Global environmental crises - a democratic response

Unprecedented changes to all levels of society, politics and businesses are required to avoid the most devastating effects of climate change and environmental degradation. This means we need durable, effective and responsive democratic institutions, accountable systems of governance, and strong political will.

Overwhelming evidence shows that human activity has a dangerous impact on the climate and our ecosystems. Yet, most political systems have failed to address climate and other environmental crises. Strong environmental governance and rule of law is crucial to supporting sustainable development as well as inclusive democratic governance.

The UN 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement represent an understanding that human wellbeing is dependent on the planet’s life-support systems as well as an unprecedented international consensus on the urgency of addressing climate change and environmental degradation. However, the fact that this has not led to enough meaningful action has meant many people do not believe that democratic governments to deliver the necessary results for their citizens - against a background of worldwide democratic decline.

Government decisions on the design of COVID-19 economic recovery packages arrive at a critical juncture for global environmental governance: during the 2020s, greenhouse gas emissions need to start falling fast if our planet is to stay within the 2°C limit of global warming needed to avoid catastrophic climate change.
WFD recognises that there are strong linkages between action to address climate and environmental crises and action to strengthen democracy.

**Political Voice**

The groups who will be most severely affected by the resource scarcity caused by climate change and environmental degradation are the same groups commonly excluded from political decision-making – the poorest, slum residents, subsistence farmers, rural women, minorities, indigenous groups, and young people. Ensuring that they are included in political processes and that decision makers listen to their political voices is critical.

**Policy development**

Realising international environmental treaties such as the Paris Climate Agreement requires the translation of these commitments into domestic laws and regulations by democratic means. Citizens, political parties, journalists, and parliaments need the capacity and resources to use the extensive evidence available on climate change and environmental degradation to inform and influence policy development.

**Policy delivery**

Almost every country in the world has legislation dedicated to the protection and preservation of the environment. However, the implementation and enforcement of these laws does not go far enough to address environmental challenges. Globally, laws are poorly enforced and access to legal remedies and environmental justice is severely limited. Few parliaments effectively hold their executives to account for failure to deliver on environmental commitments. Countries and their institutions of governance need support to make sure they deliver on environmental commitments.

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**Environmental democracy**

Environmental democracy has three pillars:

- **Transparency**: Openness and transparency are required to help citizens, civil society, media, businesses, the courts, and the international community understand what is actually happening in relation to the environment and how their governments are responding.
- **Participation**: The public – particularly those most affected by climate change and environmental degradation – need to be able to voice their concerns and influence policy-making for the right decisions to be made, and for these choices to have legitimacy.
- **Justice**: If enforcement of environmental legislation and treaties is to have meaning, and people’s human rights are to be respected, then there must be effective mechanisms for challenging the action – or inaction – of governments in acting as environmental stewards for current and future generations.

These foundations of environmental democracy were firmly established in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, which emerged from the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit:

“Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided”.

The fundamental concepts outlined in the Rio Declaration have since been embedded in other international and regional instruments including: the 1998 Aarhus Convention (47 parties across Europe and Central Asia), the 2010 Bali Guidelines, and the 2018 Escazu Agreement (22 signatories across Latin America and the Caribbean).
How WFD supports environmental democracy

WFD’s operating ethos is to be responsive to local contexts and the needs and priorities of those with whom it works. WFD supports inclusive democratic governance institutions and has a deep understanding of the dynamics involved in democratic transition. WFD is uniquely placed to collaborate with technical environmental specialists and provide leadership on issues that sit at the nexus of sustainable environmental governance and the democratic process.

WFD works with parliaments, political parties and civil society, as well as on elections. We focus on supporting those institutions that hold the government to account through horizontal (parliaments and independent bodies), vertical (citizens), and mixed (political party and electoral) mechanisms operating at local, national, regional, and global levels.

Given its existing relationships, capabilities and access to critical political actors, WFD’s work on Environmental Democracy prioritises the following:

Environmental coalitions for change

Whilst approaches to environmental protection vary widely around the world, evidence shows that a vibrant and engaged environmental civil society sector is crucial for supporting governments to make responsible policy decisions on the environment. This is necessary given that the change required to avoid the most devastating effects of climate change faces complex and multifaceted barriers across all sectors of society. WFD will utilise its convening power and its trusted relationships with political decision-makers to help form broad coalitions capable of generating political action on the environment, working in close partnership with other organisations and institutions with similar objectives.

Open data on the environment

WFD is an active participant in the Open Government Partnership (OGP), with a particular focus on supporting parliaments to play a greater role in advancing transparency and access to data for citizens. WFD will work with parliaments, civil society, and government to generate greater commitment to opening up government data as it relates to the environment, and to investing additional resource in the generation of environmental data, including environmental economic accounting as a key lever for the integration of environmental considerations across public policy.

The passage and enforcement of environmental laws and treaties

Robust and effective environmental legislation is required to address climate change and environmental degradation. In order to achieve impact international commitments must be translated into regional, national, and sub-national laws and regulations; only 17 countries have enacted domestic legislation that reflects their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement. Proper implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation requires political will, the allocation of adequate resources and a degree of political independence for relevant oversight and enforcement institutions. WFD will work with parliaments to ensure that environmental legislation is of high quality and reflects the principles of environmental democracy. The Foundation will also support parliaments in overseeing their countries’ fulfilment of international treaties, including the realisation of environment-related SDGs and the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions associated with the Paris Climate Agreement.

Political parties and environmentalism

Many political parties around the world have an underwhelming record of addressing environmental issues in their policies, manifestos, and campaign messages, and once in power rarely deliver substantive change. Environmental messages are becoming more important to voters, particularly in Europe but also increasingly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. WFD will work with political parties to enhance their knowledge of environmental issues, help them develop and deliver more progressive environmental policies, build coalitions with environmental groups to improve their evidence base for policy development, and encourage them to place environmental issues higher up in their campaign priorities. WFD will also share experiences of success, examples of green economic growth agendas and support parties to translate evidence and data into policy and legislative action. The Foundation will support cross-party dialogues on critical environmental issues to encourage action and break deadlocks.
Environmental rights

Indigenous people, youth, women and the economically disadvantaged are disproportionately excluded from important decision-making processes on the environment. An inclusive view of environmental rights is required to ensure environmental benefits accrue equitably and to consider who is being excluded from decisions on the environment. The fulfilment of environmental rights rests on the ability of the public to have access to justice in cases where environmental rights have been breached; without this they have no ability to hold polluters or their government accountable for environmental harm, to enforce their right to know or to participate in decisions on the environment. WFD has a long history of supporting human rights committees inside parliaments and will work to integrate environmental rights into their work, particularly when environmental activists are being harassed or are subjected to violence.

Natural resource management

Providing access to clean and sustainable resources and their equitable distribution within society are crucial elements of legitimate democratic governance. This requires the sustainable and environmentally sensitive extraction and use of natural resources, which is critical to reducing pollution, deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity losses. Ensuring an inclusive view of environmental justice and minimising the environmental and social impact of resource extraction requires: robust regulatory frameworks based on principles of transparency, accountability and active citizen participation; transparent engagement with the private sector; and access to legal remedies and compensation. WFD has proven experience supporting parliaments to develop legislation in the oil and gas sector and will engage on these issues in contexts where environmentally sensitive natural resource extraction is a significant concern.

Research on Environmental Democracy

While the concept of Environmental Democracy has existed for over two decades, there have been remarkably few efforts to operationalise it from a democracy support perspective via targeted programming. WFD has an ongoing research partnership with the University of Birmingham and other UK academic institutions and think tanks, and the Foundation would look to build research components into its Environmental Democracy programmes to identify what areas are most impactful and to help identify what works and what does not in this nascent field of programming. This learning would help inform donors and the international community, while hopefully also encouraging other organisations to pursue similar efforts across the globe.

WFD is developing partnerships with a range of organisations and individuals - international and non-governmental organisations, universities, think tanks, government officials, independent specialists, the private sector - whose values align with ours and who have the experience and technical skills to contribute to WFD’s Environmental Democracy programmes. Programmes may utilise a combination of UK-based, international, and national partners, tailored to meet the needs of each individual context and issue.
How WFD supports environmental democracy

Georgia

In 2018-19, WFD supported the Georgian parliament through two separate programmes to establish the practice of holding thematic inquiries and to conduct post legislative scrutiny (PLS), with the overall intention of improving the legislature’s oversight function. Both of these programmes had an environmental focus.

WFD provided assistance to the Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Committee (EPNRC) of the Georgian parliament to conduct two separate thematic inquiries on ambient air pollution and municipal waste management, while one of the components of the PLS programme was to assess the effectiveness of existing regulations concerning electric vehicles.

Through its support for these processes WFD has also helped to improve the participation of citizens in environmental decision making by supporting parliament to produce recommendations based on well-structured, transparent and solution-oriented collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs) and individual citizens, in addition to other stakeholders, such as government and the private sector.

Lebanon

With the discovery of offshore oil and gas in Lebanon, oversight of the energy sector has become a crucial issue for the government.

Since March 2016, WFD’s programme in Lebanon has focused on strengthening parliamentary oversight of Oil & Gas in Lebanon and providing support and technical advice to the Public Works, Energy, Water and Transport Committee (PWEC) and the Research and Information Department.

The support has, among other things, improved the capacity of MPs and staff to manage the Oil & Gas sector in an effective and transparent way, enhanced institutional capacity of parliamentary committees; and improved access and openness to Parliament for CSOs engaged in the oil & gas sector.

In September 2018, the Parliament ratified the Transparency of Oil & Gas law. The law ensures the disclosure of information amongst all the relevant administrative bodies and prevent conflicts of interest. It also gives the CSOs legal powers in monitoring the management of Oil and Gas sector. WFD’s programme contributed positively towards the adoption of the law and ensuring its compliance with international standards.

Morocco

In 2017 WFD’s Morocco programme supported committees to scrutinise Morocco’s fulfilment of its international commitments, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.

This included a Workshop on “Harmonising national legislation on climate change with the requirements of the Paris Agreement.” As a result of this workshop, the House of Councillors identified nine laws that needed to be amended in order to be aligned with international conventions and commitments.

Venezuela

In Venezuela WFD supported dialogue on energy reform and the development and drafting of a cross party bill on climate change, which was raised in the National Assembly in early 2018.

Study visits for MPs to hear about the Scottish and British experience of passing climate change legislation was instrumental in gathering support as were insights from Mexico, Canada and Argentina. Unfortunately, the bill has yet to be passed and given the current political situation is unlikely to be progressed anytime soon.

Contact

Rafael Jimenez Aybar
Environmental Democracy Adviser
Rafael.JimenezAybar@wfd.org

Westminster Foundation for Democracy
Artillery House, 11-19 Artillery Row, London, SW1P 1RT
@WFD_Democracy | @WestminsterFoundation | www.wfd.org