

Geneva Democracy Dialogue - Summary Report

“What does democracy mean to you?”

9 October 2024, Geneva, Switzerland

BACKGROUND



The [Geneva Democracy Dialogues](#) are designed to facilitate open, inclusive, and informed discussions on challenges for democracy, foster collaboration and innovation, generate actionable recommendations and to inform the upcoming democracy dialogues and the Caux Democracy Forum in 2025.

The Geneva Democracy Dialogues are a part of the Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation's wider [Caux Democracy Programme](#) on “Revitalising Democracy Across Europe and the Wider World”, and feed into and follow up on the Caux Democracy Forum which takes place at the Caux Palace, Switzerland.

In contrast to other dialogues, the Geneva Democracy Dialogues are not debates. They offer a platform for respectful, inclusive gatherings focused on community-relevant issues, where participants openly share ideas and seek consensus. Discussion starters and the moderator guide discussions, blending cultural wisdom with modern perspectives. Storytelling and critical thinking are key, fostering understanding and problem-solving perspectives.

GENEVA DEMOCRACY DIALOGUE – 9 OCTOBER 2024

"In a democracy, each of us carries the responsibility to engage, listen and to contribute. It is more than a political system. It is about choice and voice. How does this resonate with you?"

With these words, moderator **Ignacio Packer**, Executive Director of the [Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation](#), opened the second Geneva Democracy Dialogue, organised by Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation in partnership with the [Kofi Annan Foundation](#) and the [Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy](#) during [Geneva Democracy Week 2025](#), before handing over to speakers and participants for an inspiring conversation.

Christine Lutringer, Executive Director of the [Geneva Graduate Institute](#)'s Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, welcomed the audience which included over 40 participants from different sectors in Geneva, such as diplomatic missions, civil society academia, and international organisations.

More than one third of participants were under 35 years old, including students from [the Geneva Graduate Institute](#) and two 23-year-old politicians, all exploring a central question:

What does democracy mean to you as well as to your work and engagement?



KEY SPEAKERS

- **YANINA WELP**, Research Fellow, [Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, Graduate Institute](#)
- **MARTIN BOGOMILOV PENOV**, 23-year-old Bulgarian and Vice-President of the [Young European Federalists](#)
- **H.E. AMBASSADOR NASIR AHMAD ANDISHA**, Permanent Representative to UN from Afghanistan
- **DECLAN O'BRIEN**, Head, Democracy, [Kofi Annan Foundation](#)
- **DILARA BAYRAK**, Member of the Grand Council of Geneva in her second mandate
- **ARIADNA POP**, Head of Democracy Section at the [Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs](#)

KEY DISCUSSIONS POINTS

1. Youth Engagement and Political Participation

Youth today are less engaged in traditional democratic structures, such as voting, but are highly active in social movements and anti-systemic parties. Many young people feel disconnected from electoral politics, viewing it as ineffective in addressing their concerns. However, they are leading social movements and pushing for systemic change, demonstrating a significant level of political activity, albeit in more grassroots and unconventional ways. The challenge lies in making formal democratic processes more appealing and relevant to this generation, ensuring that their passion for change can also be channelled into traditional political avenues.

2. Multifaceted Nature of Democracy

Democracy means different things to different people—it can represent justice, peace, liberty, or a combination of these values. Importantly, it requires daily participation beyond voting in elections every few years. Young people, in particular, tend to see democracy as more than just the electoral process, associating it with broader ideals like social justice and human rights. As a result, they are more likely to engage in movements that reflect these values. Their participation in such movements should be

recognized as an integral part of the democratic process, expanding the traditional understanding of democratic involvement.

3. Democracy as a Necessity, Not a Luxury

Democracy is not a luxury; it is a fundamental necessity, much like air or love, and it must be protected and actively maintained. For young people, this message holds special significance, especially in countries where democratic systems are fragile. The youth must understand the critical importance of democracy, as they will play a pivotal role in safeguarding it for future generations. If young citizens do not actively participate in defending democracy, it risks being eroded or lost altogether.

QUOTE:

- "Democracy is not a luxury. It is essential as air. (...) It is like a torch that illuminates the way." – Ambassador Nasir Ahmad Andisha, Permanent Representative to the UN from Afghanistan

4. Adapting Democracy to Local and Cultural Contexts

Democracy must be flexible enough to adapt to the cultural, regional, and societal needs of each country, particularly when it comes to representing marginalized groups. A young member of the Grand Conseil de Genève, herself under the age of 30, emphasized that young people, especially those from diverse or immigrant backgrounds, often feel excluded from mainstream democratic processes. To encourage greater youth involvement, democracy must be more inclusive, reflecting the identities, values, and cultural needs of these young citizens. When young people see themselves represented in governance, they are more likely to engage with and trust the system.

QUOTE:

- "Be the change from within and make waves. Don't stay in the comfort of a well-oiled system."
- Dilara Bayrak, Member of the Grand Council of Geneva in her second mandate

5. Leadership Crisis and Need for Intergenerational Dialogue

A growing crisis in leadership has left young people with few credible and ethical role models to look up to. Intergenerational dialogue is crucial for bridging this gap and inspiring youth to see leadership as a realistic and trustworthy aspiration. By learning from the successes and failures of previous generations, young people can better navigate political engagement while being encouraged to take on leadership roles themselves. The absence of strong, positive role models may drive youth toward alternative forms of political participation, making it all the more important to foster dialogue and collaboration across generations.

QUOTE:

- "Young people may be frustrated with the systems, but they are not apathetic. (...) We need to be responsive to their view of democracy. Go where they are and find out what mechanisms work for them!" - Declan O'Brien, Head of Democracy and Multilateralism Programmes at the Kofi Annan Foundation

6. Multilateralism and Global Democratic Values

The erosion of democratic values coincides with a decline in trust in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. Young people, who are often more globally connected through technology and social media, tend to view democracy within a broader, international context. Restoring trust in both democracy and multilateral organizations is essential for engaging youth, who are particularly concerned about global issues like climate change, human rights, and social justice. A renewed focus on these global democratic values is key to fostering their involvement.

QUOTES:

- "If we are serious about talking about the SDGs, we need to be talking more about democracy, also here in Geneva." – Declan O'Brien, Head of Democracy and Multilateralism Programmes at

the Kofi Annan Foundation, in his intervention, insisting on the links between democracy and multilateralism

- "Democracy's underlying values are key to change the narrative and engage the youth. Freedom, equality, diversity and inclusion—this is what speaks not only to young people's minds, but also to their hearts." - Ariadna Pop, Head of Democracy Section at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

7. Resilience and the Fight for Democracy

Democracy is a continuous process that requires resilience and ongoing efforts, especially in times of political polarization. Young people are frequently at the forefront of movements demanding political change, and the concept of resilience is particularly relevant to them. It reinforces the notion that their activism is part of a long-term struggle to build and sustain democratic societies. Even in the face of challenges and setbacks, the persistence of youth-driven movements is critical for the health and future of democracy.

QUOTES:

- "Democracy is a system worth fighting for. If we get it wrong, we might not have a second chance." – Martin Penov, Vice-President, Young European Federalists (JEF)
- "Contribute to enriching democracy, get young people involved and eliminate prejudices." - Dilara Bayrak, Member of the Grand Council of Geneva in her second mandate

8. Hope and Empowerment

A message of hope and optimism is essential to inspiring young people to lead and shape the future of democracy. Youth need platforms and opportunities to take on leadership roles and influence democratic processes. Empowering young citizens to contribute to these solutions is crucial for revitalizing democracy, giving them a sense of agency and belief in their ability to effect meaningful change. By fostering a sense of hope and providing the necessary tools for participation, youth can be encouraged to take an active role in shaping a democratic future.

QUOTE:

- "Democracy is more than a state form - it's a way of living." – Young participant from Germany



VOICES FROM THE AUDIENCE

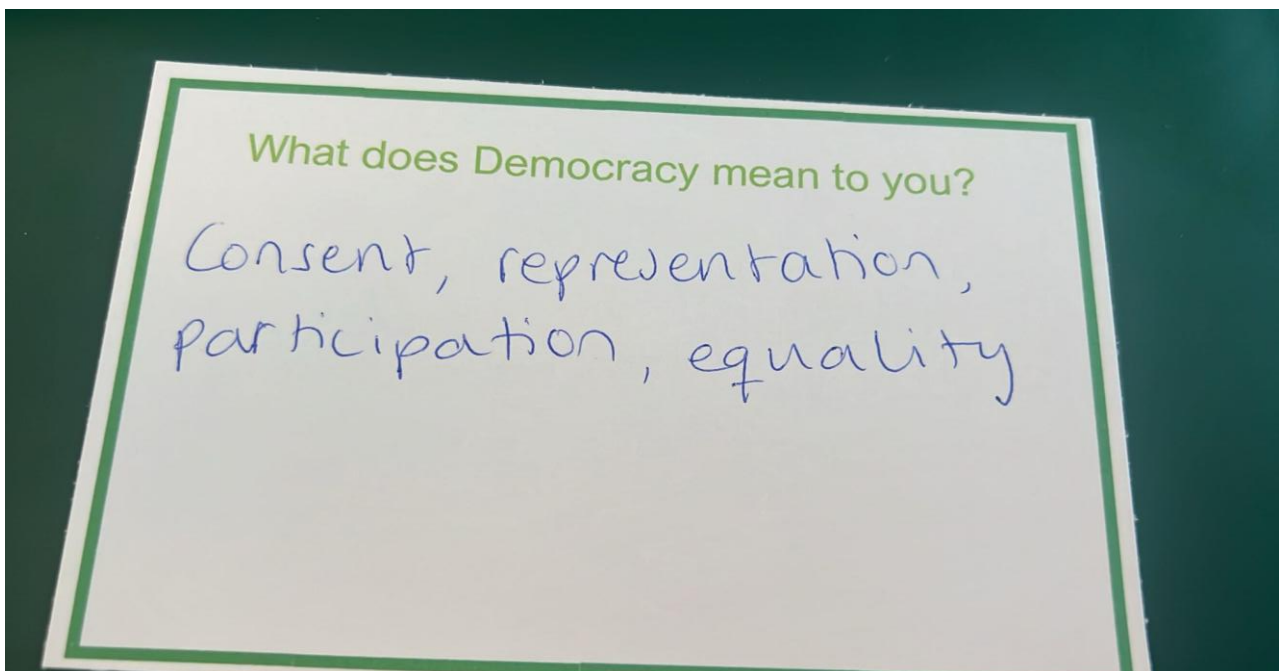
At the end of the event, all participants were invited to write down the meaning of democracy in their own life. Here are some of the outcomes:

“Democracy means inclusive deliberation and protection of human rights.”

“Democracy is an endless journey and struggle, it has endless setbacks, but it must continue.”

“Democracy means: consent, representation, participation, equality.”

“Democracy means the responsibility to engage, listen and contribute.”



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report highlights key insights from the Geneva Democracy Dialogue on "What does democracy mean to you, as well as to your work and engagement?".

It underscores the evolving role of youth in redefining democracy, not just through traditional avenues like voting but through grassroots activism, social movements, and their broader understanding of justice and human rights.

Addressing the leadership crisis, promoting intergenerational dialogue, and making democratic processes more inclusive are crucial to empowering young people and ensuring their engagement.

The presence of 37 permanent missions at the first Geneva Democracy Dialogue in May, along with the different representations at its second edition, including the FDFA in Bern, highlights the significance of this type of dialogue amongst the diplomatic community, civil society, and the UN in Geneva and would like to express our gratitude to the Swiss Government and our partner organisations for their support to the Geneva Democracy Dialogues and to the Caux Democracy Forum.



LOOKING AHEAD

The Geneva Democracy Dialogues are part of the 3-year Caux Democracy Programme. Hosting these dialogues in Geneva during Geneva Democracy Week underscores the power of collective action, strengthening the partnership between local partners, such as the Kofi Annan Foundation, the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, the Graduate Institute and the Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation, in addition to external institutions and organisations, such as JEF.

The findings of these dialogues will inform the discussions at the third Geneva Democracy Dialogues in May 2025, and will also contribute to the Caux Democracy Forum, taking place from 8-12 July 2025.



The concept of the Democracy Dialogues are expanding, amongst others with three planned events in Germany, contributing to the Caux Democracy Programme and raising awareness ahead of Germany's next nationwide parliamentary election scheduled for 23 February, 2025

At the Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation, we continue to support Afghan women and women's groups, amplifying their voices to ensure they play a full role in Afghanistan's life, both domestically and internationally. We highly value the Preservation Mission of Afghanistan and encourage further support.

At the doorstep of important elections in several European countries, such as Bulgaria and Germany, we hope for civic engagement that reflects the voices of all citizens, fostering dialogue, cooperation and inclusive and representative governance to help building a stable future.

The next Geneva Democracy Dialogue is planned for spring 2025, in collaboration with the [OHCHR](#), focusing on people-centered economics.

This report was co-authored by Simran Dinghra and the Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation