



**GLOBAL  
DEMOCRACY  
COALITION**

# GLOBAL DEMOCRACY COALITION'S

## Reflections of the GDC Regional Forums 2025

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March and April 2025, the Global Democracy Coalition convened four Regional Forums across Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, bringing together 2000 participants in person and online. From Buenos Aires to Bangkok, Nairobi to Milan, citizens, activists, policymakers and scholars engaged in vibrant dialogues on the state of democracy and pathways to renewal.

Despite regional differences, the message was clear: democracy may be under strain but it remains resilient. Across continents, participants reaffirmed the urgency of defending fundamental freedoms, rebuilding trust in institutions, and ensuring that youth and marginalized communities are not sidelined but placed at the heart of democratic life.

Four powerful lessons that cut across every region:

- *Trust and accountability:* A profound crisis of trust in institutions is driving disengagement, but citizens are demanding more transparency and accountability.
- *Youth as present, not future:* Young people across all regions insisted that they are not leaders of tomorrow but active changemakers today. From Latin America's 'empty chair' installations to Asia's co-created action plans, youth called for structural reform, not symbolic gestures.



- *Democracy and rights are interconnected:* In Africa, corruption and environmental justice were seen as inseparable from democratic renewal. In Europe, freedom struggles in Ukraine and Belarus underscored the global stakes. In Asia, youth highlighted how disinformation and exclusion hinder their participation.
- *Local innovation, global solidarity:* Territorial approaches in Latin America, grassroots climate action in Africa, digital activism in Asia, and coalition-building in Europe show that while challenges are global, solutions are rooted in both local contexts and cross-border alliances.

These forums were more than regional gatherings—they were building blocks of a global democratic conversation. Together, they point to concrete next steps: investing in civic innovation, empowering youth leadership, addressing corruption and inequality, and strengthening international coalitions to defend freedom and democracy.

In the light of the decision by the US administration to cut its foreign aid budget, the Coalition Secretariat, together with the Steering Group and with the support of one of our donors, made the difficult but necessary decision not to convene a Global Forum this year. Instead, resources were redirected to an emergency fund, which enabled nine coalition organizations in distress to continue their vital work. This act of solidarity underscores the Coalition's commitment not only to convening conversations, but to standing by its partners in difficult times.









# INTRODUCTION

## WHY REGIONAL FORUMS?

The world is at a critical juncture for the future of democracy. Across continents, citizens are questioning whether democratic systems can deliver on their promises of justice, equality and freedom. Authoritarian regimes are increasing their power and sophistication, deploying technology, propaganda and economic leverage to undermine institutions at home and abroad. Trust in governments is eroding, civic space is shrinking, and participation remains fragile. Alongside these threats, however, are also signs of resilience and innovation. Communities continue to organize protests, experiment with new forms of participation and create networks that transcend borders and generations. Recent youth-led mobilizations around the world remind us that even in difficult circumstances, democracy remains a powerful force for change. It was in this context that the Global Democracy Coalition (GDC) convened its 2025 Regional Forums in Milan, Buenos Aires, Bangkok and Nairobi. These gatherings brought together 2000 participants from over 40 countries. Civil society leaders, policymakers, academics, grassroots organizers, youth and media voices all contributed to a truly global conversation about the present and future of democracy. The forums were conceived as spaces not only for analyzing challenges, but also for imagining solutions, testing approaches, and mobilizing action.

The aims were clear: to capture regional perspectives on the state of democracy and human rights, to identify innovative strategies that address urgent threats and to feed into a global process that builds momentum toward the GDC's Global Forum and shapes future advocacy.



Each forum was co-organized with local partners and designed to foster dialogue, experimentation and collaboration. They blended high-level debate with participatory workshops and creative activities, from youth-led interactive exercises to symbolic gestures such as the 'empty chair', a powerful reminder of the voices still missing from decision-making spaces. In every region, ideas were not only discussed but experienced, tested and transformed into tangible pathways for democratic renewal. The conversations demonstrated that democracy is both universal and deeply contextual. While all regions are grappling with declining levels of trust, authoritarian pushback, disinformation and inequality, these manifest themselves in different ways. In Europe, democracy is tested by war on its borders, and the urgency of defending freedom struggles abroad. In the Americas, a profound crisis of trust has driven citizens to create new forms of local and community-driven democracy. In Asia, structural barriers continue to exclude youth from decision making, even as young people emerge as powerful digital and street-level mobilizers. In Africa, corruption and climate injustice are inseparable from democratic renewal, as Generation Z protests call for systemic reform.

By convening regional dialogues, the Coalition ensured that global strategies were informed by local realities. The forums allowed participants not only to reflect on democracy's challenges, but also to co-create actionable proposals rooted in their communities' experiences. More than a series of events, each became a building block in a global democratic conversation, adding depth and perspective to the larger mosaic.

This report brings together the voices and insights of those who took part in these forums. It highlights regional specificities, identifies cross-cutting lessons and makes recommendations for governments, donors, civil society and the Coalition itself. Above all, it amplifies the perspectives of youth leaders, grassroots activists and community innovators who are working every day to defend and renew democracy. Their message is clear: democracy is not only defended in parliaments or at summits, but in neighbourhoods, classrooms and online spaces, and through the courage of those who demand accountability.



CREATION OF  
A "DEMOCRACY  
CAUCUS" WITH  
BENEFITS FOR  
DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES



# REGIONAL SNAPSHOTS

## SUMMARY

Each of the four Regional Forums organized by the Global Democracy Coalition in March and April 2025 offered a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing democracy today. Taken together, they painted a picture of a world where democratic values are being contested, but also where communities and civil society are innovating and resisting with creativity and determination.

In Milan, the conversation centred on Europe's responsibility to stand with those on the frontline of authoritarian repression and to reimagine global governance so that democracies can act collectively. In Buenos Aires, local leaders and grassroots innovators demonstrated how trust in democracy can be rebuilt from the ground up, through experimentation and community-driven approaches. In Bangkok, youth from across Asia pushed for structural reform to ensure their participation in politics, refusing to accept tokenism or exclusion. In Nairobi, activists and policymakers linked democracy with the urgent struggles against corruption and climate injustice, showing that governance, rights, and sustainability are inseparable.

While each forum reflected its own regional realities, certain threads connected them all. Participants underscored the crisis of trust in institutions, the demand for accountability and the need for youth to be treated as current leaders rather than future promises. They showed that local innovations—whether through civic technologies, community labs or youth-led activism—can generate solutions, but that global solidarity is essential to defend and sustain them.

The following sections provide a closer look at each of the four Regional Forums. They highlight the discussions that took place, the insights that emerged, the debates that shaped them and the proposals that point to a more resilient democratic future.

## FREEDOM MARATHON: GDC EUROPE FORUM

Held in Milan under the banner of the Freedom Marathon, the GDC Europe Forum was less a traditional conference and more a laboratory for imagining a global coalition for freedom. Participants confronted Europe's dual challenge: How to defend democracy at home while standing in solidarity with those resisting authoritarianism abroad.

### Key highlights

- The freedom struggles in Belarus and Ukraine were framed as global battles for democracy.
- The urgency of building coalitions that link citizens, civil society and states across borders.
- Youth leadership was seen as a critical driver of renewal, amid calls for structural opportunities to act now.
- There was a broad agreement that the existing international order is ill-equipped to defend democracy, sparking debates on reform and new models.



Photo by: GDC Europe Forum



## Discussion and debate

The Forum revealed a shared sense of urgency. The war in Ukraine and repression in Belarus were not treated as isolated crises but as part of a wider struggle that will define the future of democracy itself. Participants stressed that authoritarian regimes do not remain confined within borders—they actively export propaganda, fear and repression, often weaponizing technology, energy dependence or migration to destabilize democratic societies. For many, this reinforced the conviction that Europe cannot afford to see itself as insulated. Its credibility and its very stability depend on standing with those who resist authoritarianism abroad, while also addressing vulnerabilities within its own democratic systems.

These reflections quickly led to a broader discussion on the international world order. Many observed that the multilateral architecture designed in the aftermath of the Second World War has become increasingly paralysed in the face of authoritarian aggression. The United Nations was singled out repeatedly as essential in principle, but hamstrung by outdated power dynamics and political compromises. Some argued that it can still be salvaged through bold reforms—abolishing the Security Council veto, enforcing existing treaties with real consequences and opening up space for citizen participation in global governance structures.



Others pushed further, questioning whether reform is sufficient. They emphasized that even a reformed UN might be too slow or politically constrained to respond to today's democratic crises. For this reason, participants proposed the creation of new mechanisms outside the UN system: a Democracy Caucus of like-minded states capable of acting quickly when democratic values are under threat.



Additional proposals included citizen assemblies that would transcend borders and give ordinary people a direct voice in shaping international policy, and a global transparency platform to monitor and expose corruption and repression in real time.

What was striking was not the division between reformers and those advocating for new architectures, but the broad agreement that the status quo is untenable. Participants agreed that freedom cannot

survive without stronger and more enforceable mechanisms for accountability, for both states and multilateral institutions. This means moving beyond rhetorical commitments and to create structures—either within existing institutions or outside of them—that can deliver tangible consequences when democratic norms are violated. For many, this was not just an institutional issue but an existential one: without credible enforcement, authoritarian regimes will continue to erode the rules-based order with impunity.

Youth leadership was another thread woven throughout the debates. The Forum acknowledged a worrying erosion of civic participation across Europe. Many young citizens feel disillusioned or disengaged from traditional politics. The young participants present were unequivocal in their response, however; they are not willing to wait for their turn. They insisted on being treated as full partners today, not simply as leaders of tomorrow. Their interventions emphasized the need for structural opportunities—quotas in political parties, avenues for civic tech engagement and transnational platforms where youth can connect and advocate collectively. As Bernard Dika put it, *‘if we wait, there may be no democracy left for us to inherit’*. The youth contributions were not just passionate, but also deeply strategic, linking grassroots mobilization with institutional reform and showing how digital activism can be harnessed to re-energize democratic life.



Photo by: GDC Europe Forum

Another important line of debate centred on the role of citizens in revitalizing democracy. Several participants challenged the assumption that democratic renewal can only come from governments or formal institutions. They highlighted the rise of citizen assemblies, protest movements and grassroots organizing across Europe as proof that legitimacy must also be rebuilt from the bottom up. This led to reflections on a broader concept of 'societal democracy', one that constantly listens to citizens and integrates their voices into governance beyond election cycles. For some, this was not just a corrective to institutional stagnation, but a defence against authoritarian narratives that thrive when citizens feel ignored or powerless.

By the close, participants had not produced a blueprint for a new coalition for freedom, but they had defined its essential contours. Solidarity with those resisting repression abroad, rethinking or reinventing global institutions, grounding democracy in active citizen participation and ensuring that youth are treated as co-authors of democratic renewal emerged as pillars. The Milan Forum was less about producing ready-made answers and more about clarifying what is at stake, articulating the principles that must guide future action and demonstrating the energy and creativity that Europe can contribute to a broader global movement.

Perhaps most importantly, the Forum highlighted a shift in mindset: democracy in Europe can no longer be seen as something to defend solely within national borders. Participants recognized that the frontlines of democracy are global—from Kyiv to Minsk, from grassroots protests to international institutions. Europe's role is not just to preserve what it has, but to join forces across borders, to push back against authoritarianism wherever it appears and to imagine together a democratic order that reflects the realities of this century rather than those of the last.

## Takeaway

The Milan Forum crystallized a core insight: for Europe, defending democracy is no longer only about safeguarding its internal institutions—it is about joining forces across borders to resist authoritarianism and to design a democratic order that reflects the realities of our century.

## Proposals emerging from the Forum

- A reform of existing multilateral institutions, including proposals to limit or abolish the UN Security Council veto and strengthen enforcement mechanisms for international treaties.
- Alongside these reforms, participants also proposed creating new structures outside the UN system, such as a Democracy Caucus, a voluntary coalition of like-minded democratic states, to coordinate action more quickly when democratic norms are threatened.
- An International Legal Defence Fund to support persecuted activists and political prisoners.
- A Global Transparency Platform to monitor human rights violations and corruption in authoritarian regimes.
- Citizen assemblies to give global citizens a direct role in shaping international decisions.
- Reform of the UN Security Council, including the abolition of veto powers, to democratize global governance.



## Voices from the Forum

*'Five years ago, Belarusians chose democracy. They stood up, voted, and demanded a better future. But their votes were stolen. Authoritarian regimes do not stay within their borders; they export oppression, fear, and propaganda',*

— Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, President-in-exile of Belarus

*'There can be no real peace without Ukrainian leadership in peace negotiations. To let dictators get their way does not lead to peace, but to more destruction and war',*

— Oleksandra Romantsova, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Ukraine

*'Young people are often told they are the future, but the truth is, we must act now. If we wait, there may be no democracy left for us to inherit',*

— Bernard Dika, Spokesperson for the President of Regione Toscana

*'The world has seen several treaties about democracy, but without enforcement, they are just words on paper',*

— George Katrougalos, UN Independent Expert

*'What if diplomacy also included direct participation from global citizens?',*

— Virginia Fiume, European University Institute

*'It is important to remember that democracy is not just about elections. Democracy is about the entire system—the checks and balances, the rule of law, the protection of fundamental rights, the ability of people to organize, speak freely, and hold power accountable. Without these, elections alone mean nothing. That's why autocrats love to hold elections—they know that a rigged election can provide the illusion of legitimacy without any of the real substance of democracy',*

— Kenneth Roth, former executive director of Human Rights Watch



## CHANGE NETWORKS FOR DEMOCRACY: GDC AMERICAS FORUM

The GDC Americas Forum took place in Buenos Aires under the theme Change Networks for Democracy. At a time when trust in democratic institutions across Latin America is at a historic low, the Forum created a space for local leaders, activists and innovators to reimagine democracy from the ground up. Participants emphasized that while democracy is under pressure from polarization, inequality and authoritarian tendencies, communities across the region continue to generate creative responses. The Forum underscored the idea that territory is not just geography, but the engine of democratic renewal.

### Key highlights

- Democracy in Latin America is being reshaped at the local and community levels, where citizens experience both exclusion and innovation most directly.
- A deep crisis of trust in institutions was acknowledged, linked to the distance between governments and citizens, corruption and weak accountability.
- Youth and marginalized groups demanded genuine participation, rejecting tokenism and calling for structural inclusion.
- Innovative methodologies, such as empathy mapping to understand lived realities, systems mapping to reveal structural drivers and Change Networks that bring diverse actors together to co-design solutions, were used to co-create democratic responses. Concrete outputs included democracy labs, digital literacy campaigns, civic tech tools and intergenerational leadership circles.



Photo by: GDC Americas Forum

## Discussion and debate

The Buenos Aires Forum opened with clear recognition of the problem: democracy in Latin America is struggling to retain its legitimacy. Citizens feel excluded from decision making and many associate institutions with bureaucracy, corruption or inefficiency rather than representation. However, participants refused to stop at the diagnosis. Instead, the discussion shifted to how democracy can be reimagined at the local level, where exclusion is most visible but also where innovation is most possible.

Participants from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay highlighted how territorial approaches can anchor democracy. Local government, municipalities and grassroots organizations were identified as spaces where experimentation can happen, and where participatory budgeting, open data initiatives and community-driven decision making are already being tested and scaled. One participant put it simply: *'We must democratize not only power, but also imagination—and that starts in the neighbourhoods'*. This framing reflected a core conviction of the Forum: that solutions must be grounded in lived realities, not imported from outside.



Photo by: GDC Americas Forum

A recurring theme was the erosion of trust. Across the panels and workshops, participants described a vicious circle in which citizens disengage from politics, leaders become less responsive and institutions grow weaker. This disconnect has created fertile ground for populism, misinformation and authoritarian narratives. Restoring trust was seen as the most urgent challenge, requiring greater transparency and accountability and more inclusive decision making.

Importantly, trust was discussed not only as a precondition for democracy, but also as a consequence of democratic practice—something that can only be rebuilt through sustained engagement and reciprocity.

Youth engagement emerged as a central axis of debate. Participants underscored that young people are often described as apathetic, but the barriers to their participation are systemic: lack of confidence, exclusionary



communication, bureaucratic hurdles and, in some cases, outright discouragement. A live word cloud created during the Forum revealed ‘disinterest, distrust, bureaucracy, lack of confidence and discouragement’ as the most cited obstacles. Young leaders pushed back against narratives of disengagement, calling for horizontal, agile and collaborative forms of governance that reflect their realities. One participant insisted: *‘We don’t just want a seat at the table. We want to redesign the table itself’.*

Another strand of debate addressed technology and inclusion. Participants recognized that digital tools are enablers of participation but warned against ‘techno-solutionism’ that ignores social divides. Access to open data, digital literacy and civic tech were considered essential, but participants highlighted the persistence of a digital divide that excludes rural and vulnerable populations. Similarly, the Forum drew attention to the contradictions of inclusion: *‘We talk about participation, but don’t build ramps to the polling station’.* Discussions on disability rights, migrant inclusion and intergenerational collaboration reinforced that democracy must be physically, culturally and socially accessible.

Throughout the Forum, Change Networks methodology was used to move from discussion to action. Tools such as empathy mapping and systems mapping allowed participants

to identify the root causes of democratic disconnection and to prioritize feasible, impactful solutions. Symbolic interventions such as the ‘empty chair’ left for missing voices—reminded participants that democracy requires deliberate space-making for those excluded. The act of weaving networks visually demonstrated the power of interconnection and collaboration across territories.

By the conclusion, participants had produced a number of concrete proposals on creating local democracy labs, launching digital literacy campaigns, developing open-source civic tech, establishing Regional Change Networks and building intergenerational leadership circles. These were not abstract ideas but actionable steps grounded in practice, ready to be replicated across the region.

The emotional resonance of the Forum was also striking. Many participants described the event as a rare space where they felt heard, connected and energized. As one noted, *‘We didn’t know how much we needed a space like this, especially at a moment like this one’*. In a context where polarization and fatigue often dominate, the Forum provided hope that collaboration across borders and communities is still possible.

### Takeaway

The Buenos Aires Forum showed that democracy in Latin America will not be renewed by top-down reforms alone. Its resilience depends on territorial innovation, rebuilding trust, the structural inclusion of youth and marginalized voices, and the creative use of civic technologies to reconnect citizens and institutions.

### Proposals emerging from the Forum

- Establish local democracy labs to test and replicate participatory models.
- Launch digital literacy campaigns targeted at vulnerable populations.
- Develop open-source civic tech tools for monitoring and co-designing public policies.
- Create intergenerational leadership circles to foster collaboration across age groups.
- Institutionalize Regional Change Networks for policy exchange and peer learning.



## Voices from the Forum

*'Crisis is not destiny',*

— participant, Buenos Aires

*'We must democratize not only power, but also imagination  
—and that starts in the neighborhoods',*

— Gabriela Vega Franco, Recambio, Peru

*'We don't just want a seat at the table. We want to redesign  
the table itself.'*

— youth participant, Buenos Aires

*'Data is a right, not a bonus. Without it, democracy becomes  
opaque',*

— Natalia Carfi, Open Data Charter

*'We talk about participation, but don't build ramps to the  
polling station. That's a contradiction',*

— Karina Sánchez, Municipality of Junín



## BREAKING BARRIERS FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION: GDC ASIA FORUM

The GDC Asia Forum was held in Bangkok under the theme Youth, Democracy and Elections. It brought together nearly 100 participants, including youth leaders, academics, civil society organizations, diplomats and policymakers from across the region. The discussions reflected both the vibrancy and the vulnerability of democracy in Asia. While young people are increasingly active in movements and digital spaces, systemic barriers continue to prevent them from participating fully in formal politics and decision making. The Forum became a platform not only for identifying these obstacles, but also for creating a regional action plan for youth political participation.

### Key Highlights

- Young leaders rejected tokenistic approaches and demanded structural reform to enable genuine participation in politics.
- Persistent barriers were identified, such as entrenched elites, high entry costs, weak voter registration systems, gender discrimination and shrinking civic space.
- Civic education, training and advocacy emerged as critical short-term priorities.
- Participants stressed the importance of tackling disinformation and online harassment, especially that targeted at young women leaders.
- A co-created multi-stage Action Plan set out short-, medium- and long-term strategies for youth inclusion.



Photo by: GDC Asia Forum

## Discussion and debate

The Forum began by recognizing the paradox facing youth in Asia. While young people are the largest demographic group in many countries and have demonstrated their power in social movements—from Hong Kong to Thailand and the ‘Milk Tea Alliance’—their representation in formal politics remains strikingly low. Participants described how systemic barriers perpetuate this exclusion. Political dynasties dominate political party systems, electoral processes are costly and complex, and voter registration frameworks often fail to engage with younger citizens. The result is a structural deficit in which youth are politically active in the streets and online, but under represented in parliaments and decision-making spaces.

A recurring theme was the interplay between governance and exclusion. Entrenched elites were described as resistant to opening up space for new generations, while financial barriers make political participation unattainable for many young people. Gender discrimination compounds these challenges. Women, in particular, face harassment, violence and systemic under-representation. Several young women leaders shared experiences of online abuse, intimidation, and the absence of institutional protections—underscoring that without tackling gender-based violence, youth inclusion will remain incomplete.



Debates also highlighted the challenges facing civil society. Funding gaps, generational divides and increasing repression have weakened many youth-led organizations. Participants warned that without stronger support, the pipeline of young activists moving into leadership positions will dry up. At the same time, they recognized

the power of digital activism. Networks like the ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ were celebrated as creative, cross-border movements that demonstrate the potential of youth solidarity in the digital age.



Participants cautioned that digital spaces are double-edged, however, as disinformation campaigns and online harassment are eroding trust and silencing young voices.

At the heart of the Forum was a co-created Action Plan on youth participation, structured around short-, medium- and long-term priorities. In the short term, civic education campaigns, training workshops and advocacy initiatives were identified as urgent steps to build awareness and capacity. Medium-term



goals included the establishment of youth groups within political parties, gender quotas, curricular reforms to integrate democratic values and stronger policy frameworks on protecting youth and women in politics. Long-term aspirations went further, calling for structural reforms to reduce the dominance of political dynasties, support for youth-led social enterprises and the institutionalization of youth wings in civil society and policymaking spaces.

By the close of the Forum, the message from youth was unmistakable. They are not passive stakeholders waiting for permission to lead, but current actors determined to claim their place in shaping democratic futures. As one participant summarized, *'We are not the leaders of tomorrow. We are the leaders of today—but the system needs to let us in'*.

### Takeaway

The Bangkok Forum demonstrated that democracy in Asia cannot be renewed without tackling the structural barriers that exclude youth. From political dynasties to online harassment, the obstacles are systemic—but so too are the solutions. The latter must combine education, policy reform and institutional change to recognize youth as full democratic actors now. The Asia Forum showed that youth are not passive spectators but architects of change, demanding structural reforms to make politics inclusive.

## Proposals emerging from the Forum

- Launch civic education and advocacy campaigns to engage with youth in the short term.
- Support youth groups in political parties and introduce quotas for youth and women in elected bodies.
- Revise curricula to integrate democratic values and critical thinking.
- Strengthen protections against online harassment and gender-based violence.
- Promote cross-border youth alliances such as the 'Milk Tea Alliance' as spaces for solidarity.
- Advance structural reforms to reduce the dominance of political dynasties and increase opportunities for youth-led organizations.



## Voices from the Forum

*'We are not the leaders of tomorrow. We are the leaders of today—but the system needs to let us in',*

— Youth participant

*'Without tackling gender-based violence, youth participation will always be incomplete',*

— Forum participant, Bangkok

*'Digital activism can be a powerful tool, but disinformation and harassment are pushing many young voices out of the debate',*

— Youth activist

*'Political dynasties will not open the door for us. We have to build new spaces of participation ourselves',*

— Youth leader



## DEMOCRACY, CORRUPTION AND CLIMATE JUSTICE: GDC AFRICA FORUM

The GDC Africa Forum was held in Nairobi at Daystar University with the theme 'Advancing Democratic Resilience at the Intersection of Human Rights and Environmental Justice'. It convened over 200 participants from 14 African countries, including youth leaders, civil society organizations, policymakers and grassroots activists. The Forum emphasized that democracy in Africa cannot be separated from struggles against corruption, human rights violations and climate injustice. It was a vivid reminder that governance, rights, and sustainability are inextricably linked, and that the renewal of democracy on the continent will be driven by those who experience these challenges most directly.

### Key Highlights

- Corruption was identified as a root cause undermining both democracy and environmental sustainability.
- Generation Z-led protests were recognized as powerful engines of democratic renewal across the continent.
- Participants linked climate justice with human rights, stressing that marginalized groups bear the brunt of environmental degradation.
- Grassroots organizations were seen as central actors in fighting corruption, defending civic space and leading climate action.
- Proposals focused on institutional reform, the redistribution of resources and youth empowerment.



Photo by: GDC Africa Forum

## Discussion and debate

The Forum opened with an acknowledgement of Africa's paradox. The continent is rich in natural resources, human capital and creativity, but corruption and weak governance have eroded public trust, undermined institutions and left many citizens excluded from decision-making. Participants were unanimous in naming corruption as one of the greatest threats to democratic resilience. With billions of dollars siphoned annually from public budgets, corruption was described as not only a political and economic crime, but also as an attack on human rights and the environment. One participant argued: *'When corruption drains our resources, it robs communities not just of money but of schools, hospitals and forests'*.

A major line of debate centred on the intersection of democracy and climate justice. Africa contributes the least to global emissions but is disproportionately affected by climate change. Participants stressed that climate governance cannot be treated as separate from democracy. Communities affected by floods, drought and deforestation must be given a voice in decision making. Corruption in environmental governance, such as mismanagement of carbon credits or extractive industries, was highlighted as a double injustice — harming the planet while entrenching inequality. Grassroots activists shared how local initiatives, from tree planting movements to community-led climate monitoring, are protecting ecosystems and strengthening democratic participation.



Photo by: GDC Africa Forum

The role of youth movements featured prominently in the discussions. Across the continent, Generation Z protests have challenged corruption, demanded electoral transparency and confronted authoritarian governments. From Senegal's recent youth-led mobilizations to Kenya's own waves of protest, participants noted that young people are forcing governments to listen and shaping new forms of civic resistance.

At the same time, many emphasized that youth activism remains precarious. Repression, intimidation and limited access to formal politics often silence young voices. Forum participants called for youth participation to be institutionalized through youth councils, quotas and protection of civic space so that the energy of protest movements translates into sustainable political change.



Another strand of the debate focused on shrinking civic space. Participants described how laws, intimidation and violence are being used to silence civil society, journalists and activists. They also shared examples of resilience, however, such as legal aid networks, digital activism and solidarity among grassroots organizations. Technology was described as both a risk and an opportunity. While digital surveillance and online repression are spreading, tech is also enabling new forms of accountability, from exposing corruption to mobilizing protests.

By the close of the Forum, participants had converged on a set of principles for Africa's democratic renewal: corruption must be confronted as an existential threat; climate justice must be treated as a democratic issue; youth must be recognized as current leaders; and civic space must be protected as the foundation for all other rights. The conversations reinforced the fact that democracy in Africa will not thrive unless governance, human rights, and sustainability are also addressed.

### Takeaway

The Nairobi Forum made clear that democracy, human rights and environmental justice are inseparable in Africa. Tackling corruption and empowering youth are not just political reforms; they are prerequisites for a sustainable democratic future.



## Proposals emerging from the Forum

- Criminalize corruption more comprehensively and close legal loopholes that allow impunity.
- Strengthen civic and political education to empower youth as active citizens.
- Redistribute carbon credits and natural resource revenues more equitably.
- Support grassroots climate initiatives that link environmental protection with democratic participation.
- Institutionalize youth councils and intergenerational dialogue platforms.
- Use technology to enhance transparency and accountability while safeguarding against digital repression.



## Voices from the Forum

*'When corruption drains our resources, it robs communities not just of money but of their future',*

— Gladwell Otieno, AfriCOG

*'We need to stop treating corruption as business as usual and start treating it as an existential threat to democracy',*

— Samuel Kimeu, Kenya

*'If people cannot influence how natural resources are managed, their democratic rights are already being violated',*

— Wanjira Mathai, World Resources Institute

*'Gen Z is not asking for permission. We are already reshaping Africa's democratic landscape',*

— Achieng Akena, Pan-African Lawyers Union

*'Our civic space is shrinking, but our determination is growing stronger. Each time they close a door, we open another',*

— Phyllis Omido, Center for Justice, Governance and Environmental  
Action

*'Technology is not neutral. It can oppress or empower. The question is: who controls it, and for whose benefit?',*

— Nanjala Nyabola, writer and political analyst









## Cross-cutting Lessons

While each Regional Forum reflected the specific realities of its continent, together they revealed striking commonalities. Across Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe, citizens and activists voiced frustration with failing systems, but also shared bold ideas for renewal. Four themes in particular emerged as threads that connect all four conversations.

### CRISIS OF TRUST, DEMAND FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

In every region, participants spoke of a deep crisis of trust in institutions. Citizens increasingly doubt whether governments, parliaments, or even international organizations are working in their interest. This mistrust is fuelled by corruption, elite capture, disinformation and the perception that political leaders are disconnected from everyday realities. In the Americas, participants described how disengagement and frustration have weakened the legitimacy of democracy itself. One leader noted that *'people don't see democracy delivering on their daily lives, and that is where trust dies'*. In Africa, corruption was highlighted as the most visible expression of this breakdown, draining resources that should have gone to schools and hospitals. In Europe, the inability of international institutions to hold authoritarian states accountable was cited as a driver of disillusionment. Across all the forums, however, participants did not reject democracy itself—they demanded that it be strengthened through accountability, transparency and genuine participation. Rather than an argument against democracy, the crisis of trust was framed as a call to rebuild democracy on firmer foundations of integrity and responsiveness.

## YOUTH AS CURRENT LEADERS

Perhaps the clearest and most consistent lesson was the insistence that young people are not leaders of tomorrow but leaders of today. In every forum, youth voices rejected tokenism and symbolic gestures. They demanded real power and structural reform to allow them to participate in decision making as equals. In Buenos Aires, the 'empty chair' symbolized the absence of youth, among other missing voices, from current political spaces, while young participants called for the table to be redesigned. In Bangkok, youth leaders co-created an action plan that ranged from civic education to quotas in political parties and long-term reforms to break the grip of political dynasties. In Nairobi, Generation Z activists highlighted recent mass protests in Kenya, Senegal and Nigeria as evidence that youth are already reshaping politics on the continent. In Milan, young Europeans warned that waiting passively would mean inheriting nothing. Across the regions, the message was unified: democracy without youth is incomplete and systems that exclude young voices are doomed to irrelevance.

## DEMOCRACY, RIGHTS, AND CLIMATE INTERLINKED

A third shared theme was a recognition that democracy cannot be siloed from broader struggles for rights and sustainability. In Africa, participants emphasized that corruption and environmental degradation are inseparable, and climate governance failures are seen as democratic failures. In Asia, young leaders highlighted how gender discrimination and online harassment prevent equal participation, linking human rights directly to the health of democracy. In Europe, the struggles of Ukraine and Belarus underscored how sovereignty, freedom and security are tied to the defence of democratic values. In the Americas, the inclusion of marginalized communities—people with disabilities, migrants and older adults—was framed as essential to rebuilding legitimacy. Taken together, these reflections point to a powerful truth: democracy is not just a political system, but the framework through which societies achieve justice, equality and sustainability. To defend democracy is also to defend human rights and the environment.

## LOCAL INNOVATION, GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

The forums underscored that renewal comes from the ground up, but requires solidarity across borders. In the Americas, methodologies such as Change Networks and democracy labs showed how local experimentation can rebuild participation and trust. In Africa, grassroots climate activists demonstrated that community initiatives can both protect ecosystems and strengthen democratic participation. In Asia, digital networks such as the 'Milk Tea Alliance' illustrate how youth movements can transcend national borders. In Europe, proposals for a global coalition for freedom reflect an understanding that authoritarian threats are global in scope and demand collective action. Local innovations give democracy new life but without global solidarity, they risk being isolated and vulnerable. The lesson is clear: defending democracy in the 21st century requires both grassroots creativity and cross-border coalitions.

Taken together, these four lessons remind us that democracy is alive, contested and evolving. The crisis of trust is real, but is matched by citizens' demands for accountability. Youth are no longer willing to wait—they are insisting on shaping the present. Human rights and sustainability cannot be separated from democratic practice. Finally, while solutions are rooted locally, they can only thrive through global solidarity.









# RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

The Regional Forums made clear that while democracy faces grave challenges, it is also rich with possibilities for renewal. Citizens are not abandoning democracy—they are demanding that it deliver. The voices from Milan, Buenos Aires, Bangkok and Nairobi converged on a call for greater accountability, stronger inclusion and new forms of solidarity that match the scale of authoritarian threats. Translating these lessons into action requires commitment from governments, donors, civil society and the Global Democracy Coalition itself.

## FOR GOVERNMENTS AND DONORS

Public funding for democracy and human rights remains alarmingly low, at less than 1.5 per cent of global Official Development Assistance (ODA). Participants in all regions stressed that this is no longer sustainable. In early 2025, the USA cancelled around 86 per cent of its USAID awards and 41 per cent of State Department programmes, cancelling roughly \$80.5 billion in aid, much of it democracy-, rights- and governance-related. Defending democracy must be treated with the same urgency as defending peace, healthcare, or the environment. Governments and donors should increase dedicated resources for democratic governance, not only in electoral cycles, but also for civic education, participation and institutional reform.

Investing in youth leadership was another consistent demand. From Buenos Aires to Bangkok, young leaders made clear that tokenism is not enough. Governments should create structural pathways for youth participation by supporting quotas for young candidates, funding leadership training and creating accessible channels for youth to influence policymaking. Without such measures, democracies risk losing legitimacy with the largest demographic group in many countries.

Finally, governments must recognize that environmental justice is a democratic imperative. From Nairobi to rural communities across the Americas, citizens emphasized that climate governance cannot be separated from rights and accountability. Policies and funding must therefore integrate climate and democracy by supporting grassroots climate initiatives, redistributing carbon credits fairly and strengthening participation in environmental decision making.

## FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND PARTNERS

Civil society is on the frontline of democratic renewal. The Forums showcased many innovations that can be scaled-up and replicated, such as Change Networks—collaborative groups that bring together diverse local actors to identify problems and co-design democratic solutions—and democracy labs in Latin America, civic tech platforms in Africa and Asia, and citizen assemblies in Europe. Partners should invest in these proven models, adapt them to local contexts and ensure that innovations do not remain isolated experiments but spread across regions.

Strengthening coalitions will also be critical. Authoritarian regimes are increasingly operating across borders, sharing tactics and resources. Democratic actors must do the same. Civil society organizations should deepen collaboration with one another, as well as with academic institutions, local government, media outlets and the private sector, to create powerful alliances that can resist disinformation and defend civic space.



Equally important is amplifying marginalized voices. Women, migrants, people with disabilities and grassroots activists are often the first to feel the impact of democratic erosion, but they are the least represented in decision making. Civil society must not just include them but place them at the centre of democratic reforms, ensuring that new practices and institutions reflect the full diversity of society.

## FOR THE GLOBAL DEMOCRACY COALITION

The GDC has a unique role to play. The Regional Forums showed that it is not just a convener, but a bridge between grassroots voices and global institutions. The Coalition should carry forward the momentum of the Forums into the Global Forum when it next meets, ensuring that regional insights shape global debates.

Its advocacy should remain anchored in the cross-cutting lessons identified across all four regions: the demand for trust and accountability, youth as present leaders, the integration of democracy with rights and climate justice, and the dual need for local innovation and global solidarity. These themes give the Coalition a clear mandate to frame the global democratic agenda.

Finally, the GDC must continue to build bridges with multilateral institutions and democratic governments, ensuring that regional insights and citizen voices inform policy at every level. As the Milan Forum highlighted, existing global structures are faltering but new coalitions are emerging. The GDC can act as a hub that connects local and regional experiences with global policymaking, ensuring that citizen voices are not lost in translation.

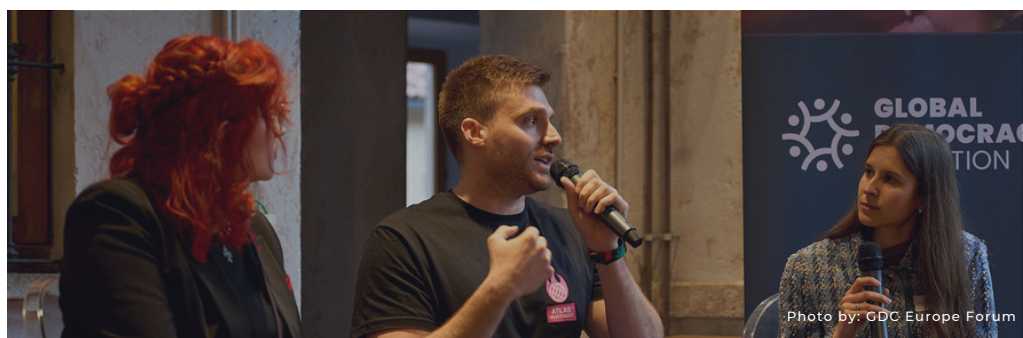


Photo by: GDC Europe Forum





# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR GOVERNMENTS AND DONORS

- *Prioritize democracy funding:* in a context of global cuts to democracy assistance, it is essential to increase ODA allocations for democracy and human rights. Investing in democratic governance must be understood as an enabler of all other development efforts, from health and education to climate resilience and economic inclusion.
- *Invest in youth leadership:* create quotas, leadership training, and structural opportunities.
- *Integrate climate and democracy:* treat environmental justice as central to governance.

## FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND PARTNERS

- *Scale-up local innovations:* replicate democracy labs, youth councils, civic tech and literacy campaigns.
- *Strengthen coalitions:* build cross-border and multistakeholder alliances that bring together civil society, youth, academia, local government, media outlets and the private sector, to counter authoritarian narratives and defend civic space.
- *Amplify marginalized voices:* put women, migrants, people with disabilities and grassroots actors at the center of democratic reform and institutional design.



## FOR THE GLOBAL DEMOCRACY COALITION

- *Carry forward the momentum:* integrate regional insights into the Global Forum when it next meets.
- *Anchor advocacy in cross-cutting lessons:* focus on trust, youth, climate-democracy nexus and solidarity.
- *Build bridges with global institutions:* ensure that insights from GDC partners inform decision-making bodies at the national and multilateral levels.









# CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

The Regional Forums of 2025 demonstrated that while democracy is under severe strain, it is also alive with innovation, resilience and courage. From Milan to Buenos Aires, Bangkok to Nairobi, citizens voiced their frustration with broken systems, but also their determination to reclaim and reinvent democracy in their own contexts.

The conversations showed that democracy's future will not be secured by declarations alone. It will depend on accountability that restores trust, youth who insist on shaping the present, societies that link rights and sustainability to democratic practice and communities that turn local innovation into global solidarity. These lessons are not abstract. They are already being lived out—in the protests of Generation Z, the creation of civic technologies, the defence of freedom in Ukraine and Belarus, the democracy labs of Latin America, the youth-led action plans in Asia and the grassroots climate initiatives in Africa.

The Global Democracy Coalition has a critical role to play in amplifying these voices and connecting them to global institutions. It can ensure that local struggles are not isolated, but instead shape the global democratic agenda. As authoritarian threats grow more coordinated, so too must democracies and their defenders. The GDC stands as a bridge between grassroots creativity and multilateral decision making, and between urgent local struggles and the long arc of democratic renewal.

The journey that began with four Regional Forums will continue next year and beyond. The call is clear. Democracy is not self-sustaining. It requires defenders, innovators and coalitions bold enough to imagine and build a freer, more just and more sustainable world.

# ANNEXES





- Europe Forum Report – Milan

Link: <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/GDC-Europe-Forum-2025-Final-Report.pdf>



Americas Forum Report – Buenos Aires

Link: <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/GDC-Americas-Forum-2025-Final-Report.pdf>



[content/uploads/2025/11/GDC-Americas-Forum-2025-Final-Report.pdf](https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/GDC-Americas-Forum-2025-Final-Report.pdf)

Asia Forum Report – Bangkok



Link: <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/GDC-Asia-Forum-2025-Final-Report.pdf>

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Africa Forum Report – Nairobi

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This report was written and designed by Elisenda Ballesté Buxó.

It offers a concise synthesis of the 2025 Regional Forums, distilling the core discussions, reflections, and preliminary recommendations that emerged across the dialogues. The document captures the perspectives shared by partners from Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe, highlighting common challenges as well as region-specific insights.

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