

Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative

Team Europe Democracy (TED) Working Group (WG) 2

LAB 1

9th of April 2025, 11:00 - 12:30 CET



Strengthening Local Community Engagement and Democratic Governance Resilience in Situations of Fragility

ANALYTICAL REPORT

LAB Concept.

The LABs are experimental spaces within the TED Working Group (WG) 2 framework, designed to bring together TED Network members, local actors and democracy practitioners in an informal, open virtual roundtable format. It aims to encourage candid exchanges, peer learning and collective reflections on how to support local democratic resilience in fragile situations. By combining experience with practical instruments, the LABs explore context-driven approaches/principles, unlock new ideas and generates actionable recommendations to inform and strengthen Team Europe's democracy support programming efforts.

[ALDA](#), the European Association for Local Democracy, and a TED WG2 Thematic Lead, led the LAB 1.

Introduction.

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the pathways to strengthening democracy are often non-linear, shaped by complex political, social and economic challenges. In such settings, traditional models of democracy support, often relying on top-down approaches or established civil society organisations (CSOs), are insufficient. Instead, there is a growing recognition of the need to ground interventions in local realities, leveraging the resilience of grassroots actors, promoting local solutions and exploring flexible, adaptive funding mechanisms.

This report summarises the key takeaways as to principles and actionable recommendations from a LAB 1 on *Strengthening Local Community Engagement and Democratic Governance Resilience in Situations of Fragility*. The discussions focused on how to support local actors, authorities and communities, design interventions that are context-sensitive and build long-term democratic resilience, with particular attention to ongoing challenges in countries such as Palestine, Sudan, Uganda, Ukraine, Belarus and Central-Latin America.

Setting the Scene: Situations of Fragility.

Within the LAB, a situation of fragility is understood as one where a country or region experiences chronic instability, conflict or violence, severely limiting the capacity of state



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institutions to uphold the basic rights and needs of the population. Such situations are characterised by heightened vulnerability, poverty, corruption, discrimination and a breakdown in the social contract between state and society.

Key features that may indicate a situation of fragility include:

1. Loss of effective control over parts of the national territory
2. Pervasive corruption, criminal behaviour and activity
3. Inability to collect taxes, revenues or mobilise/draw on citizen support
4. Large-scale, involuntary displacement of the population
5. Sharp economic decline
6. Group-based inequalities
7. Systematic and institutionalised persecution or discrimination
8. Significant emigration or large turnover of skilled professionals ("brain drain")
9. Widespread environmental degradation



It is important to clarify the definitions and typologies of fragility. Rather than relying on rigid classifications, fragility should be understood as a spectrum - one that captures varying degrees and dimensions of vulnerability, shaped by local realities and evolving over time. While frameworks from the OECD, World Bank and EU provide useful reference points, local and partner experiences are essential in capturing the realities on the ground. For instance, *"...go beyond OECD-type definitions and look at complex or post-conflict situations in practice."* For example, ALDA draws from the insights of +50 organisations working at the local level, reflecting how fragility is experienced in practice. Although priorities and manifestations of fragility vary from country to country, from one period to another, there is a need for a shared reflection on what constitutes a situation of fragility - one that incorporates both institutional assessments and the lived realities of local actors. For example, the listed key features above do not include shrinking civic space or acts of terrorism, both of which undermine the stability of the countries where some of these organisations operate.

Round 1 - Principles for Democracy Support in Situations of Fragility.

Building on their experience and collaboration with local partners, ALDA outlined a set of principles intended to serve as a foundation for the LAB discussions:

- Where support is channelled through **sub-granting schemes**, as a tool to strengthen and empower grassroots organisations, ensuring local ownership while maintaining quality through mentoring and coaching.



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- Prioritise outreach to emerging and less established actors, not just long-standing CSOs/Non-governmental organisations (NGO), but **broaden the range of partners** to encourage new voices and innovative approaches.
- Emphasise **co-design and co-creation** with local authorities to build trust, cooperation and shared responsibility.
- Support efforts that strengthen democratic practices, local governance and resilience **without engaging in political confrontation, interference or regime change**.
- Back and encourage activities that **bring people together**, creating space for **collective and inclusive** reflection, dialogue and connection.
- **Allow flexibility** as well as room for **locally defined priorities**, as long as **democracy and participation remain cross-cutting elements**.
- Consider the **attribution of the Local Democracy Agencies (LDA) label** to recognise, formalise and support local actors committed to participatory democracy.

1. Empower Local Actors through Flexible Support Mechanisms.

For more information:

- [ALDA - European Association for Local Democracy](#)
- [ALDA - Methodological Handbook on Sub-granting Schemes](#)
- [Libya Rebuild](#)
- [Decentralised Cooperation | Observatori](#) (EU-LAC)
 - [Conclusiones del Diálogo Regional | Observatori](#)
- [Locals in Sudan are Saving Lives that International Aid Agencies can't Reach](#)
- [Local Democracy Agency Mariupol](#) and [LDAM 2025.pptx - Google Slides](#)
- [Free Belarus Centre](#)
- [ECDPM - European Centre for Development Policy Management](#)
- [TED-ECDPM: Exploring EU and Member States' approaches and options to addressing the shrinking civic space | Capacity4dev](#)
- [Enabel - Belgian Agency for International Cooperation](#)

In fragile contexts, empowering local and grassroots actors goes beyond merely offering financial support; it hinges on recognising **local ownership** as a central pillar, ensuring to support the local democracy they would like to see and changing the “donors” mindset, listening better. This requires funding models that are flexible and adaptable, ensuring sustained support even in unpredictable and volatile environments and make concrete impact in the live of citizens

Small sub-granting schemes, as mentioned, serve as a prime example of this approach. These schemes not only offer financial backing that can be efficiently utilised and accounted for but also integrate mechanisms for capacity-building. Through mentorship, coaching and tailored support, sub-grants help strengthen the abilities of local actors, ensuring that the impact of the funds extends beyond immediate financial needs and contributes to long-term resilience and self-sufficiency.

A further example comes from **Libya's** fragmented landscape, where tribal affiliations and competing power centres made direct funding to local authorities unfeasible. In this context, support could instead be channelled through CSOs acting as intermediaries, but also universities (e.g. [Libya Rebuild](#)) which enabled civic participation and governance without reinforcing existing power imbalances. Here the use of small-scale sub-grants, also proved effective, as they allowed for closer oversight and due to size helped prevent the emergency of power struggles linked to financial resources.



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In **Central America**, where shrinking civic space and declining decentralisation pose significant challenges, small-scale grants have been pivotal in sustaining local engagement. In **El Salvador**, the drastic reduction in the number of municipalities (from +260 to 44) undermines local democracy by making it more difficult for local governments to represent and engage citizens, including their access to decision-making. Small-scale interventions that focus on grassroots efforts, such as local dialogues or community-driven projects, can ensure that civic participation remains alive at the local level (e.g. [Conclusiones del Diálogo Regional | Observatori](#)).

This approach encouraged longer-term engagement rooted in sustainability, rather than short-term visibility. By supporting local actors through manageable, constant and accountable funding streams, these mechanisms help gradual, context-driven change, while safeguarding the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the process.

The success of such funding mechanisms thus also depends on broadening the scope of local partners. Traditional CSOs and NGOs are often the go-to partners, but they may not always reflect local dynamics, often due to limitation as to institutional frameworks or even being 'compromised' (e.g. government co-opted, privatised or exiled). By working with local groups such as youth networks, informal community movements, cities actors and other grassroots organisations, interventions can tap into untapped potential. These "[unusual suspects](#)" bring innovative approaches and an authentic connection to the community, often making them more effective in addressing local needs - and most importantly, they not only **build trust** but often already have it. In this context, working towards alliances between informal and more established civil society actors is particularly valuable, as such cooperation can strengthen collective impact, bridge gaps in reach, legitimacy and enable both to support and benefit from one another.

For instance, in **Sudan**, where the state apparatus is weak or absent in many areas, local actors such as neighbourhood committees have stepped in to provide governance and basic public services. Their involvement has filled the governance vacuum, illustrating how [local actors](#), despite not being part of formal state structures, can play a pivotal role in ensuring community resilience. In **Mariupol, Ukraine** - a city under siege yet a community on its own thanks to strong decentralised governance - [local and community actors \(including local councils and universities\)](#) acted as first responders supporting internally displaced communities, maintaining core functions, service delivery and enabling continued community participation, even as formal institutions came under severe strain.

Additionally, according to the [Free Belarus Centre](#), civic and local actors in exile or forced displacement should not be overlooked. Many maintain strong ties to their communities, acting as essential connectors and continued voices for democratic values. Over time, this has given rise to a new dynamic - an "**ecosystem in exile**" - where actors regroup and organise. In doing so, they often evolve into political actors, forming opposition platforms and preparing for reintegration when conditions allow their return. For instance, **Belarusians** that fled the 2022 election crisis and repression, have created proto-institutions like a Coordination Council (proto-government), proto-parliament and presidential offices. These structures act as legitimate alternatives to the authoritarian regime and are increasingly engaged in formal dialogue with EU counterparts (e.g. Council of Europe) and Member States (MS).

¹ Sara Giancesello and Amandine Sabourin (ECDPM), *Exploring EU and Member States' approaches and options to addressing the shrinking of civic space*, 2024. [Exploring EU and Member States' approaches and options to addressing the shrinking civic space | Capacity4dev](#)



This diaspora ecosystem is not only political, but also deeply grassroots. Clusters of civic activism continue to mobilise support, share knowledge and sustain democratic aspirations from abroad. Exile thus opens the space for new networks, partnerships and knowledge generation to take root - particularly through engagement with host countries and peer-to-peer platforms. These connections (critical bridges) help sustain their involvement and enhance their ability to support democratic processes both from abroad and, eventually, back within their home contexts.

The role of the above-mentioned local intermediaries cannot be overstated. They serve as trusted local actors who bridge the gap between grassroots initiatives and local authorities, creating a more resilient and inclusive governance structure. “Formalising” their role - for example through the attribution of a LDA label - can support their recognition, provide needed legitimacy, funding opportunities (e.g. grants) and offer a degree of safeguarding.

Both [ECDPM](#) and [Enabel](#) emphasised the importance of regularly mapping actors to identify those influencing local democratic governance, to determine credible partners with genuine influence. For example, the EU Delegation in **Burkina Faso** in 2022 focused on territorial development driven by local actors, where mapping local stakeholders was seen as key to understanding what is feasible and whom to collaborate with. This is of importance, as some local actors including “unusual suspects” and CSOs, may be co-opted by governments or privatised, compromising their integrity and impartiality, shaped by politics, competition and manipulation. These mappings should also account for the differing priorities and partner preferences of each donor, as understandings of which organisations to engage with can vary widely.

It's a continuous exercise of re-mapping as context change and organisations, technical expertise and talent shift, discoverable during the regional dialogue in **Antigua, Guatemala**, organised by the EU-LAC Observatory of Decentralised Cooperation.

2. Stay Engaged with the Central Government. If Possible.

While the focus of democracy support is often on local-level actors, engaging with central authorities remains important - particularly in contexts where they hold significant influence over the political and institutional landscape, as seen in countries like **Madagascar**.

Where possible, cooperation with central governments can help create enabling environments for local democracy. However, in more restrictive or authoritarian contexts, such engagement must be carefully calibrated. *“Even to work at the local level, you need space and sometimes support from the central government... [question is] how to engage with central authorities without compromising local dynamics...”* It should avoid direct confrontation or regime-challenging approaches, instead seeking openings for dialogue and gradual reform that respect the political sensitivities of the context. The approach must be adaptive and grounded in a nuanced understanding of each country's specific dynamics.

3. Discreet Support “Undercover Democracy” - Rule of Law as a Democratic Entry Point.

For more information:

- [Evaluation of the European Union Support to Rule of Law and Anticorruption in Partner Countries \(2010-2021\)](#)



According to ECDPM, the [2010 – 2021 evaluation of the EU's support to the rule of law and fight against corruption in partner countries](#) highlights that rule of law initiatives are most effective when they are grounded in people's lived experiences - such as access to justice, land rights and protection from arbitrary governance. By focusing on practical issues like equity in public services and accountability, these initiatives not only increase the legitimacy of rule of law efforts but also provide a pathway for advancing broader democratic principles. This approach resonated with IDOS, as in politically sensitive and fragile contexts—where overt democracy-building faces resistance or foreign-backed initiatives are met with suspicion - it offers a strategic entry point to promote values such as transparency, accountability, and participation. By focusing on these principles without explicitly framing them as democratic, the approach reduces the risk of backlash. Programmes addressing immediate concerns, such as fairness in the courts or efficiency in public administration, are hence more likely to build trust in institutions and strengthen the democratic process.

It's therefore important that strategies in these settings must differ significantly from those employed in more open contexts.

4. Safeguarding Civic Space and Supporting Digital Engagement.

For more information:

- [Hope 4 Life Uganda](#)

As physical spaces for civic engagement continue to shrink in many situations of fragility, digital platforms offer a viable alternative. Digital tools enable activists, civil society organisations and community members to organise, mobilise and communicate, even when traditional channels are blocked or restricted. However, the digital space is not without its risks. In contexts where authoritarian regimes control or heavily monitor internet activity (e.g. **Belarus**), digital engagement can lead to repression, increased surveillance and online harassment. This presents a delicate balancing act: promoting digital participation while also safeguarding privacy and security.

The role of digital tools has been particularly important in countries like **Uganda**, where the youth diaspora plays a central role in civic mobilisation (e.g. [Hope 4 Life Uganda](#)). Social media and other digital platforms are often the primary channels through which they exchange, have access to information, as well as engage with local politics, demonstrating the growing relevance of digitalisation in driving political participation. *“Flexibility is key. When laws were passed to curtail rights, young people shifted to online mobilisation. We’ve been mobilising to Parliament through online conversations.”* There is a strong demand for support to strengthen digital skills - especially in remote and rural areas - in fields such as disinformation resilience and source verification, to ensure that digital engagement remains both effective and safe. In **Ukraine**, digital platforms have not only served as vital communication channels during conflict but have also become key spaces for civic participation, enabling direct communication with local authorities, where accountability and civic oversight are integral to their use.

This requires a holistic approach to digital engagement, one that integrates training, capacity-building and mentorship, especially in digital security and privacy practices, to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised groups can participate safely and inclusively.

5. Work with, Not Against: Co-Design and Co-Creation.



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For more information:

- [ALDA - AUTREMENT Project](#)
- [Palestine - Enabel - Belgian Agency for International Cooperation](#)
 - [Local Government Reform and Development Programme](#) (LGRDP)
 - [Area Resilience and Development Initiative](#) (ARD Initiative)
 - [Other projects](#)
- [Free Belarus Centre](#)
- [Hope 4 Life Uganda Projects](#)

In situations of fragility, adversarial approaches (e.g. demand regime changes) often exacerbate tensions and hinder progress. *“In contexts of fragility, we shouldn’t ... look at regime change. Let’s also build democratic practices that survive even when formal institutions are weak.”* Rather than imposing external models, a more sustainable approach is to work alongside local actors and authorities through co-design and co-creation of initiatives. This process builds trust and ownership, ensuring that interventions are context-sensitive, do not inadvertently replicate mistakes of previous top-down approaches and have a higher chance of sustainability. *“We see partnerships where actors from the global North come with a plan, and the local is asked to implement. We should rethink that. Support should build, not displace, local initiative.”* There is an *“importance to use local narrative and indigenous approaches.”*

An example of successful co-design is **Tunisia**, where, through the [AUTREMENT Project](#), two local municipalities have engaged citizens in participatory urban planning, despite facing political instability. Involving citizens in decisions about infrastructure - whether it's constructing bypasses or bike lanes - demonstrates that democratic practices can still be integrated into local governance and urban development, even in challenging contexts. In that case, it's an essential transversal topic.

Co-design not only instils ownership but also builds a culture of democratic engagement. By collaborating with local authorities, interventions become more attuned to local realities, reducing the risk of alienating key stakeholders and ensuring that reforms are relevant and sustainable.

In **Palestine**, despite the layered challenges of occupation, fragmentation and governance complexity, local actors have pioneered models of territorial development and integration. One example is the joint work of local government units under a territorial development approach, like the [Local Government Reform and Development Programme](#) (LGRDP) and [Area Resilience and Development Initiative](#) (ARD Initiative), which encourages resilience by enabling collective service delivery across municipalities. This model strengthens legitimacy through community engagement and has helped to preserve institutional functioning amidst crises. *“We’ve adopted a territorial development model where local government units work together to deliver services. This joint approach has enhanced resilience and community engagement, even under occupation.”* Engaging citizens in shared planning processes, even under constrained conditions, has been essential for trust-building and anchoring democratic values at the local level.

One of the key insights in working within situations of fragility is that fragility is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. It manifests differently depending on the country, region and community. Context-specific programming that is informed by local realities, rather than institutional assessments or generic/output metrics (e.g. number of trainings or quotas), is crucial for effectiveness. This means that interventions but also the deliverables must be adaptable, multi-dimensional, inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of each context. Local



communities need to see the results and feel engaged in the process. Important factors for flagships like the EU's Global Gateway to be accountable to.

A triangulated approach that includes technical staff, second-tier local government officials and sympathetic individuals within state institutions can help open spaces for democratic engagement, even in highly repressive environments. In **Belarus**, for example, individuals within the state apparatus who are sympathetic to democratic values may still provide a means to engage with the system in ways that would be impossible if direct interaction with the regime were the only option.

Local actors in exile also play an important role in democratic transitions, as they maintain networks and connections to their home countries. In **Nicaragua**, for example, exiled communities continue to mobilise and support democratic change. Their connections to local communities are essential for ensuring that democracy-building efforts remain relevant, even in the face of displacement.

Furthermore, local knowledge must be at the core of all interventions. *“Sometimes we feel lost when we try to look for real partners... The reality is fragmented and decentralised, and that's where local knowledge becomes critical.”* It is not enough to rely on external expertise - critical insights from local actors, especially the youth, are invaluable for understanding the complexities of the context and shaping effective strategies. *“We adopted a youth-led organising principle that recognises young people as experts of their own challenges...”* Local actors often possess a deep understanding (closely attuned) of their community's needs and realities, making them key drivers of change.

There is also a growing demand for regional cooperation, especially among youth in countries like **Uganda** (e.g. [Hope 4 Life Uganda Projects](#)) and **Kenya**, where cross-border exchanges and peer learning have proven effective in strengthening democratic engagement and building shared momentum. Support programmes encouraging this are greatly appreciated.

6. Create Safe Spaces for Democracy Dialogue and Trust-Building.

For more information:

- [NALAS - Network of Associations of Local Authorities of Southeast Europe](#)
- [NALAS - Promoting deliberative democracy and innovative approaches to citizen participation in South-East Europe](#)
- [NALAS - Community of Practice](#)
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: [Mostar Citizens Assembly](#) and [Banja Luka Citizens' Assembly](#)
- Croatia: [Rijeka Citizens' Assembly](#)

In situations where deep mistrust exists between citizens and local authorities, creating safe spaces - both online and offline - for dialogue becomes a priority. These spaces should focus on mutual understanding, a shared sense of community responsibility and help re-anchor the idea that democratic values are not external impositions but grounded in local traditions and experiences. For instance, **Central America** has a strong history in democracy building, far before it was dubbed as a “Western Construct.” In **Sudan**, core democratic values such as accountability and participation already exist in local traditions and governance systems. While in **Palestine**, for instance, intergenerational dialogues between elders (often having roles in local governance) and youth have helped to rebuild social cohesion and trust. These dialogue

spaces (sitting around a table) enable communities to collectively define their needs, interpretations and even solutions.

A community of practice or peer-to-peer network on deliberative democracy could be explored. For example, [NALAS](#), the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of Southeast Europe, promotes such spaces by strengthening the capacities of local authorities and their associations to organise citizens' assemblies, while also emphasising equal footing in these discussions. Positive experiences from **Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia** show that citizens' assemblies - formed through random, representative selection, including underrepresented groups - can help local decision-makers build trust, strengthen relationships and better understand citizen priorities (e.g. [Mostar Citizens Assembly](#); [Banja Luka Citizens' Assembly](#) (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and [Rijeka Citizens' Assembly](#) (Croatia)). These assemblies support mutual learning, redistribute power, identify and address interests, promote implementation of decisions, and contribute to reconciliation and depoliticization of topical issues. It is important to note, however, that deliberative mechanisms like citizens' assemblies are not a replacement for free and fair elections or traditional forms of participation, but rather a complement that can revitalise representative democracy.

It can also be more effective to engage citizens around a simple, relatable idea or activity - without necessarily naming "democracy" at the outset but working in its spirit. *"...projects that were not intended to support democracy [used] to still advance democratic goals. That creative use of existing tools is crucial."* Starting small, on a shared issue or concern, creates space to introduce democratic values in a way that feels rooted in everyday experience. Over time, this can open conversations about what democracy means from a local perspective, based on people's own reflections and lived realities.

The same approach applies when raising awareness about local governance. Citizens may not initially know what local governance entails, who their local authorities are or how to engage with them. Creating opportunities for people to come together, learn and reflect on these roles can gradually shift mindsets. As individuals begin to understand their place in local governance, they gain the confidence to voice concerns, ask for change and participate more actively.

This steady, community-led process builds familiarity and ownership. It lays the groundwork for deeper engagement, ensuring that when broader political transitions do occur, the community is not only ready but already engaged. Trust, once established through these small but meaningful steps, becomes a durable foundation for long-term democratic resilience.

Hence this requires recognising that democracy is also not a one-size-fits-all model, but something that must resonate locally. To this end, local democracy and participation should be treated as cross-cutting/mainstreaming themes in all activities and sectors (its transversal). Flexibility in project/programming topics is important - but initiatives should consistently integrate democratic principles and participatory approaches as core components, not standalone objectives.

Identified Key PRINCIPLES for Democracy Support in Situations of Fragility.

- **Local ownership through sub-granting and mentorship/coaching.**



- **Pragmatism and inclusivity**, work with - and safeguard - emerging, those in exile, local changemakers (women, youth, elderly, vulnerable groups) and other “unusual actors.”
- **Promote alliances** between formal and informal (civic) actors and movements.
- **Co-design and non-confrontational engagement with central (if possible) and local authorities.** Build democratic legitimacy, ownership and community trust.
- **Democratic resilience over regime change.** Support the development of democratic habits, practices, and cultures that can endure, even in volatile or hybrid settings.
- **Safe spaces** for participation and dialogue.
- **Flexible, small-actions, context-driven** programming. Democracy support in fragile settings requires time, adaptability and risk awareness. It is a process, not a quick fix.
- **Recognition of local intermediaries** – “Local Democracy Agencies.”
- **Youth-led and digital approaches and capacity-building** to civic participation. Invest in youth-led movements and recognise young people as experts, capable of shaping more inclusive systems. Support must go together with digital rights and protection.
- **Territorial, regional and collective development models.** Encourage joint approaches among local government units to deliver.

Round 2 - Recommendations for Democracy Support in Situations of Fragility.

Create Enabling Spaces for Participation and Dialogue.

1. Create and expand safe spaces (both online and offline) where local authorities, civil society and communities’ leaders - including youth and women’s organisations - can engage in open, constructive dialogue without fear of retaliation. Build trust. These spaces should go beyond traditional venues and include unconventional places such as schools, healthcare facilities, markets and other community-centric/everyday spaces, ensuring comfort/familiarity, broader access and participation.
2. Shift the language of democracy and human rights to ensure it resonates with local communities. Avoid political jargon and instead reframe these concepts through the lens of local priorities such as public services, healthcare, education, job creation, local economic development. Work with “local narratives.” This approach builds broader support and engagement by connecting democratic principles to tangible, everyday concerns.

Identify and Empower Local Actors.

3. Continuously map and remap the landscape of local actors involved in governance, including both traditional and emerging players - particularly the “unusual suspects.” This process should identify human rights and democracy champions, cities actors who may not fit conventional criteria but are crucial to sustaining democratic practices. Develop a comprehensive “integration/context-specific diagnostic tool” to identify new avenues for collaboration and ensure that no critical voices are excluded. Recognise that local-level engagement extends beyond electoral processes and support must include actors like technical staff in local governments and community leaders who play a vital role in democratic development, especially in fragile settings. Regular actor mapping is also



essential to identify credible, context-specific partners with genuine influence - while avoiding co-opted actors - and must reflect each donor's distinct priorities and risk assessments.

4. Offer flexible, context-sensitive funding mechanisms with criteria adapted to local realities. This should include options for small-scale grants, sub-granting and re-granting models that enable grassroots organisations to remain accountable while responding to shifting circumstances. Funding must reflect the diverse capacities and legal statuses of local actors, ensuring inclusion rather than exclusion.

Co-design Interventions Based on Local Realities.

5. Tailor support to the specific needs and capacities of local communities through context-responsive, co-designed approaches. It is critical to capture and integrate local knowledge, especially the perspectives of youth, into programming. This ensures that support is aligned with local realities and is more likely to lead to sustainable, locally driven outcomes.
6. Invest in the capacity building of grassroots, community and youth-led movements, with a particular focus on empowering communities to effectively use digital platforms for civic engagement. This includes providing digital literacy training (also regional/cross-border exchanges), enhancing awareness of digital risks such as surveillance and misinformation and equipping local actors with the necessary tools to navigate these challenges safely and effectively.

Encourage Cross-Border and Regional Cooperation.

7. Facilitate regional and cross-border cooperation to build solidarity, knowledge-sharing and inspire innovative approaches to governance and democracy. Peer-to-peer partnerships across regions can help create new models of democratic engagement and strengthen resilience in fragile contexts. *"When local governments in [other countries] shared how they worked around restrictive conditions, we realised we're not alone - that peer [cross-country/region] support gave us tools we didn't know we could apply."*

Elevate Local Democracy in EU and MS Foreign and Development/International Cooperation Policies.

8. Raise the profile of local democracy within EU and MS foreign, diplomatic and development policies, ensuring that local actors and governance are not seen as being supported as standalones but supported as key drivers of democratic renewal. Mainstream local democracy as a transversal theme within broader sectoral approaches, placing local-level engagement at the forefront of the European agenda. By prioritising local actors, the EU and MS can remain engaged in fragile contexts and support democratic renewal from the grassroots up.
9. Utilise EU and MS institutions/agencies such as the European Committee of the Regions to promote decentralised approaches, particularly in funding that supports regional, transregional and transnational cooperation. These funds should empower local governance structures, promote peer-learning across regions and reinforce bottom-up democratic resilience through collaborative partnerships.



10. Global Gateway documents stress that one of the ultimate success factors is whether the investments benefit local communities. Hence, ensure that Global Gateway investments are systematically accompanied by participatory and transparent mechanisms that enable local communities and governments to have a voice in decision-making processes. Global Gateway must encourage inclusive, democratic engagement at all levels, laying the foundation for long-term democratic resilience. Leverage Global Gateway to forge strong connections between local democratic governance and sectoral (360°) development.

Take a Multidimensional, Integrated Approach.

11. In highly complex governance and democracy settings, sectoral approaches alone are insufficient. Support should be multidimensional, addressing the interconnected challenges of social, economic and political development. Focus on strengthening local actors who can navigate across these dimensions and are equipped to serve as drivers of resilience, ensuring that their role in democratic renewal is recognised and reinforced.

Conclusion.

Democracy support in situations of fragility should be understood as a dynamic spectrum, where various factors such as conflict, repression and institutional erosion intersect in ways unique to each context. Emphasis was on the need to complement institutional definitions, such as those from the OECD, World Bank and EU, with locally informed perspectives. This approach calls for embracing diverse typologies - whether dealing with authoritarian regimes with strong local traditions, post-conflict recovery zones or occupation-influenced systems. Tailoring support to the specific needs of each situation, rather than relying on generic labels, is essential for making a meaningful impact.

The challenge of democracy support in these contexts requires a fundamental shift in how interventions are designed and implemented. Rather than imposing external solutions, international partners must engage local actors, provide flexible funding and focus on small, sustainable changes that empower different groups within communities to shape their own democratic futures. Democracy-building is most effective when it is rooted in local realities, where ownership and context-specific needs drive the process. Such support tempts to change the mindset and change may come later. At the core of this approach is the recognition that strong, context-sensitive partnerships are key. By focusing on flexible support mechanisms such as small-scale grants, co-designing initiatives with local authorities and creating safe spaces for dialogue, both international and local actors can collaborate to drive sustainable democratic change. Understanding the diverse landscape of local actors - from well-established CSOs, diaspora to emerging grassroots movements - is critical in ensuring that democracy-building efforts reach those most capable of advocating for democratic practices within their communities.

Given that fragility is multifaceted and ever-evolving, democracy support must be both multidimensional and adaptable. It should focus on the interconnected social, political and economic challenges faced by local populations. By embedding democratic principles across all sectors of international cooperation and maintaining a focus on local ownership, international efforts can help ensure that democracy-building processes remain inclusive, relevant and sustainable. Through this approach, local communities and international stakeholders can work together to strengthen long-term democratic resilience, creating safe spaces for dialogue, cooperation and the collective pursuit of democratic ideals.



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The link between decentralisation and democracy is clear: where decentralised governance has been weakened or eroded, human rights violations and the repression of civil society often follow. Therefore, reinforcing local democracy is not only a governance priority but a fundamental human rights imperative.



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