

FROM COPENHAGEN 1995 TO DOHA 2025: DEMOCRACY AS ENGINE OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SHARED PROSPERITY

Policy Brief, November 2025

INTRODUCTION¹

Thirty years ago, the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration affirmed democracy as a cornerstone of people-centred social development ([United Nations 1995](#)). In 2025, at the United Nations World Summit for Social Development in Doha, that vision has been revived with new urgency. The Doha Declaration reasserts democracy's essential role in advancing social development—a recognition largely absent from recent UN texts ([United Nations 2025](#)). This renewed commitment offers a vital normative and political foundation, reminding the global community that democracy is an engine of both social development and shared prosperity.

This recognition comes at a critical moment. Democratic backsliding is accelerating, and progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16—peace, justice, and strong institutions—is off track ([International IDEA 2025a](#); [International IDEA 2025b](#)). Uneven prosperity-related progress in health, education, poverty reduction, gender equality and employment continues to hinder the achievement of the SDGs set out in the 2030 Agenda ([UN DESA 2025](#)). Foreign aid cuts risk compounding these setbacks ([Global Democracy Coalition, International IDEA and IFES 2025](#)).

The Doha Declaration reasserts democracy's essential role in advancing social development.

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM THE GSOD INDICES

A report by International IDEA, under the SDG16 Data Initiative, presents robust evidence on the democracy—social development and shared prosperity nexus, drawing from its Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices and scholarly

¹ 'The Interplay of Democracy, Inclusion and Prosperity' has been Switzerland's thematic priority during its Chairship of International IDEA's Council in 2025. Switzerland has closely collaborated with and supported International IDEA in the preparation of this Policy Brief *From Copenhagen 1995 to Doha 2025: Democracy as an Engine of Social Development and Shared Prosperity*. The views and analyses expressed in this Policy Brief, however, do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of Switzerland.

research (SDG16 Data Initiative 2025; International IDEA n.d.). The report makes a clear case: democracy, social development and shared prosperity must advance together to renew the social contract and fulfil the promise of Copenhagen, Doha and the 2030 Agenda. Failure to deliver tangible progress risks eroding public trust in democracy itself.

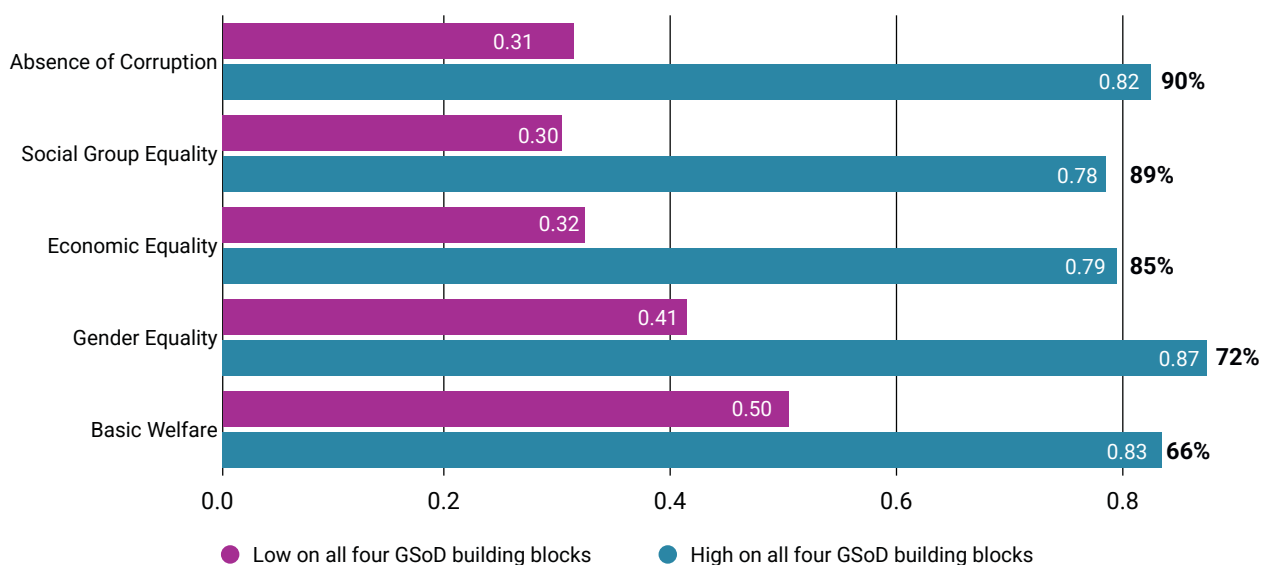
Some of the key findings of the report are:

Democracies perform better than non-democracies on key social development and prosperity indicators (see Figure 2):

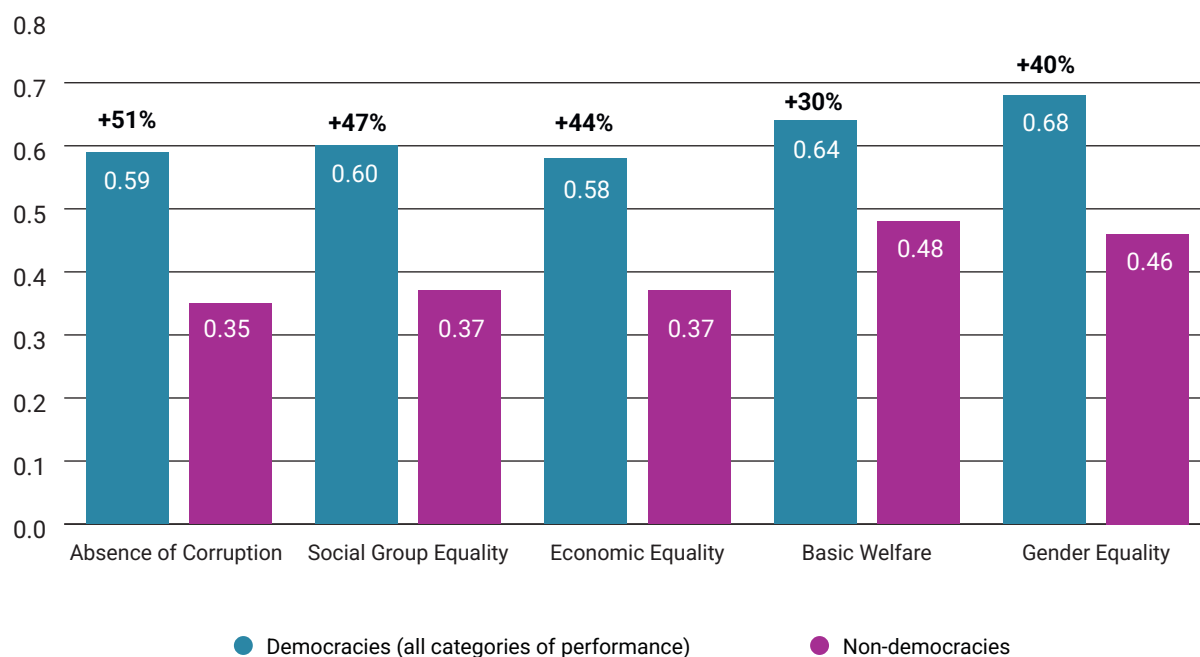
- **Basic Welfare**—covering health, education and nutrition—is on average 30 per cent higher in democracies.
- **Gender, Economic and Social Group Equality** are 40–47 per cent higher in democracies.
- **Corruption** levels are about 50 per cent lower in democracies.

The quality of democracy matters. In high-quality democracies, the differences are striking—levels of Basic Welfare are about 66 per cent higher; levels of Gender Equality, Social Group Equality and Economic Equality are more than twice as high; and levels of corruption in high-quality (high-performing) democracies are 90 per cent lower than in non-democratic countries. (Figure 1).

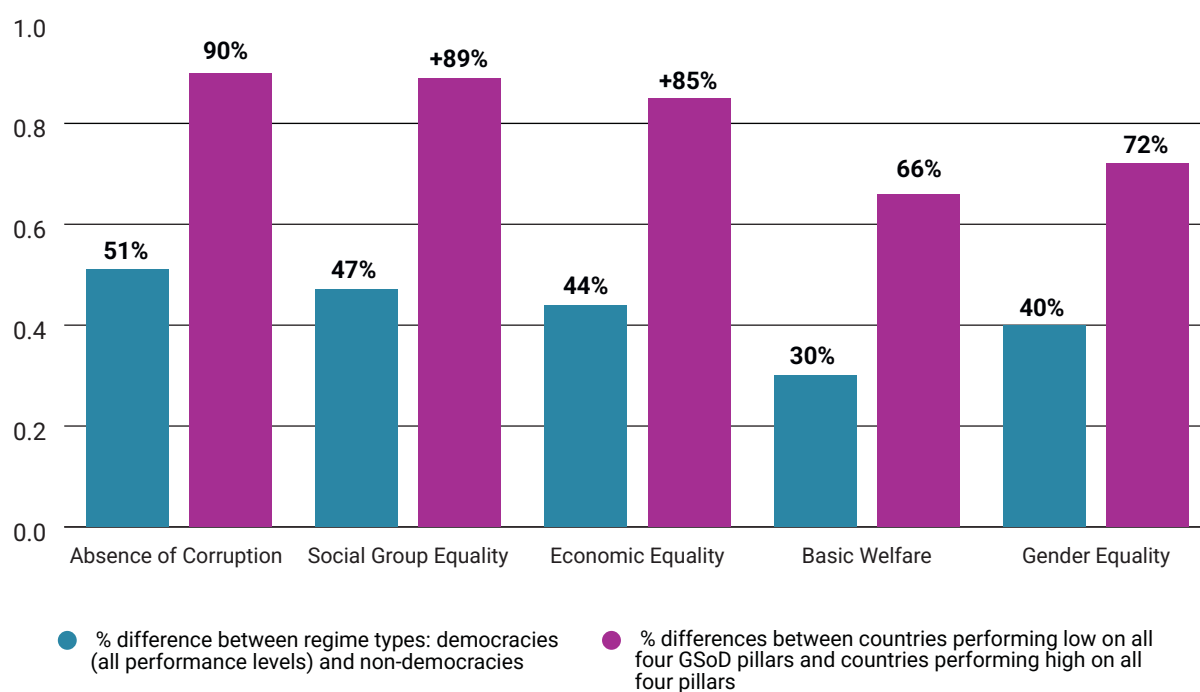
Figure 1. Averages of selected GSoD Indices by levels of democratic performance (and % differences)



Source: International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.53>>.

Figure 2. Averages of selected GSoD Indices by regime type (and % differences)

Sources: International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2019), <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>>; International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.53>>.

Figure 3. Percentage difference between democracies of all levels and non-democracies and between low- vs high-performing countries

Source: International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.53>>.

Rule of law is essential for social development and prosperity. Analysis of the 29 GSoD measures reveals that governance and rule of law are most strongly linked to Basic Welfare and Economic Equality, with the highest positive correlations observed for Absence of Corruption (0.75 and 0.84 on a scale of 0 to 1) and Predictable Enforcement (0.72 and 0.84) (see Figure 4).

Democratic representation and rights matter for how inclusively those gains are shared. Rule of Law, Representation and Rights indicators show strong positive correlations with Gender and Social Group Equality, highlighting that inclusive prosperity depends not only on good governance but also on democratic institutions and rights protection. Figure 4 illustrates this dual influence: Rule of Law indicators like Predictable Enforcement and Judicial Independence correlate strongly with Social Group Equality (0.88 and 0.84) and Gender Equality (0.78), while Rights and Representation indicators—such as Access to Justice (0.89), Civil Liberties (0.84), Electoral Integrity (0.76) and Elected Government (0.75)—also show robust links.

These findings underscore that while governance supports basic welfare and fairness, democratic representation and rights are critical in determining how evenly and inclusively those gains are shared across social groups (see Figure 4).

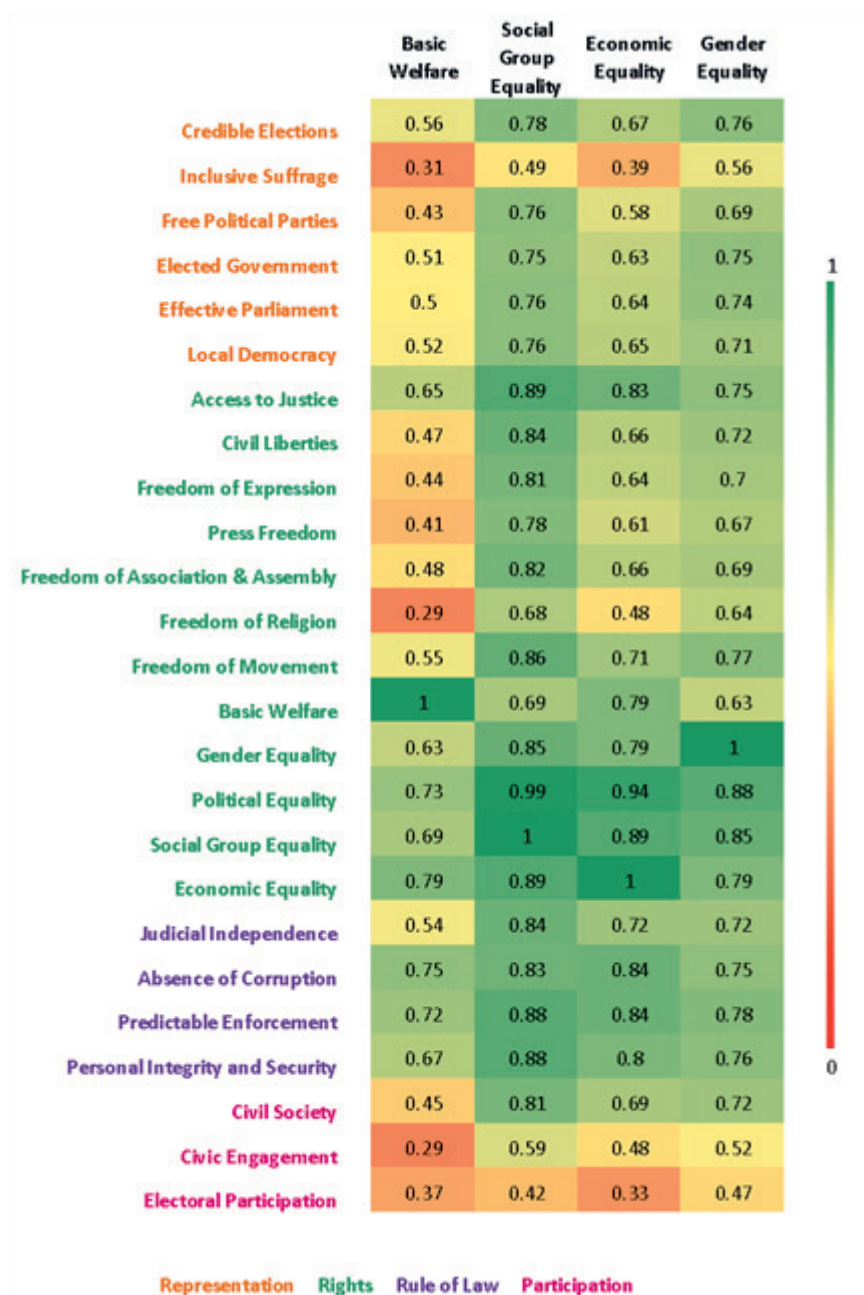
Democratization drives social development and prosperity, while democratic decline reverses them.

Democratization drives social development and prosperity, while democratic decline reverses them. Drawing on scholarly studies, the report also shows that when societies democratize, they tend to experience stronger economic growth, increased social spending and improved social development outcomes, while autocratization or democratic decline typically reverses these gains, eroding prosperity and social development progress ([Acemoglu and Robinson 2012](#); [Wigley et.al. 2020](#); [Murshed et. al 2022](#)).

The evidence rejects the notion of an ‘authoritarian advantage’. On average, democracies outperform non-democratic regimes on social development and prosperity indicators, even though a few exceptions exist. Non-democratic regimes that achieve high social development outcomes tend to be empirical outliers. Out of 74 countries without democratic elections, only a very small number achieve high levels of welfare or equality. Singapore stands out as a rare case of low corruption, while Cuba and Serbia perform relatively well on Gender Equality. These examples, however, are the exception rather than the rule. China, often cited as a model of authoritarian success, ranks only in the mid-range on welfare, equality and corruption indicators. No autocracy achieves high levels of Economic or Social Group Equality. Most autocracies struggle with inequality, weak public service delivery and unreliable economic data.

Not all democracies automatically deliver for their people. While specific dimensions of democracy are strongly correlated with social development outcomes, the relationship is neither deterministic nor uniformly causal. Democratic governance alone does not guarantee positive development

Figure 4. Correlations between GSoD Indices and selected measures of social development



Note: 0= low; 1 = high.

Source: Calculations based on International IDEA, Global State of Democracy Indices, [n.d.], <<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gsoD-indices>>, accessed 14 July 2025.

results. Empirical evidence shows that many democratically elected governments continue to face significant challenges in providing social development and prosperity for their citizens.

The perception that democracies are failing to deliver is closely linked to declining trust in democratic institutions.

The perception that democracies are failing to deliver is closely linked to declining trust in democratic institutions. While democracy provides the framework for social development and prosperity, when it falls short, citizen trust by in democratic institutions can erode, undermining the social contract and fuelling support for authoritarian alternatives. Public opinion data across regions show that waning support for democracy often reflects citizens' perceptions that it is failing to deliver tangible social progress and shared prosperity (Fukuyama, Dann and Magaloni 2025).

Public opinion data show that:

- In Africa, 66 per cent of people prefer democracy, but only 37 per cent are satisfied with its performance (Afrobarometer 2024).
- In Latin America and the Caribbean, support for democracy fell from 68 per cent in 2004 to 59 per cent in 2023, driven by corruption and economic hardship (Lupu et al. 2023).
- In high-income countries, satisfaction with democracy dropped from 49 per cent in 2017 to 35 in 2025 (Wike, Fetterolf and Schulman 2025).

PATHWAYS LINKING DEMOCRACY, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SHARED PROSPERITY

The report identifies several pathways through which democracy enables social development and prosperity:

Strengthening the rule of law and reducing corruption improves social development outcomes

Democracies tend to have *stronger effective rule of law*—62 per cent higher on average than non-democracies (International IDEA n.d.). This reduces corruption, ensures resources reach vulnerable groups and fosters equal access to justice (Jenkins 2021; Dwi Nugroho et al. 2022). Studies show that lower corruption correlates with better health and education and poverty reduction outcomes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, democracies with lower corruption experienced fewer deaths (McMann and Tisch 2023).

Weaker rule of law undermines social development by enabling corruption that diverts public funds from health and education, inflates medical costs through counterfeit drugs, lowers school enrolment, deters investment due to legal uncertainty, and deepens inequality by allowing elites to capture benefits at the expense of marginalized groups (Dridi 2014; UNDP 2015; Bate and Mathur 2017; UN Women et al. 2019; World Justice Project 2022).

Violence and conflict hinder social development

Violence and conflict undermine social development by destroying infrastructure, displacing communities, reducing school attendance, weakening health systems, and diverting public spending from education and health to security (UNDP 2023; Mukombwe, du Toit and Hendriks 2024). Democracies are more likely to sustain peace, while participatory governance and women's involvement in peace processes contribute to longer-lasting recovery (V-Dem 2023; Endeley and Molua 2024).

Electoral competition and political participation create incentives for delivery

Elections and inclusive participation foster accountability. Governments subject to electoral competition are more likely to invest in health, education and infrastructure to earn voter support (Lizzeri and Persico 2004; Min 2015; Ofusu 2019). However, elections alone are insufficient—without robust rule of law and strong protections for rights, these electoral incentives may fail to translate into equitable and effective service delivery.

Rights protection—a pillar of inclusive social development

Civil and political rights—such as freedom of expression and association, and access to information—are essential for inclusive development. They enable citizens to demand better services, hold leaders accountable and ensure that social and economic gains are shared equitably across social groups (Acuña Alfaro 2024). Where these rights are restricted, development becomes less inclusive, and inequalities are more likely to deepen.

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CONCLUSION

Democracies are best placed to deliver inclusive and sustainable progress—but they must show tangible results to retain trust. The 2025 World Summit for Social Development in Doha has been a vital opportunity to reaffirm democracy's central role in driving social development and progress as a basis for renewing the social contract.

Yet, democracy needs both delivery and defence. Foreign aid cuts risk sidelining support for democracy and governance in favour of other pressing development priorities—a short-sighted approach. Democracy is the enabler that ensures scarce public resources are used effectively, not siphoned off, and reach those who need them most.

In a world grappling with conflict, inequality, climate change and democratic backsliding, democracy is not a luxury—it's a lifeline. Crises offer a chance to reimagine democracy—not just as a system of political rights, but as a foundation for social and economic justice.

Policy recommendations

- **Make democracy a development imperative.** Embed democracy explicitly in the implementation frameworks of the Doha Political Declaration and Agenda 2030 (and its successor framework) as a prerequisite for sustainable social development and shared prosperity.
- **Strengthen rule of law and anti-corruption.** Ensure public resources reach those who need them by supporting independent judiciaries, robust anti-corruption frameworks and access-to-justice systems. Promote (fiscal) transparency, open government and citizen oversight of public budgets, procurement and service delivery.
- **Boost delivery capacity and citizen trust.** Engage citizens in developing 'democracy delivery compacts' linking government commitments to measurable improvements in jobs, public services and social protection, monitored through independent citizen feedback mechanisms.
- **Protect rights and foster political participation and representation.** Safeguard civic and political freedoms and foster inclusive representation, enabling citizens to hold policymakers accountable and ensure equitable development outcomes.
- **Renew the social contract.** Promote social dialogue and participation to ensure policies reflect public priorities and rebuild trust in democratic institutions. Bring together governments, civil society and the private sector to renegotiate the social contract around fairness, opportunity and equality.
- **Integrate democracy into development frameworks.** Treat democracy as central, not peripheral, by embedding democracy metrics into development policies, multilateral financing and debt-relief frameworks, rewarding governments that strengthen rule of law, reduce corruption and expand civic freedoms.

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int