



Global Democracy Theory of Change

Exploring Common Causes of Democratic Erosion and
Potential Strategies for Democratic Renewal (*Phase 1*)

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Introduction and Background

GLOBAL CONTEXT

Throughout the world, countries are experiencing a rise in authoritarianism¹ and democratic backsliding. This democratic erosion is occurring against the backdrop of an increasingly fragmented international order and existential and interconnected threats, including climate change, the AI revolution, and an unprecedented number of armed conflicts.²

Electoral gains by authoritarian-populist candidates across the ideological spectrum reflect a growing frustration among people with institutions and ruling elites, and many are turning away from traditional democratic systems. This moment presents both an opportunity and an obligation to reimagine and transform democracy and the movement to promote and protect the concept and ideal around the world, making it more responsive to people's demands and better equipped to tackle global challenges.

Western governments and philanthropies have long been primary funders and supporters of democratic movements globally. However, their leadership - particularly that of the United States - in advancing a pro-democracy agenda has been increasingly undermined and called into question, due to domestic political challenges, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and diminished credibility in promoting democratic values abroad. This report comes at a critical moment when the United States government has reduced or cut many of its international democracy protection programs, posing a significant threat to this sector. The urgency to invent new strategies for democratic renewal has never been greater.

PROJECT PURPOSE

We undertook this project to better understand whether common causes of democratic erosion exist across the globe, examine potential actions to reverse erosion and protect democracy, ask why these solutions have not been implemented or failed to achieve lasting impact, and explore potential new strategies and in-roads to a path of democratization. Our goal is to suggest strategies for reversing the global decline in democracy through a theory of change³ that complements, or in some cases replaces, existing largely state-led and Western-led initiatives. A particular focus is the global democracy infrastructure, where we aim to identify gaps, especially in areas that have yet to be explored or where current efforts are falling short, and propose potential solutions. We do not wish to start any

¹ [The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule](#), Freedom House

² [New data shows record number of armed conflicts](#), PRIO

³ A theory of change is a structured framework that outlines how and why a desired change is expected to happen. It identifies the problem to be addressed, the underlying causes, and the pathways through which interventions or strategies can lead to the intended outcomes. A theory of change typically includes: a problem statement and its root causes; long-term goals (the desired change); key assumptions about how change happens; strategies and interventions needed to achieve the goals (short and medium-term outcomes); indicators of success.

new programming, but rather, to shine a light on challenges and opportunities through a comprehensive framework.

This report, representing the first stage of a longer term and iterative project, aims to provide project stakeholders with a shared diagnosis of the problem we are seeking to address, outline initial strategies and ideas to counter democratic decline, and propose next steps in developing a theory of change. We do not intend for this report to be final or authoritative, but rather, a conversation-starter that aims to augment potential action in the wide democracy ecosystem at a pivotal moment.

Common Causes of Democratic Erosion

In developing a potential theory of change, we began by identifying the root causes of global democratic decline to ensure that proposed strategies are grounded in an understanding of its underlying drivers. This section provides an overview of the potential main causes of global democratic erosion, drawing on insights from stakeholder interviews⁴ and extensive existing research on the subject.

Mistrust Of Institutions And The Political Establishment

Democratic erosion is driven by deepening mistrust of institutions and the political establishment, related to, amongst other issues:

- **Growing Corruption and Impunity:** Collusion between political and economic elites leads to oligarchy and state capture, where private interest groups exert disproportionate influence over public institutions and policies to serve their own interests rather than the public good. Grand corruption—high-level abuse of power for financial or political gain—manifests through rigged contracts, weakened anti-corruption mechanisms, and politicized institutions, diverting resources from public services. Petty corruption – everyday bribery by officials – further erodes public trust and deepens inequality. When corruption is systemic and unchecked, it undermines the rule of law and weakens confidence in institutions’ ability to ensure fairness, justice and accountability⁵.
- **Eroding Truth and the Spread of Disinformation:** Polarization, the spread of fake news, and media privatization and fragmentation erode a shared fact system, leaving society vulnerable to authoritarian and populist discourse. The ability to discern truth from lies is increasingly undermined, making it easier for disinformation to manipulate public opinion and distort democratic processes. A lack of investment in “alternative literacies” (e.g. digital, climate science, civic, cultural) further weakens individuals’ ability to critically assess information and navigate complex issues.

⁴ Over 40 stakeholders have been consulted to date, including representatives from civil society organizations, human rights activists, academics, and funders across diverse geographies.

⁵ [How corruption at the top erodes support for democracy](#), Stanford Report

■ **Affective Political and Cultural Polarization:** Deep divisions along ideological, identity-based, and socio-economic lines, including class, ethnicity, religion, and the urban-rural divide, erode social cohesion and create an “us vs. them” mentality, contributing to mistrust in institutions and elites. The atomization of social relations further weakens social cohesion, with people increasingly disconnected from one another and their communities⁶. Polarization also leads individuals to focus more on their own issues and political party allegiances, at the expense of engaging with collective efforts to address common democratic challenges.

Deep divisions, including class, ethnicity, religion, and the urban-rural divide, erode social cohesion and create an “us vs. them” mentality, contributing to mistrust in institutions and elites.

■ **Elite-Public Disconnect:** Political parties increasingly fail to represent the population effectively, resulting in public mistrust and waning interest in participating in political processes. This disconnect is compounded by the failure of government to overcome systemic inequalities, perpetuating elite reproduction and limiting opportunities for social mobility. Excessive bureaucracy further alienates citizens by creating impersonal and convoluted systems. As a result, citizens frequently feel powerless and lack meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions at both the national and international levels.

■ **Economic and Social Inequalities:** Growing disparities driven by systemic discrimination, weakened social protection policies, exploitative labor laws, unequal access to education and opportunities, and state capture, weaken social bonds and fuel public discontent with government, potentially leading to social unrest⁷. These inequalities often exclude marginalized communities from political and economic participation, amplifying feelings of alienation and disempowerment. The concentration of wealth⁸ and power among elites further entrenches inequality, allowing them to influence policy decisions at the expense of the broader public interest.

■ **Perceived Inability to Deliver:** Governments’ perceived or actual inability to provide effective public services, ensure security, and address crises exacerbates public frustration and disillusionment, reinforcing the belief they are incapable of delivering fairness or improving people’s lives. Chronic issues like rising crime, corruption, economic stagnation, and inadequate healthcare or education systems deepen the perception of state ineffectiveness.

However, the failure to constrain the predatory political ambitions and methods of certain elected leaders may present an even greater driver of democratic backsliding⁹.

⁶ *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That’s Pulling Apart*, Noreena Hertz

⁷ [Political Unrest Worldwide Is Fueled by High Prices and Huge Debts](#), *New York Times*

⁸ [Super-rich increase their share of world’s income](#), BBC

⁹ [Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Populist-Authoritarian Threats To Democracy

Democratic systems face escalating threats from populist and authoritarian actors, including:

- **Exploitation of Fears and Grievances:** Populist politicians throughout the world stoke fears and exploit people's grievances to gain and consolidate power, focusing on issues such as immigration, the heterogenization of societies, ethno-nationalism, national sovereignty, shifting cultural norms, insecurity, and economic hardships. Using law-and-order rhetoric and scapegoating minorities, they often promise a return to a glorified past.
- **Undermining of Democratic Institutions and Closing Civic Space:** The spread of misinformation and propaganda, the co-optation of traditional elites, the harassment of opponents, and the discrediting and manipulation of electoral systems enable authoritarian leaders to erode democratic norms, consolidate power, and silence dissent. Once in power, they further dismantle democratic institutions, tighten restrictions on civic space, and support one another through illicit financial flows, military alliances, and international cooperation¹⁰.

Importantly, the closure of civic space¹¹ is a global trend, with governments across political regimes constraining civil society, suppressing dissent, and limiting press freedom through restrictive NGO laws, surveillance, police crackdowns on protests, and the criminalization of activism. These repressive tactics weaken accountability, pluralism, and open debate—the very foundations of a functioning democracy.

- **Alternative Authoritarian Models:** Non-democratic regimes like China and Gulf States are often portrayed as successful alternatives to Western liberal democracy due to their rapid economic growth, political stability, and alignment with cultural traditions. These regimes also highlight their capacity to address global challenges and assert influence independently, while offering the possibility of economic lifelines to other countries through “transactional diplomacy” that bypasses human rights demands.

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¹⁰ [The New, Broader Alliance of Autocracies](#), Council on Foreign Relations

¹¹ [Rights Reversed A Downward Shift In Civic Space](#), CIVICUS

Weakness of Pro-democracy Messaging and Narrative

Pro-democracy narratives currently struggle to address these key challenges effectively for several reasons:

■ **Fragmentation and Polarization:** Fragmentation and polarization across class, education, age, ethnicity, religion, gender, and geography have fractured society and eroded a shared political community, undermining the foundations of the existing “social contract”¹². Failing to bridge these divides and foster a sense of unity, narratives on democracy struggle to address the diverse and deeply entrenched concerns of modern societies. For example, pro-democracy actors have been ineffective in addressing immigration with a positive message that effectively and proactively addresses fears about this issue and changing demographics. At the same time, it is essential to debunk the false narratives¹³ that authoritarians and oligarchic elites deliberately craft to sow division and divert attention from the economic and social harms caused by their policies.

Democracy does not deliver overnight and relies on strong institutions, good governance, and adherence to the rule of law.

■ **Articulating Democracy’s Value:** Making the case for democracy requires showcasing its effectiveness in delivering tangible results, ensuring peace and stability¹⁴, and creating conditions for everyone—including businesses and civil society—to thrive. Democracy does not deliver overnight and relies on strong institutions, good governance, and adherence to the rule of law. There is often a gap between public expectations and what democracy can realistically achieve, making it essential to communicate

the gradual nature of democratic progress. Speaking to principles of accountability, representation, and fairness—along with tailoring messages to local histories and cultural contexts—may also resonate more than abstract discourse about democracy.

■ **Communication Infrastructure:** There is a lack of comprehensive communications systems to disseminate pro-democracy messages to broad audiences at scale, potentially in contrast to authoritarian actors’ ability to leverage digital platforms, state-controlled media, and disinformation campaigns to shape public narratives.

■ **International Democracy Agenda:** The international democracy agenda is weakened by the perception of hypocrisy in Western foreign policy, the supposed success of authoritarian regimes in delivering economic benefits and ensuring internal security, and the failures of multilateral institutions in addressing key global issues like peace and sustainable development. Economic interests usually outweigh democracy and human rights, both domestically and internationally, as states

¹² [Democracy in the age of fragmented identity](#), London School of Economics

¹³ [Debunking 5 top inflation myths](#), Economic Policy Institute

¹⁴ [Media Freedom, Democracy, and Security](#), OSCE

prioritize trade, investments, and strategic alliances, while invoking the principle of non-interference in their internal affairs. This dynamic significantly hampers international cooperation on democratic promotion. Furthermore, civil society and citizens face limited opportunities to participate in multilateral decision-making.

Goals and Pathways of Change for Global Democratic Renewal

Building on this diagnosis, a suggested aspirational goal for the project is to reverse the global decline of democracy and foster greater collaboration among pro-democracy movements to advance a renewed vision of democracy. To achieve this, stakeholders proposed two long-term goals for pro-democracy actors to focus on—rebuilding trust in the democratic process and transforming international cooperation on democracy—alongside key strategies for each goal. The following long-term goals and strategies are intended for further discussion and development in future iterations of the project:

Focus on rebuilding trust in the democratic process through:

- Revolutionizing democratic deliberation and participation and involving citizens and civil society.
- Upholding fairness in the face of socio-economic inequalities and injustice, focusing on accountability and transparency, and delivering to citizens in the policy areas that most impact their lives and perceptions of democracy.
- Creating societal resilience to combat disinformation while regulating tech platforms and addressing concentrations of power in the tech industry.
- Envisioning a new, inclusive and shared political community that unites people.
- Building communication infrastructures and strategies that counter disinformation and culture wars promoted by authoritarians and match their playbook to shape public discourse.
- Bolstering legal frameworks to allow swift action against the increasingly sophisticated strategies from authoritarian actors that exploit legal gray areas.

Focus on transforming international cooperation on democracy by:

- Listening to the priorities of local communities.
- Identifying issues that require international decisions or cooperation.
- Sharing knowledge to support local political leadership.
- Building effective, Global Majority¹⁵-led pro-democracy cooperation at national, regional, and global levels.

¹⁵ We use “Global Majority” instead of “Global South” to refer to people who make up most of the world’s population but have historically been marginalized, underrepresented, or excluded in global decision-making processes, including Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, as well as Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups.

- Uniting actors from different political groups and ideologies who are willing to collaborate against authoritarianism.

Key assumptions underlying these strategies:

(Theories of change are typically formulated as “if ... then ... because ...” statements to explain how and why change is expected to occur. The following statements outline the underlying assumptions for the proposed strategies and the conditions presumed necessary for their success. As we continue building the theory of change, these assumptions will need to be examined, validated, and refined to ensure they are relevant and accurate.)

The following statements outline the underlying assumptions for the proposed strategies and the conditions presumed necessary for their success.

- If citizens actively participate in democratic processes and deliberation, then they will be more engaged, leading to greater trust in democracy and better outcomes because participation fosters a sense of ownership, accountability, and investment in democratic institutions.
- If political parties and governments become more representative and responsive to citizens’ needs, then public confidence in democracy will increase, leading to greater participation and legitimacy because people are more likely to support systems that reflect their interests and address their concerns.
- If democracy delivers tangible benefits, addresses inequalities, and upholds fairness, then citizens’ trust in it and social cohesion will strengthen because people will see democracy as a system that works for them.
- If a compelling narrative on democracy is crafted and effectively communicated, it will inspire people to value democracy, elect pro-democracy candidates, and hold their leaders accountable for upholding democratic values because narratives shape public perception and create emotional connections.
- If international cooperation on democracy prioritizes local perspectives and non-Western leadership, then it will be more impactful and perceived as more legitimate than externally imposed agendas because locally driven efforts are relevant and mobilize communities, and Global Majority states are better positioned to garner broader global support.
- If pro-democracy efforts are large-scale and unified across sectors and ideologies, then they will be more effective in countering authoritarianism because coordinated action amplifies influence and minimizes fragmentation, and broader coalitions are stronger and mobilize wider support.

Recommendations for Pro-Democracy Advocates

In discussions on potential strategies and solutions for reversing global democratic erosion, participants offered recommendations for pro-democracy advocates¹⁶, ranging from practical, actionable steps to more aspirational ideas. The following recommendations focus on designing more effective strategies, leveraging power, investing in a more coordinated and inclusive democracy infrastructure, better resourcing democracy efforts, and crafting narratives that inspire collective action. As a follow-up to this report, we plan to gather feedback from project stakeholders on which ideas and recommendations resonate most and should be prioritized for implementation and funding.

To enhance their strategies, pro-democracy advocates should consider:

- Embedding democratic governance goals into broader policy areas, including national security, trade, and climate action.
- Complementing tactical and technical responses with a political/ideological vision for addressing global challenges.
- Fostering the leadership of Global Majority states and civil society actors, ensuring they play a central role in shaping and advancing pro-democracy strategies.
- Building broad coalitions that bring together academics, artists, diaspora communities, youth, and actors from across the political spectrum to bolster democratic movements and back up strategies.
- Designing campaigns with clear goals, such as:
 - Addressing the threat state capture poses to democracy by curbing the outsized influence of extreme wealth concentration over politics, policymaking, and public discourse.
 - Strengthening global efforts to regulate big tech and curbing monopoly power while investing in broad, coordinated content distribution ecosystems, engaging non-tech-focused organizations in the process.
 - Promoting feminist leadership—characterized by inclusivity, empathy, collaboration, shared power, and a commitment to challenging oppression while advancing social justice and equality—on the global stage, as an alternative to authoritarian strongmen leadership.
 - Establishing a democracy framework that both measures democratic performance and holds violators accountable through effective enforcement mechanisms (e.g. internationally-led sanctions).
- Studying under-researched topics, such as:
 - The costs of oppression in non-democratic models, including political, economic, social, and environmental consequences in regimes such as China, Rwanda, and Gulf States¹⁷.

¹⁶ By pro-democracy advocate, we refer to any actor actively promoting and defending democratic values, institutions, and practices, including civil society, policymakers, funders, and other key stakeholders.

¹⁷ This would require determining the feasibility of measuring the direct costs of what countries spend on oppression and the opportunity costs of the loss of potential gains in economic, social, human and other terms, which are reflected in the case for democracy report.

- Authoritarian actors' funding models, which prioritize long-term, large-scale investments in key areas such as gender and media, drawing lessons for democratic movements on how to neutralize and replicate such strategies.

To expand their impact, pro-democracy advocates could leverage under-targeted strategic institutions and governments, including:

■ **Economic and financial actors, such as:**

- Bilateral trade treaties that could include protections for civil society, provided a critical mass of organizations actively advocates for their inclusion and enforcement.
- Regional and national development banks to advocate for democratic governance frameworks.
- Financial Action Task Force (FATF) where civil society engages with governments on compliance with anti-money laundering and terrorism financing rules that curb corruption and authoritarian financing.

■ **Political actors, such as:**

- Regional powers in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East that could be encouraged or pressured to adopt pro-democracy foreign policies and strengthen support for civil society in their regions.
- Small states, including Costa Rica, Denmark, Uruguay, Belize, Chile, Guatemala, Taiwan, and Slovenia, recognized for their commitment to international cooperation and leadership on global issues such as climate change, nuclear risks, and economic development could form a pro-democracy cohort.
- Newly elected African leaders from Senegal, Ghana, and Botswana, among others, who could be valuable allies for pro-democracy efforts regionally and on the global stage.
- Political parties and networks—often overlooked by democracy support initiatives, which typically prioritize civil society—to foster more inclusive political processes and enhance diversity among elected officials.

To build a stronger democracy infrastructure, civil society, governments, and funders should explore investing in:

- Improving access, connections, and funding for grassroots actors to engage in influential spaces, including support for translation and visa facilitation.
- Global Majority-led convenings and networks, alongside regional democracy alliances and South-South exchanges, to center voices from the Global South in global democracy conversations.
- Supporting civil society-led, bottom-up initiatives over government-led, top-down approaches to ensure that local voices and needs are prioritized in democratic development.

- Strengthening cross-border collaboration between national and regional movements for mutual exchange, learning, and solidarity— focusing on civil resistance tactics, tools, and best practices that can be replicated and scaled (e.g. safe spaces for rest and refuge, movement-building strategies); create shared global resources.
- Creating new structures, such as:
 - Peer networks for staff within democracy organizations (directors, communications, finance, evaluation) to foster peer learning, support, and exchange.
 - Cross-sectoral networks (e.g. humanitarian, development, democracy, human rights) to break down silos and amplify collective impact.
 - Networks and initiatives that include academics, artists, diaspora communities, and youth to enrich democracy efforts with diverse perspectives.
 - A robust operational structure for democracy, modeled after an entity like NATO, to assess emerging risks and provide comprehensive support across strategy, operations, and response, and/or a Conference of the Parties-style (i.e. climate COP) or Davos-style Forum for democracy, providing a platform for authoritative analysis from think tanks and academic institutions alongside creative, forward-thinking solutions. In these structures, composed of states, civil society, and other stakeholders, states would participate but not lead.

To better resource pro-democracy efforts, civil society and funders should consider collaborating on:

- Clarifying donors’ constraints related to unrestricted funding, compliance, and reporting requirements, and exploring ways to shift to multi-year strategy and budgeting cycles, allowing for more flexibility and long-term support.
- Exploring tapping into foundations’ endowments, making the case that the current moment demands bold financial commitments to democracy.
- Creating a pooled democratically-run fund in support of movements and organizations worldwide, with contributions from government and private donors, providing flexible funding and managed by a transparent and inclusive governance structure.
- Engaging with potential supporters, such as:
 - National and regional development banks for democracy-supporting initiatives.
 - High-net worth individuals and philanthropy/wealth management advisors, including from Global Majority countries¹⁸, to mobilize resources for democratic resilience.

¹⁸ [Philanthropy in the Global South: A new model?](#), *The Philanthropist Journal*

To craft narratives that resonate with broad audiences and inspire collective action, pro-democracy advocates should strive to:

- Expand the definition of democracy beyond just elections:
 - Address people’s everyday concerns—such as the cost of living, employment, and security—and clearly demonstrate how democracy benefits people and society.
 - Leverage research like V-Dem’s findings¹⁹ that show democracies outperform autocracies in key areas such as economic growth, public services, and peace. While acknowledging that democratic transitions may be challenging and long-term in their impact, explain the “messiness” of democracy constructively, framing it as a process of continual improvement.
 - Counter the argument that democracy is inefficient and requires strongmen.
 - Reclaim values co-opted by autocrats, such as patriotism, family, and freedom of expression.
 - Dispel false narratives spread by oligarchic elites on topics like inflation, economic growth, and meritocracy.
 - Define shared values (e.g dignity, representation, accountability, safety, prosperity) that transcend political divides, and articulate a vision for a new political community that unites citizens in collective purpose.
- Tailor narratives to local cultures and contexts, drawing on Asian and African ancestral traditions of democracy, while prioritizing the voices of Global Majority and grassroots actors to speak about what democracy means to them.
- Develop values-based messaging that fosters a sense of shared responsibility and inspires collective action; create a pro-democracy narrative playbook.
- Explore how to disseminate evidence of democracy’s value to broad audiences, at scale, while also identifying influential champions—such as Mary Robinson from The Elders—who are unafraid to speak out in support of democratic values.

Expand the definition of democracy beyond just elections: address people’s everyday concerns and demonstrate how democracy benefits people and society.

Potential follow-ups to this report for SNF Agora (and other research institutions):

- Research academic freedom and attacks on researchers and research as part of the authoritarian playbook, investigating the suppression of knowledge and critical inquiry and its impact on civil society and democracy.
- Produce a study or book that consolidates findings, analysis, and actionable ideas, and organize a global roadshow or series of events to disseminate the research and spark conversations on these issues.

¹⁹ [Case for Democracy](#), V-Dem Institute

Next Steps

The next phase of this project will focus on further developing the theory of change while gathering feedback on which strategies and ideas should be prioritized - particularly those gaining traction among funders and organizations that could take on this work. This will involve fostering discussions on democracy narratives, gathering feedback from funders, incorporating perspectives from political networks, government officials, diplomats, and local civil society actors in Global Majority countries to refine recommendations and next steps, and refining pathways of change.

To kickstart this process, immediate actions may include:

- 1. Comprehensively mapping the democracy narrative ecosystem:** Better understand the landscape and identify a useful framing for a discussion on democracy narratives that inspire solidarity and collective action.
- 2. Participating in the development of a Consortium for New Democracy Narratives:** Collaborate with the Open Government Partnership, FrameWorks, Fundación Corona, and People Powered to develop, test, consolidate, and apply new democracy narratives.
- 3. Organizing a funders' roundtable:** Convene private funders to explore challenges and opportunities in supporting democracy movements and collect initial feedback on the proposed strategies and recommendations.
- 4. Engaging pro-democracy political networks in Global Majority countries:** Gather insights on key challenges, opportunities, and priorities to strengthen inclusive political processes, enhance international support, and connect with democracy movements.
- 5. Hosting consultations with frontline activists and government officials from Global Majority countries:** Gather their perspectives on the initial recommendations and gain additional insights.
- 6. Advancing pathways for change:** Continue developing strategic approaches to rebuilding trust in democratic processes and transforming international cooperation on democracy, further shaping the theory of change.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Effective International Solidarity with Democracy Movements

Two brainstorming sessions on international solidarity held on December 2 and 9, 2024 aimed to unpack the meaning and importance of solidarity from international allies—such as foreign governments, civil society, funders—with democracy movements, the solidarity needs of these movements, what works and the barriers to solidarity, and potential strategies to foster effective solidarity within and across regions. These are the key takeaways from the discussions.

Definition of solidarity: Solidarity is the unity of feeling or action among people with shared interests, built on empathy and shared values. Unlike material support, which is often provided by institutions such as governments and funders, solidarity typically occurs between individuals and movements. While it often emerges from cultural or historical affinities, it is also essential to foster connections beyond these affinities to create broader alliances. Solidarity is not a one-way street; activists must extend care and support to other struggles, recognizing that mutual solidarity ensures reciprocal support in times of need. However, in some contexts, external solidarity—particularly from Western actors—can be counterproductive and perceived as interference.

Importance of solidarity: Solidarity is vital for democracy movements under attack, often serving as a lifeline for activists facing threats by providing critical support, visibility, and protection. But for solidarity to be effective, it must go beyond symbolic gestures and translate into strategic action. Historical and contemporary examples—from anticolonial movements and civil rights struggles to the #MeToo movement and climate justice activism—demonstrate the power of solidarity in driving change. A key question raised in discussions is whether solidarity alone is enough or if efforts should

shift toward devolving power. Ultimately, the focus must remain on how best to support those on the frontlines of democracy struggles, ensuring solidarity leads to meaningful, lasting impact.

Effective tactics: Solidarity relies on building trust and relationships, particularly through regional solidarity among nations with shared histories. In sensitive contexts, discreet diplomatic support—such as offering activists refuge in embassies or engaging in back-channel diplomacy—can be more strategic than public statements. Celebrities can also be powerful allies by using their platforms to reach wider audiences. Organized civil society provides crucial backing to spontaneous movements, helping sustain activism beyond initial moments of mobilization. Raising visibility is another key tactic, as media, social networks, and official forums help prevent injustices from being forgotten or normalized.

Barriers to solidarity: The “NGOization” of activism often restricts support for informal movements. A restrictive funding landscape, with increased scrutiny on donors and shifting foundation priorities, further limits access to resources. Solidarity is also uneven, with racial and geopolitical biases influencing which causes receive attention. Governments often provide inconsistent support, as foreign policy considerations outweigh human rights concerns. Public engagement remains a challenge, as discussions on democracy fail to resonate broadly, and authoritarian regimes actively dehumanize activists to sow mistrust. Additionally, burnout among activists and a lack of support for grassroots movements weaken long-term efforts. To be effective, civil society must break away from outdated strategies and develop innovative approaches.

Proposed Solutions:

Systemic Changes: Strategic solidarity efforts should prioritize strengthening civil society’s capacity, countering authoritarianism, and moving beyond symbolic gestures. Building mutual trust and equitable partnerships between funders and activists is crucial, and so is encouraging funders to be less risk averse, in solidarity with those on the frontline. Funders and civil society should work together to navigate structural challenges around more flexible, long-term support, like budget cycles and bureaucratic requirements. Funding mechanisms must also be made more accessible to medium-sized and underrepresented civil society organizations. Additionally, advocating for greater representation of civil society leaders and marginalized groups in government can help bridge the gap between grassroots movements and institutional decision-making.

Tactical Actions: Regional solidarity models could be developed and tested in Africa and Latin America, to amplify specific struggles and scale successful initiatives globally. Engaging with small states committed to multilateralism and democratic values—such as Costa Rica, Norway, Barbados, Slovenia, and Taiwan—can strengthen international solidarity efforts. A strategic framework for intentional global organizing could be designed with key funders and stakeholders to better coordinate efforts. Experimenting with value-based messaging for collective action can help mobilize broader audiences. Finally, pro-democracy movements can learn from authoritarian regimes’ long-term, large-scale funding strategies.

APPENDIX 2: Better Coordinated and More Inclusive Global Democracy Infrastructure

This report summarizes the key insights and ideas generated during three brainstorming sessions on the global democracy infrastructure held on January 30 and 31 and February 6, 2025. These sessions aimed to tackle critical challenges highlighted during stakeholder consultations, including the lack of strategic cross-regional and global spaces for effective coordination and strategizing, the need to keep democracy and human rights central to the international cooperation agenda, and the importance of amplifying and centering voices from grassroots movements and Global Majority actors.

Definition of the global democracy infrastructure/architecture/ecosystem: The global democracy ecosystem encompasses the networks, institutions, actors, and processes working collectively to advance and defend democratic principles and governance worldwide. It includes grassroots movements, civil society organizations, regional and international institutions, governments, and donors, all interconnected to ensure the resilience of democracy at local, regional, and global levels.

Challenges:

Geopolitics and National Interests: Western democracies' double standards undermine democracy, as they often prioritize strategic interests over democratic values in their foreign policy. Elected authoritarians and autocrats are frequently invited to international convenings while grassroots voices are excluded. These international conferences tend to produce broad declarations without concrete enforcement mechanisms. The US's retreat from global leadership, coupled with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, further deprioritizes democracy on the international stage. Additionally, nations prioritize economic interests and trade over democratic principles, both domestically and globally. Less powerful countries entering economic partnerships with authoritarian regimes are often deterred from supporting pro-democracy agendas due to the fear of economic retaliation.

Funding: Civil society's dependence on restrictive project-based funding from bilateral donors and foundations, compounded by recent widespread funding cuts and attacks on civic space, has significantly weakened its resilience. In contrast, authoritarian actors have strategically invested considerable resources in advancing their agendas. Furthermore, the funding system itself is flawed, operating in a top-down, competitive, and undemocratic manner that fragments efforts and hampers collective impact.

Narratives: There is a significant gap in the shared understanding of democracy, with discussions often being too abstract and confined to elections. In addition, there is limited knowledge on how to effectively communicate the relevance of democracy, the importance of civic space, and the benefits that come with them.

Infrastructure: There are many democracy initiatives, but they lack coordination and connection, highlighting the need for better integration and de-siloing. The democracy support infrastructure

tends to focus heavily on civil society, often overlooking the role of political actors and processes. Civic space continues to erode globally, and civil society elitism results in a disconnect between frontline actors and international NGOs. Youth, essential to supporting organic movements, are increasingly disenchanted with politics and unsure of how to get involved, whether through joining political parties or running for office. In addition, there is a lack of inspirational moral leadership on the international stage.

Solutions:

Strategies: Effective strategies for strengthening democracy must prioritize leadership from Global Majority and grassroots actors, recognizing that global challenges require global solutions and cannot be led solely by Western countries. Democracy defense should take precedence over promotion, with a focus on protecting democracies from backsliding rather than converting autocratic states. Efforts should shift from government-driven, top-down democracy promotion to civil society-led initiatives that empower local democratic movements. Strategies should be rooted in addressing people's concerns, backed by popular mobilization and building a strong domestic constituency. We need a comprehensive framework for a democracy index, identifying and sanctioning violators of democratic principles and human rights. Programs should focus on civic education, leadership development, and youth representation in movements, while integrating democratic governance into broader strategies like national security and trade. A critical mass of organizations are needed to effectively integrate democratic governance into bilateral trade treaties, as current efforts are fragmented. Engagement with national and regional development banks could promote democracy-supporting investments. Finally, international coordination is needed to regulate big tech, break monopoly power, and build broad, inclusive content distribution ecosystems.

Engagement with New and Existing Actors: Engaging with political parties and candidates from the Global Majority, including ideologically aligned networks in Brazil such as Foro de São Paulo and Rede Futuro, is crucial for fostering citizen engagement and civil society participation, diversifying government representation, and advancing political agendas that serve the common interest. It is also essential to reach out to the non-Western business community for their support while leveraging outspoken democracy champions, such as Mary Robinson from the Elders, to expand alliances and amplify impact. In addition, engaging with small states committed to a rule-based order—such as Denmark, Costa Rica, and the Marshall Islands—can support international cooperation on democracy. Democratic “middle powers” should also collaborate to set governance and election standards, helping to promote democratic values across regions.

Funding: We should take advantage of the current moment to advocate for changes in the funding system, including the creation of a pooled fund for democracy that is democratically governed and provides flexible funding. Additionally, engaging with business leaders in Global Majority countries, such as South Africa, Brazil, and Nigeria, could inspire them to support funding initiatives within their own countries, thus localizing funding mechanisms.

Infrastructure: South-led convenings, regional democracy alliances led by non-Western states, along with South-South exchanges, cross-border learning, and connections between movements, should be prioritized to enhance Global Majority leadership. Bringing movements together at the intersection of human rights issues such as climate, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and economic justice is essential for fostering unity and amplifying collective impact. Grassroots actors must have increased access to resources, connections, and funding to participate in influential spaces, especially in light of growing political, financial, and legal challenges, including lawfare and surveillance. Creating shared global resources and structures, such as a NATO-like framework for democracy, a COP or Davos Forum dedicated to democracy, could boost momentum and coordination within the global democracy ecosystem. However, it's important that such frameworks remain under civil society leadership rather than being dominated by nation-states. While big events provide valuable opportunities for networking and strategy discussions, a key challenge lies in including new participants without sacrificing momentum in ongoing collaborations. Providing feedback to stakeholders after consultations is a best practice that helps build trust, while establishing peer networks can be instrumental in facilitating staff-to-staff exchanges, learning, and growth.

Narratives: To address the perception that democracy is a Western export, it is crucial to engage Global Majority civil society and governments in defining what democracy means to them. Democracy should be framed beyond just elections, clearly explaining why it benefits people and society, even if those benefits are not immediately visible. Connecting democracy with economic development, speaking about shared values, and offering hope are key to building stronger support. Additionally, shifting the conversation toward democratic governance rather than democracy in general and making it more inviting to youth is important. We must also reappropriate values that autocrats often claim, such as patriotism, family, and freedom of expression, and challenge their argument that democracy is too unwieldy and requires a strong leader. A pro-democracy narrative playbook could help guide these efforts.

Ideal vision for the global democracy infrastructure: The ideal global democracy infrastructure must be agile, action-oriented, and guided by a holistic definition of democracy that extends beyond elections. Global Majority actors should play a central role in championing democracy, ensuring that efforts are inclusive and prioritize the leadership of civil society and grassroots movements. The infrastructure should move away from top-down approaches and instead support locally and regionally led initiatives that empower democratic movements and institutions. To enhance collaboration and knowledge-sharing, cross-regional spaces for strategy and coordination, along with cross-sectoral networks, are essential. Peer networks should be established to tackle common challenges and foster learning. The active participation of artists, academics, youth, and diaspora communities is critical in shaping innovative strategies and mobilizing broad-based support. Finally, a democracy narrative playbook and shared resources should equip stakeholders with the tools to improve messaging, knowledge, coordination, and strategies.