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International Council on Social Welfare

April-May 2025

Welcome letter of the ICSW Executive Director



Professor Antonio López Peláez, Executive Director of ICSW, Professor of Social Work and Social Services at the National University of Distance Education (UNED), Spain

Dear ICSW members, friends, and interested readers,

Welcome to the April-May 2025 issue of our newsletter.

For almost 100 years, the global organizations linked to social work, IFSW, ICSW and IASSW, have been mobilizing every year to celebrate Social Work Day, both globally and locally, including the celebration of Social Work Day at the UN. To celebrate Social Work Day is not only to celebrate our long history as a profession and as a scientific discipline. To celebrate is also to denounce injustices, to defend social protection, to evaluate social policies and levels of social welfare, and to make visible the challenges we face as individuals, groups and communities in increasingly polarized and tense societies. In short, celebrating Social Work Day means mobilizing to strengthen the social welfare and social protection floors. On April 4, 2025, the United Nations Headquarters in New York hosted a meaningful celebration of Social Work Day, bringing together social workers, students, and advocates from around the world.

Organized in partnership with the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the event highlighted the enduring impact of the social work profession on global policy and human development.

The first World Summit in Copenhagen in 1995 was a celebration in this broad sense: it allowed us to reconnect, evaluate ourselves and establish collective strategies to strengthen the welfare state. The Second World Summit for Social Development 2025, a key global event on social development, will be held in Doha, Qatar, from November 4-6, 2025. I am sure it will also be a relevant event. From ICSW, we contribute to this event with the statement to the Economic and Social Council, which is available on our website. The ICSW International Conference on Participation, social welfare and local administration in times of AI (Ronda, Spain 24-25 April 2025) has allowed us to work together with the presidents of IFSW and IASSW on a key issue: citizen participation as a guarantee of social welfare. The ICSW Ronda Declaration on Meaningful Participation, Inclusive Social Welfare, and Democratic Local Governance adopted on 25 April 2025, Ronda, Spain by International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), with the support of IFSW and IASSW, contributes to frame the debate on social protection from a perspective based on democratic citizenship and respect for human rights. The ICSW Ronda Declaration is available on our website, and we will send it to the World Summit in Qatar, as a relevant document to articulate sustainable social policies in the coming years.

Throughout these months, from ICSW we are working intensively in the preparation of the Global Social Work Conference #SWSD2026, in Kenya. Together with our sister organizations, IFSW and IASSW, we are making progress with local partners in the organization of what will undoubtedly be one of the most important congresses of Social Work in Africa in the 21st century. I would like to thank here the availability of Professor David Androff, from Arizona State University, who has accepted to join us as global coordinator of the congress, the same role that our colleague Professor Vishanthie brilliantly exercised in the Panama 2024 congress. Thank you very much, David.

In this newsletter our global president, Sergei Zelenev, collaborates in the President's Corner section. Our special representative at the UN - Geneva, Dr. Gloria Kirwan, contributes with an

President's Corner:
Civil Society at the Forefront: Navigating the Crossroads of Change



Dr. Sergei Zelenev, ICSW President.

Social conditions are never formed in a vacuum. They are shaped and reshaped by a myriad of interrelated forces—historical legacies, cultural values, economic paradigms, political institutions, and evolving societal expectations. As we consider the role of civil society in the contemporary world, it becomes evident that this sphere—comprising non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, professional associations, faith-based initiatives, voluntary movements, and informal community networks—occupies a pivotal space in articulating values and influencing social development. This complex welter of actors is providing a much-needed counterbalance to state and market forces.

Social welfare, as a core domain of social

article on her intervention at the World Day of Social Work at the UN. And finally, in a Documentation section, you can access the full text of the ICSW Declaration of Ronda, and a guide that expands on the contributions of the ICSW Declaration of Ronda. Finally, in the News and upcoming events section, we remind you again of the key dates of the next World Summit in Qatar, and you can find attached the Ronda Declaration..

Many thanks to all ICSW members and interested readers for your commitment to social welfare, which is a collective task that benefits us all.

Take care and stay healthy

Antonio López Peláez

ICSW Executive Director

development, cannot be reduced to a mere set of services or public expenditures. In my view it reflects the moral and ethical compass of a society. To think clearly about social welfare is to engage with fundamental questions about justice, equity, and collective responsibility. Civil society is uniquely positioned to raise these questions—often critically, sometimes disruptively, but always with the aim of holding both public and private actors accountable. It offers a platform for multidisciplinary inquiry, integrating insights from sociology, economics, political science, ethics, and the lived experiences of people.

One of the more elusive aspects of civil society's role is its capacity to foster critical, creative, and visionary thinking. What encourages innovation in social policy? What pushes the boundaries of the possible? These are difficult questions, and there is no single or definitive answer. Yet what is clear is that civil society often nurtures the conditions necessary for such thinking. Free from the constraints of electoral cycles or quarterly financial reports, civil society actors can pursue long-term visions and pose uncomfortable but essential questions. They are frequently the first to recognize emerging issues—whether in climate justice, digital rights, or the care economy—and to articulate the ethical imperatives that institutions must eventually confront.

In today's shifting economic and geopolitical landscape, civil society's voice becomes even more

critical. The economic dimension of development has always played a major role in shaping societies, but the current dynamics are more volatile than ever. Rapid technological change, shifting geopolitical alliances, supply chain realignments, climate-related disruptions, and demographic transitions all contribute to a world that is increasingly unpredictable. The speed of change risks leaving people disoriented—and in that space, misinformation and polarization can take root.

We are entering an era marked by a reset of the global economic system. The rules that have governed trade, finance, and international cooperation for the past eight decades are under pressure. Whether this transition leads to a fairer and more resilient global order remains to be seen. What is certain, however, is that civil society must not remain on the sidelines. Its role is to engage actively in global deliberations, amplify the voices of the underrepresented, and ensure that humanistic values are not drowned out by the clamor of fiscal discipline, inflation targets, or trade imbalances.

There is, of course, no denying the complexity of the issues at hand. The recently released ICSW Manifesto, available on the website, makes every effort to capture this evolving and intricate landscape. While we must acknowledge that public debt, monetary policy, energy prices, and demographic shifts all impose constraints, policy should not be reduced to the management of constraints. Rather, it should be about imagining new possibilities. Civil society is essential in this effort. It reminds us that behind every economic statistic is a human story, and that meaningful progress must be measured not only in GDP or stock indices, but in well-being, social inclusion, and sustainability.

In this context, it is crucial to re-examine the consequences of globalization. Decades of deepening trade ties have brought rapid growth to many regions but have also exposed significant imbalances. In some advanced economies, deindustrialization and job displacement have generated grievances—some valid, others politically manipulated. The prevailing narrative often places the blame squarely on globalization. However, evidence suggests that technological progress and automation have been even more significant drivers of manufacturing decline. Across both surplus- and deficit-running nations, manufacturing output has

often remained stable, while jobs have vanished due to gains in efficiency and automation.

These disruptions are real, and civil society cannot ignore them. Communities torn apart by job losses or left behind by technological change need more than abstract reassurances. They need tangible support, meaningful participation in decision-making, and policies that reflect their lived realities. Civil society can help bridge this gap. It can advocate for inclusive industrial policies, lifelong learning systems, and social protection schemes that are both robust and empowering. It can contribute to designing localized responses that are sensitive to context, culture, and community strengths.

Unfortunately, dominant policy responses have too often relied on compensatory measures—redistributing gains from "winners" to "losers." This zero-sum framing fails to capture the complexity of the transitions underway. It reinforces divisions and inhibits collective action. Civil society, by contrast, offers a more nuanced perspective. It focuses on transformation rather than mere compensation. It promotes systems where value is co-created, not simply transferred.

To realize this potential, civil society itself must continue to evolve. It must safeguard its independence, renew its legitimacy through accountability and transparency, and resist the temptation to become overly technocratic or detached from grassroots realities. It must foster coalitions across borders, disciplines, and sectors—recognizing that today's challenges are interconnected and global in nature.

Civil society is not a monolith, nor should it be. Its strength lies in diversity—of voices, methods, and missions. Some organizations may work closely with governments, while others may protest against them. Some focus on service delivery; others, like



ICSW, concentrate on advocacy and research. Together, they form an ecosystem of civic engagement that keeps societies vibrant, pluralistic, and adaptable.

As we look to the future, the role of civil society will only grow in importance. In a world where the pace of change accelerates and the certainties of the past recede, civil society provides a moral compass and a platform for deliberation. It helps societies navigate the trade-offs of development, uphold the dignity of all individuals, and build resilience from the bottom up.

Ultimately, the task ahead is not simply to react to global shifts but to shape them. Civil society has a critical role in this endeavor—not as a spectator, but as an active participant in remapping the global landscape for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Ronda Conference: Rethinking Participation for Responsive and Adaptive Welfare Systems

The recent conference held in Ronda, Spain, on 24–25 April brought together stakeholders, experts, and practitioners from across the social policy and development sectors to explore the urgent need to reimagine welfare systems in response to today's unprecedented global challenges. The Presidents of the three partner organizations—Prof. Antoinette Lombard (IASSW), Dr. Sergei Zelenev (ICSW), and Prof. Joachim Mumba (IFSW)—actively participated in the discussions and endorsed the conference's outcome documents. UNED provided vital logistical support.

The discussions emphasized the importance of embedding human rights-based approaches into social policies and social work practices. Central to this was the role of participation—understood as inclusive, meaningful, and collaborative engagement of citizens—in shaping and implementing social policies that are resilient, equitable, and legitimate. Participants acknowledged that societies worldwide face a complex and rapidly evolving set of challenges. The aftermath of COVID-19 exposed and deepened existing inequalities, while technological advancements and demographic shifts continue to reshape social dynamics. Meanwhile, climate change and geopolitical instability threaten the very foundations of social cohesion and development.

These challenges demand innovative, adaptable social policies grounded in human rights principles.

The conference reached a clear consensus that participation must be at the heart of these transformative efforts, enabling responsive welfare systems that address the needs of all citizens.

A key observation was the dual role of participation as both a means and an end in democratic societies. Participation empowers citizens to shape policies that affect their lives, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging. This empowerment is essential to counter democratic disenchantment and reduce the appeal of populist movements, which often flourish when people feel disconnected from decision-making processes.

Importantly, the conference highlighted that meaningful participation extends beyond electoral cycles. It helps build a collective sense of purpose and trust in democratic institutions and is vital for community cohesion and the provision of social services. Participation also enables individuals to achieve well-being and a sense of agency. Moreover, it creates a feedback loop that allows communities to adapt to evolving challenges and pursue shared goals, thereby enhancing overall social welfare.

Participants emphasized that broad-based participation—including civil society organizations, nonprofits, and even private sector actors—can drive the co-design and co-creation of social services and public goods, such as environmental protection. Citizen participation thus emerged as a transformative innovation in social protection policies, shifting from top-down approaches to more responsive and equitable systems that reflect real community needs. By including diverse voices, participation fosters social inclusion and strengthens trust in public institutions.

The conference reaffirmed the partners' commitment to human rights principles as the cornerstone of meaningful participation. These principles—human dignity and the universality of rights; nondiscrimination and equality; the right to full participation; and the accountability of public duty-bearers—were recognized as essential foundations for building inclusive and democratic societies.

Discussions underscored the following implications:

- The Right to Participate: Every individual must have the opportunity to participate in decisions

that affect their lives, ensuring their voices are heard and considered in policy-making.

- **Equal Access:** Access to services and decision-making processes must be equitable to prevent discrimination and marginalization.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Public duty-bearers must act transparently and be accountable for their decisions, fostering trust between citizens and institutions.
- **Adequate Resources:** Sufficient resources must be allocated to support participation opportunities, ensuring that engagement is meaningful and sustainable.

In conclusion, the conference established a strong consensus that participatory approaches rooted in human rights principles are essential for building welfare systems that can respond to today's complex challenges. By embracing participation as both a means and an end, societies can foster social cohesion, trust, and resilience. The guiding principles of human dignity, equality, accountability, and adequate resourcing must inform efforts to implement meaningful participation at all levels of governance. In this way, the conference laid a solid foundation for rethinking participation as a key pillar of responsive and adaptive social policies in the 21st century.

Social Work Day at the United Nations 2025, UN-New York



Dr Gloria Kirwan

RCSI, ICSW UN-Geneva representative.

With the theme 'Looking Back to Move Forward', a large gathering of 500 delegates including social workers, social development workers, students, administrators, and faculty from many countries assembled in the United Nations Headquarters in New York to mark Social Work Day at the UN 2025. The event was organised and co-ordinated by a

committee with representatives of the ICSW, the IASSW and the IFSW, and was sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Morocco to the United Nations, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the International Organization on Migration.

Taking place within World Social Work Month, Professor Shirley Getanio Gabel (IASSW and Fordham University) welcome delegates to this event to celebrate the vital role that social workers play in responding to societal needs and upholding human rights in every region of the globe. In his opening address, ICSW President Sergei Zelenev described this event as an important opportunity for reflection, dialogue and a renewed commitment to social justice. On behalf of the organising bodies, he expressed gratitude for the support and attendance of representatives of UN member states, the UN secretariat and intergovernmental organisations, noting the importance of collaboration with key partners in advancing social development and strengthening multi-lateral cooperation.

This event at the UN, which has been running annually for over 40 years, showcased the many ways in which social workers have contributed to the work of the United Nations, highlighting the significant contributions that social workers make to sustainable development and the promotion of human rights. In her keynote address, Professor Lynne Healy traced the extensive role social workers have played over a long period in delivering the aims of the United Nations. Through their work, social workers have been involved in the full range of activities ranging from coordinating emergency responses to working for long-term sustainability, human rights and social inclusion. Two of the panel members, Prof Martha Bragin from the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College and Stephanie Asare Chair of the NASW International Committee, spoke of their direct involvement in different aspects of the work of the UN, providing examples of the range and reach of the work that social workers carry out. The event was fully interactive with questions and information-sharing from the assembled delegates.

Event Organising Committee:

Shirley Gatenio Gabel, IASSW

Robin Mama, IFSW

Sergei Zelenev, ICSW

Rebeca Thomas, IASSW

Sophia Caporusso, IFSW

The panel of speakers pictured here (Left to Right): Professor Emerita Lynne M. Healy, University of Connecticut, Main Representative to the UN for the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW).

IASSW representative to ECOSOC.

Stephanie Asare Nti, Founder of Social Work Beyond Borders;

Professor Martha Bragin, Hunter College, CUNY;

Dr Gloria Kirwan, RCSI, ICSW UN-Geneva representative;

Megan Fujita, Vice President of Education at the Council on Social Work Education;

Professor Shirley Gatenio Gabel, Fordham University, UN Representative of the IASSW;

The Honorable Ambassador Omar Hilale, Morocco's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York;

Professor Sergei Zelenev, President, International Council on Social Welfare;

Charles Katoanga, Director of the Division for Inclusive Social Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs;

Pär Liljert, Director of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Office at the UN.

The full recording of this event is available on the UN Web TV at this link: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k18/k18lhsdc18#:~:text=On%20April%204th%2C%202025%2C%20social%20work%20students%2C%20faculty%2C,that%20social%20workers%20can%20advocate%20at%20the%20UN>



ICSW News

Second World Summit for Social Development 4 - 6 November 2025 | Doha, Qatar

The United Nations General Assembly, through its resolutions [78/261](#) and [78/318](#), decided to convene the "World Social Summit" in 2025, under the title "the Second World Summit for Social Development." Convening at the level of Heads of State or Government, the summit aims to address the gaps and recommit to the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action and its implementation and give momentum towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The summit will be held in Doha, Qatar from 4-6 November.

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Contributions to the newsletter are welcome!

Ronda Declaration 2025

On Meaningful Participation, Inclusive Social Welfare, and Democratic Local Governance

Adopted on 25 April 2025, Ronda, Spain

By

International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)

Introduction

We, the delegates, experts, practitioners, and representatives of the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), gathered in Ronda, Spain, on 24-25 April 2025, in pursuit of a shared vision for an inclusive, participatory, and sustainable future. United by the principles of social justice, democratic accountability, and human dignity, we affirm our commitment to strengthen citizen participation in the governance of social welfare systems and local administration.

The Ronda Declaration builds upon the ICSW's longstanding commitment to human rights-based social policy and reflects the diverse experiences and insights of our global membership. Our deliberations culminate in this document—an urgent call for governments, civil society, and international organizations to work collaboratively toward systemic reforms that place participation at the heart of governance.

Context and Imperatives

We are living in a time defined by profound transformations—post-pandemic recovery, growing inequality, environmental crises, global geopolitical shifts, population ageing, and the accelerated evolution of digital technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI). These forces are reshaping the social contract and demanding bold, inclusive governance models that are responsive, equitable, and resilient.

Now more than ever, there is a need to reimagine the role of citizens—not merely as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of public welfare and democratic institutions. Participation is no longer optional; it is essential for legitimacy, social cohesion, and effective governance.

While democratic participation is a fundamental value and an essential pillar of inclusive governance, it is important to recognize that participation alone does not guarantee equitable or progressive outcomes. To strengthen the transformative potential of participation, safeguards must be built into participatory frameworks to ensure transparency, deliberative quality, and accountability. Avoiding tokenism is a critical step, but we must also be vigilant against manipulation and co-optation. Embedding mechanisms for feedback, continuous learning, and independent oversight can help mitigate these risks.

Vision and Values

The Ronda Declaration envisions a future where:

- Every person, regardless of age, ability, background, or location, has the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decisions that shape their lives.
- Welfare systems are not only service providers but platforms for democratic engagement and community building.
- Local governments are empowered and equipped to facilitate inclusive participation across all communities.
- Participation is institutionalized, resourced, and protected by legal frameworks that ensure its sustainability.

Guiding Principles

We reaffirm our dedication to human rights and democratic governance by upholding the following principles:

- **Participation as a Right and Value:** Every individual must have the right and opportunity to shape the policies affecting their lives.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Ensure universal access to participatory processes, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Build public trust through open, responsive governance and clear accountability mechanisms.
- **Resource Commitment:** Allocate sufficient public resources to facilitate sustained and inclusive citizen engagement.

Key Commitments

We call upon national and local governments, civil society, and international organizations to adopt and institutionalize the following actions:

1. Promote Participation as a Foundation of Welfare Systems

- Recognize participation as a universal human right.
- Empower communities through co-creation of services and policies.
- Promote social protection schemes that allow beneficiaries to articulate needs, evaluate services, and contribute to policy development.

2. Enable Inclusive Digital and Intergenerational Engagement

- Leverage digital tools and AI for participatory democracy, ensuring accessibility for all.
- Combat digital exclusion by investing in digital literacy for citizens and public servants.
- Ensure transparency and defend the primacy of human dignity, aspiration, and need in digital environments.

- Promote intergenerational dialogue and cooperation for community resilience.

3. Strengthen Local Administration as Pillars of Democratic Governance

- Equip local governments with authority and capacity to lead participatory processes.
- Create subregional and rural platforms to address geographic disparities in engagement.
- Embed participation into legal, administrative, and cultural frameworks to ensure sustained and meaningful citizen engagement.
- Institutionalize participatory budgeting and planning processes, allowing citizens to influence resource allocation.

4. Invest in Competency and Practice Sharing

- Train social workers, social development practitioners, and local officials in participatory and community engagement practices.
- Develop networks to exchange best practices globally, supporting localized innovation.
- Implement continuous learning opportunities to adapt to emerging societal needs.

Pillars of Action

1. Participation as a Universal Right and Social Asset

We reaffirm participation as both a fundamental right and a public good that strengthens societal resilience. Participation enhances individual well-being, social trust, and the legitimacy of institutions. It builds human, social, and civic capital that underpins development and peace.

2. Operationalizing Participation Across Welfare Systems

We urge the integration of participatory practices across all stages of welfare policy—from needs assessment to co-design, implementation, and evaluation. Mechanisms must be tailored to reflect local realities and population diversity, ensuring that services respond to community priorities and aspirations.

3. Leveraging Digital Tools for Inclusion, Not Exclusion

Digitalization, including AI, presents new opportunities for civic engagement. However, it must be pursued with vigilance against digital exclusion. Governments must invest in digital infrastructure, accessibility, and literacy, particularly among disadvantaged populations, to ensure that the digital divide does not become a new form of marginalization.

4. Promoting Intergenerational and Intersectional Dialogue

Participation must bridge generational, ethnic, and social divides. Intergenerational solidarity is critical for community cohesion. Systems must proactively include youth, older persons, people with disabilities, and marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

5. Institutionalizing Participation Through Legal and Structural Reform

We call on local and national governments to adopt legal frameworks that enshrine participation as a norm, not a novelty. This includes the establishment of permanent structures such as participatory councils, citizen assemblies, co-budgeting mechanisms, and inclusive committees.

Priority Recommendations

To realize this vision, we recommend the following actions to local administrations and allied institutions:

- **Create Conditions for Equal Participation:** Ensure that participatory opportunities are available, affordable, accessible, acceptable, and accountable to all citizens.
- **Combat Exclusion in All Forms:** Identify and dismantle barriers to participation—social, institutional, economic, and digital.
- **Resource Vulnerable Populations:** Allocate additional support to groups most at risk of exclusion, including rural communities, migrants, ethnic minorities, children, older persons, and people with disabilities.
- **Enhance Digital Competencies:** Provide training and resources to both citizens and public servants to fully engage in digital participatory platforms.
- **Promote Rural Inclusion:** Develop context-sensitive platforms and outreach strategies to include remote and isolated communities in decision-making.
- **Train and Equip Social Workers:** Foster the development of community-based practitioners with expertise in participatory methods and inclusive facilitation.
- **Document and Disseminate Good Practices:** Share successful participatory models across jurisdictions to inspire innovation and learning.

A Call for Global Solidarity

The challenges of our time require collective action grounded in solidarity and mutual accountability. Participation is the foundation upon which inclusive and sustainable societies are built. It is not merely an instrument of governance—it is a democratic imperative and a reflection of our shared humanity.

Our Commitment

We, the signatories of this Declaration, commit to:

- Advancing policies that prioritize inclusive participation in all spheres of governance.
- Building alliances across sectors and borders to promote participatory democracy.

- Supporting the development of legal and institutional frameworks that embed participation in public life.
- Empowering communities through education, information, and equitable access to resources.

Let this declaration be a rallying point for global collaboration toward a **Society for All**—one that values every voice, fosters community, and upholds human dignity. Together, we commit to transforming participation from aspiration into everyday reality.

Guidance Document
for
ICSW Ronda Declaration on Participation,
Social Welfare,
and Local Administration

1. Introduction

The **International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)**, committed to advancing human rights-based social welfare at local, national, and global levels, presents this Guidance Document as a report following the expert gathering held in Ronda, Spain, on November 28–29, 2024. It incorporates feedback from ICSW members and reaffirms our commitment to citizen participation as a cornerstone of effective and legitimate social welfare systems, with a focus on the role of local administrations.

2. Preamble

In an era shaped by the aftermath of COVID-19, rising inequalities, superdiversity, rapid digitalization, climate change, demographic shifts, geopolitical instability, and the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), societies face unprecedented challenges. These transformations necessitate reimagined social policies rooted in human rights to ensure responsive and adaptive welfare systems. Participation—through shared decision-making and collaborative implementation—creates inclusive, resilient and legitimate democratic institutions.

3. Rationale for Participation

Participation is not only a means to achieve social goals but also an end in itself. It grants citizens a direct role in shaping policies and actions that affect their lives, countering democratic disenchantment and reducing the influence of populist movements. A renewed focus on full participation beyond the electoral cycle fosters a collective sense of purpose and trust in institutions.

Full and inclusive participation is a pathway to empowerment of individuals, vital for community cohesion as well as development, and the provision of social services. It enables individuals to achieve well-being, fostering a sense of belonging, agency, and community cohesion integral to collective social welfare. Participation also creates a feedback loop that helps communities adapt to challenges and pursue shared goals, enhancing overall welfare.

Broad-based, equal participation, including civil society organizations, nonprofits, and even for-profit businesses—can facilitate the co-design and co-creation of societal services and common goods, such as environmental protection.

Citizen¹ participation represents a significant innovation in social protection policies. It transforms traditional top-down approaches by involving citizens in decision-making, ensuring policies are more responsive, equitable, and reflective of real community needs. By including diverse voices, citizen participation fosters social inclusion and strengthens trust in public institutions.

4. Guiding Principles for Meaningful Participation

ICSW upholds the following **Human Rights principles**:

Human dignity and universality of rights, nondiscrimination and equality, the right to full participation for all and the accountability of duty-bearers i.e. public administration. These principles imply

- The right of all individuals to participate in decisions affecting them.
- Equal access to services and decision-making processes.
- Transparent and accountable actions by public duty-bearers.
- Adequate public resources are allocated to participation opportunities.

¹ The term 'Citizens' is understood here as all regular resident populations, regardless of their nationality

5. Examples of Good Practice

Through the Ronda Declaration, ICSW affirms the following good strategies:

1. **Acknowledging Participation as a Universal Human Right:** The right to full participation in decisions affecting one's life is a universal human right and a pathway to well-being. Full and equitable participation also builds social and economic capital, fostering societal capacities.
2. **Acknowledging the usefulness of meaningful participation as a mechanism for pooling knowledge, resources and harnessing 'crowd intelligence'**
3. **Utilizing Citizen Participation for mapping the needs and for Shared Diagnosis:** Participation ensures more accurate diagnoses of social needs, enabling welfare policies to reflect community priorities. Equal access to information from local governments is essential for effective participation.
4. **Creating Legitimacy and Trust in Social Protection:** Engaging citizens in decision-making strengthens the legitimacy and implementation of social protection systems, fostering trust in public institutions.
5. **Promoting Preventive Social Protection:** Citizen involvement is critical to designing preventive social services that enhance quality of life and reduce long-term social costs.
6. **Combating Bias and Discrimination:** Participation fosters inclusivity and equity, addressing systemic biases in social services.
7. **Promoting Digital Inclusion:** Ensuring equal access to digital participation platforms, empowering people rather than marginalizing them.
8. **Intergenerational Solidarity:** Participation bridges generational divides, fostering community cohesion. Intergenerational dialogue is vital for positive community changes.
9. **Co-Designing of Welfare Systems:** Participation by citizens, civil society organizations, and both nonprofit and for-profit entities ensure welfare systems are responsive and sustainable.
10. **Seeking effectiveness through Participatory Evaluation:** Involving diverse stakeholders in evaluating welfare services improves their responsiveness and effectiveness, reducing opportunities for corruption and abuse.
11. **Aligning Participation with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**
12. **Institutionalizing Participatory Mechanisms** through agreements and standard practices. This requires appropriate **legislative frameworks** that enable local governments to create and fund permanent participatory mechanisms.

13. **Aiming at empowerment of residents:** While participation is generally considered good – but it can vary from tokenism to genuine empowerment.

Three Levels of Participation:

1. **Information Sharing** – One-way communication without feedback mechanisms (at worst, disempowering tokenism).
2. **Consultation** – Seeking opinions through polls and feedback on predetermined decisions.
3. **Engagement and Empowerment** – Enabling civil society groups to shape and implement decisions.

Participation is an issue of power devolution: how much we (experts, politicians) are ready to give power to people.

6. Role of Local Governments

Local administrations are uniquely positioned to facilitate this participatory approach. As the tier of government closest to citizens, they play a vital role in shaping welfare provisions and addressing community needs. ICSW recognizes the importance of empowering local administrations to engage citizens in the design, implementation, and evaluation of welfare policies. Through participation, communities achieve shared understanding, develop more accurate diagnoses, enhance social cohesion, and strengthen the legitimacy of social protection systems and governance.

Special attention is needed for rural and isolated areas, where distance, financial constraints, and cultural barriers pose challenges to participation.

Local Governments must create genuine prerequisites for equal access. At the community level particularly, the equal rights to participate materialize **only when all** the following conditions are met:

1. **Availability** – Services exist within a reasonable distance.
2. **Affordability** – Costs are manageable for all citizens.
3. **Accessibility** – Physical and attitudinal barriers are removed.
4. **Acceptability** – Services align with diverse cultural and social needs.
5. **Adequacy** – Quality standards meet participants' needs.
6. **Accountability** – Public authorities ensure fair access and address barriers and accountability mechanism are in place.

The above checklist makes it clear that *Accessibility* has many dimensions and it is not an issue for people with disabilities, only. This checklist is particularly relevant for e-services and e-government. Local administration has a key role in removing the barriers to digital participation.

7. Making Use of Digitalization Opportunities

Digitalization opens new avenues for citizen participation. Local governments can use digital tools and AI to foster engagement through interactive, accessible communication channels. Methods such as democratically governed online platforms for feedback and participatory budgeting empower residents to propose, discuss, and vote on municipal budget allocation. AI can also help organize and analyze input, streamlining decision-making processes. These immersive engagement methods encourage public participation in areas like urban planning by visualizing potential community impacts.

However, inclusive and equitable participation requires accessible, affordable, and high-quality channels that meet the diverse needs of all population groups.

Mechanisms must be in place to ensure public authorities' accountability. Without careful "design for all," vulnerable groups, including the elderly, minorities, and people with disabilities may be excluded and left behind.

8. Recommendations to Local Governments

To implement these principles, the expert group meeting jointly convened by ICSW and the Ronda Municipal Administration recommends the following actions for local administrations:

1. **Ensure Accessible Channels** for information sharing, dialogue and involvement.
2. **Promote Participation in Rural Areas:** Address barriers to participation in rural and isolated areas and establish strategies to enable engagement.
3. **Establish Subregional Platforms** for collaborative participation.
4. **Enhance Digital Competencies:** Strengthen digital skills among citizens and administrators for broader, more inclusive participation.

5. **Facilitate Cross-National Learning:** Engage in comparative analysis of participatory approaches worldwide, share and compare best practices
6. **Implement Participatory Co-Design Processes:** Integrate participatory methodologies across local administration functions to create responsive welfare programs. Integrate citizen input into welfare planning.
7. **Train Social Workers in Participation Methods** – Build community engagement skills.
8. **Provide Continuous Training:** Offer ongoing education for local government officials and social workers on participatory methods.
9. **Mainstream** participatory practices and participatory culture and non-discrimination in local affairs practices.
10. **Give Particular Attention to Groups That Are Vulnerable and Easily Marginalized**, such as older people, youth and children, people with disabilities, and minorities.
11. **Institutionalize Participation Mechanisms:** Embed participation in policies and regulations.
12. **Commit to *Society for All* -principle:** Ensure all citizens are included as active participants in community life and beneficiaries of good governance.

9. Conclusion

In democratic societies citizens' participation is A RIGHT, yet there is much room for improvement in:

1. **Decentralizing Power** – Ensuring citizen influence beyond electoral processes.
2. **Expanding Access to Participation** – Eliminating barriers to engagement.
3. **Fostering a *Society for All*** – Enabling every individual to contribute to social development.
4. **Co-Creation and Co-Design** – Leveraging partnerships across civil society, businesses, and households.

This Ronda Expert Group Report reaffirms our belief that citizen participation is central to the future of social welfare. We urge local governments and civil society to adopt these principles, fostering a society where individuals, families, and local organizations

actively shape the policies and systems that affect their lives.. Together, we can build resilient welfare systems that meet current needs and anticipate future challenges.

Resources

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<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/Health/GC14.pdf>

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<https://rm.coe.int/code-of-good-practice-civil-participation-revised-301019-en/168098b0e2>

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