



World Forum for Democracy “Can Democracy Save the Environment?”

CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS from the 9th Edition

The 9th edition of the World Forum for Democracy took place under the unprecedented circumstances, caused by the ongoing pandemic. Despite travel and health constraints, it gathered speakers and participants from all over the World. For the first time, the entire Forum, including Labs and Forum Talks, was livestreamed online, which helped it reach a larger audience. The interest in the Forum was additionally expanded through activities of various artists that complemented the programme. The Forum also benefited from the “12 months, 1 question” campaign, which preceded the live event and enhanced the quality of the deliberations.

Facts & Trends

Some facts and figures helped define the challenges and clarify trends, offering insight into how much the pandemic had actually affected views on democracy and climate change across the world. Concern about environmental problems had increased considerably – notably among the young – together with the willingness and readiness to act. The global impact of the pandemic had brought a higher awareness of the importance of the role of the UN in dealing with climate change, though its action was still seen as ineffective. According to one of the speakers, *“before the pandemic, the challenge facing (Western) democracies was the restoration of trust in government, the rise of populism and the spread of misinformation. Today, the main challenge is that while trust in authorities has been restored, citizens’ support for democracy is more fragile, particularly among younger cohorts”*.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS, OR THE CITIZEN: WHO IS SETTING THE PACE?

Citizens’ demands and their active role in pushing for sustainable solutions were seen as key motivator for policymakers. Yes, democracy is alive (witnessing for instance the birth of many green parties), but it often lacks leadership. Many civil society actors were demanding new – and often intersecting – rights for which traditional institutions were not designed. The pace was definitely set by citizens who understood the role of central governments mainly as being responsible for regulatory frameworks. More focus on the role of constitutions, practices such as citizens’ assemblies, enhancing the input of scientific evidence into decision-making and encouraging tripartite social bargaining were helping step up the pace of change, improving the flow of communication and reducing the sense of citizens’ alienation from the decision-making process. There was lower trust in the capability of International Organisations to deal effectively with climate issues. These were however trusted to deal with human rights and freedoms issues globally and with helping find solutions that would not further entrench inequalities. International organisations could accelerate the pace of change by offering more assistance to their member-states, by setting environmental criteria for their projects, and by enforcing international standards. As democratic governments are more likely both to enter international

treaties and respect multilateral engagements, saving the environment might depend upon the global health of democracy.

WHAT GOVERNING STYLE IS BEST PLACED TO TACKLE THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE?

The strength of governments and their capacity to implement decisions were seen as much more important for responding to the environmental challenges than the question of whether a country is a democracy or not. Nevertheless, despite their slow decision-making and the perceived preference for short-term solutions, the overwhelming majority of the best-performing countries when it comes to dealing with environmental issues were democracies. The evaluation of different governing styles revolved around the issues of the role of technocracy in decision-making procedures, access to information, the role of human rights, trade-offs between deliberation and efficiency, and national and transnational approaches to governance. Less democratic governing styles only *appeared* more efficient when compared to democracies. Since they lacked adequate channels of receiving feedback from the citizens, they also could not respond to their needs and develop long-term consensus. Democracies also had their limitations and often witnessed a gap between regulations and their implementation. Countries that respected the rule of law and human rights allowed demands for more inclusion (including, for example, indigenous populations) and better integration of their societies, more bottom-up approaches and, ultimately, legal redress against inactive governments. Whilst it was recognised that overall democracies performed better on climate issues, it was not possible to wait until there were more democracies, coalitions had to be built across nations based on trust and accountability.

PUBLIC OR PRIVATE: WHAT ROLE FOR WHICH SECTOR

The need for collaboration, building trust and partnerships between different sectors was seen as crucial in surmounting the environmental challenges of our age. The state should act more responsibly, by incorporating higher environmental standards in regulation, taxation, and expenditure policies. It should act consistently not only in domestic, but also in the international arena. The judicial branch should make sure that the economic interests do not supersede human rights, that indemnities are proportionate to the damage caused, and that justice is accessible to all victims of environmental degradation. Local authorities should be more engaged in designing innovative solutions with the private sector, where positive innovation is taking place. The private sector could play a major role in incentivizing more responsible behaviour, finding more efficient solutions and reducing the negative social impact of the economic transition. On the other hand, private sector actors, when unhindered by state institutions, could create significant environmental damage and destroy people's livelihoods, especially in rural areas. The state should therefore cut its existing support for practices that degrade the environment and increase supports for environmentally positive measures, for example by compensating farmers adequately for their environmental services and encouraging development of economically viable alternatives in the private sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In an age in which democracy is in distress, the deliberations of the Forum can restore hope for democratic renewal, while at the same time showing the way towards adequately meeting the environmental challenges. The main question of this year's edition "Can Democracy Save the Environment?" was collectively answered through a series of **recommendations** below drawn from the 2.5 days of discussion and debate:

To International Organisations:

- Introduce the right to a healthy environment in the catalogue of fundamental human rights: ensure their universal respect, including through making this a condition for financial aid and other forms of assistance.
- Re-evaluate implementation of international conventions concerning the Protection the Environment through Criminal Law, the Convention on Civil Liability for Damage resulting from Activities Dangerous to the Environment and other international documents concerning protection of the environment.
- Introduce policies aimed at improving the consideration of shared environmental resources into conflict prevention strategies and post-conflict situations.
- Consider changes to international humanitarian law that would allow a degree of maintaining and monitoring of the state of the environment even during armed conflicts.
- Integrate the gender dimension into climate policies.
- Prioritize long-term measures to help democracies maintain adequate levels of institutional stability, offsetting the short-term focus on election cycles and better enabling them to fulfil their environmental commitments.

To the Council of Europe:

- Introduce the right to clean, healthy and safe environment among the list of human rights protected by the Council of Europe and recommend inclusion of crimes against the right to healthy environment in the criminal codes of the member-states.
- Consider establishing a watch-list of governments persecuting environmental activists, using excessive force against protesters, or organising defamation campaign against activists.
- Include specific monitoring of freedom of expression for media reporting on environmental issues and activism in the member states.
- To the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – develop criteria for evaluating the sustainability of regions and cities.
- To the CINGO – develop reporting and monitoring mechanisms for protection of environmental activists and their organisations.
- To the Council of Europe Development Bank – introduce specific and rigorous environmental standards when deciding on financing new projects.
- To the European Court of Human Rights – develop legal mechanisms that will assure easier access for litigation cases concerning damage to the environment and make clearer definitions of exhaustion of all the legal means in the member-states when dealing with such cases.

To national governments:

- Institutionalise citizens' assemblies and ensure that implementation mechanisms for their recommendations are in place.
- Ensure that regulatory, taxation and expenditure policies adequately address environmental challenges, and educate citizens to engage popular support for them.
- Establish public-private collaborations on environmental issues whose criteria of success can be clearly defined, measured, and evaluated.

- Where there are indigenous people, harness their knowledge where possible and ensure that traditional communities have legal assistance sensitive both to the framework set by national legislation and the traditional norms and customs.
- Improve access to information, training, and environmental education in order to raise awareness of the issues concerning the environment and ensure the right of access to environmental information for individuals, NGOs, and activists.
- Improve access to environmental justice and introduce environmental crimes in the national criminal codes; ensure just indemnities for the victims of environmental degradation and facilitate access to justice for the citizens willing to initiate a litigation case; ensure that the indemnities paid for the consequences of environmental degradation are proportionate to the costs of mitigating the damage; develop adequate training mechanisms for the employees of the judiciary dealing with environmental issues.
- Consider creation of offices that would monitor compliance of domestic companies with environmental standards – and in their operations abroad.
- Ensure protection for environmental activists, protesters and whistle-blowers, both offline and online.
- Include youth in decision-making processes on environmental policies, establish safe platforms for youth discussing environmental issues, and organise mentorship programs.
- Develop mechanisms for enhancing intergenerational solidarity.
- Encourage and incentivise the private sector to take a more active role in improving the state of the environment; incentivise solutions that emphasize the circular economy, responsible waste management, and usage of local resources and energy efficiency.
- Incentivise changes in consumption and environmental habits towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN. Re-evaluate the level of commitments.
- Consider changing the approach to approving entry of new chemicals into the market – allow them to enter the market only when they are proven not to cause harm.

To local and regional authorities:

- Rethink urban development – build more resilient and “slower cities”; emphasize aspects of “liveability” and sustainability; prioritize designs that foster more interpersonal contact and creation of social capital within the neighbourhoods.
- Expand the scope of deliberative democracy and establish rules or practices to address and implement their recommendations as binding by the local authorities; develop participatory mechanisms that maintain the levels of trust necessary to convince people that they are actors in meaningful change.
- Maintain a holistic approach to dealing with environmental problems, by including the institutions of the state, local organisations, institutes, and think tanks, civil society, and the private sector’ ensure the application of bottom-up, demand-driven and community-based approaches when dealing with the ecosystem solutions.

To the civil society:

- Ensure intergenerational solidarity and create avenues for youth participation at an early age in order to help young people develop a more activist mindset: ensure the presence of intersectional knowledge in this process.
- Create mechanisms for demonstrating solidarity with environmental activists who are the victims of violence and defamation campaigns and raise awareness of climate justice locally, nationally, and globally.

- Foster exchange of experience and knowledge, networking by environmental activists, and the further development of handbooks and action toolkits.
- Advocate for more deliberative democracy on environmental issues and foster democratic vitality through civic engagement and education.
- Develop communication strategies for technical and scientific information in order to ensure that the citizens can fully understand implications of the debates concerning climate change; ensure the presence of intersectional perspectives and knowledge, including in collaboration with media, schools, and other institutions.

To the private sector:

- Engage in dialogue with other stakeholders (governments, local authorities, citizens, the international organisations) and ensure responsible cooperation when dealing with environmental issues.
- Engage in public-private partnerships in a cross sectoral manner, in good faith and with a view to community benefit.
- Ensure that consumers can state their environmental preferences in early stages of designing products and services.
- Adhere to same environmental standards at home and abroad: demand that the state does not allow market access to companies that do not adhere to the domestically recognized environmental standards.
- Enhance the engagement of the private sector in providing environmental services, like biodiversity enhancement, fire protection, habitat restoration, etc.
- Develop resilience strategies compatible with the ones of the local communities, especially when dealing with the environmental disasters.
- Support organisations helping address environmental damage by less responsible parts of the private sector.
- Ensure that society can benefit from access to the expertise of the private sector in dealing with environmental challenges.