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The effects of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts

A rapid evidence assessment

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About this report

This report presents the findings of a rapid evidence assessment on the effect of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts. It presents new insights into the findings of a series of six evidence gap maps on democracy, human rights and governance interventions that were originally commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development's DRG Centre, via a partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago. This report was made possible due to generous support from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

This report is a shortened version of a technical report that provides additional details and analysis of the body of evidence.

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The effects of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts: A rapid evidence assessment

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Summary

The last 30 years of democracy are characterised by a paradox: on one hand, efforts to promote democracy are on the rise; on the other, democratic backsliding is reaching its highest level to date. Understanding what works to support democracy and freedom in a democratic backsliding context is a necessary step in reversing the trend.

In light of the concerning decline in democratic standards such as competitive elections, political participation, and public accountability worldwide, this rapid evidence assessment aims to address the synthesis gap regarding effective interventions to strengthen democracy and freedom in contexts of democratic backsliding. We analyse 64 studies from 13 countries published between 2007–2023, including 59 quantitative impact evaluations and 5 qualitative evaluations.

The assessment reveals limited evidence on the effectiveness of identified interventions, which makes it challenging to determine the most effective and transferable strategies to promote freedom and democracy. The analysis indicates predominantly small, positive, and statistically insignificant effects. Nonetheless, individual evaluations highlight interventions that show promise in certain contexts, such as strengthening the capacity of public, judicial and security sectors or voter information, voter education and get-out-the-vote campaigns.

Moreover, the analysis of barriers provides insights into the specific challenges raised by democratic backsliding contexts that may contribute to these modest effects, such as stakeholder resistance, restrictive and non-democratic social norms, lower democratic literacy, and limited resources. Those barriers may be overcome by building on facilitators such as the engagement of democracy champions, the influence of civil society organisations or strategies for public mobilisation. Perception plays a key part in the success of democracy and freedom interventions, as they must build legitimacy for the democratic model while also empowering political stakeholders to take part in this potentially new governance model.

Overall, this assessment provides insight into the effectiveness of interventions to strengthen democracy and freedom in the context of democratic backsliding, while highlighting the need for further research and nuanced approaches to promote democratic ideals and values. The contextual analysis of democratic backsliding calls for careful diagnosis of democracy at the scale of the intervention to develop well-founded theories of change.

The diversity of contexts and interventions also requires careful interpretation of findings that might not be transferable to all contexts. In the absence of a 'one size fits all' intervention, the design of democracy and freedom interventions must be tailored to the democracy outcomes they seek to address. Finally, in a backsliding context where governments can act as both drivers and barriers to democratisation, inter-governmental and research-government collaboration is needed to expand access to data and evidence for democracy.

Contents

Summary	i
List of figures and tables	iii
Acronyms	iv
1. Background	1
1.1 The issue.....	1
1.2 Aims and objectives.....	1
2. Methods	3
3. Descriptive findings	5
3.1 Search results.....	5
3.2 State of evidence on the effects of democracy and freedom interventions in a selection of democratic backsliding contexts.....	6
4. Effects of democracy and freedom interventions in a selection of democratic backsliding contexts	12
4.1 The contextual factor of democratic backsliding.....	13
4.2 The effect of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts.....	16
4.3 Barriers and facilitators in the effectiveness of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts.....	26
5. Conclusion	29
5.1 Summary of findings.....	29
5.2 Limitations of available studies.....	30
5.3 Implications for policymakers, implementers and researchers.....	31
5.4 Strengths, limitations and future directions.....	35
Online appendixes	37
References	38

List of figures and tables

Figure 1: PRISMA diagram	6
Figure 2: Number of impact evaluations of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts by year	7
Figure 3: Distribution of studies across the selection of countries	8
Figure 4: Frequency of studies by backsliding episode	9
Figure 5: V-Dem democracy scores in included countries (1990–2021)	9
Figure 6: Risk of bias of studies included in the evidence synthesis	12
Table 1: Summary of criteria (population, intervention, comparison, outcomes, study design) determining study eligibility for the REA	4
Table 2: Frequency of impact evaluations by intervention-outcome domains	8
Table 3: Frequency of included studies by study design	11
Table 4: Sources of funding for included REA studies.....	12
Table 5: Overview of included backsliding contexts.....	14
Table 6: Effects of interventions.....	23

Acronyms

CDD	Community-driven development
CI	Confidence interval
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DRG	Democracy Human Rights and Governance
EGM	Evidence gap map
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GOTV	Get out the vote
GRADE	Grading of recommendations, assessment, development, and evaluations
REA	Rapid evidence assessment

1. Background

1.1 The issue

In 2023, various reports highlight a global decline in democracy standards over past decades: the V-Dem Institute's 2023 Report on Democracy reveals that the progress made in democracy worldwide over the past 35 years has been reversed, with 72 per cent of the world's population now living under autocratic regimes (Papada et al. 2023, p.6). The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's Global State of Democracy 2022 report shows that in the last six years, the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism has more than doubled compared to those moving towards democracy (International IDEA 2022, p.1). Human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Freedom House warn of the erosion of civil liberties (Human Rights Watch 2023a; Repucci and Slipowitz 2022).

Despite democracy and democratic freedom gaining international interest from policymakers in the past three decades, there has been a concerning trend of democratic backsliding worldwide (Sonnenfeld et al. 2020; Kozakiewicz et al. 2022; Berretta et al. 2021, 2022; Gonzalez Parrao et al. 2022a, 2022b). Democratic backsliding refers to the deterioration in qualities associated with democratic governance within any regime. These qualities may include freedom of expression, civil liberties, party competition, institutional checks, accountability and transparency.

Given the growing interest in democratisation and the increasing trend of democratic backsliding, there is a need for evidence on the effectiveness of interventions addressing this issue. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers require this evidence to understand what strategies work to counter democratic backsliding and support the democratisation process. However, our recent mapping of evidence on democracy, governance, and human rights reveals a synthesis gap regarding the effects of interventions in contexts of democratic backsliding.

1.2 Aims and objectives

In this report, we present a rapid evidence assessment (REA) on the effect of democracy and freedom interventions. Our primary research objective is to identify and describe the available evidence on the effect of those interventions in democratic backsliding contexts. To achieve our objective, we draw on the studies included in the six USAID democracy, human rights and governance (DRG) evidence gap maps (EGMs) as of October 2022 (Sonnenfeld et al., 2020; Kozakiewicz et al., 2022; Berretta et al. 2021, 2022; Gonzalez Parrao et al. 2022a, 2022b).

The EGM projects systematically searched for and presented evidence on the effectiveness of human rights, rule of law, independent media, civil society, governance effectiveness and political competition interventions. We provide novel insights on the state of evidence identified in democratic backsliding contexts, and present new information to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of democracy and freedom interventions implemented in democratic backsliding contexts?
2. How do the effects of interventions vary according to contextual factors, such as regime type, country income status or implementer type? Do they vary according to whether backsliding is specifically acknowledged in the research, or whether the intervention has a specific objective to address an element of backsliding? Do they vary according to different subgroups of a population?
3. What is the risk of bias for studies on the effects of democracy and freedom interventions implemented in democratic backsliding contexts?
4. Are there any reported unintended consequences associated with democracy and freedom interventions?
5. Which factors are reported as barriers to and facilitators of effectiveness among democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts?
6. What evidence exists on the costs of the included democracy and freedom interventions?

The scope and research questions were designed in consultation with Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) advisors and represent a topic of particular interest for their Development and Open Societies Directorate. Our review also addresses one of the evidence synthesis gaps observed in our recent mapping (Lwamba et al. 2023) to provide policymakers, practitioners and researchers evidence on what works for democracy and freedom in democratic backsliding contexts. Our body of evidence includes six intervention domains:

- *Accountable governance, including horizontal and vertical accountability, checks and balances, and rule of law:* interventions working on structural changes in public institutions to make them more accountable, transparent and responsive to citizens' demands while being compliant with human rights laws and standards.
- *Civic space, including freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression:* interventions working with civil society actors to build capacities, mobilise, and support the use of and demand for civil liberties and citizens' rights.
- *Electoral integrity, including the capacity and autonomy of election management bodies, voter registration, prevention or control of vote-buying and other irregularities, and government intimidation and other forms of electoral violence:* interventions working with all stakeholders of the electoral process to build capacities and ensure transparency in free and fair electoral processes.
- *Inclusive political participation, including the inclusion of women, youth and minority groups, opposition parties, and full geographic representation:* interventions working from both a top-down and bottom-up approach to ensure that all citizens and actors can take part in the democratic political system.
- *Freedom of media and digital technology:* interventions supporting the role of media and digital technologies in providing information and holding political representatives accountable.
- *Corruption and other aspects of economic democratic governance:* interventions ensuring the transparent and compliant management of public funds.

The change enabled by these interventions at the macro, institutional and individual levels is theorised to contribute to short- and long-term outcomes that help to reverse the trend of democratic backsliding, and to sustain and consolidate democracy. These outcomes are categorised within the following five domains:

- *Knowledge, belief, attitudes and norms*: stakeholders are provided with the knowledge, awareness and necessary capacities to take part in the democratic process and adopt democratic behaviours.
- *Participation and civic or political engagement by the general public*: citizens are empowered to take part in democratic life as individuals or as part of civil society.
- *Institutional capacity and service quality*: institutions are governed in accordance with democratic principles and human rights, and are responsive to the demands of citizens.
- *Transparency and accountability*: democratic governance is enabled through transparent and accountable institutions elected by the people and is free of corruption.
- *Trust and social cohesion*: democratic collaboration is enabled through inter- and intra-group (e.g., citizens, institutions) trust and social cohesion.

2. Methods

Instead of conducting new searches and screening, the REA relies on evidence gathered by the six DRG EGMs. These EGMs covered various topics related to democracy and freedom, making them suitable for the REA. The EGMs followed a standardised process, including consultations with experts, literature searches, and screening. They searched multiple databases and sources, ensuring a diverse range of publications, and used both manual and automated screening techniques to identify relevant studies.

The inclusion criteria for the REA were established in collaboration with experts from the FCDO. The criteria included participants from selected countries, specific intervention categories aligned with interest areas for FCDO, the presence of a comparison group, relevant outcome categories, and quantitative and qualitative impact evaluations study designs. Studies published from 1990 onwards and in any language were eligible (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of criteria (population, intervention, comparison, outcomes, study design) determining study eligibility for the REA

Criteria	Description
Participants/ Geography	Individuals and organisations in the countries selected with FCDO: Sub-Saharan Africa: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia; Europe and Central Asia: Türkiye; South Asia: Bangladesh, India (for a subset of studies related to trust and social cohesion) and Pakistan; and East Asia and the Pacific: Indonesia and the Philippines.
Interventions	Interventions introduced during an episode of democratic backsliding in the last 30 years related to the following areas of FCDO interest: accountable governance and rule of law; civic space and freedom; electoral integrity; inclusive politics; corruption and economic democracy; and freedom of media and digital technology (see Appendix A for the full list of interventions and definitions).
Comparison	A study must have included a comparison group, though there are no exclusion criteria based on the type of comparison (e.g., status quo, waiting list, other intervention).
Outcome	The following outcome categories are included: institutional capacities and service quality; knowledge, belief, attitudes and norms; participation and civic/political engagement by the general public; transparency and accountability; and trust/social cohesion (see Appendix B for the full list of outcomes and definitions).
Study designs	We include quantitative impact evaluations, qualitative evaluations and systematic reviews. For quantitative impact evaluations, we include studies using an experimental or quasi-experimental design. For qualitative evaluations, we include studies using a subset of designs (listed in Appendix 3). We include systematic reviews that synthesise the effects of an intervention on outcomes (descriptions of included study designs are available in Appendix C).
Language	Studies in any language are eligible, although search terms used to identify the literature were in English.
Publication date	All studies published from 1990 onwards.
Status of studies	We include ongoing ¹ and completed quantitative impact evaluations, qualitative evaluations, and systematic reviews. This considers prospective study records, protocols and trial registries.
Publication status	We include studies published in any outlet, including peer-reviewed journals, working paper series, organisational reports and unpublished author manuscripts.

¹ Ongoing studies, such as protocols, are included when they provide sufficient information to determine that they meet all criteria. This includes an explanation of primary and secondary outcomes, as well as the intervention to be evaluated.

Double-coded data extraction was performed by training reviewers and involved capturing various aspects of the studies, including descriptive data, methodological information, quantitative and qualitative data, and cost information. Reviewers independently coded the data, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The research team ensured consistency and reviewed the data extraction process.

To facilitate cross-study comparisons, standard effect sizes were calculated based on the outcome measures reported in the studies. Dependent effect sizes, arising from multiple publications or studies based on the same data, were addressed by linking related papers and selecting one main study for data extraction.

Unit-of-analysis issues, such as allocation and analysis at different levels, were assessed, and adjustments were made if necessary. Efforts were made to obtain missing data by contacting study authors. The risk of bias in included studies was assessed by two independent reviewers using 3ie's risk-of-bias tool and considered factors such as confounding, missing outcome data, and biases in study design and analysis. Following the selection of estimates, reported estimates and meta-analysis were also assessed through an adaptation of grading of recommendations, assessment, development and evaluations (GRADE)² to rate the confidence of findings.

We also conducted a qualitative description of the barriers and facilitators to interventions' effects, as well as their costs. This information was extracted both from the quantitative impact evaluations (when this information was available in the study) and the qualitative evaluations. We did not undertake an additional search for qualitative evidence or costs.

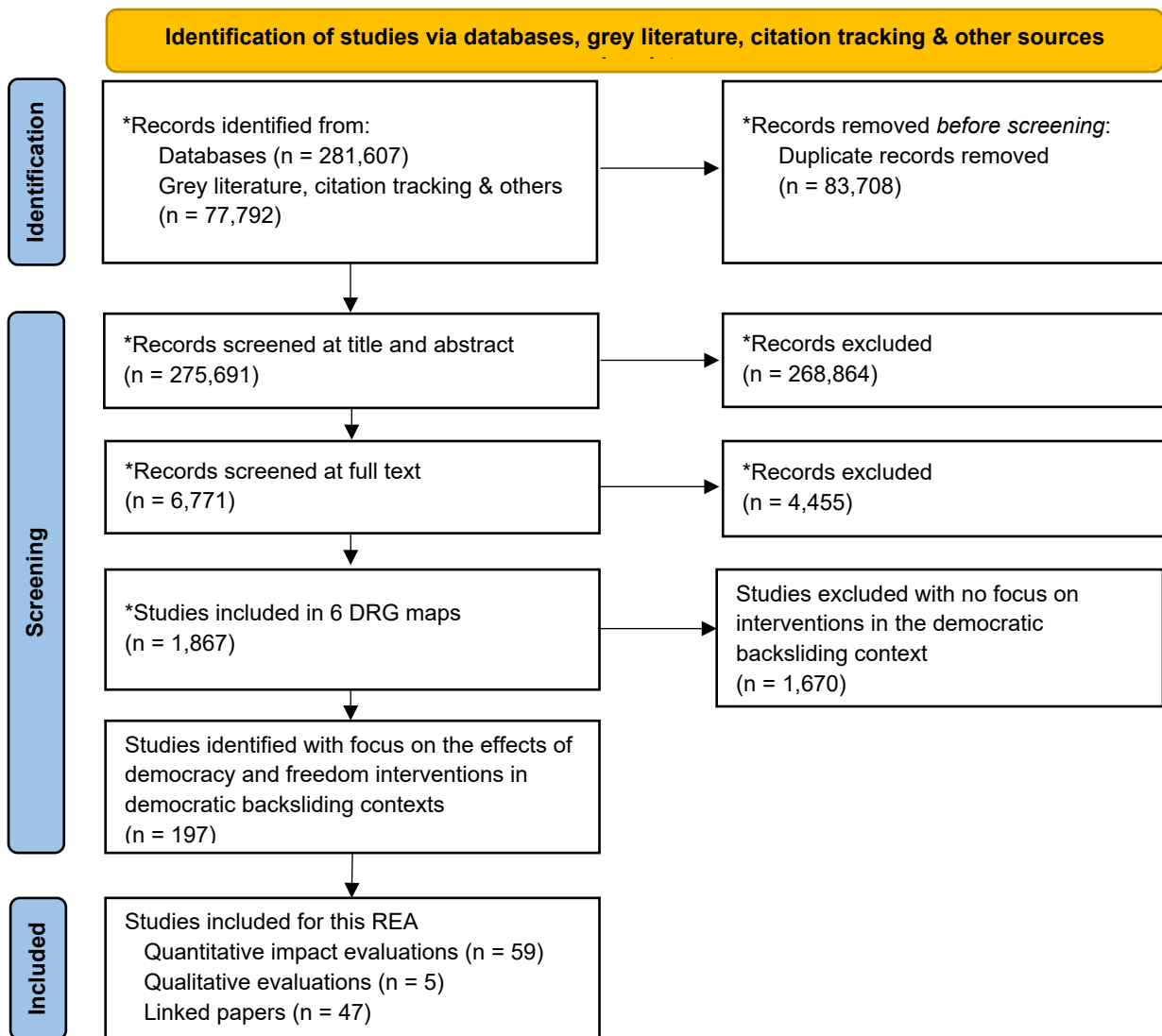
3. Descriptive findings

3.1 Search results

A total of 1,867 studies were included in the six DRG maps (Figure 1). We identified 197 studies in this body of evidence with a focus on the effects of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts. From these 197 studies, we selected 59 quantitative impact evaluations, 5 qualitative evaluations and 47 linked papers for this REA (see Section 3 for detailed inclusion/exclusion criteria).

² GRADE is a method for presenting summaries and assessing confidence levels in systematic review findings. For more information about GRADE see Siemieniuk and Guyatt (n.d.)

Figure 1: PRISMA diagram



*Note: Steps marked with * were carried out as part of the production of the six DRG EGMs.*

3.2 State of evidence on the effects of democracy and freedom interventions in a selection of democratic backsliding contexts

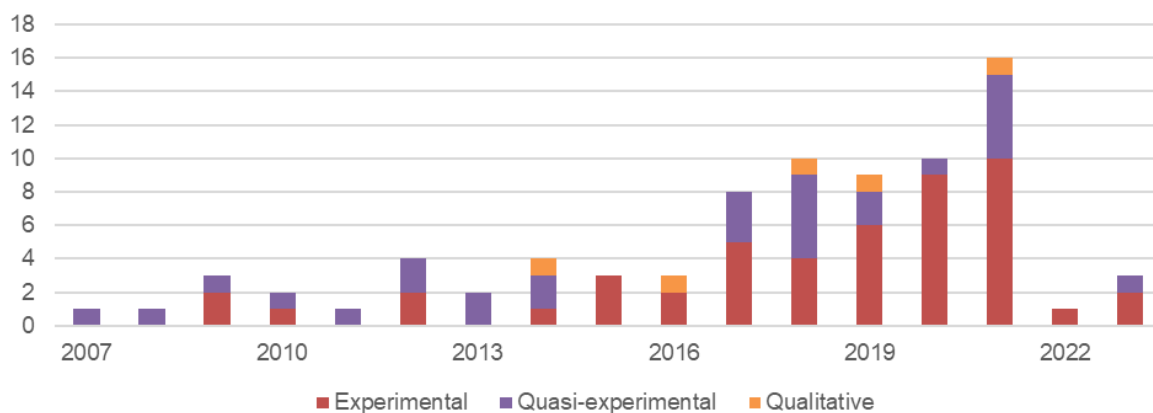
3.2.1 Volume and growth of evidence

Overall, we identified 64 studies (including 59 quantitative impact evaluations and 5 qualitative evaluations). This constitutes 3 per cent of the 1,867 impact evaluations in the six DRG EGMs, and 33 per cent of the 197 studies initiated in a context of democratic backsliding. Of the 64 included studies, 60 are completed and 4 are protocols or ongoing studies.

Studies included in our REA were published between 2007 and 2023; 65 per cent of our body of evidence was published between 2017 and 2021, peaking in 2021 (n = 15) (Figure

2). The five qualitative evaluations were published in 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021 and do not show specific publication patterns.

Figure 2: Number of impact evaluations of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts by year



3.2.2 Intervention and outcome coverage

Almost half of the included studies consider interventions related to *accountable governance* (n = 24). This intervention domain is particularly driven by a number of studies focusing on the effect of *decentralisation* (n = 9), *capacity strengthening of public officials* (n = 5) and *access to public data* (n = 4). Evaluations under the *civic space* and *electoral integrity* (n = 15) domains are also common in our body of evidence. They focus primarily on the effects of *voter information* (n = 11) and *public education for civic awareness and participation* (n = 9). Interventions under the *media* (n = 5) and *corruption and economic democracy* (n = 4) domains gather a smaller number of studies in our body of evidence (Table 2)³.

The evaluations covered in our REA mainly focus on outcomes related to *knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms* (n = 34); *institutional capacity and service quality* (n = 32); and *participation and civic/political engagement by the general public* (n = 32). However, fewer studies report the effect of interventions on *trust and social cohesion* (n = 15) or *transparency and accountability* (n = 13).

The most common intervention-outcome groups evaluated are the effects of *accountable governance* interventions on *institutional capacity and service quality* (n = 19) and the effects of *civic space* interventions on *knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms* (n = 14). On the other hand, none of the studies in the *media* intervention domain report on outcomes related to *institutional capacity and service quality*, *trust and social cohesion* or *transparency and accountability*.

³ Although we observe different regional trends in our body of evidence, we cannot offer global observations as this body of evidence was selected based on FCDO countries of interest. The reader should consult the mapping of evidence in a backsliding context for more insights into the overall body of evidence (see Lwamba and colleagues 2023).

Table 2: Frequency of impact evaluations by intervention-outcome domains

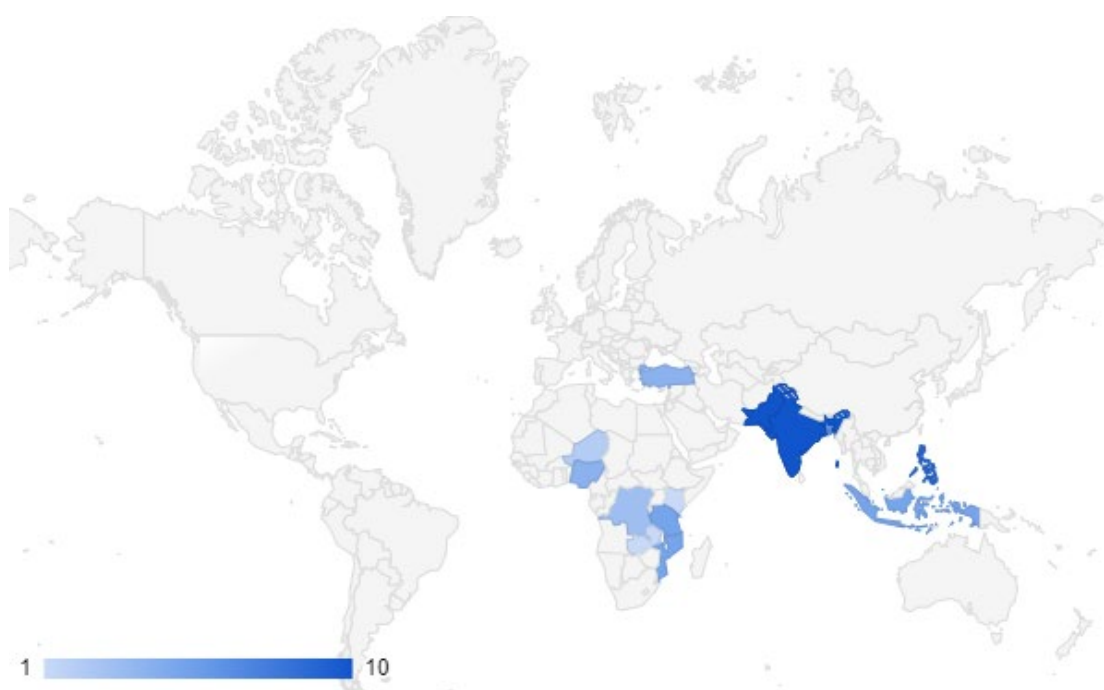
Outcomes	Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms	Institutional capacity and service quality	Participation and civic/political engagement by the general public	Trust/social cohesion	Transparency and accountability	Total
Interventions						
Accountable governance	10	19	10	4	7	24
Electoral integrity	9	2	11	4	3	15
Civic space	14	5	10	4	2	15
Inclusive politics	6	11	6	6	3	11
Media	3	0	3	0	0	5
Corruption and economic democracy	2	4	3	2	3	4
Total	34	32	32	15	13	64

3.2.3 Geographic coverage and democratic backsliding contexts

Geographic coverage

Our study analyses interventions implemented in 13 countries across the world. Over one third of the evaluated interventions were implemented in South Asia (n = 26; 40%); however, we also observe a smaller cluster of impact evaluations in Sub-Saharan Africa (n = 21; 32%). The remainder of the evidence focuses on the East Asia and Pacific region (n = 14; 22%) and Europe and Central Asia (n = 4; 6%). India and Pakistan are the most prevalent countries (n = 10 each; 15%) and are closely followed by the Philippines (n = 9; 14%) and Bangladesh (n = 6; 9%). Less evidence is available for Zambia and Kenya (n = 1 each; 1%) (Figure 3).

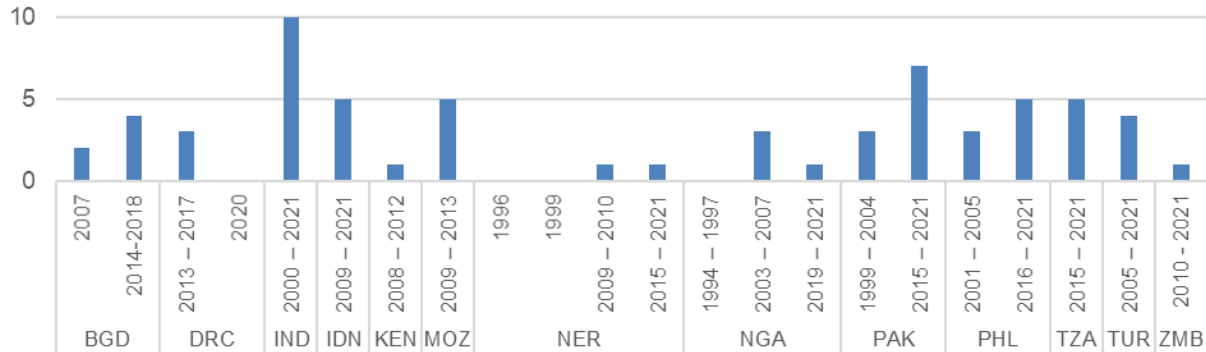
Figure 3: Distribution of studies across the selection of countries



Backsliding context

The body of evidence covers interventions initiated between 2001 and 2020 and in 18 of the 22 backsliding episodes identified in the selected countries (82%). The democratic backsliding episodes in India from 2000 to 2021 garners the highest number of studies (n = 10) followed by Pakistan between 2015 and 2021 (n = 7). However, backsliding episodes that occurred in DRC in 2020, in Niger in 1996 and 1999, and in Nigeria between 1994 and 1997 are not covered in our body of evidence (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Frequency of studies by backsliding episode

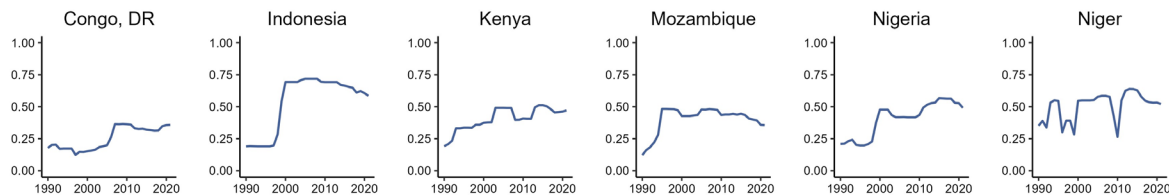


An analysis of V-Dem democracy scores shows that the 13 analysis countries have had different experiences with democratisation and democratic backsliding in the last 30 years (Figure 5), in particular:

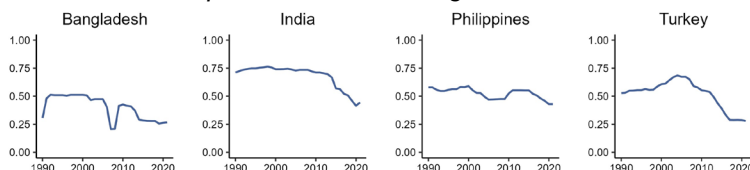
- An overall increase in democratic standards over the period with some episodes of democratic backsliding in DRC, Kenya, Niger, Mozambique, Indonesia and Nigeria;
- Backsliding and an overall decrease in democratic standards over the period, despite some episodes of democratisation in Türkiye, the Philippines, Bangladesh and India;
- Fluctuations in democratic standards caused by episodes of backsliding and democratisation but overall, long-term democratic progress has stalled over the thirty-year study period in Pakistan, Tanzania and Zambia.

Figure 5: V-Dem democracy scores in included countries (1990–2021)

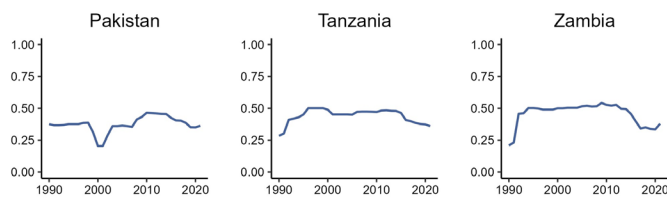
Countries that experienced an overall increase in democratic standards



Countries that experienced backsliding and an overall decrease in democratic standards



Countries where there have been fluctuations in democratic standards



Note: Diagrams are created by the authors, based on the episodes of regime transformation dataset (V-Dem 2022)

Despite their differing recent histories of democracy, the contextual analysis highlights some patterns that may raise challenges to democracy among the selected countries:

- *Electoral fraud and violence* can undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process and erode public trust in electoral and democratic institutions (Human Rights Watch 2019).
- *Coups*, or any form of illegal seizure of power by force, cause a major breakdown of existing institutions and power structures. It sometimes involves violence, which can result in a fracture of the political and civic spheres (Islam 2016).
- *Political discrimination* is the exclusion of individuals or groups from the political process based on their race, ethnicity, religion or other characteristics. It limits diversity and access to political rights and democratic redistribution (e.g., right to vote, access to public services, rights protections) through political marginalisation (Human Rights Watch 2023a).
- *Restrictions on basic freedoms* such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press have an impact on democratic life at all levels. They restrict the capacity to hold the government accountable, the ability to access information and services, and the ability of individuals and groups to participate in democratic life (Freedom House 2021b).
- *Corruption* erodes public trust in the government by concentrating power and resources in the hands of a few. It also erodes the representative aspects of democracy by influencing political decisions while limiting participation in the political process (Freedom House 2022a).
- *Political polarisation* increases the power divide between political groups by increasing the influence and power of one political group over others. By reducing political competition, political polarisation also reduces the ability of citizens to elect their representatives and the ability of opposition parties to offer political alternatives (Freedom House 2022b).
- *Political violence and threats to civil society* increase the divide between political authorities and civil society actors (The Guardian 2023).
- *Low democratic literacy* and limited knowledge of democratic principles reduce the ability of citizens and political actors to take part in the democratic process and advocate for democracy (Carter Center 2011).

3.2.4 Methods of evaluation and risk of bias

Most of our studies employ an experimental design for causal inference (n = 39; 60%).⁴ The most common approaches among quasi-experimental designs (n = 26; 40%) are fixed-effects and difference-in-difference (n = 16), followed by statistical matching (n = 8). Those designs are more common among studies focusing on *accountable governance* and measuring their effect on *institutional capacity and service quality* (n = 8). Regression discontinuity designs, instrumental variables and interrupted time series each have fewer than three studies (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency of included studies by study design

Evaluation design	No. of quantitative impact evaluations	% of quantitative impact evaluations
Experimental evaluations	39	62%
Non-experimental evaluations	26	38%
<i>Difference-in-differences & fixed effects</i>	16	27%
<i>Statistical matching</i>	8	13%
<i>Regression discontinuity design</i>	2	3%
<i>Instrumental variable estimation</i>	1	2%
<i>Interrupted time series analysis</i>	1	2%

We also include a smaller subset of qualitative evaluations (n = 5). Two of the included qualitative evaluations use outcome harvesting, while the other three use process tracing, contribution analysis and qualitative comparative analysis.

In the 64 studies in the evidence synthesis, we identified a total of 319 reported effects. Among these, three are reported as low risk of bias, 120 as raising some concerns for risk of bias, and 196 as high risk of bias (Figure 6). The most common sources of bias are related to the lack of reporting on attrition and potential spillovers. If attrition is not balanced or measured across treatment and comparison or control groups, it may affect the results. Similarly, access to treatment by control groups or spillover may affect the overall results of the experiment. Studies in our body of evidence often lack reporting data on aspects that did not allow us to assess whether they were considered and/or mitigated.

⁴ Some studies use both experimental and quasi-experimental approaches. Similarly, some quasi-experimental studies use combinations of methods.

Figure 6: Risk of bias of studies included in the evidence synthesis



3.2.5 Funding

The data on implementing agencies, programme funders, and research funders for the studies included in this analysis revealed that government agencies (comprising governments and government departments that implement development programmes within their countries) most frequently implemented programmes and funded research (Table 4). They are followed by international aid agencies, academic institutions and international financial institutions. However, 20–66% of the studies did not report any implementing or funding agency.

Table 4: Sources of funding for included REA studies

	Programme Implementation Research Funding			
	Implementing agency	Funding agency	Qualitative evaluation	Quantitative impact evaluation
Academic institution	4 (6%)	4 (6%)	0 (0%)	13 (22%)
Charitable or private foundation	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	2 (3%)
For-profit firm	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Government agency	21 (32%)	18 (28%)	1 (20%)	7 (12%)
International aid agency	4 (6%)	4 (6%)	1(20%)	9 (15%)
International financial institution	0 (0%)	4 (6%)	0 (0%)	4 (7%)
Non-profit organisation	19 (29%)	3 (5%)	1 (20%)	4 (7%)
Not specified	29 (45%)	43 (66%)	1 (20%)	21 (35%)

Note: Where more than one agency is reported by studies, multi-coding is permitted (i.e., a study may include more than one listed funder).

4. Effects of democracy and freedom interventions in a selection of democratic backsliding contexts

In the following section, we present the effect of democracy and freedom interventions on democratisation outcomes in democratic backsliding contexts. We begin with a discussion of the contextual factors which may affect whether and how an intervention works in a given context, and which should be considered in the design and delivery of democracy and freedom interventions. We then analyse the size, direction, and statistical significance of the effects of each intervention type according to our framework. Finally, we discuss potential barriers to and facilitators of successful interventions in this sphere.

4.1 The contextual factor of democratic backsliding

As outlined in the previous section, the context of democratic backsliding is characterised by an erosion of democracy indicators and movement towards autocracy. This erosion can be attributed to multiple factors, such as a reduction in civil liberties, a lack of checks and balances, or low levels of accountability or transparency. It can also be reinforced by other contextual factors, including fragility and conflict, economic status, or regional integration (Carothers and Press 2022).

4.1.1 Diversity in backsliding contexts

Despite being classified as backsliding democracies, each of the 18 episodes of democratic backsliding in the body of evidence arise from different causes and have different consequences. Nonetheless, we observe a few common patterns (see Appendix D for a detailed list of backsliding episodes):

- The seizure of power by non-democratic actors (e.g., military) was seen in countries such as Bangladesh in 2007 and Niger in 2010. This often resulted in the suspension of democratic institutions, including cessation of democratic participation and suspension of political movements.
- Allegations of electoral irregularities and fraud were prevalent in many of these episodes. Controversial elections, manipulated outcomes, and disputed results undermined the legitimacy and credibility of democratic processes. Examples of this pattern include the 2011 elections in DRC, the 2009 elections in Mozambique, and the 2019 elections in Nigeria.
- Restrictions on freedom of expression and the press were widespread. Harassment, intimidation, and censorship of journalists, activists, and opposition voices were commonly reported. We notably observe these characteristics in Türkiye (particularly since 2016), Zambia and Pakistan. This curtailed the ability of citizens to freely express their opinions, limited political discourse, and hindered the functioning of a robust democratic society.
- Corruption and abuse of power by political leaders were also recurring themes. Instances of embezzlement, nepotism, and favouritism eroded public trust in the democratic system and weakened the accountability of those in power. We observed such episodes in the Philippines, Tanzania and Kenya.
- Human rights abuses including extrajudicial killings, torture, and harassment were reported in several countries, indicating a disregard for the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights. This is particularly true for minority groups in India, Türkiye and Indonesia.
- Some backsliding episodes were characterised by broader governance challenges such as systemic corruption, poverty, security threats, and inequalities. These factors contributed to a climate of instability and weakened democratic institutions in countries such as DRC, Kenya, Mozambique and Pakistan.

Despite these patterns, the analysis of specific intervention contexts according to the democratic backsliding indicators reveals different challenges for each backsliding episode. While some episodes are caused by a decrease in all democracy indicators (e.g.,

Bangladesh in 2007, Pakistan between 2015 and 2021, India between 2000 and 2021), others are driven by a sharp decrease in one or several indicators (e.g., electoral integrity in Mozambique between 2009 and 2013, media and electoral integrity in Tanzania between 2015 and 2021).

It is important to note that a change in the same democracy indicators across countries may correspond to very different local manifestations of backsliding. Our included interventions occur in different democratic, stability, and economic contexts, all of which can shape backsliding, and must be considered in the design of interventions to reverse it (Table 5).

For example, despite the common decrease in accountable governance, electoral integrity and civic space, the situation in the Philippines differs in important ways from that in Niger: the Philippines has transitioned to electoral democracy and does not face the same fragility, regional integration, and economic challenges as Niger. As presented in Table 5 below, democratic backsliding does not refer to a single phenomenon; rather it is a general label for a wide array of events that weaken democratic norms and systems, and broadly construed.

Table 5: Overview of included backsliding contexts

Backsliding episode	Political regime	FCAS	Income level	Areas of decline				
				AGC	EI	CS	IP	M
Bangladesh 2007	CA	No	L					
Bangladesh 2014–2018	EA	No	L (2014–2015) LM (2016–2018)					
DRC 2013–2017	EA	Yes	L					
India 2000–2021	ED (2000–2018) EA (2018–2021)	No	L (2000–2008) LM (2009–2021)					
Indonesia 2009–2021	ED	No	LM (2009–2020) UM (2021)					
Kenya 2008–2012	EA	No	L					
Mozambique 2009–2013	EA	No	L					
Niger 2009–2010	EA	No	L					
Niger 2015–2021	ED	Yes	L					
Nigeria 2003–2007	EA	Yes	L					
Nigeria 2019–2021	ED	Yes	LM					

Backsliding episode	Political regime	FCAS	Income level	Areas of decline				
				AGC	EI	CS	IP	M
Pakistan 1999–2004	CA (1999–2001) EA (2002–2004)	No	L					
Pakistan 2015–2021	EA	No	LM					
Philippines 2001–2005	EA (2004–2005) ED (2001–2003)	No	LM					
Philippines 2016–2021	EA (2018–2021) ED (2016–2017)	No	LM					
Tanzania 2015–2021	EA	No	L (2015–2020) LM (2021)					
Türkiye 2005–2021	EA (2013–2021) ED (2005–2012)	No	LM (2005) UM (2006–2021)					
Zambia 2010–2021	EA (2013–2021) ED (2010–2012)	No	L (2010–2011) LM (2012–2021)					

Note: FCAS = Fragile and conflict affected setting, CA = closed autocracy, EA = electoral autocracy, ED = electoral democracy, L = low income, LM = lower-middle income, UM = upper-middle income, AGC = accountable governance and corruption, EI = electoral integrity, CS = civic space, IE = inclusive politics, M = media. Areas of decline are based on decreasing indicators according to the V-Dem episodes of regime transformation dataset (V-Dem 2022)

4.1.2 The incorporation of contextual factors in the design of interventions

Despite the diversity of contexts and the multiple elements driving backsliding episodes, the analysis of our body of evidence rarely reports on the integration of specificities of the backsliding context into intervention design.

We analyse the relevance of interventions with regard to the democratic challenges faced by their implementation countries. By matching the intervention domain of each study with the areas of decline in the corresponding backsliding context (e.g., a voter information intervention in a country challenged by electoral integrity), we observe that 98 per cent of studies focus on a relevant intervention to address the contextual backsliding areas.

However, the relevance of the intervention domain does not necessarily mean that the design is tailored to address democratic challenges faced in the specific intervention context. We can illustrate this nuance through the lower number of studies that specifically acknowledge an objective of addressing democratic backsliding challenges through their intervention: 14 per cent of the included studies explicitly report on the intervention objective of addressing a democratic backsliding challenge, and 18 per cent of the studies provide an analysis of the backsliding challenges experienced in their intervention setting.

Finally, we observe a discrepancy between the scale of the intervention and the scale of the democratic challenge faced by the country of implementation. Over 60 per cent of our studies analyse the effect of interventions through randomised controlled trials often implemented at the village or district level. Only 10 per cent of studies analyse a country-wide intervention. However, we can observe a difference between the overall democratic

challenges faced by the country and the specific challenges faced by democracy actors at the local level.

4.1.3 The measure of democratisation

The small number of studies reporting on the specifics of democratic backsliding in the intervention design is also reflected in the measure of democratisation. Despite areas of democracy decline across multiple outcome domains for most of our included backsliding episodes (Table 5), 51 per cent of studies analyse the effect of an intervention on a single outcome domain, while 3 per cent of the studies provide analyses across all outcome domains. For each intervention type, we would expect it to be more likely to influence certain outcomes over others.

As illustrated in Table 2, we generally observe alignment between interventions evaluated and outcomes measured: studies primarily focus on the expected outcomes matching the intervention domain. For example, most studies of accountable governance measure the effect of interventions on institutional capacity, and most studies of electoral integrity measure the effect of interventions on political participation (especially through voter turnout). This shows a discrepancy between the measure of democratisation and the multiple areas of decline causing democratic backsliding.

Similarly, despite the observed differences in experiences of democracy and democratic backsliding among specific population groups, a minority of studies provides subgroup analyses for the measure of effect: 29 per cent of the body of evidence provides subgroup analyses, including nine studies providing subgroup analysis based on sex or gender. We observe a small number of studies specifically focusing their subgroup analysis on other key actors of democracy, such as civil society organisations (n = 1), migrants and refugees (n = 2) or public officials (n = 5).

4.2 The effect of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts

In the following sub-section, we present the effect of democracy and freedom interventions on democratisation outcomes. Overall, the available evidence is sparse and has methodological shortcomings, both of which limit the conclusions that can be drawn with confidence. However, it does provide insights that can inform researchers and implementers in addressing the complex trends of democratic backsliding. We first provide additional information on the measure and interpretation of effect, and then analyse the effects reported and synthesised in our body of evidence. We conclude with insights on how to interpret the findings in a democratic backsliding context.

4.2.1 Measuring the effect of interventions

Our REA analyses the effect of interventions through 319 estimates reported from 16 interventions and 17 outcome categories. Each estimate is the measure of the effect of a specific intervention against one of our outcome categories. When data allow, we combine estimates from independent studies to provide a synthesised measure of the effect of an intervention category on an outcome category with a meta-analysis. For each estimate

and/or meta-analysis we report on:

- The *size* of the effect: the magnitude of the effect of the intervention on the beneficiary group;
- The *direction* of the effect: the positive or negative effect of the intervention on the beneficiary group; and
- The *statistical significance* of the effect: the attributability of the change to the intervention effect, to chance, or to other elements.

4.2.2 Overview of the effects of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts

Overall, we observe limited and unevenly distributed evidence across our framework categories: of the 272 potential analyses of our intervention and outcome framework, our body of evidence provides data for 121 intersections. Out of those intersections, we were able to run 19 meta-analyses; the rest of the analysis is reported through independent studies. Three of the meta-analyses show statistically significant results and include 3 to 14 estimates. The overview of meta-analyses shows limited evidence, but also a high level of heterogeneity between reported results.

Similarly, the significant effect reported by single studies shows a low level of consistency across indicators, as well as measures that do not always allow for comparison of results across independent studies. The combination of meta-analysis and independent effects analysis shows that the effects observed are primarily small, positive and statistically insignificant.

Evidence is limited and unevenly distributed

The body of evidence specifically focused on the democratic backsliding context is relatively small (n = 197, including 64 studies in our REA) compared to the overall body of evidence on the democracy, governance and human rights sector (n = 1,867). Although more evidence is required to confirm this hypothesis, the discrepancy might be related to the additional challenges raised by democratic backsliding contexts when implementing democracy and freedom interventions.

In contexts where the principles of transparency and accountability are eroded, implementation of an intervention seeking to reverse the trend might raise additional challenges in obtaining buy-in from governments and communities. This observation is reinforced by the unevenly distributed evidence across interventions and outcome domains. In the latter, we observe an evidence gap in outcomes related to *transparency and accountability, trust and social cohesion*, or outcomes measuring internal governance processes. Once again, this might be related to challenges in accessing data and information in a context where transparency, governance integrity and accountability are decreasing.

The effect is mostly small, positive and not statistically significant

Overall, both the meta-analyses and independent effects show mostly small, positive and not statistically significant effects of the democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts. More evidence will be needed on similar interventions in non-backsliding contexts to assess whether this observation is caused by the backsliding context.

However, the similar range and direction of effect across our 16 interventions' categories might highlight the particular complexity of achieving large and significant effects across the diversity of actors, interests, mechanisms and political influences involved in the backsliding democratic principles. This might also indicate a lack of tailoring of interventions to contextual specificities, as only a small portion of our evidence both acknowledges the specific context and explicitly intends to address it.

In most cases, the effects do not exceed a standardised mean difference of 0.10. Although interventions aimed at promoting democracy and freedom can have an impact in situations where democratic values are declining, these effects are typically modest and often lack substantial evidence for applicability in other contexts. The extensive range of possible combinations between interventions and outcomes, and the low number of studies in each meta-analysis, make it challenging to conduct moderator analysis to investigate variations based on factors such as context, duration, study design and potential biases.

Effect is heterogeneous

Our body of evidence is characterised by a diversity of contexts, leading to a diversity of effects. Although the low amount and high heterogeneity of evidence do not allow for moderator analyses that could show different effects according to subgroups, study design or other contextual elements, we do observe high levels of heterogeneity in the observed effects across intervention and outcome domains.

Analogous interventions in similarly democratically challenged contexts do not bear the same effects. This might reinforce the importance of a deeper assessment of the political economy, fragility and/or economic status of the field of intervention and how it might influence intervention effects. Categorising a context as backsliding, even by identifying a high-level challenge (e.g., electoral integrity or corruption), is thus not enough to understand the reality of the context, identify the best fit-for-purpose intervention, and ensure its success. A thorough contextual analysis and mapping of stakeholders and influence is needed to design interventions in democratic backsliding contexts.

4.2.3 The effects of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts by outcome domain

The analysis of the effect of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts highlights specific considerations imposed by this context of interventions, as well as specific challenges regarding the effect on targeted populations. Despite limited and unevenly distributed evidence of mostly small, positive, not statistically significant and heterogeneous effects, the body of evidence provides trends and findings under each outcome domain.

Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms

The *knowledge, belief, attitudes and norms* outcome domain refers to the collective understanding, opinions, values and social norms held by various stakeholders in the political regime (e.g., citizens, state actors, service providers). It encompasses individuals' perceptions of preferred candidates or political parties; democratic behaviours exhibited by justice actors, public institutions, and society members; levels of knowledge and

awareness regarding freedom and democracy principles; and public satisfaction with democratic values and the legitimacy of government processes and outcomes.

Acting on this outcome domain is particularly relevant in a democratic backsliding context, where understanding of democracy, perceptions and norms can act against democratic principles. By promoting knowledge and democratic behaviours and norms, interventions can enable structural changes in the political systems towards democracy.

In our body of evidence, this outcome domain is measured through 77 estimates, 14 interventions and 4 outcome categories. We do observe a small, positive and significant effect of *capacity strengthening of public, judicial and security sectors* interventions on *attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy* ($\hat{\mu} = 0.07$; 95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.03 to 0.12; $p < 0.001$).

However, this result is based on three estimates, and largely driven by Gaikwad and colleagues (2023), which was the only individual estimate with a statistically significant positive effect. In this study, the authors analyse the effect of a capacity-strengthening intervention on elected elites and officials to support water connectivity and mobilisation of local communities on this issue in India. They observe that individuals in targeted communities were more likely to report that they had been encouraged to participate in collective action on formal access to water.

We also report on the effects of *public education, voter information* and *community-driven development (CDD)* on outcomes of *attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy, democratic behaviours, and knowledge and awareness about freedom and democracy principles*. Although all analyses show small and positive effects, none of them is statistically significant. However, none of the interventions show statistically significant and negative effects under this outcome domain.

Participation and civic/political engagement by the general public

This outcome domain refers to the citizens' participation and engagement both in the formal democratic process and as actors of the community to influence political decisions and make use of their democratic rights. It encompasses electoral participation (both as voter or candidate), engagement in civil society organisations and local mobilisation, use of political rights, and participation in community-based activities.

In the context of democratic backsliding where the participation of citizens or groups of citizens can be denied, acting on participation and engagement helps to ensure that the democratic process is truly working as a representation of the interests of the people, rather than a selection of powerholders. It ensures that all citizens can contribute to the decision-making process and have a voice in the political sphere.

Our body of evidence covers this outcome domain through 71 estimates across 16 interventions and two outcome categories. We observe a small, positive and significant effect of *voter information, voter education and get-out-the-vote (GOTV)* on *public engagement in democracy and governance* ($\hat{\mu} = 0.11$, 95% CI: 0.002 to 0.22; $p = .04$). The

reported effect is based on 14 estimates ranging from -0.05 to 0.46 standard deviations. The largest effect is based on door-to-door facilitation campaign to help migrants obtain local voter identification cards to participate in the national election in Lucknow and New Delhi (Gaikwad and Nellis 2021; $\hat{g} = 0.46$, 95% CI: 0.38 to 0.55; $p < .001$).

The analysis of the effect of *electoral monitoring, observation and mitigating electoral violence, public education and behaviour change interventions for civic awareness and participation, CDD and co-production of public services, and support for media to uphold accountability and democracy promotion* showed small, positive but not statistically significant effects of those interventions on *public engagement* and *citizen participation in the community*. Once again, none of the interventions shows statistically significant and negative effects under this outcome domain.

Institutional capacity and service quality

The *institutional capacity and service quality* outcome domain encompasses measures of effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility, compliance and support mechanisms within governance institutions and public services – such as policy quality, public expenditure, performance of legislators, or support mechanisms for human rights. In the context of democratic backsliding where access to public services and government benefits might not be fairly distributed, assessment of institutional capacity and service quality is an indicator of democratic functioning. It provides insight into the capacity of the public system to uphold democratic values and ensure access and quality of public services and compliance with human rights.

Our REA analyses the effect of interventions on this outcome domain through 64 estimates, 12 interventions and 5 outcome categories. Although we observe small and positive effects of *CDD* interventions on the *quality of governance, public service effectiveness and efficiency, and access to public services or government benefits*, none of these effects are statistically significant.

Regarding *access to public services or government benefits* ($\hat{\mu} = 0.05$; 95% CI: -0.02 to 0.12; $p = 0.14$), the meta-analysis is based on seven studies with a high level of heterogeneity (effect sizes vary extensively from -0.32 to 1.12 standard deviations) and becomes statistically significant if we remove the study from Labonne and Chase (2011), which is considered an outlier based on the meta-analysis model.

One of the studies of this meta-analysis is the work from Madajewicz and colleagues (2021). In this randomised controlled trial implemented in Bangladesh, the authors analyse the implementation of three local decision-making processes for the installation of deep tube wells: the top-down process (where the decision is taken by local authorities), the community participation process (where the decision is taken through a local initiative of citizens) and the regulated community participation process (where the decision is facilitated through a meeting and need for unanimous decision). The latter led to higher household-level reporting of the use of safe drinking water following the intervention ($\hat{g} = 0.09$; 95% CI: 0.05 to 0.12; $p < 0.001$).

We also observe a small positive but not statistically significant effect of *decentralisation, administrative devolution or reorganisation* on *public service effectiveness and efficiency*. None of the intervention categories shows statistically significant and negative effects under this outcome domain.

Transparency and accountability

The *transparency and accountability* outcome domain assesses the level of openness, clarity, and accountability within public institutions and governments both during and between electoral processes. It encompasses the ability to monitor government institutions, access public information, and hold governments responsible for making decisions free from corruption. Transparency and accountability are two major values that are at risk during democratic backsliding episodes, which erode trust and transparency in decision-making. By increasing accountability levels, interventions may act against authoritarian influences and combat corruption to reinforce the integrity and reliability of democratic governance.

Despite the relevance of transparency and accountability in the democratic backsliding context, we note a major evidence gap in comparison to other outcome domains. It covers 28 estimates across 11 interventions and 3 outcome categories. This observation is in line with the conclusion of the recent EGM on governance effectiveness (Gonzalez Parrao et al. 2022b, p.34), which highlights that ‘outcomes focusing on government processes and the accountability and quality of policymaking, are less frequently studied’.

The report’s hypothesis on this evidence gap can be particularly relevant to backsliding contexts: it might be due to difficulties in accessing not publicly available data or involving government authorities in experimental designs. Although this hypothesis would need to be verified through further evidence, access to internal data, hidden practices (e.g., corruption) and engagement with governments might be even more challenging in backsliding contexts where transparency and accountability are deteriorating.

Due to the lack of available evidence, we cannot assess the positive or negative effect of our intervention categories under this outcome domain and can only rely on results reported in independent studies. We note that only three of the included estimates report statistically significant results.

For example, one of the largest and most statistically significant effects observed under this outcome domain is reported by Afridi and colleagues (2017). In their randomised controlled trial, the research team analyse the effect of electoral quotas for women in village councils in India and their effect on corruption and learning. The authors observe a small, positive and statistically significant effect of the intervention on requests from citizens to review official records ($\hat{g} = 0.11$; 95% CI: 0.01 to 0.21; $p < 0.001$) and calls for *government and electoral transparency and accountability*.

Trust and social cohesion

The outcome domain of *trust and social cohesion* refers to the level of trust, interaction and peaceful coexistence among citizens and between citizens and their government. It

includes indicators related to social bonds, absence of conflicts, intragroup trust (within social groups), and public trust in government, institutions, electoral processes, civil society and media.

In the context of democratic backsliding, trust and social cohesion are both affected by and affect the health of the democratic system. Through the erosion of democratic principles, trust and social cohesion among citizens and between citizens and their government may be affected, as political decisions do not represent the interests of citizens or may give prevalence to a specific group or elites. Similarly, mistrust and lack of social cohesion can lead to conflict that may affect the stability of a democratic regime and catalyse its erosion.

As with the previous outcome domain, *trust and social cohesion* garner a lower number of estimates: 29 estimates across 10 interventions and 2 outcome categories. We observe a small, positive and statistically significant effect of *voter information, voter education and GOTV* on *public trust in government* ($\widehat{\mu} = 0.09$, 95% CI: 0.03 to 0.15; $p = .01$).

This meta-analysis is based on three estimates from three studies (Aker et al. 2017; Gaikwad and Nellis 2021; Liaqat et al. 2018). The observed outcomes ranged from 0.04 to 0.16 standard deviations, with all estimates being positive. Aker and colleagues (2017) analysed the effect of the provision of civic education through leaflets and SMS targeting voters in the 2009 elections in Mozambique. Their randomised controlled trial found that the civic education campaign led to a higher level of voter trust in the electoral commission ($\widehat{g} = 0.16$; 95% CI: 0.04 to 0.28; $p = .01$).

The meta-analysis of *CDD and co-production of public services* shows small, positive but not statistically significant effects on *public trust in government*. Once again, none of the interventions show statistically significant and negative effects under this outcome domain.

Table 6: Effects of interventions

Positive and significant result (meta-analysis)																			
Non-significant result (meta-analysis)																			
Negative and significant result (meta-analysis)																			
Non-significant effect reported in a single study (no synthesis)																			
Reported effects in individual studies (no synthesis) – mixed or negative effects																			
Reported effects in individual studies (no synthesis) – reporting positive effects																			
		Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms				Participation and civic/political engagement by the general public		Institutional capacity and service quality					Transparency and accountability			Trust/social cohesion			
		Attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy	Democratic behaviours	Knowledge and awareness about freedom and democracy principles	Public satisfaction in democratic values	Public engagement in democracy and governance	Citizen participation in community, civil society and media	Quality of governance	Public service effectiveness and efficiency	Access to public services or government benefits	Compliance with laws and rules	Human rights support mechanisms and processes	Monitoring of public institutions by civil society	Government and electoral transparency and accountability	Corruption	Electoral corruption and malfeasance	Social cohesion	Public trust in government	
Accountable governance	Decentralisation, administrative devolution or reorganisation	-0.02(-0.09;0.04) 0.06(-0.06;0.17)	0.02(-0.01;0.04) 0.14(0.03;0.24)			-0.03(-0.09;0.04) -0.12(-0.19;-0.05)		-0.03(-0.09;0.04)	0.04(-0.02;0.10)	0.05(-0.01;0.12)				0.03(-0.03;0.10)	0.02(-0.05;0.09) -0.06(-0.13;0.01)			0.07(0.01;0.14) 0.02(-0.05;0.09)	
	E-government and digital transformation of administrative processes		0.00(-0.15;0.15) -0.04(-0.19;0.11)	-0.23(-0.38;-0.08) 0.13(-0.01;0.28)		0.16(-0.19;0.51) 0.10(-0.05;0.25)	-0.00(-0.20;0.20) 0.95(0.41;1.48) 0.13(-0.07;0.32)	-0.13(-0.20;-0.06) -0.06(-0.21;0.10) 0.02(-0.14;0.17)			0.10(-0.15;0.34)			0.06(-0.11;0.23) 0.04(-0.13;0.21)	0.05(-0.04;0.15)				
	Performance incentives						0.54(0.21;0.86)	-0.33(-0.50;-0.16) -0.33(-0.59;-0.06)		0.29(0.06;0.51)									
	Public procurement reforms and public-private partnerships					0.18(0.02;0.35)		-0.03(-0.08;0.02) -0.01(-0.03;0.01) -0.03(-0.05;-0.00) -0.02(-0.04;0.00) -0.01(-0.03;0.01)		0.04(-0.01;0.09) 0.03(0.00;0.05) 0.02(-0.01;0.04)									
	Capacity strengthening of public, judicial and security sectors	0.07(0.03;0.12)	0.05(-0.02;0.13)	-0.01(-0.08;0.06)		-0.04(-0.11;0.03) 0.06(0.01;0.11)	0.12(0.02;0.23)	-0.05(-0.12;0.02) -0.02(-0.09;0.05)	-0.05(-0.28;0.18) 0.08(-0.01;0.17)	0.07(-0.09;0.23)	-0.00(-0.05;0.05) 0.00(-0.05;0.05)	0.04(-0.10;0.17) 0.04(-0.03;0.11)		0.01(-0.07;0.09)	0.06(-0.02;0.14) 0.01(-0.06;0.07)			-0.04(-0.14;0.07)	-0.03(-0.10;0.04) -0.12(-0.28;0.04)

Positive and significant result (meta-analysis)																			
Non-significant result (meta-analysis)																			
Negative and significant result (meta-analysis)																			
Non-significant effect reported in a single study (no synthesis)																			
Reported effects in individual studies (no synthesis) – mixed or negative effects																			
Reported effects in individual studies (no synthesis) – reporting positive effects																			
		Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms				Participation and civic/political engagement by the general public		Institutional capacity and service quality					Transparency and accountability				Trust/social cohesion		
		Attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy	Democratic behaviours	Knowledge and awareness about freedom and democracy principles	Public satisfaction in democratic values	Public engagement in democracy and governance	Citizen participation in community, civil society and media	Quality of governance	Public service effectiveness and efficiency	Access to public services or government benefits	Compliance with laws and rules	Human rights support mechanisms and processes	Monitoring of public institutions by civil society	Government and electoral transparency and accountability	Corruption	Electoral corruption and malfeasance	Social cohesion	Public trust in government	
	Access to public data and right of information	0.05(-0.04;0.14) 0.07(0.01;0.14)		0.24(0.17;0.32) 0.21(0.12;0.30) 0.13(-0.15;0.41) 0.53(0.28;0.78)		0.01(-0.06;0.08) 0.32(0.19;0.46)	0.41(0.19;0.64) 0.17(0.00;0.33)	0.03(-0.09;0.14)	0.42(-0.17;1.02) 0.00(-0.07;0.07) 16.07(13.63;18.51) 0.16(0.05;0.28) 0.42(-0.17;1.02)	0.05(-0.01;0.12)			0.05(-0.01;0.12)		-0.10(-0.19;-0.01)		0.03(-0.04;0.09)		
	Support services for marginalised groups	0.08(0.03;0.13)				0.06(0.01;0.11)								-0.00(-0.05;0.05) -0.02(-0.07;0.03) 0.00(-0.05;0.05)					
Civic space	Capacity building and support services targeting civil society organisations	0.08(0.03;0.13) -0.00(-0.06;0.05)		0.04(-0.02;0.09)		0.06(0.01;0.11) 0.00(-0.05;0.06)	0.00(-0.05;0.06)	0.01(-0.04;0.07)						-0.00(-0.05;0.05) -0.02(-0.07;0.03) 0.00(-0.05;0.05)					
	Public education and behaviour change interventions for civic awareness and participation	0.11(-0.04;0.25)			0.02(-0.03;0.08)	0.01(-0.10;0.13)	0.08(0.00;0.15)										0.09(0.01;0.17)	-0.27(-0.44;-0.11) -0.06(-0.14;0.01)	
	Civil society mobilisation	0.08(-0.04;0.20) 0.05(-0.07;0.17) 0.07(-0.02;0.15)	0.00(-0.15;0.15) -0.04(-0.19;0.11)	-0.06(-0.21;0.09) 0.13(-0.01;0.28)		0.16(-0.19;0.51) 0.10(-0.05;0.25)	-0.00(-0.20;0.20) 0.95(0.41;1.48) 0.13(-0.07;0.32)	-0.06(-0.21;0.10) 0.02(-0.14;0.17)						0.06(-0.11;0.23) 0.04(-0.13;0.21)					
Electoral integrity	Electoral rules reform		-0.62(-0.91;-0.34) -0.14(-0.42;0.13)	0.004(-0.07;0.08)		-0.11(-0.20;-0.02) -0.15(-0.42;0.13)		-0.17(-0.37;0.02)	0.02(-0.18;0.22)				0.11(0.01;0.21)		-0.11(-0.22;-0.01) 0.06(-0.05;0.16)		0.004(-0.07;0.08)		

Positive and significant result (meta-analysis)																				
Non-significant result (meta-analysis)																				
Negative and significant result (meta-analysis)																				
Non-significant effect reported in a single study (no synthesis)																				
Reported effects in individual studies (no synthesis) – mixed or negative effects																				
Reported effects in individual studies (no synthesis) – reporting positive effects																				
		Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and norms				Participation and civic/political engagement by the general public		Institutional capacity and service quality					Transparency and accountability			Trust/social cohesion				
		Attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy	Democratic behaviours	Knowledge and awareness about freedom and democracy principles	Public satisfaction in democratic values	Public engagement in democracy and governance	Citizen participation in community, civil society and media	Quality of governance	Public service effectiveness and efficiency	Access to public services or government benefits	Compliance with laws and rules	Human rights support mechanisms and processes	Monitoring of public institutions by civil society	Government and electoral transparency and accountability	Corruption	Electoral corruption and malfeasance	Social cohesion	Public trust in government		
	Electoral monitoring, observation and mitigating electoral violence			0.18(0.06;0.30)		0.07(-0.06;0.21)											-0.07(-0.38;0.24)		0.09(-0.03;0.20)	
	Voter information, voter education, and GOTV	0.05(-0.00;0.09)	0.07(-0.01;0.15) 0.10(0.04;0.15)	0.09(-0.01;0.19)		0.11(0.00;0.22)								0.11(0.03;0.20)		0.04(-0.27;0.35) 0.13(0.02;0.25)		0.09(0.00;0.17)	0.09(0.03;0.15)	
Inclusive politics	CDD and co-production of public services	0.01(-0.04;0.05)	0.02(-0.01;0.04)	-0.01(-0.06;0.09)		0.00(-0.05;0.06)	0.06(-0.06;0.18)	0.02(-0.16;0.20)	0.02(-0.03;0.08)	0.05(-0.02;0.12)		0.04(-0.10;0.17) 0.04(-0.03;0.11)	0.01(-0.07;0.09) 0.03(-0.03;0.10)	0.06(-0.02;0.14)			0.12(-0.02;0.26) -0.33(-0.67;0.00) 0.37(-0.11;0.85)		0.02(-0.06;0.10)	
Media	Support for media to uphold accountability, and democracy promotion	-0.08(-0.27;0.11) 0.16(0.02;0.30) -0.09(-0.27;0.08)		0.25(0.07;0.42) 0.15(0.03;0.26) 0.21(0.04;0.39)		0.14(-0.05;0.32)											-0.12(-0.24;-0.01)	0.10(-0.01;0.22)	0.14(0.02;0.26)	
Corruption and economic democracy	Monitoring corruption, discrimination and violence	0.05(-0.03;0.13) 0.03(-0.07;0.13) 0.01(-0.07;0.09)	0.05(-0.02;0.13)	-0.01(-0.08;0.06)		-0.04(-0.11;0.03)	-0.03(-0.24;0.17)	-0.04(-0.10;0.03) -0.05(-0.12;0.02)	-0.05(-0.28;0.18) 0.04(-0.10;0.18)	0.07(-0.09;0.23)							0.12(-0.10;0.35) 0.01(-0.05;0.08)		-0.04(-0.14;0.07)	0.06(-0.01;0.13) -0.12(-0.28;0.04)

4.3 Barriers and facilitators in the effectiveness of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts

Our finding of mainly small and/or non-significant effects of democracy and freedom interventions in backsliding contexts may indicate that many interventions have not been suited to address the root causes of anti-democratic conditions in the contexts in which they are implemented. This reinforces the importance of considering barriers and facilitators that may affect intervention effectiveness. The following section presents the barriers and facilitators we have been able to identify in our body of evidence.

Our presentation of barriers and facilitators is subject to two important caveats, however. The first is that because most interventions had no significant effects on key outcomes, we are limited in our ability to identify factors that facilitate successful interventions; we would likely need a larger sample of successful interventions to identify such patterns.

The second caveat is that the included studies are predominantly quantitative impact evaluations. Such studies tend to focus narrowly on identifying the magnitude of the intervention's effects, without discussing implementation details or rigorously examining why an intervention resulted in its effect. A thorough analysis of barriers and facilitators would require a dedicated search for different types of evidence, such as process evaluations.

4.3.1 Resistance to democratisation may inhibit intervention impact

Change in governance systems may be challenged by the difficulty of introducing new practices in an established hierarchical system. In democratic backsliding contexts, this difficulty is reinforced by the existing power structure and resistance from agents with a stake in the status quo or concerned with losing power or control. Two studies by Banerjee and colleagues (2020, 2021) illustrate this resistance to democratisation.

Banerjee and colleagues (2020) experimentally tested the effects of a digital platform that manages payments and invoicing in real time for India's largest public works programme. As this platform reduced leakage of public funds, street-level implementers strongly resisted the intervention. According to the authors, their lobby against the intervention was grounded in administrative data showing a decline in public expenditure. However, experimental results later showed that the reduction in expenditure was due to reduced leakage, not a lower level of programme delivery.

In the second study, Banerjee and colleagues (2021) conducted a large-scale randomised trial to test interventions for management reform among the police of Rajasthan, India. The study implemented a number of interventions, including halting the transfer of officers, training, improved duty rotation and leave, community monitoring, and using decoys as victims to improve performance.

The authors commented that the limited success of some of their interventions may have resulted from resistance created by middle managers (i.e., station chiefs) that disrupted proper implementation. In particular, interventions that withdrew authority from these managers (e.g., decisions related to the transfer of police officers to other stations or management of duty rota) faced substantial resistance during implementation.

4.3.2 Norms and social practices can prevent change

Some authors highlight the influence of restrictive sociopolitical norms and informal power balances as barriers to democratisation efforts. Working on structural changes might then be a necessary step to democratisation, as local dynamics and sociopolitical realities can impinge on the intervention's goals.

In DRC, Laudati and colleagues (2018a) report several factors that influenced the community reception and impact of the CDD programme. Their qualitative investigation revealed that service providers felt they lacked the social or political power to communicate with line ministries. Other factors included existing social hierarchies, power dynamics, preference for traditional medicine, intra-ethnic rivalries, and regional insecurity. The projects sometimes became entangled in conflicts within villages, or the benefits were captured by the elites.

In Pakistan, Khan (2020) evaluated a campaign to encourage women voters' turnout. Findings indicated that campaigns targeting men may affect their attitudes towards women's participation; however, in this case the change in attitudes did not appear to result in behavioural changes.

Experimental evidence from Cheema and colleagues (2023), also conducted in Pakistan, supported this notion and showed that targeting male household members along with females can increase female voter participation. Note, however, that the latter two effects are quite small and derived from the same country. This evidence may not transfer to other settings, and interventions targeting women's political participation should be backed by a thorough understanding of gender dynamics in the local context.

4.3.3 Democracy champions may catalyse the implementation of change

Several authors in our body of evidence highlight the importance of engaging a diverse array of local stakeholders to facilitate change, particularly 'champions' who have a measure of influence. Khwaja and colleagues (2020) evaluated an intervention that helped Pakistani local revenue collection bodies to improve their tax collection efforts. Based on data collected from the field, the authors argue that engaging local leaders facilitated the communication strategy to motivate citizens to pay more taxes, though it should be noted that this intervention had no significant effects on outcomes in our framework.

4.3.4 Strengthening the capabilities and skills of actors in democratic systems may facilitate change

Democratisation and democracy rely on a number of civic and political stakeholders (e.g., civil society organisations, governments, voters). Some authors highlight the importance of skills and capacities of actors in democratic systems. In the tax policy reform experiment mentioned above (Khwaja et al. 2020), officials in the local tax collection authority were trained in technology used for data management and public engagement. Interviews and focus group discussions indicated that the intervention improved the department's capacity to collect, manage and monitor data.

4.3.5 Democratic governance requires resources and infrastructure

Despite the lack of evidence on intervention costs, a number of authors comment on the resources required by functioning democratic systems. The lack of access to such resources may place major constraints on the potential of interventions, particularly small-scale interventions, to effect change.

In the context of a community-driven development reform in Tanzania, Pretari (2019) evaluated interventions promoting community-driven governance and accountability through the use of digital tools. However, qualitative case studies uncovered implementation challenges stemming from limited access to and use of online platforms by citizens. The authors also observed differential access to technologies according to gender, socioeconomic status or age.

Banerjee and colleagues (2020) observed similar phenomena in their analysis of the introduction of a digital platform that manages payments and invoicing in India. Madajewicz and colleagues (2021) conducted a field experiment in Bangladesh to test whether community participation in a CDD programme would improve the provision of public goods such as water. Based on interviews and observations, the authors report that the programme's success was undermined because hydro-geological conditions were not favourable for installing tube wells, which were key elements of the intervention.

4.3.6 Appropriate engagement with democracy stakeholders is key

Some authors comment on the importance of the right strategies to engage with various stakeholders. Hearn and colleagues (2016) employ the outcome harvesting approach to assess the impact of strengthening civil society organisations on their engagement in the reform process of the Indonesian justice sector. Their case studies reveal three factors associated with the organisations' abilities to catalyse justice sector reform: evidence-informed and collaborative approaches in engagement, reputation and resources, and capacity to develop and maintain relationships with government institutions.

Similarly, according to Tsai and colleagues (2018), the delivery of civic leadership training to community leaders was facilitated by a constructive working relationship between the project's implementers and the secretary of the department at the time, who had a background in civil society organisations. (However, it should be noted that this training intervention had no significant effects on outcomes in our framework.)

Other authors highlight the importance of engaging effectively with citizens. Chadha and Wadhwa (2018) investigate 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, engagement with their households and communities was instrumental in allowing women to participate in the programme.

Similarly, Laudati and colleagues (2018b) highlight the importance of 'translating' democracy concepts into language that will resonate with citizens. They suggest that different understandings of terms such as empowerment, governance, and accountability

impeded some citizens' participation in the Tuungane 2 CDD programme in DRC. The authors recommend communicating in local languages using terms widely understood by citizens.

4.3.7 Democratisation requires political actors motivated to pursue democratic aims

Political actors need motivation and incentives to contribute to democratic governance. Gaikwad and colleagues (2023) highlight the importance of political motivations: in India, the authors evaluated how a bureaucratic facilitation and political coordination intervention motivated politicians to provide water in slums. Based on their field observations and reports from local partners and project staff, they suggest that politicians native to the locality were less motivated to provide water connections to slums, as they believed they had fixed vote banks from locals. In contrast, the authors reported that non-native politicians tended to be more proactive in providing such public services, as they see slum dwellers as potential additions to their vote banks.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of findings

Recent reports from international observers on democracy all highlight a global erosion of democratic standards: according to the V-Dem Institute's 2023 report on democracy, 72 per cent of the world population lives in autocracies. Understanding what works to promote democracy and freedom in democratic backsliding contexts is needed to reverse this trend.

We analyse the effects of interventions targeting democracy and freedom in democratic backsliding contexts through 64 evaluations (59 quantitative and 5 qualitative) published between 2007 and 2023. A majority of the studies analyse the effects of interventions through experimental designs and with a short follow-up period: 92 per cent of included studies analyse impacts within six months of the end of the intervention. Our study analyses the effect of 15 intervention categories (aggregated into 6 domains) across 17 outcome categories (aggregated into 5 domains).

Overall, the evidence on each type of intervention is scarce, which limits our ability to identify interventions with support from a robust evidence base. The high number of unique intervention-outcome combinations also limits the scope for moderator analysis, which could be used to shed light on how effects vary by context, duration of exposure, study design, risk of bias, and so on.

In those cases where we were able to meta-analyse results from multiple studies, effects were generally small and not statistically significant. In three cases, meta-analysis yielded statistically significant and positive effects; however, they were small and likely of limited practical significance (standardised mean difference below 0.1 in each case). Patterns are similar when we analyse individual estimates: there are relatively few statistically significant effects and even when significant, they rarely exceed 0.1 standardised mean difference. The largest effect sizes tend to come from studies with very small sample sizes.

The contexts in which these studies were conducted are heterogeneous. We focus our analysis on 13 countries that have experienced different forms of backsliding with different causes: electoral fraud and violence, coups, political discrimination, restriction of basic freedoms, corruption, political polarisation, and political violence. Although 98 per cent of our studies focus on an intervention relevant to backsliding challenges faced at the national level, manifestations of backsliding at the local level (where interventions are often implemented) may differ from these.

The complexity of democratic backsliding systems and implementation barriers contribute to these small and statistically insignificant effects. While further evidence is required to make direct attributions, several factors can influence the outcomes observed in the context of democratic backsliding. Various barriers and facilitators come into play. One significant impediment to effectiveness arises from resistance to change among those in power, particularly those who benefit from the erosion of democracy. Additionally, restrictive social norms, such as gender-based norms and socioeconomic exclusion, along with limited resources, present challenges in shifting perceptions and behaviours towards democracy.

Conversely, certain facilitators can significantly enhance the impact of democracy and freedom interventions. Local stakeholders, including public officials, traditional leaders, and civil society organisations, have the potential to play a crucial role as catalysts for change. They can act as intermediaries between various actors, advocate for change, and fulfil the role of duty-bearers. Moreover, the effectiveness of people's participation and interventions depends on whether participants are motivated to pursue democratic aims.

Lastly, the authors emphasise the vital importance of creating an enabling environment for democracy. This involves building the necessary skills, infrastructure, and resources to sustain democracy and prevent its regression into backsliding.

5.2 Limitations of available studies

Given the focus of our REA on a subset of countries, the overall evidence base on the effect of democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts is limited: we selected 64 of 197 studies initiated in a democratic backsliding context, which were a subset of the 1,867 studies from 3ie's democracy, governance and human rights EGMs. In other words, our sample represents only 3 per cent of the broader literature on democracy and governance in low- and middle-income countries.

The rarity of evaluations in backsliding contexts may be due to the inherent difficulties in conducting rigorous evaluation studies in contexts where basic freedoms are restricted and poor transparency limits the availability of key data. This limited body of evidence constrains our ability to reach transferable conclusions about the likely effects of the interventions.

Although all studies are initiated in the context of democratic backsliding, only a minority either specifically seek to address democratic backsliding (14%) or report their results

according to international measures of democratic backsliding. Although all studies measure relevant outcomes, they frequently provide little information on the context of the intervention and how it seeks to address democratic backsliding issues at the local or national level. It is therefore difficult to determine the extent to which programme theories of change identify plausible mechanisms to address the root causes of backsliding in the contexts where these programmes are implemented.

Similarly, in contexts where inclusive political engagement is limited, only a few studies provide subgroup analyses (especially on politically marginalised groups such as women, youth or rural communities). This might be partially explained by the difficulty in involving these groups in research in contexts of eroded democratic standards. However, such inclusion and subgroup analyses would improve our ability to determine whether these interventions are benefitting the most marginalised citizens.

The available evidence carries a substantial risk of bias and, based on an adaptation of the GRADE assessment, a majority of findings are rated as low or very low certainty. In particular, studies regularly lack sufficient reporting on potential attrition or spillovers that might affect the reliability of results.

We observe a lack of mixed-methods research and cost evidence across our entire body of evidence. Given the unique factors at play in each context of backsliding, there is a particular need for additional qualitative information about barriers and facilitators, potential complementarities, and the sustainability and cost-effectiveness of interventions. Although several studies report on the total cost of the programme or intervention, only a few provide detailed cost analyses or breakdowns per component, which are required for informative cost-effectiveness analysis.

5.3 Implications for policymakers, implementers and researchers

5.3.1 Implications for policymakers and implementers

Implementers should begin with a careful diagnosis of the barriers to democracy and freedom in the local context and develop a well-founded theory of change. One possible reason for the lack of significant effects in this literature is that the interventions are often not targeting the true root causes of the democratic challenge they seek to address. While the vast majority of the studies in our body of evidence implement an intervention relevant to democratic challenges identified at the national level, only 14 per cent of them explicitly aim to address a specific backsliding challenge, and only 18 per cent provide some form of backsliding analysis.

These low figures could suggest that in most cases, the causes of backsliding have not been accurately diagnosed, and therefore the treatments may not align well with the underlying issues. In other words, the interventions' theories of change may be inaccurate. Before interventions are implemented, therefore, scoping work should seek to identify the backsliding challenges at the scale of the intervention, and interventions should be designed using an explicit theory of change that specifies how the proposed intervention will address the identified root causes.

Policymakers and implementers should set realistic expectations for the scope of potential changes given the scale of the intervention. Democratic backsliding is typically measured using national-level indicators, such as those used by V-Dem or the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, yet interventions are typically implemented at local levels. Obviously, local change is a necessary precursor to national change, but it will take time for the local reinforcement of democratic norms and systems to filter up to the national level.

Notably, the indicators used to measure local changes differ markedly from those used by international observers (e.g., V-Dem, International IDEA) to measure national-level governance structures. None of the included studies assessed the state of democracy at the local level using sets of indicators such as those used by international observers. Some national-level indicators will be inapplicable at the local level and vice versa, but policymakers and implementers may wish to consider adopting recognised national-level indicators to measure local progress.

While each intervention shows promise in improving democracy and freedom outcomes, none seems to address all the potential areas of democratic backsliding. In the absence of a one-size-fits-all solution, **policymakers should, therefore, prioritise their funding based on the aspect of democracy they aim to strengthen or support:**

Regarding *knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and norms*, evidence shows positive and statistically significant effects of *capacity strengthening of public, judicial, and security sectors*, as well as *voter information, voter education, and GOTV* interventions on *attitudes and beliefs about freedom and democracy*. The effect of these interventions also highlights the different entry points that policymakers and implementers may use to address backsliding: while *capacity strengthening of public, judicial, and security sectors* mainly works with public institutions to drive change, *voter information, voter education, and GOTV* directly target citizens and voters to claim their electoral rights.

However, policymakers and implementers should note the relatively small magnitude of these effects and consider barriers and facilitators that will influence them. It is also important to bear in mind that changes in attitudes may not necessarily lead to changes in behaviours; therefore, policymakers and implementers should ensure that they have considered potential barriers on the pathway from attitudes to behaviours, and have strategies for addressing these.

In terms of *participation and civic/political engagement by the general public*, there is a small yet positive and statistically significant effect of *voter information* on *public engagement in democracy and governance*. When it comes to encouraging participation and engagement from marginalised groups, policymakers and implementers should be cognisant of social norms and other factors that prevent marginalised groups from participating in political processes.

Regarding *institutional capacity and service quality*, although more than half of included interventions target outcomes such as *quality of governance, public service effectiveness*

and efficiency, or access to public service or government benefits, none of them yield statistically significant results. This could be due to institutional resistance to change from actors who benefit from democratic backsliding, or because the interventions did not address the root causes of issues with service quality. Policymakers and implementers can leverage local democracy champions (such as local authorities, officials, and civil society organisations) to increase the influence of interventions and drive change.

In terms of *transparency and accountability*, the evidence is relatively thinner regarding the effects of included interventions on outcomes such as *corruption, government and electoral transparency and accountability*, and *electoral corruption and malfeasance*. The scarcity of evidence may stem, in part, from challenges in accessing public data or internal institutional information in contexts of endemic corruption and low transparency. In these contexts, policymakers and implementers (and researchers) may need to rely on proxy measures for these outcomes – ideally, those that have been validated in prior research.

When it comes to *trust and social cohesion*, evidence shows a small, positive and statistically significant effect of *voter information* interventions on *public trust in government*. However, there is limited evidence on the effects of interventions on *social cohesion*, highlighting the need for policymakers and implementers to collaborate with researchers to expand the evidence base in this area.

Where evidence is available, policymakers and implementers can use it. In the absence of a universal solution to democratic backsliding, existing evidence from specific contexts or that addresses specific democratic backsliding challenges is a precious resource for implementation design and decision-making. Despite the limited body of evidence on democracy and freedom interventions in democratic backsliding contexts, policymakers and practitioners can consult evidence on a diverse range of interventions to inform their decisions.

They should therefore draw from evidence in contexts that are comparable not only regarding the overall backsliding trend, but also regarding criteria such as regime type, economic status, conflict and stability context, or specific areas of backsliding both at the local and national level. The use of evidence may also build on the potential barriers and facilitators identified by other authors in backsliding contexts: this includes barriers related to resistance to change from non-democratic actors as well as entrenched social norms preventing the transition to democracy.

To catalyse change, implementers may choose to build on the observations of authors highlighting the potential of localisation, and capacity strengthening of local actors, role models and democracy champions as facilitators of change. They might also tailor their intervention to reflect the importance of perception and legitimacy of democracy as a governance model and the participation of citizens within it.

Where evidence is scarce, policymakers and implementers can contribute to filling the gap. In contexts of democratic backsliding, where access to public data and the transparency and accountability of public institutions may be challenged, the role of

policymakers and governments as sources of data is particularly important. To produce reliable evidence, researchers need reliable and transparent data from government bodies that will allow for reliable measures of intervention effects.

Policymakers can also contribute to filling evidence gaps through partnerships with quantitative and qualitative evaluation researchers, ideally from the earliest stages of programme design. In working with researchers, policymakers can also stress the importance of cost-benefit analyses and mixed-methods evaluations to aid decision-making and ensure that these elements are incorporated into programme evaluations.

5.3.2 Implications for researchers

The democracy and freedom sector needs more evidence on the effectiveness of interventions. V-Dem and other international observers' democracy scores in included countries indicate that democratic backsliding has become more prevalent in the last two decades, suggesting this is a fruitful area for research. The available body of evidence is sparsely distributed across intervention and outcome types, and therefore many research questions remain understudied. Most or all interventions have only been studied in one or few contexts.

To enhance analysis accuracy, evidence must integrate both quantitative and qualitative aspects and focus on equity dimensions. Democracy necessitates behavioural changes from various actors, including individuals, society, and institutions. By understanding the local context, mechanisms, and participants' perceptions, we can better analyse the effects of democracy and freedom interventions on democratic backsliding. More mixed-methods research is required to expand the body of evidence, identify effective approaches, and understand the mechanisms at play.

Additionally, including equity aspects (e.g., subgroup analysis based on gender, age groups, or socioeconomic groups) can provide further insight into intervention effects. Building on this existing evidence, researchers may also contribute to the work of implementers by developing tools and guidelines for better assessment of backsliding contexts, particularly at the local level, and improved tailoring of intervention designs to specific democratic challenges at scale.

For comprehensive democratisation measurement, researchers must analyse all aspects of democracy. While many studies focus on specific aspects of democratic backsliding, or the expected democracy outcomes of an intervention category (e.g., *participation* in a *voter information* intervention or *attitudes* for a *capacity strengthening* intervention), few studies examine the interventions' impact across the entire set of outcome domains. Linking research findings to existing indices on democratic backsliding (e.g., V-Dem, International IDEA) may also facilitate comparison across contexts.

Future research should prioritise transparency in data collection processes. In backsliding contexts where transparency and accountability of political actors are limited, transparency in the data collection process is an important consideration for the reliability of findings. Although more evidence would be needed to assess whether those research

challenges are more prevalent in democratic backsliding contexts, studies often lack information on respondents' knowledge of the intervention and/or consciousness of backsliding challenges, potentially influencing their answers and data quality. Efforts should also be made to minimise attrition rates, as many studies faced challenges in tracking individuals throughout the intervention period.

Nationally representative analyses would be valuable in understanding intervention effects beyond local contexts. While 62 per cent of studies used experimental designs representative of the targeted area's population, only a few studies conducted experiments at the regional or national level. In comparison, 40 per cent of studies in the six DRG EGMs (including both backsliding and non-backsliding contexts) used experimental designs. Additional research using, for example, national panel datasets would provide greater insight and confirm or challenge existing findings.

Analysis should consider the longer-term effects of interventions. The analysis of backsliding trends in the last 30 years shows that some contexts have been experiencing unstable trends of autocratisation and democratisation for extended periods. Studies analysing intervention effects at multiple points in time are currently lacking, thereby impeding our understanding of how these effects may evolve. Thus, longer-term impacts in targeted areas may differ from short-term effects, and more evidence is needed to assess the sustainability of positive and/or negative trends observed across our intervention framework.

Cost evidence is needed to assess the efficiency and value for money of interventions. Reporting on the total budget of an intervention is not enough to fully assess its cost and benefits. Researchers can contribute to filling this evidence gap through additional cost analysis in published evaluations and/or specific cost-benefit synthesis of democracy and freedom interventions.

5.4 Strengths, limitations and future directions

Findings of REAs must generally be interpreted with greater caution than those of systematic reviews. Apart from the abbreviated approach to search and screening described below, our approach followed the Campbell Collaboration guidelines for a systematic review. Both the outcome mapping and data extraction were performed independently by two reviewers, and we undertook the analysis according to our proposed methodology (Section 3).

Our body of evidence is based on a subset of six EGMs published between 2020 and 2022, and we have not undertaken additional searches and screening. We only searched for updated linked papers or published versions of studies that were ongoing at the time of the initial search. Thus, despite the rigour of our analysis, some relevant studies might not be included. In particular, due to resource constraints, we selected 64 studies out of the 197 identified in the DRG EGMs (based on FCDO countries of interest) and did not include relevant evidence from countries such as Brazil, Russia, Myanmar, Bolivia, or Mali.

Similarly, our study focuses on interventions *initiated* during a backsliding episode. Thus, some studies of interventions mostly implemented in a backsliding episode might not have been included because they began in a democratic context. Thus, there is potential to expand the body of evidence across additional contexts.

The high variability of studies meant that only a subset could be analysed through meta-analysis. This limits our ability to draw generalised conclusions about the effectiveness of the included interventions. Similarly, the DRG EGMs included a limited list of qualitative designs; additional insights on barriers and facilitators might be present in additional research that was beyond the scope of the DRG EGMs or this REA. Moreover, only a subset of studies provided cost data, meaning that it is not possible to weigh the benefits of interventions against their costs. Future impact evaluations in this space should aim to measure outcomes – and costs – in standardised ways so that results can be synthesised more productively in the future.

We used an adapted GRADE approach that assessed the overall strength of evidence based on four factors: risk of bias, inconsistency of results, imprecision, and publication bias. We did not downgrade based on the indirectness of the evidence, and the tool has been adapted across domains to better fit the type of data we analysed. Future studies could cover all applicable GRADE criteria to increase the accuracy of the certainty rating.

Online appendixes

Online appendix A: List of interventions selected with FCDO (EGM)

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/FCDO-Dem-REA-Report-Summary-Online-appendix-A.pdf>

Online appendix B: Full list of outcomes and definitions

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/FCDO-Dem-REA-Report-Summary-Online-appendix-B.pdf>

Online appendix C: Further information on included study designs for the evidence gap maps

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/FCDO-Dem-REA-Report-Summary-Online-appendix-C.pdf>

Online appendix D: Characteristics tables

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/FCDO-Dem-REA-Report-Summary-Online-appendix-D.pdf>

Online appendix E: Technical report

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/FCDO-Dem-REA-Report-Summary-Online-appendix-E-Technical-Report.pdf>

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