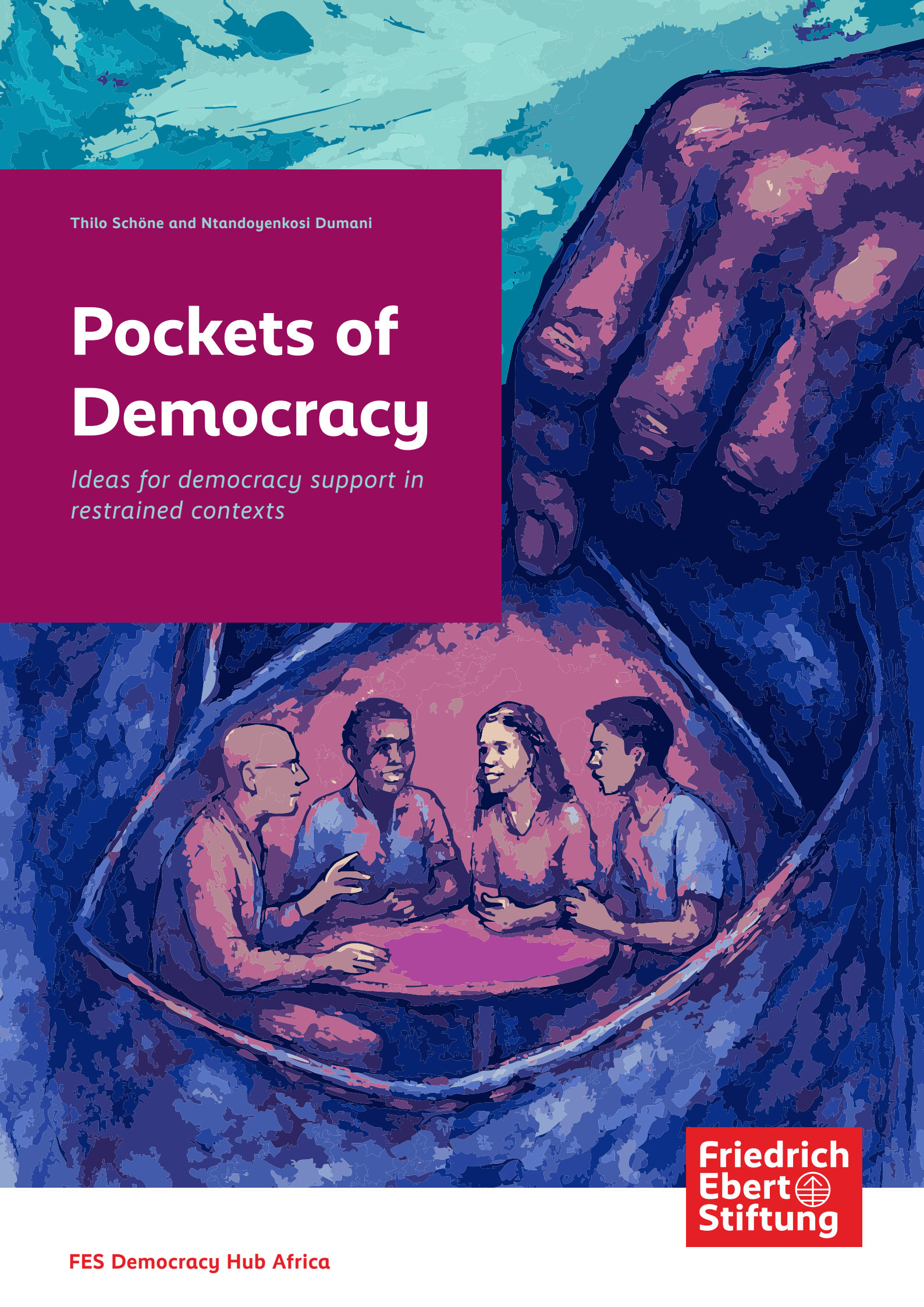


An illustration of four people (two men and two women) sitting in a circle inside a cave, illuminated by a warm light source. The cave walls are textured and brown. The people are engaged in conversation. The overall style is painterly and warm.

Thilo Schöne and Ntandoyenkosi Dumani

Pockets of Democracy

Ideas for democracy support in restrained contexts

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info@fes.de

Issuing Department

Division for International Cooperation / Global and European Policy

Responsible for Content and Editing

Nina Netzer | Social Democracy

Contact / Order

Christiane.Heun@fes.de

Editing

Ciaran Cronin

Design/Layout

Blind Vision (Pty) Ltd

Cover Design

Blind Vision (Pty) Ltd

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Thilo Schöne and Ntandoyenkosi Dumani
October 2025

Pockets of Democracy

*Ideas for democracy support in
restrained contexts*

Pockets of Democracy:

Ideas for democracy support in restrained contexts

By Thilo Schöne and Ntandoyenkosi Dumani¹

Every piece of clothing has pockets. They can be opened and closed as needed. Pockets are stretchable depending on how much one needs to fit in. Pockets are hidden from the observer at first glance. This is the idea behind Pockets of Democracy. They are part of a larger project that supports democracy, looking inward and outward at the same time. They are flexible and can be hidden if necessary.

The demotivation of shrinking spaces

Humanity is currently experiencing the third wave of autocratisation. This conclusion was reached by democracy supporters on the ground and is supported by academia.² Today, 72 per cent of the world's population lives in autocracies, setting us back to 1986.³ In 2022, three times as many countries became autocracies as democracies.⁴ The idea that economic development can only be sustained in democracies has been called into question, as 46 per cent of the world's GDP is currently produced in autocracies. For hundreds of years, and institutionalised for around 70 to 80 years, democracies have been supported in their creation, stability, and restoration by people worldwide, traditionally from the Global North. By 2025, democracy supporters⁵ can be found in local communities, NGOs, faith-based organisations, trade unions, human rights organisations, international organisations, and state-owned development agencies worldwide. However, new concepts are needed due to the reduced space for democratic movements. These concepts are often termed 'shrinking', 'closing', or 'closed' spaces. 'Shrinking spaces', for example, refers to limiting the spaces of civic participation 'to reduce contestation and to neutralise rival centres of power of influence'.⁶

In their review of the existing literature, Hossain et al. (2018)⁷ concluded that the consequences of closing democratic spaces for development remain unclear. Responses are lacking. However, thanks to their compilation of different studies, we now know that closing spaces are usually associated with the following patterns:

- (a) *civic space has changed more than shrunk, although new restrictions affect aid-supported groups disproportionately;*
- (b) *new regulations are not all unwelcome, but nonetheless shift power from civic to political actors;*
- (c) *how that power shift shapes development outcomes depends on how political elites deploy that power, and in whose interests;*
- (d) *while there are instances where civil society has been curtailed to advance "developmentalist" agendas, it more often enables land and natural resource grabbing, or the abuse of labour or other rights of marginalised and disempowered groups;*
- (e) *while short-term economic growth is unlikely to be adversely affected, economic crises are more likely in settings where civic space is closed, and it is highly improbable that development has any chance of producing equitable, sustainable, or inclusive outcomes under conditions where civic space is restricted or closing.*⁸

Yet, while the mechanisms and effects of shrinking or closing spaces are well understood, the focus of answers has been on analysing how spaces are closing and at most proposing ways to adapt or mitigate them at the

¹ This position paper was inspired by the outcomes of focus group discussions, interviews, and plenary discussions with over 30 young activists from 20 different African countries. Some took part in the 'Young African Democrats Incoming to Berlin' in March 2023, while others participated in workshops supported by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and convened by the Young African Activists Network in Madagascar in May 2023 and in Mozambique in November 2023. The paper is also based on secondary research based on various academic articles, civil society reports and academic research on the subject matter. Furthermore, it draws on the practical experience of the FES in supporting democracy in Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, and Botswana, as well as on insightful discussions with knowledgeable partners and friends in these countries and beyond. It has also been informed by the outcomes and lessons drawn from 18 months of implementing the concept thereby enabling praxis to inform theory.

² Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg (2019) A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?, *Democratization*, 26:7, 1095-1113, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029

³ Felix Wiebrecht, Yuko Sato, Marina Nord, Martin Lundstedt, Fabio Angiolillo and Staffan I. Lindberg (2023) State of the world 2022: defiance in the face of autocratization, *Democratization*, 30:5, 769-793, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2023.2199452

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The term refers to any individual, network or organisation that promotes democratic values, in either an abstract or concrete sense, regardless of origin. It explicitly does not limit itself to organisations from the Global North, but rather includes actors and non-governmental organisations from all over the world.

⁶ European Partnership for Democracy (2020) Thinking democratically: recommendations for responding to the phenomenon of 'shrinking spaces', <https://nimd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Closing-democratic-space-exec-summary.pdf>

⁷ Hossain, Naomi et al. (2018) What Does Closing Civic Space Mean for Development? A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework, IDS Working Papers.

⁸ Id., p. 1.

international and national levels (cf. EPD,⁹ Gowan and Batmanglich 2009,¹⁰ Hossain et al.¹¹). Unfortunately, fewer and fewer actors are willing or able to push back. While the existing spaces must be kept open, other solutions should also be considered: democracy supporters could also start looking for alternative, non-traditional spaces while defending the existing ones.

Moving beyond the sphere of theory and drawing on the practical experience of a political foundation, this paper attempts to identify such spaces, however small, particularly in constrained contexts through a proposed approach based on the metaphor of ‘pockets of democracy’.

Back to the roots: Building democracy from below!

Although narratives of closing spaces are a useful analytical tool, they fail to motivate action and are not useful for supporting democracy. The term ‘closing spaces’ highlights the significance of autocrats and their various methods of limiting civic participation. However, such narratives fail to place activists and democracy supporters at the centre of the debate. The term limits creativity and increases desperation, and at best it leads us to defend those spaces that are now closing. While democracy supporters should continue to defend the remaining spaces, they must stop lamenting the end of the last wave of democracy. A new wave could begin. Today, 70 per cent of the population of the African continent is under the age of 35, and this figure is projected to rise to 75 per cent by 2030¹². Depending on how they are engaged, the youth can represent both an opportunity and a challenge.

Urbanisation is also a factor here, since it will arguably change social, cultural and political behaviour patterns. Informal traders, gender activists and environmental groups are growing in importance everywhere. While recognising the significant challenges posed by rising poverty rates, increasing crime, high levels of sexual violence against women, growing violent extremism, an escalating number of coups d’état, and the devastating impact of climate change on African economies and environments, evolving grassroots communities demonstrate effective strategies for advancing in the face of shrinking spaces.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that, in the current context of increasing repression, funding cutbacks and staff shortages – not to mention the very personal impacts on democracy defenders and their families, ranging from the reduction of financial livelihoods to

threats against personal safety – activists have significantly less energy and capacity to defend existing spaces and open new ones. This dual burden can lead to a downward spiral, so the emergence of grassroots initiatives and alternative democratic practices is vital for countering despair and sustaining hope for renewal.

Remain hopeful, change spaces, and start widening them again: Pockets of Democracy

As democracy supporters around the globe have come to the realisation that they cannot always effect democratic change by turning ‘the big wheel’ in a country, they must look towards innovative concepts that restore the essence of democracy to its core: building dialogue and participation in societal processes from below. This approach is slow and small-scale, but has the potential to widen spaces and increase participation, thus fostering democratic development. Moreover, this must happen in the open; democracy support cannot be hidden. It must be transparent.

Of course, the Pockets of Democracy concept does not purport to be a universal blueprint for supporting democracy. It is not a magic wand that can reignite democracy at a time when it is waning. Rather than replacing them, the PoD approach complements other approaches to supporting democracy, including dialogue formats, alliance-building and transformative change-making, to name a few. It offers an additional perspective on the wider debate about renewing and sustaining democracy.

Although it is particularly relevant in contested, shrinking or closed civic spaces where conventional strategies often encounter significant obstacles, it can also be applied to different political contexts. This is precisely because, as will become clear later in the paper, the spaces defined as PoDs actually exist in a variety of contexts and can serve as effective anchors for democratic resilience. Recent developments and the erosion of democratic standards in established democracies in the Global North (so-called mature democracies) have demonstrated the fragility of democracy. Hence, this approach is useful for cultivating spaces that serve as anchor points for sustaining and potentially expanding democracy. There are three ways to support ‘pockets of democracy’:

1. It’s not only a matter of ‘doing no harm’ but of ‘doing good’: The diagonal dimension for development partners: Even national and international development actors that do not explicitly work on supporting democracy have a high level of responsibility for the

⁹ European Partnership for Democracy (2020) Thinking democratically: recommendations for responding to the phenomenon of ‘shrinking spaces’, <https://nimd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Closing-democratic-space-exec-summary.pdf>

¹⁰ Richard Gowan and Sara Batmanglich (2009) Democracy Support: A fresh start, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/global/06537.pdf>

¹¹ Hossain, Naomi et al. (2018) What Does Closing Civic Space Mean for Development? A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework, IDS Working Papers

¹² African Union. (2019). Africa’s Future: Youth and the Data Defining their Lives. The African Union Commission (AUC), Department of Human Resources, Science and Technology and the Population Reference Bureau (PRB). https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/37828-doc-soayr_policy_brief_ok.pdf

environment in which they operate and implement their projects. It is unacceptable that we still witness donor-sponsored or –implemented development projects promoting technical projects within an autocracy without sufficient consideration of the wider social and political context. This approach is unacceptable because it tends to strengthen autocrats and even give them a lifeline, while ignoring or outright undermining the need for inclusive and democratic development. We believe on normative grounds that equitable and sustainable development cannot happen without democracy.

In authoritarian contexts, development cooperation should prioritise horizontal and vertical actors who strengthen local capacity, democratic values and the voices of citizens. Projects that ignore these principles may inadvertently reinforce authoritarian regimes by bolstering their control and legitimacy. Engagement with governments in such contexts should be strictly limited to necessary formalities, and any projects involving the state should be kept to a minimum and be primarily symbolic. This ensures that the bulk of resources and influence remains with independent actors.

Although this assumption has been challenged by certain countries in recent years, it still holds true for an overwhelming number of places in the world. For example, why are donors supporting the implementation of financial software for a highly autocratic and corrupt government's ministry under the umbrella of 'good governance'? All development partners, whether national or international, have a responsibility to include elements that support or are conducive to democracy in their programmes, no matter how technical they appear. It's not just about 'doing no harm' but about 'doing good'. Many infrastructure, farming, fisheries, water access and renewable energy projects implemented by national partners could incorporate critical components of democratic practice, such as participation in decision-making, dialogue amongst the population and sustained local monitoring to foster accountability, transparency and inclusivity. This would make a difference for the following reasons:

a. Democracy requires a foundation of economic development and social justice, in particular to provide the economic means for political participation, enable the inclusion of marginalised groups, and minimise the number of extremists who profit from dire economic situations. Development partners should incorporate elements that bolster democracy into their plans for economic, social and ecological development.

b. Development projects could provide an opportunity to practise democracy on a small scale. For example, if a dam is built or renovated, why not include a series of dialogues with the local population? Why not recruit regional personnel for the construction work and allow

them to form workers' councils? Why not establish an elected local governance council for people living around the dam? If donors are supporting climate-adapted farming for women, why not include local roundtables and safe spaces for women, as well as ensuring their participation in decision-making around crops, harvests, how the profits are used and the impact on their social life?

c. It is clear that projects planned in Western capitals will ultimately fail. Yet it still happens a lot. Including target groups in projects and ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making creates a greater impact and improves the sustainability of every project. Beyond the democratic argument, this approach is also economically sound. Nobody needs any more 'white elephants', yet they are still being built and more are planned.

d. Development cooperation from international donors must constantly justify itself in the recipient countries. An increasing number of right-wing extremists, as well as ordinary citizens, are questioning the usefulness of development aid 50–60 years after many African countries gained independence. Although the arguments used by both the left and the right are generally problematic, some questions are quite justified. In times of reduced public budgets, explaining development aid by the number of boreholes drilled, farmers trained or maize delivered after an earthquake will no longer suffice. People need stories to believe in in order to be convinced. One great story of social democracy was that of continuous progress towards a socially just democracy with an economy for all. So why shouldn't this story of democracy be at the heart of international cooperation? Incorporating democratic principles into all cooperation projects will enable this narrative to endure. This would convince and motivate those paying for the projects, those implementing them, and, most importantly, those profiting from them.

Examples: In the context of infrastructure projects, such as the construction of roads and dams, or training sessions on technical topics such as smart agriculture, fishing and crafting, donors could organise roundtable discussions with communities to conceptualise projects together. They could also hold a series of dialogues throughout the project to allow for participation and accountability, encourage the creation of workers' councils to enable democracy in the workplace, and even implement measures for the local governance of projects in coordination with village councils, etc.

2. Back to local politics: the vertical dimension for democracy supporters: National and international democracy supporters naturally gravitate towards the capital cities of countries, attempting to fulfil their mission through national representatives of NGOs, political parties, trade unions, and faith-based

organisations. There is nothing wrong with continuing to support these organisations if they are the result of national democratic activism taking root. However, these national spaces are closing in too many countries. While it is important to continue defending national spaces, it is also crucial to be flexible and move towards local politics for three reasons:

a. Due to their distance from the centre of power and their sheer number, local spaces are less monitored and contested, allowing easier access for citizens interested in participating. If there are many of them, they cannot all be closed at the same time. They are mostly not organised around political issues, but rather everyday concerns, which makes them appear ‘politically innocent’ and not threatening to the power and interests

Example

An example from the implementation: the informal sector

This pocket of democracy emerged from the collective efforts of informal traders to confront a pervasive but often overlooked issue – sexual harassment in market spaces. By framing the issue as a social and safety concern rather than a political one, a rare common ground for engagement was established between traders, authorities, and feminists.

What began as dialogue around protection and dignity soon evolved into a more structured platform: a city-wide informal sector working group that brought together a variety of stakeholders in an ongoing forum for representation and engagement. With support, the group was strengthened internally through training on democratic governance, leadership, organising, and negotiation. These skills enabled the group to expand its scope and begin leading policy processes, shaping a new framework for an inclusive and participatory informal economy in collaboration with the city.

By fostering connections across sectors and championing collaborative, transformative solutions, the group showcased how bread-and-butter issues can open up democratic space from below and anchor a more just urban future.

Other informal sector associations from different cities have started connecting with this pocket to exchange expertise and create working groups in their own cities.

of autocrats at first glance. They can exist in private (hidden) spaces or in public, and thereby look outward. It is crucial to link the different spaces within a city and between cities to foster pressure-resistant networks and reinforce the resilience of these new spaces.

b. In order to correct a historic mistake of democracy supporters, one much focus on building participation from below, where such movements are emerging. In all ‘successful’ democracies, movements have been established in villages, clubs and factories on the periphery of society, rather than at the often autocratically ruled centre.

c. Let us not forget that, in many African countries, democracy is associated with the West and was imposed in some places as a condition for development aid, as French President François Mitterrand did in his famous La Baule speech in 1990. The coincidence with the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the Bretton Woods Institutions did not help the narrative of democracy in Africa. This narrative overlooks pre-colonial African traditions of democracy, which we encountered alongside monarchies, anarchies and dictatorships across the continent.

Addressing socio-economic local ‘bread and butter’ issues such as housing, schools, access to water and the organisation of markets is important. It makes democracy more tangible and justifies the choice of system. It is not surprising that, in countries affected by persistently high levels of poverty, communities support politicians who distribute political donations ahead of elections. Addressing local issues and achieving tangible results for the population is likely to empower them. This approach also aligns well with the concept of a ‘Just City’ in Africa

Examples: Cooperation with the informal sector, residents’ associations and village and city councils on development projects involving participatory conceptualisation, continuous dialogue, accountability and the expansion of local discussion spaces on topics such as market organisation, water, housing, schools and public transport. Citizen and gender budgets enhance access..

3. New actors on the horizon: the horizontal dimension for supporters of democracy: Within national, regional or local spaces, democracy supporters must actively identify pockets of democracy. These are spaces where participation is still possible and which are less politicised. These spaces would focus on actors and topics that are not generally considered to be ‘political’ and would be distinct from the traditional topics of human rights, governance, anti-corruption and democracy. Although these spaces may appear ‘less important’, they are indeed crucial for any democracy development ‘from below’. They survive, and sometimes

even thrive, despite the state, not because of it. It is citizens at the grassroots level who create alternative spaces and organise outside the traditional political system. Exploring such non-traditional spaces would contribute to supporting democracy for several reasons:

Example

One example of implementation: Community radio stations

A small community radio initiative emerged in a context where the indigenous language and culture were marginalised and where mainstream media was inaccessible. What began as a modest platform for promoting language and cultural, as well as local news, evolved into a pocket of democracy. It enhanced access to transformative content, gave ordinary people – especially women and young people – a voice, and provided a platform for dialogue where community leaders could be held accountable.

After identifying it as a pocket of democracy, the initiative began by strengthening its internal governance competence, training its board, facilitating strategic planning and supporting participatory programming methods. Broadcasting equipment was also provided. Over time, the radio station began forging connections with other community radio stations, and together they created a national platform for policy advocacy on issues affecting community radio stations.

Subsequently, they created national-level platforms for cross-sectoral dialogue with feminist groups and trade unionists. Its ability to bring together diverse voices to discuss shared issues, such as livelihoods, gender justice, and public goods, helped transform dialogue on social issues such as language and culture into a broader scope of civic discourse. This made it both sustainable and influential, demonstrating that seemingly apolitical spaces can quietly nurture democratic values, accountability, and collective agency.

a. Intensely scrutinised spaces would be avoided, and while they may be defended, they might not be opened up again. It is important to choose spaces that receive less attention and begin to widen and link them. With regard to cities, it is important not to support these pockets of democracy in isolation, but rather to integrate them into the wider society, allowing them to flourish as democratic flowers in an autocratic desert. Community radio stations that discuss social, cultural, economic or ecological topics are a prime example, since they provide spaces where debate, participation and accountability can be practised without touching on topics labelled as political.

b. Therefore, it is crucial for supporters of democracy to consider new actors that differ from those who were partners in the last wave of democracy in the 1990s. As societies change, so, too, must partner relations. While new actors are emerging and competing with traditional ones, they cannot be ignored. We need to start talking to these new actors and helping them to integrate democratic elements such as participatory decision-making, accountability, dialogue and elections into their nonpolitical spaces. Community garden organisations, for example, fight poverty and food insecurity, thereby creating the preconditions for democracy. Including elements of roundtables, dialogue and accountability measures enables tolerance and participation to be practised. However, these organisations, like other community-based organisations, will not usually appear on the map of democracy supporters.

c. It would be possible to connect these pockets of democracy across country borders and encourage the spread of democratic principles within an apparently non-political space. For example, informal traders on a country's border who practise internal elections, hold monthly dialogues on their challenges and elect their representatives are most likely to influence their counterparts on the other side of the border.

Examples: Youth networks, informal traders, gender activists, community radio stations, climate change activists, student clubs, trade unionists, cooperatives and community gardens, etc.

The ultimate aspiration of the Pockets of Democracy (PoD) approach is to nurture resilient, participatory spaces that can withstand repression, foster civic agency and, over time, interlink to influence broader democratic processes. While PoDs alone cannot initiate or guarantee democratic transitions, they provide fertile soil in which future democratic openings can be nurtured. In highly restricted contexts, their existence itself is a significant achievement that must be nurtured, connected and safeguarded as part of a long-term democratisation strategy.

It must also be understood that 'Pockets of Democracy' do not exist simply because the autocratic state allows them to, nor because they are irrelevant and non-threatening to the state. Citizens are essentially creating alternative spaces and organising outside the traditional political system. The question of whether these spaces are permitted to exist because they do not threaten the state misses the point of PoDs. What is important is that these spaces are potent and offer new possibilities for democratisation. They are social structures that can be used for political organising.

In authoritarian contexts, the reality is that, when they amass sufficient power, they may attract the attention of the regime. However, the objective is to ensure that, when that time comes, they are sufficiently robust, connected and politicised to serve as a new arena for resistance.

But how do we identify PoDs?

PoDs do not announce themselves. They emerge subtly in everyday struggles and are often 'invisible' when the environment is scanned through the formal political lens and traditional tools of analysis. They do not identify as democratic actors. Nor do they usually conform to the institutional and organisational norms that have become standard in the mainstream civil society or political spaces. Instead, they emerge organically, shaped by social and economic struggles, organised out of necessity and driven by their immediate needs defined by present material conditions. In other words, their organisation is not based on formality, but on function. These pockets can be found in unlikely places, such as a cooperative of women traders that rotates its leadership, a youth network deliberating on urban safety, or a group of farmers deciding together how to use a communal irrigation scheme. They are often found at the margins of society, in sites of everyday struggle, ranging from big cities to townships, peri-urban communities and rural peripheries.

Identifying these PoDs requires an open mind and a willingness to reimagine where democratic agency takes place. For a long time, this has occurred silently outside of mainstream civic and political spaces. Over time, the characteristics of spaces defined as 'Pockets of Democracy' have become discernible through the implementation of the concept. These characteristics are innate to the pockets and can be cultivated and amplified through various interventions. It is important to understand that, in this context, a PoD is defined by the characteristics it already possesses, rather than its potential to achieve these indicators. These indicators enable democracy actors to distinguish PoDs from other forms of organisation and determine whether a space is worth investing in. For a space to qualify as a PoD, according to the definition of the term, it must exhibit all of the following indicators:

→ Democratically self-organised:

People come together voluntarily in PoDs, where they collectively define their structure, processes, and goals. Leadership emerges from within through democratic means and is accountable to the group. Decision-making is participatory, and mechanisms for dialogue, consensus or voting are employed, even if informally. These must be internally defined, reflecting the community's own commitment, and not be externally imposed.

→ Organised around social and economic interests:

PoDs are always embedded in the everyday social and economic interests of their members. They revolve around shared needs, common struggles or collective aspirations tied to livelihood, survival or dignity. PoDs are rarely organised for civic or political purposes. In fact, spaces that are specifically organised to pursue civic interests do not meet our definition of a PoD. They are organised around the everyday concerns of their members, such as food, education, informal trade, health, labour, climate and housing, which are not necessarily political. These everyday issues serve as powerful entry points for civic engagement. This connection to social and economic struggles lends PoDs legitimacy and durability.

→ Defined membership and shared goals:

A PoD is a group with a defined membership or a group of people with shared struggles, identity, common interests or collective agenda. It is not a loose 'catch-all' space for people with unrelated interests. Rather, its defining characteristic as a pocket is the clarity and specificity of its purpose, which is usually narrowly defined around the social or economic pursuit that unites its members. This could be a women's farming cooperative, an association of informal traders, or a radio station serving a specific community. The members are not beneficiaries or a constituency for an agenda, but rather the owners and drivers of the space who exercise their own agency.

→ Demonstrable self-sustainability and long-term resilience:

Resilience is a hallmark of a real pocket. Genuine PoDs have a demonstrable capacity and track record of sustaining themselves without external intervention. The staying power and resilience exhibited by the pocket are amongst its most important characteristics. Its ability to adapt and endure, especially in hostile or shifting contexts, signals its authenticity and democratic potential. PoDs survive not because they are externally resourced, but because they are needed and supported by the communities they serve. Due to their rootedness, they can weather repression, resource scarcity and shifts in context.

They draw on local knowledge and internal systems of support and solidarity. A PoD demonstrates:

- the ability to mobilise internal resources (time, skills, materials, and finances);
- continued functionality, with or without external support, including after support ends or when political pressure increases; and
- the capacity to self-correct, resolve internal disputes and maintain cohesion over time.

→ Democratising in its content and pursuit:

A space can only qualify as a PoD if its members demonstrate commitment to democratic values and outcomes, both in how they conduct themselves and in what they seek to achieve, and in the means employed to do so. The methods and values practised by the pocket matter. It must be democratic in both form and outcome. Although the members of the PoD do not call themselves 'democratic', their practices, narratives and methods – such as dialogue, consensus, representation, inclusion, transparency, shared leadership and equitable participation – contribute to building a more democratic society.

→ A pathway for civic participation:

Although a pocket of democracy is organised around a specific, necessarily narrow social and economic interest, it has the potential to connect with broader civic affairs. This does not mean that it must be overtly political. Rather, it should enable its members to engage with civic issues, starting with those directly linked to their interests. For example, a vendors' association could participate in and influence the local municipality's public budget processes and the delivery of public goods and services to vendors. It is unlikely that a space which remains entirely inward-looking and disconnected from community or public life will become a PoD, unless there is a clear pathway for connecting it to civic affairs. It must be capable of being linked to broader civic affairs. This enables the actors involved to engage, if only indirectly, in shaping public discourse, influencing policy or contributing to community problem solving in ways that foster collective agency.

How can PoDs be supported, and is this a legitimate approach?

PoDs can be characterised and evaluated in terms of their self-organisation and resilience over time. However, inviting external actors to support them might inadvertently weaken the pocket and create dependency. Once identified, pockets present both an opportunity and a challenge for those supporting democracy. For many democracy supporters, once a PoD has been identified, the instinct may be to fund, formalise or scale it up immediately. However, these approaches often negate the very qualities that made the pocket vibrant, self-sustaining and resilient in the first place. The challenge lies in supporting it without distorting, co-opting or weakening it. Even the most well-intentioned intervention can lead to over-formalisation, loss of autonomy or dependence on donors if it is not well thought through. Support must therefore be gradual, contextual and respectful, building on the pocket's internal logic rather than imposing an external project logic.

Furthermore, particularly in post-colonial contexts, the question of legitimacy must be raised and answered

honestly. For example, what legitimacy does an international organisation have to support PoDs in a village in West Africa? In most cases, it does not, because questions of reciprocity could be raised, as well as the issue of negligence towards local civil society structures. Yet the equally important question is: who is asking this question, and who is answering it? Are they African governments, political parties and civil society organisations in Africa? Or is it democracy activists in Africa? Or is it civil society in the Global North? It is indeed important for international democracy supporters to remain self-aware, particularly in the context of ongoing decolonisation. However, retreating from the shared democratic values that international democracy supporters have with their partners on the ground, which are anchored in the host countries' constitutions, would be fatal for the latter. This would undermine the credibility and legitimacy that many international actors, particularly non-state actors, currently enjoy in different countries and at various levels of society. Ideally, international democracy supporters should act on the basis of shared values of democracy, freedom, and social justice with their local partners rather than of the interests of their country of origin. These partners cannot always be states, given that the majority of governments today are autocratic.

Therefore, support for PoDs must be guided by the principle of solidarity, not 'saviourism', and must be based on strategic patience. Support for PoDs must adhere to the fundamental ethic of non-extractive engagement. Supporters must not exploit these pockets for stories, statistics or models. Instead, they should walk alongside these groups, amplifying their voices, defending their autonomy and connecting their agenda to broader opportunities and possibilities.

Based on experience and emerging lessons, three interrelated engagement components are proposed: internal strengthening, facilitating dialogue and building alliances. It is important to keep an open mind and understand that PoDs are at different levels, so these interventions must be adaptable and tailored to the specific needs of each pocket.

1. Internal strengthening:

In order for the pocket to become more effective and play a greater role within democratic spaces, it is often necessary to strengthen its internal capacity and competence in areas such as governance, leadership, strategic planning, organising, stakeholder mapping and skills training, as well as its operational capacity in terms of tools of the trade (equipment, materials, etc.). Support for internal strengthening should be based first on deepening what already works well. Rather than imposing external strategies, the goal should be to enhance the pocket's internal logic and integrity without seeking to transform it. The goal is to amplify its own capacities and strengthen what is already working.

- Listen before acting: support must be based on genuine listening. What are the pocket's goals, concerns and visions? External actors must take a back seat and allow community members to define the agenda. Support must be modelled around the priorities of the pocket, as shaped by its agenda, rather than the agenda of the donor.
- Support internal leadership and governance: for instance provide capacity-building around participatory leadership, internal democracy, accountability, conflict resolution and strategic planning.
- Enhance operational and strategic capacity: where relevant, support the basic systems (financial, communication, coordination, organisation and mobilisation) that enable the pocket to function effectively and efficiently.
- Preserve autonomy and identity: avoid bureaucratising or over-professionalising. The pocket must remain rooted in its context and not be transformed into a mini-NGO to suit donor templates.

2. Creating an inclusive platform for sustained dialogue:

Once the pocket has been strengthened internally, the next step is to connect its issues to civic discourse. Creating an inclusive dialogue platform is essential to enable diverse voices to collaborate in creating solutions that reflect their realities. Without platforms to engage with peers, communities and public authorities, groups risk remaining isolated. This approach is not only more effective but also builds trust and mutual understanding while enabling stakeholders to find common ground and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. The platform then becomes a space where the voices of these groups can be heard and influence decision-making. For example, through such dialogue, informal vendors can gain safer and more dignified working environments, while city authorities can benefit from an orderly and well-managed urban space that serves the entire community. The following aspects can be considered when creating the dialogue platform:

- Issue-based engagement: dialogue should begin with the issues the pocket is already dealing with, such as urban transport, market access and public health. The point is not to 'teach democracy', but to practise it in relation to real challenges, connecting democracy to public goods in the process.
- Interface with duty bearers: facilitate interaction with local authorities, government departments and public officials. Help the pocket frame its voice in policy-relevant ways without losing its grassroots character.

- Connect to civic discourse: dialogue platforms should help the pocket frame its interests within broader questions of social justice and democracy. For example, a water committee debating equitable distribution should see itself as part of a democratic process.

3. Building alliances:

While PoDs for the most part emerge in isolation and must be cultivated individually, their potential is enhanced when they are connected to each other and to broader social and civic platforms. If they remain isolated, they may become closed systems or echo chambers. Their ability to influence public institutions and policies remains limited. Moreover, such pockets are fragile and can easily be co-opted or experience burnout, becoming weakened over time. Therefore, if they are to be transformative for the whole country, it is important to establish links between pockets. This enhances resilience, fosters learning, enables collective action and allows local experiences to influence broader change. In the process, pockets can strengthen each other, build collective agency, and create a broader community of practice. This approach is effective in enabling pockets to resist co-option and instrumentalisation, and fosters democratic resilience. It enables PoDs not only to survive difficult political contexts, but also to give rise to new waves of democracy from the ground up. PoDs can be connected and linked in three main ways: sectorally, cross-sectorally, and geographically.

i. Sectoral linkages: It is important to connect groups operating within the same thematic or sectoral area, such as youth groups, informal traders, community gardens and climate justice organisations. These connections foster a sense of collective identity, amplify voices, and facilitate the development of sector-wide strategies and platforms. Connecting PoDs within the same sectors helps to build coherence and facilitate shared agendas, thereby increasing sectoral bargaining power. It allows for specialised dialogue with relevant state institutions and development actors, while also deepening sector-specific democratic practice.

For instance, a network of community radio stations can strengthen capacity and advocacy policy. Another example of a sectoral linkage is connecting informal traders' associations across different markets to coordinate advocacy on licensing and urban policy.

ii. Cross-sectoral linkages: Cross-sectoral linkages involve connecting pockets from different sectors or issue areas. These linkages broaden perspectives and facilitate collaborative mobilisation across various social struggles. This approach also helps to build bridges between issues and identities—for example, by linking an informal traders' association with a gender justice initiative in order to integrate feminist perspectives and create collaborative civic platforms. Another example would be bringing together trade unionists, students and climate activists to

engage in joint campaigns around public transport or energy access.

Cross-sectoral linkage is a powerful way to break down silos, build alliances, create broad-based coalitions and foster collective agency. This kind of networking recognises the complex, overlapping and intersectional nature of injustice, helping to build movements capable of tackling systemic issues together.

iii. Geographic linkages: Geographic linkages refer to connections between PoDs across different sites at local, national, and international levels. These connections are crucial for enabling scaling up, replication and the creation of distributed networks that can act collectively and adaptively across space.

Local-level linkages: The importance of establishing connections between different areas within the same locality cannot be overstated. These linkages allow PoDs to be scaled up without sacrificing local rootedness. They create networks that are less vulnerable to repression and increase impact by sharing tools, strategies and resources. Over time, such local geographic linkages can underpin democratic renewal from below. Connecting groups within the same city (e.g. residents' associations, informal sector groups and youth clubs) can foster solidarity and strengthen advocacy around common issues.

National-level linkages: It is also important to link PoDs to the national discourse. This involves forming alliances between local democratic pockets across provinces or regions to participate in coordinated national campaigns. Connecting PoDs to national platforms can elevate local voices into legislative or policy spaces at a national level. It also gives local struggles a national character and enables joint campaigns on joint issues that are best tackled at a national level, such as land rights or social protection. This can catalyse broad-based mobilisation and open up new democratic spaces.

International linkages: PoDs should also be connected across borders, particularly in sectors such as the informal economy, where cross-border informal traders frequently interact with their counterparts in other countries. The same applies to cross-border communities in most countries, where colonial borders have divided communities that may share identities, languages and livelihoods. These communities often have shared languages, customs, struggles and organising traditions, and they are well placed to establish democratic pockets across borders, based on mutual recognition and collective strength.

International linkages enable these PoDs to share tools, learn from each other and inspire one another, building transnational solidarity around shared issues such as the informal economy, climate change and the closing of civic spaces.

In terms of policy, international connections also enable engagement with regional and global policy platforms, including regional and multilateral institutions, and allow for influence beyond their own countries. These connections also offer PoDs access to regional platforms, legal instruments and advocacy spaces, thereby creating additional layers of protection and influence when local democratic space comes under pressure.

Moreover, recent developments demonstrate how events in one country can inspire similar mobilisation elsewhere. Youth, feminist and informal economy actors often draw strength from each other's victories and resistance. Democratic change, protest waves, youth-led actions and grassroots women's organising in one country often have a ripple effect across borders, revealing the connective power of collective action and hope.

Supporting without suffocating

Throughout all these stages, support for democracy must remain rooted in the realities and priorities of the PoDs. The objective is not to 'scale up' these pockets to create formal institutions, but rather to nurture their organic growth, enhance their impact and resilience, and connect them to democracy. Democracy supporters must be aware of the context and timing to avoid over-exposure or political risk. The focus should be on long-term support rather than short-term development 'interventionism'.

Identifying and supporting the PoDs is a delicate but essential task. It requires democracy actors to be patient and recognise that societal change happens slowly and unpredictably in unexpected places. When these small, hidden spaces are cultivated intentionally and connected with purpose, they can become the seeds of a new democratic culture that is resilient and rooted in local contexts.

Let us connect these pockets – but how?

Firstly, we can start by looking for these pockets in our communities, NGOs, international organisations, and state-owned development agencies.

Secondly, while acknowledging the post-colonial context in which we live, democracy remains universal at its core. Although the term 'democracy' is of Greek origin and has gained a negative connotation worldwide, individuals and groups everywhere still desire freedom of speech, a say in how their neighbourhood develops, and recognition if they are on the margins of society. Nobody likes to be told how to live by others. This is a universal truth that can help to create a democratic space for the future, and over time, build up resilient PoDs that will grow. This could inform how democratic institutions are rethought, even in places considered democratic, as support for this political system decreases. Yet its core values of freedom, social justice and solidarity remain in high demand amongst citizens.

Thirdly, an approach to development oriented towards democracy requires international donors to change their funding models, since these do not match the needs of democracy supporters. Donors should be willing to take more risks, adopt a long-term approach, be more flexible with their financial guidelines, and focus less on activity and indicators. It must be acknowledged that democracy is not a technical process that can be measured by calls for proposals and successfully completed logical frameworks.

The concept of ‘Pockets of Democracy’ is one of many contributions, and it is innovative in its linkages and the story it (re)tells: democracy must grow from below. Democracy must be continuously supported and require narratives, as Jobelius and Steinhilber outline in their excellent analysis of six lessons for democracy supporters from the past.¹³ Every actor supporting democracy should identify PoDs in their area, protect them and expand them, so that the next wave of democratisation can begin and more people can enjoy freedom, social justice and mutual solidarity.

¹³ Jobelius, Matthias and Steinhilber, Jochen (2020) Progressive Democracy Promotion: What we can learn from history for securing the future of democracy, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16500.pdf>

Pockets of Democracy: Ideas for democracy support in restrained contexts

When civic space shrinks, democracy doesn't vanish—it can be found in “pockets of democracy”: resilient, everyday spaces existing around bread&butter issues. Examples are community radios, informal traders' groups or community gardens where participation and accountability are quietly practiced. The publication shows how these pockets can connect and grow via three avenues—diagonal (development cooperation that actively “does good” instead of only “doing no harm”), vertical (stronger local politics), and horizontal (new actors and cross-sector networks). It also outlines how allies can support without suffocating — by strengthening internal capacity, creating inclusive dialogue platforms and building alliances — so that many small pockets add up to overall democratic renewal from below.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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