

CAN DEMOCRACY SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT?

WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY



COUNCIL OF EUROPE, STRASBOURG
16-18 NOVEMBER 2020

www.wfdemocracy.org

CONCEPT NOTE

More than ever we see the interdependence of our physical and our political worlds. On a planet in crisis, does democracy have what it takes to save the environment?

Our societies have been tested by an extreme and unexpected global challenge in 2020, but while an essential battle is fought against the Covid-19 pandemic, humanity's greatest existential threat looms ever larger. Environmental damage and climate change have not gone away. The poisoning of our land and pollution in our air and water is still killing plants, animals and humans alike. Rising temperatures and sea levels are on course to render lands uninhabitable and force people to leave their homes and seek new lives. The time to act is now!

Yet recent polling indicates the highest ever recorded levels of dissatisfaction and mistrust with democracy as a system of government. Its response to a whole series of recent challenges – economic, pandemic, and indeed environmental – have disappointed millions of people. Many are questioning the capacity, competence and even legitimacy of democratic governance to address their greatest needs.

So, when it comes to stopping and reversing the devastating damage done to our environment, we must ask ourselves what it really takes to get the job done. How to ensure that democratic leadership be capable of the swift and decisive action required? If our current way of life is incompatible with our long-term health and survival, how can we mobilise ourselves to make fundamental change? What economic, civil and human rights price are we willing to pay? Has the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that we are in fact capable of great shifts in our habits at times of need? Could new restrictions and behavioural change also “flatten the curve” of environmental damage? Do our governments enjoy sufficient trust to enable them to take the necessary action in time?



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Key issues to address:

National governments, international organisations or the citizen: who is setting the pace?

We often hear that the public is impatient with the speed and determination shown by governments in addressing the global environment crisis. But civil society is increasingly mobilised and local initiatives are multiplying. Are national and international authorities' moving more slowly than public opinion, or is public opinion actually holding them back? What is preventing governments from taking more radical steps? Perhaps they are influenced by business and economic interests, or by the demand for increased investment of public money in other areas ranging from infrastructure to pensions to public services. These are also legitimate concerns. The context also varies between north and south, between developed and less developed economies, so can we really ask the same sacrifices from all? How can democracies and international organisations manage such competing factors and demands?

What governing style is best placed to tackle the environmental challenge?

Comparing different governmental approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on their capacity to implement immediate and short-term actions. The legitimacy of democratic decision-making comes from its transparency, accountability and the consent of those it represents. But in a crisis situation, does this slow down reactions when speed is of the essence? How can we reconcile crisis management with individual rights and freedoms and respect for democratic deliberation at every level of government?

Public or private: what role for which sector?

When it comes to the prevention and mitigation of environmental damage, behavioural change and technological solutions are required. Has the public or private sector done the better job in this area – and which is best placed to provide meaningful change in the future? Will this be primarily a matter for market economies responding to supply and demand? Might the solution come instead from governments and international organisations stepping in with norms and incentives that correct market failure? If, in fact, we need the best of both sectors to fix the problem, then what form might new public/private partnerships take?

The 2020 World Forum for Democracy will debate the issues and generate new ideas for tackling the environmental crisis we face today. It will bring together leading voices from politics, business, NGOs, academia and journalism, and citizen-led initiatives from around the world.

The Forum is a unique platform for political decision-makers and activists to debate solutions to key challenges for democracies worldwide. By identifying and analysing experimental initiatives and practices, the Forum highlights and encourages democratic innovations at the grassroots and their transfer on a systemic level in order to strengthen the foundations of democratic societies. The Forum thus contributes to the evolution of democracy and the development of more participatory and inclusive structures and institutions. Plenary sessions will be an opportunity to discuss with speakers from all continents, political perspectives and walks of life and to frame the questions. The labs will allow participants to test innovative initiatives that offer responses to the key questions. This is a moment to think big and make change.

