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

LAB 1 & 2

Resilient Local Democratic Governance

Strengthening Local Community Engagement and Democratic Governance Resilience in Situations of Fragility
&
Breaking Silos and Embedding Good Governance in Local Governance and Public Services

A PRACTITIONER'S NOTE

Purpose and Context.

In a fractured geopolitical landscape marked by democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space and cascading crises, the future of democracy is being forged not only in elections, parliaments and presidential palaces but in municipalities, local councils and neighbourhood assemblies. As national or central institutions struggle to maintain trust and legitimacy, local governance stands out as an entry point for renewing the social contract, advancing inclusive participation and sustaining democratic resilience. Whether in situations of fragility or relative stability, it is at the local level that governance becomes tangible and people-centred, where institutional credibility can be restored or further eroded.

Recognising this, Team Europe Democracy (TED) Working Group 2 (WG2) launched a two-part LAB series to explore how local democracy can be strengthened in practice, particularly in the face of intersecting pressures.

- **LAB 1**, led by ALDA (European Association for Local Democracy), on *Strengthening Local Community Engagement and Democratic Governance Resilience in Situations of Fragility*.

- **LAB 2**, co-led by UNDP and Platforma (pan-European coalition of local and regional governments and their associations) on *Breaking Silos and Embedding Good Governance in Local Governance and Public Services*.

Drawing on grounded experience, diverse country cases and multi-stakeholder dialogue, the LABs generated concrete messages for the EU, Member States and democracy practitioners.

This practitioner's note synthesises the LAB's shared **strategic takeaways**, **core principles** and **recommendations** to guide more effective, adaptive and locally anchored democracy support strategies.

Strategic Takeaways.

1. **Local democracy is a frontline defence in situations of fragility.** Where national or central governance is contested, delayed or dysfunctional, local authorities and actors often remain the most accessible and trusted institutions due to their proximity to citizens and daily realities. Their role in stabilisation, mediation and the delivery of basic services must be strategically recognised and adequately resourced - while also ensuring good governance (e.g. performance-based support).

2. **Strategic patience is essential. Local democratic change is cumulative, not linear.** Supporting democratic culture at the local level requires long-term engagement, not quick wins. Progress often emerges gradually through relationship-building, community dialogue and iterative, context-specific action, particularly in politically sensitive or situations of fragility. Small grants can be a powerful tool, both to support flexible responses and to strengthen the accountability and absorptive capacity of local authorities.

3. **Proximity to citizens makes local authorities uniquely positioned to counter societal fragmentation.** Local governments and civic actors are well placed to rapidly identify and respond to localised disinformation and other divisive narratives. Their closeness to communities allows them to stay attuned to people's concerns, engage directly with citizens and deliver tailored services that reflect local needs and realities. Maintaining this role requires sustained support, but also benefits from peer learning and innovation, including approaches such as triangular cooperation and city-2-city exchanges.

4. **Local governance is a strategic entry point for rebuilding the social contract.** Participatory local planning, inclusive service delivery and transparent budgeting provide visible evidence that democratic systems can respond to people's needs; serving as a counterweight to disenchantment and the appeal of authoritarian alternatives. However, investment is needed to avoid "participation fatigue" and the pitfalls of tokenistic or checklist-driven approaches.

5. **Local actors often operate under political pressure but outside the spotlight.** While national dynamics dominate donor attention, local leaders, civil/technical staff and civil society actors frequently face coercion, resource constraints or legal risks with little external support. When these frontline actors are left exposed, democratic backsliding is more likely to take root from the ground up.

6. **Investing in intermediary and bridging actors can de-risk engagement.** Local NGOs, "Local Democracy Agencies (LDA)," universities and networks that link citizens with local authorities can act as trust brokers and incubators of innovation. In politically constrained settings, they often provide a safer channel for democratic engagement and experimentation.

7. **Local crises are rarely local in impact.** From forced displacement to food insecurity and climate shocks, local governance breakdowns have regional and even global consequences. Strategic democracy support must anticipate and address these spillover effects.

8. **Not all forms of decentralisation support democracy.** Decentralisation reforms can be manipulated to entrench elite control or bypass local accountability. Strategic support must distinguish between administrative de-concentration and genuine democratic empowerment. This requires strong contextual understanding and the use of tools such as risk assessments and Political Economy Analysis (PEA) with a specific focus on local dynamics.

9. **Youth and informal civic actors often lead in situations of fragility - but remain overlooked.** Emerging movements, informal coalitions and young leaders often hold more credibility than formal institutions, especially in contested settings. Failing to engage them risks missing the pulse of societal change.

10. **Supporting local governance at the frontlines requires flexibility and adaptability.** In fragile or repressive settings, uncertainty is inherent, and actors may not always meet conventional compliance standards. Administrative and financial frameworks must be sufficiently flexible to enable meaningful engagement, as rigid procedures can hinder effective support on the ground.

11. **Local governance reform can be a stabilising force even in the absence of national democratic progress.** Strategic local investments (e.g. focus on basic services – education, health, WASH) can help preserve civic space, protect community cohesion and sustain reform momentum - offering a democratic foundation ready for reactivation when national opportunities arise.

12. **Team Europe's strength also lies in complementarity - not only in uniformity.** By leveraging their diverse comparative advantages - from municipal partnerships and peer learning to technical assistance and rights-based advocacy - EU and Member State actors can offer flexible, layered support that responds to complex local realities.

Core Principles and Messages.

1. **Participation must be embedded, not occasional.** Civic and political engagement should be continuous and rooted in everyday governance, not limited to elections or donor-driven moments.

2. **Local ownership is the engine of resilience.** Resilience and trust grow when communities lead – setting local priorities to budgeting to implementation. Often, they are also the first responders in times of crisis and ensure the upkeep of public investments.

3. **Context drives relevance.** Every intervention must be shaped by local social, political and conflict dynamics, with the agility to adapt as conditions shift. There is no one-size-fits-all model.

4. **Trust is built through shared responsibility.** Co-design with local authorities, civic actors and informal groups anchors legitimacy, strengthens community ties and sustainable democratic cultures.

5. **Safe spaces are democratic infrastructure.** Whether physical or digital, environments that enable open dialogue, collaborative problem-solving and dissent without fear are vital for societal cohesion.

6. **Pluralism needs connective tissue.** Strategic alliances across sectors (public, private, civic, academic) and levels of governance break silos and unlock more systemic, durable outcomes.

7. **Power must be redistributed, not centralised.** Territorial and decentralised approaches - from local councils to inter-municipal cooperation - bring decision-making closer to people and improve service delivery and accountability.

8. **Digitalisation is a tool, not a fix.** When deployed inclusively and ethically, smart technologies can widen civic space and modernise governance but they must never compromise rights or access.

9. **Democracy is not a sprint but a practice.** Support must cultivate democratic habits, networks and capacities that can weather political volatility, focusing on long-term resilience over short-term wins or regime change.

10. **Youth and women are democratic leaders now.** Not just future stakeholders, they are innovators and drivers of change today. Support must centre their leadership and expertise, especially in civic, political and digital domains.

11. **Informal and emergent actors matter.** Movements, returnees, local entrepreneurs and unconventional changemakers are often closest to lived realities and must be recognised, protected and engaged.

12. **Learning is power and solidarity strengthens it.** Peer-to-peer, triangular, South-South and regional exchanges enable communities to co-create practical solutions, deepen democratic culture, solidarity, understanding and builds mutual resilience.

Recommendations.

1. **Create safe, inclusive spaces for civic dialogue and participation.** Support the creation and expansion of safe, inclusive spaces (both online and offline) for open dialogue between local authorities, civil society and community leaders. Engage women, youth, displaced/returnees and marginalised groups by using (or revitalising) familiar venues like schools, markets, libraries and health centres, as well as digital platforms adapted to accessibility challenges. Trust-building and long-term engagement are key.

2. **Reframe democratic language through local lenses.** Democracy and human rights messaging must resonate with local realities. Recast these principles through priorities such as public services, healthcare, education and economic opportunity. Employ locally rooted narratives and avoid politicised or technocratic jargon to increase resonance and support.

3. **Identify and empower diverse local actors.** Systematically map and engage a broad range of local actors, including "unusual suspects" like community, religious leaders, technical staff and youth organisers. Develop context-specific diagnostics to identify credible, non-co-opted partners and tailor support to their roles in governance.

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4. **Provide flexible, context-responsive funding.** Adapt funding mechanisms to situations of fragility, offering flexible modalities such as sub-grants, re-grants and community-managed models. Criteria should accommodate the legal and organisational diversity of grassroots actors, enabling responsive, accountable support for evolving local needs.

5. **Co-design interventions based on local knowledge.** Embed co-design as a default approach. Involve local communities, civil society, businesses, academia and authorities in designing and implementing programmes. Use participatory budgeting, digital tools and offline mechanisms to ensure broad, equitable engagement throughout project cycles.

6. **Strengthen local capacity for digital civic engagement.** Invest in digital literacy, cyber-security awareness and cross-border exchanges to empower youth and grassroots movements. Equip local actors with the tools and safeguards needed to safely engage online, counter misinformation and use digital spaces for democratic participation.

7. **Support multi-stakeholder alliances and collective intelligence.** Incentivise alliances across government levels and sectors (public, private, civil society) to scale inclusive governance models. Fund peer-learning, triangular, South-South cooperation and institutional partnerships that embed collective learning and shared responsibility into governance reforms.

8. **Modernise local institutions through smart, safe, inclusive technologies.** Support digital innovation in local governance such as AI, mobile platforms and blockchain/quadratic funding for transparency, citizen engagement and efficient service delivery. Safeguard inclusion and rights by embedding ethical standards, civic protections and equitable access from the outset.

9. **Link public services to participation, economic development and trust.** Reimagine public services as participatory platforms that generate jobs, skills and local economic growth. Position CSOs and communities as co-leaders in service delivery and local development. Use quick wins from citizen-led improvements to build institutional trust and accountability.

10. **Integrate local democracy into development and foreign policy.** Elevate local democracy as a strategic pillar of EU and MS diplomacy and development cooperation. Mainstream local governance and participation across all sectors and instruments, reinforcing the EU's ability to remain engaged in situations of fragility and support long-term democratic resilience.

11. **Leverage global gateway for inclusive local governance.** Ensure Global Gateway investments are accompanied by transparent, participatory mechanisms that empower local communities and authorities in decision-making. Use the initiative to connect democratic governance with 360° development impact, ensuring local ownership and accountability.

12. **Adopt a multidimensional and adaptive approach.** Recognise that in situations of fragility, social, economic and political development are deeply interlinked. Support integrated, cross-sectoral initiatives led by locally trusted actors who can navigate complex dynamics and drive resilience from within their communities.

Illustrative References.

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Country Case Studies:

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- **Tunisia:** ALDA - AUTREMENT Project;
- **Sudan:** Locals in Sudan are Saving Lives that International Aid Agencies can't Reach;
- **Rwanda:** Digital Impact Alliance;
- **Senegal:**
  - Le Sénégal lance un projet de déminage en Casamance avec l'appui du PNUD et de l'Inde;
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- **Palestine:**
  - Palestine - Enabel - Belgian Agency for International Cooperation;
  - Local Government Reform and Development Programme (LGRDP);
  - Area Resilience and Development Initiative (ARD Initiative);
  - Other projects;
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- **Ukraine:**
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- **Bosnia and Herzegovina**: UNDP - Municipal Environmental Governance Project (MEG II)
- **South-East 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;

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- **Croatia:**
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