



Amman Centre for Human Rights Studies – Public Report

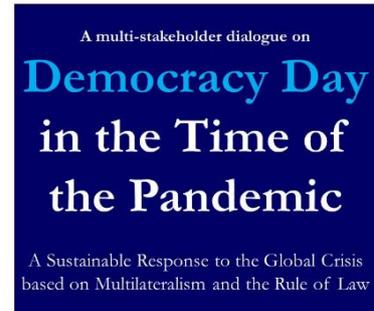
DEMOCRACY DAY IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC: A SUSTAINABLE RESPONSE TO THE GLOBAL CRISIS BASED ON MULTILATERALISM AND THE RULE OF LAW

A Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue Webinar Organised By UNDEF

September 16, 2020: 9AM – 10:30AM (EDT)

ACHRS Representative Participants:

Madison Wells & Alexander Royall



Join us on
Wednesday,
September 16, 2020
9:00 AM - 10:30 AM



Brief Introduction

The event was held on the occasion of the International Day of Democracy. Mr Massimo Tommasoli, Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the UN, was the moderator for this webinar. The following texts are loosely based on what was said by each speaker. The objective of this public report, which is by no means a transcript, is to inform those who were not present by summarising the core message and information that was shared by each individual speaker, as interpreted by ACHRS' representative participants.

List of Speakers:

- Mr. Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary-General, IDEA
- Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, IDLO
- Ms. Annika Savill, Executive Director, UN Democracy Fund
- Stefano Stefanile, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations
- Ambassador Annika Ben David, Ambassador-at-large for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden
- Ms. Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (video message)
- Ms. Diam Abou Diab, Arab NGO Network for development, Beirut
- Mr. Gerald Abila, Founder, BarefootLaw
- Mr. Enrico Giovannini, Spokesperson, Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) (video message)
- Mr. Massimo Tommasoli, Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the UN

Introductory Speakers

Mr Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary-General, IDEA

Mr Casas-Zamora pointed out that Covid-19 threatens more than the lives and livelihoods of people around the world, it also threatens the future of liberal democracy. At least 70 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and subnational elections due to Covid-19, out of which at least 33 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums.

There is an urgent need for our Covid-19 response to respect the rule of law and engage in evidence-based consensus, said Mr Casas-Zamora. The free flow of information must be protected as well as other defining elements of a working democracy. The use of proper metrics, trustworthy data, and fact-based evidence is now more important than ever.

Mr Casas-Zamora argued that if the future of democracy matters, then the time has come to build global coalitions, join forces, and build better and more resilient democratic institutions. Mr Casas-Zamora stated that it is not enough to just defend democracy, but the frontiers of what is possible must be expanded and the opportunities that come with the crisis must be seized with both hands. Democracies must adjust their institutions based on a new social contract that focuses on reducing inequalities, including gender inequality, and nobody must be left behind. Democracies must improve to better cope with multigenerational challenges like climate change.

According to Mr Casas-Zamora, it is the job of different stakeholders within the field of democracy to enhance democratic institutions, establish trust from the people, and to increase resilience in the face of new, modern challenges.

Mr Casas-Zamora concluded that, faced with the threat of authoritarian regimes, all relevant stakeholders need to stand up for democracy and translate their commitments into actions. It must be remembered that victories are always transient and subject to reversal, and the relevant actors must dare to make the case for democracy as hope and light in this season of dark.

Ms Jan Beagle, Director-General, IDLO

Ms Beagle pointed out that much has been said about the gravity of the Covid-19 crisis, but it is remarkable that, already at this stage, clear and powerful voices are emerging, not least from the United Nations, that speak about the root causes that have aggravated this crisis so deeply.

According to Ms Beagle, perhaps one of the most urgent questions is how opportunities can be created from the challenges we face. Ms Beagle stated that IDLO will do its part as it has a mandate to advance the rule of law. Ms Beagle said that the focus should be on stronger and more inclusive institutions, legal empowerment of minorities and vulnerable groups, combating poverty, and increasing accountability to build trust in public institutions. These are some of the key tenets, which are crucial to both deal with the pandemic and in moving forward towards a just and sustainable recovery that will allow countries to 'build back better'.

Ms Beagle provided the listeners with some examples of IDLO's work in Somalia and Mali. In the case of Somalia, Ms. Beagle explained that IDLO is currently working on capacity-building of

state institutions in order to create a setting in which human rights can be respected and social cohesion can be built.

Ms Annika Savill, Executive Director, UN Democracy Fund

According to Ms Savill, the crisis has opened up a toolbox for governments looking to constrain democracy using Covid-19 as a pretext. Civil society has been affected and weakened by the pandemic as the pandemic's underlying conditions have hit civil society hard at where it is most vulnerable. In addition to that, Ms Savill argued that civil society has already been facing an increasing number of restrictive laws since 2012.

Moreover, as Ms Savill pointed out, much of civil society activism has moved online as a result of Covid-19. According to her this has led to a digital divide between the *have* and *have nots* when it concerns accessibility as many still have little or no access to the internet and other relevant digital tools.

Ms Savill argues that people must also remember to praise, thank, and encourage civil society. There is an expression that goes 'never waste a crisis', said Ms Savill, and this crisis has opened a window for civil society to do even more, an opportunity they seem to have seized.

Ms Savill summed up some of the current activities that were carried out by the UNDF in support of global human rights and democracy, such as teaching media literacy and digital safety, empowering women who have been struck relatively hard by the pandemic, raising awareness about the surge of domestic violence, training journalists, highlighting inequality, and setting up projects to aid women with disabilities in Afghanistan.

UNDF's Executive Director also spoke about Lebanon which is experiencing multiple crises, including a socio-economic crisis, the economic and social effects of Covid-19, and more recently the Beirut port explosion. The 3rd speaker will speak about the situation in Lebanon.

1st Speaker: Stefano Stefanile, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations

Mr Stefanile pointed out that most countries have been faced with the need to adopt extraordinary regulatory measures to tackle the pandemic. Mr Stefanile said that these ongoing measures risk negatively impacting domestic human rights and democratic processes and that it is therefore vital that social protection is ensured with transparent and effective measures that promote sustainable recovery.

Mr Stefanile subsequently covered some aspects of the situation in Italy, which was one of the first countries to be heavily hit by Covid-19.

- Drastic measures such as the state of emergency and their consequences;
- The need for public safety to go hand in hand with the respect for constitutional principles, international law, and more broadly the rule of law;
- The fact that measures should be taken by the government whilst being anchored in the principles of necessity and proportionality, a requirement that applies to measures taken on both the local and national level;
- The necessity for the publicity and transparency of all acts and measures adopted by the government to ensure accountability; measures were published in the official gazette;

- The pandemic acted as an occasion to measure the solidity of the Italian democratic foundations.

In Italy, Mr Stefanile added, the pandemic presented critical challenges and discussions on a number of issues, including the reopening of schools. This has and continues to be an extraordinary situation for policy makers. As part of this national and global discussion, Mr Stefanile and his colleagues have been exploring options to shape a better recovery from the pandemic that includes a strong and renewed commitment to good governance, the rule of law, and human rights.

2nd Speaker: Annika Ben David, Sweden's Ambassador at large for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law.

Ms Ben David reconfirmed that Covid-19 is not just a health crisis but also a threat to human rights, rule of law, and democracy. Ms Ben David said that the pandemic has been acting as a vacuum in time that can be exploited.

Ms Ben David referred to the importance of SDG16 for the 2030 SDG agenda. Without respect for human rights and democracy, there will be no respectful rule of law and it will not be possible to have one without the other as they are mutually reinforcing.

The *Drive for Democracy Initiative* provides support for democracy and stands up for democratic defenders and institutions, said Ms Ben David. The ambassador argued that there is always an urgent need to safeguard democracy, but that this need is even more important today as it must be ensured that the actions taken to combat Covid-19 will not undermine democracy, human rights or the rule of law.

Ms Ben David promised that work is being done to ensure that there will be both accountability for human rights violations committed during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as consequences for any undermining of democracy and rule of law. Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law must never be taken for granted, they are now more important than ever, and it will only be possible to 'build back better' if people work together, Ms Ben David concluded.

3rd Speaker: Diam Abou Diab, Arab NGO network for development, Beirut

Ms Abou-Diab gave an overview of the situation over the last year in Lebanon, pointing out that it has been very challenging with the pre-Covid-19 socio-economic crisis, including the 2019 revolution and the Syrian refugee crisis which are all underpinned by a deep political crisis. This has been exacerbated by Covid-19 and the Beirut explosion. Covid-19 cases are on the rise again and daily cases have been increasing since August 2020, warned Ms Abou-Diab. Lebanon has the third highest rate of inflation globally with the Lebanese Pound having lost 85% of its value since October 2019. Ms Abou-Diab mentioned that unemployment rates are estimated to be around 40% with an even higher rate for youth unemployment. Moreover, Lebanon has been affected by its geographical location in a region of turmoil as it is highly sensitive to developments on the geopolitical stage. Ms Abou-Diab emphasised the strength of Lebanon's civil society and the bravery they have showed during these difficult times.

4th Speaker: Gerald Abila, Founder, BarefootLaw

'Let's not leave anyone behind'

Mr Abila spoke about his work in Uganda as he explained that his organisation is at the forefront of using (new) technologies and supporting innovations. BareFootLaw aims to empower people and to allow different actors to develop solutions for the problems they might face across the African continent. Innovation and digitalisation play a huge role in moving forward, said Mr Abila.

Access to justice is the primary objective of Mr Abila's organisation. An objective that has been harder to reach due to the effects of Covid-19. According to Mr Abila, the health crisis has developed into an economic crisis, followed by a rule of law crisis, and eventually the culmination into a human crisis.

BareFootLaw is an enabler for creative innovation, contributes to the development of laws, and stimulates out-of-the-box thinking. Mr Abila calls for civil society and the private sector to support technological innovations within the field of human rights and democracy, especially at a time when technology is highly innovative and developing at an exciting speed.