



Plural Futures for Democracy

Reflections from the Plural Futures for Democracy Workshop, Washington DC, November 2025

Edited by Alina Rocha Menocal and Matt Baker

September 2026

About this Publication

The insights, arguments and observations collected here are informed by conversations held during the Plural Futures for Democracy Support workshop convened by the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) and partners held in Washington, DC in November 2025. While the contributions reflect themes that emerged during those discussions, the views and perspectives expressed here are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent those of the organisations they may be affiliated with, including the TWP CoP.

Acknowledgements

The editors express our deepest gratitude to everyone who joined us for the *Plural Futures for Democracy Support* workshop held in Washington, DC, in November 2025. Your openness, engagement, curiosity and willingness to grapple with difficult questions and shared challenges laid the foundation for what proved to be a rich and nurturing conversation over the course of two days – one that we hope this publication will continue. On behalf of the TWP Community of Practice, we would also thank Michael Jarvis and his team at the [Trust, Accountability and Inclusion Collaborative \(TAI Collaborative\)](#) – your support and generosity were instrumental in making our November 2025 convening at the Open Gov Hub possible. We are equally grateful to our (former) colleagues Sithandiwe Mujuru and Lyndsey Hand at the University of Birmingham, whose hard work behind the scenes ensured that everything ran smoothly. Last but certainly not least, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to this publication. We are deeply appreciative of the reflections and insights you have shared, as well as your time and patience throughout the editorial process. This collection is immeasurably richer because of your generosity.

Suggested Citation

Rocha Menocal, A., & Baker, M. (eds.). (2026). *Plural Futures for Democracy: Reflections from the Plural Futures for Democracy Workshop*, Washington DC, November. Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

About the Contributors

Editors



Originally from Mexico, **Alina Rocha Menocal** is an internationally recognised expert on politics and governance with 20 years' experience in conducting high-quality and impactful policy-relevant research. Over the course of her career, Alina has worked to bridge the gap between research and policy in thinking about governance and the politics of change, as well as to inform more effective engagement and ways of working among international actors. She is a Senior Associate at the [Westminster Foundation for Democracy](#), and the director of the [Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice](#). Until June 2022, she was a Principal Research Fellow at [ODI Global](#), which she joined in 2005 and where she remains a Senior Research Associate. From 2016 to 2020, she served as Senior Democracy Fellow at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). She has advised a wide variety of international organisations including the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), and Global Affairs Canada. Alina has published widely on democracy and governance and holds degrees from Yale University and Columbia University.



Matt Baker was formerly Senior Advisor for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and is currently the Director of Research at [Rebuild Local News](#). With extensive experience applying qualitative and quantitative research across government, non-profit, and think-tank sectors, he is also the founder of [DRGHub](#), a platform that curates research, evidence and technical knowledge related to democracy, human rights and governance programmes.

Other contributors



Shanthi Kalathil is a distinguished advisor, consultant, and speaker specialising in national security, democratic resilience, and strategic competition in the information age. A senior fellow at the [University of Southern California \(USC\) Center on Communication Leadership and Policy](#), she previously served as deputy assistant to President Biden and coordinator for democracy and human rights at the [National Security Council](#). She is active on the boards and advisory councils of several organisations, including the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#), [Radio Free Asia](#), the [Eurasia Foundation](#), and the [McCain Institute's Human Rights and Freedom Program](#).



Selin Kumbaraci is a Strategy and Partnerships Consulting Specialist with CIVIC, the World Bank's [Civil Society and Social Innovation Alliance](#). Working at the intersection of climate action, civic participation, social innovation, and development finance, she focuses on strengthening the role of citizens and civil society in addressing complex development challenges. Selin played a leading role in developing the [Green Accountability Platform](#), a global initiative promoting transparency, accountability, and community participation in climate finance. Previously, Selin worked on climate, energy, and sustainability policy with the [Atlantic Council](#) and other organisations. She is a graduate of Johns Hopkins SAIS and the Middle East Technical University.



Sarah Lister has more than 30 years' experience working on democratic governance in developing countries. She is currently Co-Director of Governance, Rule of Law and Peacebuilding at the [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#), where she oversees policy and programme support to its global portfolio including electoral assistance, parliamentary development, public-sector transformation, anti-corruption, legal identity, youth empowerment, civic engagement and information integrity. Prior to this, she was the Director of UNDP's [Oslo Governance Centre](#), where she led the team in bridging research, policy and practice on governance and peacebuilding in transitional contexts, with a particular focus on [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 16](#). Among other positions, she has also worked for [BBC Media Action](#), the [Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit](#) in Kabul and the [Institute of Development Studies](#) in the UK. She has lived and worked in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. Sarah has a PhD and MSc in Social Policy from the London School of Economics, and a BA in History from the University of Cambridge.



Laura Pavlovic is the Director of Programs at the International Senior Lawyers Project, a non-profit that mobilises a network of global, regional and local law firms to provide pro bono legal support, promote the rule of law and advance accountable, just, and sustainable economic development. Until July 2025, she served as the Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for USAID's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, where she led the agency's efforts to foster stable and peaceful societies in complex political transitions and conflict-prone environments. She was previously the inaugural Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator at USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG), where she led efforts to elevate democracy, human rights and governance as a core objective of US foreign assistance. She also served in USAID's missions in East Africa, Ukraine, Serbia, and the Regional Development Mission for Asia based in Bangkok. In 2025, she co-founded Our USAID Community, a grassroots network of more than 2,400 former USAID employees working to protect a non-partisan federal workforce.



With a background in democracy, human rights, and media, **Vukasin Petrovic** has pioneered the practical application of behavioural science, using entertainment and pop culture as powerful tools to champion democratic values. His career began as a student activist in Serbia and led to senior leadership roles at [Freedom House](#) and [FHI 360](#). Today, he leads Future Perfect, an advisory practice that helps democratic organisations rethink how they operate in an uncertain world. Vukasin believes that to stay relevant today, we must realise that the writers' room and the gaming studio are just as vital to the future of democracy as the ballot box.



Aly Rahim is Program Manager and Global Lead for [CIVIC: The Civil Society and Social Innovation Alliance](#) at World Bank. He works at the intersection of development finance, civic participation, social innovation, and institutional reform, leading global efforts to strengthen how citizen voice, civil society, and community knowledge contribute to policy, service delivery, accountability, and investment outcomes. His work focuses on building more inclusive, effective, and resilient development systems, while advancing new approaches to financing and scaling civic and social innovation in areas ranging from climate action and human development to fragility, governance, and digital public infrastructure. Aly has held senior leadership roles across the World Bank, including Practice Manager for Social Sustainability and Inclusion in West Africa and Assistant to the World Bank Group President. Previously, he served as a Canadian Foreign Service Officer. He holds degrees from Georgetown University and Dartmouth College.



Kristen Sample is the Governance Director and Coordinator of the Democracy Innovation Lab at the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#), where she oversees transparency, anti-corruption, local governance, and parliamentary strengthening programmes. Kristen has more than 25 years' experience in democracy support programmes, including over 15 years working in Latin America. Prior to joining NDI, she was Director of Global Programmes and Andean Regional Director for the [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance \(International IDEA\)](#). Kristen has also published extensively and worked as a consultant for [UN Women](#), the [Inter-American Development Bank](#), [Open Society Foundations](#), and the [Club of Madrid](#).



Jean Scrimgeour is Co-CEO and Chief Innovation & Operations Officer at [Accountability Lab](#), a global trans-local network making governance work for people across Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond. With 15 years spent working across Southern Africa, the UK and the US, she has long been preoccupied with how accountability functions in practice, across different contexts, under real political and financial pressures. At Accountability Lab, Jean focuses on the organisational and operational questions: how civil society networks learn and adapt, how infrastructure can be built that serves rather than burdens the people doing the work, and how intermediary organisations can be genuinely useful rather than merely transactional. She is particularly interested in what it takes to hold a diverse, distributed network together, and what gets lost when the system prioritises financial compliance over proximity, trust and context.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Part I: Synthesis of Workshop Discussions.....	7
1. Plural Futures for Democracy Support: How can democracy assistance remain effective and relevant in a changing world?	7
Part 2: Adaptation in Practice to the Current Geopolitical Moment	10
2. Resilience, Adaptation and Renewal: Reflections from the National Democratic Institute (NDI)'s Experience to Rethink Democracy Support in a New Era.....	10
Part 3: Where Next for Democracy Support?	14
3. Democracy Won't Win on Facts Alone	14
4. Principled Pragmatism: Rethinking Democratic Governance Support in a Changing World.....	18
5. Beyond Development: Reframing Democracy Support as Global Security	22
6. Building Resilience through Transitions: A New Model for Democracy Support.....	25
7. From Funding to Financing: Civic Infrastructure as a Core Enabler of Conducive Investment Environments	31
8. Designing Evaluation and Learning for the New Reality Without Rebuilding the Past	35

Introduction

Alina Rocha Menocal

Democracy Support at a Crossroads

The [field of democracy support finds itself at a crossroads](#). What has long been understood as a relatively coherent – if imperfect – community of practice is confronting profound political, financial and intellectual challenges. [Democratic backsliding](#) continues across countries and regions. Public trust in democratic institutions has eroded, including in many long-established democracies. Populations increasingly question whose voices count more – or less – in political processes and whether democratic systems can ensure the security, prosperity, and overall wellbeing of their populations. At the same time, the international order that underpinned much of the post-Cold War expansion of democracy assistance, and international development more broadly, is shifting in ways that are likely to prove enduring rather than temporary.

The contraction of funding for democracy, rights, governance and peacebuilding programming that accelerated throughout 2025 has brought these trends into particularly sharp relief. Major bilateral donors have [significantly reduced their commitments to international assistance](#), while [geopolitical priorities are increasingly being reframed](#) around national security, economic competitiveness and transactional relationships. The institutions, partnerships and funding models upon which much of the democracy support field has relied for decades can no longer be taken for granted.

These developments have created what feels like an existential crisis in the field of democracy assistance. Programmes have been cancelled. Many organisations have been [forced to restructure or close](#). Longstanding partnerships have come under strain. The immediate consequences have been painful and, in many contexts, devastating for organisations and movements working to advance democratic values and practices.

Yet if the current moment is undeniably one of disruption, it is also [one of possibility](#).

Periods of profound change can create opportunities for difficult but necessary conversations that are otherwise postponed when systems appear stable and resources remain plentiful. The questions confronting the democracy support community today are therefore not simply about survival or financial sustainability. They are fundamentally about what democracy support is for, how democratic change can happen, and whose knowledge, priorities and aspirations ought to shape the future of the field.

Why Plural Futures?

Many of these questions are not new. For decades, practitioners, policymakers, researchers and activists have debated the tensions between universal democratic values and locally grounded democratic practice; between technical programming and political realities; between institutional reform and citizens' experience; between donor priorities and local ownership. Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) approaches emerged precisely as a response to some of these tensions, emphasising that [democratic change is neither linear nor technocratic, but deeply political, context-specific and relational](#).

The current moment, however, demands an even deeper reckoning.

What if the challenge before us is not simply to adapt existing models of support for democracy to changing circumstances, but to recognise that some of the underlying assumptions that have shaped the field are themselves in need of reconsideration? What if such support can no longer be organised around a relatively settled understanding of what democratic progress looks like or how it should be achieved? What if plurality in both democratic futures and pathways towards them, is not a constraint to be managed but an essential organising principle for the future?

This edited volume begins from the premise that we are living through precisely such a moment. The idea of 'plural futures' emerged from conversations held during the *Plural Futures for Democracy* convening organised by the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) in collaboration with other partners at OpenGov Hub in Washington, DC, in November 2025. Bringing together practitioners, researchers, policymakers, funders, academics, movement leaders and strategists from across the democracy and governance community, the workshop sought to create space for collective reflection on a deceptively simple question: how can democracy support remain politically smart, relevant and effective in a changing world?

There was no single, straightforward answer.

Participants grappled with a range of interconnected challenges: the collapse of major funding streams for democracy assistance; democratic erosion and shrinking civic space across diverse political contexts; growing economic insecurity and inequality; the increasing appeal of authoritarian and populist alternatives and narratives; technological disruption; and the changing nature of geopolitical competition and cooperation. Yet, alongside these challenges, participants also identified important sources of democratic resilience and renewal. [Youth-led movements](#) continue to reshape political debates on climate justice, gender equality, and economic inclusion. [New forms of civic action](#) are emerging at local and transnational levels. Universities, cities, social movements, informal networks and digital communities are increasingly serving as spaces for democratic innovation and problem-solving. Organisations across the democracy support ecosystem are experimenting with new partnerships, funding models and approaches to learning and adaptation (see for example [the work that Accountability Lab is doing on this](#)).

The Case for Plurality

What became increasingly apparent throughout these conversations is that the future of democracy support is unlikely to consist of a single, coherent model waiting to be discovered or designed. Rather, it will almost certainly be more plural, more contested and more politically complex than the approaches that preceded it.

The plural in *Plural Futures for Democracy* therefore carries several meanings.

First, it recognises that democratic aspirations and practices are necessarily diverse. Democracy has always taken different institutional forms across contexts and historical moments. People's priorities and expectations of democratic governance are similarly varied and shaped by local realities. In some contexts, democratic aspirations may be expressed through demands for economic justice, public accountability, or access to services. In others, they may emerge through struggles over civic space, political participation or climate resilience. Democracy support that assumes a single entry point, institutional model or theory of change risks overlooking the political and social realities that shape how people experience democracy in their everyday lives and ascribe it meaning, and how they might pursue democratic change.

Second, plurality reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary democratic challenges. The future of democracy cannot be meaningfully separated from debates about inequality, migration, technological transformation, public service delivery, corruption, climate change or global security. Many of the actors advancing democratic values today do not necessarily describe themselves as democracy practitioners. Nor do they always operate within the boundaries traditionally associated with democracy programming. Young climate activists, investigative journalists, anti-corruption campaigners, mayors, social entrepreneurs and digital rights advocates may all be engaged in profoundly democratic struggles without necessarily adopting the language of democracy promotion.

The implication is significant. Rather than asking how democracy can be mainstreamed into other sectors, we may need to ask whether democratic practice is already present within struggles that the democracy community has not always recognised as its own.

Third, plurality reflects the realities of a [changing geopolitical order](#). Much of the architecture of contemporary democracy assistance developed during a particular historical period characterised by relatively stable assumptions about liberal democracy, globalisation and international cooperation. That world is changing. The rise of middle powers, growing geopolitical fragmentation, the weakening of multilateral institutions and the increasing salience of security and economic concerns are reshaping both the opportunities and constraints for international democracy support.

Whether one views these developments with optimism or concern, they require us to think more carefully about how democratic values are advanced internationally and how democracy support relates to wider debates about development, security, resilience and international cooperation. The

future of democracy support may involve different actors, different funding arrangements, different forms of partnership and different political narratives than those that have predominated over recent decades.

Finally, plurality requires humility.

For a field that has historically been organised around the transfer of knowledge, models and approaches across contexts, the current moment presents an opportunity to reconsider who produces knowledge about democratic change and whose experiences are valued. Some of the most important efforts to promote democratic change have come not from donor-funded programmes, valuable as they have been, but from practitioners and communities adapting to their own political realities – often with limited resources and at considerable personal and organisational risk.

Local actors have long demonstrated [extraordinary resilience and political sophistication in navigating complex environments](#). Youth movements have developed innovative forms of mobilisation and coalition-building. Civic organisations have found creative ways to defend democratic space under increasingly restrictive conditions. Organisations forced to adapt to financial shocks have generated valuable insights about resilience, collaboration and institutional transition. These experiences are invaluable sources of political and practical knowledge that can inform the future of the field as a whole.

What's in this Collection?

The contributions included in this booklet reflect many of the themes and tensions highlighted above. They do not offer a single narrative about where democracy support should go next – although it is nevertheless possible to identify some common ideas, themes and trends across the diverse perspectives and emphasis that different authors offer.

The contributions are organised in three broad sections.

In **Part 1**, **Laura Pavlovic** synthesises the discussions from the meeting held in Washington, DC, highlighting both the profound challenges confronting democracy support and the emerging sources of resilience, partnership and innovation identified by participants. Among other things, Laura emphasises the opportunities that TWP approaches and principles provide to rethink funding models, strengthen locally grounded partnerships and build more adaptive forms of collaboration and learning.

Part 2 examines how one organisation in the democracy support ecosystem, the [National Democracy Institute \(NDI\)](#), has sought to adapt to the current geopolitical moment. In her contribution, **Kristen Sample** argues that organisational resilience is not simply a question of doing more with less, but of rethinking strategies, partnerships and institutional priorities in response to shifting political and financial environments.

Part 3 brings together a series of forward-looking contributions exploring different pathways for the future of democracy support. The different authors consider questions that are likely to shape debates for years to come. **Vukasin Petrovic** explores how democracy might be reframed in ways that resonate more meaningfully with people's lived experiences. **Sarah Lister** asks what principled pragmatism looks like in democratic governance programming. **Shanthi Kalathil** argues that democracy support must adapt to a changing world by treating democracy as essential not only for development, but also for international peace and security. **Aly Rahim and Selin Kumbaraci** analyse what more resilient civic ecosystems might require and outline why civic infrastructure is a core component of effective investment environments. Finally, **Matt Baker** reflects on how approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) must evolve if they are to remain useful in a rapidly changing field.

Looking Ahead

Taken together, these contributions reveal something important about the current moment. Democracy support is not simply experiencing a funding crisis. It is undergoing a broader process of profound transformation. Existing approaches are being questioned not only because resources are diminishing, but because the problems democracy seeks to address – and the ways in which those committed to democratic change seek to address them – are themselves evolving.

This raises uncomfortable but necessary questions. How do we remain committed to democratic values without becoming overly attached to specific institutional or programmatic models? How do we build broader coalitions without diluting core principles? How do we support democratic resilience in contexts where democracy itself may not be the most politically resonant frame? How do we develop systems of funding, learning and partnership that are sufficiently flexible to support locally grounded democratic practice over the long term?

There are no easy answers or blueprints.

If there is one overarching message that emerges from both the Washington, DC meeting and the contributions collected here, it is that the future of democracy support will require a combination of principled commitment and political pragmatism. It will require greater humility about what external actors can achieve and greater confidence in the capacities and agency of those working closest to the challenges and opportunities of achieving democratic change. Building on core TWP principles and experiences, it will require building new partnerships, embracing experimentation and becoming more comfortable with complexity, uncertainty and plurality.

Most importantly, it will require resisting the temptation to imagine that there is a single future waiting for democracy – or for democracy support. Democratic futures are necessarily multiple and nonlinear. They will emerge (and recede) through political contestation, struggle, collective action, institutional innovation and democratic imagination in ways that cannot be predicted or prescribed.

This collection is intended as an invitation into that conversation. Whether you are a funder considering new approaches to investment, a practitioner navigating difficult organisational choices, a researcher seeking to understand changing political realities, or a policymaker concerned with the future of democratic governance, we hope the reflections gathered here will provoke questions, generate ideas and encourage collaboration across communities and fields of policy and practice.

The future of democracy support will not look like its past. That may ultimately prove to be one of the greatest opportunities before us. Rather than asking how we preserve what once was, the more relevant question is what kinds of democratic futures we wish to help make possible, and whether we are willing to embrace uncertainty, take risks, and rethink our assumptions, relationships and ways of working in order to get there – in short, how we can (continue to) think in more politically aware ways and work differently as a result.

Part I: Synthesis of Workshop Discussions

1. Plural Futures for Democracy Support: How can democracy assistance remain effective and relevant in a changing world?

Laura Pavlovic

On 18 and 20 November 2025, practitioners, funders, academics, movement leaders and strategists from across the international democracy community gathered at OpenGov Hub in Washington, DC to discuss how democracy support can remain politically smart and relevant as international funding flows and geopolitical dynamics shift and public perceptions of democracy are challenged both globally and locally. The workshop surfaced emergent sources of dynamism and resilience, identified several shifts in practice needed to nurture them, and generated areas for continued collaboration across a community navigating profound change yet still committed to reforming democratic development and donor systems.

The forms of democratic leadership proving resilient in the current global context even amid acute disruption in democracy assistance since 2025 underscore the need for a deeper reckoning with long-standing assumptions within the sector about how change happens, how legitimacy is built, and how external actors can most constructively support democratic practice. Sustaining key Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) principles on locally led solutions and collaborative learning will be critical not only to strengthening democratic resilience today, but also to demonstrating why adaptive, relational, and locally grounded approaches are essential to the future of democracy support.

Funding Shock or Inflection Point?

Workshop participants took stock of both sudden and longer-term dynamics shaping democracy support in 2025 and beyond, in the United States and globally. Recent [analysis](#) conducted by International IDEA and the International Federation for Electoral Systems (IFES) indicates that nearly 70% of all US government-funded support for democracy, rights, governance and peacebuilding – worth over \$14 billion – has been terminated. The effects of this contraction, coupled with US disengagement from global discussions on civic space and broader support networks, have been especially acute for organisations working with vulnerable and marginalised communities. Other bilateral donors are similarly grappling with reduced budgets and pressure from increasingly illiberal political agendas.

At the same time, official [development assistance continues to decline as a share of global capital flows](#), raising questions about whether private capital will invest in the enabling environments that have long supported democratic actors. Against this backdrop, participants underscored the need to demonstrate more clearly the contribution of investments in civil society and governance to broader

development outcomes, and to explore how domestic resources might play a larger role in sustaining citizen engagement and civil society ecosystems.

Beyond the immediate effects of funding losses, participants pointed to a set of persistent, interrelated challenges that have long shaped approaches to democracy assistance. Threats to information integrity and civic space remain acute, including the ways digital platforms influence participation, accountability, and public trust even as emerging efforts seek to reclaim technology as a site of civic engagement rather than simply a vector of risk. Democratic norms continue to erode through weakened institutions, uneven enforcement of rules, shrinking tolerance for dissent, and the growing dominance of security-first approaches. Rising inequality has intensified these pressures, fuelling insecurity and anger that populist narratives readily exploit.

In this environment, democratic institutions are widely perceived as serving elites rather than meeting public needs, while democratic processes are often seen as performative, externally imposed, or not improving people's lives. These perceptions have prompted renewed debate about whether, as Sarah Lister also emphasises in her contribution, democracy should remain the primary organising frame for reform efforts, or whether greater emphasis should be placed on adjacent domains such as rule of law, anti-corruption, security, or climate where democratic practice can more tangibly address citizens' priorities and strengthen institutional legitimacy. Participants also noted that short funding cycles and the persistence of incentives favouring reactive programming frequently constrain investment in durable institutions, sustained partnerships, and iterative learning.

Emerging Drivers of Progress, Partnership and Programming

Against these headwinds, participants identified sources of momentum that continue to sustain democratic practice across regions. Several people cited [youth-led movements and mobilised communities and local networks as critical drivers of resilience](#), defending democratic norms and practices even as formal civic space narrows. Digital activism, creative resistance, and democratic leadership emerging through work on climate, governance of natural resources, migration, and economic and social justice were highlighted as important bright spots. Technology featured not only as a tool for mobilisation, but increasingly as a forum for participation and accountability.

New forms of partnership are also taking shape, particularly those rooted in institutions and networks that already command social legitimacy. Universities, libraries and subnational institutions were seen as playing an increasingly important role as forums for dialogue. Participants pointed to ongoing efforts to build shared infrastructure, address relational gaps, and deploy international democracy expertise in new ways. Expanding democracy networks to better integrate academics, mayors, and private-sector actors and to deepen regional, subnational, and trans-local collaboration was a key theme.

Participants reflected on what effective programming looks like under current conditions. Anti-corruption and accountability work continue to offer an entry point for reform, even in restrictive environments. Knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer platforms remain important, though many noted

that prevailing incentives still privilege discrete projects over the longer-term partnerships that often yield deeper impact. Opportunities persist to integrate governance and social accountability into other sectors in ways that both improve sectoral outcomes and also demonstrate the objective value of democratic practice. Flexible funding, rapid-response mechanisms, and long-term institutional support were repeatedly underscored as essential, alongside renewed attention to reframing democracy narratives to better reflect people's felt needs, experiences, and expectations and to clearly demonstrate how democratic institutions and practices improve daily life.

Opportunities to Leverage Thinking and Working Politically

Current resource constraints have reinforced shifts in practices TWP practitioners have emphasised for years, if not decades: away from directing and delivering, and towards convening, facilitating, and strengthening networks at local and regional levels; away from compliance-heavy, donor-driven models and Western-centric frames and towards peer-to-peer exchange grounded in shared political realities. As the dominance of bilateral assistance continues to recede, blended capital, pooled funds, community foundations, and risk-sharing approaches show real promise as providing more stable foundations for longer-term investment in the structural drivers of democratic resilience – and may offer the opportunity to build the kind of adaptive, locally grounded financing architecture that TWP practitioners have long argued the work requires.

What Comes Next?

The second day of the workshop shifted from diagnosis towards collective sensemaking. Participants considered priority investments needed to support the growth and renewal of the democracy ecosystem, including the need for more compelling value propositions for democracy, longer-term strategies and financing, strengthened peer learning, and expanded cross-sector integration. Small-group discussions identified opportunities for further collaboration to advance longer-term financing approaches, widen the democracy ecosystem, and deepen engagement with accountability and learning mechanisms.

Taken together, the discussions offered a nuanced picture of democracy support at an inflection point. Funding contraction, polarisation, technological change, and rising inequality are further exposing the limits of traditional assistance models. At the same time, participants pointed to growing energy among youth movements, universities, subnational actors, and cross-sector coalitions that are reimagining democratic practice in locally grounded and politically informed ways. Sustained attention to TWP's core practices – convening, connecting, and collective learning – will be essential to supporting these emerging efforts. They will be equally important to all of us if we are to reshape the systems, incentives, and partnerships needed to adapt democracy support to a changing world.

Part 2: Adaptation in Practice to the Current Geopolitical Moment

2. Resilience, Adaptation and Renewal: Reflections from the National Democratic Institute (NDI)'s Experience to Rethink Democracy Support in a New Era

Kristen Sample

Around the world, [democracy is under increasing pressure](#). Rising authoritarianism, economic insecurity, corruption, and declining public trust in institutions are constraining civic space and weakening democratic governance. At the same time, organisations offering democracy assistance are confronting severe funding cuts and more hostile operating environments.

The experiences since the start of 2025 highlight important lessons about how democracy assistance must evolve to remain effective in an era of democratic backsliding. In this essay, I share some reflections on how the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#) has sought to adapt its approaches to support democratic resilience, protect civic participation, and help reformers respond to emerging opportunities and threats against what has been an extremely challenging backdrop.

Lessons

Back to basics: reaffirming support for election integrity and citizen election observation

For much of the first quarter of the 21st century, it appeared that credible elections were on the rise and increasingly recognised as a global norm. The growth and acceptance of election observation by nonpartisan civic organisations appeared to be one of the most tangible democratic advances since the advent of the so-called [Third Wave of democratisation](#) from the late 1970s to early 1980s. The promotion of [participation, transparency, accountability](#), and long-term public engagement with elections (which often have [spillover effects](#), strengthening democracy more broadly) led to major [gains in electoral integrity](#). However, [election integrity has been under threat](#) in recent years, as demonstrated by intimidation or detention of opposition members, attempts to disenfranchise voters by making voting more difficult, attacks on the autonomy of electoral commissions, and obstacles to citizen election-monitoring initiatives. As outlined in the first-ever [Report on the Global State of Election Observer Rights](#), published in January 2026, it is critical to ensure that the legal framework and administrative procedures are not used to prevent citizens from monitoring their elections. Accordingly, the [Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors \(GNDEM\)](#) and NDI are working together to develop model laws and accreditation procedures to protect the rights of civic organisations to monitor elections.

Identifying new pressure points to raise the cost of autocracy and corruption

As international support for democracy assistance declines, [autocratic governments have grown more emboldened](#) to target civic actors. Repressive contexts leave limited options for civic action and domestic accountability. Applying a [Thinking and Working Politically \(TWP\) lens](#), with its emphasis on incentives and political drivers, activists can identify creative pressure points that raise the costs of autocratic rule and systemic corruption. [Kleptocracy](#), for instance, is an international problem that can be solved only through cross-border approaches. For example, in Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Laos PDR, proceeds from [large-scale online fraud compounds and global cybers cam operations](#) – often referred to as ‘pig butchering’ scams – help finance repression and enrich regime-linked elites. Because these scams disproportionately focus on individual victims in wealthier countries, governments in Europe, North America, and Australia (should) have strong incentives to curb them. This alignment of interests creates an opening for democratic activists. As an example, NDI is supporting partners to spotlight the transnational harms generated by authoritarian kleptocracy and help [galvanise an international response](#) that increases pressure on the repressive regimes in Southeast Asia.

Radical collaboration

Corrupt and autocratic leaders [work in concert](#) across borders. Learning from one another, they rapidly update old tactics and develop new ones to compromise political rights and civil liberties. The [spread of ‘foreign agents’ laws](#) is one example of authoritarian governments learning from each other. To mount an effective countervailing effort, democracy activists must be equally adaptive, nimble and networked. This is why NDI is deepening its engagement in global networks like the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\) Learning Circles](#), the [Open Parliament e-Network](#), and GNDEM, given their critical role in reinforcing global democratic norms and facilitating peer learning. Against a backdrop of ongoing budget cuts, and also building on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic about the importance of accessible and effective virtual collaboration, there will be fewer in-person meetings, making it imperative to deploy innovative tech tools (such as [deliberAlde](#) or [Dembrane](#), for example) for effective virtual learning, engagement and decision-making. In a context of global backsliding, cross-border networks have played a crucial role in boosting the visibility and legitimacy of individual civic organisations, both nationally and internationally, especially across the Global South. These bonds have proven critical when one or more of its members are under attack. One such example happened in December 2025 when Ugandan nonpartisan citizen observer and respected human rights lawyer [Dr Sara Bireete was arrested](#) on trumped-up charges, initially without access to legal counsel or visits from her family. Rapid response from GNDEM and other regional networks helped draw attention to her detention, provided solidarity and support during a time of crisis, and offered assistance as Ugandan civil society develops strategies on how best to respond.

Supporting democracy defenders to prepare for and navigate fleeting opportunities

Each year, potential windows of democratic opportunity open in what had been autocratic and corrupt countries, as seen in recent years in [Bangladesh](#), [Guatemala](#), [Moldova](#), [Syria](#), and, most recently, [Hungary](#). However, while a change in political leadership is an important first step, it is insufficient to ensure a successful and sustainable democratic transition. Even in contexts where incoming leaders demonstrate a genuine commitment to integrity and democracy, corrupt networks and autocratic practices can remain deeply embedded and resilient and constrain democratic deepening – often dashing citizens’ expectations that political change will improve their livelihoods. This emphasises the importance of reformists acting quickly to achieve results, while also holding off predatory actors who seek to derail the reform process. NDI is investing in partners’ rapid-response capacity to prepare for and navigate transition moments. The support includes the application of TWP principles to draw on lessons and outcomes based on the type of rupture that has triggered a potential opportunity, whether it is through critical elections, popular uprisings, armed conflict, death of a leader, or some other relevant event. NDI also supports practitioners in drawing lessons from opportunities that have recently arisen in different contexts in order to develop strategies anchored in local realities that move beyond getting to elections and also [target networks of corruption and other spoilers](#).

Integrating inequality and economic precarity into democracy programming

Inequality, economic precarity, and corruption are important drivers of political apathy and are easily exploited by populist leaders in their quest for power. Unsustainable levels of public debt are especially problematic for development and democracy around the world. Governments are dedicating ever more of their budgets to servicing their debt; approximately [50 countries spend more on debt service than on education or health](#). The impact on women and other vulnerable social groups tends to be especially acute, given their greater reliance on public services. In the run-up to the 2025 general elections in Malawi, [NDI supported civil society](#) to put public debt at the centre of public debate through assessments and scorecards of party platforms, debates among the candidates, civic advocacy and youth mobilisation. Recognising that today’s debt will shape tomorrow’s opportunities, the programme included a focus on engaging university students in discussions on the impacts of public debt, with students resolving to use social media to raise this issue with their peers and form groups to advocate for stronger citizen oversight in public finance. In Malawi (and across the region), NDI will continue to work with civil society and the wider public to channel growing economic frustrations into constructive political engagement and advance reforms for greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens’ priorities.

Doing more with less

While being cost effective had always been an objective in democracy support (and the broader field of development assistance), this has now become an imperative. In recent months, NDI has experimented with various ways to maximise value for money. For instance, when USAID funding support for citizen election monitoring in Honduras was cancelled in

2025, NDI worked with local partners to adopt a new election monitoring methodology based on statistical principles – the [Process and Results Verification for Transparency \(PRVT\)](#) – to reduce the number of observers required while enhancing the quality of information on the conduct of voting and counting and allowing for independent assessment of the accuracy of the official results. As a result, observers attended only about 5% of polling stations (1,000 of approximately 20,000), but were still able to independently verify that the official presidential results reflected the ballots cast and had not been manipulated. Further, to fill the funding gap, the election-observation initiative also received critical support from the Honduran business community. In the Western Balkans, NDI is exploring efficiency by using technology. For instance, NDI is investing in partners' rapid-response capacity to prepare for and navigate transition moments.

The challenges currently facing both democracy and democracy support around the world are profound, but they are not insurmountable. Across regions, citizens continue to demand accountable governance, fair elections, economic justice, and meaningful political participation. NDI's experience demonstrates that sustaining democratic resilience requires both a recommitment to core democratic principles and a willingness to innovate in politically smart ways in response to rapidly changing political realities. Whether through protecting election integrity, strengthening transnational solidarity, supporting reformers during critical transition moments, or helping citizens channel economic grievances into constructive engagement, NDI is adapting its work to meet this moment. In an environment of shrinking resources and growing authoritarian coordination, the future of democracy assistance will depend on strategic collaboration, local leadership, and the ability to do more with less while remaining firmly grounded in the values of inclusion, accountability, and citizen participation.

Part 3: Where Next for Democracy Support?

3. Democracy Won't Win on Facts Alone

Vukasin Petrovic

Democracy Won't Win on Facts Alone

Those of us committed to making democracy work – academics, journalists, politicians, activists, donors and many others – are losing ground. Not simply because authoritarian leaders are better organised or better funded, although sometimes they are. We are losing because authoritarian movements understand something that much of the democracy support community still finds difficult to accept: the struggle for democracy is not primarily about facts and reason. It is about emotions, values, beliefs and belonging.

For decades, democracy advocates have tended to act as though the public is a jury waiting to be persuaded by evidence. If only people had the right facts, they would reach the right conclusions. But that is not how people process information. Research in psychology and behavioural economics shows that [facts are filtered through emotions, existing beliefs and social pressures long before rational analysis begins](#). When information threatens someone's identity or worldview, people often use reasoning not to reconsider their position, but to [defend it more effectively](#).

Authoritarian leaders [understand this](#) instinctively. They do not simply attack democratic institutions. They offer stories that make people feel secure, understood and connected to something larger than themselves. Meanwhile, democracy advocates too often communicate in ways that sound abstract, procedural or detached from people's everyday lives.

Why Facts Are Not Enough to Change Minds

This is an uncomfortable truth for anyone who believes good evidence should speak for itself. But decades of research suggest otherwise.

When we encounter new information, [interpretation comes only after our brains have already filtered it through](#) emotions, prior beliefs and social norms. The [Yale scholar Dan Kahneman](#) has shown that people confronted with evidence that challenges deeply held beliefs frequently use their analytical abilities not to evaluate that evidence objectively, but to dismantle it. Ironically, the more analytically capable someone is, the better they may be at defending an existing position.

The problem, then, is not that people are irrational. Rather, reasoning often serves two different purposes. Sometimes it is open-minded and genuinely evaluates evidence. At other times it is defensive, protecting identities and beliefs that feel under threat. Which form of reasoning people

engage in depends less on the quality of our argument than on whether they feel secure enough to consider it.

This helps explain why democracy campaigns built around facts alone often struggle. They may succeed in presenting accurate information yet fail to create the emotional conditions in which people are willing to hear it.

Values Shift Under Pressure

Research on human values offers another important insight. According to the psychologist Shalom Schwartz, [people everywhere share many of the same fundamental values](#). What changes is not which values they hold, but which ones become most important under different circumstances. During periods of stability, people tend to prioritise openness, tolerance, self-direction and universalism – the values commonly associated with democratic societies. During periods of insecurity, economic uncertainty or rapid social change, priorities shift towards security, order, tradition and belonging.

This is not necessarily evidence that citizens are becoming more authoritarian. It is often a perfectly understandable psychological response to anxiety and uncertainty.

[Authoritarian leaders have become remarkably adept at responding to these concerns](#). Rather than attacking democracy directly, they present themselves as defenders of security, identity and stability. Democracy supporters, by contrast, often appear to speak primarily about rights, procedures and institutions. Whether fair or not, this creates the impression that they are less interested in the concerns people experience in their daily lives.

The challenge, therefore, is not to abandon democratic values but to reframe them. Democracy must be presented not only as morally right, but as something that protects people's security, dignity, fairness and sense of belonging.

Consider judicial independence. Democracy advocates frequently defend it as an abstract constitutional principle linked to the rule of law. For many people, however, that language feels distant. A more persuasive framing is much more personal. Imagine you are involved in a dispute over your home, and the person suing you is a close friend of the politician who has the power to dismiss the judge hearing your case. How confident would you feel that justice would be done? Suddenly judicial independence is no longer an institutional concept. It becomes a question of personal security and fairness.

Democracy becomes compelling when people experience it not as a lecture, but as something that directly affects their everyday lives.

Why Popular Culture Matters

This is why popular culture matters far more than many democracy advocates have been willing to acknowledge.

Popular culture plays an enormous role in [shaping values, identities and social norms](#). Television shows, films, games, podcasts, influencers and online creators increasingly shape how people understand fairness, authority, trust and power. Yet democracy supporters have often treated these spaces as peripheral rather than central to political life.

Stories frequently change attitudes more effectively than arguments because they lower people's defences. Rather than telling audiences what to think, they allow them to experience situations emotionally. Viewers or players live through injustice, corruption or abuse of power without feeling they are being lectured.

The impact of entertainment on public attitudes is well documented. Television series such as [Modern Family](#) helped normalise new understandings of family and marriage for millions of viewers. [HBO's Watchmen](#) introduced many audiences to the history of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in ways that decades of historical scholarship had struggled to achieve. The brilliance of [The Pitt](#) (2025–) is that it proves that democratic values are the ultimate internal guardrail. It reframes the ‘failing’ hospital not as a lost cause but as a resilient moral shield that works only because the people inside it refuse to let go of their ethics.

Video games can be even more powerful because they require players to make choices and experience their consequences. Games such as [Life is Strange](#) encourage players to reflect on the long-term effects of their decisions, while [This War of Mine](#) makes the human cost of conflict deeply personal. Unlike a news article or policy paper, interactive storytelling makes consequences difficult to ignore.

The point is not that democracy organisations should become entertainment producers, nor that culture should become propaganda. Rather, democratic values should be woven more intentionally into the stories people already consume and enjoy.

At present, much of this happens by accident. But there is enormous, untapped potential in working with writers, producers, game designers and content creators to tell stories that make democratic values emotionally meaningful without becoming didactic.

Meeting People Where They Are

If democracy advocates want to regain ground, they need to stop believing that public debate takes place primarily through newspapers, policy reports or election campaigns. Increasingly, people form their identities and worldviews through streaming platforms, gaming communities, creator networks, social media and sports culture.

This does not mean abandoning activism, journalism or political organising. Mass movements remain indispensable. They create moments when democratic values become visible and urgent. But movements create peaks. Popular culture shapes the emotional landscape on which those peaks emerge.

Making democracy attractive again requires accepting uncomfortable truths.

- First, people are not persuaded by facts alone. Evidence matters, but it always passes through emotions, identity and values.
- Second, democratic values need to be connected much more explicitly to people's everyday concerns about security, fairness, dignity and belonging. This is something that other contributors to this collection also highlight, including Sarah Lister, Kristen Sample, and Shanthi Kalathil.
- Third, many of today's most influential cultural spaces are ones that democracy advocates have largely ceded to others.

The task ahead is therefore not simply to defend democratic institutions. It is to make democracy feel relevant, emotionally resonant and worth caring about in everyday life. That means showing up intentionally in the places where people already form beliefs and identities: in entertainment, gaming, creator platforms, sports communities, social media and everyday conversations. It means framing democracy not only as a system of governance but as something that protects what people value most – their families, their communities, their security and their future.

Only when democracy becomes something people feel, rather than simply something they understand, will it once again become something they are prepared to defend.

4. Principled Pragmatism: Rethinking Democratic Governance Support in a Changing World

Sarah Lister

As new challenges continue to arise, the passage of time nonetheless offers a moment to reflect on the cataclysmic shifts of 2025. The year laid bare the [depth of democratic erosion](#), the ongoing contraction of civic space, and the growing uncertainty about how democratic values can be advanced in increasingly contested political environments. Yet, across very different contexts, people – often young people – sought to realise their vision of more just and equal societies.

At the same time, 2025 was a [year of reckoning for democratic governance programming and initiatives](#). Alongside mounting political pressures, many organisations have faced a sharp decline in funding. According to mid-year [OECD analysis](#), official development assistance (ODA) to government and civil society sectors – including human rights, democratic participation, and civil society – was projected to decline by 21–36 % between 2023 and 2025. This forced difficult choices and prompted hard questions about sustainability, focus, and impact.

Together, these dynamics intensified a process of soul-searching among international governance and democracy practitioners that had been gathering momentum for some time. While some would argue that the field is only now confronting questions it should have long been asking, the past year brought those concerns into sharper focus. One moment for discussion was the Plural Futures for Democracy workshop hosted by the Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) Community of Practice in Washington, DC, in November 2025. This essay reflects my own thoughts on that conversation.

A Moment of Tough Reflection

If anybody was in doubt, it became clear in 2025 that [democratic governance programming was at an inflection point](#). Long-standing programmatic models felt ill-suited to both political and financial realities, even as underlying issues of power, accountability, and inclusion grew more urgent.

Yet many of the questions being asked felt familiar to me, reflecting enduring tensions within the field. However much we have asserted (and believed) the universality of values and aspirations, in many parts of the world, democracy initiatives and programming have been associated with Western approaches and often perceived as closely aligned with foreign policy objectives. National and local actors have not always welcomed that association, and this perception has undoubtedly shaped how democracy support has been received – and resisted – in different contexts.

For all the destruction of democratic and civic ecosystems in 2025, the partial rupture of this association has also created some space, however limited, for listening more carefully, speaking more

honestly, and thinking more critically about democratic governance support from international entities.

Principles Before Political Theory

In my view, the starting point for thinking differently must be first principles. Not political theory in the abstract, but fundamental questions: Why do people care about democracy? What does it mean in their lived experiences? What does it feel like to be governed democratically or not? And how does democracy intersect with economic justice and equality?

Seen this way, democracy is less about institutional forms and more about agency, accountability, inclusion, voice, and dignity. It is about whether people can influence decisions that affect their lives, whether power is constrained and contestable, and whether systems respond to people rather than exclude them.

This shift –from institutional form to lived experience – opens space for new entry points, new actors, and new forms of engagement.

Partnership Before Programming

This reframing also presents opportunities for new types of partnership and collaboration. Too often, democratic governance programming has been narrowly defined, by whom we expect to be a democratic actor, which sectors qualify, or what language is acceptable. This has limited reach and relevance at precisely the moment when democracy needs broader coalitions.

Democratic ideals are embedded in struggles for gender equality, climate justice, information integrity, anti-corruption, and social inclusion. Treating these as peripheral rather than central to democracy is a strategic mistake.

In Washington, DC, and elsewhere, there have been [lively debates](#) about ‘mainstreaming democracy’. But perhaps if democracy is fundamentally about people’s ability to shape their futures, then movements for gender equality, youth leadership, and social and climate justice are not just adjacent to democracy or simply spaces where democracy can be ‘embedded’. They *are* democracy.

A related shift is from programming to partnership. Traditional programmatic approaches – defined interventions, predetermined outcomes, tightly controlled delivery – are increasingly ill-suited to complex political environments. This insight has long underpinned [thinking and working politically \(TWP\) approaches](#). But the conversation now needs to move beyond how to embed TWP within programmes, towards understanding what TWP means in contexts that are not programme-driven at all.

In reality, some of the most powerful democratic work is happening in spaces that are not ‘ours’. Social movements, informal networks, digital communities, and cross-sector alliances are shaping political norms and accountability in ways that formal programmes cannot easily replicate.

The task for the international democratic governance community, therefore, is less about designing more politically informed programmes, and more about supporting, connecting, and amplifying what others are doing.

Four Ways Forward

What does this look like in practice? Four interlinked approaches point towards a way forward.

Platforms, Not Projects

Rather than standalone projects or programmes, we should invest in platforms – spaces that enable collaboration, experimentation, and learning across institutions and borders. Initiatives such as FutureGov, a United Nations-backed initiative focused on helping governments modernise and improve public services through innovation, digital tools, and stronger public-sector capabilities, illustrate how public-sector innovation, peer learning, and problem-solving communities can reshape governance practice.

Engaging Communities That Are Not ‘Ours’

Democracy work must intentionally reach beyond traditional democracy communities. Gender equality advocates, youth movements, climate activists, and digital rights defenders are already engaged in democratic struggles, irrespective of whether they frame them as such. Supporting these communities requires listening first, adapting language, and recognising that democracy may not be their primary banner but is often central to their objectives.

Finding Strategic Entry Points

In more constrained or politically sensitive contexts, anti-corruption, information integrity, service delivery, the climate transition or public-sector effectiveness can provide viable entry points for reform while still advancing democratic outcomes. These approaches should not be seen as second-rate substitutes for democracy work; they are pathways to democratic change.

Rethinking Knowledge Sharing

Finally, we need to rethink how knowledge is generated and shared. Traditional models – reports, toolkits, expert-led dissemination – are not sufficient. What is needed are dynamic, peer-driven learning systems that support adaptation in real time. A key question raised in the TWP gathering in Washington, DC was what kinds of knowledge, infrastructure, and incentives are now required to make this possible.

Grounded in Principles, Open to Change

None of this implies lowering ambition. The goal remains democratic governance that is accountable, inclusive, and responsive. But achieving it requires a shift in how we work – towards approaches that are adaptive rather than prescriptive, politically informed rather than technocratic, based on coalitions rather than programmes, and rooted in first principles.

The challenge is not to preserve existing approaches, nor to step away from democracy when it becomes difficult, but to rethink how democratic values are advanced in practice. That means working with greater humility, strengthening partnerships, and paying closer attention to how democracy is experienced in people's everyday lives.

5. Beyond Development: Reframing Democracy Support as Global Security

Shanthi Kalathil

The New Global Context

The world today looks very different to how it did a few years ago. The previously widely held ideal of an international system underpinned by democratic values, human rights and the rule of law is being contested, undermined, attacked, and delegitimised. We are now in a peculiar transitional era, one no longer bound by the rules and norms that underpinned the post-World War II order. This diminishment of universal values in international relations, the rise of regional blocs and middle powers, and the dominance of a transactional approach to global geopolitics means that the context for international democracy support has fundamentally changed. Moreover, we cannot expect that there will be an easy reversion to old norms or values, if there is one at all.

Democracy Support at a Crossroads

For those who have long worked to support democracy around the world, this is a particularly difficult inflection point. How do we buttress or reformulate the key values, institutions, and processes of a liberal order that may no longer really exist – or should we jettison these for something new altogether? How can we make democratic values relevant in a volatile era of populist authoritarianism?

At the same time, the sustainability of the democracy support community has also been called into question with the collapse of funding by a major donor, the US government. As a new geopolitical reality emerges, other bilateral donors are also pulling back, moving funds from support for international development to defence budgets. This has posed a conundrum for democracy organisations worldwide, who are fighting to survive amidst drastically reduced resources.

Over the years, the democracy support community established close ties with development agencies as their chief donors – and indeed, democracy support has largely been framed as a development issue. But that has inadvertently created a blind spot. In fact, democracy is not *only* a development issue; it is also closely tied to geopolitics, and international peace and security in particular.

Security and Democracy Linkages

The nexus between democracy, rights and security is hardly novel. Indeed, the founding of the United Nations and the premise of the liberal order itself was that freedom and rights were inextricably woven into the preservation of global peace and security. After the horrors of World War II, the deliberate fostering of a rules-based system predicated on liberal democracy, open markets and multilateral cooperation was thought to be the best safeguard against fascism and global chaos.

More concretely, after the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the international policy discourse turned to state-building. Under the George W. Bush administration in particular the US put [democracy and security at the heart of its emphasis on stabilising fragile states](#). Although the Iraq War itself was [controversial](#), this period nonetheless produced valuable [insights](#) and innovations, including a [new willingness to engage with politics in development](#) and a deepened understanding of the [significance](#) of political economy and drivers of change. Concepts such as security-sector reform became more holistically integrated into discussions about governance and development, and vice versa. But the powerful negative consequences of the failures in Iraq, including the [unfortunate and false equating of democracy support with externally driven regime change](#) and a growing [‘no nation building’ ethos](#) among donor countries, meant that some of these lessons and practices were lost. This wariness only increased as populists rose to power around the world and a [growing isolationist impulse](#) took hold.

Yet in this current global juncture, integrating democracy and security concerns more explicitly is barely a choice for vulnerable democracies bordering powerful authoritarian neighbours. Taiwan’s emphasis on its democratic values and practices forms an integral part of its resilience to China’s hybrid attacks, and it provides an important example for the region. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe have likewise long understood that defending democracy and protecting their countries against Russian aggression are one and the same.

In a world where growing authoritarianism presents perhaps the most potent threat, issues like election integrity, countering information manipulation, reducing polarisation, and combating kleptocracy are indeed fundamental to security and stability. Moreover, fostering transparent and accountable governance, buttressed by independent civil society and media, could help address plummeting trust in institutions and reassure people that democratic systems do indeed deliver for them. Reconstituting democracy support to include the defence of democracy, as well as thinking politically about incentives, coalitions, and power centres, may help integrate this work into a security frame.

Strategic Focus and Future Directions

Given these seismic global shifts, the field of democracy support is due for a strategic re-examination. As part of this, we should consider expressing a more expansive view of democracy and its fundamental importance in anchoring a stable, peaceful, and just international system. This wider lens may open possibilities for different types of framing, including a focus on incentives and coalitions, as well as funding from security-focused donors and others. In a practical sense, this work is already happening within specific sub-areas and communities. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats ([Hybrid CoE](#)), for instance, is a network-based international expert organisation serving 36 participating states, the European Union (EU), and NATO. Appropriate for its work, its hybrid nature fuses a security framework to the defence of democratic values, particularly in developing strategies to build social resilience to hybrid threats. The new European Democracy Shield similarly seeks to [safeguard](#) democracy against complex challenges including foreign information manipulation and other efforts to attack elections and erode trust in democratic processes.

It should go without saying that this does not mean entirely forsaking an emphasis on other technical areas, or on specific local-level community needs, which should drive local priorities. But at a higher level, expanding the aperture through which we consider democracy and democracy support may help attract new and much-needed allies, supporters, and communities.

Challenges and Opportunities

This will necessarily invite challenges and tensions that will need to be navigated. An expanded framing will require engagement with new communities, coalitions and power brokers. Defence ministries, for instance, will certainly bring differing perspectives, priorities and even language to the table. Democracy organisations should ensure that democratic priorities are not seen as purely instrumental to, or subjugated under, perceived higher-order security goals.

But there are opportunities here as well, to reframe and refresh conversations not only about democracy, but also about security. True international security relies at its most basic level on informed communities who can exercise their rights and participate peacefully in decisions that affect their own wellbeing and livelihoods, without having to resort to conflict. A global order dominated by authoritarians, or framed in terms of transactional value alone, is inherently unstable, chaotic and brittle. The world has learned this the hard way many times, but seems poised to relearn this most fundamental of lessons. The democracy community is well placed to lead this conversation.

6. Building Resilience through Transitions: A New Model for Democracy Support

Jean Scrimgeour

The [global aid cuts](#) that began in 2025 have exposed deep structural weaknesses in democracy support systems that were never designed for long-term resilience. As funding has contracted, [civil society organisations \(CSOs\) have faced](#) not only financial pressure but also accelerating losses of capacity, knowledge, and trust – revealing how deeply the sector is [shaped by donor-driven incentives, risk aversion, and unequal power relations](#).

This essay argues that these dynamics are not simply a response to crisis but the result of a long-standing political economy in which accountability flows upwards rather than outwards, and where proximity to donors often matters more than proximity to communities. In this system, structural fragility is reinforced by [rigid funding models](#), missed opportunities for strategic transitions, and the invisibility of frontline actors who are closest to civic action.

At the same time, the current disruption creates an opportunity to rethink how democracy support is organised. It highlights the importance of recognising and resourcing [‘invisible weavers’](#) who sustain civic ecosystems, protecting institutional knowledge through strategic transitions such as mergers or closures, and investing in collaborative infrastructure that strengthens collective resilience.

Ultimately, the essay calls for a shift towards political realism: acknowledging constraints, aligning ambition with operational reality, and building more flexible, locally grounded systems. The central argument is that resilience will not emerge from restoring past funding models, but from fundamentally rethinking how power, knowledge, and support are organised before the narrow window of opportunity for meaningful change closes.

The Political Economy of Crisis

We, both donors and recipients, have collectively built and sustained a model of centralised grants wrapped in a bureaucracy that privileges proximity to donors over proximity to communities and rewards [upward accountability](#) over impact. While donors involved in democracy support may have designed this architecture, many non-profit organisations and CSOs have adapted to and reinforced it. The result has been a system that has exposed deep structural fragilities rooted in power [asymmetries](#).

When organisations restructure or close down, donors and governance structures frequently regard this as failure rather than as strategic adaptation, impeding efforts to preserve value. I recently came across a telling example: two organisations with near-identical missions pursued an internal merger in an effort to reduce costs and avoid duplication, only to find that their primary obstacles were funders

and governance bodies reluctant to be associated with entities that might be struggling and the possible questions that might accompany the reasons for that struggle.

One important consequence of this kind of risk aversion is that the sector loses important collective assets – hard-won knowledge and relationships fall away rather than being preserved. This reflects a shared political economy in which all actors, whether consciously or not, have prioritised donor mandates and the logic of competing for (ever-scarcer) sources of funding over more strategic and realistic collective decision-making.

So, for instance, while it might make more political, financial, or practical sense for an organisation to close or radically transform the way it works by sharing resources and so on, the prevailing objective remains to follow what donors want, even if the latter are driven by their own incentives and their overarching concern may not be the overall coherence and sustainability of the organisational ecosystem. The question is not only whether CSOs can become more resilient, but whether we can jointly examine our own motivations and needs across donors, partner organisations and communities to fundamentally reimagine and shift the power structures governing democracy support.

Impacts of Loss of Funding

Through [Accountability Lab's tracking of US cuts to overseas development assistance](#), we have witnessed how funding shocks ripple beyond financial devastation. Other long-term effects include erosion of trust, loss of institutional knowledge, severely diminished capacity, and isolation when making critical decisions under pressure.

Organisational contraction has triggered a 'brain drain' as experienced staff leave, taking decades of knowledge and relationship-building with them. This knowledge cannot be replaced quickly, even if funding returns.

In response to crisis and the need to secure funds at any cost, organisations tend to abandon core missions for 'more fundable' work. This **mandate drift** leads to de-prioritising critical, longer-term programmes in favour of those that can show results quickly even if they achieve far less impact, all in an effort to show people are doing something – anything – irrespective of how relevant or important.

As international support and normative constraints weaken, governments face fewer external checks on their actions. The resulting reduction in the political and reputational costs of interference creates opportunities for further restrictions, reinforcing a **cycle of shrinking civic space**.

Abrupt programme closures undermine community trust. What took years to build evaporates rapidly, altering the political relationship between civil society and communities.

Making the 'Doers' Visible

Critiques of US-funded 'prime' partners (organisations that have direct contracts with the US government) follow a common thread. Such organisations have tended to create rigid administrative

systems that prioritise upward accountability over learning and adaptability based on what is happening in a given context. As such, they avoid taking risks and are disinclined to test, experiment and correct course because the (perceived) cost of failure may be too high. On the other hand, while donors value the kind of certainty that this low-risk way of operating provides, such a narrow managerial approach has considerable limitations.

Among other things, it is ill-equipped to respond to the changing operating environment, needs and priorities of frontline organisations that are ‘doing the work’. This helps to highlight an ongoing gap between localisation rhetoric and practice, whereby [power remains concentrated at the top, and groups building civic engagement, defending rights, and strengthening accountability on the ground remain by and large invisible](#). Many of these organisations have suffered from this ‘structural invisibility’ with the funding cuts that started in 2025 in the US and beyond. Lacking the networks to mobilise support has resulted in devastating closures.

Still, organisations that are at the forefront of ‘doing the work’ have been through crises before, and they have proven remarkably resilient. They have often been able to adapt and carry on despite reduced funding. This resilience is not sufficiently rewarded. Donors and power holders continue to prioritise organisations that are part of donor circuits over those ‘doers’ that are quietly achieving results. In response, initiatives have emerged to challenge these dynamics, with the aim to ensure that those doing the work using proven models don’t disappear simply because they are not ‘household names’ to distant funders. [Civil Society Wayfinder](#), for example, is a word-of-mouth campaign powered by the knowledge of local advocates, built to close the widening gap between international institutions and the communities that are taking action.

Elevating frontline voices is a strategic necessity. Overlooking their know-how limits our vision of the sector’s future and deprives us of the insights needed to navigate it, at a time when we cannot afford to waste valuable resources.

What’s Emerging

Despite the ongoing crisis, critical capacities suggest pathways forward if we work with the current reality in which we find ourselves.

Collaborative infrastructure that supports the existence of an organisation (including, among other things, governance bodies, policies and procedures, financial systems, back-office functions), both formal (e.g. [fiscal sponsorship](#), or an arrangement whereby an established, legally registered charitable organisation provides legal and tax-exempt status to a group, project, or individual) and informal (e.g. [mutual aid](#)), is a consistent request from civil society groups seeking to replace zero-sum competition for funds with arrangements that build collective resilience. This means two things in practice. First, reducing duplication by sharing back-office and operational infrastructure. Second, developing a clearer, more strategic understanding of how organisations within an ecosystem can resource and sustain each other – shifting from isolated actors to a cohesive, interdependent whole.

The challenge for donor agencies is to move from reactive, ad-hoc support towards intentional, sustained investment in the backbone infrastructure that holds the sector together.

Making ‘invisible weavers’ – those individuals who quietly sustain and strengthen civic and social systems by building relationships, connecting actors, translating across sectors, and helping collective problem-solving continue when formal institutions or funding mechanisms are under strain – making them more visible and supporting their work more purposefully and explicitly could strengthen the resilience of the democracy support field. This is because, while their work is often not sufficiently valued and duly compensated, weavers play an essential role in [translating between formal institutional logics and adaptive needs at the community level](#). The example of a [project coordinator](#) in Tunisia provides a powerful illustration of this at work. The coordinator helped young people turn frustration with corruption into civic action by weaving across worlds that usually pull apart: the trust and belonging of a youth-peers ‘family’, the credibility of a formal non-government organisation (NGO), pragmatic relationships with public authorities, and the expectations of international donors. The visible result was youth participation; the invisible work was holding those worlds together by leveraging a system that relies on ‘someone who knows someone who referred someone’ while using a series of short-term projects to sustain a longer-term civic strategy.

[Strategic transitions](#) emerge as organisations explore possible ways forward, including mergers, transformations, and closures. When they are properly supported, these transitions can protect institutional knowledge. This requires shifting narratives from treating difficult organisational choices as signs of weakness or failure to recognising adaptation as political realism.

Reimagining Support through a Political Lens

The current moment demands approaches grounded in reality. As number organisations in our community, including [Carnegie](#), [Global Democracy Coalition](#), [Humanity United](#), and [Accountability Lab](#), have highlighted:

Power asymmetries are structural

Proximity gaps between donors and local practitioners reflect different forms of knowledge and legitimacy. Translation (or what some might call [intermediation](#)) work between donor mandates and community-based know-how and experience is essential and needs to be adequately resourced. Part of this needs to start by recognising more fully and explicitly the essential bridging role that (so far mostly) invisible weavers play to bring together different actors, align their priorities and expectations, and harness collective action, often behind the scenes.

Flexible funding is strategic

Core funding and multi-year commitments recognise that meaningful change requires sustained investment in relationships, trust-building, and iterative [learning](#).

Transitions are political opportunities

Strategic evolution can preserve institutional knowledge if it is properly supported. This requires protecting knowledge, preserving institutional memory, maintaining relationships, and continuing to cultivate trust.

Local insight enhances the wisdom of resource allocation

Current systems tend to privilege those adept at navigating donor circuits over actors who are at the forefront of harnessing change at the local level. When local actors influence allocation and decision-making, not just implementation, funding is better equipped to navigate political complexities and avoid unintentional harm.

However, none of the aspirations outlined above can be realised without addressing the gap between vision and reality. Major aid cuts and the broader retreat of funding for civil society have fundamentally altered the operating environment, creating significant challenges for organisations and communities alike. While numerous reimagining and reflection processes – both formal and informal – have generated thoughtful recommendations from all over the world about the future of the aid sector, a critical challenge remains: translating these ambitions into practical strategies that are both realistic and sustainable within current political, economic, and social realities.

Civil society needs to work collaboratively with funders and other partners to better understand operational constraints, regulations, and the specific environment in which they are working. Only by overlaying these realities with our own vision is it possible to create incremental but meaningful change and lay out concrete steps to get from where we are to where we need to be. This does not mean abandoning ambition but rather building systems that are ‘good enough’ for now, and that can ultimately serve as a foundation for more radical transformation. Expecting systemic change within current constraints risks creating either overly idealistic expectations that disappoint all parties or simply replicating existing flawed approaches.

The path ahead requires political realism: acknowledging where we are, understanding the constraints within which we operate, and strategically navigating towards change that is feasible, meaningful and sustainable. Without this honest reckoning, parts of the ecosystem may weaken or fail, leading to disappointment, frustration, and tension among the very stakeholders who need to work together to build a more resilient sector.

The Window for Change

Our ways of thinking and working can be very hard to adapt especially during times of what seems like seismic change. The choices we make now will determine whether civil society emerges as smaller and more fragile, or robust and capable of recovery. Restoring project-based funding alone will not address the deeper and ongoing damage, nor will it match the realities of the current context. Capacity loss, once eroded, cannot be quickly rebuilt.

As we confront the question of what the future of international support to democracy may hold, we need to think very seriously about how we build differently to fit the current context. This means embracing more flexible, people-centred approaches that are grounded in political reality rather than on idealised assumptions about how change should happen. It also means elevating the voices and

perspectives of local actors who understand their own contexts by ensuring that they are meaningfully included in decision-making spaces and that they are adequately prepared to engage. It calls for creating stronger coalitions that connect global purpose with local knowledge.

Most importantly, it requires a shift in how resilience is understood: not as endurance alone, but as adaptive, politically informed action guided by purpose. The expertise, relationships, and adaptive capacity already exist. The question is whether the international community is willing to recognise and invest in them, and to build the necessary collaborative infrastructure to sustain them.

The challenge isn't about agreeing on what needs to change. Rather, it is about aligning on how to make that change happen – and doing so before the narrow window closes.

7. From Funding to Financing: Civic Infrastructure as a Core Enabler of Conducive Investment Environments

Aly Rahim and Selin Kumbaraci

Civic Infrastructure is Economic Infrastructure

As governments and donors [cut development spending](#), funding for civic and social-sector organisations is [shrinking rapidly](#). Yet this is happening at exactly the moment when these organisations are becoming more, not less, important.

The core argument of this essay is simple: civic organisations are not peripheral ‘nice to have’ actors in development and investment systems. They are part of the infrastructure that makes investments work.

Just as roads, ports, and energy systems support economic activity, civic infrastructure supports the social and institutional conditions that allow investments to succeed in practice. When communities have meaningful, constructive channels to shape, monitor, contest, and improve investment decisions, projects are more likely to identify risks early, resolve disputes before they escalate, reduce corruption and delivery failures, and maintain the public trust needed for implementation. Civic infrastructure is not a parallel social agenda, but a core part of the institutional and economic infrastructure that strengthens investment quality, reduces delivery risk, and helps create the trusted environments needed to mobilise and sustain public and private capital.

What is Civic Infrastructure?

In this context, civic infrastructure refers to the systems and processes through which citizens, communities, and organised civil society can systematically inform, influence, monitor, and hold to account public and private investment decision-makers.

This includes:

- Community consultation and co-design processes;
- Grievance and dispute-resolution systems;
- Feedback and monitoring mechanisms;
- Budget transparency and oversight tools;
- Watchdog organisations and local media; and
- Civil society groups that connect communities with governments and investors.

Together, these systems create the ‘connective tissue’ between decision-makers and the public. They help identify problems early, improve policy design, and strengthen legitimacy and trust. Importantly, they also reduce investment risk.

Why This Matters for Investment

Investors and governments often focus heavily on financial and contractual risks while treating social and governance risks as secondary issues to be managed later. In practice, however, many costly project failures begin as unresolved social and governance problems.

Weak community engagement, poor transparency, land disputes, corruption, or a lack of public trust can delay projects, increase costs, damage reputations, and undermine long-term viability.

Research from the Harvard Kennedy School and Queensland University on major extractives projects estimates that [social conflict costs around US\\$20 million per week](#) in lost production, with nine-month delays adding up to US\$750 million in extra costs, illustrating how quickly social and community dynamics translate into material delivery and financial risk. Similarly, US studies found that [communities that lost local newspapers faced higher municipal borrowing costs](#), partly because weaker local accountability increased perceived risk.

Strong civic infrastructure helps reduce these risks by improving communication, accountability, and problem-solving before issues escalate.

In practice, this can include:

- Identifying community concerns that need to be addressed to ensure effective engagement;
- Establishing conflict-resolution mechanisms and resolving disputes early;
- Improving project design through stakeholder feedback;
- Detecting corruption or contractor failures; and
- Creating trusted channels for grievances and mediation.

These functions help support smoother and more predictable implementation. They also improve the broader investment climate by strengthening confidence in governance systems and reducing uncertainty.

From Project Risk to Market Stability

The benefits of civic infrastructure operate at two levels.

- At the project level, it can reduce risks – such as protests, disputes, or failures in community consultation – that can derail individual investments.
- At the market level, it can [strengthen broader governance](#) systems by improving transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. When governments have better feedback loops and more trusted institutions, policies are more predictable and implementation becomes more reliable.

This matters because investor confidence depends not only on laws and regulations but also on whether institutions function effectively in practice.

Civic infrastructure helps make that possible.

From Managing Symptoms to Treating Root Causes of Risk

Building on this point, across both the public and private sector, civic infrastructure can be understood in terms of delivery risk – in other words, whether an investment converts into real outcomes on time and on budget. It can generate measurable returns by creating the ‘listening infrastructure’ that:

- Makes investments more fit-for-purpose and demand-driven;
- Reduces social, reputational, and operational risks for both investors and governments; and
- Improves the overall legitimacy, efficiency, and performance of investments.

Where [participation and accountability ecosystems](#) are stronger, the probability and severity of governance shocks, corruption-driven uncertainty, and social backlash as well as legitimacy crises can be lower. Strong civic infrastructure can reduce the risk of market-wide instability by improving the feedback loops and social problem-solving capacity that keep systems functioning under stress.

This, over time, can contribute to lowering perceived governance risk, help lower the market-level risk premium and, ultimately, the cost of capital. In many emerging markets where the cost of capital remains a binding constraint to private-sector mobilisation, upstream civic de-risking can complement traditional tools that tend to focus on financial and contractual risk, while leaving root causes of delivery-disrupting social and governance risk insufficiently addressed.

Rethinking How Civic Infrastructure Is Funded

Despite its importance, civic infrastructure is still financed in fragmented and short-term ways. Many organisations rely on small project grants that do not match the long-term role they play in governance and investment systems.

A more sustainable approach would treat civic capabilities as part of core economic infrastructure. In the short term, donors and development institutions should better coordinate funding and support coalitions and long-term partnerships instead of isolated projects.

In the medium term, civic engagement and accountability functions could be integrated directly into public investment programmes, development finance, and private-sector risk-management strategies. Over time, there is also potential to build a more durable ‘civic capital market’ that recognises transparency, participation, accountability, and other civic functions as investable assets linked to measurable outcomes, enabling a true civic financing architecture to emerge.

Conclusion

The debate about civic participation is often framed as a normative, social question. But it is also an economic one.

Strong civic infrastructure helps investments succeed by reducing conflict, improving accountability, strengthening legitimacy, and making institutions more responsive and predictable.

In doing so, it can lower delivery risk, reduce the cost of capital, and support more stable investment environments.

As development finance faces [historic contractions](#) and governments face difficult choices, civic organisations should not be treated as optional add-ons. They are part of the foundational infrastructure needed for economic growth, effective governance, and sustainable investment.

8. Designing Evaluation and Learning for the New Reality Without Rebuilding the Past

Matt Baker

For decades, the democracy support field has invested heavily in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) – building evidence, refining indicators, and strengthening accountability systems. That work created an important foundation. But the collapse of the USAID-era architecture now forces a more fundamental reckoning: not how to preserve the existing system, but what evidence and learning should be for.

The central question is whether the field will simply recreate the same model under new branding or use this rupture to rethink MEL from the ground up. For too long, evidence systems have been designed primarily to reassure funders. The next phase requires something different: approaches to learning that are genuinely useful to the practitioners, citizens, and coalitions on whom democratic futures depend.

As the field considers what comes next, that distinction is not semantic. It is strategic.

Traditional MEL systems were largely designed to meet donor requirements: to verify delivery, track outputs, and ensure compliance. Overall, they have been effective at answering whether programmes did what they set out to do. What they have been less equipped to do is support broader aims that are now central to the sustainability of democracy work given the new reality confronting the field: building public legitimacy, informing adaptive strategy in complex political environments, and communicating value in ways that resonate beyond technical audiences.

The limitations inherent in traditional MEL are not a failure of effort or intent. Many practitioners have pushed the field forward through approaches like [adaptive management](#), [Collaborating, Learning and Adapting \(CLA\)](#), and [Thinking and Working Politically \(TWP\)](#). But these innovations have often been layered onto systems [still fundamentally oriented toward upward accountability](#). As a result, MEL has struggled to fully support real-time learning, to capture non-linear change, or to generate narratives that connect with citizens, policymakers, and other stakeholders outside the immediate programme ecosystem.

The opportunity now is not to discard existing systems, but to move them towards approaches that are more adaptive, more participatory, and more attuned to the political and social realities. The focus should be on rebalancing MEL to include, among other things, moving from compliance to decision-useful learning, evolving from outputs to lived outcomes and adjusting to the need to account for internal accountability to external relevance. Importantly, stronger or different MEL alone cannot determine political outcomes. Democratic trajectories are shaped by power, interests, and narratives

that extend well beyond the scope of evaluation systems. But MEL can contribute to how the work is understood, how it adapts, and how it builds connections with the people it ultimately seeks to serve.

What the System Was Actually For

In the field of international democracy support as we have generally known it, standard indicators – focused on elections held, laws passed, organisations supported – can track formal activity reasonably well. But they are far less adept at capturing trust, perceived fairness, narrative resonance, or delivery credibility. This is not a technical limitation that better indicators can fix. It reflects a deeper structural misalignment that is out of step with a field that is unlikely go back to what it once was: the MEL system has been calibrated towards what funders could verify, not what democratic change requires.

As participants at the Plural Futures for Democracy Support convening argued, traditional, compliance-heavy models are ill-suited to current realities; short-termism undermines resilience; local leadership matters; and the [challenges that democracies face in seeking to meet](#) the needs, aspirations and expectations of their populations erode legitimacy. This consensus is not anecdotal. It aligns with a growing body of research showing that democratic outcomes depend less on isolated institutional reforms and more on system-level dynamics: trust, perceived responsiveness, and the capacity of institutions to solve everyday problems. The evidence that the field has tended to privilege to date has pushed practice in precisely the opposite direction – and this moment of profound existential crisis may yet offer an opportunity to (re)imagine how to assess and value democracy support differently in a new reality. Below I sketch out some ideas for how this could be done.

The Credibility Gap as a Shared Problem

Across contexts, democratic legitimacy faces similar pressures: governments fail to meet basic expectations, inequality and insecurity undermine trust, and democratic norms weaken without fully collapsing. The phrase ‘we don’t eat democracy’ reflects a global credibility gap between democratic promises and everyday realities.

Standard indicators cannot capture this gap. They were not designed to do so. Treating domestic, regional and international democracy contexts as separate problems probably compounds the blind spot further – fragmenting learning precisely where problems converge and where the most useful insights might cross borders.

What keeps repeating, across geographies and institutional forms, is that democratic legitimacy is less a formal product of institutional design and more a process that involves perceived responsiveness, narrative resonance, and the accumulation of trust. These kinds of dynamics are not easily measured. They are also exactly what the field needs to understand to remain relevant in the current moment.

From Transfer to Translation

Addressing these shortcomings requires more than methodological adjustment. It requires a shift in we understand what MEL is for. The dominant mode has been what we might call a transfer mode:

solutions, frameworks, and indicators lifted from one context and applied to another, often with a clear direction about who holds knowledge and who receives it. The alternative is a translation mode, beginning with shared problems and asking how different actors, operating under different political and institutional constraints, are experimenting with responses, and what can be learned from those experiments without flattening context or stripping them of risk.

Translation is slower, messier, and more politically fraught. It produces fewer toolkits and more arguments. But it also redistributes epistemic authority away from those who control frameworks and towards those navigating power, incentives, and trade-offs in real time. We see this when governance programmes reject top-down anti-corruption ‘toolkits’ such as Western auditing software and instead broker sector-specific, local compromises between municipal mayors, informal business cartels, and civic groups to ensure a water pipeline, for sake of example, actually gets built with the standards and safeguards it needs to operate safely. That redistribution is precisely why it remains difficult, and precisely why it matters.

For evidence practice, this reorientation implies several shifts: learning questions over performance targets; comparative sense-making over standardised benchmarks; mixed methods that foreground practical experience alongside institutional data; and iterative feedback loops rather than retroactive validation. This is not an argument against rigour. It is an argument for rigour that matches the complexity of the problem.

New Modes, Not New Models

If the field is serious about engaging this new reality without simply rebuilding the past under new branding, the emphasis should be on new modes of working and learning rather than new models to be replicated.

Several such modes surfaced during our Plural Futures convening. Spaces to share problems, organised around issues like delivery credibility, trust, or inequality allow evidence to accumulate across contexts rather than within country portfolios. Peer-learning architectures generate practice-based evidence through horizontal exchange, rather than extracting knowledge upward into donor-legible formats.

Independent evaluation – including rigorous impact evaluation where feasible and a stronger base of comparative research – remains important, particularly for discrete, scalable interventions where causal questions can be meaningfully posed. In sectors like health or education, this kind of evidence has reshaped practice at scale. In democracy, rights, and governance work, the conditions for such evaluations are rarer: the interventions are more politically contingent, the counterfactuals harder to construct, and the outcomes slower to materialise. That limits scope but does not eliminate the value; it argues instead for being deliberate about where and when this kind of investment in rigorous evaluation is warranted, rather than either fetishising it as the standard or dismissing it entirely.

Universities, cities, and subnational actors can serve as bridging institutions: carrying local legitimacy while enabling comparative insight. And evaluation itself can function as adaptive infrastructure focused on testing assumptions, documenting trade-offs, and informing course correction, rather than producing retrospective proof of success.

These approaches treat evidence not as a compliance artifact but as a public good: something that supports collective learning rather than satisfying individual accountability requirements.

The Choice the Field Has Postponed

There is a deeper choice underlying all of this that the field of democracy support has long preferred to defer: [between control and learning](#). The former offers reassurance, comparability, and the appearance of rigour. The latter offers relevance, adaptation, and political risk. For decades, it was possible to have something of both. That window has closed.

What comes next will require accepting that learning, like movement-building itself, will always be political, uneven, and uncomfortable. It will require letting go of practices that promise certainty where none exists and investing instead in approaches that make uncertainty visible and usable. It will require aligning funding, accountability, and research with [the realities of democratic practice](#): adaptation under constraint, learning through failure, and action in contested political space.

About the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice

The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

The TWP CoP is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and works in partnership with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) to help to sustain and disseminate knowledge, lessons and experiences in the TWP space.

Visit our website:

<https://twpcommunity.org/>

Subscribe to our Newsletter:

<https://twpcop.substack.com/>

Get in touch:

Email: info@twpcommunity.org

Bluesky: [@twpcommunity.org](https://bsky.app/profile/twpcommunity.org)

LinkedIn: [Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice](https://www.linkedin.com/company/thinking-and-working-politically-community-of-practice)



**WESTMINSTER
FOUNDATION FOR
DEMOCRACY**



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity