WFD’s COVID-19 response

Supporting democracy, human rights, good governance, and equality during the COVID-19 crisis

June 2020

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

Even before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, democracy worldwide had been in serious crisis. The threats to democracy have been well publicised, with both Freedom House and the Economist documenting 13 years of decline. Elections had lost credibility and democratic institutions were being hollowed out. Civil society, human rights defenders, and journalists were being silenced. China, Russia, and other autocrats had been increasingly subverting democracy across the globe, while the rest of the international community’s efforts to support democratic freedom had grown weaker.

It was against this already challenging background that COVID-19 emerged. A powerful piece from Thomas Carothers at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace perhaps best sums up the risks: “The coronavirus will likely transform other pillars of democratic governance—such as electoral processes, civilian control of militaries, and civic mobilization—and potentially reset the terms of the global debate on the merits of authoritarianism versus democracy. The pandemic will almost certainly usher in broader effects on governance by overburdening countries’ basic governance functions, taxing their socio-political cohesion, exacerbating corruption, unsettling relations between national and local governments, and transforming the role of nonstate actors.”

Since our establishment in 1992, the primary aim of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) has been to assist, support and encourage the peaceable establishment and development of pluralistic democratic practice and political institutions. COVID-19 presents perhaps the greatest threat to democracy since our founding, which followed shortly after the end of the Cold War. Our most serious concerns are as follows:

• **Breakdown of democratic solidarity and the rules-based international system**

  Increased division and distraction amongst leading democracies, combined with a decline in democracy support as Oversees Development Assistance (ODA) shrinks, could lead to failing to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs), uphold human rights conventions, and meet other global governance challenges (including tackling climate change and corruption). The growing influence of autocratic regimes could also lead to a breakdown in the international rule of law, transparency, accountability, and justice mechanisms that benefit UK national interests, including economic growth, trade, security cooperation, and managing migration.

• **Reduced accountability and imbalance of powers**

  Centralisation of powers to deal with the crisis could lead to long-term increases in executive power and decreases in accountability – horizontal (legislative, judicial) and vertical (civil society, citizens, decentralised government). Meanwhile, corruption could increase as commitments to transparency and greater citizen engagement are scaled back, and governments may attempt to remain in power indefinitely by cancelling elections or holding them under unfair conditions.

• **Declining equity and compromised rights**

  With women, youth and vulnerable groups – including people with disabilities (PWDs), indigenous groups, and those living in extreme poverty – already marginalised in government decision making, there is serious risk that COVID-19 measures will be implemented unfairly, leading to increasing inequality. Meanwhile, civic and privacy rights may erode as a result of hastily drafted emergency measures, and may not be returned after the crisis abates.
• Economic crisis leading to greater insecurity

Economic deprivation and food insecurity resulting from COVID-19 could lead to heated competition for limited resources, growing protest and hostility from disgruntled groups and citizens, and greater use of state violence to maintain order. Increasing polarisation already evident before COVID-19 could escalate and metastasise, with widespread scapegoating of minorities, rising discrimination against LGBT+ communities, and increased gender-based violence.

These challenges are serious, with the long-term future of the advancement of democracy, human rights, good governance, and equality subject to what happens in the next 12 to 18 months; this is not the time for complacency. Many autocratic regimes look at COVID-19 as an opportunity to consolidate their power and to directly challenge the global order established by the world’s leading democracies, including the United Kingdom. Despite this, many democracies have demonstrated that a commitment to evidence-based policy, investment in state capacity, transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making can deliver much better results when it comes to managing the COVID-19 crisis.

The case for democracy is clear, yet it will not make itself. Simultaneously defeating the COVID-19 pandemic and the global democratic crisis requires robust action by a wide range of actors: governments, NGOs, foundations, media, the private sector, unions, and many others. The WFD COVID-19 Response Paper outlines how WFD plans to contribute to this effort.

Executing the COVID-19 ‘pivot’

WFD’s 2017-2022 Strategic Framework laid the groundwork for WFD to operate more effectively in rapidly changing, challenging contexts. Over the past three years, we have transformed how we analyse the many contexts in which we work, and modified how we design, deliver, monitor, evaluate, and learn from our programmes. We have incorporated new working methods and formed new partnerships, all with a view towards improving our ability to impact wider political and governance systems. Given WFD now works in over 30 countries across the globe, each with their own unique challenges and opportunities, this shift to a more flexible and adaptable way of working has been critical to our continuing success.

Together, these reforms have put WFD in position to successfully “pivot” in order to better address the novel challenges facing both newer and more-established democracies resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the organisation, WFD will adapt to:

• Put inclusion first

WFD’s programming will promote greater inclusion and enhance the political influence of women and vulnerable groups. Gender equality, protection of human rights, and addressing the exclusion of communities from political life will remain a core part of WFD’s work. In many ways, these issues determine the success of WFD’s mission. They will be particularly relevant as governments build more resilient states able to protect citizens in the face of future disasters. We will therefore make an understanding of the gender impact of the recovery policies, and the ability of women and excluded communities to provide political leadership, central to our approach. This is particularly important given women have proven particularly capable in improving health outcomes.

• New ways of working

Programmes must be practically feasible to implement, both for WFD and its partners. Face to face engagement will be a challenge in many countries where WFD works, with international travel to country offices likely impossible in the short term and potentially restricted and/or expensive in the longer-term. WFD’s primary model of establishing local offices run
by national staff will prove beneficial and cost-effective in this new reality, but WFD will also need to make greater use of virtual technology to ensure its British and international expertise is mobilised effectively.

• **Changing priorities**

WFD must meet the new priorities and challenges of its partners. For example, WFD’s transparency and anti-corruption work may increasingly focus on government spending in response to the crisis, sharing approaches such as “pro-active” auditing (used in Sierra Leone to monitor real-time spending during the Ebola response). Parliaments that had not prioritised business continuity planning before the crisis now have high levels of interest in learning from the experience of others.

• **New opportunities**

WFD will launch novel strands of work that are strategically well-suited for the new context. Many parliaments are facing a crisis of legitimacy and relevance as emergency powers are granted to the Executive, and want to engage stakeholders and citizens through strategic communications and two-way digital technology. New initiatives with civic technology (such as the ParlApp WFD supported in Sierra Leone) will be launched to enhance citizen engagement and transparency.

**Country, regional, and global initiatives**

WFD operates at multiple geographic levels - country (including subnational), regional, and global - each of which requires a degree of adaptation to COVID-19, both operationally and programmatically.

WFD’s country-based work will remain foundational for the organisation, and we aim to maintain our presence across 30+ countries, adapting our programmes to the new circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. We will also explore opening new country offices in strategic locations such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Armenia when feasible. WFD’s broad footprint is critical, as the challenges to democracy are global and effective resistance requires a worldwide response. We also benefit greatly from the accumulated knowledge, expertise, skills, and innovation from across our network of partners, with WFD playing a critical of facilitator of cross-country exchanges.

Even before COVID-19, WFD had been planning to expand its regional and global engagement to combat the rise of authoritarianism through support to a growing, interlinked network of democracy advocates (inside and outside government). The pandemic has accelerated these plans, which at the same time will need to increasingly operate remotely given travel (and cost) limitations. Anticipated initiatives will likely include:

• **Facilitating a wider range of global and regional networking initiatives, bringing together (virtually) leading political actors.**

Parliamentary, political party, CSO, and electoral - in digital workshops, discussion groups, and mentoring sessions to share experiences and emerging innovative practice in the COVID-19 context. For example, WFD plans to work with its Patron Speaker Lyndsey Hoyle to organise online ‘learning exchange’ webinars for Speakers from parliaments around the world to share experiences of setting up virtual parliaments and remote working.

• **Extending its commitment to working with civil society organisations via the Open Government Partnership (OGP), including reviewing the OGP policy on parliamentary engagement to help ensure government responses to COVID-19 are open and transparent.**
• Developing a range of e-courses – accessible through WFD's website and via global platforms such as AGORA – to support parliaments, political parties, CSOs, and electoral stakeholders.

WFD will also translate more of its training materials, studies, research, protocols/rules of procedure, etc. into common regional languages (French, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Bahasa/Malay) and sharing via WFD’s website, AGORA, and other relevant platforms.

• New communication initiatives to help amplify the Foundation’s programming, research, analysis, blogs, and products/tools.

These include the creation of a public COVID-19 response tracker for all WFD country programmes that highlights: 1) the emergency actions taken by governments; 2) the parliamentary response; 3) social and economic implications; and 4) political impact. In addition, WFD will promote the work of other relevant democracy assistance organisations, experts, academics, and policy makers, while also highlighting examples of democratic resilience and adaptation across the globe.

Thematic and research initiatives

Over the next 12 to 18 months, WFD will develop a range of thematic and research initiatives to address emerging threats to democracy, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic: closing civic space; threats to privacy and rights to assembly; and risks to electoral integrity, amongst others.

However, WFD will also remain focused on the longer-term trends, challenges, and opportunities that remain relevant despite the immediacy of the COVID-19 crisis, with a particular focus on encouraging reforms that increase openness and transparency, help citizens participate in policy-making, and address long-running policy problems that have proved resistant to improvement, such as tackling climate change and addressing inequality.

WFD’s Technical Advisory Unit (TAU) - made up of experts in governance, parliamentary practice, political parties, inclusive politics, transparency, elections, human rights, strategic communications, and environmental democracy - is leading on developing a range of new programming methodologies, and tools responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Meanwhile, WFD’s Research Programme continues to collaborate with leading British and international academic institutions and think tanks to produce ground-breaking research, focusing on answering some of the most elusive questions related to how to design and implement effective democracy assistance programmes. Together, some of the new initiatives planned under the COVID-19 pivot include:

• New approaches to prioritising the inclusion of women, youth, and vulnerable groups (especially PWDs, the LGBT+ community, and those living in extreme poverty) in the COVID-19 response, as well as by supporting greater capacity in gender-based and intersectional analysis amongst policy makers.

• Protecting democratic, civic and human rights through effective oversight of emergency and fast-tracked legislation, including support to human rights committees, post-legislative scrutiny (PLS) of problematic legislation, and bolstering coalitions of stakeholders advocating for privacy rights, civic space, and the ability to engage in political life.

• Advancing commitments to open and transparent government by exploring new ways of working that engage CSOs and citizens virtually through their websites, social media, and civic tech innovation. We will also consider opportunities to strengthen more effective strategic communications by parliaments and political parties in order to educate citizens about COVID-19 and help build public trust.
• Exploring new opportunities to advance financial accountability at a time when countries will be facing serious economic and fiscal challenges, are likely to accumulate substantial new debt, and will encounter serious risks of large-scale corruption in the procurement and distribution of COVID-related aid.

• Supporting parliaments to adapt to new ways of working as a result of the COVID-crisis, including business continuity planning, virtual working, and effective crisis communication. WFD will help parliaments develop virtual parliamentary frameworks that set out how they can legitimately function in partial or online-only circumstances.

• Providing advice to parliaments, political parties, civil society, and electoral commissions on the legal, political, and practical aspects of delaying (or holding) elections, and support stakeholder engagement to collectively examine and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the voting process, campaigning, candidate and voter registration, civic/voter education, campaign finance, and election observation.

• Retaining focus on the emerging area of environmental democracy, given the ongoing climate emergency and the UK’s leadership role in hosting COP 26 in 2021. WFD would continue to undertake research, develop policy papers, and support parliamentary committees, political parties and civil society to advance environmental reform and encourage a “green recovery”.

• Developing new research initiatives, including: how structural and political factors – in particular, citizen trust in state institutions and women’s political representation and leadership – impact COVID-19 response; COVID-19 emergency measures and their impact on “re-centralisation” of government power; the intersectionality of COVID on conflict, political polarisation, and populism across different regions; and COVID-19’s impact on electoral integrity.

**Operational transformation**

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, WFD has already taken action to strengthen its corporate systems and processes to support remote working, improve effectiveness and efficiency, and enhance organisational resilience in the face of potential threats and business disruption. This change programme will complete in 2020-21 and progress into a cycle of continuous improvement and a focus on raising standards across the organisation. We will build on these foundations to transform the way that WFD delivers its activities. This will complement WFD’s traditional strengths in facilitating high quality face-to-face interactions with new capabilities for online engagement and digital delivery.

WFD’s new Digital Action Plan will focus on four pillars: skills, content, delivery & impact, and partner services, and will be rolled-out in a phased way. Following a foundational phase, which will include establishing a new Digital Partner Panel, WFD will pilot new approaches (phase 1), before moving to broader delivery and demonstrating results (phase 2), ultimately aiming to achieve scale and sustainability for the digital delivery of programme activities (phase 3). Throughout this process, we will continuously learn from our experience and focus relentlessly on delivering high quality and impactful interventions that meet the needs of our stakeholders.

**Funding during the COVID-19 crisis**

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the COVID-19 crisis for WFD will be the high likelihood of reduced levels of official development assistance (ODA) – linked closely to unprecedented drops in GDP in donor countries – and less focus on the areas of democracy, human rights, and good governance. Much donor funding is likely to shift towards health response, humanitarian assistance, and economic recovery - all unquestionably critical areas of support.
However, WFD will continue to stress to donors three key points. First, that democracy, human rights, good governance, and stability are all at serious risk, and backsliding that occurs over the next 12-18 months may prove extremely difficult to reverse. Second, that a weakening of fundamental democratic rights and accountability mechanisms is likely to exacerbate problems in delivery of health, food security, conflict, corruption, and economic stabilization, driving up the eventual cost of addressing these issues. Third, that the cost of democracy and governance assistance is relatively low, but best delivered over a long period of time by trusted partners; significant funding cuts could lead to abandoning partners in their greatest time of need, resulting in breaches of long-term trust and a loss of diplomatic influence.

**Coming out of the COVID-19 Crisis**

The COVID-19 crisis is undoubtedly one of the most difficult, all encompassing challenges in a generation. However, it is likely that the pandemic will abate in the next 1 to 3 years, either due to the successful creation and deployment of a vaccine and/or treatment, natural processes such as herd immunity, or a diminution of infectivity or severity. This is not guaranteed, but it is reasonable to plan for the likelihood of this occurring.

While the disease itself may fade, there is a serious possibility that it will have changed the world for the medium to long term. Political systems, economies, livelihoods, transportation, health, trade, cultural traditions, and many more aspects of public (and private) life may have changed. Some regions may emerge relatively unscathed, and others could be nearly unrecognisable. It is important to learn from this crisis and to help our partners “build back better”, with greater resilience to future pandemics or other political, economic, or environmental shocks.

While attempting predictions may be folly, WFD is committed to coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic as a more flexible and effective organisation, able to continue advancing its key principles of democracy, inclusion, transparency, accountability, citizen participation, credible elections, and human rights. We will also continue to invest in resolving the most critical public policy problems of the modern era - environmental degradation and climate change - which if not addressed will leave us without a planet to govern. Investments made in digital transformation and support to civic technology were already in motion before COVID-19, and will become increasingly integral to WFD’s approach in the future. Throughout, WFD’s vision will remain: the universal establishment of legitimate and effective, multi-party, representative democracy.

As a non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, supported by the Department for International Development (DfID), and with long standing relationships with the UK political parties, Westminster, and the devolved legislatures of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, WFD will also continue to be a vital partner to the UK government. We will increasingly contribute to policy decisions the UK government makes, including feeding in the UK’s Integrated Review (planned for 2020/21), providing evidence to Parliament, providing policy and technical input to FCO and DFID, and taking part in discussions on the future of Global Britain.