

‘With time, such powers can seep into legal frameworks and become permanent, undermining the rule of law’

António Guterres issued the following warning in his message for this year’s International Day of Democracy:



UNITED NATIONS  NATIONS UNIES
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY

15 September 2021

As the world struggles to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating consequences, we must learn from the lessons of the past 18 months to strengthen democratic resilience in the face of future crises. This means identifying and developing good governance practices in situations of emergency – whether public health, environmental or financial.

It means addressing the egregious global injustices laid bare by the crisis, from pervasive gender inequalities and inadequate health systems to unequal access to vaccines, education, the internet and online services. Along with the profound human toll borne by those most deprived, these persistent historical inequalities are themselves threats to democracy.

Strengthening democracy also means embracing genuine participation in decision-making -- including peaceful protests -- giving a real voice to people and communities that have traditionally been excluded. The silencing of women, religious and ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, human rights defenders and journalists is an impediment to creating healthy societies. Democracy simply cannot survive, let alone flourish, in the absence of civic space.

Finally, safeguarding democracy means phasing out emergency powers and laws as the worst of the pandemic subsides. Some States and security sector institutions rely on emergency powers because they offer shortcuts. With time, such powers can seep into legal frameworks and become permanent, undermining the rule of law and consuming the fundamental freedoms and human rights that serve as a bedrock for democracy.

As I stressed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, every crisis poses a threat to democracy, because the rights of the people, in particular those most vulnerable, are all too quickly ignored. For this reason, protection of rights in times of crisis is a key element of my Call to Action for Human Rights.

On this International Day of Democracy, as we look beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, let us commit to a future in which we recognize human rights and the rule of law as fundamental to democracy. Let us commit to safeguarding the principles of equality, participation and solidarity, so that we can better weather the storm of future crises.

Final short list of project proposals approved for UNDEF’s Round 15

The UN Deputy Secretary-General has approved a short list of 35 project proposals for the UN Democracy Fund’s Fifteenth Round of Funding, amounting to over nine million dollars, in accordance with a recommendation by the UNDEF Advisory Board. UNDEF has contacted those short-listed.

As agreed with the UNDEF Advisory Board, this Round particularly welcomed project proposals that address the challenges to civic space and democracy posed by the COVID-19 crisis. All the projects on the short list have direct relevance to the pandemic and its impact on civil society and democracy.

The fifteenth call for project proposals was open from 1 November 2020 to 6 December 2020, in all of UNDEF’s focus areas: women’s empowerment; rule of law and human rights; youth engagement; strengthening civil society interaction with government; media and freedom of information; tools for knowledge; community activism and electoral processes.

UNDEF received 1,622 project proposals from organizations in 110 countries, the vast majority local civil society organizations in Africa, Arab States, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, despite the very real constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the large volume of proposals, UNDEF is not able to contact all applicants individually. Inclusion in the short list is a significant achievement, but it does not in itself mean that the project proposal will be approved for funding. Shortlisted applicants are now required to complete the final stage of the selection process: negotiating a formal project document with UNDEF -- in effect a contract between the grantor and the grantee. This requires the applicant to provide a more elaborated project design, and involves comprehensive guidance, mentoring, input and review by UNDEF’s project officers. Only upon successful conclusion of this process will the project be approved for funding.



NEWS FROM THE FIELD

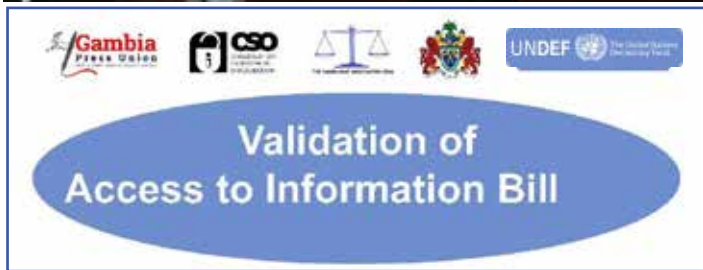
New legislation makes history in Gambia



An UNDEF project in Gambia facilitated the National Assembly's passing of an Access to Information Bill in July 2021. With this, Gambia becomes the last English-speaking country in West Africa to recognize access to information as a legal right. It marks the first time in Gambia's history that civil society has worked directly with the Government on legislation from conception to enactment, all made possible by UNDEF's support.

Implemented by [The Gambia Press Union](#), the project built a coalition of civil society and media organizations -- the Civil Society Coalition on Freedom of Information -- which engaged with Government and drafted the proposed legislation for the freedom of information bill; created a platform for

dialogue with the Ministries of Justice and Information to allow for direct consultations and reach a consensus on the legislation; provided training for journalists on the topic; and conducted advocacy among the general public to build wide support for access to information as a tool to enhance accountability and good governance.



Pioneering citizens' assembly explores pandemic responses among sceptics

An UNDEF pilot citizens' assembly project in the Balkans yielded lessons on pandemic responses within sceptical communities. The project, implemented with [The newDemocracy Foundation](#), brought together a diverse group of randomly selected citizens to make recommendations to Government on how to prevent COVID-19 case numbers from rising. The

citizens drove the agenda and formulated questions that they needed answered to reach an informed common-ground position. To overcome mistrust of experts, the assembly members identified speakers to attend meetings to address questions directly. Experts from the Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization, and senior representatives from reputable medical research institutes answered questions around availability and type of vaccines, the role of the government, and preventative measures. Following the information gathering period, the assembly has produced a final report with 15 concrete policy recommendations to be presented to the Ministry of Health in a public hearing. Recommendations included to let citizens pose their own questions directly to medical professionals. The use of vaccine passports was seen as acceptable and fair.



NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Advancing constitutional rights of women in Chile



An UNDEF project in Chile is seizing the historic opportunity of the country's current constitutional process to ensure women's participation and the inclusion of gender content. Implemented by [Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género](#), this nation-wide initiative is working to advance women's understanding of a new constitution's importance to them and their rights; generate debates on key gender issues; and advocate for the inclusion of gender aspects in the drafting process.

On 15 June, the project brought together online over 100 civil society organizations and social leaders as well as 35 constitutional assembly delegates, key actors of the reform process, to discuss and agree on the principal components of a gender-sensitive constitutional agenda. The agenda frames the key demands for the coordinated advocacy efforts of stakeholders towards the inclusion of gender issues in constitutional debates and deliberations.

Empowering young community leaders in Palestine

An UNDEF project in Palestine is empowering youth to participate in their communities and create a new generation of changemakers and leaders. Implemented by [Zimam](#), the project trains youth to formulate policy challenges and solutions, supports them in building networks with relevant public officials and community leaders, and provides safe spaces for debate and decisions for change.

Since February, the project has been holding monthly two-day professional training workshops on topics such as communications, campaign management, negotiations and policy formulation. Through these trainings, youth learn from top experts and are supported by Zimam staff to gain policy knowledge, build advocacy and interpersonal skills, and are provided with resources to advocate for policy changes in their communities. The young leaders have already begun tackling local policy challenges, for example, public water quality and sewage treatment and local traffic congestion that detrimentally affect their communities.

