

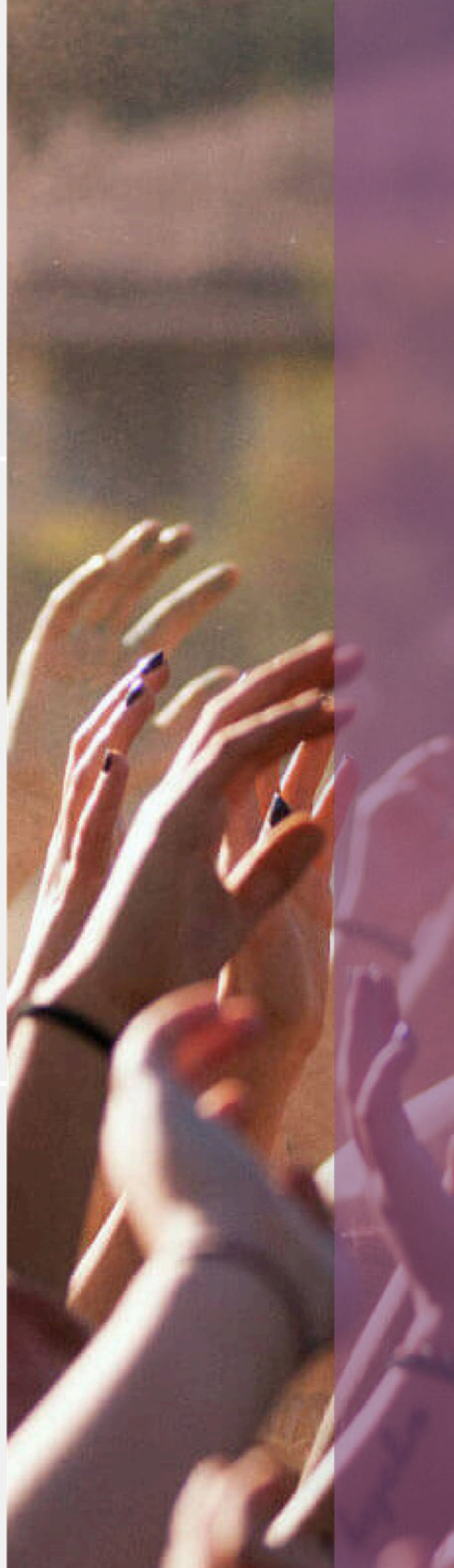


Outcome document 6: Roundtable on Democracy, Multilateralism and Migration

Rights, Accountability, and Political Agency across Borders

Understanding the links between
multilateralism & democracy to
tackle global challenges more
effectively

May 2026



Context

On 26 March 2026, the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Geneva Graduate Institute convened the sixth roundtable in a series examining the intersections between democracy and multilateralism. Held at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, the session brought together experts and practitioners from international organisations, civil society, academia, foundations, and diplomatic circles to discuss the links between democracy, migration, and multilateral governance.

The discussion was structured around the issue brief *Rights, Accountability, and Political Agency across Borders*, authored by Dr Valerio Simoni.¹ This outcome document synthesises the main analytical threads and collective recommendations that emerged, organised around four cross-cutting themes.

THEME 1: Migration governance as a stress test for democracy

A central point of convergence in the discussion was that migration governance offers a particularly sharp lens on the condition of democracy itself. The way states treat people crossing borders reflects, in concentrated form, the quality of democratic institutions, including judicial independence, protection of fundamental rights, transparency in decision-making, and accountability in the exercise of public authority.

Where democratic safeguards weaken, rights violations against migrants tend to become easier to justify and harder to contest. Pushbacks, arbitrary detention, collective expulsions, shrinking civic space, and the criminalisation of solidarity were discussed not simply as migration-policy failures, but as warning signs of wider democratic deterioration.

Several participants stressed that migration is not only affected by democratic weakening; it is also actively used within democratic politics. Public and policy debates on asylum, irregular crossings, labour migration, and border control are frequently mobilised to channel broader anxieties, produce divisions between “insiders” and “outsiders”, and reframe who is seen as deserving of rights and recognition. In this sense, migration politics can become a driver of democratic decline rather than merely a symptom of it.

¹ The Issue Brief “Rights, Accountability, and Political Agency across Borders” that was presented at the Policy Dialogue can be accessed [here](#).

The discussion also highlighted a theme that deserves greater emphasis: migration-related disinformation. Participants pointed to false claims about non-citizens voting, targeted campaigns against the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), and broader forms of media manipulation that cast doubt on democratic legitimacy while deepening suspicion toward migrants. Several noted that such narratives are not only peripheral distortions; they increasingly strike at the core of democratic processes themselves.

A further point raised was that attacks on migrants often precede or foreshadow broader attacks on rights. Participants suggested that migration should be understood not only as a separate field of policy conflict, but also as an early-warning site where wider transformations in democratic culture and public argument become visible. In this perspective, the treatment of non-citizens may serve as an early warning indicator of democratic decline.

Recommendations

- 1. Integrate migration governance into democratic health assessments. Human rights monitoring bodies, democracy indices, and multilateral review mechanisms should systematically include migration governance as an indicator of democratic resilience.*
- 2. Treat migration-related disinformation as a democratic integrity issue. States and multilateral actors should strengthen counter-disinformation strategies and support independent media and fact-checking initiatives.*
- 3. Encourage research and monitoring frameworks that track how anti-migrant measures, rhetoric, and exceptional governance practices anticipate or accompany wider democratic deterioration.*
- 4. Monitor the links between democratic backsliding and migration policy trajectories. Restrictions on migrants' rights should be recognised as potential precursors to wider democratic regression.*

THEME 2: The accountability gap between norms and practice

The effectiveness of multilateral frameworks ultimately depends on domestic implementation, monitoring, and enforcement, which are often shaped by political positioning. The dialogue highlighted a well-developed yet underperforming normative framework. Human-rights instruments, refugee law, labour standards, together constitute a dense normative landscape.

Yet they coexist with practices that often move in the opposite direction, especially where migration management is increasingly shaped by deterrence, externalisation, bilateral deals, and security-first approaches, or by short-term, transactional logics that sideline broader human-rights and governance concerns. There is clear tension between state sovereignty and human rights in relation to accountability challenges. Policy approaches tend to fall along a spectrum between security-driven and people-centred models, with the former prioritising border control, non-discrimination in a limited sense, and state sovereignty.

Externalisation poses a central accountability problem, with reduced scrutiny, weakened judicial oversight, and greater distance between decision-makers and those most exposed to harm. The relocation of migration governance into the security realm has had long-lasting effects: once migration is primarily handled through security institutions, surveillance expands, legal safeguards weaken, and control measures can become politically profitable even when ineffective or abusive. Harsh measures are often politically rewarded, which reinforces fragmentation and weak accountability.

Recommendations

- 1. Reaffirm that existing human-rights, refugee, and labour norms remain the baseline for migration governance, including in bilateral and mini-lateral arrangements.*
- 2. Strengthen accountability within existing frameworks. States and multilateral institutions should make fuller use of existing review mechanisms under the GCM, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and regional processes, with clearer follow-up on commitments and stronger civil society participation.*
- 3. Develop accountability safeguards for externalised migration governance. Agreements involving third-country migration control should include clear human rights due diligence obligations and accessible remedy mechanisms.*
- 4. Use existing multilateral review and coordination spaces, including the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF), regional reviews, and Geneva-based forums and policy dialogues, more strategically to expose implementation gaps and sustain accountability pressure.*
- 5. Place migrants' political rights on the agenda of future review cycles. Political participation, freedom of association, and protection from politically motivated persecution should be explicitly addressed in future revisions and review processes.*

THEME 3: Political agency, participation, and representation beyond token inclusion

A recurring conclusion of the dialogue was that excluding migrants from decision-making processes is not only a normative failure but also a failure of governance capacity. Participants stressed that policy processes are weakened when they exclude the knowledge, lived experience, and social capital of those most directly affected. In areas such as housing, education, and local integration policy, exclusion leads to less effective and less legitimate outcomes.

The dialogue challenged dominant framings of migrants as passive recipients of policy or solely as economic contributors. Migrants are political actors: they vote where permitted, organise collectively, support communities through remittances, and participate in social and political mobilisation across borders. Particular attention was given to the local level. Cities and municipalities are often the primary sites where integration, social cohesion, and democratic participation take shape in practice, yet they remain under-resourced and insufficiently represented in multilateral migration discussions.

Participants also emphasised the importance of civic education, including multilingual and community-based approaches that incorporate migrants' histories, legal rights, and lived experiences. Political agency is a core feature of democracy itself, and migrants are therefore central to democracy rather than marginal to it. Migrant political agency must be foregrounded through elections, advocacy, public debate, and grassroots mobilisation.

Recommendations

- 1. Institutionalise migrant participation in governance processes at local, national, and multilateral levels, including municipal planning, national reviews, and UN processes. Invest in multilingual civic education as a tool for democratic participation, social cohesion, and rights awareness.*
- 2. Strengthen channels for migrant and diaspora political representation, including*
- 3. through voting rights where possible, advisory platforms, and more robust inclusion in multilateral review processes.*
- 4. Strengthen the capacity of municipalities and other locally rooted organisations (for example community groups, unions, and faith-based networks) to mediate between multilateral commitments and the concrete settings in which migration governance is lived, contested, and implemented.*

5. *Develop stronger qualitative and quantitative indicators of migrants' living conditions, including housing, labour, access to services, and civic participation, so that formal commitments can be measured against actual outcomes.*

THEME 4: Multilateralism Under Strain – Reinvesting in Existing Mechanisms

The dialogue took place against the backdrop of significant strain on the multilateral system. The withdrawal of key states from international commitments, the rise of transactional bilateralism, and the weakening of shared normative frameworks have all reduced the capacity for coordinated migration governance. However, participants warned against abandoning multilateral frameworks simply because they are imperfect. Existing mechanisms still matter, including the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) review processes, the UN Network on Migration, and related Geneva-based forums. Some noted, however, that these frameworks retain important gaps, including limited engagement with migrants' political rights and persistent state reluctance to move beyond narrow sovereignty logics.

The International Migration Review Forum, held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in May 2026, was mentioned as one concrete opportunity to revisit implementation gaps and push for more serious accountability.

The dialogue highlighted that existing multilateral standards and mechanisms should be used more effectively, rather than replaced by new architectures. The International Migration Review, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, and the work of relevant Special Procedures were identified as underused avenues for accountability and norm reinforcement. A strong emphasis was placed on the need to reconnect Geneva's institutional processes with ground-level realities and with the actors who experience migration governance most directly, including local authorities, civil society, youth organisations, and migrant-led groups. This echoes the participants' call to reconnect migration debates to broader social-policy questions — labour, housing, welfare, education, territorial inequality.

Recommendations

1. *Use the International Migration Review as a strategic accountability moment to strengthen follow-up on commitments and elevate gaps in political rights protection.*
2. *Create structured channels between Geneva-based processes and sub-national actors, including municipalities, parliaments, youth groups, and civil society organisations.*

3. *Apply democratic standards internally within multilateral institutions, including transparency, meaningful participation, and accessible accountability mechanisms.*
4. *Reconnect migration debates to broader social-policy discussions on labour, housing, welfare, education, and territorial inequality, rather than treating migration as a self-contained problem.*

Conclusion

The dialogue affirmed that democracy, multilateralism, and migration are deeply interconnected dimensions of a shared political challenge. The quality of democratic institutions shapes the conditions migrants face. Migration governance reveals the extent to which democratic commitments are upheld in practice. The strength of the multilateral system determines whether shared standards can be meaningfully sustained.

Across all four themes, participants converged on a common diagnosis: the institutional tools already largely exist. What remains insufficient is the political will to use them fully, the capacity to connect them across levels of governance, and the inclusivity required to ensure that migrants themselves are present as political actors rather than policy subjects. At a moment of renewed pressure on multilateralism, the dialogue called for reinvestment in existing frameworks, local institutions, and democratic culture. How states govern migration remains one of the clearest tests of whether democratic and multilateral commitments are being upheld in practice.