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## COVID-19, Democracy, and Global Governance: Using Convening Power to Build Back Better

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On September 21, 2020, world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations (UN) with a declaration. Still struggling to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, they agreed: “Multilateralism is not an option but a necessity as we build back better for a more equal, more resilient and more sustainable world. The United Nations must be at the centre of our efforts.”[2]

The four-page UN seventy-fifth anniversary declaration contains the phrase “build back better” three times. What does building back better, an approach developed in the UN system since the mid-2000s in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction efforts,[3] mean in the post-Covid-19 context? To rebuild after the Second World War, leaders in 1945 reflected on causes of the atrocities and (re-)constructed international institutions with the hope of preventing future wars. Partly to avoid the recurrence of such destruction,

states set human rights as a pillar of the UN Charter alongside peace and development. They committed to promote equal rights of humans and of nations, respect for international law, social progress and better standards of life.[4] Today, while international organizations (IOs) have generated innovative normative frameworks, many have had difficulties adapting institutions and mobilizing political will to respond to current global challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic is a worldwide disrupting event, extended in time, which encourages us to deliberate about how post-pandemic global institutions might evolve.

This essay focuses on potential implications for global governance of the Covid-19 pandemic's intersection with another crisis in the 2020s – that of democratic governance. These two crises vary in intensity in different world regions and are evolving against the backdrop of other burning issues: climate change, struggles for equality and social justice, and efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs). While outcomes are difficult to predict in the midst of the pandemic and rapidly shifting political responses, some initial insights can be gleaned.

## A paradigm shift

In recent years, a paradigm shift has been underway in international support for development and democratic governance. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development codified a shift to the universal applicability of global development commitments.[5] Unlike previous agendas, both developing and industrialized countries committed to achieving the sustainable development goals at the domestic level, while recognizing differentiated responsibilities to assist countries with special circumstances.[6] Relevant to the Covid-19 crisis, this shift has reinforced the idea that states of all types – large and small, industrialized and developing – face some common challenges in improving access to social services and protection of vulnerable groups. Similarly, international support for democratic governance has witnessed a slow shift away from a decades-long division between established democracies and democratizing countries, which could now learn from one another on a more equal footing to find solutions to common challenges.[7]

These paradigm shifts, however, have not yet been fully internalized. Any state or society may be a source of knowledge that could benefit others. It has taken far too long for North Americans and Europeans to learn from the infectious disease expertise of their Asian colleagues during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the early stages, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and others had valuable insights into the importance of protective masks,

treatments, and testing. If their expertise had been recognized and listened to more quickly and attentively, many lives might have been spared.

During crises, it is crucial to avoid reinventing the wheel. The Covid-19 pandemic clearly revealed deficiencies in transnational communication between representatives of national and local governments, international organizations, civil society, and other stakeholders, including medical and public health professionals. One way to improve knowledge exchange is to build on the UN's convening power. The UN has unique venues for inclusive, (voluntary) cross-regional learning, developing partnerships, and problem solving, yet with varied results. Weaknesses of the World Health Organization's (WHO) response to Covid-19 have been widely discussed.[8] A component of reform efforts would be to strengthen platforms for sharing expertise through the UN system in various issue areas.

## International crises of democratic governance

Recent years have taught us that established and consolidated democratic regimes are more fragile than previously imagined.[9] One challenge in the post-Covid-19 era will be to repair frayed democratic institutions in the United States, Europe, and beyond. Societal support for democratic governance has receded in many states, in part due to governments' failure to attenuate inequalities, to provide essential services for all, or to improve living conditions. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan argued, the best way to help democracies flourish is "to inspire people to import it by demonstrating that democracy works." [10]

The UN's role in electoral assistance evolved in the late 1980s and early 1990s from the organization's support for decolonization and peace agreements, as well as Articles 21 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which codified, inter alia, the idea that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government.[11] After the Cold War, UN General Assembly resolutions also codified key components of democratic systems,[12] while the UN Secretariat, funds, and specialized agencies developed programs to support democratic governance.[13] The UN system "does not endorse or promote any specific form of government," stated UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 1997, "Democracy is not a model to be copied but a goal to be attained." [14]

Until the mid-2000s, the International Conferences on New or Restored Democracies provided an inclusive venue under the UN umbrella for international cooperation towards democratic goals.[15] Cross-regional initiatives have also taken place through the Community of Democracies, with more selective participation and outside the UN system. Since 2015, Sustainable Development Goal 16 (“promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”) has become a focal point for some efforts, as has the sustaining peace approach. To a greater extent since the mid-2000s, democracy and human rights have encountered contestation as priorities in the UN system, sometimes at the level of implementation. Nevertheless, in the UN’s seventy-fifth anniversary declaration in September 2020, member states agreed: “We will continue to promote respect for democracy and human rights and to enhance democratic governance and the rule of law by strengthening transparent and accountable governance and independent judicial institutions.”[16]

## Covid-19 and democratic governance

Of the factors affecting cross-national variation in Covid-19 transmission and mortality, there has not been a clear link with political regime type.[17] The World Health Organization has called attention to Uruguay, Senegal, Mauritius, Mongolia, South Korea, and New Zealand, among others, as designing pandemic responses with components from which other countries might learn.[18] In early stages, successful Covid-19 responses appear to have been aided by preparedness after infectious disease outbreaks such as SARS or Ebola, trust in political institutions, evidence-based leadership and communication, robust and accessible public health systems, and state capacity, for example, to conduct contact tracing and testing.[19] Also critical is access to reliable information and data.[20] While democracies have achievements with other health indicators, such as life expectancy at birth or survival of children under five years,[21] and are a source of effective Covid-19 vaccines, several, especially in the Americas and Europe, have floundered during the pandemic, with high loss of life. A challenge for states concerned about protecting human rights in Covid-19 responses is to improve democratic institutions’ ability to equitably deliver public goods, including access to quality health care, vaccines, and other non-pharmaceutical interventions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased some risks for democratic governance. These include expansion of emergency powers, surveillance, disinformation, corruption, and human rights violations.[22] The Varieties of Democracy Institute recently developed indices of pandemic backsliding and democratic violations,[23] and International IDEA created a global monitor of Covid-19’s impact on democracy and human rights.[24]

Economic challenges in the wake of the pandemic widen routes for corruption and for non-state actors with different loyalties to engage where public sectors have fallen short.[25] Parallel authority structures sometimes provide needed services to certain groups, yet have disputable records safeguarding the rights and well-being of all. Nevertheless, many civil society groups have developed creative digital ways to assemble and protest.[26] Several countries responded to the pandemic with increased use of electoral innovations such as online or early voting and voting by mail.[27]

Many solutions to democratic challenges can be found locally, while problems such as corruption and polarization have some common features across societies. Their potentially destabilizing effects suggest a need to have all hands on deck, and that international partners might serve as a useful source of support. Like climate change, Covid-19 has become a nucleus for alternative realities. Some protesters are not simply challenging policy measures such as masks or lockdowns, they are also denying the existence of Covid-19. With democracy, where is the line between alternative reality and different interpretations? If violations of democratic norms occur, shared societal (and political party) understandings about the basic ingredients of democratic behavior are essential to defend against erosion, in pandemic and non-pandemic contexts. Intimidation stifles self-expression – and thus deliberation and learning – which are critical for democratic politics and the health of individuals and societies.

In states with democratic erosion, a challenge is to (re)articulate and clarify, in a non-partisan and serious manner, what democratic governance means in post-Covid-19 contexts and to reaffirm commitment to its principal components. Political equality is at the core of the ideal of democracy, although practices have often differed from the ideal.[28] A spectrum of understandings of democracy ranges from procedural minimal to substantive. Beyond free and fair competitive elections with universal suffrage, provisions for participation and representation, and components such as civil and political rights, access to justice, democratic rule of law, and separation of powers, some definitions also include social and economic outcomes.[29] Gerardo Munck argues that “a process is not democratic if the outcomes have been predetermined.”[30] Yet progress often entails expansion of the enjoyment of rights (e.g., civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights). Post-pandemic reconstruction efforts might revitalize policy conversations at international, national, and local levels about expanding quality access to public services for vulnerable groups.

As many analysts have noted, Covid-19 has highlighted and exacerbated inequalities along gender, racial, socioeconomic, occupational, and other lines. Reaffirming its “full

commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the blueprint for building back better after the pandemic,” the UN General Assembly in September 2020 agreed “to make sustainable long-term investments to eradicate poverty in all its forms, as well as address inequalities and human rights abuses or violations...and address climate change and the environmental crisis in order to build a better future for all.”[31] Participatory approaches help to identify pressing policy or delivery needs and tailor the SDGs in unique country contexts. Post-pandemic deliberations are also an opportunity to incorporate new ideas alongside traditional understandings of democratic governance. As Richard Youngs argues: “The search for forms of democracy that differ from prevailing Western norms is legitimate and needs to be taken seriously...Non-Western countries certainly offer new ideas for democratic innovation, and democracy supporters from the West need to do more to encourage these ideas.”[32]

Reordering among competing priorities and values recurs periodically in the UN system. Certainly, the global Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis are currently among the world’s highest priorities. While democratic governance became highly salient in the 1990s, issues such as poverty eradication, climate change, and gender equality have subsequently risen on international agendas. Yet even as new issues have become more salient, they have not, thus far, entirely pushed away previously salient issues. To prevent future crises and promote well-being in the longer term, efforts will need to integrate new lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic into the broad spectrum of lessons accumulated through the UN’s history.

## Building back better in a plural world

Building back after the pandemic can draw and build on the UN system’s convening role.[33] Valuable knowledge for the next crisis might originate from Palau or Iceland, Ghana or Costa Rica. Some partnerships emerge and receive support via UN venues that facilitate cross-regional interactions among member states, IOs, civil society, and other stakeholders. Official development assistance (ODA) and humanitarian aid are vital ingredients of post-Covid-19 recovery that face critical resource constraints.[34] While industrialized states’ obligations (e.g., SDG 17) cannot be discussed in detail here, in the field of development, the UN’s convening function can support a paradigm shift towards a more egalitarian policy space to address shared problems. The approach is non-coercive, as local and national communities decide for themselves whether and in what ways ideas might be relevant in different contexts.

Perhaps the best-known examples of the UN's convening role are UN-sponsored global conferences, such as the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, or the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, which brought together world leaders and thousands of civil society representatives and stakeholders. Critics object that such events are expensive, that agreements among UN member states are insufficiently progressive, or that follow-up has been inadequate.[35] Yet others highlight longer-term effects, as these events have generated new institutions, supported the development of new ideas and international commitments, stimulated research, encouraged mobilization, and have facilitated recurring cross-regional exchanges among civil society, state, IO, and other actors.[36] Another example is the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which convenes a widely-attended, annual two-week meeting to discuss implementation of international gender equality and women's empowerment commitments. The annual High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development reviews progress towards achieving the SDGs, while Voluntary National Review (VNR) Labs and side events for sharing experiences have taken place in parallel. On a more regular basis, agencies and programmes across the UN system convene events on specialized topics. Future research might examine strengths and weaknesses of such events, for example, convened by the WHO, UN Development Programme (UNDP), or the UN Secretariat, or political debates in the UNGA, with an eye to supporting post-Covid-19 recovery efforts.

At the 75th UNGA in September, Sweden, together with representatives of Georgia, Liberia, Mongolia, Portugal, Tunisia, and Uruguay launched a new group of "Friends in defence of democracy" with cross-regional participation.[37] What this group will do remains to be seen. Further, U.S. President-elect Biden has expressed an aim to "organize and host a global Summit for Democracy." [38] Reconstruction after 1945 relied heavily on U.S. leadership. Today, the country's domestic political, social, and economic challenges place it in a different position. Leadership in international society in the 2020s depends on actors that exemplify the full range of norms that constitute good global citizenship. This is a tall order. Some actors excel in issues such as environmental protection, others in poverty reduction or advancing human rights. Leadership in the post-Covid-19 era will be collaborative and entail fluid partnerships among states, international organizations, civil society, and other stakeholders. Cultivating effective, inclusive cooperation and exchanges towards shared goals thus remain important roles for global governance.

While international norms and priorities evolve, the lessons learned from collective trauma in international history do not disappear. To build back better after Covid-19, not only can we benefit from deepening cross-regional multilateral exchanges to prepare for future pandemics, to fight hunger, corruption, and the erosion of democratic norms, or to prevent the elevation of one group over another. We also need to listen.

## Notes

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[2] A/RES/75/1, p. 2.

[3] See, for example, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's 2017 publication: [https://www.unisdr.org/files/53213\\_bbb.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/53213_bbb.pdf). The concept has also featured prominently in the transition and campaign of U.S. President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris; see: <https://buildbackbetter.com/priorities/>; <https://joebiden.com/build-back-better/>. All URLs were last accessed on December 20, 2020.

[4] UN Charter, <https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/>

[5] UNGA, 25 Sept. 2015, A/RES/70/1.

[6] Macharia Kamau, Pamela Chasek, and David O'Connor (2018): *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals*. London: Routledge.

[7] On shared challenges between older and newer democracies, see International IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2019 report:

<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/the-global-state-of-democracy-2019.pdf>; Thomas Carothers (January 27, 2016): Look Homeward, Democracy Promoter, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/27/look-homeward-democracy-promoter-pub-62604>; Richard Youngs (May 6, 2016): European Liberal Power as a Two-Way Street.

Carnegie Europe. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/05/17/european-liberal-power-as-two-way-street/iyco>. For post-colonial perspectives, see Vyatcheslav Morozov, (ed.) (2013): *Decentering the West: The Idea of Democracy and the Struggle for Hegemony*. Farnham: Ashgate.

[8] José E. Alvarez (2020): The WHO in the Age of the Coronavirus, *American Society of International Law*. doi:10.1017/ajil.2020.79.

[9] See Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018): *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about our Future*. New York: Viking.

[10] Kofi Annan (Dec. 6, 2016): Democracy Under Pressure, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/opinion/democracy-under-pressure.html>



[11] See Edward Newman and Roland Rich (eds.) (2004): *The UN Role in Promoting Democracy: Between Ideals and Reality*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press; Kirsten Haack (2011): *The United Nations Democracy Agenda: A conceptual history*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[12] UNGA resolution “Support by the UN system for the efforts of Governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies,” was considered annually in 1994–2000 and biennially until 2012 (A/RES/49/30). See also UNGA resolution “Promoting and Consolidating Democracy,” 4 December 2000, A/RES/55/96; and A/HRC/Res/19/36.

[13] Newman and Rich 2004; UN Democracy Fund: <https://www.un.org/democracyfund/>.

[14] Report of the Secretary-General, UNGA, 21 October 1997, A/52/513, para. 27, p.5.

[15] Catherine Hecht (2017): Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclusive Multilateral Venues: The Rise and Fall of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on New or Restored Democracies. *International Politics* 54(6): 714-728; Petru Dumitriu (2003): The History and Evolution of the New or Restored Democracies Movement. Paper commissioned for the Fifth International Conference on New or Restored Democracies, Mongolia.

[16] UNGA, A/RES/75/1, para. 10, p.3.

[17] Rachel Kleinfeld (March 31, 2020): Do authoritarian or democratic countries handle pandemics better? Commentary. Carnegie Endowment. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>.

[18] Statement by WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 7 September 2020: <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---7-september-2020>.

[19] Ibid; Kleinfeld 2020; Lancet Covid-19 Commission Statement on the occasion of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly. (October 10, 2020): [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31927-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31927-9/fulltext); Richard Youngs and Elena Panchulidze (2020): Global Democracy & Covid-19: Upgrading International Support. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/07/14/global-democracy-and-covid-19-upgrading-international-support-pub-82297>.

[20] Ibid; Julia Leininger (April 27, 2020): Tackling the pandemic without doing away with democracy. *The Current Column*, German Development Institute/Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE). [https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/German\\_Development\\_Institute\\_Leininger\\_27.04.2020.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/German_Development_Institute_Leininger_27.04.2020.pdf).

[21] Thomas J. Bollyky and Ilona Kickbusch (October 23, 2020): Preparing democracies for pandemics. *BMJ* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4088>.

[22] See Afsoun Afsahi, Emily Beausoleil, Rikki Dean, Selen A. Ercan, and Jean-Paul Gagnon (2020): Democracy in a Global Emergency: Five Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Democratic Theory* 7(2): v-xix, and articles in special issue; Frances Z. Brown, Saskia Brechenmacher, and Thomas Carothers (April 6, 2020): “How will the Coronavirus Reshape Democracy and Governance Globally?” Commentary. Carnegie Endowment. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>; Youngs and Panchulidze 2020.

[23] Palina Kolvani, Martin Lundstedt, Seraphine F. Maerz, Anna Lührmann, Jean Lachapelle, Sandra Grahn and Amanda B. Edgell (2 October 2020): Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy and Disinformation Seven Months into the Covid-19 Pandemic. V-DEM Policy Brief, No. #25: [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/37/de/37defb66-9457-4eeb-887a-f0c168dc4365/v-dem\\_policybrief-25\\_201002\\_v2.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/37/de/37defb66-9457-4eeb-887a-f0c168dc4365/v-dem_policybrief-25_201002_v2.pdf).

[24] <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/#/indices/world-map?covid19=1>.

[25] See Brown et al. 2020; International IDEA 2019.

[26] Brown et al. 2020; Afsahi et al. 2020; Youngs and Panchulidze 2020.

[27] Ibid.

[28] See Gerardo L. Munck (2009): *Measuring Democracy: A Bridge Between Scholarship and Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 127.

[29] See Varieties of Democracy: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>.

[30] 2009: 125.

[31] UNGA Resolution, “Comprehensive and coordinated response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic,” 11 Sept. 2020, A/RES/74/306, para. 41, p. 11.

[32] Richard Youngs (2015): Exploring “Non-Western Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 26(4): p. 140.

[33] UNGA resolutions in Sept 2020 on Covid-19 advocated greater cooperation for sharing timely, accurate, transparent information, scientific knowledge, and, *inter alia*, establishing participatory multi-stakeholder platforms. A/RES/74/307, para 1, p. 2; A/RES/74//306, paras. 51-53, p. 13.

[34] Maryam Zarnegar Deloffre (April 17, 2020): “Failed or Failsafe? Global Pandemic Response as Polycentric Governance,” *Global Cooperation Research: A Quarterly Magazine*, Käte Hamburger Kolleg, Centre for Global Cooperation Research, pgs. 8-9.

[35] See Michael G. Schechter (2005): *United Nations Global Conferences*. New York: Routledge, pgs. 13-14.

[36] Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss (2001): *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 116-119.

[37] <https://www.government.se/statements/2020/09/announcement-friends-in-defence-of-democracy/>

[38] Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (March/April 2020): Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump, *Foreign Affairs* 99 (2): 64-76.

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