

GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DEMOCRACY AND MULTILATERALISM: BACKGROUND PAPER TO THE COMMISSION REPORT

WORKING GROUP 1:

**REVITALIZING SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY
WITHIN THE UN SYSTEM**

ABOUT THIS REPORT



This report is the result of discussions and consultations with academic experts, civil society and philanthropic leaders, former and current UN officials, and UN Member States, co-facilitated by Massimo Tommasoli and Annika Silva-Leander.

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The recommendations reflect the collective input and exchange that emerged from these consultations and do not necessarily represent the individual views of all the participants.

The report was co-authored by Massimo Tommasoli and Annika Silva-Leander. It is intended as a contribution to the work of the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism and as input into the broader debate on the protection and renewal of multilateralism and democracy.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronyms	Full Name / Explanation
AI	Artificial intelligence
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRS	Creditor Reporting System
DPO	Department of Peace Operations
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
EAD	Electoral Assistance Division
GDC	Global Digital Compact
GFP	Global Focal Point for the Rule of Law
HRC	Human Rights Council
ICNRD	International Conference on New or Restored Democracies
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
UNCAC	United Nations Convention against Corruption
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNPA	United Nations Parliamentary Assembly
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism convenes at a moment of deep global uncertainty. The multilateral system faces mounting strain. Adherence to shared rules is weakening at a moment when deepening global crises require more effective international cooperation. This crisis of multilateralism is closely linked to a broader and intensifying crisis of democracy, as more countries move toward authoritarianism, many democracies experience backsliding, and two-thirds of the world's population are now living in non-democratic regimes. Against this backdrop, the Commission's Working Group on Revitalizing Support for Democracy within the UN System examined how the United Nations can strengthen its role in supporting and protecting democracy as part of its broader mission to advance peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. The Working Group focused primarily on the ability and capacity of the UN system to strengthen and protect democracy, and to a lesser extent on democratic reforms within the UN's own governance structures.



The report recognizes that the United Nations has never had an explicit mandate to promote democracy, reflecting both the primacy of state sovereignty and its global membership of states with diverse political systems. At the end of the 1990s, however, there was a growing recognition that democratic governance serves as an important enabler of the UN's three main pillars: human rights, sustainable development, and peace and security. Amid a global weakening of adherence to democratic norms, implementing this insight has become more difficult in the UN context. Nonetheless, the UN Charter and the UN's foundational documents are grounded in universal principles that recognize the rights, dignity, and autonomy of human beings, which are closely aligned with democratic values such as "equal rights" and the "self-determination of peoples" (Charter Article 1.2). Through the work of its bodies, programs, entities, funds, and specialized agencies, the UN continues to support democratic governance, notably through electoral assistance, rule of law and constitutional support, peacebuilding, human rights promotion and monitoring, anti-corruption efforts, gender equality initiatives, and programs that strengthen civic participation and inclusion.

Despite the UN system's inherent constraints in strengthening and protecting democracy, the report argues that the future of a rules-based international order depends on renewed commitment to democratic principles. It further suggests that effectively addressing today's complex global challenges requires more accountable, inclusive, participatory, and responsive—in other words, democratic—forms of governance, rather than a retreat from democratic norms. At a time when both democracy and multilateralism face mounting pressures, the United Nations should therefore bolster its efforts to strengthen democratic resilience, accountability, and inclusive political participation. Such efforts should build on the UN's comparative advantages and be pursued as part of a broader institutional ecosystem in which different actors play complementary roles in protecting democracy.

The report argues that revitalizing support for democracy within the UN system will require both institutional innovation and renewed political commitment from Member States.

The report identifies potentially **transformative reforms** for UN Member States to consider in order to reimagine the UN system for a new era, while recognizing limits on their political viability in the current geopolitical context. Chief among these are: making the protection of democracy a key priority of the new UN Secretary-General; placing democracy more explicitly at the center of the post-2030 development agenda as a critical enabler of sustainable development; strengthening UN human rights mechanisms to address democratic backsliding; and exploring the creation of a UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy. In addition, given that a significant proportion of the world's population lives in contexts where state representation may not fully reflect the popular will, Member States should consider enriching UN decision-making and strengthening its multi-stakeholder character by amplifying civil society, citizen, public, and parliamentary voices by establishing a Civil Society Envoy; piloting Global Citizens' Assemblies to bring public input into UN policymaking; and further strengthening the role of elected representatives and parliaments in UN policy forums through a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly.

In light of the current political constraints, however, a **pragmatic approach** would be to take immediate

practical steps to **strengthen and safeguard existing UN frameworks and activities in support of democracy**, many of which are under increasing resource strain. Key recommendations are to adequately resource democracy-related mandates and functions; protect existing normative frameworks from dilution; further strengthen coordination and system-wide coherence on democracy-related issues across UN entities and across the three pillars; and expand UN access and partnerships with civil society and other stakeholders in the global democracy ecosystem.

The key thematic recommendations are to:

- elevate constitutionalism as a distinct focus within UN rule-of-law work;
- integrate electoral assistance more closely with political, human rights, and peacebuilding efforts;
- continue to build on recent developments under the United Nations Convention against Corruption, particularly new global standards on political finance transparency to counter corruption and improvements to the UNCAC review mechanisms in its second phase; address shrinking civic space and strengthen the role of the United Nations in defending, promoting, and enabling civil society engagement and participation in democratic governance;
- protect the UN's human rights pillar, and strengthen coordination across the UN human rights system, increase protection for Special Procedures mandates, and improve linkages between human rights monitoring and other democracy-support efforts within the UN system; and
- make concerted efforts to protect gains on gender equality against a growing backlash.

Finally, the report recognizes that rapid technological change presents both opportunities and risks for democratic governance. Digital platforms, surveillance technologies, and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping the information environment and creating new threats to electoral integrity, political participation, accountability systems, and privacy. To address these challenges, the report identifies significant normative gaps in global governance frameworks and calls for support to multi-stakeholder efforts to develop safeguards for responsible AI, digital rights and governance, and countering online gender-based violence.



INTRODUCTION

The Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism convenes at a moment of deep global uncertainty. The multilateral system that once sustained international cooperation faces mounting strain as adherence to shared rules weakens, even as global challenges increasingly require, collective action. This crisis of multilateralism is closely linked to a broader democratic recession, marked by rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding amid a growing concentration of political, economic, and technological power that risks eroding the rules-based international order (**Nord et al. 2026; CIVICUS 2026b**). Against this backdrop, the Commission's Working Group on Revitalizing Support for Democracy brought together academic experts, philanthropic and civil society leaders, and former UN officials to examine and make recommendations on how the United Nations can strengthen its role in supporting and protecting democracy as part of its broader mission to advance peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. This report is the result of discussions in the Working Group and consultations with other academic experts, civil society, and former and current UN officials, as well as UN Member States. The recommendations in this report reflect the collective inputs and exchanges that emerged from these discussions, building on prior and ongoing advocacy initiatives on reforming the UN system. The Working Group focused primarily on the UN system's ability and capacity to strengthen and protect democracy, and to a lesser extent on reforms to the UN system's governance structures.¹

¹ The analysis did not focus on such issues as reform of the Security Council.



PROTECTING DEMOCRACY AT A TIME OF “POLYCRISIS”

2.1. THE CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM

In 2025, the United Nations turned 80 amid one of the most serious crises of legitimacy and financing in its history. Although some critics argue that the UN is unfit for purpose, overstretched, or ineffective in addressing global challenges ([Schaefer 2024](#)), the Working Group argued that the UN system remains critical for addressing the interconnected challenges of a globalized world—from climate change and pandemics to armed conflict and economic disruption that affect all regions. Nonetheless, the UN system is facing serious obstacles to addressing today's complex global challenges. The liberal international order that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War is being eroded by Member States that reject collective problem-solving, amplifying long-standing critiques that it was marked by double standards and structural inequities.² Both long-standing and new geopolitical tensions pose existential threats to the UN system, bringing standoffs and paralysis to the Security Council, and polarization to other parts of the UN, where human rights norms have been attacked by some groups of states seeking to reopen debate on previously agreed standards ([Banjo 2026](#)). Member States are choosing alternative, sometimes illiberal, pathways to resolve transnational problems, effectively undermining their own creation after World War II.

At a time when multilateralism faces sustained attack by actors that seek to undermine it, the UN is operating under significant structural, financial, and political constraints, while current reform efforts struggle to keep pace with the scale of the challenges.

² As Canadian Prime Minister Carney stressed in his address to the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in January 2026, "we knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false. (...) We participated in the rituals, and we largely avoided calling out the gaps between rhetoric and reality" ([Carney 2026](#)).

Calls for reform of the UN are not new. For decades, debates about reforming the UN system (**Müller 2022**) have stressed that the proliferation of mandates, overlapping functional responsibilities, and cumbersome bureaucratic structures have contributed to increased inefficiency in the use of resources, as well as fragmentation or duplication of mandates and programs (**ICM 2016; HLAB 2023**). This has added to some Member States' reservations about using the UN system to advance sustainable development, promote and defend human rights, and prevent, mitigate, and end deadly conflicts. Some Member States, notably the United States, have advocated deep budget cuts to limit the UN's focus on humanitarian aid. Throughout the history of these reform efforts, however, overall support among Member States for the multilateral system and its role in upholding a rules-based international order has remained strong, with a focus on improving effectiveness rather than questioning the system's existence.

In recent years, however, the UN's challenges in preventing or ending large-scale wars have led critics to lose faith in its ability to deliver on its core mandate of peace and security (**Gowan 2026**). Major political changes in many countries that were traditionally supportive of multilateralism have contributed to radical changes in the UN policy landscape. Some states have reassessed their engagement, while others have sought more effective multilateral cooperation. A growing number are calling for fundamental reform (**Council of Councils 2025**). In those countries, including major donors such as the United States and other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Member States, the rise of populism and narrow definitions of national interest have produced disruptive policy proposals that pose critical threats to the functioning of the United Nations.

Far from fulfilling the promise of a peace dividend anticipated at the end of the Cold War, today's global landscape is marked by a fragmented mosaic of violent conflicts—from low-intensity civil wars to interstate wars—that risk escalation, fuel arms races, militarization, and securitization, and drain immense resources away from the objectives of sustainable development.³

Migratory flows, driven by factors such as war, conflict, the impact of climate change, economic imbalances, and the deep inequalities that exacerbate fragile contexts, are perceived as destabilizing factors in more affluent societies, although the economic, social, and political impacts are born more by the countries of transit than those of destination. Nonetheless, right wing populist political parties exploit migration in arguments in support of divisive narratives, fueling discourses of nationalism, polarization, and extremism.

These trends portray a completely different geopolitical landscape to the one that led to the establishment of the United Nations at the conference of San Francisco in 1945. Emerging economies have shifted the global balance of power, creating the conditions for a multipolar world. Different trends in demographic growth, the economic expansion

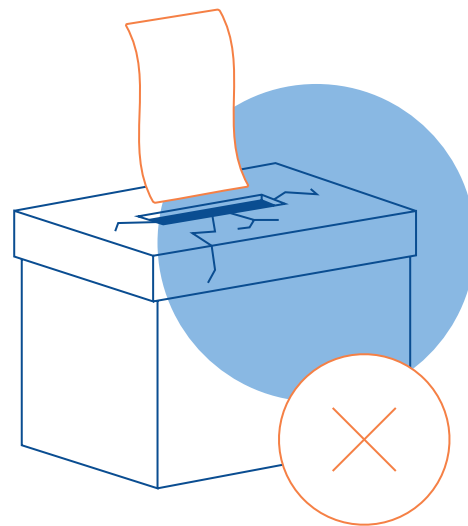
³ On militarism and excessive defense spending see SIPRI (2025). The most recent SIPRI data indicate that “the volume of major arms transferred between states increased by 9.2 per cent between 2016–20 and 2021–25. States in Europe more than trebled their arms imports, making it the biggest recipient region. Total exports by the USA, the world's largest supplier of arms, increased by 27 per cent. This included a 217 per cent increase in US arms exports to Europe” (**Carney 2026**)

of the BRICS countries, social movements, and political activism—often associated with responses to historical injustices—as well as institutional reforms aimed at adapting to a changing global economic landscape have brought new regional and global powers from the Global South to the fore to claim their space in global governance forums. New private sector actors that have leveraged the opportunities created by economic globalization and digital expansion now exercise unprecedented geopolitical influence, leaving states increasingly dependent on privately owned digital platforms, infrastructure, and data. Technological change, particularly the rapid advance of artificial intelligence, is fundamentally reshaping economies and societies, and the way power is exercised and governance organized worldwide ([OECD 2025b](#)). Critics argue that many United Nations structures and processes were designed for a different geopolitical era ([Perell and Aly 2024](#)), and now require adaptation to today's more complex global landscape.

2.2. THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

At a time of mounting global crises, democracies across the world face converging pressures, such as intensifying political polarization, the spread of disinformation, the concentration of executive power, declining public trust, corruption and the erosion of accountability systems, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities. Together, these are driving democratic backsliding globally ([Bisarya and Rogers 2023](#)). In addition, technological advances are providing challenges and opportunities that are irreversibly transforming livelihoods, jobs, and infrastructure, with implications for democracy and society that are yet to be fully understood. At the same time, these advances are altering the foundations of the fabric of societies, including the mechanisms at the core of political and social systems, and information and communication ecosystems.

Recent reports on global democracy trends paint a worrying picture. According to International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report 2025, more than half of the 174 countries assessed have declined in at least one key aspect of democratic performance over the past five years. The four pillars of democracy— representation, rights, the rule of law, and participation—are under strain, as demonstrated by unprecedented global declines in judicial independence, press freedom, and electoral integrity ([International IDEA 2025a](#)). Freedom House highlights that just 21 percent of the world's population



are living in countries rated “Free” in 2026, down from 46 percent two decades before ([Freedom House 2026, 1](#)). Data from the V-Dem Institute confirm a global increase in “autocratization,” which poses existential challenges for democracy, taking it “back to 1978 levels for the average global citizen”. Three-quarters of the world population (74%) is currently living in an autocracy ([V-Dem Institute 2026](#)). The 2026 CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report notes that today's interlocking crises hit hardest those who already have the least access to rights: “Women, LGBTQI+ people, migrants and refugees, and the civil society that stands with them, are bearing the brunt of this assault, as civic space restrictions tighten and the funding that sustains them collapses.” Just 7 percent of the world's population currently live in countries or territories where civic freedoms can be reasonably exercised without well-founded fear of persecution ([Firmin, Pousadela, and Tiwana 2026, 5](#); see also [CIVICUS Monitor](#)).

The data show that democracy is confronting challenges to both its resilience and its public legitimacy (**International IDEA 2025a**). In many countries, declining support for democracy is linked to perceptions that democratic systems have failed to deliver economic development, social progress, or security, creating space for populist and extremist politics that offer quick fixes for grievances. These perceived failures are often exploited by authoritarian regimes to justify restrictions on political freedoms and to consolidate power, contributing to broader democratic backsliding characterized by weakened institutions, shrinking civic space, manipulation of information, and threats to electoral integrity. Persistent exclusion also undermines democratic legitimacy, as women, youth, and minority groups remain underrepresented in political life while facing a growing threat and backlash (**Roggeband and Krizsán 2020**). At the same time, globalization and external economic constraints limit autonomy in national policy, feeding public perceptions that democratic governments cannot effectively respond to citizens' needs. The mismatch between short electoral cycles and the long-term nature of major policy challenges raises expectations that democratic politics struggles to meet. Digital technologies have intensified these pressures by enabling misinformation and new forms of political manipulation. Surveillance, including through facial recognition technology, increases the capacity to control citizens and voters, and for direct repression or coercion (**Funk, Shahbaz and Vesteinsson 2023**). Large technology companies exert significant influence over democratic processes, through their control of digital platforms central to public discourse and information flows, but face limited accountability. While often framed as neutral spaces, their algorithms and data-driven business models shape exposure to information, amplify polarizing content, and often contribute to disinformation and political manipulation. The concentration of power among these firms, alongside the use of digital technologies for surveillance, raises concerns about reduced regulatory effectiveness and the chilling effect on democratic participation (**Owono 2025**). These dynamics intersect with the broader crisis in multilateralism and the rules-based international order, as democratic backsliding erodes international cooperation while declining international support and funding for democracy further weaken efforts to defend and strengthen democracy worldwide.



Furthermore, democracy assistance has sometimes been perceived as reflecting the values of western liberal democracies linked to western or Global North-driven agendas, particularly when the gap between rhetoric and practice is shaped by competing policy interests in areas from trade to security. The reaffirmation of multilateralism as a basic principle of international relations is a prerequisite to effectively address such perceptions. The UN is uniquely placed to draw on its comparative experience and local knowledge to counter such perceptions. Much as trust in democratic institutions and processes has been fading in many countries, including in established democracies, there is a need to restore confidence in democracy assistance as a fundamental area of action for supporting inclusive national efforts to build democracy, and an enabler of the achievement of UN goals in the fields of sustainable development, human rights, and peace and security.

2.3. THE UN AND DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE

2.3.1. THE UN'S HISTORICAL APPROACH TO DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE

While the UN Charter makes no explicit reference to democracy, some key democratic principles and values permeate it, from respect for human rights to fundamental freedoms, from recognition of the equal rights of women and men, to life in larger freedom, self-determination, and the removal of distinctions based on race, sex, language, or religion ([UN 2009b](#)). Furthermore, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone "has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives; the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures" (Article 21). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that "Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions: (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors" (Article 25) ([Democracy Without Borders 2023](#)).

Moreover, the UN's official website describes "democracy as a **core value** of the United Nations", which it supports by **promoting human rights, development, and peace and security**. Indeed, despite the lack of a definition of or explicit references to democracy in the UN foundational documents, both UN Member States and the UN Secretariat—particularly since the mid-1990s—have recognized a role for the UN system in supporting democratization efforts at the national level.⁴ This was particularly the case following the wave of democratic transitions in the 1970s in Southern Europe, in the 1980s in Latin America and in the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe, as reflected in the attention paid by the UN General Assembly to the process of the International Conference on New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD).⁵

The UN Secretary-General serves as the chief administrative officer of the United Nations and as a political and moral convenor, exercising agenda-setting, coordinating, and good-offices functions through authority largely defined by the UN Member States. While the Member States have the power to deliberate on and adopt norms, the role played by the

⁴ The Security Council recognized this role through approval of peacekeeping missions in transitional contexts. Mancini stresses that, "since the end of the Cold War, the UN Security Council has continuously—although not consistently—promoted democracy and propagated democratic elections as a basis for a governance template for countries on its agenda" (2015, 235). Both the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, which was established in 2006, have adopted resolutions on democracy that affirmed the role of the UN ([OHCHR 2026](#)).

⁵ The ICNRD was launched in Manila in 1988 by 13 states: Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Greece, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines, Portugal, El Salvador, Spain, and Uruguay. The second ICNRD took place in Managua in 1994. It was attended by 74 Member States and adopted a Plan of Action that called on the UN Secretary-General to undertake a study on ways in which the UN system could support the efforts of governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies ([UN 1995](#)). This issue became an item on the General Assembly agenda and the main anchor in General Assembly deliberations on the role of the UN in supporting democracy (see resolution A/RES/49/30 of 7 December 1994). Subsequent ICNRD conferences were held under the aegis of the UN in Bucharest in 1997, Cotonou in 2000, Ulaanbaatar in 2003 and Doha in 2006. The seventh ICNRD, to be hosted by Venezuela, was put on hold following the death of President Chavez. The ICNRD process has since stalled.

Secretary-General as a norm entrepreneur is particularly important (Rushton 2008). In the field of democracy support, a common thread links the actions of the Secretaries-General—both those who led the organization during the peak of democratic transitions, and those who have had to face the severe democratic backsliding trend in recent years. This role goes beyond the generic promotion of democracy and human rights as universal values. It helps to shape the agenda in many ways, from the support provided to negotiation processes, to defining key issues for consideration by Member States, producing robust, evidence-based analyses, and in some cases promoting paradigm shifts to address global issues and challenges.

The Working Group noted that despite the institutional constraints, successive Secretaries-General have played influential roles in advancing democracy support agendas.

In 1996, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali presented his analysis of the UN's commitment to supporting democratic transitions and reforms in his *Agenda for Democratization* (Boutros-Ghali 1996). At the turn of the century, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed the relevance of democracy to achieving the UN's mandates (Annan 2002). In 2007, the General Assembly established observance of International Democracy Day on 15 September.⁶ This provided an opportunity for the Secretary-General to issue statements about democracy and its importance for the UN system and the world. In 2009, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon adopted a Guidance Note on Democracy, which remains the main policy statement on democracy assistance by the UN Secretariat. The Guidance note underscores that:

In the twenty-first century, we continue to be confronted with the triple challenge of building or restoring democracies, preserving democracies, as well as improving the quality of democracies. Key challenges for the UN in this context are: how to more effectively promote universally recognized democratic principles, institutions and practices; how to respond, in a consistent and predictable manner, to ruptures with democracy, as triggered by coups d'état or other unconstitutional transfers of power; and how to respond to, or even help to prevent, the slow and gradual erosion in the quality of democracy and the weakening of democratic freedoms, practices and institutions which sometimes occur. (UN 2009b, 1)

In retrospect, in the period 1990–2015, the UN operated in a global context characterized by expanding democratization. In their Millennium Declaration, Member States emphasized the importance of popular participation in governance. The zenith of UN engagement in democracy support at the policy level was probably reached at the 2005 World Summit. Its outcome document renewed Member States' commitment "to support democracy by strengthening countries' capacity to implement the principles and practices of democracy and resolve to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations to assist Member States upon their request" (UN 2005). It also established the UN Democracy Fund (UN 2005, paragraphs 135–137),⁷ which is still the only UN fund with an exclusive mandate on democracy.

The financial crisis of 2007–2008, however, marked a turning point in many policy areas, including support for democracy. It undermined public confidence in the ability of democratic political systems—in both established and newer democracies—to deliver economic development, especially to those segments of the population who perceived themselves to be the main victims of globalization.

The so-called Arab Spring relaunched interest in democratic transitions but its controversial aftermath strengthened the positions of those who prioritized stability over democratization (Ould Mohamedou and Sisk 2017).

At a UN Summit on the post-2015 development agenda in September 2015, the General Assembly adopted *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (**UN 2015c**). Although democracy is mentioned only in the preamble, this important agenda constitutes the last major consensus-based convergence on democracy-related issues experienced at the UN, with a strong focus on accountability and affirmation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highly relevant to the building blocks of democracy, such as SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on peace, justice, and accountable institutions.

In the same year, three major reviews of the UN's peace operations, its peacebuilding architecture, and Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UN Security Council 2000) stressed—from different perspectives—the importance of inclusive political processes for sustaining peace (**UN 2015a; UN 2015b; Coomaraswamy 2015**).

At this time, UN policymakers, practitioners, and scholars either explicitly or implicitly adhered to one of two broad schools of thought. The debate centered on the tension between a principled commitment to supporting democracy or a preference for stability regardless of governance structures. Many analysts underscored that democracy contributes to an enabling environment for attaining key UN goals, stressing the interlinkages between democracy and the three core pillars of the UN: sustainable development, human rights, and peace and security (Newman and Rich 2004; Haack 2011). They deemed democracy an important and, in contexts such as countries emerging from conflict, essential factor in the success of the UN's work and mandates.

Other analysts highlighted the tensions and conflicting aims in the relationships between peace and security, democratization, and the realization of human rights, as well as the relation between democratic institutions and processes, and the achievement of development (Wilson 2006; Zanotti 2011). Another debate centered on the perceived trade-offs between democracy and models of the developmental state (**Berhe 2021; Wade 1990**).

The backlash against multilateralism comes with assertions of the primacy of sovereignty, which is often invoked by those who oppose multilateral engagement in support of national democratization. A renewal of multilateralism will therefore require careful unpacking of the notion of sovereignty. The principle of state sovereignty in the UN Charter restricts the UN's scope for more assertive engagement on democracy and constitutionalism, as such actions risk being perceived as interference in domestic political processes. However, the Working Group noted that popular sovereignty, which is a core principle of democratic political theory, holds that state authority is derived from the will of the people.

Accordingly, multilateralism requires Member States to accept certain constraints on their sovereignty, in particular to ensure that human rights take precedence and that governments do not act without constraint toward their own citizens, as affirmed by the United Nations in the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

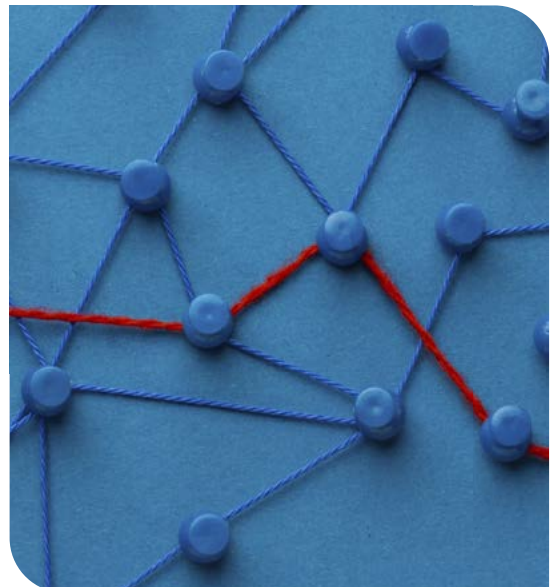
⁶ See Resolution A/RES/62/7, the last one adopted by the General Assembly in the context of the ICNRD. The date was chosen to recall the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Democracy by the Inter-Parliamentary Union General Council at its 161st session in Cairo on 15 September 1997.

⁷ For a comprehensive review of the UN's work on democracy assistance in the early 2000s, see Newman, and Rich (2004).

Increasing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding among UN Member States has reduced support for democratic norms at the UN. This shift is reflected in how states speak about democracy, and how frequently: 74 percent of countries explicitly mentioned democracy in General Assembly High-Level Week speeches between 1992 and 2003, but that has fallen to an average of just 54 percent since 2015 (and a low of 46% in 2024) (Sourek 2026 forthcoming). The growing contestation around democratic norms among UN Member States has made it more difficult to openly discuss and support democracy within the multilateral system. This has introduced more circumspection to the approach to democracy⁸ by some UN funds, programs, entities, and specialized agencies. At the same time, funding cuts are affecting the UN system as a whole, with significant implications for programs related to human rights and democracy. This signals a dilution of UN Member States' explicit political commitment to advancing a democracy agenda as outlined in policies adopted over 20 years ago. It also documents a parallel, largely implicit, shift in the framing of the UN's democracy-related work away from explicit references to democracy, to more technical approaches to or framings of politically sensitive areas, such as support for political and institutional reforms, and the more technical aspects of strengthening key democratic institutions and infrastructure. It is no coincidence that similar shifts are taking place in related areas. A good case in point is the hostility of the United States, among others, to what it calls "gender ideology," and the backlash against the gender equality agenda on sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ rights, involving funding cuts to the UN agencies working on these issues, notably UN Women and the UN Population Fund.

2.3.2. THE UN'S CURRENT DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE ARCHITECTURE

Democracy-related normative frameworks, activities, and programming within the UN system are currently spread across multiple parts of the organization. The UN General Assembly, where the UN's 193 Member States are represented, sets normative frameworks through resolutions and political declarations. The **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** (OHCHR) conducts human rights monitoring and reporting, while the Human Rights Council (HRC), the highest political Member State body on human rights, establishes norms and mandates across a wide spectrum of rights, including Special Procedures mandates related to freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression, human rights defenders, and the independence of judges and lawyers.



⁸ Although it should be noted that [UNDP's 2026–2029 Strategic Plan](#) explicitly mentions democratic governance, the rule of law, and human rights, while electoral participation was included in the [2022–2025 Strategic Plan](#) presented and reported to the board (UNDP et al. 2025a).

Operationally, the **United Nations Development Programme** (UNDP) provides direct support and technical assistance to democratic governance, elections, parliaments, and accountability institutions at the country level.

Democracy-related work is also embedded in the UN's peace and security pillar, such as mediation, political missions, and peacekeeping operations led by entities such as the **Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)** and the **Department of Peace Operations (DPO)**, where democratic institutions, especially election management bodies, human rights commissions, other independent bodies, and civil society, including women and youth groups and local communities at large, are often regarded as essential to sustaining peace. The UN's peacebuilding programs are coordinated through the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, and the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, which align political, development, and security assistance to help countries emerging from conflict rebuild institutions and strengthen inclusive governance as part of sustaining peace. The **Electoral Assistance Division (EAD)** (EAD) at the United Nations DPPA provides technical support, policy guidance, and coordination to help Member States conduct credible, inclusive, and transparent electoral processes in line with international standards. **UN Women** advances democracy by promoting women's political participation and leadership, encouraging the development of civil society organizations that promote gender equality, and supporting constitutional and legislative reforms to eliminate gender-discriminatory laws that, among other things, constrain women's capacities to engage in public decision making. **UNESCO** supports media development and safeguards freedom of expression, including through support for independent journalism, media pluralism, and the protection of journalists. The UN Democracy Fund (**UNDEF**) provides targeted support to civil society projects that strengthen democratic participation and accountability. Together, these components form a significant, albeit somewhat fragmented, ecosystem supporting democracy across normative, policy, and operational levels of the UN system.

The UN democracy support architecture described in this report (sections 2.3.2., 2.3.3. and 3.2) is likely to be reshaped by the UN80 reform process, although the exact impact of these reforms on the UN's democracy support work remains unclear. The UN80 process aims to streamline mandates, improve coordination, and adapt the UN system to contemporary political and financial pressures, while operating within the constraints set by Member State interests. It is also likely to be affected by decreasing bilateral and multilateral aid flows. The OECD recently announced that international aid fell by 23.1 percent in real terms in 2025, the largest annual drop in the history of official development assistance (ODA) (**OECD 2026**). This is a much bigger reduction than the one the OECD projected only a year ago, when it estimated a 9–17 percent drop in net ODA in 2025, following a 9 percent decline in 2024. Democracy assistance is among the most affected sectors, not only within the UN system. The OECD projected that support for the government and civil society sectors, comprising human rights, democratic participation and civil society, and public sector reform, would decline by 21–36 percent between 2023 and 2025 (**OECD 2025a, 13**).

Analysis of the current challenges facing the broader ecosystem of democracy has highlighted an existential threat to democracy assistance and the need for a fundamental rethink of the sector, posed by the severe disruption from the US retreat and aid cuts in 2025, declining support from other democratic donors, the growing global influence of authoritarian powers, and weakening democracies (**Carothers, Kleinfeld, and Youngs 2025, 8; Silva-Leander, Emmons, and Pompei 2025**).

2.3.3. KEY UN PROCESSES OF RELEVANCE TO THE DEMOCRACY AGENDA

The UN system has traditionally addressed democracy through a development, governance, and rights-based lens rather than an explicit political framing. This was also the case in the key UN processes and frameworks that marked the past decade. The **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, particularly SDG 16, anchors commitments to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies by emphasizing the rule of law, accountable institutions, access to justice, and inclusive decision making. The **Summit of the Future** and its outcome documents, the **Pact for the Future**, the Global Digital Compact, and the Declaration on Future Generations, endorsed by Member States in 2024, have sought to update multilateral cooperation by reaffirming core governance principles while addressing emerging challenges such as digital governance, civic space online, information integrity, and the impact of new technologies on participation and trust. The **World Social Summit for Social Development**, held in Doha in 2025, and its Political Declaration reasserted democracy's essential role in advancing social development—a recognition otherwise largely absent from recent UN texts. This recent renewed commitment, although not as extensive as in the Copenhagen Declaration 30 years ago, offers a vital normative and political foundation for a recognition of the nexus between social development and democracy (**Silva-Leander 2025**). Together, these processes reflect a pragmatic UN approach to the protection of democracy, embedding it in broader agendas on development, peace, gender equality and inclusive participation, technology, and multilateral renewal rather than treating democracy as a standalone political objective.

In the face of these trends, recognizing that the UN is primarily a Member State-led institution, two key sets of questions guided the analysis carried out by the Working Group:

1.

Can the UN be more consistent in its orientation and more explicit about its role in supporting democracy building? How can the UN develop its own capacities, building on its considerable body of experience from its work on the ground in all regions of the world, to more consistently and effectively assist democratization processes in pursuit of its three principal mandates of security, human rights, and sustainable development?

2.

What institutional and political reforms would enhance the UN's ability to strengthen and protect democracy? What feasible reforms within UN frameworks and instruments would embed democratic principles, prevent democratic erosion, respond to democratic crises, and strengthen democratic resilience?





THE WAY FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS ON STRENGTHENING THE UN SYSTEM'S SUPPORT FOR AND PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY

The Working Group argued that the UN has a vital role to play in democracy building, given its global mandate and universal membership, its convening power, its norm-setting role, and its operational presence in most of its 193 members. The Working Group emphasized that any substantive reform of the United Nations system is fundamentally contingent on the political will of its Member States, given that the organization's authority, resources, and operational effectiveness are shaped by the commitments they choose to make and sustain. In view of the concerted attacks on democracy as a set of principles and as a political system, the UN—led by its Member States—must rethink its work in ways that not only promote, but also protect democracy. This calls for a fundamental reimagining of the multilateral system. Therefore, some of the recommendations in this report are transformative in nature.

Another set of recommendations focuses on more pragmatic reforms that work within current institutional frameworks to strengthen the UN's existing democracy-related work. These also depend to a significant extent on the political will of the UN Member States. However, in view of current efforts to erode the UN's capacities and reach, this pragmatic approach must be sensitive to the danger that any efforts to strengthen mandates on human rights and democracy risk opening the door to mandate weakening by Member States hostile to democracy.



The recommendations generated by the Working Group are therefore organized in three sections: (a) general recommendations on elevating democracy support within the current UN system; (b) thematic recommendations; and (c) reimagining the UN system and its support for democracy.

The recommendations are addressed to three main target groups, Member States, the UN system, and other stakeholders, and reflect their distinct but interdependent roles in advancing reform. This structure is intended to distinguish between more immediate, practical improvements to current systems, and longer-term, transformative reform proposals. The recommendations in this section were generated through dialogue with the Working Group and key informant interviews, but also build on existing work by experts in academia and civil society.

3.1. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES, THE UN SYSTEM, AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

3.1.1. RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES

Given the declining support for democratic norms globally, the Working Group urges Member States to explicitly recognize and renew commitments to the central importance of democratic principles and practices as a foundational pillar of a rules-based international order.

They should do so by:

1. **Upholding democracy in practice, not only in principle:** Member States should adhere to democratic norms and principles not only rhetorically, but also in practice by conducting free and fair elections, upholding the rule of law, and protecting fundamental rights, supported by independent oversight institutions such as ombuds, equality bodies, and national human rights institutions.
2. **Recognizing gender equality, and inclusive participation and representation as fundamental components of democratic governance,** and protecting gains on gender equality, and the rights of women and girls and other vulnerable social groups against backlash.
3. **Guaranteeing that sexual and reproductive rights and freedoms, and recognition of the rights of LGBTQI+ persons,** are viewed as integral to democracy.
4. **Placing democracy at the center of their multilateral engagement:** Member States should strengthen their internal coordination to treat support for democratic norms as a cross-cutting priority across all the UN bodies and multilateral forums in which they engage, to promote the coherence, consistency, and visibility of democracy-related commitments throughout the UN and broader multilateral system, by:

Consistently articulating support for democratic norms in UN discourse and documents, and delivering on them. In addition to upholding democracy in practice at the national level, consistently mainstream and publicly affirm democratic norms and their importance to the three UN pillars in their UN discourse, such as high-level speeches and interventions, intergovernmental agreements and negotiated texts, and outcome documents.

Adopting clear positions on democracy-related issues and advancing these consistently across all multilateral processes and reporting mechanisms, ensuring coherence and accountability. Member States should ensure consistency and interlinkages between their positions on democracy-related issues in UN reporting and review mechanisms, such as the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, and the 2030 Agenda, among others, and support regular reporting to the General Assembly on national and regional democracy-related efforts.

Fulfilling and strengthening democracy-related reporting obligations. Member States should fully comply with their UN reporting obligations and systematically integrate democracy-related commitments, analysis, and data into mechanisms such as Voluntary National Reviews, Universal Periodic Reviews and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms

of Discrimination Against Women periodic reviews, drawing where appropriate on independent academic and civil society sources (Sourek 2026 forthcoming).⁹

Actively encouraging candidates for senior UN leadership positions, including Secretary-General, to make clear, public commitments, not only to strengthening democracy support, but also to upholding and defending democratic norms.

5. **Enabling sustained funding to UN democracy support:** Across all areas, declining and unpredictable funding streams are a systemic constraint on effective UN democracy support. Member States should therefore provide predictable and adequate funding for UN democracy support functions, including UNDP, DPPA, EAD, UNDEF, the human rights pillar, OHCHR and relevant Special Procedures, UNESCO, UNODC, and any other UN entities working on democracy-related goals.
6. **Building alliances and partnerships among like-minded states and stakeholders:** Member States committed to democracy and democratic principles should strengthen their coordination through formal and informal UN groupings, including mechanisms such as “friends groups” or a “Democracy Caucus,” to advance shared positions and coordinated action in support of democratic principles within the UN system (see **Atlas Movement** and **Community of Democracies**). Intergovernmental organizations with democracy-related mandates such as International IDEA can support the facilitation of such processes.
7. **Using existing UN reform frameworks more strategically to advance democracy and support for democratic norms:** Member States should leverage existing frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda and Pact for the Future, to advance democracy-related action without reopening foundational agreements.
8. **Expanding, institutionalizing, and safeguarding civil society and Permanent Observer participation across UN processes:** Member States should ensure the direct, meaningful, and systematic participation of civil society and Permanent Observers across UN processes—including the General Assembly, the Security Council, and Universal Periodic Review—by integrating them into consultations, deliberations, and review mechanisms, rather than relegating them to parallel tracks. Strengthened multi-stakeholder participation would enhance legitimacy, broaden perspectives on decision making, and bridge the gap between global governance and citizens, by:

⁹ This report on how democracy is addressed in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) proposes: integrating democratic governance more systematically across the VNRs; strengthening the quality of reporting on democracy-related issues; ensuring that VNR processes are genuinely open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent; protecting and expanding civic space as a foundation for credible SDG implementation; using non-official data as a means of transparency and accountability; strengthening reporting on political inclusion and representation; reporting explicitly on press freedom and fundamental freedoms; linking governance factors to development outcomes; and using VNRs as tools for accountability and gap identification (Sourek 2026 forthcoming).

3.1.2. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UN SECRETARIAT

COORDINATION AND SYSTEM CONNECTIVITY

1. Drawing on existing mandates, continue to strengthen system-wide coordination, coherence, and policy alignment on democratic governance across the UN's pillars and processes.
2. Build on and continue to strengthen coordination among the UN system's political, legal, implementation, and human rights entities working on democracy-related issues, including through existing working groups or task forces to generate synergies, support coordinated responses, and reduce siloing and duplication. There is currently an informal group on democracy within the UN Secretariat, but no official/formal working group.

A more formal group could help to elevate this agenda and to ensure greater system-wide coherence.

HUMAN RESOURCES AND CAPACITY BUILDING

3. Raise awareness and continue to build the capacities of UN staff on democracy building and protection in complex transitional settings (economic, political, and war-to-peace transitions), for example, through the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs).
4. Continue to develop and protect subject matter expertise on democracy-related knowledge such as constitutions, elections, women's political participation and representation, and governance inside the UN.



COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY

5. Embed democracy in the UN's communication strategy, highlighting the importance of democratic accountability for the achievement of development, peace and security, gender equality, and human rights for all. This messaging should draw on the robust evidence and data that demonstrates the enabling role of democratic principles across the UN's three pillars.¹⁰
6. Speak up consistently at the highest possible level on threats to democracy, fundamental freedoms, and human rights, grounding this in data, evidence, and analysis of the risks to democratic institutions and processes, and linking such analysis to the UN's work on fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, gender equality, and SDG 16.

PARTNERSHIPS

7. Continue to build and expand partnerships with key actors in the democracy support ecosystem, including with civil society organizations such as democracy and human rights organizations, feminist organizations, anti-corruption organizations, and minority rights groups, as well as with universities and academia, think tanks, international organizations, the private sector, and sub-national governments. These partnerships strengthen the UN's democracy support role by leveraging distinct comparative advantages.

¹⁰ Robust evidence on the linkages between democracy and the three UN pillars can be found, for example, in International IDEA and UN OHCHR (2013), International IDEA and United Nations Development Program (2013a), International IDEA and United Nations Development Program (2013b), International IDEA, UNDP, and UN Women (2013), Cram (2024), International IDEA and Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (2025), and Silva-Leander (2026).

3.1.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

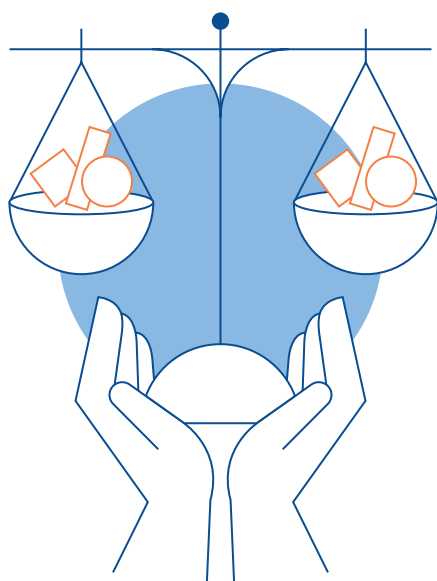
1. **Civil society** should continue to speak truth to power and strengthen the UN's role in protecting democracy by systematically providing fact-based analysis, data, evidence, and early warning analysis on democratic backsliding, civic space restrictions, threats to electoral integrity, and racial and gender discrimination in public life. It should also engage more strategically with UN accountability mechanisms such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Universal Periodic Review, the Voluntary National Reviews, and the CEDAW periodic reviews to ensure democracy-related concerns are reflected in Member States' UN reporting and recommendations. It should continue to build cross-border coalitions to defend civic space and democratic norms in order to amplify advocacy at the UN level. It should also ensure closer collaboration with UN country teams and emerging regional UN hubs to help shape the UN's democracy-related programming, linking democracy protection with fundamental freedoms, civic space, gender equality, and SDG 16. It should continue to advocate for meaningful participation in UN forums and hold governments accountable for upholding democratic commitments and protecting fundamental freedoms. It should: deliver interventions on critical thematic and country-specific issues; coordinate joint statements to elevate civil society perspectives; advise UN officials and inform Member States of global civic space and human rights trends; and organize and support civil society-led advocacy to place critical issues on the UN and Member States' agenda ([CIVICUS 2026b](#)).
2. **Regional organizations** should coordinate democracy support and electoral assistance with the UN system, ensuring that regional expertise and legitimacy complement UN country-level engagement; and partner with the UN to promote peer review and accountability mechanisms, thereby encouraging Member States to uphold democratic norms and linking regional initiatives with global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda.
3. **The private sector** should continue to work with the UN and other stakeholders on business responsibilities regarding respect for human rights and tax justice. It should also commit to develop and implement responsible AI standards and governance frameworks that protect fundamental rights, safeguard civic space, and ensure that emerging technologies support rather than undermine democratic principles.
4. **Academia, think tanks, and other intergovernmental organizations** should produce independent data, research, and analysis on democratic performance, civic space, and inclusive participation, as well as their relation to the human rights, sustainable development, and peace and security pillars of the UN to provide evidence that complements official reporting. One such example is the [SDG 16 Data Initiative](#), which produces non-official data to track progress on SDG 16 and annual shadow reports. This work should provide data that is disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and other relevant axes of social cleavage and political exclusion. Such research would contribute to monitoring and assessing Member States' democracy and human rights records, as well as reporting under UN frameworks. This rigorous independent analysis strengthens accountability, informs UN deliberations, and supports evidence-based policymaking on democracy-related issues. A valuable independent clearing house on the UN's democracy-related work is the [UN and Democracy Hub](#), hosted by International IDEA.¹¹
5. **Philanthropic institutions and donors** should step up their funding and take on more responsibility for supporting civil society organizations and projects working explicitly to advance democracy and its foundational elements in contexts where civic space is under pressure, authoritarianism is gaining ground, and major public funding streams have been cut back or abolished.

3.2. THE UN'S RESPONSE TO KEY DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES AND THEMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The UN undertakes valuable programming across areas that support core dimensions of democracy, even where it is not explicitly framed as such. The following recommendations, organized by thematic area of work, aim to recognize these efforts and propose ways to further strengthen them while enhancing system-wide coordination, coherence, and policy alignment across the UN's pillars and processes. Declining and unpredictable funding is a systemic constraint. As emphasized in Section 3.1.1, any efforts to strengthen existing mandates must be matched by predictable and adequate resourcing.

3.2.1. RESPECT FOR CONSTITUTIONS, CHECKS AND BALANCES, AND THE RULE OF LAW

THE UN'S WORK ON THE RULE OF LAW AND CONSTITUTION-MAKING



The UN has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the principle of **the rule of law** including for example at the 2012 high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the rule of law (**UN 2012**), in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially through SDG 16 (**UN 2012**), and in the Pact for the Future (**UN 2024a**), as well as in the rule of law resolutions of the **Human Rights Council**. The UN has also developed guidance on its rule of law assistance (**UN 2008**) and support to constitution-making processes (**UN 2009a**, **UN 2020b**).¹² Country-level UN guidance is often undermined by polarized, volatile conditions that disrupt mediation and limit political facilitation, as well as by contexts where formal rule of law commitments do not translate in practice, resulting in procedural or limited compliance, or “rule by law” rather than rule of law.

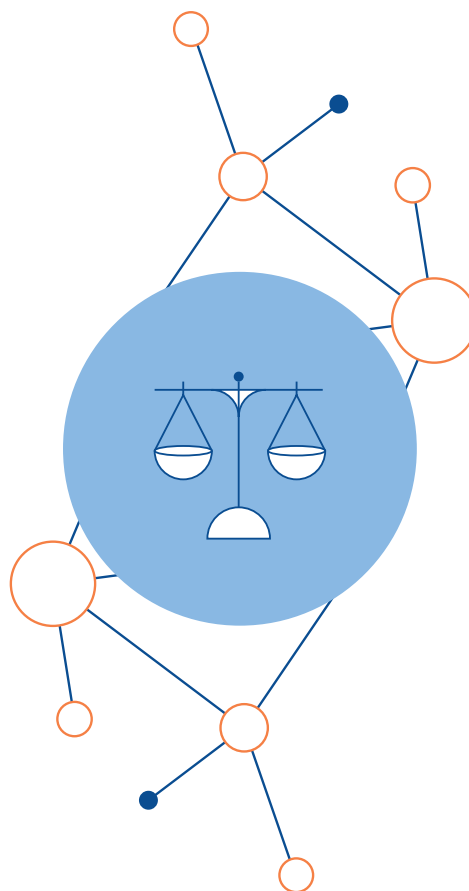
For the UN, **constitution making** is a broad concept that is understood as the process of drafting or amending

¹¹ The main source of data on aid flows is the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS), which covers all sectors. A dedicated democracy assistance tracker should, of course, cover all the actors engaged in democracy building and not only the UN. The main resource currently available online is produced by the European Democracy Hub, but it focuses only on EU and EU Member State spending in the period 2014–2023 (see <https://epd.eu/news-publications/exploring-democracy-trends-a-democracy-support-data-interactive-tool/>). Another dataset, the Donor Tracker, does not provide disaggregated data on democracy support. The closest democracy-related category in this online resource is gender equality (see <https://donortracker.org/topics/gender>).

¹² The guidance was published by Ban Ki-moon following endorsement by the then Secretary-General's Policy Committee, which was replaced in 2017 by the Executive Committee (Tommasoli 2026 forthcoming).

a constitution, or the substance of constitutional text, and the subsequent implementation of a constitution. Both process and substance are critical elements of constitution-making. UN departments, offices, funds, and programs have created an inter-agency Constitutions Working Group, which serves as a system-wide forum for coordinated constitutional assistance. Key UN actors include DPPA, UNDP, UN Women, OHCHR, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

The **Global Focal Point for the Rule of Law (GFP)** is a coordination platform created in 2012 by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for the delivery of UN rule of law assistance. The GFP is co-chaired by the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and UNDP, and includes UNODC, UNHCR, OHCHR, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), and UN Women, as well as entities such as the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO). At the country level, the senior UN official is responsible for GFP implementation. At the Senior Executive level, the Rule of Law Coordination and Resource Group (RoLCRG), chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, has the overall leadership role for the rule of law. The Rule of Law Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General catalyzes efforts to advance the rule of law, including through technical assistance and capacity-building. Since 2012, the GFP has provided joint rule of law support to more than 40 countries and territories. As of 2024, it had mobilized over \$50 million and deployed 179 experts.



The erosion of democratic institutions and processes, in both newer and older democracies, is particularly evident in the dimension of the rule of law (**International IDEA 2025**).

The rise in executive overreach at the expense of robust legislatures and independent judiciaries has been a prevalent global trend for at least the past decade. Some elected leaders are manipulating or subverting constraints on their power, and in some cases working with other authoritarian leaders to undermine the international norms and values of liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Despite regional attempts to deter it, outright rupture of constitutional rule through violent or other means still occurs. Recent military coups in West Africa, some backed by segments of the public, reflect another form of democratic erosion driven by exclusion and a backlash against political elites seen as disconnected from citizens' needs (**UNDP 2023**). A recent review of UN peace operations and unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs), published by the International Peace Institute, underscores that "the ability of UN missions to shape political transitions following UCGs tends to be constrained by factors outside their control," such as those posed by other international, domestic, and regional actors, including growing geopolitical divisions in the Security Council (**Trithart and Tadesse 2025**).

The Working Group addressed the following question:

- What more can the UN system do—within its current mandate—to constrain executive abuse of power, prevent and punish coups and unconstitutional transfers of power, and push back against authoritarian strongmen working together to weaken and disrupt the rule of law?

In the context of global democratic backsliding and its effect on the rule of law and constitutionalism, recognizing that different parts of the UN system tackle rule of law-related issues differently, the Working Group noted that the UN's work in these areas faces several critical challenges:

- *Challenges in defining constitutionalism:* The Working Group noted that constitutionalism is insufficiently articulated in UN frameworks, and less frequently addressed and often overshadowed by a focus on the rule of law, which is sometimes treated separately from constitutional issues— and from such principles as judicial independence, due process, equality before the law, accountability, and political participation. The UN principle of state sovereignty restricts the UN's scope for more assertive engagement on democracy and constitutionalism, as such actions risk being perceived as interference in domestic political processes.
- *UN mandates and resources for democracy and rule of law support:* UNDP and other UN entities are actively involved in justice sector reform and rule of law issues, through approaches that aim to combine technical and political perspectives in dialogue with different stakeholders. While such work is inherently political, the entry points for it might be through more technical routes, based on requests for support or technical assistance. **OHCHR** supports constitution-making by providing normative guidance, technical assistance, and process advice to ensure that both the substance and the drafting process align with international human rights standards. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers also plays an important role in monitoring, and reporting and advising on threats to judicial independence worldwide, engaging with governments and other actors to promote fair and impartial justice systems. However, funding for rule of law issues has been declining in recent years due to ODA cuts, putting UN programming in this area at risk.¹³

The Working Group's recommendations focused on the need to:

1. Ensure that all UN rule of law programming continues to be consistently grounded in international human rights standards by considering the adoption of a human-rights-based approach to rule of law programming, in consultation with OHCHR.

2. Elevate constitutionalism within the UN

Consistently address constitutional issues as a specific area of work within the broader domain of the rule of law, by avoiding its reduction to purely technical concerns and recognizing its fundamentally political dimensions.

Align UN constitutional, rule of law and peacebuilding programming, and peace agreements with the key institutional vulnerabilities associated with democratic backsliding, with a particular focus on executive constraints, term limits, judicial independence, civilian oversight of the military, and the backlash against gender equality.

¹³ According to OECD CRS data, UN funding for legal and judicial development to developing countries has declined from \$50.5 million in 2020 to \$32.9 million in 2024.

3. Use conflict prevention as leverage

Anchor democracy and constitutional assistance firmly in the UN's conflict prevention mandate, including early action on democratic backsliding, by building on the mandate defined in the **Sustaining Peace resolution** adopted by the UN General Assembly and the Security Council on 27 April 2016.

Treat democratic legitimacy as a core element of peace and security. Recognize democratic backsliding and unconstitutional changes of government as potential threats to international peace and security.

4. Focus on prevention, not just crisis response

Shift resources and political attention to early warning, constitutional safeguards, and accountability mechanisms by strengthening the Secretary-General's preventive diplomacy tools and funding political missions that support mediation, dialogue on constitutional reform, and electoral integrity before democratic breakdown becomes violent or irreversible. In this regard, monitor rights violations, which are often dismissed as cultural preferences, such as the disenfranchisement or marginalization of Indigenous groups, revocation of women's reproductive rights, the weakening of domestic violence legislation, and the intensification of barriers to immigration. Monitoring the extent to which socially marginalized individuals register to vote and actually vote provides potentially useful conflict early warning indicators.

5. System wide coordination

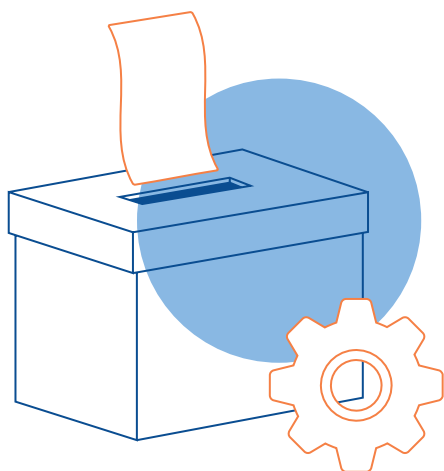
Evaluate system-wide coordination efforts on the rule of law, such as the Global Focal Point for the Rule of Law, to identify ways to further strengthen coordination, responsiveness, and impact.

3.2.2. ELECTORAL INTEGRITY


THE UN ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE ARCHITECTURE

Since 1991, the UN has provided technical advice and other forms of assistance to requesting states and electoral institutions to help strengthen their electoral processes. Such assistance is provided at the formal request of the Member State concerned or pursuant to a mandate from the Security Council or General Assembly. The Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs is the system-wide focal point for electoral assistance, with support from the Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA).

The UN provides various forms of electoral assistance, such as technical assistance (the most common type), expert panels, operational support to international observers, and support for creating conducive electoral environments, as well as other types of assistance in rare cases. In mission settings, electoral assistance is generally delivered through mission components under the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) or the DPPA.



In non-mission settings, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the largest implementer of electoral assistance. Other UN entities with a mandate to work on electoral matters include OHCHR, UN Women, and UNESCO (**UN 2025a**).

The OECD CRS indicates that between 2003 and 2024 the UN spent over \$366 million on supporting elections in developing countries, approximately 3.4 percent of UN ODA labeled with the “Government and Civil Society” policy marker. From a peak of \$35.4 million in 2016, the UN disbursed \$13.1 million in electoral assistance in 2024 (**OECD Data Explorer, n.d.**).

Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of democracy that require both technically correct and trustworthy processes, and healthy ecosystems that allow citizens to participate and have a say in how they are governed. Electoral integrity is also a core human rights issue, as international human rights law explicitly recognizes the right of every citizen to participate in genuine and free elections (**Article 25 ICCPR**). These processes are under serious threat from a variety of factors, such as politicized election bodies, restricted access to voting, and influence strategies that seek to undermine public trust in their outcomes.

Since the wave of democratic transitions in the 1990s, the UN has played an increasing role in electoral assistance, guided by a set of internal policies.

Over time, electoral assistance has shifted from being part of large peace operations, to a central feature of peacebuilding efforts, to more targeted technical support. The UN has played an important role in the broader electoral assistance community of practitioners, as a coordinator and convener (e.g., around the Declaration of Principles on International Election Observation), or through contributing to experience-sharing, the affirmation of principles, and the advancement of norms and best practices (Tommasoli and Pearce-Laanela, 2023).

The Working Group addressed the following questions:

- What role can and does the UN system play in strengthening norms and practices on electoral integrity?
- What can the UN system do to enhance the role played by international election observers in protecting the integrity of electoral processes?
- What strategic issues should the UN system address in strengthening institutions and building capacities in the field of electoral assistance, both in countries emerging from violent conflict and in countries affected by democratic backsliding?

The Working Group recognized the important role played by UN electoral assistance in the democracy-building landscape.

- The UN provides electoral assistance only at the request of the Member State concerned or based on a mandate provided by the General Assembly or Security Council. It is provided primarily through technical support, advisory services, and coordination, with a clear institutional separation between electoral assistance and election observation. The latter is generally not the responsibility of the UN, unless exceptionally mandated by the General Assembly or the Security Council, but is conducted by independent observer missions such as those deployed by the European Union, the Organization of American States or the Carter Center, among others.
- Credible and peaceful elections depend on the leadership and commitment of political leaders and candidates, alongside impartial election administration. External actors and electoral assistance providers, including the UN, can play a role in supporting sound electoral administration, and can help to strengthen transparency and inclusion.
- However, their engagement is most effective when it reinforces credible processes grounded in genuine democratic commitment, guided by careful judgment about when such conditions exist. Demand for electoral assistance typically arises in conflict-affected and highly challenging environments where processes most need support. A central challenge for any electoral assistance provider is to respond to such demand without inadvertently legitimizing flawed elections.
- All UN electoral assistance is anchored in conflict prevention and gender-sensitive approaches, and is underpinned by broad consultations with domestic actors, including opposition and civil society actors. The engagement of the UN is intended to support nationally owned electoral processes, particularly in fragile, transitional, and post-conflict contexts, and is informed by needs assessment and consultation processes.
- Within the UN system, there is a clear division of labor among key actors: the EAD in the DPPA provides neutral, system-wide leadership on electoral policy and technical support on request. UNDP delivers the bulk of the on-the-ground electoral cycle assistance and capacity-building with an emphasis on inclusion, national ownership, and building independent and resilient electoral institutions. UN Women brings a gender lens to electoral support by advancing women's political participation and inclusion in electoral processes. UNESCO also works in this space, especially on issues related to media and information integrity. Finally, OHCHR monitors human rights in the electoral context and advocates for respect for and protection of the right to vote in genuine elections for the entire electorate.



The Working Group emphasized the importance of recognizing the distinctive value-added by the UN system in the field of electoral assistance, noting that its comparative advantage consists of its convening power, perceived neutrality, system-wide reach, technical assistance, and ability to link electoral assistance with peacebuilding, human rights, and development efforts. This enables the UN to play different and context-specific roles, ranging from technical support to political facilitation and conflict mitigation. Uniquely, the UN, drawing on the DPPA's preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding mandate, also plays a behind-the-scenes mediation and preventive diplomacy role in highly contested and conflict-affected elections, using its political legitimacy and convening power to de-escalate tensions and support peaceful electoral outcomes in ways no other actor can.

A key challenge is the fact that, almost by definition, UN (and other international) electoral support is typically requested and provided in circumstances in which it is needed; that is, in contexts in which capacities and processes still require improvement, or in which democracy is still nascent or developing. In such cases, concerns and questions about possible shortcomings in the process and its outcome can negatively color perceptions of the role of the international assistance provided. These could cascade into concerns that such support helps to legitimize the outcome of a flawed process. However, technical support alone cannot improve the integrity of an election. The UN system must therefore grapple at times with managing diverging expectations of the impact of its support, mainly the expectations of the requesting Member State and national authorities, and those of donors, international observers, and domestic actors.

Recognizing this tension, the Working Group noted the difficult balance the UN must strike between delivering technical assistance based on international standards while avoiding political positioning and ensuring that its engagement does not appear to legitimize flawed electoral outcomes (UN 2025c).

The Working Group made the following **recommendations** to reaffirm and further strengthen the UN's support for electoral processes:

1. Set realistic and broadly shared expectations for UN support and what it can contribute, recognizing that international technical assistance takes place in a much broader ecosystem of domestic and international engagement.

The ultimate responsibility for ensuring credible and peaceful elections lies with domestic actors. The domestic electoral ecosystem consists of political parties, leaders and candidates, parliament, election management bodies, human rights mechanisms and institutions, civil society organizations, and domestic observers. In challenging environments, these domestic actors tend to operate with support from an ecosystem of international actors with complementary roles, including the UN, as well as international election observers, regional organizations, other intergovernmental organizations, electoral assistance providers, and international civil society organizations. However, this international ecosystem is not optimally coordinated in most contexts, which sometimes results in duplication of effort or competition for scarce resources.

Recognizing that different parts of the UN system have different mandates and approaches to electoral assistance, the Working Group recommended strengthening coordination of the broader electoral assistance ecosystem, including closer collaboration between the UN and regional organizations that have a more explicit democracy protection mandate. The Working Group also emphasized that the UN has adopted an electoral

cycle approach in which electoral processes are not treated as isolated, technical events but as part of the wider democratic environment in which elections take place. It therefore recommended that an ecosystem perspective on electoral assistance should recognize that the integrity of elections depends not only on the technicalities of the electoral process and the act of voting, but also on the broader institutional, informational, political, and social environments that shape the context in which elections take place. Complementary actors can engage more directly where the UN's mandate is constrained, while the UN contributes its unique convening power and technical support, making close coordination across the electoral assistance landscape essential.

2. Continue to reinforce UN system-wide approaches to electoral assistance, deploying the full range of instruments.

It was recommended that the UN continue to deploy and coordinate its full range of instruments around electoral processes—combining electoral assistance with development support, good offices, constitutional advice, human rights assessments, and other forms of engagement, and using electoral processes as entry points for broader assistance where appropriate, while conflict-sensitivity, gender equality, and human rights considerations remain a crucial dimension of this work. Since elections in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings are highly sensitive, carefully sequenced and context-aware processes can support stabilization, while

poorly designed ones risk exacerbating political and social tensions. Accordingly, the UN should continue its valuable work on the substantive dimensions of elections— participation, inclusion, turnout—alongside maintaining its commitment to procedural integrity, while reaffirming that determinations of electoral credibility remain the responsibility of independent observers. The UN could also play an enabling role by encouraging greater engagement between international political party development organizations and democratic political parties in these contexts.

3. **Clarify the conditions and red lines for UN engagement in non-democratic or contested contexts.** While recognizing that different parts of the UN system operate under distinct mandates and modalities of engagement, the Group noted the need for Member States to clarify parameters for UN intervention in situations where processes may be exclusionary or accompanied by serious rights violations and repressive rule. (Note that this recommendation is equally valid for all electoral assistance stakeholders.) While recognizing the political sensitivity of such decisions, such red line parameters could include as necessary conditions for engagement consultations with a broad range of national stakeholders, including opposition and civil society groups. In some contexts, such actors may view UN support as providing a measure of stability or an important international presence, even in difficult circumstances. In others, they

may judge the environment to be too challenging for meaningful engagement. Listening to these perspectives throughout the UN system can help to inform red lines and guide more context-specific approaches to UN engagement.

4. **Ground engagement decisions in broad and inclusive societal consultations.** Member States should recognize, through the appropriate intergovernmental organs, that UN electoral assistance will not be sustainable over time if it does not enjoy broad domestic support from actors across the broad national political spectrum, including opposition and civil society actors, as well as those representing women and marginalized groups, and local government. To capture perspectives beyond the national government, the UN should be supported to continue to consult these groups when deciding on whether or how to provide electoral assistance. Needs assessments and inclusive consultations, including with women and other marginalized groups, can be essential safeguards against externally legitimizing undemocratic processes through over reliance on government views. This can help to determine the appropriate modalities for UN engagement. In challenging contexts, support to voter education or basic technical assistance may be limited to avoid legitimizing exclusionary processes. In other contexts, more political measures could be recommended, such as mediation between different political groups and good offices.

3.2.3. CORRUPTION

THE UN ANTI-CORRUPTION ARCHITECTURE

The **UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC)**, which was adopted on 31 October 2003 and entered into force in December 2005, is at the core of UN work on tackling corruption. It is the only legally binding and near-universal anti-corruption treaty, with 193 States Parties. Its focus is on international cooperation, criminalization and law enforcement, asset recovery, prevention, technical assistance, and information exchange. Another important component of the anti-corruption architecture is the SDG framework, in particular SDG 16 on peace, justice, and accountable institutions, as well as the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted on 15 November 2000, and the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. In addition, the **2020 UN Common Position** was developed across the UN system prior to the UN General Assembly Special Session on corruption as a key framing document for the consolidated efforts of the UN system to support implementation of the UNCAC.

Key UN actors in this domain are the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UNDP, the Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) by the World Bank and UNODC, and OHCHR, which provides technical assistance to anti-corruption authorities incorporating a human-rights-based approach into anti-corruption efforts.¹⁴ General Assembly Resolution [A/HRC/59/L.6](#) underscores the importance of policy coherence across UN processes in Geneva, Vienna, and New York on addressing corruption and its human rights impacts, while recognizing UNODC as the lead body coordinating UNCAC efforts within the UN system.

According to the OECD CRS, between 2007 and 2024 the UN invested over \$90 million in support of anti-corruption organizations and institutions, which represents 0.8 percent of total UN ODA to the “Government and Civil Society” sector. From a peak of \$14 million in 2017, the UN disbursed \$6.8 million in 2024 ([OECD Data Explorer, n.d.](#)).

The capture of politics by corrupt actors, oligarchs, business interests, and criminal groups leads to one-sided outcomes that benefit private interests over the common good, and that undermine democratic processes. Given the transnational nature of the global financial system, these actors depend on external instruments and partners for their licit and illicit activities. In some cases, criminal groups are forcing their way to power through violence or more subtle forms of bribery, extortion, and handouts. A powerful argument about the intersection between democracy and anti-corruption concerns the close relation between civic engagement on anti-corruption and the broader movements advocating for political, economic, and social reform in countries such as Bangladesh, Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines, and Serbia ([Lee and Carothers 2025](#); [Human Rights Watch 2026](#); [Transparency International 2026](#)).¹⁵

The Working Group discussed what more the UN can do to expose these forces, curtail their actions, and restore relative balance to fair and open politics.

Political finance: An interesting feature of UNCAC is its Article 7, which focuses on the transparency and accountability of political parties and candidates. It requires states to ensure that political finance is transparent, through measures to prevent corruption and

¹⁴ Other international actors working in the anti-corruption space include the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the OECD, and such international review mechanisms as the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) of the Council of Europe, and the Mechanism for Follow-Up on the Implementation of the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption (MESICIC).

¹⁵ On the nexus between democracy and corruption, see UNODC, [Anti-Corruption Module 3, Key Issues: Corruption and Democracy and International IDEA \(2019\)](#). The Global Protest Tracker hosted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is an online resource on mass protests since 2017. It reports that there have been protests against political and financial corruption in at least 66 countries since 2017, see <https://carnegieendowment.org/features/global-protest-tracker>.

promote integrity in political processes. It is the strongest commitment to transparency and accountability in political finance in a UN convention. The potential of this provision is demonstrated by the recent adoption, at the December 2025 11th session of the Conference of States Parties (CoSP 11), of a ground-breaking resolution on political finance transparency and integrity (see **International IDEA 2026**). This detailed text sets out the most comprehensive global standards on enhancing transparency and accountability around money in politics. Some key democracy assistance actors, such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), International IDEA, and Transparency International, led the advocacy for the resolution, in partnership with a group of like-minded Member States that played a critical role in drafting and facilitating the resolution. The resolution provides an important basis for anti-corruption actors to advance national implementation of UNCAC commitments on political finance integrity.

- Other important resolutions adopted at CoSP11 **advanced standards** on specific anti-corruption issues, procurement integrity/transparency, beneficial ownership, asset recovery, whistleblower protection, and recognition of the transnational nature of corruption.
- CoSP11 also agreed to strengthen the UNCAC peer review mechanism in its second phase.¹⁶ If implemented effectively, this important agreement on a stronger, **more inclusive, and more transparent review mechanism** could lead to higher levels of civil society participation and greater transparency in many countries, which would not only assist efforts to curb corruption, but also enhance democratic governance. Efforts to strengthen the review mechanism have been supported by a wide range of civil society organizations.¹⁷ Besides governmental processes, **the role of civil society and investigative journalism** has grown over the years, particularly in terms of gathering and using data to expose corruption, promote accountability, and advance multi-stakeholder open data initiatives. The CoSP11 agreement could help to bolster these efforts.
- Three resolutions adopted at CoSP11 reaffirm the importance of integrating international human rights obligations into anti-corruption efforts.¹⁸ Resolution 11/4 notably emphasizes that combating corruption and protecting human rights are mutually reinforcing, and calls for greater cooperation and information-sharing among relevant national institutions.

However, implementation gaps suggest that several recommendations could strengthen the effectiveness of UN anti-corruption work:

1. — **Increase government accountability:** Members of the Working Group expressed concern that some Member States use international anti-corruption forums to “whitewash their corruption track record.” The Working Group therefore recommended Member States to translate UNCAC commitments into meaningful actions/outcomes at the national level.
2. — **Address the enforcement gap in tackling grand corruption and illicit financial flows:** There are major implementation gaps concerning limited accountability, complex corruption networks, opacity in financial systems, and the need to address victims of corruption. The United Nations and interested Member States could support a phased process to examine options for strengthening international enforcement against grand corruption, including the potential role of an **International Anti-Corruption Court** as a complementary mechanism where national jurisdictions are unable or unwilling to act.¹⁹
3. — **Address anti-corruption dimensions in new related conventions:** An anti-corruption lens could be integrated into the ongoing negotiations on the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, for example in the field of tax-related illicit financial flows.

4. **Build on existing efforts to further strengthen coordination and policy coherence on corruption across the UN system and with external actors**, by advancing more integrated, cross-sectoral approaches and enhanced cooperation among relevant forums and institutions—including in areas such as development and the environment—while drawing on the significant and growing body of work on corruption and human rights, in order to maximize impact and help to address the inherent limitations of existing peer review processes.
5. **Address the human rights impacts of corruption and associated illicit financial flows** by incorporating a human-rights-based and victim-centered approach in global anti-corruption policy forums.
6. **Strengthen peer review mechanisms:** Advancing and improving credible and regular peer review mechanisms could provide an avenue for increasing accountability, learning, and dialogue among national stakeholders on the implementation of anti-corruption agendas.
7. **Address the shrinking civic space and increasing funding challenges for civil society and the UN:** The capacity of civil society actors to advocate for anti-corruption measures and hold governments accountable should be strengthened at the country level, and civil society participation in, and access to, UNCAC and other UN forums should continue to be facilitated and expanded (UN [OHCHR 2026](#)).



¹⁶ For an analysis of all the resolutions adopted at CoSP11, including the resolution that makes the UNCAC review mechanism stronger, see https://uncaccoalition.org/cosp11/#Analysis_of_CoSP11_Adopted_Resolutions.

¹⁷ An open letter by the UNCAC Coalition in support of a stronger mechanism has been signed by over 500 civil society actors. See [Open Letter: Enhancing Anti-corruption Efforts Globally by Adopting a More Effective, Transparent and Inclusive UNCAC Review Mechanism](#).

¹⁸ [Resolution 11/1](#) on international cooperation and technical assistance, [Resolution 11/5](#) on follow up to the Marrakech declaration, and Resolution 11/5 on enhancing data collection make explicit reference to the importance of upholding obligations under international human rights law. Resolution 11/4 cross-references language from Human Rights Council Resolution 59/6, recalling the commitment to prevent and combat corruption in a manner consistent with Member States' human rights obligations; expressing concern about the negative impacts of corruption on human rights; and recognizing that the promotion and protection of human rights, and the prevention and fight against corruption, are mutually reinforcing.

¹⁹ See the campaign to establish an International Anti-Corruption Court promoted by Integrity Initiatives International.

3.2.4. EQUALITY, AND CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS ARCHITECTURE

The international human rights architecture comprises a number of different mechanisms with a variety of mandates and procedures, involved in a range of activities. Their observations and recommendations serve to inform political and legal action to improve human rights protection. The architecture is made up of **the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**, the UN's institutional lead on human rights issues; the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)** system, a peer review mechanism of UN Member States that operates under the auspices of the Human Rights Council (HRC); the human rights **treaty bodies**, committees of independent experts with mandates that emanate from the nine core international human rights treaties and one optional protocol; the **Special Procedures** of the HRC, independent human rights experts with thematic and country-specific mandates; and **other investigative mechanisms** established by the Security Council, the HRC, the General Assembly, the Secretary-General or the High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR). In March 2015, the HRC established a **Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law**, which takes place every two years and held its fifth session in 2025.

In 2026, a Human Rights Group was created by UN80 to enhance the unified approach to human rights across the UN system. The group is led by the HCHR and is composed of entities from across the UN system: the OHCHR, the Development Coordination Office (DCO), DPPA, OCHA, the Office of Legal Affairs (OLA), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UNDP, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, and UN Women.

In terms of core-funded activities, the OECD CRS reported disbursements of over \$810 million on human rights in the period 2003–2024, which accounted for 7.5 percent of the total “Government and Civil Society” policy marker. In 2025, the OHCHR worked in 87 countries and raised \$262 million in project funding; in 2026, it launched an appeal for \$400 million.²⁰

GENDER EQUALITY

The UN advances gender equality through a combination of **normative frameworks, monitoring mechanisms, and operational programs**. Key pillars include the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** and its monitoring body, and the **Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**, as well as the work of the **United Nations Commission on the Status of Women**, which makes global policy commitments.

Until 2010, the UN's gender architecture was underfunded and dispersed between four small entities. The creation of UN Women represented a significant commitment to accelerating the UN's gender equality goals. UN Women leads efforts to promote gender equality across the UN system, while gender equality commitments are also integrated into broader UN agendas, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and **SDG 5**, as well as human rights mechanisms such as the HRC and the UPR. Together, these frameworks combine global norm-setting, monitoring of state commitments, and operational support at the country level. **UN Women** has developed a global knowledge and data initiative on **women in local government**, a unique knowledge hub that compiles comparable statistics for SDG indicator 5.5.1b and tracks women's representation, electoral systems, and legislated gender quotas on local-level participation. It also monitors and analyzes gender quotas and other temporary special measures, maintaining **databases and policy analysis** on quota laws worldwide to support reforms aimed at achieving gender parity in political decision making.

Together with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, UN Women produces the **“Women in Politics” global map**, an annual infographic showing the distribution of women in executive and parliamentary positions worldwide and tracking progress toward equal representation.²¹

UN Women also provides support for gender equality in constitutional law, practical on-the-ground support for voter registration campaigns targeting rural women, training for candidates for public office, and support to women parliamentarians to develop cross-party caucusing mechanisms.²²

In 2017, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched a gender parity strategy to equalize the number of women and men in all parts of the UN at all levels, a move that brought significant early successes, particularly at senior levels (**UN Women 2022**). However, there is still ambivalence on gender parity at the UN. Only five women have been President of the General Assembly and none Secretary-General. The forthcoming recruitment process for a new Secretary-General represents an important opportunity to signal the UN's commitment to gender equality.²³

An essential principle of democratic societies is equality before the law, including equal opportunities for all to participate in politics. Nonetheless, individuals, and especially women and other vulnerable groups, as well as organized civil society face an array of challenges at both the national and the international level. Respect for freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of expression continues to decline around the world. A striking feature of many autocratizing contexts are attacks on the rights of women and sexual or gender minorities, as right wing populists use misogynistic attitudes for political mobilization, particularly targeting young men. The anti-gender equality backlash has been signaled by the reversal of laws on women's reproductive autonomy and protection from violence in the household, and by the weakening or repurposing of public institutions such as ministries or commissions on women's rights (**Roggeband and Krizsán 2020**).

The UN human rights system has several mechanisms for dealing with these challenges, but their strengths and weaknesses could be exacerbated by the ongoing crisis of multilateralism.

The **UN80 Initiative** calls for a strengthened system-wide approach to human rights across all the pillars of the UN's work. One work package within the UN80 Initiative (**UN**

2025b) has involved the establishment of a Human Rights Group to ensure that human rights considerations are systematically integrated into UN policies and activities, while also improving efficiency and impact across the system at all levels. However, the reform process launched as part of the UN80 Initiative, which is intended to strategically adapt the UN system "to become more agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today's complex global challenges amid tightening resources," could have unintended consequences for delivery of the UN human rights architecture, linked to reduced capacities among existing mandates. Furthermore, in the context of UN80 reforms, UN Women and UNFPA are currently targeted for a cost-cutting merger, which feminist observers argue would weaken the UN's effectiveness in promoting gender equality (**FOS Feminista 2026**).

Severe budgetary cuts across the UN are posing serious challenges for the capacity of the system to deliver on its human rights mandate as a system-wide obligation. While the ongoing liquidity crisis has created a difficult environment and called for some tough choices by the UN Secretariat, there are concerns among civil society that funding cuts to the human rights pillar are politically motivated by some Member States that want to see it diluted in order to avoid scrutiny (**Democracy Without Borders 2026**). In 2024, the OHCHR spent \$438.9 million, of which 61.4 percent (\$269.4 million) came from voluntary contributions and 38.6 percent (\$169.5 million) from the UN regular budget. The OHCHR regular budget, already reduced in 2023–2025, was cut by 16.7 percent in 2026, leading to a cut of 117 posts and a considerable streamlining of offices and operations (**ISHR 2025**). Civil society organizations such as **CIVICUS (2026a)** have warned that these cuts have severely reduced an already weakened UN human rights pillar and UN capacity, and weakened protection for activists, communities, and independent groups working to defend basic freedoms, especially in countries where human rights work is seen

²⁰ [OECD Data Explorer • CRS: Creditor Reporting System \(flows\)](#)

²¹ Other major UN Women knowledge products include the [Gender Quota Portal](#), the first UN hub on global comparative knowledge of legislated gender quotas at the national and local levels. UN Women co-led with UNDP and Statistics Norway the publication of [Guidance on utilizing electoral administrative data to produce statistics on political participation](#), and the development of a [postelection questionnaire and survey implementation guidance to measure participation in political and public affairs](#), as part of the Praia City Group on Governance Statistics guidance for National Statistical Offices.

²² See also the UN Women-led WYDE Women's Leadership Initiative.

²³ On the campaign for a woman to be the next Secretary-General, see [Parlamis \(2026\)](#).

as a threat. The defunding has already reduced the delivery capacity of the UN system, and led to significant weakening of the system of Special Procedures. For example, field visits, reports (their length and translation), online accessibility, and the duration of interactive dialogues have all been reduced, while the ability of Special Rapporteurs to send communications to governments and third parties, as well as to engage in public communication, including press releases, has been constrained—undermining the depth, scope, and potentially the independence of their work.

Despite the lack of a distinct global normative framework affirming the right to democracy, the nexus between democracy and human rights is very clear and has been constantly highlighted in the work of the UN human rights institutions and bodies, including in the Special Procedures and the UPR process. The following recommendations would make this nexus more explicit, operationalize it, and contribute to further enhancing the effectiveness of the UN human rights system. The reforms could be considered as part of the 2026 review of the UN Human Rights Council.

SPECIAL PROCEDURES

1. Strengthen coordination and system coherence on human rights

- Consider strengthening the integration of democratic principles across relevant human rights mandates—including those related to participation, civic space, the freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and electoral rights—by building on existing frameworks and practice to ensure a more coherent and explicit focus on democracy within OHCHR and Special Procedures work.
- Strengthen, and create where necessary, structured and strategic spaces and mechanisms for regular cross-mandate coordination on democracy-related and cross-cutting issues, including elections, protest movements, civic space, freedom of association and expression, human rights defenders, surveillance, and technology, as well as the rights of women and minorities, moving beyond ad hoc or informal collaboration.
- Support joint statements, joint letters, and joint country visits by UN Special Rapporteurs with democracy-related mandates.
- Strengthen the linkages between UN human rights treaty bodies, particularly the Human Rights Committee, through regular engagement, aligned outputs, and opportunities for Special Procedures to present and report.

2. Strengthen capacity and expertise

- Support mandates to address democracy-related issues even where democracy is not explicitly referenced, in areas such as elections, inclusive participation, civic space, and protest movements, where relevant and consistent with mandate parameters.

3. Protect mandate-holders and institutional integrity

- Develop effective UN-side protections for mandate-holders facing targeted reprisals, intimidation, or sanctions, recognizing the chilling effects such attacks have on the system as a whole.
- Explicitly recognize and respond to coordinated political pressure and intimidation against Special Procedures as an institutional risk that requires collective UN responses.

4. Protect and increase funding and resourcing

- Increase predictable and transparent funding for Special Procedures, and establish adequate staffing levels per mandate.
- Provide adequate funding and logistic support to UN Special Rapporteurs with democracy-related mandates.
- Avoid deepening inequities among mandates created by reliance on external fundraising, which advantages some mandates over others.
- Protect funding for coordination, travel, translation, outreach, and engagement in both Geneva and New York.
- Restore adequate resources for mandate-holder coordination, including reinstating the annual coordination meeting among Special Procedures.
- Address the structural underfunding of existing democracy-related mandates that lack explicit budget allocations and currently rely on OHCHR cross-subsidization.

INSTITUTIONAL CONNECTIVITY AND COLLABORATION

5. Continue to enhance institutional connectivity and strengthen bridges between the UN in Geneva and New York, for example, by improving mandate-holders' access to the UN premises in New York (in addition to Geneva processes), or more explicitly addressing the human rights implications of democracy-related resolutions in the General Assembly.

6. Raise awareness and understanding of democracy-building challenges in transitional settings among UN leadership and staff, including through SRSGs and Special Rapporteurs.

7. Deepen operational collaboration between UN country teams and other UN entities and country-level presences that work on human rights, including OHCHR field offices, UNDP, UNESCO, UNODC, and UN Women, as well as partnerships such as the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), to increase coherence and impact.

KNOWLEDGE, LEARNING, AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

8. Build and strengthen a solid analytical base on the interlinkages between democracy and human rights, including assessment tools, evaluations, and gender-disaggregated data focused on experiences and cases from all regions of the world, aimed at UN staff, Member State delegates, practitioners, and actors on the ground.

9. Create spaces for shared learning on emerging and evolving challenges, such as digital repression, surveillance technologies, foreign interference narratives, and changing protest dynamics.

10. Enable collective strategic thinking among mandate-holders, particularly in response to complex, fast-evolving political and technological environments.



UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEWS

11. Strengthen the linkages between the UPR process, other peer review processes, and review mechanisms, and their democracy assistance focus areas:

- Draw relevant lessons from the UPRs that could be useful for deepening and improving other peer review processes and voluntary review mechanisms, such as those related to UN conventions in democracy-related areas or the Voluntary National Reviews in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Continue to systematically draw on relevant UPR recommendations in the design and timing of electoral support. Where appropriate, electoral processes can serve as entry points for implementing UPR recommendations related to political participation, inclusion, and fundamental freedoms, helping to align human rights commitments with electoral reform and practice.²⁴

FORUM ON HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY, AND THE RULE OF LAW

12. UN Member States should consider strengthening, reimagining, and institutionalizing the Forum on Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law to make it more impactful as the principal UN platform for dialogue on democracy and rule of law issues. This could involve:

- Adopting a more structured annual, multi-stakeholder model inspired by, for example, the United Nations Forum on Business and Human Rights.
- Encouraging structured civil society input on practical ideas for improving the Forum's relevance and impact.
- Holding regular annual sessions with thematic focus areas more directly related to critical issues on the democracy agenda.
- Strengthening participation by civil society, national human rights institutions, and parliaments.
- Serving as a venue for reviewing global democratic trends and sharing good practices in democracy strengthening and protection.
- Providing a structured channel for feeding policy recommendations into the Human Rights Council and other UN bodies.

13. Strengthen merit-based membership standards for the Human Rights Council: To reinforce the credibility and effectiveness of the Human Rights Council, Member States should strengthen implementation of merit-based standards for Council membership so that states elected to the body demonstrate a genuine commitment to upholding human rights and democratic governance. This would help to ensure that the Council further strengthens its credibility as the UN's principal human rights body, and its capacity to address democratic backsliding, civic space restrictions, and rule of law concerns. This would involve:

- Strengthening the application of merit-based criteria during Council elections, including demonstrable cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms and commitments to protect civil and political rights.
- Encouraging competitive elections and transparent candidate pledges, and supporting initiatives that increase scrutiny of candidates, including independent assessments by civil society and international organizations.
- Promoting greater accountability for Council members, including regular reporting on the implementation of voluntary pledges and requiring cooperation with Special Procedures and the UPR.

²⁴ Note that the human rights and anti-corruption community has been working to bridge some of these gaps (Pasternik, Moggs, and Zappile, 2025).

CIVIC SPACE

14. Consider conducting a system-wide independent audit of implementation of the UN Guidance Note on Civic Space to assess how effectively its principles of protection, participation, and promotion are being applied across the UN system. The review could assess how UN entities integrate civic space considerations into programming and political engagement, identify implementation gaps and strengthen accountability for civic space protection across UN pillars, and provide recommendations to Member States on strengthening institutional accountability for civic space protection. The findings should be reported to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly to ensure visibility and follow-up.

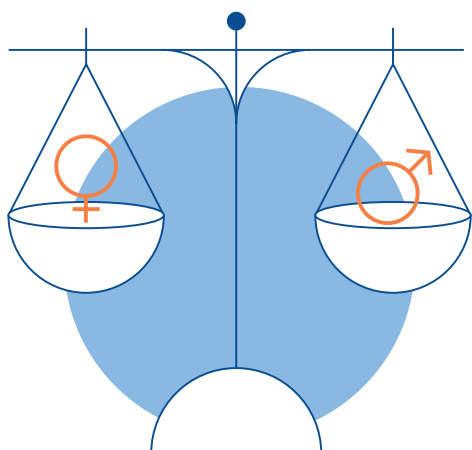
15. Undertake a system-wide mapping and analysis of existing good practices across the United Nations on engagement, participation, consultation, and co-ownership with civil society, drawing on recommendations from prior reviews and external assessments. This should identify good practice examples, enabling factors, institutional barriers, and lessons learned, and inform the development of practical guidance, incentives, and accountability mechanisms to support the more consistent and meaningful integration of civil society across UN processes and programming.

16. Strengthen the UN response to reprisals against and intimidation of civil society as a collective responsibility: The UN, supported by Member States, should elevate its response to reprisals and threats against individuals and organizations engaging with the UN system, ensuring that existing reporting mechanisms lead to meaningful action. Addressing reprisals more consistently would signal that the UN takes seriously the protection of those who engage with its human rights and governance mechanisms. This would involve:

- Ensuring systematic discussion of reports of reprisals within the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly.
- Strengthening coordination between UN entities in responding to reprisals cases.
- Providing clearer follow-up on actions taken in response to documented cases.

17. Continue to strengthen system-wide engagement on democracy with civil society by leveraging the UN's country-level presence, including the expertise and field engagement of OHCHR and UNDP, while reinforcing the United Nations Democracy Fund's distinct role as the UN's dedicated funding mechanism for democracy.

18. Strengthen the unique role of the United Nations Democracy Fund—as the only UN entity with an explicit democracy mandate in its title—by expanding its resources to support locally driven, evidence-based civil society initiatives that advance democratic participation and accountability, while enhancing coordination with UN country teams and other actors.



GENDER EQUALITY

19. Protecting investments in women's political participation and representation is essential to safeguard decades of progress toward inclusive and accountable governance. These initiatives should be shielded from budgetary cuts that risk reversing hard-won gains in democratic representation.

20. Defend dedicated institutional space for the promotion of gender equality, and in particular the role of UN Women. In the context of a potential merger with UNFPA, it will be important to ensure that UN Women's work on women's political participation and representation is protected and sustained. Similarly,

sexual and reproductive rights must not be sidelined, and the connections between women's sexual and reproductive rights and civil rights should be explained and defended as part of the protection of democracy.

21. Since the size and strength of autonomous feminist movements are strongly associated with democracy (Forester et al. 2022), **funding for women's autonomous activism must be protected and expanded.**

3.2.5. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

THE UN, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND AI

In October 2023, the UN Secretary-General established a High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence with a mandate to address the risks and opportunities associated with AI, and its international governance. In September 2024, the UN Summit of the Future adopted the Pact for the Future, which includes the Global Digital Compact (GDC), a framework for fostering global cooperation on governing digital technology and artificial intelligence that aims to harness the potential of digital technologies and bridge digital divides. In August 2025, the General Assembly established an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance, a 40-member global scientific body that provides evidence-based assessments of AI's societal, economic, and technological impacts.

Entities involved in UN work in this area include the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO, UNDP, **OHCHR**,²⁵ and the HRC. In 2024, the ITU listed 408 AI cases and projects run by 47 agencies and bodies of the UN system (ITU 2024).

In the absence of a specific policy marker on digital technologies and artificial intelligence, data on UN work on "Information and communication technologies" can provide a rough estimate of the volume of investment in this sector. The OECD CRS indicates that in the period 2003–2024 the UN disbursement on this theme amounted to about \$51.6 million, which is about 18 percent of total UN ODA investment in communications (OECD Data Explorer, n.d.).

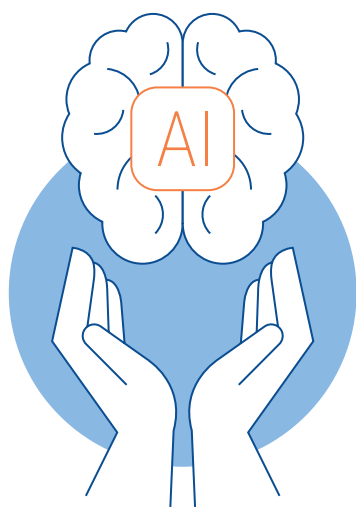
²⁵ OHCHR has an established and expanding body of work on digital technologies and human rights, including mandated reporting and guidance on issues such as AI, privacy and surveillance, active engagement with legislatures, courts and technology companies, and the development of new advisory services and partnerships to address emerging challenges, including in the context of elections, see <https://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/digital-space-and-human-rights>.

The vast spread of digital technologies has brought great benefits and great costs to democratic societies. Various social media, for example, and the business model that undergirds them, can act as a super-charged engine for manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda, damaging the information ecosystem that is the lifeblood of healthy democracies and essential for accountability processes. AI is accelerating toward wider adoption in ways that pose even more danger to democracy and human rights, not least by propelling pervasive surveillance that chills the exercise of human rights, compounding harm. The Working Group identified major gaps in the existing UN architecture on digital technologies and AI with respect to democracy:

- **Normative gaps on technology and artificial intelligence:** There are significant normative gaps in how the involvement of emerging technologies in artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, and online information manipulation are addressed within electoral and democracy support frameworks. Existing UN norms and guidance have not kept pace with the speed and scale of technological change, which is affecting electoral integrity and political participation.
- **Insufficient safeguards on data protection and digital rights:** There is weak or uneven attention paid to data protection in electoral processes, including of the use of voter data, biometric systems, digital voter registration, and campaign technologies. The absence of robust, globally coherent standards is an increasing risk to privacy, trust, and the credibility of elections.
- **Fragmented treatment of digital threats across the UN system:** Related to the above, there are problems around the fragmented way digital repression, surveillance, and technology-enabled interference are handled across UN mandates, with limited integration between electoral assistance, human rights, and technology governance work.

The Working Group recommended:

1. —



The UN and its Member States should work collectively, building on the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and its implementation, and leveraging the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)+20 review process, to **reaffirm the importance of a people-centered, rights-based information society, constrain the most harmful aspects of digital technology and AI**, and ensure that the right to information is respected (Fernández Gibaja, Becker Castellaro, and Hammar 2024). This should include practical follow-through on the UN Secretary-General's AI Advisory Body recommendations on global AI governance, and alignment with emerging UN system capacity on digital and AI oversight, including the recently established Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies (ODET) and new UN-mandated scientific assessment efforts. They should also systematically integrate human rights expertise across relevant processes and panels by mandating and adequately resourcing the OHCHR to support and inform their work.

2. **Address the implementation challenges of the Global Digital Compact:** The following elements should be considered as part of implementation of the GDC:
 - Present options for the creation of a mechanism to ensure that online contexts are safe and free of discrimination, enabling women and vulnerable groups to freely express political opinions.
 - Promote a global governance framework for AI that encompasses the entire life cycle of AI systems, which should prioritize testing before public deployment, safety, robustness, and trustworthiness while ensuring inclusivity and transparency.
 - Ensure that AI governance takes a risk-based approach to identifying, assessing, preventing, and mitigating compounded human rights and democracy risks, considering the severity and probability of potential harms, thereby informing decision making regarding AI development, deployment, and regulation.
 - Promote an AI governance system that adopts a multi-stakeholder approach that incorporates inputs from diverse actors, including from all regions and sectors.
 - Minimize fragmentation between governance frameworks by establishing global standards and interoperability.

3. **Strengthen safeguards on data protection and digital rights in electoral processes:** To mitigate risks related to privacy violations, manipulation, and foreign interference, the UN should promote stronger and more coherent standards on data protection in elections, including on the collection and use of voter data, biometric systems, digital voter registration, campaign technologies, and cross-border data flows.

4. **Fill normative gaps on technology, artificial intelligence, and foreign interference:** The Working Group agreed that a relatively solid international normative framework for elections is already in place that should not be reopened, as doing so would risk diluting rather than strengthening it. At the same time, it recognized important gaps in relation to technological developments that need to be addressed. To better protect electoral integrity and political participation, it recommended the UN to develop clearer, system-wide normative guidance to address the impacts of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, which would address more sophisticated digital surveillance, online information manipulation, and foreign interference in elections and democratic processes.

5. **Improve system-wide coherence in responding to digital and external threats to democracy:** The UN should continue to strengthen coordination across electoral assistance, human rights, peace and security, and technology governance mandates to address digital repression, surveillance, online manipulation, and foreign interference in a more integrated and consistent manner, avoiding fragmented or siloed responses.

3.3. REIMAGINING THE UN SYSTEM FOR BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN A RULES-BASED GLOBAL ORDER

The Working Group argued that, in the context of intensifying geopolitical tensions and growing existential challenges, the United Nations must fundamentally reimagine itself in order to adapt to a changing global order. It therefore advanced six potentially transformative recommendations aimed at reforming the UN system to place democracy more centrally on the organization's agenda and to strengthen its multi-stakeholder character by broadening societal participation in its governance processes. Several of these proposals have been advanced through civil society campaigns in recent years and are presented here for consideration. The report outlines the principal arguments for and against each proposal in a balanced manner to support a nuanced assessment of their value and viability.

For these recommendations to be viable, sustained Member State political support will be essential, alongside agreement on mandates, resources, and governance arrangements that respect the UN's intergovernmental nature while opening up more space for multi-stakeholder engagement and allowing democracy-related work to be pursued more explicitly. Their implementation will also require coalition-building across regions (see the above recommendation on a Democracy Caucus), close collaboration with civil society and other stakeholders to strengthen their voices in UN governance, careful framing to avoid politicization, and leadership from the UN Secretary-General to translate political endorsement into system-wide action.

While recognizing, in line with the Pact for the Future and other reform initiatives, the need to enhance Security Council representativeness and regional equity, expand its membership to better reflect current geopolitical realities, address veto use, and improve its accountability, effectiveness, and transparency, the report does not directly address Security Council reform, as this issue falls beyond the scope of its democracy-focused analysis.

3.3.1. MEMBER STATES SHOULD PLACE DEMOCRACY AT THE CENTER OF THE POST-2030 AGENDA

During the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, some Member States and civil society actors advocated for explicit recognition of democracy within the framework. The eventual compromise was the inclusion of SDG 16 on peaceful, just, and accountable institutions, as various Member States opposed direct references to democracy in the final text (Dodds, Donoghue, and Leiva-Roesch 2017; Fukuda-Parr 2016). Research and policy analyses have increasingly demonstrated that democratic governance plays an important role in advancing sustainable

development outcomes, both as an enabling condition and as an accelerator of progress across the Sustainable Development Goals (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; **Cram 2024; UNDP et al. 2025b; Silva-Leander 2025, 2026**).

As discussions emerged on a post-2030 development framework, the Working Group argued that this relationship could be recognized more explicitly, either through a clearer articulation of democracy within SDG 16 or through its direct inclusion in the next global agenda. Other Member States, experts, and civil society organizations caution, however, that reopening the normative architecture of SDG 16 could carry political risks, by creating opportunities for some Member States to dilute existing commitments on governance, accountability, and participation. There is also concern among Member States and civil society that launching a new agenda before the 2030 Agenda has been implemented would be counterproductive. Many therefore advocate extending the 2030 Agenda to ensure delivery and avoid diluting existing commitments with new ones.

3.3.2. ESTABLISH A UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON DEMOCRACY

MEMBER STATES SHOULD CREATE A DEDICATED MANDATE ON DEMOCRACY TO FORCEFULLY ELEVATE THE ISSUE WITHIN THE UN SYSTEM.

Some members of the Working Group have been actively engaged in advocacy initiatives aimed at establishing new Special Procedures mandates under the Human Rights Council. Two principal initiatives have emerged. The most developed proposals focus on the creation of a UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy, alongside some calls for a UN Special Rapporteur on Elections (**Jennische and Gunneberg 2024**).

A UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON DEMOCRACY

A UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy could help to reinvigorate democracy support within the UN system amid global democratic backsliding. The proposed mandate could include two core functions: strengthening the UN's normative framework on democracy and addressing underexamined areas as they relate to political rights, such as election integrity, effective parliaments, political participation, and institutional design. The rapporteur would adopt a comparative, non-punitive approach, supported by an advisory board, and operate cost-effectively through voluntary contributions. The proposal is broadly aligned with the UN80 reform agenda, offering a system-wide, integrative mandate that enhances coherence and impact without significant additional resource demands. There is broad civil society backing, but realization would depend on committed leadership by like-minded states. The joint call for a UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy has been endorsed by more than 150 civil society groups and think tanks worldwide (**see Democracy Without Borders**).

Critics caution that such a mandate could contribute to mandate proliferation, and increase duplication with existing mechanisms, politicization within the Human Rights Council, and implementation challenges given current resource constraints and political resistance from some Member States. Concerns have been expressed that any new mandate should complement and reinforce existing Special Rapporteurs with democracy-related mandates, rather than replace or undermine them.

3.3.3. STRENGTHEN UN LINKS TO ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES BY CREATING A UN PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

For over 20 years, the United Nations has worked in partnership with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world organization of national parliaments, to strengthen UN links with parliamentarians and work to mainstream UN commitments into the day-to-day work of national parliaments. The evolution of this partnership is reflected in the regular reports by the UN Secretary-General and various UN General Assembly resolutions on “Interaction between the UN, national parliaments and the IPU” (see e.g., A/RES/79/319 of July 2025).

One proposal that has been advanced through long-standing civil society and some parliamentary advocacy, in which some Working Group members have been actively involved, is to address the growing democratic deficit and legitimacy gap in global governance by establishing a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly.

A UNITED NATIONS PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

The **Campaign for a UNPA** is a long-standing civil society initiative endorsed over time by over 1,800 parliamentarians from more than 150 countries, many regional parliamentary bodies, and numerous civil society organizations and scholars that has advanced the proposal for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (UMPA) as a response to the parallel crises of democracy and multilateral legitimacy. It argues that involving elected representatives would add a democratic layer to global governance, strengthen accountability, and reconnect citizens to the UN. The UNPA could initially be established as a General Assembly subsidiary body under Article 22 of the UN Charter, with consultative and oversight functions, and later evolve into a principal organ. Members would be drawn primarily from national parliaments under a degressively proportional model, and organized in transnational groups. The proposal aligns broadly with the UN80 reform agenda and the Pact for the Future, and builds on long-standing advocacy and support, including from the late former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

3.3.4. STRENGTHEN THE PARTICIPATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZENS IN THE UN BY ESTABLISHING A UN CIVIL SOCIETY ENVOY AND GLOBAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

ESTABLISH A UN CIVIL SOCIETY ENVOY TO FACILITATE CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT AND DEFEND CIVIC SPACE ACROSS THE UN SYSTEM

Some civil society networks have proposed that the UN should establish a **UN Civil Society Envoy** to facilitate civil society engagement and defend civic space across the UN system. **Many civil society groups** believe that an envoy could help to expand the UN's outreach to people and communities around the world, and create pathways for better participation (**Carver 2020**). To be effective, such a role should be funded from the UN budget and established at Secretariat, ideally at the level of a sufficiently senior level within the **Assistant Secretary-General**, similar to the upgraded status of the Youth Envoy.

Such a role could help to:

- strengthen the institutional visibility of civil society engagement;
- defend civic space and participation at the UN;
- and increase coherence across departments and processes.

Numerous Member States have endorsed the platform of the **UNMute initiative**, which includes the proposal. Other Member States, particularly governments wary of expanding civil society influence at the UN, have opposed the creation of a UN Civil Society Envoy on the grounds that it could politicize the Secretariat and give nonstate actors greater leverage in intergovernmental processes. As a result, no consensus has emerged. Some representatives of major civil society groups have also expressed reservations about creating a UN Civil Society Envoy, arguing that it would centralize and bureaucratize civil society engagement, risk filtering or gatekeeping access to the UN, and divert attention from the more urgent need to protect civic space and improve existing participation mechanisms.²⁶

²⁶ This has contributed to an absence of consensus on the proposal (**Donaldson, Lehmann, and Terlingen 2017**).

It would be important to ensure that establishing a UN Civil Society Envoy did not substitute for stronger system-wide integration of civil society engagement or genuine cross-system ownership of the UN's Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space (**UN 2020a**). Responsibility for civil society engagement should be embedded across UN entities, supported by sustained leadership from the Secretary-General, reinforced through mechanisms such as the UN80 Coordination Group, and reflected, for example, in Resident Coordinators' performance frameworks.

USE GLOBAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES TO GATHER CITIZEN S' INPUTS ON GLOBAL POLICY QUESTIONS

The Working Group recommended that the United Nations establish and use the format of Global Citizens' Assemblies as a tool for UN entities to obtain informed, representative public input on major global policy questions. Convened under a standardized system-wide framework, such assemblies could be held on specific questions, such as in relation to climate mitigation, regulating artificial intelligence, or protecting human rights and democracy, drawing on randomly selected participants who reflect the world's diversity, and deliberate using transparent, well supported procedures. Global Citizens' Assemblies could serve as a practical democratic innovation that help make the UN more responsive and participatory (**Democracy Without Borders 2025**).



3.3.5. MAKE DEMOCRACY A PRIORITY OF THE NEXT UN SECRETARY-GENERAL

THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL SHOULD ELEVATE SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY ACROSS THE UN SYSTEM

The Working Group agreed that the selection of a new Secretary-General in 2026 provides a timely opportunity for these recommendations to inform priorities for and approaches to the next phase of UN leadership. First, the next UN Secretary-General should adopt **feminist leadership principles**.²⁷ Second, there should be **a fair and transparent process to pave the way for the appointment of a feminist leader**. An important signal in this respect would be **the choice of a woman** to lead the UN for the first time.²⁸

Finally, the Working Group recommended that **the new Secretary-General should elevate support for democracy building, strengthening and protection as a strategic priority across the UN system** through:

²⁷ See Pillar 2 of the UN System -Wide Gender Equality Acceleration Plan (UN 2024b, 12): "Gender transformative leadership at all levels —starting at the top —means we all act on the Clarion Call [on gender equality] and accelerate consistent and simultaneous effort to advance gender equality in our respective areas of work."

²⁸ See the 1 for 8 billion campaign at <https://1for8billion.org/>

- A. Agenda-setting and norm leadership.** The new Secretary-General should frame democracy support as a UN system-wide priority. This can be done in reports to the General Assembly and the Security Council, thematic initiatives, and flagship agendas that shape how democracy is understood, defended, and linked to the three pillars of the UN system.
- B. Advocacy.** UN Secretary-General advocacy on democracy could include defending democratic norms, based on international human rights law; articulating the connection between democracy and the UN pillars in speeches and statements; and using its voice, convening power, and good offices to defend democracy where it is under attack, such as in the case of a coup, a stolen election, or foreign malign influence.
- C. Policy guidance.** The new Secretary-General should issue clear, system-wide policy guidance on democracy, stressing the comparative advantage of UN work in democracy-related areas and the elements of a UN democracy agenda able to meet new and emerging democratic challenges that could prevent the UN delivering on its pillars.
- D. Convening and political leadership.** Through high-level meetings, summits, and quiet diplomacy, the Secretary-General is able to convene Member States, regional organizations, and civil society to bring political attention to threats to democracy and their linkages to the crisis of multilateralism, democratic norms, the importance of electoral integrity, and constitutional governance, especially at moments of crisis or transition.
- E. Good offices and mediation.** The Secretary-General's good offices role allows direct engagement with electoral disputes, democratic backsliding, and constitutional crises, using mediation, envoys, and special representatives to support political dialogue and peaceful democratic processes.
- F. System-wide coordination and coherence.** By directing and aligning UN entities, the Secretary-General can reduce fragmentation in democracy support, strengthen joint programming, and ensure that work on electoral assistance, the rule of law, human rights, and governance is reinforced rather than operating in silos.
- G. Appointments and institutional signaling.** Strategic appointments of senior leaders, envoys, and heads of UN mission allow the Secretary-General to prioritize democratic governance expertise and signal institutional commitment through personnel choices, not just speeches. The Secretary-General could assign a high level "champion" to report direct, like the Deputy Secretary-General, or a Special Envoy on Democracy.
- H. Public advocacy and moral authority.** The Secretary-General's voice carries symbolic and normative weight. Public statements, country visits, and responses to democratic erosion can legitimize democratic actors, deter abuses, and reinforce international standards even when formal authority is limited.
- I. Resource mobilization and prioritization.** While budgets remain Member State-driven, the Secretary-General can influence funding priorities, champion pooled funding mechanisms, and encourage sustained investment in democracy-support functions across the system.



CONCLUSION

At a time of converging crises affecting both democracy and multilateralism, the United Nations remains a uniquely placed, albeit increasingly constrained, actor in supporting and protecting democratic governance worldwide. While the UN does not have an explicit mandate to promote any particular system of governance, its work across its three core pillars of human rights, sustainable development, and peace and security continues to contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions, processes, and principles. This report underscores that the erosion of democratic norms is not just a domestic concern, but a systemic threat to the effectiveness of international cooperation and the rules-based order. While political realities limit the scope for transformative reform, there is still significant space for pragmatic, system-wide action to strengthen existing frameworks, enhance coordination, and protect core democratic principles across the UN's work. In this context, it is hoped that the recommendations set out in this report can help inform the UN80 reform process, contributing to efforts to make the United Nations stronger and more fit for purpose in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.



Ultimately, revitalizing democracy support within the UN will depend on renewed political and financial commitment from Member States, strengthened partnerships with civil society and other stakeholders, and a willingness to more explicitly recognize democracy as integral to peace, development, and human rights. Without such efforts, the capacity of the multilateral system to respond to global challenges will continue to be eroded. With them, the UN can play an even more meaningful role in sustaining more inclusive, accountable, and resilient forms of governance worldwide.

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