

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC LOCAL GOVERNANCE TO ADVANCE HUMAN PROSPERITY

By Susan Jay

It is admittedly a grim moment for those who believe that democratic governance is the most effective means of expanding peace and human prosperity globally. Report after report documents the erosion of the rule of law and other democratic institutions globally. The V-Dem Institute's 2026 Democracy Report estimates that global freedom is back to 1970's levels, that roughly a quarter of the world's citizens now live in closed autocracies, and that only 7% live in liberal democracies. Such facts can breed pessimism and obscure opportunities. Democratic backsliding is real, but much of the world does not live under brutal autocracies. Most people live in countries with hybrid forms of governance – which means that there are potent avenues to strengthen democratic institutions, even for communities outside strong democracies.

A critical yet underexploited pathway for improving people's lives is robust, effective democratic local governance. Strong democratic cities not only serve their residents well, but they also defend civic space, the rule of law and other freedoms in the face of democratic erosion elsewhere. The need to strengthen citizen-led local governance goes beyond democratic erosion. Local and regional

governments (LRGs) face rising demands amid population growth, urbanization and complex socio-economic issues that manifest locally, whether global, national or local in origin.

Democratic local governance creates an unsurpassed architecture necessary to tackle these many challenges. Its structures elevate solutions and channel resources to serve the community writ large, limit misuse of authority, and provide change mechanisms to optimize government performance. Recognizing these benefits, LRGs, international organizations and nongovernmental stakeholders are increasing their collaboration and peer-to-peer learning to strengthen local democratic institutions including in countries that are not well-established democracies.

This brief summarizes the power of democratic local governance in defending democratic space more broadly and delivering solutions for citizens. It also offers a sampling of the wealth of organizations, cooperative mechanisms, frameworks and other tools available to help LRGs better serve their constituents.

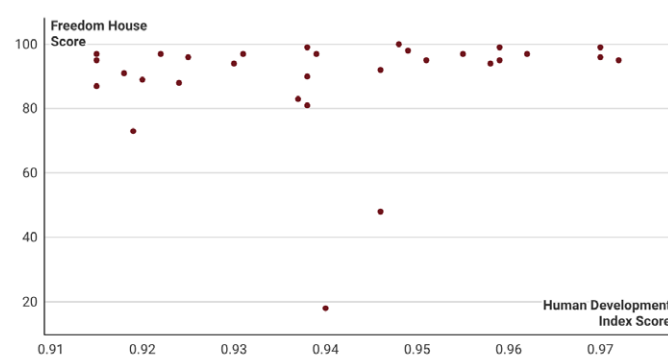
Why local and regional democratic governance matters

Democracy goes far beyond elections. It entails a system of institutions, norms and practices that enable citizens to drive government and make government accountable to and work in service of the citizenry. It upholds the rule of law by providing strong protections against abuse of power. A world without democracy is one in which a powerful few ride roughshod over the multitudes. A world with democracy is one in which the many can flourish. Even putting aside all ethical justifications for promoting liberty and justice, there are two strong, practical drivers pushing LRGs, international organizations with diverse global mandates, and other stakeholders to focus on effective democratic local governance: namely, democracy's competitive edge in delivering citizen well-being and local government's proximity to both its citizens and the challenges at hand, placing it on the front lines of numerous global challenges.

Citizen-centered governance delivers. Robust democratic governance is closely correlated with high human development, as corroborated by many studies. The countries with widespread quality of life are almost all vibrant democracies: from Japan, South Korea and New Zealand to the Nordics and Slovenia. For example, the graph on this page charts the top 30 countries in the most recent United Nation's Human Development Index (HDI) along the X axis with those countries' scores on Freedom House's most recent democratic governance "index" along the Y axis.¹ The world's most

prosperous countries, save two, are all clustered near the top of the graph. The 28 countries in that top cluster have strong democratic governance rankings. Only two countries in the top 30 of the HDI do not fit this trend, Singapore and United Arab Emirates.

Democratic Governance – Human Development Correlation



Created with Datawrapper

So why are 93% of the HDI top scorers also strong democracies? Many a book has sought to answer that question, but here is a short synopsis. Conceding that no form of government is flawless, including democracy, and that correlation does not equate causation, democratic governance does have specific attributes that fuel widespread, socio-economic opportunity and stability. The power vested in the citizenry by democratic governance creates strong positive pressures on governments to address wide community needs, rather than serving only the needs of the powerful few. Governments pushed by its citizens to be more transparent, responsive and accountable

¹ At time of publication, the most recent published versions of the two indices were the 2026 Freedom House Freedom in the World Index and the 2025 the United Nations' HDI Report based on 2023 HDI data.

to that self-same citizenry are more likely to craft systems that provide quality services and address the issues about which the community cares. It is harder to ignore poor performance when elections and courts can enforce accountability. Democracies are rules based, making it harder to divert resources. They provide citizens mechanisms to replace officials, policies and other structures deemed not to be sufficiently serving the community, making them a more resilient, effective form of governance.

Proximity to citizens and firsthand experience.

When discussing government, be it in the news or in our personal conversations, attention typically centers on national and international affairs. Yet, all around the world, daily life is profoundly shaped by LRGs. Whether LRGs are federalized (with authorities distinct from the national level), nationalized (with authorities delegated down) or a hybrid of the two, people's most frequent and direct experience of "government" is in their home towns. Whether or not services are crafted and/or funded nationally,

they are provided *locally* and the caliber of those services affects the lives of every single person on this planet.

Global, regional and national problems manifest locally and the inverse is often true as well. LRGs face a wide array of thorny issues, from public safety, economic development, and public accountability to transportation, affordable housing, and clean water, to name but a few. These matters are not the sole responsibility of LRGs, but the proximity between local leaders and citizens fosters regular interaction and provides insights into how issues and policies manifest in daily life. Bringing together stakeholders working locally and globally deepens the knowledge base and accelerates cross-fertilization of ideas, innovation and identification of tested best practices. This enables local leaders to put in place sound strategies that strengthen local democratic governance and thus, in turn, strengthen the vitality, resilience and wellbeing of their communities.

Sampling of International Initiatives on Three Key Urban Challenges

As described above, cities and towns face innumerable, multifaceted challenges. Effective responses to these many concerns depend on effective citizen engagement, public accountability, and sound public management – in short, they depend on vibrant, well-functioning democratic institutions. The following provides a snapshot of three pressing issues for LRGs, a descriptions of a few key players and initiatives in that domain and a selection of written resources. The list of actors and tools is not meant to be exhaustive. The first two topics focus on two structural pillars of improving local governance and the third focuses on a principal concern in communities everywhere. The aim is to showcase the problem-solving power of global-local collaboration and facilitate further information sharing on these topics and beyond.

Citizen Engagement

Improving avenues for constituents to contribute to local governance beyond election day is a powerful tool. Citizen involvement, for example through consultations, oversight committees, or participatory platforms, strengthens the caliber of deliberation on public policy matters, improving LRG decision making. Mechanisms for civic engagement enable LRGs to leverage constituents' deep knowledge of local conditions. In contexts where LRG officials may lack certain competencies or quality data, capitalizing on this wealth of civic expertise can help gather insights,

identify service gaps, and generate innovative solutions to local challenges. This improves service delivery community-wide and strengthens social cohesion. Many efforts in this domain focus on harnessing the power of digital technology.

Citizen engagement also enhances visibility into how decisions are made and how resources are used. This transparency builds trust and increases public participation and support for initiatives that LRGs seek to advance. When citizens can question decisions, monitor spending, and evaluate outcomes, public officials face stronger incentives to deliver quality services. This reduces the risk of mismanagement, promotes efficient and fair allocation of public funds and improves implementation.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had a number of resources for LRGs. It founded the **Accelerator Labs Network** in 2019 to advance multi-stakeholder driven development innovation. It supports programs in numerous municipalities to leverage civic-LRG collaboration to improve service delivery in diverse locations, such as the **ReLOaD3** program working with LRGs in the Western Balkans. UNDP distilled lessons from 15 civic engagement initiatives in the **At the Edge of Participation Report**. It also recently released **The Digital Participation Platforms Guide (2025 Edition)** to explain what digital participation platforms are, when to use them, and how to set up and run them effectively.

Delivering for Citizens – LRG Governance Successes through Citizen Engagement

- Skopje (Macedonia) launched a Biohacking Laboratory bringing together entrepreneurs, students, teachers and others to innovate solutions to reduce biowaste, create business opportunities, and enrich education.
- Boracay (Philippines) organized participatory forums in which diverse stakeholders leveraged their collective expertise to do systems analyses and then design durable solutions to improve food security and incomes.
- Tana River County (Kenya) implemented a community research and design strategy which included steps like youth data scouting and sourcing historic good practices from local elders to improve water management.
- Chiang Rai (Thailand) set up a multistakeholder a Social Innovation Platform (SIP) that involved deep listening, co-creation of solutions and prototypes, and collective action to combat air pollution and forest fires.

Source: UNDP At the Edge of Participation

The World Bank is similarly investing in digital civic-governmental collaboration. Its' **CIVIC Digital initiative** seeks to expand how governments (national and local), civil society, and social innovators use engagement technology including artificial intelligence to listen, respond, and collaborate with citizens. It compiled a list of digital citizen engagement efforts from local to national from around the world and is supporting the city of Nairobi's **piloting a digital citizen engagement system**.²

Yet another multinational actor advancing civic-governmental dialogue and partners at all levels is the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which is “a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy” working in over 100 countries. OECD supports citizens’ assemblies, juries, and deliberative panels that bring diverse groups of residents together to learn, deliberate, and make recommendations on complex policy issues. These processes are used by governments at all levels to improve legitimacy and decision quality. OECD prepared a detailed analyses of these collaboration tools in its publication **Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave**.

Public accountability

Another critical domain to strengthen effective, democratic local governance is through enhancing public accountability – the obligation of LRGs to use public resources responsibly, explain decisions, disclose information including fiscal and performance data, and accept consequences when they fail to meet expectations. It is a core principle of democratic governance because it ensures that those who exercise public power remain answerable to the people they serve.

Strengthening public accountability improves local governance because it creates the conditions for better decisions, cleaner management of public resources, and higher quality services. Mechanisms like audits, transparency rules, oversight structures, and internal controls directly shape how effectively local governments function.

2 Among the links provided are documents written from a global perspective as well as country-specific reports as they may provide more detailed information helpful to some stakeholders. Most documents references herein are in English, though not all. The names of resources are provided with embedded hyperlinks as hyperlinks may change.

Delivering for Citizens – LRG Governance Successes through Public Accountability Mechanisms

A major focus in public accountability is fiscal openness through measures like participatory budgeting and financial transparency. Research on initiatives implemented in LRGs such as Andalusia (Spain), Belo Horizonte (Brazil), Cape Town (South Africa), and Seoul (South Korea) demonstrate benefits, including:

- Increased local tax revenue
- Decreased cost of public debt
- Increased trust and social cohesion.

Source: Global Hub for Participatory Democracy Research Brief, Open Government Partnership Brief on Debt Transparency, and European Parliamentary Research Service Brief on Participatory Budgeting

Many accountability tools are also instruments of civic participation: external checks such as public consultations, participatory budgeting, and social audits. Examples of existing resources include **UNDP's social audit guide** that promotes transparency, accountability and civic engagement as does **OECD Budget Transparency Toolkit**, which provides practical steps for openness and integrity in public financial management at all levels of government. UN-Habitat and Transparency International co-created **Tools to Support Transparency in Local Governance** to increase transparency and accountability in LRGs, combat corruption in cities and improve services while UNDP's **Users' Guide to Measuring Local Governance** provides more than 20 ready-made tools for monitoring and assessing local governance. Many more resources are widely available online.

While member-state bodies have been important drivers in promoting public accountability, other forums have emerged as well, such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP). OGP brings together both government and civic leaders to “promote transparent, participatory, inclusive and

accountable governance.” OGP now includes more than 70 countries and 150 local governments – representing more than two billion people – and thousands of civil society organizations. They have a **treasure-trove of resources** for LRGs and stakeholders, such as an online **Open Government Guide** and **a Skeptics' Guide to Open Government**. OGP also launched **a transparency challenge for local and national governments** which has a tracker of open government commitments – providing both motivation and ideas for stakeholders.

Public Safety

Basic personal security is a foremost priority for citizens everywhere. It is cornerstone of all healthy, stable communities and essential for investments that grow economic opportunity and wellbeing. To help cities reduce crime and violence, many organizations are working to spread effective strategies for enhancing security at the local level while maintaining respect for citizens' rights and the rule of law.

UN-Habitat has numerous programs to enhance urban safety including **the Global Network on Safer Cities (GNSC) initiative**. UN Habitat teamed with the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) to bring together practitioners and researchers focused on public safety to identify lessons learned which were compiled in **the Safer Cities for All Report**. UN-Habitat also collaborated with the World Health Organization and UNICEF to create the **Guide to Creating Urban Public Spaces for Children**, a tool for practitioners to improve public spaces for children, protecting child safety and promoting their health and well-being. Multilateral organizations are tackling other aspects of public safety as well. Recognizing the importance of accountability, UN-Habitat invested in developing the **Global Urban Safety Indicators and Monitoring Tool** to help LRG officials and stakeholders better understand their environments and have quality metrics

Delivering for Citizens – LRG Governance Successes in Public Safety

- Bogotá (Colombia) improved child safety through Ciempiés, a walking school buses program for students commuting to school on busy roads, which also supported community building and nonformal learning.
- Denver (United States) reduced crime and lowered city costs of responding to crisis calls through a mobile crisis community response program called STAR.
- Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam) is among 50 cities that focused on speed limit testing, setting and enforcement to reduce traffic fatalities.
- Istanbul (Türkiye) helps residents in crisis, fosters community cohesion and has increased local philanthropy through its Pay It Forward platform.

Source: National League of Cities Brief Community response Programs, Bloomberg Cities And Bloomberg Philanthropies Awardees

to improve it. It also has worked with LRGs to transform poorer urban areas into safer, healthier places with more opportunities for residents to live in dignity. The **Building Urban Safety Through Slum Upgrading** report analyzed five case studies to help future efforts focused on reducing the pervasive crime and violence faced by slum dwellers.

Key International Actors and Major Forums

In addition to issue-specific cooperation, many actors are working to deepen comprehensive collaboration on democratic local governance at the international level. LRGs and their allies benefit from vertical and horizontal partnerships, so that dialogue, information, and relationships are not siloed. United Nations agencies and city networks are vital partners of LRGs in this endeavor. Below are some examples of major platforms fostering learning and innovation.

The **United National Human Settlements Program** (UN-Habitat) mandate is to build more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable towns and cities. It provides global expertise, policy guidance, and hands-on support. Its work spans research, technical assistance, crisis response, and collaborations with LRGs and related actors. It created an online platform, www.urbanagendaplatform.org, for the community of stakeholders to share best practices, data and other resources.

UNDP is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. As one of its core areas of work is governance, they have extensive resources for LRGs, national governments and non-governmental actors on civic engagement, several of which are discussed above.

In addition, the **United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights** (OHCHR), mandated to promote and protect human rights, is also working with LRG leaders. It published a **Guidance Framework for Creating a Human Rights City**. The framework boils down what can seem like

abstract political theory and high level international treaties into a roadmap for LRGs to leverage human rights principles such as equality, non-discrimination and accountability to improve public service delivery and foster social cohesion in their communities.

The **UN Forum of Mayors** was launched by the UN Economic Commission for Europe in 2020 and meets annually. It focuses on bringing together mayors and international organizations to address common challenges related to sustainable urban development and governance. Participants exchange good practices and convey recommendations to UN Member States about localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted by all UN members in 2015. Several goals, namely SDG16 and SDG17, are strongly linked to strengthening democratic local governance.

Beyond international organizations, city networks are working horizontally. **United Cities and Local Governments** (UCLG) is a global network of cities and local, regional, and metropolitan governments and their associations. UCLG works to amplify the voices of LRGs internationally. This includes making proposals concerning the role and perspective of LRGs in global development agendas, and increasing national and international support and recognition for LRGs in the implementation of development initiatives.

The **Global Parliament of Mayors** (GPM) is a body of, by and for mayors that functions as a parliament. Its mission is to elevate mayors' voices worldwide, and strengthen their partnerships with other stakeholders such as national govern-

ments, multilateral institutions, civic organizations and business to better address the challenges faced locally. GPM also serves as the secretariat of Urban7 (U7), the formal G7 Engagement Group representing municipal actors. Its leadership was instrumental in the adoption of the 2026 U7 Nancy Declaration that underlines the role of cities “as custodians of peace and democracy, and as the level at which the implementation and localization

of the Sustainable Development Goals translates into tangible outcomes for residents.”

Also within this community of actors sits the **Global Cities Hub**. It connects cities and LRGs to the rich expertise in International Geneva’s ecosystem. This work contributes to more effective multilateralism and better strategies to address urban issues faced by communities across the globe.

The Way Forward Together: Recommendations and Conclusions

Today, around the world at all levels of government, anti-democratic actors prey on citizens' many genuine concerns – local, national, global. To gain power and resources, such actors typically stoke fear, promote antagonism within communities, promise simplistic, unviable solutions to complex problems, and work to undermine confidence in democratic institutions.

This brief shows that strong democratic local governance is an effective pathway for advancing widespread, people-centered human development and social cohesion in the face of naysayers. While there is no shortage of challenges to tackle, there is also no shortage of LRGs, international institutions, national governments and non-governmental organizations working together to deepen democratic local governance and improve socio-economic opportunities in their communities. It shows the wealth of learning and innovation global collaboration is yielding, even when democratic space at national levels may be under pressure. It also shows the hard work of dedicated individuals across an array of institutions who seek to ensure that LRGs deliver for their residents.

While the successes to date are substantial, much work remains. The following are some recommendations for how different stakeholders can further contribute to strengthening LRGs:

International Organizations should:

- Partner with LRGs to put existing policy frameworks into practice, and adapting those frameworks as lessons emerge from real world implementation.
- Promote dialogue, research and capability building on good democratic local governance in the

agendas of international organizations, with initiatives such as the UN Forum of Mayors.

- Institutionalize measures to involve LRG officials more substantially in programs to strengthen people-centered governance and address issues of global concern.

Member States should:

- Include LRGs in nationwide initiatives focused on strengthening democratic institutions at all levels of government.
- Support horizontal and vertical research and learning across national, regional and local governments to improve people-centered service delivery and public accountability, including digital technology.

Local and Regional Governments should:

- Rigorously test promising innovations in democratic local governance and courageously share experiences publicly, whether or not results match aspirations, to grow the global knowledge base and innovate more successfully.
- Leverage various city networks to deepen peer-to-peer policy dialogue and share good practices on protecting and enhancing democratic institutions and service delivery.

Non-governmental organizations should:

- Aggregate citizens' concerns and needs through research and community mobilization.
- Advocate and partner with LRGs, member states and international organization to advance citizen priorities in improving democratic local governance.

The urgency to advance these recommendations only grows. In addition to the litany of long-standing urban challenges already discussed, the acceleration of digital innovation and the convergence of artificial intelligence (AI), spatial computing and other technologies places ever more pressure on LRGs. Whether local leaders are able to harness the new AI-enabled citiverse with tools such as predictive analytics, intelligent process management and digital twins to improve democratic local governance remains to be seen. While tech brings much promise, inept deployment of the citiverse could exacerbate alienation of citizens from public institutions and one another, eroding social cohesion at a time when polarization is already rising.

Enriching multilevel and multistakeholder collaboration will help local leaders dynamize citizen engagement, public accountability, and service delivery – from public safety and down the long list of other critical urban services. Global cooperation itself needs to be done with eye

on transparency, accountability and attentive, well-structured experimentation. The growing pressures on LRGs and skepticism of international organizations demand that stakeholders work in earnest to ensure that global cooperation is productive. Dialogue and frameworks must be translated into action. When those strategies to improve democratic local governance are tested, documented and shared widely, LRGs will be able to enhance their efficacy and resilience.

Citizens will see local improvements first hand, helping not only to increase public confidence in local institutions but also renew trust in democratic processes more broadly. The best rebuttal to actors seeking to abuse state power and resources, repress citizens, and undermine peace and justice is to show that democracy delivers. And that is ultimately the opportunity and challenge for LRGs and their allies – to make local government work in service of their communities so that all may prosper and thrive.



Global Cities Hub
Villa Rigot
Avenue de la Paix 9
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

info@globalcitieshub.org
+41 (0) 22 559 46 00

www.globalcitieshub.org