

# Joint messages on democratic governance and COVID-19

*DAC/GovNet November 2020*

GovNet members, governance practitioners and analysts are concerned that well-intentioned or opportunistic policy measures to respond to the COVID-19 crisis could have lasting negative effects on the quality of governance and SDG 16 outcomes in some DAC partner countries. The purpose of this note is to provide members with a set of messages that can be used to emphasize the importance of democratic governance in overcoming the COVID-19 crisis.

The messages are meant to be used by governance practitioners in international/multilateral fora, in respective headquarters, and in country offices. The messages identify current risks to democratic governance and identify dimensions of a global crisis response that can bolster resilience and long-term recovery, and prevent the crisis from derailing sustainable development.

The public health emergency and its devastating effects on economies and livelihoods around the world are rightfully central to the international response to the COVID19 crisis. The crisis response also provides an opportunity for OECD-DAC members and partners to galvanise commitments to democratic development through ODA-funded programmes, policy and political dialogue with partner governments, and durable institutional governance reforms. Early analysis<sup>1</sup> shows that state capacity and trust are key attributes of successful government responses to the crisis. Effective, accountable, and resilient institutions, together with a vibrant, free, and independent media, civil society and community mobilisation, are among the essential determinants of successful COVID19 recovery in the medium- to long-term.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

**1. COVID-19 should not be a Trojan horse for accelerated autocratisation.** In many countries, excessive emergency measures are accelerating the trend of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism. An unprecedented number of countries have adopted states of emergency, which reduces horizontal and vertical accountability and shifts the balance of power to executive government. For example, electoral disruptions, either because elections are postponed, held in a manner and timing that benefits the incumbent, or pursued under inadequate conditions, can create problems of legitimacy and trigger instability and violence. Civic and political space are under increased pressure in a growing number of country contexts.

**Key messages:**

- GovNet members strongly support emergency measures which have the effect of restricting civic and political space only when necessary, temporary and proportionate to the risks posed by COVID-19.
- GovNet members are committed to use financial, technical, and diplomatic resources to safeguard the legality and legitimacy of electoral processes in accordance with international norms and obligations and to protect civic and political space.
- GovNet members are committed to track the impact of the crisis on the quality of democratic governance and institutions, and to support efforts designed to bolster the separation of powers and avert democratic backsliding.
- GovNet members stand with statements and initiatives of international institutions, specialised organisations, and foundations that pursue legal and legitimate democratic governance methods in crisis response.

**2. COVID-19 should not provide a pretext for governments to undermine fundamental rights and freedoms.** Measures restricting freedom of movement, association and assembly have been adopted in over 80 ODA recipient countries with profound implications for public and private life. The impacts of such restrictions are experienced disproportionately by the poorest and most vulnerable individuals and communities. Surveillance of citizens using new technologies has substantially increased in the wake of the pandemic. Freedom of expression and access to public information is uneven. Several governments have imposed legislation that restricts freedom of expression under the guise of criminalising disinformation, and some have employed disinformation themselves. The economic impact of the crisis also risks crippling independent and public interest media in many partner countries.

**Key messages:**

- GovNet members are mindful that restrictions on individual rights and freedoms can serve political agendas, curtailing political opposition, silencing critical voices, and limiting legitimate democratic expression and the right to protest.

- GovNet members are concerned that restrictions on rights and freedoms may be kept in place long after the health crisis is over. GovNet members call on government partners to roll back restrictions as the intensity of the epidemic lessens. At all times, civil and political restrictions must be adapted to the risk level.
- GovNet members are committed to supporting and promoting independent and public interest media, facilitating the dissemination of reliable information and countering disinformation, and protecting journalists from harassment and violence.
- GovNet members call on government partners to support measures that preserve the freedom of expression in their countries as an essential attribute of an effective, legitimate and accountable response, and a strong basis for sustainable recovery.
- GovNet members are committed to supporting and protecting a free civil society that has the space to engage with citizens and with governments.

**3. Restrictive responses to COVID-19 weaken transparency and accountability mechanisms as elected assemblies, other oversight institutions, and the judiciary cannot fully exercise their mandates.** At the same time, the scale and speed of disbursements for COVID-19 response and recovery are challenging fiscal transparency safeguards and public accountability mechanisms, as the functioning of oversight and control institutions are widely hampered by declared States of Emergency. Additionally, accelerated procurement processes create new opportunities for corruption and personal enrichment. COVID threatens to entrench already powerful vicious circles of illegitimate power and money.

Members have rallied to the call of the G7 to 'do what it takes' to enable a crisis response, and the risks of corruption and misappropriation of funds have increased in kind, resulting in potential reputational risk for donors. A collective commitment of development partners is required to ensure integrity of international assistance, but also because transparency and accountability are essential building blocks of durable recovery.

**Key messages:**

- GovNet members encourage partner governments and organisations to respect domestic and international transparency and accountability standards for the management of public resources.
- GovNet members commit to support institutions and processes that strengthen accountability in partner countries, not only to reduce fiduciary risk, but also because it is necessary to sustain recovery.

- GovNet members strongly support the emphasis by the IMF on fiscal transparency, public accountability and institutional legitimacy across crisis related grants and credit facilities.
- GovNet members strongly support the principal of providing transparent financial assistance and are committed to ensure the use of transparent procurement procedures, beneficial ownership of companies, external audits, and initiatives, such as the “Call to Action on Open Response and Open Recovery by the Open Government Partnership.”
- GovNet members welcome the role of trustworthy independent actors, including civil society and independent and public interest media, in carrying out their work and holding governments to account, and commit to provide support to CSOs seeking to promote greater transparency and accountability in the COVID response.

**4. Short-term crisis responses go hand in hand with longer-term institutional renewal and development**, in the spirit of the DAC’s Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Recommendation. State capacity and citizen trust are essential attributes for governments to realise and sustain COVID-19 crisis recovery. Countries with democratic governance are best placed to respond to the crisis and ‘build back better’ for a durable recovery. As such, the crisis is an opportunity to revamp democracy promotion and localise aid delivery through capable institutions (state and non-state) that can assist to mobilise local communities and constituencies in crisis response and longer term recovery.

**Key messages:**

- GovNet members affirm that democratic political structures and institutions are inherently resilient, can better cope with unanticipated events, and provide the basis for durable development.
- GovNet members will bolster efforts to build trust in governments committed to democratic practices through the participation of civil society, marginalized communities, women, and youth, in policy-making and governance. Well-functioning democracies, especially those with low levels of corruption and a strong civil society, provide the best long-term guarantee for high citizen trust.
- GovNet members are dedicated to analyzing shortcomings in democratic governance and supporting our partners in addressing them through reform and improvement of democratic institutions. GovNet members commit to make expertise available to design evidence-based and context-sensitive institutional policy responses to the crisis.
- GovNet members recognise the importance of supporting crisis recovery and staying the course in building back more inclusive, effective and accountable institutions for development.

- GovNet members are dedicated to supporting the expansion of digital governance tools propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with democratic norms and in order to help partners to become more resilient to future crises.