

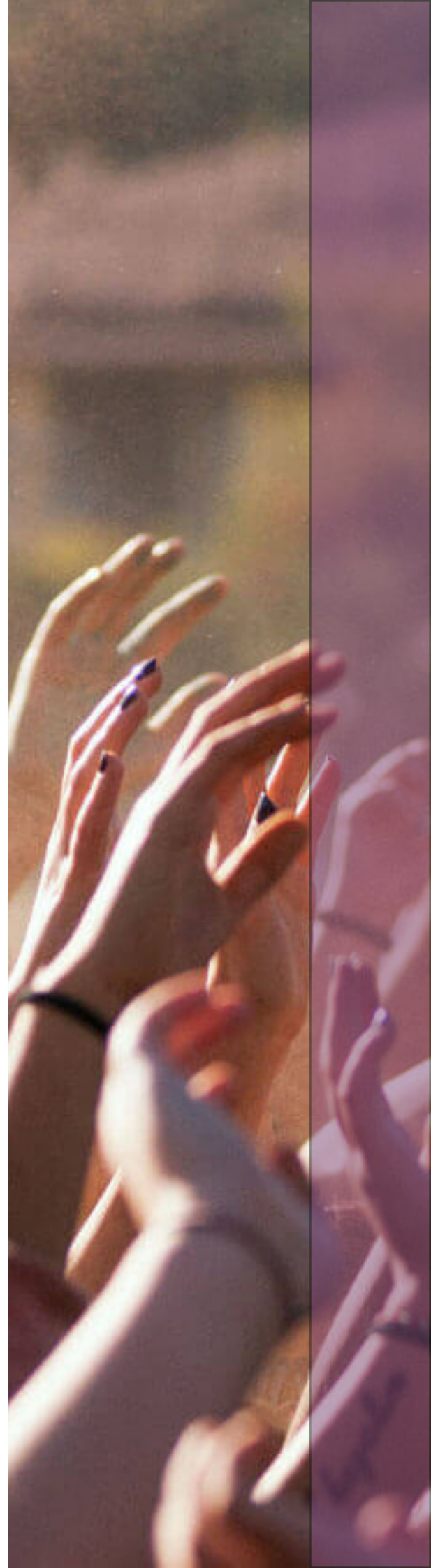


## Outcome document 3: Roundtable on Democracy and Human Rights

### Strengthening Democratic Resilience through Multilateral Human Rights Mechanisms

Understanding the links between  
multilateralism & democracy to  
tackle global challenges more  
effectively

June 2025



## Context

The Kofi Annan Foundation and Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy of the Graduate Institute are organising a [series of discussions](#) to examine the role of democratic principles, processes, and practices in responding to emerging global challenges. On 14 May 2025, we co-hosted jointly with the Permanent Missions of Costa Rica and Switzerland a high-level policy dialogue ahead of the 59th session of the UN Human Rights Council. The session took place at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, and was organised with the support of the Permanent Missions of Chile, The Gambia, Kazakhstan, and The Bahamas, and the Universal Rights Group.

The interactive panel discussion was moderated by the Executive Director of the Kofi Annan Foundation, Corinne Momal-Vanian, with the participation of several distinguished panelists, notably the Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives of Costa Rica, Chile, The Bahamas, Kazakhstan, and The Gambia. The other distinguished panelists were experts from the UN, Nathalie Rondeux and Dimiter Chalev, the Executive Director of URG, Marc Limon, and Mauricio Artiñano Guzman from the Multiparty Ethical Pact, Costa Rica.

The policy dialogue<sup>1</sup> brought together more than one hundred ambassadors, diplomats, researchers, and civil society and UN representatives, including representatives from more than fifty different state delegations, to explore how UN human rights mechanisms can be more effectively mobilized to bolster democratic resilience. Drawing on national experiences and multilateral practices, participants reflected on the interplay between democracy, human rights, and multilateralism – an essential but often overlooked nexus. This outcome document presents their recommendations organized around four main themes.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Issue Brief “Strengthening democratic resilience by leveraging engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms” that was presented at the Policy Dialogue can be accessed [here](#).

## THEME 1: Democracy is missing from the human rights discourse

Despite their deep interdependence, democracy and human rights are increasingly treated as separate agendas in multilateral spaces. Participants noted with concern that even in forums like the Human Rights Council (HRC), the term “democracy” is rarely used – a potential symptom of increasing discomfort around its normative meaning and political implications. This silence is especially troubling in an era marked by democratic erosion, polarization, and disillusionment.

Several speakers called for a return to foundational principles, rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Charter, to reaffirm democracy not as a Western export but as a global commitment grounded in dignity, participation, and accountability. Failing to address the decline of democratic norms within the human rights system itself risks undermining both agendas.

### *Recommendations:*

- 1. Encourage initiatives which reintroduce democracy explicitly into the discourse and practices of the UN human rights system, including in HRC debates, Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR), and in the work of the Special Procedures of the HRC and the human rights treaty bodies.*
- 2. Acknowledge that the pillars of democratic governance are both based on human right law, and a necessary condition for the full realization of all other rights.*
- 3. Encourage multilateral actors to speak openly about democratic backsliding, including within well-established democracies.*

## THEME 2: Leveraging human rights mechanisms to strengthen democracy

Multiple case studies demonstrated how sustained engagement with the UN human rights architecture can serve as a catalyst for democratic reform. **The Gambia**’s transition since 2017 is a powerful example: recommendations from the UPR, treaty bodies, and Special Procedures were integrated into its national development strategy, triggering reforms in judicial independence, civic space, access to information, and constitutional accountability. **Kazakhstan** shared similar experiences with embedding international human rights obligations into domestic law to strengthen democratic foundations. In **Chile**, where democracy emerged from a long dictatorship, the transition was profound but fragile; today, low public trust in institutions and unmet social demands have raised questions about the credibility of democratic governance at both national and multilateral levels. **The Bahamas**, a small island state with a long democratic tradition, emphasised how the human rights framework underpins democratic resilience, especially as external shocks like climate change test institutional stability.

However, such cases remain the exception rather than the norm. Most human rights mechanisms still fall short in explicitly addressing the democratic dimensions of rights violations. The potential of tools like the UPR and the Special Procedures to identify early signs of democratic decline – and to recommend preventive action – remains underutilized.

***Recommendations:***

1. *Encourage states to use human rights recommendations as springboards for democratic reform, particularly around electoral integrity, access to justice, and freedom of expression.*
2. *Enhance the capacity of UPR and Special Procedures to assess and address civic space and democratic resilience as part of their mandate.*
3. *Strengthen coordination between human rights mechanisms, UN Country Teams, and regional bodies to support national implementation and accountability.*

### THEME 3: Democratic culture requires inclusion, dialogue, and local ownership

Participants repeatedly stressed that building democratic resilience is not only about institutions, but also about culture, participation, and trust. In many countries, young people feel excluded from political life, and the failure to deliver on material needs has created fertile ground for disillusionment. Yet speakers underscored that democracy's strength lies precisely in its capacity for constructive dissent, dialogue, and renewal.

Panellists emphasized the importance of civic education, consensus-building, and local governance mechanisms that invite genuine participation. Initiatives in **Costa Rica**, such as the Ethical Pact for municipal elections and civil society training for local officials were cited as good examples of how trust and inclusion can be rebuilt from the ground up. The vibrancy of democratic life depends on the ability of all citizens to see themselves as stakeholders – not merely voters.

***Recommendations:***

1. *Invest in civic and human rights education, especially for young people, through schools, municipalities, and civil society partnerships.*
2. *Foster inclusive and consensus-based decision-making processes, both locally and multilaterally.*
3. *Promote models of democratic participation beyond elections, including citizen assemblies, ethical compacts, and deliberative processes.*

## THEME 4: The multilateral system must lead by example

As global pressures mount – from climate change to authoritarianism – democracy and human rights are under renewed strain. For Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries, external shocks can quickly erode institutional capacity. While the multilateral system holds many tools – Special Procedures, UPR, treaty bodies – it often fails to act preventively or in a coordinated way.

Participants called for the UN system to embody the very democratic values it promotes: transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. They urged the Human Rights Council to take on a clearer preventive role and to coordinate across mechanisms to identify democratic “weak spots” before they escalate into crises. There is also a need to move from voluntary cooperation to more structured, well-resourced technical assistance aligned with national needs.

### ***Recommendations:***

- 1. Position the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms as early warning tools for democratic backsliding.*
- 2. Ensure better coordination between all human rights mechanisms, including UPR, Special Procedures, and treaty bodies, to provide joined-up guidance to states.*
- 3. Equip UN Country Teams with the mandate and resources to support democratic institutions and civil society in a context-sensitive, solidarity-driven manner.*

## **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need to reconnect democracy and human rights as part of a shared multilateral agenda. These are not separate or competing priorities – they are two sides of the same coin: where democracy weakens, human rights are at risk; and where rights are violated, democracy falters.

The current global crisis of democracy has prompted a search for new mechanisms, forums, and tools to protect and promote democratic values and processes, but panellists and speakers from the floor called for more intentional engagement with the tools that already exist, as well as more open dialogue across political differences, and more inclusive participation at all levels. They stressed that strengthening democratic resilience is not only about defending principles, but also about building systems that deliver justice, dignity, and trust in people’s everyday lives.