**Policy paper**

# Local and regional governments facing the rise of distrust, polarisation and extremisms

Contributions from the International Day of Democracy 2023

22nd IOPD Conference

# Credits

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# About the IOPD

**The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD)** is an international network open to all cities, organisations and research centres interested in learning about, exchanging and applying experiences of participatory democracy at the local level. It was founded in 2001 within the framework of the European Commission's URB-AL program for decentralised cooperation and its official constitution was in November 2001 in Barcelona, during the 1st IOPD Conference. Also, since 2006 it has been part of the world organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

# About UCLG

**United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)** is an umbrella international organisation for cities, LRGs, and municipal associations throughout the world that is concerned with representing and defending the interests of local governments on the world stage.

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# Overview

On the occasion of the 2023 **International Day of Democracy**, 15 September, the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD), with the support of **United Cities and Local Governments** and the **City of Rio de Janeiro**, organised the **webinar "Local and regional governments facing the rise of distrust, polarisation and extremism**." This virtual session brought together five local and regional leaders and experts to explore their municipal experiences in the current challenging context for democracy, but above all, to shed light on possible solutions to reverse this crisis from local and regional governments with an international perspective.

This webinar was part of the preparatory activities for the **22st IOPD Conference held in Rio de Janeiro from November 6 to 8** with the theme "Participatory Democracy for Diverse, Inclusive and Transparent Cities." Furthermore, this webinar, which explored **SDG 16 "Peace, justice and strong institutions**", took place in the run-up to the **2023 SDG Summit**, with the aim of providing high-level political guidance for transformative and accelerated action to advance towards the 2030 Agenda.

The objective of the webinar was **to present a diagnosis of the challenges facing democracy**, especially in relation to the threats posed by the rise of extremism, the loss of a serene and serious public debate and the targeting of the media and large social media platforms.

# Methodology

To make this diagnosis and, above all, to provide recommendations on how to overcome this situation, **several local and regional leaders and experts participated sharing their thoughts and experiences**. There was also a participatory exercise through the *Mentimeter* online tool where participants were encouraged to share key ideas on the challenges facing democracy.

Through this virtual exchange session and this policy paper, the IOPD aims to **inspire and empower local and regional governments to actively address the challenges that democracies are facing in different contexts**, but also of course the situation in non-democratic countries. The speakers of the session were:

- **Jose Manuel Ribeiro**, mayor of Valongo.
- **Mohamed Wajdi Aydi,** former Sfax Deputy Mayor, expert in Local Governance and coordinator of the Association Afrique Intelligence.
- **Nils Munthe**, Policy officer - Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions SALAR.

- **Ana Maria Vargas**, PhD and Research Director in Knowledge Centre - Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy ICLD.
- **Patrícia Marques dos Santos**, Open Government Coordinator for the City of São Paulo.

**This policy paper comprehensively analyses and compiles the experiences and knowledge shared by these local and regional leaders**. The audiovisual recording of the session can be found on the IOPD YouTube channel (video available with contributions in original language without interpretation).

# A need to address the global challenges of democracy from below

In 2007 the United Nations General Assembly resolved to observe September 15 as the International Day of Democracy—**to promote and uphold the principles of democracy**—and invited all member states and organisations to commemorate the day in an appropriate manner that contributes to raising public awareness.

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) organised this session on the International Day of Democracy 2023 to explore local and regional experiences in the context of the current global crisis of democracy, trust, public debate and information impacts all levels of government, but above all, **to shed light on the possible solutions to reverse this crisis from local and regional governments with an international perspective**.

**Democracy faces several threats globally, hindering its stability and effectiveness.** These challenges range from internal issues within democratic systems to external threats that impact their functionality and integrity.

**One significant threat stems from the erosion of democratic norms and values within societies.** Populist movements and leaders often exploit socio-economic grievances and polarisation to undermine democratic institutions. They might challenge the legitimacy of the media, judiciary, or electoral processes, eroding the trust citizens have in these crucial pillars of democracy.

Moreover, **the rise of authoritarianism poses a substantial menace to democratic governance**. Countries with autocratic regimes increasingly use sophisticated tactics to curtail freedoms, suppress dissent, and limit civic engagement. This trend threatens the spread and consolidation of democratic values.

Technological advancements present both opportunities and hardships to democracy. While **technology has been used as a tool to enhance civic participation and access to information, this use also raises concerns about data privacy, misinformation, and the manipulation of public opinion**. Social media platforms, for instance, can be manipulated to spread false information, polarise societies, and undermine the democratic discourse.

Another pressing difficulty is **the global decline in civic engagement and participation**. Many democracies struggle with low voter turnout, diminishing trust in political institutions, and a lack of engagement among younger generations. This apathy weakens the democratic process and reduces the representation of diverse voices within governance structures.
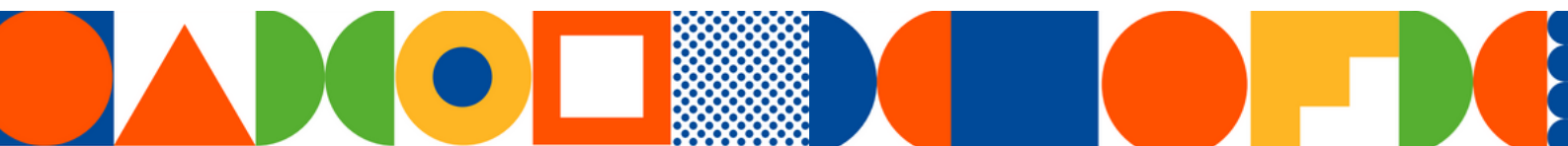
Furthermore, **economic inequality and social disparities also jeopardise democracy.** When a small segment of society holds a disproportionate amount of wealth and power, it can influence policies in its favour, undermining the principles of equality and fairness. Such disparities can fuel social unrest and diminish faith in democratic institutions to address these issues effectively.

**The global interconnectedness of economies and security has the potential to stress the threats against democracy**. Transnational menaces like terrorism, climate change, and economic crises require collaborative efforts among nations. However, differing interests and priorities among countries can hinder effective global cooperation, impacting the ability of democratic systems to address these pressing issues collectively.

Finally, **the fragility of democratic transitions in emerging democracies is a persistent challenge.** These nations often face hurdles in establishing robust democratic institutions, battling corruption, and ensuring the rule of law. External influences and internal conflicts can destabilise these fledgling democracies, hindering their progress towards stable and effective governance.

The challenges to democracy are multifaceted. Local and regional governments play a crucial role in safeguarding democracy and addressing threats to democratic values. This mission requires a concerted effort from both governments and citizens to address them. **Protecting democratic values, strengthening institutions, fostering civic engagement, and adapting to technological advancements** are crucial steps towards ensuring the resilience and longevity of democratic systems globally.

# LRGs as the frontline defenders of citizens' rights and democratic principles

**Local and regional governments play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges facing democracy**. Their proximity to transformative communities, place them as the **frontline defenders of civic rights**, often serving as **laboratories for innovative solutions** and initiatives that can reverse the negative trends.

**Fostering civic education and engagement at the grassroots level is crucial**. Local governments can implement programs in schools, community centres, and through online platforms to educate citizens about democratic principles, the importance of civic participation, and the functioning of government institutions. Encouraging active involvement in local decision-making processes empowers citizens and strengthens the democratic culture.

**Promoting transparency and accountability** within local governance is essential. Implementing open data initiatives, holding regular town hall meetings, and establishing mechanisms for citizen feedback can enhance transparency. This **transparency fosters trust between citizens and local authorities**, crucial for the legitimacy of democratic processes.

**Investing in technology for civic engagement can bridge the gap between governments and citizens**. Creating user-friendly platforms for information sharing, public consultations, and feedback mechanisms allows for broader participation and inclusivity in decision-making processes. Utilising social media and digital tools effectively can amplify citizen voices and facilitate dialogue.

**Fostering inclusive and diverse representation within local governments is vital**. Encouraging the participation of marginalised groups, women, youth, and minority communities in decision-making processes ensures that a wide array of perspectives are considered, leading to more representative and equitable governance.

Additionally, **local governments can collaborate regionally to share best practices, exchange experiences, and develop joint initiatives to strengthen democratic values**. Regional networks of local governments can facilitate knowledge transfer and mutual support in addressing common challenges, amplifying the impact of democratic reforms.

The commitment of local and regional governments to uphold democratic principles, promote active citizen engagement, ensure transparency, and foster inclusive representation are key factors in reversing the trends that challenge democracy. These efforts contribute significantly to **building resilient democratic systems from the ground up, creating a stronger foundation for broader national and global democratic advancement**.

**José Manuel Ribeiro, mayor of Valongo delivered a comprehensive address during the meeting**, emphasising the challenges of sustaining democracy within democratic nations and likening the current crisis to an infection rather than a fundamental shift, citing the emergence of populist regimes post-social and economic crises in the EU. **He underscored the damaging imbalances within capitalist systems, advocating for a Marxist analysis despite personal views**, highlighting their erosion of human dignity and the exacerbation of societal polarisation rooted in identity issues.

Ribeiro emphasised the unique significance of local democracy, stressing that elections alone don't ensure democracy but require **pluralistic respect and non-violent dissent management**. He proposed **addressing capitalist system imbalances, combating ignorance through education, and investing in citizens capable of understanding transformative values and human adaptation in a constantly evolving world**, cautioning against neglecting human development amidst technological advancements.

**Ana Maria Vargas, Research Director at ICLD Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy**, highlighted concerns about global democratic regression, citing the prevalence of autocratic regimes and misleading media portrayals. She pointed out discriminatory policies in Indonesia and emphasised citizen concern, expressing the preference for dictatorships in unstable regions, especially those facing military coups.

Vargas underscored the critical role of local governments, **advocating for "Human Rights cities"** and acknowledging **pioneering efforts by some mayors in defending democracy**, including initiatives in Guatemala aimed at indigenous inclusion and youth participation. She stressed the **importance of networks promoting local democracy** and affirmed the indispensable need for democracy, emphasising the **influential role of local governments in effecting substantial democratic changes** within limited terms.

**Mohamed Wajdi Aydi, expert in Local Governance and former Sfax Deputy Mayor,** discussed the intricacies of democracy in Africa, notably in Tunisia, highlighting its Western roots. He acknowledged Tunisia's uprising for democratic foundations but highlighted challenges like competitive regimes and the dissolution of municipal councils. Despite facing crises of poverty and dictatorship, Aydi emphasised **democracy as a beacon of hope for freedom**, albeit not always taking a tangible form.

Wajdi Aydi stressed **the evolving role of civil society in shaping democracy**, despite challenges like the absence of genuinely elected parliaments and councils. He emphasised the importance of **collective efforts, collaborative networking, and shared learning** to fortify democratic
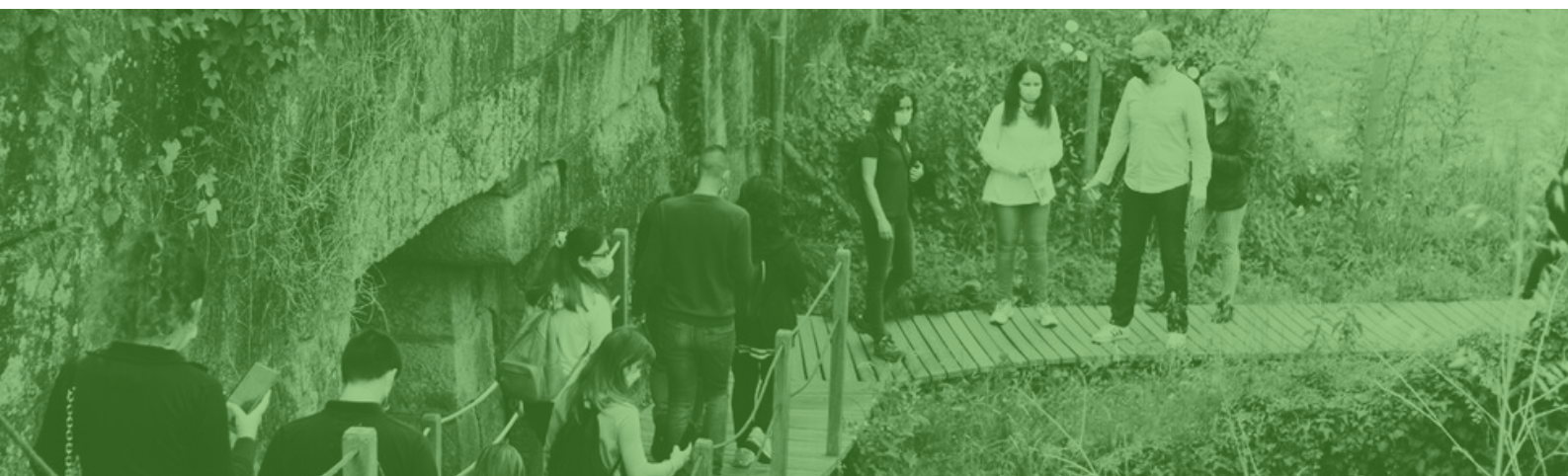
structures in Africa, highlighting the significance of unity and mutual learning in these endeavours.

**Patrícia Marques dos Santos**, **São Paulo's Open Government Coordinator**, highlighted the convergence of digitalisation and democracy, emphasising their concurrent challenges and opportunities. She stressed **digitalisation's pivotal role in expanding democratic spaces and the importance of transparency in boosting participation**. Santos cited São Paulo's increased promotion of digital tools for public consultations, **supplementing rather than replacing in-person engagement**, given the city's vastness.

She emphasised the need for **accountability in participatory processes to build citizen trust** and detailed initiatives like digital platforms, telecenter hubs, and 59 citizen councils in São Paulo. Additionally, she advocated **aligning these efforts with the 2030 Agenda** for public policy shaping and proposed decentralisation to enhance public participation in policymaking processes.

**Nils Munthe, Policy Officer at SALAR**, emphasised their efforts in promoting participatory democracy in Sweden's small localities despite the country's high functional democracy ranking. He highlighted concerns about the internet, social media, and Artificial Intelligence's potential for manipulation, stressing the **importance of digital tools in accelerating, not hindering, democratic processes**.

Munthe pointed out Sweden's democracy decline due to political extremism and polarisation affecting both urban and rural areas. He highlighted the exclusion of rural populations from democratic engagement, discussed the impact of drug trafficking on citizen fear, and showcased **participatory practices' role in accelerating development, especially in rural regions**. Additionally, he emphasised **youth involvement, citing examples of their leadership roles in facilitating progress**. Internationally, Munthe stressed **local events' significance** in reinforcing participatory democracy and encouraged continued support for young people's active engagement in democratic processes.

The discussion among the participants highlighted various challenges and approaches concerning democracy, citizen participation, and the risks they face in different global contexts.

**Ana Maria Vargas** emphasised the importance of not taking democracy for granted, acknowledging persisting challenges in trust and citizen engagement. **Mohamed Wajdi Aydi** contextualised the African situation, drawing comparisons to the experiences in Latin America in the 1970s, noting both the rise of civil society and a setback in democracy due to priorities of security and stability prevailing over human rights.

**Patrícia Marques dos Santos** focused on the significance of **civic education in engaging individuals in democratic participation**, noting the need to address everyday issues such as unemployment and hunger from a municipal perspective.

**Nils Munthe** underscored the significance of democracy at local and regional levels, emphasising the multitude of opportunities for its improvement. **Eduardo Merodio, President of IDEPA - Institute for the Development of Participative Democracy** mentioned the mistrust and disillusionment among young people, highlighting the negative influence of major communication corporations promoting hate speech, which generates distrust in democracy and participation.

The impact of "fake news" and its effect on public perception was discussed, with **Ana María** highlighting how media can influence public opinion even when objective data contradicts the presented narratives.

**Mohamed Wajdi Aydi** offered insight into Tunisia's political landscape, citing the proliferation of parties after 2010 and the necessity to educate young people about the importance of democratic participation and individual and collective freedoms.

In summary, **the dialogue underscored the necessity for civic education, the influence of media and corporations on public perception, and the importance of citizen participation in fortifying and safeguarding democracy across diverse global environments**.

# Political recommendations and conclusion

Local and regional governments play a pivotal role in fortifying democracy amid global challenges. First, bolstering civic engagement through transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and inclusive governance models is crucial. **Encouraging dialogue and involvement empowers communities to voice concerns and contribute to policy formation, nurturing a sense of ownership over democratic processes**.

Second, fostering resilience against threats to democracy involves promoting education on democratic values and civic rights at local levels. **Empowering citizens with knowledge cultivates informed decision-making and guards against misinformation or manipulation.**

Furthermore, **these governments can establish robust accountability mechanisms, ensuring transparency in resource allocation and policy implementation**. Collaborating across regions facilitates sharing successful strategies, amplifying collective resilience against democratic erosion.

Lastly, **promoting diversity and equity within governance structures reflects the populace's richness**, enhancing representation and reinforcing democratic legitimacy. By prioritising these actions, local and regional governments become pivotal in safeguarding and advancing democratic principles amidst contemporary challenges.

- **Promotion of democratic values through civic education and democratic culture:** Local and Regional governments should engage citizens through community events, town hall meetings, and accessible resources, emphasising the importance of active participation in governance. Encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and critical thinking, these entities create platforms for diverse perspectives, nurturing a democratic culture. By supporting initiatives that highlight civic duties, respect for human rights, and the rule of law, local and regional governments empower individuals to become informed, engaged, and responsible members of society, strengthening the democratic fabric within their communities.

- **Implementation of deliberative and participatory democracy's practices:** Local and regional governments can implement deliberative and participatory democracy by establishing platforms like citizen assemblies, forums, and online tools for inclusive decision-making. Encouraging diverse representation and engagement, they facilitate open discussions, allowing citizens to contribute ideas and opinions directly to policymaking. These governments prioritise transparency in information dissemination, ensuring accessibility and understanding of governance processes. By incorporating feedback mechanisms and collaborative initiatives, they foster a culture where community voices are heard, respected, and integrated into the decision-making framework, ultimately enhancing democratic practices at the grassroots level.

- **Open government with transparency, open data and co-creation:** Local and regional governments can implement Open Government by prioritising transparency through accessible information and open data initiatives. They can establish user-friendly platforms that provide comprehensive data sets and budgets, enabling citizens to track government activities. Embracing co-creation, these entities engage communities in policy design and service delivery, encouraging collaboration and feedback. By fostering a culture of openness, accountability, and proactive communication, these governments empower citizens to participate actively, ensuring responsive governance that reflects the needs and aspirations of the people they serve.

- **Promotion of local, quality media, allowing a space for information and measured debate (fact checkers in social networks and media):** Local and regional governments can promote local, quality media by supporting independent journalism through grants, training, and partnerships. They can create platforms for fact-checkers in social networks and media, ensuring accuracy and credibility. Encouraging diverse perspectives and providing resources for journalistic integrity, these governments foster an environment where informed debate and reliable information thrive. By investing in media literacy programs and facilitating collaboration between credible sources and community voices, they ensure a space for measured, factual discourse, vital for an informed and engaged citizenry.

- **Enacting SDG 17 "Partnerships for the goals": Alliance with other local and regional governments with civil society organisations in order to promote democracy:** Local and regional governments can forge alliances with civil society organisations and other regional counterparts to bolster democracy by establishing collaborative platforms. They can create joint initiatives, forums, and networks to exchange best practices, fostering mutual support and knowledge sharing. By engaging in dialogues and partnerships, these entities amplify community voices, address shared challenges, and promote democratic principles collectively. Collaborative efforts enable the pooling of resources, expertise, and diverse perspectives, enhancing citizen engagement, transparency, and accountability, thus strengthening the foundation of democracy within and across regions.

# ✚ Resources

- UN International Day of Democracy https://www.un.org/en/observances/democracy-day

- UCLG Pact for the Future of Humanity: https://uclg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/uclgpactforthe_future.pdf

- UCLG Future Envisioning Exercise on Regaining Trust: https://powerofwe.uclg.org/new/press-release-future-envisioning-exercise-regaining-trust/

- Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver? (September 2023): https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/open-society-barometer-can-democracy-deliver

- The Global State of Democracy Initiative - International IDEA: https://www.idea.int/gsod/gsod