

# DEMOCRACY AS IF PEOPLE MATTER

**UNDEF**



The United Nations  
Democracy Fund





# EVERYONE HAS A STAKE IN THE OUTCOME



ANNIKA SAVILL  
Executive Head

Every day seems to bring news of some assault on democracy. Resurgent authoritarianism, voter suppression, repression of civil society through fiat or violence, the manipulation of communal insecurities and exploitation of poor education, runaway inequality, terrorism, massive displacement: the list seems endless. Confronting it requires a daily dose of inspiration.

At the UN Democracy Fund, we get that inspiration from grass-roots activists, community and labour organizers, young people, and women leaders whose tireless daily engagement shows that they can do more for participatory democracy than all the government summits and cabinet meetings in the world. When they come together at their own initiative, all with a stake in the outcome, they will persevere until all sides are represented.

Speaking the truth takes two: one to talk, the other to hear. There must be someone in the capital listening. A confident nation gives citizens a role in the development of their country; the most effective, stable and successful democracies are in fact those where a strong civil society works in partnership with the state, while holding it accountable at the same time. Our projects not only encourage democratic participation by all groups; they also build civil society capacity to interact effectively with Government at local and national levels.

On the following pages, you will find examples of the work that UNDEF has supported in its first decade. You will see how, in these times of tumult, we are engaging with civil society organizations and people everywhere who demand to participate. Every project we support is an expression of local demand for change, local vision for how to achieve it, and local drive to get it done. For a sense of what can be accomplished over time and on a global scale, take the individual local initiatives highlighted in these pages and multiply them by the hundreds.

Our small team hopes that the challenges and progress presented here will reinforce your dedication to advance the cause of inclusive, responsive, and accountable governance and suggest ways in which you can participate, whether as an UNDEF supporter, partner, or applicant for funding.

A stylized, handwritten signature in red ink, likely belonging to Annika Savill, positioned at the bottom right of the page.

# UNDEF AT A GLANCE

## A one-of-a-kind resource

- Civil society is the oxygen of democracy. It breathes life into the work in progress that is democracy around the world.
- UNDEF works directly with civil society – often in collaboration with state and private-sector actors but always independently of them.
- We support projects designed at the grassroots to address democratic deficits and freedoms denied.
- Our grant process begins and ends at the project site: we are demand-driven, not supply-oriented.
- We commit to our partners' success. Our capacity-building works through mentoring, evaluation, and offering a platform for groups and institutions to share experience and expertise, who otherwise would have no knowledge of one another's projects. Lessons learned from each project become a resource for all – participants, future applicants, other funders, and the larger community working to build more responsive and inclusive societies.
- A self-sufficient and largely autonomous part of the United Nations system, funded entirely by voluntary contributions, we are uniquely positioned to build mutual understanding and cooperation between states and civil society at the local, national, and global levels.

## Advancing the essentials of democracy

UNDEF funds, helps design, manages, and often generates projects in eight main areas that contribute to strengthening democracy:



Rule of law and human rights



Community activism



Gender equality



Youth engagement



Media and freedom of information



Strengthening civil society interaction with government



Tools for knowledge



Electoral processes

# UNDEF'S PROJECTS 2007-2019

**Latin America  
and the Caribbean**  
118 Projects  
\$28,921,260

**Multi-Region**  
33 Projects  
\$9,146,529

**Europe**  
107 Projects  
\$23,275,634

**Arab States**  
132 Projects  
\$30,046,445

**Sub-Saharan Africa**  
238 Projects  
\$56,322,367

**Asia and Pacific**  
187 Projects  
\$43,521,181

*This map is stylized and based on an approximate scale. It does not reflect a position by UNDEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.*

We support initiatives that provide political facilitation, encourage popular participation, support civil society's role in free and fair elections, foster the development of a culture of democracy, advance political pluralism, and build civil society capacity to interact effectively with government at local and national levels. Our work also aims to advance transparency and accountability, promote the rule of law, and encourage responsive and inclusive government – while always supporting local ownership and domestic engagement, and explicitly addressing discrimination against women.

## Working wherever needed

UNDEF responds to demand in countries at any stage of democratization.

## Making the most of resources

Our strategy is to support local civil society and community leaders in addressing locally identified needs and priorities. This allows us to target scarce resources where they are needed most. It is also an investment in the ability of local people to assert their rights and improve their well-being long after our involvement has ended. We keep our staff and operational budget small by leveraging the expertise, services, and extensive field presence of diverse partners, primarily those from the broader UN system.



# UNDEF'S DONORS 2005-2020



## With diverse support

UNDEF's work is financed by voluntary contributions from a total of more than 40 traditional and emerging donors on every continent.

## Transparent and accountable to all, but beholden to none

As independent third-party evaluators have found, UNDEF is not beholden to the vision, doctrine, or geostrategic interests of any Member State, commercial entity, or philanthropic institution.

Our evaluation process and lessons learned database advance accountability to not only donors, but partners and participants.

We answer to project participants and to a governance structure unlike any in the field of democracy support. Our Advisory Board, which provides policy guidance and reviews project proposals, brings together a range of stakeholders: Governments – those countries who have made the seven largest financial contributions to the Fund, and six countries reflecting geographical diversity; up to four individuals; and two civil society organizations. We are also guided by our UN partners in the UNDEF Programme Consultative Group, who represent many parts of the UN system worldwide and who provide expert advice, project selection support, and monitoring in the field.

For more information about UNDEF, please visit [www.un.org/democracyfund/about-undef](http://www.un.org/democracyfund/about-undef)



# RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

## In the South Caucasus, reforming unjust criminal justice systems

"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons," Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in the 1860s.

In 2012, the citizens of Georgia caught a horrifying glimpse of themselves when a leaked video revealed that juvenile prison inmates were being subjected to physical and sexual abuse.

That moment of revelation sparked massive protests, a change of government, and a long, slow process of criminal justice reform. In turn, Georgia shared its experience and expertise with neighbouring Armenia.

The Armenian penal system has lacked alternatives to incarceration for even petty crimes. Judges have sentenced even minor offenders to long stretches in severely overcrowded prisons with little access to health care and other services.

Take the case of former taxi driver Sahak Shahinian, who has spent the past five and a half years in an Armenian prison for selling a small

amount of marijuana, an offense he says he did not commit. As a result of imprisonment, he says, "I lost my house, I lost my health."

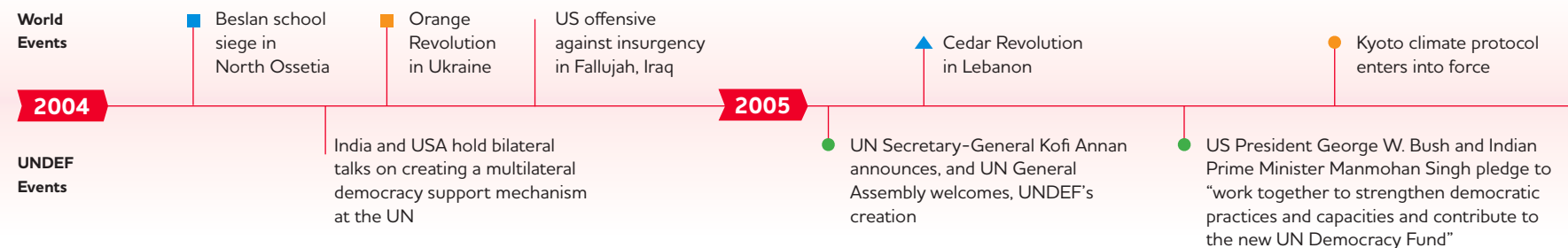
He suffered a heart attack while incarcerated and did not get adequate treatment. He has applied for parole five times, but been rejected.

To promote more proportionate responses to crime – and respect for the human rights of those in conflict with the law – Penal Reform International in 2013 launched a project with Armenia's Civil Society Institute to share with Armenia the lessons learned in Georgia. The UNDEF-supported initiative pushed for community-based alternatives to imprisonment and greater use of early release from prison.

This led UNDEF to initiate and fund a follow-up project, concentrating on Armenia alone and implemented by the Civil Society Institute, to see through a package of pilot reforms aimed at establishing a probation system.

**UNDEF has funded some 700 two-year projects in more than 150 countries. Each has expressed the ambition of people buffeted by events, to develop and exercise the ability to change their circumstances.**

*Symbols connect related events:*



Civil society engagement has been the primary engine of change. NGOs, lawyers, academics, and experts have lobbied for reforms and provided guidance to help authorities develop better policies and put them into practice. They have conducted workshops with government institutions, law enforcement training institutions, and ministries of justice. Staff who work with offenders have received training on providing for the needs of those from vulnerable groups – like women, juveniles, or those with serious illnesses – in accordance with international norms.

A study visit for Armenian criminal justice officials gave them an opportunity to observe Georgia's new procedures and institutions, which include pre-sentence reporting and electronic monitoring.

According to Giorgi Arsoshvili, director of Georgia's National Probation Agency, the motivation behind the new approach is simple: "We really want [probationers] to be back in society." Counselling, vocational training, and employment opportunities offered through agreements with private companies help them get there.

After leaving prison, some probationers stay in halfway houses. If Malkhaz Gobosashvili had gone straight home from prison after completing four years behind bars for vandalism, he says, "I would probably be like a madman, because I was away from society."



UNDEF project photo

While committing a crime should result in sanctions, explains lawyer Anna Melikyan of the Armenian Civil Society Institute, it "doesn't mean that you should be deprived of any rights that a person, a human being, should have."

On June 6, 2016, the first Armenian Law on Probation and Probation Service entered into force. UNDEF is proud to claim some of the credit.







## COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

### In Georgia, people power confronts the car

Humans versus machines. It's not just the stuff of science fiction. It's a power dynamic that plays out daily on the streets of many post-Soviet cities. One of them is Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where citizens are campaigning for pedestrians' rights in a bid to build a more inclusive and people-oriented society.

Spearheading the campaign is Iare Pekhiti, a Tbilisi-based civil society organization whose name means 'Go by Foot'. The movement came about at the encouragement of UNDEF, which met with the embryonic group in 2013 and proposed a project to advocate for changing laws and attitudes that favour cars at the expense of the majority of people who do not own or use them.

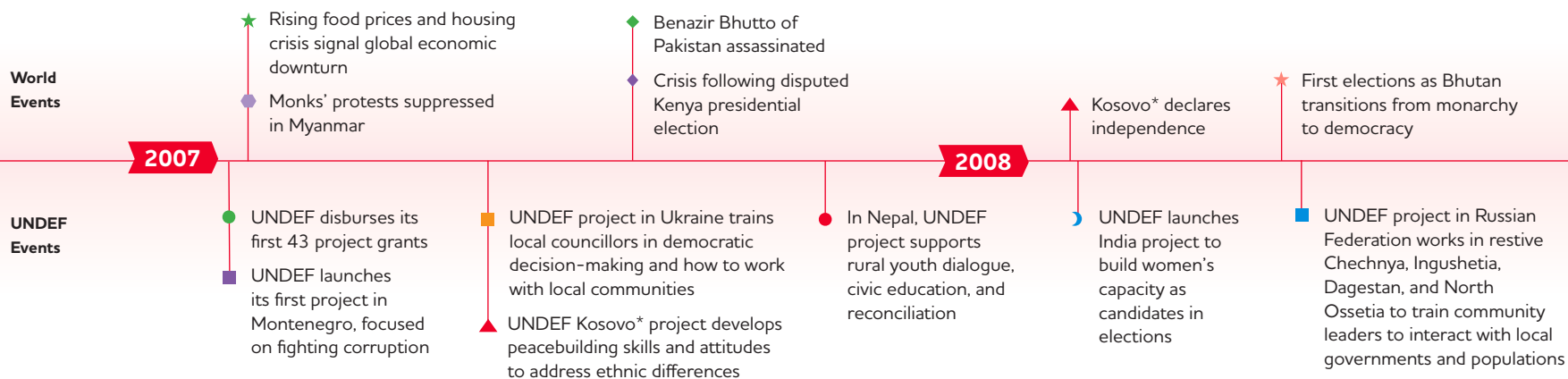
There are enormous challenges – and roadblocks – to overcome.

Outdated traffic laws have failed to keep up with skyrocketing road use and a steady increase in road accidents, most of the victims of which are pedestrians.

Double-parked cars make it impossible for pedestrians to navigate the city's sidewalks. Because current penalties are not enough to change motorists' behaviour, new legislation advocated for by Iare Pekhiti includes a penalty point system to strip repeat parking offenders of their licenses.

Proposed legislation also would benefit residents like Iare Pekhiti board member Erekle Urushadze, who is forced to negotiate many hazards when he takes his daughter out in her stroller. Crossing major streets like Rustaveli Avenue, where traffic seems never to stop, means walking up to half a kilometer out of his way to traverse one of the city's poorly lit underpasses that stink of urine. Most lack escalators, which means that people with strollers – and those whose age or disability makes it difficult for them to climb stairs – can find themselves stuck.

Tbilisi's city hall is waking up to the urgency of the issue. But new laws are only half the battle. Iare Pekhiti works with the media and conducts 'Ugly Walk' tours to spotlight the challenges confronting





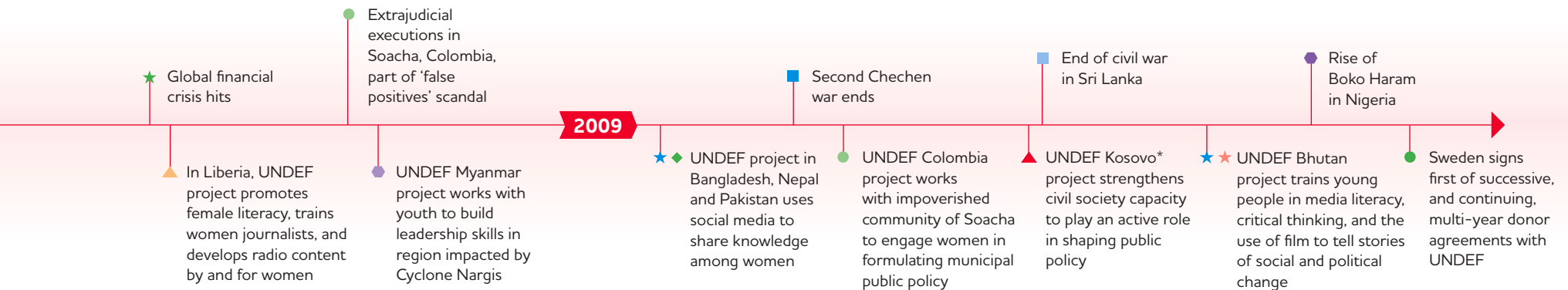
UNDEF project photo

pedestrians. The aim is to raise a generation more mindful of people's needs and rights and less given to the notion, still prevalent among older citizens, that owning a car means having power.

"Trying to separate a post-Soviet from his car is like trying to separate Genghis Khan from his horse: he will not do it willingly," says Annika Savill, UNDEF's Executive Head. "The hope is that by working with the young generation, a new mindset can take hold."

Fuelling Iare Pekhit's work is a vision of Tbilisi as a city in which pedestrians can move about freely, in which drivers respect pedestrians, and in which the authorities uphold the rights of all citizens.

Before Iare Pekhit, Georgia had no organized movement for pedestrian empowerment. Now, as the people of Tbilisi find their voice – and officials start to listen – this project can serve as a model for similar initiatives elsewhere.





# GENDER EQUALITY ELECTORAL PROCESSES

## In Uganda and India, empowered women boost grassroots democracy

In many democracies, the powerful still withhold the services and protections of the state from people on the basis of class, minority status, geography, or disability. These violations of democratic principles are felt even more sharply by women, who face the additional disadvantages of norms and networks that exclude them solely on account of their gender.

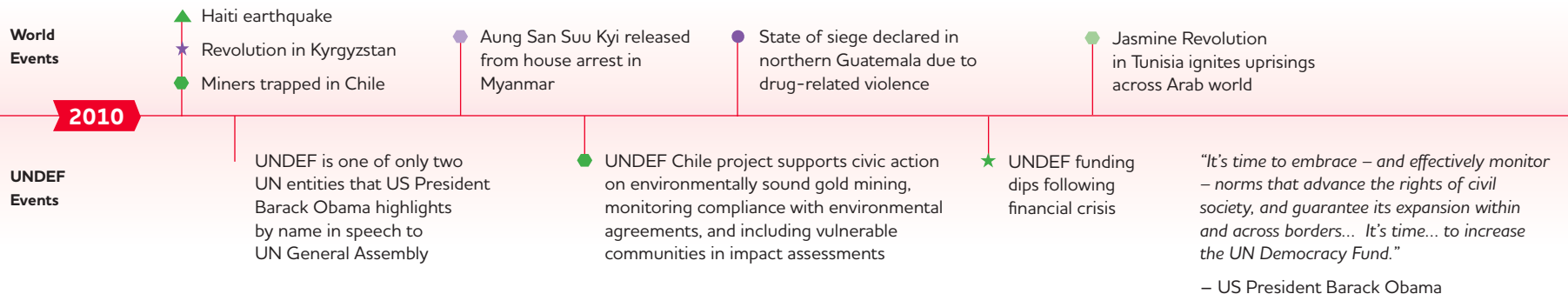
Women in Uganda and India have taken action. With UNDEF's support, they have asserted their right to engage their governments in the face of cultural chauvinism and political discrimination. In both countries, they have teamed up with civil society organizations to obtain training in leadership skills and to strengthen the networks of supporters needed for the fight ahead.

In India, the struggle has focused on village councils, or Gram Panchayats, in the state of Rajasthan. Starting in 2009 women, aided by an UNDEF initiative implemented by the Hunger Project, asserted themselves through the village councils and pressed district authorities to provide for neglected community needs.

Maya Paliwal, who presided over the Kesuli Gram Panchayat, says that workshops carried out as part of the UNDEF project helped her overcome her hesitation to speak – and, most importantly, taught her how to prepare and present petitions to district authorities. Armed with that knowledge, she secured piped water and electricity for 200 households.

Improved accountability, while not an explicit aim of the project, has been one of its outcomes – as when Sundar Bai from Gogathla discovered that public funds had been spent on nonexistent wells. She alerted the district manager, who fired those responsible.

In Uganda, where UNDEF helped to design a project that began in 2012, the strategy had two prongs: strengthening women's networks, and improving services and policies. At the national level, parliamentarians formed women's caucuses to work together across party lines to advance gender-sensitive legislation. As Asamo Hellen Grace, a member of parliament from the Eastern Region, puts it, "We have learned to operate jointly and with a unified voice."







UNDEF project photo

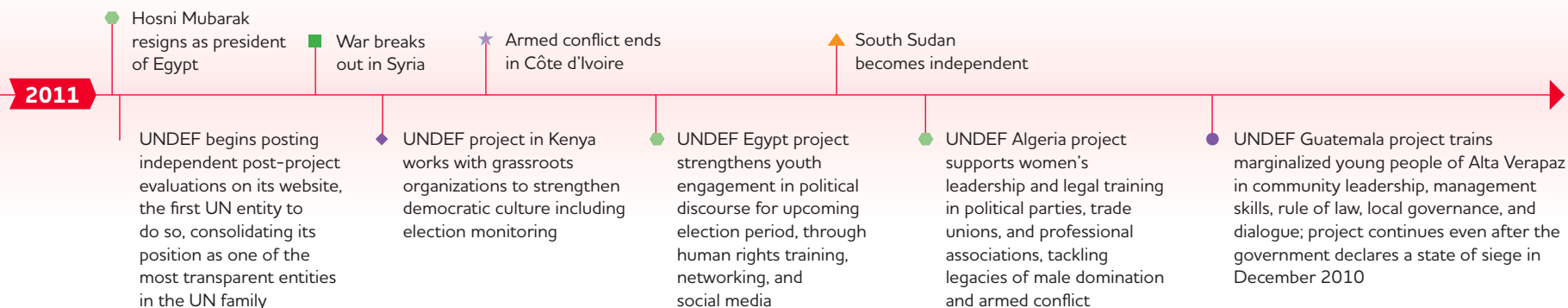
The project also supported a push to empower women and make policies and services more gender-sensitive in four far-flung districts. It helped women to assert their presence in new Village Budget Councils set up to allow citizens to monitor budgets, identify gaps in service delivery, and bring these to the authorities' attention.

In Gulu district, for example, women pressed officials to acknowledge that the local health centre was poorly managed – and improve its performance.

In both countries, women had previously demonstrated both an eagerness to serve as representatives and a keen understanding of what their communities needed. But their passion to fight for their communities had met little encouragement. Even where women had broken barriers and won election to representative bodies, they still had to overcome entrenched interests with little knowledge of the ins and outs of government or of how to navigate arcane bureaucracies.

By equipping women representatives to be effective leaders, both UNDEF projects have helped build networks for women at all levels. Men serving in government can draw on the proverbial old boys' club to share knowledge and experience, wield influence, and support each other. Few such opportunities exist for women.

The projects also show that women's participation in local government in contexts as different as India's and Uganda's can yield better services, more effective and accountable government – and greater social justice, with policies and budgets that counter discrimination and address the needs of women and others traditionally left at a disadvantage.





## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

### In Laos, young activists solve local problems and drive local democracy

In recent decades, free-market reforms have spurred foreign investment in Laos, especially in natural resource extraction and urban development. But the benefits have bypassed the rural communities in which most people live, and the environment has suffered. In response, in 2009 the government began to encourage civil society to help shape development plans and created space for public input in the seventh Socio-Economic Development Plan, for 2011–2015.

Recognizing this as an opportunity for youth in marginalized communities, UNDEF supported the Participatory Development Training Centre in designing a project to increase young people's participation in local and provincial planning and policymaking. Reflecting local priorities, the project would focus on natural resources, biodiversity, and preserving indigenous knowledge.

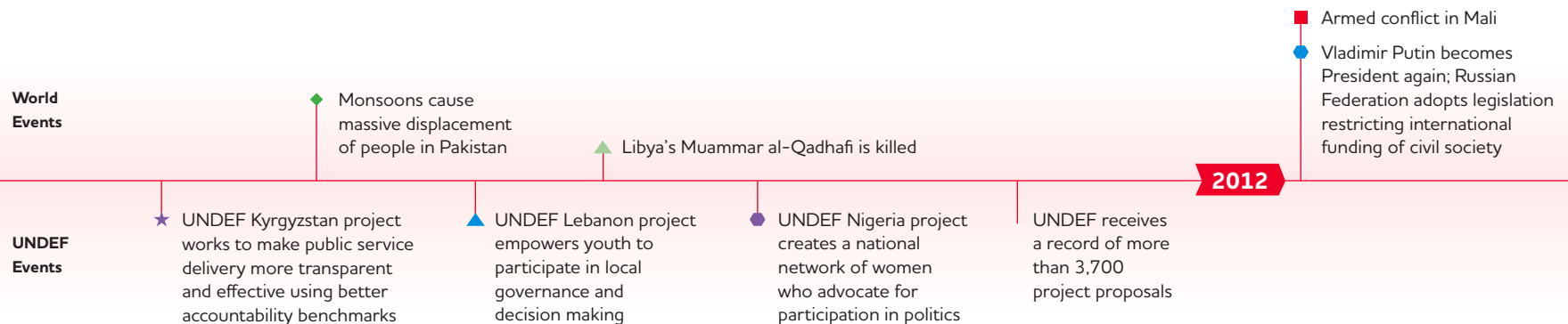
As part of the project, a student group led by secondary schoolteacher, Phanmaly Sysomphone, embarked on a study to identify the challenges facing their corner of Hinboun district, in Khammoune Province.

Borrowing from traditional know-how, the students experimented successfully with organic fertilizer and convinced farmers to use it without damaging the environment. Crop yields have improved.

The teenagers also persuaded village authorities to build a designated waste facility by demonstrating that disorganized disposal was a problem.

The young people presented their findings and recommendations to local and provincial authorities, including as part of the process of making annual village development plans. An evaluation of the project shows that officials have begun to make environmental protection a priority and, in doing so, have incorporated the activists' contributions.

With help from UNDEF, the project provided training in how to conduct research, analyze problems, and advocate for change. Young activists learned film production to document local



conditions and practices, and print and web publishing to get the information out.

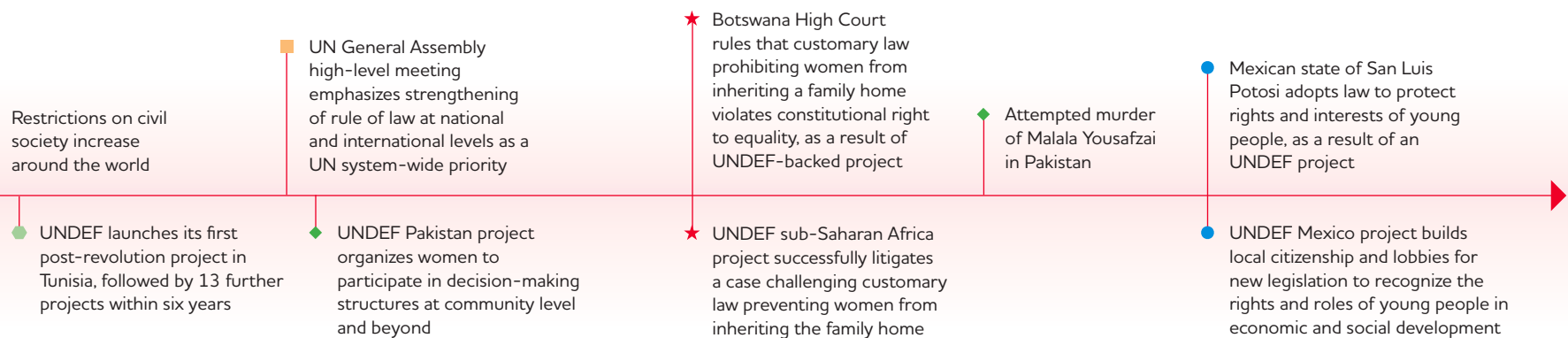
The activism, and the change it aims to spark, have not ended with the project's completion.

A secondary schoolteacher in Sayaboury Province reports that project participants “have developed an urge to contribute to an improved quality of rural life” and continue to seek ways to engage in local decision-making, providing duty-bearers evidence with which to better represent the interests of local communities.

The UNDEF project has enabled a new generation of engaged young people to rise. As part of the project in Paek district, seventh-grader Boudsady Xayphunya conducted a survey on the local economy in Nao village. What especially struck her was the shortage of teachers. When she grows up, she plans to return to her hometown as a teacher. “I would like to be involved in education to develop the knowledge about our community and the rural areas of our province,” she says.



UNDEF project photo







# MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

## In Colombia, building peace and democracy by helping journalists to do their jobs

A functioning democracy is a place where citizens are fully informed and have unrestricted spaces in which to air grievances, engage in debate, hold government accountable, and address society's challenges. Democracy thus depends on media that are free to do their work.

In Colombia, decades of conflict, rampant corruption, and restrictions on constitutionally guaranteed freedoms seriously hampered the media. During the worst times, journalists worked under threat of violence – with shocking numbers murdered, kidnapped, or assaulted and few perpetrators brought to justice. But even as violence abated, harassment and a range of subtler pressures continued to silence sources and discourage reporters from delving into topics deemed sensitive by those seeking to conceal malfeasance or shirk responsibility.

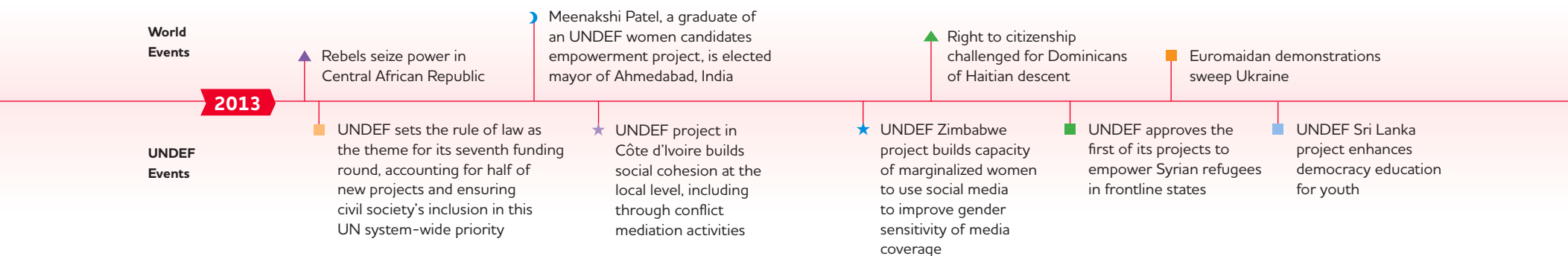
In late 2010, an UNDEF-funded project implemented by Colombia's Foundation for Press Freedom, FLIP, set out to reveal the range of restrictions, threats, and risks confronting journalists. Working with the Proyecto Antonio Nariño Alliance, a coalition of civil society organizations, the initiative created a set of standardized

indicators to systematically monitor freedom of expression and access to information. To ensure its legitimacy, each indicator was the product of consultation and self-scrutiny among journalists and others working in communications and human rights.

The indicators measured security risks and assaults on journalists, and the degree to which these occurred with impunity. Also monitored were indirect means of restricting freedom of expression, like censorship by media higher-ups or self-imposed silence.

The effort sought to capture the diverse challenges facing journalists in Colombia's different regions – including the impacts of the armed conflict, which fell most heavily on rural areas. The findings were publicized widely.

Having hard data on these issues is key, says the Foundation, as this allows Colombians to assess the quality of their democracy and push their government to enact and enforce policies to better protect journalists and respect citizens' rights.



In the course of developing and publicizing the indicators, the Alliance engaged in dialogue with the government. The project coincided with government efforts to enhance transparency and democracy and work together with civil society in parallel with peace negotiations towards a national ceasefire.

In 2014, as these negotiations moved towards an agreement, UNDEF encouraged FLIP to launch a subsequent project, also funded by UNDEF, to promote debate on the role of media in post-conflict Colombia and to strengthen the contribution of journalists and civil society to implementing the peace agreement and building democracy.

This sequel project continued to draw attention to the challenges facing journalists, especially those in conflict-affected areas. It gathered new data that fed into the ongoing work, and produced a documentary film on the risks confronting journalists in Choco, a largely Afro-Colombian region, when dealing with topics like indigenous rights, drug trafficking, or corruption.

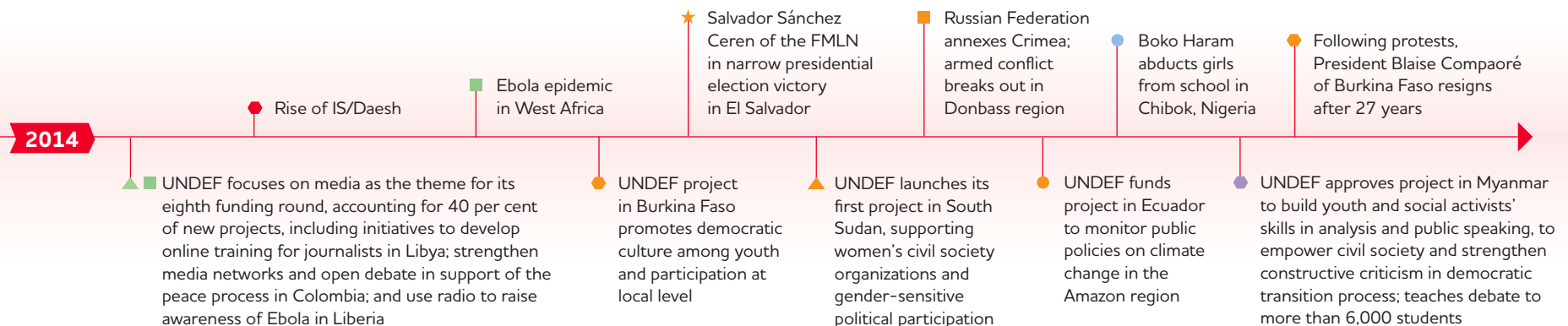
The initiative culminated in a series of consultations among media and human rights experts to develop an 'Agenda for the Freedom of the Press and Peace'. Published in 2017 and publicized widely



UNDEF project photo

via social media, the Agenda sparked discussion on how the media can enhance peace, especially in conflict-affected areas.

The conflict tore Colombia's social fabric, and recovering communication is a way to recover that social fabric. These two UNDEF-funded projects have made the case that strong media can advance democracy and peace by ensuring that the public has access to critical information and by providing peaceful channels to address challenges and resolve differences.





# STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY INTERACTION WITH GOVERNMENT

## Marginalized groups form coalitions to envision a new Nepal

When citizens come together to envision a democratic structure for their country – and inscribe it in a constitution to guide generations to come – what can be done to ensure that their vision reflects the aspirations of all, including those historically relegated to the margins?

Social exclusion has been a salient challenge for Nepal – a country with more than 90 languages, sizeable religious minorities, and a caste system that designates some as untouchable. Marginalized groups bear a disproportionate burden of poverty and discrimination that has barred them from participating in economic development and political life.

As the country emerged from 10 years of insurgency and sought to draft a new constitution, UNDEF supported the National Coalition Against Racial Discrimination, an independent NGO network, in designing a project to coordinate and mobilize representatives of marginalized groups so they could influence the framing of the new Federal Democratic Republic's constitution.

Launched in October 2009 to run alongside the Constituent Assembly, the UNDEF-funded project engaged activists from groups including the Dalit caste, the Adivasi and Janajati indigenous groups, and the Muslim minority. At its heart was a process of forming connections and sharing knowledge and experiences – and then embarking on collective advocacy.

A series of workshops convened activists to discuss issues that mattered to them – like identity, language and education, autonomy and minority rights, and representation in governance – and organize themselves into coordination committees. To inform their work, the National Coalition produced reference materials on, for example, human rights and federalism around the world.

To advocate for marginalized groups' perspectives and concerns, activists consulted with civil society and political actors. Drawing on lessons from other UNDEF projects, participants also reached out to media to raise awareness among the wider public.

### World Events

2015

Deadly terrorist attacks on the Bardo Museum and a resort near Sousse, Tunisia

Refugee crisis reaches acute proportions

Sustainable Development Goals adopted

Myanmar elections

### UNDEF Events

UNDEF focuses on youth as theme for its ninth funding round, accounting for 40 per cent of new projects

UNDEF introduces off-cycle funding for emerging needs; expands existing project to empower Syrian women refugees in Turkey by creating a 'House of Initiatives' for Syrian women's projects

UNDEF Ukraine project establishes networks of environmental organizations and publishes four legislative proposals to advocate for environmental policy reform, transparency, and public participation

*"Confident nations are those that see civil society as an indispensable partner in working for the betterment of society. In places where support from individual Governments may be difficult, the United Nations – including the United Nations Democracy Fund – stands ready as an objective source of funding without the baggage of politics and history."*

– UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon



Sashi Tulachad, host of the popular radio programme Shor and a member of the Janajati indigenous group, joined one of the coordination committees. The project, she said, provided informative interactions and yielded useful materials for her programme, which addresses the concerns of those marginalized in society.

The project culminated in the drafting of an alternative constitution. While the Constituent Assembly dissolved in May 2012 without having completed its mission, the alternative constitution did lead its thematic committees to consider proposals like non-territorial federalism and guaranteeing the fundamental rights of women, Dalits, Muslims, and others.

Participation in the workshops inspired student and youth members of project partner Tamu Hyula Chhoj Dhi – an advocacy organization of the Gurung indigenous group – to reach out to other students in Tanahau and Kaski districts. They shared their knowledge of federalism and indigenous rights, and pushed local political parties to support federalism based on ethnicity.

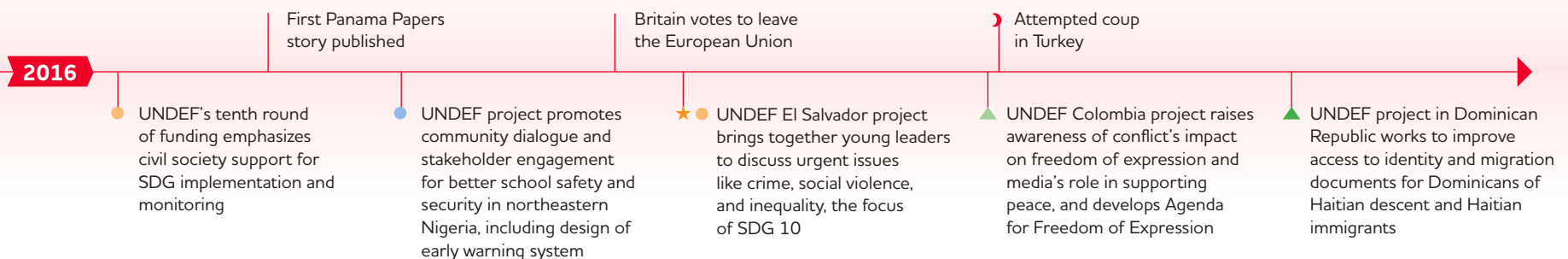
Thanks to the UNDEF project, leaders of indigenous groups began to speak out in support of the concerns of Dalits and Muslims. Anti-Discrimination Day, once organized only by Dalits, was now jointly celebrated. In 2012, representatives of Dalits, indigenous



UNDEF project photo

groups, and others marked the occasion with a mass rally and a jointly drafted memorandum advocating for the rights of marginalized groups to be enshrined in the new constitution.

This kind of exchange and collective action by different groups attests to what many project participants had said when the Constituent Assembly dissolved: that the process of successfully developing an alternative constitution was more important than the immediate outcome of the Constituent Assembly's work. With UNDEF's support, the process had empowered and enabled them to forge relationships of solidarity and thereby boost their impact, and prepared and positioned them to participate in future debates to shape a new, inclusive vision of their country's future.





# TOOLS FOR KNOWLEDGE

## A (search) engine of democracy

What rights do citizens have under international law? What exactly are their countries' obligations to uphold these rights? The answers to such questions lie buried in the texts of 334 multilateral conventions, complex documents that are far from easy to access, parse, or fully understand.

That makes international law hard to enforce and easy to ignore. When public servants, lawyers, academics, and grassroots activists have a hard time pinning down the precise details of a state's obligations or a human rights standard, it becomes difficult to ensure that states meet those obligations or put those standards into practice. And citizens, without knowledge of what they are entitled to, cannot hold their governments to account.

The challenges redouble for speakers of languages other than English, French, or Spanish – as the texts of international conventions are usually not even available in their languages.

In Arabic, only 190 conventions are available, and until fairly recently, tracking down those texts was an ordeal.

In 2008, UNDEF supported Mandat International in addressing this problem by building an Arabic search engine specifically dedicated to international human rights and humanitarian law. Creating the underlying database entailed a painstaking process of finding and compiling all the conventions and their Arabic versions, to the extent that these existed; collecting every state's reservations, ratification, and signature dates; and indexing each article, one by one. Then, they tested the site, soliciting input from end users including think tanks, NGOs, diplomats, and academics.

With help from UNDEF in project design, the resulting website, [www.qanouni.org](http://www.qanouni.org), is simple to use for experts and ordinary people alike. A user picks a country and a topic – say, corruption or the death penalty. The search results instantly bring together the relevant articles of all international conventions binding on that country with respect to that topic. All the details – signature and ratification process, entry into force, any reservations – are there. A manual and training videos also are available in case users need help in finding what they seek.

### World Events

▲ Colombia peace deal

■ Syrian government forces recapture Aleppo

● Attack on Berlin Christmas market

■ Ukraine Parliament adopts environmental impact assessment laws to comply with European standards, following UNDEF environmental-law reform project

### UNDEF Events

● UNDEF approves Tunisia project to build economic empowerment, participation, and inclusion of youth vulnerable to jihadism and IS recruitment

● UNDEF approves project in Cambodia to empower women community leaders to address climate change  
UNDEF's Advisory Board agrees a designated theme for the call for proposals: inclusion, diversity, and pluralism

UNDEF receives its second-highest number of project proposals, at 3,002  
Germany triples its support as UNDEF donor

*"The United Nations role in international democracy support is much wider, much broader, and much more important than many observers of this community realize... We have the United Nations Democracy Fund, which when it was started a little more than 10 years ago, many people had questions about, but has proven itself to be effective, respected, and legitimate in parts of the world where it's very difficult for others to operate."*  
– Thomas Carothers, Senior Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

2017

UNDEF signs its 700th project  
Canada joins UNDEF donors as a major contributor  
UNDEF launches web-based interactive lessons-learned platform with funding from UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Qanouni.org fills a longstanding vacuum, meeting the need for detailed knowledge of international conventions especially among grassroots organizations whose work in making sure governments fulfil their obligations depends on such knowledge. By democratizing access to information otherwise trapped in esoteric documents, it is a contribution towards greater awareness of – and respect for – human rights.



UNDEF project photo

Venezuela enters acute crisis

- ▲ UNDEF project in Central African Republic trains women to monitor service provision by local governments
- UNDEF launches its second project in Montenegro, focused on advancing transparency
- UNDEF programmes its first project in Russian Federation since 2013

Mass flight of Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh

- ◆ UNDEF negotiates project in north-western Pakistan for political participation of young women
- UNDEF launches civil society dialogue in Turkey

Saudi Arabia allows women to drive

- UNDEF negotiates project in Mali for to help civil society organizations engage with defence institutions to reduce corruption and strengthen accountability

China Communist Party congress

*"In some countries, a dangerous illusion has taken hold that democracy is in contradiction to stability or conflict prevention. Quite the contrary: by destroying democratic institutions, by suppressing civil society, by undermining the rule of law and human rights, authoritarian rule creates conditions for extremist ideologies and terrorist activities to thrive. It prevents societies from developing peaceful channels and effective instruments for the resolution of grievances and other challenges."*

– Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General

Kenya election result challenged



## SPECIAL INITIATIVE

### Transforming Syrian refugees from statistics into human beings living in dignity

The world has never seen so many refugees – 22.5 million people and counting, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Forced by conflict or disaster to flee across their country's borders, they are met with new insecurities and challenges: establishing an official identity, fending for themselves and their families, recreating some semblance of a life in the artificial environs of tented camps or among host communities who themselves struggle with myriad needs.

More refugees have fled war-ravaged Syria than any other country – 5.5 million, with the tally still rising.

There is nothing abstract about the numbers. Each one represents a person with rights, aspirations, and abilities thrown into limbo. The pharmacist, engineer, or lawyer who now cleans hotel rooms to keep the family economy going. The daughter married off at 14 years of age to ease the family's financial burdens. People who go about their daily affairs overshadowed by alienation stemming not only from unfamiliar surroundings and an uncertain future but also from a lack of power and opportunity to make decisions or have a say in their own lives and within their new communities.

UNDEF has supported civil society organizations working to advance agency, build social cohesion, and create economic and political opportunities – especially for women and young refugees, the often-overlooked majority – in the three countries with the largest numbers of Syrian refugees: Turkey, which hosts some 3 million; Lebanon, more than 1 million; and Jordan, over 660,000.

In Turkey, UNDEF is at the leading edge of collaboration to sustain progress by creating a 'House of Initiatives', a centre in which refugees themselves can pool resources, experience, and expertise

to create, secure outside funding for, and implement their own projects.

The seeds of the project were sown in 2014 with an UNDEF-funded capacity-building effort for Syrian women refugees in Reyhanli, near the Turkey-Syria border, so as to give them opportunities to organize, engage, and support other refugees while preparing for the future.

After finishing their workday as hotel cleaners or camp-school teachers, the women, many of whom had professional qualifications, gathered to learn about and strategize over ways to organize and assert their rights. Lively discussion punctuated training sessions on international law as it pertains to the rights of women and children, especially in conflict settings, and on the rights and entitlements that come with refugee status. Subsequent training covered project management, including how to assess a project's feasibility, how to develop a business plan, and how to communicate effectively, for example through social media.

UNDEF Executive Head Annika Savill visited the project in September 2015 to propose an expansion that would translate into reality a range of practical initiatives proposed by the women; maximize synergies between them by bringing them together in one house; and serve as a community resource centre for all Syrians in Reyhanli, then numbering 40,000. "It's courage and work like yours that can transform a refugee from a statistic into a human being living in dignity," Savill told the group.

The ensuing initiatives tackle major needs and concerns. Women who practiced law in Syria have formed a legal clinic to help their fellow refugees to obtain identity papers and to review or validate

other essential documents. Another group has set up a service to coordinate and disseminate information on what services refugees are entitled to use, and how to access them. A theatre ensemble has formed to help fellow Syrians cope with the traumas of war and displacement. And girls who otherwise would be at risk of being married off are receiving vocational training in a bid to give them other options and ease their families' financial pressures.

The women's projects, and now the community centre in which these have been brought together, have become a model for similar initiatives to empower refugees in other countries.

Meanwhile in Lebanon, Syrian refugees make up between a quarter and a third of the population, and in Jordan they comprise about a tenth. UNDEF is supporting efforts to empower young people and women to secure better services for, and make local government more accountable to, refugees and host communities alike. As a result, social cohesion is being built in places where tensions between locals and refugees had run high because everyone struggled to get by amid strained service provision and scant job opportunities.

In both countries, ActionAid International's Arab Regional Initiative and Global Platform Jordan are helping young people and women to build their capacity for creative activism and their understanding of social accountability. This has enabled project participants to take part in such accountability mechanisms as transparency boards and community-based procurement.

Existing community-based organizations, including ActionAid's youth-led community centres, have gone on to hold quarterly meetings with public and humanitarian service providers. At these, the groups hold officials' feet to the fire on previous commitments and press for new measures or improvements to meet the needs of refugees and host populations. In the process, they have created



UNDEF project photo

new opportunities for young people and women from both communities to plan and engage in activism together.

Since young people command majorities among refugees and locals, they share an interest in increasing their representation in decision-making at all levels. As Ibrahim Sahouri, a youth leader in Zarqa, Jordan puts it: "We are all youth and it does not matter if some are Jordanians or Syrians. ...Our cause will remain to influence any decisions that affect us all."

These projects attest to the fact that even refugees, forced to flee all they once knew, can assert their rights and agency – and that when they do so, they wield the power to advance freedoms and welfare in their new, alien surroundings. Whether they move on to permanent homes in new countries or return home to Syria one day, as so many hope to, they will carry with them these experiences and this power.

# LESSONS LEARNED

## An interactive platform open to all

How can civil society activists, practitioners, funders, and policy makers working to advance people's rights and democratic participation learn most effectively from the experiences of others? How can they apply these lessons in designing or implementing a project, applying for funding, or monitoring and evaluating their work?

At [UNDEFLessonsLearned.org](https://undeflessonslearned.org), you can search a growing trove of learning about the design, implementation, and outcomes of projects worldwide. The database was launched in 2017 with a grant from the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy, which encouraged UNDEF to turn its wealth of in-house best practices and third-party evaluations into a service that could be of use to the broader community of practitioners.

Users can search by theme, region, or their own search terms. Lessons range from the conceptual and strategic to the nitty-gritty of project management. Projects working with government, for example, have benefited from a precise level of specificity about which level of policy or decision-making they will target, and which duty bearers, service providers, or counterparts to engage. Proposals to train groups of citizens have proven more successful when they have demonstrated how participants can and will apply the training in their everyday lives. Projects to empower women are more effective when they involve male family members or community power brokers.

The tool is also used specifically by applicants for UNDEF funding, who are required as part of the proposal process to explore



projects or project elements similar to the ones they have in mind, and to show that their proposals reflect relevant learning from others' experiences.

The tool has proven self-sustaining past the initial set-up costs. Humans, not algorithms, do the work of ensuring relevance and reliability. But this involves no additional staff resources, as it has been incorporated into existing responsibilities. Redesigned evaluation templates that make it easier to populate the database have streamlined the task, and the Web platform is easy to administer and update.

Live since May 2017, [UNDEFLessonsLearned.org](https://undeflessonslearned.org) is low-bandwidth, making it easier to access from places that lack high-speed Internet service.



# DO YOU HAVE A BRIGHT IDEA?

UNDEF supports projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promote human rights, and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes. Most of our grants go to local civil society organizations in countries that are in the transition and consolidation phases of democratization.

UNDEF's annual online proposal window is open for one month each year at <https://www.un.org/democracyfund/>.

Applicants can request a grant of US\$ 100,000–300,000 for projects that run for two years. The application process takes a year and is highly competitive. Usually, the number of applicants range from 2,000 to 3,000, while only some 50 are ultimately selected for funding.

At the outset, you are not required to complete a full project document – only an online proposal form, which is basically a concept note. This is then subject to a thorough and rigorous assessment process. First, all proposals are scored by a team of independent experts against 10 criteria that you can find online at

## To prepare:

The online proposal window is open for a month, usually November–December, but please start to prepare earlier with the below steps. Also, once the window is open, do not leave the proposal until the last few days, when the system is at risk of overload.

For detailed information about our selection process and criteria, please visit our 'Apply for Funding' page, [un.org/democracyfund/apply-funding](https://www.un.org/democracyfund/apply-funding). There, you will find proposal guidelines, summaries of existing projects,

[un.org/democracyfund/apply-funding](https://www.un.org/democracyfund/apply-funding). These are meant to ensure that the project will have a significant impact, advance inclusiveness and gender equality, and represent good value for money, and that it can be sustained beyond the duration of UNDEF support.

The highest-scoring proposals advance to a long list which is reviewed by UN Resident Coordinators, who look at how the proposed activities would fit in with existing country needs and priorities. The list is also reviewed by UNDEF's Programme Consultative Group (see page 3).

Based on this collective input, the UNDEF Secretariat then distils a recommended shortlist for approval by UNDEF's Advisory Board (see page 3) and thereafter the Secretary-General.

If you advance to the approved shortlist, you are required to complete the final stage of the selection process – negotiating a Project Document with UNDEF. This is the contract between the grantor and the grantee. Only on the satisfactory conclusion of a project document, and its approval by the United Nations Controller, will the proposed project be formally approved for funds disbursement.



Illustration by James Merluzzi for UNDEF

answers to frequently asked questions, and a sample of the online proposal form.

Please visit the UNDEF Lessons Learned database at [UNDEF Lessons Learned.org](https://www.un.org/democracyfund/lessons-learned), and search it for projects or project elements similar to yours. This will help you advance or clarify your own thinking on substance, strategy, and aspects of project presentation and management. You will be required to demonstrate in your proposal that you have taken this step.

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# FNUD



Fonds des Nations Unies  
pour la démocratie

"As the world's largest democracy, it is natural that India should have been among the first to welcome and support the concept of a UN Democracy Fund... We welcome the launch of the UN Democracy Fund, because it gives us an instrument to build the institutional and human capabilities that are necessary to underpin the successful exercise of democracy."

Manmohan Singh,  
Prime Minister of India, 2005

"It's time to embrace – and effectively monitor – norms that advance the rights of civil society, and guarantee its expansion within and across borders... It's time... to increase the UN Democracy Fund."

Barack Obama,  
President of the United States, 2010

"Confident nations are those that see civil society as an indispensable partner in working for the betterment of society. In places where support from individual governments may be difficult, the United Nations – including the United Nations Democracy Fund – stands ready as an objective source of funding without the baggage of politics and history."

Ban Ki-moon,  
UN Secretary-General, 2015

"The United Nations role in international democracy support is much wider, much broader, and much more important than many observers of this community realize... We have the United Nations Democracy Fund, which when it was started a little more than 10 years ago, many people had questions about, but has proven itself to be effective, respected, and legitimate in parts of the world where it's very difficult for others to operate."

Thomas Carothers,  
Senior Vice President for Studies,  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016

"I have been a tireless defender of democracy all my life because I am convinced it is the political system most conducive to peace, sustainable development, the rule of law and the respect for human rights, the three pillars of any healthy and democratic society. As the UN Secretary-General, I oversaw the creation of Democracy Day and the UN's Democracy Fund, to support grassroots democracy around the world."

Kofi Annan,  
former UN Secretary-General, 2017

"In some countries, a dangerous illusion has taken hold that democracy is in contradiction to stability or conflict prevention. Quite the contrary: by destroying democratic institutions, by suppressing civil society, by undermining the rule of law and human rights, authoritarian rule creates conditions for extremist ideologies and terrorist activities to thrive. It prevents societies from developing peaceful channels and effective instruments for the resolution of grievances and other challenges. By the same token, toppling a dictator, or holding elections in a post-conflict situation, does not mean democracy will flourish by itself. It requires leadership, in ensuring that emerging and developing democracies are supported, so they can succeed. It requires strengthening civil society, empowering women, and upholding the rule of law."

Antonio Guterres,  
UN Secretary-General, 2017

Cover: UNDEF project photo