not creating strong connections between state and informal actors. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, decentralisation reforms that formalised processes and procedures indiscriminately, and eliminated informal actors and institutions from waste management services, may have led to worse services (Alemu 2017). Similarly, in Ibadan, Nigeria, the *ad hoc* integration of non-state actors (such as community leaders) into formal processes had a negative impact on local security provision, even though such groups play an important role in ensuring safety for communities (Ojebode, Onyishi and Aremu 2017). On the other hand, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Mjesna Zajednicas*, a type of informal local institution that operates across the countries of the former Yugoslavia, were found to improve governance when legally and systematically recognised in the structure of formal local government, especially in terms of citizen participation in decision-making and service delivery (Khan Mohmand and Mihajlovic 2016).

Extending participation in elections

Informal institutions and social norms can also impact how citizens engage with formal electoral processes. A prime example is that of women's political participation. The gender gap in electoral participation has closed in

some countries but remains high in many others, with fewer women than men standing for elections, turning out to vote, or making meaningful independent decisions on political engagement. Social norms, including gendered distribution of resources and practices of care provision in households, often play a role in keeping women away from politics. Even when they do enter politics, these norms can lead to the normalisation of harassment and silencing of female politicians (Khan and Naqvi 2020).

Though we think of social norms as 'sticky' and hard to change, recent research has shown that these can shift quickly for some civic action. In Pakistan, canvassing male gatekeepers in households alongside women in the 2018 election helped increase female voter turnout by eight percentage points – a significant increase given a nine percentage point gender gap in electoral participation (Cheema *et al.* 2022). This suggests that working only with women to shift gendered behaviours and norms, as CSOs and funders often do, may be ineffective. Social norms are moveable if we understand and work with the contextual factors that limit political participation.

This finding can be extended to other patriarchal settings and issues in which men play a gatekeeping role in constraining or shaping women's political agency. Cornwall and Goetz (2005) also highlight the role that informal arenas and democratic spaces can play in overturning women's historical and cultural disadvantages in politics, as democratic arenas where political learning and constituencies can be built.

Finally, it is important to be reminded of the importance of elections as spaces of empowerment themselves, even as they come to be used as legitimising tools by autocratising leaders. Participation in elections can empower the poorest voters. Observations across multiple elections held at regular and predictable intervals in Pakistan, an electoral autocracy, show that poor voters worked together over time to increase their agency to make more independent political decisions that worked for them, empowered by the fact that competitive elections mean that their numbers matter to political elites (in this case, powerful landlords) (Khan Mohmand 2019). The good news here is that as long as autocratising leaders continue to have regular elections, more marginalised groups will find some space for coordinated political action.

8. Donor support matters... sometimes

Should bilateral and multilateral donors be involved in strengthening democratic practice and civic action? The relationship between democratisation and external democracy support – for CSOs, judicial reforms, legislative strengthening, electoral assistance, local governance and decentralisation, media freedom and information access, and accountability and anti-corruption initiatives – is complex, with scholars debating whether such support promotes democracy and, if so, under what conditions. A key debate also concerns how authoritarian regimes use aid. Many studies argue that such governments treat external support as fungible revenue, redirecting resources to stabilise their rule rather than foster development, which may undermine democracy.

Historical experiences, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, show that aid can catalyse democratisation and political liberalisation under certain conditions. Gibson *et al.* (2015) argue that post-cold war donor strategies limited the ability of authoritarian regimes to divert aid for personalist patronage by emphasising technical assistance and improving monitoring mechanisms. As interest in the region on the part of the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) declined, African countries competed for aid, leading some regimes to grant greater economic and political rights to opposition groups.

Experiences around debt relief are also relevant, especially in a world with decreasing bilateral aid. By the mid-1990s, debt relief pressured several authoritarian regimes non-aligned with Western powers to transition from single-party to multi-party systems (the same results are not visible for countries that were aligned with Western powers, where less pressure was applied). Carter (2023) shows that negotiations under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative reduced the daily odds of repression by between 10 per cent and 30 per cent.

Aid modalities matter for the effectiveness of aid. Political aid and targeted democracy promotion have a stronger positive impact on democracy than development aid (Grimm 2015), likely due to their focus on key institutions and agents of democratic transformation – such as CSOs, social movements, the media, judiciary, and political parties (Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa and Samarin 2021). Dietrich and Wright (2015) distinguish between economic as opposed to democracy and governance aid, finding that the latter is more effective and strengthens democratic consolidation.

The structure of aid is also critical. Fragmented general support, distributed across multiple donors, sectors, and projects, tends to hinder democracy by

raising transaction costs and disrupting national accountability processes (Ziaja 2020). Conversely, coordinated support focused on institutional reform and support for non-state actors, such as CSOs, can positively influence democratisation. Democracy-specific support, often technical and non-fungible, is particularly effective in promoting political inclusion and contestation. For instance, the effectiveness of the European Union's democracy assistance in enhancing democratic outcomes stems from its integration with political outcomes and comprehensive monitoring mechanisms in beneficiary countries (Gafuri 2022).

When focused on achieving democratic outcomes, external support can constrain state repression even during periods of sustained protests, promote accountability, strengthen democratic institutions, and create spaces for participatory governance (Birchler, Limpach and Michaelowa 2016). Donors involved in democracy support need to pay particular attention to addressing constraints on civic space (Brechenmacher and Carothers 2019). Civil society's capacity to build people power and maintain safe spaces where new democratic practices can be nurtured requires external support, especially in autocratising contexts. Also, although there are instances where people power coalitions have been supported and resourced by funders, funders involved in democracy promotion often lack the flexibility to support coalitions (Rennick *et al.* 2024).

Cuts to governance and democracy aid will weaken the ability of many civil society actors to expand efforts that support democratic resilience, at a time when democracy and human rights advocates already face growing legal restrictions in many countries (Cheeseman and Dodsworth 2023). Changes in the established order of national and geopolitical accountability put lessons from the past in a new context. Systemic efforts are increasingly vital, moving beyond tools and tactics to strategies that scale from local to national levels and beyond, and building transnational coalitions of accountability actors (Fox *et al.* 2024). A new geopolitics of accountability has emerged: Western donors are increasingly reluctant to be critical of regimes in the global South, afraid this will push them towards other powers such as China and Russia; at the same time, cuts in budgets for development cooperation, as well as faltering democracy in donors' own countries, have weakened their leverage (Desrosiers *et al.* 2025).

Overall, we must be careful not to oversimplify the impacts of aid. Research on democratic transitions indicates that authoritarian regimes often liberalise incrementally, granting civil liberties to selected groups before allowing broader political competition (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Donors can help support and sustain these processes.

Conclusion

This report highlights a central point – that strengthening democracy and reversing autocratisation requires fixing the relationship between states and citizens through an approach that centres people in governance and politics.

It requires engaging states and citizens in bargains around social justice that can incrementally rebuild both social trust and trust in the state, and a sense of shared objectives around human wellbeing.



These lessons help to point a way forward at a time when democracy is in crisis

This is not easy and we do not yet have all the answers on how to do this, but as this report shows, there is significant evidence from the past 15 years that shows how the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions can be strengthened to prevent a decline in democratic values. These lessons, we believe, help to point a way forward at a time when democracy is in crisis throughout much of the world.

Democracy exists today under conditions of growing socioeconomic and political inequality. Indeed, our report shows that a good part of the discontent with democracy is not with the institutions and processes of democracy itself, but with the fact that large groups of people do not have a voice in the political decisions that affect their lives, and states do not have (and are not focused on building) institutional capacity to respond to those that are speaking up.

Yet inclusive development interventions that strengthen civic action can re-centre voices of disenfranchised youth, women, and other gender groups, ethnic and religious minorities, and poorer citizens – and make space for diverse opinions and ideological positions, aimed at understanding that to lose democratic rights harms everyone.

Efforts that can help re-align public policy with the needs of marginalised groups can go a long way towards reducing socioeconomic and other forms of inequality, and in the process, build trust in democratic institutions, actors, and practices.

For policy actors that want to support democracy, an obvious way to do so is by maintaining support to those civil society actors who expand freedoms, build active citizenship, and drive informal political mobilisation to re-engage citizens with state processes and resist authoritarianism.

The role of the Institute of Development Studies

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and its partners have co-conducted extensive research on state–society relations and active citizenship for decades, centring citizen voices. Over the past decade, our research has increasingly focused on the challenges to civic and political mobilisation in contexts of democratic backsliding and limited civic space. As democratic backsliding is happening worldwide, IDS aims to address this phenomenon through a truly global perspective.

To establish patterns in democratic backsliding and identify the best alliances and combination of strategies that work to push back against it, there is an urgent need for further research across diverse country contexts in the global North and South. Experiences from the people that have lived through authoritarianism for many years can generate important lessons for countries that have witnessed democratic backsliding more recently, including liberal democracies in the global North. Linking development approaches with political science can offer fruitful perspectives, especially when centring the role of power and people to identify how democratic values and practices can be strengthened from within society.

To repair democracy around the world, IDS, together with its research partners, seeks to facilitate dialogue and exchange across diverse contexts based on its research and co-construction of knowledge, grounded in people's lived experience.

Policy actors can also support democracy by enabling transnational linkages between pro-democratic actors and movements to facilitate learning and the exchange of ideas. In contexts where state actors erode democratic institutions, it is ever more important to nurture democratic stock in society and support pro-democratic alliances of actors at the national and transnational levels.

Democratic backsliding is a truly global phenomenon that requires global action.

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