

# DEMOCRACY AND REPRESENTATION FOR EMERGENCY ACTION

Emergency Governance for Cities and Regions  
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**POLICY  
BRIEF**

## THE INITIATIVE

This Policy Brief is part of the Emergency Governance Initiative (EGI) led by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the World Association of the Major Metropolises (Metropolis) and LSE Cities at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This Initiative investigates the institutional dimensions of rapid and radical action in response to complex global emergencies. The EGI aims to provide city and regional governments with actionable information and appropriate frameworks, knowledge and resources to navigate the new demands of leading responses to complex emergencies.

### POLICY BRIEF #06

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This is the sixth in a series of regular Policy Brief publications that complement the more data-driven Analytics Notes. Policy Briefs focus on forward-looking propositions, reform agendas, governance innovations and critical perspectives.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This policy brief is the sixth and final brief in the current cycle of the Emergency Governance Initiative (EGI). It is dedicated to arguably the most important aspect of emergency governance: the legitimacy of emergency responses and the extent to which this legitimacy must be rooted in democratic practices. This issue ties in closely with the role of cities and regional governments in strengthening local democracy as well as advancing the broader principle of subsidiarity.

The EGI's initial survey during the first phase of the COVID-19 response in 2020 identified political governance challenges such as lack of municipal autonomy, politicisation of the emergency response and underrepresentation of women, ethnic minorities and/or other vulnerable groups as top concerns. In addition, most of the wider political challenges of the 2020 emergency responses related to concerns about democracy and representation (see [PB01](#)), which this publication focuses on.

This policy brief acknowledges the difficulties in addressing such a critical and all-encompassing topic as part of a relatively short policy brief, making it hard to do it full justice. At the same time, the EGI accepts the need and responsibility to engage with the complexity of democratic emergency governance. It also aims to be proactive in advancing a critical debate and advocating real action on the ground.

The approach and methodology of this policy brief is three-fold and brings together (1) a review of academic and grey literature, (2) case study identification and analysis, and (3) the frequent deliberations of an enlarged research team.

This policy brief consists of four main sections, each building on the previous one. The following section presents the tensions and synergies between democracy and radical, rapid intervention. Section 3 focuses on the role of local and regional governments and lessons learnt from democratic practices under emergency conditions. The potentially useful concept of emergency assemblies is then presented in Section 4. Section 5, the last substantive section, is dedicated to a new emergency governance culture that is centrally informed by feminist ideals.

## 2 DEMOCRACY AND RAPID & RADICAL ACTION

**Contemporary understandings of democracy** cut across ideals such as the rule of law, transparent political procedures, freedom of the press, freedom of association, inclusive voting practices, free and fair elections, and judicial and legislative checks and balances. Democracies are designed to function predictably in order to mediate the common tasks of modern governance in the 21st century. Democratic governance at the local level functions to mediate specific issues facing respective constituent regions and cities [1].

**Local democracy has a particular role to play** in relation to regional and city level representation and deliberative and participatory democracy. Local democracy is understood as practices and mechanisms that cities and regions provide, depending on their levels of autonomy, for people to participate in and influence the public decisions that affect them. It also contributes to developing democratic values and skills and ultimately builds the foundation for strong national democratic institutions and practices [2]. The discussion in this section focuses primarily on the general relationship between democracy and emergency action, whilst from Section 3 onwards the focus is on the role of cities and regions.

**Emergencies have been defined as the product of risk and urgency [3].** A situation is an emergency if both risk and urgency are high and, as a result, require rapid and radical intervention. Unlike a crisis, an emergency may not indicate a critical turning point and may lack a direct and immediate solution [4]. Furthermore, complex emergencies in the context of the EGI are defined as long emergencies with futures that are still emerging and contingent on the type of action that is taken. Governing complex emergencies is fundamentally political [5].

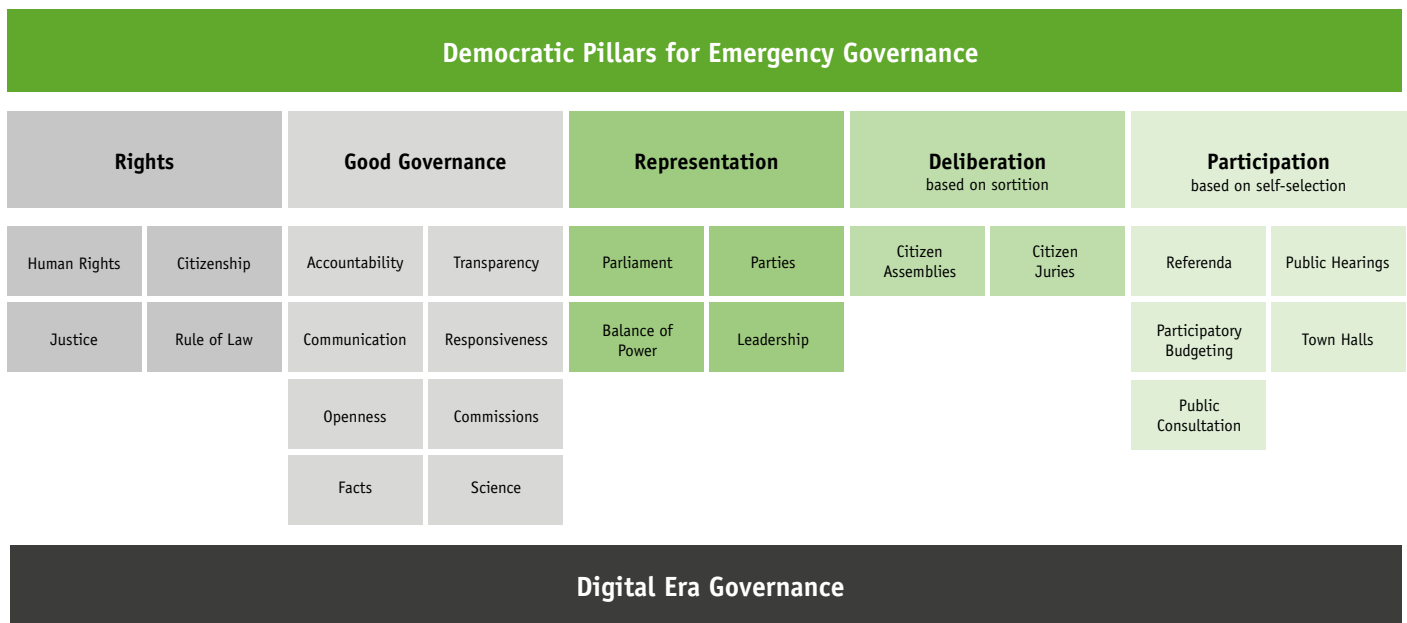
**Democracy is commonly developed around 'normal-mode' governance while exceptional circumstances of complex emergencies are increasingly prominent.** As a result, democracy has been tested more than ever before in the face of global battles against climate change [6], rising inequalities, financial downturns, and public health crises. Local, regional, and national governments have, for example, witnessed populism and a scepticism of science, illustrating fundamental problems in governing emergency responses [1]. When the public lacks trust in 'experts' guiding the policymaking for emergencies and feels too removed from decision-making, their views on appropriate responses to emergencies can differ from those identified by governments.

**Complex emergencies are re-shaping democratic institutions and representation.** The recent COVID-19 pandemic unfolded at a historical juncture which proved particularly worrying for democracies, amidst indications of a global democratic recession [7], democratic backsliding [8] and global autocratic drift targeting [9-11]. Emergencies have also been historically highlighted as events which catalyse further political polarisation and democratic disaffection [12-14]. Citizens<sup>1</sup> living under democracy or autocracy face markedly different experiences during complex emergencies, as living under democracies has been shown to favour the reconsolidation of popular trust in democratic institutions [9].

**This policy brief differentiates five main categories of democratic legitimacy as part of responses to complex emergencies:** (1) rights, (2) good governance, (3) representation, (4) deliberation, and (5) participation (Figure 1). Of these, the latter two require clearer differentiation: deliberative processes involving mini-publics bring together a relatively small group of people who are broadly representative of the wider population. A group of citizens become citizen representatives, the aim being that

<sup>1</sup> In this publication, 'citizens' refers to both legally recognised citizens and residents of a given city or region.

Figure 1: Democratic Pillars for Emergency Governance



Digital Era Governance

they have an in-depth understanding of trade-offs, whilst trying to find common ground amongst the group and come up with recommendations. In contrast, participation focuses on breadth of participation and reaching as many and diverse people as possible. The depth of engagement is less ambitious, with aims such as gathering opinions and aggregating points of view [15, 16].

The key components of democratic legitimacy above are both tested and enhanced as part of emergency responses. The next two subsections discuss these dynamics in general before Section 3 then focuses on specific opportunities for local democracy.

### 2.1 TENSIONS: HOW EMERGENCIES TEST DEMOCRACY

**Urgent action leads to democratic shortcuts in the name of expediency.** Emergency declarations enable fast-track processes that allow governments, including local and regional bodies, to act rapidly and avoid established processes of coordination, consultation and scrutiny. Governments tend to approach emergencies from a short-term perspective, [9, 17] postponing efforts until crises occur [18] and then demanding immediate action. Within the structured systems of governance and divisions of power, the representative funnel of government is forced into a scenario whereby rapid decision-making is expedited and assigned to the top chains of command [19].

**The need for radical intervention grants political actors exceptional powers.** These powers tend to fall outside the purview of normal legislative and judicial review or transparency, and can produce an illiberal, autocratic drift [7, 11]. In the context of the COVID-19 response, the lack of parliamentary scrutiny of the executive decisions linked to lockdowns, hospital admissions, and the securing of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has been identified [20]. Here, emergency legislation also

enabled local authorities to change decision making and democratic practices, with an overall expansion of decision making by operational units of government [20].

**Exploiting emergency powers undermines democratic institutions in the long term.** For some time, crises and states of emergency have offered political leaders various opportunities to extend their powers and political control beyond the realm of emergencies and beyond the original duration of the emergency [21]. For example, emergency interventions weaken democracy when executive orders and expedited review processes are used for non-emergency related decisions [19, 21, 22]. Such risks are further enhanced when executive powers are then used to seize expanded authorities with little resistance [23].

**Real or perceived requirements for controlling emergencies compromise rights.** Responding to complex emergencies, governments often restrict political rights and civil liberties, constrain the media and free press, and infringe upon personal data (citizen surveillance), thus eroding checks and balances [24-30]. In some cases, citizens are mandated to use digital applications to access emergency information, services, and data [31] without much knowledge or transparency of how their data is being used.

**Emergency governance challenges local democracy and devolution.** Democracies rely on familiar, normative structures which are difficult to adjust to unprecedented and unfamiliar states of emergency. Emergencies confront deliberately designed institutions of democratic states with situations they are not prepared for. Multilevel governance in particular struggles to adapt to emergencies as communities, cities, and metropolitan regions are forced to find new methods of coordination (see PB04). Furthermore, other key governance actions proposed by the New Urban Agenda [32] such as the strengthening of metropolitan governance are either ignored or sidelined.

**Complex emergencies strengthen technocratic decision making.** Emergency responses that ‘follow the science’ give considerable power to ‘experts’ and technocratic institutions. Such shifts ultimately risk political decisions no longer being addressed via democratic institutions but instead are made by technical committees, advisors and non-elected officials. In this context, some observe trade-offs between consensus and expertise [15] as well as risks to transparency in a range of political situations. For example, major transparency shortcomings were identified with regard to the UK’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), as well as between local and national government levels in China [20, 33].

**Emergency responses presented as apolitical or allegedly neutral can enhance polarisation.** The initial approach and consensus seeking of emergency responses may limit important political debate and productive conflict [34]. As a result, initial overall support for government action declines over time and is replaced by ‘blame games’ and ‘blame shifting’ [35]. In local politics, the political vacuum under emergency governance extends to planning policy and deliberation, which suffers from the lack of space for agonism and real debate [20]. This has been the case, for example, with planning applications that have been processed without due regard to the usual standards of public consultation and debate.

**Emergency responses accentuate the information gap between elected leaders, experts, and civil society.** Routine and non-routine emergencies (see [PB04](#)) differ from complex emergencies in relation to civil society’s information economy. As a result, it is difficult for preparedness efforts to sustain attention and galvanise resources [36, 37]. Governments rely on experts while the public relies on civil society news and media, which increases the likelihood of false news threatening the validity of the information economy [31, 38, 39]. This makes it difficult for civil society to rely on data and science and increases the likelihood of growing distrust in government.

**Lack of clear political mandates compromises accountability during emergencies.** Depending on the type of complex emergency and its temporality, governments may have been elected without any reference to the emergency. Furthermore, governments struggle to get a clear signal from the population to establish such mandates retroactively. For example, during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments redirected resources and implemented emergency plans without having previously presented the possibility of such actions to the electorate. By contrast, responses to complex emergencies such as addressing climate change, a continuous and longer-term emergency, are generally part of most political parties’ platforms. Nevertheless, unprecedented and evolving emergencies challenge the conventional trajectory of representative democracy, as politicians must design new political mandates while already in power.

## 2.2 SYNERGIES: HOW EMERGENCIES ENABLE DEMOCRACY

**Complex emergencies act as triggers for democratic engagement and innovation.** Particularly when calling for a state of emergency or an emergency response, there can be considerable levels of public engagement (e.g. the climate emergency and the initial COVID-19 response) and broad support for government action – the ‘rallying round the flag effect’ [35]. During that period, broad support across the political spectrum exists and partisan politics tends to steer away from scoring political points [20]. A particularly promising enhancement of democratic practices for governing complex emergencies is the establishment of mini-publics or emergency assemblies (see Section 4).

**The pressures of complex emergencies motivate citizens to become proactive agents for change.** Direct involvement and contributions by civil society are often necessary to produce rapid solutions to complex multifaceted problems. Decentralised responses can also enhance the agility of collective action and responsiveness to specific local circumstances. When these are both designed and perceived as more useful than top-down, centralised emergency responses, citizens are motivated to get involved and make a difference. The bottom-up initiation of climate action and emergency declarations are prominent examples of this.

**Complex emergencies activate local democracy.** In the same way that citizens are motivated to become more pro-active, emergency responses provide a backdrop for a more active local state, which is likely to be more capable of advancing actions based on established democratic processes. This synergy between democracy and emergency responses is particularly promising when combining concrete local intervention with broad principles and values [6].

**Immediate action and tangible outcomes can boost confidence in the collective.** With recent emergencies, including the public health and climate crisis amongst others, policy agendas have been re-shaped around the now, with a focus on immediate action [9] whilst also recognising long-term consequences. This serves to demonstrate to the public that governments and societies have the capacity to act collectively through adaptive governance, attending to the here and now when necessary.

**Complex emergencies require decentralised data and information.** In addition to gathering knowledge initially produced by citizens and civil society organisations, the generation of decentralised data also enables new democratic practices. First, there are datasets which can be generated by citizens themselves and shared with the relevant stakeholders and public authorities. In the context of complex emergencies, this has ranged from data on personal health to local air pollution levels. Second, officials at local and municipal levels of governance can crowd-source attitudes, opinions and ideas to find solutions to pressing challenges.

**Emergencies can direct attention to the most vulnerable, usually people who already faced structural inequalities and discriminations.** In turn, this can help address basic rights and indirectly address the pervasive shortcomings of even the most democratic contexts. During COVID-19, many cities assisted homeless people and arranged for proper accommodation at least in the short term. In that sense, expediency paired with inclusive governance offers strong potential for synergies. Older people, informal workers, women, people living in poverty and other groups who, in addition to structural vulnerabilities, are most impacted by emergencies, could benefit from direct action from local and regional governments.

To conclude, it is important to stress that democracies have struggled with persistent shortcomings even prior to the current wave of complex emergencies. These have included crises in equitable representation and participation, a lack of popular trust in government, turbulent leadership, and difficulties adapting to changing circumstances [1]. As a result, public satisfaction with the way democracies are functioning has decreased since the mid-1990s [40].

Furthermore, very few governments had previously had any form of established processes in place to democratically engage with complex emergencies [18]. More generally, global civil society lacked a well-developed process of political engagement to respond to complex emergencies, particularly with voting through electoral processes at national and local levels being postponed [41]. As a result, questions about the democratic legitimacy of rapid and radical emergency responses were common, even in those countries with the highest level of democratic practices. Moreover, the role and ability of parliaments to convene and guarantee a free and open society and critical components of deliberative and participatory democracy have been strained in the context of the pandemic [23, 24, 40]. Finally, different complex emergencies impact democratic practices differently. COVID-19 has stifled in-person engagement, which compromised multiple forms of democratic engagement. In contrast, the climate emergency has motivated citizens and governments to explore innovative formats for democratic governance.

Table 1 below summarises the key tensions and synergies between democracy and emergency governance presented above. While many are not specific to local democracy, the following sections show that local democracy may present a particular opportunity to reduce tensions and strengthen synergies.

**Table 1: Summary of tensions and synergies between democracy and emergency governance**

Tensions	Synergies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Urgent action</li> <li>Radical interventions</li> <li>Exploited emergency power</li> <li>Compromised rights</li> <li>Stalling devolution</li> <li>Technocratic decisions</li> <li>Limited political debate</li> <li>Information gaps</li> <li>Lack of clear political mandates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trigger for engagement</li> <li>Citizens as agents for change</li> <li>Activation of local democracy</li> <li>Confidence in the collective</li> <li>Requirement for decentralised data</li> <li>Attention directed to most vulnerable</li> </ul>

## 3 LOCAL EMERGENCY RESPONSES, DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES AND INNOVATION

This section reviews key democratic practices and innovations that have emerged over recent years as part of the broader response to complex emergencies.

### 3.1 RIGHTS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

According to the United Nations (UN), “democracy provides an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will of people is exercised”. However, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) stresses that derogations from, and limitations to, individual rights are permissible under certain conditions based on a legitimate aim [42]. This is the case for emergency declarations where restrictions are imposed on some fundamental rights by all tiers of government [43].

It is generally agreed that emergency measures should work according to the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination [44] when limiting rights. Ideally governments should “rely as much as possible on the ordinary powers of government to safeguard democracy” [45]. When emergency declarations are in place, trust in government is essential and legal certainty and transparency are vital to ensure trust.

The role of local and regional governments in safeguarding rights and advancing good governance when responding to complex emergencies varies considerably. At the most fundamental level, **subnational governments have the potential to maintain trust in democracy as their institutions operate closest to the people.** “Democra-city (...) the city thus becomes more and better than any other institutional place, the ultimate arena within which the best results may be achieved for democracy in the 21st century” [46].

The COVID-19 emergency response provided many local and regional governments with broad guidelines under which they should undertake different actions to enforce compliance measures. Some even relied on health acts to give a legal basis to quarantine and lockdown [45]. In these situations, local governments found it difficult to counteract democratic deconsolidation [45]. **Local initiatives to mitigate compromised rights included the re-alignment of emergency powers (see Box 01), direct action to support vulnerable and structurally disadvantaged populations, and city apps with privacy safeguards** (see final subsection on digital era governance). For example, care systems in Buenos Aires extended the provision of tablets and trained the older population on how to access services and information during COVID-19 [47]. Similarly, Madrid City’s Council launched the website ‘Madrid sale al balcón’ to channel citizen initiatives during isolation [48]. Above all, good governance (as detailed in Figure 1) was supported by cities and regions through concerted support of multilevel emergency governance (see PB04).

### Box 01: Building local trust and legitimacy | Vancouver (Canada)

The city of Vancouver raised concerns about the unique emergency powers it has compared to other cities in the province. Finding that its emergency act gives the city too much power, and in the spirit of increased vigilance and accountability, Vancouver intends to align its powers with those of other cities in the province through a major update to the Emergency's Program Act of British Columbia to limit the time and scope of its emergency powers.

When addressing migration and displacement issues during crises, decisions usually come from national governments overseeing and securing national borders. On the one hand, this leaves local and regional governments once again with the task of implementation rather than decision-making and potential democratic practices. On the other hand, some cities have been active in recognising their role in the "promotion of inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable societies" [49]. This was the case with over 150 mayors who adopted the Marrakech Mayors Declaration [50] to guarantee migrants and displaced persons the right to the city and to address migration alongside urban planning (see Box 03 on migrant's rights in Palabek and Box 04 on Winooski).

**At times of social unrest, cities must engage with fundamental questions of rights and protest.** In Latin America, the Colombian city of Cali activated new coalitions to restore democracy (Box 02) while local governments in other Latin American countries have tried to build social legitimacy by securing a deliberation arena in which people can openly protest, develop joint proposals and participate in the constituent process at the national level [51].

### Box 02: Third sector actors to 'restore democracy' | Cali (Colombia)

Santiago de Cali experienced violent expressions of social unrest and human rights abuses following the announcement of a tax reform by the national government on 28th April 2021.

To de-escalate the violent confrontations and attempt to restore peace, action was taken on several fronts:

- The Archdiocese of Cali actively participated and brought all actors involved to the table, opening space for dialogue around "Compromiso Valle" [52].
- The presence of multilateral organisations and other national and international actors provided a birds-eye view of possible risks, especially in the context of human rights abuses.
- A legal decree was signed by the mayor under which the local government officially recognised the use of open debate as a conflict de-escalation mechanism [53].

Despite the efforts of different actors to restore democracy in Cali, some URC (*Unión de Resistencias Cali*, the protesters' name) leaders felt that the group had lost an opportunity for further negotiations which could have resulted in more radical changes once the decree was approved.

### While the climate emergency has enabled novel forms of democratic engagement, practices specifically linked to questions of rights and good governance are less pronounced.

Possibly the most fundamental rights question linked to climate action relates to cities as spaces for protest, direct action and civil disobedience. While new protest movements such as Friday for Futures and Extinction Rebellion were initially welcomed and celebrated, more disruptive follow-up practices have put cities and regional governments in a more difficult position, especially in the face of increased repression of climate activists by national governments.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the experiences mentioned above, in terms of protecting and reinforcing local democracy during complex emergencies:

- Cities and regions must recognise rights and good governance as key components of the democratic legitimacy of their emergency responses, alongside issues of representation, deliberation and participation.
- Local governments can help protect governance oversight mechanisms and ensure they continue to function [41, 54-56]. When adjustments are required in the short term, they need to be compensated for by follow-up inquiries, commissions or reviews at a later stage.
- Emergency responses must apply laws equally and objectively to avoid rights constraints for the most structurally discriminated groups. Local and regional governments can take the lead on rights-based approaches as part of their emergency responses.
- Local governments are in a good position to engage in a continuous process of trust building, which includes clear communication, open presentation of any temporary limitations of rights, discussion of trade-offs between policy choices, and building broad alliances of already trusted stakeholders.

## 3.2 REPRESENTATION

A fundamental dimension of democratic rule is support for it through representation. Rather than votes on individual policy decisions as part of referenda, political representatives are elected to legislative chambers and/or executive offices based on political manifestos as part of representative forms of democracy. Under non-emergency conditions, representatives are accountable for the electoral programmes they have set out, and voters scrutinise their leaders' actions [57].

However, responses to complex emergencies not only involve actions beyond those programmes previously stated but also alter other policies and priorities and can disrupt election schedules and processes. COVID-19, for example, resulted in many elections at national and subnational levels being postponed, such as in Brazil [41]. As for political mandates, most of them had to be re-framed in the context of an emergency and their continuity and validity were overshadowed, making it difficult for citizens and scrutinising bodies to monitor them.

In this context, innovation revolves around the **transparency and accountability** of electoral processes when they take place. When postponed, **innovations for actively communicating with people and introducing reasonable adjustments to maintain the status quo are essential**. During COVID-19, maintaining the status quo involved relying on earlier governance and electoral approaches which were familiar to local people and helped to maintain trust. In Sebkhā, one of Mauritania’s most densely populated urban communes, a network of district chiefs from each neighbourhood were co-opted by the local government to engage with the local population [58]. In Brazilian cities, biometric identification was suspended [59] and elections for municipal governments relied on official photo-ID documents only. Canada tried to maintain the status quo by ensuring equitable access to voting in municipal elections: Vancouver City Council passed a motion to allow residents voting by mail to get online or telephone help when filling out a ballot at home [60].

New processes for non-voters such as migrants and refugees are particularly critical when responding to complex social emergencies such as a refugee crisis. The residents of Northern Uganda’s Palabek refugee settlement elected their own Refugee Welfare Councillors (see Box 03). Such efforts to improve representation as part of emergency responses can also build on practices in progressive cities such as Winooski and Montpelier in the state of Vermont (USA), who have passed voting reforms to allow non-U.S. citizens to vote in municipal elections (see Box 04).

### Box 03: Refugee voting rights | Palabek refugee settlement (Uganda)

In July 2018, half of the 10,000 residents of Uganda’s Palabek Refugee Settlement participated in the first successful democratic election of the Refugee Welfare Council. According to the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the Ugandan Prime Minister, this had never happened before: no Ugandan settlement had ever elected all their leaders by secret ballot on the same day and without violence. The strengths of this election lay in its open application process for candidates, the electoral resources made available to candidates, the secret ballot and the secure voting process. Despite the introduction of this democratic process, the elections did not give significant authority to refugees or their democratically elected councillors.

### Box 04: Migrants’ voting rights | Winooski (United States of America)

In 2021, a little less than one hundred non-U.S. citizens voted in the Winooski municipal election. To address heightening polarisation, the city council decided to set up a resident charter commission rather than moving directly to a municipal council vote. In 2020, after strong public outreach work and deliberation, the decision to allow the expansion of voting rights was submitted to residents for a vote, which passed with 70% in favour. Robust outreach, education, and feedback from residents were core elements to Winooski’s success.

An important, though often symbolic, positioning of local parliaments and assemblies can be seen in votes declaring a climate emergency. By May 2022, a total of 2,099 jurisdictions in 38 countries had declared a climate emergency [61]. However, in contrast to COVID-19 emergency declarations, they have, so far, served only as acts to acknowledge the risk and urgency of the climate emergency rather than to initiate radical and rapid action. Thus, these parliamentary climate emergency declarations have not limited rights or expanded specific powers of the executive, nor have they differentiated the application of measures across population groups. However, this approach might also indicate that governments are acting on this emergency without necessarily transforming institutions and democratic structures (see [AN04](#) for four different types of emergency declarations).

The following conclusions can be drawn from these experiences and practices regarding representation:

- While representative democracy and its institutions at the local level are often taken for granted, responses to complex emergencies require special attention to, and full consideration of, legislative chambers.
- Any adjustments to election cycles or changes to municipal mandates must follow the principles of transparency and accountability.
- Some complex emergencies, particularly those linked to migration and displacement in the context of crises, require adjustments to voting rights to ensure fair representation as part of emergency actions.
- The declaration of states of emergency by local parliaments and assemblies is an important endorsement of the representative rather than the executive branch of local jurisdictions and may give greater democratic legitimacy to radical and rapid action.



### 3.3 DELIBERATION AND PARTICIPATION

The final two components of democratic legitimacy for emergency responses are the most frequently referenced forms of local democracy. Both deliberation and participation share considerable aspirations for ongoing improvements and adjustments, even during non-emergency situations.

However, some complex emergencies can place democracy under siege, with restrictions on physical interaction (in the case of COVID-19) resulting in the preclusion of traditional participatory practices [62-64]. For example, when Zimbabwe's Chitungwiza municipality employed participatory budgeting – to engage with residents in drafting the 2021 budget – public consultations were delayed and then hurriedly carried out due to COVID-19 [27].

As part of their response to complex emergencies, local and regional governments have tried to enable new participation practices and platforms (see Box 05). On the one hand, most local government innovations have focused on **building much closer communication** with people by providing essential information when dealing with emergencies through the extensive use of technology and social media. On the other hand, they have also **co-created public policies and plans through hybrid formats** and, in some cases, **collectively solved problems** (for example through hackathons and shared-responsibility strategies, see Box 06). To enable inclusive practices, local governments have had to address the digital gap between technology use and access. Overall, across both directions for participatory innovation, a **stronger engagement with third party actors** such as local non-governmental organizations and the private sector has been critical.

#### Box 05: Democracy for life and a decentralised response to COVID-19 | Valparaiso (Chile)

Early on in the global pandemic, cities adopted extreme lockdowns as a preventative measure to contain transmission of the virus. However, Valparaiso opted for a “communitarian” approach and the city was divided into 15 polygons that aligned with the reach of each of the local health centres. The local government successfully decentralised local services and advocated for a redistribution of power by:

- Borrowing existing community buildings to temporarily introduce local offices and provide people with administrative services closer to home;
- Implementing “Democracy for life”, a programme through which people decide on how to allocate resources during an emergency;
- Communication and data collection using existing channels such as WhatsApp and Facebook and by asking people to voluntarily provide personal data whilst connecting directly through its 15 local offices and community leaders.

The decentralised offices, communal cooking pots, and community gardens, among other initiatives, have now become permanent strategies of the local government.

Cities have been exploring **new spaces for public participation by expanding the use of existing online platforms** such as Decidim – a free, open-source participatory form of democracy for cities, originally developed by Barcelona during the emergency response. New York, for example, is undertaking participatory budgeting, inviting people to register and meet to vote on ideas [65]. This comes after the Participatory Program (planned in 2018) faced economic constraints because of COVID-19 [66]. Similarly, Mexico City has employed the term “the public plaza”, whereby public consultations around transport, open data and political mandates take place and vacancies for some political positions can be scrutinised [67]. However, the impact and effectiveness of these practices has yet to be established; they might not be representative enough, leaving some demographic groups outside the process.

#### Box 06: Democratic climate emergency response | Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

During 2019–2020, Rio de Janeiro undertook a comprehensive participation process based on a strategy of shared responsibility and empowering people to build the city's climate action plan for the next 30 years. By having a direct dialogue with people, using online platforms, and connecting key actors on the ground, the local government built a successful governance approach to address the climate crisis. As a result, the process gathered over 35,000 contributions, and 800 actions are being implemented [68]. According to the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD), 65% of people's contributions were incorporated as climate action plan goals [69].

#### A particularly critical component of participation for emergency governance is collective knowledge production.

This recognises that knowledge should come in part from - and stay connected to - local social realities [70]. Collaborative knowledge production empowers people and taps into their experiences. This has a critical effect on governance in terms of reframing the aim and justification of the actors involved, recognising that the participation of citizens - and LRG residents as a whole - is an essential element of local democracy.

**In cases where formal democratic and participatory opportunities are insufficient** to engage with governments during emergency responses, **multiple forms of discontent** (online action, demonstrations and riots) **emerge**. Across the world, demonstrations targeting the spectrum of complex emergencies ranging from the climate emergency to the housing crisis prepared the ground for new deliberative and participatory practices. Many of these are deeply rooted in specific contexts and expand the repertoire of local democracy. At the same time, there is often a gap between a “grandiose claim about citizen initiatives and their reality on the ground” [71], making them potentially flimsy and with no concrete outcomes.

The experiences and insights discussed here lead to the following conclusions on deliberation and participation:

- Complex emergencies impact differently on deliberation and participation. COVID-19 has been particularly challenging due to limits placed on physical interaction, while the climate emergency has strengthened relevant processes.
- Social media can be a critical enabler of productive participatory engagement but can also result in considerable polarisation and confrontation.
- Collective knowledge and data production are a major opportunity benefitting both democratic engagement and better decision making.

### 3.4 DIGITAL ERA GOVERNANCE

Cutting across all key components of democratic legitimacy is the enabling role of **digital era governance** which, in spite of its potentially corrosive role in terms of polarisation, must be acknowledged. In Europe, a handful of cities, such as Amsterdam, Helsinki [72] and Lyon (see Box 07) have set up innovative initiatives aimed at giving people more control over their data and the ways such data is used for governance.

#### Box 07: Citizen wallet | Lyon (France)

Lyon has introduced a pilot project for data privacy for users of city services [73, 74]. The city has experimented with a personal data management system since 2020, giving users of public services greater knowledge and control over their own data. The service allows people in the city to access a centralised data “citizen wallet” to see and control their stored personal data, and control how this data is shared with the city and third parties. Ultimately, the aim is to give people power over data collection and increase levels of trust in the city’s government.

In Latin America, cities advocated for open data during the procurement processes, balancing the velocity of budget allocation during COVID-19, underlining the importance of being accountable [75]. The city of Mexico accelerated plans for the digitalisation of services and free internet access points, [76] whilst Buenos Aires [77] and Bogota [78] created platforms for transparency and open government.

In India, the COVID-19 emergency has, in certain cases, enabled democratic processes through digital transparency. Since 2015, India has empowered cities through the 100 Smart Cities programme, which commits to them becoming data-smart and adopting open data strategies. Databases containing information on health, transport and climate have been made available to the public [79]. This data-oriented approach helped cities such as Gwalior (India) use data during emergencies, sharing information across stakeholders and fostering people’s trust through the transparent use of data. This then evolved into a standard procedure for public health crisis responses [80]. Similarly, as part of the Integrate Command Control Centre, Kochi’s (India) web platform allows citizens to file complaints about issues in the city or about data they have come across in the new open databases; the relevant officials are required to act on the complaints in a timely manner.

Despite the lack of innovation and concerns about the democratic domains of rights, **new technological solutions that bolster elements of democratic legitimacy have emerged across continents** (see Box 08). Applying the principles of trust and accountability to data and digital architectures has become a central concern in emergency responses and an area of significant innovation.

#### Box 08: Civic tech tools | Taipei

Taipei City is one of the first Asian cities to sign the Open Data Charter: open data and civic participation have been identified as one of the keys to Taiwan’s successful response to COVID-19 [81]. By making some COVID 19-related data accessible, Taipei empowered its civic tech community to create tens of tools including a map showing where masks were available for purchase. This bottom-up response has been heralded as central to the city’s success in tackling the pandemic. By openly communicating the challenges the government faced, rather than putting up a facade of invincibility, a host of decentralised actors were able to contribute to solving emergency-related problems by building on official information [82].

Some **natural risks do emerge with the rapid deployment of openness and digital technologies** such as weakness in data management and privacy. These risks can result in a breakdown of data privacy, which significantly reduces trust in local governance [83].

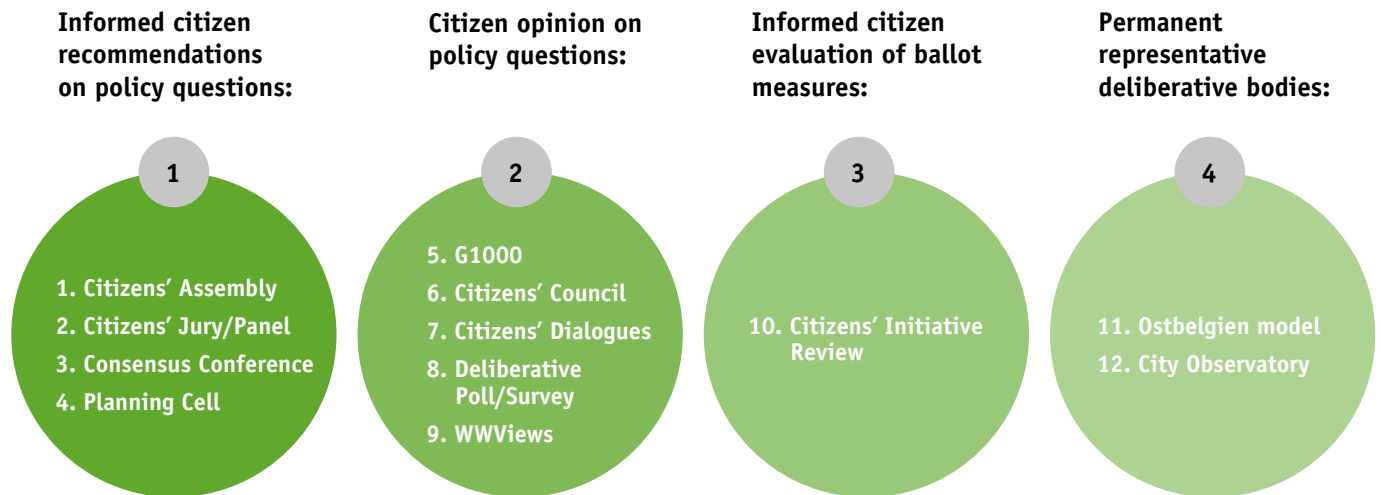
Finally, the use of social media has established a common ground for reporting the abuse of power and police as well as connecting with international organisations such as the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). This could be a result of broader access to data, information and social media so that people are more empowered to exercise citizen oversight, “to observe their representative’s job and reward or punish them” [57].

From these experiences and broader insights, we can conclude the following:

- Digital era governance is a critical enabler of more democratic responses to complex emergencies, whilst at the same time the risk of polarisation through social media has to be acknowledged.
- Allowing citizens to control personal data and enabling open data for local tech communities may bring new ways of supporting local infrastructure and services.
- Local government agendas must address the digital divide and offer public internet access points.
- The digitalisation of local services can contribute substantially to improving the resilience and communication of emergency responses.
- Digital transparency is particularly useful to balance reduced public engagement in a time of rapid and radical interventions.

## 4 EMERGENCY ASSEMBLIES

Figure 2: 12 deliberation types for four purposes



Source: OECD, 2020

As highlighted above, one key democratic practice increasingly informing more democratic emergency governance is citizens' assemblies. In this context, the EGI refers to **emergency assemblies, a practice that builds on the deliberative approach to mini-publics, citizen's assemblies, citizen juries and panels and, in the context of emergencies, on climate assemblies.** The OECD [15] has defined 12 different types of deliberative models, mostly for non-emergency governance modes (see Figure 2). Generally, they are well suited to addressing values-based dilemmas, complex problems that involve trade-offs, and long-term issues. Experiences with mini-publics are well documented for the Global North and are rapidly increasing for other parts of the world. 'Democracy beyond elections' [84] has published a list of more than [2,000 citizen's assemblies and similar processes from across the world](#) [85]. The overview below is mostly informed by insights from higher income cities and regions, but these insights are applicable beyond these contexts.

### 4.1 WHAT ARE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES?

**A citizens' assembly is a group of people brought together, typically by a government, to discuss a policy issue and suggest recommendations for the government to address that issue.** The group of people who deliberate are chosen so they are representative of the wider population in terms of demographics (e.g. age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status) and political opinion. Citizen's assemblies have been used to address a range of policy issues. They have been used to navigate political impasses on a controversial or divisive policy, such as gay marriage or abortion in Ireland, and they are increasingly used around the world to tackle complex emergencies such as mitigation of the climate crisis, addressing local social issues, and more recently to advise on policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery.

The key strengths of citizens' assemblies as a mechanism for democracy include [15, 86]:

- **Time and space for real debate:** The social, economic and overall societal consequences of measures can be well thought through and discussed.
- **Building trust:** Participants understand the work of politics better. They also come into contact with each other beyond information bubbles and echo chambers.
- **Signpost function:** Politicians perceive the population better and know exactly where the citizens can and want to go with concrete measures. Solutions with majority support become visible.
- **More than opinion polls:** Citizens' assemblies allow for more in-depth discussion of issues, expert knowledge, debate and personal exchange.
- **Involvement of all:** The phenomenon of certain social groups participating little in politics is reduced. This is ensured above all by the sortition procedure, but also by the payment of loss of earnings, support for childcare, care of relatives and translation services.
- **Lobby control:** The procedure is transparent and not very susceptible to lobby influence, specific campaign groups or vested interests
- **Valuing:** The discussion is fair and fact based. When people meet each other directly, the likelihood of hate speech and fake news is reduced.
- **Support:** The results support parliaments and councils in decision-making processes.
- **Diversity of voices:** The representative nature of the group improves the chances of putting forward better recommendations compared to a group of more like-minded people, as groupthink is less likely to occur and a wider range of lived experience is brought to the table.

## 4.2 TOWARDS EMERGENCY ASSEMBLIES

The focus of this section is on the most common form of a deliberative exercise, citizens' assemblies, examining how they have been - and can be - applied in the context of complex emergencies. Many of the lessons from this can be applied more broadly to other deliberative practices for emergencies. However, it is critical to acknowledge the importance of context and to recognise country and region-specific backdrops cutting across history, culture and related democratic and political practices.

**To date, with a few exceptions, there have been limited examples of deliberative exercises that have been set up exclusively to give recommendations to governments as part of an immediate and official emergency response.** The time it takes to set up and operate deliberative exercises investigating a key issue in depth means that there is limited scope for highly time-sensitive recommendations if deliberative structures are not put in place upfront. Deliberative practices have therefore rarely been used for routine or non-routine emergencies and instead tend to be applied to complex emergencies with longer time horizons, above all the climate emergency.

Moreover, deliberative processes have not so far been embedded in the day-to-day bureaucratic processes of government. There are two points to be made about this when it comes to complex emergencies. The first is that any recommendation made by an emergency assembly will only be implemented properly when sufficient accountability mechanisms are put in place once the emergency assembly makes its recommendations and then disbands. The second point is that governments would have to have deliberative structures already in place so that they are fully operational when a decision needs to be taken relating to an emergency. If these structures do not exist prior to an emergency, then the deliberative practice is likely to be poor in quality and output.

**Permanent citizens' assemblies are an attempt to address this, by developing a permanent governance structure for more fully integrated deliberation.** Key lessons on how emergency assemblies could be institutionalised are provided by two developed examples of permanent citizens' assemblies, one in German-speaking Belgium (the "Ostbelgien Model") and the other in Paris (see Box 09). Emergency assemblies beyond the Global North are also increasingly gaining traction, but with a lower degree of permanency. Delibera, a local NGO in Brazil, is advocating for permanent mini-publics across municipalities with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy [87]. A well-documented case from India includes a citizen's assembly in the experimental township of Auroville [88].

### Box 09: Learning from permanent citizens' assemblies

In 2019, the city of Paris and the parliament of Ostbelgien established permanent citizens' assemblies. In Paris, 100 residents over the age of 16 were randomly selected, taking into account proper representation (gender, age, geography) [89]. On the Belgian side, 24 randomly selected residents were invited to take part in the local government's permanent citizen's assembly initiative [90]. Permanent citizens' assemblies are made up of a citizens' council and multiple citizens' panels, which each act similarly to a citizen's assembly, addressing and making recommendations on a specific policy issue or question. The council sets the agenda for a small number of citizens' panels each year and works all year round to hold politicians and government officials to account to deliver on their recommendations. The council is made up of a representative sample of the public, who are members for 18 months, with a third of the membership rotating every 6 months. The panels are made up of separate members to the council. Members of the citizens' council have often been members of a previous panel, which helps to keep the expertise and knowledge of the democratic process within the group [91] [92].

**For deliberative processes to work as part of the response to complex emergencies, clarity about what is urgent and requires immediate action versus structural, adaptive issues is critical.** For example, as part of the climate emergency there is a key difference between urgent CO<sub>2</sub> emissions reduction and the adaptation of environments so that they respond better to increased flooding. These differences of time horizons exist for other complex emergencies, such as health, where there is tension between firefighting to treat acutely unwell people and longer-term investments in public health and preventative services. It is important that deliberative processes consider and address the differences in these types of decisions.

Climate assemblies (see Box 10) and citizens' councils for COVID-19 (see Box 11) are two mechanisms that seek to contribute, through deliberative practices, to a better and more democratic response to complex emergencies. **Their promise derives from their independence, their productive disruption to the existing bureaucratic system, their potential integration into existing decision-making structures, and their ability to consider issues over longer time horizons.** To address issues concerning poor delivery of policy recommendations, it is important to look at how to align the participatory and deliberative logic with the bureaucratic logic of government administrative processes, together with political logic.

**Box 10: Climate assembly | Budapest (Hungary)**

Following the election of a new climate-focused mayor, Budapest declared a climate emergency in 2019. With the pressure and support of multiple civil society groups, the Council of Budapest held the *Budapest Climate Assembly* over two weekends in September 2020, asking a representative group of 50 citizens the question: “There is a climate emergency. What should Budapest do?” The purpose of the assembly was for citizens to feed into the development and prioritisation of policies in the Budapest climate strategy, which will have funding of up to €8 billion by 2030 to decrease emissions. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, digital tools were used to aid the in-person meetings.

The assembly produced eight recommendations for policy-makers, each with strong support, across policy areas including buildings, green spaces, transport, place shaping, water use and ongoing climate-damaging projects. The successes of the assembly include giving greater publicity and political support to passing the climate strategy and paving the way for further participatory and deliberative practices in Budapest.

**Box 11: Citizens’ council for COVID-19 | Augsburg (Germany)**

Following a relatively mild first COVID-19 wave between March and August 2020, the City of Augsburg anticipated a more difficult second wave during that winter. In September 2020, under the leadership of the city’s mayor, the citizens’ council for COVID-19 was set up, the first of its kind in Germany. The council was established in two phases of three months each and brought together 10 citizens selected representatively from several hundred applications. The city was supported with advice from the *Buergerbeirat Demokratie*, the experiences of climate assemblies and a range of specific city-level best practices. Among the successes of the council was clearer communication of the responsibilities of the city as opposed to other tiers of government, considerable interest from local citizens and the media, and a range of specific, on-the-ground ideas to assist the COVID-19 response by the city.

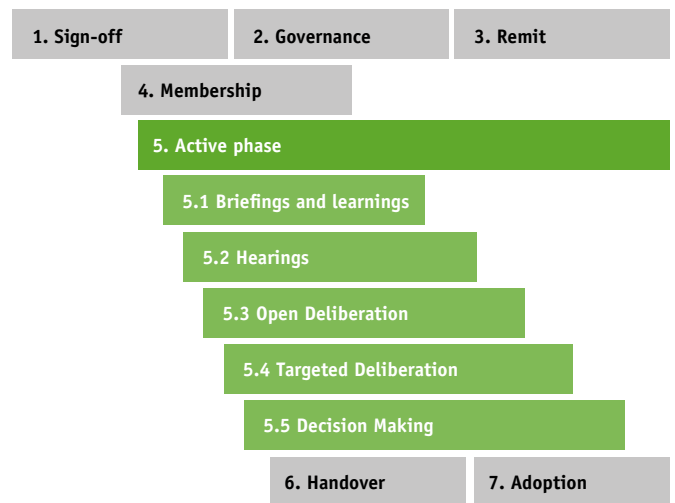
**4.3 OPERATIONAL ASPECTS**

Below follows an overview of one possible process for setting up and operationalising emergency assemblies to strengthen the legitimacy and trust in local institutions during complex emergencies. This approach builds on the experiences documented for the EGI case studies, engagement with practitioners, and the broader work on mini-publics and citizen’s assemblies by the OECD [15], Democracy R&D [93] and Beyond Elections [84].

In this suggested process, **emergency assemblies should be created by local and regional governments immediately and independently from the specific complex emergency that they have to address.** The fundamental idea here is to have the infrastructure and participants ready to engage at any point. Alternatively, emergency assemblies can initially be structured around the climate emergency as an ongoing, long emergency relevant for any given context. To involve civil society as a whole media support is important which may be more challenging when a specific complex emergency is not evident. Institutionalising a climate assembly as a proxy emergency assembly might be one possible response to this.

Figure 3 below summarises a possible process of implementing and operating emergency assemblies. For long and complex emergencies, the active emergency assemblies phase could be repeated regularly, possibly focusing on the different and most urgent aspects of emergency responses.

**Figure 3: Suggested process of setting up and running emergency assemblies**



1. Decision to set up emergency assembly ideally fully supported by local government and assembly/parliament via vote; determination of the available resources
2. Setting up of emergency assembly governing and advisory group to oversee key decisions, governance arrangements and ensure impartiality of information provided
3. Definition of remit and scope, particularly clarifying whether this is a permanent emergency assembly or dedicated to a specific complex emergency
4. Establishing emergency assembly membership (determining overall size – minimum of 20, typically 100 people), consider rotation for permanent emergency assemblies. Participants drawn from lottery and then identified via sortition to ensure good representation of the population (e.g. by age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, place of residence)

5. Active emergency assembly phase with a series of online or in-person meetings and contact points over several weeks or up to one year; ad hoc meetings, on several dates, often over weeks or months. Different formats include surveys, workshops, round tables, design thinking engagement, Multi-Criteria Analysis (MCA), town halls, and others. Facilitation needs to be impartial.
  - 5.1 Briefing and learning sessions supported by experts and local government institutions (based on comprehensive, balanced, unbiased, and accurate information)
  - 5.2 Hearings of stakeholders and the general public
  - 5.3 Deliberation among participants, sharing of opinions and further clarification of technical/scientific input
  - 5.4 Deliberation to identify policy options and to assess different options (opportunity to employ MCA)
  - 5.5 Decision making and agreement on recommendations. No requirement for consensus/voting as pragmatic optional
6. Hand over recommendations to government, review by public administration and refinement of policy options
7. Adoption of new policies by local government based on emergency assemblies' recommendations

## 5 AN EMERGENCY GOVERNANCE CULTURE BASED ON FEMINISM

**New approaches to democratic governance are needed to eliminate pervasive forms of discrimination and inequality whilst also coping with the complex socio-political nature of crises and emergencies. Building feminist governance systems and practices at the local level offers an alternative to 'command and control' structures that too easily erase people's diverse needs and aspirations** [94]. Feminism explicitly combats the main structures of oppression: the patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism [95]. The recent COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the unequal distribution of burdens on women linked to lockdowns and other measures, such as the critical need for (health) care. Such a reality underlines the need for leaders and governments to pay particular attention to the different experiences of the population in the context of complex emergencies. From the individual power of action through promoting a feminist leadership, to a collective approach from local governance that prioritises empathy, to the broader scale of proposals for local democracy through the lens of caring, this section presents three key aspects of a renewed, just, and inclusive emergency governance.

### 5.1 FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Leadership and emergency governance are commonly associated with top-down, command-and-control approaches. Yet, **alternative and more democratic interpretations of leadership based on feminist commitments have the potential to offer a truly inclusive and empowering form of governance**. This section expands on proposals for *feminist* leadership, which here has a broader meaning than *feminine* leadership since it not only focuses on women's inclusion and participation in leadership positions but also on that of other gender identities and structurally discriminated groups – and indeed of all people who are committed to feminism's proposals for the just and inclusive exercising of power. It also acknowledges and accepts that knowledge goes hand in hand with personal emotions and experiences and it values them in their plurality and diversity [95, 96].

In that sense, **feminist leaders are committed to depatriarchising politics and public policies**. Feminism opposes sexist representations of who and what authority is – usually portrayed as 'neutral' and 'objective' – and deconstructs the dominant norms such as exaggerated virilism in attitudes (body language, voice and language, clothes, etc.). Feminist leadership is attentive to people's voices, their situations, needs and aspirations. It listens to all, and fosters collaboration and solidarity, as well as transparency and communication. It harnesses the diversity of experiences to resolve conflicts and generates co-created solutions working in solidarity [97]. However, for feminist leadership to thrive and constitute a radical alternative to traditional predatory leadership, it needs support from the right institutional culture, one based on decentralised, multilevel, and participatory structures that include a plurality of perspectives [97]. Through a virtuous cycle of cultural shifts in our representations of power, institutional support and feminist leadership, the exercise of political power can shift. Feminist leaders actively seek to share power (empower) by giving power to [98] the collective [94, 99]. Doing so repurposes **leadership as a transformative lever for change so that there is a more collaborative, horizontal and empowering approach to power**. In that sense, feminist leadership aims to use power to remove the barriers to leadership and decision making experienced by underrepresented groups (see Box 12 and 13).

#### Box 12: National Network of Municipalities for Diversity, Inclusion and Non-discrimination & Feminist municipalities network in Chile

Several municipalities in Chile have built an informal network to extend policies around diversity, inclusion, non-discrimination, education, and the promotion of human rights. They share knowledge horizontally and advocate for law enforcement to protect minorities' rights and representation. Specific approaches and offices within each municipality are dedicated exclusively to migrants, LGBTQIA+, women, and indigenous groups. Recently a second network has been established so that more municipalities can adopt a feminist approach.

Furthermore, feminist leadership considers intersectionality as central to understanding the multiplicity of inequalities which intersect with gender, and the specific forms of domination and experience created by these intersections. Ultimately, **leadership inspired by intersectional feminism fosters inclusion and empowerment** [100]. To address the unequal distribution of the impacts of complex emergencies, feminist leaders pay particular attention to tending to, and protecting, structurally discriminated and marginalised communities who are most vulnerable to emergencies [101]. To do this, feminist leaders are more attentive to their respective needs and aspirations. Understanding vulnerability is itself a complex task that requires leaders to steer away from essentialising people into fixed social categories.

### Box 13: Feminist leadership | Longueuil (Canada)

In the city of Longueuil, Mayor Catherine Fournier and City Councillor Lysa Bélaïcha describe their leadership and governance approach as feminist. Equal representation between genders and inclusion of diversity was a key element of their political campaign. Before being elected in 2021, they ensured that candidates from underrepresented and marginalised groups were placed in some of the most promising districts.

Beyond their leadership style, the mayor and her team are working to transform the fabric of the city from a traditional administration that delivers technical services, to a place of care and wellbeing.

Ultimately, in the context of complex emergencies, a municipal approach that is feminist, caring, and empathic creates more social cohesion, one of the most important priorities for the mayor.

Ultimately, **feminist leadership is based on the recognition that every voice is essential to the functioning of the democratic process** [102]. This principle promotes a diversity of experiences to resolve conflict, generate co-created solutions and work in solidarity and collaboration [103]. To accomplish it, such leadership strives for openness, flexibility and adaptability, and inclusion [104].

## 5.2 GOVERNANCE BY EMPATHY

In 2020, the EGI referred to the concept of ‘governance by empathy’ as an important principle of emergency governance (see [PB02](#)). Feminist local leaders are also using it to define a feminist way of exercising power and governing, especially at local and regional government level given that this level is closest to citizens and residents.

**Empathy is something to be continuously fostered and reinforced.** Empathy is a conscious effort to place oneself in someone else’s shoes/situation. It requires an extension towards the other to identify and recognise their experience and aspirations, and address their specific needs [105]. Although it can look like a natural character trait, empathy is socially constructed and it is important to acknowledge that the degree of empathy may vary among people based on their

culture, beliefs and prejudices. This potentially represents a serious limitation to the concept. Empathy is therefore something that has been consciously developed and cultivated, from an inclusive (and for instance, feminist) perspective [70]. **Practising empathy can help to better identify and reduce inequities and injustices, while extending empathy is vital if we are to reduce polarisation** [97].

**People rather than institution-centric policy** making is particularly relevant as part of emergency responses that require sacrifices and compromises. Particular attention should be paid to the way citizens interact with governments and public service provision. Human and user-centric design of policies and services take priority, sometimes even over cost efficiencies and budget concerns. Indeed, policies should not be decided and designed from above, but should take account of situated needs for care and justice [106]. Proactively searching out desegregated data that are more granular (contextual and qualitative) and localised is, for instance, key to an inclusive and gender-responsive policy [107]. Governance by empathy therefore combines feeling (driven by conscious inclusive objectives) with action.

**Local governments are particularly well positioned to engage in governance by empathy.** Above all, it requires experience of life from the perspective of citizens [30b] and having proximity to local concerns. Politicians and officials at higher levels of government will find this far more difficult. **Governance by empathy** can be achieved by enabling a distributive model for governance arrangements where power exists through fair and dynamic relations based on solidarity and collaboration [108]. It also encourages collective responsibility between individuals, (local) governments, civil society and the private sector through various mechanisms and social networks [109]. Furthermore, promoting association and solidarity over competition is encouraged by, and facilitates, governance by empathy.

We propose a rethink of local democracy based on what feminist analysis of care work and relations teaches us about our fundamental interdependencies. There is a need to reshape participation and decision-making processes – and democracy as a whole – so that it prioritises local and caring democratic institutions, processes, and practices.

## 5.3 CARING AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

**While services, policies and the infrastructures of care are a central substantive concern of emergency responses, feminist reflections on care and caring work and relations on the ground provide a backdrop to more democratic emergency governance.** For the EGI, care doesn’t just mean For the EGI, care doesn’t just mean “hands-on care, or the work people do when directly looking after the physical and emotional needs of others – critical and urgent as this dimension of caring remains. ‘Care’ is also a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life. (...) Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive” [110]. Additionally, care practices are based on people’s situated and grounded knowledge and experiences, which are the starting point for fostering a caring and just democracy [111].

**Care offers healing and reparations to longstanding structures of exclusion and oppression.** Care is both a right and a co-responsibility [112]. Feminist approaches to care highlight the relational and interdependent, but still unequal, capacities of care providers and receivers. The city of Bogota is advancing an innovative care agenda which has been partially informed by the COVID-19 experience and has recently introduced its 3R strategy of recognising, redistributing and reducing care burdens.

The pandemic has shed light on historically hidden care and domestic work, especially in occidental societies. Experiences of inequalities in the private sphere relating to care work are also numerous and gender-based, as well as collective and society-driven phenomena, and are therefore inherently political matters. **A caring approach to democracy recognises and re-values the so-called reproduction work, activities and relations and the people and groups associated with them.** It refuses the symbolic and material divisions and hierarchisation between the public and private spheres, production and reproductive activities, which widen inequalities [102, 103]. Overall, feminist and caring local politics analyse how the devalued and hidden informal economy and unpaid care and domestic work may be impacted for the worse by policy changes and emergency measures [102, 113]. Therefore, local and regional governments are particularly well positioned to challenge hierarchies and compartmentalisation through adapted, inclusive and caring democratic responses to crises (see Box 12) [99, 113]. Democratic and caring cities and territories highlight the experiences of inequality in the private sphere as being collective and society-driven and therefore an inherently political matter (see Box 13).

**Caring democracies are people centred.** One area of focus should be to improve the fabric of society through solidarity [102, 103]. This requires building on our interdependencies, looking at how each of us relates to the other, even through 'weak ties' [70, 114] to generate attachment and care for others through democracy and the commons. Creating bonds and ties (and recognising and valuing them) is the opposite of domination. The goal here is to transform the relationships in society in order to reconcile us to each other and feel proximity, reciprocity and camaraderie [115]. Such a model requires continuous buy-in from residents and excluded voices within a framework of care.

**Democratic processes based on care foster inclusive decision-making and deliberation.** They focus on multi-stakeholder and co-creation as governance models [94] to foster policy dialogue and inclusive decision-making [112]. In summary, **a caring local democracy is based on an understanding of the importance and interdependence of the experiences, knowledge and voices of all,** actively seeking out shared understanding and solidarity in particular through the proximity afforded at the local and regional levels of government. Ultimately, its goal is to foster individual agency and collective empowerment. Whilst care is a central tenet for democratic governance at any point in time, it becomes even more critical as part of emergency governance.

In conclusion, a feminist agenda for a new emergency governance culture builds on, and expands, many of the principles of intersectional feminism, empathy and care: to eliminate all discrimination and inequality and advance just democratic institutions, processes and practices. As a minimum, it builds awareness and transparency [116]. It also expands inclusive access to decision-making spaces and promotes mechanisms for diversity in participatory and representative democracy [117]. Most importantly, it recognizes underrepresented groups' agency and diverse voices, and ensures conditions that allow for their participation in public and political life [103]. **Revaluating and fostering our relations and recognising our interdependencies, the role of feminist leadership, governance by empathy and building a local caring democracy in times of emergency** relies on building a distributive, participatory and empowered model for power, where leadership exists based on relationships of fairness and solidarity [98], where governance builds collective responsibility and trust between individuals, communities and (local) governments, and where governments are committed to protecting democracy against all odds during emergencies [118].

## 6 CONCLUSION

Given the complex nature of questions about democracy, which become even more critical when part of emergency governance, this policy brief aims to establish a point of departure for future engagement, deliberation and practical advice.

The cornerstone of this input is a broader recognition of what democratic legitimacy entails. Particularly for urban-level engagement, it is important to ensure that the emphasis on participatory practices is not just expanded to embrace deliberation but recognises the fundamental components of representative democracy. Furthermore, good governance and rights need to be considered from the outset, and cities and regional governments now have a unique opportunity to compensate for democratic backsliding under conditions of emergencies.

A particularly important addition to these critical components is the development of a new culture of democratic emergency governance. Here, the policy brief has shown that feminist frameworks can lead the way in informing not just conceptual frameworks but concrete practices. Together with the care analyses and practices and advancing governance by empathy, these frameworks can be mainstreamed into emergency programmes today and be developed further.

The brief has also shown that many of the more abstract discussions about democracy and emergency responses can be directly linked to specific urban practices on the ground. Moving forward, learning more from these practices is the most promising next step for better and more democratic emergency governance, together with additional support for daring and innovative initiatives.



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