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## Interventions to reverse democratic backsliding need to be more context-aware

In recent years, the world has witnessed alarming levels of democratic backsliding or deterioration in democratic principles such as free speech, political competition and the rule of law. In 2022, according to the V-Dem Institute, 72 per cent of the world's people lived in autocracies (Papada et al. 2023, 6).

Amidst this trend, evidence on the effects of interventions aimed at addressing democratic backsliding can inform decision-making. To contribute to filling the evidence gap, 3ie recently produced an evidence map and rapid evidence assessment (REA) on the effect of democracy and freedom interventions implemented in democratic backsliding contexts. This brief summarises the key findings and implications of this work.

### Highlights

- There is a large body of evaluative evidence on democracy and freedom interventions, but a relatively small portion assesses interventions conducted in contexts experiencing democratic backsliding.
- The number of evaluations is increasing, but no systematic reviews exist, and very few studies evaluating democracy and freedom interventions in contexts experiencing democratic backsliding measure their effects on trust and social cohesion outcomes.
- Interventions and evaluations conducted in backsliding contexts are generally undertaken at the subnational level, but often fail to acknowledge the specific domains or drivers of backsliding in their immediate context.
- An analysis of 64 studies across 13 countries finds that there are no 'silver bullets', and where interventions are effective, their contributions are usually not statistically significant, small and/or context dependent.
- Implementers can use this analysis to design context-responsive interventions by considering the common factors that limit the impact of democracy interventions and building on lessons from interventions used in similar contexts.
- Implementers and researchers can contribute to building a stronger evidence base on what works – and when – in backsliding contexts by thoroughly analysing specific challenges and contexts before intervening, and ensuring interventions are robustly evaluated.



Our analysis addresses the following questions:

- What is the state of evidence on democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts?
- What are the effects of democracy and freedom interventions implemented in democratic backsliding contexts? How do the effects of interventions vary according to contextual factors?
- Do studies report which factors serve as barriers to and facilitators of the effectiveness of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts?
- What should policymakers, researchers and practitioners consider when working on democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts?

## Conceptualising democratic backsliding and responses to it

For our evidence map and REA, we defined democratic backsliding as the erosion of qualities associated with democratic governance within any regime. These qualities may include, among others, freedom of expression, civil liberties, party competition, institutional checks, accountability and transparency.

Interventions to stop and reverse autocratisation or backsliding in democratic qualities may incorporate top-down and/or bottom-up

approaches, involving political leaders and citizens in adopting democratic behaviours (Buriil 2022). These democracy and freedom interventions can take various forms, such as policy dialogues, support for political parties, strengthening of institutions, media support, rule of law promotion, anti-corruption measures, electoral support, democracy education or civic space support (European Partnership for Democracy 2020).

Using the existing literature, we developed a conceptual framework to categorise democracy and freedom interventions and associated outcomes in democratic backsliding contexts into broader domains (Table 1). This framework helps us to track trends in the body of evidence, such as which interventions and outcomes related to reversing democratic backsliding and consolidating democracy are most and least studied.

**Table 1: Democracy and freedom intervention and outcome domains**

Intervention domains	Outcome domains
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Accountable governance</li><li>■ Civic space</li><li>■ Electoral integrity</li><li>■ Inclusive political participation</li><li>■ Freedom of media and digital technology</li><li>■ Corruption and other aspects of economic democratic governance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms</li><li>■ Participation and civic or political engagement by the general public</li><li>■ Institutional capacity and service quality</li><li>■ Transparency and accountability</li><li>■ Trust and social cohesion</li></ul>



# What is the state of evidence on democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts: where, when, how, what?

## The state of evidence on democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts

- Evidence from democratic backsliding contexts is limited relative to the total volume of impact evaluations and qualitative evaluations in the field of democracy, governance and human rights.
- We found no systematic reviews and few qualitative studies of democracy and freedom interventions.
- The distribution of evidence across geographies is uneven: the majority of studies were conducted in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, with India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Tanzania being the most studied countries. Fewer studies are available in the Middle East and North Africa in countries such as Egypt and Jordan.
- While there are clusters of evidence for certain intervention domains, such as accountable governance and strengthening of civic spaces, the media and inclusive politics intervention domains suffer from evidence gaps. With regard to outcomes, we observe clusters on institutional capacity and service quality, but gaps in trust and social cohesion outcomes.

### The evidence base on democracy, governance and human rights is substantial, but only a small proportion focuses on contexts characterised by democratic backsliding.

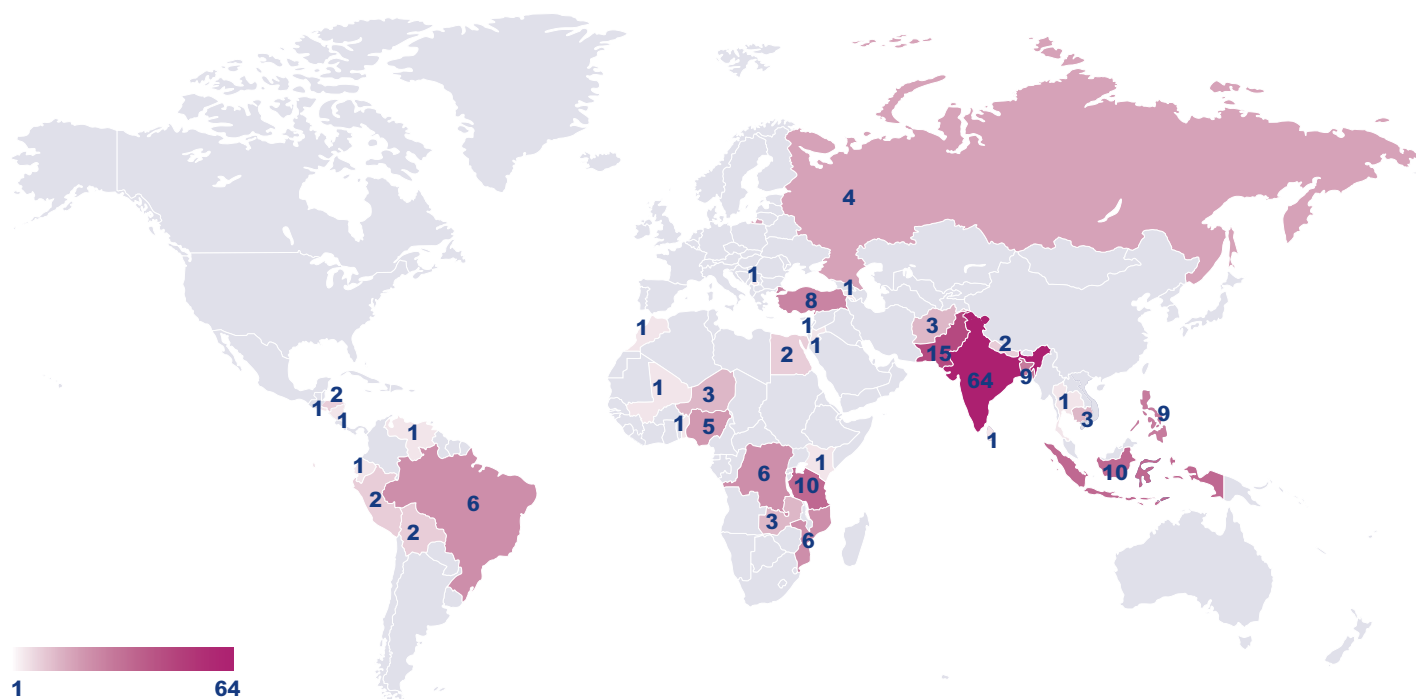
The evidence map identified 188 quantitative impact evaluations (mostly through experimental design) and nine qualitative evaluations published between 1998 and 2021, but no systematic reviews on the effects of democracy and freedom interventions in contexts of

democratic backsliding. This set represents a small proportion (12%) of the studies in the overall body of evidence identified across 3ie's six evidence gap maps on democracy, governance and human rights, suggesting a need for more research into intervention effectiveness in these contexts.

**The studies evaluate interventions in 35 countries globally, with the majority in lower-middle-income and democratic countries.** This is a relatively low number compared to

the 75 to 88 countries that have experienced democratic backsliding in the last 30 years based on V-Dem and International IDEA data. The largest number of these interventions was conducted in South Asia (50%), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (20%). As Figure 1 shows, smaller clusters of evaluations exist for interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean (8%), East Asia and the Pacific (12%), Europe and Central Asia (4%), and the Middle East and North Africa (3%).

**Figure 1: Geographical distribution of evidence**





# What is the state of evidence on democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts: where, when, how, what?

**Evidence on freedom and democracy interventions in backsliding contexts is not evenly distributed amongst our included interventions and outcomes.** As Table 2 shows, we found clusters of evidence on the effects of accountable governance interventions on outcomes such as *institutional capacity and service quality; knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms; and participation and political engagement*. Similarly, a higher number of studies of *civic space and freedom interventions assessed impacts on outcomes such as institutional capacity and service quality and participation and*

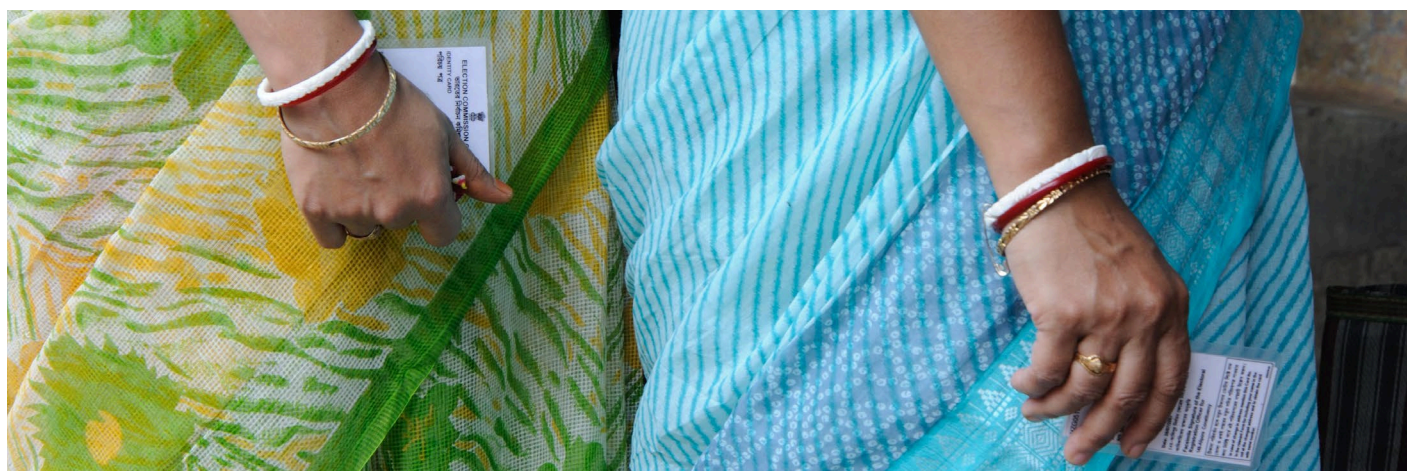
*political engagement*. Few studies evaluated interventions focused on *media, inclusive politics and corruption*, and the *trust and social cohesion* outcome domain suffers from an evidence gap.

**Most evaluations used an experimental design** (n = 114). In general, qualitative evaluations were rare in this area. Among the qualitative evaluations, process tracing (n = 4, 44%) was the most common design used.

**Whilst aid expenditure patterns show increased commitment to fight corruption and strengthen governance** (OECD CRS 2022),

**international aid agencies more regularly financed impact evaluations of civic space and freedom interventions and accountable governance interventions, leaving evidence gaps in other areas, including those in which official development assistance spending has increased, such as media and inclusive politics.**

However, a large sample of the studies did not specify their funding source, and it is unclear how representative the reported funding data are of actual evaluation funding trends among international aid agencies.



**Table 2: Interventions and outcome distribution**

Outcomes	Institutional capacity & service quality	Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes & norms	Participation & civic or political engagement by the general public	Transparency & accountability	Trust/ social	Grand total
Interventions						
Accountable governance & rule of law	25	43	14	6	1	67
Civic space & freedom	26	8	24	9	2	38
Corruption & economic democracy	6	12	8	4	3	15
Electoral integrity	22	7	15	8	1	27
Inclusive politics	3	14	5	3	4	14
Media	10	3	9	4	1	12
Multicomponent	15	2	22	9	0	29
Grand total	79	76	63	26	9	188

# What are the effects of democracy and freedom interventions implemented in democracy backsliding contexts? How do the effects of interventions vary according to contextual factors?

## The effects of democracy and freedom interventions and how they vary by context

- Democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts primarily yield small effects that are not statistically or practically significant.
- Similar interventions in multiple democratic backsliding contexts often do not yield the same effects.
- Only a small proportion of studies acknowledge the immediate intervention context and its particular challenges to democracy, either in designing interventions or measuring their effects.

The REA synthesises evidence on the effects of interventions implemented to address democratic backsliding in 13 countries in East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The analysis of the effect of democracy and freedom interventions initiated during democratic backsliding episodes in these contexts shows predominantly **small effects**. However, those effects vary from one context to another and are **rarely statistically significant**. Nonetheless, we do observe small, positive effects of:

- *Capacity strengthening of public, judicial and security sector interventions on attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy outcomes; and*
- *Voter information, voter education, and get-out-the-vote interventions on public engagement in democracy and governance and public trust in government.*

Despite the growing body of evidence, more information from different contexts is needed to better assess the impact of interventions. Where evidence is available, we observe that analogous interventions do not necessarily bear the same effects, even in contexts with similar challenges to democracy. For example, while Fafchamps and colleagues (2020) observed a negative (but not statistically significant) effect of voter information on public engagement in democracy and governance in Mozambique, Gaikwad and Nellis (2021) observed a positive (and significant) effect in India for a similar intervention.

**Diverse symptoms, root causes and contexts across the 18 unique backsliding episodes covered in the REA might explain why effects differ.** Backsliding contexts are heterogeneous. Even when challenges across contexts fall under the same broad categories (such as electoral integrity or corruption), similar

interventions do not lead to the same effects. This diversity calls for tailored approaches to intervention design to address the specific challenges in these contexts.

However, **the design and measurement of intervention impacts seldom acknowledge context**. Only 14% of the included studies explicitly report on the intervention objective of addressing a democratic backsliding challenge, and just 18% of the studies provide an analysis of the backsliding challenges experienced in their intervention setting. Similarly, while 51% of the studies analyse the effect of interventions on one democracy indicator, only 3% analyse effects across all indicators. Insufficient integration of contextual specificities in intervention design and impact measurement might partially explain the heterogeneous, small, and mostly not statistically significant effects of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts.

## Strength of evidence

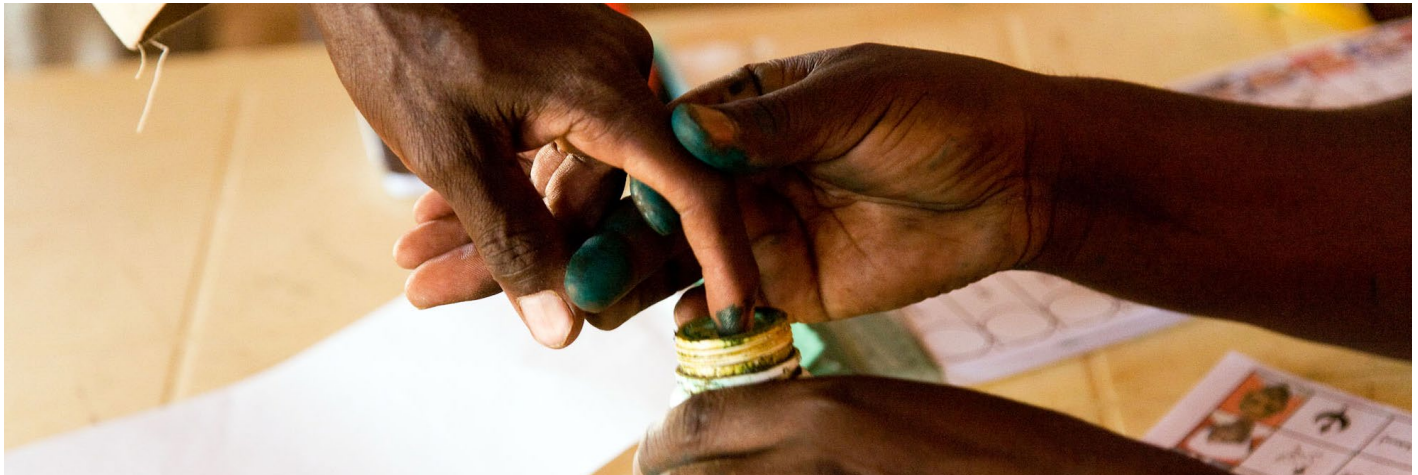
Across the 64 studies in our body of evidence, we identified 319 unique measures of effect. To assess the confidence levels for each of those estimates, we analysed the risk of bias and used GRADE (grading of recommendations, assessment, development and evaluations). Risk of bias assessment helps to check whether the impact evaluation methodology will give misleading results due to five potential sources of bias (reporting, outcome measurement, spillovers, attrition and selection). GRADE helps to assess confidence in findings based on their risk of bias, consistency, precision and reported effect size. Among the 319 estimates, three are reported as low risk of bias, 120 as raising some concerns of bias, and 196 as high risk of bias. All findings are categorised as low or very low confidence according to GRADE.



## Do studies report which factors serve as barriers to and facilitators of intervention effectiveness in democratic backsliding contexts?

### Barriers to and facilitators of the effectiveness of democracy and freedom interventions

- Barriers include powerholders' resistance to change, inadequate resources, and entrenched social norms preventing the transition to democracy.
- Facilitators include the potential of capacity strengthening of local actors and collaboration amongst stakeholders.
- Implementers need to consider the motivations of actors and their perceptions of legitimacy as a cross-cutting issue in this sector.



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By considering the barriers and facilitators noted in some studies, implementers and policymakers may increase the likelihood of their interventions producing positive impacts. The studies included in our REA highlight six, often overlapping, implementation considerations when working in backsliding contexts:<sup>1</sup>

■ **Actors with an interest in the status quo may resist democratisation.** Democracy and freedom interventions act with, and on, institutions and individuals whose interests might not be aligned with democratisation. Study authors note that interventions affect power structures and systems that might pose obstacles to successful implementation. For instance, Banerjee and colleagues (2021) conducted a large-scale randomised trial to evaluate interventions aimed at management reform of the police of Rajasthan, India. The authors commented that the limited success of some of the interventions may have resulted from resistance created by middle managers. In particular,

interventions that removed authority from these managers, such as decisions related to the transfer of police officers to other stations or management of duty rota, faced substantial resistance during implementation.

■ **Restrictive local socio-political norms might inhibit the democratising effect of interventions.** Laudati and colleagues (2018) conducted a study in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to examine the factors that shaped the community's perception and the effectiveness of a community-driven development programme. They identified several factors that influenced the programme's reception through qualitative analysis. One crucial aspect was that service providers often felt disempowered and unable to communicate effectively with line ministries. Additionally, existing social hierarchies and power dynamics within the communities, a preference for traditional medicine over modern interventions, intra-ethnic rivalries, and regional insecurity also played

significant roles in shaping the programme's impact. Furthermore, conflicts within villages sometimes affected the projects, and the benefits were occasionally appropriated by elites.

■ **Strengthening skills and capabilities may enable sustainable democratic change.** Skills and capacities are essential for democratic institutions to be effective (such as journalism curricula, technology skills, knowledge of governance principles, and election management capacity). Their absence is often associated with failing democratic systems and backsliding democracies. As part of a tax policy reform experiment in Pakistan (Khwaja et al. 2020), local tax collection authority officials underwent training in using technology for data management and public engagement. Subsequent interviews and focus group discussions revealed that this intervention improved the department's ability to collect, manage and monitor data efficiently.

■ **Democracy requires resources and infrastructure** such as tools to promote participation, polling stations, and basic services that contribute to an enabling democratic environment. Inadequate infrastructure may result in citizens' unequal access to democratic decision-making and reduced opportunities for citizens to mobilise communities and influence political discourse. Pretari (2019) conducted an evaluation of community-driven development reform in Tanzania, focusing on interventions that aimed to enhance governance and accountability through the adoption of digital tools. The study highlighted challenges encountered during implementation, particularly citizens' limited access to and utilisation of online platforms. Additionally, the author observed disparities in technology access between different gender, socioeconomic and age groups.

■ **Given the diversity of democracy stakeholders, strategies to approach and engage them are key.** For democratisation to

happen, democracy must receive buy-in from both the political and civic spheres. Some authors highlighted the benefits of amicable and collaborative approaches between democracy stakeholders. Hearn and colleagues (2016) used the outcome-harvesting approach to evaluate the impact of strengthening civil society organisations on their involvement in the reform process of Indonesia's justice sector. Through their case studies, they identified three key factors associated with the organisations' ability to drive justice sector reform: adopting evidence-informed and collaborative approaches in their engagement, possessing a good reputation and adequate resources, and demonstrating the capacity to establish and maintain relationships with government institutions. In another context, Chadha and Wadhwa (2018) investigated the impact of an adult literacy programme in Uttar Pradesh, India, on women's empowerment and social and political engagement. Programme staff observed that in addition to

engaging individual women, engaging their households and communities was instrumental in allowing them to participate in the programme.

■ **Democratisation requires political actors motivated to pursue democratic aims.** Democratisation requires political actors to perceive democracy as a legitimate governance model and themselves as legitimate stakeholders within it. Gaikwad and colleagues (2023) underscored the significance of political motivations in the context of water provision in Indian slums. Their study evaluated a bureaucratic facilitation and political coordination intervention and its impact on motivating politicians to address water needs in these areas. The authors found distinct patterns through field observations and reports from local partners and project staff. Politicians who were native to the locality appeared less motivated to offer water connections to slums, likely due

## The cost of democracy and freedom interventions

Although over half of the included studies provided some cost information such as total intervention budget or cost per beneficiary, reporting is inconsistent and rarely enables a cost-benefit analysis of democracy and freedom interventions. Costs of interventions in the included studies range from USD23,000 for the training of police staff in new practices and procedures in Rajasthan, India (Banerjee et al. 2021) to USD1.5 billion for the *Raskin* programme to provide basic services and subsidised resources in Indonesia (Banerjee et al. 2015).





# What should policymakers, practitioners and researchers consider when working in contexts with democratic backsliding?

## Considerations for policymakers and practitioners

- *Interventions to combat democratic backsliding must be supported by detailed problem analysis.* The causes and manifestations of democratic backsliding are neither simple nor common across contexts. By acknowledging that each backsliding episode is unique, implementers should begin with a careful diagnosis of the local political and civic context to develop a well-founded theory of change. This diagnosis should consider not only high-level challenges to democracy, but also the particular causes and features of the backsliding episode and the structural characteristics of the intervention setting. By acknowledging the specificity of backsliding episodes, practitioners and policymakers can prioritise and target the most pressing challenges to democracy by selecting the most appropriate intervention to address specific drivers of backsliding.

- *For sustainable democratisation to occur, interventions must be targeted at the right scale.* We identified backsliding at the national level, but national-level trends may not manifest the same way across localities within a country. Implementers should reflect on the scale of impact that can be expected from a local intervention and recognise that national-level challenges may require national-level interventions, difficult as these may be to implement. Without this reflection, practitioners bear the risk of implementing inappropriate or unsustainable local interventions that will be contravened by national trends, or vice-versa.
- *To address the challenges raised by the democratic backsliding contexts and maximise impact, practitioners can build on implementation lessons from similar contexts.* Policymakers and implementers can build on the identified barriers and facilitators to

implementation by considering the potential resistance and restrictive norms they may face, building on democracy champions through tailored engagement strategies, and building an enabling environment through a capability and resources perspective as well as the empowerment and legitimisation of democracy actors.

- *Contexts of weak transparency and accountability reinforce the necessity of policymakers as sources and commissioners of evidence.* Policymakers and implementers can play a role in increasing the availability of data and evidence. Intergovernmental engagement on evidence, partnership with researchers working in relevant contexts, and commissioning complementary evidence such as cost-benefit analyses or mixed-methods approaches can help to fill evidence gaps in contexts with democratic backsliding.





## Considerations for policymakers and practitioners

- *The democracy and freedom sectors require more evidence* across intervention and outcome domains, from local to national scales, and regarding short- to long-term effects. Democracy and democratisation are complex phenomena that have multiple causes and consequences. Only a subset of studies focuses on multiple democracy outcomes. Greater attention is needed on a diverse range of outcomes to facilitate an understanding of how interventions affect various facets of democratisation and its reverse.
- *Studies must integrate quantitative and qualitative methods* to better understand intervention

mechanisms and impacts. Few of our studies provided reliable evidence on context-specific barriers and facilitators, which is particularly vital in the democracy and governance field, where challenges and solutions are highly context-specific.

- *Researchers should strive to conduct detailed cost-effectiveness analyses* – or at the very least collect and report data on the resources required to carry out an intervention to facilitate cost-effectiveness analysis by others.
- *Future research needs transparency in data collection processes*, especially in backsliding contexts where political actors' transparency and accountability may be limited. In such situations,

ensuring transparency during data collection becomes crucial for the reliability of research findings. It is common for studies to lack information on respondents' awareness of the intervention and the challenges of backsliding, which could potentially influence their responses and overall data quality. Additionally, researchers should make concerted efforts to minimise attrition rates, as many studies have encountered difficulties in tracking individuals throughout the entire intervention period. By addressing these concerns and emphasising transparency in data collection, future researchers can strengthen the validity and reliability of their findings, particularly in politically complex environments.



## About this brief

This brief is based on the report, The effects of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts: A rapid evidence assessment. The brief is authored by Etienne

Lwamba, Pierre Marion, Ashiqun Nabi, Mark Engelbert and Birte Snilstveit. They are solely responsible for all content, errors and omissions. This brief has been funded by UK aid from the UK

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## About the rapid evidence assessment

The rapid evidence assessment, made possible with generous support from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

Office, presents findings on the effects of democracy and freedom interventions on democratisation outcomes when initiated during an

episode of democratic backsliding in 13 countries in East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While the examples relate to interventions with democratisation-related outcomes initiated during democratic backsliding episodes, they don't necessarily analyse or respond specifically to drivers of backsliding in their intervention context.



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