



WFD

Conference on

Environmental

Democracy

MARCH 2022



WFD



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

In partnership with:



NDI

NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE



WORLD
RESOURCES
INSTITUTE

Chair's summary

Anthony Smith (Chief Executive, Westminster Foundation for Democracy)

On 29-31 March, representatives of democracy support and environment organisations met to consider the interaction of two distinct crises - the 15-year decline in democratic governance and the unfolding climate and environmental emergencies. Together, we see the absolute urgency of action on the environment and believe that the challenge is essentially a political one. We won't rise to the challenge without the democratic values of accountability, inclusion, and transparency. That is where innovative environmental democracy needs to come in.

Hosted by WFD in partnership with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the World Resources Institute (WRI), the conference brought together 58 distinguished speakers alongside delegates from every corner of the world, including environmental CSOs from the global South; activist judges, lawyers and parliamentarians from the UK, Georgia, Ghana, Germany, Indonesia and Panama; think tanks, academics and researchers specialising in climate governance and economics, democracy, climate participation and environmental corruption; philanthropists and political foundations; press freedom defenders; leaders of government and private sector transparency initiatives; democracy support organisations; senior government officials from the UK, Sweden, the US and the UN system; the former Presidents of the Maldives and South Korea, Finland's Climate Ambassador, Sweden's State Secretary for International Development, and two UK Ministers – COP26 President Alok Sharma and Minister of State for the Pacific and the International Environment Lord Goldsmith.

The full proceedings of the conference are [available on YouTube](#). The main conclusions of the discussions are captured below.

Environmental Democracy as a sustainable development alternative

Environmental democracy is critical for international sustainable development, because only accountable, inclusive and transparent governance combined with environmental justice can help societies and their institutions accelerate the present pace of change. Democratic reform is critical for climate action because it will allow us to move beyond 'stakeholderism' as a box-ticking exercise, and firmly root climate action in democratic rights and structures.

Thinking and working politically for the environment and climate

Since politicians and citizens are political animals facing competing demands, the roadblocks to their political action, including differences in perceptions of the dangers of the climate emergency and competing interests, need to be higher on the agendas of climate and environment activists. At the same time, democracy support policies will fail if they do not help democracies deliver on the climate and environment.

The failure of democracies to respond to the climate crisis is often attributed to political will, but it is also an issue of democratic weakness, i.e., political short-termism, political party competition and/or complex policy remedies not understood or owned by citizens. Therefore, it is necessary to precisely identify the political problem and context to determine the democracy and governance solution. Is it polarisation? State fragility? Democratic backsliding? Lack of political will? Structural weaknesses in most democratic systems?

Although climate change and environmental degradation are failures of governance, most donors have not tackled the governance failure. Research by the Grantham Institute on Climate Change and the Environment of the London School of Economics (LSE), commissioned by WFD, showed that this is due to a low understanding by donors of the interlinkages between environment and democracy, and to a lack of enabling institutional setups to address this nexus. A series of recommendations to exploit the potential of integrating the democracy and climate agendas were put forward in the initial findings of the research, which are [available on WFD's website](#). Tackling climate change and other forms of serious environmental degradation will mean adopting sweeping reforms to our economies, our infrastructure, our behaviour, and our day to day lives. Political engagement must increase.

Many challenges, many entry points

Access to information and transparency are the first steps towards participation in decision-making and in turn access to justice, so cultures of secrecy must be tackled to allow access to high quality, empowering information. However, anticorruption efforts directly related to the environment are still few and far between.

Political parties ought to play a major role in solving the climate crisis, as conduits for people's concerns, but they needed to ask themselves 'why are young climate activists acting within civil society rather than through formal political parties?' In a polarised environment, cross-party cooperation becomes more difficult, so democracy support organisations should try to create spaces for political parties to coalesce around climate action.

Colonialism and exclusion linger in global climate decision-making, with the emphasis on mitigation rather than adaptation, and those who face the greatest impacts of climate change are rarely getting a seat at the table, both nationally and internationally. Promoting leadership of marginalised groups to exercise political voice is essential to enhance climate justice. Theo

Clarke MP, as a member of the International Development Committee of the UK House of Commons, reminded us how climate change disproportionately affects women in developing countries because of existing inequalities and is acting as a threat multiplier.

The international community can play a critical role in helping to advance environmental justice by strengthening cooperation at all levels, recognising the universal right to a clean and healthy environment, protecting environmental human rights protectors, and accelerating the implementation of the environmental rule of law. Environmental legislation empowers citizens, and the right to justice can act as a deterrent against environmental mismanagement and negligence, but there are many obstacles to environmental rule of law, e.g., lack of court independence, corruption, and lack of press freedom. Environmental and land issues are one of the most common topics that journalists have been covering when they are murdered. These issues often overlap with reporting on corruption and the misuse of official funds. It is essential to provide safety and ensure democratic space for environmental human rights defenders as key agents of democratic change.

Political leadership: emerging best practices addressing the environment and democracy nexus

COP26 President Alok Sharma stressed that *'we must continue to bring civil society into the heart of climate action, empower citizens, embolden governments, and together build a safer, cleaner, more resilient world.'*

Policy innovation in ODA programming is seeking to combine environmental and rule of law objectives. These efforts include the defence of environmental human rights, supporting coalitions for change, grassroots organisations, and the media; enhancing transparency and data generation to empower civil society and local communities; and strengthening inclusion and participation, particularly of women and marginalised groups, as a first step connecting the world of democracy assistance and environmental protection. Given the scale of the societal transformation required to tackle the climate crisis, these approaches need to be supplemented with democratic innovation at all levels: from parliamentary practices to new forms of citizen participation and people-centred, rather than government-centred, engagement.

Sweden's State Secretary for International Cooperation Jenny Ohlsson underlined the links between current threats to democracy and environmental degradation, and how democracy offers the best foundation for a sustainable society and the implementation of the Paris Agreement: *'We must reshape the way we do politics, to better include environmental concerns'. She concluded that 'sadly, the global democratic backsliding affects peace and security, but also the environment... The current authoritarian trend represents a real risk for climate action, and these linkages between environmental degradation and climate change on the one hand, and the backsliding of democracy and human right abuses and the attacks against the rules-based order on the other hand make it necessary to adopt a holistic approach.'* She offered Sweden's experience, as a major democracy donor, integrating governance and

environmental objectives to fellow climate and democracy donors interested in testing this approach.

Kathryn Stratos, Deputy Director for Climate and Cross-Sectoral Strategy in USAID's Center for the Environment, and Rosarie Tucci, Director of USAID's Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) Center presented on USAID's new climate strategy, which will be released in April 2022. Their two worlds - environment and democracy - are coming together in multiple ways. The Biden Administration's foreign policy agenda prioritises climate and democratic renewal driving an alignment within USAID that has been reinforced by the climate strategy itself. The two noted that environment and democracy are also inextricably linked in powerful ways through mutual climate justice and anti-corruption imperatives, and USAID's climate work will benefit from the DRG Center's extensive experience integrating democratic processes in other development sectors. Organisationally, USAID has formed an internal joint democracy-environment working group to advance environmental democracy policy, practice, and programming.

The Rt. Hon Lord Goldsmith, Minister for Pacific and the Environment at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), delivered the final speech of the conference. He noted: *'We need to work together. Democracy, human rights, climate change, the environment... None of these issues can be separated. We are seeing a growing rift between people and power, young people in particular despairing of the future they feel they have no power to change. In truth, those people who organise and heap pressure on governments are changing things. Voting, lobbying, joining up with effective organisations, protests, all these things can make a huge difference. But we also need to make sure that the vital organs of our democracies are in good health: free press, fair elections, functioning parliaments, independent courts. We often hear about the need to bring the public with us, but by and large on all the big issues they are. Vested interests are always going to try and stand in the way, but it is the job of governments to resist that pressure, and too often they don't. We have all we need to deliver (these changes) bar sufficient political will. People can change that as well, and I think they already are.'*

Next steps – our coalition for change

The three convening organisations, WFD, NDI and WRI, pledged to support joint dialogues and exchanges between civil society and government leaders in two priority countries to assess the existing political and rule of law capacity to meet climate commitments. Based on this assessment, participants will identify programmatic priorities and measures of effectiveness. These case studies will be distributed broadly to donors, policymakers, and implementers to show them a practical path forward for environmental democracy. We will be seeking donor and community support for this effort immediately and jointly.

By doing this, we will be advancing a political and governance strategy on climate that could also deliver assessment tools, frameworks, and indicators to the larger community with a view

to rapid scaling up – the latest IPCC report reminds us that the time for action is now, if global emissions are to peak by 2025 and start falling rapidly.

We also committed, with our NDI and WRI partners, to continuing this conversation by establishing this forum as an annual event that continues to create synergies between our communities.

In closing the event, NDI President Derek Mitchell stressed that *‘we need to reverse the democratic recession. The ability of democracies to deliver on the climate is an important part of this and of inspiring young people and all those who really care about this issue’*.

In bringing together democracy support and environmental communities, the conference represented a chance for democratic innovation on the two most important issues of our time: democracy and climate. To that end, we are delighted that the event concluded with an announcement from WFD, NDI and WRI, committing to the establishment of a new community of practice on environmental democracy, and use of two key case studies to design a democracy and governance strategy on climate. We hope that this event has catalysed closer cooperation between democracy support and environmental practitioners, facilitating the closer partnership and sustained commitment which will be needed to unlock the potential of the environmental democracy approach.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

 www.wfd.org

 [@WFD_Democracy](https://twitter.com/WFD_Democracy)

 [@WestminsterFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/WestminsterFoundation)



Westminster Foundation for Democracy
is an executive Non-departmental
Public Body sponsored by the Foreign,
Commonwealth & Development Office.



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office