

**open**Democracy

free thinking for the world



**Strategic Plan 2020-22**

*(updated August 2021)*

# Mission

**openDemocracy's goal is to challenge power and inspire change, by producing reliable, trustworthy journalism and through building skills, knowledge and capacity within the media and civil society across the world.**

# Vision

**We seek to make our world more transparent and equitable by:**

- challenging the global backlash against democracy and human rights
- making corporate and political power more accountable
- stimulating the growth of a more inclusive international media ecosystem

# How?

**To achieve this we:**

- Publish high-quality reporting, analysis, multimedia and debate
- Run long-term 'on the job' training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media, particularly diverse women, LGBTIQ people and people of colour
- Collaborate with, train, learn from and share intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society, from grassroots activists to journalists, lawyers, policymakers, educators and others
- Invest in building a more sustainable business model, including via reader support

# Theory of change

## If openDemocracy

Reaches and engages more people with high-quality reporting, analysis, multimedia and debate

Runs long-term training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media

Collaborates with, trains, exchanges learning and intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society

Invests in building a more sustainable business model, including via reader support

## This will then

Challenge the backlash against democracy and human rights

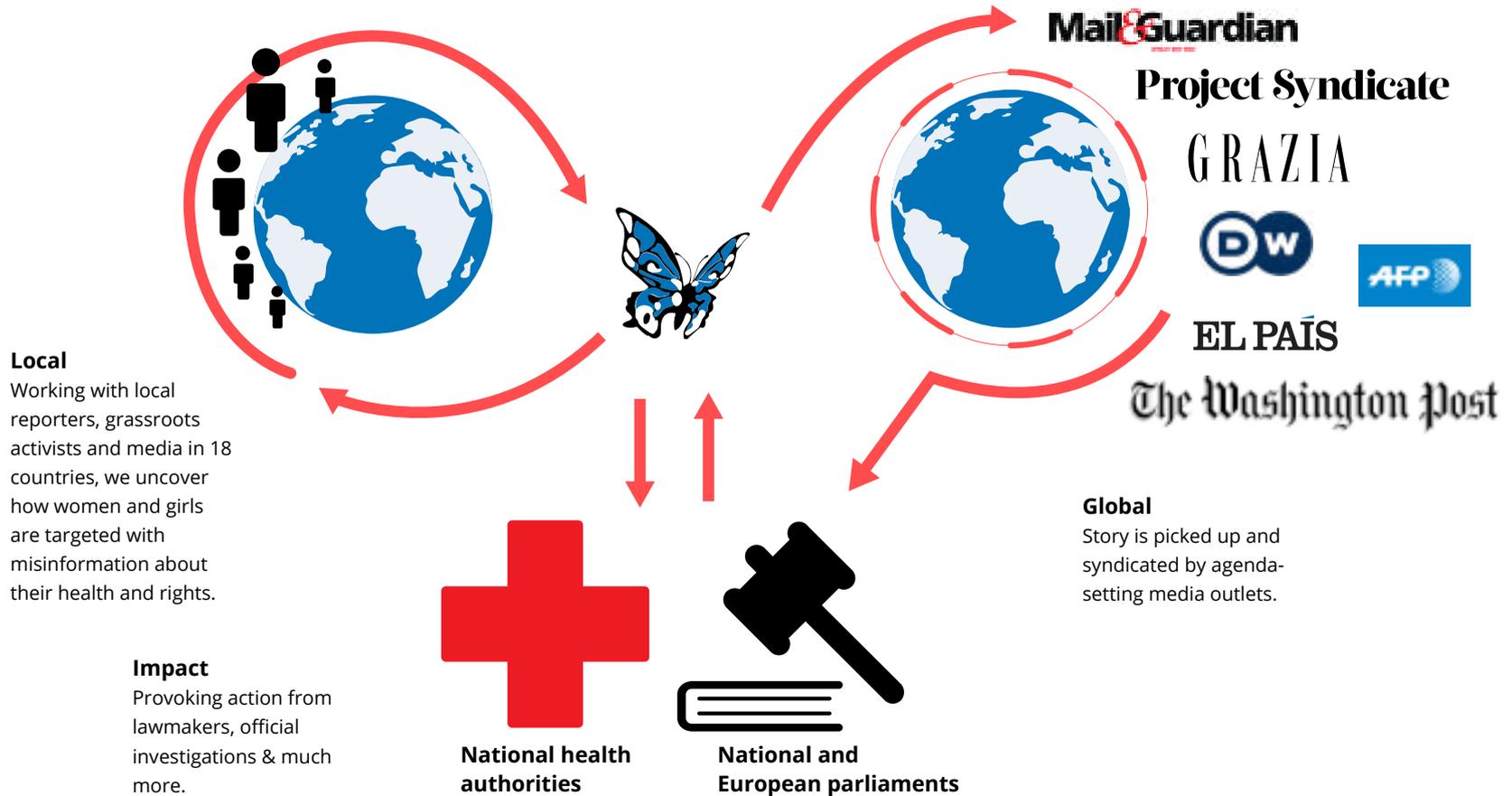
Help make corporate and political power more accountable

## The impact will be

A more transparent and equitable world

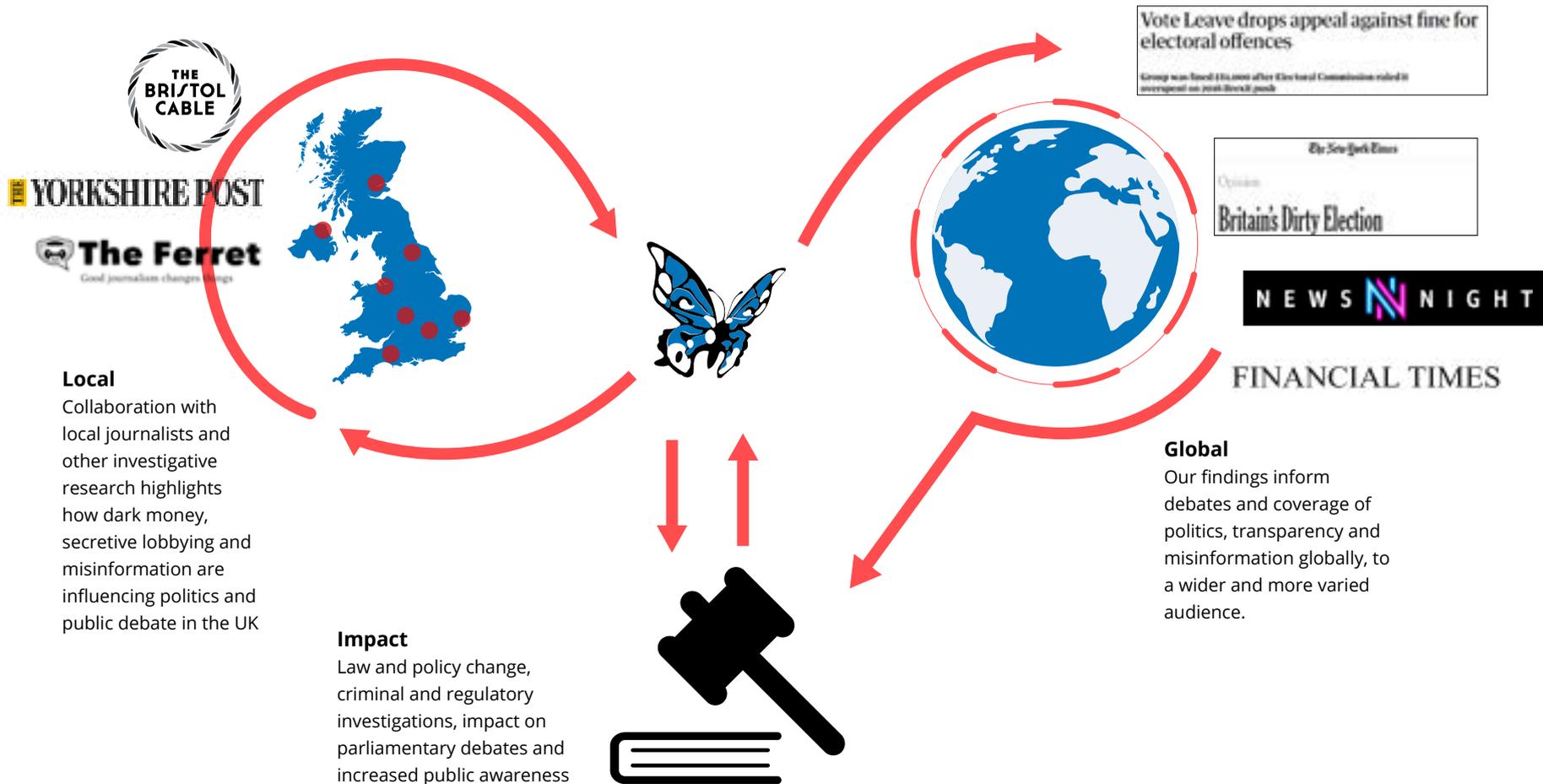
# How? Bridging global and local (case study 1)

As a global organisation with strong links to local networks, openDemocracy is uniquely positioned to act as a bridge between global policy and media debates, and local contexts and perspectives. This diagram shows how a 'Tracking the Backlash' investigation into anti-abortion misinformation has impacted lawmakers, health authorities and media.



# Case study 2: 'Dark money' investigations

This diagram shows how our UK investigative journalism has led to law and policy change, and has increased public awareness about dark money, misinformation and secretive lobbying.



# Strategic objectives 2020-22

## Objective 1: Grow and deepen the impact of openDemocracy's journalism across the world

### Context

COVID-19 has not only prompted global health and economic crises. Authoritarians have used it as a pretext to crack down on civic rights and freedoms; corporations and governments, to dramatically expand surveillance and to evade laws which protect our planet. COVID has exacerbated many underlying inequities in our world, and exposed long-term failures of our economic systems, global governance and political leadership. It has shown how misinformation isn't just a threat to elections. It can (and does) kill people. And it has sparked louder demands for justice, equity and accountability across the world.

In this context, we need reliable, trustworthy journalism more than ever. To hold leaders to account; to expose injustice and abuse of power. But also to inform and serve people. To lift up the voices of the censored and marginalised. And to facilitate progress on building a better world, long after the pandemic.

From the UK to Brazil, openDemocracy's reporting has led to action – by parliaments, regulators, criminal and health authorities. It has forced changes in the law and policy, from ending donor secrecy in the UK to investigations by official health bodies across Africa and Latin America. And it has provided a hub for debate and learning among those working to advance democracy and human rights globally.

We are reaching and engaging wider audiences. In 2019 our work appeared in media across more than 60 different countries, including The New York Times, Washington Post, Guardian, BBC, CNN, New Yorker, El País Brazil, Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle, Internazionale, Newsweek Poland, the Mail and Guardian; and lifestyle magazines like Grazia, Ebony and The Face. It has also strengthened the work of civil society across the world – from grassroots mobilisations to strategic litigation.

From 2020-22, we will grow and deepen our impact.

## Indicators of success

- Growth in readership and engagement, on our site and across our social channels and newsletters
- Syndication and reportage in other media, particularly those outside progressive news filter bubbles (eg centre-right news media; lifestyle or youth-focused outlets)
- Influencer pickup and engagement
- Evidence of impact on law, policy, parliamentary debates, reports and research

## Targets/KPIs

### Between 2020-22 we want to achieve:

- 50% growth in on-site readership, from 7.3 million readers annually to 11 million.
- Doubling of social media engagement on Facebook and Twitter (for example, doubling our Facebook interactions from 44,700 to 89,400/quarter; doubling Twitter engagements from 13,800 to 27,500/quarter\*).
- 20% annual growth in 'engaged' newsletter recipients, from 50,700 to 86,500 across three years.
- Strong presence in at least two new social channels (for example, tripling Instagram interactions annually from 600 to 5380/quarter; gaining 10,000 Instagram followers; tripling revenue from YouTube to £100 per quarter)
- Syndication or citation in at least 67 media outlets annually, 11 of which defined as 'agenda-setters'
- Impact on policy globally (see Objective 2)

*\*Targets based on current social media data; may be adjusted based on changes to platform content selection and promotion algorithms and/or other circumstances.*

# Strategic objectives 2020-22

## Objective 2: Expose and challenge the global backlash against democracy and human rights

### Context

From Viktor Orban's 'illiberal democracy' to the rise of authoritarianism and repression in Brazil, the United States and other key vectors of power worldwide, there has been a growing global backlash against democracy and human rights. Surveys show declining public trust in both democracy and in the institutions that underpin it, while populist leaders seek to undermine the principles of universal human rights, sowing division and polarisation.

From the powerful video testimonies and investigative reporting produced by *democraciaAbierta*, our multi-lingual Latin America section; to the voices lifted up by NAWA (our North Africa, West Asia project); to the corruption and oppression that our Eurasia section, *oDR*, reveals: all of openDemocracy's journalism exposes, challenges and interrogates these growing threats.

In particular, we have revealed how conservative 'backlash' movements seek to roll back hard-won rights and freedoms for women and LGBTIQ people. Our

investigations have shown how – long before coronavirus – women and girls were targeted with misinformation about their health and rights. We've investigated the global networks of these movements, many financed by US and Russian dark money. And we've mapped their influence on elections, courts, education and health systems.

This work is already having an impact on lawmakers, media and global health bodies (see case study 1). Now we're scaling it by making a strategic investment in *Tracking the Backlash*: an international consortium of journalists dedicated to exposing and reversing the backlash against women's and LGBTIQ rights. Just as the ICIJ and OCCRP have built networks to expose tax evasion and corruption, *Tracking the Backlash* aims to put the anti-women and anti-LGBTIQ 'backlash' on the map at a similar scale. We're making this move because we see a gap in public awareness and policy; but also because we know that this backlash is an assault on all of us. It is part of a wider project to establish a new, less democratic and more unequal political order – and it must be urgently resisted.

## Indicators of success

- Increased public awareness of the networks and tools being used to influence laws, policies and public opinion against democracy and human rights
- Decreased power/ability of 'backlash' proponents to reach and influence the public and policymakers
- A larger (and stronger) network of allies committed to women's and LGBTIQ rights globally, working with and/or supporting the goals of Tracking the Backlash
- Stronger laws and policies to protect and strengthen democracy and human rights globally

## Targets/KPIs

### Between 2020-22 we want to achieve:

- At least 25 major investigative projects or series which expose and challenge the backlash against human rights and democracy
- At least 75 substantive actions as a result of those investigations by stakeholders (eg citations by policymakers, law change, take-downs of hate speech or other backlash propaganda on social platforms, new regulation or other policies/actions which curtail the power of backlash actors)
- At least 750 citations or syndications of that work in other media, including at least 90 in outlets that aren't considered specifically 'progressive' or left-wing (See Objective 4)
- At least 70% growth in Tracking the Backlash readership
- At least 50% growth in Tracking the Backlash social media followers
- At least 10,000 Tracking the Backlash newsletter followers

# Strategic objectives 2020-22

## Objective 3: Build skills and capacity among groups under-represented in the media

### Context

The exclusion and under-representation in media and policymaking of diverse women, LGBTIQ people, people of colour and other non-elite groups is a key part of what enables illiberal ‘backlash’ movements to flourish. Strengthening the skills and confidence of such under-represented groups to engage in media and public debates, and to pursue journalism, is core to our approach: if we change the media, we change the debate.

There is intense global demand for the training and skills we provide. Since 2015, we have run training and mentorship for aspiring writers and civic leaders in the Middle East and North Africa (designed and led by those from the region). Our Shine A Light investigative project has its own Bright Young Reporter programme. And in 2018, our inaugural 50.50 reporting fellowships received more than 800 applications from 90 countries around the world for just four positions. These fellows have already produced some of our strongest work,

including undercover reporting and data journalism, and powerful first-person accounts – of the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised communities; of experiences of ‘gay conversion therapy’; and of training at fundamentalist camps.

In addition to exposing wrongdoing, global money flows and flawed policy, it is vital that we document and empower the resistance to the backlash. This is why investment in the media skills and capacity of diverse women, LGBTIQ people, people of colour and other groups under-represented in the media is a key priority.

## Indicators of success

- More journalists from under-represented groups working across global, national and regional media, with investigative capacity and confidence
- A global network of 'Tracking the Backlash' journalists, thoughtfully structured to tackle exclusion and encourage meaningful collaboration across borders
- A stronger openDemocracy fellowships programme, developing the skills, confidence and profile of women, people of colour and LGBTIQ journalists internationally

## Targets/KPIs

### Between 2020-22 we want to achieve:

- At least 200 women and LGBTIQ journalists actively involved in the Tracking the Backlash network across borders (from a baseline of 63)
- At least 20 mid-career or more experienced reporters involved in training and mentoring journalists along intersectional feminist principles, as part of our fellowships programme
- At least two pitches by each openDemocracy fellow accepted by other publications
- At least 15 case studies of significant engagement/ coverage of backlash issues led or shaped by openDemocracy fellows in other major media
- At least 7 people a quarter from under-represented groups completing oD journalism training programmes
- At least 5 articles a quarter, by people from under-represented groups on oD journalism training programmes, considered of good enough quality for publication on oD

# Strategic objectives 2020-22

## Objective 4: Foster pluralism and innovation

### Context

Since 2001 openDemocracy has maintained open spaces for global dialogue, debate and participation, even as many around the world seek to close them down. We are rigorous about facts. But, on many issues, we don't pursue a single editorial line: we want our readers to judge for themselves, change their minds, listen to and engage with others. We are not just a broadcasting platform – we aim to foster a transnational flow of ideas that help citizens to participate in democratic debate. We believe this is a vital driver of change globally.

This means we publish voices and viewpoints censored or sidelined elsewhere, and our editorial philosophy is plural but not neutral. We call out inequality and injustice, but we value and encourage multiple perspectives on how to tackle them. And we foster experimentation and innovation – for example, investing in initiatives that help build stronger and more resilient information ecosystems.

We believe that tackling many of the world's most intractable problems – from pandemics to climate change to corruption and inequality – involves rethinking how to organise politically, socially and economically. It involves incubating new ideas and movements. That's why we've built projects such as ourEconomy – putting people, planet and power at the centre of the debate about our economic future – and supported Transformation: a project that puts love at the centre of the search for social justice. And it's why we're developing yourData, an ethics-by-design open-source laboratory which gives users control of their data and aims to catalyse action on privacy and digital rights.

All media organisations need to innovate, if they are to survive and grow. But at openDemocracy, we seek to foster a culture of curiosity and experimentation because it's also vital for building a more transparent, resilient and equitable world.

## Indicators of success

- Growth of new projects and initiatives that serve our mission, either incubated by openDemocracy or developed in collaboration with others
- Features, ideas and initiatives adopted successfully by others who share our goals
- Evidence of perspectives or policy being altered, changed or rethought as a result of our work; or of greater understanding, tolerance or wisdom resulting from the same
- Citation or adoption of our work or ideas in other spaces, including 'non-progressive' media, movements or policy (see Objective 2)
- Wider engagement and participation in the debates we incubate and amplify

## Targets/KPIs

### Between 2020-22 we want to achieve:

- At least one major new openDemocracy initiative, which makes a powerful and innovative contribution to a major global challenge (for example, the climate emergency)
- At least one major new 'tool', system or process developed through our work successfully adopted elsewhere – for instance, the data transparency features developed by yourData, or the principles of equity and accountability applied in the Tracking the Backlash fellowships programme
- At least 10 substantive and positive citations or adoptions of our work in media or other influential spaces that aren't considered specifically 'progressive' or left-wing (See Objective 2)
- A strong body of qualitative feedback – from user engagement to survey results to policymaker or influencer action – which demonstrates that our work has helped to change people's minds, or opened them up to new ideas or perspectives

# Strategic objectives 2020-22

## Objective 5: Increase organisational capacity, resilience and financial sustainability

### Context

'Independence' for journalism is intimately linked to financial independence and sustainability. We need both the flexibility to respond nimbly to a fast-changing world, and the space and resource to think strategically and long-term. In 2019, openDemocracy was 75% grant-funded – a high proportion restricted to projects. By 2022, we want to have at least 50% unrestricted 'core' income, and to be raising at least \$1m from readers annually.

In 2019, more than 3,000 readers pledged their support to openDemocracy by making donations. This was achieved with no dedicated digital fundraising role, no tech expertise or rich data/insights about our users, but simply through telling the story of our journalism on social media, on our site and through our newsletters.

We've learnt a lot through this about how to maximise audience outreach and engagement on very limited resources. Now we are making a strategic investment in building out this workstream, with new roles and

technology. And we are committed to finding other new revenue streams too, to further diversify our business model.

This drive for financial independence, in turn, supports our wider goal of strengthening organisational capacity and resilience. It allows us to invest in team training, security and skills – and to support a collaborative and productive working culture. It enables us to grow our finance, operations and tech capacity to support our journalism, while also strengthening our governance and oversight. All of these are critical priorities which underpin all the work we do.

## Indicators of success

- A robust system of governance and oversight, based on a governance review completed in 2020 and implemented in 2021, reviewed and updated annually by the Board, aligned with our mission and values
- Highly effective finance, operations and technology capacity that supports and underpins all our work
- A collaborative and supportive working culture, which nurtures and develops talent, and encourages collective ambition and creativity
- A highly skilled team that helps drive progress on all of openDemocracy's goals; focused not only on high clicks or sharing, but on developing pathways towards deeper engagement with openDemocracy's core mission and values

## Targets/KPIs

### Between 2020-22 we want to achieve:

- Over £187k a year raised from reader donations
- Over 40% of reader revenues raised from recurring donors
- The establishment of least one major new income stream (in addition to institutional grants and reader donations)
- Positive and engaged feedback from key stakeholders – including staff; supporters; partners and readers (gathered in regular surveys)

## Activities

## Objectives

	Publishes high-quality reporting, analysis and multimedia content	Runs long-term 'on the job' training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media	Collaborates with, trains, and exchanges skills and intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society	Invests in building a more sustainable business model, including through reader support
Grow and deepen the impact of openDemocracy's journalism across the world	✓		✓	✓
Expose and challenge the global backlash against democracy and human rights	✓	✓	✓	
Build media skills and capacity among groups under-represented in the media		✓	✓	
Foster pluralism and experimentation	✓		✓	
Increase organisational capacity, resilience and sustainability				✓



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